

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Lawrence A. Scaff, *Max Weber in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, 311 pp. \$28.63 hardcover (978-0-691-14779-6)

In this handsomely produced work, Scaff has managed an unusual accomplishment of elevating what is proper to a lengthy footnote into a highly credible treatise on Weber's grand tour of America. The visit was made with his wife Marianne between August 20 and November 27, 1904. On the journey home to Germany, Weber noted that he had travelled 5,000 miles in the US and had spent 180 hours, mostly on the railroad (p. 181). His overall conclusion was that the trip was well worthwhile. Scaff's labour of love in documenting this trip confirms its significance. It is proper that an American should write this study which offsets Weber's seemingly impregnable German character.

From Scaff's analysis, a less stern and more humane figure emerges, notably of a traveller who is deeply anxious to learn about all facets of the American way of life. The first and more substantial part of the study deals with the visit itself and the second with the evolution of Weber's reception in the US. The two parts combine admirably and what emerges is a work of meticulous scholarship where all aspects of the visit are exhaustively and comprehensively covered; the fruits of the labour appearing in the highly detailed bibliographical notes. Additionally, at the end of the study Scaff provides a detailed itinerary of the American journey (pp. 252–6).

To understand the significance of this study, reference needs to be made to the growth, of late, of minor cottage industries which have sprung up around Durkheim, Weber and Simmel. These reflect a growing interest in contextualizing their works. This application of the sociology of knowledge to the discipline itself has led to a need to attend to the biographies of these thinkers and to explore the shaping of their canonical works with a view to drawing out sounder understandings of their reception. This work is a significant contribution to these shifts in sociological expectations and sensibilities. Scaff has produced a judicious, very complete and absorbing study, which, unexpectedly, effects a re-casting of the image of Weber as an inveterate ethnographer who treated the US as an extensive site for fieldwork. Many new and illumin-

ating insights emerge from this study which fully deserves the widest readership in sociology.

The 1944 musical, "Meet Me in St. Louis" and Weber have one thing in common: both were concerned with the World's Fair held there in 1904. As part of the Fair, a Congress of Arts and Science was convened in the September of that year. As Scaff indicates, it was a huge affair with 128 sections covering the spectrum of academic thought, with some 300 papers being delivered (p. 54). The invitation to Weber in 1903 to give a paper formed the pretext of his American trip. The timing of the visit was doubly significant, as Scaff indicates. Weber's trip occurred between the writings of Part I and II of *The Protestant Ethic* (pp. 16–20; 184–190). The experience of America, his explorations of the elective affinities between Protestantism, and the character and moral basis of capitalism in a democratic ethos fleshed out his theoretical material for the study. The second matter of significance is that the trip marked the rejuvenation of Weber and his return to public life after his melancholic illness. Springing to life again, Weber re-cast his image to re-emerge, unexpectedly, as a highly engaged intellectual, one deeply curious and anxious to take every opportunity to investigate this progressive nation and to explore all its social, cultural, political, educational, and religious facets. Scaff indicates well that these American investigations left a mark on Weber in ways that influenced his later highly productive sociological career.

On the trip, Weber was inveterately curious about religion in the US and Scaff makes the interesting point that "the complex biography of the 'Protestant Ethic' thesis can be pursued further in Weber's habit of observing religious services and practices" (p. 22). But Weber's interests in forms of American life went further and Scaff chronicles Weber's visits to New York and Chicago (where he saw the stockyards). He also managed to interview many economists, politicians, and presidents of university, all with a view to understanding the character of this country and its understanding of the moral basis of capitalism. Clubs, sects and churches, citizenship, gender, and education all formed part of Weber's explorations. In this study, chapters 5 and 6 are of especial interest.

The former deals with Weber's unexpected wish to visit Oklahoma and the Indian Territory and to explore its legal and political problems. As part of the trip, he was supposed to interview the editor of the *Oklahoma State Register*, but on hearing that he had pulled a gun on a fellow editor, Weber left town abruptly. Scaff gives a definitive account of this famous incident which generated an enormous amount of international press comment (pp. 77–8). The implications of the contrast Weber saw between advanced industrialized capitalism and the place of nature on the frontier are brought out well (pp. 90–7). Chapter 6 on his dealings

with W.E.B. Du Bois, the African American sociologist (who Weber esteemed highly) and on race is unexpectedly insightful. Scaff indicates persuasively how Weber connected race to the moral formation of character in ways that influenced *The Protestant Ethic* (pp. 111–112). Weber's progressive views on race as pertaining to the social rather than to the biological are notably highlighted in the study.

Chapter 7, which deals with different ways of life in the US, has an especially interesting section on “the cool objectivity of sociation,” referring to the properties of associational life which generated social capital. For Weber, these exemplified the progressive aspects of American life which he came to admire. Clubs for children and adults exemplified for Weber a unique means of shaping moral character and instilling trust in the civil domain. Sects also fulfilled these roles and on his trip Weber was anxious to explore these as much as possible, an important example being the visit to Mount Airy, North Carolina, where he observed the civil functions of a baptism (pp. 131–133). More church observations, notably of a Quaker meeting emerge in a pivotal chapter (8) on *The Protestant Ethic*. Scaff suggests that what comes to the fore on the trip is a concern with the mastery of the self rather than the work ethic *per se* (p. 146). Again, this illustrates the highly suggestive nature of this study. The influence of William James on Weber is well treated in this chapter. Overall, Scaff suggests that Weber found American life “full of secularized offspring of the old Puritan religiosity” (p. 165).

Part II of the study brings together the extensive source material on those involved in spreading the word about Weber's importance in the US, a development that is really post World War II. Scaff draws attention to “the fugitive literature” on Weber's works and the networking surrounding their translations over a long period (see Tables 1 and 2 pp. 202–3). The material on Parsons and the publishing history and translation of *The Protestant Ethic* well justifies the title to chapter 12: “The Creation of a Sacred Text.” Even though the contributions of Gerth and Mills, whose edited collection *From Max Weber* really launched Weber in the US are insightfully assessed, the last chapter on “The Invention of the Theory” might have made more of his influence on Bourdieu. Perhaps this is a churlish point to make, given Scaff's exhaustive compilation in his bibliographical notes of works pertaining to Weber's theory (pp. 297–302).

Scaff's publisher has served the author well in this handsome volume. Given its scale, the uniqueness of its insights and the relentless industry displayed, this is a work of scholarship which is most unlikely to be superseded. The study comes at Weber from an unexpected angle

and adds much to the understanding of this multifaceted giant founder of sociology.

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