



# **EUI Working Papers**

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Max Weber in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

Transdisciplinarity within the Social Sciences

Frank Adloff and Manuel Borutta (Editors)

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**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE**  
**MAX WEBER PROGRAMME**

*Max Weber in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:*  
*Transdisciplinarity within the Social Sciences*

FRANK ADLOFF and MANUEL BORUTTA (Editors)

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## Foreword

In 2006, when the Max Weber Programme was first launched, it was often thought – by applicants to Max Weber Fellowships, by potential participants in the programme, etc. – that the European University Institute was finally paying tribute to one of the most influential European Social Scientists by having a post-doctoral programme *about* Max Weber. As often happens with grant applications, many applicants to the first cohort of Max Weber Fellows embellished their applications with multiple references to Max Weber, even if their research had nothing to do with Max Weber, other than being research within the Social Sciences. These attempts at making applications ‘look *Weberian*’ were, in the end, futile. Applicants were, and are, selected from a large pool of young post-docs (within five years of finishing their PhDs) for their research excellence and commitment to follow up an academic career, to join a *multidisciplinary* post-doctoral programme in the Social Science and Humanities, without topic restrictions<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, the EUI, with the support of the European Commission (DG Education and Culture), is not paying tribute to Max Weber by organizing a programme on Max Weber studies. This would have been a programme very limited in scope and, as a result, with very limited impact in the Social Sciences and Humanities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. With the Max Weber Programme for post-doctoral studies we are paying tribute to Max Weber in a more proper *Weberian* way. In fact, there are five features of the MWP that basically define it, and which I will argue are very *Weberian*.

First, as said, it is not a narrow programme in scope that pre-defines ‘areas of research’ within the Social Sciences and Humanities, just as Max Weber did not pre-define a narrow topic for his research agenda; this allowed him to define and broaden the scope of the Social Sciences<sup>2</sup>. Second, it is a programme that pursues academic excellence, as Max Weber did in his writings – as in his famous *Science as a Vocation* (1917) - and in his academic practice; for example, as a charismatic lecturer. Third, it is a programme that, within academic excellence, specifically pursues research excellence, trying to bring together the best young social scientists world-wide, as Fellows, and leading scholars as participants in lectures, workshops and conferences, as Max Weber did in his research. Fourth, it is a *multidisciplinary* programme, not because Max Weber Fellows are expected to engage in *interdisciplinary* research, although they are most welcome to do so, but because they are expected ‘to talk to each other’ across disciplines, to overcome prejudicial disciplinary boundaries and gain understanding of how other social (or cultural) scientists work, as Max Weber understood in his ‘less disciplinary’ times. Fifth, it is a programme that, ultimately, aims to transcend its day-to-day research and academic activities by making a difference in post-doctoral education and having Max Weber Fellows make a difference in academia and in research in the Social Sciences and Humanities, just as Max Weber’s influence has transcended his own writings and lectures.

Yet even if the Max Weber Programme is not *about* Max Weber, in the sense of being *on* Max Weber, it was a most welcome initiative on the part of the Max Weber Fellows

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<sup>1</sup> Other than their research being related to the research conducted at the EUI, in a way that a suitable mentor could be found within the EUI faculty.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, as Adloff and Borutta say in their introduction, “Weber would not have called himself a ‘social scientist’ (Sozialwissenschaftler) but a ‘cultural scientist’ (Kulturwissenschaftler), a term that does not exist in the English language.”

– in particular, Frank Adloff and Manuel Borutta – to have a Max Weber conference *on* Max Weber within the first year of the programme. The result of this initiative, and of much work by Frank and Manuel, was the April 2007 conference “Max Weber in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Transdisciplinarity within the Social Sciences”. This collection of articles, together with the thoughtful introduction by Frank and Manuel, provides a good retrospective account of two days of discussions and presentations, as well as a window on ongoing research *on* Max Weber. As academic practice for the fellows involved and as a forum for current transdisciplinary research in the Social Sciences and Humanities it was a very *Weberian* conference, in the sense that the Max Weber Programme is *Weberian*. In fact, this conference opened a series of yearly conferences on *Classics Revisited*, and it was to be followed up by “David Hume on Norms and Institutions” (April 17, 2008).

I do not want to end without thanking all conference participants and, in particular, Frank Adloff and Manuel Borutta for the organization of the conference.

**Ramon Marimon**



## **Max Weber in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century or: how is Transdisciplinarity within the Social Sciences Possible Today?**

FRANK ADLOFF\* AND MANUEL BORUTTA\*

Max Weber, first a lawyer, then an economist and finally a sociologist, was one of the most important transdisciplinary ‘social scientists’.<sup>3</sup> How was it possible for him to work in so many disciplines? What was Weber’s impact on the social sciences? Are Weber’s questions and answers, are the theoretical perspectives and methodological tools he used and developed still useful for our research – or are they just outdated, Eurocentric and secularist? These questions – the origins, impact and up-to-date nature of Weber’s transdisciplinary work – were at the core of a conference held from 27 to 28 April, 2007 in San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy. The conference brought together leading scholars of history, sociology, political science, economics, law and social anthropology from Europe, India and the U.S. with the post-doctoral fellows from the Max Weber Programme of the European University Institute. This volume presents some results of this dialogue between the above mentioned disciplines. It will, we hope, contextualise and historicise Weber’s transdisciplinarity and discuss some of its limits, but also take it seriously as an intellectual adventure that continues to inspire social scientists today. Our introductory remarks will, *first*, compare the institutional settings of transdisciplinarity within the social sciences around 1900 with those of today; *secondly*, highlight Weber’s impact on the social sciences; *thirdly*, outline the potential and limits of Weber’s work for transdisciplinary studies within the social sciences. Finally, we shall sum up the contributions to this volume, which highlight Weber according to the background and in the context of the respective disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

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\* Prof. Dr. Frank Adloff, Freie Universität Berlin, John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Department of Sociology, Lansstraße 7-9, D-14195 Berlin, Germany. frank.adloff@fu-berlin.d

♦ Dr. Manuel Borutta, Universität zu Köln, Philosophische Fakultät, Historisches Seminar, Albertus-Magnus-Platz, D-50923 Köln, Germany. Manuel.Borutta@uni-koeln.de

<sup>3</sup> Weber would not have called himself a ‘social scientist’ (Sozialwissenschaftler) but a ‘cultural scientist’ (Kulturwissenschaftler), a term that does not exist in the English language. We therefore decided to use the term ‘social sciences’ in a broad way that includes history, economics, sociology, political science, social anthropology and law. While Weber’s impact on certain disciplines has been explored for sociology, political science and history (see e.g. Kocka 1986), his transdisciplinarity has, as far as we can see, not yet been the subject of systematic research.

<sup>4</sup> The conference was sponsored by the Max Weber Programme (MWP) for post-doctoral studies at the European University Institute (EUI), funded by the European Commission. We are grateful to the director of the MWP, Ramon Marimon, and to his academic assistant, Ruediger von Krosigk, for enabling us to organize the conference. The conference would not have been possible without the passionate and extremely efficient engagement of Susan Garvin. We also wish to thank the conference’s chairmen/-women and discussants Sascha O. Becker (LMU München), Stefania Bernini (MWP), László Bruszt (EUI), Jörg Friedrichs (MWP), Giammario Impullitti (MWP), Christian Joerges (EUI), Stéphanie Mahieu (MWP), Cristina Poncibò (MWP), Philippe C. Schmitter (EUI), Lars Vinx (MWP) – and the numerous participants of the vivid discussions for illuminating contributions, comments and questions.

## Historical Contexts: Transdisciplinarity Then and Now

Max Weber was born in 1864 in Erfurt; after studying law, philosophy, economics and history he received a degree in law. His ‘Habilitation’ was in Roman and trade law, and he received a professorship in law in Berlin. In 1894 he became professor of national and financial economy in Freiburg, in 1897 in Heidelberg. After suffering a nervous breakdown and various illnesses, he refrained from teaching in 1903. He lived as a private scholar in Heidelberg and died in 1920.

Since Weber worked in an era when the social sciences were not yet differentiated, it seems to be impossible to imitate his approach in the various disciplines of the social sciences as they are today. Strictly speaking, his work was *pre-disciplinary*. Furthermore, Weber was an advocate of scientific differentiation: in one of his most famous lectures – *Science as a Vocation* (1917) – he pointed out that science had reached an unprecedented level of specialization and that this would not change in the future. Scientists would have to specialise in certain fields of a discipline. Sometimes outsiders might formulate questions that are useful for specialists; however, having bigger expectations in terms of transdisciplinarity seemed to be in vain (Weber 1946/58). Thus, it seems odd to be publishing an issue on Weber and the notion of transdisciplinarity. Furthermore, it may appear presumptuous to edit a volume on Weber, presenting one of the most important ‘founding fathers’ of *sociology* as a *transdisciplinary* thinker. However, we think that it is not conceited, quite the contrary: Weber was a *pre-* and a real *transdisciplinary* scientist and it can be said that we still can learn a lot from him.

In today’s social sciences we have to distinguish between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity; the last being the most demanding concept. Multidisciplinary research refers to coordinated studies focusing on certain questions from different disciplinary perspectives. Transdisciplinarity includes the development of an overarching paradigm that encompasses a number of disciplines (see Somerville/Rapport 2000; Jeffrey 2003). It is based on the assumption that there are no ontologically compelling borders between sociology, political science, economics, history and anthropology and that all social sciences focus on the social, broadly defined as including all human activities that cannot be fully explained on physiological and biological terms (cf. Steinmetz 2007). Interdisciplinarity is a category that falls between the other two and includes an interaction between the disciplines (see Kocka 1987; Blume 1990; Klein 1990; Messer-Davidow et al. 1993; Weingart/Stehr 2000; Moran 2002; Joas/Kippenberg 2005). Normally, inter- and transdisciplinarity are seen as positive because the nature of the research problems requires an interdisciplinary treatment. Universities are organized around disciplines, but the problems which modern societies face are not (see Gibbons 1994; Wallerstein 1996/1999; Brewer 1999; Nowotny et al. 2001): “real-world problems do not come in disciplinary-shaped boxes” (Jeffrey 2003: 539). Therefore, funding agencies often require interdisciplinary collaboration from their grantees. However, it should be clear from the outset how difficult it is to overcome disciplinary boundaries and to find a common language for the purpose of solving a commonly defined problem. Furthermore, inter- and transdisciplinarity could also be goals in themselves, born out of the longing for a unity

of the sciences which was lost through the process of specialization. For whatever reason, inter- and transdisciplinarity are big issues.<sup>5</sup>

However, things get more complicated when we acknowledge that communication problems do not exist only between disciplines but within them as well. Snow's often cited "two cultures" – literature vs. science – can also be found within disciplines such as history, sociology and political science, and the tensions between them reappear under labels such as 'social history' vs. 'cultural history', 'quantitative vs. qualitative social research', 'positivism vs. constructivism' or 'explanation vs. interpretation' (see, e.g., Abbott 1990, 1991, 2004; Gorski 2004). In this context, Weber can still offer a common vocabulary and useful methodological and theoretical perspectives – even within a landscape that has fundamentally changed since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – because his work has deeply influenced the social sciences.

### **Intellectual Transfers: Weber's Questions and the Social Sciences**

Weber is not easy to 'transfer'. A look at his writings could leave one fairly desperate because most of them are so fragmented and disparate (see Joas 2007). It is clear that Weber must have had an enormous background of historical knowledge and that he was passionate in his way of theorising and looking for the truth, but it is not so clear what his general thesis was or how one could operationalise his general approach. For example, although his famous essay on the *Protestant Ethic* from 1904 has been widely discussed over the last 100 years, even this text has been severely criticised and almost nobody would defend it in its entirety today (e.g., Lehmann/Roth 1995). The two famous speeches – *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation* published in 1919 – are not texts of social science in a narrow sense. However, his opus magnum, *Economy and Society*, which was compiled by his wife Marianne after his death (Weber [1921] 1968), is really difficult to understand and it is doubtful whether many people read all the chapters. Nevertheless, the members of the International Sociological Association selected it as the most important book of the century. Weber's three books on the world religions are rich and stimulating, but many parts of this work have been disproved. According to Hans Joas (ibid.: 63-4), Weber's writings alone cannot explain his appeal; one has also to take into account that there has been and still is a Weber-cult or myth. Weber as a charismatic intellectual became a myth during his later life and after his death. This helped to make him one of the most influential social scientists after his death in 1920.<sup>6</sup>

Weber is nowadays seen as a 'founding father' of sociology, but he was also, to recall Niklas Luhmann's insight, a classical and, overall, influential social scientist – not because he gave us concrete *answers* that are still valid, but because he posed *questions* which are still with us: his questions inspire various disciplines and they provide a basis for communication among them. Even after historicising Weber's works (Radkau 2005), there is a core of questions in his writings that still accompany us.

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<sup>5</sup> Interdisciplinary institutions are, e.g., the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (1930), the Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung in Bielefeld (1966), the European University Institute in Florence (1972/76), the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Uppsala (1985) and the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt (1998).

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Weber's biography of her husband, finished in 1926, helped in creating this myth (see Weber 1975).

On a basic level, for instance, Weber focused on the foundations of the social sciences as empirical disciplines examining the actions of human beings (see Collins 1986); thus asking, how can human action be understood and explained? Are people rational actors in general or shouldn't we distinguish more clearly between different types of action and rationality? Can we identify social laws governing society, or is history a sequence of unique constellations? Furthermore, he asked: how is the integration of society possible? Do the different spheres of life – politics, economics, law, religion and private life – follow different logics? Moreover, Weber did historical-comparative work on the world religions and he tried to identify the forces that eventually led to the Western concept of modernity. Weber claimed that a general process of 'rationalization' was underway leading to capitalism, the bureaucratic state, the natural sciences, and the 'disenchantment' of the world. Although Weber's work *is* Eurocentric and his image of Europe is not up-to-date anymore, these *are* still big questions (cf. Kalberg 1994) that *should* be reformulated in new and different, non-Eurocentric and post-secularist ways. How was the modern state possible and how do we have to define 'the state' today? What is the origin and future of capitalism? How did religions shape societies in different regions of the world, and what is religion? Is modern society expanding our individual and collective freedom or do we live in an 'iron cage' of dependence? All these questions came up during Weber's time and they are still with us. But one could go a step further: Weber is still with us because some of his major categories are still applied in various disciplines. What kind of theoretical perspectives did Weber offer that might still be relevant?

### **Theoretical Potentials: is the Weber-Paradigm still up-to-date?**

For a long time Weber's works were just used as a quarry, as a repertory of concepts, that could be used for a range of purposes. But others, and we would agree with this, argue that there is more in Weber, that there is a *Weber-paradigm* that consists of concepts that can be adopted by various disciplines (see Kocka 1986; Albert et al. 2005). This paradigm of doing social research is a *balanced approach* which stands opposed to one-sidedness because it emphasizes tensions which are not resolved (cf. Schluchter 2003).

Some examples illustrate this point: Weber starts with the individual and his or her meaningful actions (affectual, traditional, value-rational, means-end rational). Therefore he is interpreted as an early protagonist of a *praxeological turn* (Welskopp 1997; Reckwitz 2000: 19, 111), but also admired or blamed for being a 'methodological individualist'. However, in his empirical studies legitimate social orders and institutional constellations are rather more important: there he speaks of institutions, organizations, strata, classes and groups in general. Weber advances the concept of rational action but at the same time he is fascinated by the concept of charismatic action, which is beyond the scope of instrumental rationality. He distinguishes between different forms of rationality (practical, theoretical, substantive and formal rationality; see Kalberg 1980), and he does not hold the view that there is only one concept of rationality as most of the Rational Choice approaches do. Weber does not ignore values; a particular unified configuration of values constitutes different ways of life.

On a methodological level, Weber wants to *understand* human action *and* to *explain* it at the same time.<sup>7</sup> This operation called “understanding and explaining” social action is related to Weber’s famous concept of constructing ideal types that bring theoretical order into the chaotic streams of social life.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Weber argues against a crude materialism and does so without falling into idealism: ‘Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the “world images” that have been created by “ideas” have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest’ (Weber 1946/1958: 280).

However, this balance between one-sided perspectives did not avert the tendency of singling out only some key concepts of Weber’s works while neglecting others – quite the contrary. For instance, methodological individualists and rational choice theorists rely on Weber, as do proponents of all kinds of societal holism such as systems theory. Positivists rely on his methodological approaches, as do followers of an interpretative paradigm (see Schluchter 2003).

The concepts of social *action*, social *order* and social *change* can thus be found in Weber; he speaks of individuals, their interests and values, about institutions, societal and juridical norms, about cultural ideas, and he is always interested in their *constellations and their tensions* – avoiding taking sides on any of these dichotomies. Thus, Weber offered the basis for a fully-fledged, non-reductive paradigm for the social sciences to which generations of researchers from various disciplines could relate during the 20<sup>th</sup> century – however selectively they did so.

But taking the Weber-paradigm seriously: would it also enable a dialogue among disciplines? The chances for such an endeavour are not bad since the scope of Weber’s work – being global in perspective and interdisciplinary in its approach – has enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years (see Sica 2004). Thus, our conference asked if Weber’s general perspectives are still relevant, and if they are, whether they can still be used across disciplines. To be more clear and exact, three questions have to be posed: *first*, how was transdisciplinarity possible in Weber’s time? We have already given the tentative answer that, on the one hand, transdisciplinarity was not the same as it is today because the boundaries of the disciplines were not yet so defined (or ‘disciplined’). On the other hand, Weber was an exceptionally-gifted and prolific thinker, able to master the scattered knowledge of his time. He did so by formulating questions which are still relevant today, and by developing theoretical categories that were sufficiently open to be used in the different emerging social sciences. *Secondly*, what exactly, however, was his influence on the social sciences? *Thirdly*, in which ways can his writings still serve as an integrating corpus to which the several disciplines might relate?

### **Disciplinary Perspectives: Weber Revisited**

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<sup>7</sup> “Sociology (...) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. [...] Action is ‘social’ insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (Weber 1921/1968: 4).

<sup>8</sup> “An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct. [...] In its conceptual purity, this mental construct (...) cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality” (Weber 1903-1917/1949: 90).

The conference began with general references to Weber's life and work, and to his particular style of transdisciplinarity. **Joachim Radkau** (Universität Bielefeld), whose current biography on Weber is the most comprehensive and far-reaching one to date, points out that Weber has often been 'quartered' and he has been claimed to be the patron of various specialized disciplines: systems theory, interpretative sociology, social history, sociology of religion, organization studies, philosophy of science and so on – notwithstanding that his specialty consisted in overstepping disciplinary boundaries. But, according to Radkau, he did this in a disciplined way; his thinking retained cohesiveness because of his anthropological approach. He believed in certain features of human nature (especially notions of passion), which can be found – albeit in different variants – in all cultures. When he was fighting against naturalism in the social sciences, it was a fight against the dubious naturalism of his time. Although he conceptualized human nature as something physical, he saw in it not only a determination but also a chance – and, starting with this idea, Radkau proposes a new naturalism as the basis for the social sciences (see also Radkau 2005).

We then moved on to Weber's methodological foundation of the social sciences in general. **Sandro Segre** (Università degli studi di Genova) makes clear that, for Weber, rational action was 'only' an ideal type, formulated for the purposes of description and explanation within the social sciences. On the one hand, Segre shows that this methodological tool made the Weberian position peculiar in the context of the epistemological discussions which characterized the German and Austrian social sciences at the turn of the 19th century. Weber, the economist, 'was not a wholehearted proponent of the German Historical School, but in reality quite positive to analytical economics of the British and Austrian type' (Swedberg 1999: 565). In the field of theoretical economics, he was almost a neoclassical economist (as we would say today), but, Weber claimed, the study of actually existing economies demands more than the principle of marginal utility, namely the perspectives of economic history and economic sociology. This reminder of the discussions of early economics and early sociology could build a basis for discussing the boundaries of both disciplines. On the other hand, Segre shows how Weber's formulation of rational action as an ideal type has elicited a considerable amount of attention, and produced different evaluations on the part of some Rational Choice theorists. Segre concludes that, because of the richness of Weber's notion of rationality, it can still compete with conceptions of rationality within current Rational Choice Theory. Hence, whereas Radkau proposes the concept of human nature (in terms of 'drives' and 'passions') as a basis for a communication among disciplines, Segre suggests a broad concept of rationality.

The following day, the conference focused on Weber's influence on the research agendas of the various disciplines. In the session on economics, Weber's most influential essay – *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* – was extensively discussed. On the one hand it was asked (Zilibotti) how Western culture and capitalism relate to each other, on the other (Hobson) whether Weber's way of posing the question was desperately Eurocentric.

**Fabrizio Zilibotti** (Universität Zürich) discusses the British Industrial Revolution that triggered a reversal in the social order whereby the landed elite was replaced by industrial capitalists, rising from the middle classes, as the economically-dominant group. While relying on some of Weber's observations in the *Protestant Ethic* (see also Becker/Wößmann 2007), he proposes an economic theory of preference formation

where both the divergence of attitudes across social classes and the consequent reversal of economic fortunes are equilibrium outcomes (cf. Doepke/Zilibotti 2006). Parents shape their children's preferences in response to economic incentives and this results in the stratification of society along occupational lines. Middle-class families in occupations that require effort, skill, and experience develop patience and a typical work ethic, whereas upper-class families, relying on rental income, cultivate a refined taste for leisure. These class-specific attitudes, which are rooted in the nature of pre-industrial professions, become key determinants of success once industrialization transforms the economic landscape.

**John M. Hobson** (University of Sheffield), however, criticizes Weber's explanation of the rise of Western capitalism as harshly Eurocentric. Hobson asks whether this means that sociological neo-Weberianism is unable to produce a non-Eurocentric account, and whether a non-Eurocentric theory of the rise of the West should be an objective for neo-Weberians. He seeks to answer these two questions by arguing that his own approach (Hobson 2004), focusing on the economic achievements of the East that were eventually adopted by the West, in some ways better realises the theoretical promises that neo-Weberians make concerning the issues of multi-causality, multi-spatiality and discontinuity/contingency in social change.

The second topic of the day was Weber's view on the relationship between religion and modernity (see Kippenberg/Riesebrodt 2001). His master narrative of a rationalization and disenchantment in modern society is examined from a historical perspective by **Hartmut Lehmann** (Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel). Lehmann reconstructs the history of the term 'disenchantment' ('Entzauberung'), which was defined by Weber as a process of elimination of the magic, as an irreversible rationalization of all worldly matters. He then highlights some of Weber's blind spots in the past and present. As a historian, Weber overemphasised the Puritans' rationality and neglected the emotional elements of their beliefs. Weber ignored the religious awakenings of the past and of the present. As a sociologist, he did not notice the emotional appeal of modern nationalism. His judgements, methods and theories were deeply influenced by the political, social and cultural context of his time. Therefore they cannot be used by social scientists as timeless and universal tools. But although Weber was Eurocentric, with a Protestant, liberal, anti-Catholic bias (see Radkau 2005; Borutta 2008), he took religion seriously as a driving force of modernity – in contrast to many of his followers (cf. Lehmann 2004).

Thirdly, Weber was a lawyer but first and foremost a sociologist of law: how did he contribute to an understanding of law as something that shapes society and that is shaped by it? **Catherine Colliot-Thélène** (Université de Rennes I) states that Weber's sociology of law, which constitutes a major part of his *Economy and Society*, has more often been cited than really read during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Without being deterministic, it situates the law within its economic and political contexts, recognizing its partially autonomous development (cf. Kennedy 2004). According to Weber, a process of rationalization is taking place in the modern era in all three spheres, which implies a certain formalization and predictability of the law. Weber's thesis that the rationalization of law encompassed a radical de-sacralization, which went so far that the law was finally perceived as nothing more than a technique of regulation that fits well with the economy and politics, has provoked a lot of comments and opposition. Colliot-Thélène finally shows the limits of this approach in the contemporary world of globalization (see also Colliot-Thélène 2001).

Fourthly, Weber the sociologist asked how the rise of the West and western modernity was possible. Is this still the right question nowadays or do we have to look at notions of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000) and entangled histories (Randeria 2006)? Is the question of the diffusion of capitalism under conditions of a modern world culture in current times not more important than the question of its genesis (Schwinn 2004)? Or did 'modernity' already have a 'global' shape around 1900 (Dirlik 2006)?

**Shalini Randeria** (Universität Zürich) whose paper is not included in this volume points out that Europeans' discourse on their own society is connected to a conceptual nationalism. The manifold linkages and exchanges between European and non-European societies both in the past and the present are disregarded, and even the current discussion on multiple modernities treats civilizations as separate entities. In contrast to this, Randeria thinks of European history in the context of colonialism and imperialism and sheds light on transnational and post-colonial perspectives. This *histoire croisée* is a shared and divided history: it allows for an understanding of the development of a global modernity as a shared history of interaction and interdependence but also points to the boundaries that are thus produced. These lasting processes, she claims, were and are crucial for the identity formation within and outside Europe.

Last but not least, we took up the question of Weber's influence on political science. Does his view of the modern state still hold, and is his theory of power and legitimate domination a basis for this discipline? **Julia Adams** (Yale University, paper not included here) addresses these questions by having a closer look at Weber's concept of ideal types. Social scientists depend on them to do the normal scientific work of macro-political analysis. They also discuss, and rightly so, the internal coherence of ideal types like 'bureaucracy', 'patrimonial domination', 'capitalism', 'charisma', 'traditional authority', 'rationalization' etc. (cf. Adams 2005). Nonetheless, ideal types are both arrays of signifiers that are used as indispensable tools of analysis and compressed arguments, whose fissures can signal not merely mistakes or sloppiness but meaningful and consequential contradictions in thought and word. According to Adams, the conceptual tensions of Weber's categories are still suitable. They reflect continuing problems in the conduct of politics, pointing to plural, theoretically-open avenues for analyzing them.

As can immediately be seen, a difficult task lay in front of us: we talked about Weber the economist, lawyer, (political) sociologist and historian, about his questions and his theoretical categories; and we talked about research traditions of various disciplines and the possibility of crossing these disciplinary borders. Whether we succeeded in coming closer to this goal is for the reader to decide.

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## Max Weber between ‘Eruptive Creativity’ and ‘Disciplined Transdisciplinarity’

Joachim Radkau\*

### Introduction: The enigma of Weber’s fame

It is not easy to say why Weber became as famous as he did. Those who have done research on him for many years are all too familiar with his weaknesses and may sometimes feel downright anger that they are devoting so much valuable time to him.<sup>9</sup> As to why they do this, the answers centre on certain of his concepts, theses, theories and methods: the types of legitimate rule, the supposed ‘elective affinity’ (Goethe) between the Puritan ethic and ‘spirit’ of capitalism, the theory of ideal types and the value-freedom of science. That is all very well. But it was already questionable in Weber’s day whether *The Protestant Ethic* stood up to empirical scrutiny, and as to ‘value freedom’, it has long been a virtual truism among social scientists that it is more sensible to face up to one’s own cognitive interests and the value judgements contained in them, rather than imagining that one can write using value-free terms about (at least the major) historical-sociological questions.

What of the concepts? ‘Charisma’ – which, though not originating with Weber, did become famous through him – has probably had the greatest success. But the social sciences have not been able to do much with the ‘a-cosmic love’ that is supposed to break social orders in two. In general, Weber showed no great skill in finding a succinct conceptualization of his thoughts.<sup>10</sup> In his haste he continually places words in quotation marks,<sup>11</sup> probably because he thought that he did not yet have the most precise concept. This is one indication of the fact that, unlike so many Weberians, he thought on the basis of phenomena rather than concepts. He was not the kind of academic whose reputation rests mainly on artful coining of his own trademark concepts. He was drawn to the concrete not least because ‘the test of concrete historical situations’ reveals ‘seemingly unambiguous concepts in their ambiguity’.<sup>12</sup>

Especially in the years from 1903 to 1907, often in debate with other thinkers, Weber published a series of lengthy essays on the theory and methodology of science, from which his executors assembled his ostensible ‘theory of science’. These writings, some of the least enjoyable in his whole body of work, were composed in troubled times when his health was teetering from one relapse to another. In 1913, when he was feeling

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\* Prof. Dr. Joachim Radkau, Universität Bielefeld, Abteilung Geschichte, Universitätsstr. 25, D-33615 Bielefeld, Germany. joachim.radkau@uni-bielefeld.de

<sup>9</sup> Even an admirer like Wilhelm Hennis can groan that Weber’s expectations of his readers border on ‘impertinence’. ‘Occasionally,’ he writes, ‘one would like to lose patience with Weber!’ Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Webers Fragestellung. Studien zur Biographie des Werks*, Tübingen 1987, pp. 22 and 19.

<sup>10</sup> Already at the age of twenty, Weber concluded an interminable letter to Hermann Baumgarten with an apology: ‘I have never managed to express myself with particular brevity; everything always keeps growing and growing.’

<sup>11</sup> There is already a literature on this too: see the entry ‘Quote marks and italics in Weber’s texts’, in: Richard Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary. Key Words and Central Concepts*, Stanford 2005, pp. 219 f.

<sup>12</sup> Review of Adolf Weber’s *Die Aufgaben der Volkswirtschaftslehre als Wissenschaft*, in: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft* 29 (1909), pp. 615 ff.

well, he detested the ‘methodological pestilence’ with which he thought sociology had been struck [B 139].<sup>13</sup> Certainly it would be hard to find the enduring essence of his work in the supposed ‘theory of science’. But his endlessly-quoted lecture of 7 November 1917, ‘Science as a Vocation’, is itself only a very partial reflection of his way of conducting scientific investigation. He was the polar opposite of the modern type of blinkered specialist whom he describes there. It is impossible to grasp what is special about him by assembling a handful of quotes from these texts.

The process of creation in Weber is not easy to reconstruct. Marianne Weber, for whom his style of work was not exactly exemplary, probably covered up many traces of it. Scarcely any manuscripts or corrected drafts of his writings have been preserved (and, even if they had, it is doubtful whether anyone would be able to make head or tail of them). He did not write out his lectures in advance but merely jotted down some keywords on a piece of paper.<sup>14</sup> ‘Yesterday I packed your lecture notebooks, but they were an absolute mess, you untidy little boy’, Marianne wrote to Max in 1910 when they were moving home in Heidelberg.<sup>15</sup> Later, in his Munich work room, he made notes on sheets of paper and spread them out on a couple of tables. Marianne developed an aesthetic repulsion for this kind of ‘chaos’:

‘Yes, the desk was taboo! A chaotic jumble of papers, [where] he often got into a frenzy looking for a note or letter and experienced the cussedness of inanimate objects. It was a long time before my appetite for beauty would tolerate such an island of disorder in his room, and the few angry outbursts I caused in him were nearly always provoked by what he called my quadratic drive for order, which, he claimed, had to work itself out in quadratic rearrangement of books and sheets of paper.’<sup>16</sup>

Actually, she almost never speaks of an angry outburst by her husband against herself. Anyone who works with such a chaos of papers around him will understand Weber’s rage, but there can be no doubt that, although he found rationalization processes everywhere in world history, his own work methods show no sign of them. As Theodor Heuss remarked, Weber’s ‘style of work’ gave an impression of ‘irrationality or restlessness in the series of questions that he addressed’ [WzG 157]. We are struck by the incapacity for any economy of work. At the same time, we note how well Marianne knew her way around his study room.

Weber’s hasty and fluttery handwriting is a nightmare for biographers, as it already was for those who received his letters or for typesetters who had to puzzle over his manuscripts; it testifies to an astonishing disregard for others and an inability to control

<sup>13</sup> Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Webers Wissenschaft vom Menschen*, Tübingen 1996, p. 69 fn. During the 1919-20 winter semester in Munich, Weber noted: ‘Method is the most sterile thing there is. ... With method alone nothing has ever been created.’

<sup>14</sup> Nachlass Weber, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (=Ana 446), Sch. 14, Marianne to Helene Weber, 28.10.1895: Max Weber had given a speech in Giessen. ‘Just think: *unfortunately* he is not writing it up – “one shouldn’t write down everything one says” – so we will know of it only from the newspaper reports. He has promised to tell me today what it contained, but I scarcely believe that he’ll get round to it.’ So, Weber did not feel that all his thoughts and ideas were so precious that he should carefully preserve them – perhaps because, in his good periods, he always had so many and suffered from the superabundance. One notes, by the way, how closely Marianne and Helene followed his work – or at least his public appearances.

<sup>15</sup> N.d., but according to information from Birgit Rudhard it should be dated to 17 August 1910.

<sup>16</sup> Ana 446 Sch. 20 VI.

his own motor functions. His illness made matters still worse.<sup>17</sup> Again and again the illegibility of his handwriting delayed publication and meant that he had to put up money of his own, or borrow it from his mother [MWG I/5, 52f.]. However good his intentions, he found it extremely hard to discipline his hand. At times he even thought that, because of his 'calligraphic incompetence', he would have to give up writing altogether! [MWG I/5, 123].

If his hand flew over the paper, so that letters tilted now one way now the other, this was probably due not only to his nervous disposition but also to the fact that he could not express simultaneously 'several correlative lines of thought' [WB 309]; he later envied Richard Wagner for his ability to have many instruments playing at once in a massive orchestra,<sup>18</sup> and he was annoyed by 'a current trend to attach undue importance to formal values and to waste time in an endeavour to bestow upon scholarly creations the character of a work of art' [WB 309]. It was an attitude which limited his impact on contemporaries but contributed to the fact that his writings long outlived the Wilhelmine era.

### Ideas and history flowing

On 30 April 1919, Max Weber described to Else Jaffé the 'boundless *torture* of work', which he nevertheless could not give up 'without going to waste'. He spoke not only of the effort of forcing himself to sit at the desk, through a 'technique of constantly voting down [his] own incredible states of mind', but also of the desperate struggle to give a linguistic form to the flow of his thoughts. It caused such tension:

'that you put on paper only a *tiny* fraction of everything that shapes up inside you. ... For, when I "receive" ideas or contemplatively allow them to form *inside* me, everything flows – no matter whether it is a lot or a little, valuable or valueless – it flows in abundance – and then the struggle begins to capture it for the *paper* ... and for me that is the true, almost unbearable "torture", which may well be noticeable in my "style".'

This deep sigh, with its undertone of relish, sheds more light on Weber's innermost creative process than almost anything else he said about himself. Certainly for the late Weber, ideas come at best in a state of *contemplation*, sometimes about imagined situations or at least in relation to polemics or practical decisions.<sup>19</sup> Weber was an irritable person, who easily became abusive and experienced states of rage that might last a long time. But unlike Marx, nearly all of whose major writings have a polemical character, Weber's aggressive phases were not periods of great creativity. In oral

<sup>17</sup> See Weber to Willy Hellpach, 18.4.1906: 'Forgive my bad handwriting! Spring always considerably increases my nervous tension' [Max Weber Gesamtausgabe, Abteilung II, Bd. 5, Briefe 1906-1908, ed. By M. Rainer Lepsius / Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Tübingen 1990, p. 83].

<sup>18</sup> In 1911, after seeing the huge scores of *Tristan* at Mina Tobler's house for the first time, Weber said that he was 'deeply affected'. 'Such a writing technique should be available to me, as then I would finally be able to say many separate things side by side yet simultaneously' [B 482 fn.]. When listening to Wagner, even the supposedly unmusical Max Weber felt that his own wishful dreams were being fulfilled!

<sup>19</sup> Eduard Baumgarten's emphasis is different: he employs the topos that Weber was a would-be statesman. The 'secret of his special mode of teaching and scholarship' lay in the fact 'that he was a researcher with the instincts and vision of a politician. This was why everything in his research "made sense" to him so rapidly and pertinently; it was "probably" the "point" from which his element of genius derived' [Max Weber, *Soziologie. Weltgeschichtliche Analysen. Politik*, ed. by Johannes Winckelmann, Stuttgart 1956, p. XIII].

debate with contrary positions, cogent points would repeatedly occur to him; but in writing, his creativity blossomed best in a process of contemplation. Often he is remarkably unconcerned about the effect on the public, especially in the years after his breakdown when he still felt weak. Late in 1905, Marianne regretted that Max ‘writes one essay after another that is then buried in the archive and read by only a few! But this profligacy with oneself is the mark of all really fertile minds.’<sup>20</sup> The more that research became for Weber an act of contemplation, the more it became a value in itself and the less important it was to publish books.

Weber, who as a child had panicked at the Baltic Sea, loved the metaphorical power of water currents and the surging sea. He experienced both history and his own thoughts as a flow. Were they ultimately just part of the great stream – the natural process so utterly different from Hegel’s self-unfolding of the world spirit? Did the possibility of knowing the world ultimately rest upon a basic identity of the self and the world? Max Weber, on the other hand, appears to have been convinced both rationally and emotionally that he had no Archimedean point outside the flow of history. This may well account also for the puzzling lack of ambition to bring his books into perfect final shape, with the result that what he left behind mainly consisted of fragments and his successors felt driven to complete the uncompleted. In Weber’s bad years, when he was incapable of finishing any major work, he must have found actual consolation in thinking about the transience of all scientific repute.

It seems paradoxical that such an inwardly-driven man as Max Weber was impelled by external impulses to write many of his works (apart from those on religion) – even if he created those impulses for himself. Evidently he had no need to feel that he was initiating a whole new direction in research, but saw his role as one of critically inserting himself into an intellectual process already under way. When he once, obeying one of Marianne’s dearest wishes, set out to write on Leo Tolstoy, he asked Rickert for one of his son’s studies of the novelist, ‘because, without an initial impetus, I probably won’t make up my mind to say anything myself. I always require a “cause” for something like that’ [MWG II/7-1, 250]. In the case of Tolstoy, he waited in vain for the external impetus.

## Two styles of scholarship

Since Weber looked for an external ‘impetus’, curiosity often led him to put this or that aside instead of being strictly economical in his use of time. Someone like Georg Simmel was quite different: when Georg Lukács sent him a manuscript in 1909, he bluntly gave him to understand that he read only what he might use for his next publications. ‘I have quite forgotten to ask whether a book is objectively good or bad; I am interested only in whether I can get something out of it for my own purposes.’<sup>21</sup> Many scholars are similarly obsessed with their own publication prospects – but Weber was not like that. Indeed, the halting style of his own works reflects the fact that he took in not only what smoothly fitted his own thought processes, but also things that appeared more cumbersome. He is often almost exaggerated in his penchant for open questions.

If, following Weber’s own method, we were to construct an ideal type of scholar, we might distinguish between a precocious and an inquisitive type. The former already has quite definite ideas in his head when he approaches the object of investigation, whereas

<sup>20</sup> Marianne to Helene Weber, 10.12. 905, Sammlung Grathoff.

<sup>21</sup> Eva Karádi/Eva Fekete (eds.), *Georg Lukács. Briefwechsel 1902-1917*, Stuttgart 1982, p. 77.



the latter finds his object exciting precisely because he does not yet know what it will present to him. They are different kinds of scientific libido, which are usually associated with different human types. Ideally, every scholar will have something of both, but in most cases one inclination is more strongly developed than the other. Which type was Weber? Some evidence suggests that he was mainly the first type. There is already a lot in his youthful correspondence which sounds awesomely precocious. Weber could be hugely self-opinionated, and he had a highly-developed capacity to construct reality in his own head. Yet he must also have been extremely curious, at least in his better times. How else can we explain why, during the Russian Revolution of 1905, he learned Russian in great haste to inform himself as accurately as possible about events, or why he intensively studied the 'psychophysics' of modern industrial labour without ever arriving at a conclusive position? The constant jumps to new issues, which a biographer like Gregor Schöllgen sees as a symptom of mental illness,<sup>22</sup> point to an extreme curiosity on his part, whose results are all the stranger because it is often intermingled with an equally striking precocity.

### Creativity as wild scholarship

People who knew Weber sometimes spoke of the eruptive side of his creativity, and this kind of perception became a familiar trope. While Robert Michels detected traces of a 'difficult birth' in Weber's writings – 'You can clearly see that it was painful for the author to push them on their way'<sup>23</sup> – Weber's mother used to describe how Max 'walked up and down in the room and how everything burst out of him as from a volcano'.<sup>24</sup> Immanuel Birnbaum, who helped persuade Weber to give his famous addresses on 'Science as a Vocation' and 'Politics as a Vocation', later recalled that the first of these burst 'like spasmodic explosions from the speaker's breast' [WzG 20]. No wonder that Weber had trouble seeing through a whole semester of lectures! As for Helmuth Plessner, Weber struck him as a man who had 'become master of his chthonic eruptivity' [WzG 32]. The classical formulations of this kind come from the historian Friedrich von Meinecke, a sensitive man with a liking for harmony who was in many respects the antitype of Weber. It is with a mixture of admiration and distance that he speaks of Weber.<sup>25</sup>

Weber himself was reported as saying: 'I couldn't care less about style; I just cough up my thoughts.'<sup>26</sup> In his attitude to work, periods of depressive aversion evidently alternated with those of euphoria when he would be overwhelmed by the rush of ideas and 'intellectual voraciousness' [WB 499]. At the same time, however, he would feel he had to make the greatest possible use of this mental state as he did not know how long it would last. If we think of all the time he lost in the long years of illness or reduced capacity for work, or in the quarrels that cost him so much without advancing his scholarly work by one inch, we have to wonder how on earth he was able to read all those books and to conceive and write down all the ideas that have come down to us.

<sup>22</sup> Gregor Schöllgen, *Max Weber*, Munich 1998, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Michels, *Masse, Führer, Intellektuelle*, Frankfurt 1987, p. 263.

<sup>24</sup> Elly Heuss-Knapp, *Ausblick vom Münsterturm. Erinnerungen*, Tübingen 1952, p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, 'Drei Generationen deutscher Gelehrtenpolitik' (orig. 1922), in: idem, *Staat und Persönlichkeit*, Berlin 1933, pp. 155f.

<sup>26</sup> Glockner, *Heidelberger Bilderbuch*, pp. 56 and 106, on both occasions recorded by Jaspers, who found this carefree attitude quite proper in Weber's case: 'Anyone who has only two or three ideas likes to nurse and pamper them and dress them up prettily. But where things keep bubbling and new ideas keep flowing forth, they simply have to escape on to paper. In such cases, it is not possible to bother about style.'

His letters do not tell us much about this as he was little inclined to make confessions there, and these dried up completely when the frenzy of creativity was upon him. At such times, with the ideas flowing freely, he must have worked at the same furious pace as in 1892, the year of the study of farm-workers. The ‘footnote inflation’ [WB 336] in many of his essays, that Marianne complained about,<sup>27</sup> shows that his texts first bubbled out of him before he concerned himself – if he ever did – with supporting evidence. Often he wrote several pages without a paragraph break.<sup>28</sup> No little sub-units took shape in the flow of his thoughts. Unlike many scholars, he did not inch his way forward from one file-card to the next, from one quotation to the next; he just blazed away when everything was ‘ready in his head’ [MWG I/19, 44]. Paul Siebeck’s lawyer, Weber’s publisher, found ‘simply dreadful’ his preface to the great collective project of the *Grundriß der Sozialökonomik*; he had not often come across ‘such a mass of foreign words and convoluted sentences nesting on top of each other’ [MWG II/8, 625fn.]. One has only to copy out such monster-sentences word by word to realize how overloaded they are with extraneous insertions and terminological duplications, and it is only after several readings that one is able to grasp everything.

Even in lectures, Weber often presented his ideas in such an unstructured manner that Marianne really lost her temper. In 1919, Else Jaffé reported to Alfred Weber that Max ‘poured out a sea of knowledge’ and let ‘his audience gradually drown in it’, ‘to the anger of Marianne, who accompanied the lecture with softly whispered “bad marks”’.<sup>29</sup> This meant that the attraction of Weber’s lectures tended to wane once people’s curiosity about the legendary figure was satisfied [WzG 34]. But, after a torrent of words that overwhelmed most listeners and readers, a formulation might strike them like a flash of lightning, as if to say that, if Weber wanted to, he could also strike a different, even demagogic tone.

### Crossing boundaries

Max Weber certainly knew about surprise effects. Especially characteristic of him was the sudden leap across spatial, temporal and disciplinary boundaries, and not least across the distance between lower and higher, material and ideal realms. Some of this is already apparent in his early writings: to-ing and fro-ing between antiquity and modernity, use of land measurement in analysing the material base of the Roman empire, identification of a certain sense of honour as integral to a well-functioning stock market, and so on. In his later writings, the leaps across boundaries are more and more audacious; they become one of the main attractions in both his oral and written statements.

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<sup>27</sup> Marianne to Max Weber, 30.12.1902, referring to the essay ‘Roscher and Knies’: ‘I just think it’s a pity that you pack into the footnotes so many pearls of wisdom that should be up there in the text; they look much better there.’ Today’s reader will agree with her. Incidentally, we should note that Marianne – who, in the view of present-day Weber experts, was incapable of understanding Max Weber – closely followed his work even on ‘Roscher and Knies’, the so-called ‘essay of sighs’, which still wrings many a sigh from today’s experts.

<sup>28</sup> Even Friedrich Tenbruck, a great admirer and a pioneer of Weber studies, felt ‘weighed down’ by the reading of *Economy and Society*. ‘This oppressive feeling ... also arises from the inner organization of the text, which often rolls pitilessly over several pages without paragraph breaks or sub-headings and provokes a sense of the futility of all efforts.’ Friedrich Tenbruck, *Das Werk Max Webers*, Tübingen 1999, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NI 197/85, Else Jaffé to Alfred Weber, May 1919.

In comparison with the narrowness of the corporate academic world, these leaps convey a sense of freedom and transcendence. Particularly as Weber familiarized himself with ancient Israel and the cultures of the East, he enjoyed bringing to bear the superiority he thus acquired over mere specialists in the field; he seasoned his observations on Western culture with side glances at Hindu yogis, Confucian mandarins, ancient Jewish prophets and priests of Baal, not least in order to dismantle misconceptions about the specificity of the West. He drew an analogy between modern socialists and ancient Egyptian bureaucrats, while Kurt Eisner, leader of the Bavarian revolutionary government, reminded him of a shaman. Georg Lukács later considered this an appalling example of Weber's 'formalism'.<sup>30</sup> Again and again he liked to draw analogies across broad expanses of time and space, which logically presupposed – even if he scarcely ever said so in as many words – that the nature of man and his social forms were always essentially the same. One particular appeal of Weber's work, ever since his early years,<sup>31</sup> is his constant ability to throw new and surprising light on phenomena from the viewpoint of different academic disciplines – first law and economics, then the study of religion, and finally even musicology from where he gained insights into Western rationalization processes.<sup>32</sup> Thus, his specialty – indeed his genius – consisted in overstepping disciplinary boundaries by doing this in a disciplined way.

Strangely enough, although Weber tortured himself for a time with the theory of science, he does not seem to have thought much at all about his preference for the large-scale. When he started to lecture again in Vienna in 1918, after a pause of nearly twenty years, Marianne noted: 'He was asked about the reasons for his passionate emotion, e.g. in presenting such distant problems as the Indian caste system – admittedly his account ended at a point where light was unexpectedly cast on problems close to us today - he could only say this about what had moved him: "Oh, well, those things are themselves so fabulously interesting."'<sup>33</sup> Curiosity was for him a drive that did not need to be justified by a theory or some practical benefit.

In Weber's time, his manner of boundary-crossing was not as uncommon as it is today, when academic specialization has advanced much further and the breadth of general education has decreased. Not only such authorities of his day as Simmel or Sombart, but also near-forgotten colleagues like Brentano and Schmoller, or even Roscher and Schulze-Gävernitz, surprise today's readers with such a range of scholarship that one sometimes wonders whether Weber was really so out of the ordinary. Yet in terms of knowledge he stood head and shoulders above the greater part of his colleagues,<sup>34</sup> most

<sup>30</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, London 1980, pp. 610ff.

<sup>31</sup> What the twenty-year-old Weber admired in the National-Liberal leader Friedrich Kapp was evidently the same goal that he had set for himself in life: 'effortlessly to bring the most diverse things into connection with one another, and unobtrusively to open up perspectives that take in the whole world' [JB 140].

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Alfred Heuss, *Max Webers Bedeutung für die Geschichte des griechisch-römischen Altertums*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 201 (1965), p. 534. In answer to my question about what was so distinctive about Weber, Hans-Ulrich Wehler also replied that it was his ability to generate surprising associations, to illuminate phenomena from unfamiliar angles, and consistently to think through this multiple perspective. Of course, there is also another kind of 'multiperspectivity', which is obtained through flights of intellect.

<sup>33</sup> Ana 446 Sch. 20 V.

<sup>34</sup> Adolf von Harnack later remarked to Theodor Heuss that he had enough of a perspective to say that, 'internationally speaking, between 1880 and 1920 Max Weber had undoubtedly been the man with the greatest powers of intellectual consumption. He did not simply take from others, however, but made his

of all in the way in which he combined a broad horizon with sharpness of vision. As a rule, a universal perspective comes with a certain wooliness and arbitrariness of vision – for example, in Alfred Weber or Oswald Spengler (whose ‘Pergamon and Bayreuth’ image yoked together the great Hellenistic city and Richard Wagner’s famous centre). Weber’s analogic leaps did not sound like the cultural pages of a daily newspaper. Hermann Kantorowicz – the legal expert who, on the question of war guilt, was in private much more critical than Weber was of the German position<sup>35</sup> – wrote of him in 1922, after the publication of Weber’s collected writings: ‘Never in modern times has so much and such diverse knowledge been gathered in one head, or presented in such language with the hardness of steel.’ ‘But,’ he continued, ‘in the end doubts appear about “Where does all this lead?” and [these doubts] reach [to] the point of despair’ [WzG 95].

### Weber’s nature

Weber often expressed himself more clearly and pointedly in speech than in writing. During his lifetime, moreover, he made an impact not only because of the content of what he said and wrote but also by virtue of his own appearance – his ‘charisma’, to use one of his own words. Given that for many years he only sporadically showed himself in public, it is astonishing how he radiated in the presence of others. When he came out in support of value-freedom in science, there was still a strong sense that he embodied certain values in his own person: truthfulness, courage, a kind of nobility and generosity of mind. And, although he had no institutional power after being released from faculty duties, he was still highly regarded as an incorruptible figure standing outside academic cliques and was more than once asked to give his advice on a professorial appointment. Karl Jaspers tells us that, when Weber started teaching again after a long interval, it was above all his ‘naturalness’ which people found captivating:

‘In appearance and gesture he was true to his original self, never cloaking himself in style and pretence. Protection via conventions and masks was not for him. He was not self-important. The way he was by nature revealed his magic directly and left him vulnerable to all kinds of attack. In him we see a man who was truly human, a man who devoted his thought to everything in the reach of human experience.’

According to Jaspers, Weber’s cognitive grasp transformed ‘original experience’ into ‘interlocking knowledge’<sup>36</sup> Other contemporary witnesses also report having a strong sense that Weber’s thoughts were not just creatures of his head but came from deep personal experience, and that Weber’s whole human personality stood behind what he said and wrote. The *Neue Wiener Tagblatt* wrote of Weber’s appearance in the summer of 1918: ‘His gaze comes from deep inside, from hidden galleries, and wanders into the far distance. His mode of expression is in keeping with this external manifestation. It has something infinitely plastic about it.’ Weber wielded this powerful effect not so much through the content of his argument as through his ‘capacity to arouse feelings

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own sense of everything he received’ [Weber, *Soziologie*, p. XI f.]. It must mean something if even Harnack, who had a huge capacity for intellectual consumption, recognized Weber’s superiority in this respect, especially as his admiration for Weber was otherwise by no means unqualified.

<sup>35</sup> See Hermann Kantorowicz, *Gutachten zur Kriegsschuldfrage 1914* (written in 1927), ed. by Imanuel Geiss, Frankfurt 1967.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers* (vol. 1 of the *Nachlaß*), ed. and trans. by Michael Ermarth and Leonard H. Ehrlich, New York 1995, pp. 334, 330.

that lay slumbering in the souls of others'<sup>37</sup> – through media skills, as it were. There are scarcely any reports of this kind from his early years as a professor: it seems to have been only the later Weber, marked by his illness, who became the medium of a shaken and despairing academic world at the end of the world war, not least because he steered onto the paths of strict science a set of emotions which, at that time, were often directed *against* scientific thinking. Of course, those who were in no mood to go along with this interplay between speaker and listener were less enthusiastic and failed to notice the structure at work. As we have seen, this was true even of Marianne.

A boundary that Weber routinely crossed was the one between theory and empirical knowledge, between abstraction and living reality (not least his own experience). Perhaps it is precisely in this respect that he is today most appropriate as a model. Franz Neumann – who after 1933, inspired by Weber's concept of charisma, wrote the most famous analysis of Nazi rule – had special praise for the unique way in which Weber combined 'a theoretical frame' with 'mastery of a tremendous amount of data, and a full awareness of the political responsibility of the scholar'.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, for Jaspers, Weber combined 'the most concrete historical research with systematic thought', in a way that had previously seemed impossible.<sup>39</sup>

Such coupling of theory and illustrative cases is certainly an art that any good university teacher should more or less master, but the talent for it does vary greatly from one type of individual to another. Detail drawn from precise observation was not, for example, the forte of Alfred Weber, who sometimes thought that he should abstain, on health grounds, from the exertions of empirical research. Else Jaffé, no doubt with her smile of amusement on her lips, wrote to him after a conversation with Max in April 1920:

Your task is to provide the "heuristic principle" ...; others can create the material. I spoke along the same lines with Max, who talked very nicely about it. *Of course* you must read a lot, to develop a view of your own, but you should never descend from the bird's-eye view to the level of detail. You stay there up above, far from individual things.<sup>40</sup>

Alfred Weber probably sensed the mocking undertone in the reference to his 'bird's-eye view'; he knew then that Else loved Max more than himself. For those well-versed in classical German philosophy, this question of scholarly style contains some erotic symbolism; Hegel said, after all, that it was a 'laziness of abstract thought to shrink monastically from the presence of the senses'.<sup>41</sup> And for Max Weber, who had managed to find his way out of asceticism, scholarship that remained at a high altitude was something dull and insipid. In his programmatic article of 1904 for the *Archiv*, he attached special value to the close association of ideas and facts and presented it as a question of scientific gourmandise:

There are ... "material specialists" and "interpretive specialists". The hunger of the first can be satisfied only with legal documents, statistical tables and surveys;

<sup>37</sup> Hennis, *Weber und Thukydides*, Göttingen 2003, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, London 1974, p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., Berlin 1925, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NI 197/97, Else to Alfred Weber, 4.4. 1920.

<sup>41</sup> Joachim und Orlinde Radkau, *Praxis der Geschichtswissenschaft. Die Desorientiertheit des historischen Interesses*, Düsseldorf 1972, p. 222.

he is insensitive to the quality of a new idea. The latter on the other hand dulls his taste for facts by ever newer conceptual distillations.<sup>42</sup>

Max Weber understood with increasing confidence how to combine the two intellectual pleasures; he developed, at least in his best periods, a rare virtuosity both in the ‘telling example’ and the ability to let concepts take on the varied hues of reality. ‘The more *examples* there are, the better and more convincing it is’, he impressed upon Robert Michels [MWG II/5, 99]. A scholarly ethos of sharp thinking as well as sharp-eyed examination pervades the whole of his work. One of those who attended his last lectures praised the ‘wealth of images’ and ‘the keen knowledge of the human soul’ with which ‘he evoked the Puritan farmer or American businessman as vividly as the old Prussian noble landowner or the Florentine patrician from the time of Dante’ [WzG 38].

Much of the ground for this was laid through the study of law, with its sharp (sometimes bordering on pedantic) distinctions between related concepts and its fondness for piquant, even slightly cynical examples. But for Weber, reality was much more than an arsenal of case material for normative conceptualization. Gertrud Bäumer, who for many years was in close touch with the Webers, underlined the

quite distinctive agitation in his speech ...whose strange, logical sharpness and representational qualities together reflected the intellectual process: the inflow of ideas from all four corners of the earth, and the way in which they were then tightly grasped and skilfully brought into logical relationship with one another. His hands repeatedly stretch out as he labours to draw all the new material together [WzG 124].

An intellectual Eros, then, to whom this lady – herself a similar combination – was especially well attuned. After Weber’s death, a competition developed among kindred virtuosos over which one best appreciated his virtuosity.

### **Weber’s art of observation**

In his appropriation of Max Weber, who until then had been cornered by the conservative Raymond Aron in the field of French sociology, Pierre Bourdieu says that ‘it was his wonderful observations which so captivated me’, ‘the rare wealth of powerful descriptions’.<sup>43</sup> Weber developed the art of intelligent observation in his early travel accounts. To be sure, he was not alone in this; it was the age of great travel writing, and in merchants’ families the keen observation of foreign parts was a particularly strong tradition. But Weber’s travel correspondence has a special fascination, since, although Marianne was more inclined than he to become emotional about nature, she found her own reports actually prosaic in comparison with those of her husband.<sup>44</sup> ‘Almost all the things that he absorbed in this way left traces in his work’, noted Marianne [WB 268].

<sup>42</sup> ‘The “Objectivity” of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy’, trs. by Keith Tribe, in: *The Essential Weber. A Reader*, ed. Sam Whimster, London 2004, p. 403.

<sup>43</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Mit Weber gegen Weber’, interview, in: idem, *Das religiöse Feld*, Konstanz 2000, pp. 115, 111, 119.

<sup>44</sup> Ana 446 Sch. 14, Marianne to Helene Weber, 13.10.1895 (after she and Max had returned from Scotland).

Did Max Weber's travel impressions really inspire him, or does the motto of the DuMont publishing house also apply to him: 'One sees only what one wants to see'? In 1903 he complained from the North Sea coast that he was 'a bookworm turned pedant', who has 'forgotten how to enjoy things intuitively' and can 'lay hold of impressions only discursively' [WB 269]. But this very complaint makes it clear that it is not his proud aim always to intercept reality with concepts and 'ideal types'; that he would dearly like to surrender, if only once, to the teeming abundance of reality, without immediately grasping everything in words. 'How I envy those who are better off in this respect' [WB 269], he sighs at the end of this reflection on himself.<sup>45</sup> Over the years he evidently made progress – which explains how later admirers of Weber could experience a meeting with the scholar as a natural event.

Weber's depiction of the pilgrimage site in Lourdes is a particularly exciting item in his early travel correspondence; it is also highly informative about the way in which prior conceptions and fresh discoveries interacted with each other. In Weber's sociology of religion, Catholicism is the greatest and strangest blank. Whether in Freiburg or Munich or on his many trips in southern Europe, he had Catholic culture constantly before his eyes – and yet it was obviously hard for him to process his impressions intellectually, especially as for a long time his attitude was full of *Kulturkampf* clichés. Still, he did not block out those impressions, nor did he have any liberal-Protestant illusions that Catholic piety was just a matter of priestly tricks. He knew that he was dealing with powerful passions.

It is true that Weber's portrait of 'priestly physiognomies' in Lourdes partly recalls Wilhelm Busch's satirical picture story *Pater Filuzius*, first published in 1872, but he also shows an understanding that Catholicism has many very different faces.<sup>46</sup> Above all, in this pilgrimage site in the south of France, Weber for the first time had a sensory impression of the element of collective ecstasy in religion, when, after long and monotonous chanting of '*Mère de Dieu, priez pour nous!*' that reached a trance-like climax, mass hysteria suddenly broke out at the sight of real or supposed cures. All genuine religion is not about details but about salvation from profound distress: that may never have been clearer to the Protestant Weber than it was in Lourdes, although later he built his sociology of religion on the idea. At first this religious ecstasy gave him an eerie feeling; he witnessed it without having a theory for it. 'I'll never forget that poor little twelve-year-old girl, who lay on a stretcher looking timidly around her, her teeth chattering, yellow and beside herself with excitement.'

Behind all the commotion, however, he saw a Catholic art of mass control that he described with a musical metaphor: to 'a superficial observer', 'the whole business gave the impression of a crowd milling around with all kinds of junk'. 'But anyone who knows the psychology of the Catholic church will watch the individuals in the milling crowd, and only then track down the mighty chord that it strikes in the nervous system of the masses. ... As an instrument of power ... the whole set-up is almost without

<sup>45</sup> This passage is already included in Marianne's letter of 16.6.1903 to Helene Weber (Sammlung Grathoff), with the comment next to 'discursively': 'Alfred must wonder what this is!'

<sup>46</sup> 'The priestly physiognomies are also constantly interesting: along with fat old Falstaffs oozing contentment and straightforwardly coarse and ugly faces, there are young pale wide-eyed fanatics whose severe mouths speak of struggles to mortify the flesh, or others who have won the struggle, or others still who have abandoned it and either sunk dull-witted into materiality or developed in the direction of a witty scepticism.' 'Sunk dull-witted into materiality': how anti-materialistic Weber could sometimes sound, at least in writing to his religiously idealist mother!

parallel.<sup>47</sup> As we see, the key to power lay, then, more in psychology than sociology. For Eduard Meyer, the German historian of the time closest to Weber in his universal horizon, the ecstasies associated with the Madonna cult surrounding the mountain grotto in Lourdes showed that Catholicism had been infiltrated by the old natural religion of the Great Mother; a religion that had nothing in common with Christian theology.<sup>48</sup> Weber, still full of the battle with his father, did not yet have eyes for the matriarchal element in religion.

### **‘Disciplined transdisciplinarity’ or social science based on ‘understanding’**

Marianne praises Max Weber’s ‘precocious ability to sympathize and empathize even with qualities that were far removed from his own nature’ [WB 152]. By no means did he display this ability in every situation, but he certainly did have it in personal as well as academic life. Honigsheim even portrays him as a virtuoso of understanding: ‘Weber’s capacity for empathetic interpretation of human behaviour was indeed ... unlimited’ [WzG 187].

Weber’s ‘empathetic understanding’ [*Verstehen*], social science based on understanding in this Weberian sense, is another theme for endless discussion because understanding is a multivalent term, in the interpretation of which different philosophies of science collide with each other. It can be meant in the sense of our understanding of a text: as reconstruction of the intended meaning. But it can also refer to that which is unspoken, indeed unconscious, between the lines of the text. It may be a rational act of interpretation, but also an intuitive act of moving into something, or even a *unio mystica* with that which is to be understood, an emotional after-experience of the experience of others.

In the nineteenth century, Johann Gustav Droysen made understanding the kernel of his theory of history - indeed, the foundation of a doctrine justifying historiography in general: ‘It is not “objectivity” that is the greatest glory of a historian. The justice of his conduct is that he tries to understand.’ As soon as he speaks of understanding, he oscillates between simple naming of an acoustic process and a code for a pan-erotic centre of history. The ‘act of understanding’, he says in rapturous language, is ‘like a direct intuition, like a creative act, like a flash of light between two electrophorus bodies, like an act of conception. In understanding, the whole mental-sensuous nature of man is completely implicated, at once giving and taking, at once producing and receiving.’<sup>49</sup> The full-blooded historian as a kind of androgynous eroticist! In Weber’s time, Wilhelm Dilthey advanced this understanding-based philosophy of science; he too sometimes spoke in the language of enthusiasm, but he was more aware than Droysen that understanding required not only a reliving of innermost feelings but also the reconstruction of a world-view. The philosophy of *Verstehen* was not necessarily a programme of irrationalism.<sup>50</sup>

Was Droysen’s and Dilthey’s understanding the same as what Weber understood by scientific understanding? Did understanding for Weber also have something to do with

<sup>47</sup> Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz Nachlass Weber Nr. 30 Bd. 12, Max to Helene Weber, 29.8.1897.

<sup>48</sup> Eduard Meyer, *Urgeschichte des Christentums*, vol. 1, Tübingen 1923, pp. 77-81.

<sup>49</sup> Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik. Vorlesungen u ber Enzyklopa die und Methodologie der Geschichte*, ed. by Rudolf Hußner, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., Munich 1967, pp. 361, 287, 26; see Radkau, *Praxis der Geschichtswissenschaft*, pp. 66 ff.

<sup>50</sup> Radkau, *Praxis der Geschichtswissenschaft*, pp. 68 f.



lived or relived experience [*Erlebnis*]? To answer this question, we must not stick to what he wrote about '*Erlebnis*' (often between ironical quotation marks) in his tortured methodological writings<sup>51</sup> - where one does sense, however, that the whole question intrigued him<sup>52</sup> - but should look at how he actually handled reality: whether farm-workers east of the Elbe, the Protestant ethic or oriental religions.

Weber more than once expressed annoyance at the fashion for 'hunting down lived experience', not least in his address 'Science as a Vocation'. But Manfred Hettling has shown that we should not take too literally Weber's inquisitorial attitude to the 'idol' called *Erlebnis*.<sup>53</sup> The displaying of one's own experiences [*Erlebnisse*] often has a narcissistic element: the original experience of satisfaction was an erotic experience, so it is no wonder that for Weber 'experiences' of such a kind belonged more in the world of pleasant illusion than in scholarly investigation. On the other hand, the deep experiences [*Erfahrungen*] that mark and change people are not necessarily suited to being shown off to others; Weber knew that only too well. And, whether or not they correspond to the model of *Erlebnis*, traces of personal experience [*Erfahrung*], including emotional experience, are present throughout his work - and account for the special attraction of many of his writings. Without doubt, understanding was for Weber not only an intellectual but also an emotional act; his work is positively teeming with passages that testify to his attempts to feel himself into deep layers of emotion. Helmuth Plessner is of the view that Weber, with his method of *Verstehen*, broke through the 'strict separation between nature and culture';<sup>54</sup> the act of empathetic understanding took place not only through the intellect but also through the natural side of man, the premise being that there is a nature common to all human beings. His thinking retained an inner cohesiveness because of his anthropological approach. He believed in certain features of human nature, which can be found - albeit in different variants - in all cultures. When he was fighting against naturalism in the social sciences, it was a fight against the dubious naturalism of his time. Although he conceptualized human nature as something physical, he saw in it not only a determination but also a chance.

Weber's career clearly demonstrates that he achieved the breakthrough to creativity at moments when he was able to combine his research with strong emotional experiences of his own. The mutual responsibility of family members - the main theme of his dissertation on North Italian trading companies - certainly resonated with his own family experiences, but not with those of pleasure and passion. This changed with his major study of farm-workers, where he could create space for his own drive for *freedom*: freedom from the parental home, which after his studies had held on to him for seven 'barren' years. Now he was able to bring to bear his experience of farmers, the land and the physical side of life during military service, and not least the militant nationalism that he felt as a kind of masculine emancipation from his mother's

<sup>51</sup> On the CD-Rom of Weber's works, '*Erlebnis*' occurs most frequently in the *Roscher und Knies* essay (*Roscher and Knies, The Logical Problems of Historical Economics*, New York 1975), and precisely there often between quotation marks.

<sup>52</sup> In *Roscher and Knies*, Weber tackles at length the notion that 'our own immediate experience is the most certain piece of knowledge that we have' (ibid., p. 160), which he attributes to the highly reputed economist Gottl-Ottlienfeld and sweepingly dismisses as unscientific.

<sup>53</sup> Manfred Hettling, 'Das Unbehagen in der Erkenntnis. Max Weber und das "Erlebnis"' (orig. his postdoctoral *Habilitation* lecture at the University of Bielefeld), in: *Simmel Newsletter*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1997), pp. 49-65.

<sup>54</sup> Hideharu Ando, 'Die Interviews mit Else Jaffé, Edgar Salin und Helmuth Plessner über Max Weber 1969/70', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 55 (2003), p. 605.

compassionate world of charity work and the socially-committed priests around Naumann and Göhre. Even in his literary style we can follow how Weber came to terms with himself through the study of farm-workers.<sup>55</sup>

Especially in his later years, he seems to have been most attracted intellectually to the divided passion of love-hate: whether towards asceticism, ecstatic emotions or the nation. Contradictory feelings bathe the object in a suspicious half-light. 'The more deeply Max Weber was drawn into a research project,' writes Jaspers, 'the stronger the half-light became, so that on close examination one is not sure whether his judgement was positive or negative.'<sup>56</sup> Rather like modernists in the field of music, Weber discovered the attraction of dissonance in scholarship. The special tone of many of his writings comes from the fact that they maintain tensions for a long time and do not even resolve themselves at the end.

Weber must have recognized the partly rational, partly instinctual sources of his creativity; he often looked for tangible insights and experience, whether directly or through other people's reports. His trip to the United States in 1904, with its surfeit of new impressions, was evidently his first great emotional peak after the bad years; a self-confirmation that gave him a new feeling of strength and creativity, all the more as experiences of America were still rare in Germany and therefore a source of superiority for much-travelled people. Marianne was sometimes incapable of handling the flood of new things; so much was alien to her, and she did not know where to begin. 'Weber, on the other hand, remained intensely receptive; after all, he had the ability to make something of everything by recasting it intellectually' [WB 300]. 'By recasting it intellectually', he makes it not always easy for us to tell how far the later reports of his travels in America are really genuine.

Weber's impressions of America do not feature at all prominently in *The Protestant Ethic*, parts of which had already been conceived and written before the trip, but they are particularly striking in later writings: for example, when he ridicules the racist theory that whites instinctively recoil from the odour of black bodies, or when he invokes the interest of American students in duelling to argue that this German tradition has a future. It is generally in his more enthralling passages that Weber likes to spice things up with details from his own life, or with the kind of inside information that is the privilege of people 'in the know'. Weber was fond of the connoisseur's gesture ('as every expert knows'<sup>57</sup>): the person who disposes of special skills as well as wide experience. He knew 'very well the Saar coalfields and the stale air which that system [the system of informers used by Saar industrialist Stumm] spreads around there', he told the Mannheim congress of the Verein für Sozialpolitik in 1905, in answer to economists who did not wish to see that, for the sake of the workers' dignity as human beings, the excessive power of big industry had to be countered with the weight of the trade unions [S 395]. In Weber's view, 'countless experiences' left no doubt that, in the bureaucracy, it is usually not the most capable but the most pliant who make a career for themselves and that, therefore, it is the exception when subordinates believe that their superiors 'deserve' to be in their post [E&S 1449]. Or: 'As every cavalry officer knows ... the maxim of *caveat emptor* [Let the buyer beware] obtains mostly ... in horse trading among comrades' [E&S 638].

<sup>55</sup> Hennis, *Max Webers Fragestellung*, p. 171.

<sup>56</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Max Weber. Deutsches Wesen im politischen Denken, im Forschen und Philosophieren*, Oldenburg 1932, pp. 74 f.

<sup>57</sup> Hennis, *Webers Wissenschaft vom Menschen*, pp. 51 f.

Karl Löwenstein, the expert in constitutional law who knew Weber well in the last eight years of his life, thought it 'demonic how this man, who remained in moral awe of any genuine religious faith – while pillorying a certain kind of tortured mysticism – knew how to grasp through the power of reason both the orgiastic ecstasy of an Indian holy man and the mechanization of Chinese religious feeling' [WzG 51]. Was it really only 'through the power of reason'? Is not the assuredness of Weber's distinction between genuine and un-genuine mysticism, ecstatic and orgiastic religiosity, the best indication that he must have had religious experiences himself – or anyway a feeling of having them – and that he thought he found them again as primal human experiences in other periods and cultures? In 1909 he wrote to Tönnies that, in order to understand the historical significance of mysticism, it was necessary to have the 'ability to *experience* such psychological states': 'there – only there' [MWG II/6, 70].

Really only there? At the beginning of *Economy and Society*, Weber remarks that 'all scientific observations strive for clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and comprehension', for *Evidenz*. 'Recapturing an experience' may not be 'an absolute precondition for its understanding', but it is 'important for accurate understanding' [*die Evidenz des Verstehens*] [E&S 5]. Weber's 'understanding' is more than mere understanding of the meaning of a text. For the later Weber, scientific *method* does not mainly consist of conceptual and procedural tools but is in many respects akin to the 'method' of religious exercises: a path whose changing stages – enthusiasm as well as self-chastisement – take one mentally and spiritually closer to a truth.

### **A feeling for the driving forces of existence**

Weber's cognitive interest developed in a direction in which headway could sometimes be made only through personal experience, on the supposition that one could thereby arrive at elemental human experiences. This applies to his early interest in people that Wilhelm Hennis has placed at the centre of attention: an interest in the human types associated with various cultures, religions and economic forms. In his inaugural lecture in Freiburg, Weber explained that political economy, as a 'science of people', was 'concerned above all else with the *quality* of the human beings reared under those economic and social conditions of existence' [PW 15] – an enquiry in which progress could not be made with the usual tools of economics.

In the spring of 1898, when he evidently felt at a scientific dead-end, he complained in a letter to the art historian Carl Neumann: 'My specialism condemns me to bury myself first in the *conditions* of antiquity and only then, by this stubborn material detour, to arrive at the *human beings* of antiquity.'<sup>58</sup> Analysis of structures was simply a means to knowledge of human beings – not the other way round, as it is for many of today's social scientists. In his considerations on future social policy, Weber also mainly asked – in this case, like his brother Alfred – 'what type of personality it promoted' [WB 415].

As a rule, of course, information about the human type that will develop under certain conditions is not explicitly found in any empirical findings, for human types mostly belong to the category of things that a culture takes for granted. Nor does one get very far along a purely theoretical route. Only through comparisons with other cultures and an imaginative capacity supported by wide experience does one draw nearer to this cognitive goal – and become able to draw analogies for the future on the assumption that there is a constant bedrock in everything human. To understand how Weber's work

<sup>58</sup> Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz Nachlass Weber Nr. 30 Bd. 4, 14.3.1898.

took shape, we must, like Hennis, mainly try to imagine the way in which he ‘set up the antennae to capture problems for scientific investigation’.<sup>59</sup>

Everywhere in Weber’s work we come across passages which, on close examination, gain their clarity and accuracy neither from pure logic nor from the sources he quotes, but only from an element of emotional sensitivity; this is true not least of his most famous hypothesis, the connection between a Puritan-ascetic ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Whether writing on landed property and labour migration, Protestantism and capitalism, or eroticism and intellectual life, Weber continually demonstrates a special gift for the construction of taut connections that derive not from pure logic but from a passionate recapturing of experience.

Characteristic of Weber is not only his own scientific passion but also his special feeling for the element of passion in all things human; this is not the least of the reasons why his work always has something exciting about it. His major writings point to the premise that everything great in the world springs from passion [MWG I/4-2, 573f.]. Towards the end of his inaugural lecture in Freiburg, he declares that a man is ‘young as long as he is able to feel the great passions that nature has implanted in us’ – passion as a natural element, the best element, in man! [PW 28].<sup>60</sup> And twenty-four years later, in ‘Science as a Vocation’, it is again his credo: ‘For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion’ [FMW 135]. Since he felt himself to be a passionate man, this suggests that Weber saw himself as having a special natural feeling for the driving forces of existence.

### Outline of an epistemological theory

From what we know of Weber, we may perhaps construct the following epistemological stance. Reality in its bewildering abundance – Weber liked to speak of the ‘infinite abundance of phenomena’ – has something resistant to the human mind. It is not easy for the mind to take hold of nature completely; rather, to avoid being taken in by its own fancies, it must in its exploration of reality always take into account what it does and how it proceeds. ‘The most radical doubt is the father of knowledge’, Weber taught in 1913. So, even an anarchist can have a ‘very good “legal mind” ’ so long as he seriously familiarizes himself with the legal order of the hated state.<sup>61</sup>

The quality of a research project is apparent in this self-critical endeavour and ‘drilling through thick board’, in a feeling for the resistance of reality. The provocative contours of reality come precisely from the resistance that it proffers to the human mind. If the researcher faces up to this resistance and does not just verbally jump over the hurdle, intellectual labour is inwardly assigned to practical action. Reality *exists*, of course, and up to a point is knowable; our knowledge is not merely a mental reflex. Our thought does not simply refer back to itself, but also – precisely if it is self-critical – refers to the object of thought.

As Jaspers rightly pointed out, we sense beneath the surface in Weber a prevailing ‘existentialist’ mood which implies that an existence drawing on every capacity of the intellect and senses contains a reality check and a road to a many-sided knowledge of the real world. Many passages in Weber’s work presuppose that intuitive knowledge is possible. How else could he have known that Sappho was ‘unequalled by men in her capacity for erotic experience’ [MWH I/19, 504]? That comes from the famous

<sup>59</sup> Hennis, *Max Webers Wissenschaft vom Menschen*, p. 183.

<sup>60</sup> See Michael Sukale, *Max Weber. Leidenschaft und Disziplin*, Tübingen 2002, pp. 57 ff.

<sup>61</sup> Heino Heinrich Nau, *Der Werturteilsstreit*, Marburg 1996, p. 155.

*Zwischenbetrachtung*, which some may see as a special case. For Weber the scientist, of course, intuition is admissible only if one has grappled discursively with the matter in question and fully probed its resistance. Weber's 'ideal types', unlike the Kantian categories, stem not only from the nature of thought but also from the external world. 'Puritanism', 'bureaucracy' and 'autonomous commune' are not concepts at which thought can arrive merely by reflecting on itself. Helmuth Plessner has pointed out that, in contrast to neo-Kantianism with its strict separation between concepts and reality, Weber's ideal types opened 'the way to phenomenology' [WzG 33].

### **The pleasurable suffering of knowledge**

Heinrich Rickert, who had known Weber since schooldays and watched, not without irony, the rise of the Weber myth, said after his death: 'The fascinating effect that he had at the lectern may have been partly due to a sense that the man up there was violently suppressing something in himself and was basically very much more than what he said' [WzG 114f.]. From the mouth of a philosopher, who thought it the scholar's business to make an impact through clear speaking, this was an ambiguous appreciation. But there was a degree of truth in it. Many obviously sensed something wild and unrestrained in Weber, which then brought itself back under control: a kind of self-tormenting, which for both himself and his listeners had something exciting and corresponded to Weber's erotic disposition.

Weber's scholarly work, during his creative periods, had its origin in love and pleasure (albeit a special kind of pleasure), not in rage and even less in cynicism. On the one hand, he was inclined by temperament to be aggressively (and quite dreadfully) self-opinionated, whether in relation to his father or to certain critics of *The Protestant Ethic*; on the other hand, he was overcome at some point by the pleasure of scourging his spontaneous passions and insisting in an equally overbearing way on the relativity of all theoretical positions. He loved the nation and then coolly dissected nationalism; he loved ancient Rome and approached it with the stone-cold sobriety of a surveyor; he could feel the passion in religion and music, but discovered the element of rationalization in both.

Such is Weber's style: to expose ardent emotion to the shock of cold water,<sup>62</sup> to destroy splendid illusions, and sometimes to dismiss an attractive new idea in favour of a conventional viewpoint, as at the end of his essay on the 'the social constitution of ancient Germany'. 'It may appear trivial,' he wrote. 'But trivial conclusions, precisely because of this characteristic of theirs, are unfortunately very often the correct ones' [SWG 556]. That is certainly true – even if many academics like to show off their competence by making their subject as complicated as possible.

Paul Feyerabend, the enthusiast for an 'anarchist' science free of methodological compulsion, claimed to be transforming science from a strict and demanding mistress into an attractive lover who anticipated each of her partner's wishes. It was up to us 'to choose either a dragon or a pussy cat for our company', and Feyerabend's preference was clear enough.<sup>63</sup> So too was Max Weber's: science for him was not a pussy cat but a

<sup>62</sup> Of course, this applied to his listeners as well as himself. 'But we felt as if under a cold shower', a former student recalled of a time when Weber said that, as a minister, he had ordered Kurt Eisner's assassin, Count Arco, to be shot [René König/Johannes Winkelmann (ed.), *Max Weber zum Gedächtnis*, Köln 1963 (=Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie 1963, Sonderheft 7), p. 26].

<sup>63</sup> Paul Feyerabend, 'Consolations for the Specialist', in: Imre Lakatos/Alan Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge 1970, p. 229.

strict mistress, who often tormented her lovers, although this did not mean that the torments were without their own kind of pleasure. It would appear, however, that Weber only gradually learned this kind of pleasure. As long as he tried to place science in the service of politics, he needed to have clear signals rather than brief glimpses. Only when he drew a clear demarcation between science and practice, conceiving the former as a mistress who would brook no one else beside her, did the pleasurable torment of critical thought make itself felt in sufficient, or indeed excessive, measure.

### **Eruptions from the ice**

Illness and recovery brought the tension between torment and pleasure, dream and disillusionment, to ever new heights of intensity. Half a century after Weber's death, Else Jaffé thought: 'One never knew which was stronger in him: the keen-eyed realist without illusions or the great dreamer.'<sup>64</sup> She had come to know a Weber who remained hidden to most people. He complained to her that his brain was a 'power hostile to love', an 'ice box' or 'ice saint', but often the 'last salvation' against 'the Devil, who played around with me when I was sick'. It seems incredible that he would seriously disown his whole life and everything he created. For a man who periodically suffered because of an inner heat, there was something pleasant about a cooling system, at least for a while.

We should not imagine that Weber's style of work was at all times taut and concentrated. As a young man, he hit upon his ideas in a state of tension, *con amore*, and the same applies at least as much to the Weber of the *Zwischenbetrachtung*. If he did not go in for 'joyful science' à la Nietzsche, he did offer, in his better periods, the model of a developed joy in knowledge that many in today's academia can scarcely imagine. If he really felt his brain to be an 'ice box', the process of knowledge was for him not rooted in reason alone; his audience, fascinated by his wild, eruptive element, perhaps saw this more clearly than he did himself.

### **Abbreviations:**

- B      Eduard Baumgarten, Max Weber. Werk und Person, Tübingen 1964.
- E & S   Economy and Society, 2 vols., Berkeley 1978.
- WzG   René König/Johannes Winckelmann (ed.), Max Weber zum Gedächtnis, Köln 1963 (=Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie 1963, Sonderheft 7).
- MWG   Max Weber Gesamtausgabe, Tübingen 1984ss.
- PW      Max Weber, Political Writings, Cambridge 1994.
- SWG   Max Weber, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik, ed. by Marianne Weber, Tübingen <sup>2</sup>1988 (1924).
- WB      Marianne Weber: Max Weber. A Biography, Hoboken, N. J. 1975.

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<sup>64</sup> Eduard Baumgarten, 'Über Max Weber. Brief an Nicolaus Sombart', *Merkur* 344-355 (1977), p. 298.

# **Weber's Foundations of the Social Sciences and Rational Choice Theory**

Sandro Segre\*

## **Preface**

Weber's contribution to the foundations of the Social Sciences and to Rational Choice Theory impinges on his conceptions of rationality and rational action. Their scrutiny is therefore necessary and preliminary. Attention will then be paid to Weber's epistemological position in the debate on the foundations of economics and the social sciences in general which took place among German and Austrian social scientists at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Weber's epistemological writings were, in fact, prodded by this debate. As these writings continue to elicit interest on the part of some contemporary Rational Choice theorists, their evaluations will be dealt with and briefly assessed here. Finally, the question will be considered whether there is any thematic or conceptual continuity between rationality, as defined by Weber, and concepts of rationality used by Rational Choice theorists. To the extent that continuity may be found, it may then be shown that Weber has provided an important bridge between pre-World War I and contemporary social sciences.

## **On Weber's conceptions of Rationality and Rational Action.**

These conceptions – widely known among Weberian scholars and sociologists in general - will be presented and discussed here, with selected references to the secondary literature. Action is rational, according to Weber, insofar as actors orient self-consciously and deliberately their action toward some end. This orientation makes their action foreseeable in its course and consequences by other actors, and by social scientists as well. Rationality indicates, accordingly, action that is calculable. Different forms of rationality can be identified from Weberian writings. They are: 1) Conceptual rationality, to the effect that precise and abstract concepts are necessary to the theoretical mastery of reality. 2) Instrumental rationality, in the sense of a proper relationship between ends and means. This involves evaluating the appropriateness of different means in relation to the ends that are pursued, taking into account secondary consequences, and establishing a hierarchy of importance of different ends. 3) Formal rationality, where activities are ordered by means of pre-established and impersonal procedures. 4) Substantive rationality, when normative ideals, such as beliefs, norms and values of whatever character, are relevant and prevail in a given historical time among historians, other social scientists, and also policy makers pursuing, for example, values of justice and equality.

Normative and instrumental rationality are related but their relationship is not binding, as value-rational actions are compatible with different instrumental actions. Instrumental rationality may, in turn, be distinguished according to whether it is subjective or objective. Subjectively rational is any conduct which is considered instrumental to reach a given end. Objectively rational is any conduct which conforms to empirically-tested scientific knowledge, for objective validity is imputed to this form

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\* Prof. Dr. Sandro Segre, Facoltà di Scienze Politiche, Università degli Studi di Genova, L.go della Zecca 8/16, I-16124 Genova, Italia. Segre@unige.it

of knowledge (Weber 1973: 126-133; 256-262, 427-438, 525-536; 1978: 24-26, 85-86. In the secondary literature, see in particular Brubaker 1984: chapters 1 and 2; Levine 1985: 152-173; 2005: 114-117). As Weber points out, “choice between alternative and conflicting ends and results may well be determined in a value-rational manner” (Weber 1978: 26). The manifold meanings of rationality make possible the use of this concept for scientific purposes in different fields, such as economic sociology and the sociology of religion, law and public administration. Moreover, what is rational from a particular viewpoint, for instance economic, may not be rational from a different point of view, for example religious, and there are different degrees of subjective and objective rationality in any given conduct. Ascertaining them is an empirical question (Weber 1922: 11-12; 1973: 435-438).

All these different forms of rationality are conceptually constructed by social scientists as ideal types. They are abstract concepts by means of which empirically observable and understandable phenomena - such as a given class of actions in any particular social or historical context - is related to beliefs, norms and values, and deemed relevant on those grounds. Some constitutive elements of these concepts, if consistent, are selected according to their value relevance, and condensed in a unitary concept. Ideal types are methodological instruments for understanding and explaining social action. Their ultimate purpose is to produce knowledge in the social sciences, including history. Specific purposes may be: the description of social phenomena; their classification and comparison; the construction of theories; and the formulation of models of social and cultural change (Weber 1973: 25-28, 126-131, 179-180, 190-214, 432-438. See also: Bruun 2007: 207-237; Burger 1987; Janoska-Bendl 1965: 49-59; Torrance 1974: 134-145; Weiss 1975: 33-80).

### **Weber’s position in the epistemological debate on the social sciences at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.**

Weber took a stance in the lively debate that took place at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century between some prominent German-speaking social scientists. The object of the debate was the question whether the social sciences, with particular reference to history, sociology and economics, pursue the same goals, and have the same methods, as the natural sciences (Bruun 2007: 111-115; Burger 1987: 140-150; Camic, Gorski, Trubek 2005: 9-16; Swedberg 1991: 259-260; 1998: 176). The so-called “debate on methods” took place between Menger and Schmoller, both of whom held teaching positions as economists. In this connection, attention will be paid to Weber’s position. Weber took issue with Menger to a greater extent than with Schmoller, even though his own position was closer to the former author. He also criticized Simmel on questions regarding the epistemology of the social sciences. Simmel was primarily a philosopher with a strong interest in epistemological problems (in addition to other subjects), but is known as a sociologist too. Simmel’s position, as stated in his epistemological writings with particular reference to his *Problems of Philosophy of History* and *The Problem of Sociology*, may be epitomized as follows.

Objective knowledge may be obtained only by means of abstract or “pure” concepts, whose empirical references may be objectively formulated to the extent that their contents have a logical, non-subjective character. Historical investigations, however, are subjective if they call for a sympathetic understanding of the psychic dispositions of particular individuals, whether they are real or constructed, such as a historical epoch. Sociology, as Simmel maintained, has an objective character, for its goal – the



discovery through a process of induction of the stable forms of reciprocal interactions – does not require any sympathetic understanding of psychic dispositions. In explicit contrast to Simmel, Weber maintained that it is not pure concepts, but rather ideal types that are the appropriate methodological instrument for research purposes in the social sciences. Ideal types differ from pure concepts in a number of specific traits.

They are consistently constructed for the exclusive purposes of understanding and explaining social action. The selection of relevant empirical phenomena is conducted according to their value relevance. Ideal types, moreover, differ from Simmel's forms of reciprocal interactions in that ideal types serve as a methodological tool for the social sciences in general (not only for sociology) and are constructed by social scientists. In contrast, forms are not methodological tools, and their discovery is the goal of Simmelian sociology. Finally, Simmel advocated the inductive procedure as necessary to determine sociologically-relevant forms by abstracting from a great number of reciprocal interactions. The interpretation of motives is not required for this task. In contrast, the Weberian procedure of *Verstehen* is relevant for the construction of ideal types, which may prove useful in understanding lived experiences and performing causal investigations in any social science (Weber 1973: 94-95, 100-101, 124; see also Segre 1987).

The methodological instrument of ideal types was also advocated by Weber when he took a stance in the debate between the economists Schmoller and Menger. Weber's position was similar to Menger's in several regards. Both authors maintained that abstract concepts are necessary as heuristic instruments to obtain theoretical knowledge having general validity in the description and explanation of economic phenomena. Weber, moreover, concurred with Menger in distinguishing between economic history and economic theory, as the former cannot be grasped by means of laws of economic development. Weber did not, however, agree with Menger's contention that actual economic behaviour can be explained by a psychological interpretation of potentially relevant phenomena, such as social institutions or alleged human dispositions. There are – Weber maintained – several heterogeneous and variously combined motives and influences which may be relevant to an explanation of economic behaviour. Their investigation should cast light on the historical and cultural contexts in which psychological factors have been economically relevant.<sup>65</sup>

A psychological investigation may provide more in-depth and valuable knowledge on the cultural determination and significance of economic or economically relevant phenomena such as institutions. Institutions cannot, however, be explained by means of psychological laws. Laws in the social sciences, and economics in particular, are ideal-typical constructions. Their purpose is to provide an understanding and explanation of the consequences of given economic situations. Hypotheses thus constructed must be verified in all particular instances, since their empirical validity cannot be taken for granted. The actors' behaviour is assumed to be oriented to the goal of monetary acquisition, and is accordingly strictly rational. Behaviour is also assumed to be rational in the sense of taking into due consideration the interests of all the actual or potential exchange partners and, therefore, conforming to the norms governing market exchanges. These norms may be epitomized in the principle of strict business honesty,

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<sup>65</sup> Böhm-Bawerk, one of Menger's pupils and followers, and a prominent economist himself, declared himself in broad agreement with Weber on the relationship between economic theory and psychology, but found Weber's thesis that economic theory has nothing to do with psychology far-fetched (Böhm-Bawerk 1957: 240, note 2).

and constitute a normative order which is binding for all the exchange partners. Their mutual informal control is more effective in curbing opportunistic behaviour than sanctions inflicted by Courts of Justice. Market behaviour is therefore predicated on mutual trust, and any combination of instrumental and value-rational conduct may account for conformity to the ethical norms of the market.

Weber's epistemological position also differed from Schmoller in important regards, some convergence points notwithstanding. Weber concurred with Schmoller, and the historical school of economics in general, in contending that empirically valid knowledge on particular historical events or phenomena having cultural significance cannot be deduced from economic concepts and abstract generalizations. Social science laws differ, accordingly, from those of natural sciences. However, Weber maintained, in contrast with the historical school, that history, and the social sciences in general, require the use of concepts. By means of concepts and generalizations, formulated as ideal types, objectively possible contexts of events can be accounted for. The distance of these ideal types from the actual course of the historical events, which cannot possibly be investigated in all detail, may be assessed to provide historical explanations and descriptions. As a consequence, historical explanations cannot be formulated without reference to the values that guide the selection of significant historical events. Ideal-typical concepts employed by historians, the one for instance of the Medieval Church, condense a number of different concepts concerning faith dogmas, norms of ethical conduct and ecclesiastic Law, and a number of other items that are meaningfully connected through ideal types. Their historical significance should be empirically verified, rather than being determined by metaphysical beliefs. Causal connections may be established in history by resorting to evaluations based on the general experience of similar courses of events rather than to theoretical knowledge.

For this sort of knowledge may be found, rather than in the historical discipline, in generalizing disciplines such as sociology and economics. Historical knowledge provides the foundation for judgments of objective possibility and, on this basis, for the establishment of causal relationships concerning individual occurrences such as actions, social formations and personalities endowed with cultural significance. Generalizing disciplines, in contrast, endeavour to formulate very abstract ideal-typical concepts that may be used for the purpose of investigating several different empirical cases, and explaining their formation, change, and consequences. The assumption of goal-rational conduct serves precisely the purpose of providing general explanations of market behaviour, both when economic conduct is in fact rational and when is not. As the selection of the research object is guided by the values of the social scientists and their historical times, and different values may be found in any given epoch and in different times, a number of distinct ideal types may be formulated. It is, accordingly, impossible to formulate in any social science, including history, a set of ideal types having permanent and universal scientific value (Weber 1924: 284-285; 1973: 130-137, 185-197, 206-209, 287-290, 452-460; 1975: 32-34; 1978: 18-22; 635-640; 1999: 167-169. See also Burger 1987: 150-153; Camic, Gorski, Trubek 2005: 16-20; Schluchter 2000: 73-80; Turner, Factor 1994: 150-151).

### **Weber's Epistemology of the Social Sciences and Contemporary Rational Choice Theory.**

Some representatives of Rational Choice Theory have evidenced a considerable interest, and contributed discussions and assessments, on Weber's epistemological position

concerning rationality and the social sciences. Their contributions will be briefly presented, compared and evaluated here, starting with Jon Elster's. Elster (2000) shows appreciation for Weber's emphasis on the relevance of values and sentiments for norms and behaviour, but makes a number of critical remarks. In particular:

- Weber does not distinguish between objective rationality, as indicated by successful action, and subjective rationality, as indicated by acting for reasons that are deemed good, namely reasons which the actor considers adequate to the purposes pursued. Whether behaviour is rational cannot be established, in other words, without knowledge of the reasons that may be attributed to the actors.
- Weber fails to differentiate between instrumentally rational behaviour, which implies acting for the sake of personal ends, and value-rational, non-self-interested behaviour, such as acting out of a sense of duty or benevolence.
- Weber does not take into consideration that subjectively rational conduct involves a process of information gathering, which is necessary but costly in terms of time, energy and money. There is, accordingly, a trade-off between the advantages of information gathering and its costs. The assessment of the optimum trade-off cannot be made on rational grounds.
- This leads to the following points:
  - (i) There may be more than one instrumentally rational course of action, while there may be no way to know, or rationally evaluate, which course is more rational. In game-theory language, such a situation is designated as multiple equilibriums. There are, therefore, many beliefs and behaviours that may be called rational.
  - (ii) Customs, convenience and tradition do not fit clearly into Weber's typology of social action, which comprehends instrumental, value-rational, affectual and traditional conduct. They partake, in fact, of all these types and, therefore, their applicability to empirical instances is partial or dubious in many empirical cases.

Raymond Boudon has, like Elster, dwelt on Weber's contribution to RCA (see for example Boudon 1987; 1998; 2003). According to Boudon, Weber has correctly emphasized cognitive and value rationality in addition to instrumental rationality, which is assumed by conventional versions of RCA. In other words, the Weberian actor is not only guided by his or her goals. Also relevant are the reasons which the actor considers strong (value rationality) and valid (cognitive rationality), given the actor's cognitive context and, in particular, his or her beliefs on what should be deemed adequate reasons for a course of action. Value and cognitive rationality, as Boudon points out, make no use of cost-benefit analysis. Boudon considers cost-benefit analysis, which is characteristic of instrumental rationality, "too rigid and narrow" and therefore devoid of general validity (1998: 820-822). As he has argued, instrumental rationality cannot explain a number of social actions that are not apparently produced by self-interest. Voting, for instance, serves no purpose, and is costly in terms of time and other resources. The belief in voting as a duty is a normative belief that cannot be explained in terms of cost and benefit. RCT, moreover, has no explanatory power when behaviour is dictated by beliefs that are worthy of serious consideration because they are not commonplace.

It is, then, apparent that Elster pays more attention to Weber's analysis of instrumental rationality, while Boudon deals at greater length with non-instrumental rationality.

Elster, moreover, raises several objections against Weber, whilst Boudon shows unqualified appreciation. Weber, as a forerunner of Rational Choice Theory, has also been considered by Norkus (2000). The author maintains that “his methodological instructions on how to approach interpretive understanding and causal explanation qualify as an anticipation of RCA” (2000: 268), finds Weber’s concept of subjective instrumental rationality “complex and fascinating” (2000: 264), and underlines the modifications which Weber brought to this concept in the course of his life. As Norkus points out, the formulation of the Weberian typology of social action may be found in a later text (1919/20), while in the former (1913), “the rational action only differed gradually from irrational action” (Norkus 2000: 272). In the later text the choice of action is determined by a number of selections, or “filters”, which are not necessarily activated simultaneously. Thus, the opportunity set – which contains only a part of all logically possible options – is restricted by the actor’s values, and then by the actor’s beliefs, habits and desires. This is, in Norkus’ opinion, a scheme of classification rather than a sociological action theory, in contrast to RCA, for it provides no explanatory or predictive statements on sociological action. It provides, however, descriptive accuracy with its distinction between instrumentally rational, value-rational and non-rational behavior.

Norkus contributes a discussion on Elster and Boudon concerning the conceptual and theoretical relations between Weberian sociology and RCT, thus possibly paving the way for a future debate. Norkus concurs with Elster that Weber’s concept of instrumental rationality is parametric rather than strategic; it presupposes, in other words, a social context that the actor cannot modify. However, he remarks that for Weber, action is instrumentally rational in relation to a subjectively-defined situation. Deviations of an actual course of action from objective rationality may be rational from a subjective viewpoint, and may be accounted for by the actor’s insufficient information and/or logical or factual errors. Moreover, Norkus finds continuity between Weber and Elster, as both authors consider some elements intervening between the logically possible actions and those in fact performed. Weber and Elster, in other words, interpose some analytical filters.

Elster’s filters consist in restrictions limiting the opportunity set on the one hand, and in the actor’s wants and expectations on the other (see Elster 1986: 12-16). As Norkus has pointed out, Elster’s filters therefore condense a number of Weber’s, such as value commitments, affects and habits. As for Boudon, Norkus remarks that the actor’s beliefs about “good reasons” cannot provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of subjective instrumental rationality, as there is no necessary consensus on what may be considered “good reasons”. However, assuming a Weberian epistemological position, this consensus may be deduced if there is a shared context of meaning. In other words, an intersubjective consensus may be inferred from the fact that the actors impute to their own actions a subjective meaning which is communicable and shared among them (Norkus 2000: 262-264, 266-267, 274-276).

These contributions by Elster, Boudon and Norkus should be evaluated in the light of Weber’s conceptions of Rationality and Rational Action, as previously presented. With reference to Elster’s strictures, Weber did distinguish between objective and subjective rationality, the former indicating any conduct conforming to knowledge that has been empirically tested and is generally considered valid, the latter referring to knowledge that individual actors think appropriate to reach their ends. By the same token, he distinguished between instrumentally rational and value-rational conduct, and asserted

that “choice between alternative and conflicting ends and results may well be determined in a value-rational manner” or, alternatively, by arranging them “in a scale of consciously assessed relative urgency”. As for the fit of customs, convenience and tradition into Weber’s typology of social action, the degree of value or goal rationality depends on whether the affectual components of action, or rather contingent ends or ethical considerations, prevail in the subjective meaning conferred upon a given conduct. The stability of the social order – adds Weber – is greatest when it is legitimate. Custom and tradition are less powerful sources of stability, while motives of pure expediency make the social order least stable (Weber 1978: 26-28, 31).

Boudon has stressed the relevance for Weber of value and cognitive rationality in addition to goal rationality, in the sense of pursuing self-interest. In fact, Weber has stated that rationalization processes are in no way confined to the particular case of pursuing self-interest, and a combination of motives may usually be found in actual conduct. Cases in point are the actors’ dual orientations to goal- and value-rationality when they agree upon a social relationship by mutual consent. It should be recalled, however, that for Weber this orientation of action provides the greatest degree of understandability as an ideal type, and hypotheses built on the assumption of the rational pursuit of self-interest are especially useful for understanding and explaining economic conduct in the market. Emphasizing the relevance for Weber of goal-rational conduct is, therefore, justified on theoretical grounds (Weber 1973: 435-437; 1978: 5, 28-30).

There is, furthermore, textual support for Norkus’ assertion that Weber’s typology of social action is a classification scheme rather than a theory. Weber himself designates this typology as a “*Systematik*” (“a systematic classification”), though not “an exhaustive classification of the modes of orientation of action” (see Weber 1956: 12-13; 1978: 25-26). There may be, moreover, a shared context of meaning between actors who have established a social relationship, though it is not necessary that “the meaning for one party is the same as that for the other” (Weber 1978: 27). As a set of ideal types, however, the purpose of the Weberian classification of social action is not only description, but also understanding and explanation. Ideal-typical classifications are not theories, as Norkus has pointed out, but they provide the conceptual apparatus for their formulation. There is, in the Weberian texts, no indication of the existence of selective mechanisms or “filters” whereby an opportunity set is progressively restricted until the actor’s wants and expectations are specified. Different modes of orientation may approximate a given ideal type, but in most empirical cases they are mixed together (“*gemischt*”) (Weber 1956: 13; 1978: 26).

Actors, in any case, are situated in a social context which they can modify only to some extent and in given circumstances, depending on the nature of this context. If actors in a social relationship take account of each other’s action, and there is no organization imposing its regulations on them, actors can modify their context of action. This holds for symmetric and asymmetric relations. To the extent, however, that there are organizations able to impose their order on actors, within pre-established bounds, then the action context is parametric. If and how much the action context is strategic or parametric is, therefore, for Weber an empirical question, but the presence of an administrative staff endowed with coercive powers makes the social context of action relatively stable for all those subject to its authority. Social action originates from an apparatus and is formally rational rather than goal-rational, as individual actions may be (Weber 1973: 441, 447-449; 1978: 26-27, 48-54).

### **The Weberian Epistemology of the Social Sciences in the Context of the Old and New Epistemological Debates.**

A recapitulation of the debates on the epistemology of the social sciences that have been considered may be opportune here. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, among German-speaking scholars Simmel contended that the interpretation of the actors' motives is necessary for historians, whose task is to obtain a sympathetic understanding of the psychic dispositions of particular individuals, whether real or constructed. Sociology, in contrast, formulates abstract concepts by a process of logical induction, and seeks thereby to discover the stable forms of reciprocal interactions. No understanding of motives or other psychic dispositions is required in this case. History and sociology have, then, different tasks and procedures. Among the German-speaking economists, Schmoller maintained, along with the so-called Historical School, that economics must be a thoroughly empirical discipline in which generalizations should be avoided and historical economic details emphasized. There is, therefore, no economic theory, but rather economic history. On the other hand, Menger advocated strong theoretical foundations for economics as a discipline that makes use of abstract concepts and formulates laws of economic processes. A psychological interpretation of potentially relevant phenomena should account for economic behaviour that has been actually observed.

Weber remarked in this connection that history and sociology, like economics and the social sciences in general, make use of particular abstract concepts called ideal types for various heuristic purposes, including understanding motives and providing explanations of social actions. Establishing causal relationships concerning individual phenomena having cultural significance is the purview of history. In contrast, sociology and other generalizing disciplines like economics formulate ideal-types in order to investigate a number of different empirical cases having cultural significance. Psychological investigations may cast light on the motives of the economic actors. Social science laws are ideal-typical constructions. Their purpose is to facilitate the tasks of understanding and explaining economic phenomena under the assumptions of perfect rationality and free competition. These assumptions characterize the ideal type of the market. Insofar as market behaviour is concerned, rational conduct implies a rational orientation to the goal of monetary acquisition, and also to the norms and the ultimate value of honesty in economic transactions.

The contemporary debate on Weber's contribution to Rational Choice Theory has evidenced not only discordant evaluations, but also partially different themes. Elster has been the most critical among those involved. Weber has been taken to task for not having distinguished between objective and subjective rationality, and between instrumentally rational and value-rational conduct. He has not, moreover, considered that there is no rational way to establish the optimum trade-off between the costs and the advantages involved in information-gathering in order to determine the most appropriate conduct. There may also be many instrumentally rational courses of action, and many rational beliefs and behaviours. Finally, customs, convenience and tradition do not fit clearly into Weber's typology of social action. Boudon has focused on value and cognitive rationality. These broad notions of rationality are distinct from the narrow notion of instrumental rationality in that they focus on the reasons that are thought to be strong and valid, rather than on cost-benefit analysis. Norkus has found that Weber's statements on social action provide a classification scheme, rather than a theory of

social action. This scheme supplies no explanation, so is therefore not a theory, but it obtains descriptive accuracy by distinguishing between instrumentally-rational, value-rational and non-rational conduct. Weber and Elster, furthermore, consider some elements intervening between the logically possible actions and those in fact performed, but these elements, or filters, are spelled out - as Norkus contends - more fully by Weber than by Elster.

An assessment of these evaluations, which concern Weber's contribution to Rational Choice Theory, has shown that Elster's criticisms are apparently unsupported. Weber has clearly distinguished between objective and subjective rationality, and between conducts that are instrumentally and value-rational. He has also indicated how the problem presented by alternative and conflicting ends and results may be rationally overcome, and how customs, convenience and tradition may fit into Weber's typology of social action. Boudon is right in stressing the categories of value and cognitive rationality, along with goal rationality, in Weberian sociology, but has omitted to underline the pre-eminent position Weber imputed to goal rationality. Norkus has correctly maintained that the Weberian typology of social action serves a classification, rather than theoretical, purpose, but his contention that there exist some specific selective mechanisms restricting an actor's opportunity set finds little support in Weber. Finally, the actor's social context is, for Weber, neither necessarily parametric nor strategic, but depends on the extent to which formal rationality prevails over goal rationality.

There have thus been two debates centring on Weber's notion of rationality. A number of features differentiate them: their historical times (the former took place at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the latter is contemporary); their nature (the former was epistemological, the latter is theoretical); the position of Weber (in the former debate, Weber was a subject, in the latter he is an object). In spite of these differences, some thematic or conceptual continuity may be found between these two debates. The notion of rationality as an ideal type provides the crucial link. In the former debate, no other participant shared Weber's position that ideal types - that of rationality in particular - provide the methodological instrument for formulating classifications, descriptions and explanations of social and historical phenomena. In the latter debate, no participant has questioned the epistemological relevance of the Weberian ideal type of rationality for the social sciences. Different formulations of this ideal type have been carefully analyzed against the background of contemporary Rational Choice Theory, and found alternatively unsatisfactory or useful for theoretical purposes. Epistemological dissent has therefore given way to theoretical dissent. In either case, however, Weber has enjoyed continuous relevance as a founding father of sociology, and the social sciences in general.

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## Weber, Marx and Contemporary Economic Theory: A Secular Theory of the Spirit of Capitalism.♦

Fabrizio Zilibotti\*

### 1) The spirit of capitalism in Weber.

How important are cultural and religious factors in shaping economic and social transformations? This question has been debated at great length in social science. On the one hand, Karl Marx regarded spiritual values as ancillary factors. Production relations constitute, in his opinion, the real foundations upon which the whole cultural superstructure of society stands. Culture, religion and ideology (the "superstructure") are mere reflections of the material interests of the class in control of the means of production. For instance, Protestantism is an ideological reflection of the economic changes that occurred in the early stages of capitalism. On the other hand, Max Weber criticized this materialistic perspective, and viewed spiritual factors as independent engines of socio-economic transformation. The development of a spirit of capitalism (*der Geist des Kapitalismus*) was, in his view, a key driving force of the industrial revolution. Likewise, emancipation from economic traditionalism was essential to the development of modern capitalist enterprise. Far from being a by-product of changes in the production structure, Protestantism, especially the Calvinist creed, played a major role in forging the modern *homo oeconomicus*.

In *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (PESC), Weber refers to three facts supporting his theory. First, in countries of mixed religious composition such as Germany, France and Britain, "business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labour, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant" (PESC, p. 3). This claim is supported, with some qualifications, by Rubinstein's (1981) recent study on the identity of the wealthiest British individuals in the 19th century. He documents that some Protestant dissident affiliations (though not all) were over-represented among the major industrialists, while Roman Catholics were significantly under-represented. A more problematic perspective is offered by Becker and Woessmann (2007), who find, in an empirical study based on county-level data from late 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussia, that Protestant regions were indeed more prosperous, but that this difference could be explained by their higher education. These differences, as they recognize, might have had their roots in religion, especially since Luther required that people should be able to

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♦ This presentation is largely based on joint work with Matthias Doepke (UCLA). See Doepke and Zilibotti (2005b, 2005c and 2007).

\* Prof. Dr. Fabrizio Zilibotti, Institute for Empirical Research in Economics, University of Zurich, Blümlisalpstrasse 10, CH-8006 Zürich, Switzerland. zilibott@iew.uzh.ch

read the Bible.<sup>66</sup> The second fact is that the countries where the Reformation (and especially Calvinism) had the strongest penetration (e.g. the Netherlands and the United States) were front-runners in the development of capitalism.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, according to Weber, the influence of Protestantism was not confined to countries that embraced the Reformation: even countries where the Reformation was less influential (e.g. Austria) imported Protestant influence through the immigration of Protestant craftsmen.

Protestantism influenced economic behaviour through its emphasis on the work ethic, patience and self-control which in turn had their roots in what Weber calls “Protestant worldly asceticism”. For instance, he writes:

“God helps those who help themselves... The Calvinist... himself creates his own salvation, or... the conviction of it... This creation... (consists of)... a systematic self-control which at every moment stands before the inexorable alternative, chosen or damned” (PESC, p. 69)

Self-control meant, according to Weber, the exact opposite of the joy of living – be it in the form of a taste for consumption or for leisure:

“The English, Dutch and American Puritans were characterized by the exact opposite of the joy of living... The *summum bonum* of this ethics (is) the earning of more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life” (PESC, p. 8)

To the ascetic Calvinist, life was not valuable on its own:

“The world exists to serve the Glorification of God and for that purpose alone. The elected Christian is in the world only to increase this glory of God...” (PESC, p. 64)

However, unlike the asceticism of Catholic monks, the glorification of God meant neither a contemplative attitude nor praise of poverty. On the contrary, the best way to glorify God is through economic success:

“where material profit is acquired through the ascetic pursuit of duty in a calling... it is morally recommended. To wish to be poor (is)...the same as wishing to be

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<sup>66</sup> Their findings are consistent with the hypothesis that human capital, and not the work ethic *per se*, matters for economic performance. However, they do not rule out the alternative hypothesis that the diffusion of Protestantism drove both higher educational achievement and a stricter work ethic. If these effects are highly correlated, the data would be unable to discriminate between the two hypotheses. It is also worth noting that Weber believed that Calvinism and other dissident Protestant creeds were much more important than Lutheranism for the development of the spirit of capitalism. The findings of Becker and Woessmann (2007) echo Botticini and Eckstein (2005), who argue that a religious reform in early Jewish history requiring Jewish people to learn to read induced many of them to exploit their acquired comparative advantage, to migrate to cities and specialize in capital-intensive human activities such as artisanship, trade, and finance.

<sup>67</sup> A recent economic study by Cavalcanti, Parenti and Zhao (2007) assesses the quantitative plausibility of the Weberian hypothesis through a counterfactual exercise based on a calibrated model. Their conclusion is that differences between Catholics and Protestants can possibly explain why Northern Europe developed before Southern Europe. One should note however that Weber emphasized differences within Protestant creeds as much as between Catholicism and Protestantism.

unhealthy; it is objectionable as a glorification of works and derogatory to the glory of God” (PESC, p. 109)

And, as part of this process, saving and wealth accumulation become *ethical*:

"When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save. The restraints which were imposed upon the consumption of wealth naturally served to increase it by making possible the productive investment of capital" (PESC, p. 116)

In summary, Weber saw the main influence of Protestantism to be the adoption of an economic ethic. Although religious motivation was important in the beginning, Weber recognizes that this soon turned into a system of values which evolved according to an independent dynamic. Thrift, the work ethic, perseverance and patience were the secular manifestations of the spirit of capitalism. Weber (1915) himself stressed that their origin was not necessarily exclusively religious:

“No economic ethic has ever been determined solely by religion... The religious determination of life-conduct ... is only one of the determinants of the economic ethic” (p. 268)

Nor did Weber regard the link between religious and economic factors as one-directional. The last paragraph of PESC explicitly warns against a reversal of materialism into pure spiritualism, and encourages future research aimed at investigating how economic factors affected the success and development of religion:

“... it would also further be necessary to investigate how Protestant Asceticism was in turn influenced in its development and its character by the totality of social conditions, especially economic... it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and of history. Each is equally possible, but each, if it does not serve as the preparation, but as the conclusion of an investigation, accomplishes equally little in the interest of historical truth.” (PESC, p. 125)

## **2) Preferences and spiritual values in modern economic science.**

The study of the causes and dynamics of the Industrial Revolution has been the focus of intense investigation by economic historians. More recent literature has applied formal economic theory to explain a variety of aspects of the transition from stagnation to growth. The aim of this literature is to produce and test theories whose validity can be extrapolated to different contexts, such as the problems of the contemporary developing world.

Most such economic theories describe the transition as primarily driven by technological factors, either in agriculture or in the manufacturing sector (see Zilibotti 1995, Galor and Weil 2000, Hansen and Prescott 2002, Doepke 2004). A different view is that the key factor was neither technology nor human capital, but the inability of financial markets to collect and channel large amounts of resources towards large-scale undertakings. For instance, Acemoglu and Zilibotti (1997) propose a theory of financial

development and capital accumulation that is consistent with this view, and can explain why progress in the pre-industrial world was erratic and the transition to the Industrial Revolution slow. Finally, a number of papers have argued that institutional development and political reforms are the key to long-term growth and, in particular, to the transition that occurred during the Industrial Revolution (see e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson 2000, Lizzeri and Persico 2004). These theories are often not mutually exclusive, but complementary: for instance, political reforms such as the ban on child labor and the introduction of compulsory public education were instrumental in removing bottlenecks to human capital accumulation (see Doepke and Zilibotti 2005a).

In contrast, neither economic historians nor economic theorists have so far devoted much attention to cultural factors. The main reason is a philosophical one. A tenet of neo-classical theory is that preferences are primitive (even psychological) forces that economists interested in private and social resource allocation take as given. Humans like to consume, dislike labour effort, discount future welfare, love their children, etc., but these are innate traits which do not vary much across groups or over time. This view stands in sharp contrast with Weber's view that not only values, but even the notion of *homo oeconomicus* are historically determined.<sup>68</sup>

In recent research (Doepke and Zilibotti 2005b, 2005c and 2007), we propose a new approach that revisits the Weberian hypothesis in the light of modern economic theory. We argue that heterogeneity in culture and values over time and across social groups played a key role in shaping the socio-economic transformation that occurred during the British Industrial Revolution. In the pre-industrial world, some groups accumulated the spirit of capitalism generation after generation, while others did not. Echoing Marx's materialistic approach, we believe that economic determinants were (at least in part) behind this cultural accumulation process: material conditions and, in particular, the nature of the occupations in which different families were engaged – craftsmen, merchants, landowners labourers – shaped the cultures and values of different groups. Departing from Marx, however, we do not view spiritual factors as a mere reflection of production relationships. On the contrary, we argue that they exercised important feedback on economic relations. The mechanism linking material and spiritual conditions is a rational-choice theory: humans are altruistic towards their children and make a conscious effort to instil in them the values that best prepare them for their future material experience. So, initially small differences get magnified over time through a process of intra-family cultural transmission.

The goal of our theory is to explain the economic decline of the British landowning elite. Before the 19th century, land and wealth were highly concentrated in Britain, more than anywhere else in Europe. As late as 1850, 50% of the land was owned by less than 5000 families. Yet this elite lost ground, first in relative terms, and then, by the end of the 19th century, even in absolute terms, in a way that was historically unprecedented (see Cannadine 1990). Economic theories of inequality and development are at odd with this observation as they predict that a wealthy and well-educated elite should have been the main beneficiary of the investment-based technologies that became available with the development of the factory system.

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<sup>68</sup> An exception is the recent literature analyzing the evolution of preferences (see e.g. Dekel, Ely and Yilankaya 2007, Heifetz, Shannon and Spiegel 2005). Concerning the industrial revolution, see Galor and Moav 2002 and Galor and Michalopoulos 2006. However, Darwinian selection requires very long time horizons, whereas the changes considered in this paper occur within an interval of a few centuries or even a few generations.

However, industrialists rose from the middle class and, ultimately, replaced the aristocracy as the economically dominant group. Even the role of landowners as financiers for the new business activities was minor if compared with their extraordinary initial wealth.

What explains this reversal of fortunes? Our answer is that the British aristocracy did not possess the spirit of capitalism. In fact, it was the pre-industrial material experience of the landowning aristocracy that had made this class ill-suited to embrace and transmit to their offspring such a spirit. The opposite occurred with the urban middle classes.

While our thesis may sound unorthodox to many of today's economists, the idea that aristocrats and merchants were different human beings, as far as both their values and their behaviour are concerned, was obvious to illustrious contemporary observers. Long before Max Weber, Adam Smith (1776) had written:

“A merchant is accustomed to employ his money chiefly in profitable projects; whereas a mere country gentleman is accustomed to employ it chiefly in expense. The one often sees his money go from him and return to him again with a profit: the other, when once he parts with it, very seldom expects to see any more of it.” (p. 432)

### 3) Patience and Appreciation of Leisure.

Our theory focuses on two key traits of human preferences, patience and appreciation of leisure. These traits are standard parameters in economic models. The former is known in economic jargon as the *discount factor*; it describes the extent of agents' future-orientedness, i.e. how much their current satisfaction depends on the ability to savour future enjoyment (see Saez-Marti and Weibull 2005). This parameter is a key determinant of people's propensity to save and invest in physical and human assets (e.g. education). The appreciation of leisure is called in jargon the *marginal utility (opportunity cost) of leisure*. By measuring the ability of agents to enjoy non-working time, it measures, as its inverse, the propensity to exert labour effort (the work ethic). Our notion of patience is related to Weber's notion of *compulsion to save*, whereas the appreciation of leisure is related to his discussion of the *joy of living* and *self-discipline*. We argue that patience and appreciation of leisure are not entirely innate traits, but change over time as the result of investments made by parents to shape their children's preferences. From an economic theory perspective, this is a non-standard assumption.

Patience had already been identified as a key parameter by the early contributors to the marginalistic school. Interestingly, both Marshall and Pigou associated impatience with the lack of economic rationality. Lower classes would, in their opinion, lack the ability to weigh and foresee the future consequences of their current actions, ending up in a short-sighted life-style. More recently, Becker and Mullighan (1997) introduced into economics the notion that people can make investments in order to affect their own discount factor (patience). Several empirical studies point to the key role of patience for economic success. In the famous “marshmallow experiment” Mischel, Shoda, and Rodriguez (1989) show that, in pre-school children, the ability to delay gratification is a powerful predictor of success in education, the labour market, and marriage. Reyes-Garcia et al. (2007) run a very interesting experimental study on a sample of Tsimanes (Bolivia), a tribal society characterized by almost perfect economic equality until the 1970s. Thereafter, as the result of contacts with the outside world,

specialization and the development of market activities, this community experienced a fast trend of growing inequality, whose current level is comparable to that of contemporary British society. The researchers elicited people's preferences over a series of interviews, and then followed them over their life experience. They found that individuals who had revealed themselves to be more patient were more likely to acquire formal education, choose market-oriented occupations, earn a higher income, and rely less on traditional knowledge. Similarly, Segal (2004) finds that patience, motivation, work discipline and other *non-cognitive skills* measured in early school age are as good, or better, predictors of economic and social success as IQ tests designed to measure cognitive intelligence.

While none of the empirical studies discussed above establish whether patience and the work ethic are genetically determined or can be affected by family nurture, other studies suggest that this is indeed the case. For instance, Heckman (2000), Carneiro and Heckman (2003) and Heckman, Stixrud and Urzua (2006) document that a number of programmes targeted at disadvantaged families in the US caused significant improvements in the non-cognitive skills of the children of the treated families. Such effects are significantly larger than those scored on IQ tests, which are designed to test raw cognitive intelligence. By documenting that support to poor families improves children's non-cognitive skills, this programme evaluation literature is inconsistent with the hypothesis that non-cognitive skills are entirely hardwired. Similarly, Knowles and Postlewaite (2004) find that family nurture influences the transmission of patience and propensity to save from parents (especially mothers) to children. In conclusion, different streams of literature show that patience and the work ethic are important human assets that are subject to a process of cultural transmission.

#### **4) A Parsimonious Theory of the Demise of the British Aristocracy.**

In the tradition of modern economic theory, in Doepke and Zilibotti (2007) we construct a parsimonious dynamic general equilibrium model where investments in patience and appreciation of leisure are aspects of the process of human capital accumulation. We assume that shaping children's preferences is possible but costly to parents. For instance, parents must spend time on children's religious education, or on teaching them to appreciate classical music. Both patience and appreciation of leisure are valuable assets which increase children's future happiness in a utilitarian sense. However, how much each asset is worth in relative terms depends on the occupational choice of the child when he becomes an adult. Will he have a lot of free time? Will his rewards in life come soon or only accrue in later age? Preferences, in turn, have an active role as they affect important choices, such as occupational choice, savings (capital accumulation) and labour effort.

The mechanics of the model can be understood with the aid of figures 1 and 2. Consider figure 1 first. Pre-industrial artisanship was highly intensive in human capital investment: it required a lengthy painful process of apprenticeship and journeymanhood before a young candidate, after passing a demanding exam, could set up his shop. In contrast, unskilled labourers and landowners had flatter earning (and effort) profiles. Thus, artisans had stronger incentives to invest in patience. In turn, patient people were more likely to choose artisanship. In contrast, labourers - but also wealthy landowners - expecting their children to earn flat wages, had weaker incentives to instil the values of patience into their offspring. As a result, labourers' children would grow less patient and less inclined to invest and to become artisans. A self-reinforcing mechanism links,



then, occupational choice and investment in patience: artisans and urban middle classes become the patient classes. The success of Calvinism in the urban middle class can be viewed as a means to transmit these values.

Figure 2 shows the corresponding mechanism for the appreciation of leisure. Here, it is the availability of free time that determines the incentive for a social class to invest in this asset. Aristocratic landowners were, by the nature of their economic activity, best endowed with free time. So, parents had a stronger incentive to instil in their children good taste for time-intensive refined activities. As a matter of fact, leisure activities remained for centuries almost a monopoly of the upper classes. Neither the urban middle classes nor the lower classes had much of an incentive to teach their children the appreciation of sophisticated leisure activities.

Aristocrats' devotion to consumption and leisure activities is well documented. And so is their low propensity to save, which is, in our theory, an immediate implication of the limited emphasis in their upbringing on patience and forward-orientedness. This resulted in lavish expenses, little investment in financial markets and growing indebtedness. One might wonder what kept the aristocrats from selling their land: aside from social norms, there were severe legal constraints on such a possibility. The institution of the *entail* required that estates could neither be split nor sold by the owner. However, estates were increasingly mortgaged, which was the closest they could get to selling them in exchange for present consumption. Social norms also developed in the direction of reinforcing these habits: contempt for business and industrial activity was almost a defining characteristic of the aristocratic culture at the dawn of the industrial revolution.

In the pre-industrial world, cultural divergences within society had limited economic effects, aside from occupational choice. Land remained the main source of wealth. However, the industrial revolution made available new technologies which increased the rate of return for savings and entrepreneurial effort. At that time, the urban middle class had acquired the spirit of capitalism. As in standard economic models, patience translated into a high propensity to save, while the work ethic made middle-class individuals prepared to undertake great effort to achieve economic success. The aristocracy had the wealth but no spirit of capitalism and did not invest in the new technology, at least not in the proportion that could be expected from their extraordinary wealth. Eventually, capital accumulation led to leap-frogging: the landed elite lost ground and was replaced by the industrialists as the new economic and social elite. The theory conforms with the evidence from both social and economic history. In particular, the leap-frogging and eventual demise of the British aristocracy is documented in the studies of Rubinstein (1981), Crouzet (1985) and Cannadine (1990). A particularly interesting piece of evidence is a study on the professional choice of graduates from Cambridge - a school attended almost exclusively by the aristocratic *elite* and often by non-first children who would not inherit the land. Only a negligible fraction of them were set to engage in business activities, while church, public administration and universities were the most popular activities of the children of the landowning *elite*.

In PESC, Weber argued that economic development and wealth accumulation would eventually undermine the original ethic of the pioneers of capitalism. He discusses, for instance, John Wesley's concerns about the loss of religious fervour among the Methodist adepts after they became enriched. Our theory predicts similar dynamics. In our theory, the work ethic deteriorates as the agent's income becomes less dependent on work effort. It was precisely the low reliance on labour effort that had

made the landowning *rentiers* ill-disposed to acquire a work ethic (and to emphasize its opposite, i.e. appreciate leisure). However, as industrialist dynasties were enriched, the founders' children and grandchildren could rely on growing capital income, and became less dependent on their labour effort. The captains of industry then became *rentiers* and their spiritual tension to accumulate deteriorated. Just as with the landowners, this created an incentive for them to accumulate a taste for leisure. Since the taste for leisure increases the opportunity cost of labor effort, it eventually undermined the bourgeoisie's propensity to invest. Social historians document the growing involvement by the enriched bourgeois middle class in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and how this was associated with a changing moral attitude towards the joy of living.<sup>69</sup>

There is also evidence that the growing emphasis on the joy of living brought about a loosening of the compulsion to save and some economic decline. In a study from a sample of British business leaders born between 1789 and 1937, Nicholas (1999) documents that third-generation entrepreneurs strongly underperformed relative to firm founders. This observation is especially interesting since it is at odds with a purely genetic view of entrepreneurial skills and preference transmission. It is also at odds with the view that the main reason why it was the urban middle class rather than the rural *elite* who made the industrial revolution is that the former had the right technical skills for the new technologies. In contrast, our emphasis on culture and its endogenous dynamics is coherent with the observations.

## 5) Conclusions.

In this presentation I have shown how Weber's thesis of the spirit of capitalism can be developed and integrated into modern economic theory to cast light on episodes of economic history. Based on joint research with Matthias Doepke, I have documented a number of observations that are consistent with the hypothesis that cultural factors played a major role in the socio-economic transformations at the time of the British industrial revolution. In particular, they may have caused the replacement of the landowning aristocracy as the economic and social elite. Our approach integrates a secular version of Weber's hypothesis with a scent of Marxian materialism and a rational-choice economic theory of human capital accumulation and cultural transmission.

The theory can provide new lessons outside of the specific historical context to which it is directly applied. For instance, it suggests the existence of self-reinforcing mechanisms linking the exclusion and marginalization of some groups and minorities with the lack of incentives for parents to invest in values that could help their children out of the *trap*. Saez Marti and Zenou (2006) explore a similar mechanism in a theory of statistical discrimination and cultural transmission of the work ethic. In other cases, the exclusion or discrimination from some professional and social activities may bring about increasing economic success for the groups that are subject to discrimination (see Fang and Norman 2006). Understanding the interplay between cultural and economic dynamics is an exciting and open field for future interdisciplinary research.

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<sup>69</sup> For instance, Bailey (1989) writes "At mid-century the Victorian middle class had been suspicious of the moral temptations of a beckoning leisure world... By the end of the century prescriptions had become more permissive - from 'Be virtuous and you will be happy' to 'Be happy and you will be virtuous' - and middle class leisure grew more expansive and assured" (p.110).

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**Reorienting Weber?  
Is a non-Eurocentric theory  
of the Rise of the West desirable and possible?**

John M. Hobson\*

**Introduction**

For a long time, the debate on the Rise of the West has seen liberals, Marxists and Weberians pitted against each other. But particularly since the publication of David Landes' *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* in 1998,<sup>70</sup> the debate has begun to shift onto the terrain of 'Eurocentrism versus non-Eurocentrism'. One of the most significant aspects of this new debate is how it has shifted our perceptions of the old debate. Thus, seen through a non-Eurocentric lens, now Marxism, Weberianism and liberalism appear as but minor variations on the same Eurocentric theme. Put simply, the sound and fury of the old debate is now seen as something of a storm in a teacup. In this paper I want to explore this debate more fully, not least so as to appraise my own position. Prior to my recent book, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*, (which was published in 2004) I was a 'signed up' Weberian, seeking to produce a neo-Weberian historical sociology of International Relations. This was laid out in three previous books which stem back to 1997.<sup>71</sup> Prior to that I published a book that explored a neo-Weberian sociology of the state in long-run economic development.<sup>72</sup> This all came on the back of my conversion from Gramscian Marxism to neo-Weberianism that occurred in 1986 when I was privileged to take a master's course on Sociological Theory with Michael Mann at the LSE. Tracing forwards from there, I began my PhD with Mick in 1987 and completed it in 1991 (which was later converted into my 1997 book).

I mention all this not just to signal my neo-Weberian credentials but to raise a conundrum that I now face – something which this conference paper brings to a head in my own mind (though I have been grappling with it for some time now). And this conundrum is initially straightforward: the non-Eurocentric framework that I developed in my recent 2004 book brought me into confronting Max Weber's Eurocentric account of the Rise of the West. Daunting though it is to be standing here among a host of prestigious Weber fellows, I still feel compelled to register my dissatisfaction with Weber's account on the grounds of its profound Eurocentrism. Of course, Weber is not alone in this respect – Karl Marx's account is just as Eurocentric. That said, though, I

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\* Prof. Dr. John Hobson, University of Sheffield, Department of Politics, Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield, S10 2TU, United Kingdom. J.M.Hobson@sheffield.ac.uk

<sup>70</sup> David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (London: Little, Brown, 1998).

<sup>71</sup> J.M. Hobson, *The Wealth of States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); J.M. Hobson, *The State and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); S. Hobden and J.M. Hobson (eds.), *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>72</sup> L. Weiss and J.M. Hobson, *States and Economic Development* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

still feel that Max Weber remains very much the godfather of the Eurocentric approach to the rise of the West. And it seems clear to me that all of Weber's modern followers have produced equally Eurocentric accounts of the rise of the West,<sup>73</sup> including my mentor Michael Mann, as well as Anthony Giddens, John A. Hall, Randall Collins, and a host of others.<sup>74</sup> My personal conundrum therefore may be stated thus: given that I am committed to developing a non-Eurocentric theory, does this mean that I have to divorce myself from the neo-Weberian school, which I have prided myself in being a part of in the last decade? Even so, it would be a vain objective were I to stand here merely to think out aloud on my own personal conundrum. More importantly, all this begs a series of questions that I would invite my audience to consider as I proceed.

First, although much of what Weber and his followers wrote on the rise of the West is Eurocentric (as I shall explain shortly), I ask whether this means that neo-Weberianism is unable to produce a non-Eurocentric account. I shall not attempt to answer this but it is one for further reflection. Second, we need to ask the prior question: should a non-Eurocentric theory of the rise of the West be an objective for neo-Weberians? Third and finally, I seek to answer the first two questions by arguing that my own approach, which I shall sketch out, in some ways better realises the theoretical promises that neo-Weberians make concerning the issues of multi-causality, multi-spatiality and discontinuity/contingency in social change. Ironically, therefore, I want to argue that in some key ways non-Eurocentrism can best realise the central criteria that define neo-Weberian historical sociology (though, of course, this all depends on what we mean by Weberianism). I shall turn to consider these questions in the conclusion.

In the light of these questions, the paper is set out in three parts. Part 1 briefly explains what Eurocentrism is and briefly summarises how Weberian theories of the rise of the West are Eurocentric. Part 2 then sets out a sketch of my own non-Eurocentric account of world history. It is sub-divided to deal with the two main theses of my approach. First, I shall return a progressive history to the East and, second, I shall argue that the rise of the West was enabled by Eastern help. The final part – the conclusion – will suggest that the standard Weberian questions that lie at base of the enterprise on the rise of the West are problematic and inevitably result in a Eurocentric narrative. And I shall close by suggesting why my own approach in some ways better realises some of the central theoretical objectives of neo-Weberianism than does the neo-Weberian account of the rise of the West. Of course, in so doing, I guess that I am implicitly already answering my own conundrum – that perhaps after all I do not have to divorce myself from neo-Weberianism. And if so, then I might go one step further and invite some of my Weberian audience to develop their own non-Eurocentric accounts.

## **I: How Weberianism is Eurocentric**

As is well-known, Eurocentrism is a metanarrative that places Europe or the West at the centre of progressive world history – past, present and future. Of course, Eurocentrism

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<sup>73</sup> See the discussions in: J.M. Hobson, 'Eurocentrism and Neorealism in the 'Fall of Mann': Will the Real Mann Please Stand Up?', *Millennium* 34(2) (2005): 517-527. The reference for Mann's response is found below in n. 35.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986 and 1993); Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity); John A. Hall, *Powers and Liberties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); Randall Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).



is a loaded term in that it implicitly suggests that to treat Europe in this way is somehow a bad thing, or at least a negative. And many might well reply – as indeed some do – by rhetorically asking why this should be seen as a bad thing. As John Roberts put it in his Eurocentric book, *The Triumph of the West*, Eurocentrism means

“putting Europe at the centre of things”, and its usual implication is that to do so is wrong. But, of course, if we are merely talking about facts, about what happened, and not about the value that we place on them, then it is quite correct to put Europe at the centre of the story in modern times.<sup>75</sup>

David Landes reinforces this line of thinking by asserting that, ‘As the historical record shows, for the last thousand years the West has been the prime mover of development and modernity’. On this basis he then dismisses non-Eurocentrism with the follow-up point: ‘That still leaves the moral issue. Some would say that Eurocentrism is bad for us, indeed bad for the world, hence to be avoided. Those people should avoid it. As for me, I prefer truth to goodthink. I feel surer of my ground’.<sup>76</sup>

Both Landes and Roberts in effect make their claims by asserting the positivist assertion that one can separate facts from values, thereby legitimising their explicit embracing of Eurocentrism. But it is precisely the impossibility of the fact-value distinction wherein the source of the problem lies. For what eludes Roberts, Landes and many others, is that Europe only *appears* to occupy centre-stage of progressive world history because Eurocentric values have led them to select Europe as, or place it at, the centre of the story in the first place. Conversely the East only appears to be absent because it has been selected out, or written out, of progressive world history, having been consigned to its dark ghetto. And all of this is a function of the European identity-formation process wherein Eurocentrism was invented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Of course, most people assume that Eurocentrism is an ethnocentric framework which places Europe at the centre. But it is much more than this. However, rather than go into a lengthy discussion of the emergence of Eurocentrism, here I simply want to focus on those aspects of it that have found their way into the theory of Max Weber and his contemporary followers. The first point to note is that the whole process of inventing a European self against an Eastern other began with a process of ‘splitting’. That is, Eurocentric thinkers constructed what I call an imaginary *line of civilisational apartheid* between East and West. The next step was to designate the West as the superior entity and imbue it with all manner of progressive characteristics – progressive, that is, in terms of their ability to enable economic and political development. In particular, the West was painted as rational, individualistic and had liberal states, which in turn implied a strong civil society (from which development sprung). Conversely the East was painted as a series of absences. Or, put differently, it suffered only regressive characteristics – of which irrationality, collectivism and Oriental despotic states were the principal ones. And finally, Romantic thinkers of the early nineteenth century extrapolated this newly constructed picture back in time to Ancient Greece, thereby painting a permanent picture of Aryan-European supremacy. It was then assumed that the West had developed through its own internal characteristics from Ancient Greek times onwards. This is the Eurocentric thesis of the ‘self-generating West’.

<sup>75</sup> J.M. Roberts, *The Triumph of the West* (London: BBC Books, 1985), 201.

<sup>76</sup> Landes, *Wealth and Poverty*, xxi.

By the mid-nineteenth century this metanarrative had become endogenised across the newly emergent Social Sciences disciplines. Most importantly, the great theorists of the rise of the West – especially Marx and Weber – endogenised these categories into the heart of their theories. Both of these classical scholars reproduced this narrative perfectly. Both argued that progressive development was only possible in the West because of its progressive institutions. And both dismissed the possibility of development in the East owing to their alleged regressive features. Marx referred to the Eastern states as oriental despotisms while Weber labelled them patrimonial. Weber, of course, paid far more attention to the East across his writings than did Marx. Weber's central thesis was that Eastern states and societies were irrational while only in the West did modern rationality emerge. Weber, of course, also placed great emphasis on the East's so-called regressive religions. It was this that led him to assert that only the West developed that unique mentality which culminated in the ethic of world mastery, while the East was doomed to merely passively conform or adapt to the world. Thus progressive development was thought to be as innate to European history as stagnation was to the east. In fact, so static has the East been that it is a trope of Eurocentrism to assume that the East has no history. Ultimately, both Marx and Weber and the majority of their followers have assumed that the story of the rise of modernity could be told by focussing only on Europe. And this is based on the Eurocentric assumption that the rise of modernity was an entirely endogenous story; one that could be told with no reference to the East.<sup>77</sup>

My key point here is that this Eurocentric story is false – not simply because it has negative political implications – but more importantly, because I believe that the East played a considerable role in enabling or promoting the rise of the West on the one hand, and the emergence of modernity on the other. And this, of course, brings us full circle to where we began the discussion – returning us to the positivist justifications for Eurocentrism that Landes and Roberts make. All of which means that the proof of the pudding lies not so much in revealing the normative biases that underpin Eurocentric analyses (which are profound), but in revising our understanding of the rise of the West by painting an alternative picture. And this picture which brings Eastern agency back in is what I turn to in the second part of this paper, where I consider the many achievements made by Eastern societies.

## **II: Returning Progressive History to the East**

In this section I shall provide a brief overview of how Eastern development preceded that of the West. In effect, I seek to return a progressive history to the East – one that as we have seen – has been obscured or lost by the dominance of Eurocentrism. Moreover I shall suggest that many of the assumptions that Weber held of the East are not borne out. I shall turn first to Islam and then to China. I choose these two regions for attention not only because they led the world at various times in terms of economic development, but also because they also played such an important role in setting up and maintaining the global economy that, I argue, emerged after the sixth century.

### **Islam and Rational Economic Development?**

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<sup>77</sup> For a full discussion see J.M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Ch. 1.

Let me begin by noting some of the things that Islamic merchants achieved after about 650 in terms of their relationship to globalisation. First of all, Islam, following Muhammad's revelation, provided a vital means to unite the hitherto fractious Middle East. And one of the most significant aspects of Islam was its penchant for trade and rational capitalist activity. It deserves emphasis that this immediately stands at odds with the Eurocentric assumption that Islam was a regressive religion that blocked the possibility of capitalist, let alone *rational* capitalist, activity; something which, of course, was claimed by Max Weber. But it appears to have been forgotten, wittingly or unwittingly, that Muhammad himself had been a *commenda* (or *qirād*) trader. In his twenties he became married to a rich *Qurayshi* woman (the *Quraysh* had grown rich from the caravan trade as well as banking). Interestingly the

Meccans – the tribe of Quaraysh – caused their capital to fructify through trade and loans at interest in a way that Weber would call rational.... The merchants of the Muslim Empire conformed perfectly to Weber's criteria for capitalist activity. They seized every and any opportunity for profit and calculated their outlays, their encashments and their profits in money terms.<sup>78</sup>

In the light of this, it is interesting to note some of the linkages between Islam and capitalism that can be found in the Qu'rān. According to Maxime Rodinson's detailed examination, he asserts that the Qu'rān, 'Does not merely say that one must not forget one's portion of the world, it also says that it is proper to combine the practice of religion and material life, carrying on trade even during pilgrimages and goes so far as to maintain commercial profit under the name of "God's Bounty"'. Islam prescribed that businessmen could more effectively conduct a pilgrimage than those who did only physical labour. Indeed the Qu'rān states that:

If thou profit by doing what is permitted, thy deed is a djihād.... And if thou invest it for thy family and kindred, this will be a Sadaqa [that is, a pious work of charity]; and truly, a dhiram [drachma, silver coin] lawfully gained from trade is worth more than ten dhiraams gained in any other way.

And Muhammad's saying that 'Poverty is almost like an apostasy',

implies that the true servant of God should be affluent or at least economically independent. The booths of the money-changers in the great mosque of the camp-town Kufa possibly illustrate the fact that there was no necessary conflict between business and religion in Islam.<sup>79</sup>

It is also significant that the Qu'rān stipulates the importance of investment. And while we usually consider the *Sharī'a* (the Islamic sacred law) as the root of despotism and economic backwardness, it was in fact created as a means to prevent the abuse of the

<sup>78</sup> This and the next two references are from Maxime Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), pp. 14, 16-17, 29 respectively.

<sup>79</sup> S.D. Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 228-9.

rulers' or caliphs' power and, moreover, it set out clear provisions for contract law. Not surprisingly there was a rational reason why the Islamic merchants were strong supporters of the *Sharīa*. Furthermore, there were clear signs of greater personal freedom within Islam than within medieval Europe. Offices were determined on the basis of 'egalitarian contractual responsibilities'. These entailed notions of rationality that were, according to Hodgson, closer to the modern notion of *gesellschaft* than to traditional notions of *gemeinschaft*.<sup>80</sup>

Ultimately Islam's comparative advantage lay in its considerable 'extensive' power. That is, Islam was able to conquer horizontal space, realised most fully in its ability to spread and diffuse across large parts of the globe, as well as in its ability to spread capitalism. The centre of Islam, Mecca, was in turn one of the centres of the global trading network. Islam's power spread rapidly after the seventh century so that the Mediterranean became in effect a Muslim Lake, and 'Western Europe' a promontory within the Afro-Asian global economy. Islam was to have a particularly powerful influence on the development of Europe as we shall see, especially, though by no means exclusively, via Islamic Spain. Above all, the Islamic world constituted no less than the *Bridge of the World*, across which many Eastern 'resource portfolios' (ideas, technologies and institutions) as well as trade passed through to the West between 650-c.1800.

The picture of a dense urban trading network counters the traditional Eurocentric vision of Islam as a desert populated by nomads. As Marshall Hodgson put it, Islam was 'no "monotheism of the desert", born of the Bedouins' awed wonder at the vast openness of sky and land... Islam grew out of a long tradition of urban religion and it was as city-oriented as any variant of that tradition'.<sup>81</sup> Maxime Rodinson reinforces the general claim being made here:

the density of commercial relations within the Muslim world constituted a sort of world market... of unprecedented dimensions. The development of exchange had made possible regional specialisation in industry and agriculture.... Not only did the Muslim world know a capitalistic sector, but this sector was apparently the most extensive and highly developed in history before the [modern period].<sup>82</sup>

Islam spread not only westwards to Christendom but also eastwards right across to India, Southeast Asia and China, as well as southwards into Africa through either religious or commercial influence (and often both). Its economic reach was extraordinary for the time. So much so that by the ninth century – as various contemporary documents confirm – there was one long, continuous line of transcontinental trade pioneered by Islamic merchants, reaching from China to the Mediterranean.<sup>83</sup>

The Middle Eastern Umayyads (661-750), Abbasids (750-1258) and North African Fatimids were especially important, serving to unite various arteries of long-

<sup>80</sup> Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 111-16, 141.

<sup>81</sup> Hodgson, *Rethinking*, 133.

<sup>82</sup> Rodinson, *Islam*, 56.

<sup>83</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 199; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Africa and the World* (New York: International Publishers, 1975 [1946]), 174, 192.

distance trade known in antiquity between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. These included the Red Sea and Persian Gulf routes – which constituted the major trade routes that linked up the Afro-Eurasian economy. The Middle Route, according to Abu-Lughod, also had a significant land route component that went across from the Middle East through Transoxiana and then either southwards to India or eastwards to China.<sup>84</sup> These routes remained important right down to the nineteenth century, though their significance here lies in the point that it was along these routes that Islamic merchants acted as pioneers of regionalisation (or proto-globalisation), linking up the Afro-Eurasian landmass into a single economic ecumene.

Returning to the discussion made earlier, the pioneering propensity for economic development that the Muslims displayed translated into a wealth of innovations and production breakthroughs that, as we shall see, would later influence the West. Between about 650 to at least 1000, Islam occupied the leading edge of not just ‘extensive global power’ (the ability to project economic tentacles outwards in order to bind regions together), but also occupied the leading edge of ‘global intensive power’ (the ability to produce in such a way that it attracts and promotes global trade and global flows). Eric Jones claims that the Abbasid Caliphate was the first region to achieve *per capita* economic growth (supposedly the *leitmotif* of modern capitalism).<sup>85</sup> Fernand Braudel’s description is noteworthy, where he described the economic activity of Islam after 800 in the following terms:

‘Capitalist’ is not too anachronistic a word. From one end of Islam’s world connections to the other, speculators unstintingly gambled on trade. One Arab author, Hariri had a merchant declare: ‘I want to send Persian saffron to China, where I hear that it fetches a high price, and then ship Chinese porcelain to Greece, Greek brocade to India, Indian iron to Aleppo, Aleppo glass to the Yemen and Yemeni striped material to Persia’. In Basra, settlements between merchants were made by what we would now call a clearing system.<sup>86</sup>

A string of Islamic intensive (productive) innovations and technological/ideational refinements was crucial here. However, because I shall discuss some of these later, I shall produce a quick summary list here to illustrate my claim. Notable here is that Islamic systems of production were way ahead of European achievements at that time. Paper manufacturing began after 751. Textile-manufacturing was especially important: Syria and Iraq were famous for their silk manufactures, while Egypt led the way in linen and woollen fabrics. Notable too is that the Muslims dominated the Europeans in terms of iron production, and in steel production they dominated down to the eighteenth century. Moreover they long held a comparative advantage in military technologies. And last but not least, Islamic production extended to sugar-refinement, construction, furniture manufacture, glass, leather tanning, pottery and stone cutting.<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, Egyptian sugar-cane production was a leading global industry and extensively exported its refined ‘sukkar’ across much of the world (hence the term

<sup>84</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*.

<sup>85</sup> Eric L. Jones, *Growth Recurring* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), Ch. 3.

<sup>86</sup> Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations* (London: Penguin, 1995), 71.

<sup>87</sup> S.D. Goitein, ‘The Main Industries of the Mediterranean Area as reflected in the Records of the Cairo Geniza’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 4 (2) (1961), 168-97.

‘sugar’). Islam also harnessed energy through windmills and water-mills, which were deployed for industrial production purposes. Moreover, the Middle East/North Africa had a comparative advantage over Europe with respect to scientific knowledge and learning. No less important was the creation of a whole series of capitalist institutions (concerning partnerships, contract law, banking, credit and many others), upon which not only Islamic production, investment and commerce rested but also global trade. All in all as Eric Jones aptly concludes, ‘The record of technical and economic advance in the Abbasid... demonstrates that the [Islamic] past was by no means changeless’.<sup>88</sup>

### **China at the centre of global production and trade, ca.1450-1800**

In countering Eurocentric world history I shall deal here with two main arguments. First of all, I shall claim that China underwent something of an economic miracle in the eleventh century under the Sung. And second, I shall argue that China did not withdraw from the global economy after 1434 as Eurocentrism generally believes, but instead played a vital role right down to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This simultaneously challenges the standard Eurocentric claim that whatever China achieved in the Sung period came to naught as China regressed, especially after 1434. Let me sketch the outlines of each of these points in turn.

First, dealing with the Sung economic miracle, China underwent something of an iron and steel revolution. The first cast-iron object was dated from 513 BCE, and steel was produced by the second century BCE.<sup>89</sup> No one to my knowledge – not even Joseph Needham – has challenged the well-known data on iron production provided by Robert Hartwell. Hartwell estimated that in terms of gross annual production, China produced 13,500 tons of iron in 806, some 90,400 tons by 1064 and as much as 125,000 by 1078.<sup>90</sup> The striking nature of this is revealed by two comparisons: first that Europe as a whole would only produce greater volumes by 1700, and that even as late as 1788 Britain was producing only 76,000 tons. Second, the price ratio (measured as a ratio of the value of iron to rice) stood at 177:100 in Sung Szechwan in 1080 and 135:100 in Shensi, thereby indicating that the price of iron was low. It should also be noted that these provinces were not atypical because prices were even lower in North-East China. But the striking statistic here is that as late as 1700, Britain had an equivalent figure of 160:100, which was perhaps about a third higher than the price found in the northeastern Chinese markets of the eleventh century. Finally, in 977 the Chinese price ratio had stood as high as 632:100, which represented almost a four-fold reduction in price in the space of just one hundred years. It took Britain over two hundred years to achieve such a price reduction – namely from 1600 to 1822.

Eurocentric scholars often dismiss this achievement by arguing that Chinese iron was confined only to weapons and decorative art rather than being used for tools and production. But the fact is that iron *was* used to make everyday items and tools as we would expect in an industrial revolution. These included knives, hatchets, chisels, drillbits, hammers and mallets, ploughshares, spades and shovels, wheelbarrow axles, wheels, horseshoes, cooking pots and pans, kettles, bells, chains for suspension bridges,

<sup>88</sup> Jones, *Growth Recurring*, 67.

<sup>89</sup> Tsun Ko, ‘The Development of Metal Technology in Ancient China’, in Cheng-Yih Chen (ed.), *Science and Technology in Chinese Civilisation* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1987), 229-38.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Hartwell, ‘Markets, Technology, and the Structure of Enterprise in the Development of Eleventh Century Chinese iron and Steel Industries’, *Journal of Economic History* 26 (1966): 29-58.

armoured gates and watchtowers, bridges, printing frames and type, and many others too numerous to list here.

No less impressive here were the manufacturing techniques that the Chinese invented. They produced a variety of forms of iron, using cast iron for purposes such as shovels and ploughshares (as well as cannon), while simultaneously producing wrought iron for bladed purposes (eg. swords and knives). This is especially significant because the Europeans used wrought iron for most of the medieval period. 'It seems in fact that the Chinese world... arrived directly at casting iron, without passing, as the European countries did, through the long intermediary stage of forging it'.<sup>91</sup> The cast iron was far superior given its greater strength. And it was precisely because China could harness the much cheaper cast iron that the economic miracle was so widespread in its effects throughout the country.

In turn, all this was made possible by breakthroughs in smelting upon which cast iron was based. Here the use of blast furnaces and piston-bellows were especially important (though again, these had already been known for about 1400 years). The bellows delivered a continuous flow of air that was necessary to maintain the required high temperatures (975°C). These were being used in the fourth century BCE and were propelled by water-power as early as 31 CE. Moreover, the Chinese were producing steel (which is derived from cast iron) as early as the second century BCE, while Europe only developed steel in the modern period. Particularly important here was that the production of Chinese steel was conducted in the fifth century CE by a 'co-fusion' process where wrought and cast iron were melded together.

Finally, another striking innovation was the eleventh-century substitution of coke for charcoal (given that wood was in short supply). This is hugely significant precisely because Eurocentrism insists that this was first achieved by the British many centuries later. But Britain was like China in that both used coke in order to solve the problem of deforestation. And yet another feature of the Sung Miracle that is usually attributed to the eighteenth century British was its remarkable achievements in textile manufacturing. The Chinese silk industry began as early as the fourteenth century BCE. And arguably the most advanced industrial-technological innovation was found in the textile industry with the widespread adoption of the water-powered spinning machine for hemp and silk. Striking though all these achievements in the iron and steel industry as well as that of textiles were, they were but the tip of a large industrial iceberg. For such production presupposed a major infrastructural support network.

China's transport network and ability to tap energy resources were highly impressive and were extraordinary for their time. Thus while the first water-mills to enable iron production in Europe appeared in 1025, as early as 31 CE Chinese water-mills were developed in order to propel the bellows in the blast furnaces. Noteworthy too is that petroleum and natural gas were tapped by the Chinese for fuel, cooking and lighting purposes probably as early as the fourth century BCE.<sup>92</sup> Indeed the extensivity of this innovation is revealed by the fact that permanent asbestos-lamps were mass-produced for homes some time around the tenth century CE.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, the canal and

<sup>91</sup> Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 69.

<sup>92</sup> Peter J. Golas, *Science and Civilisation in China*, V (13) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 190-7.

<sup>93</sup> Robert Temple, *The Genius of China* (London: Prion Books, 1999), 119-20.

pound-lock were major innovations (the latter was invented in 984).<sup>94</sup> And the transportation of coal, iron and steel along the canals enabled their distribution to the south of the country, which was vital in enabling the Chinese economic miracle not least because it meant that the huge internal demand for these materials could be met. Strikingly, between 1750-1858 the British built about 6,000 kms of canals – which is usually portrayed by British economic historians as one of the major ‘triumphs’ of the industrial world. But this pales into insignificance when compared to the Sung miracle’s achievements. Thus by the thirteenth century the Chinese had built 50,000 kms of canal waterways, which hosted much larger vessels than those that plied the winding British canals.

I could go on and detail how taxation, paper, printing and commercialisation were all impressively developing in China at this time, but I shall leave this aside here. Instead I want to turn my attention to the second point mentioned above. As noted, Eurocentric scholars see the official ban on trade enunciated in 1434 as the moment when China fully withdrew from the global economy. They largely see in this a tacit recognition by the Chinese authorities that their economy was too weak and retreat into isolation was a safer bet. Incidentally, Eurocentric scholars also use this as a means to ‘prove’ their point that whatever occurred during the Sung period, it was but an ‘abortive revolution’, with growth and development drying up thereafter. Moreover, in place of Chinese international trade, they claim, was the regressive Chinese *tribute-system* that was entirely separate from the global economy. And finally, all this is important to establish given that it opened the way for the pioneering Europeans after 1492 to spread across the world and dominate it following the Voyages of Discovery.

The Eurocentric picture goes wrong because it takes too literal a view of both the official ban and the Chinese tribute-system. The official documents are distorted by the Chinese government’s attempt *at being seen* to maintain a Confucian (ie. isolationist) ideal. Moreover, the withdrawal is wrongly confirmed by the existence of a regressive Imperial Tribute System, which was supposedly based on coercion and state-administered forms of tribute rather than commercial trade. But the tribute system, despite claims to the contrary by the authorities, was *inter alia* a powerful and lucrative trading system. As Rodzinski notes, the tribute system ‘was often, in effect, only an outward form for very considerable foreign trade. In many cases foreign merchants, especially those from Central Asia, presented themselves as the bearers of fictitious tribute from imaginary states solely for the purpose of conducting trade’.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, trade relations in East and South-East Asia expanded as Chinese tribute relations expanded. This was even, at times, conceded in official Chinese documents. To this can be added a number of points.<sup>96</sup>

The fact is that the tribute system was more voluntary than forced. This was because gaining access to the Chinese market by paying nominal amounts of tribute was a means by which so-called vassals could enrich themselves. How else can we explain the fact that the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch repeatedly *asked* to join the system as vassals? Moreover, vassal states often competed with each other in order to pay tribute – again so as to gain access to China’s lucrative economy. And a whole variety of rulers

<sup>94</sup> Joseph Needham, Wang Ling and Lu Gwei-Djen, *Science and Civilisation in China*, IV (3) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 300-6, 344-65.

<sup>95</sup> Witold Rodzinski, *A History of China* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979), 197.

<sup>96</sup> See especially Gang Deng, ‘The Foreign Staple Trade of China in the Pre-Modern Era’, *International History Review* 19 (2) (1997), 256.



including the Sultan of Melaka, the rulers of Brunei, the Chōla kings of Coromandel and the princes of Malabar, were anxious to send tribute so that they might gain Chinese protection against some of their neighbouring enemies. Testimony to the voluntary aspect of the system lies in the point that when vassals were deprived of their tributary status, it often led to a violent reaction by the so-called vassal. For example, at the end of the sixteenth century Japan invaded Korea (a Ming vassal state) in order to force China to resume the tributary relationship and even threatened an invasion of China if she refused! One further strategy frequently deployed by Asian merchants was by producing phoney credentials, posing as emissaries paying tribute ‘as a fig-leaf for humdrum commercial trade’;<sup>97</sup> and again, this was well known and even occasionally admitted in Ming documents.

In addition, it is also clear that the official ban was a myth. First, as already noted, the tribute system was in part a disguised trading system. Second, many private Chinese merchants traded by circumnavigating the official ban in a number of ways. One such way was via smuggling. And because government officials often collaborated with the smugglers, the ban obviously became unenforceable. Indeed, so large was the smuggling trade that during the 1560s the Ming government eventually gave in and legalised the smugglers’ main port (Port Moon). Finally, it is noteworthy that not all private trade was banned. Much of it was officially sanctioned in three key ports: Macao, Chang-chou in Fukien Province, and Su-chou in western Shensi Province. Later in Ch’ing times, trade was conducted through Amoy, Ningbo and Shanghai. As Lach and Kley explain:

The earliest Western observers, such as Mendoza, had been under the impression that Fukienese merchants traded abroad illegally with the connivance of local officials. [But] seventeenth-century writers – Matlief was one of the first – shortly came to recognize that the merchants from the Chang-chou area had official permission to trade beyond the empire’s borders.<sup>98</sup>

All of this suggests that the Chinese economy was very much linked in to the global economy. But the clincher surely lies with the simple point that most of the world’s silver was sucked into China, thereby confirming that the economy was not only fully integrated within the global economy but was robust enough to enjoy a strong trade surplus. Accordingly, it is worth briefly considering this point further.

The key moment was the mid-fifteenth century, when the Chinese economy was converted onto a silver standard. And coupled with the point that China’s economy was the strongest in the world, so it generated a strong demand for silver from abroad. Given that the rest of the world was in a trading deficit with China, so silver moved into China. Eurocentrism emphasises the discovery of America as the key moment not only in terms of beginning the process of proto-globalisation but also in signifying the key role that the Europeans would now play in the emergent global economy. But this obscures a yet more important story. For what the discovery ultimately achieved was that it enabled the Europeans to pay their deficit with China with silver that was plundered from the Americas. Moreover, it also enabled them to play a direct role in the Indian Ocean

<sup>97</sup> Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 114.

<sup>98</sup> Donald F. Lach and Edwin J. Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe, III* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 1618.

economy. Put simply, Eurocentrism places too much weighting on European agency in the proto-globalisation phase to the detriment of Eastern agency. For the upshot of the story told here is that it was the Chinese economy that was vital insofar as it effectively sucked the Europeans outwards into the world.

One way in which this was achieved was through the global arbitrage system that emerged after 1492. For the fact is that because the price of silver relative to gold was high in China but low in Europe, this led to the creation of a global arbitrage system that was centred on China. Thus Europeans exported silver to China where it was exchanged for gold, only to be sent back to Europe where it was exchanged for higher amounts of silver, before being sent back to China where the whole process began anew. And as Kenneth Pomeranz rightly notes: ‘had China... not had such a dynamic economy [based on a silver monetary base which enabled her to]... absorb the staggering quantities of silver mined in the New World over three centuries, those mines might have become unprofitable within a few decades’.<sup>99</sup>

So to sum up this section: it is clear that Chinese merchants continued their extremely lucrative trading with or without official sanction, and that China played a major role in the global economy right down to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All in all, it seems clear that the usual Eurocentric view, which holds that the East was a backward region that was incapable of significant economic progress, needs to be revised. But more importantly in this context, I want to now briefly turn to my second proposition which challenges the Eurocentric assumption that Europe self-generated. The argument of the second section of this paper is that Europe might never have made it through to modernity without the considerable help that was provided by the East.

### **Eastern origins of the Rise of the West**

In my book, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*, I argued that there were two main ways in which the East enabled the rise of the West. First I emphasised the role of *emulation*, whereby the Europeans copied and assimilated the more advanced Eastern ideas, technologies and institutions that flowed across mainly along the sinews of the Eastern-led global economy. And second, I emphasised the Eastern contribution in terms of the Western imperial plundering of Eastern resources – land, labour and markets. Here I shall focus on the first process and provide a brief sketch of how this worked itself out. In essence I argued that each of the major turning points in the rise of the West, beginning with the feudal revolution and ending with the British industrial revolution, were significantly enabled by the borrowing of Eastern ‘resource portfolios’ (ideas, institutions and technologies). Because I do not have space to go through all these in detail I shall merely point to a few of the key moments to illustrate my claim.

Although Weberian accounts ignore the Italian economic revolution, nevertheless most Eurocentric accounts begin with the commercial and financial revolutions that washed across Europe after about 1000. The standard view credits the Italians as the prime agents or movers in all of this. But while the Italians were undoubtedly the prime movers *within* Europe, they only were so because of their privileged trading connection with West Asia and North Africa – especially Egypt.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 273.

<sup>100</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 35-8; Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, III (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

For a significant amount of trade from the East passed across the Islamic ‘bridge of the world’ into Italy and thence across Europe. That is, the Italians were not pioneers, but intermediaries, of the global trade that flowed across from the East. Moreover, Italy’s financial success owed much to the Islamic financial institutions that also diffused across to Europe. The Italian *collegantzia* partnership (‘invented’ in the eleventh century) was, in fact, an exact replica of the Islamic *commenda* agreement that had been invented at least four centuries earlier. But this should hardly come as a revelation given that Muhammad himself was originally a *commenda* merchant. Moreover, all the major ‘Italian’ financial institutions – bills of exchange, checks, credit institutions, banks and insurance – originated many centuries earlier in Islamic West Asia before they diffused across to Europe.

Before turning to the Renaissance which is conventionally thought to have originated in Italy, the next major turning point comprises the Voyages of (Re)discovery. These allegedly represented the sign of Europe’s scientific, military and nautical/navigational superiority. But virtually all of the navigational and nautical technologies/techniques deployed by Da Gama and Columbus – the square hull and stern post rudder, the lateen sail and triple mast system, the astrolabe and compass, as well as lunar cycle charts, solar calendars, latitude/longitude tables and trigonometry – were borrowed either from China or Islamic West Asia. Put simply, had it not been for the diffusion of these Eastern portfolios there might never have been a European Age of Rediscovery. For without them, the Iberians would surely have remained confined to the Islamic Mediterranean.

As noted above, the Voyages of Rediscovery allegedly reflected the intellectual breakthroughs associated with the so-called European Renaissance (and which would later be complemented by the European scientific revolution). Moreover, these two intellectual movements are singled out by many Eurocentric historians as constituting the vital turning points that enabled Europe’s breakthrough to modern capitalism. But while many Europeans trace their modern heritage back to the Renaissance, and hence to Ancient Greece, the fact is that many of its central ideas were derived from the world of Islam, all of which were pioneered after the eighth century CE.<sup>101</sup> Islamic breakthroughs in mathematics, including algebra and trigonometry, were vital. The former term was taken from the title of one of al-Khwārizmī’s mathematical texts. And by the beginning of the tenth century all six of the classical trigonometric functions had been defined and tabulated by Muslim mathematicians. Developments in public health, hygiene and medicine were also notable. Al-Rāzī’s medical works were translated and reprinted in Europe some 40 times between 1498 and 1866. And Ibn Sīnā’s *Canon of Medicine* became the founding text for European medical schools between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The Muslims developed numerous medicines and anaesthetics and pioneered the study of anatomy. They were also keen astrologers and astronomers, and their ideas were avidly borrowed by the Europeans. Ibn al-Shātir’s mathematical models bore a remarkable resemblance to those used by Copernicus 150 years later. And as early as the ninth century, al-Khwārizmī calculated the circumference of the Earth to within 41 metres. Last but not least, the Baconian idea that science should be based on the experimental method had already been pioneered by the Muslims (not the Greeks).

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<sup>101</sup> Hobson, *Eastern Origins*, Ch. 8; Jack Goody, *Islam in Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

One of the key moments for neo-Weberian analyses lies with the European Military Revolution (1550-1660). While I agree that this was indeed a major turning point, I would want to emphasise the point that the only problem with the concept of the European military revolution is its adjective. For all the major technologies that formed the core of this revolution were in fact invented during the world's first modern military revolution (850-1290) that occurred in China. These comprised the Chinese invention of gunpowder (850), the metal-barrelled gun firing a metal bullet (1275), and the cannon (1288). Conventionally it is thought that the first cannon was invented in England (1327), as is revealed in picture form in the famous manuscript by Walter de Millemete. But this picture is an exact replica of the earlier Chinese cannon. It might be replied that this could have been an entirely coincidental event. But the giveaway here is that claims for an independent European invention are rendered problematic by the fact that no military expert has ever been able to produce any evidence for the necessary military developments that must have preceded the 1327 English cannon. For such an invention presupposes a long line of prior developments. But such a lineage is readily available in the Chinese context stemming back to c.850. Moreover, strong circumstantial evidence exists to suggest that the cannon, as well as the gun and the recipe for gunpowder, diffused across to Europe where they were subsequently assimilated.<sup>102</sup>

Finally, for Eurocentrism the culminating point in the rise of the West is that of the British industrial and agricultural revolutions. But behind the headlines of pioneering British inventors lay the Chinese who had undergone their own industrial miracle during the Sung dynasty in the eleventh century. Eurocentrism preaches that the British agricultural revolution was allegedly spurred on by a series of brilliant British inventions, including the curved iron mouldboard plough, Jethro Tull's seed drill and horse-drawn hoe, the horse-powered threshing machine and the rotary winnowing machine. Added to this were breakthroughs in crop rotations. But in each case, these had been invented in China by the sixth century. In the case of the plough and rotary winnowing machine, Chinese models were directly brought across (either by the Jesuits, European scientists or Dutch sailors). And the remaining inventions were most likely copied from Chinese manuals that flooded Europe after 1650 (some of which were transmitted by the Jesuits).

Much the same story applies to the British industrial revolution. Thus while Eurocentrism celebrates James Watt for his pioneering skills in inventing the steam-engine, the fact is that he owed much to the Chinese. The essentials of the steam-engine go back to Wang Chên's *Treatise on Agriculture* (1313), which in turn go back to the Chinese invention of the water-powered bellows (31 CE). Moreover, Chinese breakthroughs in gun and cannon manufacturing were also important in enabling the later invention of the steam-engine (given that the cannon or gun is in effect a one-cylinder combustion engine and all of our modern motors are descended from it). Interestingly, a further link here is that one of the major challenges confronting Watt was the need to bore an airtight cylinder; interesting because he turned to John Wilkinson for help, given that Wilkinson owned a boring mill that was designed for cannon production.

While Eurocentrism axiomatically assumes that it was the British who first used coal to produce iron ore, this in fact began in eleventh-century Sung China under similar conditions of deforestation (as was noted earlier). And the famous Martin-Siemens steel

<sup>102</sup> Joseph Needham, Ho Ping-Yü, Lu Gwei-Djen and Wang Ling, *Science and Civilisation in China*, V (7) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 572-9.

process of 1863 was pre-empted by the Chinese ‘co-fusion’ process that was developed in the fifth century CE. Given China’s substantial lead in iron and steel production, it was not surprising that British producers (including the famous Benjamin Huntsman of Sheffield) undertook detailed studies of Chinese production methods in order to develop their own steel manufacturing techniques. It is true that the European invention of the Bessemer Converter (1852) was significantly derived from the breakthroughs made by the American, William Kelly, in 1845. But what is not usually pointed out is that Kelly himself had brought over four Chinese steel experts to Kentucky from whom he learned the principles of steel production.

The other great pillar of the British industrial revolution was the development of cotton-manufacturing. But while British inventors such as John Lombe are usually singled out for praise, this misses the point that some of their inventions had been pioneered in China many centuries earlier. For example, Lombe’s silk-machines became the model for the Derby cotton-machines. But while Lombe’s ‘invention’ is recognised as a copy of the Italian machines, what is not usually admitted is that they in turn were a direct copy of the earlier Chinese inventions that had been assimilated in the thirteenth century. Notable too is that in textiles, the Chinese had long developed machines which differed in only one detail from James Hargreaves’ famous ‘spinning jenny’ and John Kay’s equally famous ‘flying shuttle’. All in all, therefore, it is debateable as to whether there would ever have been a British industrial revolution had it not been for the much earlier pioneering Chinese breakthroughs, the knowledge of which (if not the actual technologies) were transmitted to Britain through a host of oriental global channels.

## Conclusion

In this conclusion I now want to return to the questions that I posed at the beginning. First, I want to briefly consider whether a non-Eurocentric approach is desirable. Many of those who subscribe to Eurocentrism do so on the grounds that, whether we like it or not, the West has been dominant for the last 500 years if not the last thousand. They would almost certainly point to the fact that it was the West and not the East that made the breakthrough to modernity. Thus whatever the normative demerits of Eurocentrism might be, it remains the best way of understanding the world. I have several responses to this that are worth mentioning.

While the West did make the breakthrough (though so too did Japan), nevertheless in one sense this is an unfair litmus test to apply. For in so doing it eradicates from view, or simply renders irrelevant, all the economic and ideational achievements that the East made. That these were significant is in part confirmed by the point that without these Eastern developments the West might never have made the breakthrough. This means that we need to recast Max Weber’s original question which asked: what was it about the West that enabled its breakthrough and equally, what was it about the East that prevented it from developing? Put simply, the major problem with ‘Why Europe and not the East?’ is that it is an *absolute question* that demands an *absolute answer*. In the process, the scholar attributes permanently positive attributes to the West and permanently negative ones to the East. But this cannot explain why China occupied the leading edge of global productive power from 1100 and the leading edge of global extensive power from 1450 to 1800. In order to illustrate my point consider the following ‘thought experiment’.

Were we to set up a social science department in a university around 1100, we might well seek to answer *the* compelling question at that time: ‘How did Sung China undergo its economic miracle while Europe remained mired in a backward agrarianism and a relatively weak commercialism?’ And we might well offer the following explanation. China embodied unique properties and institutions that were absent in Europe. China enjoyed a strong state that created a pacified and stable environment for capitalism to develop, while conversely, Europe was held back by a plethora of states that were too weak to enable capitalism. Moreover, Europe in contrast to China was a realm of warring states. Furthermore, China enjoyed a strong work ethic that was contained within its rational Confucian religion. By contrast, Europe was held back by Christianity which at that time specified respect for authority and a long-term fatalism that prevented hard work and rational restlessness. Perhaps a book would have been written to explain all this, suitably entitled *The Confucian Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which would definitively demonstrate why Catholicism was inimical to economic progress, and why only Confucianism embodied the correct set of virtues to enable economic progress. And much the same could have been said with respect to Islam only one hundred years earlier, no doubt eliciting the ‘best-selling’ book, *The Islamic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Accordingly, I would argue that Weberians have been looking in the wrong place for their founding question. A more appropriate question would be: *how and why did the leading edge of global economic power shift between East and West between 500 and 1800 to eventually promote the breakthrough to modernity?* Not only does this temporally relativist question enable non-Western achievements to register on the scanner, but it also allows us to envisage the possibility that the breakthrough to modernity was made through a combination of Western and Eastern achievements. Failure to ask this means that we return to the standard question which serves to reify the self-generating West while dismissing the East to the backward periphery of progressive world history. That this has tragic political/normative consequences should be grounds to question this question. But here I have sought to problematize it by producing an alternative non-Eurocentric world history that returns a degree of agency to the East while putting Europe in its proper place.

Finally, I want to consider whether all that I have said necessarily stands in opposition to the neo-Weberian approach. And here I take my cue from the work of Michael Mann, who has placed a great deal of emphasis on the proposition that there is no such thing as a bounded society and that ‘because there is no bounded totality, it is not helpful to divide social change or conflict into ‘endogenous’ and ‘exogenous’ varieties’.<sup>103</sup> This leads on to his equally well-known claim that societies are not pure and self-constituting but are impure and promiscuous. My problem with all this is that Eurocentrism (which is implicitly deployed by Mann),<sup>104</sup> contradicts this claim. This is because Eurocentrism, through positing a line of civilisational apartheid between East and West, creates a vision of singular international societies which are self-constituting and bounded totalities. Moreover, it also leads the researcher to view Western development as something that is entirely endogenous to European society.

<sup>103</sup> Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, I, 1-2.

<sup>104</sup> See also Michael Mann’s response to the Eurocentric charge in his essay: ‘The Sources of Social Power Revisited: A Response to Criticism’, in John A. Hall and Ralph Schroeder (eds.), *An Anatomy of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. 370-84; also Michael Mann, ‘Explaining International Relations, Empires and European Miracles: A Response’, *Millennium* 34(2) (2005), 541-50.

Paradoxically, therefore, the conclusion of my non-Eurocentric approach is to reinstate Mann's original neo-Weberian claim by insisting that European society is impure and hybrid or promiscuous, and that the East and West display various characteristics of each other as they blended together through manifold inter-civilisational interactions over the last 1500 years. Thus, only by moving to a truly *global* rather than international approach can we falsify the notion of societies or international societies as pure and self-constituting. My final point, then, is to suggest a neo-Weberian approach might best be promoted by importing at least some non-Eurocentrism into its theoretical corpus, in the absence of which Weberianism is found wanting in terms of its own noble theoretical objectives.

## Two visions of the key world-historical moments, c.500-1900

	<b>EUROCENTRISM</b>		<b>NON-EUROCENTRISM</b>
733	Charles Martel's victory over the 'Saracens' at the Battle of Tours and Poitiers	751 1453	Arab victory in the Battle of Talas establishes Islamic supremacy in West Central Asia Ottomans take Constantinople (1453)
600-1000	Europe pioneers the Medieval Agricultural Revolution	400 BCE – 500	China pioneers many technologies which enabled the European Agricultural Revolution of 18 <sup>th</sup> and 19 <sup>th</sup> centuries
c. 1000	Italians pioneer long-distance trade/early capitalism and Italy becomes the leading global power	c. 1000	Italians join the Afro-Asian-led global economy. Oriental globalisation enables the diffusion of Eastern 'resource portfolios' to enable the development of the backward West
Post-1095	European Crusaders assert control over the Islamic Middle East	1095-1517	The Italians remain dependent upon the Islamic Middle East and Egypt
c. 1400-1650	Italian Renaissance and Scientific Revolution	c. 800-c 1400	Eastern or Islamic Renaissance (which subsequently enables the European Renaissance and Scientific Revolution)
1434	China withdraws from the world leaving a vacuum that is soon filled by the superior Europeans	1434-1800/1839	China remains pre-eminent as the foremost world trader and producer and is able to resist Western incursions as well as dictate terms to the European traders
1455	Gutenberg invents the movable metal-type printing press	1095/1403	Pi Shêng invents the movable-type printing press (1095); Koreans invent first movable metal-type printing press (1403)
Post-1492	European Age of Discovery and the emergence of early Western proto-globalisation	c.500-1500/1800	Afro-Asian Age of Discovery: the Easterners create and maintain the global economy (and preside over Oriental globalisation). Chinese <i>choose not</i> to initiate imperialism
Post-1492	The Spanish plunder American gold and silver bullion	c. 1450	China initiates a silver currency and, as the world's foremost producer/trader, provides a strong demand for Europe's silver plundered from the Americas
1487/8	Bartholomeu Dias is the first to reach the 'Cape of Storms'	c. 200-1421	Arabs sail round the Cape (c.1450) and into Europe. The Chinese (c.9 <sup>th</sup> century), Polynesians (c.3 <sup>rd</sup> century) and Indians sail to the Cape and East coast of Africa
1498	Da Gama makes 'First Contact' with a primitive and isolated Indian people	c. Post-800	Indians in trading contact with the rest of Eurasia; Indians are economically superior to their Portuguese 'discoverers'. Chinese, Indian and perhaps Black African and certainly Islamic, science and technologies provide the basis for Portuguese ships and navigation
1498-c.1800	The Europeans defeat the Asians and monopolise world trade	1498-c. 1800	Europeans fail to defeat the Asians and remain dependent upon them for a slice of the lucrative Eastern trade: Afro-Asian Age continues
1550-1660	European 'Military Revolution'	c. 850-1290	Chinese 'Military Revolution' – the technological ingredients of which came to underpin the European Military Revolution
1700-1850	First industrial miracle occurs in Britain	600 BCE – 1100	Chinese industrial miracle. Assimilation of Chinese technologies and ideas enables British industrial revolution
1700-1850	British industrialisation is the triumph of domestic- or self-generated change	1700-1850	'Non-Europeans' (especially Africans) significantly contribute to British industrialisation through the appropriation and exploitation of their many resources
1853	Commodore Perry 'opens up' isolated Tokugawa Japan: Meiji Japan as a 'late-developer' industrialises by copying the West	1603-1868	Tokugawa Japan remains tied in with the global economy. Independent Tokugawa development provides a launching pad for the subsequent Meiji industrialisation (Japan as an 'early developer')
1820s	Britain reverses its trade deficit with China	1820s	Britain only reverses the trade deficit by pushing drugs in China

Source: J.M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (CUP, 2004), 318-21



## Max Weber and the Dialectics of Disenchantment and Re-enchantment in Modern History

Hartmut Lehmann\*

### I.

Before discussing the “dialectics of disenchantment and re-enchantment in modern history”, it may be helpful to go back to Max Weber and see how he used these terms. In my estimation, the result of such an inquiry is quite surprising. While “*Entzauberung*”, that is disenchantment, is one of those terms which are often cited in literature about Weber, one can find this term in Weber’s works only in relatively few places. As far as I could find out, Weber does not use the term “*Entzauberung*” before the year 1913. One looks in vain for it in the first version of his famous study “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” published in 1905. In 1913, Weber was working on two texts: he was writing the first draft of the section on religious communities (“*Religiöse Gemeinschaften*”) in the project later labelled “Economy and Society”, and he wrote the draft of his interpretation of the economic ethic of Confucianism and Taoism that is a major part of his studies about the economic ethic of world religions. In the text “*Religiöse Gemeinschaften*” Weber used the verb “*entzaubern*”, that is to disenchant, in one instance<sup>105</sup>. In the text on Confucianism and Taoism one can find the term “*Entzauberung*” twice<sup>106</sup>; not so, however, in his studies about the economic ethic of Buddhism and Hinduism, which he finished in 1916, nor in his studies on Ancient Judaism that he undertook in the following years<sup>107</sup>.

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\* Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hartmut Lehmann, Universität Kiel, Institut für Kirchengeschichte, Leibnizstraße 4 , D-24118 Kiel, Germany. lehmann@mpi-g.gwdg.de

<sup>105</sup> Max Weber. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Nachlass Teilband 2: Religiöse Gemeinschaften*, ed. by Hans G. Kippenberg. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 2001, p. 273. As Weber points out in this passage, it was “intellectualism” that pushed back magic, thus “disenchanting” the world.

<sup>106</sup> Max Weber. *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Konfuzianismus und Taoismus. Schriften 1915-1920*, ed. by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1989, pp. 114, 450. In both instances Weber does not refer to Confucianism or Taoism but explains that complete disenchantment was only an achievement of ascetic Protestantism in the occident.

<sup>107</sup> This is somewhat surprising as Weber was convinced that the process of disenchantment began within Ancient Judaism. See Max Weber, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte. Abriss der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte. Aus den nachgelassenen Vorlesungen* ed. by Siegmund Hellmann and Melchior Palyi. 1920. Here I have used the 3rd. ed. Berlin 1958, where Weber states the following on p. 308: “Prophetien haben die Entzauberung der Welt herbeigeführt und damit die Grundlage für unsere moderne Wissenschaft, die Technik und den Kapitalismus geschaffen”. See also Max Weber. *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Das antike Judentum*, ed. by Eckart Otto. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 2005, p. 135.

But there can be no doubt that by 1917 “*Entzauberung*” had become a key term in Weber’s vocabulary. In 1917, in his famous speech about “Science as a Vocation” (“*Wissenschaft als Beruf*”), Weber explains that in his time God had become disenchanted (“*entzaubert*”)<sup>108</sup>, and he speaks about “*Entzauberung der Welt*”, that is about the disenchantment of the world, as part of the processes of “*Rationalisierung und Intellektualisierung*” (rationalization and intellectualization)<sup>109</sup>. In the revised version of the text “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” which Weber produced in the winter of 1919/1920, the formula “*Entzauberung der Welt*” became a standard term which he inserted into the original text in key places no less than four times<sup>110</sup>, and the same is true for his famous “*Zwischenbetrachtung*”<sup>111</sup>, which he also wrote in the last year of his life.

What does Weber mean when he speaks of “*Entzauberung der Welt*”? The answer to this question consists of two parts. First, for Weber “*Entzauberung der Welt*” is a process of global dimensions during which all magical means granting salvation are discarded and expelled. According to Weber, this process began within ancient Judaism, it was supported by Greek science, and it culminated among the Puritans who laid the foundations for the modern world. Second, therefore, “*Entzauberung der Welt*” amounts to a fundamental decision concerning the elimination of magic within the world, and thus the rationalization of all worldly matters. For Weber, the result of disenchantment is the exclusion of all magical explanations of the world and a concentration on inner-worldly asceticism. One can even go a step further and argue that “*Entzauberung der Welt*” is the very process that led to the victory of occidental rationalism and, in the end, to the claustrophobic existence of modern man in an iron cage.

Until recently, within British and American scholarship Weber’s text on “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” was read in the English translation by Talcott Parsons, first published in 1930. In translating “*Entzauberung der Welt*”, Talcott Parsons never used the term disenchantment. In one instance he speaks of “the elimination of magic from the world”, in another instance of “the elimination of magic as a means to salvation”, in a third instance simply of “the religious rationalization of the world in its most extreme form”, and in the fourth and last instance of “the radical elimination of magic from the world”<sup>112</sup>. In other words, in translating “*Entzauberung*” the way he does, Parsons emphasized both the element of magic and the act of elimination. If I am not mistaken, by doing so he transforms what is a fascinating metaphor for Weber into a series of concrete actions.

<sup>108</sup> Max Weber. *Wissenschaft als Beruf 1917/1919. Politik als Beruf 1919*, ed. by Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1992, p. 101.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. P. 109.

<sup>110</sup> Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, vol. 1. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1920 (here used 7th ed. 1978) pp. 94, 114, 156, 158.

<sup>111</sup> Edited as part of Max Weber. *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*, ed. by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1989, pp. 479-522; p. 512: “*Entzauberung der Welt*”.

<sup>112</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. New edition with introduction by Anthony Giddens. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1976. For the quotations see pp. 105, 117, 147, 149.

In his new translation of Weber's text "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", published in 2002, Stephen Kalberg followed Talcott Parsons' interpretation. Kalberg translates "*Entzauberung der Welt*" as "the elimination of magic from the world's occurrences", as "the exclusion of the use of magic as a means to salvation", and as "a process that eliminated magic from the world"<sup>113</sup>. Without going into linguistic subtleties, it is my impression that the term disenchantment characterizes the meaning that Weber wants to convey much better than the translation of "*Entzauberung der Welt*" either by Talcott Parsons or by Stephen Kalberg.

Let me add another observation. As of now, nobody has been able to explain the origin of the term "*Entzauberung der Welt*"<sup>114</sup>. Within modern sociology, this term has had a most remarkable career and serves as a *passpartout* for all aspects of the processes of modernization and rationalization. Is it possible that Weber coined the term himself? Or did he come across the term, like it and begin to use it? Perhaps the most likely solution can be found in a combination of both of these possibilities. In the early 1690s the Dutch theologian and philosopher Balthasar Bekker had published a three volume work on "*De betoverde Weereld*", that is, in German, "*die bezauberte Welt*". A new biography of Bekker appeared in 1906<sup>115</sup>. We know that Weber visited the Netherlands many times in the decade before the First World War. Perhaps on one of these visits Weber discovered the early Enlightenment thinker Bekker whose views were close to his own; perhaps Weber had come across a copy of the German translation of Bekker's book in the Heidelberg library<sup>116</sup>. In any case, it seems likely that he translated and modified Bekker's book title, thus creating his own formula "*Entzauberung der Welt*". But this is a hypothesis without proof. I continue to search for a better explanation.

Let us now look at the notion of re-enchantment and let me say right away that there is no exact equivalent for this term in any of Weber's texts. Even though I looked hard, I could not find the term "*Wiederverzauberung*" or any similar term. There are, however, some passages in Weber's work that come very close to the idea of re-enchantment. For example in 1917, in "*Wissenschaft als Beruf*", Weber argues as follows: "*Die alten vielen Götter, entzaubert und daher in Gestalt unpersönlicher Mächte, entsteigen ihren Gräbern, streben nach Gewalt über unser Leben und beginnen untereinander wieder ihren ewigen Kampf*"<sup>117</sup>. In English: "The old Gods, deprived of magical powers, rise from their tombs and strive to gain influence over our lives and renew their eternal struggle"<sup>118</sup>. This passage is very close to one of the concluding remarks in the "Protestant Ethic" about the impact of rationalization and the iron cage which had already been part of the first version of this text in 1905. In summing up his insights on the impact of the Puritan ethos on the emergence of a capitalist spirit, Weber wrote:

<sup>113</sup> The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New Translation and Introduction by Stephen Kalberg. Third Roxbury Edition. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing Co., pp. 60, 70, 95, 97.

<sup>114</sup> See Friedrich H. Tenbruck, "Das Werk Max Webers", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 27, 1975, pp. 669-671; Johannes Winkelmann, "Die Herkunft von Max Webers 'Entzauberungs'-Konzept", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 32, 1980, pp. 12-53. Winkelmann also refers to the "Genese der Entmagisierung im antiken Judentum" (pp. 19-21).

<sup>115</sup> W.P.C. Knuttel, Balthasar Bekker, *bestrijder van het biigelof*, s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff 1906.

<sup>116</sup> A translation of Balthasar Bekker's book was in the possession of the Heidelberg University Library: Johann Moritz Schwager, Balthasar Bekker's *bezauberte Welt*. Neu übersetzt. 3 vols. Leipzig 1781.

<sup>117</sup> Max Weber. *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, p. 101.

<sup>118</sup> My translation.

“Niemand weiß noch, wer künftig in jenem Gehäuse wohnen wird und ob am Ende dieser ungeheuren Entwicklung ganz neue Propheten oder eine mächtige Wiedergeburt alter Gedanken und Ideale stehen werden, oder aber – wenn keins von beiden – mechanisierte Versteinerung (in 1905 Weber had said: “chinesische Versteinerung”), mit einer Art von krampfhaftem Sich-wichtig-nehmen verbrämt”<sup>119</sup>. In the recent excellent English translation by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, this passage reads as follows: “No one yet knows who will live in that shell in the future. Perhaps new prophets will emerge, or powerful old ideas and ideals will be reborn at the end of this monstrous development. Or perhaps – if neither of these occurs – Chinese ossification, dressed up in a kind of desperate self-importance, will set in”<sup>120</sup>. In the English translation by Talcott Parsons, the same passage conveys the same ideas but sounds somewhat different: “No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance”<sup>121</sup>.

In his studies on religious communities, Weber used the term “*Wiedergeburt*”, that is rebirth, quite often. But one has to keep in mind that for Weber the notion of rebirth is not an equivalent or a synonym for the term re-enchantment. Rather, in his thinking “*Wiedergeburt*” means reincarnation, and even more precisely, it means rebirth produced by charismatic magicians who assist individuals longing and striving for salvation. Weber does not indicate that he had an interest in other related terms like awakening, or re-awakening, or revival. In fact, in my view it is one of the weaknesses of his interpretation of the Puritans that he ignored the role both of eschatology and of religious revivals. While Weber had a keen sense, and a congenial understanding, of the systematic and sober way in which Puritans led their lives, he neglected what may have seemed to him the irrational elements in their beliefs, namely the hope for the Second Coming and the longing for complete conversion as a result of repentance and remorse. For Weber, Puritans were rational human beings. They secured their place in heaven by working methodically. As I read and understand Puritan sources, these same persons were full of fear, the fear that they would not be eligible for eternal life, the fear that they would die a premature death without the assurance of salvation, and much of what they did was a direct result of this overriding fear.

Be this as it may, in our context it is crucial to note that the notions of disenchantment and re-enchantment do not possess the same weight in Weber’s thinking. Most certainly, in the last six to eight years of his life, disenchantment was a key term for Weber. He seems to have liked this term, and he used the formula “*Entzauberung der Welt*” to illustrate and explain the far-reaching and irreversible effects of the processes of rationalization. But in evaluating these effects, Weber did not rejoice. Rather, he saw a future determined by petrification and ossification: in short, a life in the shell as hard as steel, the “*stahlhartes Gehäuse*”, forged by “ceaseless, constant, systematic labour in

<sup>119</sup> Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie, vol. 1, p. 204.

<sup>120</sup> Max Weber. The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism and Other Writings. Edited, translated and with an introduction by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells. New York & London: Penguin Books, p. 121.

<sup>121</sup> The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Translated by Talcott Parsons, p. 182.

a secular calling as the very highest ascetic path”<sup>122</sup>, and he left no doubt that “the spirit had fled from this shell”<sup>123</sup> already in his own time.

By contrast, Weber was rather vague with regard to the notion of re-enchantment. As I quoted above, he insisted that “no one knows” what will happen in the future, and he also listed, among various possibilities, the rise of new prophets. But he did not speak of re-enchantment (“*Wiederverzauberung*”) in this context, nor did he specify the kind of messages these new prophets would pronounce.

One should keep in mind, therefore, that the notions of disenchantment and re-enchantment are not balanced in Weber’s thinking. Rather, Weber sees a clear dominance of the notion of disenchantment over anything that could be related to re-enchantment, and it is the very progress of disenchantment that he analyzes in some of his most important studies.

## II.

In approaching the complex theme of the dialectics of disenchantment and re-enchantment in modern history, I will make use of Weber’s views in two ways. First, I will ask how he perceived the relationship of disenchantment and re-enchantment in the past, and then I will discuss his prediction of how this relationship might look in the future. To put my agenda more directly, I want to ask: Was Weber a good historian, and how good was he as a prophet? In answering the first of these questions I will restrict myself to modern history. As is well known, Weber had an excellent training, and an impressive knowledge, in ancient as well as in medieval history. But what we are concerned with here is the more recent past.

As I pointed out before, Weber did not grasp the impact that eschatology and revivalism had in the lives of Puritans. By looking primarily at the role of asceticism, and by analyzing the special professional habitus Puritans developed, he understood, I am afraid to say, perhaps only half of what motivated Puritans, but not the whole. In particular, he did not take into account those aspects that are close to the notion of re-enchantment, and the same can be said of his remarks about Pietists, Baptists, and Methodists. Even as he travelled through the United States in the fall of 1904, he was looking for what one could term the “*Urgestalt*” of Puritan sects and the habitus they created, but he was quite unaware of the impact both of the First as well as the Second Great Awakening, not to mention more recent revivals<sup>124</sup>.

The same is true for Weber’s knowledge of religion in the recent German past. Although he was engaged in some of the meetings of the “*Evangelisch-soziale Kongress*” as a young man, he did not observe, it seems to me, the influence of more

<sup>122</sup> The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Translated by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, p. 116.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. p. 121.

<sup>124</sup> Hartmut Lehmann, “‘Kirchen’ und ‘Sekten’ in Nordamerika. Anmerkungen zu einem Essay von Max Weber”, in: Atlantic Understandings. Essays on European and American History in Honor of Hermann Wellenreuther. Ed. by Claudia Schnurmann and Hartmut Lehmann. Hamburg: LitVerlag 2006, pp. 371-381.

recent revival movements in Germany, for example the “*Erweckungsbewegung*”. Weber also ignored the impact of “*Innere Mission*”, the domestic missions in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the role played by the adherents of Pietism in his own time. In the years before 1914, Weber did not even notice that charismatic Christians organized themselves in the Pentecostal movement also in Germany. The reason for this is not difficult to understand. Weber had grown up as a “Kulturprotestant”, as a bourgeois Protestant German, and although he studied Protestant sects in later years, he never acquired an affinity for, or a personal knowledge of, this kind of religiosity<sup>125</sup>.

It is interesting, it seems to me, that Weber did not even understand the religious qualities, one could even say the seductive pseudo-religious potential, of modern nationalism. Rather, for Weber nationalism was limited primarily to power-politics, and not to vague emotional feelings. Nor did he link in his work charismatic leadership to any kind of re-enchantment.

It is an open question whether Weber’s remarks about the rise of new prophets can be brought into any kind of closer connection with the rise of Leninism and communism, as well as with the rise of fascism and National Socialism. Were Stalin and Hitler the kind of new prophets that he was alluding to? Would he have discovered an element of re-enchantment in the totalitarian ideologies both from the far right and from the far left?<sup>126</sup> Would he, like many German Protestants, have hailed the Nazi seizure of power (the “*Machtergreifung*”) in 1933 as a major step towards a rebirth of Germany? We don’t know, but I think that the answer is negative.

The same kind of scenario can be unfolded with regard to the continued success of disenchantment in post-1945 Europe. Would Weber have comprehended the accelerated secularization of German society in recent decades, in fact of all European societies since the late 1960s, as an aspect of the ossification, or petrification, that he had prophesied? Would he have regretted the downfall of institutionalized churches, of the “*Anstaltskirchen*”? How would he have commented on the combination of affluence and privatization of religion in post-1945 Europe? Would he have concluded that late twentieth-century Europeans are stuck in a new kind of iron cage, made up of excessive television consumption, long-distance travel by car and plane, obsessive interest in sports and at the same time notorious overweight?

It would, to raise a last point, be intriguing to have Weber’s reaction with regard to the overwhelming influence of charismatic and fundamentalist religion in many parts of the world today - in North America and in Latin America, in Africa and in Asia. The new religious movements in these parts of the world are far apart from Weber’s sober Puritans. By contrast, would Weber have praised secularization and the distanced and sceptical way most Europeans deal with religion? Again, we don’t know.

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<sup>125</sup> Hartmut Lehmann, “Max Webers Weg vom Kulturprotestantismus zum asketischen Protestantismus”, in: *Asketischer Protestantismus und der ‘Geist’ des Kapitalismus*. Ed. by Wolfgang Schluchter and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2005, pp. 33-47.

<sup>126</sup> Of basic importance for these matters: Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik 1890-1920*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 2nd. ed. 1974.

In concluding this part of my paper, let me stress that I do not want to say that Weber was biased as a historian and not very good as a prophet. Such remarks would be unfitting, unjust, and short sighted. What we have to see, and what we have to make use of, are Weber's genuine contributions to the social sciences and to historical scholarship. In the context of our topic, let me recapitulate three of his major achievements. First, by highlighting the progress of rationalization and disenchantment, Weber pointed to a major aspect of any kind of social and cultural modernization. Second, by analyzing the role of the "*methodische Lebensführung*" of Puritans, that is their methodical way of doing business and caring for salvation at the same time, he provided a sharp tool for dissecting and understanding the role of habitus in modern societies. Third, by discussing the relationship of religion and modernization, he uncovered one of those problems that has been extremely controversial up to the present day and perhaps also in the future. In this sense, therefore, in retrospect Max Weber's observations and conclusions are as relevant today as they were in his own time.

### III.

Let me add in a third and final part of my paper some remarks about the dialectics of disenchantment and re-enchantment in modern history without direct reference to Weber's views. No doubt, European historians have tended to neglect, if not ignore, the role of religion in modern history for a long time. In the view of most historians of my generation, the age of Reformation was, it seemed, the last period in which theological arguments and religious emotions changed the course of history. For some historians, a new world-view free of religious constraints began to appear already with the Renaissance. The Thirty Years War was seen by them as an excess of violence and power-politics, accompanied by the rise of modern science. Enlightened thinkers completed the demystification and demythologization of religion – and modern history was an inner-worldly venture from then on, advancing in big leaps, propelled by the industrial revolution and urbanization, by building the modern nation-state and inventing new means of transportation and communication: in short, by discoveries, inventions and scholarship as much as by economic interests.

It is only in the last two decades that a growing number of historians have discovered that there is also a second, and sometimes hidden, history of the modern world in which religion has not disappeared. It came as a shock to some when it became known that a giant of modern science like Isaac Newton had been a deeply religious man, preoccupied for many years with deciphering the exact date of the Second Coming. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Puritans in England, Jansenists in France and in Italy, Pietists in Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, as well as Baptists, Quakers and Methodists in all English-speaking countries developed networks of their own; networks consisting of Christians deeply concerned with their future destiny and their salvation. Even though they had been despised by their enlightened contemporaries since the eighteenth century, they were relentlessly striving to create the preconditions for the coming of the Kingdom of God. As the French Revolution seemed to bring total victory for a rational organization of politics, they responded by creating Bible societies in the firm belief that people had been led astray because they had forgotten God's word; in addition, they became engaged in foreign missions because they were

convinced that once God's message had been spread to all peoples of the world, Christ would return<sup>127</sup>.

While enlightened world-views triumphed, the history of rationalization and the history of persistent transcendentalism could be clearly set apart. But matters became much more difficult, if not muddy, once modern nationalism began to capture the minds of people. Modern nations appeared as the fulfilment of God's plan for creation. But things got worse after the First World War. Now, for the radical left as well as for the radical right, "believing and belonging" comprised all aspects of life. Now the political parties and their leaders claimed to have all the answers concerning the past and the future, concerning sacrifice and salvation. After 1933, the members of the Confessing Church in Germany struggled to retain some kind of autonomy for their church.

In the past few decades, in the age of complete individualization and privatization, if not marginalization, of religion in Europe, matters have changed once again<sup>128</sup>. On the surface, most people have distanced themselves from religion. If one takes a closer look, however, one can find that many people are troubled by religious questions. But most of them no longer look to the churches for answers. Rather, some turn to esoteric or occult literature and practices, others join charismatic groups, and for still others a fundamentalist, anti-enlightened world view provides the kind of guidance for which they are searching. As in the age of Enlightenment, one can observe, at least in Europe, a growing distance between the public and the private sphere. The sciences and a strong popular belief in the progress of science dominate in the public sphere. This is true for medicine and public health, for progress in matters of technology as well as in economics. By contrast, the private lives of many people are full of fear. People do not trust politicians who proclaim a bright future. Rather, they have "Angst" that things will turn from bad to worse, in public safety no less than in matters of climate. In this context, in a strange way, the experience of disenchantment turns into a renewed interest in re-enchantment, and one wonders how Max Weber with his receptive mind and his keen intellect would have analyzed and explained the ultimate aims and aspirations of people in today's world. As I have tried to show, we cannot expect Weber to provide the answers that we need today, but in studying Weber we may be in a better position to find these answers.

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<sup>127</sup> The best analyses of the role of Christianity in the modern world can be found in the new Cambridge History of Christianity. Vol.7: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660-1815, ed. by Stewart J. Brown and Timothy Tackett. Cambridge Univ. Press 2006; vol. 8: World Christianities, c. 1815-1914, ed. by Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley. Cambridge Univ. Press 2006; vol. 9: World Christianities, c. 1914-2000, ed. by Hugh McLeod. Cambridge Univ. Press 2006.

<sup>128</sup> Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914*. New York: St. Martin's Press 2000; Hartmut Lehmann. *Säkularisierung. Der europäische Sonderweg in Sachen Religion*. Göttingen: Wallstein 2004.



## **The Disenchantment of Law? Formal and Substantive Rationality in Weber's Work**

Catherine Colliot-Thélène\*

It is futile to try to present in half an hour the different receptions of Weber's *Sociology of law* in Germany, France, Italy, the United States or Canada. I have put a brief bibliography at the disposal of whoever might be interested. Concerning this reception, I would like simply to emphasize two points. First, Weber's *Sociology of Law*, which was conceived as a part of the work known under the title *Economy and Society* (I leave aside the editorial problems related to the title and the composition of this work), has influenced, although to a limited measure, the field of the sociology of law, but it has not had the slightest influence on the theory of law, let alone on the law in the narrow sense (the positive law). Secondly, although Weber considered his *Sociology of Law* as the most finished part of *Economy and Society*, it has long been disregarded by his commentators. One of the few German authors to show an early interest in it, Manfred Rehbinder, observed in 1963 that the *Sociology of Law* belongs to the part of Weber's work that the sociologist generally avoids and the jurist almost totally ignores. However, twenty years later, the same author noticed an increasing interest in this long-neglected part of Weber's work (Lascoumes, 1995, 31-32). This growing interest seems to me even more intense now, and it occurs within the framework of a revival of the concept of the sociology of law as part of general sociology.

It would certainly be interesting in this context to discuss Weber's concept of the sociology of law in relation to contemporary approaches to the law as a social medium, whether as a sub-system following its specific logic (Luhmann) or as *the* medium that secures the link between social and systemic integration (Habermas). However, such a comparison can only be undertaken on the basis of a good understanding of the different premises of these approaches. I will restrict my talk to an exposition of Weber's sociology of law as such and develop this exposition in three points. First, I will explain the distinction Weber makes between normative and empirical sciences, a distinction that determines the relationship between the theory and the sociology of law. Secondly, I will take up Weber's diagnosis of the trends in the evolution of modern law (which are part of the general process of rationalization) and his reservations towards the first attempts made by the theory of law at the beginning of the 20th century to overcome the formalism that was characteristic of mainstream theory in Germany in the second part of the previous century. Finally, I will point out some aspects of the *Sociology of Law* that have been receiving increased attention in recent years, insofar as they seem to offer a conceptual framework for understanding the future of law when the state's

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\* Prof. Dr. Catherine Colliot-Thélène, Université de Rennes 1, UFR de Philosophie, Avenue du Général Leclerc, Campus de Beaulieu, CS 74 205, F-35 042 Rennes cedex, France.

sovereignty is weakening. However, because of the short time at my disposal, the treatment of these three points will be very unequal. On the first, I will say only what is necessary to understand the problems developed in the second, and I will limit the third to some brief indications.

I. There are good reasons for jurists' lack of interest in Weber's writings on law. Weber had an educational background in legal studies, but his approach to the law, like his approach to economics and political institutions, is a socio-historical one. He made no contribution to the theory of law, just as he made no substantial contribution to the theory of economics. The kind of analysis which he develops concerning the law presupposes the basic distinction between two types of sciences: the "dogmatic sciences" and the empirical sciences of action. The object of the former, among which he cites logic, ethics, aesthetics and *Jurisprudenz* (that is: the theory of law), is the internal consistency of normative systems of thought, while the latter aim to explain the action of concrete individuals. This action can be partly determined by norms, in so far as these individuals take account of the existence of norms, in our case the juridical ones, and decide whether to respect or to avoid them. The distinction between dogmatic and empirical sciences is briefly mentioned at the very beginning of *Economy and Society* in the comments on the definition of interpretative sociology (*verstehende Soziologie*). Weber comes back to it at the beginning of the second part of *Economy and Society*, in a chapter devoted to the relationship between the economy and the other "orders" (*Ordnungen*) of society. The law being one of those orders, Weber thinks it necessary to distinguish the meaning of words like "legal order", "legal rule" and "legal proposition", depending on whether the expressions are used by a jurist or by a sociologist. The ideal "legal order" "has nothing directly to do with the world of real economic conduct, since they exist on different levels. One exists in the ideal realm of the "ought", while the other deals with the real world of the "is".<sup>129</sup> Therefore the sense of the expression "legal order", which means to the jurist "a set of norms of logically demonstrable correctness", becomes to the sociologist "a complex of actual determinants of actual human action" [*ein Komplex von faktischen Bestimmungsgründen realen menschlichen Handelns*].

At first sight, this specificity of the sociological approach to the law is sufficient to explain, in particular, Weber's position toward modern theories of natural law which he calls the "meta-juridical axiomatics" or the "law of law", i.e. the rationally established norms to which the systems of positive law are supposed to conform in order to be considered legitimate. As he explicitly writes in the 7th chapter of the *Sociology of Law*, the sociologist takes notice of the representations concerning the "law of law" only when they happen to have practical consequences for the behaviour of law makers, legal practitioners and, generally, people concerned with law. According to Weber, the practical influence of these representations belong to the past (with the exception of America), so that we may think that he takes sides with legal positivism, declaring the theories of natural law as definitively outdated. We shall see, in the second part of this exposition, that his position is more complicated, insofar as he considers that a rationalist theory of law is necessary to the consistency of formal legalism.

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<sup>129</sup> *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society*, edited by Max Reinstein, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1969 [quoted: *Reinstein*], 12.

II. I will now take up the main topic of this exposition. For a long time, the last two chapters of the *Sociology of Law* (“the formal qualities of the revolutionary law” and “the formal qualities of modern law”) were the only ones to attract the attention of commentators. Why this exception to the general disregard for the *Sociology of Law*? The answer is that the focus of these two chapters is the particular *rationality* of modern law, so that they bring arguments to the interpretation of the development of law as part of the global process of rationalization that is characteristic of the history of Western culture as a whole. However, these chapters also introduce some elements that seem to weaken this general thesis (the encompassing process of rationalization), so that they reveal Weber’s ambivalence toward contemporary trends in the evolution of the law and the theory of law.

Before we take up the problem, it is necessary to introduce a conceptual distinction that is the key to Weber’s interpretation of the general evolution of the law in the history of modern Western societies, i.e. the distinction between the formal and the substantive (in other translations: “material”, German: “*materielle*”) rationality.

Formal rationality, which includes systematization, acquired its most accomplished expression in the school of the German Pandectists that Weber summarizes in the following way: “According to present modes of thought [systematization] represents an integration of all analytically derived legal propositions in such a way that they constitute a logically clear, internally consistent, and, at least in theory, gapless system of rules, under which it is applied, all conceivable factual situations must be capable of being logically subsumed, lest their order lack an effective guaranty”. (*Rheinstein*, 62) In other words, the only thing the lawyer has to do is a “logical analysis of meaning” (*logische Sinndeutung*) on a corpus of norms that have been established by the lawmakers. Formal rationality contrasts with “substantive” rationality. The latter does not deduce the decision concerning legal problems from general norms fixed by the law, but it takes into consideration other norms, such as “ethical imperatives, utilitarian and other expediential rules, and political maxims, all of which diverge from the formalism [...] which uses logical abstraction”. (*Rheinstein*, 63-64)

Weber interprets the global evolution of the law in Western history as a movement of growing formalization and systematization. For the sake of simplicity I am leaving aside the difference between the British tradition and the continental one, of which he is perfectly aware and which should naturally be examined more carefully in order to give an accurate account of his analyses. As we have said, Weber’s interpretation of the general evolution of the law appears as an aspect of his thesis about the process of Western rationalization. The victory of formal rationality over substantive rationality makes the law foreseeable, a characteristic which Weber deems to have helped the development of the capitalist economy and the consolidation of the rational form of political domination, the modern bureaucratic state. The formal law, the rational state and the capitalist economy make up the triad of the institutions that are characteristic of modern Western societies. Weber is opposed to every mono-causal determination and, while recognizing the influence that each element of this triad has had on the others, he repeatedly stresses that transformations of legal practice and legal thought are first internally determined. But in the end, the economic, political and legal structures of modern societies appear to share a common quality that makes them interdependent.

*Berechenbarkeit* (predictability), which the formalism of the law allows, is a characteristic in common with bureaucratic politics and the capitalist economy. *Berechenbarkeit* means at once *Kalkulierbarkeit* (calculability), which the introduction of double-entry book-keeping allows in matters of the economy, and foreseeability, which subsumption under rules makes possible in matters of law and political domination. It is this common feature which is the basis of a relationship of mutual affinity between modern forms of political domination, economic organisation and legal regulation. This is illustrated by two quotations: “The increasing calculability of the functioning of the legal process in particular, constituted one of the most important conditions for the existence of economic enterprise, which cannot do without legal security” (E&S, 883), and “‘Equality before the law’ and the demand for legal guarantees against arbitrariness demand a formal and rational ‘objectivity’ of administration” (E&S, 979), furthering the victory of a rational form of domination instead of “the personal discretion flowing from the ‘grace’ of the old patrimonial domination” (ibid.).

The down-side of this *Berechenbarkeit* is the impersonality of social relations in modern societies, a characteristic that Weber again emphasizes in the three domains of economics, politics and law. In each case, decision-making occurs “*sine ira et studio*”, without hate and therefore without love, “without regard to persons”. This point is particularly stressed in the “Intermediary Remark” [*Zwischenbetrachtung*] of the *Sociology of Religion*. The free market is not bound by ethical norms, it is fundamentally alien to any type of fraternal relationship. In the same way, the bureaucratic state apparatus appears to be far less accessible to ethical requirements than past forms of domination, like the patriarchal orders. At least, again in sharp contrast to every religiously-oriented ethics of brotherhood, the lawyer orientates his action to the dictates of general rules and abstract procedures.

In the last chapter of the *Sociology of Law*, Weber gives a brief account of the development of law and legal procedure in relationship to the different social groups that were their “bearers” (*Träger*): “law prophets”, legal *honoratiоны*, and lawyers with an academic training. At the end of this text he summarizes the main stages of legal formalism: “The formal qualities of the law emerge as follows: arising in primitive legal procedure from a combination of magically conditioned formalism and irrationality conditioned by revelation, they proceed to increasingly specialized juridical and logical rationality and systematization [...] Finally they assume [...] an increasingly logical sublimation and deductive rigour and develop an increasingly rational technical procedure.” (*Rheinstein*, 303-304). Logical sublimation and deductive rigour, that is: formal rationality, appear therefore to be the final product of the process of rationalizing the law.

However, in the same chapter, Weber points out a set of various phenomena that seem to challenge the victory of formal legal rationality, among them: “the demand for substantive justice by certain social class interests and ideologies; [...] the tendencies inherent in certain forms of political authority of either authoritarian or democratic character concerning the ends of law that are respectively appropriate to them; and also the demand of the ‘laity’ for a system of justice that is intelligible to them; finally [...] anti-formal tendencies are promoted by the ideologically rooted power aspirations of the legal profession itself” (*Rheinstein*, 321).

I will not take the time to treat each of these phenomena separately. What seems to me important to stress is that Weber is perfectly aware that most of them, far from being the remains of outdated forms of political and social organisations are, on the contrary, the products of current transformations. There are at least two major factors that undermine the primacy of formalism in law: the demands of the non-privileged classes of society and the logic of the bureaucracy of welfare (Weber had Bismarckian social legislation in mind). In Weber's time some scientists drew the consequence of those new trends by trying to explore new paths for legal theory, among them the school of free law (*die freirechtliche Doktrin*: Ehrlich, Kantorowicz) which developed a social critique of formal legality. Weber's treatment of these new trends in legal theory is rather contemptuous. He does not see a great difference between those technically argued critiques and vague "demands for a 'social law' based upon such emotionally coloured ethical positions as justice and human dignity" (*Rheinstein*, 308). Every critique of formal rationalism appears to him as "a flight into the irrational", "parallel to the irrationalization of religion". However, according to Duncan Kennedy (2004), "the socially oriented critique of legal formal rationality has won close to universal acceptance" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What is puzzling in Weber's dismissal of these developments of legal theory is that he had the analytical means to understand their appropriateness to the ongoing social and political transformations. By rejecting as irrational every questioning of formal law, Weber seems to transform the meaning of his typology of the developmental states of the law. While an "ideal type of development" should be a conceptual means of clarifying trends of evolution that are empirically established, it becomes instead the basis of a value judgment. In other words, Weber's ambiguous position toward the recent trends in the law and the theory of law are at odds with the empirical character he claims for the sociology of law.<sup>130</sup>

This difficulty exposes the limits of the great meta-narrative of "Western rationalization". I will not deny the importance of this theme in Weber's work. But I do not believe that all analyses of Weber fit into this overall framework. Weber's general prognosis concerning the political future of Western societies (the fate of an irreversible bureaucratization) is certainly based on it. But other analyses, from which those on the contemporary evolution of law are examples, illustrate a topic that is not necessarily congruent with the theme of global rationalization. This topic, already indicated at the end of the *Protestant Ethic*, is the growth of utilitarianism. If we take together the two last chapters of the *Sociology of Law*, we understand that the formal systems of legal dogmatics are the remains of revolutionary law, which presupposes the foundation of the positive rules of law on meta-positive norms: the natural law in its modern interpretation. The authority of these meta-positive norms is no longer related to some kind of transcendence, be it tradition or religion, but is founded only upon reason. Natural law, in its modern understanding, is "the specific and only consistent type of legitimacy of a legal order which (can) remain once religious revelation and the authoritarian sacredness of a tradition and its bearers have lost their force" (*Rheinstein*, 288). In the chapter on "Revolutionary Law", Weber mentions all the factors that have contributed to the loss of credibility of natural law. As a result, the "rational" is finally interpreted as the "reasonable", that is, in a utilitarian sense. While the dogma of natural

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<sup>130</sup> Cf. Rehinder, 1989.

law furthered the evolution of positive law in the direction of increasing abstraction and logic - “they have strengthened the tendency towards logically abstract law, especially the power of logic in legal thinking” (*Rheinstein*, 296) - the erosion of the rational into the reasonable paved the way for the return of substantive considerations. In other words, natural law, as the credence in the legitimacy of norms because of their inherent qualities, is the condition of the consistency of a strictly formal system of law. With the erosion of the authority of natural law, the formal mode of legal thought lost its foundation. The door was opened to a sheer utilitarian understanding of the law. “The disappearance of the old natural law conceptions has destroyed all possibility of providing the law with a metaphysical dignity by virtue of its immanent qualities. In the great majority of its most important provisions, it has been unmasked all too visibly, indeed, as the technical means of a compromise between conflicting interests” (*Rheinstein*, 298).

The erosion of the rational into the reasonable appears to be the key to the disenchantment with the law. But the term “disenchantment” here cannot have the technical meaning it has in the *Religionssoziologie*. In the history of religion, disenchantment means the disappearance of the belief in magical powers. Roughly speaking, it begins with Judaism and ends with Protestantism. The development of Western rationality parallels the decline of magical conceptions. If we consider formal rationality to be a more accomplished form of rationality than substantive rationality, we must recognize that the resurgence of substantive considerations and the disenchantment of formal legality mark, on the contrary, the end of Western rationalization. This does not mean that we are returning to the “enchantment” of previous times. What is on the verge of occurring is the end of the solidarity between political power and legal formalism. The latter may have served the purposes of the emerging rational state, but it could become, if not superfluous, at least insufficient for the national state once established. Weber was convinced that formal and substantive rationality are mutually incompatible. I do not intend here to confront him with a moral argument by disputing the rationality of legislation and legal procedures that are indifferent to the wellbeing or the happiness of the people subjected to it. But even by admitting foreseeability as the criterion of rationality, it is debatable whether political rationality converges with legal rationality, as far as we identify the latter with legal formalism. When Weber wants to show the impersonal character of modern politics, he refers indifferently, sometimes in the same texts, to the rules of bureaucratic domination and to the requirements of the *Raison d’Etat*. However, according to him, politics is oriented to the conquest and the preservation of power. It is, therefore, tempted to emancipate itself from the constraints of a strict formal legalism. During the 20th century, the “rule of law” has proved to be flexible enough to allow “social politics” that are some kind of answer to democratic demands. Without breaking the law, the Welfare State has developed a type of legitimacy that does not fit with any of the three types of legitimate domination of Weber’s typology. Elective modes of selection of political representatives and leaders force these representatives and leaders to take into account the demands issuing from society. In this sense the logic of politics goes beyond the constraints of formal legality.

III. The exposition of my third point will be sketchy, but it seems to me necessary to question the relevance of Weber’s *Sociology of Law* in the present day; that is, in a time

when the state's monopoly of legitimate violence is eroding due to increasing globalization. I can just mention recent studies on Weber's political theory that have brought to light the close relationship between his famous definition of the state and his interpretation of the history of law.<sup>131</sup> The monopoly of "violence" means, indeed, the monopoly of the power of coercion, that is, of the guarantee of rights. This monopoly is the final result of the history of subjective rights (it is almost superfluous to specify in English that rights are "subjective"), which is (inseparably) linked to the history of political domination. According to Weber we can say that an individual *has* a right in so far as his claim *to* a right is supported by a community, whatever it may be, that is strong enough to make it a reality. During most of Western history (the Middle Ages), there was a plurality of such communities (or corporate groups) that possessed the power of guaranteeing rights to an individual. These communities (which Weber calls "*Rechtsgemeinschaften*"), were heterogeneous, competing and sometimes overlapping. What the modern state has achieved is to deprive these various communities of any power to guarantee rights, unless the state itself grants it to them.

Nobody will deny that Weber is a theoretician of the national state. He considered these forms of domination as the ultimate outcome of political rationalization. But it is noteworthy that he gave a definition of a "right" that does not restrict its validity to the conditions of a state's domination. The concept "right", means a "chance, factually guaranteed to [the individual] by the consensually accepted interpretation of a legal norm, of invoking in favour of his ideal or material interests the aid of a "coercive apparatus" which is in special readiness for this purpose" (*Reinstein*, 15). The existence of an enforcement mechanism is the important point in this definition. But this mechanism is not necessarily of the kind we use today (the state apparatus), and the coercion does not need to be physical violence. In particular, it is not necessary that there be any judicial organ. A person will be attributed a right when he/she has the possibility of requiring the support of an organism of coercion to assert his/her claims, whatever that organism may be. This definition of "subjective right" is formulated in such a way that the rights of a citizen of a modern state appear as a particular case of a more general phenomenon. In the context of the state, a "right" is guaranteed by the coercive power of political authority. But we may speak of "rights" even in cases where the means of coercion which is the guarantee of the law belongs to forms of authority other than the political (for instance a hierocracy). Before the state, there were other types of communities that had the ability to support the claims of an individual or a group of individuals, i.e. to play the role of "*Rechtsgemeinschaften*".

This extensive understanding of subjective right can be a starting point for analyzing contemporary political transformations. Globalization is not a phenomenon limited to the field of economics. This global movement also encompasses legal and political aspects that many jurists are now studying with growing attention. In doing so, they tend more and more to reject the hierarchical representation according to which the national organs of legislation and of justice will simply be subordinated in the future to international ones (the Kantian paradigm). The situation towards which we are heading is closer to the medieval one, at least from a formal point of view: the coexistence of

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. Andreas Anter, *Max Webers Theorie des modernen Staates*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, 1995; "Von der politischen Gemeinschaft zum Anstaltsstaat. Das Monopol der legitimen Gewaltsamkeit", in E. Hanke / W. Mommsen (ed.): *Max Webers Herrschaftssoziologie*, Mohr/Siebeck, 2001, 102-120.

heterogeneous authorities and groups which produce rules and find ways of implementing them. They can be official organisms, regional (European) or international, but also private associations, for instance industrial corporations or associations of consumers. These various organisms are not integrated in a coherent system, but are juxtaposed, only partially and weakly coordinated, and often overlap.<sup>132</sup>

It may seem, at first, paradoxical to use the thought of such a strong champion of the nation-state as Max Weber as the means of understanding the development of the law after the nation-state. However, his broad interpretation of the notion of “subjective right” turns out to be a highly appropriate conceptual instrument for this purpose. No wonder the chapter of the *Sociology of Law* devoted to subjective rights, the longest chapter in the work, is beginning to attract increasing attention.<sup>133</sup> While the discussions of the unity or the reality of Western “rationalization” may seem outdated, Weber’s *Sociology of Law* is nevertheless a fundamental work for treating the law as a major resource in the complexity of the processes of socialisation.

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. Delmas-Marty (2006).

<sup>133</sup> Cf. Melot (2006) ; Colliot-Thélène (2005, 2006).



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