

Time and Mortality

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Max Weber Studies had no specific plans to mark the centenary of the great man's demise. The journal did organize two centenary conferences, one on Confucianism and Daoism and a second on Hinduism and Buddhism. The rationale and motivation were fairly obvious for these celebrations, since India and China, and Asia more generally, has experienced a balancing up with the West. Coming world powers, a hundred years later, get to interrogate the milestone publications on civilizations and religions.

With the 2020 pandemic many planned conferences were cancelled, so that did leave an obvious gap, which the journal is now dutifully acknowledging with its tributes. Weber's death was something of an accidental death. Else Jaffé and Alfred Weber thought Marianne and the doctor were far too complacent about Max's condition and with proper treatment he should have survived. Opinion is split whether a late ripple of the 'spanish' flu carried him away. Some years back I asked Professor John Oxford, doctor and influenza expert, what his view was - having sent him Marianne's account of Weber's last days. He said the 1918-19 influenza led in the final stages to pneumonia, with the inference that it would not be possible to discriminate. The historian Joachim Radkau dug out the autopsy report, significant in itself since it was presumably thought uncommon to die of pneumonia in the summer of 1920. Weber had an enlarged spleen and his stomach lining had half self-digested.

We are quite well informed of Weber's attitude to his own death. He was trained to be an officer in a mass conscription army, one of the bloodiest and insensitive of all armies, Prussia's. As an adolescent he visited the once blood-soaked battlefield of Trautenau, sixteen years after the great slaughter of the Prussian-Austrian war, a war completely unjustified except to the ogre Bismarck. The young officer in his many army manoeuvres training would know full well what modern riflery and artillery were capable of. Soon after the Great War started, Max was vaingloriously boasting to his lady friend Frieda Gross, wife of the pacifist Dr Otto Gross, that he should be leading his company into battle. This was piece of romanticism that is hard to square with the trainloads of wounded arriving in a back siding of Heidelberg railway station for treatment in the Heidelberg-district lazarettes commanded by Reserve Captain Max Weber.

Weber's attitude to death was fatalistic, though faced with mortality in the form of a heart spasm in April 1920, he agreed with Else Jaffé's suggestion: 'It was if a cold hand had touched you'. In the summer semester he sprang back with

enormous activity with two new lecture courses on Socialism, attracting 600 students, and General Theory of the State and Politics, attracting 400 students; in addition a seminar for postgraduates. The galley sheets for *Economy and Society* were corrected and demanded much time and concentration, and he also corrected the first volume of the Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion. His sister Lily, the youngest of the siblings, had committed suicide in April 1920 in troubling circumstances, and he was planning to bring the orphaned children to Munich that autumn in the small house he was renting in Seestraße, hard by the Englischer Garten. While working hard he did not self-isolate. Else Jaffé, moving house in Munich, camped overnight with her maid in Seestrasse and Weber accepted dinner invitations, himself inviting Else and her mother, the baroness, to an Italian restaurant. Marianne returned to Munich after a lecture tour and visiting the Bielefeld relatives at the end of May. A couple of days later Weber took to his bed with fever and what was diagnosed as bronchitis.

He died at a high point of achievement and ambition and we are left to wonder what might have been. Bertrand Russell was born eight years after Weber in 1872. He died almost a hundred years later. In 1969 I once passed him in the street in Penrhyndeudraeth in north Wales where he had retired. Like Marianne and Alfred, Max Weber could well have been active into the 1950s - as was Russell into the 1960s (in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament). It is entirely pointless to speculate how he would have come to terms with post-1945 Germany; Wilhelmine attitudes, which is how we tend to hold on to him as a person, cannot even be contemplated. The great 'what-might-have-been' is the Weimar Republic.

The three main time periods of his life were the Bismarck era and the foundation of the German Empire, Wilhemine Germany, and Weimar. He repudiated Bismarck and Prussia, exactly when is hard to place. The move to Baden's Freiburg was still something of an 'au revoir' to Berlin and he did the 'boy-from-Berlin' shtick in his inaugural lecture, a shock and awe tactic for the undeserving Badenese. Heidelberg's liberal and cosmopolitan legacy could not be resisted, though his retrospective critiques of Althoff of the Prussian Kultus Ministerium and Bismarck's legacy come quite late, after 1910. We know that the democrat, supporter of universal male suffrage, was already present and voluble in his account of the 1905 Russian Revolution. And, of course, it is unmistakable in his great wartime articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the summer of 1917. Universal and fair suffrage with a proper parliamentary constitution flowers from the corpse of the Bismarck myth and hatred of the military dictatorship of Ludendorff and Hindenburg. The monarch, always a liability, had been sidelined by the military junta in July 1917.

The foundation of the Weimar Republic offered a new beginning, but one that faced fearful challenges. As we enter the economic dislocation caused by Covid-19 virus, the complete economic breakdown of Germany's economy in 1918-1919 is more readily appreciated. In 'Germany's Future Form of State', which appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* at the end of November 1918, Weber says calling an economic policy socialist or liberal is now besides the point when the employment chances of the working masses had to be improved as did meeting the basic needs of the whole population. He pin-pointed the immediate need for capable leadership, repudiating in part his 'Parliament and Government' position of 1917. All such writings are now provisional in the flux of events, he wrote. Alongside a chancellor elected and responsible to parliament is added a president elected directly by the people. The president can override the party political representation in the parliament and appoint the chancellor; the president can also be recalled by popular ballot. In the federal states, universal suffrage and full parliamentarization remains his position with elected representatives sitting on a federal council. The bureaucracy is subject to parliamentary oversight and parliament is the source of legislation. The constitutional safeguard of this architecture is itself the legality of the constitution, something Franz Neumann in *Behemoth* (1942) never reproached Weber for, though he did the National Socialist jurist, Carl Schmitt.

Weber's preferred political model was a constitutional monarchy on a parliamentary basis, but in 1919 the twins of political and economic dislocation demanded a strong executive, hence a plebiscitary leader who, if necessary, could put national interest ahead of party-political sectionalism and federal particularism. This placed the spotlight on the qualities required of a leader. A charismatic demagogic personality given to whipping up immediate emotional effusions in the electorate need not apply for the job. A presidential candidate must have acquired political experience, in the school of parliament. He needed to assess the situation in an objective and matter of fact way. His political choices needed to be thought through in terms of their consequences. The political leader required fortitude in order to bring Germany through a 'polar night of icy darkness' to a new sunny dawn.

If we force the analogy and see this programme as 'making Germany great again', we immediately feel a sense of discomfort. What happens when a president fails the leadership test, or becomes partisan (which the second Weimar President did)? A plebiscitarily elected president is the preferred political form in many democracies today, and some refuse to abide by legal constitutionalism. Many prime ministers, formally following the Westminster model, have centralized power in their office, minimized the role of parliament, and effectively rule by electoral plebiscite. The European Union is a confederal structure at the level of member states with Presidents of the Council, the Commission, and the

European Central Bank subject to weak democratic accountability, although the whole construction of the Union is based on rigorous legalism of agreed treaties.

Should we be discouraged by Weber's experience and disappointments in each of the major periods of his lifetime as a reformer? He had a fast political mind, and he grasped the sociological consequences of any economic policy or situation. As a member of the younger wing of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* he forced the confrontation with a 'Politik' based on state paternalism, bureaucratic conservatism, and industrial cartellization demanding in its stead democratization, freedom of voluntary associations, and openness to world markets. But (with the the Bülow bloc of 1907-08) the larger conservative forces of German politics and economy stymied any such move to liberal democracy. In 1917, in condemning the strategy of unrestricted submarine attacks on allied shipping, the madness of annexionist war aims, and the subordination of the chancellor to military dictatorship, he came close to a treasonable charge of lese-majesty. He was the lead editor, in the *Grundriß der Sozialökonomik*, of a galaxy of economists and he laid the foundations of social economics whose potential remained untapped amid the economic disasters of the Weimar Republic. Dying at a formative point in the Republic's birth, we can bewail with Marianne Weber the tragedy of one of the most influential figures in Germany at that time being removed from the scene.

Why bother, just what is the purpose of a critical social science? As a rhetorical question this is moronic, one could equally ask why bother with a free press when it is so frequently manipulated and suppressed? To give a Weberian answer, it is the duty of a citizen in a democratically liberal republic - inclusive of all citizens and overcoming, in the USA, Du Bois's 'color line' - to be engaged and not hide behind the faux-comfort of an authoritarian regime for narrow class or sectional purposes; or in our day consumerist comforts. And one of the conditions for a critical social science is the free university, ordered by the faculty and responsive to learning and scholarship. This was another battle Weber did not win, since higher education was an intrinsic part of making Prussia great and the ministry of education saw it as its right to intervene, just as large industrial concerns placed their economic professors in the university.

On a personal note, I turn to the twenty year period of the existence of *Max Weber Studies*. Getting beyond the first few years seemed an achievement when the journal was started by David Chalcraft, Austin Harrington and myself, with the welcome addition of Duncan Kelly and Joshua Derman. It was a conference decision of the Max Weber study group, which in its annual meetings was producing quality research papers that required a dedicated outlet. UK sociology tended to be hostile to Weber (for normative and Marxian reasons), so there were educative reasons to inform. We published with a certain trepidation, since

the German scholarship was intimidating and Weber in his original German is not a walk in the park. Scrambling on language skills became a necessity as the Max Weber Gesamtausgabe (MWG) started turning out its weighty blue volumes. And the *Briefe*, Section 2 of the MWG, had started to appear. Complete immersion in Weber's scholarly world was now possible, something I had discovered in 1992 when reading the Ascona correspondence in the Prussian Secret State Archive in Merseburg; aided by Christopher Clarke my neighbour in the small reading room who was reading the immaculate copperplate of Frederick the Great's decrees. The 'complete' Weber has made it possible to make a direct assessment of his *œuvre* and life without the intermediation of interpretative authorities.

Of course, everyone is still informed by Talcott Parsons, Raymond Aron, Karl Jaspers, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Guenther Roth and Wolfgang Schluchter but the journal opened its pages to heterodox interpretation as well as the heterogeneity of the *œuvre*. It is now possible not only to have the critical edition of 'Musik' from the MWG but also to have it properly reviewed by musicologists. Translation has been integral to rubbing the gilt off older translations, with Hans Henrik Bruun, Keith Tribe and Jean-Pierre Grossein setting new standards. Wilhelm Hennis triggered a major switch in interpretation by foregrounding *Lebensführung* as a concept, which until then had remained as 'way of life' in Parsons' translation. Whether there is a philosophical anthropology in Weber is something that requires checking back to Fichte, just as tonality requires a knowledge of Helmholtz, who it should be mentioned needs to be read on the strange term 'psychophysics'. We are used to these journeyings back and forth in respect to Kant and, as Uta Gerhardt has shown, we can emancipate ourselves from older readings of the methodology.

The *Briefe* also gave new life to the 'biographical Weber', with three major biographies appearing in German, some of which occupied top slots in non-fiction sales. What Reinhard Bendix achieved in his *Intellectual Portrait* for American readers, had now been achieved for the German public. Biography is a different genre to social science; it publicizes but cannot avoid falling into reductionist pits. Yet as Radkau cheekily observed of Weber scholars and interpreters, the footmarks enter the sick lion's cave but none come out.

The *Gesamt*-life does not produce the *Gesamtwerk*. Instead, let us say 'the complete life' in 47 volumes of the Max Weber Gesamtausgabe underscores the idea of a runaway world, the title used by Tony Giddens for his commentary on our contemporary modernity. Weber warned of this at the end of the *Protestant Ethic* and established it in his economic sociology: modern capitalism has an unstoppable dynamic that reduces humans, in their generations, to mere bystanders. Capitalism will end either, as he hints in the *General Economic History*,

when it escapes its nation-state holder and self-destructs, or when it has burnt the last hundredweight of fossil fuel - a course which has probably already doomed the human environment of the Earth to catastrophic heating. Wolfgang Schluchter summarizes the *Grundriß* project, started in 1909, as viewing economy through the factual conditions of need, consumption, nature, technology, the division of labour, and society. We still await the realization of this conspectus which will make social science great again.