What Can We Learn from History?: Competing Approaches to Historical Methodology and the Weberian Alternative of Reflexive Understanding

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The historical turn in political science has yielded numerous innovations in historical methods, but little in terms of systematic engagement with historical methodologies, understood as the logics of inquiry underlying historical analysis. The lack of engagement with historical methodologies has led to a narrowing of the space for historical inquiry, as scholars are often presented with a binary choice between realist and poststructuralist approaches, with the question of objectivity serving as the intractable divide. To the extent that scholars have carved out a middle ground, it has rested on contextualist approaches, though these too have been vulnerable to the critique of objectivity. In this article, I articulate the principles of a fourth position, rooted in the methodology of Max Weber and the idea of reflexive verstehen (understanding), a mode of investigation which seeks an empathetic understanding of historical subjectivities while foregrounding the researcher’s subjective orientation to the inquiry. The Weberian alternative, I argue, navigates a unique path around the gauntlet of scientific objectivity. It offers the possibility of historical understanding that is rooted in subjective understanding, but by virtue of submitting to a process of evaluation and incorporating an element of reflexivity can claim the status of scientific knowledge. It also enables an “event” driven approach to historical inquiry that expands where we can look for historical knowledge. In doing so it both improves the quality of historical understanding and increases its scope.

Keywords: Historical methodology, social science history, philosophy of the social sciences, Max Weber, ideal types

History is ubiquitous in the study of politics. Any observational study and many interpretive works must call upon the past in one way or another.

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Yet our engagement with historical methodology often lags behind our enthusiasm for historical inquiry. There has emerged a growing literature devoted to demonstrating the contributions of historical scholarship.\(^1\) There have also been concerted efforts to formalize the methods of historical analysis.\(^2\) With few exceptions, however, these works have tended to privilege methods; that is, the tools of historical research, over methodology, the logics of inquiry underlying historical analysis.\(^3\) Important as the exposition of methods has been for strengthening the position of historical analysis within the social sciences, the neglect of methodology has meant that key questions in the study of history are infrequently explored: What can we learn from historical analysis? What kinds of claims can we make based on historical inquiry? And what are the conditions for historical understanding? Indeed, historical analysis may be the most utilized and least theorized of social science methodologies. What is more, it is one of the least historicized. This means that social scientists often have not grappled with the circumstances that gave rise to these methodologies, what challenges they were meant to address, or how their innovators thought they could be most fruitfully deployed.

The lack of engagement with historical methodology is problematic for many reasons but foremost is that it can make it seem as if there is only one, closing off much needed intellectual spaces and privileging dominant paradigms. To the extent that multiple historical methodologies are acknowledged, they are usually presented as a binary choice between realist and poststructuralist approaches with the

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1. Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Ziblatt, “The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies,” *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (2010), 931–968; Orfeo Fioretes, Tulia Falleti and Adam Sheingate eds., *Oxford Handbook on Historical Institutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980): 174–97; and Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert Lieberman eds., *Oxford Handbook of American Political Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

2. Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Kelemen, “The Study of Critical Junctures” *World Politics* 59 (2007); Anna Grzymala-Busse, “Time Will Tell?” *Comparative Political Studies* 44 (2011): 1267–97; Peter Hall, “Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Research,” ed. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ian Lustick, “History, Historiography, and Political Science,” *The American Political Science Review* 93 (1996): 605–18; and Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

3. Important exceptions include: Theda Skocpol ed., *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984); William Sewell, *Logics of Inquiry* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Hall, *Aligning Ontology and Methodology*. 

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question of objectivity serving as the intractable divide. Realist methodologies hold that there is an external reality to historical facts that can be gleaned through proper scientific method, and that historical forces operate with enough regularity that our knowledge of the past can authorize actions in present. Poststructuralist methodologies, on the other hand, emphasize the constructed nature of historical narrative and impossibility of authentically representing the past. For poststructuralists, the inability to access the past makes claims to learn from history invalid and attempts to authorize actions on that basis illegitimate.

Efforts to maintain a middle ground within the realist-poststructuralist dichotomy have often relied on contextualist methodologies, which emphasize the importance of a contextualized understanding of historical events and subjectivities, but maintain the possibility of an authentic reading in context. Contextualists make more modest claims about what we can learn from history, establishing scope conditions for the generalization of historical knowledge. The contextualist middle ground has been an important landing spot for historically minded scholars who wish to offer theoretical accounts of historical processes while attending to the particularity of different contexts. But this middle ground has proven somewhat unstable. This is because, while usefully bringing in important dimensions of subjectivity, attention to scope conditions, and an appreciation of the idiographic aspects of historical explanation, this approach does not always take seriously the limits of objectively ascertaining “context.” As such, it can collapse into a kind of realism itself, assuming that if we can just sharpen our tools, we will be able to extract the correct information.

Presented with the realist-poststructuralist binary and the vulnerabilities of the contextualist middle ground, historically minded social scientists increasingly gravitate towards the realist position and the positivist methods associated with it. The

4. Michel Trouillot, Silencing the Past (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 4–6; and Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, Comparative Historical Analysis, 22–25.
5. The many “historical turns” in the social sciences have seen a revival of the contextualist tradition. See for example: Tulia Falleti and Julia Lynch, “Context and Causal Mechanisms in Political Analysis” Comparative Political Studies 42 (2009):1143–66; Richard Locke and Kathleen Thelen, “Apples and Oranges Revisited,” Politics & Society 23 (1995): 337–67; James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, Explaining Institutional Change (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Pierson, Politics in Time. Such approaches often focus on mid-range theory with the goal of discerning mechanisms that operate within certain scope conditions rather general laws of social action. There is a great deal of complementarity between the contextualist approach and the Weberian alternative I articulate below, one which can help to fortify this middle ground.
6. Ian Hall, “The history of international thought and International Relations theory,” International Relations 31 (2017), 241–60; and Martin Jay, “Historical Explanation and the Event” New Literary History 42 (2011), 557–71.
7. Discussions of this trend within the tradition of historical institutionalism can be seen in the exchange between Hay and Wincott and Hall and Talyor: Colin Hay and Daniel Wincott,
gravitational pull of realism is on display for example in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer’s landmark work on comparative historical analysis. In it, they identify their approach with the realist position, explaining that “the danger of not taking sides on this issue is that promising young researchers may be steered towards the theoretical nihilism embraced in more extreme forms of postmodern theory.” Whether or not these concerns are justified, it is clear that maintaining a pluralist space for historical analysis is a challenge given the perceived lack of alternatives.

The present inquiry is animated by a desire to maintain this pluralist space. I proceed from the premise that, while the realist position might make sense for some modes of historical analysis, it can be quite limiting for others. In particular, the realist emphasis on universal categories of analysis and discerning general laws through nomothetically oriented comparison can be challenging for those who seek to grapple with historical particularities, explain a singular event, or even compare multiple cases that do not offer the requisite variation in attributes. Yet such investigations are essential for historical knowledge and for social science research.

I endeavor in this essay to articulate the principles of a fourth position, which I offer as an alternative that will allow for such exploration and place it on firm scientific ground, one that makes possible historical explanation without the drive toward generalization. To counter Mahoney and Rueschemeyer’s fears of nihilistic postmodernism overtaking historical investigation, the present inquiry and search for an alternative is motivated by the concern that the realist position may not best serve all modes of historical analysis and that promising young researchers will be pushed towards rigid notions of scientific objectivity that would leave large swaths of historical knowledge unexplored.

The alternative approach offered here is rooted in the methodology of Max Weber, and specifically the idea of verstehen (understanding) as it is developed in his works. This is a mode of investigation aimed at achieving an empathetic understanding of historical subjectivities while foregrounding the researcher’s subjective orientation to the inquiry. I focus here on a dimension of verstehen that has been underappreciated in discussions of historical methodology—the role of reflexivity in improving historical explanation and providing the grounds for scientific rigor. Through the practice of reflexivity, Weber aimed to bring into focus the subjective orientation of the researcher; that is, the theoretical and conceptual priors they bring to the research,

“Structure, Agency and Historical Institutionalism,” Political Studies 46 (1998): 951–57; and Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor, “The Potential of Historical Institutionalism: A Response to Hay and Wincott” Political Studies 46 (1998): 958–62). For a more recent discussion see also Dennis Pilon, “Beyond codifying common sense,” Studies in Political Economy 102 (2021): 101–18).
8. Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, Comparative Historical Analysis, 24.
the cultural predilections they inscribe in the analysis, and the value judgements involved in their scholarly determinations. But rather than trying to overcome this subjectivity to achieve an objective reading of history as with realist approaches or reverting to a nihilist anti-history as might be found in some poststructuralist approaches, Weber centers subjectivity in his methodology and uses it to improve historical understanding. This is achieved through the evaluation of ideal types, a method meant to formalize and make explicit the researchers’ subjective orientation so that it can be evaluated as part of the work product. It is through the reflexive rather than objective evaluation of ideal types that historical analysis can claim the status of scientific knowledge. Throughout the essay I will refer to this as “reflexive verstehen,” a term not meant to connote a different category of verstehen but to emphasize the reflexive element at the heart of this concept. It is a kind of historical understanding that can only be achieved through active reflection on the cultural and historical situatedness of the researcher and the ways in which that shapes their analytical lens.

Through the practice of reflexive verstehen, Weber was able to navigate a unique path around the gauntlet of scientific objectivity, one which offers the possibility of historical understanding that is rooted in subjective understanding, but by virtue of submitting to a process of evaluation can claim the status of scientific knowledge. Such an approach, I argue, opens up a great deal of space for historical researchers who wish to offer causal explanations of historical processes without the assumption of universalism and the drive towards generalization that accompanies realist methodologies. At the same time, it empowers the researcher to offer affirmative historical accounts, and not just the deconstruction of historical narratives that is privileged in poststructuralist approaches. Finally, it builds on and complements contextualist approaches by emphasizing the importance of an empathetic reading of history in context, but layers on an element of reflexivity that places contextualist understanding on firmer ground. Importantly, such an approach enables a problem-driven, or what we might think of as an “event” driven, approach to historical inquiry that vastly expands where we can look for historical knowledge. In doing so, it both improves the quality of historical understanding and increases its scope.

Before turning to Weber, I begin with a review of the three prevalent positions of historical realism, contextualism, and poststructuralism. I do so with a view to elucidating some of the key epistemological and ontological difference within these methodologies and the impasse they have come to engender. Because I also seek to historicize their development within the social sciences, I engage with these methodologies through the works of some of their most influential proponents, each a foundational figure in the social sciences. I discuss the realist position through the historical methodology of Karl Marx. The contextualist position is examined through
the writings of Marc Bloch. And the poststructuralist position, I explore through the writings of Michel Foucault. While it is only possible to offer brief sketches of their contributions here, returning to these works helps to elucidate a debate that has been muted in contemporary discussions of social science methodology. In addition, historicizing these methodologies helps bring into focus the particular fights their innovators were fighting and the stakes of different approaches. In this respect what I offer here represents a history of historical methodology in the social sciences. Taken together these works reflect a thread of a “conversation” about history that I revisit here in the hopes that something of these old debates can reinvigorate historical inquiry today and open up new avenues for historical exploration. While each offers important perspectives on the question “what can we learn from history?”, I argue that the Weberian approach of reflexive verstehen navigates a unique path between scientific absolutism and radical relativism, offering important and underappreciated insights on both the possibilities and limitations of historical inquiry.

**Historical Methodology**

The question of what we can learn from history involves both the epistemological determination of what is knowable about events in the past and the ontological determination of how consistently the forces of the past act on the present. Taken together these epistemological and ontological commitments inform the methods chosen to conduct historical inquiry and also have important implications for how we are to use history; that is, the extent to which history directs or authorizes a course of action in the present.

Many of our contemporary approaches to historical methodology in the social sciences have their roots in nineteenth and early-twentieth century debates about the nature and origin of modern society. The approaches discussed here all bear the mark of these times, and all positioned themselves against traditional historiography in which history was essentially a history of great men and monumentalized events. Traditional historical accounts typically treated such phenomena as the succession of kings and dynasties. And historical knowledge was understood to be the accumulation of historical facts through the examination of political, diplomatic, and other formal documentary evidence. This approach was often accompanied by a naïve realism, which took historical subjects as given and their meaning unchanging.9

The turn to “the social” in historical inquiry, which in different ways marks the approaches described below, was part of a project to undermine these traditional

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9. John Toews, “Historicism from Ranke to Nietzsche,” in The Nineteenth Century, ed. Warren Breckman and Peter Gordon, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 301–29.
accounts and the forms of authority which relied on them. But it also brought with it pressing questions about the validity of various approaches to historical methodology within the social sciences. The table below is an attempt to capture by way of simple classifications the logics of these different approaches.

Table 1. Historical Methodology

| Exemplar | Methodology       | Epistemological Accessibility | Ontological Regularity | History’s lessons                                                                 |
|----------|-------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ranke    | Classical Realism*| The truth of history can be directly observed | Continuous, Universal | The lessons of history can be directly applied and used to authorize actions in the present |
| Marx     | Scientific Realism| The truth of history can be understood through the proper scientific method | Dialectical, Universal | The lessons of history derived through scientific analysis can be directly applied and used to authorize actions in the present |
| Bloch    | Contextualism     | The truth of history can be gleaned by reconstructing the social context in which it is embedded | Contingent, Particular | Lessons of history are contingent and can only be applied in limited ways, generalization is possible only with established scope conditions |
| Foucault | Poststructuralism | The truth of history cannot be ascertained; history only exists as a production of the present | Radical Discontinuity | History does not offer discernable lessons, attempts to authorize actions on this basis are illegitimate |
| Weber    | Reflexive Verstehen | We can capture a dimension of history, though never a complete or truthful picture | Indeterminate, Particular | What we learn from history is partial and perspectival, reflexivity is needed to account for this in any application of historical knowledge |

*Classical realism is offered here only as a baseline. In this essay, it will not be treated separately, but will be discussed as an entry point into scientific realism.
In the following discussion, I seek to elucidate each position through the works of one of its most influential proponents. The choice of thinkers is meant to focus on those whose work engaged explicitly and systematically the study of history. Thus, while in each category there are others whose work might fruitfully be explored to shed light on methodology in general, for the purpose of understanding *historical* methodology, these thinkers offer an advantage in teasing out the questions that may be specific to historical analysis.

While the goal here is to highlight the differences between these methodologies and thus offer some stark contrasts, it should also be noted that there are other methodological dimensions that might lead to different configurations and reveal overlaps between these positions.\(^\text{10}\) If one considers, for example, classification along the lines of inductive/deductive/abductive methodologies one might cluster these approaches differently. Or cast along the lines of material vs. ideational ontologies, other categorizations may emerge. Many such themes cut across methodologies, reflecting an “analytical eclecticism” at the heart of these approaches.\(^\text{11}\) The categorization employed here is guided by the specific objective of this essay to identify the dimensions relevant to the question “what can we learn from history?”. I now turn now to a discussion of each position, offering an exposition oriented toward this guiding question.

**Historical Realism: Marx and the Dialectic**

Historical realism anchors one end of the spectrum for historical methodology. Though rarely ever discussed as such in the social sciences, this approach is at the heart of many works which draw on historical facts, actions, and events, for the purpose of comparison and analysis. Historian Peter Novick maintains that, at its core, historical realism involves:

> a commitment to the reality of the past, and to the truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction . . . Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are “found” not “made.”\(^\text{12}\)

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\(^{10}\) For an alternative configuration see Rudra Sil, “The Division of Labor in Social Science Research” *Polity* 32 (2000): 499–531.

\(^{11}\) Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

\(^{12}\) Peter Novick, *The Noble Dream* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 1–2.
For the purpose of this analysis, I will deal with one variant of historical realism, which I refer to as scientific realism. Whereas classical or naïve realism posited that the researcher could “observe” history in an unmediated way, a more sophisticated scientific realism resides in the claim that our theoretical priors condition our perceptions, but we can overcome these impediments through the use of scientific methods.

In this analysis, the approach of scientific realism is explored through the historical methodology of Karl Marx. Though Marx did not engage with methodology as a separate area of inquiry, his approach to the study of social processes has been linked to a distinct historical methodology developed in several works, but most apparent in The German Ideology, Grundrisse and Capital. Centering this methodology is the epistemological claim that, with the proper scientific method, history is knowable, and the ontological claim that the forces of history operate with enough regularity that our knowledge of history holds discernable lessons for the present.

Marx’s historical methodology distinguished itself from classical realism in its treatment of historical facts, which Marx maintained cannot simply be extracted from their context and connected across time and space. While there is an external reality to objects—here he is in agreement with classical realists—their epistemic status in the social world is transformed by the manner in which they are embedded in social relations. Even the categories of thought found in various epochs are, according to Marx, “historical and transitory,” reflecting the particularity of their context. This recognition however did not lead Marx down a path of seeking subjective understanding of these social relations, as it would later for the contextualist

13. Classical realism, most often associated with nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke, often entailed the belief that we can “observe” the past through its artifacts and records, and that there is no meaningful difference between what happened and what we perceive.

14. An animated debate within the philosophy of history has helped to elucidate the lines dividing naïve from more sophisticated variants of realism. See C. McCullagh, “Historical Realism,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 40 (1979): 420–25; Leon Goldstein, “Historical Realism: The Ground of Carl Becker’s Skepticism,” Philosophy of the Social Sciences 2 (1972): 121–31; Adrian Kuzminsaki, “Defending Historical Realism,” History and Theory 18 (1979): 316–49; and Leon Goldstein, “Against Historical Realism,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 40 (1980): 426–29.

15. I deal here with the methodological aspects of Marx’s work as distinct from his historical materialism which contains both methodological and theoretical claims. For other discussions of his methodology see Eric Hobsbawm, “Marx and History,” New Left Review 1 (1984); P. J. Kain, “Mar’s Dialectic Method,” History and Theory 19 (1980): 294–12; Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, New Departures in Marxian Theory (London: Routledge, 2006).
approach. Rather, he sought to devise a scientific method that would allow him to extract from the “chaotic conception of the whole” attributes which could transcend the particular and inform a coherent theory of history.\textsuperscript{16}

This scientific method involved a dialectic process that would begin and end with “the concrete,” moving between what has been called “the real concrete” and “the concrete for thought.”\textsuperscript{17} The real concrete referred to objects in their immediate social context, “a rich totality of many determinations and relations.” The “concrete for thought” approximated a theoretical understanding of the real concrete. It was, in Marx’s words, “a reproduction of the [real] concrete by way of thought.”\textsuperscript{18} It is in the dialectical relationship between the two that the truth of history can be found.\textsuperscript{19}

This dialectic hinges very much on a process of abstraction by which one can distinguish those parts of the real concrete that are particular to the context and those parts that are transcendental. This is done by comparing multiple contexts and identifying the common traits, which is what Marx undertakes in formulating his own categories of analysis. On the category of production, he writes, “\textit{production in general} is an abstraction, but a rational abstraction in so far as it really brings out and fixes the common element and thus saves us repetition.”\textsuperscript{20} Importantly, abstractions are understood to be reflections of reality, as valid as those which can be derived from observation of any particular context. For example, on the category of capital, he maintains that “capital in general, as distinct from the particular real capitals, is itself a real existence . . . While the general is therefore on the one hand only a mental mark of distinction, it is at the same time a particular real form alongside the form of the particular and individual.”\textsuperscript{21} Capital \textit{in general}, he stipulates, can only exist as an abstraction, but it is “an abstraction which grasps the specific characteristics which distinguish capital from all other forms of wealth—or modes in which (social) production develops.”\textsuperscript{22}

This means that abstractions; that is, the general form of things, contain a truth that cannot be found in the particular, giving them distinct analytical value. Moreover, because properly derived abstractions will increase in precision over

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\textsuperscript{16} Karl Marx, \textit{Grundrisse} (New York, Penguin, 1993 [1861]), 100.
\textsuperscript{17} Bertell Ollman, \textit{Dance of the Dialectic} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 60.
\textsuperscript{18} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 101.
\textsuperscript{19} Resnick and Wolff, \textit{New Departures}, 23–25.
\textsuperscript{20} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 85.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 449.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 449.
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time as differentiation increases from one epoch to another, within Marx’s epistemology, the perspective of the present represents a privileged standpoint for historical understanding.

This epistemological approach was united in Marx’s methodology with a universalist ontology which allowed for both continuity and discontinuity as part of a dialectic. While every epoch is governed by different laws, according to Marx, it is still possible to distill a logic of history that is lawlike.23 This logic could be interrupted, but absent interruptions, historical processes reproduced themselves in different forms that are discernable from the perspective of universal history.24

This universalist orientation would become a central commitment of Marx’s methodology. A critical feature of his challenge to traditional historiography was a rejection of the idea that historical understanding can be achieved through the study of discrete nations and their leaders, or that the significance of events could be understood without connecting them temporally to broader processes of social transformation. For Marx, in fact, such traditional approaches served to conceal the underlying structural determinants of the course of human history. It is only through the integration of historical forces in different arenas, across political borders, and through different epochs, that the logic of history—its purpose and meaning—could be gleaned. This logic of history was of course meant to authorize actions in the present. The knowability of history through scientific means, combined with the ontological regularity of historical processes gave rise to a sophisticated, but thoroughly realist answer to the question “what can we learn from history?”. History instructs us in a very real sense, revealing its truths to those who apply the proper methods.

The influence of scientific realism on historical methodology within the social sciences has been substantial, and the Marxian variant perhaps the most so. One can see the intellectual lineage of this methodological approach in various works of macro-historical analysis, a distinctive feature of which is the focus on establishing linkage across historical and geographic contexts, with much less attention to historical particularities or the perspectives of the actors involved. This includes classics of historical political economy such the works of Immanuel Wallerstein, a pioneer of world systems theory, and foundational works of political development such as those of Alexander Gerschenkron and Barrington Moore.25

23. Karl Marx, Capital (New York: International Publishers, 1967 [1867]), 17–19.
24. Kain, “Marx’s Dialectic Method, 301.
25. Other recent examples include the works of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson as well as those of Carles Boix; see Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, The Narrow Corridor
There can be no doubt about the importance of scientific realism in the development of historical methodology. In moving past traditional historiography and naïve realism, it offers robust tools for those wishing to develop general theories of social transformation. While this more sophisticated form of realism rests on the use of scientific methods for valid historical understanding, however, the critiques which follow target exactly that. Contextualism, poststructuralism, and Weberian reflexive verstehen, while differing in many important respects, all share a skepticism regarding the methods of scientific inquiry and the possibility of overcoming the challenge of subjectivity. For each, the problem of subjectivity is confronted in different ways, but all seek to unsettle the scientific certainty offered in realist approaches.

**Historical Contextualism: Bloch and Total History**

Against the backdrop of scientific realism which dominated the study of social history throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, there emerged an alternative approach rooted in historical contextualism as a means of understanding processes of social and political development. This approach relies on the reconstruction of context in order to gain an understanding of the subjectivities of actors and an appreciation of events as they were experienced. Contextualism, which has seen a revival in recent years with a new “historical turn,” in the present analysis represents a potential “middle ground” for historical methodology, acknowledging the subjective nature of historical understanding but maintaining the possibility of an authentic reading of history in context.

Though of course context plays a role in a great deal of history inquiry, its place in social science history was firmly established through the historical methodology of the French Annales School and especially the work of Marc Bloch. The Annales...
school, so named after its flagship publication, *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, took off in the early-twentieth century and revolutionized historical methodology by marrying it to social theory while maintaining rich contextualized understandings of particular historical milieus.

Bloch, along with Lucien Febvre, was one of the early pioneers of the *Annales* school and one of its most influential proponents. A historian of Medieval Europe, Bloch in many ways saw himself carrying on a tradition of Marxian scholarship, but distinguished himself methodologically in several important respects. Epistemologically, he saw as the key to historical analysis a mode of inquiry that could tap into actors’ subjective understandings of their situation. While historical subjectivities were of course central to Marx’s analysis as well, for Marx they were obstacles to historical understanding, reflecting the particularity of the material conditions in which they were embedded. For Bloch, however, far from impediments, these subjectivities were the key to understanding. The ability to view the world as it was experienced by historical subjects was essential for an authentic reading of history.

This kind of understanding for Bloch required a reconstruction of and immersion in the relevant historical context. To this end, Bloch and other *Annales* scholars, advanced a mode of inquiry that they referred to as “total history,” which sought deep contextualized understandings for specific historical periods, rather than sweeping accounts across epochs. Bloch insisted on the need to bound historical investigation spatially and temporally, establishing what today we might refer to as “scope conditions” for generalization. The “total” in total history refers to the substantive purview of historical investigations. Against the heavy reliance on economic determinants in Marx’s work, Bloch maintained the need to incorporate all aspects of social life within historical investigation.27 It was through this combination of narrowing the spatial and temporal focus and expanding the substantive orientation of social inquiry that one could gain confidence in historical inferences.

Bloch himself approached history with the instincts of an ethnographer, drawing insights from various dimensions of social life, and utilizing a wide array of non-documentary sources such as maps, coins, topographical details, and architectural styles. It was not uncommon, for example, for Bloch to create replicas of agricultural tools to better understand the materialities of labor in feudal society.28 Through this, he aspired to understand the subjectivity of those he studied—their

27. Bryce Lyon, “Marc Bloch: Historian” *French Historical Studies* 15 (1987): 195–207, at 200.
28. Daniel Chirot, “The Social and Historical Landscape of Marc Bloch” in *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, ed. Theda Skocpol, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 30.
beliefs, fears, values, and priorities. This would be the basis of a “histoire des mentalités” as he described it, a history offered from the perspective of those studied. In one of his central works, *Feudal Society*, Bloch used such methods to develop a sensibility toward his subjects that considered “modes of feeling and thought,” “folk memory” and “intellectual milieus.” In doing so, Bloch painted a complex picture which challenged the primacy of the material over the spiritual in accounts of economic development.

This epistemological shift came with important ontological modifications, as Bloch placed great emphasis on contingency, resisting universal claims and leaving as the subject of empirical investigation the question of whether social processes operated with enough regularity that they could be applied to multiple contexts. For Bloch, whether or not concepts can travel and how far, were questions that had to be answered through contextualized comparisons, not assertions to be posited *a priori*.

It is for this reason that Bloch placed great emphasis on comparative history, which he offered as an alternative to universal history. The importance of comparison is that it left open the question of origins and outcomes. In contrast to Marx’s historical methodology which aimed to ascertain a universal logic to history, for Bloch there could be many logics. Through comparative history, one could discern mechanisms that would operate similarly given similar conditions, but it would not require the historian to attribute them to a single universal cause. The result would be a far more fragmented and contingent reading of history than the proponents of universal history would accept, but it was for Bloch a necessary condition for historical explanation.

The kind of complexity offered by comparative history also helped to guard against the abuse of history by those who would claim to identify discrete origins for specific outcomes. In his most influential work *On the Historian’s Craft*, he takes aim specifically at what he terms “the idol of origins” criticizing those who seek a singular point of origin for complex social structures such as seignorialism and feudalism. Bloch maintained that such complex structures emerge from “total social

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29. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961[1939]).
30. Chirot, “Social and Historical Landscape,” 26.
31. Alette Hill and Boyd Hill, “Marc Bloch and Comparative History,” *The American Historical Review* 85 (1980): 828–46; and William Sewell, “Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History” *History and Theory* 6 (1967), 208–18.
32. Marc Bloch, “Pour une histoire comparee des sociétés europeennes,” *Revue de synthèse historique* 46 (1928): 15–50, 46–48.
33. Bloch, *Historian’s Craft*, 29–35
situations” that could not be reduced to single causes. In addition to being analytically flawed, “history oriented toward origins” could easily be “put to the service of value judgements.” The intrusion of such value judgements, he maintained, turns history into propaganda, a reading of history aimed at promoting a cause in the present.

The Annales school and Bloch’s work in particular remain important influences on social science methodology. Subsequent challenges, however, also serve to make clear the limits of contextualism. At the heart of this is what historian Martin Jay has identified as a fundamental logical flaw in a purely contextualist position: its reliance on an objective construction of context. For contextualists, the construction of context is critical for historical understanding because it sheds light on actors’ subjectivity. This can be seen in the Annales school’s pivot to examining “total history” and in contemporary contextualist approaches where we see emphasis on examining actors’ subjective understandings of their situation. Scholar have emphasized the importance of getting an accurate reading of “what actors were actually fighting about.” Some have argued for a subjective understanding of time itself, maintaining that time operates differently in different contexts. And frequent are the reminders that we cannot infer actors’ motivations from outcomes but must understand them “in time.”

Implicit in these views is that we as researchers do not share the subjectivity of those we study, and further that our own subjectivity may be a hindrance in achieving historical understanding. Indeed, this is the greatest challenge posed by contextualists to realists. It has been an important and generative challenge. But herein lies the logical inconsistency of a purely contextualist position: if it is the case that our subjectivity is different from those whom we study, then that subjectivity will necessarily inform the construction of the context we seek to understand. Simply put, context is not self-evident. As Jay explains, “the documents that reveal context never speak for themselves without being questioned by their present reader.” Moreover, we must make choices about what constitutes the relevant context and these choices are invariably conditioned by the very value judgements Bloch sought to exclude from historical analysis.

34. Ibid., 25
35. Jay, “Historical Explanation.”
36. Capoccia and Ziblatt, “The Historical Turn,” 940.
37. Grzymala-Busse, “Time Will Tell?”
38. Pierson, Politics in Time.
39. Jay, “Historical Explanation,” 559.
40. Hall, “History of International Thought,” 247.
Below I discuss the poststructuralist position and the Weberian alternative. Both see the reconstruction of context as inadequate to overcome the challenge of objectivity. But while for poststructuralists these limitations led to a rejection of writing history in the traditional sense, through the use of reflexive verstehen, Weber offers a potential complement to contextualism that would allow for the kinds of contextualized understandings Bloch saw as important for valid explanation, without assuming the possibility of objectively reconstructing context.

**Historical Poststructuralism: Foucault and Genealogy**

Of the various approaches to reading history in the social sciences, poststructuralism has offered perhaps the greatest contrast to realism. Continuing a dialogue with and against Marx’s historical methodology, this approach also has its roots in the French academy. Marked by a linguistic turn, poststructuralism questions both the knowability of historical events and the stability of meaning in the events themselves. In this view, the limitations of language become the primary limitations of knowledge. Language operates as the culturally specific system of meaning and signification which limits both actors’ shared understanding of events, and the historian’s ability to access the truth of any event. As a result, there are neither fixed meanings to historical events nor privileged positions from which the truth might be known. Thus, for the poststructuralist, there can be no “objective” knowledge of the past, understood as knowledge which is intersubjectively invariant.

Historical analysis then becomes something different all together. At an extreme, history becomes fiction and historical narrative a literary act. From this perspective, the subject of study is indistinguishable from the act of studying it. There is no reality to it other than what the narrator conjures. For example, in narrating *The Making of the English Working class*, E. P. Thompson was also *making* the English working class. Moreover, in the hands of poststructuralists, historical analysis is primarily concerned with deconstruction, “an analysis of style, genre and narrative structure, more usually associated with fictional literature, applied to the understanding of the historian’s sources and written interpretation.”

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41. Jane Caplan, “Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction,” *Central European History* 223 (1989): 260–78; and Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
42. Caplan, “Postmodernism,” 266
43. Hans Kellner, “Narrativity in History,” *History and Theory* 26 (1987): 1–9; and Haden White, *Meta-history* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 1973).
44. Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), 58.
Among poststructuralists, Michel Foucault’s work stands out for the centrality of history to the analysis. For Foucault, the subject of historical investigation is history itself—its generation, narrative structure, disciplinary forms, and institutionalization in the service of power. Knowledge for Foucault is always bound within an historical *episteme* which he conceived as a closed system of meaning without the possibility of transcendental understanding. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, he defined an episteme as “something like a world-view . . . a general stage of reason, a certain structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape.”

His conceptualization of epistemes recalls many aspects of Marx’s epochs, but unlike Marx’s ontological orientation which linked epochs through a dialectic, for Foucault a radical discontinuity made any genuine understanding across epistemes impossible. Just as those within an episteme cannot escape from it, we in the present do not have unmediated access to it. We bring to it the discursive practices of our own episteme which we too cannot escape. For this reason, Foucault maintained that knowledge of the past can only exist as a production of the present.

For Foucault, this became the grounds for a radical revision of the nature and purpose of history, shifting the terrain of historical investigation from one oriented toward recovering the truth about history, to one aimed at understanding the ways in which power and discourse operate to produce truths. Much like those who came before him, Foucault was acutely aware of the power that history has over the present. The search for origins in history was also of great concern to him, as both a futile endeavor given the inevitable gaps between past origins and present purposes, and also one that had the potential to create false gods, empowering those who claimed historical origination to authorize actions in the present. In contrast to his realist and contextualist predecessors, however, he saw critique as the only safeguard against the abuse of history.

Foucault’s mode of critique took the form first of “archeology” and later “genealogy.” Both methods aimed to identify historically specific structures of thought that shaped discourses and experiences in a given epoch. A central goal of archeology is to demonstrate historical discontinuities, and to “cleanse history” of all “transcendental narcissism.” Beyond this, genealogy aims explicitly to disrupt familiar structures and categories such as “madness,” “the social,” and “criminality.” By focusing on emergence and descent rather than origins, a genealogical investigation

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45. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972), 15.
46. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, genealogy, history,” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1991).
47. Foucault, *Archaeology*, 203.
aims to trace the lineage of present practices and institutions so as to reveal the contradictions, unexpected inheritances, and erratic progressions which gave rise to and persist within them. The “taken for granted” becomes problematized in ways that reveal its radical contingency.48

In many ways, Foucault can be seen as rescuing historical poststructuralism from the grips of nihilism by grounding his critique in an investigation of power. Betraying a deeper influence of structuralist, particularly Althusserian thought, in Foucault’s hands historical inquiry and its fruits were no longer the irrational play of culturally coded systems of meaning. There was a “there” there, a thing to study, even a “logic” to history, though that logic was not a transcendental one but discontinuous across historical epochs.49

Foucauldian genealogy, however, aims to accomplish a very different goal than typical historical works. Foucault himself disavowed history in the traditional sense, seeing in it little more than the production of the prevalent power dynamics of an epoch. Certainly, genealogy is a mode of writing history, but it is one oriented primarily towards the critique of historical knowledge and the epistemes which produce it. This can also be seen in more recent works employing Foucauldian approaches. Take for example Ido Oren’s study of the influence of U.S. foreign policy on the discipline of political science or Arturo Escobar’s Encountering Development, which traces the discursive construction of development in the postwar period.50 Both works offer transformative perspectives that challenge the very premise of the fields to which they contribute. But they do so by revealing the ways in which the idea of democracy and of development are the production of prevalent power structures. They do not offer a history of democracy or of development per se.

As important and generative as such critiques are, genealogy as a mode of doing history ultimately accepts a dissenting role for the historian,51 leaving little room for affirmative historical construction and little guidance as to how it might be undertaken. This self-imposed limitation of poststructuralism can come at a high cost for those who seek to write an affirmative history of democracy or of development, as well as those who would appeal to history to narrate experiences of persecution or inequality.52 I will argue below that, for these and other perspectives that seek to

48. Foucault, “Nietzsche, genealogy, history,” 82.
49. Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” Critique of Anthropology 4 (1979): 131–37, 74.
50. Arturo Escobar, Encountering Development (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Ido Oren, Our Enemies and US (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).
51. Munslow, Deconstructing History, 70.
52. Critics have pointed to the tensions between such approaches and the desire to make truth claims about histories of oppression. See for example Mary Hawkesworth, “Knowers,
make affirmative historical claims, Weber’s reflexive verstehen represents an alternative that can incorporate the poststructuralist critique of objectivity while maintaining space for the construction and not just deconstruction of historical knowledge.

**Reflexive Verstehen and the Weberian Alternative**

Within the preceding discussion we can see the contours of one of the central debates of the social sciences as it has played out in one particular strain of social thought. This specific conversation has focused on historical analysis, but analogs of the realist, contextualist, and poststructuralist positions can be found in many other areas of social inquiry. And, as in other fields, it has resulted in an impasse that leaves us cycling between the limitations of each position in providing satisfactory methodological grounds for historical analysis.

Here I elucidate the principles of a fourth position, rooted in the methodology of Max Weber and his development of the concept of verstehen (understanding) as an essential feature of historical explanation. Weber was not alone in making use of the concept of verstehen, though his conceptualization was distinctive in two important respects: first is the view that any causal explanation of social action must be based in an empathetic understanding of the motivations of actors; and second is the claim that an accounting of the historians’ own conceptual and theoretical priors is necessary to achieve this understanding. While the first of these features has received a great deal of attention, the latter has been less prominent in analyses of verstehen. But it is precisely the reflexive aspects of historical inquiry that provide the basis for understanding in this approach, and the method by which scholars can offer robust causal explanations despite the challenge of objectivity. For this reason, I distinguish the Weberian alternative as a form of “reflexive verstehen.”

By incorporating the practice of reflexivity, Weber transforms subjectivity from an obstacle to a tool for achieving greater historical understanding. This is accomplished through the evaluation of ideal types, a method meant to formalize

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53. Among his contemporaries, Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel also developed this idea in their works.

54. See for example H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, "The Man and his Works," in From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (London: Routledge, 1948); and William Tucker "Max Weber’s Verstehen," The Sociological Quarterly 6 (1965): 157–65.
and make explicit the researchers’ subjective orientation so that it can be evaluated as part of the work product. Ideal types, understood as a construction of the researcher, are always partial and perspectival, never capturing the truth of any social situation. Despite this, ideal types can be useful for explaining social action. And it is in the idea of usefulness rather than truthfulness that one finds their scientific value. This approach weaves a complicated path around the question of objectivity, making it possible to offer causal explanations without rooting them in assumptions of universal generalization. As such it also opens up important opportunities for historical inquiry and the exploration of historical phenomena that may not fit neatly into nomothetically oriented causal analyses.

Weber’s “in-betweeness” has led many to underestimate the novelty of his thinking, dismissing him as either a confused contextualist or Foucault-lite. Indeed, his methodological writings do not help his cause. The overall picture is somewhat fragmented, at points contradictory, and in many respects incomplete. The goal here is not to impose a coherent scheme on these diverse works or his thought which was continually evolving between 1895, his first works on the topic, and 1919, the time of his death. My aim, however, is to elucidate through these works what Weber struggled to achieve—an approach to reading history that resisted what he saw as the untenable truth claims of realists and contextualists and the radical critique of historiography, which in his time was embodied in the works of Nietzsche, but anticipated many of the claims of the poststructuralist school. What I offer here is, in the Weberian spirit, a deliberate construction, an ideal type, a heuristic device meant to accentuate certain aspects of Weber’s writing in order to address a specific problem. The standing of such a construction for broader questions about reading history is, as Weber would have it, partial and perspectival, meant to increase understanding rather than resolve a disagreement.

Reflective Verstehen and the Ideal Type
Weber’s critique of objectivity was central to his methodological writings. The beginnings of his thinking on these matters can be found as early as his Inaugural Address at Freiburg University in 1895, later published as “The Nation State and Economic Policy.” This address has drawn attention both for its political content and

55. Georg Sauth, “Nietzsche, Weber, and the affirmative sociology of culture,” European Journal of Sociology 33 (1992): 219–47; and Dreyfus and Rabinow, Michel Foucault, 133, 166.
56. Wilhelm Hennis, Max Weber (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988); and Wolfgang Mommsen, Max Weber and German Politics (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
its methodological claims. In it, Weber offered an early articulation of themes that would reoccur throughout his methodological writings. He also brought into focus some of the objects of his critique—the emerging fields of economic and social policy, in which science was expected to deliver guidelines for state policy and whose practitioners presented themselves as delivering scientifically objective assessments of the best economic and social policy.

Weber’s message was clear and unequivocal: science cannot provide answers to questions of value, and it was competing values that were at stake in determining policy. Delivered to inaugurate the university’s new program in Economic and Social policy, one of the first of its kind, the message was seen as heretical, and was almost certainly intended as such. In the opening lines of the address, Weber declared that his aim was to offer a “personal” and “subjective” view of economic matters. He continued later to explain that such value orientations are constitutive of science, which for him included a science of history, or any other form of scholarship which makes authoritative knowledge claims. He took aim both at traditional accounts of national economic development and the ascendance of political economy (at this time, coterminous with Marxist political economy) with its goals of “social reform,” “social justice,” and “productivity,” which were offered as objective and value-neutral criteria for the determination of economic policy. Such concepts according to Weber, do not emerge from scientific inquiry but reflect the specific value orientations that inform such inquiry. As he explained it, “the notion that there are such things as independent economic or ‘socio’ political ideals shows itself clearly to be an optical illusion as soon as one tries to discover from the literature produced by our science just what its own bases for evaluation are . . . One finds value judgements everywhere without compunction.”

It was Weber’s aim to disabuse his audience of the idea of a value-neutral social science by demonstrating that one’s value orientations inform every part of scholarly inquiry, including those of Weber himself.

The intrusion of value judgments was unavoidable, according to Weber, because there is no scholarly determination that is not informed by a certain notion of value. Indeed, the very designation of an event as worthy of study entails such

57. Ola Agevall, “Science, Values, and the Empirical Argument in Max Weber’s Inaugural Address,” Max Weber Studies 4 (2004): 157–77.
58. Rita Aldenhoff-Hübinger, “Max Weber’s Inaugural Address of 1895,” Max Weber Studies 4 (2004): 143–56.
59. Ibid., 143–56
60. Max Weber, “The Nation State and Economic Policy,” in Weber: Political Writings (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–28, at 18.
judgements. In his essay on “Ethical Neutrality” he wrote: “the problems of the social sciences are selected by the value-relevance of the phenomena treated.”61 Classifications of a given phenomenon also entails such judgements. In “Objectivity in the Social Sciences” he wrote: “the quality of an event as a ‘social-economic’ event is not something which it possesses ‘objectively.’ It is rather conditioned by the orientation of our cognitive interest, as it arises from the specific cultural significance which we attribute to the particular event in a given case.”62 No manner of scientific method could remedy the problem of objectivity because scientific facts themselves are produced through these value-laden choices.63

To be sure, Weber was acutely aware of the dangers of value judgements entering scientific inquiry. However, these were not things that could be eliminated. Rather, the goal was to make them explicit. This is precisely what he aimed to do with the notion of the “ideal type,” an approach which he offered as an answer to the problem of objectivity in the social sciences. Though ideal types have been more frequently discussed with reference to Weber’s sociological work, often presented as tools of analysis and classification, they were in fact developed in his historical writings and offered as a means of dealing with an epistemological dilemma: If all knowledge is value-laden, how can we learn from history? Often mistaken as “approximations” of reality, ideal types were in fact meant to be explicitly one-sided constructions.64 He describes them as follows:

Formed through a one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and through bringing together a great many diffuse and discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual events, which are arranged according to these emphatically one-sided points of view in order to construct a unified analytical construct [Gedanken].65

As a tool of understanding social action, the ideal type was meant to be a model of a historical individual motivated by a certain set of concerns: material, spiritual, material, and cultural. It was a means to understand the complex interplay of these elements in human action.

61. Max Weber, “Ethical Neutrality” in The Methodology of the Social Sciences (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949), 12.
62. Max Weber, “Objectivity in the Social Sciences” in The Methodology of the Social Sciences (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949), 64.
63. Patrick Jackson, “The Production of Facts” in Max Weber and International Relations, ed. Ned Lebow, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
64. Thomas Burger, Max Weber’s Theory of Concept Formation (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976), 119; Patrick Jackson, The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations (London: Routledge, 2011); Richard Lebow, “Weber’s Search for Knowledge,” in Max Weber and International Relations, ed. Ned Lebow, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 55–56.
65. Weber, Objectivity, 90.
psychological, etc. As formulated via the ideal type this historical person is a simplification, in fact, a deliberate oversimplification, offering a view of what the world might look like if social action were motivated exclusively by the ideal type.

The ideal type is necessary for historical understanding according to Weber because the characteristics of any given phenomenon are infinite but what we can represent theoretically is finite. However, this also poses dangers to historical understanding because what we choose to represent is always partial and perspectival, a function of value judgements reflecting our own theoretical predispositions as well as our social and cultural commitments. It is therefore of the utmost importance that these one-sided constructs be made explicit so that they can be evaluated.

It is useful to contrast Weber’s use of ideal types with Marx’s use of abstractions. For Marx, abstractions arise from the dialectic between the real concrete and the concrete for thought, the latter offering a reflection of the former. For Weber the ideal type removes itself from empirical reality as soon as it attains generality. Against the realist claim to derive general concepts from empirical phenomena, Weber maintained that the general cannot come from the empirical, which by its nature is always particular. The general can only exist as a construction of the historian via an ideal type. This applies to the act of conceptualization more broadly. Once any aspect of a phenomena is abstracted, it ceases to exist in the world since only particular things have an empirical reality. Thus, the ideal type, in order to achieve its generality, according to Weber, “removes itself from empirical reality which can only be compared or related to it.”

This point is of crucial importance for Weber, because it strips general concepts of their source of legitimacy—that they are at some level “representations” of reality, and instead makes them a creation of the scholar.

In order for this to be considered a part of science and not dogma, ideal types must be subjected to empirical comparison and evaluation. With ideal types in hand, Weber tells us “historical research faces the task of determining in each individual case, the extent to which this ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality.” And again, “the ideal-type is an attempt to analyze historically unique configurations or their individual components by means of genetic concepts.” Importantly, such an approach is oriented toward the acquisition of particular knowledge,

66. Ibid., 68–9.
67. Ibid., 100.
68. Ibid., 90.
69. Ibid., 93.
which for Weber is the ultimate goal of any science. In this view, the value of social science methodology does not rest on whether it can uncover general laws, but how much social action it can explain. If anything, general laws are meant to help us understand particular phenomena, they hold no inherent value in themselves.

Moreover, the purpose of this process of comparison and evaluation is not falsification. Rather this exercise is meant to determine whether these cognitive constructs reveal something useful about particular empirical phenomena. Because explanation rather than generalization is the ultimate goal of historical inquiry for Weber, it is the *usefulness* of the ideal type in explaining social action, rather than its *truthfulness* in capturing an external reality, that determines its scientific value.70 This process of evaluation might reveal multiple ideal types to be useful in understanding a particular context, though all are necessarily partial.

The evaluation of ideal types is not meant to resolve disagreement, much less come to some sort of valid conception of the truth. In his essay on “Ethical Neutrality” he writes, “we must oppose to the utmost the widespread view that scientific “objectivity” is achieved by weighing the various evaluations against one another and making a “statesman-like” compromise among them.”71 There is no possibility for compromise or rational deliberation among different views, because, as Weber stated repeatedly, the value orientations which inform the construction of ideal types do not come from science but rather from conviction. Moreover, such conviction can serve as an effective shield against disconfirming evidence:

One may, for example, demonstrate ever so concretely to the convinced syndicalist that his action is socially “useless” i.e., it is not likely to be successful in the modification of the external class position of the proletariat, and that he even weakens this greatly by generating “reactionary” attitudes, but still—for him—if he is really faithful to his convictions—this proves nothing.72

This is because the value orientations that inform a Marxist history are incommensurable with those that inform a liberal history or a feminist history. No process of

70. This standard has been compared to John Dewey’s “pragmatic rule” (Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*, 158). Weber’s thought did share some common ground with American pragmatism, and he had many occasions to correspond with Dewey. He rejected, however, the pragmatist claim that scientific communities could, through rational deliberation, reach valid scientific inferences. See James Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82–84.

71. Weber, *Ethical Neutrality*, 10.

72. Ibid., 23.
adjudication will resolve conflicts of value or convince the Marxist of historical facts employed by the liberal or vice versa. The historical facts themselves—what a document says, for example—are meaningless save for the assessment of their relevance and value by the historian. And once mobilized for a particular explanation, historical facts take on that value orientation.

What is the point of this process of evaluation then if not to resolve disagreements? For Weber it serves the critical purpose of encouraging reflection on the nature and source of disagreements, which are rarely about historical facts but about the interpretation of those facts. He maintains that “the real significance of a discussion of evaluations lies in its contribution to the understanding of what one’s opponent—or one’s self—really means—i.e., in understanding the evaluations which really and not merely allegedly separate the discussants and consequently in enabling one to take up a position with reference to this value.”73 The purpose of the evaluation is precisely to bring about reflexivity, an acknowledgement of the particularity of views and the notions of value inherent within them. That the same historical facts can be used for highly divergent explanations necessitates a reckoning with the interpretive schemes and value orientations which give facts their meaning.

No amount of historical investigation or scientific inquiry will resolve conflicts of value, but the evaluation of ideal types helps to make this conflict transparent, revealing those parts of the analysis that are rooted in distinct value orientations. Even in disagreement, this discussion has utility. He explains, “‘understanding all’ does not mean ‘pardoning all’ nor does mere understanding of another’s viewpoint as such lead, in principle, to its approval. Rather, it leads, at least as easily, and often with greater probability to the awareness of the issues and reasons which prevent agreement,”74 namely, that they proceed from different theoretical priors and value orientations.

This process of evaluation, for Weber, is the “hairline” which separates science from faith.75 Though historical inquiry always proceeds from value orientations that do not themselves come from science and are not amendable to resolutions by scientific means, unlike faith, their empirical claims can be interrogated and their notions of value problematized. The real danger, for Weber, was not that value judgements would enter into historical inquiry, but that, without a sense of reflexivity, they would become an invisible part of the analysis, invisible even to the

73. Ibid., 14.
74. Ibid., 14.
75. Weber, *Objectivity*, 110.
historians themselves. Without an evaluation of the concepts we bring to bear on our investigations, historical inquiry becomes entirely self-referential: we get out what we put in, though we take it to be evidence of something external to our own values. It is a rather extreme form of confirmation bias that threatens to undermine the very possibility of learning from history.

By incorporating the practice of reflexivity, Weber’s methodology helps to place historical inquiry on firmer scientific ground. Rather than trying to overcome subjectivity as do many realists, or take subjectivity to be an insurmountable obstacle to the writing of history as do many poststructuralists, Weber centers subjectivity in his methodology and introduces reflexivity as a means of accounting for this in the analysis. This mode of analysis accepts the historian’s subjectivity to be an inescapable reality, and offers transparency about this subjectivity as the standard of scientific rigor. In doing so, it empowers the researcher to move beyond critique to offer affirmative constructions of historical knowledge via alternative ideal types. In addition, this mode of analysis enables a problem-driven, or rather “event”-driven approach that opens up space for historical explanation beyond the typical boundaries of prevalent methodologies. Finally, because this approach is driven by historical explanation rather than generalization, it offers highly permissive criteria for where to look for historical knowledge, requiring only that a case be relatable to the ideal type to be considered suitable for evaluation.76 As such, it expands the scope of historical research considerably, affording opportunities for exploration that may not easily fit into nomothetic case-based comparisons but nonetheless are necessary to advance historical understanding.

Methodology and Method: The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

One need look no further than Weber’s canonical work in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to see how the methodological orientation of reflexive verstehen pays off in terms of improving historical understanding. His goal in this work is to offer an explanation for the rise of modern capitalism, according to him, “a very different form of capitalism which has appeared nowhere else.” What is distinctive in this form is its reliance on the “rational capitalistic organization of (formally) free labour.”77 For the modern capitalist system to take off, he posits, a

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76. Ryan Saylor, “Why Causal Mechanisms and Process Tracing Should Alter Case Selection Guidance,” *Sociological Methods & Research* 49 (2020): 982–1017.

77. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1992 [1930]), xxxiv.
certain kind of social action was necessary, one in which the pursuit of accumula-
tion for its own sake is the ultimate goal. To understand how such a mode of social
action not only emerged but became prevalent is the primary task of the work and
what brings him to an evaluation of ideal types, trying to identify the historical sub-
jectivity that would make such a system possible.

The historical person who exhibits the capitalist spirit, he stressed, can only be
understood via the construction of an ideal type “a complex of elements associated
in historical reality which we unite into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of
their cultural significance.”78 The ideal type of the capitalist spirit is a model of what
the world would look like and what types of actions we would expect to see if this
were the sole motivation for action. It is deliberately a one-sided oversimplification
and it is in fact this quality that makes it analytically useful, identifying a discrete set
of motivations and precising the behavior we might expect to see on that basis.

For any given event there may be many ideal type constructs that elucidate
different aspects of social action, all understood to be partial in their exposition
of human behavior. Weber states as much of his own construction: “This point of
view . . . is, further, by no means the only possible one from which the historical
phenomena we are investigating can be analyzed. Other standpoints would, for this
as for every historical phenomenon, yield other characteristics as the essential ones.”79
Though all are partial, however, there are more and less useful ideal types and their
value is determined by how much their expectations align with the observed social
action.

He begins with an evaluation of the prevalent ideal type—the model of rational
economic man which had come to dominate accounts of political economy and ex-
planations of the rise of modern capitalism. This model would lead us to the expec-
tation that capitalist accumulation will be oriented to the satisfaction of material
needs and that labor would be contingent on rewards—the greater the reward, the
more we would expect persons to labor. According to this perspective, any depar-
ture from this behavior would be viewed as irrational. In evaluating the ideal type,
however, Weber reveals this understanding of rationality to be of a historically par-
ticular nature, already rooted in modern capitalist values. To illustrate the point, he
offers the following scenario:

A man, for instance, who at the rate of 1 mark per acre mowed 2½ acres
per day and earned 2½ marks, when the rate was raised to 1.25 marks per

78. Weber, The Protestant Ethic, 13.
79. Ibid., 14.
acre mowed, not 3 acres, as he might easily have done, thus earning 3.75 marks, but only 2 acres, so that he could still earn the 2½ marks to which he was accustomed. The opportunity of earning more was less attractive than that of working less. He did not ask: how much can I earn in a day if I do as much work as possible? but: how much must I work in order to earn the wage, 2½ marks, which I earned before and which takes care of my traditional needs?80

While puzzling from the perspective of rational economic man, this preference of working less when wages increase, he maintained, is commonplace outside a capitalist context.81 The expectation that labor will increase with wages reveals the value orientation of the researcher who is already the product of an acquisitive capitalist culture. In constructing the ideal type of rational economic man, they have smuggled in these values and naturalized what is a historically particular phenomena (acquisitive tendencies) into a universal attribute.

An evaluation of the ideal type through this reflexive orientation reveals how the importation of cultural values into the research leads to the erroneous conclusion that the non-acquisitive attitude is irrational rather than the recognition that our expectation is situated in a particular kind of rationality and a particular historical subjectivity. Today the acquisitive attitude may seem universal given the prevalence of capitalism, but in fact it emerged out of a specific set of historical circumstances. Assumptions about rational accumulation and indeed, the very ideal type of rational economic man reveals itself to be not a universal but a particular historical model, one belonging to the modern capitalist world.

The inadequacy of the ideal type of rational economic man in explaining the form of social action needed to support modern capitalism led Weber down a path of constructing a different ideal type, one for which he had to layer on cultural as well as psychological factors related to early Calvinism and the doctrine of predestination in order to account for a unique historical subjectivity and the emergence of a distinctive attitude toward labor. The rise of modern capitalism, he maintained, required, “an attitude which, at least during working hours, is freed from continual calculations of how the customary wage may be earned with a maximum of comfort and a minimum of exertion. Labour must, on the contrary, be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling. But such an attitude is by no means a product of nature.”82

80. Ibid., 23–4.
81. Ibid., 24.
82. Ibid., 25.
The historical person who exhibited this attitude, he tells us, is unique in that the natural relationship to material objects was reversed. “Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs. This reversal of what we should call the natural relationship, so irrational from a naïve point of view, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all peoples not under capitalistic influence.” Understanding the emergence of this historical subjectivity is the work of *The Protestant Ethic*, but it is work that is only made possible by the reflexivity applied to the evaluation of ideal types.

As this brief discussion illustrates, the practice of reflexive *verstehen* played an important role in Weber’s historical methodology. This approach is formalized through the evaluation of ideal types, a method that allows the analysis to move beyond critique to offer an affirmative historical narrative. Oriented toward the explanation of a particular historical event, the rise of capitalism, the work does not aspire to uncover general laws. But by offering an ideal type that explains more of the observed social action, it improves both the quality of historical understanding and the content of scientific knowledge.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this article has been to articulate an approach to historical methodology rooted in Weber’s concept of reflexive *verstehen*. Such an approach aims to develop an empathetic understanding of human behavior by foregrounding the subjective nature of historical inquiry. The key to this is a reflexive orientation towards historical inquiry, which Weber formalizes through the evaluation of ideal types, understood as one-sided constructions meant to make transparent the theoretical and conceptual priors we bring to historical research. This approach, I have argued, can both improve the quality of historical understanding and expand the scope of historical investigation.

Reflexive *verstehen* is contrasted with three prevalent approaches to historical methodology in the social sciences. Against the realist claims that a truthful rendering of history is possible with the correct scientific methods, reflexive *verstehen* maintains the unavoidability of subjectivity in constructing historical narratives. While sharing this constructivist position with poststructuralists, however, reflexive *verstehen* does not give up on the possibility of historical explanation, offering a
distinctive method for the affirmative construction and not just deconstruction of historical narratives. Finally, this approach shares with contextualism the emphasis on achieving a contextually grounded understanding of historical subjectivities, but layers onto that the critical element of reflexivity as a necessary component of historical understanding.

By weaving this complicated path, Weber’s reflexive verstehen offers a novel understanding of the possibilities and limitations of historical inquiry. It tells us that what we can learn from history is necessarily partial and perspectival. We can construct ideal types that capture a dimension of social action, though never a complete picture. Through an evaluation of these ideal types, we can better account for the conceptual and theoretical priors we bring to our research, but not eliminate them. We can assess these ideal types in terms of how useful they are in explaining social action, though not how truthful they are in representing empirical reality. And while such an evaluation may help to shed light on broader phenomena, it is not meant to uncover general laws.

This position may not satisfy the committed realist who believes that history can be known as it truly happened and used to authorize actions in the present, nor the skeptical poststructuralist who sees all history as fiction. For others looking for space within this binary, however, the Weberian alternative holds many opportunities. It offers an event-driven approach to exploring history that leaves wide open the scope of exploration. It also provides tools to improve historical understanding and make claims to scientific knowledge. As such it represents an important contribution to historical methodology and a path forward for historically minded social scientists amidst the centrifugal pull of the realist-poststructuralist dichotomy.

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