

Weber's
**POLITICAL
SOCIOLOGY**

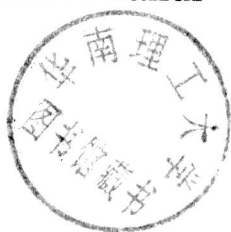


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E200603881



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Weber's Political Sociology

© Publisher

First Edition, 2006

ISBN: 81-8220-144-6

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PRINTED IN INDIA

Published by Dr. N.K. Singh for Global Vision Publishing House, New Delhi-2 and *Printed at* Balaji Offset, Naveen Shahdara, Delhi-32.

WEBER'S POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

PREFACE

Max Weber, grew up in Germany during the Bismarckian era, was a political realist and an analyst of power politics. He examined constitutional problems in the spirit of political engineering, yet he was deeply concerned with ethical problems and with the cultural significance of the power struggle. There are several contradictions in his political analysis: he was a monarchist who openly denounced the Kaiser; later, a liberal with a pessimistic view of the masses and an awareness of the need for personal leadership; and a passionate individualist faced with the rising forces of collectivism.

These contradictions prevented Weber from finding outlets for his drive to act decisively and led him instead to divert his great energies into his scholarly work. But even in his scholarly work contradictions prevailed. Every word of Weber's seems a precarious victory over the complexity of facts; despite their massive scope, his writings are fragments. Substantively, his work bristles with an awareness of the unresolved paradoxes of the human condition, which Weber sought to understand on the basis of his extraordinary historical knowledge and to conceptualise at a level between historical description and a theory of sociological universals.

The primary object of this book is to present comprehensive vision of Weber's political sociology, in which seven important papers have been included such as *Political Events; Politics as*

a Vocation; Structures of Power; Class, Status, Party; Bureaucracy; Charismatic Authority; and the Meaning of Discipline. The work will be undoubtedly an important source of information about the political sociology to students, scholars and teachers. In addition, it should prove useful to politicians, social activists, public servants, and the general readers. Constructive comments, criticisms, and suggestions are sought for.

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INTRODUCTION

Politics is a common activity of human beings; it fills human history. It has assumed different forms over the ages; it has been based on different principles and has produced the most varied institutions. This is the aspect which interests the sociologist. Thus defined, political action is obviously not to be confused with the state, which is only one of its historical expressions, and precisely the one corresponding to the trend of modern civilisation toward rationalisation. There have been political units other than states, from cities to empires. Politics thus predates the state, even if in our day political activity tends to be reduced to state action or to pattern itself on certain aspects thereof.

Politics and the States

Weber defines the state as the political structure or grouping which "successfully upholds a claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order."¹ That is its specific character, to which must be added others. On the one hand, it implies a rationalisation of law, with consequences such as specialisation of the legislative and judicial powers and establishment of a police force responsible for protecting the security of individuals and ensuring law and order; on the other hand, it is dependent upon a rational administration, based on explicit rules, which enable it to intervene in the most

various areas, from education to health, economic action and even culture; finally, it possesses a virtually permanent military force. In Weber's view, a socialist state favouring systematic-state planning is not an original structure, save perhaps by reason of the charismatic character of the revolution which brings it into being, for in all other respects it does no more than carry the rationalisation of political society a step further. Basically, socialism is merely a typical form of the modern state.

Weber observed an analogous development in the structures of the churches as hierocratic powers which, like every other power, use psychic coercion and claim a monopoly thereon in the form of an institution which dispenses or refuses the spiritual benefits of salvation. Hierocracy is characterised by spiritual domination; to put it another way, the churches assume the character of an undertaking based on rational rules and an administrative authority.

Weber was less concerned, however, to analyse the historical structure of the state than to clarify the nature of the political phenomenon in general. For the legitimate use of violence has belonged to other groups than the political unit: to kinship groups, to corporations or again to feudal lords. The political organisation is thus far from having always possessed the institutional rigour of the modern state; in earlier times, it was sometimes no more than an amorphous structure, or even an occasional and ephemeral association. Weber puts this idea in yet another form: the political unit has always constituted a grouping (*Verband*), and only in our own day has it assumed the character of a rigid institution (*Anstalt*). We therefore have to explain the specific nature of the political group if we wish to understand the political phenomenon as such.

Political activity is characterised in the first place by the fact that it takes place within a circumscribed territory. Its frontiers do not have to be strictly established; they may be variable; but without the existence of a territory individuating

the group, there can be no politics. A consequence is the characteristic separation between internal and external, regardless of the form of the internal order or that of the external relations. This separation is inherent in the concept of territory.

Secondly, those who live within the frontiers of the group adopt a form of conduct meaningfully oriented in relation to that territory and the corresponding community, in the sense that their activity is conditioned by the authority responsible for maintaining order, involving the possible use of coercion and the obligation to defend their integrity as a community. At the same time, the members of the political group find within it a number of specific advantages which provide new opportunities for their activity in general.

Thirdly, the instrument employed by political action is force, and potentially violence. Of course, it also uses all other conceivable methods to bring its undertakings to a successful conclusion, but, in the event of the failure of other methods, force is its *ultima ratio*, its specific means. It follows that domination (*Herrschaft*) is central to the political phenomenon and that the political group is essentially a group exercising domination. Political action may consequently be defined as the activity which claims the right of domination on behalf of the authority established in a territory, with the possibility of using force or violence in case of need, either in order to maintain internal order and the advantages which it entails, or to defend the community against external threat. In a word, politics is the process which ceaselessly aims at forming, developing, obstructing, shifting or overturning the relationships of domination.

Domination is the practical and empirical expression of power (*Macht*). Weber defines power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance," and domination as "the probability that a command with a given specific content

will be obeyed by a given group of persons.”² Neither of these is peculiar to politics alone, since there exist other circumstances or necessities (economic, pedagogical, etc.) where men also have to assert their will. They become political when the will is meaningfully oriented in relation to a territorial grouping with a view to achieving a goal which is meaningful only through the existence of that group. There is nothing political in putting power at the service of a strike with a view to obtaining material advantages (better pay or other conditions of work) so long as such action is not aimed at the domination of the territorial group as a whole; in other words, so long as it is respectful of established authority and regulations.

Underlying all political domination is the fundamental relationship of command and obedience. Provided the order is carried out, the person in command possesses authority, regardless of the reasons which prompt the members to submit (fear, respect, advantage, expediency, tradition, etc.). Obedience signifies that the members of a political unit act as persons who regard the content of the command as the precept governing their individual conduct, simply because they formally recognise its necessity, independently of their personal opinions on the merits or demerits of the command as such.

The exercise of authority is by its very nature the factor of organisation of the group; in our day, it is generally exercised on the basis of a highly structured organisation, thanks to the existence of an administration, a permanent apparatus of coercion, rational regulations, etc., which serve as safeguards of the continuity of political activity. This situation, however, is characteristic only of the modern state and not of politics in general, for political groups have existed without any established administration, or where the political functions were performed by slaves or individuals personally attached to the sovereign. The relationship of command and obedience means that any domination will be exercised by a small number—a minority

which in one way or another imposes its views on the majority. There is no government of all by all, nor even of the minority by the majority.

The democratic system may make it appear that this is not so, thanks to the elective process and other forms of majority consultations, but in fact it is always a minority which decides and which orients the general political activity of the group according to its views. From this, there follows a second consequence: in so far as the apparatus of domination succeeds in securing its continuity, it tends inevitably to wrap its intentions and some of its actions and decisions in a cloak of secrecy. This is an indispensable condition of all coherent and effective political activity. While the nature and the number of actions which governments conceal may vary from one system to another, or from one state to another, it remains that there is no form of domination which does not remain secret in some essential points.

Prestige and Other Concepts

The power exercised by a political group is generally accompanied, even among its members, by a sentiment of pride and arrogance which may, in given circumstances, assume an aggressive character. Some political units—generally small nations like Switzerland or Norway—while forcefully expressing their pride, generally relate that sentiment merely to their autonomous status, being jealous only of their independence, of the exemplary character of their institutions or simply of their history. Political pride may also assert itself in the play of foreign relations, as in the overbearing attitude of the country which pursues policies of “greatness,” “honour” and power in the world; then we have desire for prestige. This latter concept is fundamental, in Weber’s view, because it throws light on certain political phenomena such as that of “great power,” nation, or imperialism. It undoubtedly implies an irrational aspiration; nevertheless, without it, some international relationships, such as hegemony or

colonialism, would be incomprehensible. Desire for prestige appears as a dynamic factor of politics.

Theoretically, every political power is a potential aspirant to prestige; because of the competition and rivalry between political units, whether on commercial, ideological or any other grounds, it is natural that each should seek to play a historical role in which it can take pride, or champion a solution which it regards as preferable to those presented by other countries. To seek to influence international relations, whether for purposes of annexation or aggression or in order to contribute to pacification, is to assert the will to prestige. Clearly, therefore, the "great powers" which in our day hold the key to peace or war are actuated by this motive more than the rest. The economic capabilities of those countries are of course a major factor, but without the specific passion for prestige—in other words, if we do not take account of the role which they desire to play the motivation of most of their actions will remain incomprehensible.

Changes of system do not affect this fundamental attitude. Thus while the economic factor, for instance, has rightly been regarded as one of the constituents of imperialism, Weber rejected the exclusively economic explanation in vogue in his day, particularly among Marxists, and maintained that imperialism is also in large measure the expression of a desire for prestige. States with a feudal structure are perhaps least drawn to this form of political expression. On the other hand, since the socialist countries constitute merely a particular type of the modern state, they too will display imperialistic tendencies. Indeed, it is hard to see why their attitude toward weaker states should differ from the familiar attitude of the great powers in that respect; moreover, because of its internationalist vocation, socialism presents itself as a victorious idea aspiring to the widest political propagation and expansion.

In common parlance, "national state" in our day means simply "state." But what is a nation? Is it an ethnic reality based

on racial community? This definition does not correspond with the facts; many examples, including that of Alsace (annexed by Germany at the time when Weber was writing his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*), belie that notion. For we see that the bond created between the Alsatians and France through their participation in the historical destinies of the French Revolution, and their consequent contribution to the overthrow of feudalism, is stronger than the one existing between the Alsatians and Germany by reason of a common racial origin. The criterion of linguistic or confessional community is equally inadequate.

The nation is primarily the expression of power based on the passion for prestige: Neither politically nor conceptually is it a univocal term (national sentiment is variously expressed by the English, the Americans, the Russians, the Germans or the French); an analysis could be developed in this connection of the attitude peculiar to each nation. Because it is based on prestige, the nation is an emotional reality belonging to the sphere of evaluations and faith. It is, therefore, highly probable that nationalism will continue to be a determining political factor, particularly since the prestige of power and that of culture usually go hand in hand although it cannot be said that such concomitance serves the cause of cultural development.

Notwithstanding the humanitarian and egalitarian programme of certain parties, they too are power organisations. Weber defines the party as "an associative type of social relationship, membership in which rests on formally free recruitment. The end to which its activity is devoted is to secure power within a corporate group for its leaders in order to attain ideal or material advantages for its active members. These advantages may consist in the realisation of certain objective policies or the attainment of personal advantages or both."³ Unlike social classes, parties are always associative relationships, because they have specific goals, such as the execution of a programme or the attainment of lucrative positions. They thus constitute an apparatus, or an

undertaking, based on power and intended to procure it through the domination which they claim to exercise.

It is possible to develop an analysis of parties (which Weber was content to outline) according to whether they constitute permanent or ephemeral organisations, whether they are based on patronage, class or ideology, or again, whether their structure is juridical, traditionalist or charismatic. Weber laid particular emphasis on the role of large-scale contributors to party funds, which is often neglected. Contrary to what might have been anticipated, parties based on class ideology do not reject such patrons, as we see from the German Socialist party, which was financed by Paul Singer, or again from the Russian revolutionary parties. Another point which the sociologist must examine is that parties are combat organisations and that their efficacy in the rivalry for power depends in large measure on the prestige of their leaders. There may even be a contradiction between the apparent internal democracy of a party and the devotion of the activists to the person of the individual who has succeeded in gaining control of the apparatus. In general, organisations intended simply to advance the material interests of their members display more hostility to the charismatic leader than do ideological parties.

At the time when Weber was writing *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, the racist ideology was beginning to gain ground in Germany, under the cloak of a so-called science of anthropology. As early as 1910, Weber took a clear stand against the movement at a congress of the German Sociological Society, explaining that race is an ambiguous concept which remains undifferentiated, and cannot be used scientifically, but only evaluatively. Hence, from a strictly sociological point of view, statements such as "the vigour of a society depends on the vigour of the race" or "the race reacts in a given manner," or again, the expression "racial unity," are devoid of meaning.

In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Weber approached the problem quite differently, concentrating on the ethnic rather than on the anthropological aspect. The sociology of politics, in so far as it aspires to the title of a science, must not issue value judgments or condemn a political opinion, but must seek to understand the political choices and the value judgments made by political leaders or groups. The racist ideology must, therefore, be recognised as a power phenomenon. Biology, clearly, can no more be regarded as the foundation of the sociology of politics than can economics, psychology or religion. Nevertheless, because certain political parties or structures base their action on the ideology of race, sociology has to take account of it.

A closer look at racism shows it to be an essentially subjective and negative concept, since it asserts the superiority of blood without valid reason, and leads to a segregation based on contempt and superstition. In addition, the meager results culled by the science of race are all debatable. Nevertheless, racism is a determining factor of power and therefore of prestige, particularly since the concept of nation introduces ethnic factors, even if the latter do not constitute criteria for its definition. The race concept, then, plays or may play a determining political role to the extent that the idea gains credence that a common existence (*Gemeinsam-keit*) within the confines of specific frontiers is founded on a community (*Gemeinschaft*) of race.

Weber mentions numberless other political concepts, without going into them all and sometimes without giving them so much as the briefest analysis. The concept of collegiality he treats at somewhat greater length, but without introducing any novel insights by comparison with what may be found in other works devoted to the theory of the state. The same applies to his treatment of the concepts of the separation of powers and representation, save that he sought to make his typology more rigorous. The main emphasis in his sociology of politics is on a particular aspect of domination—that of legitimacy, and

particularly on the types of legitimacy, that is, on the various possible ways of conceiving the relationship between command and obedience.

The Three Types of Legitimacy

No form of authority is satisfied with an obedience which is merely external submission on grounds of common sense, expediency or respect; it seeks further to arouse the members of the group to faith in its legitimacy, that is, transform discipline into adherence to the truth which it represents. Weber conceived of three types of legitimate authority. The first, which he called "legal authority," is rational in character; it is based on belief in the rationally established laws and in the legitimacy of the leaders appointed in accordance with the law. The second, or "traditional authority," is based on belief in the sanctity of traditions in force and on the legitimacy of those who are called upon to exercise power. The third, which Weber called "charismatic authority," is based on the members' abandonment of themselves to an individual distinguished by his holiness, his heroism or his exemplariness. Legal authority is the most impersonal; the second is based on piety, and the last is in the realm of the exceptional. Weber makes it clear from the outset that he is referring to ideal types—hence to forms which are seldom if ever encountered in their pristine purity in historical reality; for charismatic authority, for instance, is not wholly lacking in legality, and traditional authority has certain charismatic and even bureaucratic aspects.

The effectiveness of legal authority, Weber says, rests on the acceptance of a number of interrelated ideas. First, that any given legal norm, whether established by agreement or by imposition, is valid on grounds of expediency or rational values or both. Secondly, that every body of law constitutes a system of technical prescriptions or norms; justice consists in the application of general rules to particular cases, while the purpose of the administrative process is to protect people's interests within the