



Basit Bilal Koshul

THE POSTMODERN  
SIGNIFICANCE OF  
MAX WEBER'S  
LEGACY



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THE POSTMODERN SIGNIFICANCE OF  
MAX WEBER'S LEGACY:  
DISENCHANTING DISENCHANTMENT

BY  
BASIT BILAL KOSHUL

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*To my parents:  
Dr. Muhammad Ikram Koshul  
and  
Mrs. Shagufta Ikram Koshul*

My Lord! Shower Your grace upon them both, just as they cherished  
and reared me while I was a child!

(Qur'an, 17:25)

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## ABBREVIATIONS OF WEBER'S WORKS

- BTL  
(2002) "Between Two Laws." In *Weber: Political Writings*. Ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- LCS  
(1949) "Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences: A Critique of Eduard Meyer's Methodological Views." In *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press. 113–188.
- MEN  
(1949) "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality.'" In *Max Weber on The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press. 1–47.
- OSS  
(1949) "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy." In *Max Weber on The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press. 49–112.
- PESC  
(2002) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Stephen Kalberg. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Press.
- PV  
(1946) "Politics as a Vocation." In *From Max Weber*. Ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press. 77–128.
- RK  
(1975) *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics*. New York: The Free Press.
- RRW  
(1946) "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions." In *From Max Weber*. Ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press. 323–359.
- SPWR  
(1946) "The Social Psychology of World Religions." In *From Max Weber*. Ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press. 267–322.

- SR

(1993) *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

- SV

(1946) "Science as a Vocation." In *From Max Weber*. Ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press. 129–156.

## INTRODUCTION

Shortly after Max Weber died in 1920, Wittenberg characterized him as “a child of the Enlightenment born too late” and described his scholarship as “a vitriolic attack on religion.” With only a few notable exceptions, the subsequent evaluation of Weber’s legacy has been a variation of Wittenberg’s assessment. For example, Hekman (1994) has asserted that “the central dichotomies of Enlightenment thought” (i.e., fact vs. value and subject vs. object) serve as the foundation of Weber’s “philosophy of social science as well as his ethics.” Gane (2002) concurs with Hekman’s assessment. Casanova (1994) argues that Weber’s thesis about the “disenchantment of the world” has “its ideological origins in the Enlightenment critique of religion.” In making this assessment, Casanova is echoing Schluchter (1989). In sum, secondary literature on Weber has largely characterized Weber’s scholarship as (a) merely an expression of Enlightenment thought, and (b) inimically hostile to religion. If this is indeed the case, then Weber’s scholarship is largely irrelevant to contemporary discussions about formulating post-Enlightenment models of discourse and inquiry that hold the promise of transcending the limitations of disenchantment and investing contemporary culture with meaning and significance.

But this is far from being the case. Only a gross misreading of Weber would label him a “child of the Enlightenment born too late”—one who remains committed to the Enlightenment dichotomies of fact vs. value, subject vs. object. A careful reading of his work reveals Weber to be a post-foundationalist thinker, far ahead of his time. Weber’s reflections on the methodology of scientific inquiry (often called Weber’s methodology of the social sciences) replace the dichotomous logic of Enlightenment thought with a relational logic that posits an intimate and irreducible relation between fact/value (Ciaffa, 1998) and subject/object (Ringer, 1997). In making the move toward relational logic, Weber anticipates the trend in late twentieth-century social science that seeks to replace disenchanting dualisms with relational dualities—a trend noted by Lawrence (1989), among others. Weber’s scholarship is also a far cry from being inimically hostile to religion. Weber’s critical analysis of scientific rationalism reveals that suprarational elements are always present in the very foundation of scientific rationalism and that “only a hair line separates faith from science” (OSS, 110). Weber offers this valuation in the concluding pages of an article titled “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy.” Weber’s rationalization of the methodology of scientific inquiry reveals that suprarational presuppositions and extra-scientific value-ideas are at the very root of all scientific rationalism—there cannot be anything called “scientific inquiry” that is not rooted in this “un-scientific” ground. Weber’s

exposition of the presuppositions and value-ideas (*Wertideen*) underpinning scientific rationalism opens up novel possibilities of facilitating a mutually enriching dialog between religious rationality and scientific rationality. Once again Weber is far ahead of his time: this dialog is now well underway between the natural/physical sciences and religion—for instance, Polkinghorne (1998, 2001) and Barbour (1997, 2000)—but it is not even being seriously contemplated by the social sciences.

The failure to appreciate the potential contemporary significance of Weber's work is in large part due to a particular way of reading Weber. Much of the secondary literature in the field of Weber studies is divided between those who see Weber primarily as a sociologist of culture (i.e., Mitzman, 1970; Schluchter, 1979, 1989) and those who see him primarily as a methodologist of the social sciences (Kalberg, 1994). Arguments have been advanced that there is no relationship at all between these two aspects of Weber's work (Bendix, 1962). This dichotomous reading of Weber's corpus reinforces the reading of dichotomies into his work. A defining character of the present study is that Weber the methodologist of the social sciences and Weber the sociologist of culture will be in sustained conversation with each other with respect to a central theme—disenchantment of the world. In the vast body of secondary literature in Weber studies, it is rare to see these two aspects of Weber in sustained conversation with each other. This is a significant oversight in light of the fact that Weber the methodologist of the social sciences comments upon, clarifies, and sometimes completes critical observations made by Weber the practicing social scientist—especially with respect to the relationship between scientific rationalism and the disenchantment of culture. An integrated and relational reading of Weber invests his work with fresh meaning and significance that is not possible otherwise. This reading shows Weber's corpus to be a veritable gold mine of insights that can make unique and significant contributions to the contemporary debates about the methodology of the social sciences and the existing cultural condition.

### The Chapters in Brief

Chapter 1 begins with laying bare those aspects of Weber's writings that seem to justify Wittenberg's observation that Weber is nothing more than "a child of the Enlightenment born too late" whose work is "a vitriolic attack on religion." Weber's observations as a sociologist of culture can be interpreted as asserting that history has been a process of the progressive rationalization of human thought and action—a process that he called the "disenchantment of the world." As a historical development, disenchantment is a product of the rupture between religious rationalism and scientific rationalism. While tension between the two rationalisms has been always present throughout human history and in all cultural milieus, it is only under modern cultural conditions that the tension reaches a breaking point. For Weber it is this rupture that has led to the complete disenchantment of culture. Disenchantment of the world brings with it meaninglessness as the penultimate value—meaninglessness as the value through which the universe is viewed and as the value that ultimately determines human existence in the universe. I integrate Weber's observations from *Science as a Vocation*, *Religious Rejection of the World and Its Directions*, and *The Social Psychology of World Religions* to provide a detailed description of disenchantment.

Weber's analysis suggests that the rupture between religious rationalism and scientific rationalism—and the resultant disenchantment—cannot be redressed by any modern or premodern means. Schluchter (1989) and Casanova (1994) identify Weber's disenchantment thesis with the process of secularization and posit that it is an expression of Weber's judgment that the rift between religion and science is permanent. Consequently, disenchantment is the inevitable and irreversible "fate of our times" according to Weber's sociological analysis of culture.

Chapter 2 offers an alternative reading of Weber's work. I argue that while Weber's disenchantment thesis can be interpreted as the description of a historical process, it is neither a prescription for modern culture nor the product of some immutable evolutionary process. In making this argument, I turn to Weber's analysis of the philosophical and epistemological underpinning of (social) scientific inquiry—often called Weber's "methodology of the social sciences." While other writings from Weber are included in the discussion, the article titled "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy" is at the center of the discussion in chapter 2. In his methodological writings, Weber demonstrates acute awareness of the fact that religion and science have completely distinct identities. The tone and frequency with which he makes this observation make it appear that his methodological insights affirm his sociological insights that the divide between religion and science is natural and unbridgeable. But at the end of the discussion summarizing his position on the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of (social) scientific inquiry, Weber states:

We are now at the end of this discussion, the only purpose of which was to trace the course of the hair-line which separates science from faith and to make explicit the *meaning* of the quest for social and economic [i.e., cultural] knowledge. (OSS, 110)

Löwith (1989) offers an insightful analysis of this particular observation by Weber and identifies it as a critical aspect of understanding "Weber's Position on Science." Löwith notes that Weber's understanding of science is predicated on positing an intimate and irreducible link between faith and science.

For Weber, while science is a rational inquiry of empirical reality, it is underpinned by a variety of supra-rational elements. Weber posits that the activity of scientific inquiry is not possible without a suprarational (i.e., faithful) affirmation of the non-rational presuppositions and extra-scientific value-ideas that lie at its roots. Conversely, belief in ultimate values shapes the way human beings behave in the world and rationally articulate their vision of the world and of their place in it. Weber posits that all such actions and rationally expressed ideas generated by belief in ultimate values (i.e., faith) provide the cultural science with material that they can investigate—and provide "objective knowledge" about. On all of these accounts, Weber's understanding of science posits an intimate relation between faith and science. While Weber the sociologist of culture documents constant and progressively intensifying conflict between religious rationalism and scientific rationalism, Weber the methodologist of science sees an intimate and irreducible proximity between faith and science.

While chapter 2 establishes the fact that Weber sees an intimate proximity between faith and science, my argument goes further—I see Weber establishing a bridge between faith and science. Chapters 3–5 will present evidence supporting this



hypothesis. Summarily stated these three chapters will explore the “what?” “how?” and “why?” of science according to Weber. Chapter 3 will address the question “What does science study?”—Weber’s answer to this question bridges the fact/value dichotomy. Chapter 4 will attend to the question “How does science arrive at an objectively valid description of reality?”—Weber’s answer to this question bridges the subject/object dichotomy. Chapter 5 will explore the question “Why does one undertake a scientific investigation of culture?”—Weber’s answer to this question bridges the religion/science dichotomy. Taken together, Weber’s bridging of these dichotomies bridges the “hair-line which separates science from faith.”

I begin presenting the evidence of a Weberian bridge linking faith and science in chapter 3. In this chapter I address the question: What does (cultural) science study? In identifying meaning (*Sinn*) as the ultimate object of scientific investigation, Weber bridges the fact/value dichotomy because the very concept of “meaning” is possible only by bridging the fact/value dichotomy. For Weber, all human culture and all human activity that produces culture is made possible by the meaning (*Sinn*) that human beings confer upon a finite segment of empirical reality. At this level meaning is a value that produces human culture. But at the same time meaning is the most important (perhaps all important) fact that (cultural) scientists investigate and try to explicate in scientifically objective terms. In the final analysis it is the meaning that social actors invest in cultural institutions and acts that brings these institutions and acts into existence and creates the facts that (cultural) scientists deem worthy of study. At this level meaning (*Sinn*) is the penultimate fact that (cultural) scientists study.

Weber goes on to address two other critical questions that shed greater light on the fact/value character of meaning (*Sinn*). He addresses the question “What contribution can the scientific study of facts make to the understanding of values?” Furthermore, “What is the value of science itself as a fact of human culture (i.e., as an activity that modern cultural beings find meaningful?).” These two questions take on special significance in light of Weber’s contention that science can neither produce value nor pass judgment on values. But, for Weber, it is nonetheless the most precise analytical tool that cultural beings have at their disposal to gain uniquely valuable knowledge about the values that human beings find meaningful. Chowder (1995) notes that irrespective of the angle from which one approaches Weber’s work, the investigation, understanding, and critical role of meaning (*Sinn*) in human culture is at the heart of Weber’s methodology of scientific inquiry. Consequently, Weber’s methodology of the social sciences establishes the categorical indispensability of that which Weber’s sociology of culture has documented to have become superfluous in modern culture—that is, meaning (*Sinn*).

In identifying meaning (*Sinn*) as “what does cultural science study?”, Weber bridges the fact/value dichotomy. In explicating “how does cultural science arrive at an objectively valid description of reality?”, Weber’s methodology bridges the subject/object dichotomy. Chapter 4 presents evidence from Weber’s methodological writings to illustrate this point—a point that implicitly informed almost all of the discussion in chapter 3. When the cultural scientist studies any part of empirical reality, he/she is studying an “objective fact” that is a manifestation of a “subjective value” held by an actor. Furthermore, while the investigator is studying an “objective fact,” invariably, the orientation of his/her investigation has been determined by

a “subjective value” that he/she holds. Subjective and objective factors are intimately intertwined in both the empirical phenomena being investigated and in the processes of the investigation itself. Consequently, it would be a most illogical assumption that the scientific account given at the end of the investigation (i.e., the investigator’s “conclusion”) could be characterized as being purely “objective” or purely “subjective.” For Weber, the final account comes in the form of an “imputation” that is composed of objective elements (i.e., the ideal type and observed nomological regularities) and subjective elements (i.e., the investigator’s own imagination and cultural value-concerns). In Weber’s methodology, an imputation is a “causal interpretation” that provides the scientific account for empirical phenomena. Weber’s notion of imputation integrates, while it simultaneously rejects, specific elements from the “objective causal explanation” offered by proponents of the historicist method and the “subjective interpretive understanding” offered by the proponents of the *Verstehen* school. It is not only Weber’s notion of imputation that bridges the subject/object dichotomy. Weber offers a detailed argument illustrating that all scientific inquiry ultimately produces knowledge not only about “objects” in empirical reality. For Weber, if scientific inquiry is done well, it ultimately lays bare the hidden presuppositions and value-ideas of the subject that has undertaken the inquiry. In other words, for Weber, scientific inquiry is no less a means of gaining self-knowledge by the inquiring subject as it is about gaining knowledge of objects.

By the beginning of chapter 5, there would be sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Weber’s methodology of the social sciences bridges the faith vs. science, fact vs. value, and subject vs. object dichotomies. If even one (to say nothing of two, and even less of three) of these dichotomies pollutes Max Weber’s work, then a coherent account cannot be provided for a very important part of empirical reality, that is, Max Weber’s work on the sociology of religion, law, music, economic history, politics, methodology of the social sciences, and so on and so forth. The depth, breadth, and significance of Weber’s work are the product of a philosophical and epistemological understanding of scientific inquiry that is free of any of these dichotomies. Taking this as the starting point, chapter 5 focuses on the postmodern significance of Weber’s scholarly legacy.

Chapter 5 begins with posing the question “Why does a scientist undertake a scientific investigation of culture?” This question is posed to not only deepen an understanding of Weber’s methodology of scientific inquiry, but also to understand Weber’s own motivations for dedicating his entire life to the pursuit of scientific knowledge about culture. I present evidence from Weber’s writing to demonstrate that it is not possible to adequately appreciate his answer to this question without bridging the religious/scientific dichotomy. The “why?” of scientific inquiry has an irreducible religious element in it in the form of a desire to transform the “what is” into the “what ought to be”—the very intellectual problem that Weber identified as being at the heart of all religious rationalism. Weber finds the “what is” of his cultural condition (i.e., disenchantment) to be deeply problematic because it is undermining passionately held values that he deems worthy of being held. He undertakes a scientific investigation of the origins, trajectory, and salient features of this “what is” with the hope of identifying the parameters and possibilities of challenging and modifying the disenchanted cultural condition. Weber himself notes that one of the major tasks of

religious intellectuals has been the construction of possibilities that make a challenge to the “fate of the times” plausible. Consequently I argue that, by his own definition, there is a religious dimension to Weber’s work insofar as it contains the resources that make it rationally plausible to challenge and undermine the “what is” of the disenchanting condition and offers a vision of post-disenchantment cultural possibilities.

My argument that Weber’s work contains the resources that could be used to challenge disenchantment as the “fate of our times” is premised on the claim that the appreciation of this potential requires a recognition of the post-Enlightenment character of Weber’s work. Because of the importance of this point, the first part of chapter 5 concentrates on demonstrating how an Enlightenment reading of Weber makes his work largely irrelevant to contemporary intellectual and cultural debates. This point is illustrated by looking at the evaluations of Weber offered by Gane (2002) and Hekman (1994). They posit that Weber remains trapped inside the Enlightenment paradigm and then explicitly identify this as being the primary reason for his contemporary irrelevance. But this evaluation of Weber’s work and relevance is challenged by Ciaffa (1998), Ringer (1997), and Alexander (1983). All three of these thinkers posit that Weber’s methodology bridges a particular dichotomy—for Ciaffa the fact vs. value dichotomy, for Ringer the subject vs. object dichotomy, and for Alexander the real vs. ideal dichotomy. Furthermore, all three argue that the manner in which Weber bridges the particular dichotomy has a great deal to contribute to methodological and epistemological discussions taking place at the end of the twentieth century. I build upon the insights offered by Ciaffa, Ringer, and Alexander by first bringing the three disparate perspectives into conversation with each other and then taking their line of reasoning further. This synthesis is then complemented by Weber’s own reflections on “progress.” Weber notes that “progress” can lead to either differentiation (and subsequently disenchantment) or it can lead to heightened self-awareness and an increased capacity for self-expression. This discussion sets the groundwork to present the argument that Weber’s work contains uniquely valuable resources that rationally disenchant disenchantment—in a scientifically valid manner. Weber’s work disenchanting scientific rationalism on three accounts:

- (a) His analysis of the constituent parts of scientific rationalism lays bare the facts that it stands on nonrational foundations and that the practice of science is made possible only by suprarational affirmations of these foundations.
- (b) He demonstrates that while competing values (and value systems) of the worldly spheres cannot be rationally reconciled (the process of rationalization being itself responsible for the conflict), one can practically reconcile conflicting values in one’s vocational commitment.
- (c) He offers a theoretical image of the world that demonstrates that one can rationally and scientifically challenge disenchantment as the “fate of our times,” even though scientific rationalism posits that no such challenge is possible.

Even though Weber does not provide a remedy to the malaise of disenchantment—Weber would say no scientist should even make a pretension of doing so—he does demonstrate that a rational and scientific stand against disenchantment is possible.