

## Envoi: Who was Max Weber ?

The underlying aim of this book has been to show that there really was a Max Weber, a single individual and not an undigested accumulation of dispersed scholarly industries; that (in the words of Albert Salomon) his ‘works are all the expression of an integrated, compact personality, and they complement and inform one another.’<sup>1</sup> Who then was this man ?

He was a German thinker who reflected on a modernity that was the outcome of history. The distinctive feature of 19<sup>th</sup> century German thought was not its nationalism but its universalism. Manifest in a proliferation of front-rank universities spread across a wide variety of states with no regard for political boundaries (Swiss, Russian, Prussian, Habsburg), German-speaking Central Europe formed an unusual society which devoted proportionately more resource, and attached a higher value to understanding the world, than any other in recent history. Universal *Wissenschaft* was a crucial component of German identity where the nation-state could not be. This unpolitical cast of mind was indeed overlaid by nationalist commitments, but down to 1914 the original cultural foundation was not radically altered.<sup>2</sup> Seen in this light 19<sup>th</sup> century German thought represented the third, and last, great cultural flourishing of a network of European cities in succession to classical Greece and Renaissance Italy. Max Weber, the bourgeois laureate of the city and a man with a clear sense of the diminished status of politics, was an outstanding if slightly unusual product of this society and its *Kultur*. Unusual because he was not prepared to admit that the calling of a university academic dedicated to *Wissenschaft* stood higher than any other, while his exalted conception of *Wissenschaft* was such that it cast a sceptical light on some of the premisses of academic life. Nonetheless after painful hesitation this was the path he chose, albeit in a conditional manner: living amidst the academic community but without its elementary duties or rewards.

The range of his thinking was as broad as any of his encyclopaedic German predecessors, and in this sense he stood within a great tradition of ideas going back to Leibniz and beyond. But still he was not a systematic thinker in the manner of Hegel or (in aspiration) Marx, because his starting point was new and unprecedented in the history of European thought: not system and unity but their absence. Youth and cultural formation presented him with a series of disintegrative contexts. First, the developing perception of an “anarchy of values” within society, where a Catholic saw the world differently to a Socialist, who saw it differently to a Liberal and so on. Alongside the divisions in society, there also existed a sense of the multiplicity of possible individual value-commitments, as was evident from the great Nietzschean vogue after 1890. Secondly, there was an emergent sense of history as infinite and potentially unmasterable. In principle the past was not orderly but an infinitely voluminous and implicitly relativistic ‘chaos’, a state of affairs that had been laid bare (or created) by a century or more of academic inquiry into the remote past. This was ‘the stream of immeasurable happening [that] rolls on endlessly in the face of eternity.’<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, there was specialization: the continuous specialization of function in society – evidenced by the multiplicity of occupations or *Berufe* – and, most tangibly, the specialization of academic inquiry as data and research findings accumulated and the size of

<sup>1</sup> ‘Max Weber’ [1926], *Werke* ed. Peter Gostmann et al., (Wiesbaden, 2008), I.138.

<sup>2</sup> The Baltic German university of Dorpat, which produced Adolf Harnack *inter alia*, was however subject to compulsory Russification from 1895.

<sup>3</sup> »Objektivität« [1904] WL 184.

the university sector expanded — enormously so after ca.1860. Specialization was distinctive in that it was a historically inevitable and thus necessary form of disintegration. The modern blinkered commitment to the *Beruf* as an ‘absolute *end in itself*’ [XX.23], without any wider vista, was a peculiarly deep-seated form of torment because, from an individualist Weberian perspective (unlike a holistic Durkheimian one), one’s horizons were continually being narrowed with good reason.

How did Weber respond to these contexts ? He looked above all to religion and history because these were the only resources which, he supposed, could supply comprehensive answers regarding the fragmented modern predicament. (This comprehensive and universal frame of reference was the crucial residue of the encyclopaedic past.) His first conclusion was elementary: the modern “world” like its past history was indeed fragmented and infinite, and so meaningless. Unlike his contemporaries, many of whom also took ideas about present-day plurality and historical relativity as a starting point, he did not suppose that “the world” could be reconstituted like Humpty Dumpty as something unitary and meaningful. Ascetic Protestantism, the ultimate form of Christianity both logically and historically, was also the first attempt to cope with this situation, in the form of a functionally efficient, tough-minded admission of human inability to construe the world as meaningful: the meaning of the world might still be supposed to exist but only the hidden god (*deus absconditus*) could know it. However, this 17<sup>th</sup> century theological ‘root’ was now long since discarded. In a modern situation one must construct meaning for oneself, as an individual within a particular *Kultur* at a particular point in time — and such is the obvious light in which Weber can appear as a proto-existentialist thinker. The first resource here was the purity of abstract thought detached from infinite and chaotic reality, operating according to its own formal logic; yet thought and *Wissenschaft* were worthless if they were simply disconnected from reality. Social science must therefore operate according to an equally weighted, bipolar mantra, ‘the *thinking* ordering of *empirical* reality’,<sup>4</sup> just as its two great instruments were the (ordering) concept and the (empirical) experiment. Here is another elementary difference from Marx: the belief that personally generated conceptual abstraction was an indispensable moiety of thought, whatever the volume of ideology emitted by academic *literati*.

Weber’s bipolar, conceptual-empirical approach to reality in general (“the world”) is mimicked by a bipolar solution to the problem of specialization: proper understanding of the absolute necessity of specialization throughout society – the world of *Berufe* promoted and legitimated by the Protestant ethic – must include recognition of the fundamental inadequacy of the purely specialized perspective. In an academic context a dilettante could be intellectually as fruitful as a specialist, and was logically no more imperfect. Social science could not transcend specialization, and reunite disintegrated reality; yet it could and should insist on the inadequacy of reliance on specialization alone. It was not a master science, but it could serve a unique function by acting as a mediator between a series of specialized disciplines, and the sociologist’s perspective should be multi-disciplinary at least. Weber’s multi-disciplinary and ultimately universal frame of reference, combined with his refusal to portray the world in simple unitary terms, are principal causes of the difficulty which we, as victims of a still more developed specialization, experience in trying to grasp him as an individual. Yet any failure on our part in this respect is fundamental, since it denies precisely what is unique and individual about him.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. ibid., 150 etc.

The empirical conclusion to his historical thought was that, while the past was no longer intrinsically meaningful, it still offered us *external* coherence, in the form of the accumulated legacy of the past into which we are born. This legacy was, however, ambivalent. The result of millennia of cumulative rationalization was a ‘steel housing’ (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) [XXI.108], though this was not (contrary to widespread misconception) simply coercive. The ‘steel housing’ was *not* an ‘iron cage’,<sup>5</sup> since its unparalleled rational and technical efficiency provided the essential services and goods of mass consumption that few inhabitants of the housing would willingly go without. Dropping out was always a possibility, in Weber’s day as in ours, for there was no Berlin Wall to prevent it. Yet the high watermark of protest rarely exceeded the creation of bohemian communities, such as the one at Ascona that Weber visited in 1913-14, or (more conventionally) the creation of a defined and regulated space for leisure, which in his case seems to have consisted of over-consciousness and only partially successful attempts to escape *Kultur* and return to nature on solitary holidays.<sup>6</sup> In short, the inherited, “rationalized” cast of mind left only a small amount of “free” room for manoeuvre in the present, and the power of such externally imposed but now internalized constraint was if anything more far-reaching than the shared understanding of universal, religious meaning which preceded it [cf. XX.3], and from which it was descended. Today Weber’s comprehensive historicism is surely his most remote trait; but any want of sympathy on our part by no means invalidates his chain of thought or the impact of the past upon us. There is *longue durée* in European history, whether we attend to it or not, while the world we live in today, which is bound together more by formal uniformity and technical procedures than by any profound consensus regarding human meaning and values, is recognizably descended from the world he outlined a century ago. And this remorseless continuity was something he predicted with absolute certainty.

In the partially disintegrated, partially constraining context presented by a continuously evolving modern society, his primary focus was on ideas that stand outside miscellaneous, infinite and inscrutable reality. Hence the central distinction between formal and substantive categories of thought. Formally pure thought is logical, seamless, systematic and coherent. Law is an outstanding example, and here again we note the paradoxical coincidence of formal thought with the forces of external cohesion and constraint. By contrast what is substantive is assumed to be miscellaneous. The generic description for formally pure thought carried over into conduct is that which is formally rational where, given the great miscellany of our values and first assumptions, ‘One can... “rationalise” life according to the most varied ultimate perspectives and in very different directions.’ Formally rational conduct is not good or meritorious in itself. However, it serves a purposive function by definition, and in the context of a modern Occidental or Western world that is rationalized to such a high degree, it must be assumed to be the most efficient and well-adapted form of conduct. Furthermore, formal rationality is accompanied by substantive categories which are compatible with it: *Sachlichkeit* (the acceptance of unalterable external actuality); the observance of “impersonality” within personal relations when in a public or “social” context; and the institutional embodiment of rational behaviour, bureaucracy. Standing next to these are historical categories which are not purely rational, but which contain a high rational quotient or have an ‘elective affinity’ (or high probability of coincidence) with

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Lawrence Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage* (Berkeley, 1989) — a fine book.

<sup>6</sup> His daily postcards to Marianne, who might be busy at home or on her own separate cure, form a considerable body of correspondence.

rational structures and procedures: capitalism and the bourgeois city. Weber does not deny that his categories are arbitrary, personal inventions: they are his attempts to create meaning. Yet he implies that they are more than this. Historically these partially integrative categories are primarily (though not exclusively) derived from religion, the only previous scheme of comprehensive and integrative thought; furthermore, they respect the ‘iron facts’ and ‘realities’ bequeathed to modernity by rationalizing historical evolution. On both counts they are appropriate categories by which to construe Occidental modernity.

Of course there is another world outside the fraction of reality that has been reintegrated in this way. This is the world of specificity and infinite miscellany, of what remains personal in a social context, and what is private. Even here Weber offers us some categories such as mysticism and charisma with which to group variety and evanescence, though they are much harder to hold onto, just as he notes that there are some ‘life orders’ such as sexuality and art which are less susceptible to formal analysis, and yet not entirely beyond it. A social science of empirical reality must recognise this world too, just as Max Weber the man craved it even to the extent of sometimes wishing to annihilate his ordering self — in musical ecstasy, abandonment to a woman, exposure to the risk of death in war. But in ‘everyday life’ (which is not to be sneered at because it is everyday) [XXI.26 &c], one should begin with the rational and *sachlich* conception of modernity which history and religion have bequeathed to us.

Max Weber is a historically dated figure in one important sense: that, like all humanity, he has dates attached to him. However, as a product of the most historically sensitive era ever known to European *Kultur*, he had an exceptionally acute and refined awareness of this fact, and reasoned accordingly. The proposition that ‘Max Weber is not our contemporary’<sup>7</sup> is indeed a physiological truth, but it is an intellectual absurdity. Never was there anyone more present on the page, on the screen, and above all in our minds, than he is today.

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<sup>7</sup> Dirk Kaesler, *Max Weber* (Munich, 2014) 10.