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From Weber to Parsons and Schutz: The Eclipse of History in Modern Social Theory¹

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Sociologists have generally dissociated theoretical synthesis from historical research, but the triumph of general theory over historicism is a hollow one. Efforts to formulate general theories of society devoid of historical limitation have created serious problems for theoretical work. This article examines two important examples of this tendency: Parsons's and Schutz's use of Weberian sociology to derive general theories of social action. A historically grounded procedure for generating concepts was central to Weber's work. It united explanatory and interpretative analysis within a reflexive framework that responded to the intellectual and political interests of the theorist. Early writings of Parsons and Schutz surmount, in different ways, Weber's strictures on the limits of general theory by eliminating the historical component of Weber's thought. This development reversed Weber's theoretical achievement, decomposing his synthesis into hostile theories based on key fragments of his analysis.

Originally, sociological theory linked historical reflection and theoretical synthesis. This fusion of history and theory laid the foundation for the conceptual schemes of classical sociology that continue to inform contemporary analysis. However, theoretical developments in the 20th century, completing the transformation of classical sociology into an academic discipline, gave rise to increasingly abstract theories divorced from historical work. This article traces these developments in one major branch of sociology: action theory. It shows how the creation of general theories of action with an analytic or phenomenological orientation eliminated central historical concerns that animated Weber's work. Moreover, it suggests that these efforts are responsible for some important problems confronting contemporary theoretical work in sociology.

The central problem raised by this study—the eclipse of history in sociology theory—cannot be resolved by references to misinterpretations of Weber. Misinterpretation cannot account for similar trends in the action theories of Parsons and Schutz, which are guided by essentially antithetical

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philosophies of science. Nor can purely intellectual histories of sociology (e.g., Hawthorn 1976) explain the causes and consequences of this separation of history and theory. More salient is analysis focused on the internal theoretical issues (epistemology and methodology) and the external ideological interests (e.g., the attack on historical materialism) that combined to exclude the problem of historical knowledge from theoretical work. The eclipse of history in modern social theory is not unique to action theory. However, striking differences between the role of historical research in Weberian sociology and in later action theories said to be derived from Weber make these theories a crucial case for the study of more general theoretical trends. Examination of these issues is timely because of rising interest in the status of historical inquiry in sociological theory. The recent publication of previously untranslated works from Weber's *Wissenschaftslehre* (1975, 1977) and of the Schutz-Parsons correspondence (1978) will probably heighten interest in these issues.

Expositions frequently cite Weber's seminal definition of action theory in *Economy and Society* (1978, p. 4), regarding it—correctly or not—as an alternative to a Marxian approach to social theory. Action theory takes as its point of departure actors' subjective orientation to their projected action. These premises indicate the theoretical and ideological interests shared by Weber, Parsons, and Schutz. But, in very different ways, the writings of Parsons and Schutz in the 1930s revised Weber in order to formulate general theories of social action. Both revisions eliminated the problem of historical knowledge in theoretical work to overcome Weber's deep-seated suspicion of general social theory and transhistorical concepts not related to particular moral and political interests.

FACT AND THEORY IN WEBER

The problem of historical knowledge determines the structure of Weber's theory of social action. Weber's preoccupation with this problem accounts for the importance he attached to the notion of *Wertbeziehung* (value-relevance). The problem of historical knowledge, in turn, cannot be dissociated from the attack on historical materialism by the neo-Kantian school associated with Rickert, Simmel, and Weber. The following remarks clarify Weber's strictures on *Wertbeziehung*, causal analysis, and ideal types, as well as their relation to the problem of historical knowledge. Afterward, I reconstruct critical links—often muted in Weber's later writings—between neo-Kantianism and the polemic on Marx.

Weber's neo-Kantian position on facts is a critical one. Empirical facts are constructed in view of well-defined theoretical interests. Objects and events are not automatically facts because of some inherent "facticity"; rather, they are formally delineated in advance of empirical work. This is

true for all disciplines in the natural and social sciences. What unites different disciplines in the common pursuit of science is the precise specification of the categorical forms of the facts they study.

Various theoretical interests that define different forms of facts establish differences between natural and social science.² This is an epistemological distinction. Nowhere did Weber assert the currently familiar argument (see Bershady 1973, p. 26; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Freund 1978, pp. 167–68; Giddens 1971, p. 134; Hirst 1976, pp. 51, 57; Schutz 1962, pp. 5–6, 10, and 1972, pp. 3–5; Walsh 1973) that innate differences between matter and spirit, nature and culture, or the meaningless and the meaningful account for the differences between natural and social science. Such arguments exhibit what may be termed an “ontic fallacy”: ontological distinctions between units studied by natural and social science are in large part reflections of different formal principles that guide the construction of facts (Rickert 1921*a*, pp. 173, 469; Weber 1949, pp. 64, 68, and 1975, pp. 68, 120, 185).

For Weber, facts are selective assertions about reality. Empirical statements cannot describe events and objects exhaustively. The infinite complexity of reality is unknowable in the absence of epistemic norms that designate one-sided principles of selection (Weber 1949, p. 72; 1975, p. 57). Facts are, therefore, selectively *constructed*. Theoretical interests formally specify principles that justify and guide the construction of different types of facts. The reduction of quality to quantity in constructing certain facts logically follows from the theoretical interests of natural science. Demands for quantitative data make sense in view of the natural scientific interest in forming increasingly abstract, general laws for prediction and control. When selectively viewed “as if” it were subject to causal laws (or to statistical probability), an event or object becomes a quantitatively enumerated fact.

On the other hand, the social sciences have different theoretical interests. Their formal presupposition is that individuals are “cultural beings” who lend significance to the world they inhabit (Weber 1949, p. 81). This strictly formal presupposition is not subject to empirical validation, but it provides a selection principle for constructing social scientific facts: cultural significance. Value-laden estimates of individuality or uniqueness establish the cultural significance of an event or object (Rickert 1921*b*, p. 92; Simmel 1972, p. 90; Weber 1949, pp. 90, 143). Qualitative features of social facts logically follow from attempts to understand the “characteristic uniqueness” (Weber 1949, p. 72) of social life.

² Social science, in this paper, is used in place of Weber’s references to “historical science,” “socio-cultural science,” and “sociology.” Empirical research (history) and theoretical synthesis (sociology) are, in a Weberian perspective, subdivisions of the socio-cultural sciences.

Uniqueness and individuality are the province of historical research. Out of history's infinite complexity, historical research isolates discrete events whose significance (however estimated) justifies their selection as objects of inquiry. According to this thesis (Rickert 1921*a*, p. 169), the theoretical interest in cultural significance logically implicates historical inquiry as the methodology of empirical social science. Historical research provides the methodological counterpart to the theoretical interests of the social sciences because of its ideographic orientation, its orientation to unique, nonrepeatable events.

Value-Relevance and Causal Analysis

Empirical objects of analysis in social sciences are culturally significant events. Such objects are "one-sided" representations dependent on the researcher's values (Simmel 1972, p. 82; Weber 1949, pp. 72, 82, and 1975, p. 259). By providing the criteria of cultural significance, values establish selective points of view that create discrete events out of the infinite flow of history. This point is a basic tenet of the neo-Kantian school to which Weber belonged. Rickert (1921*b*, pp. 90–94), Simmel (1972, pp. 76–77), and Weber (1949, pp. 62, 117–18) argued that "those elements . . . of events which we value" are "thrown into relief," isolated from their empirical context which, in its entirety, is incomprehensible because of its infinite complexity. Value-laden judgments of significance held by researchers thus supply a selection principle for the historical methodology of social science: "reflection concerning value-relevance is the ultimate basis of the historical interest" (Weber 1975, p. 102).

Selection of facts as potential objects of analysis implies not simply a choice of studying *A* or *B*, but a value-oriented construction of *A* and *B*. Weber did not argue merely that objects of analysis presuppose "points of view [that] are oriented to values"; he said that "selection or *identification* [emphasis added] of the object of empirical explanation is 'determined' by its relation to values" (Weber 1975, p. 256; 1977, p. 122). Thus, the principle of *Wertbeziehung* is linked to the construction of social facts. Weber was most emphatic on this point (1949, pp. 84, 159–60): empirical objects of analysis are constructed interpretively on the basis of values. Habermas stressed correctly (Stammer 1971, p. 61) that *Wertbeziehung* "is not related in the first place to the choice of scientific problems, but to the construction of possible objects of cultural scientific knowledge." Commentators often fail to grasp this point, equating the principle of value-relevance with a principle governing problem choice in science (see Burger 1976, pp. 89–90; Freund 1969, pp. 51–55; Giddens 1971, p. 141; Hirst 1976, pp.

54, 63; Parsons 1967, p. 87).³ Even when two researchers select the same problem, they can construct different empirical objects of investigation, with different dependent and independent variables. Consider, for example, stratification research. Status-attainment research uses a set of interrelated variables that are implicitly specified by the value-laden notions of meritocracy in functionalist theory and its economic analog, human capital. Status variables that measure, among other things, occupational prestige and education are the salient "facts" of this stratification model. On the other hand, Marxist approaches, with their value-laden notion of class conflict, specify different variables. Ownership of the means of production and exercise of authority in work constitute the salient "facts" of this stratification model. Both models can and do use some identical variables (e.g., education), but, as Horan (1978, p. 537) observes, the key variables of the two models are not translatable.

Interpreting the cultural significance of events is not, of course, the sole task of empirical research. This is a preliminary, but necessary, procedure that constitutes a potential object of analysis, the "historical individual," whose historical genesis must then be explained. This explanation reveals "the causes to which the 'valued' characteristics of the 'individual' are related in a causal regress" (Weber 1949, p. 159). The tasks of empirical research are thus twofold: "to understand on the one hand the relationships and the cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestation and on the other the causes of their being historically so and not otherwise" (Weber 1949, p. 72). These two tasks of research represent, respectively, synchronic and diachronic levels of analysis. Assessments of cultural significance are essentially "static" (Weber 1949, p. 147), but they selectively pinpoint aspects of human behavior motivated by values. Because only the individual can produce meaningful conduct (Weber 1968*b*, p. 439), cultural significance is seen as the teleological result of individual efforts to implement valued characteristics of the object of analysis.

Thus, the principle of cultural significance not only designates objects of analysis, it also tentatively indicates their causes. Weber discussed the two phases of analysis as follows: "The former type of analysis reveals the 'valued' components of the object, the causal 'explanation' of which is the problem of the latter type of analysis" (1949, p. 149; see also 1975, p. 181, and 1977, p. 121). These two phases of analysis, interpretation and explanation, are of equal importance for empirical research. Rickert (1921*b*, pp.

³ Only in view of this failure could a recent writer assert (Brown 1978, p. 19) that Weber's interpretive sociology "assumes one can look at another historical (or social) situation without being historically located oneself." Weber's doctrine of *Wertbeziehung* emphasized the historical location of the theorist whether he studies his own or another society.

107–9) and Weber (1975, pp. 75, 102–8, 120) criticized positivist attempts to determine the significance of cultural events from the nature of their antecedent causes or their causal implications for subsequent events. Establishing statistical uniformities, though it checks interpretation, does not fulfill the function of interpretation (Weber 1975, p. 65; 1978, p. 12).

Theorists establish the point of departure for causal analysis by constructing empirical facts, by interpreting the cultural significance of events. However, causal analysis is not dominated by strictly quantitative techniques in contrast to qualitative value-analysis in the first stage of research. Causal explanation in social science, which reveals the serial causality of an event, is not identical with the search for universal, causal laws in natural science (Rickert 1921*a*, pp. 282–85; Weber 1948*a*, p. 292).⁴ Analytic reduction in the formation of causal laws is an abstracting process that progressively effaces individuality and uniqueness and therefore overlooks the cultural significance of events. Rigorous reduction deletes precisely those elements of the object of analysis that social science seeks to understand (Weber 1975, pp. 197, 218). Thus, causal explanations in social science do not attempt “to subordinate ‘facts’ under abstract concepts” but to integrate “the ‘particular fact’ . . . as a real causal factor into a real, hence concrete *context*” (Weber 1949, p. 135; 1975, p. 197).⁵ These strictures limit not only the degree of abstraction but also the number of causal factors in sociological explanation. All historically antecedent causes of an event need not be considered. A potentially infinite chain of causes (Weber 1977, pp. 88, 103) is delimited by the one-sided accentuation of significant elements in the event to be analyzed (Weber 1949, pp. 78, 81; 1975, p. 102). The construction of empirical facts “creates the points of attachment from which there are to be regressively traced the web of causal connec-

⁴ Bershady (1973, pp. 26–41) badly misrepresents the historicist doctrine of neo-Kantianism that Parsons attacked in *The Structure of Social Action*. Citing Dilthey and Windelband, Bershady argues that neo-Kantians precluded causal analysis in historical research, permitting only descriptive, ideographic research. This is true for Dilthey and Windelband, but Rickert and Weber hold precisely the opposite view. According to Rickert and Weber, the concept of causality is equally important in the natural and the social sciences. Natural and social science differ, in this regard, only because the former searches for general causal laws while the latter reveals the concrete serial causality of events.

⁵ Failure to understand Rickert’s and Weber’s distinction between two concepts of causality—the concrete, serial causality of events and general causal laws—has led to much confusion. This confusion is evident in the claim that Weber’s analysis of meaningful action seeks “to explain it in terms of nomothetic causal relations” (Brown 1978, p. 17; see also Freund 1969, p. 90; Hempel 1965, pp. 161–63) or that his causal analysis assumes “that all qualitative differences were ultimately reducible to ‘purely quantitative differences’” (Kapsis 1977, p. 355). Kapsis quotes Weber (1948*a*, p. 292) but so completely out of context that Weber’s argument is inverted. Parsons (1949, p. 628) offers similar arguments but, being aware of their divergence from Weber’s views, regards them as an interpretation of the hidden analytic dimension in Weber’s thought.

tions" (Weber 1949, p. 149). Causal analysis considers only those antecedent factors of an event that are relevant to its culturally significant elements.

Social reality is understood, then, as the outcome of efforts to implement values; and this reality is logically comprehended by the methodology of historical research. " 'Meaningfully' interpretable human conduct ('action') is identifiable by reference to 'valuations' and 'meanings'. For this reason our criteria for *causal* explanation have a unique kind of satisfaction in the 'historical' explanation of such an 'entity' " (Weber 1975, p. 185). Non-subjective factors that condition the pursuit of values are also relevant for causal explanations. The significance of an event imputes a second-order significance to those nonsubjective factors which meaningful action takes account of as objective conditions (Rickert 1921*b*, pp. 106–7; Weber 1949, pp. 64–65, and 1968*b*, pp. 430–31).

Causal analysis is subject to verification and is not affected by the vicissitudes of value-relevance. The criteria of causal adequacy are universal; the criteria of cultural significance depend on the values of the researcher. It is the construction of empirical facts, not the "determination of the historical 'causes' for given objects," that is "subjective" (Weber 1949, p. 159; 1975, p. 273). Causal analysis is variable only because the range and types of empirical objects in social science vary with changes in the values of social scientists.

How do these issues bear on Weber's substantive research? Consider his work on Protestantism and capitalism. Weber's preoccupation with rationalization establishes "a definite point of view" (1948*a*, p. 293; see also 1968*b*, p. 438, and 1975, p. 188), the value-relevances guiding his construction of the empirical object of analysis, that is, rational capitalism. Of capitalism's infinite number of causal antecedents, only some are relevant to a genetic explanation of its origins. It is the historical genesis of capitalism's rational elements that concerns Weber. Weber's comparative methods are, in turn, required by the nature of genetic explanation. A comparative (occidental/nonoccidental) analysis of legal and religious factors promoting rational conduct (1961, pp. 250 ff.; 1978, p. 551) demonstrates "the historical uniqueness of European cultural development" (1949, p. 156) that led to the rise of rational capitalism in the West. This attempt to understand the historical genesis of uniqueness underlies Weber's comparative analysis of capitalism. Thus, he remarked that "without the universal diffusion of these [Protestant] qualities and principles . . . capitalism today, even in America, would not be what it is" (1948*b*, p. 309).⁶ Without reference to

⁶ Cf. Weber's remarks (1949, p. 72) quoted on page 1184. Weber also stresses the use of comparative methods in causal explanations of uniqueness in his sociology of ancient civilizations (1978, p. xxxvii).

the general problem of identifying and explaining uniqueness in social life, the empirical analysis of religion and economic life in Weber's writings cannot be properly understood. Consequently, his argument loses much of its force and intelligibility when formalized so as to overlook or ignore the comparative perspective that is used to analyze uniqueness.

Ideal Types and General Laws

How do Weber's earlier methodological writings square with the ideal types presented in *Economy and Society*? Because explanations of social action involve those contextual (nonsubjective) factors that may either hinder or promote the realization of values, general analytic laws may play a part in formulating type concepts. But, because of its concern with cultural significance, social science uses analytic laws, for example, the theory of marginal utility, as strictly heuristic aids in creating ideal types (Weber 1949, p. 100).⁷ Formation of ideal types with the aid of analytic laws does not, however, lead to new analytical laws (Weber 1975, p. 150).

There is, then, no decisive "break" between Weber's earlier and later writings or between his methodological and substantive investigations as is often alleged (Freund 1978, p. 164; Lazarsfeld 1962, p. 464; Mommsen 1974, pp. xiii–xiv, 13–17; Parsons 1949, p. 502; Rex 1971, p. 18). The problem of historical knowledge that informs Weber's early writing clearly dominates his theoretical work in *Economy and Society* (1978, pp. 19–21). This continuity is evident in Weber's strictures on the functions and limits of ideal types. Ideal types are tools of causal analysis and, therefore, are indirectly governed by the principle of *Wertbeziehung* that guides the construction of objects of analysis. Moreover, the comparative method of Weber's historical research is preserved in the conceptual structure of ideal types. Comparison between ideal types and empirical cases allowed Weber to generate genetic accounts of unique configurations at a high level of generality. However, the level of generality never equals that of analytic "laws" because of the incompatibility of rigorous analytic reduction with analysis of cultural significance. Ideal types are indeed general concepts, but, unlike nomological concepts, they reveal "not the class or average character but rather the unique individual character of cultural phenomena" (Weber 1949, p. 101). Thus, social theory, in the form of ideal types, demands a balance between generalizing abstraction and concrete analysis (Weber 1975, pp. 62–65, 196).

Ideal types combine interpretative and explanatory functions. They caus-

⁷Cf. Weber (1968a, p. 396): "Sobald wir diese [empirischen] Wirklichkeit selbst, in ihren kulturbedeutsamen Bestandteilen, erfassen und kausal erklären wollen, enthüllt sich die ökonomische Theorie alsbald als eine Summe 'idealtypischer' Begriffe."

ally relate formal features of social life to their culturally significant elements, to typified subjective meanings seen as antecedent causal factors. Ideal types are heuristic aids designed to help impute causes to events shaped by both subjective and nonsubjective factors (Weber 1949, pp. 106, 111, 130). As an empirical generalization and interpretive scheme, the ideal type pinpoints adequate causes of many unique configurations or historical individuals" (Weber 1949, p. 187; 1975, p. 189; 1977, p. 107). Ideal types facilitate explanatory and interpretative analyses while maintaining a "subjective point of view" because empirical generalization never achieves nomological status. As a discipline concerned with ideal-type construction, sociology occupies a middle ground between the nomothetic search for highly abstract concepts, subsuming events under analytic laws, and the ideographic interest in the serial causality of unique events.

One consequence of Weber's view of ideal types is the impossibility of general theory per se. His strictures on theory, stressing its heuristic and mutable nature, are a direct result of his concern with the problem of historical knowledge. The principle of *Wertbeziehung* and the task of analyzing the genesis of uniqueness in social life condemns theory to a noncumulative proliferation of paradigms (Weber 1949, pp. 84, 105, 159–60).

Value-Relevance and Historical Materialism

The ideology of the neo-Kantian school to which Weber belonged can now be outlined. Opposition to Marxism within this school was part of a broader attack on evolutionary and positivist social theories (Bendix and Roth 1971, p. 245). This opposition focused specifically on the positivist and evolutionary presuppositions in the crudely materialist versions of Marxism that flourished at this time. Simmel and Rickert upheld the "epistemological idealism" of neo-Kantianism against all forms of historical and conceptual "realism" (Rickert 1921*b*, p. 131; Simmel 1972, pp. 186, 199) that included major versions of Marxism. In their view, historical materialism displayed an egregious disregard for the doctrine of *Wertbeziehung*. A materialist philosophy of history and the personal "conviction" of "political democracy" are inseparable: adherents of "democratic and socialist politics," responsible for promulgating economic interpretations of history, appear to be particularly prone to conflating *Wertung* and *Wertbeziehung* (Rickert 1921*a*, pp. 341, 344). Thus, the importance attached to economic factors was thought to represent an implicit selection principle based on unacknowledged value-relevances. So-called laws of historical materialism, according to Rickert (1921*b*, pp. 131–32) and Simmel (1972, pp. 194–95), are rooted in values of the least common denominator that appeal to "large

masses" by invoking "material" or "animal" values, values of the "stomach."⁸

Simmel (1972, pp. 89–90) and Weber (1949, p. 103; 1977, pp. 88–89) argued that laws of historical materialism are necessarily partial and heuristic and, at best, represent only one possible array of ideal types. Weber regarded historical materialism as a monocausal doctrine of economic causality (Mommsen 1974, p. 51; Weber 1977, p. 92). Despite his positive opinion of the heuristic value of economic approaches to historical explanation, Weber strenuously attacked any notion of monocausality. His strictures on concept formation in the social sciences deny the possibility of building theories that, like Marxism, seek to explain the totality of social life. For Weber, every social theory is necessarily partial.

Weber's epistemological idealism refutes historical materialism only by denying the possibility of creating a general and total theory of society. He demoted the privileged claims of economic determinism while acknowledging the many substantive insights of Marxist interpretations of cultural events and processes. The Marxist interpretation remains but one among the infinite number of possible interpretations shaped by different, ever-changing cultural interests. It is, therefore, incorrect to allege (Hirst 1976, pp. 65–66, 76) that Weber's typologies are automatic consequences of his neo-Kantian framework. Precisely the opposite is the case. Weber's theory of social action does not claim any special permanence or privilege beyond the continued relevance of those cultural interests that Weber brought to his work. These concerns, related to the problem of rationalization and the "uniqueness" of the West (Hawthorn 1976, p. 163), shape the ideal types outlined in *Economy and Society*. Views of Weberian typologies as definitive guides for non-Marxist research parody Weber's own views and obscure those critical elements that made his work possible in the first place.

Critical students of Weber, such as Parsons and Schutz, have understood the impossibility of establishing, within a strictly Weberian framework, general theories of action that uphold, in opposition to Marxism, the "subjective point of view." The subjective point of view could form the basis of a general social theory only if the critical principle of *Wertbeziehung* and the associated problem of historical knowledge were detached from Weber's work. To follow this development, I turn to the early work of Parsons and Schutz.

⁸ Cf. Simmel's remarks, in another context, on the valuational inferiority of the mass compared with the individual (1950, pp. 31–33). Similarly revealing is Rickert's blunt remark that, in view of the value of individuality, "Goethe zu einem solchen Menschen ['Durchschnittsmenschen'] sich verhält wie die Diamant Kohinoor zur einem Stück Kohle" (1912a, p. 246).

WEBER, PARSONS, AND SCHUTZ: THE UNIT ACT

The action theories developed by Parsons and Schutz in their early writings begin with the problem of meaning posed by Weber. All three theorists argued that emergent features of social life result from the pursuit of ends that have meaning for actors. Weber, however, insisted that identification of meaningful ends of action presupposes a set of value-relevances: the theorist's cultural interests limit the potentially infinite number of causally efficacious motives of action. Parsons and Schutz radically changed this feature of Weber's work, eliminating the principle of *Wertbeziehung* and the problem of historical knowledge from their theories of social action. One consequence of this development is the uncritical view of "facts" that their theories take.

A preliminary observation shows how Parsons and Schutz diverged from Weber, and from each other, on the issues of value-relevance and the role of theory in constructing facts. All three based their theories of action on the analysis of irreducible "unit acts." Weber (1968*b*, p. 439) regarded "the single individual and his action" as the basic unit of analysis. This definition stresses cultural significance relative to specific evaluative pre-suppositions of the theorist. Unit acts, for Parsons (1949, pp. 731, 739) and Schutz (1972, p. 11), are, respectively, composed of certain analytic elements or "nothing else than processes of meaning-establishment and understanding occurring within individuals." Parsons's definition of unit acts has a strictly analytic status and is therefore not logically tied to the actor's account of action. In explicit opposition to Parsons, Schutz defined unit acts from the actor's account of them; only the actor "is qualified to 'breakdown' his own action system into genuine 'unit acts'" (Schutz and Parsons 1978, pp. 37-38, 41). Curiously enough, Weber's doctrine of *Wertbeziehung* straddled the positions of Parsons and Schutz on this point. Because Parsons and Schutz abandoned this doctrine, they lost sight of critical links between the interests of the theorist and the construction of the most fundamental "fact" in social science, the unit act. The following remarks trace the exclusion of historical issues from Weber's work, first by Schutz (1972) and then by Parsons (1949).

SCHUTZ: INTERNAL TIME-CONSCIOUSNESS AND
SELF-INTERPRETATION

The initial premise of Schutz's phenomenological interpretation of Weber implies the irrelevance of *Wertbeziehung*. A phenomenological approach to theory requires suspension of all judgments of the adequacy or causal efficacy of subjective meanings. No basis for such judgments is possible as this would violate the premise of the *epoché*, the "bracketing" of judgment in phenomenological analysis (Husserl 1962, pp. 96-99; 1965, pp.

106–7). Units of social action, for Schutz, are immediately presented to the observer in actors' accounts of their action. Thus, the observer's criteria of significance cannot constitute possible objects of analysis. "It is methodologically inadmissible to interpret a given series of acts as a unified sequence without any reference to a project and then ascribe to them a subjective meaning" (Schutz 1972, p. 216). "Projects," subjective meanings of anticipated action, are both the interpretable object of analysis and the yardstick of analysis. Despite Weber's pronouncements on the subject, Schutz claimed that Weber was not concerned with the subjective meaning of action but "with the external course of the act quite apart from any concern with the conscious experiences of the actor" (1972, pp. 226–27).

For Weber, *Wertbeziehung* epistemologically justified interpretive procedures in sociology and practically oriented it to specific tasks. Schutz turns instead to an ontological description of certain invariant features of consciousness as a guide for interpretive understanding. "The meaning-structure of the social world can only be deduced from the most primitive and general characteristics of consciousness"; namely, the "internal time-consciousness" in which meaning is "constituted originally and in its most generic sense" (Schutz 1972, pp. 12–13, 40; Schutz and Parsons 1978, p. 35).

The following implications of internal time-consciousness are relevant for the production of meaning. Like Husserl (1962, pp. 290–92; 1964, pp. 175–81), Schutz regards meaning as an attentional modification of lived experience. This modification isolates past experiences from the uniform stream of consciousness. Meaning "is merely the special way in which the subject attends to his lived experience" (Schutz 1972, p. 215). This attention to lived experience has pragmatic roots. Anticipated actions, "projects," are guided by past ("because") motives of similar completed actions. Thus, "self-interpretation of lived experience" presupposes all anticipated action in present experience; "every project 'interprets' the meaning being constituted in the projected action by referring it back to analogous acts" (Schutz 1972, pp. 90, 94, 105). For Schutz, temporality is crucial because meaning links lived experience with anticipated actions; meaning "elevates experience into an action" (1972, p. 215). This is as true for the interpretation of social action as it is for self-interpretation.

Time and Social Meaning

The simplest social action involves the face-to-face encounter with its "simultaneity . . . of two separate streams of consciousness" (Schutz 1972, pp. 102–4, 134, 163, 181, 219). All interpretive understanding of others *implies* this simultaneity (Schutz 1972, pp. 135–36), most completely approximated in direct encounters between consociates. Anticipated

action is oriented toward consociates by isolating previously shared experiences relevant to the contemporary project; "only a previously projected piece of behavior can be oriented" to others (Schutz 1972, pp. 144-45). Thus, as in the case of individual consciousness, "meaning in the social world is itself conditioned by time" (Schutz 1972, p. 220).

The temporal parameters of social meanings, however, are more variable than those of self-understanding. Interpretive understanding of others presumes shared experience. Schutz traced "the modifications this assumption undergoes in the different regions of the social world" (1972, p. 105). From intimate contacts between consociates in present time, regions of increasing anonymity radiate in concentric circles toward past and future time. Within each region exists "a way of perceiving and a way of understanding the subjective experiences of others" (Schutz 1972, pp. 135, 139, 219). Increasing anonymity implies decreasing simultaneity of separate flows of consciousness and, therefore, greater reliance on more depersonalized, fixed, general, and typified forms of meaning (Schutz 1962, pp. 71-72; 1972, pp. 184-85, 193-95, 203, 219). Interpretations of "contemporaries" and "predecessors" can proceed only "in an ideal-typical way" (Schutz 1972, p. 226).

For Schutz, all social meanings are invariably organized "within the framework of the categories of familiarity and strangeness" (1962, p. 72). Social meaning is not, in this scheme, a "predicate" variously attached to different types of action; social action itself is a complex of meaning (Schutz 1972, pp. 215-16). The production of meaning, not the attainment of meaningful goals or ends, is central to Schutz's theory of action. Social action is accomplished by the intersubjective creation of meaning, while contextual problems raised by the problem of attaining ends fade from view.

Schutz proscribed the implicit causal analysis incorporated in Weber's ideal-typical concepts. For Schutz, ideal types are typified meanings, called "cookbook knowledge" or common sense, used by actors to interpret action (1962, p. 73). According to Schutz, the contextual problem of action, implementing goals or values, led Weber to idealize actors. Actors in Weberian theory are fictitious "puppets," responding automatically to theoretical concerns not evident in the naive attitude of everyday life because the depicted consciousness of such actors "is not subject to the ontological conditions of human existence" (Schutz 1962, pp. 81-82).

The ontology of everyday life in Schutz's analysis underlies his general theory of action. This theory circumvents central issues in Weberian sociology raised by the problem of historical knowledge. Historical estimations of adequate causes and of significant consequences of efforts to realize valued ends are foreign to Schutz's use of ideal types. Instead, he reduced history itself to a subjective field of experience, to categories of intimacy and anonymity. This stance is also evident in recent phenomenological ap-

proaches to social theory. Historical research in sociology becomes a study of *conceptions* of existential historicity because in history “there is only a succession of ‘presents’ and of prevailing notions of the past in relation to them” (Lyman and Scott 1970, p. 190; Lyman 1978, p. 94). Uniform conditions of establishing meaning in the social world, for example, the rupture between individual streams of consciousness and “objective” time, shape the historical dimension of social life (Berger and Luckmann 1967, pp. 58, 93). These views are completely antithetical to Weber’s preoccupation with unique conjunctions revealed by historical inquiry.

FROM *WERTBEZIEHUNG* AND IDEAL TYPES TO NORMS AND LAWS

Parsons’s enthusiasm for Weber has two sources. First, more than any of the authors examined in *The Structure of Social Action*—Durkheim, Marshall, Pareto—Weber worked within both idealist and positivist theoretical traditions. Weber’s synthesis avoided the extremes that vitiated both traditions: the idealist disregard for “obstacles to the realization of norms” and the positivist dismissal of “normative aspects of action” (Parsons 1949, pp. 486, 638, 683, 732). Second, Parsons saw in Weber’s writings a non-Marxian foundation for general theory. Parsons argued (1949, pp. 503, 510, 715) that Weber’s “anti-Marxian interpretation” of the origins of capitalism stressed “ultimate values and value attitudes” and led directly to “an analytical sociological theory.” The formal and substantive outlines of Parsons’s action theory, an analytic framework stressing the centrality of norms (Burger 1977, p. 326), can thus be discerned in Weber’s writings. For Parsons, Weber’s seminal contribution was to combine idealism and positivism in a general theory that upheld, in opposition to historical materialism, the subjective point of view.

Parsons’s interpretation of Weber is idiosyncratic and unduly stresses normative aspects of meaning (see Cohen, Hazelrigg, and Pope 1975) for the following reason. Weber “refuted” historical materialism, but only at the expense of general theory per se. For Weber, the untenable features of historical materialism were merely specific instances of a more widespread fallacy: the attempt to go beyond ideal-typical analysis to develop a general theory of society. Parsons’s concern with normative dimensions of social life, a concern evident in his earliest writings (1935), was, as we shall see, inseparable from the analytic turn Weberian action theory takes in *The Structure of Social Action*.

According to Parsons, Weber failed to see that ideal types, while representing the unique configurations of historical individuals, are themselves analytically reducible. Parsons sought to defend an “analytic view” in opposition to historicist conceptions of theory (Bershady 1973, p. 6), which, in Parsons’s view, unduly constrain Weberian theory. An ideal-typical con-

cept is a specific "set of relations between the values of the analytic elements" of a more general theory (Parsons 1949, pp. 616–18, 621). Parsons claims that Weber was unaware of the general analytic theory implied by his ideal types (1949, pp. 626, 716) and therefore "did not exhaust the analytic possibilities" presented by his empirical research (Parsons 1949, pp. 577n., 628–29, 633–35, 685). The following assertion guided Parsons's interpretation of Weber: "A complete scientific theory is not attained until all concrete types of a class of historical individuals . . . can be thought of as exemplifying different combinations, according to laws, of the same analytical and structural elements" (Parsons 1949, p. 624). Given the universal character of analytic knowledge, ideal types must be "systematically related to one another" (Parsons 1949, pp. 618, 626) irrespective of the value-relevances of different theorists that shape them.

Parsons's discussion of the three types of action shows how his emphases on normative constructs and on general theory are mutually supportive. He asserted (1949, p. 684) that "one principle aspect of the ideal type is its normative character." Since Weber's antipathy toward general theory concealed this, he regarded the three types of action as irreducible. Parsons observed that it was possible to analytically reduce these three types to structures of rational action governed by different norms (1949, p. 648). For traditional action, "the adaption of means to ends" is "rational" within the limits established by norms, for example, "a traditionally fixed standard of living" (Parsons 1949, pp. 616–17, 646). Thus, traditional action, as *zweckrational* and *wertrational* action (1949, p. 645), can be reduced to analytic elements of the unit act.

In general, *The Structure of Social Action* attempts to rectify Weber's "employment of ideal-type concepts in place of more general analytic concepts" (Parsons 1949, p. 619).⁹ This, in turn, implies loosening the limits that the problem of historical knowledge imposed on analytic theory in social science. Weber, we saw, relegated analytic knowledge in social theory to the task of specifying relevant nonsubjective conditions that hinder or promote the pursuit of values. If the problem of implementing values and realizing ends dominates social theory, it is possible to enlarge the role of analytic knowledge proportionately. This precise strategy underlies Parsons's interpretation of Weber.

This strategy for developing a general theory within an action framework led to the preoccupation with normative dimensions of values characteristic of Parsons's work. The subjective meaning of action, for Weber, was selectively constituted by the interests of the theorist and empirically demon-

⁹ Cf. a later formulation of the same point by Parsons (1967, p. 75): "It is now possible to go somewhat beyond the concept of the ideal type, by making a more sophisticated and thorough use of the concept of system."

strated by historical methods that preclude rigorous analytic reduction. Parsons circumvented these limitations by recasting the problem of meaning in normative terms. His earliest writings argued that the ultimate ends of action innately tend toward normative integration (1935, p. 295). For Parsons, norms are objective features of society (1949, p. 75). They are simply selected and not selectively constituted by the principle of *Wertbeziehung*. Parsons's discussion of this principle suits this distinction: the "‘subjective’ direction of interest of the scientist," understood by Weber as the basis for selectively constructing facts, is for Parsons an interest determining "a choice of variables" (1949, pp. 585n., 683). Objectively specified norms establish the subjective meaning of the means-end relationship of action.

Thus, Parsons transformed the inherent autonomy of value-choice, presumed by Weber, into the normative determination of value-choice. Parsons's emphasis on the normative dimension of values radically solves the problem of meaning in Weberian sociology. It becomes possible to apply a rigorously analytic theory to the study of action because norms objectively specify for actors the appropriate means and ends of action. This objective specification eclipses the theorist's value-related selection of causally significant meanings. As Horton (1964, p. 294) observed, "The problem of the perspective of the observer . . . is avoided by interpreting values not as political and utopian ideals, but as neutral objects of the social system being observed."

The major issue confronting Parsons's action theory is the implementation of normatively sanctioned values. Meaning itself is no longer a problem. Thus, Parsons's emendation of Weber preserved Weber's synthesis of idealist and positivist thought but also avoided the problems of *Wertbeziehung* and historical knowledge. This emendation achieved its desired goal of loosening the limits posed by these historical problems to the development of analytic social theory.

Science and Action

Parsons's analytic emendation of Weber is clearly incompatible with a distinction between the logic of concept formation in the natural and the social sciences. For Parsons (1949, pp. 591, 595, 597, 623), differences between the two sciences are not logical, as Weber thought, but substantive. Theoretical interests in explanation or control and interpretation do not delineate boundaries between natural and social science. The development of analytic theory with "the motive of control" characterizes sociology as well as the natural sciences (Parsons 1949, pp. 595–98). The point about control is valid given Parsons's subordination of the problem of meaning to the problem of implementing values. The "motive of control" not only

applies to the social scientist but also is an integral feature of rational action. An inherent interest in control is a prerequisite for achieving one's ends.

Rational action requires empirically valid propositions to enable the selection of means to proceed in accordance with the norm of rationality. The instrumental utility of empirically valid knowledge thus establishes the solidarity of science and action. In many early works, Parsons defended this solidarity despite the unsystematic nature of empirically valid propositions used to guide action in everyday life (1935, pp. 286–88; 1938, pp. 654–56; 1949, pp. 586, 599–600, 699). The solidarity of science and action is a basic assumption that guides Parsons's concern with "the role in action of the norm of rationality in the sense of a scientifically verifiable intrinsic means-ends relationship" (1949, p. 683).

The interest in control common to action and science underlies Parsons's effort to develop an analytical theory of action. The "susceptibility of rational action to general causal analysis" and, hence, the importance of general analytic concepts in social science follow from the convergence of science and action: "Does not the solidarity of scientific knowledge with rational action imply the existence of a formal schema of elements of action which is . . . exempt from the relativity of concrete knowledge?" (Parsons 1949, pp. 584, 638, 715). Weber (1975, p. 186) had made the same point but with the following caveats (p. 188): (1) rational selection of means to achieve determinant ends "functions *exclusively* as an hypothesis or as an ideal typical construct" having "heuristic" value (emphasis in original); (2) when such rational action is analyzed, "interpretation" is minimized and consists of the general dictum that individuals act "purposefully." Parsons easily disposed of these troublesome caveats because (1) he eliminated by fiat the problem of historical knowledge posed by *Wertbeziehung* and (2) he stressed the normative component of ends that objectively "fixes" interpretative issues. Parsons thus created a theory of action that is analytic rather than heuristic; yet this analytic theory also retained a place for "idealistic" elements in the analysis of highly rationalized activities.

This analytic recasting of Weberian theory, though it retains "idealistic" elements, reduces interpretive tasks to empirical specification of norms. The essential "tension" between "normative" and "conditional" elements of action is, then, not as acute as Parsons suggested (1949, p. 732); such "tension" exists in the problem of attaining normatively sanctioned ends. If the autonomy of value-choice is "fixed" by the normative determination of ends and means, obstacles to the attainment of ends will preoccupy theoretical work. This focus on empirical obstacles to sanctioned ends in *The Structure of Social Action* displays intimate links between analytic action theory and systems theory. Cybernetic developments in Parsons's

later writings on evolution (1966, 1975) do not represent a qualitative change in the direction of his work. The problem of attaining normatively sanctioned ends is analytically similar to the cybernetic problem of specifying "goal state" variables of self-regulating systems. In both cases, the same issues of control are raised by the congruence of empirical processes and science. Hermeneutic issues are equally irrelevant for both phases of Parsons's work.

Because Parsons did not distinguish between concept formation in natural and in social science, he reintroduced a rigorous separation between historical and sociological research. Sociology sees in "historical individuals" merely single instances that demonstrate the operation of general laws; history regards the historical individual for its own sake (Parsons 1949, pp. 598–99, 760). No longer is historical research an integral moment of theoretical work in sociology. For Weber, historical reflection established the theorist's relation to his subject matter and constituted potential objects of analysis. For Parsons, historical work retrospectively tests general theories of society. Thus, history is reduced to the field of validation for general propositions that are developed in isolation from the problem of history.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, little common ground exists between the action theories extracted from Weber by Parsons and Schutz. They applied different formal and substantive interests to Weber's work, interests that were shaped by contrary philosophic temperaments. Aside from staunch convictions that their work represented the subjective point of view in sociology, only the following similarities stand out in the development of Parsons's and Schutz's action theories: (1) Weber's heuristic view of concepts is reworked, in antithetical ways, to justify general theories of society, and (2) the centrality of historical inquiry for theory is abolished. For Schutz, ideal types were not heuristic tools of inquiry but products of the mundane theorizing of actors. An ontological analysis of certain invariant features of consciousness demonstrated the source of these ideal types. Fealty to the subjective point of view required analysis that refrained from substituting second-order concepts for the actual type-concepts used by actors to establish social meaning. Parsons resolved the unsatisfactory status of ideal types by analytic reformulation. An epistemological analysis showed that ideal types were combinations of elements analytically relevant for all concrete types of action. Parsons's normative definition of values that motivate action created a subjective point of view that was compatible with a general, analytic theory of action.

The extraction of general theories from Weber's work by Parsons and Schutz severed critical links between historical research and theoretical synthesis. This conclusion does not imply that Weber perfected a *rapprochement* between history and sociology, only that their intimate connection in his work disappeared in the early works of Parsons and Schutz. Singularity and uniqueness in history are ignored by Schutz's ontology of the temporal parameters of social meaning. Historical dimensions of social life acquire the character of a subjective drama in which individuals reconcile their inherently free intentionality with established social meanings. The singular nature of historical reality is thus transformed into its opposite: a wholly abstract, universal relationship between predecessors and the present. Parsons, on the other hand, delineated sharp boundaries between historical and theoretical work. His positivist view of history depicts it as a succession of discrete space-time events, and the historical dimension of social life becomes a fund of empirical data to be used for testing general theoretical propositions.

Both Parsons and Schutz acknowledged the incompatibilities of their emendations of Weber. Parsons sharply disavowed Schutz's ontological approach (Schutz and Parsons 1978, pp. 66, 73-74, 85, 88); Schutz reproached Parsons for not appreciating the central importance of internal time-consciousness (Schutz and Parsons 1978, p. 104). Many theoretical controversies in contemporary sociology focus on this and other differences between their action theories. They disagreed sharply about the existence of a single rationality governing science and action. Moreover, Parsons's explanatory analysis of implementing normatively sanctioned values and Schutz's interpretive analysis of meaning-establishment characterize antithetical positions in the ongoing positivist-phenomenological debate in sociology. It is ironic to observe that Weber did not conceive of the tasks of explanation and interpretation as antithetical. The strands of Weber's synthesis of positivist and idealist theories, unraveled by Parsons and Schutz, have come to form hostile theoretical camps within sociology.

Are today's theoretical problems in sociology due in no small measure to efforts to derive general theories without historical reflection? I have suggested this idea elsewhere (Zaret 1978), and this case study supports that thesis. Central to Weber's theoretical work was a historically grounded procedure for generating concepts. It united explanatory and interpretive analyses and was reflexive in a historical sense: it took into account the historically conditioned interests—intellectual, moral, political—of the theorist. Contemporary debates between practitioners of positivist and phenomenological sociology focus precisely on these elements of Weberian sociology: explanation, interpretation, reflexivity. Dividing historical and sociological work has been a penny-wise and pound-foolish economy in terms of our ability to surmount current controversies and generate new

theories. As Stinchcombe recently suggested (1978, p. 17), benefits of a division of labor between history and sociology may be more illusory than real because sociologists "do much better theory when interpreting the historical sequence than they do when they set out to do 'theory'."

Still, a wholesale conversion of sociology to Weberian practices will not resolve the theoretical issues raised in this article. These issues apply to a broader spectrum of theories than those examined here. The eclipse of history in the rise of academic sociology is not limited to Parsons's and Schutz's revisions of Weber. Consider, for example, the transition from evolutionism to cybernetic theories, from the positivist school of Comte and Durkheim to current work on theory construction, from Marx's research to the arid structuralism of Althusser, Hirst, and Poulantzas. Moreover, Weber's skeptical view of theory as a noncumulative collection of paradigms is clearly unsatisfactory. A skeptical view of theory is not, however, a necessary consequence of a thoroughly historicized sociology but depends, instead, on the manner in which theory is historically grounded. Can historical interests of the theorist be grounded in something other than or in addition to personal values? Weber's work reveals the problems to be solved more fruitfully than their solutions. Thus, the widespread assumption in Western sociology (Bershady 1973, pp. 1-10) that historicism has been irrevocably laid to rest may yet be premature. Development of historically grounded theory still remains one of the vital tasks confronting sociology.

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Weber, Parsons, and Schutz

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