Max Weber's Construction of Social Theory

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Martin Albrow

**St. Martin's Press
New York**

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Scholarly and Reference Division,
St. Martin's Press, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue,
New York, N.Y. 10010

First published in the United States of America in 1990

ISBN 978-0-333-28546-6 ISBN 978-1-349-20879-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-20879-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Albrow, Martin.

Max Weber's construction of social theory / Martin Albrow.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Weber, Max, 1864-1920. 2. Sociologists—Germany—Biography.
3. Sociology—German—History. I. Title
HM22.G3W396 1990 90-33088
301'.092—dc20 CIP

To the memory of Editha Hirschmann

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Foreword

Thirty years ago, almost to the day, I was sitting in the British Council Library in Cologne, completing my reading of Marianne Weber's biography of her husband. It had been a laborious task, chosen as a way of learning German and understanding Weber at the same time. It also took up the generous spare time allowed by the school which employed me as an English language assistant.

It was a way of developing an interest which had been fired in Cambridge by a course on the History of Historiography given by Brian Wormald, whose lectures tantalisingly stopped short of treating the last items on his book list, which happened to be on Max Weber.

I went to the London School of Economics after Germany to begin work on Max Weber's idea of rationality under Morris Ginsberg's supervision. He took the view that this was too narrow a subject for a PhD and that the idea of rationality *tout court* was more appropriate. That was somewhat discouraging and I left without completing my thesis.

But in some sense Ginsberg was right. Weber cannot be understood except through an appreciation of the idea which became his driving force, his demon, namely rationality. This book represents my acquiescence to that insight after many years of trying to understand its implications, challenge it or simply ignore it.

Had this book been completed earlier I would not now be able to agree with what it would have said. To that extent a decade or two of delay has been beneficial. But in that time my intellectual debts have mounted alarmingly, so that there is no possibility of acknowledging all the useful discussions I have enjoyed. Only the most notable are mentioned here.

Norbert Elias was simultaneously sceptical, challenging and enormously kind in my early lecturing days in Leicester; Stanislav

Andreski gave enthusiastic support in Reading; while Paul Halmos in Cardiff gave great encouragement. Since then I have enjoyed the stimulating friendships of Anton Zijderveld, Horst Helle and Johannes Weiss, each in his own way having a unique insight into Weber and always ready to share it.

In 1973–4, at the Max Weber Institute in Munich, I had the privilege of many discussions with Johannes Winckelmann who had already forgotten more about Weber than I shall ever know. Gert Schmidt was very helpful to me at that time, as was Constance Rottländer who first gave me an insight into Weber's economics. I hope it is also not too late at this stage to thank the Leverhulme Foundation for its support during that year.

As befits those who shared student days, Tony Giddens and I have always found snooker more interesting than Max Weber when we have been together, and I can only express my appreciation that he has given support at times when it was most needed and has assisted greatly in commenting and making suggestions which have proved beneficial in cutting an unwieldy document down to size. Jem Thomas gave the same first draft a thorough Weberian vetting and I am grateful to him for doing that necessary task. Chris Harris has been extraordinarily generous with his time and inspired me to make those unpalatable changes which turn a text written for myself into one which a reader can find useful. Paul Atkinson made helpful comments on Chapter 11. Liz King has, apart from assisting me in editing *International Sociology*, found time to prepare the word-processed text with her usual extraordinary speed and meticulousness. To all these people my particular thanks are due.

Above all I need to express my deep gratitude to my wife Susan Owen (Economic Adviser in HM Treasury), formerly Lecturer in Economics at University College, Cardiff, who shared with me the last throes of that institution before its enforced merger, made sure that my priorities were right and morale high and, at the same time, coped marvellously with demanding changes in her own work. Without her, this book would not have been written.

The dedication fulfils a promise made a good ten years ago to someone who had listened to lectures by Rickert and Jaspers, and took into her life's work the lesson that patients are people.

Max Weber: a Brief Biography

Max Weber was born on 21 April 1864 in the German town of Erfurt. His father was a lawyer and member of a family of prosperous textile manufacturers. His mother's family placed a high value on education. She was a religious person with an active social conscience.

The Weber family moved to Berlin in 1869 where his father became a member of the German Reichstag as a National Liberal. Max received a classical education and went on to study law at university. He did his military training and practised as a lawyer in Berlin until 1893.

He lived in a period which, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see as leading to the catastrophe of the First World War. The great European powers struggled for world mastery. Their societies were transformed by the emergence of the class of industrial workers. Karl Marx inspired an international working-class movement, while state leaders tried to pacify the demands of the masses with social legislation and to win their allegiance in the international conflict.

It was also a period of value crisis. The Christian world view was challenged by natural science on the one hand and by the glorification of power and freedom for self-expression on the other. Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud became the mentors of the younger generation.

Weber responded to these conflicts and challenges by holding fast to the values of German high culture, to the spirit of Kant and Goethe, at the same time as committing himself to a heroic ideal of intellectual integrity and service to the nation state.

It was the early period of establishing institutionalised social and economic research for policy purposes. He obtained his academic qualifications by studying the history of law and the ancient world. But his social awareness drew him to the Association for Social Policy.

While working as a lawyer he completed in 1892 a major research project on the social and economic conditions of the Prussian peasantry. His academic reputation grew and in 1894 he was called to a Chair of Economics in Freiburg, from where he moved to a similar position in Heidelberg in 1896.

His fame grew as he stated in the starkest possible terms the conflicts which were inherent in the simultaneous pursuit of national security and economic liberalism. He seemed to have glowing possibilities for careers both in politics and in academic life. But following the death of his father in 1897 Weber fell into a depression and nervous illness.

The tensions in Weber's personality have been the subject of prolonged speculation. He wrote a lengthy self-analysis (unfortunately destroyed) and sought the help of his friend, the philosopher and psychiatrist, Karl Jaspers. Those inner conflicts are frequently referred to in the great biography which Weber's wife, Marianne, published after his death.

He had married in 1893. Marianne was a second generation cousin, a formidable intellect who became a prominent leader of German feminism, surviving him until 1953. She idolised her husband, but it was a marriage of the mind and daily companionship and he at least sought sexual fulfilment in other relationships.

Weber recovered gradually from his illness. He gave up his teaching position in 1903. He travelled frequently in Europe and in 1904 spent a stimulating four months in the United States. His intellectual interests shifted. He worked on the religious basis of human rationality and on the development of Western capitalism. He began to write on the philosophical implications of empirical social science. He became well known as a political commentator.

The years from 1903 to 1920 were marked by a stream of writing which continues to be a treasury of ideas for later scholars. He wrote on topics as various as the Russian Revolution and the sociology of music, the religion of China and the development of the city, industrial psychology and bureaucratic structure. They culminated in his conceptual framework for sociology which was

linked to his enormous study of the relations between the economy and society.

Although he gave up teaching Weber maintained an intense involvement in academic life. He was in constant contact with the leading scholars of his time and he and Marianne kept open house in Heidelberg for young and old alike.

As a journal editor he turned the *Archive for Social Science and Social Policy* into the major forum for applied social research. He played the leading part in the debates on value-freedom which took place in the Association for Social Policy between 1909 and 1913. He worked strenuously to help found the German Sociological Society in 1910.

When the First World War broke out in 1914 he committed himself fully to the German cause. He served as an officer administering military hospitals but after leaving the service in the latter part of the war he wrote numerous articles criticising its conduct.

At the end of the war and immediately after Weber was prodigiously active in numerous directions. He joined and campaigned for the German Democratic Party. He wrote and spoke against socialist revolution. He was a member of the German peace delegation at Versailles. He wrote and spoke against right-wing violence.

Finally he took another permanent Chair in Munich in 1919. He lectured in overflowing lecture theatres on basic concepts in sociology, on economic history and on political science. He had laboured for years on his great works, the three-volume *Sociology of Religion* and the two-volume *Economy and Society*. He prepared them for publication, dedicating them to his wife and his mother respectively, who had just died. He was never to see them in print. He died of pneumonia on 14 June 1920.

Time Chart

The historical time over which the account in this book spreads and the thematic explorations extend over a much longer span than just Max Weber's lifetime. The chart below may help the reader by locating the events and books referred to here within that period.

<i>Events</i>	<i>Books</i>	<i>Weber's Life and Works</i>
	1781 Kant's <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> , 1st edn	
	1785 Kant's <i>Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals</i>	
	1788 Kant's <i>Critique of Practical Reason</i>	
1789 The French Revolution	1801 Goethe's <i>Faust</i> , Part I	
1814–15 Congress of Vienna	1818 Schopenhauer's <i>The World as Will and Idea</i>	
	1821 Hegel's <i>Philosophy of Right</i>	
	1835 Strauss' <i>The Life of Jesus</i>	
	1837 Hegel's <i>Philosophy of History</i> , lectures of the 1820s published	
	1841 W.E. Channing's <i>Complete Works</i>	
	1846 Marx and Engels' <i>The German Ideology</i>	
	1848 Marx and Engels' <i>The Communist Manifesto</i>	
	1859 Darwin's <i>Origin of Species</i>	

1862	Bismarck becomes Prussian Prime Minister	1864	Max Weber born in Erfurt
1863	General Union of German Workers founded		
1866	F.A. Lange's <i>History of Materialism</i>		
1867	Marx's <i>Capital</i> , Vol. 1	1869	Weber's family moves to Berlin
1870	Vatican Council Decree of Papal Infallibility		
1871	The Second German Empire founded		
1872	<i>Kulturkampf</i> begins		
1872	Verein für Sozialpolitik founded		
1875	Gotha Programme		
		1882	Study in Heidelberg
		1883–	Military service
		4	
		1884–	Study in Berlin and
		6	Göttingen. Qualifies as junior barrister
		1889	Doctoral dissertation <i>On the History of Trading Companies in the Middle Ages</i>
		1887	Nietzsche's <i>The Genealogy of Morals</i>
		1883	Dilthey's <i>Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften</i>
		1872	Nietzsche's <i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>

<i>Events</i>	<i>Books</i>	<i>Weber's Life and Works</i>
1890 Bismarck dismissed	1891 Windelband's <i>Geschichte der Philosophie</i>	
		1892 Lectures in Berlin. Completes report for the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Social Policy Association) <i>The Situation of Farm Workers in Germany East of the River Elbe</i>
		1893 Marries Marianne Schnitger
		1894 Chair in Economics at Freiburg
		1895 Inaugural lecture, <i>The National State and Economic Policy</i>
	1896 Stammler's <i>Wirtschaft und Recht nach der materialistischen Wirtschaftsauffassung</i>	Chair at Heidelberg
		1897 Death of father
		1897– Suffers nervous illness
		1903

1902	William James' <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>	1903	<i>Roscher and Knies and the Logical Problems of Historical Economics</i>
	H. Rickert's, <i>Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung</i>	1904	Weber visits World Exhibition in St Louis. Takes joint editorship of the <i>Archive for Social Science and Social Policy</i> , <i>Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy</i>
1905	First Russian Revolution	1905	<i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i>
		1906	<i>Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences</i>
		1907	<i>Rudolf Stammler's Surmounting of the Materialist Conception of History</i>
1908	German naval programme	1908	<i>On the Psychophysics of Industrial Work</i>
1910	First Congress of the German Sociological Society	1909	Editor of the <i>Outline of Social Economics</i>
		1912	Troeltsch's <i>Protestantism and Progress</i>

Events	Books	Weber's Life and Works
	1913 Jaspers' <i>Allgemeine Psychopathologie</i>	1913 <i>On Some Categories of Interpretative Sociology</i>
1914 Outbreak of First World War		1914–15 Service with the Military Hospitals Commission
		1915–16 Work on the sociology of religion
		1916–19 Newspaper articles on the war
1917 The Russian Revolution		1917 <i>The Meaning of 'Value-freedom' in Sociological and Economic Sciences</i>
1918 End of First World War	1918 Spengler's <i>Decline of the West</i> , vol. I	
1919 Treaty of Versailles		1919 Weber takes part in Versailles peace negotiations. Takes chair in Munich. <i>Science as a Vocation. Politics as a Vocation</i> . Weber elected to executive of German Democratic Party.
		1920 Dies of pneumonia
		1920–1 <i>Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie</i>
		1922 <i>Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre</i>

1926 R.H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise
of Capitalism*

Marianne Weber's *Biography of Max
Weber*

1932 A. Schütz's *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der
sozialen Welt*

1933 Nazis seize power

1937 T. Parsons' *The Structure of Social
Action*

1939 Outbreak of Second
World War

1945 Defeat of Germany

1947 T. Parsons' edition of Weber's
Economy and Society

1948 Gerth and Mills' edition *From Max
Weber*

1950 L. Strauss' *Natural Right and History*

1958 P. Winch's *The Idea of a Social
Science*

1959 W. Mommsen's *Max Weber und die
deutsche Politik*

1964 Heidelberg Conference
on Max Weber

1981 J. Habermas' *Theorie des
kommunikativen Handelns*