Personality and Institution

Reflections on paradigmatic structures in Max Weber's thinking

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Abstract

The structure of scientific revolutions - if we follow Thomas Kuhn - is characterized by crises of knowledge and chances by changes of paradigm, a term that is mostly outside the natural sciences only used metaphorically. But also, in sociology, there are something like paradigmatic premises, questioning, research strategies, conceptual structures and perspectives of research in the competition between successful major theories. At least that could be said of Talcott Parsons's system theory in the period after the Second World War, maybe also of the Critical Theory or later of the approaches of Niklas Luhmann or Pierre Bourdieu. Against this background, the publishers of the Max Weber complete edition, especially Wolfgang Schluchter and his students, were concerned with establishing a "Weber paradigm" more than half a century after the death of this "Myth of Heidelberg". The essay proposes a combination of Weber's concept of action with the development of (institutional) forms of order and their enforcement. The prerequisites of the Weber Renaissance since the 1970s are discussed and then a systematization of Weber's questions based on its "basic sociological concepts" and their logic of grading are proposed. Aspects of a Weber Paradigm are developed from a presentation of the basic principles of the "Theory and Analysis of Institutional Mechanisms", because the institutional analytical method was proven in various research contexts, especially in the interdisciplinary research of historians and social scientists.

Keywords: Max Weber; institution; concept of action; interpretative sociology; paradigm.

The Weber Renaissance

A paradigmatic approach, especially in the social and cultural sciences, always has an affinity with the "Zeitgeist", with a dominant interpretation of the world, to which even the most complex theorems can be selectively referenced.

The Weber-Renaissance, which began in the 1970s, was in our opinion influenced also by a political situation. Against the distortion of Karl Marx by the so called "Marxism Leninism" invented in Moscow, neomarxism - connected with the student's Movement -, generated despite some "scholastic" interpretations a new interest in

historically anchored social theories. That were a reason also for the great project of the *Max Weber Complete Edition* (edited by Horst Baier, M. Rainer Lepsius, Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter).[1] Marxist historical studies such as the writings of Karl August Wittfogel or Franz Borkenau were re-read (especially by "pirated prints"), followed by the works of some "opponents" and their socio-historical models, especially that of Max Weber, later also that of Norbert Elias with his theory of a civilization process.[2] During the reign of the Nazi regime, there were some exiled scientists who made Weber's work known in the United States. Then, the re-importation of his writings to Germany after 1945 has to be taken into consideration, however it was mainly reduced to methodological subjects. The large comparative studies on "Economic Ethics of World Religions" (*Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*) found wider interest only since the 1970s.[3]

If one asks about the characteristics of Weber's sociology, then of course his "concept of action" comes into play. We call it (with Rainer Prewo[4]) *Handlungsbegrifflichkeit* because Weber was not interested in theories of action as e.g. those designed by George Herbert Mead. Weber, also a historian, outlined a *reconstruction* approach *instead of a constitutional* theory of action.[5]

At the methodological level, his decision to begin with the action-orientation of the individual was meant polemically against all collective concepts or organological or collectivistic metaphors of "society", whether they came from "left" or "right". For this reason, in Weber's theoretical reflections on the establishment of social relationships, he used – similar to Georg Simmel – the term "socialization" (*Vergesellschaftung*) instead of "society". That is why his definition of sociology begins with "action" as the starting point for the individual constitution of the social. On this basis, subjective sense" (*subjektiver Sinn*) became the key concept for his construction of sociology as an understanding science (*Verstehende Soziologie*).

Although Alfred Schutz[6] rightly said that Weber did not have an explicit and philosophically accurate distinction, firstly between "action" (*Handlung*) and the process of their actual realization (*Handeln*) and secondly between "subjective" and "objective" meaning, Weber's entire work deals only with "objective" relationships of meaning, worldviews and communicatively shared meaning. Yet the seemingly

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[1] *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* (MWG).

[2] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.

[3] Cf. Friedrich H. Tenbruck: *Das Werk Max Webers*.

[4] Rainer Prewo, *Max Webers Wissenschaftsprogramm*.

[5] Cf. Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, *Rationales Handeln als großbürgerliches Aktionsmodell. Thesen zu einigen halungstheoretischen Implikationen der „Soziologischen Grundbegriffe" Max Webers*. In: Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie 31 (1979), pp. 199-236 and ibidem, *Kulturwissenschaft und Handlungsbegrifflichkeit. Anthropologische Überlegungen zum Zusammenhang von Handlung und Ordnung in der Soziologie Max Webers*. In: Gerhard Wagner and Heinz Zipprian (eds.): Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre. Interpretation und Kritik. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1994, pp. 602-661.

[6] Alfred Schutz, *Phenomenology of the Social World*.

"subjective" starting point did not disappear in any "heaven of ideas" because it always dealt with subjective motivational resources, as the "framework" for attitudes and habitus forms. This includes the question of "manhood" (*Menschentum*) which Wilhelm Hennis pointed out when he did not want to acknowledge "action" as the last point of reference: "Because," he quoted Weber, "behind the action stands the human being".[7] This incentive was very fruitful, although the wording is still misleading: rather, one would have to remember the somewhat pragmatic-anthropological formula of Immanuel Kant, according to which "the materials for an anthropology [...] are to be found only in the actions of man which reveal his character".[8]

However, this raises the problem of how to get from the starting point of the orientation of individual subjects to the level of aggregation of phenomena that would be sociologically traceable. Weber worked with a special '*gradation*' of relationship levels and therefore there is no theoretical change from an individual perspective to a systems level.[9]

The starting point for Weber's sociological basics (*Soziologische Grundbegriffe*)[10] was the distinction between behavior and action. The subjective meaning, which is still based entirely on concepts of action is oriented toward other people and circumstances. That means, others and their attitudes are decisive for social action (§ 1). At the next level, systems of means to achieve something appear as orientation variables. These are conditions for an inner methodization of action (§ 2). As a further stage follows the reciprocity of orientations, the more complex interlocking individual orientation perspectives and their *relative* determination (§ 3). The fact that such social relationships can be codified and at the same time frequently arise within the framework of fixed norm systems becomes clearer in the introduction of regularities such as tradition (*Brauch*) and custom (*Sitte*) (§ 4). However, the essential qualitative leap lies where the successive orientations, to reacting and intertwined expectations enable the creation of institutional dimensions, i.e. a legitimate order and its validity (*Geltung*) (§ 5).

Such validity claims and possibilities for a structured relationship will be more and more objectivated in the course of Weber's category analysis: order itself becomes an issue. He understood personal relationships often as fight (§ 8). Then follow different opportunities of stabilization: statutes and association rules or constitutions (§§ 12 and 13). Now the organizational guarantees of an order are introduced, namely administrative staff and sanctioning authorities (see §§ 12 and 15). Only after all these

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[7] Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber. Essays in Reconstruction* and ibidem, *Max Weber's Science of Man*.

[8] Immanuel Kant, Werkausgabe. vol. XII: *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*. Ed by Wilhelm Weischädel. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2002, pp. 794-795.

[9] That was the interpretation by Stefan Breuer, *Herrschaft' in der Soziologie Max Webers*.

[10] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*.

preparations of an organized progress appears in Weber's basic sociological terms power and the institutionally fixed dominance as crucial sociological categories.

Weber's concept of action as the key to understanding social processes and institutions

Weber's existential conception of the "person" is fundamentally different from all poststructural or postmodern theories. Intellectual discourses since the beginning of the twentieth century have been fascinated and alarmed either by an excess of individualization or at the same time by a "loss of personality" as an accompanying element of modernity.

Precisely Weber clothed his cultural-critical discomfort of those processes in personal resistance formulas. More than a quarter of a century earlier than Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's published their "blackest book" (as Jürgen Habermas called the "Dialectic of Enlightenment") in 1944[11], Weber has emphasized the ambivalence of the Western rationalization process. All the achievements of rationalization, all the advances of foreseeability also create new dependencies.[12] Jürgen Habermas later describes this as the "colonization of the lifeworld" through the power of abstract system procedures.[13] In Weber's lifetime, such thoughts were interpreted as "tragic". The dignity of the person, their responsibility, the active fulfillment of the "demon's demands, from where our life depends" were decisive. From this perspective, the inevitable limitations of rationalitiy of purpose (*Zweckrationalität*) are then a destiny for which it needs literary images. All this was named by Weber a "housing of bondage of the future".[14] In our opinion, most of those cultural-critical passages in Weber's worldview express the double perspective of a bourgeoisie (*Bürgertum*) that has not yet been empowered and at the same time anticipated its loss of validity.

Theory and Analyses of Institutional Mechanisms

All these processes are usually institutionalized. Although Weber did not develop a reflected concept of institutions, it may be helpful for an interpretation of his idea of the continuation of norms and patterns of action to look at the establishment, stabilization and transformation of social relationships from the perspective of institutions. Rehberg's "Theory and Analysis of Institutional Mechanisms"[15] intends to show how structural conditions influence the horizon of subjects that means also their

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[11] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford [first in German 1944]. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

[12] Cf. Max Weber, *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland*.

[13] Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*.

[14] See note 12.

15   Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, *Symbolische Ordnungen*.

decisions and routines, their preferences and interests. That implies to understand institutions as symbolic orders. The symbolic representation of the respective ordering principles (e.g. of "guiding ideas" or a *idée directrice*, as Maurice Hauriou called it[16]) is central, and thus they can be described as institutional asset in autonomy, such as the construction of "own spaces", "own times" and in particular (mostly mythical) "own history" of an institution.[17]

Although numerous elective affinities are shown with other, sometimes equally stored, conceptual models, system building processes and their self-referential increase in complexity (Niklas Luhmann[18]) and social structuring (Anthony Giddens[19]), macro perspectives are closely related to the approach described here. The same is valid for other theories of power, e.g. expressed also in processes of distinctions (Pierre Bourdieu[20]). Further, the "protosociological" investigations of communicative genres (Thomas Luckmann et al.[21]), the discovery of discursive orders (Michel Foucault[22]) and the analysis of interactive forms of creating role models (Erving Goffman[23]). However, this list should not be eclectic. "Institutions" are not synonymous with "organizations". However, all organizations have an institutional dimension and rely on institutional mechanisms for enforcement and self-realization. This applies for example for couple relationships, be it in intimate as well as marriage forms as an institution, but also for all types of informal and more or less formalized group relations to the most developed (according to Max Weber's terminology) associations and institutions such as the church and the state. In this context, Arnold Gehlen's impressive institutional approach is stimulationg for Rehberg's interpretation of institutional achievements and at the same time dangers of institutional power.[24]

This theoretical view does not take the "duration" of a social arrangement, because at the center of interest is the (more or less successful) statement about permanence. Quite in Weber's sense the Theory and Analysis of Institutional Mechanisms do not start from fixed orders, but from assertions of order, not of unquestionable validity, but of validity claims.

In particular, the visibility of the principles of order of a social relationship through their symbolic embodiment and presence characterizes the relationship between

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[16] Cf. Maurice Hauriou, *The Theory of the Institution and the Foundation*.

[17] Cf. Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, *Weltrepräsentanz und Verkörperung. Institutionelle Analyse und Symboltheorien*.

[18] Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society*.

[19] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the theory of structuration*.

[20] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

[21] Cf. Thomas Luckmann, *Lebenswelt, Identität und Gesellschaft*.

[22] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*.

[23] Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*.

[24] Arnold Gehlen, *Man. His Nature and Place in the World* and ibidem, *Urmensch und Spätkultur* as well as Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, Eine Grundlagentheorie der Institutionen: Arnold Gehlen, pp. 13-42.

symbolization and institutionality. Institutional stabilizations are based on the power of the imaginary and thus always have something "fictitious". The Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, in particular, based his genetic institutional theory on this aspect[25]. He has impressively shown that societies cannot form themselves without imagination and that all ordered world references are based on them. From a "magma" of the original conditions of being, arise those identity logics on which all patterns of perception and normalization of social coexistence are based. The symbolic worlds and the consciously elevated parts of the "unconscious" are constitutive for these processes. From this fundamental level follows what Castoriadis calls "*Instituierung*". From this result concrete institutionalizations leading to the syntheses of world-views.

Decisive for this perspective is also that institutions are always "stabilized tensions". Arnold Gehlen did in his impressive approach of a theory of institutions not develop this term theoretically far enough, but in terms of a phenomenology of order[26], he provided a good illustration of this basic category, for example by describing courtesy as such a stabilization of an ambivalent situation. From confidentiality to the cold, the relationship could be expanded in different directions. That is how precarious states of equilibrium can be generated and institutionalized by ritualizations and behavioral stylizations. A reconstruction of comprehensive inter-institutional competitive tensions can start from this perspective.

We would like to give an example of this approach, which could help to better understand a type of European tension balance and the specific development of Western purposeful rationality, to which Max Weber has repeatedly referred with so much emphasis. After the increasingly fictional unity the Roman Empire was broken after 395 AD by the split into an Eastern and Western empire and later into an Eastern and Western Church, began in the West, the struggle for new uniform syntheses. First, the Roman Church demanded "universality," which, however, immediately had to compete with the secular powers. For centuries, this formed the struggles and compromise formulas between priests and secular rulers. The result was the peculiar, never pacified tense institutionalization of *imperium* and *sacerdotium*. This did not lead to a pacification, but became the frame definition for supremacy claims and also their relativization. The religious dignitaries, above all the Pope, wanted to be princes and conversely the secular rulers tried to sacralize their position (for example by the idea of a "directness to God" of the French kings).

Likewise, without this background, the institutional "miracle" of the "Holy Roman Empire", existing without any centralization by the emperor and a solid territorial context it is difficult to understand. For a long time, this Europe was the continent of one

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[25] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*.

[26] Arnold Gehlen, *Man*, pp. 78-84; the term cames from Jean Przyluski, *L'Evolution humaine*, 1942.

religion, but above all also of the Reformation. Confessionalization radicalized what was always present in the old institutional conflicts between mental and temporal powers: the principles and logic of competing institutions had to be constantly monitored and translated into their own actions and thinking. That way, the conflicting interests were simultaneously recognized and relativized; in any case, the opponents remained closely connected (these are, so to speak, the deeper sources of market rationality, or in other words, this can be understood as a special case of rationalization and self-observation).

Also, in Weber's work can be found many examples of often dramatically escalating problems: especially the tension between charisma and its generalization. Just as Émile Durkheim[27] (and later Arnold Gehlen) made the ritualistic and ritually repeatable mimetic movement the beginning of the emergence of at the beginning "indefinite" then precisely fixed obligations.[28] Weber interprets in this sense the term "movement" for the "charismatically led group" which must be traced back to the "paths of everyday life". That is why

the "pure domination of charisma is regularly broken, transposed and bent into the 'institutional', and then either repressed or unnaturally mechanized [...] fused and mixed".[29]

The *Amtscharisma* is the most typical case of the institutional transformation of the personal special position of eminent persons in an socially acceptable "normalization" of prestigious positions.

Aspects of a Weber Paradigm

From all this, the following aspects can be considered as part of a "*Weber paradigm*"[30]:
- In an existential dimension, Weber constructs a concept of action that is not microsociological but reminiscent of the fact that even the most complex social structures are based on actions and omissions of the individuals who become effective in them.
- It follows a model of sociality that will enable mutual action orientations and norm expectations.
- The key words "fight", enforcement power and domination point to a continuous discussion of tensions. This concerns the institutional taming of individual energies as well as the release of human action potentials from forms of

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[27] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

[28] Arnold Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur*.

[29] Max Weber, Economy and Society, pp. 1111-1157.

[30] Cf. Gert Albert et al., *Das Weber-Paradigma*.

"geronnenen Geistes": The routinization of the charisma corresponds precisely with the demand for a re-charismatization of purely "bureaucratic-legal" rule.

- This results in traditionally formulated figuration concepts[31] that always are "process concepts".

- The dimension of symbolism shows Weber's cultural-sociological perspective insofar as he saw the meaning of the basic symbols of the human beings and their world reference, above all the fact that we are "cultural beings", able to take a position on the world and make sense of it.

- In this sense, the sociological perspective is important, i.e. the programmatic communication of interests and ideas and the understanding that the *faits sociaux* (Durkheim[32]) only become relevant in the context of their "cultural meaning" (*Kulturbedeutung*). There are not necessarily simple domination or willingness of subjugate, but a behavior with reference to the respective world and interpretations of social situations.

- "*Chance*": this is Weber's anti-terminological formula for probable actions and possible intentions to act.

- Overall, the Weberian methodology proves until today as a guideline for a sociology of reality (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*), in which the mistake of a *simple* "empiricism" can be avoided.

If we consider the results of this work in summary, Max Weber's impact for sociological modelling is based on typological systematizations and that impressive condensing of complex social constellations, which leads to results, which in turn should make visible the way in which reality diverges from it. This also shows once again a tension motif, namely between the person of the scientist with his will for knowledge on one hand and the obligation of science as an institution on the other side.[33]

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2. Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge 1984.

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[31] Cf. Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?* and Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (ed.), *Norbert Elias und die Menschenwissenschaften* and ibidem, *Form und Prozess. Zu den katalysatorischen Wirkungschancen einer Soziologie aus dem Exil: Norbert Elias*.

[32] Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*.

[33] Cf. Max Weber, (1946). *Science as Vocation* [first in German 1917/1919]. Ed. by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Free Press 1946.

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