



BOOK REVIEW

# Kaesler, Weber -- Kaube, Weber

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Dirk Kaesler, *Max Weber. Preusse, Denker, Muttersohn*

München: C. H. Beck 2014

Hardcover, 1007 pp.

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Jürgen Kaube, *Max Weber. Ein Leben zwischen den Epochen*

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It is easy to understand why no less than two biographies of Max Weber appeared in 2014. First of all, jubilees tend to attract particular attention, and 2014 marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Weber's birth. But secondly, the field has for generations been dominated by the monumental biography written by Weber's widow Marianne (*Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild* (1926 - translated into English and edited by Harry Zohn (*Max Weber. A Biography* (1975))); the only other major new Weber biography (Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber. Die Leidenschaft des Denkens* - English translation 2011) appeared as late as 2005.

The occasion, therefore, is obvious. But why write the biography of a scholar at all? Do not his or her works tell us all that we really need (or indeed want) to know? Honorably, the authors of both of the biographies reviewed here try to furnish us with an answer to this question, albeit along different lines. Dirk Kaesler, emeritus professor of sociology and a Weber specialist of long standing, argues that we cannot separate Weber's life from his works, and that both should be seen in their historical context. Kaesler maintains that if we are at all interested in Weber as a scholar, we should also consider his life and times - a unitary approach which is also reflected in Kaesler's somewhat clumsy subtitle *Preusse, Denker, Muttersohn* ("Prussian, Thinker, Mother's son"). Jürgen Kaube - for many years professor of sociology, subsequently cultural editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, but new to Weber studies - argues the other way round: Max Weber (1864-1920) is placed between two historical epochs. For a proper understanding of these epochs, Kaube says, both Weber's works and his life are valuable sources of information, because he was intensively preoccu-



ped, both intellectually and existentially, by problems that were relevant during his lifetime and are still relevant today.

Kaesler has literally for decades steeped himself in information concerning all aspects of Max Weber's life, and this is clearly reflected in his book. Its length - more than 900 pages of fairly small print - is in itself significant. Over and above this, there is a bibliography of almost 60 pages and an index of names, but - and this must be considered a serious shortcoming - no source notes at all. Kaesler himself thanks his publishers for having "slimmed down" the book considerably, and the source notes may, regrettably, have fallen victim to this slimming process. However, it would have been preferable if the text itself had been subjected to more extensive pruning. This is particularly true of the first part, where far too much space is allotted to, for instance, descriptions of remote members of the Weber family, of political conditions in Germany before Max Weber's birth, and of the details of student life in the 1880s. It is only around page 300 that we get as far as Weber's first proper academic work (his dissertation on the commercial partnerships in the Middle Ages).

Another circumstance which contributes to the book's length, but not to the same extent to its value, is Kaesler's constant habit of quoting long excerpts from Marianne Weber's classical biography. This is occasionally done with the aim of showing us where Marianne was prejudiced in her judgement (for instance, of Max Weber's father); but mostly, the quotations simply serve as lengthy complements to - or even substitutes for - Kaesler's own text. The result is often over-long - quite apart from the fact that Marianne's literary style sometimes seems rather more convincing than Professor Kaesler's.

Kaube's book is only half the size of Kaesler's, but it is certainly not a lightweight piece of work. There are fewer details, but Kaube covers the ground well, and often adopts useful and interesting points of view. Moreover, he manages to supply the reader with brief, but sufficient source notes.

Major parts of the story of Max Weber's life are essentially of a private nature. This is true of his relations with his parents and with his wife, Marianne; his deep depression in the years 1897-1902; his relationship with the pianist Mina Tobler; and his passionate affair with Else Jaffé-Richthofen in the last years before his early death. But their private nature certainly does not imply that they are devoid of interest in themselves. In some cases, they have also left important traces in Weber's works; and they are often - as Kaube, in particular, is at pains to demonstrate - symptomatic of their epoch, and thus interesting from a historical perspective.

As far as Weber's relations with his parents are concerned, he increasingly, in his twenties, orients himself towards his unusually pious and self-abnegating mother, Helene, and distances himself correspondingly from his father's easygoing, traditional and patriarchalist lifestyle. The tension between these two attitudes comes to a head in 1897, where Max has a violent quarrel with his father about the right of the mother to visit Max and Marianne without being accompanied by the father. The father dies suddenly shortly afterwards, without having seen Max again. It is understandable that some authors (particularly Martin Green, *The von Richthofen Sisters* (1974)) have succumbed to Freudian temptation, interpreting these dramatic events as a classical Oedipal situation. Kaube refers to these Freudian interpretations, but considerably downplays the relevance of this episode for our general understanding of Max Weber. Kaesler does not discuss the issue of relevance, but hedges his bets with four pages of verbatim quotation from Marianne, who was an eyewitness to the scene.

Max and Marianne's engagement only becomes a reality after a series of dramatic confrontations between Marianne and Max's mother, where Marianne finally prevails over a complex barrier of moral and conventional objections. But the most remarkable feature of this whole process is that it takes place over the head and behind the back of Max Weber himself. As Kaube nicely puts it: "Max Weber is given in marriage". The marriage between Max and Marianne is marked by deep mutual affection, and by unquestioning admiration and considerateness on her part; but viewed from the outside, the dominant feeling between them seems to be comradeship rather than love. There was no offspring, and whether the marriage was in fact ever physically consummated is a question which has titillated the imagination of certain commentators, but which the grand old man of Weber scholarship, Johannes Winkelmann, contemptuously dismissed as "aunts' gossip".

In the years leading up to 1897, Max Weber assumed an almost impossibly heavy burden of work. But a few months after his father's death, he falls into a deep depression. For years, he can do little else than sitting idle in a chair. No reading. No discussions. He resigns from his professorship, and in fact holds no remunerated academic position until shortly before his death. It is only in 1902 that he feels able to resume work. Many reasons have been advanced for this nervous breakdown: the clash with his father; the immense workload; sexual problems; feelings of guilt. Both Kaube and Kaesler wisely refrain from looking for firm answers in this respect. However, this long crisis is particularly interesting for three reasons: First, we possess a steady stream of letters between Marianne and Helene, in which the state of health of the husband/son, including his sexual problems, is discussed in surprising detail (a circumstance which Kaube, in particular, finds somewhat shocking). In this phase of his life, Weber is clearly a weak and passive object in the hands of two strong women. Secondly, Kaube sees the signs of a significant development in Weber's work when he starts writing again after his long depression. This view, which is not uncommon among Weber scholars, is not shared by Kaesler. What is certain is that, when Weber does resume work, the rate of production is in itself stupendous: from 1903 to 1905, he writes a number of long and difficult methodological studies, including the important article on "Objectivity", and at the same time, he produces his best-known work: the long article on "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism". If one compares these works with Weber's production before his breakdown, in particular his strongly nationalistic and harshly polemical Inaugural Address from 1894, it is difficult not to agree with Kaube that the personal crisis has matured Weber's views to a significant degree.

And thirdly, it is fascinating to learn, from both biographies, about the perplexity and apparent helplessness of the medical specialists consulted about Weber's condition. Every remedy is tried: cold baths, hot baths, aerotherapeutics, hypnosis, electrotherapy (though not, happily, applied to the brain), encouragement to conjugal sexual relations, anti-erection medication, ban on alcohol, gymnastics, massage, plasticine modelling - coupled with prescriptions of narcotics and stimulants: bromine, trional, veronal, arsenic and heroin. We know from Weber's letters that he remained dependent on some of this medication for many years; and against this background, his colossal scholarly achievements seem all the more impressive.

In 1909, Max Weber meets the Swiss pianist Mina Tobler and is captivated by her youth (she is 16 years younger than he is) and her musical sensitivity. We do not know for sure, nor is it of any great consequence, whether the relationship remains platonic. What is certain, though, is that it is accepted by Marianne, who for a long time, and with apparent equanimity, sees her Max leave every Saturday to visit Mina. Marianne believes, no doubt correctly, that Mina can unlock new and gentler aspects of Max Weber's character. At the same time, this new relationship is academically fruit-

ful, resulting in a long study by Weber of the sociology of music (which is, however, only published after his death).

While doubts may remain as to the degree of intimacy of Weber's relationship with Mina Tobler, no such doubts can be entertained when it comes to his liaison with Else Jaffé-Richthofen from 1917 until his death three years later. She was an unusually gifted woman who wrote her dissertation under Weber's supervision. She was unhappily married and carried on a number of affairs, including a protracted one with Weber's younger brother Alfred. For his part, Max had almost broken with Else in 1909. But when they meet again in 1917, he is overwhelmed by a stormy passion for her. Henceforth, Else is the absolute centre of Weber's emotional universe; but this does not endanger his marriage to the heroically tolerant Marianne; and it is only at the very end that he makes it clear to Mina that his relations with her must take a more secondary place. Kaesler is right in saying that Weber's letters to these three women in the years 1917-20 are not attractive, being full of "purely tactical comforting words, duplicitous half-truths, [and] flowery recollections of past events".

Apart from the private passion, strong echoes of Weber's relationship with Else can also be found in his academic production. In the "Intermediate Remarks" in his sociology of religion, there is a major section on erotic love as a separate value sphere - a thought which has its origins in remarks by Else. And tellingly, he later writes to her that this section in its revised form should really carry the following footnote: "Improved on the basis of a more intensive study of the subject-matter".

The two biographies of course also contain accounts and discussions of Weber's academic work. In this respect, Kaesler's book is considerably more detailed than Kaube's (for instance, Kaesler discusses in much greater detail the importance of Weber's two doctoral theses for his later work). Occasionally, though, Kaesler's account becomes so "pedagogical" that it almost interrupts the general narrative flow. His discussion of Weber's basic sociological concepts, for example, could almost have been lifted from a (very good) academic textbook.

Naturally, both authors focus strongly on "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" - which Kaesler aptly describes as "one of the grand narratives of the 20th century". The two authors are also at one in pointing out that Weber's long journey to the United States in the autumn of 1904 did not, contrary to what many commentators have supposed, leave strong traces in this article. In fact, Kaesler and Kaube agree that Weber was more interested in the European secularizing influence on the United States than in the possible American (Puritan) influence on Europe. But the trip to the USA did furnish Weber with central elements of his later article on the Protestant sects (a work that should always be read alongside the "Protestant Ethic").

Marianne Weber says that politics was Max Weber's "secret love". He did write a number of long and well-argued political articles and, during the Great War, voiced surprisingly scathing criticism of German policies. After the defeat of Germany in 1918, he was a member of a consultative committee for the preparation of the new German Constitution, and here argued strongly, and successfully, in favour of the election of the Reich President by popular vote - a provision which was to have disastrous consequences fifteen years later. Otherwise, he was less successful in the political field. His participation in the German delegation to the Versailles was useless, and his attempt to win a place on the ticket of the German Democratic Party for the elections to the Reichstag quickly bogged down in a quagmire of party-political intrigue. Actually, as noted by both Kaesler and Kaube, Weber's attitude towards politics was out of step with reality: as he himself admitted in sev-



eral letters written in April 1920, he was an academic, not a politician. Truth was more important to him than political compromise.

In conclusion, I feel that Kaesler's biography will no doubt, because of the impressive amount of material that it presents and the broadness of its scope, gain a lasting place as a standard work of biographical reference in the literature on Max Weber; but its lack of a persuasive unifying perspective, in conjunction with Kaesler's wish to share every bit of available information with the reader, have made it longer and more detailed than necessary. Kaube's book is shorter, but thorough, well-proportioned and crisply written, and may perhaps offer a better choice for the ordinary reader with no special previous knowledge of the subject.

So far, both books exist only in the original German. Until further notice, therefore, those who look for detailed, up-to-date information in English on Weber's life must go to the English translation of Radkau's biography (which is, however, less than persuasive in drawing parallels between aspects of Weber's life and his academic work). But for anyone with a sufficient knowledge of German, the Max Weber gap on the biography shelf has now been more than adequately filled.