

Max Weber: Capitalism as the Iron Cage

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(Translation of his intervention in *A Hundred Years after Max Weber's Death*)

<<https://sociologiauba.wixsite.com/socioaudiovisual/max-weber-100-anos>>

Among all of Max Weber's concepts, perhaps the best known is the expression *iron cage*. It is possibly one of the best known concepts in modern social science. It is a diagnosis of the industrial capitalist civilization, which I believe is highly topical. I underline 'capitalist civilization' because many times, in the readings of academic social science, especially in the United States, it is interpreted as a definition of the world of bureaucracy, but this is not so. For Weber, in particular in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, where that expression was used for the first time, it is clearly about capitalism.

In fact, the expression *iron cage* is an inaccurate translation made by Talcott Parsons. Actually, the term Weber uses is *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, 'steel-hard casing', but there is obviously an analogy, a similarity between both formulas.

So, what does Weber describe with that allegory then? It can be said that it is an allegory in the sense given by Walter Benjamin, that is to say, the *facies hippocratica* of modernity.

For Weber that allegory defines what he calls the 'tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order', capitalism, which determines 'the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism (...) with irresistible force'. A few lines later he explains, that this modern economic order is 'victorious capitalism'. So, in other words, in capitalism we all live under that absolute power, capital, that takes away our freedom; it is a protest against the absence of freedom of individuals in modern capitalist civilization. Even in another text, not in *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber speaks of capitalism as slavery without masters, *herrenlose Sklaverei*.

So, I believe that this diagnosis of capitalism as an *iron cage*, as steel-hard casing, is very current, because today we live in a totally closed universe, the universe of neoliberal capitalist globalization. A closed universe, fully ruled by the financial markets: an impersonal domination, slavery without a master, and that takes away our freedom, which determines our life, our possibility of working, our conditions of existence, etc. So that diagnosis is of tremendous topicality.

Weber was a cultural pessimist, he is part of that great movement of the *Kulturpessimismus* of Central Europe, and therefore his attitude is of resigned fatalism, in part of Nietzschean origin, in which the only possible attitude is the heroic acceptance of destiny, of the inevitable destiny, the *Schicksal*, or the other term that he uses, *Verhängnis*, fatality. That is, capitalism is a fatality, we are condemned to live in that iron cage, there is no way out. This is where Marx is radically different from Weber, although there is much in common between them in the diagnosis. Unlike Weber, Marx believes in the possibility of a socialist alternative to capitalism.

But Weber's diagnosis is very, very relevant, very current and helps us understand what is happening in today's world, and in that sense it is very contemporary, one hundred years after the author's disappearance.

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Translated by Georgina Graziano