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Introduction: New Perspectives on Weber

The publication of Max Weber's complete works, known as *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe* or MWG for short, initiated in 1975 (the first volumes were published in 1984) and finished in 2020, has in many ways changed the received image of this towering figure among classical sociologists. It has also given rise to new controversies. There is no dispute that new editions of key texts, together with a considerable amount of previously unprinted material, have underlined the unfinished character of Weber's lifework. Most notably, *Economy and Society* – long regarded as Weber's main text – has been “deconstructed”, shown to be much more heteroclitic than earlier assumptions about two parts from different periods suggested, and published in six separate volumes. Notwithstanding these results of critical scholarship, attempts have been made – especially by German sociologists – to reconstruct a “Weber paradigm”, supposedly complex and coherent enough to assert itself in competition with more recent approaches. Others have suggested that Weber's work is best seen as a kind of quarry, usable for multiple purposes and open to development in different directions.

Here I will not discuss the merits or problems of these different overall perspectives; they will, if all goes well, be reviewed at greater length in a later issue of the journal. My present concern is with a more limited topic. One of the possibilities opened by the *Gesamtausgabe* is a more informed tracing of specific themes and their trajectories throughout the changing orientations of Weber's work. The particular angle to be pursued here has to do with the writings often – but rather misleadingly – described as methodological; they are better understood as ongoing reflections on concept formation and cognitive claims in the cultural or social sciences (shifts and tensions between the two last-named labels are a significant part of the story). Weber was in fact very hostile to self-contained pronouncements on methodology, and his ventures into the field of basic concepts were always closely linked to strong emphasis on the aims of a *Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*. Moreover, the reality thus invoked was always seen as historical.

The texts to be considered are collected in two volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe*, I/7 and I/12; they include several items not to be found in the earlier edition of Weber's collected writings on *Wissenschaftslehre*. Volume I/7, titled *Zur Logik and Methodik der Sozialwissenschaften*, edited by Gerhard Wagner, contains writings from 1900 to 1907; volume I/12, *Verstehende Soziologie und Werturteilsfreiheit*, edited by Johannes Weiss, covers the period from 1908 to 1917. In light of this extended documentation, old questions about Weber's problematic can be revisited and new ones raised. Some readers of the new edition have concluded that the unity traditionally taken for granted by scholars

discussing Weber's philosophy of science is not borne out by more complete textual evidence. As will be argued here, the answer depends on what kind of unity is to be posited. Weber's reflections on foundations of the cultural/social sciences are as unfinished as is the work as a whole, and it is therefore misguided to look for a closed and definitive argument. What can be traced is the unfolding of a distinctive and coherent problematic with clearly indicated focal points; to identify them will be the main task of the following comments.

Another point to be noted concerns the influences on Weber's work and the alternatives with which he felt obliged to engage. The two volumes reviewed here provide a more comprehensive picture of Weber's discursive community and of his search for an independent path than has hitherto been available. In that light, it becomes difficult to identify him with a particular school of thought, or even a more loosely defined intellectual tradition. There is no doubt about the prominent connection to Neo-Kantian thought, and most obviously to Heinrich Rickert; but to describe Weber's sociology as quasi-Kantian (*kantianisierend*), as Wolfgang Schluchter does, seems too restrictive. There are background sources of inspiration that do not figure very visibly in the discussions of conceptual issues (the question of Nietzsche's influence on Weber is a recurrent and controversial one; the present writer is inclined to side with those who argue that the connection to Nietzsche is important, but it does not surface in the texts reviewed here). On the other hand, Weber engages – sometimes extensively – with authors now largely forgotten and in retrospect not really important for the development of his thought.

One short and incomplete but significant encounter deserves special mention. Weber started writing a critical comment on Georg Simmel's work, obviously meant to be an extensive and conclusive demarcation, but it was then put aside because of more urgent tasks and left unfinished [I/7: 101–110]. The fragment – probably written in 1908, and previously unpublished – shows that for Weber, Simmel's writings were a very major and challenging contribution to the emerging field of sociological analysis (which Weber was gradually coming to recognize as a strategic section within the broader spectrum of the cultural sciences). Although the text begins with a very determined (and verbose) enumeration of charges against Simmel, the title already indicates two points of positive contact. Simmel is invoked as a sociologist and a “theorist of the monetary economy”; the latter reference is all the more interesting in view of Simmel's disclaimer that *The Philosophy of Money* did not contain a single sentence with an economic (*nationalökonomisch*) meaning. That was, of course, a disingenuous statement, and Weber was well aware of the overlap between economic discourse and his concern with the cultural meaning of capitalism; it was one of the fundamental insights inherent in his conception of the cultural sciences that the economic domain could not be treated as a closed universe. The influence of Simmel's philosophy of money on Weber's analyses of capitalism in context has not gone unnoticed. Less familiar is the other aspect: the fundamental but problematic affinities between two critical ideas of sociology. Both Simmel and Weber (the former maintaining an explicit and elaborated connection to philosophy, the latter working with a philosophically underpinned conception of cultural sciences) approached the sociological field with strong reservations about the ways of thinking most evident in the early beginnings of that discipline. They were, in other words, already arguing against the twin constructs later singled out by critics of the sociological tradition: an emphatic and holistic concept of society, with a focus on

integration, and a belief in developmental laws – or at least logical trends – inherent in that posited structure. Those who took on board this fairly recent criticism have mostly failed to acknowledge the alternative paths opened up by Simmel and Weber. But the two classics were not in entire agreement. As Weber saw it, Simmel's idea of interaction as a defining feature of the social field was too abstract; for it to become relevant, the varying forms and contents of interaction would have to be theorized in a more systematic fashion. Weber's later work, particularly the sociology of domination and the analyses of religious communities, may be read as a continuing effort to fulfil this requirement; however, this massive and multi-faceted contribution to comparative historical sociology also reflects – as some scholars involved in recent debates have noted – limits, or at least unexplored implications, of the Weberian project. The crucial point is that Weber did not adequately conceptualize the emergent orders that are anchored in interaction but not reducible to it. There are sufficient indications in his concrete studies for this aspect to be brought to attention, but it was not properly integrated into the ongoing elaboration of basic concepts. This unfinished though envisaged task was perhaps the main reason why Weber postponed a full-scale confrontation with Simmel.

There are other examples of significant engagement with contemporaries in the two volumes; but for the purposes of this review, it seems more relevant to focus on statements illustrative of Weber's overall intellectual strategy. Three texts stand out in this regard. The first (in terms of chronological order as well as intrinsic importance) is the long 1904 essay on objectivity in social-scientific and social-political knowledge [I/7: 135–234]. Like the much more famous *Protestant Ethic*, it belongs to the phase of Weber's return to work after a prolonged illness, and in view of what we now know about his whole subsequent trajectory, the objectivity essay – as it is known to anglophone readers – seems more fundamentally prefigurative of later approaches than the narrowly focused exploration of Puritan mentalities and their role in the take-off of modern capitalism. The second text is the 1913 treatise on central concepts of an interpretive sociology, usually called *Kategorienaufsatz* in German debates [I/12: 383–440]. Last in line is the 1917 text [I/12: 441–512] on the meaning of *Wertfreiheit* in the sociological and economic sciences (the plural is noteworthy, and suggestive of openness to pluralism in both domains). Each of these texts is a self-contained argument with specific central issues; in that sense, they are microcosms of stages in the development of Weber's project. But we can also read them as pointers to the directions followed in later and more substantive work, as well as indications of ways to rethink and expand Weber's perspectives in the making. The following remarks will adumbrate some suggestions of both kinds. For our purposes, it will be useful to move from the first text to the last, and then come back to the middle one to explore a problematic more narrowly focused than the one linking 1904 and 1917.

The Demarcation of the Cultural Sciences

The objectivity essay pursues a threefold aim: to clarify the difference between natural and cultural sciences, without casting any doubt on the role of rationality in the latter; to defend the distinction between objective knowledge and value-judgments, as valid for the cultural sciences as in those dealing with the natural world, while emphasizing the value-relatedness (*Wertbeziehung*) involved in the constitution of themes for cultural

inquiry; and to insist on the radical historicity of the cultural sciences, resulting from the dependence of their interests and perspectives on changing situations. Although the importance of this text has been widely recognized, the complexity of its message is not as easily grasped; an adequate reading requires both a focus on Weber's key formulations and an effort to think beyond them. The single most significant sentence in the essay is a statement about presuppositions: "The transcendental presupposition of every *cultural science* is *not* that we find a specific culture or any culture at all *valuable*, but that we *are cultural humans* [*Kulturmenschen*], endowed with the capacity and the will to adopt a conscious *stance* [*Stellung*] towards the world and to lend *meaning* [*Sinn*] to it" [I/7: 188–189; my translation, JPÁ, italics in the original]. Before this summing up, Weber had referred to culture as a finite segment in the meaningless infinity of world events (*Weltgeschehen*), endowed with "meaning and significance" (*Sinn und Bedeutung*) from a human point of view. The implicit distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* is not spelled out; but the use of two terms may be seen as an allusion to problems yet to be tackled. It is, moreover, noteworthy that these definitions of culture do not refer explicitly to values, despite the recurrent emphasis on "value-relatedness" as a constitutive feature of cultural phenomena. To clarify the issues at stake, a closer look at conceptual sources, choices and connections is needed.

It is a commonplace that Weber's way of demarcating the field of the cultural sciences was directly and consciously aligned with the work of Heinrich Rickert. The very concept of value-relatedness was borrowed from Rickert. But there are interesting differences between the two thinkers. Rickert links the value component of culture to the most elementary structure of human action. As he sees it, value-relatedness is already inherent in the fact that "the concept of the goal is understood as a good lying in the future and to be realized, and thus connected to the concept of an intrinsic value" [Rickert 2007, 2: 343]. No such formulation can be found in Weber's essay. He refers to value-ideas as empirically evident element of all meaningful human action [I/7: 232], but that suggests a much more complex and variable pattern; it is probably best understood in light of Weber's later comparative reflections on interpretations of the world and attitudes to it. The cultural orientations active on that level demarcate different horizons for varying value-ideas.

The changing uses of the term *Wert*, as well as the uncertain relationship to other less prominent but clearly relevant concepts, suggest further reflection on the very language of values. In the context of a discussion on the "Weber paradigm", Herbert Schnädelbach [2003] raised this question, but his line of argument did not go beyond linguistic considerations; he criticized the "grammatical reification" imposed by the term *Wert* and proposed more use of *Wertung* as a word denoting activity rather than a principle or an entity. This idea does not really go beyond Weber's own way of thinking. He refers to *Wertungen* often enough to show his awareness of the point re-emphasized by Schnädelbach. To justify a more radical departure, we should note Weber's indications of open questions and unfinished work. He repeatedly refers to interpretation (*Deutung*) as the *modus operandi* of the cultural sciences, and to interpretability (*Deutbarkeit*) as a precondition for their relevance; he also stresses (in the text known as the essay on Roscher and Knies, although it deals – in a very scattergun fashion – with many other authors and issues) that a theory of interpretation is only beginning to take shape [I/7: 307]. Interpretation presupposes meaning, and in that regard Weber occasionally uses a word that later debates have brought to more

prominence: *Bedeutsamkeit* [e.g. I/7: 181], probably best translated as meaningfulness, and more often the adjective *bedeutsam*. He claims, without further elucidation, that value ideas are decisive for what becomes *bedeutsam*. The alternative view to be suggested here is that “the language of values” may have pre-empted a closer encounter with the realm of meaning.

Among later variations on the theme of *Bedeutsamkeit*, Hans Blumenberg’s use of the term is surely the most interesting [see the entry in the *Blumenberg-Glossar, Buch and Weidner 2014*]. His references and implications are not always easy to follow, but if we try to sum up the meaning of *Bedeutsamkeit* in more straightforward words than he did, the following may be suggested: The concept of *Bedeutsamkeit* refers to a horizon of meanings, open to rival interpretations and conflicts between them, and also to contrary evaluations; but the relative weight of value-orientation, their level of articulation and their translatability into normative terms are all matters to be clarified by comparative inquiry. That perspective clearly invites association with the idea of social imaginaries (not adopted by Blumenberg), coined in order to emphasize the indeterminate shadings and ramifications of meaning.

It would, within the limits of this review, take us too far to discuss the merits and problems of the social imaginaries paradigm. But there is another option available, closer to hand and more obviously in line with Weber’s indications of work yet to be done. If he saw the “theory of interpretation” as a promising approach to be developed further, it is logical to look to the record of hermeneutic theorizing for proofs of progress along that path. To be brief, four themes stand out as major foci of reflection and can at the same time be related to main directions of Weber’s work. Most fundamentally, there is the insight – formulated most clearly by Hans-Georg Gadamer – that meaning can be understood even where it is not intended; to put it another way, interpretation has to do with constellations of meanings that go beyond conscious articulation and involve perspectives on the world, of the kind that Weber associated with imputing significance and adopting a stance. His later comparative analyses of cultural worlds are – notwithstanding his less than convincing disclaimer of totalizing approaches – exemplary attempts to make sense of formations that transcend the elementary level of subjective intentions. The meaning beyond intention is thus closely linked to a second hermeneutical theme, known in Gadamerian terms as the *Vorgriff auf das Ganze*; it underlines the totalizing anticipation inherent in the understanding of meaningful patterns. A third one is the idea of humans caught up in webs of significance, of their own making but beyond their grasp and conducive to unexpected turns; this aspect of social life and historical dynamics has been particularly underlined by Clifford Geertz. Weber’s view of rationalizing processes, especially those constitutive of the Occident as a world-historical formation, fits this picture: rationalization is inherently ambiguous, but the belief in progress as a universal trend – which Weber repeatedly criticized in his writings – serves to mask the ambiguity and is therefore permanently wrongfooted by history. Finally, Gadamer’s notion of a “fusion of horizons”, occurring on multiple levels of understanding (from conversation to the interpretation of artworks and the recovery of traditions), is easily applicable to Weber’s studies of the Chinese and Indian worlds. His efforts aim at a double deepening of understanding: he comes to grips with the internal logic of major non-European civilizations, and at the same time, the confrontation throws light on the distinctive – and problematic – trajectory of the Occident.

Neither the former nor the latter part of the project is presented as leading to definitive results. The misguided view that Weber was conducting a “thought experiment” in order to identify a single and decisive cause of a Western breakthrough has been demolished by more advanced scholarship.

It remains to note a key feature of the culturally conditioned concept formation that Weber has in mind: the much-quoted and variously misunderstood defence of “ideal types” as an analytical device that is particularly suited to “bring to sharp awareness the specific character (*Eigenart*) of cultural phenomena” [I/7: 219]. This mode of concept formation is obviously to be seen as a prerogative of the cultural sciences. But it does not follow that it is confined to the more narrowly defined sciences of action [Schluchter 2003: 56]. Meaningful action is, admittedly, an eminently accessible field of ideal-typical reasoning; but Weber’s definition is both too general to be limited to that context and specific enough to indicate a focal point beyond it. The ideal type is, in the most general terms, a “one-sided *accentuation* of *one* or *several* points of view”, encompassing a plurality of individual phenomena, and as a “clarification” (*Verdeutlichung*) of certain empirical aspects [I/7: 203–204, 208]. The term *Verdeutlichung* suggests an affinity to meaning, but not an exclusive connection. In the later essay on categories of interpretive sociology, Weber notes that ideal types can also refer to “specifically meaningless (*sinnfremde*) connections”, and in the same paragraph, he describes ideal types as “sublimations of facticity” [I/12: 403]. He does not explain the “specifically meaningless” aspect, but it is tempting to suggest that it might have to do with the non-intentional dynamic of processes set in motion by human action but escaping its original horizon.

Meaning, Knowledge and Value

To sum up, the objectivity essay is both a crucial key to Weber’s substantive work and a guide to further thinking along its open-ended lines. On the other hand, close reading reveals that the twin problems of value freedom and value relatedness remain less than fully clarified, and that Weber’s undeniable efforts to move beyond neo-Kantian assumptions are not backed up by adequate conceptual resources. With those reservations in mind, let us shift to the last essay in the later volume (apart from two Weber brief reports), devoted to “the meaning of value freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) in the social sciences” [I/12: 441–512]. This text belongs to a later stage of Weber’s work, marked by advanced insights of comparative analysis (not least the *Zwischenbetrachtung* that deals with the problematic of “life orders” within a socio-cultural field of tensions) and brief but condensed diagnoses of the times. The revisiting of *Wertfreiheit* thus benefits from rich results of historico-sociological research, and the essay is a strong corrective against oversimplifications of Weber’s position, all too common in subsequent controversies. His line of argument has often been reduced to a simple dichotomy of value-free and value-laden statements; but this distinction is inseparable from a more complex frame of reference. It is of course true that Weber insists on the logical heterogeneity of two intentions expressed in judgments, the quest for empirically valid knowledge and the affirmation of prioritized values. However, both sides call for nuancing and qualifications. Weber emphasized that the kind of empirical knowledge provided by the cultural sciences is dependent on perspectives defined by the “light of the great cultural problems” [I/7: 234]; changes to that background affect both the

standpoint and the conceptual apparatus of the sciences in question. This condition justifies the description of Weber's approach as a case of scientific perspectivism [Albert 2016]; but it is also the point where the tension between the acceptance of value relatedness and the neutralization of value commitments becomes most acute. Although Weber refers to science as "looking on the current of events from the heights of thought" [I/7: 234], the whole thrust of his argumentation suggests at least an incipient awareness of an issue later made more explicit by hermeneutical thinkers. Practitioners of the cultural sciences may aspire to "heights of thought", but they never achieve complete separation from their historical situation; and their participation in its cultural life always involves value-orientations. If Weber's statement about the transcendental presupposition of the cultural sciences is to be taken in its full sense, it must apply to subjective conditions of possibility; at this level, the withdrawal from an existential *Wertbeziehung* to a theoretical one is best seen as an unfinished process, repeated without completion in the course of changing "light" from cultural problems.

On the side of valuations, it is of major importance that Weber links the difference between empirical statements and value judgments to another kind of heterogeneity; the irreducible pluralism and inescapable conflict of values. Weber takes issue with Schmoller (or with the views he attributed to Schmoller) and argues at some length against the identification of cultural values with ethical ones; as he sees it, a sober view of the human condition – and especially of its modern shape – must accept that ethical values are challenged by other claims to primacy and overarching validity, particularly but not only in the political sphere. Weber uses the metaphors of polytheism (repeated on later occasions) as well as the struggle between god and devil to underline the radical antagonism of conflicting values. But the very extremity of this constellation marks out a space for cognitive efforts. Cultural interpretation is needed to clarify the meaning of values in conflict; empirical knowledge, more or less scientific, can provide insight into the consequences to be expected from the translation of values into action. Hasty interpretations of Weber's work have often failed to take due note of these last considerations. He never denied the possibility nor the importance of reflection and debate about values; He was, in other words, not a decisionist, although he rejected the idea that science or philosophy could eliminate the moment of decision.

If the two essays discussed above can be read as successive instalments of an ongoing reflection, with a certain refocusing shift, the third one represents a more specific offshoot. Weber's project, as it took shape after the turn of the century, was anchored in a broad conception of the cultural sciences, with particular emphasis on their historical character, and there is no convincing reason to assume that he changed his mind on this. He was, however, open to differentiations and new departures within the overall framework; there is no doubt that he was a reluctant sociologist, highly critical of dominant trends in that discipline, those based on belief in universal laws of progress as well as their racialist opponents, but he came to think of sociology as a particularly strategic branch of the cultural sciences, and the 1913 text to which we now turn is the first major breakthrough in that direction. Although it was published four years before the essay on the meaning of value freedom, the latter has a prehistory that goes back to 1913; its first version was presented for discussion within the Association for Social Policy. At that time, Weber was already having doubts about the organized cooperation of social scientists, and it is revealing that

both texts were printed in the journal *Logos*, edited by Heinrich Rickert and identified as an international journal for the philosophy of culture. Weber evidently took the view that his way of doing sociology demanded a formal signalling of distance from the main currents of the emerging profession, as well as a reiteration of background assumptions and a clarification of basic operative concepts.

Towards an Interpretive Sociology

It is easy to trace the connection between Weber's early reflections on cultural significance and the subsequent turn to sociology. The strong emphasis on interpretation (*Deutung*) as the core element of culture and the key to scientific knowledge of its workings led, in due course, to closer interest in understanding, seen as the most basic kind of interpretation, and that was in turn linked to the claim that the understanding of rational behaviour was both the most conclusive and most easily conceptualizable of its kind (not that Weber denied the very possibility of intuitive understanding, but it could not serve as a basis for concept formation). The essay on "some categories of interpretive sociology" [I/12: 383–440] spells out the consequences of these interconnected steps. Its history is complicated and has given rise to some scholarly debates; the second part (V–VII) is clearly older than the first (I–IV), and was originally meant to enter into a planned collective work to be titled *Outline of Social Economics* (it never materialized, but Weber's intended contributions to it, originally published en bloc as *Economy and Society* (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*) and long mistaken for an integral main work, have now been re-edited as six separate volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe*). It is less clear how long the interval between the writing of the earlier and the later part was, and why Weber changed his mind about including the text in the supposedly forthcoming volume; but controversies about these questions are less important than the point that the separate publication did not eliminate a certain tension between the two parts. As will be seen, the second part raises some issues that point beyond the framework of the first one; given the chronological facts, this is a case of problems glimpsed and then minimized, rather than discovered en route. The essay is, on this view, not just the first systematic statement of Weberian sociological theory; it is also a testimony to tensions and puzzlements, still troublesome for those who debate the lessons of his work. It should be noted in advance that the following comments will include some critical remarks on the English translation of the text [Weber 1981]; but it is never easy to translate Max Weber, and this is one of his most difficult texts.

The problematic introduced in the first part of the essay may be summed up in three key terms: it centres on the meaningfulness, rationality and reflexivity of human action in social context. The single individual is characterized as the "nethermost unit" [*unterste Einheit*, I/12: 404] for the purposes of interpretive sociology, and even as its "atom", although Weber admits in the same sentence that this is a dubious analogy. As for the "nethermost unit", it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that this notion might face problems comparable to those dogging the Marxian distinction between basis and superstructure. The more sophisticated Marxists found themselves forced to admit that the superstructure was already inside the basis, and for the most consistent among them, this opened a road beyond Marx. Similarly, a closer and more comprehensive examination of the field claimed by interpretive sociology will tend to the conclusion that the "upper" units are already

constitutive of the “nethermost” ones. As will be argued below, indications of that constellation can be found in the text under review.

The first specific category introduced by Weber is *Gemeinschaftshandeln*, defined as “human action meaningfully related to the behaviour of other humans” [I/17: 406]. The English translation of the essay uses the term “social action”, which calls for a brief comment. Weber’s use of *Gemeinschaft* is certainly not identical with the much-quoted meaning given to this term by Tönnies, but there are certain elementary affinities. “Social action”, as defined by anglophone authors, is not always as directly predicated on meaning as in Weber’s essay, and it can be argued that his focus on mutual orientation presupposes a shared field of meaning, thus parting ways with straightforwardly utilitarian versions of individualism and making a first hint at levels of analysis beyond the individual actor. More such signs will appear as we go along.

That said, there is no obvious alternative translation, and none will be suggested here. The next step is more open to correctives. Weber moves on to define a more complex case of *Gemeinschaftshandeln*; he calls it *Gesellschaftshandeln* and identifies it with action “meaningfully oriented towards expectations maintained on the basis of orders”; he adds that the orders must be imposed (*gesetzt*) on the basis of purposive rationality, and that the acting subjects must also be guided by that principle [I/17: 408]. He allows for two kinds of action-orienting orders: they may be enforced by power-holders who make them binding for a broader community, or established through agreement of those concerned. Here the English translation [Weber 1981: 160] invites several remarks. *Gesellschaftshandeln* is rendered as “associational action”; that places the main emphasis on the voluntary variant, and the use of “associating action” to translate the reflexive turn that contains Weber calls *Vergesellschaftungshandeln* even more so. The latter term refers to the action taken to consolidate or expand the domain of *Gesellschaftshandeln*.

What the reference to association obscures is Weber’s clear intention to link *Gesellschaftshandeln* – in other words: the rationalization of social action – to domination (*Herrschaft*); not exclusively, but at least as a frequent alternative. The translation becomes even more problematic when *Ordnung* is rendered as “rule”. An order is definitely more than a rule, even if it is of the purposively rational kind; it may then be decomposable into a complex of rules, but the whole is more than the sum of its parts. More importantly, the “orders of life” about which Weber wrote a few years later in the *Zwischenbetrachtung* are worlds of meaning and value, not reducible to rules; they are interrelated in complex ways, but never completely fused. It remains to clarify whether the essay on categories contains ideas that would prefigure such perspectives. As will be seen, the third key concept introduced in the text goes some way to answer the question.

Having distinguished a general concept of meaningful social action from a specific one that foregrounds purpose and structure, Weber goes on to consider another specific type, much less clearly demarcated but – to judge from the cases mentioned – certainly not less common than *Gesellschaftshandeln*. There are, as he puts it, complexes of *Gemeinschaftshandeln* that operate without agreement on a purposively rational order, but as if such an agreement was in place, and are co-determined by the type (*Art*) of meaning-orientation characteristic of the authors [I/17: 418, here I stay close to the English translation Weber 1981: 166, except that I follow the original in referring to purposive rationality, not just rationality; it is of some importance that Weber is talking about the absence and

quasi-apparence of purposive rationality, not rationality tout court]. He coins the term *Einverständnishandeln* to describe this type of action. In this case, the English translation, consensual action, is no more ambiguous than the original; both expressions might be misunderstood as indications of agreement reached through deliberation, but that is clearly not what Weber had in mind.

The most striking thing about the definition quoted above is the horizon of indeterminacy that attaches to all aspects. An “as if” quality is attributed to a social condition, without explaining – or showing the way to explain – how the illusion is produced; the outcome of the unintended simulation is said to be co-determined by meaning in action, but the limits thus implied are not further specified; a type of meaning is posited, without any comment on how such types are to be distinguished from the ideal type of understandable rationality. The implications of these hints at unexplored problems will become clearer if we consider Weber’s examples of *Einverständnishandeln*. His reference to a linguistic community is not to be understood as a search for communicative origins of consensual action (it should, in other words, not be mistaken for an opening to the communicative rationality that Habermas tried to unveil as a latent premise of Weber’s reflections on rationalization). Rather, the linguistic community is treated as a given precondition for the understanding (*Verständnis*) of an intended meaning. And this precondition is not conceivable as a product of intentional action. No language is created or established by purposeful actors. Linguistic change takes place and new languages can emerge in the course of long-term interactive processes; the emerging patterns channel the behaviour on which they also depend. The results are neither reducible to a system of rules nor to a finite inventory of meanings.

Weber’s remarks are cryptic and tentative, but in my opinion, there is no doubt that he is getting in touch with the problematic that Durkheim subsumed under the concept of collective representations and Castoriadis identified with the collective anonymous dimension of imaginary significations. This is, to put it another way, an early and significant anticipation of issues encountered but not resolved in Weber’s later work; they have to do with socio-cultural levels that transcend meaningful individual action and constitute universes of meaning in their own right. In the case of language and cultural orientations, they are better described as fluid and under-determined patterns than as orders.

In addition to the remarks on language, Weber mentions the use of money. In this case, he claims that over and above the *Vergesellschaftung* of the exchange partners, there is a meaningful relationship to an indeterminate and vaguely imagined surrounding group of money users [I/12: 418]. In contrast to language, it makes sense to inquire about the purposes involved in the genealogy of money. But there is another side to that point. For Weber, money is a paradigmatic example of rationally grounded inventions absorbed into habit, tradition and inarticulate belief (he used that example again in *Science as a Vocation*). The reliance on a general acceptability of money thus becomes a matter of *Einverständnis* and collective imagination. As with many other key apparatuses of modern life, the embodiment of rationalizing processes becomes a mechanism of routine. The routinization of charisma is a familiar Weberian theme, but there is also a routinization of rationality, and it illustrates a point made by Weber in the first part of the essay: the very meaning of rationality is difficult to define [I/12: 403]. It is, as we may add in light of his later writings, complicated by ambiguities and paradoxes, and one of the paradoxes is the

historical fact that rationalization does not *ipso facto* entail a growth of knowledge. It can, as we have seen, result in a retreat of knowledge and an advance of unknowing belief.

Concluding Remarks

There is, in principle, much more to be said on the first complete record of Weber's meta-theoretical thought during a decade and a half, and on its relevance to his substantive work. This question becomes particularly interesting in light of new perspectives opened up by the *Gesamtausgabe* and the editorial clarifications that have accompanied its progress. Two key conclusions from that evidence stand out: the unfinished character of the whole work, mentioned at the beginning, and the multi-focal pattern of Weber's progress. Not only was he working on two major projects, the construction of a historical-sociological corpus with universal ambitions (it would be misleading to call it a system) and a comparative analysis of religions and their cultural worlds (civilizations, as we would now call them). Further differentiations appear on both sides. The sociological analyses deal with several dimensions of social life, but their interrelations remain under-theorized; and more specifically, the ubiquitous influence of domination (*Herrschaft*) and thus – ultimately – of the political order is repeatedly emphasized by Weber, but the concepts used to map this domain are not fully in line with this broad understanding (on this tension between the pre-comprehension and conceptualization, see Breuer 2011). In the essays on world religions, Weber began with a focus on economic ethics and their grounding in different cultural visions of and attitudes to the world, thus continuing the exploration of paradoxical connections between ways of worldly involvement and modes of interpretive detachment that had been initiated in the *Protestant Ethic*. But as I have argued elsewhere [Arnason 2017], the detailed analyses of Chinese and Indian patterns are marked by growing interest in the religio-political nexus, without this shift translating into a general reconsideration of conceptual approaches to politics and religion. The rebalancing move from economic ethics towards a recognition of political centrality remains incomplete.

Finally, Weber's two substantive projects were accompanied by an effort to elaborate basic concepts, less sustained and not adequately anchored in his historical research. The final but inconclusive result of this work was the text on sociological concepts, first published as an introductory chapter of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (and later in an English translation, very misleadingly, as a separate book). Although Weber regarded it as ready for publication, we should not conclude that he meant it to be taken for an exhaustive inventory; he was, as the essays reviewed here show, too conscious of choices and limits imposed by historical context to make such pretensions. But even if the text is read as a continuation and concretization of reflections documented in earlier writings, we encounter problems that have less to do with the relativity of perspectives than with basic imperfections of Weber's own conceptualizing strategy. As Stefan Breuer [2011: 17–18] argues, the recurrent but variously labelled problematic of social orders that transcend individual action reveals but does not properly account for a trans-subjective level of social reality. This difficulty is apparent at the very beginning, in the unclear relationship between subjective meaning and *Sinnzusammenhang*; the latter notion is, to use a Hegelian expression, a gesture towards the objective spirit, but it is not followed up with a more explicit engagement.

There is, in principle, much more to be said on these matters, but further discussion will have to wait for another occasion. A thematic issue of this journal, on Weber's achievement and legacy, is planned for 2024, and will link up with the arguments outlined here.

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