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書評

Joachim Radkau, translated by Patrick Camiller

Max Weber: A Biography

Polity Press, March 2009, 683 pages

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Since his death in 1920, the dominant history of the life of Max Weber (born in 1864) has been that of a brilliant social theorist and prolific writer: the author of works that even today continue to be recognized as some of the most influential in sociology by scholars and lay readers alike. Yet, despite the development of a substantial body of work in the field of Weber studies, there had been little thorough exploration of other histories of Weber's life until the publication of Joachim Radkau's *Max Weber: A Biography* in 2005. Radkau, a German historian at Bielefeld University whose previous works explored twentieth-century German politics, industry, and migration, has meticulously combed through previously untapped resources to produce a thoroughly-researched biography of Weber's life, though it remained unavailable to English-speaking readers until the 2009 publication of a condensed translation by Patrick Camiller.

Max Weber: A Biography is the product of a labor of love, born of Radkau's "psycho-physical contact" (1) with Weber through his mentor, German-born American historian George W. F. Hallgarten. Radkau's aim through the text is to demonstrate that Weber's lasting legacy as a scholar was due not only to the particular concepts and theories that he developed but rather to "what he was" (1). Yet, Radkau proposes that there is "not just one, but several, possible histories" (3) of Weber's life. He provides an account of Weber in which these stories are successfully tied together in such a way that Weber comes alive not only as a brilliant social theorist, but also as a troubled and fallible man, who paid the price of his genius through extended periods of physical and mental suffering.

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Max Weber: A Biography is structured as a “three-act play” (2), chronologically divided into overlapping periods: the years 1864 to 1903 as Part I; 1898 to 1910 as Part II; and 1909 to 1920 as Part III. Within each of these acts, Radkau explores Weber’s life thematically, rather than strictly chronologically. He shifts back and forth in time, moving loosely and irregularly between the histories of Max Weber the scholar and academic, and Max Weber the man, husband, lover, and son, experiencing manic depressive illness (which today’s readers will recognize as bipolar disorder). The reader’s impression, then, is that the balance of the text is slightly tilted towards these personal anecdotes of Weber’s life. This may be a distraction to readers seeking a more intellectually-focused biography, though it is important to note that a significant portion of the sociological discussions in Radkau’s original text was removed for the translated publication. Its pages were thus reduced by nearly one-third, in order to avoid the temptation to pin Weber “down in this or that single quote” (xv).

Part I explores Weber’s beginnings, both as a man and as a scholar. Radkau’s history of Weber begins in the home, where his family, particularly his mother, played a key role from early in his life. Beginning in these early chapters and continuing throughout the text, however, Radkau builds off of these relationships, relying on a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective to elucidate Weber’s struggles. Although Freudian psychoanalysis was in vogue during Weber’s life, Radkau’s over-reliance on sexuality as a recurring theme throughout the text becomes somewhat redundant to the twenty-first-century reader. Radkau also begins to explore the impact of Weber’s personal experiences on his work. For example, in the later chapters of Part I, we meet Weber as a budding scholar with an interest in antiquity and agriculture, who conducts a comprehensive and ground-breaking study of farm workers. Radkau suggests that it is through this study that Weber was able to make the observation which would later inspire *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, namely that “hunger and material greed are not enough: there must also

be a higher passion counteracting the human law of inertia” (83). He thus shows the interconnections between Weber’s experiences and the development of his sociological thought. The scene closes as Weber experiences the first of many relapses into manic depression.

As the second act opens in Chapter 7, Weber is in the throes of his condition, whose symptoms Radkau documents in detail. However, he is also writing *The Protestant Ethic* despite—or perhaps as a result of—his struggles. Radkau suggests that there is a dialectical, but not a mirroring, relationship between Weber’s life and his work, particularly in regard to *The Protestant Ethic*, which Radkau describes as his most personal text. We can see another example of this connection in Chapter 9, as Radkau recounts Weber’s 1904 journey to the United States, which informed his writing of *The Protestant Ethic* because of his vicarious experience of religiosity there. Yet, Weber also undertakes an imagined journey in the following year to revolutionary Russia, which Radkau suggests was even more influential than his actual journey to the United States, by introducing to him a new field of study investigating the psycho-physical state of workers. In addition to his travels, Radkau also credits Weber’s experience of prolonged illness, and his struggle against it, as the background to his perspectives on science and religion. Weber’s illness represented the struggle against naturalism: natural conditions (such as his illness, in this case) do not determine the forms of human life, but rather contain several different opportunities.

In Part III, we see one of these opportunities, as Weber has finally broken free from the cyclicity of his condition. This is a new period in Weber’s life, in which he is able to enjoy the creativity resulting from his manic depression without the once-inevitable breakdown. Weber comes into both a new phase of physical health, and also new relationships: falling in and out of love with social scientist Else Jaffe and pianist Mina Tobler, while continuing his marriage to a devoted Marianne. Radkau also discusses in detail some of the topics taken up in what would be

published posthumously by Marianne Weber as *Economy and Society*. An entire chapter is devoted, for example, to the topic of charisma, which Radkau characterizes as Weber's most innovative and attractive concept. He suggests that the Weber we see in *Economy and Society*, whose works are "orderly" and "monumental" (411), was designed to appear this way by Marianne—perhaps one of Weber's "masks" (256)—while the real man was much more complex.

The later chapters of Part III also deal with issues related to the temporal context of Weber's life in wartime Germany. These include a brief discussion of Weber's critique of World War I, which he saw as an example of the ubiquity of technological rationality without the counterbalance of human reason. Radkau suggests that the stories of Weber's life are all closely intertwined throughout his life, but especially so in the years leading up to his passing in 1920, when the pace of his life quickened politically, academically, and sexually, followed by a slow decline and longing for death. The final chapter of the book, an epilogue, draws Weber's work into the period immediately following his death, looking at the roles of his wife Marianne, Eduard Baumgarten, and Karl Jaspers in carrying forward his legacy. Radkau closes by addressing the sensitive nature of discussing in such detail—and at times almost intrusively—the once-hidden and very fine points of Weber's life by suggesting that: "Today everyone who was 'infinitely precious' to Max Weber has long been dead: there is no longer any reason for silence" (560). It is, however, left to readers to decide whether this justification is convincing.

Readers with an interest in going beyond the dominant story of Max Weber as the brilliant scholar, and those holding a curiosity about the life and times which led to the development of his genius, will enjoy this thoroughly-researched yet readable text. It may, however, be somewhat disappointing to readers hoping for a purely intellectual biography or a more systematic and in-depth treatment of Weber's defining works and key concepts—one that would set aside his personal experiences. Moreover, its length of over six hundred pages may make it unsuited to readers with

only a casual interest in Weber. Nonetheless, with *Max Weber: A Biography*, and its English translation by Camiller, Radkau filled a key gap in the literature on Max Weber's life. The inclusion of copious notes, a chronology of Weber's life, and pictures of Weber and those important to him interspersed throughout the text help the many stories of his life to come alive for the reader. Yet, perhaps, this monumental book may well be an invitation to look beyond the dominant stories not only of Max Weber but also of the still-stigmatized condition he struggled against, and to discover manifold histories of brilliance.