

# Max Weber on China



# Max Weber on China:

## *Modernity and Capitalism in a Global Perspective*

By

Vittorio Cotesta

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To my wife, Maria  
To Linda and Simona  
To Luca Martino, Francesco, and Lorenzo



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## PREFACE

Max Weber is a *classic* of the social sciences and has been for quite some time now. He is actually one of the founding fathers of the field. According to Karl Jaspers he is the “Galileo of the social sciences.” It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, from time to time, symposia, books and articles continue to be devoted to him.

Today, sociology, history and the political science are undergoing a paradigmatic change: from being the social sciences of nations and nationality, they are slowly becoming the sciences of the global world. One needs to be aware that, in order to understand single economic, social, cultural, political and religious phenomena, it is necessary to adopt an approach capable of viewing the global structure of the world and no longer simply a part of it, great or small, be it a nation or a state. Max Weber’s studies regarding the religions of the world and comparisons he made between the civilisations of the West, India and China may act as an indication of the route to take if one seeks to understand this new phase of human history.

*Max Weber on China* belongs to this tendency. It has two main aims. The first is that of reconstructing the historical-cultural reasons why, between the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, an industrial-capitalistic kind of economy and a modern society, like those then developing in Europe, did not arise in China. Scholars agree, unanimously, that in China at that time, pre-conditions capable of giving birth to modern capitalism existed. The issue to be investigated is, therefore, why this did not happen. To belie critics of Weber who have reduced his analyses to the level of a simple theory which attributed China’s failure to develop a modern capitalistic system to the negative influence of Confucianism, *Max Weber on China* provides a neo-Weberian analysis explaining how economic, cultural, political, and religious factors combined to preserve a society, which had every reason to go on living. The second aim of this volume is to try to understand how China, despite attacks by the Western capitalist powers and Japan, as well as the endless civil wars experienced over the past fifty years, has reached—and maybe even surpassed—the economy of the European countries and the United States of America.

The theoretical reference point of this volume is Max Weber's *Essays on Sociology of Religion*. The reason for this lies in the fact that—this is my belief, at least—the *Essays* constitute an inexorable precedent when carrying out comparative analyses of societies, cultures and civilisations. At the same time, they also act as case studies regarding Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Ancient Judaism, Islam, Calvinism and Christianity, revealing the similarity and differences between the answers these religions have sought to provide to one of humanity's fundamental issues: justification of the unequal distribution of happiness and unhappiness among people.

For most of the twentieth century, Weber's theory of the development of capitalism in the West was discussed. *Roughly speaking*, the question was—in keeping with Weber's stance—why modern capitalism developed in the West and not in the East.

The present thesis is that Weber's work provides a plausible answer to the first question while, at the same time, proving more useful than other theories when attempting to answer the second one. In actual fact, Weber can still be helpful when trying to understand both the *Chinese pathway to capitalism* and present-day competition between different civilisations.

Weber was a man firmly rooted in his own historical epoch. With tragic lucidity he understood the problems and conflicts of his time as well as the reasons behind them. He could not see—and this was the cause of great suffering—solutions, either for *his* Germany or for humanity.

Although the nature of the problems of that period appears to be different, the tensions between the actors of today's global political scene are equally intense. The hope is that dialogue between civilisations and cultures may prevail over conflict.

## INTRODUCTION

Almost a century has gone by since the death of Max Weber (1920). For some he is still the “Galileo of the social sciences.” (Jaspers 1932) For others, on the contrary, his work is weak from a methodological point of view and expresses prejudices typical of his times, in particular, those of his society and his social class: the grand German bourgeoisie of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.

Why such different evaluations of the author and his work? Weber has, in the meantime, become a *classic* of the political and social sciences. A *controversial classic*, however.

Worldwide interest in Weber's thinking is prodigious (Kaiser and Rosenbach 2014) and Weber continues to be a critical reference-point for many scholars of civilisations, of the history of relations between the West and the East, for scholars of economic and social developments in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Islamic world. One might say that today's global political and social sciences rest on an essential reference to Weber. There are those who share his views, his comparative methodology as well as concepts and theories indispensable for the formulation of issues they address. On the contrary, others, to formulate their theses, prefer to distance themselves from Weber. One way or another, Weber remains a figure who needs to be addressed by all.

It is legitimate, therefore, to question, raise doubts and wonder whether his analyses of the social and political world of *his* time can help us understand this age of ours.

The main question *Max Weber on China* poses is the following: *who* was Max Weber? Does it still make sense, *for us*, to study him, to avail ourselves of his concepts and theories in an attempt to address problems we need to solve *today*?

The answer to the question of *who* Max Weber *really* was is extremely complex. The publication recently of letters regarding the final period of his life (Weber 2011 and 2012) makes his biography even more interesting than it was before and reveals a personality rich in humanity, an unhappy man who, when he was just beyond his prime (50 years old), finally found happiness in his private life thanks to his love for his mistress Else von Richthofen-Jaffé; this, at a time when his country, Germany, and his social class, the grand German bourgeoisie, were heading for catastrophe. As has

been rightly observed, Weber's love relations might have provided him with the chance to start anew, enjoy a happier and more authentic kind of life. (Kaesler 2013) On the basis of the documentation available, one can imagine what Weber's destiny might have been otherwise, but his untimely death, in 1920, of pneumonia caused by the so-called "Spanish fever," put an end to everything.

The main aims of *Max Weber on China* are two: 1) an investigation of the life of Max Weber in the light of the new material published lately and of some interesting new accounts of the story of his life. (Kaesler 2014; Radkau 2013; Kaube 2014) The purpose is to throw light on the relationship existing between aspects of Weber's life and his work; 2) the other major objective of this book is to discuss criticism of Weber's work, both his way of intending the *origins* of modernity and capitalism, and—above all—his comparative analyses of civilisations. Here, we shall dwell only on three general points of the criticism launched against Weber over the years. The first concerns his thesis regarding the links between the Protestant religion, capitalism and modernity; the second, the *causal* rapport between religion and economic action; the third, the thesis whereby, unlike what happened in the West between Calvinism and capitalism, Confucianism in China seems to have hindered and impeded the birth of *modern* capitalism. According to Weber, the same appears to have taken place in India due to obstacles against capitalism created by Hinduism and Buddhism; in Islamic countries similar impediments were caused by the Moslem religion.

The book's first aim is that of examining the role played in Weber's life by a number of female figures: his mother Helene Fallenstein-Weber (1844-1919), his wife Marianne Weber-Schnitger (1870-1954), his first young lover Mina Tobler (1880-1967) and, finally, his last love, Else von Richthofen-Jaffé (1874-1973). The hypothesis is that each of them had an impact on Weber's life and work. His mother is undoubtedly present in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* because of her Puritan *ethos*. His wife, Marianne Weber-Schnitger, although not always in agreement with her husband's mother, probably strengthened Weber's Puritan tendencies.

Mina Tobler, a fact Weber himself acknowledged, was important when it came to his studies on music, Else von Richthofen for his theory of the relevance of *Eros* as a motivating source of social action. The relationship is not direct, of course, but a matter of simple "causality." Weber experienced a complex and varied series of social relations and this intense life of his—as well as his historical and theoretical studies, naturally—provided suggestions, ideas, hypotheses which he amalgamated and

developed in his scholarly production. This book's hypothesis is, as far as this topic is concerned, that all of these experiences helped Weber to formulate his multi-dimensional theory of society. However, it is also plausible that Weber may have seen in some important personages—in particular, some of the great Jewish prophets or Puritan theologians— aspects of his own character and personality. But this is not tantamount to saying that Weber simply transposed his own life into his analyses.

The rapport between Weber's life and work needs to be sought at a more profound level. He was capable of grasping the deeper-set traits of his times and trying to interpret them in the light of universal history. Reference to universal history confers, in actual fact, a specific meaning and significance upon the issue of *modern* man. As we shall see, Weber's analysis of religions rests on a major, critical issue shared by all humanity, in every era, at all latitudes: injustice and suffering perceived as unfair. The answers provided to this problem by various religions vary the ones from the others, yet, if and when compared, they acquire significance from one another. From a methodological point of view this means that Weber interpreted each *single* social phenomenon by comparing and contrasting it with others of a similar type belonging to other historical periods and geographical areas. Following precise series of comparisons and confrontations, each phenomenon examined acquired its own specific meaning and significance.

All of this appears clear only *at the end* of the analytical pathway pursued by Weber. In particular, in the *Preliminary Observations* to the *Essays on Sociology of Religion*, he summed up the meaning of his investigation of humanity's major religions and the civilisations derived from them. But this universalist *vision* of the world of Weber's was something which developed gradually during his lifetime and, the first part of *Max Weber on China*, is an attempt to reconstruct the genesis of this view in order to go on and examine its traits and cognitive effects.

*Part one* of the volume, dedicated to Weber's biography narrates the profound interweave linking his life and his scholarly interests. The study which made him famous worldwide—*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*—was conceived during a long period of psychological depression. Is there a link between this illness and this work of his? Certainly, although it is extremely difficult to discover how and where it emerged and proceeded.

Only when—and a considerable length of time was required for this to occur—his idea of *modern* society and his original theory of the birth of modern capitalism was definitively consolidated, did Weber look again at,

or, as his wife puts it, resume his beloved studies of universal history. This was in about 1910.

The notion of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*—at least its core—was born in Rome where the Webers spent the winter of 1901-1902. It concerned the origin of modern European and Western capitalism. In 1904, an important segment was added to the puzzle of the idea of capitalism. During a trip to the United States of America for the St. Louis Universal Exposition, Weber was able to gain first-hand knowledge of what more advanced capitalism meant and compare the US and European situations. In the years that followed—and not without relapses of depression—Weber re-entered public life, where he played an important role, especially in academic circles, although, in 1903, he had left his university post for health reasons. At that time, his work was the object of copious, harsh criticism. He was obliged to return more than once to his studies regarding the origin of modern capitalism to defend his theories from specific objections and general polemics. All this bore witness to an indisputable fact: in a very short period of time Weber's proposed interpretation of the origin of capitalism had drawn the attention of scholars and rivalled conceptions advanced by other scholars of his time, like Lujo Brentano (1844-1931) and Werner Sombart (1863-1941), or by so-called *Kathedersozialisten* (academic socialists) economists such as Gustav von Schmoller (1838-1917), Adolf Wagner (1835-1917) and Georg Friedrich Knapp (1842-1926). Weber was no stranger either to confrontation with great theorists of the past like Adam Smith or Karl Marx. In short, Weber was aware of the scholarly value of his theory of the origin of capitalism. Later on, he also tried to bestow universal value on it by studying the civilisations of China and India. Weber's view was now geared towards world history and sought to apply the method he had experimented while studying the origin of capitalism in Europe and the West, to analyses of civilisations as such.

Central to Max Weber's examination of civilisations was the issue of religion. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* the derivation of norms for life from the Protestant religion—in particular from Calvinism—indicated the way towards an understanding of the origin, the structure and the characteristics of modern capitalism in Europe and the West. In *Essays on Sociology of Religion* (published from 1916 on) the religions of the Orient (Confucianism and Taoism; Buddhism and Hinduism) were means by which to comprehend the Chinese and Indian civilisations. From a general theoretical point of view, one may claim that for Weber the great world religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and Taoism) provided the cultural

bases upon which the various civilisations were built. Each of these world religions was the source of a civilisation. It also occurred that more than one religion might contribute to the creation of views of the universe and of the physical and social world typical of a civilisation. This was the case with Confucianism and Taoism—later with Buddhism too—in China, with Hinduism and Buddhism in India, with the different versions of Christianity and their combination with Judaism and Greek culture in Europe and the West.

If the great world religions play a similar role when constituting the worldviews typical of their different civilisations this does not mean, according to Weber, that they are equal. On the contrary: if the feature they share is that of the role played when constituting the culture of a civilisation, their specific difference consists in the type of worldview they constitute. More particularly, the point which the great world religions share is their attempt at providing an answer to the problem common to all humanity, that of justifying suffering which people perceive as unjust. The difference lies, on the contrary, in the answer each one provides. Whether they are based on hypotheses whereby *the universe was created*, or on *godless religions* sustained by the idea that *the universe and the world are eternal*, whether they be monotheistic or polytheistic, religions, according to this thesis, are systems of symbols, ideas, images, representations, rules governing life and conduct from which *reasons* justifying society, history, the lives of individuals and their destinies are derived. From this point of view, world religions constitute a memorable event in the history of humanity. At the base of this event stands a new attitude toward nature and the social world. People no longer believe in the *magical* character of the world. They reject explanations of the origin and history of the universe and society based on mythical narration. All told, theirs is a sceptical, problematic way of looking at the world, a vision devoid of enchantment. "Disenchantment" is the term Weber used to indicate this *new* view of the world.

Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), a genial and devout disciple of Weber's, considered this process as an "axial revolution," a revolution of the very fundamentals of human society which took place simultaneously in three great Eurasian regions: China, India, the Mediterranean (Greece) during the first millennium before the present era and having its peak between the sixth and fifth centuries. The emblematic figures of this great event in human history were, according to Jaspers, Confucius in China, Buddha (the Illuminated One) in India, Socrates in Greece.

It is not our concern here to discuss whether this account of the origin of the great world religions is correct or whether it requires revision,

criticism or rejection. It is necessary, however, to point out that the process of human disenchantment did not occur once and for all, and that new mythical attitudes established themselves down through the ages due to the difficulty religions encountered when trying to respond to the fundamental problem of justifying the evil present in societies and in the destiny of individuals.

Considerable criticism was launched against Weber's theory of the origin of modern capitalism and his thesis of the different roles played by the major religions in the West and in the East. This criticism has not died down even today almost a century after Weber's death. Besides issues of minor relevance, the main focus of the objections raised concerns the *Calvinistic* origin of the *ethos* which Weber held to be the cultural and ethical bases of lifestyles which gave rise to a *rational* kind of economic behaviour where profit became a means of enriching oneself and, because it made people rich, a way of thanking God. This thesis was rejected on methodological grounds because it placed religion at the root of economic ethics and economic ethics at the base of the economy. On the contrary, at least according to Marxist-inspired criticism, he should have demonstrated how religion derived from the economic and social reality. If, however, we read the work of Weber in all its complexity, we can see how, on the one hand, he investigated the relationship existing between religion and economics in order to analyse the cultural and, ultimately, theological bases of economic action and, on the other, at a later stage—with his surveys of China and India—as an attempt to see how economic ethics emerged from the structure of society.

Another objection regards Weber's Eurocentric attitude. This issue emerged much later as part of the decolonisation process of African and Asian countries, an aspect of the cultural-political process by which African and Asian intellectuals rejected the universalist claims of European civilisation while reducing Europe to the status of mere province of the world. (Chakrabarty 2000) This position reproaches Weber for legitimising the uniqueness and singularity of Europe and the West, and, thanks to this, its supposed superiority compared to other civilisations (on this point see *Parts two and three*). The most severe criticism in this sense is that of André Gunder Frank (see *chapter thirteen*). According to Gunder Frank—though his criticism, in this case, regards all the social and political sciences—Weber seems to have, *first*, chosen some aspects typical of Western-European society and, *then*, deemed as “backward” societies which lacked these characteristics. To tell the truth, Weber chose a number of the features—economy, culture, politics, the State, culture, religion—present in all the societies he studied. The comparisons he made brought to



light the identity of Europe and the West as well as that of China and India or of ancient Jewish society (to remain within the ambit of the civilisations he actually examined).

Weber's comparative analysis is not, however, of use to us only because it helps us grasp why, when Europe embarked on the road to capitalistic modernity, others (China and India, for example) did not. It also helps us understand a new question posed with great intellectual acumen by Giovanni Arrighi (2006). The new issue to study today is how, after over a century of "humiliation," China, in such a short time, has managed to catch up with and is about to surpass the economy of Europe and the United States of America. In short, how is it that, after a century of tremendous defeats, repeated foreign occupations and grave errors of economic and social strategy, devastating domestic revolutions, China has returned to play a role as a major power upon the global scene?

As to this point (see *chapter fifteen*), comparative analyses inspired by Weber's theory provide a more complete answer than A. G. Frank's and G. Arrighi's neo-Smithian and vaguely Marxist ones. In particular, it is useful to apply the concept of the "configuration of factors" availed of by Weber when trying to understand why, while Europe was embarking on the pathway to modern capitalism, China was not although Chinese society possessed all the necessary economic and technological prerequisites. Most scholars agree, in fact, that, at the end of the eighteenth century, China was the world's most advanced country. The explanations provided over time (see *Part three*) and which compete with Weber's interpretation, are neither better nor more complete than his. Therefore, a neo-Weberian approach to the issue might point out that the complex set of modernisations carried out by China over the past forty years, making the country one of the world's most powerful, has as yet to be completed. Furthermore, it is precisely this modernisation which has produced an authoritarian society and created considerable social inequality. China still lacks a phase of its modernisation, the fifth, which concerns civil society and politics. Much has undoubtedly changed in China. Great progress has been made in the general "modernisation" of the country but we are still far from having a "modern, just, harmonious" society although the rhetoric of the present regime claims that it exists, though it is precisely what is missing from the constellation of its modernisations, exactly what its state structure lacks. At the moment the country's modern life is interwoven with and hampered by the Chinese Communist Party's monopoly of power, creating, within a completely different historical context, a form of neo-imperial power.

Finally, one needs to consider accusations of presumed nationalism and racism made against Weber. According to a brilliant definition provided by Gunther Roth (2001), Max Weber was a “cosmopolitan nationalist” or a “nationalistic cosmopolitan.” If we refer, in fact, to his family background, Weber came to maturity when his family abandoned its early nineteenth-century enlightened cosmopolitanism to become nationalistic, like most of the German bourgeoisie of the time. Yet he was educated within a milieu full of cultural, political and scientific positions. There is no doubt that, *politically speaking*, Weber was a nationalist. Whether this political attitude was transferred into his scholarly analyses is a different matter. At the end of the *Preliminary Observations* of his *Essays on Sociology of Religion* he rejected both the nationalistic approach to the study of religions and civilisations and the approach based on races (see *chapter five*) with reference to two points. The first concerned the object of his studies: religion and the civilisations deriving from it. The major world religions were, he held, universal socio-cultural systems embracing different ethnic groups and, insofar as one believed in their existence, human races. Weber did not consider either the concept of nation or that of race useful to his analyses. The other point—which does not seem to enter into contradiction with the former—, regards his political nationalism. He needed a global analysis precisely to understand if and how Germany, *his* Germany, might play its role as a major world power. His analytical cosmopolitanism was, therefore, at the service of his political nationalism, at least until the catastrophe of war upset everything.

This kind of cosmopolitan analysis is still necessary, not certainly to justify projects of world hegemony, but to plan dialogue between cultures and civilisations. To fall into the hegemonic temptations of the twentieth century would be one of the most tragic mistakes men might make today.

*Max Weber on China* is divided into three parts. The first is dedicated to the figure of Max Weber, his life and studies. The second seeks to reconstruct a number of the aspects central to Weber’s work, like his conception of modernity and his ideas of Europe and the West, as well as the contribution his theory made to world history as in the cases of Karl Jaspers’s “axial period” and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt’s “multiple modernities.” The third part of the book is dedicated to an examination and critical appraisal of a number of theories which rival Weber’s comparative analysis of relations between West and East.

*Part one* opens with a chapter called *A tragedy*. It begins with the breach between Max Weber and his father, Max Weber senior (1836-1897), which took place in June 1897, in Heidelberg. From this central episode of Weber’s life several narrative threads depart to narrate how this

unprecedented clash and its subsequent developments took shape. As the story unfolds, events from the family's present and past interweave as they follow the long pathway leading to the split between Weber and his father. Focal to this narrative are Weber's breakdown and illness. The period in question is described as a phase of "retreat from the world," while Weber's "return to the world" coincides with the development and writing of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The period (1901-1903) of the development of his theory of the origin of modern capitalism also coincides with his return to the world as he gradually overcame his bouts of grave depression.

*Chapter two—The spirit of capitalism in Europe and America*—tells of Weber's trip to the USA for the Universal Exposition held in Saint Louis in 1904. Two points are central to this chapter: Weber's return to health and his awareness that capitalism in the USA was more advanced than in Europe.

*Chapter three—A new basis for scientific and cultural activity*—regards the long period between 1904 and the 1914-1918 war. During these years Weber plays a very important role within the ambits of culture and the social sciences. Despite his keen desire and his extraordinary ability to analyse politics, he turns out to be substantially "unpolitical," something that appeared clear already during the time spent in Freiburg and his early years in Heidelberg (on this point see *Chapter one*). The crucial point of this chapter is Weber's attitude towards the Great War. He favours the war and complains that it has come too late for the only one of the many Weber siblings endowed with a warlike spirit to allow him take part, because of his age (and maybe for other reasons too). However, he finds a way to contribute to his country's war effort by setting up a military hospital in Heidelberg and running it for quite some time. Despite this—or maybe because of it—Weber was constantly critical towards the way the war was dealt with. He continually criticised Kaiser Wilhelm II and the general staff of the armed forces for their "amateurish" way of conducting politics and the war.

*Chapter four*—dedicated to a brief description of *The great unfinished works*—pursues two fundamental strands. The first consists in interpreting some of his speeches regarding *Science and politics as a profession* in order to analyse Weber's public attitude towards the catastrophe which followed Germany's defeat in the war. The second explores Weber's private life and what is known as the "Secret Weber," that is, his intimate relations with Mina Tobler and Else von Richthofen-Jaffé. This investigation highlights the contrast between Weber's public unhappiness and his private happiness. In actual fact, while the upheavals of the 1917-1920 period unfold, while Germany is undergoing a revolutionary period

adding private to collective tragedies, Weber experiences his extraordinary love affair with Else von Richthofen-Jaffé. For the first time in his life, perhaps, Weber is happy, so much so that he believed that he was about to begin life anew, only that death surprises him in the springtime of 1920.

*Chapter five* opens the *second part* of the volume and is dedicated to *The Weberian conception of modernity*. Central to this analysis is the question shared by the great world religions: justification of human suffering perceived as unjust. The concept of a plurality of forms of rationality and rationalization is the mainstay of Weber's analysis and paves the way for Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernities (*Chapter nine*).

*Chapter six—The Axial Age and Modernity: from Max Weber to Karl Jaspers and Shmuel Eisenstadt*—seeks to place Weber's theory of modernity within the context of world history. It was Karl Jaspers, with his theory of the Axial Age who placed Weber upon this plane. In this chapter the issue is addressed in three ways: the first seeks to understand whether Weber's theory may be interpreted as an Axial-Age theory; the second examined the rapport between Jaspers's theory of axial society and Weber's theory; the third analyses the relationship between Eisenstadt and the other two scholars.

In *Chapter seven—Weber and European identity*—Weber is seen as an analyst of European and Western identity. His work made a noteworthy contribution to the understanding of European identity, something which places Weber amongst the foremost European intellectuals of all times like Dante Alighieri, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Mozart, Kant, Beethoven, Goethe, Hegel, Darwin, Marx and Nietzsche all of whom outlined the contours of European and Western identity.

*Chapter eight—Nothing new on the Western front*—is dedicated to Jack Goody's criticism of Weber's work. The thesis held here is that the great British anthropologist, despite the numerous objections he made, failed to grasp Weber's methodological lesson: it is not important, as Goody would have it, to pinpoint what forms of human life have in common, but also the specificities that differentiate them. Features typical of Western identity emerge only when *compared* to Eastern societies; and vice versa. To seek common points only, means undermining all differences, not only those regarding Western societies.

*Chapter nine—Multiple modernities in the age of globalisation*—aims at interpreting Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's theory of modernity. Eisenstadt resumes and approaches Weber's theory differently in order to detect the plurality of modernity. His perspective, his "modernity programme,"

outlined and developed primarily in Europe, took on different forms as it came into contact with various human traditions, histories, cultures and religions. The concept of “multiple modernities” became for him an original tool by which to seek to understand the plural world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, simultaneously modern in different ways. As Eisenstadt claimed explicitly, his theory of modernity was not an alternative to but a *reform* of Weber’s.

*Chapter ten—The return of China upon the global scene*—introduces the topic of *part three* dedicated to relations between *Europe, the West and Asia*. What is new to geopolitical analysis today is the return of China among the great world powers. The issue that the social and political sciences need to address now is not why China did not embark on the path of modern capitalism when Europe and the West did, but why, after a century of life upon the margins of the world-economy system and in a mere handful of decades, China has recovered its position of power upon the global political scene. The question scholars now ask themselves is whether China has already resumed its position as the world’s *foremost* power. Renewed interest in China also reveals the fascination its history, culture, and civilisation have for Western intellectuals.

*Chapter eleven—The world-economy system*—provides a brief panorama of Immanuel Wallerstein’s conception of the world system of economy, which has become a frequently critical reference point for many scholars of geopolitics, most of whom are discussed in this book. Wallerstein’s theory has been criticised for its Eurocentrism. However, it had the merit as far back ago as the 1970’s and 1980’s, of predicting the end of American world hegemony.

*Chapter twelve—Two interpretations of the history of the Chinese economy*—analyses the important theory of Mark Elvin regarding the reasons underlying the Chinese economy’s “delay.” Elvin provides a theory rivalling that of Weber. However, his analysis, which seeks to explain the reasons why China did not embark upon the path of modern capitalism although it possessed all the necessary prerequisites, is not at all satisfactory.

This chapter also deals with another scholar, Kenneth Pomeranz, and his theory of the “great divergence.” Pomeranz, while starting from criticism of the reasons of presumed singularity exalted by Max Weber’s analysis, ends up confirming them, albeit from an ecological point of view. He feels that the reasons for the *great divergence* are to be found, at least in large part, in the different ecological situations existing in Britain and in China’s economically strongest regions between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

*Chapter thirteen—The microscope and the telescope in the analysis of the world system of economy*—is devoted to a discussion of André Gunder Frank’s position. Gunder Frank’s is a very complex work and here we have tried to extract its essence. It appears as a critique of all “western” social sciences—of which it too is a derivative—and attempts an examination of the worldwide economic system in order to interpret the history of humanity, past, present and future. Basing his work on research by Janet Abu-Lughod (1989) and Kirti Narayan Chaudhuri (1978, 1985, 1990), Gunder Frank shifts the birth of the world economy system further back in time and plots its hegemonic time cycles distinguishing between alternating phases of Asian and Western dominion. Now, after a phase of Western hegemony, it is the turn of Asia and China again.

*Chapter fourteen—The Asiatic Resurgence’s economic-political model*—is dedicated to the work of Giovanni Arrighi who resumes and explains the question posed indirectly by Gunder Frank. For him—and on this point the author agrees totally—the question is no longer the reasons why China failed to embark upon the road to modern capitalism when or even before Europe did; the question now is *why it is*, that, after years of direct or indirect dominion by foreign powers—its “century of humiliation”—, China has now reacquired its role as major world power and *in such a short period of time*: more or less forty years.

The last chapter—*The Resurgence of China: a neo-Weberian perspective*—is, ultimately, dedicated to proposing a multidimensional approach to the study of global social science to apply to analyses of the structure of Chinese society. This analytical approach, clearly inspired by Weber’s work, seems better equipped to grasp the bases of the issues and the internal contradictions which might prevent China from growing and establishing itself as the world’s foremost power.

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Naturally—as one is wont to say on these occasions—the responsibility for what is written here is mine alone as are the book’s mistakes and shortcomings.

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While drafting the text I tried to provide the reader with information regarding the dates of birth and death of the characters who had the greatest impact upon Weber’s life and work, and place them and their works in the era during which they lived. In some cases, however, it was not possible to find sources providing this kind of information. The dates of birth—in some cases, of death—of contemporary authors who have been mentioned in the bibliography only, have not been provided.





**PART ONE**

**MAX WEBER:  
HIS LIFE AND SCHOLARSHIP**

# CHAPTER ONE

## A TRAGEDY

### 1. Portrait of a Bourgeois Family: Puritan Ethos and Epicurean Spirit

We demand that Mama should have the right to visit us alone quietly for four to five weeks each year at a time that is convenient for her. As long as this is not done, any family relationship with Papa is meaningless to us and its outward maintenance has no value for us. (Max Weber in MWB, p. 231)<sup>1</sup>

What happened? Why such a radical declaration? A son, on behalf of his wife, too, claiming his mother's right to stay with them, *every year*, for four or five weeks, to rest; while, at the same time avowing, that, should this not happen, all *family* relationships with his father *are to be considered meaningless*. What caused such a radical *rift* between a son and his father?

But *when* did this *rift* occur? And *where*?

We are in Heidelberg, in the drawing-room of a house at no. 73, Hauptstraße. It is the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1897.<sup>2</sup> There are four people present: Max Weber the Elder or Senior (aged 61); Max Weber the Younger or Junior (aged 33); Helene Fallenstein (aged 53), the wife of Max Weber Sr. and mother of Max Weber Jr.; Marianne Schnitger (aged 27) the wife of Max Weber Jr. The parents are visiting their son and daughter-in-law; they are not staying with them but are booked in at the “Waldhorn” Gasthaus. They have come to dinner.

As soon as they arrive, they begin arguing about Helene's journey. At a certain point—without any warning—Max Weber Jr., *at the top of his*

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<sup>1</sup> Marianne Weber, *Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild* (1984); English Translation: *Max Weber. A Biography* (1988). From here on, it will be referred to MWB and the page references provided. As the biography is a US publication, the spelling in the quotations is American, unlike the UK spelling used in the present book.

<sup>2</sup> By pure coincidence Weber died on that same date, the 14th of June, though in 1920.

voice, turns on his father claiming *his* mother's right to come to stay with them, *every year*, as she pleases. The drawing-room *is struck with silence and amazement*. *How dare* a son speak to his own father without the least regard; *presuming to pass judgement on him?* How can this be?!

A few days before the trip to Heidelberg the older Weber couple had quarrelled. Helene expressed the wish to go for a few weeks to stay with their eldest son; her husband held that he ought to be the one to decide how and when his wife might take a holiday. In the end, however, he decided to go to Heidelberg too. The issue might well have ended there. But no; Max Jr. attacked his father, all of a sudden, telling him that, if his attitude towards his mother did not change, there would be no sense in maintaining family relationships with him.

Was it merely a question of Helene's holidays or did things go deeper? Could a similar question—holidays!—lead to such a serious clash between a father and his son? Apparently not; otherwise we would have to imagine some degree of folly on both sides.

Marianne, the wife and biographer of Max Weber Jr., provides us with some information to this regard. First of all, the spouses differ in character and *Weltanschauung*: Max Weber Sr. is “a man disposed to happiness and enjoyment” (MWB, p. 232), “a pleasure-seeker” (MWB, p.165) an “epicurean uncle” (MWB, p. 95); Helene, on the contrary, has a “Franciscan side” to her. (MWB, p142) Weber Jr., too, portrays his father in non-positive hues: “He has always been sanguine, and his mood is often subject to abrupt changes, even if the outward occasion is a slight one.” (MWB, p.159) His mother's character, on the contrary, is “sweet,” always open and available as far as her eldest son is concerned.

In Helene—says Marianne—the powers of the gospel were active, to whom loving service and self-sacrifice to the last were second nature, but [she] also lived in accordance with burdensome heroic principles, performed her inordinate daily tasks with a constant expenditure of moral energy, never “left well enough alone,” and *quietly placed every significant event in the context of eternity*. She was dynamic in all she did, energetic in coping with her everyday chores, joyously open to everything beautiful in life, and had a liberating laugh. But *every day she plunged into the depths and anchored in the supernatural*. (MWB, p.62-63; italics added)

If we compare this portrait of Helene with that which her daughter-in-law provides for Max Weber senior, the difference is evident:

Max's Father was totally honorable, utterly unselfish in politics and in his job, intelligent, good-natured, warm-hearted, and amiable so long as things went his way, but a typical bourgeois, at peace with himself and with the

world. He categorically refused to recognize the serious problems of life. In his mature years, he loved inner comfort, closed his eyes to suffering, and did not share the sorrow of others. His liberal political ideas could not be put into practice. New ideologies, which might have inspired him to sacrifice himself in some direction, did not kindle his enthusiasm. His cheerful openness to the world, enthusiasm for nature, and the capacity for unpretentious enjoyment; his feeling of being a fortunate person for whom everything worked out, on whose every journey the sun smiled; his ability and desire to look on the bright side of everything...He was too much the traditional, patriarchal paterfamilias, too convinced of his own superiority and his inalienable right to respect and authority. (MWB, p. 63)

At this point, we need to refer briefly to the background of these two contradictory personages. Max Weber senior descended from a family of entrepreneurs; his grandfather had been a co-founder of one of Bielefeld's first major linen-making firms. He and his family had arrived there from Salzburg, from whence they seem to have been forced into exile because of their Evangelical creed. Helene descended from a grand enterprising Huguenot family, the Souchays. There is, or there ought to be, a sense of "elective affinity" between them, at least from the point of view of their social background. In both cases, we are talking about economically solid, well-educated, liberal-minded bourgeois families, not *nouveaux riches* or simple *parvenus*. Max Weber senior is not the *uncouth* man like the one emerging from the portrayals provided by Max Jr. and his wife, Marianne. On the contrary, the story told by Marianne herself provides a picture of a far more complex situation and life pathway. We need, however, to start with Helene to understand more.

On the basis of Marianne's account (MWB, chapter: *The forebears*), Helene, as an adolescent experienced a very ugly encounter. In Heidelberg, on the floor above theirs lived the historian Georg Gottfried Gervinus (1805-1871). The Fallenstein and Gervinus families were very close and friendly, almost like relatives. The Fallenstein girls, Helene (1844-1919) and her elder sister Ida (1837-1899), used to call Gervinus and his wife—who were childless—'uncle' and 'aunt'. The relationship between the families became even closer after the death of the girls' father Georg Gottfried Fallenstein (1790-1853). Gervinus's wife taught the girls music, while he taught them history.

Meanwhile, Helene has grown up; at sixteen she is a very beautiful young woman. Gervinus, already old by the standard of the time (the year is 1860 and he is 55 years old), "respected as a teacher, loved like a father and trusted for years, one day lost control. The ageing man suddenly engulfed the unsuspecting girl with the searing heat of a passion beyond control" (MWB, p. 21) and the girl experienced a trauma from which she

*never* recovered. “From that moment on, she regarded physical passion as something guilt-laden and subhuman.” (MWB, p.21)

To escape from Gervinus’s passion, Helene begins travelling; she goes to Berlin to stay with her sister Ida, who has married the historian Hermann Baumgarten (1825-1893). Here she meets a young man, a friend and political associate of Baumgarten’s, Max Weber senior. The two young peoples “are attracted”—as we would put it today—and, after a while, get engaged. Helene believes that this will bring Gervinus peace and resignation. Instead, he is even angrier with her and treats her with scorn. At this stage, when she enters a crisis because of Gervinus’s attentions, Max is a source of comfort to her. She leans on him, confides in him:

How I should have liked to feel your dear, faithful hand gripping mine or your arm about me; then I should once again have had the blissful feeling that in this faithful arm, on this warm and loving bosom I am safe and protected and that this the place for me. And I would also have liked to show you off, my magnificent Max; I am so terribly proud of you and conceited about you. (MWB, p. 23)

Max becomes her fortress, impregnable to Gervinus. And she is deeply in love. Nonetheless, there are already some signs of concern:

Things do not always go as smoothly for me on the inside as it may look, and in matters of faith and religion, the firm trust in God, I can still learn a great deal from you, for, in these things I have by no means attained clarity. In all this, I was disturbed and deprived by my association with Gervinus, and it is very hard to regain it. . . . When I vainly tried to find a way out of all the entanglement, when I was about to despair at the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that arose between my love, between you and me, the scales fell from my eyes. Where was my support? I did believe in God’s omnipotence, in His dispensation, but I could not surrender to Him trustingly, I was not able to say from the depth of my heart, “Father, not as I will it but thou wilt.” (Helene Fallenstein in MWB, p. 23-24)

So, even her religious faith falters, while Max is her safe haven, the anchorage to which she tethers the frail barque of her existence:

And even after our betrothal, I had not yet learned to place my confidence in God again. Then you came along with your pure, believing heart, and although you may not have known how things were with me in that respect, you did set me on the right path with some of the things you said. You have no idea how happy you have made me with this, but you must believe me when I say that I owe it largely to you if I have come closer to

God again. But my dearest, only Max, you will also help me, won't you, not to lose courage if I find out, as I recently have, that I have forgotten how to seek and probe. I know you will help me to go on trying all the same! (Helene Fallenstein in MWB, p. 24)

Perhaps, if we sound these excerpts more in depth, the springtime of love already contains the seeds of its own winter. Helene is in love now; she sincerely loves Max. But, even if his personality is becoming her refuge and consolation, though only indirectly, she seems to warn him that this may not suffice.

Things are faring well for the moment. Married life proceeds with evident success. Helene's commitment is greatly appreciated by her relatives, though there is some room for perplexity. Her mother, Emily Fallenstein (1805-1881), while visiting the couple observes: "As a housewife, Helene is really in her element. However, up to now, she has taken things a bit too seriously, especially domestic economy. But that will pass; it is only her exaggerated conscientiousness because she is practical by nature." (Emily Fallenstein in MWB, p. 28)

Helene herself, already during the early years of marriage, no longer places her trust totally in Max as she did before; the *syntony* between them seems to have come to an end.

Sometimes, I think that I have advanced in some things, made a little progress since my wedding, but then there are always days when it is evident that despite all those good intentions everything remains the way it has been. But Max must not know about such moods; he does not laugh at me but thinks it is quite unnecessary to have such thoughts, and will not admit their validity. (Helene Fallenstein in MWB, p. 29)

Helene has acquired a religious and social awareness that the young Max finds hard to understand. "Strange"—says Marianne—"Despite her wonderful talent for being good—or perhaps because of it—her life, like that of her far more delicate mother, was marked by great inward struggles. *Helene always applied absolute standards* and in every situation demanded the utmost from herself. Therefore, she was never satisfied with herself and always felt inadequate before God." (MWB, p. 29; italics added)

Marianne provides a key by which to interpret the entire issue. Writing to Ida, Helene is happy because she is able to confess her dream to her sister, that of becoming—she is only twenty-eight at the time—old as soon as possible. What could be the reason for this *deep desire*? Marianne's hypothesis is: