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Review of Michael Löwy, La cage d'acier: Max Weber et le marxisme wébérien

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*La cage d'acier: Max Weber et le marxisme wébérien*, by **Michael Löwy**. Paris: Éditions Stock, 2013. 193 pp. 18.00 € paper. ISBN: 9782234070226.

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Michael Löwy is one of France's best-known sociologists, as well as an internationally known Marxist thinker. *La cage d'acier: Max Weber et le marxisme wébérien*, on Weber and Weberian Marxism, offers an interesting take on Weber, given Löwy's decades of writings on Marxism, the Frankfurt School, and the theology of liberation, as well as on romanticism in social thought.

In the first two parts of the book, devoted to Weber as such, Löwy "privileges" Weber's "cultural pessimism, his pitiless diagnosis of bureaucratic capitalist civilization . . . and his somber premonitions concerning the future it holds in store for us" (p. 9). He makes short shrift of the hackneyed view of Weber the idealist and Marx the materialist, suggesting that many of Weber's strictures against Marxism as "a naive historical materialism" are aimed at the prominent Marxist theorist of the German Social Democrats, Karl Kautsky (p. 29).

Löwy portrays both Marx and Weber as merciless critics of capitalist modernity. Among the points of affinity he suggests are a certain degree of nostalgia for the non-alienated labor of the medieval European craft worker and their notion of a subject-object inversion. In the latter framework, modern human beings are dominated by forces of production that they themselves participate in creating, via commodity fetishism wherein human relations are as relations between things (Marx) or the celebrated "iron cage" (Weber). (Löwy is well aware of the imprecision of Talcott Parsons's translation of Weber's "*stahlhartes Gehäuse*" as the iron cage, proposing instead a "compartment hard as steel [*habitable dur comme l'acier*]," but he adopts the term as the title of his book

because of its wide currency in the international literature on Weber [p. 66].)

In discussing Weber's cultural pessimism, Löwy argues that he is hardly value neutral in describing modern capitalism as having enclosed us in an iron cage. He also underlines the fact that Weber's iron cage metaphor "is a type of allegory of modern industrial capitalist civilization—and not, as is often believed, of the process of bureaucratization" (p. 71). In this sense, Löwy goes beyond the common view in contemporary social theory of Marx and Weber as the most sophisticated theorists, respectively, of capital and class, and of political power and the state.

Nor does Weber see the "iron cage" as a constricting, albeit necessary, form of progress; for, as Löwy notes, at no time does Weber conceptualize "an 'elective affinity' between capitalism and freedom" (p. 72). And again in similar fashion to Marx, Weber, he notes, saw modern capitalism as "a system of domination at the same time absolute and impersonal"—in Weber's words, "a slavery without a master" (p. 72). He is here connecting Weber to Marx's notion of capital (not the capitalist) as an impersonal force that rules over the human subjects that helped to create it.

At the same time, Löwy elaborates differences between Marx and Weber in terms of the latter's refusal of any type of revolutionary dialectic and his lack of interest in a socialist alternative to capitalism. This too is connected to Weber's cultural pessimism.

In elaborating all of these issues with remarkable care and without the slightest condescension from a Marxist standpoint, Löwy has carried out one of the most serious and probing dialogues to date between the Marxian and Weberian traditions in sociology.

Most North American readers, however, will find the third part of the book, on Weber and twentieth-century Marxism, to be its most original and compelling aspect. The first group of these Marxist thinkers transformed Weber's concept of the Protestant ethic into a notion of "capitalism as religion," as expressed by the radical philosopher Ernst Bloch in 1921 and soon taken up in greater depth by Walter Benjamin of the Frankfurt School. In Benjamin's formulation, Christianity after the Reformation did not pave the

way for capitalism, but actually transformed itself into a cult of capitalism, a cult that relentlessly took over daily life while eliminating most religious holidays and demonizing the poor. Löwy arrives at this via a close reading of an early 1920s manuscript by Benjamin that develops Bloch's point more systematically and that also refers to Weber's sociology of religion. For his part, Erich Fromm connected Weber's Protestant ethic to Freud's anal character, linking both of them to the mentality of capitalism.

The second group of thinkers examined in Part Three were Weberian Marxists, among them Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who coined the term as a description of Georg Lukács. Here Löwy, author of an influential study of Lukács, links the Lukácsian theory of reification not only with Marx's commodity fetishism, but also with Weber's concept of rationalization. In addition, Löwy underlines the ways in which Lukács's early interactions with Weber helped to free him from Kautskyian economic determinism. In a somewhat similar vein, Antonio Gramsci is seen as having critically appropriated Weber's theorization of the links between Protestantism and capitalist modernity. Löwy stretches his argument too far, however, when he connects José Carlos Mariategui to Weber, even while acknowledging that the great Peruvian Marxist never actually read Weber.

Among the other Weberian Marxists, Frankfurt School members Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse also critically appropriated the Weberian concept of rationalization, transforming it into their famous concept of instrumental reason. Of course, as Löwy notes, these revolutionary thinkers also separated themselves from Weber, "by their humanist and socialist standpoint, their refusal of capitalism and bureaucracy as necessary and inevitable formations of modernity, and their utopian concept of a society free of reification and domination" (p. 164).

Löwy rounds off his discussion of the Frankfurt School by arguing for a sharp demarcation between Jürgen Habermas and Weber, which he connects to Habermas's uncritical stance toward Enlightenment reason and to his lack of affinity with Weber's cultural pessimism. This is especially true of the later Habermas of *The Theory of Communicative Action* and after, who "distances

himself considerably from the Weberian-Marxist tradition." Löwy writes with some justice that Habermas "formulates a new theory drawn from Durkheim, Parsons, and Luhmann" that reconciles itself with "actually existing" capitalist modernity in a manner at odds with both the Weberian Marxist tradition and with Weber himself (p. 180).

Löwy concludes with an evocation of the contemporary relevance of Weber: "Never as much as in our era have the iron rules [*règles d'acier*] of capitalist civilization exercised so great a coercion on populations" (p. 192).

I have not in this small space done justice to this remarkable book, which draws on a wealth of literature in German, French, English, and Spanish. It would be a great pity if it were not translated into English.

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*Just Married: Same-Sex Couples, Monogamy, and the Future of Marriage*, by **Stephen Macedo**. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 300 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780691166483.

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What does the advent of legal same-sex marriage mean for the future of the institution of marriage? This is the central question addressed in *Just Married*. Stephen Macedo tackles this question from the perspective of political theory and public philosophy, drawing on relevant social scientific evidence. He makes three key arguments in the book's three parts. In Part One, he asserts that legal recognition of same-sex marriage is consistent with America's core political values of equality and liberty and will not damage the institution of marriage. He addresses broader critiques of civil marriage in Part Two, arguing that there are valid and important reasons for maintaining civil marriage in its current form. He concludes in Part Three by refuting the argument that same-sex marriage inevitably leads us down a slippery legal slope to legalized polygamy, arguing that there are crucial differences between polygamy and same-sex marriage