Max Weber journeyed twice to the United States, as Lawrence Scaff notes in his new book, *Max Weber in America*. The first was the journey he made in person in 1904 just after sending the first part of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to press. The second was the transit of his writings into English and then into the canonical heart of American sociology in the 1950s. This close-grained reading of Weber’s American trip and the American dissemination of his writings sheds illuminating light on both.

Weber’s three-month tour of the United States in 1904 is known in its general outlines to every Weber scholar. Marianne Weber gave it a central place in her biography of her husband in the chapter she titled “The New Phase.” It was during the course of that journey that Max Weber’s renewed energy made clear to his deeply anxious wife that he had found his way past the mental and physical breakdown that had overwhelmed him in 1898. She sketched him as a traveler overflowing with energy and curiosity, immune to the America-critique of his traveling companions. Scaff fills in that trip with a raft of new detail, drawn from Weber’s unpublished letters and from more than two dozen archives in the United States. Closely and lucidly written, this is as near as we will come to seeing the United States in 1904 through Weber’s eyes.

What sort of eyes were they? Weber came to the United States, unlike some of the others in the transatlantic intellectual network, with no single, controlling agenda in mind. *The Protestant Ethic*, whose sections on Protestant asceticism and the spirit of capitalism he was to complete in an intense bout of work in early 1905, seems to have been already fully shaped in his mind. He visited a wide variety of churches during his American tour: a German Reformed church in western New York, an African American Baptist church in Washington DC, a plain Quaker meeting in Haverford, Pennsylvania, a splendidly equipped Christian Science church and an Ethical Culture Society meeting in New York City, a Methodist church in rural Mount Airy, North Carolina, and, later that afternoon, the total immersion baptism of new adult members in an ice-cold mountain brook by the town’s Baptists. Except for the baptism scene, which found its way into many of Weber’s subsequent writings, almost none of this figured in any serious way in *The Protestant Ethic*. Weber had hoped to hunt up fresh material on Baptist piety at Brown University, but he was told that the college, seeking to shed its original Baptist identity, no longer collected religious material. In any case, as the text of *The Protestant Ethic* makes clear, Weber already had what he needed on Anglo-American piety in the English books available to him at Heidelberg. Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, which figures so strongly in part 1, had been given to Weber as a child. Though American readers often yearn to see themselves in *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber’s firsthand experience in America had almost nothing to do with its writing.

What caught Weber’s attention in the United States was not the religious psychology that he was to make so central to capitalism’s formation in *The Protestant Ethic*. 
From the outset of his sojourn, Weber was convinced that the doctrinal questions (the “calling,” “predestination,” “justification,” and the rest) that had so strongly shaped the culture of early Protestantism were in sharp decline in the United States. A different and more overtly sociological theme struck him now. That was the way in which the scrutiny the religious sects gave to the public behavior of new members served as a guarantee of their commercial honesty and credit worthiness, not only to their co-religionists but to the world at large. As the sects had declined, the fraternal associations and college social clubs had, he thought, taken up the same task of bourgeois behavioral self-certification. Joining the ranks of the scrutinized was good for one’s public reputation. (Weber came to the United States a year too late to see the first Rotary Clubs in action and to witness, in their rites of self-selection and self-congratulation, the Protestant ethic scrubbed utterly free of guilt and salvation anxiety.) But it was this that he saw—not the anxious asceticism of Puritanism or the iron cage of rationalized modernity—in 1904 America.

Although Weber elaborated on these themes in his only written works devoted specifically to the United States, “Churches and Sects in North America” (1906) and “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” (1920), they were no means the only themes to catch his eye. Some of what he saw during his months in the United States was standard tourist fare: the Brooklyn Bridge and Manhattan’s skyscrapers, Niagara Falls, a college football game, and the hog-killing disassembly line at the Chicago stockyards. Marianne Weber quickly formed an active interest in the work of American social feminists, seeking out Jane Addams at Hull House, Lillian Wald at the Henry Street Settlement, and Florence Kelley, who Marianne was sure was “by far the most outstanding figure” they met in their three months in the United States.[1]

Max Weber moved easily through the network of influential American social scientists who had studied in Germany, many of whom he solicited for contributions to the Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, whose co-editorship he had just assumed. He sought out William James. He went to an evening of Yiddish theater. He met with Samuel Gompers and had dinner with the secretary of a local printers’ union. On the recommendation of one of these contacts, he spent five intensely interesting days in the Indian Territory, listening to debates over conversion of Indian tribal lands into private individual allotments, watching new houses springing up and older ones being rolled away to make room, marveling at the oil derricks dotting the prairie and smelling the petroleum in the air. “With almost lightening speed everything that stands in the way of capitalist culture is being crushed,” he wrote (p. 90).

The status of race relations in the United States absorbed Weber particularly deeply. He had a long conversation with W. E. B. DuBois at the St. Louis Congress of Arts and Sciences. He successfully solicited an essay from DuBois and was keenly interesting in seeing The Souls of Black Folk (1903) translated for German readers. That meeting with Du Bois inspired, in turn, a visit to Tuskegee Institute, though, to his regret, Booker T. Washington was traveling and could not be interviewed. Tuskegee was hopeful and inspiring. Among a hundred white Southerners he talked with, in contrast, he found only racial prejudice, “aimlessness, and impotent hatred of the Yankees” (p. 110). Of all the problems of democracy that he had found in America, the problem of the color line was the most pressing of all, he concluded, and he looked forward to writing on the subject himself.

This is the way the eclectic traveler’s eye works: absorbing a huge range of experiences, the mind alive with a moving train of novel impressions. An odd figure in the knickers and knee socks that were his traveling outfit and the imperfect English for which he was quick to apologize, Weber was a close and vivid observer of scenes. He talked with everyone, and he generalized—as travelers do—quickly, imaginatively, and often, spectacularly wrongly.

A conversation with a traveling salesman in Oklahoma and the caustic remark of a cousin in Mount Airy gave him the foundation for his assertion that joining a religious body known to scrutinize its members carefully was good for sales and business. But where did Weber get the notion that had settled in his mind by the 1920 essay that “in general, only those men who had success in business [in America] who belonged to Methodist or Baptist or other sects” akin to them? Or, still more mistakenly, that “the majority of the older generation ... of the American 'promoters,' 'captains of industry,' of the multi-millionaires and trust magnates belonged formally to sects, especially to the Baptists”? The gravitational pull felt by both national and local business elites toward the distinctly church-like Episcopal communities seems to have completely eluded Weber. And where did he get the impression that should a Methodist or Baptist businessman get in over his head through no fault of his own, his congregation would guarantee his loans to his creditors? [2]

Weber’s certainty that church-mindedness and reli-
igious dogma were dying out in the United States rested on somewhat firmer evidence. He was deeply struck by the notion that Protestant ministers—once locked so fiercely in quarrel with one another—should now blithely exchange pulpits. The system at Northwestern University which allowed undergraduates to “bank” chapel attendance credits so that they could slack off in their senior year seemed to Weber so “incredible” that he couldn’t resist underscoring what he had learned with italics and double exclamation points (p. 50). Together with Brown University’s apparent discard of its Baptist past, it clinched the point for Weber that American society was in the throes of rapid Europeanization and secularization. “The secularization of American life … will in a short time have dissolved the traditional national character and changed the significance of many of the fundamental institutions of the country completely and finally,” he concluded in a footnote to The Protestant Ethic.[3]

It is a shame that Scaff, an accomplished Weber interpreter, does not pay more attention to these and other ways in which Weber transformed impressions into knowledge. The sharp and telling eye for detail, the eclectic interests and curiosity, the boldness of the leap from particular detail to general pattern, the trust in informants, and the power of an already existing template of ideas: these were not only elements in Weber’s own fertile mind and makeup. They are recurring features of the traveler’s eye and of travel-acquired knowledge. Still, if Scaff lies too much under the Weber aura to put it in this way, his reconstruction of Weber’s American travels gives us material never available before for this and other inquiries.

Weber’s second journey to America, in translation and, ultimately, into canonical texts, is given more compressed treatment in Max Weber in America than his 1904 travels. Weber scholars will find Scaff’s meticulous treatment of the translation of Weber’s texts extremely useful. He charts the rivalry between the intellectual circles interested in translating, assembling, and anthologizing their own versions of the Weber corpus. He notes the difficulty in finding English equivalents for many of the key terms in Weber’s sociology and adds his own critique to the renderings that Talcott Parsons imprinted into the Weber canon. The history of translation has a key role to play in the new transnational history of ideas, and Scaff’s chapter “The Creation of the Sacred Text” treats it with intelligence and care.

In contrast, Scaff’s final chapter, “The Invention of the Theory,” will seem to many readers much too short and rushed. Inventing a unified Weber out of a corpus of writings that was spread across so many domains of inquiry was part of the matter. Injecting “Weberian sociology” into the core concerns of American sociological inquiry in the 1950s, at a time when Weber’s influence on the social sciences in Germany was at its low ebb, was another and even more important part of the phenomenon. Scaff seems content to underscore the enduring intellectual importance of Weber’s work. In an essay on the transatlantic travels of Weber’s notion of “charisma,” published in the summer 2011 issue of the New German Critique, Joshua Derman offers a more contextual explanation, and to my mind a more persuasive one.[4] The history of reception, even broadly conceived, does not fully grasp the Weber moment in American sociology. It is ultimately a part of the general history of the social sciences, as they stood at a critical tipping point in the United States at the end of the Second World War, and the ways in which a cluster of differently invented “Webers” became, for the moment, powerfully useful ways of answering the challenges that they were posed.

One of the great strengths of Scaff’s book is to bracket Weber’s two American journeys—as person and as texts—together. On the first of these journeys, Max Weber in America promises to be the definitive account. On the second, there is still much more to be done.

Notes

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