

# Possible Worlds Historiography

## INTRODUCTION

This discussion has two objectives. It applies our heuristic for reading sociologically to the mode of Sociology usually called “qualitative analysis”. Second, it explores how this heuristic might act as the framework for ethnomethodological analyses of investigative reports. It takes its departure point from an aside on conditional relevance made by Lynch [2007] in his paper *The Origins of Ethnomethodology*. In that comment, the notion of conditional relevance within chains of action sequences is generalised beyond its traditional habitus, namely the domain of conversational turn taking and related analyses, to all aspects of the organisation of social life. We pick up this loosening of ties (or broadening of application) and use it to outline one way Ethnomethodology (EM) might address Sociology, and sociological texts in particular, without the need to deploy any of its critical armoury nor its usual tactic of topical transposition. We ask about conditional relevance as an endogenous feature of the organisation of sociological writing/reading (the construction of a case, in this instance). In so doing, we treat conditional relevance as a key feature of what we have called “action at a distance”. With Lynch, we believe conditional relevance to be one possible general property of action sequences with its provision to be found in all aspects of social life. Providing for and discovering conditional relevance is an essential task in the sense assembly of sociological courses of reasoning. The aim here is to demonstrate how, through his manifest competence in managing the production of such conditional relevance, Max Weber secures one of the cases he makes in Ancient Judaism [Weber 1952]

We have long thought the early papers of Harvey Sacks deserve more attention than they are generally given. Four in particular [Sacks 1997], [Sacks 1972], [Sacks 1963] and [Sacks 1999], although clearly finding their way, sketch an approach to sociological analysis of forms of social life which constitutes them as distinctive finite provinces of meaning.<sup>1</sup> In an inchoate way, Sacks initiates what were later to become standard techniques in EM, namely the presenting of a way of life's "shop floor work" and its character as "instructed action" alongside materials germane to that way of life as displays of what is required for competent performance. Two of the papers focus on the practices of Sociology and seek to open up that discipline's "adoption of the scientific attitude" as an idiosyncratic extension and transformation of the Natural Attitude towards sociality in daily life. As a finite province of meaning rooted in the Natural Attitude (as they all are), Sociology "reconstrues" social objects as data of the social and then transforms them into sociological phenomena.<sup>2</sup>

Here is an example of what we have in mind. Near the beginning of *Ancient Judaism*, Sacks makes the following assertion.

I am proposing, then, that Weber's is a method for making transformations from documentary materials. The problem I shall address is *how* does Weber produce his transformations? Imagine that one had the Old Testament and its critical exegeses on the one hand and blank paper on the other. What set of instructions would be required in order to produce a document similar to *Ancient Judaism* from these materials? [Sacks 1999, p. 33]

Sacks' answer is that Weber "interrogates" Old Testament materials and treats what he finds as "responses" to his questions.<sup>3</sup> Using these responses as 'evidence', Weber produces a sociological reconstruction of Israelite society. In other words, in order to bring out its structure Sacks analogises Weber's method to standard techniques in police and judicial practice for assembling evidence in the making of a case. Weber has no direct access to Bronze Age Israelite society. His only

<sup>1</sup> Better awareness of this quartet might help put an end to much of the twaddle talked these days about the origins and ambitions of Conversation Analysis as a naturally observable social science. But we digress.....

<sup>2</sup> This description is ours not Sacks'. It is our interpretation of Garfinkel's discussion of "rendering theorems" [Garfinkel 2002] heavily influenced by the work in the philosophy of science of Woodward and Bogen [1988] and Woodward [2009]. Sacks talks about his approach as 'reconstruction' which somewhat underplays the essential hermeneutics of all sociological investigation (including that of EM), something which is of particular relevance vis a vis Weber who famously remarked social actors were inevitably suspended in webs of meaning. The implication is that all sociological descriptions are construals and what we offer here is a construal of Weber's own construal. This stance can be giddy making, especially if accompanied by the conviction any attachment to 'ground zero truth' (as some naturalistic philosophers like to call it) and hence empirical bite about a phenomenon, has been lost. Since we are committed to Sociology as a discipline of "keyed descriptions" and its investigative subjects as inquirers (among other things) into the facticity of social phenomena, we see no need for alarm. Those wishing for more than our present insouciance, might like to consult [Sharrock and Anderson 1982] and [Anderson and Sharrock 2019]

<sup>3</sup> Schegloff [1999] makes much of Sacks' "construction" of Weber's "interrogation" of his sources as an instance of Sacks' evolving interest in what would come to be called the "formal properties" of practical actions such as sociological description.

witnesses are the texts of the Old Testament and related documents, so he culls what evidence he can from them. Sacks' sociological interest in Weber's *Ancient Judaism* is as a display of the work of interrogation and the compiling of a case on its basis. This construal is Sacks' formulation of Weber's "turning" towards his materials and his adoption of a variant of 'the sociological attitude'. The definition of the finite province of written/read meanings designated by the label "Ancient Judaism" is constituted under this attitude.

Sacks treats this method as a solution to a key problem Weber faces in producing his account, namely the calibration of his description against the required common-sense version of criteria for causal and meaning adequacy. Weber cannot take a trip to ancient Israel to witness (an important word, that) society at work for himself (and neither can we). There can be no intersubjective triangulation of natural descriptions of the direct experience of ancient Israelite life as a criterion of adequacy for what he says. All Weber can do is secure the plausibility and build a case for his hermeneutic reconstruction of Israelite history by relying on his readers to use common sense criteria of recognisability, clarity, consistency, coherence etc. to determine the acceptability of the depiction given. Elsewhere, this is how Weber describes the self-same challenge.

This rather extensive formulation of a simple matter, which was required for the sake of clearing away ambiguity, shows that the formulation of propositions about historical causal connections not only makes use of both types of abstraction, namely, isolation and generalization; it shows also that the simplest historical judgment concerning the historical "significance" of a "concrete fact" is far removed from being a simple registration of something "found" in an already finished form. The simplest historical judgment represents not only a categorially formed intellectual construct but it also does not acquire a valid content until we bring to the "given" reality the whole body of our "nomological" empirical knowledge. [Weber, 1949 p. 175]

Of all the possible ways the history of Israel from the Abrahamic peregrinations to the return from Babylon might be told, Weber's task is to convince his readers his interpretation is the most reasonable. Hence the wording of our title.<sup>4</sup>

One thing Weber's text is doing, then, is producing a plausible account of Israelite history. But it is also doing much more. Its plausibility rests on the recipient design of the account's self-explicating character. Call this the interactional problem of textual order. The requirement for achieving meaning adequacy necessitates the assurance of a reciprocity of perspectives between

<sup>4</sup> Let us be very clear. The use of 'possible worlds' in our title has nothing in common with the attempt by Lizardo and Strand [2022] to add a "probabilistic Weber" to the Rogues Gallery of Webers assembled by Parsons, Geertz, Giddens and others.

Weber and his readers in order to prevent the work being encountered as “specifically senseless”.<sup>5</sup> The motivational structures guiding courses of action must be recognisable and comprehensible to, if not necessarily shared by readers. This is the rhetorical problem of textual order. Wound into both is the documentary problem of textual order. Solutions to the interactional and rhetorical problems of order turn on adequately solving the documentary problem of order. The heart of that problem is conditional relevance, the achieving the integration and coherence of the ‘story’ he wants to tell about the social structural implications of the evolution of Yawhe worship from a mixed polytheistic-magical belief system to a monotheistic hierocratic religion and its role in the subsequent rationalisation of Israelite society as a “pariah community”. The integration and coherence of the story and the achieved conditional relevance of its components as a written/read case provide for the account’s recognisability and adequacy as a causal history of the sequences of the events he presents. The events can be found to be properly following *from* and not just *after* one another.

There is a second sense of conditional relevance at work here. This has to do with the multiplicative ordering of elements in the structure and its completeness. Just as hearers presume (i.e., expect and project) internal consistency in the construction of turns and the use of category memberships, so readers presume adequate completeness in a structure of reasoning. Demonstrating such adequate completeness within its course is the work of that reasoning. This sense of adequately constructed conditional relevance provides for putatively ‘reasonable’ causality without connotations of determinism or combinations of sufficient and necessary conditions. The connections are just the realisations of those possibilities Weber chooses to reconstruct.

Only if *Ancient Judaism* contains solutions to the problems of recipient design is the case made; a case which, from the outset, Weber intends should counter, indeed refute, Werner Sombart’s interpretation of the role of Judaism in the development of early modern Capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The allusion is, of course, to Garfinkel’s famous ‘experiments with trust’ [Garfinkel 1967].

<sup>6</sup> The essays appeared in Weber’s journal the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Socialforschung* between 1917 and 1919. They were his response to Sombart’s study. A more direct consideration of Sombart’s [1913] argument can be found in Weber [1968, vol 1 part 2 Ch 6 sect. xii]; also published as Weber [1965].

## Section 1. The Taken for Granted Disciplinary Context<sup>7</sup>

In describing how *Ancient Judaism* relies on interrogation to produce a description of the history of Israelite society, Sacks indicates how to construe the text as a reconstruction; that is, how to see it as an instance of the use a standard method of sociological analysis, the interrogation of materials, texts, notes, objects etc, to propose a reconstruction. This approach answers one important sociological question, However, our interest goes further. It asks: What makes Weber's collection of essays *this* reconstruction, the one which Weber intends? That is, how are the results of his procedure and their deployment shaped to produce the text as the self-organising, self-explicating plausible account it was designed to be for the audience for whom it was written? To offer an answer to Sacks' question revised in this way, we need to understand a bit more of the context within which Weber was placing his research; a context which was very much understood and appreciated by those for whom he was writing.<sup>8</sup>

*Ancient Judaism* was not an innocent project for Weber. For several years, he had been a major participant in the so-called *methodenstreit* over the choice of an appropriate paradigm for social research. The objective of his contribution to the argument against scientism in the human sciences was to demonstrate the superiority of his own preferred typificatory causal explanations over those of more conventional historiographical and hermeneutic approaches. For Weber, such explanations relied on idiosyncratic or individual personal motivation. In addition, within the circle of German scholars with which Weber most clearly identified, a debate was underway over the relative strength of his own account published in 1905 of the origins of Capitalism in the commercial practices and religious ethic of the Protestant sects and Werner Sombart's account (which appeared later) of Capitalism's roots in the adoption of usury as a prominent business practice among the secularised Shephardic Jews of the Venetian and other trading empires. For Weber, the ideal typical outlook of Jewish religiosity after the diaspora was a form of *ressentiment* expressed in a rationalisation of Jewry's pariah status and was inconsistent if not wholly at odds with that of capitalistic practices.<sup>9</sup> The arguments in *Ancient Judaism* are derived deductions from

<sup>7</sup> This section is much longer and more detailed than we would have preferred. This extensiveness was prompted by a concern the frames of reference our readers might bring to our account of *Ancient Judaism* would not be congruent with the frames of reference Weber's readers brought to his. The latter were the frames which guided his writing. Since the solutions he provides to the interactional, rhetorical and documentary problems of conditional relevance are designed against just those frames, we have included more of the "background detail" than might otherwise have been needed.

<sup>8</sup> This is where we part company with Sacks' thematic motif of judicial procedure and move towards our own. See below.

<sup>9</sup> In *The Social Psychology of World Religions* [Weber, 1948, p 270 - 72], he warns against a too simplistic adoption of Nietzsche's concept. Rather than 'hostility' or 'jealousy' derived from relative deprivation of whatever kind, Weber attaches it to the (subjective) experience of suffering. The experience of suffering is taken by Jews to represent the condition of "odiousness" in other people's eyes and as a sign of secret guilt. If fortune favours the brave and the good then misfortune is attached to the unworthy (a "theodicy of good fortune"). With Judaism, it is

the materials in the Old Testament pressed to demonstrate the endogenous nature of that inconsistency.

The contents of *Ancient Judaism* do not consist in a single thought developed over the fourteen or so essays in the main part of the book. They are an ensemble of individual pieces presenting an array of symmetric suggestions regarding the relationships between societal, social and economic conditions (including changing political structures) and an evolving ethic which eventually fuses political and religious sentiments into a theodicy based on the distinctive identity and destiny of 'Israel' as the chosen people. For Weber, this relationship is a functional correlate to the kind of "elective affinity" which he identified between the socio-economic experience of the Protestant sects and the ethos of Capitalism. He sets this conception out very clearly and it is worth quoting it at length.

Now the point is not that the life conditions of the Bedouins and semi-nomads had "produced" an order whose establishment could be considered as something like the "ideological exponent" of its economic conditions. This form of historical materialistic construction is here, as elsewhere, inadequate. The point is, rather, that once such an order was established the life conditions of these strata gave it by far the greater opportunity to survive in the selective struggle for existence against the other, less stable political organizations. The question, however, why such an order emerged at all, was determined by quite concrete religious-historical and often highly personal circumstances and vicissitudes. Once the religious fraternization had proven its efficiency as a political and economic instrument of power and was recognized as such it contributed, of course, tremendously to the diffusion of the pattern. Mohammed's as well as Jonadab ben Rechab's religious promises are not to be "explained" as products of population phenomena or economic conditions, though their content was co-determined thereby. They were, rather, the expression of personal experiences and intentions. However, the intellectual and social means which they utilized and further the great success of creations of this very type are indeed to be understood in terms of such life conditions. The same goes for ancient Israel. (Weber, 1952, pp 79-80)<sup>10</sup>

The factual status of the Old Testament's account of the origin and development of the Jewish nation from Abrahamic times to the setting up of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah is understood not to be the issue. At no point are these 'facts' evaluated. Rather, what is at issue is the understanding post-exilic Jews came to of that history. Weber's readers knew contemporary

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the suffering of the community (in times of challenge and distress) rather than the individual which was expressed as *ressentiment* and channelled into the discounting of pariah status with a theodicy of salvation and the promise of future glory. See also Weber [Weber 1949 p. 190] where the pariah community is held to sublimate its lack of esteem etc in a religiosity of rectification in which 'The Last will be First' or in some future 'messianic salvation'.

<sup>10</sup> Hereafter, quotations without name and date references are from Weber's *Ancient Judaism*.

Archaeology and Ancient History generally held the sequence of events described in the post-Abrahamic sections of Genesis to be broadly correct. But he and they also knew there were already doubters even if Jewish Talmudic scholars tended to demur. Available non-Biblical evidence collected from excavations and the few available and relevant documents of contemporaneous cultures did not mention a migration from Mesopotamia to Canaan, an exile of Hebrew people in Egypt, an invading force of liberated exiles from Egypt subduing the tribes in the western Levant, the demolition of the walls of Jericho and so on. Perhaps even worse, no consensus was to be found on who or what made up the Davidic kingdom nor, indeed, whether there was a Davidic kingdom. According to the majority opinion these days, if there was it was likely to be a small set of hilltop towns and fortresses under the control of local warlords among whom David and his son Solomon were preeminent. What was accepted then and remains so now is that Nebuchadnezzar did destroy the Temple of the Jews in 586-7 BCE, enslaved only the Royal, warrior, priestly and administrative classes and carried them off to Babylon.

The emerging dissensus Weber was aware of has coalesced into two possible alternative accounts of the historical origin of the Jewish people as a politico-religious grouping to that presented in the Old Testament. The first is they emerged as the dominant force following the conquest of North Eastern Egypt and Canaan by the Hyksos culture after 1800 BCE, though quite where the Hyksos originated is unclear. The second is that they were the leaders of defensive alliances among some of the tribes in the western Levant in the face of invasions from Egypt, Greece and Mesopotamia (Assyrians, Akkadians and Persians). These alliances or confederations culminated in the formation of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the central Canaan region. The populations of these kingdoms were not genetically homogenous, neither was there a single religious practice. Among the monotheisms, though, the Yahwe cult was of relatively minor importance. There are just two known inscriptions which *could* be references a group called 'Israel' in the 1200 to 1400 BCE period.

Most importantly, it was agreed then and is agreed now the main body of the first 5 books of the Torah was composed in the period immediately after the return from Babylon and the following four a little later. They were written by the Temple elite (the Levites) and (other than by fundamentalist Talmudic scholars) are usually presumed to offer a rationalisation of the need for an authoritarian religious state (a Jewish version of Oriental Despotism) to provide internal stability and external security. The personal warrior god, the covenants, the pariah status and identification with a specific geographical region are all fused in the ideology of the uniqueness of Judaism.

## Section 2. The Praxeology of Possible Worlds Historiography

With all this taken for granted background in place, we can now turn to the structuring of Weber's case. Here we turn to our own analytic motif to frame our (re-)construal. We will use the form of a "well-set problem" as that is usually understood in the physical and natural sciences to represent the formal properties of the social object 'the making of a sociological case' as a sub-species of the phenomenon 'reading sociologically'. The latter is, of course, itself a specifically modified application of the universal common-sense two-part problem/solution structure. We will use this analogy as a general guiding framework within which to construe how Weber organises his case.<sup>11</sup> Just to be clear. We are not claiming Weber oriented to this framework. Neither are we claiming Weber was seeking to model his analysis on the procedures of the natural sciences. All we are saying is the construction of a written/read course of reasoning requires an organisation and we are using this motif to point to some of the formal features and their interconnections which Weber's organisation displays. It will, if you allow us to offer a mixed metaphor, help us shape a presentation of the architectural anatomy of the sociological case which Weber gives.

### PROBLEM SCOPING

Weber states the problem right at the beginning of Chapter 1. The significance of Judaism is to be found in two interconnected processes:

1. Unlike in India, Jewish society developed a caste system of 'in' and 'out' groups in which the religiously privileged in-group was also socially stigmatised. This paradox was rationally reconstructed by the Old Testament as a collective representation of the unfolding of God's will that Jews be a *pariah community*. This stigmatisation is only to be reversed with the arrival of the Messiah or through salvation in the afterlife. The caste system and its collective representation explain the various crises Jewish society passed through in historical and contemporary periods and Judaism's responses to them.
2. The Pauline intervention in the setting up of the early Christian cultic religion adopted a reading of the Old Testament stripped of the rationalisation of the pariah status of adherents. Christianity became a salvation religion without the need for 'this worldly'

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<sup>11</sup> In other studies, our use of the analogy has been tighter. For a description of the structure in its home discipline, see Wilson [2017 and 2019]. In our view, Mark Wilson's explicitly philosophical studies of the practical work of constructing and resolving scientific problems stand as a massive untapped resource for ethnomethodological investigations of technical disciplines.

stigmatisation. This is what underpinned its role as Rome's Imperial religion and later the development of the Medieval Church as a bureaucratized state religion and all which has followed in the West from that process.

Clearly, the question Weber is addressing is not what would subsequent world history have been like *without* the Israelite collective representation of themselves as a pariah community but why did they develop it in the first place? Why did it happen in that society and not in India? Of course, one can endlessly muse on the possibilities of counterfactual history, but for Weber the question is simply: Of all of the possible ways the social structure of that particular group of nomadic tribes at that particular point in Bronze Age Levantine history could go, why did it go that way?

### **Registration<sup>12</sup>**

Alongside the considerable taken for granted evidential background used to frame and address his problem, Weber has to isolate and abstract particular features of the history of Israelite society from the welter of material provided in the extant sources and the Old Testament. Following Wilson (see note 11), we call this process of extraction 'effacement'. By effacing detail irrelevant for his analysis or which he cannot accommodate within it, Weber deliberately constructs a 'small world' whose conditions he can explicate, control and examine.

Under this registration, history is conceived simply as a structure of collectively encountered forces and collectively developed responses. The forces are socio-economic and the responses are modes of rationalisation. These are all that Weber wants to track. Dynastic histories, the histories of Imperial expansions and contractions, technological history, the history of trade and commerce etc., etc., etc. are only relevant if they impinge in a direct, demonstrable way on the sequencing of modes of rationalisation. A very clear example of this is his treatment of the adoption of the war chariot by the leaders of the Confederacy. This technology had secured Egyptian military dominance. However, it could only be afforded by the very wealthy. Not only were its materials expensive to obtain, using chariots required horses to be kept solely for its use. Unlike oxen, horses did not fulfil the function of draught and stock animals. This meant estate holdings had to generate sufficient surplus to allow the costs of the innovation to be covered. As a result, its adoption created a cadre among the leadership class which, over time, developed into the war lordship of the Davidic monarchy. The war chariot was given a place in the religious panoply through symbolic connection to the Ark of the Covenant as it was wheeled into battle at

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<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion of this term, see [Smith 1996]

the head of the army. Surrounded by his similarly mounted lieutenants, the war god Yawhe drove into battle on his chariot.

### **Notation**

Although he does not talk explicitly in these terms, Weber clearly uses an evolutionary trope as the motor of his analysis. At the level of social structure, history is a sequence of mutations generated by rationalised collective responses to socio-economic causes. This history is a punctuated evolution, though. Within Weber's sociological reconstruction of the structure of the standard historical account, the story of Israelite society can be viewed a history of adaptation to the contingencies of serial migrations and settlement. Where the Old Testament and accepted history saw these events as divine in origin, Weber treats them as endogenous, their divinity being an endowment of their rationalisation. The endogenous history of societal evolution is a kaleidoscope through which Weber wants us to view the events narrated in the Old Testament. Each mutation is yet another turn of his kaleidoscope.

Within the compass of this evolutionary trope are two others which shape the account he is developing. The first is a strategy of conceptual substitution. The sociological epoché of the social attitude is not a method of doubt. It is a mechanism of substitution whereby sociological considerations displace their social counterparts. It is this substitution which underpins the theory of societal evolution. Elsewhere, it can be discerned in the way leading ideas are introduced. Take the core notion of *berith*. This refers to the giving and reciprocal assumption of a commitment to holding to one's 'word'. What you can expect others to do. Who will do what they have committed to and, just as importantly, who can't be trusted to do so Both are mundane matters of concern around which social transactions coalesce. Trust of this kind is not peculiar to the Jews or to the Semitic tribes of the Middle East. Weber introduces it by positioning it as an ethic of governance rather than a matter of everyday practical consideration. In so doing, he lifts its significance to the level of the value rationality of socio-political institutions. Among early pastoralists of what is now Northern Israel, Syria and Eastern Turkey, he tells us, *berith* was owed only to one's kin, one's neighbours and those who were 'guest people' in one's land, the *gerim*. The central purpose of exchanges of *berith* was support in time of war. Even though, after the exile, one still needed to manage the mundane task of stable courses of personal interaction, Weber is clear at that point *berith* was owed only to those who shared commitment to the theodicy of Yahwe as the supreme God of the chosen people. The boundaries of this allegiance circumscribed the obligation of trust. As a consequence, matters of the traffic of daily life have been subsumed into a construal of the socio-historical sequencing of an evolution of religiously

validated socio-political institutions. Weber is not unique here. Construals such as this are standard patterning devices in much sociological theory.

A third trope is ad hoc synecdoche. For Weber, this is an important selection device. Using it, he develops a profile of 'significant moments' in the flow of historical events. Such moments have significance because they consist in a nexus of contingent conditions where the evolutionary possibilities could have gone a number of ways. Rather than presenting these conditions in terms of their place in a teleology, Weber reverses the dependency. He looks at the evolutionary history from the point of view of the particularities of an unfolding of series of individual clusters of conditions. Of particular import is the set of social conditions under which the Jewish community lived towards the latter part of the Babylonian exile. (See below.)

What all these tropes turn on is an unstated premise of Weber's design, namely he and his readers share the predisposition to use that form of common-sense reasoning which Hume referred to as a "habit of the mind". This is an inclination to see temporally ordered objects as causally connected. Utilising selective *post hoc propter hoc* sequencing as a principle of conditional relevance allows Weber to organise what otherwise might be seen simply as time separated contingencies into a pattern of significant turning points. This pattern is the solution to the problem he has set himself.

#### PROBLEM SPECIFICATION

What we have been talking about so far is Weber's general orientation towards his initial problem. In *Ancient Judaism*, he builds a mosaic of analyses using this orientation. Each takes a dimension of society and traces its evolution by construing them through the kaleidoscope of mutations described above. This has two effects. By elaborating the logic of that account against the particulars of each dimension, it builds explanatory momentum for the description he is constructing. We cannot follow him in his reviews of the physical, economic and social environment at the time of the Patriarchs, the continuous re-definition of the notion of a 'covenant' and its role in the formation of the Confederacy in time of war nor the emerging administrative structure of Yawhe worship and the place of the Prophet. Instead, we will focus solely on the way the emergence of the concept of the Israelites as a pariah community is specified.

Here are Weber's clearest statements of the evolutionary path he has to trace.

Without the promises of prophecy an increasingly "civic" religious community would never voluntarily have taken to such a pariah situation and gained proselytes

for sharing it with world-girdling success. It is a stupendous paradox that a god does not only fail to protect his chosen people against its enemies but allows them to fall, or pushes them himself, into ignominy and enslavement, yet is worshipped only the more ardently. This is unexampled in history and is only to be explained by the powerful prestige of the prophetic message. This prestige rested, as we saw, externally on the fulfilment of certain predictions of the prophets, or more correctly, on the construction of certain events as the fulfilment of prophecies. (p.364)

and

Prophecy together with traditional ritualism of Israel, brought forth the elements that gave Jewry its pariah place in the world (p. 336).

### **System Laws**

The quotation from *Methodology* at the beginning of this discussion contains the phrase "our 'nomological' empirical knowledge". We should approach this notion carefully. By it, Weber does not mean determinate laws of social history such as Michel's famous 'Iron Law of Oligarchy', Marx's universal 'contradictions of capitalism' or Schumpeter's immutable "forces of creative destruction". What he is talking about are social regularities, recurrent features visible over the course of historical events. In *Ancient Judaism* as elsewhere, two especially are emphasised. The first is the increasing rationalisation of individual and collective representations of the natural and social orders. This is his famous "disenchantment of the world". Second there is the imbrication of both instrumental and value rational considerations determining relevances for individual and collective choices. In all spheres of life, both instrumental and value rationality are present and normative. What drives historical evolution is change in socio-economic conditions (largely but not entirely shaped by means-end rationality) together with changes in how those causal forces are collectively represented. As we will see, particular configurations are the outcomes of choices over value rationalities (for example modes of governance) are made on instrumental grounds by those responsible for the management of collective representations (in the case in hand, the prophets and the priests).

### **Boundary Conditions**

These set the limits on forces and events to be considered. They operate at two levels. First there are global boundaries to the socio-historical space Weber is describing. This space has temporal, spatial and related cultural limits. The temporal boundaries set are the Abrahamic migration and the post-Babylonian exile re-settlement. The spatial boundary is that of the western Levant. The cultural boundary at any stage is the configuration of the Israelite community and its *gerim* or metic population of guest workers at that point.

There are two obvious features to this boundary marking. As a cultural agent, Abraham exists as a pastoralist and a Yahwe devotee *and that is all*. He is not a bearer of Mesopotamian culture and religious practices being seeded in Israel. As far as this history of Judaism is concerned, it starts with Abraham. Similarly, under this particular specification, it stops with the settlement and the creation of the state religion. As there is no causal pluperfect history so *there is no causal future perfect history* either. There is no interpretation of the post-exilic regime gleaned by looking forward to the later history of the Jewish state and the regular eruptions of tension between adherents of this worldly and other worldly redemption by which, at various junctures, it was marked.

### **Initial Conditions**

There are only two initial conditions given for the process which culminated in the development of Jewish community's self-identification as a pariah community. The first is the combination of the gradual assimilation of the metic *gerim* into the body of religious adherents and an increasingly rigid drawing of the boundary between the ethnic, territorial and religious identity of followers of Judaism and others.

In Israel, originally, ritualistic segregation from strangers was totally absent and exclusiveness according to type received its special accent only in connection with the development into a confessional association. This transformation of the Israelite community began, to be sure, under the influence of the Torah and prophecy even before the Exile. Its first expression was the increasing inclusion of the metics (*gerim*) into the ritualistic order. Originally, the *ger*, as we saw, had nothing to do with ritual. Circumcision was not an exclusively Israelite institution. Among Israelites it was obligatory only for the army. The Sabbath was a day of rest diffused, presumably, among full Israelites and perhaps beyond the circles of Yahwe adherents. Gradually it attained the status of a rigid command of the religious ethic. That the *ger* was permitted to be circumcised and then admitted to the Passover meal (Ex. 12:48) was doubtlessly an innovation determined by the pacifistic transformation of the pious circles of Yahwists. This became (Num. 9:14) a duty of the *ger*. The enjoyment of blood (Lev. 17:10) and the Moloch sacrifice (Lev. 20:2) had probably earlier been forbidden to the *gerim* by threat of capital punishment and, above all, he was required to observe the Sabbath. The Deuteronomic and finally priestly doctrine (Num. 9:14; 15:15, 16) destroyed all ritualistic differences between full Israelite and *gerim*. (pp 336-7)

The second is the partitioning of the Jewish community into a left behind 'remainder' population made up of peasants and urban artisans in Judea and nomadic pastoralists and stock breeders in Samaria on the one hand and the population of translocated Royal, administrative, warrior and leading priestly, business and commercial classes exiled in Babylon on the other.

### Operating Conditions

These relate to the different paths the two populations followed and the need to deal with their inconsistency once partition ceased.

1. Left largely to themselves by their Persian Suzerains, the remainder population gradually accommodated itself to elements of Persian rule and Persian culture. At the same time, incoming Mesopotamian settlers, especially in the North, adopted a syncretic religious observance of local and Persian practice. The result was the gradual emergence of a relatively tolerant multicultural, polytheistic melting pot. Not surprisingly, the exiles took precisely the opposite path. From the start, they refused to accept or be accepted into the Persian culture to which they had been translocated and maintained a ritually enforced segregation from it.
2. Over time the exiles were less and less constrained by the Persian and Assyrian authorities. They were freer to take up commercial, administrative and public roles as well as to move around Babylon and its environs. This could have resulted in cultural diffusion and eventual assimilation into the surrounding socio-cultural environment. But it did not. Weber condenses the cohesive centripetal familial, cultural, economic, political, religious and other forces at work into three ideal-typical religiously imbued forces:
  - a. Residential concentration in the neighbourhoods of kosher butchers had the effect of creating 'Jewish' and 'Jewish-dominated' *arrondissements*;
  - b. The exclusionary character of rules about sharing meals or forming marriage contracts meant socially valued ties of kinship and friendship were increasingly community bound;
  - c. The observation of the Sabbath as a religiously enforced day of rest placed constraints on performance of activities and obligations during immediately preceding and subsequent days. Managing the consequences of these for business, trade and other commercial relationships led establishments, workshops and similar ventures gradually to segregate into Jewish and non-Jewish types, each with their own 'customer' and 'supplier' bases as well as their own contract rules, conventions and practices.

The inclusivity of the remainder population was directly at odds with the rigid exclusivity which characterised the 'exiled' community on its return. The structures of governance of

daily life (the 'Law') could not accommodate both. Writing the Torah provided an opportunity for the returning priestly caste of Levites to re-interpret the boundaries of the Jewish community and with it the expansion of the scope of *berith*. The inclusion of the *gerim* as participants in the Covenant reinforced the exclusivity of the in-group/out-group distinction.

Hereafter, one law shall be for the Israelite and the stranger for all time to come. (The obviously late addition Ex. 12:49 agrees with this.) According to Deuteronomy 29:11 the *gerim* belong to the union with Yahwe, and in the Book of Joshua 8:33 this is even incorporated in the Shechemite curse and blessing ceremony. (The late prescription, Deut. 31:12 hence expressly stipulates that the Torah should be publicly read also to the *gerim*.) The driving forces in this process were the demilitarization of the Israelite peasants and town farmers in connection with the interest of the priests in the patronage of the *gerim* among whom such exemplary pious people were to be found as the Yahwistic stock breeders—while the “preeminent,” in the account, figure together with the Korahites in the latter’s insurrection as opponents of the priests. The politically disqualified or less qualified strata were here, as often elsewhere, an increasingly important field of work for the Levites, and in the Exile, for the priests. (p 337)

3. Increasing importance attributed to the Torah as the collective representation of Jewish history and destiny and the shift in the nature of prophecy’s legitimation from charismatic authority to administrative or bureaucratic authority reinforced the new order. While undoubtedly Jewish parents told their children legends and fairy tales and there would have been stories, gossip and ‘urban’, ‘local’ and other kinds of ‘myths’ in circulation, the Torah became the *de facto* and *de jure* account of the origins and distinctiveness of the Jews. It was ‘the Word’ in terms of which sacred and secular events were to be interpreted.<sup>13</sup>
4. Prophecy was undergoing change during the long cultural moment Weber is focused on. The practice of oracular divination, fortune telling, augur interpretation and associated ‘magic’ was commodified as a saleable skill and hence made profane. What was being purged, prophecy proper if you like, was the ecstatic practice in which charismatic individuals legitimised their dire prognostications by reference to direction from the hand of Yahwe. Just as is the case with any form of Canon Law, over time circumstances changed, interests shifted and interpretations were re-jigged. The outbursts of the prophets were

<sup>13</sup> To appreciate what this might mean, imagine Henry VIII had insisted Geoffrey of Monmouth’s history of King Arthur be the keystone of the Church of England’s doctrine. With that as the religiously validated foundation myth for Britain and the British, would the subsequent Stuart, Hanoverian and later settlements have been possible without sparking the outrage of some 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century Nigel Farrages and their followers?

almost always reactive denunciations or promotions of such re-jigging. With the commodification of prophecy, such interventions became fewer and further between.

The dynamic of the Torah and prophecy structured the Jews' religiously framed outlook on the world. As such, the socio-political and economic dissolving of the boundaries marking off Jews from their guest people was endorsed by both the Torah and the prophets. Since the dynamism of the thematic was wholly concerned with representing the Covenant Yahwe had with the Jews, necessarily what was taken as the identifiers for being a Jew represented a key part of that Covenant. The combination of Torah legitimation and the rationalisation of prophecy is the fulcrum on which the ritual (i.e., sacrosanct) character of the relationship between the Jews and the *gerim* (i.e., the in-group/out-group boundary) turned.

#### ANALYTIC PROTOCOLS

##### **Analytic Procedures**

The inclusion of the *gerim* in the ritual order meant a broadening of the boundaries of religious distinctiveness which had defined what being Jewish was to mean for the Jews, namely being the only Chosen People. Once included in the ritual order, others could be 'chosen' too. The adverb "Hereafter" at the beginning of the opening sentence of the second paragraph we quoted above is critical here. From this point on, the causal flows are in motion and Weber assembles their interrelationships as they move through their pathways towards the hierocratic state of post-exile Judaism and with it the political dominance of the clergy and the rational reconstruction of God's will for the Jews as the fate of being a pariah people.

This interpretation contains elements of both instrumental and value rationality as the relevance structures generating the post-exile mutation in Judaism. Persian occupying forces had a standard approach to the management of defeated peoples. They worked through the religious organisations to encourage acceptance of subjugation. In return, they allowed extant religious practice to continue relatively unchanged. Such preferential treatment offered the priests the opportunity to extend their influence and reduce the role and sway of prophecy.

The increasing bourgeois rationalism of the people integrated into the relatively pacified world, first of the Persian kingdom, then of the Hellenic, had given the priests the opportunity to suffocate prophecy.....(T)he social structure again substantially co-determined the form of piety of the Jewish community, which was then stripped of prophetic charisma. (p. 382)

In return for this opportunity, the priests constructed the Torah around a theodicy which fused elements of traditional prophetic revelation and the centrality of the Covenant with a salvationism which legitimated this worldly suffering. Yawhe was the One High God for whom the Jews were the Chosen People. He had formed a Covenant with them to protect them and ensure their prosperity. In return, he required absolute obedience to his prescriptions. When the Jews transgressed, he used worldly forces to punish them and drive them back to the path of righteousness. In developing the litanies of transgressions denounced by the prophets in the Torah, the priests emphasised exclusivity of marriage arrangements and dietary restrictions as markers of obedience to the requirements of the Covenant. Restrictions on 'connubium' and 'commensalism' reinforced the tendency of Jews being viewed and viewing themselves as a people apart, socially distinct and socially stigmatised. Judaism was a community *against* the world, bound together by *berith* and owing nothing to outsiders. A community, that is, whose view of themselves and their condition is powered by *ressentiment*.

### **Analytic results**

The illustration Weber gives of the way this theodicy is expressed in practical life is as a dualistic ethic of economic relations. This is where he brings this whole discussion back to the issue of the origins of Capitalism. He draws a contrast between attitudes of Jewish and Puritan socio-religious outlooks towards usury and other practices. For the Jews, some had argued the taking of interest from outsiders was a religious commandment. For others, though, while forbidden within the community, with 'strangers' it was harmless and so was perfectly acceptable.

....(T)here was no soteriological motive for ethically rationalizing outgroup economic relations. No religious premium existed for it. That had far reaching consequences for the economic behaviour of the Jews. Since Antiquity, Jewish pariah capitalism, like that of the Hindu trader castes, felt at home in the very forms of state and booty capitalism along with pure money usury and trade, precisely what Puritanism abhorred. (p. 345)

A dualism of this kind was entirely missing from the outlook of the Puritan sects of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and had been from the start. They...

...pointed with pride to the fact that precisely in economic intercourse with the godless, they had substituted legality, honesty and fairness for falseness, overreaching and unreliability; .....the godless prefer to patronize their shops, their banks and their workshops before all others. (p. 344)

The traits which characterise the rationality giving rise to modern Capitalism, fairness, honesty and the willingness to forgo apparent opportunities for personal advantage are exactly those which are

absent in the economic structures of the Middle East, North Africa and Southern Europe where modern capitalist practices did not arise nor take immediate root.

The relevant forms of business practise are thematised as religiously valued out-group practices performed by two groups both of whom saw the need to maintain a clear moral separation of themselves from “the godless” with whom they were enjoined to interact. In this sense, for Weber they are ‘identical’. The same order of motivational causality is in place but the ideal and material interests at play differ. That is, the forms of relationship are legitimised in terms of a common desire for religious benefit, but the conditions for deriving that benefit differed. Judaism had no conception of ‘inner-worldly asceticism’, the maintenance of which engendered a relatively open range of “with-in” and “with-out” transactions for the Puritan. The same ‘work’ could be carried out for both and the same business terms could be set for both. For the Jew, such transactions were strictly limited to those licensed by canonical law, as usury was. Thus, the two “possible worlds” took their own evolutionary paths.

Each modality is a rational choice under the circumstances in which the sets of economic actors were making the decisions they did. The solution to the puzzle of their incongruity is the rendering of economic activities as religiously motivated under different ethical outlooks and different historical circumstances. The actions are impelled by ‘the same’ general causal motivations but enacted in very different ways. That generic ‘solution’ is, of course, precisely what Weber claims regarding the transformation of *berith* and the covenant pre- and post-exile and on an even broader canvas, Judaism’s *ressentiment* and its realisation in the obligation to accept its nature as a pariah community. Moreover, it is that very nature which prevented it from having the role which Sombart attributed to it.

### Section 3. Conclusion

In his intellectual biography, Reinhard Bendix [Bendix 1966] tells us Weber’s sociological outlook was fixed by his earliest studies of agricultural labourers and Stock Exchanges. In both, Weber described groups who seemed to act in ways which were at odds with what might have been thought to be their obvious *economically rational* best interests. Agricultural workers east of the Elbe declined to serve as ‘indentured’ workers on large estates even though such an arrangement would greatly increase their security and standard of living. Instead, they preferred to remain economically precarious day-labourers. Stockbrokers in Manchester, London and Hamburg chose to submit to self-regulation even though this would necessarily limit their ability to engage in trades which would maximise their opportunities and their returns. In both cases, economic activities were

suffused with non-instrumental values and choices over the possibilities of action guided by both returns and their meaning. The ideas that labour was just a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder or 'business was business' and shielded from ethical or moral considerations were entirely foreign to them.

As with the early studies so it is with his analysis of the emergence of early modern capitalism.<sup>14</sup> The socio-economic conditions favourable to the development of capitalism were present in many societies at various points in history. These conditions provided for the possibilities of historical development. What determined their actual course was the meaning structure within which those possibilities were evaluated. In this respect, *Ancient Judaism* was to be seen as the complement to (and hence conditionally relevant on) his much more famous *Protestant Ethic*. It is a complement because it is a rebuttal of Werner Sombart's counter study. Sombart argued it was purely the facts first that the Jews were a diaspora community with close familial and kin networks holding to the *berith* norm and second that they were allowed to lend money at interest when late medieval Christians in the trading cities of Italy, France, Germany and England were not which were the precipitating conditions for the emergence of institutionalised banking. And it is true, the institutions of credit, brokerage and their management were required for capitalism and the trust between members of Jewish extended kin groups facilitated their development. But for Weber, these were not what made modern capitalism distinctive. Its distinctiveness was to be found in the moral order of its self-regulated practices.

This moral order was entirely different to that within which the Sephardic communities operated, a moral order which did predispose rational economic action but of a kind which could not have led to the forms which modern capitalism took. The Protestant dissenting sects, like the Jews, saw themselves as a people apart. Like the Jews, they saw worldly success to be a mark of divine favour. And like the Jews, that success necessitated commercial interaction with non-believers. But the ethical stance taken towards the non-believer was different. The same moral obligations were placed on dissenters in their commercial engagements with non-believers as with believers. This was a unified moral outlook. For the Jews, it was entirely different. A dualistic, in-group/out-group moral order was in place which justified practices with non-believers which were forbidden with regard to fellow believers. This dualism had its origins in the construction of a collective representation of the 'Being' of Judaism as a pariah community developed as part the re-

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to remember Weber is not talking about modern Corporate Capitalism, State Capitalism and their many modern versions. His interest is in the ethical world of a particular section of the mercantile classes in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. That the capitalism this outlook engendered developed into the rapaciousness of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century is a proper subject for a Weberian analysis.

writing of the early history of Jewish society and its relationships to Yawheism after the exile to Babylon. Of course, this representation was itself a rationalised history suffused with instrumental and value orientations.

*Ancient Judaism* traces the path Judaism took from a polytheistic natural religion to a prophetic war cult and eventually to a bureaucratic state religion. At each stage, the theodicy defining the relationship of believers to Yahwe underwent revision and emendation. With the Torah, it became a soteriology of this worldly odiousness and rejection to be compensated for by the realisation of the Jews status as the Chosen People either through a Messiah or at the Final Judgement. This soteriology was encapsulated in the acceptance by the Jews of their inclusion in a pariah community.

Weber's presentation of the Bronze Age history of Israelite society is a paradigm of how to make a sociological case. But it is a case made indirectly and, one might say, in counterpoint. The extreme competence, aptness and efficacy of its design are demonstrated as much in what he does not say as what is included in his text. What he chooses to leave out is that which he can assume his readers know, can see for themselves and most importantly can conclude for themselves. The conditional relevance of this knowing, seeing, interpreting and concluding is given both by the completeness and locally produced logicity of the internal order of the argument made and by the references, notes and pointers he provides. In that respect, *Ancient Judaism* is rather like a mathematical proof or a set of accounts. When it "works", much of what makes it work is not what is set out on the page but what is called up, touched off, resonated with and altered in the heads of its readers. Weber provides just enough guidance, just enough reconstruction, for the train of thought he constructs to be visible and the steps in reasoning to be found plausible and justified. This is Weber's achievement. His is competence *nonpareil* in the production of plausible sense assembly within a structure of sociological reasoning. Weber was not simply writing a history of Judaism. He was building a case which convinces; a demonstration of why the open possibilities of history turned out the way they did. And, as a case of sociological reasoning, it is unsurpassed.

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