

## ***Guest Editor's Preface***

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1. This special number of *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics* devoted to Max Weber (1864-1920) faces a challenging question: how much of his thought and work is alive today? The occasion is the centenary of the publication of Weber's best-known work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-05). The essays presented here, all by major Weber specialists, demonstrate that many important aspects of his thought are still at the centre of scholarly attention.

Needless to say, the historical and social context in which Weber's ideas developed is profoundly different from ours, but the basic issues which occupied him are still very much with us. This makes Max Weber a "contemporary classic" in every sense. Here I shall list just a few of his more fertile themes, with a view to suggesting some further possible lines of investigation.

2. As a whole, Weber's work can be seen as a grand attempt to fashion a sociology of Western culture and of the meaning structures underpinning the social orders in which individuals live. This problematic is also the context of his interpretative sociology, which aims to trace collective concepts back to the meanings that individuals ascribe to their own actions in relation to those of other individuals. Once he has set up these terms of reference, Weber is able to take account of both the structural coercion exerted on individuals by the autonomous legality of social orders, and the source of such orders in the individual. This basic feature of Weber's thinking has important consequences for his theory of knowledge in the historical-cultural sciences, where truth is never seen as a matter of adapting the mind to an supposedly external object but of constructing a possible object of knowledge. It is thus a matter of interpretation, in which the object is determined by a subjective value-relation that is constitutive of its very reality. The "ideal type" itself, through a process of idealization, makes it possible to identify an object of knowledge which, by reflecting the subjective perspective of its construction, testifies to the possibility of breaking down the objective into set of perspectives (see the essays by Stephen Turner and Ola Agevall). The ultimate source of this possibility is located by Weber in anthropology, in the fact that we are "cultural beings" given to taking positions and

ascribing meaning to the world on the basis of ideas of value: culture itself is a value concept. Any possibility of cultural essentialism or of reducing cultures to supposed biological or racial substrata is ruled out. At the same time Weber precludes the possibility of totalizing historical-cultural sciences and thereby denying their anthropological premises.

3. The genealogy of the West is traced by Weber to the logic of the relationship between ideas and interests: «Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by "ideas" have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest». The cultural significance of modern capitalism as «the most fateful force in our modern life» becomes the primary object of Weber's inquiry. The West is thereby seen as an epistemic and systemic space capable of defining the criteria of capitalist rationalization itself. In this respect, Weber's American experience – his ambivalent fascination with Taylorist capitalism – was of great importance. As a preliminary, however, it must be stressed that Weber is concerned to bring out the peculiar features of the Western experience (*nur im Okzident...*) from the vantage point of cultural comparativism. This means that for Weber the concept of "the West" is more the expression of the failure and impossibility of cultural universalism than of hegemonic universalism (see the essays by R.A. Antonio and Sven Eliaeson).

Two things need to be emphasized here: on the one hand the West has its roots in a process of religious rationalization of world images that derives from an experience of the ethical irrationality of the world, and hence from the idea of conferring meaning on that which lacks it, from a theocentric, dualistic standpoint (the "rejection of the world"). On the other hand the life orders stemming from the "disenchantment of the world" then develop autonomous norms (political, economic, aesthetic, scientific) that bring them into collision with the unitary rational ethic from which they arose, confining religion to the irrational and imprisoning individuals in the "iron cage" of a new servitude. The unifying vector of this process is technical-scientific rationalization, which – above and beyond the specific normative features of each order – permeates every aspect of society. This sequence is clearly traced by Weber in the *Ethic*, where he writes that «the Puritan *wanted* to work in a vocation; we *must* do so». But it is also clearly shown in his sociology of power, which starts from the link between the duty of free obedience to a personal command (*Gehorsampflicht*) and discipline as the blind acceptance of an impersonal commanding apparatus. The problem is thus the ethical and cognitive dispossession of individuals (the "savage" knows more of his environment than civilized man) that is final outcome of the intellectualizing of the world and the disciplining of society by a capitalist domination capable of working even in the absence of "spirit".

The central issue in Weber's thinking is thus how to preserve the unity between vocation and the ethical core of the personality, a unity which, under the conditions of modern life, is rent between the fossilizing specialisation of social roles and the irrational cultivation of personal experience, especially in the artistic sphere (see the essays by L.A. Scaff and Claudio Tommasi). Stated in more general terms, what most concerns Weber is the anthropological issue of the link between social orders and the conduct of life (*Lebensführung*) – in other words, the “human type” with the best chance of survival in a world where the rational conduct of life has filled every interstice of social space while being experienced as passive adaptation to an inert mechanism. Weber insists that the crucial question for cultural sciences and social policy is not how human beings will live in the future but what they will be like. The key issue is the shaping of an autonomous personality: in other words, the problem of the *Beruf* and the “daemon” which hold the fibers of our life in a radically pluralistic horizon of norms. It is not only a question of ethical and rational clarity about the ultimate convictions an individual must obey, but also a question of “strong relativism” in an age of “polytheism of values” (see the essay by Peter Lassman).

4. These topics are also relevant to the political sphere, especially to Weber's project for the bourgeois and industrial modernization of German society (see the essay by Maurizio Ricciardi). Weber's is a thoroughgoing “microphysics of power” according to which power (along with struggle) is seen as the pervasive feature of all social relations. It is a concept that can by no means be reduced to a definition of the state as a “compulsory association which organizes domination” and which holds a monopoly of legitimate force. Weber's analysis of power goes beyond the paradigm of sovereignty, contract, constitution and legal obligation with which modern political thought has theorized the legitimation of power. The converging processes of universal bureaucratization and democratization (the factory as model for the whole of society) leads Weber to redefine the criteria for the legitimation of political authority on the basis of the link between personal leader and apparatus of command. Again his aim is to combine the personal roots and the charismatic matrix of legitimation (conceived as “faith” and the duty to acknowledge the extraordinary qualities of a person) with the coercion of bureaucracy characterized as the objectification of charisma itself, and to lay bare the contradictions of legitimation reduced to merely procedural legality. But for Weber it is also important to take cognizance of the mutual implication and the fluidity of the three types of power rather than their distinctness: the processes of institutionalization, traditionalization and legalization of charisma, as well as the drift of rational-legal power into traditional or automatic forms of obedience. This also means acknowledging that there exists a plurality of normative factors, regularities and empirical uniformities of social action: custom, consent, convention, law. Weber's underlying anthropological-political aim is to retrieve forms of personal, conscious devotion, an ethics of intention capa-

ble of endowing empty discipline with meaning; but, in the terms of his bourgeois political realism, this also means establishing a criterion for the personal political management of bureaucratic apparatuses in both political and capitalist enterprises. In this way Weber tests the validity of the categories of interpretative sociology in the political sphere, thereby bringing together science and politics (see the essay by Kari Palonen).

There is no doubt that Weber shared one thing with us: the obsession that Nietzsche's vision of the "last men", «specialists without spirit, hedonists without hearts» might turn out to be the epitome of the anthropological make-up of *homo democraticus*.