

Old Arguments, New Circumstances: On the Relevance and Irrelevance of Max Weber's Vision of Modern Politics

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I want to revisit Weber's views on the relationship between capitalism, freedom, democracy and the nation in order to examine the question of the continuing validity, or otherwise, of his analysis for contemporary conditions. While we may still learn a lot from the way Weber tackled the complexities of these relations, have the framing institutional conditions changed so much that his substantive claims are no longer valid or useful? Whereas we can locate Weber in a long line of liberal justifications of the market—of capitalism—on the grounds that the latter both creates wealth and fosters democracy, he represents a point of transition in which those arguments get translated into the language of contemporary social science. This may account for his more contingent, pragmatic and provisional affirmation of the link between capitalism and democracy, which led David Beetham to characterize Weber as a “liberal without liberal values”. It is this relocation of arguments for capitalism and democracy in contingent social conditions that makes the issue of the institutional framing relevant. If these conditions no longer hold, then Weber's arguments fall with them. Before we examine this question in a contemporary context, we need to reconstruct the original arguments.

Key Words: Max Weber, capitalism, democracy, global competition

In this paper I want to revisit Weber's views on the relationship between capitalism, freedom, democracy and the nation (Scott, 2000: 33–55; Palumbo and Scott, 2003) in order to examine the question of the continuing validity, or otherwise, of his analysis for contemporary conditions. While we may still learn a lot from the way Weber tackled the complexities of these relations, have the framing institutional conditions changed so much that his substantive claims are no longer valid or useful? Whereas we can locate Weber in a long line of liberal justifications of the market—of capitalism—on the grounds that the latter both creates wealth and fosters democracy, he represents a point of transition in which those arguments get translated into the language of contemporary social science. This may account for his more contingent, pragmatic and provisional affirmation of the link between capitalism and democracy, which led David Beetham to characterize Weber as a “liberal without liberal values” (Beetham, 1989: 312). It is this relocation of arguments for capitalism and democracy in contingent social conditions that makes the issue of the institutional framing relevant. If these conditions no longer hold, then Weber's arguments fall with them. Before we examine this question in a contemporary context, we need to reconstruct the original arguments.

Capitalism and Democracy Then

Weber's views on the relationship between state, market and political culture are most clearly expressed in his critique of those writers he vaguely—and derogatorily—labels “*die Literaten*” (littérateurs, “men” of letters).¹ One can reconstruct the outlook of the littérateurs from what Weber has to say about them, and then in turn infer something of his own position from that critique. On Weber's account, the fundamental characteristic of the littérateurs was their conservative and romantic notion of an essential “German spirit” that supposedly marked Germany out from other Western nations, and was to be preserved and defended. This spirit was thought to be threatened on two fronts: by capitalism and by formal parliamentary

1 Lassman and Speirs offer a useful definition: “in the contemporary context . . . Weber mostly uses ‘the term *Literaten*’ censoriously to refer to those writers, frequently in academic positions, who seek to influence political life by their writings although lacking, in his opinion, the expertise to do so and shouldering no political responsibility for the effects of what they write.” (Glossary to Lassman and Speirs, 1994: 377)

democracy. Together, these represented an alien western course which was antithetical to the German character and national spirit. Weber's response to these conservative nationalists sees him supporting the economic, political and cultural modernization and westernization of Germany.

Capitalism and anti-capitalism

In view of the iron-hard spring that peace will bring us, it is a crime for the *littérateurs*, of whatever persuasion, to claim that the German "will to work" is the nation's original sin and to propose a more "easy-going" way of life as an ideal for the future. (Weber, 1917: 84-85)

In marked contrast to the above "crime," Weber identifies the "need for economic work to be enormously *intensified* and *rationalized*" for reasons both of national prestige and "simply in order to make life *possible* for the masses in our country" (Weber, 1917: 84). The anti-capitalism of conservative nationalists and that of socialists is damned in equal measure for its elitism and its indifference towards the condition of the nation and of the masses (Weber, 1917: 87). The *littérateurs*' anti-capitalism is said to demonstrate a "profound ignorance of the nature of capitalism" (Weber, 1917: 89), and specifically conflates its modern rational form with premodern robber capitalism. Unlike robber capitalism, the pursuit of gain through rationally disciplined labour *is* grounded in an ethic of responsible professionalism. In contrast to the tradition of thinking in which, for example, Émile Durkheim stands, capitalism is not thought of as an amoral force in need of external moral underpinning by the state, but as itself embodying both a personal business ethic (*Geschäftsethik*) and operational ethic (*Betriebsethik*) (Weber, 1917: 90).² Capitalism thus raises the entrepreneur to a moral level that is the equal to that of professionals in other spheres. Indeed, Weber closely empathizes or even identifies himself with entrepreneurs because they have a quality which the others all too often lack, they are "*weltmännisch*," men of the world. Weber will thus not countenance any proposal for a return to an earlier precapitalist community-based (*gemeinwirtschaftlich*) and allegedly "Germanic" economic form grounded in supposed solidarity and reciprocity (Weber, 1917: 91).

² This topic is well covered in Richard Swedberg (1998: 22-53).

Democracy and universal suffrage

The demand for a return to a precapitalist *Gemeinwirtschaft* is mirrored in the political sphere by the call for a form of franchise based not upon universal suffrage, but on the differential representation of distinct social classes or occupational groups (*Stände*; estates). This attempt to recreate a *Ständestaat* (polity of the estates) as a truly Germanic state form is likewise treated by Weber as a piece of reactionary utopianism inappropriate to modern conditions and based upon “confused ideas about the ‘articulation of society’ according to the ‘natural occupations’ in ‘communities of estates’” (Weber, 1917: 100). For Weber, only representative democracy (with its plebiscitary character³) can provide a suitable institutional framework for modern rational capitalism, and thus contribute to Germany’s modernization (Weber, 1917: 103). Universal suffrage is not an expression of natural equality, but a momentary *political* counterbalance to otherwise ubiquitous *social* inequality. It represents an institutional resolution to one of the central paradoxes of modern societies: they are founded on egalitarian political principles but nonetheless shot through with economic and social inequalities. In the voting booth we are momentarily all equals—all citizens of the state—and the promise of modern democracy is made good. Modern subjects are collectively a *Staatsvolk* and not *Volksgenossen*; members of a political, not an ethnic, community. He thus strictly separates *demos* and *ethnos*, and insists that the modern political subject is the former.⁴

The German spirit

Underpinning the opposition of the *littérateurs* both to capitalism and parliamentary democracy was an essentially anti-modernist conception of the German spirit. But it is precisely this reactionary notion that had, for Weber, come to inhibit that nation’s development in the context of a competitive international state system. Since “nobody wants to be governed by ill-bred parvenus” (Weber, 1917: 118), the political questions must be: which stratum is fit to rule and by which party is this stratum represented? Here Weber’s view of the situation in Germany was highly critical. In the absence

3 For a discussion of the plebiscitary nature of Weber’s view of democracy, see Baehr 1998, ch.2.

4 Michael Mann has recently offered a detailed and disturbing account of the effects of the confusion of these two categories. See Mann (2005: 34–110).

of an aristocracy “of adequate breadth and political tradition” (Weber, 1917: 119), the cultural and political vacuum is filled by groups whose ethics are shaped by the rigid values of the *Burschenschaften* (student fraternities), *schlagende Verbindungen* (duelling fraternities) and the officer corps. Right of entry and membership of such a society was governed by a single but absolute criterion, namely whether an individual was “*satisfaktionsfähig*” (entitled to give satisfaction in a duel). Thus, the values of such a society are *in principle* incapable of democratization and modernization; status is necessarily ascribed, a principle incompatible with modern capitalism. But the culture of the officer corps and of the “colour students” has another fatal weakness: it lacks that quality to which I have already referred, it is not *weltmännisch* (Weber, 1917: 117). The notion of a German spirit thus gives voice to exactly that political culture that is holding the nation back. In contrast, only the values of the bourgeoisie are suitable to a modern society, because only these are sufficiently individualistic, democratic and worldly: “the Germans are a *plebeian people*—or, if people prefer the term, a bourgeois (*bürgerlich*) people, and this is the only basis on which a specifically ‘German form’ could grow” (Weber, 1917: 121).

Summary

In the late political writings Weber offers pretty much unqualified, though highly instrumental, support for both capitalism and parliamentary democracy on two general grounds: first, they are linked by something stronger than mere historical contingency; secondly, they are complementary revolutionary energies through which the dead-hand of tradition can be lifted and those conservative social forces which ally themselves with it broken. Weber is no less a backer of modernizing revolutions than is Marx, but his revolutionaries sit in company offices or stand on the floor of the stock exchange.⁵ He shares the bourgeois ambitions for modernization in the economic, political *and* cultural spheres, and the content of that modernization reflects bourgeois values. He shares the nationalist aim of creating a nation that is efficient (*tüchtig*), happy (*glücklich*) and valuable (*wertvoll*)

5 Wolin (1981: 412) identifies a similar motivation behind the *Protestant Ethic*: “Weber wanted not only to counter the Marxist explanation of the origins of capitalism, but to celebrate the moral and political superiority of the capitalist hero of the past over the proletarian hero of the present and future.” Though it is clear that for Weber the capitalist can be the hero of the present and future too.

(Weber, 1918a: 134) in the context of increasing international economic and political competition. To this end, since “a modern mass state has only a restricted, not an infinite, number of possible forms to choose from” (Weber, 1918a: 133), the task is to select that form which, though it cannot guarantee the end, can at least maximize our chances of achieving it.

Despite his well-known emphasis on modernity’s value pluralism, his instrumental (*zweckrational*) justification of democratic institutions presupposes one absolute value: national prestige. What distinguishes the nationalism of the late political essays from the chauvinism of his 1895 Freiburg Inaugural Lecture is that economic competition has, in the light of Germany’s defeat in the First World War, largely replaced military competition (Weber, 1895). Weber’s views might be said to exemplify Albert Hirschman’s well-known thesis that in the market economy (capitalism) the “cool” passion of economic interest has come to act as a counterbalance to the hot passions of honour, etc. (Hirschman, 1977: 20–42). In shifting the terms of the debate, Weber himself undergoes this transition from passions to interest, but without altering the ultimate aim: economic success still serves as a means towards national greatness.

Capitalism and Democracy Now

Weber’s thin and instrumental defence of democracy leads him to look not to the internal qualities of “civil” or “political” society as the source of democratic values and guarantor of democracy, but to (i) the role of internal and, more especially, external competition; (ii) to the design of political institutions and the ideal qualities of the professional politician. This places him firmly in the tradition of realists from Machiavelli to Hobbes rather than in that of sociological liberalism of the kind represented by Tocqueville or Durkheim. More importantly, it also raises doubts that such an instrumental and nationally focused defence of democracy is appropriate to, or sufficiently robust for, contemporary circumstances. Ironically, the fact that development has largely followed the course Weber was recommending may mean that his analysis has been overtaken by events.

With respect to the role of international competition in sustaining democracy, Weber, as already suggested, advances two seemingly inconsistent views: first, there are no absolute objectively justifiable values and the choice between ends is merely subjective; secondly, he justifies nationalism as the paramount value and advocates a strong *Machtstaat* politics for Ger-

many. Building on David Beetham's distinction between inward- and outward-looking societies, Antonino Palumbo and I have emphasized the significance of competition in Weber's vision of politics (Palumbo and Scott, 2003: 368-391). The choice was between "an inward- and an outward-looking society; between a narrow preoccupation with the nation's internal affairs and the development of a wider consciousness through the pursuit of 'world-political tasks'" (Beetham, 1974: 143). This too is consistent with his rejection of a conservative notion of the German spirit discussed above. As Beetham notes, "Weber's commitment to the nation [is] based on a more universal premise than simply allegiance to the specific value of *German* culture." He seeks to maintain an open and pluralist international system in order to promote interstate competition and its attendant benefits (Bellamy, 1992: 178-179). Such a view, we argued, was shaped by a faith in the creative power of Nietzschean struggles for existence and affirmation of the self. Thus, for example, on the Weberian view, patriotism is at one and the same time a way of preserving valuable cultural elements, of creating a cultural identity, of supplying the masses with a sense of embeddedness, and of maintaining a pluralist and dynamic international setting (Palumbo and Scott, 2003: 384).

It is this context of international competition that makes the selection of the best—in the sense of the most efficient (fittest)—political institutions, and indeed cultural values, vital. A nostalgic adherence to institutions and values that are no longer "*tauglich*" (fit for its purpose) will condemn the nation to failure in a context of sharpened international competition. Such arguments have become the common sense of modern capitalism. If there is a context in which they are still relevant in their original form, then it is in those societies where the transition to capitalism is underway, and where "conservative" arguments are still to be heard. This, however, should not lead us to take their validity for granted, nor to neglect what is contentious or tendentious in them. While Weber's arguments are more subtle than the uses made of them by modernization theorists in the 1950s through to the 1970s—e.g. in recognizing that institutional design can at best remove "mechanical hindrances" to development rather than guaranteeing it (Weber, 1918a: 134)—he nevertheless plays down the varieties of institutional forms that capitalism can adopt (Hall and Soskice, 2001: 1-70).

From international to global competition

At least superficially, Weber adopts a modernizing rhetoric not dissimi-

lar to that of advocates of globalization in its neo-liberal guise: there are changes going on at the international/global level that sharpen competition (Weber's "iron-hard spring"). Nation states must either adapt or lose out. But it is precisely the strong thesis of advocates (and indeed critics) of economic globalization that provides the most fundamental challenge to Weber's views on the relationship between capitalism, democracy and the nation. If contemporary globalization really does mean the decline of the nation state (Ohmae, 1990: 180-198) or its "hollowing out" (Rhodes, 1994: 138-151), then the institutional framework which Weber's arguments must assume—states as relatively autonomous spatial entities in a relation of mutual competition—is no longer in place. Furthermore, the argument that politics trumps economics—that economy serves *Staatsraison*—would no longer be valid. The very process of international competition that Weber commends in the interest of the nation would have now washed the ground from under the nation state, the latter having no option but to bend to the logic of a mobile global capitalism. This is a prospect that Weber's political argument could not allow him to contemplate. The nation state is the baseline from which all else follows. He had to adhere to the view set out in the 1895 lecture: the economy serves *Staatsraison*. If the diagnosis of contemporary globalizers is correct, then Weber's position would indeed have been overtaken by events: the efforts of nation states to keep pace with economic developments ultimately weaken them, or render them redundant; questions of governance shift from the arena of national electoral politics to that of international institutions that operate at a supra-state level. In another sphere, these arguments are echoed by theorists of cultural globalization who make analogous claims with respect to cultural practices. Such arguments would be no less damaging to his analysis: the international context is no longer one of competing cultural *pluralism*, but of increasing cultural *homogeneity*. It is not only the conservative notion of an essential German spirit, but the very notion of a national culture—of the kind Weber too presupposes—that becomes increasingly meaningless in a context of flows of populations, cultural goods, technologies, ideas and values (Appadurai, 1990: 295-310). Like the nation state at the political level, national culture becomes the missing middle as the cultural action increasingly takes place at either the global or the local level; a process for which the term "glocalization" has been coined.

However, such arguments are highly controversial, and the critique of these strong versions of globalization theory tends, if anything, to vindicate

Weber's position. Those who are sceptical of the globalizers' claims have argued that nation states are more robust, and national institutions more path dependent, than either globalization supporters or critics allow (e.g. Hirst and Thompson, 1996: 170–194), and that the degree of cultural exchange has been exaggerated (e.g. Mann, 1997: 472–496). There is a growing body of literature arguing that we are witnessing not the hollowing out or decline of the (nation) state, but the *transformation of its capacities* (e.g. Weiss, 1998: 188–212; Waltz, 1999: 693–700 and Brenner, 2004: 447–488).⁶ Thus, for example, after reviewing the state of the current world order, Kenneth Waltz concludes with what is essentially a reaffirmation of Weber's 1895 position: “politics, as usual, prevails over economics” (Waltz, 1999: 700).

Nevertheless, even if Weber's analysis emerges relatively unscathed from the strong globalization thesis that has been advanced over the last fifteen to twenty years, those arguments which speak of the transformation of state capacity rather than its absolute decline also challenge some of the fundamental assumptions with which he was working. At least two factors are relevant here: (i) the possible breakdown of institutional “pillarization”—i.e. the institutional barriers between state and market; (ii) the erosion of collective—and specifically class-based—collective identities. I shall briefly discuss both points.

Although Weber was fully aware that capitalism and the modern state shared a common legal-rational logic, and even that the state was itself a form of “enterprise” (*Betrieb*) (Weber, 1918a: 146), his argument that capitalism and democracy are mutually supportive presupposes their institutional *separability*. This can clearly be seen in his criticisms of socialism. In the essay on socialism (Weber, 1918b), he argued that where the two poles of power—capitalism (based upon a monopoly of the means of production) and the state (based upon a monopoly of the means of coercion) become fused, the worker is exposed not merely to economic *exploitation* but also to political *subjugation*. Such conditions come to resemble pre-capitalist relations in which “the master was not a simple employer, but rather a political autocrat” (Weber, 1894: 161). Under socialism, there is neither a counterweight (*Gegengewicht*—a term he repeatedly uses) to the power of the state, nor

6 Brenner is also highly critical of Weber who he sees as taking territory as a given and treating the nation state as a fixed “*container*” rather than a shifting *spatial process* (Brenner, 2004: 451). However, this criticism seems to me less deadly than Brenner assumes. It ignores the historical dimension of Weber's approach.

supervision, by the state, of economic enterprises:

whereas the political and private economic bureaucracies [...] exist alongside one another at present, as separate entities, so that economic power can still be curbed by political power, the two bureaucracies would then [under socialism] be a single body with identical interests and could no longer be supervised or controlled. (Weber, 1918b: 286)

Under capitalism, the power of the state is limited not merely by institutional checks and balances, but also by the existence of a second source of social power, namely the capitalist enterprises and the market. In this sense, the institution of the state and the market are “pillarized”: relatively autonomous with mutually respected boundaries, but supporting a wider structure. While Weber is aware that the fusion of the state and capitalism threaten institutional pillarization, the focus of his concern was more-or-less exclusively on the grip of bureaucracy over all aspects of social life, particularly where welfare measures once more firmly anchored quasi political rights in employment status. He thus does not consider the mirror possibility, namely that capitalism itself may come to undermine the partial autonomy of the institutions of state and market due to the unfettering of its own dynamic from political control. But this is exactly what is being increasingly argued by political sociologists and political scientists concerned with the transformation of state capacity.

One example here is the recent work of Colin Crouch (2001: 240-249; 2004: 31-52), which sums up a number of contemporary concerns and arguments. Crouch argues that by reducing the state’s role to that of providing a “level playing field” for market relations, New Right policies over the last twenty-five years have increasingly subordinated the state to the market. Rather than further separating state and market, such policies have, paradoxically, opened up the former to corporate interests and weakened rather than strengthened the divide. In other words, institutional pillarization has been breaking down, but in a one-sided manner:

This logical conclusion of neo-liberal thinking breaks with the fundamental liberal principle with which it started: mutual recognition of the separate spheres of state and market, their different logics and their respective goals. Not only is the state seen as having no goals or *modi operandi* different from those of market actors, but it is seen to gain by

subordinating its activities as much as possible to those of market actors. (Crouch, 2001: 248)

On this view, advanced capitalism comes to structurally resemble socialism on Weber's account of it. In both cases, two separate but mutually supporting pillars of power, which might check each other's tendency to become all-encompassing, have been partially fused, removing potentially constructive synergies. That it is the market rather than the state that now becomes the dominant partner does not make the loss of balance between state and market less threatening to what Weber considers the residue of autonomy that may still be possible under conditions of rational, bureaucratic domination.

In the current literature, three aspects of the increasing permeability of state and market are frequently mentioned: first, the increasing dependence of political parties—as bearers of organized civil society interests—upon corporate funding as they move away from mass membership; secondly, the remodelling of public service provision along market lines taking the private firm as the paradigm (e.g. Marquand, 2004: 6–36); thirdly, the rapid spread of managerialist techniques of organizational governance—particularly target-setting and audit—into the public sphere (Power, 1997: 1–68). Under such conditions, critics fear that politics will be reduced to management (Hirst, 1996: 97–116), political parties to “phantom firms” (Crouch, 2004: 70–77) and the autonomy and independence of the civil service—and thus its control function—weakened or lost (du Gay, 2000: 1–13). Since “a public domain protected from market power is a precondition of democratic governance” (Marquand, 2004: 132), contemporary concerns about the effects of unfettered market influence closely echo the themes of Weber's original critique of socialism, but the perceived danger comes from the opposite direction.

The second development that is frequently discussed represents a more profound shift in the sociological framework away from that with which Weber was operating. That earlier sociological context was one of the increasing massification of society, and with it the emergence of large-scale collective identities, notably, of course, class. Thus, binding the masses in to democracy—without according them real power—was one of the major political challenges that Weber's arguments were intended to address (Baehr, 1990: 242–265; Bellamy, 2003: 70–103). Weber's emphasis on the channelling of “negative politics” into a positive force of legitimation and sup-

port for the politician in his struggle against the administrative apparatus reflects this context. Although controversial, theories of class dealignment and “post-modernization” point to the increasing fragmentation of such collective identities, the growing importance of other political cleavages, and the declining size of the manual working class in advanced societies (see Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 28–89 for a strong version of these arguments). Whereas Weber saw the ‘masses’ in general, and the working class in particular, as a potential danger to democracy, paradoxically, recent arguments in political sociology have identified the decline of such large-scale collective identities as a factor that may weaken democratic institutions. In the absence of danger—and thus also control—from below, political elites are thought to have become increasingly “disembedded” from local (and national) social relations. Again, it is Crouch who draws the potential political lessons from such developments:

The manual working class had begun the [20th] century as the future battering on the door, representing the collective interest in an age damaged by individualism: it brought the message of universal citizenship and the possibilities of mass consumption in a society that knew only luxury goods for the rich and subsistence for the poor. By the end it represented history’s losers. (Crouch, 2004: 56)

The new freedoms from constraint from below are said to contribute to what Crouch characterizes as the emergence of “post-democratic” practices within a context that has remained formally democratic, but in which democratic institutions have increasingly been bypassed and/or marginalized.

Unlike the strong globalization thesis, these arguments focusing upon the transformation of state capacities and styles of governance do not bluntly imply that Weber’s original arguments are outmoded. Rather, the point is that under these new conditions those arguments are no longer sufficiently robust to defend democracy against encroachment. Even if we remain on the level of Weber’s instrumentalist justification for liberal democracy, the exclusive emphasis upon national interest is too narrow to address current concerns, and his elitism is unhelpful under conditions in which it is the elite that has become increasingly unconstrained, and thus freer to act according to its own arbitrary will, and to forge its own alliances.

In the light of these concerns, I shall conclude by arguing that (i) we need an instrumental justification for democracy that is intrinsically more

egalitarian in character than Weber's plea in the name of the nation; (ii) his emphasis upon leadership and upon the particular qualities of the political leader is too narrow and places too much faith on the virtue of the individual political actor. With regard to the first point, I shall contrast Weber's instrumentalism with that of the development economist Amarta Sen, and with respect to the second point, I want to refer back to an argument made some time ago by Sheldon Wolin (2005: 376–383), namely that Weber's Machiavellian conception of leadership is the Achilles heel of his vision of politics.

From Staatsräson to human agency

Amarta Sen's, rightly celebrated, analysis of the relationship between development, the market and democracy has striking points of similarity and contrast to the Weberian views discussed here. Just as Weber insisted, against theories of the primacy of the economic, that economic action was a form of *social* action, so Sen (1999: 31) asserts that "individual freedom is quintessentially a social product". The implication is that economic growth is not, as it is for economic liberals, an end in itself:

The usefulness of wealth lies in the things that it allows us to do—the substantial freedoms it helps us to achieve. But this relation is neither exclusive (since there are significant influences on our lives other than wealth), nor uniform (since the impact of wealth on our lives varies with other influences). (Sen, 1999: 14)

However, in this quote a fundamental difference also emerges. While Sen shares Weber's view that there is normally a positive relationship between democracy and market freedoms, and thus adopts a similarly instrumentalist approach, whereas for Weber it is the national interest that is the single end towards which democracy and capitalism are the means, for Sen it is human capacity that plays this role. It is in this sense that Sen's concern is more *intrinsically* egalitarian than Weber's. It is not the prestige of the nation, but an increase in human agency (to adopt a more sociological language) that is the end towards which the market is usually, but not inevitably, the means. Sen is not arguing the case for the automatic equation of trade and freedom here, but using freedom as the criterion for assessing economic development. Economic freedom is one, albeit vital, component of individual freedom. For example, barring women from the labour market

typically reduces their agency by maintaining their dependence upon husbands or other male relatives. Involvement in the labour market usually increases it by weakening those dependencies.⁷ The neo-liberal version of the globalizing project ascribes priority to the economic by arguing, or simply asserting, that social and political improvement is either a prerequisite for, or will follow more-or-less automatically on from, economic growth or from free trade. Sen inverts these relations: it is freedom rather than economic development in itself that is the criterion against which progress is to be assessed.

Sen argues not only that there is good empirical evidence to support the argument that democracy is instrumentally useful in facilitating economic development, he argues (consistent with his notion of human capacity) that freedom is a universal value. In supporting universal human rights, Sen seeks to show that there are intellectual resources in *all* cultural traditions that support freedom and rights against custom and order, and, conversely, there are strong order-based arguments for tradition in the West. Thus, while he recognizes that individualism, including market individualism, is a force against “tradition,” he insists that individualism is a constant component of all cultures and is not necessarily a Western import. This is a position similar to that Weber himself adopted in his early analysis of farm labourers in Prussia (Weber, 1894: 158–187) and Georg Simmel elaborated in the *Philosophy of Money* (Scott, 1998: 105–116). Cultures, for Sen, neither have an essential core, nor do they have a necessary right to survival in their

7 Here Sen seeks to affect something of a gestalt switch in our perception of poverty. Poverty is not low income, but “capability deprivation”, of which, of course, low income is an instance, but so too are low life expectancy (not always associated with low income), illiteracy, lack of access to health care or education, living in a degraded (natural or human) environment, and so on. Sen’s aim is to create a more complex picture of deprivation; one which neither reduces agency to economic factors alone, nor gives in to the relativism sometimes implied in strict theories of relative deprivation. He notes, for example, that blacks in the US have a lower life expectancy—and thus are in this sense “poorer”—than many lower income inhabitants of the Third World. Thus, “*relative* deprivation in terms of *incomes* can yield *absolute* deprivation in terms of *capabilities*” (Sen, 1999: 89). Not only does this offer a more refined picture of where (which kind) of poverty is to be found, but also capability deprivation and its opposite (agency) yield a standard with which, for example, to assess when deregulation is desirable (e.g. because it increases wealth-making capacities by lowering the level of restrictions on economic activity) and when it is not (e.g. because it so weakens the health or educational systems necessity for fuller social agency).

current form unless their members will it. Here again, Sen's argument closely parallels Weber's view that sharing institutions does not in itself weaken local societies. Finally, by democracy, both mean the standard institutions of representative democracy which, for Weber, provide legitimation for the politician in his or her struggle against bureaucracies or, for Sen, force the political elite to take the needs and welfare of the population into account. But even this points to a significant divergence from Weber's position: Sen does not share the former's elitism, nor his pessimism about the moral resources of a wider culture.

Thus, the problem is not the fact that Weber's defence of democracy is instrumental, but rather the choice of ends to which it is the means. The other side of his elitist pessimism is, arguably, an over optimism about the moral qualities of those politicians willing to bear personal responsibility. This shall be our final point in identifying the limits of Weber's vision of politics.

Modernizing Institutions and the Professional Politician

Weber makes the case for institutional reform via a critique of the main alternative "solution" to political malaise: strong leadership. A "new Bismarck" is not a potential solution to political crisis, and the hope for such a thing is itself one of its symptoms. Weber argues that Caesarist leadership can become an obstacle to finding effective institutional arrangements.⁸ Even where such a figure takes centre stage, short-term benefit will be paid for with long-term damage to political institutions and political culture. In the case of Bismarck, "his rule led the nation to lose the habit of sharing responsibility", left behind "a nation *entirely without political will*" and "accustomed to *submit passively*" (Weber, 1918a: 144). In the longer-term Caesarism will reinforce the tendency towards *Beamtenherrschaft* (rule by officials): "ever since Bismarck's resignation, Germany has been governed by men who were 'officials' (in mentality) because Bismarck had excluded all other political minds besides his own" (Weber, 1918a: 161). So it is not to the leader we should look to for the solution, but to institutions themselves and to their reform.

Once more, Weber's preferred solution is the modernization of German politics through the adoption of now standard features of representative democracy: parliaments, party competition, a quasi-plebiscitary system of

8 Again, see Baehr 1998 for a very useful discussion.

elections and ambitious politicians competing for power and personal glory. He is in fact very explicit about this project of bringing German institutions into line with those of other (Western) nations on the grounds of the latter's objective superiority: "only someone with a regrettable lack of faith in the independence and strength of the German character (*Deutschtum*) could believe that the essential character of the nation would be called into question if we were to share effective institutions for running the state with other nations" (Weber, 1918a: 133). Thus, it is on grounds of efficiency rather than popular participation that Weber recommends parliamentary democracy (Bellamy, 1992: 211–214). The efficiency of democratic institutional arrangements is measured against their ability to redress two key political effects of bureaucratic domination: (i) the reduction of politics to the competition of material interests, which allows bureaucracy to maintain its power merely by playing one set of interests off against another; (ii) the refusal of officials, or those politicians with the mentality of officials, to take *personal* responsibility for their actions. But it is not the exceptional leader in whom we should place our faith, but in everyday professional politicians: "What we lacked was *leadership* of the state by a *politician*, which does not mean a political genius (they can only be expected every few centuries), nor even an important political talent, but simply by anyone who is a politician *at all*" (Weber, 1918a: 162). Parliamentary democracy is the most effective means of putting in place those conditions that facilitate the emergence of such political figures and the constitutional and practical preconditions—crucially the control of budgets—through which they can become effective as a force against civil service administration. But it also creates less formal preconditions for the emergence of political leaders: parliaments act as schooling for politicians and as a mechanism of their selection (*Führerauslese*). Once more it is the parallel between representative democracy and the capitalist enterprise that is the key. Both the entrepreneur and the politician operate in a competitive market, and it is this fact of permanent competition and struggle which hones the skills of each.

However, despite the emphasis upon institutional reform and on the normal—rather than exceptional qualities—of political leaders, the demands that Weber places on the latter are considerable. He is, for example, quite explicit at the start of *Politik als Beruf* that of the three types of legitimate authority—traditional, charismatic and legal-rational—it is the second that interests him. The modern professional politician (*Berufspolitiker*) is, or can be, a charismatic type operating within a context that is itself

governed by legal-rational rules and procedures. The party leader “sprang from the soil of the constitutional state” (Weber, 1919a: 313). His historic forerunner is the servant of princes, but it is only in the West that this figure is “also to be found in the service of powers other than the princes alone” (Weber, 1919a: 316). Thus, Weber’s politician is neither strictly a prince, nor the direct descendent of princes. Rather, in a kind of master-servant dialectic, the profession of princely advisor—eventually minister—has come to develop an autonomy from, and eventually more significance than, princes themselves. Here Weber refers to two processes: “the rise of princely absolutism *vis-à-vis* the estates and the prince’s gradual abdication of personal rule to the specialist officials to whom he owed this victory” (Weber, 1919a: 322). The *Berufspolitiker* is not the successor but the usurper of princely powers, and it is on his or her shoulders that Weber places the remaining burden of responsibility for maintaining a worthy and valuable nation.

The parallels between Weber and Machiavelli on these points have been noted before (e.g. Wolin, 2005: 175–213; Pocock, 1975: 462–505), and have recently been elaborated by Kari Palonen (2002: 116–122). In Pocock’s influential interpretation, Machiavelli is said to be working in a tradition in which *virtù* was the imposition of form on *fortuna* via action; via an “innovation” that “opens the door to fortune because it offends some and disturbs all” (Pocock, 1975: 160). Machiavelli’s concern, and Weber’s, was to identify the specific qualities (*virtù* for Machiavelli, *Tugenden* for Weber) that are required in order to rule effectively where the ruler aspires to be more than a mere administrator who reproduces the given material. For both Machiavelli and Weber, the support of the people is necessary for the prince/politician in his or her struggle against established forces. However, whereas Weber tends to view the people (*das Volk*) as irresponsible and fickle, Machiavelli argues that the favour of the people can be a firm foundation since they act as friends to the leader in times of adversity. Where the private citizen rules with favour of the people, Machiavelli ascribes to the latter the role of balancing the forces that potentially oppose the ruler just as Weber’s ascribes to plebiscitary democracy the function of acting as a counter-weight to another great power, namely that of bureaucracy (Weber, 1919b: 304–308).

For both authors, the personal quality of the leader is central. For Weber, these qualities are analogous to those of the entrepreneur (Pocock’s “innovator”). If the state is an enterprise, then the politician is its entrepreneur: “The struggle for personal power and the acceptance of full *personal*

responsibility for one's cause (Sache) which is the consequence of such power—this is the very element in which the politician and the entrepreneur live and breathe” (Weber, 1918a: 161). Finally, this ability must rest upon a refined sense of what is politically possible (Machiavelli's distinction between the “possible” and “desirable”; Weber's distinction between the ethic of responsibility and ethic of conviction), and upon a strict separation between politics and morality: morality “is not a hired cab which one may stop at will and climb into or out of as one sees fit” (Weber, 1919a: 358). Both authors leave a universalizing morality behind; both propose a moral pluralism in which the standards we apply to politics are those appropriate to it and not those imported from any other realm of worldly or unworldly activity. Those who are unclear about this had better not involve themselves in politics since the attempt to introduce a cosmic morality into politics “lacks dignity and will have dire consequences” (Weber, 1919a: 356). Thus, Weber's equivalent of those who “imagine for themselves republics and principalities that no one has ever seen or known” (Machiavelli, 1997: 57) are those who in seeking to use political means—violence—to create justice on earth end up bringing about “exactly the *same* results as any militarist dictator” (Weber, 1919a: 357).

However, can the professional politician bear the weight of responsibility Weber places on his/her shoulders? What Pocock hints at, the political theorist Sheldon Wolin had already made explicit in the following comment on *Politik als Beruf*:

... along with its clear-eyed recognition of the way bureaucracy has invaded all political realms—party, government, and legislator—Weber plaintively pleaded for a conception of political leadership cut to truly classical proportions. Weber's leader is a political hero, rising to heights of moral passion and grandeur, harried by a deep sense of responsibility. But at the bottom, he is a figure as futile and pathetic as his classical counterpart. The fate of the classical hero was that he could never overcome contingency or *fortuna*; the special irony of the modern hero is that he struggles in a world where contingency has been routed by bureaucratized procedures and nothing remains for the hero to contend against. Weber's political leader is rendered superfluous by the very bureaucratic world that Weber discovered; even charisma has been bureaucratized. (Wolin, 2005: 379–380)

Wolin is operating here with a rationalization thesis consistent with that proposed by Weber, but, writing further down the line, the living machine (bureaucracy) makes even Weber's faint hope in the power of the politician look desperate. Wolin's view is that Weber overloads this politician with expectations, the meeting of which would require superhuman moral rectitude. Weber's realism about political institutions and the low expectations that he places on the moral resources of community find compensation in the idealisation of the qualities not of the political genius, but of the normal professional politician who is capable of balancing passion with a sense of proportion. The politician must bear heroic personal responsibility to compensate both for the amoral nature of the bureaucratic apparatus and the irresponsibility of the masses. Neither Weber's nationalism nor the elitism that leads him to place a professional politician in the heroic pose of a warrior fighting the combined forces of mass irrationality and bureaucratic indifference seem appropriate to an age in which political and economic interests have become increasingly confused, and in which bureaucracy has been refashioned in the image of the firm.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that Weber's sociologically realistic and instrumentalist vision of politics retains much of its power. I have also defended his analysis against strong versions of the globalization thesis (whether in an acclamatory or critical guise). However, I have suggested that the strong nationalism and elitism that underpins his analysis is not only antithetical to "progressive" contemporary tastes, but also, and more importantly, that it renders Weber's arguments insufficiently robust for maintaining the kind of balance between political, economic and cultural systems, which he clearly believed was necessary, under conditions in which the problem is not so much how to bind the masses into society but its elites, and in which the kind of institutional pillarization his argument presupposed has been weakened not by the subordination of the market to the state, as he feared, but, in the current post-Keynesian world, of the state to the market.

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舊論新局：韋伯對現代政治的識見 於今之適用與不適用處

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摘 要

在這篇論文裡我打算重探韋伯對資本主義、自由、民主與民族間關係的看法，以檢視他的分析對當代的情勢是否仍具有效力，還是已不再有效。雖然我們仍然可以從韋伯處理這些複雜關係的方式中學到很多，但塑造這些關係的制度條件是否已經大幅改變，而使得韋伯的主要觀點不再有效或有用？我們一方面可以將韋伯置於那種以資本主義創造財富並促進民主為由，而正當化市場——資本主義——的自由主義之悠久傳統中，但他其實代表著一個轉捩點，從他以後，前述觀點被轉譯成當代社會科學的語言。這或許能說明為何他會對資本主義與民主間的關連，抱持較為偶然性、實用性及有條件的肯定。大衛·比頓（David Beetham）因而將韋伯描述成一個「沒有自由主義價值的自由派」（Beetham, 1989: 312）。正是因為支持資本主義與民主的主張，被重新置入偶然形成的社會關係中，因而使得形塑兩者的背景制度框架變得重要。如果這些背景條件不再成立，則韋伯的論點也就隨之失效。在我們以當代的脈絡檢視這項問題之前，我們必須重構原始的論點。

關鍵字：馬克斯·韋伯、資本主義、民主、全球競爭