Ernst Troeltsch’s Evaluation of Max and Alfred Weber:  
Introduction and Translation of a Letter by Ernst Troeltsch  
to Heinrich Dietzel

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Ernst Troeltsch died in his Berlin flat as a result of a pulmonary embolism, early in the morning of 1 February 1923, shortly before his 58th birthday. In the obituaries printed in many European newspapers, the liberal philosopher of history is compared with his friend Max Weber, who also died relatively young at the age of 56, two and a half years earlier. The two scholars probably met each other in Heidelberg in 1897, when Weber took up the Chair in Economics and Finance. Troeltsch had taught systematic theology there since the summer semester of 1894. Very quickly, these men of the same age became close friends. It was not long, however, before their intense intellectual exchange became overshadowed by Weber’s illness. In 1903, the manic-depressive sociologist had to give up his teaching post. His famous studies on ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’ (Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus) overlapped with Troeltsch’s historico-cultural investigations into the significance of Protestantism for the rise of the modern world (Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt).

The friends also competed with each other in the critical methodology of the historical and cultural sciences, as well as in the interpretation of ancient Judaism. Weber was the more inspired of the two and Troeltsch the more successful in his own day. This caused tensions that were intensified by their wives. As a champion of the liberal, middle-class women’s movement, Marianne Weber did not think much of Marta Troeltsch, who came from a Mecklenburg estate and was not accepted as part of Heidelberg’s liberal scholarly world. The situation was further aggravated when Max’s brother, Alfred Weber, came to Heidelberg to take up

1. The numerous obituaries published in the European daily press, religious periodicals and academic journals are now collectively available in: Ernst Troeltsch in Nachrufen (ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf in collaboration with Christian Nees; Troeltsch-Studien, 12; Gütersloh, 2002).
a professorship at the University in 1907. In spite of antipathies to this economist with critical views on the Church and theology, Troeltsch was on relatively good collegial terms with Alfred and kept in contact with him. Max, however, thought his younger brother, by four years, was shallow and dishonourable on account of his affairs, an opinion that not only came from Max’s moral rigour but was probably also compounded by jealousy.

From 1910, the Webers and the Troeltschs lived together at 17 Ziegelhäuser Landstraße, directly on the River Neckar opposite Heidelberg’s Castle. Daily life together under one roof could well have exacerbated latent conflicts. Max and Marianne began to gather together young avant-garde intellectuals at their Sunday Jour. Libel action against colleagues, arguments with journalists and interventions in appointments procedures at the University revealed Max Weber’s resentment at having been condemned to an ineffectual role in the public domain. Until his appointment at the University of Vienna in January 1918, this damaged genius was forced to lead the life of a lonely scholar. Troeltsch, on the other hand, was making a dazzling academic career for himself, enjoying major literary successes, and had gained a great deal of political influence. After 1910 or thereabouts, he was considered within Baden’s political arena to be the spokesman of Heidelberg University, which he represented in the Upper House of the Baden parliament from 1909 to 1914/15.

Very little is known about the situation in 17 Ziegelhäuser Landstraße; only a few odd scenes can be reconstructed relatively accurately. Troeltsch frequently invited students to their garden and liked to be sung to by one of his favourite students who was highly gifted musically. From time to time, Max Weber joined them and was introduced to the theology students by Troeltsch with deep reverence and respect. The latest edition of Weber’s correspondence also shows that, now and then, Troeltsch very probably took part in the discussions between Max Weber and Georg von Lukács. As a rule, Troeltsch would go down to the Webers’ Jours on Sundays. Otherwise, only relatively few sources have been found to date that shed light on the relationship between Weber and Troeltsch during their years together in the Fallenstein Villa. However, these tense relations at such close quarters must have become even more strained when the childless Webers shared in Marta Troeltsch’s pregnancy. At the christening in their own home in October 1913, Max became the godfather of Ernst Eberhard Troeltsch. A few months later, Berlin University offered Troeltsch a chair, dedicated especially to him, in Religions-, Sozial- und Geschichts-Philosophie und die christliche Religionsgeschichte (i.e. a combination of the philosophy of religion, philosophy of history, social philosophy and the history of the Christian religion). Troeltsch was now an
internationally famous figure and theologian of ‘Kulturprotestantismus’. His imminent move from Heidelberg, where he had made his mark as a popular orator, town councillor and elected representative in Baden’s Upper House, might well have contributed to Max’s dramatization of a moral conflict between the two men shortly after the start of the war. The nation at war had designated Max Weber as the reserve captain, head of Heidelberg’s military hospital, making the reserve deputy sergeant Troeltsch, professor of systematic theology and member of the Privy Church Council (Dr. theol., Dr. phil. h. c., Dr. iur. h. c.), one of Weber’s subordinates. According to Marianne Weber’s account, the row was triggered by the expert on Romance languages and literature from Alsace, Friedrich Schneegans, who wanted to cheer up French prisoners of war in Troeltsch’s sickbay ‘with small gifts’. To be on the safe side, Troeltsch had a soldier accompany Schneegans, ‘without Weber’s knowledge’. ‘This incident so enraged Weber that he brusquely broke with his friend,’ writes Marianne in her famous biography of her husband.  

Three years later, Troeltsch mentioned this conflict to the economist in Bonn, Heinrich Dietzel, with whom he had become friends during his Readership there from 1892 to 1894. Troeltsch’s letter had been prompted by an appointment at Bonn University. As a student of Adolf Wagner, Dietzel was seen as the last upholder of classical British economics in Germany and had gained considerable influence in his subject. He had asked Troeltsch to advise him on which man should be appointed to the chair in economics, Alfred or Max. However, strictly speaking, Troeltsch’s reply is no mere vote or academic reference for the selection committee. Rather, the offended friend draws up a double psychographic profile of the two extraordinary brothers that reveals his discomfort with both of them. Despite their close friendship and daily coexistence, Max remained for Troeltsch ‘in many ways problematic and hard to fathom’. ‘I don’t know what his ultimate motives are,’ he writes about a man with whom he spent hundreds of nights engrossed in discussion.

It is not easy to characterize the terminology Troeltsch chooses for his portrait of the Weber brothers. Deserving particular attention is the fact that he avoids making any direct reference to the world war, and nowhere touches upon the position held by Max and Alfred Weber on the ‘war of minds’ (Krieg der Geister). However, some phrases clearly show his reservations about Weber’s political standpoint. Especially telling is his criticism of Weber’s pretence to be a natural rights democrat. When he wrote this letter, Troeltsch too had long been convinced that Germany

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needed a democratic form of political order and had fought resolutely for domestic reforms. However, he argued for the necessity of this democratization, not on the basis of some general ideal of reason or rational natural law, but in historical and politico-pragmatic terms. And he was consistent in this approach of combining reflection on natural law with historically practical concerns, even in his central papers on the founding of parliamentary democracy in Weimar, such as his famous speech on ‘Natural Law and Humanity in World Politics’ (Naturrecht und Humanität in der Weltpolitik), delivered at the German College of Politics (Deutsche Hochschule für Politik).3

Also striking is Troeltsch’s use of the term relativism. In many respects, it is a key concept in Troeltsch’s thought in that, with other theorists of modern historicism, he sees the central resultant problem of the general historicization of thought to be its recognition of all binding norms and cultural values as historically relative. In his historico-theoretical studies, which he pursued with great intensity after taking up his teaching post in Berlin in May 1915, it is precisely this problem that he tries to tackle: how to acknowledge the inevitability of historicism whilst restricting its relativistic effects. It is imperative to read his letter about the Weber brothers in the context of his work on the book Der Historismus und seine Probleme, which he never completed.4 In this letter, he takes a closer look at Weber and develops a critique of the latter’s practical philosophy which, ultimately, accuses him of having rendered ‘cultural values’ derivative of individual decisions. Troeltsch was perhaps the first interpreter of Weber to characterize the theory of value-neutrality, on the one hand, and the subjective choice of values, on the other, as ‘decision-based’ (Dezisionismus).

Of great import is the phrase nude et crude, i.e. ‘naked’ and ‘open’, which Troeltsch uses in the last paragraph of his letter to Dietzel. Is it permissible to disregard Troeltsch’s request for discretion and hand over these intimate details ‘to a larger circle’? Laying such letters bare for all to see will always have elements of intellectual voyeurism—even if these letters reflect intellectual constellations of great rarity.

3. Now to be found in Ernst Troeltsch, Schriften zur Politik und Kulturphilosophie (1918–1923) (ed. Gangolf Hübinger in co-operation with Johannes Mikuteit; Ernst Troeltsch, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 15; Berlin/New York, 2002).

Ernst Troeltsch to Heinrich Dietzel 22 October, 1917

Dear Colleague,

22/X/17

This is once again a difficult commission. I must say straight away that I had a terrible row with Max Weber at the beginning of the war. He threw me out of his flat in a most offensive manner. The reason was that he called my views chauvinistic, ‘without a sense of national honour and dignity’. It was about my behaviour towards a pacifist from Alsace whom I advised to remain silent, while he supported him without reservation. In reality, old differences of opinion were behind this outburst. He thinks I am a weak compromiser and a political cretin. But that’s between ourselves. It’s just I have to tell you in order to account for a certain degree of reserve on my part and to intimate that, despite all the will to objectivity, a certain degree of bias is to be expected in my judgement.

First of all, then, Max W. He thinks he’s now perfectly healthy and is looking to become active again in the public sphere. He cut a striking figure at the Diederich Publishers’ circle in Lauenstein and then on a course at the adult education centre (Volkshochschule) in Heppenheim. Participants spoke of his bubbling energy and intellectual fullness, but also of his impassioned vehemence. Alfred W tells me that the appointment to Vienna is the intention of the Viennese government. However, Max would like to stay in Heidelberg, if the Baden government gives him a sufficiently remunerated teaching post in sociology or a related subject. Whether or not they will do this I do not know. At any rate, MW would like to have a post and be publicly effective, among other things because the war has also meant for him that he can no longer depend on private means of subsistence. Incidentally, you know just as well as I do that for years now he has directed his interests towards sociology and political science, and has almost completely given up economics as such. However, with his enormous talent and ability to work, it would be easy for him to get used to it again. To me, by the way, he is in many ways deeply problematic and hard to fathom. I don’t know what his ultimate intellectual motives are. It is mere pretence when he appears as a natural rights democrat. He sides with ‘victims of persecution’ at every opportunity and does so with excessive vehemence. A strong hatred of the Prussian system and the person of the present monarch is also at work here. Yet his grounds for democracy etc. are always historically relativistic and practically oriented. My impression is that, in reality, practical politics is his forte, and that it is only his tremendous abilities that allows him to be a brilliant scholar as well. Practical politicians do not need final principles, but knowledge of the situation and its possibilities. I have never understood how this relativism squares with his moral intransigence, which particularly likes to prey on the conscience of those who do not know him. This trait is most biting when directed against his friends and against the ruling system, against everything that is official, satiated and in power, or seemingly in power, and presents itself as justice to those deprived of recognition and the oppressed. However, as soon as this rage has died down, he immediately reverts to judging the situation in the most matter-of-fact, relativistic and shrewd manner, and he is just as ironic towards his protégés as he is condemning of his opponents. He is then an overbearing personality who subjugates everything to his politico-national aims without regard for the people to the left and right of him. It goes without saying that all this is done with the greatest conceivable measure of personal selflessness and decency. All the same, in this respect I am one of those once bitten twice shy.

Of an entirely different nature is his brother A. He too is very nervous and very passionate, but in a completely different way. Where Max is severe and manic, A. is sharp, clever, diplomatic and a little nervous and fidgety. Interested at first in religion and aesthetics, he turned to economics, thought of himself initially with a certain degree of jealousy and irritation as a duodecimo edition of his brother, then became increasingly independent, fell completely under the spell of social democracy in Austria, then broke with it ever more thoroughly in Heidelberg, became estranged from his brother both inwardly and outwardly, sought for ideal grounds and positions for economics and politics, sympathized with modern idealists, such as Bergson, Stefan George etc. Today, he has also given that up again and is looking for a stronger, more substantial foundation for national ethics and politics. He is very intelligent, has a diplomatic disposition despite appearances to the contrary, is keen and nimble in his perception, directed towards principles and a fiery national idealist at heart. He is held in high regard by Rödern and others, and is currently initiated in many things. He has a great deal of character and sincerity, but little stability. He is a good and gripping speaker, even if he makes his listeners uneasy and nervous. In Heidelberg he has a great deal of influence among colleagues and students. He too has the moral decency and justness that runs in the family. I have only found him to be a good colleague, even though he has worked against me in the past. He is not particularly fond of Christians, or what he considers Christians to be. As a teacher he is extremely influential, with a very keen sense of responsibility. He educates his students. All in all, he is an outstanding person whom I highly respect and value. He is more human than his brother, but I consider the latter’s abilities to be even greater.

Well, that’s as objective as possible. Please be careful in making use of this. Such detailed knowledge is, of course, based on confidential and intimate statements made by both men and it would seem simply nude crude indiscreet if passed on to a larger circle. On the other hand, however, I have to tell you what I know. Otherwise this letter is of no value to you. After all, you can get commonplaces from other people. That’s it then.

Kindest regards,
Yours faithfully,
E. Troeltsch

Translated by Friedrich Wilhelm Graf

Ernst Troeltsch an Heinrich Dietzel 22. Oktober 1917

Lieber Kollege!


Eine ganz andere Natur ist sein Bruder A. Auch er sehr nervös u sehr leidenschaftlich, aber in ganz anderer Weise. Wo Max massiv und tobsüchtig ist, ist A. spitz, klug, diplomatisch u ein bishen aufgeregt u zappelig. Anfänglich ästhetisch u religiöss interessiert kam er zur Nationalökonomie, empfand sich zunächst mit einer gewissen Eifersucht u Gereiztheit als Duodezausgabe seines Bruders, wurde dann immer selbständiger, geriet in Österreich völlig in den Bann der dortigen Sozialdemokratie, brach dann in Heidelberg auch damit immer gründlicher, entfernte sich innerlich u äußerlich von seinem Bruder, suchte nach ideellen Einfallsgründen u Positionen für


Herzlichste Grüße
Ihr getreuer E Troeltsch.