1   Introduction

Richard Ned Lebow

Max Weber is not an international relations theorist, yet he is arguably the father of modern IR theory. He provided an analysis of the state and its intimate relationship to violence that is central to the realist paradigm. He focused attention on the drives for power and domination, which are equally central to realism. He was a major influence on Hans Morgenthau, the most prominent postwar realist theorist. Weber also speaks to constructivists. He emphasized the importance of diverse motives in foreign affairs, including those of honor and status, and how foreign policy goals and the concepts we use to understand them are culturally determined. He also made a persuasive case for combining historical and sociological analyses. Weber was deeply concerned with ethics and its relationship to politics and scholarship. Ethics has become a core concern of contemporary international relations theory, and for many of those who work in this subfield, Weber's "*Politik als Beruf* [The Profession of Politics]" essay is a jumping-off point.

This is not a work of intellectual history; contributors are not drawn to Weber only because of his influence on our field. We believe that Weber's life and writings remain relevant to contemporary international relations and its study. He sought to come to terms with the political, epistemological, and ethical problems of modernity, and to understood how closely connected they are. His efforts are imaginative, sophisticated, even inspiring, but also flawed. His epistemological successes and failures highlight unresolvable tensions that are just as pronounced today and from which we have much to learn. In the 1930s and early postwar decades, Weber was incorrectly represented as a structural-functionalist by Talcott Parsons and as a positivist by Edward A. Shils and C. Wright Mills.[1] Their translations and readings of his work wash out the tensions in his writings and continue to resonate among so-called mainstream American social scientists. It is important to present a different and more accurate version of Weber to present-day social scientists.

Weber wrote before, during, and immediately after the cataclysm of World War I. He lived most of his life in what we have come to view in

1

retrospect as Europe's golden age. Many educated Europeans of his era believed in material, cultural, and ethical progress and were self-confident about their place in society and their countries' role in the world. Other artists and intellectuals rejected this "bourgeois" certainty as delusional, were alienated from their culture, and had deep forebodings about the future. In Germany, historian Heinrich Treitschke and philologist-philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche gave voice to this pessimism. Weber straddled this divide, as he did so many others.[2] He saw the state as a progressive instrument and was an unabashed German nationalist. He nevertheless followed Nietzsche in believing that the gods had departed from European skies, compelling individuals to invent their own.

Nietzsche focused on Europe's underlying cultural crisis, and Weber on its political and epistemological manifestations.[3] In a disenchanted world, there was no certainty of any kind, not only about values, but also about scientific knowledge. Weber warned: "Even though the light of *ratio* may keep advancing, *the realm of what may be known will still remain shrouded in unfathomable mystery*. That is why *Weltanschauungen* can never be the product of progressive experience and why the highest and most stirring ideals can become effective for all times only in a struggle with other ideals that are just as sacred to others as our ideas are to us."[4] Because beliefs are arbitrary, people need to convince themselves of their validity and often do so by warring with those espousing different beliefs.

Weber saw a second threat arising from modernity in the form of bureaucracy. It was an expression of "formal rationality" and gained traction because of its efficiency. He considered bureaucracy stifling to human creativity in the first instance because it imposed rules to govern as much behavior as possible. Rules had to be simple to be understood and were likely to be enforced in a heavy-handed way. They reduced the authority and independence of individuals, and, as circumstances changed, ultimately stood in the way of efficiency and common sense. Weber feared that ordinary citizens would live in "a steel-hardened cage" of serfdom, helplessly, like the fellahin in ancient Egypt. Bureaucracy also threatened to reorient people's loyalties by narrowing their horizons to those of their institution. In the absence of deeper ethical commitments, bureaucracy would impose its own values on people. The *Kulturmensch* (man of culture) would give way to the *Fachmensch* (occupational specialist). For the latter, the only ethical yardstick would be the interests and power of the organization. Quoting Nietzsche, Weber predicted "the 'last men'" would be "specialists without spirit [and] sensualists without heart."[5]

These threats were equally evident in the academy and political life. In the course of his university career, Weber complained vociferously

about colleagues who put their personal interests above those of their discipline or university. He wrote bitterly about the National Party, the Catholic Center Party (Zentrum), and the Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD), whose leaders pursued narrow class and party goals at the expense of the nation. They defended these interests, and more troubling still, held worldviews that discouraged compromise with other parties.[6] He developed a powerful and compelling critique of Wilhelminian Germany that challenged head-on the Bismarck myth and attributed the nation's political crisis to the Prussian autocrat's utter contempt for and demagogic dealings with anyone who showed political talent or opposed his domestic and foreign projects. Weber believed that Prussian aristocrats had served their country well, but in more recent times consistently abused their power for parochial, self-serving purposes. The middle class and workers, who might oppose them, lacked experience and confidence.

Despite his powerful critique of formal rationality and bureaucracy, Weber recognized their positive side. They made possible the industrial revolution and modern state, both of which led to a significant rise in living standards, health, and education. They provided at least the theoretical potential for human fulfillment if some means could be found of holding bureaucratization in check. He rather naively looked to capitalism as a possible counterweight as it encouraged individual initiative and was creating multiple centers of power independent of government. Socialism, he was convinced, would further encourage the growth and encroachment of government bureaucracy and rapidly lead to the worst kind of dystopia. His concept of "plebiscitarian leader democracy" was another possible counterweight because it used charisma to constrain bureaucracy and bureaucrats.[7]

In his thinking about international relations Weber is very much a product of his time. Following Hegel and prominent German historians, he endows the state with ethical potential and gives its priority of the wishes and self-interests of citizens. He adheres to a Darwinian view of politics and routinely describes peoples and states as competitors in an unending and unavoidable struggle for survival. He treats states as fully independent units and is oblivious to the process of globalization that was making national economies interdependent, although it would be halted temporarily in 1914. More relevant to our world are Weber's understanding of science, ideal types, singular causality, and the relationship between science and value. Our book focuses primarily on these concepts and problems and their contemporary import.

Chapter 2 by Ned Lebow provides an overview of Weber's political life and activities and political writings. It explores his thoughts about the

state, politics, and tragedy. This analysis of Weber's political commitments and approach to domestic politics and international relations provides a useful background for the chapters that follow. Lebow argues that Weber's approach is anchored in Hegel's view of the state and Social Darwinism and its emphasis on survival of the fittest. Few, if any, twenty-first-century scholars would subscribe to his assumptions about economics and politics. His epistemology rests on different foundations: Kant and historicism. Both remain relevant to contemporary social science. Weber's approach to politics and social science offers a double cautionary tale. The inconsistency, even contradiction, between his political and scholarly commitments is hardly unique, but is all the more striking in a man who tried so hard to recognize his priors and take them into account. His failure should make us more aware of the extent to which our own normative commitments and theoretical writings are deeply embedded in and restricted by our place in society and the contemporary *Zeitgeist*.

In Chapter 3, Ned Lebow elaborates Weber's approach to knowledge in the context of controversies between historicists and positivists, and historicists and neo-Kantians. He argues that Weber sought to build on these traditions while finessing their drawbacks and limitations. The result is a definition of knowledge as causal inference about singular events that insists on the individual as its unit of analysis, uses rationality as an ideal type, and employs counterfactual thought experiments to evaluate putative causes. For many reasons this approach is no "silver bullet," but represents an imaginative and fruitful attempt to chart a more rewarding path toward knowledge in what Weber, following Dilthey, called the "cultural sciences."

Lebow contends that Weber's approach has unresolved tensions. The most important is the contradiction between his recognition of the subjective nature of the values and interests that motivate research but insistence on the objective means by which it might be conducted. Facts and values are not so easily reconciled, and Weber came to understand that they influence, if not determine, the questions we ask, the methods we choose to research them, what we consider relevant evidence, and the inferences we draw from it. Weber acknowledges that research questions are subjective, and answers too, because they depend on contextual configurations. All knowledge is ultimately cultural and local in nature. Lebow concludes by exploring some of the lessons of Weber's project and its problems for contemporary international relations theory.

In Chapter 4, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson confronts Weber's conception of the "ideal-type," a term, he contends, that is not well understood in the contemporary social sciences. All too frequently it is operationally

defined – or at least "used" – as an excuse not to expose one's conceptual equipment to any form of empirical evaluation, whether this means descriptive accuracy, explanatory utility, or something else. Simply call a dubious notion an "ideal-type," and one can deflect all manner of criticisms by suggesting that one is only making a "first cut" at some phenomenon – a "first cut" that will eventually be replaced by a better depiction.

Jackson laments this misuse of the ideal type because, for Weber, it was closely connected with an entire strategy of scholarly analysis that bears little resemblance to the neo-positivist hypothesis testing so dominant in much of contemporary social science. Ideal-typification is one part of a procedure that devalued general laws in favor of case-specific configurational explanation, eschewed universal notions of causality in favor of singular causal analysis, and preferred value clarification over the effort to rationally legislate courses of action.

Ideal-typification is the heart of Weber's methodology, and misunderstanding it as a form of "approximation" underpins a whole series of misreadings of Weber. There is something quite epistemically radical going on in Weber's rejection of the idea that theoretical concepts capture the determinate essence of their objects of analysis, and his embrace of a form of cultural relativity that links ideal types firmly to the value commitments of the scholars and scholarly communities developing and deploying them. Politics – the arena of decision, compromise, and creative action – is thus freed to be a realm in which reason can advise, but not dictate, and scholars can clarify social and political dilemmas, but not resolve them by academic fiat. To minimize this dimension of Weber's methodology is to ignore the criticism that this founding figure of the modern social sciences leveled against his contemporaries – and would level once again against much of our current academic practice.

In Chapter 5, Stefano Guzzini addresses the question of power. He argues that Weber's power analysis is at the crossroads of two different analytical domains. First, there is the domain of political theory; it is concerned with the nature of the "polity" in which questions of the organization of (organized) violence and of the common good, as well as questions of freedom, are paramount. It is where *Macht* and *Herrschaft* relate to "government" or "governance" and political order, as well as personal "autonomy." Second, there is the domain of explanatory theory, in which the purpose of power analysis is understanding behavior and the outcomes of social action. Hence, instead of relating to a theory identifying the nature of the polity, it is embedded in a theory of action and subsequently a social theory of domination. Power does not refer to

government or authority, but to terms like "agency" and "influence," if not "cause."

Weber is both a scientific protagonist for the defense of this divide and an attempt at a synthesis. Weber's synthesis mobilizes a praxeological tradition, where politics is the "art of the possible" in which collective violence is not antithetical but fundamental to politics, and where power is furthermore connected to the idea of state sovereignty and the discourse of the reason of state, including his famous ethics of responsibility. The chapter connects Weber's political ontology of existential struggle with his sociology of *Herrschaft* and with his political praxeology, by embedding it into his analysis of world politics and history.

Jens Steffek explores Max Weber's theory of modernization with a view to the study of international relations in general, and public international organizations (IOs) in particular. Most Weber scholars agree that at the core of his extensive and multifaceted writings is a theory of modernization, conceived as an answer to the question of why industrial modernity developed in the Occident and not in other parts of the world. Weber's account of modernity is focused on a process of rationalization that can be observed in changes of individual behavior and societal institutions. At the structural level, rationalization is characterized by the advance of formal law, bureaucratic forms of organization, and the increasing resort to scientific and technical expertise.

In the field of international relations, constructivist scholars have referred to some central aspects of Weber's modernization theory in their study of international organizations. They have applied Weber's account of bureaucracy to international organizations, along with the conceptually related notion of a "rational-legal" form of authority and legitimacy, typical of the modern age. However, it seems fair to say that in international relations, the reception of Weber's modernization theory has taken place in a rather piecemeal fashion. Scholars have singled out some elements from his sociology of authority, not always conscious of the overarching modernization-theoretical context in which they stand.

Steffek makes the case for a more comprehensive approach. He argues that the emergence of international organizations as an organizational form needs to be seen in the context of the expansion and professionalization of public administration that has taken place in the Occident since the nineteenth century. The universal spread of this organizational form, in particular its extensive use of formal law, eliminated arbitrariness from authoritative decisions and made them more predictable – a precondition for the emergence of industrial societies and capitalism. In his discussion of the relation between organizational form and rationalizing purpose, Steffek concentrates on the notion of

Willkür (arbitrariness, despotism) in Weber's academic and political writings. The term, he contends, is crucial for us to understand the gestalt shift of government in the process of modernization. In fact, Weber chiefly used it when contrasting ancient with modern forms of government. It is the elimination of the despotic element in decision making that makes the rationalization of government possible. As predominantly bureaucratic organizations, international organizations are destined to follow the same rationale. Their purpose is to transform the contingencies of international power politics into rule-bound decision making. His discussion ends on a cautious note. Max Weber presented the rationalizing features of bureaucratic modernity as a historical matter of fact. Steffek would qualify this account of modernity to the extent that a bureaucratic rationalization of government was always a promise and idealization, not necessarily an unambiguous historical reality.

In Chapter 7, John Hobson argues that Weber's work on historical sociology and IR was founded on a consistent West-centric base. This base comprises what he calls "Eurocentric institutionalism," which he differentiates from scientific racism. Weber's historical sociology is thoroughly Eurocentric first because it emphasizes the unique or exceptional rationalization process as enabling the rise of European modernity and second because he insisted that modernity was destined to materialize in Europe and not in the East owing to the latter's irrational institutions and culture. Hobson goes on to argue that this Eurocentrism underpins the three different approaches that can be found in Weber's writings on IR.

Hobson argues that Weber's early writings on IR were marked by a certain realism. However, in his lesser-known wartime writings, Weber became critical of realist IR and moved toward something that is reminiscent (or preemptive) of the Eurocentric rationalist wing of the English School (as in Martin Wight and Hedley Bull). Here the emphasis is on how Germany should play the key role in securing the reproduction of European international society, not least by maintaining the sovereign integrity of the smaller nations. Here Weber echoed the imperialist argument that Bull and Wight subscribed to when he argued that Germany's "responsible" role could be secured only through the implementation of imperialism in the non-Western world. Finally, the chapter closes by considering the connections between Weber's argument for the need to maintain the integrity of European international society with that proposed by the Pacifist Eugenicists, which insisted that Europe must be shored up so that it does not fall victim to the predations of the in-coming "Yellow Peril." Hobson insists that though there are some overlaps in

evidence, nevertheless Weber's approach is thoroughly Eurocentric rather than scientifically racist in nature.

Chapter 8 represents one of the many conclusions that could fittingly be offered to this volume. David Lebow and Ned Lebow explore the consequences of Weber's writings for key theorists of a succeeding generation. If Kant's shadow extended over the long nineteenth century, Weber's provided a penumbra for the twentieth. Social scientists in multiple disciplines were influenced by his thought. Lebow and Lebow examine four such thinkers: Carl Schmitt, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and Hans Morgenthau. They offer a novel take on their respective projects by comparing their responses to Weber and the ways in which it shaped their thought.

Lebow and Lebow suggest that much of what makes Weber so interesting is the deep tension in his thinking between moral subjectivity and scientific rationality. It runs through his thought, and indeed his life. Weber wrote his epistemological essays before the catastrophe of 1914 and died not long after the Weimar Republic was founded. The Weimar and Nazi eras exposed and heightened tensions of all kinds. What to Weber and his contemporaries may have appeared at most lacunae, we now see as sharp tensions, if not contradictions. His successors felt compelled to address, and resolve as far as possible, these tensions and contradictions as they posed stark and compelling dilemmas for them. None of them succeeded because the intellectual tools they inherited were inadequate to the task of addressing the dark modernity that had emerged.

Rather than resolving Weberian tensions, Schmitt, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Morgenthau accentuated them. Schmitt transformed them into absolute oppositions and warrants for excluding ethics from politics, and Adorno and Horkheimer into dialectical contradictions. Only Morgenthau managed to preserve Weber's tragic legacy, although he failed in his attempt to make it a source of political restraint. Morgenthau's robust notion of politically engaged scholarship is nevertheless more authentically Weberian than its alternatives. However, Morgenthau couched his arguments at least in part in the language of science, ironically encouraging a misreading of his works that undercut his political and epistemological objectives.

There is much to learn from Weber and his successors. Their writings represent novel and imaginative responses to modernity and its political and ethical problems. Their successes and failures in grappling with these problems help us to put them into sharper focus. They also indicate the truth of Weber's firmly held belief that all knowledge is contextual. The writings of Weber and his successors, whether addressing

bureaucracy, the state, capitalism, or international relations, are inspired and limited in equal amounts by contemporary developments. For the same reasons, they often led themselves to readings opposed to those they intended. There is little reason to suppose that we can do any better. We might nevertheless learn some important lessons about the limits and possibilities of scholarship, and develop more intellectual sophistication and humility in the process.

Notes

1. S. N. Eisenstadt, "Introduction," in Eisenstadt, ed., *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. x–xii; Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Max Weber and Modern Social Thought," in Mommsen, ed., *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 169–96 for accounts of American social science's engagement with Weber.
2. On Weber's methodological positions, see Fritz Ringer, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), chapter 3; and the essays by Guzzini, Jackson, and Lebow in this volume.
3. Weber read Nietzsche and subscribed to his "ethic of human dignity [*Vornehmheit*]," but made only one reference to him in his letters. Ringer, *Max Weber*, p. 241.
4. Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Wiley, 1974), p. 325.
5. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 178, quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*.
6. Max Weber, Inaugural Lecture, delivered in May 1805 and published as *Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik. Akademische Antrittsrede* (Freiburg and Leipzig, 1895). English translation, "The Nation State and Economic Policy," in Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs, *Weber: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1–28. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber. Collected Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), chapter 5 on Weber's critique of social democracy in Germany.
7. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Max Weber and Bureaucracy and Bureaucratization: Threat to Liberty and Instrument of Creative Action," and "Rationalization and Myth in Weber's Thought," in Mommsen, *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 109–20, 133–44.