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Max Weber and World War I: Culture and Politics

Like virtually everyone else among the intellectuals on both sides, Max Weber greeted the coming of World War I in 1914 with enthusiasm, hailing it as "gross und wunderbar." Nor did he ever really change this view; "the war was a good war," he unrepentingly held in 1919, after having indignantly rejected, as a member of the German delegation to the Paris peace conference, the sanctimonious Allied pretence to having won the war through superior virtue. "Never before have I felt so strongly the good fortune which has allowed me to be born a German as in these gloomy days of our humiliation." He thought that Germany had lost the war because of incompetent political leadership but had shown her character and would rise again; "History, which has given to us and only to us a second spring-time, will give us a third. Of that I have no doubt."

Weber's reasons for supporting the war, though marked with his own inimitable stamp, were in a general way similar to those which produced the almost manic belligerency of this generation of European writers and thinkers. The war was "great and wonderful" in 1914 because it brought a spirit of community, of adventure and of heroism to replace the gray pall of bourgeois mediocrity, spiritual flaccidity, mendacious commercialism. The greasy till, the shivering prayers, the trash and triviality of a hideously mean-spirited society had led to a counter-revolution of assertive Nietzscheanism which dominated all Europe's serious, avant-garde thought and expression during the years prior to 1914, and prepared them for their collapse into the "August ideas" of regeneration by armed conflict. Hard though it is for a generation of pacifists to understand, to be for war at that moment was to be against the bourgeois Establishment, against decay, against elitism, against the reign of bureaucracy and bourgeois reason. Into this context fits the somber romanticism of the

Weber who sought antidotes to the "iron cage" of rationalization, and "the disenchantment of the world."

Other Weberian ideas, fairly characteristic of the era, may readily be identified: (1) Life as conflict: "to be free of illusions and acquainted with the fundamental fact of the eternal struggle of men with one another," as he had declared in 1895 and continued to believe. ("The war seemed to him a worthwhile experience because it invoked the supremely noble qualities of which men are capable when caught in a crisis situation," Ilse Dronberger remarks.)

(2) The ethic of *Verantwortung*, of responsibility, in a demonic world ruled by power and not goodness: "If we had not wanted to risk this war, we should have abstained from the Reich's founding and remained a people of small states." Having made the choice, Germany could not responsibly refrain from seeing it through with all its risks. And she owed to posterity, as Weber said several times, the right to a choice of alternatives to Russian bureaucratic despotism, AngloSaxon dullness, and French diletantism! No one was prouder of German *Kultur*.

In other words, power exists; if we don't use it, someone will, and we have a right to present future generations with our own distinctive cultural style, as an option. The corollary was that the nation-state is the arena of modern political action, and of cultural creation. Weber of course shared this assumption with many others of this generation, not least in the France of Maurras, Barrés, and Péguy. And he shared the acceptance of a Nietzschean will to power, which meant daring to affirm one's distinctive self, to become fully what one is in full confidence that this essence is worth asserting. The national culture's right of self-affirmation was a matter not of vulgar material strength but of full consciousness. During the war Weber stressed a point he had previously made, that only a politically mature people deserves a world role. Power must be based on culture, on total social development, to be legitimate. Perhaps that student of Weber's, George Lukacs, learned from him this insistence that subjective cultural consciousness must accompany and legitimize seizure of power, though Lukacs transferred the concept from nation to class

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The Max Weber who was not a romantic but a stern realist revealed himself during the war. He soon turned away from the perfervid "August ideas," during which people experienced a kind of revolu-

tionary ecstasy, and to which the great majority of his fellows remained loyal. Opposing any loss of nerve or weakening of will, the 1914 spirit supported war to the utmost, uncompromising peace terms, annexationism and, internally, postponement of reforms for the duration. Weber backed the reforms, both because he saw inept political leadership in urgent need of immediate remedy and because of the principle that "Only a politically mature people is a *Herrenvolk*." The Germans would have no right to win the war and impose victor's terms unless they had developed a political culture more advanced than they presently had. At the same time, on grounds of *Realpolitik*, Weber opposed the annexation of Belgium, and annexations in general. By 1917 he was thinking of a compromise peace rather than victory. Germany must look ahead to the postwar years. She could not possibly gain her goals of world power through this war alone. She would be faced with the old encirclement dilemma. She would need allies, and could not afford to alienate both Russia and the West.¹ Extravagant territorial demands would breed another encirclement and insecurity. Even if she won the war, "a peace whose result was that Germany's boot stood on everyone's toes in Europe . . . would be the end of a real German policy both within and outside of Europe." Weber joined a few other of the *Gelehrter* in preaching moderation. But it was like sanity in a madhouse.

In the spring and summer of 1917 Weber joined in criticism of German policies and leadership, especially the fatal U-boat decision, that resulted in the so-called peace resolution being passed by the Reichstag. His articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* were so bold that they incurred censorship, being a direct attack on the Emperor and the high military leaders who were beginning to dominate German policy, in the absence of any other leadership. The crisis of political leadership, which was leading Germany to disaster, galvanized Weber to sharpen his analysis of the whole German, Bismarckian political system. This constitutes the most important effect of the war on Weber's thought. Practical realities forced him to take up theoretical themes with which he had long been involved, but which now took on a special urgency, as he watched his beloved Germany lose the battles of propaganda, of diplomacy, of policy, negating the heroism of its soldiers by this inept political leadership.

Weber's concern about the absence of a political class in Germany was an old theme. "Since his youth he had dreamed of a political party which could operate on a plane removed from all class and group interests." Looking for an effective governing elite, Weber saw

the decadent Junker aristocracy, the cowardly German bourgeoisie, the inexperienced and politically naive socialists. None was gifted enough, or selfless enough, to govern. The Bismarck system required a powerful autocrat; but the Emperor was a joke. The celebrated bureaucracy could administer but not govern, carry out orders but not make decisions; it was not a *political* class. Politics, Weber came to believe, is a calling, a *Beruf*, the province of a special class or caste. Such a professional political group would "place the power instinct of the nation above every other consideration." It would be the conscious class of the nation as Lenin's party was supposed to be the conscious class of the proletariat.

How to obtain such leadership? The events of the war led Weber to a rather curious position. Germany must adopt democracy and parliamentarianism, not because of their inherent qualities but because in no other way could leaders be trained in the modern age. All that matters is the selection and training of that rare type so lacking in Germany but produced, to Germany's dismay by the British system, in the person of a Gladstone or (now) Lloyd George—the politician who commands the confidence of the masses, who is a great demagogue, but who also possesses keen judgment and a sense of the realities of power. Democracy could not be defended on the dilapidated grounds of natural right or "sovereignty of the people," which was "ideological trash." Its real value lay in raising up and bringing into positions of power political leaders of genuine ability—winners on the *Wahlschlachtfeld*, the electoral battle-ground.

This battlefield, the seat of real power, in the "democracies," no longer lay in Parliament, Weber knew, but in the Party "machine" where feudal-like chieftains did battle with each other for control of an extra-legal apparatus of power, such as Bryce and Ostrogorski had described. Parliament, however, had an indispensable role. Again, its traditional justification, as "representing the people" and checking the power of an absolute monarch, was long outmoded; England, "the parliamentary country par excellence," had had its parliamentary golden age in the aristocratic seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What Parliament now provides is a training ground where the rough-hewn charisma of the demagogic chieftain learns political wisdom. Here, forced to confront the realities of power and to practice the arts of government, the demagogue becomes a statesman. A Lloyd George gained his spurs in the rough-and-tumble of Welsh politics but honed them into tools of government during Parliamentary debates. Able to rally the masses, he also could produce canny

politics. In Vilfredo Pareto's vocabulary, he was a foxy lion. Parliament gave him practical experience of responsible statecraft. A *Führer* who could only please the masses was a mere demagogue. The war experience had shown Weber the danger of popular ideas unchecked by knowledge of the high and difficult art of grand politics. The August ideas, annexation fever, the U-boat decision, all this to Weber was "hysteria" and "demagoguery." What was lacking in Germany was not so much popularity as professional skill in statecraft. The Parliamentary experience could provide the latter.

Between his great series of articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1917, boldly attacking the Kaiser's government and demanding full parliamentizing of the Reich, and 1919, Weber (after viewing the first Republican one) lost some of his belief in parliaments. In helping to draw up the Weimar constitution, he was responsible for the direct popular election of the President. The democratic Leader was to be plebiscitary, not parliamentary. In his famous conversation with Ludendorff, Weber indicated that "the people" would judge the leader, who should be allowed to say, once he had been elected, "shut up and obey," but who, if he failed was unceremoniously dumped: "to the gallows with him." Yet Parliament had a role as the agency of inquiry and investigation and presumably the registry of the acclaiming or deposition. Problems of the exact relationship between popular president and parliament remained and found an echo in the Gaullist Fifth Republic which seems so closely molded on Weberian ideas. In general, the experience of popular, democratic electioneering and Party machine leadership, leading to ability to address and win the confidence of the masses, was only one of the two essential ingredients of adequate political leadership in a modern state, the other being experience on the floor of a Parliament which possessed real power, since from it emerged immediately the Party leader who became head of Government.

The age of the urban masses needs the demagogue, who has an instinctive grasp of mass emotions and the ability to gain their trust, along with the will to decide and act; but a modern nation-state also requires the skills of the professional politician, who knows when to compromise or adjust realistically to objective conditions, taking a cool long-range view. It was the War that drove these lessons home to Weber. It had produced powerful mass emotions, necessary to victory, but which required channeling. Unguided, the enthusiasm of the August Ideas resulted in unrealistic war aims, annexation fever, the U-boat hysteria. Germany had utterly failed to bring forth

leaders capable of dealing with the situation. The Western allies won the war not because of their superior military force or will to victory but because of their political superiority, Weber thought. Because they had been trained in the schools of democratic elections and parliamentary politics, their leaders were neither dilettantes nor bureaucrats—the impotent extremes of German politics—but real leaders. It should be noted that this was not a matter of “charisma,” that much-abused Weber term, or “great men.” The 1917 articles criticized Bismarck for leaving Germany dependent on a superman, which can be expected only once a century. What was needed was a system capable of producing a regular supply of politicians with the requisite skills and training. The British system turned mediocrities into successful leaders; the German one blighted even genius. It must be admitted that at the Paris Peace Conference Weber was deeply surprised and disillusioned at the Allied leaders’ surrender to emotional extremism in the form of the vindictive peace settlement.

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During the war, as a result of his responses to the challenge of Germany’s need for political leadership, Max Weber attained his highest powers and his greatest national fame. He was brilliant and popular when he taught at Vienna in the spring and summer of 1918. On his return he found himself a national figure, giving many political addresses, taking part in the framing of the new constitution and going to Paris as part of the peace delegation. He had his choice of prestigious academic posts in 1920 when he decided to replace Lujo Brentano at Munich, writing his own ticket in regard to terms. His sudden death in the early summer of 1920, as he stood on the threshold of his own national leadership, may be seen as the tragic crushing of his strong spirit by the impossible demands of modern *praxis*; he was the last great intellectual to come close to wedding deep and clear thought to practice.

It was perhaps an index of Weber’s failure that though her third chance did come, Germany also muffed it. Weber’s plebiscitary caesar arrived, almost on schedule after the “ten hard years” Weber had foreseen for his country after the lost war. He was a man with the charisma suitable to a *Führer*, and with some instinctive grasp of mass emotions, but he had not gone through the school of democratic and parliamentary processes, where he would have learned the art of politics. Hitler certainly tried to combine the roles of tribune of the people and “ice-cold” Machiavellian realist, tempering romanticism

with realism (Hegel with Machiavelli, as Lukacs put it). But his lack of political experience condemned him to terrible errors, and he was a dreadful caricature of the Weberian model. In following him, the German people showed their lack of political maturity.

Weber's caesar was not one who ruled as a tyrant over a slavish people, but a leader whom they recognize, select, and show their political maturity by following, always reserving the right to dump him if he fails. The elected parliament keeps a close eye on him, a role which he accepts because he has come through the education of parliamentary politics. Knowing that it cannot directly govern, Weber's parliament, it would seem, is willing to give the leader a free hand to act, yet is prepared to blow the whistle on him should he run amuck. There is also, of course, the bureaucracy, which serves him by providing, in *Zweckrational* fashion, the factual materials which form the basis of his decisions. A vigorous Reichstag and an efficient bureaucracy, each in its proper role, certainly formed necessary parts of Weber's governmental ideal. But what they exist for is to husband the single decisionmaker. If the political machinery has worked properly in creating him, he should not require much watching or checking.

Such political ideas, distilled from the experience of the war working on ideas Max Weber had spent his life pondering, must command respect, though they have seemed either bizarre or dangerous to some. Do they have contemporary relevance? Numerous examples from today's political leadership, or lack of it, suggest the obvious point that leaders with both charisma or skill in manipulating the symbols of mass psychology, and judgement, realism, responsibility, are in short supply. In Indonesia, for example, a flamboyant demagogue brought the country to near ruin after which a solid technocrat without personal appeal has slowly lost support. Jakarta must yearn for a judicious mixture of Sukarnoism and Suhartoism, just as Washington presumably wishes that appealing personalities had garnered sufficient experience to be able to govern. The French Fifth Republic was surely the greatest tribute to Weberian political thought; but its leader traded on military charisma, not the democratic and parliamentary career Weber thought necessary. The career in democratic-parliamentary politics does not seem to produce the man of powerful decisiveness and national appeal. The *Führers* rise from outside the system, like Hitler or Peron, or from the military, like Franco and too many others to list. Lacking political experience, they can only rule by force or fraud and end in disaster.

The democratic-parliamentary system continues to grind out mediocrity. Competent bureaucrats in office continue to weary and disgust the masses. In brief, the problem of leadership in a modern democratic state to which Max Weber addressed his enormous talents remains the central one, but it is not clear that he was able to find its solution.

Allan N. Sherlin, in a review of recent Weber literature (*Journal of Modern History*, March, 1977, p. 111), remarks that "Most writers on Weber have not considered his life relevant to an analysis of his thought." They should, for it seems evident that during the First World War his most important and suggestive political thought emerged from a fruitful if agonizing encounter between his theoretical ideas and experience—a true *praxis*.

NOTE

1. Weber preferred to choose the West; the supreme German blunder in his eyes was the demand to annex Belgium. But in the East he wished independence for the smaller Slavic peoples and the Balts—an essentially Wilsonian program of self-determination.

Bibliographical note:

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