

Gianfranco Poggi

**Max Weber, Dalla terra alla fabbrica: Scritti sui lavoratori agricoli e lo stato nazionale (1892-1897), edited and translated by Furio Ferraresi e Sandro Mezzadra. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005, LII+169 pp.**

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## Recensioni

**Max Weber, *Dalla terra alla fabbrica: Scritti sui lavoratori agricoli e lo stato nazionale (1892-1897)*, traduzione ed edizione a cura di Furio Ferraresi e Sandro Mezzadra. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005, LII+169 pp.**

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Italy has a lengthy and significant tradition of contributions to Weberian studies, comprising both translations of Max Weber's writings and studies – general and monographic – of his work-and-person. This volume adds to both components of that tradition: on the one hand, Ferraresi and Mezzadra produce readable translations of sometimes difficult works (see their lexicological statement on pp. L-LII to get the flavour of the queer German terminology of forms of employment applicable to rural activities). On the other, they lead up to those translations with a substantial introduction, remarkable both for its thoroughness and for the insights it contains. The book, furthermore, adds significantly to the huge body of *Weberiana*, both in German, English, and Italian, by focussing on one particular phase and aspect of Weber's scholarly production – his writings of 1892-1894 on the German rural workers. (The volume includes, however, a statement of 1897 on the theme of "Germany as an industrial state").

The importance of these writings had long been recognized – I remember hearing about them for the first time fifty years ago, in the context of the Weber seminar Reinhard Bendix used to hold in his house on the Berkeley – but many secondary treatments have viewed them as products of "Weber before Weber", and assimilated them to even earlier writings dealing with Roman and medieval economic history. The editors have not undertaken to make available in Italian the main body of the writings in question, and one cannot blame them for that. Rather, they have extracted from the editions of those bulky writings now available in several tomes of the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* a number of particularly significant texts, produced on different occasions and for different purposes. One consequence of this is that one finds, in going from one item to the others of the editors' selection, some amount of repetition. But this disadvantage is more than compensated by the fact that Ferraresi and Mezzadra have made available to the reader, in relatively compact form, and in Weber's own (translated) words, the main results yielded to him by an extensive and intense period research, results which he had consigned, *in extenso*, to rather lengthy reports.

This particular moment in Weber's scholarly career was occasioned by various circumstances. First, Weber had relatively long-standing connexions with two associations which, in the early 1890's, undertook research surveys on one aspect of what could be called "the German agrarian question" – the part played in German agriculture by the rural classes, be they peasants or workers operating under a different "labor constitution". One association, of which Weber was an active and highly combative member, was the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, which had decided to focus its research on one particular region, the Prussian territories east of the Elbe – that is, in what is now Polish territory, but was then largely divided up among estates owned by the *Junker*. The scope of the research was wider, and embraced Germany as a whole, in the case of the other association,

the so-called Evangelical-social Congress, with which Weber had a somewhat looser relationship, that of a sympathizer. There were other differences between the two surveys – signally, the fact that the former gathered its evidence concerning the conditions of the rural subaltern groups chiefly from estate owners and employers, the latter from the Protestant pastors to whom was entrusted the spiritual well-being of those groups. (In reporting both these methodological choices, one feels the need to add (*sic!*) Weber, one must say, had strong misgivings concerning both strategies of data collection. But his main task was to analyse whatever data they had produced).

Second, Weber's published writings on the history of ancient Roman agrarian institutions and relations had established not just his general standing as a scholar but his interest and competence in matters which showed some affinity with those confronted by both surveys, since both at bottom dealt with one fundamental social problem which Weber had studied in ancient Rome: how do land-owners and land-non-owners relate to one another in the context of agricultural activity? Third, both surveys presupposed an implicit policy agenda which Weber, as a passionate nationalist, shared. All over Germany, the status quo in the relations between land-owners and rustics was threatened by the extent to which the latter were "voting with their feet", that is leaving the countryside where their families, in most cases, had lived and worked for generations, and heading for industrial work either in Germany or abroad. Generally speaking, this involved them in a process of proletarianization which had significant and potentially threatening political implications. In Eastern Prussia, in particular, it created a vacuum which the owners and employers tended to fill with immigrant man- and woman-power originating from Poland (then part of the Czarist empire). This tendency was of particular concern to Weber (among others) because it affected the security of the Reich's borders, and brought the native German population into contact with elements of – he felt – culturally inferior stock. (Readers with a penchant for political correctness are likely to be shocked by a number of passages in the texts in question, where interestingly the cultural disparity between the two populations is seen as reflected also in the respective dietary habits! Apparently the disparagement of *Kartoffel*-eaters which a couple of generations ago Mediterranean people routinely expressed about Germans was common among the Germans themselves in Weber's own time, but addressed to their Slavic neighbours. Somehow, bread-eating was seen as the *echt Deutsch* alternative).

Weber's serious and demanding engagement with these two surveys had somewhat different publishing outcomes. His findings concerning the data from East Prussia were reported in 1892 in a thick book, full of tables, which in 1984 was republished in two tomes of the *Gesamtausgabe* under the title *The situation of rural workers in Germany East of the Elbe*. Those concerning the Evangelical-social congress inquiry were originally published as a number of shorter essays or texts of speeches, which together with others again make up two other tomes of *Gesamtausgabe*, published in 1993 as *The question of rural workers, national state and economic policy: Writings and speeches 1892-1899*. Note also that the editors have translated, from the first book, only the conclusions [pp. 3-34]; the other four translations [pp. 35-169] are of texts from the second.

My appreciation as a reviewer of this book (a paperback in the series *Comunità è libertà* edited by Roberto Esposito and Carlo Galli) went through two phases. At first, I felt that the work put into it by the translators and editors, however meritorious and

indeed admirable in itself, was somehow wasted – for, let’s face it, the great majority of readers, no matter how interested in Max Weber, would find it easier to access the substance of these texts by reading summaries of them and comments on them in easily accessible secondary works. (I am thinking particularly of the second chapter in Dirk Kaesler’s *Max Weber: Eine Einfuehrung in Leben, Werk und Wirkung*, which exists also in English and in Italian). On this account, I thought, the book in question could only be seen as a generous present made by the editors to a very small group of dyed-in-the-wool Weberophiles such as it may exist in Italy. On second thought (and on second reading), however, it occurred to me that there are in this book plenty of passages (including, in fact, some quoted by Kaesler) which very much deserve to be read by students who have a less specialistic interest in Weber. As I have already suggested, there are quite a few repetitions in the volume, as well as a number of rather dry and sometimes forbidding arguments about, say, the “constitution” of labour performed on the land or about the varieties of its retribution and of the related occupational figures. But in the rest of the book the force and originality of Weber’s thought are often fully in evidence. I am thinking, for instance, of a number of passages where he shows his appreciation of the realities of rural life and of the unavoidable complexity generated by one raw fact – the intrinsically seasonal nature of agricultural work makes it impossible for landowners to establish with all the rural workers the same stable employment relationship. Or: the nature itself of agricultural labour makes it plausible to reward it, at least partly, in nature rather than in specie. Or: an implication of the increasing involvement of agricultural production in market affairs (including those connected with exports) is to render the rural employment relationships more and more akin to the industrial one, with all the consequences this has for class formation and class conflict.

I will just mention a few other arguments of a different nature, which the reader will find effectively expounded in these texts and which are echoed, and differently substantiated, in later works of Weber’s. (Kaesler plausibly suggests that these writings contain something like a “red thread”, destined to run through most of Weber’s later ones, however different in theme, method, and tone). The so-called “alliance between rye and iron”, that is between the two socio-economic interests dominant in Wilhelmine Germany: larger agricultural estates in the hands of the Junkers and the growing heavy-industry concerns in the hands of the upper stratum of the bourgeoisie. The originally seigneurial and patriarchal cast of the Junkers’ relations to the *manants* of their estates, and the corrosive effects on those relations of the Junkers’ attempts to modernize the management of their estates. The tendency of some parts of the German bourgeoisie to ape the Junkers’ manners and dispositions and their reluctance to engage in politics and to modernize the way in which the Reich is governed. The redoubtable effects of the growing dependency of the East-of-the-Elbe estates on Polish labor, and more generally on immigration. The extent to which considerations of a “value” nature – chiefly, the individual’s aspiration to autonomy – are inducing German peasants to accept the risks and burdens connected with a move to the towns and to industrial labour. Finally, the inexorably impersonal nature of the employment relationship in the industrial context and the fact that it unavoidably leads to class conflict.

One final remark. Toward the end of his life, Weber stated publicly that in no profession sheer chance plays as great a role as in the academic one. Perhaps Ferraresi and

Mezzadra do not sufficiently acknowledge that the impact on Weber's own life course of the publications from which they have selected their texts constitutes a very good illustration of that statement. (In other words, *Maximilianus de se fabulam narrabat*). At the time Weber was immersed in the pains embodied in those texts, the University of Berlin offered him a chair in commercial law. This was presumably due to the resonance produced among scholars by his early writings on the history of medieval companies, and to the success he had recently had as a temporary replacement for a famous teacher in the field of commercial law. However! Rather than taking over that post, Weber accepted, instead, a chair of *economics* at Freiburg. This was the first chair he effectively held, though not for long, for within three years he moved to the University of Heidelberg, once more to an economics chair.

Now, Weber had no specialist training in that discipline, nor any standing in it, and according to some he never *really* was at home in it and comfortable with it. (According to a former colleague of mine, Arpad Szakolczai, this discrepancy between Weber's nominal attachment to economics and his lack of any real expertise and interest in it, may have been among the causes of the serious mental illness which nearly paralyzed him over a few years at the turn of the century). Only his studies on rural workers, if anything, had seen him involved in research on contemporary economic issues, albeit research conducted in an empirical mode which in our days most economists disdain. *Their* success must have suggested to the Freiburg decision-makers that their author – a young scholar with a strong background both in law and in legal and economic history – was the right person to whom to entrust an economics chair. *Habent sua fata libelli!* But in this case, it seems, the books' fate played in turn a fateful part in the life course of a scholar whose unparalleled significance for modern social theory we do not cease to register and to celebrate.

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