

Weber

Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity

Edited by
Sam Whimster and Scott Lash



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MAX WEBER, RATIONALITY AND MODERNITY

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Editions and Abbreviations of Weber Texts

- AJ *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. Hans Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: Free Press, 1952).
- ES *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).
- FMW *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948).
- GASS *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1924).
- GASW *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1924).
- GEH *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight (London: Allen & Unwin, 1927).
- GPS *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1971).
- MSS *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry Finch (New York: Free Press, 1949).
- MUS *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, trans. and ed. D. Martindale, J. Riedel and G. Neuwirth (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958).
- MWG *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Horst Baier, M. Rainer Lepsius, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Wolfgang Schluchter and Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1984–).
- PESC *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin University Books, 1930).
- RC *The Religion of China*, trans. and ed. Hans Gerth (New York: Free Press, 1951).
- RI *The Religion of India*, trans. and ed. Hans Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: Free Press, 1958).
- R&K *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics*, trans. Guy Oakes (New York: Free Press, 1975).
- RS *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, 3 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1920–1).

Editions and Abbreviations of Weber Texts

- WL *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. J. Winckelmann (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1973).
- WS *Weber, Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman and trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
- WuG *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1972).

For reasons of exactitude and consistency of usage quotations of Max Weber's writings used throughout this reader may differ from the existing, standard translations.

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Introduction

SAM WHIMSTER and SCOTT LASH

As we enter the closing decades of the twentieth century there is a growing recognition that Max Weber is our foremost social theorist of the condition of modernity. His pre-eminence, which is only now beginning to be truly appreciated, stems from the scope, the depth and the intensity which he brought to this project. Simply put, Weber sought to explain the place of the modern individual in the world. Behind this deceptively simple formulation lay a gigantic enterprise.

Max Weber pursued three sets of questions: first, how Western civilization came to modernity, why other civilizations progressed in different directions, and the consequences of the attainment of modernity for the world as a whole – what Weber referred to as its ‘universal historical significance’. A second set of questions relate to the nature and character of modernity; for Weber these turned on the special place of science and rationality within society. Third, there is a set of questions about living in the modern world; here Weber’s position comes down to recognizing modernity for what it is and thereby placing limits on our expectations as to what is and what is not possible in a modern, rationalized world. These three sets of questions – one might say Weber the comparative historian, Weber the social theorist of rationality and Weber the social philosopher – can be seen to be interlinked when they are addressed through the concept of modernity.

It is as well to be clear that approaching these questions from an interest in the phenomenon of modernity represents a substantive change within Weber studies. This is not a particularly sudden shift, for the signs of the re-orientation of our interest in Weber have been building up over the last ten years. The process has been signalled by the emergence of a new Weberian scholarship that places culture and religion as the primary explanatory concepts in Weber’s account of *both* the religious and the modern age. Friedrich Tenbruck’s seminal article (translation, 1980) argued that we had to understand Weber’s theory of societal change as deriving from a developmental logic rooted in a society’s religious and cultural world-view. In a similar vein Wolfgang Schluchter demonstrated

that growth in cognitive capacity, seen as a kind of quotient of civilizational rationality, was interdependent with the developmental stage of society (1979, pp. 11–64). Apart from tapping an overlooked side of Weber's work, these studies had significant implications for the modern world and underlined Max Weber's assertion that we study other cultures in order to make intelligible our own position in the world (Mommson, 1974, pp. 1–21). These analyses have placed the emphasis of study upon world-views and the ways in which they provide a coherent structuring of the social world and man's place within it. As a comparative sociologist of religion Weber outlined the distinctive features of the great cultural religions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. This enabled him to point up the distinctive difference of the Protestant world-view. But the story does not end with the translation of this world-view into the rational and practical attitude to the world that formed the basis for the modern institutional practices within the state, the bureaucracy and the enterprise, for Weber also charted the transition of this relatively well unified world-view to its dissolution in a secularized culture. Here the trajectory of Weber's analysis moves from a Protestant society, through the Enlightenment to the post-religious, 'rationalistic' world with its characteristic plurality of 'gods and demons'.

Interpretations of Weber on the secular age are diverse and mutually conflicting; a situation that reflects the state of Weberian scholarship and the reception of his thought. While we attempt in this Introduction to provide an overview of these debates, it has to be recognized that ultimately the reception of his ideas relates to the current, and at the moment, unintegrated state of contemporary social theory. As a starting point, it is instructive none the less to consider the way in which Max Weber since the Second World War came to epitomize a 'value-free' social science. Much of sociology was based on the need to know and chart the demographic dynamics of the people – their age distribution, their family size and housing patterns, their changing occupational and class structure, their educational and leisure needs and their political affiliations. The role of Max Weber in this model was peripheral, but he was due to play a more central role. Weber represented the humanities input into the social sciences and was associated with the 'new' interpretive approach (and in addition was germinal for historical sociology). It was the political and campus struggles of the late 1960s, however, that brought Weber centre stage. The investigative/social-trends model of social science was never properly equipped to defend itself to its students and practitioners as a legitimate science of social reality, and in the intellectual and moral panic consequent upon the campus disturbances Max Weber was crudely appropriated to enforce the axiom of 'value-free' social science.

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This led to a situation where Weber was presented as a founding member of 'positivist' sociology and a defender of intellectual orthodoxy, whereas Marx and, for example, Lukács and Gramsci stood for the radical, the humanistic and the committed. Max Weber's subtle and long dialogue with the ghost of Marx was turned into a stick to beat the claims of radicalism (see Antonio and Glassman, 1985). What is now evident, however, is that the wrong end of the stick was picked up. Weber did have a very clear stance on the relation of science, politics and culture. Moreover it was radical and not orthodox, and towards the end of his life was addressed not so much against Marxists as against two enemies: a positivistic conception of science that threatened to 'behaviourize' the problems of man as a cultural being, and, secondly, the irrationalist nature of cultural movements that demanded authenticity and immediacy in opposition to the 'objectivizing' character of science (see Turner and Factor, 1984a). This legacy is not solely a sophisticated methodology of social science, but has rightly been perceived as a more general, existential stance to questions of knowledge, values, truth and commitment in a world where modern science and rationality should signify the elimination of illusion (Löwith, 1982).

In order to bring out the complexities and paradoxes of this stance a further change in social and political theory needs to be registered. Whereas Marxism had held an exclusive monopoly on radicalism, moral conviction and the certainties of collective action, by the late 1970s this role had been appropriated by a new liberalism that propounded a theoretical radicalism and the demand for its social and political implementation and by a new conservatism and its associated moral fundamentalism. Socialism and liberalism were compared and assessed in terms of their liberating potential and their oppressive practice of power rather than in terms of exploitation and its supersession. This signified more than a realignment in politics; it opened up a set of issues that never received adequate airing in the old left-versus-right debates, of Marx against Weber, of capitalist irrationality versus formal rationality.

Grasping this new scenario places us in a far better position to consider the full range and power of Weber's thought. Instead of a formalized sociology that stressed the ideal type, insisted on the separation of 'fact' and 'value', tended to an ahistorical usage of Weberian typologies and took the Protestant-ethic thesis as a model of modernization for societies whose cultures neither were Christian nor shared many of the social structural principles of Western Europe (see Hall, 1985), we now have possession of a Weber who does not simplistically exclude values, who offers a number of versions as to how societal change is to be conceived and is far less Eurocentrist in its account of the processes of rationalization.

Accompanying this reorientation is a new interest in the role of culture in a post-religious world and a polemicization of the question whether contemporary industrial civilization will advance to a secular, rational (and implicitly progressive) culture. An examination of recent trends in social theory reveals Weber's presence but as yet has not given proper recognition to his nodal position. Critical social theory has been marked by a more appreciative evaluation of Weber. Whereas the old Frankfurt project sought to berate capitalist society for its irrationalities and superficialities (Marcuse, 1971) and made its assessment from a putative canon of aesthetic rationality, Jürgen Habermas now seeks out not so much a Weber who is the theorist of instrumental rationality and its implicit subservience to the dominant interests of capitalist society but rather a Weber whose concept of substantive rationality can be refashioned by the instruments of an interpretive tradition of social theory.

In French social theory Weber's prophetic insights into the deadening effects of bureaucratic, economic and cultural rationalization have had echoes in both structuralist and post-structuralist thought. The idea that the autonomy of the individual is fatally compromised by the processes of rationalization received expression in the structuralists' critique of the moral-rational ego. But it was in the figure of Michel Foucault that the implications of the emergence of modern institutions for the autonomy of the person, both psychic and physical, became most apparent. This was more than an affinity between the Weberian analysis of rationalization and the Foucauldian analysis of power and institutions, but marked a deeper concern about the genealogies of rationality in the modern era and how the modern citizen could best respond to assert the integrity of his or her person.

The restitution of the moral integrity of the individual is the prime concern of the cultural conservatives who sought to build an absolutist standpoint for morality and conduct amidst the *malaise* of what they regard as today's value-pluralism and rootlessness. In social theory this concern was signalled by Daniel Bell, who saw contemporary popular, mass culture as undermining the old disciplines of work, family and cultural enjoyment. Bell's at times apocalyptic analysis ended in a call for the resurrection of traditional Judaeo-Christian values; a call echoed by other analysts of the discontents of modernity such as Christopher Lasch and Alistair MacIntyre. Bell's theme was in part the Weberian one of the secularization of the Protestant ethic. But where Weber sounded the arrival of modernity with the elegiac notes of cultural disenchantment, for Bell modernist culture signified the rage against order and the search for the new and the immediate of the European avant-garde. This in its turn became the popular, but disintegrative, culture of capitalism from the generation of Bob Dylan onwards.

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The pathways of all these analyses lead back to Max Weber, for he sought to make intelligible the social grounding of rationality. It was under the impact of modernity that Weber queried the nature of reason and rationality which Enlightenment thinkers had taken to be sovereign and self-evidential. For Weber the histories and trajectories of reason and rationality had to be traced, their effects upon the social world pursued; most especially, he pressed the need to come to terms with the findings of those investigations. These issues take Weber studies beyond the old debates as to who had the 'correct' concept of science and whether capitalism was 'rational' or 'irrational'. Instead there is now a much more earnest concern about how best to live in advanced industrialized societies and about the extent to which science and rationality can be a resource for directing our lives. In other words, we are faced with the technological and political problems about where to draw the line beyond which science cannot advise and of determining the possibilities of freedom and control in a world of rationalized structures of government, technology and work.

To be armed with such questions and to return to Max Weber along the different pathways of contemporary social theory are of course no guarantee that the questions will be answered satisfactorily. In Weber's contradictory persona these questions ultimately give rise to a number of antinomies: the ability to act and control our lives vs the objectifying consequences of action; material causality vs cultural meaning; the directionality of historical development vs the contingency of history; the objectivity of truth vs the relativism of knowledge; and the commitment to values and beliefs vs the responsibility to the consequences of one's actions. In the consideration of these antinomies one has to decide whether Weber needlessly or erroneously complicates the analysis of social reality or whether he properly warns us away from easy solutions. These antinomies recur in different ways and in different guises throughout the four parts of this book. But attention has first to be given to a brief exposition of Weber's understanding of modernity, so that these antinomies may be more precisely located. Pertinent here, drawing on the recent Weber scholarship, are the topics of (1) man's relation to the world and its periodization (Schluchter, 1979, pp. 11–64), (2) the processes of rationalization (Kalberg, 1980) and (3) the world of many spheres (Brubaker, 1984, pp. 61–90).

A Threefold Periodization of Man's Relation to the World

The analytic of Weber's thinking about the relation of man to the world turns on the account of how the world is interpreted by the great world