

Joachim Radkau

Max Weber. A Biography.

Cambridge and Malden: Polity 2011.

683 pages

\$35.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-7456-4148-5)

Generally, all the works devoted to the figure of the eminent German sociologist Max Weber deal with his intellectual aspects and all the scholars are forced to know only the theoretical details of Weber's profile; in the literature about Max Weber there is a kind of void between *life* and *work*. Obviously, many books have been written about Weber's life, as for instance Marianne Weber's *Max Weber: ein Lebensbild*. But all the books devoted to Weber's life are intellectual biographies instead of biographies as such. Joachim Radkau, Professor of Modern History at the University of Bielefeld (Germany), tries to fill this void in the existing literature on Weber with this extensive book (note, though, that the original German edition that came out in 2005 with the title *Max Weber. Die Leidenschaft des Denkens*, is almost 300 pages longer than this English version). At any rate, this is not an ordinary biography: Radkau ambitiously attempts to connect an account of Max Weber's inner psychological and human aspects with his theoretical work. Radkau's book is full of interesting details regarding Weber's life, many of which have been uncovered by Radkau in Weber's family archive (which is generally inaccessible to scholars).

Radkau's *Max Weber*, like a Hegelian dialectical scheme, is divided into three parts: part one is entitled *The Violation of Nature*, the second one *Nature's Revenge*, and the third part *Salvation and Illumination*.

In the first part, Radkau introduces the readers to Max Weber's family environment, where the most important figure was Weber's mother Helene Fallenstein. In this case, everything gravitates around the concept of "nature". During his childhood the German sociologist suffered from an unhealthy maternal relationship, to the extent that he thought that he "had reason to feel that she had treated him cruelly, already as a child, though not equally in all periods of his life" (13). Nonetheless, Max Weber's conception of nature "was not determinist but 'possibilist'; he thought not in terms of structures but in terms of opportunities for action" (14).

In the second part, Radkau examines Max Weber's struggles with depression and neurasthenia, struggles that forced the German sociologist to stop working for a while. In fact, Weber could not lecture or work on his academic research: the source of these problems, according to the main Weberian scholars, was his overworking. Because of this he also suffered from insomnia and, as Radkau writes, "bad sleep was nature's punishment for any overtaxing of one's strength. It was an unavoidable punishment: nature knew no mercy" (151). But Radkau tries to unhinge this commonplace, tracing instead a link between Weber's nervous breakdown and his personal experiences. Among these experiences Radkau mentions a sexual trauma reported by Weber: he is said to have become sexually excited while being spanked by a maidservant (though Radkau thinks the woman was in fact Weber's mother).

In the third and final part of his book, Radkau analyzes Max Weber's return to scientific work. As is well known, Max Weber, beginning in 1909–1910, began to work assiduously once again. From this late period originate the sociological concepts of value-free science, ideal-type, charisma, and so on.

Radkau's *Max Weber. A Biography* is an enormously detailed and fine-grained book. It will surely become a must both for sociologists and for Weberian scholars thanks to the innovative approach that Radkau applies in his work. By taking into account Weber's private life and his theoretical concepts, conceived as a unity, Radkau gives us a new and insightful image of Max Weber.

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