On the Centrality of Action: Social Science, Historical Logics, and Max Weber’s Legacy

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Abstract This article draws attention to the fundamental centrality of “action” – i.e. symbolically constituted behavior – for the historical and social sciences. The work of Max Weber and contemporary American historian and theorist William H. Sewell, Jr. are examined, so as to shed light on the debate concerning social science’s central subject matter as well as on the implications of this work for sociological and historical theory. The examination of Sewell’s view leverages the importance of the concept of action underlying Weber’s concept of “social action.” Weber’s position on action and social action is of great interest not only to general theory but also to the field of cultural sociology, which has neglected to develop systematically upon the theoretical purchase Weber offers to it.

Introduction

William H. Sewell, Jr.’s question, “What do we mean by the ‘social’ in social science?” (2005f: 318), signals to social scientists of all stripes that the definition of the central subject matter of social science endures as a signal problem and source of contention (cf. Alexander and Seidman, 1990; Friedman, 2004; Greenfeld, 2004, 2005b, 2007, and 2013; Joyce, 2002; Latour, 2002; Malczewski, 2013b; Pascale, 2010: 160–161; Small, 1904; Spillman, 2002: 5–7). The definition of the central subject matter of social science is of fundamental concern, for embedded in this definition is a view as to what constitutes the putative organizing principle upon which the empirical validity of social scientific claims may be judged as well as a view as to what provides the empirical link that binds the various social sciences together and that permits their comparability and intelligibility. To be sure, definite phenomena that comprise the focus of inquiry and against which the adequacy of explanatory theories is proven are fundamental to each science aspiring to incremental advances in reliable knowledge. Yet social science, in distinction to biology, which, for instance, has advanced beyond the physicalist/vitalist debate to focus on the processes of life (Mayr, 1997: 2–23, 273), is not generally recognized by a characteristic theoretical framework or – more importantly for the purposes of this article – by a specific set of facts indicative of its motivating concerns that would define it. Theoretical debates in the social sciences are principally

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concerned with methodological approaches at the expense of specifying or building consensus around the central object of study (Sewell, 2005f: 319–321; Tilly, 2005; Turner and Turner, 1990). In contemporary sociology, the ongoing debate between advocates of either so-called cultural or structural approaches exemplifies this tendency (Friedland and Mohr, 2004; Gans, 2012).

The circumscription and definition of the set of phenomena essential for the testing of social scientific theories is a condition the absence of which precludes adjudication amongst competing theories on empirical grounds. By their very nature, descriptive claims about empirical phenomena must factor in and index the characteristics of such phenomena in order to be scientifically valid. Complementarity is essential (Malczewski, 2013b). This much is obvious. Formal or theoretical claims, for their part, are creative works of reason. As Albert Einstein’s Herbert Spencer Lecture delivered in 1933 at Oxford reminds us, there is no necessary complementary relationship between the content of a theory and the totality of empirical facts (1982; cf. Holton, 1986: 2–5). Hence, unlike descriptive claims about empirical reality that are tethered to the objectively observable characteristics of the phenomena themselves, formal or theoretical claims must be complemented – that is to say, have their scientific validity established – in other ways. In Karl Popper’s view, “The criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability” (2008: 48; Popper’s emphasis). A scientific theory minimally must be formulated such that it is falsifiable or refutable, and it must be corroborated by (i.e. find its complement in) evidence through systematic testing. In the absence of a defined set of comparable empirical phenomena, social science constitutes an indefinite activity, one – although it may share an aim (Malczewski, 2013b) – without a true shared object and without standards permitting rigorous and consistent adjudication amongst theories.

What specific set of phenomena, such as the processes of life studied by biology, constitute the characteristic domain of social science? Engaging this problem in one of his last books, Charles Tilly argues that scholarly approaches to the description and explanation of human social processes fall into several roughly cut categories or types of social scientific accounts, each of which rests on competing foundations (2005: 3–22). He argues that, among these accounts, different types of phenomena are seen to constitute and cause social processes hence generating contradictory lines of explanation. Tilly’s analysis provides insight as to what distinguishes the several approaches that comprise social science, and he contributes clarity to the discussion concerning the nature of the divide separating different approaches whilst accounting for the
kinds of questions regularly pursued in analyses of the social. Markedly, however, a discussion of the putative basic set of phenomena which the competing approaches purport to explain remains absent from Tilly’s analysis. Without reference to a fundamental empirical set of phenomena against which the adequacy of the descriptions that inform analyses of the social may be judged and against which the validity of competing approaches and theories may be proven, the scientific status of the analyses Tilly documents remains dubious. The fractured approach of social scientific inquiry to which Tilly draws attention signals the *ad hoc* character of the bulk of social scientific theory, a character which stems from endemically selective use of evidence and that ultimately derives from the absence of a basic circumscribed order of phenomena against which competing approaches can be systematically tested. Social scientific debate is largely preoccupied with contesting methodologies whose roots do not extend deeply enough to reach the putative phenomenal layer of the distinctly human social reality that would enable adjudication amongst competing views and help lead to comparable scientific theories that would fuel scientific progress. As Sewell puts it, “the social sciences have far more highly developed methodologies than ontologies” (2005f: 320).

Notably, in the concluding chapter of his celebrated collection of essays on social theory, Sewell advances a compelling claim concerning the definition of the basic or elemental set of phenomena that is characteristic of social science. He argues:

The social . . . is best understood as, first, an articulated, evolving web of semiotic practices . . . that, second, builds up and transforms a range of physical frameworks [or built-environment effects] that both provide matrices for these practices and constrain their consequences. (2005f: 369; cf. 319–321)

He argues that examination of this set of phenomena leads to reliable knowledge. Despite his apparent lack of engagement with Max Weber’s thought – a lack of engagement that is surprising, given that Weber is one of two of social science’s founding fathers who worked specifically on the problem of the role of symbolically constituted behavior and order in human life and on making this set of phenomena the central object of a science – Sewell converges with Weber in his view of the basic phenomena central to social scientific inquiry. Both Sewell and Weber directly address the problem of establishing the elemental set of phenomena characteristic of social science and indicative of social science’s constitutive aims.

My argument has three parts. First, I examine briefly Sewell’s view so as to gain leverage on the epistemological significance of
Weber’s concept of “action” underlying “social action” and to draw attention to the fundamental importance of symbolically constituted behavior for social science. Second, I discuss Weber’s legacy in order to emphasize his view of symbolically constituted reality and its implications for historical and sociological theory. Third, I offer an assessment of the engagement with Weber’s view of action and social action in cultural sociology that demonstrates that Weber’s work is neglected in the one field to which it is of the most immediate value. I conclude that Weber left us a legacy that remains to be surpassed.

The Elements of the “Social” and Historical Logics

As noted above, in Sewell’s view social science’s basic set of phenomena is comprised of semiotic practices. In his use of the term semiotic, Sewell refers specifically to what he calls meaningful practices (Sewell, 2008: 587) – practices that, by my lights, are characterized by a symbolic (i.e. law-, rule-, or convention-based) quality. This is the quality of interest to us here. The social, in this view, thus exists in practices where symbolic principles are found. Groups, institutions, classes, ethnicities, and (following his interchangeable metaphors) other physical frameworks or “built-environment effects” are seen as the outcomes of human actions conditioned and mediated by streams or sequences of symbolic practices (2005f: 362–372).

The response Sewell offers to his guiding question is one that posits symbolic reality (i.e. a basic empirical set comprised of instances of symbolically constituted practices) as the relevant set of phenomena for addressing the problems set by social science. Sewell’s aim is to discover diachronic, temporal, and historically conditioned types – or “logics,” as he calls them – of symbolic practices, so that the expression and transmission of these types can be evaluated in terms of how they come into being, endure, and transform (2005f: 358). In this view, the organizing principle, formulated as a concept or postulated as a theoretical entity, of a set of symbolic practices hence is drawn from the outcomes of concrete empirical actions that constitute the cases to be understood. It is in these basic symbolic practices that logics of the social are observed. Sewell writes:

[‘logics’ are] concepts arrived at by inference . . . about features that the social world must possess in order for the patterns actually observed (the invention of the concept of revolution in Paris in 1789, the Hawaiians’ classification of Captain Cook as a god, the devastation of middle-class savings in the Argentine currency crisis, or the coevolution of strategy and rules in basketball) to be true. (2008: 592)
Logics, being conceptually drawn from basic sets of symbolic practices, serve both to explain patterns of such practices (e.g. the invention of the concept of revolution in Paris) as well as to shine light on the significance of the individual symbolic practices upon which the logics are grounded. Logics in this way advance beyond basic description: they are theoretical concepts amenable to testing against empirical evidence. This approach is epitomized in Sewell’s discussion (2005d: 225–270) of the post facto construal of the taking of the Bastille as an act of the people’s sovereign will and the remarkable effects of this construal on the political world as it introduced “new conceptions of what really exists (the violent crowd as the people’s will in action), of what is good (the people in ecstatic union), and of what is possible (revolution, a new kind of regeneration of the state and the nation).” Sewell argues, moreover, that the most profound consequence of the taking of the Bastille was the reconstruction of the categories of French political culture and action. This claim accounts for both discrete symbolic practices and structures, the latter of which Sewell terms built-environment effects (2005d: 245; cf. Sewell, 2004). Such claims exhibit historical soundness whilst speaking to a broader social scientific interest in identifying explanatory factors of human social processes and products.

Drawing attention to the fact that durable characteristics or structuring forces are theoretical entities drawn from and empirically based in symbolic practices, Sewell’s concept of built-environment effects embodies a deliberate focus on the dynamic duality of the social (cf. 2005b). He emphasizes the central importance of meaning – i.e. symbolic organizing principles – in human life whilst regarding structuring forces as both conditions for and consequences of meaning. In employing the term built-environment effects, Sewell seeks to leave behind the conceptual baggage carried with usage of the structure\(^5\) terminology and thus to avoid creating analytical lacunae with each new claim (e.g. how to account for complements such as agency?). In this way he endeavors to nuance and overcome what he calls the conventional “mental habit of dividing social life into material or ideal elements” (2008: 588), a habit that is regarded as both deeply problematic and misleading (cf. Greenfeld, 2004, and 2013; Geertz, 1973: 57).

The primacy Sewell places on symbolic practices articulates well with social scientific inquiry that seeks to account for actors’ justifications of their actions (whether specified at the level of the individual or group) whilst shedding light on the multiplicity of built-environment effects rooted in symbolic practices. Sewell helps widen the view of the reach of meaning (to wit, consider his discussion of the interactive bodily kinesthetics of basketball; 2005f:
337–361) and demonstrates that values, frames, scripts and the like do not in fact “appear out of thin air” – as one critic of meaningful analyses puts it (Gans, 2012: 128). He also recognizes the fact that communities, societies, or the world-economy, for example, as objects of science, are theoretical entities that are symbolically constituted (e.g. Marseille’s dockworkers, the American people, or the Swiss banking system). His view helps to steer against reification of these theoretical entities by illustrating the basic importance of symbolic practices in analyses of cause and effect at the levels of, for example, systems or structures. The built-environment has its own putative causal laws and is also subject to those putative causal laws that direct symbolic practice at the individual or micro-sociological levels – this is an implication of the theoretical entities of the built-environment having been fashioned from more basic or elemental symbolic practices.

Given his emphasis on delimiting the central subject matter of social science, his conclusions concerning symbolic practices, and his view regarding the built-environment effects of such practices, it is remarkable that Sewell only makes a handful of cursory references to the thought of Max Weber (see Sewell, 2005h: 5, 189, 189 n.13, 193, 267, 328). Most strikingly, none of these references engages Weber’s discussion of “action” and “social action,” his exacting epistemological statement illuminating his view concerning the characteristic empirical qualities central to social scientific inquiry.

This is noteworthy because Weber bequeathed to social science a view on the nature of the social which not only anticipates as it were Sewell’s view but surpasses it insofar as it also offers a theory of motivational understanding that ties symbolically constituted behavior to the putative states of consciousness of individual actors (Greenfeld, 2005a: 325; Greenfeld and Malczewski, 2010; Malczewski, 2013b; cf. Campbell, 2006: 209–212). What is more, Weber is clearly the most incisive historical analyst among the major founding figures of social science, providing us with a methodological means of accounting for the role of symbolically constituted practices in human social order from both historical and sociological perspectives. Most importantly, Weber provides us with a general theoretical view of how symbolic principles condition and directly shape human action and enduring patterns of social order.

Symbolically Constituted Reality: Max Weber and the Fundamental Priority of “Action”

The definition of the “social” in social science stands before us in Weber’s concepts of “action” and of “social action.” Consider Weber’s definition of sociology:
Weber’s definition of the relevant set of phenomena concerns two related kinds of facts, those termed action and social action. The first kind is elementary; in the second kind a restricting analytical distinction inhere. To begin with, these facts share the characteristic of being individual behaviors to which subjective meanings are attached. Subjectively meaningful behavior – action – constitutes the elemental or basic unit. For the purposes of the approach Weber calls sociology, however, a second characteristic must be present: social action manifests the quality of the subjectively meaningful behavior taking account of or being related to the behavior of others and being thereby oriented in its course. It is social action thus understood that constitutes the sociological locus of interest and that is treated as the central analytical unit in Weberian sociology. It follows, both from Weber’s methodological discussions and from his practice throughout his work, that causal explanation of patterned behavior is fashioned out of such units. Empirically observable “typical modes of action,” “courses of action that are repeated,” or enduring patterns of meaningful behavior are composites of the interrelated subjectively meaningful behavior of numerous actors (1978: 29). The empirical uniformities inherent in such phenomena, as far as sociology is concerned, offer the problems to be understood and explained.

Weber’s methodological focus reveals certain theoretical presuppositions that bear directly on the definition of the central subject matter of social science. The elemental or basic unit is action – behavior to which a subject attaches meaning. The organizing principle constitutive of meaning is symbolic, and it is the symbolic character of this principle that is most noteworthy. Symbols represent other phenomena – most importantly, as it concerns us here – ideas or abstract concepts, and rules or conventional relationships (i.e. rules of action). In Weber’s view of action there is an implicit theory of symbolic phenomena that regards meaning as being internally represented: the actor is in some significant way seen as behaving in a context of symbolic principles that he recognizes (although not necessarily in the sense of self-conscious recognition or subjective adoption) and that immediately and directly orient his behavior. Weber’s location of meaning at the level of the subject implies a direct link to consciousness. His concomitant argument that meaning shapes interests (1969b: 280; Eastwood,
2008) and that it provides the putative explanation of social outcomes links the symbolic (or rule based) aspects of consciousness to human social order as such.

In the concept of social action, the criterion of an actor’s meaningful behavior being related to the behavior of others makes clear that social action is fundamentally orientation to symbolically constituted realities and relationships. These realities and relationships are seen to be imputed to the context of behavior by the actor and function as immediate phenomena that point to the explanatory conditions and determinants of behavior. What is thus of supreme importance for social science is understanding the way that symbols themselves represent states of consciousness including basic orientations to reality (to include “interests”), rules of order, and other aspects of patterned behavior. The concept of social action denotes theoretical entities or analytical units fashioned on the basis of elemental instances of action. Weber’s so-called idealism is first and foremost a standpoint grounded on the recognition of instantiated behaviors bearing a symbolic or meaningful element.

The concept of action draws attention to an order of phenomena whose defining quality is its symbolic ordering principle. In calling action “elemental,” I draw attention to the role action plays in social scientific theory: it serves as the relevant general class of basic statements used to adjudicate between contesting theories (cf. Popper, [1935/1959] 2002: 74–94). This view of Weber’s concept of action is consistent with the one he set forth in the Logos essay of 1913 wherein he argues that the “individual [as the agent of meaningful behavior] and his action” are treated as the most basic unit or “atom” (Weber, 1981: 158 – my emphasis; cf. Gerth and Mills, 1969: 55; Graber, 1981; Oakes, 1998; Whimster, 2007: 251–252; and, Weber’s letter to Robert Liefmann of 9 March 1920 quoted in Whimster, 2007: 263; cf. Turner, 2007).

Concerning the methodological guidelines pertaining to the description and explanation of action, Weber’s approach is interpretive in the specific sense of identifying the relevant symbolic organizing principles evident in the phenomena being studied and seeking to understand them. The determination of such principles entails drawing them out of a given set of behavior and then, for the purpose of inquiry, extracting and then exaggerating the qualities to be accorded analytical weight – i.e. fashioning an “ideal type.” Determination of these principles requires examining the contextual process of their origination and attaining, as Weber puts it, a “clear intellectual grasp of the action-elements in their intended context of meaning” (1978: 5). This approach is relevant for determining both what he calls “intended meaning” (i.e. the specific
organizing principle attributed to the empirical raw material constituting a given case) as well as a “theoretically conceived pure [or ideal] type” (i.e. a constructed rational standard against which the raw material of isolated cases of subjectively meaningful behavior is measured for the purposes of sociological analysis) (1978: 4; Weber’s emphasis). Weber writes, “All interpretation of meaning . . . strives for clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and comprehension [Evidenz: certainty or quality of the result]” (1978: 5, 58). The explanation of the role of the symbolic organizing principles discovered in a given case as it pertains to an idealized or conceptually refined set of social action then follows as a secondary step, one that is possible only after the action elements have been described or characterized.

In Weber’s work, types of meaning serve the role of isolated variables whose relation to sets of enduring patterns then comes under scrutiny. Such variables have both historical and sociological value. To wit, Weber distinguishes sociology from history. History concerns important individual human events and “the causal analysis and explanation of individual actions, structures, and personalities possessing cultural significance” (1978: 19, 29). Sociology, by contrast, opening a more analytically extensive view, concerns generalizations of processes of social action and, in this way, contributes concepts that help situate and explain historically important phenomena (1978: 19–20; cf. 1978: 4). It is important to note that although the methods of history and sociology diverge as a result of the difference in emphasis stemming from history’s and sociology’s guiding questions, both history and sociology take symbolically constituted behavior – action – as the empirical key to understanding humanity. It is not as if Weber sees the historical realm as operating outside the sociological one or vice versa. No. Each perspective logically implies the other, although the nature of causal explanation for history differs from that of sociology because it asks different questions about phenomena seen from differing levels of abstraction and understands their interrelation from a different vantage point. Weber’s methodological statements complement his aim to focus on social action and emphasize the constructed nature of this concept. It follows that the methods employed in discovery must be appropriate for this specific set of facts (1978: 9). The nature of sociological questions demands that the sociologist cast a wide net. “Sociology, in contrast to history,” as Rob Beamish characterizes this view, “then, should move away from the specific and unique to establish more generalized knowledge and theories of social action” (2010: 175). It is clear that history and sociology for Weber share action as their elementary empirical material, although it is the analytically delineated facts
termed social action that – for methodological reasons specific to sociology – constitute the central subject matter of this science, and, as he puts it, “may be said to be decisive for its status as a science” (1978: 24).9

Action, although it is instantiated symbolic behavior, notably concerns an order of reality that is a-material: that is to say that the order or set concerned appears to be as if autonomous from the material reality of its behavioral substratum. This a-material set of phenomena manifests organizing principles that are symbolically constituted and that hence transcend the material conditions on which they partially (albeit significantly) depend. Arbitrary conventions, rules of order, and ideas or abstract concepts are all realized in a certain sense as behavior, although their characteristic organizing principle stands apart from the behavior taken simply as behavior or mere motion. What is perhaps most striking is the central theoretical implication of Weber’s work: namely, that this order of phenomena exerts a force (both a conditioning force as well as a causal force) over every aspect of human history and society. Action is not merely a simple heuristic or analytical facet of some purportedly more foundational set of empirical phenomena: it is treated by Weber as an empirical order of phenomena of its own kind. It is clear, moreover, that Weber sees that how the actor construes his action is as important as the nature of the action when seen as a motivating force: it is through sociological examination that we can use the former to establish the latter and, thereby, make sense of both. Action and social action in this way imply each other, but action is empirically prior and, at the level of description, more basic. The argument I am advancing is not to be confused with Reinhard Bendix’ important claims that ideas and individual behavior possess “an irreducible dimension” (1977: 474) or that Weber is indebted to the tradition that sought to build analyses of society on the conception of an “elementary unit” (486–493). Yes, Weber’s thought patently exhibits an anti-reductionist stance, and it is a commonplace observation that analytical rigor is a paramount characteristic of his approach. My argument goes further: action points to, and Weber specifically engages, a specific order or set of phenomena that provides the fundamental basis for concepts and explanatory theories of social processes. Weber explicitly specifies a central subject matter for social science, and, in this way, anticipates as it were Sewell’s concern for making an ontological commitment.

To illustrate this point, I examine Weber’s well-known discussion of Benjamin Franklin’s writings concerning devotion to the increase of capital and the type of meaningful behavior it indexes. Weber begins by describing the peculiarity of the manner in which capital
is conceived or understood and the imperatives that are seen to accompany action oriented by it. Consider the following passage from Franklin:

Remember, that time is money... that credit is money... that money is of the prolific, generating nature. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on... The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker... He that murders a crown, destroys all that it might have produced, even scores of pounds... (Weber, 2011c: 77; Weber’s emphasis here and onward)

Referring to this passage and many others like it, Weber argues that the meaning of this passage (i.e. the organizing principle of this set of symbolic phenomena) concerns “the idea of the duty of the individual to increase his wealth, which is assumed to be a self-defined interest in itself” (79). He continues, “Indeed, rather than simply a common-sense approach to life, a peculiar ‘ethic’ is preached here: its violation is treated not simply as foolishness but as a sort of forgetfulness of duty. Above all, this distinction stands at the center of the matter. ‘Business savvy,’ which is found commonly enough, is here not alone taught; rather, an ethos is expressed in this maxim. Just this quality is of interest to us in this investigation” (79). Weber’s elementary data are symbolically constituted: it is this symbolic quality and its compelling nature that Weber seeks to make sense of and which is the empirical crux of his analysis. First order description of the symbolic principles embodied in the concrete writings of Franklin paves the way for both historical comparative analyses of cases and, following this, the establishment of pure or ideal types; these ideal types are analytical categories (or second order description) that permit the categorization or classification of sets of similar data. Based on comparative analyses of cases, Weber argues that the passage above is emblematic of a typical pattern of social action that he terms the “spirit of capitalism” (76), wherein the acquisition of money in the modern economic order is “the result and manifestation of competence and proficiency in a vocational calling” (80–81). Claims based on the relevant characteristics of this “spirit” or “ethos” are thus legitimated by the extent to which these characteristics are in evidence in the empirical material (as seen from the standpoint of the guiding question and approach) which is essentially symbolic even though it is instantiated as action and therefore has a behavioral component.

Looking at Weber’s work from this angle, it is clear that his genetic or causal claims are based on a sensitive treatment of symbolic phenomena that amounts to nothing less than scientific scholarship that is both historical and sociological. Sam Whimster
(2007: 56–57) lends support to this view regarding Weber’s approach, drawing attention to the exemplary argument in “Luther’s Conception of the Calling” (Weber, 2011c: 99–109) that is based purely on textual exegesis and analysis of meaning. Weber seeks to map the course and consequences of this peculiar ethic – the typical pattern of meaningful behavior oriented to the increase of capital – as it relates both to the individual actions and the larger structures or institutions characteristic of modern capitalism. Implicitly drawing attention to the elementary importance of action, Whimster writes, “sociology is ‘individualistic’ . . . Structures, classes, regimes, orders, value spheres all feature, unavoidably, in Weber’s sociology, but not as social objects or things . . . The operation of ‘structures’ (Weber’s Gebilde) is denominated in the motives, meaning, thinking and actions of individuals” (2007: 266; my emphasis). The ethic is, from this perspective, considered a force that is simultaneously outside of or external to particular individuals insofar as it conditions the context of action (e.g. in Gebilde) as well as internal to or emanating from those same individuals. Regarding both of these aspects, the acceptance of guiding ethics or ideas need not be consciously recognized by the actors for an ethic to play a causal role (2011c: 81): what is most important is that behavior is explained by reference to the ethic as an ordering principle.

Weber’s interpretive approach, being historically sensitive in the specific sense of what I call here first order description, demands appreciation of the context of a given case in order to determine the form of its organizing principle. Comparative analysis, moreover, gives way to second order description which permits verification and allows what is shared between cases to be distinguished from what is peculiar to them. Weber, in this way, accounts for both the historical specificity of given cases as well as the ideally-specified continuities among historical cases (cf. Weber, 1978: 20). This approach is of equal import to both historical and sociological questions. To wit, determination of a particular aspect of social action, as in the belief of success in increasing capital as a sign of virtue and proficiency in a calling, allows for examination of the genesis of such social action and in this way sheds light on questions concerning the immediate historical context (e.g. one understands a contemporary individual’s capitalist behavior better for having understood Franklin, and one understands Franklin better for having understood Luther/Calvin/Baxter) as well as those questions concerning sociologically relevant processes (e.g. one understands contemporary capitalist behavior better for understanding the nature of the symbolic practices that serve as the significant context in which such action appears). Weber’s
approach demonstrates sensitivity to the fundamentally historical (i.e. localized, contextual, unique-yet-patterned) nature of human action. Even the paradigmatic cases that wrap Weber’s ideal types in historical flesh, such as the passage from Franklin above, cannot for an instant be seen as being perfectly rendered by the ideal type’s organizing principle, due to the abstract conceptual isolation and definition peculiar to the analytical process. “Other vantage points,” Weber writes, “would identify other features of our historical cases as ‘essential’, as is true with every historical case. From this premise it follows unequivocally that whatever one understands by a ‘spirit’ of capitalism by no means necessarily can or must correspond to that which we will note as essential in our exegesis here” (77).

Meaning Counts

Weber’s concept of action has been overlooked or minimized in discussions of his thought as well as in cultural sociological theory – one place where it ought to attract most serious attention. The testament embodied throughout Weber’s work that “meaning really does count” – i.e. that symbolic principles are to be accorded fundamental priority – is much more than a methodological view. The proposition that meaning counts is patently one of Weber’s fundamental guiding notions or thema and is perhaps the most salient characteristic of Weber’s scholarship. Throughout Weber’s vast body of work, meaning does not only count as the characteristic quality of a distinctive set of empirical phenomena to be examined for the purposes of understanding and explaining it in an objective, logically consistent manner, but meaning also counts specifically as the defining quality of history and sociology and is patently the paramount characteristic of Weber’s sensibility (see Weber, 2011a: 80–81). Below, I address the neglect of engagement with the concept of action both in the literature on Weber and in cultural sociology.

Concerning the minimization of the concept of action in studies on Weber, consider as exemplary proof Stephen Kalberg’s authoritative edition of Weber’s work (2005b). The term action is neither included in the glossary of Weber’s key concepts nor is there any substantive discussion of action underlying social action, nor is there an inquiry into the epistemological implications of action for sociology or social science more generally (Kalberg, 2005b: xxi, 10, 11, 14, 19–22). The realm of symbolic principles is, as it were, taken for granted. Elsewhere Kalberg uses “meaningful action” and “social action” synonymously, therein eliding what ought to remain distinct (2008: 275 n. 1 and n. 3; and, 2009: 566). Action is also
absent from the glossary of Kalberg (2009: 560). Bendix (1977: 473–494) and Walter Wallace (1994: 224–227) include discussions of Weber’s definition of social action, and the authors are careful not to elide action and social action. The focus of these discussions, however, concerns the descriptive and explanatory implications of Weber’s methodology and not the nature of the underlying phenomena of interest. Such is also the case in Richard Swedberg’s *The Max Weber Dictionary* (2005: 2): a full page is devoted to the concept of action, but the epistemological and ontological implications are left unaddressed. Swedberg’s entry for the related term “meaning” (160–163) probes somewhat deeper, but this entry treats the concept of meaning merely as an analytical facet and neglects commenting on the significance of meaning as the central subject matter of Weber’s science.

There are notable exceptions. To wit, although action is also absent from the glossary of Whimster (2004: 407), Whimster does include a key passage on action from “Basic Sociological Concepts” (312), which implicitly provides guidance on this point (2004: 302, 296–358; cf. Whimster, 2007: 247–270). The most striking reference to action, perhaps, is found in Martin Albrow (1990: 135–137) where he writes “Like [Goethe’s] Faust [Weber] concluded that the foundations, the beginning of things, lay with the Deed, or at least with something very similar, namely action.” Albrow claims that Weber’s definition of sociology “remains to this day the most consciously chosen, and the most painstakingly derived of any of the multitude of competing definitions which this [sociology] now prolific intellectual growth has borne” (137).  

Colin Campbell (1996: 8–37; 163 n.1; cf. 2006) offers additional support regarding the neglect of action: he argues that action has been systematically forgotten in derivative so-called action theories. To wit, the absence of engagement with Weber’s discussion of action and social action is especially notable in the one field that perhaps should be most receptive to Weber’s view of meaning – the field of cultural sociology. To illustrate, a survey of the 65 essays that comprise the recent *Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (Hall, Grindstaff, and Lo, 2010) reveals neither a single discussion of Weber’s concepts of action or social action nor a single case of sustained engagement with Weber’s view on subjectively meaningful behavior. Although Weber is mentioned just over a dozen times, there are only eight references to Weber’s works in these 65 essays, of which only four briefly and obliquely touch the question of meaning (three are made to “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” and one is made to “The Social Psychology of the World Religions”). Of the 28 essays in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture* (Jacobs and Hanrahan, 2005) none sustains
discussion of Weber’s thought. Weber is mentioned in passing here only a handful of times, and his concepts of action and social action are never introduced. This trend is in evidence elsewhere (Edles, 2002; Griswold, 2008). *Cultural Sociology* (Spillman, 2002), an anthology admittedly not focused on “classical” authors, composes 31 essays of which one (Swidler, 2002) refers to Weber’s concept of social action – this is done, however, in an endnote. There are comparatively many cursory references to Weber in this collection of essays, but in the section entitled “Key Ideas” (Spillman, 2002: v) none of the seven essays on “Analyzing Culture in Society” is by Weber. The “key ideas” are provided in essays by Ruth Benedict, Georg Simmel, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Edward Shils, Raymond Williams, Clifford Geertz, and Pierre Bourdieu, many of whom Weber directly and profoundly influenced. In Alexander and Seidman’s influential text, *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (1990), Weber’s work itself is not presented. This perhaps may be explained by Alexander’s interpretation of Weber – namely, his emphasis on Weber’s universal categories and methods, which comes at the expense of elaborating upon that to which those categories and methods apply (1988: 19–20, 30–31, 54–56, 180, 271–275, 306).

Such absence of engagement with Weber’s view of meaning is surprising, given that Weber’s essay “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” one of a handful of works that is presumably known to every student of sociology (Campbell, 2006: 207–208; cf. Halsey, 2004: 171) and that is most clearly a work that deliberately aims at scientific explanation of meaning, places the problem of meaning on center stage and is strikingly guided by an approach to meaning that seeks to provide an account of historical instances, transformations, and endurance of meaning from an methodologically disciplined whilst theoretically expansive point of view. Weber’s approach in this one short essay is interpretive, explanatory, and comprehensive, which is to say that it is oriented and amenable to examination from several perspectives (whether at the level of an individual or a group, or whether structural, institutional, historical, etcetera).\(^{15}\)

The view that Weber’s position demands engagement with unexpressed subjectivity (Wuthnow, 1987) neglects the explicitly empirical nature of action. Likewise, the view that Weber is preoccupied with “the inner workings of the religious psyche” at the expense of understanding practice or more external forms of cultural power (Swidler, 2002: 321; cf. 2001: 187–189) introduces a division between action and practice that Weber would never countenance (much less regard as viable) and which his specific view of action logically prevents. Such a characterization suggests a
dichotomization that is at odds with the general tenor of his thought. It also overemphasizes the value for Weber of a given complex of empirical relationships (such as the "spirit of capitalism") in its role in social transformation that patently occurs at several sites and at manifold levels of complexity (Weber, 2011c: 76). The various realms of life (97), Weber indicates, originate in the ways of life common to whole groups of people, and in this way they are internally (or individually) and externally (or interactionally and practically) guided. The contest of domination concerning a particular manner of life is absolutely not determined by the internal logic characteristic of a given complex of elements or other forms of what Ann Swidler calls "psyche." Weber does argue that "[religious ideas] carry purely within themselves an autonomous momentum, lawful capacity (Eigengesetzlichkeit), and coercive power" (2011c: 390–391 n.96), but the spirit of capitalism for Weber captures a symbolically constituted type of behavior that is at a minimum economically, geographically, and psychophysically conditioned (390; 1978: 7) and, to focus on symbolic sites, surfeit with competing forms of development in those departments of life that have been systematically organized. This view captures the characteristic elements of a specific genetic or causal set of relations that logically depends on the nature of the questions being asked by Weber about a specific concrete set of phenomena.

The common interpretation of Weber's thought, moreover, that sees in it teleology or necessity (notably, Sewell, 2005g: 189 n. 13) and that overemphasizes the place and power of structures in Weber's thought (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scaff, 1989) is fundamentally misguided. Phenomena such as bureaucratic organization or the state are always abstract effects or outcomes whose essential reality begins and ends with meaningful behavior and, therefore, with individual actors whom are never regarded by Weber as single-minded automata of the kind depicted in George Tooker's painting *Government Bureau* (1956). Weber's stress on the so-called "iron cages" peculiar to certain cultures is meant to draw attention to the diachronic and historical nature of both symbolic practices and their enduring effects as patterns of action. Weber's well-known (but regularly misinterpreted) image of the "iron cage" captures patterns of action that are in his studies essentially dynamic, historical, accidental, and multi-directional.

To illustrate, in Weber's argument concerning the evolution of the concept "Beruf" in "The Protestant Ethic" the actions of a single person, Luther, take the concept in a new direction – in this way, the aspect of historical contingency is prominent – and the enduring effects it comes to have for practice later are seen as being conditioned by events (e.g. the development of rational forms of
accounting, or the particular direction taken by free labor) that are external to this peculiar development. Weber accounts for the meaning relevant for Luther and for the place it occupies in the changing context which it conditions and shapes diachronically. In addition, it is clear that Weber sees this variable (and it is just one of many) playing multiple roles in, to borrow Sewell’s language, “diverse and interconnected domains of practice” (2005f: 338). The idea of a vocational calling, for example, although it is methodologically treated as a type of social action, is essentially the idea of certain symbolic principles driving practice, and it is tied to patterns of symbolic phenomena that have evolved to such an extent that, as Weber shows us, they are not what they once were. Seemingly paradoxically, the idea of a vocational calling is simultaneously seen as a necessary causal factor, and yet it is as if an irrelevant factor for contemporary actors in the modern capitalist order. He writes, “the capitalist economic order of today is a vast cosmos into which a person is born. It simply exists, to each person, as a factually unalterable casing (unabänderliches Gehäuse) in which he or she must live” (81). He emphasizes that the subjective adoption (or conscious acceptance) of the maxims of the “spirit of capitalism” do not constitute a condition for the further existence of capitalism (2011c: 81; 2005: 19). There is, notably, no paradox here: it is simply the case that an important genetic or causal element no longer plays the role it once did, but its effects endure. More than this, the effects have become so concretized that their historical and contingent nature has been obscured. In other words, the metaphor of the “iron cage” or “steel-hard casing” (stahlhartes Gehäuse) is itself a paradoxical metaphor – it is as if were both there and not there, and, most importantly, recognition of its historical nature is recognition that it need not be this way (2005: 123; 2011c: 177). It is at odds with the body of Weber’s thought to overemphasize the dependent set so as to constrain social thought in an iron cage of its own.

Conclusion

So, what do we mean by the “social” in “social science”? Sewell argues that we must focus on the meaningful mediations that make men interdependent members of each other’s worlds (2005f: 329). He claims that the central questions in accounts of social life are, first, the meaning to the actors who experience any social action, institution, or event, and, secondly, the place of such meaning in the changing frameworks that constitute the environment for such actors. He writes, “The central challenge for researchers is to reconstruct those meanings and experiences in a form simultaneously
true to the ever-changing world being studied and graspable by the researcher’s audience” (2005f: 320).

It is clear that Weber anticipated this view over a century ago. The specific set of phenomena that is the focus of Weber’s sociology (social action) and the simultaneously interpretive and explanatory method of working on this reality that Weber developed both captures the fundamentals of Sewell’s view and directs our attention to the underlying elemental set of phenomena – behavior which is symbolically constituted, or action. Explication of symbolic principles and accounting for their durable effects and causal relations is the heart of Weber’s approach. Weber determines meaning methodologically through the construction of ideal types, and, once the data have been characterized thus, the next step is to attain a causal explanation of their course and consequences (1978: 4). In this way, Weber accounts for enduring patterns or manners of action as well as the specific practices from which they are derived analytically (cf. Kalberg, 1994: 23–49). Hence he offers history and sociology a theoretical standpoint that accounts for putative motivating forces and actors’ subjective states or interpretations of their behaviors. Cultural sociology appears to be preoccupied with the latter half of the question at the expense of the former (cf. Campbell, 2006; Vaisey, 2009), but Weber demonstrates to us that we need an account of social motives as a condition for understanding the significance of subjective states.

Further examination of Weber’s thought promises to be fruitful for contemporary social science insofar as it draws out the value of Weber’s contribution for meaning-minded historians and sociologists, arguing against the need to “forget” Weber (Runciman, 2008). Such examination helps keep open, to borrow Rolland Munro’s term, “sociological routes” (2010) to related disciplines such as anthropology and the economic and political sciences. Kalberg’s claim that “Weber’s empirically-based concepts are empowered to take cognizance of ‘fateful events,’ tenuous balances, fissions and fusions, and unrepeatable configurations” is one that should grab the attention of all scientists of the “social” (2008: 285).

Max Weber aimed at creating a science on the foundation of meaning, a science for which every scientific fulfillment would raise new questions and, as he puts it, “ask” to be surpassed and outdated (1969a: 138). Weber left us a legacy that, with a clear understanding of his approach as a guide, still asks to be surpassed and outdated. The central goal of this article is to demonstrate that the “social” has been hiding in plain sight. Now that meaning appears to be taken more seriously than ever, Weber’s work merits a closer look.
Notes

1 This is not to suggest that such objectively observable characteristics are patent, uncontested, or even interesting. The most basic descriptive claim or concept depends in an important way upon the qualities taken to be of significance by the person constructing the claim, and thus it depends in a certain important respect upon the question or problem driving the investigation (Malczewski, 2013b). The resulting claim, however, must refer explicitly to characteristics that are objectively observable and subject to corroboration by others.

2 Sewell’s work (2005h) received the Prize for Best Book in Sociological Theory from the American Sociological Association in 2008. It also has attracted critical attention (Cook, 2012; Hollinger, 2008; Joyce, 2010; Pedersen, 2008; Riley, 2008; Steinmetz, 2008).

3 The other is, of course, Émile Durkheim, whose theory of collective representations and basic focus on social facts (“manners of acting, thinking, and feeling,” which are essentially symbolically constituted phenomena) offers perhaps the most systematic treatment of the issue (1937 [1895]: v; Malczewski, 2013a, and 2013b; cf. Mauss, 1928: v).

4 For the sake of clarity, I use the language of “symbols” rather than that of “meanings.”

5 Concerning Sewell’s view of “structure” see the following: (Sewell, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2005e, 2005f, and 2008; Steinmetz, 2008; Riley, 2008; Lizardo, 2010). For an exemplary and instructive misinterpretation of Sewell’s view, see Patterson (2007).

6 Sam Whimster’s translation of Weber’s definition is as follows:

Sociology, a word often used in quite diverse ways, shall mean here: a science which seeks interpretive understanding (deutend verstehen) of social action, and thereby will causally explain its course and effects. By ‘action’ is meant human behaviour linked to a subjective meaning (Sinn) on the part of the actor or actors concerned; such behaviour may be overt or occur inwardly – whether by positive action, or by refraining from such action, or by acquiescence to some situation. Such behaviour is ‘social’ action where the meaning intended by actor or actors is related to the behaviour of others, and conduct so oriented. (Whimster, 2004: 312)

7 Characterizations of Weber (e.g. Vaisey, 2009: 1675–1676; Swidler, 1973, 1986, and 2002) that neglect to address his explicit view that subjective adoption of symbolic principles (ideas, values, etc.) is not necessary for the motive or causal force of these principles to be evident manifest a limited appreciation of Weber’s theory of motivation (cf. Campbell, 2006; Cohen, Hazelrigg, and Pope, 1975).

8 Weber invokes the image of the “atom” for rhetorical purposes, so as to emphasize his point. It would be a grave mistake to read some sort of naive positivistic view into this comment. Weber’s awareness of the constructed nature of scientific claims permeates his work (cf. Weber 2011b).

9 The empirical phenomena that constitute the complex of “historical reality” (Weber, 2011a: 78, 83, 88, 95, 105, 111) obviously include ways of behaving that are not subjectively meaningful. Weber does not intend to suggest that phenomena devoid of subjective meaning (or any other factors, for that matter) are unimportant (1978: 7; cf. Weber, 1975: 29). Additionally, Weber’s discussions of the role of “genuine” or “pure” charisma (1978: 246, 252, 1120–1121, 1111–1157; cf. Greenfeld, 1985) or of
facts such as psychic or psychophysical states or processes (to include typical variations in the reactions of individuals according to reaction-time or precision; Weber, 1978: 7) clearly demonstrate that “social action” constitutes an aspect of a manifold process in his view (cf. Albrow, 1990:147, 135–157; Greenfeld, 1985; Weber, 1981). Weber emphasizes: “in the last analysis the same principle applies to these as to other phenomena which are devoid of meaning. Both the actor and the sociologist must accept them as data to be taken into account” (1978: 7).

10 My argument here complements Campbell’s (2006) and Kalberg’s (1996), the latter of which, given the state of the field of cultural sociology at the time it was written, does not speak especially to the value Weber has for this field today (cf. Kalberg, 2005a).

11 Swidler has claimed that Weber’s sociology of religion provides the fullest theory we have about how ideas shape action (1993: x), although this theory appears to be given less credence in Swidler’s other work (1986; 2001; cf. Vaisey, 2009). See Peltonen (2008) regarding what may be an emerging acceptance of the “Weber Thesis” within the economic historical literature. A suggestive take on this thesis is offered by Greenfeld (2001, and 2005a).

12 I borrow this expression from Yale’s Strong Program advocates (cf. Alexander and Smith, 2010: 13) and apply it to Weber, who, as I argue, is an ideal proponent of this view.


14 Strikingly, Marcel Mauss made a similar claim about Durkheim (Mauss, 1928: v). The convergence of Weber and Durkheim on this matter is examined in Malczewski (2013b; cf. Malczewski, 2013a; Greenfeld, 2007).

15 To be quite clear, my use of the term comprehensive should not be taken to imply unified or universal. Weber would strongly resist such a characterization.

16 Regarding the latter point, see Kalberg (2008: 274).

17 For a contemporary view focusing on practice (specifically, the relationship between church governance and economic activity) using an approach that complements Weber’s, see Mutch (2009, especially pages 601–603).

18 For background on this problem see Kalberg (1993, and 2001).


20 See Kalberg (1996: 57–64) for an illustration.

References


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