STEPHEN P. TURNER

Introduction

Max Weber is widely regarded as the greatest figure in the history of the social sciences, and like Karl Marx or Adam Smith, who might be regarded as rivals to this title, Weber was much more than a disciplinary scholar. There is a demotic Weber, whose ideas have passed into common currency; a students' Weber, who is a founding figure of sociology or the theorist of modernity; a scholar's Weber, who is the creator of core ideas that have influenced the development of various specialties and whose specialized writings are is still debated within these specialties; a canonical "Weber" who is the subject of a scholarly industry, and, so to speak, a "deep" Weber, who has been the subject of the serious and continued reflection of several of the greatest intellectual figures of the century. Unlike Smith and Marx, there is no "ideological Weber": no one has turned Weber's thought directly into a political world view and set of policy recipes for the consumption of the general public. But there is a very important "political Weber" whose account of the morality of political life has influenced many politicians and political thinkers and remain central to questions about the nature of political responsibility.

The practiced ear can find echoes of Weber in the most diverse places – from the commonplace notion of "the Protestant Work Ethic" to the ubiquitous modern use of the term charisma, to the idea of bureaucratization. But the echoes can also be heard in many more recondite settings – from Harvey Mansfield's defense of George Bush as a particularly pure example of adherence to the ethic of responsibility in politics to Helmut Schmidt's earlier invocation of the same idea in German politics, to Octavio Paz who used the image of Weberian rationalization in attempting to understand the puzzle of the difference between the United States and Mexico. Weber, put simply, is one of the sources of our culture, and a source at the highest as well as the lowest level.

One can begin to gauge the significance of Weber by listing the huge variety of ideas and phenomena that the term "Weberian" has been used as

a synonym for, or to modify. "Weberian" is widely used to signify such things as these: an approach to the study of social life and history in which institutions, particularly the state, are given causal significance and autonomy; as a synonym for interpretative or hermeneutic inquiries as opposed to positivist social science; as a name for the type which the modern rationalized western social order exemplifies and the world view of modernity with which it is associated; as a way of thinking about the subject matter of the social sciences by ordering the fundamental division between things that have histories and things that have natures in terms of the difference between what we can understand and what we can explain; as a way of seeing religion from the underside of its practical consequences in the everyday life and especially the economic life of individuals; as a way of seeing international politics as a struggle between competing interests and irreconcilable "ideal interests"; as a way of seeing political ethics and the morality of politics in terms of the distinction between responsibility and conscience; and as a way of seeing the state itself as an order resting, sometimes precariously, on legitimating beliefs.

The sheer diversity of these uses, the frequently subterranean character of the paths from Weber to their users, and the apparent but mystifying conflicts in the attitudes that inform them lead us to the puzzle of Weber himself. It might seem to be an easy task to tie up the various ideas into a more or less coherent package, and to discover a hidden essence that informs the whole of the work. This is the simplifier's Weber. Yet even the simplifications are not simple. Weber is pre-eminently a theorist of modernity and a modernist in his rational acceptance of the inevitability of rationalization. In this form Weber, through the American sociological theorist Talcott Parsons, is the source of much that figures in the conventional notion of "development" that the west has applied in the last fifty years to its "Others." Weber was certainly among the first to understand that the nineteenth-century alternatives of socialism and capitalism necessarily shared the same means, bureaucratic rationalization, and were thus more similar than different. But even Weber the theorist of modernity proves elusive. The "rationalistic" development of Weber's thought is matched by an anti-rationalist side. The notions of choice and commitment to world views that figure in existentialism and ultimately in post-modernism have sources in Weber's: the post-modern condition was well-described in his essay "Science as Vocation." Here Weber appears as a Cassandra and a critic of modernity.

The terrible inadequacy of this kind of simplification of Weber's thought is shown by the depth of reflection on Weber. His thought was the subject of long, and intellectually formative, reflection by such a

diverse group of major figures of twentieth-century intellectual history as the existentialist philosopher, Karl Jaspers, the French sociologist and political commentator Raymond Aron (who, ironically, was the intellectual counterweight to another existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre), the doyen of post-war American foreign policy thinking Hans Morgenthau, Parsons and Edward Shils (each of whom developed his ideas in different directions). And he was also a subject of deep reflections by his opponents. Leo Strauss read and attacked Weber, but recognized at the same time that the challenge Weber posed to political philosophy was of the deepest significance – deeper than the ideology of the market or the ideology of opposition to the market. It goes without saying that only a thinker of extraordinary profundity could carry the weight of all this reflection. But merely listing these thinkers suggests that treating Weber "as a whole" and regarding portions of his work as portions of a doctrinal whole, that is to say treating him like a Leibniz or Descartes, would lead not to a single, deep understanding of Weber, but to a series of fundamentally incompatible deep interpretations.

I have not mentioned Weber the scholar, who as a young legal historian read thousands of medieval contracts in various languages to write a dissertation on medieval trading companies prior to the legal creation of the limited liability company, who in the middle of his life learned Russian in a few months in order to follow, and write on, the beginnings of revolutionary upheaval, and who, in his last decade, absorbed vast amounts of scholarship on the religions of Asia to write the relevant chapters for his *Economic Ethic of the World Religions*. This Weber is both the most impressive and the most difficult to know. Necessarily, the most central task that a *Companion* to Weber can address is to make sense of this Weber, the endlessly energetic working scholar. The sociologist Arthur Stinchcombe has commented that the best of Weber's companions was Max Rheinstein, who annotated a translation of the section of *Economy and Society* on the sociology of law. Rheinstein, he says, is

> clearly a mind of the same order of magnitude as Weber himself. He has treated Weber's text as a statement about the world, and . . . compared the text with the world. He is the only annotator who sometimes says, "Here Weber seems to be mistaken," and then goes on to say what the facts of the case are and what it means for the theoretical point under discussion.

In contrast, he notes, Parsons compares Weber only to other theorists, and members of the Weber industry treat "the text as a reflection of Weber's mind rather than the world . . . staying within the sacred tradition without

saying how that tradition relates to the world."[1] These remarks set a high but not inappropriate standard for understanding Weber as a working scholar. But it is a standard that can be approximated today only by allowing for the fact that scholarship has moved on in the fifty years since Rheinstein worked, and the tasks of interpretation and commentary have become more rather than less difficult.

The problem of assessing Weber as a scholar, that is to say of saying whether he was right, is now inseparable from the problem of interpreting Weber and of interpreting and evaluating subsequent scholarship. Rheinstein himself was close enough to the intellectual world of Weber to be comfortable in the belief that he understood Weber. Today, to say whether Weber is right requires that one understand him, and this means both understanding a past world of scholarship and understanding the alternative ways in which the world has been described and interpreted since this world vanished. Connected to this problem is the difficult matter of specialization. A *Companion* needs to supply a guide to complex and sometimes exotic secondary literature rooted in disciplinary traditions that have long diverged. A difficult balance must be struck between the problem of interpretation and the problem of evaluation. It should be said that there are many excellent texts which are companions to Weber in a sense that is congruent with a long engagement with Weber's thought from, so to speak, the inside. These texts are valuable: it is absurd to think that a thinker who was the product of the previous century and a scholarly milieu that has long since disappeared can be adequately read as a contemporary. In any case, Weber scholarship is not easy to do on any other basis than long-term continuous engagement and reflection. Nevertheless, the reader who wishes to know whether Weber is right or wrong and wishes to form an independent understanding and evaluation of Weber needs something more: critical distance.

The goal of critical distance must, given the internal diversity of Weber's work and the disciplinary diversity of the secondary literature, be approached in a variety of ways. *The Cambridge Companion to Weber* is divided into sections reflecting general areas of concern: rationality, rationalization, and psychology; politics and culture; religions and their economic ethics; and law and economics, reflecting Weber's writings. But the chapters fall into several distinct types. Some chapters are explications of Weber's writings, either in their historical and biographical context or in relation to present concerns, or both. Some are presented "from the inside,"

[1] Arthur Stinchcombe, *Stratification and Organization: Selected Papers*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 286–287.

others explicitly "from the outside." Jon Elster and Alan Sica consider, respectively, Weber's model of rational action and thesis of rationalization. Elster's perspective is contemporary and from the outside, from modern rational choice theory and its concerns with such themes as emotion; Sica makes some similar points from the inside, and from the perspective of the secondary literature on Weber. They show that Weber was as concerned about the limits of rationality and rationalization as he was about the processes themselves. Wolfgang Schluchter, writing from perhaps the most profound engagement with Weber of any living scholar, examines one of the most neglected aspects of Weber's career that is closely connected to this dual concern: his attempt to examine empirically the work process of a modern industry in terms of variables like fatigue. The importance and relevance of this aspect of Weber's work will be discussed below, for it points to a major error in the way Weber has been understood by some of his sociologist admirers.

In the next section, Peter Lassman and Lawrence Scaff provide basic overviews and explications of Weber's key concepts in the area of culture and politics. Guenther Roth examines Weber's thinking on ethnicity and nationality. Each of these essays is both historically sensitive and written with an eye to present relevance. Lassman and Scaff both abstract a set of core ideas from a number of diverse texts and show the consistency of Weber's thought on these topics. Roth shows the coherence of his thought on a major issue of the twentieth century, nationalism and ethnicity, and how these ideas appear in a range of contexts, from his explicitly academic writing to his political journalism and his private letters. This essay does a great deal to capture the flavor and texture of Weber's thought, and also shows the deep interrelations between his private thinking and his scholarly thinking on what remains a major issue in Europe and the world.

Weber's work has been a fecund source of controversy, and several of the remaining chapters are histories of these controversies, and this is another means of gaining critical distance. John Love, in two chapters, examines the complexities of the disputes over Weber's discussions of Asian religion and the economic ethic associated with it, and the separate dispute over ancient Judaism. These disputes are important to understanding Weber's mode of analysis, but they have been carried out in specialist settings that are for the most part inaccessible to the ordinary reader, and too often have been concerned not with what Weber actually said, but with caricatures of the argument. Sven Eliaeson examines Weber's political career and thinking by focusing on his extended meditation on the problem of creating constitutional structures that allow for political leadership, an area of

especially important controversy that has been central to the political reputation of Weber in Germany.

Another type of chapter is concerned with specific areas to which Weber contributed, and is written by specialists in these areas. The subsequent development of these fields provides another means of gaining critical distance. The complex debate over Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and his writings on religion has continued in various forms and settings throughout this century. It is one of the greatest and longest running of all academic controversies. Alastair Hamilton's judicious analysis of the dispute shows why the issue has not died: despite the elusiveness of the thesis, it grasps a deep historical truth. Harold Berman and Charles Reid examine Weber as a historian of law – a topic that formed a large proportion of Weber's actual writing – and show some ways in which Weber was selective in his coverage, even in connection with issues which were central to him, such as the impact of Protestantism. Stanley Engerman examines Weber's troubled relationship to subsequent economic history, and shows where Weber anticipated later concerns. Finally, Wilfried Nippel examines Weber's relationship to the discipline of ancient history, in an essay combining explication and analysis of controversy with a discussion of Weber's influence on the area.

Several issues that have loomed large in past writing about Weber have been given less emphasis in this collection, because of considerations of space. The topic of Weber's sociology of economic institutions is indirectly touched on by several of the contributions but, as Stanley Engerman notes, is not developed in his chapter. An excellent survey of this topic is available, however, Richard Swedberg's *Max Weber and the Idea of Economic Sociology*.[2] Weber's occasional writing, and especially his political journalism on Russia, are not examined. The publication of texts, especially letters, in the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* has greatly clarified Weber's views on politics. But the sheer quantity and contextual complexity of this material make it difficult to handle in the format of a *Companion* volume.[3] There is also no direct discussion in the *Companion* of Weber interpreted as a fully realized normative political theorist, though this remains a vital part

[2] Richard Swedberg, *Max Weber and the Idea of Economic Sociology*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

[3] Detailed discussions of Weber's political activity are available elsewhere. Wolfgang Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890–1920*, trans. Michael S. Steinberg, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1974] 1984 remains the definitive survey, and is also a highly accessible work. The newly published letters, to the extent that they add to or alter Mommsen's picture, have not been comprehensively surveyed, but Roth's chapter in this *Companion* does elucidate a key example of the kind of issues raised by these letters, as well as his political journalism and his practical political thinking.

of the Weber literature, as shown by Peter Breiner's recent *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*.[4] It must be said that Weber himself never wrote explicitly as a normative political theorist; consequently the issues in connection with these interpretations are somewhat different in character from cases in which there was a specific scholarly literature with which he was engaged and which responded to him.

Perhaps the most significant decision, however, was to omit any detailed discussion of Weber as a methodological thinker. A very large part of the critical literature on Weber, from the earliest commentaries, has focused on his account of the nature of what he called the "historical sciences," and treated Weber as a philosopher – a title he never claimed. Two major discussions of the large secondary literature on these topics exist, however, and, again, both are accessible to the general reader. Bruun's book on value in Weber's thought is still unsurpassed.[5] Sven Eliaeson will soon publish a comprehensive review of the literature on Weber's methodological thinking, *Max Weber's Methodologies*,[6] which will provide a comparable service for this very complex side of Weber's thought. Some acquaintance with Weber's methodological views and value theory is essential, however, and I will furnish a brief overview of them in the rest of this introduction, and attempt as well to shed some light on the core of his normative political thinking.

Weber applied to Weber

Understanding Weber and Weber's work today is an intellectual puzzle which Weber himself would have relished, for it illustrates his fundamental methodological argument, especially concerning the historically relative nature of social science thinking. In the remainder of the introduction, I will describe this argument and examine some of its premises. These premises have to do with values, and are the source of Weber's relativism. His applications of these ideas to the value choices faced by scholars and politicians are among the most telling and powerful of his writings. They appeared in a series of writings that were collected posthumously as the

[4] Peter Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.

[5] H. H. Bruun, *Science, Values, and Politics in Max Weber's Methodology*, Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1972.

[6] Sven Eliaeson, *Max Weber's Methodologies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, forthcoming. The recent book by Fritz Ringer, *Max Weber's Methodology: the Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, cannot be recommended. Criticisms of this book may be found in a review symposium in *The International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*12 (2), 1998.

Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre, and known as the *Wissenschaftslehre* (*GAW*). The most important of these are his essays "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy" and "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics," collected and translated in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (*MSS*).

Weber's is perhaps the most vivid and coherent formulation of the problem of historical relativism as it arises in the social sciences (or, as he called them, the historical sciences). He posed the problem in this way: if the occupants of different historical epochs have different worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*), and if worldviews are compounded of or ultimately based on value choices that are themselves ultimate (in the sense that they are not subject to additional justifications that would be persuasive to those committed to other ultimate values), then to exist in a historical period and to conceive of one's world in accordance with its worldview is to have made an implicit value choice. If, in addition, worldviews have the function of constituting the objects of interest to us as analysts (that is to say, if they constitute the things that we want to explain, such as the early capitalist's act of saving), then the historical facts that are objects of explanation for us may well not be objects, or objects with the same significance or meaning, for others, in other historical epochs governed by other worldviews.

These apparently simple premises place the participant in the historical sciences, the analyst, in the following difficulty. If we are to explain the early capitalist's act as though it were our kind of act, that is to say, to give it the kind of meaning that those of us in a particular epoch would give it if we were to perform the act, we may be simply reinventing or reconstruing the act in such a way that it no longer has the meaning that it had to the person who performed it. The naive historian who does this will simply make the actions of figures in the historical past strange and unintelligible. But even the most sophisticated historian can be misled when an agent with a different worldview merely appears superficially to be acting in accordance with our way of thinking about what we do. In either case, there is a failure of historical understanding.

Our dilemma is that we have no alternative to the project of understanding people in, so to speak, our own terms. We have no other starting point than "our" way of constituting the objects of analysis. Of course, we can admit that we are trapped inside our worldview, and concede that there is nothing we can do to understand the early capitalist but to understand him in our terms, even if this perhaps means understanding in a way that has nothing to do with the way he and his contemporaries understood these actions. The other is to claim that we as historians *can* successfully enter into the mind of the early capitalist. But this claim seems inevitably to rely

on intuition, and it is difficult to see how historical evidence can decide between rival intuitions. One way out of this dilemma would be scientistic: to dispense with "understanding," look for causal laws that provide explanations, and ignore questions about the significance or meaning of action, on the grounds that such questions are inherently valuative and therefore unscientific. Causal laws, however, do not come in our everyday terminology: just as in natural science, we would have to construct a new language of description, and new concepts of a type different from the concepts familiar to us from our own social experience.

Weber rejects each of these options. He dismisses the "no significance" alternative by considering the best case for it, and points out that even if this alternative were feasible and we could produce laws, as we can in the natural sciences, the results would be in the form of concepts that do not allow us to answer the kinds of questions that we as historical scientists or social scientists pose. We want to answer such questions as "why did modern capitalism emerge and come to dominate the world?" We have no idea what sorts of concepts the "no significance" social scientist might find to express her laws in, but "capitalism," for example, is not the kind of term she could use. The concept does not even arise in the worldview of, for example, people in subsistence economies, or even people in the past of Europe and the classical world. It is a term that arose, relatively recently, within our "worldview," and it is a category that has valuative significance, negatively or positively, to us.

We are trapped by the implicitly valuative and historically limited character of the kinds of questions we wish to ask. Nevertheless, if we recognize the existence of differences in worldviews, between, for example, the time of the Reformation and our own, we raise the possibility that these different worldviews can themselves be understood. We can construct models, both of human action and of worldviews, that we can systematically evaluate by comparing them to the evidence we have about the worldviews of others and about the course of their action. Assessing actions and modeling worldviews turn out to go together. To understand the actions of the early capitalist it is necessary to understand his values and the worldview that informs and embodies these values, such as asceticism. To fail to understand asceticism is to be cut off from our subject. But how can we understand it? We must begin with our own understood world, and with models of action behavior derived from our own social experience and employing the kinds of explanations we give of the actions of one another. In both the case of worldviews and the case of actions, we are compelled by the sheer complexity of the material to think in terms of typifications or models with which we can communicate our

findings. We can construct these typifications explicitly, aiming at clarity, through abstractions that are necessarily also simplifications. We can then explain the typifications to our own contemporaries so that they can share a model of the early Protestant worldview.

So there is an activity of conceptualization and conceptual construction that is appropriate to the social sciences. The problem is that the significance of these models is readily misconstrued. The models of rationality we apply to economic actions may be historically very robust, that is to say they apply across and within a variety of contexts. We can show how the early capitalist's actions were rational, in the sense of being in accordance with a broader model of rational action, once we have identified his aims and connected them to his worldview. We may even be able to construct ideal-types that facilitate explanation, and they may be so clear and compelling that they outlast the very worldviews whose problems they were originally designed to solve. The models or typifications are simply tools that enable us, with our worldview and with the historical questions that can arise within it, to explain the actions of others. They have no foundation or claim to "correspond to reality" beyond these uses.

It was in this spirit that Weber offered his own conceptual constructions, such as his ideal-types of authority. Of course, they have proven to be applicable long after the academic milieu and political culture of elitist liberal pessimism that motivated their construction vanished into history. There is no assurance that they will be equally useful in the future. Though Weber's account of the worldview of the early capitalist motivated by religious anxiety was one of the most compelling, and controversial, reconstructions of a worldview ever composed, one may ask whether it will retain its utility indefinitely. Even now, it seems, audiences for whom religion has lost its significance have difficulty grasping Weber's account. This is, potentially, the fate of all such models: they serve particular audiences, for particular purposes of understanding; when these purposes change, their utility may vanish, and indeed so may their intelligibility.

Weber's texts themselves have the same difficulties for us that Weber believed actions have for the historical analyst generally. To understand them, we must reconstruct the contexts that motivated them, and to do this we must in some sense idealize and typify them, and also use these typifications to see what problems Weber thought his arguments solved. The problems they solved are not entirely alien to us. But neither are they precisely the same. This should be taken as a danger signal for interpreters. "Contextualism" is only a partial solution: Weber himself would have observed that appeals to context" are equally subject to the dangers of ideal-typical reification (c.f. *MSS* 96).