Weber, Max, 1864-1920

Definition: **Weber, Max** from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*

1864-1920

German sociologist

Born in Erfurt, he was educated at the universities of Heidelberg, Berlin and Göttingen and taught law at Berlin from 1892, political economy at Freiburg from 1894 and economics at Heidelberg from 1897. He accepted a chair of sociology in Vienna in 1918, and in 1919 he took over the chair of sociology at Munich. Regarded as one of the founders of sociology, Weber is best known for his work *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1904, Eng trans *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1930).


Summary Article: **Weber, Max**

From *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*

German jurist, political economist, preeminent figure in sociology, and profound theorist of religion, capitalism, and democracy. Max Weber (1864–1920) has exerted wide influence on social thought. Empirical and theoretical claims he made have passed into the debates and conceptual vocabularies of diverse fields—economic history, law, politics, comparative religion, philosophy of social science, several specialized geographical area studies, and even applied policy studies of entrepreneurship, development, and modernization. Through widespread use, his originally technical concepts of “charisma” and “the Protestant ethic” have passed into everyday English.

**Links between Political, Religious, and Economic Institutions**

In Weber’s theory of politics, *charisma* refers not only to the mere magnetism of a public personality but also to actual power. If, as he famously said, “the decisive means for politics is violence,” the stable footing of political order nevertheless was not a material but a subjective one: the moral claim to uncoerced obedience—that is, to legitimate authority. Weber distinguished three types of justification for the fundamental inequality between rulers and ruled. As one of them, “charismatic authority” is a claim that points neither to custom and immemorial tradition nor to rational laws and constitutions but, instead, invokes extraordinary personal qualities. Weber’s paradigmatic example of charismatic authority—Jesus’s “It is written, but I say unto you”—dramatizes his point that matched beliefs and inner dispositions of rulers and ruled sustain power. Like religion, politics orients individual behavior within broad systems of meaning and culturally ratified values of right conduct and just deserts.

The subject of Weber’s classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) is not simply the “work ethic” of everyday English but a complex of cultural and technical disciplines. Those embody the rationality peculiar to capitalism in its specifically modern form. While agreeing with Karl Marx that capitalism had material preconditions and produced new class antagonisms, Weber insisted that crucial to its emergence was an unprecedented human outlook: the “rational asceticism” of seventeenth-century Calvinist sectarians. Their goal of salvation rejected “the world,” with its intermittent leisures and consoling traditions, to embrace methodical work in a calling with joy, as a pious end in itself. Thus,
paradoxically, modern capitalism emerged as an unintended worldly consequence of other-worldly interests.

To test his theses about the relationships between religious interests and economic ethics, Weber studied the antecedents of modern capitalism in the West, while comparing the West with China, India, ancient Israel, and medieval Muslim societies. For example, *The Religion of China* presents Confucianism as the “status ethic” of rationalist bureaucrats, whose sober this-worldliness is fully at home with economic traditionalism. By contrast, his essay “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions” presents Christian other-worldliness in two radically different forms: “asceticism,” with the active believer as instrument, and “mysticism,” with the believer as passive vessel. The first opens worldly work to the pursuit of salvation, thus promoting rational rules of conduct held to please God. The second promotes contemplative withdrawal from a world deemed profane—and thus provides no bridge to economic ethics. Other conceptual contrasts that he developed for those purposes—such as prophet/priest, ethical prophecy/exemplary prophecy, and ultimate ends rationality/instrumental rationality—have proved applicable to many others.

In path-breaking essays on method, Weber elaborated a sociology suited to his chosen problems. That sociology does not seek explanations of group phenomena observed from the outside (such as facts about nature) but instead starts with “individuals” as its conceptual units—these, however, are not actual persons but logically constructed “ideal types.” He held that sociology should be able to reduce even collective concepts, such as “feudalism,” “bureaucracy,” and “state,” to “understandable” action by individuals who, in pursuing purposes, attach meanings to their conduct. Weber’s results are a theory of material power with the ideal element of legitimate authority, a theory of class that affiliates structural position with habits of mind and heart, and a theory of religion in which ideas, because they generate practical ethics, sometimes function as “switchmen of social progress.”

**Life and Career**

Max Weber belonged to a generation for which the weakening of traditional religion, the rise of capitalism, and the emergence of mass democracy were current events. In the 1870s and 1880s Germany became a diplomatic and military giant in Europe, acquired African colonies, gave the vote to more of its citizens, and enacted protective social legislation. Its rapid industrial development and the resulting inequality led to religious and secular agitation for reform and to the rise of socialism with muscle at the polls. Growing up in Berlin, the burgeoning capital of Prussia (and of Germany as well after its unification by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1871), Weber witnessed the human hubbub whose order he would later study. Some Germans embraced, some rebutted, but none ignored Marxist theory as an account of capitalism and of the new class system that displaced the old status hierarchy. Weber joined those debates. He rejected socialism but labored for reform; and he critically but carefully explored the implications of historical materialism.
Born April 21, 1864, in Erfurt, the town where Martin Luther once lived, Weber descended from well-to-do Protestants on both sides of his family. His father was a prominent jurist and legislator; his mother, a well-educated, deeply religious woman of powerful social conscience. His elite milieu was conversant with the political, religious, and academic trends of his day. Weber’s academic career began with the study of law and political economy, with a break for military service during which he earned a reserve officer’s commission. A man of prodigious talent and capacity for work, he worked full time as a junior barrister while completing a doctoral thesis on the history of medieval trading associations and, two years later, a postdoctoral thesis on the history of agriculture in Roman antiquity.

Thereafter, he held several distinguished teaching appointments. In 1897, however, he experienced a depression that ended productive work for four years and precluded regular teaching for nearly twenty. During those years of mainly private scholarship, he worked on his monographs about the world religions and on his monumental *Economy and Society*, an outline of sociology and a seminal effort to grasp religion, politics, and economic life as interlocking institutional orders. In 1904 he toured widely in the United States, presenting a paper on Germany’s social problems at the Congress of Arts and Sciences in St. Louis, participating in civil rights leader and author W. E. B. Du Bois’s conference on crime at Atlanta University, visiting educator Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, attending many churches (including those of relatives in Virginia and North Carolina), and working on *The Protestant Ethic* in the library at Columbia University. In his essay “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” and elsewhere, he commented on the links he saw in the United States between Protestant “believers’ churches,” the disciplined voluntary associations to which they gave rise, and the evolution of a secular political culture suited to modern democracies—developments he contrasted with the decadence he saw in German politics.
In its totality Weber’s work is a vast investigation into the human significance of modernity. He argued that—for better and for worse—the trend of development in the West has been what he called “rationalization,” the collective and objective output of individual reason. But to the Enlightenment’s optimistic view that humans are most free when they are most rational, Weber responded with a paradox. If rationalization has meant the “disenchantment of the world” that enables scientific progress and limitless economic growth, it has also meant the dominance of bureaucracy in the coordination of everyday life, vocational specialization that narrows intelligence and experience, and the displacement of “substantive rationality” (reckoning with persons and customary expectations) by “formal rationality” (reliance on impersonal rules and cold calculation). Therefore his abiding question, as scientist and as citizen, was how to find ways to wrest human freedom from what he saw as its main antagonists in the modern world, capitalism and bureaucracy.

As a scientist, he advocated the posture of “ethical neutrality,” a striving to separate fact from value, what is from what should be. That posture, controversial then and now, constituted his view of science as a vocation, as set forth in a 1919 lecture to activist students at the University of Munich. Science could clarify the likely outcomes of given policies and rationally relate means to ends, but the choice of ends lay outside its realm—and could accountably be made only through struggle in the public realm of political and moral choice. There, he insisted, a “polytheism” of values prevails. Struggle there was a citizen’s duty. Accordingly, as citizen, he took strong public stands throughout his career: repeatedly denouncing authoritarian politics; initially supporting Germany’s entry into World War I but later criticizing war policies; helping to found the Social Democratic Party; and serving on the commissions that drafted the German response to the charge of war guilt and the constitution of the Weimar Republic. In “Politics as a Vocation,” a companion lecture that has resonated in social movements since, he contrasted the “ethic of responsibility,” which foresees consequences, with the “ethic of ultimate ends,” which sees pure intentions above all. Weber’s young audience heard his prophetic warning that “a polar night of icy darkness” would intervene before their enthusiastic hopes had any chance of realization. He died June 14, 1920.

See also Enlightenment; Germany; Marxism; Protestantism.

Bibliography


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