

## Original Paper

# 100 Years since the Death of Max Weber

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### Abstract

*Weber published theories in all social science disciplines to be much debated and revised by later scholars. Today it is his *Wissenschaftslehre* that is most relevant. Published in 1922 and first now available in translation entirely, it is a huge and original achievement, placing him among top philosophers of science with Popper, Hempel, Nagel and Kuhn.*

### Keywords

*action, meaning, reason, interpretation, causation and understanding*

## 1. Introduction

One can look at Max Weber's publications from different angles. The mainstream interpretation was stated by Reinhard Bendix (1964), although American sociologist Talcott Parsons already in the 1930s recognized his unique contribution to the social sciences. Recently other interpretations of or approaches to Weber: a Freudian interpretation with focus on the troubled personality of Weber; a Marxist approach placing Weber in the political situation in Germany at his time—"situation determined" *a la* K. Mannheim, including the German catastrophe.

Weber lived a difficult life working like an ascetic. He failed as an *Ordinarius* and he gave a virulent talk on the *Ostfrage* at UNI Freiburg 1895. This was his inaugural speech, calling -wrongly- for nationalist policy or state intervention against Polish migrations. Yet, Weber's genius appears after his personal collapse in especially his philosophy of the social sciences and history. His Wissenschaftslehre (1922) remains the most original work on social science methodology till this day.

## 2. Microfoundations

Weber identified the basic micro unit in social science analysis as intentional behaviour. The emphasis for Weber was upon intention—what he called "Sinn" (meaning).

Meaning is the inner side of behaviour: goal, belief, will, emotion, etc. When outer behaviour is

orientated by complex *Sinn*, there is “*Sinnzusammenhang*”. Weber devoted much time to analysing such meanings or complexes of meanings. This emphasis on the basic subjective nature of human activity opens up for the analysis of ideas, plans, hopes, etc. Since the relationship between inner and outer behaviour is many-one, finding the correct intention requires a conjecture or hypothesis. Intention or reason is simple or complicated.

### 3. Means and Ends

Weber declared that every rational action could be analysed with the means-end framework for understanding the inner aspect. Much criticism has been raised against Weber’s methodology of understanding an actor’s motive—the inner side. It is all wrong. Without intention, how to account for the outer side?

Weber stated that any hypothesis from “*verstehen*” needs corroboration or evidence. A social relation occurs when two persons relate to each other in consciousness, I.e. *Sinn*. What, then, does “*Sinn*” refer to? The scope of *Sinn* is large and its importance makes a great difference *visavi* Nature and the natural sciences.

### 4. Teleology and Rational Choice

The most basic model in the social sciences today is the rational choice framework. Its origins are to be found in micro economics—*homo economicus* in Austrian economic theory. Weber’s model of meaningful behaviour is sharply teleological like rational choice but lacks the requirement of utility and probability. The means and the ends do not have to be causally related! And objectives may be unfeasible or not capable of realization. Weber modeled all kinds of meaning or intentions, whether rational as with Bismarck or irrational as with the *virtuosi* of religion.

### 5. Macro Theory: Ideal-Types Causality

The subjective aspects of action did not pose a hindrance to causality. It was not the mind-body problem that interested Weber, but cause and effect in social life. He argued incessantly that belief and ideas mattered, although as a realist he underlined power and material benefits. Thus, he was to penetrate into the cores of religious beliefs, while explaining religious struggle as conflict over life opportunities. All forms of priesthood he looked upon as the institutionalized power ambition.

Thus, Weber analysed at great length Eastern and Western religions, omitting Islam and Orthodox Christianity. Why? They did not fit the so-called “*Weber thesis*” below.

Weber put forward a number of macro theories where he often employed his specific method of concept formation -*ideal-types*. Here, we have:

- (1) The difference between the Orient and the Occident ecologically-in anticipation of Wittfogel’s thesis.

- (2) The end of the Antique period by the transformation of slaves into serfs-anticipating Roztovzeff's thesis.
- (3) The evolution of two Law families that could claim justice, or the difference between Roman law and Common Law on the one hand and socialist law as well as *Kadijustice* on the other hand-anticipating *Law and Economics*.
- (4) The *Staendestaat* as the ideal type of feudal society.
- (5) The emergence of commercial law in late medieval trading societies.
- (6) The rise of modern *Herrschaft* with the ideal type of bureaucracy.
- (7) The two ideal types of democracy: parliamentary and presidential democracy.
- (8) The impossibility of a socialist or military economy-anticipating Hayek.

All these theories include causality arguments, which needed various kinds of evidence, even counterfactual analysis.

Weber became well-known for his theory about the rise of capitalism—Weber's thesis linked the modern market economy with the Reformation, especially Calvinism, leading to endless debate about *Sinn, causation, and modernity*.

Weber argued 1904 that the parallel between the meaning of reformation and the meaning of modern capitalism were affiliated both logically and causally. He then in 1913 set out to show the opposite: no capitalism, no Calvinism. Causation called for evidence from outer behaviour or actions. The debate over the so-called Weber thesis goes on, now as the origins of modernism. For example swedish economic historian K. Samuelson denied any connection, neither on the level of meaning (Sinn) nor in causation.

## 6. Wissenschaftslehre

While composing his major empirical theories from 1900 he also wrote philosophy pieces continuously. They rank high on originality, breaking off from the contemporary German schools of philosophy. He would today be classified as *internalist* due to his microfoundations, rejecting for instance *externalism* a la J. Searle and his New Realism = One Reality I.e. the world of quantum physics.

Weber rejected behaviorism, phycicalism, reductionist and historicism as well as prevailing German philosophy at that time.

## 7. Conclusion

Weber developed a meta-science in a very original manner, picking the best from mainly German philosophy. He was neither a Kantian nor a positivist or adhered to phenomenology. His concept of the inner aspect of actions is today highly relevant. The subjective meaning cannot be neglected.

Weber's philosophy of science is today highly relevant for the humanities and social sciences concerning his discussion of meaning or subjective sense. Human decision making involves reflection over the *Either-Or* alternatives in every choice situation as well as identifying of means and ends in

freedom.

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