

**ONKEL MAX
OR, A FOOTNOTE TO MAX WEBER**

Peter Beilharz

One hundred years later, folk like us still work in the shadow of Max Weber, or else we follow his example and precedent. How has this come to be, and what might it signify? In this intermediate reflection I look back on my own encounter with Weber, how this relationship was established and developed through local encounters with some of those touched by Weber, in my case the Budapest School in exile, via Lukács, as well as teachers such as Hanfi, Redner and Arnason. My good fortune in all this was to meet Onkel Max as a philosopher and not only a sociologist: as a diagnostician of the times, then and now.

When I was little, we had an adopted uncle, Onkel Max. He smiled from time to time when he came to visit for *Kaffee und Kuchen* on a Sunday afternoon, but didn't say much. Impeccably dressed, he smoked small cigars, and drove a now vintage, then new VW Beetle – of course. He was a constant, if somewhat detached, presence in our lives.

Later, when I grew up, there was another such genial presence in my intellectual life: that of Max Weber. I came to Weber as an undergraduate, as I shall narrate below. But it needs to be made clear in the beginning that I am not a Weber scholar, or at least not a Weber specialist. I can claim with varying degrees of legitimacy to be a scholar of the work of Marx, differently of Gramsci, of Zygmunt Bauman and Bernard Smith. My relationship to Max Weber studies is peripheral, though my relation to this journal is one of keen and sustained interest.

With reference to my stronger areas of interest and competence, some interesting methodological parallels suggest themselves, at least with reference to the more recent scholarship on Marx and Gramsci. In the last decade or so the volume of work on both Marx and Gramsci has exploded. Some of this has to do with textual rediscovery, and with further new work in the archive on near

definitive editions, as in *MEGA 2*; some with the spirit of the times, ongoing crisis and the sense that we have still yet to get major thinkers like this aright. In these fields of study it is now common to distinguish between two basic approaches, philological, or textual and interpretative; and adaptive, or more creative. In the case of Gramsci, there is still work to be done in establishing that the *Prison Notebooks* consist of fragments, intellectual diary entries in an itinerary of imprisonment rather than a theory in the stronger, so to say Germanic sense. What Gramsci meant, that is one thing. What his followers might do with the key ideas is another. The notion of interregnum, for example, has generated new interest in the present for now departed sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman and Keith Tester, and that of hegemony attracts ongoing interest in terms of political developments around the globe. In the case of Marx, there is of course endless interpretation. This includes the discovery that *The German Ideology* is not really a book; the discovery that there are not only ethnological notebooks, but also ecological notebooks; and differently, the extension of the notion of the metabolism between nature and society out into ecomarxism. This latter is the work of extension.

These kinds of distinctions between textual, and creative enthusiasms may be difficult always to sustain, but they are suggestive. As for me, while I share something of the forensic curiosity, the field of my endeavour is more often contemporary. I find myself somewhere between *Economy and Society* and *The MacDonaldization of Society*, the latter a kind of applied Weberian riff on the master theme of rationalization. This likely puts me in the adaptive, post Weberian field when it comes to Weber Studies. And earlier?

How did we come to Weber in Australia, in my case in Melbourne? As undergraduates in teacher training we read from Gerth and Mills: *From Max Weber*. Not a bad place to begin, though not especially inspiring in the heady radical days of the early seventies either. Subsequently I was taught Weber by philosophers, including Zawar Hanfi, who suggested we think of Marx and Weber in the spirit of Prometheus and Sisyphus, respectively, and Harry Redner, who made the link to Nietzsche; and then later again by my La Trobe mentor Johann

Arnason, both a philologue and a creative interpreter, as well as by the members of the Budapest School who came to Australia in 1978. Lukács came to be a switchpoint, along with the essay of Karl Loewith on Weber and Marx.

The Budapest School had a major effect on us in the time of their Australian exile. We were in our twenties: perfect timing. Our Lukács, into the 1970s, was not theirs. We were keen on the early revolutionary work; they, now, on the aesthetics, before and after October 1917. Likely we did not actually talk so much about Lukács and Weber, though they did follow the model of the salon, throwing together intellectuals of different orientations and inclinations in their suburban home on Sunday nights. Weber was a background presence in all this, until the Hungarians began to work up their own theories of modernity into this period. There were two central texts generated by them here. The first was *Dictatorship Over Needs*, published by Fehér, Heller and Markus in 1982. The second was an essay, 'Class, Democracy, Modernity', which appeared in 1983. In theoretical terms, it might be said that throughout this period, the Budapest School were shifting in terms of the classical presences from the orbit of Marx to that of Weber. Markus remained the finest of Marx philologues, but Fehér was taken by the Weberian thread of *Realpolitik*, and Heller attracted to the critique of the centrality of state and bureaucracy alongside the power of capital. Ergo the vital interest here in modernity, itself further brought out by new debates concerning modernism and the postmodern. This in turn poured into work of my own such as *Postmodern Socialism* (1994), and into the culture of our journal, *Thesis Eleven*.

Was Critical Theory, or East European Critical Theory, then, more than the meeting of minds in Marx and Weber? Surely. But this was a radically different approach to the formalism of Lichtheim, and his suggestion that Weber's sociology of religion might fit into the Marxian theorem as superstructure to base, or even to Loewith, where one possible implication was an approach that was additive rather than given to reorientation, synthesis or reconstruction.

So together we read *The Protestant Ethic*, along with Simmel's essays on the Stranger and the Metropolis, and the section of *Capital* on the fetishism of commodities. We read *The Protestant Ethic* against the *Grundrisse*, puzzling over the origins of capitalism. And we went on ourselves to teach these texts, not least because they offered such brilliant formulations of ideas in capsule form. From 1971 we read the Reification essay in *History and Class Consciousness*. Did it not, does it not read like Weber, or Simmel? 'We are concerned above all with the *principle* at work here: the principle of rationalization of what is and *can be calculated* ... rationalization is unthinkable without specialization' (Lukács 1971: 88). I came to understand that there would be no Frankfurt School without Weber – no *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, no extended theory of rationalization as the possibility of history or progress turning back on itself: no Zygmunt Bauman; no *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Later it became more fully apparent that this was also one of the sources of our attraction to the thought of Cornelius Castoriadis – as he put it, he had in *Socialisme ou barbarie* only pulled at one thread in the social edifice, or its labyrinth – the thread of bureaucracy. There were precedents, such as the work of Bruno Rizzi in *The Bureaucratization of the World*, and parallels, in what I argued in Kautsky and differently in Bauman was a kind of Weberian Marxism (Beilharz, 1992, 2000), but the place here to begin thinking was indubitably with Onkel Max.

In those earlier days I was keen already as a young Marxist to foreground Weber as the necessary complement to Marx. In the field of political science in which I originally trained it was customary then to insist that you could have one or other, Marx or Weber, not both. Weber was often treated as a toolmaker for contemporary political sociology. I wrote a review essay seeking to align the two great thinkers, perhaps in the wake of Loewith in *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, then freshly published in complete translation, but working rather in the direction of the suggestion that these were not so much two differing analyses of the same process, as two different ways of seeing or thinking (Beilharz 1983). My preference then was one I shared with Arnason: 'If Marx can be regarded as a greater thinker than Weber, it is less because of manifest contents than because of the self-transcending implications of his thought' (Arnason 1978: 3). Arnason

wrote like he thought, with acute precision: If... He went on to track Weber's expansive project in his own enthusiasms for other civilizations and civilizational analysis.

In those earlier days we read everything else of and on Weber that we could find – not that there was a rich field in English in the seventies. Bendix, Beetham, Mommsen followed by the work of Larry Scaff, Tenbruck, Roth and Schluchter, these mediated for us by Arnason, who was working on a series of papers with titles such as 'Marx and Weber – Contrast and Convergences' (1978) and 'Rationalisation and Modernity: towards a Culturalist Reading of Max Weber' (nd, 1980?). Habermas' turn to the theory of communicative competence reinforced our curiosity in Weber, as did the publication of Jeff Alexander's magisterial debut in the four volumes of *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, but also the work of Steven Seidman, *Liberalism and the Origins of European Social Theory* (1983). In Melbourne Arnason compelled us to take philology seriously, not least with reference to the puzzles we had over the translations of the notions of iron cage and disenchantment left us by Talcott Parsons. But by and large, our reading of Weber was mediated more by Marx, and rather less by Parsons, which may well have been our good fortune.

Later I wrote a handbook entry on Weber for a book I edited in 1992, and still, remarkably, in print: *Social Theory: A Guide to Central Thinkers*. There, I wrote:

To turn to Weber's published work is immediately to be overwhelmed – sociology of religion, medieval and ancient law and history, sociology of music ('The History of the Piano'), action, the city, methodology, charisma ... The binding thread is Weber's concern with culture, or how we live, and its rationalization (Beilharz 1992: 225).

This, of course, is barely to scratch the surface. It offers only one interpretation, and one here pitched at introductory level, yet persisting with the impulse that Weber was a sociologist with philosophical intent, if he was to be classified as a

sociologist at all. Did he not somewhere write in correspondence, 'I now find by the conditions of my appointment that I am a sociologist'?

Assembling a collection of my essays 1980-2020, entitled *Circling Marx*, I now see also that I have been circling Weber for four decades or more. Earlier jokes cast Weber as the bourgeois Marx, as though Marx was not also bourgeois, at least in some of his fundamental cultural sensibilities. Others spoke of Weber's dialogue with the ghost of Marx, though for us perhaps it was rather a matter of being shadowed by the Ghost of Weber. It was Paul Ricoeur who indicated that there were three masters of suspicion – Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. Nietzsche remains a key atmospheric element in the thinking of Weber, however intangible. There is the spectre of the last man; the ghosts of Goethe, and Schiller; the contemporaries, the thinkers who pass through his work and life, Simmel, Michels, the radicals of Ascona – the other Max Klinger (Whimster, 1999).

And there is the stance – aristocratic radicalism, if not romantic anticapitalism? There is the diagnosis of the times; so many themes that travelled, in addition to philosophy of history, philosophical anthropology, culture and personality – ethics of responsibility and redemption; the need to choose between the warring gods, and to respect distinct spheres of existence; an analytical, if not personal nihilism, types of domination, ideal types, and then the attitude: skeptical, balanced, measured, sober yet encyclopedic, and capable also of looking into the abyss, the chilling prospect of facing that last ton of fossil fuel, *usw.*

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So it is one hundred years since the death of Max Weber, who is said to have urged on his young friend Georg Lukács the imperative that the immediately preceding events in Russia would set the cause of socialism back one hundred years. We are still waiting, and we remain troubled by the other echoes between his own time and ours. There is still so much to learn, both in terms of philology and interpretation. In the meantime, *Max Weber Studies* is twenty years old. It is a tribute to the decades of work, editing and scholarship of Sam Whimster and

his friends and collaborators. When I pick the copies off my shelf I am astonished by the breadth and diversity of interests which *MWS* has managed to sustain. The realization is the obvious one, that the journal has managed to nurture and develop a kaleidoscopic relationship to Max Weber, his writing, his life and times, and his people. This is a masterwork of curation, as well as the slow boring of hard boards that is the conduct of editing itself. We cannot overcome a sense of astonishment about the richness and diversity of this intellectual culture, as enacted by the Sunday Circle, and the precedent which this enacted for this journal.

Reading *MWS* is a reminder that Weber was interested in almost everything, and it is this which makes his project and legacy inexhaustible. Marx's project was diverse enough, but it had certain coordinates which make its contours relatively predictable, as in the critique of political economy. Nothing quite similar can be said to characterize Weber's work, not even the critique of modernity. The canvas is bigger, the curiosities unquenchable. To turn to Weber's work is immediately to be overwhelmed; so we return, again and again to his work, now with the volumes of *MWS* as a perennial companion.

'What I have had to say will necessarily disappoint you.' Of all the lines of genial provocation in Weber's work, this remains my favourite. Or in that last moment of *The Protestant Ethic*, where having cornered materialism he gives it back with the other hand ... for we must take a stand, while always remaining open to the possibility that we will get it wrong. For me, this is the legacy of Onkel Max. Sitting together with him remains a transformative experience.

Peter Beilharz is Professor of Critical Theory at Sichuan University

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