

What did Weber Mean by his View that Sociology Must Start from the Understanding of Individual Action?

Christopher Cunningham

University of Essex

Abstract

The works of Max Weber have undoubtedly been a major influence in the development of both modern sociology and the wider discipline of the social sciences. The writings of Weber have 'astounded' readers with what is described as his 'encyclopaedic scholarship' (Freund, 1966), with a knowledge which transcends the disciplines of history, economics, the arts, law, and religion. His words, underpinned by the concepts he used to continuously analyse the world throughout his lifetime, flow like a never ending stream, only being halted by his death in 1920, before being carried away by the tide to reach the shores of many minds, laying the foundations for academic study of the 21st century. Whether Weber was aware of the impact that his own individual action would have on the world, is a question for consideration, as is an enquiry as to whether Weber 'understood' his own actions and why he took them. Yet what is clear is that Weber's approach to sociology offered a scientific methodology which was able to recognise how the (inter-) subjective meanings and symbolic references of human beings shaped the actions of individuals, and that of the society.

Keywords: Max Weber, Modern sociology, Individual Action

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Introduction

By recognising the conditions from which the ideas of Weber were born, is it possible to interpret how and why he saw a need for an alternative approach to understanding the functions of society. The paper begins with a brief outline of Weber's methods and approach to sociology, incorporating concepts such as *meaningful relationships* and *ideal types*, and drawing on classic works, such as *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, and thereby framing the *view* of Weber; the paper moves on by attempting to *understand* this *view* by encapsulating Weber's theory within the analysis of Cunningham's (2014) study of the concept of 'race'. The paper concludes with an analysis of this essay's own compounds, presenting the theory discussed in practical terms, bringing forth a further discussion of concepts such as the bureaucratisation of education.

Weber's Interpretative Sociology

Weber suggests that 'sociology' is: 'the science whose object is to interpret the meaning of social action and thereby give a causal explanation of the way in which the action proceeds and the effects which it produces' (Weber, 1978, p.7). It is the *meaning* of the 'action' which is the feature of Weber's analysis, and, indeed, the backbone of his interpretative method, otherwise known as *Verstehen*. The concept of *Verstehen* can be described as 'understanding', although this definition is rather too broad, and can be best explained using Weber's quote above, as being the 'understanding of the causal explanation' (Outhwaite, 1975). In a sense, this brief explanation of the 'methodological foundations' allows for an oversimplified answer to the question of this paper: sociology must start from the understanding of individual action, because individual action influences and creates social action through *meaningful* relationships.

In order to help establish what a *meaningful* individual action is, and therefore help determine what a meaningful relationship of social action is, Weber constructed the concept of the *ideal type*. He suggests that 'the ideal-type is to be used as a kind of yard stick against which to compare and evaluate empirical cases' (Parkin, 1991, p.29). By establishing a scientific procedure which recognises the 'rational' features of the *type*, it is then possible to set apart the 'irrational' features (deviation) and 'patterns of meaning' – or rather the subjective meaning of individual action, which allows for causal explanation (Weber, 1978, p.9).

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The method of analysis of Weber's interpretative sociology can clearly be seen in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; his study which aimed to establish a causal link between the religious philosophy of the Calvinist Protestant, with that of the everyday functional ethics of the 16th century - which influenced the early rise and success of modern capitalism (Morawska [2], 2014). It is suggested that the *meaningful relations* discovered in this study reveal, what at first glance, appears to be a paradoxical nature; only when the 'logical relation of implication' can be placed within the wider 'context of meaning', can *verstehen* be reached. This can be explained by the Calvinist concept of God being the 'wider context'; the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and the devotion to controlled economic activity are the 'paradoxical logical relation of implication' (Outhwaite, 1975, p.53).

This overview of Weber's interpretative sociology, with a very brief explanation of an example of his theory in practice, brings light to 'his view that sociology must start from the understanding of individual action'; in as much that: by understanding individual action, that is, by understanding the *meaning* of the action, the sociologist is able to *understand* the relationships between individuals, and the *meaning* of their interaction. This can be explained as the 'making of culture'. With 'culture' being able to determine the course of human history through acts of human behaviour, as proposed in *The Protestant Ethic*, the sociologist is able to *understand* the functions and features of society by analysing and *understanding* the individual.

Although this paper has offered an interpretation of Weber's 'view', it is yet to establish what this 'view' *means*. In an attempt to delve into the realms of *verstehen*, this analysis will now deviate from the ideal typical essay of the undergraduate student of sociological theory, to propose a notion which aims to build on Weber's explanatory approach of individualism. By recognising that: 'because social facts only exist by virtue of the concepts employed to define and organise them, we could in effect bring new facts into being and dispose of others simply by altering our conceptual frame of reference' (Parkin, 1991, p.31); it is essential to move on by analysing Weber's methodology within an 'altered conceptual frame of reference', which can be compassed using sociological analysis of the 21st century.

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Interpreting the Concept of 'Race'

When writing on *The Nature of Social Action* in his *Selections in Translation* (Weber, 1978), Weber very briefly touches on his belief of 'racial differences'. He extends his thoughts a little further on the subject by talking of the 'promising beginnings' of the 'comparative racial neurology and psychology' of his times, in the author's introduction to the *Protestant Ethic*. Indeed he 'admits that he is inclined to think the importance of biological heredity very great', and believes it 'natural to suspect' that these 'heredity differences' lay behind the 'certain types of rationalization developed in the Occident'. (Weber, 2001, p.xlii). Despite his 'inclinations', he accepts that the 'heredity approach' was unable to effectively produce measurable data, which in effect produced the need to 'analyse all the influences and causal relationships which can satisfactorily be explained in terms of reactions to environmental conditions' (Weber, 2001, p.xlii). Similarly, despite his 'natural suspicions', he accepts that 'anthropological types', 'stand with equal right despite differences acquired through tradition' (Weber, 2001, p.177).

On writing of *The Nation* in his *Structures of Power*, Weber distinguishes between the acceptance of 'Indians' and 'Negroes' by the 'Yankees', concluding a negative feeling towards the 'Negro', especially when he adopts the same way of life and has the same social aspirations as the 'Yankee'. This negative feeling, or rather, *action*, is described as being a 'social aversion', and is explained by the fact that 'Negroes have been slaves' (Weber, 1948, p.177). This example is testament to Weber's expertise as a Sociologist. Although his own thoughts and feelings appear to carry somewhat of an ethnocentric tone, his sociological analysis appears value neutral, demonstrated by his ability to subjectively analyse the *ideal anthropological type* which stands with 'equal right' to any other. None the less, although fully recognised, Weber's expertise is not the feature of this 'deviation'; rather it is the concept of 'Race', and an interpretation of that concept which is the feature of analysis. For this purpose, it is reasonable to conclude that much of Weber's social analysis was founded on a belief or *understanding* of the 'difference' between 'race's'.

The method of Weber's interpretive sociology can be incorporated into the study of Cunningham (2014), revealing the relevance of his method in the 21st century. Featured in *The 'Race' To*

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Humanity, 'Mix-d: UK' is an organisation established to provide a platform for expressing issues of race, and is directed towards an audience of 'mixed race' children. If one were to analyse the *meaningful individual actions* in relation to this organisation, such as, why the children attended the project, then it is plausible to begin an explanation of *meaningful social actions*, through the 'understanding' of the causal explanations. It is possible that an in-depth analysis of the causal linkages would suggest a connection between the 'individual' complexity of 'classifying' these individuals into 'traditional racial groups'; to a 'social common action' or creation of 'identity', symbolised by the terminology 'mix:d'; to the societal change, such as the inclusion of 'mixed race' into the official racial categories, and the generally accepted terminology within UK society. This, supporting Weber's view, demonstrates how society is shaped by *meaningful individual actions*.

Crucially, adding further weight to the deconstruction of 'race', it is Cunningham's (2014) comparison of the racial categories of other societies, namely South Africa, which uncovers the unending possibilities for the variations of *individual meaningful action*. This unending possibility was, in itself, the cause for requirement of Weber's *ideal type*. Yet, as can be seen, the *ideal anthropological type* proposed by Weber is not sociologically substantiated; a view shared by Parkin (1991), who recognised that the 'social construction of facts' were 'problematic' for Weber because 'the eradication of all preconceptions was not humanly possible' (Parkin, 1991, p.31). Parkin goes on to suggest that 'entities like social classes, for example, could be abolished in a conceptual stroke' (Parkin, 1991, p.31). Cunningham's study of 'race' reveals it to be a 'socially constructed entity to be abolished with a conceptual stroke'.

Perhaps the apparent paradoxical nature of Weber's method, discussed in the example of *The Protestant Ethic* is being reflected here, in the using of his method to explain Cunningham's (2014) study. On the one hand, approaching the sociology of 'race' with the aim of understanding the *meaningful actions of individuals*, offers insight into the behaviour which has gone on to shape human history, i.e. the creation of new 'racial categories', which can be seen as a result of many *meaningful actions*. On the other hand, it is the 'yard-stick' of analysis, his *ideal type*, which has fallen prey to the deconstruction of a socially constructed fact. If it is, as suggested, the presence of

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paradoxical illusion being reflected here, then the method suggests a 'hidden notion' yet to be revealed, which may offer some insight to the *meaning* of Weber's 'view'.

The notion of an *ideal type*, proposed by Weber, was used as an instrument of measurement for methodological analysis in *The 'Race' To Humanity*. When discussing the changing nature of the concept of 'culture', this paper demonstrates how the *ideal types* of 'racial categories', although a key component of measurement within the study, have through examination, rendered themselves absent from existence. The example of the 'created culture', obtained through shared experiences, values, etc.; of the family discussed in Cunningham's (2014) study, supports Weber's view that 'common actions' of individuals are the causal explanation of societal developments (Morawska [3], 2014); and represent on a micro scale how culture can be created on a macro scale through shared 'experiences' of individuals. Yet, it is the promotion of 'an understanding where the individual is able to develop and recognise his or her own identity from within' (Cunningham, 2014, p.10) which is the concluding concept of Cunningham's study. This is referred to as the 'Golden Philosophy' and proposes that: 'all human beings possess a Golden soul given by God; that all human beings are of the same "race", all with different identities' (Cunningham, 2014, p.8). Within the context of *understanding* the sociology of Max Weber, this concept can be seen as an extension of *individualism*, and it is argued here that an adoption of this method was the intended *meaning* of Weber's view. This claim, although somewhat unsubstantiated can be examined further to determine that, if indeed this was Weber's intended meaning, why was it not the view promoted? Why was Weber's focus centred on the meaningful actions of individuals, in relation to other individuals, rather than with themselves?

Understanding Weber

Self-Knowledge lies at the heart of *understanding*, and in contrast to the commonly accepted comprehension of Weber's *meaning*, continues subjective analysis in an *inward* direction to the *self*, rather than on an *outward* direction to the *other*. By *understanding* our own *meaning of action*, the *meaningful actions* in relation to others become a redundant feature for analysis, with societal views and social action, such as the concept of 'race', being a non-effectual element.

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The paradoxical features of Weber's method; in particular the *ideal type* – which is crucial for his method of analysis, yet is both open to value-laden interpretation, and is subject to possible adaption and eradication; offer insight into why Weber did not appear to extend his individualistic approach to the extremes of *The Theory Of Self* (Cunningham, 2014). It could be argued that Weber was reliant upon the *ideal type* as a means to execute sociological analysis. It was discussed previously how Weber was able to set aside his 'ethnocentric beliefs' to conduct sociological analysis in a way which was more or less 'value-free'. Yet it was Weber's 'beliefs' which led to his construction of the *ideal anthropological type*, which although 'equal', was still segregated by a notion of 'cultural difference'. This demonstrates how the environment within which Weber wrote was able to influence and hinder his possibilities for explanation. Weber's 'encyclopaedic scholarship' (Freund, 1966) undoubtedly equipped him with an expansive knowledge of people and their practices throughout the world, yet these people were 'classified' into groups, which in itself provided opportunity for Weber's method to be implemented.

The view that 'sociology must start from an understanding of individual action' relates synonymously to the notion that 'sociology must start from an understanding of self'. To suggest that an adoption of the idea of *Self-Knowledge* was in fact the 'intended *meaning*' of Weber, is indeed a bold statement; yet, if it is accepted that: only by understanding our own emotions, motives and actions, is it possible to adopt a subjective interpretative method of analysis which is reliant upon empathetic comprehension; then some measure of transparency is revealed. Without intending a psycho-analytical attempt on the mind of Weber, it is intriguing to imagine the extent to which he was able to *understand* his own actions. It is logical to suggest that evidence of his quest for *Self-Knowledge* is reflected in his writing. An individual may write for many reasons, but the initial intended action has two plausible explanations: 1) The individual writes for an audience; or 2) The individual writes for themselves. The first suggests a possibility that Weber was writing to influence the minds of others, which, if was the intended meaning, has proven extremely successful. The second suggests that Weber was writing for self-reflection, a gathering of thoughts, a construction of ideas, an expression, or in a broader sense – to establish how he relates to the world. Taking into consideration his 'extended sabbatical' life, his love of travel, his thirst for knowledge which transcends disciplinary distinction, and the context of his writings which

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appeared at times confusing; it is reasonable to suggest that his motives for writing were motivated by the second persuasion.

A traditional interpretation of Weber's meanings, would suggest: that by understanding the individual, it is possible to understand society. However, the interpretation of this paper proposes: that by understanding the self, it is possible to understand the world. Although Weber's aspirations for 'furthering the science' are clear, it is reasonable to extend this by suggesting that it was the 'science of self' that he was aiming to promote, seeing in it the potential to *understand* himself and the world – *verstehen*.

If, by the obtainment of *Self-Knowledge*, the individual is able to recognise how their own individual action shapes social action which is reflected in society's make up, and is returned to them as an *action* by society to them as an individual; then sentiments of theological thought which echo ideas of 'karma' or 'oneness' become relevant to the concept of *verstehen*. Perhaps this *understanding* was a motivating factor for Weber's studies on religion, which were cut short by his passing in 1920. In these studies he states: 'The possibility of questioning the meaning of the world presupposes the capacity to be *astonished* about the course of events' (Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, p.207; cited in Kasler, 1988). The 'Golden Philosophy' similarly proposes a concept of 'oneness' which operates through a network of interactions with the *self*. Just as it is possible to eliminate social facts such as 'social classes' (Parkin, 1982), or 'racial distinction' (Cunningham, 2014), so too is it possible to eradicate the concept of 'multiple societies', which then places the sociologist in a position where only the study of the individual is possible; whether that be the *individual* component, or the *individual* whole is irrelevant due to their *causal relationship* which itself becomes the feature of study.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to find *meaning* in Weber's view. In order for this aim to be carried out, an historical analysis was taken into consideration, in an attempt to determine whether a causal relation affected the thought process which shaped his meaning. For this point, it is concluded that although a causal relationship did negatively affect the ability to communicate this meaning; the

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meaning itself was not altered. The paper moved on by offering a brief outline of Weber's 'view'. This outline provided opportunity to discuss the mechanical workings of the methodological structure of analysis, before applying it to the empirical study of the concept of 'race'. It was around this moment that the paper 'deviated' from the *ideal typical* undergraduate essay. In consideration of the 'findings', which concluded that Weber's 'view' *means* that: Sociology must begin with a *knowledge of self* which is symbolic to the individual in synonymy with society; it is only natural that this concluding section continues along this line of deviation. With this in mind, and in an endeavour to conduct sociology, I will now proceed in an attempt to explain the *meaning* of my *action*, that is: why did I deviate from the ideal type?

An ideal typical undergraduate essay would fall into the realms of what Weber describes as the 'rationalization of education' (Weber, 1948, p.240-244). This would suggest a 'regurgitation' of the information presented to the student, with the essay acting as a means to demonstrate the student's comprehension of this information. The aim of this 'regurgitation' would be the obtainment of a good grade, or as Weber explains, to achieve well in this 'special examination', which is the 'universal means of monopolization'. Yet, as was explained previously, there are two plausible motivations for writing, the first, to write for others, would fall into this explanation of a 'rationalized education' and would be the motivating factor of the students attempts at higher education.

It appears that my 'deviation' from this *ideal type* is a result of my motivation for writing being of the second plausibility, to write for myself. This would suggest that my attempt of higher education is not founded on the desire for 'monopolization', rather *knowledge of self*. This would suggest that I approach Higher Education in what Weber refers to as a 'Charismatic' way (Weber, 1948, p.245-252), which opposes the 'bureaucracy' of 'rationalized education'. Yet, it is also clear from my attempts to demonstrate an understanding of Weber's approach, and to fulfil the task required in this assignment, that this writing was also intended for an audience. This would suggest the balance of a charismatic approach within the frameworks of bureaucracy; a deliverance of my own philosophy/social theory through an explanation of the works of Max Weber.

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