**Weber, Max (1864-1920)**

Maximilian ‘Max’ Karl Emil Weber was born 21 April 1864 in Erfurt, present-day Federal Republic of Germany, and is a prominent figure in the emergence of sociology as an academic discipline. He is best known for the concept of the ‘iron cage’ (or ‘steel-hard casing’: *stahlhartes Gehäuse*) of modernity, which he introduced in his essay ‘Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*’* (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, see Weber 1930), first published in two parts in 1904 and 1905, and then again with some revisions at the end of his life in 1920. Weber’s studies range in topic from world religions, to urbanism, to law and politics, to epistemologies of the social sciences, but coalesce around the problem of the rational status of knowledge and authority in modern industrial economies; he notably observed charismatic authority alongside bureaucracy as equally constitutive of modern democracies. His comparative-historical sociology stands against the historical materialist critique of Marx and Marxism, but is equally distinct from the positivism of earlier sociologists Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. The interplay and oppositions amongst these interpretive, materialist and positivist approaches in method and epistemology came to shape the contours of modern social and political thought.

Weber earned his doctorate in law in 1889 and completed his *Habilitationsschrift* (a second dissertation required for university teaching in Germany) in 1891 at Berlin. He was Professor of Political Economy at Freiburg from 1893 and of Economics at Heidelberg from 1897 until 1903, when he retired due to mental exhaustion, just as he was composing *The Protestant Ethic* (Radkau 2009). The concept of the ‘iron cage’ of modernity presented in this text can thus partly be taken to reflect the mental anguish and struggle with rationality within Weber’s personal life; analytically, the ‘iron cage’ crystallizes a general emphasis apparent in much of his work on the deeply paradoxical and even tragic forces driving industrial capitalism. For Weber, the political economy of capitalism was defined by rational book-keeping, the exploitation of nominally free labour and the severing of household economics from the public realm of business (Kemple 2007). The thesis of *The Protestant Ethic* postulates that the strict asceticism preached by early Protestant reformers ultimately led to the secularization of their work ethic by unintentionally providing a justification for the rise of ‘the spirit of capitalism’. Weber arrived at this thesis through a historical survey of Northern European religious ideals, compared to both Southern Europe’s Roman Catholic codes of living and emergent American work regimes and secular philosophies.

In claiming the ‘spirit’ of secular capitalism was a social construct that emerged paradoxically out of a religious ethic of a strict asceticism, Weber’s argument is a prototypical example of sociological method and theory because it demonstrates that human institutions are cultural constructions, contingent on historical conditions, rather than morally and naturally given. Weber’s tone turns dark and fatalistic at the end of the essay in reference to his own present moment in the early twentieth century: ‘The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so… In Baxter’s [English, Puritan] view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the “saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.” But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage… For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved”’ (Weber 1930, 181-82).

*The Protestant Ethic* was first translated into English (1930) by Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979). Subsequent studies have reconsidered Parsons’s choice of ‘iron cage’, connoting a prison cell, as the translation for *stahlhartes Gehäuse,* which more literally means ‘steelhard casing’, connoting instead, for example, the ornamental encasing of a watchworks or the protective shell of a weapon (see Baehr 2001). The essay was later revised for Weber’s collected essays on the sociology of religion, which also included studies of Hinduism and Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, and Ancient Judaism, posthumously published by Weber’s wife Marianne (née Schnitger, 1870-1954) as part of his unfinished magnum opus, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* ( *1921-1922; Economy and Society*). Weber’s work was central to Parsons’s systematic synthesis of sociological theories in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). Although not yet calcified into a general theory of structural-functionalism, Parsons’s later extraction from *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (*The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 1947) drew English-language sociologists’ attention to the possibilities for a general, grand theory of human society. This mid-century application of Weber’s work towards a general social theory has since been cast as a misunderstanding of his historical-interpretive approach, whose central notion is the method of constructing ‘ideal types’ (Kalberg 1994). An ideal type is grounded in empirical observation but involves conceptual synthesis, as opposed to merely computing a statistical average, for example. Formulated by accentuating aspects of various real cases, each of which displays generalized elements, the ideal type posits a unified analytical construct that accentuates empirical patterns or logical consistency from within the ‘chaotic stream’ of history. The resulting simplification is as artificial as utopia, Weber (1949) writes, insofar as both are logically possible but analytically fabricated.

Through his involvement with the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* (German Society for Sociology), alongside other members such as Georg Simmel, Werner Sombart and Ferdinand Tönnies (Adair-Toteff 2005), Weber aimed to distinguish a ‘value-free’ (*wertfrei*, sometimes rendered as ‘value-neutral’ or ‘ethically neutral’ in earlier translations) rational and scientific approach to social and political studies. Two of his best-known essays, ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf’ (‘Science as a Vocation’) and ‘Politik als Beruf*’* (‘Politics as a Vocation’), are lectures first presented in 1917 and 1919, respectively, in which he addressed students about following their sense of calling (*Beruf*) while excoriating both professors who taught through charisma and scholars whose aims were ideological rather than methodical and based in evidence and observation (see Weber 1946). While consistently adhering to a rational, ‘value-free’ approach to social science, Weber’s methodology was nonetheless reliant on interpretive idealism, aiming to unite supposedly subjective understandings and ostensibly ‘objective’ explanations. This goal was especially important in Weber’s Germany given the firm distinction usually accorded *Erklärung* or causal explanation in the national sciences and *Verstehen* or interpretive understanding in the cultural or social sciences. At root, Weber saw his work as bridging the two ways of approaching reality, ultimately by achieving an *erklärendes Verstehen*, or explanatory understanding.

Given the interpretive underpinnings in Weber’s methodology and his emphasis on the dialectic of material conditions and cultural context, of idealism and materialism, it is no surprise that his work continues to be revisited in postmodern thought, applied to late modernity, and recast in neo-liberal times for insights into the new spirit of capitalism.

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**List of works**

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