

On the “Topological” Reading of Max Weber*

LEPSIUS M. R. (2016). MAX WEBER UND SEINE KREISE: ESSAYS. TÜBINGEN: J. C. B. MOHR (PAUL SIEBECK).
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The collection reviewed here, *Max Weber and His Circles*, is one of the posthumous publications of the writings of the outstanding German sociologist, Mario Rainer Lepsius (1928–2014). The book was prepared for publication by his son Oliver, a lawyer and philosopher of law, a professor at the University of Münster. It contains sixteen essays on Max Weber. Lepsius explores a wide range of issues related to the life and work of the classic of German sociology. Here are a range of topics he regards as among the most interesting ones: the meaning of the initial statement of the Weberian question and the intellectual echo of his writings, the ideas about what a professional politician should do, the political activity of Weber himself, and the biographical and historical context that formed him. The texts included in the collection were written by Lepsius over about thirty years. Some of them were discovered by his son Oliver in the researcher’s archives and are published for the first time: “The Impact of Political Orders on Man: Max Weber’s Hopes and Fears Seventy Years After,” “Max Weber and the German University,” “Max Weber in Italy,” and a small treatise on Weber’s house in Heidelberg (“Cultural Liberalism, Cultural Protestantism, Cultural Feminism”).

The author’s long and diverse study of the personality and intellectual legacy of one of the founding fathers of sociology can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that Lepsius, who has received several honorary scientific awards (including an honorary doctorate) and was a member of several academies (including some foreign ones), was for many years a full professor at the University of Heidelberg, with whom Max Weber’s work is closely associated. His works include studies on various aspects of modern society: the development of institutions in modernity,¹ the theory of democracy,² German reunifica-

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В данной работе использованы результаты проекта «Между политической теологией и экспрессивным символизмом: дискурсивные формации позднего модерна как вызов социальному порядку», выполняемого в рамках Программы фундаментальных исследований НИУ ВШЭ в 2019 году.

1. *Lepsius M. R.* (1990). *Interessen, Ideen und Institutionen*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

2. *Lepsius M. R.* (1993). *Demokratie in Deutschland: Soziologisch-historische Konstellationsanalysen*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

tion and European integration,³ the social structure of industrial society,⁴ and the history of sociology as a self-reflection of modernity.⁵ But he is no less famous as a co-editor of the 47-volume Max Weber Complete Edition (Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe [MWG])⁶. This unique historical and critical edition set new standards for research on the history of sociology throughout the world. The last volumes of this project, which lasted more than 30 years, were published in 2018. According to many of those involved in this project, Lepsius played a key role in the implementation of this grandiose intellectual enterprise, starting with a discussion of its concept in the mid-1970s.

Despite the fact that he does not have a large volume of writings, and that his books are mainly collections of articles like the one reviewed here, in the eyes of Weber scholars from around the world Lepsius is considered to be a leading figure or “grandseigneur,” according to Dirk Kaesler, the famous German sociologist.⁷ Moreover, he was one of the most influential social scientists, first in the West and then in the united Germany of the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. His outstanding scientific work and organizational talent received official recognition: from 1971 to 1974, Lepsius was the chairperson of the German Sociological Association, founded in 1909 by Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Werner Sombart, Georg Simmel.

The book consists of five parts:

Section I, “The Scholar and His Impact” (pp. 1–75), is devoted to the Weberian research program in the broadest sense. It highlights the following topics: (a) the research of the uniqueness and potential of Weber’s sociology (pp. 3–19); (b) the applicability of his approach to the study of institutions in the context of German reunification (pp. 20–37); (c) Weber’s prognostic gift in relation to the risks of modernity (pp. 38–50); (d) the applicability of Weber’s concept of charismatic authority to Adolf Hitler’s “Führerstaat” (pp. 51–57); and (e) Weber’s role as the founder of modern social sciences (pp. 58–75). Especially should be noted the importance of Lepsius’s analysis, done through Weber’s conceptual framework, of deinstitutionalization processes which happen in the political and legal order of modernity under charismatic rule when “the tyranny of a ruler is not limited by any institutional boundaries” (p. 54).

Section II, “A Politician” (pp. 79–114), consists of two small texts: one about Weber’s activity in the establishment of the German Sociological Association mentioned above, and the second about his relations with German universities. In Section III, “The Travel-

3. *Lepsius M. R.* (2014). *Institutionalisierung politischen Handelns: Analysen zur DDR, Wiedervereinigung und Europäischen Union*. Wiesbaden: Springer.

4. *Lepsius M. R.* (2015). *Soziale Schichtung in der industriellen Gesellschaft: Mit einer Einführung von Wolfgang Schluchter*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).

5. *Lepsius M. R.* (2017). *Soziologie und Soziologen: Aufsätze zur Institutionalisierung der Soziologie in Deutschland*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).

6. *Weber M.* (1984ff.). *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe (MWG)*. 47 Bände / Hrsg. H. Baier, G. Hübinger, M. R. Lepsius, W. J. Mommsen, W. Schluchter, J. Winckelmann. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).

7. *Kaesler D.* (2017). *Die Weberei, sie höret nimmermehr auf*. Available at: <https://literaturkritik.de/lepsius-max-weber-seine-kreise-weber-max-weber-gesamtausgabe-weber-max-weber-gesamtausgabe-weber-sie-hoeret-nimmermehr-auf,23023.html> (accessed 22 June 2019).

ler” (pp. 117–140), Lepsius gives unique data about Weber’s trip to the United States in August–November of 1904, and of his repeated stays in Italy between 1899 and 1913.

Section IV, “The man in his relationship” (pp. 141–271), the most voluminous one, is devoted to the most personal, even intimate moments in Weber’s life. It includes five studies of his biography, personal connections and social milieu. The range of topics discussed here is broad — from the issue that has key significance for the whole of Weber’s scholarship and concerns the historical contextualization of sociology of the early 20th century (pp. 143–158) to the reconstruction of the life of Weber’s family in the house at Ziegelhäuser Landstrasse, 17 in Heidelberg (pp. 159–209) and the confused story of his love affairs with Mina Tobler (pp. 210–231) and Else Jaffe (pp. 232–251). The section ends with a study of the role of Munich in Weber’s life and the preservation of his memory in the Bavarian capital (pp. 252–271). Here the reader can learn more not only from Weber’s personal, but also from his intellectual life, for example, the fact that despite being an international celebrity, Weber was elected with only a small majority of votes a member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.

According to some critics, it is this biographical section which reveals Lepsius’s outstanding skills in clarifying particular moments of Weber’s life or interpreting specific Weberian ideas and his own social affiliation with the same bourgeois environment which Weber himself openly described as his own background. The articles in this part of the collection clearly express the author’s subtle understanding of this milieu with its vital and stylistic features, such as its urban character, education, rhetorical power, the charm and sovereignty of the high modern culture holder. For example, in the article called “Cultural Liberalism, Cultural Protestantism, Cultural Feminism,” Lepsius, using the example of Weber’s family house in Heidelberg, masterfully reconstructs the family and public life of the Protestant “bourgeoisie of education” in Germany at the turn of the 20th century, emphasizing their liberal spirit and slightly diminishing the economic basis of their cherished openness — the large family property. It is not a big surprise that under Lepsius’s pen Weber’s villa, built in 1847 by Max’s grandfather, turns with its numerous inhabitants into a meeting place for various luminaries, descendants from famous German scientific, entrepreneurial and creative dynasties — the author himself gave entertaining tours around the building.

In this regard, it is striking how the pretty four-storeyed Max Weber House on the picturesque bank of the Neckar River is now used by the University of Heidelberg — not as a museum,⁸ as might be expected — but as an international educational center where students from abroad attend language training courses and receive a career guidance in advance of their further studies. It was here, in the apartment on the second floor, that the Weber couple lived from 1910 to 1919 and it was here that Marianne Weber returned after Max’s death in Munich in June of 1920. She lived there until her death in 1954, having pragmatically transformed her salon not only into a place for weekly meetings of Heidel-

8. Of course, the university museum does have Max Weber materials, but they are presented there in their standard “museum-like” version.

berg intellectuals (“Geister Tee”), but also into a significant center for the reception and promotion of her husband’s intellectual heritage (pp. 188–195).

In the final section V, “Max Weber Complete Edition” (pp. 275–313), the author tells us about the design, structure and bibliographic features of this project, which has long been the most important event in the world of Weber scholarship. It should be noted that Oliver Lepsius was assisted in the preparation of the book under review by another co-publisher of the MWG and no less important scholar of Weber, Wolfgang Schluchter.

In exact accordance with its own title, the book depicts, with literary elegance and sociological precision, the thematic, personal and geographical circles which Weber himself was the center of. Without slipping into nastiness in the reconstruction of Weber’s confused affairs with Else Jaffa or with musically gifted Mina Tobler, the author while analyzing these tangled personal relationships comes to important conclusions: for example, the genealogy of Weber’s sociology of music becomes much clearer within this constellation.

It remains a matter of regret that Lepsius did not have enough time to write a separate piece about the most important woman in Weber’s life — his wife Marianne — who after his death became an active promoter of her husband’s ideas. This gap in the book is partially compensated for by the extensive passage devoted to her in the text about Weber’s Heidelberg apartment. In particular, the reader can learn some underreported details of Marianne Weber’s own intellectual activity — for example, of her public position as the president of the League of German Women’s Associations and her political position as a representative in the federal state parliament of Baden or her book titles, including *Wife and Mother in the Development of Law*, for which she was awarded an honorary doctoral degree by the Faculty of Law of the University of Heidelberg.

Dirk Kaesler described Lepsius as “a small forms master”: even small texts written by Lepsius provoke, in the prepared reader, a peculiar effect of presence, infecting the reader with the author’s confidence that this was the case in Weber’s circles and that this is how the works of the classic should be interpreted. Despite the essay genre, this is a volume of outstanding scholarship of Weber’s intellectual heritage, which allows the audience to join the highest intellectual culture and feel the passion of Weber approaching his subject. These are characteristic not only of the author, but of his hero as well. We hope that this wonderful book will become available not only to the German-speaking public, but also to the global scientific community interested in the life and work of a great sociologist.

О «топологическом» прочтении Макса Вебера

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