

Editorial

This double issue of *Max Weber Studies* is devoted to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and is the fruit of a conference held at Toynbee Hall, London in June 2004, held to mark the appearance a hundred years ago of Weber's essay which was published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* in two instalments in November 1904 and June 1905. It might be asked whether this is a pointless celebration of a work that has already been intensively debated over the twentieth century by both the historical and social sciences. What new can possibly be added? First it should probably be noted that the essay is undergoing another intensive phase of study, and not just through the centenary conferences held in London, Madrid, Buenos Aires, Montreal, Heidelberg and Munich and more. Preparations by Hartmut Lehmann for the forthcoming Max Weber Gesamtausgabe edition of the essay and by Peter Ghosh for a new translation based on historical principles as well the appearance of new translations by Stephen Kalberg and by Peter Baehr and Gordon Wells have raised the scholarly pitch of debate. In addition, the team of David Chalcraft, Austin Harrington and Mary Shields have placed Weber's captious replies to his critics in English for the first time. (See the debate on translation in *Max Weber Studies* 2.1). And in this issue Wolfgang J. Mommsen* reveals his findings about the pre-history of the essay in the light of his editing of Weber's lectures from the late 1890s on *Nationalökonomie* for the Max Weber Gesamtausgabe.

So what is new? As has been argued by Hartmut Lehmann, the essay probably started life in Weber's mind as a review of Sombart's *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, which was published in two volumes in 1902. Mommsen demonstrates that in his lectures on *Nationalökonomie* Weber had already rehearsed the theme of the cultural and religious

* This was probably one of the last of Wolfgang J. Mommsen's academic appearances before his untimely death some weeks later. Participants at the Toynbee Hall conference are unlikely to forget the extraordinary sense of engagement Mommsen brought to the occasion. The last issue of *Max Weber Studies* carries a number of appreciations.

determination of human economic needs, and he had covered the large themes of the history of capitalism and the role of economic theory – including a mastery of Austrian marginalism, something Joseph Schumpeter pointedly denied to Weber in his *History of Economic Analysis*. History and theory were never opposed choices, a *canard* for which both Weber and Sombart had occasion to rebuke their fellow editor, Edgar Jaffé, after he had written a misleading statement in 1917–18.

As is well known the Protestant ethic essay underwent a revision in 1919 before its inclusion in 1920 in volume one of *Die Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. What is less well known is that Weber had consistently refused to publish the essay as a freestanding book despite the pleading of his publisher. As Lehmann notes below, in the first version of the essay Weber had made a list of things still to be researched, including the influence of asceticism on humanistic rationalism, a backward look to the beginnings of innerworldly asceticism in the Middle Ages and its later translation into utilitarianism. Weber never got around to writing up this programme. His essay as he himself said was a ‘sketch’, a preliminary essay about the widest of possible topics, the genesis of modern capitalism and its cultural roots and significance. Peter Ghosh observed during the Toynbee Hall conference that the essay is canonical but it should not be taken as a classic. It is difficult to fit within Weber’s own oeuvre, it established no clear research programme or school, and we might also remark that it is not an easy text to write about. We need to remind ourselves that in its brilliance and originality it was ‘only’ an essay – one that went to the limits of what can be asked within science.

In the Anglophone world the essay is best known through the much loved and much reviled translation by Talcott Parsons. Lawrence Scaff has been into the archives to discover the making of this translation by the 26 year-old Parsons. He shows that Parsons, contrary to recent accusations, intended the greatest possibility fidelity to Weber’s original in what he called a ‘semantic translation’. In this he had the full support of Marianne Weber, but not, as it now turns out, of the English and American publishers and their advisor R.H. Tawney. The published translation is a corruption of the manuscript originally provided by Parsons in 1929. His original rendered the syntax and meaning of the opening sentence of the ‘Vorbemerkung’ correctly, but some meddler broke the back of the sentence – still one of the most important in social science today.

When Parsons first read the essay, he read it straight through 'as if it were a detective story' – a remark that echoes Mina Tobler's comment that she read it 'as if it were a good novel', even while a fretful Max Weber thought she would find it boring (*Max Weber Studies* 4.1: 19). Like Tobler, that gladly has been the experience of many generations of students. But if it was a novel, what was the plot, and if it was a 'Krimi' what was the crime? Well, it was the Calvinist and baptizing sects 'who did it'. And the crime was not capitalism, since, as Weber pointed out, capitalism and its psychological prop acquisitiveness was as old as history. In the name of being called by one's god, a 'berufliche Kultur' was perpetrated that in its way was a crime against all those civilizations that for aeons had kept chrematism in check. The modern person is a somebody ('*Persönlichkeit*') who has exchanged the unquestionable values of a civilization for the self-directed activity of his and her own goals, and the carapace in which this somebody is attired is that of an occupation. Today in a globalized world of capitalism – not so much *Hochkapitalismus* as *Überallkapitalismus* – the medium of conversation is not *Kultur* but occupation – footballer, academic, futures dealer, beggar, computer programmer. It is not one's condition or plight as cleric, believer, lord, rich man, lady, and poor man. When the Soviets attempted the experiment in creating a new socialist civilization they objectively and correctly identified modern occupations as crucial; instead of class and estates there would be workers, technologists, scientists, doctors, teachers, commissars, artists. Schumpeter, to Weber's political outrage, supported the soviets as an interesting experiment; but from a Weberian viewpoint the 'experiment' of modern occupations without the beast of capitalism would be equally worthy of attention.

The articles by Hans-Peter Müller and by Pier-Paolo Pasqualoni and Alan Scott pursue the theme of 'berufliche Kultur'. A number of linkages are flagged up. Does occupation require a permanent 'geistliche' accompaniment, or does the world of occupations fall prey to the 'letzten Menschen' devoid of spirit? What kind of character or personality is the habitus for occupational holders? How does occupational behaviour become a form of 'Lebensführung' and how is a particular form of conduct sustained by values belonging respectively to the spheres of culture and politics? The overall Weberian answer is that these questions always remain pertinent but no systematic solution can be given as to how the linkages operate. In a macro sense, contingency rules. Whatever the society or period, the point is to inquire, both conceptually and empirically, into these issues. Today,

sociologists like Richard Sennett note the ‘corrosion of character’, where character is a moulding receptacle of upbringing, skills, values and ethics. Sennett’s character-less worker presages the onset of pure acquisitiveness, which in the Weberian canon would not sustain rational, systematic capitalism. Müller as well as Pasqualoni and Scott, in line with Boltanski and Chiapello’s *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, argue that there are new classes of entrepreneurs and globalization-critical activists whose profession is self-directed activity infused by a sense of mission.

When Talcott Parsons first read *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* he felt that it spoke to him. Whether it speaks to cultures other than lineal descendants of Protestant faith can be termed an issue of validity. Weber framed the issue in the opening sentences of the ‘Vorbemerkung’: the big problem of universal history is that a civilization has appeared in the West that ‘we’ like to think of as lying ‘in a line of development having *universal* significance and value (“Gültigkeit”)’. ‘Nur im Okzident gibt es “Wissenschaft” in dem Entwicklungsstadium, welches wir heute als “gültig” anerkennen’. Validity is the Kantian concept that served as a reality check during the shock of modernity. In Weber’s formulation both ‘gültig’ and ‘Wissenschaft’ go into scare quotes. It becomes an open question whether occidental science and the accompanying achievements in rational capitalism, art, law and government is an achievement of universal validity; further, the Kantian test for this – validity – is itself open to doubt. Weber did not answer his own question (not least because he died soon after, for the ‘Vorbemerkung’ was written in 1920), though his whole oeuvre provides the platform for thinking about the issue.

One answer is to side-step the question and to substitute the pragmatic question: does it work for you, as a society or culture? Validity cannot be reasoned but only demonstrated in action. If contemporary China embraces the main procedural principles of rational capitalism – the separation of household and communities from the firm, free labour, rational accounting, and widespread commercialization – then modern (western) capitalism is universally valid. And as a footnote to this, *Max Weber Studies* has been asked for Chinese translation rights for the article by Pasqualoni and Scott – a fractional indicator of a universalizing interest in human rights. Peter Ghosh in his comparison of the philosophical pragmatism of William James to that of Weber’s sociological treatment of religion comes to the conclusion that effectiveness in the world would fall far short of Weber’s own validity criteria. For these ultimately (‘letztlich’, not ‘vorletztlich’) would be

anchored in the values of a *Kultur* – the common confidence in a set of values that belonged over generations to a definable (e.g. linguistic) community. Troeltsch in the post-war years before his death in 1923 made a tremendous effort to widen the question and draw others into a discussion of the validity grounds of a Christian based civilization in relation to other civilizations. Abrahamic religions draw their authority from revelation. Their universalizability, as Sam Whimster notes in his article, depends on the ability to diffuse and spread a religion; the concept of validity seems to embrace both authority and successful diffusion.

Boltanski and Chiapello's treatment of this is to argue that the modern economic order always has to justify and legitimate itself in the face of criticism. Capitalism has renewed itself since the 1980s in the face of counter-cultural critiques and practices; it is still dependent on a 'spirit' that will motivate and affirm the new individualized project worker. So, for Boltanski and Chiapello, validity is not the issue; rather, belief and justification is – and this places an interesting Ritschlian gloss on their sociology of capitalism.

Mohammad Nafissi in his comparative treatment of Islam and Christianity accepts the validity of the transformative effects of religious reformation in Europe and the consolidation of modernity at a decisive phase within the European sphere. This is the standard against which the Islamicate has to be assessed in its historical patterns and development. Nafissi does not declare against Weber's handling of Islam – that he picked on the wrong bit of the Islamicate, the hedonistic warrior tribes and sultanistic patrimonialism and not, as Sami Zubaida argues, the urban communities and institutions of not necessarily Arabian Muslims. Nafissi criticizes Weber for not producing an ideal type of religious reformation *tout court*. In the case of Protestantism he took the reformation for granted. Weber also failed to notice that Islam of the golden age stood for a comprehensive reform of Abrahamic faiths: Jesus Christ's peculiar theistic status was regularized to prophet and a vengeful Yahweh was softened to compassion and persuasion. The engagement of this powerful *Weltbild* with political structures and social groups for a variety of multi-causal reasons proved less than enduringly dynamic. The city-state of Mohammad came under the influence of a debilitating Sunni routinization in the emerging imperial context. Islam despite its reformatory head start failed to develop the complex state-church and state-sects relationships of Europe and North America. The question now turns on whether an evolutionary recovery of the Islamic golden

age makes it credible to speak of an Islamic modernity, at least to the limited extent that a Confucian influenced modernity is now observable in China.

Jack Barbalet sees Weber's denial of the Jews as a possible social carrier of modern capitalism as one based in an essentialist characterization of the Jews and their faith as a 'pariah people'. Weber failed to balance his account of Jewish ethics as discriminating between the in-group and the out-group with the external forces of diaspora and ghettoization. Evolutionary game theory escapes to an extent the methodological dilemma of integrating 'idealist' internalist reasons with external 'material' causes by hypothesizing an attitude that does not have to succeed or fail in one historical moment. The *Ur*-question of how markets originally formed can be answered through environmental and selective uptake of different dispositions.

Liah Greenfeld argues that the Protestant ethic thesis is wrong but the overall methodology is correct. The thing that needs to be explained is how a traditionalist economic order is kicked into a higher order of dynamism. Her answer is not the Puritan sects but the creation of nationhood that conferred an equality of status on a people. This allows unfettered economic activity and the birth of the modern occupational world. Economic 'take-off' coincides with the achievement of nationhood in the major advanced countries. What is validated in modern capitalism is a specific form of rationalization of human behaviour in pursuit of economic ends. And if we look across to Mommsen's exposition of Weber's lectures in *Nationalökonomie* Weber had already set up a methodological framework to handle the many varied ways in which cultures determine economic need.

Peter Breiner poses the problem of primitive accumulation. In Adam Smith's terms, how does the cycle of saving and re-investment start in the first place? One of Smith's answers was the exercise of frugality. Weber, of course, has an explanation for this: salvation anxiety transferred to the rigid control of economic conduct. But, Breiner points out, Weber's narrative is not continuous. And, as Greenfeld notes, economists like nothing more than to ensure historical continuity through the retrospective 'extrapolation' of the rational individual. What we have in the *Protestant Ethic* is a series of stepping-stones, starting with the Fuggers (as old style merchant-aristocracy) to Benjamin Franklin, to Kidderminster weavers and hard-working Methodists. With Tawney there was a narrative (individual and institutional); not so with Weber who provided a genetic ideal type—a concept that has yet to impress the community of historians. For

Breiner, the *Protestant Ethic* is a 'just-so' story, and he extends this analysis to the professional politician where the stepping-stones are few and far between. And one influence here on Weber, as Palonen shows, was his old sparring partner Werner Sombart who, while terribly modern about artisans and capitalism, did not realize that modernity was an across-the-board experience applying to politicians as well.

So, the genetic ideal type is less than an hypothesis but rather something of an inference. Perhaps 'kapitalistischer Geist' was the ghost in the machine. Another way to approach the problem is through game theory. Sandro Segre passes Weber's treatment of rational action through the optic of contemporary rational choice theory, using the example of Weber's work on the stock exchanges. Weber seems to come out of this unscathed, but he is subject (via James Coleman) to the question of how action at the individual level aggregates to change at the societal level. Evolutionary game theory, as used by W.G. Runciman, is heuristically intriguing. Calvinistic economic attitudes (of the sort described by Weber) can be marking time for generations before joining the mainstream of history; all they have to do is keep replicating within their own 'meme-pool' until the 'right' economic/environmental conditions appear, for instance, in the nineteenth century. This does not have to be a history of origins, only one of operant conditions. Would this make Weber's account too reliant on the 'Uniqueness of the West', as Sami Zubaida charges? Eerily so – modernity might have been an accident, not just an *Eigenart* but a singularity impossible to validate, and hence those scare quotes.

Sam Whimster

