Research Program, Paradigm or Problematic? Three Ways of Reading Max Weber

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Abstract: This paper discusses ways of understanding the unity of Max Weber's work and argues that the concept of problematic is more suitable than those commonly used in contemporary philosophy of science, such as paradigm or research program. The concept of problematic implies a less closed and integrated framework than the other two; it also places more emphasis on the problems of conceptualization. All these features make it a more adequate key to Max Weber's eminently multi-disciplinary and multi-perspectivistic but very unfinished project. The reference to a problematic connotes both strengths and weaknesses; the strengths have to do with Weber's exceptional ability to tackle diverse domains of research and theorizing in an original and productive way, the weaknesses with unclear connections between them and with insufficient grounding in basic concepts. These claims are backed up by closer examination of Weber's sociology of rule, especially his analysis of changing historical relations between political and religious power. Insights gained through this approach to the political sphere can then serve to conceptualize the cultural and economic ones in a way that builds on Weber's work but goes beyond its historically conditioned horizons.

Keywords: Max Weber; paradigm; research program; problematic; rule; religion; culture

DOI: 10.14712/23363525.2025.7

The following reflections are not grounded in any primary research on Max Weber's intellectual biography. They will draw on new approaches to Weber – sources, interpretations and debates – made possible by the recently completed publication of his collected writings.[1] Some reasonably well established conclusions about the development of Weber's work, shared by the most representative scholarship on the subject, will be taken for granted; on that basis, I will argue that the new perspectives opened up by the *Gesamtausgabe* have highlighted three different ways of reading Weber, and that one of them is significantly superior to the others. This line of interpretation will then serve to background a brief concluding sketch of possible post-Weberian viewpoints. If that term is taken to indicate a combination of key Weberian insights with adequate efforts to develop them further and think beyond their original context, such aims have proved difficult to achieve. Two particularly influential twentieth-century sociologists, Talcott Parsons and Pierre Bourdieu, made vastly premature claims to that effect. As I have argued elsewhere [*Arnason 2020a*], Shmuel Eisenstadt's work is a more genuine example; but here the discussion will focus on general concepts and criteria, rather than specific cases.

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1 The *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe* was organized and supported by the Bavarian Acaddemy of Sciences; the first of 47 volumes was published in 1984, the last in 2020. Some of the volumes have been published in a *Studienausgabe,* and a digital edition is in progress.

Preliminary Remarks: Why Classics and Which Most?

Some forty years ago, at the beginning of a book then meant to be his *magnum opus* (later superseded as such by Luhmann 1997), Niklas Luhmann exhorted the sociological community to stop "gnawing the bones of the classics" and adopt a "new theory design", which was of course a codeword for his own theory of autopoietic systems [*Luhmann 1984: 8*]. It is hardly to be doubted that this eminently tasteless remark has fallen flat; during the first decades of the present century, the classics have proved more present in sociological debates than they had been for some time before, whereas Luhmann's attempt at a radically new beginning has lost much of its initial appeal.[2] Not that the classics were ever completely forgotten; however, their relative weight varied, and so did the understanding of their role. This is not the place for a detailed survey of that story, but a brief glance at salient alternatives will help to contextualize the following discussion of a particularly important classical source.

Earlier views on the role of the classics include the claim that their names and exemplary works can serve to identify major divides within the discipline of sociology, divergent orientations of a more general kind than the specific disagreements between proliferating schools. Examples of such invocations are the references to Weber and Durkheim as pioneers of – respectively – individualistic and collectivistic approaches (now definitively known to be misleading), or to Marx and Durkheim as the paradigmatic theorists of conflict and normative integration. As a purely descriptive take on the history of sociology, this view can thus be credited with some truth. On the other hand, it bypasses the questions of substantive perspectives and theoretical issues that might link the classics to contemporary debates. Another approach, more attentive to that legacy, stresses the interdisciplinary scope of the classics, largely obscured by later efforts to confine them – as founding fathers – within a strictly circumscribed canon of sociology. Two aspects of these broader horizons merit a closer look. All three authors recognized as classics of the first order developed distinctive philosophical perspectives, still relevant to problems arising when the social sciences are – intermittently – forced to face questions about their foundational assumptions. None of the three cases can be dismissed or downsized as a mere derivative of earlier philosophical teachings. The particular importance of Hegel for Marx, Kant for Durkheim and Rickert's Neo-Kantianism for Weber is not in dispute, but in each case, the privileged source was (more or less smoothly) integrated into a project that broke new ground. The complex Marxian paradigm of production (with additional but hesitant glimpses of dimensions beyond its borders) was not a simple transcription of capacities and achievements that Hegel had ascribed to the world spirit; as I have argued elsewhere [*Arnason 2020b*], the starting-point is a breakthrough to an anthropological perspective, which then serves to provide new responses to problems posed by Hegel's account of the world spirit awakening to itself. Kantian connections were essential to Durkheim's focus on the moral integration of society; but in his later and most important work on the elementary forms of religious life, the emphasis shifts to social creativity and its articulation

[2] One sign of growing doubts about Luhmann's approach is the controversy on the conceptual status of his laconic statement that "there are systems" (*es gibt Systeme*). In my opinion this must be read as an ontological statement; the attempt to present it as an inaugural constructivist move – a kind of intellectual "big bang" – casts doubt on the cognitive status of the whole subsequent analysis.

through collective representations. Society creates and re-creates itself, and in so doing, it also creates a broader world. It may be tempting to interpret this comprehensive re-theorizing as a transformation of Kant's elusive thoughts on the role of the imagination in the constitution of experience; but even so, it would amount to an innovation so radical that a distinctive philosophical perspective must be given its due. Moreover, the interpretive approaches necessitated by the mature conception of religion and society are best described as a case of hermeneutics in actual use, though not by name, and in that sense a move to closer contact with philosophy than before.

As for Max Weber, the most conclusive evidence for an independent and original philosophical position is to be found in a text from the beginning of what most Weber scholars regard as the second phase of his intellectual biography. The essay on objectivity in the social sciences (which still awaits an adequate English translation) is, on one hand, emphatically in line with neo-Kantian thinking on specific features of scientific inquiry in the socio-cultural sphere, and more specifically with Heinrich Rickert's version of it. This is the main point of Weber's argument on *Wertbeziehung,* an essential complement and counterweight to the principle of value neutrality, but much less noticed by readers and self-styled disciples than the latter. However, the same text contains formulations that go beyond neo-Kantian horizons and indicate dimensions open to a different kind of philosophical reflection. Weber subordinates the value-relation supposedly constitutive of social-scientific knowledge to historical change; if it is true that – as many interpreters have argued – that the recourse to neo-Kantian ideas helped him to settle accounts with German historicism, there is also a case for arguing that his further engagement with the issues singled out by both sides led to a deeper and more differentiated understanding of history. In that context, it is noteworthy that he uses the concept of "cultural significance" (*Kulturbedeutung*) to signal the connection that lends meaning and contours to themes of the social sciences (he refers, for example, to the *Kulturbedeutung* of modern capitalism). This term obviously implies a broader focus than *Wertbeziehung,* and a clearer emphasis on meaning beyond value (but not thereby divorced from it). And there is another sign of unmistakable but uncompleted thoughts on that note. In a concluding statement on the transitory character of dominant interests and central themes in the social sciences, Weber refers to the "light of the great cultural problems" (*das Licht der grossen Kulturprobleme*) moving on and redefining the agenda of scholarly research [*MWG I/7: 234*]. Two aspects of this formulation call for comment. Where we might have expected a conceptual pinpointing, Weber resorts to the time-honoured and massively meaning-laden metaphor of light (its history has been impressively reconstructed by Hans Blumenberg [*2001*], but he did not mention Weber). The only plausible common denominator of its multiple uses is that it implies the possibility of a search for truth. The second step is properly conceptual, but it is surely not irrelevant that Weber refers to problems, rather than values or meanings. Some implications of that will come to light when the discussion moves closer to the substance of his work.

The above comments should suffice to show that Weber did draw on and – up to a point – articulate a philosophical perspective. Two other interpretive viewpoints will strengthen the case for placing him ahead of the other classics, in terms of intrinsic reach as well as relevance to strategic tasks of contemporary scholarship. Not the least weighty aspect of interdisciplinary ambitions is the fusion of historical and sociological

perspectives, characteristic – in different ways and degrees – of the three major classics. Marx's version of that approach found its first representative expression in the opening chapter of the *Communist Manifesto* (this part of the text was obviously what Weber had in mind when he described the *Manifesto* as a first-class scientific achievement); in a later phase, *Capital* combines historical and structural analyses of an evolving socio-economic order (that is one major reason why the search for a unified logic of *Capital* was misguided). The intertwining of history and sociology is at first sight less obvious in Durkheim's writings, but a closer look will reveal some significant connections. His work on the evolution of educational thought in France, less noted than it deserves, is a study in historical sociology. The much more influential *Division of Social Labour*, although most prominently an exposition of systematic theory and primarily received as such, is anchored in a background picture of late medieval and early modern European transformations. Durkheim's crowning work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, is outside the domain of historical sociology, but the analysis of a tribal society and its religious culture is undertaken – at least in part – in search of a key to the understanding of more complex historical patterns and their transformations (with particular reference to the French Revolution).

If a historical dimension is common to the sociological thought of all three classics discussed here, there is no doubt that Weber stands out as the most committed to historical research and most capable of innovative historical approaches to problems of social theory; he is therefore of prime interest to those who share the idea of historical sociology as a way to reorient a whole discipline, rather than a special branch to be added to existing ones. Several substantive aspects and developmental phases of Weber's work may be noted in support of this view. First of all, Weber was – in terms of research interests, though not of academic status – a historian before he became a sociologist, and his focus on classical antiquity deserves particular mention. A programmatic statement on knowledge and objectivity, published when he resumed scholarly work after a breakdown, relies on a historical turn to gain some distance from the philosophical debates to which it relates. Simultaneously, he produced his most widely read, most controversially debated and arguably most misunderstood work: the essays on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. They are saturated in history (including passages that must be counted among the so far inconclusive attempts to establish historical psychology as a discipline), and on one occasion, Weber described them as a purely historical study. That did not prevent them (more precisely: the later amplified but no significantly revised book publication) from becoming the most discussed text of the sociological tradition, whereas no remotely comparable response has come from historians (Sokoll 2020 argues that they have yet to face the challenge in an appropriate way).

This shift of disciplinary focus cannot be dismissed as a misunderstanding (the real misunderstandings lie elsewhere and will be discussed later). Whatever Weber may have thought of the *Protestant Ethic* at the time of writing, it is a text that poses crucial problems at the intersection of history and sociology, and the additions to the 1920 edition enhance that aspect.

Looking back at the last decades, before and after the turn of the millennium, there is no doubt that in regard to the last-mentioned issue (theoretical lessons from the classics), Max Weber's work has been by far the most prominent source. There may be signs of declining interest. A German scholar [*Schwinn 2020*] has coined the term *Klassikerdämmerung*

(twilight of the classics), with particular reference to Weber. If there is such a trend, it is probably best understood as part of a more general darkening that has set in as the delusions of neo-liberal millenarianism evaporated. But the changes in question are a reason for maintaining contact with Weber, not for consigning him to past history. Instead of entering a world benignly governed by market forces, we are back in a world of economic crises, great power competition, and wars threatening to go global. This state of things is closer to Weber's world than were the recent *fin-de-siècle* expectations. Some participants in ongoing discussions have raised the question whether Weber is our contemporary or not; it seems clear that present global developments are making him more contemporary.

The Search for Unity

The following line of argument will assume that the case for contemporary relevance needs no further pleading; the next question to be tackled is then the problem of thematic and interpretive unity in Weber's work (to use an expanded version of Friedrich Tenbruck's formulation). Given the extent and complexity of the work, as well as the vast secondary literature, it is obviously true that no shorthand summary will be of any use. But if we accept the hermeneutical principle that the understanding of a text or a set of them involves a broader commitment to certain guidelines and horizons of interpretation, we can distinguish underlying ways of reading Weber, based on alternative premises with some background in the philosophy of science and divergent enough to imply different visions of the work as a whole. The rival concepts of a paradigm and a research program are obvious cases in point. It is true that in the discussion that developed in the wake of the *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe*, they have been used in a rather unsystematic way; those involved have opted for one or the other, not necessarily with full recognition of their divergences. But the two terms have well-established meanings and connotations, we can refer to discussions where they have been confronted, and a proper use of such sources will have consequences for the reading of Weber. However, the main thrust of the approach attempted here is to argue in favour of a third option: the concept of a problematic. It originates from French discussions, where it has been used in a rather loose fashion, without clear definitions, and sometimes invoked under other names. The following explication will centre on a somewhat stylized version of the concept; but the reworked meaning is in line with prior usage, and as I will try to show, it helps to clarify crucial questions concerning the interpretation of Weber's work.

The proposals for a more adequate and context-sensitive reading of Weber should not be mistaken for an advocacy of unqualified return. Although it is true that we can more directly link up with his ideas than with those of the other sociological classics, there are also arguments to rethink, loose ends to be finalized and shortcuts to be corrected. The concluding reflections of this essay will therefore seek to clarify the necessary conditions for a theoretical project to claim genuinely post-Weberian credentials. As I have argued elsewhere [*Arnason 2020b*], Cornelius Castoriadis and Shmuel Eisenstadt are the two most significant thinkers of that kind. Both are indebted to Weber, but reformulate and reorient his insights in new contexts; they both theorize the unity of history and society, albeit in very different ways. The parallels and affinities that can nevertheless be noted have something to do with comparable ways of criticizing dominant traditions, first from within

but ultimately resulting in a radical break. Castoriadis came out of the Marxist tradition but arrived at the most comprehensive and innovative critique of historical materialism; Eisenstadt took off from the widely shared framework of Parsonian structural-functionalism but became increasingly critical of its basic assumptions, and his civilizational turn marks a decisive move beyond the variations on action and system as alternative and/or complementary paradigms of social theory. A further point to be noted is that both Castoriadis and Eisenstadt reject the evolutionist view of history and society, no longer defended in nineteenth-century versions but variously reformulated by Habermas, Luhmann, Parsons, Runciman, Schluchter and Tenbruck. Evolutionist preconceptions have been a major obstacle to effective engagement with Weber.

Here the focus will be on general criteria for moving beyond Weber's conceptual boundaries without losing touch with his often-unfinished explorations, rather than on particular attempts in that vein; and as indicated above, the argument must begin with a comparison of alternative ways to read Weber. The concept of a research program is often used in a loose fashion (after all, any intellectual project that requires further work can be described as a research programme. What matters for present purposes is a distinctive meaning, elaborated (primarily by Imre Lakatos) within the school of thought known as critical rationalism, and designed to counter the destabilizing and self-destructive implications of Karl Popper's original statement of that position. It is this emphatic version of the concept that has – in unclear association with the rival concept of paradigm – been invoked in discussions about the structure and significance of Weber's work. Our first task is to disentangle the two concepts, and that is best done with direct reference to the source where they were first and most effectively brought into contact [*Lakatos – Musgrave 1972*].

For those who incline to hermeneutical modes of reading and reflection (including the present writer), it is tempting to defuse and downsize the confrontation between Thomas Kuhn and the critical rationalists by arguing that both sides were – unbeknownst to themselves – working with revamped hermeneutical figures of thought. They both emphasized the interpretive dimensions that hermeneutical thinkers have described as pre-comprehension, anticipation of the whole and interplay of horizons (the latter involving fusion as well as differentiation and mutual polarization).[3] The idea of a research program highlights the importance of whole theoretical frameworks for the testing and advancing of knowledge in light of experience, but with a twist towards intentionality, control and transparency; that trend finds expression of an agenda, the selection of basic assumptions to be maintained and specific claims to be put to the test, and in the choice of alternative theories to fit and enable new discoveries. By contrast, the idea of a paradigm posits a more sweepingly and emphatically holistic pattern, including non-intentional and to some extent non-cognitive components. Lakatos concludes the statement of his view by claiming that his concept of a research program is normative, whereas Kuhn's notion of a paradigm is "social-psychological" and makes scientific revolutions "a matter for mob psychology" [*ibid.: 177, 178*]. This comparison of an idealization with a caricature is not very useful (the methodology of research programs is clearly meant to serve analytical and historical purposes as well

[3] It should be noted that Gerard Radnitzky's work on "metascience" [*Radnitzky 1968*] pioneered the attempt to identify harmeneurical figures of thought within the school of critical rationalism; but it was written before Kuhn's confrontation with Lakatos.

as normative ones), but may be read as a backhanded way of acknowledging a difference of dimensions.

The idea of a paradigm is – *prima facie* – the more genuinely hermeneutical of the two options, not least because of its stronger accent on implicit meanings and tacit knowledge. But its weaknesses are the obverse of its strengths. The effort to encompass multiple aspects is vitiated by insufficient attention to their differences; critics have noted a tendency to shift abruptly between intellectual, social and cultural determinants; similarly, relations between the scientific community and a broader universe of discourse and meaning remain under-theorized. It is also possible to identify situations where interpretations in terms of paradigms run into particular problems. They face difficulties when dealing with cases where approaches within a shared field of inquiry differ so markedly that the idea of a multi-paradigmatic condition seems plausible but must be reconciled with the unity of a discipline; they are ill-equipped to deal with thinkers who venture on a multi-disciplinary project and draw on correspondingly diverse sources while remaining aware of open and fundamental questions in each of the explored domains (Max Weber is an outstanding example of that position); and they will not easily accommodate a constellation of pioneers who inaugurated a new branch of knowledge in different but partly overlapping ways, and without any of them completely and exclusively identifying with it (that was the situation of the sociological classics, and especially of Weber as the most important and most interdisciplinary among them).

These observations bring us a bit closer to Weber's work. As mentioned above, recent debates around it have invoked both the idea of a paradigm and that of a research program, not always with due attention to the difference between them. However, there are examples of explicit and reasoned opting for one or the other; here I will only briefly consider one case of each. In a paper explicitly titled "The specificity and the potential of the Weber paradigm", M. Rainer Lepsius [*2003*] proposed a definition in terms of a "space with three poles": the unfolding of action, the formation of structures and the projection of meaning. As he notes, this "principle of three-dimensionality" should not be identified with a multi-level analysis; the three components are mutually irreducible, but always already intertwined. So far, so good; the problem is that on closer examination, the whole constellation turns out to be embedded in a much more complex and ramified pattern of interrelations (the German phenomenological word for it would be *Verweisungszusammenhang*). The "projection of meaning" that shapes the course of action and the build-up of institutions (as we might also label the "structures" mentioned by Lepsius) is grounded in patterns of culture, defined by Weber as ways of lending meaning to the world and adopting a stance towards it; there will be more to say about this concept of culture, but at this point it should be noted that it posits a close but variable connection between interpretation and evaluation. On another level, the tripolar "space" is involved in social processes, and they are of two kinds: each of the components has its own processual character (as Lepsius notes), but there are also macro-processes that affect all of them in significant ways. Weber's concept of rationalization reflects this duality, but it was never fully clarified. Finally, the main connection between cultural patterns and social-historical processes is a complex of spheres, in Weber's terms "orders of life"; they represent distinctive domains of meaning, value and conduct. This is one of Weber's most seminal themes, but also one of the least conclusively analyzed. If all these problems are taken into account, the result

looks less like a ready-made paradigm than a highly unfinished conceptual mapping of a vast and diverse terrain.

Wolfgang Schluchter [*2005*] prefers the idea of a research program, but he does not so much argue against the idea of a paradigm as list the advantages of the other option. They seem to be of four kinds. A research program is, in principle, more open to confrontation with experience than a paradigm. It is, by definition, involved in and dependent on competition with other such programs. Its distinction between the formulation of problems (*Problemstellung*) and the testable solutions to them (*Problemlösung*) enables a nuanced reading of Weber: his *Problemstellungen* remain – to a large extent – valid and instructive, but his solutions call for a more critical debate. Notwithstanding these arguments in favour of a research program, Schluchter arrives at a definition roughly identical to Lepsius's paradigm. His trinity of action, order and culture is therefore open to the objections outlined above. Moreover, he explicitly identifies his Weberian research program with a theory of rule-governed action [*ibid.: 11*], and that has reductionistic implications for the concepts of order and culture. If order is reduced to rules, thus excluding less explicit and more problematic patterns, it follows that the concept of culture will tend towards a focus on its programmatic function (however, "culture" is not one of the keywords explained in the second part of Schluchter's paper). The theory of rule-governed action is obviously superior to utilitarian models, but it needs at least two major correctives. On one hand, there is the approach that stresses the creativity of action, most systematically presented by Hans Joas [*1996*]; on the other hand, a theory of action should take note of the aspect that we might – following Gregory Bateson – call "schismogenetic", most effectively brought into sociological discourse by Norbert Elias's analysis of figurations leading to conflicts.

Defining a Problematic

To sum up the discussion so far, the concept of paradigm can serve to highlight aspects that are less visible from the perspective of a research program; it might therefore seem more congenial to the hermeneutical reading of Weber that will be attempted here. On the other hand, it implies a closure and a level of interpretive integration that will prove hard to reconcile with the specific problems posed by a critical reading of Weber's work. One of the most prominent figures in Italian debates on Weber has described the hermeneutical challenge in stark terms. Noting that the two major projects (the now separately published successive instalments of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* and the comparative studies of world religions and civilizations) were not completed, he continues: "anyway, we do not know whether it was at all Weber's intention to provide a clearly defined picture of the ultimate direction of his work as a social scientist. Rather, his way of working suggests the image of multiple roads simultaneously opened, roads where there are more or less visible advances and more or less consistent corrections of course, without him – dominated as he was by the necessity to obey the urgency of his enormous speculative tension – really feeling the need for an even provisional synthesis. With regard to the main works, but also to the methodological essays, the impression is that of an unorganized overlap of several lines of analysis" [*Marra 2022: 12*]. The author adds that it is thus left to the reader to judge which tracks were interrupted and which were followed, at least to a significant extent.

This is the situation to be tackled through a third way of reading, based on the concept of a problematic. Marra's description (to my mind quite convincing) pinpoints the most salient intuitive grounds for doubting the relevance of the two abovementioned alternatives. If Weber's work is as centrifugal, multi-directional and open-ended as Marra suggests, it lacks the coherence of a research program. We can easily identify or imagine programmatic constructions based on choices of some Weberian themes and intellectual trajectories at the expense of others (a classic case is the long influential but now much less accepted reading that portrayed him as a pioneering theorist of action). Such reductions of scope and complexity are in fact regressing to pre-Weberian modes of thought. Matters become more complicated when attempts are made to encompass the whole work, with its loose ends, internal tensions and conceptual ambiguities, in a streamlined scheme claiming paradigm or program status. Some examples of that kind will be considered below.

The concept of a problematic comes from the French tradition of the philosophy of science, where it has had a rather elusive career, much less conducive to clear definitions than the anglophone discussion of the two other approaches. It has been implicitly invoked in other terms (as in Foucault's concepts of *episteme* and discursive order) and explicitly linked to projects now discredited and abandoned (as in a case that will be briefly discussed below). But if we look for its origins, it seems clear that it was first introduced by Gaston Bachelard [*2024 (1949)*]. Admittedly, his definition of it was a good deal less than exhaustive, but some indications are there, and they were to some extent improved on by later commentators on his work. Bachelard's reference to the concept of problematic is intimately linked to his polemic against empiricism and existentialism (the latter target being a feature of the French philosophical scene in the aftermath of World War II) and to his quest for a rationalism that could turn the table on these adversaries. In very brief terms, that kind of rationalism had to be guided by the idea of a knowledge in context, process and community; Bachelard also calls it a "questioning rationalism" where "the foundations are themselves put to the test, they are called into question by the question" [*Bachelard 2024: 116*]. Patrice Maniglier's interpretation of Bachelard sums up the latter's project in a very shorthand way: it involves the "substitution of the category of problem for that of object", and this is "something the French epistemological tradition shares with both the Popperian and the Heideggerian traditions" [*Maniglier 2012: 21*]. The author might also have mentioned Weber's reminder that the domain of a science should be conceived as a *Problemzusammenhang,* rather than a type or a set of objects. Differences from the Popperian tradition will emerge as we move towards a more detailed reconstruction. As for the Heideggerian one, it would make more sense to speak of a hermeneutical tradition (unknown to Bachelard and anathema to some of his successors); in this case, the search for more specific points of contact will prove crucial to a more precise concept of problematic, and that applies most significantly to a key theme in the French branch of hermeneutics. The conflict of interpretations will be seen to matter more to the demarcation and articulation of a problematic than it does in the context of research programs or paradigms.

The road thus indicated must begin with a slightly more extensive account of Bachelard's theses. His most basic point is an emphasis on context, against the atomism which he sees as an enduring flaw of empiricist thought. "Everything becomes clearer if we place the object of knowledge within a problematic … It goes without saying that we

are now dealing with an *interesting* object, an object for which the objectivating process is not finished" [*Bachelard 2024: 113–114*]. A problematic is focused on the frontier between the known and the not-yet-known but to-be-known; in this capacity, it redefines the Cartesian idea of doubt (for Bachelard a legacy no less in need of correction than empiricist fallacies); it becomes a localized and contextualized awareness of fallibility and uncertainty. Finally, a problematic is constitutively linked to what Bachelard called "interrationalism", the reasoned exchange of views, arguments and conjectures within a scientific community. In this way, the concept of problematic implies a lesser emphasis on the unity of that social basis than does the concept of paradigm; the coexistence and communication of multiple problematics replaces – or should replace – the dominance of one paradigm. As for the alternative model of a research program, Bachelard's position makes such arrangements look less stable and less like rational constructions than they do from the perspective of critical rationalism. They reflect the unfolding of innovative encounters between problematics.

Patrice Maniglier's interpretation of Bachelard adds some significant points to the original formulations. As he puts it, a problematic "is not simply a set of questions; it is rather the matrix or the angle from which it will become possible and even necessary to formulate a certain number of precise problems" [*Maniglier 2012: 21*]. If questions are asked about the character and composition of the matrix, it seems obvious that the answer can only begin with concepts, i.e precisely the element that was – as we have seen – under-exposed in the debate about paradigms and research programmes. But those of us who have taken on board the notion of social imaginaries will be inclined to bring it into this discussion. Not only is the analysis and interpretation of social imaginaries (pioneered by Cornelius Castoriadis, Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor) best understood in terms of a problematic; it also throws light on the underpinning meanings of approaches that do not explicitly acknowledge the imaginary dimension.[4]

That said, a more qualified acceptance of another statement by Maniglier should be noted. He maintains that a problematic offers an alternative between already elaborated or structured options. This claim must be toned down. A problematic can be multi-perspectivist (as will be seen, that feature is essential to a clear demarcation from the other two epistemological models), but whether this potential develops into structured alternatives will depend on a variety of circumstances. To put it another way, the conflict of interpretations is a possibility inherent in the defining pattern of a problematic, but its levels of articulation vary greatly.

Bachelard's work is still a seminal source for those who see the concept of problematic as a promising option for the philosophy of science, but there are other thinkers to be remembered. A later and temporarily much more influential use of the concept was linked to a very ambitious and briefly authoritative reinterpretation of Marx. To avoid misunderstanding, it should be noted that this reference to Louis Althusser does not imply any sympathy with his version of Marxism, which turned out to be an exemplary blind alley; but some purely methodological points can be acknowledged. In his introduction to a proposal for a new reading of Marx, Althusser invoked the concept of problematic as the most adequate way of defining the "specific unity of a theoretical formation" [*Althusser 1969: 24*]; he further argued, with an explicit reference to Bachelard, that this perspective

[4] For more information on social imaginaries, see Adams and Smith 2019.

becomes particularly revealing when the focus is on the "epistemological breaks" that lead to the constitution of a new scientific discipline. Further work made it clear that a problematic is, most fundamentally, made up of concepts; for Althusser, Marx's foundational contribution to a new discipline – a science of history – was, first and foremost, enshrined in the basic concepts of historical materialism. In specifying the meaning and – as he saw it – proper use of these concepts, Althusser also acknowledged (although in a backhanded way and without any verbal concession to hermeneutics) the conflict of interpretations as an accompaniment to a problematic; his advocacy of Marxism as a science of history was inseparable from a critique of earlier readings, in his view overly philosophical and dependent on humanistic ideology. The understanding of concepts as both building blocks and problem indicators is easily compatible with Bachelard's idea of a problematic as the frontier between the known and the to-be-known, and it will be important for further discussion.

When Bachelard coined the concept of problematic, he was clearly more interested in its relevance for the natural rather than the social sciences. But it is safe to say that its later career has moved it closer to social theory, and this becomes even clearer if we add a few words on a recent development. The concept has become an exemplary vehicle of what some sociologists (beginning probably with Anthony Giddens) have called the double hermeneutic of social theory. The original insight expressed in this term was that hermeneutical approaches to the social world – designed to grasp the intertwining of meaningful action with the instituted and culturally articulated patterns of meaning – should be understood and justified as encounters with the inbuilt hermeneutical efforts of social actors and forces; the reasoned inquiry into meaning was to be attuned to the practical uses and invocations of meaning. A move from this perspective to the concept of problematic is most visible in Peter Wagner's theory of modernity [especially *Wagner 2008*], although he is not particularly keen on stressing the hermeneutical connection. Briefly, the key point is that modern developments in different socio-cultural spheres – economic, political and ideological – can be analyzed as interpretations and implementations of alternatives available within a problematic, and are therefore more or less susceptible to challenges by other elaborations based on the same problematic. Economic orders, political regimes and ideological models are embedded in fields of cultural articulation and conflicting interpretations; levels of conceptualization vary, but that element is always to some degree present. Wagner identifies the three key "problématiques" (to use his preferred term) as epistemic, political and economic (it may be suggested that the ideological field is an intersection of the epistemic problematic with the two others); they are "spaces of experience and interpretation", and the relevant units of analysis will depend on "a common space of experience giving the background to a specific and unique interpretation of modernity" [*Wagner 2008: 12*].

In a different context, I have argued [most recently in *Arnason 2023*] that the concept of problematic is an indispensable category of civilizational analysis. Eisenstadt sometimes used the term "cultural program" to describe the formative role that he attributed to interpretations of the world and the human situation in it; the connection between culture and institutions is central to his view on the "civilizational dimension of human societies". The substitution of a cultural problematic for a cultural program has several noteworthy consequences. We need not presuppose an internally consistent pattern; the cultural orientations

of a civilizational formation can be more or less marked by crosscurrents, tensions and conflicts. Such problems may be more or less mitigated by a stable division between dominant and marginal cultural themes. Divergent interpretations of shared cultural sources are a recurrent trend, interconnected with dynamics and distributions of social power. Varying degrees of ideological codification and critical reflection are also to be expected. All these aspects are focal points for comparative analysis and by the same token signposts for conceptual framing. In general terms, the shift just outlined calls for a stronger emphasis on social imaginaries (with the connotations of indeterminacy, ambiguity and excess meaning), rather than a clearly defined pre-programming logic of norms and values. It would be anachronistic to look for explicit ideas of this kind in Weber's writings, but as will be seen, there are allusions and adumbrations that can still serve to flesh out the agenda of civilizational analysis.

To sum up the advantages – or promising suggestions – inherent in the concept of problematic, they may in general terms mostly be described as distinctive twists to ideas shared with the two other approaches. The focus on problems and their interconnections (Weber's *Problemzusammenhang*) has become a commonplace in the philosophy of science; the reference to a problematic adds two specific points. It implies a questionable unity; a problematic is less committed to central and stable assumptions than a paradigm or a research program, more open to the possibility that the centre of inquiry might shift in response to changing contexts. It also entails an increased problematization of singular components. As we have noted, it places a stronger emphasis on basic concepts than do the alternative models, but at the same time, it makes them contestable. The conflict of interpretations is integrated at the most basic level. These two features enhance the processual character of a problematic; it is a framework in movement, more so than a paradigm or a research program, both of which allow for a fundamental though not absolute constancy of their core premises. Finally, the concept of problematic was shown to relate particularly strongly to cases where foundations are laid for a new discipline or a radical revision of an existing one undertaken. This last consideration has an interesting bearing on Weber. His interdisciplinary project brought new perspectives to all the fields involved, but more distinctively foundational efforts were reserved for two of them: sociology and the comparative analysis of civilizations. Weber's approaches to them differed in degree and kind. The grounding of sociology, most methodically and extensively presented in the section on basic concepts at the beginning of the later part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft,* is neither a concluding capstone of the entire work, nor a self-contained new departure; there were simultaneous moves in other directions, and notable absences in the list of concepts (e.g. culture and institution) raise doubts about the completeness of the argument. It is nevertheless a series of systematically interconnected and clarified definitions, and that is more than can be said about the other foundational move. The *Vorbemerkung* at the beginning of Weber's collected essays on the sociology of religion is justly regarded as one of his most important texts (it is also his last statement), and it does (as Benjamin Nelson was the first to fully realize) outline the case for comparative civilizational studies, but the level of conceptualization is not at all comparable to the sociological project, and the nomenclature is uncertain. A credible witness [*Staudinger 1982: 7–8*] cites Weber as saying – before the 1914 outbreak of war – that *Kulturgeschichte,* not sociology, was his main interest; what he meant was obviously what we would now call a global history of civilizations.

The most marked difference between the concept of problematic and those of paradigm and research program is, as we have seen, the constitutive link between a social-historical and a theoretical level; the problematic of a social theorist (or the less explicit one of a social scientist) functions through a dialogue with the operative problematic of social formations, be they particular institutional spheres or encompassing cultural worlds. There is no literal anticipation of that theme in Weber's work, but an indirect one is easily located. It is implicit in his concept of value relation (*Wertbeziehung*), central to the essay on objectivity and taken to denote a formative precondition of social scientific knowledge. From the Weberian perspective, values are problematic in a double sense: they lack logical grounding and they are enmeshed in mutual rivalry. This situation does not change if we subordinate the language of values to a more hermeneutical perspective, allowing for broader horizons of meaning; that opens up a space for interpretive conflicts.

Key Themes and Major Projects

At this point, we should move from preliminaries to direct engagement with Weber's work. If the concept of problematic is to serve as a key to its unity, and at the same time to be enriched through this encounter with a classic, the first step must be to confront and criticize other conceptions of unity. The search for a thematic unity, most forcefully pursued by Friedrich Tenbruck, was one of the most effective motives for the revival of Weber studies during the last decades of the twentieth century. Repeated attempts to portray rationalization as a unifying theme were obviously related to evolutionist preconceptions, then influential across ideological divides, but interpretations of Weber as an evolutionist now seem to have been laid to rest. Wilhelm Hennis argued against the emphasis on general rationalization, on the grounds that Weber was solely interested in a specific kind of rationalization: the rational conduct of life (*Lebensführung*) and had a pronounced preference for one type of such conduct: the one that originated in radical Protestantism, found its most transformative expression in an ethical sublimation of capitalist development and gave rise to a broader idea of vocation that became central to modern culture. While the prominent place of this thematic complex in Weber's work is not in dispute, the claim that it was his exclusive concern is quite untenable; he was certainly interested in the logic of bureaucracy as a historical phenomenon and an increasingly dominant force in modern societies, and also in the rationalizing drive of modern science (for unclear reasons, he uses the term "intellectualization" to describe the latter case, but it obviously belongs to the broader family of rationalizing processes). These two forces were at odds with the imperatives of autonomous *Lebensführung*, but in different ways: bureaucratic domination threatened to destroy it, whereas science as a vocation imposed a kind of self-negating *Lebensführung*, an ethos of unconditional service to the cause of advancing knowledge.

However, the manifest interest in multiple rationalizing processes cannot justify the more sweeping conception of rationalization as a unifying theme. In the first version of the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber had already referred to the diversity of context-dependent, divergent and in part contradictory patterns of rationalization; the concept thus enters his field of vision and his theoretical language as a centrifugal notion, conducive to a proliferation of themes and perspectives, rather than to any kind of synthesis. He never developed an adequate unifying counterweight to this pluralism. Three tentative hints in that direction

can be distinguished, none of them taken beyond first steps. One option, the most elementary, is to start with the general observation that rationality translating into rationalization always involves (and demands) some kind of added content, analytically separable from the abstract imperative of making things or thoughts more rational; this viewpoint finds expression in the distinction between formal and material rationality and/or rationalization, most visibly operative in the sociology of law. Another approach, outlined in passing, relies on basic dimensions of human activity; the rationality of logical thinking is distinguished from the rationality of purposeful action. This primary typology can be taken further; the rationality of thought extends to the construction of worldviews, and the rationality of action has to do with value-orientations more fundamental and comprehensive than the changing correlations of means and ends. Glimpses and reminders of both these domains can be found in Weber's work, but no systematic elaboration. Finally, the orders of life (*Lebensordnungen*), distinguished most clearly in Weber's *Zwischenbetrachtung*, are primarily thematized as value spheres, but they are also to some extent associated with main frameworks of rationalization, and to that extent they would at least impose limits on the proliferating pluralism first envisaged in the *Protestant Ethic*.

The whole complex of issues concerning rationality and rationalization is one of the most markedly fragmentary parts of Weber's work, and not at all supportive of the search for thematic unity. In the final instance, this is due to the dependence of rational perspectives, projects and developments on cultural contexts; culture appears as the formative, path-directing and -differentiating background to rationality. As noted in the editorial introduction, Wilhelm Hennis's efforts to redefine Max Weber's *Fragestellung* (in opposition to sociological reductionism) fail to reach the most promising starting-point for such arguments: the conception of cultural humanity as a transcendental presupposition of the cultural sciences. But even a full acknowledgement of that premise does not provide the required evidence for thematic unity. In the essay on objectivity, Weber defines cultural humanity in terms of two basic capacities: to lend meaning to the world and to adopt a stance towards it. As I argued in a much earlier publication [*Arnason 1988*], Weber's later work did not follow this guideline in a systematic way; and most importantly, the lines of interpretation that linked up with it did so in a one-sided way, privileging the attitude to the world (acceptance or rejection) over the ways of lending meaning to it. Moreover, the emphasis on cultural presuppositions should not be mistaken for a justification of culturalist reductionism. Neither *homo politicus* nor *homo oeconomicus* is reducible to cultural humanity, as defined by Weber, although both of them draw on cultural sources. Weber had of course much to say about relationships between the three dimensions of human societies; but as will be seen, gaps and self-limiting choices within that field constitute a major shortcoming of his problematic.

Instead of continuing the search for thematic unity, the present discussion will opt for a contrary claim, to be – provisionally – taken as an interpretive hypothesis, with the expectation that the following closer reading will do something to substantiate it. The view to be defended is that where many interpreters have looked for unity we find in fact a specific plurality, more precisely a constellation of pluralities; with regard to each of them, as well as to the ways of combining approaches to them, Weber pursued a more complex and ambitious project than the other sociological classics and his work still holds lessons for contemporary scholarship; but unanswered question and unexplored issues

in all three abovementioned fields and on the level of synthesizing perspectives reveal an underlying problematic that calls for restructuring rather than mere restatement or direct continuation.

The pluralities in question are of three kinds. In the primary analytical context, Weber distinguishes different components of the socio-cultural world. In his own terms, this means above all a division into religious, political and economic aspects; there will be some comments to make on his definitions of them. A second theme is the exacerbated tension between "life orders" and corresponding values in advanced modernity. Up to a point, these orders correspond to the three fundamental aspects, but Weber takes them further; here the main focus will be on the socially based and socially formative ones. As such they are neither an exclusively modern phenomenon, nor is their differentiation a universal historical trend; both the premodern steps towards their institutional and interpretive separation, more marked in some civilizations than in others, and the modern turn to a situation of acute conflicts must be understood in relation to specific historical contexts. Finally, the comparative analysis of different cultural worlds, better understood in terms of mutual contrasts than in thematic isolation, became a crucial part of Weber's agenda. It seems clear that a certain distinction between Orient and Occident was already evident in his early work on the social and economic history of antiquity, but later work involved the division of the Orient into two very dissimilar cultural worlds, Chinese and Indian, as well as a clearer periodization of Occidental history, still following traditional notions of classical, medieval and modern, but with unequally developed new perspectives within each phase. It does not seem far-fetched to suggest that tripartite divisions were important – though not equally marked – within every part of this very broadly defined last field. Most prominently, the Eurasian triangle of Chinese, Indian and Occidental civilizational domains replace the traditional dichotomy of Orient and Occident. The three phases of Occidental history remain; within the world of antiquity, there is at least an adumbrated distinction between Judaic, Greek and Roman origins of European history; the medieval world can be seen as an arena of interplay and rivalry between the unifying religious culture supported by an institutional framework, the emerging territorial states and the newly empowered *homo oeconomicus* fostered by the medieval cities. That story had a modern sequel: the culture of modern, bourgeois capitalism.

To understand how this multiple plurality of perspectives played out in Weber's intellectual trajectory, we must start with the question whether there is a main work that would dominate or sum up the whole body of research and reflection. The traditional but misguided assumption that *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* was such a work was irreversibly discredited in German debates connected to the *Gesamtausgabe*. An alternative view was put forward by Friedrich Tenbruck, who argued that the collected essays on the sociology of religion should be regarded as Weber's principal text, on the grounds that they developed an evolutionary theory not formulated as such anywhere in other writings. That claim has also been rejected; the predominant opinion is now that the texts posthumously collected in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* and the essays on the sociology of religion (also posthumously published, but prepared by Weber) represent two projects, complementary but unfinished. The following discussion will adhere to this reading, but with several important qualifications. They will put us on the track of conceptual reflections that unfold in the background of the two projects, though not in equal measure. If the projects can be

described as research programs, the conceptual level involves a problematic, in the sense outlined above.

The qualifications are partly based on the exceptionally illuminating work of Peter Ghosh (2014), who has thrown new light on the *Protestant Ethic* and its place in Weber's work. His conclusions differ sharply from influential earlier views. According to an interpretation defended by Talcott Parsons and for some time widely accepted by Weber scholars in the English-speaking world, the *Protestant Ethic* demonstrated that a certain religious culture – that of ascetic Protestantism – was crucial to the rise of modern capitalism in the West; the essays on India and China had then reinforced this thesis by showing that a capitalist breakthrough did not happen where this factor – or a comparable one – was not present. Closer reading of Weber's texts (not least due to German debates moving beyond the Parsonian straitjacket) revealed this to be a vast oversimplification, incompatible with the added content of the essays on India and China; notwithstanding the overall title referring to economic ethics, they had moved towards more complex analyses of cultural worlds. As a result of this correction, the *Protestant Ethic* came to be seen as merely the first instalment of a more long-term and broadly conceived project, surpassed in importance and perhaps superseded by later work. An offshoot of this interpretive line was the claim that Weber's 1919–1920 lectures on social and economic history had proposed a final theory of modern capitalism, reducing the argument of the *Protestant Ethic* to a partial perspective [*Collins 1986*]. As shown in the editorial introduction to the corresponding volume of the *Gesamtausgabe* [*MWG III/6*], the textual evidence does not support such speculations. Weber's last thoughts on modern capitalism did not depart from the ideas of the *Protestant Ethic* in any significant ways; his additions to its 1920 edition did not amount to a revision. It is true that the 1919–1920 lectures contain a more detailed distinction between external and internal – in other words: structural-institutional and cultural-ethical – aspects of capitalism than any earlier part of Weber's work; but in principle, this analysis stays within the dichotomy of *Form* and *Geist,* already formulated in the *Protestant Ethic*.

Against the devaluation of the *Protestant Ethic,* Ghosh argues that it can still be read as a centerpiece of Weber's work. The key reason backing this assessment is the central role attributed to the idea of the vocation (*Beruf*), traced back to its origins in ascetic Protestantism, shown to have found its most transformative (but also, in the long run, most self-defeating) expression in the historical dynamic of modern capitalism, and theorized as a formative component of modern culture, broadly defined. It is not being identified as the single decisive cause of the modern capitalist breakthrough; Weber is too aware of the infinite complexity of causal interconnections to make that kind of claim. Rather, the point is to grasp a cultural orientation that has a double impact: it lends a specific charge to capitalist development and links it to a wider social-historical context. As Weber repeatedly stressed, the argument of the *Protestant Ethic* is incomplete, and Ghosh documents his plans (and his publisher's pressure) to continue it. That did not happen; instead, Weber embarked on the two major projects mentioned above. Both of them can be understood as indirect continuations of the *Protestant Ethic*: they explore broader horizon suggested but not thematized in Weber's 1904–1905 essays. On one hand, the "social orders and forces" (to use Weber's own terms) related to and interacting with the economic sphere had to be brought into conceptual focus; that task was tackled in successive parts and versions of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. On the other hand, the case of transformative Protestantism

invited comparison with other cultural worlds, beginning with those most markedly different from European patterns; the essays on India and China pursued that aim, and a study of Islam was in the making but not brought to fruition.

The transition to this two-pronged inquiry was not quite direct; Ghosh is more attentive than most Weber scholars have been to the fact that there was a brief return to work on classical antiquity after the completion of the *Protestant Ethic*. Weber published the final version of his text on agrarian relations in antiquity in 1908. As Ghosh shows, the main reason for this detour was that it enabled Weber to clarify both the general concept of capitalism and the differences between its modern and premodern versions (as well as the corresponding long-term perspectives). Apart from that, the most obvious comment to be made from the viewpoint of present scholarship is that Weber's interpretation of ancient history, and more specifically of its final Roman phase, is in some ways surprisingly close to Marxist views; the affinity is clearest when the discussion turns to problems of an economy based on slavery, its dependence on wars of conquest and its decline when they ground to a halt. Late antiquity is now predominantly seen as a time of multilinear transformation, rather than simple decline and fall, and the role of politics and religion is given more weight than in Weber's account.

Politics and religion figure prominently in the two major projects, but – as will be seen – not without some difficulties in defining their domains and interrelations. To get closer to such problems, we must begin with a brief glance at the division as such. It is not a complete mutual separation of two research programs. As Ghosh notes, results of the comparative research on world religions were incorporated into the writings that became *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*; the section on religious communities, now published as a separate volume of the *Gesamtausgabe* [*MWG I/22-2*], reflects this cross-substantiation. To a much more limited extent, insights into the sociology of power (primarily linked to the typology of rule) entered into the essays on the economic ethics of world religions. Such overlaps raise questions about the very distinction between two projects. In my view, it can only be duly understood and defended if we add a point that is missing in Ghosh's interpretation. Notwithstanding the fact that they are written from specific angles (more complex than the title suggests), and despite Weber's reluctance to admit any kind of totalizing intention, the comparative studies of world religions did develop into openings to a comparative analysis of civilizations, with particular emphasis on their core cultural patterns. That breakthrough is the decisive reason to distinguish this part of Weber's work from those that went into the making of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.

To conclude this characterization of the two projects, their different levels and directions of inbuilt self-reflection should be noted. In the case of the one resulting in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft,* a rethinking of issues and presuppositions led to a radical but very incomplete revision. Two aspects of that outcome are of major importance. On the substantive side, the sociology of rule (*Herrschaft*) was reconceptualized in a way that provided clearer categories (the three types of legitimacy), but did not get far enough to rework the historical content of the earlier version and remained ambivalent about some key questions (notably democratic legitimacy).[5] With regard to basic assumptions and orientations,

[5] English translations of *Herrschaft* have varied. Parsons rendered it as "authority", but this is quite misleading; later translators preferred "domination", but "rule" has the advantage that it underlines the connection to the state.

Weber came to recognize the need for definitions of operative concepts; he also took the further step of identifying this line of reflection with a grounding of sociology, geared to the double task of refuting speculative misconceptions and spelling out the implicit guidelines of ongoing research (his own and that of others).

There are no comparably significant reflexive turns in texts belonging to the other project; but a certain degree of self-clarifying effort, expressed in short and tentative statements, was required to sustain the move to multi-civilizational levels. Three texts of that kind stand out as particularly instructive, all written during the late phase of Weber's work. The first in chronological order, and arguably the most important, is the *Zwischenbetrachtung* (intermediate consideration), inserted between the essays on China and India in the 1920 publication (there is, however, a slightly earlier and somewhat less elaborated version, traditionally treated as a part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* but now published in the separate volume on religious communities [*MWS I/22-2: 141–157*]). Next in line is the concluding chapter of the essay on India, where Weber sets out to define general characteristics of "Asiatic religiosity" [*MW I/20: 253–264*]. It is one of his most confusing and least discussed texts, but closer examination will reveal genuine problems behind the chaotic surface. The third and last is the abovementioned introduction (*Vorbemerkung*) to the essays on the sociology of religion. These intermediate reflections, as they might all be described, illustrate three things more salient in this late phase of Weber's work than before: a vast range of themes interrelated in ways yet to be further clarified, plans for future fields of research and theorizing, and an enduring ambiguity of key concepts in progress.

Beyond Capitalism and Bureaucracy

As a qualification to this picture of a multifocal agenda, we may look for recurrent thematic fixtures, signs of Weber's dominant interests surfacing across the divides and distances between his multiple domains of inquiry. Following Peter Ghosh, three such keystones can be identified: religion, capitalism and bureaucracy. They constitute the core of his framework for the genealogy and interpretation of the modern world. Although he never proposed or even hinted at a monocausal explanation of the transition to modernity, he clearly saw the articulating scope and transformative potential of religious significations as the most promising starting-point for a comprehensive analysis of various factors converging in a breakthrough. The specific role of paradoxes in the genesis of modern culture, exemplified by the destinies of ascetic Protestantism, was best understood in a religious context; for Weber, this was an important consideration. As for the formative forces active after the transition, Weber's emphasis on modern capitalism (culminating in its description as "the most fateful force of the modern world" in the *Vorbemerkung*) is an uncontested focal point. Some scholars (e.g. Basso 2021) would claim that the modern state, with its monopoly of legislation, is the other main shaper of modern history; but it is a well-established fact that Weber hesitated between different definitions of the state (more will be said on that below), and when he dealt with the modern state, which he even considered equating with statehood *tout court*, its bureaucratic rationality was the unequivocal defining feature. It was also the meeting-ground of capitalist development and state formation.

These observations on Weber's abidingly dominant interests raise a question only briefly mooted by Ghosh, but deserving of further discussion. It has to do with Weber's

conceptual armory and the specific weight of ideal types in that context. It seems clear that the Weberian concepts of religion, capitalism and bureaucracy, as such, are not ideal types, but that ideal types come into play when the task is to describe them from specific angles. Weber was notoriously reluctant to define religion, but he could not have embarked on a comparative study of religions and their socio-economic impact without some kind of pre-comprehension; for one thing, such a preliminary perspective is involved when he classifies an important tradition (Confucianism) as a doubtful borderline example of religion. The problem reappears on the level of particular religious formations. Ghosh specifically notes that asceticism, as defined in Weber's general sociology of religion, is an ideal type, but ascetic Protestantism is not; it is a common label for a concrete grouping of religious confessions. In the case of capitalism, the conceptual constellation is somewhat different. The claim that the history of capitalism begins with ancient civilizations is backed up by an ideal-typical general definition, but when it comes to diverse historical types, capitalism turns out to be a complex phenomenon whose elements and variations must be examined in multiple contexts. Modern capitalism is not always approached from the same angle; the capitalist dynamic of the ancient Roman economy and its reversal are contextualized in a different way; hints at capitalist trends in other historical settings are not taken to comparable lengths. Finally, nobody doubts the ideal-typical character of Weber's section on bureaucracy in the earlier part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft,* but this is first and foremost an interpretation of modern bureaucracy, and the references to patrimonial bureaucracy do not amount to an alternative ideal type (the very concept of patrimonialism is so vague and sweeping that it might even be seen as an example of counter-productive ideal-typization). The more general problem posed by these conceptual issues has to do with the justification and direction of hermeneutical amendments to Weber's ways of theorizing. There are several possible openings to that line of interpretation, but in the present regard, it is the interplay of historical context and theoretical construction that calls for clarifying remarks. Ideal types are undeniably characteristic of Weber's scholarly approach (though not invented by him); the other side of that matter is their grounding in holistic but open-ended conceptualizing of historical patterns (epochs, cultural worlds or institutional complexes), within and across which the ideal types are applied. The second focus, less frequently discussed than the first, was what Adorno had in mind when he praised Weber (after denouncing his positivist inclinations) for grasping the importance of constellations [*Adorno 1966*].

If the three main matters of interest are to be seen as historical fields and forces (aspects of the history that gave rise to modernity as we know it), more must be said about the dynamics of that domain. Here we can link up with Wolfgang Mommsen's argument about rationalization and charisma as the two opposed but complementary modes of historical change. The fundamental ambiguity of the former concept has already been noted; the notion of charisma is ambiguous in a more substantive sense. Its most widely accepted meaning refers to leadership, both religious and political. As Mommsen [*1982: 97–143*] shows, its place in Weber's vision of history is more complex than this popular usage would suggest. The concept of charisma refers to creative discontinuity in a general sense, and in contrast to the processual continuity implied by the concept of rationalization; thus defined, it may be understood as a displaced offshoot of Weber's emphatically outlined but underdeveloped concept of culture, and the phenomenon of exemplary or transformative

individuals is one of its manifestations, recurrent in multiple fields but not the only one. To complete the picture, one step beyond Mommsen's interpretation is needed. The concept to be added is that of *Entzauberung*, to be defined in relation to the two others. On one hand, it is obviously grounded in the concept of rationalization, but it is not simply a radicalizing turn of that process; the fact that its logic finds its final expression in relation to the world (*Entzauberung der Welt*) shows that it takes rationalizing trends to a new level. On the other hand, it challenges charisma in a more fundamental way than mere rationalization does. Rationalizing processes can result in a preservation of charisma, but *Entzauberung* tends towards an elimination of meaning, and is thus in frontal conflict with the charismatic creation of new meaning. It is a significant feature of Weber's late phase that he was increasingly aware of this cultural dynamic, but uncertain about its ultimate destiny; the concluding sentences of the 1920 edition of the *Protestant Ethic* admit the possibility of future charismatic innovations.

The next step will take off from Ghosh's argument, but move beyond the horizon of immanent interpretation, towards a conceptual mapping along post-Weberian lines though not without a background Weberian inspiration. As I will try to show, the enduring focal points identified by Ghosh are also potential starting-points for a restructuring of the whole theoretical field that they mark out. They entail implicit references to a broader context, thus providing scope for alternative interpretations and – if that possibility is taken to ultimate lengths – a shift to different views of their internal patterns as well as their interrelations. This use of Weber's work fits the model of a problematic, rather than the two other modes of reading.

References to capitalism in Weber's writings reflect three different perspectives. On the most elementary level, the general and ideal-typical definition of capitalism as identical with the pursuit of ever-renewed *gain*, of "*profitability* (*Rentabilität*)" [*MWS I/18: 3*]. This denotes a continuous and rational mode of economic activity (*Wirtschaften*) and is not far removed from Marx's conception of capitalism as an economic regime of perpetual accumulation. In other formulations Weber adds the point that to qualify as capitalistic, this pursuit of gain must be peaceful; that implies some reservations about the notion of war or booty capitalism, repeatedly mentioned in both premodern and modern contexts. It would seem to represent an intermediate stage between capitalism proper and the mere quest for "the greatest possible monetary gain" [*MSW I/18: 2*]. The second perspective is the one applied in the *Protestant Ethic* and the late lectures on economic history, and also involved in the contrast drawn between ancient and modern constellations. Capitalism appears as part of a more complex socio-cultural context, dependent on and interacting with other components; in the modern setting, that is primarily a matter of connections to religious culture and bureaucratic statehood (with the long-term prospect of a capitalist dynamic undermining the foundations of religious life and fusing with the expansion of bureaucratic power). This vision of the future points towards a third perspective, most clearly expressed in the *Zwischenbetrachtung*. Here the economic sphere appears as an "order of life" among others, and as such a particularly alien rival of religion. The orientation of a rational economic order is determined by monetary prices that result from the struggle of human interests on the market, and this trend becomes fully dominant in the "cosmos of the modern rational capitalist economy" [*MWS I/19: 214*]. The metaphor of a cosmos reappears towards the end of the *Protestant Ethic*; it suggests a view of capitalism

as not just a part of a whole, but a part with claims to shape the whole and resources to implement them. In other words, this is the capitalist economy as a world order (also, and above all, in the phenomenological sense referring to a universe of meaning).

The third perspective (and, more generally speaking, the whole conceptual framework adumbrated in the *Zwischenbetrachtung*) is arguably the most ground-breaking approach in Weber's theoretical work. But it is not taken very far; neither the autonomy of each order nor their interaction and changing overall constellation are theorized in a conclusive way. The task of taking it further is therefore correspondingly important for the articulation of a post-Weberian problematic. To outline a pathway to that goal, we may start with another look at Weber's moves from elementary to complex definitions of capitalism. The interpretation of capitalism as a mode of economic activity presupposes some understanding of the latter; Weber's version of this prior step is summed up in his "Basic sociological categories of economic action" [*Weber 2019: 143–334*]. In a preamble, Weber explains his intention to avoid "the much-debated concept of value" [*ibid.: 143*]. This can no doubt be read as an allusion to the unfruitful controversy between Austrian and Marxian economists; the polarizing distinction between objective and subjective theories of value had led the whole debate astray. Marx's theory of value was vitiated by inadequate concepts (as I argued in a much older publication [*Arnason 1976*], the crucial flaw was Marx's failure to distinguish the domains of production and institution). But the marginalist critique could only target a derivative part of Marx's argument (the problem of price formation). The core problematic remained unsettled. It is understandable that Weber preferred to bypass this unpromising terrain, but there was a price to pay for that decision. His definitions of economic action and its ramifications are rather convoluted, but the translator, Keith Tribe, sums them up well: "the object of economic activity" is defined "as the acquisition of utilities" [*ibid.: 139*]. The levelling concept of utility replaces the discarded concept of value. As Tribe notes, this does not prevent Weber from achieving a synthesis of insights due to the Austrian school and the German historical school; but a third potential source, the classical tradition from Smith to Marx, was sidelined. The concept of wealth was a master key to that line of thought, brought to prominence by Smith's *Wealth of Nations* but also important for the critical as well as the utopian perspectives of Marx's work. *Capital* begins with a statement about the form of wealth prevailing in the capitalist mode of production; the inadequacy of the concepts that Marx then uses to spell out his message (principally the concept of value as a *sui generis* object produced by abstract labour) obscures the meaning of the starting-point. It reappears when Marx reaches the point where general orientations of an anti-capitalist alternative have to be indicated; the prime defining feature is a reconceiving of wealth, now identified with the free development of human capacities.

Compared to the concept of utility, wealth is a more dynamic category, in more senses than one. It refers not only to the satisfaction of needs, as does the focus on utility, but also to the resultant expansion and diversification of needs; that development can be seen as a form of wealth, and the same applies to the correspondingly enlarged scope for human activity and creation. A further implication is that the concept of wealth connotes a basic but historically variable and vastly increasable capacity to produce a surplus (for further discussion of that aspect, see Arnason 2022). It is important to note the multiple levels and guises of surplus wealth. One of the achievements in question is the gain of time for activity and/or enjoyment free from the constraints of imperative utility; this variety of

surplus has been invoked in otherwise very different contexts of theorizing on society and history. Marshall Sahlins's conception of the "first affluent society" singled out prehistoric communities that had supposedly managed their pursuit of material livelihood in a way that maximized free time; Marx's utopian "realm of freedom" was a vision of future technological progress making free time the dominant dimension of human life. More realistic approaches to historical experience will – not least – raise the question of power exercised and cultural models applied in relation to expanding temporal horizons. That is, more generally speaking, the road to be taken beyond the economic sphere; the focus on surplus leads to closer examination of its political and cultural uses and definitions.

Seen in this light, Weber's emphasis on utility as the central determinant of economic action is a concession to the generalized utilitarianism that critics have shown to be a persistent temptation for the social sciences. This is all the more striking if we recall the powerful (though largely implicit) argument against utilitarianism contained in the *Protestant Ethic*. A similar claim can be made for the analyses of bureaucratic power; not that utilitarian considerations are alien to the rationalizing processes unfolding in this context, but there is another very distinct force at work: a drive for the maximization of power. We should now take a closer look at the social and historical dimensions explored in those texts, with a view to more specific comprehension of their links to the economic sphere. Weber was well aware of such links, as shown by his classification of social phenomena as economically determined, economically conditioned and economically relevant. But his actual tracing of the connections leaves something to be desired, and as will be seen, that also has to do with incomplete and one-sided accounts of non-economic aspects.

Bureaucracy is, for a variety of reasons, the central theme in Weber's sociology of rule, and the topic that, in one way or another, guides the discussion of all others. It is the basis for Weber's most sweeping construction of a developmental line, positing a continuity from Ancient Egypt through late antiquity to the modern West (MWG I/6; this was a kind of concluding finale to Weber's study of the ancient world). It is also crucial to his analysis of modernity, with regard to observable trends as well as expected outcomes and likely regression; there is no denying the strong admixture of cultural pessimism in Weber's thought, although it should not be mistaken for the whole story. Admittedly, capitalism rather than bureaucracy is singled out as "the most fateful force of the modern world", but Weber also argues that bureaucracy is a condition, a component and an ultimate horizon of capitalist development. The rationalizing impact of the bureaucratic state created a supportive environment for the capitalist economy; the internal power structure of capitalist enterprise and organization became a bureaucratizing force in its own right; and in the longer run, the convergence of economic and political roads to bureaucratization tended to undermine the original liberating dynamic of capitalism. Last but not least, the problematic of bureaucracy became the centrepiece of a comparative project linking the general theme of power to the specific tasks of theorizing the state (the latter connection is the main reason why the translation of *Herrschaft* as "rule" is to be preferred to the previously common "domination").

The sociology of rule is a core part of the macro-project traditionally associated with *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. The general introduction to the first version is followed by a section on "bureaucratism", characterized as the most familiar, most rational and distinctively modern type of rule [*MWS I/22-4: 11*]. Bureaucracy, seen as a model of rational

rule, thus becomes a guiding example for the whole field in question; the main categories applied to other patterns of rule are either constructed as approximations or as marked contrasts to the bureaucratic paradigm. The former approach produces the concept of patrimonial bureaucracy, rather loosely defined and prone to a levelling portrayal of pre-modern and non-Western political regimes. The latter one brings in the protean concept of charisma, meant to signal a polar opposite but in fact overflowing that boundary in multiple directions. More will in due course be said about that problem. To clarify the background, loose ends of the whole framework should be noted; they appear at two different anchorages of Weber's project. At the outset, the indispensable but very perfunctorily treated concept of power is set aside after serving as a stepping-stone to the concept of rule; as Edith Hanke [*2022: 26*] notes, Weber demarcates *Herrschaft* as a "partial domain" (*Teilmenge*) of a "comprehensive but indeterminate concept of power"; he never did anything much to clarify the more At the intended summit of the argument, the theory of statehood, there is an inconclusive wavering between different definitions. Stefan Breuer [*1993*] distinguishes two Weberian concepts of the state, one singling out the monopoly of legitimate violence as a defining feature and the other equating statehood with the Occidental invention of the rational bureaucratic state. Breuer's own later work on the charismatic state [*2014*] shows that a third alternative is at least foreshadowed in Weber's writings; it centres on the monopolization of contact with divinity or other sources of extraordinary powers. Finally, the late lectures on *Staatslehre* include a very brief but potentially significant hint: the decisive characteristic of the state is said to be that it is obeyed [*MWG III/7: 69*]. If we spell this out as the ability of a power centre to impose rules within a given territory, it may be the most useful guide to the elementary structures of statehood. But since all the diverse definitions are to be found in Weber's late work, the hesitation had obviously not been overcome; it would seem to be due to the dominant interest in bureaucracy overshadowing the more basic issue of statehood as such.

Weber's second sociology of rule is very different from the first. It is structured around the well-known tripartite typology of rule, in much more rigorous conceptual terms than was the first instalment. This revised version was first outlined in a concluding section of the introduction to the collected essays on the sociology of religion, printed as a journal article in 1915; but there is nothing to suggest that it grew out of the unfolding engagement with Chinese and Indian civilizations. It is, if anything, less sensitive to lessons from the world beyond Europe than was the voluminous first instalment (thus revealing that an external overlap of the two macro-projects did not necessarily lead to substantive contact). The 1915 text is presented in cautious terms, indicating that the tripartite division is constructed for a specific purpose and is not the only conceivable approach of its kind. The purpose is easily identified: the three ideal types help to pinpoint different configurations of personal and impersonal rule. This criterion is clearly inspired by a vision of modernity as a far reaching (but not complete) departure from the over-personalized forms of power that had marked much of human history and been – in the guise of modern survivals – the target of Weber's passionate criticism.

Legal rule, occasionally but not systematically also labelled legal-rational, is a model of power exercised on the basis of rules, minimizing the personal element, and bureaucratic rule is identified as its purest form [*MWS I/19: 24*]. An obvious objection is that this view obscures the role of democracy in modern government; Weber's implicit counter-argument

is that the stabilization of democracy depends on laws about voting an on constitutional rules about the exercise of supreme power. As will be seen, this answer turned out to be less than sufficient; the levelling logic of the basic category called for correctives. Similarly – in fact even more – levelling implications are encoded in the two other types. Traditional rule is strongly associated with everyday habits and conventions, believed to go back to the beginning of time or at least to be of indefinitely remote origin; the 1915 text refers to the "belief in the holiness of the everyday" [*MWS I/ 19: 23*]. This is obviously an ideal type, but of a disturbingly reductionistic kind; it is strangely out of tune with basic facts about traditions. Comparative studies of their dynamics have not failed to underline aspects at odds with Weber's choice of focus: times and spaces devoted to reactivation of sacred sources, more or less mythologized foundational actions and episodes, different views on the world and the human condition that set civilizational traditions apart from each other. Orthodox Weberians might object that these aspects can be subsumed under the concept of charisma. That would be a flight from bad to worse; "charisma" is Weber's common denominator for an extremely varied range of phenomena, but its qualifications for that role are never clearly stated. The definition of charismatic rule as "specifically non-everyday" (*ausseralltäglich*) is strictly speaking a contradiction in terms: *ausseralltäglich* is an eminently unspecific concept. Weber makes frequent use of it, not least in religious contexts, and it is tempting to relate that to his famous description of himself as "religiously unmusical", but neither irreligious nor anti-religious. The most plausible interpretation is that he claimed to be insensitive to religious meanings, but neither hostile to religion nor ignorant of its historical importance. *Ausseralltäglich* is the kind of word likely to be used by somebody hesitating to commit himself to the idea of the sacred.

Weber evidently assumed, without further argument, that the concept of charisma was equally applicable to religious and political fields, though not to the economic domain. Charisma is defined, in similarly abrupt terms, as a distinctively anti-economic force. Another dimension of double meaning is the intertwining of personal and impersonal versions; there is no denying that Weber was particularly interested in individual embodiments of charisma, but he did admit the recurrent possibility of its de-personalization, and some formulations come close to suggesting a collective version. Weber refers to mass emotions as an expression of charisma [*MWS I/22-4: 169*], and although the term is not used, his account of the creative transformations achieved in and by the Occidental city seems easily compatible with the idea of a collective charisma. Even if we accept to focus on cases where individual excellence and socio-cultural significance are closely connected, the heterogeneity of such occurrences is striking. Religious revelation is something very different from political or military virtuosity; a mass-murdering conqueror and empire builder is hardly to be understood through the same prism as the founder of a philosophical tradition. But the most adventurous twist to Weber's notion of charisma comes in a late addition to his sociology of rule: he moves to include democratic legitimacy in his typology (a first glimpse of it, without a proper name, had already been recorded in the work on the city, difficult to date and to locate between the two macro-projects). To minimize the departure from the established version, democracy is presented as "an antiauthoritarian transformation of charisma" [*Weber 2019: 409*]. That statement seems even more puzzling if the original German expression, *Umdeutung*, is taken into account. The verb *deuten* is commonly used in the sense of interpreting, and that reminds us of Weber's remark in the

essay on objectivity, to the effect that the theory of interpretation is still in its infancy. If democracy is based on an interpretation that turns a primary authoritarian meaning into its extreme opposite, one would expect some clarification of the very remarkable interpretive process in question. No such thing is forthcoming.

If we survey the whole range of references to charisma in Weber's work, it is tempting to recall Hegel's much-quoted comment on Schelling's conception of the absolute: it is the night in which all cows are black.[6] In an earlier publication [*Arnason 1988*], I argued that the concept of charisma is best understood as a disguised or displaced return of the concept of culture, as outlined in the essay on objectivity. Central to the charismatic aspect of history and society, as seen by Weber, is the creation of new interpretive and evaluative perspectives on the world. I do not disavow this claim, but I now think that a more differentiated version is needed. The concept of charisma is not simply the resurgent concept of culture in a new dressing; it is a multifunctional substitute concept, applicable – as Weber sees it – to a variety of social and historical contexts. Its manifest overstretch calls for alternative approaches. This does not mean that it should be discarded; as I will try to show, it can be reconstructed in a significantly downsized sense. But first we need a closer look at the symptoms of trouble.

The Religio-Political Nexus

One of the parts getting short shrift when Weber revised the sociology of rule was a long final section on "state and hierocracy". The latter term refers to power structures emerging within religious communities and encroaching, in one way or another, on the domain of political rule. Weber is, in other words, dealing with what I have elsewhere [*Arnason 2014*] called the religio-political nexus, but in a somewhat one-sided fashion. Three core components of this recurrent but very variable historical phenomenon may be distinguished. It involves a constitutive role of religious meanings in the definition of political power; an intertwining of religious and political institutions, not too close for competition and conflict; and a changing, sometimes relatively stable but never uncontested balance of power between the two sides. Weber's discussion is mainly about the last aspect, with some reference to the second, but without any use of the concept of institution. It is the first-named aspect that receives least attention, and a brief reflection on premises and consequences of this omission will pave the way for a more far-reaching argument.

Weber distinguishes three versions of the relationship between political and clerical power [*MWS I/22-4: 173*]. The first (also, it seems, historically speaking) is a rulership imagined either as an embodiment of divine forces or delegated by them, and legitimized by priests who hold religious power. Another variety is the direct takeover of political power by priests; for Weber, this is the only version that can be described as a theocracy. Finally, there is the type that Weber calls "caesaropapistic" and describes as a very common pattern; it involves a supreme authority of secular rulers over churchly matters. This is

[6] It is almost tempting to suggest a more disreputable comparison. One photo of the Trumpist attack on the American Comgress on 6 January 2021 shows a rioter holding a placard with the slogan "Jesus is my saviour, Trump is my president". Needless to say, I am not implying that this activist had read Weber, but the overstretched concept of charisma, more seriously misused by later authors than by Weber himself, is undeniably conducive to the kind of amalgamation that can end in a continuity from Jesus to Trump.

supposedly the case in the Chinese, Byzantine, Turkish and Persian empires, but also in the city-states of Occidental antiquity and the "enlightened despotisms" of early modern European states; even the modern British and German monarchs who figure as heads of their reformed churches are survivals of the same regime. Weber adds that "some minimum of theocratic or caesaropapistic elements" is usually present in any kind of legitimate power, and that this reflects the magic origins of charisma [*MWS I/22-4: 173–175*].

Before going on to specific criticisms, a comment on general reasons for dissent is in order. The phenomenon conspicuously absent from Weber's typology is sacral rulership in the strong sense, as its own source of meaning, dignity and legitimacy. An enduring and widespread version of the religio-political nexus is thus left out of the picture; so is the variety of the forms that the interconnection of divine and monarchic power can assume, as well as the singular importance of the most radical attempt to relativize it (the ancient Jewish conception of monotheism). To sustain these points, it is necessary to accept Durkheim's concept of the sacred as an essential complement and corrective to Weber's way of theorizing religion. This does not entail agreement with Durkheim's sociological reductionism; it is the sacred as the structuring and meaning-giving centre of a world-view, not the sacred as a self-projection of society, that is to be brought in. Instead of Durkheim's reductionist turn, we can draw on the contributions of phenomenological thinkers that have amplified the concept of the sacred through analyses portraying it as a fusion of meaning, power and reality, as well as those of anthropologists who reassessed Durkheim's work on the Australian aborigines and introduced a dimension of the mundane in addition to those of the sacred and the profane. Compared to those lines of thought, Weber's ventures into the same region seem notably hesitant; when he alludes to the German term for the sacred, he does so in a way that downgrades its meaning. His definition of traditional rule in the introduction to essays on the sociology of religion refers to a "holiness of the everyday" [*Heiligkeit des Alltäglichen, MWS I/19: 23*], thus levelling the religious connotations to the status of habits and conventions. In a similar vein, the short and late (but not precisely datable) text on three pure types of legitimate rule [*MWS I/22-4: 217–225*] invokes a belief in the holiness of orders that appear to have existed from time immemorial. On another level, the eclipse of the sacred is completed through the genealogical conjunction of magic and charisma. The former concept is too reductionistic, the latter too sweeping and unfocused to grasp the specific meaning of the sacred. Weber's approach fails to match Durkheim's distinction between magic and religion.

To back up these claims, some landmarks in the history of sacral rulership should be noted. This broadly defined concept covers different interpretations of the relationship between human rule and its divine source; it may be understood as embodiment, descent or delegation. The differences between archaic civilizations, as well as within the history of each case, are still a matter of debate among historians. In particular, contrasts between Egyptian and Mesopotamian pattern have been extensively analyzed and shown to be less simple than first assumed, but still significant. In the context of the Ancient Near East, the Jewish transformation of political theology may be seen as a critical response to both Egyptian and Mesopotamian models. As Jan Assmann [*2002*] argues, the idea of a divine creator and legislator amounts to a transfer of sovereignty from the terrestrial to the celestial ruler, and thereby to a fundamental relativization of kingship. At the very least, older Near Eastern traditions of sacred rulership were negated. But as later developments were to show, the

radicalized monotheism that began in ancient Israel opened up new possibilities for sacral legitimation; they were realized in different ways in the two monotheistic traditions that took off from Judaism. The fusion of Christianity with Roman imperial power was a landmark; recent scholarship [especially *Heather 2022*] suggests that the emperor acted to all intents and purposes as the head of the Church, but even so, Weber's concept of caesaropapism is hardly applicable. The emperors were – despite repeated attempts – unable to gain full control over the development of theological doctrines and disputes; in other words, a deficit of ideological power. At a later stage, the medieval conflict between emperor and pope is best understood as a schism within the religio-political nexus. The consolidation of the Catholic Church bore some resemblance to state formation (noted by historians who speak of a papal monarchy); as the political summit of Western Christendom, the emperor could claim and try to extend a certain sacral authority of his own. As for the other domain of Christendom, the traditional image of the Byzantine empire as the caesaropapist regime par excellence has been subjected to criticism by scholars who argue that the relationship between imperial and clerical power was too complicated and variable for this term to be appropriate. In the Islamic world, a very emphatic original vision of sacral rule gave way to a more complexly articulated differentiation of religion and politics. Some recent scholarship, to my mind convincing, supports the idea that the caliphate was initially conceived as an institution deputizing for God, not for the prophet; later on, resurgent Persian notions of kingship, further reinforced by Central Asian conquerors, were accompanied and counterbalanced by more independent versions of religious authority, represented by the ulema and later by the Sufi orders (the Shiite version also acknowledged the ultimate but latent supremacy of the hidden Imam).

Further complications, signaled but not fully theorized in Weber's writings, emerge when Chinese and Indian patterns of rule are added to the picture. Weber had obvious problems with categorizing the Chinese state; the ultra-elastic concept of patrimonialism does not take us very far. More interestingly, but only occasionally and without further clarification, he refers to a Chinese church-state (*Kirchenstaat*); that idea was later taken up by John Lagerwey [*2010*], who suggested that if we want a European analogy to the Chinese monarchy, we should imagine a complete fusion of imperial and papal roles. That kind of synthesis helps to explain the extraordinary durability of the Chinese version of sacral rulership, as well as its ability to survive major social change. But there are other aspects that reveal the limits of the imagined European analogy. The sacral framework of the Chinese imperial centre was shaped by a shift from personal divinity to impersonal order; it started at an early stage but took a long time to be completed and was not immune to backlashes initiated by ambitious emperors. In any case, the imaginary signification of a sacral cosmic order was the paradigm that prevailed during the most representative and consequential phases of Chinese history. The prime task of the ruler was to act as a connecting link between cosmic and social order. In that mission, he was to be assisted by advisers and subordinates of a particular kind; as a social group, they had some of the characteristics of a bureaucracy (that was the feature of most interest to Weber), but they also represented a specific kind of intellectual elite, and if we follow Lagerwey (and others) in stressing the religious dimension of Confucianism, their role is – up to a point – comparable to those of priesthoods in other cultures. This does not mean that they legitimized the ruler in the sense represented by the first model in Weber's typology. But the ideal image of

an adviser risking status and perhaps life in remonstrating with a misguided ruler became a staple theme of the Chinese tradition; and the assumption that a whole dynasty could lose its legitimizing mandate was accepted as a principle of political culture.

The Chinese example highlights the dependence of the religio-political nexus on cultural horizons. The transfer of sacral significance and authority from personal divinity to cosmic order involves a comprehensive reorientation of meanings lent to the world and of attitudes to it; it thus links the typology of states and hierocracies – and through them the whole sociology of rule – to Weber's half-submerged concept of culture. But it also underlines the need for further differentiations on that level. The concept of world acceptance (*Weltbejahung*) calls for specific references to the kind and degree of human intervention that is required in different versions of this anthropological stance; the world acceptance that Weber attributes to primitive religions is not the same cultural orientation as a pattern that demands a ruler entrusted with the maintenance of harmony between humans and the cosmos, a tradition with authoritatively defined classics to guide this effort, and a systematically trained cultural elite to put the teachings into practice.

Another example enables us to take this line of argument one step further. When Weber broadened his frame of reference to include comparative analyses of major non-European civilizations, he encountered several phenomena that pointed to new perspectives and necessary reconsiderations of earlier assumptions based on a more limited range of evidence, but the implications are often less than fully spelled out. One such discovery stands out in his essay on India. He notes that early developments led to a particularly clear separation of two prominent elite groups, priests and warriors, and that nothing comparable happened in China. He does not elaborate on the contrasting Chinese pattern, but in view of scholarly work done in the meantime, the details are now easy to recapitulate. The basic fact about China is the precocious progress of state formation. The "warring states" mobilized big armies, but after the unification of China, the role and presence of military force was obscured by a dominant political culture that emphasized civil power. Archaic claimants to priesthood were replaced by the cultural elite mentioned above. The development of Daoism as a religion gave rise to a new type of priesthood, but although it became an important force in Chinese society, it was – for official, state-building and central ideological purposes – overshadowed by Confucian traditions in the twin guises of literati and bureaucrats.

The Indian pattern singled out by Weber was characterized by a dominant presence of both priests (Brahmins) and warriors, a clear division between them and a plurality of practical consequences from the separation; it could be construed as a division of labour, but could also lead to alliances and rivalries. Rulers of Indian states mostly came from the warrior stratum, and the socio-cultural regime that prevailed can only be understood as an outcome of a complex and ambiguous historical alliance between Brahmins and kings, with implications and consequences that went far beyond the strategies and situations of actors in search of social power. The Brahmins became legitimizers of kingship, thus – at first sight – fitting into the first category of Weber's typology. But what made the Indian version of the religio-political nexus most distinctive was the counterweight to this relationship. The Brahmins imposed a hierarchy *sui generis*, based on the distinction between pure and impure; it made them superior to kings. This was a type of stratification unknown elsewhere to any comparable degree, and irreducible to the standard sociological notions

of status and prestige. Its specific logic was analyzed by Louis Dumont [*1966*], who drew extensively on Weber's work but went beyond it in his analysis of hierarchy. Historians have – with some justification – criticized his account of the caste order as overly structuralist and oblivious to rivalries that could stretch its principles; but his conception of hierarchy defined by levels of purity remains relevant.

Dumont's work also helps to establish a closer connection between two aspects of Indian civilization, duly emphasized in Weber's essay: the "organic social ethic" of the caste order and the world-rejecting ethos of the most articulate Indian religions. If the ascent to higher levels of purity is equated with growing distance from the entanglements of everyday life, the rejection of the world can be understood as the ultimate radicalization of this trend. It was, as Dumont stresses, embodied in the figure of the "renouncer"; Weber had already argued that this step was taken by intellectuals of two different social proveniences; the versions commonly associated with Hinduism point to Brahmin origins, whereas the affinities of Buddhism were more with the warrior stratum (the relation to kingship is still a matter for scholarly debate). The result was a religious divergence and a long period of coexistence within a shared civilization. The two religious traditions turned out to be unequally equipped for internal and external influence; Hinduism was more capable of penetrating Indian society, Buddhism more successful in spreading across civilizational borders but less so in shaping a distinctive civilization of its own.

There is a further point to be noted, and it applies to both India and China. The shift from personified figures of the sacred to notions of an impersonal higher reality (cosmic order in China, a more transcendent vision of a realm beyond mundane illusions but also a more high-profile coexistence with polytheism in the Indian case) paved the way for more radical reflexivity. It was, in other words, an opening for philosophical reflection. That dimension of cultural history is strikingly absent from Weber's analyses; neither the comments on the realm of knowledge in the *Zwischenbetrachtung* nor the summary of rationalizing processes in the *Vorbemerkung* do anything to clarify the specific aims and achievements of philosophy. It is tempting to explain this as a result of Weber's own original but hesitant relationship to philosophy; he was aware of adopting a philosophical position that was only in part aligned with the neo-Kantian current closest at hand, and of the need for further work on basic issues, but put it off in favour of more pressing historical and sociological tasks.

If we want to add a comparative perspective on philosophy to the civilizational approach pioneered by Weber, the most promising guideline is in my opinion the idea of the "three philosophical civilizations" – China, India and Greece – proposed by Ben-Ami Scharfstein [*1978*]. Having had a brief look at the first two, it remains to take note of the third one, undeniably the most important for the global history of philosophy; as will be seen, the form taken by the religio-political nexus is also important for the road taken by Greek thought. The key aspect was the pattern now known to classical scholars as *polis* religion. This concept does not imply that all religious life was subordinated to the *polis*; what it does mean is that the institutionalized core of religious cult and custom was integrated into the political life of the city-state; in this way, the development of what Weber called hierocracy was blocked (the priesthood became a part of the city's officialdom), and by the same token, there was no driving force and no scope for the imposition of doctrinal orthodoxy. The *polis* that thus encompassed the core of religious life was a political

community, however restrictively defined at the outset, and capable of broadening its basis. Weber's attempt to subsume this pattern under the concept of caesaropapism is therefore misguided; there was no Caesar and no pope (there were tyrants, but durable tyranny was the exception rather than the rule, and did not lead to any significant change in the relationship between *polis* and religion).

The *polis* was, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet [*1981*] put it, "a civilization of political speech" (*une civilisation de la parole politique*). Various other interpreters of Ancient Greece, notably Cornelius Castoriadis and Jean-Pierre Vernant, have highlighted the connection between the self-ordering mode of political life and the autonomy of reason that found an epoch-making expression in philosophical thought. The deliberative element of politics and the disempowered character of religion combined to enable a breakthrough to new ways of articulating human being in the world. It should be added that the new cultural genres of philosophy and tragedy were more involved in dialogue with religion than overly modernistic interpretations have often suggested.

At this point, we should sum up the lessons of the above encounter with Weber's sociology of rule. Four points stand out as essential corrections to Weber's line of argument and as steps towards a reformulation of his problematic (not to be mistaken for a radical break). At the most basic substantive level, the inclusion of sacral rulership and its variations broadens the spectrum of patterns to be compared and theorized. But this thematic extension also has conceptual implications. The reference to the sacred is a cultural definition of power, and its different versions illustrate the diversity of alternative choices in that context; the range of possibilities becomes even more visible when the breaks with sacral rulership, realized in vastly different way in ancient Israel and the Greek *polis*, are taken into account. This is a significant issue in the debate on Weber's sociology of rule. His focus on legitimacy (even stronger in the later version of his typology than in the earlier one) elides the level defined by a later author as "the cultural plasticity of power" [*Pye 1985*].The stress on reasons for acceptance (in other words: the recognition of legitimacy) skates over the point that claims to legitimacy have to be understood if they are to be recognized; that precondition involves the cultural definitions of power, and they may be more or less conducive to absolute obedience, more or less vulnerable to contestation, and more or less open to negotiation.

A cultural definition of power is always embedded in broader constellations of meaning, and that brings us to the third point. The shifts that affect the religio-political nexus are interconnected with changes to cultural articulations of the world; such transformations involve reinterpretations, mutations and relocations of the sacred, as well as the emergence of perspectives that call is centrality into question. In brief, the changing patterns of the religio-political nexus are intertwined with those of culture in the Weberian sense of interpretive and evaluative relations to the world. It would be misguided – and contrary to Weber's views – to attribute general primacy to one side or the other; rather, their relative weight and the modes of their interaction are matters for comparative research. Finally, and as a corollary to the last statement, it should be noted that transformations of the religio-political nexus can – in ways that vary from one civilization to another – open up a space for major cultural innovations and enhanced autonomy of particular spheres (the example of the three philosophical civilizations is a case in point).

To sum up, the above reflections have moved from conspicuously central themes in Weber's work to background categories and domains of inquiry, defined with help of his

indications but also in critical response to shortcuts and omissions. The concept of culture, introduced in a key text but then overshadowed by a pervasive concern with religion, was – in principle – restored to a fundamental role. From the analyses of bureaucracy, with a critical look at the typology of legitimate rule, the focus shifted to the religio-political nexus (not conceptualized as such by Weber) and ultimately to the cultural context of the political. To round off this argument, it seems best to return – very briefly – to the question of the economic sphere and its integration into the context that has already been outlined through a rapprochement of culture and politics; and since the concept of the sacred has proved useful for that purpose, it may serve as a key to problems to be posed in relation to a third domain.

Capitalism Revisited

That approach links up with attempts to identify a religious element in the direct and permanent goals of capitalist economic action, not just in its broader cultural background. Such ideas have been suggested by various authors (Walter Benjamin may have been the first to raise the issue in explicit terms, but without further development). Among recent work, the abovementioned book by Christoph Deutschmann [*2001*] stands out as most insightful; here I will summarize its argument and then add a few words on the connection to Weber's problematic. Deutschmann joins those who see the "pre-monetary" perspective as a major flaw in Marx's theory of value; the generalization of commodities as a form of wealth is only possible in a monetary economy. Over and above its specific functions, money acquires a social signification as the embodiment of abstract wealth. Marx acknowledged that, but did not draw the appropriate conclusions; on this point, his analysis must be upgraded through insights set out in Simmel's *Philosophy of Money.* Deutschmann adds that in a dynamic society, committed to ongoing growth and characterized by incessant technological change, the institution of abstract wealth becomes a promise of absolute wealth – in the sense that it holds out the perspective of unlimited scope for human desires and abilities. The central meaning and dominant position which money – in the form of capital – thus acquires justifies comparison with the role of the sacred in overtly religious societies.

Deutschmann's line of argument invites reflection on some hints and loose ends in Weber's work. The discussion can begin with a well-known remark that precedes his definition of capitalism. Weber stresses that capitalism is not identical with the striving to accumulate more and more wealth (it is of some interest that the Latin expression quoted in this context, *auri sacra fames,* invokes both gold and the sacred). In light of Deutschmann's analysis, we might note that Weber's demarcation of capitalism from this supposedly age-old and cross-cultural mode of behavior overlooks a basic historical fact: Capitalism does not simply discipline and rationalize the drive for wealth; at the same time, the latter is magnified and transmuted by a new historical context. *Auri sacra fames* is reborn and reinvigorated as the commitment to accumulation as an end in itself. Deutschmann links the "promise of absolute wealth" to the concept of imaginary significations, with explicit reference to Castoriadis; it may be added that the imaginary in question is articulated at several different levels. It is already at work in the institution of money as the symbolic incarnation of wealth; a further extension is the belief in permanent self-sustaining growth; and the

vision of financial markets governing the world, harshly refuted by the massive return of great power politics, was a recent and extreme offshoot.

There are other points of contact with Weber's evolving conception of capitalism. He never claimed that the ethic inherited from ascetic Protestantism was the only source contributing to the spirit of modern capitalism, but no attempt was made to construct the more complex model that would have brought in additional factors. The "promise of absolute wealth" is a distinctive component of the capitalist ethos, certainly more durable, reinforceable and capable of broader appeal than the still much-debated Protestant source. Moreover, it bridges the divide between external and internal aspects that was central to the discussion in Weber's lectures on economic history; the self-propelling pursuit of monetary wealth is both an operative principle and an animating vision. On both these levels, it connects with notions of rationality and progress and puts its own stamp on them. This surplus meaning is crucial to the capacity of the economic sphere to project its logic onto a roader social context. But that very point is also a reminder of counter-trends. The totalizing potential of the spheres that Weber describes as orders of life (*Lebensordnungen*) is one of the themes of the *Zwischenbetrachtung*, more implicit than explicit but present enough to allow a distinction between two modes of articulation: the tendency to constitute a separate world and the rivalry that stems from multiple attempts to encompass the socio-cultural realm as a whole. For present purposes, our main concern is with the strictly social ones among Weber's orders, i.e. the economic, the political and the cultural. The last-mentioned one is of course not identified as such by Weber, but it is the domain that takes shape when we add the sphere of "thinking knowledge" (*denkendes Erkennen*) to religion and include philosophy, which does not figure as such in Weber's scheme; the aesthetic sphere is another candidate for inclusion. This reconstructed sphere corresponds, in other words and up to a point, to Hegel's realm of the absolute spirit. As we have seen, the interplay of these three domains is the field of inquiry that emerges from a critical rethinking of central themes in Weber's work. A more detailed analysis of this redefined constellation will be attempted in a later essay. But to conclude, it may be useful to recall the concept of a meta-institution. Durkheim did not use it, but as Gianfranco Poggi [*1972*] has shown, it is a perfect description of his views on religion and its dominant role in the structuration of human societies. The reading of Weber proposed here suggests a few amendments. Most obviously, the meta-institutional role of religion has, throughout a long history, been exercised through the religio-political nexus, the meta-institutional reach is therefore not to be understood as an exclusive attribute of religion. The transformations of the nexus show that the relative weight of meta-institutional forces can change. A further indication of historical change is the modern upgrading of the economic sphere; it acquires a stronger meta-institutional position than at any earlier stage, but that transformative turn can only be understood in the context of a broader historical mutation.

Rather than the codification of a Weberian research program (positing a higher degree of control and transparency than Weber's intellectual odyssey allowed), or the reconstruction of an inevitably truncated Weber paradigm (imposing a closure incompatible with Weber's uniquely multi-perspectivist project), we need a comprehensive transformation of the Weberian problematic, with due attention to lessons yet to be learned from Weber's work, but also in dialogue with thinkers who have – in different ways – moved beyond his horizons.

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To simplify things, I have quoted the volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe* and the *Studienausgabe* as MWG and MWS respectively, with numbers of series and volumes attached. Translations of Weber and other authors are my own, with one exception; I have used Keith Tribe's justly acclaimed translation of the first part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.

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