

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: Stephen Kalberg. 2016. *Searching for the Spirit of American Democracy: Max Weber's Analysis of a Unique Political Culture, Past, Present, and Future*. Routledge. 176p. ISBN: 9781612054452

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This text reviews Stephen Kalberg's *Searching for the Spirit of American Democracy: Max Weber's Analysis of a Unique Political Culture, Past, Present, and Future*, focusing on the twofold analysis Weber offered regarding the American Protestantism. The key idea Kalberg supports is that the famous "Protestant Ethic" should be read together with Weber's less known essay on "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism."

Keywords: Max Weber; Stephen Kalberg; USA

You would never believe all the things I have been asked; "How do you cope with the Negroes in Germany?" was not even the craziest question. But the people also tell stories, and I believe I have never been so merry since my first semesters at the university as I have been here with these people, who are as naïve as children and yet handle any situation.

Max Weber's notes from his journey in the US.

In a recent text of his, the Swedish Professor Sven Eliaeson, one of the most acclaimed scholars dealing with the problems arising from the study of Weber's theory of science, remarked: "Most statements about Max Weber's methodology are like passing generalizing judgments on the USA; whatever 'truth' might be articulated, there is an equally true opposite statement."

That is certainly true: we constantly hear a lot of contradictory things regarding the United States. What *is* this country? A land of couch potatoes eating burgers in front of a big screen TV? Or one of active citizens and lively communities who organize powerful demonstrations against police violence, like on the occasion of the murder of George Floyd? Is it a kingdom of consumerism or one of freedom? A promised land, where hard work is rewarded, or one of the most severely affected by social and economic inequalities places on earth?

Is its essence to be found in the cosmopolitan urban centers, with the world's most famous universities, or in the "anachronistic" rural states of the South who vote for Trump? Or is the United States perhaps an amalgam of all these different things? And, if so, how are the various ingredients of this heterogeneous mixture related to each other?

In 2014, another major Weber scholar, this time an American, published a short book trying to thematize the tensions and contradictions that characterize the society in which he lives. This scholar is no other than Stephen Kalberg, Professor of Sociology Emeritus at the University of Boston, and the book is titled *Searching for the Spirit of American Democracy: Max Weber's Analysis of a Unique Political Culture, Past, Present, and Future* (2014, Paradigm; 2016, Routledge). In the next few pages, I will try to sketch out the reasons for which I find this work to be quite important for those interested in the thought of Max Weber as well as those who ponder on questions of contemporary politics.

To my mind, the uniqueness and originality of Kalberg's book stem from the excellent use he makes of Weber's underestimated writings on the cultural significance of Protestant sects for the American culture. Returning home from an 11-week long journey in the United States in 1904, where he had been invited to give a lecture at the Universal Exposition and Congress of Arts and Science in St. Louis, Weber finishes writing his famous study on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. At the same time, he composes a shorter essay on Protestant sects and churches of North America, in which many of the impressions caused by his large trip are reflected.

Although Weber's study on the *Protestant Ethic* (a remarkable synopsis of which can be found in the second Appendix of Kalberg's book) is renowned, a real milestone, for the perception of his total *oeuvre* up to this day, the different versions of his essay "Die protestantischen Sekten und der Geist des Kapitalismus" remain rather unnoticed. Although H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills have included a translation of the text in their classic collection *From Max Weber* (1946), the ideas Weber expresses in it haven't found their way to a broader audience. At the same time, in other countries (e.g. Greece, where the writer of this review comes from) scholars had to wait until 2021 to be able to read it in their own language.

Kalberg's really interesting, fundamental argument is that the *Protestant Ethic* and the "Protestant Sects" should be read together, seen as complementary parts of a whole; the one-sided emphasis on the first essay offers only a partial, if not incorrect, view of the Weberian conception of Protestantism's cultural imprint. In other words, Weber's well-known argument, according to which the practical interpretations of the Calvinist predestination doctrine pushed faithful Protestants in a sort of *world-oriented asceticism* – an industrious, energetic, organized, and disciplined activity inside the world, which construed the professional success as a sign of Grace – is only one side of the coin. That is because the study of Protestant sects and churches had lead Weber to some crucial remarks regarding the social frame in which individual action of pious Puritans took place. Impressed by the diversity and liveliness of the various social groups he met in the United States at the time – civic associations, exclusive societies, "Gentlemen's clubs," neighborhoods, schools and colleges, and so on – Weber saw them as secularized or semi-secularized forms of the spirit that characterized Protestant communities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as those of Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Mennonites, and Quakers. These communities were inspired by a strong feeling of belonging, which resulted in an atmosphere of distance or even suspiciousness toward the formal and impersonal central institutions of the State. This enabled the internal, "communal" control of the individual behavior of their members and reinforced the practices of self-government.

Thus, according to Kalberg, the image Weber sketches when it comes to the cultural influence of Protestantism is twofold: on the one side, we have the self-conscious and active

individual, who energetically intervenes in the affairs of this world and is recognized through various economic ventures; on the other, there is a vivid community, which embraces and controls individuals, imposing ethical ideals and rules upon them, and demanding their participation in the commons. These two seemingly contradictory tendencies are articulated if we think that community was regarded as the *locus* in which a person could prove himself through his/her acknowledged activity and offer. As Weber himself notes, in a passage quoted by Kalberg (p. 41), “[a]ccording to all experience there is no stronger means of breeding traits than through the necessity of holding one’s own in the midst of one’s associates.”

In other words, the specificity of American individualism cannot be separated from the one of the American communal traditions. To use a phrase of Max Weber, which Kalberg rightfully emphasizes, “American democracy is not a sandpile of unrelated individuals but a maze of highly exclusive, yet absolutely voluntary, sects, associations, and clubs, which provide the center of the individual’s social life.” It goes without saying that this passage is of enormous importance; not only for the analysis of the American political life or the cultural significance of Protestantism but also for the proper understanding of Max Weber’s work as a whole. Far from being a mere “individualist,” as he often is accused of, Weber connects the analysis of individual subjects with the one of the social forces that shape their actions.

But let us return to the book. Based on these two complementary facets of Weber’s analysis, Stephen Kalberg tries to conceive the uniqueness of contemporary American society and its political culture. Phenomena which at first seem to contradict each other – such as the ongoing spread of individualism and the persistence of a great communal tradition, or the worship of the autonomous, talented, and successful individual, on the one hand, and the emphasis on the contribution to the community, the neighborhood, the volunteer organization, on the other – are interpreted by Kalberg through the scheme of a “symbiotic dualism” that characterizes American society and can be traced back to the legacy of Protestantism and its sects. Of course, since we are dealing with Max Weber, this connection between the Protestant past and the actuality of the United States should not be read as a manifestation of a strict determinism, leading from the former directly to the latter, but as part of a broader image, where various social forces create chances, tendencies, and possibilities, which may be strong but never absolute.

Having set the theoretical foundation of his argument, Kalberg then poses some crucial questions regarding the chances and prospects of this blissful symbiotic dualism in our own era. Is it feasible to preserve the always fragile balance between the active individual and its community in times of extreme economic inequality and dominance of various elites in the public sphere? Does the increasingly bureaucratic organization of contemporary societies permit the survival of the self-governmental treats of independent social groups and communities? Nowadays, is it still possible for the individual action and the collectivity to remain interwoven, or do they fall apart, transformed into a purely utilitarian capitalist entrepreneurship and a huge bureaucratic organization, respectively?

Finally, it is perhaps useful to close this review with some critical remarks – just to honor Max Weber’s spirit, the spirit of a thinker who died 101 years ago and who always scrutinized everything that caught his attention. First, I would say that sometimes Kalberg’s main argument seems to be repeated, instead of getting richer and deeper. Moreover, the connections Kalberg establishes between the Weberian problematization and the actuality of contemporary United States remain somewhat general. In other words, given that the prism Kalberg has brought about is really unique and priceless, it would have been extremely thought provoking to read an analysis of *specific* recent political and cultural phenomena performed under this prism. Of course, Kalberg does casually refer to important issues of our times, such as populism, culture wars, and presidential campaigns. It would have been more insightful,

though, to include for all these points (or at least some of them) a thorough analysis, enriched with everyday examples – something that would, of course, have required the addition of quite a few pages in the book. Furthermore, new phenomena, some of which occurred after the publication of the book, such as Donald Trump’s election, the increasing importance of identity politics, or even the escalation of the police violence problem and the reaction of black communities could be fruitfully investigated through a similar point of view.

To sum up, Stephen Kalberg’s *Searching for the Spirit of American Democracy: Max Weber’s Analysis of a Unique Political Culture, Past, Present, and Future* offers an important and innovative access point to Max Weber’s work, drawing the reader’s attention to an unnoticed aspect of the Weberian treatment of Protestantism, and we can only hope more works in the same line of thinking will soon follow.

Last but not least, it should be noted that the book not only guides us magnificently through Weber’s sociological universe but also provides us with some hints about the way he used to work while studying his contemporary world. In this respect, the first Appendix of the book, containing details from Weber’s long journey in the United States, is absolutely delightful: it highlights how Weber took advantage of his trip to absorb as much as he could of this laboratory of Modernity while also referring to his meetings with respected figures of the American intellectual scene, for example, W.E.B. du Bois, important African American sociologist, for whom Weber later wrote he was “the most important sociological scholar anywhere in the Southern States, with whom no white scholar can compare.”

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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