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Contextualizing Max Weber

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W. H. Swatos and L. Kaelber, eds, *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100: Essays on the Centenary of the Weber Thesis*. London: Paradigm, 2005, 266 pp., ISBN 1594510989 (hbk), US\$65.00, 1594510997 (pbk), US\$26.95.

E. Winter, *Max Weber et les relations ethniques: Du refus du biologisme racial à l'État multinational*. Saint-Nicolas: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004, 214 pp., ISBN 2763780539 €17.00.

Sociology and the Classics

Sociology takes its 'founding fathers' seriously. Many sociologists refer to and build on what they regard as their intellectual heritage. They tend to celebrate and commemorate those classical authors who inadvertently or intentionally helped to set up the discipline. These authors are viewed as integral to the academic field, providing the building blocks for future generations. After a century or more, they are still being taught to undergraduates and postgraduates, and there is a huge market of secondary literature on the classics – some for teaching purposes, and some very scholarly.

Such retrospection is unusual, especially for a comparatively new discipline whose early ambition was to promote social change by challenging old ways of thought and organization. As the natural sciences pride themselves on the progress that they have made, their classical authors are treated quite differently: while their intellectual products are regarded to be immense achievements, they are also considered to be relics of a bygone

era with remarkably little significance for today. Historians of science might study the intricacies of the arguments developed by Isaac Newton or Johannes Kepler, but very few physicists or astronomers would spend their precious time on this. The study of the classics is virtually absent in the training natural scientists acquire because previous achievements are supposed to be superseded by later ones.

The social sciences as a whole exhibit a stronger link with their classical authors. However, even within the social sciences, it is sociology that honours its intellectual pioneers to the greatest extent. Social psychologists may occasionally refer to Wilhelm Wundt, William James or George Herbert Mead, but the actual study of the classics does not play such a significant role in the discipline as it does in sociology. Contemporary economists show even less interest in their classical authors. It is rare for economists nowadays to refer extensively to the insights provided by, say, David Ricardo, Karl Marx or John Maynard Keynes. The rise of game theory and mathematical modelling has eroded the interest in the history of this discipline, creating a theoretical framework into which earlier, more discursive contributions largely defy translation.

There are a number of reasons why sociology has cultivated such a special relationship with its founders. First and foremost, sociologists have never achieved a clear consensus regarding the basic methodological principles and theoretical assumptions of their discipline. The more agreement exists in a discipline regarding those fundamental issues, the less likely are members of the relevant scientific community to show a great deal of interest in its history. This explains, for instance, why analytical philosophers and historians of philosophy have so little to say to each other. The former assume a consensus regarding the main rules and principles of the discipline and therefore disregard the work by historians of philosophy. The latter recognize plurality and therefore fail to acknowledge the hegemony of analytical philosophy. Disagreement on fundamental approaches and principal conclusions keeps people wedded to the history of their discipline: they will use this history to situate themselves within contemporary debates and to establish legitimacy for the views they hold. Far from becoming outmoded, the authority of the classics is strengthened by the passage of time, their long survival indicating a deeper level of insight that retains validity despite huge social transformations. Indeed, sociologists often appeal to the classics to identify themselves to others and to attribute intellectual weight to the specific positions they take. For instance, Jeffrey Alexander locates his neofunctionalism and his cultural turn in the intellectual tradition of Talcott Parsons and Emile Durkheim, whereas Randall Collins's historical sociology situates itself in a Weberian tradition (e.g. Alexander, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c, 1982d, 2003; Collins, 1988).

However, a lack of methodological and theoretical consensus within an academic discipline is not a sufficient condition for its interest in its foundational authors. For instance, literary critics disagree on the theoretical or methodological assumptions of their discipline, but they do not draw on classical authors as frequently as sociologists. This is mainly because they do not subscribe to the notion of cumulative theory formation that is so widespread in sociology. Although sociologists do not embrace the notion of scientific progress that can be found among natural scientists, they do assume that theory formation proceeds in a cumulative fashion, whereby intellectual achievements of the past are fundamental to and incorporated in present endeavours. From Parsons (1951, 1968) onwards, social theorists use and reuse the intellectual products of the classics in the hope of achieving theoretical advancement. Underlying this intellectual genre is the assumption that the classics provide significant insights that need to be consolidated, combined, recycled and built upon – as if sociologists have taken on board Newton's aphorism that 'if I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants' (see Merton, 1993).

Two issues follow from this, both of which are relevant to locating Swatos and Kaelber's book on Weber's *Protestant Ethic* and Elke Winter's *Max Weber et les relations ethniques*. First, because of the significance of these classical authors, there is often disagreement as to who is worthy to be among the select group. Karl Marx, Max Weber and Durkheim are the usual choices (e.g. Alexander, 1982b, 1982c; Giddens, 1971; Hughes et al., 2003; Morrison, 1995). But some commentators question the importance of Marx and Durkheim, or find this selection too limited (e.g. Hawthorn, 1987). Other candidates include, for instance, Georg Simmel (e.g. Levine, 1997) and Alexis de Tocqueville (e.g. Boudon, 2005). Given these disagreements, the consensus regarding the status of Weber is all the more striking. Most sociologists, if not all, would agree that Weber is one of the principal figures in the history of the discipline, and the huge amount of literature on his work and legacy is testimony to the status he has acquired. Whereas Marx and Durkheim foster animosity, the same cannot be said of Weber. Authors with very different theoretical perspectives or domains of specialization speak warmly of Weber and regard him as one of their cardinal sources of inspiration. That is why Weber is in the peculiar position of appealing to critical theorists (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973) as well as rational choice theorists (Coleman, 1990). Weber is also relevant to people working in diverse substantive areas, ranging from the sociology of religion to the study of ethnicity.

The second point is more counterintuitive. Surprisingly, the close link between the classics and current theory formation has meant that the history of sociology as an independent academic discipline is relatively underdeveloped. Whereas the history of political thought is a well-established

intellectual discipline with methodological sophistication, the history of sociology is less so. There has been, within the discipline of sociology or social theory, less interest in the history of sociology for its own sake. The history of sociology has more often been regarded as a means to contemporary theory formation than as an end in itself. In contrast with the history of political thought, there has also been less interest in the specific methodological issues connected to the history of social thought. However, recently, sociologists such as Camic and Gross have tried to turn the tide and have developed a framework for the study of the history of sociological thought (e.g. Camic and Gross, 1998, 2001; Frickel and Gross, 2005). This work shows affinities with the contextualist tradition in the history of political thought (e.g. Skinner, 1969; Tully, 1989), focusing as it does on the institutional and intellectual contexts in which sociological thought has been produced. Both *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100* and *Max Weber et les relations ethniques* can be situated within this contextualist perspective.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Swatos and Kaelber's *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100: Essays on the Centenary of the Weber Thesis* very much fits in with this newly developed interest in the history of sociology. It develops an in-depth analysis of the specific conditions in which Weber wrote his famous two essays on Protestantism and capitalism. A century after its publication, Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1992) still fills scholars with sufficient enthusiasm to commemorate the anniversary of its publication with an edited collection. This is an interesting sociological phenomenon in itself, which calls for an explanation. It should first be noted that the English-speaking sociological community became acquainted with Weber through Parsons, whose *The Structure of Social Action* devoted a large section to Weber's work on Protestantism and capitalism (Parsons, 1968: 500–38). This, together with Parsons' translation of *The Protestant Ethic*, helped to make it a leading classic text. R. H. Tawney's (1990) *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* broached similar ideas to a British audience. But Tawney drew on (and appealed to) economic and political history more than social theory, and – despite subsequently writing an introduction to Parsons' 1930 translation of *The Protestant Ethic* – did not in his own work especially steer readers towards Weber for a more analytical explanation.

Second, Weber's central methodological positions are clearly present in *The Protestant Ethic*. These include his rejection of a Marxist view of history, his use of ideal types, his commitment to methodological individualism,

the role of *Verstehen* and the relationship between purposive action and unintended consequences (see Baert, 2005: 37–60). Further, although the text tackles a very specific historical period, it also alludes to the broader historical implications, which stretch right to the present day. The discussions around modernity, as they have been unfolding in the last couple of decades, are fuelled by and are in many respects an ongoing dialogue with Weber's views regarding rationalization (e.g. Bauman, 1991, 1993; Beck, 1992; Habermas, 1991a, 1991b; Ritzer, 2000).

Swatos and Kaelber's collection presents some valuable additions to the growing corpus on Weber's writings. It includes contributions by some leading specialists on Max Weber such as Stephen Kalberg. Consistent with the new sociology of ideas, several chapters focus on the specific intellectual, institutional and sociopolitical context in which Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Based on a careful historical analysis, Hartmut Lehmann's chapter reveals the intricate intellectual exchanges between Weber, Werner Sombart, Felix Rachfahl and Lujo Brentano in relationship to the explanation for the emergence of capitalism. With the help of a detailed description of this intellectual network (see also Collins, 1998), Lehmann contextualizes not only the specific arguments presented in *The Protestant Ethic*, but also the discussions that followed its publication. In his contribution, Martin Riesebroth argues that Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* cannot be reduced to a single modernization thesis. Instead, he prefers to locate Weber's writing in its context and acknowledge the multilayered nature of Weber's argument. He focuses on the subtle differences between the first and second editions of *The Protestant Ethic*. For Riesebroth, these differences can be explained by transformations in the intellectual and political background and by changes in Weber's own intellectual development.

In Chapter 3, Nielsen's careful analysis of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and of Weber's replies to his critics allow him to show that Weber promotes a particular philosophy of history or 'grand narrative'. However, contrary to Wolfgang Schluchter (1996), Nielsen insists that this philosophy of history does not subscribe to a developmental, evolutionary or 'directional' view of history. In Chapter 4, Lawrence Scaff discusses Weber's trip to the United States in 1904 and its relevance in the context of the literature on the US that was available at the time: for instance, Bryce's *American Commonwealth* or Hugo Münsterberg's *Die Amerikaner*, both of which Weber was acquainted with. Particularly, Scaff focuses on Weber's visits to the Oklahoma and Indian Territory. He explains convincingly how this visit ties in with some of his interests in political and economic sociology, although the chapter is at times anecdotal and the link with *The Protestant Ethic* remains tenuous. In Chapter 5, William Swatos and Peter Kivisto trace the intellectual trajectory of *The*

Protestant Ethic, from its influences to its reception. Unsurprisingly, Talcott Parsons appears as a central figure in the reception and dissemination of Weber's text, not least because he translated it into English but also because he incorporated some of its central themes in his own work. This is an especially informative chapter, so the reader is left wondering why it did not appear earlier in the book.

Whereas Chapters 1–5 are historical, Chapters 6 and 7 evaluate Weber's arguments, and Chapter 8 shows the relevance of these arguments for understanding American society today. Chapter 6, by Lutz Kaelber, evaluates Weber's arguments in the light of new empirical research. Kaelber's analysis also rests on a subtle reconstruction of Weber's typology of economic organization and motives; this is necessary because lack of clarity on this score has clouded previous arguments for and against Weber. On the whole, Kaelber's conclusion is favourable towards Weber, and he defends him against critics such as Rodney Stark. In the penultimate chapter, Philip Gorski presents a more critical assessment of the Weber thesis. Gorski agrees with Weber that the Protestant Reformation played a significant role in the economic transformations that took place. However, he prefers to focus not on the intrinsic nature of Protestant beliefs, but on the differences in economic resources, incentives and institutions between North Atlantic (Netherlands and Britain) and continental Europe. Whereas Chapters 1–7 mainly deal with the interpretation and evaluation of *The Protestant Ethic*, Chapter 8 applies the main themes of the book to American history and society. Stephen Kalberg explores the relevance of Weber's notions of rationalization and 'iron cage' for understanding past and present political culture in the US.

Given the importance of the methodology and philosophy of social science in Weber's writings, and the continued intellectual interest in refining and applying Weber's contributions in this area, Swatos and Kaelber's collection could have benefited from more discussion of Weber's methodology in *The Protestant Ethic*. Given the extent to which Weber's thesis has been criticized, the collection could have explored rival explanations to a greater extent. On the whole, the collection is very favourable to Weber's central arguments – although, it should be added, by no means uncritical. These reservations do not detract from the obvious value of this book, which includes some high quality contributions. It will particularly appeal to readers interested in the historical context in which Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic* and to a lesser extent to those still probing the validity of the Weber thesis.

Max Weber, Race and Ethnicity

Whereas the previous book largely ignores the methodological issues, they are central to Elke Winter's *Max Weber et les relations ethniques: Du*

refus du biologisme racial à l'État multinational. This book consists of two parts. The first part locates Weber's views on race, ethnicity and nationhood within a historical context. The second consists of a translation of the debate on 'Race and Society' at the first Congress of German Sociology (1910); Werner Sombart presided over this session and it included interventions by Max Weber and Alfred Ploetz. This is the first French translation of the debate.

In the first part of the book, Winter manages to show convincingly a gradual shift in Weber's writings towards a mature sociological perspective. Weber has exercised a significant influence on the sociology of race and ethnicity but the precise nature of his intellectual trajectory on this score is less well known. Winter's book is very helpful in this regard. But the book is also important in another respect. Because Durkheim and Weber are so crucial to the foundation of the discipline of sociology, we sometimes forget the intellectual context in which they wrote and the 'non-sociological' or 'archaic' ideas they held. Durkheim's views about women are good examples in this respect. In *Suicide* (1989 [1897]) and *Division of Labour* (1984 [1893]), he develops the most preposterous theories about the differences between men and women. But equally outlandish are Weber's comments about various social groups such as the Polish immigrant population or Slav people in general, and Winter elaborates on them at length. Winter does this while pointing out that Weber's methodological position, in particular its focus on the fact-value distinction, made him wary of racial or biologically based theories. This methodological position is also very apparent in the second part of the book, the translation of Weber's talk at the first Conference of the German Sociological Association. I personally did not find this debate as interesting as the rest of the book; the discussions had a slightly unfinished air to them. But they do show Weber's intellectual sharpness and tenacity, especially when he scrutinizes Ploetz's arguments and repeatedly asks for empirical evidence. Weber did not criticize Ploetz's racial theories on moral grounds but showed the empirical and conceptual lacunae in his argument. Here, we see Weber's methodological orientation at work, insisting as he does that value-patterns and ideological orientations should not interfere with the research process as such. Nevertheless, Winter's own text (the first part) is more informative than the debate, and so is her introduction to the debate. In general, the strength of Winter's book lies in the fact that it shows the intricate link between Weber's philosophy of social science and his substantive concerns – the extent to which his complex methodological considerations underlie his views about race, ethnicity and related themes.

Often, secondary sources on Weber's substantive work ignore his methodological and philosophical considerations, and Winter's book is a

nice exception in this regard. Winter also suggests that her book will help contribute to contemporary debates on the issues concerned, but I am less convinced about this because the sociological literature in these areas has moved on considerably since Weber wrote, and Winter does not quite do justice to this development. More generally, her discussion of other books that use Weber or secondary sources on Weber is at times rather sketchy. However, these minor reservations should not take away from the obvious quality of this book: this is a subtle contextualization of Weber's writings in this area that provides a persuasive account of the relationship between very different sections of his *oeuvre*.

In short, both books, the Swatos and Kaelber collection and the one by Winter, are useful additions to the growing corpus on Max Weber. This is not a mean feat given the vast amount of literature that is already available.

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