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MAX WEBER

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Abstract

With Marx and Durkheim, Weber is considered a major classic in political sociology. While his theories of bureaucracy, political charisma, and the protestant ethic and capitalism have become standard material in textbooks, his writings have been lately considerably reevaluated. With the publication of new texts (*Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe*) and a growing secondary literature, several scholars have pointed to the fruitfulness of Weber's interpretive approach to the study of micro-macro linkages with concepts like *Lebensführung* (the conduct of life), *Chance* and power share (*Machtanteil*). These have provided sources of inspiration for political sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Randall Collins or others, such as Wilhelm Hennis and Catherine Colliot-Thélène. Another emerging line of inquiry has involved analysis of politics and parliamentarisation as counterforces to growing bureaucratisation, which Weber saw as being one of main drivers of modern world, his perspectivist view on knowledge serving as a medium to control officials and experts.

Max Weber (1864-1920) is a major classic in the humanities and social sciences. Trained as a legal historian, Weber was appointed professor in political economy at the University of Freiburg in 1894 and at Heidelberg University in 1897, from which he resigned for health reasons in 1903. In 1904, Weber became one of the editors of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* and in 1909 the main editor of the lexicon *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*.

At the beginning of the Great War, he served a year as a voluntary main administrator in a military hospital in Heidelberg. From Autumn 1915 onwards Weber wrote newspaper polemics in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, criticised the expansionist war policy of the German government and of many professorial colleagues as well as took stand for a constitutional reform in favour of parliamentarism and democracy. Weber resumed teaching for one academic term in 1918 at the University of Vienna, and 1919 he took over the chair of political economy and sociology at the University of Munich. Weber died in Munich from pneumonia in June 1920. (The most complete Weber biography is Kaesler 2020).

In his academic theses in law, Weber dealt with ancient and medieval legal history, but he also became involved in studies on agricultural workers east of the Elbe. In these works, he emphasised the political consequences of economic policy and the structure of the Prussian nobility. Weber was also engaged in the 1890s in major studies on the stock market.

In his early work on the East Elbian agricultural worker's situation, Weber's focused on the opposition between feudal and bourgeois orders. He was critical of the timid and unpolitical mentality of the German bourgeoisie, which had not broken with the economics of dependence and the reverence towards the agrarian nobility and the military in Prussia. It had even increased certain neo-feudal tendencies, for example in the rituals of student corporations. This attitude was manifest in the bourgeoisie's lack of political self-confidence. The bourgeoisie was supported by the Prussian plutocratic suffrage and the rule of officialdom over the powerless parliament in the Bismarckian empire. As a *homo politicus* and committed to 'human rights and democratic institutions', Weber wrote on the Russian 1905 revolution,

analysing in detail the pseudo-constitutional character of the tsarist reforms. He offered a rather pessimistic view of Russian parties and elections.

In the *Archiv*, Weber published important articles on the theory and methods of history and social sciences (on methodology see the volumes I/7 and I/12 of *Max-Weber Gesamtausgabe*, below MWG) as well as the first version of his *Protestant Ethic*. In the essay “Die Objektivität sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis” (1904, in MWG I/7), Weber contributed to the controversy between Gustav Schmoller and Carl Menger in contemporary economics. He had in common with Schmoller a historical approach, but he rejected the normative bind: political economy could not be a world view. With Menger, Weber shared the interest in theorizing but disputed Menger’s naturalistic view by insisting that contingent human action was intelligible in terms of *Chance*. Weber offered the ‘ideal type’ as a medium of interpretation that transcended the empirical vs. normative divide.

More generally, inspired by Nietzsche and Westminster parliamentary practice, Weber understood knowledge as an unending debate from opposed perspectives. Weber pleaded for a science of reality (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*) but regarded reality as conceptually inexhaustible. However, concepts provided indispensable instruments for debating alternative interpretations of reality and possible courses of action. Weber saw the parliamentary model of debating as a model for the understanding of scholarly controversies (for Weber’s parliamentary view on knowledge see Palonen 2010 and 2017).

In these, scholars must situate themselves in relation to the existing stand of controversies and choose the value relation (*Wertbeziehung*) of their own research agenda. Regarding the issues on the scholarly agenda, Weber underlined in his *Wertfreiheit* article (1917, in MWG I/12) the role of value freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) in judging the strengths and weaknesses of various interpretations, independently of the position of their adherents: the ‘truth’ of every claim was contestable in principle and subject to further debates. For Weber, value freedom was also a critique of administrative powers in professorial appointments and as well as of the professor’s value declarations *ex cathedra*, which he saw as a way to avoid the questioning of their authority.

Starting from the *Kategorien* essay of 1913 (in MWG I/12), Weber called the ideal typical approach ‘interpretative sociology’ (*verstehende Soziologie*), as opposed to normative and empiricist styles of scholarship. In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, (MWG I/23) Weber as a methodological individualist built his work on the concepts of social action (*Handeln*), social relationships (*Beziehungen*) and associations. (*Verbände*). He saw central concepts of power (*Macht*), rule (*Herrschaft*), law (*Recht*) and state (*Staat*) as concepts containing distinct profiles of chances for action. Weber distinguished between three formal types of legitimacy: traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic rule. These formal concepts were mixed with practices. Political orders differed from one another in terms of their profiles or legitimisation of rulership. The three types of legitimacy served above all as instruments of criticism, given that no order can conclusively justify its legitimacy. Legitimation depends on the ruled audience’s belief in legitimacy (*Legitimitätsglauben*). This belief included the anti-authoritarian reinterpretation of charisma among the elected rulers.

During the war, Weber publicly criticised the Bismarckian heritage of German politics. Against the nationalists, he underlined Germany’s fragile position in the concert of European powers and discussed the expected post-war situation, with an emphasis on Germany’s links with the Western powers and in contrast to an authoritarian Russia. He backed Woodrow

Wilson's plans for the League of Nations (*Völkerbund*), which marked a shift in his views from the balance of great powers towards accepting the legitimacy of supranational institutions.

Weber's late 'academic pamphlets' on parliament and suffrage (MWG I/15) as well as the lectures on science and politics as vocation (MWG I/17) constitute his core political writings. In his 1917 *Wahlrecht* essay, Max Weber regarded parties based on free recruitment of members and supporters, setting the candidates for parliamentary institutions. Weber rejected tendencies to prevent or turn back democratisation, such as the plural voting (Belgium), the plutocratic tripartite division of electorate (Prussia) or corporative representation (*berufsständische Vertretung*). For him, free and fair elections between partisan candidates formed a method of selection based on counting and not weighing votes, on an existential equality of citizens.

For Weber, the modern state was based on the rational-legal daily rule of the bureaucracy. In his *Parlament* study (1918) he saw, however, a danger in the universal tendency towards bureaucratization and looked for counterweights for it in parliamentary government. As an alternative to the rule of officialdom (*Beamtenherrschaft*), he regarded parliamentary government of party leaders as competing professional politicians as the main source of efficient control of the administration. With his perspectivism, Weber extended the parliamentary style of politics in line with Westminster practices to a procedure against the officials' claims for superior knowledge based on facts (*Sachwissen*). He demanded parliamentary control with hearings, access to sources and examination committees, the cross-examination of officials from different ministries, the access to the sources (*Dienstwissen*) and official secrets (*Geheimwissen*).

In *Politik als Beruf* (1919), Weber defined politics as a striving for power and distribution of power shares (*Machtanteile*). Power as chance to impose one's will consist of different kinds of shares and their mutual confrontation. Politics contains both the chances over power shares and ways of using them in a struggle with other. Referring to the studies of James Bryce, Moisei Ostrogorski and Robert Michels on elections, parties and political leadership, Weber saw the dangers of bureaucratisation not only in the state administration but also in the party apparatus and electoral machine. As an alternative, Weber proposed a combination of professional parliamentarian with office and staff. For the Weimar Republic's constitution, Weber recommended a directly elected, plebiscitarian president, combined with a government responsible to parliament.

Weber not only discussed the historical types of politicians from ancient Athenian demagogues onwards. He distinguished between degrees of acting as a politician, starting from citizens as occasional politicians and part-time notables, ending with politicians living off politics in democratised parliamentary polities. As a person, the modern ideal type of politician must dispose of a sensitivity for power (*Machtgefühl*) and avoid all vanity (*Eitelkeit*). However difficult it may be, the politician must be able to combine the criteria of passionate commitment (*Leidenschaft*), sense of responsibility (*Verantwortungsgefühl*) and approximate judgement (*Augenmaß*). Finally, Weber discussed the *ethos* of the politician as a type of person, who should combine the ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortung*) and conviction (*Gesinnung*), even if combining these was, as Weber admitted, an 'art of the impossible'.

Max Weber's wife Marianne edited posthumously the *Grundriss Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* as well as the first collections of Weber's writings. After WWII Weber gained an international

reputation as a classic of sociology. After 40 years of work, the critical edition of Weber's writings, letters, and lectures (*Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe*) is now available (for a presentation see Lichtblau 2022, the volumes enumerated are on pp.120-124). The journal *Max Weber Studies* has been published since 2001, with Sam Whimster as the editor-in-chief.

Weber's conflict model of social relationships, based on the unequal distribution of class, status, and power, has had a major impact in research in international relations (see Morgenthau 1946) and in political sociology through the works of, among others, Pierre Bourdieu (Susen and Turner 2012) and Randall Collins (Ben-David & Collins 1966). After the heyday of the post-war empirical social science and the structuralist and Marxist waves in the 1970s, in the 1980s the MWG editions and new translations (see esp. Lassman & Speirs 1994, Bruun & Whimster 2012, Tribe 2019) helped Weber become a first-class modern thinker.

More historical readings and the *Gesamtausgabe* as well as new translations have altered and expanded Weber's scholarly reception, made visible his Nietzschean heritage and concepts such as *Lebensführung* (life-conduct) and *Chance*. Wilhelm Hennis (1987), Lawrence Scaff (1989) and Catherine Colliot-Thélène (1992) have been among the initiators of a new wave of Weber scholarship. This has led to a reappraisal of history, contingency, and political action in Weber studies. With this new academic interest outside the German-speaking area, Max Weber has become a frequently quoted author in cultural criticism and parliamentary debates.

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