

## 'Hellenic Intellectual Culture' and the Origins of Weber's Political Thinking

Wilhelm Hennis  
Keith Tribe\*

### Abstract

This essay explores what Thucydides in particular, and classical studies in general, meant to Max Weber. Of course, only a handful of Weber's writings make use of directly classical material; but judging his work quantitatively in this way tells us relatively little about his perspective on the world, and the stance he adopted to it. Hennis finds a way into this problem through consideration of Roscher's own Habilitation dissertation, *Leben, Werk und Zeitalter des Thukydides* (1842). Taking up Weber's comment in the methodological essay on Roscher, that it is directed to Roscher's early writings, Hennis shows how this can illuminate our understanding both of Weber's classical background and his 'historical methodology'.

Keywords: Classical studies, history, Max Weber, methodology, politics, Thucydides.

All previous objective comprehension of the world weaves on a cloth begun by the Greeks. We see with the eyes of the Greeks, and use their phrases when we speak.<sup>1</sup>

In this final attempt at an understanding of the biography of Max Weber's writings I wish to present a thesis expressed in this aphorism from the introduction to Burckhardt's *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*. Weber had eaten of the tree of knowledge: he was consciously perceptive, but no sage, and certainly not a prophet. Behind him there lay Plato, Kant and, of course, Rickert's *Wertlehre*. After Nietzsche, he was the first conscious 'sophist': he viewed the world with the eyes of a Greek and expressed himself in these terms. Here I resume my initial venture against the anachronism of treating Weber as a sociological 'founding father', a critique that is now more than twenty years old. Among the tasks I then proposed was that we

\* Translator

1. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* (ed. Oswyn Murray, trans. Sheila Stern; London: HarperCollins, 1998 [translation modified Keith Tribe]), p. 12.

should do more than simply place Weber's work within contemporary 'bourgeois' thought; his work should also be treated as part of the conception of a 'fully-developed' mankind that proved such an irritant to modernity—a conception that defined political thought from Machiavelli through Rousseau and Tocqueville to Weber.<sup>2</sup> Here I will try to make something of this idea. Appraisal, critique and above all further development of this proposition must, on the other hand, be left to specialists.

There is a passage invoking Thucydides in Jakob Burckhardt's *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* which, like little else, makes science so appealing to a young person. I have in mind the passage where he refers to *sources* that stem from *great men*. They are, he writes, simply inexhaustible; books that have been dissected a thousand times still have to be read once more 'because they present a peculiar aspect, not only to every reader and every century, but also to every time of life. It may be, for instance, that there is in Thucydides a fact of capital importance which someone will note in a hundred years' time.'<sup>3</sup> The present writer first read *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* as a fifteen year old, and this statement expressed something not easily forgotten: that science could be a passion, could not be pursued entirely dispassionately. For me, Max Weber is a 'great man', and I read his texts as 'sources', so that I might better understand this man.

I have never noticed a new fact of great significance in Thucydides. I cannot even read him in the original; but I do not think that necessary for my purposes. I think a translation will do: my topic is Weber, I want to shed a little more light on his intellectual development, on the biography of his work. Given the variety of translations and the wealth of commentary there is no need for me to read Thucydides in the original.

In approaching this topic I have sought to keep in mind a remark made by Eduard Meyer, to whom we shall come shortly. He noted that there was an increasing tendency in recent historical writing '...to turn scientific method into its opposite: instead of proceeding from the quite certain to the less certain in interpretation and composition, conclusions were drawn from indefinite factors and then used to overturn the known and the familiar, forcing an artificial intuition

2. W. Hennis, *Max Weber's Central Question* (Newbury: Threshold Press, 2nd edn, 2000), p. 38.

3. Translated and abbreviated as *Reflections on History* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943); here p. 29; the sense of this passage can also be found in the 'Introduction' to Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, p. 10.

upon historical material'.<sup>4</sup> I take this proposition to heart; but, all the same, 'Nothing can be done here without some hypotheses'. That is, of course, a quote from Max Weber.<sup>5</sup>

So, to begin with, did Weber know his Thucydides? How significant was classical Periclean Greece for him? Did this singular epoch of world history make any impression upon his way of thinking, perhaps reinforcing his early inclination? What was Hellas to him? 'Hellenic intellectual culture', his formulation, was certainly one of the 'crucial aspects'<sup>6</sup> in the 'cultural development of the Occident and the Near East', 'ranking equally' with the 'historical significance' of ancient Judaism, Roman Law, and a Roman Church founded upon the Roman concept of administration, running into Protestantism as the ultimate pivot for the 'cultural development of the Occident'. Why is 'Science as a Vocation' really the only classical text that comes to mind if we think about Weber's assessment of the universal historical significance of 'Hellenic intellectual culture' – that swansong to all the hopes stemming from a science arising out of the spirit of 'Hellenic intellectual culture', that 'enormous experience that gave inspiration to Socrates' pupils'? The impact of Weber's speech was likewise 'enormous'. Whoever began his studies in a German university after 1945 could detect the aftershocks in the minds and souls of all the better teachers.<sup>7</sup>

Prompted by his writings on the sociology of religion, but also by the impact of the two important addresses on science and on politics, Weber's contemporaries freely compared him with Old Testament prophets of doom. That fitted the time: Spengler, exis-

4. Eduard Meyer, *Nachtrag zum ersten Band der Geschichte des Altertums* (Stuttgart, 1925), p. 70.

5. M. Weber, *Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1924), p. 283; cf. Max Weber, *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* (London: NLB, 1976), p. 377.

6. *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie [GARS] III* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1920), p. 7.

7. The most important writings of Weber were available shortly after the end of the war. Dieter Henrich's dissertation was completed in 1952. Despite opposition from 'Frankfurters' Weber was the theme of the 1924 Sociological Congress. Nonetheless, a positive reception was withheld from Weber, especially on the part of political science, due to the influence on opinion of its leading 'founding fathers' – see Gangolf Hübinger, Jürgen Osterhammel and Wolfgang Welze, 'Max Weber und die wissenschaftliche Politik nach 1945', *Zeitschrift für Politik* 37 (1990), pp. 181-204. For the impact of Weber on the author see 'Political Science as a Vocation. A Personal Account' in my *Max Weber's Central Question*, pp. 211-35.