

# Max Weber: 1864–1920

Max Weber's Living Legacy

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June 14, 2020 was the hundred-year anniversary of Max Weber's death. He died in Munich at age 56 after most likely contracting the Spanish flu. He is often considered one of the founding fathers of sociology next to Marx and Durkheim, despite Weber resisting this label. Given Weber's worldwide reception, his enduring relevance for sociology and beyond is unbroken, even though he left a huge unfinished work not intended as a conventional sociological grand theory but as a historical-comparative attempt to understand how humans interact within their social environment and how they construct a social reality of their own making.

Weber's popularity waxed and waned with the rise of positivism in the second half of the twentieth century. The current trend to critically judge hypothesis-testing as the supreme method to unlock law-like cause-and-effect social relationships now seems to be giving Weberian thought a new lifeline. The commemoration of Max Weber's death during another pandemic coincides with the publication of his Complete Edition (*Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* [MWG]) in 47 volumes. The MWG provides, for the first time, "a definitive historical-critical edition of the entire range of his thinking and engagements, not only a basis for a comprehensive account of his life and work but also a resource for moving beyond textual reconstruction and interpretation to new applications and possible extensions of . . . [his] ideas" (Hanke, Scaff, and Whimster 2019:3).

The anniversary and the publication of the MWG provide a good reason to reassess Weber's contribution and living legacy to sociology and the social sciences. In this short essay, I do not ask if Weber is still relevant (he is). Instead, I argue that it is his openness to interpretation, illustrated by the emergence of *Weberology* and *Weberianism*, that has made his work last for so many decades. Toward this end, I will examine the influence of his conceptual and methodological innovations and how they were absorbed, contextualized, revised, reinterpreted, and applied in the last 100 years. Then I will evaluate Weber's universal influence through translations and publications and his influence on the teaching of sociology. Next, I review the trivialization, exploitation, and abuse of Weber's prestige and authority for often contrary purposes, an outcome that is often ignored. The conclusion summarizes Weber's continuing relevance.

### Scholarly Impact

Weber's scholarly contribution to the discipline is not in doubt since he dealt with the big questions of his and our times: the emergence and challenges of modern capitalist societies in comparative and historical perspective. He not only moved sociology into new territory but also broke new ground in anthropology, economy, history, political science, religion, law, media, and cultural

studies. In addition to being an academic and educator, Weber was also a literary critic, editor, anti-war activist, journalist, and politician.

Some scholars argue that his work covers four major areas of social reality: (1) ideal-typical regularities of action and the meaning actors assign to their actions; (2) the carriers and context of social action—that is, strata, classes, organizations, and the role of societal domains like economy, religion, and politics; (3) the role of ideas, interests, values, norms, and cultural practices explaining the association of people in groups (*Vergesellschaftung*) and community-building (*Vergemeinschaftung*); and (4) actors' lifestyles (*Lebensstil*) and conduct (*Lebensführung*), which help us understand how individuals are shaped by different types of rationality and how they express their habitual, mental, and ethical dispositions.

Weber's influence is evident in enduring concepts and terms he coined or defined for the social sciences that gained general popularity: charisma, bureaucracy, domination, status, prestige, power, objectivity, ideal types, rationalization and alienation, the Protestant ethic, the purpose of academic life, and the critique of the so-called iron cage that traps individuals in arrangements based purely on teleological efficiency, rational calculation, and control (Scaff 2015).

Weber has influenced many notable social scientists and social philosophers in different national settings, particularly in Europe (France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Spain, Scandinavia, Spain, the United Kingdom)<sup>1</sup> and North America<sup>2</sup> but also in Asia (China, Japan)<sup>3</sup> and Latin America.<sup>4</sup> But the lack of

a homogeneous character of his theories and concepts as well as selective and sometimes controversial translations and publications led to a fragmented understanding and application of Weber's opus, impeded by his arguably convoluted writing style. Different scholarly disciplines, topical fields, and national contexts construed separate versions of Weber's work. For example, in the study of world religions, we can observe historicist-comparative Weber interpretations next to anthropologically oriented and constructivist neo-Weberian approaches.<sup>5</sup>

Weber's ideas were used for many, sometimes contradictory, purposes, such as a theory of social action—a rational-actor model as well as a guideline for structural functionalist analysis—and as a foundation of modernization and system theories. As a result, the meaning of Weber's perceived contribution changed over time, indicating that his work is not a closed system but an open book from which different perspectives and interpretations have been and can be creatively deduced.

Two schools of thought representing the legacy of Weber have developed: *Weberology* and *Weberianism*.<sup>6</sup> *Weberology*<sup>7</sup> mostly investigates Weber's historical, intellectual, and political history as well as his scholarly development (*Werkgeschichte*). *Weberology* is not a form of advocacy of Weber but interprets his concepts and methodologies in the context of Weber's position as a "classical" sociologist, his biographical and editorial reinterpretations and revisions. It is about "what Weber said when, about what, in what terms and for what purpose" (Bruun 2011:145). Textual exegesis of his work and biographical narratives by *Weberologists*

<sup>1</sup> Some representatives are Adorno, Aron, Bourdieu, Chalcraft, Eliaeson, Elias, Foucault, Giddens, Habermas, Hanke, Hennis, Horkheimer, Jaspers, Löwith, Lukacs, Mannheim, Marcuse, Merleau-Ponty, Mommsen, Morgenthau, Scheler, Schmitt, Schumpeter, Schütz, Stammer, Strauss, and Tenbruck.

<sup>2</sup> Some representatives are Bell, Bellah, Bendix, Burger, Eisenstadt, Gerth, Janowitz, Lazarsfeld, Mills, Oberschall, Parsons, Riesman, Shils, Singer, Veblen, and Yinger.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Ibaraki, Kuroda, Orihara, Su.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Da Mata, Motta, Morcillo Laiz, Weisz, Zabudovsky Kuper.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Berger, Gellner, Geertz, Lynch, B. Turner, and Wilson.

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars belong to both groups.

<sup>7</sup> Some representatives of *Weberology* are Eliaeson, Chalcraft, Collins, Gerhardt, Hanke, Hennis, Kaelber, Kalberg, Lash, Lehmann, Löwith, Merton, Mommsen, Morcillo Laiz, Parsons, Poggi, Radkau, Riesebrodt, Rossi, Roth, Scaff, Schluchter, Tilly, Sica, Swedberg, Tenbruck, Tribe, Turner, von Schelting, Weisz, Whimster, and Winckelmann.

range from defensive statements to hostile criticism.<sup>8</sup>

The publication of the MWG has renewed philological and other substantive controversies among Weberologists about Weber's biographical, disciplinary, philosophical, political, and methodological affiliations with Dilthey, Du Bois, Kant, Marx, Menger, Nietzsche, Rickert, Schmoller, Simmel, and other eminent scholars of his time and age. Using synoptic, diachronic, and synchronic intertextual analytical methods, Weberologists also have studied the linguistic and contextual changes of Weber's concepts and terms such as ideal type, pure type, and type. They scrutinize the challenges of translating his work, examine the orthodox and the heterodox history of Weber scholarship, explore the critical versus pre-critical text-based treatment of his writings, and more.

Weberology confirms that there is a lack of a consistent and unified consensus about the meaning and content of a Weberian theory. Instead, the contingent and contextual character of his work, which emphasizes the unique rather than the universal, is made visible (Gordon 2020). There is an eclectic cornucopia of interpretations, commentary, and applications to a wide variety of themes and research topics, or, as Caldwell (2015:215) wrote, there are "as many Webers as there are interpreters of his work."

Weberianism,<sup>9</sup> on the other hand, is defined as the creative application of Weber's concepts and methods to contemporary social problems. As in the case of Weberology, there are wide-ranging differences in

applying Weber depending on time, place, and issue. So far, no overarching consensus has emerged regarding where, when, and how to use the Weberian toolbox. Depending on how Weber has been atomized and (de-) contextualized as well as the availability of translations, we can distinguish Weberian, neo-Weberian, and post-Weberian, "old" as well as "new" Weberian approaches.

Weberian studies have, for example, applied Weberian thought to topics as far-ranging as the trajectory of global capitalism, transformations in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, rising inequality, religious conflict, great power competition and foreign policy, new pandemic conflicts, the ethics of life, religion, and science, nuclear weapons, and culture and consumerism in modern capitalism.

Some argue that applying Weberian concepts and terms to present-day topics could lead to new insights about current autocratic or direct plebiscitary trends; the resurgence of charismatic strong leaders and nationalism (Joosse 2018); sovereignty and legitimacy issues of supranational entities and institutions; failed states and the increase of migration; sectarian religious movements in the Middle East in the context of the diffusion of power and state authority; and the fragmentation of beliefs, lifestyles, and conduct in a world increasingly influenced by social media, spurious facts, and artificial intelligence (Strazzeri 2016). Like Weberology, Weberianist scholarship proves the time- and space-transcending continuous applicability of Weber thought.

## Dissemination and Reception

Additional evidence regarding Weber's living legacy includes translations, publications, and teaching. In the post-Second World War era alone, Weber has been translated 900 times in more than 40 languages, including about 190 translation into Japanese, 170 into English, and 90 into Spanish (Gerhardt 2016). Since the year 2000, more than a dozen major collections of articles about Weber and his work have been published in English, German, French, Spanish, and Japanese. In addition, several thousand academic articles, dissertations, and other publications dealing with Weber have been

<sup>8</sup> In the aftermath of World War II, Weber was critically reviewed for his views on plebiscitary leadership democracy, his perceived apologetic and nationalist attitudes, bourgeois relativist theories, and neo-Kantian methodology, even though or because he helped formulate the first draft of the liberal Weimar constitution. Ironically, some of his fierce critics were themselves influenced by his thought, such as Lukács, Marcuse, Mommsen, and Habermas.

<sup>9</sup> Some representatives of Weberianism are Albert, Albrow, Bendix, Bruun, Chalcraft, Gerth, Giddens, Gunderson, Habermas, Hennis, Joas, Joosse, Kaelber, Kalberg, Lepsius, Mills, Müller, Parsons, Prisching, Roth, Scaff, Schluchter, Schneider, Schwinn, Swedberg, Tenbruck, Turner, and Whimster.

printed over the last decades. With the groundbreaking completion of the MWG, which makes Weber ever more accessible, no end is in sight (Hanke 2015).<sup>10</sup>

In a 1997 ISA survey, 32 percent of sociological professionals ranked Weber's books *Economy and Society* (1976) and the *Protestant Ethic* ([1904–1905] 2011) as the most influential publications in the field.<sup>11</sup> In 2013, the *Protestant Ethic* was nominated the second greatest book in the field of sociology.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in 2020, *Economy and Society* and the *Protestant Ethic* were listed among the "most popular,"<sup>13</sup> respectively the fifth and sixth "best sociology books of all time."<sup>14</sup>

Weber's status as a "classic" of sociology in the teaching of the discipline and the frequency of citing and referencing his works around the world is not in doubt either, as seen in his continuing prominence in university curricula and textbooks concerned with the history of sociology and its theoretical foundations. Among English-language printings three types of Weber publications can be distinguished (Kaelber 2006:132f): first, readers and textbooks geared toward the undergraduate market that make Weber palatable for general student audiences,<sup>15</sup> second, compilations that refine or add

new insight to existing knowledge for graduate and doctoral students after previously untranslated material has become available; and third, niche publications for specialists in the profession. The latter are organized in numerous Weber societies, regularly convene at conferences, and publish prodigiously, for example, in the *Journal of Classical Sociology*; the *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*; *History and Theory*; the *Journal of Historical Sociology*; and, of course in particular, *Max Weber Studies*, a journal that is solely dedicated to his work.

### Trivialization

The continuing pertinence of Weber's ideas and his popularization in academic teaching and scholarship have also triggered trends of trivialization, which can be considered an unavoidable consequence of any enduring conceptual and methodological innovation with broad application. Weber shares this fate with other "classics," such as Marx.

Weber often has been borrowed as an honorific reference in the opening pages of journals and books on charisma, bureaucracy, status groups, and the Protestant ethic, sometimes in a clichéd and ritualized fashion as a quasi-cult object without being applied seriously. Other times, in a conformist nod to sociological convention, Weber is superficially cited to provide quasi-professional prestige and legitimacy or to adorn current concepts without innovative substance.

The selective use of theories, concepts, terms, and quotations out of their original context often leads to overinterpretation or banalization, if not falsification (Eliaeson 2002:128f). This is made easier, as previously mentioned, by Weber's rejection of the existence of a systematic theory. Moreover, his sometimes diffuse or ambivalent terms and conceptual frames open to multiple interpretations make his work an easily exploitable "quarry" (Käsler 1979:228f).

For example, exaggerated claims were made to align Weber with critical realism and rational-choice theory. Others used concepts like disenchantment, rationalization, modernization, and differentiation in an ahistorical fashion to explain or make sense of political and economic problems of our

<sup>10</sup> Alan Sica lists about 5,000 English-language publications pertaining to Weber in his 2004 *Max Weber: A Comprehensive Bibliography*.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/history-of-isa/books-of-the-xx-century>.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.listmuse.com/best-books-sociology-top-10.php>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=toppopularsociologybooks>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bookscrolling.com/a-ranking-of-the-best-sociology-books>

<sup>15</sup> Examples of popular textbooks are Seymour Miller (1963), *Max Weber*; S. N. Eisenstadt (1968), *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*; J. E. T. Eldridge (1970), *Max Weber: The Interpretation of Social Reality*; W. G. Runciman (1978), *Max Weber: Selections in Translation*; Stanislaw Andreski (1983), *Max Weber on Capitalism, Bureaucracy, and Religion*; Wolf Heydebrand (1994), *Sociological Writings of Max Weber*; Sam Whimster (2004), *The Essential Weber: A Reader*; Stephen Kalberg (2005), *Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity*; and Stephen Kalberg (2017), *The Social Thought of Max Weber*.

time, overgeneralizing Weber's relevance or deifying his scholarship. Regardless of overuse and trivialization, contemporary scholars and encyclopedia editors agree that Weber continues to stimulate much solid scholarship, informs sociological teaching, and is useful for the understanding of human societies and social action.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

In contrast to the work of other once-fashionable or so-called "classical" sociologists of the past who have over time been discarded or lost their relevance, Max Weber stands out for his continuing relevance in the social sciences.<sup>17</sup> However, the reception of Weber underwent several twists and turns in the last 100 years. It was influenced by theoretical fads in western sociology, poor translations, and political events, in particular Weber's ban from sociology under fascist, Stalinist, Maoist, and other autocratic regimes.

The reason for Weber's appeal for social science and policy-making practitioners is the broad comparative, multidimensional, multicausal, and transdisciplinary character of many of his theoretical and methodological concepts. He provided critical insights into the rise of supposedly "modern" western capitalism in comparison with non-western civilizations and pointed out the importance of the meaning human agents assign to their social actions.

Even when rebranded, redefined, and rejected, Weber's ideas have created ripple effects in areas beyond pure sociological inquiry and beyond their original intention, leaving footprints that many may not recognize as Weber-related. His work has inspired new understandings (*Verstehen*) of past and present-day societies because he

was a non-utopian realist who did not perceive history as linear, teleological, or accumulative progress but understood its nonlinear, unpredictable, contingent, and unintended properties (Kalberg 2008:284f).

Empirically analyzing societies and civilizations on their own terms, Weber pointed out the anti-utopian nature and weaknesses of modern capitalist societies such as moral relativism, embattled reason, and the ever-present specter of authoritarianism. In that sense Weber can be seen as "the heroic liberal conscience of reason and individual freedom in the disenchantment world of Western modernity" (Caldwell 2016:214).

Because social science itself (like the societies it analyzes) is bounded by the limits of the socio-historical and biological development of the human species and forces of change, continuity, and selection, there is no guarantee that social theory and the reception of "classic" authors will continue as before. As societies and humans change in time and space, it is unavoidable that social scientific contributions and insights also will lose their bounded relevance, fade, and become obsolete.

Although the continued relevance of Weber has outlasted that of most of his predecessors as well as that of many of his contemporaries and successors, his work too may eventually dim, an outcome that he himself wisely conceded. Yet, while it eventually will be lost in the past as other human creations, it will remain enshrined in the history of human thought.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Max-Weber-German-sociologist>; <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weber/#ConRem>.

<sup>17</sup> Some have argued that the continuous popularity of Weber is a result of the failure of sweeping general theories like Marxism or functionalism. This propelled Weber into the position of being one of the few "classical" sociologists providing theoretical guidance from the past to the present (Chalcraft, Howell, Menendez, and Vera 2008).

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