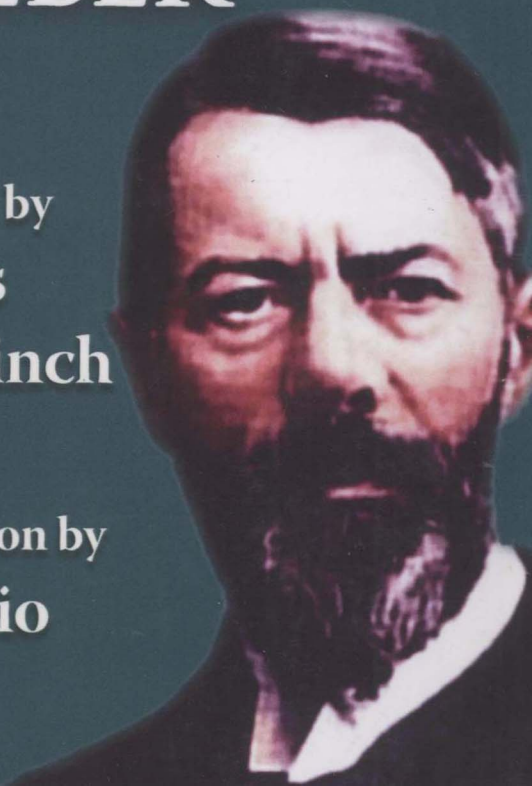


METHODOLOGY of SOCIAL SCIENCES

MAX WEBER

Translated and edited by
Edward A. Shils
and Henry A. Finch

With a new introduction by
Robert J. Antonio
and Alan Sica



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Transaction Publishers
New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2010024177

ISBN: 978-1-4128-1319-8

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Weber, Max, 1864-1920.

Methodology of social sciences / Max Weber.

p. cm.

Originally published: Free Press, 1949.

“The book is a reprint from a 1949 printing translated by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. The book has a new introduction written by Robert J. Antonio and Alan Sica.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4128-1319-8 (alk. paper)

1. Social sciences--Research--Methodology. I. Title.

H62.W393 2010

300.72--dc22

2010024177

METHODOLOGY
of
SOCIAL
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Introduction to the Transaction Edition

Robert J. Antonio and Alan Sica

I

Weber's Thoughts on Methods in Context

When this book first appeared over sixty years ago, knowledge of Weber in the Anglophone sphere was based on only a few of his many works, and even though graduate students in the social sciences were still at that time required to read French and German, few of them were sufficiently proficient to comprehend Weber's famously convoluted originals. So the rash of English translations of Weber's major works that appeared during the 1950s, imperfect as some of them proved to be, were essential to the widening influence that his ideas were to have among an ever-growing international audience in sociology, political science, comparative religion, history, and allied fields. Of all those postwar translations (for a comprehensive listing, see Sica, 2004), none was so broadly influential as Weber's essays on methodology and epistemology. Yet even in translation, the essays remained hard to follow, so inevitably a few catch-phrases from this rocky landscape began to be repeated ritually when substantiating assorted viewpoints—"ideal-types," "heuristic device," and "*Verstehen*" among the favorites—while most of the material presented in these dense pages was left for specialists to sift through as the occasion arose.

The purpose of this new edition is to remind another generation of scholars, perhaps less enthralled or worried by these fundamental questions than were their predecessors, that Weber's intelligence and wide learning still repay study, simply because he remains unmatched in sociological creativity and intellectual capacity of the macro-analytic variety. Durkheim "sociologized" the normative world more nimbly,

Simmel's portrait of interpersonal life was more subtle and penetrating, and Marx created a more coherent political and intellectual agenda. But when it comes to mixing high-level historical knowledge with social science methods, Weber is still the beginning point of the most fruitful work to date. And the conceptual and axiological problems he posed for himself in 1904, as incoming co-editor of an important social science journal, remain with us this long century later. What distinguishes his vigorous attack on the questions at hand from today's more resigned frame of mind lies in the context of his professional ties, as well as his thorough knowledge of socio-economic literature and history (Roman, medieval, and modern). We can continue to learn from him since he "connected the dots," many of which we no longer even perceive as suitable for fruitful linking.

Already thirty years ago, Toby Huff in two notable essays exposed the exceedingly complex context of Weber's "tortuous" reasoning—the standard characterization among specialists—during this period of his labors. Huff showed that Weber argued with and against the philosophical psychologist Franz Brentano, Heinrich Rickert's epistemology, Gustav Schmoller and Carl Menger over methods best suited to the social sciences, Wilhelm Dilthey's complex theory of understanding, the remnants of Hegelian "emanationism" via Emil Lask, Mill's *Logic*, and other positions long since forgotten (Huff, 1981; 1982). Huff remarks, "Weber was widely read in the philosophy of science of his day" (p. 466), which understates the case. All this constitutes a thick soup that requires very substantial energy to digest, and were it not for Weber's dialogue with these and other sources, much of this heated debate would likely seem by now hardly worth the trouble to comprehend.

Marianne Weber and her associates persuaded J.C.B. Mohr of Tübingen to publish in 1922 a 579-page collection of essays by her recently deceased husband, which they entitled *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Collected Essays on Scientific Methodology/Epistemology). It was one of four, large, free-standing volumes of posthumously collected works. In addition, his three volumes canvassing comparative religions definitively redirected research in that field, yet because they were heavily historical in nature, they remained less important for non-specialists than were his more broadly "philosophical" works treating methodological practice and reasoning. *The Protestant Ethic and the*

Spirit of Capitalism had first appeared in 1904/05 as two journal articles, and immediately caused a firestorm among economists, historians, sociologists (few in number at the time), and others with vested interests in the argument it posed. Yet as famous as it remained, its contribution to methodological matters was also slight, except as an object-lesson in how to carry out comparative-historical research. Aside, then, from his magnum opus, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Economy and Society*), during the remaining years of the century the *Wissenschaftslehre* became the most important set of Weber's essays in terms of global influence, since many scholars were at that time refining the philosophy of social science methods in uneasy relation to both the natural sciences and the humanities. They looked to Weber because he was uniquely able to merge exacting historical and economic knowledge with the fine points of philosophical disquisition in a way that his notable contemporaries and teachers—Eduard Meyer, Heinrich Rickert, Rudolf Stammler, Wilhelm Windelband, Karl Knies, Wilhelm Roscher, and many others—did less handily.

Constructing these essays caused Weber enormous psychological discomfort—a “burden and a torment” (Huff, 1981: 470)—since he wrote many of them just as his partial recovery from complete emotional collapse had begun, around 1902. In her indispensable biography, Marianne Weber reflected on the difficulty her husband experienced while trying to define social science methodology for his attentive, yet highly competitive, colleagues:

His first works were primarily the expression of a young historian with an insatiable hunger for material, a man who was so moved by the development and decline of a vanished life that a reflection of that life was resuscitated in him.... Then, in 1902, after the severe crisis that would last for a long time, Weber's creative impulse was directed toward an entirely different intellectual field. From an active life as an academic teacher and politician he was banished to the contemplative atmosphere of his quiet study. Whether for external reasons or because of an inner compulsion, he now withdrew from reality in his capacity of thinker as well and devoted himself to thinking about thought and about the logical and epistemological problem of his science. (Marianne Weber, 1975: 306)

Like many academics, Weber was prodded by colleagues at the University of Heidelberg to write for a festschrift (honoring their university), and like scholars before and since, his ambition far outstripped the available time, so he failed to supply the promised chapter. Since “theory had

always interested him as much as history” (p. 307), particularly theorizing pertaining to the logic of socio-economic and historical inquiry, and the contrast between the normative and the extant, he gradually overcame his inhibitions and psychological dilemma, and managed to produce a series of dense, lengthy treatises in this general area, even at great personal cost. They included *Roscher and Knies* (1906), *Critique of Stammer* (1907), and several shorter works. The former came to be known privately between Max and Marianne as the “essay of sighs,” Max calling it a “wretched ‘patchwork job’ (*Stöpserei*),” to which the ever-supportive Marianne responded, “How terrible that you had to begin with such a devilishly difficult investigation! It is more of a strain than empirical work” (Radkau, 2009: 250-51). She was surely correct. Weber’s sustained, sometimes irascible, attacks on Roscher, Knies, and particularly Stammer, are easily the least studied of his works in English, having nearly fallen into oblivion since the translations appeared thirty-five years ago. This reflects less on their quality as intellectual achievements than on their sheer difficulty of apprehension. Thus, it was wise of Shils and Finch in the late 1940s to select from these many works on method several articles which, though different from each other in scope and intentions, cohered in their serious attention to the subtleties of “doing social science” in a way that was philosophically and practically defensible. (Weber did not use the word *sociology* until quite late in life, and even then usually in quotation marks, but it is clear that his implied “rules of sociological method” were as much aimed at this new discipline as Durkheim’s had been in 1895.)

Continuing her analysis of Weber’s writing during this crucial period—one of her long book’s most useful chapters—Marianne observes that “Weber did not care about the systematic presentation of his thinking, for he did not wish to be a professional logician. Even though he valued methodological insights highly, he did not value them for their own sake but appreciated them as indispensable tools that helped to clarify the possibilities of perceiving *concrete* problems. And he attached no importance whatever to the form in which he presented his wealth of ideas” (p. 309, emphasis added). She positions Weber in the *Methodenstreit*, highlighting the difficulty of reconciling freedom (now better known as “agency”) with deterministic relations (“laws”) which remained then, as now, the holy grail of natural science. Weber and his teachers, then colleagues, were perplexed

by trying to reconcile human initiative with the search for stable regularities of conduct. Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, Georg Simmel, Rickert, Schmoller, Menger, Droysen, and many others fought it out over several decades, many using Mill's *Philosophy of Scientific Method* as a touchstone for debate. Marianne summarizes Weber's contribution: "Thus he brought works by Dilthey, Wundt, Simmel, Münsterberg, Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld, Johannes von Kries, Eduard Meyer, Rudolf Stammler, and others into his discussions. From Rickert's *kulturwissenschaftlich* [cultural-science] logic Weber took a doctrine that he later supplemented with his own sociological method—that the sciences are separated not only by differences in *subject matter*, but also by differences in *interest* in the material and the formulation of questions" (p. 311). (Specialists have refined our view of Weber's relationship with Rickert and others, but these emendations do not change the main point; see e.g., Bruun, Eliaeson, Huff, McFalls, Oakes, Ringer.)

This may seem by today's methodological standards an uninspired debate, yet the larger questions proved intractable rather than solvable, and the social sciences simply "moved on" via correlation analyses—which, it should be noted, was not unknown to the scholars in Weber's large circle, but which seemed to them an insufficiently encompassing posture to assume for the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Indeed, Weber discussed the limits of correlational analysis (what he called "parallelism"), the shortcomings of which that he saw then remaining with us, despite advances in applied technique. As Marianne wisely observed, "unlike the natural sciences, their [social sciences] cognitive goal is not a system of general concepts and laws, but the special character of concrete phenomena and connections, although in this they also use the concept and rules of events as means of cognition ... human action is accessible to us through peculiar mental processes that are not applicable to natural phenomena—namely *understanding* through reliving [*Nacherleben*], which makes it possible to interpret the contexts of meaning [*Sinnzusammenhänge*]" (p. 312).

Debates about the role of *Verstehen* in the social sciences exhausted themselves some time ago, yet in today's larger sociological arena, they have been forgotten rather than transcended. It is easier, of course, to correlate one variable with another than to "interpret" the "meaning" of human action, or inaction, or any form of social life, so the long-fought disputes which so bothered Weber's German colleagues have slipped into irrelevance for many sociological researchers—despite the fact that plausible and "objective"

interpretation is usually their unvoiced goal. Compare today's blasé attitude toward interpretative finesse with Weber's insistent examination: "Weber teaches: the truth content of empirical sciences, whose point of departure is *extrascientific*, is created by subjecting the connections that were at first grasped 'understandingly' or 'intuitively' to the rules of rigorous thinking—above all to the rules of 'causal attribution' ... '*Only what is causally explained is scientifically treated.*'" Basing himself on the ingenious teachings of the physiologist von Kries, Weber analyzed the complicated logical operations by which a valid historical perception of concrete events is created ... the natural sciences and the historical cultural sciences use the same types of logical tools. Cultural science ... seeks the rules governing events and creates general concepts for a better understanding and interpretation of the concrete" (p. 313). It is this style of analysis that has given Weber's essays their lasting significance.

Several terms appear repeatedly in these essays, so much so as to attain totemic status, for example, "causal," "logic," and "concrete." The latter two apparently meant a great deal to Weber in that Rickert and others had dwelt on the "logical problems" thought to be peculiar to the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and Weber wanted to continue this conversation, having assimilated all his predecessors' points of view. In one footnote in *Roscher and Knies* bearing on Simmel's *Philosophy of History* (Weber, 1968: 48n1; Weber, 1975: 239, n.13), Weber used the word "*konkreten*" three times and "*individuellen*" five more, all eight of which Guy Oakes translated as "concrete" (to Huff's annoyance; Huff, 1981: 470). Weber was keen to show that he, as historian and economist, dealt not with what might be, ought to be, or should have been, but with what "was the case." Their journal, the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft*, would provide guidance to interested readers by way of "objectively" accurate information, but without any imposition of normative suggestions for "correct" action. That task Weber and his scholarly colleagues would leave to metaphysicians and theologians, whose stock and trade was the dispensation of value-positions rather than factually precise information.

Marianne Weber claims that "Weber did not care about the systematic presentation of his thinking, for he did not wish to be a professional logician." And yet he thought hard and at length about these problems in a style that reflected his knowledge of professional philosophers' discussions. Nevertheless, his "concern with logical questions" grew from "a