Reflections on Max Weber's thoughts concerning ethnic groups*

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Abstract. The relevance of Max Weber for social anthropology has not yet been fully realized and his thoughts on ethnic groups have been neglected in German ethnology until fairly recently. It is shown that his thoughts on this topic are frequently distorted in the English translations. The importance of the concepts mores (Sitten), estates (Stände) and castes for Weber's views on ethnic groups is discussed. The role of migratory movements, the fluidity of ethnic boundaries, the idea of a chosen people and the terms kinship community, "Völkerschaft", tribe, people, and nation as Weber relates them to the concept ethnic group are briefly commented on. A final assessment of the value of Weber's thoughts on the characteristics, origin and development of ethnic groups will only be possible after the publication of the new critical edition of Economy and Society.


I am grateful to Frau Professor Dr. Ulla Johansen for perspicacious editorial advice as well as to Dr. Michael Rössler M. A. and Dr. Joachim Görlich M. A. for critical and incisive comments. I also thank the conveners of the conference on “Ethnicity, Identity and Nationalism in South Africa: Comparative Perspectives” at the Institute of Social and Economic Research of Rhodes University, Grahamstown, from 20-24 April 1993 for permitting me to present an earlier version of this paper. This is the reason for the allusions to South African problems. The conventional abbreviations for the works by Max Weber (i.e. WuG, GAzW, GAzSuS, GAzRS) have been added to the dates of publication of the editions consulted in the text and footnotes as well as in the bibliography to facilitate the location of references in alternative editions.

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There exists a myth in German ethnology that Max Weber exerted an important influence on the development of social anthropology. This can hardly be the case, however, as Radcliffe-Brown only became acquainted with his writings when he was at Rhodes University in Grahamstown during the mid-fifties. After reading parts of Economy and Society there after his retirement from Oxford Radcliffe-Brown is reported to have said: “It is really damned good stuff. ... What a pity nobody told me about him earlier.” (Andreski 1984: viii) Even though more than forty years have passed since Radcliffe-Brown’s sojourn in the Eastern Cape, Weber’s relevance for social anthropology, or ethnology for that matter, has not been fully realized even today, although he is frequently referred to obliquely in asides. Hardly ever are the accessible German texts quoted by social anthropologists, however, but only the frequently indifferent translations into English.

The main motive for dealing with Weber’s thoughts on “ethnic groups” in this paper is that in the discourse about the key concepts “ethnos” or “ethnic group” in German ethnology today Weber is assigned a subordinate role at most. It would be intriguing to try and explain why Weber was so rarely mentioned in connection with the basic concepts “ethnos” and “Volk” in German ethnology until fairly recently. Perhaps it is due to the fact that Johann Gottfried Herder’s “Volksgeist” (folk spirit) and Adolf Bastian’s “Elementargedanken” (elementary ideas) and “Völkergedanke” (folk idea) were so important for German ethnological discourse. It would be interesting, incidentally, to ask the question whether Weber influenced the use of the term “volk” as it was or still is used in the discipline of “volkekunde” in the Afrikaans speaking universities in South Africa as Herder and probably also Bastian definitely did. One should also remember that Herder was pivotal not only for the development of “Völkerkunde” in the German speaking countries of Europe, but also among such peoples as the Czechs as Václav Hubinger (1992) reminds us in a recent article. “Völkerkunde” or ethnology is still considered by many to be a “Geisteswissenschaft”, that is a discipline in the humanities or arts in contrast to a “Sozialwissenschaft” or social science. This question cannot be discussed here in detail, although I consider drawing a strict line between the humanities or arts on the one hand and the social sciences on the

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1 In the collection of articles edited by Schmied-Kowarzik and Stagl (1980), for instance, Max Weber is mentioned fairly frequently, but in connection with such problems as explaining and understanding (“Erklären” and “Verstehen”), rational action (“rationales Handeln”), ideal type and structure, not, however, in connection with such terms as “ethnos” or “ethnic unit” or “ethnogenesis” or “Volk”. Nor does Max Weber rate an article in the new edition of Hirschberg’s (1988) dictionary of ethnology, whereas Émile Durkheim does!

2 For the development of “volkekunde” in South Africa and its relationship to social anthropology see Richard J. Gordon and Andrew D. Spiegel (1993) and John Sharp (1981). To my mind there are disconcerting parallels to the relationship between “Völkerkunde” in Germany and social anthropology in Britain and its former dependencies between the two World Wars that are perceptible even today.
other or between an interpretative (Stellrecht 1993) and an analytical (Schweizer 1993) ethnology or anthropology for that matter to be shadow-boxing. And I have the hunch: Max Weber might have agreed (Kocka 1988)!

One should not exaggerate the neglect of Weber in German ethnology in respect of ethnic groups, however. Ernst Wilhelm Müller (1989) briefly discusses Weber's treatment of “ethnic phenomena” in a recent article, although to my mind he does not sufficiently emphasize some important points Weber makes concerning ethnic groups such as their intimate connection with castes, for instance, or the constitutive sentiments of honour and dignity. Georg Elwert (1989) refers to Weber in a footnote in connection with the term “nation”, but does not deal with his attempt at the systematization of terms in this respect. Burkhard Ganzer (1990) repeatedly refers to Weber in a recent article on the definition of the concept “ethnic group”. And finally, Arno Pascht (1995) in his thesis on the use of the concept “ethnicity” in the scientific and societal discourse in Germany today shows that Weber thought the term “ethnic group” might one day in fact become dispensable altogether.

This is a fairly recent development, however. Neither Richard Thurnwald (1931-1934) in his voluminous and somewhat bewildering as well as incoherent opus on human society nor Wilhelm Mühlmann (1939) in his article in the standard handbook on ethnology published before the Second World War mention Weber in their lists of authors quoted or referred to. It may be significant that after the final denouement of the German catastrophe in 1945 Wilhelm Mühlmann (1964, 1985) began to make use of Weber's ideas in connection with ethnic groups in his publications. The impression one gains, however, is that for some reason Weber did not have a great impact on the mainstream of German ethnological discourse as far as the basic concepts “ethnos” and “Volk” are concerned until fairly recently.

At first sight this may seem different in the English speaking world, where Weber is frequently quoted and sometimes even briefly discussed in the recent spate of argument about “ethnicity” in sociology, but somewhat less so in social and cultural anthropology. In sociology he is referred to not because his ideas are no longer useful. On the contrary! Quite a number of the points he made about the origin and characteristics of “ethnic groups” are still considered worthy of serious discussion. And Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1993: 1) actually proceeds from Weber’s definition of

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3 Max Weber is mentioned neither in the indices of the books edited by Elizabeth Tonkin, Maryon McDonald, and Malcolm Chapman (1989) and Leroy Vail (1989) nor in the one by Manning Nash (1989), and in those by James Kellas (1991) and Thomas Eriksen (1993) he is mentioned only obliquely. However, Antony D. Smith (1994) does mention him in connection with the significance of politics and ethnicity in a recent piece; compare also Ronald Cohen (1978) and Brackette F. Williams (1989: 415).

4 For this assertion cf. for instance Horowitz (1985: 21-4, 52-3, 136-7) and Calhoun (1993: 220, 222, 231). Michael Rössler has suggested that it might have been opportune to discuss what Emerich Francis (1965; 1976) has to say on Weber’s thoughts on ethnicity, but there is neither the time nor space to do so.
"nation" in his recent magisterial tour de force on the turmoil of ethnic conflicts afflicting our modern world, although he does not quote the original.

However, Weber is frequently alluded to only in passing when ethnic groups or phenomena subsumed under the term ethnicity are debated. His insights concerning ethnic groups are hardly ever seriously discussed in detail, but only piecemeal and not in the total context he placed them in. It is significant, for instance, that in an article entitled "Class, status and ethnicity as perceived by Johannesburg Africans" Philip Mayer (1957) mentions Weber in connection with the term "pariah", but does not seem aware of the fact that Weber discussed the term ethnic group in close connection with his treatment of "castes", that is, in intimate relation to the concept "pariah".5

Moreover, Weber is frequently misquoted and indifferent translations of his at times difficult texts are used without reference to the German original. In order to demonstrate to what kind of distortions of his thoughts such a procedure can lead to, the following ostensibly verbatim quotation should be compared to both the original translation and the actual German text:

"Weber suggested that 'ethnic membership (i. e. membership of a category displaying some common cultural trait) does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community (no matter how artificially organized) that inspires the belief in common ethnicity.' (1965: 306)." (Sharp 1988: 86)

The translation the author concerned is alluding to and has rendered as a sort of paraphrased quote reads in full as follows:

"The belief in tribal kinship, regardless of whether it has any objective foundation, can have important consequences especially for the formation of a political community. Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent - because of similarities of physical type (sic) or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration - in such a way that this belief is important for the continuation of non-kinship communal relationship, we shall call 'ethnic' groups, regardless of whether an objective blood relationship exists or not. The ethnic group differs from the kinship community precisely in being a group (which believes in its common descent) but not a community, unlike the kinship group which is characterized by actual communal action. In our present sense, the ethnic community itself is not a community (sic); it only facilitates communal relationships. It facilitates and promotes all types of communal relationships, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificial that inspires the belief in common

5 The most perspicacious recent discussion of Max Webers ideas on castes and pariah groups in German ethnological writing is contained in Hermann Amborn's (1990: 215f., 223f., 272f.) classic on specialists and craftsmen among the southern Ethiopian agricultural societies.
ethnicity. This belief tends to persist even after the disintegration of the political community, unless drastic differences in the custom, physical type (sic!), or, above all, language exist among its members.” (Weber 1965: 306)

That the rendering by the author quoted above can only be judged as a garbled paraphrase of the original translation should be obvious.

When one turns to the original German text referred to by the translator quoted, however, one finds:


To anybody with a basic reading knowledge of German it should be obvious that the translation referred to by the author in question cannot be accepted as an adequate rendering of the original German text. Weber perceived an essential difference between “Gemeinsamkeit” (commonness) on the one hand and “Gemeinschaft” (community) on the other! But the translation quoted has “community” for both concepts. So, in fact, Weber’s text contains a far more sophisticated argument than is discernible in the English version quoted.

Here only one instance of a completely incorrect and especially irritating translation of a word can be discussed that results in an inexcusable distortion of what Weber was trying to say. The term “Habitus” means “bearing” or “deportment” or “outward appearance” in German, but not “physical type” as the translation reads. Moreover, it should be emphasized that Max Weber expressly speaks of “äußere(r) Habitus”, not just of “Habitus” (Weber 1976 WuG: 234). Anybody relying only on the translation quoted or even on the one contained in the English version of Economy and Society by
Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Weber 1978: 389), but unacquainted with the German original might all too easily be tempted to stigmatize Max Weber as a racist. But he was nothing of the sort! In fact, considering how prevalent eurocentric theories of racial superiority were not only in Germany, but also in Great Britain, North America, and elsewhere in his day, it is surprising how critical Weber was of anything that even smacked of explaining cultural differences by those of race and how outspoken he was in his condemnation of the unfounded racialistic ideologies propounded by his contemporaries. During the first conference of the German Sociological Association at Frankfurt in 1910 Weber vehemently attacked Alfred Ploetz, who had given a paper on “The Concepts of Race and Society”.

During the second such conference in 1912 he berated Franz Oppenheimer, who had given a presentation on “Race Theory and the Philosophy of History”. Weber did not deny that perhaps one day some phenomena in human societies might just possibly by explained in biological terms. But he insistently demanded that it was absolutely necessary to make every effort to explain social or cultural phenomena in either sociological or historical terms first, before resorting to biology.

As far as ethnicity is concerned this stricture surely still holds today!

It is therefore a logical consequence emanating from Weber’s stringent quest for purely sociological reasons for the grouping of individuals that the initial section of the chapter entitled “Ethnische Gemeinschaftsbeziehungen” in Economy and Society—and not “ethnische Gruppen” even though all translations into English render this caption as “ethnic groups”—is a meticulous attempt by Weber to distinguish analytically between actual biological descent on the one hand and “äußerer Habitus” or outward appearance on the other. Moreover he arrives at the hardly surprising conclusion that differences in rank or status due to socialization and education in the broadest sense of the term are far stronger obstacles to a conventional marriage or connubium than differences in somatic type (Weber 1976 WuG: 234-5).

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6 “Die Begriffe Rasse und Gesellschaft”. In his critical discussion of this paper Weber said among other things: “... man hat... behauptet..., der Gegensatz zwischen Weißen und Negern... beruhe auf ‘Rasseninstinkten’. Ich bitte mir diese Instinkte und ihre Inhalte nachzuweisen. Sie sollen sich unter anderem darin offenbaren, daß die Weißen die Neger ‘nicht riechen’ können. Ich kann mich auf meine eigene Nase berufen; ich habe bei engster Berührung gar nichts Derartiges wahrgenommen. Ich habe den Eindruck gehabt, daß der Neger, wenn er ungewaschen ist, genau so riecht wie der Weiße, und umgekehrt.” (Weber 1988 GAZSuS: 456-62: 460). That is to say, the bodily odour of an unkempt European was just as pungent as that of an unkempt Afroamerican, if not more so, as Weber’s own nose had told him during his visit in the United States!

7 “Die rassentheoretische Geschichtsphilosophie.” Among other things Weber said in his critical discussion of this paper: “... es läßt sich mit Rassentheorien beweisen und widerlegen, was man mag. Es ist ein wissenschaftliches Verbrechen, heute, mit ganz ungeklärten Begriffen, ... durch kritiklosen Gebrauch von Rassenhypothesen die freilich viel schwierigere soziologische Analyse umgehen zu wollen, die keineswegs aussichtslos ist, ...” (Weber 1988 GAZSuS: 488-91, 489). That is to say, Weber condemned the uncritical use of racial hypotheses as a scientific crime and was of the opinion that sociological analysis was a far more difficult undertaking than the simplistic application of racial theories.
A perhaps even more serious case of the misrepresentation of Max Weber's teachings concerning ethnic groups, that cannot be discussed in extenso here, is that he is frequently labelled as a "primordialist". A statement by John and Jean Comaroff implying this is contained in the following quotation, for instance: "Contrary to the tendency, in the Weberian tradition, to view it [ethnicity] as a function of primordial ties, ethnicity always has its genesis in specific historical forces, forces which are simultaneously structural and cultural." Now, apart from the fact that Max Weber would not have known what the term "ethnicity" or "Ethnizität" might mean for the simple reason that the word did not exist in his time, Weber was by no means a "primordialist", as any careful reading of his texts concerning ethnic groups or relationships will show even in the indifferent available translations into English. In fact, upon reading his texts one can arrive at no other conclusion than at the one that he was profoundly aware of the fact that "ethnic groups" were the result of clearly

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9 In the original this quotation is in italics as well as in bold print. So both authors seem to have thought they knew what they were talking about (Comaroff, John and Jean 1992: 50). In a footnote, however, reference is made not to anything by Weber himself, but to two texts by Hechter (1975: 313f.) and Greenberg (1980: 13f.). I have been unable to consult the text by Hechter referred to, but in another book by the same author (Hechter 1987) that treats of the formation of human groups in general terms Weber is mentioned in connection with the solidarity of classes and "status groups", but he is by no means categorized as a "primordialist" in connection with "ethnic groups". Superficial reading of the text by Greenberg might possibly create the impression that he was referring to Weber as a primordialist, but a careful perusal of it should convince anybody that this is by no means stated expressly. And, in fact, on the pages referred to by the Comaroffs (Greenberg 1980: 13f.) Weber is not mentioned in connection with "primordialism" at all. Besides, where Greenberg (1980: 11) actually refers to Weber in the introductory chapter, in which he discusses "primordialism", he mentions only Weber's thoughts on free wage labour and capitalism in the latter's General Economic History, not to his reflections on ethnic group relationships in Economy and Society.

10 Cf. Dubow (1994). The word "ethnicity" is listed neither in the main body nor in the addenda and corrigenda of my Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1969), although "apartheid" with the date 1949 is!
discernible historical developments or processes that in the terms used today would definitely be categorized as both structural and cultural.

Considering the relative neglect of Weber’s thoughts on ethnic communal relationships in German ethnology as well as how these are misconstrued in the English speaking world, it seems appropriate to discuss some points he made about the origin and development of ethnic groups, although this can be done only briefly and the selection may appear somewhat arbitrary.

One of the most interesting points Weber (1976 WuG: 236f.) makes is that ethnic groups are characterized by a certain kind or type of common norms he terms “Sitten”. He expressly distinguishes these “Sitten” from customs or usages, that is, “Bräuche” on the one hand as well as from conventions (Konventionen) and law (Recht) on the other, but also from the “Interessenlage” or the situational interests (Weber 1976 WuG: 15f., 187-94; Kiss 1973: 126-9). “Sitte” is usually translated by the word “custom” in the translations of relevant Weberian texts into English (Weber 1965: 305f.; Weber 1978: 387f.). But such a rendering of the word totally misconstrues the meaning of this essential term and thereby obfuscates the issue. Custom is generally used in the sense of “Brauch” or “Brauchtum” in anthropological and sociological texts, whereas the fuzzy term “usage” is hardly ever employed as a scientific term, at least not in the sense of a social custom or norm. But, by using the term “custom” for “Sitte” the consequence is that the term “usage” has to be employed for “Brauch” in English translations of Weber in order to distinguish it from “Sitte”.11 Considering the profound influence Immanuel Kant had on Max Weber’s thought (Albrow 1990), it is well to remember that the title of Kant’s Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten is translated as Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals. Therefore “Sitten” in the sense Weber uses this word in respect of an essential, constitutive element of ethnic groups might more aptly be translated by the term “mores”12 in the sense it is used in by the legal anthropologist Pospisil (1971: 344). Then “custom” could be retained as the more appropriate translation for the term “Brauch” or “Brauchtum”.

Whether one agrees or not, however, one has to accept the fact that Weber considered a special kind or type of social norms to be in no small measure constitutive of ethnic groups, and these were a certain type of norms he located conceptually between usage or custom on the one hand and conventions and law on the other as they were more binding than the former, but could not be considered legal norms as the latter. These mores or “Sitten” were engrained in the behaviour of a plurality of individuals forming

11 Talcott Parsons was aware of the problem posed by the term “Sitte” and even refers to the distinction between “mores” and “folkways” drawn by William Graham Sumner (1906), but nevertheless considers “custom” to be closer to “Sitte” (Weber 1964: 121, fns 42 and 43).

a group that had a belief in its solidarity (Gemeinsamkeitsglaube). These "Sitten" or mores lead to or cause – Weber himself says "speisen", that is feed – sentiments of honour and dignity, “Ehr- und Würdegefühle” (Weber 1976 WuG: 236f.). For any serious discussion of the basic concepts “ethnos” and “Volk” or people this insight surely is of immense value.

Weber was aware that the formation of ethnic groups is always or almost always connected with “class interests” or economic interests. He nowhere denies this. But in this respect he was far more subtle than many present day ethnologists or anthropologists as well as sociologists and historians, who believe in something they call “class consciousness”. It is for this reason they frequently cannot understand the origin and development of such ethnic groups as the “Afrikaaners” in South Africa, for instance, whose ethnicity cuts across class distinctions just as much as does that of the Bavarians or Brandenburgers for that matter. Weber does not connect the formation of ethnic groups simply with classes as a one to one relationship. His devastating critique of the notion of “class consciousness” is well known. But he did discern close parallels between the origin and development of ethnic groups and of “Stände” (Weber 1976 WuG: 239f.), that is, of what should be termed “estates” in the sense the Abbé Emmanuel Sieyès used the word in his pamphlet entitled ”Qu’est-ce que le Tiers Etat?” and not “class status” as Parsons translates (Weber 1964: 424f.). Nor does the term “status group” employed by Roth and Wittich (Weber 1978, vol. 1: 302f., 305f.) seem totally adequate either or at least not in the context of Weber’s thoughts on ethnic community relationships.


14 Cf. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1969/1933): “5. A class or order in a community or nation – 1643. 6. An order or class as part of the body politic, participating in the government directly or by representation. ME.” Cf. Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1974): ”2: social standing or rank especially of a high order 3: a social or political class specifically one of the great classes (as the nobility, the clergy, and the commons) formerly vested with distinct political powers.”

15 Admittedly the translation of the German term “Stand” poses difficult problems. It would, however, require an extensive dissertation to try and elucidate what Weber actually meant when he employed the word "Stand”. One should nevertheless be aware of the fact that the role of estates in German history was being intensively discussed at the turn of the century by such contemporary historians as Otto Hintze (1902: 1962; 120f., 140f.), with whose work Weber must have been acquainted as he quotes him approvingly in his critical discussion of Roscher’s historical method (Weber 1973 GA:W: 29, fn 1; Hintze
“Estates” (Stände), Weber quite emphatically maintains, are communities (Gemeinschaften), whereas classes are not! Such “estates” are based, among other things, on the same distinct kind of norms as ethnic groups, namely on mores or “Sitten”, that in their turn again lead to sentiments of honour and dignity. And he expressly states that the mores and sentiments of honour and dignity characterizing ethnic groups are similar or almost identical to those of “estates”. Thus “estates” have many of the characteristics that are typical of ethnic groups and vice versa (Weber 1976 WuG: 238f., 536f). On the other hand this implies the distinction between a hierarchical ordering and a parallel ordering or a horizontal and vertical arrangement, so that one can speak of ranked and unranked ethnic groups. However, Weber does not speak of class differences in this connection, but of “Stände” or “estates” that may become “castes” with an ideology of common descent when they are hierarchically ordered. A possible rendering of the term “Stand” at least in this connection might be “ranked corporate group” or “order.”

On the basis of common mores as well as sentiments of honour and dignity a belief in mutual solidarity can develop that may be transformed into an ideology of common descent. In contrast to a kinship community (Sippengemeinschaft) an ethnic group is not a community, but only a group with a feeling of solidarity. A kinship community

1897). The term “Stand” at that time had a different meaning to the one it has today, however (cf. Rössler 1970). What seems clear though, is that Weber consciously used the term “Stand” as a counter-concept (Gegenbegriff) to class (cf. Walther 1990; Blickle 1989). The following quotation from an etymological dictionary should indicate what a wide range of connotations Weber must have had in mind when using this term: “Speziell bezieht sich Stand auf die Stellung in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft; dann auch auf etwas Dauerndes, vgl. Ehestand, Brautstand, Junggesellenstand, Witwenstand, der ledige Stand; noch spezieller mit Bezug auf Beschäftigung und Rang: geistlicher, weltlicher Stand, Priestersstand, Kriegerstand, Militärstand, Zivilstand, Bauernstand, Arbeiterstand, Bürgerstand, Ritterstand, Ruhestand, der dritte Stand = Bürgerstand im Gegensatz zu Adel und Geistlichkeit nach frz. tiers-états; ein Mann von Stande ist jemand, der einem vornehmern Stand angehört, ähnlich Ständeperson. Wörter wie Bauernstand usw. werden dann auch kollektiv gebraucht für die Gesamtheit der dem betreffenden Stand Angehörigen. Hieran schließt sich der Gebrauch des Plurals Stände (Landstände, Reichstände, Provinzialstände) für die korporative Vertretung eines Landes oder einer Provinz, weil in derselben die verschiedenen Stände ihre gesonderte Vertretung haben; erst sekundär wird dann zuweilen auch ein einzelnes Mitglied einer ständischen Korporation als Landstand, Reichstand bezeichnet, vgl. den die Wahl seiner Mitstände auf den Stuhl der Ottonen setzte Schiller; dazu Standesherr, ständisch ... Auch in der gewöhnlichen Bedeutung von Staats ... kommt es vor: zu Häuptern eines Stands gehören Hirn darein Haller, die Gebäude die der Stand Bern selbst aufführt sind grof/Goethe Briefe 9. 10. 1779.” (Paul 1966: 628). It should be evident from this quotation that the term “Stand” has more to do with rank than with status and is closely connected with the concept “state” in the sense of a political entity.

16 This is stressed by Donald L. Horowitz (1985: 21-24).

is characterized by communal action (Gemeinschaftshandeln), an ethnic group exhibits only a potential for communal action at most (Weber 1976 WuG: 235f., esp. 237).

Weber was aware of the significance of migratory movements of peoples for the origin and development of the ethnic consciousness of groups. On account of the contrasts between the mores (Sitten) of the immigrants and those of their indigenous neighbours in foreign lands the mutual consciousness of kind was enhanced (Weber 1976 WuG: 238, 239-40). The relevance of this insight for developments occurring all over the world and especially in many parts of the Third World today whether it be in Afghanistan, the Republic of the Sudan or southern Africa is obvious. But Weber also anticipated the findings of members of the Manchester School of social anthropology concerning the escalation of ethnic rivalry among the migrant labourers in the mining towns of Central Africa (Mitchell 1974; Epstein 1978).

In respect of boundaries between ethnic groups generally Weber propounds a decidedly modern conception. Unless sharp linguistic boundaries or limits of political or religious communities back up differences in the mores (Sitten) the transitions in these are fluid and there can then also be no fixed ethnic boundaries. Edmund Leach (1989) according to a posthumously published article would have had no quarrel with this, as he maintains there are no clearcut boundaries between cultures or ethnic groups and tribes. Nor would Frederick Barth (1969) have done so, who is today considered to be one of the first social anthropologists to question the idea that boundaries between ethnic groups are impermeable and fixed or static (Orywal and Hackstein 1993: 594-5). Clearcut boundaries of the areas of validity of ethnically relevant mores (Sitten) that are not conditioned by politics or economics or religions originate only as a result of the migration or expansion of peoples according to Weber. The resulting contrasts in the ways of life of neighbouring peoples as a rule lead to a mutual conception of differing descent, whether there is an actual consanguineous relationship or not (Weber 1976 WuG: 239f).

Weber pointed out that behind all ethnic distinctions one finds the idea of a chosen people. He considers this idea to be analogous to the sentiments of honour and dignity or prestige of higher ranking estates i. e. “Stände”. Among horizontally arranged ethnic groups this idea of a chosen people may be claimed by each of the groups concerned severally, who then mutually despise each other. As a result all kinds of differentiating features such as the style of wearing the hair or beard as well as some connected with the economic order may be seized upon as symbols of ethnic groups. However, not all such outward signs or appearances such as hair fashions cause repulsion on account of their symbolic value alone, but for other reasons (Weber 1976 WuG: 239). It is questionable whether the significance of symbols for the constitution of ethnic groups is sufficiently recognized even today. However that may be, Weber definitely anticipated the present day discussion concerning “ethnic markers”.

We have already heard that Weber differentiates between the kinship community as a community on the one hand and the ethnic group merely as a solidary group on
the other. But he also distinguishes between “ethnic group” on the one hand and “Völkerschaft” – a term I am unable to translate, though in one translation it is valiantly but quite obviously incorrectly rendered as “clan” (Weber 1965: 308) –, tribe, “Stamm”, and people, “Volk”, on the other, although all these groupings also have a belief in common descent (Weber 1976 WuG: 240). For Weber the concept “nation” has a number of elements in common with “ethnic group” as well. The sentiment of solidarity in both, for instance, includes the idea of common descent and a common essential character (Weber 1976 WuG: 528f.). Nevertheless, the concept “nation” cannot be equated with “ethnic group”, a concept that is, according to Weber, a difficult one, which he thought might have to be abandoned once a more differentiated terminology had been developed (Weber 1976 WuG: 242).

The ethnic solidarity of a group does not by itself establish a community. It is merely one factor that facilitates the formation of a community (Vergemeinschaftung). However, the sentiment of ethnic solidarity is conducive to the formation of political communities. On the other hand the existence of a political community inspires belief in the solidarity of the ethnic group that lives on even after the political community concerned has collapsed or disappeared (Weber 1976 WuG: 237f.).

This has been a discussion of a fairly arbitrary selection of ideas from Weber’s incisive examination of the characteristics, origin and development of ethnic groups. But it should have become evident that Weber’s thoughts on this important ethnosociological problem are still relevant today. Perhaps, however, such a selective discussion of his views is not inappropriate at present. Most, if not all of Weber’s published texts on ethnic groups are contained in his Economy and Society. But Wolfgang Schluchter (1989) has indicated that we shall probably have to take leave of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft in its present form as a myth. So, when the new critical edition of the relevant texts are published that today are only available in a conflated and distorted version, it is to be hoped that someone will attempt a thorough critical analysis of what Max Weber actually had to say about ethnic groups.

One other point should also have become evident: One cannot talk about what Weber had to say about ethnic groups without reading him at least in the available original German texts! For, many of the attempts at translating Weber are wrong, if not devastatingly so! The result is that frequently the sophistication of Weber’s analysis of ethnic phenomena is obscured and at times even completely distorted.

18 Dr. Klaus Schubert has suggested “populace” as a translation to me, but this word does not contain the connotation of common descent as “Völkerschaft” does!
References


Johannes W. Raum: Reflections on Max Weber's thoughts concerning ethnic groups


