

Essay

Thinking with Wolfgang Schluchter

Wolfgang Schluchter, Mit Max Weber. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2020, 289 S., br., 59.00 €

Besprochen von **Prof. Dr. Guy Oakes**: Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Monmouth University (USA), E-Mail: goakes@monmouth.edu

<https://doi.org/10.1515/srsr-2021-0026>

Schlüsselwörter: Max Weber, weberianische Soziologie, klassische deutsche Soziologie

Last Man Standing

For Wolfgang Schluchter, 2020 was surely an extraordinary year. The last of the forty-seven volumes of the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* (hereafter MWG) had been published, following which the centenary of his death that was celebrated by the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften as well as many less august establishments. Schluchter was the sole survivor of the original editorial committee that had planned this prestigious edition in the 1970s and supervised the entire project subsequently. As the author of its famous ‘green brochure’, he was, at least in this respect, its lead editor. In this slight but dense prospectus, distributed in the thousands by Mohr Siebeck, the conception, scope, structure, and philological standards of the project were spelled out. Moreover, Schluchter seems to have prevailed in the aftermath of the German theoretical controversies of the 1970s, dominated by the debate over the comparative merits of Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action and Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems. Although Weber was a presence in both theories, Schluchter argued that sociology requires only one theoretical anchor: the work of Weber.

Today neither critical theory nor systems theory plays a significant role in German sociology. Schluchter’s Plädoyer for a “weberianische Soziologie,” on the other hand, has clearly demonstrated its durability. Following the death of the most influential postwar ‘German sociologist’, an American with the improbable name Talcott Parsons, he became the academic most closely identified with Weber’s work, not least on the grounds of his numerous volumes of Weber scholar-

ship that began to appear in the 1970s (for his more recent collections, see Schluchter, 2009; 2016; 2018b).

Schluchter has spared no efforts in attempting to establish this sociology. The research program that he christened “Theoriegeschichte in systematischer Absicht” has exploited the archival work that provides the basis for the MWG in a masterful fashion, using its insights into the complex history of Weber’s thinking and the unexplored interpretations they make possible. The new book is yet another contribution to this program, which assumes that there is some sense in which systematic theory construction can be derived from research into the history of ideas, configured and tailored for this purpose.

The Book

The book comprises ten essays that, taken together, pursue formidable ambitions and aims. There is a recondite attempt, situated in a tradition of German metaphysical idealism, to construct a philosophical basis for Weber’s sociology (essay 1). There are expository pieces examining Weber’s work on the economy (essays 2 and 4), politics (essays 7 and 8), intellectuality (essays 5 and 6), and religion (essays 2, 9, and 10), the chief existential orders and cultural spheres that he investigated. There are studies comparing his thinking to alternative perspectives (essays 3, 4, and 8). And there are biographical vignettes.

With the exception of the first essay, these studies reprise, in the main, the Wolfgang Schluchter we know: the master of the *Glasperlenspiel* of Weberian taxonomics and exegetics, mining Weber’s texts to tease out ever more refined implications. Notable in this regard are essay 4, which documents Weber’s changing views between 1894 and 1920 on how *Wirtschaftstheorie*, *Wirtschaftssoziologie*, and *Wirtschaftsgeschichte* are linked, and essay 7, which sets the lecture “Politik als Beruf” against the background of the political confusion produced by the German revolution in winter 1918–19 as well as the personal quandary that, as Schluchter supposes, Weber faced in choosing between politics and the academic-scientific life as postwar careers.

All of which, in a book of moderate length, bespeaks an impressive endowment of *chutzpah*. Or does it? No one has a stronger claim to write such a book than Schluchter himself. No one, living or dead, has surveyed the full range of Weber’s work longer and with greater effect. For tenacity in the field of Max Weber research and a determination to produce a theoretical synthesis of the fragmentary and unfinished body of his work, no one matches Schluchter for perseverance and resolve. Among Weberian scholars he is the supreme ‘protestantische Ethiker’.

However, when we consider the coherence of the book and the sense in which Schluchter's studies conform to its title, darkness falls. The essays, he suggests, are tightly coupled: problems considered only in an abbreviated fashion in one essay are examined in more depth elsewhere in the book. On the other hand, he also claims that each study can be read independently: "Jede präsentiert einen in sich geschlossenen Argumentationszusammenhang" (Schluchter: v-vi). This seems paradoxical. If an essay only touches on a theme or sketches its lineaments, in what sense can it qualify as a self-contained argument or analysis? In any case, we are left to puzzle out how the essays are connected in Schluchter's mind. How are we to discover the thread that runs through them? In addressing these problems, I pursue two lines of inquiry. What are the merits of Schluchter's attempt to produce a philosophical foundation for Weber's sociology? And in what sense is he engaged in thinking "mit Max Weber"?

Philosophical Dead Ends

As early as 1979, Schluchter's monograph *Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus* included a chapter on the philosophical basis of Weber's sociology (Schluchter, 1979). At that point, he maintained that the neo-Kantianism of the Southwest German School – especially the work of Heinrich Rickert – provided a philosophical underpinning for Weber's thought. However, the limits of what Southwest German neo-Kantianism could achieve in this regard became plain, and by 2020, a new candidate appeared: *Bewusstseins- und Subjekthphilosophie*, as Schluchter calls it. At this juncture, I consider three questions raised by his exercise in foundation-building. What sort of account constitutes a philosophical foundation of Weber's sociology? Is there a reason to think that without a philosophical foundation, his work would be defective in some respect? And what can be said regarding the soundness of the philosophical position that Schluchter advocates?

What does it mean to construct a philosophical foundation for Weber's sociology – 'foundation' of course being a metaphor in this context? What conditions must be satisfied or criteria met? On these matters, Schluchter says nothing. Instead he seems to make the tacit assumption that this foundation can be produced in only one way: by an argument that establishes logical conditions for the possibility of the individual actor – and, by implication, the actor's conduct – that are basic concepts of Weber's sociology. Employing the language of German idealism introduced in Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, he calls this essential piece of reasoning a 'transcendental argument'. If individual actors and their conduct exist, certain propositions that are logically necessary for their existence must be true. What are these propositions?

Is a philosophical foundation indispensable to Weber's sociology? There is no reason to suppose that Weber thought this was the case. Neither of the two volumes of the MWG devoted to his 'Wissenschaftslehre' – essentially work in the philosophy of the social sciences – includes any evidence that Weber believed his work as a social scientist would be incomplete or unfinished, perhaps even seriously defective, without a philosophical foundation. Nor does Schluchter offer any evidence that Weber was a fundamentalist in this sense.

What of Schluchter's sketch of a philosophical foundation? Performing a breathtaking exercise in expository compression, he constructs it from his reading of Karl Jaspers's writings on consciousness as interpreted by Dieter Henrich. In addition, he draws on Henrich's extensive writings on Fichte that extend over a half-century, representing an attempt to reconstruct the core of Fichte's thinking as an original theory of a pre-reflexive, unitary, and subjective consciousness. If this seems somewhat distant from Weber's thinking and intellectual sensibility, that is because it is. Even if Weber had been wedded to the necessity of a philosophical foundation for his sociology, it could not have been Schluchter's theory. The conceptual basis of Weber's sociological thought, first set out in the essay "Über einige Kategorien der verstehenden Soziologie," was published in 1913, six years before Jaspers's *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, the text on which the Jaspers-Weber connection in Schluchter's analysis is based. Moreover, the key figure in Schluchter's scheme is not Jaspers but Henrich. It is Henrich's reading of Fichte and Jaspers that Schluchter credits for his scheme and its distinctive character as "subjekttheoretisch ausgerichtet und bewusstseinsphilosophisch fundiert" (Schluchter: 10). Henrich was not born until 1927, seven years after Weber's death. Marx could not have described himself as the father, or even as a precursor, of Western Marxism because he could not have read Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno, or Marcuse. Dostoevsky could not have regarded his novels as inspirations for Nietzsche, Freud, Kafka, or Woody Allen. For the same reason, it was logically impossible for Weber, although a monumental thinker, to develop a philosophy based on Henrich's reading of Fichte and Existenzphilosophie. It follows that irrespective of what its other virtues may be, Schluchter's sketch of a philosophical foundation can play no role in his larger project of thinking with Weber, who could not have understood himself as doing what had not been conceived or thinking what had not been thought until decades later. This is of course not an original insight in the philosophy of history (see, for example, Danto, 1968; Skinner, 1969).

What can be said of the philosophical strengths of Schluchter's foundation? For several reasons, some more troubling than others, it is clear that he has chosen a high-risk philosophical strategy. The most dangerous risk is evident. All mistaken or suspect assumptions, all fallacies and other weaknesses of the Fichte-Jaspers-Henrich tradition will be implicated in Schluchter's strategy and em-

bedded in his philosophical foundation. The point of departure for Schluchter's philosophical exercise, he claims, is Jaspers's distinction between subject and object (Schluchter: 3). Or perhaps it isn't. Schluchter is ambivalent about the influence on Weber of *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, written by his much younger acolyte and enthusiast. Only a few pages later, we learn that this distinction rests on a unitary conception of consciousness. Without the transcendental presupposition of an undifferentiated consciousness, Jaspers's distinction would not be possible (Schluchter: 10). Schluchter finds this ur-consciousness in the work of Henrich, whose importance for his argument can hardly be exaggerated (see Henrich, 1982: 99–159; 2003: 157–262; 2007: 143–247; Schluchter, 2018a). The unitary consciousness is, with one exception, unqualifiable and inert. It is pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic, pre-reflexive, impersonal, nonrelational, and unmediated. Comparable to the concept of evil in medieval Arabic, Jewish, and Christian thought, it is understood overwhelmingly in terms of privation, on the basis of qualities it does not possess. The single exception of ur-conscious activity is Selbstkenntnis, not to be conflated with Selbsterkenntnis, as Schluchter emphasizes: direct self-knowledge, or self-knowledge by acquaintance. In the Henrich-Schluchter scheme, a unitary and inchoate ur-consciousness that knows itself by acquaintance but does not know that it knows itself is the transcendental presupposition of Jaspers's subject/object dichotomy and the ultimate foundation of subjectivity.

Schluchter offers no suggestions as to how the distinction between Kenntnis and Erkenntnis can be made. However, this issue is relatively insignificant in comparison with the assumption that Bewusstsein is the ultimate or primitive form of self-knowledge, constituting the identity of the subject. Bewusstsein, conceived as direct knowledge of the self, is a mental act, the object of which is consciousness itself. Thus consciousness as self-knowledge reintroduces Jasper's distinction, even though consciousness is both the subject that conceives and the object that is conceived. In order to re-establish the unity of subjectivity, another and more fundamental unitary consciousness is needed on which this distinction can somehow be grounded. This putatively more primitive consciousness must exercise the same performative function of direct self-knowledge by acquaintance, which again reintroduces the subject/object dichotomy that Schluchter, following Henrich, refuses to accept as an ultimate premise in the philosophy of mind. The result is a dilemma. Either an ultimate dualism of consciousness as both subject and object, which Schluchter rejects, or an infinite regress of conceptions of consciousness that are held to be primitive, indivisible, and unitary but are not. In either case, the most brief and crucial section of the book – the attempt to ground Weber's "Soziologische Grundbegriffe" in an ontology of radical transcendental subjectivity: Fichte and Jaspers as read by Henrich, who is in turn interpreted by Schluchter – falls to pieces.

There is more. Even if it were possible to refute, escape, or finesse the above critique, intractable difficulties remain. There is considerable controversy in the contemporary philosophical literature over the extent to which transcendental arguments are valid and what, if anything, they can be used to prove. There is no philosophical consensus on the legitimate scope of these arguments that justifies Schluchter's tacit but unmistakable confidence in a "transzendente Methode" (Schluchter: 10). On the contrary, the recent discussion documents not consensus but conflict over the status and valid functions of transcendental arguments. The range of conflicting views, with no evident prospect for resolution, is impressive (for a comprehensive and lucid analysis of the current state of philosophical opinion on this matter, see Stern, 2020).

Moreover, even if transcendental arguments are valid for some purposes, a transcendental presupposition could not establish the philosophical foundation that, as Schluchter supposes, Weber's sociology requires. At best it would supply only a necessary condition, one of its essential building blocks. For a foundation, sufficient conditions are needed.

With the exception of Henrich and a brief allusion to the work of Manfred Frank (Schluchter: 9–10), Schluchter ignores all philosophical work produced since the Second World War that would seem to be indispensable to his project. Even a cursory inspection of recent work in epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and the theory of action on fundamentalism, consciousness, direct knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance, and pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic thought reveals a hyper-professionalized literature that is prodigious, technically complex, and well-stocked with controversies on fundamental points. Secure paths to solutions or persuasive arguments become improbable in the extreme when the ground is shifting. The upshot: if these considerations carry weight, Schluchter's exercise in foundation-building does not end well.

A problem of opportunity costs also arises for the presumed readers of the book: sociologists in the cultural sphere of the German language and the diminishing cohort of sociologists outside this sphere who can still operate with some sophistication in the German language. The intellectual labor required to comprehend Schluchter's strategy will challenge the wits and test the patience of social scientists who have not made a thorough and recent study of Fichte and Jaspers as they have been read by Henrich. In view of the brevity and the furious pace of life, are the intellectual and professional payoffs sufficient to outweigh the costs of achieving a grasp of German idealism adequate for the purposes of reading Schluchter? Even for readers who live off or for Weber, an obvious question is at stake: Is it worth it?

Missed Opportunities: The Unwritten Lecture on Thinking with Max Weber in Mind

We should not fail to consider that Schluchter's embrace of the Jaspers-Henrich line of thought may lie in another motive: the fact that the book announces a significant new turn in his work on Weber. As the years passed, Schluchter claims, he found himself engaged "immer mehr in ein Denken mit ihm." This is the new perspective he ascribes to the book: "Es sind Studien über Max Weber, aber auch Studien mit ihm" (Schluchter: v). What does it mean to think with Max Weber? Is there something singular in the way he thought – a distinctively Weberian logic, mode of reasoning, or set of assumptions? If there is, what is it, and what has Schluchter learned from it? Concerning these matters, the book has nothing to say.

If a master class on what it can mean to think with Max Weber were wanted, Schluchter has been ideally placed. During the Heidelberg summer semester 1977, he and Henrich offered a seminar on "Max Weber's Wert-und Geschichtstheorie" (Schluchter, 1979: viii-ix). In the Heidelberg summer semester 1983, Henrich delivered a lecture in the old Aula of the university. He stood at the same lectern from which Jaspers, the month after Weber's death, gave his legendary memorial address on 17 July, 1920 – an apotheosis of Weber's life and character as the embodiment of Truth with a capital T, 'the Word made flesh' in a post-Christian sense. The title of Henrich's lecture: "Denken im Blick auf Max Weber." Henrich's ideal type of a man who thought with Weber in mind was Jaspers himself. His first book, *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (1913), employed the concept of ideal types as well as Weber's methodological distinction between *Verstehen* and causal explanation. *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (1919) was based on the seminal "Zwischenbetrachtung" (1915) in Weber's essays on the sociology of religion, exploiting its analysis of conflicting concepts of rationality and antinomies in alternative modes of rationalizing the conduct of life. As Henrich read it, the memorial lecture "beginnt und gipfelt in der These, daß Max Weber in Wahrheit Philosoph gewesen sei" (Henrich, 1986: 207). Weber became and remained Jaspers's intended or ideal reader, "dessen Gesamtsicht in dem von den Werken erschlossenen Sachbereich von ihm selbst beachtet, bestätigt und zu neuen Einsichten erweitert gefunden werden könnte" (Henrich, 1986: 211). It was in Jaspers's understanding of Weber's life and death as the embodiment of truth that his philosophy had its origin "als Lebensziel und als Programm, das alle Arbeit organisierte" (Henrich, 1986: 208). In Henrich's conception, therefore, all of Jaspers's philosophical work can be understood as a dialogue with Weber.

Late in Jaspers's life, Weber's now famous love letters to Else von Richthofen-Jaffé came into his hands. Replete not only with heated "knabenhafter Leiden-

schaft,” they were also filled with stratagems designed to deceive his wife and close friends. The letters shattered Jaspers’s “Bild” of Weber as the incarnation of an authentic philosophy and devastated his own self-identity as a philosopher, at least for a time. Weber’s affair with Else was “ein Verrat,” a stunning breach of faith with everyone who believed in his “Größe.” Perhaps this held for Jaspers above all others. After all, he had convinced himself that the “Tatsächlichkeit” of Weber’s life was the personification of truth itself. In rethinking Weber, he was reassessing the authenticity of his own philosophy. Was there a resolution of the apparently irresolvable conflict between radical truthfulness and radical betrayal? Jaspers thought he had perhaps found the elements of a resolution – or was it merely another Weberian paradox of rationality? – by rereading the “Zwischenbetrachtung” and delineating the outlines of a new image of Weber. In this new picture, Weber not only accepted the antinomy of values and value spheres in the social sciences and philosophy, but probed the depths of axiological antinomy in his own life. As a result, he attained a truth that Jaspers had failed to grasp before the shock of the letters to Else: “in dieser Antinomik Stand finden und ein ganzes Leben ohne Verlust der Wahrhaftigkeit führen” (Henrich, 1986: 210). For a reader not initiated into the presumptive discursive subtleties of Existenzphilosophie, this seems to be an oblique way of saying that Weber learned to deceive his wife and friends without losing his bearings. F. Scott Fitzgerald put this matter rather more charitably. Weber passed “the test of a first-rate intelligence,” namely, “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (Fitzgerald, 1956: 69). It was after Jaspers had made this last attempt to think with Weber that he wrote his one-time student Hannah Arendt on 29 April, 1966. Comparing Weber with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, he observed that it was only Weber who “hat Ernst gemacht mit der grenzenlosen Redlichkeit” (Henrich, 1986: 231).

So much for Jaspers’s final image of Weber, ending his numerous tortuous efforts to find consistency, balance, and unity in a finite life and work constituted by a seeming infinity of contradictions. A superb lecture with the title “Denken mit Blick auf Max Weber” could also be written about Schluchter. Since no such account has been undertaken, he had an excellent opportunity to do so in this book, perhaps comparing his own efforts to think with Weber in mind to those of Jaspers. Jaspers’s leitmotiv was a philosophical question, perhaps the question of all questions. What is Schluchter’s leitmotiv? He has been gifted with a long professional life devoted largely to writing about what Weber thought and what might be made of it, following architectonic objectives that Weber did not pursue and perhaps did not envision. He has the intellectual chops to engage with Weber, commanding a breadth of understanding of Weber’s oeuvre that no other contemporary Weber scholar could be expected to match. Because he has situated

himself squarely in the tradition of Jaspers and Henrich, seasoned students of Weberiana might open his book with a reasonable expectation that he would either take the path that Jaspers staked out and consider the extent to which his efforts have borne fruit; or if not, follow another course that seems to show greater promise.

It can be said, with little exaggeration, that Schluchter's work on Weber represents a lifetime project of constructing a unified Weberian field theory for sociology, a Weberian Theory of Everything Sociological. But if no philosophical basis can be established for the unity of Max Weber as Weberian Kulturmensch, his reflexive or self-conscious thinking about his most elemental decisions, what are the prospects for philosophically grounding a Weberian system of sociology? If there is no intrinsic coherence in Weber's intellectual life – the apparent result of Jaspers's attempt to settle accounts with Weber – what is the outlook for the Weber paradigm of Schluchter's sociological imagination? Various reconceptualizations of Weber's thought are, of course, possible. But in what sense can they be understood as efforts to think with Weber?

Thinking with Max Weber in mind is a mode of professional existence and, more generally, of the conduct of life. What are the essential elements of this life? What are its imperatives – or, in Weber-Speak, its ultimate values? What consequences do they entail for the post-Max Weber Weberian? What is the character of the thinker and the thought that they form? On these matters, which trace the outlines of the Unwritten Lecture, the book does not speak. How does Schluchter weigh up the results of some four decades of his intellectual life? These questions suggest that in thinking with Max Weber, he has perhaps just begun.

References

- Danto, A. *Analytical Philosophy of History*; Cambridge University Press: New York, 1968.
- Fitzgerald, F. S. *The Crack-up*; New Directions: New York, 1956.
- Henrich, D. *Fluchtlinien: Philosophische Essays*; Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M., 1982.
- Henrich, D. Denken im Blick auf Max Weber. In *Karl Jaspers. Philosoph, Arzt, Politischer Denker*; Hersch, J. Ed.; Piper: München, 1986; pp 207–231.
- Henrich, D. *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2003.
- Henrich, D. Denken und Selbstsein: Vorlesungen über Subjektivität; Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M., 2007.
- Schluchter, W. *Die Entwicklung des Okzidental Rationalismus. Eine Analyse von Max Webers Gesellschaftsgeschichte*; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 1979.
- Schluchter, W. *Die Entzauberung der Welt*; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2009.
- Schluchter, W. *Max Webers späte Soziologie*; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2016.

Schlachter, W. Berlin und die Folgen: Dieter Henrich zum 90. Geburtstag. In *Philosophie und Leben: Erkundungen mit Dieter Henrich*; Vollhardt, F. Ed.; Wallstein Verlag: Göttingen, 2018a; pp 261–265.

Schlachter, W. *Handeln im Kontext*; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2018b.

Skinner, Q. Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas. *History and Theory* 1969, 8, 3–53.

Stern, R. „Transcendental Arguments“ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (Ed.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/transcendental-arguments/> (Zugriff Jan 6, 2021).