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Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity, ed. Stephen Kalberg

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***Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity*, ed. Stephen Kalberg, Blackwell Publishing, 2005**

Ira J. Cohen, general editor of a series of books, including this one, on “modernity and society” notes that Max Weber (1864-1920) observed (in 1919, one year before he died) that when one is a scientist, he must be reconciled to knowing that his work will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years. “Each scientific ‘fulfillment’ raises new questions: it asks to be ‘surpassed’ and outdated.”

While this has been true of many works in the disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology, and political science, Weber’s work has not met the fate he anticipated. Even today, more than 80 years after his death, his work is not dated. Only someone such as Alexis de Tocqueville shares this luster. Weber, the author of the still valid *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, was never caught up in an untenable philosophy of history, an anachronistic ideology, outdated pivotal concepts, or polemical engagements, as were, respectively, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and other classical theorists.

“What makes Weber’s works invaluable for social theory today is that he introduced an entire agenda of questions about the nature and origin of modern Western civilization, inaugurated with the advent of modern capitalism, bureaucratic forms of administration, science and scientific technology, and systematically codified and administered bodies of formal law.” (says Cohen).

Cohen says that Stephen Kalberg, the scholarly translator and commentator on Weber’s works, provides a fine summary of the questions that framed Weber’s concern with modernity at large. Kalberg says that Weber’s questions about the survivability of our dynamic and open societies are even more valid today than when Weber posed these questions. Weber asked how can societies be organized in a manner that nourishes individualism and individual rights? What are the parameters of social change in the West?

Weber does not provide answers with broad strokes of the theoretical brush. He identifies and describes the many elements (constellations) that contribute to the unique outcomes in Western society. This is more challenging than the reductionist theories of those who try to fit all events into an economic or political theory.

One issue that most troubled Weber is back in the news today: the concern over the erosion of ethical meaning in Western modernity at large. Interestingly enough, and contrary to contemporary European thought, Weber found hope for the continuity of ethical meaning in the

peculiar nature of the United States, which even early in the 20th century was demonstrating the transition of Puritan Protestant values into secular life. Even in our most ruthless Robber Baron era, the Protestant values about calling and character were very much alive.

Weber's comparison of German and American capitalism is enlightening, and also relevant to understanding the differences between American and European thought. Weber noted that in Germany's history, state officials and the aristocracy dominated educational institutions, and these sectors opposed the power of money-makers. In America, this obstacle was absent. "When moving toward modern capitalism, countries do not stand on a level playing field, as little as they do when moving toward modern democracy. Nor are the different historical contexts shattered and banished by the wheels of modern capitalism to the same extent or in the same manner," Weber wrote.

In comparing rural social structure in Germany and the US, Weber observed the role of traditional and conservative religion. In Germany, first the Catholic Church and then the Lutherans supported (and romanticized) the peasant, with his conservative way of life, against the dominion of urban rationalist (capitalist) culture. He also noted that intellectuals too have largely been anti-capitalist. Why? Weber says that ever since they became a profession, "they want to be ruled only by persons whose social culture they consider equivalent to their own; therefore, they prefer the rule of the economically independent aristocracy to the rule of the professional politician."

One other issue in which Weber demonstrated himself to be far ahead of his time was his challenge to the then popular movement of "race biology." A colleague, Alfred Ploetz (1860-1940) was a prominent representative of the "race biology" school. This was the movement that was later used to justify Nazi racial theories. Ploetz said that the modern advances in biology and genetics legitimized a paradigm change. He said that the "vital race" (Aryans) must take precedence over the ephemeral, miniscule and imperfect existence of individuals, for the race represents the organic unity of life. The health of society depends upon the purity of the "blood of the race." The weak and infirm, who lower the quality of the gene pool, must be prohibited from reproducing.

Weber responded that economic and political factors offer a better explanation for societal circumstances than the "blood of a race." He uses the fall of Rome as an example: in his view, it wasn't the consequence of "pollution" of their blood, but of economics and governance.

He also noted that the difference in social esteem given by American Whites to Blacks and Indians had nothing to do with inherited racial characteristics, but followed from social ones: Blacks had been slaves and Indians not. He said that the whole racial theory struck him as having a completely mystical character, and not a scholarly one. He considered racial theory hypothetical and highly speculative rather than scientific.

This new translation of some of Weber's greatest contributions to modern thought is welcome. For intellectuals, he offers a model of clear and critical thought.

Laina Farhat-Holzman