

Max Weber and Interpretive Sociology

Max Weber was born into a wealthy family from Western Germany, whose fortune and tradition were in the field of textile manufacturing. Weber's father was a prominent jurist, active in municipal and national affairs. Weber spent most of his youth in his parents' household, which was a meeting place for influential liberal politicians and professors from the University of Berlin. Thus, Weber developed intellectual interests from early in life.

After concluding his secondary education (the *gymnasium*), Weber attended the University of Heidelberg as a law student. In 1883 he went to Strasbourg for a year of military training and returned to Strasbourg for brief periods in 1885, 1887, and 1888. He studied law at the universities of Göttingen and Berlin from 1884 to 1885 and took his examinations in law in 1886. He continued to study in Berlin and received his law degree from Göttingen. From 1886 to 1890 Weber pursued graduate studies in law at the University of Berlin, carrying on independent work in the field of legal history (*A Contribution to the History of Business Organizations*, 1889). There, his interests concerned the various legal principles through which costs, risks, and profits of an enterprise were to be born by several individuals.

Soon, Weber began to undertake the training required for appointment to the bench, which included the study of political problems of agrarian society. This led him to study legal institutions and to qualify as an instructor of law at the University of Berlin. In 1891 he presented his second work, *Roman Agrarian History and Its Significance for Public and Private Law*, which dealt with sociopolitical and economic developments in Roman society. In 1892 he carried on extensive investigations of rural labor in the German provinces east of the Elbe River, which were published as *Peasant Relations in Far Eastern Germany* (Vol. 4 of the *Schriften des Vereins für Sozial-Politik*).

In 1893, Weber married Marianne Schnitger and finally left the house of his parents. The following year he became a full professor of economics at Freiburg University, delivering his inaugural address on "The National State and Economic Policy" in 1895. One year later he accepted a position in economics with the University of Heidelberg.

From 1897 to 1900 Weber was stricken by illness brought on by exhaustion and anxiety and was forced to reduce, and finally to suspend, his

academic work. During this time he enjoyed traveling, especially to Italy, and he spent some time in Rome. By 1901 Weber was recovered enough to return to academic work, but setbacks occurred with unfortunate frequency. In 1903 he became associate editor of the *Archives for Social Science and Social Welfare*, renewing his contacts with the intellectual community.

Weber's only visit to the United States occurred in 1904, when he accepted an invitation to participate in a congress of arts and letters held in St. Louis. In that year he also published the first results of his more recent scholarly activities — an essay on methodology, a discussion of agrarian policies in Eastern Germany, and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. However, he remained unable to resume all his academic duties, and only through an arrangement with the University of Heidelberg and the German Ministry of Education did he receive adequate financial support. In 1907 a private inheritance enabled him to give up the association with Heidelberg and live as a private scholar, a freedom that led him to commence an intensive scientific activity.

Weber served during World War I for a time as the director of army hospitals in Heidelberg. In 1918 he became a consultant to the German Armistice Commission at Versailles and to a commission charged with the task of writing the draft of the Weimar Constitution. During the summer of 1918 he taught a course at the University of Vienna and, in 1919, feeling well enough to resume his academic career, he accepted a position at the University of Munich. Weber died in June, 1920, at the age of 56, with most of his work unfinished or unpublished.

The Historical Context of Weber's Position

Max Weber's sociological theory and methodology find their historical presuppositions and referential relevance in the discussion and polemics that, beginning with the middle of the 1800s, impregnated German culture with the task of reaching a precise accounting of the sociohistorical sciences and of the validity of their investigative procedures. Such controversy led to a little-understood and gradual crisis of the programmatic orientation that the historical school had promoted in order to ground concrete research on the presuppositions of romantic ideals. The research program of the historical school intended to give each discipline of human science a solid foundation of evolutionary, legitimizing history. The possibility of attaining this goal was questioned by several intellectuals, as were the procedures developed to establish historical validity. Few disciplines were spared controversy. Political economy, sociology, law, and psychology were each characterized by lengthy debates that lasted nearly a half-century and that resulted in the formation of the human sciences on their own merits, and not as the fulfilment of a historical process. These debates, most of which focused on methodological issues, served to clarify the

nature and parameters of the disciplines, as well as the appropriateness of different research methodologies. In the end, the historical school was not totally refuted, but was subjected to corrections and transformations through which the social sciences were constructed in a new configuration.

In 1883 Menger raised a strong critique of economic historicism, and his was one of the first and most thorough revocations of the historical school. Menger's dissent was adopted by Roscher and then by Hildebrandt (and others). This criticism was directed toward the tendency found in classical economics to base theoretical conclusions on the fiction of *Homo Oeconomicus*, a figure that was always identical in his atemporal structure and that served as the self-reflective mirror for the satisfaction of his economic needs. Menger and the others opposed a historical economy devoted to adapting laws of economic development, laws based on the positing of organic connections linking economic phenomena to other kinds of social phenomena. In their criticism, the new economists appealed to a conceptual scheme contrary to the Romantic notion of inexorable progress, namely the idea that economic structures and practices form an integral part of the life of a people as a manifestation of their particular, epoch-specific "Spirit." In *Research on the Method of the Social Sciences and of Political Economy*, Menger attacked the reigning methodology of the historical schools and advocated the appropriation of hypothetico-deductive methods. On the one hand, then, the legacy of the historical school was being altered by Schmoller and his followers, through their demand that economic phenomena be properly historically researched, i.e., without recourse to stereotypes. On the other hand, the science of economics, invigorated with analytical models, became autonomous from historiography. Economics thus moved towards what came to be known as positivism, and asserted an independence from the other sociohistorical disciplines.

The methodological controversy in economics illuminated analogous problems being raised in other social disciplines. In addition, the problem of the interrelationships of the social disciplines gradually became widely addressed, and it was in this debate that Max Weber assumed an important role. In the late nineteenth century, sociology was a discipline just beginning to achieve its own autonomy and scientific respect. The historical school blocked the possibility of an independent sociological enterprise by asserting as the ground of each social science the storiographical systematization of their individual materials. Thus the work of sociology became secondary to understanding historical processes.

For those who objected to the narrow view of historiography, one alternative was to follow the methods of French or British positivism; however, this was a view that German sociologists did not find palatable. Instead, they focused on the question of the relation of sociology to storiography and to the other social sciences. Two solutions were forthcoming, the first somewhat more consistent with the historical school, as represented by Karl Marx, and

the second emerging through a critique of the philosophical implications of positivist methodology. In the end, the reduction of sociology to a storio-graphical basis, as earlier intended, could no longer be maintained. Instead, sociologists needed to identify the specificity of sociology and its categories.

Ferdinand Tönnies, while still linked to Romantic ideals, approached an independent position for sociology in *Community and Society* (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1887). This work established a distinction that would remain operational in the development of subsequent German sociology, including that of Weber. To the positivist presupposition of a necessary order of social laws that the sociologist must determine, and to the Comtean analogy between sociology and physics, German sociology responded with a focus on typical forms of social relations as they characterize different social epochs.

In their separation from storio-graphy, then, sociologists developed two research orientations. First and most immediately, sociologists gave up the pretense of sociology's being the science of society as a totality, and posited instead a more specific function of sociology within the constellation of social sciences. The questions of the differences in character between sociology and other social disciplines, and the question of the connection between sociology and historical research were among the issues addressed by Georg Simmel in *Sociology* (1910). Other sociologists soon entered the dialogue, which led to various elaborations of *formal* sociology, the analysis of the forms of social relations as they exist independent of historical contexts. Other sociologists, such as Oppenheimer and Alfred Weber, moved in a different direction, concentrating on the examination of cultural phenomena.

Practitioners of the sociohistorical disciplines found themselves confronted with methodological controversy and were forced to deal with substantive questions of orientation. Thus by the time Max Weber became coeditor of the *Archiv für soziale Gesetzgebung und Statistik* in 1903, historiography was already under lethal attack. Max Weber and his contemporaries realized that the polemics concerning appropriate social scientific methodology, which included matters of political and ideological significance, demanded a specific delineation of social scientific procedure in contradistinction to that found in the natural sciences. The debates internal to the domains of economics, sociology, and political science were linked by a problem of a more general order — the nature of the *geisteswissenschaften*. Progress had already been made in the field of economics, especially by Menger. Similarly, the ongoing debate within sociology against the Comtean equation of physics and social science had provoked statements of an antipositivist character. What was required was progressive liberation from the historical school, yet with a concession to the need for some historical orientation within the social sciences. Only by constructing a heterogeneous sociology, incorporating both historical influences and static, nonpositivist analyses, could German sociologists legitimately posit the attainment of objectively valid knowledge.

Two systems of sociology emerged in answer to this challenge. On the one hand, Wilhelm Dilthey suggested that the social sciences involve the study of *spirit*. Such sciences differ from those oriented to natural phenomena by virtue of differentiations in the field of study and in the diversity of methods employed. For Dilthey, the domain of nature is distant from, and alien to, the domain of human affairs. The starting point for social science will thus be human experience (*erlebnis*). In his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften (Lectures on the Sciences of Spirit)*, written in 1883, Dilthey proposes that the human being's immediate, lived experience of the world constitutes the fundamental relationship to be studied by the social sciences. This relationship concerns the historical objectification of *erleben* and the human "understanding" that attains such an objectification in the light of its own origins. Dilthey is proposing a science of Spirit, and thus the sociologist must translate the structural forms of life into the abstract notions of value, meaning, and scope. This is necessary in order to identify and illuminate the manifestations of "Spirit" that appear as a result of human agency in a particular historical setting. The procedure used by Dilthey to examine these manifestations is "understanding," which we may consider analogous to the more familiar technique of "introspection."

Through his emphasis on the subjective, Dilthey established a clear distinction between his perspective and that of the sciences of nature. Natural sciences work with categories of causation and attempt, via the verification of causal relationships, to construct systems of laws. The world studied by the natural sciences is always foreign to the human being. It is a world with which the person has a constant and ongoing relationship, but it is a world that is always recognized as "other" to the observer and that can be grasped only through "natural" categories. Dilthey's analysis of the historical school did not lead him to reject objectification outright, however. He sought to establish a connection between human science and objective historiography through the focus on understanding. The target of understanding, and the subject matter of the human sciences, always involves objectifications of human mind (or "Spirit"), in which category Dilthey includes both objective texts and human behaviors in their historical contexts. The goal of analysis of such objectifications, however, is the disclosure of the subjective meanings with which they are imbued, by both the mind of the author of the behavior and the value-context within which the author exists. Methodologically, then, the difference between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the natural sciences rests within the antithesis of explanation and understanding and within the antithesis of causality and meaning.

The methodological solution arrived at by Windelband and Rickert is quite different than that proposed by Dilthey. Windelband and Rickert addressed the problem at the level of logic, an approach tracing its roots back to neo-Kantianism. Their critique of Dilthey rejected the subjective orientation as resting on a metaphysical, and hence irrational, foundation. In *Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft (History and Natural Science)*, published in 1894, Windelband

suggested that the human sciences and the natural sciences could be differentiated on the basis of their particular cognitive scope. On the one hand, the sciences of nature are nomothetic (oriented toward the construction of a system of general laws); on the other hand, the social sciences are ideographic (oriented toward the determination of the individuality of certain phenomena). From this perspective, Dilthey's attempt to construct a position between the sciences of "Spirit" and the natural sciences loses its importance. That is, any phenomenon, whether natural or spiritual, can be investigated by considering it a particular case of a norm or by considering it in its individual and non-repetitive character. Because the phenomenon is to be considered by either one method or the other, the connection between the two perspectives sought by Dilthey thus falls as soon as it is proposed.

Rickert, in *Die Grenzen der Naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (1896–1902), further developed the contrast established by Windelband and sought to propose an *objective* mediation between nomothetic and ideographic methods, in contrast to the subjectivist perspective of Dilthey. For Rickert, nature is to be referred to in the general, by inclusive and universal propositions. History, on the other hand, is to be considered with reference to the individual occurrence of the phenomenon. Thus the historical object or event is viewed in its particular form as a "relation of value" that makes possible the isolation and characterization of the historical object's individual context and character. The historical world, then, most often emerges as an organized multiplicity of individual events, as a totality, and within a developmental process. Rickert suggests that the theoretical grounding of our understanding of historical events involves an empirical reality constituted by values and relations of values — or "culture." The realm of historical knowledge is that of culture, and the values embedded in the historical object or event are cultural values. Consequently, the proper sciences for the study of historical phenomena are those that nomothetically investigate the relationships of values that make up the meaning of the historical object. Rickert realized, however, that values are not thoroughly objective, and in 1921 he accepted the notion of "understanding," defined as the comprehension of meaning, as the aim of the science of culture. Rickert proposes, then, that the logical distinction between the natural sciences and the historical sciences be changed into a distinction between fields of research, identified and justified on the basis of the presence or absence of a "relationship of value."

Weber's Interpretive Sociology

In general, from about 1883 until the early years of the new century, the antithesis between the natural and social sciences remained at the center of the methodological controversy, and on the resolution of that controversy rested the validity of the sociohistorical sciences. The polemics that emerged led to

an ongoing and exhaustive debate involving attempts to prove or refute one thesis or the other or to devise some form of reconciliation. Dilthey indicated that the validity of the sciences of "spirit" could be established in the circular relationship of experience, expression, and understanding. These sciences find their guarantee (even if limited and conditioned) in the identity of the cognitive subject and its world. The investigator and the field of research are the same. The human being can understand his world, the sociohistorical world, because he is a part of it, and can therefore grasp it from the inside. Dilthey's fundamental thesis, which was supported by a number of sociologists of the day, including Georg Simmel, constituted one dimension of the critique of the sciences of man. For Rickert and his followers, however, the validity of the sciences of culture is contained in the philosophy of values and draws its strength from the thesis of the character of absoluteness that must be attributed to such values.

Max Weber developed his sociohistorical methodology within this environment of confrontation. His interests seem to have been twofold: First, he attempted to devise a precise methodology for conducting sociological research. Second, he sought a method of reconciling objective sociohistorical research with political interests. A fairly broad and diverse set of problems emerged during his research, and Weber intended to devise a way of dealing with them all. While studying the history of commercial law during the Middle Ages and the history of Roman agrarian law, Weber had to confront the problem of the relationship between economic institutions and their corresponding juridical concepts. One of the issues Weber addressed in this area was the question of the difference between historical research and juridical analysis. His analysis of the socioeconomic breakdown of ancient civilization then led him to investigate the significance of economic factors in the course of history. However, his participation in the editing of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* and his research into the conditions of farmers in the eastern part of Germany also led him to a consideration of the nature of sociological field research and the relationship of field research to the political movements that change human living conditions. Another set of issues, and one that is more purely sociological in character, emerged as a consequence of Weber's analysis of the influences of industrialized labor on human social arrangements and behavior. In each of these cases, Weber's investigative work was linked to the question of method and to the logical formation that would most accurately obtain meaningful results.

Weber's methodology was thus developed during the process of concrete research, in contradistinction to some of the earlier sociologists, and responded to the question of how to adumbrate the functions of empirical analyses in the domains of sociohistorical and political action. The first statement of this methodology may be found in an essay written during the final decade of the nineteenth century, *Roscher und Knies und der logischen Probleme der historischen Nationalökonomie*. In this work, Weber analyses, and disputes, the presuppositions

of the historical school of economics, which argument requires that he take a position regarding the inheritance of Romanticism. Simultaneously, he clarifies the methodological conflict defined by the positions of Dilthey and Rickert.

Weber begins by accepting Menger's critique of Romantic historicism. Indeed, economic historicism is viewed not as an authentic historiographical procedure, but rather as a form of research caught up in evolutionary presuppositions and prejudiced by Romantic categories. The positivist answer to this flaw is to admonish the researcher to investigate history accurately by carefully and objectively analyzing the individual economic structure and the process that leads from one structure to another. Rejecting the notion that there can be a "spirit of the people" that would serve as a cause of sociological phenomena, and also rejecting the transposition of biological concepts into the sociological sphere (as in "organic interpretation"), Weber proposes a wider frame of analysis than did Roscher and Knies, a frame of analysis that joins objective knowledge with hermeneutic understanding. Weber therefore refused to accept the metaphysical presuppositions of the historical school, namely that history develops in a universal sequence susceptible to nomothetic acquisition.

History, for Weber, is a form of knowledge that may *possibly* be confirmed as valid, but the autonomy of that knowledge is not guaranteed by either a specific psychological reality or a specific empirical reality. Neither the phenomenon studied nor the methods used can themselves constitute the logical structure of research; nor can they, in themselves, certify the objectivity of that research. In order to devise a method that would ratify the validity of knowledge, Weber rebuts positivism in favor of the position of Dilthey.

Weber's methodology is not wholly appropriated from Dilthey, however. Weber refuted the notion of historical subjectivism implicit in Dilthey's method. Moreover, Weber rejected Dilthey's methodological reliance on intuitionism. For Weber, the sociohistorical sciences are not different because they take Spirit as their object rather than nature, nor are they different because they proceed through the internal understanding of meaning, rather than through causal explanation. What distinguishes sociohistorical knowledge from natural science is its particular logical structure, which consists of an orientation toward individualization. This focus on individualization, as noted earlier, is an essential component of Rickert's position, and Weber adopts this argument from Rickert in order to reach a reconciliation of the conflict between positivism and interpretation. For Weber, then, not the object of investigation, but rather the scope of the investigation and the method of its conceptual elaboration are the key issues. Dilthey's method of descriptive psychology is unsatisfactory. Instead, the sociohistorical sciences are distinguished by the mode in which research leads to empirical verification and results are translated into a specific form of causal explanation.

The combining of Dilthey's and Rickert's perspectives means that Weber advocates a modified form of interpretive methodology. The sociohistorical

sciences are to use a form of interpretation adequate to their object of study, and such a position is legitimate if the intent of the procedure is not immediate "understanding," as an act of intuition, but rather the formulation of interpretive hypotheses open to empirical verification and causal explanation. Thus understanding no longer excludes causal explanation, but coincides or is compatible with a specific form of explanation. The sociohistorical sciences thus are disciplines which use a process of interpretation to establish causal relations regarding individual phenomena. The interpretation of meaning, then, coincides with the determination of the conditions of the event.

As a consequence of these investigations, Weber developed a new research strategy, a strategy that was faced with an old and serious question — the question of objectivity. In order to guarantee objectivity, Weber had to come to terms with two conditions. First, his methodology had to avoid any presupposition of value-assignment to the phenomenon under investigation. Second, the methodology had to admit of verification of social scientific assertions through causal explanation. The analysis of these two conditions, which needed to be met for his method to warrant acceptance, was conducted in two essays: the first, *Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis*, written in 1904, and the second, *Kritische Studien auf Gebiet der kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik*, from 1906.

Weber addressed the first condition, that of value-free research, by utilizing Rickert's differentiation between "judgments of value" and "relations of value." The conservative, "organic" conception of society found in the old historical school was not as much a method of analysis as it was a means of supporting political and ideological valuations of social phenomena. Overcoming such presuppositions meant a liberation from the political implications of historiography. This necessity corresponded with practical questions raised by the changes in the German socioeconomic structure and Germany's emergent position as an international power.

In Weber's view, the human sciences can consider the questions of sociopolitical life and can contribute to the solutions of problems raised by ideological orientation, but the investigation itself must remain objective. Thus the sociohistorical sciences cannot formulate judgments of value, and their results must not become the basis for a political orientation. Such orientations are located not at the level of the ideal validity of values, but at the level of *de facto* existence. Accordingly, it is not possible to say that particular values are or are not valid politically; it is not possible to prescribe one action rather than another. What *is* possible is the investigation of the influence and consequences of values in the historical process. Scientific research is independent of value positing; it establishes that which is, rather than suggesting that which should be. Thus there exists a discontinuity between value judgments and scientific research.

The foregoing deals with value judgments, not value relations, and Weber carefully made this distinction. That is, the sociohistorical sciences

do not include practical valuation as a matter of method. Sociohistorical research does, however, involve a theoretical relation to the values that delimit the object of analysis from the empirical context within which the phenomenon occurs. "Value relation" is thus not an assignment of value made by the scientist, but a discovery of the choices made by the actors under investigation. By making this distinction, it is possible to establish a sphere of research in which the investigation proceeds in an objective manner and that leads to the construction of causal explanation.

Weberian methodology thus begins with Rickert's analysis of historical knowledge. "Value relations" make possible the determination of the historical object, constituted by its "cultural meaning." Such meaning is always individualized, and the meaning of a particular phenomenon is conditioned by relations with other phenomena. Weber modified Rickert's approach by redefining the relationship between the historical object and values. For Rickert, this relationship constitutes the foundation for the unconditioned validity of historical knowledge. The values ruling the emergence of the historical phenomenon are universal and necessary. Weber argued that the relationship of empirical data to values is not necessary and that the data involve criteria that are not universal, but rather are the result of situational choices. The relations of values discovered by the researcher thus influence the direction taken by the research and the viewpoint that delimits the field of inquiry. Each sociohistorical science, then, does not deal with a predetermined realm of phenomena but is constituted by the particular viewpoints identifiable in the phenomenon under investigation. The internal relations among the sociohistorical sciences are determined by the problem at issue, and not by a systematic delineation of scientific interest. Furthermore, culture itself no longer is presented as a determined field of research grounded on necessary values. Culture becomes an autonomous domain of investigation that varies with the historical development of each social scientific discipline.

It would seem that Weber advocates a position of extreme relativity, one that views social phenomena as unique manifestations of value relations. If this were the case, it would be impossible to establish causal relations. Weber recognized this and proposed that causal explanation in the social sciences is possible and that it is of a different character than that sought by the natural sciences. The question is: how can we arrive at a causal explanation that is at the same time a meaningful understanding of the historical object? Such a causal explanation demands a selection of empirical data and a disclosure of relations among empirical elements of the phenomenon. While the totality of relations available for investigation can potentially yield a conceptually inexhaustible set of causal relations, the research into causal explanations is necessarily selective and follows the specific viewpoint that orients the investigation. Thus, *explanation is restricted to a finite series of elements, determined at each step on the basis of a theoretical viewpoint, and which proceeds along a particular*

direction of relations. "Direction" here refers to the theoretical acceptability of possible causal elements to the general model guiding the research. This direction is abstracted from other possible research strategies. Thus, the cause of an event is imputed to that event through the process of sociohistorical research. This methodology, however, faces the problem of empirical verification of the imputed cause. Because a selection of relations has occurred, how is it possible that these, and not some other set of relations, led to the phenomenon?

Weber says that the authenticity of the causal explanation can be demonstrated through the imaginative construction of a hypothetical series of relations, which is abstracted from the empirical series of relations. Then, the researcher systematically compares the two. This strategy thereby leads to the development of a hypothetical explanation, more or less commensurate with the real one, and therefore the resulting causal explanation is more or less relevant to the phenomenon. The imputation of the cause of the event is thus indirect and involves judgments of "objective possibility." These judgments, moreover, are distributed along a continuum of adequacy from "adequate causation" to "accidental causation." When the hypothetical construct is not explanatory, the researcher must acknowledge that the elements excluded from the explanation are pertinent to "adequate causation." When the hypothetical series parallels the real, empirical process, the researcher must conclude that the elements excluded from the explanation are linked to the phenomenon by "accidental causation," and, indeed, their presence in the event is more or less indifferent.

The ongoing comparison between hypothetical and real series of relations makes it possible to establish at each step of the investigation the causal importance of a particular element to the occurrence of the phenomenon. The "causes" thus revealed are not *all* the causes of the event in question, but rather compose the conditions acceptable to a certain line of research, according to the assumptions of a particular viewpoint. It becomes clear that by delineating such qualifications, Weber gives up any insistence on the classical model of causal explanation and proposes in its place an explanatory methodology that yields theoretically possible causal sequences, rather than nomothetic absolutes. For Weber, the sociohistorical sciences do not establish the determinant factors of a phenomenon; rather, they individualize a certain group of conditions that, among other possible groups of conditions, make the phenomenon possible. To the necessary relationship of cause and effect, then, is added a conditional relationship of meaning, and the manner in which this is accomplished will be considered a little later.

Although the social scientific scholar investigates a domain that is at least partly subjective in character, and although she operates in a limited research field, the results of research are objectively validated by virtue of the logical structure of the explanatory procedure. The guarantee of objectivity rests on the correct application of methodological procedures. At this point,

then, Rickert's position seems decisive and incontrovertible. Weber, however, views the domain of the social sciences differently. For Rickert, historical science was constituted by a system of disciplines (the sciences of culture) that were linked by nonmodifiable relationships, with each domain assigned a specific realm of study. Weber views such rigidity as problematic, since the sociohistorical scientist works from within a viewpoint that may change as new problems or new situations emerge. Thus new disciplines can arise, and the boundaries between disciplines can shift or disappear. What is common to the social sciences is Weber's methodology, the orientation toward the explanation of events through the investigation of the individual constellation of empirical elements, and the use of procedures that make the causal-meaningful explanation of events possible.

The Meaning of the Ideal Type

We are at this point presented with a difficult problem. How can it be possible to construct sociological generalizations from the causal-meaningful explanation of an event? In other words, what is the status of nomological knowledge in Weber's scheme? In order to prevent the results of social science from being completely relative and provincial, Weber responded to these questions with the theory of the ideal type. Whereas natural science aims at a system of general laws to explain a particular multiplicity of phenomena, and to obtain increasingly general levels of explanation, sociohistorical science uses uniformity in the formulation of general statements to aim at the explanation of an individual phenomenon. Thus nomological knowledge pertains to both kinds of science, but it functions differently in each. What for the natural sphere is the end of research is for the social scientist an interim moment of the investigation.

The explanation of the individual instance thus presupposes nomological knowledge, the knowledge of typical uniformities of human behavior that can be empirically verified. This knowledge of uniformities, a general conception of behavior, is constituted through a procedure of abstraction that isolates some factors from the multiplicity of empirical data and coordinates them into a coherent, noncontradictory framework. The result of this process of abstraction is always an ideal type. On the one hand, the ideal type is different from reality and cannot replace it, and on the other hand, the ideal type must provide the instrumental device by which to explain the individual instance of the phenomenon.

The ideal type provides two guidelines for sociohistorical research. First, the ideal type establishes a criterion against which to refer empirical data collected during the research. Second, the ideal type provides a conceptual frame by which to orient the research project. In a sense, the rules followed by the scientist during the process of explanation themselves assume an ideal-typical

character. The discipline of economics especially, and, in an analogous manner, all of the other social sciences, entail such ideal-typical rules of investigation. While all of the sociohistorical sciences pursue the explanation of the individual case, the path toward such explanation proceeds through the general, through nomological knowledge. In this way, historiographical investigation and the abstract social disciplines, such as economics or sociology, are linked by the same procedures — the elaboration of ideal types. And the objectivity of social scientific knowledge is guaranteed by the nomological grounding of the ideal type.

Thus for Weber, the problem of securing the objectivity of the social sciences finds its solution in the examination of the logical structure *internal* to the sociohistorical disciplines (i.e., the rules of explanation). Weber's epistemology becomes a methodology and is configured as a style of analysis that he believes will enable the sociohistorical scientist to work most effectively. As a product of his own research into specific historical phenomena, Weber's methodology derives its vitality from his efforts to solve problems that faced the nascent social scientific disciplines. In other words, Weber's methodology emerged from his research projects, and his research projects emerged from his methodology. Perhaps Weber's work in the sociology of religion best demonstrates this relationship between sociohistorical research and methodology. His explanatory scheme is demonstrated in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5), in *The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1906), in *The Ethics of the World Religions* (1915–19), and with special clarity in the section on the sociology of religion in *Economy and Society*, published posthumously in 1922.

With the conception of the ideal type, Weber mediates, or establishes a middle ground, between the earlier historiography and social scientific disciplines, between positivism and interpretation. Certain issues remained: how thorough an understanding of the phenomenon results from the use of ideal-typical methodology? Or, to ask the same question in another way, what are the limitations of the ideal type as a heuristic tool? Answers to these questions will suggest the strength of the mediation between historiography and social science. For Weber, sociology becomes the forge in which this linkage is created, and the works on the sociology of religion, as well as the essay *On Some Categories of "Understanding" Sociology* (1913), clarify the utility of the ideal type.

The ideal type captures the "uniformities of human achievement" in terms of their embodied meaning. The autonomy of the sociological discipline is ensured by this focus on uniformities of behavior accessible to the observer's understanding. These "uniformities" are not "laws" as sought by positivist sociology; instead, they are empirical constellations of phenomena that are expressed in the ideal type. And the "understanding" that characterizes the sociological approach brings to light the uniformities of the phenomena under investigation

as well as the concepts that determine the meaning of the phenomena. This is the beginning of a description of Weber's *Verstehen* sociology.

The *Verstehen* approach posits its own research realm, which begins with a particular orientation to the phenomenon. An "orientation" here refers to any kind of human action that takes a position regarding an object as its term of reference. In such a situation, the object becomes identified with human action as it is simultaneously objectively conditioned. The issue here is not human action as such, but rather human action as it is thoroughly *social*. In other words, the action towards the object at issue for the sociologist is that which refers and relates to the action of other persons. What thus characterizes sociology is the regard for the orientation of other individuals, and the consequent possibility of understanding action because of that regard. Therefore, the "meaning" of an orientation is constituted by the subjective intentions of the actor toward the object of action and the coincidence or opposition of that meaning with those of other actors. The possibility of sociological understanding consists of the determination of the goals of action and their underlying behavioral directions.

To establish the aims of an orientation, however, to establish the ways in which the orientation emerges and is maintained (e.g., its conditions of possibility), represents the assumption of a position regarding those conditions of possibility in a determined social relation. *Verstehen* sociology thus has the task of elaborating the kinds of social action that can be found to recur in the behavior of individuals in terms of their orientations to social phenomena. The elaboration of these orientations is the ideal type, and the key to such analysis is the immediate interpretive intelligibility of the rational orientation toward goals maintained by the social individual on a recurrent basis. Moreover, this form of ideal-typical methodology can formulate other explanations of behaviors that consist of orientations to social objects, but that reflect lesser degrees of rationality.

Indeed, ideal-typical explanation treats behavior that can be distributed along a scale of decreasing intelligibility. Weber, in *On Some Categories of "Understanding" Sociology*, constructs a typology of meaningful actions divided into "rational-instrumental," "value-oriented," "affective," and "traditional" types. Rational-instrumental action is that undertaken by virtue of its logical connection with a desired goal. Value-oriented action is that undertaken on the basis of a value or moral judgment, regardless of its instrumentality. Affective action is that which is consistent with the affective state, or the desired affective state, of the actor. Traditional action is undertaken as a consequence of the dictates of the customs of the group. Later, in *Economy and Society*, Weber typologized action into "action in community" and "action in society," a division reminiscent of Tönnies' distinction, and which reestablishes a relationship between Weber and the tradition of German sociology. *Economy and Society* in fact emerges out of a systematic study of the relations of orientations and the corresponding (and resultant) systems of social relations among indi-

viduals, on the one hand, and the description of types of economic organization, on the other. Much of Weber's discussion forms an answer to Simmel's analyses of forms of social relations, in which Weber attempts to overcome certain presuppositions regarding the way of life of individuals. For Weber, the analysis of individual orientations and actions moves quickly to the analysis of relational cases, which are established on the basis of reciprocal orientations. That is, the social action undertaken by the individual occurs within a constellation of orientations pertinent to other persons, and all of these orientations condition each other. The explanation of social action, then, requires the construction of the ideal type.

Earlier, it was mentioned that one of Weber's typifications of action involved a value orientation. The question of value, which was central to the positions of Windelband and Rickert, became quite important for Weber during the political situation that led to World War I. Weber consistently made a distinction between objective social research and judgments of value. With the breakdown of German culture during the war, Weber renewed his efforts to separate the two. In the essay *Der Sinn der "Wertfreiheit" der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften* (1917), Weber addressed the question of the difference between political valuations and empirical grounding of socio-historical science. While his arguments tended to restate assertions he had made as early as 1904, a problem of grave consequence did emerge. Always for Weber it was true that sociohistorical research cannot formulate judgments of value or provide justification for such judgments, but is that to suggest that the sociohistorical sciences must remain mute when it comes to questions concerning values? Is a critique of values possible? Weber confirms that the sociohistorical sciences cannot say anything regarding the normative validity of values, but they can indeed establish the empirical existence of values and can throw light on the conditions and consequences of their realization.

From the moment that a person acts on the basis of a value-orientation, which always implies a certain "cost," there is an engagement of determined means and determined consequences. Thus, a technical critique of value-orientations can establish the coherence of the means/goals relationship and the relations of these means and goals with other social phenomena. Thereby the critique of values can be obtained on an empirical level, through the identification of means and the typification of conditions for the realization of values selected as goals. The social scientist cannot say whether a value is valid or not, but she can demonstrate that determined means are or are not suitable for the attainment of given values. Above all, the social scientist can demonstrate how means toward a given value threaten or block the exercise of others, and the various conditions that each require to be expressed.

Weber thus reaffirms the multiplicity of value-orientations and the relations, including those characterized by tension, that exist among them. That the social scientist may encounter a multiplicity of phenomena has already been

acknowledged in Weber's discussion of the diversity of viewpoints from which social scientific inquiry could proceed and the links between the viewpoint of the scientist and ideological and cultural orientations. Human action implies the taking of a position towards values, and such a position is based on the acceptance of certain values and the refusal of others. Social research is also human action and thus involves a selection of values and of viewpoint. These value spheres do not offer unconditional validity, for either the person involved in social action, or the social scientist involved in research. The subject must decide every time, in each situation, which values to call his own, and which to refuse, in order to act historically. Values are no longer, as they were for Rickert, absolute normative criteria, indifferent to the human effort of realization of goals. Values subsist in their possibility of orienting human action by virtue of a selection recognized by the actor as normative, and thereby in their possibility of orienting action. The ontological existence of values is eliminated, and what remains is their normative transcendence based on the irreducibility of *de facto* existence. Thus can Weber write, in 1919, about the meaning of science and of politics as *vocation* (*Wissenschaft als Beruf and Politik als Beruf*).

By enunciating and exploring the philosophical implications of methodology, Weber was able to carry out an analysis of the historical situation of humans in relation to values. From these examinations was derived the coherence of new interpretive categories, in their nonprejudiced use and explanatory rigor. These interpretive categories and the conceptions that lead to them constitute a significant modification of German historicism and a decisive change in the process of the development of the German sociohistorical sciences. Because he was able to mediate between historiography and Dilthey's descriptive psychology through the use of the ideal type, Weber ushered interpretive sociology into a new and promising domain.