

THE EMERALD GUIDE TO
MAX WEBER

Emerald Guides to Social Thought

Series Editor: John Scott

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THE EMERALD GUIDE TO MAX WEBER

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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CHAPTER 1

WEBER IN CONTEXT

Max Weber has been claimed by many disciplines as ‘their’ pioneer, founder, or key contributor. He has been variously described as a sociologist, an economic historian, or a political theorist, and he has been seen as an important contributor to central concerns in such areas as legal studies, religious history, and the study of education. This diversity of claims is matched by Weber’s own reluctance to identify with any particular discipline. He held university posts in economics and in social studies, but spent large periods of his life as an independent scholar with no disciplinary or institutional affiliation. He was, for a time, a member of the German Sociological Society, helping to organise its attempts to establish sociological study and research, but he was ambivalent in his commitment and eventually gave up his membership. Although he came to describe his final academic publication as his ‘sociology’, he regarded this simply as one part of his wider intellectual concerns.

His work was, indeed, wide-ranging. He wrote on Roman history, Chinese religion, political democracy, Western musical harmony, agrarian property, Indian caste systems, forms of legal partnership, the operation of stock exchanges,

the Russian revolutions, and many other matters. His particular concern throughout his life was to understand the origins and distinctive features of modern, Western societies in all their complexity and to contrast this with an understanding of the development of oriental societies. He is, perhaps, best regarded simply as writing in 'social science', the branch of intellectual endeavour for which he devised a solid methodological foundation. This designation allows him to be claimed by all who wish to learn from his achievements, and it allows those achievements to be seen in an interdisciplinary context that accords with contemporary developments in academic life.

The influences on Weber's work were as diverse as his own writings. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, German intellectual life was sustained and disseminated by an academically trained body of state officials, church ministers, lawyers, and, above all, university professors, who regarded themselves as a 'cultivated' elite able to contribute to the highest aspects of human existence through their cultural activities. The basis of their shared worldview was the idealist philosophy and social theory that had been derived from Immanuel Kant's philosophy by Georg Hegel, Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich von Schiller, and Friedrich Schelling. At the heart of this idealist system of thought was the claim that the categories, meanings, and values that are the essential conditions for human knowledge are not simply subjective properties of individual minds but are objectively real and valid. These 'ideas' are logically necessary in order for there to be any knowledge at all and so had to be seen as something more than simply an individual's subjective preference or point of view. This led to the claim that they exist as aspects of the 'objective mind' or 'objective spirit', a view that could all-too-easily be given a religious or metaphysical interpretation as forming a national spirit or 'soul'.

Idealism became the organising principle for the foundation in 1870 of the University of Berlin by Wilhelm von Humboldt, himself a contributor to the development and articulation of many of its key tenets. The University, with a Philosophy Faculty at its centre, became the model for all subsequent new universities and university reforms.

These were the intellectual influences that shaped Weber's family background and his early academic career in the final decades of the nineteenth century as Germany experienced a period of rapid social change. A strong and influential university-trained intellectual bourgeoisie existed alongside a weak economic bourgeoisie that had emerged with the slow German industrial growth of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This class was politically weak, control over state power being monopolised by the landowning *Junker* class. From around 1870, a much more rapid industrialisation had begun and there was a growth in large-scale undertakings, resulting in social dislocations as well as economic advances. This new bourgeois class of large financiers and industrialists became more influential in government and the state administration, where they asserted their particular economic interests.

Weber was one of the generation of German intellectuals who felt that the consequences of economic growth were threatening the values that lay at the heart of German culture. Many of these intellectuals took a rather conservative view of German culture and allied themselves with the *Junkers* in opposition to the power of the large capitalists. Their self-doubt about classical liberal principles led them to support the centrist and interventionist policies of the *Reich* Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Through the National Liberal party they took a conservative and nationalist position. Others, including Weber, took a more radical view and looked to a strengthening of parliamentary control over

government and hoped for a *Reichstag* that would no longer be dominated by a narrow expression of sectional class interests but would have a power base in political parties led by stronger and more mature bourgeois leaders. Those who took this more progressive view saw a need to adapt to mass politics through social reform in order for their cultural concerns to be met and for the economic advances already made to be secured. This gave them a particular stance on intellectual matters.

Idealism had given an ‘historical’ orientation to all the human disciplines. These *Geisteswissenschaften* – the spiritual disciplines or cultural studies – were first characterised by Hegel and were given their clearest formulation by Wilhelm Dilthey in the 1880s. It was Dilthey who formulated a method of ‘hermeneutics’, according to which human phenomena had to be understood in their larger cultural and historical context and as the outcome of a historical process. This approach had been taken by the historian Leopold von Ranke, who held that the historian must describe past events and periods in their own terms and not by present-day standards. Events must be understood in their specific historical context – the historian seeing a situation as the participants saw it and as they interpreted and understood it. This method proposed that economic activities, laws, and religious doctrines should all be studied in relation to an unfolding development of the values contained in and defining the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ of a people. This orientation was closely allied with the view that the soul of the German people – the *Volksgeist* – required its expression in distinctive national institutions rather than through the separate and fragmented principalities and kingdoms among which German people were still divided until 1871.

Historical studies saw each phase of a people’s development as necessarily shaped by their expression of the inner

spirit of their culture in an ‘objectified’ external form as distinctive social institutions. The philosopher Heinrich Rickert stressed that this objectification of a national spirit had to be seen as driven by the cultural values to which individuals were related by virtue of their membership of a particular, historically defined people. Historical change was seen as a progressive development towards an ever-more perfect expression of the spirit of the people.

This approach pervaded the studies that Weber undertook as a student and scholar, and he came to know many of the key figures, even as he developed a critical attitude towards their work. Weber came to reject any idea of a collective soul or spirit, arguing instead that the culture of a society is something shared by the members of a population and is contained only in their individual minds. It was, therefore, to the individual that Weber looked as the creator of values and the force behind social life and historical developments. In taking this individualistic approach, he was close to both earlier idealists such as Johann von Goethe and contemporary philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche.

Weber was especially concerned to arrive at an appropriate methodology for all the social sciences, and it was his connections with progressive philosophical colleagues in Heidelberg that helped him to develop these ideas. Rickert, together with Emil Lask and Wilhelm Windelband, had returned to a Kantian basis for idealism, and Weber drew on this in his early view of the cultural sciences – seeing them now as what would today be referred to as the humanities – from which he saw the social sciences emerging.

Weber’s approach to economics was firmly rooted in the arguments of the historical school that began with writers such as Friedrich List and had been developed into an orthodoxy by Wilhelm Roscher, Karl Knies, and Bruno Hildebrand. He was, however, particularly influenced by a

younger generation of more progressive intellectuals who had revised the historical approach by rejecting much of its emphasis on the idea of a national soul expressed in economic activity. Gustav von Schmoller and Lujo Brentano, for example, stressed simply the need to understand economic phenomena as embedded in their particular, historically specific, social and cultural context. Weber was, however, also influenced by English political economy and, in particular, by the strongly individualistic and analytical approach that was being developed from this by Carl Menger and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk in Austria. Menger's ideas had proved controversial when introduced into the German intellectual mainstream, and the 1880s had been marked by a protracted *Methodenstreit* – methods struggle – between Menger and Schmoller. Weber's work recognised the strengths of each position, and he came to temper Menger's analytical abstractions with an awareness of the ways in which individual actions expressed subjective meanings and had a historical character. Weber's view of the modern economy was also influenced by the growing number of socialist writers who took a Marxist view of the specifically 'capitalist' economy. Marxism and the labour movement had grown with the increasing scale of industrial activity and posed a growing challenge to the liberal and conservative political parties. While Weber rejected Marxist politics, he recognised the importance of Marx's ideas on the class basis of the modern state and the role of class action in driving the development of the modern economy.

Weber sought to understand modern economies as products of specific historical processes, but he recognised that this reflected the actions and decisions taken by concrete historical individuals and could not be reduced to the expression of a national soul. This led him to join the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, founded by Schmoller, Brentano, and Adolph

Wagner to promote policies of state intervention akin to the 'New Liberalism' that was developing in Britain. Their policies were to address social problems through collective action without advocating full-blown socialist solutions. Weber was concerned about enlarging the views of these so-called *Kathedersozialisten* – 'Socialists of the Chair' – by drawing on analytical economic theory to guide effective policies of social improvement and economic efficiency.

The work that Weber undertook on politics and law was similarly rooted in idealist concerns. The prevailing view was that the purpose of political theory was to specify the ideal or perfect form of state appropriate to a particular historical time. The central idea was that of the 'legal state' (*Rechtstaat*), by which was meant a state that was to act not arbitrarily at the whim of a monarch but according to formal legal principles. The concern was to show how this could also be a 'cultural state' that acted according to ethical values. Johann Droysen had established a view of politics as concerned with the realisation of ethical ideals through power relations, and this approach had been taken forward by Heinrich von Treitschke and Wilhelm Roscher as the view that state policy is to be concerned with a pursuit of the ethical soul of the nation. In this vein, Roscher had posited an evolutionary development in political power in Germany from monarchy through aristocracy to democracy.

Weber's views had been shaped by Georg Jellinek's critical reconstruction of this tradition. Jellinek, a professor at Heidelberg and later a colleague of Weber, had published his *General Theory of State Law* in 1900, arguing that the state must be seen simply as an association with the power to enact laws and that ethical considerations have no part to play in politics. This gave a sharper edge to Weber's own views on social and economic policy and allowed him to develop a

positive theory of the state and a 'realist' theory of international power politics and political sovereignty.

This point of view underlay Weber's interventions in party politics. He was, however, as ambivalent in his political associations as he was in his disciplinary affiliations. Along with other progressive intellectuals such as Meinecke, Ferdinand Tönnies, Brentano, and his own brother Alfred, Weber was associated with the National Liberals and the Progressive Party in an attempt to find a middle way between conservative traditionalism and the Marxism of the Social Democratic Party. This brought him into contact with Friedrich Naumann's Evangelical Social Union. Committed to both liberal principles and to German national interests, however, Weber could not identify with any one party. His concern for social questions later took him into association with, though not membership of, the Conservatives, the centrists, and the Social Democrats. Towards the end of his life he was, for a while, more closely associated with the German Democratic Party and sought parliamentary representation, but he was never one to regard himself as an uncritical supporter of any one party.

It was Weber's awareness of the historical embeddedness of economic, legal, and political phenomena in a social and cultural context that first brought him into contact with sociologists. Recognising the need to relate these phenomena to the interests, activities, and powers of the social groups that comprise a society, he looked to sociology for insights – though he was dissatisfied with what he found.

German sociology in the last part of the nineteenth century was dominated by the works of Albert Schäffle and Ludwig Gumplowicz, both of whom worked in the Franco-British traditions of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer and who had begun to have an international influence of their own. Both writers took the view that societies were real phenomena with