

REVIEW ARTICLE

COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY OR ASIAN STUDIES?

Max Weber's Essays on India and China under Scrutiny

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I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Wolfgang Schluchter, professor of sociology at the University of Heidelberg, with the financial help of the Werner-Reimers-Foundation has organized a series of international and interdisciplinary conferences which were intended to evaluate various parts of Weber's historical and comparative writings, published early in this century, on the basis of more recent historical and theoretical knowledge. Two of these conferences centered on Max Weber's essays on India and China which are known in the English-speaking world under the titles 'The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism' (transl. and edited by H. Gerth) and 'The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism' (transl. and edited by H. Gerth and D. Martindale). As a result of the two conferences, two volumes have been edited:

Wolfgang Schluchter: Max Webers Studie über Konfuzianismus und Taoismus. Interpretation und Kritik. (suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 402). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1983. 416 pages, DM 24.-

Wolfgang Schluchter: Max Webers Studie über Hinduismus und Buddhismus. Interpretation und Kritik. (suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 473). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1984. 382 pages, DM 20.-

Because of their comparative perspective, Weber's essays on India and China have long been a challenge for sociologists as well as for specialists in the two fields of Asian studies. Their historical content as well as their theoretical framework and the formulation of the main questions have stimulated new research but also much critique. It is obvious that many new historical facts have come to light since Weber's time and that many aspects of Chinese and Indian history are seen by modern scholars in a different or at least in a more differentiated way. The contributors to Schluchter's two volumes bring out

many of the critiques which must be made in this respect, correcting, for instance, Weber's concept of Chinese law (K. Büniger) and of Indian law (J.D.M. Derrett), some statements on Theravada Buddhism (H. Bechert) and on Indian sects (H. Kulke), on the Chinese city (S. van der Sprenkel) and on Confucian literati (P. Weber-Schäfer).

But Weber's essays are also the result of a comparative approach which should be evaluated in its own right. Weber's intentions and his terminology have not always been understood by indologists and by sinologists who read the essays on India and China as if they were monographs on these cultures. Particularly the English versions of Weber's essays have contributed to certain misunderstandings because they have been published without regard to their context and because of the very poor translation of the essay on India in particular (Kantowsky 1984).

Weber's essays on India and China are part of his 'Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen' (The Economic Ethic of World Religions) and have an important 'Introduction' and 'Intermediate Reflection' the translation of which may be found by the English reader under the titles 'The Social Psychology of World Religions' and 'Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions' in 'From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology' (transl. and edited by H. Gerth and C.W. Mills). All of this is part of Weber's 'Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie' (Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion), Tübingen 1920-21, which also contain his "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", and it should, moreover, be interpreted in relation to the chapter on 'Sociology of Religion', contained in Weber's 'Economy and Society'.

Schluchter reminds the reader of this context in his introductory essays to the two volumes under discussion, and it is refreshing to see that many contributors to Schluchter's two volumes have been aware of the complicated interrelations between Weber's writings.

Sociologists have often considered Weber's essays on India and China in the context of a so-called 'Weber-thesis', as a simple control-test of a thesis about the relationship between protestantism and capitalism which Weber, supposedly, had expounded in 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism'. Many scholars, interested in questions of industrialization and modernization in the Third World, have tried to prove or to disprove this 'Weber-thesis' and the results of their efforts fill many book shelves. However, modern research, especially in Germany, has underlined the fact that the thesis of a relationship between protestantism and capitalism was well known even before Weber, and that Weber was interested only in the protestant contribution to the formation of a certain rational conduct of life, a certain ethical life-style which had an 'elective affinity' to capitalism. As for the essays on India and China, it has recently been suggested that they must be interpreted in relation to Weber's 'overriding question' concerning the phenomenon of rationalization, or even, more precisely, the phenomenon of the rationalization of the conduct of life. Schluchter does not cease to remind his readers that Weber wanted to contribute to a typology and sociology of rational-

ism, - which implies that there may be different kinds of rational forms and directions of the conduct of life. All this insistence on the typology and sociology of rationalism should not make us forget, however, that Weber also, perhaps mainly, wanted his essays on India and China to be "contributions to the characterization of modern Western man and to the knowledge of Western man's becoming and culture" (Marianne Weber 1984, p.346).

It is a relief to find very little mention of the 'Weber-thesis' in Schluchter's two volumes - but few are the contributors who ask truly comparative questions. S.N.Eisenstadt and Th.Metzger, among the contributors on China, are interested in the normative contents of the Chinese tradition; they criticize or at least reinterpret Weber's idea of a lack of tension in Confucianism, as compared to Protestantism. On the other end of the scale we find N.Sivin who considers Weber's comparative questions to be fruitless, and M.Elvin who limits his analysis to economic and technological factors and considers the analysis in terms of meanings which people attach to their actions, as unnecessary - at least in the case of China.

Among the contributors on India, G.Obeyesekere, while not quite agreeing with Weber's interpretation of early Buddhism and with the use of the concept of exemplary prophecy, pursues a comparative approach, while S.Tambiah remains within the Buddhist tradition and feels that the choice of the economic ethic as a yardstick in the study of religion is the result of a prejudice. Important, though non-comparative, is Heesterman's contribution on caste and karma.

For the comparative analysis, too little has perhaps been said about the question whether Weber's interpretation of the influence of heterodox sects and movements in Asia on a possible rational conduct of life must be reviewed in the light of modern research, and in which way. This is regrettable, particularly in view of the interesting framework provided by Schluchter's introductory essays. H.Kulke's contribution on the bhakti movement in India and H.Schmidt-Glintzer's contribution on the concepts orthodoxy/heterodoxy in China touch on this question, but are mainly concerned with other problems. From a comparative viewpoint, contributions on the Indian city and on Indian science might also have been useful.

A number of contributors to the two volumes have raised against Weber the charge of ethnocentrism. This charge should not be minimized, but it also raises certain questions. The term ethnocentrism may have different meanings: some use it to denote implied value judgements relating to other cultures, others mean the use of Western concepts, e.g. the concept of theodicy, in the study of non-Western cultures, and still others (N.Sivin, K.P.Gupta) consider an approach ethnocentric if it is the purpose of its author to study or analyze another culture in order to better understand his own - the approach of comparative sociology. At least in the last instance we are not dealing with a methodological but with a philosophical question which is at the very heart of the debate between "Weberians" and specialists of Asian studies (indologists, sinologists et al.).

Max Weber might have said that the more we rationalize one method or scientific approach, the more there is the likelihood that it collides or is in tension with other principles of rationalization, with other scientific approaches. Schluchter hopes, in any case, that the interdisciplinary and intercultural discussion in his two volumes, if it cannot completely overcome the tension between comparative sociologists and those who study the 'uniqueness' of Asian cultures, may at least contribute to the spread of the knowledge of Weber's comparative cultural sociology.

Together, Schluchter's volumes update Weber's studies of world religions historically, and they provide contrasting, yet mostly critical views on his method and on his 'Problematik'. Schluchter's own contributions provide comprehensive introductions from an immanent point of view.

It should not be left unmentioned that Schluchter has also edited a volume on the third essay of Weber's 'The Economic Ethic of World Religions', about ancient Judaism (W. Schluchter (ed.): *Max Webers Studie über das antike Judentum. Interpretation und Kritik.* (suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 340). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1981, 330 pages, DM 14.-).

A translation of all volumes into the English language would be useful.

II. SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE VOLUME ON WEBER AND CHINA

1. Schluchter's introductory paper first analyses the intentions and purposes of Weber's 'The Economic Ethic of World Religions', mainly in reference to the 'Introduction' (see above). He then discusses the systematic position which Weber attributes to Confucianism within the world religions and, finally, he gives a summary of Weber's essay on China, followed by a discussion of the major critiques.
2. Wolfram Eberhard updates Weber's historical knowledge of China and he suggests that Weber's concept of an 'unchanging China' should be replaced by the idea that there were several distinct periods in the Chinese past. China since the Han dynasty must be understood as a state with a rational government and, since Sung times, we find the beginnings of capitalism.
3. Sybille von der Sprenkel describes the political order of traditional China on the local level: towns and villages. She points out that the towns since late Ming times had their own ethos and were not mere administrative centres but powerful economic units, contrary to Weber's opinion. Since Sung times, the central administration had a positive attitude towards commerce and trade.
4. Mark Elvin questions what he considers to be Weber's thesis, namely that the traditional Chinese situation was due to the lack of a certain mentality. He proposes the theory of a 'high-level equilibrium trap': Supply and demand in China were constrained by a special combination of circumstances,

- in particular the impossibility of improving productivity in agriculture under pre-modern technology. This 'trap' could only be broken by the introduction of new technology exogenous to the Chinese world.
5. Karl Büniger gives a summary of our present knowledge of the traditional Chinese legal system which, in his opinion, followed the principles of the Legists. We cannot talk of 'Confucian law'. Büniger agrees with Weber that the concepts of 'subjective rights' and of 'limited company' did not exist in China.
 6. Arnold Zingerle reflects about the conditions under which intellectual exchange between sinologists and sociologists may be possible and he discusses a recent sinological critique of Weber's essay on China in the context of Weber's methodology.
 7. Peter Weber-Schäfer discusses the term 'Confucian literati'. He maintains that Weber's group of bureaucrats and aspirants cannot be compared to the total number of those who had the status of literati, because many literati were never admitted to administrative positions and certain administrative positions were filled by specialists who were not literati.
 8. Thomas Metzger concentrates on Weber's concept of tension. While Weber found no 'tension' in Confucianism, as compared with the tension in Puritanism, Metzger redefines tension as the result of a 'sense of predicament' in a hopeless battle and he suggests that the Neo-Confucian who strove for self-perfection, felt such a tension. Because of the existence of this 'tension' in Neo-Confucianism, Metzger sees continuity between traditional China and modernization.
 9. Tu Wei-ming discusses aspects of Neo-Confucian philosophy not directly related to Weber's essay.
 10. Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer suggests that it is difficult to apply the concepts orthodoxy/heterodoxy to traditional China, because there was no official dogma and 'heterodoxies' were tolerated as long as they did not question the legitimacy of the administration. Weber's opinion that Chinese heterodox movements did not produce a methodical way of life, is nevertheless accepted in principle.
 11. Nathan Sivin compares Weber's approach with that of Joseph Needham. Needham knew that the Chinese were more advanced scientifically up to the Renaissance, and his approach also has the advantage of taking account of intercivilizational processes. But both Weber's and Needham's approaches are, according to Sivin, problematic because questions like "Why did China not produce autochthonous capitalism" or "Why did China not produce modern science" are without real interest if we want to understand what happened.
 12. Shmuel Eisenstadt tries to show that, contrary to Weber's opinion, there was no lack of transcendental vision or tension in China, but that there existed a secular definition of this tension and a this-worldly mode of its resolution. This reformulation of Weber's thesis can explain, according to Eisenstadt, both the forcefulness and the weakness of Weber's essay

and can also lead to an understanding of why in China the encounter with modernity gave rise to a revolutionary transformation.

III. SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE VOLUME ON WEBER AND INDIA

1. Schluchter's introductory paper analyses aspects of the 'Intermediate Reflection', in particular the concepts of world-adaptation and world-renunciation, and of mysticism and asceticism. The results of this analysis are then used to summarize and to interpret Weber's essay on India. The Bhagavadgita is seen to be at the centre of this essay and of his 'sociology as Weltanschauung'.
2. Jan Heesterman points out that, in Weber's view, the caste system becomes a particularly stable phenomenon when it is related to the karma doctrine. But, according to Heesterman, the traditional caste society and the ethical rationalism of the karma theodicy are an unsteady combination, as can be seen in the institution of the renouncer or in the tension between varna and jati. Weber was not aware of these tensions in Hinduism.
3. Wendy O'Flaherty maintains that the karma doctrine is an answer to an existential problem. Rather than functioning like clockwork, it accepts emotionally satisfying answers to the problem of evil. For instance, bhakti can intervene, providing grace instead of justice.
4. David Shulman asks whether we are justified in distinguishing a great and a little tradition in India, and he suggests that the claim of the brahmins to be the foundation of Hindu culture is justified. He bases this opinion on the comparison of several versions of a myth which is found at all levels of Hindu society.
5. Krishna P. Gupta feels that, on the whole, Weber's method is not useful for the study of Hinduism. He shows, however, that Weber's perspective changes slightly in different parts of his oeuvre and sees an important theoretical advance in those parts where the historical uniqueness of a religious tradition is stressed.
6. J. Duncan Derrett asks whether Weber's analysis of Hindu law is still relevant today. Weber did not realize, Derrett concludes, that Hindu law is a phenomenon *sui generis*, different from the tradition of Roman law and from the Judaic and Islamic tradition. The dharmashastras are not lawbooks but admonitions or recommendations, and the 'legal' activities of the shastris were part of their endeavours towards the creation of virtue.
7. Stanley Tambiah questions Weber's interpretation of early Buddhism as a movement of elitist intellectuals renouncing the world. The order of monks, the Sangha, rather lived in symbiosis with the world; and what Weber considered to be changes in Buddhism (political ideas, adaptation to the needs of the masses) which he attributed to Ashoka's era, had, according to

Tambiah, its beginnings in early Buddhism.

8. Gananath Obeyesekere questions Weber's characterization of the Buddha as an exemplary prophet. Early tribal religions were of non-ethical nature, but the Axial Age produced two branches in the Indo-Iranian religious tradition: ethical prophecy of Zoroaster and ethical asceticism of the Buddha. This ethical asceticism was possible only in connection with a lay community. It is a weakness of Weber's characterization of Buddhism to depict the monks as not interested in the lay community.
9. Heinz Bechert accepts the main points of Weber's interpretation of early Buddhism and also the idea that certain factors, described by Weber, produced a change in the old 'soteriology of intellectuals'. Bechert thinks that there are also some still valuable suggestions in Weber's description of Theravada Buddhism, but he considers Weber's remarks on the later developments of Buddhism in India as insufficient.
10. Hermann Kulke evaluates Weber's interpretation of the Hindu sects and finds that he overemphasizes the sexual-orgiastic aspects. Kulke suggests three possible reasons which may have led to Weber's interpretation:
 1. In Weber's time, the sects were often interpreted as an expression of the degeneration of the Aryan brahmins on Indian soil;
 2. The idea of sexual orgies was necessary in the context of Weber's concept of rationalization;
 3. Weber was irritated by the idea of 'new sexuality' and by the 'new gurus' of his own time.
11. Shmuel Eisenstadt thinks that there may be a contradiction in Weber's analysis of India: on the one hand we find the idea of renunciation of the world in Hinduism and Buddhism - and on the other hand the creation of a great civilization. In his article, Eisenstadt tries to solve this apparent paradox in an analysis based on the concept of 'Axial Age'.
12. Karl-Heinz Golzio, in an appendix, provides information on the indological sources which Weber used.

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