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Book Review: Max Weber. *Politik als Beruf* (“*Politics as a Vocation*”)

Bertil Haggman

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**Max Weber. *Politik als Beruf* ("Politics as a Vocation").
Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2010**

Reviewed by Bertil Haggman

"Politics is a strong and slow drilling of hard boards." (*Die Politik bedeutet ein starkes langsames Bohren von harten Brettern...*) This is a quote from the work of one of the most famous sociologists ever, German Professor Max Weber. In 2010 a new edition of his work *Politics as a Vocation* was published in Berlin, Germany. It is the first in a planned series of new editions of works of the great German sociologist including *Staatssoziologie* (*Sociology of the State*) and *Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (*General Economic History*).

Max Weber was born in 1864 and passed away in 1920. His works have had a considerable influence on 20th-century sociologists. Weber opposed the orthodox Marxist view that economics was the primary societal determining factor. In contrast he stressed the plurality and interdependence of causes — religious values, ideologies, and charismatic leaders — in shaping societies. Max Weber is today probably mainly remembered internationally for *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, with its thesis of the connection between the ascetic ideal fostered by Calvinism and the rise of capitalist institutions.

The Reformation was a critical period in European history that saw a reorientation of basic cultural frameworks of spiritual direction and human outlook, destined to have a great impact on economic life as well as other aspects of modern culture. Weber tended to view Protestant rationalism as one further step in the series of stages of increasing rationalization of every area of modern society.

Politics can be defined in many ways, one being that it is the leadership or influencing the leadership of a political association or a state.

What is a state? It is a community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a given territory. The elite in that community needs continuous administration, requiring obedience to those who hold power. The decisive means of politics is violence (*"Für die Politik ist das entscheidende Mittel: die Gewaltsamkeit."* (p. 57) So the elite must control the material goods necessary for the use of the violence needed. (This is a view from 1918. It should be noted that violence is playing a minor role in twenty-first century European party politics.)

If a politician lives for politics, he either enjoys power or serves a cause. The politician who lives off politics makes it the permanent source of income. A political organization is thus needed for the struggle for power. These organizations have developed into modern parties.

There are basically two categories of politicians: administrative officials and political officials. In reality, ministers (political officials) are less in control than the heads of divisions in ministries, who are long-term, administrative appointees.

Political leaders in the West are often demagogues. They have existed since the creation of the constitutional state and certainly since the establishment of democracy (see for example p. 28 in the new German edition).

The politician must have passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion. Passion means a sense of matter-of-factness, of passionate devotion to a cause, to the god or demon who is its overlord. Responsibility to the cause must be the guiding star of action. For this, a sense of proportion is needed. Warm passion and a cool sense of proportion must be forged together in one and the same soul.

The politician must combat vanity in order to be devoted to his cause, and must preserve some distance, not least from himself. Lack of objectivity and irresponsibility are the two deadly sins of politics; vanity, the need to personally stand in the foreground, can make the politician commit these sins.

“Politics as a Vocation” was one of two public lectures by Max Weber given in 1918 after the allied victory over Germany in World War I. In the lecture he said he was concerned with charismatic leadership of the demagogue in parliament:

Men do not obey him by virtue of tradition or statute, but because they believe in him... [their devotion] is oriented to his person and to its qualities. The demagogue cannot do it alone. He needs a staff and a bureaucratic organization to dominate effectively.

In the past the highest leader was forced to work through and with men who had their own power centers, which they controlled. So he had to work to “expropriate” the power of these men and replace it with bureaucrats who worked for him.

Weber continues by describing professional politicians, who are prominent in democracies.

Only independently wealthy men can live for politics. Poor men can also be professional politicians, but it must then be possible to make a steady income.

For loyal service offices of all sorts — in parties, newspapers, cooperative societies, health insurance, municipalities, as well as in the state positions — are given out by party leaders. Struggles within political parties are both for the patronage of office, but also struggles for objective goals.

Weber describes the weakness of the German system of government under the emperor before 1918 as having relied too much on bureaucrats and not allowing for the influence of politics:

Der echte Beamte – das ist für die Beurteilung unseres früheren Regimes entscheidend – soll seinem eigentlichen Beruf nach nicht Politik treiben, sondern : “verwalten”, *unparteiisch* vor allem, - auch für die sogenannten “politischen” Verwaltungsbeamten gilt das, offiziell wenigstens, soweit nicht die “Staatsraison”, d.h. die Lebensinteressen der herrschenden Ordnung, in Frage stehen. *Sine ira et studio*, “ohne Zorn und Eingenommenheit” soll er seines Amtes walten. Er soll also gerade das nicht tun, was der Politiker, der Führer sowohl wie seine Gefolgschaft, immer und notwendig tun muss: *kämpfen*.

[The proper civil servant (this is crucial for assessing our former regime) is not supposed to pursue a policy of his own, but rather to "manage," impartially above all. This applies even to so-called "political" appointees, officially at least, unless the “raison d'état”, i.e., the vital interests of the ruling order, are in question. He is to hold office *sine ira et studio*, “without wrath and without bias.” He is not supposed to do what the politicians, the leader and his followers, must always and necessarily do: *fight!*] (p. 27)

Weber underlines that the bureaucracy needs to be under the control of politicians since it lacks any sense of direction or purpose. Weber notes that choosing the career of a politician can lead to power. So the politician must ask himself if he can do justice to the responsibility of power. So what kind of a man must one be if he is to be allowed to put his hand on the wheel of history? He must have devotion to a cause and coolness in choosing effective means to the end and must be undistracted by personal vanity.

Weber believed that different life spheres have different moral laws, which may come into conflict. So what is wrong elsewhere in life may not be wrong in politics. It might therefore not be wrong for a politician to lie his way into office.

No doubt some of the observations by Weber in *Politik als Beruf* are obsolete in the twenty-first century but it remains a very interesting and entertaining work.

A personal favorite quote of mine is:

Zwar die Gefolgschaft des Kriegsfürsten fragt ebensowenig nach den Bedingungen normaler Wirtschaft wie die Gefolgschaft des revolutionären Helden der Strasse.

Beide leben von Beute, Raub, Konfiskationen Kontributionen, Aufdrängung von wertlosen Zwangszahlungsmitteln: - was dem Wesen nach alles das gleiche ist." [Certainly, the warlord's followers ask just as little about the conditions of normal economics as the followers of the revolutionary hero of the street. Both live from booty, robbery, confiscations, contributions, the imposition of worthless means of compulsory payment: - all of which are essentially the same.] (p. 16)

This comment was made in the era when not only Germany was the victim of communist civil war. Other countries suffered too from communist armed revolts that continued for many years in the 1920s. The worst threat was over in 1920 when the Russian communist armies were stopped at Warsaw from overrunning Western Europe. This Polish military victory (now often forgotten) certainly saved Germany from a communist dictatorship although communist revolts continued in the country for a few more years.