

Max Weber: political and theoretical positions and his relation to Marxism in the first stage of his production

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Abstract: Max Weber wrote his first works between 1889 and 1898. Although the German sociologist's well-known works were written between 1903 and 1920, it is in the production of that first period where this article focuses in. We are particularly interested in responding the following query: which was the theoretical relationship of Weber with Marx—or with the historical materialism in this first period of his career—and how is it related with the political positions of both “classics”?

Key words: Weber, Marx, historical materialism, political position, compared sociology.

Resumen: Max Weber redactó sus primeros trabajos entre 1889 y 1898. Si bien las obras más conocidas del sociólogo alemán fueron escritas entre 1903 y 1920, es en la producción de la primera etapa en donde ponemos la atención en este artículo. Particularmente nos interesa responder a la siguiente interrogante: ¿cuál fue la relación teórica de Weber con Marx o con el materialismo histórico en dicha fase de su carrera y cómo se vincula esto con las posiciones políticas de ambos clásicos?

Palabras clave: Weber, Marx, materialismo histórico, posición política, sociología comparada.

It is undeniable that the most spread and debated works by Weber derive from the two first decades of the XX century: from *The Protestant Ethics* and *the Spirit of Capitalism* and *Collected Essays on Education*, up to *Sociology of Religion*, *Political Writings* and his posthumous works such as *General Economic History* and *Economy and Society*. But Weber has also previous texts which are noteworthy.

This paper examines Weber's political and theoretical position in what we call "the first stage" or the "first period of his production"; and which corresponds to the last decade of the XIX century, approximately. This starting stage can be located with more precision between 1889, the year when he presented his doctorate thesis in law: *The History of Commercial Partnerships in the Middle Ages*, and 1897-1898, when the nervousness illness that would keep him away from intellectual work started.

With regard to his theoretical position, we are essentially interested in one aspect: his relation with Marxism. Several specialists in sociologic theory have sustained that Weber's work cannot be read without taking into account his obliged reference to Marx. From my point of view, it is considered that Weber established a constant debate with Marx's ghost, and the essential part of his work was configured in his controversy with him. In this article we aim to specifically analyze this theoretical link in the first phase of Weber's career.

Opposing interpretations

We shall now analyze what some authors say to this respect. Talcott Parsons, the most important referent of the structural functionalism, analyzes Weber's thinking in detail in his classic work from 1937, *The Structure of Social Action*. In it, he sustains that there is a first stage in the production of this author that is, in general, a period of unconnected historical studies, "with a very clear materialist bias". However, he argues, there is a new orientation in his work from a specific moment (approximately 1903). In it, one can read "an anti-Marxist interpretation" of the modern capitalism and its genesis.

Undoubtedly, the main point of departure of the descriptive treatment of Weber was Marx. Marx's writings and the expositions on capitalism and socialism which are dealt with in them caused a profound impression in Germany during Weber's period of formation, but, in general, it was the "historical" Marx and not the Marx that is more closely related to the classic economic theory. In many of the descriptive categories applied to the capitalist system, Weber concurs with Marx (Parsons, 1968: 626).

Parsons will later add that, despite certain agreements, the center of interest of both authors is different and that there are marked differences in perspective; and these are mentioned throughout his work. In the end of it he concluded that, in empirical terms, the main attack from Weber's work was directed towards Marx's historical materialism. He set a theory on the role of the value elements, in the context of a "voluntaristic theory of action".

A similar consideration in this first state and on the existing relation with materialism is found in Stanislaw Kozyr-Kowalski. The scholar of the Weber/Marx relation deduced the causes of the decadence of the antique culture from Weber's paper, and argues "[...] that until 1896 Weber found himself under the overwhelming influence of the historical materialism and that, even in an explicit way, he accepted the thesis that the changes in the economic base have a decisive importance for all the kinds of culture" (Kozyr-Kowalski, 1971: 247). According to this author, the long period of the critics from Weber to the Marxist theory started in 1904 with *The Protestant Ethic* and the *Spirit of Capitalism*.

However, if one performs further research, one finds that not all interpretations support this. Gerth and Mills, for instance, think that the evolution of Weber's thinking occurs in the opposite sense: from a starting posture of a simple rejection towards a more "complex" one. In his introduction to the *Essays in sociology*, they sustain that Weber opposed historical materialism in defense of the inexhaustible complexity of the causal pluralism, and that later on his political and intellectual relations with Marxism will change to become more complex.

Another perspective on the problem is that of Arthur Mitzman, who defines the theoretical relation in this first stag as more "accidental" than it will be in the years later to his personal crisis:

Even before his crisis, Weber had demonstrated the influence of Marx' ideas when he juxtaposed, in a style full of references to *Communist Manifesto*, the personal domination of the pre-capitalist social order to the government of impersonal class of the modern bourgeoisie. But this usage of Marx was almost accidental. Both Sombart and Tönnies demonstrated a much higher interest in said philosopher before the end of the century. However, after his crisis, a great part of Weber's work – from the *Protestant Ethic* up to the political analysis made during the war – was based on the critical examination of Marx's historical materialism (Mitzman, 1976:166).

In view of the variety of unequal responses regarding the relation between Weber and Marx in these first ten years, it is necessary to carefully and personally read Weber texts, in order to synchronically consider his thinking and his social and political activity in that specific moment of history.

Weber's social and political orientation

Weber's concern for the political issues has been frequently mentioned. It is parallel to his interest in the academia. From the most famous of his biographies — the one written by his wife years after his death— we can synthetically reconstruct his orientation in this period.

According to Marianne Weber, the point of departure of his political position was the national liberalism of his father to which he added new elements; in order to, later on, pass to a social liberalism, more “progressive” if one wants to call it that way. As Weber himself later on recognized, in his youth he voted for the conservatives, and he did so to the democrats some time later (Weber, 2003: 260).

Since 1886, Max made an association with a circle of economists, government employees and academic socialists who were interested in the social ideas, although they were “free from class aspirations”. They were social reformers, for whom the intervention of the State in social affairs was essential. Weber's approach to these tendencies moved him away from the liberal-national attitude of his father.

The political interests of the young man, born in Erfurt, were forged by the political-national ideals (Germany as a power), on the one hand, and the ideals of social responsibility and justice (an aspiration for the welfare

of farmers and workers) on the other. It was clear that the concern on the social questions was the only way to avoid the misfortunes associated to the advance of the modern industrialism.

Among the “chair socialists”, the following stand out: Lujo Brentano, Heinrich Herkner, Willhelm Roscher, Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner. These university professors did not accept the ideal of social harmony, which is a characteristic of the liberal economic thinking. Their proposal to the problems of industrialism, different to that of the socialists or Social Democrats, was to direct the economy by ethical ideals and to make the State regulate the contracts of employment. They opposed to free trade and fought in favor of improving the situation of the working class, despite recognizing the kinds of property and production that existed.

This group founded in 1873 the “Association of Social Politics”, with the objective of elaborating proposals of social policy that could be considered by the State. It boasted to have overcome the classes and parties, and promoted a social reform that would become a mid point between the instructions from Manchester’s *laissez-faire* and the revolutionary Marxism. Weber joined said association when it left the political action and was devoted to academic activities. Along with Sombart, Tönnies and Alfred Weber, he belonged to the “youth” generation of the association, which wondered about what attitude to take with regard to Marx’s work and which provided a different response to that of the older generation.

The young generation only accepted the importance of Marx’s work. They agreed that capitalism and the struggle between classes it created was a constituent of modern social relations. The older generation denied the concept of capitalism, except when they used it in the analysis of some economic problems of lesser importance. Therefore, the younger generation thought that such an analysis was, at best, superficial: modern society could only be understood based on a profound knowledge of Marx’s work (Beetham, 1979: 27).

in the early 90’s, Weber took part in the Evangelic-Social Congresses, in one of them, he presented an exam of that which was understood as the new “religion” of the workers: the materialist vision of history. They declared there that the most significant social task of the Church was to

overcome these ideas, and it was at the same time recognized that it was not possible to oppose, in the name of the Church, to the economic claims of the struggling workers who were headed by the social democracy.

Weber and his friend and leader of the Social Christian movement Friedrich Naumann had:

[...] a positive attitude towards the mechanization and industrialization as a *sine qua non* condition for a great power with an increasing population. They did not want to move back the wheels of history; they wanted, instead, to struggle against the defects of the modern capitalist system from within. On the other hand, they both considered the capitalist development of the great domains of the provinces to the east of Elbe River as a national and social disaster (Marianne Weber, 1995: 167).

Maintaining Germany as a great power was for them a duty and a requirement to provide the masses with a decent life. They wanted an “emperor with social awareness”.

Approximately one decade later, Weber declared himself an “economic nationalist” and described the political economy as a servant of the nation-State, that is, a servant of the power interests of the nation. In the same sense, he understood that the State was not a means to achieve social reform, but that social and political justice was necessary to safeguard the State.

He believed that only one class that could give preference to the political and economic interests of the Nation instead of its own could be able to govern, and this was not, in his opinion, the case of the working class, which lacked the national passion of the French.

In order to illustrate Weber’s class position, it is interesting to see the criticisms he makes to Naumann’s program on the foundation of a “national socialism”. This project of the dispossessed was deemed to fail, inasmuch as it was against the ascending classes. He wanted, in opposition to that, unity with the bourgeoisie, which had to be provided with more social consciousness.

At the moment of establishing a difference between labor and property, his program makes all ascending classes of the population which have already acquired a property, including the ascending strata of the working class natural, enemies of the national socialist movement. Only the faeces of the

population will then belong, economically, to this movement. This party of the weak will never be something. [...] This political confusion is owed to the fact that the opposition to the land owners that was contained in the first draft of the program was abandoned. The only question that remains is who to provide with support, to the bourgeoisie or to the agrarian feudal class. Given its actions against the bourgeois, the social democracy has only smoothed the way for the reaction. And chances are that the same mistake might take place here (Marianne Weber, 1995: 238).

The following lines from Marianne Weber's biography are probably the ones that best summarize the relation of the scholar with the different existent political position in Germany back then:

Weber shared with the liberal left the *democratic* ideals, but he yearned a great national political sense in them; in this regard, they were for him "Philistines". Weber shared the *individualist* attitude of the national liberals, and he also accepted their conception of industrial capitalism as the organizing strength that was necessary for the national economy. However, their lack of social and democratic convictions and of political social vision constituted, for Weber, an unbreakable barrier. What linked him to the conservative and Pan-Germanic circles was his national feeling, but they supported the economic policy of the agrarians at the expense of the German spirit and that of his German compatriots (Marianne Weber, 1995: 240).

Up to this point we have a perspective of the sociopolitical posture of our author in the first period of his career, which allow us to contextualize the analysis of his initial writings that will be tackled in the following section.

From the study of rural workers to Fribourg lesson: Nationalism, Pan-Germanism and social Darwinism

Between 1890 and 1892, the "Association of Social Politics" undertook an empirical investigation on the agricultural workers in Germany. Weber was in charge of evaluating and interpreting the questionnaires submitted by rural workers from the east of Elbe River. The conclusions of this work, *The Situation of Farm Workers in Germany East of Elbe River*, were firstly published in 1892, and they demonstrate Weber's nationalist position in the aforementioned direction.

One can summarize that the central concern of this writing is the fact that the advance of capitalism in the countryside over the old organization of labor had led to the marginalization of German labor force, given the fact that foreign workers were cheaper for the employer: they have a lower level of life and are employed temporarily, and with low salaries. Free workers from oriental farms are expelled by Russian and Polish immigration, a situation that leads above all, from Weber's point of view, to a "constant deterioration of Germanness".

According to this study, at the beginning, foreigners entered as seasonal workers, but, later on, some of them remained and occupied the lands of the Eastern border which the Germans had taken centuries ago from these villages. The context where the depopulation of the rural east occurs is the dissolution of the old agrarian collective system, in favor of large scale farms. The landowners accumulate land, replace the privileges and in-kind payments for their sharecropper with salaries, and start to be oriented towards the market. When they change from being a feudal patriarchal class to a trade entrepreneurial class, they destroy the old community of interests with their workers; in other words, they are not natural representatives of the interests of their people any longer.

Also, the patriarchal organization of agriculture, where employees were used to obey, was the basis of the military discipline and, therefore, therein lies the success of the German army. The great capitalist exploitation, on the contrary, exists at the expense of the level of alimentary consumption of the workers, at that of the nationality and the capacity of defense of the German territory.

This analysis – argues Weber – does not mean that the changes in the organization of the agricultural exploitation are the decisive factor or the most significant when studying the situation of the agricultural workers, but they have to be taken into account indeed.

Having said this, Weber introduces an explanation of psychological nature on the change that workers had from serfs to workpeople. The material of the questionnaires that allows recognizing the subjective position of the workers on the changes demonstrates there is a very stressed "individualist tendency" in them.

Individualism appears again incessantly as an essential trace of change. The domestics flee from familial exploitation (*Hauswirtschaft*) from the lord, the thresh worker who aspires to be liberated from his exploitation after his insertion into domination, the worker with a contract who relinquish a safer *Instellung* in favor of a much more miserable employment as a “freelance” day laborer, the owner of small landholder who starves before looking for an employment where he will be dependent. The uncountable workers who accept lands at any price from those who divide domains and spend their life in the ignominious dependence on usurer interest rates, only because that can provide them with the “autonomy” they desire, that is, the independence with regard to the bond of personal domination contained in any rural labor contract; the phenomenon is repeated everywhere. One cannot do anything against such elemental reactions. It is the powerful and purely psychological enchantment of freedom what is expressed here. It is essentially a great illusion but, it is known, man, and furthermore the agricultural worker “shall not live only on bread”. The aspirations of agricultural workers demonstrate us exactly that “earning their bread” is of secondary significance. They want, above all, to be the architects of their own happiness or disgrace. This characteristic of the modern world is the result of a psychological evolution of general kind and one on which we ourselves have experience [...] The changes in the psychological needs of men are almost bigger than the transformation of the material conditions and it would be scientifically unacceptable to ignore them. Any purely economic study– and, specifically one made on the problems in the agrarian organization – would not depict reality (Weber, 1995b: 165-166).

The difference between rural and industrial workers is that the former do not aspire to a socialist solution, but to an individual one. Those who do not pay attention to this difference – he states – have not had a look at the rural world.

Once the diagnosis has been made, the author that in later writings will constantly postulate the methodological ideal of the “evaluative neutrality” as supposition for any scientific undertaking on the cultural reality introduces his own evaluation. He judges this process of displacement of the national labor force as “harmful” from the economic and political point of view; this is so due to the loss that it supposes in terms of colonization, Germanity and capacity of defense of the uninhabited East.

He also urges the State to intervene using its power in the agricultural sphere. The State – he asserts – cannot disregard the social group (farm workers) that has provided the base for the German army. In view of the extremely complicated situation in the agricultural exploitations of the East, “the State must decide and take in its hands the evolution in course and shall lead it in a direction that corresponds to the national interest” (Weber, 1995b: 167).

As we will see several times, the German nation-state has for Weber a supreme value. The decisive criterion is the German power. The grandeur of Germany is the goal that conducts his thinking, and this orientation can be clearly seen in the early research made by Weber on agricultural affairs. The following paragraph from the biography written by Marianne is illustrative to that respect:

Weber contemplated all this process, on which he himself had shed light, from the severe viewpoint of a statesman. “I consider the farmer’s labor issue simply as one of a common political sense: I do not consider it an issue of knowing whether the workers of the farms are correct or incorrect, nor as a problem on how cheap labor shall be provided to landowners”. He felt that the agricultural policy shall not be determined by the interests of production, but by the interests of the State: the conservation of a dense, vigorous and loyal population as a reserve for the national armed forces and for the pacific defense of the borders on the east. Therefore, close the border again, do not let the farming lands be consumed by the great fiefs; colonize systematically (Marianne Weber, 1995: 162-163).

What we have to highlight after reading the *The Situation of Farm Workers in Germany East of Elbe River* is that Weber, at least in this research, postulates that the economic factor, mentioned by Marx and Engels as a determining one, is significant, but not “the most important” or the “decisive” to explain the situation of the rural workers. Against what for him was a unilateral materialist explanation, and therefore not enough, he mentions the intervention of *psychological* reasons, such as the eagerness or *instinct* for “freedom in order to give an account of the geographic displacement of the German farmers and their transformation from servants to workers. In view of the spiritual need for autonomy of the individual, the issue of subsistence becomes “secondary”.

Weber argues that any purely economic study would not be real. One cannot disregard, in his opinion, the non-economic causes that promote the historical processes, the ideal facts, that in certain cases are even preponderant.

Without stating it overtly, Weber is undeniably questioning Marxism at this point; although by no means this must be understood as the axis or determining factor of the research. The concern in this work is, more than theoretical, political, and it is based on Weber's nationalism and Pan-Germanic positions.

Lastly, inasmuch as the classical Marxism insists on the need of a coalition between farmers and the proletariat as condition for a more or less stable socialist victory¹, an alliance that would be possible given their common condition of exploited classes, in this article Weber attempts to highlight the distance that exists between the aspirations or interests of both in Germany. As we have seen, the problem of the rural worker is for Weber one with regard to the access to an independent existence. "This is a rural problem and its distinction from the labor (industrial), is the fact that the rural people strongly aspire to an individual solution and not to a socialist" (Weber, 1995b: 165-166). Those who don't see this is because they don't know anything about the rural world – he declared sententiously.

As a conclusion, in this text written between 1890 and 1892, and published in 1892, one can already identify a principle for a debate with Marx's theory.

As part of the fifth Evangelical Social Congress, held in 1894, Max Weber and his friend Paul Göhre joined forces to perform a new study on the situation of the workers of the countryside. The objective this time was not only to recognize their economic conditions, but also the intellectual,

¹ In his analysis of the defeat of June 1848, Marx says: "The French workers could not step forward at all, nor touch a single hair of the bourgeois regime, before the mass of the nation, set between the proletariat and the bourgeois, the farm workers and the small bourgeois risen against this regime, against the domination of the Capital, had not been obliged by the march of the revolution to unite to the proletariat as its vanguard" (1973: 56). And Engels in the introduction from 1895 sustains that even in France, where the conditions are much more favorable for an uprising strike than in Germany "[...] the socialists understand more and more that there cannot be a lasting victory for them, unless they win the great mass of the people, that is, the farmer workers" (1973: 24).

religious and moral ones, as well as their mutual effects. We allude here to this second study, less known, because according to Marianne Weber, it shows the limitations of the materialist conception of history:

From the points of view which Weber took to analyze his topic, the following is of interest: he used specific material to illustrate the limitations of the economic vision of history. [...] The decisive factor for the destinies and the general situation of the workers of the farms was not the general economic condition of their milieu, but the traditional social stratification. In the rural regions, it was not determined by the technical and economic conditions, but by the way in which the population had been grouped, by the distribution of the settlements and the lands, and by the legal aspects of the labor contract (Marianne Weber, 1995: 169).

Also in 1894, and in the context of the same concerns mentioned up to this point, Weber published a not very well known article on Argentina, entitled “Colonist’s economies in the Argentina”. The research which had been previously performed on the farms of Eastern Prussia, configured, as sustained by Ricardo Sidicaro, “the great problem, whose limits and secondary derivations must have provided the question that encouraged him to explore the case of Entre Ríos” (Sidicaro, 1995: 158).

This text on the colonists from Entre Ríos reports the compared advantages of the Argentinean agro in the world of cereal markets, and their higher competitiveness in comparison, for example, to those from the German East. In order to do so, he describes the well-known conditions of fertility of their lands and the nature of their organization or social structure with its corresponding “cultural level”. In this case it is worth mentioning that those fertility conditions had an influence from Weber’s point of view, but not a decisive one.

As a marginal note, it is interesting to mention that in the third volume of *Capital*, corrected and published by Engels in that same year (1894), the production of the Argentinean Pampas and their competence in the cereal markets of Europe is also mentioned, and in this case it is really attributed to the fertility of their lands.²

In his article, Weber writes that the agricultural companies of the Argentinean colonists suppose an extremely cheap procedure, given the fact that they are structured as an industry for a season that absorbs labor force during three or four months every year and which expels it once it is used without taking any responsibility or concern for their permanent support.

While thinking in Germany, he says: "In order to be able to compete with economies such as those described, we shall be able to descend and not to ascend in the nature of our social structure and in our cultural level, reaching the level of semi-barbarian people of low population density, such as Argentina" (Weber, 1995a: 180).

In order to produce as "cheap" as they do, workers in Germany shall forget the national cultural needs that are typical of civilized and sedentary people. They shall come to that typology of "barbarian nomads", and it is what has started to occur in the East with the entrance of the Polish immigrant workers. Therefore, if we previously saw that his proposal was to close the borders to stop Slavic immigration, in this case the diagnosis derives in the silent call to protect the national economy. This is done considering the theory of free world trade as a "utopia", inasmuch as there are not a universal State and an absolute equality of the cultural level of the humanity.

Once more, the interest on the national issue is present: the political objective of the defense of the German nation that passes through all these writings and that makes him question the internationalist thinking in regard to all its tendencies, among them the socialist.

² "But everything is perishable. The transoceanic lines of navigation and the Indian trains, north and South Americans managed to set great extensions of lands in conditions to compete in the cereal markets of Europe. From one side, to the North American grasslands and to the Argentinean pampas, the steppe that the nature itself had managed to make fertile lands for the plow, virgin lands that could provide during the year abundant crops with primitive methods and without the use of fertilizers. [...] A part from Europe's land remained definitely eliminated from the competence in the growth of cereals (F.E.)" (Marx, 1982b: 673-674).

[...] It is really bothersome to see that there exist controversy on facts that are obvious and undisputed. This occurs using an arrogance that is in fact only found in the specific dialect of a school of political economy which has yet to understand that the economic laws which it dogmatically believes in depend on the absolutely unreal condition of international cultural equality, it is the same mistake made by the internationalism in all its forms and the international socialism (Weber, 1995a: 183).

We shall bear in mind that Marx was precisely one of the founders of that labor association that personified the international nature of the movement and that aimed at putting into practice the appeal of 1848: “proletariat from all countries, unite!”. We speak of the I International or Socialist International, founded in London in 1864. Marx was the “soul” of the “International Association of Workers”, and wrote its Inaugural Manifest and the Provisional Statutes.

But in the article on Argentina we do not find more than that to illustrate the theoretical relation that we want to observe. In May 1895, having taken possession of the chair of Political Economy at the University of Fribourg, he delivered his inaugural lesson, which he published under the name of *The national State and The Political economy*. The author found here the opportunity to disclose his personal and “subjective” point of view on economic and political phenomena.

In this work, Weber again declared himself on the agrarian problems of the East and repeated his demands to the State. The general topic of the text is, in first place, the role that the racial and psychic differences play among the different nationalities in their economic struggle for their existence, and in second place, the role of the national State in this.

With regard to the province of the western Prussia, Weber wonders about the reason for the unequal capacity of adaptation to the economic and social conditions of life between Germans and Poles, considering that they had concurred for centuries in the same soil and in equal conditions. And he answers: such difference in the capacity of adaptation of both national groups is due to “their unequal racial physical and psychic characteristics”. This explains why the Polish perspective has gained space in the territories of the East, producing an “economic displacement”. “[...] The Slavic race obtains from victory *its more modest desires with regard to the level of life* – partly

in material nature and partly in the ideal – which nature has provided to it or which have been inculcated to it in the past” (Weber, 2003a: 24).

It is not a higher intelligence in the economic affairs or a superior capital what makes Polish farmers replace the Germans, in fact – he argues – it is the opposite. Poles suffer less from the fluctuations of the market because they are satisfied with producing to meet their own needs and have less interests with regard to the level of life.

It seems, hence, that we are witnessing a process of selection. Both nationalities settled long time ago in identical living conditions. The result has not been as the vulgar materialism imagined, that both nationalities have appropriated the same physical and psychic qualities, it has, instead, occurred that one of them is ceding to the other; that the one which has more capacity of adaptation to the true living, economic and social conditions is overlapping the other (Weber, 2003a: 26).

Weber introduces in this analysis the notion of “selection” as opposed to the materialist idea of a determination in the last instance of the historical processes by the material conditions of life. This notion, it must be said, is kept in his work to the extent that it is part of the “essential sociological concepts” of his great work called *Economy and Society* (1922).³ The author imagines the social scenery as a space of constant struggle of the man against the man (which has a signification that is very far from that of the Marxist concept of “struggle of classes”). In this struggle between individuals for existence, which generally occurs hidden behind an apparent “peace”, a process of social selection operates. Abiding by the terminology of social Darwinism, Weber explains that, in the case of Western Prussia, the different personal qualities, physical and psychic characteristics of both races explain the different personal qualities of adaptation and, therefore, the result of “social selection” in said hidden economic struggle. Thus, the outcome of the selection is not necessarily the triumph of the best: the German farmers

³ He defines there the selection as the latent struggle for existence (for the probabilities to live and survive) that takes place between individuals or kinds of individuals. Any typical struggle and competence and in mass – he adds later – take in the long term “to a ‘selection’ of those who possess to a greater extent the personal conditions that are necessary in average to win in the fight” (Weber, 1999: 31).

here “lose the game in comparison to an inferior race” – writes Weber, with a clearly racist vocabulary.

In regard to the question on what to do in view of the concerning situation of the East, Weber repeats the advice to the “nationalists” tending to maintain the Germanism of these territories, formulated years before. He firstly recommends to close the oriental border in order to “contain the Slavic flood”, and in second place the systematic purchase of land by the State directed to the colonization of German farmers in the property obtained and improved by the State.

Let us now advance on other problems treated in the text. The “anti-materialist” argumentation on the ideal reasons of the exodus of German day laborers, which was put forward in the research of 1892 on the workers from the East, is repeated almost in a textual way in *The National State and the Economic Policy*. The German day laborers emigrate neither out of reasons of *material* nature, nor by the nostalgia of the fun that a city provides, but they are “moved by a feeling of primitive idealism”. They are moved by one of the most basic instincts that nest in the human heart: the spell of the liberty – says Weber. “This is a phenomenon of psychology of masses”. The perspectives that the field provides are those of a proletariat existence, without any opportunity of independence, and only Polish temporary workers are able to submit to these conditions.

With regard to the aforementioned question on the political decision to close the borders, we discovered here another dispute with the thesis or presupposition (simplified and vulgarized) of the historical materialism: specifically with the thesis of the “correspondence” between the economic and political powers, or the remission from this to the other. Considering that immigration benefits the most prominent landowners, Weber argues: the border was closed to protect nationality during Bismarck’s government, despite the fact that he owned great extensions of land and was “class aware”. After his resignation, it was reopened by the enemy of the agricultural workers, according to the desires of the landowners. “[...] This demonstrates that not always does the ‘economic position of class’ decides the affairs of the political economy. What was decisive *here* was the fact that the steering wheel of the State passed from a strong hand to one that is less firm” (Weber, 2003a: 28).

In other words, what the author affirms is that it was not the *class interests*—as the economic vision of history would postulate, but *personality* aspects the ones that led the State policy *in this case*. As we have established somewhere else (Duek, 2007), the concern on the relation between the economic and political orders is a constant in Weber's reflection.

Some pages below, Weber warns us of the dangerous advance of the *economic point of view* in all the fields of social thinking (jurisprudence, history, political science), and points out that such an interpretation risks overestimating the significance of its own perspectives. In the context of this reasoning, and without having overtly pronounced Marx's name, he condemned the Marxist conception of political power.

We can say that classical Marxism (Marx, Engels) sets the basis of the State in the relations of class domination. It states the problem on who *exercises the political power* (that was expressed as *problem of "sovereignty" and of its origin*: the people, God or a combination of both?) and on the terms of its legitimization.

In the text we are analyzing, Weber's vision is contrary to that representation. For him, the leading classes can and shall set the permanent interests of the power of the nation on any other consideration. The State is the carrier of the *interests of the nation*. The national State is the earthly organization of the power of the nation, and the *reason of State* constitutes the criterion of the utmost value.

According to Weber, the modern *overestimation of the economic aspect* is wrong as it assumes that "[...] the spirit of political solidarity will succumb to the divergent economic interests of the moment, and that even *on its own* it would be a reflection of the economic substratum that is a characteristic of those changing interests. To a certain extent, that is something which only occurs in times of a radical social change" (Weber, 2003a: 35).

It is true – he argues – that the disposition for the specifically political interests does not live in general in the *mass* of the nation, occupied in the struggle to subsist. But

at certain moments of exception, in the case of war, the masses also become aware of the significance of national power; then, it becomes clear that the national State is based on deep psychological bases, even in the economically oppressed layers of the nation, and that by no means is

it only a “superstructure”, as that of the organization of the economically dominant classes. What occurs is that, in normal times said political instinct is immersed into the great mass below the threshold of consciousness. In such a situation, the specific function of the leading economic and political classes as bearers of the political awareness is the only reason that justifies their existence in a political way (Weber, 2003a: 36).

To sum up, not only does Weber refute at a theoretical level the Marxist arguments of the infrastructure/superstructure (the State as legal and political superstructure that is founded on the economic base), but he also justifies the political leadership of the ruling economic classes for certain circumstances, inasmuch as they are the ones with more political “maturity”.

According to Juan Carlos Portantiero, the main criticism from Weber to the Marxist paradigm is linked with this. At the moment when Marxism privileges the conflict between classes over the rest of the social conflicts it impoverishes, for Weber, the possibility of knowledge on the complex articulation of the society. Its historical process, in contrast, would advance from the political to the economic.

When analyzing *The national State and the Economic Policy*, Portantiero pays specific attention to the controversial relation of the author with the Marxist approach. Weber states:

[...] had assimilated the lesson provided by the “late” capitalist development of Germany in the relation between the economy and the State. The reflection on that *top-to-bottom revolution* embodied in the “iron chancellor” (“the German state has not been founded by the autonomous strength of the bourgeoisie”) will move him away from theoretical conceptions considered as sociocentric — Marxism and Liberalism — and, in a certain way, to intervene this schema, but not in order to found a metaphysics of the State but a sociology of it. The Marxism of the II International and liberalism were unable, according to Weber’s perception, of accounting for the situations of the kind of the German capitalist expansion of the end of the century: they had been thought for (and in) previous moments: the typical English history of the late XVIII century and the first half of the XIX. The distinction between the economic and political power, with the empirical possibility of providing supremacy to the latter – which will be an essential key in his sociology – is based on the evaluation of the German “case” that, on the other hand, was going to be more a rule than an exception in the processes of capitalist development (Portantiero, 1982: 433).

We shall also point out that in the opening lesson, Weber was very explicit with regard to his political stance, which one shall not disregard. If one of our suppositions is that maybe there is at the same time a theoretical debate and a political dispute between Weber and Marx, and that the conceptual differences between both classics are *ultimately* determined by their political disagreements,⁴ we believe that this can be clearly seen in the publication from 1895.

In fact, Weber here recognizes himself as a member of the bourgeois classes: “I feel as one and I have been educated in its principles and ideals”. And although he admits that many sectors of the bourgeois in Germany are not yet completely mature to constitute a political leading class of the nation, this, the first of his “political writings”, is a call to the bourgeois to become the bearer of the national interests.

The German labor class – he reasons out – is neither politically mature nor is it in the path to become one. The whole rancor from Weber against socialdemocracy is expressed in this paragraph:

It is immensely less mature in political terms than what it wants to make believe to a clique of newspaper editors, who would like to win the monopoly of their leadership. In the circles of these outstanding bourgeois one is very keen on playing with reminiscences from a hundred years ago, what has been achieved, in fact, is that here and there some fearful spirits see in them the spiritual descendants of the men from the French convention. The only thing is that they are infinitely more inoffensive than they believe; not even the minimal spark from that Catilinian energy of the action appears in them, nor, to tell the truth, the weak gentle breeze of the impetuous *national* passion that could be inhaled in that convention. Poor political puppets, is what they are: they lack the strong instinct of power that any class that feels to be called to perform political leadership has to have [...]. And because there is nothing more harmful for a great nation than being governed by miserable men politically uneducated and because the German proletariat has not lost this character yet, that is why we are their political adversaries (Weber, 2003a: 39-40).

⁴ We highlight the expression “ultimately” considering that that determination is far from being mechanic, immediate or direct. In other words, we do not expect that the theoretical positions are a mere direct consequence of the political postures, but neither do we believe that they are absolutely autonomous. From our point of view, the theoretical practice has “relative autonomy” with regard to the other social practices.

Then, while Marx writes “from the point of view of the proletariat”⁵ Weber declares himself – few times as explicitly as here, it is true – political adversary of this class. This difference in the political position of the classics is from our perspective, the point of departure wherefrom theoretical discrepancies shall and may be understood, either philosophical, sociological, economical or historical.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that in *The national State and the economic policy* the author expressed for first time, however succinctly, his convictions on the problems of the philosophy of science, anticipating his later thesis on the “valorative neutrality”.

In this discourse, Weber criticizes the idea of the economists mentioning that political economy as a science can obtain valorative criteria to guide the political practice *from itself*. For him, it is not possible to obtain value judgments on the economic facts departing from economic knowledge about its subject of study. On the contrary, political economy is for him more a “servant of politics”. Weber clarifies that the idea is not to resign to the evaluation of the economic facts, a fact that is very necessary, but to insist in the need that the researcher controls the value judgments, to know consciously what evaluations are being introduced and to recognize the personal and subjective nature of the opinions provided.

In the context of this reasoning, Weber criticizes the eudaimonistic position of the pioneers of the political economy, who considered that the indisputable and unique goal of this science was the improvement of the “balance of pleasure”, which required to improve the production of goods to increase wealth. Thus, he considered the technical-economic problem of production as the most important value criterion of the political economy – or at least he had an identity with it – the technical-economic problem of production. But not only does he direct his criticism to the old representatives of political economy. He also questions those who recognize in political economy a discipline that shall be concerned about

⁵ In *Capital*, and also in other previous works, Marx faced the criticism to the “bourgeois” economy, a criticism which represents – according to his words – the class that has as historical mission to disrupt the kind of capitalist production and finally abolish classes: the proletariat (see the Epilogue to the second edition of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol I).

the distribution of goods, introducing values from the point of view of “social justice”.

That is how Marianne Weber explains the context in which these positions were registered and to which Weber declared himself against:

The orientation within the social sciences was the following by then: the “great elderly people”, especially the English founders of the political economy, considered that an increase of pleasure, specially through an increase of wealth – that is, a promotion of the economic production of goods, at any price – was the evident goal. Afterwards, when – under the protection of these ideals – the “free game of forces” gave rise to a implacable purchasing eagerness, and it became clear the over exploitation of those who did not have anything. Most of the young scholars adopted a different approach. As we have seen, they became “socialist scholars” [Kathedersozialisten]. It was considered then that the goal of the political economy was a fair distribution of the goods, that is, the fulfillment of a moral obligation (Marianne Weber, 1995: 307-308).

Lastly, through a careful reading we discovered that when Weber emphasizes the impossibility of the scientific knowledge of providing criteria for the actions, his target is also the Marxist economic theory (either from Marx particularly or that of the Marxists in general).

The fact is that Marx and Engels, far from aiming at a neutral science, had elaborated their concepts from a perspective of class. In other words, they have acted in their practical theory as organic intellectuals of the labor class. As Althusser highlights, “[...] Marx’ theoretical thinking is formed from the political thinking, and his political thinking from his action, his political struggle; all that at the service of the international labor struggle of classes. We can already say it with clarity: in his theoretical works, as in his political combats, *Marx has never abandoned, from its first compromises from 1843, the field of the labor struggle of classes*” (Althusser, 2003: 47).

Marx thinking has been created at the interior of the existent labor movement, and his analysis of capitalism is intrinsically united to his political project. A large part of his work constitutes a “critic of the political economy”. A critic that is inseparable from a point of view of class (proletariat), a critic directed to fight against the “bourgeois” political economy and at the same time the capitalism as a kind of production based

on the exploitation of a class by another. This is exactly what disturbs Weber: a political economy that aspires to be scientific cannot be guided by ideals on kinds of production (communist *versus* capitalist) nor can it attempt to objectively support the political course to follow.

The ideals that we insert are also in the object of our science and are not something specifically inherent to it or from its own elaboration, but they are old general types of human ideals. Only someone who sets its basis in the purely Platonic technological interest, or someone who, on the contrary, starts its projects on the current interests of a specific class, be it dominant or dominated, may it want to extract from said same object a criterion for its evaluation (Weber, 2003a: 33).

To sum up, Weber's stance is that political economy does not have to be directed by eudaimonistic ideals (happiness as the supreme good) nor by ethical principles (justice), nor by interests of class which come from judgments in favor or against certain kinds of production (the case of Marxism). All of this would imply the introduction of the personal practical evaluations in the empirical research. However, Weber accepts a single normative criterion: the political criterion in the adoption of "national" ideals.

The idea is not – he thinks – to analyze the German economic development from above, from the height of the great German States, and become thus a defender of them, nor to make it from below, from the point of view of the classes in ascent. When Abellán interprets Weber, he mentions:

The same mistake is being made in both cases; one is going beyond that which science allows. In both cases, historians analyze the economic phenomena with criteria and values that are related to the meaning that said phenomena have for the State or for a social class in ascent, and tend to consider economically good or better everything which favors any of the two agents that are mentioned [...]. The question underlying Weber's criticism is if science can establish or determine values, criteria of performance, with objective nature, if one can determine that some values are better than others or if a specific political option is better or more valuable than another. For Weber, already from that Lesson of 1895, science cannot provide objective values; it cannot establish from itself that some values are better than others (Abellán, 1991: 21-22).

As a conclusion, Weber's reflection gives rise to challenge the "scientific" nature of the economic developments from Marx, or, at least, to highlight the misunderstanding of the Marxist desire of serving through the theoretical (economic) research to the political struggle.

In fact, as Engels writes in 1886:

Capital has been called sometimes, in the continent, 'the Bible of the working class'. No one knowing a bit of the labor movement would deny that the expressed conditions in this work become every day, more and more, the essential principles of the great movement of the working class, not only in Germany and Switzerland, but also in France, Holland, Belgium, North America and even in Italy and Spain, and that the working class recognizes everywhere and increasingly the most accurate expression of their situation and their aspirations in the conclusions of this book." (Engels, 1982: XXXII).

This fusion (or "confusion") of theoretical, practical, scientific and political interests, is what Weber is not willing to accept.

Let us now analyze some ideas of the work called "The Social Causes of the Decline of Ancient Civilization", which we know was published in 1896 in the *The Truth** newspaper. It is a conspicuous historical article to which scarce attention has been given in the secondary literature, but which is of special interest given the fact that it has been said that it is "a noticeable work with influences from the Marxist methodology" (Pegoraro, 1999: 2).

In his analysis of the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire, Weber refutes all the explanatory hypothesis of the contemporary historiography. He sustains that Roma did not fall due to the invasion of the barbarians and to their numerical superiority, nor was the Fall due to the incapability or errors of political leaders. The decline of this culture was not attributable to its political system, to its despotism, to the immorality and prodigal way of life of the highest social circles. "Other more important process than the guilt of individuals" – says the author – were the causes of the decline and fall of the empire.

Such phenomenon is neither attributable to the disintegration of the traditional family nor to the "degeneration of the ancient race", that

* Translation of the name that appears in the original version (*La Verdad*), no further reference is made in the text.T.N.

would be, according to certain “Darwinist” hypothesis, the result of the natural selection practiced in the army recruitment and that condemned the strongest to celibacy. Once those explanations have been dismissed, Weber considers that the secret of the collapse of the Roman Empire can be found in their economic system or, in more extensive terms, in the peculiarities of the *social structure* of old days. According to Weber, “[...] any cycle of their cultural evolution is strictly determined by them (Weber, 2000: 108-109).

The ancient culture – he sustains – is a culture of slaves. Along with the free work of the city, there is servile work in the countryside, and this kind of work unceasingly increases in the antiquity, given the fact that only the work of the slaves allows landowners to produce more than what is necessary for them to meet their needs, that is, to produce for the market. “Thus, the owner of slaves has become the economic support of the antique culture, and the organization of the labor of the slaves constitutes the essential infrastructure of Roman society, and, consequently, we have to obtain more details about its social nature” (Weber, 2000: 112).

Its market economy depended on large agriculture provided by slave labor force, which allowed the major landowners to obtain revenues, live in the city and engage in politics. However, in order for this system to work, the whip was a condition: producers had to be submitted to military discipline, which could only be guaranteed through the institution of the “slave barracks”, which not only deprived workers from property, but also from family. But given the fact that this kind of confinement life prevented the natural increase of the slave population, the question became how to meet the demand for new hand labor force? The only way was the regular afflux of men for the slave market. When Rome was not able to successfully finance the wars of annexation, and therefore to obtain slaves, its economic structure experienced considerable changes which explain the essential in the decline of the empire. In production, the role of slaves became less important in favor of that of the farmers who, despite having property and family, were submitted to new kinds of servitude.

[...] The settler had already become a servant who cultivated the land conferred by the landowner and he was obliged to specific benefits in compensation. This economic change in the situation of the settler immediately produced

a legal appendix, which also expressed, formally, the same kind of remark on the settler considering them as labor force assigned to the domain of the landowner: the subjection to the land (Weber, 2000: 115).

When slave labor lost importance it became impossible to produce a surplus to be sold. The transformation then resulted in the decline of the market economy of the Roman cities and in the increasing importance of a self-sufficient natural company. The fall of the Roman Empire had as main cause – according to the analysis of the young Weber – the decomposition of the commercial economy based on slave labor force and its replacement by a natural economy with the hand of servile labor, where the satisfaction of the needs of the landowner through labor was the most predominant goal.

The politics of the elder empire forced it to charge taxes in money, mainly in order to keep professional bureaucracy and the permanent exercise that any great State requires within its borders. But those measures clashed with the economic incapacity of the owners – who produced only to meet their own needs – to contribute with money deliveries.

The fall of the Empire was the forced political consequence of the gradual disappearance of trade and the resulting growth of the natural economy. And, in essence, it only meant the dismantlement of that administrative apparatus and, therefore, of the political superstructure of a regime of economy and money, that did not match with the economic infrastructure which had its existence in a regime of natural economy (Weber, 2000: 120).

This is the reasoning of the author. We have to admit that the general approach of the essay, and more precisely the use of certain terms by Weber, cannot but be surprising to us in the light of other works. Although there is not any allusion to Marx or to Marxist authors, we verified that the kind of analysis that is present here is close to that of these authors more than that performed by Weber in any of other of his works. In its few pages, the work provides us with a much more “structural” perspective than the one he will propose years later for sociology with its “individualist *method*”. Far from approaching to the problem from the understanding of the action of the individuals, the author rejected the individualist hypothesis and dug in the characteristics of the “social structure”. It alludes to “processes”: “more important processes than the guilt of the individuals”.

Likewise, it is in the *economic* conditions where Weber finds the key of the *cultural* evolution of the antique civilization. Slave work – he argues – is the “necessary infrastructure” of Roman society; that is why its decline is the basis of the decline of the Empire. The political superstructure is modified, according to his analysis, when the economic infrastructure does it. The *juridical* relations change as a result of the economic change.

The use of the concepts of infra and superstructure is interesting, even without any quotation marks; above all taking into account the arguments that he found in 1895 (*The national State and the economic policy*), one year before this work was published and in which Weber had elaborated against the consideration of politics as a “superstructure”.

This difference of position in these texts that are so close in time make us think that probably “The Social Causes of the Decline of Ancient Civilization” were not written by Weber in 1896, at the time of its edition, but some years before. Although we have not confirmed this supposition, we have a piece of information provided by Giddens, according to it, this starting historical writing would be previous to the publishing of the work on the condition of the farmers at the east of the Elbe, 1892 (Giddens, 1994: 208).

Weber’s explanation on “The decline and fall of the principate” by causes that are essentially economic and not political, military, moral or psychological, is what makes Stanislaw Kozyr-Kowalski estimate that up to the moment of this writing Weber was “under the overwhelming influence of historical materialism” and that he openly accepted the thesis of the determination of the kinds of culture by the economic conditions. Nonetheless – Kozyr-Kowalski adds– he understood this thesis in a very similar way as the scholars of German Social Democracy did. Consequently, most of the objections that Weber stated later on the Marxist theory are also appropriate for his own analysis on the collapse of the Roman civilization.

On the other hand, Anthony Giddens also warns about the proximity between Weber’s thinking in this text and Marx’s ideas. The explanation provided by Weber on the Roman decadence – he suggests – “[...] has a lot in common with the succinct description that Marx had outlined about the same events” (Giddens, 1994: 208). But, far from speaking as Kozyr-Kowalski in terms of a heavy “influence”, Giddens mentions that Weber

came to this result without having read Marx's work, whose most important parts explain the disintegration of the Roman empire: the *Grundrisse*. Also, Giddens considers that from his first works, there is in Weber a conviction that all kinds of rough economic determinisms shall be rejected.

Conclusions

Having made this general analysis on the orientation of Weber's work in this first stage of his production (1889 to 1898) and on the aspects of his biography and historical context that help us understand his political positions, we have the chance to answer some questions: is Parsons affirmation that the first studies have a "very clear materialist bias"? Can we sustain with Kowalski that until 1896 Weber was under the "overwhelming influence of historical materialism"? Or, in the opposite direction, do we coincide with Gerth and Mills on that at the beginning of the 90's Weber was opposed to the historical materialism from a posture of simple rejection?

In other words, with the elements that we have and that we have exposed in these pages, how can we accurately characterize the relation of Weber and the author of the *Communist manifesto* in this period?

The only text where we notice a similarity with the kind of materialist reading of history is the short article "The Social Causes of the Decline of Ancient Civilization" for which we ignore the exact date of edition, but we consider that it is previous to the rest of the works that have been analyzed. In its paragraphs, key concepts are used acritically on the Marxist theory, and they are repeatedly challenged in the rest of his work. But apart from this atypical text, we do not perceive in Weber's early production any strong influence from materialism. In fact it is the opposite.

Already in *The Situation of Farm Workers in Germany East of the Elbe River*, published in 1892, Weber starts, in a manner of speaking, his polemic dialogue with Marx, when he disdains what he defines as the a "materialist unilateral" point of view in the explanation of the displacement of the German day laborers. In opposition to that, he stresses the causal imputation of the phenomenon in a psychological motive: the "freedom instinct".

Two years later, in the new study on the situation of the workers in the fields mentioned by his wife, the author uses empirical material to "illustrate the limitations of the economic vision of history", according to

the expression used by Marianne. In that same year, in *Colonist's economies in the Argentina*, he criticizes the internationalism in all its forms, including the socialist internationalism.

Finally, *The national State* and the political economy represents the text of this phase in which the debate with Marx acquires larger dimensions. Weber here insists on the ideal reasons for the exodus of the farmers, and presents history as a struggle between individuals in which the result depends on the physical and psychic qualities of the races (“social selection”). With this, he creates a clear distance from historical materialism. He states objections to the “overestimation” of the economic aspect that is a characteristic of said trend and refutes in the same way the conception of the State as a form of organization of the dominant classes, that is, as a “superstructure”. Lastly, he introduces an “epistemological” debate stating the inability of scientific research to provide the criteria or ideals for the action by itself, alluding (among others) to the “Marxist political economy”, which is directed by the interests of the dominated class and attempts to support in an objective way the political practice.

We must take into account, lastly, that Weber’s political positions are liberal and essentially nationalist, rooted in the desire to see Germany become a great power.⁶ He himself recognizes in one of the texts that he

⁶ Based on certain reflections made by Weber on the German reality, some authors have even used the term “imperialist” to classify his orientation. Gerth and Mills, for instance, assert that: “[...] By the mid-90’s, Weber was an imperialist, he defended the interests of the power of the national state with definitive value and used the vocabulary of the social Darwinism” (Gerth and Mills, 1972: 48). Max Weber expressed himself several times in favor of an energetic policy of a world power on the side of Germany. In 1897, as part of the first naval German project, he said: “Only the lack of absolute political vision and the naïve optimism do not recognize that the inevitable expansionist political-commercial tendencies of the civilized bourgeois people, lead, after a period of competence that is apparently peaceful, again to the dilemma in which only force decides the degree of participation of each nation in the control of the land and with also the range of action of its population, specially of its labor class” (Quoted in Mommsen, 1973: 13). In fact, it was one of the favorite arguments of the time to associate the level of life of the working masses with the success or failure of the expansionist policy. Wolfgang Mommsen, a learned person, has called this a “socialist” variant of the imperialism or “progressive imperialism”: it was considered that the imperialism offered the German bourgeois the possibility of satisfying the aspirations of the labor class avoiding internal conflicts.

is a political adversary of the proletariat class, a class to which Marx, on the contrary, wanted to represent.

As a summary, we conclude that there is already in this first stage a recurrent reference to Marx's ideas and a polemic (above all towards the end) with this great thinker, however in general not in an absolutely explicit way.

In order to achieve this result – we shall mention –, it has been necessary to examine the set of works available and not only isolated reflections from random writings, this, in turn, could lead the reader to rushed and not sufficiently grounded conclusions. Our purpose is to collect, through the use of different texts, the general sense of the intellectual link that is of interest for us.

The disparity of opinions of the aforementioned commentators with regard to the nature of the relationship that Weber established with Marx in his starting phase can be partly due to the fact that they have a different work in mind, and each of them formulates his own assertions with regard to it. Thus, when Parsons refers to Weber's concern in his first studies by the "material" factors, he mentions his doctorate thesis and the *Agrarian Conditions in Antiquity*; Kozyr-Kowalski bases his reflection on "The Social Causes of the Decline of Ancient Civilization"; whereas Gerth and Mills when highlighting Weber's opposition to the historical materialism thinking of the work on the *Farm Workers in the east of the Elbe River* and in *The national State and the economic policy*.

We shall clarify that in order to say that one can identify in this phase of Weber's production certain controversy with Marxism does not imply to sustain that this is the structuring nucleus of the early Weberian thinking.

As Giddens states:

It would be an immense simplification of the intellectual milieu in which Weber wrote to suppose that these opinions were developed in his thinking simply within the context of an encounter with Marxism. When he wrote his first works, Weber took as point of departure the contemporary problems that prevailed in the main trend of the jurisprudence and economic history of Germany. The interest that Weber soon demonstrated in Rome reflects the controversy of his time on the causes of the Roman economic decadence. His research on the farm workers of eastern Germany is part of the large study carried out by the members of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, whose origin is in

the concern on the problems that are significant for the political practice [...]. However, one shall recognize that the conclusions to which he came in these first studies directed more and more his interest toward the topics that set him in direct relation with the fields where Marxist thinking was concentrated: specifically, the particular characteristics of the modern capitalism and the conditions that rule its creation and development (Giddens, 1994: 211-212).

Lastly, and although it was the objective of this short article, we shall point out that the controversy of Weber with Marxism is not exclusive of this stage, but, as we have mentioned in other works (Duek, 2007), the usual “dialogue” with Marx has a constant presence in the Weberian reflection, passing throughout all his production, from the study of farm workers in 1892 until the course on economic history in the last year of his life:

His critical relation and of polemic with Marx and Engels’ thinking is early demonstrated in the writings of his youth and is repeated in the rest of the phases. Consequently, it is not valid to propose strong periods on Weber’s work according to this attitude, in the sense that, for example, it is not possible to identify a period of materialist inclination and another that is antimaterialist, or phases of interest in Marxism and phases of indifference, etc. It is only possible to set marks of differences in intensity. The theoretical dispute with Marx reaches its peak between 1904 and 1907, specifically with the writing on *The cognitive “objectivity” of the social science, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and The “surmounting” of the materialist conception of history* by R. Stammler, whereas the political confrontation with the Marxist socialists is more intense in the political writings from 1917 to 1919 (Duek, 2007: 253).

To conclude, we cannot but point out that, far from demonstrating a profound knowledge on Marx’s work,⁷ Weber’s debate is directed to certain essential and spread ideas of Marxist thinking, as in the case of his materialist interpretation of society and history, the figure of infrastructure

⁷ Some Marx’ and Engels’ works were published after Weber’s death (*Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of State, Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, The German Ideology, A Critique of Political Economy*). But apart from this fact, that obviously determine the partial or fragmented knowledge of the whole production of Marx and Engels, from the writings that Weber could have known, in his work he only mentions explicitly *The Communist Manifesto, The Misery of Philosophy, The Capital and The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. It is even possible to say that the knowledge of these is

and the superstructure, the role of the struggle of classes in the historical development or the expectations towards a socialist society. Likewise, despite having Marxism as a constant intellectual interlocutor, Weber interprets some of his thesis in a kind of simplified way or without fully understanding the complexity of this thinking.

Unlike the readings of some interpreters, our examination of the set of Weber's production argues that it is not that Weber rejects the vulgar version of the Marxism that was common at the time of the turn of the century, to recover the original formulation and save it from distortion, but mainly, it does not differentiate between both approaches and treats them in an undifferentiated way. Sometimes, it is Weber's reading on the Marxist thinking, above all on his thesis on the economic determination "as a last resort", which results mechanical or simple, but neither Marx nor Engels, as their correspondence demonstrates, would accept said dogmatic interpretation of the thesis of historical materialism.

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unequal. If from the conference on *The Socialism* (Weber, 2003c) one deducts that Weber made a careful reading of the Manifesto, we cannot assure the same with regard to *The Capital*, the work with more theoretical range from Marx.

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