Abstract

Max Weber was a legally-trained historian, appointed as a Professor of Economics, and who played a founding role in German Sociology. He was important as a political and constitutional commentator. His early work was in ancient history, where he advanced a novel account of the effect of the loss of a supply of new slaves and the declining position of the free peasants in Italy and its consequences for the decline of Roman cities. As a private scholar and editor, he wrote his most influential works, including “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” which argued that the doctrine of predestination created a psychological sanction which produced the rationalizing capitalist. His methodological writings were a defense of a causal social science that deals with meaningful material. The “Economic Ethics of the World Religions,” considers the failure of capitalistic calculability to originate outside the West. Economy and Society consists of a typology of forms of social action, and examines the interrelations between ideal and material interests and guiding ideas, particularly forms of legitimacy, such as charisma, in the processes of institutional and cultural transformation. In politics he supported “leadership democracy” on pragmatic nationalist grounds, rather than on valuative grounds.

Weber, Max (1864-1920)

Max Weber was born Karl Emil Maximilian Weber in Erfurt, Thuringia on April 21, 1864. His father, Max Weber (1836-1897) was a lawyer from a family of wealthy industrialists and merchants with international connections, whose core business was a linen factory in Oerlinghausen, in Westphalia. His uncle transformed this factory, which had been a traditional family concern, into a model modern business. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism contains thinly concealed elements of this history. Weber’s father was a younger son in this family. His father pursued a legal and political career, serving in the German Reichstag 1872-1884. Politicians and intellectuals, particularly historians, frequented the Weber household in Berlin. His mother, Hélène (née Fallenstein) was highly educated, religious, and active in poor relief.

Weber entered the University in 1882, studying law, as well as economics,
ancient history, philosophy and theology, and entered into the student life of the time, joining a fraternity. He served the first year of officer training in the army at Strasbourg, where relatives of his mother's were prominent at the University. He returned to Berlin in 1884, and concentrated on law and legal history. Here he became a hard working scholar with a sedate lifestyle, simultaneously pursuing his legal education and taking exams, completing military service, and continuing his academic studies. Levin Goldschmidt and August Meitzen instructed him in “Staatswissenschaft” and he became a doctoral student under Goldschmidt, also briefly clerking at the Royal District Court of Charlottenburg, and performing military service in Posen. His dissertation, “Development of the principle of joint liability and the separate fund in the public trading company from the household and trade communities in the Italian cities” (1889), based on hundreds of Italian and Spanish sources, was well-received. He joined the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Association for Social Policy) out of a concern with the “Polonization” of the Eastern regions of Germany, and became involved politically in the “Evangelisch-sozialer Kongress.” He continued his academic work, receiving his Habilitation under Meitzen for “Roman agrarian history and its importance for state and civil law” in 1891. During this period, the Verein für Sozialpolitik employed him for a study of “The conditions of the agricultural workers in East Elbian regions of Germany.” The study, a huge empirical survey designed as the basis of policy recommendations, marked a new direction in his career. The recommendations were controversial, but made his reputation as an agricultural economist, and enabled him to secure a Professorial appointment in Nationalökonomie at Freiburg in 1894. From there he was appointed to a similar position at Heidelberg.

A mental breakdown after the death of his father ultimately led him to relinquish his teaching duties, but he eventually returned to an active role as an editor and producing scholar. His major ‘methodological’ essays (posthumously published as his Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschatfslehre in 1922) included part one of “Roscher and Knies” published in 1903, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy” in 1904, part two of “Roscher and Knies” and “Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences” in 1905 and 1906, and, in 1907, “Critique of Stammler”. With the 1904-5 publication of “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” his work began to take several new directions. During this period Weber traveled to the United States, where he spent several months, appearing as an Agricultural Economist at the 1904 St. Louis World's fair, and visiting American relatives. His experiences were the basis for some of his subsequent writings. He became fascinated by the revolution of 1905 in Russia, learning the language in three months in order to follow the unfolding events, and wrote extensively on them, from a point of view that emphasized matters of social structure. Over the next few years he completed his work on ancient agrarian economic life, agreed to take over the editing of a work which evolved into the text now known as Economy and Society, which Weber was never to complete. He became engaged publicly in questions of university policy, and also pursued inquiries into industrial psychology in
the family textile works, an expression both of his interest in the rationalization of work and his recognition of the role of such psycho-physical factors as fatigue in work processes.

Weber also played an active, though characteristically combative role, in two academic organizations, the Social Policy Association and the German Sociological Society. He was one of the founders of the German Sociological Society in 1909, but left soon after because of his views on the separation between scholarship and advocacy. These views, which later became famous, if not well-understood, under the label "value-free science," were developed and elaborated in a complex and long-running dispute within the Social Policy Association. This dispute began largely as a political dispute over matters of policy but it quickly escalated and was transformed by Weber and his brother Alfred into an accusation that their opponents in this dispute had confused considerations of value with objective policy considerations, a point that was particularly crucial for Weber, who rejected the bland statism of his monarchical socialist older colleagues. Weber articulated an elaborate rationale for his position which followed from his notion of the nonrationality of ultimate value choice. He also argued that maintaining this separation was part of the duty of university professors.

Weber's role in what was to become *Economy and Society* expanded and he became author rather than editor, a task which together with the series of studies that comprised *The Economic Ethics of the World Religions*, occupied him until his death. Neither project achieved final form. During World War I Weber, a reserve officer, worked as a hospital administrator, until reorganization made his services unnecessary. When the outcome of the war became clear, he wrote a series of articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on the future constitution. During this period he gave two speeches with parallel titles to the Munich Free Students Association, "Science as a Vocation," apparently in late 1917, and "Politics as a Vocation" in early 1919, after which both were published. The speeches were an aggressive and telling challenge to the cultural and political optimism of the time, and in the Weimar era remained relevant, especially to the long-running discussion of the "Crisis of the Sciences." After the war Weber served as a member of a group invited to participate in "Reichsamt des Innern (Office of the Interior)" meetings which produced the general outlines of the constitution of what became the Weimar Republic (Mommsen 1974, 355), became a professor of economics at Vienna in 1918 and Munich in 1919, and unsuccessfully pursued a career in politics. His untimely death, June 14, 1920 in Munich, came when his influence among intellectuals was at its peak.

2. Weber's Early Work
Weber's habilitation dissertation, although he later dismissed it as a "one of the sins of his youth" (quoted in Tenbruck, 1987, 237), together with an essay on "The Social Basis of the Decline of Ancient Civilization" (1896) marked him out as an original scholar. The dissertation used his knowledge of medieval land tenure law to illuminate the Roman
agrarian situation. It depended on the plausible but unprovable assumption that two of the different methods of mapping used by the Roman Colonial land surveyors corresponded to different types of land tenure: untaxed, roughly measured lease rights from public land, and precisely measured, private taxed lots. He argued that the size of the private lots suggested that they were too small for subsistence, and that the smallholders on this land had from the first depended on access to public land to survive, but that this access was eventually cut off by the rich, who could pay for leases and work the land with slave labor. He reasoned that the poor but free peasants were forced, by the inadequacy of their holdings, to assume labor obligations to landlords as rent, and later to be legally bound to the soil. When new slaves were no longer available, barracked slaves, who had enabled production for the market, had to be raised in status, freed sufficiently to encourage them to reproduce, making them essentially into serfs. Increasingly, money transactions were replaced by transactions in kind, the coastal commerce on which the slave produced surpluses depended vanished, and the cities diminished in power and in fiscal, and consequently political, importance for the state. The new rural economic order was manorialism *de facto*, so this was in effect an account of the origins of the medieval agrarian order.

3. The 1903-1907 Methodological Essays
Contemporary disputes in ancient history, notably the “Bücher-Meyer controversy,” over a stage-theory of the development of the *oikos*, were formative for Weber. His most important methodological article, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy,” was published in 1904, on the occasion of the transfer of control of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* to a team of editors of which he was the leading member. Weber argued that to construct a historical explanation, or even an object of explanation, requires conceptualization, which he examined in terms of the concept of ideal-types, which he distinguished from mere classifications that simply sorted objects into categories. Ideal-types typically diverged from reality, or were applied to empirical cases from which they diverged, as in the case of ancient capitalism, but served the purposes of the historian by virtue of the fact that they allowed the historian to ask questions that are meaningful in the present. Thus while ideal-types were indispensable to the historical disciplines, these disciplines were also prone to a particular kind of error. The mistake in each case is that something that is properly regarded as an idealization of a phenomena is treated as a real force or a teleological process. In Weber's hands, this was a powerful means of methodological criticism. Not only did it serve to indicate how the developmental models of his near predecessors and contemporaries, including Marx, used the idealization to constitute the phenomenon it explained, it called into question the project of final conceptualizations of history or social life, as well as the cognitive status of such conceptual constructs as “the state.”

The line between the parts of historical understanding that are relative and those that are non-relative and factual is difficult to draw. In “The Logic of the Cultural
Sciences," he spoke of the "real causal processes" which our concepts give an intelligible form to. In "Objectivity" he argued that "genetic ideal-types," are themselves relative to a culture-bound historical interest: the calculation of probabilities is fully objective, but the selection and conceptualization of the conditions cannot be. These are inherent limitations of a social science that must operate with concepts whose meaningfulness derives from sources outside of the science itself—sciences which speak "the language of life" a language which is itself necessarily bound to a historical moment and its values (1949, 107).

This argument takes on a special significance in connection with his account of values themselves. Weber argued that scholarship could at best enable judgments about the adequacy of means for ends, the consistency of ends, the separation between and the difference between factual and valuative considerations, but could not constitute the basis of either value judgments or the endorsements of policies, at least to the extent that the valuative purposes of the policy could not be given scholarly justification. Ultimate value choices, worldviews, religions, and national cultures were alike in that they were ultimately matters of commitment, not reason, and consequently questions of "superiority" were misplaced.

4. The Protestant Ethic Essay
These basic methodological ideas, and especially the idea of ideal-types, figure in Weber's 1904-5 essay, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The core problem of the essay was to account for the disruption and replacement of traditional economic life, and he argued that it was in part the indirect effect of Protestantism. Reformation theology, and particularly Calvinism, altered the problem of salvation. The doctrine held that the Elect, those predestined for salvation, are called to worldly tasks and an ascetic lifestyle: worldly monasticism. But, Weber reasoned, the doctrine of predestination was psychologically intolerable, and produced deep anxiety, which had to be allayed by pastoral assurances that faithful work in a calling was a sign of election, creating a novel and powerful psychological sanction for conduct. The theological premise thus had the indirect effect of producing a personality which, in the appropriate setting, becomes the austere, abstemious, rationalizing capitalist.

There are many controversial features of this account, some of which result from the fact that the doctrinal element of the ideal-type which Weber constructed only imperfectly corresponded to the theological doctrine of much of Protestantism in Europe. Nevertheless the account is deeply compelling, in part because the depictions of the believer accord so well with a character type that unquestionably did leave a profound mark on western culture. Weber closed the essay with some prophetic remarks about the course of western culture, and an important analysis of the cultural situation created by the secularization of the "ethic." He observed that the rosy blush of its "laughing heir," the Enlightenment, has faded, and that the inexorable demands of the modern, rationally organized economy, enforce the organization of work into "callings" but strip them of
their religious meaning. He commented that even the accumulation of wealth takes on the character of sport, and the people in the machine of capitalism became divided beings, “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart” (1958, 182)

In his late lectures on economic history, Weber restated the thesis with some different emphases, notably with respect to the rational organization of free labor, which Weber came to see as especially crucial, and indeed to be the distinguishing feature of modern capitalism in contrast to booty capitalism, trade, and political capitalism, all of which were found in the ancient world. The crucial moment when “the production of goods was emancipated from all the bonds of inherited intelligence, and came under the dominance of freely roving intelligence” (1961, 227), the moment in which the craftsman was replaced by the worker, and the owner of the firm supplied tools, exacted discipline, and assumed the risks. This change was, Weber thought, a precondition for the mechanization of work, with the goal of saving labor costs and in this sense rationalizing labor. And together with this was the rationalization of the use of capital generally, through rational accounting methods, rational price-setting for the purpose of profit, and backed by calculable law. The worldwide expansion, and continued success, of these practices did not rest on the foundation of religious belief. Weber also provided an overview of other factors in the development of capitalism, such as calculable law, and other contingencies, like the availability of coal in Europe, without which, he argued, “the revolution in the means of work... might have stopped and modern capitalism in its characteristic form never would have appeared” (1961, 226).

5. Economy and Society and the Economic Ethics of the World Religions
In the last decade of Weber's life he produced a major methodological text, “The Categories of an Interpretative Sociology”; a major systematic work, the incomplete Economy and Society, and the bulk of his mature substantive work, Economic Ethics of the World Religions. The essays that make up this work are overtly concerned, with the question of why a rational capitalism based on calculability originated exclusively in the West. But their larger theme is the general problem of the cultural specificity of the West, that is to say the peculiarity, in world terms, of Western political, economic, and legal institutions. But the uniqueness of the West requires an unusual explanation.

The general development of religious ideas corresponds to the development of particular social strata, with peasants having a strong affinity for magic, aristocratic classes for a kind of self-justifying, charismatic self conception. These affinities tend to be relatively stable and do not work to transform the social structures in which they arise. The problem of explanation, consequently, is to identify the point of openness in which a very specific kind of innovation, namely those that have transformative effects on individuals or groups might arise. The general promise of religion is health, wealth and happiness. And the basic affinities to strata express these needs in forms specific to the strata.

The exceptional cases are the ascetic religions, which offer rebirth or redemption,
and more generally religions that are doctrinally open to rationalization, and that produce potentially transformative innovations through rationalization. Religious rationalization, however, while producing new coherence in consistency in religious doctrines, characteristically serves to produce discrepancies with other "spheres" from which religious life is differentiating under the same pressure of circumstance. A general problem which all salvation religions answer to is the problem of the relationship between destiny and merit, the problem of theodicy, which these religions develop in extraordinarily elaborate ways—ways which on the one hand “rationalize” the discrepancies by making the fact of evil or bad luck intelligibly consistent with the religious ideology, but also in ways that are consequential for practice. The Chinese solution, for example, was to reconcile the two by recourse to popular magical practice, which in turn had negative consequences: a “deep repugnance to undertaking any change in the established conduct of life because supernatural evils are feared” (1966, 261). Ancient Judaism, in contrast, devised solutions that excluded and repudiated magic, and this carried over into Christianity and consequently into the western worldview in a way that favored the eventual development of science and technology.

Weber pointed to many similar indirect effects of general institutional conditions, conditions that do not directly determine possibilities, but nevertheless greatly reduce the probability of developments in a particular direction. Rationalization, for example, means the attainment of greater consistency and completeness, but the two take various different forms for intellectuals and practical persons, such as merchants, and the direction that rationalization takes in a given situation or in the face of given problems is governed by many circumstantial contingencies. Weber saw the various forms and processes of rationalization as interacting with one another, that is to say sees rationalization in one sphere as creating difficulties which require rationalization to relate to spheres, and thus producing a kind of dynamic ongoing process of mutually reinforcing rationalization. Occasionally Weber appears to slip into the error of regarding the rationalization process as itself a historical force, but these rare cases ordinarily can be interpreted in causal, and typically “interest” terms, as when for example the rationalization of modern law on the continent is interpreted as driven by the status interests of law professors.

6. Economy and Society

Economy and Society consists of a typology of forms of social action, especially institutional action, together with extensive historical commentary on the types. Weber said that the claim to be made on behalf of the typology was its usefulness and the elaboration of the typology is an extended demonstration of the uses to which the types could be put in analyzing actual historical forms, particularly of institutional structure, and characterizing their historical course of development as the product of the basic properties of the type, always with the caveat that these were idealizations rather than “real” types with a teleological character.

The most famous of these typologies involves beliefs legitimating authority and
the forms that were characteristically produced by these beliefs. The categories were charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal. These were ideal types, which almost never, if ever, appeared in reality in a pure form. Traditional authority was based on unwritten rules believed to be handed down from time immemorial; rational legal authority rested on the belief and the validity of written rules produced according to written procedures, and charismatic authority was the authority of the extraordinary person. Weber had in mind of course such figures as Napoleon and Jesus Christ, but he found many more modest examples in Indian gurus and medieval battle leaders, and in each of these cases obedience rested not on either written or unwritten rules but on the direct influence of the exceptional individual himself. Weber was careful to point out such things as the attenuated charismatic element in the modern monarchy and the jury.

Charismatic authority, Weber observed, is inherently unstable, though its temporary effects, and thus historical consequences, may be great. Gradually the critical charismatic leader must support his followers materially and this marks the beginning of the transformation of charisma into the everyday. Charismatic regimes also face problems of succession, and the “routinization” of charisma through ritual in order to pass on charisma to successors soon becomes transformed into something akin to traditional authority, or alternatively into a bureaucratic system.

The value of the ideal type is not so much that it serves to predict as that it enables one to ask relevant questions or identify relevant causal processes, but this process is itself governed by our cognitive purposes rather than something inherent in the historical world itself. Much of Weber's discussion of the historical case material is indeed about the logical unfolding of implications of basic ideas such as charisma or rational legal authority. However, there is no sense in which this unfolding is causally inevitable, but rather that concepts like charisma are useful in making processes intelligible precisely because the elaboration of the idea corresponds to the kind of developments that historical agents actually bring about in the course of their actions employing their own ideas, beliefs, and so forth.

7. Weber as a political thinker
Weber was self consciously part of the post-Bismarck generation, and an ardent nationalist who was deeply concerned about the problem of succession of leaders. Bismarck's career had shown how forceful and successful leadership produced popular acquiescence and even enthusiasm, even at the expense of making Parliament weak and irrelevant, and overriding party loyalty. Weber saw this form of popular leadership, exemplified for him by both the unelected Bismarck and the elected Gladstone, as a key to the nature of modern politics: modern regimes were mass democracies in fact, regardless of the forms of constitutions, because they required mass legitimacy and support to be effective. He saw that electoral forms, and beyond this the administrative machinery of parties, were constrained by the demands of effective electoral politics. He was concerned on the one hand that interest-faction parties, especially parties that
inevitably were bureaucratically organized, would be effective electorally, but that this would assure the predominance of party hacks rather than figures who could act boldly as leaders. He responded by suggesting a presidential office in which the president required support in the form of a plebiscite rather than party support, and thus stood above and outside of party structures. Although this analysis supported a liberal and democratic republican form of government, Weber nowhere based his argument for this form of state on traditional liberal constitutional concerns, such as the preservation of rights or the expression of the will of the people, notions he regarded as mythological, but instead based it on the problems of selecting great leaders in the face of the modern need for popular support for the tasks of nation-building.

Many interpreters have noted that the Nietzschean language of greatness that Weber employed, as well as the specific concerns about freedom he expressed, are rooted in a morality of the value of “personality” that is potentially in conflict with constitutional liberalism, and especially to its egalitarian elements. When he observed that in rational work organizations “each man becomes a little cog in the machine and, aware of this, his one preoccupation is whether he becomes a bigger one,” and when he asked if “a portion of mankind [can be kept] free of this parceling out of the soul” (quoted in Mayer 1956, 126,128) his concern was with a form of freedom accessible only to the few. Yet Weber’s argument proceeds on more than one level. On the one hand he presented the state as a tool whose distinctive and necessary means is violence, and traced the origins of the historical conditions which constrain the possible present forms of state. But he made the point that the state is a means not necessary merely to the achievement of his own values, but to the achievement of virtually all this-worldly values: only someone like a Tolstoyan Saint has no need of the state. For the rest, there are no alternatives.

7. Weber’s Reception
Weber was not employed as a professor during his most productive years, and exerted relatively little influence through the training of students. His primary personal influence was through a salon that he and his wife held in Heidelberg which attracted many of the best minds, and particularly the best young minds, of the university, across various disciplines. This group included Georg Lukaës, Emil Lask, and Karl Jaspers. Jaspers portrayed him as an existentialist hero: “an idealized modern man who resolutely exposes himself to intellectual risks and lives through intellectual tensions passionately without accepting final resolutions” (Schluchter 1996, 1).

The Nazi period cut off serious discussion of Weber, who was described in the intellectual circles that supported the regime with the derogatory term “liberal,” a characterization that shaped the revival of his thinking in the postwar period. Weber’s “liberal” admirers, such as Jaspers, promoted the idea that Germany would have been saved from Nazism had Weber been accepted as political leader, and as a consequence, after the Second World War, Weber was reinterpreted as a precursor of the new federal republic and its form of liberal democracy. This distortion was relentlessly attacked by
Wolfgang Mommsen in his 1959 dissertation which noted Weber's attitude toward the normative premises of conventional liberal constitutionalism and suggested that his devotion to the idea of great leadership placed his thoughts uncomfortably close to the facist Führerprinzip leadership principle of Nazi political thought. This suggestion produced a controversy that broke out in a visible way in the 1964 commemoration of the centennial of his birth, when the thesis was radicalized by Marcuse and Habermas. Mommsen later stressed that he did not believe that Weber's own intentions had been anti-democratic in the Nazi manner, but that nevertheless "it crossed the boundaries of the traditional understanding of democracy and was amenable to reinterpretation in an anti-democratic sense" (1974, 421).

Weber's thought appears early in the United States, but not as a founding figure of sociology, since he had no "system" of the sort that other German and American thinkers had, and was only intermittently identified as a sociologist. Economists first translated his work: Frank Knight his *General Economic History*, based on student lecture notes and some added material from earlier work, Talcott Parsons his *Protestant Ethic*, the argument of which was popularized in Britain by R. H. Tawney. After the second world war, the American social sciences, and especially sociology, were exported, in part as an alternative to Marxism, and Weber's ideas, understood primarily in American terms, became influential, in the United Kingdom and in Germany itself. The characteristic emphasis was on value-free science and the rejection of ideological thinking, and on specific sociological concepts, such as charisma and bureaucratization, and on Weber's rejection of the Marxist claim of primacy of material over spiritual or institutional explanation. Weberian approaches typically were seen as emphasizing the practical demands of bureaucracy, or the autonomous role of interest other than economic interests, such as ideal interests. The notion of the Protestant ethic fit with analysis of modernization and development of the sort that were part of the American response to third world and anticolonial movements, and were generalized and applied to such countries as Japan.

Weber came to be regarded as a distinguished forebear of antipositivist sociologist by virtue of his use of the terms meaning and understanding to differentiate his own approach to sociology. The refinement and appropriation of Weber's idea of an interpretative sociology by phenomenologists such as Alfred Schutz became one source of a phenomenological approach to sociology. Weberian ideas were also conveyed through the writings of such figures as Karl Mannheim and Norbert Elias, but in forms increasingly distant from Weber's own thought. This set the stage for a series of rediscoveries within sociology of "the original" Weber so that the 80s and 90s saw within sociology, and especially in the work of such writers as Wolfgang Schluchter, and more generally in connection with the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* project, a much more disciplined return to Weber's original concerns, and a vindication of the importance of such basic problems to Weber as the problem of western uniqueness.

Although in his final post and through much of his teaching career Weber was an
economist and economic historian, his influence on economic history has been limited. But within political science and sociology, by the end of the 20th century, a great many of the fragments of Weber's thought had become part of the standard conceptual tool kit. It is doubtless a result of Weber's gift as a clarifier of concepts that these tools have shown such as an astonishing staying power. In many cases, such as the concept of charisma and Protestant ethic, the concepts passed into common usage.

8. List of works


Selected English Translations of major writings:

Press, Ithaca, NY.


References and Further Reading