

**Places of memory. Max Weber in 2020.
Some personal reflections.**

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Berlin - Freiburg - Heidelberg - Munich. The cities in which Max Weber lived and worked are places of memory. In the summer of 2020 all four had events planned and I was invited to discuss the intellectual aura of his personality and the actuality of his work. Then Covid-19 arrived and all intellectual communication changed. Those events, when not simply cancelled, were transferred to the internet. All of a sudden all reflections on Max Weber attained a new quality. It became thinking about the importance of social and cultural-scientific classic figures in a time of historical crisis.

Cultural thresholds and the crisis of modernity

What type of crisis is the pandemic of 2020? The historian Jacob Burckhardt, whom Weber very much admired, wrote that 'historical crises' are moments when the 'pent up forces' of social tension are released: 'The world-process suddenly attains a terrible rapidity.'¹ Weber knew such a situation when at the end of the First World War the new order of Germany, of Europe and the world had to be decided.

Weber identified three 'potentials', in the sense of Jacob Burckhardt, on which Europe's present and future hung: capitalism, the nation state, and democracy. Already before the war, when planning *Economy and Society*, Weber intended to write extensively on the theme of 'The Modern State and Capitalism.'² His very last lectures in the summer of 1920 in Munich on the "Sociology of the State' pursues

¹ Cited here, *Jacob Burckhardt, Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, with an afterword from Jürgen Osterhammel. Munich: 2018, p. 176.

² MWG I/24, p. 157.

explicitly the same theme. In his lecture outline for students he dictated 'Modern State and rational Capitalism,'³ but he died before he could give the lectures.

The pandemic of 2020 with its rapid slump in the world economy, the erosion of democracies, and the enormous demands on state intervention directs our attention to the Weber problem of the 'Modern State and rational Capitalism' under conditions of democratic legitimation of power. This has become even clearer to me since March 2020 when the lockdowns were imposed. The issue that takes centre stage for me is the correspondence of the 'great cultural problems' of our world, which Covid-19 has exposed in detail, and the cultural problems between 1900 and 1920 on which Weber worked as a social scientist and intellectual.

Today's sociologists warn correctly that the pandemic is epoch changing. The Covid-19 crisis has to be placed in the bigger picture of the 'cultural threshold' of the late 20th century, writes Andreas Reckwitz. The crisis makes visible the 'polarised social structure' of late modernity and demands an urgent 'readjustment in the tasks of statehood' in the face of de-regulated global capitalism. Covid-19 shows 'that a highly dynamic society at full pace requires a state, that instead of de-regulating and mobilizing society stabilizes and regulates it'. Covid-19 throw a pitiless spotlight on late modernity that is in many regards a radicalised form of modernity and links back to the epoch changing period at the beginning of the 20th century. It was then that 'developed over a few decades an unfolding industrial society, an organised capitalism, a mass democracy and an urban popular culture.'⁴ Remembering Max Weber in the Covid-19 crisis of 2020 therefore for me means in the first analysis, as an historian, the close connection of epochal change in the late and the early 20th century.

Historical plaques binding past and present

³ MWG III/7, p. 66.

⁴ Andreas Reckwitz, 'Verblendet vom Augenblick. Die Corona-Krise wurde panisch zum ungeheuren Epochenbruch stilisiert. In Wahrheit erleben wir etwas anderes: Der Staat erfindet sich gerade neu – indem er Risikopolitik betreibt', in *Die Zeit* Nr. 25, 10 June 2020, p. 45. The article is based on the social theory of Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*. Berlin 2017.

The speed of Weber's epoch and the willingness to experiment stimulates a new alignment with the pandemic defined field of capitalism - state - democracy, and for me forces a reconsideration of his place in modernity's culture of memory a hundred years after his death; in particular, the commemorative plaques which are mounted on his former homes. Memorials place scholars, artists or politicians in the light of our time. They are part of the culture of memory in the public realm and tie together past and present.

All memories have two sides, and that is true for the classics of modern cultural and social sciences, among whom Weber is counted. These are the two sides of historicization and actualization. Obviously Max Weber is not our direct contemporary in the 21st century. His work - now published in 47 volumes in a complete edition as is possible - brings to expression his scientific knowledge and the specific life experiences of his own time. However, alongside the distance we feel, when we place Weber exactly and in detail in the scientific and social context of his revolutionary epoch of the early 20th century, the reading of his work leads to the re-contextualization of his present in the light of our 21st century problems. It is the continual and enlightening reading that defines what a classic is.

My virtual journey to Weber's residences in Berlin, Freiburg and Munich and my actual stay in Heidelberg is linked to the cardinal question of the the culture of memory: what has become foreign to us and belongs closed off in the past? What do we appropriate for our present and what signals are we picking up from the commemorative plaques?

Berlin

The City of Berlin had decided to mark the centenary of Weber's death with a commemorative plaque on the one-time 'Villa Helene' in Charlottenburg, now 21 Leibnizstrasse. The young Max spent 21 formative years there. The plaque reads: 'Weber lived here from 1872 to 1893. Charlottenburg and Berlin provided his formative and educational path. Weber's studies on the sociologies of religion,

economy, and power are current in the social sciences to this day. Always politically engaged, he was an adviser on the democratic constitution of the Weimar Republic of 1919.'

I was invited to give an address at the unveiling of the plaque. The celebration was cancelled and my interpretation of Max Weber's Berlin was put online. It is worth the effort to carefully reconstruct what Berlin offered experientially to the pupil, the student, the lawyer and the young professor in the Law Faculty of the University of Berlin. Weber witnessed at close quarters the construction of a modern nation state under conditions of highly dynamic industrialization.

Theodor Mommsen, the famous ancient historian, who called himself 'animal politicum', had vigorously contested the candidate Max Weber in his doctoral disputation of 1899, but at the end announced: 'When I finally make my way to the grave, so would I rather say to none other - "Son, take my spear, it is too heavy for my arm" - than Max Weber who I highly esteem.' That is more than an anecdote. Max Weber grasped the spear and in much took over the habitus of the 'Gelehrtenpolitiker' Mommsen. Both combined their universal-historical thinking always with a critical engagement with the issues of the day. Already in Berlin Weber developed the instinct of an 'animal politicum'. There are to be sure the instincts of a political 'public intellectual' in Mommsen, and not those of a professional politician in the service of democratic party politics.

From 1918 Weber held high expectations that Berlin would become the power centre of a democratic and sovereign national state in the economic reconstruction after a lost war. If Covid-19 today re-kindles the debate over the crisis of western democracies, then the comparison is worth making with the debates over Germany's new order and Europe in the crisis of 1918-1919. On the 'battleground of current problems' Weber in his time wanted both an executive empowered to make decisions, which he termed a 'plebiscitary leader-democracy', and an open plurality of ideas and interests. Combative pluralism was a cultural value. On this he based his theory of democracy which we are able to recall today. Berlin, the

centre of epochal change in the early 20th century, offered for him a scene shifting experience for the observation and description of 'the modern cultural world'.⁵

Freiburg

In Freiburg there was to have been a panel discussion on the current significance of Max Weber. For several reasons I wanted to place 'combative pluralism' and the 'political scientist' centre-stage.

The commemorative plaque on Weber's house, 22 Schillerstraße, reads: 'Max Weber 1864-1920 - Economist, Sociologist, Political Scientist - lived in his house while belonging to Freiburg University 1894-1897'.

Freiburg is a good place to consider with Max Weber 'heroes'. This is due in part to Wilhelm Hennis. Like no other, the Freiburg political scientist Hennis looked for the 'traces of Nietzsche in Max Weber's work' and attributed the 'shock of the radical disenchantment of the world' to the 'Nietzsche experience'. 'For Weber there is no human relationship, no 'way of life' that was not determined by conflict. Life is conflict, conflict is life'.⁶

The sociologist Ulrich Bröckling, invited to the Freiburg discussion, is the author of the study 'Postheroische Helden'. In it he describes how the Nietzsche experience led to an inflationary demand for heroes. Weber opposed the cult of 'Übermensch' with the 'heroism of objectivity' and demanded 'remaining cool in the face of obstinate reality without breaking down'.⁷

⁵ Cf. Gangolf Hübinger, 'Das Berlin Max Webers. Laudatio zur Berliner Gedenktafel für Max Weber aus Anlass seines hundertsten Todestages: <https://www.hiko-berlin.de/projekte/berliner-gedenktafeln/max-weber>. A small monograph is envisaged: 'Berlin Max Webers'.

⁶ Wilhelm Hennis, 'Die Spuren Nietzsches im Werk Max Webers' in *Max Webers Fragestellung. Studien zur Biographie des Werks*. Tübingen, 1987, ch. 4, pp. 167-191 (quoted pp. 167, 187).

⁷ Ulrich Bröckling, *Postheroische Helden. Ein Zeitbild*. Berlin, 2020, here p. 96f.

It is interesting how the present crisis discourse draws on Max Weber's concept of the hero. The philosopher Dieter Thomä brought out a book at the same time as Bröckling with the title 'Why Democracies need Heroes'. The idea comes from Max Weber and with good reasons.

In Max Weber's theory of rulership a 'hero' in a very simple sense of the word is a person who when faced with a coercive order says 'nevertheless' ('*dennoch*') and throws his whole personality and creative strength in the balance in order to create a new order. To be sure the 'heroic' implicitly runs alongside Weber's theory of a democratic charisma. Thomä makes this explicit when he asks 'whether heroes à la Weber could be useful for the business of democracy?' and answers with a 'yes'.⁸ He can say this because he associates a 'combative pluralism' as the kernel of democracy with Weber. It is demanded of democracies 'to fight and to defend' plurality as a guiding value. In the framework of a democratic constitution heroism is demanded unconditionally as a commitment to the plurality of individual ways of life.⁹

That is totally Weber. His theory of democracy is centred on action. It requires every 'citizen' to enable the plurality of ideas and interests and to safeguard the individual's freedom.¹⁰ Whether we call fighters for these values heroes or not is for me secondary. What matters is the political-ethic of 'enough' in the face of danger. That was decisive in Weber's fight with the populist 'democracy of the streets'.¹¹ It costs little to complain about the 'impulsive ignorance' of an American President as destroying democracy. From a Weberian perspective we should not just consider the charismatic virtuosi of authoritarian power but also ask with the same stringency about the leadership qualities of the opposition. Oppositions must also have to realize effectively their own 'treasury of ideas', as Weber put it.¹²

⁸ Dieter Thomä, *Warum Demokratien Helden brauchen. Plädoyer für einen zeitgemäßen Heroismus*. Berlin, 2019, p. 111.

⁹ Ebd., p. 117, 120.

¹⁰ Weber speaks of 'citizen pride', *Deutschlands künftige Staatsform*, MWG I/16, p. 106.

¹¹ Gegen die 'für rein plebiszitäre Völker typische aktuelle und irrationale Straßenherrschaft' durch eine 'unorganisierte Masse: die Demokratie der Straße', MWG I/15, p. 550.

¹² MWG I/15, S. 547.

So which force unleashes charismatic or heroic mobilization in democratic opposition, in the parliaments, in electoral campaigns, and in civil society activities? I think this is exactly the question of 2020 that puts to the test Max Weber's fundamental thesis: the modern mass democracy is not a 'pile of sand'.

Heidelberg

The 'Fallenstein Villa' at 17 Ziegelhäuser Landstraße, Weber's residence from 1910 to 1919 is today itself in its entirety a site of memory. As the 'Max Weber Haus', it is owned by the University of Heidelberg and may once be called the 'Marianne und Max Weber Haus'.

In my own scientific biography it is a special place. Because I have studied intensively three of the residents of this famous house, the aura of the house has never left me. I undertook a study of Gottfried Gervinus, the historian and liberal representative of the Paulskirche Parliament in the revolution of 1848. Gervinus was also a tutor of Helene Weber, mother of Max, when she was brought up in this house. I happen to be a co-editor of the Complete Works of Ernst Troeltsch, as well as the Weber edition. The theologian and cultural philosopher Troeltsch lived in the same house from 1910 to 1915; Weber from 1910 to 1919. It was in this house that both men argued in friendly competition about the genesis and structure of the modern world. 17 Ziegelhäuser Landstraße is a site of memory of its own sort, a symbol for the 'liberal, enlightened and democratic Germany'.¹³

I moderated the panel discussion on the centenary of Weber's death in the salon of Max Weber Haus, which the University of Heidelberg convened on 15 June and was live-streamed on the internet. The title was 'Max Weber. Interpreter of Modernity'. The participants were the Weber biographers Dirk Kaesler and Jürgen Kaube as well as Wolfgang Schluchter, expert on the complete oeuvre.

¹³ M. Rainer Lepsius, 'Kulturliberalismus, Kulturprotestantismus und Kulturfeminismus. Das Max-Weber-Haus in Heidelberg, Ziegelhäuser Landstraße 17', in Lepsius, *Max Weber und seine Kreise*. Tübingen 2016, pp. 159-209, here p. 208.

My expectations were high, that Weber's modernity was confronted by the modernity triggered by today's Covid-19. Modernity in the time of Weber - that was the revolutionary upheavals in all areas of life around 1900: the rapid expansion of global capitalism, the daily confrontation of opposed religious values, political ideas and economic interests, and the start of mass democracy and state administrative provision. How had 'the son of the modern European civilization' experienced and researched these upheavals? Which of these problems do we work on now and, as before, and how useful are Weber's questions and concepts for our own thinking of the orders of society?

These were the issues that I directed attention to. The answers surprised me a little. Dirk Kaesler emphatically said that 'Max Weber is no longer our contemporary'. So much antiquarian distancing made me doubt whether Weber actually belonged to an anthology of 'Classical Thinkers of Sociology' in the 21st century. Wolfgang Schluchter was sceptical whether Weber's 'old concepts' were fit for our 'new problems'.¹⁴ New problems require new concepts.

So can we verify a transfer of problems from Weber's time to ours, as already noted with Andreas Reckwitz. In the history of the problem of modernity stands Weber's triad of globalized capitalism - 'till the last hundredweight of fossil fuel is burnt',¹⁵ the 'power dynamics' of international politics of the 'quantitatively large political communities',¹⁶ and the 'active mass democratization'¹⁷; how should they be connected? For without a regulation of the tensions that arise from these three poles in modern society, is there no longer, following Weber, any 'validity of an order'. Weber's view on the interconnectivity of modernity remained unanswered in Heidelberg.¹⁸

¹⁴ Relates to the title of the book by Thomas Schwinn and Gert Albert (eds.), *Alte Begriffe – Neue Probleme. Max Webers Soziologie im Lichte aktueller Problemstellungen*. Tübingen 2016.

¹⁵ MWG I/18, p. 487.

¹⁶ MWG I/22-1, p. 224f.

¹⁷ MWG I/15, p. 538.

¹⁸ The discussion has been put on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5n3Xk5Gtl4>.

Munich

In Munich, the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and the adult education college wanted to discuss the same theme. The panel discussion included: 'To think modernity', 'On the relationship of religion to the moderns', 'On politics and the associational society', 'On rationalization and globalization'. Everything had to be cancelled because of Covid-19. Thus I was not able to moderate the panel on which the political scientist Klaus Schlichte and the historian Friedrich Lenger were to discuss whether and how 'rationalization and 'globalization' stood in the centre of Weber's thinking. I would have wanted to lead the discussion on the following points: What is the connection between Weber's narrative of the 'rationalism of world mastery' and the dynamic of world powers and world markets in the 20th and 21st centuries? The starting point would be the core thesis from Weber's manuscript on 'Communities' for *Economy and Society*. 'Among a plurality of co-existing polities, some, the Great Powers, usually ascribe to themselves and usurp an interest in political and economic processes over a wide orbit. Today such orbits encompass the whole surface of the planet.'¹⁹

When we read this sentence anew of 'Great Powers' which want to dominate the 'whole surface of the planet economically and politically', which of Weber's issues in the period of imperialism can we use to describe our multipolar world system? How will the disposition of the world system change after Covid-19 in respect to China, the USA, the European Union, Russia, India and Brazil? The Munich themes remain on the agenda for future Weber discourse.

Munich for me always means a dispute with the plaque on the house in 16 Seestraße: 'In this house of the poet Helene Böhlau lived the important jurist, economist, political scientist and sociologist, professor at the University of Munich, Max Weber, born 21 April 1864 in Erfurt and lived here from July 1919 to his death 14 June 1920.'

¹⁹ Weber, *Economy and Society*. New York: Bedminster Press, 1968, p. 912; MWG I/22-1, p. 225.

The plaque reveres him as a jurist, economist, and political scientist and sociologist but not as an historian. To speak of Weber as 'historian' would seem to require a special justification. Albeit, it is well known how significant it was for Weber to present himself as an historian of law, the lasting effects of the economist on the historical school of economics, how critically the political scientist examined the issues of contemporary history and how rigorous he was as a sociologist through a framework of sharply separated basic concepts to thereby provide the necessary '*preparation* for the full historical knowledge of civilization'.²⁰ With a certain fatigue that sociologists display to Weber, it is perhaps time to rediscover anew 'Weber, the historian'.²¹

Final Remark

'The light cast by the great cultural problems has moved onward. Then even science prepares to shift its ground and change its conceptual apparatus so that it might regard the stream of events from the heights of reflective thought.'²² How do we read this famous closing passage from 'The "Objectivity" of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy' in the time of crisis of 2020? Has Max Weber with this insight shunted himself off into a cultural museum? I don't consider that is the case. Thinking with Max Weber in 'the light cast by the great cultural problems' about modernity, therein lies much further potential. My virtual travel to Berlin, Freiburg and Munich and the actual trip to Heidelberg signals to me the future theme which Max Weber foregrounded in unwritten chapters of *Economy and Society*. How would Weber's chapter on 'The Modern State and Capitalism' have turned out and how would he have linked it to 'The Cultural Problems of Democracy'?²³ If the problems of modernity are relentlessly zoomed in on because of Covid-19, then they have to be discussed within this Weberian constellation.

²⁰ Max Weber: Die „Objektivität“ sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis (1904), MWG I/7, S. 164.

²¹ Jürgen Kocka (ed.), *Max Weber, der Historiker*. Göttingen 1986. The volume relates to contributions from the International Historikertag of 1985 in Stuttgart.

²² Translation from *The Essential Weber. A Reader*, ed. S. Whimster. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 403.

²³ Letter to Gustav Schmoller, 14 December 1904, MWG II/4, p. 417.

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