

# Max Weber

The Kingston Philosophy Circle

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*To understand modernity is to understand Weber. The tensions between (rational) enlightenment and (human) survival were described by Weber in the debate about religious asceticism and the modern ethic, the bureaucratization of life and its standardisation, the contrasts between hedonism and discipline, the disappearance of the autonomous liberal individual in the iron cage of state regulation, the emergence of science out of the irrational religious quest, the decline of charismatic authority with the spread of the administrative machine, the erosion of the intimate in the face of large-scale administrative structures, the death of God and the pluralization of the life-world. These developments describe modernisation, while anticipating post modernisation.*

**Turner: Max Weber from History to Modernity**

The aim of what follows is to give a straightforward account of Weber's work and philosophical position aimed at the non specialist. To begin I will discuss Weber's background in Neo Kantian philosophy and methodology and his "dialogue" with Marx which leads up to the Protestant Ethic.

Perhaps one should begin by simply noting the enormous profound changes that the first industrial revolution wrought. These affected economic activity, culture, organisation of work power relations and structures. And the scope and depth of these was probably without precedent.

Weber, like Marx was profoundly impressed with this, and poses the question: why did this happen and why, in particular, did it happen in the occident, the west.

Whilst Weber enormously respected Marx's analysis of the industrial revolution and the social forces consequently unleashed, he believed that Marx had left out the role of agency, meaningful action and culture in social change. To unpack this lets very briefly firstly reconsider Marx and his famous predecessor Hegel.

## **HEGEL AND MARX**

Very roughly, Hegel viewed society through the prism of history (Heraclitus an important predecessor) Hegel views the antinomies of Kant (set out in the Critique) as contradictions which arise, not from a false extension of metaphysics to the transcendental, as Kant claimed, but from different phases in history. That is, through the passage of time, societal contradictions will become reconciled through the unfolding of a dialectical process (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) through history. Hegel also believes that the absolute (analogous to Kant's unknowable "thing in itself") will be knowable as the Absolute through the increasing moral clarity of mankind achieved through this process of historical development. Hegel sees this as proceeding dialectically, as mentioned, through a process of social conflict and its resolution.

Hegel, Like a lot of his contemporaries, was much influenced by the French revolution and the transformative power for social change through conflict. He also believed that this social conflict was worked out at the ideological level and one can talk about the "spirit of the age". In fact we still use the terms "Geist" and "Zeitgeist"

Marx famously "turns Hegel on his head". Marx is a materialist rather than an idealist philosopher. He (Marx) believes that the main agents of social change are material conditions, and the economy. The main causes of social and cultural change are technology and work organisation. A good example from today perhaps is the role of computing and telecommunications : the world wide web, the internet, messaging and voice and related technologies on culture today and how that culture has been transformed over the last two and a half decades.

Marx was of course living through the high point of the British industrial revolution and saw not only the tremendous power of the transforming economy to affect change and create wealth (for some) but also of course the terrible oppression of the factory workers. So Marx rejects Hegel's Idealism but accepts the dialectic, as the cause of conflict as a change mechanism acting through history.

It has been said of Marx that he affected a union between German Historical philosophy (Hegel) and British political economy (Adam Smith, David Hume, David Ricardo, Richard Malthus etc) by interpreting the economy as a dialectical process particularly through the mechanism of class conflict. He sees the inevitable triumph of the working class as the result of an extended historical process.

Two points come out of this. Marx brings together two self-sustaining "historicist" processes: firstly the dialectic; the dynamic of change through history, and secondly the British classical economic analysis of industrial processes with its emphasis on the self regulating power of the unconstrained market. Marx is seeking a "lawlike" process of history which governs society and human behaviour.

## **WEBER IN A “DIALOGUE” WITH MARX.**

Weber respects Marx’s analysis.

But he reacts against this somewhat nomothetic materialist *process* view, believing rather that human agency, meaning and culture, (particularly religion) played a role as change agents in the Industrial revolution. In this Weber was influenced by contemporary neo Kantian philosophers like Wilderbrand and Rickert and their forebears Schleiermacher and Dilthey who sought explanation at the level of meaning or meaningful action.

Now, the idea that all of the sciences whether natural or social should essentially follow the same model is traceable back to at least JS Mill (Mill: A System of Logic), and probably to the beginnings of the enlightenment in Francis Bacon. It is an idea that is still widespread today.

## **EXPLANATION OF BEHAVIOUR AT THE LEVEL OF MEANING**

This was strongly contested within Germany during the 19th Century particularly by the Neo Kantian schools of philosophy. Neo Kantianism was a philosophical movement which flourished in Germany in particular from about 1870 to around 1920. Very roughly, and as the name suggests, it was concerned to move away from the influence of Hegel and back

to Kant although attitudes towards Kant varied amongst different philosophers of this school.

German thinkers, especially Dilthey, distinguished strongly between the study of society *geisteswissenschaften* on the one hand and the natural world *naturwissenschaften* on the other.

Neo Kantian thinkers like Wilderbrand, Dilthey( I mention more below) and Rickert agreed that there was a fundamental difference between the natural sciences, on the one hand, and studies such as history, jurisprudence, and economics, on the other. But they disagreed as to where that distinction lay and whether there was just one science pursued in a rather different way in the humanities or whether they were two completely distinguished activities.

The Neo Kantians had important predecessors, Wilhelm Dilthey Jacob Burckhardt (author of “The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy”, which can be seen as a predecessor of a Weberian style of analysis) and Fredriech Nietzsche all of whom were Professors at the University of Basel, where they didn't quite overlap.

All three were heavily influenced by Schropenhaur. In particular his insight that knowledge could be both external via representation following Kant but also internal via the “Will”.

This, from Dilthey “Natural science can do no more than explain (erklären) observed events by relating them to other events in accordance with natural laws. These laws tell us nothing of the inner nature of the things and processes that we study. But with human beings there is a sense in which it is possible to go beyond observable actions to something internal: we may understand (verstehen) their actions in terms of their thoughts, feelings, and desires. We can know not merely what a man does but the experiences (Erlebnisse), the thoughts, memories, value judgments, and purposes that have led him to do it.” Note the Schropenhaurian slant and the concern with values.

## NEO KANTIANISM AND WEBER

There were two principal “schools” of Neo Kantian thought, one at the University of Marburg which centred around Friedrich Lange, Herman Cohen, Paul Natorp, and Ernst Cassirer. The other the so-called Southwest School was variously centred around the Universities of Strassburg, Freiburg and Heidelberg. The Leader of this school was Wilhelm Windelband and his students Heinrich Rickert (who was a junior colleague of and most directly influenced Max Weber. Weber became a Professor of Economics at Freiburg) and Emil Lask. Now it was Rickert who largely took issue with Dilthey and it was Weber who supported him in this

Rickert’s concern was a lack of objectivity or repeatability in Dilthey’s approach to the nature of understanding. Rickert accepted and agreed that the nature of explanation in the human sciences was not to try and formulate law-like propositions but rather to formulate causes at the level of “meaning” as we saw above. However just as natural scientists broke external objects down into components and subcomponents in order to formulate natural laws so the historical sciences ought to be more active in their analyses, focussing on unique events, actors, collectives or organisations that the historical/social researcher selected and exaggerated in pursuit of their researches.

This, of course, was compatible with Kantian thought that knowledge was a selection or organisation in terms of the Kantian categories, space, time causation and so on.

So it was this more rigorous Rickertian form of historical/cultural analysis that was Weber's starting point.

Explanation at the level of “meaning” or verstehen also means encountering the values of the actors being investigated. Weber followed the neo kantian view in rejecting noumena, things in themselves, and therefore believed that all values were subjective. It was therefore not possible to make any judgement about actors' values because that for the investigator would be an act of faith. Social sciences then had to be value free in the sense

of putting aside all value judgements, but also be aware of value-relevance that is assessing human action as falling under value systems. Weber's solution to this was the ideal type.

## **IDEAL TYPES**

Weber believed that rigorously constructed ideal types were essential to an approach that was both valid as an analysis of meaningful behaviour and was also repeatable as a scientific procedure.

So then what are these types or idealisations or ideal types? An ideal type was a scholarly construction or abstraction of a social process or cultural entity of interest. One might have ideal types of different forms of say: power and authority, of bureaucracy and control, of economic forms, say an agrarian economy. Ideal types are constructed by the social investigator as intellectual tools of analysis.

In *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, Weber is looking at the connection of two (or more actually) ideal types :On the one hand The protestant ethic, and on the other The spirit of capitalism. The objective is to try and show that there is indeed a congruence, In Weber's phrase an "Elective affinity" between them at the level of meaning. That the values and ideals exemplified in "The Protestand Ethic" could lead to the specific behaviours identified in the spirit of capitalism. In particular Calvinistic protestants believed themselves to be under the pull of a calling, a drive to demonstrate election by means of an unremitting drive of "this worldly" action creating a sort of heroism amongst the bourgeoisie. Unsurprisingly the book proved enormously controversial, provoking sharp reaction amongst economic historians in Germany and later elsewhere.

## **The theory of Action**

Briefly but importantly, Weber developed a typology of types of social action in terms of types (Traditional Social Action, Affective

social action, Value Rational Social Action, Instrumental Rational Social Action) so that types of action could be situated in respect of particular types of value to give an explanation of action.

## **THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION.**

Having argued that there is a meaningful link between the characteristics of the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism Weber went on to ask why fairly extreme forms of protestant thought lead to industrial capitalism in the Occident and why this didn't happen anywhere else. He develops his argument through a series of monumental comparative studies of: Ancient Judaism, Confucianism, Buddhism (Religion of China), India. Plus detailed analysis of mediaeval economic institutions: the City, Guilds, the Agrarian economy. Unfortunately he did not live long enough to complete a comparable study of Islam.

He argues that the critical features of protestantism: its religious sanctioning of righteous capitalist behaviour on the part of the bourgeoisie; Thriftiness, honesty in dealings, unremitting this worldly business activity as a sign of election, were not present in the other great world religions although many had other characteristics which might seem desirable from the perspective of the development of capitalism.

In addition to the detailed studies of particular religions, Weber also writes a detailed treatise on the Sociology of Religions where he develops a more general theory.

Key to this are types: Firstly, types of domination: Charismatic, Traditional, Rational, There are subtypes of these too but which I will not go into here.

**Charismatic domination.** Essential to the idea of Charisma is that of "apartness", literally under the grace of God. The Charismatic like the ubermensch is someone whose authority rests upon their transcendence (loosely speaking) from the everyday, the common. Typically one thinks of Religious leaders: Christ, Mohammed, Old Testament prophets and so on, but after

the death of God this role can be assumed by men of unquestionable evil :Hitler, Stalin (a less straightforward example) and modern Populist and Neo Fascist leaders. Key point is that their *legitimacy* (another Weberian concept), their acceptance as somehow valid. really depended upon themselves. Charisma is one of the most powerful agents of contestation and change, the ability to confront the established order in order to bring about change. The confrontation is often direct, think of Christ “It is written but I say unto you”  
Echoes here of the Hegelian dialectic and the Hegelian notion of tragedy. (as conflict)

### **Succession: the routinisation of charisma**

Leaders, charismatic or otherwise, die and this raises the problem of succession. A famous example is Islam: the war of succession after the death of the Prophet leading to the fission of Islam into Suny and Shiite, a split which has lasted until this day.

Perhaps the most typical succession is the transition from Charismatic Domination under the leader to, in the case of religion, traditional domination under the priesthood. Traditional because it is legitimated in virtue of ever having been thus.

So if Charisma is one important force in social change then rationalisation / bureaucratisation is another. In the wake of the Charismatic leader comes the priesthood. Weber talks in terms of the “routinisation of Charisma” The conversion of the preachings of the Prophet into edict and law is supervised by the priesthood who are likely to establish some sort of organisational procedure, a type of bureaucracy, to facilitate this.

Over time there is a *rationalisation* and consolidation of religious doctrine in the hands of the priesthood resulting in sanctified narrative and law. The Bible, The Qur’an, The Talmud are notable examples

Especially since the enlightenment there has arisen another important form of domination. The domination by virtue of rationality and science called by Weber, Rational Domination. We now (i.e., today, in the twenty-first century) anticipate that social institutions; public bureaucracies, the law, and democracy have the science-like characteristics of rationality (appeal to reason) , disinterested rule following and lack of bias. We see a continuing conflict between rationalised religious doctrine which has legitimacy from tradition and Charismatic domination. This can be contrasted with Hegelian ideational or Marxian Class conflict which Weber noted as an additional factors.

Weber recognises routinisation and the growth of bureaucratic control as an enormously powerful force particularly in the context of the industrial revolution leading to the “disenchantment of the world” and what Adorno refers to as the commodification of culture.

We see reflections of this ,for example, in both Kierkegaard, the need to bypass cynically routinised Christianity and return to the Charisma inspired original vision (“the leap of faith”) and Nietzsche in his contempt for the “herd” or indeed the substance of Book 2 of the Genealogy of Morals

## **THE DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD AND THE IRON CAGE**

Even a casual perusal of classical literature, say Book 1 of the Iliad, early books of the Odyssey or the Aeneid reveals a world where Gods are sacrificed to, prayed to and reveal themselves as arbitrarily motivated actors on the world stage. Typically there are a multiplicity of gods who are competitive with each other.

In Ancient Judaism Weber notes there commences a change with profound long term effects. Multiple Gods are replaced by one all-powerful God(Yahweh),where reverses of fortune are

explained in terms of God's displeasure rather than the intervention of some rival god. Worship of other Gods is deemed idolatrous. The injunction is not to try and intercede with God by sacrifice but rather to earn his continuous pleasure by obedience to law. Thus “otherworldly” interventions in an enchanted world aimed at securing the support of a particular deity are transformed **into** “this worldly” rational action, following and obeying the law.

This in religious terms achieves its most extreme point, arguably, in varieties of Protestantism as we saw above. However letting in the Law amplifies the process of disenchantment.

Law is a paradigm of rationalisation for Weber the rationalisation of modern law in Western societies takes on the specific form of formal rationalisation. Rationalised law is formal and abstract, exemplifying the disenchantment of the modern world. At the most general level, the quantity of law increases as societies grow and become more complex, because there is an increased need to have specified legal rules in a society that is more anonymous and diverse. The various members of large-scale societies do not readily know what is lawful and what is not, so that law has to increase in terms of the rules it incorporates and the degree of explication of those rules.

The progressive rationalisation of the Law combined with ever increasing /formal bureaucratic control leads to an ever growing disenchantment of the world and a repression of the individual man encased in a “steel hardened” cage something akin to the analysis presented by Nietzsche in Book 2 of the “Genealogy of Morals” by Freud un “Civilisation and its discontents” Marx’s concept of Alienation and Durkheim’s of Anomie.

## POLITICS

I mentioned the concept of the calling in the context of the Protestant ethic earlier. That one is “called” or drawn to a particular set of values which might underpin a vocation, and which might provide a set of underlying values as a goal of rational action.

In his important lecture: Politics as a vocation, delivered to a student body in Munich shortly after the cessation of the first world war and during a crisis period in German history, Weber highlights this and contextualises it. The title of the talk in German is Politik als Beruf. The word Beruf carries a double meaning in German both job, one’s day to day employment underpinned by an *ethic of responsibility* and Vocation underpinned by an *ethic of conviction*. (echoes of Bureaucratic rationalisation and Charisma) An essential feature of modern democracy was the party (we will talk more about this shortly) and the party machine. The social organisation that dealt with all the grubby bits of politics. Selecting candidates, raising funds, getting the vote out, discipline and so on. The mechanisms were well familiar to Weber the pre-eminent scholar of Bureaucracy. However he had a somewhat cynical view of party operations. One of his students, Robert Michels, had propounded the so-called “Iron law of Oligarchy ” that, in closed organisations such as political parties it was always the activists, those prepared to put in the administrative slog, turn up early and stay late, master the rule book, who rose to power. Anyway, this was an essential feature of political leadership. The leader had to have an ethic of responsibility, he or she had to get their hands dirty and had to make sure that things happened. But at the same time they had to have an ethic of conviction, to be able to provide an overall vision and narrative for the party and to be able to talk to the nation as a whole. As we noted in connection with Charismatic and Traditional /Rational (Bureaucratic) domination there is a potential conflict between these two. Nevertheless the Leader has to embrace both. This is also a reflection of a tension that we have already noted between Charismatic authority, the

Leader and traditional / bureaucratic domination in the form of the party machine<sup>1</sup>.

## **CLASS STATUS AND PARTY**

Weber's analysis of social cleavage might be called neo Nietzschean. Weber understands the causality of social differentiation is based upon power rather than class. Weber does not concur with Marx's analysis that class conflict is the fundamental driver of social change or that it is simply the ownership or non ownership of the means of production quote "Class, at its core, is an economic concept; it is the position of individuals in the market that determines their class position. And it is how one is situated in the marketplace that directly affects one's life chances" . So rather, as we have said, it is **power**, the chance to realise one's will even against the resistance of others, which determines one's life chances either economically or in terms of status.

This is only one facet however. Classes situate individuals in society and provide a basis for collective social action in terms of class interest. Overlaid on this though is status, status honour, status stratification (say caste) and status groups. What causes status stratification is often different to market differentiation

one might thus say that "classes" are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas "status groups" are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special "styles of life." An "occupational group" is also a status group. For normally, it successfully claims social honour only by virtue of the special style of life which may be determined by it. The differences between classes and status groups frequently overlap.

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<sup>1</sup> As an aside I strongly recommend listening to **David Runciman's** brilliant lecture on **Weber and Leadership** in **Talking Politics History of ideas**. There is also quite a good one on Nietzsche The Genealogy of Morals

So there is market distribution and stratification and stratification by status and honour. But what about power? The inhabitants of the domain of power in modern society are political parties as we have already touched on. Weber then has a much more complicated theory of social status and placement than does Marx, although it has been said that Weber offers a diagnosis where as Marx offers a cure (in the form of social revolution)

**Weberian Marxism** It was probably Georg Lukacs's "History and Class Consciousness" (chapters on reification) who first attempted to incorporate Weberian ideas into Marxist thought. His work was immensely influential amongst Marxist thinkers. Another influential book has been Adorno and Horkheimer's "Dialectic of Enlightenment" where the *pessimistic* diagnosis of society was also clearly influenced by Weberian ideas although Weber's name is not actually mentioned. Weber is more explicitly engaged with in another book that Horkheimer wrote at more or less the same time: "Eclipse of Reason". Somewhere else Weber is clearly influential and Weberian issues articulated without explicitly naming him is Marcuse's One Dimensional Man. All of these are Marxist thinkers who attempt to incorporate Weberian ideas into an essentially Marxist structure

Coming from a somewhat different background Jurgen Habermas does not engage very directly with the Weberian Marxist thesis his "Legitimation Crisis" picks up, as you might guess from the title, on Weberian themes, as, in a different way does his "Theory of Communicative Action"

And so to France, Maurice Merleau Ponty was France's most eminent phenomenologist and like Schultz he was also interested in history, famously he was involved in a spat with Albert Camus resulting in his "Humanisme et Terreur" and Camus's "L'Homme Révolté" Like the thinkers mentioned above he also attempts to renew Marxism (this, of course, was after the full details (or some

of them) of Stalinism began to emerge in France after WW2) by incorporating Weberian concepts into a Marxist shell in a book called "Les Aventures de la Dialectique". I believe that this is the first occasion where the term "Weberian Marxism" is actually mentioned. The book however does not really accomplish an integration of Marxian and Weberian thought but is more in the nature of a programmatic statement.

I began by highlighting The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism as a dialogue between Marx and Weber and Weberian Marxism continues that. Both Marx and Weber are children of Kant, one by Hegel and the other, I suppose, by Schopenhauer. The gulf remains wide, one embraces history and "scientific socialism" the other rejects law-like statements and seeks explanation of particular historical phenomena at the level of meaning. One looks for inevitability the other for the possibilities of human action arising out of culture and meaning. One seeks to embed reason and morality in history, the other is studiously disinterested. Can they be reconciled? I think the jury is still out.