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A PREFACE WITH A HISTORY, OR:
SEVEN WAYS TO MISS THE POINT OF MAX WEBER'S OWN RESEARCH PROGRAM

[seventh 'History of the Humanities' conference; Amsterdam, November 17, 2018]

I can still see in my mind's eye the three hefty tomes of Max Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* ('Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion') that my father kept in a bookcase on the landing. Even from the outside they looked quite forbidding, and when in 1964 I left home for Leyden University to study history I carefully kept passing by those tomes and whatever essays they might contain on a subject as foreign to me as the sociology of religion. As a history student I did learn, inevitably, of the existence of something called 'the Weber thesis' about capitalism and Calvinism, which from 1905 onward (when Weber first published it) brought the author lasting renown. By way of preparation for an hour-long oral examination by one stern history professor I had to work my way, utterly bored, through a British historian's (R.H. Tawney's) book-length effort to refute the Weber thesis — an effort that did little to alter my prejudice or endear me to the author of that thesis. Nor did a suggestion by another professor, a staunch Calvinist himself, to engage me in the apparently forever-ongoing debate about the Weber thesis. In the meantime, other historical works helped me develop a preference, never since lost, for doing history the comparative way. If only I had realized at the time that no historian was better equipped to demonstrate how best to do comparative history, and how best to avoid its manifold pitfalls, than the very same Max Weber whose hefty tomes I kept so carefully skirting!

Decades later, and meanwhile a history professor myself, I opened (for some reason that I don't quite remember) Marianne Weber's biography of her late husband, and I got hooked almost at once. Only now did I begin to realize what I had been missing. It is in particular the lengthy passages she dedicated to those three hefty tomes that now began to intrigue me. I learned that the very title of the three hefty tomes is apt to lead the careless passer-by astray. Rather than just a loose collection of disparate essays on something so unattractive-sounding as the sociology of religion, the three tomes really contain a highly coherent set of mostly quite lengthy treatises, with that on 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' coming first. But I now gathered that what united this particular treatise and the at least equally lengthy ones that followed, those on Confucianism, Hinduism & Buddhism, and ancient Judaism, respectively, rested partially hidden in their alternative title. As meanwhile myself the owner of those tomes, what I now held in my hands proved to be a study of nothing less than 'Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen' ('The Economic Ethics of the World Religions'). Of course, I am telling you here absolutely nothing new; countless scholars before me and after me have noticed the same; only, I am right now introducing the theme of my lecture to you, and I am using to that end my personal road to Weber, and how it is that it took me so long, and along so circuitous a pathway.

Already more than half-converted by Marianne's sympathetic but also very learned account, then, I finally opened the first of the three hefty tomes on its first page. There I encountered an introductory piece, impeccably yet most unappealingly entitled by Weber 'Vorbemerkung' ('Preparatory Remark'). Reading it just floored me. Why? And how had I managed to miss its profound message for so long?

Here is, first of all, a very brief summary of what those fifteen pages appeared to have to say.

In introducing the fourteen hundred pages that follow it, the 'Vorbemerkung' places the 3-tome series under the aegis of what Weber here regards as the in part unique development that, amidst the great civilizations, distinguishes the European variant. He lists several phenomena and historical processes that Europe definitely had (or still has) in common with her fellow civilizations, but also a number of *pronounced forms* thereof that are historically found in Europe alone. He holds the latter, uniquely European phenomena to be mutually connected by a specific form of rationality. In other civilizations, too, you find a quest to grasp through observation and studious reflection how natural phenomena hang together, but only in Europe in the period of the Renaissance did this quest begin to assume the pre-eminently rational guise of modern natural science. In every civilization you encounter music, often refined and elaborated down to its most minute components, but only Europe saw the early-medieval onset of a multiform development that eventually led to the rationally differentiated, modern chord harmony of a Bach, a Beethoven, a Wagner. The striving for profit is a feature of every time and place, and so is capitalism in its diverse forms: predatory capitalism, adventurers' capitalism, speculators' capitalism. But only in 16th-century Europe do you find the first onset of our modern capitalism, based as it is on the rational calculation of profit and loss and on free but at the same time disciplined and efficiently organized labor. Weber attributes two general characteristics to these and a few other specifically European developments: that *rationality*, and a certain *universality* in the sense of either general validity (as in modern natural science), or the boundless expressive forms that reside in the triad (as in modern chord harmony), or the elimination through competition of all other modes of production (as in modern capitalism).

In short, to quote the opening sentence of the 'Prefatory Remark':

It is both inevitable and right that someone who is himself the offspring of the modern world of European culture should approach problems in world history with the following question in mind: through what concatenation of circumstances did it come about that precisely, and only, in the Western world certain cultural phenomena emerged which stand — as at least we like to imagine — in a historical line of development of *universal* significance and validity?

So Weber has two primary concerns. In certain cultural domains Europe has produced something that is not only very exceptionally its own but also lies in a 'historical line of development of *universal* significance and validity', of concern, in principle, to the whole of humanity. And the question is how this may have come about. At this point Weber's answer to that question is but very vague; we just heard him state that what is singular about Europe's history is 'due to a concatenation of circumstances'. This tells us nothing more than that some monocausal answer cannot be given to the question. Even so, the phrase does prepare us, when we move on to the first instalment (the one on Protestantism and capitalism) of the treatises that together make up 'The Economic Ethics of the World Religions', for a considerably less simple-minded account than the popular one, which simply runs thus: 'according to Weber, Protestantism caused the rise of capitalism' (immediately followed, with numerous historians, by 'and of course he was dead wrong about that').

But back now to the 'Preparatory Remark'. My theme today is how easy it is to miss the piece itself, and the message it contains, exemplified by how easily I myself have missed both the piece and its message. How can that have happened? Indeed, how is it that it can easily happen still?

Here is one very recent example, taken from an in many ways truly admirable work, Joel Mokyr's masterful *A Culture of Growth. The Origins of the Modern Economy* that came out last year. On p. 287 he

attributes to Max Weber “the old chestnut” that China never had any science at all. Recall now what we just heard Weber argue in his ‘Preparatory Remark’ about other civilizations, too, displaying serious investigations of natural phenomena and how these hang together, whereas in Europe alone such investigations at one point in its historical development began to take the specific guise of modern natural science. How likely is it, then, that, in Weber’s 300 pages long treatment of Chinese conceptions of the world and our human place in it, he would just baldly state that China never had any science, period? It is not likely, and indeed he does not state anything of the kind. What Weber does state is that in China such researches did suffer lethally from the magic-perfused mental climate in which they were undertaken. That view has meanwhile proven to be far too simplistic; only, it is not at all equivalent with denying China any science at all. Or, to amplify the point, not only Mokyr but countless other commentators, too, have interpreted Weber’s vision of Europe’s singular development as an *absolute* – as if he were arguing that Europe developed something that the other advanced civilizations just never had. His much more interesting, much more stimulating point of comparative departure is rather that Europe shared numerous features with other advanced civilizations, but that some of them – science, music, capitalism; a few more – turned in Europe into something far more specific – modern science, modern chord harmony, modern capitalism; a few more. And what further singles out these modern specifications is (to repeat) that each of them pointed, according to Weber, in a direction of universal rationality and validity.

I widen the point further. What we have in Weber’s ‘Prefatory Remark’ is a healthy counterpoison against all reasoning about the differences between civilizations in terms of lacking this, that, or the other. It is true that certain civilizations did not develop certain things that others did. Much more usual, however, is a number of variations on a common theme, as with the common theme of everyday dinner utensils and the variation resting in your eating it with chopsticks here, with forks and knives there. Just so, on the large scale of phenomena like capitalism, science, or music, you find their multiple forms just about everywhere. They are not lacking; it is only that one specific civilization happened to develop them in a very specific, much more pointed direction – a direction of universal validity.

Happened to develop them? Or is it possible to adduce causes for these developments? Weber certainly thought so, and that is what his vast, cross-culturally comparative, three tomes-long investigation is aimed at from start to finish.

So much for setting forth what those who have passed by the ‘Preparatory Remark’ the way Joel Mokyr and countless others did, have been missing. How, indeed, have they managed to miss it?

In my abstract I announced that I would list at least seven ways of missing it.

Let me, in the frame of this largely Anglosaxon-tinged conference, address the matter of translation first. The fact is that ‘The Economic Ethics of the World Religions’ has never been translated into English. What has been translated, are separate parts, *as if* they are separate – that is, they have been translated, by partly different translators, as stand-alone pieces. The first treatise to be translated was *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in 1930 by the well-known sociologist Talcott Parsons. I already told you that this work, following directly on the Preparatory Remark, forms the first portion of the first tome of ‘The Economic Ethics of the World Religions’, which came out in the year when Weber passed away, 1920. However, as a stand-alone piece it had, indeed, come out first in 1905, and it was in that quality that Parsons translated it.

In other words, he cut the treatise loose from the larger frame in which Weber had meanwhile enveloped it, and in which it attains its full, historically-comparative meaning and significance. So did the German / American sociologist Hans Gerth when he translated the treatises on Confucianism and Taoism, on Hinduism & Buddhism, and on ancient Judaism, as if each forms a book apart, unrelated to the other portions. As a consequence of that approach, two pieces in the three hefty tomes remained outside the translation process altogether: the 'Zwischenbetrachtung' ('Intermediate Reflection') that Weber inserted between his essays on China and on India, and, yes there we are back again, the 'Preparatory Remark'. And it so happens that these two much shorter essays are far and away the most informative writings that we have from Weber about, respectively, his point of departure for, and the theoretical underpinnings of, the entire series.

I am not saying that the 'Preparatory Remark' has never been translated. It has been, in two collections, one entitled *Max Weber. Selections in Translation* (1978), and the other *Max Weber. Readings and Commentary on Modernity* (2005). And if, under these unexciting titles, you nonetheless manage to come across the 'Preparatory Remark', you still find (but only if you take the trouble to compare the translated version with the German original) that their translators have simply left out certain portions of Weber's argument. Are there better ways to hide from the AngloSaxon, and therefore from the world center of scholarship, what Max Weber was really aiming at in one of the two large enterprises that kept him occupied over what proved to be the final decade of his immensely productive life?

I doubt whether there are better, that is, more effective ways. But there have certainly been other ways to hide it, or at least to keep it away from the limelight it has deserved all along.

For instance, the habit of examining the essays on religion in China, India, and ancient Israel separately has also manifested itself in Germany. In the 1980s an expert on Weber's oeuvre, Wolfgang Schluchter, took the excellent initiative to organize three successive conferences on each of these portions of the 'Economic Ethics of the World Religions' with a parade of international specialists (Sinologists, Indologists, Hebraists) to see what, after more than half a century, was still valid or at least of possible use in those three hefty tomes. Depending to some extent on whether the specialist in question was a broad-minded person or more of a hair-splitter, the essays in question earned a remarkably positive verdict from the respective juries. Except the 'Prefatory Remark' and the 'Intermediate Reflection', that is, the overarching statement of the problem and the grand formation of the theory, themselves: these two fell victim to the very division into distinct specialisms I am addressing here, and just remained outside the discussion.

So we have now arrived at the way in which certain wide-spread academic habits have, surely inadvertently, stood in the way of the 'Preparatory Remark' acquiring the renown it so amply deserves. I return now to the personal account with which I opened my lecture. I should surely have been keener, way back in the 1960s and 'seventies. But there are also less personal sides to how long it has taken me, once cross-culturally comparative history began to captivate me, to find the way to Weber.

Ideological thinking habits are surely part of the reason why. It was not quite for nothing that I instinctively shunned involvement in the never-ending debate about what passed (and still often passes) for the Weber thesis about Calvinism and capitalism. I was not aware at the time that Weber had not at all been out to explain the rise of capitalism out of Calvinist conceptions of divine predestination, but only to

establish a relation of 'elective affinity' there where emerging features of modern capitalism came to co-exist in certain 17th century European lands with a specifically Calvinist or baptist outlook on professional life. But whether or not I was aware at the time of that so much more sophisticated, true Weber thesis (and I was not), I did sniff in any case the deeply ideological load of the entire debate at the time – scholars with religious and theological axes to grind were overwhelmingly engaged in it, and that was not an approach to the past that I felt, or feel, much in sympathy with.

Another barrier on the circuitous way toward the 'Preparatory Remark' rested in Weber being loudly and widely advertised as the anti-Marx. That is, he was said to be the great scholar who had demonstrated, against the Marxist, historical-materialist fashion of explaining historical events, the viability of historical explanation carried out by pointing at underlying ideas – as if that was what Weber had been doing in his 'Protestant Ethic'.

Further, at the time of my missing the 'Preparatory Remark' and its significance, Weber was widely known as, professionally, a sociologist, and even as one of the founders of that discipline. That is, to be sure, entirely correct – he was. But is that all he was? The same American scholar who, in 1930, translated *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons, also translated Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* ('Economy and Society') – the outcome of the other massive investigation that Weber undertook during the final decade of his life and likewise not quite managed to complete. Parsons went on to turn his own interpretation of, in particular, the methodological portion of that massive work into the cornerstone of the very sociology that in the 1950s through 1970s became predominant world-wide – primarily America-based functionalism. Other aspects of Weber's expertise – the jurist, the political scientist, the methodologist, the economist, the economic historian, the cultural historian, the historian of religion, the historian of Roman agriculture, the music historian, the cross-culturally comparative historian – were examined, if at all, in just the academic niches of the relevant specialists.

We are here taking part in the seventh conference that brings together historians of the humanities. It is at the same time hard and easy to remember that when, no more than ten years ago, the first conference opened, likewise here in Amsterdam, the history of the humanities hardly yet existed. Its inventor, Rens Bod, had the wide vision to see that, beyond the study of the history of musicology, or of art history, or of literary science, or of the writing of history, and so on and so forth, it is desirable, but also possible, to take a grander look and to examine the past of the humanities in one bold, unifying grab for the whole. He has also had the vision to examine that vast topic not just for one cultural sphere but the cross-cultural, historically-comparative way.

What is the fate of daring, cross-culturally comparative historical efforts? Or is there a common fate? I doubt it, but perhaps the fate of Weber's effort has to tell us something in that regard. I discern grounds for pessimism and for optimism alike.

My pessimist conclusion first. It is indeed only too common in academic life: as the translation history of Weber's three hefty tomes, and also the way Schluchter set up his three panels suggest, the grand, coherent vision gets so easily lost in the discussion between specialists, and is barely heard, in ways further reinforced manifold by a whole range of academic, mostly disciplinary habits that I shall, after all, leave unspecified here.

My optimist conclusion is that, luckily, there are meanwhile scholars who have been able to assess the full significance of Weber's 'Preparatory Remark', as also its companion piece, the 'Intermediate Reflection'. The pioneer, in my opinion, has been the German historian Joachim Radkau in his *Max Weber. Die Leidenschaft des Denkens* (2005; translated with one chapter left out as *Max Weber. A Biography*). In this outstanding biography, the best biography I have ever read, you are guided along by means of all those guiding threads that, like the 'Preparatory Remark' among others, are strewn over Weber's oeuvre. With this biography the age of Weber, the man of the thesis, and of Weber, the scholar sadly carved up between the specialists, has come to an end, to give way to a more ample Weber. This scholar, who at least resembles the full Weber, is thus revealed to be, almost a century after he passed away, still one of the most inspiring thinkers that we, historians, can learn from. This is particularly true of the cross-culturally comparative approach to big historical questions, in which Weber was the great pioneer. It is a terrain that even among *bona fide* scholars, and *a fortiori* among the many amateurs, is a veritable minefield of wishful thinking and of monolithic explanations. It is one of Weber's greatest achievements to have picked his way very carefully through this hazardous territory.

For instance, in making his comparisons he unerringly opted for the one level at which it makes sense to make them. He does not go for the macro-level, where civilizations are being compared with each other as such — that way you inevitably end up in worthless essentialisms. Nor does he opt for the micro-level, where you compare singular phenomena or events with each other — there the historian's standard objection to historical comparison holds sway that each event is unique in itself. Instead, he opts for the meso-level. In his case the unit of comparison rests in what he calls the 'economic ethics' of a given civilization — how matters of production, of commerce, of professional life, etc., are principally conceived there, and how, as such, they bear the mark of its predominant religion.

Further, page after page you find with Weber a grandiose interplay between a bold yet subtle leading question (the one posed in the 'Preparatory Remark') and a theoretical schema (that of the 'Intermediate Reflection'), on the one hand, and, on the other, loads of empirical material that is never there just for its own sake but that helps shape the schema while at the same time fleshing it out.

That is how it should be done, and with some effort all of us can still pick up a thing or two from how, almost a century ago now, Max Weber did it.