

Walter L. Goldfrank

## 1. DEJA VOODOO ALL OVER AGAIN: REREADING THE CLASSICS

One of the first things I was taught as an undergraduate in 1957 was never to say I'd been reading this or that text, but rather that I'd been rereading it, in fact that chapter "x" or pages such-and-such were of particular interest. This usage of course would immediately serve to mark me as a learned and sophisticated person who had long since read everything worth reading and was merely refreshing his memory. A sociological friend tells me that he too was taught this, as a Berkeley graduate student, by Hanan Selvin in the early 1960s. Many years later, a few weeks ago to be exact, a colleague asked if I had read any new books on development he should look at, and I replied that no, not really, that mostly I found it more satisfying to reread the classics than to chase the ambulances that careen from crisis to crisis around the globe, and that chapter 20 of Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944) seemed especially useful to ponder these days.

It was when I was a graduate student in his care that Professor Hopkins greatly reinforced my rereading bent, which besides is much cheaper than buying books and much easier than frequenting libraries.

So today I want to revisit some classic pages he taught me to cite, though not from Polanyi, nor from Adam Smith on pin-making, nor yet from Lenin on the development of capitalism in Russia. Rather, I want to call your attention once more to pp. 248-51 of Durkheim's *Suicide* (1951) and pp. 66-69 of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (1950).

For several years now we sociologists have heard much talk about structure and agency as if they referred to different phenomena or to radically distinct aspects of the same thing. This distinction can make little sense to students of Hopkins, who always insisted that social structures are formed, reproduced, and reformed by the agency of actors. This lesson most often came my way with reference to nouns ending in "ation," like "situation," "organization," or "stratification." Such nouns, we were taught, refer at once to an outcome and to a process, to a structure and to the agents who create it, to a state or condition and to the human activities that constitute it in an ongoing way.

For example, you may find yourself in a sticky situation, as I did when I tried to compose this talk, but you realize when you think about it that some other people's actions situated you there, along with your own. You might find it convenient to talk about social organization, institutional arrangements and all that, but you'd better remember that someone is doing the organizing, instructing, and reminding the participants about where they belong, and sanctioning and rewarding them to keep them in line. And you wouldn't be a sociologist if you didn't discuss stratification, from the secret ranking discussed in a whisper around Fayerweather Hall at Columbia to the visible and contentious ones that are the stuff of politics. But if you think of stratification(s) merely as structure, you are neglecting the activities of appropriating and selling, or of evaluating and judging, the very activities that produce the classes or strata you are observing.

Rereading pp. 248-51 of Durkheim's *Suicide* is a good way to help yourself think about stratification. These pages occur in section II of the famous chapter about anomie where Durkheim is urging us to recognize that unregulated aspirations, or "passions" which are not "harmonized with the faculties" (p. 248), can drive individuals

to despair and that such regulation is an eminently social matter, rather than a biological or psychological one. Only society, he tells us, “can estimate the reward to be prospectively offered to every class of human, functionary in the name of the common interest” (p. 249). At this point, echoing Marx’s assertions about the historical and moral elements in the wage, Durkheim refers to the “dim perception” that “different social services” are valued differentially and that different “degree[s] of comfort” are hence “appropriate on the average to workers in each occupation” (p. 249). He asserts that social notions of appropriate levels of living for distinct social groups change over time, but that, within relatively fixed limits, individuals know what they’re supposed to want and therefore tend typically not to want more than they’re likely to get.

“Public opinion” (p. 250), that is, the acts of judging and discussing by (at least) those with a voice, constructs not only the “hierarchy of functions” (p. 250) or positions but also the rules of access to those positions. “Once it regarded birth as the almost exclusive principle of social classification; today it recognizes no other inherent inequality than hereditary fortune and merit ... but this discipline can be useful only if considered just by the peoples subject to it” (p. 251). Durkheim argues that, were inheritance abolished in the interest of greater equality, unequal talents and gifts would still produce inequality. More interesting: he suggests that, were equality of results demanded, it would take more social discipline to constrain the gifted to accept parity with the mediocre than it would, under a meritocracy, for the less accomplished to accept their lesser stations. (God, do the French elites dream of meritocracy!)

Most of this is well known as the basis of the so-called functional theory of stratification, and except for the observation that stratification is an ongoing activity, it’s not a point of view one would normally associate with Prof. Hopkins. But this last speculative point about the differential social coercion involved in maintaining meritocracy as opposed to equal outcomes had previously escaped my notice, despite many rereadings, as I’m sure it did yours. It is perhaps applicable to considerations of exit, voice, and disloyalty in the recently defunct

self-styled socialist regimes, perhaps also to how we might rethink the institutional arrangements through which we currently fund graduate students in our departments. In this way, rereading is an activity which can lead us to reevaluate and restratify, as well as to reconsider macrosociological issues.

My second rereading is from pp. 66-69, and most of you will have highlighted those pages in your copies of Weber's *Protestant Ethic*. These pages occur in the chapter entitled "The Spirit of Capitalism," and in them Weber gives a behavioral account of a hypothetical transformation of economic activity from traditionalistic to rationalized capitalism. He begins by describing the idyllic life of a putter-out in the middle of the eighteenth century: receiving cloth from his peasant producers, dealing via correspondence with his middlemen customers, working maybe five to six hours a day, earning moderately, getting along well with his competitors; "[a] long daily visit to the tavern, with often plenty to drink, and a congenial circle of friends, made life comfortable and leisurely" (p. 67). The spirit of all this was traditional: the way of life, the profit rate, the amount of work, the labor relations, "the circle of customers and the manner of attracting new ones" (p. 67).

"Now at some time this leisureliness was suddenly destroyed," Weber continues, "often without any change in the form of organization" such as factories or mechanization (p. 67). Rather, one young man merely went around the countryside, "carefully chose weavers for his employ, greatly increased the rigor of his supervision ... and thus turned them from peasants into laborers" (p. 67). He also changed his marketing strategy by cultivating "the final consumer," attending to details, personally soliciting customers, "adapt[ing] the product directly to their needs and wishes," and "introduc[ing] the principle of low prices and large turnover" (pp. 67-68). Given the competitive situation, those who would not imitate the new business methods went under, or at the least "were forced to curtail their consumption" (p. 68). Weber goes on to argue that the spirit of capitalism thus embodied "produces its own capital and monetary supplies as the means to its ends" and that "the first innovator" was generally met with "mistrust, ... hatred, above all ... moral indignation" (pp. 68-69).

What occurred to me on this rereading is the following. Whatever the connection between the alleged worldly asceticism of latter-day Calvinist Protestants and the introduction of rationalized business practices, the processual model Weber presents in these pages can be taken as paradigmatic for understanding changes in competitive situations of any kind. It has lately seemed to me that the sort of rationalized behavior Weber describes on pp. 66-69 has been occurring in the fields of health, and, ironically enough, leisure itself. In the status competition of the reasonably well-off, it is not enough to drink eight glasses of water a day, but it must be environmentally and minerally correct water. It is not enough to perform moderate exercise, but such exercise should improve and tone each muscle group. We are enjoined and cajoled to measure our body fat, to reduce our cholesterol, to monitor our intake of various substances. Worse yet, odious innovators in Weber's sense are leaving the realm of business and invading sports and leisure, so that one is embarrassed (if not quite run out of town) to play bad tennis or drink indifferent wine. What indeed is left for the elite amateur in a world of rational Weberian professionals?

Rereading the classics, I want to assert, is an activity that both befits the elite amateur and benefits the rational professional. Whether you seek to fortify your fading recollection of an enduring insight or to mine yet another nugget for yet another article in yet another journal so that you may advance in yet another competitive struggle, reopen the great books. You may yet get to say, "I can't believe I reread the whole thing."

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