Max Weber and the “Weltkrieg”

By Carlo Bordoni

The twentieth-century opened under the sign of great trust in progress and technology. Machines, which had since ever been considered as a dangerous adversary and as a source of primordial fear, quickly began to lose their disquieting aspect and to become an ally of human beings as a ductile tool to overcome physical strain. Airplane and car created new opportunities for transport at unprecedented speed beside steam-locomotives, which had replaced horse-powered coaches as the main link between cities.

Of such evolution also benefited the military: weapons became lighter, automatic, transportable and lethal as the new tanks or submarines. War had already been changing like strategy: from Napoleonic war to Franco-Prussian war in 1870 artillery had reversed the impact of the forces on the field, but only with the new century, and in particular with the “Great War”, an extraordinary change occurred: war started to be conceived positively, in the mind of people even before than in the combatants’ view. General rehearsal took place in the Italian-Turkish war in 1911-1912, better known as the Libyan war, when airplanes (nine Italian aircrafts), cars, motorcycles and unfortunately toxic gas were for first employed.

The old conception of war as a physical fighting carried out hand-to-hand with the enemy, with great masses of soldiers rallying enemy positions to conquer was replaced with the idea (or illusion) of a mechanised war in which advanced technology took the place of human force.

Combat was no longer based on direct fighting or on the possibility to overcome the enemy with one’s own strength, but rather by means of conduction/mastery of machines, for which knowledge, communication, expertise and promptness really count.

This new idea of an indirect combat, mediated by technology, which let the weapons do the dirty job, was perhaps one of the main arguments that convinced people in the
early years of the twentieth-century that war was after all not an evil to escape but rather an opportunity to catch, insofar as weapons rather than men would fight it and because it duration – unlike past war, which were went on for decades – would be short. A lightning-war, a Blitzkrieg as a modern war should be, in which velocity, rapidity of decision-making, courage – juvenile qualities – are determining factors.

The idea of a war which was not fearful but beautiful, if not even a source of wealth as a powerful stimulus for economic growth and change against the stagnation of the past, spread all over the early twentieth-century and persuaded also those who, as pacifists and internationalists, were afraid of being accused with weakness, cowardice, defeatism, pessimism or even worse with being reactionaries.

Nonetheless, the nineteenth-century, despite its social problems, barricades, communes, revolution and the growing pressure of masses, had been enlightened by internationalism, also derived by the experience of Socialism and Marxism, whose Manifesto of 1848 – although not rejecting violence – invited to a trans-national brotherhood which stretched beyond the interests of single countries, convinced that the problem of working-class people were the same everywhere.

Conversely, the reinforcement of the State, of national culture, traditions and interests was the aim of conservatories, who based their own principles on the defence of such ideals as the Fatherland and the State. Not by chance all right-wing movements since the nineteenth-century on have recalled key-concepts such as Nation, people, and Fatherland by attributing to them some sacred value and by highlighting the emotional feeling of participation in a closed enclave, coherent and made recognisable by the share of values and symbols. Terms like people and popular, nation and national or even social often recur in the acronyms of right-wing parties and movements, which attempt to obtain consensus by moving the lever of emotions. The feeling of belonging to the nation, patriotism, so glorified during the Italian “Risorgimento”, had its part of responsibility in the growth of aggressive feelings toward other countries. Nationalism revealed itself as a fertile ground for war.

The most surprising thing is that intellectuals, and among those sociologists, who had inherited that branch of positivistic philosophy aimed at studying society with
scientific method, i.e. with a super partes and objective approach, supported the interventionist position in the face of war.

Among these sociologists stood out in particular Karl Emil Maximilian Weber, or Max, born in Erfurt in 1864 and dead in Munich in 1920. Weber was on the one hand the father of modern sociology; he claimed the need for sound objectivity and non-evaluation in sociological research (Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschafstlehre, published in 1904 and 1917 and collected in 1922), of studies on religion up to his fundamental Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, published posthumous in 1922; on the other hand he was the intransigent nationalist, the firm assertor of the superiority of his country and its historical mission to preserve and develop civilisation against barbarisation.

By assuming a contradictory and sometimes even counterproductive attitude, Weber showed his faith in war as a catalyser of change and as a shocking event capable of waking the consciences from lethargy and pushing civilisation forth.

Aldo Toscano, who devoted an important study to the sociologists of the Great War, wrote that since the very beginning Weber knew that sooner or later something terrible would happen and that Germany should then play its role in world by facing the hostility of other countries. Nonetheless, Weber always remained faithful to the German cultural patriotism with sense of honour and devotion.

Therefore, the outbreak of the war found him prepared and enthusiastic. The words of his wife Marianne in his monumental biography of 1926 do not leave doubts behind: the scene is set in Weber’s house, where he is surrounded by friends and disciples on July 26, 1914, the last Sunday before the war which would be declared two days later, on Tuesday 28. Marianne recounts that the guests asked for his opinion and waited with anxiety for his answer: he said that a war would permit the young people to find the real connection with their own community by means of sacrifice.

Weber could not enlist, which made him bitter. His faith in Germany remained firm also in the face of serious familiar losses. In 1915 he wrote to his sister Lili, concerning his brother-in-law Hermann Schäfer, fallen at Tannenberg during one of the first combats, that this new war would be, despite its outcome – great and wonderful and above all expectations.

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During the conflict Weber strongly defended the German policy. The letter of January 1916 to Gertrud Bäumer, editor of the magazine *Die Frau* testifies to that, where he wrote that a people that is numerically superior, organised as a powerful State should lead the destinies of other small countries. In the same year, though, the first doubts rise. In 1916 Weber wrote that after the sinking of Lusitania on May 7, 1915 time was against Germany and that war would become a satanic event that would eventually crush the German people. Later on he started to believe that peace should be the necessary outcome of a brief war, in order to avoid irreparable economic damages. Finally, on November 4, 1918, in the face of the disastrous conditions of Germany, in a public speech in Munich Weber proposed to accept peace at all costs. But the effect was not as hoped for. He was contested and even accused of being a traitor. As others had done before, Weber too decided to write his opinion about the German responsibilities for war, in a work published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in January of 1919.

The end of the war and the foundation of the Republic of Weimar saw the decline of an intellectual who always has a “secret passion” for politics and was ready to do whatever possible for his nation and to lead the young people, but who had no followers in such a quest.

**For further reading**


