

WEBERIAN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY



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Weberian sociological theory

Max Weber is undoubtedly one of the most important sociologists of all time, and his writings have been extensively commented upon. Yet, as Randall Collins convincingly argues in this book, much of Weber's work has been misunderstood, and many of his most striking and sophisticated theories have been neglected, or even overlooked. By analyzing these hitherto little-studied aspects of Weber's writings, Professor Collins is able both to offer a new interpretation of Weberian sociology and to show how the more fruitful lines of the Weberian approach can be projected to an analysis of current world issues.

Professor Collins begins with Weber's theory of the rise of capitalism, examining it in the light of Weber's later writings on the subject and extending the Weberian line of reasoning to suggest a "Weberian revolution" in both medieval Europe and China. He also offers a new interpretation of Weber's theory of politics, showing it to be a "world-system" model; and he expands this into a theory of geopolitics, using as a particular illustration the prediction of the future decline of Russian world power. Another "buried treasure" in Weber's corpus that he brings to light is Weber's conflict theory of the family as sex and property, which Professor Collins applies to the historical question of the conditions that led to the initial rise of the status of women. He also makes other applications of the Weberian approach – for example, to produce a comparative theory of technological innovation, and theories of the conditions for heresy disputes in both religious and secular form, and of alienation as a secular political ideology.

This broad view of the corpus of Weber's work shows that Weberian sociology remains intellectually alive and that many of his theories still represent the frontier of our knowledge about large-scale social processes. It will interest teachers and students of sociology, political science, history, philosophy, and economics, as well as appealing to any reader concerned with such current affairs as world politics, feminism, and the role of technology.

For Sam Kaplan

Preface

This book represents an effort to demonstrate that Weberian sociology is intellectually alive, in at least as full a sense as Marxian sociology is alive today. By this I mean not only that Max Weber's works are a landmark in the history of our discipline but also that in many respects his ideas still mark the frontier of our knowledge. This is particularly true in the areas of macrosociology: politics, economics, large-scale stratification patterns, and above all in the megasociology of long-term historical change. At the same time, I am no believer in the excessive adulation of past theorists, no matter how heroic. The best way to demonstrate the vitality of Weber's theories is to show they are capable of projection beyond themselves. That is what this book attempts to do.

Weber was an extraordinarily multisided figure, and I do not claim to develop more than a few sides of his approach. I have acquired some appreciation for what Weber's various sides have included, or at least engendered, from my teachers of some years past Talcott Parsons and Reinhard Bendix. Various parts of this book have benefited from comments or other assistance by Samuel W. Kaplan, Vatro Murvar, Stephen Kalberg, Guenther Roth, Walter Goldfrank, Norbert Wiley, Whitney Pope, Al Bergesen, Immanuel Wallerstein, Wolfram Eberhard, Jack Goldstone, Paul DiMaggio, Ken Donow, Craig Calhoun, Robert L. Hamblin, Michael Hout, Arthur L. Stinchcombe, Rae Lesser Blumberg, Richard Gordon, Melvin Seeman, Roy d'Andrade, and Victor Zaslavsky. Whether they approve of what has resulted here is, of course, another matter.

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Introduction

Why another book about Max Weber? He is recognizably among the most important sociologists of all time and, except for Karl Marx, probably the most commented upon as well. Yet Weber's sociology is one of the least well understood. I say this even though everyone has heard of the Protestant ethic, charisma, and the iron cage of bureaucratization, and current Marxists write of legitimation crisis and make most of their revisions in a Weberian direction.

Very simply: because some of the most important parts of Weber's advanced work have been overlooked, underused, or drastically misunderstood. An instance is Weber's theory of capitalism. His early paper "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1904) has been the subject of an enormous literature. For many, it remains the "Weber thesis," despite the fact that others have pointed to his mid-period series on comparative world religions, which moves considerably beyond his early position (1916/1951, 1916-17/1958, 1917-19/1952; see Parsons, 1967). And, indeed, Weber's comparative analyses remained half finished, with pictures still to be drawn of ancient Mediterranean societies, Islam, and medieval Christendom; and Weber's last treatment of the subject, just after the end of World War I and in the aftermath of the German revolution, deals with Marxism much more extensively and moves his sociology of economics much farther from his early idealist interests.

In the case of Weber's theory of politics, I would argue that his explicitly stated position in his systematic work *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1922) has never been fully set forth, let alone appreciated and developed. His views of politics have been the subject of much polemic (e.g., Mommsen, Adorno, Marcuse, Roth) and have been made the basis of some quite famous developments in subsequent social theory, of which the ideas of Mannheim (1935) and C. Wright Mills (1956) are only a few examples. Nevertheless, the views of Weber's politics have been constructed out of bits and pieces of his political sensibilities. One such is in his middle-of-the-road lecture to his radical students in 1919, "Science as a Vocation" ("Politics is a strong and

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slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective. Only he who in the face of all this can say 'In spite of all!' has the calling for politics." [Weber, 1946:128]), with its emphasis on the now rather maligned preference for academic value-freedom. Other scholars have concentrated on Weber's writings on legitimacy, pulling these in a strongly conventionalist, *Ordnung*-conscious direction (Parsons, 1947) or, alternatively, flourishing the possibility of charismatic revolution (Gerth and Mills, 1946). Still others have sought Weber's politics in his writings on bureaucracy (Mannheim, 1935; C. Wright Mills, 1956; Gerth, 1982). Whereas these writers have taken Weber's theme of rationalization in a pessimistic sense, others (Schluchter, 1981; Habermas, 1979) have put a progress-oriented and evolutionary construction on it.

But there is, in fact, a systematic exposition of the theory of politics by Weber himself. The last seven chapters of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, making up more than a third of his major book, are devoted to different aspects of politics (domination, legitimacy, bureaucracy, patrimonialism, feudalism, charisma, hierocracy, and so forth). Some (rather small) parts of this work are famous, but taken out of their context as segments of a general comparative treatment of the sociological dimensions of politics. One of the most often overlooked is the beginning part of chapter 9, "Political Communities," which introduces the entire analysis to follow. Segments of this have been reprinted in the famous Gerth and Mills reader (Weber, 1946), but without capturing the initial, key arguments and the logic that ties the whole scheme together. Weber's theory of politics turns out to be an unsentimental view of the conditions of domination and conflict. Legitimacy plays a central enough role in this, but in Weber's full model legitimacy is not the static typology that it has been in the hands of his commentators. Weber proposes a dynamic for legitimacy, one that is tied both to the status claims of the state in the international military arena and to the three-sided grid of contending interest groups within the society (the familiar "class, status, and party").

Weber's political sociology, I am going to argue, works essentially from the outside in. Societies cannot be understood alone, as independent functional units, cultures, or arenas delimited for the convenience of the analyst. Their politics is tied first and foremost to the shifting relationships of the external realm. Weber was oriented toward the "world system" long before Wallerstein popularized the term, but with a difference: Weber attempted to show (fairly successfully, I believe) that the key external dynamics of states is not economic but military – geopolitical in the largest sense. What this implies, I conclude, is that a great deal of political analysis has to be

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redone, and that the direction to follow is to consolidate and improve what is known of geopolitical theory – the causes and consequences of the military interrelationships of states – with an emphasis on extending it to link up with internal politics. Throughout the various interactions, in which internal politics reverberates back into the external arena, I think it is worthwhile keeping our attention on a central Weberian theme: that the guiding dynamic is a larger, international status system, not reducible to the economic (or bureaucratic or other) internal interests and resources of local political actors.

Perhaps enough has been said to make the point of there being much in Weber that has remained buried and that is well worth salvaging and using as the point of departure for ourselves. There are other areas, as well, in which Weber has hidden treasures, or in which the Weberian perspective can advance our theoretical understanding of some central issues. One such area is the treatment of sex. Weber has a powerful, and unsentimental, theory of the family; it has gone almost entirely unnoticed, but it offers a realistic conflict viewpoint on the issue of sexual stratification, and points to some of the crucial historical developments that have changed the status of women in the West. As in much of the rest of Weber, the analysis of the family is unique in showing how much of family structure hinges on politics.

I make no claim to have uncovered the “true” Weber. Perhaps such a thing exists, but we certainly do not know it. Surprisingly enough, we still lack a definitive full-scale intellectual biography of Weber. We know well neither his personal life, nor his social and intellectual milieu, nor the development and continuity of his ideas through the various phases of his life. What we have instead are the (somewhat censored) memories of his wife (Marianne Weber, 1925/1975), some psychohistorical speculations and sexual exposés (Mitzman, 1970; Green, 1974), and a series of very competent studies on selected themes (Parsons, 1937; Bendix, 1960) that nevertheless remain one-sided and selective. We have nothing like the fully rounded picture of Emile Durkheim and his milieu that emerges from Steven Lukes (1973) and Terry Clark (1973), although some useful building blocks exist (Bendix and Roth, 1971; Burger, 1976; Kalberg, 1980).

My aim is not to provide that intellectual biography, or even to offer a glimpse of what I think would be a well-rounded picture of Weber. My picture is one-sided, and quite consciously so. Weber was much more of a German idealist of the Dilthey type, and a historicist of the school of German historical economics, than I choose to emphasize here. There is no doubt that, especially in his early works, Weber is explicitly concerned to give the role of ideas in history their

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due, and to defend both ideas and history against the encroachments of positivist causal generalizations.¹ Personally I am much more sympathetic to that positivist effort to build an explanatory science, and I believe that the value of Weber's works is in just the leads he gives toward building a sophisticated and realistic conflict theory. Such are not the preferences of many theorists today, since we live in an era in which the spirit of Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaft* is reechoed by trendy modes of Frankfurt Marxism and the various dialects of Paris structuralism, and further reinforced by the bias toward particularism and specialization characteristic of our crowded academic world. The existence of these trends is one of the reasons why Weber's treasures have remained buried so long, even after intense examination during the past half century.

Perhaps, then, I am going against Weber's posthumous wishes, putting emphasis where he would not have himself intended. Certainly my approach goes against much of his explicit methodological writings, which stress that theories can only take the form of ideal types with which to chart the particulars of the endless flow that makes up history. But ultimately it is of no importance to what degree I have drawn from a one-sided selection of Weber. My complaint

¹ This is particularly clear in his early articles in *Schmoller's Jahrbuch* on Roscher and Knies (1903, 1905, 1906/1975), written at just the time he was working up his approach to the Protestant ethic. These works are notably parallel to Durkheim's early work (in fact his Latin dissertation) on Montesquieu (1892). In each case, the writer was defining his own position vis-à-vis his principal intellectual ancestors, although the substantive content of the positions each took up was diametrically opposed. Durkheim praised Montesquieu as a predecessor in the scientific search for the basic structures of society, whereas Weber attacked precisely this type of belief in nomothetic laws, evolution, and the value premises implied in the image of the healthy or diseased social organism. Roscher, writing in the 1840s, marks the beginning of the distinctively German school of economics, repudiating classical economics in favor of the study of the historical development of economic institutions. Weber himself was, above all, just such a German historical/institutional economist, which should be borne in mind when considering his position on the *Methodenstreit* that makes up the background of his methodological essays. The *Methodenstreit* was, in fact, a debate within economics, set off by the Austrian Carl Menger's revival of neoclassical economics, which occasioned a furious attack by Gustav Schmoller, the leader of the historical/institutional school. Weber not only sides with Schmoller, bolstering his position with Rickert's neo-Kantianism, but purifies Roscher's style of economics of its vestigial Hegelianism of "spiritual" stages of development. Weber even uses Marxism to attack Roscher's concept of the *Volksgeist*: "From the point of view of the contemporary Marx-oriented conception, it is self-evident that the development of a Volk is to be understood as determined by these typical economic stages" (1903/1975:76). But Weber only wished to play off one-sided idealism against one-sided materialism; in his view, any systematic thought distorts the inexhaustible variety of reality. Weber directed this in particular against any deductive system of general principles; the most prominent examples he was combating were, of course, classical and neoclassical economics, although evolutionary sociology of the Spencer type also fell under its ban.

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against previous selections from his treasure chest is not that they have been one-sided but only that they have chosen some of his lesser contributions and left some of the most important. Ideas are important merely for what understanding of the world we can get from them, and to the systematic extension of such knowledge I should be happy to subordinate all else.

Weber had certain strengths that make him still our greatest resource as a sociologist. One is that, of all the great sociologists, he was by far the most historically comparative. Marx certainly had very large intellectual ambitions, but in fact virtually all of his analysis was done of the economic history of northwestern Europe, and his scattered references to other societies are neither systematically thought through nor comprehensive. Durkheim, on the other hand, had a clear sense of the importance of comparative historical evidence for sociology. He stated that such comparisons constituted the main application of the method of concomitant variation characteristic of experimental science; for him, historical comparisons played for the sociologist a "role analogous to that of the microscope in the order of physical realities" (quoted in Lukes, 1973:404). But Durkheim himself knew far too little history to follow his own recommendation. For history he substituted static anthropological comparisons of tribal societies – a choice that has left its legacy by nearly monopolizing the more formal scientific part of comparative analysis; see, for example, Murdock (1967).² Durkheim was particularly deficient in comparative understanding of politics and economic institutions, especially since the rise of the large-scale state. This was, of course, where Weber shone. Despite their extreme methodological differences, Weber was

² Comparative sociology has suffered the consequence of a strong anthropological bias toward tribal societies and against the large-scale historical states that made up Weber's subject matter. This bias has been exacerbated by the methodological dogma that the search for general laws requires a solution to "Galton's problem," the possibility that similarities in the social structures of various societies were due not to structural causes but merely to the fact that the traits in question diffused from nearby societies. The answer generally accepted has been to choose samples of societies remote from each other in space; such societies are almost always tribal because large-scale historical empires are notably *nonisolated* and "contaminated" by diffusion. One ironic result has been that comparative analysis gives the illusion that social structures leaped directly from tribal to "modern" forms – one of the main sources of simplistic fallacies about industrial society such as have been exposed by the recent family history. In fact, "Galton's problem" is an absurdity; *all* societies are affected by diffusion, and Murdock-style "world samples" simply pretend it doesn't exist by systematically excluding all possible data on how the diffusion might have occurred. The real problem is not to find mythically isolated societies for comparison, but to develop a theory of just how the larger "external" context of societies affects their internal traits. A moment's thought will indicate that this is hardly an automatic result; what diffuses and what does not is hardly indicated in any of the methodological beliefs popular among comparativists.

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in the ideal position to carry out Durkheim's program of showing by comparative analysis the causal conditions underlying large-scale social structures.

Moreover, there is more than a hint that Weber himself got more from his comparative studies than would have been allowed inside the straitjacket of his philosophy of ideal types. For these ideal types are not merely a kind of Kantian universals through which we see the historical flux. Ideal types, like other complex concepts, themselves contain the embryo of scientific generalizations. Categories such as charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal legitimation do not exist merely for the sake of labeling and classifying history; they are embedded in a larger network of concepts and in an image of how they work. The three types of legitimation, for example, are related to another set of ideal types: Weber's concepts of organization (mainly political organization). Nor does bureaucracy stand by itself as an isolated ideal type; it is part of the set (1) bureaucracy, (2) patrimonial organization (with its relatives, patriarchy, sultanism, feudalism, etc.), and (3) the uninstitutionalized retinue of followers (one might say, "social movement") of a charismatic leader. Thus the routinization of charisma is not merely a psychological or cultural transformation from feelings of charisma into either traditional or rational-legal authority; it is part of a process of organizational transformation in which the original social movement, through the organizational impetus of its own success, acquires property and hence becomes transformed into either bureaucracy or patrimonialism (or mixtures and variants thereof).

One could go farther and show how Weber's famous dimensions of stratification – class, status, and power, with their less familiar subtypes (see Wiley, 1967) – are themselves meshed in a larger explanatory scheme. Since much of this comes out in the chapters to follow, I will limit myself to mentioning here that the "status" dimension is a crucial one in Weber's scheme. It is the area in which he made his most famous contributions: the importance of religion, both in economics and in politics; the diversifying of the Marxian class scheme with status groups, which gives the theoretical potential for treating ethnicity and sex, problems that have remained intractable from the Marxian viewpoint (as well as from most others). But status is closely linked with legitimacy, the dynamic element in Weber's political scheme; it is also linked with authority, the center of his sociology of organizations, and with monopolization of market opportunities, which is key to his treatments of economics and of social class. Weber's categories, in other words, do us relatively little service if we confine them to the doctrinal role of ideal types. Whatever Weber's

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own feelings about the matter turn out to have been at various stages of his life, it is apparent to me that his ideas are robust and burst the seams of the historicism and idealism he strove so mightily to defend.

Weber's historical comparisons, then, are among his great strengths, and a major reason why we continue to go back to him. They underlie his sheerly intellectual attraction, since Weber obviously lacks the kind of political appeal that draws people to Marx. Another of Weber's strengths is his capacity for breaking through normal modes of understanding. He is full of unexpected insights and subterranean connections, although many of them have proved too forbidding for most readers attempting to dig through the unaccustomed historical examples from which Weber induced (and constructed) his generalizations. Weber's Protestant ethic is, of course, a sufficiently well-known instance of digging through one institutional realm, the economic, to find a seemingly alien one beneath, religion. But this remains a superficial example. One might even lay out Weber's major insights as an extension of this overturning of the obvious.

Weber's threefold scheme – class, status, and party (or economics, culture, and politics) – echoes throughout his works. He is multidimensional in every respect. One might say that a vulgar version of Weber is to stress the status dimension (religion, culture, values) as underlying all else. Thus capitalism is but an offshoot of Christianity; stratification, of a status hierarchy; and politics, of legitimacy. A more complex version would be the route taken (to a certain extent) during his middle period by Talcott Parsons (1951; Parsons and Shils, 1951), in which certain analytic dimensions (in Parsons's case, four rather than three) are applied to every institution, so that each has its functional specialization, as well as containing within itself all of the other dimensions. (Thus religion has a political aspect and an economic aspect; politics, a religious aspect; etc.) I regard this as a mode of scholasticizing, and a diversion from constructing a genuinely explanatory and dynamic theory. But, for purposes of exposition, something like an "exposé" reinterpretation of Weber's three main dimensions might be facetiously used as a guidepost.

That is to say, one might "uncover" the underlying reality of these institutions as follows: (1) *Religion* is "really" *economics*; (2) *politics* is "really" *religion*; (3) *economics* is "really" *politics*.

Religion as economics

Weber is famous, of course, for arguing that religion provided the underpinnings of capitalism. And this is true, I shall argue, in a

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broader sense than that of the early Protestant-ethic thesis. But religion is economic in other respects as well. When Weber analyzes churches, he points above all to their economic organization: not in the sense that churches must rest upon this or that form of surrounding economy but, rather, that a church itself is an organization that has certain material requisites for its survival. The forms of religion change with its material resources. The principal ground for the routinization of religious charisma is the acquisition of property and sources of income (i.e., regular sources of support) for the religious specialists; how these properties are organized (here one may think of the economics of Buddhist temples, Islamic madrasahs, Christian bishops, or Protestant congregations) is a crucial determinant of the larger religion.³

Of course, religion is not merely, much less “really” or “ultimately,” economics. But that unnatural slant gives us the proper position from which to see one of the crucial dynamics of world history, and a distinctively Weberian viewpoint. Within Weber’s multidimensionality, religion occupies a privileged place for the analysis of capitalism in particular. The first step in professional sophistication is to show how complicated things really are; but this remains only the first step. Multidimensionality and complexity can end up merely muddying our picture of the world to unintelligibility. That is why the higher stage of scholarly insight is to point to a guiding thread through the labyrinth.

In the chapters of Part I of this book, grouped under the rubric “Economics,” religion gives us that guiding thread. Chapter 2, “Weber’s Last Theory of Capitalism,” is a systematic outline of the full theory of the institutional characteristics and social prerequisites for the emergence of capitalism. The picture that emerges is predominantly institutional; apparently “free-floating” religious ethics, ideas of predestination, and the like fall into their proper places as part of a set of institutional patterns linking status communities, religious organizations, and the rational-legal state. The picture here is multidimensional, with a vengeance. Nevertheless, its skeleton consists of two long chains of historical conditions: one producing a particular kind of balance in the political sphere that can either regulate or plunder the productive economy; the other producing the social net-

³ To give a modern application: One reason that the Catholic Church has maintained a continuing presence, despite the erosion of its community support in recent decades, is because its vast property holdings keep the institution going through “hard times.” Given this viable organizational base, it seems only a matter of time before religious leaders emerge who make the “reforms” that regain its ideological appeal in some constituency. I owe this observation to Joseph R. Gusfield.