

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE TO

### '“Energetic” Theories of Culture'

by Max Weber

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I must admit as principal co-translator of this text that it is no surprise to me that no one has previously completed a translation of these twenty-six pages of tortuously difficult German from the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1973, pp. 400-426). Weber's German often simply defies translation into English. This, however, is not due to the complexity of his own ideas or the terminology in which they are expressed, but because of the convoluted syntax of the German of this period and the technical vocabulary and pseudo-scientific explanations found in the authors he is criticizing. Sentences of fifteen and even twenty or more lines are not uncommon. But because of the accepted use of dashes, colons, and parenthetical comments within a single sentence in the academic prose of this period, even the shorter sentences can pose seemingly insurmountable problems. Moreover, the essay is in fact nothing but a long, detailed review of a book by a now surely insignificant figure in the history of sociology, Wilhelm Ostwald (1853-1932), although this attack appeared in the same year that Ostwald was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

What nevertheless makes the essay of interest and hopefully worth reading is the severity of this attack, the delightfully merciless satirical style in which it is written, and, perhaps of most value, the concise statement of Weber's own methodological concerns which follow from his *Frontalangriff* on the narrowly conceived "positivism" of the dominant sociology of this era. One sees Weber struggling to free sociology from an endless web of confusions. One also gets a glimpse of the many intellectual currents of this period with which he had contact—from social Darwinism, the new experimental psychology, Freudian psychology, German historiography, English utilitarianism, French positivism, budding developments in the science of economics, progress in the natural sciences, neo-Kantian "theory of knowledge" and ethics, the debate over "psychologism" in the philosophy of logic,

to demands that there be a reform of "natural languages" through the construction of an ideal, formal language.

The materialistic, positivistic view that Weber is arguing against here clearly resembles a kind of "technological determinism" then associated primarily with the right-wing social Darwinism of the industrial-bourgeoisie and the academic technocrats and government officials who were aligned with them. At one point in the essay Weber labels this view "Produktivismus," which we might define as the view that whatever technological developments lead to greater, more efficient "productivity" in the industrial sector must *necessarily* be a "good" for the society. Weber's criticism of this view and the methodological presuppositions that support it turn primarily on three issues. The first two of these are clearly stated in the list of errors, viewed both "logically" and "factually," that are to be found in the works of figures like Ostwald singled out in the first paragraph of the text. A third issue arises implicitly from the topics that Weber discusses in the course of the review.

First, Weber is explicitly critical of the "positivist" (Comte or Mach) assumption that for sociology to be a science it must have the appearance of physics (or chemistry, or biology—or whatever "hard" science is currently either most successful or popular) and be rooted in the methodology of the natural sciences. Second, Weber points out over and over that just because certain conditions exist in society does not mean that they *should* exist. His formulation of the "is—ought" problem is thus here tied closely to his well-known concern with the place of "value-judgments" in the social sciences. Borrowing then from the philosophical terminology of that period, one might characterize the third issue by saying that Weber clearly emphasizes the "intentional" nature of human culture in this review. The issue arises in this essay primarily through the emphasis given to questions concerning the role of "art" in the development of human societies and his claim in the closing pages that in order to understand the stages of technological development one must also examine the "constellation of interests" characteristic of a particular culture.

It should, however, be no surprise that Weber would be concerned with such matters. His interests here are simply consistent with a long tradition in Germany of concern with the themes of *Kultur* (contrasted with the French ideal of "civilisation"), *Bildung* (i.e., the cognitive processes of socialization giving rise to *Kultur*), and the problem of the peculiar nature of the *Kultur* or *Geisteswissenschaften* that

runs from the later works of Kant through Fichte, Schiller, Goethe, and Hegel, down to Dilthey in Weber's time, and on to the Gadamer-Habermas debate of the last decades. My view then is that this text clearly shows Weber on the “phenomenological-hermeneutical” side of current debates over the methodology of the social sciences and against all narrow forms of positivism. However, to say that Weber was of a “hermeneutical” persuasion clearly does not mean that he was not interested in quantitative or statistical methods. For if that was the case he surely would not have spent the time he did working through the works of Ostwald or Ernst Solvay, whose sociological formulas are examined in tedious detail in the second footnote. The point is rather that for Weber the use of these methods must conform to the independently formulated goals of a “science of culture.”

I hope, of course, that this text can be of some service to Weber scholars in clarifying his views and the development of them during this period of his research. I must, however, confine my further remarks here to a few specific comments concerning the translation itself. The goal has primarily been one of making Weber read well in English. What this has meant in this case is preserving the delightfully harsh irony that characterizes this review, which should be evident from the remarks at the very beginning concerning the peculiarity of Ostwald's “artistry of presentation” (*Darstellungskunst*). There is a play here on the ambiguity of “art” (*Kunst*), which in both English and German can refer to either technical or artistic skill. A normal translation here would simply be “art of presentation,” but to prompt the reader into seeing that there is something odd going on from the very beginning of the review, the clumsier expression “artistry of presentation” has been employed. After all, consistent with Ostwald's own theories, “artistry” should play no part whatsoever in social, i.e., technological development. Yet there is a certain artistic style in even the works of the dullest technocrat, which is derived from their most fundamental assumptions about reality. Thus, if the reader does not catch the irony in passages like this or does not find himself laughing out loud in the course of reading the text, our translation has failed. For it may well be the humor in the text more than Weber's specific criticisms that make it worth reading.

The reader might also want to keep in mind the following comments on the translation of the key terms “energetic” and “goodness proportion” taken from Ostwald's book. The terms “energetic” (*adj.*) and “energetically” (*adv.*) translate the German forms of *energetisch*.

Since the "phenomenon" that Ostwald designates by this term often appears here to have less to do with various forms of "energy" than with the mysterious qualities attributed to realms like the "psychical" in parapsychology, there was a great temptation to translate the adjectival form as "energetical" rather than "energetic." Ostwald's term is not in fact to be found in current standard German-English dictionaries. For "energetic" in the normal English sense of "having lots of energy," for example, there is only the German term *energisches*. Ostwald's term is instead derived from the supposed general science of "energy" *Energetik* ("energetics"). The pseudo-scientific character of such an enterprise thus leads one to employ "energetical" (which might raise associations with "psychical"). This, however, might seem to unduly prejudice the translation, so for this reason, and out of charity to Ostwald, we have used "energetic" throughout the text.

The difficulties to be found in the term translated as "goodness proportion" are hardly so easily resolved. Ostwald's term is *Güteverhältnis*. The term describes a "proportion" (or "relationship") that seems to be nothing more than a measure of efficiency, or what in a purely technical vocabulary might be referred to simply as "efficiency" (*Wirkungsgrad*). (See definition, p. 36 [407]). Ostwald's claim, however, seems to be that this kind of "efficiency" is the main "good" toward which human societies strive (as if Aristotle and Comte could so easily be reconciled with one another). The noun *die Güte* alone could be translated with a variety of terms from "goodness (of heart)," "generosity," "charitability," to "grace." The closely associated technical term *das Gütegrad* is, on the other hand, a synonym for *Wirkungsgrad* with apparently no "evaluative" connotations at all. However, since it is through a sleight-of-hand with terminology like this that Ostwald turns description into positive evaluation, we have opted for the value-laden connotations of the term "goodness proportion" throughout the text.

There are, of course, many other explanatory comments that might be made about the translation, but the reader who does not have at least a good reading knowledge of German would only find them tedious. There are doubtlessly still many errors in the text, but hopefully none of any serious consequence. Anyone who should want to search for them or try to come up with better solutions than we have is certainly encouraged to do so. I must only add here, however, that

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without Charlie's assistance the translation would certainly be even less perfect (and probably would not have been completed at all). Both of us would also like to give credit to the fortunate student exchange agreements between the University of Kansas and universities in Stuttgart and Zürich that provided us with the time while studying in Europe to complete a project of this nature.

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