



Vergemeinschaftung and Vergesellschaftung in Max Weber: A reconstruction of his linguistic usage[☆]

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ABSTRACT

When Max Weber made use of the terms “Vergemeinschaftung” and “Vergesellschaftung” in the first chapter of “Economy and Society”, he was among other things alluding to Ferdinand Tönnies’ well-known usage of “Gemeinschaft” and “Gesellschaft”, as well as to related conceptions in the work of Georg Simmel. However, Weber’s usage not only differed from the senses in which Tönnies and Simmel used these terms; he had himself altered his own usage since the early draft of this chapter, published in 1913 as “On some Categories of Interpretive Sociology”. The tangled resonances that result from this are carefully identified and separated, and in so doing light is shed upon the nature and status of Weber’s intentions in writing his important chapter on “Basic Sociological Categories”.

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The two versions of the “Basic Sociological Concepts” and their significance in Max Weber’s writings¹

For some time now efforts to subordinate Max Weber’s writings to the kind of social theoretical readings which take their orientation from Marx, Durkheim, Parsons and Luhmann have

become strikingly uncommon. Instead, attention has turned to the fact that Weber, in contrast to other classical sociological writers, consciously avoided the concept “society” (*Gesellschaft*). As a consequence, the interpretive sociology that he founded is no longer promoted as a contribution to a theory of society, but is now increasingly understood as a conceptual sociological approach which was intended to be placed alongside, and serve, the development of historical research.² We should also not be misled by the decision of the editors of the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* to retain, after all, the familiar *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* as the main title for Weber’s contributions to the *Grundriß der Sozialökonomik*, rather than the substantially more fitting and long-favoured *Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte*. For this editorial decision does not represent a reversion to the previous interpretation of Weber’s writings as so many contributions to social theory. Firstly, new research related to editorial work on the *Gesamtausgabe* demonstrates the degree to which the texts collected under the title *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* escape any such interpretation. Secondly, Weber’s contribution to the *Grundriß* has come down to us in two separate fragmentary

[☆] This is a translation of “Vergemeinschaftung” und ‘Vergesellschaftung’ bei Max Weber. Eine Rekonstruktion seines Sprachgebrauchs”, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* Jg. 29 Heft 6 (December 2000) pp. 423–43. Translated by Keith Tribe (Department of History, University of Sussex, United Kingdom, e-mail address: tess@dircon.co.uk).

¹ Since the object of this paper is to explore Weber’s linguistic usage, its variation and development, the key concepts are here left untranslated, so that the reader might be able to see clearly the relevant connections and discontinuities. There are two separate problems. Firstly, while *Gemeinschaft* can be relatively straightforwardly translated as “community” together with its cognates, to translate *Gesellschaft* simply as “society,” or “the social” is misleading, not least that *Gesellschaft* was never the central concept for Weber that this might imply. Moreover, between 1913 and 1920 he changed his usage towards *sozial*; but for example to render *Vergesellschaftung* as the English “socialisation” violates Weber’s own distancing from Simmel’s use of the term, as Klaus Lichtblau demonstrates below. There is an argument for the use of “socation” as a translation of *Vergesellschaftung*, as Lawrence Scaff does successfully in his essay “The ‘Cool Objectivity of Socation’: Max Weber and Marianne Weber in America”, *History of the Human Sciences* Vol. 11 No. 2 (1998) 61–82, espec. 64 citing a passage from the 1906 essay on “Churches” and “Sects”. However, to use this translation in *Economy and Society* Ch. 1 §9. would be quite misleading and undermine the arguments which Klaus Lichtblau here advances. Secondly, the prefix “ver-” can be added to German verbs to convey a sense of movement or process: *fahren* (to travel), *verfahren* (to become lost); *rutschen* (to slip), *verrutschen* (to slip over, or at least experience a sudden unexpected slip); and nouns can be formed in many cases from these verbs, as happens with *Vergemeinschaftung* und *Vergesellschaftung*. Hence these two nouns imply a process, not primarily a condition. The reader also needs to be aware that *Handeln* should be consistently read as “action”. [trans.].

² Johannes Weiß, “Georg Simmel, Max Weber und die ‘Soziologie’”, in O. Rammstedt (ed.) *Simmel und die frühen Soziologen. Nähe und Distanz zu Durkheim, Tönnies und Max Weber* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1988) 36–63; Hartmut Tyrell, “Max Webers Soziologie – Eine Soziologie ohne ‘Gesellschaft’”, in G. Wagner, H. Zipprian (ed.) *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre. Interpretation und Kritik* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1994) 390–414; Klaus Lichtblau, “Soziologie und Antisozioologie um 1900: Dilthey, Simmel und Weber”, in Peter-Ulrich Merz-Benz, Gerhard Wagner (ed.) *Soziologie und Antisozioologie* (Universitätsverlag Konstanz, Konstanz, 2001) 17–35.

versions, and these fragments compel us to recognise the differences between the two different versions in responding to such questions, before moving on to seek a comprehensive interpretation of the manuscripts in question.³

A differentiated approach of this kind is needed not only in respect of the material part of Weber's sociology, but also with regard to the basic sociological concepts that he employed. For the terminology used in the older and more extensive part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* remains closely linked to the conceptual distinctions he employed in his 1913 essay "Über einige Kategorien der verstehenden Soziologie", and not to the "Soziologische Grundbegriffe" of 1920 published as Ch. 1 of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* in the newer section of the work. There are therefore not only two different versions of Weber's contribution to the *Grundriß*, but two different versions of his basic sociological concepts; and these must be clearly and precisely distinguished if we are not to create enormous confusion in dealing with the final "great book" that Weber left at his death.⁴ The implications of this historical approach to the texts can be clarified by taking one simple example that gives some indication of the material problems arising. It is well-known that Friedrich Tenbruck, to whom we are indebted for many very significant contributions to our better understanding of Max Weber, repeatedly emphasised that, just like Georg Simmel, Max Weber preferred the concept *Vergesellschaftung* to that of *Gesellschaft*. Tenbruck argued that both Simmel and Weber sought in this way to mark themselves off from the nineteenth century tradition of speculative theories of society, while at the same time stating their opposition to the reified use of collective concepts in the social sciences.⁵ But Tenbruck neither told us how Weber and Simmel actually employed the concept of *Vergesellschaftung*, nor did he ask himself why Weber, and not Simmel, had gone further and used the related and equally important concept of *Vergemeinschaftung*. This basic conceptual distinction in Weber's work about which Tenbruck had nothing to say relates of course not to Simmel, but to Ferdinand Tönnies, whose early sociological text *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* of 1887 employed a corresponding categorical distinction, even if Tönnies himself did not employ the concepts of *Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung*.⁶

Answering the question regarding the degree to which Weber's use of *Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung* was influenced

by Tönnies is however hindered by the fact that Weber's own linguistic usage did not remain unchanged. There is instead an earlier and a later version of his use of these basic concepts for his sociology of *Verstehen*, both of which are expressly linked to Tönnies' book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*.⁷ Unfortunately, however, neither the relation of the two different usages of *Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung* in Max Weber's writings has been clarified, nor is there in the commentary any consensus on how strongly Weber's usage of these terms can in fact be traced back to the distinction that Tönnies made between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. A recurring failure to take sufficient account of the difference between the older and the newer versions of Weber's basic sociological concepts has made it difficult to properly evaluate the textual consequences of both usage and difference. Opinion ranges from a clear recognition of Tönnies' influence on Weber, as in Talcott Parsons and Robert Nisbet,⁸ to René König's supposition that the 1913 essay on categories represents a "uniquely oblique polemic against Tönnies".⁹ By contrast, there prevails among those who do clearly distinguish Weber's two conceptual versions the view that it was only in the later, 1920, version that Weber's usage approached Tönnies' own, while Weber's earlier use of the terminology is thought to be unconnected to Tönnies.¹⁰ In this regard Stefan Breuer is an exception, taking the opposing position: that it is especially in the 1913 essay on categories and the older sections of *Economy and Society* that Weber is strongly influenced by Tönnies, later moving away from Tönnies in the first chapter of *Economy and Society*.¹¹ No agreement has even been reached on the repeatedly-expressed supposition that Weber replaced Tönnies' contrast of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* with a tripartite conceptual construct. While Parsons took the view that Weber's category of "struggle" or "conflict" represented a third form of social relationship alongside *Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung* and so overcame Tönnies' dualism, René König was of the opinion that Weber distinguished himself from Tönnies by treating struggle and force as a constitutive element of associational and social action, and so radically separated himself from Tönnies quite evident glorification of *Gemeinschaft*.¹² There has also recently been controversy over the question of which of the two versions of the basic

³ Wolfgang Schluchter, "Max Webers Beitrag zum 'Grundriß der Sozialökonomik'. Editionsprobleme und Editionsstrategien", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* Jg. 50 (1998) 327–43; Wolfgang Mommsen, "Zur Entstehung von Max Webers hinterlassenem Werk 'Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Soziologie'", *Europäisches Zentrum für Staatswissenschaften und Staatspraxis*, Berlin 1999; Klaus Lichtblau, "Der Fortschritt einer Edition. Zur Wiederkehr von 'Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft' innerhalb der Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe", *Soziologische Revue* Bd. 23 (2000) 123–31.

⁴ The "hinterlassenes Hauptwerk" whose status as such Friedrich Tenbruck vigorously questioned – "Das Werk Max Webers", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* Jg. 27 (1975) 663–702 [translated as "The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber", in Keith Tribe (ed.) *Reading Weber*, Routledge and Kegan Paul (London, 1987) 42–84]. The idea that *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* was a final "great book" can be traced originally to Marianne Weber's biography, reinforced by Johannes Winckelmann's essay, "Max Webers Opus posthumum. Eine literarische Studie", *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* Jg. 105 (1949) 368–87. This view can be treated today as unquestioned, so long as it is recognised that there is no coherent and complete book, but instead a series of significant textual fragments that were written as part of Weber's contribution to the *Grundriß*, and which have therefore to be placed in a broader and historical understanding of Weber's writings which is still developing. Important for this are the various parts of MWG Bd. 22, which assemble Weber's scholarly *Nachlaß*.

⁵ Friedrich Tenbruck, "Emile Durkheim oder die Geburt der Gesellschaft aus dem Geist der Soziologie", *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* Bd. 10 (1981) 337; *Die unbewältigten Sozialwissenschaften oder: Die Abschaffung des Menschen* (Styria, Graz, 1984) 133ff., 203; "Gesellschaftsgeschichte oder Weltgeschichte?" *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* Jg. 41 (1989) 422ff., 428ff.

⁶ See on this Niall Bond, "Ferdinand Tönnies und Max Weber", *Annali di Sociologia* II, 49–72.

⁷ In both the 1913 essay on sociological categories and in the first chapter of *Economy and Society* Weber referred to this book very positively, and emphasised that deviations in conceptual structure from the linguistic usage of Tönnies and other writers was not necessarily founded upon a divergence of views – see his remarks in the first footnote to "Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology" (trans. Edith Gruber) *Sociological Quarterly* Vol. 22, 179; and *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (trans. Alexander Henderson, Talcott Parsons) (William Hodge and Co., London, 1947) 80. In comments at the 1910 meeting of the Sociology Society in Frankfurt he went so far as to call *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* "one of the founding works of our modern social-philosophical perspective" – *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik*, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) (Tübingen, 1924) 470.

⁸ Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action. A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*, Second Edition (Free Press, New York, 1949) Vol. II, 640–94; Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (Heinemann, London, 1970) 71–82.

⁹ René König, "Die Begriffe Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft bei Ferdinand Tönnies", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* Jg. 7 (1955) 369.

¹⁰ Günther Roth, "Introduction" to Max Weber, *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978) CII; Werner J. Cahnman, "Tönnies and Weber" in his *Ferdinand Tönnies. A New Evaluation. Essays and Documents* (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1973) 259; Cahnman, "Tönnies, Durkheim and Weber", *Social Science Information* Vol. 15 (1976) 847; Cahnman, "Tönnies and Weber: A Rejoinder", *European Journal of Sociology* 22 (1981) 154; and Bond, "Ferdinand Tönnies und Max Weber", *European Journal of Sociology* 22 (1981) 67ff.

¹¹ Stefan Breuer, "Max Webers Staatssoziologie", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* Jg. 45 (1993) 200ff.

¹² Parsons, *Structure of Social Action* (Free Press, New York, 1949) 653, 694; König, "Die Begriffe Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* Jg. 7 (1955) 368ff.

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