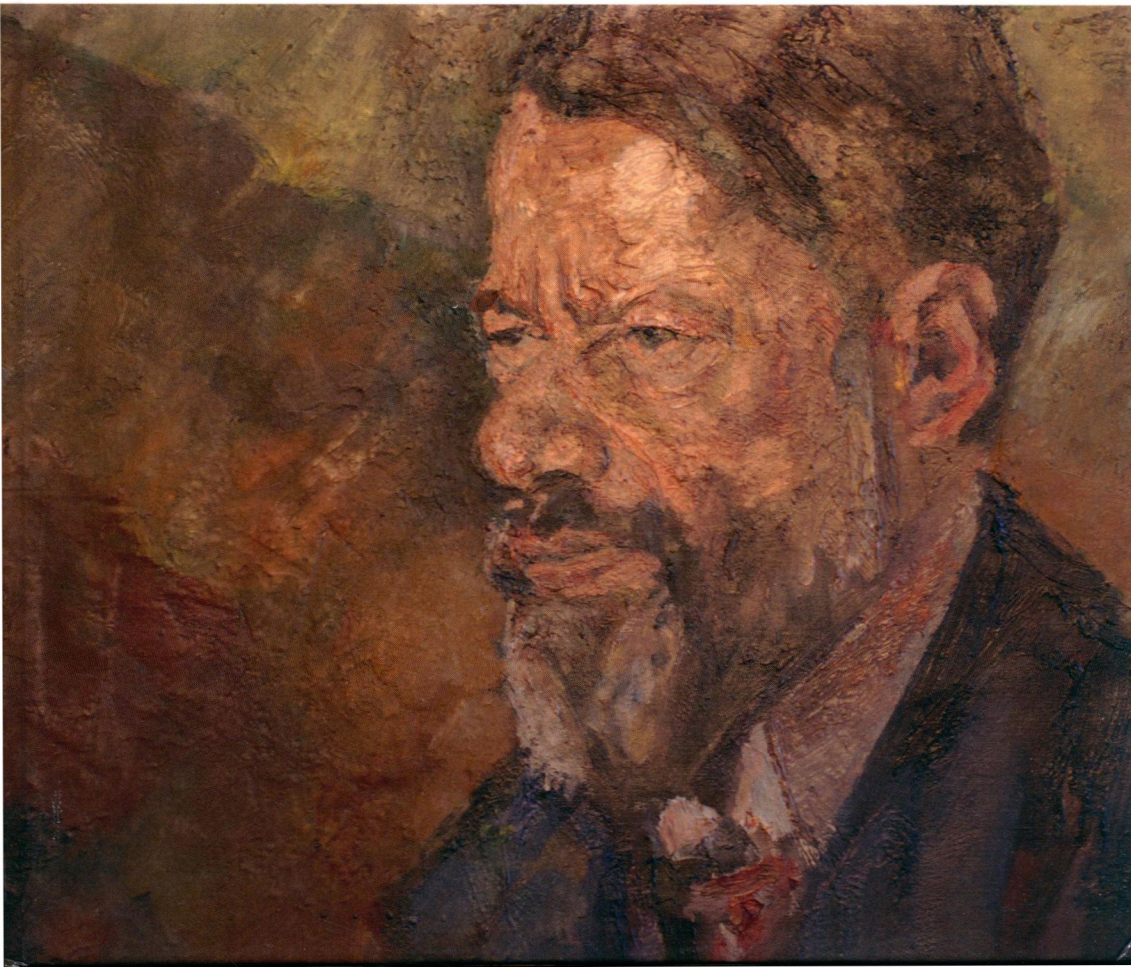


# MAX WEBER AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

EDITED BY RICHARD NED LEBOW



The status of Max Weber as one of the great sociologists is well established. Particularly in English, however, remarkably little has been written on the importance of his thought for International Relations. Richard Ned Lebow and his colleagues have more than filled that gap with this book. Weber was a theorist of the *Machtstaat*, not so much out of enthusiasm, but out of his understanding of a tragic historical necessity. Accordingly, to understand his position requires not only paying attention to his more policy-oriented statements (which the authors do well) but also to the epistemological and conceptual underpinnings as well as the philosophy of history that shape his approach. This book gives us a whole new side of Max Weber and, in doing so, an important and fresh way of looking at International Politics.

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Cover image: Portrait of Max Weber by Otto Neumann (1920), hanging in the Salon of the Max-Weber-Haus, Heidelberg University.  
Photograph by Jens Steffek.

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS  
[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

ISBN 978-1-108-41638-2





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# Max Weber and International Relations

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*Edited by*

Richard Ned Lebow

*King's College London*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
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# CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

4843/24, 2nd Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi – 110002, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108416382](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108416382)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108236461

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First published 2017

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-108-41638-2 Hardback

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## Max Weber and International Relations

Max Weber explored the political, epistemological, and ethical problems of modernity, and understood how closely connected they were. His efforts are imaginative, sophisticated, even inspiring, but also flawed. Weber's epistemological successes and failures highlight unresolvable tensions that are just as pronounced today and from which we have much to learn. This edited collection of essays offers novel readings of Weber's politics, approach to knowledge, rationality, counterfactuals, ideal types, power, bureaucracy, the state, history, and the non-Western world. The conclusions look at how some of his prominent successors have addressed or finessed the tensions of the epistemological between subjective values and subjective knowledge; the sociological between social rationalization and irrational myths; the personal among conflicting values; the political between the kinds of leaders democracies select and the national tasks that should be performed; and the tragic between human conscience and worldly affairs.

Richard Ned Lebow is a professor of international political theory in the Department of War Studies, King's College London, Bye-Fellow of Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, and the James O. Freedman Presidential Professor Emeritus at Dartmouth College, USA. He has authored, coauthored, or edited thirty-six books and more than 250 peer-reviewed articles and chapters. He has made contributions to international relations, political psychology, history, political theory, philosophy of science, and classics. He is a member of the British Academy.



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# 1 Introduction

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*Richard Ned Lebow*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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