

Weber

Weber

Sociologist of Empire

Kieran Allen

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Preface

This short book arises from an experience of teaching a course on classical sociology to first year students for over 20 years. Across the world, there are similar courses which discuss the writings of Max Weber, who is hailed as one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the discipline.

There are many standard textbooks available but they tend to present a similar package of Weber’s key ideas. Thus, they will cover his theories in bureaucracy, stratification, legitimate authority and the Protestant Ethic and the rise of capitalism. Students will leave these courses with some insights into modern society but will not be encouraged to be overly critical of Weber. He has joined the canon of sociology and, therefore, it is implied his writings contains some pearls of wisdom.

Sociologists often talk about ‘foundation myths’ when they discuss nations. In order to forge a national community with its own distinct ethnic identity, myths of origins are widely popularised. These often consist of stories of great heroes, decisive battle or daring rebellions. Yet, strangely, this same critical inquiry is not applied to the discipline of sociology itself. The classics, it appears, are to be respected – particularly if they are ‘value free’ and contain no obvious political agenda.

This book challenges this assumption. It pinpoints Weber’s deeply political agenda that lies behind the more anodyne presentation of his theories. It situates him within the context of imperial Germany which had a growing ambition to challenge the hegemony of its British rival. Weber’s imperialist outlook shaped his views of two key countries, India and China, which he produced books on. But his wider defence of capitalism and empire pervades most of his work in subtle ways.

None of this is to suggest that a study of Weber does not bring its rewards. It is a rare individual who gains insight solely from those who share their own perspective. Weber described a culture of ‘instrumental rationality’ in modern society that is based on calculation and control. In a world, where finance houses seek to place a numerical value on their ‘risk ratings’ or where the diet industry focuses on precise calorie loss, one cannot but respect some of his early insights.

But those who wish to analyse the underlying dynamics of a society that produce tremendous inequality and unhappiness will have to look elsewhere – particularly if they want to bring change.

It is from this critical perspective that this book arises.

1

Introduction

We live in a strange world, with inequalities on a scale never dreamt of before. Three billionaires, for example, now own more than the population of sub-Saharan Africa. The small unelected boards of directors of companies such as General Motors control more resources than South Africa or Poland. Virtually every area of life from the human body to sporting activities has been turned into a commodity. And overhanging much of this dismal state of affairs is a new era of global permanent warfare. Under the rubric of an unending 'war against terrorism' the greatest military empire of the world has given itself the right to fight 'preventative' wars in any region of the planet it deems to be harbouring a threat to its interests.

The most elementary question many will ask is: why? Why is our society so violent, unequal and often dehumanised? Each year, thousands not only ask this question but also decide to study how this society functions. They enrol in colleges, for courses in sociology, hoping to get critical insights into how society works – and maybe what can be done to change it. The mere act of wanting to *understand* rather than simply *accept* is often the first incipient sign of a rebellion against social norms. An opening is created for a sense of unease about the world.

To its detractors, sociology is a soppy subject. It has none of the hard and fast mathematical models of economics. Its academic practitioners turn up on televisions to discuss 'trends' in alcohol drinking among teenagers or the relationship between crime and 'family breakdown'. The more serious commentary about the economy or the changes in the political spectrum is left to other 'experts'. Some have claimed that the marginal role of sociology in official society results from it being a left-wing subject. Irving Horowitz, a Hannah Arendt Distinguished Professor of Sociology, has arrived at the startling conclusion that sociology has been taken over by ideologues of the far left and is now 'largely a repository of discontent'.¹ It has changed from being an objective social science to an outpost of political extremism. He claims that in areas like criminology, sociologists are now 'eclipsed by the expertise of police

officers, legal and para-legal personnel and so on'.² The punishment for the politicisation of the discipline is that funding has been cut and its status has been downgraded.

There are, of course, many sociologists who profess sympathy with the left. This is hardly surprising as the task of sociology is, after all, to defend the idea of 'the social' – that we live in a society, and not just an economy. As the global political elite try to turn everyone from hospital patients to students into 'customers', defending the idea of society against notions that we are simply an aggregate of market consumers can radicalise some. One of the best representatives of this trend was Pierre Bourdieu. The huge strikes in France in 1995 over pensions and social welfare payments spurred him into an active engagement with workers. He denounced corporate globalisation because 'it is in the name of this model that flexible working, another magic word of neo-liberalism, is imposed meaning night work, weekend work, irregular working hours, things which have always been part of employers' dreams'.³

Bourdieu is, however, by no means the norm. For every radical critic of the system, there are scores of others who advocate support for the existing framework of society. The best-known sociologist in the English-speaking world today is probably Anthony Giddens. Many entering sociology courses encounter him through his textbook, titled simply *Sociology*. Giddens alongside his German co-thinker, Ulrich Beck, have become ideologists for Third Way politics. They profess to offer advice to social democratic parties on how best to adapt to the new challenges posed by globalisation. This advice is often quite vague and amounts to accepting corporate globalisation. Third Way politics fits easily with the political outlooks of New Labour in Britain or with that of the former US president Bill Clinton. 'No one has any alternatives to capitalism', Giddens sternly asserts, 'the arguments that remain concern how far and in what ways capitalism should be governed and regulated'.⁴

Sociology is, thus, mainly a site for conflict about interpretations about society. It may profess to be non-political – to focus on wider social trends rather than immediate political issues which people have interests in – but it nevertheless deals with issues that people passionately fight over. Sociologists often adopt a non-political guise because of the pressure of their jobs and careers – even as they make the most outrageously political statements. Many of the disputes within sociology occur at a highly abstract theoretical level, often surrounded by the most forbidding jargon. However, in their complex

and confusing ways, they often reflect debates in the wider society about whose interests should be served or which direction society needs to go in.

At the heart of the conflicts there is often a reference back to the argument between Marx and Weber who are described as the founding fathers of the discipline. Their varying interpretations about the origin of capitalism, its nature, the role of class and their ideas on how societies change – or do not change – all impinge on, and re-emerge in, modern debates. The reason for this is that both men provided stunningly comprehensive overviews of modern capitalism.

A study of the writings of both men can be highly rewarding and they cannot simply be dismissed as 'dead white men' with few insights to offer today's society. Marx and Weber wrote in a very different style to present-day sociologists. With the exception of one early work by Weber, they did not carry out detailed quantitative or qualitative studies. They did not confine themselves to simply testing a few isolated and relatively narrow hypotheses. Instead, their work is characterised by a grand sweep that searches for what constitutes the fundamental dynamic of modern society. They were not subject to the now quite rigid divisions between different academic subjects – between history, politics, economics and what is now considered sociology. Instead, they straddled all these areas of inquiry, producing masterpieces which provided interpretations of what was unique about modern capitalism and what were the historical factors which went into its creation. As a result, their writings reach for the totality of experience of life under capitalism.

Moreover, they come at this society as relative strangers. Capitalism was only in its infancy in Germany when Marx wrote and the country had only recently been united when Weber was writing. Sociologists have often stressed that the eye of the 'outsider' can see far more than those who have grown accustomed to their surroundings. Marx and Weber, therefore, had huge advantages when it came to analysing social phenomena such as bureaucracy or the working of the 'free market'. They were not so accustomed to these societies that they regarded them as natural. They did not assume that issues to do with the distribution of income or human freedom had been put beyond argument. Quite the opposite. They subjected the wider social structure to a piercing scrutiny that led, despite their differing perspectives, to quite bleak visions about its future.

Unfortunately, however, students are often introduced to the writings of Marx and Weber in a dry, abstract manner that is shorn of their political contexts. This is more difficult with Marx because of his open advocacy of revolt and his links with the socialist movement. However, if his political activity is recognised, it is then bracketed out again by references to his 'controversial' views and by the suggestion that he was over-focussed on class. Marx is, above all, presented as a reductionist because he stressed the importance of economic factors and outmoded because he failed to see the new complexities that could emerge with a globalised knowledge economy. Thus a recent textbook boldly claims 'analyses of race (and indeed gender) in the contemporary world have pointed to new issues of inequality and power that are not adequately addressed by classical Marxism'.⁵

The winner of the debate within classical sociology is often deemed to be Weber. Of course, few apart from his ardent followers, directly award him plaudits. Weber's main reward comes in the form of a praise of his sophistication. Instead of a crude two-class model of modern society, Weber advocated a complex multi-class model. Instead of Marx's economic determinism, Weber appreciated multi-factoral causation. Instead of naive hopes of a better world, Weber was able to warn of the impending danger of bureaucratisation. He appears in most sociology courses as a well-packaged figure that is the doyen of 'value free' sociology. Whereas Marx advocated revolution, Weber appears detached and engaged with 'complexities' that Marx never considered.

Weber's sociology fits in more easily with a form of academic learning which defines itself as neutral while disguising its own hierarchies and biases. He holds out many intellectual advantages for this tradition. Weberian sociology can recognise the existence of social conflict – but can also imply that there is no need to challenge the wider system. It can provide a powerful appreciation of how social phenomena are historically constructed but deny there are any inherent contradictions within the present society. Weber's overall pessimism, which assumes that domination of human beings by fellow human beings is inevitable, enables sociologists to make a critique of society – but also to imply there is little prospect of overall systemic change. All of this cuts the link between critical knowledge and political action – and that is extremely helpful to a purely career-minded academic.

The great irony, of course, is that Weber was passionately political. His own injunctions about the need for 'value free' sociology were

honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Weber was an ardent German nationalist and a free market liberal. His crude endorsement of nationalism offers few attractions for academics of today and so has often been ignored. When Weber, for example, writes at length in his classic book *Economy and Society* about 'the great powers' and the inevitability of imperialist expansion displacing 'pacifist' forms of free trade,⁶ many sociologists simply ignore the passage. Their focus is on the more general remarks that apply to many different historical societies rather than concrete stances that Weber took. Weber had a tendency to write in generalities even while promoting the most specific political positions. His overall style indeed lent itself to an apolitical reading of his texts. The problem, though, is that this abstract reading of Weber as the pure academic carries its own undeclared political punch.

The packaging of the academic Weber began after his death and owed much to mainstream American sociology. Weber's influence in Germany was minimal in the years immediately after his death in 1920. Essays and reviews which dealt with his work often appeared in journals that were quite tangential to social science. The major social science journal of the time, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, did not review a single book of his.⁷ During the period 1922 to 1947, less than 2,000 copies of Weber's *Economy and Society* were sold.⁸ Few German sociologists regarded themselves as his followers and so his influence was 'fragmentary and patchy'.⁹ With the Nazi seizure of power and the purge of universities, even this was virtually wiped out. His influence grew eventually because of the activities of three key figures.

The first was his wife, Marianne, who helped to construct *Economy and Society* and gathered together four collections of his writings after his death.¹⁰ Marianne Weber's editing of these works reflected some of her personal concerns. In 1926, she also produced the now standard biography from which most subsequent biographies have drawn heavily. Her approach to her husband contains a paradox. She was an active feminist who wrote books on marriage and the women's movement but her biography of Weber is effectively a hagiography. Much is left out and often incidents are referred to only vaguely. The overall aim of the book is clearly to construct a 'great man'. Marianne Weber and her friend Karl Jaspers were part of the Heidelberg Circle in the 1920s. The central belief of this circle was that Max Weber was a personality of outstanding rank who never found the acclaim he

deserved among fellow academics or the general public.¹¹ The aim of Marianne Weber was to correct this alleged wrong.

The second key figure who helped construct the modern Weber was Johannes Ferdinand Winckelmann. This former judge and state official who served the Nazi regime faithfully believed that Weber offered an alternative account of historical development to Marx and so he systematically began to assemble his work after the Second World War. Winckelmann was, however, quite selective in how the assembly was carried out. He eliminated all polemical writings from the section on government in *Economy and Society* in order to put together a timeless piece of value-free sociology.¹² Weber's description of the enemy armies fighting Germany during the First World War as being 'composed increasingly of barbarians' and 'the flotsam of African and Asiatic savages',¹³ for example, disappeared. In a new era after the defeat of the Nazi regime, West Germany took the side of the US during the Cold War. Weber's crude advocacy of German nationalism appeared superfluous and above all unsociological.

The third and by far the most important figure who became a promoter of Weber was Talcott Parsons, the leading theoretician in American sociology in the Cold War era. Parsons has been described as 'the champion of the American version of liberal capitalism'.¹⁴ A Harvard professor, he began his major sociological theorising during the Depression years of the 1930s. He was connected with a group of academics who formed the Pareto circle in the elite university. This was a conservative think-tank that saw Pareto as the 'Marx of the bourgeoisie'.¹⁵ George Homans expressed the ethos of the circle candidly when he remarked that 'as a Republican Bostonian who had not rejected his comparatively wealthy family, I felt during the thirties under personal attack, above all from the Marxists'.¹⁶

The central concern of Parsons was the problem of how social order was maintained. His sociological writings were developed against a background of mass meetings, marches, union membership drives and widespread unrest in American society. The conservatives felt insecure, threatened and uneasy. As one early critic of Parsons put it, 'the problem of social order is the conservative's way of talking about the conditions when the established elite is unable to rule in traditional ways and when there is a crisis in the master institutions'.¹⁷ Parsons' aim was to construct a 'grand theory' that focussed on how common values and norms helped to generate a stable and ordered society. Through a style of abstract theorising, Parsons sought to develop an alternative approach within American sociology to that

of the writings of the Chicago school. This school had grown around a number of brilliant writers who explored the different immigrant communities and subcultures in Chicago. It was often inspired by a vague social reformist politics that expressed a sympathy for the underdog.

The key to the construction of Parsons' grand theories lay in importing some of the themes of classical European sociology into a new intellectual system that defended American values. Parsons saw Weber as the most important figure of the European tradition and the one who was the closest to his own concerns. In one of his final lectures, he stated that Weber 'served in a very real sense, as my teacher'.¹⁸ Parsons did his doctoral thesis at Heidelberg and had become acquainted with an earlier German debate on the origins of capitalism. He translated Weber's work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* into English in 1930.

Parsons' major theoretical book, *The Structure of Social Action*, which was published in 1937, helped place Weber at the head of the sociological canon. Parsons suggested that Weber was 'fighting ... against the positivistic tendencies of Marxian historical materialism'¹⁹ and so Weber's ideas could be regarded as precursors of Parsons' own 'voluntaristic action' theory. This latter theory, it was claimed, had achieved a complex synthesis that integrated the role of values, choices and material situations into a powerful framework of action. *The Structure of Social Action* was subsequently described as 'the American alternative to Marxism'²⁰ because it offered a grand theory that stressed common values rather than class conflict.

In 1939, Parsons received a letter from Friedrich von Hayek urging him to revise a translation of *Economy and Society*. Von Hayek was the leading free market fundamentalist of his age, opposing not just Marxism but also Keynesian attempts to regulate the economy. He regarded Weber as an important ideological forerunner because, like Hayek himself, he had drawn on the influence of the Austrian school of economics that stressed the role of individual choice in the market place over any form of public regulation. Von Hayek was anxious that Weber's work should receive a large English-speaking audience and so he turned to Parsons for help.²¹ Parsons not only obliged in the translation but also wrote an introduction that was designed to further establish Weber's importance.

However, if Parsons established Weber in the canon of American sociology, he also played down his emphasis on power relations. This was exemplified most clearly in his translation of Weber's term

Herrschaft to mean 'leadership' rather than 'domination'.²² He took up Weber's argument that ideas had significant worldly consequences and could be stimulants to social action. However, he tended to remove some of the bleakness of Weber's vision by stressing how the acting out of conventional ideals led to success. In brief, he Americanised Weber. As Tribe put it,

There appears to be some justification for concluding that it was the 'agenda setting' activities of Parsons and his associates that played the greatest role in establishing Weber as a classical sociologist, an agenda that was then supplemented by the teachings of émigrés and the appearance of translations. Representing Weber in this way, Parsons set forth in the world a construction that was based on a set of assumptions, which were then employed in the reading of selected 'central' texts.²³

One of the main effects of Parsons' construction was to create an image of Weber as an architect of a sociological system that was above political conflicts. Weber thus entered the canon of American sociology as a 'value free' sociologist. He became a valuable icon in the Cold War – an intellectual giant who rivalled and surpassed the USSR's championship of Marx. One of Parsons' close collaborators, Edward Shils, for example, described Weber's corpus of work as 'the most fundamental and most learned achievement of sociology'.²⁴ Shils' praise was by no means disinterested. He strongly disliked the tendency for members of the sociological profession 'to judge their respective societies from the standpoint of a Utopian egalitarian ideal'.²⁵ He despised the collectivist ethos behind the welfare state and saw Weber as prophetic in warning against bureaucratisation. Shils praised Weber as a classic free market liberal who thought 'rewards should be commensurate with achievement'.²⁶ In brief, a supporter of the American way before his time.

Shils was linked to the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a CIA sponsored organisation that sought to wage an intellectual struggle for the hearts and minds of left leaning intellectuals. One of the other participants was Daniel Bell. In 1960, Bell produced his famous book *The End of Ideology*, which argued that serious conflicts between social groups with different value systems were over in the industrial societies. The conflicts between left and right would henceforth be replaced by minor tensions within the dominant consensus. Bell's co-thinker and fellow supporter of the Congress for Cultural Freedom,

Seymour Martin Lipset, went further and proclaimed his own 'end of history' thesis. 'Democracy' he argued 'is not only or primarily a means through which different groups can attain their ends or seek the good society; it is the good society itself in operation.'²⁷

The inspiration for many of Lipset and Bell's arguments was again to be found in their own particular interpretation of Weber. Bell hailed Weber for having a 'pragmatic view, which seeks reconciliation as its goal'.²⁸ He used Weber's distinction between 'the ethic of responsibility' which implied an acceptance of the existing framework of society and 'the ethic of conscience' which applied to those who questioned the way society was organised. This latter group had not accepted the permanence of capitalism and so operated as 'pure believers' who 'burn with pure, unquenchable flame and can accept no compromise with faith'.²⁹ Weber's seemingly reluctant endorsement of capitalism on the pragmatic grounds of realism, efficiency and 'rationality', suited many former left intellectuals such as Bell and Lipset. Weber was thus pressed into service to marginalise the remaining dissenters in Cold War American society as near-religious zealots.

One of the reasons, however, why Weber was such an effective ideological tool was that his influence on American sociology was not just confined to the conservative right. C.W. Mills was the leading dissident in American sociology in the Cold War era. He was also one of the two translators of the classic collection of Weber essays, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, which popularised Weber's work in America. The introduction to the book helped to establish Weber as the originator of key insights into the system of stratification and domination. Unlike Parsons, it placed Weber in his political context and drew links between this and his sociology. However, it emphasised certain aspects of Weber's writings which made him appear more of a left-wing liberal than he actually was. Weber was presented as moving from an openly imperialist position in his youth to a more democratic position in his later years. He was opposed to the German revolution of 1918 not for class reasons but rather because 'he realized that the revolution could not lead to lasting socialist institutions'.³⁰ The introduction quotes Marianne Weber at length to indicate that Max had 'sympathy with the struggle of the proletariat for a human and dignified existence'³¹ and pondered whether he should join their ranks as a member of the Social Democratic Party. He only rejected this, apparently, because 'one could only be an honest socialist, just like a Christian, if one was ready to share the way of life of the

unpropertied'.³² This Weber could not do because of his health and the fact that 'his scholarship simply depended upon capital rent'.³³

This relatively sympathetic portrayal of Weber formed the background for a particular presentation of his relationship to Marx. Weber was seen to partake in the 'humanist tradition of liberalism which is concerned with the freedom of the individual to create free institutions'.³⁴ This led him to try to show how there were different spheres of political and economic power. He was able to incorporate elements of Marx's teaching into his sociology but could also 'round out' his economic materialism. Moreover, whereas Marx had denounced capitalism for being irrational, Weber's liberalism led to a clearer focus on how it was the very embodiment of rationality. This form of rationality was preparing 'man for his absorption in the clattering process of the bureaucratic machinery'.³⁵ The overall effect of Mills and Gerth's introduction was to present Weber as a more sophisticated sociologist who had corrected Marx's lack of emphasis on human freedom.

The introduction acknowledged that there was certainly a tragic element to Weber's writings because little could be done to arrest the bureaucratic machine – but it was a romanticised tragedy. Thus Gerth and Mills wrote,

For Weber, capitalism is the embodiment of rational impersonality; the quest for freedom is identified with irrational sentiment and privacy. Freedom is at best a tarrying for loving companionship and for the cathartic experience of art as a this-worldly escape from institutional routines. It is the privilege of the propertied and educated: it is freedom without equality. In this conception of freedom as a historically developed phenomena, now on the defensive against both capitalism and bureaucracy, Weber represents humanist and cultural liberalism rather than economic liberalism.³⁶

Weber's deep pessimism about the possibility of changing capitalism and his ambiguous critique of its cold, bureaucratic machinery had a strong appeal to intellectuals such as Mills and many later sociologists. Mills was a fierce critic of the power structure of American society and described himself as a 'plain Marxist'.³⁷ However, in one key area C.W. Mills was much closer to Weber than Marx: his dismissal of workers as agents of change. Mills saw the main division in society as being between a 'power elite' that grew out of the military industrial complex and a 'mass society', which was firmly controlled and

manipulated. Workers were the victims of history with little potential for self-liberation. The awesome power of the cultural apparatus of modern capitalism led to endless possibilities for manipulation. Weber's notion of rationalisation and bureaucratisation fitted well with Mills' own pessimism. But Mills in turn helped to establish a longer tradition in sociology – which eventually outlived the demise of Parsons' theories – whereby Weber appeared to have a more modern appeal than Marx precisely because he implied that class struggle had no great political potential. As the possibility for fundamental social change was closed down, sociology became at best a source of liberal energies that aimed to create a space for a certain type of freedom – 'freedom without equality'.

Once Weber became dominant in US sociology, concerted attempts were made to re-establish his reputation in Germany. In 1964 Parsons and Reinhard Bendix, an important biographer of Weber, carefully planned and then used the occasion of the German Sociological Association conference to promote Weber's reputation over the growing influence of the Marxist-based Frankfurt School.³⁸ This occurred against a background of opposition to the nuclear arms race and the Cold War. Afterwards, Guenther Roth gave a flavour of the polemics by claiming that attacks on Weber from 'Marxists and Nazis have been remarkably similar' and that opponents of Weber 'use a sociological approach for political purposes or deny altogether the present rationale of political sociology and to some extent even question the viability of Western pluralist society'.³⁹ The possibility that those who defended Western capitalism might be equally using sociology for political purposes was discarded. The 'canonisation' of Weber as the main classical sociologist of the free world was complete and he now became 'not the object of scepticism or utility but the object of piety'.⁴⁰

Of course, Weber's reputation was challenged. The student revolt of the 1960s and the huge radicalisation that followed led to a revival of Marxist ideas in some sections of the academy. By the early 1970s, there was virtually no area of sociology without Marxist writers. In many instances, Weber was simply bypassed and a new language of analysis was created. However, there were also direct assaults on his work. A key reference point for a new re-assessment of Weber was Wolfgang Mommsen's book *Max Weber and German Politics* that was completed in 1959 and only translated into English in 1984. It documented the strong German nationalism in Weber's outlook and so shattered some of the make-up that had been applied by right-wing

American sociologists. Although Mommsen was eventually to become more sympathetic to Weber, his work had an extraordinary liberating effect. Writers like Paul Hirst were able to challenge the inherent elitism of Weber's critique of popular democracy and attack his arguments that genuine democratic decision-making and popular rule are impossible in all but the most simple of societies.⁴¹ Others like Tom Bottomore could claim that Weber 'remained to the end a fervent nationalist, a half-hearted democrat and an implacable opponent of socialism'.⁴²

Nevertheless, the left-wing challenge in sociology was not sustained. When the revolts of the late 1960s subsided there developed a vogue for highly obtuse forms of theory that had no link with actual struggles. Particular variants of Marxism that ultimately looked to China, Russia or particular Third World 'socialisms' for liberation did not help. When many of these regimes collapsed after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, many left academics became convinced there could never be an alternative to capitalism. The only thing that was attainable was a stronger, more pluralistic 'civil society', which became an ethical realm of solidarity held together by moral sentiment and natural affection.⁴³

The result has been a resurgence of Weber's popularity in sociology and he has now achieved a near hegemonic status. His work fitted in neatly with the apparent death of the working class. Against the 'reductionist' message of Marxism, Weber's sociology offered a framework for analysing how social groups engage in strategies of exclusion and status-seeking. His work on bureaucracy was taken as almost prophetic after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. His stress on the fragmentation of workers and their inability to advance common political goals is deemed to be more relevant in a post-industrial society. In brief, Weber has become the touchstone for many modern theorists who accept the inevitability of capitalism and the impossibility of change. More than that he has become the fountainhead for the established wisdom of sociology itself. As Hennis put it,

Never before in the history of the science has an orthodoxy (a 'paradigm') been able to establish itself so powerfully and decisively and yet with minimum of intellectual effort. Seldom today challenged, and certain of its utility, modern social science requires only occasional reference to authority. The greatest, most venerated and silently respected figure of authority is that of Max Weber.

Whoever dares to throw doubt on the legitimacy of established social science must direct himself to that figure.⁴⁴

This book sets out to challenge this state of affairs. Its starting point is that sociology today has lost much of its critical sharpness. The days of the Sociology Liberation Movement when radical sociologists took on establishment figures who worked with governments are long over. The dominant ethos in sociology today is to advocate a mild form of tolerance for multiculturalism and a critique of social hierarchies – but from within a perspective that accepts the status quo. Weber's influence within sociology helps to articulate an overwhelming pessimism about workers' struggles and a dismissal of their significance. His hegemonic status blends in easily with a 'cultural turn' whereby sociologists focus on how reality is constructed through interpretations and meanings – rather than examining the contradictions at the heart of the class structure. This is all the more ironic in a society which is producing inequalities on a scale that has never been dreamed off in previous history. As millions of people look to the wider movement against corporate globalisation, it is vital that this tendency within sociology is challenged.

The book offers both an introduction to Weber and a critique of his ideas. It summarises his argument as accurately as possible for students of sociology and then subjects this argument to critical scrutiny. It places Weber in his political context as a sociologist of empire and shows how his defence of capitalism pervades his writings. It suggests that far from offering an 'objective' value-free account of modern society, Weber's sociology is deeply ideological. It points, for example, to his support for the First World War and his deep hostility to the growth of the revolutionary left in the aftermath of Germany's defeat. It suggests that these political stances were the logical outcome of a type of theorising which advocated an acceptance of capitalism on the grounds of tragic necessity. Such a critique does not deny that Weber provided significant critical insights into the workings of modern society. However, while there are many individual insights to be gained from a close reading of his writings, it is also necessary to identify how his overall framework rested on a belief that capitalism represents the best of all possible worlds.

Our belief is that no value-free sociology is possible in a world where the production of ideas is linked to the dominance of capital. Too often the latent function of the cry that sociologists be value-free is to demand that 'Thou shalt not commit a critical or negative value

judgement – especially of one's own society.⁴⁵ By offering an account of Weber which seeks to question his status as the most venerated and silently respected figure of authority, this little book also hopes to help re-open the path for a critical, politically engaged inquiry into modern capitalism.