



*Max Weber*

# ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

AN OUTLINE OF INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

*Edited by* Guenther Roth  
and Claus Wittich

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## List of Abbreviations

Some of the extant translations were extensively annotated by the original translators. This annotation was to the largest part retained, and in some cases complemented by the editors; we also used some of the annotation provided for the 4th German edition of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* by Johannes Winckelmann. The unsigned notes in Part One, chs. I-III are by Talcott Parsons, in Part Two, chs. VII-VIII by Max Rheinstein, and elsewhere by one of the editors as identified at the head of each section of notes. The following abbreviations were used to identify the authors of other notes:

- (GM): Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills
- (R): Guenther Roth
- (Rh): Max Rheinstein
- (W): Johannes Winckelmann
- (Wi): Claus Wittich

In the editorial notes, a number of abbreviations were used for works (or translations of works) by Max Weber; these are listed below. A group of further bibliographical abbreviations used only in Max Rheinstein's annotation to the "Sociology of Law" is given in Part Two, ch. VIII:i, n. 1 (pp. 658-661 below).

*AfS* or *Archiv*

*Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck). (A scholarly periodical edited by Max Weber, Edgar Jaffé and Werner Sombart from 1904 on.)

*Agrargeschichte*

*Die römische Agrargeschichte in ihrer Bedeutung für das Staats- und Privatrecht*. Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1891. (Weber's second dissertation.)

"Agrarverhältnisse"

"Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum," in *Handwörterbuch der Staats-*

*wissenschaften*, 3rd ed., I (1909), 52-188. Reprinted in *GAzSW*, 1-288. (Page references are to this reprint.)

#### *Ancient Judaism or AJ*

*Ancient Judaism*. Translated and edited by Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952. (A translation of "Das antike Judentum," Part III of "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen," first published in *AfS*, 1917-19, and of a posthumously published study, "Die Pharisäer," both in *GAzRS*, III.)

#### *Economic History*

*General Economic History*. Translated by Frank H. Knight. London and New York: Allen & Unwin, 1927; paperback re-issue, New York: Collier Books, 1961. (A translation of *Wirtschaftsgeschichte*. Page references in ch. VIII are to the 1927 edition, elsewhere to the 1961 paperback.)

#### *Fischoff*

*The Sociology of Religion*. Translated by Ephraim Fischoff, with an introduction by Talcott Parsons. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.

#### *GAzRS*

*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. 3 vols. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1920-21; unchanged re-issue 1922-23.

#### *GAzSS*

*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1924.

#### *GAzSW*

*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1924.

#### *GAzW*

*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. 2nd ed. revised and expanded by Johannes Winckelmann. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1951. (1st ed. 1922.)

#### *Gerth and Mills*

*From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Translated and edited by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.

#### *GPS*

*Gesammelte Politische Schriften*. 2nd ed. revised and expanded by Johannes Winckelmann, with an introduction by Theodor Heuss. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1958. (1st ed. München: Drei Masken Verlag, 1921.)

#### *Handelsgesellschaften*

*Zur Geschichte der Handelsgesellschaften in Mittelalter*. (Nach

*südeuropäischen Quellen*). Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1889. Reprinted in GAZSW, 312-443. (Page references are to the reprint. This was Weber's first dissertation.)

#### Protestant Ethic

*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons, with a foreword by R. H. Tawney. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958 (first publ. London, 1930). (A translation of "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus," GAZRS, I, 1-206; first published in AfS, 1904-05.)

#### Rechtssoziologie

*Rechtssoziologie*. Newly edited from the manuscript with an introduction by Johannes Winckelmann. ("Soziologische Texte," vol. 2.) Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1960 (2nd rev. ed. 1967). (This is the German edition of the "Sociology of Law" underlying the revised translation in Part Two, ch. VIII, below.)

#### Religion of China

*The Religion of China. Confucianism and Taoism*. Translated and edited by Hans H. Gerth. New edition, with an introduction by C. K. Yang. New York: Macmillan, 1964 (1st ed. Free Press, 1951). (A translation of "Konfuzianismus und Taoismus," Part I of "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen," first published in AfS, 1916, reprinted in GAZRS, I, 276-536.)

#### Religion of India

*The Religion of India. The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. Translated and edited by Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1958. (A translation of "Hinduismus und Buddhismus," Part II of "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen," first published in AfS, 1916-17, reprinted in GAZRS, II.)

#### Rheinstein and Shils

*Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society*. Translated by Edward Shils and Max Rheinstein, edited and annotated by Rheinstein. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954.

#### Shils and Finch

*The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Translated and edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1949. (A translation of three methodological essays, "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis," AfS, 1904; "Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet kulturwissenschaftlicher Logik," AfS, 1906; "Der Sinn der 'Wertfreiheit' der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften," Logos, 1917/18; reprinted in GAZW, 146-214, 215-290, 475-526.)

*Theory*

*The Theory of Social and Economic Organization.* Translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, edited with an introduction by Parsons. New York: The Free Press, 1964 (first publ. New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

*Wirtschaftsgeschichte or Universalgeschichte*

*Wirtschaftsgeschichte. Abriss der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte.* Edited from lecture scripts by Siegmund Hellmann and Melchior Palyi. München: Duncker & Humblot, 1923. (2nd ed. 1924; 3rd rev. ed. by Johannes Winckelmann, 1958.)

*WuG and WuG-Studienausgabe*

*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie.* 4th edition, revised and arranged by Johannes Winckelmann. 2 vols. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1956. *WuG-Studienausgabe* refers to the licensed paperback edition (2 vols.; Köln-Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1964) which already incorporates some of Winckelmann's further revisions for the forthcoming definitive 5th German edition.

## Preface to the 1978 Re-issue

After several years of being out of print, during which time it rapidly attained the status of a bibliophilic rarity, *Economy and Society* is now for the first time available in this country and abroad as a hardcover and a paperback, thanks to the cooperation of the American publishers who have separately published segments of the work in older versions.

The present re-issue is identical with our 1968 edition, although some errata are eliminated. In the meantime, Professor Johannes Winckelmann, on whose fourth German edition of 1956 and 1964 our own edition is based, has completed his fifth and final edition with three hundred pages of annotations—a feat that only a member of his scholarly generation could have accomplished (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1976). When the English editors prepared their own edition, they cooperated closely with Winckelmann in clarifying many dubious passages in the posthumously published work and in identifying literary and historical references, but unfortunately, the new annotations of the fifth edition could not be included in the present English re-issue.

Several important Weber translations have appeared since 1968. Edith E. Graber translated Weber's essay "On Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology" (M.A. thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Oklahoma, 1970). This essay, the most important definitions of which appear here in Appendix I, was a fragmentary first draft of the general conceptual underpinnings for the work, but Weber decided to publish it separately in 1913. Just before conceiving the idea of *Economy and Society* Weber finished his great encyclopedic essay on the economic and political history of antiquity, which Alfred Heuss, one of the most respected German classicists, has called "the most original and illuminating study yet made of the economic and social development of antiquity." This work, discussed here in relation to *Economy and Society* in the introduction (xlii-lvii), has now been translated by R. I. Frank under the title *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

Most of Weber's methodological critiques, which prepared the way for the positive formulation of his sociology in *Economy and Society*, have now



been translated. Guy Oakes translated and edited Roscher and Knies: *The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* (New York: The Free Press, 1976) and *Critique of Stammer* (New York: The Free Press, 1977). An excursus on the Stammer critique is found in *Economy and Society*, pp. 325-32 below. Oakes has also translated and edited Georg Simmel's *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), to which Weber refers in his prefatory note to ch. I, p. 3 below. Louis Schneider translated "Marginal Utility Theory and the So-Called Fundamental Law of Psychophysics," *Social Science Quarterly*, 56:1, 1975, 21-36. This leaves untranslated only Weber's demolition of the "energeticist" theories of culture of the famed chemist and natural philosopher Wilhelm Ostwald, and some scattered but important methodological observations in his substantive writings.

The 1968 introduction by Roth was intended in part as a supplement to Reinhard Bendix's *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (1960), which for the first time presented comprehensively the substance of Weber's comparative sociology of politics, law and religion as it is found in *Economy and Society* and the *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion* (containing the studies of the Protestant ethic and sects in relation to the spirit of capitalism and in contrast to the religious and social order of China, India and Ancient Judaism). This well-known study too was re-issued in 1978 by the University of California Press with a new introduction by Roth, which covers the Weber literature accumulated since 1960. One further yield from Bendix's and Roth's concern with Weber was a joint volume, *Scholarship and Partisanship*, also published by the University of California Press in 1971. Moreover, Roth has continued his methodological exploration of *Economy and Society* in three other essays, "Socio-Historical Model and Developmental Theory," *American Sociological Review*, 40:2, April 75, 148-57; "History and Sociology," *British Journal of Sociology*, 27:3, Sept. 76, 306-18; and "Religion and Revolutionary Beliefs," *Social Forces*, 55:2, Dec. 76, 257-72.

An up-to-date bibliography of the almost limitless secondary literature is Constans Seyfarth and Gert Schmidt, eds., *Max Weber Bibliographie: Eine Dokumentation der Sekundärliteratur* (Stuttgart: Enke, 1977), 208 pp. For the latest bibliography of Weber's own writings, see Dirk Käsler, "Max-Weber-Bibliographie," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 27:4, 1975, 703-30.

For the present re-issue the editors are greatly indebted to the unflagging interest and efforts of Mr. Grant Barnes of the University of California Press and to the support of Mr. Georg Siebeck, of the firm of Mohr-Siebeck in Tübingen, the German publisher of Weber's works.

Finally, we dedicate with sorrow this edition to the memory of Carolyn Cain Roth (1934-1975), who for several years lived with the burden of our intense labors, showing great forbearance and retaining the salutary distance of an artistic vision, which should always balance the sober concerns of scholarship.

BAINBRIDGE ISLAND, WASHINGTON

Scarsdale, New York

February 1977

Guenther Roth

Claus Wittich

## Preface

This is the first complete English edition of *Economy and Society*. All hitherto unavailable chapters and sections have been translated and the annotation has been considerably expanded. The Appendix contains a brief terminological supplement and one of Weber's major political essays. All previously translated parts used here have been thoroughly revised and many passages have been rewritten. The original translators of these chapters are absolved from all responsibility for the present version of their work. We would like to thank Ephraim Fischhoff for going over our revision of his translation of the "Sociology of Religion" (Part Two, ch. VI) and for making further suggestions and offering other help. However, he too should not be held responsible for the final version.

A number of extant translations were completely replaced: in Part One, ch. IV, "Status Groups and Classes"; in Part Two, ch. III:3, "The Regulation of Sexual Relations in the Household," ch. IV:3, "The Oikos," ch. XIV:i-ii, "Charisma and Its Transformations," and ch. XVI, "The City." This last book-length chapter was newly translated by Wittich; all other new translations were first done by Roth. Our strategy of translation is explained in the Introduction.

The following earlier translations of sections of *Wirirtschaft und Gesellschaft* have been used and revised with the permission of the publishers, which is gratefully acknowledged.

Ephraim Fischhoff, trans., *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 1-274; now Part Two, ch. VI;

Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. and eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 159-244, 253-262; now Part Two, chs. IX:3-6, XI, and XIV:iii;

Ferdinand Kogegar, trans., "The Household Community" and "Ethnic

Groups," in Talcott Parsons *et al.*, eds., *Theories of Society* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), vol. I, pp. 296-298, 302-309; now Part Two, ch. III:1, ch. IV:2, and ch. V:2;

Talcott Parsons, ed. (A. M. Henderson and T. Parsons, trans.), *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964; originally published by Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 87-423; now Part One, chs. I-III;

Max Rheinstein, ed. (Edward Shils and Max Rheinstein, trans.), *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 11-348; now Part Two, ch. I, chs. VII-VIII, ch. IX: 1-2, and ch. X.

Without the dedication and hard labor of the previous translators the present edition might never have been undertaken. Hans Gerth, who spent a singular amount of time on the translation of Weber's works, deserves special recognition. The broadest contribution to the reception of Weber's thought has clearly been made by Talcott Parsons' translations and writings.

Our special gratitude goes to Prof. Johannes Winckelmann, the German editor of Weber's works and head of the Max Weber Institute at the University of Munich, who gave us access to his text revisions for the forthcoming 5th edition of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* and always freely shared his thoughts on textual and other problems.

Finally, we want to thank Hans L. Zetterberg, who combines scholarship and entrepreneurship; he held out the challenge, patiently waited for the manuscript, and then saw it through to its publication. We are also grateful to Mr. Robert Palmer for preparing the index and to Mr. Sidney Solomon of the Free Press for supervising the technical preparation of the work and for designing the volumes.

BERLIN AND NEW YORK

March 1968

Guenther Roth

Claus Wittich

# INTRODUCTION

by Guenther Roth

*We know of no scientifically ascertainable ideals. To be sure, that makes our efforts more arduous than those of the past, since we are expected to create our ideals from within our breast in the very age of subjectivist culture; but we must not and cannot promise a fool's paradise and an easy road to it, neither in thought nor in action. It is the stigma of our human dignity that the peace of our souls cannot be as great as the peace of one who dreams of such a paradise.*

Weber in 1909

## 1. A Claim

This work is the sum of Max Weber's scholarly vision of society. It has become a constitutive part of the sociological imagination as it is understood today. *Economy and Society* was the first strictly empirical comparison of social structure and normative order in world-historical depth. In this manner it transcended the plenitude of "systems" that remained speculative even as they claimed to establish a science of society.

Decades have passed since the manuscript was begun and left unfinished, yet few works in the realm of social science have aged so little. Its impact has been considerable over the years, although in a fragmented and erratic fashion as the various parts became available only piecemeal to the English reader or remained altogether out of reach. Weber's ideas on social action and sociological typology, on instrumental and substantive rationality, on formal and material justice, on bureaucracy and charisma, on religious beliefs and economic conduct, have been gradually assimilated by social scientists—by way of accurate reception, imaginative adaptation and, not too infrequently, inventive misinterpretation.

The renaissance of comparative study in the nineteen-sixties has restored some of the original intellectual setting of *Economy and Society*.

This has given a new pertinency to the work and is one reason for the complete English edition; another is the hoped-for correction of the uneven influence exerted by the isolated parts. Now the work has a fair chance to be understood as a whole, and its readers have a better opportunity to comprehend it—this will be a test for both.

*Economy and Society* is Weber's only major didactic treatise. It was meant to be merely an introduction, but in its own way it is the most demanding "text" yet written by a sociologist. The precision of its definitions, the complexity of its typologies and the wealth of its historical content make the work, as it were, a continuous challenge at several levels of comprehension: for the advanced undergraduate who gropes for his sense of society, for the graduate student who must develop his own analytical skills, and for the scholar who must match wits with Weber.

*Economy and Society* is part of the body of knowledge on which Weber drew in his unwitting testament, his speeches on "Science as a Vocation" and "Politics as a Vocation," which he delivered shortly after the end of the first World War before a small number of politically bewildered students. By now thousands of students have read these two rhetorical masterpieces with their poignant synopsis of his philosophical and political outlook as well as of his scholarly animus. Yet the very compactness of the two speeches impedes easy comprehension. *Economy and Society* elaborates much that is barely visible in them. However, it minimizes the propagation of Weber's own philosophical and political views, since it wants to establish a common ground for empirical investigation on which men of different persuasions can stand; in contrast to some of the methodological polemics, *Economy and Society* is meant to set a positive example. Yet there is more to it than is readily apparent. The work contains a theory of the possibilities and limitations of political democracy in an industrialized and bureaucratized society, a theory that Weber considered not only empirically valid but politically realistic as against a host of political isms: romanticist nationalism, agrarianism, corporate statism, syndicalism, anarchism, and the Marxism of the time. Hence, there is in the work an irreducible element of what Weber considered political common sense, but this does not vitiate the relative value-neutrality of the conceptual structure. Moreover, the work is full of irony, sarcasm and the love of paradox; a dead-pan expression may imply a swipe at the Kaiser, status-conscious professors or pretentious *littérateurs*.<sup>1</sup> And finally, with all its seemingly static typologies, the

1. Ironical formulations and wordplays are hard to render in translation, and it would have been self-defeating pedantry to explain more than a fraction in the editorial notes.

work is a sociologist's world history, his way of reconstructing the paths of major civilizations.

## 2. *Sociological Theory, Comparative Study and Historical Explanation*

*Economy and Society* builds a sociological scaffolding for raising some of the big questions about the origins and the possible directions of the modern world. Weber set out to find more specific and empirically tenable answers to those questions than had been given previously. He belonged to the small number of concerned men who shared neither the wide-spread belief in Progress, which was about to be shattered by the first World War, nor the new philosophical irrationalism, which had begun to appeal to many younger men.

Weber's image of "economy and society" is so widely shared today among research-oriented students of society that in its *most general* formulation it no longer appears exceptional, unless we remember that it drew the lines against Social Darwinism, Marxism and other isms of the time. Weber rejected the prevalent evolutionary and mono-causal theories, whether idealist or materialist, mechanistic or organicist; he fought both the reductionism of social scientists and the surface approach of historians, both the persistent search for hidden "deeper" causes and the ingrained aversion against historically transcendent concepts. He took it for granted that the economic structure of a group was one of its major if variable determinants and that society was an arena for group conflicts. He did not believe, however, in the laws of class struggle, jungle or race; rather, he saw men struggle most of the time under created laws and within established organizations. Given the incomplete reception of his work, the roles he attributed to force and legitimacy have been overemphasized in isolation. *Economy and Society* clearly states that men act as they do because of belief in authority, enforcement by staffs, a calculus of self-interest, and a good dose of habit. However, Weber was not much interested in master-key statements on the nature of Society and was set against the "need for world-formulae" (*Weltformelbedürfnis*). Unlike Engels, he saw no grounds for assuming an "ultimately determining element in history." *Economy and Society* demonstrates the rather concrete level on which he wanted to approach sociological theory and historical generalization.

After 1903 Weber clarified his methodological position toward the cultural and social sciences in half a dozen essays.<sup>2</sup> But in *Economy and*

2. Cf. 1. Roscher und Knies und die logischen Probleme der historischen Nationalökonomie (1903/6), 145 pp.; 2. Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaft-



Society he focussed on those concepts and typologies that would directly aid the researcher. He developed his sociological theory—his *Kategorienlehre*, as he sometimes called it—as an open-ended, yet logically consistent formulation of fundamental aspects of social action, on the one hand, and of historical types of concerted action (“general ideal types”) on the other. The construction of such trans-epochal and trans-cultural types as, for example, enterprise and *oikos* or bureaucracy and hierocracy, makes sociological theory historically comparative. In this way sociological theory provides the researcher with the dimensional concepts and empirical types that are prerequisites for the kind of comparative mental experiment and imaginative extrapolation without which causal explanation is impossible in history.

Weber's sociological theory, then, grew out of wide-ranging historical research and was meant to be applied again to history, past and in the making. In addition to theory in this generically historical sense, he employed substantive theories of differing degrees of historical specificity:

1. Theories explaining a relatively homogeneous historical configuration (“individual ideal type”), such as the spirit of capitalism;
2. Theories about relatively heterogeneous, but historically inter-related configurations, such as the “economic theory of the ancient states of the Mediterranean”;
3. Theories (“rules of experience”) that amount to a summary of a number of historical constellations, without being testable propositions in the strict sense: for example, the observation that foreign conquerors and native priests have formed alliances, or that reform-minded monks and secular rulers have at times cooperated in spite of their ineradicable antagonism. The occurrence of the former kind of collaboration, as in ancient Judaism, or its failure to come about in Hellas, due to the battle at Marathon,<sup>3</sup> may have far-reaching historical consequences—one reason for the scholar's interest in such historical “summaries.”

licher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis (1904), 68 pp.; 3. *Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik* (1905), 75 pp.; 4. *Stammmlers "Überwindung" der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung* (1907), 68 pp., with a posthumously published postscript (20 pp.); 5. *Die Grenznutzlehre und das "psychophysische Grundgesetz"* (1908), 15 pp.; 6. *"Energetische" Kulturtheorien* (1909), 26 pp.; 7. *Über den Sinn der "Wertfreiheit" der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften* (1917/18), prepared as a memorandum for a meeting of the Verein für Sozialpolitik in 1913. All are reprinted in *GAZW* (for this and other abbreviations used for Weber's works, see the list following this Introduction). For English versions of essays 2, 3, and 7, see Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, trans. and eds.; Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1949).

3. On the battle of Marathon and the category of objective possibility, cf. Weber in Shils and Finch (eds.), *Methodology* . . . , 174.

Of course, the explanation of any specific historical event also remains "theoretical" in that it subsumes many discrete actions and is merely plausible, because unverifiable in the manner of the experimental sciences. Weber was acutely aware of this difficulty, which was exacerbated by the scarcity and unreliability of the sources in most areas of his investigations, ancient and modern.

Sociologists live, and suffer, from their dual task: to develop generalizations and to explain particular cases. This is the *raison d'être* of sociology as well as its inherent tension. It would be incompatible with the spirit of Weber's approach to value the transhistorical ("functionalist") generalizations of any formal sociological theory more highly than the competent analysis of a major historical phenomenon with the help of a fitting typology. The sociology of *Economy and Society* is "Clio's handmaiden"; the purpose of comparative study is the explanation of a given historical problem. Analogies and parallels, which at the time tended to be used for evolutionary and morphological constructions and spurious causal interpretations, had for Weber merely instrumental purpose:

Whoever does not see the *exclusive* task of "history" in making itself superfluous through the demonstration that "everything has happened before" and that all, or almost all, differences are matters of *degree*—an obvious truth—will put the stress on the *changes* (*Verschiebungen*) that emerge in spite of all parallels, and will use the similarities only to establish the *distinctiveness* (*Eigenart*) vis-à-vis each other of the two orbits [i.e., the ancient and the medieval]. . . . A genuinely critical *comparison* of the developmental stages of the ancient polis and the medieval city . . . would be rewarding and fruitful—but only if such a comparison does *not* chase after "analogies" and "parallels" in the manner of the presently fashionable general schemes of development; in other words, it should be concerned with the *distinctiveness* of each of the two developments that were finally so different, and the purpose of the comparison must be the causal *explanation* of the difference. It remains true, of course, that this causal explanation requires as an indispensable preparation the isolation (that means, abstraction) of the individual components of the course of events, and for each component the orientation toward rules of experience and the formulation of *clear concepts* without which causal attribution is nowhere possible. This should be taken into account especially in the economic field in which inadequate conceptual precision can produce the most distorted evaluations.<sup>4</sup>

Weber had in mind men like Wilhelm Roscher, Ranke's pupil, for whom

4. "Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum," in *GAzSW*, 257, 288. (Cf. below, n. 27.)



peoples are “generic biological entities”—as Hintze put it quite adequately. Roscher has explicitly stated that for science the development of peoples is in principle *always the same*, and in spite of appearances to the contrary, in truth nothing new happens under the sun, but always the old with “random” and hence scientifically irrelevant admixtures. This obviously is a specifically “scientific” (*naturwissenschaftliche*) perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Weber’s comparative approach was directed against theories of historical sameness as well as theories of universal stages. He opposed in particular the interpretation of Antiquity, including ancient capitalism, as a “modern” phenomenon; this interpretation was advanced by “realistic” historians reacting against the humanist tradition with its idealization of classic Greece and Rome. Weber equally rejected the contemporary stage theories of rural and urban economic development. He, too, believed in a “general cultural development,” but he focussed on the dynamics of specific historical phenomena, their development as well as their decline. For this purpose he employed several comparative devices (which will be illustrated below, p. xliii): (a) the identification of similarities as a first step in causal explanation; (b) the negative comparison; (c) the illustrative analogy; (d) the metaphorical analogy.

The ideal type, too, has a comparative purpose. It was Weber’s solution to the old issue of conceptual realism versus nominalism, but in the context of the time it was his primary answer to the scientific notion of law and to the evolutionary stage theories. Weber wrote much more on the logical status of the ideal type than on his comparative strategy. This imbalance is reflected in the literature; a great deal has been written about the ideal type, but very little that is pertinent to the art of comparative study. As historical “summaries” of varying degrees of specificity, ideal types are compared with slices of historical reality.<sup>6</sup> For the researcher the issue is not whether the ideal type is less “real” than other historical concepts; rather, his task consists in choosing the level of conceptual specificity appropriate for the problem at hand. Weber’s ideal types, as the reader can himself see, involve a theory about the dynamics and alternative courses of the phenomena involved. They are not meant

5. “Roscher und Knies . . .,” in *GAzW*, 23.

6. “All expositions for example of the ‘essence’ of Christianity are ideal types enjoying only a necessarily very relative and problematic validity when they are intended . . . as the historical portrayal of facts. On the other hand, such presentations are of great value for research and of high systematic value for expository purposes when they are used as conceptual instruments for *comparison* and the *measurement* of reality. They are indispensable for this purpose.” Weber in Shils and Finch (eds.), *Methodology* . . . , 97.