Max Weber on 'ethnic communities': a critique

MICHAEL BANTON

Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT. An untitled draft found among Weber's posthumous papers was published. In English translation it was given the title 'Ethnic Groups'. In the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* it is titled 'Ethnic Communities'. In this manuscript, Weber treated the feeling of belonging together because of shared ethnic origin as a social construct, underlain by a desire to monopolise power and status. Subsequently, Weber determined to put an end to the use of collectivist concepts, but at the time of writing he treated groups as real entities, instead of using the concept of group as an aid in the explanation of behaviour. The causal connections in ethnic group formation and maintenance have been more closely identified in subsequent sociological analysis.

Near the end of his life Weber (1947: 138) declared that 'In science, each of us knows that what he has accomplished will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years. That is the fate to which science is subjected; it is the very meaning of scientific work.' He believed that objective knowledge could be obtained within the social sciences and that these belonged, together with other sciences, within the German conception of *wissenschaft*, a more inclusive category than the contemporary English-language conception of science. *Wissenschaftlich* knowledge cumulates because 'every scientific "fulfilment" raises new "questions"; it *asks* to be "surpassed" and outdated'. Just prior to this Weber had also averred that 'ideas would certainly not come to mind had we not brooded at our desks and searched for answers with passionate devotion', so the suggestion that discoveries themselves *asked* to be surpassed was just conjectural muse of the intellectuals. There should be no dispute that usually both, imagination and application, are required before a scholar identifies a good question. When an answer is found it often means breaking the original question into smaller ones, and revising general principles in the light of what has been discovered at lower levels. Some research workers never hit on a really good question. Problem-finding and problem-definition are important and sometimes underestimated components of the research process.

As Weber predicted, his review of 'ethnic communities' is now antiquated; yet it is still worth examining it, and its fate in later sociology, to see if lessons can be learned from the weaknesses of the text itself, including the misjudgements of its editors and translators and, indeed, from the failures of later

sociologists to appreciate the complexities of the underlying issues. An important clue is the recognition that Weber had identified some new research questions. The focus of his ideas about methodology shifted from concern with problems of historical economics towards the development of a conceptual scheme that could transcend the differences between historical periods. The present critique does not extend to any passages in Weber's other works which bear on questions of ethnic community.

Ethnic communities

Among the papers found after Weber's death in 1920 was an untitled draft that has since been published in the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* and given the title *Ethnische Gemeinschaften* (Weber 2001: 168–90). In English, this is better translated as 'Ethnic relations of communities' (an expression Weber used elsewhere) than as 'Ethnic Groups', the title it was given by Roth and Wittich in their volume, *Economy and Society*, where it features as a chapter. Some of the arguments in the draft are also to be found in the text 'Stände und Klassen' (known in English as 'Class, Status, Party'), which had reached the stage of corrected galley proof in 1920 (Mommsen 2005: 84, 90).

The unpublished papers, the *Nachlass*, were edited by Marianne Weber and Melchior Palyi and published together with other material as part of a unitary work, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Although for half a century most sociologists have been willing to accept *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* as a synoptic treatise with some unfinished sections, specialist opinion now considers this to have been unjustified. As one of the most recent editors has written, 'Marianne Weber was obviously mistaken in her assumption that the so-called older section of *Economy and Society*, which she edited from Weber's papers, constituted part of a comprehensive project. In fact, the earlier texts were little more than a heap of manuscripts, many of them incomplete, mostly without definite titles or with no titles at all.' She, and Weber's later editor, Johannes F. Winckelmann, were wrong to believe 'that *Economy and Society* was one coherent, though incomplete, work that could be made coherent by careful editing' (Mommsen 2005: 71, 72). It is improbable that Weber would have wished the document found among the 'earlier papers', and now titled *Ethnische Gemeinschaften*, to be published in the state in which he left it in 1911.[1]

The earlier papers testified to Weber's struggles with the orthodoxies that prevailed in the German universities of his time. The most dramatic controversy was the *Methodenstreit*, in which adherents of the 'historical' or 'ethical' school of economic thought opposed the views that have come to be identified with the Austrian school of economics. The two schools had very different ideas about the problems social scientists should seek to resolve. Weber drew from both sides. Rejecting any orthogenic conception of social evolution, he contended that social scientists should focus on the discovery of

causal relations. For this purpose generalised theoretical categories, or transcultural concepts, were essential. This view of the abstract character of empirical knowledge was later developed by Karl Popper (1972: 151–90), who distinguished a 'third world' of objective thought from a first world of physical states and a second world made up of states of consciousness. The modern student would conclude that Weber did not properly understand the concept of *Homo economicus*, for he continued to assert that an Austrian analysis neglected non-economic motives, and that neo-classical economics was to be criticised because its conclusions were based 'on a fictitious human being similar to a mathematical model' (Mommsen 2005: 78; Levine 2005: 122 n28).

Mommsen (2001: 40) has endorsed Werner J. Cahnman's conclusion that in the period from 1910 to 1913 Weber used *Gemeinschaft* in a pre-Tönniesian general sense of 'social group'. He did not accept Tönnies' conception of a transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*; instead, he detected a continuing process of rationalisation. From 1913 onwards Weber shifted from the use of concepts of community (*Gemeinschaft*) and community action (*Gemeinschaftshandeln*), which implied a relation to an historical phase, to concepts of society (*Gesellschaft*) and social action (*soziales Handeln*), which fitted better with a conceptual scheme aimed at transcending differences of time and place. Yet in 1920 Weber still differentiated communal action from associative action, depending on whether the orientation of the actor rested on a subjective feeling of mutual belonging or upon a rational calculation of net benefit. The utility of such a distinction is questionable. Theorising is easier if action is seen as oriented to the maximisation of net benefit, and benefit is the satisfactions of immaterial or psychic gains, including those associated with the comforts of custom or routine, than if action is divided into Weber's four classes of instrumentally rational, value rational, affective and traditional action.

In what he called his *Kategorienlehre*, Weber developed a set of analytic categories that were published as Part One of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. The 'earlier papers' were brought together under the clumsy title 'The Economy and the Arena of Normative and De Facto Powers' as Part Two of the same volume. The first chapter of Part One, on basic sociological concepts, is highly abstract. Commentators differ in the significance they attach to the several themes that run through it. One theme is that of historical explanation, as in the discussion of Eduard Meyer's hypothesis about the causal significance of the battles of Marathon, Salamis and Platea for the development of Greek, and therefore occidental, culture. Beyond noting Weber's concern with the multiplicity of motives that might have to be considered in explaining an action, that theme will not be pursued here. It has less relevance to the discussion of ethnic relations than two other themes: those of conceptual refinement and methodological individualism. Other notable elements include the statement that social action is always to be understood as the behaviour of one or more individual persons, and that behaviour is to be assessed against a standard (a 'pure construct') of instrumentally rational action. For many

readers this will denote the optimal use of means to attain a desired end, but Weber's choice of words has posed difficulties for those who have translated this section into English.

In trying to create a new transcultural and technical vocabulary Weber was acutely sensitive to the limitations of ordinary language concepts; he frequently placed them in inverted commas to draw attention to their weaknesses. Later writing about ethnic relations has been less cautious and has suffered from a failure to distinguish between two kinds of discourse, or two vocabularies. One mode of discourse is sometimes called ordinary language; it embodies the vocabulary of daily life and of political rhetoric; the other is the language and vocabulary of social science. The former employs folk concepts that are fashioned to aid the solution of the problems of everyday life, and which are subject to political distortion. The latter develops analytical concepts that can be applied to all societies and all historical periods, like the concepts in economics of demand, supply and inflation. Sometimes the contrast between vocabularies is formulated as a distinction between *emic* and *etic* constructs.[2]

Weber's *Kategorienlehre* also displayed what has come to be called methodological individualism. Just before his death he wrote to a friend, 'If I now happen to be a sociologist according to my appointment papers, then I became one in order to put an end to the mischievous enterprise which still operates with collectivist concepts [*Kollektivbegriffe*]. In other words, sociology, too, can only be practised by proceeding from the actions of one or more, few or many individuals' (Bruun 1972: 38). In wanting to put an end to the use of *Kollektivbegriffe*, he was not seeking to compile a list of words whose use was to be banned, but to discourage reliance on unsatisfactory modes of explanation. Collectivist concepts are often prospective short cuts to explanation. They posit the existence of abstract collectivities (like societies, groups and institutions), and complexes (like capitalism, nationalism and racism), that are thought to determine individual behaviour. They offer top-down explanations without allowing for the bottom-up processes that are at least equally important in sociology. The best way to put an end to the undesirable consequences of reliance on collectivist concepts in sociological reasoning is to identify their component parts, and to specify all the links in the supposed causal chains.

Yet, since they are often important in the practical language of everyday life, collectivist concepts can never be eliminated from political discourse. For example, humans need some concept of society if they are to hold a political outlook, since this can help them decide their priorities at election time. For the discussion of policy questions it is often necessary to start from the political framework regulated by a state. In industrial societies with diverse populations, ideas of integration, multiculturalism, racism and so on can, like the concept of society, be important in the determination and implementation of policy. Therefore, the better strategy for sociologists is to retain the use of collectivist concepts in political discourse, while at the same time trying to

supersede their use in social scientific discourse by better explaining the observations for which they seek to account.

This is relevant to the question of how quickly, and how economically, scientific work is superseded. The process rarely runs in a straight line; some theories may be abandoned as unpromising rather than as having been discredited; and some are revived later. The process moves fastest in physical science, where perceptions of the intellectual problems may not be greatly influenced by policy concerns. The process moves more slowly when policy problems are given priority. Weber insisted that politics be kept out of the lecture room. In developing a new conceptual scheme he pursued analytical lines without reference to any policy implications.

This article does not join the debates about the intentions behind Weber's statements on methodology. Instead, it argues that if Weber's contribution to the growth of knowledge on ethnic relations is to be assessed it is best to start from his *Problemstellung*, from what he selected as problems to tackle. He might well have agreed with the view of Karl Popper (1963: 67) that 'we are not students of some subject matter but students of problems'. Yet the understanding Weber sought ranged far wider than that incorporated in the doctrine of explanation central to Popper's (1972: 191–6) teaching. When scientists study problems susceptible to deductive explanation their findings can be more rapidly evaluated and superseded. Weber's difficulties with *Ethnische Gemeinschaften* were the greater because he had not been able to define sharply the problems he was addressing and because, from a Popperian standpoint, his aspirations for an interpretive sociology exceeded that which is possible within social science.

Racial belonging

Ethnische Gemeinschaften advanced three positive arguments. The first was that an ethnic group was *künstlich* (in contemporary parlance, a social construct) because it was based on a belief in shared *Gemeinschaft*. Second, the belief in shared *Gemeinschaft* did not create the group; the group created the belief. Third, group formation resulted from the drive to monopolise power and status. Humans wanted economic and social privileges for themselves and their allies.

In *Economy and Society* (Weber 1968: 385–98) the text was divided into four sections. The first (on belonging to a race) declared that a racial group was constituted only when individuals perceived themselves and others as possessing common inheritable traits derived from common descent. Many of Weber's contemporaries would have insisted that membership of a race was to be determined solely by physical characteristics, thus, members of distinctive races were expected to behave differently because of their inherited tendencies. Weber has been complimented by later generations for opposing this thesis and maintaining that membership of a race was a source of communal action

only, where the individuals concerned had a subjective feeling of shared identity. This feeling could spring either from common activity or from a sense of common fate in virtue of shared opposition to other visibly different groups. It was the character of the social relations, particularly of any attempt to secure and defend a position of privilege, that accounted for the subjective feeling. In this Weber was anticipating the later literature on race as a social construct.

Weber's statement that belief in inherited difference creates a group fitted the circumstances of whites in the United States South better than those of blacks, whose feelings of belonging together stemmed not from any attempt to monopolise social power but from another group's success in doing so. Group formation entailed a rejection of those not qualified for membership, and this rejection was social rather than biological in origin.

This section's second paragraph embodied at least two puzzles. Why did it open with a reference to the reproduction rate of hybrids? Did this hark back to a nineteenth-century debate about the definition of species? Zoological convention dictated that the horse and the donkey were separate species because the offspring of their mating was a mule, and a mule was sterile. The racial typologists were inclined to represent blacks and whites as separate species, some maintaining that the hybrids resulting from black-white unions were less fertile than their parent stocks. So if the reproduction rate of mulattoes was found to resemble the rates of blacks and whites, that would prove that blacks and whites were not distinct species. If they were not distinct species, then the reciprocal racial attraction and repulsion was socially determined and might be measured. Weber suggested that if the numbers of black-white unions that resulted from both exploitative and egalitarian relationships could be estimated, this could cast light on sexual attraction and repulsion between groups with a developed ethnic consciousness. The second puzzle was the use that he had in mind for any such measures. What might they prove? To write – as Weber next did – about the abhorrence of inter-racial sex as resulting from the Negroes' demand for equal civil rights was an unjustifiably condensed reference to a much longer chain of cause and effect, even if it was partially corrected by the sentence that followed.

Weber went on to discuss the conditions for intermarriage, a topic continued into the following section. The reasoning with which he passed from membership of a race to membership of an ethnic group was muddled, partly because of this unexplained preoccupation with intermarriage. In the second section Weber insisted that while group members often believed that their social distinctiveness derived from their physical distinctiveness, the causal relation was the other way round. Their ancestors might have made them physically distinctive by selective breeding but it was differences of custom that regulated marriage patterns. This contention might have been better placed towards the end of the section on race, where Weber wrote that in the creation of communities factors other than physical difference were at work. These subjective factors influenced the degree to which blood relationship was taken

into account. The reference to 'actual racial kinship' in the first sentence of the paragraph was an unnecessary distraction because it was the following sentence that identified the problem he was addressing, namely the observation that in the United States the tiniest drop of Negro blood assigned a person to a lower category when larger measures of Indian blood did not. Weber contended that the difference in white behaviour towards Negroes and towards Indians arose in part from the whites' aesthetic preference for Indian over Negro physical characteristics, continuing 'but without any question it arises also from the memory that the Negroes . . . were a people of slaves, or in other words a group disqualified in terms of social class'. This last sentence jumbled together different kinds of cause and did not identify any source for the aesthetic preference. Whites discriminated against blacks because a particular kind of social convention had been established. Beliefs about the past, which would have been highly selective, might have been adduced to justify that convention. Weber knew this because he went on to say so in the next section.

   For those who honour Weber's contribution, one disappointment is that after having mentioned the 'several million mulattoes in the United States' he simply referred to 'the two races'. He did not put the word 'races' in quotation marks, though it was the more needed here than in some other places if he was to signal to readers that he regarded the groups as social constructs. Contemporary sociologists will endorse Weber's assumption that any theory of ethnic and racial relations must start from the significance placed upon similarities and dissimilarities of objective characteristics (whether physical or cultural), and offer an explanation of why the same difference might be treated as socially significant in one society or situation and not in others. That may be an historical problem, but it also has a sociological component hinted at in Weber's observation that in patriarchal societies the father was free to grant equal rights to his children born by slave mothers. Some of those classed as mulattoes will have had more European than African ancestry and in other parts of the Americas (as in the Netherlands Indies) the whites found it to their advantage to recognise an intermediate class or 'race'. That the whites in the USA sought to monopolise social power does not explain why the line was drawn against 'the tiniest drop of Negro blood' rather than at some other point or in some other way. It is easier to excuse Weber for having no complete answer to the question than for his failure to draw attention to the existence of the sociological problem. Moreover, he might well have noted that if the motive underlying the formation of the white community was to monopolise social power, then the action was associative and not communal.

Social interaction

Editors have titled the second section *Entstehung ethnischen Gemeinsamkeits-glaubens* (the origin of the belief in ethnic togetherness). Reviewing the bases

on which groups were formed, this opened with a declaration that it was irrelevant whether a belief about visible distinctiveness was attributed to heredity or to tradition. Why then did members of a community enter more easily into relations with one kind of people than another? Weber's answer to his question was that in many cases the decisive factor was the community members' lack of understanding that they were following social conventions. Conventions were the means by which communities differentiated themselves as they sought to monopolise particular social and economic positions. To do so they needed to act collectively. 'Almost any kind of similarity or contrast of physical type and of habits can induce the belief that affinity or disaffinity exists between groups that attract or repel each other.'

Though the belief does not create the group it can be important for the maintenance of the group. It was primarily the political community that inspired belief in shared ethnicity. Beliefs strengthen structures; structures reinforce beliefs. To identify a causal relation Weber would have had to step back and specify the links in a long chain of co-dependencies. There is no point zero at which group formation starts. Groups exist before an individual is born; he or she is socialised into beliefs about their nature. Yet some kinds of groups fade away and other kinds do not. In asserting that the attempt of group members to monopolise economic and social power underlay group formation, Weber was starting to uncover determinants of human behaviour of which the participants were not conscious, which were not of a biological character, and which operated in ways comparable with the economic determinants conceptualised as demand, supply and inflation that were mentioned above. He confronted a problem of exposition: where to find a starting point from which to trace the causal relations? That remains a problem today.

Roth and Wittich divide some of Weber's long paragraphs into shorter ones. In what they present as the fourth paragraph of this section Weber changed tack to observe that a belief in community distinctiveness could develop group-forming powers if it was 'reinforced by the memory of some actual migration, whether in the form of colonisation or of individual voyages'. For example, the spiritual ties of German-Americans with their homeland survived despite the fact they had mingled almost totally with other inhabitants of their new country. It is notable that this observation should have been advanced before Weber offered his well-known statement that 'We shall call "ethnic groups" those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonisation or migration'.[3] Outward appearance (*äusseren Habitus*) was treated as one possible basis for the formation of an ethnic group, and this was presented as a group one step larger than a clan (*Sippe*).

Nevertheless, this was not a strict definition. It was not part of a classification of groups specifying the criteria by which an ethnic group was to be distinguished from other and similar kinds of group. It conflated contemporary characteristics with possible historical origins, and was written

in a way that makes the reader wonder whether Weber's encounter with German-Americans on his visit to the USA had led him to use them as a paradigm case for his conception of an ethnic group. It also raises the question why Weber should have regarded German-Americans as an ethnic group rather than as a national group? When they first reached the United States the immigrants would have been German nationals, so some discussion was to be expected of the criteria determining when they became an ethnic group.

Had Weber worked further on the development of his individualistic perspective he would surely have addressed the issues that arise, because the same individuals may belong to several groups. This cannot have been far from his thoughts because he referred to a shared language, and the observance of ritual regulations based on shared religious conceptions, as playing 'an exceptionally important part in creating feelings of "ethnic" affinity'. It looks as if it was in describing his initial problem as the explanation of ethnic *communal* action that led Weber astray. He would have been taken in a different direction had he instead asked, 'why do German-Americans, or any other specimen group, engage in collective action?' This would then have led him to consider all the possible factors (class, status, party, shared ethnic origin, religious congregations, occupational and leisure groups, etc.) that might have been part of an explanation, and their relevance to associative as well as communal action. Multiple memberships are important to social life, for the cohesion of a community is a function of the multiplicity of group memberships. In the passage just quoted, Weber described religious practice as contributing to ethnic affinity, though the opposite probably also held; shared descent presumably facilitated the maintenance of the distinctive religion. It is more helpful to note that any enduring group is likely to be multi-dimensional and that it is often impossible to separate the dimensions.

The relevance of multiple group membership to the analysis of social change was overlooked. Weber's procedure was to list possible sources of a belief in a common ethnic identity that could help account for communal action among groups such as German-Americans. He did not go on to weigh the importance of such a belief relative to any awareness of other shared memberships as comparable stimuli to communal action, nor remark that over the course of time the relative importance of different memberships changes; for some persons, membership of an ethnic group may be of diminishing importance, either because of the processes usually known as assimilation or because events stimulate changes. The US declaration of war on Germany in 1916 evoked hostilities that led German-Americans in some localities to downplay their ethnic origin. The effects of Hitler's declaration of war upon the USA at the end of 1941 must also have contributed to a decline in the German-American community spirit in comparison with the persistence of some other hyphenate identities. For the study of ethnic relations, and particularly for consideration of social integration, analysis of how people

come to leave groups is at least as important as analysis of what brought them into the groups in the first place.

Subsequent sociological analyses, for example those dealing with conflicts in Northern Ireland, have brought out in detail how structural oppositions reinforce hostility in interpersonal relations between persons who identify with opposed interests. They have also drawn attention to the critical influence of those individuals who invest their energies in highlighting shared grievances and in mobilising others to collective action. Weber might well have taken up such matters in a revised and full version of *Ethnische Gemeinschaften*. Yet, there is one respect in which his revisions of 1920 still overlooked a relevant variable. For Weber, action was social only if it was meaningfully oriented to the behaviour of others. If, because of a shower of rain, a number of people put up their umbrellas at the same time, this was not *social* action but a similar reaction to a common stimulus. In social action, the actor, Ego, by observing the other party, Alter, becomes acquainted with 'objective facts'. Ego will perceive Alter as playing an occupational role or occupying a status; Alter's appearance, name or demeanour may lead Ego to associate Alter with a particular social group, perhaps one identified with shared ethnic origin or religion. Ego may treat Alter differently on this account, but will not necessarily do so. There are many circumstances, particularly in urban living, in which roles may be important and group memberships of this kind are socially irrelevant.[4]

While Ego may perceive Alter as either a fellow-member of Ego's own group, or as an outsider, Ego may also notice signs suggesting that Alter is of higher or lower social status, and this may influence Ego's behaviour towards Alter. A distinctive complexion, or a sign of ethnic or national origin, may be regarded as a sign of social status. Weber's schema allowed for signs of differences between *Stände*, an expression usually translated as status groups but which can also, and perhaps better, be translated as estates, for many of Weber's references were to highly stratified societies known from the historical record.[5] However, the fine gradations of difference that constitute the calculation of individual status in industrial societies cannot be accommodated within a classification of groups.

Further paragraphs in this section illustrated the author's earlier propositions with observations on ethnic distinctions in other societies. He maintained that the sense of ethnic honour was an 'honour of the masses' since it enabled the poorest members of a group (particularly of a dominant group) to take pride in being superior to members of some even poorer group. Weber listed a few specific factors, notably 'shared language and, after that, a common pattern of ritual regulation of life'; he asked, if such factors were subtracted from ethnic identity, 'what then is left?' He concluded that while a belief in common ancestry facilitated collective action, 'It is not feasible to go beyond these vague generalisations. The content of joint activities that are possible on an ethnic basis remains indefinite. There is a corresponding ambiguity of concepts denoting ethnically determined action, that means, determined by the belief in blood relationship. Such concepts are *Völk-*

erschaft, *Stamm* (tribe), *Volk* (people), each of which is ordinarily used in the sense of an ethnic subdivision of the following one.'

The classification of groups

The third section of the chapter discussed the relationship between political community, tribe and folk. It concluded that units like the twelve tribes of Israel and the *phylai* of classical Greece were political artefacts. If such a group was incorporated into a *polis* it was called an *ethnos*. Political activity could develop in such a way that all members of a tribe or people might feel obliged to support one another. This is where Weber doubted whether there was any 'ethnically' determined social action. Were the contributory factors subtracted, nothing would be left; the concept of an 'ethnic' *Gemeinschaft* would evaporate; in this it corresponded to one of the most vexing and emotionally charged concepts, that of nation. Weber found that he could not, by refining ordinary language and vocabulary, create corresponding analytical concepts.

This brought to an end the text entitled *Ethnische Gemeinschaften*, but after it Roth and Wittich, following the earlier German editions, have added another text, *Machtprestige und Nationalgefühl* (entitled 'Nationality and cultural prestige' in translation), which may have been intended for an address to the German Sociological Society (Mommsen, 2001: 53). It overlaps with the third section. In it Weber observed that peoples of common descent but different religion sometimes saw themselves as different nations, like the Serbs and Croats, and that minorities speaking a different language might not consider themselves full members of the nation to which they were assigned. German-speaking Poles had no strongly developed sense of Polish nationality. He hesitated to call the Belgians or the inhabitants of Luxemburg and Liechtenstein nations. French-Canadians were another special case. If there was any uniform phenomenon designated by 'nation' then it was a pathos linked to the idea of a political community formed by people sharing common language, religion, customs or memories.

The third section in particular shows that at the time of writing Weber thought of the ethnic community and the nation as two of a set of six formations to be found in all kinds of society. The sequence ran: household, neighbourhood, kin group, ethnic group, religious group and then political group. Beneath this thinking lay an assumption that the differences between these groups were real (which should be contrasted with the view that 'group' is an abstract category used to explain behaviour and that those concepts which explain most are to be preferred). 'Ethnic membership', Weber wrote, 'differs from the kinship group precisely by being a presumed identity, not a group with concrete social action'. Kinship groups were based on a reality (*zu deren Wesen einen reales Gemeinschaftshandeln gehört*). What was this reality? Weber knew well that descent was calculated quite differently in different societies, often being related to property ownership; that the reckoning of

kinship was highly variable; and that the rules governing marriage and adoption so important to Roman society were manifestly social in character. Kinship is not consanguinity. It can be created by adoption and by marriage, for the social father is not always the biological father.

By what logic were political groups to be distinguished from other groups? The household, the neighbourhood and the kin group can all be highly political. It would be better to insist that all groups have a political dimension even if it is of varying importance. The same applies to relations between groups. Some have written about ethnic conflicts as if they were a special class of conflicts. This may be acceptable for non-scientific purposes, but it detracts attention from the many elements also present in conflicts between religious, language, caste and other kinds of groups, and therefore hampers the analysis of group formation and maintenance. It is not only concepts of the ethnic group and the nation that dissolve once the various dimensions of actual groups are abstracted; *all* these classes dissolve (Banton 2000).

The classification of groups must flow from the purpose of the classification. Laws against discrimination recognise distinctive groups based on colour, disability, ethnic or national origin, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation. Their effective enforcement may require a definition of an ethnic group. The language of statutes has to be a refined form of ordinary language that relies upon folk or *emic* concepts. In ordinary language, when persons identify with groups they use proper names (like 'the Smith family', 'the residents of the valley', 'the Campbell clan', 'the Gypsies', 'the Presbyterians' and 'the socialists'). Scholars, and those who formulate social policies, often find it helpful to classify these identifications in ways that suit their purposes. Scientific analysis, whether in the physical, biological or social sciences, seeks to uncover causal relationships. Classifications of natural phenomena, whether inanimate, like chemicals, or animate, like plants and animals, aim to promote discovery of the causes that underlie the similarities between things sharing classification. They are of a technical character, reflecting knowledge about the nature of these phenomena. They need technical names. The sociological analysis of ethnic relations will also depend upon the elaboration of a technical language using analytical or *etic* concepts.

Part One of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* would probably have contributed more effectively to the growth of sociological knowledge had Weber first described the intellectual problems he wished to address, and then fashioned his proposals as means to his end. A classification of social groups might have been part of the means. Agreement on the problems to be tackled, coupled with the determination to solve them, drives the research process.

Weber's legacy

In the inter-war years sociologists were much concerned with the claims that were being advanced for racial explanations of differences in historical

development. Having given cogent and concise reasons for rejecting these claims, Weber went on to other business. In the USA, where there was a bigger academic market for sociology, the negative arguments for rejection were insufficient; a teacher had to come forward with better explanations of the differences between the positions of black and white Americans. The concern with race, reflected in the influence of Franz Boas and Robert Park, tended to blot out considerations of ethnic difference. In North American universities anyone who lectured in sociology had to attract and retain enrolments by addressing what students could recognise as important issues. It was Weber's sociology of religion that attracted most attention there, as can be seen from the pages of Sorokin's *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (1928). Relatively few teachers and students had access to, and could understand, the German texts. While an English translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was published in 1930, a translation of the text on ethnic communities became generally available only in 1961.

There was little reference to *ethnic* differences before 1935 when Sir Julian Huxley and A. C. Haddon published, for a popular readership, a critique of the Nazi-inspired 'pseudo-science of racial biology'. They wrote that in their book 'the word *race* will be deliberately avoided and the term (*ethnic*) *group* or *people* employed' (1935: 91–2). A different use of *ethnic* had appeared in New England by the end of the 1930s; communities made up of the descendants of immigrants from Europe (like Irish-Americans) were being referred to as ethnic minorities and their individual members as 'ethnics'. This usage, to be found in Lloyd Warner's study of 'Yankee City', differed from that of Huxley and Haddon. For them, ethnic group was a synonym for nation, or a group that might obtain its own state, not a group content to be a minority within a state containing other similar minorities. Weber referred to both usages but did not see them as significantly different. Oliver Cox (1948: 317–19) maintained that 'ethnic systems' classified persons according to culture or physical distinguishability. Cultural ethnics and racial ethnics were both power groups, and a group could be both ethnic and racial. For Lloyd Warner, however, an ethnic group was a subdivision of a racial group (Warner and Srole 1945: 295) and ordinary language usage in the USA has followed Warner's practice more often than Cox's.

Weber wrote of classes as *bases* for social action, of a belief in common origin as a *basis* for the creation of a community, and of action *emerging* from a common situation. Later work by economists and other social scientists, much of it associated with theories of rational choice, has explained how action can emerge from a jumble of causal factors. The analysis of free-riding pioneered by Mancur Olson (1965) has shown that a shared interest is insufficient for collective action to result. Nothing happens unless one or more mobilisers, persons with a special dedication to such action, agitate for the attainment of what they regard as a shared good. Seen from this standpoint, the belief in the distinctiveness of German-Americans was not to be explained just by the memory of migration; that memory had to be evoked

and utilised by persons who, for a multitude of possible reasons, wished to build a community. Though Weber described groups as developing their own customs, and described the establishment of social conventions, he neglected to investigate the processes by which sentiments of identification were reinforced or undermined. A group's customs, and the sanctions upon deviance, can counter-balance the self-interest that underlies free-riding. The significance of group norms is captured in the distinction between act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism; according to the latter mode of reasoning, individuals agree to the enforcement of rules that maximise their net benefits.

In neo-classical economics it was agreed long ago that what Weber called 'non-economic' motives had to be comprehended in the calculation of net benefit. Why he should have thought that a distinction between communal and associative action could aid the discovery of causal relationships is puzzling. The challenge to social scientists is to account for collective action and why particular alternatives are favoured, not to explore what lies behind revealed preferences. Mathematical reasoning has helped resolve the intellectual problems posed by the many different kinds of motivation and the ordering of values (see, for example, Coleman 1990). Those who analyse social relations in earlier historical periods now deploy theories very different from those of the 'historical' school.

The study of ethnic relations has moved on since Weber's day, though not in any uniform progression. One notable occasion was a conference at which some Nordic social anthropologists asked how it was that selected ethnic groups in several continents all maintained distinctive identities, despite the fact that some group members crossed over and became members of the other group. They concluded, in the words of Fredrik Barth (1969: 15) that it is 'the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses'. None of them referred to Weber's writings. It was the attempt to solve an empirical problem that led them to their conclusion.

Neither Barth nor Weber wrote about 'ethnicity' as an abstract determinant of behaviour. It looks as if sociologists took a wrong turning in the 1970s when some of them started to treat 'ethnicity' as a master concept that subsumed the concepts of ethnic group and ethnic origin. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, editors of the influential *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (1975), were less inclined to put words like 'ethnicity' in quotation marks because they were less suspicious of *emic* concepts. They took the word to be an identifier of a new reality. The key changes in their conceptualisations have been traced by Steve Fenton (2003: 92–105); his quotations show Glazer and Moynihan to have been preoccupied with the tendency of people in many countries 'to insist on the significance of their group distinctiveness and identity and on new rights that derive from this group character'. If there was a 'new reality' to be called ethnicity, what, they asked, had made it so salient? From being part of an *explanans*, ethnicity had become an *explanandum*.

Ordinary people designated their group distinctiveness with proper names, while their ideas about their identity and rights reflected their circumstances.

Whether their ideas and behaviour were coherent and distinctive enough to constitute a single *explanandum* was questionable. The *emic* conception of ethnicity leads to reification. Thus, criticising Fenton's claim that the concept of ethnicity is grounded in social practice, Taylor (2003) objected that the argument presupposed that ethnicity had some authentic 'thinghood'. He complained that 'it does not answer where "ethnic" groups come from' nor explain 'what makes something "ethnic" in *the first place*'. Similar questions have to be asked of Malesevic's conception of ethnicity (Malesevic 2004). He shows little hesitation in writing of theories of ethnicity where Fenton holds that 'there cannot be a theory of ethnicity' (2003: 179–82). In this respect, Fenton is closer to Weber than Malesevic, even though Fenton does not accept Weber's individualistic assumptions. This dispute will not be quickly resolved.

Conclusion

Sociologists who specialise in the study of ethnic and racial relations have come to regard a manuscript that Max Weber was unable to prepare for publication as a key contribution to their field, one with which present day students should be acquainted (Fenton 2003: 9, 61). They sometimes look back to Weber's work to invoke his authority for their own conclusions, endorsing his rejection of racial explanations while passing over the difficulties to which he drew attention. As Stone (1995: 395) has maintained, few contemporary perspectives on race and ethnic relations cannot be linked, in one way or another, to Weber's writings. Another commentator, while insisting that Weber's analysis remains highly edifying, observes that neo-Weberians set out to supplement rather than to modify Weber's original position (Malesevic 2004: 136).

Many sociological publications make no impact and are soon forgotten, but in view of Weber's eminence it is noteworthy that subsequent research on ethnic and racial relations did not connect up with his writing on these issues. It looks as if there may have been a hiatus, and that it occurred because Weber was not able to identify with sufficient clarity the problems in this field that he wished to address, and because he could not demonstrate that he had proposals which would help their solution. However, this can be only part of the answer. It has to be remembered that in the 1920s sociology was only just starting to find a place in universities. Moreover, whereas Weber wished, so far as is possible, to keep politics and sociology separate, many sociologists specialising in the study of ethnic and racial relations have wanted to address questions of social policy; for their purposes there have been advantages in the use of ordinary language concepts, including some that Weber would have considered collectivist. Because the examination of problems that appear to be of purely intellectual interest has been a lesser priority, there has been little incentive to learn from Weber's struggles with the concept of an ethnic group.

Anyone who sets out to formulate a systematic sociology of ethnic relations could learn from these struggles because they exemplify the basic problems of such a sociology.

Weber's essay marked a significant advance over previous academic writing about ethnic and racial relations. As he predicted, it has now been superseded, but it remains instructive to examine Weber's 'original position' and to identify the obstacles that he failed to surmount. Many of them have yet to be overcome.

Notes

1 The editors of the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* published an overview of the text of *Economy and Society* which has been helpfully published in English translation (Baier *et al*. 2000). Attention is also drawn to an English translation of a review of the *Gesamtausgabe* volume discussed here (Lichtblau 2003).

2 Though many writers have drawn a distinction between these two modes of discourse, there is no agreement on the best names for them. The *emic/etic* distinction is short and symmetrical, even if it has not been drawn consistently by American anthropologists. As Lett (1996) formulates it, *emic* constructs are accounts expressed in categories meaningful to members of the community under study, whereas *etic* constructs are accounts expressed in categories meaningful to the community of scientific observers.

3 *Wir wollen solche Menschengruppen, welche auf Grund von Ähnlichkeiten des äußeren Habitus oder der Sitten oder beider oder von Erinnerungen an Kolonisation und Wanderung einen subjektiven Glauben an eine Abstammungsgemeinsamkeit hegen, derart, dass dieser für die Propagierung von Vergemeinschaftungen wichtig wird, dann, wenn sie nicht 'Sippen' darstellen, 'ethnische' Gruppen nennen, ganz einerlei, ob eine Blutsgemeinsamkeit objektiv vorliegt oder nicht.*

4 The words *relation* and *relationship* can usefully be distinguished. Between husband and wife, landlord and tenant, employer and employee, there are relationships governed by law and custom. Ego and Alter may enter into relations in which one plays the role of husband or landlord or employer, and the other the role of wife, tenant or employee. In the course of an encounter they may switch from one relationship to another. A relationship exists between roles; relations exist between individuals. In German a comparable distinction can be detected between *Verhältnis* and *Beziehung*. Weber's *soziale Beziehung* should in my view be translated as 'social relations' but none of the English language translations known to me recognises the distinction in question.

5 'Status group' is now the usual translation of *Stand*, though Weber's conception relates more closely to pre-industrial forms of stratification than to the contemporary calculation of socio-economic status.

References

Baier, Horst, M. Rainer Lepsius, J. Wolfgang Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter. 2000. 'Overview of the text of *Economy and Society*', *Max Weber Studies* 1(1): 101–114.
Banton, Michael 2000. 'Ethnic conflict', *Sociology* 34(3): 481–98.
Barth, Fredrik (ed.) 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Oslo: Universitets Forlaget.
Bruun, H. H. 1972. *Science, Values and Politics in Max Weber's Methodology*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.
Coleman, James S. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Cox, Oliver C. 1948. *Caste, Class, and Race*. New York: Doubleday.
Fenton, Steve 2003. *Ethnicity*. Oxford: Polity.

Glazer, Nathan and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. 1975. *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Huxley, Julian S. and A. C. Haddon. 1935. *We Europeans: a Survey of Racial Problems*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Lett, James W. 1996. 'Emic/Etic Distinctions' in *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Holt, vol.2, 382–3.

Levine, Donald N. 2005. 'The continuing challenge of Weber's theory of rational action' in Charles Camic, Philip S. Gorski and David M. Trubeck. *Max Weber's Economy and Society: a Critical Companion*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 101–26.

Lichtblau, Klaus 2003. 'Max Weber's two sociologies', *Max Weber Studies* 3(2): 233–8.

Malesevic, Sinisa 2004. *The Sociology of Ethnicity*. London: Sage.

Mommsen, Wolfgang J. 2001. 'Einleitung' in Max Weber. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte; Nachlass. Teilbd. 1. Gemeinschaften* (ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen). *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*. Bd.22. Abteilung 1. Schriften und Reden. Tübingen: Mohr, 1–65.

Mommsen, Wolfgang J. 2005. 'Max Weber's "Grand Sociology": the origins and composition of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Soziologie*' in Charles Camic, Philip S. Gorski and David M. Trubeck. *Max Weber's Economy and Society: a Critical Companion*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 70–97.

Olson, Mancur 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Popper, Karl R. 1963. *Conjectures and Refutations: the Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Kegan Paul.

Popper, Karl R. 1972. *Objective Knowledge: an Evolutionary Approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sorokin, Pitirim 1928. *Contemporary Sociological Theories*. New York: Harper.

Stone, John 1995. 'Race, ethnicity, and the Weberian legacy', *American Behavioural Scientist* 38(3): 391–406 reprinted in John Stone and Dennis Rutledge (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity: Comparative and Theoretical Approaches*. Oxford: Blackwell, 28–42.

Taylor, Rupert 2003. 'Review of *Ethnicity*: *Racism, Class and Culture* by Steve Fenton', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 26(6): 1115–16.

Warner, W. Lloyd and Leo Srole. 1945. *The Social System of American Ethnic Groups*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Weber, Max 1947. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Edited and translated by H. H. Gerth and C.Wright Mills. London: Kegan Paul.

Weber, Max 1968. *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (translations by various authors). New York: Bedminster.

Weber, Max 1972. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehende Soziologie*, 5th edn, ed. Johannes Winckelmann. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck.

Weber, Max 2001. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte; Nachlass. Teilbd. 1. Gemeinschaften* (ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen). *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*. Bd.22. Abteilung 1. Schriften und Reden. Tübingen: Mohr.