

## INTRODUCTION

From the beginning, discussion of Max Weber's writings and ideas has been interwoven with a fascination for his life. Karl Jaspers established the point of view early in his retrospective appreciations: the work was seen to reflect the person, and the person the work. The fascination has never lost its attractions. This can seem surprising, for Weber's life was in some ways so unexceptional. What did he really *do*, after all? His meteoric rise in the university world was cut short by illness. He actually served on faculties only at the beginning and end of his career, and for barely six years. No school of thought bore his imprint, and his actual students were few in number. In public life his occasional efforts at a political career came to nothing. His interventions in political affairs and public debate left him an outsider in his own time. His efforts to establish new directions or new institutions in intellectual life similarly fell on deaf ears or, as with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie, ended in misunderstanding and his sudden withdrawal. Even the great editorial project of his life, the encyclopedic *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* (Basic Outline of Social Economics), became a casualty of World War I and remained a mere fragment when Weber died in 1920. Viewed as a whole, the life offers a sobering record of disappointment and failure.

And yet there was still the work, fragmentary as it may have been, covering the sweep of world history and culture, and raising the largest questions about the emergence of the modern world. Much of it remained unfinished or scattered throughout journals, handbooks, occasional publications, or newspapers. Weber's favorite medium was the extended essay, the handbook article, the encyclopedia entry, the exploratory investigation of indeterminate length—the kind of writing that would make an editor cringe today. With the exception of his dissertation and habilitation, he did not write a single book. Form seems to have counted for little; expressing the ideas in words on paper, often by dictation, was what mattered above all. Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, that much of this work was hidden or forgotten. It is astonishing, nevertheless, to note that two of his articles (on German agriculture, forestry, and industry) published in English translation in *The Encyclopedia Americana* in 1907–8 were unknown until this century, having escaped any of the previous bibliographical dragnets, starting with those cast in the 1920s by his wife and a few diligent Munich students.

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Authors sometimes must await those who come afterward for their work to be brought together, read, interpreted, and remembered. Max Weber is an interesting and perhaps extreme instance of the phenomenon: dismissive of his own accomplishments, obscure in his own time, yet renowned and widely cited in ours, even in the popular media. How did this circumstance come about? What accounts for his present-day reputation? How did it become possible for us to speak of a “Weberian” perspective, approach, analysis, or theory?

Anyone who has read Weber’s writings with care will be tempted to point to internal textual evidence for an answer, noting the compelling formulations and the subtexts of intense personal engagement, whether the subject is the Old Testament prophets, the ascetic practices of everyday life, the formation of Western music, or abstractions like patrimonial domination and charismatic authority. The effect of the cascade of sparkling ideas, the combination of factual detail and abstract generalization, the melding of the subjective and the objective, can be utterly breathtaking, as many readers have remarked. But such an answer comes too easily, for there is a far more complex and even more compelling narrative that needs to be set forth, one that requires close attention to the intellectual, historical, political, and social context of Weber’s thinking. That narrative is the subject of this book. It requires bridging different fields of inquiry and writing a cultural and intellectual history, whose ultimate aim is to give an account of the intellectual biography not simply of the man but of the work itself.

The intellectual biography of the work and an adequate explanation of the Weber phenomenon is crucially dependent on understanding what happened to Max Weber and his work in America. Interestingly, the notion of a search for “Weber in America” can be pursued in two quite different but complementary ways, for Weber really *was* in the United States for nearly three months in 1904, traveling with his wife and occasionally others, an episode long familiar to readers of the biography written by his wife, Marianne Weber’s *Max Weber: A Biography*, though a particularly important experience that has never been fully explored in all its dimensions and details. Indeed, the Webers’ American journey in the age of Progressivism and the Theodore Roosevelt presidency is a worthy subject in its own right, reminiscent of Alexis de Tocqueville’s and Gustave de Beaumont’s earlier sojourn in Jacksonian America. My narrative of what the Webers did, who they met, and what they saw and thought opens onto an expansive cultural history of the United States, a recovery of our past at the very beginning of the “American Century.” My discussion in part 1 gives the journey itself and the Webers’ accompanying commentary a long-overdue comprehensive treatment. But what happened in 1904 was also a harbinger of what was to come following Max Weber’s death in 1920—namely, the use, interpretation, and dissemination of his thought in the United States by American scholars, such as Frank Knight and Talcott Parsons, starting in

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the 1920s, and joined thereafter by German émigrés and others from the English-speaking world. The subsequent development of “Weberian” thought and perspectives in the human sciences is the subject of part 2.

With regard to Weber’s months in the United States, nearly all of what we have known until now has come from Marianne Weber’s account, published in 1926. The American journey played a pivotal role in the larger scheme of Weber’s life and work, for it occurred just as he was beginning to emerge from the debilitating psychological collapse of 1898, a life-altering event brought on by a number of complex social and psychic factors, including overwork and exhaustion, severe unresolved conflicts within the family, and powerful libidinal tensions categorized under the heading “neurasthenia” in the diagnostics of the time. In writing her husband’s biography, Marianne tended to stylize these months of emergence from illness, culminating in the 1904 journey, as the beginning of the “new phase,” the critical turning point in Max’s struggle to return to the world of thought, scholarship, and public activity. Rewriting Marianne’s account recently, Joachim Radkau has placed the American journey on the path of escape from the furies of a vengeful nature and onward to personal “salvation and inspiration.” Both have a valid point to make about the trajectory of Weber’s experience. There is indeed a sense in which the American experience and its promise inspired Weber’s imagination and enthusiasms, a passage in his life that Weber himself seems to have noticed in precisely such terms. Moreover, whatever explanation one chooses to give for the changed circumstances, it is noteworthy that the Weber whose work we have read, appropriated, criticized, modified, and incorporated into the discourse of modern social science and political life has been until recent years exclusively the Weber of the texts written in the last sixteen years of his life, starting in 1904, at age forty.

Now for all its heightened and sympathetic tone, Marianne Weber’s narrative contains significant gaps, omissions, forgotten passages, and exaggerations from the standpoint both of Max’s ideas and interests and of her own. It is thus essential to question her narrative edifice and begin anew, returning to the sources she used, such as the correspondence within the family or with colleagues, while also exploring new avenues of knowledge and interpretation; for the months in the United States we need to ask what Weber actually did, why he did it, whom he met and why, what he saw, and what significance this concentrated episode had for him and his work. And we need to ask the same questions of the earlier narrator, Marianne Weber herself, in order to construct a new foundation beneath her account. Such questions have biographical implications, of course, but they also contribute importantly to a biography of the texts Weber produced, and thus to a better understanding of the rationale underlying the appropriation of his work.

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With an intellectual of Weber's stature, commonly considered a founder of sociology and the modern social sciences, we should be aware that a biography of the person and the work is also to some extent a biography of the sciences and the emergent scientific disciplines. For this reason my investigation does not end with Weber's experience and the 1904 journey but pursues in addition the question of the subsequent reception and deployment of his ideas. For peculiar historical and political reasons, the discussion of part 2 is to a large extent an American story, beginning in the 1920s with the codification and earliest translations of Weber's work, continuing in the 1930s and '40s with its pedagogical and professional deployment, and culminating after World War II with the reintroduction of that work into Europe. Retracing these steps might be viewed as a kind of "reception history" or *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. But it is much more than this, for it involves an investigation of the ambitious effort to define the subject matter of the new social science disciplines, to institutionalize a body of knowledge, and to create a particular kind of educational regime in the modern research university. Needless to say, forces far beyond the circumscribed horizon of those with access to Weber's writings were at work in these contexts. So to write about the construction and appropriation of Weber's thought is thus in unusual ways to plunge into the contentious debate over the modern university, educational policy, and the politics of the intellectuals, carried out in this instance initially in the United States beginning in the twenties, and then after 1945 extended elsewhere primarily in Europe, but then also in Asia. The result is a fascinating disciplinary, institutional, and intellectual history, a complex and shifting configuration of perspectives and commitments to a particular kind of inquiry that form one of the twentieth century's most important chapters in the politics and sociology of knowledge. Since Max Weber wrote comparatively about the world civilizations, capitalism, and the developmental tendencies of "rational" modes of social action and social and economic organization, the uses and extensions of his work beyond its circumscribed point of origin has been all the more remarkable and compelling.

I would like to add that writing about Weber and "America" today from this double perspective inevitably involves reflecting on the problem of the image or representation of America—the *Amerikabild*, to use the German expression—that is so unavoidable today, as it was throughout the twentieth century. To return through Weber to the age of his contemporaries, to prominent figures like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, or the people he met, such as William James, Samuel Gompers, W.E.B. Du Bois, Florence Kelley, or Robert Latham Owen, offers not only an opportunity to view American society and intellectual life and the American polity as it was a century ago but also an opportunity to reflect on the passage of a century and its significance—its hopes and promise, disappointments and catastrophes. This is very much a book placed prior to the First World War at the beginning of the "American

Century.” It is difficult to avoid the infectious optimism and potential of that moment, amplified by Weber’s own exuberance in the United States and signaled by the dynamics of Teddy Roosevelt’s fall presidential campaign that he witnessed. The picture of a Max Weber fleeing from the modern world, skeptical about “democracy” and issuing dark warnings about “the masses” is essentially a clever falsification, satisfying various unhistorical ideological needs of the intellectuals. The actual historical lessons of Weber’s American journey are far simpler: History offers nations exceptional opportunities sometimes, and it offers little solace for those in need of definitive answers and unambiguous truths.

My approach to Weber in this study is, in a word, *historical*. Or using stronger language, one might call it radically “historicist” in the sense that I seek to improve our understanding of Weber’s thought by investigating its genesis in the specific historical situation of his life and times, his social attachments and intellectual engagements. It has become popular to characterize such an approach as “genealogical.” Whether or not the term might add a serviceable metaphor, it can only provide clarity if it means a tracing of the sources and development of ideas in language, social interactions, or experience. There are obviously approaches other than the historical to Weber or to any other major writer and thinker that are useful and important: systematic, analytic, comparative, topical, thematic, or problem-oriented. When skillfully deployed, each can contribute in significant ways to understanding ideas and advancing our thinking. Choosing one does not exclude the others. They also can be instructively combined, as I intend to demonstrate in some of the sections of this volume. Yet at this stage in the work on Weber, his generation, and the problems of the *fin de siècle* in both North America and Europe, there is a particularly compelling need to recover the contexts and relationships out of which emerged major bodies of work, as well as modern social theory, the contemporary social sciences and the institutions supporting them.

I must add a comment about the importance of the United States and “America” for Max Weber, a comment that also contains a word of caution. In Weber’s mature work the United States returns again and again as a point of departure, a context for comparison, an illustration, an example, a source of observation and material for reflection. In this regard the only real competitor is Great Britain and England. By contrast, Weber says little about contemporary France or Italy. Thinking historically and comparatively, in the sweep of European civilization it was Rome that inspired his historical imagination, not the nation-states of the present. To the east his eyes were drawn to Russia, not out of intrinsic interest but for world historical reasons having to do with the revolutionary transformation of a traditional social and political order. The juxtaposition of America and Russia in his thought can appear as a reminder of Alexis de Tocqueville’s similar ruminations on a Europe positioned between

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two great world powers. But unlike his French precursor, for Weber such a perspective was not a matter of seeing in America the face of the future, or of triangulating a European developmental path, though he sometimes expressed views about “convergence” between the Old and New Worlds. Instead, the American journey represented an opportunity for observation and illustration of a certain kind of moral and social order, and a cultural and political dynamic linked to capitalist development.

To make sense of this order and trace its dynamic has the effect, whether intentional or not, of moving the American presence toward the center of Weber’s thinking about the modern world. But a word of caution is necessary, for it would be misleading to conclude that Weber’s thought revolved around American themes or problems, or that the large innovative questions he posed, for example, about religious beliefs and economic activity could have been asked only as a result of the American experience. It is rather the case that Weber’s *problematics* emerged from an immersion in social and cultural world history, the civilizations of the West and the East, and through engagement with complex debates in the sciences over the origins, nature and meaning for the contemporary world of “capitalism”—the “most fateful force in our modern life,” as he called it.

“America” had a place in these discussions for well-known reasons, many of which Weber identified in his speech at St. Louis, Missouri: it was a new nation, possessing an immense territory, in the post-Civil War era without an old aristocracy, and in that respect unburdened by the power of tradition, but having both “democratic traditions handed down by Puritanism as an everlasting heirloom” as well as an economy exhibiting in unparalleled ways the “effects of the power of capitalism.” Which of these contending forces would emerge victorious? How could their contrasting effects be reconciled? What would occur as the course of history caught up with the United States? Weber found a striking formulation for the historical context of such questions, noting, “It was perhaps never before in history made so easy for any nation to become a great civilized power as for the American people. Yet, according to human calculation, it is also the last time, as long as the history of mankind shall last, that such conditions for a free and great development will be given.” What will then become of this most consequential of world historical experiments, and in the end what will be its enduring value?

This kind of questioning is the spirit in which Max Weber invoked America in his work—as actuality and symbol, as history and myth. The invocation involved a world historical perspective and assessment, like that voiced toward the end of his life in “Science as a Vocation,” echoing Tocqueville: “Permit me to take you once more to America,” Weber intoned, “because there one can often observe such matters in their most massive and original shape.” Similarly, in the concluding paragraphs of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* he referred to America exhibiting the capitalist spirit’s “high-

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est development” and “emancipation.” Such statements appear to match the fin-de-siècle topos of America as a model for the most distinctive aspects of modernity. But they do more than this. They offer an opening appropriately onto the biography of the work, an invitation to join the quest. It is an invitation I have chosen to accept.