

Tribute to Max Weber on the Centenary of his Death

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Max Weber Studies

Having just had occasion to trot through all twenty volumes of *Max Weber Studies*, with unbounded thanks to Sam Whimster and his colleagues for their manifold labors, it becomes obvious that a small international army of bright and energetic scholars continue, even this century after Weber's death, to mull over the significance of Weberianism, to take issue here and there with the Old Man's claims, to stake positions which they know will raise the hackles of their peers, and, in short, to emulate the Ghost of Heidelberg as far as their abilities allow. One begins to wonder about the meaning of a single person's death, particularly one that came suddenly, unexpectedly, unwanted, 'in the prime of life,' and without any substitution available. Broken-hearted Durkheim was gone in 1917 at 59, Simmel the next year only 60, so the three giants of classical theorizing were silenced in quick succession. Even remote parallels in our own time to the central roles they played are rare. Though not young, Jascha Heifetz's death in 1987 ended a superior level of violinistic technique that had not been heard since Paganini passed away in 1840 (at 58, two years older than Weber). Marlon Brando's unseemly end could be mentioned similarly as a gauge of unequalled acting talent. On a much smaller scale, my own demise by cardiac arrest was a temporarily terminal condition, but having dipped a toe in The Styx, one returns with an even deeper appreciation for what Weber accomplished in an abbreviated and tormented lifetime.

What are the sources of his undiminished appeal? Clearly Marx's legions never die because the cruel exploitation of laborers never ends, and he spoke directly to that condition with a rhetoric that thrills its hearers, especially among the young and downtrodden. But with the exceptions of *PE's* conclusion and the two Munich lectures on vocations, Weber persistently resisted blatant rhetorical flourishes or hortatory claims. Perhaps it was his training as a lawyer or economist or ancient historian that prevented him from writing 'from the heart and to the heart.' Or maybe his father's

Realpolitik versus his mother's pious sincerity persuaded him to avoid emotionality while creating scholarly work. Marianne Weber would have us believe this, and since I find her book inescapable to my view of her husband, it seems plausible that Weber muzzled himself in public writing—as opposed to the content of his private letters, where he often exhibited a range of human foibles that readers of *Wirtschaft u. Gesellschaft* may find hard to fathom.

In August, 1968 the syllabus to my introductory sociology course at William and Mary (a two-semester class) asked us to read the Scribner paperback edition of *PE* (\$1.65 at the time), which I dutifully did, except for the endnotes, which I found too demanding for the sophomoric mind. Given the cascade of awful events in that year, and the ever-present threat of being drafted into the Vietnam War, losing oneself in a difficult text became quite appealing. Only in graduate school did I discover the endnotes to be as interesting as the text itself. Combining that book with Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* in another class that semester swept me away from a tedious pre-med curriculum and into the arms of social theory, never to escape. Even when an apprentice I saw that Weber (and Mannheim) dealt seriously and interestingly with matters unavailable elsewhere, that they understood the social and historical worlds even better than did Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, Hunter Thompson, or the other 'major thinkers' on campus of the era. Tom Wolfe was the exception, I later learned, due to his attention to Weber during doctoral studies at Yale, upon whom he told me once that he relied constantly in his lifelong dissection of telling status distinctions in American society.

What is it about Weber's thought processes and astringent prose that draws into his ken such a wide range of readers, whereas other all-stars of earlier times—consider Spencer, Le Bon, Tönnies, Pareto, Cooley, Tarde, Veblen, Sorokin, even Weber's close friend Michels—seem now distinctly antique in their interests and/or mode of expression? Part of this neglect of the past has more to do with the temperocentrism that transfixes and hamstring our age, than a putative intellectual inferiority of such writers whom we would like to believe have somehow been transcended. For instance, one can still learn a great deal from Gaetano Mosca about ruling elites, and Pareto covered everything from econometrics to Roman history with extraordinary insight.

Yet ‘who now reads’ them, to mimic Parsons on Spencer in 1937. As other talented writers remain marooned in the library’s stacks, this year Harvard University Press issued Keith Tribe’s welcome retranslation of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, part I, and two years ago Stanford published Swedberg’s *Max Weber Dictionary*, 2nd edition. *The Oxford Handbook of Max Weber* just appeared, and *The Routledge International Handbook on Max Weber* is in process. With time perhaps a fat selection of Weber’s letters from the *MWG* will appear in English, too. There seems no end to interest in his person—more so all the time—and in the work.

Before me lies the clothbound 1930 edition of *The Protestant Ethic*, translated by Parsons (‘Tutor in Economics, Harvard University’), with a Foreword by R. H. Tawney, a titan of that period, now neglected. (I could as easily have grabbed one of Kalberg’s successive translations, or that by Baehr and Wells, but the Parsons version reminds me of my youthful hopes, so it takes the floor.) Reconsider Endnote 66 (p. 232): ‘The Calvinistic faith is one of the many examples in the history of religions of the relation between the logical and the psychological consequences for the practical religious attitude to be derived from certain religious ideas. Fatalism is, of course, the only logical consequence of predestination. But on account of the idea of proof the psychological result was precisely the opposite. For essentially similar reasons the followers of Nietzsche claim a positive ethical significance for the idea of eternal recurrence. . . But, on the other hand, the content of ideas of a religion is, as Calvinism shows, far more important than William James (*Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902, p. 444f.) is inclined to admit. . . The religious experience as such is of course irrational, like every experience.’

These passages represent 10 out of 55 lines of text in that single note. How might it be written today, were anyone so bold as to conceive of such a statement? Perhaps thus: ‘The *so-called* Calvinistic faith, *which of course varied enormously across time and space and eventually evolved in such a way as to distance itself considerably from Calvin’s actual dogma (see Botherby and Lesser, 2014)*, is one of the many examples, *too numerous here to list and too varied to amalgamate within a single schema (but cf. Zinman’s response to Heffendorfer, 2016)* in the history of religions—to the extent that *any given religious orthodoxy can be interpreted as a coherent whole, a singular vision—*

of the *alleged* relation between the 'logical' (*in Western terms*) and *what was at one time referred to as* 'the psychological' consequences (*very likely a false binary*). . .'

Weber's arguments, unlike this hypothetical counter-formulation, are muscular, insistent, subtly arranged, cannily hedged when necessary, tied intimately to vast data of historical or economic experiences, unambiguous in direction, and succinct. They are the work of a man carefully living on an independent income (usually his wife's, which fluctuated in value), whose imagination had not become bureaucratized or cretinized for the purpose of mass pedagogy. He wrote for a small circle of cognoscenti who could not be fooled, so he quickly absorbed tremendous categories of source material, came to conclusions that were often unpopular, and blasted away with whatever rhetorical tools he might allow himself. He admired Lukács and could tolerate Stefan George, both at close range, but did not imitate their expressiveness. *Wissenschaft* called for precision and concision, which is how he operated when not writing missives to friends and family. But he was not immune to emotionality of a certain type. As Hans Gerth recalled when concluding his contribution to a 1964 commemorative symposium about Weber, 'In the midst of mountainous waves of ideological and utopian illusions, Weber maintained the composure of the stoic man he was. He died with the words on his lips: "The real thing is Truth".'

Weber's *The Religion of China* has come in for much comment lately due no doubt to that country's race toward 'world domination.' But in 1963 when C. K. Yang wrote a new introduction to the paperback edition (and China had just witnessed the death of 56 million citizens due to the Great Famine of Mao's devising, with the Sino-Soviet Split well in gear), the atmosphere was wholly different. Yang, a native Chinese with two degrees from Chinese universities, author of *Religion in Chinese Society* (1961), claimed that 'the book remains an extremely stimulating work . . . and a source of provocative ideas for the study of Chinese society. . . Bold indeed was Weber's spirit when we consider the overwhelming complexity of his extensive cross-cultural studies . . . a work of such theoretical complexity and empirical extensiveness.' Unlike critics today, Yang wisely noted that critique 'occasionally undertaken' must be guarded, 'and this applies especially to the accuracy of the empirical data used, a point for which Weber can hardly be held responsible because of the general shortage of precise information on

China in the Western languages of the time.’ Yang himself was tutored at home in the Confucian classics (c. 1925), yet overcame paternal objections by attending a modern university instead.

Weber did not hesitate to characterize Chinese culture as resistant to Western rationalization when he famously wrote, for instance, ‘The very concept of logic remained absolutely alien to Chinese philosophy, which was bound to script, was not dialectical, and remained oriented to purely practical problems as well as to the status interests of the patrimonial bureaucracy.’ Regarding Confucian thought in general, he argued: ‘With the greatest practical matter-of-factness, the intellectual tools remained in the form of parables, reminding us of the means of expression of Indian chieftains rather than of rational argumentation’ (p. 127). Such ‘eurocentric’ remarks might today be dismissed merely as Teutonic chauvinism were it not for, among much else, Endnote 1 (pp. 250-252), a bibliographical and critical cornucopia occupying 103 lines, evaluating more than 43 individual works, including a 1911 Columbia University dissertation in English. And one cannot forget long Endnote 14, wherein Weber supplies numerical data of ‘state income’ between 997 B.C. and 1021 A.D., demonstrating the in-kind taxation system when coinage became scarce. As students of the book know, the 37 pages of endnotes cannot be ignored if Weber’s arguments are to be assessed fairly. My advanced Chinese students have sometimes written home for parental expertise regarding Weber’s arguments, and are amused to learn that their parents had read Weber’s book in Chinese translation, and regarded it as a necessary classic.

What should Weberians do in pursuit of continued relevance? The first task will be to persuade academic librarians to buy the entire *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*, all 56 volumes for 13,888 euros (\$15,000). Then interested scholars must acquire German at a level commensurate with Weber’s writing, especially the thirteen volumes of letters that have not been translated. And teachers must persuade their doctoral students to do the same (as it was prior to 1970 when a reading knowledge of French and German was universally required for a Ph.D. in sociology). Given that either or both of these demands will go unmet in many settings, one could revert to the older or fresher English translations. Here is where hermeneutics comes in (in contrast to the non-

exegetical assignments given to authors in *The Oxford Handbook*), for interpreting Weber reasonably well requires partial recapitulation of his mental condition, as preposterous as that might seem.

For instance, absorbing his habilitation (*Roman Agrarian History*) throws one into the world of Theodor Mommsen and others with whom Weber studied, and ‘against’ whom he wrote that demanding work. Similarly, comprehending the true meaning of *PE* means re-reading Franklin's autobiography, Luther's and Calvin's theology in part, John Wesley's religious arguments, plus those of the Baptists, and so on. It is highly unlikely that anybody today would be able or willing to devote enough time and energy to evaluate and elaborate Weber's arguments *in toto*, something we know from the extraordinary lengths to which scholars like Hans Henrich Bruun and Peter Ghosh have gone in order to issue ‘comprehensive’ studies of Weber's methodology and the *PE*. Yet that remains ‘the assignment.’ If anything can be transmitted meaningfully to readers today, at whatever level, from the sociological classics—with Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel heading the list—then careful reckoning with their styles of thought (cf. Mannheim), their motivations, their sources of information, their scholarly and personal environments, must be pursued as far as one can, even within the brevity of life and competing duties.

And this, by the way, means far more than wondering about the real or imagined roles that their genitals may have played in their lives, as they created the works we continue to admire and puzzle over. Our current fascinations were not theirs. Had they lived in a psycho-sexual environment like ours, they would not have had the time nor inclination to write what they did, and we would be far poorer for it, to a degree truly painful to imagine. Even more important, though, than adolescent concerns about sexual olympics among the Edwardians is the question of theoretical continuity. In 1983, four years after Parsons' death at 76, *AJS* agreed to publish the longest review-essay in its history to that point, entitled ‘Parsons, Jr.’ [by A. Sica]. It was part of the merciless frontal assault waged by The Sixties crowd against the WWII veterans who were not yet designated The Greatest, but often acted as if they were. When Marty Lipset and Reinhard Bendix jumped ship from the Berkeley sociology department, and when senior professors at Columbia (and elsewhere) took mighty umbrage at the May,

1968 *Strawberry Statement* crew, even as the 'revolutionaries' were being pounded by New York mounted police, the die was cast. From those moments everything that Parsons' students and colleagues wrote about consensus and civility became a bad joke. Yet now, to recall Sam Clemens' poignant remembrance of his father's wisdom in hindsight, when one opens *The Structure of Social Action* to almost any page, or when consulting the earlier Parsons' writing about economic theory and history, one must admit to chagrin. He was smart, literate, theoretically adventurous, and running away from Spencer as fast as he could to establish his own 'brand,' one that could not have existed without tremendous assistance from Weber and Pareto.

Without the link created by Parsons' early writing, without Schumpeter or Tönnies—in short, without the vast materials in *Theories of Society* (1961), some of it anyhow, lovingly assembled by Parsons, Shils, and their confederates—the task of 'selling' Weber within today's Market of Triviality and Self-Importance becomes progressively harder, until at last it is no longer possible. Weber cannot be skimmed; he does not render 'the bottom line' readily; his Wiki article is barely representative; the so-called primers say more about their authors than about Weber. In Parsons' lifetime, beginning with his studies in Heidelberg and friendship with Marianne Weber, there was a direct, sustaining current between American theorizing and the German titan. Many students learned about Weber by means of Parsons' first book, or at least were alerted to the former's importance. What Merton did for Durkheimian thinking, Parsons did for Weber. And if Parsons' post-war writings ruined sociology's reputation as a clear-headed enterprise, the joke of his failure has become ours.

Weber died only 17 years before Parsons' *Structure* appeared, and we are 83 years from its publication. But it might as well be several centuries in terms of what most readers, young or old, can tolerate nowadays in the way of serious theoretical, historical, and socio-cultural argument. How wonderfully ironic that just as the *MWG* is completed, the chance of it being put to adequate, not to mention widespread, use diminishes in the face of faux-literacy and the inability to think fundamentally about social processes. Where is the new Parsons who will redirect the attentive back to that man who so wisely married Marianne Schnitger?

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