Politics and Public Opinion in Max Weber

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Abstract: Social media now strongly determine public opinion, while traditional media, especially newspapers, are losing influence. Max Weber was aware of the power of public opinion. As a sociologist, he presented an extensive project outline for the study of the newspaper industry at the First German Sociologists' Conference in 1910. As a bourgeois intellectual, he tried to actively influence the formation of public opinion through newspaper articles and political speeches. However, the tension between politics and public opinion remains a blind spot in Max Weber's political sociology because of his sudden death. My contribution goes in search of traces. At issue are central questions particularly relevant in modern mass democracies: Who has the official 'mandate' to form and represent public opinion? How much publicity is wise in terms of state policy? What power does public opinion have in relation to the legitimacy of political systems?

Keywords: Max Weber; press inquiry; journalism; political sociology; mass democracy

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Political affairs are public affairs.
Max Weber to Karl von Amira, August 23, 1919[1]

Something has changed. In the public sphere, an increasing brutalization of language and an increased willingness to use violence against public figures, especially politicians, can be observed. With the 21st century, "social media" are on the rise, replacing traditional forms of communication, but also professional reporting and legally relevant responsibility structures. The expression of opinion has become more direct and "democratic", but also more emotional, more dramatic, because it is aimed at transient attention, clicks and likes. Classic journalism of news evaluation and reflective commentary is fighting for market share. At the same time, a strengthening of populist currents can be observed in Europe and America. The core principle of parliamentary democracy, representation, is called into question. The political class, the elite "up there", no longer seems to represent the population. Protest actions are organized via social media channels.

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas described the "structural transformation of the public sphere" as a multiple transformation of social, economic, legal and political structures in interaction with changed forms of communication. With this complex sociological explanatory approach, he follows in Max Weber's footsteps – without naming him directly.

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[1] Weber's letter to Karl von Amira [*MWG II/10: 738*] concerns Weber's election to the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities. For political reasons – Weber was considered the "foster father of the [Bavarian] Soviet Republic" (*Nährvater der Räterepublik*) [*MWG II/10: 750*] – the Historical Class had only agreed to his co-optation by a narrow majority.

Habermas thus points beyond media sociological studies in the narrower sense, because he focuses on the interplay between the different spheres. Max Weber approached the founding of the German Sociological Association with two major projects, which he presented at the First German Sociologists' Conference in 1910: a press inquiry and an association inquiry. The study of the newspaper industry was a project close to his heart, because newspapers were largely the product and means of expression of modern mass society. The change in media and communication occupied him as a social scientist, and at the same time he tried to influence public opinion through newspaper articles and speeches as a politically engaged intellectual during the First World War.

The following contribution aims in particular to focus on the interaction between politics and public opinion or opinion-forming in Max Weber's work, by 1) attempting to explain these terms, and 2) examining the intermediary powers with regard to their function of political opinion-forming in the age of mass democracy – here the focus is on Weber's press inquiry. After a look 3) at the legal framework in Germany, 4) describes the support layers and professional opinion leaders of Weber's time. Finally, 5) presents the connection between the political system and public opinion in Weber's work. As a brief look beyond Weber, the section on "The Press and the Public" discusses the 7th German Sociologists' Conference in 1930, the last before the National Socialist "Third Reich".

Definitions: Politics and Public Opinion

"Politics" is clearly defined by Max Weber. At the beginning of his speech "Politics as a Vocation", given in the revolutionary winter of 1918/19, he states: "In our terms, then, 'politics' would mean striving for a share of power or for influence on the distribution of power, whether it be between states or between the groups of people contained within a single state" [*Weber 1919/1994: 311*; *MWG I/17: 159*]. Nevertheless, the definition of the term is not included among the "Basic Sociological Concepts" or the "The Types of Rule" of 1920. Thus, the term remains outside the domains of general categories and typologies of legitimacy. Presumably, if Weber had not died suddenly in June 1920, he would have included it in his planned sociology of state and parties.

It is more difficult to systematically grasp and locate the concept of "public opinion" in Weber's work. He does not give a definition. To this day, the term "public opinion" in the German language is an ambiguous term in need of interpretation. Although it was translated from English and French into German in the 18th century, it has been given its own slant. It stands in the tradition of the Enlightenment and a rising bourgeoisie which demanded civil liberties, and which critically dealt with the ruling estates in terms of "public opinion" [*Hölscher 1978*; *Tönnies 1922*]. In German, the term resonates with a critical ability to judge, but also with a moral component. In 1871, the jurist Johann Kaspar Bluntschli, who last taught in Heidelberg, wrote about "Public Opinion": "It has become the authority of the ignorant multitude and the study of the wise. Public opinion always presupposes a *free judgment*, as is possible in political matters, but alien to religious emotion. Without the development of the power of thought and the faculty of judgment (*Urtheilsfähigkeit*), therefore, there is no public opinion, and it can only flourish in a free life of the people. It is the opinion primarily of *the greater middle classes*" [*Bluntschli 1871: 745*]. It expresses itself in various forms, including "free speech", "in meetings of all

kinds", but above all "in the press and the people's representation" [*ibid.: 746*]. From the viewpoint of political science, it is therefore "a public power", but "not a public authority" [*ibid.: 747*]. – Later, Habermas, quoting Fraenkel, gets to the point: "public opinion rules, but it does not govern" [*Habermas 1965: 260*]. – The jurist Franz von Holtzendorff, who placed Bluntschli's definition at the beginning of his study "The Essence and Value of Public Opinion", demarcates public opinion negatively: distinct from private opinion, the opinion of the state organs, the political party majority, expert opinion and professional opinion. It can be identical with the types of opinion mentioned, but it does not have to be. Rather, it is an independent power, not the sum of different individual opinions, but an "imagined" uniform opinion [*Holtzendorff 1880: 44*], which was also described as "popular opinion" in the language of the time.

Jürgen Habermas develops a critique of "public opinion" as an ideological entity: it is a specific construct of the liberal bourgeoisie that at the same time legitimizes the rule of law and parliamentarianism through "public opinion" [*Habermas 1965: 93–94*, *258*].[2] In Max Weber's work, "public opinion" comes into focus as a factor in connection with his study of the Russian Revolution of 1905. In the struggle for fundamental liberal rights – in particular freedom of the press and freedom of assembly – the Zemstvo movement, i.e. the Russian self-governing bodies, had strong support in public opinion [*Weber 1906/1995: 105*; *MWG I/10: 263*]. In his writings on Russia in 1906, Weber followed this struggle for freedom benevolently, but at the same time critically. To this end, he learned Russian and, according to Marianne Weber, subscribed to several Russian daily newspapers in order to be able to follow developments directly [*MWG I/10: 9, 685, 687*]. Weber was very aware of the power of public and published opinion, so he read newspapers of various orientations in order to be well informed. The idea of an investigation of the newspaper industry in 1909/10 seems to have been largely due to his sensitization by the failed Russian Revolution.

As a scholar and intellectual, Max Weber himself used the means at his disposal to influence public opinion in Germany. On the one hand, there are the appeals written by the educated middle class on current political issues, be they calls for solidarity or petitions on draft laws;[3] on the other hand, there are the many "letters to the editor" that Weber wrote on questions of science policy.[4] However, his involvement in the First World War

[2] The sharpest criticism, however, was made by Carl Schmitt, to whom Habermas also refers [*Habermas 1965: 94*]. In the last chapter of "Political Theology" Schmitt says: "The bourgeoisie is committed to freedom of speech and freedom of the press, and it did not arrive at those freedoms from any kind of arbitrary psychological and economic conditions […]." It had itself made "freedom of speech and press" its "religion", so that "the ideal of political life consists in discussing, not only in the legislative body but also among the entire population, if human society will transform itself into a monstrous club, and if truth will emerge automatically through voting" [*Schmitt 1992/2005: 62–63*]. This passage, as well as the entire last chapter, is not found in the otherwise identical article in the memorial volume for Weber in 1923. It would have offended Weber.

[3] A particularly good proof of this are the 11 petitions and appeals that Max Weber co-signed in the years 1902 to 1912. They range from invitations to the Evangelical Social Congress to Prussian electoral reform, women's issues and support for an association for international understanding [*MWG I/8: 405–478*].

[4] These letters concern the "Bernhard Case" (1908) [*MWG I/13: 75–104*]; "The Alleged 'Academic Freedom' at German Universities" (1908/09), a debate in which Weber stood up in particular for Robert Michels [*MWG I/13: 109–138*]; the reporting on the Third German Conference of University Teachers in Leipzig (1909) [*MWG I/13: 171–179*], and on the Fourth German Conference of University Teachers in Dresden (1911) with Weber's statements on the alleged "Althoff System" [*MWG I/13: 298–362, 378–393*]; cf. the selection of translations [*Weber 2008: 53–79, 116–146*].

was extraordinarily great; he tried to influence the political opinion of Germans through the spoken and written word, advocating rational conduct of the war and necessary constitutional reforms. In the times of war and the revolutionary upheaval of 1918/19, the public mood was particularly emotionally charged. In this respect, Weber's appearance here can be studied as an example of the practical handling of public opinion by the liberal bourgeoisie.

Intermediary Powers and Political Opinion Formation

James Bryce dedicated a chapter to "Public Opinion" in his two-volume work *The American Commonwealth* [*Bryce 1890: II, 237–364*], which Max Weber studied extensively.[5] Bryce defines it as: "the aggregate of all that is thought and said on a subject, – sometimes merely the views of the majority, the particular type of thought and speech which prevails over other types" [*ibid.: II, 239*]. In contrast to European societies, whose public opinion is shaped by educated and propertied classes, i.e. estates, it is represented in America by "the man in the cars" [*ibid.: II, 242*]. American public opinion, therefore, as Bryce believes, no longer needs representative bodies, but expresses itself directly in accordance with the democratic ideal. Public opinion in the U.S.A. is therefore identical with the "will of the people" (national will), not as in England, France and Germany.

Against this background, Max Weber's concern to investigate the significance of the intermediary powers – press (newspapers), associations (clubs, parties, sects) – in two large-scale projects of the newly founded German Sociological Association can be described as very European and bourgeois. What significance do these social institutions have under the radically changing conditions of modern mass society? Max Weber's "Disposition", his "Preliminary Report" on a newspaper inquiry and its presentation in the context of the "Annual Report" at the First German Sociologists' Conference in October 1910 in Frankfurt am Main have all found widespread resonance among media scholars in recent decades,[6] particularly since the first publication of the "Preliminary Report" by Wilhelm Hennis in 1995 and its English translation [*Weber 1909b/1998*]. In the meantime, this text has also been translated into French [*Weber 1909b/2001*] and Spanish [*Weber 1909b/2012*]. The texts have been included in the Max Weber Complete Edition (*Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe*) since 2016 [*MWG I/13: 139–152, 208–228, 256–286*]. In contrast to Hennis, who interpreted Weber's outline of the newspaper inquiry anthropologically – the question of what type of human beings is shaped by modern culture [*Hennis 1998*] –, I would like to focus on the connection between the newspaper industry and public opinion, i.e. strengthen the political science perspective.

The press inquiry is actually a newspaper inquiry in the strict sense of the word, because the newspaper was the only medium of mass communication in Weber's time, before there was even radio. The major German newspapers sometimes published several issues a day as well as special supplements, for example, the liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*, to which Max Weber subscribed. Before the outbreak of the First World War, 4,200 independent

[5] With marginal notes and underlining by Max Weber in the copy of the Heidelberg University Library.

[6] In Germany, especially: [*Weischenberg 2012*; *Weischenberg 2014*]. The special issue of Max Weber Studies of July 2013 provides a good overview of the reception of the Press Inquiry and its current relevance: [*Darmon – Frade 2013*; *Bastin 2001/2013*; *Bastin 2013*; *Davis 2013*; *Dickinson 2013*; *Weischenberg 2013*].

newspapers were published in the German Empire [*Hübinger 2008: 33*]. In order to stay informed even on vacation Max Weber had his wife forward newspapers to him [*MWG II/5: 344*; *MWG II/8: 150*]. Weber wanted to have the importance of the press investigated in a large-scale study by scientists and practitioners at home and abroad and, something which is very topical, undertook a fundraising operation, including the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. The text on the "Preliminary report on a proposed survey for a sociology of the press" of April/May 1909 served as an application. It was approved on 16 July 1910, i.e. before the First German Sociologists' Conference [*MWG I/13: 284 n. 49*]. There, Weber sums up his question in the "Annual Report" (*Geschäftsbericht*): "What is the significance of capitalist development *within* the area of the press for the sociological position of the press in general, and for its role in the formation of public opinion?" [*Weber 1911/2008: 86*; *MWG I/13: 269*].

In the first part of his project outline, Weber devotes a detailed, expert catalogue of questions to the material aspect, the portrayal of the newspaper industry as a capitalist private enterprise. The focus is on the questions of how increasing capital requirements affect newspaper production and sales, what influence owners, advertisements and subscriptions have on financing. In mass societies, according to Weber, public taste plays an extraordinary role. There can be large fluctuations in sales, especially in the case of individual sales of newspapers, and corresponding adjustments to the readers' wishes [*Weber 1911/2008: 86*; *MWG I/13: 268*], which usually means a flattening in terms of content. Competition and monopolies characterize the newspaper market just as in other capitalist branches of business. It is obvious that these conditions of the mass market have an effect on the "newspaper attitude" (*Zeitungsgesinnung*) – as it is called in the "Preliminary Report" – but especially on the formation of public opinion.

If one takes a closer look at section "III. The production of public opinion by the press" with its eight sub-sections in the "Preliminary Report", one gets an impression of the complexity of the planned empirical survey, but also of the depth of Max Weber's concept of "public opinion". Sub-section 1. covers "Comparative analysis of the forms of newspaper reading" at home and abroad [*Weber 1909b/1998: 118*; *MWG I/13: 224*]. Weber is here concerned with the presentation of content, such as the relationship between (telegraphic) reporting and commentary. At the Sociologists' Conference Weber explains this with reference to the different reading expectations in America, where newspaper consumers only want "facts", while in France they prefer "a paper with a particular slant" (*Tendenzblatt*) [*Weber 1911/2008: 87*; *MWG I/13: 270*]. Sub-section 2. considers "What are the other media forms that the Press *displaces*", while sub-section 3. raises the question of "What kind of reading matter does the press encourage, and what changes in forms of thought and expression does it promote (*erziehen*)?" [*Weber 1909b/1998: 118*; *MWG I/13: 225*]. Using Russia as an example, Weber shows that the "granting of the – relative – freedom of the press", i.e. the relaxation of strict censorship measures, has abruptly opened up the market for leaflets and newspapers, and therefore the demand for magazines and books has fallen immediately and dramatically [*MWG I/13: 149 with n. 18*; *Weber 1909b/1998: 118*; *MWG I/13: 225*; *Weber 1911/2008: 89*; *MWG I/13: 273*]. As a result – a very topical point – readers' attention spans are restricted to short items and longer texts are no longer consumed at all. Neurological examinations were already carried out in Weber's time [*MWG I/13: 272 with n. 29*]. How do the brain and perception change as a result

of media consumption? At the Sociologists' Conference, Weber explains: "The continual change, and the recognition of the massive changes in public opinion and of the universal range and inexhaustible variety of opinions and interests" weighs on the newspaper reader [*Weber 1911/2008: 89*; *MWG I/13: 273*]. The flood of news has to be processed and ordered by modern people, daily, hourly, by the minute. The fourth sub-section covers the "Influence of colloquial speech by the press". Does so-called "newspaper German" have an effect on the written and literary language, on the "need for discussion and knowledge" as well as on the readers' possible cognitive and logical-systematizing thinking abilities? [*Weber 1909b/1998: 119*; *MWG I/13: 225*]. Then follows sub-section 5.: "What kind of people does the Press *make* 'famous' or influential?" [*ibid.*]. At the Sociologists' Conference, Weber spoke more drastically of the power of newspapers to "create and destroy someone's livelihood" [*Weber 1911/2008: 84*; *MWG I/13: 266*]. Sub-section 6. deals with "The nature of the demands made on press contents according to gender, occupation, social stratum both at home and abroad" [*Weber 1909b/1998*: *119*; *MWG I/13*: *226*]. With this genuinely sociological question, Weber wanted to capture the usage behavior of readers more precisely. Finally, 7. deals with "The degree of 'discretion' on the part of the press" and 8. "Newspaper publicity and 'public morality'" [*ibid.*]. Here, Weber – as he explained at the Sociologists' Conference [*Weber 1911/2008: 84*; *MWG I/13: 265*] – had the American press in mind, which, for example, had published all the personal details of the future wife of a British lord, which would have been considered improper in Europe. The distinction from the sensationalist press ("gutter and 'revolver' press" in Weber's words [*Weber 1909b/1998: 119*; *MWG I/13: 226*]) concerns the more general question of what is made public in the newspapers or what belongs in the very personal area worthy of protection. With these individual points of investigation, Weber wanted to create a basis for discussing the significance of the press and its "ubiquitous, standardizing, matter-of-fact and at the same time constantly emotionally-coloured influence on the state of feelings and accustomed ways of thinking of modern man, on political, literary and artistic activity, on the constitution and displacement of mass judgments and mass beliefs" [*ibid.*].

Compared to the detailed work plan for the press inquiry, the keywords for the association inquiry, which was also planned, are more modest. Max Weber wanted to use the "Sociology of Associations" to examine all civic-voluntary forms of socialization that are located between the "forced associations" (state, commune, church) and the family. In the classical bourgeois understanding, these intermediate groups, from bowling clubs to political parties to artistic and religious sects, are an expression of civil society and its claim to self-organized representation of interests. In the case of the party, it is obvious that it is "a structure fighting for domination and therefore tends to be organized, often very tightly and 'authoritarian'" [*MWG I/22-1: 270*; *Weber 1922a/2013: 939*]. The parties can be oriented and organized in very different ways: While in Germany the parties were still predominantly ideologically oriented (Social Democracy, the Catholic "Centre"), in North America they were organized as pure party machines in order to get majorities and thus also government jobs ("spoils") in the event of electoral success. In contrast, Weber regarded the sect – as he wrote in his first anti-critique of Rachfahl in 1910 – as the "archetype of those social groupings which today mould 'public opinion', 'cultural values' and 'individualities'" [*Weber 1910/2001: 77*; *MWG I/9: 618*]. While Weber assigns the sects a (morally) formative role in the formation of public opinion, the parties are more concerned with

actively influencing public opinion in the sense of public interests through their party press and talented political speakers.

Neither the association nor the press inquiry were implemented. Although Max Weber had invested a lot of time, commitment and also money in the planning of the press inquiry, he withdrew from active planning in February 1911 [*MWG II/7: 93, n. h*]. The official reason for Weber's withdrawal was court proceedings concerning the press, in which he was himself involved from May 1911 to October 1912. Without the spiritus rector, the project came to a standstill.

The Legal Framework in Germany

The conditio sine qua non for the formation of public opinion is the right to freedom of expression and also the freedom of assembly. The constitution of the German Empire of 1871 did not contain any fundamental rights, and it was only the Weimar Constitution that protected under Article 118 the right "to freely express one's opinion by word, writing, print, image or other means", but only for German citizens and "within the limits of the general laws".[7] During Weber's lifetime, freedom of the press was granted by the Reich Press Law of 7 May 1874, but at the same time it was subject to restriction. The decisive factor for German press law was the imprint obligation introduced in § 6, which requires the name and address of the printer and publisher as well as the responsible editor for every print publication – known to this day under the abbreviation "V.i.S.d.P." ("Responsible within the meaning of the Press Act"). This information enabled the authorities to prosecute if they thought it necessary. § 30 included special provisions for times of war and "riot". These took effect as early as 1878 at the time of the Anti-Socialist Law. Censorship measures were imposed on a larger scale during the First World War. This also affected the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, because of Max Weber's article "German Parliamentarism in the Past and Future. III. Administrative Publicity and Political Responsibility" of 24 June 1917 [*MWG II/9: 660*].

Relevant to Max Weber's first press trial of May 1911 was § 11, paragraph 1 of the Press Act, according to which the responsible editor of "a periodical" is obliged "to record a correction of the facts communicated in the latter at the request of a public authority or private person concerned without intervention or omissions […]".[8] This was Weber's lever against the responsible editor of the *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, which had not wanted to print Weber's reply to an anonymously published article. Weber's actual goal was to find out the name of the author (Otto Bandmann) and in turn to obtain information on who had spread the rumor in Heidelberg that he (Weber) had cancelled a duel with Arnold Ruge due to illness. The informant was the Heidelberg lecturer in journalism Adolf Koch.[9] The media law aspects of this unpleasant court story have been presented by Albrecht Götz von Olenhusen [*Götz von Olenhusen 2016*]. The corresponding trial documents and letters

[7] Cf. https://www.verfassungen.de/de19-33/verf19.htm (7. 6. 2024).

[8] Cf. https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Gesetz_%C3%BCber_die_Presse (6. 6. 2024).

[9] Cf. the editorial preliminary note to Max Weber's letter to the editors of the *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten* of 11 January 1911 [*MWG II/7: 31–33*], as well as the editorial report on: Weber, Zur Affäre Dr. Ruge I. Brief an das Heidelberger Tageblatt, 9. Januar 1911 [*MWG I/13: 235–238*]. Weber's second reply to Ruge is translated into English [*Weber 2008: 104–105*].

are printed as attachment in MWG [*MWG II/7: 816–988*]. In the "Preliminary Report" on the newspaper inquiry, Weber had still expressed understanding for the anonymity of newspaper articles as practiced in Germany, since it protects the journalist from censorship measures and guarantees a certain uniformity of newspapers. By contrast, in his own case Weber wanted to have the anonymity of the journalist lifted by the courts. This corresponded to his own credo of personal responsibility, especially in the political sphere – known worldwide as the "ethic of responsibility" ever since his later speech "Politics as a Vocation" [*Weber 1919/1994: 359*; *MWG I/17: 237*].

Social Carrier Groups and Professional Opinion Leaders

The question of the influence of social classes and the "political spirit cultivated by them" on the "formation of a country's public opinion" had been raised by Weber in September 1909 in connection with Georg Jellinek's project for a German-American Institute for International Law and Comparative Politics [*MWG II/6: 258*]. There are no systematic explanations by Weber on the question, but his own statements during and after the First World War provide sufficient evidence to form an impression.

It was the development of Germany's foreign and domestic policy that brought about Max Weber's engagement. From December 1915 he actively intervened in political debate as a speaker and article writer, the latter preferably in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Weber's activities are documented in the two volumes "On Politics in the World War" [*MWG I/15*] and "On the Reorganization of Germany" [*MWG I/16*]. In November and December 1918, Weber even took an active part in the editorial work of the *Frankfurter*, "to help", as he wrote to his mother on 19 November 1918. And – somewhat resigned – he continues: "It is politically useful and there is nothing else to do now" [*MWG II/10: 309*]. Weber felt compelled to go public to fight for his political convictions, which can be described with a few keywords: a parliamentary monarchy with equal suffrage; the disempowerment of Wilhelm II, who in his eyes was incompetent; and a moderate policy of war aims. He took on the mandate of the "scholar-intellectual" (*Gelehrten-Intellektueller*), as Gangolf Hübinger put it [*Hübinger 2019: 4*]. Weber felt supported in this role by the self-confidence of the cultural-Protestant bourgeoisie, which saw itself as the leading class despite the feudal structure of the Empire.[10] In his Munich speech on the "reorganization of Germany" of November 4, 1918, Weber was finally defeated by an enraged revolutionary audience. The liberal citizen in a "frock coat", as Oskar Maria Graf described Weber, was shouted down [*Hanke 2020: 178*]. The liberal, culturally Protestant bourgeoisie lost its leading role in the formation of public opinion.

Max Weber was not squeamish in the political battle of opinions**;** verbally, he could be very sharp in attacking his political opponent. During the World War he reserved his contempt for the "literati". This primarily meant reactionary, right-wing publicists who defended the government's backward-looking state and economic policy, as well as its preposterous war policy. The arsenal of Weber's insults was large, as the following examples prove: "short-sighted 'law and order philistines'" [*Weber 1917b/1994: 84*; *MWG I/15:*

[10] Cultural Protestantism was an influential movement in the German Empire that wanted to reconcile the Protestant faith with modern culture. It was supported in particular by the enlightened educated middle class.

351], "scribbling romantics" (*Tintenfaßromantiker*) [*ibid.: 100, 366*], "prolix ideologues" (*schreibselige Ideologen*) [*ibid.: 90, 357*], "childish literary soap-bubbles" [*ibid.: 95, 361*], "dilettante literary ideas" [*Weber 1918b/1994: (149 n. A)*; *MWG I/15: 454 n. 1*], "literary phrase" [*ibid.: (164), 472*], "philistine literary chatter" (*spießerhaftes Literatengeschwätz*) [*ibid.: (165), 472*] and "stupid literary moralism" [*Weber 1917b/1994: (111)*; *MWG I/15: 378*]. The list could be continued indefinitely. In summary, Weber turned "literati" into a combative negative formula for political ignorance, stupidity, and statements lacking all objectivity. He found it downright fatal when the "literati" made "the moral gossip of the philistines the standard of political judgment" [*Weber 1918b/1994: (164)*; *MWG I/15: 472*]. He denied them an objectively substantiated ability to judge political issues. In his speech "Politics as a Vocation" Weber took a critical look back at the influence on the press during the World War. He cites the devastating influence of advertisements by political interest groups and the irresponsible statements of the "notoriously worst tabloid newspapers" [*Weber 1919/1994: (333)*; *MWG I/17: 195*]. What deeply upset him, and is expressed in his polemical and pejorative language, was the obvious impact of these "literati" on public opinion. The disputes are therefore primarily about the fundamental question: Who actually has a "mandate" to form public opinion? Weber also gives an answer to this in "Politics as a Vocation". There he devotes a longer passage to journalism "as a profession".

It is worth taking a closer look at these remarks, which Weber apparently did not make during his speech, but later added to the printed version of "Politics as a Vocation". In doing so, he links up with the keywords from his "Preliminary Report" for the newspaper inquiry of 1909, where he had already thought about the "social background, previous education", the social position and the "professional organisation of journalists" [*Weber 1909b/1998: 116*; *MWG I/13: 221–222*]. Gangolf Hübinger rightly points out that by around 1900 journalism had been professionalized through training at academic institutes, plus representation by the "Reich Association of the German Press", founded in 1910, into which, among others, the "Association of German Journalists' and Writers' Associations" and the "Association of German Editors" were merged [*Hübinger 2019: 110*]. In "Politics as a Vocation" Max Weber greatly enhances the importance of the journalist by assigning him a firm and significant place in the political sphere. In addition to the professional politician, who gains influence through the power of speech, the "political publicist" has an even more "lasting" effect through the printed word. For Weber, both are the appointed representatives of "modern demagogy" [*Weber 1919/1994: (331)*; *MWG I/17: 191*]. "Demagogy" is not pejorative here but, as will be explained in detail later, is to be understood in Weber as having a political role in a democracy. Weber thus assigns the journalist the official mandate for the formation of political opinion, in contrast to the "literati" who, in a useful formulation by Gangolf Hübinger, "enchant" "world views and power relations" instead of "disenchanting" them – like the journalists [*Hübinger 2019: 112*].

In order for journalists to be able to fulfil their socio-political mission Weber opposes the widespread bad public image of journalists while at the same time binding them to a high professional ethos. As free-floating intellectuals, they lack a fixed class affiliation, which – claimed Weber – must be compensated for by extraordinary character traits [*Bastin: 2013*]. These are: "the sense of responsibility of every honourable journalist"; great "inner balance", because of the dangers that the profession entails, and because of the lack of "firm conventions of his profession" and economic security; furthermore: "discretion"

and incorruptibility, precisely because journalists are flattered by the "mighty of this earth" [*Weber 1919/1994: (331–334)*; *MWG I/17: 191–196*]. From an intellectual point of view, Weber considers journalistic achievement to be creative work comparable with scholarly achievement. His respect for journalistic work was all the higher since it has to be produced under heightened time pressure, "immediately, to order", and should be "immediately effective" [*ibid.: 332, 192*]. The psychological pressure that weighs on the journalist is – as Weber indicates – extremely high. However, according to Weber, the mutual permeability of the two professions – that of journalist and of politician – had so far been very limited and only possible in the Social Democratic Party. When mass democracy became a reality with the revolutionary upheavals in Germany, Max Weber pinned his hopes on professional journalism with a high, self-committed professional ethos in terms of political opinion-forming.

Political System and Public Opinion

The influence of public opinion on politics is undisputed. During the First World War, Max Weber observed the pressure exerted by certain press campaigns on the government and the Reichstag. He spoke of "unprecedented agitation directed against the Reich Chancellor and other statesmen" or of an "unscrupulous press agitation" that had prepared the ground for the January strike in Berlin [*Weber 1918a/1984: 416, 420*]. A heated atmosphere can not only influence the decisions of political leaders, but also – as Weber suggests – undermine the stability of the government, so that – as in Germany in 1918 – there is a loss of legitimacy and ultimately a collapse of the existing political system.

In relation to government policy, how much right the public has to information and the transparency of government decisions is a legitimate question in democracies. Weber already dealt with the question in connection with his projected press inquiry: In the British Parliament, the "mother of all parliaments", it had been forbidden since 1738 to report on parliamentary deliberations without a privilege. The weekly *North Briton* was severely fined in 1762 for the violation, because it was a parliamentary "breach of privilege" [*MWG I/13: 264*; *MWG I/23: 584 with n. 57*]. Until 1998, it was still possible to exclude the public from parliamentary sessions at the request of a member of the House of Commons. The British Prime Minister's cabinet also did not meet in public – as the term suggests. Max Weber, whose political ideas were strongly oriented towards the British system of government, was quite statesmanlike in his assessment of what belonged to the public and what did not. As a liberal and with reference to Jacob Burckhardt, he rejected radical publicity, as had prevailed in Hellenic democracy [*MWG I/13: 263–264*]. His own demands for publicity therefore did not correspond to those of radical democrats. In terms of constitutional policy, Weber advocated a differentiation of statements by the German head of state that were either personal and private or made in his official function. Weber had been outraged by Kaiser Wilhelm II's ominous public statements on foreign policy and had also sharply criticized them. The Kaiser's statements had been exaggerated by the press's need for sensationalism and had caused "a useless and detrimental excitement of the public" [*Weber 1917a/1984: 287*]. During preliminary constitutional deliberations, Weber advocated that the Imperial Privy Council (*Reichskronrat*), namely the Reich Chancellor and the Minister-Presidents, should be responsible for the publication or non-publication of

the monarch's foreign policy statements [*ibid.: 286–288*]. This was intended to keep the monarch out of public party affairs and thus protect his reputation in the public eye [*Weber 1918b/1994: 197*; *MWG I/15: 509*].

Another matter close to Max Weber's heart was the "publicity of administration". He felt it was outdated for a democracy that the entire administrative apparatus could work unchecked and invoke "official secrecy" to fend off any possibility of external control. For the new imperial constitution, he therefore proposed the right of inquiry (*Enqueterecht*), based on the British model. It allows special parliamentary committees of inquiry to summon officials and question them. This right, proposed by Weber, was incorporated into the Weimar Constitution and the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany and thus belongs to the existing democratic constitution. However, what Weber at the same time wanted to prevent was the unhindered release of the documents and deliberations to the entire public. Weber also claimed "confidentiality" (*Diskretion*) for politically highly explosive issues, such as warfare and peace negotiations, for reasons of state [*Weber 1918b/1994: 186*; *MWG I/15: 496*]. It seemed to him that informing the public in parliament through official announcements was the statesmanlike solution. However, this meant the controlled release of government decisions in order to protect them from misinterpretations or tendentious press coverage [*ibid.: 208, 522–523*].

Although the power of public opinion is undisputed, it has no institutionalized place in the constitutions of modern democracies. It lies, in the words of the jurist Johann Kaspar Bluntschli, beyond the powers of state and government. Instead of talking about "public opinion", Max Weber often uses the older term "demagogy". This has been introduced into political theory, and with interesting parallels: Attic democracy since Pericles and Ephialtes was – as Weber explained in the text "The Three Pure Types of Legitimate Types" – "completely tailored to the existence" of the "demagogue", "without whom the state machine would have no prospect of functioning" [*Weber 1922b/2004: 140*; *MWG I/22-4: 736 with n. 26*]. In the ancient democratic constitutions only the election of strategists was provided for, but not of the demagogue. Their position was based solely on the trust of the population. For Weber, therefore, the great demagogues – along with the prophets and war heroes – are examples of the purest type of charismatic rule. Because of their charismatic authority, they gather a following around them. Weber transfers this relationship to the modern parties: the demagogue is able to build up a party following using his personal charisma, but also with the support of the party apparatus. On this basis, he can be successful in political struggle and gain official rulership. If he is confirmed by plebiscite, he is a democratically legitimized politician and thus part of the political system. Max Weber's "plebiscitary leadership democracy" is therefore based on the figure of the "demagogue", who manages to win the trust of the masses through various selection stages and who is able to integrate them into the political system. In this way, Weber establishes a contact between the two spheres – public opinion and politics.

Mass democracy was a challenge for the liberal bourgeoisie, as the following sentences by Max Weber from "Parliament and Government" clearly demonstrate: "The *danger* which mass democracy presents to national politics consists principally in the possibility that *emotional* elements will become predominant in politics. The 'mass' as such (no matter which social strata it happens to be composed of) 'thinks only as far as the day after tomorrow'. As we know from experience, the mass is always exposed to momentary,

purely emotional and irrational influences. […] By contrast, as far as national politics are concerned, the *un*organised mass, the democracy of the street, is wholly irrational. It is at its most powerful in countries with a parliament that is either powerless our politically discredited, and that means above all where *rationally organised parties* are absent" [*Weber 1918b/1994: 230–231*; *MWG I/15: 549–550*].

Max Weber's political argumentation shows that he wanted to bind political action – among the masses he described the boundary between reactive behavior and meaningful action as "highly fluid" [*Weber 1920a/2019: 100*; *MWG I/23: 174*][11] – to fixed rules and orders. To ensure that the political and public spheres were not exposed to the easily influenced mass moods, Weber placed great emphasis on strengthening "rationally organized" parties and a high-tension professional ethos for the modern "demagogues": politicians and journalists.

"The Press and the Public" at the 7th German Sociological Conference 1930

On October 4, 1930, Siegfried Kracauer reported somewhat listlessly in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* about the Sociologists' Conference in Berlin that had just ended [*Kracauer 1930*]. As a journalist, he focused on the first section on "The Press and the Public", which was close to his interests. However, he complained about the lack of knowledge of research literature and the "empirical facts" [*Kracauer 1930/2011: 341*]. And so Kracauer appears as an advocate for Weber's claim that press inquiry should collect reliable facts, but without mentioning him. That is however what Leopold von Wiese did: in his foreword to the printed proceedings, he drew a direct link to Weber's work plan presented at the 1910 Sociologists' Conference [*DGS 1931: X*]. In the subsequent papers by Carl Brinkmann, who was actively involved in Weber's memorial volume in 1923, and Hans von Eckardt, the Heidelberg newspaper scholar and son-in-law of Else Jaffé-von Richthofen, as well as in the contributions to the discussion, there is no direct reference to Max Weber. However, the frequent references to the press as a private-capitalist acquisitive enterprise and the resulting orientation of the newspapers sound quite Weberian.

Heinrich Waentig, the Prussian Minister of the Interior, himself an economist and sociologist, but also a politician, formulated the explosive nature of the topic of "The Press and Public Opinion" in his welcoming address: he noted how in the "age of democracy, i.e. the decisive influence of the masses of the people on the formation of the will of the state and the state administration", that the press and the public relate to each other, and how much control and criticism of the public the politician has to put up with [*DGS 1931: 7*]. With historical distance and the knowledge that the 7th Sociologists' Conference was the last before Hitler's seizure of power, the situational descriptions of the press in the presentations and contributions to the discussion read as very clear-sighted – in contrast to Kracauer's negative impression. The contributions to discussion also reflect an exchange between the various intellectual milieus of the Weimar period, from Carl Schmitt to the Social Democrat Friedrich Stampfer to Eric Voegelin. There was almost unanimity that the "liberal ideology of freedom of the press", as the main speaker Brinkmann called it, had

[11] On the double face of the power of public opinion (information versus manipulation of the masses): [*Senigaglia 2002: 230*].

reached its limits [*DGS 1931: 9*]. Voegelin drew the conclusion that the press no longer contributed to the formation of public opinion, i.e. that there had been a mental decline [*DGS 1931: 71*]. The "age of opinions and counter-opinions" had now, according to Carl Schmitt, been replaced by the age of "propaganda, suggestion, agitation". Instead of the old freedom of the press, broadcasting now has the power of censorship and monopoly [*DGS 1931: 57–58*]. Referring to the newspaper press, Wilhelm Kapp spoke of a "new censorship of the masses". There is "mass spirituality", "mass taste" and "mass instinct" [*DGS 1931: 54*]. Brinkmann put it even more harshly and spoke of "the almost dictatorial suggestion that modern mass society exerts through the press" [*DGS 1931: 22*]. In contrast to its earlier versions, critical of authorities and traditions, public opinion itself has now become a medium of "censorship of society" [*DGS 1931: 24*].

In addition to the classic newspaper industry, authorities and companies have now also set up their own press offices and press departments in order to influence public opinion [*DGS 1931: 27–29*]. In doing so, they are pursuing their own information policy and are no longer dependent on the reporting of independent journalists. They thus became part of the opinion industry themselves, but none of the participants of the Sociologists' Conference associated this with a greater plurality, or with a gain in freedom of expression.

In view of the Reichstag elections on 14 September 1930, which took place shortly before the Sociologists' Conference, the question of the National Socialists' increase share of votes motivated many speeches. How can it be, that fascists on the one hand and Bolsheviks on the other have such a strong following, even though there are no major press organs behind them? Farsightedly, editor-in-chief Friedrich Stampfer said that both parties aspired to rule and strove to take control of the entire press [*DGS 1931: 63*]. Kapp explained the formative influence of these new aspiring masses through the "organs of internal mediation of the groups, the organs of attitude of the federations (*Gesinnungsbünde*)– whether it is the *Nationalistischer Beobachter* or the *Rote Fahne* or the *Jungdeutsche* or the *Stahlhelm*". These make them "immune to the journalistic will of the big press" [*DGS 1931: 56*].

Taken together, the statements of 1930 indicate a structural change in public opinion. This is no longer determined by plurality, argumentative exchange, freedom of expression and critical expertise, but by left- and right-wing populist attitudes that claim to be an expression of society as a whole. The "current mass mood", as Carl Brinkmann stated, blames the existing political institutions themselves for "disenchantment with parliamentarism and formal democracy" [*DGS 1931: 26*]. In this way, the so-called public opinion of the time undermined the legitimacy of Weimar democracy. In retrospect, self-censorship and the concentration of mass communication, together with the simultaneous erosion of freedom of expression can be seen as warning signals of an incipient totalitarianism. Explaining mechanisms of opinion-formation and political influence in an insightful way could be an important academic contribution to political culture today.

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