

## REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI RENDU

### Sociology's Don Giovanni

**Joachim Radkau**, *Max Weber: A Biography*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 683 pp. \$42.00 hardcover (978-0-7456-417-8)

Some years ago, a colleague's choice of an image for the jacket cover of his specialist study of Durkheim generated mixed feelings of mirth and violation. The photograph was of Durkheim, clearly on holidays, asleep in a deckchair. The image seemed to trespass on a received sensibility that the Olympian founding figures of sociology were not to be trivialized in such a way but then, they were human after all, presumably living in the real world, and, like everybody else, went on holidays. By degrees, elevations of the major sociologists have been lowered to earth as expectations of embodiment, biography, and reflexivity have crept into the discipline's accounting for its analytical destiny. Far from destroying the legacies of sociology, these domestic inspections have greatly enhanced understandings of the discipline's own intellectual capital and its peculiar forms of accumulation. Reflections on their intellectual and cultural milieux, their networkings, and their personalities have greatly enhanced understandings of Goffman, Bourdieu, and Durkheim. Radkau's biography reflects this paradigm shift, producing what might be termed a "new Weber."

Seldom has a biography of a sociologist been more justified. In Weber, there is a mysterious interchange between his prophetic powers regarding modernity and his own personality. Were the gloomy visions of this seer based on analytical conjecture, were they the projections of a self at war with itself, or both? The sense that Weber has to be understood by reference to his inner self famously emerges in that last sentence of his Hamlet-like lecture "Science as a Vocation," when he conceives of ultimate duty as the "demon who holds the fibres of his very life." Given that few sociologists feel so possessed, what did Weber mean?

Radkau explores these "demons," which were not solely metaphorical, but were a codeword for the nocturnal emissions that so debilitated Weber that he abandoned academic life for a significant period. Weber also suffered from neurasthenia that impaired his capacity to work.

Eroticism and asceticism came in a strange mixture that produced an unexpected degree of religious struggle to reconcile both, which Radkau well chronicles in chapter 7. It is this unexpected facet of Weber, brought to the fore by Radkau, that so marks the value of this study. Both the illness and Weber's own religiosity are shown to be matters of conjecture, yet in some fated collision they drove him forward to sociological greatness.

No serious sociologist can be without a copy of this heavy tome. Artfully translated by Patrick Camiller, the study is hypnotic reading, beautifully written, lively, stimulating, and wonderfully well organized. A page-long synopsis appears before each of the three parts of the study, the subheads of each of the 19 chapters are listed in the contents at the beginning, and a chronology of his life appears at the back. Weber seems to have met his match in Radkau, who (as 93 pages of notes attest) has chased through correspondence, diaries, journals, the writings, and almost everything else written and unwritten to provide a biography that is unlikely to be equalled.

Despite my praise, the publishers and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs deserve to be pilloried for this edition of Radkau. Doubtless, as a study of a very German academic, a man of nerves whose enormous academic powers were so bedevilled, who fell into despair and then rose into genius, who was erotic in inclination but ascetic in aspiration, and who preached value freedom yet was embroiled in German nationalism and a war effort, this biography has its own justifications. Many will dip into the index for references to Weber's writings and the vast army of German academics and politicians who passed in and out of his life. But it is as a sociologist that interest in Weber lies. Therefore it is extraordinary that the one chapter from the German version to be sacrificed in the English translation was on Weber and sociology. As with most things in Weber, his attitude to sociology was perverse, opaque, and contradictory. Glimmers of his views are tantalizingly noted by Radkau in the introduction, where he claims that the chapter was left out lest the whole view of Weber be obstructed. Given the way Radkau swings in and out of Weber's writings and the gestation and use of his concepts, the loss of this fulcrum chapter is deeply annoying. Weber's acid reflections on Comte, his uneasy relationship with Simmel, and his response to Marx remain unavailable to non-German readers, who are left with aspects of these in Scaff's *Fleeing the Iron Cage*, which provided Radkau with the incentive to write the study. A further spur was the availability of the correspondence between Weber and his wife Marianne, which Radkau has ransacked. Her biography of Weber and her pervasive influence looms in the study, adding much to the mythology surrounding his greatness.

The power of this study emerges in the way the genesis of Weber's ideas, on music, charisma, politics, religion, and the purpose of academic life to name a few, are given a biographical location. The sphinx-like prophet is humanized and placed in the milieu of his family. Radkau is especially good on Weber's relationships with his mother and his brother Alfred. In the aptly entitled Chapter 5, "Eruptions from the Ice," Radkau captures Weber's genius, his "wild scholarship" and his eerie capacity to leap across academic boundaries with an awesome thirst for knowledge and an unparalleled capacity to soak it up. The "new Weber" emerges as a man of deep contradiction, aspiring to be the icy cold exhorter of scientific integrity, stoically enduring the pursuit of inconvenient facts in an ascetically disinterested calling, but saddled with a volcanic personality in a state of sexual and emotional turmoil. Reconciling these contradictions generated in Weber an explosive mixture which Radkau reveals in ways that well justify the significance of his biography.

Giving flesh to this "new Weber" reveals many traits: his humour, beer drinking, and diet; his time in the fraternity and the army; his love of Wagner; his stint in the army in World War I; his love-hate relationship with Germany, and the mysteriousness of his death (like Durkheim's). No review could do justice to the plethora of new insights into Weber that emerge in this study, which will keep specialists happy in controversy for years to come.

The study is especially timely at a moment when religion, not class or gender, is coming to the fore as the critical focus of sociological deliberations. Those who regard interest in matters of religion as being "unsociological" are in for a severe shock in this study. For Radkau, who has no evident theological axes to grind, "agriculture and religion would remain the greatest elements of continuity in his life's work" (p. 79). The "new Weber" conjured up by Radkau was a man of religious reticence, deeply obsessed by a stern rebuking God, fearful of damnation and caught in a tragic fate to be endured in privacy and disturbance. At the end Weber became a worldly mystic for whom death was a great relief.

The famous comment that Weber was "unmusical in religious matters," which has served to justify the expulsion of religious feelings from proper sociological sensibilities, is admirably qualified in this study. Weber was a "cripple" in terms of feelings, whether religious or erotic, and coming to terms with this incapacity was the tragedy of his life, only partly resolved at its end. Radkau brings out extraordinarily well Weber's religious struggles, noting both his biblical knowledge and his recognition of the enduring significance of the quest for salvation, especially in modernity. The quest for rationalization recast the search for salvation in ways Weber was peculiarly gifted to articulate, given the contradictions

of his personality and its academic aspirations. Radkau gives support to the notion that the hero of the *Protestant Ethic* was Weber himself. Chapter 8, on the *Protestant Ethic*, its research and construction, is exemplary. These considerations lend added significance to the emergence of reflexivity as a sociological injunction to expand disciplinary self-awareness.

Giving religion its central importance in Weber generates some fascinating chapters in this study. Weber's enormous productivity after 1912 is also well noted when he came to write particularly on the sociology of religion, or as Radkau calls it "the anthropology of religions of salvation" (p. 410) that led to *Economy and Society*. The importance of charisma is well brought out, as are his attitudes to Judaism, where his relationships with Sombart are well examined, though unfortunately Simmel appears but briefly. More than anything, one feels that Weber's sociology was shaped by matters of theological inclination that have never been properly understood. It might be bold to suggest that Weber's whole approach to religion was shaped by his incapacity to understand Catholicism. Thus, Radkau notes: "in Weber's sociology of religion, Catholicism is the greatest and strangest blank" (pp. 107–108). This is ironic, for as Radkau speculates, the *Protestant Ethic* was conceived by Weber in the Vatican library in 1902, where he read intensely on medieval monastic orders. In their ordering of time and accountability was to be found the origins of modern rationality which expanded as the asceticism practised in the cloister was transferred to the world and into Protestant stewardship. Again, Radkau is telling on detail; on the same page he mentions Weber's visit to Lourdes, where the religious hysteria led the nauseated Weber to make some decidedly non-value-free pronouncements. Radkau rightly concludes that "Catholicism did not have the qualities of a Weberian ideal type: it did not embody in pure form the old world of magic, nor had it consistently pressed ahead with the disenchantment of the world" (p. 181).

This sense of detail magnified into sociological significance emerges over the matter of the mistress, Mina Tobler, and the piano which led to Weber's interest in the rationalization of music. In few other parts of the book are the contradictions surrounding Weber so well brought together as in Chapter 13, aptly entitled "Value-Free Science, Love and Music." Little asides reveal, for instance, that in his encounters with music, the term *virtuosi* was discovered and then transferred to his sociology of religion (p. 369). One finds little references that change understandings of what was known about Weber, a case in point being in Chapter 18, "Great Speeches, the Great Love and Death," where the circumstances surrounding the delivery of his famous lecture "Science as a Vocation" are explored. Particularly striking in that lecture was Weber's observa-

tion that “an academic career is a game of chance” (p. 488). What is so interesting in the study is the way Weber’s writings can be turned back to characterize the author. An unexpected dimension of Weber is his charismatic personality as a lecturer; for example, in the delivery of “Science as a Vocation,” he played the prophet and spoke with few notes.

Many facets of Weber that emerge in the study are less than edifying. He was deeply argumentative and arrogant, with strongly held prejudices, notably directed against the Kaiser, but also against his academic critics. As part of his war effort, he exercised a stunningly inhumane regime as a medical and disciplinary officer. Bizarrely, as Radkau notes “Max Weber became healthy as a result of the war.” The war might have rejuvenated him, but, like Simmel, Weber became intoxicated with a patriotism and sense of Germanic ethos that seems to have brought out the worst in him, illustrated in his refusal to countenance any German reparations at the Versailles negotiations. The final chapter, “*Epilogue: Powerplay and the Wrangling over Max Weber’s Spirit*” deals with the growth of his reputation after his untimely death in 1920. His wife, his mistress, his nephew, and Karl Jaspers worked to ensure that his reputation endured. Rather surprising is the way some who knew him well, such as Jaspers and Else Jaffé, who lived on into the 1960s, were still fighting over his fate.

Radkau’s “new Weber” is a radical recasting that rescues his personality, his dilemmas, and contradictions from commentators such as Parsons and Shils, who supplied only partial insights into a sociologist whose own character was so fused into his sociological works. As their reputations expand, the writings and biographies of the great founding figures of sociology are picked over by many commentators who claim ownership of their gods, their sacred texts, and their insights. In this biography, Radkau has affirmed the primacy of Weber in the sociological pantheon. It will take some years for the implications of Radkau’s study to percolate into the discipline as a whole. Whilst this percolation is afoot, with time on his side, might Radkau perform a similar biographical exercise for Simmel?

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