

Max Weber's View of Objectivity in Social Science

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Contents

1 Facts and Values	1
2 Stating the Standpoints	2
3 Adhering to Values	4
4 A Two-Tiered Approach to Value-Free Social Science	5
5 Ruling Out Objectivity Prior to Perspective	6
6 Establishing a Value Prior to Analysis	7
7 Dual Legacy	8
8 Related	8

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1 Facts and Values

Max Weber thought that “statements of fact are one thing, statements of value another, and any confusing of the two is impermissible,” Ralf Dahrendorf writes in his essay “Max Weber and Modern Social Science,” acknowledging that Weber clarified the difference between pronouncements of fact and of value.¹ Although Dahrendorf goes on to note the ambiguities in Weber’s writings between factual analysis and value-influenced pronouncements, he stops short of offering an explanation for them other than to say that Weber, being human, could not always live with his own demands for objectivity. Indeed, Dahrendorf leaves unclear exactly what Weber’s view of objectivity was. More specifically, Dahrendorf does not venture to lay out a detailed explanation of whether Weber believed that the social scientist could eliminate the influence of values from the analysis of facts.

¹Ralf Dahrendorf, “Max Weber and Modern Social Science,” Ch. 37, Max Weber and his Contemporaries, eds. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London: The German Historical Institute/Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 577.

Did Weber believe that, even though facts are one thing and values another, social and economic facts could be evaluated without the analysis being influenced by values? And what is the relation of objectivity to values? Could objectivity, for instance, be used to show that one value is superior to another? Or does objectivity apply only to the analysis of facts? Do one's values or perspective stem from human nature, metaphysical views, personal identity, or is it just as likely that they are a mere construct of culture?

These questions, and others like them, underlie much that has been considered ambiguous in Max Weber's writings: His methodology. Since his death, sociologists and political scientists have been disputing where Weber stood with regard to questions concerning the relationship of objectivity to facts and values. "Most of Weber's commentators," Edward Bryan Portis writes, "have assumed his advocacy of the fact-value dichotomy, despite his explicit and implicit assertions to the contrary, because of his numerous statements denying the ability of science to refute any normative position or to help one choose among contending normative orientations."² Indeed, hardly a scholarly piece is written on Weber, it seems, without the preamble that Weber's views on this subject have been widely misunderstood, with the implication that the scholar at hand intends to finally set the record straight.

This essay has more humble ambitions. Although it takes issue in the final section with part of the exhaustive view laid out by Portis, this essay does not purport to set forth yet another definitive interpretation of Weber's views on objectivity. Rather it seeks to shed light on Weber's view of the applicability of objectivity by attempting to answer the overarching question that sits at the foundation of those posed above: Was Weber an advocate of value-free social science?

The answer, as will be shown, is both yes and no — because, this essay will argue, Weber maintained a two-tiered approach to value-free social science. On the one hand, he believed that ultimate values could not be justified "scientifically," that is, through value-free analysis. Thus, in comparing different religious, political or social systems, one system could not be chosen over another without taking a value or end into consideration; the choice would necessarily be dictated by the analyst's values. On the other hand, Weber believed that once a value, end, purpose, or perspective had been established, then a social scientist could conduct a value-free investigation into the most effective means within a system of bringing about the established end. Similarly, Weber believed that objective comparisons among systems could also be made once a particular end had been established, acknowledged, and agreed upon, a position that allowed Weber to make what he considered objective comparisons among such economic systems as [capitalism](#) and socialism. Thus, even though Weber maintained that ultimate values could not be evaluated objectively, this belief did not keep him from believing that social problems could be scientifically resolved — once a particular end or value had been established.

2 Stating the Standpoints

But first, just what is Weber's own standpoint, as determined by his ultimate values? It is, no doubt, influenced by one of his key concerns: "the quality of human being in any given economic and social order."³ Sometimes, however, his standpoint is nationalistic. And in yet

²Edward Bryan Portis, *Max Weber and Political Commitment: Science, Politics, and Personality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), p. 75.

³Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs, "Introduction," *Weber: Political Writings* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. xi.

other essays, it champions individual liberty. Indeed, Weber's perspective changes, and it is likely to be driven not by one value but by levels of them, ranging from humanism to a concrete objective. But the fact that Weber had a perspective lends little support to the two-tiered interpretation, other than to show that he believed it was permissible for a social scientist to possess a value-determined standpoint. His treatment of perspective is another matter, however.

One hint that begins to shed light on Weber's view on the fact-value question is a characteristic that recurs in several of Weber's essays and speeches: Weber announces, often at the beginning of a speech or essay, the standpoint from which he plans to evaluate a given situation or set of facts. Likewise, if he changes his focus during a presentation, he often declares the new standpoint. In his opening remarks of "The Nation State and Economic Policy," one of Weber's early speeches, he sets a precedent for this pattern while unveiling a justification for his perspective. The "inaugural lecture is an opportunity," Weber says, "to present and justify openly the personal and, in this sense, 'subjective' standpoint from which one judges economic phenomena," revealing that he maintained that even the examination of such seemingly hard data as economic facts were subject to the influence of a perspective determined by values.⁴ When Weber shifts course later in the speech to prescribing what should be done to deal with the problems on Germany's eastern frontier, he discloses his new perspective: "the standpoint of the German people."⁵ The solution would obviously be quite different if it were made, say, from the standpoint of the Polish workers. Similarly, in one of his later lectures, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," Weber tells his audience near the beginning of his remarks that he will expose "the political deficiency of this system ... from the standpoint of success."⁶

Although Weber often announces the value from which he intends to analyze a particular policy, he also acknowledges that the value may be merely a construct of one's culture or society. An example of the influence of culture upon perspective lies in Weber's comments about political economy. As soon as the method of analysis known as political economy makes value judgments, Weber says, "it is tied to the particular strain of humankind (*Menschentum*) we find within our own nature. ... The economic policy of a German state, and, equally, the criterion of value used by a German economic theorist, can therefore only be a German policy or criterion."⁷ Yet the perspective still must be acknowledged.

Regardless of whether a social scientist's value-orientation stems from cultural norms, nationality, or a worldview, what remains certain for Weber is that the value is neither intrinsic to the subject matter nor specific to its context — a view that categorically separates value from facts. Weber takes care to refute such views in his discussion of the methodology of political economy in "The Nation State and Economic Policy." First, Weber assails those economists who maintain that political economy can derive its own ideals from the subject matter. The notion that there are independent or socio-political ideals shows itself to be a delusion as soon as one delves into the literature in an attempt to identify the basis for its evaluation, Weber says.⁸ "The truth is that the ideals we introduce into the subject matter of our science are not peculiar to it, nor are they produced by this science itself."⁹ Rather,

⁴Weber: Political Writings, "The Nation State and Economic Policy," p. 1.

⁵ibid. p. 12.

⁶Weber: Political Writings, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," p. 331.

⁷Weber: Political Writings, "The Nation State and Economic Policy," p. 15.

⁸ibid. p. 18.

⁹ibid. p. 19.

the values stand above the subject matter; they are of a higher order. For Weber, it is less important what another analyst's core values are than whether he clarifies them for the benefit of both himself and his audience.

Weber also criticizes those scientists who often “unconsciously allow the starting point for our analyses and explanations of economic events to determine our judgements of these events,”¹⁰ demonstrating that he separates the subjectivity of value-orientation from the objective evaluation that is carried out after the value orientation has been established. In other words, Weber is chastising those scientists who allow the subjectivity of their perspective to determine their analysis of the facts. As examples of the economic scientists who have made this mistake, Weber points to the historical apologists and to the Marxists.

3 Adhering to Values

What matters even more to Weber is whether one adheres unflinchingly to his values. In “The Profession and Vocation of Politics,” Weber explicitly articulates how one must look at life from a chosen value: “What matters is not age but the trained ability to look at realities of life with an unsparing gaze, to bear these realities and be a match for them inwardly.”¹¹ The comment exposes the inherent relationship, for Weber, between value-free analysis and value-driven moral action, a dichotomy that resurfaces in Weber's discussion of an ethics of commitment and an ethics of responsibility. To be “a match for them inwardly” is to cling to one's values even in the face of the inevitable “polar night of icy darkness.”¹² “For truly, although politics is something done with the head, it is certainly not done with the head alone.”¹³ Values are linked to the heart — to subjectivity — as much as they are linked to the head.

Weber himself seems to adhere to his own values — or at least he argues repeatedly for the veracity of one ‘cause’ over another. Perhaps this is among the trends that have led many Weber scholars astray, especially since “Weber feels that no cause can be ‘proved’, simply by intellectual means, to be superior to any other.”¹⁴ Despite his own attachment to, for example, the values of individual liberty, his “philosophical stance did not provide a mechanism for validating democratic values in and of themselves.”¹⁵

How can Weber's arguments for his ultimate values be reconciled with the view that value-free analysis can be conducted only after a value or purpose has been established? Lassman and Speirs, in their introduction to *Weber: Political Writings*, provide the answer. “Although Weber believed that values could not be given any form of ‘ultimate’ foundation, it was possible and indeed necessary”¹⁶ to argue for them because “the tensions between competing values are essential in order to prevent cultural stagnation.”¹⁷ Even though Lassman and Speirs do not explain precisely how it is possible to put forth objective arguments supporting subjective values while maintaining a commitment to truth, they do allude to one solution:

¹⁰ibid. p. 19.

¹¹Weber: *Political Writings*, “The Profession and Vocation of Politics,” p. 367.

¹²ibid. p. 368.

¹³ibid. p. 367.

¹⁴Weber: *Political Writings*, Introduction by Lassman and Speirs, p. xxiii.

¹⁵Anthony Giddens, “Weber and Durkheim: Coincidence and Divergence,” *Max Weber and his Contemporaries*, eds. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London: The German Historical Institute/Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 188.

¹⁶Weber: *Political Writings*, Introduction by Lassman and Speirs, p. xxiv.

¹⁷ibid. p. xviii.

Weber's "scholarly investigations and political essays have the purpose of making clear, in an objective manner as possible, the realities and possibilities given in any particular situation."¹⁸

4 A Two-Tiered Approach to Value-Free Social Science

Having examined Weber's views of the role of perspective and values in social scientific analysis, the evidence, both from Weber's writings and from commentaries on them, must now be considered in support of the interpretation that Weber took a two-tiered approach to value-free social science.

First, it must be shown that held Weber believed ultimate values could not be proved scientifically, a position alluded to in several preceding remarks. Lassman and Speirs, writing in their introduction to Weber: Political Writings, address the matter directly. Weber held the belief, they say, that "there is no longer any possibility of an objective ranking of ultimate values or moral principles."¹⁹

Weber's own writings support Lassman and Speirs' conclusion that Weber considered ultimate values and their subsequent political values to be subjectively determined. For instance, in "Between Two Laws" Weber writes that certain communities are able to provide the conditions for not only such "bourgeois" values as citizenship and true democracy, "but also much more intimate and yet eternal values, including artistic ones."²⁰ The language that Weber uses to characterize these two types of values leads to the interpretation that he held them to be a subjective matter. Regarding the first set of values, labeling them "bourgeois" brings to light their contingent nature: They are the product of a class, a strata. Regarding the second set, the labels "intimate" and "eternal" clearly set them apart from any objective foundation. An "intimate" value is by definition personal, an opinion. Further: It carries the connotation of emotion, of mystification. Likewise with "eternal."

This element of mystification, of faith in what is ultimately unknown and unknowable, materializes in other pieces of evidence that help substantiate Weber's view that ultimate values cannot be objectively established. "The nature of the cause the politician seeks to serve by striving for and using power is a question of faith."²¹ Yet here Weber refers to the politician, not the social scientist. But could the same theorem not be applied to the social scientist? Could "social scientist" not be substituted for "politician" and, say, "facts" for "power"? And then could the social scientist not be asked to use those facts objectively while maintaining a commitment to his values? Answering these questions in the affirmative, which can be done only through an argument by extension, a frail but not hopeless step, leads to interpreting "The Profession and Vocation of Politics" as a metaphor for the actions of the social scientist, showing that the values he seeks to serve are also a question of faith.

The argument by extension notwithstanding, there is other evidence that Weber held the social scientist's values to be a subjective matter. Portis, for instance, says Weber "believed it impossible to justify ultimate values scientifically. He presumed they were derived from the metaphysical commitments that define one's general outlook."²² Rogers Brubaker, in

¹⁸ibid. p. xxiii.

¹⁹ibid. p. xxiii.

²⁰Weber: Political Writings, "Between Two Laws," p. 76.

²¹Weber: Political Writings, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," p. 355.

²²Portis, Max Weber and Political Commitment, p. 15.

The Limits of Rationality, also acknowledges that Weber's discussion of value orientations amplifies those of a long line of ethical relativists. Weber believed that "value orientations are essentially subjective, and that conflict among them cannot be rationally resolved."²³

Furthermore, Weber believed that value orientations could not be eliminated from social scientific work. They necessarily determine the analyst's perspective. Portis writes that Weber, in his Freiburg inaugural address, said "political economy was a 'political science,' in the sense that it must proceed from a value perspective."²⁴ More crucially, Portis goes on to quote Weber as writing that "there is no 'objective' scientific analysis of culture ... or 'social phenomena' independent of special and 'one-sided' viewpoints — expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously — they are selected, analyzed, and organized for expository purposes."²⁵

5 Ruling Out Objectivity Prior to Perspective

But how, given this assertion by Weber, can he be seen to advocate a value-free analysis once a perspective has been established? The first hint lies in the quotation itself. Weber does say that there is no objective analysis "independent of special and 'one-sided' viewpoints," a remark that does not rule out objectivity, only objectivity prior to a perspective.

This interpretation of Weber's position derives additional support from other comments Weber made regarding objectivity. Example: One of the "deadly sins in the area of politics" is, Weber says, "a lack of objectivity."²⁶ The objectivity, however, can engage only after a value has been established; otherwise, this remark is logically inconsistent with Weber's statement that "the nature of the cause the politician seeks to serve by striving for and using power is a question of faith." The two statements, taken together, imply that once a political position — a value or perspective — has been established, the politician must hold to the ideal of objectivity. Furthermore, without resorting to the two-tiered interpretation of Weber's view of value-free social science, it would be difficult to reconcile Weber's comment that a lack of objectivity is a sin with the comment that there is no objective analysis independent of special viewpoints.

Lassman and Speirs supply another piece of evidence for the view that Weber believed a subjective end had to be established before objective analysis could proceed. They write: "The 'disenchantment' that Weber described did not stop with liberalism. The traditional philosophical foundations of all political ideologies and doctrines were threatened by a relentless undermining of their own presuppositions." This extract reveals that Weber, at least in Lassman and Speirs' view, was interested in analyzing from an objective viewpoint the makeup of various political systems — but it also shows that the objective analysis could only be carried out once the purpose of the system, i.e., the ultimate value upon which it is based, is identified and acknowledged.

Thus it seems, both by default and implication, that Weber believed the political analyst could adhere to the principle of objectivity once an value or perspective had been laid out. In this regard, Weber departs from -or rather builds upon -the philosophy of social science

²³Rogers Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 5 and 6.

²⁴Portis, *Max Weber and Political Commitment*, p. 71.

²⁵Portis, *Max Weber and Political Commitment*, p. 72, quoting Weber from *The Methodology of Social Sciences*, trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949), p. 72.

²⁶Weber: *Political Writings*, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," p. 354.

laid out by Friedrich Nietzsche, whose thought influenced Weber. Nietzsche's perspectivism maintains that all interpretation is necessarily mediated by perspective, making analysis unavoidably laden with biases, presuppositions, values, and so forth. Weber builds on Nietzsche's perspectivism by maintaining that objectivity is still possible — but only after a particular perspective, value, or end has been established. For the politician, the question of value is a choice of a faith; but once it is made, it should be pursued by objective means. For the social scientist, value necessarily determines perspective and influences the facts chosen for analysis, but once those decisions are made, the social scientist is bound by the principle of objectivity.

The work of Weber scholars supports this conclusion. Brubaker, for instance, affirms the two-tiered interpretation of Weber's view regarding objectivity:²⁷

“The selection of means to a given end can be assessed in terms of its objective rationality, since it is possible to discriminate objectively — for Weber, scientifically — between adequate and inadequate means. But the notion of objective rationality does not apply to wertrational action — to action conceived as intrinsically rather than as instrumentally valuable, as an end in itself rather than as means to some further end.”

Portis agrees, writing that Weber came to believe that empirical methods, in social science, could distinguish between true and false beliefs only when researchers took a distinct orientation toward their own ultimate values.²⁸

6 Establishing a Value Prior to Analysis

On another level, however, Portis also argues that Weber nevertheless maintained that political activity and social science are incompatible pursuits, and this is where Portis' interpretation of Weber's thought on objectivity goes afoul.

Weber, he says, “denied that objectivity would be equated with impersonality or that it was possible for thought to be compartmentalized into normative and objective categories.”²⁹

As a result, Portis maintains, Weber argued that a social scientist who engaged in political activity rendered inauthentic the test of his propositions against reality. Thus, Weber's perspective, Portis contends, is that politics are autonomous from science both in principle and in practice.

Portis is partly right. Yet he is also partly wrong. He accurately portrays Weber's first-level view that denies the existence of either positive or natural law, affirming the fact-value dichotomy: “The categories through which social phenomena are perceived must be radically subjective, derived from priorities that the investigator brings to work rather than universal laws discovered through systematic observation.”³⁰ Portis, however, soon goes astray — or just does not go far enough — in characterizing Weber's view of the fact-value dichotomy: “Because these categories are antecedent to social scientific analysis, social problems cannot be scientifically resolved.”³¹ True, Weber would agree, categories must be established

²⁷Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality* , p. 54.

²⁸Portis, *Max Weber and Political Commitment* , p. 71.

²⁹ibid. p. 9.

³⁰ibid. p. 10.

³¹ibid. p. 10.

prior to analysis. Once established, these categories also entail ends, and it is by working objectively toward those ends that allows the social scientist to resolve a given social problem scientifically.

Moreover, if one accepts Weber's view that objectivity can be applied to social and economic problems only after a distinct value orientation has been established, it follows that political action does not corrupt a social scientist's objectivity as long as the scientist's perspective or values are explicitly acknowledged.

The crucial element that Portis overlooks is that by choosing categories, by establishing a value prior to analysis, as the social scientist must, he is necessarily making decisions that are inherently political in nature. Given this, the converse of Portis' conclusion in fact holds: That a social scientist cannot engage in objective analysis without taking overt political action, because the choice of values is itself a political act. From this it follows that **science and politics are, for Weber, not mutually exclusive; rather, they are mutually inclusive**. The social scientist cannot proceed with objective analysis until after his values or perspective have been established, an act which is political, whether conscious or not, whether announced to others or not.

7 Dual Legacy

Thus, despite Portis' ideal vision of Weber's thought to the contrary, social science and political activity are compatible: The social scientist, in conducting research and analyzing facts, is necessarily influenced by his political position, at least to the extent determined by his ultimate values. Weber knew this, and exhorted his fellow social scientists to clarify both for themselves and for others the values driving their investigations. Such a clarification is the prerequisite to objective analysis of facts with a particular purpose or value in mind.

Furthermore, again despite Portis' claims to the contrary, part of the power and allure of Weber lies in the dual legacy that he handed down: He succeeded, at least in the totality of his work, in being overtly political while remaining true to his integrity as a social scientist. At least one work by Weber — his short essay titled "The President of the Reich" — directly bears this out. And even if, as Portis argues, Weber did become psychologically tormented by the tension he felt between his need to voice his political views and his need to feel integrity as a social scientist, what allowed him, in the end, to succeed in being both political and scientific was his two-tiered approach to value-free social science.

Weber sees the damage inherent in failing to openly acknowledge one's values, and the even greater danger in falling prey to the delusion that the analyst can evaluate social facts completely independent of own values. Weber sums up this position in "The Nation State and Economic Policy": "We in particular succumb readily to a special kind of illusion, namely that we are able to refrain entirely from making conscious value judgements of our own."³² In other words, when the analyst fails to clarify and consciously acknowledge his values, it is unlikely that he can conduct the subsequent analysis impartially. The acknowledgement of a value orientation is the prerequisite to objective evaluation.

8 Related

[Goals in Reading Max Weber's Early Works.](#)

³²Weber: Political Writings, "The Nation State and Economic Policy," p. 19.

[Max Weber's Interest in Studying Capitalism.](#)

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