CHAPTER 20

From the System of Values to the ‘Clash of Values’—Weber’s Reorganisation of the Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Values

In order to be able to examine Weber’s restructuring of neo-Kantianism as an intervention into the ideological dispositif of bourgeois domination, I distinguish three aspects of his modifications: the shift from the ‘system of values’ to the value decision of the ‘personality’, the attempt to historicise the concept of the value relation and the adjustment of the neo-Kantian philosophy of values to the antagonisms of social interests.

20.1 The Ambivalence of the Value-Decisionist Concept of the Subject

What allows Weber to ‘liquefy’ the neo-Kantian conceptual apparatus is a shift of emphasis, from the validity of systems of values to the internal instances of a ‘personality’ constituted by ‘ultimate’ standards of value. As early as his essay on ‘Roscher and Knies’, he presents a concept of the personality that ‘discovers “its” essence in the persistence of its internal relationship to certain ultimate “values” and “meanings” of life’.1 It is these ultimate values—and not, say, needs or motivations—that ‘become ends and thereby translate into teleologico-rational action’ within a personality’s activities.2 In the essay on objectivity, he conceives of the ‘innermost elements of the “personality”’ as being comprised of the ‘highest and most ultimate value judgements’, those that ‘determine our actions and give sense and meaning to our lives’.3 Now it is the higher-order ‘value judgements’ that ‘we experience as something “objectively” valuable’, and a personality’s ‘dignity’ results from the fact that it recognises values ‘it relates its own life to’.4 It is not particular values that matter, but the subject’s ability to relate its life to ‘values’ in the first place, thereby providing that life with ‘meaning’.

1  Weber 1975, p. 192.
2  Ibid.
4  Ibid.
By equating the reference to values with the meaningfulness of life, Weber can then go on to blend the concept of the ‘personality’ with that of the ‘man of culture’ [Kulturmensch], the latter also being defined in terms of such an ability to institute meaning: ‘All cultural science has its transcendental premise not in our finding a particular or indeed any “culture” valuable, but in the fact that we are men of culture, equipped with the ability and the will to consciously take a stance on the world and provide it with meaning’.\(^5\) While Rickert’s considerations on cultural value are grounded in a transcendent realm of values, Weber relies on an ‘ontology of the man of culture’.\(^6\) His ability to ‘relate’ his life to values is expressed particularly clearly in the concept of the decision. Since what is meant are not common everyday decisions but ‘value decisions’,\(^7\) Weber also sometimes speaks of ‘ultimate’ decisions.\(^8\) They are what distinguish the ‘personality’ from the ‘diffuse, vegetative “underground” of personal life’.\(^9\) It is because of this unmediated opposition that Weber does not know what to make of Freudian psychoanalysis, in spite of his having carefully studied it.\(^10\) Another contrast can be found in Gramsci, who defines the human being as a ‘series of active relations’: to develop a ‘personality’ means ‘obtaining a consciousness of these relations’, and to change one’s own personality is to change these circumstances.\(^11\)

In Weber’s view, what distinguishes a ‘consciously lived’ life from one that ‘floats along’ in nature’s thrall, is a ‘chain of ultimate decisions . . . by virtue of which the soul chooses . . . its own destiny, as in Plato’.\(^12\) According to Henrich, the reference to Plato is to the end of the \textit{Politieia}, which Weber ‘reinterpreted

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\item \(^6\) Wegener 1962, pp. 117, 124.
\item \(^7\) Weber 1988d, p. 511.
\item \(^9\) Weber 1975, p. 192.
\item \(^10\) See Marianne Weber 1975, pp. 38off.
\item \(^11\) Gramsci 1975b, pp. 1344–5. Thus, according to Gramsci, an individual philosopher’s historical personality is also determined by the active relationship between him and his cultural environment, which he seeks to transform, an environment that responds to what the philosopher does and functions as “teacher” by forcing him to engage in ongoing self-criticism’ (Gramsci 1975b, p. 1331). The critique that Gramsci then formulates can also be applied to Weber’s value decision: ‘These days, when the “thinker” contents himself with his own, “subjectively” free thought, he provokes ridicule, for the unity of science and life is an active unity, and it is there that freedom of thought first realises itself’ (Gramsci 1975b, p. 1332).
\item \(^12\) Weber 1988d, pp. 507–8.
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