

# Max Weber and World War I

## 막스 베버와 1차 세계대전

Gianfranco Poggi \_University Of Virginia

지안프란코 포지 \_버지니아 대학교

### Abstract

Max Weber was always interested in political affairs, not only as a scholar, but also as keen observer and critic of the way in which contemporary Germany was ruled. He lamented the inadequate extent to which, as compared with other European countries, the running of governmental affairs had been modernized. The start of the war intensified his commitment to the cause of Germany as a great power, to which he gave expression – while remaining fully engaged in creative scholarly work – chiefly in his intense activity as a publicist, and occasionally in direct involvement in the conduct of official affairs. Germany's defeat constituted for him a tragedy, but intensified his effort to modernize the country, among other things by playing a significant role in the drafting of the Weimar constitution.

- Key words: Max Weber, World War One, Flaws in the German Reich's political structure, Emphasis on parliamentary reform and democratization. Participation in constitutional reform

### 초록

막스 베버는 학자로서 뿐만 아니라 당시 독일 통치방식에 대한 날카로운 관찰자이자 비판자로서, 정치적인 일에 항상 관심이 있었다. 그는 독일의 정부운영이 다른 유럽 국가들과 비교해볼 때 근대화된 정도가 부적절하다는 것을 비판했다. 1차 세계대전 발발은 그로 하여금 독일이 위대한 힘의 원천이 되는데 참여하는 것을 더욱 강화시켰다. 창의로운 학자의 작업을 본업으로 계속하면서도 그는 주로 대중홍보자로서 또 때로는 공식적인 일에 직접 참여하는 행동가로서 자신의 의사를 표현했다. 독일의 패배는 그에게 비극적인 일이었지만, 이를 계기로 그는 여러 일들 중 바이마르 헌법의 초안을 만드는 데 중요한 역할을 함으로써 국가를 근대화시키기 위한 노력을 더욱 강화했다.

- 주제어: 막스 베버, 1차 세계대전, 독일제국 정치구조의 결함, 의회주의적 개혁과 민주화에 대한 강조, 헌정개혁에 참여

As even a minimum of familiarity with Max Weber's "life and works" would suggest, the great military conflict of 1914-18 had a huge existential impact on his last few years, involving him persistently and deeply in what had promptly been acknowledged as a "great war" and in the immediate post-war period.

We shall discuss a few aspects of that involvement; but we may begin here with a remark that may surprise some readers. In spite of Weber's sustained professional and personal interest in politics, and in spite of the role played by expressly conceptual concerns in his monumental contribution to social theory, *the war phenomenon as such* did not evoke much attention in his professional thinking – especially that ample part of it we would assign to sociology and political science. That the phenomenon itself was relatively *untheorized* by Weber, may be suggested by considering instead, say, two contemporary German books, respectively by Karl Otto Hondrich and Hans Joas.<sup>1)</sup>

At the conceptual level, of course, Weber considered organized violence chiefly as one aspect of the nature itself of politics. In fact, One of his most widely recognized and cited conceptual contributions, defines the key protagonist of modern political experience, *the state*, as an organization which possesses and exercises the monopoly of legitimate violence over a specific territory.

However, within Weber's writings, that monopoly does not manifest itself only in a state's ability to build up and if necessary avail itself of a superior *military* capacity vis-à-vis other states, but also in the routine exercise of other, peacetime forms of violence, focused on its relations to its civilian population. Such relations require the state in the first place to maintain the public order, in the second place to enforce the legitimate claims individuals may acquire toward one another, according to the state's own juridical rules, in the pursuit each of its own private interests. On both counts, the state must establish and maintain a capacity to coerce the population to obey its own commands.

Of course Weber was fully aware of the historical significance of the military components of state activity and of related institutions (especially fiscal ones). Charles Tilly's famous dictum "War made the state, and the state made war" may or may not have had in Weber's work one of its immediate sources. But – it seems

---

1) K.O. Hondrich, *Lehnmeister Krieg* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 2000), H. Joas, *War and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

to me – when Weber emphasised the conceptual significance of physical force for political institutions and in particular for the (modern) state, he had primarily in mind its employment by domestic agents of the executive and the judiciary: bailiffs, policemen, tax collectors, customs officers, prison guards, truant officers, executioners – *and* soldiers when they play a direct role in repressing unlawful manifestations of popular discontent and in re-establishing the public order at the behest of the civil authorities.

This is in keeping with Weber's keen sense that the state, like other polities, is in the first place a set of institutional and material arrangements for the domination of one part of society by another; the employment or the threat of organized physical violence primarily grounds, expresses, and sanctions that domination.

This view is reflected also in the important place held by the notion of legitimacy in Weber's political thinking. There is no place for such a notion in the context of 'politics between nations', at any rate in the Westphalian / Hobbesian / anarchical understanding of such politics which presumably Weber shared. For him, legitimacy is chiefly a (contingent) quality of the 'vertical' relationship between the dominant and the dominated part of society, a (contingent) aspect of the command / obedience relation – and there is no such thing as command/obedience in the 'horizontal' relationship between sovereign nation states.

On this account, perhaps surprisingly, within Weber's conceptual account of modern politics in particular, one may detect something like a vacancy as concerns the war phenomenon. The overriding concern of all politics as Carl Schmitt was to conceptualize it was to establish and maintain a privileged locus of sovereign decision about who is friend and who is foe – a decision with an obvious military edge. There seems to be no place for this view in Weber's own conception. In addition, in the texts I am aware of he does not refer, say, to the fundamental treatment of war by von Clausewitz. More broadly, Weber attaches no conceptual priority to the *geopolitical* problematics, which had recently been prioritized by the German political geographer Friedrich Ratzel, or by the American admiral Mahan.<sup>2)</sup>

Such problematics occupy much attention in Weber's historical and sociological

---

2) See however Stephen Turner, "Max Weber's forays into geopolitics," ch. 6 in A. Sica, ed. *The Anthem Companion to Max Weber* (London: Anthem Press, 2016).

writings, but do so chiefly in a narrative mode. They have *relatively* minor significance, instead, where he *does his act* in the unique capacity as a scholar who, on the basis of an unequalled historical, juridical, sociological awareness of a huge range of diverse social and cultural phenomena, identifies within them a number of salient, recurrent aspects, and expressly conceptualizes them in a distinctive mode – the formation of *ideal types*.

Personally, I like to characterize this mode, as Weber proposes and practices it, by referring to the old English dictum *there is more than one ways of skinning a cat*, but complementing it with *yes, but not that many ways!*

As is well-known, Weber's ideal-types profile conceptually social and cultural phenomena as diverse as, say, the ways in which religious creeds generate and transmit to the believers different understandings of the so-called "problem of evil", or the ways in which previously independent producers are induced to submit their working practices to an employer's directives.

A number of those ideal-types address significant features of the political sphere, such as the privileges and obligations of the powerful, the modalities of their selection, the relation between political commands and legal judgment, or the arrangements made for administration. However, I repeat, I do not know of an expressly ideal-typical or otherwise sustained conceptual treatment of the phenomenon of war. Of course Weber occasionally discusses the military roles (if any) of personnel charged with administrative responsibilities; but his focus is on the arrangements prevailing, within different political entities, for selecting and rewarding that personnel and for monitoring and coordinating its administrative initiatives. Its military activities mainly appear as a component of those arrangements, particularly those relating to the funding and provisioning of military units.

In 1998 appeared in German (an English edition for the time being is not available) a remarkable contribution to Weberian studies by the Finnish political scientist Kari Palonen: *Das "webersche Moment"*.<sup>3)</sup> Its subtitle, *Zur Kontingenz des politischen*, emphasizes a crucial aspect of Weber's thinking, sometimes ignored by interpretations which, impressed by Weber's forceful accounts of very diverse socio-historical phenomena and/or by his effort to systematize their interpretation (often,

---

3) K. Palonen, *Das 'Webersche Moment': Zur Kontingenz des politischen* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998).

again, in the ideal-typical mode), derive from them the impression that the chains of events in question render *necessary*, as if dictated by inexorable laws, a given outcome. Palonen's book argues forcefully against this view, pointing up, so to put it, the role of (to coin an expression) *casuality* – often suggested in Weber's argument by the recurrence of the expression *chance* – over against that of strict *causality*. We can attribute to contingency developments occurring neither by necessity nor on a random basis.

Of course, according to Weber certain institutional arrangements produce predictable flows of consequences. Nevertheless, the making and establishing of those arrangements presuppose numerous premises that *need not* apply together. In particular, as to a major theme of his work, Weber often points up that Western modernization was the product of the intrinsically unpredictable convergence of phenomena of very diverse nature, taking place within unique historical contexts. To quote a significant secondary source: Weber “believed that historic liberty that evolved into modern democracy arose out of circumstances so contingent they may be unrepeatable”.<sup>4</sup>) In this sense, *contingency* is a major aspect of Weber's interpretation of what happens in history and how it happens.

Palonen argues forcefully that this is signally the case in the political sphere as Weber deals with it. His title echoes that of an important book by J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment* (1975) After reminding us of what Machiavelli says respectively about *fortuna* and about *virtù* as the contrasting makings of the success or failure of the undertakings of rulers, Palonen brilliantly discusses the numerous and diverse ways in which Weber articulates that insight in analysing political matters.

Now, one might suggest that *war* is the political phenomenon that most openly and dramatically points up the significance of contingency, at any rate if understood as the impossibility of predicting the outcome of major political undertakings. Why? Because in principle no war would ever take place if the contending powers could safely anticipate – from their knowledge of one another's resources and practices – the outcome of their clash of arms. Not for nothing Napoleon, whenever a senior member of his staff suggested to him he ought to appoint as a general one member of the officer corps, would seriously ask whether the individual in

---

4) J.P. Diggins, *Max Weber: Politics and the Spirit of Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 314.

question was “a *lucky man*”. Carries the same message Napoleon’s motto applying to the field of battle – *on s’engage, puis on voit*.

One can of course find such insight occasionally voiced by Weber; for instance, in a letter of his to Minna Tobler of August 17 “No one can know how a war will end since there are many accidents in war”<sup>5)</sup>.

However, in Palonen’s treatment of his own chosen theme, Weber has little to say expressly about the war phenomenon. For instance his chapter “Die Kontingenz des Politischen bei Weber”, discusses several distinctive *topoi*, that is expressions recurrent in literary or scholarly discourse about the significance of a given principle – in this case the contingent nature of major socio-historical events. Some such *topoi* occurring in Weber’s arguments could be expected to focus expressly on war, but in fact do not do so.

For example, according to Palonen, in Weber the *topos* “Kampf”, “finds its meaning as expression and instrument of contingency”.<sup>6)</sup> If translated, as it often is, as *battle*, it would inherently point to the war phenomenon. But, as Palonen interprets it, “Kampf” is probably best translated more generically as *struggle* or *conflict*; and Weber uses it regarding situations which have no war-like connotations, as in the following striking sentence from *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*: “Capital accounting in its *formally* most rational form presupposes the *Kampf of the human being with the human being*”.<sup>7)</sup> Or: “A social relation can be referred to as *Kampf* insofar as action is oriented to the intent to realize one’s own will against the resistance of one or more parties”.<sup>8)</sup> Or: “Even the economic *Kampf* of nationalities can be carried on under the semblance of ‘peace’”.<sup>9)</sup>

*Macht* – generally translated as *power* - is another *topos* which easily brings to mind the war phenomenon; but one could say that Weber’s well-known definition of it does not imply such a reference. To him, as stated in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*,

---

5) W. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 191f. For a recent re-assessment of this book, see H. Bruhns, “Max Weber et le politique: retour sur l’oeuvre de Wolfgang J. Mommsen” in H. Bruhns, P. Duran, eds. *Max Weber et le politique* (Paris: L.G.D.J., 2009).

6) Palonen, see fn 3, 163.

7) *Ibid.*, 49.

8) *Ibid.*, 49.

9) *Ibid.*, 60.

“*Macht* means any opportunity, within a social relation, to carry out one’s own will also over opposition, no matter on what the chance is based”.<sup>10)</sup>

Now, there is of course a sharp contrast between the relatively low emphasis on the war phenomenon in Weber’s conceptual writings and its irruption into his own existential experience (both as a citizen and as a scholar) from the beginning of world war one. That complex of events sharpened and made more persistent a sensitivity to political affairs – both domestic and international – that had accompanied the entire existence of Max Weber, alongside of course his vocation as a scholar.

In fact, the coexistence and frequent interaction in Weber’s thinking (to quote the title of an important collection of Weberian studies by Bendix and Roth’s) of *scholarship and partisanship*<sup>11)</sup> had found clear expression nearly twenty years before the beginning of the war, at a most significant moment of his academic career. This was the inaugural lecture Weber held in May 1895 as the newly appointed holder of the chair of economics at Freiburg University.

The resulting text is one of the few originating before the war contained in the *Max Weber Politische Schriften* edited by Wolfgang Mommsen.<sup>12)</sup> We deal with it here because Weber’s inaugural lecture explored critically aspects of the institutional framework of German politics during the Wilhelmine era to which he was to refer persistently during the war, since their persistent legacies continued to evoke his reasoned concern.

On such a markedly *public* occasion as an inaugural lecture, Weber explicitly assigned his own discipline a mission very different from one commonly imputed to economics, having chiefly to do with the maximisation of the material well-being of individuals and groups. According to Weber, instead, “The science of national economic policy is a *political* science. It is at the service of politics – not of the day-to-day politics of the current power holders and classes, rather of the enduring power interests of the nation. And for us the *national state*.....constitutes

---

10) Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* Vol I, 5th ed. (Tuebingen: Mohr, 1978), 28.

11) R. Bendix and G. Roth, *Scholarship and Partisanship. Essays on Max Weber* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

12) M. Weber, “Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik,” *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, see fn 11, 1-25.

the worldly power organization of the nation, for which the ultimate criterion, even in the context of economic considerations, is the *raison of state*.... For economic nationalists [this] constitutes the sole supreme standard of value also for assessing the classes which hold in their hand, or aspire to, the guidance of the nation".<sup>13)</sup>

This last statement opens up a fundamental, somewhat controversial argument in the Freiburg lecture, often considered a major account of what is often called *der deutsche Sonderweg*, meaning some salient peculiarities of Germany's path to modernization. Toward the end of the lecture, Weber stated "I am a member of the bourgeois class....raised in its views and ideals".<sup>14)</sup> On that very account, however, he pointed up a critical fault in the contemporary experience of his own class. The current political position of the German bourgeoisie regrettably contradicted a generalization he had previously stated, according to which "the *attainment of economic power*", at all times, has led a class to consider itself as a candidate also for *political leadership*".<sup>15)</sup>

According to Weber, when and where that statement did not hold, this fact constituted two major weaknesses for a politically constituted *collective entity*. First, the danger entailed if a class, which had lost its economic significance, continues to perform a leading political role significance. Second, the danger entailed if the class now economically predominant appears not ready to play a critical political role. Both aspects, Weber argued, were present in the current German situation, in spite of the astonishing national success represented by the country's political unification into the Reich (1871) under the leadership of Bismarck, and its subsequent position as one of the key European powers.

The establishment, in the Reich as a whole, of highly particular institutional arrangements - largely on account of the leading role played in the unification process by the Prussian state - had assigned supremacy over the Reich's political affairs to a complex governmental and administrative apparatus, at the center of which stood the strongest military establishment in Europe, the control over which was, as a matter of principle, a key privilege of the Kaiser himself and of the

---

13) Ibid., 14.

14) Ibid., 20.

15) Ibid., 19.



Chancellor he appointed.

This and other aspects of the Reich's constitution contrasted with the key role assigned, in many other European powers, to representative institutions, whose policies largely promoted the political interests of the national sections of the economically dominant bourgeoisie. The German section, however, seemed largely satisfied with the structures and processes of what was characterized as an *Obrigkeitsstaat*, an authoritarian state.

At the level both of the Reich and of its component states – the most important of which was of course Prussia: the Prussian king was constitutionally also the German emperor – representative institutions played at best a marginal role. Unlike other national bourgeoisies within Europe, the German bourgeoisie had been the protagonist of very innovative economic undertakings (see below) but had not resolutely confronted the *Obrigkeitsstaat* with strong political demands. It had not requested for representative bodies the power of making legitimate inputs into the composition of governments and the formation of the state's policies, and subsequently the task of monitoring the administrative implementation of those policies. Essentially, according to Weber, the Reich had remained largely *politically unmodernised*.

This, in spite of the fact that in the course of a few decades the German bourgeoisie had successfully modernized, instead, the country's economy, by promoting a radical, historically novel industrialization process. An extensive banking system had gathered unprecedented amounts of capital, and successively invested it (chiefly via a well-functioning stock market) into the production, within larger and larger factories, of new – mechanical, chemical, electrical – goods. Such products often embodied newly attained scientific knowledge, produced in the country by modernized, high-grade academic establishments and by specialized research institutions (In the Reich, the historical predecessor of the great German asset constituted today by numerous, prestigious *Max Planck* research institutes, had been the *Society for the Advancement of Sciences* instituted in 1911 and named after the Kaiser himself!).

Those products, together with conventional ones already in existence, were marketed on a mass basis to the growing population of a number of urban centers, characterized among other things by high literacy rates. Furthermore, German Universities produced not only universally recognized bodies of *natural science* but

also internationally prestigious bodies of *cultural science* dealing with history, philosophy, law, economics, medicine, psychology.

In spite of these achievements, the German bourgeoisie had not applied to the political sphere the capacity for modernization it had demonstrated in the making and marketing of commodities and in the sciences. Instead, it had continued to demonstrate its confidence in the activities of traditionally privileged bodies of governmental, military and administrative personnel, many of them descendants of the traditional nobility. This was the chief aspect of the German *Sonderweg*.

The constitutional framework Germany had acquired under the unchallenged guidance of Bismarck was made to some extent worse, from what we can construe as Max Weber's viewpoint when, in 1888, he oldest current member of the Hohenzollern dynasty succeeded to the position both of Kaiser and of Prussian King under the name Wilhelm II. He definitely did not have the right calibre for those positions; this found expression, within less those two years after his two-fold coronation, in his most unfortunate decision not to allow Bismarck to continue to play the absolutely central role he had previously exercised. The key reason for the decision was that the Kaiser had a very high – and totally unwarranted – opinion of himself and of his own competence and promise as a ruler and a statesman, and was trying to project and reassert that opinion in his personal activities and in those of a narrow circle of trusted members of his own court.

There were some ambivalences in Weber's reaction to these developments. The Emperor's decision to exclude from the political scene a genius such as Bismarck was considered by Weber as a most irresponsible act. However, he had previously learned to resent and criticise the authoritarian traits of the system of rule Bismarck himself had constructed and dominated, and his determination not to allow any of his associates in government to acquire and demonstrate political capacities remotely comparable to his own. As to the Emperor himself, Weber seems to have experienced, at first, some affection for him; but his consideration of his qualities as a ruler was never high, and deteriorated over time. He resented the extent to which within the publicly inaccessible sphere of the Imperial court were taken initiatives which Weber judged to have dealt inadequately (or worse) with important political affairs, both domestic and international. In the long run he developed something like contempt for the Emperor's character. During the war, he

went as far as suggesting that Wilhelm II was “a defeatist”.<sup>16)</sup>

We cannot, here, convey to the reader in detail the political framework within which Weber operated in the years previous to the war. He had been involved chiefly in numerous, highly original and demanding scholarly pursuits, whose main products were numerous essays published in high-grade scholarly journals accessible only to a narrow, highly sophisticated audience.

These essays, too, demonstrated Weber’s constant awareness of the significance of political structures and processes in their sustained, creative analysis of major world-historical developments, without giving expression to his own concerns, opinions, and passions relating to current political events. About these, however, we know a great deal from three chief sources: his correspondence; his biography, written by his widow Marianne<sup>17)</sup>; the reports of Weber’s views and opinions recollected and subsequently published by a chosen circle of contemporaries (fellow scholars, aspiring academics, friends) who took part in the informal gatherings the Webers often held in their Heidelberg home.

Much of what we can learn from such sources was subsequently expressed and amplified in the writings – mostly newspaper editorials or statements presented at public events – published by Weber during the war and after its end. Those bearing of political affairs can be best accessed in a collection edited by Wolfgang Mommsen as Max Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, subsequently translated into several languages.<sup>18)</sup> There are also numerous, useful secondary sources, indicating among other things the circumstances within which those writings were originally published and clarify their contents.

For from the beginning of the war, after saluting it as “whatever the success... great and wonderful”<sup>19)</sup> Weber undertook to play in it, as far as possible, an active role. At first he aspired to do so in a properly military capacity at the front, for as a young man he had been trained and had qualified as junior officer in the Reich’s Army reserve. However, having been judged unfit for such service, Weber,

---

16) Diggins, see fn 4, 187.

17) Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography* (London: Routledge, 1988) remains a fundamental source, though its account of Max’s life has long been amplified, qualified, corrected by subsequent works. See for example J. Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

18) See fn 10, above.

19) H. Bruhns, *Max Weber und der erste Weltkrieg* (Tuebingen: Mohr, 2017), 4.

in the rank of captain, was assigned a task in the administration of a number of military hospitals established in Heidelberg and its surroundings.

In the first year of the war, Weber worked at this task most assiduously and conscientiously, seven days a week for twelve hours a day; among other things, he supervised the nursing activities of numerous volunteers, many of them women.<sup>20)</sup> He even submitted a relatively extensive report containing various suggestions for the best management of the establishments in question. However, in August 1915 he asked to cease carrying out this service because he envisaged being called to a more significant public position,<sup>21)</sup> and while awaiting this once again he devoted himself chiefly to his own scholarly pursuits. The recollections of his wife and of other associates and his correspondence, however, suggest that within this private existence, his passionate concern with the ongoing military events and other public affairs remained intense (It has been said of him that he was indeed an ardent nationalist, though far from an arrogant chauvinist).<sup>22)</sup>

Frequently, his attitude found expression in extensive, rigorously reasoned and cogently expressed *prises de position* about ongoing developments, which mostly Weber elaborated and expounded within the circle of his familiars and associates (who sometimes debated about them).<sup>23)</sup> Subsequently he would render public and argue vigorously for those *prises de position* through the medium of newspapers articles, many of which, beginning in the summer of 1916, appeared in a prestigious paper, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (Note that, particularly toward the end of the war, these publications had to observe the constraints of censorship). He also submitted a memorandum to an authority dealing with foreign affairs<sup>24)</sup> as well as reports on the deliberations of various bodies. Finally, he gave speeches on public occasions, mostly organized by the German Democratic Party. Before referring to the more significant and controversial among these contributions Weber made to the public debate on political affairs, let us mention that during the war he was involved in the activities of a few public bodies. However, his aspiration to intervene in the

---

20) Diggins, see fn 4, above, 14.

21) Mommsen, see fn 5, above, 211.

22) Diggins, see fn 4, above, 205.

23) The book by Radkau mentioned in fn 18 has made several contributions to this information.

24) H.Bruhns, see fn 20, above, 22.

making or implementing of significant governmental policies was frustrated. For example, in the middle of 1915<sup>25)</sup> he took part in an official mission charged with monitoring aspects of the occupation of Belgium by German forces and recommending relevant practices: but the whole operation lasted only a few days.

Subsequently, Weber became a member of the German Democratic Party (located so to speak on the left wing of the spectrum of the Reich's liberal, bourgeois political forces) and publicly subscribed to its program. As one would expect in view of Weber's media visibility at the time as a commentator and critic on public affairs, the appropriate committee of his party seriously considered him as a potential candidate at forthcoming elections. Weber rather expected to be elected in Frankfurt, but did not actively promote his own candidacy within the party.<sup>26)</sup> Perhaps on this account the party itself found no place for his name on its ballot, thus denying its own electorate the opportunity to support or to ignore Weber's positions.

Furthermore, after the German defeat, at one point the newly born Republic appointed Weber, in his professional capacity as an economist, a member of a minor committee which in May 1919 travelled to Versailles, where the terms of the peace were being elaborated, to deal with the harsh financial arrangements the winners were imposing on the vanquished while producing the treaty. The committee's mission<sup>27)</sup> only lasted a few days, and produced no worthwhile results. Worse, it offered Weber a closer consideration of what punishment was being inflicted on Germany, to begin with by imputing to the Reich what came to be called "the war guilt", that is the primary responsibility for initiating the conflict in 1914.

Weber went as far stating, "Czarism constituted the most terrible system for the enslavement of men and nations ever devised – until the peace treaty proposed here"<sup>28)</sup> which the Reich could not refuse to sign. In spite of this, according to Mommsen, Weber's "national emotions quickened in the hour of defeat".<sup>29)</sup> The major exception to the disappointing record of Weber's involvement in official

---

25) Diggins, see fn 4, above, 188.

26) Bruhns, see fn 20, above, 75.

27) Turner, see fn 2, above.

28) Mommsen, see fn 5, above, 316.

29) *Ibid.*, 321.

affairs was his participation in an expert commission deliberating on what should become the Weimar Republic's constitution (We shall deal with his significant input into this very important initiative below). One may wonder why was such little use otherwise made of Weber's keen interest and significant qualifications in the context of official activities, including those of parties? Possibly because both the stature itself of the man and his well-known disposition to express himself both authoritatively and sharply (accounts of Weber's character invariably refer to his *volcanic* personality) made him an awkward potential associate to other participants. They might appreciate his views, but hesitate to have them publicly argued by him in person. In any case, sources mentioned above provide us with a reliable account of the positions taken by Weber about various issues debated within the German public sphere during the war and immediately after.

To begin with, in his view various conditions had led the country to commit itself militarily to the unprecedentedly large and murderous conflict provoked initially by the assassination at Serajewo on June 28, 1914, of the Arch-duke of Austria Franz Fernand and his wife.

Weber had considerable misgivings about what he considered the incompetent handling of the immediate consequences of that event by the Reich's diplomacy. But in retrospect he felt that Germany's decision to go to war was rendered unavoidable by the drastic ultimatum Austria (Germany's main partner) had presented to Serbia, and by the Tsarist empire's decision to mobilize its massive army.<sup>30)</sup>

Accordingly, as we mentioned he was repelled by the view, proclaimed by the winning powers at Versailles, that the German Reich bore the main "war guilt".<sup>31)</sup>

In any case, what was the war all about from Germany's viewpoint, according to Weber? He had long felt that the Tsarist empire's expansionist policies constituted a serious threat to the powers governing central and eastern Europe, which unlike Russia itself had for some time experienced and shared some cultural and social advantages of modernity. But among those powers it was Germany's particular historical responsibility, conferred upon it by its unique power position, to deal with that ominous threat, as well as with the lesser one represented by the hegemonic role Britain empire had been exercising for some time, availing itself chiefly

---

30) Diggins, see fn 4, above, 207, 220.

31) Mommsen, see fn 5, above, 316f.

of the enormous imperial resources Britain could draw upon, chief among these its unchallenged naval superiority. It could also aspire to put to use, in upholding its position, its own unique historical association with the United States. As to France, it inevitably aspired to a *revanche* after its defeat and the loss of territory inflicted on it by the German states, under the leadership of Bismarck's Prussia, in the war of 1870-71 – at its end of which the German Reich had been proclaimed *in the royal palace at Versailles!*

In the light of this understanding of the origins and nature of the war, Weber positioned himself with respect to the public debate the war had initiated in Germany about “the ideas of 1914” – an expression coined to match (and contrast) the “ideas of 1789” associated with the French revolution.<sup>32)</sup> That debate was promoted chiefly by patriotic intellectuals; this in itself inspired some diffidence in Weber, always keenly aware of the political ineptness of contemporary German *literati*, scholars included.

Having registered with regret to what extent the participants in the debate explicitly rejected institutional innovations inspired by liberalism and democracy, Weber disassociated himself in the debate from the so-called *pan-German* option – that is: to attain in a victorious war the political unification of all people sharing German or a Germanic languages (such as Dutch and Flemish) and as such (in some understanding of the option) embodying the superiority of the Aryan race.

Weber, for one thing, did not subscribe to the widely entertained notion that for centuries, in spite of the country's political dis-unity, Germans had constituted a *kulturvolk*, whose distinctive identity rested chiefly on the wide recognition of its artistic products, such as Bach's music or Goethe's poetry, or of its intellectual products, such as Kant's philosophy. Such a view could not be of assistance in constructing Germany's contemporary identity as a major world power.<sup>33)</sup>

Furthermore, Weber feared that pan-German policies would provoke opposition from the century-old political partnership between Austria and a number of significant non-Germanic countries, beginning with Hungary. No, for Weber the construction of a *nation* and the political pursuit of its interests by means of power

---

32) See [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideen\\_von\\_1914](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideen_von_1914).

33) Max Weber, *Political writings*, edited by P. Lassman, R. Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 123.

had to be the task of a *state*.

Weber lent some approval and support, instead, to the contribution to the debate on “the ideas of 1914” conveyed by the expression *Mitteleuropa*. This was the title (among other things) of a book published in 1915 by his friend Friedrich Naumann, according to which central European powers, without losing their independence, would benefit from close cooperation on economic and military affairs, under the Reich’s benevolent guidance, jointly seeking imperialist expansion outside Europe.

In the course of the war, Weber played a significant role in a related but different debate, more relevant to the conduct of hostilities and apt to involve a broader public – the debate on war *aims*. He resolutely opposed, in particular, a widely advertised policy according to which at the end of a victorious war Germany should *annex* to its own territory some of those belonging to countries which had lost the war.<sup>34)</sup> Weber had had some misgivings about the early march of the German army into neutral Belgium, which others assumed would eventuate in the annexation of that country to the Reich. He consistently argued that, assuming its final victory, the Reich should at most ask for guarantees of permanent demilitarization of the territories it had occupied, but not annex them.

Promises to the German public of territorial aggrandisement – or the threat of them to the enemy forces – did not have to be fulfilled after the outcome of the war to which he aspired. *That* outcome would consist, in negative terms, in the elimination of the menace constituted by the Russian empire; in positive terms, in the unchallenged assumption by the Reich of a key role in future world politics, and particularly in the competition among Western countries about imperial domination over the rest of the world. As Mommsen argues, for Weber the only justifiable objective of the war was the preservation of the German Reich as a great power among the European world powers. The point was not for it to seek territorial gains but to constitute a solid base for a future German world policy. In view of this conception, Weber reacted negatively to the brutal terms Germany imposed on Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litowsk, although of course he had no sympathy either for the Tsarist policy, which had started the war, or for the Bolshevik policy that put an end to it.

---

34) Mommsen, see fn 5, above, 193.



A further, significant aspect of Weber's *prises de position* during the war regards one of the greatest military innovations – submarine warfare. He had always felt some misgivings about the outsize role Admiral Tirpitz had long played in the Reich, availing himself of the great trust accorded him by the Emperor himself and by the narrow circle of his personal advisors. Weber had to some extent subscribed to the original intent of Tirpitz's policies – to equip the Reich with a military fleet, which could, in the long run, challenge the world-wide supremacy of the British navy. However, he had some objections to the magnitude of the effort that intent required, and in the course of the war, these objections extended to the emphasis now placed by Tirpitz on submarine warfare, and on the necessity of building a large U-Boot fleet. Weber's misgivings about this were intensified by the disaster where the *Lusitania*, a passenger book, was sunk in the Atlantic by a German submarine in May 1915, with the loss of many civilian lives.

What induced Weber to articulate particularly serious objections was the official proclamation of a new policy of unrestricted U-Boot attacks on.<sup>35)</sup> He foresaw that sooner or later such a policy would induce the USA to join the allied side and display in the conflict the strengths of own army and fleet.

Weber had a great advantage over the great majority of those in Germany who intervened in this and related debates. Thanks, among other things, to what he had learned about America *on the ground*, during a stay in the United States in the second half of 1914, he had a keen sense for the views and tendencies of the American public and of the American government. He also knew what unequalled industrial resources the country's military forces could commit to their intervention in a serious European conflict – all aspects of the possible entry of the US into the war entry into the war on the allied side systematically ignored or underestimated in the Reich. The events taking place after that entry fully justified such apprehensions of this.

Weber was disposed to engage in wartime public debates with an eye not only to the content of current military policies but also to the potential impact those policies might have at the end of the war on the domestic social structure of the Reich – even assuming the latter's victory (the hypothesis of its defeat could not

---

35) *Ibid.*, 227.

be entertained in the media). He declared his concern, for instance, over the fact that the financial dependence of the Reich-at-war on the large funds provided by public loans was increasing the political leverage of the groups more capable of committing their own resources to such loans, thus of rentier strata.<sup>36)</sup> He deplored the accumulation of war profits in the hands of specific components of the bourgeoisie, and in 1917 found particularly outrageous a Prussian legislative proposal amounting, in his bitter judgment, to *the ennoblement of war gains*. If enforced, that proposal would apply to landed properties recently acquired by members of the bourgeoisie the *entail* provisions characteristic of the feudal institution of *fideicommissus*. That is, such properties would be permanently vested exclusively in the oldest member a given family, could not be sold or mortgaged; they would thus be taken out of the normal traffics relating to agricultural properties, and serve instead the pursuit of rent rather than profit by privileged households.

Such an arrangement, Weber bitterly argued, amounted to “German soil being handed over, behind the backs of the fighting army, to feed the vanity of a new plutocracy grown rich from the war, by creating fee-entailed estates for men anxious to attain a patent of nobility”. This was all the more deplorable as long as remained in force the peculiar Prussian electoral law, which assigned the individual members of electorate, on the basis of how much tax each paid, to one of three classes. These took all significant decisions on legislation, the budget etc., which resulted in the systematic prevalence of the interests of the wealthier elements of the population. Weber considered “utterly untenable” this form of franchise.<sup>37)</sup>

Weber also criticized the fact that the workforce of industries whose products were directly relevant to the military effort, besides being spared the risks of participating directly in the murderous conflict, was seeing its own wages increase with respect to other sections of the working class.<sup>38)</sup>

Through the first two years of the war, Weber basically trusted the political leadership provided by the Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg. He saw with concern the ways in which that leadership was hindered by the Kaiser via the court circles,

---

36) Weber, see fn 33, above, 85.

37) *Ibid.*, 82.

38) *Ibid.*, 85.

and progressively marginalized by the growing political weight informally assigned to the top military *milieu* centered on the twin figures of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, the protagonists of the huge German victory over the Tsarist army in the Battle of the Masurian Lakes in September 1914. These circumstances led to Bethmann-Hollweg's fall in July 1917, his replacement by an inadequate figure, Georg Michaelis, and a further increase in the political leverage of that *milieu*. According to Weber such events amounted to "a fatal crisis of leadership".<sup>39)</sup> This he considered to be the most dangerous circumstance possible for a power contending with other powers; it created a vacuum into which could rush a body of politically unqualified and irresponsible personnel, such as bureaucratic officialdom.

This judgment of Weber's is argued, with others of near-equal significance, in the very important writings he published chiefly in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* beginning in 1916, which subsequently appeared as a book under the title *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland: Zur politischen Kritik des Beamtentums und Parteiwesens* (Parliament and Government in the new order of Germany: For a political critique of officialdom and political parties)

As this suggests, even assuming (as Weber did or pretended to do, from sheer patriotism or in order to circumvent the strictures of censorship) that the Reich, together with the Habsburg Empire, would in the end win the war, the country had gone through experiences of such nature and magnitude that also its constitution should register them in its future content.

The key experiences were two. First, of course, the demands imposed by the war itself both on the military units fighting on various fronts, and on the rest of the population. This had to struggle with the increasingly inadequate supply of various kinds of provisions and amenities, which it had previously taken for granted – a condition that became more and more pressing with the duration of the conflict, generating "war-weariness".

The second experience, in the last two years of the war, was the increasing public awareness of revolutionary developments in an enemy country – Russia. Some of these affected not only its conduct of the war but also (even more drastically) its domestic arrangements for policy-making. The revolutions respectively of

---

39) Mommsen, see fn 5, above, 240f.

February and October 1917 had among its protagonists also sections of the military previously marginalized by those arrangements, and above all (to use an expression loaded with threatening meanings) “the masses”. Multitudes of soldiers, peasants, denizens of major cities, had suddenly become politically mobilized and had created ruling arrangements of their own making – *soviets*, that is “councils” of soldiers and workers. The mode of operation and the rhetoric of these units could evoke collective emotions and aspirations also in countries on the other side of the war, challenging their own standing arrangements for policy-making.

As Mommsen suggests, Weber’s awareness of both these conditions (in the case of Russia, an awareness previously demonstrated by two well-informed, penetrating essays he had written in 1906 on two major recent turns in Russian domestic politics) may have contributed to his urgent sense that major changes were called for in the Reich.<sup>40</sup> But we may also say that Weber, over twenty years since his inaugural lecture at Freiburg, was imparting a distinctive, controversial content to his own previous argument for the political modernization of Germany. He now assumed that the moment for this had finally come, and was challenging the country to take new choices. Two of these he assumed to be dictated by the circumstances.

First, some form of *parliamentarization* of the public processes whereby major policy initiatives were considered, undertaken, legitimated, and sanctioned. A parliament of some kind would be a site where, following pre-established procedures, different bodies of opinion concerning such initiatives could be discursively confronted one another, and where in the end the decisive say belonged to the parliamentary representatives of the majority of electors.

Second, the *democratization* of the electoral system, according to the “one man, one vote” principle (which at the time was assumed not to refer to women). Weber opposed proposal conferring the suffrage only on individuals in possession of *Besitz* (a certain amount of possessions) or *Bildung* (a certain level of education), or conferring it not so much on individuals as to preconstituted collective bodies, composed for example by all individuals qualified for the practice of a certain trade. On the contrary, members of the Reich’s parliament (whatever it would be called) should be elected via “universal equal and direct suffrage”.<sup>41</sup> Otherwise, Weber felt, with-

---

40) Ibid., 267.

out democratization after the war Germany would be subjected to a parliament of warrofiters.<sup>42)</sup>

Assuming the realization of those two fundamental changes, further constitutional issues would have to be solved, such as the role Parliament might play in the selection of members of the executive, the budgeting of public expenses, the production of legislative acts, or the monitoring of administrative operations.

The immediate political context of these considerations of Weber's (the last year or two of the Reich) did not permit him to raise a vital question, the difference it might make whether the German should be a monarchy or a republic. In the last few days of the war, the so-called October Reform modified the imperial constitution by establishing a parliamentary regime. Weber seems to have favored this solution, including the abdication of Wilhelm II as King of Prussia and emperor and his replacement by another member of the Hohenzollern dynasty.<sup>43)</sup> At first Wilhelm II refused to abdicate, but was forced to do so on 9 November 1918 under the pressure of on-going political upheavals.

Earlier that day a leader of the largest socialist party had proclaimed what later came to be called the Weimar Republic – an event that Weber, unlike some of his close political or professional associates, accepted as a *fait accompli*. He had assumed that this fundamental constitutional phenomenon would be accompanied by revolutionary events mobilizing sections of the military and of the population, but contemplated with distaste some of those events that occurred, writing “this bloody carnival....does not deserve the honorable name of revolution”.<sup>44)</sup>

Weber spoke contemptuously of two leaders of the extreme left, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg (305), but basically appreciated the role played by the socialist parties in placating or repressing the most threatening disorders (Largely on this account a British historian of modern Germany speaks authoritatively of “The aborted revolution”).<sup>45)</sup> This appreciation was reinforced by his comparison between the events in Berlin and other parts of Germany, and those

---

41) Ibid., 248.

42) Ibid., 274.

43) Ibid., 296.

44) See G. Craig, *Germany 1866-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), chap.XI.

45) Mommsen, see fn 5, above, 412.

that in Munich led first to the formation and the constitutional secession from Germany of a Bavarian “Free State”, then to the proclamation of a “Republic of the workers’ and soldiers’ councils” bloodily suppressed in May 1919 by troops acting upon a mandate from the government in Berlin.<sup>46)</sup>

Naturally Weber’s own “national emotions were quickened in the hour of defeat” and intensified further by his confrontation, during his brief experience at Versailles, with the punitive nature of the terms imposed there by the winning powers. He wrote, as we have seen, “Czarism constituted the most terrible system for the enslavement of men & nations ever devised – until the peace treaty proposed here”.<sup>47)</sup> He regretfully accepted the government’s decision to sign that treaty, although he had previously considered the possibility of its being rejected, and even that of a desperate call for armed resistance *à outrance* by the population at large to the possible occupation of parts of Germany by allied troops.<sup>48)</sup>

Weber found particularly objectionable the Western powers’ request that, as an aspect of the German “war guilt”, major political personalities of the now defunct Reich, beginning with the former Kaiser, should subject themselves to judgment by a purpose-built court of their own making. There was no warrant for such a request under international law, and Weber was keen to have that recognized by the court in question; thus he took it upon himself to persuade the dominant figure in the previous supreme command of the German army, General Heinrich Ludendorff, to submit himself to the court’s judgment, and to appoint Weber himself as his own lawyer. The two had a tense person-to-person encounter but Ludendorff would not yield to Weber’s request.<sup>49)</sup>

Meanwhile Weber had been living what Mommsen calls “his finest hour”<sup>50)</sup> (by taking part in a constitutional committee deliberating in secrecy, on the premises of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, on the content of the Republic’s constitution). Here he could bring to bear the expertise on such matters he had demonstrated in his wartime series of articles on “Parliament and Government” as well

---

46) Ibid., 321.

47) Ibid., 321.

48) Ibid., 287.

49) Ibid., 325.

50) Ibid., 355.

as in a successive series. And he did so – sometime with controversial effects for the constitution’s content – while inspired by one key goal, expressed as follows during the war: “We wish to pursue a world policy, but this is possible only for a master nation, [that is] a nation that holds control of its government firmly in hand....As a free, mature people we shall be able to enter into the circle of the master nations of the earth”.<sup>51)</sup>

For the time being this last aspiration had to be surrendered, but a new constitution could assist Germany in becoming for the first time “a nation that holds control of its government firmly in hand”. The twin institutions of parliamentarization and democratization were already firmly in place (or so it seemed). Nevertheless, their precise workings and their mutual relations had to be arranged by the constitution, addressing issues concerning the role of parliament in particular.

Furthermore, the nature and extent of the powers vested in the political system’s top position – that is, the Presidency of the Republic – had to be clarified. For instance, if the appointment to that office was to be determined by the respective weight of the parties contending in parliament, wouldn’t that arrangement weaken the legitimacy of the office’s holder in the eyes of minority parties and their followers? Would not the same happen with respect to another key appointment, that of the Chancellor? Would the Chancellor be primarily responsible to parliament (that is, in the first instance, to the parliamentary majority) or to the President?

Issues of this kind, it seems, weighed on the mind of Weber to such an extent as to impart a significant twist to his own thinking about the Republic’s constitution – in association perhaps with something like an intense nostalgia for the creative role Bismarck had played many decades before in the genesis itself of the Reich. The twist, as I called it, was sharply formulated in the opening statement of a short article, “Der Reichspräsident” Weber published on 25 february 1919, in the context of his participation in the making of the Weimar constitution. Here is its opening:

The first President of the Reich was elected by the National Assembly. *In future the president of the Reich absolutely must be elected directly by the people.*

---

51) Ibid., 269.

And a subsequent sentence:

It is ...essential for us to *create* a head of state resting *unquestionably on the will of the people*, without the intervention of intermediaries.<sup>52)</sup>

In other arguments to this effect Weber characterized this mode of selection of the highest office-holder as being *plebiscitary*, that is offering the greatest possible constituency the opportunity of saying its own decisive *yes or no* to a candidate who, if elected, would be empowered to take significant decisions. The Weimar constitution basically endorsed this arrangement, which on 26 April 1925 led to the ascent to the Presidency of the former Field-Marshal Paul Hindenburg.

Until his death on 14 June 1920, Weber, on some occasions, had articulated further his own rationale for the proposal of February 1919. He had done this, in particular in his speech of 28 January 1919 “Politics as a vocation”, given to an audience composed chiefly by students of Munich University – where on the following month he would begin to act as a Professor – and published as a pamphlet later that year.

This is one of Weber’s richest, most quoted, rather controversial texts. It discusses, besides the plebiscitary mode of election other aspects of political leadership, particularly those that differentiate those holding or aspiring to it, from other kinds of political personnel, especially members of the bureaucracy, expected not to make policy choices but to implement them competently and dutifully. The relationship between those two kinds of political personnel always was one most significant concern of Weber’s, both as an observer and critic of political affairs and as a political actor himself.

Hence, the title of significant books such as for example Stefan Breuer’s *Burokratie und Charisma: Zur politischen Soziologie Max Webers* or Mommsen’s *The age of bureaucracy: Perspectives on the political sociology of Max Weber*.<sup>53)</sup> The first book expressly points up another key topic of *Politics as a vocation*, – “charisma” – which has attracted much attention and aroused much controversy. The title of last chapter of the second, “A liberal in despair” captures the import of Weber’s political think-

---

52) Weber, see fn 33, above, 304.

53) S. Breuer, *Burokratie und Charisma: Zur politischen Soziologie Max Webers* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), W. Mommsen, *The Age of Bureaucracy: Perspectives on the Political Sociology of Max Weber* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).



ing especially in its last phase. What the reader can find in *this* essay does not attempt to do justice to the significance of these themes.

- ▶ Submitted : 2017. December. 9.
- ▶ Reviewed : 2017. December. 12.
- ▶ Accepted : 2017. December. 15.

## References

- Bendix, R. and G. Roth. 1971. *Scholarship and Partisanship, Essays on Max Weber*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Breuer, S. 1994. *Burokratie und Charisma: Zur politischen Soziologie Max Webers*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Bruhns, H. 2009. "Max Weber et le politique: retour sur l'oeuvre de Wolfgang J. Mommsen" H. Bruhns and P. Duran, eds. *Max Weber et le politique*. Paris: L.G.D.J.
- Bruhns, H. 2017. *Max Weber und der erste Weltkrieg*. Tuebingen: Mohr.
- Craig, G. 1980. Germany 1866-1945, chap.XI. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Diggins, J. P. 1996. *Max Weber: Politics and the Spirit of Tragedy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hondrich, K.O. 2000. *Lehrmeister Krieg*. Reinbeck: Rowohlt.
- Joas, H. 2003. *War and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- K. Palonen. 1998. *Das 'Webersche Moment': Zur Kontingenz des politischen*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Mommsen, W. 1974. *The Age of Bureaucracy: Perspectives on the Political Sociology of Max Weber*. New York: Harper & Row.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. *Max Weber and German Politics 1890-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Turner, Stephen. 2016. "Max Weber's forays into geopolitics." A. Sica, ed. *The Anthem Companion to Max Weber*. London: Anthem Press.
- Radkau, J. 2011. *Max Weber: A Biography*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Weber, Marianne. 1988. *Max Weber: A Biography*. London: Routledge.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 5th ed, Vol I. Tuebingen: Mohr.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994. *Political writings*, edited by P. Lassman, R. Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. "Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik." *Gesammelte politische Schriften* 1-25.