

100th anniversary of the death of Max Weber: Commemoration from the Americas (Introduction)

JESSÉ SOUZA (UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO ABC (UFABC), SÃO PAULO)

Since the end of the 1990s, the so-called “left turn” has been gaining ground in Latin America, breaking with the “Washington Consensus” for two decades. On the basis of rising commodity prices and strong economic growth, social and labour policies were expanded and reshaped. While the West held on to its neo-liberal model and faced growing social and political distortions due to the financial crisis of 2008, poverty in Latin America was reduced by almost half. These achievements were accompanied by broad social mobilisation and in some cases complemented by new models of political participation. The region became more independent and gained international influence.

Since the middle of the last decade, this political trend has reversed. With the fall in commodity prices, the region has fallen into an economic crisis, which has quickly worsened the social situation and fuelled political conflicts. Progressive forces have lost legitimacy and influence. Social dismantling and discrimination against the weak and minorities have become a part of the political programme, and in some countries, such as Brazil, politicians on the extreme right have been elected into government.

Over the last two decades, Latin America has had a century’s opportunity to embark on a new path of development in politics and the economy. This option has been weakened, but has not yet failed. It is now necessary to learn from the mistakes of the last decade of progressive governance, for those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it.

To do so, it is necessary to analyse the internal factors for the recent failure of progressive governments that contributed to this social and political crisis. The left’s loss of confidence and legitimacy has hardly been analysed so far. What is particularly striking is the silence of

many intellectuals who, not so long ago, strongly supported progressive governments. For this reason, CALAS launched a dialogue platform in Guadalajara in early October 2019 entitled “The Latin American Left in the 21st Century: Looking Back to the Future.” There it became clear that the relationship between state and society plays a central role in the failure and must be discussed anew, but also that new projects committed to the political and social participation of all must be a part of this process .

One of the most influential state theorists to date is Max Weber. It is necessary to take into account that Max Weber, albeit from a “culturalist” reading that distorts his work, is the most important author for hegemonic social science in the Americas as a whole. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Max Weber’s death, the following volume presents various contributions that explore the significance his ideas continue to have for the analysis of the state, where it could be expanded or replaced and what significance Max Weber still has for Latin America today.

The set of texts presented here discuss Max Weber’s work at two different levels of abstraction. The texts by Wolfgang Schluchter, Hans-Jürgen Burchardt and Boike Rehbein are dedicated to discussing methodological and philosophical aspects that are considered essential for the understanding of Weber. In the case of Rehbein the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, in the case of Schluchter the relationship between ideal and material causality, and in Burchardt’s case the need to criticize the Weberian concept of the modern state.

The set of texts by Jessé Souza, Marcos Abrão and Francisco Colom refer, on the contrary, to Max Weber’s application to the concrete Latin American context. Souza questions the „culturalist“ use of Max Weber in

American social sciences in general, both in the USA and in Latin America. Abrão shows how this skewed reading was used politically in Brazil, while Colom focuses on the traditional use of the concept of patrimonialism for Latin America. The two levels of abstraction must be interconnected in order to produce a productive critique of the use of Max Weber in American sciences.

This volume shows that Weber is still the most important thinker both for the construction of “American exceptionalism,” and then for the construction of the idea of USA as the „promised land“ of the ascetic Protestant and his supposed moral superiority; and, on the other hand, for the construction of the idea of the Latin Americans as an inferior and corrupt people. The “culturalistic” approach in US and in Latin America social sciences is still today dominated by the figure and the ideas of Max Weber. Patrimonialism, ascetic Protestantism, modernity, tradition are all terms from Weber’s work which were interpreted by the Americans and Latin Americans in very peculiar ways.

It is precisely this context that profoundly affects the Americas as a whole that the present collection of texts aims to help to clarify. To understand how Weber was used and misused by American and Latin American thinkers and readers is to understand the very scheme of continental domination and the role of ideas in it. Weber is significant both for the legitimation of the USA as a homeland of ascetic Protestantism and freedom, and also for condemning Latin American countries to the backwardness of patrimonialism and tradition. Reviewing these paradigms, decentering methodology and theory is a central objective of CALAS.

Author’s biography

Jessé de Souza is a Brazilian sociologist, professor at the Federal University of ABC, with research in the areas of inequality, social stratification and critical theory. He is a fundamental reference of contemporary Brazilian social thought, having published on political sociology, peripheral modernization theory and inequalities in contemporary Brazil. Among his recent works, stand out *A Construção Social da Subcidadania* (2006); *A ralé brasileira: quem é e como vive* (2009); *Os batalhadores brasileiros: Nova classe média ou nova classe trabalhadora?* (2010, 2012). More recently he published *A elite do atraso: Da escravidão à Lava Jato* (2017).