

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Bizas, Konstantinos

Title: Reading Weber and the Claims of the Weberians

Year: 2016

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

Copyright: © The Author & Manchester University Press 2016

Rights: In Copyright

Rights url: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

Please cite the original version:

Bizas, K. (2016). Reading Weber and the Claims of the Weberians. *Redescriptions : Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, 19(1), 98-102.
<https://doi.org/10.7227/R.19.1.7>

Review

Lawrence A. Scaff, *Weber and the Weberians*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, 199 p. ISBN 978-1-137-00625-7.

Konstantinos Bizas, University of Athens, University of Jyväskylä

The short treatise *Weber and the Weberians*, authored by one of the leading experts on Weber of our times, the American sociologist and political scientist Lawrence Scaff, is indicative of substantial shifts in our understanding of Weber. In particular, Scaff goes at great lengths to unravel relevant stereotypes through a careful reading of Weber's works and those of Weber's claimed appropriators throughout the century, rightly noting that the work under way of the editors of the *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe* to restore Weber's late *Economy and Society* "to its original form and authorial voice [...] may yet open new doors onto interpretive possibilities" (p. 19). Hence, a fuller and more carefully edited access to Weber's oeuvre will probably incite systematizations and comparisons with other figures of a similar far-reaching impact beyond immediate contexts, such as those usually studied by disciplinary philosophy (an exercise already initiated by Wilhelm Hennis), providing thus a canonized reference point both for the historical mapping of interrelations and the assessment of a substantial portion of 20th century Western intellectual life.

Scaff's book is an invaluable source for academics interested in several disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences, either as experts concerned to master the examined field or as pregraduate students seeking well-informed textbooks, since it provides such a mapping that uses Weber as its initial and rather sympathetic reference point and then moves to appropriators, mainly in the Anglophone social sciences. Scaff's social-scientific training has allowed him to set up an exceptional and easy-to-grasp narrative that puts into a well-prepared order all the significant themes. Hence, since Scaff's acknowledgement has been secured, we will insist on weak points, in a way similar to the one Weber once reserved to Eduard Meyer, mainly derived from interests beyond an American sociologist's priorities, such as those coming from history and philosophy, as well as mediating efforts of the latter beyond the social sciences, such as "archaeology" and "genealogy" properly understood.

Chapter One serves as an outline for the book's main topics. Scaff explicates the difficulty of his project through the fact that Weber did not found a distinctive "school of thought", a state of affairs further explained through "institutional" reasons, having to do with Weber's limited career as an academic, as well as more substantial "personal" reasons, concerning Weber's shifting and concrete-centred priorities vis-à-vis general systematizations. Nonetheless,

Redescriptions, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 2016), © *Redescriptions Association*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/R.19.1.7>

Scaff identifies certain “distinctive signposts” of the Weberian “approach to knowledge”, fashioned according to methodological terms popular in Anglophone social science. An archaeological checking of Scaff’s list would suggest that most characterizations were not used by Weber himself and probably distort the assessment of Weber’s relevant views. For instance, as regards Weber’s alleged “historical and comparative approach”, careful readers of Weber’s critique to Meyer may perceive that Weber advanced the “comparative” ‘evaluative analysis’ as a different than “history”. The other basic theme of this chapter is an outline of Scaff’s mapping of the Weberians, on which Scaff ingenuously distinguishes circles of scholar approximation of Weber’s ideas, putting thus in a proper order the basic appropriations of Weber from his circle of direct German associates, then from his first American translators and German émigrés, and finally from post-war appropriators, also emphasizing with the aid of invaluable tables the persisting identification problems emerging from the editing and the translations of Weber’s works. The chapter closes with a few references on Weber’s appropriations in countries beyond the US, insisting on France and Japan, and providing limited references to Britain and Weber’s actual homeland, Germany. Certain striking absences are Colliot-Thélène in France, Weber’s gradual appropriations in Britain by Hayek and Popper, and Scaff’s gravest lack of emphasis in Weber’s distortion in Germany in the 1960s due to the Frankfurt School’s polemic debates with Popper, Hans Albert and other alleged “positivists” variously associated with Weber, whereas we should also bring up Weber studies in other languages such as the voluminous Greek work of Kosmas Psychopaidis, Thanasis Gkiouras and Pantazis Terlexis.

Chapter Two focuses on themes associated with Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Scaff is detailed in the nuances of Weber’s terminology on “ethic” and “spirit”, defeating thus stereotypes of judging Weber in terms of “idealism vs materialism”, whereas in one of the few cases in which Scaff provides substantial historical precedents for Weber’s work, readers are informed on Karl Knies’ influence on Weber on the topic. Similar associations with precedents, either in genealogy’s critical tone or in philosophy’s more reconciliatory attitude could moderate Scaff’s general sympathy for Weber, whereas his admiration of Weber’s groundbreaking comparative studies of religions could be checked if one reflects archaeologically on their gaps (e.g. ancient Greek religious life and Byzantine forms of Christianity). Scaff documents properly Weber’s argument of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and its impact in German and later American academic circles, rightly acknowledging a gradual shift of relevant uses of Weber in the US towards the post-war “modernization theory”, more recent cultural critics of capitalism, and social scientists associated with the “cultural turn” and historical sociology. Scaff also uses this chapter to discuss crucial methodological aspects of Weber’s work. His presentation of the “ideal type” could be improved through

a discussion of late Weber's insertion of the different case of "pure types" and a clearer association of "ideal types" with Weber's relevant devices of "logic" and "rational/rationality". We may claim that Weber's turn to "types" assuming the form "ideas" and his "special logic" are meant to provide simple easy-to-grasp representations of key aspects of a topic to be taken as interventions to the state of knowledge that counts as valid on the different occasions. We could appreciate similarly Scaff's references to "causal adequacy", "understanding", "explaining" and "meaning", which could also be illuminated through a reference to Weber's dependence on Dilthey, whereas Scaff's pains to disentangle Weber from the "methodological individualism" stereotype could be assisted from a partial association of the latter with Hayek's reading of Weber.

Chapter Three treats a wide range of topics centred upon Weber's and the "Weberians" understanding of "social action" and issues related to "authority", for the appropriation of which Scaff rightly implies that, despite their popularity, they reflect quite partial uses. Scaff provides a decent presentation of Weber's famous four "pure types" of action (*zweckrational*, value-rational, affective, and traditional) that could be improved with a clearer dissociation of *Zweckrationalität* from the inadequate translation of "instrumental rationality" and a stronger association with the presently popular "strategies", whereas his presentation of the succession from first to last type could be improved through an emphasis on Weber's latent polemic against the last two types, presented by Weber as liminal in terms of consciousness or rationality. A brief presentation of the questionable claims on Weber by traditions known as "hermeneutic" or "interpretative" follows, prior the extensive unraveling of the limitations of Weber's most popular 20th century appropriations by Parsons and Habermas. The summary of Weber's views on legitimation and *Herrschaft* (more properly translated as "rulership") is quite helpful, although the discussion on the appropriations of their aspects needs further clarification. For example, aside from emphasizing Weber's polemic presentations of "tradition" and "traditionalism", Weber's "charisma" could be assessed in terms of his vital interests in the far reaching potentials of religiosity as an issue capable of "marking a final victory over the 'human soul'" (Weber's quote in p. 37). Hence, one could draw parallels with Freud, as well as with Weber's disregarded childhood favourite Machiavelli, who used to regard founders of religions as more influential than political legislators.

Chapter Four assembles topics usually associated with "institutional" or "structural" analysis in the contemporary social sciences, as well as other themes of Weber's work presently covered by political science and legal studies. Scaff is quite analytical on Weber's distinctively German interests in "bureaucracy", the "state" and "law" and on their appropriations or assumed convergence with later theorists. The presentation could be improved through a closer association of such "types" with the perspective of "mechanisms", "ap-

pareils” and “dispositifs”, which has been quite popular since Freud and Heidegger. Weber’s conceptual apparatus could actually be seen as comparatively more advantageous due to its clearer contextual sensitivity and transparency of the persons involved, whereas other Weber’s devices that could have been treated accordingly are the *politischer Verband* (political association), political parties and parliamentary politics. As for the political-scientific themes Scaff does examine, he rightly highlights the yet unexplored or insufficiently exploited potentials of Weber’s nuanced understanding of topics including citizenship, nationality, ethnic groups and races, or even democracy and civil society. Furthermore, Scaff introduces in this chapter Weber’s importance for political philosophy, acknowledging Hennis’ relevant impact, but blaming him for reliance on selective readings and for a lack of a more substantial elaboration.

Chapter Five presents topics related to the identification of long-term processes in history associated with Weber’s so-called “rationalization thesis”. For the latter, Scaff analyzes three quite different instances from Weber’s work where “rationalization” or the “logics” of different value spheres appear. In all cases, Scaff properly distinguishes these cases from Weber’s uses of “rationality” (p. 142) by associating the former with long-term historical processes or formal simplifications, whereas his argument could be enhanced through their understanding as “types” serving as simplifying “interpretations” that convenience Weber’s occasional scholar interventions. Scaff then moves to appropriations or identifications of similar patterns in German leftists he calls “Weberian Marxists” and in other scholars that have worked in North America since. Scaff’s treatment of Foucault’s relations with Weber is weak, claiming that Foucault is a “thinker sui generis” and that “the record of his thinking remains incomplete” (p. 147–148). Scaff wrongfully claims that there is no “matter of influence”, since Foucault has more numerous overt references to Weber than usually thought, often in the same occasions where he cites Kant, an author acknowledged by Scaff as an influence only on Weber; other apparent Foucault’s appropriations of Weber include the over-celebrated “governmentality” analysis in the elementary terms of “conduct”, the approach of “power” in quite parallel terms to Weber’s *Herrschaft* and the distinction between the “universal” and the “special intellectual”, actually drawn from Weber’s “Wertfreiheit” article. Aside from recent attempts by late Eisenstadt and “developmental history” to pluralize “modernization theory” through an appropriation of Weber’s themes, the chapter closes with a discussion of suggested ways to depart from perceived discontents of “rationalization” and “disenchantment”. Scaff’s argument about Weber could be simplified through emphasizing the religious (and distinctively Protestant) element behind individual saviours for each value sphere and Weber’s pessimistic emphasis in interventions on small “private” environments, whereas later North American “re-enchantment” calls could be seen as more moderate suggestions, resting mainly on aesthetics.

Chapter Six deals with Weber's treatments beyond particular social-scientific appropriations. Scaff highlights Weber's persisting overall significance for the social sciences indicating Weber's role in the founding of expertized disciplines and his potentials for a renewal of such disciplines as present-day "economics" against Weber's "social economics" or the classic designation of "political economy", whereas his overall scheme for Weber's usefulness for social science could be criticized as suggested for Chapter One. Scaff then turns to Weber's wider intellectual significance beyond the social sciences, returning thus to Hennis, for whom Scaff rightly identifies two different aspects in using Weber. The former properly rescues Weber from subsequent constructions in terms of social scientists' vested interests, situating his significance instead in the light of a wider Western tradition next to such authors as Machiavelli or Montesquieu. Despite Weber's strong discontent with what counted as a doctrinaire "philosophy" in his time, this viewpoint is quite justified, due to Weber's mindful insertions associating his labours with such authors as Montesquieu (in the concluding paragraphs of the first essay of the *Protestant Ethic*), or Nietzsche, as well as his engagement in his present-day politics in similar terms, cited by Scaff himself. Besides, Weber's concern to provide contextually convincing "types" and "explanations" imprinted to his audience to an extent comparable to that of a religion could be unified in simpler terms through a stronger association of Weber with Machiavelli. Hence, Weber could be seen more properly as a disappointed liberal who tried to hegemonize smaller or larger domains in an effort to foster such freedoms as freedom of research or the freedom of expressing one's independent opinion for the long-term good of one's homeland. Scaff then rightly criticizes Hennis for his other paternalistic use of Weber as an educator for present-day political interventions, whereas his final comments on an interest on Weber from scholars working on geographical areas outside Weber's actual focus could be checked archaeologically through an awareness of the limitations of Weber's subject-matter when constructing his ideal types and the need for their reworking in terms of the ongoing production of more carefully documented knowledge around the globe.