

Simonetta Piccone Stella

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## Book Review

**Lawrence A. Scaff, *Max Weber in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, 328 pp.**

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Marianne and Max Weber embarked on their three-month journey to America from Bremerhaven, Germany, on Saturday, August 20, 1904 and approached New York's Ellis Island the evening of August 29. Max Weber had been invited to attend the St. Louis Congress of Art and Science and to present a paper in the economics section through the contact of his Heidelberg colleague Georg Jelinek. Weber's interest for America had been long-standing and the invitation came timely because his attention had turned lately to the theme of the relationship among economic action, economic development and the moral order of society. Weber was working on his new project, the two-part essay "*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*," whose publication and completion spanned the months in the United States: he was eager to search for those aspects of social life related to his thesis about the affinity between an ascetic religious ethos and economic activity.

"My questioning – as he explained – deals with the origins of the ethical style of life that was spiritually adequate for the economic stage of "capitalism" and signified his victory in the human soul" [p.13].

On her side, in this journey Marianne Weber was also benefiting from an opportunity: inquiring into the degree of women's emancipation in the United States (the "woman's question") and the dynamics of the modern American family. In fact, Scaff's book pays a fair amount of attention to Marianne's specific interests, since among his main sources are the correspondence of the couple and Marianne's notes, in addition to the book Weber's wife had devoted to Max: "*Max Weber, a Life*" [Heidelberg, 1950]. In Marianne's account the travel to the United States took place in the months in which Weber was just starting to recover from his long illness, from that debilitating depression which Marianne has documented in detail in her long biography. The emergence from that dark period is called by her a new phase,

"the critical turning point in Max's struggle to return to the world of thought, scholarship and public activity" [p. 3].

In this sense, the American experience had the merit of inspiring Weber's imagination as he wrote at the end of the journey speaking about "an expansion of the scientific horizon".

"*Max Weber in America*" is a deceptive title. It must be understood both literally and bibliographically: America being not only the place where the two Weber toured for three months but also the country that came to read, study and translate Weber's books, and to assimilate his stimulating reflections. Starting with the translation by Frank Knight in 1927 ["*General Economic History*"] and by Talcott Parsons in 1930 ["*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*"],

“the American reception – as Scaff writes – was a lengthy and unusually complex affair, one that continue to this day” [p. 197].

Therefore the book deals with two focuses: the biographical experience of the journey, on one side, and the intellectual history of Weber’s work and ideas explored through the network of American scholars drawn to his theory and outlook, on the other.

The two Weber were tourists of a rather refined kind – very exigent and sociologically oriented visitors. Not only Max wanted to explore the phenomenon of immigration in the New World and in its different states but also the Indian territory with its problems as well as the “color line” with its intriguing connection between race and class – the Negro experience – in rural and urban contexts. In his trip to Oklahoma and Muskogee in Indian territory he witnessed the federal agency activity and attended two main events: the land auction to the Indian Agent’s office – “a tremendous achievement” – and the distribution of the legal payments to members of the Creek tribe. The Creek payment offered to Weber an unusual opportunity for ethnographic, direct observation:

“5000 Creeks are coming, camping here in tents ... I watched troops of Indians arrive to get their money; the full bloods have peculiar tired facial features and are surely doomed to decline, but among the others one sees intelligent faces. Their clothes are almost invariably European” [p. 89].

Scaff remarks that

“for Indian agent Schoenfelt these would be routine business transactions but for Max Weber they seemed to take on the representational quality of the fate of a people and the unfolding of historical destinies” [p. 90].

The Congress in St. Louis had prompted many opportunities of introduction to and exchange with academic colleagues; among them, Weber had identified a number of personalities who could be interesting contributors to the *Archiv fur Sozialwissenschaft und Sozial Politik* where he had lately assumed editorial responsibility. These exchanges are at the origin of his acquaintance with W.E.B. Dubois, one of the most prominent figures of the African American community. Unlike other St. Louis attendees and colleagues, Weber deliberately sought out leaders of the African American community and paid attention to their educational institutions and political aims. W.E.B. Dubois was in the end the only one, among many contacts, who accepted the invitation to write an article for the *Archiv*. With him, Weber discussed issues of race and ethnicity and he was so enthralled by his scholarship and knowledge that he seriously planned a second journey to the States, and especially to the South,

“because I am convinced that the “colour line “ problem will be the paramount problem of the time to come, here and everywhere in the world”, as he wrote in a letter to Dubois [p. 100].

Weber was particularly intrigued by the juxtaposition of the race problem with the class problem: his critical thinking about race was expressed later in a heated exchange with the scholar Ploetz to whom he reminded that race is a category of culture and that prejudice is

“a product not of facts and empirical experience, but of mass beliefs” [p. 113].

The claims that inferiority could be demonstrated through the data of empirical science was rejected outright:

“Nothing of the kind is proven. I wish to state that the most important sociological scholar anywhere in the Southern States in America, with whom no white scholar can compete, is a Negro – Burckhardt Dubois” [ibidem].

The visible and incessant immigration influx in the continent provoked the constant interrogation of the two visitors, Marianne for her concern about the social welfare of the newcomers and the involvement of women’s voluntary labour in it, Max for his basic questions about the functioning of American democracy and the ethnic integration of different groups. Max visited many settlements, old and new, collecting impressions and pieces of information, especially when in the last two weeks, before departing, he paid several visits to the Lower East Side in New York City. “New York – Scaff writes – became the final social laboratory” for a journey which had started with an awareness of the different immigration faces since the first days spent in Chicago. How the new arrivals in America, helped by the educational institutions, the social workers, the municipalities and the urban environment could become American and acquire a new citizenship was one of the main inquiries of their tour. The “new citizenship” implied the immigrants to turn away from traditionalism and their older sources of identity, becoming “equal” and “modern.” Still, in Weber’s account, the theme of socialization and integration in the new country was developed through his peculiar interest for the “sects.” Scaff reminds the reader that Weber in 1904 was in the middle of his most original enterprise, the essay on *“Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”* – thus, the work ethic and the special dynamics of religious sects were the features of American society which constantly occupied his mind. How a psychological drive to a systematic conduct of life develops? How the anti-authoritarian plight of the religious sects could feed and keep alive the cooperative skills of their members as well as their stern individualism? It is in connection to this interrogation that Max and Marianne managed to attend numerous religious services of different sects in many cities and villages during their tour. The expressiveness and liveliness of the ceremonies, songs and dancing of a Southern Baptist Church had drawn enthusiastic comments.

In his journey Weber had made the best of his opportunity to observe many different environments as well as many individual persons, always with a eye on the legacies of Puritanism and work ethic. His most acute remarks would be included in the second instalment of the essay on Protestant Ethic, after the return to Heidelberg. The essay in fact is filled with the rich and vivid material which he had assembled, echoing at times the impressions drawn from personal encounters. This is the case, according to Scaff, of his acquaintance with William James and his circle in Cambridge, Massachussetts. Scaff quotes a passage from the Protestant Ethic which conveys to him the idea that Weber had William James in mind, namely the pathos of the “feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual” and the “restless and systematic struggle with life” characteristic of “that disillusioned and pessimistically tinted individualism” found

among peoples with a Puritan past” [p. 153]. From the beginning, the social and historical differences between American capitalism and European capitalism which Weber underlined are summarized in his appreciation of the different quality of the two political processes:

“the historical context and social forces to which really existing modes of production are introduced produce paradoxes, creating in America an association between the culture of capitalism and equal rights, equal opportunities and a sense of freedom from authoritarian traditions; and, by contrast, in Europe an association with an imposed, alienating, exploitative rationalization of life. It is part of the paradox that in the former case capitalism can be seen as working hand in hand with “democracy” or democratization, in the latter as promoting a kind of modern authoritarianism” [p. 64].

The dissemination of Weber’s theory and reflections in the English speaking world was slow and gradual. At the time of his voyage to New York in 1904 Weber was practically unknown as a scholar. The complicated history of the translation and incorporation of his work into the social science canon starts with the initial steps taken by Parsons and by Gerth and Wright Mills (in 1930 and in 1946) with their translation and editing of his most important essays. In addition Scaff mentions the group of émigrés of the 1930s, affiliated to the New School for Social Research in New York, such as Albert Salomon and Hannah Arendt, among whom Weber’s work was widely cited and discussed. In this large network there was some sharing of texts and knowledge as well as “priorities” disputes and “rivalries” over informal rights to translation. Through the lengthy diffusion and familiarization with his works today

“it is no longer uncommon to have Weber appear in popular literature ... in places like the New York Review of Books, The New Yorker, the Atlantic Monthly ... much as Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud might have been in previous decades” [p. 197].

Fascination with Weber’s writings has brought to the popularization of some of his ideas, notably “charisma,” “bureaucracy,” “work ethic,” and of his latest essays “*Science as a Vocation*” and “*Politics as a Vocation*”. Yet the author notes that in the American disciplines the nature of Weber’s contribution itself is still contested or poorly formulated, partly because of the disputes over the division of labour within the emerging social science disciplines themselves [p. 198].

Scaff’s book is a fascinating reading. Its scrupulous description of Weber’s background and life events and his analysis of Weber’s reception in the American universities and scholarship combine expertise and insight. It covers a relatively unknown episode in Weber’s life with an excellent and thorough research.

Simonetta Piccone Stella  
Università di Roma “La Sapienza”