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The Usefulness of Max Weber’s Oeuvre in the Discussion of Development in Asia Today

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The purpose of this paper is to indicate briefly some ideas and concepts which might be of interest in the discussion of development in Asia today and which have been drawn from Max Weber’s œuvre as a whole (as opposed to his studies on Indian and Chinese religions only).

At the same time, some other ideas and concepts which are often assumed to be in the Weberian tradition but are based on a limited reading of the œuvre as a whole, will be shown to be misunderstandings.

Few are those who have read Weber’s studies on India and China within the context to which they belong, namely the ‘Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion’, and who have interpreted them in the light of the ‘Prefatory Note’, the ‘Introduction’ and the ‘Intermediate Reflection’, essential parts of the ‘Collected Essays’. Weber’s ‘Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion’ have never been translated as a whole into English and, as a consequence, it has not often been understood how they are linked together. The quality of some of the translations is a matter for despair.

Because Weber was a Westerner and lived and wrote during a time when colonialism still flourished, it has been assumed as obvious that he was a defender of Western capitalism and proud of that capitalist spirit to which the protestant ethic has

contributed so much. His studies on the world religions have even been seen as an implicit defence of colonialism, imperialism or simply the dominance of the West.

It is instructive to read the reactions and comments of many Indian, Buddhist, Chinese and Muslim authors in this regard. They seem to have felt that they must either refute what they believed to be the 'Weber thesis' or accept underdevelopment and stagnation for many years to come. Some of them, finally, perhaps under the influence of American functionalist interpretations of Weber's œuvre, have tried to point to functional equivalents of the protestant ethic or to capitalist 'strands' in their own countries and cultures. On the whole, it may be said that some authors accepted Weber's theory — and then tried to show that he missed some facts (e.g. capitalistic 'strands' in Asia), while others accepted Weber's facts but tried to prove wrong what they thought to be his theory.

Weber never attempted anything like a monograph on India or China. His studies intentionally emphasize only the elements in which other cultures differ from Western civilization. They are "oriented to the problems which seem important for the understanding of Western civilization" (Weber, 1930, p. 27), its form of rationalism and its origins. Nor was it Weber's intention to prove the otherworldliness of Asian religions in order to validate his thesis about Western Protestantism, as it has often been suggested.

Weber never addressed himself to the issues of industrializing and modernizing 'underdeveloped' countries, at least not directly. While many Asian (and Western) authors have tried to prove that there is a potential for capitalist development in their region — in some regions proofs are obviously not necessary any longer — Weber would not have denied that possibility. Predictions of trends were abhorred by him; more than anyone else, he foresaw the possibility of unexpected consequences of historical phenomena and actions and he would not have tried to predict a future of any kind.

While Weber's studies dealt with the purely historical question of the absence of the modern Western spirit of capitalism in Asia (contemporary conditions were mentioned only incidentally), his purpose was much more profound. According to the expertise of Tenbruck (1980), Weber was interested in the more general question of how rationality develops and evolves at the confluence of ideas and interests. His notion of rationality was very wide and must not be understood to mean only a means-end-rationality (Zweckrationalität). He opposed Zweckrationalität and Wertrationalität (value-oriented rationality) and distinguished between formal and material rationality. His notion of rationality was comprehensive and ambivalent.

We can say that one of the major intentions of Weber was to produce a 'typology and a sociology of rationalism' (Gerth & Mills, p. 324), to confront the various types of rationalisation, produced by India, China, Islam and the West, and to show why a certain kind of rationalisation, of which one can find embryonic stages elsewhere, has developed mainly in the West. This of a certainty doesn't mean that he considered non-Western societies as irrational.

Various attitudes and phenomena in Asia have been compared to or linked to those of the modern Western capitalistic spirit. For instance the so-called

a) Acquisitive drive

Weber never questioned the existence of an acquisitive drive among Asia's merchants and tradesmen; indeed, he noted that the Indian or Chinese merchant or artisan