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Review Essay 45

Richard Ned Lebow, ed. *Max Weber and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781108416382 (hardback, \$99.99).

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Neo: Is that your point, Councillor?

Councillor Hamann: No. No point. Old men like me don't bother with making points. There's no point.

—*Matrix Reloaded*

At first, *Max Weber and International Relations* may be mistaken for a very 90s book. That would be unfortunate. Most of its contributors entered the field during the immediate post-Cold War 'reflectivist' uprising and like many of the revisionist engagements with the canon in the 1990s, this volume presents a rather unorthodox reading of its protagonist. And yet, in many respects, it goes well beyond that. In the 1990s, there was, for instance, something like a cottage-industry among doctoral students with 'critical' dispositions but no clear research questions: pick a 'real classic' casually referenced by an 'IR classic' and show how 'IR classics' got 'real classics' wrong. This rather elementary exercise was peppered with fancy jargon, but none of the sophisticated '-ologies' could conceal the fact that decades later a significant part of that IR generation was as perplexed by the events 'on the ground' as were the mainstream theorists they once criticised.

As a result, calls for abandoning excessive meta-theorizing and re-engaging with the 'world' are heard today from different quarters. In a way, Weber is a perfect candidate for studying how to do just that. After all, his theoretical sophistication notwithstanding, he cannot be accused of neglecting the worldly problems of his time and place. But then again, if re-engagement with the world is the issue, why address it by examining yet another 'classic' rather than the world itself? In other words, who needs another book on Weber?

One way of answering this question is by jumping to this particular book's concluding chapter. There Ned Lebow and David Bohmer Lebow relay Hans Morgenthau's conversation with Karl Deutsch in which the latter warned the former that it was "almost inevitable that his theory becomes 'hard boiled' in the hands of

strategists... who know no history” (194).¹ If anything, Lebow’s volume places Weber in context, while taking measure of this context’s historical depth. More importantly, however, the history that thus provides a much needed background for theoretical discussions is not merely a history of Weber’s thinking. In some important sense, it is the history of the world. Or one particular facet of it, the one we routinely call (western) ‘modernity.’

Needless to say, one cannot expect any comprehensive discussion of modernity in a relatively small book focusing on selected aspects of Weber’s oeuvre. But this is where the book’s real strength comes through: it is exceptionally well thought through, focused and structured *as a whole*, and yet this structure is never allowed to turn into the infamous ‘iron cage,’ forcing each contributor to make the same point over and over again. In fact, there is no fixed point to be made, or discovered in Weber’s writings on this interpretation of those. Rather, there is a certain trajectory to be (re)traced, the one Weber himself lays out rather uneasily.

This trajectory invariably begins with Weber’s conceptualization of modernity as a polysemic experience, subdivided into various distinct realms, each governed in its peculiar way. Then comes Weber’s failure to sustain these clear-cut distinctions, *together with* his analytical rigour that does not allow him to take easy shortcuts *and* his ethical and political convictions that make capitulation impossible. Lebow chooses to define the resulting situation as “tensions” and identifies four of these: epistemological, sociological, political and tragic. (1-8, 172-95)² These four nodal points, in turn, provide the book with its structure.

This underlying structure is never advertised explicitly, but once it becomes clear, the choice of contributors appears only ‘natural.’ One would expect Patrick Thaddeus Jackson to focus on the ‘epistemological’ tension,³ Stefano Guzzini - on the ‘sociological’ one,⁴ with John Hobson adding historical and postcolonial dimension to it,⁵ Jens Steffek - on ‘political,’⁶ and Lebow himself - on ‘tragic.’ Yet, it is not that straightforward. The boundaries between ‘tensions’ are challenged and traversed, rather than established. Thus, Jackson’s discussion of Weberian ‘ideal types’ brings in sociology of knowledge and politics. Guzzini locates Weberian ‘international relations’ at the impossible and yet necessary intersection of two realms that are supposed to be categorially distinct: constitutive political ontology and explanatory theory of action. This particular

¹ David Bohmer Lebow and Richard Ned Lebow, “Weber’s Tragic Legacy,” in *Max Weber and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 194.

² Richard Ned Lebow, “Introduction,” in *Max Weber and International Relations*: 1-9; Bohmer Lebow and Lebow, “Weber’s Tragic Legacy”: 172-199.

³ Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, “The Production of Facts: Ideal-Typification and the Preservation of Politics,” in *Max Weber and International Relations*: 79-96.

⁴ Stefano Guzzini, “Max Weber’s Power,” in *Max Weber and International Relations*: 97-118.

⁵ John Hobson, “Decolonizing Weber: The Eurocentrism of Weber’s IR and Historical Sociology” in *Max Weber and International Relations*: 143-171.

⁶ Jens Steffek, “International Organizations and Bureaucratic Modernity,” in *Max Weber and International Relations*: 119-142.

transgression, in turn, becomes clearer following Lebow's reconstruction of Weber's intellectual context and Hobson's dissection of his Eurocentrism.

It is fascinating enough to follow these reconstructions and dissections in detail, but perhaps even more interesting is their cumulative effect, which is best appreciated when looking at the volume as a whole: an appreciation of the fact that the ongoing drawing of meaningful distinctions - something every student of theory is supposed to learn, and not least from Weber - is bound to result in the recognition one's own limitations. This is what Morgenthau defined as "tragic" in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*.⁷ To understand *politics*, we need to grasp man in his complexity that goes well beyond his rationality. But to *understand* politics, we have no choice but to rely on reason.

Morgenthau's refusal to see this ineliminable limitation as a mere 'contradiction' to be resolved one way or another is what sets him apart, according to Lebow and Bohmer Lebow, from other immediate students of Weber, both on the right (Carl Schmitt) or on the left (Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer). But this is also where one could start raising questions about the limitations of Lebow's own framework. For Morgenthau, 'tragic' is almost a characteristic of 'political.' For Lebow, the two are distinct, and yet related in a way that is somehow more significant than in the case of other 'tensions.' (173-7)⁸ Why exactly remains unclear, mostly because, throughout the volume, both 'tragedy' and 'tensions' are used as metaphors rather than fully-fledged concepts. As such they still do an important and interesting job, but the reader is left with a feeling that both could be pushed further. For instance, in the direction of Michael Dillon's early discussion of 'tragedy' by now significantly extended into the realm of biopolitics;⁹ or that of Derridean 'undecideables' once explored by Jenny Edkins in relation to the 'political.'¹⁰ To be sure, this particular trajectory may be too postmodern for a volume dedicated to the exemplary modernist; and yet, by following it we may arrive at a better understanding of what exactly connects an exegesis of Weber to the world of today. Is it not the case, after all, that the frustrating breakdown of analytical distinctions so evidently on display throughout the volume matches the way in which the world itself is turning into a 'zone of indistinction'?

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⁷ Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946)

⁸ Bohmer Lebow and Lebow, 'Weber's Tragic Legacy': 173-177.

⁹ Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security: Towards a Political Philosophy of Continental Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996)

¹⁰ Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back in* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999)