Max Weber’s *The City* and the Islamic City

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Abstract

Wolfgang Mommsen noted that Weber, despite his rejection of any philosophy of history, implicitly advanced one of his own. This article explores one aspect of this philosophy: the teleology of a unique Western history, which serves as a grid in terms of which other histories are read. In effect, other histories are considered in terms of what the West had and they lacked: a sociology of absence. *The City* discussed one crucial link in this teleology of the West. I consider this essay in relation to the Islamic city, and how Weber characterized it in different parts of his essay, in contrast with the Western city. I argue that Weber essentialized Islam, like he did China and India, in ways which eliminated history and geography and their considerable range of variation, in favour of implicit ‘ideal types’. The consequences are explored in relation to themes at different points in the history of Muslim cities.

Keywords: Gellner, guilds, Islam, Ottoman Empire, philosophy of history.

Wolfgang Mommsen illuminated and elucidated the work of Max Weber in his many seminal works. One of his early essays, ‘Max Weber’s Political Sociology and his Philosophy of World History’ (Mommsen 1965), was particularly influential, and I for one continue to find it most useful in teaching. It alerted us to the fact that Weber, despite his utter rejection of any philosophy of history, implicitly advanced one of his own. He saw historical transformations as the product of an unconditional freedom of the personality to act in accordance with orientation to transcendental values. That is the basis of charisma, which is then routinized. So, the movement of history was seen by Weber as a dialectic between charisma and routinization, especially pertinent to the triumph of rationality and bureaucracy in the modern age. This theme subsequently became common in writing and teaching on Weber, and has been much debated. This idea that Weber had an implicit philosophy of history has been further developed in relation to the ‘uniqueness of the West’ theme, so central to Weber, and one that has continued to exert great influence in the elaboration of that idea by many subsequent writers. That may be said to consti-
tute a philosophy of history because it seemed to postulate a teleology of the West, developing through various links into ever expanding rationality culminating in modern Western capitalism. Its other aspect is that the course of this unique development then becomes a scheme in terms of which other civilizational areas, primarily China and India, are interpreted. These civilizations are read, as it were, through a grid of Western development: what is it that the West had and they lacked, so that they failed to develop along its path into capitalism? This becomes a sociology of absence (Hirst 1975: 197). One of those links was the medieval European city, in contrast to its ancient and oriental counterparts.

Max Weber had much to say about Islam, but not in the systematic manner of his treatises on China and India. Most of what he had to say about Islam was, as it were, in passing, making comparative points in relation to some location or theme (Turner 1974; Zubaida 1972). This was the case with his essay on the City.

The City is part of Weber’s ‘uniqueness of the West’ project. The European Medieval city and its institutions were, for Weber, a crucial link in the development of economic rationality and modern capitalism. This project also involved the drawing of contrasts between the features of this unique Western genealogy of capitalism and corresponding features in other civilizations, notably China and India, to underscore why they did not progress in the Western direction. In effect and in summary, these other civilizations were read through a grid of Weber’s construction of Western history. These other civilizations lacked features such as Roman law, feudalism, the autonomous city and ultimately the equivalent of the Protestant Ethic. Instead, they contained features to do with tradition, kinship, cults and quiescent religious ethics which contributed to their stasis and inhibited revolutionary transformations. China, for instance, was a complex society and polity, drawing on considerable resources, featuring notable advances in science and technology, yet the obstacles and constraints of its society and religious ethos inhibits the advances which occur in the West.

2. Weber’s essay did dwell on differences between types and regions in Europe. He was clear that they did not all share the features of north-western European medieval cities. These, for Weber, were the type which typified the link in the chain of the history of the West.
A crucial element for Weber in the distinctiveness of the Occidental city was *fraternization* between its citizens, contrasted to the vertical stratification of Chinese cities by clan bonds, and the Indian by caste barriers (Weber 1958: 96-99). Christianity plays an important part in this process in that it individualizes the faithful and weakens the bonds of kinship. Believers participate in Christian cults as individuals, which facilitates fraternization and gives it religious sanction. Burghers join as individuals in an oath of citizenship (Weber 1958: 102). Although this process is facilitated by religious membership, the urban institutions formed on the basis of this fraternization are entirely secular (Weber 1958: 103).

The dimension of *kinship* bonds versus individuation is, then, central for Weber’s reading of the oriental city through the grid of Western uniqueness, a theme that recurs in many other contexts in Weber’s work. I shall not consider this theme in relation to China and India (not that I am qualified to do so), but I shall question Weber’s formulations on Islam. Weber recognized that Islam, like Christianity, requires individual adherence, and considers the community of the faithful to be a fraternity of individuals. It rejects clan cults as idolatry. These doctrinal points do not necessarily indicate what happens in various historical contexts, which vary greatly in Islam as they do in Christianity. Weber admits this individualism of Islam:

> The ritualistic obstacles to fraternization were more absolute in India and China where subjection to the clan was only relative. The barriers grow more weak as one moves into the Near East (Weber 1958: 119).

For Muslims the barriers to fraternization were not religion or kinship cults, but ‘the tribe’.

> In contrast to this [Christianity and the medieval city], the whole history of internal conflicts of the caliphate indicates that Islam never overcame the rural ties of Arabic tribal and clan associations, but remained the religion of a conquering arm structured in terms of tribes and clans (Weber 1958: 100).

I would take a deep breath before making such a sweeping statement. But, of course, much of Islam, throughout its history was not Arab, including the most important and long-lasting Muslim empire, the Ottoman, which ruled from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries, and covered much of the Middle East, the Mediterranean and the Balkans. Within Arab and subsequent empires, including the Ottoman, the significance of tribal ties varied greatly over time and place, and were of little, if any value, in the great Ottoman cities. In fact, Arab
tribes were in decline as early as the Abbasid empire, which brought the Persian aristocracy into the corridors of power and which adopted Persian manners and cultures. The pious urbanites who developed and instituted Islamic religious law, the Shari’a, were de-tribalized Arabs who disapproved of Bedouin ways as *Jahiliyya*—as barbarism and ignorance. These characters had much in common, in attitudes and outlooks, with the burghers of European cities. There is much more Roman law in the transaction sections (sale, hire, partnership, contract) of the Shari’a and Jewish law in the ritual and family aspects than anything Bedouin (for the origins of sacred law see Zubaida 2003: 10-39). The warriors, by the ninth century, were not Arab tribes but Turkish mercenaries and slaves (and Weber emphasized this military phenomenon in another tract of his argument, to be considered below). Indeed, much of the political and cultural conflict that characterized the later Abbasid empire (ninth to thirteenth centuries) involved that between the tribal and the urban principles, as well as that of Arab virtues versus Persian culture and Turkish soldiery. The latter elements triumphed in the Sultanates that sustained a theoretical puppet Caliph (for history of the early caliphate see Kennedy 1986).

The theme of tribe versus city was central to the historical constructions of Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), the fourteenth-century Arab writer. He advanced a cyclical theory of history, seen as a succession of ruling dynasties, each originating in tribal conquest of the city, then being absorbed into the soft living and comfort of urban life, to be overtaken by another dynasty hardened by the rigours of the desert and reinforced by primary solidarity of the tribe. Ernest Gellner famously adopted these ideas and expanded them into a sociology of Islam, to which religion is seen as central (Gellner 1983). Without going into a critical consideration of that sociology (which I have done elsewhere, Zubaida 1995), we can note that Gellner considered the Ottoman Empire to be an exception to that general pattern, which is a pretty big exception, given the longevity and geographical stretch of that Empire from 1389 to 1922. The fact of the matter is that ‘tribes’ (diverse formations) were important political players in certain times and places, and unimportant or non-existent in others. The problem with Weber’s (and Gellner’s) essentializing approaches is that they evade that history in favour of an a-historical model. This process is facilitated by Weber’s ‘ideal type’ methodology, which, disarmingly, dispenses with the messiness of actual history in favour of an ordered model.

Kinship networks, as distinct from ‘tribes’ were, of course, important in society and politics in the Muslim world, as they were in many
Nepotism and kinship solidarities were important factors in many facets of life at various points in history. For instance, the elaborate religious bureaucracy under the Ottomans, dealing with worship, education and law, as well as the lucrative administration of religious foundations, was theoretically based on qualifications and seniority. By the seventeenth century, the high positions in that bureaucracy became almost hereditary, with young men in their teens and twenties sometimes assuming high positions, inherited from fathers or uncles (Zubaida 2003: 60-66). In the West, too, families like the Borgias monopolized clerical and worldly powers over several generations, and nobility was inherited. That is not to say that the Ottomans and the West were similar in these respects: clearly not. Patterns of kinship and nepotism were part of radically different formations. Each was ‘unique’, and each varied and developed over time, and assumed different forms in the different countries and regions. Weber was not wrong on that count. He insisted, however, in reading the one through the uniqueness of the other: a sociology of absence.

The other strand of Weber’s characterization of the Muslim city in contrast to the European was that of arms, soldiers and citizens. He argued that ever since Roman times, the countries of the West featured various armed groupings which were independent from rulers and states and were able to establish some autonomy from them in defending their interests. Weber cites peasant militias and armed knights. This practice spread to the incipient cities, with armed burghers and urban knights usurping powers and jurisdictions from kings, lords and bishops. This provided the bases for urban autonomy and institutions (Weber 1958: 119). In contrast, the oriental cities were the seats of kings and lords, originally empowered by the control of irrigation (the old chestnut of ‘hydraulic society’), and they established their power base in bureaucracy and the soldiery dependent on rulers and supplied by them; what Weber referred to as the ‘separation of soldiers from ownership of the means of warfare’ (Weber 1958: 119). Weber certainly had a valid point here regarding the bases of autonomy of some Western cities, quite distinct from royal and military powers in many cities elsewhere (including ‘the Orient’). At the same time, it is important to analyze the precise function of arms in the politics of particular cities, which varied greatly even within Ottoman lands and at various times. They all featured multiple military forces with different commands and interests which played various parts in urban politics. In Istanbul, for instance, the Janissaries, from the mid-seventeenth century till their elimination in 1826,
formed an urban power base among the market classes. The regiments integrated themselves into the trade and craft guilds and became part-time soldiers. This amalgam, often in alliance with the lower ranks of the religious classes and provincial notables, proved a formidable challenge to the Sultan and the ruling powers, extending on occasions to deposing and executing the sovereign (e.g. Selim III in 1807) (see Quataert 2000; Zubaida 1995). Again, these forms of autonomous power of an urban soldiery are totally different from European patterns, but they have to be analyzed in their own terms rather than as a general absence characterizing all ‘Oriental’ cities, including those of Islam.

The autonomy, power and organization of the West European city in contrast to the oriental are embodied in guilds, corporations and urban institutions. It is often said that the oriental city lacked autonomous institutions and was ruled by the absolute powers of kings and military lords who were based in the city. Guilds, when they existed, in China or Ottoman cities, were subservient to those masters and did not represent bases of urban autonomy. The observations on guilds and corporations are largely true (at least for Ottoman cities). However, to say that these cities lacked the institutions of the their Western counterparts does not imply that they had no institutions.

Ottoman cities had trade and craft guilds, the organization of which varied in the different cities and over time. Some have speculated that Roman and Byzantine guilds were ancestors to both Europe’s and the Ottoman’s. Even if that was the case, these forms of organization developed and mutated over time. We have noted the close association between the military Janissary regiments and the urban guilds in Istanbul. While not representing juridical autonomy, it did give some of the urban classes a power base. As regards ‘fraternization’, we should note that Sufi mystical orders were superimposed on guild organization in many instances. The hierarchy of religious initiation corresponded to the guild hierarchy. The Janissaries, for instance, were organized as lodges of the Bektashi order of dervishes, highly esoteric and heterodox and frowned upon by orthodox religious authority, which was, for the most part, powerless to dislodge it (Birge 1937). The guilds in Cairo and Damascus sometimes corresponded to determinate urban quarters, often gated and with a distinct identity and organization, and at the same time to a Sufi order. The Shaykh of the order would also be the head of the quarter and closely associated with the guild master (Baer 1977). At other times and places some guilds were multi-religious, and included Christian and Jewish practitioners.
of the craft. These were, perhaps, more ‘universalist’ than Western equivalents in which, according to Weber, fraternization coincided with Christian confession.

Another urban institution in Muslim cities throughout most of their history were the *awqaf* (singular: *waqf*), religious endowments given by notables and rich individuals as pious deeds. Typically, a charitable *waqf* would build a mosque or a school or a hospice, then devote a chunk of urban real estate (shops, markets, houses) to generate revenue for its maintenance. Some of these *waqfs* were private, in that they generated revenue for descendants of a particular family. This was a device to protect property and estate from confiscation by the authorities. These institutions generated a whole industry, mostly of religious personnel, concerned with the administration of these institutions and funds, and taking their cut. These became a central element in the geography of the city, as well as generating issues of political conflicts and struggles (Van Leeuven 1999). Commentators have noted the negative aspect of these institutions, in that they arrested great urban wealth which was henceforth frozen, and a hindrance to investment and innovation. Be that as it may, for a historical sociologist to understand the Muslim city s/he has to take account of the economics and politics of these institutions and not merely note their negative aspect, and certainly not assert that these cities lacked institutions in which its citizens participate as calculating agents.

Finally, it would be interesting to consider the long passage in *The City* on Mecca (Weber 1958: 86-89). Weber recognizes here that Mecca (obviously before Saudi rule in the early-twentieth century) does not conform to his other characterization of the Islamic city: it is a kind of city state, with considerable autonomies of institutions and political groups. At some points it is not clear whether Weber is discussing Mecca in the ninth or nineteenth centuries: the essence seems to be continuous. His remarks make most sense, however, for the nineteenth century. Although officially part of the Ottoman Empire and central state, Mecca retained the power of local nobility and patriciate, with their own (slave) armies and revenues. Weber was aware of guilds and legal institutions with autonomy, not directly subject to power of central state or local patriciate, for example, qadis, chief judges, of the four schools of Sunni law. However, despite these autonomies, the city still lacks an essential element of the West:

> The idea of an association which could unite the city into a corporate unit was missing [another instance of Weber’s sociology of absence] in Mecca. This furnished its characteristic difference from the ancient polis
and the early Medieval Italian commune. However, when all is said and
done, this Arabic condition—of course omitting specific Islamic traits or
replacing them by Christian counterparts—may be taken to typify the
period before the emergence of the urban community association. It is
also typical for occidental commercial sea cities (Weber 1958: 88).

That is to say, Mecca is an incomplete autonomous city as in the West.
It reached a stage comparable to early Italian Medieval cities, but can
not quite make it. It would be interesting to find out what Weber
would have made of ‘specific Islamic traits’ which he had to omit.

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