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Max Weber
**The Agrarian Sociology of
Ancient Civilizations**



The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations



MAX WEBER

Translated by R.I. Frank



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'In science, each of us knows that what he has accomplished will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years'.¹ Such was Max Weber's somewhat poignant view of a scholar's work, but in fact the fate of his own writings shows that he was too optimistic about the advance of scholarship. The present book, in particular, was not studied or used for over fifty years. As late as 1965 a distinguished ancient historian could call it 'still the most original and penetrating account ever written of Antiquity's social and economic development'.² Analysis had till then largely held the field. Now, however, there is a renewed interest in theory and synthesis, and this work should at last gain the audience it deserves. Readers will find here a remarkable survey of 3,000 years, one which traces the institutional framework within which political and intellectual developments took place. They will find more if they know something about the author and his premises, methods, and purpose. What follows aims to give the essential information on these matters together with references for further study.

1. Author

Max Weber was born in 1864. His father was a wealthy lawyer and a leading member of the Imperial Parliament, so he grew up in Berlin and as a young man met many of the leading figures in German politics and scholarship. At the University of Berlin he studied law, writing his first dissertation on the mediaeval trading companies (1889)³ and his second on Roman land use system (1891).⁴ Thus Weber qualified himself in both German and Roman law, an unusual feat in those days and an early indication of his independence of traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The second dissertation is in many ways a key to Weber's studies. It is based on complete mastery of the primary sources, in this case mainly a collection of abstruse Latin documents on surveying; here we see Weber's link with the German school of legal historians who used philological methods to interpret legal sources and to trace the development of institutions. Weber in fact had close ties with the greatest member of this school, Theodor Mommsen, 'prince of philologists'. At Weber's first doctoral examination Mommsen questioned him closely on one of his theses, then concluded by saying that although still unconvinced he would offer no further objections. 'Younger men often have ideas which at first seem unacceptable ... But when the time comes for me to go, there is no one to whom I would rather entrust my work than the much esteemed Max Weber.'⁵

Now the historical school was characterized by Savigny's famous argument against legal reform, and by his view of social change as 'organic', rooted in national character. Hence its members tended to ignore classes and conflicts of interest.⁶ Even Mommsen's legal works show this trait, the more noteworthy since his personal views in politics were quite dissimilar.

But Weber's 1891 work shows the influence of a very different approach. After registering his great debt to Mommsen he goes on to say that he had studied Roman agrarian institutions

by first looking at their practical importance for particular interest groups, a method he had learned from his teacher, August Meitzen.⁷ The latter, to whom in fact the work was dedicated, had written a major work on the land use systems of Celts, Slavs, and Germans. Again and again he explained the appearance and character of agricultural – i.e. economic institutions by the interplay of political and social factors. For example, he argued that among the Celts the influence of Christian monasticism caused sedentary agriculture to become predominant, and as a result of this Celtic chiefs became manorial lords. Again: he traced the origin of the Russian mir from the taxation system introduced by the Mongols. In such analyses the political factor tended to dominate the economic and intellectual.⁸

During the next few years this tendency to emphasize political factors grew more pronounced. Weber's thinking centred on the struggle for power. He made this plain in the inaugural lecture he delivered in 1895 at Freiburg University on assuming the chair of economics: 'Even behind the processes of economic development we find the struggle for power, and when the nation's power is at stake this immediately becomes the determining factor in shaping our economic policies. The study of economics is a political study, and it serves in the formation of policy – not the policy of whatever class or clique holds power, but rather the policy which serves the permanent power interests of the nation.'⁹ Soon afterwards Weber told delegates to a political convention that 'everyone in politics must be free of illusions and must keep in mind one fundamental reality – the inescapable, unending struggle on earth of group against group'.¹⁰

Such statements have been interpreted as reflections of Weber's oedipal hostility to his father and everything he stood for. This psychological explanation can be supported by a good deal of biographic data, and indeed the harshness of his views may have been connected with the severe inner conflicts he experienced during these years.¹¹ The aspect which I should prefer to emphasize here is Weber's self-consciousness as a member of a particular class. His inaugural lecture makes this explicit – and rather unconventional – confession: 'I am a member of the bourgeoisie, I was reared in its values and ideals, and I identify myself with it.'¹²

This aspect is crucial because it is a link with the two concerns which soon came to dominate Weber's thought on politics and history, concerns which are of central importance in the present work: capitalism and rationalism.

The connection between capitalism and the modern bourgeoisie is well understood today by all. However in Imperial Germany the matter was more problematic because the issue between feudalism and industrialism had not yet been settled. The Junkers had gained a new lease of rule with Bismarck, and remained a dominant force until the fall of the monarchy. Because of Weber's commitment to national power and his own political feelings he was not necessarily strongly in favour of new leadership and new policies. Hence the great political struggles of the period forced him to think constantly of the relation between capitalism and his values as a member of the bourgeoisie and as a German.¹³

At this point, however, Weber added a highly personal contribution: he insisted on the intimate connection between bourgeoisie, capitalism, and *rationalism*. In 1904 he published the first part of his famous study on the relation between Calvinism and capitalism, 'one of the few great historical interpretations that have posed a problem where once was universal agreement or a void', in which he argued that the drive for profit had sprung from Puritanism.

morality, the heir of monastic asceticism.¹⁴ In the same year Weber assumed joint responsibility for a leading journal of the social sciences and as a statement of editorial policy he published an extended essay on method, in which he argued for objectivity in scholarly work and for the exclusion of value judgements. In his own work during the remaining years of his life he sought to maintain this ideal, devising concepts and models bereft of all metaphysical associations. A famous example is his definition of the state as a political institution which claims for itself a monopoly of physical coercion for the enforcement of its orders. The aim of Weber's work was to develop a whole set of value-free, rationally conceived concepts for the study of society to take the place of the traditional ones.¹⁵ Along with this went a series of studies on the development of law, religion, and society – together constituting 'a history of rationalization in the political, religious, economic, and legal institutions of man'.¹⁶

Here it is appropriate to note that this emphasis on rationalism began in 1904, just after Weber had recovered from a severe mental illness which afflicted him for six years.¹⁷ It seems a plausible inference that his struggle to regain sanity led him to centre his values about rationalism and also made him unusually sensitive to irrational tendencies in himself and his society.

This emphasis on rationalism helps us place Weber in the context of his times. The German academic community during 1890–1920 was divided sharply between supporters of traditionalism and modernity, and Weber became the leading modernist.¹⁸ From this came many distinctive features of the present work – its attention to the struggle between secularism and theocracy, and its emphasis on bureaucracy (which Weber regarded as the inevitable – though personally distasteful – corollary of rational government). It also explains such particulars as the fact that he stops to condemn vigorously anti-Semitism, which was already an important element of irrational, anti-modernist thought.¹⁹

Weber seems to have seen the historical tendency towards rationalism and rational organization as inevitable, and in some way he identified himself with studying this tendency and its progress. One consequence was that in 1905 the outbreak of the first revolution in Russia evoked passionate interest in him. He taught himself the Russian language in order to follow events in Russian newspapers. For months he read, discussed, and wrote about the struggle for constitutional government there.²⁰

To this period, too, belongs a series of fundamental articles on the character and method of the cultural sciences. Again and again, Weber returns to the criteria which are crucial for him: rationalism and objectivity. His basic conclusion was that the methods and conclusions of the cultural sciences must be subjected to the most exacting tests of objectivity, but the problems studied and even the material exploited must inevitably be defined by the student's own values. 'Empirical reality becomes "culture" to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas. It includes those segments and only those segments of reality which have become significant to us because of this value relevance. Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is coloured by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us.'²¹

This is an important aspect of Weber's thinking. He took it as axiomatic that the historical studies *what interests him*, and his own researches exemplify this. That is why the present work gives so much attention to transfer of land, various forms of contract, and other phenomena which interested Weber – for the light they shed on different economic systems.

Likewise this explains the frequent analogies with Russian institutions – which Weber had just been studying. At the same time, however, Weber insisted that the historian must pursue the answers to his questions with every resource available and must, above all, define clearly the basic concepts he uses. Just because he accepted the subjective character of the scholarly questions he insisted that the answers given must be based on objective and critical use of all available evidence.

In 1908 Weber gave concrete proof of his interest in objective research. The Association for the Study of Social Policy, of which he was a leading member, had decided to conduct an extensive survey of the effects of factory labour on industrial workers. Weber took over the project and made it a model of its kind. Instead of aiming to produce a descriptive study he focused on basic problems and their causes. Even more important, he devised a much improved type of questionnaire and then – for the first time in Germany – insisted that it be answered by the subjects themselves, the workers. Weber himself published a series of articles on the interrelations between the psychological and physiological aspects of factory work, based on his own synthesis of relevant work in the fields of psychology, medicine, and psychiatry. Then he himself spent several months analysing the accounts and production figures of a textile mill for the project. The result was a pathbreaking study, in many ways a remarkable forerunner of modern social surveys.²²

This study of modern factory work engrossed Weber's energies during the summer and autumn of 1908. No sooner was it completed than he plunged into intensive work on an entirely different subject, agricultural conditions in Antiquity. The editors of an encyclopedia had asked Weber for an article on this subject because of his 1891 dissertation on Roman agriculture, but in fact Weber gave them something very different, a book-length study of the social and economic system of the ancient world.²³ That work, translated for the first time, is the substance of the present volume.

Weber was then at the height of his creative powers. There is no surer proof of this than that he wrote the work in four months.²⁴ It was published in 1909, and internal evidence indicates that Weber neither revised nor even corrected it, despite his mention of seeing proofs. As a result there are certain faults of style and organization, due to haste; for example, his remarks on the comparative method – a crucial matter! – come as an afterthought at the end of the bibliography.

On the other hand the work gains greatly in unity. From first to last Weber concentrates his focus on a few basic themes, and throughout he keeps his main purpose clearly in view. These aspects will be discussed below.

1909 marks the beginning of the third and final phase of Weber's career, in which he devoted himself fully to sociology. Weber had originally been trained in law and was then called to Freiburg and Heidelberg as an economist. His work was in the tradition of the historical school of economics, and in fact in 1909, when the Heidelberg Academy was founded, he was elected as an historian. Sociology was then unacknowledged as an academic discipline: 'Although in Heidelberg at that time many things were considered from the standpoint of sociology, the science of society as such did not appear in the college catalogue.'²⁵

From 1909, however, Weber was actively engaged in a series of projects designed to establish sociology as an autonomous discipline. In that year he accepted direction of the

Handbook of Social Economy, a series of monographs designed to give an outline of the social sciences. Weber himself wrote a general introduction to the series; this is the massive work now called *Economy and Society*. At the same time he supervised two team projects and also led in founding the German Sociological Society, of which he became organizing secretary. Until his death in 1920 these responsibilities, along with political commitments, occupied Weber entirely.²⁶

For our purposes, therefore, we need not concern ourselves with this final, sociological phase of Weber's career. The present work is historical in scope, and in what follows Weber's premises, methods, and aims as an historian will be our concern.

2. Premises and Methods

Three intellectual traditions shaped Weber's thinking: historicism, hermeneutics, realpolitik. Let us consider each.

(a) Towards the end of his long life Friedrich Meinecke recalled how he first came to grasp the central doctrine of historicism, individuality. As a university student he attended the lectures on historical method by Johann Droysen, and on one occasion heard this: 'If we call everything that a single person is and has and produces A, this consists of $a+x$, where a includes all that comes to him from outward circumstances (his country, his race, his period and so on), and the minute x his own contribution, the work of his own free will. But however small (nearly to vanishing point) this x may be, it is of infinite value, and from the moral and human point of view, the only thing of value. The colours, brush and canvas used by Raphael were made of materials that he had not created, and he had learnt how to use them for drawing and painting from such and such masters; the idea of the Virgin, saints and angels had been taken over from the Church's tradition; and such and such a convent engaged him to paint a picture for a particular sum of money. But the fact that such an occasion, such materials and technical conditions, such traditional models were used to create the marvels of the Sistine Chapel, shows the infinite worth of the infinitesimal x in the formula $A = a + x$.

For Meinecke this was the key, 'this secret of personality, which forms the basis of a historical achievement'.²⁷ Many years later, when describing the origins of historicism, he remained true to this conception: 'The essence of historicism is the substitution of a procedure of *individualising* observation for a *generalising* view of human forces in history.'²⁸

Note the opposition made explicit by 'substitution'. Historicism arose as an alternative to philosophic and positivistic systems. In this respect Weber was thoroughly historicist, for he rejected any theory based on evolutionary stages or metaphysical connections. Thus his friend Honigsheim noted that in matters relating to philosophy and epistemology 'the man whom Weber thought of as having a position at odds with his own was Hegel'.²⁹

However this emphasis on individuality had led to an impasse by Weber's time: the mass of information made available by organized collection and analysis of sources had become so great that the need for guide lines in selection was ever more apparent. Many could find no rational solution, among them even Theodor Mommsen. In an address of 1874 he distinguished between the critical study of sources and the 'pragmatic writing' of history: the former proceeded on the basis of reason and science, but the latter was a matter of intuition and inborn talent. 'The stroke which forges a thousand links, the insight into the uniqueness

of men and peoples, evinces such high genius as defies all teaching and all learning. The historian has perhaps greater affinity with the artist than with the scholar.’³⁰

Such a conclusion, however, could not satisfy historicists, if for no other reason than that their positivist critics claimed the authority of science. In fact during 1880–1910 there was a remarkably productive debate on the autonomous aims and character of the cultural – as opposed to natural – sciences, history in particular.³¹ That debate need not be reviewed here. It will suffice to consider the arguments of Eduard Meyer, partly because in a long essay he summed up the essence of historicist thought as of 1902, but mainly because Weber wrote a long critique of this essay in which he indicated clearly his own relationship to historicism.

Meyer begins in orthodox fashion by distinguishing sharply between the general and the particular: laws and concepts are the province of anthropology and sociology, whereas history deals with individual and unique events.³² Each event, furthermore, is caused in the first instance by a decision, an act of will by an individual: ‘The Second Punic War began because of a decision made by Hannibal.’³³ Finally, the result of such a decision is unpredictable and even in retrospect cannot be explained in terms of cause and effect; at any moment in history innumerable factors interact, and the ultimate resultant of this interaction is determined by chance. Enlargement of the scope of history to include a greater diversity of factors leads to descriptions which are more inclusive but still not really explanatory: ‘The causal connection between the various causal chains which interact in the historical process can never be established; ... in the real world chance determines everything.’³⁴ Thus, chance determined that Philip II and Mary would not have a child, as a result of which Elizabeth became queen and England was led to oppose the papacy and embrace Protestantism. Again chance alone made possible Bismarck’s entire political career, for he entered the Prussian legislature as substitute for a deputy who happened to fall ill.³⁵

The historian’s task, therefore, is to focus on the unique and characteristic, to describe events rather than propound theories. But this leads to ‘the fundamental question’: of the innumerable facts and events recorded in our sources, which are historical? Which, that is, deserve historical study? Meyer’s answer is twofold: (a) those are historical which have consequences (*was wirksam ist*), (b) among these – still a large mass – the historian will select according as the interest of his time centres on political or economic or religious or artistic matters. The cause of this interest need not be examined; it suffices that it exists.³⁶

Now all these notions proceed from a fundamental premise about human personality and human society: that they are autonomous entities, motivated by ideas, and entirely free in their choice of means and ends. It is worth noting here that Meyer’s discussion of free will begins with consideration of the decision ‘whether I shall go out for a walk now’, and that he actually equates this with historical policies of Alexander, Frederick II, and Bismarck.³⁷ From this necessarily followed his emphasis on the individual, unique, and characteristic.

It is Meyer’s fundamental premise which Weber, somewhat circuitously, carefully analysed and refutes. First he dismisses the idea that the historian’s task is to focus on the unique: not so, then the study of Bismarck should begin with his thumbprint.³⁸

Then he goes on to Meyer’s definition of the historically significant: that which has had consequences. Not so, says Weber: many facts and events which have had no consequences are none the less important because they can be used to elaborate category concepts – ‘heuristic instruments for the establishment of the generic “character” of certain artists

epochs or for the causal interpretation of concrete historical interconnections'. Particular facts must be integrated into concrete contexts shaped by these concepts. Only in this way does history become a 'science of reality'; the idea that the historian's task is simply to describe pre-existent reality, to report the facts, is naïve and inaccurate.³⁹

Weber's argument is based on a fundamental premise completely opposed to Meyer's. Individuals, societies, and events are not regarded as unique entities, but rather representative of one or another general category, and each can be understood only by reference to this category. Furthermore, an historical development ('interconnection') is not a fortuitous accident, but rather an example of a general type of process, and this development can only be explained ('causally interpreted') by reference to that general type.

Meyer had already dismissed any such concern with generalization by deriding the various laws and stages propounded by positivist historians striving to emulate natural science. Weber carefully distances himself from the positivists, basing his theory instead on the concept of 'objective possibility'; this had been first proposed in 1888 by a physiologist and was subsequently adopted by statisticians and criminologists. In an important passage Weber notes an affinity of history with criminology in that they are both basically concerned with human actions and social relationships.⁴⁰ To compare this with Meyer's grave analysis of the decision whether or not to go out for a walk, is to see in a flash Weber's greater depth and powers of synthesis.

As to objective possibility, its use solved the dilemma posed by Meyer and like-minded historicists: either determinism or indeterminism, either the rule of laws or the rule of chance. Instead, category concepts could be framed to correlate concrete effects with concrete causes, and do this without necessarily postulating the existence of uniformities. Anyone who has seen recent discussions of such problems as the relation between inequality in income and cognitive skills will be aware of the scope of this type of analysis.⁴¹ The essence of the matter is that the opposite of chance is not necessity but adequate causation, a relationship established as probable between certain conditions present in a category concept.⁴²

This brings us to the crucial element in Weber's argument, the category concept (*Gattungsbegriff*) or, as he later preferred to call it, the ideal type. This tool became the basis of Weber's method, but it was also the key to that important element of his thinking which was derived from hermeneutics.

(b) From the Reformation onwards, hermeneutics – the interpretation of texts – was especially cultivated in Germany, since Protestant doctrine there depended on interpretation of the Scriptures. Rules and doctrines developed, and by 1829 they had been given authoritative systematization by the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. He defined the task of hermeneutics as the reconstruction of the thought of a text as its author meant it to be understood. The basic step towards this aim was to identify the leading ideas of a text; its subordinate elements would then fall into place.⁴³

This method of interpretation was applied to classical texts by August Boeckh. The philologist, he argued, must re-think and so 're-know' a text. He must grasp its individuality, which comes from the creative spirit of the author, but also its structure, which comes from the genre in which it is written, for from this structure comes a text's 'subjective connections'. This is the central (and most original) element in Boeckh's formulation.⁴⁴

These two ideas – re-thinking and structure – were developed into a general method of the cultural sciences by Wilhelm Dilthey. In studying the works and actions of men ‘objectifications of spirit’ – the aim, he argued, should not be to subsume them under general laws and so explain them, as in natural science, but rather to grasp each object’s structure and individuality, and so interpret it (*verstehen*), as in hermeneutics. To do this one must posit a general concept – an ‘ideal type’ – of the phenomenon of which the object is a representative, then compare the type with the object to understand the meaningful relationship between its elements and to see its individual characteristics.⁴⁵

Dilthey’s work on the cultural sciences started to appear in 1883, and Weber seems to have adopted his basic ideas by the time of his own 1904 essay on method, in which he insists that the cultural scientist must ‘not only observe human conduct but also interpret it’.⁴⁶ The emphasis on *verstehen* is very reminiscent of Dilthey, as is the following discussion of ideal types. Then in 1913 Weber published an article on ‘interpretative (*verstehende*) sociology’ and this along with a reference to Jaspers makes his debt clear. Weber’s exact relationship to Dilthey need not be explored here. What is important is that Weber and other scholars used Dilthey’s ideas to integrate all the varied aspects of cultural life – not the least of their aims being ‘to break the Marxist schema’ – and so developed what has been called ‘historical hermeneutics’.⁴⁷

Weber’s indebtedness to hermeneutics is important because it helps us to ‘interpret’ his own links with historicism. Weber was historicist in his opposition to all general schemes and in his refusal to explain in causal terms. His use of the ideal type exemplified this orientation.

It must be emphasized here that Weber’s historicism separates him from the many other scholars of different tendencies who freely used types, concepts, and comparisons. A glance at a survey of German constitutional theory, for example, shows that as early as 1820 von Haller distinguished three basic types of state: patrimonial, military, and theocratic; and in 1859 von Mohl described six types: patriarchal, patrimonial, theocratic, classical, legal, and despotic.⁴⁸ Weber, a graduate of the Berlin law faculty, was undoubtedly familiar with these works and in fact used some of the terms just listed in his own works. Indeed, it has been recently argued that he owed his use of typology to a work in this tradition, Jellinek’s 1900 manual of general political theory.⁴⁹ Furthermore, one of the classic typologies of all time, Toennies’ distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, was propounded as early as 1888 and Toennies derived inspiration not from historicism and hermeneutics but rather from Thomas Hobbes and the Scottish political economists.⁵⁰

Weber, however, stands apart from these schools of thought in his insistence on the individual and the unique as the ultimate aim of study. The tenacity of historicist principles in his thought is remarkable. The whole of his 1904 essay on method is permeated by them. ‘Where the individuality of a phenomenon is concerned, the question of causality is not a question of laws but of concrete causal *relationships*: it is not a question of the sub-sumption of the event under some general rubric as a representative case but of its imputation as a consequence of some constellation. *It is in brief a question of imputation.* Wherever the causal explanation of a “cultural phenomenon” – an “historical individual” – is under consideration, the knowledge of causal *laws* is not the *end* of the investigation but only a *means* ... In the cultural sciences, the knowledge of the universal or general is never valuable in itself.’⁵¹

This close link with historicism may have been a corollary of a Kantian epistemology

There is no need to discuss the latter here. What is important is that these two lines of thought seem to have drawn Weber towards Dilthey's interpretative (*verstehende*) method and in concrete terms this meant that he regarded his ideal types as nominalist constructs to be used solely for heuristic purposes in defining as clearly as possible the individuality of each development in history. That is stated clearly in the concluding note on method at the end of the present work, and it is set out at greater length in a letter to the conservative historian Georg von Below. This letter is the more interesting in that it contains a direct reference to the present work. The relevant passage is as follows: 'This winter I intend to publish a rather extensive contribution to the *Outline of the Social Sciences* series on the form of political associations. It will deal with the subject in a comparative and normative manner even though some may well sneer "Dilettantes compare". For I think that one can only define the specific characteristics of, for example, the mediaeval city – and that is precisely the sort of thing which is the historian's task (in that we are absolutely in agreement!) – after one has established which of these characteristics were lacking in other cities (classical Chinese or Islamic). That is a general rule. The next task of historians is to give a causal explanation of those specific characteristics. I cannot think that you really disagree with this, and in fact many of your comments seem to support rather than to contradict my idea.

'Now the preliminary, quite modest task [of establishing the common characteristics of a class of phenomena such as the city] can be performed by sociology – at least as I conceive it. Of course it is inevitable in doing this that the sociologist will give offence to the scholar who has mastered a particular field, since after all nobody can be a specialist in all fields. Even so I think such [comparative] works are valuable for science. For example my own article on ancient agrarian history in the *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften* has proved useful even on those points where its conclusions have since been corrected. The Leipzig dissertations of Wilcken's students seem to me to indicate that. This is so despite the fact that the article was written in great haste and is by no means a model of its kind.'⁵²

These remarks indicate the curious way in which Weber remained within the tradition of the historicist and hermeneutic traditions. His intellectual heritage was also shaped by a third and more modern, tradition: *Realpolitik*.

(c) German history destroyed German idealism. In 1848 rifles and bayonets easily smashed the liberal movement for reform and unification. This seemed proof to many Germans that politics was a matter of power rather than programmes. In 1853 August von Rocha developed the 'realistic' view in a book which added a word to European language: *Realpolitik*. After 1860 this tendency was strengthened by a new set of ideas deriving from Darwinism. Finally, Bismarck's series of victories during 1862–71 had a tremendous influence on domestic politics, for he achieved great national goals without recourse to the one thing which both liberals and conservatives had considered necessary for them: ideology. The result was a sharp shift in values and outlook. The German middle classes in general became thoroughly militarized, and German historians increasingly tended to glorify the state and its power as ends in themselves.⁵³

Two examples of this tendency are relevant to Weber's thinking. Theodor Mommsen entered politics as a passionate liberal nationalist, and took an active role in the 1848 revolution. However, the ignominious collapse of the liberal movement convinced him that words alone could accomplish nothing, and he bitterly criticized the dreams of idealists.

the 1862–5 Schleswig-Holstein crisis he supported Bismarck despite the authoritarian character of his regime; in other words, for the sake of unity and strength he was willing to postpone political reform. Mommsen's case is especially significant, since his democratic convictions were never in doubt, and indeed he later became a vigorous opponent of the Bismarck regime. Still, his desire for unity and power was so great that in 1862 even he was willing to compromise.⁵⁴ His historical work had a similar emphasis. Eduard Meyer flatly stated that for Mommsen 'the great ideals of human life and culture ... were historically embodied for him in the national idea and its realization by a strong state'. In the same essay an obituary – written a few days after Mommsen's death – Meyer makes a regretful comment which reveals much about Meyer himself and his 'realistic' colleagues in 1903: Mommsen's unyielding liberalism caused him to break with Bismarck, 'which made many regret that the revered scholar identified himself so entirely with principles which seemed to them outdated and unsuited for the great tasks facing the present age'.⁵⁵ Yet by non-German standards even Mommsen's liberalism was somewhat weak. At Oxford he astounded his liberal hosts by sharply condemning Gladstone, Home Rule, and the Irish land law.⁵⁶

Even more significant is the case of Hermann Baumgarten, for he was Weber's uncle and his friend and mentor during 1883–93.⁵⁷ In 1866, in the light of Bismarck's stunning victory over Austria, Baumgarten published a pamphlet with the revealing title: *German Liberalism: Self Criticism*, in which he argued that bourgeois liberals had shown themselves unsuited for action, and must now acknowledge the superior political abilities of aristocrats and therefore accept their leadership. The last few months had done more for German unity than decades of liberal efforts, and now he urged his fellow liberals to put aside 'secondary considerations' and work for a powerful German state.⁵⁸

Power, of course, was prized because it was felt that the world – the 'real' world! – was shaped by national conflict and struggle. That was the conclusion of disillusioned liberals after 1848, and became the thesis of *Realpolitik*. Mommsen summed up the essence of the latter with his dictum:

Leben est Wirken
und Wirken ist Kampf.⁵⁹

Now Weber was predisposed to such ideas by his class, family, and education, and in fact they proved fundamental to all his thinking. Politics was for him essentially a relentless struggle among men. When he wrote on economics he insisted on the same model: 'Even under what seems to be the rule of "peace" the economic struggle between national groups (inside Germany) follows its course.... No, even in the economic struggle for existence there is no peace.'⁶⁰

This view had its corollaries in Weber's epistemology and even psychology. Scholarship as science, he insisted, could only define appropriate means for a given end, but the end itself must proceed from personal values and individual decision: 'So long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or, speaking directly, the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion.'⁶¹ Along with this, on the most profound level, there was Weber's conviction that human personality, including his own, was shaped – and, indeed, enhanced – by the struggle between reason and

will, between the rational and the irrational⁶² In the individual, as in society, struggle was universal and inescapable.

From these views follow certain conclusions about the nature of society and history. Above all, the presumption that conflict, implicit or explicit, is always endemic in them. Since men's differences are irreconcilable, war between societies is inevitable. Within, societies themselves must be held together by force rather than consensus, and those who control the force will use it to further their own interests and values. That was clearly Weber's position, the position of Thrasymachus as against Socrates.⁶³ Hence, as Franco Ferrarotti has pointed out, Weber was not only generally interested in the nature of power, but particularly concerned himself with the question 'Why do men obey?'.⁶⁴ This presumption of struggle lies behind the two basic organizing principles of Weber's historical work – contrast and characterization. Contrast is achieved by comparing alternatives, these being sometimes stages or possibilities, sometimes – and here Weber is most challenging – conflicts inherent in an historical structure. Consider, for example, his analysis of archaic Greece in terms of secular versus theocratic forces, or his view of the Gracchan period as a struggle between free and unfree labour. A more general example is the repeated use of the polarity of *oikos* and capitalist forms of economy as an analytic tool.

Even more striking is the manner in which Weber characterizes. He defines a particular society and period in terms of its dominant classes, institutions, and values. The three are inextricably related for Weber and influence each other reciprocally. This gives his approach and his work remarkable focus; Weber does not describe, he 'interprets'. When he deals with a society he imputes a definite direction and character to it, from which necessarily follow certain inherent strengths and weaknesses. In other words, Weber analyses structures. This brings us to the nature of his historical study.

3. Weber and Historiography

Historical studies in Weber's time were dominated by Ranke and his successors. The hallmark of this school was a rigorous criticism of texts, together with a narrow concentration on political and military events and a tendency to focus on heroes and leading personalities. These characteristics were shared and prized by the men who held the important chairs, edited the leading professional journals, and trained most graduates.

Towards 1880, however, the first signs of impatience with this historical establishment appeared. Rankean methods, it was argued, had reached a dead end, for the professionals were becoming philologists rather than historians, more interested in editing sources than in studying problems. In particular, they showed themselves unable to cope with the new themes and problems connected with industrialism and class conflict.

This opposition to Rankean historiography crystallized in *Kulturgeschichte*, the antecedent of what we know today as social history. One of the earliest general statements of this school was a work on *The Tasks of Cultural History* published in 1889 by Eberhard Gothein, a scholar whom Weber singles out for praise in the present work. In 1891 Karl Lamprecht published the first volume of his *German History*, a landmark in the historical study of society rather than events, and in 1893 this current of historiography reached classical studies with the publication by Robert V. Pöhlmann of the first volume of his *History of Ancient Communism*.

Weber, of course, was part of this newer direction of historical studies, and he himself frequently uses the term *Kulturgeschichte* in the present work. He too implicitly rejected the older emphasis on personalities and events, and instead focused on structures and on the interaction of long-term factors.

Where Weber differed, however, was in his general refusal to 'modernize'. He declined to adopt easy analogies between ancient and modern proletariat, industry or capitalism. His rejection of these is, indeed, the origin of most of the polemical asides in the present work, and here again his immediate target was Eduard Meyer.

In 1893 the economist Karl Bücher had published a general outline of economic history, *The Rise of the National Economy*. His thesis was that Antiquity was dominated from first to last by 'house economy', in which production, exchange, and consumption all occurred within great households. The next higher stage of economic organization, city economy, did not appear until mediaeval times, and only in the modern age did the highest form of economic organization, the national economy, emerge.⁶⁶

Two years later Eduard Meyer was invited to address the Third Congress of German Historians, and he decided to rebut Bücher's theory. He had little trouble in showing that it was a construct based on the naïve premise that history exhibited a continuous progression which, evidently, culminated in the modern state. Instead, argued Meyer, historians should acknowledge that Antiquity came to a definitive end, that development began anew with the Middle Ages, and that the Mediterranean peoples had therefore experienced 'two parallel periods'.⁶⁷

Meyer used this phrase only in passing, yet it suggests the implicit drift of his analysis. Whereas Bücher stressed the dissimilarity (and primitiveness) of Antiquity, Meyer emphasized its similarity with the present, its modernity. For example: he compared the mass movement of the peasants into Athens in the fifth century as a result of the onset of slavery to the similar movement into cities in England as a result of the onset of industrialization.⁶⁸

Weber vigorously resisted this tendency to modernize. Many passages in the present work show his insistence on the individual and specific character of the basic institutions of Antiquity, notably ancient capitalism and ancient slavery. Here again he shows his strong tie to historicist tradition, his philological concern with understanding things in their own context and their own terms.

Even more important, Weber was simply too learned and too penetrating a thinker to be satisfied with simple analogies and verbal constructs. Consider, for example, Meyer's view on the fall of the Roman Empire: for him, the fundamental reason for the end of Antiquity was the spread of ancient culture, which led to its extinction. 'Here too the general lesson of experience is confirmed: the more a culture expands, the more shallow it becomes.'⁶⁹ Weber's analysis was of another order entirely; it was based on a firm grasp of the evolution of ancient political and economic institutions, and proceeded from a close attention to the realities of power. The Roman Empire was finally overrun, after all, because its army became weak, not because its culture became shallow. Weber never forgot fundamental historical realities of this sort, and this was part of his greatness.

Finally, it should be noted that nothing need be said here about the historiography of the time outside Germany. Weber was perfectly ready to use sources edited and published

France, England, Italy, and even America; but he seems to have been totally untouched by historical and sociological thought beyond the borders of his country. This is, perhaps, one of the most important clues to understanding Weber – his strengths and also his weaknesses.

4. *Translating Weber*

Karl Jaspers, Weber's close friend, has recalled that Weber was remarkably indifferent to his own prestige and status, and attributes to this – among other things – his indifference to the style and polish of his writings: 'Side by side with penetrating thought, exactness of definition, careful organization, we find indifference to the linguistic form, composition, bulk and proportions of his work ... Often we find repetitions, digressions, followed by a leap back to the subject, enumerations that are not absolutely necessary, involved sentences and incidental remarks. Max Weber could not bear to reread even his manuscripts, much less his printed works: he took no pleasure in the published work, but proceeded with the task which it was only a step.'⁷⁰ Guenther Roth has noted particular problems in Weber's style: his excessive use of quotation marks and qualifications, and his 'skilful use of syntax [which] permits more complex construction than is feasible in English'.⁷¹

These features are present in the text translated here, along with a few others, notably a conspicuous lack of paragraphing and connectives. To make the translation clear and readable the translator has consequently taken certain liberties with the text. First, Weber's long sections have been broken up into paragraphs which correspond to the sequence of his reasoning. At times a few words have been transferred from the end of a paragraph to the beginning, in order to supply a connection. Occasionally a word or phrase has been interpolated for the sake of clarification; where this occurs, it is indicated by brackets.

Second, Weber's long sentences have been broken up, and his digressions have been set apart as separate sentences or paragraphs. His few footnotes were evidently afterthoughts and as they are mostly closer to the logical development of the main work than many digressions actually in it, they have been integrated into the text.

Finally, stylistic features that would seem eccentric and distracting in English have been avoided. Quotation marks have been used sparingly, verbs take the place of abstract nouns and foreign terms are translated. Where some doubt persists about the precise connotation of a key term it is given in parentheses. Translated foreign terms are also so given.

5. *Bibliographic Note*

The main work presented here was originally published as an article in an encyclopedia 'Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum', *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (1909), pp. 52–188. After Weber's death his widow reprinted it as part of his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Tübingen, 1924). pp. 1–288. Marianne Weber noted on page 1 that the title had been dictated by the encyclopedia, and that in fact the work represented 'much more, namely a social and economic history of Antiquity'.

Weber's account ends with the Early Roman Empire, the later period including the transition to mediaeval conditions having been assigned by the encyclopedia's editors to the

article on the colonate by Michael Rostovtzeff. Therefore this volume includes as continuation an essay by Weber on the decline of the Roman Empire. It was originally presented in 1896 as a popular lecture before the Academic Society (*Akademische Gesellschaft*) of Freiburg in Breisgau, and in the same year was published as an article, 'Die sozialen Gründe des Untergangs der antiken Kultur', in the magazine *Die Wahrheit*, vol. 6 (1896), pp. 57–77. Marianne Weber reprinted it in the above-mentioned book as pp. 289–311.

6. *Supplementary Bibliography*

Most of the important recent studies of Weber's work are mentioned in the notes. Here let it suffice to comment that any study of the man and his ideas must start with the biography by his widow, Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: Ein Lebensbild* (Tübingen, 1926; 2nd ed. Heidelberg, 1950), a masterpiece of interpretation.

Weber's bibliography of sources and studies is a remarkably full survey of the best work available at the time. For more recent publications the reader should consult the bibliographies of the *Cambridge Ancient History* (12 vols., 1928–39) and Hermann Bengtson's *Introduction to Ancient History*, tr. R. Frank and F. Gilliard (Berkeley, 1970).

The most obvious supplement to this volume is Weber's own *General Economic History*, tr. F. Knight (New York, 1927, rptd. London, 1961); this is based on a course Weber gave in the winter of 1919–20 just before his death, and in it there are extended discussions of feudal and capitalist institutions which illuminate many aspects of Weber's discussions here. It is valuable to compare this with a recently published work of Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, tr. J. Cohen (London, 1964), since Marx and Weber drew to a great extent on the same tradition of scholarship and both aimed essentially at showing the developments leading to capitalism.

The only formal successor to Weber's work up till now is that of F. M. Heichelheim, *Ancient Economic History*, tr. J. Stevens, 3 vols. (Leiden, 1958–70). This work has particular features and merits: it shows the great break between bronze and iron age cultures, the rate of development in the Mediterranean world, and the differences between city and imperial policies. Heichelheim used many of Weber's concepts, and shared his 'liberal' dislike of bureaucracy and centralization; nevertheless much of the work is marked by what Weber would have called 'a lack of clear concepts', and in particular the enormous bibliographies are entirely unorganized. See the reviews by R. Blake and J. Larsen in *Classical Philology* 35 (1940: of the German edition), pp. 73–6, and 60 (1965), pp. 294–5, respectively.

There are three good short surveys of the economies of Greece and Rome: J. Toutain, *The Economic Life of the Ancient World*, tr. M. Dobie (London, 1930), with much information on various sectors; C. Mossé, *The Ancient World at Work*, tr. J. Lloyd (London, 1969), mainly about Greece and notable for extended consideration of 'the idea of work' and other cultural factors; and J. P. Levy, *The Economic Life of the Ancient World*, tr. J. Biram (Chicago, 1967), which gives a brief account of Near Eastern developments as well, is especially valuable for information on monetary policies and problems, and has an excellent bibliography of recent works.

A more sophisticated work, concerned with basic concepts and problems in the study of Greco-Roman antiquity, is the latest volume of the Sather Lectures, *The Ancient Economy* by

M. I. Finley (London, 1973). On many points Finley agrees with Weber, notably on the character of the ancient city (cf. pp. 138–9); on some he disagrees, as on the reasons for the decline of slavery. In general, Finley stresses the importance of cultural rather than political factors, particularly those which made for ‘built-in inefficiency’ (p. 106). Hence his lapidary conclusion: ‘the prevailing mentality was acquisitive, but not productive’ (p. 144).

General aspects of Antiquity are discussed comparatively in the following works: K. Polanyi, *Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economics* (New York, 1968); K. Polanyi et al., *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (Glencoe, 1957); S. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (London, 1963) and *The Decline of Empires* (Englewood Cliffs, 1967), C. Cipolla (ed.), *The Economic Decline of Empires* (London, 1970, esp. pp. 16–91 on Rome).

Slavery is surveyed by W. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 1955); many problems are touched upon in a reader edited by M. I. Finley, *Slavery in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1960). Much monographic work is now being done in Eastern Europe, and also in Western Germany under the sponsorship of Joseph Vogt for the Mainz Academy, so the time for a synthesis is not yet at hand. For comparative purposes a valuable work is E. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York, 1965); on the other hand its assumptions about slave reproduction in the U.S. South evidently need qualification: see P. Curtin, ‘The Slave Trade and the Atlantic Basin’, *Key Issues in the African American Experience*, ed. N. Huggins et al. (New York, 1971), pp. 74–93.

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(b) Mesopotamia: L. Delaporte, *Mesopotamia*, tr. V. Childe (London, 1925), esp. part II, 3 on economic organization; C. Kraehling et al., *City Invincible* (Chicago, 1960) on urbanism; A. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, 1964).

(c) Israel: Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, tr. H. Gerth and D. Martindale (Glencoe, 1957, first published 1917–19); S. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vols. 1–2 (New York and London, 1937); B. Netanyahu (ed.), *World History of the Jewish People*, series 1, vols. (Ramat-Gan and New Brunswick, 1963–72), esp. vol. 3, ch. 13: ‘The Manner of the King’, by E. Speiser.

(d) Greece: W. Woodhouse, *Solon the Liberator* (London, 1938); H. Michell, *Economics of Ancient Greece*, 2nd ed. (London, 1957); M. I. Finley, *Studies in Land and Credit in Ancient Athens* (New Brunswick, 1952); J. Fine, *Horoi: Hesperia*, supp. 9 (1951).

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I. Economic Theory and Ancient Society

The pattern of settlement in the European Occident contrasts with that common to the civilizations of East Asia. The differences may be summed up briefly, if somewhat imprecisely, as follows: in Europe the transition to fixed settlement meant a change from the dominance of cattle breeding (especially for milk) to an economy dominated by agriculture with cattle breeding continuing as a secondary element; in Asia, on the contrary, there was a shift from extensive, and hence nomadic, agriculture to horticulture without milk-cattle breeding. The opposition is a relative one, and may not be true of prehistoric times, but regardless of when it arose, it led to fundamental distinctions. Thus among European people private ownership of land is always connected with the division and final assignment of communal grazing lands among smaller groups, whereas among Asians this development did not occur and so the primitive agricultural communal units found in the West – for example the mark and the commons – were either unknown in Asia or else had a different economic function. For this reason the role of communal property in East Asian village organization, unless it is of modern origin, for example caused by the tax organization, differs markedly from European parallels. Nor does one find among East Asians the ‘individualism’ connected with ownership of herds, with all its consequences.

Among Occidentals therefore (mainly, but not only, in Europe) we find everywhere certain characteristics at the start of development. Usually, so far as we can judge, sedentary agriculture arose when the land available for exploitation was reduced through an increasing shift of emphasis from milk-cattle breeding to field crops. This is true not only for North-West Europe but also in essentials for South Europe and the Near East.

However, this development was profoundly modified in prehistoric times in the Near East (Mesopotamia) and in the single major African centre of civilization, Egypt, by the fundamental importance of riverine irrigation systems. Theoretically irrigation agriculture could have evolved directly out of the simple agriculture which existed before the domestication of animals into the later stage of horticulture, but in any case irrigation gave the entire economy of these areas a very specific character in historical times.

In contrast, the Greek and also – despite the ancient sources’ emphasis on the use of cattle for work, not milk – the Roman communities had agrarian systems which were fundamentally closer to those of mediaeval Europe. Antiquity took a different course, however, from the time when the masses, having been attached to the land for its intensive development, were no longer available for military service, so that a division of labour arose with a professional military class which then sought to exploit the defenceless masses for its own benefit. The development of military technique into a profession, presupposing permanent training and practice, sometimes accompanied this development and sometimes caused it. In the early Middle Ages of Europe this process, as we know, led to the establishment of ‘feudalism’. Only the beginnings of a system similar to mediaeval feudalism can be found in Antiquity; there are no real analogies to the combination of vassalage and benefice or to the development of Roman-Germanic feudal law. Still it appears unnecessary and unwise to limit the use of the concept ‘feudalism’ to its mediaeval form. Both East Asia

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