

## MAX WEBER: A PASSIONATE THINKER

Lecture and discussion at the Goethe Institute, Washington, March 21, 2007. Jointly organized by the GHI and the Goethe Institute. Speaker: Joachim Radkau (University of Bielefeld); comment: Lawrence A. Scaff (University of California, Berkeley).

Joachim Radkau took up the challenge issued by Lawrence A. Scaff in the introduction of his book on Weber, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber* (Berkeley, 1989): "What is needed, above all, is to encounter Weber once again from the beginning and with a sense of judgment alert to the potentials of what he actually wrote and said." This is the approach that Radkau took in his own Weber biography: One must begin anew. For although Max Weber is regarded as the greatest social scientist in the world, no comprehensive Weber biography that meets academic standards has been written in the more than eighty years since his death on June 14, 1920. Moreover, the bulk of Weber symposia are not about the actual Weber, but about invoking an imaginary Weber in support of one side or another in the latest social scientific debate. Even though there is an ocean of literature on Weber that reaches well beyond Germany from Berkeley to Tokyo, Weber's work continues to hold untapped potential.

Radkau's central thesis is that Weber was not the determined enemy of *Naturalismus* (natural-science methods and explanatory models) in the social sciences to the extent often depicted. Instead, he offered, as Friedrich Tenbruck has recognized, "the peculiar spectacle of a passionate attack on *Naturalismus* from naturalist positions." This tension, this love-hate relationship with nature, permeated his entire life and work. This point reveals particularly clearly that one can better understand Weber's work if one views it against the backdrop of his life experiences: his suffering and his love. This, too, is a leitmotif of Radkau's biography: that there is an intimate connection between Weber's shifting attitude toward *Naturalismus* in the social sciences and his experiences of love and pain.

Radkau's thousand-page biography, to be published in an abridged English translation by Polity Press in the spring of 2008, is divided into three parts: (1) The Ravaging of Nature; (2) Nature's Revenge; and (3) Redemption and Inspiration. The first two titles allude to the terse comment by Weber's wife Marianne in her *Lebensbild* of Max Weber (1926) regarding her husband's 1898 nervous breakdown: "Long-ravaged nature begins her revenge." Radkau does not believe that Max Weber broke

down due to overwork, as Marianne seems to imply, but nevertheless sees her comment as appropriate in a different way. All biographers of Weber are confronted with the problem of how to deal with Marianne Weber's *Lebensbild*: Weber's widow seems to come between them and Max Weber. Again and again, the dark joke told by Otto Gradenwitz, a lawyer from Heidelberg who knew the Webers, is retold: The *Lebensbild* was "historically valuable" in that it aroused sympathy for the "often misunderstood practice of burning widows on funeral pyres." The *Lebensbild*, however, is an ambiguous book that requires reading between the lines. In addition, Radkau has analyzed a wealth of previously unknown correspondence, including Max Weber's love letters to Else Jaffé of 1919–1920, which have been treated as a state secret in past Weber research, and which reveal a previously unfamiliar, even unimaginable Weber, who suffers from the fact that he feels his brain to be a "refrigerator."

In the end, Radkau argued, one must work not merely *on* Max Weber, but *with* and *through* him in order to find new scholarly inspiration. For this reason, it is important not only to study Weber's theories and concepts, but to examine his work in the vital context of his life and to investigate in detail the creative tension between his bold intellect and his changing life experiences. In light of this, Radkau started his biography with a quote from Ralf Dahrendorf: "The many fields of inquiry that have drifted apart since Max Weber's death—a process that the occasional invocation of his name could not prevent — once constituted a unity, not in a system, but rather in a person. Whoever manages to write a biography of Max Weber that recreates this unity could also restore to the sterile landscape of modern social science some of its former charm."

*Joachim Radkau*