

Weber's legacy

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Proving his mastery of Weber's oeuvre, Scaff's new book considers the imprint left by various aspects of Weber's work on the imagination and production of three generations of authors from Europe and North America. He shows that the confrontation between contemporary scholars and Weber's legacy is a show that will run and run...

Reviewed: Lawrence Scaff, *Weber and the Weberians*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 199 p.

As recently as 2011 Lawrence Scaff reaffirmed and enhanced the significant position within Weber studies he had gained in 1989 with his book *Fleeing The Iron Cage*, by publishing *Weber in America*, an original, in-depth account of the itinerary, and of the intended and unintended impact on Weber's thinking, of the three-months visit to the US he made with his wife in 1904. One striking aspect of that work was the sheer amount of research effort that had gone into its production. It had required, among other things, the first-hand collation and exposition of much previously unavailable information concerning the numerous and diverse locales, individuals, and situations the Webers had encountered during that voyage. All such labor was fully justified by the admirable quality of its product.

The same quality is now much in evidence, together with other virtues, also in Scaff's new book, *Weber and the Weberians*. Here, the author's indefatigable industry as a scholar, while never expressly vaunted and underscored, is bound to astonish whoever considers the range and variety of themes the book successively considers and adjudicates. The intrinsic virtues of his argument – chiefly: magisterial command of the sources, authoritative analysis and clear exposition of their contents – are in evidence throughout. One also appreciates the fact that this impressive intellectual equipment is never put to use to overwhelm readers, but, so to speak, to associate them with the author's own discussion. In any case the book, in spite of its brevity, establishes, in my view, that Scaff rightfully belongs in the narrow circle (say, four of five members) of the top Weberian experts active today world wide.

Scaff's overarching theme is of course the imprint left by various aspects of Weber's oeuvre on the imagination, the research undertakings, the production, of three generations of authors from Europe and North America - from a few members of the Weber circle at Heidelberg (such as György Lukács and Karl Jaspers) to many scholars active and productive today on all continents. Although he does not seek to – as it were – catalogue all the potentially relevant authors in question, and pays attention only to those he deems worthy of it, the book comes to a close with a 20-page bibliography. He expressly discusses only a minority of the authors in that bibliography, others are just referred to in parentheses within the text (which has no footnotes).

Scaff's impressive mastery of all these materials allows him to marshal them in a way which is at the same time comprehensive and selective. They address a small set of significant topics, emphasizing what is distinctive about the various authors' contributions to their discussion. The whole argument is preceded by a short chapter ("Weber and his legacy") which narrates successive phases in the story being surveyed.

That story a whole is summarized as follows at the beginning of the *last* chapter:

In the twentieth century Weberian thought experienced a surprising transformation. It started as a local phenomenon confined to a very small group of scholars searching for intellectual orientation, and ended as a widely acknowledged major contribution offering a wealth of possible directions....Today Weberian thought has long since ceased to be bounded by local traditions, or even for that matter limited to the problems of the social sciences.....Weber has had unusual staying power, widely cited if not always carefully read, not because of its status as a classic, but because his ideas continue to speak to the conditions of the modern rationalized world, to address the dilemmas and choices confronting those living within this world. (163).

Scaff develops this insight in the four preceding chapters, each devoted to one cluster of contributions made by Weber to a distinctive, major theme. In some cases he himself was the first to put forward authoritatively those themes, which evoked much attention and controversy from other scholars. The chapters' titles are, respectively, "Historical and cultural analysis" (23-62), "The theory of social action" (63-106), "Orders, structures, institutions" (107-134), "Paths to the modern world" (135-162). This arrangement entails that Scaff does not address consecutively the various writings of Weber's, but freely calls upon many of them on account of their relevance to relatively distinct concerns. The ensemble of the writings usually referred to as *The protestant ethic*, for example, is referred to throughout the work, articulating its bearing on the different concerns of the chapters. In each of these, Scaff makes a synthetic (and always illuminating) statement about Weber's relevant insights, then introduces a discussion of how they were interpreted, expounded, criticized by a number of later, significant authors.

Some authors treated those insights as the point of departure of arguments of their own, more or less self-consciously intended to elaborate, criticize, systematize Weber's own arguments, sometimes bringing them to bear on topics he had not considered. Scaff gives relatively extensive accounts of the more significant intellectual undertakings of this kind, and in doing so he renders a significant service also to readers interested chiefly in the resulting scholarly production, not just its relationship to Weber's own position.

See for instance, in chapter 3 ("The theory of social action") Scaff's compendious but at the same time comprehensive and enlightening treatment of the attempt Parsons made, over several decades, to develop systematically a general theory of action. According to Scaff, the outcome of that tour de force, for all its intrinsic merit, confirms the doubts Weber himself had about the possibility of "a universally valid system of general theory in the social sciences that could prove useful for understanding actual cultural and historical phenomena" (78).

This, incidentally, is one of several passages in which Scaff reminds us of Weber's persistent commitment, throughout his oeuvre, to addressing and comprehending actual historical events, acknowledging their intrinsically contingent nature, and the inexhaustible diversity of their specific features. In view of this, says Scaff, for Weber "to ensure reliable conclusions requires tacking back and forth between different levels of analysis: theoretical generalization, concept formation and empirical observation" (46).

Or, consider Weber's innumerable statements, especially within *Economy and society*, concerning the strengths and limitations of ideal-type concepts as tools for comprehending and explaining socio-historical reality. On this very account they are constructed as abstractions, capable as such to throw light on their most diverse concrete embodiments, as long as who uses them bears in mind that each embodiment may sometimes be located *between* a pair of concepts, or realized to a variable extent *within* single concepts.

To return to chapter 3, its title itself (again, “The theory of social action”) made it predictable that it would contain a discussion of Parsons. Less predictably, the next author discussed at some length is Habermas, who “armed with a somewhat different array of concepts and a revised problematic...was prepared to explore the path toward a comprehensive theory of society once again – a path that inevitably led back to Max Weber’s work and to the theory of social action” (87). According to Scaff, Habermas radicalized Weber’s vision (especially as expressed in the *Zwischenbetrachtung*) of “a conflicted world of life-orders and value-spheres vying for recognition and autonomy, operating in tension with one another”, by giving overdue recognition to a basic contrast between his own conceptual creation - *communicative* action - and the predominant Weberian emphasis on *instrumental* action. Essentially, Habermas is putting forward “an alternative non-Weberian paradigm, sharing the kinds of abstractions and perspectives found, for example, in the theories of John Rawls” (69).

Within the space available for this review, it is impossible to do more than mention a few other contemporary authors discussed by Scaff who have more or less expressly and successfully focused part of their own work on specific aspects of the Weberian: say, Gouldner on bureaucracy, Alexander as the proponent of the strong version of the cultural turn; Foucault’s or Gorki’s emphasis on discipline as a distinctive component of the constitution of the modern self; Roth’s and Schluchter characterization of Weber’s approach to successions of major social and cultural complexes as “developmental history”, rather than a distinctive form of “evolutionary” thinking; or Eisenstadt’s notion of “multiple modernities”.

Scaff’s brief last chapter, “Weberian social theory and the future” (163-174) first summarizes the import of his preceding argument, then introduces what he considers as “the most profound, sustained and challenging version” of the contemporary scholarly (and, to an extent, public) reception and interpretation of Weber – that put forward in two works by the German political scientist Wilhelm Hennis (1923-2012). Hennis, essentially, argued for a move away from the framework within which nearly all authors had previously *dialogued with* Weber, variously pursuing a shared intent, to produce a valid and comprehensive body of objectively valid social-scientific knowledge. He had argued for the necessity of an entirely different framework of interpretation, focused on the continuities and discontinuities between the Weber legacy and a glorious Western tradition, originating in classical Greece, of sustained philosophical reflection on social and political affairs.

The abiding intent of that tradition was, according to Hennis, to assist the formation of a distinctive, intrinsically worthy “type of human being”, one capable of constituting, protecting, fostering public institutions which would pursue such values as freedom, individual responsibility, the discursive elaboration of policy through public discussion. This, Hennis argued, was what also Weber’s thinking was all about; largely inspired by Nietzsche’s concern over the contemporary neglect of such values, it aspired to reaffirm them not only theoretically but also through Weber’s active, passionate commitment to them.

My own scant familiarity with Hennis’s insistent and vigorous re-interpretation of Weber’s whole *life and work*, does not inspire anything like the consideration it receives in the very last few pages of Scaff’s admirable book. But it does suggest another reason why the confrontation between contemporary scholars and Weber’s legacy is a show that will run and run. If in a few years Scaff himself updates his book, he will further assist his readers in making sense of, and in profiting from, the ungoing intellectual process which a remarkable Weberian scholar, Dirk Kaesler, has cheekily characterized in the title of a recent review of his, “Unermüdlich spinnt die Weberei weiter”. Sorry, but I do not know how to translate his pun into English!