

Max Weber's *The City* and the Islamic City

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Abstract

Wolfgang Mommsen noted that Weber, despite his rejection of any philosophy of history, implicitly advanced one of his own. This article explores one aspect of this philosophy: the teleology of a unique Western history, which serves as a grid in terms of which other histories are read. In effect, other histories are considered in terms of what the West had and they lacked: a sociology of absence. *The City* discussed one crucial link in this teleology of the West. I consider this essay in relation to the Islamic city, and how Weber characterized it in different parts of his essay, in contrast with the Western city. I argue that Weber essentialized Islam, like he did China and India, in ways which eliminated history and geography and their considerable range of variation, in favour of implicit 'ideal types'. The consequences are explored in relation to themes at different points in the history of Muslim cities.

Keywords: Gellner, guilds, Islam, Ottoman Empire, philosophy of history.

Wolfgang Mommsen illuminated and elucidated the work of Max Weber in his many seminal works. One of his early essays, 'Max Weber's Political Sociology and his Philosophy of World History' (Mommsen 1965), was particularly influential, and I for one continue to find it most useful in teaching. It alerted us to the fact that Weber, despite his utter rejection of any philosophy of history, implicitly advanced one of his own. He saw historical transformations as the product of an unconditional freedom of the personality to act in accordance with orientation to transcendental values. That is the basis of charisma, which is then routinized. So, the movement of history was seen by Weber as a dialectic between charisma and routinization, especially pertinent to the triumph of rationality and bureaucracy in the modern age. This theme subsequently became common in writing and teaching on Weber, and has been much debated. This idea that Weber had an implicit philosophy of history has been further developed in relation to the 'uniqueness of the West' theme, so central to Weber, and one that has continued to exert great influence in the elaboration of that idea by many subsequent writers. That may be said to consti-

tute a philosophy of history because it seemed to postulate a teleology of the West, developing through various links into ever expanding rationality culminating in modern Western capitalism. Its other aspect is that the course of this unique development then becomes a scheme in terms of which other civilizational areas, primarily China and India, are interpreted. These civilizations are read, as it were, through a grid of Western development: what is it that the West had and they lacked, so that they failed to develop along its path into capitalism? This becomes a sociology of absence (Hirst 1975: 197). One of those links was the medieval European city, in contrast to its ancient and oriental counterparts.

Max Weber had much to say about Islam, but not in the systematic manner of his treatises on China and India. Most of what he had to say about Islam was, as it were, in passing, making comparative points in relation to some location or theme (Turner 1974; Zubaida 1972). This was the case with his essay on the City.

*The City*¹ is part of Weber's 'uniqueness of the West' project. The European Medieval city and its institutions were, for Weber, a crucial link in the development of economic rationality and modern capitalism.² This project also involved the drawing of contrasts between the features of this unique Western genealogy of capitalism and corresponding features in other civilizations, notably China and India, to underscore why they did not progress in the Western direction. In effect and in summary, these other civilizations were read through a grid of Weber's construction of Western history. These other civilizations lacked features such as Roman law, feudalism, the autonomous city and ultimately the equivalent of the Protestant Ethic. Instead, they contained features to do with tradition, kinship, cults and quiescent religious ethics which contributed to their stasis and inhibited revolutionary transformations. China, for instance, was a complex society and polity, drawing on considerable resources, featuring notable advances in science and technology, yet the obstacles and constraints of its society and religious ethos inhibits the advances which occur in the West.

1. All references in the paper are to Max Weber, *The City*, translated and edited by Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (1958).

2. Weber's essay did dwell on differences between types and regions in Europe. He was clear that they did not all share the features of north-western European medieval cities. These, for Weber, were the type which typified the link in the chain of the history of the West.