

The World in Images. Subjectivity and Politics in Max Weber

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ABSTRACT

This essay sets out to reconstruct the main characteristics and performances of the notion of *Weltbild* in Max Weber. The underlying idea is that world image is the principal place for deciphering the profile of subjectivity in a particular age and the decisive factor for understanding the subject's physiognomy. The essay is divided into three parts. The first (§§ 1-2) reconstructs the Weberian notion of world image. The second (§ 3) deals with the relationship between materiality and world images. The third (§ 4) reconstructs Weber's world image as it emerges from *Politics as a Vocation*, highlighting how this world image provides the background from which Weber draws lines of argument for his normative proposal on the relationship between ethics and politics.

Introduction

This essay sets out to reconstruct some characteristics, performances and systematic values of the notion of world image [*Weltbild*] in Max Weber. The underlying idea is that world image is the decisive dimension for understanding the physiognomy of subjectivity in a particular age. The world image defines individuals' attitude towards the world in that it delimits their possible performances and makes it more or less possible that a particular type of practical conduct will be produced and/or spread. In short, the world image is the principal place for deciphering the profile of subjectivity in a particular age and the

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decisive factor for understanding the subject's physiognomy, resources, as well as what he/she can and also cannot do.

The main systematic value of the notion of world image in Weber's theory is that it allows anthropology to be radically neutralised. Man's position in the world is not an anthropological given, but the product of a world image. Weber was the first author to have more coherently stressed the extraordinary variety and changeability of man's attitude towards the world and his dependence on images. What is important for man's relationship with the world is not human nature, but something less ultimate and inaccessible: the concrete physiognomy of the image, or rather images, of the world. Hence, human subjectivity's position with regard to the world is a contingent given. It is not determined by anthropology. The anthropological presupposition consists exclusively of the fact that man's relationship with the world is always mediated by images, by subjective depictions whose validity lies simply in the fact that they are believed.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first (§§ 1-2) reconstructs the notion of world image by analysing the only context in which Weber explicitly thematises this topic. The second (§ 3) deals with the relationship between materiality and world images. The third (§ 4) reconstructs Weber's world image as it emerges from *Politics as a Vocation*. At the same time this part seeks to highlight how this world image provides the background from which Weber draws lines of argument for his normative proposal on the relationship between ethics and politics, and, simultaneously, and more radically, determines the efficacy of his proposal.

1. The World in Images

As regards the concept of world image, it has been noted how little consideration is given to this concept in critical literature and how, in any case, it is analysed exclusively within the specific context of the consequences of world religions on practical conduct and in particular on the economic ethos of the followers of the great world religions. With the exception of the work by Kalberg 2004 – whose view diverges significantly from the perspective put forward here – the few essays that have set value by the role of this notion have done so with a view to reconstructing Weber's sociology of religion. There have been no investigations from a more global perspective of a theory of society and politics, despite the background presence of this concept in the reflection Weber

devoted more explicitly to diagnosing his own era, namely *Politics as a Vocation*.

While it underlies the vast amount of work produced by Weber on the subject of the sociology of religion, the topic becomes explicit in an extremely famous passage from the *Introduction* to the *Economic Ethics of the World Religions*:

The conception of the idea of redemption, as such, is very old, if one understands by it a liberation from distress, hunger, drought, sickness, and ultimately from suffering and death. Yet redemption attained a specific significance only where it expressed a systematic and rationalized “image of the world” and represented a stand in the face of the world. For the meaning as well as the intended and actual psychological quality of redemption has depended upon such a world image and such a stand. [...] “From what” and “for what” one wished to be redeemed and, let us not forget, “*could be*” redeemed, depended upon one’s image of the world. (Weber, 1974c, p. 280, italics mine)

Albeit in the specific context of describing the religious image of the world – or rather, describing the world image of the religiosity of redemption – here Weber focuses on some aspects that are typical to every world image. First, the world image gives an interpretation of our condition: it selects the (material and ideal) elements that we deem intolerable and defines or focuses on the goods that we intend to pursue. In other words, it defines the core of what we are interested in and the fundamental object of our care and concern. It is only within the framework of a particular world image that needs, passions and requirements receive a definition.

In the definition of what we wish to be redeemed “from” and “for”, an absolutely decisive role is played by the second performance typical of every world image: the definition of the *horizon of what is possible*. Defining the possible does not simply overlap with a certain interpretation of our condition, but, to a large extent, actually constitutes it. The *need* for redemption, for liberation from something (whether it be ideal or material) is also and above all conditioned by the perception of a *possibility* of redemption. We wish to be redeemed from something because redemption from that something is possible on the basis of a certain world image: only if that specific redemption is considered possible. Hope and desperation do not come into play in interests and needs that are already defined, but they are the fundamental link pin in order to define them. A generic state of suffering, deprivation and the presence of social strata that are oppressed or thought of negatively, are not enough to “produce”

or “arouse” the need for redemption. There is no perception of material or symbolic deprivation that disregards an interpretation of the world (i.e. a world image), but above all no suffering or deprivation produces the will for redemption or ethic-religious mobilisation without an interpretation of the world that makes a possibility of redemption credible (Weber, 1974c, p. 267).

Third, the world image is the decisive element in order to define the tools needed to obtain our goals, whether they be liberation from suffering or achieving a condition of salvation. For example, the individual or collective, peaceful or violent nature of the means that are indispensable to achieve each goal we pursue depends on the world image. In the same way so do the forms of self-governance and discipline of the passions connected to these goals. Lastly, defining the means and procedures for satisfying the requirements promoted by each world image in turn produces secondary material and ideal interests, directly connected to the specific ways of obtaining the primary goals.

World images are not “simple” ideas, metaphorical intuitions essentially consisting of a compact core of intuition that cannot be broken down. If anything, ideas are the initial core that is then developed and used in the world images: «[...] Yet very frequently the “world images” that have been created by “ideas” have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamics of interest» (Weber, 1974c, p. 280). Therefore, for Weber, world images are essentially conceptual, rational and systematic constructions, which take shape thanks to intellectual strata who process ideas and intuitions generated by charismatic types of forces. Intellectuals are the main actors in building world images. They are not always, indeed hardly ever, their creators. Weber’s world images are complex and sophisticated constructs in which small differences can lead to profoundly different practical and also political attitudes. In terms of world images, the distance between Luther and Calvin, or between the Baptist movement annihilated at Münster and the Quakers of New England, is by no means a chasm, while the differences in their attitudes towards the world, and to political violence in particular, are extremely significant. On the other hand, even a radical pluralism of *Weltbilder* does not dent their capacity to structure individual attitudes towards the world in the slightest.

The world image does not necessarily correspond to the belief in an objective ethical sense of the world. The latter characterizes all religious *Weltbilder*, but does not belong to them alone. As we will see, secular world images also exist that attribute an objective sense to the world and its future. Nevertheless,

the world as a meaningless infinity is no less a world image than a meaningful world is. The image of a world lacking an objective meaning has exactly the same kind of impact – though in many ways the contents are the opposite – on the forms of moral experience, on the type of expectations and on the perception of temporality as the impact of world images that insist on the existence of an objective meaning.

Finally, to speak of world images is to neutralize any claim of truth with relation to the way one conceives of the world. Contrary to the notion of ideology as false consciousness, the notion of an image does not refer to the idea of a true/authentic depiction of the world. Access to the world is always and only through images because we cannot give an answer to the question of “what is the world?” that we can claim to be true. The question relating to the world as an ideal totality of phenomena is at the same time misplaced in theory, undecidable in science and unavoidable from a pragmatist point of view. For Weber a world image conditioned and influenced by modern science is no *true* than the world image of religions in general or that of Christian monotheism. For Weber, the world image’s capacity to orient practical conduct and model subjectivity is nevertheless separate from its value of truth. Modern science does not demonstrate atheism. The world is a metaphysical entity. It can be given a particular shape only through an image, which results from an interpretation that can be said neither to be true nor false, which is effective insofar as it is believed and not because it is authentic.

Therefore, in Weber, the world image is a *single and systematic* intellectual construct (lacking in significant gaps). Not necessarily coherent, it interprets the world as a constitutively indeterminate totality of phenomena for essentially practical ends. The world image is a *world in images*: a product of human artifice that makes a selection, a summary (an order) and integrates – real and possible – experience. This provides the framework of reference in order to interpret our conditions and define our requirements and expectations. Here the image is not imitation, a reproduction, or a likeness. Instead, it is something projective, something that is necessarily creative, that is put forward as a single way of relating with something that cannot be grasped but that has to be referred to. The image is (the only) way of determining (which is indispensable from a practical viewpoint) something that by its constitution is undetermined, and is objectively inaccessible. Weber’s world image is a conceptual image that is the result of human work. It makes the unmanageable manageable, because

it rids the world of its excess of complexity, its surplus of experience. The world can either be given in an image, or not given at all.

The fundamental variables of the way in which individuals behave towards the world – from adaptation to extraneousness, from indifference to rejection, from escape to domination – do not refer to human nature, but to the image that individuals, groups and civilisations form of the world.

2. Indifference towards the Origin: Neutralising the Imagination

The most singular feature of Weber's approach to the topic of world images is shown in the two moves that he uses to deal with the issue of the origin and diffusion of a *Weltbild*: in that he forgoes formulating a theory on the role of the different faculties – in first place the imagination – in creating a world image and, I would say in a specular manner, in that he emphasises the material conditioning that decides the success of a world image.

One of the most striking aspects of Weber's recognition of ancient Jewish prophetism – one of the crucial phenomena for the genesis of the Western Christian *Weltbild* – is his lack of reference to the imagination as the faculty directly or indirectly involved in creating new world images. The few references to the prophets' fantasy [*Phantasie*] are essentially used to describe the aural rather than visual nature of Jewish prophetism (Weber, 1952, p. 312). Nevertheless, in this case, the centrality of hearing is more an effect of the world image than an indication regarding its productive strength: Weber's reasoning does not aim to single out the mental faculties involved in creating a *Weltbild*, but to underline how the image of the world and of God typical of ancient Judaism selects the emotional states recognised as charismatically prophetic.

The reasons for this lack of interest lie, first of all, in his emphasis of the intellectual nature of world images. It is precisely owing to their nature as constructions of the intellect, their physiognomy and, above all, their concrete impact on conduct in life that these images essentially depend on the work of intellectual strata who do not correspond to those who provided the original core of ideas. The capacity of a particular *Weltbild* to orientate, its effective capacity to direct practical action is not linked to the original core connected to the charismatic personality, but to the intellectual strata's global work of arrangement and elaboration. It is only once it has been crystallised in a world image that the idea produces its effects. It is only after the idea has been elabo-

rated and harnessed in a complex and composite intellectual construction that the practical effects of a world image can unfold. In producing world images, the constructive – intellectual/conceptual – element clearly predominates over the simple ideational moment in terms of understanding the practical effects of *Weltbilder*.

But the totally decisive point is that Weber does not direct his interest at the moment that one could say gives rise to the creation of a world image, since what essentially grasps his attention is the question of which elements determine its success. It is here that Weber's perspective takes on its most typical appearance, when he introduces the notion that the success of a world image depends on its capacity to give plausible responses to the threats that a society perceives as decisive. It is here that the conceptual tool proposed by Weber to read subjectivity, its possibilities and limits, meets the material analysis of society and the reconstruction of the actors' physiognomy as the conditions for understanding the success or failure of a particular *Weltbild*.

3. The Material Conditioning and Autonomy of World Images

The whole of Weber's sociology of religion project could be summed up as the attempt to render account of a dual process of influence or conditioning: on one hand, he tries to grasp the effects of different world images on individual conduct and – through these effects – on the economic, social and political arrangements of a human group; on the other hand, he attempts to explain the success or failure of a particular *Weltbild* – or of some specific variant of it – as a result of the (broadly speaking) material conditions of social life, of its hierarchies, and of the physiognomy of its main actors.

The crucial point is that the relationship between *Weltbilder* and the material dimension does not give a general theory, nor a philosophy, nor provides a total reconstruction that can be called a determinism. The whole reflection on world religions is an attempt to develop a theory of world images, while thinking of both their material conditioning and autonomy at the same time. Weber's reconstruction of the influence of the materiality of social life on world images indeed contemporaneously excludes any determinism that makes the latter a mere reflection of the material dimension. If what it is legitimate to expect individuals to do depends on the combination of their material condition and their world image, their world image does not appear determined neither

by their material condition, nor by the material conditions of the whole human group that they belong to.

The nature of the relationships between the material dimension and world images is thematised by Weber in the *Introduction* to the *Economic Ethics of the World Religions* in a polemical comparison with two positions that are in reality very distant: on one hand historical materialism and on the other Nietzsche's theory of resentment. What these two perspectives nevertheless have in common is a deterministic connection between an interest-situation and the religious ethics of a specific *Weltbild*.

In various ways people have sought to interpret the connection between religious ethics and interest-situations in such a way that the former appear as mere "functions" of the latter. Such interpretations occur in so-called historical materialism – which we shall not here discuss – as well as in a purely psychological sense. A quite general and abstract class-determination of religious ethics might be deduced from the theory of "resentment", known since Friedrich Nietzsche's brilliant essay and since then spiritedly treated by psychologists. (Weber, 1974c, p. 270).

The thesis that there is a deterministic tie between material condition and world image is what the two theories have in common, and what Weber had rejected just a few lines earlier with an explicit reference to historical materialism:

It is not our thesis that the specific nature of a religion is a simple "function" of the social situation of the stratum which appears as its characteristic bearer, or that it represents the stratum's "ideology", or that it is a "reflection" of a stratum's material or ideal interest-situation. On the contrary, a more basic misunderstanding of the standpoint of these discussions would hardly be possible. (Weber, 1974c, pp. 269–270).

While the materialistic conception of history and Nietzsche's theory of resentment may both deterministically reduce *Weltbilder* to the material dimension, nevertheless they possess a very different idea of the materiality upon which the images are made to depend. In addition to establishing a binding tie between materiality and world images, historical materialism and the theory of resentment appear marked by a specular defect with relation to the way in which they conceive the materiality that *Weltbilder* are supposed to derive from: while materialism reduces materiality to the economy, the theory of resentment proposes a barely determined idea of materiality whose definition ends up being

the alternative of whether the social group that one belongs to is favoured or not. This is the reason why the critique of the theory of resentment moves on a dual level: the explicit level which disputes the thesis of resentment as the common ethical-religious source that judges suffering as positive – and the world image that upholds it – and a more implicit level linked to the defining the dimensions of materiality that are significant in the establishment of a particular *Weltbild*.

As far as the first level is concerned, Weber's lines of argument can be boiled down to two observations. Weber puts forward the first not in the *Introduction* to the *Economic Ethics of the World Religions*, but again in explicit reference to Nietzsche's position, in the paragraph of the *Religiöse Gemeinschaften* dedicated to *The Religion of Non-Privileged Strata*:

The limited significance of the factor of *ressentiment*, and the dubiousness of applying the conceptual schema of "repression" almost universally, appear most clearly when Nietzsche mistakenly applies his scheme to the altogether inappropriate example of Buddhism. (Weber, 1978, p. 499)

In reality, it is precisely Buddhism, according to Weber, that belies Nietzsche's theory since it is «the salvation doctrine of an intellectual stratum, originally recruited almost entirely from the privileged castes, especially the warrior caste, which proudly and aristocratically rejected the illusions of life, both here and hereafter» (Weber, 1978, p. 499). Buddhism shows how the origin of the religiosity of redemption is not to be sought in the social situation of the disadvantaged social strata, but in an intellectual need that can also be harboured in the privileged social strata.

In the *Introduction* to the *Economic Ethics of the World Religions* Weber instead follows another path. Here his critique of Nietzsche's line follows an argument that takes the emphasis on duty, typical of the religiosity of redemption of the unprivileged strata, away from the root of resentment:

The sense of dignity of socially repressed strata or of strata whose status is negatively [...] valued is nourished most easily on the belief that a special "mission" is entrusted to them; their worth is guaranteed or constituted by an *ethical imperative*, or by their own functional *achievement*. [...] One source of the ideal power of ethical prophecies among socially disadvantaged strata lies in this fact. Resentment has not been required as a leverage; the rational interest in material and ideal compensation as such has been perfectly sufficient. (Weber, 1974c, pp. 276–277)

But it is at the second level that Weber's critique of Nietzsche allows us to focus on what his idea of materiality is. In fact, at the conclusion of his critical assessment of the resentment thesis Weber hisses: «The specific nature of the great religious and ethical systems has been determined by social conditions of a far more particular nature than by mere contrast of ruling and ruled strata» (Weber, 1974c, p. 277). The materiality that needs to be called upon in order to understand the conditioning exercised on world images cannot have the closed confines of economic interest, nor the coarse-grain alternative between the privileged and the unprivileged.

We can identify at least four distinct dimensions of materiality that have conditioned religious *Weltbilder*, and influenced decisive aspects of them. The first consists of geographical and climatic/natural conditions: the importance of rain for crops and the necessity – of course depending on geographical and climatic factors – of regulating water – building dams and canals for protection against flooding and internal navigation – for example, were not only a fundamental factor in building a central power and patrimonial bureaucracy in China, but also had significant consequences on the world image and divinity of Confucianism (Weber, 1968, pp. 21ff). The second dimension consists of the international political context and the role of the phenomenon and the experience of war in the perception of collective destinies. In China,

[t]he unification of the empire, which proceeded with only minor interruptions from the third century BC onward represented the internal pacification of the empire, at least in principle. No longer was there the legitimate opportunity for internal warfare. The defense against and the subjection of the barbarians became simply a governmental police duty. Thus, in China, the God of Heaven could not assume the form of a hero-God who revealed himself in the irrational destiny of his people through its foreign relations, or who was worshipped in war, victory, defeat, exile and nostalgia[.]

in the same way as the god of ancient Israel (Weber, 1968, p. 26).

While the third dimension of materiality significant for defining a world image is the one more directly linked to economic interests, it is on the fourth and last dimension that Weber dwells at length on several occasions:

The chivalrous warrior class, peasants, business classes, and intellectuals with literary education have naturally pursued different religious tendencies [with regard to the kind of empirical state of bliss or experience of rebirth that a religion should offer]. [...] These tendencies have not by themselves determined the psychological character of religion; they have, however, exerted

a very lasting influence upon it. (Weber, 1974c, p. 279)

Every social stratum has a tendency towards a particular type of *Weltbild* and religious experience. Not only does this tendency not necessarily configure a bond, but it turns out to be founded more on the nature of the profession, on the physiognomy of the activity carried out and not on economic interests in the strict sense of the word. The element that for example inclines warriors or farmers, artisans or bureaucrats towards a certain world image cannot be formulated in terms of economic interests and does not depend on the quantity of wellbeing or economic resources at their disposal. Rather it refers to the physiognomy of a relationship with the world that is rooted in their social identity and unites subjects who, from the strictly economic point of view, possess interests that may even be opposing. There is a *tendency* among castes, classes, social strata and particular characteristics of the religious world image that is rooted in the concrete physiognomy of the contribution that each group gives to social reproduction: a sort of ontological-social root to the world image.

It is on this basis that for each of the great religious *Weltbilder* Weber identifies the social stratum that was its carrier, propagator and privileged representative:

If one wishes to characterize succinctly, in a formula so to speak, the types representative of the various strata that were the primary carriers or propagators of the so-called world religions, they would be the following: In Confucianism the world-organizing bureaucrat; in Hinduism the world-ordering magician; in Buddhism, the mendicant monk wandering through the world; [...] and in Christianity, the itinerant journeyman. To be sure, all these types must not be taken as exponents of their own occupational or material "class interests," but rather as the ideological carriers of the kind of ethical or salvation doctrine which rather readily conformed to [*sich besonders leicht vermählte*] their social position. (Weber, 1978, p. 512).

The crucial question that comes up at this point relates to identifying the elements that decide which social stratum manages to model "in its own image" the world image that is then also shared by all or nevertheless some others. The implicit answer in Weber's investigation of the world religions singles out the reasons for the success of a particular *Weltbild* as its capacity to appear more persuasive owing to something that individuals already believe, or more plausible owing to a certain experience of the world, or more suited to providing convincing answers to the challenges that a human group perceives. Hence, what essentially governs which basic features are selected for a world image are

the challenges and threats that an entire society perceives as incumbent. In addition to a world image being rooted in the inclination [*Neigung*] of a particular social stratum towards a certain type of religiosity, Weber insists that the success of a *Weltbild* depends on its suitability for the nature and physiognomy of the challenges that the natural and social, economic and political context is experiencing. The world image that best reflects the nature and dimensions of the existential threat that a society is exposed to and the forces/resources needed to deal with it is the one that succeeds.

The non-deterministic bond that links social identity and world image is also due, therefore, to the fact that in the end the image imposed upon the whole of society and all the strata is the one that is in close harmony with the social being of one particular stratum alone. “Ready conformity” between a social position’s materiality and religious world image singles out the carriers and privileged representatives of a certain type of religiosity, but it is not the indispensable requirement for adopting a particular religious *Weltbild*. The various *Weltbilder* are also accepted/shared by those for whom there is no ready conformity between social position and religious world image. The expression “readily conformed to” serves to single out the social strata that are the main supporters and propagators of a particular (religious) image of the world, but this image is also shared by other social strata (sometimes by all the other social strata) for whom there is no ready conformity. Not only does a certain social position simply incline towards a world image with which there is a ready conformity, but the image that a particular social stratum adopts is not necessarily the one that readily conforms to its material condition.

In the face of conditioning by a plurality of material dimensions, *Weltbilder* possess an autonomy essentially linked to two factors. First of all, their greatly inertial nature: world images possess a duration that by far exceeds the material constellations that conditioned them, and that makes them an independent and significant factor conditioning both the material organisation of a society and the possible directions in which the same world image can be transformed.

The autonomy of the world images with respect to their material conditioning is linked, in second place, to their possessing an autonomous evolutive capacity, to the existence of an autonomous legality that governs their “lives” and that can produce significant changes – with significant effects on the ethical conduct of individuals – regardless of any conditioning of a material kind.

4. Weber's World Image

In Weber's line of thought, the notion of *Weltbild* is conceptualised and explicitly applied in reference to the world religions only. Nevertheless, in my opinion it is possible to glimpse its application in a different context too: in Weber's diagnosis of modernity. Or rather, the context in which he sets out the normative proposal that he puts forward on the basis of the transformations of modernity.

In the two conferences (*Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*), the texts in which Weber's take on his times becomes more explicit, it clearly emerges how his normative proposal on the conditions for giving a single meaning to life cannot be separated from the expression of his "own" image of the world. It is in this particularly significant sense that the author who perhaps more than any other stressed the objectivity and non-valuation of scientific work is "forced" to come face to face with undemonstrable assumptions as soon as he has to motivate a practical option, or to assess its burden on the subject. It will be helpful to outline the fundamental features of Weber's *Weltbild* in order to highlight how world image is the inevitable reference for a practical stance towards the world even in «a godless and prophetless time», since science is not able to respond in an objective – definitive and universal – manner to the question of what the world is, and, finally, since the answer to this question is the fundamental variable that decides the (non-material) burden of a certain attitude towards the world.

The first characteristic trait of Weber's world image can be seen as his denial of the existence of an objective meaning. For Weber meaning is subjective property: it is not a property of things, but a capacity of the subject. The world does not have a meaning, it does not express any normativity. This position implies first of all that he distances himself from any religious world image:

The inward interest of a truly religiously "musical" man can never be served by veiling to him and to others the fundamental fact that he is destined to live in a godless and prophetless time by giving him the surrogates [*Ersatz*] of armchair prophecy. (Weber, 1974b, p. 153)

What is worth observing immediately is that it is not late modernity that is lacking a god and prophets, but Weber's world image. From an empirical point of view because Weber's contemporary times do not sociologically show generalised atheism, and from a theoretical viewpoint because modern science does not demonstrate atheism. As is well known, Weber defined himself relig-

iously as *unmüsilisch*, he did not believe that scientific development in any way demonstrated the unsustainability of religious faith, instead he believed that modern science “enforced” a redefinition of the forms and nature of religious experience, that it pushed the perception of God to the sidelines, but in no way could the image of a world without God be demonstrated by means of science. There is no space for any truth in the blunt alternative between the religious and non-religious image of the world.

Not just that: Weber’s times celebrated the splendour of two world images that defend the idea of an objective meaning of the world without being religious images. First of all, progress, as the secular surrogate for an objective religious meaning of the world.¹ Second, Marxism and the communist prophecy of the advent of the reign of freedom:

Even as late as, 1906, a mere minority among a rather considerable number of proletarians gave as reason for their disbelief in Christianity conclusions derived from modern theories of natural sciences. The majority, however, referred to the “injustice” of the order of this world – to be sure, essentially because they believe in a revolutionary compensation in this world. (Weber, 1974c, pp. 275–276)

The growing modern detachment was not exclusively the result of the effects of modern science and did not in any way imply the decline of faith in an objective meaning of the world. Religion, communist progress and a godless and prophetless world were co-present world images and the choice still remained a question of faith all the same.

The place where the “nominalistic” torsion and denial of an objective meaning of the world become more evident is in the second characteristic aspect of Weber’s world image.

Every empirical consideration of this situation would, as the elder Mill remarked, lead to the acknowledgement of absolute polytheism as the only appropriate metaphysics. [...] It is really a question not only of alternatives between values but of an irreconcilable death-struggle, like that between “God” and the “Devil”. (Weber, 2011, p. 17)

¹ «Der “Fortschritts”-Gedanke stellt sich eben erst dann als notwendig ein, wenn das Bedürfnis entsteht, dem religiös entleerten Ablauf des Menschheitsschicksals einen diesseitigen und dennoch objektiven “Sinn” zu verleihen»; Weber, 1903, note 83.

There is explicit reference to classical polytheism and the rebirth of the ancient gods in *Science as a Vocation*. Equally as explicit – and repeated several times – is the distinction between polytheism and relativism. Nevertheless, it is precisely the reference to Greek classical antiquity that enables us to appreciate the differences and the effects on the subjectivity of repositing polytheism outside a metaphysics that gives a statute of objectivity to the fight between life orders and values.

The shallowness of our routinized daily existence in the most significant sense of the word consists indeed in the fact that the persons who are caught up in it do not become aware, and above all do not wish to become aware, of this partly psychologically, part pragmatically conditioned motley of irreconcilably antagonistic values. They avoid the choice between “God” and the “Devil” (Weber, 2011, p. 18).

In a world image that does not attribute objectivity to polytheism, but embeds it in the overstepping of a certain threshold of intensity of meaning in the relationship with objects, the boundary between polytheism and relativism loses its inevitability. For the ancients it was inevitable to choose between Apollo and Aphrodite because their struggle was an inevitable, objective conflict. Modern man only has to experience conflict and need to choose after adopting a stance with regard to life that does not let it go by like a natural event: something that not only does not turn out to be inevitable, but, from the viewpoint of a comfortable life, even turns out to be preferable. The superficiality of everyday life indicates the absence of reflexivity, the lack of distance from life that corresponds to the reign of routine and habit, to the domination of the obvious: something extraordinarily convenient that makes choosing the only demon to whom to entrust one’s life strings onerous and not inevitable.

With the third aspect of Weber’s world image we start to come across some of the fundamental issues to which religious world images have also tried to provide an answer. It is the aspect of human action as destiny, the heterogenesis of the ends as the logic within worldly happenings: the matter of Puritanism’s contribution to creating a bourgeois method of living «instructs us in the paradox of unintended consequences: i.e., the relation of man and fate, of what he intended by his acts [*Absicht*] and what actually came of them» (Weber, 1968, p. 238). Human action in the world has to resign itself to the idea of the paradoxical nature of consequences with respect to intentions, of what is prompted by the action with respect to what the subject proposed as his aim. It is the paradoxical nature of the relationship between intentions and outcomes

that world images have tried to account for through the idea of providence and postulating an otherworldly level of compensation.

Weber's insistence on the ethical irrationalism of the world can be interpreted as a specific dimension of this aspect: namely, the denial of the idea that in the world «from good comes only good; but from evil only evil follows» (Weber, 1974a, p. 122). The world is not the place of congruence between destiny and merit, the place of coherence between the moral quality of the action and the moral quality of the effects, but the realm of «undeserved suffering, unpunished injustice, and hopeless stupidity» (Weber, 1974a, p. 122). Weber's indication with regard to the centrality of this aspect for the development of all religions enables us to cast light on a crucial point: world images possess different capacities of meaning, a different explicative power. Where the religious image had pinpointed a problem to which it responded with faith in another world, in Weber's world image this place is taken by the tragic enactment of the world's ethical irrationality as a given without remedy.

The last characteristic of Weber's *Weltbild* is disenchantment, in the dual meaning of objectivising the laws on how the world works, but also of faith in the possibility of man obtaining knowledge and experience of the world. Disenchantment does not mean more effective knowledge of the processes and conditions of life that surround us, but «[the] belief that if one but wished one could» and that «one can, in principle, master all things by calculation» (Weber, 1974b, p. 139). A disenchanted attitude towards the world is the trait of Weber's *Weltbild* that is most directly affected by modern science, but it is nevertheless still a world image, something that goes beyond scientific knowledge in the strict sense and is constituted as the horizon of expectations, as faith in the capacity of reason for which we can have arguments, but no proof. It is feeling at home in the world despite its objectivity: it is having faith without wonder.

Nevertheless, the world image alone is not the only thing that defines the individual's condition in late modernity and dictates the outlines of Weber's proposal on how it is still possible to give a meaning to life as a whole. An integral part of the problem is also Weber's analysis of the material processes that define late capitalistic modernity. It is a complex diagnosis that nevertheless can be described with three theses: the transformation of the economic cosmos into an iron cage (capitalism as the most deadly of the powers of our times); the incumbent threat of bureaucratic petrification (the cage of future servitude);

and finally material satiety owing to the overabundant availability of consumer goods.

In this material scenario, Weber's fundamental question is this: on what conditions is a conduct possible that can provide answers to the question on the meaning of life? The general lines of Weber's answer are clear: on condition that a bond can be reactivated between individual action and ethical powers. It is here that the centrality of the relationship between politics and ethics is rooted. If there has to be a relationship, the concrete physiognomy that Weber tends to give to this relationship is decided on the basis not just of the economic and material conditions in the broad sense of late capitalism, not just on precise institutional conditions, but also on the resources and the horizons of meaning made available by a particular *Weltbild* with their capacity to establish the global burden of a particular practical conduct.

The exposure of Weber's world image therefore provides the background that holds up the normative line of argument concerning the particular inflection that ethics can take on in politics. Hence, political action is guaranteed its resources of meaning. The solution that Weber proposes is for the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of intention to complete each other: an indication taking note that – in a world full of goods, by now the only world available – an ethics that radically rejects the world is unlikely to be feasible. Beware: Weber's discourse and his world image cannot demonstrate that, in particular in politics, the choice to follow the ethics of intention is ethically indefensible. He can only provide arguments to support his position and to this end he does not disdain from using strained, polemical interpretations that demand a coherent performance from the interlocutor who is hypothetically in favour of an ethics of intention. However, at the close of the lecture, Weber himself admits he is unable to provide one.

Indeed, it is not exactly a logically coherent and linear solution to toughen the excessively compromissorial tendency of the ethics of responsibility with the intransigency of ethics of intention. Nevertheless, it does respond to two diverging requirements of Weber's world image and his analysis of the present: the difficulty to radically reject the world once the world has become the only available horizon, but also the awareness of the world's ethical irrationality and the need to remain unwilling to totally adapt to its logic.

Translated from the Italian by Karen Whittle

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