

On the Methodology of Social Science*

By Georg Simmel**

I.

The question of the essence of knowledge^I – its meaning, its origin, its justification – seldomly disquiets the human mind as would be befitting for the depth and significance of the issue.¹ As long as cognition provides useful content for both the practical as well as the ideational facets of life, we do not question its foundations; only when, based on our inner needs, we conceive of its results as unsatisfactory or antagonistic do we elevate the crucial problem of its justification, its meaning, its validity of this cognition^{II} to the forefront. Thus Kant’s epistemological critique formed, spanning a century and a half of the development in the natural sciences with the exception of mathematics and mechanics, and this critique was enthroned as legitimized knowledge contents, thus erecting a terrible contrast vis-à-vis the needs of the mind.^{III} Social-scientific cognition appears today to require a principled critique of itself, since in the never-ending disagreement about its content only one thing emerges without dispute: Its inadequacy in terms of the pressing need of time, which nevertheless seeks to appeal to this cognition.

The great contrasting viewpoints on all knowledge also appear here. On the one hand, an empiricism which concludes the historical description of social

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1896. “Zur Methodik der Socialwissenschaft.” *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich* 20 (II): 575–85.

Rudolf Stammeler. 1896. *Wirtschaft und Recht nach der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung. Eine socialphilosophische Untersuchung*, Leipzig: Veit & Co., 668 pages. The following remarks do not constitute a comprehensive examination of the thoughtful and profound work. In particular, the epistemological criticism of historical materialism which is contained within it will be impossible to overlook by its proponents or opponents.

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¹ General remark by the editors: To avoid ambiguities as much as possible, we will translate “Erkenntnis” as “knowledge,” “Erkennen” as “cognition,” “Erkenntnis-” in composites as “epistemological.”

life with its stating of facts; on the other hand, a constructive systematizing which begins with general concepts and expects the development of truth herefrom, and which can only be confirmed partially and after the fact by concrete data.^{IV} This contrast which is inherent to all theoretical fields permeates all practical questions. Coming from the previous progression of things, the empiricist direction will appear as inevitable to further progression, and one will have to subordinate oneself to its factualness; the factual lawfulness of the circumstances consists here of the practically moving force which we must simply acknowledge empirically. In contrast, the tendency – which is not even assuaged in theory with the blunt acceptance of facts, but which seeks a conceptually closed rational system of things,^V – will guide practical development from the standpoint of reason, opposing the natural progression of the efficacy of ideas, values, freedom.

Kant has moderated the tension between empiricism and metaphysics by demonstrating how much metaphysics is contained unavoidably within experience; that this is not passive acceptance of factual impressions, but rather a processing of the latter within categories that are in us *a priori*. In my *Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* I have sought to make this facet productive for the historical sciences which Kant applied exclusively to the natural sciences by demonstrating the extent to which historical research is dependent on *a priori* prerequisites, even if it believes to be proceeding entirely empirically, and how much over-empiricalness is contained within its apparently exact factualness.^{VI} Completely independently of this, Rudolf Stammler employs in his work *Wirtschaft und Recht nach der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung* an application of the Kantian methodology for social science. In contrast to its empiricist directions, he seeks to demonstrate that scientific experience of social matters is only possible when certain concepts underlie this experience, and that these bring about an image of *society* out of the nature of human passions and human technology. Stammler applies this proposed solution to the theoretical and practical side of this foundational conflict.

Empiricist historical examination of historical materialism alleges, as it is widely known, that the prevailing law within a society is only the manifestation and the product of its economic conditions; purportedly the basis for this is the technological production, the economy as a specifically formed creation and as an exchange of material goods, and through it the legal formation of society is determined. To this Stammler responds: The social economy begets the law to such little extent that this law, contrarily, must be a precondition for it so that there can be a social economy. Of course this is not implied in the sense of a temporal preceding;^{VII} historical reality is rather a direct conjoining of technological-material production and legal order.^{VIII} But this latter is allegedly *the logical prius* belonging to the former, as form to substance,^{IX} and the mere materiality^X of the technological production of goods only creates a social economy by occurring within legally ordered forms. Aside from these, it is an

object of natural science, technology, individual psychology – but not of a particular, that is social, science. As little as causal laws are deducible from experience, since it first forms these from the raw substance of sensory impressions, as little can law emerge from the economy; because in this view the economy either implies mere technology and in this respect it is not a social matter at all, or it means the social economy which only emerges as the shaping of technological material *in specific legal forms*. Thus law and the economy do not, as is alleged, stand in a relationship of mutual dependence; instead, the legal rules constitute the formal side of the unified object of social-scientific investigation – of social life – whose mere substance^{XI} is technological production. It is thus in the very least a claim prone to misunderstanding to consider the use of the steam engine as the cause of social and legal transformations of this century. This mere technology has nothing to do with society and law as such. Only because it impinged upon an existing legal order and was conceived in the form of the same, the process emerged which one describes as the degradation of the crafts and the proletarianization of the masses. Under a different legal order, for example under a socialist or anarchist order, the invention of the steam engine would have had completely different social and legal consequences. The social significance of a changed production technology is thus dependent on its manifestation in specific legal forms, thereby creating social phenomena which can then push towards changes of the legal constitution.

Hereby a significant heuristic principle is pronounced. Without reflection one has derived from the differences of technological production – whether in crafts or factories, whether the consolidation or the separation of fields, whether with the division of labor or through undifferentiated production – the necessity of particular modifications of law, thereby overlooking that every change of technology can only unfold certain characteristic outcomes if it encounters an already existing, specifically delineated social order.^{XII} Only in combination with law whose contemporary forms it seizes can the progress of production technology elicit those social phenomena which then find their abstract expression in new legal regulations. The task will no longer be: To explain the changes of law from the changes of economic matter as its “superstructure” – but rather to explain more completely and more deeply these changes from specific phenomena which the technological-economic changes have evoked by impinging upon an already existing legal order and which, by assuming a constancy of this material factor, would have had a different effect if the prevailing legal constitution had been different. In this sense, it seems to me, that the view is definitely dethroned how production as such – exclusively through its immanent, technical characteristics – is the sufficient cause of a legal order, and proven to be a case of the typical error. Namely that changing one element in a complex system is thought to cause the next developing state of the whole solely due to that single element; whereas in reality it exists in those combinations in which the relatively unchanged continued functioning of the remaining

elements causes the change of that single element. Thus, for example, it may be sufficient for popular expression, but hardly for scientific analysis, that the impoverishment of an individual counts as the cause of one's moral degradation. Because only in its interaction with the prevailing constitution of this individual has the changed economic moment brought about the overall result of moral decay; a completely different result would have ensued upon that other moment when the remaining, relatively constant processes of the respective soul – *with which the changed process is merely coordinated as a cause of the new state of affairs* – had been different.^{XIII}

II.

That fruitful methodological thought of Stammer, however, rests on a general sociological principle which appears much more questionable to me and hence also proves that unsettledness of the foundation in intellectual matters does not need to threaten the solidity of the higher structure.^{XIV} Stammer is in search of a completely distinct notion of “society” – in contrast to the nature-like togetherness, the mere sum of its parts;^{XV} and he finds it in that social life “is a living together of people established by externally binding norms.” Thereby, in his view, social life first becomes the unifying entity of a specific science. Humanly devised provisions separate societal togetherness from the merely natural; all the while the externality of its provision^{XVI} – i.e. its indifference towards the subjective motivating forces of its observance – separates it from morality. The external arrangement – which need not be legal by any means, but can also be based on convention – is the *a priori* under whose condition the domain of society appears as a scientific unit.

I do not intend to misconstrue the significance of this attempt. The problem is accounted for with great distinctiveness here: Following which criteria from the vast side-by-sidedness and confoundedness of individuals^{XVII} does the special object come into view which we call society? And one can formulate one's answer in general as follows: By a grouping of individuals according to *ideas*. Just as a world of beauty comes about by ordering the natural over and against the indifferent being of beautiful and hideous, so too does the moral world emerge in our causal structuring of specified appearances according to values, which are similarly connected and separated by lines that are not, however, previously designed in their natural structure. This is how the world of social-scientific examination is created by extracting those syntheses by individuals which succumb to a humanly devised regularity from the whirl of natural relationships, and by consolidating them as a unified object of social science. In this view, everywhere where the behavior of persons is impacted not only by natural laws but by a human norm^{XVIII} – of course within those established mechanical necessities—there is “society.”

Hereby, however, a mere side effect – a secondary *conditio sine qua non* – appears to be elevated to a positive principle of life for society.^{XIX} The religious community, for example, will not be able to do without certain external regulations of its togetherness; still, what ties it into a societal unit is the consciousness of the communal relationship as a highest principle, it does not form as society by virtue of the “regulation through externally binding norms,” but rather by the acknowledgement that everyone knows to be one with another in faith. And this is not only the *occasion*^{XX} on which the socialization according to Stammler’s definition takes place, but it is rather this consciousness, this psychological interaction in the “invisible church” that is already society, and it is only a kind of formation of the already existing socialization^{XXI} if its members are somehow tied to an external norm of behavior. Moreover, the members of a *Kassenverein* are subject to a specific regulation concerning the contributions and expenses, since this entire affair could not endure without it. But even that is only one limiting condition: The positive principle of socialization is mutual assistance, not the form of technical regularity which it assumes for itself. And finally an example from a mundane area: A jovial gathering, a “society” in a more narrow sense undoubtedly presupposes a large number of regulations in terms of behavior amongst its members. But even when these are respected completely, nevertheless society emerges in its meaning and principle of life – to employ Aristotelian terms, following its *entelechie* – only when mutual bemusement, excitement, and exhilaration sets in. To derive the concept of society from “external regulation” is the same as if one attempted to make the concept of purposive behavior dependent on the human hand. Because surely all purposive behavior can only occur in the forms of movement that is enabled by the mechanism of our hand – but this technical condition is not therefore the essence of our purposive action. Regulation is hardly the creative condition of society, as little as language is. There is undoubtedly no socialization without language in words or gestures: But to the same degree, there is also no language without socialization. Thus like a regulation, language is a condition or a form, a product or a co-producer of society – but not its core and essence itself.

And what can regulation mean?² Surely only command, guarantee, intention of regularity in behavior. The comportment of a person or members of a group is “regulated” when in a similarly conditioned situation the same action results. Now there is no doubt that, irrespective of the content of action, such regularity of forms must be established so that a society is able to endure at all. Just as an individual could not exist if – with absolute capriciousness – one reacted with permanently varying actions to the same situation, so too society could also not endure if among its members – in its side-by-sidedness – the corresponding

² I cannot find – *salvo errore* – in Stammler’s work a definition of this concept which is central to him.

irregularity predominated. So regulation is only the condition that a group once established continues to exist, not the formative condition of its coming into being. And when Stammler precludes the remaining possible regulation of behavior, namely behavior pertaining to morality, by explicitly designating societal behavior as “external,” i.e. purely independent of the subjective motivating forces of its fulfillment, this too does not offer us insight into the essence of society. For regulation – in contrast to that emanating from within the subject – to be “external” already requires society. When regulation does not emanate from within, then it can only be initiated from actors outside of the subject with whom the subject stands in binding relationships – in other words, from a society. The definition thus goes round in circles.

I do not think that in socio-philosophical investigations one can embark from a more specific definition of society than that it always exists wherever numerous individuals interact. For if society is to be an own object in its own right of an independent science, it can only achieve this if the sum of its constitutive individual parts form a new unit; otherwise all problems of social science would be ones of individual psychology.^{xxii} Unity of several elements, however, is nothing other than interaction among them, mutually dependent acting forces of cohesion, attraction, and perhaps even of a certain repulsion (see below). That these interactions which tie in individual elements to a higher societal unit occur in the form of regulation may be acknowledged; however, this does not imply the essence but merely an attribute of socialization.

One might retort that in my conceptual definition, even two combatting and decisively mutually opposed armies could nevertheless form a “society.” I am indeed tempted to consider war as a borderline case of socialization. No one will doubt that competition is a social principle; perhaps even all socialization, like the physical world, requires opposing forces in addition to forces of attraction. Competition and loathing, reservation and estrangement create jointly with the opposing and connecting forces the precisely circumscribed form of society in first place; often also the individual circumstances which in the sole efficacy of their centripetal tendencies would melt into a formless mass. War is that interaction in which the *quantum* of unifying forces, in contrast to the repulsive ones, approaches the limiting value of zero, or which reaches it in the case of conduct in war in the absence of any mutually respected law of war. If one views it as a borderline case of socialization in this regard, it is thus not a counter-instance of the conceptual definition described above.

III.

In stark contrast to all types of relativism, Stammler asserts an unconditional distinction within societal efforts; between the solely subjective which emanates exclusively from the impulses of the prevailing situation, and the objec-

tively justified according to a generally valid criterion. In his view, there may not be substantively specified social being or occurring^{XXIII} which could purport to manifest itself as a penultimately justified, absolute ideal. But this must exist as a formal idea which determines whether an empirical or desired social state of affairs is objectively justified – a highest common place of all social evaluation, which may not be attainable concretely according to its definition, but which stands judgingly above all single purposes. To him, the ultimate goal of all social life so described is “the community of freedom-aspiring people.”

I set aside this determination of the normative ideal here as not of methodological interest and instead inquire about Stammler’s alleged necessity thereof. He is guided by the analogy of theoretical cognition. Here, too, the immediately perceived fact is not yet objective truth; rather, the idea of a generally valid regularity and objective unity of nature must be a basis so that out of the confusion of sensory singularities, a valid truth beyond mere subjectivity emerges. Therefore there must be, so that there can even be a distinction between subjectively random and objectively justified social efforts, an *overarching* reason without which there could not be a justification for or against a social institution.^{XXIV}

This parallel proves less than one might first assume. If we distinguish between subjective impression and objective truth within theoretical knowledge, this itself is founded on the prerequisite of an objective world beyond the self (independently of whether the self also captures the world in the epistemological speculation); thereby conceptions which align with the world are characterized as objective, in contrast to those which do not share this relationship. At the same time desire,^{XXV} the process of valuation, the practical vision has no counterpart, and it cannot, irrespective of relationship or lack of relationship to it, prove decisive in terms of its objectivity or mere subjectivity. The highest norm from which every singular one should derive its justification exists as much within human valuation as the deeper one, whereas thinking finds its criterion in its accordance with an empirical world independent thereof.^{XXVI} The contrast of objectivity and subjectivity therefore has an entirely different meaning in the theoretical sphere than emerges from the sphere of desire; through the mutual control of thinking and experience the unity of knowledge identifies a fixed standpoint, while the sphere of the will lacks such a criterion and hence also the contrast of an objective unit of its substance to its subjective particulars.

And what is the significance of that unit of the theoretical worldview which ought to involve the same for the practical-social? It consists of our individual knowledge imaginings^{XXVII} that belong together according to rules. Certainly not according to one overarching rule! But rather that each purported unit diverges into a multitude of internally unconnected principles, for example the law of non-contradiction, the law of causality, the mathematical axioms.^{XXVIII} A world which we conceive of according to the law of non-contradiction need therefore not be causally ordered; a causally ordered one need not necessarily align with Euclidean axioms; contrarily, our mathematics could be entirely va-

lid without involving the law of causality. The “unity of knowledge” thus merely implies that its individual components follow the norm of certain, most elevated principles; these principles, however, do not in their own substance form a unity, but rather only coexist side by side in the actual worldview. The analogy in no way forces us to view social life as incomplete before we have arrived at its purposive unit.^{XXIX} It is rather entirely possible that herein a series of overall different tendencies are operating concurrently side by side, all of which are headed towards a highest endpoint that cannot be further reduced. Thus I believe that individualism and collectivism, the progressive and the conservative mindset, the instinct towards subordination and towards coordination, the more abstract and the sensualist proclivities aspire to separate social ideals, each of which constitutes a last resort. When there nevertheless is, in instances of conflict between these tendencies, a decision that is assessed as objectively correct and another as false and thereby apparently one criterion is presumed to be elevated above others, so one can further assume – as experience also reveals in thousands of individual cases – that also in this elevated criterion only the greater psychological force finds its expression, either of an individual or, more frequently, of a combination of individuals. And this one can assume without succumbing to the skepticism and empiricist superficiality abominated by Stammler.

Each era has a particularly firm collection of convictions and tendencies – both in the practical as in the theoretical – which becomes the criterion of all individually appearing beliefs and aspirations, thus representing this as subjective vis-à-vis the objective. This complex of criteria, however, as it has evolved historically, continues to be subject to reformation:^{XXX} On the one hand, through the still hardly understood process of quasi-organic self-development of socio-psychological contents;^{XXXI} on the other hand by means of a complex containing differently pronounced elements wherein previously subordinated elements can arise to a dominating position, thereby changing the character of the whole. Thus a new tier of ultimate maxims is exalted above the hitherto highest and objective by means of immanent or external corrections, which now itself becomes the criterion of preceding ones. The stages in this process only have in common the contrasts of truth and error, objective and subjective, logical and psychological; but these are nothing but the abstract expressions of the relationship between the most general, the most firm, the most pronounced ideas and those more contingently situated. This is hardly skepticism that, on the contrary, the holding on to a generally valid, absolutely unifying ideal of knowledge, morality, and society must lead to skeptical despair if we see ourselves entangled in the confrontation in unsolved quarrels, uncertainties, and deficiencies. We attain a sound position, in contrast to a rigid one, if we regard the objective – both in perceiving and in acting – as a *relational concept*^{XXXII} which expresses the relationship of the historically dominant beliefs and tendencies to the weaker or transient or more individual ones. For even if such

absolute factual correctness existed, it would only be accessible to us in the *Gestalt* of the notion that emerges to dominance historically; it would thus represent a useless epistemological duplication.³ This does not preclude, of course, that we treat the most significant standpoints in the theoretical as in the practical-social domain – *as if* they, in genetic distinction to all individuality and subjectivity of aspirations, represented the objectively true.

If one demarcates the relativistic perspective I advocate here in a sufficiently broad and encompassing manner, it includes in itself the additions which its lower forms had to seek in opposing, in the rationalist and absolutist theories. In that way, from this perspective, for example, the conflict between the historical and the dogmatic schools of political economy will resolve itself. Concerning each economic “law,” one will be able to assume that its validity can be derived from the specific historical conditions of the economic situation, and the knowledge of that law from the economic situation of the time. However, this historical process is only comprehensible within the preconditions of – and by making use of – certain *factually* valid propositions and concepts which form the *a priori* of that historical derivation. These themselves rest on a temporally preceding historical development; this development itself requires for its coming into being (both per se and in the knowledge thereof) certain simple, factually valid norms, etc. towards the undetermined.^{xxxiii} The demand with little significance in its generality that both methods should “complement each other” is replaced here by the specific principle: That each rationalist theorem requires a historical derivation for its understanding, and that this historical

³ A thought is always only “true” in respect to another, not in relation to some kind of truth ideal situated outside of all thought. The entirety of thought is as little true as the entirety of substance is heavy. The characteristics are only valid in the relation of the components to one another, which we then erroneously apply to the whole on the one hand and to the individual element itself on the other. How long did one believe that the apple itself was heavy until one acknowledged that it is only so in relation to the Earth, as the latter is also to the former. To prove the distinction between the objectively correct and that which has arisen merely psychologically, Stammler frequently borrows the idea that the truth of a law of nature – for example the law of gravitation – is entirely independent of the psychological circumstances and forces through which Newton discovered it. Truth is purported to have a validity resting in itself, which can materialize more or less in a random psychological constellation without the latter being able to somehow alter the contents of truth. However, the law of gravitation is only “truth” because it summarized certain elements of our imaginative world in the most fitting and least contradictory way. This law is only “truth” according to a certain status and markedness of the remaining scientific worldview. It may be an error after a few thousand years. This conviction can only appear as skepticism if one believes in a thoroughly objective truth which no human force can ever achieve – particularly because Kantian idealism must appear as a denial of the external world as long as one clings to a world as situated beyond ours in an absolute way, and in contrast to which our perception [of the external world, the editors] must simply be a tottering dream. The same criticism applies to every effort to create a substantive and universal – albeit general as it may be – ideal within a moral and social world.

genesis cannot occur without a rationalist *a priori*. The *regressus in infinitum* contained herein is a fully legitimate expression for the inability to attain the perfection of our knowledge beyond any given level.^{xxxiv} Expressed in Kantian terms: Instead of two constitutive and, as such, incompatible principles we receive two regulative principles wherein each is the substructure of the other.^{xxxv} A mechanical combination or an eclectic compromise of opposing methods is thus not at stake, but rather their deployment as alternating steps of *one* comprehensive methodology.

Annotations

- I “Wesen der Erkenntnis”.
- II “Geltung dieses Erkennens”.
- III “gegen alle Bedürfnisse des Gemütes”.
- IV “die von den Thatsachen nur nachträglich und unvollkommen bestätigt werden kann”.
- V “ein begriffsmäßig abgeschlossenes Vernunftsystem der Dinge”.
- VI “wie viel Überempirisches in ihrer scheinbaren exakten Thatsächlichkeit steckt”.
- VII “Natürlich ist dies nicht im Sinne zeitlichen Vorhergehens gemeint”.
- VIII “die historische Wirklichkeit sei vielmehr ein unmittelbares Zusammen technisch materieller Produktion und rechtlicher Regelung”.
- IX “wie die Form zum Stoff”.
- X “die bloße Stofflichkeit”.
- XI “bloße Materie”.
- XII “eine schon bestehende, bestimmt qualifizierte Socialordnung”.
- XIII “wenn die übrigen, relativ konstanten Prozesse der fraglichen Seele, *denen der veränderte als Ursache des neuen Zustandes doch nur koordiniert ist*, andere gewesen wären”.
- XIV “die Festigkeit des Oberbaus”.
- XV “im Gegensatz zu dem bloß naturhaften Zusammen, der bloßen Summe der Einzelnen”.
- XVI “die Äußerlichkeit dieser Regelung”.
- XVII “aus dem ungeheuren Nebeneinander und Durcheinander der Individuen”.
- XVIII “nicht nur von Naturgesetzen, sondern von einer menschlichen Normierung”.
- XIX “zum positiven Lebensprincip der Gesellschaft”.
- XX “*Veranlassung*”.
- XXI “Ausgestaltung der schon bestehenden Vergesellschaftung”.
- XXII “Individualpsychologie”.
- XXIII “kein inhaltlich bestimmtes sociales Sein oder Geschehen”.
- XXIV “ein oberster Grund vorhanden sein, ohne den es überhaupt keine Begründung für oder gegen eine sociale Einrichtung geben könne”.
- XXV “Das Wollen”.
- XXVI “während das Denken sein Kriterium an seiner Übereinstimmung mit einer empirisch von ihm unabhängigen Welt findet”.
- XXVII “unsere einzelnen Erkenntnisvorstellungen”.
- XXVIII “z. B. den Satz des Widerspruchs, das Kausalgesetz, die mathematischen Axiome.”
- XXIX “ehe wir zu einer höchsten Zweckeinheit desselben gelangt sind”.
- XXX “unterliegt nun weiterhin selbst der Umgestaltung”.

XXXI “durch den noch sehr wenig aufgeklärten Prozess der gleichsam organischen Selbstentwicklung der socialpsychischen Inhalte”.

XXXII “*Verhältnsbegriff*”.

XXXIII “und diese ihrerseits bedarf zu ihrem Zustandekommen (sowohl an und für sich wie in der Erkenntnis) gewisser einfacherer, sachlich geltender Normen u.s.f. ins Unbestimmte”.

XXXIV “Der hierin gelegene *regressus in infinitum* ist der völlig legitime Ausdruck für die über jeden gegebenen Stand hinaustreibende Unvollendbarkeit unseres Wissens”.

XXXV “statt zweier konstitutiver, und als solcher unversöhnlicher, Principien erhalten wir zwei regulative, von denen jedes der Unterbau des andern ist”.