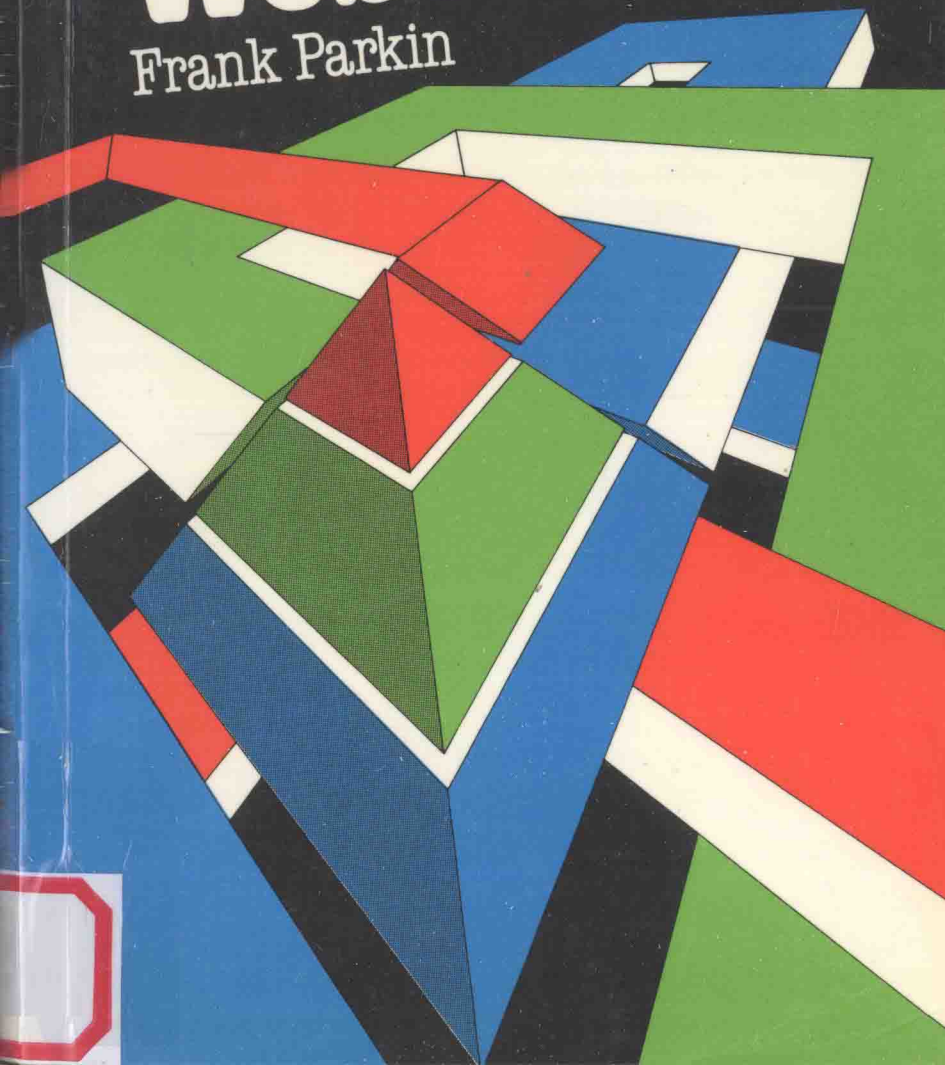


KEY SOCIOLOGISTS Series Editor: Peter Hamilton

Max Weber

Frank Parkin



MAX WEBER

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MARX and Marxism

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KENNETH THOMPSON

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Frank Parkin is a graduate of the London School of Economics (B.A. Anthropology 1961; Ph.D. Sociology 1966). From 1965 to 1975 he was Lecturer, then Reader, in Sociology at the University of Kent at Canterbury.

His publications include *Middle Class Radicalism* (1968); *Class Inequality and Political Order* (1971); *The Social Analysis of Class Structure* (Editor, 1975); *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique* (1979).

He is currently an Associate Editor of *Theory and Society*, and a member of the editorial board of the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Since 1975 Dr Parkin has been Tutor in Politics, and Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford.

Editor's Foreword

Max Weber, like his close contemporary Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) deserves a special place in any series devoted to *Key Sociologists*. Indeed his name is frequently combined with those of Durkheim and Karl Marx into a sort of secular trinity of sociologists deified wherever sociology is taught. Yet despite the apparent companionship of the trinity they appear on closer examination to be rather uneasy bedfellows. Marx was not strictly a sociologist – the label existed in his lifetime but could hardly be said to describe any recognisable discipline. This does not stop us from describing Marx as a Key Sociologist – indeed another book in this series is devoted to *Marx and Marxism* – primarily because what he wrote is central to the modern concerns of professional sociologists. Durkheim similarly does not share a great deal in common with Weber. Although both were academic sociologists the characteristic theories and methods of the two men set them at a considerable distance from each other. Even their approach to developing the new science of sociology differed fundamentally, Durkheim devoting his life to the patient work of creating the teaching institutions, learned societies and journals so essential to its institutionalization, whilst Weber was more of the pure scholar content to grapple with fundamental problems and from time to time come up with an inspirational idea that others

could use. Typically, perhaps, he favoured the closed world of the private salon as the location of much of his teaching – when he could do it. For a lengthy period in the middle of his life mental problems robbed him of the ability to teach.

But Weber and Durkheim do share certain similarities. Both were concerned to develop a subject which would have appeared to Marx to be at best a highly partisan 'science' of society and at worst a 'bourgeois ideology'. When they began this work the discipline of sociology hardly possessed a solid European base at all (the situation was a little different in America). It had only a tenuous foothold in the otherwise very go-ahead German universities of the late 19th century – as witness the fact that Weber did not obtain a University post as a sociologist until relatively late in his life, coming to the subject from economics. Durkheim was faced with a similar situation in France and, like Weber, made the move into sociology from other academic areas – in his case philosophy and pedagogy.

Why then is Weber a *Key Sociologist*? The proper answer to that question is to be found in Frank Parkin's book, and I will not try to anticipate it here. A few general remarks are however worth making. Like Marx and Durkheim, Weber was responsible for the emergence of ideas which continue to be central to the development of the subject. Concepts like that of 'meaningful social action', 'ideal-type', forms of domination, and the stratification processes of societies, have been used and reworked by sociologists to approach a wide range of problems. Originally conceived at a time when the intellectual boundaries of sociology were very limited, these ideas have shown their power by retaining a currency through all the vicissitudes of the growing subject on its way to becoming an international science. Yet Weber's ideas are by no means simple complements to those of Marx and Durkheim; each wrote for a particular audience and with quite different aims in mind. This is why no matter what attempts are made to synthesise their theories they remain essentially contradictory – different *models* for apprehending the complexity of society. Weber's sociological models are different from those of his fellows in the trinity: they stress a methodological individualism opposed to both Marxian and Durkheimian constructs of social collectivities, a belief in the value of individual insight, and a lack of faith in the possibility of ever achieving irrevocable answers to sociological questions.

Whilst it is incontrovertible that Weber's work has influenced much of Western sociology, it has to be pointed out that it contains imprecisions and contradictions which have led to a range of different interpretations of his concepts and methods. Weber would not have been

surprised at this, but it remains the case that the 'Weber' who is referred to as the source of this or that key formulation or typology is in effect a constantly changing character capable of being read in a number of different ways.

Thus the great merit of Frank Parkin's study is that it concentrates on the four central elements of Weber's *oeuvre* which have been most discussed and utilised by other sociologists. In turn he examines what Weber put forward as method or theory, and then provides a critique which illuminates both the strengths and contradictions of his sociology. And it is perhaps in his contradictions that Weber is most important for sociology. For in looking critically at what he said we can move on to develop sociological ideas which are an advance on Weber's. Sociology has pretensions, at the very least, to being a science — and no science can afford to treat the work of its key thinkers as inviolable and safe from criticism. It is only by exploiting the errors of its forebears that a science can progress. Frank Parkin's book shows very clearly why Weber holds a key position in the development of sociology, but at the same time why his ideas are stepping stones towards deeper insight about society.

Peter Hamilton

To John and Krishan

Preface

This essay takes another look at some of Weber's best known contributions to political and social theory. There is hardly anything in the main body of the text about Weber 'the man' — his career, his family life, his political doings, or his occasional bouts of madness. For those interested in these things I have provided a brief biographical sketch.

Four substantive areas of Weber's work are considered. Chapter One deals with his recommendations and pronouncements on method. Here a number of questions are raised about the procedural uses and application of *Verstehen* as a distinct mode of understanding, and about the explanatory claims made on behalf of ideal-type constructs. Weber's views on ethical neutrality and on historical explanation are also touched upon.

Chapter Two examines his treatment of the normative and institutional components of social action, with particular reference to religious beliefs and conduct. Some doubts are expressed about Weber's line of reasoning in seeking to establish a causal link between early Protestant beliefs and the rational capitalist mentality. There is also an attempt to demonstrate the tension between his analysis of Calvinism and the more 'materialist' stance that pervades his general sociology of religion.

Chapter Three considers his discussion of authority relations and the typology of domination. The suggestion is made here that Weber tends to muddy the distinction between legitimation and legitimacy, and that his sociology of domination is vitiated by the absence of a complementary sociology of compliance.

Chapter Four deals with his contribution to stratification theory. Some contrasts are drawn between Weberian and Marxist analyses of class and property relations, and conceptions of the state. Particular attention is given to Weber's ideas about status-group formations with the distributive set-up. The essay concludes with some comments on Weber's somewhat eccentric evaluation of the role of 'party' in the overall distribution of power.

Donald MacRae has said that "Practically all that is written on Weber is written in awe". I have tried not to let my own sense of awe at Weber's achievement degenerate into reverence. Most of the arguments set out in the following pages were first aired in a series of lectures and seminars given at various times in Oxford, Berkeley, and New York University. I am most grateful to the teachers and graduate students at these places for their often successful efforts to show me the error of my ways.

Magdalen College, Oxford
September, 1981

F.P.

Biographical Sketch

Max Weber was born in 1864 in Erfurt, once a Hanseatic town, now part of the German Democratic Republic. Soon after his birth the family moved to Berlin where their home became a talking shop for local academics, businessmen, artists and political big-wigs. The young Weber would have found it hard to avoid having to listen to a good deal of cultured and high-minded chatter, as well no doubt to some less than enlightened political views. After taking his *Abitur* he enrolled as a student of jurisprudence at Heidelberg University. There he seems to have gone in for all the conventional Student Prince activities: a little studying, a lot of drinking and carousing, and trying (successfully) to have his face slit open in the duelling hall.

After a year out for military service he resumed his studies, first in Berlin, then in Göttingen. Here he knuckled down to serious work. In 1889 he completed his doctoral dissertation on medieval trading companies and two years later presented his *Habilitationsschrift* on some aspects of Roman agrarian history. This formally qualified him for a university appointment and he duly took up a post as law lecturer in Berlin. After a couple of years he moved on to Freiburg and then, in 1896, back to Heidelberg.

It was at Heidelberg that his troubles began. In 1898 he suffered