

A seminar-workshop of the Max Weber study group poses a Weberian diagnosis on the current situation of the press and journalism.

The seminar, organised on 3 May at the University of Manchester, was the second in a series of seminar-workshops seeking to ‘think our present’ with Max Weber. The first event, organised at the University of Salford last 7 December, had addressed the question of the university today and the 3rd one, on financial markets, will be organised at the University of York in the Spring of 2014. The series is meant both for Weberians and non-Weberians, academics and students.

Max Weber’s lifelong interest in the press and journalism (he was himself a prolific newspaper contributor) connected with a major remit he saw for the ‘social and cultural sciences’ – namely ‘the historical and theoretical knowledge of the general cultural significance of capitalist development’. He had therefore no doubt, in proposing in 1910 a work programme to the newly founded German Society for Sociology, to outline a survey of the press as its first task. The planned survey asked questions about the cultural significance of the press through the empirical analysis of press firms as capitalist undertakings. As Siegfried Weischenberg (University of Hamburg), who has just published the first comprehensive study of Weber and the media, highlighted, Weber proposed to ‘disenchant’ the media world and subject it to sober examination. Aeron Davis (Goldsmiths College) further noted that, although Weber’s concerns connected with those of what became the two dominant interpretive paradigms in media studies (the ‘liberal/professional’ paradigm of journalistic autonomy and the ‘critical Marxist/Market’ paradigm of how dominant elites exert control over the news production process), his main interest lied in the dynamics of press firms as organisations and the stringent rationalisation of news production. Weber linked this to the mass production of ‘indifference’ and thus to the further depoliticisation of modern life, as Gilles Bastin (Sciences Po Grenoble) observed. Weber analysed the positioning of journalists in such a production system and in society at large – and what possibilities this left for affirming a public vocation, a tension which he summed up, in Bastin’s analysis, in his view of the journalist as ‘pariah’: maybe again a very apt metaphor for today’s journalists, in an age of attack on all the institutional and professional gains of the 20th century. To Roger Dickinson (University of Leicester), conversely, it is Weber’s idea of ‘professional accomplishments’ which needs to be returned to, for rejuvenating a sociology of professions approach to journalism.

The papers presented at the seminar have been published in a special issue of *Max Weber Studies* (13.2) in December 2013.

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