



“Max Weber’s Desk is now my Altar’: Marianne Weber and the intellectual heritage of her husband”

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ABSTRACT

Max Weber died suddenly on 14 June 1920 in Munich mid-way through a course of lectures on “Sociology of the State” and with two books in the press: the three volumes of his sociology of religion, and the first four chapters of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. His widow, Marianne Weber, at the time active in regional politics and the women’s movement, immediately suspended all commitments other than work on her dead husband’s intellectual legacy. In the following years she completed *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* from manuscripts, edited four volumes of his collected writings, assembled Max Weber’s extensive correspondence, and in 1926 completed a definitive biography. This detailed account of Marianne Weber’s construction of her dead husband’s intellectual legacy provides a fresh perspective upon Weber’s reputation.

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In the early evening of 14 June 1920 Max Weber died at home in his apartment, part of a house in the Seestraße belonging to the writer Helene Böhlau. A brief and ultimately fatal illness tore the 56 year-old, at the time a Professor in the University of Munich’s Economics Faculty, away from teaching that he had only resumed 1 year earlier, and from two ongoing publication projects. At his death bed there stand two uncomprehending women: Marianne Weber and Else Jaffé-von Richthofen, possibly also his nephew Eduard Baumgarten, a young and eager student of his uncle.² Next day an artist visited the apartment and took a death mask of the deceased.³ The cremation took place early on 17 June at Munich’s *Ostfriedhof*. Attending the formal, but secular ceremony were representatives of the university, of the student body, of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, of the *Verein für Socialpolitik*, and of the German Democratic Party (DDP), all of whom paid tribute to a great scholar, as versatile as he was argumentative.⁴ According to the local press, the ceremony ended with a

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¹ Translated by Keith Tribe from “‘Max Weber’s Schreibtisch ist nun mein Altar’. Marianne Weber und das geistige Erbe ihres Mannes” in Karl-Ludwig Ay, Knut Borchardt (eds.) *Das Faszinosum Max Weber. Die Geschichte seiner Geltung*, UVK, Konstanz 2006, pp. 29–51.

² See for an account of Weber’s final hours: Marianne Weber, *Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild*, 3rd edn (including an index and notes by Max Weber-Schäfer), J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) (Tübingen 1984), 711f; Marianne Weber, *Lebenserinnerungen*, J. Storm (Bremen, 1948), 119; Eduard Baumgarten, *Max Weber. Werk und Person*, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) (Tübingen, 1964), 678.

³ According to Eduard Baumgarten, *Max Weber*, note to Table 18, it is not known who the artist was, but the date given is 15 June 1920. The death mask is held by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

⁴ See newspaper reports in *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* No. 24 (18 June 1920); *Bayerische Staatszeitung* No. 140 (19 June 1920); *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* No. 244 (18 June 1920); *Morgenblatt*, 3 (the most detailed report); *Münchener Post*, No. 139 (18 June 1920), 5; also the account given by Otto Baumgarten to Paul Siebeck in a letter of 30 June 1920, and the reply on 3 July 1920, which contains an impression of the ceremony from Robert Wilbrandt, the Tübingen economist (Mohr/Siebeck Archives, Tübingen).

minor sensation: the dead man's widow addressed a few words to those in attendance and in so doing breached Bavarian convention, certainly also more generally conventions prevailing in a Weimar democracy still enmeshed in imperial tradition.

Who was this bold woman?⁵ Marianne Weber, married to Max Weber since 1893, a faithful partner and support in his difficult years of illness, was in the summer of 1920 just short of 51 and at the peak of her social and political career. She had in January 1919 been elected as one of the first women to the Baden Constitutional National Assembly as a candidate for the left-liberal DDP.⁶ Because of the move to Munich she surrendered her seat after a few months in September 1919, but was persuaded by her old friend and political associate Gertrud Bäumer to become chairperson of the Union of German Women's Associations (*Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine*).⁷ And so during the early months of 1920, as her husband was at his desk drafting lectures and correcting proofs, she was constantly travelling on the Union's business.⁸ The sudden death of Max Weber brought about a swift reorientation of her life; she immediately withdrew from all engagements and positions and for 6 years devoted herself exclusively to the care of her husband's papers, and to his memory.

In retrospect, and justifying herself to her female associates, Marianne Weber described this phase of her life in emotive terms: "Max Weber's desk is now my altar".⁹ She sacrificed her physical and intellectual powers to her dead husband and his life's work, describing herself as "his servant".¹⁰ For us today such expressions border on the uncomfortable; she described her work in the most emotional and religiously loaded terms. The custody and disposition of Weber's papers, and the composition of his biography, became part of a religiously transfigured death cult in which Marianne Weber assumed the role of High Priestess. Somewhat derisively Golo Mann dubbed her in his memoirs "Max Weber's terrestrial curate".¹¹ If we take as a basis Max Weber's criteria for a professionalised priesthood then some of its elements can indeed be applied to Marianne Weber: she gathered mourners around herself, and read Weber's writings with students, first in Munich and later in Heidelberg. In what were for her very happy moments Max Weber was, as she said, "among us".¹² Despite her considerable financial difficulties she persisted in seeking a return to the symbolic Heidelberg house on the Neckar. Here, on the Ziegelhäuser Landstraße, she created a permanent memorial intended to preserve the presence and the "spirit" of Max Weber. His reconstructed study became hallowed ground. In this room, at his desk, surrounded by personal effects valued as "relics" by Marianne Weber, work was done on the manuscripts, proofs corrected and his life written up.¹³ In the large drawing room looking out on to the Neckar Marianne Weber continued the Heidelberg and Munich salon tradition of afternoon tea, the so-called *Geistertees*.¹⁴ Right up until her death on 12 March 1953 Marianne Weber remained the central supervisor and curator of her husband's intellectual legacy.

This essay is directed to an account of this work in a less emotive register, seeking to be as concrete and objective as is possible.

⁵ For Marianne Weber see the thorough account by Günther Roth, "Marianne Weber und ihr Kreis", his introduction to *Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild*, ed. Piper (Munich, 1989) IX–LXXI; Roth's new introduction to the 1988 Transaction Books edition of *Max Weber. A Biography*; and the brief biographical sketch by Michael Matthiesen ed. Walther Killy, Rudolf Vierhaus, *Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie* Bd. 10, K.G. Saur (Munich, 1999), 357f. Both of these writers start from an interest in Max Weber, but they do at the same time seek to draw Marianne Weber out of the shadow cast by her husband. A more decidedly feminist approach, seeking an assessment of Marianne Weber's own scholarly qualities, can be found in the writings of Theresa Wobbe: "Marianne Weber (1870–1954). Ein anderes Labor der Moderne," ed. Theresa Wobbe, Claudia Honegger, *Frauen in der Soziologie. Neun Porträts*, C.H. Beck (Munich, 1988), 153–77; and especially in the collection edited by Bärbel Meurer, *Marianne Weber. Beiträge zu Werk und Person*, Mohr Siebeck (Tübingen, 2004).

⁶ She was elected as a representative of Constituency IV for Mannheim-Heidelberg-Mosbach (Personal file for Marianne Weber, Geheimes Landesarchiv Karlsruhe Nr. 231/10957). See also *Lebenserinnerungen*, 85–112; Wolfgang Bocks, "Marianne Weber," ed. Bernd Ottnad, *Baden-Württembergische Biographien* Bd. 2, W. Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 1999) 476–9, here 476; together with the detailed account by Konrad Exner, "Marianne Weber. Die erste Rednerin im badischen Parlament", *Badische Heimat. Zeitschrift für Landes- und Volkskunde, Natur-, Umwelt und Denkmalschutz* No. 2 (June 2005), 277–80.

⁷ See *Lebenserinnerungen*, 112, and Margit Göttert, "Gertrud Bäumer and Marianne Weber. Kampfgefährterinnen im Bund deutscher Frauenvereine", in Meurer, *Marianne Weber*, 145–50.

⁸ *Lebenserinnerungen*, 120f.

⁹ *Lebenserinnerungen*, 115.

¹⁰ *Lebenserinnerungen*, 114.

¹¹ See Golo Mann, *Erinnerungen und Gedanken. Eine Jugend in Deutschland*, 3rd edn, S. Fischer (Frankfurt a.M., 1986), 283. He came into contact with Marianne Weber through his friend Max Weber-Schäfer as a student in Heidelberg (1929–32/33).

¹² Letter from Marianne Weber to Karl and Gertrud Jaspers, 19 December 1920 (DLA Marbach [henceforth Marbach archive], Jaspers Papers): "Incidentally, there is a special time for me each week: on Saturday afternoons 12–15 young people come – Max's students and also Frau Jaffé, Frau Bernstein, Loewenstein and two other older people. We read Max's writings, at present we have been reading the last *Logos* essay on value freedom for some weeks. I prepare in advance, we read and discuss paragraph by paragraph ...". *Lebenserinnerungen*, 116, 124f.

¹³ *Lebenserinnerungen*, 115, 125, 133; Marianne moved back into the house on the Ziegelhäuser Landstraße in December 1922.

¹⁴ Marianne Weber, "Academic Conviviality", *Minerva*, vol. 15, No. 2 (1977) 214–46; Roth, "Marianne Weber und ihr Kreis". VLVf., LII–LVII; "Der Marianne Weber-Kreis" in *Festgabe für Georg Poensgen zu seinem 60. Geburtstag am 7. Dezember 1958*, F.H. Kerle (Heidelberg, 1958); Georg Poensgen, "Zehn Jahre Marianne Weber-Kreis im Kurpfälzischen Museum" in *Ruperto-Carola. Mitteilungen der Vereinigung der Freunde der Studentenschaft der Universität Heidelberg* Jg. 17 Bd. 37 (June 1965) 105–10; while the organisational capacity of Marianne Weber is on display in her postwar correspondence with Dolf Sternberger (Marbach Archive, Sternberger Papers).

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