



Hinnerk Bruhns, *Max Weber und der Erste Weltkrieg*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017, 221 pages

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REVIEWS

GREGOR FITZI

Hinnerk Bruhns, *Max Weber und der Erste Weltkrieg*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017, 221 pages.

Like a fisherman, who lays out all the riches he has gathered in his net after a successful catch, Hinnerk Bruhns, today one of the most affirmed Weber experts, presents in his latest book the findings of several years of research on Weber's writings and activities during as well as after the First World War (WWI). With an acute historical gaze and great philological accuracy Bruhns assesses the complete set of the available sources, that is, the collections of Weber's writings and letters from 1914 and the years before his death in June 1920, which are now available thanks to the Weber edition (*Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*, vols. I/15, I/16 and II/8, II/9, II/10,1+2). This profound engagement with the sources is one of the book's major strengths. Weber is portrayed as a German social scientist, who of course had strong patriotic feelings, yet at the same time he was deeply concerned with the necessity of setting out the political conditions for the future peace process in Europe after WWI. Bruhns briefly relates the meaning of Weber's phase of silent engagement for the Heidelberg military hospital in the first year of war (145–155) and describes in great detail how since his first public intervention in August 1916 Weber opposed the political dilettantism of the German Emperor, the submarine warfare and the claims for territorial annexation of the *Alldeutschen* (1–28). The survey of Weber's statements then introduces the analysis of the way in which he engaged in a

polemic with the senselessness of the so-called “ideas of 1914” (28–50), and developed what Bruhns calls the “ideas of 1918” (51–68).

This is one of the most interesting interpretative key sections of the book. Here, Weber is described as an intellectual who engaged in criticism of the social classes that profited economically from the war, because he judged the growing social inequality as the major danger for the stability of the society moulded by the war effort. Accordingly, the new ordering of Germany after the war could not result in granting the privileges of the war profiteers, for instance, by maintaining the three-class franchise system in Prussia. Yet, it had significantly to redistribute wealth to the classes that had sustained the greatest effort at the front and to recognize their role with a generalization of direct universal suffrage. The “principle of balance” within society as well as in the political system thus seems to guide Weber’s thought around 1918, of course, because he intended to advocate the future of Germany amongst the European great powers, yet above all, as Bruhns underlines, because Weber wanted his country to develop a substantial political and economic democracy. What comes to the fore is Weber’s effort to put political rationality at the centre of the action again at a time when he perceived that a logic of unrealistic military goals was completely uncontrolled, so leading his country and turning into total irrationality. Moreover, since 1917 for Weber the residual possibilities of an acceptable peace were at stake, so that his major concern was that every success on the battlefields would worsen the chances of achieving a durable peace in Europe (68–87).

The aim of Bruhns’ research is, therefore, to gain a better understanding of Weber’s attitude in the last year of war as well as in the uncertain following period of the “lost peace”. This could only be achieved by going into more detail in respect to Weber’s activities, by critically addressing his well-known quotes about the war and reconstructing their textual and historical context. Accordingly, Bruhns dedicates a chapter to Weber’s understanding

of the relationship between science and war (89–143) and a further chapter to the topics that in the secondary literature characterized the classical depictions of Weber's attitude to life and the world as if it were a variation of Goethe's Faust. Amongst others, this critical assessment concerns the conceptual trio of war, death and destiny as well as Weber's conception of honour (155–167; 176–181). Yet, Bruhns also dedicates time to a deepening reflection on Weber's language in the writings, speeches and letters during and after WWI, thus focusing on his polemic with Sombart's attitude to the war (168–176). Gradually, the aim of the reconstruction becomes clear for the reader. It is a portrayal of Weber's complex personality, the idiosyncratic ways of expressing himself in letters and speeches and the different styles (sometimes analytical and ascetic, sometimes choleric and polemic) of his writings. The complexity of the figure of Max Weber eventually comes to the fore. He is not a commentator who can be understood by taking some of his emotional outbursts literally. The interpreter has to dig deeper – this is the incidental advice that the author gives his reader.

Nevertheless, in browsing the book the attentive reader might sometimes ask himself what is the central purpose of Bruhn's research. With dramaturgically well-calculated suspense this is revealed only at the end of the volume. Chapter III.7 about Weber's so called "*Macht-Pragma*" ("Power-Pragma") becomes so to speak the fishing boat, into which the net is emptied, and the yield of the research is eventually ordered into its main interpretative scheme (188–198). For a long time and thanks to illustrious interpreters like Raymond Aron the intent of Weber's work was identified with the search for Germany's power-political position in the world (188). The nation should have been Weber's only "secret daemon", as his biographer Kaube still wrote in his *Max Weber. Ein Leben zwischen den Epochen* (2014).

Mommsen's 1959 assessment is eponymous for all these positions with his first published book on *Weber and German Politics 1890–1920* (1984) that constitutes the central critical reference for

Bruhn's reconstruction of Weber's attitudes during and after WWI. Based on the appraisal of the complete sources of Weber's public work and private life from 1914 to 1920, Bruhn's therefore asks the question whether it is possible to claim that radical nationalism is the only ideal of reference for Weber's whole work. As is to be expected from a trained philologist, the answer is very prudent and complex. Yet, in conclusion it is also clearly negative: namely, the idea that Weber was a radical nationalist throughout his life is simply false. Instead, Weber's central contribution to political thought has to be seen in his sociologically underpinned conception of a strong parliamentary democracy that would be able to restore social equality in Germany (51 ff.) as well as in his conception of a reconstituted balance between the European powers that –for better or worse – looks very similar to the European Union of our time (102). The results of Bruhn's research thus grant a completely new dimension to the debate about Weber's political positions and attitudes towards parliamentary as well as economic democracy, international relations and Europe, so that a resumption of the controversy about Weber's contribution to the theory of politics and especially of democracy can be forecast for the years ahead.

VINCENZO MELE

Denis Thouard and Bénédicte Zimmermann (Eds.), *Simmel, le parti-pris du tiers*, Cnrs Éditions, Paris, 2017.

Some collected volumes originate from ritual academic meeting producing not necessarily an improvement in the cultural and scientific debate. This is not the case of the book edited by Denis Thouard and Bénédicte Zimmermann that represents a significant contribution in the French reception of Georg Simmel. Both editors are affiliated with the *Centre Georg Simmel* (EHESS/CNRS) in Paris, an interdisciplinary research centre addressing a range of