

Max Weber, Contextual Economics, and Schmollers Jahrbuch

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Upon Max Weber's death – 100 years ago, on June 14, 1920 – many contemporaries considered him a great thinker and an intellectual luminary, but he is also remembered as a contradictory character with numerous tensions, in his person and work (e.g., Käsler 1972; König and Winkelmann [1963] 1985; Mommsen and Osterhammel 1987; Swedberg 1998). This ambiguity, still attached today to the person of Max Weber and his multifaceted and increasingly influential work, is also reflected in reviews of his publications. For example, the American sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz observed: If “for [Talcott] Parsons, Weber was the conservative, almost Prussian sociologist par excellence, a serious student of bureaucracy, elites, and charismatic authority, for [Robert] Merton he is the liberal European (rather than German) sociologist par excellence, a man who upheld the dignity of learning over and against the indignities of nationalism. The interesting thing is that Weber is such a magnificent ambiguity that he can easily uphold both interpretations – as well as a third” (1964, 351).

Weber wrote on an extremely diverse array of topics such as economy and society, politics and law, state and domination, religion and culture, and his writings cover various periods and contexts from antiquity through the Middle Ages to modernity. Upon his passing, Weber's *oeuvre* was scattered and partially unpublished. However, the monumental *Max Weber Complete Edition (Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe [MWG])* was conceived in the 1970s and – after a set of 47 volumes with a total of 54 volumes and sub-volumes – completed recently in June 2020 (Schluchter 2021), consolidating his works and making them accessible for Weber scholarship, which has literally exploded over the past decades. A part of Weber's continued appeal and topicality is attributable to the fact that his scholarly legacy is seldom understood as the systematic development of a narrowly delineated field of research, but rather as a specific per-

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spective of approaching topics: as a set of methods for grasping “central questions” which seek to examine – to be understood here in the broadest conceivable sense – “the development of *Menschentum*” (Hennis 1983, 138–158).¹ With this in mind, Weber’s research program cannot, from a contemporary perspective, be exclusively assigned to a particular field of the modern social sciences: Alfred Marshall’s economics, just as sociology, was the result of the ongoing disciplinary differentiation of what was still predominantly considered *Nationalökonomie*, or political economy, during Weber’s lifetime – as is also clearly visible in the titles and tables of contents of this journal during its first decades.² The increasing specialization and emancipation of the individual disciplines was already in full swing (McAdam, Kolev and Dekker 2018; Horn and Kolev 2019), to which Weber himself admittedly also made a pioneering contribution with his ambitious project *Grundriß der Sozialökonomik* [Outline of Socio-Economics] (Tribe 2014, 714–721; Kolev 2018, 12–17). Especially at German universities, however, “the unity of the social sciences” (Albert [1955] 2014), i. e., the demand not to consider economic phenomena in isolation but to “think” and “do” economics and the other social sciences as one, remained largely intact until the 1940s (Häuser 1994, 57–61).³

Weber grew up amid the German Historical School of political economy and respected Gustav Schmoller, at times paying tribute to him as a “revered master” (Weber [1922] 1988, 458). When renaming this outlet to become the *Journal of Contextual Economics – Schmollers Jahrbuch*, we located the legacy of the Historical School to

¹ We agree with Keith Tribe, the translator of Hennis (1983, 2000a, 2000b), who notes the great difficulty of translating Weber’s term *Menschentum*: “Unlike ‘humanity’ or ‘mankind’, this term expresses the potential variability of ‘humanity’ rather than suggests a universal ‘human nature’. Professor Hennis, in suggesting that perhaps the best course would be to leave the word untranslated, emphasizes that Weber was precisely not interested in ‘general human attributes’, but rather the variety of forms that the ‘human’ can assume” (1983, 171–172). Wilhelm Hennis (1923–2012) was a professor of political science and sociology at the University of Freiburg from 1967 to 1988. In the late 1970s, he turned his attention to Max Weber and he interpreted Weber’s research program as “a science of man,” a reading which constituted an important impulse to the accelerating international interest in Weber (Anter 2013).

² For an overview of all tables of contents from 1877 to 1944, see Simon (1998, 252–289). How loosely demarcated the field was at the turn of the century is also evident from the erstwhile titles of this very journal: first *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Rechtspflege des Deutschen Reichs* [Yearbook for Legislation, Administration and Judicature of the German Empire], from 1877 onwards *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich* [Yearbook for Legislation, Administration and Economy in the German Empire]. The journal has been published by Duncker & Humblot since its foundation in 1871. Commemorating the long-standing editorship of Gustav Schmoller (starting from 1881), the name was changed in 1913 to the eponymous title of *Schmollers Jahrbuch* [Schmoller’s Yearbook].

³ Unless otherwise noted, translations from German are ours. The specific notion of “the unity of the social sciences” can also be found in the later research program of German ordoliberalism, but also in recent research programs in political economy like James Buchanan’s Virginia School and Elinor and Vincent Ostrom’s Bloomington School (Kolev, Goldschmidt, and Zweyert 2019).

be part of what we have called “contextual economics”.⁴ Wilhelm Hennis (1987), in particular, demonstrated how profoundly Weber’s work was rooted in the Historical School. In doing so, Hennis referred primarily to two fundamental characteristics of Weber’s research program, which, despite the respective idiosyncrasies of the various representatives, run like a thread through the Historical School, all the way from the Older Historical School of Bruno Hildebrand, Wilhelm Roscher, and Karl Knies, to the Younger Historical School associated with Schmoller, to the Youngest around Werner Sombart and Weber.⁵ This included, in particular: (1) the recognition that economics is first and foremost a science of man; and (2) the seemingly tautological addition that it is also a political science. In his inaugural address in 1895 at Freiburg, Weber formulated it as follows: “[A] human science [eine Wissenschaft vom Menschen], and that is what political economy is, investigates above all else the quality of the human beings who are brought up in those economic and social conditions of existence” (Weber [1895] 1980, 437), and further: “The science of political economy is a political science” (*ibid.*, 438).

Let us begin by considering the first point: In the course of the 19th century, political economy in Germany succeeded in establishing itself as a discipline with a self-understanding of being a *Geisteswissenschaft*. The Historical School, which emphatically pursued this path and achieved international renown in doing so, interpreted the concept of the humanities as situated outside of the so-called “exact” (natural) sciences (Häuser 1994, 48). More precisely, such a science had the ambition to address the *whole* human being, and as such positioned itself in conscious opposition to a science of the constructed, unrealistic human being as practiced by branches of political economy which the History School saw as too abstract (Hennis 1987, 38). This was a key source of divergence between the Older Historical School and Classical Political Economy, and this opposition was also constitutive for Schmoller’s doctrine. The latter considered it not the least of the Historical School’s achievements that contemporary economic and social sciences “have again understood and looked at political economy in its correct context with the whole of the rest of culture, that it has identified the function and position of morality, custom, and law in the mechanism of society more correctly [...] In contrast to rationalism and materialism, today’s political economy has arrived at a historical and ethical conception of the state and society. It turned away from a mere market and exchange theory, [...] instead of situating the world of goods and capital at the center, it again places the human being at the heart of science” (Schmoller [1897] 2018, 225–226).

⁴ In our coinage, “contextual economics” is primarily interested in the relationship between the economic order and the other societal orders. By contrast, isolating economics concentrates on those processes that operate within the economic order (Goldschmidt, Grimmer-Solem, and Zweynert 2016).

⁵ For the difficulties of using the notion of “school” in the context of the different generations commonly associated with the Historical School, see Rieter 2002 and Grimmer-Solem (2003, 19–34).

There is no doubt that Weber took emphatically different positions than Schmoller on some issues, which often obscures the fact that he did agree with him on fundamental questions. He neither shared Schmoller's ethical evolutionism and cultural optimism, nor his assessment of psychology as the central basis of all social sciences. For reasons of space, we omit the *Werurteilsstreit* (e.g., Rieter 2002, 150–154; Derman 2012, 46–79; Glaeser 2014), the value judgments debate, which, fundamental as it is, has been aptly portrayed as an “inexhaustible source of misunderstanding” (Hennis 2000a, 55). Weber's multifaceted and well-documented aversions to Schmoller (Schön 1987, 62–68), however, ultimately revealed not so much factual demarcations as a changed intellectual habitus (Herold 2019, 290–291; see also Hennis 2000b, 112–113). Between Weber and Schmoller, 26 years his senior, lay an entire generation. For Weber, they were worlds apart. In correspondence from the MWG, Weber's resentful aversion to the (politically) overpowering headmaster of the Historical School is evident in numerous passages: He protested vehemently against Schmoller's dominant behavior in committee meetings of the *Verein für Socialpolitik*, where Weber felt that Schmoller was using “his role as the committee chair to exert pressure in factual discussions” (MWG I/8, 264; see also MWG I/11, 9–10), and he played the role of “the insulted party in reaction to any criticism from younger members” (MWG II/5, 253). That Weber's constant criticism of Schmoller and other established scholars can, to a great extent, be considered a form of rebellious emancipation on the part of the younger generation is corroborated, among other things, by the following lines of private correspondence by Weber from 1908, referring to an age limit for professorships: “The fact that Wagner [73 years old] is still teaching is a damn scandal; Schmoller [70 years old] will soon become one. A maximum of 30 years from tenure, as in Russia, isn't a bad idea” (MWG II/5, 571). Or again in 1911, referring to a review by Schmoller: “Heaven grant that I, for my part, will stop writing before I go senile. (I fear it won't be long!)” (MWG II/7.1, 325). At the same time, Weber confesses that he does not see Schmoller as the “worst” of those “who consider their main role to be placing obstacles in my path as the head of the wise men. [...] He was always so objective that my radical demands were actually welcome to him” (MWG II/7.2, 590). Schmoller, on the other hand, must even have held a certain sympathy for Weber. Despite his irritation at Weber's impulsive and unrestrained manner, he fostered his career, although Weber was not one of his students (Hennis 2000b, 112).

The human being, in particular the economically acting human being, and the orders and powers that influence its actions – rational vs. nonrational, social vs. nonsocial, economic vs. economically oriented, traditional economic vs. rational economic (Swedberg 1998, 22–36; Morlok 2013, 71–99) – is Weber's central question (Hennis 2000a, 83–84). As is well known, religious ideas are an important factor for Weber (Weber 1904b; 1905a; [1904b; 1905a] 1930), but by no means the only one in his theory of economic development (Swedberg 2003). His socio-economic reflections are based on the – genuinely contextual – insight that all economic activity is human activity, but human activity is by no means limited to economic

activity, so that it would be inadequate and not sufficiently complex to want to explain it merely in terms of economic categories, or to limit it to the (isolated) realm of the economic order. Accordingly, from the perspective of a modern contextual research program, the idea of *humanomics* promoted by McCloskey (2021) offers both a critique of contemporary economics and a proposal for a “better economic science,” i. e., economics with an awareness of the whole human being within historical and ethical frameworks.

Following Hennis’ persuasive case, the second characteristic through which we can read Weber’s research program as being in line with the Historical School may at first glance appear almost meaningless, namely Weber’s insight that “the science of political economy is a political science” (Weber [1895] 1980, 438). On closer examination, however, this comment contains both the starting point and a core idea of contextual economics. As Hennis astutely argues: “What did it mean for a German economist in 1895 to state that his science was a ‘political’ one? An assurance, delivered in national-imperialistic tones, that it should not be ‘unpolitical’? Not at all. In the terminology of Weber’s time the opposite of ‘political’ is not ‘unpolitical’, but ‘cosmopolitical’” (1987, 32). In other words, Weber – like the Historical School in general – understood his political economy as a counter-proposal to those economic approaches which claim universal, cosmopolitical validity for themselves.

The relativistic understanding of economics, according to which economic phenomena must always be viewed in their specific historical and cultural context, is a legacy of Friedrich List. It constituted the nucleus of the Historical School’s critical engagement with Classical Political Economy and later with neoclassical economics. A brief examination of positions of leading proponents of the school, one of them Weber’s own economics professor (and later his chair predecessor) at Heidelberg Karl Knies, makes clear how close Weberian Socio-Economics was to this contextual tradition of thought, indeed how it grew out of it (Hennis 1987, 33–34). Roscher’s conception of a “political science”, for example, plows the very same furrow when he writes:

Political economy [Staatswirtschaft] is not mere chrematistics, the art of becoming wealthy, but a political science, where it is important to appraise people [...]. Our objective is the representation of what peoples have thought, wanted, and felt in economic terms, what they have striven for and achieved, why they have striven for it, and why they have achieved it. Such a representation is only possible in the closest alliance with the other sciences of a people’s life [Volsleben], especially legal, state and cultural history (Roscher 1843, IV).

To continue in this vein with Knies:

All the economic life of a people is so closely connected with the other expressions of its life that one is only able, when looking at it separately, to grasp it in the truth of empirical reality, if one keeps the connection with the whole in mind [...]. If political economy were to limit itself to the description of laws in the world of material goods, or if it were to seek to originate only a technical economic theory of business, it would have to renounce the name and character of a theory of a political economy [Volkswirtschaftslehre] and concede the place of its claims to a

new independent discipline. But if it wishes truly to take the real facts of people and state as the basis of its observations and reasoning, if it wants to solve problems arising in the life of these people and this state, then it must not detach its field and task from life as a whole, but must treat both like a living member in a living body. [...] Because national economy has to take this connection into account, and in its own concerns has to participate in the moral and political task of the whole, so it must be appointed to join the ranks of the moral and political sciences (Knies 1883, 436–437).

With the same point, Schmoller argues concisely that:

The term “economics,” adopted by the Americans and partly by the English, instead of political economy [...] seems to me even more impractical, because it also seeks to eliminate the people, society, the social side of the economic process by using the economy as a mere material process (Schmoller 1911, 429).

And a few pages later:

[T]he national economy is always at once both a piece of the shaping of nature by man and a piece of the shaping of culture by the feeling, thinking, acting, organized society (*ibid.*, 431).

Accordingly, when Weber remarked in the Freiburg inaugural address for his first chair in political economy that “[t]he economic policy of a German state, and the standard of value adopted by a German economic theorist, can therefore be nothing other than a German policy and a German standard” ([1895] 1980, 437), it can be understood as nationalist – equally admissible is a contextual reading as explained here. In this case, Weber’s understanding of political economy as a “political science”, as a “science of man,” proves to be a strikingly modern perspective of contextual economics. It is the connective element in a tradition of economic thought at whose present end this journal sees itself. These continuities should not obscure the fact that the tone in which Weber could discuss his intellectual predecessors was harsh in the extreme, and not seldom excessively polemical.

From this perspective it is not without a certain irony that, along with a book review of a volume on the development of popular nutrition in the Schmoller-edited book series *Staats- und sozialwissenschaftliche Forschungen* (Weber 1903b),⁶ Weber’s only longer publication in *Schmollers Jahrbuch* was the series of articles on “Roscher and Knies and the Logical Problems of the Historical Political Economy” (Weber 1903a; 1905b; 1906; [1903a; 1905b; 1906] 2012), initially intended to be included in a volume on 19th century Heidelberg professors, among them Knies. It was Weber’s first extensive treatise after a period of severe mental breakdowns, in which he rigorously took to task the naturalistic elements of the Historical School (Härpfer and Kaden 2020, 271–274). Marianne Weber aptly refers to it in her biography of her husband as an “essay full of sighs” [*Seufzeraufsatz*] (Weber 1926, 291), which dragged on for years and ultimately remained unfinished. A proposed fourth essay, which was to conclude the series, was never written: Hennis (1987, 50) suggests that Weber himself

⁶ For Schmoller’s editorial efforts focusing on book series in political economy and Prussian history, see Grimmer-Solem (2003, 84–86).

recognized the inappropriate nature of his discussion of teachers who were important to him – “a form of patricide” – and let the matter rest.

Although the Heidelberg volume featuring Knies was the originally intended outlet, Weber decided to take a detour via Roscher, whose contribution to the historical method he appreciated and criticized as emanatist, biologicistic, as well as flatly religious. In turn, he saw Knies’ fallacy in particular in confusing free will with genial-creative irrationality. The object of Weber’s interest, however, were not the persons – Wilhelm Wundt, Hugo Münsterberg, Friedrich Gottl, Georg Simmel, Theodor Lipps, and Benedetto Croce are also discussed – or their “achievements”, but – as is explicit in the second part of the title – the “[logical[-methodical] problems” they abstracted from. The systematic analysis in “Roscher and Knies” overlapped temporally with the “Protestant Ethic,” which shines through twice in the first “Roscher and Knies” installment. The early methodologist Weber incidentally formulates his version of what a spontaneous order means:

Before and after Roscher’s time, the fundamental problem of economics, both substantively and methodologically, has been the following: How can we explain the formation and the continued existence of institutions of economic life which, although they were not created collectively for a particular purpose, seem to us to function purposively ([1903a; 1905b; 1906] 2012, 20)?

In addition, he decisively advances the aspects of his own research program: *verstehende Soziologie*; an ingenious sketch of the rationality of the ends/means relation, the teleological rationalization and its *ceteris paribus* application to the “free” and rational action of a “personality” (including the scope of nomological knowledge); and finally, that:

[Knies] comes extremely close to realizing that the economic “laws” are models of rational action, deduced not through a psychological analysis of individuals but – by means of an ideal-typical reproduction of the mechanism of price struggle (*ibid.*, 90).

Although these articles cannot be considered a comprehensive discussion of Roscher and Knies,⁷ Weber’s own methodological insights are expanded in his later writings (Härpfer and Kaden 2019, 6–8) and resonate especially well with his foundational piece “The ‘Objectivity’ of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy” (Weber 1904a; [1904a] 2012).⁸ This article was also Weber’s first single-authored contribution to *Archiv für die Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, whose editorship he assumed jointly with Werner Sombart and Edgar Jaffé in 1904 with a co-authored programmatic “Accompanying Remarks” (Jaffé, Sombart, and Weber

⁷ Tenbruck’s (1959, 605) assessment of the manner as “functionless” and “embarrassing” is not unreasonable.

⁸ “Roscher and Knies” (1903a; 1905b; 1906; [1903a; 1905b; 1906] 2012) and “Objectivity” (1904a; [1904a] 2012) have been recently translated and edited by Bruun and Whimster (2012). In a review of this collection, Tribe (2013, 635) saluted that Bruun and Whimster had finally drawn a line under the “sorry history” of the damage that earlier translations into English had done to Weber’s international reception.

[1904] 2012). The *Archiv* became the prime outlet for Weber's publications from this point, which is one explanation of why *Schmollers Jahrbuch* did not receive more submissions by Weber.

Even if Weber was considered an irritant throughout his life within the (Younger) Historical School, he remains its most influential heir in the long run. Schmoller's comprehensive program was not directly continued under Weber's aegis, because Weber knew that Schmoller's one-sided contextual approach of "historical-ethical political economy" could not be realized as a fully-fledged alternative to isolating economics. In Weber's work, however, Schmoller's contextual program was transformed and entrenched into a contextual perspective that remained true to the goal of examining – not exclusively, but primarily – the cultural significance of economic and social processes (Homann 1990, 379). The challenges of our time, more urgently than ever before, call for answers that require economists to engage in a dialogue with neighboring disciplines. These challenges also require a historical and methodological awareness of our own discipline and its capacity to solve problems. Thus, it may even be considered helpful that Max Weber cannot be claimed from – and for – a single discipline within social science research. Instead, his extremely broad reception makes him ideally suited as a "bridge-builder" across and indeed within the different social sciences (Kolev 2020, 38). Weber's lifelong struggle shows how important, but also how difficult, methodological debates can be. To loosely quote Schmoller,⁹ one might say: For years we have been telling students that much like we need both the right and the left eye to see, so we need isolating and contextual perspectives for the different phenomena economists are struggling to explain and, in a Weberian sense, also to understand.

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⁹ His original reminiscence of the *Methodenstreit* reads as follows: "I have been in the habit, for years now, of saying to students that, as one needs both the right and the left foot to walk, so are both induction and deduction equal parts of scientific thinking" (Schmoller 1911, 478).

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