



Max Weber (1864–1920)

Karl Emil Maximilian Weber was born in Erfurt, Thuringia to a family of notable heritage. His father, Max Sr., came from a Westphalian family of merchants and industrialists in the textile business and went on to become a National Liberal parliamentarian of influence in Wilhelmine politics. Max Weber was thus brought up in a prosperous, cosmopolitan, and highly cultivated family milieu that was well-integrated with the political and social establishment of the German *Bürgertum*.



Educated mainly at the universities of Heidelberg and Berlin, Weber was trained in jurisprudence, eventually writing his *Habilitationsschrift* on Roman law and agrarian history. After some flirtation with legal practice and public service, he received an important research commission from the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* (the leading social science association under Gustav Schmoller's leadership) and produced the so-called East Elbian Report on the displacement of the German agrarian workers in East Prussia by Polish migrant labourers. Greeted upon publication with much praise and some political controversy, this early success led to his first university appointment at Freiburg, to be followed shortly by a prestigious professorship in political economy at Heidelberg. Weber and his wife, Marianne, an intellectual in her own right and early women's rights activist, soon found themselves at the centre of the vibrant intellectual and cultural life of Heidelberg; the so-called "Weber Circle" attracted such intellectual luminaries as Georg Jellinek, Ernst Troeltsch, and Werner Sombart and later a number of younger scholars including Marc Bloch, Robert Michels, and György Lukács. Weber himself was also active in public life as he continued to play an important role as a Young Turk in the *Verein* and maintain a close association with the *Evangelische-soziale Kongress* (especially with the leader of its younger, liberal wing, Friedrich Naumann). It was during this time that he first established a solid reputation as a brilliant political economist and passionate public intellectual, albeit with a somewhat unpredictable and laconic temperament.

These fruitful years came to an abrupt halt in 1896 when Weber collapsed with a nervous-breakdown shortly after his father's sudden death (precipitated by a heated confrontation with Weber). Although severely compromised and unable to write as prolifically as before, he still managed to immerse himself in the study of various philosophical and religious topics, which resulted in a new direction in his scholarship as the publication of various methodological essays, and especially that of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. After this stint, essentially as a private scholar, he slowly resumed his participation in various academic and public activities. With Edgar Jaffé and Sombart, he took over editorial control of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften u. Sozialpolitik*, turning it into the leading social science journal of the day as well as his new institutional platform. In 1909, he co-founded the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*, in part as a result of his growing unease with the *Verein's* political orientation and lack of methodological discipline, becoming its first treasurer (he would resign from it in 1912, though). This period of his life, until interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, saw the height of his achievements as he worked intensely in two areas: the comparative sociology of world religions and his contribution to the *Grundriss der Sozialökonomie*, in particular the sections on economic and legal sociology, which would be put together and published posthumously as



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Economy and Society. Along with the major methodological essays that he had drafted during this time, these works would become mainly responsible for Weber's enduring reputation as one of the founding fathers of modern social science.

In 1919, he briefly taught in turn at the universities of Vienna (*General Economic History* was an outcome of this experience) and of Munich (where he gave the much-lauded lectures, *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*), while compiling his scattered writings on religion in the form of a massive three-volume *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* [GARS hereafter]. All these reinvigorated scholarly activities were ended abruptly in 1920 when he suddenly died of pneumonia in Munich. Max Weber was fifty six years old.

Philosophical Influences

Weber's philosophical worldview, if not coherent philosophy, was informed by the deep crisis of the Enlightenment project in fin-de-siècle Europe, which was characterized by the intellectual revolt against positivist reason, a celebration of subjective will and intuition, and a neo-Romantic longing for spiritual wholesomeness. As such, the philosophical backdrop to his thoughts will be outlined here along two axes: epistemology and ethics.

His early training in law had exposed him to the sharp divide between the reigning Labandian legal positivism and the historical jurisprudence championed by Otto von Gierke (one of his teachers at Berlin); in his later incarnation as a political economist, he was keenly interested in the heated "strife over methods" (*Methodenstreit*) between the positivist economic methodology of Carl Menger and the historical economics of Schmoller (his mentor during the early days). Arguably, however, it was not until Weber grew acquainted with the Baden or Southwestern School of Neo-Kantians, especially through Wilhelm Windelband, Emil Lask and Heinrich Rickert (his one-time colleague at Freiburg), that he found a rich conceptual template suitable for the clearer elaboration of his own epistemological position.

Ethics: Kant and Nietzsche

The way in which Weber understood Kant seems to have been through the conceptual template set by moral psychology and philosophical anthropology. Weber's understanding of this Kantian ethical template was strongly tinged by the Protestant theological debate taking place in the Germany of his time between (orthodox Lutheran) Albrecht Ritschl and Matthias Schneckenburger (of Calvinist persuasion), a context with which Weber became acquainted through his Heidelberg colleague, Troeltsch. Suffice it to note in this connection that Weber's sharp critique of Ritschl's Lutheran communitarianism seems reflective of his broadly Kantian preoccupation with radically subjective individualism and the methodical transformation of the self.

Weber's ethical sensibility is built on a firm rejection of a Nietzschean divination and Foucaultian resignation alike, both of which are radically at odds with a Kantian ethic of duty. In other words, Weber's ethical project



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can be described as a search for a non-arbitrary form of freedom (his Kantian side) in what he perceived as an increasingly post-metaphysical world (his Nietzschean side).

Weber's main contribution as such, was one of the founding fathers of modern social science. Beyond the recognition, however, that Weber is not simply a sociologist par excellence as Talcott Parsons's Durkheimian interpretation made him out to be, identifying an *idée maitresse* throughout his disparate oeuvre has been controversial ever since his own days and is still far from settled. *Economy and Society*, his alleged *magnum opus*, was a posthumous publication based upon his widow's editorship, the thematic architectonic of which is unlikely to be reconstructed beyond doubt even after its recent reissuing under the rubric of *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* [MWG hereafter].

Politics and Ethics

Even more explicitly ethical than was his methodology, Weber's political project also disclosed his entrenched preoccupation with the wilful resuscitation of certain character traits in modern society. At the outset, it seems undeniable that Weber was a deeply liberal political thinker especially in a German context that was not well known for liberalism. This means that his ultimate value as a political thinker was locked on individual freedom, that "old, general type of human ideals". He was also a bourgeois liberal, and self-consciously so, in a time of great transformations that were undermining the social conditions necessary to support classical liberal values and bourgeois institutions, thereby challenging liberalism to attempt a radical self-redirection. To that extent, he belongs to that generation of liberal political thinkers in fin-de-siècle Europe who clearly perceived the general crisis of liberalism and sought to resolve it in their own liberal ways. Weber's own way was to address the problem of classical liberal characterology that was, in his view, being progressively undermined by the indiscriminate bureaucratization of modern society

Charismatic Leadership Democracy

Such a concern with ethical character is clearly discernible in Weber's stark political realism. Utterly devoid of any normative qualities, for instance, the modern state is defined simply as "a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory," whether that legitimacy derives from charisma, tradition, or law. Further, he held that, even in a democratic state, domination of the ruled by the ruler(s) is simply an unavoidable political fact. If the genuine self-rule of the people is impossible, the only choice is one between leaderless and leadership democracy (*Führerdemokratie*). When advocating a sweeping democratization of post-war Germany, thus, Weber envisioned democracy in Germany as a political marketplace in which strong charismatic leaders can be identified and elected by winning votes in a free competition, even struggle, among themselves. Preserving and enhancing this element of struggle in politics is important since it is only through a dynamic electoral process that national leaders strong enough to keep an otherwise omnipotent bureaucracy under control can be made. The primary concern for Weber in devising democratic institutions has, in other words, less to do with the values and institutions that can realise the ideals of democracy as such than with the breeding of a certain character fit for



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national leadership. So far, Weber's theory of democracy seems to contain certain authoritarian elements that can support Jürgen Habermas's famous critique that Carl Schmitt, "the *Kronjurist* of the Third Reich," was "a legitimate pupil of Weber's".

Leadership democracy is, however, not solely reliant upon the quality of its leaders, let alone that of a caesaristic dictator. In addition to electoral competition, Weber saw localized, yet public associational life as a breeding ground for the formation of charismatic leaders. When leaders are identified and trained at the level of, say neighbourhood choral societies and bowling clubs, the alleged authoritarian elitism of leadership democracy comes across as more pluralistic in its conceptualization, far from its usual identification with demagogic dictatorship and unthinking mass following. Insofar as a civil society, or "sect-like society" in his own parlance, functions as an effective medium for the horizontal diffusion of charismatic qualities among lay people, his notion of charisma can retain a strongly democratic tone to the extent that he also suggested social pluralism as a socio-cultural ground for the political education of the lay citizenry from which genuine leaders would hail. In short, the charismatic leadership ideal in Weber's political project also requires a heterogeneous and pluralistically organized civil society as its corollary. Together, Weber expected, strong national leadership and a robust civil society would form a bulwark of political dynamism in times of bureaucratic petrification.

Weber's main problematic turned on the question of individual autonomy and freedom in an increasingly rationalized society. His dystopian and pessimistic assessment of rationalization drove him to search for solutions through politics and science, which broadly converge on a certain *practice of the self*. What he called the "person of vocation," first outlined famously in *The Protestant Ethic*, provided a bedrock for his various efforts to resuscitate a character who can wilfully combine unflinching conviction and methodical rationality even in a society besieged by bureaucratic petrification and value fragmentation. It is also in this entrenched preoccupation with an ethical characterology under modern circumstances that we find the source of his enduring influences on twentieth-century political and social thought.

Source: Adapted from: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weber/>



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