

The Pandemic and Max Weber

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*I had a little bird,
Its name was Enza.
I opened the window,
And in-flu-enza.¹*

Was Max Weber a late victim of the so-called Spanish flu, a pandemic that had nothing Spanish about it? We cannot say with any certainty, though it is very probable. Now, a hundred years later in early 2020, it is something of an irony of fate that all the events that were planned to commemorate the centenary of his death have become a victim of a pandemic. Max Weber himself would not have shed any tears about the planned centenary events, indeed quite the opposite. He already stood moderately distanced from the business of the modern conference. Thus he wrote - delayed because of an 'obstinate influenza'- in April 1909 to Gustav Schmoller that he would and could be chairman of the committee of the German Sociological Society 'only so long as it was prevented from becoming a general debating and gossip society [...]'.¹ Conferences were fine for him if they discussed research strategies, research projects, research conclusions and methodological questions. This was very much the case with the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* which he wanted to impose - though without success - on the German Sociological Society, of which he was a founder and on which he just as quickly turned his back.

Had Weber guessed what would be written about him in the hundred years after his death - how he would be discussed, argued over and blustered about - then he wouldn't have just spoken about *methodological* pestilence.² He would have demanded that the social sciences direct their energy into the investigation of the surrounding reality. For Weber, in the years before his death, the war, the lost peace, the position and future of Germany were the central societal, political and economic problems. The catastrophe of the World War hid from him, like most of his contemporaries, the enormous extent of the 'Spanish' flu, which the American soldiers landing in Europe had brought with them, a

¹ This was a children's skipping rhyme heard nationwide during the height of the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918, probably of earlier origins, perhaps from the time of the Russian flu. Influenza is a frequent theme in his letters - often to be read, 'in bed with influenza'.

pandemic that would claim three or four times the number of human victims than the war itself, which today for us represents Europe's own primal catastrophe.

Seen in terms of numbers the deaths from today's Covid19-pandemic are not comparable with the World War, or the Spanish flu, or the Russian influenza pandemic of 1889-1895 that was spread along the railway tracks, or the medieval and early modern plagues. But it does appear to us contemporaries as a phenomenon that we already - to speak with Weber - endow with historical significance and consider as a cultural historical fact. In his disagreements with Karl Knies and Wilhelm Wundt Weber, from the viewpoint of cultural values, placed military devastations such as the incursion of Gustav Adolphus into Germany, the incursion of Genghis-Khan into Europe, the natural catastrophes such as the incursion of the Dollart, or the effects of the Black Death on the social history of England, all on the same level: 'All those events have left behind historically significant consequences - that for us are anchored to "cultural values"'.³

The anchoring of consequences to cultural values is the decisive point. Weber adds that it is only by causally explaining cultural-historical 'facts' that we arrive at history in the real sense of the word. 'And because the nature of the concept of "culture", this *invariably* means that [the historical analysis] will as its culmination lead to knowledge of a context which understandable human action (or, more generally, "behaviour") is conceived as being fitted into and influenced by - because that is what "historical" *interest* is concerned with.'⁴ History, according to Weber and so historiography, relates to natural events always through human cultural values. The influence of natural events on human behaviour determines the viewpoint of the investigation.⁵

We have to take such a Weberian stance if we want to understand why today's pandemic with far fewer deaths than previous pandemics - the Hong Kong flu of 1968-70 of around one million deaths - is already declared, while still in the midst of events, a turning point in the history of the modern economy and society; that is, an end to globalised capitalism, or at least a radical curtailment of it, a turn to the local from the global, a re-localisation and re-nationalization of production chains, a comprehensive new order of values, the revaluation of the previously ignored or despised occupations that in the months of lockdown have guaranteed the continuity of the necessities of life: checkout staff, delivery men, waste disposal - everything that belongs to the logistics of food and other goods essential to life. Weber's ideas on the 'treatment of work as vocation' are now clearly revealed. Even more striking is the case of the stylizing of

doctors and hospital personnel as everyday heroes, after years of neoliberal politics of cost reduction in the public sector alongside the the extreme financialization of the economy.

In a country like France where the corona virus has led to a marked loss of authority of politics by the government and administration - and as predicted by Jacques Attali two days after the start of the confinement, on 19 March 2020 - should the system of western society prove itself incapable of solving the crisis, then political power in the future would then belong to those 'who know how to show empathy for others. The dominant sectors of the economy will also be those of empathy: healthcare, hospitality, food supply, education, ecology.'⁶ It remains to be seen how after a year or two this new order and euphoria will look and whether the crisis will really lead to a change in direction of the life conduct of our western societies; whether and how far the experiences of these months will be remembered as a fixed point for future behaviour. In Weber's theory of historical development or historical transformation such a modification in human action oriented to ideas is not the result of immediate, even so drastic, events, but the outcome of a long development of very small steps.⁷

France's political system in the corona virus also demonstrates the actuality of Weber's concept of office charisma, the '*institutional* turn of charisma'⁸ and his observation that the parliamentary kingdom of England: '...the English parliamentary monarchy is more genuinely charismatic than the Continental monarchy, which encourages the ruler to exercise power merely because of his right of inheritance irrespective of whether he is an idiot or a political genius'.⁹ Replace 'Continental monarchy' with the Presidency of the Fifth French Republic, then one can see Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale of the emperor's new clothes as a congenial translation of sociological theory into imaginative prose.¹⁰ Weber's topicality is not limited to such terms or perspectives, which are not the sole property of *his* 'sociology'. The problems of his time are not ours, and yet they are comparable in many ways. The topicality of Weber's science of reality lies on the one hand in the radicalism with which he related it to values, and on the other hand in the radicalism with which he, as a scientist, saw reality tied into a political force field.

The central dimension of the crisis is not the pandemic as such, just one of many in human history - even if this virus seems to be particularly treacherous, but the measures that governments in most countries around the world have taken against it. This has

happened not as a concerted action, but nevertheless with the same effect, not forgetting that in a networked world all spatial distance shrinks to immediate simultaneity. In the reaction to the pandemic what was unheard of before and unimaginable is that in almost all countries of the world the economy, thus in effect the global economy, was largely shut down for several months by political order; the wheels of production, international trade and, to a lesser extent, domestic trade could be halted and the borders closed. Had politics regained control of the economy? Had in the scale of values the health of the people dethroned growth and gross domestic product? Or was the fear that the economic damage would be greater without such radical political interventions into economic life?

The globality of the pandemic gives the impression that there will be a global reaction and global re-consideration, that global capitalism - which is a thoroughly vague and unweberian concept - in its extreme form has played itself out. While the pandemic knows no borders the struggle against it takes place primarily within national borders, and sometimes even within regional borders, for example in Italy, Spain or the United Kingdom. It was also a global effect that boundaries that had already disappeared were suddenly pulled up again. The national framework also largely determines the reactions of intellectuals and public opinion. There are many voices which understand the present crisis as a mild prelude to the coming ecological crisis and which calls for a global reaction.

But here, too, the perspective can be explained to a large extent from the assessment of the respective national situation and development, and from the criticism of the way in which the respective national political system has steered its population through the crisis - with varying help from Fortuna.

In France, two of Weber's central themes became virulent: on the one hand, the relationship between high administration (bureaucracy, technocracy) and political leadership; on the other hand, the question of the relationship between politics and science, scientific advice and political decision-making. On the latter thematic, the pressure of events and the need for concrete decisions have led slowly and not everywhere to the realization that politics cannot hide behind the protective shield - even more controversial and divergent - of scientific expertise. On the first thematic, there are now sharp criticisms of the centralist French state structure, the infantilization of the citizens - Marcel Gauchet rightly speaks of a '*folie bureaucratique*'.¹¹ Administration at the highest level suffers from strong self-encapsulation and the inability to use public and

private sectors efficiently and flexibly to mobilize joint efforts.¹² Whether this leads to genuine reforms remains to be seen. In this regards it is interesting to note the difficulties in organizing the home production of protective masks and virus tests. The evidence shows that under the far more severe conditions of the First World War, the French elite were able to organize a most efficient war economy. That was quite comparable to what was largely initiated by Walther Rathenau in Germany. Max Weber at the time had summed up the principle of war economy:

How did this war economy actually work? Built on the acceptability of an outrageously one-sided goal and an inefficiency that characterize war as an enemy of sound economy - as a "life living off capital" - it would mean bankruptcy if continued into peacetime. On the other hand, it did not mark the exclusion of the entrepreneur from the economy, not at all. On the contrary. Only in another form, it opened the door to the entrepreneur. Not just in the form of war profits from suppliers. No, even the state socialism of their organizations could not exist without him. Your really big business organizational ideas and achievements come almost entirely from business people, not from bureaucrats.¹³

What to a large extent was possible in France a hundred years ago, is not matched even in miniature in early 2020, despite the martial rhetoric of the state president.

Whoever prophesies or yearns for the end of globalised capitalism, and thereby fails to think in terms of a concrete form of economic organization, but of a speculative booty-capitalism, in the total financialization of the economy, consumer society, the reckless and systematic destruction of the environment and nature, thus an irrational system and at the same time an irrational way of life, such a person is not going against a Weberian picture of the future or even against a Weberian concept of modern capitalism. The development, which Max Weber had anxiously observed some hundred years ago, had a quite different centre of gravity: it was the final victory of a new form of life: 'the rational, occupationally divided, expert bureaucratic organization of all human authoritarian institutions, from the factory to the army and the state.'¹⁴

Max Weber's critique of capitalism was entirely within the lines of the ideas of his epoch. In a nutshell: on the one hand criticism of the exploitation of the wage workers, criticism of the working and living conditions imposed on them, of the 'pursuit of that empty and pitiless economic struggle for existence that bourgeois phraseology describes as "peaceful cultural work": another form of the struggle of man with man, in which not

millions [like in the Great War, HB], but hundreds of millions, year in year out, waste away in both body and soul, go under or lead an existence in which some recognizable "meaning" is truly infinitely stranger' than that of fulfilling one's duty in war.¹⁵ Karl Marx would have applauded the first part of this statement, and analogously, some people today fear that the economic crisis triggered and accepted by politics will result in a far greater number of victims than the pandemic. On the other hand, Weber's critique of capitalism dealt with the decline of cultural man 'to a specialist without spirit, a hedonist without a heart'.¹⁶ However, this was little more than traditional cultural criticism, and even this catchy phrase from *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* was not an invention of Max Weber, but came from one of the great captains of economy and industry at the end of the 19th century.¹⁷

What Weber called the specific peculiarity of modern industrial capitalism will not be reversed or even placed in doubt by the corona crisis. When Weber's concept of disenchantment is applied to today's conjecture, observation, or assertion that this crisis has made people lose their blind confidence in security - life security - in our affluent society, that is, a loss of confidence that 'all things in principle are *subject to control by calculation*',¹⁸ as Weber defines the term, it cannot be ruled out that the long-term impact of the crisis will be greatly overestimated for purely emotional reasons.

Our world is not that of Weber's. Yet it repays to look at today's world through Weber's eyes. To give two examples: The potentialization of globalization between 1920 and 2020 does not change in the least one of the basic motifs of Weber's socio-political analysis, even though today there are actors involved who could not have even be imagined then. This motif was the conflict on the one side between economic interests (and their servicing economic-political ideologies and the use of science to legitimate them) and, on the other side, national or national-political interests. To avoid the usual misunderstanding (that viewed him as a nationalist from the perspective of after Hitler and World War II) we should talk instead of 'nation' and even better of 'political community'. It is with these concepts we can subsume not only nation-states but also the European Union. This then allows us to apply, without difficulties of the present situation, the value conflict between politics (in the sense of the *res communis*) and economy (the material interests of interested parties), which is presented by Weber using various examples (security, population issues, avoiding rural exodus and emigration, free trade, cross-border migrant workers, social justice, the interests of production, international

competition, etc.). It is no accident that the pandemic is accompanied by a rise in international tensions.

Weber lived in a time of advanced industrialization, he knew neither of the consumer society, nor the throw-away and leisure society. There were, for him, natural disasters but not an environmental crisis. The oft-cited quote of burning the last ton (*Zentner*) of fossil fuel¹⁹ was for him no more than a pathetic metaphor; the disappearance of the original forests that he had seen on his trip to America was little more than a sporadic observation without any weight against his fascination with galloping urbanization and industrialization.²⁰ At the end of the First World War, the population of the world was less than two billion, today it is almost eight billion. The fact that we human beings are for the planet a virus, as the French social anthropologist Philippe Descola recently put it, was completely beyond the ken of Max Weber and his contemporaries.²¹

Weber's crucial ideas on the human world or the relationship to the environment culminate in the ideal-typical opposition of mastery of the world vs. adaptation to the world, as an expression of different indeed contradictory rationalization strategies - as radically opposed types of respectively *rational* attitude to the world - both in fact anchored to *irrational* social ethics.²² The typical Puritan and the typical Confucian, who Weber places on the stage in his search after the originating conditions of modern entrepreneurial capitalism are figures from a submerged world. What then remains of Weber's questions about our life conduct, our 'practical attitude to the world'²³ and their rational or irrational anchoring; in the words of Goethe, much quoted by Weber, 'the demands of the day'.

Can our world still be saved? Two rational demands confront one another: the one demands a lifestyle which sees a symbiosis of humans-world-nature relations, the other sees the rescue coming from the economic crisis, keeping the drive wheel of capitalism in motion - consumers please keep consuming. Which of the two demands is rational, which irrational? Weber had asserted in his culture-critical analyses of modern development that the 'outer goods of this world increasingly and finally' have gained 'an inextricable power over humankind', as never before seen in human history.²⁴ He himself relativizes these value judgements and beliefs.²⁵ What is analytically more interesting is his observation that the modern economic system 'bound to the technical and economic requirements of mechanical-machine production'²⁶ determines the lifestyle of all

individuals like an engine. For Weber, the continued operation of the engine depended on the presence of fossil fuels. Today, it is only the consuming consumer who keeps the engine of production running and is supposed to get it going again after the Covid crisis.

This however leads back to the question that Max Weber raises right at the end of his most famous work, though did not answer: the question of the meaning of a determined conduct of life 'for the content of social-political ethics, and so for the manner of organization and functions of the social groups from the conventicle to that of the state'.²⁷

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Notes

¹ Letter to Gustav von Schmoller, 13 April 1909. *Max Weber Briefe 1909 bis 1910*, MWG II /6, edited by M. Rainer Lepsius und Wolfgang J. Mommsen. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1994, p. 99.

² Max Weber, [Beitrag zur Werturteilsdiskussion im Ausschuß des Vereins für Sozialpolitik, 1913], in Heinrich Heino Nau (ed.), *Der Werturteilsstreit. Die Äußerungen zur Werturteilsdiskussion im Ausschuß des Vereins für Sozialpolitik (1913)*. Marburg: Metropolis-Verlag, 1996, p. 186; now in MWG I/12, p. XXX. Also, Edoardo Massimilla, 'La "pestilenza metodologica" et la "maledizione del rospo": Max Weber lettore di Gustav Meyrink'. *Archivio di Storia della Cultura*, XXXI, 2018: 263-272.

³ Max Weber, 'Knies und das Irrationalitätsproblem', *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre.*, edited by J. Winckelmann. Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1988, p. 54 und 83. (hereafter WL)

⁴ WL, p. 83; *Max Weber. Collected Methodological Writings*, trans. H.H. Bruun, edited by H.H. Bruun and S. Whimster. New York and London: Routledge, 2014, p. 54.

⁵ WL, p. 100. Zu Kulturwerten cf. WL, p. 212.

⁶ <http://www.attali.com/societe/que-naitra-t-il/>

⁷ On this see Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'Max Webers Begriff der Universalgeschichte', in *Max Weber der Historiker*, edited by J. Kocka. Göttingen, 1986, pp. 51-72.

⁸ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Nachlaß. Teilband 4: Herrschaft* (MWG I/22-4). Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2009, p.157.

⁹ MWS I/22-4, p. 563; *Economy and Society*, ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich. New York: Bedminster Press, 1968, p. 1148. Translation altered.

¹⁰ Cf. Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, Thomas Frank, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider. Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft. Texte, Bilder, Lektüren*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002.

¹¹ 'L'attestation dérogatoire de déplacement restera comme un chef-d'œuvre de la folie bureaucratique. Il faudra la conserver pieusement pour l'édification des générations futurs !' *Le Monde*, 7-8 June, p. 9.

¹² Cf. Patrick Weil, 'Ce que la Grande Guerre a à nous apprendre sur la pandémie', *Le Monde*, 10-11 May 2020, p. 32.

¹³ Max Weber, 'Deutschlands künftige Staatsform', *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands. Schriften und Reden 1918-1920*, MWG I/16, ed. W. J. Mommsen with W. Schwentker. Tübingen: Mohr, 1991, p. 114.

¹⁴ Max Weber, 'Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland', *Zur Politik im Weltkrieg: Schriften und Reden 1914-1918*, MWG I/15, edited by Wolfgang J. Mommsen with Gangolf Hübinger. Tübingen: Mohr, 1988, p. 461.

¹⁵ Max Weber, 'Zwischen zwei Gesetzen', MWG I/15, p. 97; *Weber Political Writings*, ed. P. Lassman, trans. R. Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 78.

¹⁶ *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1988, p. 205. (hereafter GARS); *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons. London: Unwin, 1967, p. 182. (hereafter PESC)

¹⁷ Cited by Gustav Schmoller, *Grundriss der allgemeinen Volkswirtschaftslehre*, Bd. 1, Berlin 1900, 225 : 'Genussmenschen ohne Liebe und Fachmenschen ohne Geist, dies Nichts bildet sich ein, auf einer in der Geschichte unerreichten Höhe der Menschheit zu stehen!' Cf. Hans-Christof Kraus, 'Kontroversen um Puritanismus und Kapitalismus. Zur neuen kritischen Edition der "Protestantischen Ethik"'. *Politisches Denken Jahrbuch*, Bd. 25, 2015: 260.

¹⁸ Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf. 1917/1919. Politik als Beruf. 1919*, MWG I/17, edited by Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter with Birgitt Morgenbrod. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1994, p. 9.

¹⁹ GARS I, p. 203; PESC, p. 181.

²⁰ 'Aber die Stunde des Urwalds hat auch hier geschlagen', Letters from 28 und 29 September and 2 und 3 October 1904 (Muskogee, Indian Territory) to Helene Weber, p. 314. cf. 316 (Urwaldpoesie) and 318 : gewaltiger Zauber [...] trotz Petroleumdreck und Qualm. In *Max Weber Briefe 1903 – 1905*, MWG II/4, edited by Gangolf Hübinger and M. Rainer Lepsius with Thomas Gerhards and Sybille Oßwald-Bargende. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 2015.

²¹ Philippe Descola, 'Nous sommes des virus pour la planète', *Le Monde*, 21-22 May 2020, p. 27.

²² Max Weber, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Konfuzianismus und Taoismus. Schriften 1915-1920*, MWG I/19, edited by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer with Petra Kolenko. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1991, p. 201.

²³ MWG I/19, p. 208.

²⁴ GARS I, p. 204; PESC, p. 182.

²⁵ GARS I, p. 206; PESC, p. 284 n119.

²⁶ GARS I, p. 203; PESC, p. 181.

²⁷ GARS I, p. 205; PESC, p. 182.

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