

from: Gianluca Manzo (ed.),  
Theories and Social  
Mechanisms - Oxford:  
Bardwell Press, 2015.

## 4

### “ORIENTATION TO OTHERS”

---

A Central but Forgotten Concept  
in Max Weber's Sociology

*Richard Swedberg*

Cornell University

One of my favourite writings of Mohamed Cherkaoui is his book *Good Intentions: Max Weber and the Paradox of Unintended Consequences* (2007).<sup>1</sup> The main reason is that this study mixes in a truly ingenious way an attempt to use the ideas of Max Weber with an interest in social mechanisms. Following Mohamed Cherkaoui, and in homage to his work, I have tried to follow this strategy in this brief chapter.

In the first sentence of §1 of Part I in *Economy and Society* Weber presents his well-known definition of sociology. Sociology, the reader is told, is a science that focuses on “the interpretive understanding of social action”. In the next two sentences he explains what he means by “action” and “social”. Action is defined as behaviour to which the actor attributes “subjective meaning”. What makes action “social” is that “its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (Weber, [1922] 1978: 4).

In this paper I will argue that one part of this definition has largely passed unnoticed, but is nonetheless central to Weber's view of sociology. It is the definition of what is “social” and it can be found in the

last sentence of §1 that deals with action being "orientated in its course [to others]".

The last sentence of §1 of Part I in *Economy and Society* reads as follows in English: "Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course". This is a translation of the following sentence: "Soziales Handeln aber soll ein solches Handeln heissen, welches seinem von dem oder den handelnden gemeinten Sinn nach auf das Verhalten anderer bezogen wird und daran in seinem Ablauf orientiert ist" (Weber ([1922] 1972: 1).<sup>2</sup>

The secondary literature devoted to Weber's famous definition of sociology in §1 of *Economy and Society* is large and has especially tried to establish what Weber means with *Verstehen* and meaning. Practically no attention, however, has been devoted to the fact that Weber qualifies his statement of what constitutes the general subject of sociology (meaningful behaviour) by saying that it also has to be social or oriented to the behaviour of others.

This is all the more peculiar since it is precisely this element that separates out sociology from the other cultural sciences and provides it with its very own subject matter. While many of the cultural sciences deal with meaningful behaviour (such as history, political science, economics and so on), what defines sociology as a separate science is precisely that it studies meaningful behaviour ("action") that is oriented to others ("social").

In this paper I will try to rectify this omission by focusing squarely on the concept of orientation to others in Weber's sociology (Part I). I will also introduce a few examples from works in social science in which a very similar concept has been used, in order to illustrate the fruitfulness and flexibility of Weber's concept (Part II). I shall conclude by discussing which aspects of "orientation to others" still remain to be explored; how this concept differs from the concept of social interaction; and how it may be further improved (Part III).

## I. WEBER'S CONCEPT ORIENTATION TO OTHERS

Given the fact that the concept of *orientation to others* is central to Weber's definition of sociology, a number of questions arise. How, for

example, does Weber define "orientation to others", and how does he use it in his sociology? Did Weber borrow this concept from somebody else's work or did he invent it himself? And, finally, when does the concept of orientation to others first appear in Weber's work and how does it evolve over time?

When confronted with questions of this type, one naturally turns to the enormous secondary literature on Weber's work which has accumulated over the years. In this particular case, however, very little is to be found.<sup>3</sup> In his famous *Structure of Social Action* (1937) Talcott Parsons, for example, cites Weber's definition of sociology in *Economy and Society* and also comments on the various elements of Weber's definition of sociology (Parsons, [1937] 1967: 641, 649).<sup>4</sup> He, however, has nothing to say about the element of "orientation to others".

Pretty much the same is true for other standard works on Weber's sociology by such well-known scholars as Raymond Aron ([1967] 1970), Julien Freund ([1966] 1972) and Alexander von Schelting (1934). The main thrust in these works is that the two key elements in Weber's definition of sociology are "meaning" ("*Verstehen*") and "action". That these two elements also are constitutive for other social sciences ("cultural sciences") rather than sociology, especially history and economics, is not commented upon.

Of the major interpreters of Weber, there is to my knowledge only one person who has paid attention to the fact that orientation to others represents a distinct concept in Weber's work and that it is constitutive for the way in which he conceptualizes the very nature of sociology. This is Alfred Schutz in *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1932).

Schutz's interpretation, however, is somewhat limited for the reason that he basically uses Weber's concept of orientation to others as a prelude to his reworking of this concept, for theoretical purposes of his own. He is not, in other words, very interested in how Weber himself understood and used the concept of orientation to others. Nonetheless, Schutz does make some interesting comments on Weber's concept of orientation to others, and I shall return to these in a moment.

In the rest of the secondary literature on Weber one can find an occasional comment or two on the notion of orientation to others, but nothing that is either comprehensive or particularly penetrating.<sup>5</sup> No

author singles out orientation to others as a special concept in its own right, and it therefore remains at the level of what Robert K. Merton has called a *proto-concept*, that is, an early and underdeveloped version of what may later become a scientific concept.<sup>6</sup> As the reader soon shall see, I have however found Dirk Käsler's (1988) discussion quite helpful.

It is not known whether Weber himself invented the concept of orientation to others or borrowed it from somebody else's work, as he so often did. If he borrowed it from somebody else, a good candidate would be Kant. The German philosopher used the concept of orientation in many of his writings and especially in a well-known article called "What is Orientation in Thinking?" ([1786] 1991).

But Weber typically changed the concepts that he borrowed from the work of others in a fundamental manner, as exemplified by the notions of charisma and the ideal type. One should therefore not expect to find the key or "explanation" to what he meant by some term by looking at what may well have been its source of inspiration. This would also seem to be the case with "orientation", at least in so far as Kant is concerned.<sup>7</sup>

It is also possible today, through various electronic editions of Weber's work, to establish when he first used a term, how frequently he used it and the like. Since this paper, however, deals with Weber's use of his concept in his sociology and not in his pre-sociological works, I will leave this task to others.

What I will focus on in this chapter is primarily the role of "orientation to others" in the crucial *Economy and Society* and the writings that Weber wrote in preparation for this work. Of particular interest are especially the following two writings: the article that was published in *Logos* in 1913, and Part 1 of Volume 1 in *Economy and Society*. The reason why so much importance should be attached to the *Logos* article ("Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology") is that it represents Weber's first major attempt to establish a theoretical foundation for sociology as a special science in its own right.

Of particular interest is also Part 1 in Volume 1 of *Economy and Society*, since it represents the only section of the book that we today know as *Economy and Society* which Weber himself cleared for publication (e.g. Schluchter, 1998). It is also in Chapter 1 of Part 1 that we find

the final version of Weber's attempt to establish a theoretical foundation for sociology.

Weber's article in *Logos* is very complex and deserves a much fuller discussion than it can be accorded here. Nonetheless, it shall be pointed out that the concept of orientation to others has roughly been assigned the same place in the definition of sociology that can be found in the *Logos* article as in *Economy and Society*. That this is the case is clear from the following central quotation about the task of sociology:

That kind of action that is specifically important for interpretive sociology is, in particular, behaviour (1) that, in terms of the subjectively meant meaning of the acting person, is related to the *behaviour of others*; (2) whose course is *partially determined* by this meaning-relatedness; and (3) that can therefore, on the basis of this (subjectively) meant meaning, be intelligibly *explained*. (Weber, [1913] 2012: 274; cf. Weber, [1913] 1981: 152)

As the reader may have noticed, Weber uses the term "related to", rather than "oriented to", in the definition just cited. This particular term, however, is used by Weber as synonymous with "oriented to", and it can, for example, also be found in the definition of sociology in Chapter 1 in Part 1 of *Economy and Society*.<sup>8</sup> It should be added that while Weber does not use the term "orientation to" in his definition, it is frequently used throughout the article.

It is, however, in Part 1 of *Economy and Society* that we find Weber's fullest and most official explication of the concept of orientation to others. The great part of what Weber has to say on orientation to others can be found in Chapter 1 (general sociology) and in Chapter 2 (economic sociology); in Chapter 3 (domination) and Chapter 4 (status groups and classes) he only makes an occasional use of this concept. Since this paper is focused on general sociology, I will primarily be drawing on Chapter 1, and especially on the section in this chapter which is exclusively devoted to the concept of orientation to others (Weber, [1922] 1978: 22-4).

In his chapter on general sociology in *Economy and Society* Weber starts out by carefully outlining what kind of actions do *not* fulfil the criteria of being oriented to others, and which consequently do not

qualify as "social action". There is, first of all, the demand that the action must be oriented in a meaningful way to what someone else does. A bicycle rider, for example, who collides with another bicycle rider, has not oriented his or her behaviour to the other person; they just happen to bump into each other by accident.

It is important to point out at this stage of the discussion that just as Weber's interpretive sociology is centred around the idea of *meaning* (*Sinn*) or human behaviour that is understandable, so orientation has an element of meaning to it. At one point in his explication in Paragraph 1 of what constitutes "social behaviour" (which is the section where the concept of orientation is explicated in Paragraph 1), Weber describes social action as being "*meaningfully oriented*" (Weber, [1922] 1978: 23; emphasis added). An act, to give a concrete example, may have a different meaning if it is oriented towards someone who is, say, a Protestant than a Catholic.

The action, Weber continues in his explication of the sociological use of the concept of orientation, also has to be directed at another *person*. Solitary prayer or several people who simultaneously open their umbrellas when it starts to rain, do not constitute (meaningful) actions that are directed at other people—and hence do not qualify as social actions. Actions which are exclusively oriented to values and facts constitute further examples of actions which are not to be characterized as social action; and so do actions oriented to inanimate objects.

But even if one keeps all of these qualifications in mind, the area which Weber assigns to "social action" is very large, and it includes a great number of different types of action. To give a proper account of how Weber views social action, one would have to go through Chapter 1 paragraph by paragraph and summarize what Weber says in each of these. Given the size and the aim of this paper, which is to draw attention to Weber's concept of orientation to others, this way of proceeding is not appropriate. From a more general perspective, however, one can say that Weber analyses different types of social action according to *time*, to *the object* toward which they are oriented, and to *the way* they are oriented; and a few words will be said about each of these categories.

As to time, Weber notes that social actions can be oriented to the past, to the present, and to the future. Social actions can also be

oriented towards individuals, and towards what Weber calls "orders". Social actions, finally, can be oriented towards individuals and orders in four major ways: in an instrumentally rational manner, in a value-rational manner, in an affectual manner, and in a traditional manner.

Little need be said about the time dimension of social action and that social action can be directed towards the past, the present and the future. As an example of an act which is oriented to the past, Weber mentions revenge. There also exists an enormous secondary literature on the four different ways in which social action can be oriented (instrumentally rational, value-rational, affectual and traditional action). The only thing that needs to be added here is that Weber states that these four ways of acting do *not* constitute social action per se; for this, they also have to be meaningfully oriented at the behaviour of others. This last point is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the secondary literature. Still, it vitally affects our understanding of these types of action, especially value-rational action.<sup>9</sup>

The objects of social actions are not only individuals but also orders, as we learn as we continue to read *Economy and Society*. The three basic configurations that result from Weber's argument have been helpfully summarized by Dirk Käsler (1988: 157). There is first of all the single individual who may orient his or her actions to another individual or to many other individuals. You may, for example, orient yourself to another person by addressing him or her, by looking at him or her, and so on.

The second configuration is that of mutual orientation, between two or more individuals. Examples of mutual orientation include such well-known Weberian concepts as struggle, competition, power and domination (see Weber, [1922] 1978: 38–40, 53–4). What Weber calls associative and communal relationships fall in this category as well.

Actions can also—and this is the third configuration—be oriented towards so-called orders. An order (*Ordnung*), Weber explains, originates in a social relationship, and is characterized by the fact that its content can be summed up in a few maxims of behaviour (Weber, [1922] 1978: 28, 31; cf. Swedberg, 2005). These maxims appear as exemplary or obligatory to the actors. Organizations, it should be noted, constitute a special kind of order (closed social relationships which are enforced by a staff).

It is clear that there exist combinations of these three categories. A person may, for example, orient his or her actions to another person and an order at the same time. Two orders can interact through the agency of two individuals, and so on.

Weber discusses some of these combinations in *Economy and Society*. He also notes that an act can be oriented to more than one order simultaneously, and gives as an example someone who decides to duel, despite the fact that duelling is forbidden. He further notes that being oriented to an order does not necessarily mean that one accepts its maxims. A thief, for example, orients his or her actions towards the law, but also attempts to outwit its guardians.

It would also seem clear that the concept of orientation lends itself in some cases to a networks analysis. I will not pursue this issue here, however, but instead proceed to the next task, namely a critical discussion of the way that Weber constructs and makes use of the concept of orientation to others in his sociology.

First of all, it has to be admitted that there is something to Alfred Schutz's charge that Weber's concept is not very clear (Schutz, [1932] 1967: 17). For one thing, Weber confuses things by using the word "orientation" in several different meanings. One example of this is when Weber in his economic sociology introduces the term "economically oriented action", where the word orientation is used in a different way (Weber, [1922] 1978: 64–68).<sup>20</sup>

Weber also states very clearly that social action must be oriented to "the behaviour of others" in his definition of sociology in Chapter 1 in *Economy and Society*—only to later say that it also can be directed at an order. It is finally also true that Weber nowhere in *Economy and Society* (or elsewhere) provides a definition of what he means by the expression "orientation to". How, for example, does this concept differ from the psychological concept of perception? And how is it related to symbols and the use of language?

Schutz is also very critical of Weber for not properly distinguishing between situations in which an actor affects someone else, and situations in which an actor is affected by someone else (Schutz, [1932] 1967: 144ff.). It is not clear to me what consequences this distinction has for Weber's concept of orientation to others, and this also goes for some related points that Schutz makes in *The Phenomenology of the Social World*.

Schutz does not spend much time on explaining these things, and the reason for this, it seems to me, is that he is primarily interested in criticizing Weber's concept of orientation to others for theoretical purposes of his own. What is beyond doubt, however, is that Schutz should be commended for having realized that orientation to others plays a crucial role in Weber's sociology. More work of similarly penetrating character is clearly much needed.

But even if there are some problems with Weber's concept of orientation to others, it is also important to realize how much Weber actually accomplishes with the help of this concept. First and foremost, it allows him to recast a good part of standard sociology and produce fresh and interesting definitions of concepts such as conflict, competition, power, and so on.

The idea of orientation to others also goes well with Weber's view of the role of contingency in social life. Actors often orient themselves to *expectations* about what other actors will do, based on their earlier experiences, Weber says, but these expectations may not coincide with how these other actors will later behave. There consequently exists a strong link between Weber's concept of orientation to others and his concept of probability (*Chance*).

The concept of orientation to others also fits very well with Weber's vision of society as an ongoing process. Society, in Weber's mind, does not consist of collective actors and solid, objective structures, but of individuals who orient their actions to what they think other actors will do.<sup>21</sup> There is also the fact that an additional amount of flexibility (as well as complexity) is introduced into the analysis through Weber's idea that an actor can simultaneously be oriented to several orders and/or actors. All in all, one can say that Weber's concept of orientation to others is very flexible and central to his general view of sociology.

## II. LATER AND RELATED USES OF THE CONCEPT OF ORIENTATION TO OTHERS

But even if Weber makes good use of the notion of orientation to others in *Economy and Society*, is it also a concept that more generally can be of help in sociology? In trying to answer this question I shall refer

to some research by other sociologists and social scientists than Weber who on their own have made use of the idea of orientation to others without necessarily using this exact formulation. I shall first say something about the way that G. H. Mead made use of this idea, then about its role in reference group theory, and finally I will comment on the way that it has been used by economists, in particular by Thomas Schelling. In each of these examples I shall try to establish both the centrality of the idea of orientation to others and also how a particular study adds to Weber's original use.<sup>12</sup>

G. H. Mead and Weber conceived their most major ideas around the same time, but do not appear to have been aware of one another (e.g. Joas, 1985: 90–102). That the notion of orientation to others is central to Mead's work is immediately clear from such concepts as the social act and taking the role or attitude of the other. In taking the attitude of the other, for example, the actor needs to figure out what the other person thinks, and adjust his or her behaviour to this. It should also be pointed out that this form of orientation and action can be carried out in a more or less deliberate manner. If Actor A wants to act in a rational way, he or she will try to figure out the possible strategies of Actor B, and then adjust his or her behaviour to these. Game theory, as I shall return to, can be seen as an attempt to analyse precisely this type of rational behaviour.

But it may also be the case that *all* forms of social action (in Weber's sense) hinge on the capacity of actors to see things from the perspective of other actors. In order to orient oneself to someone else's behaviour in a meaningful way, both actors have so-to-speak to inhabit the same cultural universe. The notion of orientation to others, in other words, presupposes the cultural capacity of taking of the role or the attitude of the other; and this version of Mead's thesis goes considerably deeper than when the actor simply attempts to view things from the perspective of someone else, in a more or less deliberate manner. What Mead says about children learning the rules of society by playing and participating in games is obviously also relevant in this context.

It seems clear that Mead was trying to solve much larger problems with the notion of taking the role or the attitude of the other than what Weber ever attempted to do with the concept of orientation to others.

While Weber was satisfied with having found a concept which allowed him to sharpen up his own version of sociology, Mead attempted to use the perspective of taking the role or the attitude of the other to explain the very emergence of the self, the way that humans think, the nature of communication, and quite a few other topics as well (e.g. Cook, 1993: 92–6).

From Weber's point of view, Mead's ambitions no doubt appear excessive—but this does not mean that many of Mead's ideas cannot be used to open up new perspectives on Weber's concept of orientation to others. It would appear to be a good working hypothesis, for example, to assume that orientation to others affects the self of the actor; and Mead's ideas on social psychology can more generally be used to counter Weber's negative attitude to the use of psychology in sociology.

Mead was also very interested in perception and symbols; and one wonders how these are related to Weber's notion of orientation to others. Weber avoided these two topics in his theoretical sociology, but not in his sociological studies. Perhaps a close scrutiny of his sociological studies would provide some clues in this context.

In my second example—reference group theory—the term "orientation" is often to be found, although it is not singled out and treated as a special concept of its own. Nonetheless, the idea that an actor orients his or her behaviour to some other actor or group is absolutely central to reference group theory.

What is novel about reference group theory is that the actor typically compares or identifies himself or herself to some group, as opposed to looking at oneself and the world through the eyes of somebody else, as in Mead's theory. We have here, in other words, a case of orientation to others which entails a comparison or some form of identification. And secondly, while Mead argues that the individual is formed by the group or society of which he or she is a member, reference group theory suggests that the individual may (also) be influenced by a group of which he or she is *not* a member. A person's orientation, in brief, can be to a membership group as well as a non-membership group; and the latter case may well be the theoretically more interesting one.

While non-membership groups are often spoken of in the social science literature as if they all were of one type, especially Robert K. Merton

has emphasized that they are actually quite diverse (see Merton, [1957] 1968a: 345ff.). There are, for example, non-membership groups which the actor wants to be a member of, as well as non-membership groups which he or she does *not* want to be a member of. In the former case, we may speak of a positive orientation to a non-membership group, and in the latter case of a negative orientation.

There also exist groups that the actor may want to be a member of, but which he or she is not allowed to join; and this means that a reference group can be either open or closed. One can furthermore be oriented positively or negatively to a group, of which one has once been a member. And the remaining members of a group can, in their turn, be positively or negatively oriented to its former members, as such highly charged terms as traitor, renegade and deserter indicate.

Merton also points out that in cases of comparative orientation, the actor has to somehow get to know the norms of the target group, and that the ease or the difficulty with which this can be accomplished needs to be investigated. The degree of social visibility of a group is an important issue from this perspective, and questions of the following type need to be addressed:

Which processes make for accurate or distorted images of the situation of other individuals and groups (taken as a frame of reference)? Which forms of social organization maximize the probabilities of correct perception of other individuals and groups, and which make for distorted perception? (Merton, [1957] 1968a: 302)

Also some economists have worked with the idea of orientation to others and contributed to its evolution in new directions. This is especially the case with game theory, where the key idea is precisely that an actor takes what another actor does into account in deciding how to act. Much game theory, however, is highly artificial, according to its critics, and cannot be used to capture what goes on in reality.

This type of criticism has especially been directed at game theory by Thomas Schelling, from *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960) and onwards. What Schelling especially directs his criticism at is the so-called

two-person zero-sum game. The analysis in this type of game, he says, operates with far too restrictive assumptions. In particular, Actor A does not need to figure out what Actor B wants, since he or she is supposed to know this in advance. Each player also knows the alternatives available to himself or herself as well as to the other actor (e.g. Luce and Raiffa, [1957] 1985: 57–8). The result is that no orientation to the other needs to take place: "No spark of recognition needs to jump between the two players; no meeting of minds is required; no hints have to be conveyed; no impression, images, or understandings have to be compared" (Schelling, [1960] 1980: 163).

Besides games centred exclusively around conflict, Schelling argues that "a theory of interdependent decision" also should deal with what he calls mixed games and games of coordination. Mixed games—which are probably the most common type of games in empirical reality—have elements of both conflict and coordination. What happens in a pure case of coordination, Schelling specifies, is that Actor A signals something to Actor B in such a way that the latter will expect Actor A to behave in a certain way—and this will also make Actor B behave more predictably from Actor A's perspective. The process of coordination or convergence of expectations is integral to this type of phenomena:

Players have to understand each other, to discover patterns of individual behaviour that make each player's actions predictable to the other ... They must communicate by hint and by suggestive behaviour. Two vehicles trying to avoid collision, two people dancing together to unfamiliar music, or members of a guerilla force that become separated in combat have to concert their intention in this fashion, as do the applauding members of a concert audience, who must at some point 'agree' on whether to press for an encore or taper off together. (Schelling, [1960] 1980: 85)

In *Micromotives and Macrobehaviour* (1978) Schelling makes another contribution to the theory of orientation to others, this time by emphasizing the fact that an actor's behaviour may be directly influenced by the exact number of other actors doing something. This last

idea has been picked up and further elaborated especially by Mark Granovetter through the concept of thresholds (e.g. Granovetter, 1978, 1983; Granovetter and Soong, 1988).

A threshold is defined as "the number or proportion of others who must make one decision before a given actor does so"; and it can, according to Granovetter, be used to explain the dynamics of such diverse phenomena a voting, migration and the diffusion of innovations (Granovetter, 1978: 1420). Populations with roughly the same average preferences behave, for example, in very different ways, depending on the precise distribution of thresholds among the individuals. If some group lacks people with low thresholds (activists) or with somewhat higher thresholds (excitable people), nothing will happen or the whole process will quickly stall, once it has been set in motion. If these two categories are present, however, the process will start up, accelerate, and perhaps end up in a full-scale riot.

Behaviour oriented to coordination with another actor may also involve some kind of signalling, Schelling ([1960] 1980: 83) says; and a whole monograph has been devoted to this phenomenon by economist Michael Spence (1974; for later developments of the theory of signalling, see Gambetta, 2009). According to Spence, two facts characterize signals: they can be altered, and they affect the way that Actor B, who receives the signals, will orient his or her behaviour towards Actor A, who has sent the signals. What Spence calls "indices" can, however, *not* be altered, and these refer to such characteristics as sex and race. Under certain circumstances signalling can reach a stable equilibrium, according to a model that Spence specifies. If an employer comes to feel that certain signals that job seekers give off about their productivity, are indeed correct, he or she will be satisfied and stop looking for other signals.

Timur Kuran, another economist, approaches signalling from a very different angle than Spence and in a way that is perhaps more congenial to the sociological version of orientation to others. According to Kuran, an individual may send off false signals, not because he or she wants to reach some specific goal (such as getting hired, in Spence's case), but simply because of social pressure. This phenomenon Kuran terms preference falsification, and he describes it as "misrepresenting one's genuine wants under perceived social pressures" (Kuran, 1995: 3).

Any individual, Kuran argues, has in reality two types of preferences: private preferences and public preferences. In many situations actors prefer to give off false signals, due to social pressure, and in certain cases, as Kuran shows, this can have consequences that the actor deeply regrets. If everybody thinks that everybody else is positive to some legislation, while in reality everyone is against it, the proposal will nonetheless be accepted; and, similarly, if there is no secret ballot, a very unpopular proposal may get passed.

### III: CONCLUDING REMARKS

No one should underestimate the amount of theoretical underpinning by which [Weber's] definition of sociology was sustained. It remains to this day the most consciously chosen, and the most painstakingly derived of any of the multitude of competing definitions which this now prolific intellectual growth has borne.

—Martin Albrow, *Max Weber's Construction of Social Theory*, p. 137

Through the argument in this paper I hope to have established that Weber's concept of orientation plays an important role in his definition of sociology and deserves more attention. I also hope to have shown that other social scientists than Weber have intuitively, and independently of Weber, used ideas that are very similar to the notion of orientation to others, something that again would indicate that we are dealing with an important phenomenon.

As to the research on this topic by other social scientists than Weber, some readers may feel that what Mead *et al.* have to say, rather falls into the well established category of "social interaction" than into the concept of orientation to others. This may well be true to some extent, especially for certain aspects of the work of Mead, but that is not the end of the story. It should be emphasized that Weber *includes* much of what later sociologists term social interaction in his general scheme of sociology. We should recall that Weber starts Chapter 1 of *Economy and Society* with a section on social action and ends with a discussion of organizations—after a section on just social interaction ("social relationships").



More importantly, with the help of the concept of orientation to others Weber can also handle a range of phenomena that the paradigm of social interaction is unable to deal with (e.g. Turner, 1988, Emirbayer, 1998; see also Weber's critique of Simmel's use of interaction as the defining feature of sociology in Weber, [1908?] 1912). The Weberian idea of behaviour oriented to an order cannot, for example, be explained through the concept of social interaction. The same is true for the key notion in reference group behaviour—that an actor orients himself or herself to another group than the one he or she is a member of. In brief, the notion of orientation to others is more subtle than that of interaction.

Many puzzles surrounding the concept of orientation to others no doubt remain to be solved. For one thing, a number of questions relating to Weber's own use of this term need to be answered. What, for example, does it mean to Weber's project of a sociology based on methodological individualism that he suddenly introduces the concept of an *order* and that behaviour can be oriented to this order? And why does Weber not explicitly state that an individual's behaviour can be oriented to signs and symbols? Does not, for example, the reading of a book—or the reading of this very article—mean that the behaviour of the reader is oriented to the ideas of the writer, via the written word? Questions of this type raise interesting and intriguing problems. They should also lead to a realization that we have not yet exhausted Weber's notion of orientation to others and what can be accomplished through his splendid vision of an interpretive sociology.

## NOTES

1. I gratefully acknowledge information and/or other help from Mabel Berezin, Hans Henrik Bruun, Laura Ford and Wolfgang Schluchter.
2. There also exist a few other translations into English than the standard one, which comes from the edition of *Economy and Society*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Weber, [1922] 1978). Before citing these other translations, I will however cite the full comment on the word "orientieren" that one can find in Hans Henrik Bruun's translation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and related texts into English:

*orientieren*: The obvious translation is 'orient'. But, in *Categories* (RS: Weber, [1913] 2012), 'orientieren an' can be a problem. In many cases, the

'orientation' means that the acting person somehow relates his action to something, without specifying whether that 'orientation' represents conformity or the reverse. (Indeed, Weber specifically discusses the case of criminals 'orienting' themselves towards an established order, not by conforming, but by trying to conceal their crime). In these cases, 'orientieren an' has been translated as 'orient towards'. But there are instances where the orientation is very definitely meant to represent conformity. In those cases, 'orientieren an' has been translated as 'orient in accordance with' or 'orient according to'. (Weber, 2012: 491).

Talcott Parsons translated the key sentence in Weber's definition of sociology as follows: "Action is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course" (Weber, 1947: 88). Parsons also attached a long footnote that singles out and discusses a number of terms—but not "orientation to others" ("In this series of definitions Weber employs several important terms which need discussion. In addition to *Verstehen*, which has already been commented upon, there are four important ones: *Deuten*, *Sinn*, *Handeln*, and *Verhalten*" (Weber, 1947: 88, note 3). The translation by H. P. Secher reads as follows: "The term 'social behaviour' will be reserved for activities whose intent is related by the individuals involved to the conduct of others and is oriented accordingly" (Weber, 1962: 27). Keith Tribe's translation: "Such behaviour is 'social' action where the meaning intended by actor or actors is related to the behaviour of *others*, and conduct so oriented" (Weber, 2004: 312).

3. Hopefully there will be some comments in the *Gesamtausgabe* of Weber's works. Ch. 1 in *Economy and Society* is scheduled to appear in Band 23, which had not been published when this paper was written (January 2013). The title of Band 1/23 is *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Soziologie Unvollendet 1919–1920*. According to Wolfgang Schluchter, Band 1/23 will appear in the summer or fall of 2013.
4. For Parsons' translation of ch. 1 in *Economy and Society*, see note 2.
5. See e.g. Girndt (1967: 44–46). In Winkelmann's well-known volume with comments on *Economy and Society* there is no reference to the part of Weber's definition of sociology that deals with orientation to others (Winkelmann, 1976: 1). The literature on social action similarly avoids discussing the element of orientation to others in Weber's definition (see e.g. Campbell, 1996).
6. "A proto-concept", to cite Merton's definition, "is an early rudimentary, particularized, and largely unexplicated idea ...; a concept [on the other hand] is a general idea which once having been defined, tagged, substantially generalized, and explicated can effectively guide inquiry into seemingly diverse phenomena" (Merton, 1984: 267).
7. Kant mentions several uses of the term orientation in his essay "What is Orientation in Thinking?" There is first of all "the proper sense of the word", which Kant also calls "the geographical concept of the process of orientation". He describes this as follows: "to *orient* oneself, in the proper sense of the word,

means to use a given direction—and we divide the horizon into four of these—in order to find the others, and in particular that of *sunrise*” (Kant, 1991: 238–39). One may also “extend” the geographical concept for use in mathematics, Kant says; and this “mathematical sense [of the word orientation]” constitutes its second meaning in his work. “Finally”, Kant writes, “I can extend this concept even further” and this would be “to orient oneself ... in thought, i.e. *logically*” (Kant, 1991: 239).

This last meaning is clearly the one Kant was most interested in and he also describes it as follows: “If the concept of orientation is extended and defined more precisely, it may help us to cast light on the various ways in which the maxim of healthy reason is applied to the cognition of supra-sensory objects” (Kant, 1991: 238).

In the entry for “orientation” in *A Kant Dictionary*, Howard Caygill writes that “the notion of orientation is used [by Kant] in theoretical philosophy to pass judgment on the speculative use of reason with respect to the supersensible” (Caygill, 1995: 311).

Finally, the argument in an interesting article by Stuart Dalton on orientation suggests a possible link between Kant and Weber, namely that subjectivity can be inner-oriented or other-directed (to use the terminology of David Riesman). Or in Dalton’s own terminology, one may, with the help of Levinas and Kant, view “subjectivity as orientational rather than foundational in nature” (Dalton, 1999: 433).

8. In the definition in Chapter 1 in *Economy and Society* Weber uses “*orientiert*” as well as “*bezogen*”: “Action is ‘social’ insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of (*bezogen*) the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented (*orientiert*) in its course” (Weber, [1922] 1978: 4; for the German original, see Weber, [1922] 1972: 1). “Related to” in the definition from *Logos* is a translation of “*bezogen*”; see Weber, [1913] 2012: 274; for the German original, see Weber, [1913] 1922: 429. The term “oriented to” is also used a number of times in the *Logos* article.
9. Value-rational action is per definition directed at a value in a specific way, and it becomes social, as I interpret Weber, by simultaneously being oriented to the behaviour of some actor(s). An example of a *social* value-rational action would be when someone who thinks it is absolutely right/wrong that abortion is legal, says so at a public meeting of opponents.
10. There exist two kinds of economically oriented actions in Weber’s economic sociology in *Economy and Society*: economic action which makes use of violence and non-economic actions which also takes economic considerations into account.
11. Weber does not use the concept of society in his theoretical sociology. See e.g. Frisby and Sayer (1986: 67–72).
12. Other examples exist as well. That the concept of “field”, as used in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, includes the notion of orientation to others is clear (see e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 94–115). Also the new institutionalists in organization theory argue that all organizations in an organizational field are aware of each other and that this awareness is constitutive for the very existence of the field (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 64–5; cf. DiMaggio, 1986). For an argument that

markets come into being through the actors being oriented to one another through terms of trade-schedules, see White (1981); and for the idea that corporations diffuse “conceptions of control” by being oriented to each other, see Fligstein (1990).

## REFERENCES

- Albrow, Martin (1990) *Max Weber’s Construction of Social Theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Aron, Raymond ([1967] 1970) *Main Currents of Sociological Thought II. Durkheim, Pareto, Weber*. trans. Richard Howard and Helen Weaver. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Loïc Wacquant (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Campbell, Colin (1996) *The Myth of Social Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Caygill, Howard (1995) “Orientation”, in Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 131.
- Cherkaoui, Mohamed (2007) *Good Intentions: Max Weber and the Paradox of Unintended Consequences*. Oxford: The Bardwell Press.
- Cook, Gary A (1993) *George Herbert Mead: The Making of a Social Pragmatist*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Dalton, Trevor (1999) “Subjectivity and Orientation in Levinas and Kant”, *Continental Philosophy Review* 32: 433–49.
- DiMaggio, Paul (1986) “Structural Analysis of Organizational Fields: A Blockmodel Approach”, *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 8: 335–70.
- DiMaggio, Paul and Walter W. Powell (1991) “The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields”, in DiMaggio and Powell (eds.), *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 62–82.
- Emirbayer, Mustafa (1997) “Manifesto for a relational sociology”, *American Journal of Sociology* 103: 281–317.
- Fligstein, Neil (1990) *The Transformation of Corporate Control*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Freund, Julien ([1966] 1972) *The Sociology of Max Weber*. Trans. Mary Ilford. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Frisby, David and Derek Sayer (1986) *Society*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Gambetta, Diego (2009) “Signaling”, in Peter Hedström and Peter Beramn (eds), *The Oxford Handbook in Analytical Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 168–94.
- Girndt, Helmut (1967) *Das soziale Handeln als Grundkategorie erfahrungswissenschaftlicher Soziologie*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.
- Granovetter, Mark (1978) “Threshold models of collective behavior”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 83: 1420–43.
- (1983) “Threshold models of diffusion and collective behavior”, *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*, 9: 165–79.

- Granovetter, Mark and Roland Soong (1988) "Threshold models of diversity: Chinese restaurants, residential segregation, and the spiral of silence", *Sociological Methodology*, 18: 69–104.
- Joas, Hans (1985) *G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-Examination of His Thought*. Trans. Raymond Meyer. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kant, Immanuel ([1786] 1991) "What is Orientation in Thinking?" in Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*. Ed. H. S. Reiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 237–49.
- Käsler, Dirk (1988) *Max Weber: An Introduction to His Life and Work*. Trans. Philippa Hurd. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kuran, Timur (1995) *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mead, George H. ([1934] 1962) *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of A Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Based on a course given in 1927.
- Merton, Robert K. ([1948–1949] 1968) "Patterns of influence: Local and cosmopolitan influences", in *Social Theory and Social Structure*. 1968 enlarged edn. New York: The Free Press, pp. 441–74.
- ([1957] 1968a) "Continuities in the theory of reference groups and social structure", in *Social Theory and Social Structure*. 1968 enlarged edn. New York: The Free Press, pp. 335–440.
- ([1957] 1968b) "(With Alice Rossi) Contributions to the theory of reference group behavior", in *Social Theory and Social Structure*. 1968 enlarged edn. New York: The Free Press, pp. 279–5.
- (1984) "Socially expected durations: A case study of concept formation in sociology", in W. W. Powell and R. Robbins (eds), *Conflict and Consensus*. New York: The Free Press, pp. 262–83.
- Parsons, Talcott ([1937] 1967) *The Structure of Social Action*. Vol. II. New York: The Free Press.
- Schelling, Thomas ([1960] 1980) *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- (1978) *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Schelling, Alexander von (1934) *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.
- Schluchter, Wolfgang (1998) "Max Webers Beitrag zum 'Grundriss der Sozialökonomik'", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 50: 327–43.
- Schutz, Alfred ([1932] 1967) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Spence, Michael (1974) *Market Signaling: Informational Transfer in Hiring and Related Screening Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Swedberg, Richard (2005) "Orientation to others", in *The Max Weber Dictionary*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 190–91.
- Turner, Jonathan H (1988) *A Theory of Social Interaction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Weber, Max ([1908?] 2012) "Georg Simmel as a sociologist and theoretician of the money economy (trans. Hans Henrik Bruun)", in Max Weber, *Collected Methodological*

- Writings*. Trans. and ed. Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster. London: Routledge, pp. 418–21.
- ([1913] 1922) "Ueber einige Kategorien der verstehenden Soziologie", in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, pp. 403–50.
- ([1913] 1981) "Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology (trans. Edith Graber)", *Sociological Quarterly*, 22: 151–80.
- ([1913] 2012) "On Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology (trans. Hans Henrik Bruun)", in Max Weber, Max, *Collected Methodological Writings*. Trans. and ed. Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster. London: Routledge, pp. 273–301.
- ([1922] 1972) *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*. 5th rev. edn. Johannes Winkelmann. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.
- ([1922] 1978) *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (eds). Trans. Ephraim Fishoff et al. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- (1947) *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Ed. and trans. Talcott Parsons. New York: The Free Press.
- (1962) *Basic Concepts in Sociology*. Trans. H. P. Secher. New York: The Citadel Press.
- (2004) "Basic sociological concepts" (trans. Keith Tribe), in Sam Whimster (ed.), *The Essential Weber: A Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 311–58.
- (2012) *Collected Methodological Writings*. Trans. and ed. Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster. London: Routledge.
- White, Harrison C (1981) "Where do markets come from?" *American Journal of Sociology*, 87: 517–47.
- Winkelmann, Johannes (1976) *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Erläuterungsband*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.