

**Max Weber's
Methodology
The Unification
of the Cultural
and Social
Sciences**

FRITZ RINGER

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THE UNIFICATION OF THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETATION AND EXPLANATION



One of Max Weber's greatest achievements was his integration of two divergent perspectives that have divided theorists and practitioners of the historical, social, and cultural sciences since the nineteenth century.¹ The barrier between these two approaches was particularly high in Weber's own academic culture, but it has also appeared in other ages and scholarly contexts. Indeed, its remnants remain serious obstacles to thought in our own intellectual environment. To identify Weber's methodological project as the unification of the cultural and social sciences is thus to take a position on certain current issues as well.

The two lines of analysis may be called the 'interpretive' and the 'explanatory' approaches, and of the two, the interpretive one was certainly dominant in Weber's own world. According to that tradition, the chief task of the historian or student of culture is the 'hermeneutic' or interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*) of human 'meanings.' Thus historical actions are to be understood—not causally explained—in relation to the agents' intentions and beliefs. Texts, cultures, and historical epochs are to be conceived as systems of interrelated meanings or concepts, systems that can be elucidated only 'internally,' 'in their own terms.' Like other scholarly tradi-

1. See the Bibliography for Weber's relevant writings and abbreviations used. Note also that short forms of citation will be used throughout for works more fully described in the Bibliography.

tions, the interpretive line of analysis has been pursued with varying degrees of rigor. Some of its champions have portrayed the understanding of meanings as an intuitive leap or an empathetic identification. But this subjectivist emphasis has been supplemented or replaced by more complex models of interpretation, with results that can be validated in principle. Like other scholarly traditions, moreover, the interpretive approach has produced impressive exemplars of scholarly *practice*, even when it has been weakly or misleadingly defended in theory.

The explanatory tradition, too, has been richer in its practices than in its methodological codifications. With or without the benefit of theory, for example, historians have long been concerned with the causes of events. Some have distinguished long-term or 'underlying' from short-term or 'precipitating' causes; others have explained particular 'trends' or outcomes in terms of various 'contributing factors.' Such commonsense analytical tactics have prevailed across the whole spectrum of the cultural and social sciences; yet attempts to explicate them have run into problems, including the central difficulty of reconciling theories of explanation with theories of interpretation.

On the whole, spokesmen for the explanatory direction have minimized the methodological differences between the natural and the historical or cultural sciences. Some of them have believed—or been suspected of believing—that the facts about the past could be assembled to yield significant empirical generalizations, or to reveal transcultural regularities, 'constant conjunctions' in the sense of David Hume. A few theorists within the school have sought to ground the explanation of human actions in the 'laws' of psychology or physiology; or they have anticipated that such 'naturalist' strategies will succeed in the future. But the clearest 'neo-positivist' program in the contemporary cultural and social sciences is Carl G. Hempel's 'covering law model' of historical explanation. According to the strictest, 'deductive nomological' version of this model, to explain an event is to deduce the statement that it occurred from (a) specified initial conditions and (b) one or more universal laws that 'cover' the case.² Hempel has explicitly conceded that explanations

2. Hempel, "Function of General Laws," and "Reasons and Covering Laws."

in human affairs are likely to be imperfect in various ways, usually falling short of the standards required for prediction. Nevertheless, Hempel and other neo-positivists see no *logical* difference between explanations in the natural and the cultural sciences. Some of them have distrusted the interpretationist emphasis upon relations of meaning. In any case, a clear tension between prominent codifications of the explanatory and the interpretive traditions subsists in our own day, and that tension was markedly greater in Weber's own culture.

If Weber nevertheless resolved the tension—and thus achieved the unification of the cultural and social sciences, he did so by means of two crucial reformulations. To begin with, he adopted an intricate and flexible scheme of *singular causal analysis*, a type of analysis in which *particular* events, historical changes, or outcomes are traced to their causally relevant antecedents. The word singular should not be taken to imply a monocausal approach, or an exclusive emphasis upon single individuals or 'basic facts.' Only what is *explained* is singular, and this only in the logical sense that it is not general (like the ideal gas law, or Gresham's law), that it can be more or less specifically identified and located in space and time (like a volcanic eruption, the Defenestration of Prague,³ or the rise of Western capitalism). Weber's account of singular causal analysis was based upon probabilistic and counterfactual reasoning, not upon deductions from causal laws. His concepts of 'objective probability' and 'adequate causation' cannot be satisfactorily characterized in a few sentences; we will have to come back to them. But his overall conception is one of alternate processes and possible outcomes that are more or less probable, more or less strongly favored by relevant causes. The typical causal question is not whether a particular event necessarily followed upon one or more antecedent conditions, but why a certain historical path or outcome was what it was, *and not something else*. A cause is not a sufficient condition for the occur-

3. The Defenestration of Prague took place on May 23, 1618. At a meeting of Protestant rebels, two Catholic governors "were thrown from a window in the palace of Prague," a historical encyclopedia informs us. "They fell seventy feet into a ditch, but escaped with their lives." The incident had something to do with the origins of the Thirty Years War; but I don't know who gave it its wonderful name.

rence of the effect; it is a factor that, in conjunction with other background conditions, is comparatively likely and thus 'adequate' to bring about the outcome, rather than other possible alternatives. The world of the cultural and social sciences is an infinitely complex network of causal relations among particulars. We explain aspects of that world by means of probabilistic and counterfactual comparisons between what has actually happened and what would have happened in the absence of adequate causes—or conjunctions of causes.⁴

Along with this line of analysis, Weber developed a model of interpretation based upon the hypothetical attribution of rationality that dispensed with subjectivist *and* naturalist assumptions, while redefining the interpretive process as a form of singular causal analysis. In the interpretation of past actions, according to Weber, we begin by supposing that the relevant agents rationally pursued appropriate ends. The rationality we thus tentatively attribute to historical actors is typically a form of instrumental, 'technical,' or means-ends rationality, although we also project consistency in the agents' motives and beliefs—along with coherence in the texts of the past. What we thus heuristically ascribe to actors in the past is of course *our* rationality. (It is hard to see what else it could be, at least to begin with.) As we proceed to 'compare' the behaviors we anticipate with the courses of action pursued in reality, we adjust or supplement our models of rational action to take account of (a) divergences between our assumptions or modes of reasoning and those of the agents we seek to understand, and (b) irrational motivations and other intervening factors. Our ultimate objective is to construct a set of possibly heterogeneous motives and beliefs that are jointly adequate to account for the behaviors actually observed. Altogether, the interpretive procedures suggested by Weber closely resemble the probabilistic and counterfactual reasoning he associated with singular causal explanation. In that sense, Weber's model of interpretation *depended upon* his account of singular causal analysis, and *both were needed* to spell out an integrated methodology of the cultural and social sciences.⁵

4. Ringer, "Causal Analysis."

5. Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge*, pp. 18–21.

The close connection between interpretation and explanation in Weber's thought is further illustrated by his recommendation of 'ideal types' as heuristic devices. His ideal types are simplifications or 'one-sidedly' exaggerated characterizations of complex phenomena that can be hypothetically posited and then 'compared' with the realities they are meant to elucidate. Often, the ideal types Weber actually suggested were models of rational action; sometimes, they were patterns or processes traceable to simplified sets of causes. They permitted selected elements within causal or behavioral sequences to be ascribed to specified causes, motives, or beliefs. In any case, one cannot understand Weber's doctrine of ideal types apart from his broader vision of causal analysis and interpretation. For Weber and for us, in sum, ideal types make sense only to the extent that they permit the discriminations and counterfactual 'comparisons' involved in the construction of adequate interpretations or explanations.

In contrast to some recent commentators, I see Weber as a clarifier and occasional critic of the German historical tradition, not as a passive heir. I have elsewhere drawn upon Pierre Bourdieu's writings to define the 'intellectual field' as a constellation of positions that are meaningful only in relation to one another, a constellation further characterized by differences of power or authority, by the opposition between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and by the role of the cultural preconscious, of tacit 'doxa' that are transmitted by inherited practices, institutions, and social relations. Specifying the vague notion of 'context' in this way, one can see that individuals may stand in a variety of specific relationships to their intellectual and social environment.⁶

Thus all participants in an intellectual field should be expected to share at least some of the implicit assumptions upon which it rests, or some element of the pretheoretical 'habitus' it tends to perpetuate. Yet especially during periods of instability in the intellectual field or in the wider culture, mute doxa may be partly replaced by explicit contests between more or less orthodox and heterodox positions. At such junctures, the most rigorous and unconventional thinkers

6. Ibid., pp. 1–12.

will initiate a process of critical clarification. They will seek to codify and explicate inherited practices, to convert previously mute knowledge into explicit concepts—and thus also occasionally to expose as problematic what was formerly taken for granted. Weber's project, in sum, is best understood as a critical clarification of the German historical and interpretive tradition. He was not just a perpetuator of that tradition, or its champion in the face of 'positivism'; nor can he himself be identified as a 'positivist' in any coherent sense of that term. Rather, as I hope to show, he was at once a causalist and a sophisticated interpretationist, and he simultaneously renewed and transformed his methodological heritage.

Even while trying to 'locate' Weber in his intellectual field along these lines, I will attempt a rational reconstruction of his views in the light of certain *contemporary* texts on the methodology of the human sciences: I will refer to significant present-day accounts of causation and of rational interpretation. Weber himself explicitly recommended the 'ideal typical' use of contemporary models of rational thought as means of reconstructing the texts and belief systems of the past. He saw no conflict—as I see none—between such 'presentist' tactics and the ultimately 'past-minded' or 'contextualist' aim of rigorous interpretation. Indeed, I hope that my readers will find this essay an aid to their own reflections on the questions of method it raises.

Finally, a few words are in order about the relationship between Weber's methodological theories and his substantive work as a comparative historian and social scientist. I must concede that in principle, his theories cannot be fully appreciated apart from his analytical practice. Even his critical relationship to his intellectual field was shaped as much by substantive social and cultural considerations as by methodological issues, and yet this essay will be deliberately restricted to his methodology. I hope eventually to move beyond these artificial limitations in further work on Weber. In the meantime, I want merely to suggest that Weber's substantive achievements were thoroughly grounded in his methodological program.

ASPECTS OF WEBER'S INTELLECTUAL FIELD

1

Sometime around 1800, an educational revolution took place in the German states; it occurred much earlier there than it did in England or France, and it did so long before the industrial revolution reached Germany. One element in this transformation was the emergence of the research imperative, the expectation that university faculty will do original research and prepare their students to do the same. The other crucial component in the revolution was the establishment of educational and professional qualifications for future secondary teachers, and the ultimate introduction of similar credentials for other learned professions as well. In all modern European societies, advanced education eventually became almost as important a source of middle-class self-images as wealth and economic power; but this was true particularly in Germany, where the educational revolution took place earliest and the industrial revolution followed relatively late.

The radical renovation of the universities in Prussia and in other German states during the decades around 1800 assigned an especially important place to the faculties of arts and sciences, or of 'philosophy.' The reform movement was inspired by the new German Idealist philosophy, but also by a neohumanist enthusiasm for classical Greece and by the ideal of *Bildung*, meaning education in the sense of cultivation or personal self-development. While the concept of *Bildung* was of course subject to change over time, it came to represent a fairly stable view of education, and to inform the ideology of the

German *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated middle class. Thus *Bildung* always referred to the development of the individual's personal potential through an interpretive relationship with great texts. Roughly comparable concepts emerged in other cultures, but in Germany, the ethos of *Bildung* took on an almost metaphysical pathos. Much of German academic culture, Max Weber's intellectual field, can be understood only in the light of the model of *Bildung*. Thus the philological and historical disciplines, not the natural sciences, initially defined the norms of rigorous scholarship in nineteenth-century Germany. The word *Wissenschaft* referred to all forms of systematic knowledge; but a traditional animus against merely 'utilitarian' studies tended to identify 'pure' *Wissenschaft* with theoretical insight and with *Bildung*, rather than with practical intervention in the world. In the language of post-Kantian Idealism, the world exists so that, in coming to know it, the human mind may realize its potential. And in what came to be the German idea of the 'cultural state' (*Kulturstaat*), government found its legitimacy in the intellectual and cultural life it sustained and represented. This too was consistent with the norms of *Bildung*.¹

The German Historical Tradition

We can begin to understand the German historical tradition that Weber continued and clarified by considering the concept of *Bildung* as it was used in his time. A persistent model of *Bildung* implied that the self-cultivating reader could reproduce or relive (*Erleben*) the experiences or 'values' embodied in his texts, or that he could intuitively identify with their authors.² This subjectivist vision helped to sustain the claim that learners were totally transformed by the venerated sources in which they immersed them-

1. Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*; for German originals of texts cited there, see the translation as *Die Gelehrten*. For a summary analysis of *Bildung* as of 1890–1920, see Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge*; for the history of the concept, see esp. Vierhaus, "Bildung."

2. This is explicit, for example, in a dictionary definition from the interwar period. See *Der grosse Brockhaus*, 15th ed. (1928–35) cited in Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge*, pp. 95–96.

selves. Other, methodologically sounder models of interpretation were eventually evolved, including by Weber himself. Yet what may be called *the principle of empathy* long remained a temptation within the German historical tradition. It dictated, for example, that historians must 'put themselves in the place of' the historical agents they seek to understand. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with this injunction, as long as it is understood in a loose and metaphorical sense. Taken literally, however, it implies a process of empathetic reproduction that cannot be communicated or validated. The successful historian becomes a genius, and her powers a mysterious gift. The more she succeeds in identifying with agents in cultures other than her own, moreover, the more she raises what came to be called the 'problem of historicism' (*Historismus*): knowing only historically specific world views, we have no reason to exempt our own values and beliefs from the contingent flow of historicity.

The other element in the concept of *Bildung* that helped to shape the German historical tradition may be called the *principle of individuality*. The self-cultivating individual was consistently portrayed as absolutely unique, imbued with a distinctive potential for personal fulfillment.³ German theories of advanced education thus diverged sharply from a recurrent French emphasis upon the 'socialization' of the younger generation in the light of inherited norms. Nor was *Bildung* conceived as the enhancement of a universal capacity for rationality; it was the development of an incomparable individual. This radical cultural individualism could acquire a utopian significance. It also encouraged a positive view of both individual and cultural diversity; this is the implication that attracted John Stuart Mill to the thought of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Yet the principle of individuality could also make a mystery of the relationship between the incomparable individual and his group or culture.

Thus the religious historian Ernst Troeltsch, one of Weber's most thoughtful contemporaries, placed the "concept of individuality" at the heart of the German Romantic critique of the "mathematical-mechanical West European scientific spirit":

3. Along with notes 1 and 2 above, see Simmel, "Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur," in his *Philosophische Kultur*, p. 248.

The basic constituents of reality are not similar material or social atoms and universal laws . . . but differing unique personalities and individualizing formative forces. . . . The state and society are not created from the individual by way of contract and utilitarian rationality, but from supra-personal spiritual forces that emanate from the most important and creative individuals, the spirit of the people or the religious idea.⁴

Clearly, the principle of individuality excluded additive views of aggregates, including political groupings. Moreover, the commitment to individuality in the study of history made a problem of change. Since 'mechanical' causal processes were excluded, change could only be a teleological unfolding of preexistent potentialities or an "emanation" of intellectual or spiritual forces.

Given the purpose of this essay, I cannot attempt a full account of the German historical tradition.⁵ But I can call attention to the thought of a few significant individuals—or to aspects of their thought. Leopold von Ranke was commonly regarded as the dean of nineteenth-century German historians. He attained that status because he rigorously applied the source-critical methods transmitted by the philologists to an unprecedented range of historical sources. He was a great practitioner of the historian's craft. What he mainly recommended in his theoretical and methodological writings was a past-mindedness that recalled the principle of empathy. He wrote of "placing oneself back into [a given] time, into the mind of a contemporary."⁶ In line with the concept of the 'cultural state,' moreover, he saw states as the outward embodiments of "intellectual forces," "moral energies" that could be understood only by means of "empathy."⁷ That is why his history of interstate relations took its significance from the cultural conflicts they seemed to embody.

4. Troeltsch, *Naturrecht und Humanität*, pp. 13–14, cited in Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*, pp. 100–101.

5. But see Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*, pp. 97–102, and esp. Iggers, *German Conception of History*.

6. Ranke, *Die grossen Mächte*, p. 22.

7. Ibid., p. 60.

At the same time, Ranke persistently championed the principle of individuality. He not only believed that great statesmen and thinkers truly *stood for*, and thus legitimately guided, their nations; he also saw states themselves as “individualities,” with their own distinctive “tendencies.”⁸ Indeed, he repeatedly insisted upon the discontinuity between “the general” and “the particular.” “From the particular,” he wrote, “you may ascend to the general; but from general theory there is no way back to the intuitive understanding of the particular.”⁹ What the historian must start from, therefore, is “the unique intellectual and spiritual character of the individual state, its principle.”¹⁰ As a profoundly religious thinker, Ranke was able to accept each culture and epoch as utterly distinctive, and yet find meaning in world history as a whole.

Among nineteenth-century German theorists of history, only Johann Gustav Droysen equaled Ranke in authority. Having been available to students in manuscript for some time, his reflections on history were finally printed in 1882.¹¹ They rested upon a sharp contrast between explanation and interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*). Droysen associated the latter with intuitive insight, but also with the recovery of past human actions and beliefs from the “traces” they have left in the present. Like Wilhelm Dilthey after him, Droysen distinguished between processes “internal” to the human agent from their outward “expressions.”¹² The point of historical inquiry, he argued, is our need to orient ourselves in the “moral world,” finding a meaningful link between our past and our future. Much like Hegel, Droysen insisted that “the state is not the sum of the individuals it encompasses; nor does it arise from their wills or exist for the sake of their wills.” Adapting the neohumanist and Idealist theory of *Bildung*, he described the course of history as “humanity’s coming to consciousness.”¹³

8. Ranke, *Das politische Gespräch*, p. 25.

9. Ibid., p. 22.

10. Ibid., p. 19.

11. Droysen, *Grundriss der Historik*, pp. 415–488.

12. Ibid., pp. 422–424.

13. Ibid., pp. 435, 441–444.