

Research Paper

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Max Weber and the age of Trump

On the relevance and topicality of the sociologist and media researcher on the 100th anniversary of his death

Abstract: He has been called one of the greatest Germans of all time, the most important social scientist ever, a significant source of inspiration and irritation in attempts to observe and describe modern society. Even today, exactly 100 years after his death, his works are respected all over the world. In both the USA and China, *The Protestant Ethic* in particular – a holistic attempt to analyze the driving forces of American society that has never been equaled to this day – has lost none of its influence. Max Weber was a scholar of every field, following meticulous (empirical) studies with profound publications on national economics, legal and religious history, politics, music, the mass media, and much more. Yet the international career of the ›bourgeois Marx‹ did not really begin to take off until after his premature death in 1920. Initially, it was his wife who boosted his fame with clever publication management and networking. Today, a host of Weber researchers in many countries are working to decrypt his work – much of which remains a mystery. Weber undoubtedly left behind numerous short and snappy terms, categories, and quotes. But, even after multiple volumes of the enormous *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe* [collected works; hereinafter referred to as MWG], much of what he meant is still unclear. And thus, the ›disenchanter‹ remains our companion in this new century. This certainly applies to his work on media and journalism. He was one of the first to recognize how important they are in the 20th Century. The observation strategies and categories he used to research them are just as relevant and topical today, in the age of Trump, mediatization, and communicative penetration.

Who was Max Weber?

When Max Weber died aged 56 on June 14, 1920, exactly 100 years ago, from the effects of Spanish flu, he left three ›widows.‹ One was his wife, his first cousin once removed, with whom he lived in a kind of comradeship marriage. Then there was his much-younger lover Mina Tobler, a Swiss pianist whom he used to meet in Heidelberg for ›musical studies‹ in the broadest sense. Finally, there was Else Jaffé-von Richthofen, his former doctoral student, the wife of a colleague and for many years also the lover of his brother, the sociologist Alfred Weber. She was the love of Max Weber's life, spending the last years of his life with him in a relationship described by his biographers as »deep« and »ecstatic«.

Weber's private life was almost as complicated as his erratic works, which are all but impossible to tackle bibliographically even in the exhaustive MWG. After around four decades of work, completion of its publication in 47 volumes is now slated for 2020, one hundred years after his death. Almost all the original editors have passed away in the meantime. Incidentally, the blue volumes of the MWG are similar in appearance to the collected works of Marx-Engels (MEW), although significantly more expensive.

This grandiose project is dedicated to a man full of contradictions. Max Weber was a person at odds with himself: on the one hand, an academic titan and altruistic natural leader, unusually intelligent, sensible and unpretentious; on the other, an egocentric polemicist, chronic know-it-all and touchy nitpicker. He was as fascinating as he was irritating – a statement that applies to the person as much as the works he left behind.

At the end of the Imperial Era, the philosopher Karl Jaspers even proposed him for the office of Imperial President. Friedrich Ebert (1871-1925), who was later elected the first President of the Republic by the National Assembly in Weimar in 1919, died five years later than Max Weber. Their graves at the Bergfriedhof cemetery in Heidelberg are just a stone's throw apart. The first Federal President Theodor Heuss (1884-1963) was also an admirer of Weber, as is seen from various obituaries and recollections he wrote of the sociologist, whom he had met as a young man. Shortly after Weber's death, he characterized him as brilliant, yet immoderate.

In his youth, Weber was a chubby, beer-drinking, cigar-smoking student who liked to duel. His values and feelings were stuck firmly in the 19th Century. Yet his thinking was modern, as is seen, for example, in his advocacy of the rights of women.

As a young adult, it did not take long for Max Weber to be appointed a professor. Following a serious illness, he became a bundle of nerves, quickly forced to give up his position at the university for health reasons and be supported by his wealthy wife. For a long time, the renowned yet idiosyncratic private scholar

seemed unable to succeed at anything – but he then managed to work his way up to become the hero of young German sociology, a highly coveted speaker and publicist. Finally, he found the role of extra-marital lover and briefly took on a professorship in Munich, before pneumonia brought his life to a quick and premature end.

In academia, he remained a (highly respected) outsider – something that no longer appears to exist today. The vanity that afflicts many professors seems to have passed him by – as did his professorial colleagues. Many of them were »canailles,« he wrote in a letter to another academic. Likable and only too justified was his early warning against escalating bureaucracy, which he said created the »enclosure of bondage« of which he often spoke in various contexts.

Another reason that Weber was so admired by his contemporaries was his refusal to assimilate – at all, ever – in difficult times and under complicated circumstances. It is inconceivable that he would have behaved in such a cowardly way as the Republican Congressmen in the impeachment trial of Donald J. Trump. Weber never shied away from conflict, although he did occasionally go too far. He was not full of bravado – unlike so many intellectuals, whom he attacked as »literary men« and bestowed with verbal injuries such as »phrase thresher,« »painted plebeian,« and »inkwell romantic.«

Again and again, he put all his strength into defending the honor of other people, reported his widow in her Weber biography (Marianne Weber 1926). His second biographer, Karl Jaspers (1958), also highlighted the altruistic traits of the hero of his early years: before the war as an academic and during the war as a gallant provider. He highlighted a constant fight for justice as the general motivation behind his actions.

There is now an overwhelming amount of Weber literature – an estimated more than five thousand English-language publications about him and his works. »Weber researcher« has become a full-time job. With his catchy phrases, Max Weber even appears in television series such as *The West Wing* (starring Martin Sheen as the American President) and in the hit German carnival song »Ich bin so froh, dass ich nicht evangelisch bin« [I'm so glad I'm not a protestant] by Jürgen Becker (Mitternachtsspitzen) – effectively an abridged version of his study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

The Protestant Ethic – (perhaps) Weber's greatest hit

Max Weber's analyses of the emerging modern society (including all his errors) continue to have an effect to this day. One could wish for an observer who could observe and describe »our postmodern modern age« (Welsch 1993) with a similarly sharp eye. He had a kind of love-hate relationship with modern society. On

the one hand, he was clear in registering its high cost for the individual. On the other, he was fascinated by the new world that was emerging before his eyes, just as he was fascinated by the New World that he got to know on a five-month journey all over the USA in fall 1904. By then, he had already largely completed his influential study *The Protestant Ethic*, aimed at North America.

Its theme is one that was to become famous as the ›Weber hypothesis,‹ has always remained as topical as it is controversial, and secured constant attention for Weber, especially in the USA: the close connection between Protestantism and capitalism, indeed capitalism's unleashing through the power of the religion. The strongly Calvinist lifestyle of ›austere Protestantism‹ had, claimed Weber in this essay, had a defining influence on the professional and economic attitudes of the actors.

Max Weber originally published his essay on *The Protestant Ethic* in 1904 and 1905, immediately attracting enormous attention and provoking some strong reactions. These in turn caused him to write four detailed »anti-reviews« – furious attacks that were published from 1907 in various volumes of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* [Archive for Social Sciences and Social Policy].

Religious influence as a central driving force of capitalism is a plausible, attractive yet bold hypothesis that is now doubted by many economists in particular. The starting point for the study was the question of how the idea had come about that man must fulfil his professional duty. Weber – who described himself as a religiously »unmusical« Protestant – argued that it was through religious passion that capitalism originally gained its permanence. Then, however, the care for external goods proved an »iron cage« – his famous metaphor for the consequences of the possessive urge in capitalism for the lifestyle of the individual, which he presented at the end of his study.

Even more than a hundred years after its publication, unbelieving observers of modern American society, with its mixture of unbridled acquisitiveness and rampant bigotry, should look to this work. It contains explanations on the »spirit of capitalism,« which can help to understand what is happening in the age of Trump.

The current presidential election campaign is further proof of the extreme way in which religion is ingrained in America's DNA. It is a high mass of professions of faith from everyone involved. Almost two hundred years after the death of Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, the country is ruled by bigots like no other Western-style democracy. Jefferson, on the other hand, was a man of the Enlightenment, certainly a kind of agnostic, who brilliantly advocated a strict separation of church and state his entire life.

Today, the idea of an atheist being a candidate for president in this country – 40 percent of whose population still espouses creationism more than

150 years after Charles Darwin – is all but unimaginable. Weber's program of disenchantment did not take off there. Even well-known television presenters like Chris Cuomo (CNN) barely miss an opportunity to publicly state that they are »men of faith.« Of course, the fanatical capitalist Trump also knows that his chances of election would fall if he accused the strictly religious Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Mitt Romney, his sworn enemy in the Republican Party, of religious hypocrisy, or even went on to admit that his own religiosity knows only one god: himself. The chronic dealmaker worships money and success and, at least in this context, acts on earth in line with the logic of The Protestant Ethic, which Max Weber described so lucidly in his day. Trump follows the postulate of asceticism incorporated into the work only in respect to alcohol and tobacco...

In the words of sociologist and Weber researcher Dirk Kaesler (2006), The Protestant Ethic means the start of one of the »grand narratives.« With its help, he claims, people all over the world have tried to make sense of their history and their future. This narrative of the »affinity« between Protestantism and capitalism is effectively the counter-hypothesis to Karl Marx' grand narrative of the rise and inevitable fall of capitalism. It has also attracted attention elsewhere: For decades, Max Weber has been a key point of reference for discourse about China's unique path to capitalist communism. His work *The Protestant Ethic* even topped the non-fiction bestseller list in China in 2006.

The clear-up and the ›Weber renaissance‹

Marianne Weber (1870-1954) outlived her husband by more than three decades. Immediately after his death, she began work on the Herculean task of sorting through his academic legacy and securing his posthumous reputation. The first step was to compile his writings into his magnum opus *Economy and Society*, which was dismantled into its original parts again in the MWG. Everything else also turned out to be a mammoth undertaking – one that has continued to present those left behind with mysteries and an enormous amount of clean-up work for almost a hundred years: first his widow, then his disciples and ›heirs,‹ who are working to decrypt his »disenchantment of the world« to this day. It all leads to plenty of conflict about what Weber really meant.

The first disputes are triggered by the question of where to place Weber, who was a trained lawyer, a Professor of Economics, an economic and religious historian, a nestor of sociology, and a mentor in journalism and communication studies. It is almost impossible to put him into a single category. Even his contemporaries were unsure about which part of his character held the upper hand – his tendency to be heroic, one-sided, brusque and unforgiving, or the democratic,

humane, tolerant, mediating and impartial side? There is plenty of evidence of both.

Six years after her husband's death, Marianne Weber submitted the unwieldy tome *Max Weber: A Biography*, which was considered the standard work on the sociologist for many years and was revised again shortly before her death. Mina Tobler (1880-1967) and Else Jaffé (1874-1973) were guests of honor in Heidelberg in April 1964, when the German Sociological Association (GSA) held its now-legendary 15th Sociology Day in Weber's honor to celebrate his 100th birthday. Just as at the first Sociology Day in Frankfurt in 1910, the central themes were value freedom and critique of capitalism – in advance of the student movement. Its stars included Talcott Parsons, Raymond Aron, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor W. Adorno, while a young Jürgen Habermas attracted attention with a rather unobjective discussion piece.

At this time, Weber's star had not yet truly risen – despite decades of dedication from his widow and numerous eulogies to both the person and his work. His laudators included not only academics like Jaspers, but also Theodor Heuss and Konrad Adenauer – the central German politicians of the post-Second World War era.

With the maverick academic, failed politician, and temporary publicist having long been more of a secret of the academic community, it was not until the 1970s that a kind of Weber renaissance emerged, combined with a popularization of his works. Today, it seems as though no superlative is big enough for him. He is considered by some to be the greatest German of all time, and certainly a »German genius« (Watson 2010). These are dimensions in which only Donald J. Trump is praised today – largely by himself.

Perhaps Max Weber really was one of the last polymaths. The enormous range of topics to which he turned his hand in his short life, which was blighted by illness again and again, extends from ancient agricultural structures to the trading companies of the Middle Ages and the farm workers east of the Elbe, from the religious roots of capitalism and the connection between business and society to the manifestations of journalism and the press.

In the years before his death, he even contributed his much-quoted lectures on science and politics as a vocation to the stock of central texts. In *Politics as a Vocation*, he appealed for understanding of the difficulties that serious journalistic work faces, differentiating between ethics of ideology and ethics of responsibility to present categories on which moral discourses (not only) on political actions chafe to this day. When he appeared in front of students in Munich at the time, eye-witnesses were fascinated by the »aura of an Old Testament prophet« that surrounded him as he spoke without notes.

To this day, none of his biographers has truly succeeded in making sense of this Max Weber and his work, although the most recent attempts, published in

the year of his 150th birthday, are certainly impressive (Kaesler 2014, Kaube 2014). Another enormous tome puts all its eggs in one basket: suppressed sexuality in an unsatisfied marriage (Radkau 2005).

Some of what Weber wrote and said is almost public property today – available to be quoted at any opportunity and especially popular with politicians (such as Helmut Schmidt). Various of his lucid neologisms and formulations have now gained hit status: ideal type, ethics of responsibility, charisma, the tough boards a political has to drill through, »with both passion and good judgment,« and, above all, the »disenchantment of the world«.

The ›press enquiry‹ – the failed large-scale project

The famous disenchantment formula – as a basic diagnosis and perspective of his sociology – can also be applied to Weber's proposals for a »media sociology,« which are contained in the »press enquiry« project presented at the First German Sociology Day in 1910. At the time, and afterwards, sociology and later communication sciences missed a golden opportunity: By standing on the shoulders of this giant, it would have been possible to gain early foresight into the media society of our time and even the toxic public communication in the age of Trump. After all, the questions formulated by Weber describe largely exhaustively the academic access to processes of self-observation in society with the help of media and journalism; they appear compatible with the postmodern consciousness of paradoxes of the mass media, like perversions of social media.

But the relevant subjects showed – at least on this topic – their impotence at the time and then proved ignorant of theory-led empirical investigation of media and journalism. Weber's plan for this kind of investigation was then forgotten for a long time, before a few social scientists and communication scientists returned to it.

In those months before the Sociology Day, the press enquiry was the top priority for Weber, as his many letters on the topic show. He looked for staff and financial support, as the undertaking would not only involve a great deal of work, but also be very expensive. On October 20, 1910, he presented his »business report« with a host of specific research questions – on topics as diverse as media and publicity, media economics, features of media actors, an international comparison of media and journalism systems, and journalistic practice (in particular news collection and selection. If one organizes these research questions (20 in all) and translates them into modern terminology, it is clear that only a few are specific to that time: They appear universal and topical even today.

The significance of this research plan, which has almost the dimensions of a special research field and was therefore described by Weber biographer Joachim

Radkau as a »stillbirth,« is now considered of a very high level from a specialist point of view. It is also worth noting that Weber is counted among the most important references for empirical media research in the USA.

However, it was not until more than 20 years after the conference in Frankfurt, and more than 10 years after his death, that Weber's questions were gradually worked through by the relevant academic discipline. In fact, they were first addressed by communication research in North America, especially by researchers with European roots (including Lewin and Lazarsfeld).

The planned study was a »disenchantment program« directed at »rationalized,« even then in part already »Taylorized« journalism: its social function and its economic conditions, its procedures, roles and consequences – and all the associated paradoxes that characterize journalism (Pörksen/Loosen/Scholl 2008).

The media sociologist and his legacy

Opinions in the literature vary as to why the ambitious undertaking ultimately failed. The authors can at least agree that Weber's pyrrhic victory in the »war of the Heidelberg professors« played an important role. His then fight against the protection of sources and his destruction of the journalism studies professor Adolf Koch had lost his project the support of the German press and journalists. It was ultimately Weber's small (legal) battles that caused that great war to be lost.

All that ultimately remained of Weber's plan was a small survey of editors, in which the completed questionnaires disappeared, and a few dissertations – and more or less clear traces in various empirical studies, some of which were only conducted decades later. In recent years, specific research projects have been dedicated to these traces.

Meanwhile, his focus on the mass media proved to be merely a temporary episode. In this topic, too, there was a long delay between Weber's activities and their reception by the relevant academic field. It was not until the 1950s that communication studies began to become interested in Weber's research ideas, which he had presented in Frankfurt and on which he had concentrated with great dedication for a long time. The field had finally seen that Weber was suitable as a reference in the field, which had never enjoyed a particularly distinguished reputation. First Fritz Eberhard and Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, then later Hanno Hardt and Arnulf Kutsch, drew attention to the fact that, as part of his inspiring efforts to establish sociology as a new academic discipline, Max Weber had made sustained appeals to target the mass media, which had been emerging since the 19th Century, and its actors – namely the journalists.

It is now clear that, over the decades, Weber as a media sociologist had a wide-ranging influence in both the theory and empirical investigation of media and

journalism. Some of this effect has been direct, such as when his questions, categories or terms (e.g. ideal type, charisma, ethics of responsibility) are picked up on and his (internationally) comparative methodological access is adopted. Yet he has also had an indirect influence – for example via the detour of reference to social theorists, many of whom refer back to Weber themselves a great deal. Examples such as Habermas, Luhmann, and Bourdieu show how this manifests itself in current theory debates in communication science – for instance in the discourse about system/actor constellations in journalism research (Weischenberg 2012, 2014).

In 1930, a decade after Weber's death and two decades after the presentation of his press project, the 7th German Sociology Day in Berlin, which was dedicated to him, looked at the topic of »press and public life.« It was another remarkable event, held shortly before the National Socialists came to power in Germany. In the discussion, Carl Schmitt, its intellectual pioneer, presented his radical conservative concept of press freedom as a »polemic term.« Ferdinand Tönnies, Chair of the DGS since its foundation, triggered anger among the academics present, including Emil Dovifat, by calling their subject »chicken science« – a pejorative name that has stuck.

Was Max Weber a journalist (too)?

The wide range of efforts to identify Max Weber also includes the search for answers to the question of whether he was (also) a journalist. There is no doubt that he repeatedly published work in journalistic media for a time, for example in his favored paper the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (1915-1919), the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* (1916/1917), the *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* (1919), and, very early on, the *Allgemeine Zeitung München* (1898). It is also true to say that he was interested in the media and journalism his whole life and that there were diverse links. As both an academic and a publisher, he certainly possessed a rare combination of theoretical and practical skills.

Yet it is doubtful whether it is really possible to talk of Weber as having had a media career, as is sometimes claimed. He himself did not see »journalist« as even a peripheral part of his career. Unlike Karl Bücher, who was a member of the staff for several years, he did not work in the editorial office of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Weber did spend a few weeks in the offices of the paper in late November 1918 – not as a journalist, but as a political advisor. It was during this time that he produced various newspaper articles on Germany's future system of government.

As early as May/June 1917, he had published a four-part series of articles about »parliament and government in Germany's new order« in the *Frankfurter Zei-*

tung. His widow later reported that Max Weber considered a new career shortly before his death and could have imagined working for a newspaper – a change of heart that probably had less to do with serious (late) career planning and more to do with acute frustration with his disliked role as a university lecturer, which he had recently resumed following a break of many years.

However, especially when he gave his opinion on current political issues, Weber did have a certain affinity with the newspaper article as a genre. Yet in these articles in particular, even though he simulates journalism, he proves to be someone who observes from the perspective of an academic – as many media professors today tend to do when they are attracted to public media. There is no doubt that Weber rises to the »challenge of the day« – at least thematically – in his topical pieces, thus meeting editorial expectations. Yet his structure is often closer to that of the speaking style of a lecture, rather than adhering to the rules of the journalistic genre; the style has the emotion of an editorial and is certainly anything but free from value judgments. His newspaper articles are examples of the zeitgeist from which Weber operated in public at the time (Hufnagel 1971).

The angry »scientist of reality«

Max Weber was a self-proclaimed »scientist of reality.« His research accommodated »reality« – at least to the extent that it attempted to empirically record and describe its complexity from different observation perspectives. Initially, he always focused on (modern) society and investigated the consequences of its peculiarities. This was done in such an original, yet often erratic, way that many of Weber's followers after his death believed that they could pick out anything imaginable from his work and make it their own. This, too, demonstrates the suggestive power of his ideas – on the history of religions, on the emergence of capitalism, on power and sovereignty, on rationalization, bureaucracy and the existence of social institutions, and all in all on the disenchantment of the world (through science). Indeed, he was the first to recognize the importance of involving the emerging mass media as an influencing variable and investigating its features and effects.

Weber allowed himself, even in public, something very rare: anger. He had the courage of his convictions – something that he proved both as an academic (such as in promoting Jewish academics against strong opposition) and as a political publicist. He stood up for his opinion on almost every issue and at almost every opportunity – often as a creative thinker and at times right to the extreme of legal dispute. His method was simple: The trained lawyer insulted people up until the point at which they took him to court – where he would then come up trumps. Admittedly, this method did not work with Kaiser Wilhelm II, whom he

particularly hated and who simply ignored his attacks.

Weber, the »institutionalist« (Pöttker 2019), would have observed attentively and fought with all his polemic means Donald J. Trump's destruction of the social institutions in the USA that support integration and sustainability in society. Trump's »war against the media« was the first and most striking attempt at de-institutionalization at every level. Since then, he has attempted to take the wheels off the justice system in particular.

Somewhat late, but no less brilliantly, Max Weber has become a topic for topical media and its journalists. There is no comprehensive systematic research into this, either. But it is noticeable that Weber's work is often turned to when labels are needed for something complex or a flame is to be ignited – both in Germany and elsewhere. Max Weber has thus become a topic for a broad public over the last two decades. Not only have popular media popularized the person and his works – even specialist colleagues are interested in Weber as a person, however compartmentalized and insignificant the events to be presented are.

In the 1980s, few journalists in the USA would have heard of the name Weber. But his reputation soon exploded in the media – admittedly strictly within the mechanisms of journalism, which makes journalism out of everything. A qualitative analysis of sources from the years 1998 to 2000 shows how Weber's theoretical considerations and categories were presented in a way that was so accessible to the public that the sociologist suddenly became a kind of icon. Like all media icons, he paid the price of his ideas being alienated, abbreviated, twisted, and even instrumentalized for other people's persuasive purposes. The liberal use of Weber's categories in the media is shown in particular by the terms »Protestant ethic,« »iron cage,« »bureaucratization,« and »charisma« (Sica 2004).

In terms of dealing with media and journalism in a normative way, the potential of Weber's differentiation between the ethics of ideology and responsibility demonstrates how topical Weber is. This differentiation can be made plausible using the example of investigative journalism, in which the actors' behavior is generally guided by an orientation that is rational and based on the ethics of responsibility. If the aim is to achieve a »good objective« using specific – possibly questionable – means (such as the clarification of defects or misdemeanors in the political system), value-rational, ideological-ethical principles are put on the back burner during research.

A sentence from the declaration of principle that Max Weber made in Frankfurt on the function of the mass media is more fitting than ever in the age of the »media crisis and media war« (Weischenberg 2018) – and in these times, in the USA even more than in Europe: »Imagine that the press were gone; what would modern life be without the kind of publicity that the press creates« (Weber 1911)

About the author

Dr. Siegfried Weischenberg (*1948) started out as a journalist. After around ten years, he switched to the universities sector to aid in the establishment of the model degree program in Journalism Studies in Dortmund. After this, he became a Professor of Journalism Studies and Communication Studies at the universities of Dortmund (1979-1982), Münster (1982-2000) and Hamburg (2000-2013), also acting as a guest professor in the USA, Russia and South Africa, among others. He also held lectures and taught in many other countries, including China, Cambodia, Indonesia, South Korea, Ecuador, Chile, Israel, Turkey, Lebanon, Belarus and Ukraine. Weischenberg published more than 20 books and numerous papers in academic journals, in particular on the topics of news journalism, political communication, media technologies and system theory. Together with colleagues, he twice investigated 'Journalism in Germany' based on representative samples of its actors. From 1999 to 2001, he was National Chair of the German Federation of Journalists. He lives in Hamburg and Port Alfred (South Africa). Contact: weischenberg@gmail.com

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