

Did Weber think that the social sciences could be 'objective'?

Weber's views on whether or not the social sciences could be objective are very closely related to his attempt to resolve the *Methodenstreit*, or conflict of methods, in the social sciences at the beginning of the 20th century. The only way in which a study could be objective is by applying the methods of the natural sciences - *Naturwissenschaften* - rather than those of the 'sciences of the spirit' - *Geisteswissenschaften*. Weber believed that neither approach offered a fully satisfactory answer to the conflict, and in his rejection of the use of the *Naturwissenschaften* approach, he rejected the suggestion that the social sciences could be entirely objective. Instead he encouraged the use of 'ideal types', whereby the individual social scientist would declare all his assumptions before embarking on a study, leading to a 'relative objectivity' superior to the 'intuitionism' of traditional social history.

The *Methodenstreit* began in the study of economics, so it is appropriate that this should be used as an example to explain what the conflict was about. Economists of this period keenly believed that their subject was able to use the positivist methods of the natural sciences in order to predict economic behaviour. They assumed a model of the market comprised of individual utility maximisers, with equilibrium reached by the 'invisible hand' of price and profit mechanisms. The state was seen as having a limited role constrained to defence, law and order and the provision of public goods. Politics was pushed aside as ideas of what we *ought to do* became subordinate to economic predictions of what we *could do*. Jevons captured this attitude in these terms: he said of economics that "if reality does not correspond to its abstractions, it is not economics that is at fault but the real world that is in error". Weber criticised this, claiming that we ought to know the grounds on which these assumptions were being made. He claimed that while in the natural sciences, it was not necessary to understand why a stone fell beyond stating the laws of gravity, but in the social sciences it would be useful to know the premises on which the model of a consuming household was based. In order to make headway with the latter, the observer must 'understand' his subject in such a way that the observer of the falling stone need not. It is also interesting to note that the main opponent of the classical economists, Karl Marx, was also subject to Weber's criticism. Weber objected to the way in which Marx claimed to have found the 'laws of motion of modern society', rejecting any idea of immutable social or economic laws. 'Scientific socialism', he claimed, was an

oxymoron, and any similar systematic thought was seen by him as distorting reality. He claimed that "the presuppositions of the social sciences remain variable into the indefinite future" - such changes could not accommodate such a prescriptive system as Marxism.

The other method of inquiry generally employed was that of the *Geisteswissenschaften* or 'sciences of the spirit', a loosely-defined term which drew social science closer to the methods of history and further from those of natural science. The group promoting this view, such as Roscher and Knies, were radical empiricists, believing that in narrow areas of history we could learn from proven facts, which would speak for themselves without the need for any prescriptive model.

Weber, in his search for a universal social science, felt a need to resolve this conflict of methods. On the one hand were the proponents of the *Naturwissenschaften*, arguing for an objective reality (no matter which cultural context it appeared in), a nomothetic 'social physics' with one prescriptive model, and the study of pure facts which had no impact on our interpretation of a given event. On the other hand believers in the *Geisteswissenschaften* argued that we should search for 'cultural meanings' and aim to understand the spirit of the age with empathy and intuition. They claimed that history was an ideographic, once-and-for-all process where certain events (such as the rise of Western capitalism) could only have happened under unique circumstances, and argued that the facts themselves imputed values on us which would affect our interpretation of any event. Such an approach was despised by positivists such as J.S. Mill, who claimed that sociology was in a 'backward state' and was 'a blot on the face of science' - their solution was to apply the methods of the natural sciences even more vigorously. This solution has been applied more in economics than elsewhere - the *Naturwissenschaften* methods were the undisputed victor during the last century. However, Weber rejected this view, claiming instead that the social sciences had a definite theoretical purpose, object, methods and problems, and that certain of their aims and principles could not be included among the aims and principles of the natural sciences. Despite this refutation of the positivist approach, Weber also attacked a number of closely related responses to positivism, especially the 'intuitionism' of Roscher and Knies.

Weber argued against the 'objective reality' position of the positivists by claiming a number of differences between the natural and the social sciences. Firstly, he claimed that the establishment of a hypothetico-deductive system of nomological laws was not the aim of the social sciences at all. Correlations may have had 'extraordinary heuristic value' but had 'no causal status' at all. "It is obvious that

historical reality," said Weber, "including those 'world-historical' events and cultural phenomena which we find so significant, could never be deduced from these formulae." Secondly, he argued that sociocultural phenomena have definitive properties which distinguish them from the subject matter of other sciences, leading to a peculiar method of identifying, explaining and describing them which rules out the possibility of a natural science of the sociocultural. Finally he claimed that 'the facts' did not speak for themselves. There is, he claimed, no sociocultural observation language which is theoretically neutral and logically independent of the way we see these phenomena, and that it was our very *erkenntnisinteresse* or 'theoretical interest' which constituted any collection of phenomena as a social problem in the first place. The main argument against this positivist view, aside from Weber's own theses, came from the 'intuitionists', who claimed that social phenomena should be studied with empathy and a 'reproduction in immediate experience' of the phenomenon in question. However, as Weber pointed out, there was "no guarantee that these value-feelings will correspond in any way to the feelings of the historical persons with whom the writer and reader empathise." There could therefore be no objectivity in this method either. Any empirical position - within natural sciences as well as social sciences - presupposes some conceptual apparatus which supplies criteria for the intelligibility and truth of the proposition. This conceptual apparatus is invariably not objective in the social sciences, as the historical events themselves will produce 'value-feelings' in the observer which bias his view. 'Interpretation' of an object which has any conceivable cultural value is not a constituent of a purely empirical-historical account - one which explains concrete 'historical entities' in terms of concrete causes. On the contrary, this 'interpretation' constitutes the *formation* of an historical entity itself. Weber argued that there was a role for ethical, aesthetic and religious norms in allowing the scientist to decide which fact, or historical individuality, should be assigned importance and studied. 'Value-freedom', as Weber defined it, meant giving the observer the freedom to choose what would be interesting to study without, for example, the interference of an authoritarian state. 'Value-relevant' presuppositions exist which are neither derivable from the investigation nor testable against the empirical findings which issue from it. In social science, unlike in natural science, things were seen as being studied for their impact on human history rather than their theoretical significance. Only after establishing the basis for his enquiry could the social scientist proceed. The investigation should be carried out as objectively as possible, but full objectivity was never possible due to the slide into

relativity which such interpretations provoked; one could not say that one's 'empathy' was any more revealing than anyone else's.

Weber's resolution of the *Methodenstreit* revolved around 'ideal types' - abstractions that social scientists would create, based on their beliefs about what it is interesting to study, which include essential properties and lack all non-essential ones. The typical 'rational economic man' is an example - a being who does not exist in reality, but who can nevertheless be studied as a logical ideal. Once this ideal was established, and all reasons for establishing this ideal had been declared, a 'relative objectivity' was then possible. The 'laws' of economics were not laws in the *Naturwissenschaften* sense but were in fact more like ideal types, based as they were on our current cultural values. Weber claimed in other works that Protestantism was largely responsible for the introduction of a capitalist culture - this he saw as the 'understanding' which economics had lacked. Schumpeter claimed that Weber did not object in principle to what economists did, but disagreed with them on what they thought they were doing, that is the 'epistemological interpretation of their procedure'. Weber wished for the 'ideal type' to correspond as closely as possible to reality, but since there was no guarantee that it would be followed in practice, it could not be seen as an end in itself, nor as an historical force, nor as a practical ideal.

An example a Weberian might give concerns the timing of revolutions. One theory suggests that a revolution will occur when the gap between expectations and income grows sufficiently large. Yet when the English Poll Tax of 1389 was imposed, resulting in an undoubted material loss for peasants, the masses had no concept of revolution whatsoever and responded by taking their grievances to the person least willing to help them - the King himself. Such a theory as that would only be possible in one particular type of political system at one point in history. Weber's point was that the assumptions and 'ceteris paribus' clauses were ignored at our peril, as they concealed subjectivity. For example, a socialist could not deduce the optimum course of action for a human society, but given certain goals, could establish the most cost-effective means of achieving them. The *Naturwissenschaften* lost out where non-quantifiable values were concerned - even the most sophisticated objective analysis could not establish whether a small decline in economic performance was a price worth paying for an increase in political freedom.

The sociologist would therefore never be able to display objectivity, but could display 'relative objectivity' if his ideal type was explicit and his assumptions and biases all declared. Weber's belief was that if everyone analysed something subjectively, while

no position could be truly objective, an 'inter-subjectivity' existed where everyone was able to know how the reports might be biased. Which ideal type to use can be disputed for two reasons. The first is that it does not seem important or relevant according to the political or cultural inclinations of the objector. The second reason would be if the theory were inconsistent on its own terms, or incompatible with some other value-judgement simultaneously affirmed, or with a known matter of fact - in which case the theory could be rejected.

Complete relativism is prevented thus - if a theory does fit the facts, it cannot be claimed that because of this the theory is objective truth, as the choice of topic under review (and thus formation of the topic itself) are invariably subjective. However if a theory is inconsistent within its own terms, it can be seen as objectively wrong. Weber therefore believed that the social sciences could - while labelling some theories as objectively wrong - never establish objective truth in the same way as the natural sciences.