

Procedural Interlude:

Introduction to Sociologies of Rationality

To think of a philosophical affirmation as true in a particular historical period... but as superseded and rendered 'vain' in a succeeding period, without however falling into scepticism and moral and ideological relativism, in other words to see philosophy as historicity, is quite an arduous and difficult mental operation.

The idea of 'objective' in metaphysical materialism would appear to mean an objectivity that exists even apart from man; but when one affirms that a reality would exist even if man did not, one is either speaking metaphorically or one is falling into a form of mysticism. We know reality only in relation to man, and since man is historical becoming, knowledge and reality are also a becoming and so is objectivity, etc.¹

To be a rationalist it is not necessary to believe that science will be completely mastered in the near future. It is enough to recognize that there is no precise point at which the domain of the mysterious, of the irrational, begins, a definite point at which scientific thought is impotent and cannot pass. The point here is not to cast aside completely the Cartesianism that is in our blood. We must remain impenitent rationalists, but our rationalism must be rid of its simplicism. It must learn to suspect facile and formal explanations. It must be increasingly imbued with a sense of the complexity of things.²

In spite of vast differences, 'ideas' have essentially the same psychological roots whether they are religious, artistic, ethical, scientific or whatever else; this also applies to ideas about political and social organization. It is a time-bound, subjective value-judgement which would like to attribute some of these ideas to 'reason' and others to 'intuition' (or whatever other distinctions may be used).³

In Chapters 1 and 2 I argued that the marxist revolutionary theorists of the early 20th century failed to develop a comprehensive theory of revolution. They shared the marxist view that revolution required the conscious agency of the proletariat, but how

¹Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 436, 446.

²Emile Durkheim, *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education*, ed. Everett K. Wilson, trans. Everett K. Wilson and Herman Schnurer (New York: Free Press, 1961 [1925]), 265.

³Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978 [1968]), 1116.

this consciousness was to come about remained for them bound up in a restricted set of assumptions — or to be more precise, risky projections — about social motivation and action as ‘in the last analysis’ a function of class. If ‘the last analysis’ is never reached, it may be asked, what practical meaning can this have? In his notes from prison, Antonio Gramsci opened up the compressed conceptual space of marxist revolutionary theory by opening out his theory of revolution to a more densely articulated sociology, enabling revolutionary political action to be coherently informed by the range of social motivations generated by complex history far from ‘last analysis’ conditions.

Gramsci’s intellectual relationship to Machiavelli illuminates the initial political dimension of this argument. In machiavellian republicanism, the world that confronts the politician is contingent but masterable through the application of virtue. The prince (or the modern collective ‘prince’, the party) can demonstrate this virtue only in the active struggle with the forces of history; victory is the only proof of fitness, and the fruition of virtue is the construction of a new order. So virtue is equal parts preparation and performance. It is the marriage of knowledge and action, the ‘philosophy of praxis’. Gramsci’s theory of revolution was thus based on the (dialectical) tensions between understanding and criticizing, between knowing the world and changing it.⁴

It is crucial in this tradition, therefore, to know as much and as specifically about the real relations of force as possible, the strengths and weaknesses of foes and allies alike; idealizations and demonizations are of little practical value. For Gramsci, the compression of politics to class or any other simple schema as a *theoretical* move was thus excluded by the political significance of the *historical* complexity of social life. His intellectual equipment included an imperative to know the social world in all its practical intricacies. In the chapters that follow, the dimensions of Gramsci’s sociologized marxist conceptual space will be further tested against the most expansive ‘bourgeois’ sociology of his day. But this exploration will make sense only if Gramsci’s affinity to machiavellian republicanism is kept in mind. It may also be helpful as an initial matter to explain how a

⁴In this sense, machiavellian republicanism reinforced and concretized politically the conceptual linkage of theory and practice (praxis) already firmly rooted in marxism, most famously in the eleventh “Thesis on Feuerbach.” Marx’s sense of historical *logos* tended to block the fertile insecurity of contingency that Machiavelli’s political theory was steeped in.

revolutionary marxist who disdained sociology and two ‘bourgeois’ sociologists who had both rejected marxist politics could plausibly share any conceptual space at all.

I. Gramsci’s Critique of Sociology

If sociology is the study of societies and how people act within them, then Gramsci was doing sociology. But such definitions are too easy to niggle over; they set up categorical frontiers that then have to be defended, so that we are forced to take a stand: are Alsace and Lorraine French, or German? What if, in many respects, they are, have been, and will be *both*?

Gramsci himself knew for sure that he was not doing sociology, and said so. But this rejection has to be read against the categorical claims of the publicists of a new discipline, at a time when sociology had only recently become a distinct field of study and academic specialization. What Gramsci actually rejected was not the study of society, something he clearly did himself, but positivism, the ‘bourgeois science’ criticized also by Lukács.⁵

Society had been discovered in the late 19th century by the brilliant and the mediocre alike, and for the latter the study of it was readily normalized as ‘science’: in practice, the uncritical and above all *unhistorical* description of human interrelations in terms of eternal, unchanging laws and categories. Things that do not change have no history. For Gramsci, sociology was any reductive or compressed study of society that took its locally valuable results and attempted to universalize them, supposing that what was true at a particular place and time must be true everywhere, always. It is in this sense a ‘sociological’ error to suppose that all ‘bourgeois’ social theory is inherently foreign to Gramsci.⁶

⁵The comparison of Gramsci and Lukács on this basis has been made often. See Michael Löwy, “Gramsci e Lukács: verso un marxismo antipositivista,” in *Gramsci e il marxismo contemporaneo*, ed. Biagio Muscatello (Rome: Riuniti, 1990); Tibor Szabó, “Dittatura, democrazia e fattore soggettivo nel pensiero di Luxemburg, Gramsci e Lukács,” *Il politico*, 3 (1987); and Richard Kilminster, *Praxis and Method. A Sociological Dialogue with Lukács, Gramsci, and the Early Frankfurt School* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

⁶Joseph A. Buttigieg’s Introduction to Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 1, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari (New York: Columbia UP, 1992) contains a superb discussion of Gramsci’s nuanced but unusual approach to sociology and reveals in detail what mediocrities Gramsci associated with the term. Buttigieg draws special attention to Gramsci’s critique of Achille Loria, Cesare Lombroso and others for taking tiny scraps of empirical evidence and building enormous ‘scientific’ conclusions from them, likened to a paleontologist re-

In particular, the bourgeois sociologists failed to understand the dialectic of history; or, to use the terminology of the last chapter, the dynamics of historical emergence. Gramsci discussed this as the passage from quantity to quality, a point at which a given slow development of historical forces reaches a threshold and a leap to something new occurs — a change that is greater than the sum of its determinants. In such a leap, consciousness is the key emergent factor; people may only free themselves from determinate historical contingency through conscious, collective action, a factor generally discounted by those sociologists who take the natural sciences as their model — and by marxist orthodoxy. “But the fact has not been properly emphasised that statistical laws can be employed in the science and art of politics only so long as the great masses of the population remain (or at least are reputed to remain) essentially passive, in relation to the questions which interest historians and politicians.”⁷

Until humans control their actions consciously, they will indeed act as forces of nature and every empirical description of their behavior by the sociologists will be correct. Thus, Gramsci recognized a contingent value in a book like De Man’s *Beyond Marxism* (1929) in which the Belgian former marxist used Freud’s insights about collective irrationality to discount the objective possibility of socialist revolution. De Man “invites us to ‘inform’ ourselves in more detail about the real feelings of groups and individuals and not those that are assumed on the basis of sociological laws. But De Man has made no original discoveries... he has elevated to the status of a scientific principle an empirical criterion of the art of politics which was already well known....”⁸ To Gramsci, Bukharin’s at-

constructing a dinosaur from one bone (which turns out to be from a mouse). Gramsci used this image to interrogate a variety of intellectual artifacts, including Italian left-wing positivism, the variants of French sociology based on organic metaphors, and in general any attempt to legitimate and naturalize human studies with the trappings of physical science. As Buttigieg points out — based on an impressively focused and rigorous philological reconstruction from some of the ‘minor’ notes — in Gramsci the term ‘sociology’ has a special meaning.

⁷*SPN*, 428.

⁸*SPN*, 430. Gramsci was fascinated with this feature of De Man, and returned to it often because it was a perfect caricature of his own efforts. “Nevertheless, De Man has an incidental merit: he demonstrates the need to study and elaborate the elements of popular psychology, historically and not sociologically, actively (that is, in order to transform them, educating them, into a modern mentality) and not descriptively as he does....” *Q* 3, ¶ 48, 329; *SPN*, 197. This is my translation, more literal and with the proper ‘not’ before both ‘sociologically’ and ‘descriptively’ (without which the sense is rather drastically altered). Much of Gramsci’s discussion of the “extremely mediocre” De Man is translated in *FSPN*, esp. 446-54.

tempt to construct an orthodox marxist sociology in *Historical Materialism* was more disturbing; Bukharin's 'metaphysical materialism' made humans the passive instruments of abstract, universal, impersonal forces of cause and effect, as such quite incapable of seizing conscious control of their own lives. "The only correct point of view is that of determinism," Bukharin claimed.⁹ Marxism became quite unrevolutionary on this basis.

I. The Metahistoricity and Historicity of Reason

For Gramsci, the world is something we make, either consciously or unconsciously. "We maintain therefore that man is a process, and, more exactly, the process of his actions."¹⁰ This is a radical premise, and a number of conclusions follow from it. First, for Gramsci there can be no such thing as a fixed 'human nature' that transcends historical context.¹¹ We make ourselves and our surroundings differently dependent on the intricate variety of changing, contradictory (or contingent) circumstances that he called "the 'complex of social relations'." As historical relations change, so do humans.¹²

But if humans are changeable (and with them their environment or their perception of it, which amounts to the same thing), then the fixity of any 'fact' or 'truth' is relative to historical moments and situations. This means that the value of science or any other 'rational' method will always be local rather than universal, since the structure upon which knowledge is built is always contingent.¹³ Even reason is historically and so-

⁹Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1969 [1921]), 37.

¹⁰*SPN*, 351.

¹¹"Meanwhile, it is necessary to establish that 'nature' cannot be spoken of as anything that is fixed, immutable and objective. One comes to realize that 'natural' almost always means 'correct and normal' according to our current [*attuale*] historical consciousness, but that the many have no consciousness of this historically determined actuality [*attualità*] and hold their way of thinking to be eternal and immutable." *Q* 16, 1874. See also *SPN*, 355. This may be compared to Lukács' thoughts in *History and Class Consciousness* on capitalism as a 'second nature', but Gramsci noted that "One often hears that a certain habit has become a 'second nature'; but was the 'first nature' really the 'first'?" *Q* 16, 1875. Gramsci was rather less taken with the epistemological status of the dialectical method than was Lukács.

¹²If one insists on the philosophical mode of thinking, then the 'essence' of humanness is to have no essence; or to be changeable, which amounts to the same thing. "One could also say that the nature of man is 'history'...." *SPN*, 355. In philosophy, this position is called historicism, but I am arguing here against leaping to this abstract language when studying Gramsci.

¹³This is why Marx refused to describe systematically the post-revolutionary future — how can we 'know' now what people who have changed their history will 'know' then? Lukács' claim that marxism must be understood as a method, not as a body of knowledge, is similar. This also helps

cially constructed; as an obvious example, what is reasonable to the bourgeois is not reasonable to the proletarian, and vice-versa — and the actions of neither would make much sense to a feudal lord or peasant. Under these circumstances, commitment to a particular ‘mode’ of rationality is historically bound, and insofar as choices are available they must be made pre-rationally, on the terrain of morals (values and *vocation*, as Weber put it). Ultimately, for Gramsci, history tells us what is rational and what is not by generating winners and losers.¹⁴

Thus, the observation that ‘facts’ are constructs and ‘truth’ is always local is no justification for despair or lazy thinking, in Gramsci’s view.¹⁵ It does mean that knowledge is always subject to contestation; knowledge is political.¹⁶ We are rescued from “skepticism and moral and ideological relativism” by the practical necessity of living and acting here and now, a necessity that makes our local knowledge entirely adequate.¹⁷ Consciously or

to explain why a number of variants of 20th-century marxism, most famously the ‘critical theorists’ of the Frankfurt School, became virtually obsessed with self-criticism and with the auto-corrosion of reason. Contrast this sense of the open-endedness of history with this, from Bukharin’s *Historical Materialism*: “If we know the laws of social growth, the paths along which society necessarily travels, the direction of this evolution, it will not be difficult for us to define the future society,” 49.

14“It is often forgotten (and when the critic of history in the making forgets this, it means that he is not a historian but an active politician) that in every instant of history in the making there is struggle between rational and irrational — understanding for irrational that which will not triumph in the last analysis, will never become effective history, but that in reality is also rational because necessarily tied to the rational as an essential moment of it — that in history, even though the general always triumphs, the ‘particular’ also struggles to impose itself and in the last analysis also imposes itself insofar as it determines a certain development of the general and not some other.” Q 6, 689-90.

15Gramsci was impatient with the idea that the collapse of absolute principles should mean the impossibility of principled action on any basis, or that disinterested study was the only escape from the relativity of social embeddedness. Chemistry experiments are one thing, “but in the relations between men things happen very differently and the consequences have a very different import. Man transforms reality and does not limit himself to examining it experimentally *in vitro* to recognize in it laws of abstract regularity. War is not declared as an ‘experiment’....” Of course this must be done based on exact knowledge of “existing social relations and not on empty ideologies or rational generalities;” principles then come from the accumulation of this experience, “put in the form of concepts or of imperative norms.” Q 15, 1813. Compare this to Durkheim’s statement on the social basis of the categories of knowledge, below.

16A fruitful comparison with Foucault would begin on this point, but Chapter Six on Gramsci and Weber will suggest others.

17Against Kant’s categorical imperative, he noted that people in general act as they think everyone like them ought to; husbands who kill their unfaithful wives think all wronged husbands should act so, etc. So all moral systems are local. “The argument about the danger of relativism and skepticism is not valid, therefore. The problem to pose is another: does this given moral con-

unconsciously, we construct our world with contextual solidity. So even if there is no un-contingent ‘Reason’, we can still assess our surroundings and act reasonably.

The more people who can be brought to share this assessment, the more collective power solidifies the construct and makes it ‘real’, even ‘natural’. Indeed, the historical dominance of the bourgeoisie is based in part on just such an effort by the class to lead a collective assessment of the surroundings (or historical construction of reason); this is the essence of ‘hegemony’. And the revolution must be based in equal part on the construction of a new practical reason, which Gramsci called a philosophy of praxis, an integral conception of the world, or ‘counter-hegemony’, this time under humans’ conscious control. It is in this sense that the revolution requires an ‘intellectual and moral reform’ .

I. The Sociology of Rationality

A point easily forgotten about the intellectual products of the early years of the century is that by that time it had been possible to be unapologetically ‘beyond good and evil’ for at least a decade. In this climate, there developed a very substantial and legitimate middle ground between the increasingly hollow universalizing claims of the Enlightenment and the radical irrationalism of various movements from pan-germanism to futurism.¹⁸ To rescue civilization from its enemies or even to make sense of the new world, some grasped, a return to the optimistic fantasies of days gone by was not a promising strategy. The tools of the modern intellect had to be reforged from their primitive, naive forms into more flexible, subtle instruments.

In his *magnum opus*, *Economy and Society*, Max Weber summed up the work of a career by delimiting the investigative space of sociology to “meaningful, i.e., subjectively understandable” action.¹⁹ This definition of study would be remarkable simply as a shift of scientific inquiry toward the fuzzy areas of meaning and subjectivity; but he had something more fundamental in mind. Empiricism would require only that social action be described, and laws of behavior deduced from observable regularities. *A priori* or normative ception have within itself characteristics of a certain durability?” *Q 16, ¶ 12*, 1875. Gramsci settled accounts with kantian rationalism in this note, and also in *SPN*, 373-4.

¹⁸David S. Luft, for example, dates the ‘crisis of European liberalism’ from 1880, when liberalism’s negative success in “breaking the bonds of tradition” ran up against its inability to construct a positive new order out of the “moral vacuum” that resulted. *Robert Musil and the Crisis off European Culture 1880-1942* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980), Introduction.

¹⁹Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 4.

rationalism (positivism being one variant) would require that social action be held to a single ultimate standard of rationality in terms of which all particular meanings are interpreted and judged.²⁰ In contrast to both of these models, Weber's sociology was driven by the meanings attached to actions by the actors themselves, to which it was the responsibility of the scientist to conform her understanding. Meaning was to be studied as a human creation, the product of a local *logos*. In this procedure normative reason does not disappear, but it is bounded within the locality of particular contexts of meaning.

In his own masterpiece, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim confronted the status of reason in science in terms of the debate between empiricism and (kantian) apriorism.

Such are the two conceptions that have competed for centuries. And if this debate has gone on and on, it is because the arguments back and forth are in fact more or less equivalent. If reason is but a form of individual experience, then reason is no more. On the other hand, if the capacities with which it is credited are recognized but left unaccounted for, then reason apparently is placed outside nature and science... But if the social origin of the categories is accepted, a new stance becomes possible, one that should enable us, I believe, to avoid these opposite difficulties.²¹

Society grounds reason and its categories of understanding collectively; it filters and structures the reception of information through 'collective representations', which at the most basic, general and categorical are "ingenious instruments of thought, which human groups have painstakingly forged through the centuries, and in which they have amassed the best of their intellectual capital."²² Science uses these categories at their highest conscious elaboration, but is itself bound by their historicity. "For our reason is not a tran-

²⁰Again, economic rationalisms characteristic of either the maximizing individual or the class struggling within the relations of production are the classic modern western models of this analytical mode. Positivism worked for the most part with some variant of the liberal maximizer (recall Darwin's debt to Malthus) superimposed on nature.

²¹Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 14.

²²Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 18. The 1915 translation gives 'accumulated' for 'amassed', a more intriguing and suggestive rendering that also seems contextually more appropriate. Fields gives this sense in translating Durkheim's footnote to this passage: "This is why it is legitimate to compare the categories with tools: Tools, for their part, are accumulated material capital. Moreover, there is close kinship between the three ideas of tool, category, and institution."

scendent faculty; it is implicated in society and consequently conforms to the laws of society.”²³

The contextuality of reason as a social and historical construct is the shared insight that most strikingly links the conceptual spaces of Gramsci, Durkheim and Weber. When reason descends from the heavens (where it had occupied the space of God in the secular theology of the 18th and 19th centuries) and becomes the stuff of history, it becomes material for contestation and investigation. It becomes an instrument in an entirely new way. These three theorists represent at its most elaborate a transitional moment between the tendentially unifying confidence of modernism, in which reason is a discoverable given, and the conceptual fragmentation of postmodernism, in which reason is disintegrated beyond hope of unity.²⁴ They each struggled to find a place for and understand the power of reasons that, while no longer universal, had locally decisive value — science among them.²⁵

To do so, they based their investigations of social action on modes of rationality in various historically-elaborated social manifestations.²⁶ Thus, at the conceptual center of the three men’s work is what I call the ‘sociology of rationality’, the science of human action as a product of contextualized rationality. Each was confident that sense can be

²³Emile Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 110.

²⁴It is tempting to accept Irving Horowitz’ deceptively lucid formulation (offered about the neo-machiavellians) that “What they did was to offer sociology what Freud and his circle offered psychology — a rational explanation for irrational behavior.” Quoted in Alan Sica, *Weber, Irrationality, and Social Order* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), 24. But really, how could such a thing be possible? If any rational explanation of a human action is possible, it can only be either a projection of the rationality of the explainer onto her ‘object’, or an appropriation of the rationality of the ‘object’ by the explainer. In each case, to call the action ‘irrational’ is a sleight-of-hand.

²⁵This is a cliff from which, by and large, American postwar theorists of society have backed away. Continental theorists have leapt.

²⁶“Another point to establish is this: that a way [*modo*] of living, of acting, of thinking has been introduced into the whole of society because it is that of the ruling class does not of itself mean that it is irrational and should be rejected. On close inspection one can see that there are two aspects to every fact [or act, *fatto*]: one ‘rational’, that is, in conformity with the end or economical, and one ‘modal’ [*di moda*, also having the sense of ‘fashion’], that is a particular [*determinato*] mode [*modo*] of being of the first, rational, aspect.” *Q* 14, ¶ 67, 1728; *SCW*, 127; translation adjusted. He gives the apparently trivial example of wearing shoes (rational) and shoe styles (mode) — thus *SCW*’s translation of *di moda* as ‘fashionable’. But the broader sense of modalities of reason is strongly suggested by the context of the note taken as a whole, in which the confrontation of style with substance is a subset of a more general point about the *historical* rationality of every particular development, in its time and place.

made of human action; this is the role of science. But what sense human actions make is just as historical as the actions themselves; *how* action makes sense, or the basis of sense, is just as much an object of investigation as the action. The sociology of rationality is thus the science of these local rationalities, that is, of historical human interrelationships and sites of meaning. For Gramsci, Durkheim, and Weber, the space of this science was the human world and its products, created by the intelligible action of human beings.²⁷

It has been argued that such an approach leaves ‘irrationality’ as a “residual category.” But the conceptual act of contextualizing reason can in effect wipe out the category of ‘irrationality’ altogether by making it entirely relational.²⁸ To call something ‘irrational’ we have to have a particular ‘rationality’ in mind. Action is then always rational (in the sense of calculatingly goal-oriented) with respect to premises that are contextual, and *pre-rational*.²⁹ Rather than ‘irrational’, action might be called ‘differently rational’ — if ‘irrational’ were not so much more convenient, given an understanding of the term’s relationality. For example, rational action with respect to the expression of feelings (e.g. love, anger) or pursuit of their objects may be highly irrational with respect to self-preservation, and on a broader scale with respect to social order.³⁰ This view of the matter is diffi-

27Such products, for each of them, included the metaphysical and metahistorical mysteries usually handled with capital letters to indicate their status outside of the sphere of human construction: God, Reason, Truth, Beauty, Being, and so on.

28I believe that this approach to the issue supplies a productive rejoinder to Alan Sica’s argument in *Weber, Irrationality, and Social Order*. By shifting attention from procedures to premises Weber was able to look at all social action, including the most inchoate or unpredictable, as contextually meaningful. This argument will be taken up in more detail below, in Chapter 6.

29People are always (though often unconsciously and conflictedly) acting toward goals based on values. Rationality is the *technique*, and as such is entirely neutral. The point is to investigate what these goals and values *are*. On this basis one could draw the conclusion that all human action is irrational, but this is simply to flip the normativity of reason over to the negative side and to re-universalize it there.

30Emotions enter as a central subset into the calculus of *meaning* of which rationality is the chief instrument in Weber’s analysis of social action. It is important to read passages like the following with respect for Weber’s subtlety:

2 The more we ourselves are susceptible to such emotional reactions as anxiety, anger, ambition, envy, jealousy, love, enthusiasm, pride, vengefulness, loyalty, devotion, and appetites of all sorts, and to the ‘irrational’ conduct which grows out of them, the more readily can we empathize with them. Even when such emotions are found in a degree of intensity of which the observer himself is completely incapable, he can still have a significant degree of emotional understanding of their meaning and can interpret intellectually their influence on the course of action and the selection of means.

cult to grasp if we accept as a baseline that there is a *single* rationality (involving, say, maximization of material utility, a form of ‘materialist metaphysics’) that is more or less successfully approximated by particular human actors, or that there needs to be such a thing.³¹ To resist such sneaky universals “an arduous and difficult mental operation” is required, like standing firm on the back of a moving elephant without mistaking its solidity for permanence.

It is important to understand that Gramsci, Durkheim, and Weber were all rationalists, but there is no metaphysical sense to this. They understood humans to act for reasons, and so they believed that human actions make sense and can be made sense of.³² This is all that Durkheim’s famous statement at the beginning of *The Rules of Sociological Method* means.³³ Of course, empirical action will be based on an often-intermixed mul-

3 Why is ‘irrational’ marked off here? Because it is not a normative category in Weber’s usage, but a relational one linked to the methodologically convenient ideal type of rational action. “Only in this respect and for these reasons of methodological convenience is the method of sociology ‘rationalistic.’ It is naturally not legitimate to interpret this procedure as involving a rationalistic bias of sociology, but only as a methodological device.” Weber, *Economy and Society*, 6-7. Weber understood very well that he had to confront and vanquish apriori rationalism (including his own), that is, that he had to contextualize reason, in order to understand how people’s actions have meaning and make sense. He could as easily have said ‘differently rational’ for ‘irrational’ in this passage, since emotional motivations still give rise to meaningful behaviors that can be interpreted intellectually in terms of the selection of means. Whether Weber was comfortable with this knowledge is a different question.

31 Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) still has a beautifully embarrassing impact for those trained in the rationalism of elite academic white male Europeans; this specifically gendered aspect of the issue was not on the mind of any of the men under scrutiny here. Indeed, they were culturally blind to it — which is part of Woolf’s point. A pithy statement of this comes to me from a talk by philosopher and historian of science Sandra Harding (Spring 1995) who alluded to the “virility of rationality.” See also Harding’s *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991). Instantly classic discussions of the masculine biases built into supposedly universal humanity and reason are Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979), and Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: “Male” & “Female” in Western Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993 [1984]). For another extended discussion of the difficulties inherent in any attempt to construct collective activity as a function of any *single* rationality, see (*inter alia*) Ann Ferguson, *Sexual Democracy: Women, Oppression, and Revolution* (Boulder: Westview, 1991). Women have been among the many groups emerging in the late 20th century with much to tell about the dominating effects of normative rationalities — this literature is now vast and rich, and my citations are unavoidably arbitrary.

32 Just as ‘production’ has been misread in Marx to mean exclusively ‘economic production’, ‘rationality’ has been misread in the social theory of the early 20th century exclusively as ‘normative rationality’.

33...[T]he only [designation] we accept is that of *rationalist*. Indeed our main objective is to extend the scope of scientific rationalism to cover human behavior by demonstrating that, in the

tiplicity of partially-conscious and frequently-conflicting values, so that ‘making sense’ of it is generally an intricately complicated task — even aided by ‘methodologically convenient’ heuristic devices like Weber’s ideal type.³⁴ But since the framework of rationality operates at all levels of social structures, and actions by individuals or groups can make sense according to a local rationality that is decidedly irrational by identifiable general (less local) standards or information, there is an appropriate basis for judgment within even contextualized rationality. Indeed, some actions or analyses can be ‘objectively’ more rational or even scientific at a given moment than others. Locality is not license, and progress toward greater rationality is possible, although as Weber pointed out it may not be desirable.³⁵

A final procedural admission is in order. The relationship of these social theorists to the social localization of rationality is perhaps best described as ‘tense’ or ‘conflicted’. In the discussion of them in this interlude, I have distilled and purified to some degree the most radical aspect of their shared insight; there were certainly moments aplenty when each of them knew quite well what was rational and what was not, and did not apologize to history for being sure he was right. Furthermore, each believed that what he was doing was ‘located’ at the highest attainment of human intellectual capacity, a situated judgement that is difficult to square entirely with the repositioning of reason and rational-

light of the past, it is capable of being reduced to relationships of cause and effect, which, by an operation no less rational, can then be transformed into rules of action for the future. What has been termed our positivism is merely a consequence of this rationalism.” Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. Steven Lukes, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1982), 33. The rationalism Durkheim speaks of here is instrumental rationality: simply a mechanism, the systematic technique by which people pursue definite ends chosen by historically and culturally bound values. There is no evaluation inherent in such assessments of causality, as Hume pointed out. It is crucial in reading these theorists’ texts to separate this sense of rationality as a tool that people use or do not use to link their actions to their ends — be these material, ideal, emotional, or (most frequently) some combination — from reason as either a universal or a local normative ideal (with the ‘irrational’ as its demonic dark side).

34“In the great majority of cases actual action goes on in a state of inarticulate half-consciousness or actual unconsciousness of its subjective meaning. The actor is more likely to ‘be aware’ of it in a vague sense than he is to ‘know’ what he is doing or be explicitly self-conscious about it.” Weber, *Economy and Society*, 21. Perhaps interpersonal communication (and even self-understanding) occurs at the interstices of these multiplicitous ‘sites’ or overlapping spaces of meaning, which also can offer multiple grounds for immanent critiques that escape the sterility of both naïve universalist judgment and the refusal to judge of abstract cultural relativism.

35In terms of the framework I have set up here, Weber’s ‘iron cage’ metaphor describes the increasing extension and dominance over alternative modes of rationality of the local rationality of western materialism.

ity argued here. Their simple response from out of this hubris might well have been, how else does one go on?

The contextualization of reason that I have called sociology of rationality requires a different sort of investigation than had ever been attempted so systematically. Without a universal standard by which to judge particular actions, Gramsci, Durkheim, and Weber were always in the position of having to respect and investigate the particular, and then to relate it to provisionally more general standards (e.g. Weber's 'ideal types'). But knowledge is always local and incomplete, and the leap from analysis to action, for each of them, was one that could only be justified existentially.