

Ana Petrov

*RETHINKING RATIONALISATION: EVOLUTIONISM AND IMPERIALISM
IN MAX WEBER'S DISCOURSE ON MUSIC*

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This new book by Ana Petrov, Lecturer at the Faculty of Media and Communication of the Singidunum University in Belgrade benefits from the author's double specialism as a musicologist and a sociologist. The impetus for writing this book was Petrov's observation that Max Weber's oeuvre has usually been studied in the context historical and political sociology, social economy, the sociology of law and religion, while his contributions to the sociology of culture and arts have been neglected. In the last decade of his life (1910–1920) Weber aspired to write a comprehensive study that would encompass music, architecture, painting, sculpture and literature. However, only his sociology of music saw the light of day, compiled from Weber's manuscripts after his death and published in 1921. Petrov observes that Weber's discourse on music differs significantly from the rest of his output; namely, Weber is usually regarded as a representative of the historicist tradition in sociology who refused to fit social sciences into the context of the evolutionistic or deterministic philosophies. However, Petrov asserts that his discourse on music "has unequivocally evolutionistic elements" (p. 30). Moreover, Weber's work was fundamentally influenced by the musicological/theoretical context at the turn of the 20th century, by which time the evolutionist paradigm had been incorporated into scholarly discourses on music. Petrov argues that his concept of rationalisation was actually formulated during his engagement with music and that "only after having considered music history as a process of a rationalised progress did Weber continue to ponder over some other aspects of social life that might have had the same logic" (22–23). Thus Petrov aims to highlight the importance of music in Weber's sociological discourse, to showcase the complexity of his construal of history and sociology of music, and to demonstrate how the concept of rationalisation is inseparable from the evolutionistic narrative.

Although Weber nurtured an interest in arts and music throughout his life, Petrov notes that he was inspired to formulate his sociology of culture after the first meeting of the Deutsche Soziologische Gesellschaft in October 1910. Whilst investigating the elements of evolutionism in Weber's sociology of music Petrov poses two initial hypotheses: that the concept of rationalisation exemplifies the evolutionistic construction of history and sociology of music, and that the formation of the concept of rationalisation was a consequence of the influence of musicological evolutionism on Weber's discourse.

The book is divided into five segments: *Introduction*, *Evolutionism in Nineteenth-Century Scientific Discourse*, *Evolutionism in Nineteenth-Century Discourses on Music*, *Evolutionism in Weber's Discourse on Music*, and *Conclusion: Implications of Weber's Discourse on Rationalisation of Music*. After the introduction, the next two chapters retrace the genesis of the evolutionist discourse. Petrov relates evolutionism in social sciences to imperialism, racism and colonialism. Drawing on post-colonial and cultural studies, she reconstructs the origins of the key terms of 'social Darwinism' and 'cultural evolutionism' and overviews Herbert Spencer's and Charles Darwin's discourses which promoted the notions of the superiority of European/Occidental societies, with West regarded as 'dynamic', 'progressive', 'modern' and 'rationalised', while non-Western societies were labelled as 'irrational', 'undeveloped', 'primitive' and 'inferior'. Petrov then overviews Spencer's and Darwin's theories of evolution and emphasises that their approaches to music included a narrative of a progressive unilinear development of music that unfolded from 'primitive' towards 'civilised' practices and implied a dichotomy between Western and non-Western societies; hence both approaches had unequivocal imperialist and racist implications.

In the chapter *Evolutionism in Nineteenth-Century Discourses on Music* Petrov argues that Spencer and Darwin jointly influenced musicology "which eventually led to the construction of a field of scholarly discourse on music that promulgated evolutionary thinking on music" (77). Petrov shows that the evolutionist narrative imbued musicology since the inception of this discipline, which resulted in the conception of music history as a progressive linear flow and a continuous development, as well as the separation of scholarly discourses onto 'art' and 'folk' music. This was due to the fact that a "number of authors who, as university professors and editors of the new magazines were in charge of organising the respective institutions, had one crucial goal — the constitution of the 'science of music' as legitimate knowledge equal to the accepted scientific discourses, which at that time meant the natural sciences" (81). After overviewing the activities of a number of German and Austrian scholars who contributed to the formation and development of modern musicology, Petrov concludes that the field of comparative musicology (ethnomusicology) was constructed as an alternative discourse on music that dealt with 'other' musics, which also led to the construction of numerous theoretical dichotomies such as developed/undeveloped, Western/non-Western, civilised/primitive, written/oral, structured/non-structured, and superior/inferior music (109).

When Petrov finally returns to Weber in the chapter *Evolutionism in Weber's Discourse on Music*, she insists that "it is not the sociological (both positivist and historicist) theoretical background that had the most important influence on Weber's understanding of music and the formation of the model of rationalisation (...) but rather the musicological and ethnomusicological theories of the time, i.e. discourses on music that were predominantly evolutionist" (121). She singles out the writings by Helmholtz, Hornbostel and especially Riemann as relevant for Weber's concept of music rationalisation; in particular Riemann's understanding of the system of equal temperament resonated profoundly with Weber, and they both saw it as the proof of the uniqueness of Western music.

In her critique of Weber, Petrov cites Andrew Zimmerman's assessment that "Max Weber was an imperialist, a racist, and a Social Darwinistic nationalist, and these political positions fundamentally shaped his social scientific work" (167). Petrov approaches Weber from the framework of post-colonial musicology, whilst relying on Zimmerman's problematisation of the concept of rationalisation as a theoretical construct that served as an analytical means of producing discourse that was promoted as scientifically 'neutral', 'objective', and beyond any attempt at value judgement. Petrov sums up that Weber's theory of rationalisation includes the following features: development of the more complex units from the simpler ones (such as intervals) and, at the same time, a constant progress of a species (tonal system); the presence of selection and fight (visible in Weber's conviction that composers find the best solutions and rule out the wrong ones, as well as in his division of composers and performers into 'professionals' and 'dilettantes'); and the existence of a certain inner logic of progressive development and a construal of the rationalisation itself as a development (141).

Petrov's writing style is somewhat redundant, with 'signposts' and 'clues' scattered throughout the book and oft-repeated conclusions. Although this book would have benefited from a more careful copy-editing, it still offers a valuable new insight into an important segment of Max Weber's work that has thus far been neglected. Furthermore, Petrov focuses precisely on the problematic segments of Weber's oeuvre that had previously deliberately been overlooked in order to avoid 'tainting' the legacy of this sociology 'classic'.

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