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John Warrack

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

Men are governed by many things, climate, religion, laws, maxims of government, examples of things past, customs, manners; from all of which is derived a general spirit.

MONTESQUIEU

ON 17TH AUGUST 1786, three months before Weber was born, Frederick the Great died in his armchair at Sanssouci. He left Prussia dominating the loose confederation of some three hundred independent sovereignties, ecclesiastical states and free cities that formed the notoriously ill-named Holy Roman Empire. Germany, as a single political unit, was still eighty-five years from realization, and a political concept of much complexity; for even when the term 'German Empire' officially came in with the Hohenzollerns in 1871, divisions remained as legacy of the ancient tribal separations. Most of the major issues in German history have always in some way been connected with unification; and at no time was this longing for unity deeper or more widespread than at the turn into the nineteenth century. The threat of Napoleon proceeded to bring to boiling point nationalist feelings that were already simmering under Prussia's domination; and no study of the Romantics and their most representative composer has proper meaning unless seen against the background of this aspiration. For with the body politic in a state of decay, it was to the poets, writers, philosophers and musicians of Germany that the initiative passed and from them that the age took its characteristic colour.

Frederick's last-minute creation of a *Fürstenbund*, an association of princes for mutual protection, was inadequate to confer strength on the Empire's ailing frame, which now, after almost a thousand years, was tottering to its grave. Its bodily parts remained, preserving their outward shape though scarred by disease and senility; it was still capable of a gesture in imitation of the old grandeur, as Mozart found when he visited Frankfurt for the Coronation of Leopold II as Holy Roman Emperor in 1790; but its authority was enfeebled, its energy spent. Prussia went rapidly to seed under Friedrich Wilhelm II; and the chaos of the other states was exemplified in South Germany, where Carl Friedrich of Baden lamented, 'My neighbour of Württemberg<sup>1</sup> does his best to ruin his land and I do my best to improve mine; but neither of us succeeds.' The Electorates were often in the hands of reactionary and corrupt bishops; the Free Cities, especially Bremen, Lübeck and above all Hamburg, fared a little better; while the Imperial

<sup>1</sup> King Friedrich: see Chapter 4.

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Knights, an absurd, archaic survival, lorded it over diminutive territories that could not support themselves and indeed often became derelict. The Empire was based politically on an intricate and rusty set of anachronisms, economically on feudalist agriculture and a primitive industry still controlled by mediaeval guilds.

Yet if Germany was politically decrepit, her intellectual life was at fever pitch. The Empire could, it is true, boast a few famous institutions: Hanover supported the University of Göttingen, Saxony encouraged the book trade of Leipzig and in 1765 had founded Europe's first geological school in the Academy of Mines at Freiberg. But these few signs of grace gave no adequate representation of the tremendous throb of individual energy beneath. 'While political life was backward and anaemic,' writes G. P. Gooch, 'a vigorous intellectual activity held out the promise of better days. Wolff and Lessing, Moses Mendelssohn and Nicolai, the leaders of the *Aufklärung* . . . exhorted their countrymen to use their reason without fear; and deeper notes were struck by Kant and Herder, Hamann and Jacobi. The Augustan age of German literature opened with Klopstock. Lessing and Wieland, Kleist and Gleim, Goethe and Schiller, Lenz and Klingler, Bürger and Voss, Thummer and Salzmann, Kotzebue and Iffland poured forth a flood of poems, satires, novels and dramas, which created and delighted a reading public.'<sup>1</sup> The very lack of a centralized society favoured then, as now, the cultivation of scattered, mutually exclusive intellectual groups, as Mme. de Staël observed: 'Since there is no capital where the social life of Germany gathers, the spirit of Society has little effect; the empire of taste and the force of ridicule have no influence. Most writers and intellectuals work in solitude.'<sup>2</sup> New periodicals circulated among these groups, reflecting the growth of a fresh critical spirit which preferred the individual and his own judgement against the mentally inflexible state.

The first target of this new questioning was religious: after Lutheran dogmatism had yielded to the extravagances of Pietism, and Pietism to rationalism, it was now the turn of the human heart. But the political course it also, more significantly, took was noted by Goethe in 1790: 'Knights, robbers, an honest Tiers Etat and an infamous nobility—such are the ingredients of our novels and plays during the last ten years.' The theatre, as usual, gave warning of the attack to come; the aristocracy, as usual, either ignored it or hoped by tolerance and patronage to draw its teeth. The ferocity of the attacks on the social and political establishment makes surprising reading to those who fancy that theirs alone is the age of fresh, rebellious outspokenness.

Yet though there was a ferment of ideas, a solid tradition of political thinking to organize it was lacking. For all the brilliance of the opposition,

<sup>1</sup> G. P. Gooch: *Germany and the French Revolution*, p. 18 (1920).

<sup>2</sup> Mme. de Staël: *De l'Allemagne* (1810).

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headed as it was by such as Schiller, Lessing and Wieland, with the voice of Kant in the background, it was left to a lawyer's son and a journalist to rally the attack. Friedrich Carl Moser's *Der Herr und der Diener* drew critical attention to the problem of rulership; but more effective still was the journal founded by a certain Schlözer which scourged the nobles so relentlessly that its editor had every need of the protection guaranteed him by the government of Hamburg. The longing for a new age of brotherhood also found expression in secret societies—principally the Freemasons, who numbered among them Goethe, Herder, Lessing, Wieland and Mozart, perhaps also Voltaire; and the Illuminati, an exceedingly quaint cult founded by an idealistic charlatan, Adam Weishaupt. Each was to varying degrees oppressed. A few conservative spirits hoped to revive the failing Empire by infusing fresh vigour into old customs; this right wing to the movement of unrest was headed by Herder, but the left could boast Goethe, Schiller and Lessing and, behind them, the general weight of feeling. The whole of German idealism is connected not to a false classicism but to the Romantic movement, and takes its theoretical origins from Kant, Fichte and Schlegel. Kant's great *Critiques* are of political significance only in their influence on those writers whose voices were rousing the nation; Fichte, on the other hand, provided a direct trumpet call. He is a founder of German nationalism, and if his exhortations have a distasteful ring in view of subsequent German history, they contain at least one sound observation (as Weber and many another artist was to demonstrate) in claiming that an essential part of the German spirit lay with her simple burghers. When we acknowledge Wagner's genius in cultivating the Romantic traits of subjective eroticism, heroic legend and religious quest, we should not forget *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

There were, further, three major outside influences on this intellectual ferment. One was Rousseau, whose writings caused him virtually to be deified in Germany. Equally important, as witness of theory put into heroic action, was the American War of Independence, in which France had taken an active part against England. But crowning everything was the marvellous example of the French Revolution. It is impossible to exaggerate the emotion with which the news of this was received in Germany. Not even the Terror could stem the tide of emotion. Some excused what was happening with the argument that only fire could cleanse a plague house; others retained faith in the drama of revolution while deploring the clumsiness of the performers; a group of conservatives, such as the poet Gleim and the famous traveller Carsten Niebuhr, mistrusted the whole thing and blamed the secret societies; few, in a Europe inexperienced in revolution, were percipient enough to see that what had happened in France (as well as the reactions to it) was to be an example for well over a century to come. On the whole, the aristocrats naturally feared the revolution, the burghers applauded and were then

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shocked by the turn of events, intellectuals managed to formulate arguments to justify their faith, and the peasants began wondering if they too might take matters into their own hands. In a few cases they actually did so briefly; but admiration did not generally inspire imitation. As a mere bundle of states, Germany could not easily take national action; feudalism, though incompetent, was seldom as oppressive as in France; and as Mme. de Staël observed, ‘The Germans combine the greatest audacity of thought with the most obedient character.’<sup>1</sup> Respect for religious and civic traditions held good.

But the events following 1789 left Germany permanently changed. Her political decline was hastened: after the Congress of Rastadt ceded the left bank of the Rhine, Görres wrote his sarcastic obituary of the invalid who had lingered too long:

On 30th December 1797, at three in the afternoon, the Holy Roman Empire, supported by the Sacraments, passed away peacefully at Regensburg at the age of 955, in consequence of senile debility and an apoplectic stroke. The deceased was born at Verdun in the year 842, and educated at the Court of Charles the Simple and his successors. The young prince was taught piety by the Popes, who canonized him in his lifetime. But his tendency to a sedentary life, combined with a zeal for religion, undermined his health. His head became visibly weaker, until at last he went mad in the Crusades. Frequent bleedings and careful diet restored him; but, reduced to a shadow, the invalid tottered on through the centuries till violent haemorrhage occurred in the Thirty Years’ War. Hardly had he recovered when the French arrived, and a stroke put an end to his sufferings. He kept himself unstained by the *Aufklärung*, and bequeathed the left bank of the Rhine to the French Republic.

The way was open for an upsurge of national and individual emotion in which poets and musicians, now replacing Church and State, set about voicing the aspirations of an emergent middle class—a major part of the movement of feeling we call Romanticism. There could be no more exciting time into which might be born a composer with an inherited love of the theatre, a naturally acute sensibility, an instinct for his country’s scenery, legends and hopes, and a distinct personal flamboyance. His failings, some of them purely of physique, were to prevent the realization of all the promise stored up in him: he was a slow developer, and all his music is early music. But his very weaknesses give Weber something of his essential virtues; and though he cannot, like Beethoven, transcend his age in solitary greatness, by being so intimately bound up with it he expresses it more completely, both helping to form it and taking his characteristic colour from it. Germany was rediscovering its essential spirit; like a well-tuned violin string, which has lain slack and has not yet tautened to hysterical pitch and finally snapped,

<sup>1</sup> Mme. de Staël: *op. cit.*

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it was in a state of ideal tension, to the skilled musician giving forth its truest note.

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Weber's son Max Maria always believed that the family was descended from one Johann Baptist Weber, a Doctor of Jurisprudence born in about 1550 and heir to considerable estates in the Pisemberg and Krumbach districts of Austria. In 1622 he was given a barony by Ferdinand II, becoming a Lower Austrian government chancellor in 1642. His only direct descendant was a daughter, though his younger brothers probably left landed property outside Austria; one of these, Joseph Franz Weber, was supposedly the composer's ancestor. Traces of this line disappeared in the Thirty Years' War, to re-emerge in the Upper Rhineland in the War of the Austrian Succession.

These beliefs were repeated from Max Maria<sup>1</sup> in all Weber literature until 1913, when Arthur Schurig pointed out the unreliability of Max Maria's work.<sup>2</sup> The question was taken up by Rudolf Blume,<sup>3</sup> who cast doubts upon the descent from Johann Baptist and suggested that Weber's grandfather Fridolin had been superintendent of the Imperial armoury at Freiburg and later steward at Schönau, marrying first Katharina Baumgartner and then Eva Maria Schlar. These matters rested until what seems to be the final truth was established in a genealogical study by Friedrich Hefe.<sup>4</sup>

Hefe discovered that the background of the Weber family was considerably more humble than the composer and his son had been led to believe. Their earliest known ancestor seems to have been one Hans Georg Weber, originally a miller's boy at Stetten. In 1678 he married a widow, Kunigunde Has; she died in 1699 and he shortly married Maria von Stein (possibly his employer's *schöne Müllerin* daughter). Most of his fifteen children died early: of them three were named Anna, two Fridolin, three Maria, three Johann Jacob and two Joseph. Hans Georg is known to have been a godfather 23 times over, a sure sign of respect and popularity. He died in 1704, leaving, among his surviving children, a son Fridolin, born in 1691. Intended for the priesthood, Fridolin was sent at the age of 15 to study at the Ludovica Albertina University in Freiburg; hence he graduated as *baccalaureus philosophiae*. His first position was as tutor to the son of the local baron of Stetten, Franz Ignaz von Schönau. It was a difficult post: the boy suffered from persistent ill-health, and despite every care from Fridolin, who sat with him day and night, he died in 1712. On top of this disaster the family

<sup>1</sup> MMW, Vol. I, pp. 4–6.

<sup>2</sup> Schurig: *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (1913).

<sup>3</sup> Blume: *Freiburg im Breisgau, der Geburtsort der Gemahlin und des Vaters Carl Maria von Webers* (1917).

<sup>4</sup> Hefe: *Die Vorfahren Carl Maria von Webers* (1926).

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fell seriously into debt, and Fridolin was compelled to look for a new post. This he found in 1721 as a steward in Zell, where he married a barber's daughter from Freiburg, the 27-year-old Maria Eva Schlar.

This marriage brought into the family some French blood, a fact which has been held responsible for the brilliant element in Weber's music. Maria Eva's father was one Lorenz Chelar from Gingham (probably either Guignen in the Dep. Ille-et-Vilaine in Lower Brittany or Guingamp in the Dep. Côtes du Nord). Freiburg contained at that time a considerable French minority: the scene of many battles in the Thirty Years' War, it had changed hands often, been the subject of a particularly strong migration in the years 1677 to 1697, and finally been relinquished by the French at the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1744. It was about the year 1695 that Lorenz Chelar had come to find work as a barber. He married Susanna Oxenriedin, whose family has been traced back to the last third of the 16th century and to Swiss stock from the French-speaking part of the Canton of Basel. Maria Eva, the youngest of his three children, was born on 6th April 1698, less than a month after her father's death. She was brought up by her mother, who by the end of the year had married another French barber, Michael Jullin.

When the War of the Polish Succession broke out in 1733, the Baron asked Fridolin to take the lease of his estate; and despite the difficulty of the times, this Fridolin agreed to do. The struggle between the great powers flowed over Fridolin's new estates, which suffered equally from the Imperial and the French troops. The people of Zell refused to pay their contribution to the French, who promptly arrested a number of hostages, among them Fridolin, whom they held prisoner for thirty-eight days until payment was made. But his freedom was bought hard: the difficulties arising from the debt caused friction with the Baron that developed into a series of legal wrangles not finally settled until 1750, ruining Fridolin in the process. In 1732 he requested citizenship of Freiburg, and here he lived until his death in 1754.

Fridolin's children were five in number—Maria Johanna Adelheid (1729?–1807), Fridolin II (1733?–1779), Franz Anton, father of the composer (1734?–1812), Maria Eva Magdalena (1739–1791), and Johann Nepomuk Fidel Felizian (1740–?). There was a tradition in the family that Fridolin I had played the violin and the organ and was a gifted singer; certainly a musical strain revealed itself in Fridolin II, who also had a good voice and who played the violin well. His love of music led him to leave his stewardship for a musical post in Mannheim, where he was pianist, perhaps had a job as bass player, and is known to have been especially busy as a copyist and choral répétiteur. His daughters Josepha, Aloisia and Sophie were singers—Aloisia was already famous at 15 and became prima donna at the Vienna Hofoper when 19—while the fourth sister, Mozart's future wife Constanze, was also a singer and a pianist. Nothing is known of Fridolin I's

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four other children, except Franz Anton. Not only the musical gifts but a strain of restlessness began to show in him: Hans Georg had been the miller's boy whose *Lust* was traditionally *das Wandern*; Fridolin I spent most of his life on the move; and in Franz Anton this, combined with a distinct instability of character, degenerated into a fecklessness in which the family intelligence became little more than sharpness of wit.<sup>1</sup>

There is, so far, no question of the prefix 'von'. Certainly Max Maria genuinely believed that his family was noble, and quotes a deed of 1738 whereby Carl VI bestowed on 'the brothers Fridolin and Xaver Weber' the 1622 barony conferred on Dr. Johann Baptist Weber. This has crept into at least two German heraldic books,<sup>2</sup> which claim that the brothers Weber took Dr. Weber's arms, a divided shield with on the left a silver moon on a gold ground, on the right a golden star on a blue ground. On the other hand there is no trace of this in other volumes. In any case, Fridolin I knew nothing of this. His son Fridolin II was, it is true, described as *nobilis* on his marriage in 1756; but *nobilis*, in an age replete with titles, was not at all the same thing as *adelig*. Councillors and professors were addressed as *hochedelgeboren*, upper class students as *wohledel und wohlgelehrt*, distinguished citizens as *edel* or *wohledel* and so forth—courtesy titles of the kind that still survive in the formal addressing of letters in various countries, as with our own 'Esq.' The deed of 1738 has not proved traceable. There are many noble Webers in lists of the Austrian nobility, but no deeds for these Webers; while as for the coat of arms—this was affected by many citizens.

But upon the usages concerning coats of arms a crucial point hangs. In 1743 Fridolin Weber I signed a receipt for 666 thalers, and in the following year a letter, using a seal. The helmet shown on this is the *Stechhelm*, the closed steel helmet (shown sideways) resembling the English squire's helm, and not the *Spangenhelm*, the barred helm reserved in England for the sovereign and princes of the royal blood. Originally a helmet was indeed a sign of nobility. But in the Holy Roman Empire, 'the pressure for the use of the helmet was great on the part of those burghers whose arms were unrecognized as having any nobiliary or patrician value at all . . . Owing to this pressure for the use of a helmet, a stage was reached in some realms when the non-nobles could not be denied the use of a helmet and so we find them being

<sup>1</sup> Carl Maria passed this wandering strain on to his son, and biographer, Max Maria (1822–1881), a gifted writer who joined the Rhine and Saxon Railways and rose to be a Ministry official. He visited North Africa, Vienna and Berlin, later travelling as foreign trade representative in England, France, Scandinavia and North America, whence he was recalled in 1880. He inherited none of his father's musical gifts, though he was enough of a Weber to produce a work on railways and nationalism (1876). Carl Maria's younger son, Alexander Heinrich Victor Maria (1825–1844) was a promising painter whose work includes a good drawing of Max Maria.

<sup>2</sup> *Knecht's Deutsches Adelslexicon* and *Stammbuch des blühenden und abgestorbenen Adels in Deutschland*.

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allowed a closed helmet, while an open helmet was considered the prerogative of the noblesse.<sup>1</sup> Since the sixteenth century, in fact, the *Spangenhelm* had been used by nobles and doctors, the *Stechhelm* by burghers; and with the decline of heraldry in the eighteenth century, even these distinctions were often ignored. It follows, then, that if the Webers had really been noble, they would never have used the lower-ranking *Stechhelm*, as Fridolin did on his seals. The Breisgau ancestors of Carl Maria knew nothing of any nobility in their family; nor did Fridolin II, who only a few months before his death, in 1779, signed himself Hofmusikus Fridolin Weber (without a 'von'). Everything, then, points to Franz Anton as the culprit; and certainly the pretence at nobility accords entirely with his character.

Franz Anton Weber was, as we have seen, Fridolin I's second son. He was born not in Freiburg, as is often declared, but in Zell.<sup>2</sup> He began his career as a Lieutenant in the Palatinate Army, fought in the Seven Years' War, and may have been wounded during Frederick the Great's famous lightning victory at Rossbach over superior Allied numbers on 5th November 1757; he is said to have carried his violin into battle with him. Max Maria, however, states that he was already at Hildesheim by then, engaged to be married to the daughter of his chief. Certainly in the same year, according to the State archives of Hanover, the Elector Clemens August of Cologne (who at that time occupied various sees including that of Hildesheim) gave by decree to Maria Anna Fumetti, the eldest daughter of the Court financial councillor, the stewardship of Steuerwald; this carried with it the understanding that she should marry someone of good report so that he might be appointed steward. Franz Anton married her in 1758; three months later he wrote to the Elector, thanking him for the appointment and requesting also the directorship of the establishment at Hildesheim. To this the Elector agreed, in the face of objections from Hildesheim itself that nothing was known of Franz Anton's capabilities; and later he intervened to insist on the appointment becoming effective forthwith. Franz Anton retained the post for ten years. He was eventually dismissed in 1768 by Clemens August's successor, Bishop Friedrich Wilhelm, with an annual pension of 200 Reichsthaler for the education of his children. The grounds for his dismissal are not known, though in a later decree the Bishop speaks of them as just; nor is there other evidence of his stewardship except that he quarrelled with his inferiors. But even Max Maria records Franz Anton's habit of playing his violin on long

<sup>1</sup> Robert Gayre: *The Nature of Arms*, p. 119 (1961).

<sup>2</sup> The Freiburg University register gives Franz Anton as having been born there; but there is no entry in any church register, and in any case Fridolin was steward in Zell from 1721 to 1738. Franz Anton's younger sister and brother (born in 1739 and 1740) are both entered in a Freiburg church register. The Zell church registers have been burnt, so that no exact date for his birth is available. Carl Maria never refers to his father's birthday nor mentions it, like others, in his diary, although he was a dutiful son. Max Maria presumed that the date was 1734.



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walks when the papers on his desk lay in dust and confusion. His appeal to have the pension continued in 1784, after the death of his wife, was refused; it was transferred to his brother-in-law Fumetti von Winzenburg. But meanwhile Franz Anton was calling himself von Weber, even though named simply Weber in the Elector's decrees: the first mention of the 'von' is in his dismissal notice. From everything we know of him, it is typical that he should have assumed this false title. Max Maria describes him as 'conceited and ambitious, boastful and bragging, reckless and eccentric and untruthful.' It seems to have been no exaggeration. Though never more than a Lieutenant, he allowed himself to be addressed as Major in Salzburg in 1797; while in Stuttgart in 1809 and Mannheim in 1811 he described himself as Baron (*Freiherr*) and Chamberlain (*Kammerherr*). Clearly he encouraged everyone, even within his family circle, to regard him as a noble: Carl Maria inherited the belief in perfectly good faith, and his aunt Adelheid, Franz Anton's sister, styled herself Baroness. It is thus through usage, not inheritance, that the composer retains his 'von'.

From Steuerwald, Franz Anton went on to become music director in Lübeck in 1778, and in the following year he took up a post as *Kapellmeister* to the Prince Bishop of Lübeck in the little town of Eutin. On a visit to Vienna to hand his sons Fritz and Franz Edmund over to Haydn as pupils, he met Genovefa Brenner; and there he married her on 20th August 1785 with the composer Righini and the actor Lange—later Aloisia's husband—as witnesses. Genovefa had originally come from the region of Kaufbeuren in Swabia. Her father was Markus Brenner, a peasant turned cabinet-maker who eventually became chief cabinet-maker to the Bishops Joseph and Wenceslas of Augsburg, whose summer residence was the Castle of Oberdorf. In 1749, when 19, he was apprenticed to Leonhard Fischer (maker of the famous high altar at Oberdorf), and in the same year married Viktoria Hinterland. Genovefa was their fourth child, born at Markt-Oberdorf on 2nd January 1764. Her paternal grandfather was a peasant, Johann Brenner; her maternal grandfather was Georg Hinderlang, a 'distinguished hunter and an excellent man' according to the church register. Genovefa was 21 when she met Franz Anton, 'blonde, blue-eyed, pretty and calm' according to Max Maria, as melancholy and dreamy as her fellow Swabian, Kleist's Käthchen von Heilbronn. She was also a singer of some experience and talent (she had visited Naples, probably as a member of a musical troupe, when only 10), a fact which was made use of by Franz Anton, when, tiring of arranging music for consecrations and wedding receptions in his capacity as town musician of Eutin, he formed a theatrical troupe with his family as backbone and set out on his travels across Germany.

All the foregoing is more than documentary obligation in preparing the way for a study of the composer. In it we find several vital strands beginning to converge. That Weber was not of the aristocracy is itself of some import-

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ance. As we have seen, the lower and middle classes from which he really sprang were beginning to emerge as the dominant class of the new Europe, guardians of the spirit of liberty and the source of most of the Romantic artists. A little further back, Weber was of country stock—his four great-grandfathers were miller, surgeon-barber, peasant and huntsman—and Romanticism is also largely the revolt of the country against the town, of the awe-inspiring and irrational qualities in Nature against the order and reason of society. Part of the change from the Enlightenment towards Romanticism is from moderation and intelligent scepticism to an enjoyment of violence and the irrational for its own sake as well as for the exciting new vistas of feeling it opened up. Weber was, by birth alone, very much a man of his time.