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MAX WEBER 1864–1964

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MAX WEBER was born in Berlin on April 21, 1864. The American Sociological Association took cognizance of the centenary year of Weber's birth at its Montreal meeting in August, 1964, by devoting a plenary session to his work and its significance. The three papers presented at that session are published in this issue of the *Review.* The Editor has asked me as chairman of the session to write a brief introductory note, giving a few highlights of the significance of Weber's work.[1]

Weber died in 1920, at 56. His early death is of a place with the unfinished and in a certain sense fragmentary character of his work. Weber was above all a pioneer who broke new ground and in spite of his enormous command and mobilization of historical, comparative, and, Professor Lazarsfeld reminds us, experimental materials, he consummated virtually no finished studies in any field. This of course is partly due to the enormous scope of what he undertook, but the very fact that he did delve so widely is indicative of his character as a scholar. That he raised so many questions he did not fully settle through careful attention to a single specialty is in turn related to the fact that important areas of his work are still highly controversial.

In a man of Weber's stature—which surely is not questioned even by his severest critics—these are not in any simple sense faults. Incompleteness and fragmentation at certain levels is entirely compatible with clarity of *direction.* To my mind the most significant aspect of Weber's work is the direction it gave to the development of sociology and related disciplines. This statement should not, however, be interpreted to mean that Weber's contribution was essentially programmatic, that he merely told others what they ought to be doing. On the contrary, he "practiced what he preached" on a grand scale. The enormous scope of his writings, which is the obverse of their incompleteness, laid out a larger part of the macroscopic interests of social science, as they come to a focus in sociology, than that of any other scholar in or near his own time. With the directional orientation he gave to his work, his numerous but systematically interrelated "essays" provided a foundation on which much already has been built and much more surely will be in the future.

A grand-scale directional reorientation of the type Weber accomplished, especially when it deals with social subject-matter is very likely to be associated with major social and political crises and change. Weber's 50th birthday, when he stood at the height of his

[1] A more extensive centenary observance was organized by the German Sociological Association at Heidelberg, April 20–30, 1964. Along with a number of other American sociologists, I was privileged to participate. The Proceedings of that meeting are to be published by the German Sociological Association. I covered some of the same ground in this note though in considerably more extended form in my paper for the Heidelberg meeting, "Evaluation and Objectivity in Social Science," which will be published in German in the Proceedings and in English in the *International Social Science Journal* in 1965.

intellectual powers and was in the midst of his most important contributions, fell in the year of the outbreak of the first World War. This marked the end of an era and the beginning of another, of which the shape is still only distinctly visible half a century later. It was not merely a very costly war, but it touched off the Russian Revolution, it saw the United States rise from a position peripheral to the main European system of "great powers" to the paramount position among great powers. Further, it foreshadowed the end of the age of colonial Empires and with it the great drive toward "modernization" of the non-European world. Weber's native Germany was near the storm center of the great disturbance and he, as a highly cosmopolitan intellectual passionately concerned with politics, was acutely sensitive to its implications.

The direction Weber gave to sociological thinking grew out of the intellectual situation at the turn of the century, in the first instance in Germany but also with reference to the traditions of France and even more Great Britain. Between the traditions that dealt with human relations, culture and behavior in terms of the model of natural science, and those that stressed the relation of things human to the "humanities," a radical hiatus was developing. In Germany the problem was shaped largely by the idealistic movement in philosophy, with Kant as the most important reference.

The Kantian dichotomy between phenomena and noumena as a focus of intellectual disciplines gradually became the basis of the late 19th-century German distinction between natural and "cultural" sciences (*Kultur* or *Geisteswissenschaften*). In Weber's relatively immediate background stood the work of Dilthey and Rickert, and the impressive empirical contributions of the historical schools in jurisprudence (Weber's own immediate subject), economics, religion—in such cases as Harnack and Weber's friend Ernst Troeltsch—and other fields. Here the Hegelian "construction" of a philosophy of development of the *Weltgeist* had broken down into the "particularism" of studying historical cultures, epochs, and in detail "traits." The general trend was to impose an ideographic method on such studies and to link the attention given to human "values" and other cultural concerns, to the "understanding" (*Verstehen*) of cultural complexes and subjective motives, explicitly repudiating generalized analytical conceptualization, which was claimed to be relevant only to the natural sciences.

In Weber's time the socialist movement also came to be very important among European intellectuals, most conspicuously in its Marxist form. This took its primary departure from the Hegelian branch of German idealism, but it claimed, by "setting Hegel on his head," to give priority to "material" interests over those of *Geist* or *Kultur.* In formulating the operation of these interests, Marx adopted a modified version of Ricardian economic theory, emphasizing the elements of conflict and instability in the "capitalistic" system. Primarily "historical" in orientation, Marx's formulation was essentially a theory of capitalism as a concrete historical system, extended backward into its "feudal" antecedents and forward into its presumptive replacement by "socialism." Other versions of socialistic thought involved other intellectual components, but for Weber the Marxist was surely the most important.

Marxists as well as idealistically inclined "historicists" sharply rejected all forms of "positivism" in social matters which tended to assimilate the socio-cultural disciplines to the natural sciences. Perhaps the most important branch of positivism had been "utilitarianism," with respect to which the problem of the status of economic theory was particularly central.[2]

Weber was a true "historicist" in one vital respect. His life work focused on the problem of understanding the significance of the society of his own time in Europe. It is indicative that he called it capitalism, thus following the Marxists' terminology and in part sharing their negative evaluation.[3]

[2] I have covered a good deal of the relevant intellectual history more fully in "Unity and Diversity in the Intellectual Disciplines," *Daedalus,* 94 (Winter, 1965), pp. 39–65.

[3] Weber's Introduction to his general series on the sociology of religion, which was translated for the English edition of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* is perhaps his clearest and most succinct statement of his approach to the broad problem.

Weber retained this basic orientation, but he found himself increasingly dissatisfied with the intellectual resources provided by any of the main branches of contemporary social thought. He struck out for himself on three distinct though intimately related fronts. In each case it is important to recognize not only what he took over from one of the older traditions, but also why he could not accept the established treatments of the relevant problems.[4]

The three "fronts" of his reorientation are first, the necessity for redefining the "methodological" orientation of social science (in the sense of the term closer to the philosophy of science than to techniques of research); second, the need to develop a scheme of generalized analytical theory, and third, the need to mobilize and interpret *comparative* as distinguished from merely "historical" information (in the sense of either the particulars of the object of study or its immediate temporal antecedents).

On the first front Weber's primary concern was to establish a methodological basis for grounding objective and valid *causal* explanation in the cultural and social fields without sacrificing an empathic understanding of motives and meanings and hence the role of values and normative elements in society and culture. Here the famous doctrine of the value-freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) of social as of all other science was his starting point. Weber's position has often been misunderstood, in a positive direction, as maintaining that the scientist should have no value-commitments of any sort. This is not the case. The doctrine denotes, rather, freedom to pursue the particular values to which *the scientist* must be committed. For Weber science was a specialized "vocation," with values that must needs take priority over and hence be free from others current in the same society, notably those involved in political and religious commitments.[5] This differentiation is clearly a function of the development of science as a social subsystem, with organizations and roles specialized for teaching and research. The associated problems become more acute when this institutionalization extends into social science.

The second of Weber's famous methodological criteria was that of relevance to values (*Wertbeziehung*). Here he borrowed from the historicist tradition by introducing the investigator's value system as an element of relativity, in the sense that the investigator is guided by his conception of problems that are significant in terms of these values, especially of course in the social fields. This did not imply a sacrifice of objectivity in the first instance, however, because the objectivity refers to the criteria and procedures of empirical demonstrations of propositions. Beyond that the observer must be related to his human subjects in terms of a common code of meaning, which certainly includes a value component. Hence values particular to the investigator and his culture are always part of a larger system of values and can be systematically related to its other parts. This of course applies to the relation between the values of the scientist qua scientist and the other values of his own culture that help determine his problem-statements. Weber thus admitted the variability of human values into the very center of his conception of method in social science, but without implying the lack of either objectivity or generality which had so often been associated with emphasis on these values.

The methodological significance of values for the social sciences is directly articulated with a third focus, Weber's insistence on the importance of "understanding" subjectively held meanings and motives (*Verstehen*). This was one of the most important tenets of the idealist-historicist tradition; above all, it contrasts sharply not only with radical positivism as in the early behaviorist movement, but also with the utilitarian version mentioned above. This is because the latter, especially in an aspect of economic theory which is still powerful, tended to treat the "wants" of individuals as "given," not only

[4] Weber's methodological work is most fully set forth in the volume *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (2nd ed.), edited by Johannes Winckelmann, Tübingen, 1951. A selection of these essays appeared in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (translated and edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch), Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1949.

[5] See his famous essay "Science as a Vocation," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze Wissenschaftslehre, op. cit.,* and in English in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, pp. 129–159.

for heuristic purposes, but as a substantive assertion that removed the problem of their inter-dependence with other variables from any social science consideration. Moreover, the inherent incomparability of the wants of different individuals has repeatedly been asserted in this tradition. Weber, in contrast, treated the understandable (in his sense) elements of culture, notably values, as part of individual personality, on the one hand, but on the other as part of the culture common to individuals in the same society. This is applied particularly to values, but also to norms and to various symbolic systems. Weber thereby overcame the methodological individualism inherent in the utilitarian tradition and, at the same time guarded his position against the "intuitionism" of the idealists by insisting on linking the motives and meanings he studied with overt behavior. In his famous conception of sociology as a science of social action he therefore combined "interpretative understanding" with the "causal explanation of the course and effects" of action, which referred to the level of overt behavior. The last reference was, to him, indispensable to objectivity.

In combination, these three aspects of Weber's methodological position led to his most radical break with idealist-historicist social thought, namely his insistence that the cultural disciplines must be built around generalized analytical conceptualization, i.e., theory in the sense used in the natural sciences, and hence could not be confined to the ideographic delineation of historical "individuals" and sequences. First, the scientist's special values obligated him to respect empirical evidence bearing on propositions at many levels of generality, including those that linked many "historical" cases, as instances of general categories or as standing at different points on systematically formulated ranges of variation. Second, the selectivity involved in the value-relevance principle implied that the evidence bearing on problem solutions could not exhaust the concrete phenomena studied, but must be analyzed by reference to abstractly defined variables. Applying these inferences to the study of "subjective" contents, Weber concluded that no interpretative understanding could pretend to convey, as so many idealists claimed, the "essence" (*Wesen*) of the phenomenon in a sense precluding other emphases arrived at from other perspectives. This requirement of inherent abstractness, and the empirical controls necessitated by linking subjective subject-matter with overt behavior, meant that theory, or generalized conceptualization, was a central component of any genuine discipline in this field.[6]

The sense in which Weber did and did not develop a theoretical system pursuant to his methodological commitments is complex. What can fairly be said, I think, is that he presented a most comprehensive outline, illustrated and at many points even verified, by immense masses of historical material treated in an explicit, comparative framework. The major orientation from which he set up the outline is very clear indeed; it is a kind of charter for macro-sociological research, still very largely valid today.

With increasing definiteness in his later years, Weber came to concentrate on sociology, though the range of his knowledge in many other fields was encyclopedic. Quite correctly, I think, he viewed the phenomena of normative control of interests and other aspects of overt behavior—thus, the conditions of successful control—as the appropriate focus of sociology. In his most systematic theoretical exposition he went directly from the concept of social action and its orientations to the concept of legitimate order.[7] Problems of order, as distinguished from those of the categories of "interests" that define the primary subject-matter of economics and political science, thus constitute the core of sociological concern; normative order also forms the basis of sociology's intimate interdependence with the theory of cultural systems.

In my opinion, the great extent to which the core of Weber's substantive sociological work, both theoretical and empirical, lay in

[6] Weber thus formulated a conception of the nature of science and the place of generalized and abstract theory in it which closely approached the conception developed from a very different starting point by the philosopher of science Alfred North Whitehead, (*Science and the Modern World,* New York: Macmillan, 1925.)

[7] Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization,* Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1947, pp. 124 ff.

the sociology of law has not been adequately appreciated.[8] Partly because of his personal training and background in law, perhaps, he did not stress this as prominently as he might have, but rather took it for granted. He made important contributions not only in his monograph on the sociology of law,[9] but at many other points in his comparative studies, particularly those dealing with political structures and processes.

In any case, Weber was anything but a legal "formalist."[10] He was concerned not merely with the content of legal and other norms, but precisely and in the greatest detail with their interdependence with political and economic interests. Unlike Marxists, he carefully distinguished political and economic structures and processes from each other; these were the second and third primary foci of his substantive sociological analysis. Indeed it is in the field of political structure and process that his substantive work has exerted its greatest influence. Note that what Weber treated as the *sociology* of economic and political phenomena centered precisely in the relation of such phenomena to systems of normative order—this distinguished the "Sociological Categories of Economic Action"[11] from economic theory as such, the nature of which he understood very well.

The sociology of religion, in comparative perspective, was for Weber the most important area of relations between society and cultural systems, though he made many scattered observations on science, the arts and various other aspects of culture. The primary link between religious orientations and symbolic systems and society lay in the values legitimized by religious beliefs and attitudes. It was in this context above all that he developed a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which values systems influence concrete behavior.

Here, more than anywhere else in his work, Weber brought out most sharply his methodological break with the historical schools, including Marxism. It was not so much that he asserted the independent influence of religious orientations and values relative to economic and political interests, as he did, for example, in his study of the Protestant Ethic. He also saw that to demonstrate it required a comparative and theoretically analytical treatment. This requirement was the rationale for his ambitious but unfinished series of comparative studies in the sociology of religion. As in the economic and political fields, he was always careful to study the interdependence of religious and other social phenomena, not to confine himself to one side.[12]

Just as the four methodological positions Weber took, as briefly outlined above, defined a major direction of scientific research and thinking for sociology, the four substantive areas of interest just reviewed constitute an outline of its core interests. His relatively "tough" empirical orientation, particularly in the economic and political fields, may seem to English-speaking sociologists less original than it did to those in Germany; nevertheless, Weber built the intellectual heritage of humanistic historical scholarship into the canons of an analytical and empirical social science at a far higher level than anyone before him. He pointed a direction for a unified sociology to take, and his outline of its principal substantive interests has not been equalled for clarity and comprehensiveness, by any single contributor to our field. These services, as well as his many stimulating ideas and challenging generalizations and interpretations in more specific empirical problem areas, demand special attention to the centenary of his birth.

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[8] One of the few secondary writers on Weber who has done justice to this phase of his work is Bendix. See Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber, An Intellectual Portrait,* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1962.

[9] Max Weber, *Max Weber on the Sociology of Law,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press; in German in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft,* Tübingen, 1922 (rev. 1956).

[10] Cf. his early essay on Rudolf Stammler, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze Wissenschaftslehre, op. cit.*

[11] The title of Ch. 2 of *Theory of Social and Economic Organization, op. cit.*

[12] See Weber's "Castes, Estates, Classes and Religion," in *The Sociology of Religion* (translator, Ephraim Fischoff), Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.