

Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *A History of German Society, Volume One, From the Feudalism of the Old Reich to the Defensive Modernization of the Reform Era, 1700–1815* (1987)

Abstract

The first volume of the Bielefeld historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler's five-volume *History of German Society* appeared in 1987. In the foreword, Wehler (1931–2014) states that he conceived the work as a “problem-oriented analysis of important processes and structures” that have shaped German society over the past two hundred years. He explains that his narrative revolves around the “primary dimensions” or “axes” of economy, rule, and culture. Wehler also addresses the extent to which he was guided by Max Weber in the formulation of this typology.

Source

Foreword

[...]

Since no modern history of German society has been written until now, it is worthwhile to provide at least the outline of important developments because it will remain extremely difficult to attempt a comprehensive, well-rounded, overall presentation of this subject for the foreseeable future. The problems that present themselves to anyone undertaking such a plan dispel all initial illusions with discouraging persistence. This is primarily due to the peculiar difficulties associated with the project of societal history [*Gesellschaftsgeschichte*] as such. In some ways it would probably be easier to write a German political history. But even if one disregards this particular difficulty, more about which in the “Introduction,” there are very few accounts by individual historians that attempt to grasp German history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so that, in general, there is a lack of syntheses that one could use as guides, approvingly or disapprovingly, while constructing a modern German societal history.

[...]

Introduction

In this work, important aspects of the development of German society from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day will be analyzed. To be more precise, the aim of this outline of modern German societal history is to describe the complicated transformation process by which a society, in less than two hundred years, went from nearly two thousand agrarian, early capitalist, aristocratic-patrician, corporatist-absolutist dominions of old European Germany to our contemporary state-regulated, republican-democratically constituted society of highly organized industrial capitalism. This outline attempts to describe this transformation process in its essential features, and, if possible, to explain the transition to a qualitatively new social formation.

The focus is not on the state and constitution, nor on the policies of governments and administrations, let alone political events themselves. Rather, it is on the society-shaping interactions between economy, rule, and culture in

modern German history. That means giving center stage to studies that are designed and executed for the long-term goal of a societal history. The present account is still a preliminary outline, not a comprehensive societal history itself, because the inherent demands of this programmatic concept make for a very ambitious goal. Nonetheless, this concept of societal history informs the entire text and must therefore first be explained.

I. Societal History as an Attempt at Synthesis: Dimensions and Goals

Modern societal history understands its subject as the whole of society [*Gesellschaft*] in the sense of [the English term] “society” and [the French] “société.” It thus tries to capture as much as possible of the basic processes that have determined and perhaps still determine the historical development of a large-scale system, one usually situated within state political boundaries. Following the “secular theories” and categories that Max Weber developed for his universal historical studies [...] in order to grasp as precisely as possible the specific character of the occidental type of society through comparisons with other cultures, three equal [...] dimensions of society can be analytically distinguished. These are rule, economy, and culture, each shaping every society in a fundamental sense, yet at the same time interpenetrating and contingent. In other words, the human world is founded, if one looks at the fundamental elements in their literal sense, on “work, power, and language” (Habermas). Each of these dimensions is relatively autonomous in application and impact, and none can be derived from the others, however much analysis of historical reality depends on their combination and interdependencies. It is important to trace how intensively rule dialectically conditions and influences economy and culture, how economy does likewise to rule and culture, and culture to rule and economy. In my opinion, there are no rational criteria that make it possible to define the superior potency of one dimension or another from the outset in an abstract, definitional sense. Only an exact analysis of the historical constellations reveals which dimension or combination of factors was strongest in each case.

Once one acknowledges the equal weight and standing of these constitutive dimensions, one cannot privilege any one of them openly or covertly, granting one more historical depth or explanatory power over another. The objective of such a Weber-inspired societal history is in fact similar to what French historians have for some time called “total history” – or what one might term the “general history” of a society, albeit without the old limitation to political history. Now the claim that it is possible to actually capture totality is already “illegitimate,” to say nothing of the practical overtaxing of any scholar who attempts it. Human knowledge in the humanities remains partial knowledge, which is bound to the specific research objectives or to “cultural values” [*Kulturwertideen*] (Weber) and changes as these frames of reference themselves do. But as a vanishing point, a guideline, a regulative idea in the Kantian sense, this societal history nevertheless remains tied to a utopian totality, which in the process of delineation, of course, is pragmatically restricted, with more or less far-reaching effects.^[1]

Deciding on such a broadly conceived societal history simultaneously entails the renunciation of another theoretically and empirically possible history of society that references specifically German traditions. This other understanding of societal history has been shaped since the 1820s by that influential German social theory, which, since Hegel, Stein, and Marx, has conceived of society as the “sphere between state and individual,” as an autonomous “system of needs” (as it is called in Hegel’s philosophy of right), as a system of interests and dependencies of “civil society” [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] that is strictly separated from the state, a society that rose and rapidly expanded in close interaction with the modern capitalist economy. In this sense, this notion of “society” and its history is bound up with the modern separation of the territorial institutional state and *societas civilis* or of economic and civil society. The Hegelian-Marxian schools of thought – and the social sciences linked to them, regardless of how – tend to attribute to the dynamic socioeconomic core of the overall system, that is, to the locus of modernization, a power of action that is superior, as the elderly Engels cautiously put it, “in the last

instance,” exerting structural effects on other areas of reality.

To proceed a priori from this hierarchy of historical potentialities, however, presupposes an act of faith. Its superiority cannot be convincingly proved with only rational arguments. By contrast, the historian who assumes the equal importance of the three fundamental dimensions of rule, economy, and culture is on much firmer ground and thereby avoids unnecessarily prejudicing his initial position. Of course, this argumentative distancing from an influential tradition of German social theory and social science (on which, at an early stage before writing this book, I originally wanted to base my study, until my preoccupation with the multitude of historical problems drove me ever more clearly toward the Weberian conception) in no way precludes also shifting the focus to economic or social developments. But only historical analysis reveals whether – and for which time periods – precedence must be ascribed to economy, rule, or culture in the first place. In the phase of early and high industrialization, for example, the “social question” of the proletariat has a different meaning in everyday lives and governmental policies than does the situation of industrial workers in the era of state-regulated capitalism and social and welfare state interventionism, which can fall back on completely different control mechanisms and de-escalation measures.

Theoretically and systematically, however, to emphasize this point once again because of its importance, the only tenable position in the long run, absent convincing and intellectually honest preference criteria, is to assume the fundamental equality of the primary dimensions of a modern societal history. Admittedly, the discussion of such dimensions is ultimately only a helpful metaphor with which to analytically dissect a complex, tightly interwoven correlation of historical effects and then grasp them empirically in a better, more credible way. In this context, it remains true that I do not have any reliable criteria at my disposal with which to decide definitively for my purposes whether the rational culture of the Occident made industrial capitalism possible in the first place and then kept it viable; whether the peculiar social structures of Europe were decisive for the breakthrough of the industrial and political revolutions since the end of eighteenth century; whether the capitalist economy represented the most consequential strand of development, or if instead the specific systems of rule in the West were the *sine qua non* of its historical uniqueness. As will become clear, the crystallization of these elements into a unique general constellation was decisive.

Such a far-reaching history of society in the Weberian tradition and the equal ranking of its three basic dimensions raises the problem of selection (selection always remains unavoidable anyway) with unmitigated or even comparatively increased acuteness. Which choice of problem can still be convincingly legitimized within this conception and its comprehensive claims? For this purpose, the concept of “dimensions” and their respective contents must first be specified more precisely, before the prevailing epistemological interests and the selection preferences associated with them are discussed in more detail.

If one does not want to surrender to the complexity of historical reality by withdrawing entirely to manageable monographic research, in extreme cases to positivistic miniature work, but rather wishes to gather in a synthesis the dominant elements of an age in context, then submitting them to an abstract organizational scheme is unavoidable. This is the purpose of the already mentioned differentiation of central dimensions or “axes” that run through the social fabric. “Axis” means two things here: an at least implicit condensed historical context of effects as well as a heuristic tool to facilitate a more detailed historical and systematic investigation. Societal history has a lot to do with how society as a whole is constituted, that is, with its “social structure.” With this category one gains a general umbrella term for the entire internal structure of society, which is determined by economic conditions, the social hierarchy situation, political institutions, societal organizations such as parties and interest groups, family, education system, and church – in other words, by a multitude of institutions and prestructured fields of

activity, not least also by cultural norms, religious values, and changing interpretations of the everyday social world. Seen in this light, societal history is in many ways social structural history. Even when dealing with such a complex phenomenon as social structure in the sense described here, it is advisable to employ organizing and classifying concepts such as “axis.”[2]

Whether one uses “dimension” or “axis,” both require, as stated, an initial substantive definition. In order to come to a preliminary terminological agreement, it should be said that economy marks out a field of those activities in which people in “metabolism with nature” engage to make a living.[3] In the period covered here, the economic structure – as the institutionalized regulatory system that permanently combines natural resources, human cooperation, and technological equipment for the production of goods and the provision of services – is increasingly determined by the functioning of markets for land and goods, capital and labor, by technological progress as a fuel for the engine of industrialization, as well as by novel transportation and communication systems, until organized capitalism and the modern interventionist state introduce additional regulatory imperatives.

Political rule In the tradition of Max Weber denotes socially structured power, which invariably means organized and standardized power that affords those in possession of it the possibility or even certitude of enforcing their will or achieving their mission from different bases of legitimacy, whether they are in government or a local administration, in parliament or on a feudal estate. Public political rule must be distinguished from forms of private rule, which are also at issue, for example, in the family or workplace, even if the legal sanctioning of such private rule may depend on political decisions.

Following the broad concept of cultural anthropology, culture should encompass ideational and institutional traditions, values and attitudes, mental configurations, ideologies, and forms of expression, in other words, that symbolically encoded comprehension and interpretation of reality, with the help of which not only linguistic-written communication, but virtually any kind of communication is maintained and stored, so that all behavior and action remains embedded in and guided by this complex of symbolic interaction.

Needless to say, it would be a terrible illusion to believe that these dimensions could be found so neatly separated in reality. In fact, they permeate nearly all human institutions, albeit with an ever-changing degree of influence. The noble estate, for instance, is always about the exercise of dominion, while at the same time it is an economic enterprise and a site of cultural hegemony. But both the relative autonomy of these dimensions and the increased analytical clarity gained by so structuring the issues and material made it worthwhile to follow such a straightforward division in the following account and to emphasize the interdependencies where appropriate.

Although it helps to not use too many categories in such theoretical reflections, other important societal axes can be emphasized here for pragmatic reasons, especially since they are frequently employed in the analysis. For example, the system of social inequality has such great significance in every society that it seems justified to treat that system as a central axis, as happens in this book. At the same time, one must keep in mind that social inequality, to anticipate an argument to be developed in more detail below, is strictly speaking a result of the interplay of the unequal distribution of power and rule, economic situation, and culturally conditioned interpretive frameworks. Thus, social inequality remains an outcome of the intersection of the three systematically superordinate dimensions. As a ubiquitous phenomenon, however, whose consequences visibly or secretly dominate the life prospects of groups and individuals down to the most remote niche of everyday life, social inequality deserves to be mentioned here already.[4]

If one proceeds from the broad definition of societal history just outlined, one is committed to capturing as much

as possible of that history's structural, epoch-defining characteristics in a synthesis. In this understanding, which to a certain extent envisages an unattainable optimum, the goal is to make sense of an entire society in a specified time period with a history oriented towards rule, economy, and culture, and toward populace, politics qua policy, and social inequality. In any case, this is how the prevailing tendency of the following account can be characterized formulaically.

As this is still a rather preliminary work for a future, more multifaceted societal history in the full sense of the term, one that takes further important aspects into account as well, a certain preference for the dimensions or axes of economy, rule, and social inequality can probably also be justified. With regard to the dimension of culture, where I feel the limits of my expertise the most, I have focused primarily on culture's socio-political conditions and developmental trends. Within this restricted framework, churches, schools and universities, the press, the literary-journalistic market, and the rise of science are all treated, just as left-leaning Hegelianism, political romanticism, and other elitist and class-bound ideologies are. In this respect, cultural factors are definitely taken into account. Nowhere, however, is it claimed that culture in the sense of philosophy, architecture, music history, etc., is treated with equal weight and in the same detail as the other dimensions. Although [high] culture will hopefully be more clearly emphasized on the whole than this caveat would at first suggest, no secret should be made of what I myself perceive as an unfortunate deficit.[5]

Despite these limitations, the remaining tasks are both difficult and rewarding enough that societal history remains a reasonable, if tentative, goal. It is one of the basic assumptions of this work that, by the end of the eighteenth century, an unprecedented universal-historical caesura had begun in the West. This break also brought about a new constellation in Germany, for the understanding of which the socio-historical approach promises to be particularly fruitful. Its explanatory potential and the limits usually associated with such a methodological choice will be discussed later. The obvious objection that those who do not prioritize state policy, international relations, or the power of ideational convictions distort history from the outset thus need only be countered at this juncture with the assertion that viewing societal history from the perspective of state policy tied to traditional political history, or with an eye to the ideas of traditional intellectual history, has so far produced a less promising approach to the internal dynamics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Providing evidence for this key thesis is ultimately the responsibility of the entire account.

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NOTES

[1] J. Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*. Tübingen 1967, 179, 166 (Frankfurt 1970); G. Simmel, *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1892). Munich 1923, 67 f.; M. Weber, *Ges. Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre (=WL)*. Tübingen 1973, 178; cf. W. Schluchter, *Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus. Eine Analyse von M. Webers Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Tübingen 1979; W. Schluchter, *M. Webers Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, in *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie (=KZfS)* 30. 1978, 438-67; W. Schluchter, *Rationalismus der Weltbeherrschung*. Frankfurt 1980; W. Schluchter and G. Roth, *M. Weber's Vision of History*. London 1979; W. Schluchter, ed., *M. Webers Sicht des antiken Christentums*. Frankfurt 1985; W. Schluchter, ed., *M. Webers Studie über Hinduismus u. Buddhismus*, *ibid.* 1984; W. Schluchter, ed., *M. Webers Studie über Konfuzianismus u. Taoismus*, *ibid.* 1983; Schluchter, ed., *M. Webers Studie über das antike Judentum*, *ibid.* 1981, J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns I*, *ibid.* 1981, 225-366 (these writings offer an excellent introduction to the above-mentioned points of view). – As is well known, J. Burckhardt (*Weltgeschichtl. Betrachtungen*, Berlin 1929) also argued similarly with regard to the mutual influence of his

“historical potencies.” See more generally T. Nipperdey, *Die anthropolog. Dimension der Geschichtswissenschaft*, in Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie*. Göttingen 1976, 33-58. – In “Civilization matérielle et Capitalisme” (3 vols, Paris 1979, English: *Civilization and Capitalism*, 3 vols, N.Y. 1981/84, German: *Sozialgeschichte des 15.-18.Jh.*, 3 vols. Munich 1985/86), F. Braudel also laid out four ordering systems (economy, politics, culture, “social hierarchy”) rather loosely, by no means systematically; see. II, 2, 409, 507-18; III, 63, 85; F. Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism*. Baltimore 1981, 64, 67 (German: *Die Dynamik des Kapitalismus*. Stuttgart 1986), as well as S. Kinser, *Annaliste Paradigm? The Geohistorical Structure of F. Braudel*, in *American Historical Review* (=AHR) 86. 1981, 91 f., 63-105; G. Roth, F. Braudel and M. Weber, in the same and Schluchter, 166-93, esp. 183, note 40.

[2] F. Engels to W. Borgius, 25.1.1894, in *Marx-Engels, Werke* (=MEW), vol. 39. Berlin 1968, 206, similarly more often in the later letters. – There is a clear discussion of this issue in J. Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte – Strukturgeschichte – Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, in *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (=AfS) 15. 1975, 1-42; revised version in: Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte*. Göttingen 1986, 48-111, 132-76, 217-46. See, by way of contrast: H.-U. Wehler, *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, in 2. Festschrift (=Fs.) W. Conze, ed., W. Schieder and V. Sellin I. Göttingen 1986, 33-52, also in Wehler, *Aus der Geschichte lernen?* E. J. Hobsbawm, *From Social History to the History of Society*, in *Daedalus* 100. 1971, 20-45, German: *Von der Sozialgeschichte zur Geschichte der Gesellschaft*, in *Geschichte u. Soziologie*, ed., H.-U. Wehler, Cologne 1976/ Königstein 1984, 331-53; P. Laslett, *History and the Social Sciences*, in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (=IESS) 6. 1968, 434-40; by contrast, L. Stone, *History and the Social Sciences in the 20th Century*, in Stone, *The Past and the Present*, Boston 1981, 3-43. – “Axis” is used more or less in the same sense as by A. Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, N.Y. 1975, 30, 96, 188, 294 (German: *Die Klassenstruktur fortgeschrittener Gesellschaften*. Frankfurt 1984) and by D. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, N.Y. 1973, partly in German: *Die nachindustrielle Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt 1975, 27-29. See also: F. Fürstenberg, *Sozialstruktur als Schlüsselbegriff der Gesellschaftsanalyse*, in *KZfS* 18. 1966, 441, 443, 445 f., 450-52; R. Mayntz, *Sozialstruktur*, in *Evangel. Staatslexikon*. Stuttgart 1966, 2099-103.

[3] K. Marx, *Das Kapital I*, in MEW, vol. 23, 1962, 192. Virtually the same formulation can be found in J.G. Droysen, *Historik*. Darmstadt 1974, 21. As the best brief study of the rise of the modern market-based economy and society, see K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*. Boston 1968, German: Vienna 1977/Frankfurt 1978; see D. C. North, *Markets and Other Allocative Systems in History: The Challenge of K. Polanyi*, in *Journal of European Economic History* (=JEEH) 6. 1977, 703-16. The entirely neoclassically oriented IEES (17 vols., N.Y. 1968) does not even contain a small contribution on “market”!

[4] Because of its omnipresence and the extent of its consequences, social inequality is discussed in detail in Part I (III). In the context of these reflections on the main dimensions of society and their fusion with reality, it should perhaps be specifically emphasized, once again, that although many social institutions and processes appear to possess a certain independence, they are in fact simultaneously shaped by economy, rule, and culture, and therefore simply elude linear assignment to one of the main axes of societal structure. One thinks, for example, of family and socialization, household and marriage, estate and peasant farm, and so on. These social substructures and processes are not subsumed under each of their various functions, whether economic, emotional, sexual, legal, or cultural. Rather, they bundle together a multitude of functions as if in a microcosm, which, within historically fluctuating boundaries, again affects the world of work, politics, leisure, and mentality. In historical reality, such coordinating institutions far outweigh the one-dimensional ones; and only with the modern differentiation of economic, political, and social systems into relatively sharply defined categories has it become increasingly possible to clearly assign greater numbers of

institutions and spheres of action to one of the three aforementioned dimensions. Therefore, when it comes to situating structures and processes in this historical account, it is usually impossible to avoid compromises or repetition.

[5] One could further complete the scheme by likewise including the external spheres of society overall: foreign policy and foreign trade; ideational, social, and cultural influences; so that the whole of society would be broadly embedded in its international context. Since domestic and foreign policy, domestic and foreign economy are often separated only for analytical reasons, this expansion would not only be possible in principle, but it would also entail an additional increase in complexity and would be welcome for that reason alone (see H.-U. Wehler, *Kritik u. kritische Antikritik*, in *Histor. Zeitschrift* [= HZ] 225, 1977, 362-84, also in Wehler, *Krisenherde des Kaiserreichs 1871-1918*. Göttingen 1979, 404-26). Although problems relating to the external spheres are often taken into account here, above all the structural differentiation effects of international stratification and the state system, they are not included alongside the aforementioned focal points of societal history as topics of equal rank. The reasons for this decision are mostly pragmatic. The intended focus, which, from the point of view of the history of science, is also meant at least in part as a critique of the privileging of diplomatic history and foreign policy, already includes enough complicated problems that should not be multiplied, especially since numerous difficult questions are raised by the interference or relative autonomy of domestic and foreign affairs. Therefore, the constraint can be well justified; moreover, it corresponds to my present interests. It remains the case that, for example, in connection with questions of relative backwardness, the transfer of industrial technology, imperialism, and foreign trade, these areas are dealt with because doing so is unavoidable in every respect, but without them coming fully to the fore. – Since there is again the question of methodological difficulties, it should be added that I am well aware of other painful gaps of substance in the analysis. The history of law, for example, and thus the history of one of the great organizing powers of societal life, but also the history of religion and other fields of intellectual history are either missing altogether or, measured against my wishful thinking, discussed far too briefly.

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