



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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I. Biography of Weber

MAX WEBER (1864-1920)

“Die bange Nacht is nun herum
wir reiten still, wir reiten stumm
wir reiten ins Verderben” – Herwegh, Reiterlied¹

NOTE ON SOURCES: We are fortunate to have a comprehensive biography of Max Weber written by his wife, Marianne, first published six years after his death, in 1926. For decades, this was the primary source of information about Weber's life. Recently, however, our knowledge in this area has been greatly supplemented by Joachim Radkau's *Max Weber: A Biography*, published in English in 2009. Radkau's sympathetic portrait nevertheless includes several less flattering details of Weber's personality and character, not included in his wife's biography. For more on Weber's intellectual development, and less about his personal life, read Fritz Ringer's *Max Weber: An Intellectual Biography*, published in 2004.

Overview

Max, full name Maximilian Karl Emil, Weber was born in Erfurt, a bustling commercial city in what is now central Germany, on April 21, 1864. Weber spent his life in a rapidly industrializing and increasing militaristic Germany, living through the devastations of the first World War, and witnessing the rise of fascism during the early years of the Weimar Republic. Like many writers and thinkers of his day, he was interested in how this new industrial society came to be. His most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, was a partial answer to that question. Weber would also come to create a particular approach to sociological inquiry, more focused on interpretation and less focused on policy proposals than Durkheim's.

Social Background/Family

Weber was the first of eight children, born to a wealthy statesman (Max Weber, Sr.) and his somewhat devout wife Helene (Fallenstein). The Webers had been a prosperous family for many generations, making their money in the linen trade. Max grew up in bourgeois comfort, in a home devoted to politics and intellectual pursuits. In fact, Weber's younger brother, Alfred, would also become a sociologist.

1. This is a song Weber was known to sing near the end of his life, during the tumultuous Weimar years. It can be translated as, “The anxious night is over now; we are riding quietly, we are riding silently, we are riding to perdition.” (Marianne Weber, *Max Weber*, Wiley and Sons (1975 translation)).

Education and Training

In 1882, Max earned his high school diploma and, according to his wife's biography, "also helped his friends to cheat their way through." His teachers, she claimed expressed some doubts about his moral maturity, finding him a troublesome if intelligent student. At age 18, he enrolled at the University of Heidelberg, where he followed in his father's footsteps by studying law. He also took up fencing at his father's fraternity house. By all accounts he led an active social life in college, visiting other bourgeois families, drinking, fencing, and even dueling (from which he suffered a distinctive scar on his face for the rest of his life). Marianne tells us he had no talent for saving money and would often ask for increases to his allowance.

In his second year, he took time off to serve in the military, but found military life difficult. Despite becoming a squad leader, he complained in a letter home that "the military existence is gradually getting too stupid and loathsome, especially since in recent weeks it has left no room whatsoever for anything else." He liked the military much more after entering into officer's training, and he left the following year with admiration of the "machine" and a greater sense of patriotism.

He returned to university and eventually earned a law degree in 1889, with a dissertation on the history of trading companies in the Middle Ages. For seven years he lived in the family home, studying further and teaching classes when he could. He did not leave home until his marriage in 1893, to his cousin Marianne Schnitger. During this time, Marianne tells us, he felt oppressed by his father, who ran his house with strong authority, requiring obedience of his children and his wife, who suffered a great deal. Max, she says, "was reserved and never asked relieved himself by a frank discussion of the problems. He repressed everything." He urgently wanted to leave.

When his cousin came to visit, moving from the country to the city, they quickly became attached. Here is how Marianne tells the story of their engagement:

The seriousness of their relationship was lightened by their sparkling humor and impish banter. The engagement was still supposed to be kept secret, but as Weber remarked, "Every jackass here gives me a meaningful look and asks me whether something has happened to me. I would never have thought I was beaming so."

Career

In 1894, the newly married couple moved to Freiburg, where Weber was appointed Professor of Economics. In 1896, they moved to the Heidelberg, where Weber continued as an Economics Professor. He spent his time researching and writing on economics and legal history. Max and Marianne had no children. Instead, they maintained a vibrant social circle of intellectuals.

In 1897, Max's father died. Max and his father had quarreled two months before, particularly about his father's treatment of his mother, and every biographer points out that the death hit Max very hard. He became depressed and suffered insomnia. Eventually, he had to leave teaching altogether to spend some time in

recovery. He made one brief foray back into teaching in 1902 but left again in 1903 and would not return to an official posting until 1919, one year before his death. During that time, he wrote much that would be published after his death, on matters sociological and political.

He spent much of 1904 touring the United States, notes and letters of which letters have recently been published.² Given the importance of Benjamin Franklin to his own understanding of the development of the spirit of capitalism, visiting the United States was an important chapter in his life. Weber took many notes on what he witnessed there. When visiting upstate New York, he observed,

My trip to Buffalo yesterday was very pleasant, even though all the walking around along lengthy streets was fairly strenuous. Despite the magnificent buildings, the shopping streets as a whole look no more inviting than those in New York: Everything is obscured with a black sooty haze, windows are sometimes dirty- in short, new and yet already falling into disrepair, somewhat like our own suburbs., By contrast, the residential district is the world of elegance, nothing but tree-lined green streets with charming wood-frame houses that look as if someone had just taken them out of the toy box and placed them on the velvety green lawn. They are the only completely new and original architecture that I've seen here so far, and aesthetically far more satisfying than the imposing stone palaces in New York (September 9th).

In contrast to this pleasant scene, Weber was struck by the dirty sootiness of Chicago, the fifth largest city in the world at the time,

Chicago is one of the most unbelievable cities. In the city among the skyscrapers, the condition of the streets is utterly hair-raising. Soft coal is burned there. When the hot dry wind off the wastelands to the southwest blows through the streets, and especially when the dark yellow sunsets, the city looks fantastic.... Everything is mist and thick haze, and the whole lake is covered by a purple pall of smoke...It is an endless human desert....[In the stockyards], for as far as one can see from the Armour firm's clock tower there is nothing but herds of cattle, lowing, bleating, endless filth. But on the horizon, all around - for the city continues for miles and miles until it melts into the multitude of the suburbs - there are churches and chapels, grain elevators, smoking chimneys, and houses of every size (September 19th).

In 1907, he received an inheritance that allowed him to put off paid employment. He and Marianne lived well and continued to host intellectual parties and discussions. They experimented (disastrously says Radkau) with an open marriage. In 1909 Weber helped found the German Sociological Association, serving as its first treasurer. In 1912, he tried to organize a leftist political party, but was ultimately unsuccessful. When World War I began, in 1914, Weber volunteered and was appointed as a reserve officer. Weber would eventually become a strong critic of Germany's nationalist expansionism and called for the expansion of suffrage. He was one of the advisers to the committee that drafted the Weimar Constitution. He unsuccessfully ran for a seat in parliament. It was at this time that he returned to the university, where he gave a famous lecture criticizing opportunistic politicians. The lectures from his last year of life were written down and have circulated as important Weberian texts for years. At the time of his death, he was working on what he

2. See Scaff's *Max Weber in America* (2011).

considered his masterwork, *Economy and Society*. Marianne would continue the work and publish it as Max's own in 1922. Marianne continued to work his notes and half-finished manuscripts into books and publish them for the next several years.

His Work

In the early years, Weber wrote mostly on legal history and economics. He was very productive during this time and published his dissertation on trading companies in the middle ages in 1889, a book on Roman agrarian history in 1891, a book on farm labor in Eastern Germany in 1892, a book on the stock exchange in 1894, and a book on the state and economic policy in 1895. After his father's death, it was several years before he could work again. He wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published as an essay in 1904. This work marks his turn to more sociological writing. Although he continued to write and lecture in these later years, almost everything was left unfinished at his death. Marianne Weber did much to compile and publish this later work, including his famous *Economy and Society* (1922) and *General Economic History* (1924). The English-speaking world knows Weber primarily through translation, and most of these translations were completed in the 1940s and 1950s, many by Talcott Parsons, the great mid-century American sociologist working out of Harvard University.

Questions

1. How does Weber's background and career compare to that of Durkheim, his near contemporary? To Marx?
2. Weber was a keen observer. How is this evidence in the brief extracts from his 1904 visit to the United States?