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29 Max Weber

Of all the classical social theorists, it is probably fair to say that none have suffered such distortion as Marx and Weber (though this transformation is also a broader trend, including Freud and Durkheim). Marx and Weber have been turned into apologists for the very phenomena which they set out to criticise, Marx set up as an apologist for Soviet 'primitive communism', Weber as an enthusiastic advocate of bureaucracy, the 'value-free' science, and the onward march of rationalisation. An accompanying problem in the reception of Weber has been the widespread tendency to set Marx and Weber against each other, as adversaries, with Weber as 'the bourgeois Marx' (cf. Bittman 1986; Beilharz 1983). We need to scrape off some of these accretions on Weber before we can begin to indicate something of the nature of his thought, because it is really only quite recently that Weber scholarship has begun this exercise of reading Weber with new (or, in a historical sense, old) eyes.

Before we proceed to Weber's sociology, a word is appropriate about his politics. Marx's communism is universally declared or declaimed, as though it were uncommon for social theorists to engage in politics. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, Weber, and Durkheim, and more recent theorists such as Castoriadis and Habermas, are all, by definition, political animals. Weber was political from the first to the last. The young Weber was an active researcher into social policy and labour conditions; the later Weber conducted research into the psychophysics of industrial work, but was also a participant in the Versailles peace negotiations and a contributor to the Weimar Constitution (Tribe 1989; Mommsen 1989; Weber 1988).

In all this, his sympathies were arguably closer to the German Social Democratic Party than has been acknowledged, at least to its reformist current (Mommsen and Osterhammel 1987). It is no accident that two of his young friends, Lukács and Michels, were revolutionaries, for Weber also had his romantic impulse. Writing closer to the turn of the

century, though, he believed the hope of redemption to be decisively lost, a redundant Victorian dream. As recent scholarship in English has finally recognised, the vital figure in Weber's shadow (along with Goethe) is Nietzsche. If Weber's world is one without great hopes, it is also, like Nietzsche's, one without the traditional great illusions. Where Marx's lifespan was 1818–1883, Weber's was 1864–1920. Weber's moment, rather like our own today, was one of circumspection, introspection, and modest hopes. Right-and left-wing myths of progress were both too fearful for Weber, but he was not the defeatist he is often portrayed as.

THE 'PROTESTANT ETHIC' AND WEBER'S SOCIOLOGY

To turn to Weber's published work is immediately to be overwhelmed—sociology of religion, medieval and ancient law and history, sociology of music ('The History of the Piano'), action, the city, methodology, charisma ... The binding thread is Weber's concern with culture, or how we live, and its rationalisation. Weber's leading and most controversial work here is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5). Contrasted to massive and arid texts such as *Economy and Society* (in English, 1968), it is Weber at his reflective and conversational best. Weber's essay is often cast as a narrowly religious inquiry, or as a metanarrative about ideology and the primacy of ideas in social life. Neither proposition manages to capture Weber's purpose, which is to discuss problems of rationality and the rationalisation of culture. Where Marx draws out commodification as the central trend of modernity, Weber draws attention to the tendency to universal calculation, itself underpinned by the rationalisation, disenchantment or demagification of everyday life (Weber 1904–5: 18).

In common with Marx and Durkheim, Weber takes a stand against utilitarianism or the cult of utility, that which would replace all matters of quality with calculus about quantity (Seidman 1983). Weber regards rationalisation as an inexorable, yet ambivalent process (Löwith 1982). As he argues later, citizens of modernity need bureaucracy, justice, legality and administration, yet they all, in turn, also feed upon us. Weber does not, however, construct his theory in terms of the bureaucratic system. In form and content his method is essayistic. It is neither exhaustive—heaping up empirical evidence—nor systematic in the manner of Marx's *Capital*. Weber's approach to knowledge is conversational, in the manner of hermeneutics; he uses exemplary instances, the historic figures of Franklin and Baxter, in order to illustrate the claim that with capitalism there emerges a new way of living: or more precisely, that capitalism emerges together with a new, rationalised and calculative way of life.

Calvinism encourages asceticism, the gathering of wealth to God's greater glory, and not for worldly luxury; this accumulation of capital

makes possible the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Now the logic of the worldly pursuit of gain for God turns back on itself; if religion helps to bring about the advent of capitalism, capitalism itself promptly sets about destroying religion. Weber quotes Goethe: asceticism seeks ever the good, but creates evil (Weber 1904–5: 172). Thus Weber appeals to the theme present throughout his work, the Hegelian cunning of reason or irony of history, what in everyday life we less elegantly call unintended consequence. The implication is clear—what we call rationality becomes irrational. Capitalist rationality produces a self-sufficient, self-sustaining cosmos, to the extent that its citizens forget the plurality of rationalities (p. 78). Bound, like Sisyphus, to the stones of our specialisation, we become entrapped within the steel-hard housing of our own unwitting manufacture (p. 181). Disenchantment confronts us. Like Marx, Weber summons Goethe to judge the human condition: we are 'Specialists without spirit, hedonists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved' (p. 182). Little wonder that Weber is often read as a pessimist, or paired together with Nietzsche as a nihilist.

But there is more to the story. If this is Weber's common visage in social theory, then there is another Weber in mainstream sociology, the one who wrote about (and allegedly was enthusiastic about) bureaucracy and model-building. Most undergraduates are fortunate to meet the reflective or philosophical Weber at all. What they typically find served up as Weber in sociology is the proposition that status and political power offer a counterbalance and qualification to the power of class, and the model concerning the ideal-typical attributes of bureaucracy (Weber 1948: chs. 7 and 8). The significance of status and political power are indeed considerable for Weber, for they indicate a plurality of forms of domination and spheres of action not routinely recognisable to Marx.

For Marx, the problem of modernity is capitalism; for Weber, capitalism is a fundamental part of the problem, but only part of it. Weber makes the elementary observation that classes do not, cannot act—groups do, including groups and representatives which identify with classes. Weber retains a pragmatic sense of action compared, say, to Lukács or the young Marx, for whom the proletariat was a collective actor. The forms of action, authority and legitimation Weber then identifies as traditional, charismatic and rational-legal, roughly sequential viewed schematically, but always in mixed historical fusion. Bureaucracy becomes predominant in all spheres of public life because of the increasing formalisation of public relations; this begins the Weberian process later explained by Habermas as the colonisation and juridicalisation of the life-world.

The increasing centralisation of bureaucracy proceeds hand-in-hand with the increasing centralisation of wealth (Weber 1948: 221). Ironi-

cally, just as capitalism erodes religion, so does organisation undermine the mass democracy which it emerges in league with (Weber 1948: 224; Michels 1915). As with the *Protestant Ethic*, however, Weber's claim is not simply that bureaucracy exists in some narrow institutional or organisational sense; rather it is that our culture, our practices and beliefs become bureaucratic. It is not ideas which bring about this process, but material and ideal *interests*, as actors conceive them (Weber 1948: 280). If the popular image of Weber's sociology and its buzz words—status, bureaucracy, charisma—are then reinserted into this context, a more striking image of Weber's purpose can be allowed to emerge. His is a sceptical social theory, governed by concerns of complexity, action, individual motivation, forms of association, and social consequence.

POLITICS AND SCHOLARSHIP

The nature of Weber's project becomes further apparent when it is located in the context of his three famous lectures, on politics and knowledge as vocations and on socialism. The lectures reward careful reading. Parts of them address a world long gone; parts pierce the heart of the present. Even without knowing the timbre of his voice or the inflection of his native German prose, the lectures tell us a great deal both about Weber and about ourselves. Weber viewed the social world as necessarily consisting of distinct spheres and ethics. The problem with bureaucracy, for example, was to keep it where it belonged; similarly with other practices.

In the context of the growing political demagoguery of the emerging Weimar Republic—the collapse of the Empire left insurrection widespread, fascism incipient—Weber was anxious that politics and scholarship be kept separate, not because they were unconnected, but because each had its own distinct purpose. Politics proper concerned matters of state. Politics needed to be kept separate from bureaucracy or administration; each practice was significant, for all societies, real or imagined, were compelled to secure their own order (Weber 1948: 91–2). Administration calls on coolness; politics, for Weber, is primarily the scene of struggle and passion. Yet ironically, like much else in social life, political action is also given to turning back on itself. This is a general predicament for Weber, part of a broad societal process in which *means* come to dominate *ends* (Weber 1948: 120).

Politics and scholarship alike demand persistence, which is difficult in both spheres because each is given to corruption. Scholarship is, if anything, more arbitrary. Insight can be the product of accident or coincidence just as much as of deskwork, but deskwork remains the formal precondition of knowledge (1948, p. 136). Anticipating Foucault's concerns about power and knowledge, Weber also sketches

the idea of the specific as opposed to the renaissance intellectual (p. 137) and, like Lévi-Strauss, he proposes that we moderns do not know ourselves any better than the 'primitives' (p. 139).

In all this Weber's is an astonishingly contemporary presence—his scholarship is committed yet contingent, and he relies upon the case study rather than the master work, microsociological insights emerging from macrosociological thinking. Above all, Weber's social theory is consistently historical, located within a sense of the epoch as one where science and religion have been sundered. Science can no longer generate meaning. But this does not leave us without hope, or without meaning. It throws upon us the responsibility to create our own meaning out of our own chests, for within the disenchantment of modernity there remain gods or orienting values to choose between (p. 155). So Weber exhorts us, via Goethe, to take up our vocations (p. 156). God is not dead, rather polytheism reigns; the shift, historically, is that research can no longer inform us of our values, which we must rather each grasp or forge. We make our own gods, but ours is not a godless-valueless world; God is no longer given by tradition, but chosen.

Scientisation is thus a dominant trend, but this does not mean that knowledge is no longer possible. Weber is concerned with the limits to knowledge, but he is no epistemological nihilist. Views of culture are always perspectival (Weber 1949: 81). And while perspectives are obviously socially formed,they are also individual. Weber put great stress on the individual, and on individual responsibility. In the collision of world views or gods, it was individuals who needed to take their stand and to argue. Weber would doubtless have agreed with Goethe's maxim that we aspire to the truth still, even though we know it to be elusive. Now clearly these kinds of sympathies in Weber make possible certain potential openings to existentialism and to phenomenology.

The question then returns: whether we do live in a metaphorical iron cage or prison and, if so, whether we can flee it to a sphere of value where we must create our own meaning (Scaff 1987). The least that need be said here is that the iron cage metaphor is overblown. It is essentially a mistranslation which too easily aligns Weber with the nihilism of Nietzsche and the anthropological pessimism of Foucault's prison-society image. Here it is important to remember that, like Foucault the prison activist, Weber was indeed a reformer. He understood that there was a strong relationship between social theory and social policy. The intransigence of the world did not tempt him to turn his back on politics or on scholarship as kindred vocations.

Was Weber, then, a socialist? The answer to this question is no, but it raises another, more interesting question about the relation between liberalism and socialism. Weber was in some ways a cultured bourgeois like Keynes, but this did not prevent either from being a reformer. The logic of his social theory, however, was that the prospect of a qualitative

break between capitalism and socialism was simply inconceivable. The day after the revolution—here he would agree with Gramsci and Durkheim—it would still be necessary to have bread in the shops and to get the children to school. In this regard Weber's distaste may be said to be for certain socialists more than for socialism, which he viewed as an historic form of economic organisation (Weber 1978: 251).

In his lecture on socialism Weber discusses the *Communist Manifesto* as a document of scientific achievement in the first order (Weber 1978: 256). What he objects to is its assertion that socialism could mean the end of domination. Weber sympathetically discusses the possibility of cooperation, but views state and capital as the central institutions of economic life, and fears the tyranny of the state more than that of capital. And in this, too, his social theory is perspectival, for he can immediately accept that from the position of the working class the view is different, even if the problems faced across society are similar. Socialism for Weber is one of the warring gods, but it is not the one he will choose. Given the irreconcilability of the modern gods, it is impossible for Weber to accept that there could ever be any kind of end to history or to struggle, to difference or to conflict. Modernity tests our mettle, each one of us: it demands to see how much we can stand, and this goes on every day of our lives.

Weber's influence in Australia has been strong but late, retarded, arguably, by the institutional emergence of sociology as a discipline only into the 1960s. Weber's influence on pioneers such as Davies (1964) and Encel (1970) is clear. Later followers include Wild (1978). On the whole, however, the philosophical Weber is a recent arrival in Australia, as in other English-speaking academic cultures. Weber has been re-read culturally or philosophically by teachers such as Zawar Hanfi and Harry Redner and by those enthusiastic for Habermas (Arnason nd; Brand 1990) or Lukács (Grumley 1988), and has an increasing if indirect presence in the present enthusiasm for the historical sociology which he largely pioneered, but which has yet to settle accounts with this debt (see, for example, Kennedy 1989).

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