

Work and the Conduct of Life: Weber's Legacy

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Abstract

The article examines the role of work in Weber's oeuvre. Work is not a central concept for Weber but he did write extensively on the subject, and the article organizes his writings into four domains: the organization of work, occupation and social stratification, work and political community, and finally, work, personality and life style. This analytical and empirical interest in labor and labor regimes was embedded in his major problem – the rise of the West, and his analytical framework involved the study of economy, polity and culture. The article discusses Weber's problem, sets out his analytical frame of reference, and reconstructs his major empirical studies as well as the famous 'Protestant Ethic' studies where the objective and subjective aspects of work and its meaning are particularly prominent. In conclusion, Weber's legacy for sociological studies of work in the twenty-first century is outlined with respect to current problems and discourses in this sociological field.

Keywords: Labor, lifestyle, occupation, personality, Protestant ethic, rise of the West, stratification, work.

Unsere Arbeit ist und kann, wenn sie einen Sinn behalten soll, nur sein wollen: Fürsorge für die *Zukunft*, für unsere *Nachfahren*. Aber es gibt auch keine volkswirtschaftliche Arbeit auf der Grundlage optimistischer Glückshoffnungen. Für den Traum von Frieden und Menschenglück steht über der Pforte der unbekanntes Zukunft der Menschgeschichte: *lasciate ogni speranza*.

Nicht wie die Menschen der Zukunft sich *befinden*, sondern wie sie *sein* werden, ist die Frage, die uns beim Denken über das Grab der eigenen Generation hinaus bewegt, die auch in Wahrheit jeder wirtschaftspolitischen Arbeit zugrunde liegt. Nicht das Wohlbefinden der Menschen, sondern diejenigen Eigenschaften möchten wir in ihnen emporzüchten, mit welchen wir die Empfindung verbinden, dass sie menschliche Größe und den Adel unserer Natur ausmachen.

Max Weber, 'Der Nationalstaat und die Wirtschaftspolitik' (1895)¹

1. M. Weber 1921/1971: 4; M. Weber 1996: 17. English translation: If our work is to retain any meaning it can only be informed by this: concern for the future, for those who will come after us. But there can also be no real work in political economy on the

1. Introduction

Work played a crucial role throughout the oeuvre of Max Weber. He was above all interested in the meaning of work, the emergence of a rational work organization and the relationship of vocation and personal identity. This preoccupation with labor and its correlates was however embedded in a larger problem set which defined his life as a scholar, namely the rise of Western capitalism and the uniqueness of occidental modernity.

Max Weber was probably one of the last universal scholars of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century who could equally be regarded as an economist, legal scholar, political scientist, historian and sociologist. His widely ranging scientific interests dealt with economic, juridical, historical and sociological studies of Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Modernity. Where other classics just looked at work, the division of labor and social differentiation, Weber studied the embeddedness of work in four domains: (1) with regard to the technical and economic structure, he analyzed the work organization and the structuration of labor through bureaucracies; (2) with respect to the social structure, he clarified the relationship of occupation and social stratification; (3) *vis-à-vis* the political structure, he was preoccupied with 'Classes, Estates and Parties' as forms of political community; (4) dealing with the cultural structure, he focused upon ascetic Protestantism and the culture of the West elucidating the intricate relationship of vocation, personality and style of life. Given this richness, it does not come as a surprise that the towering figure Max Weber became a multiple founding father. He inspired not only social and political theory, but helped establish many specialized fields of sociology: economic sociology, the sociology of work, occupation and industry, organizational studies, the sociology of inequality and stratification, political and cultural sociology as well as the sociology of religion.²

basis of optimistic dreams of happiness. In the dream for peace and happiness there is written above the door of the unknown future of human history: abandon hope all ye who enter here.

The question which leads us beyond the grave of our own generation is not how will human beings feel in the the future but how they will be. In fact this question underlies all work in political economy. We do not want to train up feelings of well being in people, but rather those characteristics we think constitute the greatness and nobility of our human nature.

2. On religion see W. Schluchter (1988); on economy see M. Granovetter and R. Swedberg (1992); in general see P. Hamilton (1991) and J. Weiß (1989).