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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Max Weber's Charismatic Democracy

Xavier Márquez

Ever since the advent of the constitutional state, and even more so since the advent of democracy, the typical political leader in the West is the 'demagogue'. The unpleasant overtones of the word should not make us forget that it was Pericles, not Cleon, who first bore this title. Lacking an office, or rather being charged with the office of the leading strategist (the only office to be filled by election, in contrast to the others which, in ancient democracy, were filled by casting lots) Pericles led the sovereign ekklesia of the demos of Athens. Actually, modern demagoguery, too, employs the spoken word, and does so to an enormous extent, if one considers the electoral speeches a modern candidate has to make. . . . When plebiscitary leaders are in charge of parties, this means a 'loss of soul' . . . for the following, what one might call their spiritual proletarianisation. In order to be a useful apparatus in the leader's hands, the following has to obey blindly . . . But the only choice lies between a leadership democracy with a 'machine' and democracy without a leader, which means rule by the 'professional politician' who has no vocation, the type of man who lacks precisely those inner, charismatic qualities which make a leader.¹

Delivered in Munich in the chaotic period immediately after Germany's defeat in the First World War, Max Weber's famous lecture on 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics' comes across as a bracing dose of realism. From its opening definition of the modern state as the organization that 'lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence' (310), the lecture stresses that politics is about power and struggle; and though state power is more than mere violence – it requires, as Weber repeatedly notes, legitimation – the political leader who uses it is always making a 'pact with diabolical powers' (362). The lecture thus argues that political leaders need an ethics of *responsibility*: not just a cause that they believe in and feel called upon to fight for, but a concern with the intended and unintended consequences of political action in their struggle for this cause, and a clear-headed understanding of these consequences.

Both the German defeat and the revolutionary politics of the time, with their utopian tinge (the Bavarian revolution had taken place in November 1918), gave urgency to Weber's call for an ethics of responsibility. He had repeatedly stressed in his wartime writings that the key problem with the German Reich under Kaiser Wilhelm II was that it did not nurture responsible political leaders, both in the institutional sense of 'accountable leaders' and in the ethical sense of leaders willing to take responsibility for their actions.² 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics' was simultaneously a diagnosis of the causes of this failure, and an argument for a certain kind of democratic leadership. Loosely speaking, for Weber the key problem of modern politics (in Germany as elsewhere) was its general tendency towards *bureaucratization* (its 'professionalization'); and his solution was to embrace a more *political* democracy, a democracy that does not shun partisan struggle, trusts its leaders with genuine power, and accepts and even celebrates the inevitability of 'demagogy' as the key means through which leaders gain the confidence of the people.

Scholars have long noted that although Weber was a consistent supporter of both universal suffrage and the parliamentarization of politics in Germany in the late 1910s, he did not argue for the intrinsic value of democracy.³ In his view, the ideal of 'self-government' in the modern state was a fiction.⁴ Modern mass democracy was at best a form of oligarchy, where small groups made all important decisions, and ordinary citizens were dominated by political leaders and the state bureaucracy. As the opening extract for this chapter puts it, voters in mass democracies were for Weber little more than 'spiritual proletarians', blindly following the powerful emotional appeals of charismatic politicians. From this perspective, Weber's views fit into a long history of thinking about democracy that discounts the capacity of the many to escape the rule of the few; one thinks here of Thucydides' claim that Periclean Athens, though 'nominally a democracy' was in reality 'government by the first citizen' (2.65.9), the first demagogue.

But if democracy did not empower ordinary people in any important sense, Weber nevertheless thought it the best system, under modern social conditions, for the selection of leaders capable of articulating genuinely

national interests and effectively using the state to pursue them. His instrumental defence of democracy as a more *efficient* means for producing leaders under modern social conditions than other forms of government was both original and enormously influential on contemporary views of the limits of self-government.⁵ More strikingly, Weber even attempted to rehabilitate the ambiguous figure of the charismatic demagogue as a responsible political leader. This move is obviously troubling in light of the tragedy of German politics in the 1930s; yet at a time when populist leaders appear to threaten Western democracies again, Weber's defence of a certain kind of democratic charismatic leadership is worth examining in some detail.

Weber argued that genuine democratic self-rule was possible only in relatively simple social conditions. The ideal-type of democracy could only develop wherever small numbers of people were equal in status and administrative tasks were simple enough that no enduring differentiation between state officials and the members of the community emerged, as in the Swiss *Landesgemeinden* (cantonal governments) or some American townships.⁶ But like most theorists of democracy since the nineteenth century, he thought that modern social conditions had rendered such forms of direct self-rule effectively impossible, since even small differences in the amount of time citizens can devote to politics tend to result in enduring distinctions between rulers and ruled, and in particular in the appropriation of political power by the rich: 'wherever it exists, direct democratic administration is unstable. With every development of economic differentiation arises the probability that administration will fall into the hands of the wealthy.'⁷ Increases in population size, the division of labour and the need for continuous administration thus all inevitably result in the development of relationships of domination that displace or hollow out all forms of direct democracy.⁸ From this point of view, the soviets of the Russian and Bavarian revolutions were a costly fantasy, easily rendered irrelevant by bureaucratic organizations.

Nevertheless, Weber, like Tocqueville before him, thought that the modern age had been decisively democratized, in the sense that the old status distinctions that structured aristocratic societies had been swept away with the emergence of the modern state. 'It is no mere coincidence', he wrote in a pamphlet on 'Suffrage and Democracy in Germany' published in 1917, that 'equal "numbers suffrage" is on the advance everywhere, for the mechanical nature of *equal* voting rights corresponds to the essential nature of today's state'.⁹ The modern state considers the person not in terms of their particular social position (their 'estate', as in the *Ständestaat* of the medieval period), but simply as a citizen, the equal of all other citizens under the law. Its development thus rendered justifications for restricted suffrage increasingly untenable. And this demand for equal voting rights became all the more pressing during the war; one could not decently deny the suffrage to men who had faced death for the sake of the state.¹⁰ The problem, for Weber, was thus not whether demands for democratic participation should

be heeded, but which form the emerging 'mass democracy' should take. And here the key considerations for him were not about the consent of the people or the representation of their interests but about their *leadership*.

To be sure, Weber did not altogether discount the representative function of democratic institutions. As he put it in his 1917 series of articles on 'Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order':

it is . . . a condition of the duration of any rule that it should enjoy a certain measure of inner assent from at least those sections of the ruled who carry weight in society. Today, parliaments are the means whereby this minimum of assent is made manifest.¹¹

One of the virtues of democratic competition was that parties were formed to represent specific interests or world views, including the interests of the working class. And the need to get the votes of specific groups put some limits on the pursuit of policy by leaders, even if voters themselves remained generally passive. But for Weber *all* political institutions required a minimum of assent ('legitimacy', in his theoretical terminology). Democracy was not unique in its need for assent, only in the explicit manner in which this assent was expressed. And Weber worried that the more parties represented specific material interests (a tendency which he thought was strengthened by electoral systems using proportional representation, as in the Weimar republic), the less likely they were to produce responsible leaders. A parliament made up exclusively of representatives of economic interests would be a parliament of '*closed, philistine minds*'¹² rather than 'a place for free rational debates' about genuinely national policy.¹³

Genuine leaders, according to Weber, are people capable of articulating a vision for national and not just sectional interests, and of pursuing that vision responsibly, through the 'slow, strong drilling of hard boards' that constitutes politics (369). Such people not only make politics their profession but have a *vocation* for it, an 'inner calling' that pushes them to fight for their cause. But they could not come to the fore if positions of power are in the hands of people with a quite different mentality. In particular, the excessive dominance of bureaucracies in the state and the political parties tended to smother the emergence of the man with a vocation for politics and resulted in irresponsible decisions. Yet since the bureaucratization of the state and the development of bureaucratized political parties were not accidental features of modern life, but long-term historical trends that we cannot avoid short of a radical (and destructive) simplification of social life, Weber argued for strengthening the mechanisms for the selection of leaders whose authority depended, not on bureaucratic structures, but on the confidence of the people, and who could therefore impose their will over those bureaucratic structures: the paradoxical figure of the *responsible* charismatic 'demagogue'.

The problem of bureaucratic domination displays both an institutional and an ethical dimension. Institutionally, the problem concerned the degree

to which a political leader was able to control the bureaucracy, setting the 'political goals' which the bureaucrat must implement. Weber noted that the bureaucratic official, with his technical expertise, has an advantage over the amateur politicians supposed to direct them, and may come to expropriate their power (326). The resulting over-dominance of the state bureaucracy, which he saw as a particular problem for the German state during the war, led to irresponsible decisions in the institutional sense: top bureaucrats could not easily be *held responsible* for their decisions when their position depended only on the confidence of the monarch (himself an amateur). From this point of view, the obvious solution was to ensure that the highest decision-makers were genuinely accountable either to parliament or to the people, and that parliament had a robust right of inquiry to check the administration, a position that Weber advocated consistently in his political writings from the late 1910s. Without accountability there could be no responsibility.

More importantly, however, Weber thought that the training and socialization of state bureaucrats resulted in a mentality averse to genuine responsibility. Because the 'honour' of the official consists in carrying out a political leader's instructions, not in taking responsibility for them, 'precisely those who are officials by nature and who, in this regard, are of high moral stature, are bad and, particularly in the political meaning of the word, irresponsible politicians' (331). One thinks here in particular of Ludendorff, who essentially ruled Germany as a military dictatorship during the last years of the war but did not want to take responsibility for Germany's defeat.¹⁴ Moreover, the bureaucratic mentality fails to understand the *political* consequences of action, since the bureaucrat is not trained for partisan combat but for impartiality, and thus does not normally learn how to defend his vision of the national interest in the context of partisan struggle. But modern politics is unavoidably structured by partisan conflict; decisions that do not take this context into account are necessarily irresponsible.

The training ground for political leaders therefore could not be the bureaucracy with its emphasis on meritocratic promotion and impartiality. Instead, Weber argued, the highest offices of the state should be open to people whose leadership talents have been tested, not by civil service examinations, but by partisan combat in defence of their cause, political work in parliament, and their overall ability to gather a following. Access to accountable power was key; if parliamentary leaders were powerless *vis à vis* state bureaucrats, Weber thought they would tend to be concerned with minor patronage or sterile ideological polemics.¹⁵ In his wartime writings he thus focused on strengthening parliamentary institutions *vis à vis* the monarch. But by the time Weber delivered the 'Vocation' lecture, the monarchy was gone, and he had come to believe that a parliament fragmented by proportional representation would be too easily captured by unaccountable economic interests to be able to produce genuine leaders. The

top leadership of the state, Weber now suggested, should have a *plebiscitary* legitimation, coming not from parliament but from the people. Such an office would be both a natural outlet 'for the desire for leadership' (351), and a counterweight to the 'machine politicians' without a vocation that he expected would dominate the new *Reichstag*.¹⁶

Machine politicians were an inevitable outgrowth of the development of political parties. Insofar as political leaders must be *politicians* rather than bureaucrats, Weber took it for granted that they would emerge from within political parties. But like all large-scale organizations, political parties tended to bureaucratize, especially under the pressures of the competition for votes; politics tended to become a *profession*. The result was the emergence of a new figure, the political professional or machine politician, who lives not (just) *for* politics (to fight for a cause, or a set of values) but *from* politics. The American 'boss' was Weber's main example: a person who was not interested in power as a means to fight for a cause, but as a way of making his living, as well as for the 'subjective rewards' that power brought.

The profession and vocation of politics are not mutually exclusive; one can live both *from* politics and *for* politics. But Weber argued that only the party leader who lives primarily *for* politics is able to articulate national interests that rise above class struggles.¹⁷ Socially, this means that a genuine political leader is likely to be a person of independent means, that is, a person who does not need to make a living *from* politics. The lawyer emerged as a key figure in this context, since the advocate was both likely to have the rhetorical skills that were needed to fight for a cause effectively, and also to be more available for politics than many other kinds of people, given his high income and the specific demands of his work. (The overwhelming number of lawyers in the US congress and other national parliaments suggests that Weber was not wrong about this, even if not all of them are the kinds of leaders Weber hoped for.)

By contrast, Weber explicitly stressed that the rich capitalist entrepreneur, who might seem to possess 'independent means', was too tied to the running of his business to either devote sufficient time to politics, or to have a sufficiently dispassionate view of the class struggle (318–19). Capitalist entrepreneurs may be natural leaders, but they could not represent truly national interests. Similarly, the political professional without a vocation – the party boss – was too tied to the bureaucratic structures of the party, and too concerned with mere power, to provide responsible leadership. His concern was to maximize votes, not to defend a particular conviction; the politics of party bosses was therefore a 'soulless' politics, capable at best of representing sectoral interests, and tending to suppress new ideas and new men.¹⁸

But party bosses would subordinate themselves to the charismatic leader, that is, the leader who was able, through the force of his personality, to gather a personal following and prove they could win office: the 'dictator of the electoral battlefield' (342). Such a charismatic leader did not merely 'represent' some interest group. He fought for an 'inner cause', shaping the

views of his followers through his demagoguery more than they shaped his; the followers then became basically passive, even 'spiritually proletarianised'. But they still played an important democratic role; for charisma has to be *proven* by works, and a leader who could no longer prove his worth by accomplishing the things he set out to do would be abandoned by his followers. (Charisma, in Weber, was never merely a matter of pure demagogic technique.) And while demagoguery was a characteristic of all modern political systems (including the authoritarian system in Germany during the war),¹⁹ only the demagogic leader who has to submit himself to plebiscitary approval in the context of a serious competition for power could be held accountable.

Thus we end with the paradox of a *responsible* charismatic demagogue. Like Tocqueville, Weber was searching for a new aristocracy, a social stratum capable of providing genuine leadership in the new democratic conditions;²⁰ indeed, also like Tocqueville, if for interestingly different reasons, he also looked to the legal profession as a potential source for it. The bureaucratization attendant to all modern large-scale organizations threatens the possibility of such leadership. The democratization of politics, insofar as it rewards the ambitious and provides outlets for charismatic leadership, offers an escape from the bureaucratic cage. But the double-edged nature of charismatic leadership did not escape Weber; acknowledging that both Pericles and Cleon can play this role, he was consistent in his demand that democracy must make it possible to hold *both* accountable.

Notes

- 1 Max Weber, 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics', in *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Lassman and Donald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). The original lecture was delivered in Munich on 28 January 1919, and then revised and published as a brochure in the series 'Intellectual Work as a Vocation. Four Lectures to the Union of Free Students' in October 1919. The excerpts at the beginning of this chapter appear at pages 331 and 351 of the Lassman and Speirs translation. All citations to the lecture are to this edition.
- 2 See, in particular, 'Suffrage and Democracy in Germany' and 'Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order', both published in 1917, and both collected in *Political Writings*.
- 3 See, for example, David Beetham, *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), 102. Beetham cites a letter by Weber to Ehrenberg of 1917 where Weber notes that 'forms of government are for [him] technical means like any other machinery'.
- 4 Mommsen quotes a letter by Weber of 4 August 1908 to Robert Michels: 'Such notions as the "will of the people", the true will of the people, ceased to exist for me years ago; they are *fictions*.' See Wolfgang Mommsen, *Max Weber and*

- German Politics, 1890–1920*, 2nd edn (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1984), 395.
- 5 Joseph Schumpeter, who articulated and defended the classic ‘minimalist’ conception of democracy, was greatly influenced by Weber. See Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 3rd edn (New York: Harper, 1950). An updated defence of the ‘minimalist’ view of democracy can be found today in Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
 - 6 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. and trans. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), vol. II, chapter X, 948–9.
 - 7 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 949.
 - 8 Ibid., 951–2; J. J. R. Thomas, ‘Weber and Direct Democracy’, *The British Journal of Sociology* 35, no. 2 (1984): 216–40, 229.
 - 9 Max Weber, ‘Suffrage and Democracy in Germany’, 103.
 - 10 Ibid., 106.
 - 11 ‘Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order’, 165.
 - 12 Max Weber, ‘The President of the Reich’, in *Political Writings*, 306. Emphasis in the original.
 - 13 Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics*, 398.
 - 14 Marianne Weber reported a conversation between Weber and Ludendorff emphasizing precisely this point: Weber apparently believed Ludendorff should have at the very least resigned at the end of the war. See Beetham, *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics*, 236.
 - 15 ‘Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order’, 166–7.
 - 16 Weber argued at length for a directly elected president both when he advised Preuss on the drafting of the Weimar constitution (see Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics*, 364–6) and in his public writings of the period (see especially ‘The President of the Reich’).
 - 17 Beetham, *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics*, 226–40.
 - 18 Cf. ‘Parliament and Government in Germany’, 228–9.
 - 19 Ibid., 220.
 - 20 ‘Suffrage and Democracy in Germany’, 108–9.