I · The Foundations of Social Theory
Introduction

Max Weber has been described as not merely the greatest of sociologists but 'the sociologist'. Yet for most of his career he would not have described himself as a sociologist at all. His own training was in history, economics and law; he was opposed to the creation of professorships of sociology; and in a letter written at the very end of his life he said that his only reason for being a sociologist was to rid the subject of the influence of the collective — or, as it would now be put, 'holistic' — concepts by which it continued to be haunted. It was not until after 1910 that he began to compose the treatise which we now have, still uncompleted, as Economy and Society. It is a work of a markedly different kind from his early writings, whether his historical studies of medieval trading companies and Roman agrarian law or his contemporary investigations of the stock exchange and the condition of agricultural labour in the Junker estates to the East of the Elbe. Yet it would be a mistake to read too much discontinuity into the sequence of his writings. His ideas changed over the course of thirty years, as they were bound to do. But his overriding preoccupations did not. The nature of domination in human society, the role of ideas in history, the impact of industrial capitalism first on Europe and then on the world, and the scope and limitations of social science itself — on all these themes Weber's views are, broadly speaking, consistent as well as distinctive. We shall never know what more he might have had to say if he had lived to complete his studies of the social psychology of the great religions, of the sociology of the state and of the methodology of social science. But his work can still be treated as a coherent whole in terms of both method and substance.

Weber's initial unwillingness to see himself as a sociologist sprang partly from his resistance to holistic concepts and his conviction that sociological explanations must relate to the self-conscious actions of individual people, and partly from his distrust of superficial generalisation and his view of typologies as preliminaries to, not substitutes for, the analysis of institutions and events in their own context. But he also recognised that historians can only operate through the use of general concepts and that their explanations must, whether they admit it or not, appeal to some law-like regularities in human conduct. In this qualified sense, therefore, Economy and Society can be said to be putting forward a general social theory. Although Weber did not believe in historical laws in the manner of Marxism, he did believe that it is possible to construct trans-cultural and trans-

3 Quoted by Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'Max Weber's Political Sociology and his Philosophy of World History', International Social Science Journal, xvii (1965), 44 n. 2.
temporal concepts in terms of which human history can be categorised and that
even if its future course is unpredictable, its course so far can in principle be
causally explained.

The relation of Weber’s social theory to Marx’s is, however, a matter of some
dispute. Weber certainly differed from the Marxists on two fundamental and
related matters: he did not accept either that ideology is entirely determined by
underlying economic causes, or that all conflict in society is class conflict. To
Weber, ideas can and sometimes do have an independent and decisive influence
on the course of events, and class conflict is only one of the various forms of the
unending struggle for domination. He was sceptical of the Marxists’ vision of the
inevitable triumph of socialism not only because he disbeliefed in any kind of
theory claiming to prophesy the future but also because he thought that
socialism, if it came, would bring about only another form of bureaucratic
domination under which the condition of the individual worker would not be
significantly changed. But often his attacks are directed more against Marxism
than Marx. His own analyses of the nature of class interests, of the transition
from slavery to feudalism to capitalism and of the way in which material condi-
tions influence the success or failure of religious and political movements are
at many points very close to Marx’s own. What is more, his overall view of the
modern world as the outcome of an increasingly irresistible process of ‘rational-
isation’ and ‘disenchantment’ is often reminiscent of what Marx says about
‘alienation’. ¹ And when one of his colleagues tried to interpret Weber’s ideas
about the ‘Protestant Ethic’ as a kind of anti-Marxist idealism, Weber himself
protested ‘I really must object to this; I am much more materialistic than
Delbrück thinks’.²

If there is one basic assumption, or set of assumptions, underlying Weber’s
thought which distinguishes it from that of Marx – or, for that matter, of Comte
or Durkheim – it is the assumption deriving from the joint influence of Kant and
Nietzsche that reality cannot be objectively grasped by the human mind as a
meaningful whole. Any view of the world must, Weber holds, be limited and
partial, and such meaning as it has is given to it only in terms of the observer’s
values. It is not that sociology, economics or history cannot be ‘value-free’ in the
sense that validated statements of cause and effect are true or false irrespective
of what may be the moral or political preferences of the sociologist. It is that the
sociologist’s conceptualisation of the world is, and can only be, formed and
directed by what is of historical and cultural significance to him. This therefore
makes his task a lonely but at the same time an heroic one. He has to strive for
objectivity within his chosen assumptions and values while recognising that these
cannot claim any objective validity themselves.

This view of the world and the sociologist’s role in it is reflected in both the
methodological and substantive parts of Economy and Society. The first part of it
had, unlike the rest, been revised by Weber before he died and can therefore
be taken as a definitive statement of his view of what sociology can and cannot
do and how it should be about it. Weber holds that the concepts which sociology

¹ As was first pointed out by Karl Löwith in ‘Max Weber und Karl Marx’, published in
Weber’s own journal, Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, in 1932.
employs are directed to the empirical regularities observable in social action, and
that it is then for the historian, as opposed to the sociologist, to make use of them
in offering a causal explanation of whatever particular events are important
to him. These ‘ideal type’ concepts must, however, even where they refer to
collectivities (like ‘the state’) or epochs (like ‘the Renaissance’) or forms of
society (like ‘capitalism’), be reducible to the action or probability of action of
individuals; and that action must be understandable both in the sense that it can
be seen to relate to some form of rule and in the sense that the meaning of the
rule to the agent can be grasped by an external observer. Understanding
someone’s behaviour is not a substitute for explaining it: on the contrary, it is
only a part of the necessary causal account and has itself, like any other hypothesis,
to be tested against the evidence. But the need for, and indeed the possibility
of, understanding the meaning which behaviour has to the agent performing it
is what distinguishes the explanation of behaviour from the explanation of
inanimate events (which themselves, of course, may also play a significant causal
role in human history).

Much has been written about Weber’s use of the term ‘ideal type’, which he
borrowed and adapted from its use in the writings of his contemporary Georg
Jellinek, and it is certainly true that his own discussion of it is not so clear as to
make further commentary unnecessary. But the main point which he uses it to
make is simply that the concepts which the sociologist frames in order to give
meaning and coherence to the otherwise chaotic flux of history are logical
constructions – constructions, that is, of the sociologist’s own adoption or con-
trivance which furnish a standard in terms of which actual forms of social
organisation can be classified and compared. The criticism which this assertion
invites is not that it is false – it is, if anything, obvious – but that it leads Weber
into an excessive disposition to frame ahistorical typologies which do not, in the
event, lead to either the cross-cultural generalisations or the causal explanations
which the reader has come to expect. This criticism is, I think, fair. Weber’s
four-fold typology of social action and his emphasis on ‘rationality’ as the
yardstick against which individual actions and the institutions constituted by them
are to be assessed are neither necessary to, nor even very helpful towards, the
formulation of his substantive hypotheses about the causes of the decline of the
ancient world, the influence of religion on economic activity or the prerequisites
for parliamentary democracy. At the same time, however, the need for clear
definition and serviceable classification of the types of social relationships with
which sociologists, historians, economists and the rest all have to deal is un-
deniable. Weber’s own definitions and classifications may sometimes be both
more highly abstract and more strictly individualistic than they either need or
should. But then it is up to his critics to improve on them.

This holds particularly for Weber’s influential definitions of ‘power’, ‘domi-
nation’ and ‘the state’ and his classification of political legitimacy as either
‘traditional’, ‘rational-legal’ or ‘charismatic’. In accordance with his basic as-
sumption, his definitions reflect his own presuppositions and priorities about the
nature of politics. His emphasis on coercion, his insistence that domination is to
be defined in terms of obedience to commands on the part of a specified group
of people, and his definition of ‘the state’ in terms of its territorial monopoly
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of the legitimate use of force irrespective of the purposes to which that monopoly is applied all can be, and have been, challenged by others whose presuppositions differ from his. In particular, his definitions have been argued to make too little allowance for the manipulation as opposed to the coercion by rulers of those over whom they rule and the possibility that domination may be exercised by sustaining a tacit agreement to keep certain kinds of countervailing claims from being articulated at all. But it remains doubtful whether a better alternative set of definitions for the analysis of politics has yet been put forward; and it would be difficult to maintain that Weber’s stress on force and nationalism has lost any of its relevance in the decades since he wrote.

Likewise, Weber’s analysis of social stratification in terms of a three-fold distinction between the forms of power belonging respectively to classes, status groups and parties has not yet been superseded, despite the controversy which it continues to arouse. It comes, unfortunately, from one of the parts of Economy and Society which he left unrevised at his death: even the passage on status groups and classes which is here included as a postscript to the earlier and longer discussion is itself incomplete, as its final sentence makes clear. But his treatment remains the locus classicus for all sociologists who see it as necessary to conceptualise social inequality in a way which does not assume that it can always be reduced without remainder to the relations between classes defined in relation to the forces of production. It is almost certainly a mistake, despite Weber’s remark that ‘parties are primarily at home in the sphere of power’, to understand him as treating class, status (in the sense of social prestige) and power as the three dimensions of stratification, for he sees all competition and conflict between social groups as a struggle for power. But he does not see them as reducible to each other. His view is thus equally far from the ‘functionalist’ view according to which social stratification reflects the differential value which society as a whole assigns to different occupational roles and from the Marxist view according to which political power derives from ownership of the means of production. The difference between the three is not one which can be settled in the abstract: they can only, as Weber would have agreed, be tested by seeing whether the explanations which they generate stand up more or less well against the evidence which history provides independently of the moral and political preferences of those who subscribe to them. But Weber’s view, taken together with his underlying conception of the nature of social action and of the forms which communal action can take, may still turn out in the end to be the most durable of the three.

The four selections which follow, although they are all from Economy and Society, are from different parts of it. The first, as Weber’s first sub-title indicates, is to be taken as largely methodological. The second comes under his second sub-title ‘The Concept of Social Action’, and is part of a long sequence of definitional discussions of the forms of social and political relations which leads in turn into a still longer sequence covering economic relations. The third selection comes much later, at the end of a chapter on politics, and the last (which, as I have mentioned, was in fact written earlier) follows a long chapter on the forms of domination. However, they can be read in sequence as complementary to one another even by those unfamiliar with the work as a whole.