

1

A short manifesto by way of introduction

The essays gathered here spring from my work on an edition of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, a translation accompanied by a commentary.¹ Almost all of them started life as individual "comments" on the text — for example, on the word "Puritan", or a note on Burckhardt [XXI.12 n.16]. The one obvious exception is the essay scrutinising Weber's St. Louis address, though here too the principle of resolute subservience to a text is quite central, since this essay originally preceded a critical edition of the address.² Now the method of commentary, going through a text page by page, word by word, is quite deliberately deconstructive and disintegrative. It is, in the first instance, a means of escaping inherited stereotype and the mortal inertia inherent in the belief that the text is "well-known". Even so, behind the extraordinary diversity and plurality of Weber's *PE* — another reason for practising the method of commentary — there is indubitably a single authorial identity, and in the same way (however remote the comparison may seem) all my efforts at commentary come from a single hand. It is true that I differ from Weber on one important point. I do not believe it is necessary for the analyst today to create his or her own analytical structures; for though — like Weber — I accept that the infinity of historical reality must be grouped and ordered conceptually in order to render it comprehensible, yet that grouping has to a significant extent been performed by the historical actors themselves, by the concepts they themselves created.³ Hence the centrality of the history of ideas. But still, like Weber, I have some very distinct present-day affirmations to make; and besides their obvious unity of subject, the essays which follow are united by a set of primary assumptions about the past and its presentation. Of course, these will surface within the essays themselves, but it seems only fair to give notice of what to expect. The good Weberian and liberal principle of intellectual transparency, of 'the open presentation... of a

¹ To be published by Oxford University Press. This is in all essentials complete and I hope it may appear shortly.

² 'Max Weber on "The Rural Community": a critical edition of the English text', *HEI* 31 (2005), 327-66.

³ Compare Weber's wrestlings with this objection in the essay on "Objectivity": *WL* 195-200.

personal, and to this extent “subjective” standpoint’,⁴ is not to be gainsaid. I note the following.

§.1 The argument and approach of these essays is uncompromisingly historical. This does not mean that they have nothing to say to the social and political theorist. On the contrary, if theory starts from the assumption that theory must be rooted in real life, in ‘*sensuous human activity*’, or whatever else we wish to call it, then the theoretical relevance of historical inquiry into the real and the tangible is self-evident. Accordingly the fusion of theoretical and historical inquiry has always been commonplace. The only word of caution I would enter is that such a fusion is not history, because theory is not history. The sociologist or theorist who comes to Weber with an already established agenda; who finds to their delight and satisfaction that a learned trawl through Weberian texts yields precisely the desired conclusions, and then presents the findings as *theoretically* persuasive because they are “what the *historical* Weber actually thought” — such a person is not writing history, and the appeal to it is spurious.

§.2 A great deal of historical literature on Max Weber has been devoted to the question of whether he was right or wrong in his historical statements. This is more true of the *Protestant Ethic (PE)* than any other Weberian text: was it right about the origins of capitalism or the nature of Puritanism in the 17th century? I regard such inquiry as misplaced. It is a self-evident proposition advanced by Weber himself that the mere passage of time renders a thinker remote from the perspectives of an ever moving present. He or she necessarily becomes “wrong” or (more accurately) superseded: ‘Every one of us in academic “science” [*Wissenschaft*] knows that what he has done will be obsolete in 10, 20, 50 years. That is the historical destiny, that is the very *meaning* of work in academic “science”’.⁵ Note in addition that if one is writing the history of capitalism or Puritanism, then this and not Max Weber is the primary subject. Any deviation into “Max Weber studies” is precisely that: a deviation. By contrast my primary subject is not the time period around which the *PE* is loosely centred — ‘the most fateful epoch of the 17th century’ [XXI.36] — but the text itself; not early modern Europe but Max Weber, a man who is of interest to us in the first instance because of his contribution to German and European ideas c.1890-1920. The only interest I have in Weber’s historical “rightness” or “wrongness”, is as part of the history of his own, early 20th century conception of the role of historical empiricism in formulating ideas about the past.⁶

§.3 There remains a powerful ahistorical component in the essays that follow. Though the *PE* made something of a splash in Weber’s own day, it remains the case

⁴ Freiburg Inaugural, *MWG* I/4.543.

⁵ ‘Science as a Vocation’ [1917/19], *MWG* I/17.85.

⁶ See c.2, ‘Max Weber’s idea of “Puritanism”’.

that no historical view of the extraordinary efflorescence of German-language writing in the humanities and social science at that time could justify the exclusive focus on the *PE* which is the formal premiss of this collection. It is after all a text which Weber himself abandoned in 1908 and was only securely restored to life by the accident of the World War.⁷ The real elevation of the *PE* to its present height, as is well-known, is primarily a late 20th century phenomenon: the text was rendered canonical by a developing consensus of university personnel throughout the G8 countries at this time. I myself only read Weber because he was imposed upon me in my teaching capacity by the exigencies of the History syllabus at Oxford University;⁸ and I only began to reflect upon him because he appeared wholly incomprehensible in the guise in which he was presented to me and to my students: *diabolus ex machina*. Nonetheless, if the historian cannot escape his present, he will have his revenge. The obvious response to the canonical, a- and post-historical elevation of a particular text is a countervailing historicity. If the *PE* has been selected for study on the ground that it is extraordinary, then still it must be read “like any other book”: that is, with the most ruthless disregard for any canonical status.

§.4 One practical consequence of this historical and pedagogical imperative is that, if the formal starting point of these essays is an apparently narrow one – two articles published in a learned journal in 1904-5 – nonetheless the *telos* is an expansive one. First, we must try to understand the *PE* within Max Weber’s entire *oeuvre*, and within the fragile life of a single man. It is this life which supplies the matrix within which an immense variety of works jostled, just as it is an elementary and yet commonly disregarded truism that, as Marianne Weber well knew, ‘the connection between [Weber’s] humanity and the far-reaching works into which he poured his energies, is indissoluble and is integral to his portrait.’⁹ From here we should go on to try and understand Max Weber within the entire stream of German, European and ‘Occidental’ ideas. (Such an inquiry also entails knowledge of all the social and political contexts that he perceived as relevant, though I do not accept the proposition that Weber was as much a politician *manqué* as a thinker.) Textual microscopy and broad historical synthesis are indissolubly linked. To put it another way: I seek always to write history (*Geschichte*) and not merely the history of a particular book or work (*Werkgeschichte*). If the *PE* is the primary subject and point of entry, the *Kultur* of the German-speaking lands of West and Central Europe is an undoubted destination of the inquiries which follow. After all, was this not a third, and perhaps the last great cultural flourishing of a cluster of European city states in the wake of classical Greece and Renaissance Italy? Within this broader view Weber will frequently appear as an unrepresentative, marginal and eccentric

⁷ See c.3, ‘Max Weber in the Netherlands’.

⁸ University of Oxford, *Examination Decrees* for 1983-4; 1986-7.

⁹ *Lebenserinnerungen* (Bremen, 1948), 126.

individual, which no doubt betrays some hagiographical deficiency on my part. On the other hand, we may be reassured: to be “unrepresentative” in one’s own day is but a mirror image of the “extraordinary” status which promotes intellectual survival after death. The historical and the canonical perspectives may sometimes coincide.

§.5 Shortly after the first of the articles in this collection was published in 2003 – on Max Weber’s idea of Puritanism – Guenther Roth commented to me that “All this ought to have been done years ago”. (I take the absolute detachment of this statement as a very high compliment.) He was making an obvious point: that the *Protestant Ethic* has been a celebrated and profusely discussed text since its first publication in 1904-5, yet *historical* exploration of the origins, genesis and meaning of its most central themes is in its infancy.¹⁰ There is indeed a grotesque contrast between the assumption underlying educational curricula, that the *PE* is a known and elementary text – a text that may easily be taught to first degree students or even in secondary schools – and the perspective of the historian of ideas. There can of course be no doubt about the remarkable contributions made to the historical study of Max Weber by great pioneers in the later 20th century, beginning with Wolfgang Mommsen’s classical work on Weber’s politics and gathering pace since then.¹¹ I do not presume to compare myself with them. Nonetheless the *Protestant Ethic*, perhaps more than any other item in Weber’s *oeuvre*, has remained to a large extent *terra incognita*. In any historical perspective it is neither elementary nor known.

§.6 Until we grapple with this text, there can be no intellectual biography of Max Weber, because the *PE* is in a very real sense the centre point of his life. It is the central text, the ‘*Hauptarbeit*’,¹² of a middle, essayistic phase of his career which spans the years c.1902-09. This ill-determined period follows on from the evident hiatus created by his nervous collapse to create the sense of something like a total rupture — or so it would seem. As of today, the general reader may read the narrative of Max Weber’s life, but his intellectual biography does not exist except in unresolved and fragmentary form: the stupendous blocks of lava bequeathed to us by Marianne Weber in 1926 — an inadequacy of which she was well aware.¹³ And

¹⁰ See also Friedrich Wilhelm Graf: ‘Distanz aus Nähe’ in *Das Weber Paradigma* edd. Gert Albert et al. (Tübingen, 2003), 237.

¹¹ *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik 1890-1920* (Tübingen, 1959). I am not sure that I would have had the courage to embark on Max Weber as a historical subject but for the existence of Prof. Mommsen’s edition of Weber’s *Schriften und Reden 1892-1899: MWG I/4* (1993).

¹² Weber to Heinrich Rickert 14 June 1904, Nachlaß Max Weber, 30/4 Bl.94.

¹³ *Lebenserinnerungen*, 125: ‘In future others might grapple with [Weber] the researcher and statesman, and grasp him according to their own, deeper vision — though no-one was filled with his being in the same way as his wife; but at least I could deliver the material for later interpretation.’ — Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber. Die Leidenschaft des Denkens* (Munich, 2005) is a bravura performance, but, as its subtitle suggests, the author is more interested in passion (*Leidenschaft*) than thought (*Denken*). It is emphatically not a work of intellectual history.

without the intellectual biography of Max Weber, there is no Max Weber. The essays which follow are not framed as intellectual biography; but if the basis of our interest in Weber the man lies in the history of his mind rather than, say, his relations with Else Jaffé (an obvious idea to someone who was herself the holder of a doctorate), then the first lineaments of biography will be found below.