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# Objectivity in Modern Policy Sciences: A Weberian Critique

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## *ABSTRACT*

What is and what should be the function of values in inquiries into social work, social policy, economics, and evaluation? Values are an important part of policy-relevant research and evaluation, but normative thinking is probably not necessary. Our paper tries to find a way out of the maze of values, norms and political considerations. We believe, and strive after demonstrating, that Weber is one of the key scholars to consider when discussing the possibility of formulating a logically consistent programme for policy-relevant research and evaluation.

Keywords: Weber, value-freedom, social policy, social work, evaluation

# Objectivity in Modern Policy Sciences: A Weberian Critique

## ***Introduction***

In this article, we will pose a basically simple question: Is there something to learn from Max Weber's early, critical account of the methodology of human sciences, if we take a closer look at the state of the art of current, policy-relevant endeavours; social sciences and economics in their evaluative function, and evaluation research itself?

To be able to answer the question, we set forth an interpretation of Weber's classic methodological writings on the so-called *Wertfreiheit* postulate. These include the article on "*Objectivity*" in *Social Science and Social Policy* (1904/1949, 1904/1968), the article on *The Meaning of "Ethical Neutrality"* in *Sociology and Economics* (1917/1949, 1917/1968), and the famous speech on *Science as a Vocation* at the University of Munich in 1918 (1922/1968, 1922/1993). We suggest that Weber's analysis of the methodology of human sciences (*Kulturwissenschaften*) serves as a practicable platform for a critique of modern disciplinary approaches to evaluation.

We further suggest that the scholarly community in policy sciences is actually still in need of such a critique. Referring to three facts will suffice to make our point in this latter respect.

1. Scholars in several, distinct fields of social sciences and economics have arrived at exactly opposing views upon the problems associated with the *Wertfreiheit* postulate.
2. Yet, it appears that these very same scholars, holding opposing views upon the *Wertfreiheit* principle in human sciences, think that these problems have been thoroughly worked out, settled, and deep buried,

decades ago. 3. But they, – still the same scholars, – get impatient and emotional when one questions their beliefs.

To us, all this is symptomatic. These are problems that have *not* been solved, and that go straight to the core bone of social scientific and economic thinking. These problems are probably the most acute in evaluation research.

We will begin by analysing Weber's conception of the objectivity of human sciences. We will then proceed to the critique of modern policy sciences and evaluation research, concentrating on economics, social work, and the research program of evaluation. The article concludes with a brief section on *The Possibility of Socio-Economic Evaluation*.

### ***The Objectivity of Human Sciences***

Karl Emil Maximilian Weber (1864-1920) is widely considered one of the most significant figures in the development of modern social sciences (Käsler 1988, ix). There is abundant literature commenting his theories. This discussion has mainly taken place in sociology and in political science. Admittedly, we are not presenting an altogether novel interpretation of Weber's theory of objectivity in human sciences. Nevertheless, we think that in social work and in evaluation research Weber's conception of objectivity in human sciences has been undeservedly overlooked.

According to the Objectivity thesis (the *Wertfreiheit* postulate), researcher can and ought to keep the presentation of empirical facts and his or her practical evaluations apart.

„Aber es handelt sich doch Ausschließlich um die an sich höchst triviale Forderung, dass der Forscher und Darsteller die Feststellung empirischer Tatsachen (...) und seine praktisch wertende (...) Stellungnahme unbedingt auseinanderhalten solle (...).“ (Weber 1917/1968, 500.)

This norm has been interpreted in many ways. According to the strong interpretation, scientists should not take part in evaluative and normative action. According to the more limited, weak interpretation, scientists should keep their moral and ethical propositions and empirical research findings apart, as carefully as feasible. Weber himself was of the latter, but not of the former, opinion. (Tranöy 1976, 271-272.)

At first glance, Weber's thesis seems to be connected to pedagogy in the university. The in-his-time great scholar in social policy and in historical economics, professor Gustav von Schmoller, is mentioned in a lukewarm tone in the Weber's essay on "*Objectivity*" in *Social Sciences and Social Policy*. (Weber 1904/1968). The line of Weber's criticism is clear: a teacher can defend his or her values, but s/he should not propagate them "in the name of science" (Weber 1917/1968, 1922/1993). S/he must at all times keep in mind which part of his or her teaching is based on the practical evaluations, and which on scientific research proper (Weber 1917/1968, 490).

Accordingly, Weber did not actually deny the worth of practical reasoning and evaluation from the *Katheder* as such. What was important was to keep facts and values clearly separated. Weber admits that this is difficult (Weber 1917/1968, 497). But it is possible, and the fact that it is difficult does not make it less compelling as an ethical norm. Closely related to this, Weber emphasises on several, distinct occasions that science cannot provide us with value-criteria. It is simply, as pointed out by several of Weber's interpreters that "Questions concerning what we ought to do and how we should live our lives are beyond the reach of scientific arguments." (Agevall. 2004, 171.)

However, the *Wertfreiheit*-thesis was not only about teaching: it was a programme for social sciences in general. According to Hennis, being 'value-free' "means facing the world with an open

countenance, without the soothing certainties of the tradition or the optimism of modern ideas, clad in the thin armour of hope (...)" (Hennis. 1994 115). To Weber being 'value-free' means willingness to face the reality as it is, more than a single methodological rule.

Weber took an interesting, mediating position in the so-called *Methodenstreit*. He clearly dissociated himself from the scholars, usually coming from the historical school of economics, who thought that it was not the moral duty of a scientist to differentiate between facts and values, but, on the contrary, to commit to some specific societal values in research. Yet, at the same time, Weber's conception of the methodology of human sciences was closer to history, and to law, than to natural sciences. It was not the task of human sciences to formulate universal laws, nor to make use of such laws in trying to deduce human action. Human action, as an inherently cultural object of analysis, was to be understood in terms of its significance (*Bedeutung*), and significance of human action could not be understood in terms of that which is universal. Abstract, deductive mode of analysis characteristic of natural sciences, and also of neoclassical economics, did effectively away with history. It did away with culturally and personally unique domain of intentionality, and, hence, with everything that was of value and of significance, in human action. It thus did away with the *rationale* for human action.

Weber's methodology can be said to have been nominalistic. According to Palonen (1999, 43), Weber was actually a militant nominalist who wanted to purge the language of his contemporaries. To Weber idealists, naturalists, empiricists etc., all appeared to have in common a tacit assumption that the "things really are" so or so, even when they conflict with each other. Weber's view of the world is opposed to the view of naïve realism or essentialism concerning the concepts and their usage. His nominalism made it difficult, if not impossible, to rely on the conceptual categories of others. ( *ibid.*, 43).

For Weber, reality, including social world, consists of an infinite flux of events over time and in space. Gaining knowledge of this ever-changing reality involves both selection and abstraction even when the knowledge results from studies concerned with the details of concrete historical events. (Johnson et al. 1984, 81, Töttö 2004, 68.) Researchers generalize from a flow of individual events. This is possible solely through a product of value-selection by human beings. The selection from myriads of events is possible only by using values. So every process of abstraction is value-laden. Social scientists like all human subjects endow events with meaning, and it is only once they have generalised on such a basis that any causal analysis is possible. Causal statements in social sciences are, according to Weber, impossible without value orientations. (Johnson et al. 1984, 82.)

Weber considered social sciences as cultural sciences, which try to scrutinise life forms as carriers of meaning in cultural context. His ideal-types were a method for social sciences. Social sciences differ from natural sciences in many ways, but one of the central differing elements is the caprice or contingency of social life which makes it difficult to formulate empirically grounded theories, which could predict what is going to happen in the future. ( cf. Eliaeson and Kari Palonen. 2004, 140.)

However, Weber seemed to accept certain possibilities of formulating causal laws even in social sciences (Johnson et al. 1984, 80.) Weber's nominalism did not hinder him presenting theories of, for example, the nature of capitalism. He did not deny that all societies consist of structures which survive over time, but he thought that theories or ideal-types are “intellectual constructions”, or “utopias”. (Alanen 1991, 216.)

In the final analysis, Weber felt it possible to combine the traditional, scholarly view of *Kulturwissenschaften* with the requirement of objectivity. The fact that scientist him- or herself inhabits the intentional realm of the culturally and personally significant, does not do away with objectivity. Weber clearly thought that it was possible for the scientist to differentiate between reasons for opting for objects of inquiry (i.e. that which is valuable, or of significance) and reasons for accepting or rejecting propositions concerned with what s/he actually sees, when taking a closer look at those objects (i.e. the facts). It was not only possible to differentiate between these two types of reasons. In the field of science it was a moral duty.

According to Wilhelm Hennis (1994), Weber answered to a critic in an academic teachers' seminar (*Hochschullehrertag*), that

"I have to insist on my ability to delineate scientific relationships without value judgements. I am only proud of that part of my teachings where I have remained *faithful* to this ideal." (Hennis. 1994, 124.)

We will come back to these questions later on in this article. At this point it suffices to note that it cannot have been logically contradictory, in Weber's view, to rely both on idiographic methodology and on objectivity in human sciences. Allowing for the idea of a fundamentally *idiographic* reality, and thus adopting an idiographic methodology, Weber's requirement was that social and economic sciences be capable of obtaining *scientifically objective* results in inter-subjectively, or culturally, *significant* fields of inquiries.

Modern socio-economic sciences have not been particularly successful in fulfilling the demand for culturally significant and scientifically objective human sciences. The reasons for this failure differ by disciplines. In what follows, we will discuss welfare economics, social work and evaluation as modern carriers of research in social policy and political economy. Weber conducted his own



scholarly work in close affinity to both economics and social sciences. Because of this, and also because the *Wertfreiheit* postulate deals with perennial problems, Weber's formulation of it continues to be acutely pertinent to the modern disciplinary endeavours.

## ***Weberian Critique of Modern Welfare Economics***

### *A Note on the History of Economics*

In view of the discipline of economics, Weber's scholarly work was written in an interesting, intermediate stage. The period of classical political economy was over. It had been replaced by neoclassical economics discovered and developed by Leon Walras, William Stanley Jevons, and Carl Menger, all independently, all in the 1870's. The neoclassical theory of marginal utility had displaced the labour theory of value, first as the foundation of value theory, and then of the discipline of economics itself.

Yet another revolution of economic thought was to come. No later than in the 1920s, economics began to retreat from the assumption of measurable, cardinal utility. In the 1930s, following the work of Vilfred Pareto and Francis Y. Edgeworth on indifference curves, R.G.D. Allen and John Hicks succeeded in deriving the grounds of general equilibrium result with the help of ordinal ranking of individual preferences, or the ordinal utility concept. This was a real disciplinary feat, and it had some very specific implications for the interpretation of "welfare," within the scholarly circle.

Weber knew the early vintage of neoclassical economics. He was well acquainted with the neoclassical ideas of Carl Menger from the so-called Austrian school of economics. Given that

Weber could not anticipate the direction the discipline of economics was to adopt in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his analysis and critique of the early neoclassical economics are remarkably pertinent to modern welfare economic doctrine. We will first take a look at *Wertfreiheit Postulate and Weber's Critique of Early Neoclassical Economics*, and then return to these themata.

### *Wertfreiheit Postulate and Weber's Critique of Early Neoclassical Economics*

Whenever the occasion arose, Weber directed his own scientific efforts to the challenge of understanding capitalism. "What especially fascinated Weber, from the very beginning of his academic career, was the *origin and evolution of capitalism*." (Swedberg 1999, 15-16.) Weber accepted neoclassical economics – and marginal utility theory as its core component – as theoretically sober insights into the inner workings of capitalism, or the mechanism of the market. He thought, however, that neoclassical economics was incapable of providing a culturally and historically adequate theory of the *origin and evolution of capitalism*, and that it was important to be aware of this. The view upon human action of economic theory was *abstract* and *partial*, even *unrealistic* and *utopian*, because the theory was incapable of taking account of the full *significance* of human action. Weber thought, as did Rickert, Dilthey, and later on, for example, Popper, that the significance of human action was written into the idiographic (personal, cultural) fabric. In this respect, he was a child of his time; the 19<sup>th</sup> century was *the* century of history, whether we speak of natural history (Darwin), history of political economy (Malthus, Marx, Marshall), national history of art, or art of national history (national romanticism), or of the flourishing discipline of history itself.

Analytical economics offered an *abstract, partial* theory, which did not address the full *cultural-historical significance* of human action. It could be used as a *heuristic device*, and it did have some

clear merits in this respect, -- as an insight into the mechanism of the market -- but the significance proper of human action, was to be found in the historical, or *idiographic*, domain.

In his article on objectivity, Weber (1904/1949) set forth a relatively harsh critique of economic theory, from this particular angle. In the final analysis, the heuristic significance of marginal utility theory rested on the *cultural-historical* fact of capitalism. Peculiarly enough, in no contradiction to the above ideas, Weber also thought that day by day capitalist political economies came closer to, or approached, the strange utopia depicted by neoclassical economics (Weber 1908/1968, 395, cf., Weber 1908/1999, 257).

For Weber it was important to conceive of the proper scope of economics, and also to confine one's conclusions, obtained with the help of economic theory, to this scope. The edicts of the "merchant's soul" (perfectly rational economic conduct) could easily conflict with other edicts, say the edicts of the "believer's soul," or, as was the case early in Weber's career, the edicts of the "small farmer's soul."

Weber had conducted an extensive inquiry into the East Elbian agricultural conditions early in his career. He ended up differentiating between three interests, or points of view, by which an agricultural constitution could be judged. These were, according to Wilhelm Hennis (1994), "1. the *production interest (das Produktionsinteresse)*: a maximum of productivity *from* a given area, 2. the *population interest (das populationistisches Interesse)*: many people *on* a given area, 3. the 'socio-political one' (*das sozialpolitische*): a maximum extensive and even distribution of property *of* a given area." (Hennis. 1994, 117, see also *ibidem*, *passim*.)

The problem was that the first interest clashed with the latter two. Weber himself was in favour of the latter two interests, rather than the first. That is, he sided with the tradition, and with the East

Elbian small farmers. Hennis (1994) continues: “There is always an aggressive moralistic tone in Weber’s argumentation whenever unavoidable value-conflict has to be diagnosed” (ibidem), and goes over to quote Weber himself:

“Here one cannot have ‘one as well as the other.’ Rather, if one wishes to artificially support the most technologically effective large-scale farm, one must also want the continuous *thinning* of the resident rural population.” (ibidem)

The same acid attitude came up in September 1909 in the Vienna Conference of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*. Weber was totally upset by Eugen von Philippovich’s paper on *Produktivität der Volkswirtschaft* (Productivity of National Economy), indeed by the notion of “productivity” as such. According to Hennis (1994), Weber commented upon his own rage:

“The reason why I so sharply criticize at every occasion, and if you will with a certain pedantry, the mingling of the ideal (*Seinsollen*) with reality (*Seiende*) is not that I underestimate the question of the ideal (*Sollen*). On the contrary, it is because I cannot bear it when problems of global proportions, with consequences that concern great ideals, in certain sense the utmost problems that move the heart, are here turned into techno-economical questions of ‘productivity,’ and are made a matter of discussion of a *specialized* discipline, as is the national economy.” (Hennis 1994, 116.)

Weber’s (1917/1968) article on *The Meaning of “Ethical Neutrality” in Sociology and Economics*, published in *Logos* in 1917, originated in these very ideas.

### *The Abstract Doctrine*

We proposed above that Weber’s critique of early neoclassical economics is pertinent to modern welfare economics. Economics is as *abstract* and probably also as *partial* as ever, and it trespasses on practically all policy domains, and domains of evaluation, from politics to education to theology.

Weber was convinced that we are capable of differentiating between statements of fact, and statements of value. Weber was also convinced that, in human sciences, it is our moral duty to keep to the differentiation we are capable of. Modern critique of economics serves to show that if we give up Weber's convictions, the abstract, partial doctrine, with its abstract and partial policy implications, runs amok. We shall here refer but to two heavyweight critics of the mainstream neoclassical economics; to Mark Blaug's (Blaug. 1998/2006) article on *Disturbing Currents in Modern Economics – Trends in 1990s Economics*, and to Amartya Sen's (1995/2000) article on *Rationality and Social Choice*.

In his 1998 article, Emeritus Professor Mark Blaug (1998/2006) strikes as powerfully and as colourfully as ever. He is critical of the “overwhelming predominance of mathematical modelling” in modern economics. Constructing ever more fine-tuned, abstract models, young academics play the “journal game” with no regard to “empirical relevance” of their models, and with no regard to the “crucial economic problems facing society.” “Similar testimony from other spokespersons for the economics profession is easily cited. But perhaps enough has been said to make my point: Modern economics is ‘sick’ “ (All quotations from Blaug 1998/2006, 1/10.)

Weber speaks of “utopia.” Blaug speaks of the “ ‘cloud-cuckoo’ fantasyland of perfect competition.” (Blaug 1998/2006, 2/10.) Getting lost in abstract analysis, the glaciers of assumptions, is a dangerous road, because economics still continues to be a policy-relevant discipline.

Economists cannot avoid questions such as: “Do we have any good reason for thinking that economic theories are either true or false in the sense that it makes a difference for economic policy whether we act on the basis of one economic theory or another?” Blaug further remarks that mere

formalism was never the road opted for by the classics of the discipline. Keynes, Kuznets, Friedman, North, and Samuelson were all scientific realists. Blaug contends that questions concerned with facts, the “world out there,” continue to be meaningful, and are actually of utmost importance. (Blaug 1998/2000, 6/10–7/10.)

The problem which probably best illuminates the importance of realism, in economic analysis, has to do with the preferences citizens actually have over public goods and services. Think of social security and social welfare services, which are altruist, in their hindmost nature. Is it of indifference whether or not we think we all really have but the “merchant’s soul,” in the words of Weber? Is there no way whatsoever to sort out an empirical answer to this question? Is the whole question meaningless?

Amartya Sen (1995/2000) agrees with Adam Smith, Max Weber, and several other scholars in that it is a *fact* that there is something more to us than the “bookkeeper’s soul,” or the “merchant’s soul.” We should not fall prey to “low-minded sentimentalism,” according to which individual rationality corresponds to egoism. In modern utility theory the objective function is in this particular respect “helpfully permissive,” as noted by Sen. It is “(...) not tied either to ceaseless do-gooding, or to uncompromising self-centeredness.” (Sen 1995/2000, 133.)

However, even if we allow for the inherent openness of the modern, ordinal concept of utility, and for the altruist arguments within it, some of the most difficult problems associated with the *Wertfreiheit* postulate remain. According to Sen, even with the open objective function characteristic of ordinal utility theory, “(...) there is something missing in a large part of the resource-allocation literature.” (Sen 1995/2000, 132.)

“Even with this extended framework, taking us well beyond the *homo economicus*, there remain some difficulties with the notion of individual rationality used here. There is a problem of “insufficiency” shared by this approach to rationality with other “instrumental” approaches to rationality, since it does not have any condition of critical scrutiny of the objectives themselves. Socrates might have overstated matters a bit when he proclaimed that “the unexamined life is not worth living”, but an examination of what kind of life one would sensibly choose cannot really be completely irrelevant to rational choice.” (Sen 1995/2000, 133.)

In this respect Weber was subtly modest. Following Weber we could say that in welfare economic evaluation of, for example, public projects, public programs, and units operating within the public sector, it is obligatory to be all clear about the objective function. What, exactly, do we inject into the objective function in empirical indexation? In which respects does our way of depicting the objective function correspond to the actual preferences of the citizens? What has been left out of the picture? Given the problems associated with the empirical indexation of, for example, “opportunity costs,” “willingness to pay,” “shadow prices,” and “marginal social utility,” welfare economics provides us with the hardest nuts to crack in human sciences throughout. But the questions are not, in principle, unanswerable.

Why, though, should we keep to these kinds of conclusions, and carefully withdraw, at the same time, from value judgments? Or, more liberally, why should we propose but conditional judgments of value  $Y$ , given a well defined and carefully indexed value criteria  $X$ ,  $(Y|X)$ ? The question is ethical in nature, and so is, therefore, a proper answer to it, too. Weber answered the question in terms of what he conceived as the ethical code of science. The case of the East Elbian small farmers was probably decisive, for Weber. Elementary confusion – confusing *abstract, partial*, scientific *facts* concerned with improvements in productivity, with national goals, with what *should* be done in Germany, – could lead to the distortion of “the great ideals, the utmost problems that move the heart.”

This is not a problem only for those who commit elementary mistakes. It is a problem for all those who do not consider themselves omniscient, omniscience including, here (i.e. in human sciences), individual preferences of other people. The problem is particularly difficult for a person who believes that the *significance* of human action, that which is of *value*, is written into the *idiographic* (personal, cultural) fabric.

### ***Weberian Critique of Research in Social Work***

Weber's analysis of objectivity in social sciences was partly based on his experience in *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, the scientific association of researchers and administrators in social policy. In Weber's time, social work as a discipline was slowly developing from the practical experience of women and men, who had participated in charity work or poor relief and wanted to make their activities more efficient. To our knowledge, Weber did not discuss the activities of social workers, and of course he did not write about welfare economics and evaluation research, because of the apparent reason that these institutions developed only after his death. Although Weber himself did not write about the issues and questions of social work, his theories have had quite a strong influence even on social work research. In social work research, as in other social sciences, the reason for the interest in Weber was mainly his theory of bureaucracy (Pekonen 1989). The interest in Weber's theories about bureaucracy and rationality were quite essential in Nordic social work research in the 1980s. (Mäntysaari 1991., Sipilä 1989, Sunesson 1981)

For Weber, the task of a social scientist was to describe the world as it is, and not to say too much about how it should be. Although the question of *Wertfreiheit*, or the capacity of a researcher to differentiate between facts and values, and his or her moral choice as to whether or not to keep to this differentiation, is today at least as acute as in Weber's day, the central idea of *Wertfreiheit* has



not been widely discussed in social work settings – perhaps because the whole idea of “objectivity” as a guiding principle in social work research is a bit odd, at least in the European social work research ( the only exception to our knowledge is Olesen 2001). Our point here is that Weber’s *Wertfreiheit*-thesis could be useful for a researcher in social work, where partisan orientation is widely considered a rule, maybe even more than in other social sciences.

It is interesting that although the discussion about values is considered a central element of social work practice, social work research has not been very active in scrutinising ethics and values in research settings. More than examining values, the scholarly discussion has focussed on ethical questions in social work practice. (Raunio 2004, 73.)

The classic social work textbook Pincus and Minahan (1975) presents a programme with certain resemblances to Weber’s objectivity thesis. According to the writers, values are beliefs, preferences, and assumptions about what is good for man, and they are not descriptions of the world as it is, but how it should (or should not) be. Values cannot be verified or falsified by knowledge (PincusandMinahan 1975, 38). Values and facts must be kept separate in the practice of social work. Pincus and Minahan have stated that it is not possible to make evaluative judgements about social work practice on the basis of facts only. Although values are central to social work practice, they are not everything: social worker also needs facts. (PincusandMinahan 1975, 38, Raunio 2004, 72.)

Values can even be an empirical research question: what are the central values used in social work practice? Pincus and Minahan (1975, 39) explain that the primary values of social work might be stated as follows:

1. Society has an obligation to ensure that people have access to the resources, services, and opportunities they need to meet various life tasks, alleviate distress, and realize their aspirations and values.
2. In providing societal resources, the dignity and individuality of people should be respected.

The classic understanding of the role of values in social work practice did not contain deep philosophical discussions about the objectivity of a researcher. More recent social work textbooks on research methodology state that social research can never be totally objective, because researchers are humanely subjective. For example, Rubin and Babbie (2000) discuss ethical questions and the problem of objectivity in this manner. They want to be cautious: although it is impossible to be totally objective and value-free when doing research, we should still try to keep our beliefs from distorting our pursuit for truth. (Rubin and Babbie 2000, 93.)

Rubin and Babbie are moderate in their approach to the question of objectivity in social work research. This orientation is by no means generally approved of, among more radical researchers. A strong tradition in social work research considers facts and values inseparable. Questions of race and gender, in particular, have been treated in normative, and even political manner in the context of social work research.

Mariam Thalos (1994) describes three possible routes to scientific inference: ( 1) Bayesian patterns of adjustments to prior probability assignments on the basis of new evidence via conditionalization rules; ( 2) statistical assignments of confidence to hypotheses based on calculations involving relative likelihood; ( 3) "I wish p, therefore p." Only the first two examples are serious contenders for attention in epistemology of science. (Thalos. 1994.) The third orientation is based on a Radical epistemology quite popular in social work research. One example of this kind of Radical orientation

is so the called “feminist standpoint theory”, which criticised “positivism” for trying to gain knowledge for the knowledge's sake. Standpoint theory challenges this kind of a point of departure and claims that knowledge can be situated and yet true.

Feminist scholars Nancy Hartsock and Dorothy Smith (among others) developed standpoint theory at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Hartsock claims that it is women’s unique standpoint in society that provides the justification for the truth claims of feminism, while also providing it with a method with which to analyze reality (Hekman. 1997, 341). Hartsock and Smith based their ideas on Marxism, and on epistemological ideas which later on became known as social constructivism (Hartsock. 1997).

From the late 1980s and the early 1990s criticism of the standpoint theory mounted, and feminist epistemological discussion diversified (Hekman. 1997). Feminist critics of original standpoint theory have pointed out the epistemological problems of the standpoint theory from different angles. There are philosophical critics approaching the question from the viewpoint of feminist analytical tradition (Thalos. 1994). From the viewpoint of post-structuralism and postmodernism, the epistemology of the original standpoint theories is too essentialist to be acceptable (Hekman. 1997). Hawkesworth considers standpoint theory not as an epistemological doctrine, but as an analytical tool, which can be used as a heuristic instrument for political processes (Hawkesworth. 1999).

Nancy Hartsock, answering to her Post-modern critic Hekman, wrote that she originally tried to “translate the notion of the proletariat (including its privileged historical mission) into feminist terms”. (ibid. 368) “Fundamentally, I argue that the criteria for privileging some knowledges over others are ethical and political rather than purely ‘epistemological’. (...) Hekman is right that I want

to privilege some knowledges over others, because to me they seem to offer possibilities for envisioning more just social relations.” (Hartsock. 1997, 372-373.)

Standpoint theory has had an influence even on the field of social work research. “Social work's commitment to value-directed action stands in contrast to positivist commitments to value-free endeavours.” (Swigonski. , 388). Harding (cf. Swigonski. , 389) states that scientific methods can detect a bias of the individual scientist, but cannot detect the biases shared by the community of scientists. Because we cannot escape the influences of our culture and language, we should be open about the values. “Social work research must be grounded in an epistemology that honours all of our professional commitments”. (Swigonski. , 389). Swigonski is quite open in her belief that values really can guide research results, not only research questions, or make evaluative statements possible *after research*: “Standpoint theory offers an explanation of how research directed by social values and political agendas can produce empirically and theoretically preferable results.” (Swigonski. , 390).

This cannot be accepted. Standpoint theory, once so central to feminist theory, is nowadays criticized by feminist researchers as a relic from the past. In its time, it was a very liberating thought, now clearly less so. (Eliasson-Lappalainen 2006, 322, Hydén. 2000, 139). Our criticism comes from a different angle: the bias of the standpoint theory has to do with the problems of mainstream social constructivism. Social and cultural constructs are, undoubtedly, important determinants of thought, language, and action, but they are not the only determinants in existence. Along with social and cultural constructs, individual cognitive constructs rely upon several other things, surprising observations, for example, by individual scholars or scientists. Some of the encounters with data surely avoid being socially and culturally determined. For an individual scholar, his or her own observations can easily outweigh socially and culturally “accepted”

observations and norms – i.e., that which you *should* observe in order to be able to satisfy social and cultural expectations – and have in many important occasions done exactly this. As a matter of fact, we are all capable of contributing to that which is shared; to the meanings of words, and to the meanings of deeds: the social and cultural patterns of human interaction. Here we settle for claiming that facts, – that which we observe, and can count upon (which translates to that which we cannot dismiss) by empirical evidence and experience – contribute to science, and that to a reasonable degree we can sort out the contribution of facts.

### ***Weberian Critique of Evaluation Research***

Up to this point, our paper has focussed on Weber's idea of *Wertfreiheit* as a methodological guiding tool for economics and social sciences. The question we cannot avoid discussing in this context is the lot of evaluation research. Ernst House (2001, 313) says that since values lie at the heart of evaluation, hardly anything has caused more trouble in the field than fact-value dichotomy. What will come of evaluation research, if we accept and adopt the position Weber suggests?

Michael Scriven (1991) actually comments on Weber in his *Evaluation Thesaurus*.

**”VALUE-FREE DOCTRINE** The belief that science, and in particular the social sciences, should not—or cannot properly—draw evaluative conclusions 'within science', that is, from premises that are either scientifically verified or definitely true. The view is part of the **metatheory** of science, especially the social sciences, and if one (correctly) treats that as a part of science, the theory is self-refuting.” (Scriven 1991, 373)

The *Wertfreiheit* postulate is self-refuting, then, in the sense of a liar's paradox; “Everything I say is a lie?” This would be fortunate, from Scriven’s viewpoint, for Scriven is also of the opinion that the

postulate is of central importance to evaluation as a discipline, “since if true, it would invalidate almost any claims to objective evaluation within, for example, the social sciences and education.”

Scriven (1991) displays symptomatic indecision as to the denotation of the negation, in the above quoted passage. The claim, according to which *a scientist cannot derive values from facts*, is certainly not equal to the claim according to which *a scientist should not act as if s/he was capable of such a feat, and go over to act accordingly*, i.e. according to the mistaken beliefs which cannot stand even an elementary logical scrutiny. The first claim (i.e. the factual claim) is a logical truth corresponding, in a surprisingly invariable manner, to our experience in syntactic rules of natural and formal languages, and probably also in some very profound sense to the structure(s) of human cognition. It is in no sense self-refuting, as a scientific proposition.

The second claim (i.e. the normative claim) is an ethical rule, proper. We can know this by its (logical) mode. As an ethical rule, it deals with human ethical conduct, this time with the human ethical conduct in the field of science. It is a rule against low-minded partisanship under the flags of science. Fortunately, a clear majority of scientists still obey this ethical rule. But note that, from the *fact* that this *is* the case, we cannot derive the *value* judgement according to which this *ought* to be the case. The ethical rule according to which this *ought* to be case should not, incorrectly, and even deceptively, “be treated as a part of science.” In case we succeed in abstaining from such a slip, the rule is not, of course, self-refuting.

All this is all the more clear, and true, in the case of Weber. His claim was that scientists can differentiate between values and facts (the factual claim), and that, in the field of science, they ought to keep to the differentiation they are capable of (the normative claim).

But, according to Scriven, when referring to the *Wertfreiheit* postulate Weber was but making some cautionary remarks in a debate. Weber's comments should thus not be taken too seriously, although "within few years this sensible, if somewhat spineless advice, had been converted into a meta-theoretic dogma of implacable opposition to evaluative research, a doctrine that formed part of what was loosely called **empiricism**". (Scriven 1991, 373.) Apparently, Scriven did not employ Weber's own scholarly texts here. The *Wertfreiheit* postulate was presented by Weber in a debate between himself and the *Kathedersozialisten*, but it was certainly not a loose comment on a debate. The postulate was a central piece of Weber's *metaethical* toolbox for social sciences, and can be compared in significance only to its *metatheoretical* component (our capacity to differentiate between facts and values), and, perhaps, to the concept of the idealtypes.

In *Der Sinn der „Wertfreiheit“* Weber (Weber 1917/1949, 1917/1968) discusses evaluation at length. (This, of course, is a matter of translation into English: the German word "praktische Wertung" is translated to "evaluation"). Weber admits that value discussions can be of the greatest utility, if their conditions are correctly understood. These functions can be:

- a) The elaboration and explication of the ultimate internally consistent value axioms. People are often in error, not only about their opponent's evaluations, but also about their own. Discussion of value judgements can clarify the inner consistency of one's values. Its validity is similar to that of logic.
- b) The discussion on value judgements can help to deduce the full implications from value judgements. If we have this or that value, the results can be those. This type of deduction depends on logic, full casuistic analysis, and empirical observations.

c) The determination of the factual consequences which the realization of a certain practical evaluation must have: (1) in consequence of being bound to certain indispensable means, (2) in consequence of the inevitable, but not wanted outcomes. These are based on empirical observations.

d) The uncovering of new axioms (and the postulates to be drawn from them), which the proponent of a practical postulate did not take into consideration. (Weber 1917/1949, 20-21., Weber 1917/1968, 510-511)

To make it clear: Weber seems to admit that evaluation research is possible and even useful:

“The utility of a discussion of practical evaluations at the right place and in the correct sense is, however, by no means exhausted with such direct 'results'. When correctly conducted, it can be extremely valuable for empirical research in the sense that it provides it with problems for investigation.” (Weber 1917/1949, 21; Weber 1917/1968, 511.)

As a matter of fact, Scriven seems to be following the same line of thought. He admits that Hume, Moore, and others have offered simple and plausible proofs of the impossibility of deriving values from facts. “They were near enough to correct in supposing that one can't *deduce* values from facts, but they were wrong in supposing that this meant one can't *reliably infer* values from facts. “ (Scriven 1991, 374)

Scriven proposes the use of probative inference, which makes inferring from factual and definitional premises to evaluative conclusions possible. And of course, there is the refutatory evidence: *Consumer Report* does not do anything wrong, when it makes recommendations. Weber and Scriven have different opinions about the *locus* of practical evaluations: For Weber, the *locus*, in relation to the process of research can be that of *ex ante* and *ex post*, whereas in Scriven's view,



practical evaluations can be seen as an integral part of the research process itself; *ex nunc*, that is, in relation to the process of research.

## **Weber's Position**

According to Kari Palonen (2006), Weber's "objectivity" thesis is based on Weber's nominalism and perspectivism: "jede Seite in einem Begriffs- und Perspektivenstreit soll ein faire Chance haben, den jeweiligen eigenen Standpunkt zu verteidigen und ihn gegebenenfalls zu verändern." (Palonen 2006, 16). The quest for objectivity is, then, more about the application of Fair-Play rules to the scientific argumentation and rhetorics than about any simple way of reaching out for an objective description of the world. Applying these rules, scientists can learn from the practices of the Parliament, where opposing positions are being brought forward, discussed, and finally a position is accepted. Parliamentary discussions do not concern the questions of truth, but deliberation. Still, there is a resemblance between political and scientific debates.

We present a more conventional interpretation of Weber's objectivity thesis. We do not wish to defend any orthodox reading, but merely note that there is a certain, rather subtle conceptual differentiation that has been neglected by many, who have strived after a radical re-reading of Weber's objectivity thesis. Our point is: the fact that human reality – and, thus, a proper methodology in human sciences – is idiographic, and not universalistic, in its hindmost nature, does not do away with the fact that we are capable of differentiating between facts and values in human sciences, and that we, as practicing scientists, have an obligation to do so. That is to say, propositions concerning singular states of affairs and unique chains of events can be true or false in exactly the same sense as propositions concerning patterns and regularities, and even laws, of human behaviour.

It suffices to think of the discipline of history, which was Weber's primary scientific alternative to neoclassical economics. Historians do not fall victims of relativism, postmodernism, and perspectivism *en masse*, far from it: they cherish robust, verifiable facts. The same kind of voracious appetite for facts was characteristic of Weber, too.

Logically in line with this, Weber could not agree with neoclassical economics, nor could he agree with historical economics. Human existence and human reality are idiographic in nature.

Neoclassical economics could not, therefore, get to grips with the profundity of the object of human scientific inquiries. Historical economics was equally problematic, however, from the point of view of Weber, because of its partisan orientation. The method of the historical school of economics was closer to the one adopted by Weber, but its ethical mentality was altogether unacceptable. The capacity for the differentiation between facts and values in human scientific inquiries was of indifference to the active proponents of their (con)fusion. From Weber's point of view of this must have been not only an ethically unacceptable, but a scientifically unpromising line of thought, for, eventually, scientific validity would decline with scientific ethics.

To make the point clear we will set forth a bare bone model of the conceptual differentiations referred to above. In table 1, cells 7 and 8 have no counterpart in the real world, so they can be dismissed right at the outset. Weber, interestingly, made a similar point: if you are incapable of differentiating between facts and values, keeping to the differentiation cannot be your moral obligation. Otherwise, however, the cells appear to be meaningful, and practicable. Weber will be placed in cell 5. Neoclassical economics, with classical political economy, will be placed in cell 6. Historical school of economics will be placed somewhere around cells 1 and 3. Several modern

currents of social sciences will be placed in cell 3, whereas several modern currents of the discipline of history will be placed in cell 5, with Weber.

**TABLE 1. THE CHOICE OVER IDIOGRAPHIC AND UNIVERSALISTIC METHODOLOGY AND THE TWO CORE COMPONENTS OF THE *WERTFREIHEIT* POSTULATE**

		Idiographic methodology in human sciences	Universalistic methodology in human sciences
No moral obligation to keep to the differentiation between facts and value in human sciences	Capacity for the differentiation between facts and values in human sciences	1	2
	No capacity for the differentiation between facts and values in human sciences	3	4
Moral obligation to keep to the differentiation between facts and values in human sciences	Capacity for the differentiation between facts and values in human sciences	5	6
	No capacity for the differentiation between facts and values in human sciences	7	8

### ***The Possibility of Socio-Economic Policy Evaluation***

Why should all this be of interest to researchers in modern policy sciences? According to Weber it is impossible to tell how things should be by means of research. Weber is actually saying, way further, that pretending to be capable of the trick (of deriving values from facts) is wrong. It goes against the code of ethical conduct in science. We could use the Golden Rule of ethics: hardly anyone would want his or her scientific and political opponent to act otherwise, i.e. to pull value rabbits out of hats of facts.

Now, if it is impossible to tell from “what is” “what should be”, and if it is, furthermore, unethical to act as if one was capable of the feat, this clearly puts limits to the theory and ethics of helping in social work, for example. A scientific theory can predict what is most likely to happen after certain

interventions, but it cannot tell whether the change in the lives of the service users is ultimately for the good (or for the bad). The latter are value judgements. *In a democracy*, they *should not* be made by the scientists-as-scientists, but by the service users and citizens themselves, by the politicians, or, then, by the scientists-as-citizens or scientists-as-functionaries-of-the-political-machinery.

Realizing that this *is* the case can actually be quite liberating for social policy researchers. The task of a researcher (and of e.g. social workers or economists as professionals, when the professionals use research as a foundation for action) is not to take responsibility of all the miseries and misfortunes of the world. This is the task of policy-makers, and, in the final analysis, of each and every citizen. All of this leads to a modest programme for modern policy sciences – still, scientifically, a demanding task.

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