

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)

Understanding Weber by Sam Whimster brings together more than a decade of cutting-edge work in Weber scholarship since the late 1990s, in which the author has played a leading part both in his own right and as editor-in-chief of the journal *Max Weber Studies*, launched in 2000 (see www.maxweberstudies.org), as well as the most energetic English-language mediator of the scholarly critical apparatuses produced by the editors of the *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe*, published by Mohr-Siebeck (see www.mohr.de/mw). All of the most important developments in Weber research over the last ten to fifteen years are surveyed, collated, and interpreted in this extremely informative and fluently written volume. The following review confines itself to picking out just a few of this book's wealth of telling points and observations.

Weber was, as Whimster puts it, a thinker of eruptive genius. From the early 1890s to 1920, Weber's *oeuvre* evolved in fits and starts, in a pattern marked by periods of furious activity in sometimes recondite areas, followed by nervous illness, followed by surges of creativity, interspersed with episodes of petulant vituperation toward critics of his work and acts of unabashed patriotic involvement on the German political stage. Whimster suggests that some of Weber's exercises in strict concept-definition (such as the "Categories" essay of 1913 and Chapter 1 of *Economy and Society*) might in this light be read in terms of attempts to rein in and canalize the more wayward and volcanic directions of his intellectual energies, which when left to their own devices result in works of sparkling yet often maddeningly elliptical insight (such as *The Protestant Ethic* or the series of essays for "The Economic Ethics of the World Religions"). For these reasons it is also, as Whimster notes, often impossible to impose a final shape or definitive all-embracing last message on Weber's corpus or to round off its rougher edges or fill in its blank spaces — as some commentators have attempted. The essayistic character of Weber's sprawling output requires us in many ways to approach it in all its unfinished, interrupted, unrounded glory. For similar reasons, it is also not necessary to take all of Weber's protestations of intent at face value. Scholars have long recognized how Weber delved into

empirical questions in a manner frequently at odds with his prescriptive methodological injunctions in texts such as the opening pages of *Economy and Society* or the essays in the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In the essay on “Objectivity,” Weber saluted Neo-Kantian concepts and categories in ways in truth deeply belied by the style of his procedure in works such as *Ancient Israel* or *Confucian China*, which unfold in a fashion far more reminiscent of the psychologically attuned, phenomenologically sensitive qualities of the *verstehende* historical writing of an opponent of Neo-Kantian epistemology in the period such as Wilhelm Dilthey. Similarly, Weber fulminated at critics of *The Protestant Ethic* such as Karl Fischer and Felix Rachfahl, accusing them of misunderstanding the religious specificity of impulses to capitalist spirit in the early modern period. Yet in reality, as commentators never tire of reiterating, Weber left key steps in the argument of this great text essentially unclarified. Only one of its lacunae was its failure to convey some sense of the material transmission of religious ideas in contexts of popular printed media in the 16th and 17th centuries. As Whimster pointedly shows through a highly suggestive commentary on the work of Harold Innis, the Canadian media theorist and author of *Empire and Communications* (1950), at least one part of the story should have involved some sense of the breakdown of the monopoly of the church and the clerisy over material media of religious communication.

The first two chapters of Whimster’s book on Weber’s much understudied early economic studies offer vital keys for an understanding of the point of departure adopted in *The Protestant Ethic* and the later grand syntheses. A convincing case is made for Werner Sombart’s *Der moderne Kapitalismus* of 1902 as a major stimulus, a work that distinguished between “traditional” (need-based) and “modern” (acquisitiveness-driven) forms of economy in ways that Weber saw as in need of correction — most notably in Sombart’s near-exclusive emphasis on merchant adventurer capitalism and the new lust for wealth (“*auri sacra fames*”) in southern Renaissance Europe. Sombart’s book was also, as Whimster reminds us, the first formally to deploy the term “capitalist spirit” in one its chapter titles. A suggestive case is also made for Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Money* as a possible impetus, a book that Weber certainly read and that may later have informed the way Weber came to think about unintended consequences and about the uncoupling of meaningful ends of action from technical means in complex capitalist societies.

In a chapter on Weber’s *Wissenschaftslehre* or methodological writings, Whimster notes that the adage “One does not need to be Caesar in order to understand Caesar” (discussed by Weber in the early pages of *Economy and Society*) had earlier been glossed by Simmel in *Problems*

of the *Philosophy of History*, 1892. This chapter of Whimster's book tends to suffer, however, from one minor weakness: its discussion of Weber's overt attachment to Heinrich Rickert's neo-Kantian categories uncritically repeats Rickert's unfounded notion of Dilthey as a thinker guilty of "psychologism." It was never truly the case that Dilthey "effectively collapsed his hermeneutic method into the 'categories of life'" or that "this was as much a move into vitalism as it was a psychologism" (p. 99). Nor is it fair to say that Simmel practised a "subjective method ... that appealed through empathy to a common medium of the soul or psyche" (p. 251). Rickert's and Windelband's prejudiced contentions about Dilthey's categories of lived experience were definitively rebutted in the 1970s by the American scholar Rudolf Makreel in *Wilhelm Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton University Press, 1975). It should be emphasized that in principle the same arguments offered by Makreel hold also for Simmel. Unquestionably, Simmel's use of the term "soul" (*Seele*) was as complex as Weber's approach to the term *Geist*.

Two central chapters of the book discuss the phase in Weber's career that saw the genesis of *Economy and Society* in the four years preceding the outbreak of the Great War. This began life in the form of an encyclopedic handbook project edited by Weber under the title *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* ("Outline of Social Economics"). Originally the project was to encompass texts by authors other than Weber, including one contribution notably by Joseph Schumpeter (published and translated posthumously in 1954 as Schumpeter's *Economic Doctrine and Method*). Whimster helpfully shows the bearing on this project marked by Weber's earlier important essay of 1909 "Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum" (*The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*), which responded to a scheme of three stages of economic development propounded at the turn of the century by Karl Bücher, based on the concept of *oikos* economy, city economy, and national economy. In a manner similar to Bücher, Weber explained the decline of Rome by pointing to a gradual movement of trade inland driven by a constant search of the Roman armies for new sources of slave labour. The result of this process, Weber argued, was that as the Roman settlements became more and more distant from coastal trading ports, economic life eventually declined and the empire deteriorated from within. But criticisms of Bücher by Eduard Meyer prompted Weber to revise his understanding of the *oikos* as the lynchpin of economic life in the ancient world. Weber instead gradually came to think about the interrelationship of ancient *oikos* forms, medieval city forms, and modern national forms of economy in a less predominantly developmentalist manner. In Weber's hands, Bücher's evolutionary scheme increasingly assumed the form of a set of ideal-types, each of which he saw

as evincing diverse developmental connections to one another but not as composing any single overarching evolutionary structure. This train of thought may have influenced the way Weber set about compiling the fragmentary chunks of text that comprise the five main components of the first draft of *Economy and Society* from 1910–14, otherwise known as “Part 2” in the edition prepared by Marianne Weber in 1922 (and copied by Günther Roth and Claus Wittich in their English version of 1968). The *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe* now publishes these five components as separate sub-volumes under the titles *Gemeinschaften*, *Religiöse Gemeinschaften*, *Recht, Herrschaft*, and *Die Stadt* (“Communities,” “Religious Communities,” “Law,” “Domination,” and “The City”).

Whimster correlates Weber’s “Outline Plan” for the *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* from 1914 with the intended structure of the second gargantuan project on which Weber embarked in these years: the series of studies on “The Economic Ethics of the World Religions,” published incompletely in 1920 as the three volumes of *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (“Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion”). Whimster’s correlation nicely shows the synoptic place that might have been occupied in Weber’s plan by three or four other studies under the general category of religious “communalization” (*Vergemeinschaftung*), including studies on Islam, ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and Persia, Orthodox Christendom, and medieval Latin Christendom. Relaying scholarship by Hans Kippenberg (editor of the volume on *Religiöse Gemeinschaften* in the *Gesamtausgabe*), Whimster links Weber’s semi-developmental sequence of magician-priest-prophet to German historicist research on religious culture and society at the turn of the century. This research generally eschewed James Frazer’s and Edward Tylor’s evolutionary cognitivist models in favour of more open-ended interpretive categories. But at the same time, both Weber and other writers of the period sought to convey decisive criteria for demarcations between religion proper and largely particularistic local cults.

The idea that advanced religious life takes its inception from an emphatic systematic break with received habits of existence under the aspect of transcendent value-orientations of various kinds was evoked by Karl Jaspers in 1949 in his book *The Origin and Goal of History*. This text famously propounded a thesis about a watershed moment or “Axial Age” experienced by the civilizations of ancient China, India, Persia, Israel, and Greece in the first millennium BCE. In the 1980s, Shmuel Eisenstadt expanded Jaspers’ thesis into a wide-ranging comparative historical sociological program, and has more recently linked this program to a theory of “multiple modernities.” Whimster suggests that Weber’s contribution to these current debates lies in his vision of oc-

cidental rationalism as marking a kind of creative “singularity” in world history, analogous in a loose sense to ideas of the “Big Bang” in theories about the origin of the universe. In this sense, Weber’s “concatenation of circumstances” in early modern Europe unleashed something comparable to an explosive fusion or “affinity” or “selection” of factors that changed the world. This occurred contingently, accidentally, or fortuitously (*zufällig*), not by any metaphysical law of necessity; yet it occurred in a way that is today of “universal significance and validity,” in Weber’s famous phrase.

It must, however, be said that this last proposal leads to some very hotly contested terrain at the forefront of contemporary debate about Eurocentrism in the social sciences. Several questions thus remain moot in the closing pages of Whimster’s stimulating volume. Must a “singularity” be exclusive in its world-historical reach? Can there not be many “singularities”? How far does universal diffusion imply “universal validity”? Is one past event of modernity sufficient for contemporary normative self-justification of modernity? Is there not a sense — to put it provocatively — in which Weber fetishized the significance of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism’s conquest of the North Atlantic in the universal history of modernity? What — to reaffirm Friedrich Schiller’s famous question of 1789 — is “Universal History”? Can there not be multiple universal histories, each narratable from different corners of the earth?

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