
Book Reviews

Max Weber's Methodology: The Unification Of The Cultural And Social Sciences by Fritz Ringer. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997. 188 pages

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The central thesis of Fritz Ringer's informative book is that Max Weber's great achievement was the integration of two divergent approaches to the practice of history and social science. Ringer calls them the explanatory and interpretive approaches. In Weber's time the barrier between explanation and interpretation produced a great tension in the intellectual culture—a tension that Weber tried to resolve. Ringer states that even today remnants of this tension present obstacles to thought in the intellectual culture of our own time, and therefore to consider Weber's achievement then also speaks to current issues now. Weber's methodological unification consisted of both the adoption and rejection of ideas from each of the two approaches (p. 1). Ringer also makes a case for a controversial conclusion that is related to the thesis of Weber as a unifier, namely, that he was neither an opponent nor an uncritical heir of the German historical tradition—a conclusion that challenges commentators who place him squarely within that tradition (pp. 60-62).

Ringer goes on to say that Weber achieved this unification through two "crucial reformulations." Both of them center on the concept of causality, which leads Ringer to conclude that Weber was neither a positivist nor an idealist, but rather a "causalist" (p. 62). The first reformulation was Weber's adoption of "singular causal analysis" from the physiologist and statistician Johannes von Kries. Weber thought that von Kries' theory was

applicable to some given course of events that culminates in an outcome. To ascertain whether one of the antecedent events was a cause of the outcome, the historian or social scientist imagines and assumes that the antecedent in question was either absent or altered in some fundamental way. If under either assumption the judgement is warranted that there is a probability that the outcome would have been other than it was, then the social scientist has some assurance that the antecedent was an adequate cause of the actual outcome. Had the Greeks lost the Battle of Marathon, for instance, it is objectively probable that Greek civilization would have been overrun by a theocratic Persian hegemony and Occidental civilization consequently deprived of much of classical Greek thought. The battle was therefore an adequate cause of distinctive features of Occidental civilization (pp. 67-68). It is evident from the foregoing that singular causal analysis consists of the notions of objective probability, adequate causation, and counterfactual reasoning. In addition, certain "rules of experience" probabilistically link the altered antecedent with the imagined outcome; these rules justify the counterfactual reasoning. The integrative achievement of this theory, according to Ringer, is given in both the adoption and rejection of certain aspects of the explanatory approach; it adopts the notions of causation and generalizations (the rules of experience), but rejects the notion of universal connections in favor of probable linkages, according to which rules of experience connect cause with effect, although not universally, but rather statistically.

The second reformulation that shows Weber to be a methodological unifier, according to Ringer, focuses on subjective experiences as causal sources of actions. The end of an action as envisioned by an individual, his beliefs about the means to achieve it, and his motives for achieving the end are causes of the way he acts. Inner dispositions are adequate causes of outward courses of action (pp. 93-94). In analyzing Weber's discussion of such "internal causes," Ringer emphasizes his use of the ideal-type to understand the individual's thinking. Applying

the ideal-type for this purpose, Weber, according to Ringer, in effect redefined interpretive understanding as a form of singular causal analysis. Accordingly, the social scientist counterfactually constructs a typical course of action that is completely rational (right rationality) in the context of the situation faced by the individual and then compares the actual course of action with the ideal-type. Divergences of the actual action from the ideal-type yield objectively probable causes of why the action resulted in a different outcome than that predicted by the type. At some points the individual's thinking was irrational. This method of uncovering causes integrates the explanatory emphasis on causality with the interpretive preoccupation with subjective meaning, and once again we are aware of Weber's unification of the two approaches.

Singular causal analysis and the redefinition of interpretation as a causal method are Ringer's principal examples of Weber as a methodological integrator. Ringer, nevertheless, goes on to probe the points of tension between the explanatory and the interpretive approaches that influenced Weber's methodology. In this context, Weber defended the view that the distinction between natural and social science fails to coincide neatly with the differences in their objects of study, namely, the differences between nature and mind (p. 45). In contrast to the latter division, Weber concluded that natural science concerns itself with the general (the nomothetic), whereas the humanistic disciplines strive for detailed knowledge about singular, unique patterns and their causes (the idiographic) (p. 32). Here Weber followed Wilhelm Windelband. Accordingly, the humanistic scholar interests himself in meaningful configurations like the spirit of capitalism, termed by the logic of that time "historical individuals," rather than in discovering scientific laws about classes of objects. However, Weber denied that any unique social or cultural phenomenon can be described in its totality as some members of the German historical tradition claimed; knowledge

is never an exhaustive reproduction but always a selective reconstruction.

With regard to scientific laws, Weber attacked the notion that the subject matter of history and social science can be logically deduced in syllogistic fashion from universal, invariant laws, even were such laws to be found. He thus rejected the nomological-deductive model as appropriate for these disciplines. The trouble with this possibility, said Weber, is that universal laws abstract from concrete realities, yet it is precisely the latter that are of interest to history and social science. Another difficulty is that cultural objects that fit under such laws are not necessarily significant; deductions from universal laws cannot tell us which cultural phenomena are important. Since the humanistic disciplines examine only a small part of the world, they select for study only those aspects that are significant in the light of cultural values, and it is not necessarily the case that the general coincides with the significant. Therefore, the values of the investigators and their culture determine what they study and therefore what has a chance of becoming knowledge. Value presuppositions of research are absolutely unavoidable. With some modifications, Weber adopted this notion of value-relevance from Heinrich Rickert (pp. 45-49).

Not only does value-relevance determine what facts are formed into historical individuals, but it also determines which of the infinitude of their causes come to light. A myriad of causal relations abound in history, but only a relative few are worth knowing. The role of value-relevance in the determination of knowledge however, does raise the question of the latter's objectivity. Do values determine more than the selection of problems to be investigated? Ringer vigorously defends Weber's contention that value-relevance does not preclude objectivity, for once a domain of phenomena is found to be value-relevant, a methodologically correct investigation will yield scientific truth.

Other dimensions of Weber's methodology analyzed by Ringer include the role of empathy in interpretive understanding, Weber's controversial stance toward value neutrality (not to be confused with value-relevance), value analysis, and his trenchant criticisms of naturalism, holism, and irrationalism, especially with respect to how the last relates to freedom of the will (pp. 52-60). In every case Ringer locates Weber in the larger intellectual context, showing how he responded to the specific views of others. Ringer also clarifies how Weber's conclusions were informed by the dialogue between expounders of explanation and interpretation within the context of the conventions of nineteenth century German universities and the prevailing historical tradition. He shows how thinkers like Dilthey, Simmel, and Windelband responded to the challenge posed by positivism to these conventions and traditions with creative syntheses to revive the humanistic disciplines. Weber's methodological inquiries were part of that great revival.

In the chapter entitled "From Theory To Practice," Ringer attempts to relate Weber's methodology to his substantive work in history and sociology, wisely conceding that limitation of space hinders this project from being carried very far. The first issue of substance addressed by Ringer is whether one can validly find in history a primacy of one type of cause or multiplicity of causes, none of which has primacy. Here, Weber criticized Marx's historical materialism, putting forth the view that in some instances we find the economic determined by the political, in others the economic determined by the religious, and in still others different combinations of causal factors. We cannot locate one ultimate type of cause that would furnish a "resting place" for every causal chain. In the substantive sense, therefore, Weber was a multicausalist. In discussing this topic, Ringer analyzed Weber's theory of the role of world views in specific historical sequences and his theory of elective affinity. Another topic in this chapter concerns the relationship between Weber's methodological individualism and his comparative historical

analyses. Ringer informs us that he bridged the gap between the microscopic and the macroscopic levels of analysis by constructing ideal-types of collective actions. Rational thinking is attributed to collective actors, and the actual deviations from rational courses are examined in the same manner as in the case of single actions. Finally, Ringer analyzes the methodological dimensions in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this famous text Ringer finds the most interesting methodological dimension to be the ideal-type, employed to define Calvinist doctrine and the spirit of capitalism as a reaction. This work, says Ringer, is not narrative history (Weber never wrote any), but comparative history explaining how historical processes and developmental sequences result in long-term structural changes.

In several of his chapters Ringer brings Weber "up to date" by comparing his ideas about method with "contemporary formulations," mostly by philosophers of science, thereby placing him in relation to the present as well as the past. He finds interesting parallels and convergences between Weber and contemporary formulations.

Historians and sociologists would do well to read this book. Ringer presents us with a well written, clear, and succinct exposition of Weber as a methodologist, and the book has the merit of being sufficiently general to cover the subject, yet sufficiently detailed to be meaningful. Weber's abstruse notions "come to life" as their relationship to the controversies of his time are made evident. Ringer has adduced abundant evidence to substantiate the theme he stated at the beginning of the book, that Weber's methodological achievement was one of integration and unification during a period of crisis in the humanistic sciences. His overall evaluation of Weber is positive; Weber was not merely a follower, but a clarifier and transformer of the German historical tradition, and he was also someone from whose works we can learn today. Despite its clarity, this book will be tough going for readers who do not already have some

familiarity with both Weber and the philosophy of science. Although the book may prove useful to practitioners, readers would be wise to take seriously Weber's own warning about the limitation of methodology for research. In "Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences" (1905) Weber placed a caveat with regard to methodology: It can only bring to one's awareness those methods that have already proved themselves in research. We can express his admonitions in terms of modern logic: an explicit awareness of methodology has its uses under certain conditions, but such awareness is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for successful research.