Weber, Max (1864-1920) was the son of prominent politician whose family had made its fortune in the Bielefeld linen trade and a mother from a Huguenot family with academic connections. Weber was trained in the law and appeared destined for a career as a legal historian, but accepted a position in national economics in 1892 in Freiburg. He later moved to Heidelberg, where he spent much of the rest of his life. In 1903 he resigned his professorship due to a nervous condition and lived the life of a private scholar. His wife hosted a salon in which the leading literary and intellectual figures of Heidelberg as well as promising students such as Georg Lukács participated, thus expending his personal influence across many disciplines, including, in philosophy, Emil Lask and Karl Jaspers.

Between 1903 and 1907, he produced a series of methodological essays which advanced a relativistic conception of the Geisteswissenschaften, which nevertheless allowed for causal analysis. During the same period he published The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1958[1905-06]), the work for which he is best known, which introduces the thesis that the modern rational and autonomous individual was the product of the combination of Calvinist doctrines of predestination and election and the notion of “callings,” which he argued had been taken out of the monasteries and applied to the world as a whole by Protestantism, thus sacralizing work as well as capitalist accumulation.

In a series of studies of the world religions, he traced both the origins of some of the elements of Western rationalism, such as the Jewish detestation of magic, to their origins in the historical development of ancient Hebrew ritual practice, and the factors that inhibited rationalism elsewhere. During this period he also worked on a huge collection later published as Economy and Society (1966[1958]) which traced the internal histories of various political forms and forms of authority. This work most fully elaborated his distinction between traditional, rational legal, and charismatic authority.

In a series of political writings, including one major article on the form of the post war German state, Weber encouraged a strong president independent of parliament who could use his charisma to control the bureaucratized state. Among the models for Weber’s concept of charisma was the poet Stefan George, whose circle both overlapped and competed with Weber’s circle in Heidelberg.

After World War I, Weber made two famous speeches, widely discussed among German intellectuals, on the vocation of science and the vocation of politics. The speech on science provoked a huge response, particularly from literary intellectuals who were hostile to his dismissal of Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s conception of the unity of thought, which he thought was doomed by the inevitable dominance of scholarly specialization, and such thinkers as the Frankfurt School. He died in Munich in 1920, attended by both his wife, Marianna Weber, an early feminist writer on the common German language feminist theme of Mutterrecht, and his mistress Elsa Jaffe, the sister of Freida Lawrence. After his death, Karl Jaspers elaborated Weber’s thought as existentialist philosophy and celebrated Weber as a model.
Selected Bibliography