Book Review/Compte rendu

Sam Whimster. *Understanding Weber*. New York: Routledge, 2007, 312 pp. $US 41.95 paper (978-0-415-37076-9), $US 145.00 hardcover (978-0-415-37075-2)

Book titles can mislead as much they can inform. A case in point is *Understanding Weber*. Seeing that title in a publisher's catalogue you are likely to assume that this is yet another Weber exegesis directed towards an undergraduate audience of sociology students. Noticing that it is published by a commercial, rather than a university press, you might also suppose a textbook formula: a profusion of bullet points and box tables honed to "maximize accessibility." You would be wrong. Sam Whimster's *Understanding Weber* is a dense book in smallish print that requires students, and the rest of us, to do most of the work. It talks up to readers. It expects a level of seriousness commensurate with the subject. Naturally, the book describes aspects of what Weber said. But its primary goal is to elucidate the frameworks in which he said it: the debates that Weber joined, the concepts he inherited, the rhetorics he employed. In creating, single-handedly, a new genre for the appreciation of Weber — simultaneously didactic, contextual and (mostly) comprehensive — Sam Whimster's achievement is considerable.

Should it have been expected? For over thirty years, Whimster has laboured assiduously over Weber's *oeuvre*; indeed no British sociologist knows more about the genome of Heidelberg Man. Chief editor and founder of the journal *Max Weber Studies*, Whimster reads German and translates it; he has scoured every nook and cranny of the critical edition of Weber's collected works. Yet great learning can be a burden. Immersed in the material, it is hard to come up for air. Simplifying may smack of simplification, the ultimate anathema for the self-respecting scholar. So the fact that Whimster knows a great deal about Weber is no guarantee that he would write an excellent book about him. Yet he has.

Understanding Weber consists of nine chapters, one of which — "Going beyond Weber" — seeks to build on the great thinker's insights. Whimster is especially taken by the idea, propounded by Karl Jaspers and expanded by S.N. Eisenstadt, of "multiple modernities." For all his comparative rigour and historical sense, Weber was too quick, Whimster believes, to equate modernity with a singular Western path. Chinese, Indian, and Middle Eastern societies also contained the political,

social and material ingredients that, in time, could have produced, and indeed are producing right now, distinctive modern civilizations. The other eight chapters of *Understanding Weber* eschew attempts to improve on the master and seek instead to describe his early formation as a national economist and an agrarian expert (ch. 1); reconstruct the stages through which he developed into a sociologist (ch. 5 and ch. 9 painstakingly examine the mutation of the *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* into *Economy and Society*); and explain the disputes that provoked Weber's interventions. Chapter 2 contains a superb account of Werner Sombart and Georg Simmel's analyses of modern capitalism which Weber both criticized and adapted. Chapter 4 takes us into more vertiginous methodological territory, as Whimster offers extensive summaries of the German neo-Kantians Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert. Chapters 3 and 6 are devoted to Weber's theories of religion. Repeatedly, Whimster asks us to step back from Weber so as to get the necessary perspective from which to view him.

That Whimster is far more curious than most sociologists is evidenced by the illuminating section in Chapter 5 on Weber's studies of antiquity. Still, it is inevitable that a book on Weber would be influenced by the author's proclivities and disciplinary background. *Understanding Weber* reflects, in many chapters, Whimster's fascination with the Protestant Ethic argument and with the problems of establishing historical causality. In addition, he tries to rescue Weber from some of his more methodologically individualist pronouncements. Hence we are told that Weber was principally concerned not with individuals *per se* but with "interaction processes and contexts of meaning" (p. 153), "concrete" things that are always in the process of being formed. Durkheim would have approved. Yet even the indefatigable Whimster runs out of steam. He says next to nothing about Weber as a legal scholar. That is a pity because, as Stephen Turner has demonstrated, Weber's legal training powerfully shaped his sociological casuistry. And the discussion of "power, legitimacy and democracy" (ch. 8) is weak and derivative. Weber was a passionate and prolific writer on politics but *Understanding Weber* devotes only twenty-six pages to that subject. Moreover, breaking with his earlier method of deep contextualization, Whimster says next to nothing about the disputes that helped shape Weber's work on political parties and plebiscitary leadership. William Bryce, Wilhelm Roscher (as a political thinker) and Moisei Ostrogorski among others make no appearance. Weber's discussion of politics within his sociology, as distinct from his political journalism, is also not properly distinguished. Yet it is only by grasping the relationship between Weber's political journalism, on the one hand, and his political-sociological writings (in *Economy and*

Society and elsewhere) on the other, that one is able to see what he was up to.

Consider Weber's analysis of Caesarism, a term of obloquy associated for most of the 19th century with Napoleon III and referring to a popular but authoritarian mode of rule notable for its lack of dynastic legitimacy. In his correspondence and political journalism — notably, in the critique of the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck — Weber made use of standard 19th century motifs and echoed the negative connotations that mostly attached to them. Largely coeval with this older usage, however, he gradually re-worked the concept of Caesarism in a significantly new way via the lexicon and "ideal-types" fashioned for the science of sociology. In the process, three changes are apparent. First, Caesarism is demoted as a concept and becomes gradually absorbed into the much more expansive notion of "charisma." Second, Caesarism is renamed as "plebiscitary" or "leader democracy," one version of which — parliamentary Caesarism — Weber actively embraces. And third, and most importantly, the traditional problem of Caesarism's legitimacy is radically re-described in the ostensibly free-of-evaluation language of sociology; what was once seen as a highly dangerous phenomenon now becomes normalized as the inevitable accompaniment of modern democracy.

Contrary to the Routledge blurb, Sam Whimster's book is unlikely to be an "obligatory purchase for undergraduate" students, most of whom will sink in its sophistication. They and others will discover, however, a range and intelligence that no other single sociological volume on Weber possesses. I have mentioned a couple of its weaknesses. But as an orientation to what one needs to know before one properly understands Max Weber, Whimster's book is indispensable.

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