

Basit Bilal Koshul, Max Weber and Charles Peirce: At the Crossroads of Sciences, Philosophy, and Culture (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books / Rowman & Littlefield, 2014)

This is an important book that would be easy to overlook. The main value of this book is that it makes an extended comparison between two very important thinkers who are rarely considered together: Max Weber and Charles Sanders Peirce. Weber is well-known for his “interpretive sociology” (verstehende Soziologie), while Peirce is well-known for his “Pragmatism” and his triadic epistemology. Peirce is a founder of American Pragmatism, differentiating his version of William James’ Pragmatism by using the word “Pragmaticism” (he also said it was such an ugly word that no one would be tempted to steal it!).

Few thinkers have tried to connect Weber and Peirce. Even fewer have attempted to do that in such a brilliant fashion. I hope this book will provoke further discussion and debate. This is not a perfect book, but it is darned good. Unfortunately, this book is not likely to be on the radar for far too many scholars. The author is an associate professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) in Lahore, Pakistan. That is, he is not in a European or North American research-intensive university and he is not an academic philosopher or social scientist. But he writes well in English and makes a significant contribution (one is left wondering how many scholarly gems are ignored because of factors such as geography, affiliation or publisher!).

Koshul points out that many of the interpretations of Max Weber have not been based on thorough scholarship. Naturally his own interpretation could be challenged by Weber experts. But he is miles ahead of some authors who make a casual reference to Weber because they vaguely know a bit about the so-called “Protestant Ethic” thesis from secondary sources. In some ways Weber’s comparative historical sociology and political economy were ahead of his time. Koshul draws that out. If the book had only been about Weber that alone would have been enough to merit attention. But the value of this book is even greater.

Koshul makes it clear that American Pragmatist philosophy and Pragmatism generally are important to consider when thinking through Weber’s epistemological contributions. Koshul clarifies Weber’s insights concerning philosophy of social science questions that are still in dispute today. Weber’s work allows for a deep set of insights into institutionalized religious organizations and not just Christian ecclesia (e.g. Roman Catholicism in the 13th century) or contemporary Christian churches. Weber is also important for the world religions (including Judaism, Islam and Hinduism, etc.) and the “indigenous religions” that tend to be more localized (e.g. North American Plains Indians like the Lakota and the Cheyenne). The philosophy of physical science and the philosophy of religions are drawn together.

There is no indication that Weber ever read Peirce. But Weber was well-versed in German-language philosophy and historical research. Peirce was also well-read in that same body of

knowledge. Weber's mature epistemology involves the notion of interpretation involving "understanding". He borrows the epistemological and ontological notion from Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey argued that it would be possible to have what we today tend to call a Cultural Science. He translated the term "moral sciences" from John Stuart Mill as "Geisteswissenschaften".

The term "Geist" as a philosophical concept (rather than just an everyday language word) is associated with George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. The German language word "Geist" is problematic and connotes many different things. But Dilthey was merely trying to emulate Mill and the idea of a "moral science" in Mill is a science that is not just restricted to the study of physical phenomena as natural and given. Another term that is often used today is "human sciences". Indeed, in French it is common to speak and write of the sciences humaines. In the moral sciences (sciences humaines, Geisteswissenschaften) there is a need for interpretation of human "meaning". In the physical sciences that is not necessary. One does not interview a rock or a star, a tree or a frog. Children's books and just so stories anthropomorphize trees and animals, but no one would mistake a children's fairy tale for a mature work in modern natural sciences.

The key similarity between Peirce and Weber is epistemological. Another major thinker who considered the epistemological differences between physical sciences of nature and human sciences is Wilhelm Windelband. He coined the terms "idiographic" and "nomothetic". Weber was familiar with those terms. For Weber it was reasonable to consider a third, intermediate level. He referred to that third level as a matter of working with "ideal types" limited in time (t-n) and space (s-n). Ideal types are not completely idiographic but they are also not thoroughly nomothetic. Instead, if we conceptualize a continuum between the nomothetic and the idiographic then the use of ideal types is somewhere in between the two polar opposites.

A truly nomothetic law must be true for all relevant Times (T-u) and Spaces (S-u) for a particular "universe". (That particular universe does not have to be the whole infinite Universe; it can simply be this planet earth as a "universe" relevant to certain kinds of laws having to do with, for example, biological sciences.) A truly idiographic description must be very specific, but few idiographic descriptions are limited to only one very specific time (t-1) and one extremely local place (p-1).

Some authors use the term "thick description" to mean essentially the same thing as idiographic description. The idea of thick description is associated with Clifford Geertz's work on Indonesia, especially Java and Bali. Geertz did excellent anthropological, ethnographic fieldwork. But very little of his work is really thick "idiographic description".

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He actually often makes ideal-type generalizations. For example, his generalizations about the Balinese cockfight are relevant to many cockfights during several decades all over the island of Bali. He does not give us a detailed blow-by-blow of the cockfights, but quickly resorts to summary statements. That is well and good, but Geertz seems to not have fully realized that he was using a Weberian (or possibly Neo-Weberian) approach, albeit in anthropology rather than historical and comparative sociology.

Peirce did no empirical work in anthropology, psychology or sociology. That is, he was not a social scientist. Instead, he was a natural scientist, mathematician and philosopher. Weber, on the other hand, did no natural-science research and was not a mathematician. He borrowed ideas from academic philosophers like Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert. But he is not considered an academic philosopher. (He did, however, have epistemological insights which are very relevant to the philosophy of natural sciences and the philosophy of social sciences.)

One relatively minor deficiency in this book is that there is no detailed discussion of the Methodenstreit, or Windelband, Rickert and others therein involved. Geertz is also not mentioned. Nevertheless, I recommend this thought-provoking and intelligent book as a jumping-off point for continued study of the relationship between two giants who are not often thought of as having very much in common. Scholars in the sociology of religion and the sociology of science will enjoy aspects of this analysis. Weber scholars and Peirce scholars will no doubt find some minor (or perhaps even some major) flaws. But that would not be a bad thing. What would be bad is if this book got no recognition of any kind due to the fact the author may not be well-known in certain networks in North American or Europe.

The deficiencies could also be corrected in a new edition if the author pays some attention to G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx's importance to philosophy and Marx's relevance to Weber. It would also be worth making a deep analysis of the work of Wilhelm Dilthey on the Geisteswissenschaften generally. I myself have written quite a bit on a number of topics directly related to the questions Koshul raises and attempts to answer. For example, I have written about Dilthey and about Weber's epistemology.

My own dissertation was about land tax policy during the so-called "cultivation system" in Java. The kultuurstelsel (1830-1870) was a policy of increasing cultivation of export commodities using indirect rule and traditional labor obligations (corvee). Marx commented on it in a letter. He saw the village system of collective responsibility as an old system, but it was in part reinforcement of the older system due to taxation policy (Other parts of the dissertation deal with my speculations concerning the applicability of Weber's ideal type of

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Patrimonialism to Javanese civilization.) My Ph.D. advisor was Prof. Irving Zeitlin. (His brother Maurice Zeitlin is the more “Marxist” of the two.) Zeitlin taught us to see a clear relationship between Marx, the elder, and Weber, the junior scholar in the pair (because Weber was a boy when Marx died).

That is contrary to the thesis that Parsons tended to push about the two of them being opposed epistemologically. There is a grain of truth in Parsons’ views but the key factor (at least to my way of thinking) is that they have a great deal in common. For example, when Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” he is saying the same thing echoed by Weber in when he writes about the switchmen who control the train tracks (cf. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with Other Writings on the Rise of the West*, 4th edition, tr. Stephen Kalberg, New York: Oxford University Press, 3-58).

C. Wright Mills (1958) echoes it again when he writes in *The Sociological Imagination* about private sorrows and public issues. Mills is another author worth considering in terms of the issues raised. If nothing else, I hope readers of this review will at the very least skim this excellent book and order it for their college or university libraries. Koshul’s book is indeed “at the crossroads of science, philosophy, and culture” in many important ways. Perhaps some will regard this book as overly ambitious. But others will see the merit in the suggestions made, even if some aspects of the problems raised could be further elaborated.

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