

Translated excerpt

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***Max Weber***

Translated by Jefferson Chase



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EIN LEBEN  
ZWISCHEN DEN EPOCHEN



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## Introduction: Why We Should Care About Max Weber

Immanuel Kant famously remarked that man is a “citizen of two worlds.” What he meant was that we are simultaneously free and unfree. In one world we act spontaneously. In the other, we are subject to causes: social constraints, urges and natural aptitudes. But one can also be a citizen of two worlds in a historical sense, for instance, if one grows up in a world that seems to belong to the bourgeoisie and enters adulthood in a world in which the bourgeoisie is allegedly facing its own demise. People who cling to the idea of the “bourgeoisie” as a historical force have no choice but to define it terms of both power and impotence. Another sense in which someone can feel like a citizen of two worlds is if he grows up in a society that defines itself as a nation-state and a part of Christian culture, only to find, twenty years later, that the nation-state is subject to forces that are indifferent to its survival, and that Christian culture is but a faded memory. Or to use an example closer to the private sphere: Take the case of someone who gets married as a way to continuing an already existing family rather than founding a new one. Today we would call this an “arranged marriage.” Marital fidelity was considered a given. Anyone transgressing against this social norm ran the risk of going down in literature as an Emma Bovary or Effi Briest. But imagine a person who got married under these circumstances encountering, a few years later, a world in which marital infidelity is common, in which some people make it a mission to live out their sexual needs and in which the person in question both keeps and breaks his marital vows.

The lawyer, political economist, historian and sociologist Max Weber was precisely this sort of “citizen of two worlds.” He lived from 1864 to 1920 and was one of the most promising intellectuals of his generation, an exponent of the Protestant, Prussian, bourgeois elite. By the end of his life nothing was left of the world he had been born into. He left behind an enormous body of work, above all, fragments, dozens of academic essays,

unpublished book manuscripts, speeches and plans. For many people, he was one of the fathers of sociology as an academic discipline, but he resigned from the association of sociologists he had helped to found. For many people, the terms "rationality," "value-freedom" and "disenchantment of the world" will be forever linked with his incredibly broad-ranging studies. For others, Weber was a fanatic nationalist and a brilliant political thinker who dreamt of a charismatic leader at the head of a democracy and suggested that the dark side of modernism would entail a "return of the gods." Weber lived in the age of the nation-state and its crisis, the age of historical intellectualism and artistic avant-gardes, the age of Wilhelmine Germany's rise to global power and the age of political extremes.

In 1864, the year Max Weber was born, Ludwig II was proclaimed King of Bavaria, Jacques Offenbach premiered his opéra bouffée "La belle Hélène" in Paris, and in London, the first International Workingman's Association was founded with Karl Marx as chairman. The American Civil War was raging, the Confederacy launched the first successful submarine attack in history and the phrase "war of attrition" was coined." In his encyclical "Quanta cura", Pope Pius IX condemned the principles of freedom of religion and separation of church and state, and in the appended "Syllabus Errorum," he dismissed freedom of speech, pantheism, socialism, communism, liberalism and indifference as mistakes. Japan was preparing for the Meiji Restoration, which would reinstitute the old office of emperor, end the dominance of the warrior aristocracy and ultimately open the country up to the West.

In 1920, the year Max Weber died, the Treaty of Versailles took effect, and one month later the National Socialist German Workers Party was founded in Munich's Hofbräuhaus. Nationalist conservatives tried to topple the German government in what became known as the Kapp putsch. The Expressionist film "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" hit cinema screens. In Paris, the first work of literary surrealism, André Breton and Philippe Soupault's *The Magnetic Fields*, was published. The first private

radio stations started broadcasting. F. Scott Fitzgerald published his first novel, and Sigmund Freud brought out his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," which dealt with the power of unconscious urges and repression. Antwerp hosted the fourth modern-day Olympic Games. Piet Mondrian discovered the geometric style for which he would become famous, Greta Garbo made her first film, and Lenin gave his famous speech, where he promised that the communism would catch up with and surpass capitalism.

These scattered historical events illustrate the character of the epoch in which Weber lived. During this period, the world undeniably became *one* world – it was the start of what we today call "globalization" and mistakenly consider as a brand-new phenomenon. Industrial capitalism reached a high point, and technological innovations like the telegraph, steam-driven ships and electricity bridged gaps of time and space. Soon the only white spots on the world map were at the two poles. The great ideologies - nationalism, liberalism, socialism and communism - were conceived, and technological utopias were envisioned. The United States became a global power, and the Soviet system took over Russia. Capitalism, mass democracy, science organized into rational disciplines and secularization emerged as motors of world history, while various social models and intellectual "projects" sought to depart from this world. Anonymous, decentralized forces drove social change, which made many people long to get history back under control - by violence, if necessary.

In the time between Max Weber's birth and death, Germany - the society he devoted his greatest energy to pondering - played an especially significant role in world history. When Weber was born, there were slightly less than thirty-seven million people in the territory that would shortly become the German Empire. More than two-thirds of them lived in villages of less than two thousand, while less than two million lived in cities of more than one-hundred thousand inhabitants. By the time Weber died, despite the casualties of the Great War, the 1918-1920 Spanish flu pandemic and the loss of territory in the west and east to France and

Poland, the German Empire had sixty-two million inhabitants. More than fifteen million lived in big cities, and only a third in communities of fewer than two thousand people. In 1864, German industrial production was valued at 492 million US dollars, compared with 1.12 billion for Great Britain. By 1905, the year Weber's most famous work "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" appeared, German industrial production had grown to 2.48 billion dollars, compared to 2.85 billion for Great Britain. The comparison illustrates how quickly Germany had developed into a leading industrial nation. The year Weber was born, one-half of one percent of all 20- to 40-year-olds studied at university. By the year of his death, that figure had quadrupled. In 1864 there were some seven thousand university students. By the time Weber began his studies, there were eighteen thousand, and the year he died that number was at least sixty-three thousand.

Between 1864 and 1920, Germany underwent massive political and legal upheaval. In 1859, the liberal-dominated Prussian Parliament fought with the royal cabinet about who was responsible for the state budget and, with it, the financing of the army. Otto von Bismarck, who was made Prussian State Premier in 1862 in the middle of the crisis, seized this power and never gave it up. Although the Kingdom of Prussia was nominally a constitutional monarchy, many people saw Bismarck as the de facto sovereign during those years. In 1867, under his leadership, the Northern German League was founded. It was superseded by the German Empire in 1871 with the accession of Baden, Bavaria, Hessen and Württemberg. In 1900, the German Civil Code took effect. After the demise of the Hohenzollern monarchy in November 1918, soviet republics arose in some parts of Germany, while in Berlin a parliamentary democracy was proclaimed. The following year, a national assembly in the small city of Weimar ratified a new national constitution.

Because he engaged with and thought about almost all these major events and changes, Max Weber's life and work sheds a unique light on this time of epochal transformation. Weber was involved in discussions

about German industrialization and in the controversies surrounding Bismarck's policies. He investigated the preconditions necessary for Germany to become a global power and, in conjunction with Protestant circles, became actively involved in questions of social justice. He pondered whether markets only served the interests of investors or had a vital function in modern economies. He took a pro-Protestant stance in the "cultural battle" between the Prussian-run state and the Catholic Church and called for policies of imperialist expansion and domestic liberalism. He commented on the rise of socialism and the Russian Revolution. He also had things to say about everything from the "erotic movement" to the fight for women's rights, racist ideology and the mass media.

What distinguished Max Weber from most of the other intellectuals of his day was that he worked - frantically, one could almost say - on a description of a society that was still arising. In the process, Weber was part of a number of cultures typical of the period. His family was both nationalist and liberal, and as a student he behaved like a member of the right-wing fraternity scene. He was an aggressive German chauvinist although he had a love-hate relationship with "the typical German." With unparalleled diligence, he immersed himself in scholarly literature, working unbelievably long hours at university. He had contact with all the major political and intellectual movements and figures of his epoch. Sexually frustrated and over-worked, he suffered from the full range of "nervous afflictions" common around 1900. On his decades-long road to recovery, he became a kind of professional European and trans-Atlantic tourist. Even though he despised "literati," he was interested in the literary avant-garde right from the beginning, and he maintained close relationships with the bohemians of his age. After World War I, many considered him one of the brightest figures in the Weimar Republic, and he took part in both the consultations about a new German constitution and the peace negotiations in Versailles.

Weber was the best-known German social scientist of his day, yet during his lifetime he only published two books, his dissertation and his



habitation treatise. His main work *Economy and Society*, which many people doubt was planned as a main work at all, only appeared posthumously. Almost everything Weber said is the object of amazement and skepticism. Since it appeared in 1904 and 1905, Weber's essay "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" has been the subject of never-ending scholarly debates. In terms of his diligence, writing style and love of footnotes, Weber was a typical German intellectual. But he was also a man full of anger, a supercilious hothead fond of picking fights with his contemporaries.

Taking a closer look at Max Weber's life and work is worthwhile because his was a dramatic and unusual biography, and he answered questions in ways that still fascinate people today. "Modernity and – in particular its seems - the most recent times are suffused with a feeling of tension, expectation unresolved pressure, as if the main thing were yet to come," noted Weber's colleague Georg Simmel in 1900, the mid-way point between the two epochs in which he and Weber lived. Many people at the time felt that things could not continue as they had during the final third of the nineteenth century. In retrospect this was both an oppressive, if understandable sensation and a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy. Two world wars - two apocalypses - were awaiting many of Weber and Simmel's contemporaries. In what historian Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner has called "heroic modernism," politicians and intellectuals believed they could derail the course of world history, which they felt had been leading in the wrong direction for more than hundred years. What's bizarre about the feeling Simmel described is that people felt little desire to comprehend an epoch they so deeply mistrusted. Instead the end of an age of permanent transformation and constant innovation yielded expectations that "the main thing " - something truly gigantic which would make sense of all the change - was still to come.

Once, while commenting on the policies of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Max Weber characterized this feeling in slightly different terms. "People feel as though they're sitting in a train travelling at high speeds," he wrote,

"while doubting that next tracks have been properly laid." For the people sitting in the train, the next track and the laying of track in general was the top priority. In an age in which the baffling course of history drove into rote ideological faith or resignation, Weber tried to preserve intellectual reason. How could social life be described without falling into ideology or facile diagnoses? We today cannot subscribe to the answers Weber came up with, which reflect his experience of a time of multiple crises. But the point of intellectual biography is to learn something about the questions of the past. And the questions of how to live life and describe society were at the urgent center of Weber's biography and work.

## Chapter 1: A Member of the Bourgeois Classes

The bourgeois class encompasses all inhabitants of a state who by birth can be counted among neither the aristocracy nor the peasantry. - Prussian Common Law, 1794

In trying to determine who someone is we should listen, first and foremost, to that person himself. "I am a member of the bourgeois classes," Max Weber said in 1895, when at the age of thirty-one he held his inaugural lecture as Professor of Political Economics at Freiburg University. "That's what I feel like, and I have been raised with these classes' attitudes and ideals." It was both a revealing and an unusual formulation. Unusual not because it was that uncommon for someone without the word "von" in his name to stress that he was not the child of laborers or farmers. Unusual because Weber did not count himself a member of *the* bourgeoisie, as Marxists did in contrast to the proletariat or social scientists when making distinctions with the aristocracy or peasantry. Weber used the plural, implying that there were a number of bourgeois classes and that their internal differences were just as significant as those with other classes. At the same time, Weber identified with this plurality. He saw himself not as the member of the bourgeoisie but as a member of the bourgeois totality. That was almost as strange as if Weber had said: "I'm an inhabitant of the Southern German cities."

Indeed, economically speaking, Max Weber was a member of the bourgeois classes. His family lived in prosperity thanks above all to a maternal inheritance. Looking back in 1900 at his youth, Weber wrote that his family was quite wealthy by standards at the time: "Papa earned an additional 12,000 marks so we had around 34,000 marks in income." His mother's inheritance, the interest from which amounted to roughly double the amount of a senior civil servant's salary, was the result of her family's success in pan-European trade and industry, primarily in the leading branch of the industrial revolution, textiles. Around 1800, the French

Revolution led to a massive exodus of capital from France to England. There, money combined technological innovation to make the wheels of production to spin faster than ever before. Max Weber's maternal great-grandfather, Cornelius Charles Souchay from Frankfurt am Main, rode his fortune to establish one of the continent's most successful businesses, combining textile production, distribution and financing. Souchay took part in smuggling operations during the 1806-1814 economic blockade imposed by Napoleon on Great Britain and made sizeable profits from the European wars of the day. The Huguenot Souchay family was among the wealthiest Anglo-German trading dynasties and was part of a broad network spanning various empires and England, Belgium, Holland, Canada, South Africa and Indonesia. Thanks to her inheritance, Weber's mother was a millionaire.

Weber's paternal ancestors came from Bielefeld and were respected linen merchants. The Webers' lifestyle was a lot more moderate than the Souchays'. Money was earned solely to be able to live in a fashion commensurate with their social standing, and Weber's grandfather, it was said, never showed up at the office before eleven AM. In that regard he doesn't seem to have been an exception. "As far as Bielefeld is concerned," wrote Prussian Minister of Trade Christian Peter Wilhelm Beuth in 1842 to a spokesman for local businessmen, "I've often stated my opinion that the gentlemen there are merchants who rest on their laurels and wallets, and not manufacturers." Max Weber's later wife Marianne came from a branch of his family that had moved to the neighboring Duchy of Lippe so that her grandfather, the Spanish-raised Carl David Weber, could avoid Prussian military service. Nonetheless, the wealth that Carl David accumulated, also in the textile industry, was enough to provide his children and grandchildren with long-term financial independence. Max and Marianne both enjoyed inheritances from their grandparents, so the couple was hardly impoverished when in 1899, at the age of only thirty-five, health and psychological problems forced Max to retire from his teaching post.

Max Weber's family was also a part of the political bourgeoisie. His maternal grandfather Georg Fallenstein, was a member of the Lützow'sches Freikorps, a volunteer paramilitary division of the Prussian army in the battle against Napoleon. Fallenstein was also among the leaders of the failed bourgeois revolution of 1848 in Germany. The nationalist founder of the German gymnastics movement, Friedrich Jahn, was a close associate of Fallenstein. So too was the historian and German literature expert Georg Gottfried Gervinus, one of the "Göttingen Seven" who had protested in 1837 against the suspension of the Hanover Constitution by the Prussian king. Weber's father, Max Weber Sr., was one of Germany's first professional politicians and represented the National Liberal Party in both the Prussian Parliament and the Reichstag. Weber himself would later join the German Democratic Party (DDP) under the nationalist liberal Friedrich Naumann and would himself run for the Reichstag. Weber studied law and briefly flirted with a career as a lawyer and counsel for the Bremen Chamber of Commerce. But his interest in history and the social sciences drew him back to academia.

Max Weber was thus also a member of the intellectual bourgeoisie, and it's important to distinguish this class of people from the other two. The society into which Weber was born was characterized by three different revolutions that can all be described as bourgeois. There was the political revolution in favor of constitutional democracy, which was most prominent in North America and France. There was the industrial revolution beginning in England, whose symbols were the steam press, the high-speed printing machine and the fully mechanized loom. And then there was the educational revolution, including mandatory schooling, tests as criteria for university admissions and the codification of academic disciplines. Germany led the way in the third type of revolution. For more than half a century, from 1850 to 1920, Germany set many of the scholarly and educational standards in the natural sciences, engineering and the humanities. Back then, if Americans and French wanted to see what a research university was like, they would go to Berlin, Bonn, Leipzig

or Heidelberg. Max Weber grew up in an age when intellectuals acquired an enormous prestige. Yet Weber was not only a researcher. He was also an exponent of a bourgeois culture that defined itself with reference to reading and travel, Antiquity and higher education, Protestantism and the nation-state.

Bourgeois people were ambivalent about all three of these revolutions, as became clear in the final third of the nineteenth century. For a society still under the impression of the storming of the Bastille and the deposing of the French monarchy, it probably seemed as though in the modern state the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, the first and third estates, were merely trading places - as though only the very top tier was being replaced and society as a whole reoriented around bourgeoisie perspectives. Such perspectives, the logic ran, were derived primarily from the industrial revolution, from the bourgeois interest in business, trade and manufacturing - in a nutshell, from the development of private property. Education was understood as a specifically bourgeois notion of individual perfection. The *Bildungsroman*, or novel of education, the genre that arose around 1800 and dominated European narrative literature for more than ninety years, contained this idea within its typical plot structure. In it, a young non-heroic hero departs from family traditions. He sees himself confronted with a dynamic modernism that awakens hopes of personal fulfillment, but only when he is confronted with reality, does he learn how illusory these hopes often are. What was bourgeois about this storyline was not just the hero's assumed right to the pursuit of happiness in the sense of the American constitution. What also seemed bourgeois was the resolution promised by "education" to conflicts between happiness and freedom, permanence and mobility, self-determination and socialization, marriage and love, realism and romanticism. Education meant compromise, renunciation and the internalization of contradiction.