



JOACHIM RADKAU

**MAX
WEBER**

A BIOGRAPHY

Max Weber

Max Weber
A Biography

Joachim Radkau

translated by
Patrick Camiller

polity

First published in German as *Max Weber* © Carl Hanser Verlag München Wien, 2005

This English edition © Polity Press, 2009

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4147-8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10 on 11 pt Times NR
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut that is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Acknowledgements

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Page 15, 73, 202, 273 and 331, BPK; 21, 26, 32, 44, 50, 54, 200, 214, 453, 485, 501, 521, 546, Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg, Sammlung Leif Geiges; 121, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, München; 236, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow; 289, Eva Kretzschmar/Private Collection; 304, Professor Karen Hagemann/Private Collection; 361, Tilman Evers/Private Collection; 374, Georg Lukács Archives/Edith Hajós; 484, Dr Ernst Ludwig Heuss; 552, Professor Guenther Roth/Private Collection; 554, Marion Herzo-Hoinkis.

Preface to the English Edition

A first suspicion that there was a tale to be told about Max Weber came to me, not untypically for my generation, from the United States forty years ago. At the time I was working on my dissertation concerning the post-1933 German emigration to the USA, and I became friendly with one member of this group, the historian George W. F. Hallgarten, who finally ended up in Washington. We subsequently wrote a book together, *Deutsche Industrie und Politik*, in which several passages had to be blacked out under pressure from the Deutsche Bank: this made us comrades-in-arms (for Weber, the strongest bond after an erotic relationship), despite our 42-year age difference. As a student, in the summer of 1920, Hallgarten had attended Weber's final lecture and wept at the news of his death, and for the rest of his life he felt under his spell. Shortly before his own death (1975) he was even planning to write a book on 'Max Weber's Sociology – a Tool in the Hands of the Historian'. Nor was he alone in being so enchanted by the great enchanter: a cult of 'Saint Max' was actually typical among German emigrés; Franz L. Neumann once famously said, '*It is here, in the United States, that Max Weber really came to life.*' I later also came in contact with Karl August Wittfogel – formerly, in his communist period, an opponent of Weber's – who tried in his way to complete Weber's fragments on the natural basis of society. I feel myself to be his successor in this respect.

Through Hallgarten I developed a kind of psycho-physical contact with Weber. But again and again the cult associated with the 'myth of Heidelberg' aroused feelings of aversion in me. For a long time I had a sense that Werner Sombart and Georg Simmel – both on familiar terms with Weber, though later in his shadow – offered greater inspiration, or at least greater challenges. Thus, in the 1980s I attacked Sombart's thesis that a shortage of wood had threatened capitalism with collapse in the eighteenth century, and I thereby triggered endless controversy among historians of the forest. From Simmel's essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903) I drew important stimuli for my history of *Nervosität* in Germany.

Unexpectedly, this very subject opened me up to the correspondence of Max and Marianne Weber, a real treasure trove for the semantics of 'the nerves' at the turn of the twentieth century. The decoding of old reports

on neurasthenic patients also proved valuable training for my Weber researches; you don't get far with hard-to-read handwriting unless you have a certain kind of sporting ambition. Forty years ago I read with pleasure the collective volume *The Historian as Detective*, edited by Robert W. Winks. And the young Talcott Parsons read Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* 'as if it were a detective story'. Similarly, a biographer of Weber needs a detective's instinct for clues. There is an ocean of literature about Max Weber, but it should not be thought that all the facts about him have long been clear and that only a theory is required to distil them. In my study of the sources, I would have one amazing experience after another.

With hindsight I can see how Weber had already been long at work in my unconscious. In his footsteps I devoted myself for a time to the history of Pietism, and again to the history of music, but in each case I eventually got stuck. When I tried to prove, through a comparison with Asian civilizations, that Europe's centuries-long complaint about wood shortages had paradoxically reflected its relative abundance of forest, I followed Weber's strategy of a vast circling movement in the East to gain victory for the thesis (in his case, the historical function of Protestantism as a catalyst for capitalism). And after I had finished my biography of Weber, when I was preparing my 'world history of the environment' for an American translation (*Nature and Power*, New York, 2008), it dawned on me that I had unconsciously taken Weber's *Economy and Society* as my model. Much as Weber there went into the social history of 'original types' of 'socialization', so did I set out the environmental history of 'original symbioses between man and nature'. In the end my new study of Weber became a way into my own subconscious. Indeed, why not? The point of working *on* Weber is ultimately to work *with* Weber and thereby to develop one's own intellectual resources.

I received quite a boost from Lawrence A. Scaff's book about Weber, *Fleeing the Iron Cage*, which I took with me on a three-week cycling tour. In particular there was the sentence: 'What is needed, above all, is to encounter Weber once again from the beginning and with a sense of judgment alert to the potentials of what he actually wrote and said.' Yes, that was precisely what I wanted to do. Fortune then came to my aid when a chain of coincidences gave me access to correspondence of Max and Marianne Weber which had previously been hidden from the public eye, and in which a new Weber began to emerge. Weber first became famous through *The Protestant Ethic*, but that 'worldly asceticism' was not his own religion; this is something that has often been misunderstood. Stanislav Andreski (*Max Weber's Insights and Errors*, 1984) thought he had found in Weber a case 'which fits Freud's idea that creativity stems from repression and sublimation of sexual desire'. But, oh no, Max Weber is not at all a good example of that.

This is not to say that the exact opposite is true. The German media have sometimes given the impression that I see Weber as illustrating Wilhelm Reich's theory of the orgasm as man's only salvation. I am not one of the

eternal sixty-eighters, however, and I am far from denying that the spirit has its own life and its own pleasures. Sexuality is not a *prima causa*; on the contrary, Weber's life-story shows how intellectual developments open the individual to erotic experiences. Weber's life ended under the sign of Venus, not of Mars. Lawrence Scaff, in his review of the German edition of my book, recalled that 'the relationship between intellect and eros, Athena and Aphrodite, is an old theme, from Plato onward'. In Weber's case the story of this relationship was an exciting drama.

In my view, a high point in this drama was the formation of the concept of charisma. There have been heated discussions of this in Germany. Gangolf Hübinger reproached me for underestimating the extent to which Gladstone served as Weber's model of the charismatic leader. But Thomas Karlauf, in his major biography of Stefan George (*Stefan George – Die Entdeckung des Charisma*), brilliantly reconstructed the erotic aura that surrounded the concept of charisma. As our two biographies developed, they had a mutually stimulating influence on each other. Ralf Dahrendorf has said that the 'rediscovery of Max Weber' is bringing the social sciences back down to earth, from the clouds of 'systems' and 'domination-free communication'. 'Personal networks', with their anthropological side and their connectedness through lifestyles and life-crises, are shaping up as the new 'Weber paradigm'. In this respect, Weber's encounter with George seems to have been a pointer to things to come. I do not believe, however, that Weber would have thought much of a 'Weber paradigm'. In an admittedly rather high-spirited essay 'The Heroic Ecstasy of Drunken Elephants: The Substrate of Nature in Max Weber – a Missing Link between his Life and Work' (in Volker Berghahn and Simone Lässig, eds, *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), I have argued matters out with a number of critics.

'A Struggle over Weber' is the title of a piece by Wilhelm Hennis on the current state of Weber research. The struggle among different branches of science over the dead Weber – each one would like to have him for itself – sometimes reminds one of the wrangling between Hellenes and Trojans over the dead body of Patroclus. I prefer to keep out of this myself (which does not mean that I prefer to avoid any fight). Historians take delight in quoting Weber's outburst against 'this damned science of sociology' (MWG II/6, 641), at the Frankfurt Sociologists' Conference in 1910 of all places; or the heartfelt groan in 1918, in his farewell speech at Heidelberg, that 'most of what goes by the name of sociology is a fraud'. But, in what he said about Georg Simmel, the same Weber mocked 'the ridiculous self-crucifixion before the name of sociology', as if it were the devil incarnate. He cannot be pinned down in this or that single quote. The dispute among university faculties obstructs our view of the *whole* Weber. For this reason, I removed a chapter about Weber and sociology from the manuscript of this book.

Stanislav Andreski (*Social Sciences as Sorcery*, 1972) counts Weber among the chief sorcerers of the social sciences. But he becomes confused

about this, for he thinks that a good social scientist must have a sense of humour and he can find no trace of one in Weber. It is the old cliché of Weber the sombre ascetic. In 2007 a song at the Cologne carnival, 'I'm so happy not to be a Protestant', was still repeating it: 'Max Weber hat gesagt, daß nur die Arbeit wichtig ist / daß der Herrgott den begnadigt, der die Pflichten nicht vergißt . . . Dagegen sind die Katholiken richtig supercool / bei denen sind die Pfaffen Polen, Inder oder schwul.'¹ I am pretty sure that Weber would have roared with laughter at these words. Theodor Heuss, the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany, who knew Weber well and made some of the most intelligent observations about him, had relished his 'earthy laughter' (WzG 72). Even the philosopher Heinrich Rickert, who already knew Weber in his school days and later tried to torpedo the Weber cult, had to admit: 'Weber's enchanting geniality and his delightful, wide-ranging sense of humour were irresistible' (WzG 111). In 1932 Eduard Baumgarten thought he could hear the dead Weber laugh when Marianne Weber said in public that she 'couldn't care less' about Goethe.

From what we know today, Weber laughed most often and most heartily in the company of Americans: during his trip to the USA in 1904, after his years of deep depression. By no means did he see America through the spectacles of *The Protestant Ethic*. There is also a lot of disguised humour to be discovered in his work. A term such as 'trained professional ecstasies' [*schulmäßigen Berufsextatikern*] (AJ 96) is full of comedy, though perhaps this is not so evident in translation. With regard to the difficulties that translators have had with Weber – ever since Parsons rendered 'stahlharte Gehäuse' as 'iron cage' in 1928 – he sometimes reminds us of Lao-tse, whose *Tao Te Ching* is read differently in every translation. (I once joked to Sam Whimster, the editor of *Weber Studies*, that nowadays perhaps 'Geist des Kapitalismus' would be better translated as 'ghost' rather than 'spirit' of capitalism – how loudly Weber would have denounced the lack of professional honour in today's bankers!)

All the more grateful am I to Patrick Camiller, who translated my often very German style into smoothly flowing English and, in quite a number of places, found English equivalents for the melody of the German language or German wordplay; 'Schnauzel' and 'Spatz' – the nicknames for Marianne Weber and Else Jaffé – became 'Snouty' and 'Sparrow'. He also took the trouble, whenever possible, to find and insert the English source material or bibliographical references corresponding to the German original. I have cut the thousand and more pages of the German by just under a third for the English edition, sacrificing, for example, detailed accounts of Weber's ancestors and the reception history of Weber's work, as well as sections of chapters dealing with his writings on the stock exchange, his

¹ 'Max Weber said that only work is important / that the Lord pardons those who remember their duties. . . Catholics, on the other hand, are really supercool; / their priests are Poles, Indians or gays.'

debate with Karl Marx, his relations with Rickert, Simmel and the neurologist Willy Hellpach, and his quarrels with Arnold Ruge and Adolf Koch. But I have also worked into the text a large number of new discoveries and new ideas. The German edition had the subtitle *Die Leidenschaft des Denkens*, but Lord Ralf Dahrendorf assured me that ‘The Passion of Thinking’ sounds alien to English ears. I would like to thank John Thompson of Polity Press for his friendly collaboration, and Inter Nationes for the financial support it gave to the translation.

Edward A. Shils, one of the American discoverers of Weber, recalls that ‘reading Max Weber was literally breathtaking’ – so much so that he sometimes had to stand up and catch his breath. My own experience was similar. And, precisely when I read Weber again after finishing my book, I became anxious that I had overlooked something because of my lack of distance. Be that as it may, I never cherished the absurd ambition to write the ‘ultimate Weber biography’, as one critic accused me of doing. Weber is a never-ending subject. The best that my book could achieve was, as Lawrence A. Scaff might have put it, to make it easier ‘to encounter Weber once again’, unencumbered by prejudices and with the explorer’s fresh curiosity. The point is not to erect a monument to Weber but to bring him back to life.

Joachim Radkau
Bielefeld,
February 2008

Abbreviations

All letters mentioned in the text without further reference have been quoted from copies in the possession of Prof. Dr Richard Grathoff (Oerlinghausen): this collection, which also contains much other written material, is referred to throughout by the abbreviation SG (Sammlung Grathoff). According to information provided by Edith Hanke, these are copies of transcriptions prepared for the Heidelberg research office, the Max-Weber-Forschungsstelle, and their wording may therefore be considered reliable. All sources beginning with 'Ana 446' refer to the Weber papers in the Bavarian State Library in Munich.

- AJ Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale, New York, 1967.
- AS Max Weber, *Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*, trans. R. I. Frank, London, 1988.
- AWG Alfred Weber, *Gesamtausgabe*, Marburg, 1997–.
- B Eduard Baumgarten, *Max Weber: Werk und Person*, Tübingen, 1964.
- BA Bundesarchiv
- CS Max Weber, *Critique of Stammler*, trans. Guy Oakes, New York, 1977.
- EG Melchior Palyi (ed.), *Erinnerungsgabe für Max Weber* (2 vols), Munich, 1923.
- EM Marianne Weber, *Ehefrau und Mutter in der Rechtsentwicklung*, Tübingen, 1907.
- E&S Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenter Roth and Claus Wittich (2 vols), Berkeley and London, 1979.
- FMW *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London, 1970.
- GASS Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik*, ed. Marianne Weber, Tübingen, 1924.
- GLA General-Landesarchiv
- GStA Geheimes Staatsarchiv

- JB Max Weber, *Jugendbriefe*, ed. Marianne Weber, Tübingen, 1936.
- K Max Weber, *Schriften 1894–1922*, ed. Dirk Kaesler, Stuttgart, 2002.
- L Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: Ein Lebensbild* (1926), Munich, 1989.
- LE Marianne Weber, *Lebenserinnerungen*, Bremen, 1948.
- M Max Weber, *Die rationalen und soziologischen Grundlagentheorien der Musik*, Tübingen, 1972.
- MWG *Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Horst Baier, M. Rainer Lepsius, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Wolfgang Schluchter and Johannes Winkelmann, Tübingen, 1984–.
- PE Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), trans. Talcott Parsons, London, 1992.
- PW Max Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs, Cambridge, 1994.
- R Guenther Roth, *Max Webers deutsch-englische Familiengeschichte 1800–1950*, Tübingen, 2001.
- RC Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth, New York, 1964.
- RI Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale, New York, 1958.
- RR Max Weber, *The Russian Revolutions*, trans. and ed. Gordon C. Wells and Peter Baehr, Cambridge, 1995.
- S Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (1924), ed. Marianne Weber, 2nd edn, Tübingen, 1988.
- SWG Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1924), ed. Marianne Weber, 2nd edn, Tübingen, 1988.
- WB Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, 1975.
- WG Max Weber, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte: Abriß der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1923) [posthumously published lectures], ed. Sigmund Hellmann and Melchior Palyi, 5th edn, Berlin, 1991.
- WL Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (1922), ed. Johannes Winkelmann, 7th edn, Tübingen, 1988.
- WuZ Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schwentker (eds), *Max Weber und seine Zeitgenossen*, Göttingen, 1988 (= publications of the German Historical Institute, London, vol. 21).
- WzG René König and Johannes Winkelmann (eds), *Max Weber zum Gedächtnis*, Cologne, 1963 (= *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 1963, special issue 7).

At the Den of the Sick Lion

In one of Aesop's fables a fox comes to the den of a sick lion. The lion calls out for him to enter, but the cunning fox remains outside. 'Why won't you come in?' the lion asks. And the fox answers: 'I'd come straight away if I didn't see a lot of tracks going in but none coming out.' In Horace's version: '*Vestigia terrent*', 'The footprints are scary'; it has become a familiar quotation. Weber gave the impression of a sick lion to those who saw him during his illness¹ – though certainly not a lion without danger. This '*vestigia terrent*' kept going through my head as I ventured deeper into the field of Weber studies. Was it wise of me? Doubts rose up again and again. Here too there were many tracks going in but so few coming out. I had been used to conducting research in open ground, on the outer edges of the social sciences fraternity. But now Weber had landed me right at the centre, where space is tight and you can feel the elbows pushing.

My consolation was that Weber too had operated in frontier zones, and had actually specialized in crossing the boundaries between disciplines. Someone who is mainly interested in enlisting Weber for his own special subject does not know how to appreciate this characteristic. The more specialized the discipline, the more the *whole* Weber drops out of sight and gives way to a half or even a quarter of the man. Even *Science as a Vocation* can be invoked in support of one's own narrowness. Yet that text is a perfect example of how we should be wary of tying Weber to particular quotations, instead of seeing the whole person all the way from *The Protestant Ethic* to the love letters. Weber's impact was due not only to certain concepts and theories but even more to what he *was*.

In this biography we shall be especially concerned with Weber's boundary-crossing between anthropology and natural science; it has been the least remarked upon in Weber studies but, as we shall try to show, is of the greatest significance. Until now Weber has been thought of as an enemy of nature, as a writer who widened the gulf between Snow's 'two cultures': literary and sociological culture on the one hand, natural science and technology on the other. I would like to show that this is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Weber.

During decades of moving in a triangle formed by the history of technology, environment and medicine, I have come to realize that despite the ocean of literature there are still many unnoticed ways of approaching Weber which partly overlap with one another and allow new discoveries to be made. It became one of my favourite games to surf the CD-ROM of Weber's collected works and to keep hitting on passages that I had previously overlooked; it would scarcely have occurred to me from the secondary literature that the words 'technology' and 'technological' [*Technik* and *technisch*] appear there no fewer than 1145 times, often in a far from trivial sense. My research on the history of nervousness had already shown me what a treasure trove were Weber's letters – and especially those of Marianne – for the 'nervous' semantics of the period. In the eyes of 'immanentist' interpreters, all this may appear to be what Weber's editor Johannes Winkelmann once called 'women's stories' [*Tantengeschichten*]. Yet even experts in Weber's biography can be heard to say that it regularly runs into the sand, because no one really knows what was involved in the 'nervous' complaint that cast its shadow on most of Weber's creative activity.

Finally, *nature* and its composites appear no fewer than 3583 times on the CD-ROM of Weber's work. Many instances tell us nothing in particular, but others, though seemingly trivial in themselves, become much less so when they are seen in context. In fact, nature may well constitute the missing link that has often been sought between Weber's life and work – not least when he is railing against nature, both outside and inside himself. Nor should we limit ourselves to 'nature', since nature is present even without the word. Weber's declared belief in *passion* is belief in a part of nature within human beings: not only in their autonomic reactions but also in their thinking. At the end of his inaugural lecture at Freiburg in 1895 he evoked 'the great passions that nature has implanted in us' (PW 28). In 1893, in his letter of courtship to Marianne, he sighed that he had been trying 'with difficulty' 'to tame the elemental passions with which nature has endowed me' (WB 177). And one of the key sentences in *Science as a Vocation* reads: 'For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion' (FMW 135).

'Nature, so long violated, was beginning to take revenge', is how Marianne Weber commented on her husband's breakdown (WB 235), believing not without reason that her own knowledge of nature, not least human nature, was a little more advanced than his. Although a modern Weberian must try to shake off the viewpoint of Weber's widow – that gatekeeper it is so difficult to get past – her comment may here be thought rather pertinent, perhaps in a broader and more enigmatic sense than she intended. Weber's hitherto unknown love letters to Else Jaffé from the last period of his life suggest that he himself interpreted his destiny in a similar way. Accordingly, my aim is to present Weber's life as a three-act play, with nature as the generator of dramatic tension: a project in the style of a myth or, better, in that of an ideal type. Why indeed should Weber's method not be applied to himself? We learn from him that ideal types are necessary in

order to grasp reality, although it should never be imagined that reality can be *derived* from them. Certainly we shall not find it too embarrassing that life contains something over and above the schematic drama of ideal types.

Work on a biography inevitably sets up identification processes, however much various biographers, most notably of Hitler, may deny this. For months I experienced a kind of depression, many of whose symptoms were devilishly similar to Weber's, and I thought that I was coming to see many things about him in a new light. From time to time my wife would say that my identification with Weber was giving her the creeps. I protested: 'I am not Weber!' As I engaged in this work, I felt more than ever how distant I was from him. But this man parks himself in your subconscious and stares at you with his dark challenging eyes; I was not the first to have this experience. I could sense how many admirers of Weber might sometimes be seized with fury at this incubus weighing upon them.

But who was Weber really? And who were those significant others to whom he related most deeply: Marianne, Helene, Else, Alfred? The more stories I heard – and there is no end of them – the more I noticed the contradictions, and the more Weber became for me the Sphinx. He himself once described the comprehension of the individual as the atomic physics of sociology,² and it is true that in the social sciences biography does play a role similar to that of atomic theory in physics: it leads to discovery of the uncertainty principle. It is precisely in individuals, the smallest units of history, that shape and form vary according to the position of the observer. Sometimes there are not just one but several possible histories.

A lot of things in Weber become apparent only when you pay closer attention to figures in his milieu. In general, you have to train your eyes on Weber's significant others in order to understand his own development; the I takes shape through the Thou. Weber thought he was living in an age of epigones and disenchantment, and yet both he and his interlocutors open before us a truly enchanting and intellectually dazzling world. In the end we no longer know whether Weber was a 'great man' among his contemporaries – assuming we know what a 'great man' is anyway. The good sense of Weber's postulate of value-freedom is particularly striking when we take it seriously in his own biography.

But, great or not, Weber is certainly one of the thinkers through whom the social sciences have acquired a distinctive complexion and against whom one can often sharpen one's own thinking; he seems to grow and grow as you keep reading his texts. In a way just a poor sod,³ he nevertheless offers the comfort that, even when you are up against it and have already wasted a lot of energy, you may find your way in the end. Above all, he encourages you to withstand tensions, to think more boldly, to sharpen your analytical faculties, to advance 'what if?' hypotheses, to give full expression to intellectual passion, but at the same time to curb flights of the intellect by raising objections along the way. Weber is a vivid reminder that there can be something better than Thomas S. Kuhn's 'normal science', which finds its satisfaction in the confirmation of existing paradigms. By

contrast, Weberian science is an ever tense wrestling match between the superabundance of life and cold intellectual dissection.

The unity of a biography is formed by the body of a human individual – an unsatisfactory circumstance for historians who shy away from ‘naturalism’. Body and soul cannot be separated from each other, and a biographer should declare his or her faith in their unity. Emotions are not a contamination of thought but the basis that underlies thought processes; anyone who reflects on human thought must also consider this foundation. That ideas and emotions are inseparable, that many decisions ‘come from the gut’, is something which lay people have always intuited, and through the science of neurophysiology it has permeated the ranks of the most up-to-date science. Brain scientists have never found a realm of pure reason separate from the emotions, even if philosophers of science act as if there were one. Lichtenberg already knew better when he demanded of scholars: ‘Learn to know your body, and what you are able to know of your soul.’⁷⁴ Marianne Weber also knew the importance of somatic history in the life of her husband. I think that most Weber scholars are basically aware of this, although many keep it to themselves as an occult science.

Weber’s creativity, we shall argue, was rooted not least in an ever more developed capacity to make his own experience of life a key to the world, not only through generalization but also through the raising of self-critical objections. We can ‘learn from Weber’ by following these tracks, and also by following them in our own unexhausted opportunities for knowledge and experience. This for me is the ultimate purpose of a biography of Max Weber. Science and life, science and love, science and happiness: after four decades of academic existence I see no more important or more stirring subject. Weber’s life and loves, his illness and his thought are an endless source of inspiration, whether for the peculiarities of academic or erotic life – or, more important, for the Eros of science with its pain so full of relish. This is probably not the least reason why the old lion holds people in his den.

Part I

The Violation of Nature

Max Weber was born on 21 April 1864 in Erfurt, the first of eight children. His brother Alfred, with whom he repeatedly argued throughout his life, was four years younger. In 1869 the Weber family moved to Charlottenburg, when the Berlin city council appointed the father, Max Weber, senior, as a paid councillor. At the age of two Max Weber, junior, fell ill with meningitis; it took several painful years for him to be cured of it. His father pursued a dual career, as head of the Berlin building department and as a National Liberal representative in the Reichstag and the Prussian parliament, while his mother Helene did voluntary work for relief of the poor. At that time a number of leading academics and National Liberals used to meet in the Weber home. In 1882 Max Weber passed his Abitur and went to study in Heidelberg, then in 1884 switched to law and economics in Berlin. In between he performed his military service in Alsace. In 1889 he gained his doctorate with a thesis in the history of law, concerning North Italian trading companies in the Middle Ages. In 1891 he qualified as a university lecturer with a work on Roman agrarian history. Having joined the influential Verein für Sozialpolitik in 1888, he was commissioned by it in 1890 to evaluate the material on the German territories east of the Elbe contained in a country-wide survey of farm-workers; this resulted in 1892 in his first major work, which immediately made a name for him. On 20 September 1893 he married his second cousin Marianne Schnitger (b. 1870). In 1894 he accepted the offer of a chair in economics at Freiburg, where his inaugural address, 'The Nation State and Economic Policy' (13 May 1895), attracted attention because of its combination of brusque nationalism and attacks on the big landlords east of the Elbe. In 1897 he accepted an offer in Heidelberg. On 14 June 1897 he provoked a violent quarrel with his father by accusing him of making demands on the mother for his own selfish reasons. When the father died on 10 August 1897, there had been no reconciliation. In the summer of 1898 'nervous' disorders made Max Weber increasingly incapable of work, and in 1899 he was excused from further teaching duties. In 1903, at his own request, he was released from academic service.

Great Mother and Harsh Nature: A Precocious Youth on the Margins of Berlin

‘Family communism’: the primal form of society

The family, which in traditional conceptions is part of the natural order but for modern social science only appears to be so, remained Weber’s most stable lifeworld, although shortly before his own breakdown he wrecked his parents’ marriage in a violent rage. All other communities – academic faculties, political parties, civil associations – detained him only for a time. This fundamental experience marked his thinking. The historian Friedrich Meinecke, who knew Weber well, already pointed out that he ‘could be thoroughly understood only on the ground of his family’ (WzG 143f.). The microcosm of the family was all the more significant for him precisely because the wider macrocosm was brimming with irreconcilable struggle and coldly rational calculation; it remained a source of great warmth and trust, whatever the tensions and quarrels, and offered many gifts in which there was no thought of anything in return.

For Weber, then, ‘domestic’ or ‘family’ communism had something primeval and homely that distinguished it from political communism. ‘Society’, in the sense of a specific gathering of people crystallized in the family (independent of state institutions), was a primary experience – although, to be sure, it was not only natural instincts but also capital that held the family together. ‘A domestic community binds only if it is geared to indisputably common *tasks*’, Weber taught the young Arthur Salz in 1912 (MWG II/7–1, 428). Yet for Weber the family never had the mere function of an economic system; it always preserved a vitality of its own. Which was not at all to say that it was a harmonious idyll, as it showed its strength precisely in the midst of a quarrel.

With an eye to the slave barracks of ancient Rome, the 32-year-old Weber let slip a phrase that could have come from an instructor in Catholic social thinking: ‘Man can develop only in the bosom of the family’ (K 57). This sounds like a wise aphorism or a well-known and generally applicable law of nature. But Weber’s own parental home was not exactly a bed of roses: his mother did not think twice about interfering in the affairs of her grown-up children, nor they in hers, and letters were routinely passed around – even

the ‘thoroughly intimate correspondence’ that Max exchanged with Marianne and Helene when he was staying in a sanatorium (MWG II/6, 575). In any event, whereas the young Werner Sombart complained that his parents did not understand him, and that even their goodness made him feel unhappy (‘I felt at ease only with others of my age’),¹ Weber’s experience of life as a young man sharply differed from that of his nearest contemporaries in the world of social science, and this difference affected his whole intellectual-spiritual bearing. The ‘crisis of the family’ – a favourite theme of the early sociologists, especially the French² – was for Weber neither a major sociological issue nor a personal experience.

‘Family’ and its various compounds appear 786 times on the German CD-ROM edition of Weber’s works, and ‘kinship group’ [*Sippe*] 736 times. Sometimes in his writings he explicitly refers to his own family experiences. Lujo Brentano, who knew from his own merchant family of Italian origin that Catholicism and capitalism can at best only tolerate each other, once remarked with a touch of derision: ‘If Max Weber, to prove the correctness of his views, can adduce observations from the business circle close to him, then perhaps I may be allowed to do the same’ (R 65). Weber’s notes to the later edition of *The Protestant Ethic* reveal how much this criticism wounded him, although the brilliant Brentano was one of the colleagues with whom he restrained his quarrelsome proclivities.

In the web of an extended family

In a popular romantic view of society, the old extended family including grandparents and relations has shrunk in modern times to the nuclear family consisting only of parents and children. On closer inspection, we can see that the nuclear family was also a normal phenomenon in earlier times. Max Weber, however, experienced the intense (and often tense) cohesion of an extended family, of that whole web of kinship relations which is so confusing for anyone outside it.

Even his loves remained within the family circle. The first love of his youth was ‘Klärchen’, his sister Klara, whom he sometimes tenderly called ‘Kätzchen’ (kitten) and used to kiss on the mouth; their mother, feeling unmoved at Max’s wedding, poked fun at Klara’s weakness for her eldest brother by performing a sketch in which she despairingly sang: ‘Abandoned, abandoned, oh abandoned am I – such must be my grief as the “first woman” I once was . . .’³ A certain brutal candour was part of the Weber family style. Max’s first semi-fiancée, Emmy (‘Emmerling’) Baumgarten, was his cousin; Marianne was his second cousin. Indeed, when he fell in love with Else Jaffé, she was already family in the wider sense, as Marianne’s close friend for many years and Alfred Weber’s companion in life – which did not exactly make the situation easier. And Mina Tobler had for a long time been in and out of the house when she and Max became physically close: she figures in Marianne’s letters as ‘Tobelchen’. Family