

Max Weber and Adam Smith: Some points of conceptual congruence

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ABSTRACT

Max Weber's sociological economics and Adam Smith's economic sociology have a lot in common. The classical notion of action in economics rested on the concept of the economic man that based his decisions on cost-benefit calculation. Moving away from the classical paradigm, both Smith and Weber came up with quite revolutionary ideas that assigned variables such as morals, emotional affect, usage, custom, convention, tradition, etc. their due importance in explaining human action. For both Smith and Weber, society is composed of individuals and their mutual interaction. Therefore, methodological individualism and symbolic interactionism seem intertwined in the works of both these men. It must be mentioned though that although methodological individualism is an obvious choice for one trying to locate points of similitude between the two thinkers, 'symbolic interactionism' has often been a neglected aspect. Nonetheless, it is intriguing to note that Weber's concept of *consensual action* is theoretically founded on assumptions resembling the basic tenets of the theory of society propounded by scholars such as George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. Interestingly enough, Adam Smith, in formulating his concept of the *impartial spectator*, seems to have anticipated Cooley and Mead in laying the foundation of the theory of symbolic interactionism. Therefore, symbolic interactionism could be seen as a connecting link between Adam Smith and Max Weber discernible in the conceptual similarity between Adam Smith's *impartial spectator* and Weber's *consensual action*.

KEYWORDS: Max Weber, Adam Smith, impartial spectator, consensual action, Symbolic Interactionism, social action

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I. INTRODUCTION

Almost three decades ago, Swatos, Jr. and Kivisto (1991: 118) pointed out "that it may be more important than is often realized to see Weber in relation to Adam Smith." In the same year, James Buchanan (1991) published his book *The Economics and the Ethics of Constitutional Order* where he argued that Weber's allowance for both rational and irrational variables in inducing economic behavior is a restatement of Smith's argument that accords primacy to both utility and morality in the economy. Not only regarding economic behavior, but one may, without doubt, observe glaring points of convergence in thoughts between the two thinkers in other fields of intellectual inquiry, sociology being one such field.

The ancients, most notably Aristotle, held "that all men must be social, both for the development of their own personality and for the proper discharge of their duties toward their fellow-beings" (Barnes 1917:182). It could arguably be viewed as the first premise of a science of society. This science of society, in its initial days, was one whole with disciplines such as Economics and Sociology being inseparable. The indistinct identity of the disciplines in the early days of the modern social science revolution emerges as an interesting link between Max Weber and Adam Smith. Could it be the reason behind the similarity in some of their arguments? It doesn't seem too unlikely. It is argued "that economic sociology and economics were strictly linked in classical economics, especially in the work of Adam Smith" (Beckert and Zafirovski 2011:193). But, by no means does this claim look to undermine the fact that Adam Smith was "a great sociologist by almost any standard we can apply" (Stark 1967:249). Even Joseph Schumpeter (1949:60) could not keep himself from assigning the tag of "economic sociology" to Adam Smith's theory. However, what interests us more in this context is Weber's use of the term "sociological economics" (Weber 1978:311) to sum up his approach to the study of society.

Thus, in formulating their approach that carries a considerable influence from sociology, the Smith-Weber duo effected a paradigmatic shift in the unflinchingly held view by classical economics "which relegates moral and related exogenous variables to a residual and error term" (Zafirovski 2000:122). In contrast to the

classical notion of human action that gave birth to the ideal-typical concept of the *economic man*, both Weber and Smith assigned variables such as morals, emotional affect, usage, custom, convention, tradition, etc. their due importance in explaining human action. It is rightly argued that so far as action is concerned, both Smith and Weber “allow for the interplay of the material and ideal, the rational and non-rational, agency and structure, the free will and social determinism” (Zafirovski 2000:122). Hence, one might argue that the emotional, ideal, and moral aspects of human beings acquire greater importance in the works of both these thinkers implying a greater role for the underlying interactional mechanisms that determine human action.

In light of this, it shall be argued that elements of symbolic interactionism act as the connecting link between the two theories of action propounded by Max Weber and Adam Smith. In order to accomplish the task, the article is divided into two sections. Section I sheds light on the vital place of values in Weber’s theory with a view to comparing Max Weber and Adam Smith in respect of their ideas of morality. Section II deals with the theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism in both Weber and Smith; thus locating the similarity between Weber’s concept of “consensual action” and Smith’s “impartial spectator”.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF VALUES IN WEBER’S THEORY OF ACTION

Weber’s definition of Sociology could serve as the starting point in trying to understand his sociological thought. In Weber’s view, “Sociology (in the sense in which this-highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences” (Weber 1978:4). The definition was followed by an exposition of the term, *social action*. To that end, Weber expounded: “We shall speak of “action” insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning takes into account the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (Weber 1978:4).

Guided by this definition, “social action” in Weber’s sociology became the “primary object of interpretive sociology” (Weber 1978:1375). Weber’s emphasis on “subjective meaning” assigns it a fresh connotation that goes beyond the classical view of human action thought to be controlled by economic motives only. Social action, for Weber, is the bedrock of human activity. Weber lists various types of social action, *economic action* being just one among them. Guenther Roth, in his ‘Introduction’ to *Economy and Society*, observed: “Weber does not proceed from the national economy and its relation to society; rather he begins with social action, of which economic action is that rational case concerned with want-satisfaction under conditions of resource scarcity and a limited number of possible actions” (Roth 1978:lxv). Thus, it doesn’t take a special effort to understand that the actor of Weberian sociology is far from being a replica of *Homo economicus* as in the Weberian scheme “the explanation of everything by economic causes *alone* is never exhaustive in any sense whatsoever in *any* sphere of cultural phenomena, not even in the “economic” sphere itself” (Weber 1949:88).¹

In his *Economy and Society*,² Weber elucidates the concept of social action which “may be oriented to the past, present, or expected future behavior of others” (Weber 1978:22). The cause of such an action was also elaborated upon by Weber when he stated: “Thus it may be motivated by revenge for a past attack, defence against present, or measures of defence against future aggression” (Weber 1978:22). Is this action motivated by rational calculation alone? At this point, a mention must be made of Aristotle’s Practical Syllogism. It is like a mental tool used to decide upon a particular course of action. As to practical syllogism, it has been observed that “the agent’s principles, desires and beliefs are the building blocks out of which the action is constructed” (Broadie 1974:78). It must be pointed out that the interplay between ‘desires’ and ‘beliefs’ culminates in action. Thus, if the desire is the motivating factor towards action, the beliefs held by the agent direct the agent to evaluate the intended action in terms of values because “‘value’ is the supreme ‘category’, which ultimately includes all psychic process, whether ‘practical’ or ‘theoretic,’ whether a ‘logical’ content or a ‘psychological’” (Schiller 1917:653). Therefore, a purely *zweckrational* or instrumentally rational action in Weber’s typology of social action seems to be a rarity (Weber 1981:152, 154). The impossibility of an instrumentally rational action in its pure form was explained by Max Weber himself in the following words:

Action is instrumentally rational (*zweckrational*) when the end, the means, and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed. This involves rational consideration of alternative means to

¹ The sentence is quoted from Weber’s (1949) essay “Objectivity” in *Social Science and Social Policy*. For a concurrent secondary opinion, see Salomon (1935:373) who quotes from Weber’s *Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tubingen, 1925:169).

² As argued by Stephen Turner (1983), in this book Weber revises his earlier methodological optimism in explaining social action. Hence, it appears to be a good idea to take it as the defining text in Weber’s analysis of society. But the ambiguous nature of Weber’s arguments in the book is commented upon as follows: “Weber’s intention in this text are obscure” (1983:513). That sums up the struggle that Weber faces in explaining social action.

the end, of the relations of the end to the secondary consequences, and finally of the relative importance of different possible ends... Choice between alternative and conflicting ends and results may well be determined in a value-rational manner. In that case, action is instrumentally rational only in respect to the choice of means. (Weber 1978:26).

Weber seems to be convinced that a choice between alternatives can only be made in a *value-rational* manner. It could thus be logically deduced that alternatives in a given situation calling for action arise as a result of the 'practical syllogism' applied by the agent, only to be differentiated on the basis of value judgment. The feature of the modern society that empowers its members to choose between alternatives is a reflection of the central role played by values in determining social action. In fact, the concept of value itself is founded on the notion of choice as is evident from the following statement: "An element of a shared symbolic system which serves as a criterion or standard for selection of the alternatives of orientation which are intrinsically open in a situation may be called a value" (Parsons 1991:7). This facet of Weberian thought was well articulated by Anthony Kronman when he wrote: "To be a person, to be qualified to participate in the moral life of the species, one must be endowed with the power of deliberated choice – with a capacity for purposeful action" (Kronman 1983:186). The "concept of value", argues Kronman, "has no meaning apart from the acts of choice" (Kronman 1983:185). Weber's view on this also coincides with the opinion expressed by Parsons and Kronman as he affirms: "The orientation of action wholly to the rational achievement of ends without relation to fundamental values is, to be sure, essentially only a limiting case" (Weber 1947:117; Weber 1978:26).

Thus, Weber indeed recognized "the centrality of values and norms in structuring social behavior" (Stryker 1980:48-49). In fact, action in Weber's conception of culture is a value position (Parsons 1949:642-45; Weber 1949; Oakes 2003:37). It is not surprising that Weber acknowledged the role of "irrationality" in "historical-empirical action" with psychological categories such as "temperament", "moods", and "affects" playing an important part in shaping its course (Weber 1949:125). It is also claimed that Weber, "in rewriting essential parts of his sociology of religion", "recognized the role of the emotions in the constructs of rationality" (Stauth 1992:238). Therefore, the boundary between the two "ideal-types" of action – *zweckrationalität* and *wertrationalität* – seems fuzzy as "each describes a complete type of action including both means-ends relationships and ultimate ends" (Parsons 1949:643).

Ambivalence in Weber's thought on this point becomes amply clear when he concedes "that rationality cannot be treated simply as another ideal-type" (Turner 1983:510). The problem seems to be an acute one for Weber for it is argued: "The consequence of the separation of these elements is that Weber is without an account of the process or grounds for attributing beliefs or reasons for actions" (Turner 1983:512). In a similar vein, it is argued that "Weber's orientations are characterized by much ambiguity if not also considerable confusion and contradiction" (Prus 1996:42). Furthermore, Ernst Troeltsch while referring to Weber, once opined: "To me, by the way, he is in many ways deeply problematic and hard to fathom" (Graf 2004:105).³ The problem seems to grow in complexity as one finds *sixteen* different meanings of rationality in Weberian thought (Brubaker 1984). Put simply, Weber's theory of action by no means considers rational action to be based on a cost-benefit calculation alone undermining the vital role played by values in determining the course of social action (Oakes 2003:41).

The decisive role played by values in the development of capitalism was proved by Max Weber himself. In his *Protestant Ethic* essays, Weber argued: "But at least one thing was unquestionably new: the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume" (Weber 2001:40). Complementing Weber on this, Gustav Schmoller remarked: "M. Weber would not have been able to write his beautiful essays on the Protestant Ethic if he did not himself deeply sense the closest interrelationship between the economic and ethical spheres" (Schön 2006:68). In addition to playing a key role in the development of capitalism, subjective and cultural factors in the eyes of Weber did prove to be decisive in causing an agrarian change in East Germany (Mayer 1944:31; Whimster 2007:18).

That noted, it should also be emphasized that values can't exist without a reference point. What is the reference point for the evaluation of individual action? The issue stands resolved with the invention of the 'impartial spectator' in Adam Smith. On the other hand, Weber seems not to have stated his views explicitly in this regard. Moreover, Adam Smith's solution was rooted in his moral philosophy which stands in sharp contrast to Weber's theory where 'morals' have only a peripheral presence. Yet, Weber's theory of action is not averse to accepting the vital role of values in shaping the dynamics of social action (as is evident from the foregoing discussion). Therefore, a comparison of their respective views on morality would not seem superfluous at this point.

³ Troeltsch expressed himself in these terms in a letter he wrote to Heinrich Dietzel on October 22, 1917.

Two Views on Morality: Max Weber and Adam Smith

Max Weber's theory of society, unlike Durkheim's theory, rejects the concept of moral truths (Voegelin 1952:20; Abend 2008:87). This is the indubitable reason why an analysis of society based on "morally erroneous premises" was rejected by Weber (Strauss 1953:59-62). Some take an extreme view to claim that "Weber was not concerned with morals at all" (Rutgers and Schreurs 2004:105). On the other hand, Adam Smith's name is rarely mentioned without a reference to his moral philosophy enunciated in his book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, first published in 1759. How big is this difference? Let us find out.

Emile Durkheim is said to have argued that because of a conflict with science, religion lost the sway it held over people's psyche dethroning God and elevating "society" to occupy the realm of the "sacred" (Bellah 1959:460). It is probably this fact that lies behind the shift in the loci of morals from religious teachings to "group approval", a notion that dates back at least to the days of Polybius who lived in 2nd century B.C. (Barnes 1917:183; Coker 1938:117-18; Shuckburgh 2002:352-53). The reference to group approval by Polybius is, perhaps, one of the earliest in history pointing to 'reflective empathy' as the source of moral duty and justice. The thought was revived in modern social thought in the works of scholars such as David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, and Adam Smith. It entered the realm of sociological thought through the works of Saint-Simon who saw the development of religious thought "as a change from mysticism to moralism" (Stark 1945:36). Saint-Simon believed that to be socially useful, religion must rid itself of dogma to be transformed into a "positive system of morality".⁴ This is the sociological view of morality that has persisted since Saint-Simon to be echoed almost a century later in the works of Max Weber who argued that "individuals always make a choice to act according to a moral code" (Stone 2010:132).

What did Weber mean by "moral code"? Religion, in Weber's thought, was far from being the sole repository of morality in society. Instead, the norms constituting 'morals' in the Weberian model of society emerge from the particularities of a social location, also known as "space of reasons" (Westerman 2013:581). These morals maintain their validity only within the boundaries of such spaces of reasons. And it is precisely due to this reason that Weber maintained "irreconcilability of values" as the foundational theme of his theory of society. It follows from this premise that by no means a value position could be weighed against another value position. As a corollary, society is composed of "value spheres as kingdoms ruled by gods and demons locked in perpetual warfare" (Oakes 2003:30). Weber's pragmatic view on morality came out clearly when he described the modern society as an abstraction where one is asked to choose one's own God and devil (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1946:148).⁵ Therefore, Weber, far from denying the significance of values in society, seems to have conceded the significance of morals in determining social action (Turner and Factor 1994:88).

Quite similar views on morality were held by Adam Smith. He sought to explain "social and moral values as tendencies which come into existence in the experiences of man in society and constitute his social being" (Salomon 1945:26). He stressed the importance of human experience in shaping the rules of morality for it alone possesses the authority to approve or disapprove of all human actions. In his own words:

We do not originally approve or condemn particular actions; because, upon examination, they appear to be agreeable or inconsistent with a certain general rule. The general rule, on the contrary, is formed, by finding from experience, that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstanced in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of (Smith 2004:172).

Furthermore, "it is clear that this morality is pre-eminently social: Smith argues that moral sentiments are the direct expression of social life; the isolated individual would possess neither thoughts nor character for he would have no 'mirror' in which to see himself" (Swingewood 1970:169). Adam Smith too, like Max Weber, does not deal with 'morality' in its religious-theological sense.⁶ He applies ample caution in choosing "moral sentiments" as the unit of his analysis. Free from all mystical elements, moral sentiments, for Adam Smith, are valid only within a social group. Hence, they tend to vary "from group to group" (Welsh 2008:172).

In Smith's view, "morality is thus wholly secular; it is seen to flow from the reflected sentiments of others; its source is neither intuition nor God" (Swingewood 1970:170). In this respect, Smith seems to have taken a leaf out of David Hume's writings wherein Hume explains "moral sentiment" from an empiricist point of view detaching it from its roots in the notion of divine law. Moral sentiments are akin to emotions arising out of a sympathetic relationship with imaginary others. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume writes: "Thus self-interest is the original motive to the *establishment* of justice: but a *sympathy* with *public* interest is the source of the *moral* approbation, which attends that virtue (Hume 2007:320-21). Moral self-restraint, Hume argues, does

⁴ See his *Oeuvres*, XVIII, 218, n. 1. Also see M. Franck Alengry's *Essai Historique et Critique sur La Sociologie chez Auguste Comte* (1900:466-68, Paris: Alcan).

⁵ Weber alluded to this aspect of modern society in his lecture, 'Science as a Vocation'.

⁶ See Part III, Chapter VI entitled "In What Cases the Sense of Duty ought to be the Sole Principle of Our Conduct; and In What Cases it ought to Concur with Other Motives" of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* originally published in 1759.

not emanate from reason. It is “social restraint through sympathy” (Capaldi 1978:118). In Hume’s words, he who expresses a moral sentiment must “depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to him with others” (Hume 1998:75). The social nature of moral sentiments expressed by Hume and Smith does provide sufficient ground for a parallel to be drawn between their view of human action and Weber’s conceptualization of ‘consensual action’ (more on it in a bit later).

More points of similarity between Weber and Smith appear if one shifts the focus of analysis to Weber’s political sociology. In his famous lecture, ‘Politics as a Vocation’, Weber contends: “This is the decisive psychological quality of the politician: his ability to let realities work upon him with inner concentration and calmness. Hence his *distance* to things and men” (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1946:115). Elaborating upon the proposition, Weber posed a question: “How can warm passion and a cool sense of proportion be forged together in one and the same soul?” (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1946:115). He did not leave it unanswered. Rather, he proposed a solution which suggests “that firm taming of the soul, which distinguishes the passionate politician and differentiates him from the “sterilely excited” and mere political dilettante, is possible only through habituation to detachment in every sense of the word” (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1946:115-16). The thought seems to be mirrored by Adam Smith when he speaks of “two sets of virtues that enable us to live a good and unified life: what Smith calls the “awful virtues” of magnanimity and self-command, and the “amiable virtues” of benevolence and love” (Hanley 2019:8, 101).

At this point, one is left with too little doubt regarding the fact that the role of morals in society did not evade Max Weber’s attention. Rather, it formed an important mode of analysis in his thought. Weber expressed his thoughts on morals in society succinctly when he compared law and morals which, according to him, differ only in “degrees of normativeness” (Weber 1978:325). Law which is the utmost expression of rationality in society does not refer to a category entirely different from “morals”. Weber argues: “There is no socially important moral commandment which has not been a legal command at one time or another” (Weber 1978:325). In fact, Weber does equate conventions worthy of approval to “good morals” (Weber 1978:323) which testifies to the fact that Weber’s theory of society is not an ‘amoral’ theory.

Moreover, Weber’s notion of morality accords the individual the central place in society. Weber’s distinction of “ethic of responsibility” and “ethic of ultimate ends” (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1946:120-27) in politics is not without reference to moral code based on ‘practical reason’. In this regard, it is argued that “rigorous rationalization of one’s own life-conduct in order to maximize the chances of achieving one’s personally chosen goals appeared to him an essential element of moral code of behaviour in consonance with the ‘ethic of responsibility’” (Mommsen 1989:110-11). An important observation suggesting the suitability of the use of morality in the study of society from a Weberian perspective is expressed in the following words:

Because his interpretive sociology examines reasons and values, Weber’s paradigm is suited to explaining society through a moral lens; though Weber himself does not take this step, his approach can unite concepts of virtue and flourishing, and so permits a factual yet moralized critique (Westerman 2013:584).

However, it is important to note that Weber and Adam Smith existed at different points in history, and therefore, experienced different social conditions of existence. Yet, remarkable similarity exists between their views on morality; the discernible difference arising only from the use of dissimilar terminology. Nonetheless, one wonders why despite conceptual similitude in this respect, Adam Smith is an acclaimed moralist while Weber isn’t. One reason could be that Weber adopted an antinomian approach in his study of society.⁷ Being critical of the idea of progress in a highly bureaucratized and rationalized world, Weber, unlike Durkheim, kept himself aloof from abstract moralizing. But it doesn’t mean Weber was an unapologetic Machiavellian who would consider all questions regarding morals irrelevant to a theory of social action. In fact, Weber’s concern with consensual action, a sense of duty among the followers of a charismatic leader, and individual freedom do carry a moralizing effect without Weber being referred to as a moralist.

III. WEBER’S CONSENSUAL ACTION AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Adam Smith’s idea of morality rests on the concept of an ‘impartial spectator’ that exists as a set of instructions for individual actors. In following the moral injunction so received, people tend to act in a cooperative manner fulfilling their self-interest; in the process, bringing “invisible hand” into play. Handling a similar problem which he calls “consensual action”, Weber seems to provide a different answer assigning primacy to consensus-based norms (in lieu of rational choice). He defines consensual action in the following manner:

Consensus (*Einverständnis*) exists when expectations as to the behavior of others are realistic because of the objective probability that the others will accept these expectations as “valid” for themselves, even though

⁷ See “The Antinomian structure of Max Weber’s political thought” by Mommsen, *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, Vol. 4 (1983).

no explicit agreement was made...Social action that rests on such likely consensus will be called “consensual action” (*Einverständnishandeln*)’ (Weber 1978:1378).

Consensual action is based on norms, customs, and conventions, a distinguishing feature that sets it apart from other types of actions having “legal order” as the foundation. Aiming greater conceptual clarity, Weber tried not to leave any ambiguity while demarcating the two types – law and convention. Law, in Weber’s view, carries an element of coercion while consensual action, though not synonymous to voluntary acceptance of rules based on consensus, need not necessarily be enforced by means of coercive machinery. To put it in the right perspective, Weber argues: “Law exists when there is a probability that an order will be upheld by a specific staff of men who will use physical or psychical compulsion with the intention of obtaining conformity with the order, or of inflicting sanctions for infringement of it” (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1946:180). Although it doesn’t matter much as law can’t exist without legal coercion, Weber still points to psychological reasons behind people’s obedience to law. He writes: “The motives for obedience may rather be of many different kinds. In the majority of cases, they are predominantly utilitarian or ethical or subjectively conventional i.e., consisting of the fear of disapproval by the environment” (Weber 1978:314). The distinction gets even sharper when Weber explains the difference in the following words: “for us, sociologically, “legal” means an order whose empirical validity is guaranteed through a coercive apparatus of the legally social group” whereas “Convention refers to an order whose validity is guaranteed only through “social disapproval” by the conventional social group” (Weber 1981:179).

The use of terms “expectation” and “objective probability” in the above definition, coupled with the role of social disapproval referred to by Weber in this passage implies that an interactionist model would be proper to the study of consensual action. For one may get a hint of others’ expectations only if one tries to read the minds of others, and to that end, one needs to imagine one’s own self in others’ position. Adding to it, Weber also points out that “it is immaterial which motives underlie these expectations about this behavior of others. Social action insofar as it is oriented toward such “consensus” probabilities shall be called “consensual action”” (Weber 1981:168). The seemingly reduced importance of motives in explaining consensual action rules out the application of ‘formal rationality’ which is commonly applied by the method known as *verstehen* to explain the causes of social action. As a result, the role of values expressed through ethical beliefs and morals in explaining social action becomes important. In short, one needs to look beyond the realm of rational choice based on the cost-benefit calculation in one’s attempt to explain the causal dynamics of consensual action. The focus should move away from rational calculation to the unpredictable nature of human personality.

Weber himself gave his study of society a social psychological, rather a symbolic interactionist tinge when he argued that the development of modern capitalism owes its origin to the formation of a particular “personality type” (Gerth and Mills 1946:61), also called “character-structure” (Fischhoff 1944:63), largely influenced by ascetic Protestantism (Spencer 1979; Weber 2001). It was in keeping with his view that considers sociology as “a discipline of the inner understanding” (Fischhoff 1944:61). It also seems to be an interesting point that a psychological element to Weber’s sociology could have crept in from Karl Jaspers’s writings. It has been argued that Max Weber’s ‘Some Principles of an Interpretative Sociology’, which he formulated in 1913, drew vital inspiration from Karl Jaspers’s *Allgemeine Psychopathology* (Mayer 1944:53; Weber 1981:179).⁸

Pierre Bourdieu discovered elements of symbolic interactionism in Weber’s theory of charisma. Bourdieu argued: “The fact that it would not be difficult to extract the explicitly stated principles of a theory of symbolic interaction from Weber’s theoretical writings makes the reformulation of Weberian analysis in the language of symbolic interactionism all the easier – and, it would seem, all the more legitimate” (Bourdieu 1987:121). These lines from Bourdieu seem prophetic as one discovers points of resemblance between Weber’s theory of charisma and Mead’s explanation of “I”. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills argue:

Just as for George H. Mead the “I” is ordinarily in tension with the social roles derived from the expectations of others, so for Weber the potentially charismatic quality of man stands in tension with the external demands of institutional life. For Mead, the tension between the I and the role-demands is resolved in the creative response of the genius. For Weber, the response of the charismatic leader to distress unifies external demands and internal urges. (Gerth and Mills 1946:73).

It is also argued that “Blumer’s viewpoint was very similar to Weber’s” (Kivisto and Swatos, Jr. 1990:156). Herbert Blumer, in a sense, acknowledged the relationship when he said: “in many ways, in my judgement, the general perspective and approach of Max Weber was something that was rather kindred in character to what they were doing in Chicago” (Helle 1999:196).⁹ Another opinion contends that Max Weber exhibits epistemological similarity with Charles Horton Cooley (Platt 1985). Furnishing more evidence towards

⁸ Weber himself mentions Karl Jaspers in footnote no. 1 of his ‘Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology’ (1981).

⁹ Blumer expressed his opinion in this regard during an interview with Horst Jurgen Helle. The interview got published in Helle’s book, *Verstehende Soziologie* (1999).

establishing a link between Weber and the theory of symbolic interactionism, it has been argued that Max Weber became a “mediating” factor for the growth of “social interactionism” in the works of Mead and Cooley (Adler 1956:275).

More recently, Sandro Segre (2014) mooted the plausibility of looking at consensual action from a symbolic interactionist perspective. He, nevertheless, expressed his concern over the lack of due importance that the Weberian concept of consensual action has received in the field of symbolic interactionism (Segre 2014:475). It is indeed intriguing to note that Weber’s ‘consensual action’ which, in its formulation does border on the principles of symbolic interactionism, has not attracted much scholarly interest. On the other hand, the connection between Adam Smith and symbolic interactionism is not entirely unknown. Hence, it seems interesting to find out how Adam Smith fits into the scheme of things.

Symbolic Interactionism: The Connecting Link between Max Weber and Adam Smith

In his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (III.1.5), Smith argued:

We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. *This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct* (Smith 2004:140).¹⁰

It goes without saying that Smith, in a sense, had already laid the foundation for Charles Horton Cooley to formulate his theory of the “looking glass self”, although Cooley never acknowledged his debt to Smith (Truzzi 1966; Stryker 1980; Dingwall 2001; Jacobs 2012). More connection between Adam Smith and the school of Symbolic Interactionism is revealed by the reverberation of his concepts in Mead’s theory (Costelloe 1997). Precisely speaking, Smith’s ideas of “changing roles in the fancy” and “impartial spectator” were reformulated as “taking the role of the other” by Mead (Costelloe 1997:81). Most importantly, Smith’s “ideal spectator” got renamed as the “generalized other” in Mead’s theory (Costelloe 1997:81).

In the writings of the two prominent sources of influence on Adam Smith, Francis Hutcheson and David Hume, a faint emergence of the concept of “impartial spectator” could be discerned. Revealing his sociological inclination (much before the discipline of Sociology formally came into existence), Hutcheson in his *Illustrations upon the Moral Sense* posed a question: “Should any one ask even concerning these two *ultimate ends, private good and public*, is not the latter more reasonable than the former?” (Hutcheson 1769:204). He came up with an answer a few sentences later as a response to another question. Hutcheson wrote: “Does not *every spectator* approve the pursuit of public good more than private?” The answer is obvious, that he does” (Hutcheson 1769:204). Hutcheson’s was a quest to decode the complexity of “moral sense” and the importance of others’ “approval” in shaping social behavior. His final verdict on the issue is encapsulated in the following remark: “It is more probable, when our actions are really kind and publicly useful, that all observers shall judge truly of our intentions, and of the tendency of our actions, and consequently approve what we approve ourselves” (Hutcheson 1769:254). Isn’t there a slight glimpse of the impartial spectator hidden in these statements?

Nonetheless, it was David Hume who assigned a form to the ‘spectator’ that seemingly represents a collective, nay “all mankind” (Raphael 2007:30). This view of deciding on one’s possible course of action in accordance with the opinions of imaginary “others” could be discerned in Weber’s exposition of social action as well. Weber wrote: “The ‘others’ may be individual persons, and may be known to the actor as such, or may constitute an indefinite plurality and may be entirely unknown as individuals” (Weber 1978:22). A similar line of thought was explicitly held by David Hume, who used the term, “judicious spectator” (Hume 2000:371; Raphael 2007:30) to explain what would later be called ‘impartial spectator’ by Adam Smith. Thus, it is rightly argued that before Adam Smith coined the term and gave it the final shape “the concept, though not the precise name, of an impartial spectator is there already in Hume” (Raphael 2007:30).

It must also be mentioned that while Hutcheson and Hume based their theories of moral sense on sympathy, in Smith it acquired a slightly changed form, i.e., ‘empathy’ (though Smith still referred to it as “sympathy”). A conceptual similarity could be discerned with Weber’s emphasis on the role of ‘empathy’ in building consensus that would eventually “reinforce the sense of ‘oughtness’” (Weber 1978:322). The consensus thus evolved seems to mirror Smith’s impartial spectator that galvanizes a plurality of spectators into “reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct” (Smith 2004:156).

The importance of sympathy as a natural instinct was explained by Adam Smith in the following words: “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it” (Smith 2004:51). This is probably the origin of the bond that ties the individual to society. The development of fellow-feeling is incontestably the cementing agent of society. But

¹⁰ Italics added. The lines are also quoted verbatim in Raphael (2007:35).

Smith's sympathy is not just a synonym for pity or compassion, "which have a narrower application" (Welsh 2008:172). "For Smith, sympathy does not refer to pity, compassion, or empathy; instead, Smith uses it as a technical term, referring to the cognitive and psychological processes which connect people" (Rathbone 2018:3). And it is these cognitive and psychological processes that could be assumed to be at work when Weber's actor tries to assess the behaviors of others before making the final decision to act.

Just as Smith's actor is tied to an impartial spectator which is a surrogate for "social conscience" (Coker 1990:140), Weber's actor too can't exist in isolation, unperturbed by others' behaviors. Weber affirms:

An important (though not indispensable) normal component of social action is its meaningful orientation to the expectations of certain behavior on the part of others and, in accordance with that, orientation to the (subjectively) assessed probabilities (*Chancen*) for the success of one's own action. (Weber 1981:159).

How does one get convinced regarding a particular set of behavior on the part of others? How could the mental exercise of anticipating certain expected behavior on the part of others be accomplished without resorting to some kind of role-taking? The answer to a large extent came from Max Weber himself when he wrote:

But expectations of certain behavior on the part of other can also, for the subjectively rational actor, be based on his subjective belief that he can expect subjectively *meaningful* behavior from others and that he can thus predict, with varying degrees of accuracy the probabilities arising from certain *meaning* relationships (Weber 1981:159).

How is the "subjective belief" formed? It could be formed if one imagines oneself in the place of others to choose from a range of alternatives so that one's action is in agreement with the opinion of the imagined others, which in the case of 'consensual action', could be "current customs of interpretation" (Weber 1981:169) or the opinion of an imagined group of "unknown others" (Weber 1981:170). Thus, we have reached a point where the structural similarity between consensual action and impartial spectator seems quite obvious.

Consensual Action and Impartial Spectator

Consensual action need not be instrumentally rational as is evident from the following remark:

Rather, in a consensus, the valid orientation to "expectations" means only that one has the probability, on the average, of being able to adapt one's own behavior to a certain meaning of the (internal and external) behavior of others, a meaning that is assumed to be more or less valid although it may be highly irrational (Weber 1981:170).

This aspect of 'consensual action' stressing its "irrational" character could be understood with the help of the example cited by Weber himself. Joint action for providing emergency aid to a severely injured person is presented by Weber as a hypothetical case of consensual action wherein people feel an obligation (is it 'moral' obligation emanating from an empathic concern?) to fulfill their role in the joint operation because of a belief in the consensus that already exists (Weber 1981:170). What is the structure of this consensus? Does it not resemble what Smith calls the "impartial and well-informed spectator"? In the chapter entitled "Of those Systems which make Virtue consist in Propriety" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (VII.2.1), Smith covered a large intellectual territory to conclude:

None of those systems either give, or even pretend to give, any precise or distinct measure by which this fitness or propriety of affection can be ascertained or judged of. That precise and distinct measure can be found nowhere but in the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator. (Smith 2004:293).

Thus the reason why people act in accordance with a valid consensus (lacking legal codification) could be located in Weber's theory more accurately if one makes use of the conceptual tool developed by Adam Smith.

Based on the foregoing discussion, an analogy can be drawn between Weber's "rational" man and Smith's "prudent" man. Both care for the fulfillment of their "self-interest" (also "self-love" for Adam Smith), but not in total disregard for the interests of their fellow-beings. For Adam Smith, no matter how strong one's "self-love" is, one can never abandon one's desire for approbation of others (Grampp 1948; Coase 1976:531). Similarly, for Weber, the role of convention turns out to be of paramount importance in the case of consensual action. This convention entails an "expression of approval or disapproval on the part of those persons who constitute the environment of the actor" (Weber 1978:319). By heeding the approval or disapproval of the persons constituting the environment, the actor in Weber's theory comes close to Adam Smith's actor who looks for the approbation of others symbolized in the form of an imaginary 'impartial spectator'. A non-legal, yet compelling force represented by Weber's "consensus" is explained in the following manner:

To the extent that the regularities are consciously oriented towards rules at all and do not merely spring from unreflective habituation, they are of the nature of "custom" and "convention"; often they are predominantly rational maxims of purposeful self-interested action, on the effective operation of which each participant is counting for his own conduct as well as that of all others. This expectation is, indeed, justified

objectively, especially since the maxim, though lacking legal guaranties, often constitutes the subject matter of some association or consensus. (Weber 1978:324).

In order to appreciate the potent role played by consensus in the real world, careful attention should be paid to Weber's discussion of "agreements" on the Stock Exchange. Weber observed:

Can it be said that a stable private economic system of the modern type would be "unthinkable" without legal guaranties? As a matter of fact we see that in most business transactions it never occurs to anyone even to think of taking legal action. Agreements on the stock exchange, for example, take place between professional traders in such forms as in the vast majority of cases exclude "proof" in cases of bad faith: the contracts are oral, or are recorded by marks and notations in the trader's own notebook. Nevertheless, a dispute practically never occurs (Weber 1978:328).

An observation of the everyday scenario in the stock market would suggest that the sum total of individual actions in the market gives rise to a 'cooperative action' leading to the formation of "a small and stable group" in the market (Elster 1984:146). Financial markets, in general, tend to discourage "opportunistic conduct" among traders creating an atmosphere of trust and loyalty (Segre 2005:348-49). The greater role played by norms and values in modern organizations has also been highlighted in other studies (Jackall 1988). Robert Putnam (1993:167), in a sense, referred to this feature of the society when he defined *social capital* "as features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions." This raised significance of the emotional rather than the rational side of human personality leads one to recall the difficulty faced by Weber in developing a clear outline for the concept of rationality.

In Weber's scheme of things, "rationality" is the only criterion that lends itself suitable to the explanation of social action which by no means excludes actions performed to win the approbation of the 'imaginary others' resembling Adam Smith's impartial spectator. Therefore, it could be shown that Weber's actor motivated by a consensus is not a completely "rational" being. This proposition, combined with the fact that actions of the actor are oriented to others' behavior (seeking their approbation), is more than suggestive of a conceptual congruence between Adam Smith's impartial spectator and Max Weber's consensual action.

IV. IN CONCLUSION

The above discussion leads one into believing that Max Weber and Adam Smith share several important points as regards their theory of action. But an interesting catch to this conclusion stems from the fact that a direct reference to Adam Smith is too rare in Weber's work. What then lies behind the congruity of thoughts between the two men? One reason could be the personal background. It is widely recognized that since his childhood Weber had lived under the influence of Calvinist thought which he received from his mother. As a point of similarity, it could be mentioned that Adam Smith has also been labeled as a "neo-Calvinist" (Etzrodt 2008:49).

However, on a more professional plane, some scholars make a tall claim that Adam Smith had anticipated Weber's Protestant Ethic (Ditz 1984:251; Anderson 1988:1074-75). Nonetheless, it does not seem to be a satisfactory explanation as to the interconnections discovered between their two theories emphasizing human action. It could be surmised that Weber was made acquainted with Adam Smith's thought by Wilhelm Roscher who was a notable influence on Weber and did refer to Adam Smith in his works. But this too is far from being a proven fact.

Nevertheless, a connection could be established if one turns one's attention to Weber's reference to Benjamin Franklin in his *Protestant Ethic* essays. Weber's reliance on Franklin's writings to prove his thesis on the "spirit" of capitalism might have indirectly introduced an element of Adam Smith's thought to Weber's theory as it is argued (though not proven) that Franklin and Adam Smith, being contemporaries, did have the opportunity for an exchange of ideas (Eliot 1924). Thus, although there's a lack of hard evidence to suggest a direct influence of Adam Smith on Max Weber, it stands as an undeniable fact that the two seem to be aligned in terms of thoughts more than is often realized.

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