

Max Weber (1864-1920)

Max Weber has long been recognized as one of the founders of modern sociology. His theoretical works continue to provide elaboration and clarification of the logical and epistemological foundations of social science, while many of the problems he explored have remained central to social research--such as the nature and causes of capitalist development, the sources and forms of political power, and the specific role of ideal or cultural factors as determinants of social action. Weber took pains to define his concepts clearly and precisely, and many of them--for instance, charisma and rationalization--have become part of the standard vocabulary of social thought.

Karl Emil Maximilian Weber was born on 21 April 1864 in Erfurt, Germany, the eldest of six children. His father, Max Weber Sr., practiced law and was active in politics. His mother, Helene (née Fallenstein), was well educated, deeply religious, and socially conscious. In 1869 Weber's father took up the post of city adviser in Berlin, and the family moved to Charlottenberg. As a member of the National Liberal Party, he served as a deputy in the Prussian Chamber of Deputies (1868-1882) and later in the German Reichstag (1884-1897). As a result of his father's political prominence, Weber grew up in a home frequented by important politicians and intellectuals, such as Rudolf von Benningsen, Theodor Mommsen, and Wilhelm Dilthey. Weber's parents differed in character and interests, his father having little regard for religion and his mother being out of sympathy with his father's complacent worldliness.

Weber started school in 1870. Though often bored, he read widely in history, classical literature, and philosophy. He completed secondary school in 1882 and moved on to Heidelberg University, focusing on law, economics, and history. Weber returned to Berlin to study in 1884, living with his parents, whose marriage had deteriorated since the death of Weber's sister Helenchen in 1876. After spending the winter term of 1885-1886 in Göttingen preparing for the legal examination

that would qualify him as a *Referendar* (junior attorney), Weber continued to study law, history, and economics at Berlin University. He began to pursue a doctorate in law with Levin Goldschmidt, which he completed magna cum laude in 1889. For his dissertation he submitted a chapter taken from a monograph on South European trading companies of the Middle Ages. It was based on extensive research into Italian and Spanish legal documents and shows Weber's early interest in the development of capitalism and the relationship between legal systems and economics. While Weber began work on his *habilitation* he completed his legal training and certification in 1890. In 1891, under August Meitzen, he completed his *habilitation*, titled *Die römische Agrargeschichte in ihrer Bedeutung für das Staats- und Privatrecht* (Roman Agrarian History and Its Importance for State and Civil Law). Weber retained his interest in the social and economic history of ancient societies throughout his career and later contributed a substantial article on the subject, "Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum" (1909; translated as "Agrarian Conditions in Antiquity," 1976) to the *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften* (Dictionary of Political Science, 1909). Weber continued to pursue both an academic and a legal career, working as a lawyer at the Berlin Supreme Court and lecturing in law at Berlin University. At this time he met Marianne Schnitger, his father's great-niece, and they soon were engaged. They married in 1893. The couple never had any children.

Weber joined the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Association for Social Policy) in 1888 and attended the first meeting of the Evangelisch-soziale Kongreß (Evangelical-Social Congress) in 1890. The Verein commissioned Weber to conduct research into the conditions of rural laborers in the East Elbian provinces of Prussia. In September 1892 Weber presented his research and conclusions to the association, which also published his work, titled *Die Verhältnisse der Landarbeiter im ostelbischen Deutschland: Preußische Provinzen Ost- und Westpreußen, Pommern, Posen,*

Schlesien, Brandenburg, Großherzogtümer Mecklenburg, Kreis Herzogtum Lauenburg (The Conditions of Agricultural Workers in East Elbian Germany: The Prussian Provinces of East and West Prussia, Pommern, Posen, Schlesien, Brandenburg, the Grand Duchies of Mecklenburg, the Duchy of Lauenberg), as the third volume of a larger work, *Die Verhältnisse der Landarbeiter in Deutschland* (The Conditions of Agricultural Workers in Germany). Weber concluded from his extensive and innovative research that the large estates should be broken up into economically viable plots of land and made available to the workers to encourage them to remain in the area. Weber's conclusions were politically controversial, and they earned him renown within Germany as an expert on rural economics.

In 1894 Weber turned down an offer of a chair in law from Berlin University and accepted a position as professor of political economy at Freiburg University, revealing a shift in his interests from law to economics. Weber's May 1895 inaugural lecture at Freiburg, *Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik* (1895; translated as "The National State and Economic Policy," 1980), courted controversy by advocating nationalism, imperialism, and realpolitik.

Weber succeeded Karl Knies as professor of political economy at Heidelberg University in 1896. In July 1897 his personal life entered a period of crisis that began with a showdown with his father. In a heated confrontation Weber objected strongly to his father's overbearing and arbitrary treatment of his mother. Weber's father died soon afterward, on 10 August, before the break could be mended. Later that year Weber began to suffer symptoms of a nervous disorder that plagued him for the rest of his life. In 1898 he was only able to fulfill his duties with great difficulty. A series of nervous breakdowns eventually forced Weber to give up regular teaching. He resigned his professorship in 1903. At its worst Weber's condition made him incapable of work altogether. He traveled

frequently, which seemed to help somewhat, though he suffered frequent relapses.

Gradually, Weber was able to return to scholarly work. During the first decade of the twentieth century, he started turning his attention to sociology. He began to articulate his innovative approach to the social sciences in a series of methodological essays. In 1904 Weber became an editor of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik* (Archive of Social Science and Social Policy), along with Edgar Jaffé and Werner Sombart. Weber went on to publish much of his work in the journal, which became the most prestigious journal of its type in Germany. In the first issue under the new editorship, Weber included an article titled "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis" (1904; translated as "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy" in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 1949). He presents his position thoroughly and systematically in this essay, which has been particularly influential. Weber argues that the social scientist's work should be "value-free" neither in the positivistic sense of presuppositionless objectivity nor in the sense of political or ethical neutrality, but rather through a rigorous separation of fact and value, as well as of the explanation of values from the advocacy of values. Against naturalistic scientism and positivism--including Marxian thought and social Darwinism--Weber insists on distinguishing the social sciences, which involve the interpretation of meaningful human action, from the natural sciences. One of the most important tools for such interpretive understanding is what Weber called the "ideal type," in which the distinguishing characteristics of social phenomena are clearly conceptualized and used as analytical tools, rather than hypostatized as metaphysical or natural "laws."

During this period Weber began to focus his attention on religion, considered by him to be one of the most important sources of the meanings and values that inform social action. The first

product of this new line of inquiry is probably his best-known work, "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus" (translated as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1930), first published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik* in 1905 and later included in volume one of his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion, 1920, 1921). It proved to be the first part of a long comparative sociological study of world religions, "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen" (The Economic Ethic of World Religions), that Weber worked on for the next fifteen years and first published in 1916-1917 in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*.

Weber defines "the spirit of capitalism" as an ethic explicitly organized around work in a "calling," emphasizing the pursuit of profit and the maintenance of credit. The modern concept of the calling is uniquely Protestant, Weber claims, originating in the works of Martin Luther. Valuing worldly work in one's vocation may appear to be simply a matter of ethics, but Weber argues that the ethical teachings of a religion cannot be separated from its doctrine. The beliefs inculcated by Protestantism, particularly the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, exercise their own influence on conduct. Only by grasping the psychological pressure exerted by the fears and hopes relating to salvation can one understand the effect of such a belief on conduct. By illuminating the relationship between ideas and conduct, Weber suggests that his study may serve as "a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history."

Weber's essay concludes on a note of historical pessimism and methodological caution characteristic of much of his work. The construction of the "tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order" results in part from the Puritan application of rational Christian asceticism to worldly life. After industrial capitalism becomes dominant, however, it

irresistibly imposes its economic conditions and exigencies on humanity without the help of the Protestant ethic. The Puritan calling becomes an "iron cage," within which human beings are increasingly subjected to the rule of things. He concludes by recognizing that the influence of social and economic conditions on the development of Protestant asceticism requires investigation and cautions that it is "not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and history."

Weber was never reluctant to enter into controversies, and in the years before World War I he was frequently involved in academic controversies, political debates, and lawsuits over matters of honor. Weber attended the Social Democrats' party congress in 1906 and attacked what he saw as its petit bourgeois orientation. At the same time he had no respect whatsoever for the kaiser. He defended the principle of academic freedom from state interference, particularly in confessional and political matters. In 1909 Weber along with other scholars formed the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* (German Society for Sociology) in order to further the interests of empirical social research in Germany. He resigned from the society after tiring of debates with his colleagues over his principle of value-free social science. During this period Marianne Weber became one of the leaders of the movement for women's rights in Germany, publishing a study of the legal condition of wives and mothers in 1907. In 1910 the Webers moved to a new home in Heidelberg, which they shared with the theologian Ernst Troeltsch. It became a gathering place of intellectuals and writers such as György Lukács, Ernst Bloch, and Stefan George.

In 1909 Weber agreed, on the urging of the publisher of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*, Paul Siebeck, to update Gustav Schönberg's *Handbuch der politischen Ökonomie* (Handbook of Political Economy, 1882) by producing a new series called *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* (Outline of Social Economics).

Though Weber did not live to see the project through to completion, the volumes he planned to contribute ultimately resulted in the monumental treatise *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1922; translated as *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 1968), which Weber was still working on when he died. The work combines a synthesis of Weber's lifelong empirical research with a systematic presentation of his methodology. He completed his first draft of what is now part 2 in 1913 and wrote what is now part 1 in 1918-1920.

As in so much of Weber's work, the precise definition of concepts features prominently in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. He defines sociology as "a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences." Behavior becomes action when the actor attributes meaning to it, and action is social when it is oriented toward the action of others. For Weber the task of sociology, broadly speaking, is to understand social action. It thus involves interpretation, and Weber argues that the potential for understanding depends in part upon the degree of rationality informing the action. Though it may be possible to empathize with emotional states or commitments to absolute values, Weber argues that it is methodologically more efficient to understand irrational action as a deviation from forms of rational action conceived as ideal types. This distinction between rational and irrational action informs his entire methodological elaboration.

For example, Weber identifies four types of social action: traditional, affectual, value-rational, and instrumentally rational. The first two Weber describes as being on the border between meaningful action and habitual or automatic behavior. Value-rational action involves rational action governed by or oriented toward some kind of ultimate value or purpose to which other interests are subordinated. Instrumental rationality treats values as personal preferences that can be ranked according to the principle of marginal utility and pursued with the most

effective means available. When self-interest is pursued by means of instrumental reason, Weber points out, a uniformity of action develops that often exceeds what can be achieved by the efforts of political or cultural authorities.

Weber concludes his exposition of basic sociological categories by distinguishing political organizations, which make use of physical force within a given territory, from hierocratic organizations, which use psychological pressure, such as religious sanctions. A political organization becomes a state when--according to what has become a famous definition--it achieves "the *monopoly* of the *legitimate* use of physical force in the enforcement of its order" within a territory. A hierocratic organization becomes a church when "its administrative staff claims a monopoly of the legitimate use of hierocratic coercion," such as control over the goods necessary for salvation.

As these definitions show, Weber emphasizes the specific contribution of recognized legitimacy to the maintenance of the established order. He argues that legitimate authority can be based on three distinct foundations: rational grounds, traditional grounds, or charismatic grounds. Recognition of the legality of established rules provides the rational grounds. Traditional authority involves faith in established customs, commonly represented and enforced by a patrimonial ruler. In each case the grounding includes the belief that those who exercise legal or traditional authority have a right to do so. Charismatic grounds are based "on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns of order revealed or ordained by him."

"The purest type of exercise of legal authority," Weber argues, "is that which employs a bureaucratic administrative staff." Bureaucracy is a hierarchical organization of appointed, salaried officials who tend to devote their careers to the apparatus. They carry out their duties impersonally within a structure in which each

office has its own specific competence. Officials are "separated from ownership of the means of administration" and thus are dependent on the apparatus, within which they are "subject to strict and systematic discipline and control." Bureaucratic organization can be found in any sphere of social life: religion, the economy, or the state. Weber sees bureaucracy as technically superior to other types of administration, and he emphasizes its peculiar durability.

Another important distinction introduced by Weber is the one between classes and status groups. Classes are determined by conditions of existence and concomitant opportunities. Status is commonly based on "style of life" and "formal education," and status groups form around these distinctions, often attempting to monopolize the sources of their status. Weber insists that while status may be based on class, or vice versa, one is not the function of the other. They are relatively distinct forms of social stratification. The scope of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* extends far beyond these important fundamental concepts, however. It features detailed discussions of law, political organization, intellectuals, ethnicity, economics, and religion--as well as a comparative historical analysis of the city.

In 1911 Weber wrote *Die rationalen und soziologischen Grundlagen der Musik* (1921; translated as *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, 1958), his most extended discussion of art. Weber discovers within the structure of Western music rigorous formal rationality in dynamic tension with uncontrollable, irrational elements--both melodic flow and the recalcitrance of harmonic material itself. He explores links between the inner logic of music and its social foundations. Weber argues that the magic and ritual functions of music have often determined its development, while the rationalization of music depends upon its independence from them, as well as on the professional autonomy of musicians. Modern musical notation, without which modern musical composition and performance would be impossible, represents a

crucial point in the history of musical rationalization. Weber concludes his study with an examination of the sociohistorical development of musical instruments.

When war broke out in 1914, Weber served on the Reserve Military Hospitals Commission, founding and managing nine military hospitals until 1915. He viewed the war with trepidation at first, but he later became more caught up in nationalist enthusiasm. He continued his scholarly work during the war, focusing particularly on his sociology of religion. Gradually Weber grew more critical of the conduct of the war by the government. He opposed the annexation of conquered territory and criticized the policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, which he warned would bring the United States into the war. In 1917 he began to criticize the German political system as well, arguing in favor of a parliamentary system and against the class-based franchise. He published his political opinions in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, often attracting the attention of the censor. Weber had mostly recovered from his nervous disorder by 1914, and he felt free to pursue new career opportunities, taking up a position as professor of political economy at the University of Vienna in 1918.

After the defeat of Germany, Weber urged the kaiser to abdicate to save the honor of the Hohenzollern dynasty. He joined the German Democratic Party and stood for election to the Reichstag in the 1919 National Assembly elections, but internal party maneuvering resulted in his having to run on a doomed slate. Marianne Weber, on the other hand, was elected to the Baden Landtag (State Parliament) and served as leader of the Bund deutscher Frauenvereine (Federation of German Women's Associations). The new government considered appointing Weber either as secretary of state for the interior or ambassador to Austria, but he was not offered a position. He did serve as an informal adviser during the drafting of the new constitution. Weber opposed pacifism and Bavarian separatism, and he denounced the 1918 revolution

as a "bloody carnival," particularly because he felt that it had weakened Germany in its moment of crisis. Weber served on the German delegation in Versailles, helping to draft the German response to the Allies' war-guilt clause. During this period Weber gave two important lectures in Munich at the invitation of the Freistudentischen Bund (Federation of Free Students): *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1919; translated as "Science as a Vocation," 1946) and *Politik als Beruf* (1919; translated as "Politics as a Vocation," 1946), in which he presents in condensed form many of his theoretical and political positions.

In 1920 Weber wrote an introduction to his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, "Verbemerkung" (1920; translated as "Author's Introduction" in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), in which he clarifies the fundamental questions motivating the entire project. Instead of a discussion of the nature and function of religion, or an elaboration of the rationales and protocols proper to its comparative study, Weber begins by positing the unique and universal value of Western civilization. Citing examples from science, the arts, and religion, Weber identifies what he sees as distinctively Western forms of rationalization. Weber argues that modern capitalism--defined as the systematic and rational pursuit of profit based on formally free labor--developed only in the West. One may point to the technical exploitation of scientific knowledge and the presence of a rationally calculable legal system as causes of this development, but Weber insists that one must also account for the capacity and inclination of individuals to "adopt certain types of practical rational conduct." Religious belief exercises a powerful influence on conduct, and it has often prevented the adoption of such rational standards. Weber aims to show how religious belief shaped practice, in order to illuminate the character of Western rationality and demonstrate the degree to which it made the development of capitalism possible. The purpose of Weber's studies of ancient Judaism and the religions of India and China, which are much longer than the

essay on Protestantism, is thus specific and limited, "oriented to the problems which seem important for the understanding of Western culture from *this* view-point."

Weber considers what might account for this distinctiveness of occidental rationalization. He acknowledges suspecting that heredity probably plays an important role, though he professes skepticism about how that factor could be determined and measured. He argues that social science must explore environmental explanations until they are exhausted, otherwise productive lines of inquiry might be foreclosed in favor of biologicistic speculation. Weber's discussion of heredity and his insistence on the unique character of Western rationalism demonstrate that he believed that fundamental differences separated Western culture from all non-Western cultures. He was evidently receptive to the biological racial theories prevalent in Europe at the time. In his later years, both in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* and at meetings of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie, he became more critical of attempts to apply racist theory within the social sciences, frequently emphasizing the role of racist ideologies in the legitimation of social stratification.

Weber took up a professorship at the University of Munich in 1919, where he gave a series of lectures on economic history in the winter term. A reconstruction of these lectures, based on students' notes, was published after his death as *Wirtschaftsgeschichte: Abriß der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1923; translated as *General Economic History*, 1927). Some of his political stands attracted the hostility of right-wing student groups, who began to disrupt his lectures. During this period he was in the process of completing his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* and *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Weber contracted pneumonia in June 1920 and died on 14 June.

While Max Weber's works are viewed as classic foundational texts in the social sciences, his

influence has been felt less strongly in the humanities. Nonetheless, several important tendencies within cultural theory owe a great deal to his work. Western Marxist cultural criticism, particularly that of the Frankfurt School, has Weberian roots owing in part to Weber's direct influence on Lukács and Bloch. Phenomenological and existentialist philosophers have shown an interest in Weber, specifically Karl Jaspers--who was a friend of Weber's--Alfred Schutz, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The hermeneutic turn in ethnography, which provides much of the conceptual equipment of cultural studies and the new historicism in the United States, has also been influenced by Weber. Pierre Bourdieu's work on the sociology of culture--in particular his analysis of status differentiation in *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (1979; translated as *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, 1984) and his historical investigation into the genesis of intellectual and artistic autonomy in *Les règles de l'art: Gènes et structure du champ littéraire* (1992; translated as *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, 1996)--represents a fundamental engagement with and reconstruction of key Weberian problems, specifically the concept of legitimacy, the opposition between class and status, and the theory of sociocultural rationalization. Weber's conception of sociology as a science devoted to understanding the meaning of social action places him at the often contentious border between the humanities and the social sciences, making his work particularly relevant to the study of literature and culture.

Papers: The Max-Weber-Archiv is located in Munich. At the end of World War II, Marianne Weber turned the Weber papers that she was holding over to the Preußisches Geheimes Staatsarchiv. Later they were incorporated into the Zentralarchiv der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, which is now the Historisches Stadtarchiv in Merseburg.

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