

Editorial Introduction

Keith Tribe

In 1978 Alan Macfarlane, at the time a lecturer in social anthropology in the University of Cambridge, published *The Origins of English Individualism*, a work which sought to overturn the generally-accepted story of the chronology of English capitalist development, and sharply differentiate the 'English' story from that of Continental Europe. Rather than capitalist development transforming English agrarian society in the course of the sixteenth century (as argued variously by Tawney, Marx and Weber), he proposed that, by any ordinary understanding of 'capitalism', 'England was as "capitalist" in 1250 as it was in 1550 or 1750'.¹ Marx had stated in the 'Foreword' to the first edition of *Capital* that the English model served as the 'principal illustration of my theoretical account' since it was hitherto the classical site of the capitalist mode of production.² Early studies of English economic history – Seebohm, Vinogradoff, Maitland, Ashley, Cunningham, Unwin, Tawney – all implicitly supported this perspective, however much they might have disagreed with the particulars of Marx's analysis. Macfarlane's project thus offered not only a new chronology for England's economic development, but a denial that this 'English model' could serve as the foundation for a general understanding of capitalism, ancient or modern.

1. Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism. The Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), p. 195.

2. Karl Marx, 'Vorwort', *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Oekonomie. Erster Band. Buch I: Der Produktionsprozess des Kapitals* (Hamburg: Otto Meissner, 1867), p. IX. It is worth noting that the *Werke* edition of this volume (Bd. 23; Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1971) is the fourth (1890) edition, edited by Engels; and that the reprinted 'Vorwort' in that edition runs paragraphs together and entirely removes all emphases. Hence the wrong edition (only the first and second editions appeared in Marx's lifetime) and then later also 'modernised' by the *Werke* editors. Marx has obviously suffered from his editors just as grievously as has Max Weber at the hands of translators.

Macfarlane's reviews were overwhelmingly critical and negative.³ He nonetheless remained undeterred, and has since then published several works that elaborate upon this early outline.⁴ However, nobody seems to have ever pointed out, least of all Moses Finley, at that time Professor of Ancient History in the University of Cambridge, that Macfarlane's historiographical argument merely rehearsed the terms of an earlier debate – the Bücher-Meyer controversy of the 1890s. Then Eduard Meyer had maintained that the ancient economy shared many of the basic features of a modern commercial economy,⁵ and in passing cited Max Weber's criticism of Rodbertus' generalisation of the *oikos* as a characterisation of all ancient economic history.⁶ And as Takebayashi demonstrates at length, Bücher's efforts at systematising the economic development of Western Europe into a series of discrete stages were firmly linked to the work of Schmoller and Brentano, and played a significant role in the shaping of Sombart's *Moderne Kapitalismus*. Not only do we also know that Max Weber planned that the *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* should open with an account by Bücher of the stages of economic development;⁷ his final lecture course in Munich during the Winter Semester 1919–1920 began with a systematic presentation of the theoretical foundations upon which economic history could be constructed. Macfarlane's discussion of Weber in *Origins of English Individualism* rested almost entirely on

3. See my own contribution to the genre in *Social History* 4.3 (October 1979), pp. 520–22; and Lawrence Stone's useful summary of the 1978 theses when reviewing a subsequent work by Macfarlane, 'Illusions of a Changeless Family', *Times Literary Supplement* 16 May 1986, pp. 525–26.

4. See especially *The Culture of Capitalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); and *The Riddle of the Modern World. Of Liberty, Wealth and Equality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).

5. Finley republished the principal contributions to this debate in 1979: Moses I. Finley (ed.), *The Bücher-Meyer Controversy* (New York: Arno Press, 1979).

6. But Meyer omitted from his citation Weber's praise for Rodbertus' 'otherwise very insightful discussion' of ancient economy – and given Weber's notorious reluctance to acknowledge his intellectual debts, this comment on Rodbertus amounts to a ringing endorsement. See Shiro Takebayashi, *Die Entstehung der Kapitalismustheorie in der Gründungsphase der deutschen Soziologie. Von der historischen Nationalökonomie zur historischen Soziologie Werner Sombarts und Max Webers* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 2003), p. 139, referring to Weber, *Die römische Agrargeschichte in ihrer Bedeutung für das Staats- und Privatrecht* (ed. Jürgen Deininger; Max Weber Gesamtausgabe Bd. I/2; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988), p. 137.

7. Takebayashi's detailed account of Bücher's schema and its revision, together with a discussion of his sources, gives some idea of quite what Weber wanted from Bücher, but which he never got.

his reading of the *General Economic History*, with some reference to the *Protestant Ethic* and to Reinhard Bendix's *Intellectual Portrait*. But he was of course reading Frank Knight's English translation of the *Wirtschaftsgeschichte* which entirely omitted this 'Conceptual Preface', and remained entirely unaware that the chronology he encountered had a well-developed theoretical foundation.

In the later 1970s and 1980s it was usual to think of Marx as the pre-eminent theorist of capitalism as a material process. Weber was then, and is still today, widely considered to be the founding father of academic sociology who also happened to have had an interest in comparative history and the 'rise of the West'. The priority that Macfarlane gives to Marx's account of capitalist development, and his reliance for Weber upon the relatively rudimentary principles he could find in the *General Economic History*, would from this perspective still seem unremarkable and apposite. If the book had been published in 2006 instead of thirty-odd years ago it would probably draw very similar criticism – critical understanding of Marx has changed very little and Weber's very familiarity has been a massive obstacle to the wider reception of new, historically-informed commentary. As the essays gathered together here show, modern commentary on the writings and intellectual ambitions of Max Weber has moved far away from arguments over the chronology of capitalism's development and the role that Protestantism might, or might not, have played in it. This was always an extremely attenuated understanding of Max Weber's approach to capitalism and modernity, and as Peter Ghosh suggests, treating the *Protestant Ethic* as a work most pertinently discussed in terms of theology, rather than capitalism, simply leads us yet further away from the point. Moreover, as Hinnerk Bruhns so clearly shows, Weber's interest in economic history was both extensive and continued throughout his life – from his very first publication in 1889, to his last complete course of lectures in 1919–20.

The debate between Bücher and Meyer over the appropriate conceptualisation of the ancient world was closely connected with contemporary debate upon the nature and genesis of capitalism. Weber was an important contributor to this debate, referring as early as his *Römische Agrargeschichte* to 'agrarian capitalism' and the 'economic and social class interests' upon which it was based.⁸ The publication of Sombart's *Der moderne Kapitalismus* in 1902 gave 'modernity' the

8. *Römische Agrargeschichte*, p. 73.

canonical text of its genesis and structure, and when in 1904 Sombart joined Weber as an editor of the new *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*⁹ they stated this as clearly as possible:

Our journal must today treat historical and theoretical knowledge of the *general cultural significance of capitalist development* as the scientific problem to which it is devoted. And because it proceeds from an entirely specific viewpoint, and must so proceed—that of the economic conditionality (*Bedingtheit*) of cultural phenomena—it cannot evade close contact with the neighbouring disciplines of public law, legal philosophy, social ethics, with social-psychological investigations and those usually brought together under the name of sociology.¹⁰

Later that year Weber published the first part of the *Protestant Ethic* in its pages, and it was here that his essays on the sociology of religion later appeared, as well as the essays on Russia, on the psychophysics of industrial labour, and most of the ‘methodological’ essays. There is no evidence that Weber lost interest in the ‘cultural problems of capitalism’, nor that the remit of the *Archiv* was modified in his lifetime. We should therefore consider *all* these writings as so many contributions to ‘historical and theoretical knowledge of the general cultural significance of capitalist development’. Extending our understanding of Max Weber’s conceptions of economics and of economic history will therefore help us deepen our appreciation of the contribution that he made to grasping ‘the history of our present’.

9. Bought from Braun with Edgar Jaffé’s money; Sombart had published many of his early essays in Braun’s *Archiv*.

10. [Edgar Jaffé, Werner Sombart] Max Weber, ‘Geleitwort’, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* N. F. Bd. 1 (1904), p. V. Note that Sociology is a ‘neighbouring discipline’, hence the editors are not writing from the position of the social sciences in general, but rather more specifically from that of political economy.