MAX WEBER’S
POLITICAL
SOCILOGY

A Pessimistic Vision
of a Rationalized World

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INTERPRETATIONS AND MISINTERPRETATIONS OF MAX WEBER: THE PROBLEM OF RATIONALIZATION

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PROBLEMS IN THE INTERPRETATIONS OF MAX WEBER

In 1975 Friedrich Tenbruck, a well-known Weberian scholar, wrote an essay asking the question, "How well do we know Max Weber?" His answer followed in another essay, "The Work of Max Weber," in which he argued that by assuming generally that Economy and Society (EaS) was Weber's major work, we have blocked for ourselves the possibility of answering what is also generally assumed to be Weber's major question, i.e., What is the process of rationalization? Therefore we cannot find a coherent and unifying interpretation of the whole of Weber's work.

I am of the opinion with Tenbruck that as long as EaS is considered to be Weber's "major" work and the one that gives unity and meaning to his whole work, Weber's work is condemned to remain an "impressive," "gigantic," but "fragmentary," "unhomogeneous" and "unfinished" "Torso," as has been often expressed. The anti-systemic feelings of Weber and his untimely death are usually presented as tranquilizing justifications for Weber's unclear aims. The unfortunate end result is, as Mommsen has put it, "that Weber has sometimes become little more than a useful quarry for concepts and ideal types" (Mommsen, 1974:18). Ideal types like charisma and bureaucracy are picked up without prior thought to their context in Weber's work and to their
function in his methodology. No wonder they are rejected once "reality" is found to be different from what the ideal type "seemed" to indicate.

Parsons and Bendix

This confusing situation is aggravated by the conflict between the two main interpretations of Weber in America and their respective schools (Harvard and Berkeley). While for Parsons Weber absolutely intended to set down a universal general theory of social action, for Bendix Weber was primarily a historical sociologist eager to understand definitive historical institutions and structures in different societies and spheres; accordingly, sociology remained for Weber an auxiliary discipline to historical studies.

PARSONS

In addition to Weber's methodological writings and to part 1 of *Eas*, Parsons emphasizes the importance of *The Protestant Ethic* as a "refutation" of historical materialism at the methodological as well as at the empirical level and as a prime example of scientific causal explanation in the social sciences. The *Collected Essays* are also emphasized, but they are interpreted mainly as a "negative proof" of the functional relationship between Protestantism and capitalism and as a further elaboration of the "anti-Marxian interpretation." Parsons contributed to the misinterpretation of Weber's work and to the neglect of the *Collected Essays* by presenting the sociology of religion of *Eas*, which was written at the latest in 1914, as "the most important single segment of his work" and as the last statement of Weber on the sociology of religion (Weber, 1964b:xix-xxi, lxii).

In addition Parsons distorted Weber's intention by presenting *The Sociology of Religion* as "the strategically central part of a general evolutionary view of the development of human society" (lx). According to Parsons, Weber viewed the modern Western world "as standing in the vanguard of the most important general evolutionary trend" (lx).

However, in Tubingen, at the sociology meeting in honor of Max Weber, Parsons stated that "the core of Weber's substantive sociology lies neither in his treatment of economic and political problems nor in his sociology of religion, but in his sociology of law" (Stammer, 1972:40). Apparently since Weber's views of the historical roles of religions could put into question Parsons' functionalist view of religion, it was in "law" that Parsons found now the foundation for a "normative" and legitimate order. In this sense Cohen-Hazrleg-Pope's "de-Parsonization of Weber" is correct in seeing "the crux of Parsons' misinterpretation in the over-weaning emphasis on the category of the 'normative'" and in a "confusion of 'factual regularities' with 'normative validity'" (1975:229). Understandably, Parsons has forgotten Weber's critique of Stammer. Weber's phenomenological position in the essay could hardly serve as a foundation for structural functionalism since Weber's argument was that such a perspective would confuse the normative with the empirical validity of any order and would be tempted to deduce the second from the first (Weber, 1968a:303-58).

BENDIX

Bendix's, as well as Roth's, interpretations of Weber have to be seen in some respects as a reaction to what they rightly see as Parsons' misinterpretations of Weber's intentions. From the beginning Bendix emphasized the historical elements in Weber's work to counter Parsons' general-theoretical interpretation, while later on Bendix and Roth have emphasized the "typological" to counter Parsons' "evolutionist" interpretation (Parsons, 1971:4).

On the substantive level, both Bendix and Roth show a strong preference for *Eas* and a heavy emphasis upon Weber's "Sociology of Domination" (Weber, 1968c) to counter, no doubt, Parsons' neglect. Roth thinks justly that the crucial importance of the sociology of domination has for the most part passed unnoticed due to its piecemeal translation (Weber, 1968b:xviii).

Bendix is then able to offer not just an additive interpretation of all of Weber's empirical writings but also a comprehensive interpretation because he organizes his study around what he sees as the two main foci of Weber's life work: (1) *The problematic focus: as* Bendix says, "Weber was preoccupied throughout his career with the development of rationalism in Western civilization" and dedicated his life to the study of this development (Bendix, 1962:9). Bendix identifies therefore the process of rationalization as the
central theme in Weber’s comparative historical sociology. (2) The thematic focus: Bendix is able to find already in a rudimentary form in Weber’s early studies of farm laborers in eastern Germany – and of the stock exchange “the basic concepts and central problems” which occupied Weber’s life (xiii). Bendix points out that the analysis of the tensions and intercrosess between class and status, and between ideas and interests, forms the uniting link which overcomes the differences between Weber’s sociology of religion and his political sociology (85-87).

Bendix attempts also to correct the imbalances of Parsons’ interpretation of Weber’s sociology of religion by placing The Protestant Ethic in its proper perspective, both with respect to Weber’s sociology of religion as a whole and with respect to the place it has in Weber’s genetic explanation of modern Western rationalism.

Bendix points out first that The Protestant Ethic, rather than being the culmination of Weber’s sociology of religion, is only his point of departure and that it is misleading to understand the comparative studies in the world religions from the perspective of The Protestant Ethic as if they were only or even mainly a negative proof of his earlier causal explanation. Bendix thinks that it is rather the later contrast between Oriental and Occidental civilization which puts The Protestant Ethic in proper perspective (79). In this way he is able to overcome the usual methodological interpretation of Weber’s studies on The Economic Ethics of the World Religions as a series of comparative studies where, according to Parsons, “Weber attempted to hold the factor of ‘economic organization’ constant and to treat religious orientation as his independent variable” (Weber, 1964:xxi-xxii).

From the wider perspective of Weber’s later work it was the study of Ancient Judaism which for Bendix formed “the cornerstone of his attempt to explain the distinguishing characteristics of Western civilization” (Bendix, 1962:199). For it was only during his research on ancient Judaism in 1916 that Weber came across the idea that it was in ancient Jewish prophecy that one could find the origins of the ethical rationalism which he had first analyzed in The Protestant Ethic.

It is misleading, however, to argue that the study was complete once he had explained the origin of ethical rationalism because, as Bendix himself says, Ancient Judaism (1917) was only the starting point of the explanation which occupied Weber until his death three years later. We know that at the time of his death Weber had already started to work on early Christianity, Islam, and Talmudic Judaism and planned a similar work also on medieval Catholicism, which, as Bendix himself points out, were “intended to provide this ‘missing link’” (70, 285). Only then could it be said that the comparative study was complete.

Although in part 3 of his book Bendix offers an excellent analysis of the major parts of EAS, he does not offer any answer, as he promised, to the meaning of the process of rationalization in Weber’s work. In fact the only reference in this section is a disappointing footnote in which, in the context of analyzing the process of legal rationalization, Bendix states: “The term ‘rationalization’ in the sense of ‘increasing rationality’ is perhaps still subject to misunderstanding, and I have therefore either avoided the term or put it in quotation marks as above” (1962:391).

To sum up, Bendix’s intellectual portrait of Weber can certainly be seen as the definitive interpretation of most of Weber’s empirical writings. It offers, in addition, a lucid interpretation of some of the dominant themes and problems in Weber’s work; but it can hardly be the interpretation of Weber’s work as a “comprehensive whole.” After reading Bendix, Weber’s work still remains relatively unknown.

Nelson and Tenbruck

While proceeding through different ways and being moved by different interests, Nelson and Tenbruck in around 1973-74 came to very similar conclusions with respect to the problems of interpreting Weber’s work. Both came to the conclusion that EAS could not be considered Weber’s major work because it offers no answer to the problematic which dominated the last years of Weber’s life.

Both agree also that, although questions about the meanings of rationalism, rationality and rationalization were present from the beginning in Weber’s work, it was in around 1915, in the midst of his comparative studies on The Economic Ethics of the World Religions, that Weber achieved a crucial breakthrough in thinking about these matters.
Both think that "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" (1915), "Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions" (1916) and the "Author's Introduction" are the three most systematic statements of Weber's new way of thinking about the processes of rationalization.

TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE INTERPRETATION OF WEBER

I am of the opinion with Burger that (1) Weber's methodological position remained basically unchanged, although one can find multiple emphases and focuses across Weber's life history; and (2) his position forms a well-rounded, coherent and logical statement once one accepts Weber's epistemological point of departure. I also think that there is no contradiction, as it has been often said, between his methodological and his empirical writings. In fact, his methodological writings can help us greatly in the interpretative understanding of his empirical writings and in locating them within Weber's whole work. In addition, it is my thesis that the "primary historical fact"—in Weber's sense of the term, which he took from Rickert (Weber, 1949:155f.)—of Weber's life work was the "total modern culture" in which he and his contemporaries moved.

There were, however, changes of focus and of emphasis in Weber, and these are closely related to the different perspectives or points of view from which he saw the "primary historical fact." Although Weber himself did not use this unifying term, for analytical purposes I will call Weber's ideal-typical construction of the present modern-Western-rational-capitalism. Selecting the focus of sociological significance from 1903 on, one can construct three major phases in Weber's work.

1903-1909

Weber views the present as modern-Western-rational-capitalism; the "iron cage" image of bureaucracy and of the fateful economic cosmos forms the unifying link for the three major works of this period: The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904-1905), the two main essays on the Russian Revolution (1905-1906) and The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations (1908). This last work already offers the methodological and substantive link with the second phase.

1910-1914

Economy and Society is the great work of this period. In this phase Weber views the present primarily as Western-modern-rational-capitalism. The modern rational character of political, economic, and legal structures is constructed and defined in contrast to the traditional past. Weber's analysis is already comparative historical and differential, and one already finds crucial elements of the later civilizational analytic. The Religion of China, which was originally written in 1913, although later revised in 1915 and again in 1919, forms the link between the second and the third phases.

1915-1920

The Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion are the main works of this phase. The civilizational aspect becomes the predominant one, creating a shift of emphasis. The present is now viewed by Weber as modern-Western-rational-capitalism. It is the great merit of Nelson's interpretation to have insisted on the crucial importance of the civilizational perspective in Weber's later work and to have attempted to articulate systematically Weber's comparative historical and differential method.

RATIONALIZATION AS THE UNIFYING THEME IN WEBER'S WORK

Looking now at the perspectives of the three phases, one can see that the term rational is the unifying concept common to all three phases and that therefore it is the problematic from which the whole of Weber's work can comprehensively be interpreted. However the type of rationality involved in each of the phases changes, respectively, from "capitalist," to "modern," to "Western." It is in this sense that the three main lines of interpretation of Weber, namely, the "Neo-Marxist," the "sociological" and the "civilizational," are only emphasizing three different moments of Weber's work.

If my argument is correct, the question, What is rationality? and the different meanings of rationalism and rationalization remains the deciphered interpretative clue to Weber's work.

Tentatively, I see the possibility, following a somewhat modified classification by Gittleman (1977:1, 7, 10), of distinguishing three
levels in Weber's analysis of the process of rationalization: (1) rationalization of the organization of life-conduct; (2) institutional rationalization; and (3) cultural-intellectual rationalization. One can see that these three levels correspond roughly to the three dominant problematics in the three phases: (1) vocational asceticism; (2) bureaucracy; and (3) sciences, theologies and world views.

It seems to me that the decisive breakthrough came when Weber realized that the crucial element in this general rationalization was not the rationalization of technique, of organization, of conduct, i.e., of the external world, but the rationalization of the way of looking into the world, of the mind. Gittleman is, I think, correct when he calls this "the rationalization of rationality" (1970:21). The end result was not only the disenchantment of the world but the disenchantment of Reason itself.

The problem of rationality thus forms the link among his methodological position, his existential cognitive interest and his sociological work. Only an interpretation which is able to connect the three in a unifying whole will be able to offer a comprehensive interpretation of Weber.

**INTEGRATING SOCIOLOGY AND HISTORY**

In following Tenbruck it has been one of the major themes of my presentation that a prime obstacle in the comprehensive interpretation of Weber has been to consider *EoS* as Weber's last major work. I see, moreover, that another obstacle has to be solved if my four theses are to hold together, namely, the problem of integrating sociology and history in Weber's work. I think that this problem cannot be solved as long as we hold on to extremely narrow definitions of both history and sociology, which unfortunately Weber himself imposed, i.e., "history" as the causal explanation of particular events and "sociology" as the formation of generalizations (Weber, 1964a:121, 109). It should be clear that Weber's "sociology" (the label is irrelevant) does not fit either definition.

As long as we oppose history and sociology we will not be able to find a comprehensive interpretation. Only a clarification of what is meant by comparative, historical and differential sociology can help in solving the problem. Weber himself gives in several places very clear indications of what he means by it.

We find the first systematic comment on what would later become Weber's typical method in his "Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences" (1906). Weber states one of the main reasons for the critique of the historian E. Meyer:

Meyer's arguments confuse two quite different conceptions of "historical facts": (1) those elements of reality which are "valued" "for their own sake" in their concrete uniqueness as objects of our interest; (2) those components of reality to which attention is necessarily drawn by our need to understand the causal determination of those "valued" components, as a "cause" in the causal regress. One may designate the former as historical individuals, the latter as historical (real) causes, and, with Rickert, distinguish them as "primary" and "secondary" historical facts. (Weber, 1949:155)

As "primary historical fact" one could choose, according to Weber, any historical phenomenon or event which receives "significance" for us through our "value-relatedness" (Wertbeziehung). Weber gives a clue to what he chose as the primary historical fact of his investigations when he continues: "It might be, for example, the total 'modern culture,' i.e. our present-day Christian capitalistic constitutional culture which 'radiates' from Europe and which is a fantastic tangle of 'cultural values' which may be considered from the most diverse standpoints" (1949:155).

It is in this sense that I have called "the total modern culture" Weber's primary historical fact. I have argued also that the perspective from which he analyzed this fact changed, however, during his life work. The Protestant ethic, moreover, was of interest as a "secondary historical fact," that is, as a causal determination of one of the elements of the total modern culture, namely, of vocational asceticism. The study of these two different historical facts corresponds to what Roth has called the "situational" and the "developmental" levels of analysis in Weber's work (Roth, 1976:309).

Had Weber remained at this level, he would not have been a sociologist. Weber continues, however:

other cultural developments like the ones of the Incas and Aztecs . . . become relevant to us neither as a "historical object" nor as a "historical cause," but rather as an "heuristic instrument" for the
formation of theoretical concepts appropriate to the study of culture. This knowledge may function positively to supply an illustration, individualized and specific, in the formation of the concept of feudalism, or negatively, to delimit certain concepts with which we operate in the study of European cultural history from the quite different cultural traits of the Incas and the Aztecs; this latter function enables us to make a clearer genetic comparison of the historical uniqueness of European cultural development.

(1949:155-56, emphasis added)

A correct understanding of this paragraph may help to put into question the common assertion that there are different methodologies in Weber. It seems more appropriate to talk like Roth of different levels of analysis in his work. In this sense, Roth is correct when, in following Bendix's earlier interpretation, he says, "The sociology of Economy and Society is "Clio's handmaiden," the purpose of comparative study is the explanation of a given historical problem" (Weber, 1968b:xxxii). The fact that the two foremost interpreters of Economy and Society insist that it is a means to something else should have made people reflect more seriously about the assumed central position of Eus's and about the opposition of history and sociology in Weber's work.

In The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations (1908) one can already find two methodological comments which can help one to understand further Weber's comparative historical and differential sociology:

So one might take these anomalies and exceptions as yet another demonstration that "there is nothing new under the sun," and that all or nearly all distinctions are simply matters of degree. The latter is true enough, of course; but the former notion annuls any historical study. One must instead focus upon what is of central importance in a society, despite all analogies, and use the similarities of two societies to highlight the specific individuality of each. (1976:341, emphasis added)

This done, one can then determine the causes which led to these differences. (1976: 385-86)

PHENOMENOLOGY AND STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS IN WEBER'S WORK

There remain, of course, many serious problems for clarification in the interpretation of Weber. The most important being, in addition to the already mentioned analysis of the meanings of rationalizations, the clear definition of the meanings and the relationship among understanding (Verstehen), interpretation (Deutung) and explanation (Erklärung).

This definition would help to clarify some of the differences between the various phenomenological schools, as well as the differences between the phenomenological and structural interpretations of Weber. Again, rather than opposing phenomenon and structure, I think that it is necessary to try to interpret and integrate them as they are found in Weber's work, especially in his Collected Essays. I follow here an interpretation started by A. von Schelting (1934: 360ff) and which was continued by J. Winckelmann when he called Weber's "interpretive sociology" a "structural phenomenology of world history" (Nelson, 1974: 270,n.3). I think this is also what Nelson means by "civilizational analysis of the structure of consciousness."

Although I cannot elaborate further on this point here, it seems to me that Weber has both a "proto-hermeneutic" and a "proto-phenomenological" position. Both can be found in his 1906 essay "On the Logic of the Cultural Sciences" and in his 1901 "Critique of Stammel," respectively. Weber did not differentiate clearly enough, however, between the phenomenological understanding of the subjective meaning of the actor (Sinnsverstaendnis) and the hermeneutic interpretation of the cultural significance (Kulturbedeutung) of certain phenomena and of their contexts of meaning (Sinnzusammenhaenge). Both, as Weber himself seems to indicate, are integral components of sociological interpretation, and his own empirical work corroborates this. Both are also logical results of Weber's epistemological and existential point of departure. Once the real world has become disenchanted and devoid of meaning, it is only "we," "man," "the creators of culture" (Kulturgeschaffende Menschen) who can infuse some meaning into certain phenomena, which then become "culture."

This "we" however, includes both the author and the actor, and therefore the meaning will differ depending upon whether it is the meaning that a phenomenon has from the author's historical standpoint (hermeneutic meaning) or the meaning that the actor infuses into the phenomenon (subjective or motivational meaning). Both are mutually, necessarily and irremediably interrelated
because both are two main moments of the "hermeneutic circle." This becomes clearest when one attempts to understand the actual experiences of people of other cultures. Weber's interpretative understanding of social action requires the knowledge of the actors' intentions and intended ends. The fact that by this intention Weber did not only mean the subjectively conscious intention of the actor should be clear from the following quotation from The Religion of India:

The fact that the devout individual Hindu usually did not realize the grandiose presuppositions of "karma" doctrine as a whole is irrelevant for their practical effect, which is our concern.

"Karma" doctrine transformed the world into a strictly rational, ethically determined cosmos; it represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history. The devout Hindu was accursed to remain in a structure which makes sense only in this intellectual context; its consequences burdened his conduct. (Weber, 1967b: 121)

(Note: in the original, the word for "structure" is an unusual German term, Gehäuse, the same term translated as "cage" in The Protestant Ethic.)

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