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Max Weber: Sociologist for the Twenty-First Century

Arpad Szakolczai¹

In 2015 Ivan Szelenyi wrote an article for *International Political Anthropology* in which he argued that it is Max Weber who is the sociologist for the 21st century, not Jürgen Habermas. Szelenyi is not a Weber 'expert', but is among the most distinguished sociologists in the world, having been Professor of Sociology and Academic Head at Yale, NYU Abu Dhabi, UCLA, and CUNY, among others, publishing a book per year still, beyond 80, and since the 1960s intensively using the ideas of Max Weber in his work. He has a considerable role in the fact that in Hungary the ideas of Weber are known and used even more than in most European countries, though the Communist regime forced him out of the country in 1974. The article was debating paper for a special issue, in which among others Stephen Turner and Zoltán Balázs participated, and which came to focus on the term disenchantment (*Entzauberung*).

Concerning the reason why Weber should be the sociologist of the 21st century, Szelenyi (2015: 5) argued that Weber was not simply an analyst of capitalism, but a 'cultural critic' of modernity, following up on Rousseau and Nietzsche and anticipating Foucault, and placed the emphasis on how certain processes of rationalisation, bureaucratisation and standardisation, set in motion in all areas of the modern world but to be rooted in distant religious processes, set in motion a disenchantment of the world. This includes a loss of meaning and wide-ranging depersonalisation, a concern placed at the heart of Weber's work by Wilhelm Hennis (1988), particularly visible in the replacement of love with not just Eros, but mere sex (Szelenyi 2015: 9), leading to the joint rule of Kantian rationalist experts and Freudian sensualists without heart, formulated at the end of his *Protestant Ethic*, and perfectly capturing our present.

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What this means, in my reading, is that Weber went far beyond Durkheim and Marx, even Simmel, in that he identified the ills of the modern world not in temporary matters of transition, and not even problems of inequalities and poverty that could be redressed by a new revolution, but as a radically mistaken civilisational turn of which he simply saw no way out. As he formulated at the end of his lectures on *Economic History*, we are entrapped in a new iron age, or are back where we were, as if before Christ.

The frightening actuality of Weber

Now, writing in May 2020, one can easily recognise that not only Weber, but also Szelenyi were prophetic, as neither mainstream thinking, not the various Marxist critical variants can say anything meaningful about what is going on. Politicians and experts argue about the purely scientific and rational character of the anti-virus measures and get away with removing basic liberties and enforcing absurd new norms, in particular the abominable term ‘social distancing’, with evident consensus. Marxist critics place the emphasis on the poor suffering more from the measures, but this—even if true—fails to pay attention to the fact that—almost—everyone is suffering greatly, and that the core of these measures aim at the transformation of the basic coordinates of human life, thus applying indeed equally to everyone. Anti-virus measures resurrect the nightmare of a police state and evoke frightening direct parallels with life under Communism—all in the interest of promoting the common wellbeing, of course.

The central claim of this short article is that, while Weber of course could not foresee the details of our current plight, just as he did not anticipate—like nobody else—the Internet, which rendered possible the current measures, his ideas, also as part of the Nietzsche-Weber-Foucault lineage, offer a unique possibility to analyse these events, as these fit into their way of thinking about modernity without a ripple.

Pursuing disenchantment

While fully agreeing with Szelenyi and also Turner (2015: 37, 41) that ‘disenchantment’ was central for Weber’s reflections on modernity, and also that he by no means wanted to construct a ‘theory’ of modernity, Habermas and Schluchter only trying to force Weber back into the kind of German-critical theorising he wanted to escape, we need to resolve some shortcomings in which Weber’s idea was still

entrapped. Arguably, this concerns the identification of disenchantment with demagification.

Here we enter a particularly thorny linguistic issue. German *Zauber* indeed means both magic and enchantment, and even in common English being ‘magical’ and ‘enchanting’ now means the same thing. And yet, it is increasingly perceived that the application of magic, strictly speaking, is different from being enchanted by someone or something. Thus, Luca Crescenzi recently emphatically re-translated into Italian Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*, previously translated as *La montagna incantata*, to *La montagna magica*, while Patrick Curry published an important book focusing on the distinction between magic and enchantment. Even the ambiguities concerning Weber’s charisma are connected to this issue, with the original meaning of *charis* being close to enchanting beauty and gracefulness, while the would-be charismatic leaders of our time are rather using various ‘magical’ technical means in order to create an aura of being ‘enchanting’.

This point already offers a promising direction for understanding the significance of magic. The central, technical issue concerning magic—being obliterated or hidden through the frequent, and arguably not so innocent, indiscriminate mediatic use of the adjective ‘magical’—is the systematic and purposeful application of a certain type knowledge concerning the production of effects. This, on the one hand, is the exact opposite of what we mean by the full innocence, spontaneity and naturalness of something we call enchanting—a natural scenery, birds, flowers, cascades; the smile of a child, or the gait of a beautiful woman; while, on the other hand, is very close to technology, concerning the purposeful search of producing a ‘magical’ effect on the audience, whether through automatic movement, or the performance of certain ‘tricks’ beyond human capacities. It is in this sense that Alfred Gell (1998) rightly argues about the identity of magic and technology, especially concerning art effects—though, following Curry (2019), I would take enchantment out of the equation.

Such a distinction between magic and enchantment helps us reinterpret, and better integrate into the picture, Weber’s central concern with depersonalisation. Enchantment, properly speaking, is strictly concrete and thus—concerning the human aspect—personal, while magic is abstract and depersonalising. The technician-operator who produces a video clip for advertising a product carefully selects every frame in the short video in order to reach maximum effect on an anonymous virtual public, behaving in a manner closely corresponding to the sorcerers or witch-doctors analysed by Evans-Pritchard in his

classic work, while also recalling the alchemist and his vial. What this means is that technically speaking magic and technology operate in identical manners; modern disenchantment is thus indeed a loss of the enchanting, concrete and personal aspect of the natural and the social world, through a kind of technological rationalisation that by no means is so different, in its exclusive focus on producing effects, from magic.

The ends-means dichotomy as a cul-de-sac

This point, and its implication, can be followed further through the distinctions between ends and means, so central for Cartesian-Kantian dualistic-dichotomising rationality, and the type of rationality Weber identified as central for modernity: *Zweckrationalität*, translated as 'instrumental rationality'. Magic, just as alchemy and technology, is all about means and procedures, implying an obsessive focus on the performance of a strictly prescribed course of action that is supposed to infallibly produce a certain effect, whether this is dictated by the law, by scientific procedures and methods (supposedly following the course or the laws of nature), or managerial policies (which can help us to the inference, no doubt scandalous by many, that Habermasian communicative rationality, with its focus on norms and procedures, is close to both Zande magic and Vedic rituals of sacrifice, and thus to a life-hostile trickster vision of the world). This focus on means is well captured by Weber's term 'instrumental rationality'. Yet, here we immediately encounter another of the endemic translation difficulties that characterise Weber's oeuvre, as *Zweckrationalität* literally means 'ends' and not 'instrumental' or 'means' rationality.

Yet and still, 'instrumental rationality' is not such a bad term, as what is characteristic of the modern world, with its obsession with technology, science, policies and polices, and the economy, is indeed a fixation with means: how to do something better, meaning more efficiently, ignoring the point that it is by no means self-evident what 'efficiency' means, in almost any concrete human life situation.

Thus, perhaps paradoxically, the term 'instrumental rationality' captures well Weber's concerns—just as this can be said of an even more famous translational issue, the 'iron cage'; yet, we need to consider in some detail why this is the case; what hides behind the 'modern' way of dealing with ends and means.

Here, first, we must start by realising that while modernity is indeed fixated with means, this assumes a prior fixation on ends. It

is this *joint* fixation that defines the modern condition, and its intolerability. But what are these ends? How can one fixate on ends? Are not the 'ends' of human life evident? The answer is, well, both yes and no—and this is exactly what needs to be clarified.

To put it as clearly as possibly, modernity is fixated on wellbeing as an end; especially on its two modalities, health and wealth. One could say—and certainly this is the modern self-justification—that this is evident: everybody wants to be healthy and rich. However, while at one level this is indeed obvious, at another it is by no means so.

Let's start with richness. Richness is a typical schismogenic process; people can only be rich if other people are poor. Many people, starting with Bill Gates, are constitutionally unable to understand this, but this simply goes back to the meaning of the word: everybody cannot be rich, this simply makes no sense. Being rich means that some people can afford to do things others—and even more: that normal, ordinary people—cannot; and can show it off against them, gaining a certain recognition. This is a highly problematic game, and recognising this does not mean socialist or communistic egalitarianism—which is just another side of modern schismogenesis. The inference is that *wanting* to be rich is not a natural inclination, but is a highly problematic 'feature, acquired in the worst possible sense of "imitative learning"'. It is against this that the Franciscans were actively *searching for* a life of poverty—though certainly not poverty in the modern sense. Our search for wealth is thus a fixation—and we must search for its (trickster) origins—as the tricksters of anthropology are famous 'fixers'.

The question of health seems quite different, and more natural. Of course, nobody wants to be sick and—except very particular moments of life crisis—nobody wants to die. However, being healthy is not a 'purpose' of life, rather it is 'normally' a taken for granted fact that can be threatened by an illness, or an incident, when health suddenly become a major concern. But living in order to be healthy, subjecting every one of our acts to the imperative of health is another fixation, and a very modern one, closely accompanying wealth.

The corollary of these is that while of course everybody 'naturally' wants to live well, searching for the good life, this by no means is identical with an obsession with wealth and health that is indeed a central feature of the modern condition. It is the obsession with these ends that underlies the similar, parallel obsession with the means to satisfy these ends, in the form of instrumental rationality.

The elusiveness of ends

Still, we need to take this argument to further levels. As, first, paradoxical as it sounds, given the modern fixation with them as *the* ends of human life, wealth and health are simply not ends. An 'end', in terms of a life-goal, could be to finish university, to become a doctor or an engineer, to have children, to participate in the Olympic games. Even these, as everything, can become obsessions, but these at least are ends as concrete targets for which somebody can work, can live for, and can be reached. Richness is not an end proper, as it means the accumulation of money, or mere means; while health is not an end either, as it is just a basic feature of our life condition—we are either healthy or sick, but most human beings are rarely sick, so it means that health is a kind of 'default option' of the human condition, and not an end.

At the second level, we reach the even more stunning paradox that human life simply has no end. Full stop. Life is not a game, competitive or not, which ends, happily, when a certain end is reached. The endpoint of human life is death, after which something else might start, we don't know, but it is certainly not an objective. We do not live in order to die, though of course this is our fate. We can set ourselves certain targets on our lives, which we can reach, and so then we can set up other aims. But never ever an ultimate end.

This leads to the third level, getting closer to the heart of the problem of modernity, following the spirit of Weber beyond his words. The entire separation between ends and means, especially in so far as human life is considered, is not the unsurpassable horizon of rational thinking, but is simply meaningless. We live, hopefully in reasonable health and not in utter deprivation like hunger, as most people do most of the time *without* and *outside* the madness of modern obsessions and fixations; and whatever we do is not simply a means or an instrument to reach an end but *is* life itself, an activity, an occupation, a passion, that might reach fruits, but that is important in itself as simply *this is our life*.

The fourth level concerns the now evident and necessary question: but how comes that we moderns developed this obsession with ends-means? I can suggest an answer for this, still following the spirit of Weberian sociology, with its focus on religion, here complimented with the work of Agnes Horvath (2020), which since three decades is searching for the way to overcome the problems of Weberian charisma. Through a focus on the anthropological figure of the trickster,

it arrived at the neuralgic point of Christianity, the question of individualised salvation.

Salvation as the problem

By now and since long it is considered as plain evidence that Christianity is a salvation religion, a term that was central for Protestant theology and unfortunately seeped into Weber's sociology as well. Without entering lengthy theological arguments, a clear impossibility here, it should be noted that the idea that the aim of the 'First Coming' was to offer a kind of cosy personalised salvation of each, as a kind of pact—'you do as I say, and then I will bring you to Heaven'—was by no means the evident message of the Gospels, which was rather concerned with redeeming a historical event, the Fall. Mithraism, just as Manichaeism, were much more such kind of religions, both being for long competitors of Christianity (incidentally, both having Iranian origins, just as Hebrew eschatology traced there, see Cohn (1993), an extremely interesting point, given the Persian *Magi*), and arguably their salvationism somehow infiltrated Christianity. It is this salvationism, analysed by Foucault as 'pastoral power', that reached its peak with the Protestant dogma of predestination, giving rise first to the spirit of capitalism, and then the inevitable process of secularisation, where the loss of religious substance and human meaning went hand in hand with excessive instrumental rationalisation, as we know it from and through Weber.

What salvationist fixation means is that human life does have an end, a single and ultimate aim, which is—of course—not death, but the *real* life that can only come *after* death. What really comes after death of course always preoccupied humans, but only as a perplexing and inevitable worry; a care but also a trouble, perhaps underlying the etymological connections between care, trouble and thinking, so much present in German *Sorge* (and made into a central theme of *Faust Two* by Goethe), but even more so in Hungarian, where all these terms are to be traced to the root *gond*. A positive search for dying in order to reach a full and real (after) life was a rather specific concern of early Christianity, underlying the practice of catacombing (Horvath 2020), and later leading to the even more absurd excesses of Islam and Puritanism, arguably culminating in contemporary fundamentalism. This is the height of a world-hostile, world-rejecting, Gnostic nihilism, a central concern for Nietzsche, Weber and Voegelin, which also incorporated,

in various stages and in different ways (much through Byzantine mediation) alchemy, Hermeticism and neo-Platonism.

Modernity, modern nihilism, modernity as an iron cage and a carceral network of power/knowledge, the modern nation state as a Third Empire, an apocalyptic vision of the elect, as an *État-Providence*, is the secularised version of Christian Salvationism, where salvation in the other world has been replaced by an even more hopeless search for this-worldly salvation; a life of full well-being, meaning everybody being rich (a self-contradictory absurdity) and without any illness (*ditto*). For some, salvation in the other world is brought about by the inscrutable will of Yahweh, Allah, or the Lord; for others, it is the reward for a life spent in scrupulously fulfilling Mosaic or canon Law. For us moderns, in so far we are moderns, and thus Baudelaire's 'hypocrite brothers', salvation is secured by modern equivalents, the state and the economy, working sometimes hand in hand, sometimes in cross purposes, but always feeling the right to request the sacrifice of our lives for the goods—healthy and wealthy lives—that only they can deliver. Their failures, real or perceived, only entitle them, so 'they' think, to increase their parasitic invasion of our everyday lives.

In our very days, this concern moved towards an obsession with security and health, to some extent at the cost of the kind of freedom and wealth promoted by a similarly problematic economic globalisation. What Weber, and the broadly-meant Nietzsche-Weber school, and *this* only, can help us understand is that these concerns all move inside the same horizon, the horizon of modern thinking, and the foundation of this horizon is set by Christian salvationism.

Within the horizon of modern thinking, it is simply impossible to escape this entrapment. Moving outside requires the bringing in of anthropological concepts (Szokolczai and Thomassen 2019). But this is an issue outside this short piece.

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