

Max Weber at SOAS

Max Weber and China: Culture, Law and Capitalism Conference, 5-6 September, SOAS, University of London

In the world of Weber studies, confrontations between area studies specialists and the ideal type theories of Max Weber are now fairly frequent. The specialist scholars say that Weber was working with inadequate secondary materials, that these have now been made redundant by the enormous progress in twentieth century research and that, basically, Weber got it all wrong. Weberologists take cover as this fusillade of darts rain down, and then emerge with a sally of replies: Weber knew the limitations of his material and said so and what's more he got it more than half right. And, the specialists misunderstand both the theories themselves and their epistemological status. Battle descends into *mêlée* and combatants form alliances on the day, or rather in the evening in the bar on the basis of shared interests.

With Weber on China the stakes are higher. The future of the global economic system depends on the West's relations with China. A hundred years ago Max Weber wrote a classic study of cultural factors that hindered the rise of Western style capitalism in non-Western contexts. He led his series on the world religions and their economic ethics with a study of China. Confucianism was compared with Puritanism. Confucianism was accommodating to the world and essentially quietist whereas Puritanism rampaged through the world in search of the illusive certainty of salvation from a hidden god. The Chinese missed out on the crucial cultural meme that suffused modern Western capitalism and contributed to its restless striving and ascendancy.

A hundred years later the boot is being transferred to the other foot. This became abundantly clear in the final plenary session where Martin Jacques (LSE) and Ann Lee (NYU) not only pointed out the relentless rise of China since the reforms of Deng Xiaoping and the ways in which the Chinese have taken up acquisitive capitalism with vigour, but also the rapid decline of western capitalism which has stylized itself into non-productive and crisis-prone financial capitalism. The new terms of trade are debt and credit as the tables turn from opium wars and the Shanghai Bund to debt dependency. When 'China rules the world' – sooner than we fail to imagine – the rules of the capitalist game, or what Marx called capital, will be re-drawn. In 1906 Weber said of revolutionary Russia that it would have to come to terms with the *world-historical forces* of capitalism, science and human rights. It's a killer line, but will China have the strength as a nation to force capitalism to meet social needs? Science as technology is universal ; and 'Menschenrechte': will these be bourgeois freedoms or draw on a Marxist natural rights tradition? As Wolfgang Schluchter commented, China still possesses the only Leninist political party in the world, one that co-exists with runaway capitalism. The sentiment that China will adopt 'our' western rules is misplaced, though as the SOAS academic and diplomat Professor Stephan Chan pointed out, China wants to anchor itself to nation-state Westphalian and the WTO rules. Scott Lash (Goldsmiths) explained, on the basis of his new co-

authored book *China Constructing Capitalism*, that the outward form of Chinese capitalism is urban localism, and this is something that is different to the Weberian tension of substantive and formal rationality. The embeddedness of localism and its social and networked relationships recapitulates what Weber noted about magic, the earth and the sib. Only – now - this is a new form of capitalism not directed by any one rationalist worldview. Indeed if the semantics of world are examined cross-culturally, as was performed by Martin Albrow and Xiaoying Zhang, the Chinese have two different concepts of world, 'shi jie' (世界) and 'tian xia' (天下), neither of which equates to Weber's intensive use of the word 'Welt' (world), let alone 'the global'.

However, to return to the start of the (two-day) conference, many speakers had anticipated this heightened tension. Professor Su Guoxun (Harbin University), very much the senior Chinese expert on Weber launched a pre-emptive strike on the failures of Weber's analysis of Chinese civilization and history. He argued that the western perceptual manifold is disqualified to understand Chinese society, which is a thing sui generis. Su Guoxun unfortunately was refused permission to travel to London by his doctor and his paper was delivered for him, thus he missed the intersubjectivity of the (strong) audience reaction. One suggestion that emerged after was that some Chinese academics see Max Weber as the front man for the Western view of the world, and if he is demolished much else also crumbles away. What would Weber, with his repetitive insistence on making explicit where one stands, have made of that? (Just to note here, other Chinese scholars never made it to SOAS because of the UK visa obstacle course.)

Professor Wolfgang Schluchter (Heidelberg) put in a pre-emptive defence of Weber. He opened the conference, giving the first Annual *Max Weber Studies* lecture. The point of the Confucianism and Daoism study (n.b. not the 'Religion of China') was to seek out the most pronounced counter-example to ascetic Protestantism. Confucianism is intellectually instrumental for Weber in reaching an understanding of the peculiarity of Western rationalism.

Gary Hamilton (Washington) introduced the conference to the legendary Chinese sociologist Fei Xiatong who wrote the classic account of principles of Chinese rural society (*From the Soil*). Fei has similarities to Ferdinand Toennies, offering an account of the basis principles of rural society. *From the Soil* is a beautifully written work of sociology, limpidly translated by Gary Hamilton and Zheng Wang, and it is well worth including on undergraduate programmes. Fei attempted to convey the fundamental features of Chinese rural society in order to influence the political policy agenda of how China should be modernised. As an intellectual his voice was silenced during the decade of the Cultural Revolution. He would have despaired of the current policy of modernization through forced urbanization – as would have Weber, who spent the first decade of his academic life researching the rural question. Hamilton in his presentation of Fei demonstrated that the vocation of academic sociology is to understand and explain the social world through sociological concepts and to seek to educate and influence those who operate the levers of power.

Much else happened in the conference with twelve formal panels and multiple streams. Thirty China and Weber scholars from SOAS, North America, Europe and Asia tested the boundaries of Weberian analysis from the perspective of diverse academic fields such as comparative law, sociology, anthropology, history, religious studies, and economics. At the end much respect was earned by all participating through the endeavour of presenting to the academic other one's own discipline, culture and language.

The conference was supported by the BSA with Dr. Carlos Frade representing the Weber study group, generously and superbly hosted by SOAS which provided many of the expert chairs of sessions as well as the expertise of Dr Bo Hong, Dr Ernest Caldwell and Dr Athena Leoussi (Reading), and by the two academic journals *China in Comparative Perspective* and *Max Weber Studies*. Professor Martin Albrow (Bonn) and Dr Xiangqun Chang (SOAS) were inspirational in devising a conference open to all inquiring intellectual spirits. The feedback has been positive: 'A great triumph!'; 'a significant conference'; 'an intellectually stimulating conference!' 'a fantastic conference'...

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