

STEPHEN KALBERG, *Deutschland und Amerika aus der Sicht Max Webers* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013), 236 pp.

Ever since he submitted his dissertation on Max Weber in 1978, Stephen Kalberg, who teaches sociological theory at Boston University, has produced a continuous flow of studies on Weber's work. An appendix in the book under review lists 36 Weber-specific publications, many of them translated into several other languages. In the book's first chapter, Kalberg draws on his deep knowledge of Weber's work to give a concise introduction into some of the basic concepts of Weber's interpretive method. The following chapters 2 to 7 are then intended as illustrations of the explanatory potential of Weber's approach and deal with a variety of different topics. This provides a number of interesting case studies but also leads to many repetitions. The reason for this redundancy dawned on me only gradually: despite the impression created by the title, the book is not a monograph in which an argument is developed step by step in a sustained and systematic fashion but a collection of essays written for different occasions. All of the seven chapters of the book—ranging from 11 to 40 pages—were first published between 1987-2006, many of them in sociological journals like *Soziale Welt* and *Sociologica Internationalis*.

The author does not mention this fact in his introduction, but perhaps he did not think it necessary because all of the chapters, as varied as they are in subject-matter, have one basic assumption in common: every American phenomenon that the author finds in need of analysis can be explained by Max Weber's thesis that the uniqueness of American conditions must be seen as the result of the formative influence of ascetic Protestantism. Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis thus becomes the key for also understanding modern America. Due to the long-term impact of ascetic Protestantism, the American public sphere has been pervaded by positive values and an active disposition, making a retreat into private life, typical of fin de siècle German "Kulturpessimismus," unnecessary (chapt. 2). In contrast to German Lutherans, American Puritans have made work a key value in social life (chapt. 3). In contrast to Tocqueville, Weber explains the strong role of voluntary associations in American democracy more accurately by tracing their origins to ascetic Protestantism (chapt. 4). Disagreements on foreign policy

between Germany and the U.S., as for example in the case of America's invasion of Iraq, have to take into account the strand of idealistic moralism in American foreign policy that can be traced back to ascetic Protestantism. Because of that tradition, America simply has a different political culture, which explains its goal to bring democracy to Iraq (chapt. 5). Americans elected George Bush, Jr. for President in 2004 because, according to polls, moral values were more important to them than economic interests. Why? "The unique American religious tradition — the ascetic protestant sects and churches — played a crucial role" (167 m. t.) (chapt. 6). Finally, analyses of contemporary America, which criticize that an ethically motivated individualism, typical of the Protestant Ethic, has been replaced by a more selfish consumer-driven individualism, may be right for the moment. However, as Weber has argued, once cultural attitudes have taken root (as they have in America in the case of ascetic Protestantism), they may go underground temporarily but never disappear altogether and may thus be revived again. In other words: although Weber's thesis no longer seems to fit contemporary America, he is still right once we grasp the full explanatory potential of his method (chapt. 7).

Max Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis, on which Kalberg's analyses of American society rest exclusively in this book, has been under dispute ever since it was formulated in 1904/5.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Definitions of ascetic Protestantism keep shifting in this volume. In one of the first essays, we encounter Weber's initial equation of ascetic Protestantism with Calvinism, in which the Protestant Ethic emerges in response to an anxiety over predestination. But Calvinism's influence was stronger in Europe than in America, so that in one of the following essays, ascetic Protestantism is explicitly equated with Puritanism, although not all Puritans were Calvinists. Perhaps this is the reason why in yet another essay, the term Puritan has disappeared again, and Kalberg now identifies "Quakers, Baptists, Calvinists, Presbyterians, Pietists, Mennonites, and Methodists" (64 n.) as the core groups of ascetic Protestantism, although many of these groups were neither Puritans, nor Calvinists, and rejected the idea of predestination. Basically, this means that an explanation based on predestination is replaced by a shift to methodical work and saving patterns exemplified

On the whole it has been seen as a suggestive grand narrative that cannot always be squared with the facts. Some critics have rejected it on empirical grounds. Religious and intellectual historians in American Studies have criticized the vague contours of Weber's view of American Puritanism; social historians have questioned the centrality assigned to Puritanism in the formation of the United States. Weber's Kürnberger-mediated interpretation of Benjamin Franklin, a key element of his argument, remains a bone of contention. Fortunately, we do not have to enter into these debates here. The issue is not whether Weber was right or not, the issue is what we gain when we use Weber's thesis to explain events and phenomena in modern America that are far removed from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this context, bringing together scattered essays on different topics in one volume may actually be counter-productive. A claim that we may be willing to entertain as an interesting thought experiment when we encounter it in a single essay can take on a Pynchonesque quality in a collection of essays once we realize that, no matter what the topic is, the explanation is provided by always the same plot.

The author's continuous return to that one plot may have a deeper purpose, however, because in this way a familiar narrative about America can be preserved and retold. American society may have its conflicts and disagreements, but, in the final analysis, it is really shaped and unified by one founding principle. It is this principle—a claim never explicitly stated but implied many times—that makes America unique and inherently virtuous, despite remaining shortcomings. On the other hand, Germans come across in this volume as lacking drive and motivation, preferring to rely on the government and always only too willing to withdraw into privacy. Thus, in a grand sweep, published first in 1992 but still included in this 2013 publication, Kalberg sets out to open our eyes about Germany: "That private life has gained an increased role in West Germany again can be gauged by the vogue of a new inwardness in literature (see Struck 1986; Moser 1984; Muschg 1986). It is also reflected by the abundance of advice books in the realm of psychology and on personal relations, in the

by groups like the Methodists—which changes the role religion plays in the emergence of ascetic Protestantism. Kalberg never addresses these questions of definition.

widespread decision of working mothers to put their careers on hold and to stay at home for years, and it is reflected in the unwillingness of the unemployed to take on a job away from home, even where generous moving and traveling allowances are available," (113, m. t.).<sup>2</sup>

One of the problems in dealing with Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis in our field is that there remains a deep gulf between sociological theory and American Studies. Sociological theorists have more or less ignored American Studies scholarship, for example on American Puritanism, and American Studies scholars consider the theorists' broad and vague generalizations historically questionable. This book does nothing to bridge the gap. Kalberg is a respected Weber scholar who has recently received praise for a new translation of Weber's Protestant Ethic book. One would be hard put to claim, however, that in this collection of essays he has put his expert knowledge of Weber to good use. For readers who are looking for a more differentiated analysis of Weber's view of, and approach to, the United States, one may therefore recommend Claus Offe's *Selbstbetrachtung aus der Ferne. Tocqueville, Weber und Adorno in den Vereinigten Staaten* as the better alternative.<sup>3</sup>

Berlin

Winfried Fluck

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the German original: "Dass die Privatsphäre in Westdeutschland wieder verstärkt an Bedeutung gewonnen hat, ist beispielsweise an der neuen Innerlichkeit in der Literatur abzulesen (siehe Struck 1986, Moser 1984; Muschg 1986), an der Fülle von Ratgebern im Bereich Psychologie und privater Beziehungen, an der verbreiteten Entscheidung berufstätiger Mütter, ihre Karriere zu unterbrechen und jahrelang zu Hause zu bleiben, und an der mangelnden Bereitschaft von Arbeitslosen, selbst bei großzügiger finanzieller Unterstützung durch 'Umzugsgeld' und 'Fahrtkostenpauschale' einen Arbeitsplatz fernab von Familie und Freunden anzunehmen" (113).

<sup>3</sup> On the topic see also the very informative and amusing essay by Dirk Kaesler, "Man sieht nur, was man zu wissen glaubt: Max und Marianne Weber im Amerika der Jahrhundertwende," *Amerika und Deutschland. Ambivalente Begegnungen*, eds. Frank Kelleter and Wolfgang Knoebl (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 10-29.