

Nationalism and Modern Economy: Communing with the Spirit of Max Weber

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Abstract

Based on a close reading of Weber's work, the essay offers a *mentalist* (focused on the mind) reinterpretation of his sociology, sharply distinguished from the academic discipline of sociology as it has been taught and practiced. It then reevaluates the significance of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as a theory of dramatic social change (a reorientation of a sphere of social action), treating as irrelevant the philosophical framework of materialism vs. idealism in which the work is usually placed and arguing that (a) this significance is not diminished by the refutation of the specific thesis regarding the role of Protestantism in shaping the spirit of capitalism, and (b) that concentration on the relationship between religion and economy blinds the reader to the broader sociological import of Weber's theory. Finally, building on this theory, it offers a new explanation of the emergence of modern economy, replacing Protestantism as the causal factor by nationalism and briefly outlining the psychological mechanisms through which the latter's egalitarianism and inherent competitiveness leads to the orientation to sustained growth.

Keywords: Capitalism, idealism, materialism, mentalism, modern economy, rationalization, social institutions, sustained growth, Tawney.

I

In the first chapter of *Economy and Society*, Weber defined the nature of the discourse he proposed to develop in this late work. After years of hesitation and searching he decided to designate it by the name 'sociology', writing:

Sociology, a word often used in quite diverse ways, shall mean here: a science which seeks interpretative understanding of social action, and thereby will causally explain its course and effects. By 'action' is meant human behavior linked to a subjective meaning on the part of the actor or actors concerned; such behavior may be overt or occur inwardly – whether by positive action, or by refraining from such action, or by acquiescence to some situation. Such behavior is 'social' action where

the meaning intended by the actor or actors is related to the behavior of others, and conduct so oriented.¹

The choice of the term assured the incorporation of Max Weber into the annals of the discipline of sociology, newly institutionalized within the academy in his time, to be claimed and revered as one of its founding fathers. As it happened, this was an incorporation of the name (nominal incorporation, so to speak), rather than of the work or, even less so, the thought, for today very few sociologists – and perhaps not a single sociology department, as a matter of policy – would define sociology this way. The spirit of sociology as it exists and has existed in the course of the century which bestowed on it the status of a science and placed it within research universities would be entirely foreign to Max Weber; he would not have liked, one suspects, to have fathered it.

Any examination of paternity, however, would reveal that the historical individual in question is the offspring of Karl Marx. Like many an accidental father, the great ideologue was quite oblivious of such possible effect of the generative act and later entirely uninterested in the creature he had unintentionally spawned. The actual instrument of Marx's paternity was, as every paternity of course, a swarm of unthinking carriers of his message and, since in this case these agents of dissemination were also human, he cannot be held wholly responsible for the final result.

The fact of his paternity, nevertheless, remains beyond reasonable doubt. The discipline of sociology belongs squarely – however astonishing this is, when one recognizes the full implications of such belonging – within the philosophical tradition of historical materialism. Historical materialism implies that history is a material process, that is, a process essentially similar to the process of life; that historical configurations, such as societies, are material (namely, physical, chemical, and/or biological, for these categories exhaust the meaning of 'material') configurations generated out of previously existing material configurations by material means and in turn generating by material means new material configurations. The *locus classicus* of Marx's sociology, *The German Ideology*, in fact, suggests that Marx regarded history as a direct continuation of the biological evolutionary process, obviously conceived in Lamarckian rather than Darwinian terms, and therefore implying the inheritance of acquired

1. Max Weber, 'Basic Sociological Concepts', in Sam Whimster (ed.), *The Essential Weber* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 312.