

## REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI BIBLIOGRAPHIQUE

### Presenting Max Weber

**Gane, Nicholas**, *Max Weber and Contemporary Capitalism*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 148 pp., hardcover (978-0-230-24023-6)

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**Kalberg, Stephen**, *Max Weber's Comparative-Historical Sociology Today: Major Themes, Mode of Causal Analysis, and Applications*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012, 338 pp., softcover (978-1-4094-3223-4)

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**A**mong the many challenges of reading Max Weber today, one of the most difficult is presented by his own requirement to place the present under the beam of the past, but also to consider past historical developments in the shadow of current concerns. This double perspective — both historical and contemporary — complicates the assumption, still prevalent in textbooks and passing references, that Weber's writings project a unified conceptual system, or that they trace the unfolding of a single, linear historical process, such as "rationalization" or "disenchantment." The difficulties that Weber's work poses to contemporary readers often begin when he calls us to adhere to the principle of value-freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) while at the same time requiring us to make the relevance and relationship (*Wertbeziehung*) of research to our own evolving ideas and interests as explicit as possible. In a sense, Weber's eclectic and often abstract body of work is already a "sociology of the present," that is, a method for selectively interpreting, analyzing, and explaining the reasons, motives, and causes of contemporary realities.

Of the two books under review here, *Max Weber's Comparative-Historical Sociology Today* by Stephen Kalberg undertakes more of an "internalist" reading and reconstruction of the major themes Weber himself addressed, even as it also touches occasionally on theoretical and methodological questions raised by later sociologists, from Talcott Parsons to Theda Skocpol. The work is a collection of previously published essays which revise, expand, update, and sometimes restate the argu-

ments Kalberg worked out in his 1994 book on Weber, while to some extent it also serves as a companion volume to his teaching anthologies and editions of Weber's works, most notably his new translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Building on and sometimes departing from the lessons of his illustrious teachers, to whom he dedicates the book (Lewis Coser, Benjamin Nelson, Guenther Roth, Friedrich Tenbruck), Kalberg focuses on two intertwined strands of what he calls "Weber's comparative-historical sociology": the dynamic autonomy of ideas understood as causal forces in their own right, on the one hand, and the emergence of relatively consistent, coherent, and comprehensive world-images (*Weltbilder*) and methodically ordered spheres of life-conduct (*Lebensführung*), on the other. As he argues in Part I of the book, Weber's method proceeds less by illustrating broad cultural themes (even the concept of rationalization can be broken down into its practical and theoretical, substantive and formal dimensions) than by shifting perspectives between particular cases or patterns and heuristic types and constructs: "This unending tension and *back and forth* movement between 'ideas and interests' renders Weber's sociology often confusing and devoid of the elegance of all 'general formula' and evolutionary schools" (p. 86).

What Kalberg characterizes as Weber's "three stage methodology" is outlined and applied in Parts II and III with reference to the procedure Weber lays out in the revised version of *Economy and Society* and in *The Economic Ethics of the World Religions* of moving from an interpretive and comparative understanding (*deutend Verstehen*) of particular facts and action-patterns to a broad structural and causal explanation (*kausale Erklärung*) of significant developments in world history:

If 'adequate causality' ... is to be achieved, (a) facilitating and necessary orientations of action and (b) synchronic and diachronic interactions must be present. Moreover, (c) the conjunctural interactions of patterned action that occur within a context of regular action must be identified. By acknowledging both the causal importance of both the present and the past and integrating single facilitating and necessary action-orientations into a fabric of multiple patterns of action, such dynamic interactions alone, in Weber's texts, provide adequate causal explanations. (p. 179)

In order to reconstruct how Weber systematically conducts this mode of causal analysis and civilizational comparison in his essays and working notes on the rise of the world religions, despite their often fragmented, incomplete, and vague character, Kalberg devotes a series of illuminating chapters to Weber's account of how the Confucian ethic of the *tao* (world adjustment and affirmation) furnishes the organizing prin-

ciple of clan piety and patrimonial bureaucracy; how the Hindu ethic of the *dharma* (divinely ordered tasks and responsibilities) justifies caste alliances and systems of inheritance; and how the Judaic ethic of the *berith* (covenant, treaty, or oath) informs the conduct of a civic stratum of plebians and the messianic worldview of prophets. In each instance, Kalberg is concerned to demonstrate how Weber himself employs the model with varying degrees of success, rather than to determine the empirical accuracy of any particular analysis, just as Weber himself is less interested in contributing to orientalist scholarship than he is in drawing comparisons with his core case of the Protestant ethic of the *Beruf* (calling, vocation, profession), the dynamic idea which initially gave psychological sanction to the emergence of industrial capitalism in the west.

This last point, which is Weber's most famous and influential thesis, only hovers in the background of these discussions, but is made more explicit in Parts IV and V, where Kalberg contrasts the "deep culture" of the American sect spirit of self-discipline, community service, and *candor* individualism, on the one hand, with the "multiple conjunctures" that inform the German cultural ethos of pessimism, status subservience, and the individualizing values of the educated bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*), on the other. These comparative and historical analyses explain how two countries with common roots in the liberal Protestant ideals of good moral character, freedom of conscience, civic duty, and hard work could give rise to such different national and professional cultures. By focusing on the interpretation of a set of historical particulars in each case, Kalberg avoids the abstractions and distortions of conventional applications of Weber's methodology: "Hence, Weber's sociology denies support to all invidious dualisms, ethnocentrism, and provincialism — yet refuses to bestow praise upon cosmopolitanism and universalism" (p. 128).

An even more self-consciously selective and interested approach to Weber's work is the guiding thread behind Nicholas Gane's *Max Weber and Contemporary Capitalism*. Although Gane devotes considerable energy to outlining and condensing some of Weber's key methodological and substantive contributions, he is ultimately concerned with taking them as a point of departure for addressing current theoretical debates, from C. Wright Mills to Zygmunt Bauman, and contemporary empirical concerns, including the current financial crisis and the process of neoliberal globalization:

[This] is not a book about Weber's work *per se*. It does not seek either to establish the truth Weber's published writings, or reconstruct unpublished or planned work in ways that he would have intended.... Rather, the aim of the present book is ... to revisit and rework key concepts and ideas

from the writings of Weber in order to think sociologically about the social and cultural dynamics of contemporary capitalism. (p. 1)

For Gane (especially in Chapters 1, 2, and 8), the utility of Weber's work lies less in its explanatory power than in how it provides a network of flexible and mobile concepts — "thinking technologies and heuristic devices" — for understanding the political-economic and social-cultural forces that rule the modern world, as he argues in reading Weber through Gilles Deleuze: "For it is only through invention, in this case, invention of ideal types or concepts, that discovery can take place" (p. 23).

An illuminating instance of this approach can be seen in how Gane sketches and then mobilizes Weber's ideal types of the market and class in order to clarify some features of the post-Weberian emergence of neo-liberalism (especially in Chapters 4, 5, and 6). As Weber argues in *Economy and Society*, markets may operate at the limits of social action which is meaningfully oriented toward exchange partners and competitors, beyond which action becomes mere "crowd behaviour" (p. 53). Likewise, classes may also be viewed as liminal social forms insofar as individuals are oriented more toward life-chances, services, and property-ownership than toward meaningful modes of association (*Vergemeinschaftung*) and communalization (*Vergesellschaftung*), such as those which characterize parties and status groups. Taking these types as a starting point, Gane then notes that, for Weber, groupings such as classes, statuses, and parties potentially reach beyond nation-state boundaries (p. 96), just as markets may not be contained by the state but rather positioned to watch over the state and its institutions in accordance with neoliberal economic principles of free competition (p. 91). This latter insight converges with the later lectures of Michel Foucault on the neo-Weberian arguments of the Freiburg School of ordo-liberalism, which Gane extends to a discussion of the proto-neoliberal writings of Carl Menger which had such an impact on the young Weber, as well as the neoliberal writings of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek which so influenced the Chicago School economists in the period after World War II.

Gane thus does more than summarize and apply Weber's key concepts in their own terms insofar as he works within and outside this conceptual framework to project "Weber beyond Weber." Nowhere is this innovative drive more evident than in Chapters 3 and 7 which consider how returning to Weber can give us a better handle on the globalization of contemporary capitalism along with the cultural dynamics of (post) modernity. Taking Weber's ideal types of "adventure," "commercial," and "rational-industrial" capitalism as a basis (here drawing on Richard Swedberg's account), Gane considers how these types offer a useful per-

spective on the recent metamorphoses of “computerized” (Francois Lyotard), “knowing” (Nigel Thrift), and “intensive” (Scott Lash) capitalism governed by automated algorithms which harness creative energies and redesign everyday landscapes. These “new spirits of capitalism” in turn give rise to multiple, unexpected forms of modernity which are no longer motivated by the value-rational beliefs and ascetic actions that Weber identified in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, but rather by instrumental-rational action and technical interests that underpin industrial and postindustrial culture, as Ulrich Beck would later argue in criticizing Weber:

in Weber, the value-rationality of the Protestant sects turn into its other, namely, the mechanical and seemingly spiritless machineries of modern capitalism, and in Beck the instrumental rationality of this first modernity gives rise to a new modernity characterized by potentially catastrophic risks that emerge out of scientific attempts to control the world. (p. 120)

As Gane shows, however, the arguments of later critics like Beck are in fact anticipated by Weber’s own emphasis on the unintended consequences of various forms of rational action that stake out the multiple paths of modernity in the first place.

In some ways these books could not be more different: Kalberg’s is attempting an expansive and sometimes repetitive internal reconstruction of Weber’s entire project while Gane’s is working outward in a more focused way from Weber’s conceptual framework in order to diagnose some salient features of contemporary capitalism. And where Kalberg is committed to pursuing Weber’s mode of causally explaining the rise of world civilizations (though skimming over his focus on the dynamic autonomy of the Protestant idea of the “calling”), Gane is more concerned with Weber’s method of interpretively understanding the relevance of core sociological concepts to dominant economic and cultural developments today (thereby sacrificing empirical description for theoretical innovation). These differences may in part be in response to the fragmented character of Weber’s complex and multilayered work, and to the fact that his collected works in German are only now nearing completion (significantly, the definitive editions of *The Protestant Ethic* and of Weber’s methodological writings are still yet to be published). It is also interesting that neither author refers to the work of the other, perhaps a symptom of how even English-speaking Weber scholars today work in relatively autonomous academic worlds. The reference to the “contemporary” and “today” in the titles of these books should therefore serve as a reminder to us that such invocations of the present can only

highlight a fleeting moment, even as we struggle, like Weber, to hold on to more enduring insights.

*University of British Columbia*

Thomas Kemple

**Thomas Kemple** is Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia ([Kemple@mail.ubc.ca](mailto:Kemple@mail.ubc.ca)). His most recent articles have appeared in *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, and *Journal of Historical Sociology*, and his book, *Weber's Calling: The Public Intellect and the Vocation of Scholarship*, is forthcoming with Palgrave Macmillan.