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Stephen Kalberg. *Searching for the Spirit of American Democracy: Max Weber's Analysis of a Unique Political Culture, Past, Present, and Future*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2014. Pp. xii+158. \$19.95.

Europeans have for 200 years found America fascinating enough to try to anatomize it, in part as some strange new beast, in part for lessons to the author's native land. Before de Tocqueville there was de Crèvecoeur, who, in addition to *Letters from an American Farmer*, wrote four other books with American titles. In Germany, Karl May produced extremely popular works of fiction about the American Old West (*Winnetou*, *Im fernen Westen*) during the last third of the nineteenth century. Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* (1963) has America as its axial point. In 1986, Jean Baudrillard gave us *Amérique* ("America is the original version of modernity. . . . Having known no primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present"; *Amérique* [London: Verso], 7), and Bernard-Henri Lévy has recently gone—some say stumbled—"in the footsteps of Tocqueville" (*American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* [New York: Random House, 2007]).

Generally missing from this reasonably well known list has been Max Weber. He turns out to be one of the most interesting of all. Recently, Larry Scaff has given us a close-to-definitive account of Weber's travels in the United States in 1904, as well as of the reception of his works in translation (*Max Weber in America* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011]). That book is about Weber in America; Stephen Kalberg, a sociologist at Boston University, has written a short but dense and lucid book about Weber on America. And more importantly, it is about what a Weberian understanding of America might tell us about America today.

The stated goal of the book is to make sense of the "crisis commentary" so prevalent today in America. His goal is, by using Weber, to "inject a historical dimension" into that judgment (100). This book is in great part about how Weber would have analyzed contemporary America. Contemporary crisis theorists, argues Kalberg, tend to overemphasize powerful interest groups, the growth of inequality, and the "colonization of the civic sphere by elites" and underplay the specific interaction of those elements with the historical elements of American political culture and the impact of the American spirit of democracy on modes of self-governance.

Max Weber wrote two essays specifically on America. These derived from the extraordinarily wide set of interests he displayed during his 3-month visit in 1904 (the excuse was the invitation to the St. Louis World's Fair). These essays are "Churches and Sects in North America" and "The Protestant Sects

and the Spirit of Capitalism.” The second essay is actually a revision of the first, that one having been first published in *Die Christliche Welt* in 1906 (already reworked from an article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*) and appearing as the second in a revised form in the first volume of *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* in 1920. In effect, Weber has one set of materials, and in its various incarnations this—and importantly much less *The Protestant Ethic*—provides the material for Kalberg’s analysis.

His book might have been entitled *American Ethics and the Spirits of Protestantism*. His analysis is as follows—and I condense an already very tight account. In the colonial period we find what Kalberg calls a “symbiotic dualism”—on the one hand, Puritans sought to build a perfect community; on the other, they acted as “world-mastering” individualists. The two elements interacted: the self-confidence from the latter made it possible to confront the real difficulties (moral, political, psychological, and physical) of the former. It thus gives rise to a values-based civil individualism. Kalberg has two interesting, detailed chapters on this. (Incidentally, though, it is not the case that, differently from Weber, Tocqueville did not locate American origins in religion, as Kalberg claims on p. 35: after the geography section, that is how *Democracy in America* starts.)

The second period is the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Contrary to many if not most of his European colleagues, Weber saw that Americans were not isolated atoms but lived deeply within civic groups—the ones, as Kalberg notes, Putnam thought we were losing as we bowled by ourselves. In this second period, the civic sphere still remains “thick” (103), but the individualism becomes “practical-ethical” as opposed to the earlier “value-based,” but also as opposed to the increasingly standard European case of “practical-rational.” A case in point here is the story Weber repeats in each essay of the man who sought successfully to prove himself worthy to join the Baptist Church with its total immersion baptism (in a very cold stream, notes Weber) so as to be able to attract non-Baptist customers who would then know him to be honest and upright. Again, Kalberg gives us a short, lucid chapter on this development.

According to Weber, this second dualism is fragile. Given the rise of massive urbanization (and, I would add, of suburbanization), of powerful elites, of increasingly interest-based politics—in short, of industrial capitalism—the linkage “becomes eviscerated” and the practical-ethical tends to morph into the practical-rational.

What does this tell us about how to understand the “crises” or “Crisis” that might beset democracies? Weber is clear, as Kalberg makes explicit, that he rejects any generalization from single cases. His historical understanding (of “historical individualnesses”) means that one case is going to be different from another. As he writes in “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy,”

“We want to understand the surrounding reality of life into which we are thrown (*hineingestellt*) in its peculiarity . . . the ground of its historical and its not-thus-not-otherwise coming into actuality” (*Wissenschaftslehre*, 170–71, partially cited by Kalberg).

Kalberg is clear—and he is correct in my reading—that Weber does not seek to uncover “laws” but rather pays “attention to the multiple ways in which subjective meaning is formed by persons assembled in innumerable—and often antagonistic—groups” (109). The advantage of this approach is that it permits and requires us to identify sets of beliefs and values, understood in relation to different cohesive and powerful patterns of action (i.e., groups), and then explain how some support self-governance and others restrict democracy. One does not explain American democracy over time by referring to rationally choosing individuals, nor to checks and balances, nor as consequent the power of certain groups or the state—such do not give rise over an extended time frame to the beliefs and values that support democracy. (It is interesting to note that Weber spent a good deal of time with W. E. B. Dubois—for a fuller account see Scaff’s book—and through his analysis came away with the understanding that the race question would become the most important line of fracture in America. Kalberg calls attention to this on p. 121 in his appendix on Weber’s US travels.)

There are lessons here for the present, and Kalberg draws them. The beliefs and values that make democracy possible are not consequent to any combination of political and/or economic forces, although they are not irrelevant to them. He adduces Iraq, the Arab Spring, and the lot of different countries of Eastern Europe post-1989. In the United States (but in relatively few of the over 100 countries that have modeled their constitution on that of the United States) “a particular political culture anchored in a *spirit of democracy enhanced* the possibility that democratic self-governance would congeal and endure” (112). He continues on to note that “significant obstacles crystallized throughout the twentieth century” (112). America may be in for a bad time.

All this is well and clearly done with a good sense of Weber and much of the relevant literature. What can one make of it? In the first place, Kalberg has made a quiet case for American exceptionalism—the focus on culture effectively differentiates the United States from most other countries, including those that might seek in some way to imitate it. If eroded values, then no civic culture and pretty soon no democracy.

Second, while one cannot do everything, especially in a short book, the analysis seems to me to underplay the role of the Civil War (it is not mentioned, I believe) and thus of particular political events. Captain Charles Soule gave a speech to newly freed slaves of Orangeburg, South Carolina, after the war. They had been given land that had in turn been taken back from them. Soule explained their situation: “You are now free, but you must know that

the only difference you can feel yet, between slavery and freedom, is that neither you nor your children can be bought or sold. You may have a harder time this year than you have ever had before; it will be the price you pay for your freedom. . . . Remember that all your working time belongs to the man who hires you” (quoted in Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O’Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008], 218). What happens here is that the notion of autonomy put forth by Lincoln (to be in control of oneself and provide for oneself: the Free Soil model) has become reduced to selling one’s labor by working for wages, precisely the situation arising in Northern industrial capitalism. The collapse of cultures (that of Free Soil and that of the white South) is consequent to or at least greatly accelerated by the Civil War. Is this a limit on Weber (who mentions the Civil War very briefly if at all), or can we wish that Kalberg had extended Weber’s analysis to take it into account?

Third, is it unfair to suggest that some of the worries that Kalberg finds that Weber would have about our present situation have in one way or another been voiced, often by the right? I think here of a book like (I am being unfair!) Herman Kahn and A. J. Wiener’s *Towards the Year 2000* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), with its distress at “sensate culture.” Increasingly for the middle class and above, the American system has encouraged and made possible the reality of not having to defer gratification.

Finally, the reader will have noticed that most of my citations are from the last part of the book. The book has in my reading a slightly annoying didacticism, as if the major audience were advanced undergraduates. Each chapter is short and sets out the elements of what Kalberg wants to say, carefully divided into even shorter subsections. The first chapter says what he is going to say, he then says it, and the last chapter says it again. (There are two useful appendices, one on Weber’s US travels and a second summarizing the argument of *The Protestant Ethic*.)

But the above cavils too much. The book is a fine reading and extension of Weber’s work and method to an analysis of America, as well as a plea for a particular approach to social science. It does those things very well indeed.

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