

Simonetta Piccone

Joachim Radkau, Max Weber. A Biography. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, xix + 683 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/36429)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, dicembre 2011

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber. A Biography*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, xix + 683 pp.

doi: 10.2383/36429

At the heart of this important new biography of Max Weber published in Germany in 2005, lie valuable fresh sources, new highlights on Weber's private life, and a wealth of letters and correspondence among family and friends. Radkau, the author, is a historian and German history informs the framework where, at almost every page, the choices, thoughts and writings of the sociologist Weber are retraced. The historical approach proves helpful given the bulk of the volume (more than 600 pages) and above all for the final section of the biography, from 1905 to 1920, which is cluttered with different events, from the Russian revolution of 1905 to the outbreak of world war one, the defeat of Germany and Weber's participation in the Committee for the drafting of the Versailles treaty, with the risk of mixing up the trajectory of Weber's political behaviour. The historical layout clarifies also the religious and social ascendancy of Weber's family, where the figures of the Huguenot and religious mother Helene and the austere Max senior play significant roles in their son's existential choices.

The main credit of this biographical work, which follows the life of his central character practically month by month from 1964 to 1920, goes to the attention it devotes to Weber's illness, his protracted and severe nervous depression. The biographies which we are familiar with (the exceptions being Reinhard Bendix, 1980, and Marianne Weber, 1995) dismiss the illness in a few lines and deal with it in a tone of respect, reserve and distance. In the survey of Weber's work that sociological scholars used to draw, from the first essays on German agrarian situation to the late studies on universal religions, the gap induced by the long nervous breakdown, during which Weber could not write, nor read, nor lecture, not even think and had fallen off the circle of his academic colleagues, is depicted as a sort of setback, as a temporary parenthesis. There are rituality and opaqueness in the way in which the reputation of a scholar is administered in the world of sociological consideration, overlooking all the consequences that a serious pathological episode can generate on his intellectual performance. To give an example, Weber's analysis of the phenomenon of Indian catharsis and of Confucian ethics in his studies on universal religions after 1913 reflects his insights around the mindset and psychological attitude of the believers elaborated during his years of infirmity. The watershed represented by the illness in Radkau's book coincides with a watershed in the style of the biographer: the reconstruction of Weber's life after that meaningful date enters a rhythm which sets all events in sequence along a thread which is absent in the first section of it (childhood, youth) too meticulous and slow.

Together with a number of essays by Guenther Roth this biography is also the first text which deals openly with the theme of sexuality. The couple Max-Marianne is painted in its intimacy as much as possible: we shall never know where to put the blame for their white marriage and for their decision of not procreating children, but the sad and disappointed words uttered by Marianne in her letters, and her notes about the incomplete character of her marital union has the merit of withdrawing the conjugal

relationship from a too dispassionate stereotype and of colouring it with emotions and feelings. Marianne proves able to communicate about her marriage in a more explicit way than Max, but as for the stripping of the most intimate feelings the letters written by Max to Else von Richthofen in the last years of his life (Else being the second woman he loved during that period) represent a true revelation for the readers with its emotional and ardent language. Radkau prepares the ground for the last love adventure with care, spying its progress year by year through all the meetings, the exchanges and the ups and downs of the rivalry between Max and his brother Alfred, Else's previous lover. To this last erotic inclination, repressed for a long time but later accepted and passionately experienced, Radkau confides the completion of his non reticent nor one-dimensional portrait of Weber.

Max Weber's theoretical production is investigated in tight contact with his private-public movements and his relationships with relatives and friends: the precious gems of his concepts, his definitions, his clear-cut and striking words appear suddenly on the surface in the middle of a biographical report full of dates and facts. They are the evolving products of a working mind which travels from class structure to Puritanism, from Eastern religions to the methodology of value-free judgment: Radkau relates these conceptual subjects intertwining them with his account of Weber's transfers from the university of Freiburg to that of Heidelberg and later of Munich. And he reports that after 1903 Weber, slowly regaining his capacity for work, chose to engage in the essay on "Roscher and Knies", wrestling with the theory of science: which he qualified as the "essay of sighs" for the effort and strain it had required. Later, the journey that the Weber couple took to America in 1904 – breaking a long period of therapeutic visits to the Mediterranean countries – corresponded to an existential turn: from that date on Weber's physiognomy resumes its unique features, its creativity, its vividness. The American journey intersects with the writing of the essay on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The productive flow reopens, the relapses are overcome, a journal gets founded, research on universal religions is started and the rich production of Weber's writings piles up.

Radkau focuses mainly on the concepts of charisma and the ideal type (rather than rationality) when it comes to evaluating Weberian theoretical formulations. He traces the application of those back in Weber's texts, in letters and in public confrontations. The charisma concept evolves through the judgments concerning Kaiser Wilhelm the second and Bismarck and through its historical involution in the experience of routine, the inevitable outcome of charisma. In some passages of the biography Radkau exhibits an pronounced inclination to philology, more than a will to investigate his subject thoroughly in depth. He is inspired by an interpretive yearning which sometimes overflows towards reading above the lines: a name, an adjective, are sufficient to draw him towards daring conceptual shortcuts and now and then to gratuitous reading keys.

Still the whole reconstruction of the critical itinerary followed by Weber along different religious faiths and the emphasis he attaches to the concept of "charisma" (which originally means "giving the grace") when the focus moves to Eastern religions, is carried over by Radkau in a fervent and passionate style. Eastern religions and their spiritual content provide a welcome change in Weber's divided mind towards the Protestant Puritanism and the morality of asceticism he had previously investigated: they make him more self-indulgent and give comfort to his soul, as if true salvation could be

found only in the beliefs and countries of the East. In these pages Weber's character, his sentiments and his human preferences come to the surface closely linked with his intellectual strength.

Simonetta Piccone Stella
University of Rome "Sapienza"