

Weber on America

Journal of Classical Sociology

12(3-4) 553-558

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DOI: 10.1177/1468795X12454468

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Lawrence A Scaff

Max Weber in America. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. xv, 311 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-14779-6 (hbk)

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In 1904 Max Weber journeyed to America to give a lecture at the Congress of Arts and Science, a gathering of eminent scholars from around the world that was organized as part of the St. Louis Universal Exposition. This was a pivotal moment in Weber's career as it represented the first major public appearance he made after years of emotional turmoil brought on by bouts of crippling depression that ultimately forced him to resign his academic position at Heidelberg in 1903. Throughout the period of his illness, Weber used his periodic absences from the academy as an extended sabbatical, during which he formulated and refined the ideas that would later characterize his work. In addition he founded the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, one of the earliest and most significant European journals devoted to the emerging field of sociology.

The trip to St. Louis was only a small part of a much longer American excursion in which Weber surveyed many large cities and various regions in the Northeast, Midwest, West, and South, a journey lasting over three months. The account of Weber's trip is mostly known from Marianne Weber's chapter in her celebrated biography of her late husband and only encompasses about twenty-five pages of text (1988 [1926]: 279-304). Given such limited treatment, scholars heretofore could have easily been misled into regarding this trip as merely a lengthy excursion in Weber's otherwise event-filled life. Lawrence Scaff, in the current work, takes a closer look at Marianne's account of this journey and, by utilizing diary entries, letters, and other archival materials, has expanded the discussion of Weber's 1904 trip eightfold. Scaff intends this work 'to give an account of the intellectual biography not simply of the man but of the work itself' (p. 2). Indeed, what emerges is a portrait of a thinker on an intellectual journey of discovery.

While reading Scaff's book I was reminded of Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rubilov* (1966), which recounts the famous icon painter's journey through medieval Russia as a way of connecting the personal experience of the artist to his work. Just as Rubilov witnessed the centrality of Orthodox Christianity to Russian identity, so too did Weber take note of evangelical Protestantism's special role in America's historic mission. Another observer whose experience paralleled Weber's is Alexis de Tocqueville, who recounted his own impressions of the new American nation in *Democracy in America* (1835). Both

were European travelers who were struck by the dynamism of American life and its democratic vibrancy, in stark contrast to the rigid, hierarchical class system of old Europe. Unlike de Tocqueville, however, Weber never wrote a narrative account of his personal experience. Scaff's present discussion helps make up for this omission and is an invaluable examination of a formative period in Weber's life. By giving us an even more detailed description of Weber's American visit, including discussions of the events he witnessed, the people he met with, and the activities he participated in, Scaff casts even greater light on the impact of Weber's American experience on the development of his ideas, many of which can be documented by a close reading of his later published work. Following his return from the United States, Weber began his most productive period, from 1904 until his death in 1920, publishing the writings for which he is most famous, the most important of which, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, was heavily influenced by his American observations. In fact, the publication and completion of this two-part essay overlapped with Weber's American journey. Clearly, Weber's American excursion provided the goad that gave rise to that period in which he made his greatest impact on the field.

Before he came to America, Weber had already formulated the essential arguments of his discussion of the 'Protestant Ethic.' His previous studies at Heidelberg drew his attention to the connection between individuals' religious belief and their economic and social behavior (p. 22). Consequently, when visiting America, Weber made a point of observing those religious institutions and practices that lent further support to his thesis. In particular, he sought out those Calvinist sects that he believed gave its members the 'psychological drive to be systematic in the conduct of life and thus enforce the methodical rationalization of life'; in particular, those ascetic sects which were oriented towards transforming the world (p. 154). Weber was pointedly looking to observe those congregations that were more purely Calvinist (such as the Baptists or Quakers) as these sects had little institutional structure above the individual congregation and were regarded as more voluntary in membership. Ultimately, his ideas were not formulated by his observations, but reinforced. This fact is further confirmed when examining Weber's American itinerary. His visit was a selective sampling of American religious institutions as he pointedly visited only those institutions and religious congregations which fit his analysis. No visits were conducted to Episcopal or Catholic institutions. Even the Presbyterians and Lutherans did not pass muster, and this despite the fact that most of the successful captains of industry at the time tended to be members of these mainstream denominations.

For Weber, the American experiment was a unique phenomenon in the history of humankind, a nation and society formulated by the ethos and cultural underpinnings of capitalism, free of the deadening hand of European aristocracy and tradition. Weber once claimed:

It was never before in history made so easy for any nation to become a great civilized power as for the American people. Yet, according to human calculation, it is also the last time, as long as the history of mankind shall last, that such conditions for a free and great development will be given.

America embodied capitalism's 'highest development' and 'emancipation' (p. 6). The central importance of capitalism in American life was certainly in evidence everywhere Weber traveled. Landing in New York City in August, 1904, he could not help but notice that the city was in its heyday as the manufacturing center of the nation. In fact, the whole infrastructure and street grid of the city was designed as a place to work, not live. When Weber was in Chicago, Theodore Roosevelt announced his presidential re-election campaign in a local newspaper. Since Weber was an avid newspaper reader, it is not unlikely that he would have read it and taken note of Roosevelt's statement that Americans were 'fundamentally ... a business people' (p. 14). The Chicago stockyards and its labor problems gave Weber an opportunity to see capitalism in action and its attendant labor problems. He also observed assembly-line processes in slaughterhouses which anticipated the practices of Henry Ford. While still in New York, Weber and his companions noted the stark contrast between the eighteenth-century, Georgian-style St Paul's chapel and the recently completed R.H. Robertson building (still standing) poised directly opposite one another at the intersection of Park Row and Broadway. Weber saw them as 'symbols of a new kind of American sublime' (p. 28), an 'impressive symbol of the rising capitalist spirit' of America, the new cathedrals of commerce superseding those of a simpler spirituality, a contrast that, while appealing to Weber, was repellent to his European traveling companions. He criticized those like Troeltsch who 'found the outward symbols of the American spirit antipathetic and repulsive' (p. 29). Both buildings, in turn, are now overwhelmed by the recently completed Frank Gehry Beekman Tower, a juxtaposition that Weber would have appreciated. Weber and Troeltsch spent a lot of time traveling together on this trip and likely shared views on a variety of topics beyond architecture. Troeltsch would later publish a significant work (1931 [1912]) on early Christian social teaching, where he would argue that the early Christians placed little importance on the concerns of the everyday world. Individuals were more concerned with cultivating a personal, spiritual experience and not interested in social activism.

Weber journeyed to North Tonawanda, New York (just outside Buffalo), to observe firsthand the correlation between the religious beliefs of a congregation made up largely of recent German immigrants and their economic activity (p. 31). Throughout their journey, the Webers tended to stay with German expatriates. Max himself especially liked those whom he described as 'self-made men.' Here, as in the other visits Weber conducted to the various evangelical sects he encountered on his journey, Scaff notes Weber's impressions and his analysis of what he observed of the congregation's practices. In North Tonawanda, Weber collected economic and occupational data about the parson and his flock. Scaff argues that it was 'the combination of *voluntary* support for a largely independent and self-governing congregation, [the] substantial tithing of family income, and [the] high rates of Church attendance that attracted Weber's attention,' confirming his view that the sect form of organization typical of reform Protestantism was based on 'a voluntary association of religiously qualified persons' (p. 33, emphasis in original). Weber also noted, when visiting the various universities included on his itinerary, such as Northwestern and Haverford, that chapel attendance was required of students. Scaff points out that mandatory chapel attendance was actually common in American universities at the time as most were founded by religious denominations and it was even believed by most, including businessmen, to help build character (p. 52). Weber also attended a

Quaker meeting, which struck Marianne as similar to 'the most ancient Christian congregations' (p. 143). Quakerism appealed to Weber because it offered a 'this-worldly mysticism' that mandated engagement with the world rather than withdrawal. Weber redefined asceticism as an attempt to master oneself in order to change the everyday world by bringing both under 'rational' control (p. 146).

Scaff provides a detailed summary and analysis of the essay Weber delivered at St. Louis, the central event of the American journey. Weber discussed the impact of capitalism on the development of the modern rural economy with a particular focus on the United States, an apt topic under the circumstances. In his talk, he argued that America provided a unique opportunity 'to observe the practice and culture of modern "rational" capitalism in an especially concentrated form' (p. 61). Unlike their European agrarian counterparts, American farmers were now entrepreneurs, making the American farmer as much a businessman as any other small employer. The effects of capitalism were felt more strongly in America than in Europe, where 'the power of tradition' resulted in a rural population of peasants producing for local needs. America was the opposite of this since the easy availability of land allowed for market forces to dominate, and the independent farmer produced for this market unrestrained by traditional and quasi-legal dependencies. Another important factor was the absence of a hereditary aristocracy and feudal practices in America. Clearly, Weber was caught up in the spirit of American Exceptionalism so favored by American nationalists at the time. He also analyzed the recent Civil War in the United States within this framework, seeing the conflict as a struggle of the 'democratic traditions' derived from Puritanism against the 'aristocratic traditionalism' of the South. 'The defeat of traditionalism meant the defeat of reactionary anti-capitalism,' which made possible the subsequent 'bourgeois capitalist' development of the United States (p. 63). Curiously, a modified version of this interpretation of the Civil War has been adopted by a recent generation of neo-Confederates.

After his talk in St. Louis, Weber journeyed to Oklahoma, because 'nowhere else does old Indian romanticism blend with the most modern capitalistic culture as it does here. ... With lightning speed everything that stands in the way of capitalistic culture is crushed' (p. 86). At the time of his visit the federal government was in the process of ending tribal control of land and redistributing it to individuals. Weber also noted a close association between an individual's creditworthiness and his church attendance, which he believed legitimized an individual's economic status. He also observed that speculators built churches to encourage development, further underscoring that there was a convergence of spiritual, social, and economic interests. Weber noted a similar relationship between church membership and commercial success when visiting his relatives in Mt. Airy, North Carolina, where it was regarded as a testament of one's individual character (p. 132). The Webers also traveled to Tuskegee, Alabama, hoping to meet Booker T. Washington, who was absent when they arrived. Weber admired Washington's educational endeavors and writings, in which he noted an overlap with Benjamin Franklin's views on the relationship between work, self-discipline, and character building. While here, Weber confronted the race code of the South, noting that even being an educated Black did not help improve one's standing among whites. Ironically, even in the more politically 'Progressive' areas of the South, such as Knoxville, Tennessee, Weber observed the

continued segregation of public institutions and accommodations. Progressivism in the South was for 'whites only' and did little to change the continued impact of caste relations (p. 121). Scaff points out that Weber's American experience had a persistent influence on his ideas about race, ethnicity, status, and class (p. 113), recognizing that these artificial constructs often trumped economic relations (p. 115).

While he was still in St. Louis, Weber had the opportunity to meet with W.E.B. Du Bois. Scaff discusses the influence of Du Bois' writings on Weber (p. 103), noting that he especially admired *The Souls of Black Folk* (p. 107). Weber recognized that the chief social and political problem with the postbellum South was 'ethnic,' and this caused him to refine his analysis of American society. He admired Du Bois' speeches and writings, which spoke to the contradictions between a social structure based on opportunity and economic achievement, and the reality of one based on 'caste' as defined by race. Du Bois interpreted the Jim Crow regime of the South as an attempt 'to establish a new slavery by using the economic power of race prejudice to erect barriers of color caste' (p. 105). Scaff notes that although Weber solicited articles from many of the academics he met in America, Du Bois was the only one who fulfilled his promise to submit an article to Weber's journal. Weber also visited William James in Boston, whose work on the psychology of religious experience and belief he admired. Sadly there is no record of their conversation, but Weber did later allude to James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* in Chapter 4 of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (p. 146). Since Marianne was interested in the work of women in the settlement houses in the various cities they visited, they made a point of visiting Hull House in Chicago and the Henry Street Settlement in New York. Both Max and Marianne were struck by the participatory and egalitarian nature of these organizations, prompting them to comment that in America people of lower economic class could acquire higher social status. Everyone could aspire to become a 'gentleman' (p. 176).

The second part of Scaff's book is a discussion of the history of the reception of Weber's work in America and an enlightening account of how the first English translations of Weber's writings came to be produced. Scaff discusses the Parsons translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), which he describes as 'seriously defective' (p. 212). Since Parsons was a junior scholar at the time, the editors insisted that the translation be put under the supervision of a senior scholar, and so R.H. Tawney directed the project and wrote the forward to Parsons' translation. This was an unfortunate decision as Tawney did not have a clear understanding of Weber's views. Most of the textual problems associated with Parsons' translation were introduced by the editors, acting under Tawney's direction, which led to a subsequent history of fruitless argumentation among scholars in the Anglophone world over what Weber actually said. The whole discussion serves as a cautionary tale of the perils of a field relying on a single translation of a work by a significant author.

Throughout his book, Scaff pauses in his narrative of the Webers' journey to discuss the impact of various experiences and individuals on Weber's subsequent work. In many cases Scaff cites a particular point in Weber's published *oeuvre* where a particular American experience is related. In addition, Scaff also discusses Weber's intellectual debt to the various American academics and intellectuals whose ideas converged with his

own. Weber regarded America as a unique moment in time which offered a view of the future course of industrial society. As Scaff notes:

Weber took a major, fully developed theme with him to America – a hypothesized relationship, an ‘elective affinity’ between an ethos based in religious conviction, a type of worldly orientation exemplified in Benjamin Franklin’s sayings, ‘capitalist’ economic activity – and then returned with both persuasive evidence supporting the postulated relationship, and new questions about the implications of a novel *type* of social formation: the ‘cool objectivity of sociation’ in the voluntary association. It is only in America, and nowhere else, that Weber confronts this social phenomenon.

(p. 190, emphasis in original)

Scaff’s book is a significant and valuable work that clearly demonstrates his credentials as one of the leading Weber scholars of our time. At first glance it is a description of only a brief episode in Weber’s life, but is, in fact, a detailed discussion of the experiences and conversations which crystallized those ideas that later found their way into Weber’s greatest works. The book also includes an itinerary of the Webers’ trip and a selection of correspondence with American colleagues in separate appendices. The bibliography, especially the list of archival material consulted, is a very useful guide for those scholars wishing to pursue research on a specific topic covered by this text. This work is a major contribution to the scholarly literature on Weber as it provides a needed critical analysis of the background and evolution of his thought and its later dissemination to the scholarly community. No one who considers him- or herself a Weber scholar can afford to ignore this book.

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