

# Historical Paths and Intellectual Projects: The Case of Max Weber

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Historické cesty a intelektuální projekty: Případ Maxe Webera

**Abstract:** Max Weber is an elusive classic, and competing traditions claim his legacy. As in other cases, the interpretation of this classic should take into account formative experiences, historical context and links to older traditions. Weber theorized rational modernity, albeit with a certain ambiguity (the “iron cage”). He reworked the legacy of German historicism, but took it in the direction of methodological individualism; at the same time, and through the very affiliation to historicism, he contributed to German nation-building. His emphasis on the state as a necessary unit of analysis now seems obsolete, and so does his inclination to take the imperialistic dominance of the European great powers for granted. He was not immune to the ideology that opposed Germany’s cultural calling to Western civilization and Russian barbarism.

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Whether the classics should be read on their own terms or approached on the basis of present day problem definitions is a perennial question reappearing in various formulations and language guises. The classic authors could be treated as data or as colleagues. If we try to forget everything beyond the horizon of the author under scrutiny we might embark for arid “fishing expeditions” without a clear goal, collecting infinitely more knowledge without really knowing why – but if we know what we are looking for we might too easily find precisely that and violate the integrity of the classic in acts of “chronological imperialism”. There is no easy solution to this dilemma, but we do have to learn how to deal with it in order to avoid premature closures and creative interpretations extending the classic beyond his proper realm.

There is indeed a conflict between interpretation and utility. This is particularly evident in the case of Max Weber. He has been abused by many disciplines and paradigms, built into their various approaches as a cornerstone and founding father. He has emerged as the most important classic author for schools as different as functionalism, empathetic hermeneutics and survey analyses, to mention a few competing paradigms in social science.<sup>1</sup>

To understand Max Weber requires a certain familiarity not only with the peculiar German context (*Sonderweg*) but also a conception of how this might affect Weber’s own thought as well as our retrospective understanding of it. While it might be legitimate to

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the place to elaborate on this. See [Eliaeson 1995, 2002].

merely use select elements of the classic's *oeuvre* as tools, intact parts from the junkyard, contextualizing remains an important part of interpretation and a way to resolve conflicts of interpretation. Pure contextualism would be "overkill". There is something that sets a classic author above his contemporaries and makes him remain alive, speaking to us over the centuries. On the other hand, a classic is often a construction of ours – and if Max Weber were to awake from the dead he would hardly recognize the "Max Weber" invoked in various disciplines.

A "Whiggish" or retrospective contextualism is the realistic route between the Scylla and Charybdis of presentism and historicism.<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Alexander might be right in stating that we study the classics in order to learn something about our present day society<sup>3</sup> – yet this is a risky strategy of interpretation, inviting to theoretical over-interpretations, in short making us vulnerable to all those fallacies that Quentin Skinner warns us against.

Although it remains a matter of controversy if Weber was predominantly a lawyer, historian or sociologist (by profession he was an economist, with chairs in Volkswirtschaftslehre) – his role as a fundament of academic Anglo-Saxon sociology after all being a retrospective construction by Parsons' "creative extension", and his role for German scholars in the 20s also a matter of dispute [Turner – Factor 1994] – it is obvious that he made numerous contributions to what we might label "political sociology".

In the following we first ask what we can possibly mean by a German *Sonderweg*, how it affects Weber and, moreover, how it colors our interpretation of his special contribution to modern social thought. The understanding of Weber requires a recontextualization that is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for the genuine interpretation of his thought. There is an option to plead the relative autonomy of the texts – but at least the choice between competing relative autonomous "Max Webers" calls for more of context in order to learn what he actually meant.

## Weber's Historical Background: An Overview

The term *Sonderweg* may be misleading.<sup>4</sup> We could speak of the Swedish Model, the American exceptionalism, etc. All notions of *Sonderweg* somehow presuppose a nomothetic stand, a notion of a normal route. It might be more accurate to speak about *Sonderbedingungen*, peculiar circumstances, especially since the concept of a peculiar German route is ideologically suffused, much like for instance the concepts of civil society, postmodernism and globalization. But the concept of *Sonderweg* is there and we have to understand the notion and the role it has played in the reception of Weber's work. That we get hot under the collar in discussions over the peculiar route of German history depends on the fact that German domestic history became world history, due to peculiar circumstances. The Germans are in focus since the combined effects of their – in comparison

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<sup>2</sup> I don't think there is any obviously "winning side" in the controversy between Alexander and Quentin Skinner but certainly a better awareness of the methodological problems involved would help to avoid naive retrospectivism and contribute to less flawed interpretations.

<sup>3</sup> Personal conversation with Jeffrey Alexander in LA, June 1990.

<sup>4</sup> I am well aware that the concept often is used in a more narrow sense, with its focus on the combination of rapid growth in economy and slow development in the political maturing process (the theme of Thorstein Veblen [1915]) – but despite the objections that could be raised to the concept in most of its modalities I still maintain that its use at least for didactic reasons is, albeit debatable, also arguable.

to France and the UK – delayed development to a centralized nation state, as well as the geopolitical location of the German cultural realm, makes it a frustrating concern of all neighbours to understand what is going on in Germany, the key state on the European continent.

Max Weber lived in a time of ruptures and rapid developments. This is no unique predicament. One often tends to believe that one's own time is precisely such a one, with an immediate bearing upon the future. This is, however, particularly true about Wilhelmine Germany. In academia as well as in politics formative changes were taking place, within a relatively short period of time.

The German universities were seen as models for the world and served as such in several cases, most prominently the University of Chicago which was founded in 1893 with Rockefeller money.<sup>5</sup> The professors (e.g. Small and Park) of the emerging Chicago school in sociology had their degrees from German universities, like the present Humboldt University (until 1945 Friedrich Wilhelm-Universität) in Berlin. The prolonged historicist hegemony in German scholarship made some German achievements – like Weber's ideal-type methodology – more seminal than in its homeland.

In politics it remained an open question how the state structures and their legitimacy would adjust to the rapid change from rural culture to industrial mass society, and how the members of the huge emerging working class would "behave themselves" and contribute to the renewal [Roth 1963].

The second *Reich* had been founded soon after the Franco-Prussian war, which in retrospect appears as a successful part of Bismarck's nation-building. While preserving an old-fashioned form of government, the new Germany arising out of Bismarck's *klein-deutsche Lösung* (with Austria left outside) underwent a rapid commercial and industrial development. Especially the 1890s were a period of upheaval and Germany became an important competitor to the USA and the United Kingdom in international trade. At this time Bismarck had left the scene and left the country with a power-vacuum that turned out to be difficult to fill. In comparison to France and England the German transition to modern mass democracy had a considerable time-lag.<sup>6</sup>

In Germany the notion of a *deutscher Sonderweg* has generated vivid conflicts among historians, since it has a bearing upon the character of Nazi rule. Even if Nazism is seen as an anomalous historical phenomenon it can still be argued that it had continuity and deep roots given the already existing tendencies, rather than being a radical break with genuinely German traditions. If there is a particular German route and if Hitler is a product of that route, this has consequences for the German search for identity today. The matter of continuity or break and the meaning of the notion of a German *Sonderweg* are therefore still inflammatory.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This is an intriguing theme. Reciprocal trans-Atlantic contacts are also illustrated by Weber's American journey.

<sup>6</sup> Modern mass democracy is a field of inquiry for sociology ever since de Tocqueville. Historically sociology seems to be in co-variation with the need of secularized knowledge about group-conflicts.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible also to discuss Hitler and German political tradition in terms of "good" or "bad" continuity. The main division seems to be between those who normalize the history of the present Federal Republic, claiming for it a long tradition, and those who emphasize Hitler as an outcome of long-term trends in history. This is for natural reasons a "touchy" subject in Germany, generating a lot of nuanced history writing.

The most ideological meaning of *Sonderweg* is that Germany represents something between Western civilization and Russian barbarism. In contrast to Western materialism and exaggerated belief in Enlightenment reason the role of the Germans as carriers of culture in Eastern Europe is emphasized. German state-idealism also differs much from pure utilitarianism of the kind we find in the UK.

To the Germans *Kultur* had a number of positive connotations, including ideas about supreme historical values and a special mission for the German people. After all the Germans had built most of the towns east of Elbe (and West of Russia) and they felt superior to their Eastern neighbours – and also to their Western neighbours. *Zivilisation* had a certain negative scent; the culture of the Germans in their own eyes represented something “higher” and less selfish (than liberalism imprinted by utilitarian individual calculation). Civilization roughly means (in today’s wording) coca-cola and long trousers, instead of penis-tubes. Culture is churches, Goethe’s Faust and *Staatsoper*. Drawing on traditions going back to Cicero, Pufendorf and Herder had transmitted the concept of culture to the mandarins of the younger historical school. The concept of culture is connected with the ideals of the German *Bildungsbürgertum* and in due course acquired certain Romantic irrational overtones [Ringer 1969: 87–88]. This applies for instance to Alfred Weber, Max’s younger brother. During WW I, “Culture or civilization” even became an important intellectual slogan. Sweden’s internationally renowned political scientist, Rudolf Kjellén, was an energetic contributor to the “ideas of 1914”<sup>8</sup> in that debate, in which a sort of organic idealistic corporativistic *Staatsgemeinschaft* was contrasted to the freedom- and equality ideals of the Western democracies.<sup>9</sup>

In light of this general and emphatic interpretation, one realizes the need to further define and elaborate the meaning of *Sonderweg* in a number of areas, like domestic policy, ideology, constitutional history, cultural history, history of science, as well as European great power politics. Thereby we will also gain better understanding of the conditions and the context of Max Weber’s social thought, and of its contribution to that context. We will also learn how the various aspects of *Sonderweg* hang together and form a pattern.

The most conventional common denominator of this pattern is probably to be found on the level of cultural history. In the general history of ideas we speak about Enlightenment vs Romanticism as a central division over the last couple of centuries. In Germany Romanticism was particularly strong, and it is a commonplace that the Germans never totally accepted the Enlightenment. There is a lingering irrational vein in German thought, manifest on many levels, as lack of political maturity, a certain resistance to the strong liberal streak in the rest of Europe, where utilitarianism is at the core; there is even an apolitical vein in the German bourgeoisie, profiting from a development which, just as the *Reichsgründung*, had been enforced from above – and not primarily by the efforts of German citizens. Apolitical idolatry of culture as a special feature of German thought is well in line with the Prussian *Obrigkeitsstaat* (authoritarian state), which provided the form of state that the new German nation had to grow into. Politics was widely regarded as something rather to avoid than to participate in. Especially party politics was regarded

<sup>8</sup> A concept originally from Johann Plenge on 1789 and 1914 [Plenge 1916].

<sup>9</sup> *Kultur* vs. *Zivilisation* is a theme we associate with Werner Sombart, although we find the formulation already in Kant.

with a certain hesitation and abstention, since it was seen as an expression of egoistic special interest and not the common good of the nation.<sup>10</sup>

The notion of Germany as a “third way” between Western and Eastern alternatives is historically attuned to the German orientation to the East that can be traced back to the early history of the Holy Roman Empire and was particularly strongly associated with Frederick Barbarossa, who also was one of the idols of Hitler – but before that also a hero for the delayed German nation building in the days of Bismarck. During late medieval times the boundary between Slavonic and Germanic cultures was located close to Lübeck, roughly at what is today the border between Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Berlin is for example originally a Slavonic village. The Germans had gradually populated the land east of Elbe and huge parts of the original population were also gradually Germanized. When Poland after World War II was moved westwards it roughly restored the old ethnic borders of late Medieval days. The German Order in what are today the Baltic states, and Slavic princes invited Germans to build cities in their countries. The bourgeoisie in St. Petersburg was to quite some extent also German, as was a substantial part of the landed gentry and the bourgeoisie in the Baltic area. Even in recent times, ethnic belonging and national identity was to a large extent a matter of choice, as in Masuria (South East Prussia) and Silesia.<sup>11</sup>

The divisions of Poland and the existence of huge Slavic minorities within the borders of the German *Reich* made the relation to the constitutionally backward Czarist Russia sensitive. To Max Weber, the consolidation of the eastern German border became a crucial issue, intensified from 1905 onwards. Aside from the aspect of pure power politics, the concept of a German *Sonderweg* in the culturalist version could also be seen against this background. The Germans saw themselves as surrounded by culturally inferior people and therefore representing culture in the whole of central Europe, i.e. *Mitteleuropa* as a German mission. Weber was even racist in his negative perception of the Polish people, recycling prejudices that he picked up during his military training in Poznan/Posen. The British, in contrast, were seen as adhering to a more commercial and individualist and “egoistic”

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* from the time of the First World War is perhaps the most evident literary expression of this tendency of apolitical culturalism. For instance he sees war hospitals as a scene for cultural study groups. Meinecke's appeal after WW II to form Goethe-societies in order to represent the German spirit abroad is in a similar vein.

The views on the modern party system are more complex and there are time-typical elements of a Tocquevillian nature, linked to anxiety about the leveling of mass society. The labouring classes could claim political participation but not status of cultural importance. The bourgeoisie somehow were the cornerstone of the new industrial society, its attitudes and culture, but also had difficulties in organizing as an active and responsible political force. The basic idea behind modern mass democracy could be described as the bourgeoisie buying its social security and stability at the price of a certain gray mediocrity and egalitarianism. It is in this context also worthwhile pointing out that the bourgeois *Rechtsstaat* (constitutional order) and the abolishment of feudal privileges and modern mass democracy are two distinct although historically related – co-varying – projects, with certain inherent goal-conflicts. “More freedom or more democracy”, as Helmut Schelsky once put it.

<sup>11</sup> In the movie based on Günther Grass's partly autobiographical novel *Die Blechtrommel*, two cousins in Danzig land on different sides when they had to choose their national identity. Günther Grass himself was to my knowledge a Germanized Kaschube. Another example is the former Polish leader Gierek, who in good Polish German told Helmut Schmidt that “we from upper Silesia were Poles when things went well for the Poles – and Germans when it seemed to go well for the Germans”. This is also one reason why so many ethnic Germans still remains in Opole/Oppehn-vicinity; especially in the countryside it was not that easy to decide who was what after the war, so hundreds of thousands of Germans could remain as Poles in Poland, today again retaining their Germanness.

utilitarian mode of thinking, marked by calculating self-interest rather than strong convictions. The economist Friedrich List had already criticized the special features of the British political economy, and noted that the invisible hand sometimes seemed to require the support of a few gun boats and that some tariff protection might be beneficial for the development of infant industries.

The very concept of “Central Europe” (*Mitteleuropa*) as it was shaped by Weber’s friend Friedrich Naumann had the connotations of a German cultural mission, directed against Eastern lethargy and Western classic utilitarianism.

The Slavic population was regarded as primitive. The idea of German eastward expansionism found its idealistic legitimization, just like the French and the British had theirs on the other side of the oceans (“the white man’s burden”). This does not mean that Russia necessarily was seen as an enemy. Rather, Germany was split in its vision of how to behave in relation to its huge underdeveloped neighbor, rich in natural resources; this was somewhat similar to the way the Japanese related to China. To Bismarck, good relations with Russia were a cornerstone of his security policy, which aimed at continental European hegemony – but nothing more than that. The British did not object to start with, since it was a development at the expense of their traditional French enemies. To Hitler Russia was a prey to conquer and enslave. But both for Bismarck and Hitler, European hegemony as well as the appropriation of the East as a German interest sphere was the general inclination, albeit pursued with quite different means. In the meantime, von Tirpitz’s fleet building program during the reign of Wilhelm II had increasingly made Germany a threat to England, also as a world power.

The notion of Germany as the leading cultural nation in the heart of Europe was partly a compensation for the late start, in comparison to Western competitors. Delayed nation building (*Die verspätete Nation*, as Helmut Plessner wrote) is an important part of German uniqueness. One has to keep in mind here that the great catastrophe in German history is not the two world wars in our century but the Thirty Years War in the 17th century, which may have delayed German development for a couple of centuries. Half of the population perished (estimates are uncertain) and – equally tragic – the war ended without any clear-cut victory for either side.

If one of the sides in the conflict had won, later German history might have been very different. Through the Westphalian peace treaty of 1648, a powerless First Reich was perpetuated, with the *Kaiser* in Vienna and the *Reichstag* in various places (often Frankfurt am Main) before it from 1663 became more permanent in Regensburg. One might even say that the European balance of power at that time presupposed a non-functioning German state. Germany was no actor on the European great power scene but rather a fragmented conglomerate of monarchies, independent knightships, *freie Reichstädte*, etc., etc., adding up to roughly some 400 smaller entities, more victims than actors on the European scene. In 1648, for instance, Switzerland (de facto 1499) and The Netherlands (1609–1621) had seceded from a shrinking Germany, and still today the area of German culture does not coincide with the borders of the German nation, which was a perennial identity problem, especially acute in the 19th century.<sup>12</sup> Historically Germany has been shrinking in the West and enlarging eastwards. Once upon a time Metz was a German city and Savoy

<sup>12</sup> “Deutschland wo liegt es, ich weiß das Land nicht zu finden”, as Schiller said.



a part of the German Reich. Nevertheless, the *kleindeutsche Lösung* by Bismarck resulted in a Germany big enough to frighten all its neighbours and to emerge as the leading European power, once established. France, for instance, had taken over huge areas through Ludwig XIV's "policy of reunion" and obtained control over huge areas of German speaking territories in Alsace, where the French culturally oriented but German-speaking population remained a "hot potato" between the new virulent Germany and a France in decline.

Delayed German nation building was regarded as a threat by close neighbours, especially by France, which had lost its leading role, and in due course also by the United Kingdom and the United States. Due to its geographical position and political delay, Germany thus had to live with a predicament in which German domestic politics immediately became European power politics. German nationality and identity problems became European and during the 1930s even world problems. That the greatest cultural nation of Europe lacked stability as well as political continuity in foreign affairs was a dangerous problem to many nations.

### The German *Sonderweg* to Modernity

Between the Thirty Years' War and the "three-step-rocket" by Bismarck to a (Northern) German Reich between 1848 and 1870–1871, we cannot overlook the most decisive influences of the Napoleonic experience. Napoleon had made his brothers kings, e.g. Jerome in Westphalia. He thus accomplished more than the traditional French goal of establishing the Rhine as the border between German and French territory. He had bribed the ruling classes who enjoyed limited popularity among their subjects. As a result, the old rulers simply compromised themselves through their collaboration with the French intruders. Yet Napoleon in many ways was a far-sighted and "liberal" leader, civil law reforms and constitutionalism being evident examples of his modernity and his promotion of a bourgeois *Rechtsstaat* to replace the old privilege society of feudalism.

Napoleon's role was complex and contradictory. He managed to stimulate a latent German nationalism at a time when his troops were overrunning Europe. Simultaneously he destroyed in effect the system of representation in Germany, both through reforms and discrediting the old nobility through collaboration. It is often forgotten that Code Napoleon was in force in huge parts of Germany – the Westphalian parts where his brother Jerome had been king – throughout the 19th century.

*Burschenschaften* (student clubs) with slogans such as "nation, liberty, honor" were created. Fichte delivered his "Reden an die deutsche Nation" in 1806 in Berlin; in them, the German national creed found its – so far – most pregnant formulation. Only a short time earlier, Goethe had conceived of the French troops as a sort of optional cultural exchange, with educated French officers (who read his novels) in the salons.

Political modernization was irreversible, although the Germans suffered from the handicap – in comparison to England and France – that they had no state into which they could build their new nation; they had to start from a fragmented condition.

There were two main alternatives in the fragmented Germany: Habsburg or Prussia. Habsburg had the handicap of a feudal form of state and the ballast of Slavic satellites within the so-called double monarchy (or "Ka-kania", as Musil wrote, i.e., *Kaiserliche und Königliche* ...). Saxony and Thuringia are perhaps the real German heartlands, but were

out of the competition, because of unlucky coalitions and political mishaps already in the days of August, king of Saxony and Poland, in the early 18th century. Russia played a role in this development.

The old heartland of Prussia was even outside Germany but the expansion of Prussia and the establishment of the Northern German Bund had made that vital military state an important power factor, in the absence of other alternatives. This meant a certain overrepresentation of certain traditions, contributing to the slow development from a *Machtstaat* (power state) to a *Volksstaat* (rule based on popular sovereignty). “Nicht rasonieren, nur marschieren” is a colloquialism that catches the attitude of hierarchical subordination. Moreover, those parts of Germany where Prussia originally ruled are predominantly Protestant. Martin Luther had thought that revolution was wrong and that liberty was an inner quality; and to suffer from worldly injustice was spiritually educating. Prussia evidently wasn't fertile soil for revolution (although there was some turmoil in Berlin as well in 1848, “the year of the people's will”).

Prussia and Berlin, anyway, became the centre from which German modernization was generated.<sup>13</sup> However, a Junker-dominated regime had only limited options to promote modern constitutionalism, of the kind already launched in France (1789) and England (1688–1689). According to these Western models, the bourgeois classes should have a legitimate claim to participation not only in economic modernization but in the very power distribution as well; this was, or should have been, a process of “democratization”, here referring to the abolition of feudal privileges for the nobility and the introduction of equal opportunities. Ability should replace breeding and the regulations of the market, like the guild system and mercantilism, should be replaced by the market. The protection of property and legal calculability should be constitutionally guaranteed in a *Rechtsstaat*.

One cannot say that the German bourgeoisie displayed any vivid interest or talent in promoting this process; it had never “chopped off a king's head”, as Max Weber later formulated the coming of maturity of the bourgeoisie. Not until 1989 do we experience the first successful revolution on German soil, paradoxically both peaceful and within the boundaries of the old Prussian and Lutheran heartland. One could also express the lack of balance as follows: although the Germans could claim to be the culturally leading people on the European continent they were – for complex reasons – not in the forefront of the deconstruction of the feudal state and the introduction of democratic forms of government. There is also a lack of continuity in the German political culture. In England one might find a “Whiggish”,<sup>14</sup> teleological, history of political and constitutional development reasonable, i.e. that the whole development seems to be going in the direction of the classic parliamentary democracy which has also served as a prototype for several other countries, including in fact also the USA, through Montesquieu – and Germany, trying to comprehend and absorb English experiences.

There is a huge German literature on England as a good model to follow, especially between the *Gründerjahre* of the 1870s and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, when a different attitude soon was manifested, after the English declaration of war and

<sup>13</sup> Although Prussia and Berlin should by no means be identified. Bismarck rather wanted Bamberg in Franken to become the new German capital, instead of the too cosmopolitan Berlin.

<sup>14</sup> The very concept is connected with Butterfield who wrote in this vein about British parliamentary thought.



the introduction of the blockade. The Germans in fact display a double syndrome in their attitude to their English “cousins”, admiration and aloofness (*Abwendung*).<sup>15</sup>

The 19th century is the high tide of nationalism and in Germany this created tensions, above all in Schleswig-Holstein, with (at least) two principles of nationality colliding, “Scandinavianism” and German nationalism.<sup>16</sup> During the year of the people’s will – 1848 – the liberally dominated parliament in Frankfurt am Main had to ask the Prussian king for assistance to protect the Germans in Schleswig-Holstein when the Danish king did not, during the unrest. The Frankfurt parliament convened in order to define “Germany” out of the ethnic, political and cultural mosaic that was at hand within the geographic region of “Germany”, in short to create a modern national state. The Prussian king was offered the imperial crown – but declined to accept it when offered “from the gutter-stone” (“aus Lehn und Kletten”). The Frankfurt parliament (Paulskirche), without army and without real power resources, lost prestige and appeared as a debating rather than an acting assembly, which in the end had to rely on Prussia after all. After 1848 Prussia and Berlin more and more appeared as the only realistic and potent guardian of the idea of a German unified nation. Moreover, a number of disappointed liberal intellectuals – the 48ers – left, often for the USA where they pioneered social science.<sup>17</sup> This fiasco of the Frankfurt parliament affected and obstructed German liberalism for a long time, resulting in a special form of national liberalism, which broadly defined also was Max Weber’s.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to realize that the actual resulting development is one outcome out of several possible alternatives.<sup>19</sup> To Frankfurt also Representatives from Bohemia were also invited to Frankfurt. They turned down the invitation to attend. Instead a pan-Slavic conference in Prague was arranged – with German as the language of the transactions, so everybody could understand what was said. From an historical point of view a Germany including East Prussia but not Austria and Bohemia was more a reflection of the realities of power policy than of national creed and belonging. A Germany in which a catholic Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg were subordinated to Prussian dominance would not have been possible without the elegant “three-step-rocket” by Bismarck. To Bismarck it was a practical arrangement that Austria so to say “bound” so many Slavic people, as a sort of border protection bulwark against Russian inspired pan-Slavism. One might say that Bismarck did pretty much the same (although in reverse) as Lincoln did in the USA, i.e. creating a rather homogeneous nation state with similar economic preconditions, by means of power politics. Bismarck’s controversies with the labour movement and the Catholic Church are obvious parts of this nation building process.

Bismarck is of course a very controversial character in German history. It remains for instance unclear if he really intended a German unification or rather caught the

<sup>15</sup> Also Hitler later on envied the British. “How do they manage to rule and colonize India with so few civil servants? We Germans would need millions of *Staatsbeamten* for the same task”, he is quoted as saying, in one of his table conversations.

<sup>16</sup> Also in this region it was a tension within individuals, with a possible choice of being Danish or German in *Gesinnung* (as a matter of identity). Many families had been in the region long before the issue of nationality was on the agenda.

<sup>17</sup> Francis Lieber, the first chair-holder in political science (Columbia), was already there.

<sup>18</sup> Fritz Stern’s book *The failure of Illiberalism* [1972] is the classic work on this theme.

<sup>19</sup> This is also important for the understanding of Weber’s political writings during the war, in which a constitutive uncertainty about the goals and aims of the *Alldeutschen* is a recurring theme.

opportunity “by the tail” to create a greater Prussia. 1864 the Danish-Prussian war broke out, after renewed Danish attempts to make Schleswig a part of Denmark. Prussia and Habsburg joined forces in order to throw the Danish crown out of Schleswig-Holstein. In a second step Austria and Prussia came to blows over how to administer and divide the prey. By means of “blood and iron” Austria should be thrown out of the German *Bund*,<sup>20</sup> as Bismarck expressed his goal. However, Bismarck after Königgrätz (Sadowa) abstained from humiliating victory parades in Vienna and Habsburg got fairly “soft” conditions in the peace treaty, losing some territory to Prussian allies in Northern Italy. Bismarck was eager to lay a basis for good future relations, since Habsburg was a natural ally by virtue of its pacification of a great number of nationalistic Slavs. Austria had to be excluded from Germany since it as a part of Germany would be the natural centre, although with bad opportunities to form a functioning central state of a modern type. It is noteworthy that as late as 1866 Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg were on the Austrian side<sup>21</sup> and at war with Prussia, although without much fighting before the war ended (the Bavarian king in fact supported Bismarckian nation-building, trading his political support for financial aid to build some more castles).

In a third step Bismarck provoked the French to a war over the Spanish throne, the famous game around the Benedetti-dispatch in Ems just before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. Formally the war is a defense war from the German perspective, since France had declared war, and thus the defense alliance between Prussia and the Southern German states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg enforced; Bavaria and France all of a sudden on different sides, in contrast to the patterns of the Napoleonic days. The war was a rapid Prussian success and in the aftermath of the victory it was easy for Bismarck to have the Prussian king named German emperor, in a ceremony in Versailles. Already 1848 Prussia had appeared as the carrier of the German unification but this could now be accomplished without any interference from plebeian politicians.

Bismarck's legacy is a key ingredient of the German *Sonderweg* and, moreover, a natural reference point for Max Weber's political analyses. Bismarck was very authoritarian in domestic policy and treated the parliamentarians as an austere schoolteacher in the countryside treated his school class. He was, however, responsible to the emperor and not to the parliament, which in due time became his downfall.<sup>22</sup> This lack of parliamentarianism became a handicap when the central functions of the state were no longer in the hands of diligent people. Above all in foreign policy Wilhelm II turned out as a catastrophe, because of his lack of consistency and continuity, and a talent to stir up Germany's neighbours without any plausible reasons. Bismarck had staged the drama of the delayed German

<sup>20</sup> The German Bund was the framework that existed, with its loose structures and Habsburg traditions.

<sup>21</sup> As they also were obliged to. When Prussia went to war with Austria in 1866 it violated the rules of the Bund and Bayern and Baden-Württemberg were taking a fully constitutional stand when siding with Austria.

<sup>22</sup> Bismarck lost the support of the Kaiser. Wilhelm I died in 1888 and his son Frederick III died of cancer after only a few months in power, to be succeeded by the young Wilhelm II. The story behind Bismarck's resignation – or rather dismissal – is complex – but the *result* was disastrous, especially in the field of foreign policy, estranging Russia from Germany and isolating Germany from its natural British ally. Most historians today seem to agree that Bismarck had reached the end of the road and that his resignation was unavoidable. Wilhelm II had more progressive positions both on anti-socialist laws, expanded welfare policies, etc, and Bismarck's enemies had won the German parliament elections. But if it was not possible to go on with Bismarck it was just as difficult to cope with his legacy.

nation-building and there was not much of leeway for a new political leadership to mature and develop under his rule. He left the nation with a power vacuum that turned out to be difficult to fill.

This is really the main problem for Weber in his political writings: how to promote political reforms adjusted to the particular and peculiar (weak) German political culture, basically a modern capitalism in feudal guise.

The *Junker* were more inclined to promote their own economic interest, rather than the interest of the nation as a whole, simultaneously being the recruiting ground for both the army officers as well as the leading *Staatsbeamte*. No efficient political control could subordinate their power to the common good.<sup>23</sup>

The problem was accentuated when a conflict of interests between the *Junker* and the state became more acute, in the wake of American grain imported to Europe. On the big farming estates East of Elbe it became increasingly profitable to hire Polish seasonal workers instead of Germans. The border with Czarist-Russia was thus weakened, according to Weber and other critics of *Junker-egoism*.<sup>24</sup>

This lack of harmony between the interest of the ruling class and the common good of the nation as a whole is by no means unique for imperial Germany, but has a number of parallels, for instance in Latin America today. However, combined with the relative political unwillingness and impotence (lack of power instinct and maturity) of the German bourgeoisie it is a main feature of German political culture in the days preceding Weber.

The failure of German liberalism back in 1848, as well as the dissonance between utilitarianism and German idealization of the state created a hindrance to a “normal” road to modern mass democracy, especially as the Bismarckian “Obrigkeitsstaat” was so successful. During a few decades economic development was astonishingly rapid, the production of coal and iron multiplying, and Prussia, moreover, developing into the first modern welfare state, pioneering social policy institutions, social insurance, retirement schemes, etc. To make the new classes part of the development – give them a stake in the economic success of the rapid industrialization, albeit for strategic purposes: to prevent opposition and revolution – was in the interest of the state, to promote political stability. This successful development “from above” contributed to an apolitical and obsequious stance among the bourgeoisie that enjoyed the fruits of that development: one does not bite the hand that feeds. It also was a hindrance to labour party agitation, since the workers had already got some of their reforms so to speak “for free”, without fighting for them.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The Junker-class was by no means homogeneous and the higher offices were reserved for the higher nobility.

<sup>24</sup> This is the main theme in both Weber's voluminous studies from the 1890s on the farm workers in the German East and in his inaugural lecture in Freiburg. The former were sponsored by the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* and runs to almost 1000 pages. They are now republished in a critical edition in *Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe*. One must keep in mind the basic fact that the border with Russia and with (what remained of) Poland was identical after the third division of Poland and that a huge Polish minority existed especially in the province of Poznan/Posen.

<sup>25</sup> The best literary presentation of the German apolitical subordination is probably Heinrich Mann's novel *Der Untertan*. The famous Köpenick-captain is another illustration from real life, nakedly illustrating the respect for the insignia of power. An unemployed man in Berlin dressed as an officer and took over the command of a group of soldiers in open street, marching to the mayor of Köpenick and demanding money in the town hall. Even if the “captain” was caught a laughter rolled over Europe (including Germany itself) and the man could after his release from prison make a living as appearing as himself, the famous captain from Köpenick. Zuckmeyer has written a play about the incident.

A lot of liberals – including Max Weber's father Max Weber sr. – accommodated to Bismarckian Germany. German national liberalism thus had a specific character, without really being anchored in a constitutional praxis, a "democratic creed". Democracy becomes more *Brauch* than *Sitte*, i.e., a stable pattern of behaviour albeit without the support of internalized norms. There is a German *Reichstag* and a Prussian *Landtag*<sup>26</sup> with general suffrage and the right to vote divided into three groups (*Dreiklassenwahlrecht*) where the principle one-man one vote was modified (this system prevailed in Prussia until the end of World War I). Participation in the elections was rather low, especially among the workers, who also were discriminated against by the system, not only because of electoral rules but also by anti-socialist laws. Germany for long remained a *Machtstaat* more than a *Volksstaat*. Might preceded right.

### Post-Bismarck Politics and Ideology

The problem with the domestic political legacy of Bismarck was that of bringing about a relevant system of responsibility and control adjusted to and in accordance with the traditions at hand. This is the historical context of Max Weber's "*plebiszitäre Führerdemokratie*", i.e. a form of parliamentarianism with a strong leadership, why not a "Bismarck", albeit without *Junker*-egoism and instead of being responsible to the *Kaiser* responsible to a parliament with not only universal but also equal suffrage, in order to create *legitimacy*.

In foreign policy the legacy of Bismarck vanished quickly. The good relation to Russia disappeared as a result of diplomatic shortcomings, giving leeway to the French to replace the Germans as creditors at a large scale. This is the beginning of the somewhat untraditional alliance system that in the end encircled Germany and the central powers during the First World War.<sup>27</sup>

Bismarck had abstained from overseas colonial expansionism. The basic view that Germany was satisfied to be the hegemonic power on the European continent ("Deutschland ist saturiert") might be a threat to France and Russia – but hardly in itself to England. From a German viewpoint it was all right if England and France were engaged in colonial imperialism, bound to step on each other's toes, which also happened, in the famous Fashoda-conflict of 1898, when France and the United Kingdom were on the brink of war. The traditional antagonism between England and France was in harmony with German hegemony on the continent, although there is also another tendency in British foreign policy, at least from the 1740s onwards, to prevent any power from achieving such a hegemony, which after all could develop to a potential threat also to British trade interests. But Bismarck was eager to make clear that Germany's sphere of interest was in the East, while Wilhelm II spoke about "Germany's future being on the Ocean", a statement bound to alienate the British as natural allies against France.

<sup>26</sup> Here we should keep in mind that Prussia from the Vienna congress onwards became very big, encompassing two thirds of the territory of the German *Reich*. A strong Prussia was part of the European balance of powers after the Vienna congress, an important element in the system of Metternich. Prussia in the end also held a large chunk of the Rhineland.

<sup>27</sup> Also on this point a modification is called for, since it is only too easy to see Bismarck as a wise person whose legacy was lost by dilettantism. However, the prolongation of a secret non-aggression pact with Russia in a situation when Austria, after all Germany's closest ally, faced Russian inspired pan-Slavism in the Balkans could be rightfully questioned. What if Austria had found out about it?

One might discuss if Bismarck really did the right thing and whether perhaps an earlier German overseas imperialism would have been natural under the circumstances and less alienating to the neighbouring powers in Europe, if Germany had earlier taken, so to speak, its “fair share” and thus maintained a sound balance, instead of now laying the basis for future conflicts and fears when Germany all of a sudden seemed apt also to take its place as a world power at the side of the United Kingdom and the USA. Of course Germany also had *some* colonies – but in comparison to the world empires of England and France this was “peanuts”. A less modest and more “normal” imperialism would have left the German state less space and less reason for challenging mistakes and to upset its neighbours. Alternatively one should have stuck to Bismarck’s European program with more limited ambitions that might appear offensive to France and Czarist-Russia – but neither the United Kingdom nor the USA.

The world was in fact close to an alliance between Germany, England and the USA. It was “in the air” after the turn of the century and might have resulted in a different development of modern world history; with probably both France and Russia shrinking to secondary powers and two world wars perhaps never taking place. This is speculation and cannot be tested – but it remains an issue among professional historians how serious these discussions between Germany, USA and the UK were. In our context be it enough to note that the alliance system that triggered World War I was by no means natural, rather a break with history in several ways, and to quite some extent also a result of bad and outdated German domestic political arrangements, with too much power in the hands of an incompetent monarch and no clear location of responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

From a retrospective perspective it is relevant to note how badly Germany seems to have done in its attempts to form a consistent and responsible foreign policy. There is a connection between foreign and domestic policy, as also implied in Wolfgang Mommsen’s views on the causes of World War I, where outdated forms of governments of major actors on the international scene, i.e. Czarist Russia, Habsburg and Germany are ascribed a significant role for the resulting development.

Another way to express this is to propose that democratic states never get into war with each other and old-fashioned modes of government are threats world peace. The rapid German nation building automatically became a threat to the surrounding world.<sup>29</sup> As Randall Collins [1995] points out Germany was in many ways a modern state on the verge of modern democracy, scoring high on such variables as industrialization, secularization, bureaucratization, etc. It was also an open society with a free press and an energetic opposition, and a modern party system in formation. But the Kaiser was an anachronism, since he could intervene in politics significantly more than for instance the British monarch.

Up to here we have predominantly focused on the political aspect of *Sonderweg*. The particular route of the German history has also a more direct link to Weber’s scientific

<sup>28</sup> The emperor thought he was sovereign, which he perhaps was in Prussia, while actually Germany as a whole was a federation with a federal institution above the ruler. This deserves to be mentioned because of the strong federalism in German history.

<sup>29</sup> At the same time – somewhat paradoxically – one might also argue that foreign policy aiming at peace should not be allowed to become too democratic either. The need for calculability, to be able to predict each other’s actions – must be based on a long continuity, which is in most states provided by the nobility as diplomats or the formation of consensus in foreign policy and defense matters among the leading groups over the head of the people.

work, through the tradition of German *historicism*, as a reflection of the same *Sonderweg* on the intellectual level. In the German context of delayed nation building the historical disciplines became more important than in the rest of Europe.<sup>30</sup> To define and diversify the meaning of the term *historicism* (*Historismus*) is not all that easy, but rather complex and challenging. The historical school had an important role in the construction of a national awareness; it was to an extent *creating* the national legacy. The Germans had for long in their own conception been a people of apolitical and romantic dreamers.<sup>31</sup>

Leopold von Ranke is a good name to illustrate the new history in Germany, although Herder and Fichte are important forerunners. Historicism is complex as an intellectual current with a dual role in the history of ideas. It promotes a new critical awareness about the sources and how to evaluate them, thus performing a secularizing function, through the gradual fettering of Clio, although it maintains an important role in the formation of nation-building traditions. Historicism simultaneously modernizes historical method through increased rigor and as a movement is in a certain opposition to Enlightenment rationalism, in fact being part of the Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment. In a delayed and young Germany that is both regionalist and fragmentarized, split up politically, culturally and also to some extent ethnically, history writing performs a more central function than in countries having already gone through the development to centralized and rather homogeneous parliamentary democracies. The prolonged historicist hegemony in German intellectual life is in my view perhaps the most notable cultural element in the German *Sonderweg*.

It is largely due to historicism that Enlightenment rationalism and machine culture/civilization never got the upper hand in the German sphere. Scholars in the cultural sciences thus had a great responsibility and an important role in the process of German nation building. We have mentioned Ranke but there are a number of scholars and philosophers that come to our minds, besides Herder and Fichte also Schelling and Hegel; all contributing as *Gelehrte* (scholars) to the same tradition of German illiberal and idealistic nation building. If we compare Germany to England, a favourite pastime of many German intellectuals, one might say that it is easier to be a *laissez-faire* liberal in a country which already has a state, which the Germans did not have – but was on the verge to create with the help of the university professors. Hegel's views on the Prussian state as the manifestation of the world spirit is illustrative. Originally a Swabian (from Stuttgart) and a product of *Evangelisches Stift* in Tübingen he became in Berlin a promoter of the Prussian state idealism, based on idealist historicist philosophy with a certain ambiguity to Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> In France (Thiers) and with a time-lag Sweden (Edén); it is not rare that leading historians also become leading statesmen, in an era when both the natural and the historical sciences enjoy a lot of prestige.

<sup>31</sup> "Die Russen und Franzosen beherrschen das Land, das Meer gehört den Briten, nur im Traumreich der Luft herrschen wir Deutschen unbestritten", as Heinrich Heine put it.

<sup>32</sup> This is – admittedly – difficult and we will later try to diversify the conflicting traditions that form the starting point for Weber's views on science. Let us here say that Hegel's super-rationalism displays a mixture of idealism and conceptual realism that stands for precisely those traits in the German tradition that Weber transcends, albeit in an adjusted guise, in order not to alienate the strands of thought he wishes to reform.

For a general presentation of "historicism", see Georg Iggers's contribution to *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*.



It is by no means peculiar to Germany that state formation, war (and taxation) go hand in hand, together with national bible translations and formation of national churches, like in Sweden and England. The misfortune of Germany was that it was a late starter and much space was already occupied by neighbouring powers.

On the level of scientific doctrines, the “hegemony and the crisis of historicism”, as it is manifested in the aftermath to the great *Methodenstreit* between Schmoller and Menger appears as the most important element in the German intellectual ambience.

### Weber's Thought: Inherited Problematic and Unfinished Reworking

I have tried to describe the social and political context of Weber's work. The lack of maturity in a young and not very homogeneous nation is the main fact. A lot of traits prevalent in Weber's time are still valid and relevant. German modern history is a long identity crisis, enervating to all Europeans, since it is a concern of all Europeans. As the country that lost the wars Germany has taken over the liberal democratic model of the victors and developed what Jürgen Habermas has defined as *Verfassungspatriotismus* (constitutional patriotism), with a reification of the constitution that brings the United States into mind. It is in general obviously difficult for Germany to find a form of government that answers to the traditions of the country, based in its own history.

Napoleon is to blame. But there are in addition a number of negative experiences, except for the Federal Republic which must historically be labeled a success but which also is the result of the total surrender and national catastrophe in 1945, in fact the downfall and destruction of the German nation. The German national creed is a weak and late child of sorrow, doomed to generate conflicts once it had its take-off.

There are many differences today, in comparison to the situation in Weber's time. The *Junker*-class is no longer around as a hindrance to German economic and political modernization. Prussia does not exist any longer; it was abolished soon after the Second World War. War (with weapons) is no longer an option in French-German conflicts of interest; it is impossible already for infrastructural reasons.<sup>33</sup> And civil wars on the Balkan don't bring about European great wars any longer, even if a lot of dust is stirred up and old great powers conflicts of interest are still easily reawakened and present. No matter how tragic and problematic the Balkan situation might be, it did not again generate a conflict between the major European powers, only arguments.<sup>34</sup>

I have tried to imply a link between the socio-political and the strictly intellectual context. The national insecurity of the Germans generates a tendency to compensate “by deriving a sense of its existence from the sources of its own development”. The Germans have an unsatisfied urge to search their origins and mission within history and philosophy. There is also in German spiritual life a certain irrational Romantic tendency to totalize in matters of belief (*Weltanschauungsfragen*). Romanticism in itself means a certain element of anti-Enlightenment.

<sup>33</sup> The economies are so closely interwoven that war is a practical impossibility.

<sup>34</sup> Genscher went far in his support for Croatia and it took France and England a long time and many atrocities to reorient from a pro-Serbian position. But old conflicts were in the end not regenerated and Germany, France and the UK ended up on the same side in the Kosovo war against Serbia.

A nation needs for its establishment some sort of basic myth, and after “the death of God” through Enlightenment the nation and the people remain as distributors of “higher” goals, resulting in the mixture of Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment in German historicism and idealistic philosophy. It is necessary to relate Weber’s efforts to this context. Only to read the texts might generate misrepresentation. The context is lost for most of us, yet we have to try to regain it.<sup>35</sup>

The supposed contrast of culture and civilization is part of German identity, conceived as a mission in Europe. The legacy of or rather vacuum after Bismarck is evidently a point of departure for Weber’s political sociology in its various manifestations; it is ever present in his political commentaries throughout the war. The fact that rapid economic development left the political maturing process behind should, as he argued, be seen as a result of Bismarck’s leadership. The bourgeois citizens – or rather subjects – were content and not game for biting the feeding hand. An early romantic reaction against the Enlightenment, based in part on anti-French and anti-British resentments, resulted – in the long run – in a dual role for historicism as part of mythical nation-building as well as a driving force in the renewal of historical research. Weber took part in the methodological renewal task, to resolve what his neighbour Troeltsch had formulated as the predicament of a crisis of historicism. Troeltsch and Weber visited the USA together in 1904 but also lived as semi-detached neighbours in the same house (Ziegelhäuser Landstrasse 17) in Heidelberg. An influence on Weber is a reasonable assumption although Troeltsch’s work on the crisis of historicism was published after Weber’s death.

Delayed nation building was a result of Richelieu’s and Napoleon’s interest in preventing the emergence of a powerful German state, although Napoleon also modernized Germany and stimulated the formation of national identity, while simultaneously depriving Germany of a basic domestic polity structure, a system of representation, leaving the Germans with the necessity to start their nation-building from scratch. The anti-liberal streak, the failure of the liberal 1848 revolution and the lack of affinity between liberal utilitarianism and German state-idealism, worked in the same direction.

This is the scenario for Weber’s political thought (in political sociology as well as on constitutional matters) and to quite some extent also his methodological writings.

Weber’s main task on the *methodological* level is to introduce intersubjective concept formation in the social sciences, under the influence of neo-Kantian nominalism and Austrian marginalism. This is the aim of several of his methodological essays, especially the programmatic so called Objectivity-essay from 1904.<sup>36</sup> His is a mediating role, giving a helping hand to his fellow historicists; their constructions had Hegelian feet of clay and could not meet criteria of rational proof. Weber intervened against essentialism and conceptual realism. The crisis of historicism as defined by Troeltsch could not be resolved on the existential level – we have to live with the “necessity of choice” to borrow a formulation from the British sociologist Anthony Giddens – but Weber clearly elaborated a polytheistic or relativistic methodology which at least allows for the rationalization of value-hierarchies and instrumental means-end-analysis, which also applies to his political sociology. We can

<sup>35</sup> Intellectuals in the days of Weber were often so involved in nation building that they were hardly independent and innovative minds, rather fulfilling an important state-function.

<sup>36</sup> “Die ‘Objektivität’ sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis”, GAW: 146–214.

thus live with the predicament of value-incommensurability in post-Enlightenment and yet remain on a scientifically sound basis, avoiding uncontrolled value intrusion.

Applied to the study of politics Weber's project is even more of an inside job, although we here see some of his concepts in operation. Throughout the 1890s he pursues a number of policy studies on the situation of the farm workers east of Elbe, to be found in a condensed version with regard to the effects for nation-building and national security in his famous *Freiburger Antrittsrede* from 1895.<sup>37</sup> His more hastily conceived writings on the Russian pre-revolution of 1905 have a similar character – and so do his numerous contributions to especially the *Frankfurter Zeitung* during the war, with current comments on war events as well as constitutional affairs.

Weber wanted to renew the German political system and actually appears as a pioneer of parliamentary democracy (and after the war mass democracy) with a directly elected president. He is not essentially a democrat but a nationalist, realizing that the preservation of German culture and the dignity of human beings as masters of their own destiny requires a break with the authoritarian "Prussian" pattern. The culture and autonomy of the educated individual is Weber's main concern, in the end.

Weber notes that "democratization" in the sense that the structure of social estates is being leveled by the state run by officials, is a fact. Democratization means that power shifts from officials to party bosses [see for instance *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 1976: 825 *et passim*].

"There are only two choices: either the mass of citizens is left without freedom or rights in a bureaucratic, 'authoritarian state' which has only the appearance of parliamentary rule, and in which the citizens are 'administered' like a herd of cattle; or the citizens are integrated into the state by making them co-rulers."<sup>38</sup>

Weber states that the people never rule but choose their rulers (*WuG*). We also find more pessimistic visions, for instance when stating that "any thought [...] of removing the rule of men over men through even the most sophisticated forms of 'democracy' is 'utopian'" (letter to Robert Michels 4 August 1908, here quoted from *Mommsen* 1984: 394). The charismatic leader is supposed to *create* his following – but it is the people he has to convince.

One cannot say that Weber is crystal clear about what role, more precisely, the people ought to play. His perspective is not to maximize democracy, but to prevent chaos and uncontrolled rule by hazardous demagogues and the street mob [see for instance *Weber: GPS*: 125], which at the end of war appeared as a more urgent task.

That Weber by no means believes in a genuine "will of people" is explicit, for instance in the famous passage in the letter to Michels, quoted above: "But oh, how much resignation you will still have to face! Such notions as the 'will of the people', the true will of the people, ceased to exist for me years ago; they are *fictions*" [*Mommsen* 1984: 395].

Weber as a *Vernunftsdemokrat* (democrat by reason rather than creed) might appear as cynic, but developments in political sociology in which the Ostrogorsky-Weber-Michels approach to power-relations seems to be basic to later theorizing, such as Robert Dahl's polyarchy-approach or recent theories about "iron triangles" as crucial phenomena,

<sup>37</sup> "Freiburger Antrittsrede: Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik", *GPS*: 1–25.

<sup>38</sup> "Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland" (December 1917, *GPS* 291).

indicates its empirical adequacy. Experts intrude in democratic rule – and has to do so, or at last: it is hard to avoid. This generates new problems of legitimacy. Something has to be realigned; we are still wrestling with the problem.

The legacy of Bismarck is very ostentatiously the point of departure for Weber, both in his early works as well as in his war contributions, even on the level of headlines.<sup>39</sup> The notion of a plebiscitary, charismatic and sometimes “Caesaristic” leader is formulated not only with the German context in mind; Carlyle’s Romantic conception of the role of great men is also part of the background. It is, however, very well attuned to a basic trait in the German hesitation to the French and British paradigm and a response to a problem situation created by Bismarck.

Certainly the German *Sonderweg* is no universal key to the understanding of Weber. There are a number of factors to keep in mind, not to forget the tacit character of several British influences (e.g. J S Mill), the fallacy to mistake Weber’s taxonomies in *Economy & Society* for his own genuine positions, the tendency to read him, for instance on charisma, with “Durkheimian” sociological spectacles, as more of a “collectivist” than Weber would himself ever endorse. Yet the German *Sonderweg* is crucial for the understanding of his political sociology and has a considerable impact on the intellectual problem situation, i.e., the crisis of historicism. Moreover, it offers a good remedy against recurrent misrepresentations of his sociology and is an important part of the necessary recontextualizing of Weber, in order to bring about better and less biased interpretations.

The prolonged historicist hegemony in Germany has several manifestations, some of which we have mentioned. The economist Friedrich List appears as one dominant figure. The somewhat overconfident and condescending attitudes to abstract theory, which we find in the younger historical school, also belong in this context.

One might simply say that due to the peculiarities of German history the Germans became world champions in history writing while the British excelled in political economy and the French in ideology and revolution. History had a privileged position in Germany and that imprints both problems and prospects in a formative period when Max Weber touches upon several perennial paradigmatic divides.

The renewal of historicism, transforming it from an art of archive studies combined with empathy and improved source criticism into a secularized discipline meeting criteria of evidence, is Weber’s major scholarly achievement.

The full understanding of Weber requires a number of contextual insights. We have to learn about his ambiguous relation to Dilthey. We have to grasp the hesitation to assimilate French elements and terminology, like “sociology”. Pure contextualism, moreover, does not account for the innovative elements, which Weber picks up largely from neo-Kantianism.

But in addition to the obvious relevance for Weber’s political sociology as we meet it in, for instance, the *Freiburger Antrittsrede*, the crisis of historicism as diagnosed by Troeltsch is clearly also *Sonderweg*-related. This crisis is what Weber responds to, incorporating elements also from the adversary’s side in the famous *Methodenstreit* between history and theory, a controversy not yet fully resolved.

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<sup>39</sup> A quick look at *GPS* (or the shorter English selection, *Political Writings*) is enough to clarify this; it is recurrent throughout Weber’s life.

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- Weber, Max: (See following list of abbreviations).

## Abbreviations

Weber's works:

- GARS = *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie, I–III*. Tübingen: Mohr, 9. ed., 1988.
- GASW = *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*. Tübingen: Mohr, 2. ed., 1988.
- GAW = *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Tübingen: Mohr, 7. ed., 1984.
- GPS = *Gesammelte politische Schriften*. Tübingen: Mohr, 5. ed., 1988.
- MWG = *Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1984– (unfinished).
- WuG = *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Economy & Society)*. Tübingen: Mohr, 5. ed., 1976.
- “Freiburger Antrittsrede”: “Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik”, in GPS.

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