



# From scarce resources to 'the good economy': a new 'version of economization' replacing Weber's rational ascetism as the capitalist spirit?

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**To cite this article:** Kristin Asdal (2022) From scarce resources to 'the good economy': a new 'version of economization' replacing Weber's rational ascetism as the capitalist spirit?, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 15:6, 849-853, DOI: [10.1080/17530350.2023.2167853](https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2023.2167853)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2023.2167853>



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Published online: 25 Jan 2023.



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## From scarce resources to ‘the good economy’: a new ‘version of economization’ replacing Weber’s rational asceticism as the capitalist spirit?

**Economy and Society: A New Translation**, by Max Weber, edited and translated by Keith Tribe, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2019, 520 pp., US\$26 (paperback), ISBN 9780674916548

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 16 December 2022; Accepted 9 January 2023

**KEYWORDS** Weber; Economization; Economists

One of the major merits to Keith Tribe’s new introduction and translation of Weber’s *Economy and Society* is to *re-place* Weber, taking him out of the firm grasp of (American) sociology and releasing him onto alternative planes for grasping economic life and the problem of social-economic explanation.<sup>1</sup> It is as if he asks us to consider: What would happen to our way of relating to Weber if we read his main concern, in the context of his writing, as the economy and economics and not the social and sociology? Another major merit is to bring the English translation and introduction of Weber closer to the original German language and meaning, which consequently alters how we should understand Weber’s sociology.

Troubling how Weber’s concepts of ‘*herrschaft*’ and ‘*verband*’ have been translated as ‘authority’ and ‘corporate group,’ Tribe argues that these translations ‘conceal internal linkages in the conceptual armory that Weber so painstakingly assembles’ (4). ‘*Herrschaft*’ implies that all social organization requires rule, direction, and command. This procedural, organizational, and command-side of Weber’s notion of ‘*herrschaft*’ does not come through when translated simply as authority. Moreover, as Tribe illustrates, the concept can only come to life and gain explanatory value in definite and specifiable contexts, that is within particular and distinct organizational forms and forms of social order – in other words, ‘*verband*.’

There is also a side to Tribe’s new translation and introduction which is less explicit, namely that it can be taken as an invitation to bring Weber as a ‘political economist’ into closer conversation with Weber ‘the sociologist’ and his studies of organization and bureaucracy. When we start imagining ‘*herrschaft*’ as a key sociological concept that requires organizational contextualization, Weber’s work becomes particularly useful for analyses of what I have elsewhere denoted as ‘versions of economization’ (Asdal and Huse 2023): ordered procedures for formatting the economy as part of distinct organizational and bureaucratic forms.

If Weber’s analysis of ‘rational asceticism’ in *The Protestant Ethic and the Capitalist Spirit* (2001 [1904]) were to be translated into a study of the Norwegian postwar economy understood as a distinct version of economization, the Ministry of Finance and the economists who make up a large part of its staff could be said to be the incarnation of Weber’s rational asceticism. Through the procedures and tools of double entry bookkeeping – practiced not at the level of the firm, but at the level of the national economy made manageable by a complex system of state budgets and accounting (Lie and Vennesland 2010; Lie 1995) – the Ministry of Finance allocates ‘scarce resources’ (the credo of their discipline) at a state and national level. Protecting the purse of the state as if it was their own, the Ministry of Finance has come to serve as a super-ministry – a ministry whose charge is to sanction every penny spent. *All* resources are to be subjected to the same form of cost-efficiency, including natural resources. Bringing nature into the economy simply becomes a practical problem – a mere problem of calculation (Asdal 1998). And so, environmental concerns and problems are encountered as efficiency concerns. Policies and principles for using, for example, the

best available technology to combat environmental problems are within this framing attacked and critiqued as a waste of funds and as a failure to fully utilize the services the natural environment provides (Asdal 2008). By ascribing not only a price, but the ‘correct’ price, the economists have aimed at subsuming nature itself into the complex system of state budgets and accounting. Green taxes have been levied as a means to bring nature into the economy and subsequently into the market economy – cared for by the market mechanism.

In this version of economization, Weber’s notion of ‘life conduct’ (5), understood as the process of leading one’s life *and* the process of social formation (lebensführung in the original Weberian wording and the concern with *sociation* as Tribe puts it), becomes relevant. Rational asceticism as a particular form of life conduct and social formation came to be expressed in the economist profession, the formation of the Ministry of Finance in which they resided, and consequently the Norwegian political economy at large. Following from this Norwegian example, Weber’s concern with life conduct and his thesis of rational asceticism can be a lens through which we can grasp a discipline or a profession in its connection and exchange with the bureaucratic organization – the *verband* – of which the profession is part. In pursuing such analyses, I have suggested we add Weber’s key notion of life conduct and sociation to our conceptual armory. But I suggest we add a couple of other concepts too, namely ‘sache’ and ‘sachlich’. In arguing this, Weber’s objectivity thesis (Weber 2012 [1904]) will serve as the entry point.

A key dimension of Weber’s work that may add to the analysis of rational asceticism as a particular version of economization, and which is particularly relevant for the Norwegian economist profession and Ministry of Finance, is precisely Weber’s objectivity thesis (Weber 2012 [1904]). In fact, it could be argued that The Norwegian post-war economist profession took Weber’s objectivity thesis almost to the extreme in their insistence on the division between fact and value (or in Norwegian – ‘sak’ and ‘vurdering’). Their conviction, expressed most clearly by the Nobel-laureate Ragnar Frisch at the Department of Economics at the University of Oslo, where the majority of economists at the Ministry were trained, was that there could and indeed *should* be a sharp divide between the issue at hand and any judgment or value-assessment of said issue (Frisch 1962 [1937]). Both the Norwegian economy and the discipline of economics were, consequently, to be conducted in accordance with this distinction.

However, like ‘verband’ and ‘herrschaft’, the two notions ‘sache’ (or ‘sak’ in Norwegian) and sachlich (or ‘saklig’ in Norwegian) do not easily translate into English. To work in a ‘saklig’ or ‘sachlich’ manner is that of attending to and staying *with* the issue, thing, or object at hand in a dispassionate and indeed object-oriented manner (Asdal 2015). Moreover, the notion ‘sak’ has a thing-element to it that is not captured in the English notion of ‘issue’, and the notion ‘sachlich’ is not simply about being objective or neutral, but about attending carefully to the very ‘thing’ in question and as if ‘peeling off’ the assumingly unnecessary. Read in this light, it should not come as a surprise that the economists’ rational asceticism also expressed itself in their preferred environmental policy: what the economists at the Ministry first targeted when seeking to implement taxes for the sake of the environment was precisely excess and unnecessary products (Asdal 1998). Not only were finances not to be spent unnecessarily, certain *things* were deemed unnecessary.

Space does not allow for delving into the full complexity of Weber’s objectivity thesis. Here it must suffice to say that there are reasons to argue that Weber did not put forward as strong a division between fact and value as it is sometimes argued (see Palonen 2022; Palonen 2014; Asdal and Hobæk 2020; du Gay 2008). Moreover, ‘sak’ understood as a thing or a case is also the very subject matter which moves through and within the organization and is worked upon in a structured manner at the different stages integral to bureaucratic or organizational procedure (Asdal 2015). In short, this is ‘the stuff’ of the organization, often consisting of work with and upon documents. It is a form of ‘case work’ exercised by bureaucrats or experts on particular issues (Møller 2022) and so also a key part of what Weber called ‘*dienstwisse*’: bureaucratic knowledge or competence (see Mangset and Asdal 2019). Consequently, the notion of ‘sak’ or ‘sache’ may add a procedural element to the study of organizational form and the version of economization in question, whereas

the notion ‘sachlich’ may extend our analytical grasp towards *the manner* by which cases or issues are worked upon.

Towards the very end of *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber reasons that the rational asceticism which had started to unfold within and transform the world had become superfluous. The victorious capitalism no longer had need for it, Weber reasons, because it had now established itself on technical grounds (Weber 2001 [1904], 116). Our current contemporary context suggests that this claim needs to be reassessed. Rather than adhering to Weber’s substantial claim, we can instead pursue his method and conceptual armoury as an entry point for understanding and analyzing how new versions of economization – with their own distinct procedural manners and ‘things’ to be worked upon – seem to be emerging.

Weber is often read first and foremost as a scholar concerned with theories of modernization linked up with the understanding that society develops into distinct institutions in processes of differentialization. What we observe in our contemporary society is perhaps rather a form of *re-differentiation*: an economy that is neither ordered by a clear-cut calculative rationality or logic, nor confined within a particular form of efficiency-based training, expertise, and organizational rational asceticism. A hypothesis with regard to our contemporary society is that the economy is now instead emerging as a new and differently ordered normative sphere. If this is so, this can be linked to a new financialized *and* moralized version of economy where the issue is no longer the correct allocation of scarce resources based on precise calculations of alternative costs and ends, but rather the idea of manufacturing markets for collective concerns (Frankel 2019) and that of doing good with money (Asdal and Engen 2022; Asdal 2021; Fourcade 2017; Langley 2020; Doganova and Karnøe 2015; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Rather than ensuring no penny is spent in vain, the aim becomes the *provision* and *directing* of capital; an economy where the division between fact and value is displaced from being the overriding good, to capital as both the instrument for moving capital towards good ends and capital as a good in and of itself. In other words, a version of economization as a ‘good economy’ (Asdal 2021) where that of distinguishing between fact and value is no longer the issue, but rather an idea of value creation that encapsulates the good, and the sustainable too.

Helped by Weber’s notions *herrschaft*’ and ‘*verband*’ we might take care to consider such developments and phenomena as neither simply moral projects nor simply new economic logics, but as phenomena that take on ‘rule forms’. As such, they can be analyzed as procedurally and ‘office-ordered’ phenomena that economize in new ways, and to draw our attention towards comparing and contrasting ‘neo-classical’ rule-forms and sociation of economic expertise with other forms of economic discipline – such as that of economists trained in business schools and taking organizational form in innovation and in finance.

As Tribe underlines, Weber was concerned with processes rather than structure – sociation rather than with society. In fact, this speaks interestingly to recent contributions across Science and Technology Studies (STS) and social studies of markets approaching the economy as in the process of ‘becoming’ through financialization (e.g. Chiapello 2015), capitalization (e.g. Muniesa 2017), and economization (e.g. Çalıskan and Callon 2009) rather than as a predetermined or pre-given structure. In conversation with Weber and his sustained interest in forms of ‘*herrschaft*’ and ‘*verband*’, which take their unique form and indeed only come to life in concrete empirical settings, we can start to observe how these different *versions of economization* (Asdal and Huse 2023) may shift, be transformed, and take on varying forms of organizational rule and procedures, producing ordered yet uniquely and contextually composed kinds of economic life.

## Note

1. This paper is linked to the research project Valuetreads supported by the Norwegian Research Council (301733).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Norges Forskningsråd: [Grant Number 301733].

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2023.2167853>

