MAX WEBER ON POWER AND AUTHORITY

BY

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CONTENTS

- INTRODUCTION
- AUTHORITY IN PHILOSOPHY
- THE MAN WEBER
- WEBER’S VIEW ON AUTHORITY
  - TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY
  - RATIONAL-LEGAL AUTHORITY
  - CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY
- DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AUTHORITY AND POWER
- CRITIQUES
- CONCLUSION
INTRODUCTION

Whenever there is a particular system containing humans, like e.g. organizations, there must be some authority acting as a stabilizing factor making e.g. employees follow the directions of the leaders. Authority will help to prevent anarchy, and help to define a clear hierarchy of decision-making. A clear hierarchy will potentially lead to an effective organization, consisting of strong and legitimate authority relations between leaders and followers.

This authority is only granted to leaders if followers find his or her authority legitimate. This illustrates the fictitious believe that leaders automatically posses authority. Instead, leaders are given authority by their followers to e.g. inspire, control and command. If authority is to be seen legitimate, the relation between authority and followers must be balanced, so that the authority relation is accepted by the followers. This was also seen by Max Weber as a prerequisite for maintaining authority and effective authority relations.

This intellectual exercise is going focus on authority based on the philosophical postulations of Weber. We would see what authority means in philosophical field, know who Weber is and his views in authority and also see some of the critiques levelled against him; then follows a general conclusion.

AUTHORITY IN PHILOSOPHY

In government, the term authority is often used interchangeably with power. However, their meanings differ: while power is defined as the ability to influence somebody to do something that he/she would not have done, authority refers to a claim of legitimacy, the justification and right to exercise that power. For example, while a mob has the power to

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punish a criminal, for example by lynching, people who believe in the rule of law consider that only a court of law has the authority to punish a criminal.

Since the emergence of social sciences, authority has been a subject of research in a variety of empirical settings: the family (parental authority), small groups (informal authority of leadership), intermediate organizations, such as schools, churches, armies, industries and bureaucracies (organizational and bureaucratic authorities) and society-wide or inclusive organizations, ranging from the most primitive tribal society to the modern nation-state and intermediate organization (political authority). The definition of authority in contemporary social science is a matter of debate. According to Michaels, in the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, authority is the capacity, innate or acquired for exercising ascendancy over a group. Other scientists argue that authority is not a capacity but a relationship. It is sanctioned power, institutionalized power.

In political philosophy, the jurisdiction of political authority, the location of sovereignty, the balancing of freedom and authority, and the requirements of political obligations have been core questions from Plato and Aristotle to the present. In many democratic societies, there is an ongoing discussion regarding the legitimate extent of governmental authority in general. In the United States, for instance, there is a widespread belief that the political system as it was instituted by the Founding Fathers should accord the populace as much freedom as reasonable, and that government should limit its authority accordingly.

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2 Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authority. (14/03/12)

3 Cf. Ibid.
In religion, there is a tendency to act in the belief that what will result will be different than what would have happened had a subservient act (e.g. prayer, meditation, service to others, etc.) not been performed- this is the essence of exercised authority. What one does in expectation of meeting with the approval of the divine is derived from some means of obtained faith. The faith comes by being affected by the authoritative direction of the divine. Authoritative sources in religion communicate their direction through commandments and/or expressed approval of behaviour deemed to be acceptable or beneficial, with the expectation that the subject of this didactic process will use wisdom and understanding in their actions of service.

THE MAN WEBER

Max Weber was born on April 21, 1865, in Erfurt, Germany (Prussia). He was a voracious reader with an encyclopaedic knowledge, having extensive knowledge of the Greek classics as a young boy and being fluent in such philosophers as Kant, Goethe, and Spinoza before entering college. In 1882, Weber entered the University of Heidelberg, where he studied law. By all accounts, Weber was the typical fraternity member, spending a good deal of time drinking beer and fencing.

Max Weber is one of sociology’s most intricate thinkers. Part of this complexity is undoubtedly due to the breadth of his knowledge. But on June 14, 1920, Max Weber died of pneumonia.⁴

WEBER'S VIEW ON AUTHORITY

Max Weber, in his sociological and philosophical work, identified and distinguished three types of legitimate domination (Herrschaft in German, which generally means 'domination' or 'rule'), that have sometimes been rendered in English translation as types of authority, because domination is not seen as a political concept in the first place. Weber defined domination (authority) as the chance of commands being obeyed by a specifiable group of people. Legitimate authority is that which is recognized as legitimate and justified by both the ruler and the ruled.

Max Weber distinguishes three types of authority: Traditional authority, Rational-legal authority and Charismatic authority.

TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY

This type of authority rests on an established belief that leaders have a traditional and legitimate right to exercise authority, where different traditional circumstances enable and legitimize those in command to exercise authority. This traditional authority gives rise to patrimonial systems like e.g. patriarchal and feudalistic systems and societies. These systems are however dependent upon the followers' acceptance of this authority, and that the followers see this type of authority as legitimate.

RATIONAL-LEGAL AUTHORITY

This type of authority rests on the belief in the "legality" of formal rules and hierarchies, and in the right of those elevated in the hierarchy to posses authority and issue commands.
This type of authority is often seen as legitimate in bureaucratic systems, which enables impersonal, specific and formal structures of modern companies. For Weber, this bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge. People will hence find this type of authority legitimate, if the authority is distributed to leaders based on e.g. rationality and capability.

CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY

This type of authority rests on the belief in an exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual, and on the normative patterns or orders revealed and issued by him or her. Charismatic leaders are often seen as legitimate in times of crisis or change when extraordinary leadership is called for, and when this extraordinary leadership is recognized in the specific authorial figure by followers.5

According to Max Weber, only the traditional and rational-legal types of authority relationships are stable enough to provide the fundament for permanent administrative structures such as e.g. business organizations. Structures formed on charismatic authority, will therefore most likely need to evolve into more stable forms of authority.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AUTHORITY AND POWER

The concepts of power and authority are intimately linked together in political philosophy. Power means or denotes the coercive method employed by those entitled to our obedience while authority implies force exercised or capable of being exercised with the general approval of those concerned. In the political sphere, authority occurs when there is willing, compliance, and power to command and enforce.6

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5 Cf. www.businessmate.org/Article.php?ArtikelId=29

6 Cf. Dipo Irele, Introduction to Political Philosophy (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1998), p. 76
Weber tried in his own way to distinguish between authority and power by defining power as any relationship within which one person could impose his will, regardless of any resistance from the other, whereas authority existed when there was a belief in the legitimacy of that power. He further states that what distinguishes authority, from coercion, force and power on the one hand and leadership, persuasion and influence on the other hand, is legitimacy.\(^7\)

Therefore, the difference between the concepts of power and authority is that; in the case of the former, it is simply based on naked force while in the latter case, it is rule-governed and therefore obedience to the authority is not simply to the personality concerned or premised on the use of force but it is based on an acknowledgement of some rules which make obedience to the authority obligatory. Authority, therefore, carries with it some suggestion of legitimate.

**CRITIQUES**

One of the major critiques on Weber’s views on authority was on his claim that bureaucratic organizations were based on rational-legal authority. Parsons and Gouldner notes that Weber said authority rest both in the ‘legal incumbency of office’ and on ‘technical competence’. This works if superiors have more knowledge and skill, but often this is not the case. Thompson tries to say that staff-line distinctions seem to be a structural resolution of authority-ability quandary that Weber overlooked. He went further to say that Weber doesn’t distinguish between definitions and propositions in his model; his lists of distinguishing characteristics are linked between each other.\(^8\)

\(^7\) Cf. www.hrmguide.co.uk/history/classical_organization_theory.htm.

Despite all these above, recent theorists think that earlier theorists misread Weber and distorted his views. Weber was defining a formal rationality that was not necessarily optimal for efficiency. He realised that formalization could degenerate into formalism, and that bureaucratic forms concentrated power at the top and could cause an ‘iron cage’ to imprison the low level worker in obscurity and monotonous detail.\(^9\)

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, we have made an attempt to look into the philosophical views of Weber on authority. We tried to look into his division of authority and how he stressed on its importance to the society. Among the three divisions he saw the rational-legal authority as the pillar of bureaucracy. This choice he may have made seeing the rational-legal authority as an enterprise that gives rights and legality to the superiors. But despite being based on the idea of formal rationality, Weber’s concepts were idealistic. He believed that bureaucratic control would lead to a number of social consequences.

\(^9\) Cf. Ibid.