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Max Weber

Joshua Derman

In view of the fundamental fact that the advance of bureaucratization is unstoppable, there is only one possible set of questions to be asked about future forms of political organization: (1) How is it at all possible to salvage any remnants of 'individual' freedom of movement in any sense, given this all-powerful trend towards bureaucratization? It is, after all, a piece of crude self-deception to think that even the most conservative among us could carry on living at all today without these achievements from the age of the 'Rights of Man.' However, let us put this question to one side for now, for there is another which is directly relevant to our present concerns: (2) In view of the growing indispensability and hence increasing power of state officialdom, which is our concern here, how can there be any guarantee that forces exist which can impose limits on the enormous, crushing power of this constantly growing stratum of society and control it effectively? How is democracy even in this restricted sense to be at all possible? Yet this too is not the only question of concern to us here, for there is (3) a third question, the most important of all, which arises from any consideration of what is not performed by bureaucracy as such. It is clear that its effectiveness has strict internal limits, both in the management of public, political affairs and in the private economic sphere. The leading spirit, the 'entrepreneur' in the one case, the 'politician' in the other, is something different from an 'official.' ... The struggle for personal power and the acceptance of fully personal responsibility for one's cause which is the consequence of such power – this is the very element in which the politician and the entrepreneur live and breathe.¹

Max Weber's concern for individual freedom, the rights of man and representative democracy brought him into contact with key elements of the

liberal political tradition. Whether this German scholar and politician *manqué* was *actually* a liberal – and if so, what kind of liberal – nonetheless remains a topic of debate. Some interpreters have seen him as a ‘liberal in despair’, who drifted away from traditional liberal ideals in his determination to ensure that individual autonomy might still be possible under modern conditions. Others have preferred to regard him as the heir to an established ‘elitist’ current within the liberal tradition. Finally, there are those who believe that Weber does not belong among liberals at all, but rather in the company of republican thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Alexis de Tocqueville, who sought to cultivate ‘the power of the soul’ through politics. What makes this idiosyncratic figure, who was born in 1864 and died in 1920, into such a provocative interlocutor for modern liberals? Consider the three questions he poses in the passage quoted above.

The first question is a philosophical one: How is individual freedom possible under the conditions of modern life? Before we can receive an answer, Weber plunges us into the world of high politics, where the ‘present concerns’ of his text play out. What forces, he now asks, are available to counteract the increasing powers of the state bureaucracy? More specifically, how is democracy, even in a ‘restricted sense’, to remain possible in light of the creeping expansion of officialdom? The answer is yielded by a third question, ‘the most important of all’, even though strictly speaking it is not so much a question as an observation. ‘Leading spirits’ in politics and the economy are fundamentally different creatures than officials, he tells us. Our failure to appreciate and act on this difference endangers individual freedom and the possibility of modern democracy.

Though Weber’s questions are meant to build on each other, they are connected not so much by logical inference as by conceptual leaps, which carry the reader from the domain of universal history into the contemporary political dilemmas of late imperial Germany. These dramatic shifts are characteristic of Weber’s intellectual formation and temperament. As the beneficiary of a late nineteenth-century German humanistic education, he was capable of approaching the problems of modernity through the perspectives afforded by an encyclopedic knowledge of world history. He was also an impatient and impetuous thinker. No sooner had he begun one project, or one train of thought, than he felt compelled to set off in a new direction, without necessarily having brought his investigation to a conclusion. The unconventional pattern of his academic career also contributed to his interdisciplinary proclivities. After training as a lawyer, he quickly received a chair in political economy, but taught for only a few years before succumbing to a nervous breakdown that kept him from the

lecture hall until the final years of his life. In spite of his illness, or perhaps because it granted him a respite from professional pressures to specialize, he was able to make contributions to an astonishing variety of fields: the methodology of the social sciences, the history of capitalism in classical antiquity and early modern Europe, the economic ethics of world religions and the formulation of a distinctive approach to what he called 'sociology'. In addition, Weber was an engaged political thinker. He dabbled in liberal politics as a young man, and in the aftermath of the First World War he advised the committee that drafted the constitution of the new German republic.

Weber's innovative way of thinking is already apparent in the way he identifies his subject matter: 'The advance of bureaucratization.' Weber did not coin the concept or critique of bureaucracy, which first emerged in the political discourse of late eighteenth-century France, but he did extend the concept of bureaucracy far beyond the explicitly governmental officialdom with which it was conventionally associated. As he understood it, modern bureaucracy was a form of administration based on 'recruitment, salary, pension, promotion, professional training, firmly established areas of responsibility, the keeping of files, hierarchical structures of superiority and subordination' (145–6). This kind of officialdom had become a universal phenomenon in the modern West, manifesting itself not only in the administration of the state and private economic corporations but also in the army, church, university and voluntary associations such as political parties. All these institutions were staffed by trained specialists who kept meticulous records and understood their place in a hierarchical chain of command, obeying detailed and regular rules of procedure.

Weber was both appreciative and critical about the impact of bureaucracy, whose expansion, he believed, had become an ineradicable feature of modern life. Once a corps of highly trained officials had taken charge of an organization, he argued, it was essentially impossible to replace or remove them, unless one were prepared to suffer a calamitous drop in efficiency – a scenario that he presumed few people would be willing to countenance. The high standard of living in Western countries depended in large part on the efficient and rationalized form of administration provided by trained officialdom. The advantages of modern bureaucracy, combined with its unusual degree of institutional tenacity, made its advance essentially 'unstoppable'. But while it might be naive to think that one could live without modern bureaucracy, Weber also warned that it was foolish to assume that officials or technocrats could solve the most fundamental problems of modern life – problems that demanded a fundamental choice between incommensurable values or human goals, rather than merely technical solutions.

The politician or entrepreneur who could put forward a 'cause' and rally others in support was 'something different', as Weber put it, from the administrator who prided himself on scrupulously following the instructions of others. While officialdom might possess the virtues of conscientiousness and impartiality, its effectiveness was marked by 'strict internal limits', especially when it came to matters that demanded visionary leadership.

Broadly speaking, the advance of modern bureaucracy threatened what Weber called the 'individual freedom of movement' [*Bewegungsfreiheit*]. Here it is worth considering his choice of terminology. Weber typically used the phrase 'freedom of movement' to signify what we would consider to be liberal rights, such as the freedom of conscience, association or commercial activity. In 'Parliament and Government in Germany', he expressed concern that the predominance of administrative agencies in determining human life chances – something that he imagined might result from the post-war socialization of the German economy – could jeopardize legal rights that previously had been taken for granted. It would be much more difficult for workers to find recourse against maltreatment or exploitation if their employer was the state rather than a private corporation. 'Private and public bureaucracies would then be merged into a single hierarchy,' he cautioned, 'whereas now they operate alongside and, at least potentially, against one another, thus keeping one another in check' (157–8). But Weber had more than just civil liberties in mind. It was not only the sanctity of personal and property rights that Weber wished to 'salvage' from the advance of modern bureaucratic organizations but also the freedom to follow one's conscience and transform the world. In his sociological handbook *Economy and Society*, he argued that the most fundamental of the rights of man, the one which historically paved the way for all the rest, was the freedom of conscience.²

How, then, did Weber think his contemporaries in imperial Germany could 'impose limits' on the state bureaucracy and 'control it effectively'? He believed that only the parliament could effectively monitor and constrain the state bureaucracy, and he devoted much of his wartime essay 'Parliament and Government in Germany' to proposing constitutional reforms that would empower it. Parliament was the site where responsible political leaders would be selected, trained and, if necessary, removed. But where should these leaders come from in the first place? Weber's explanation factored in two developments that he regarded as inexorable in a modern mass democracy. The first was the extension of the suffrage, which he believed would eventually encompass all adult males wherever it was contested. The second was the centralization and professionalization of political parties, which were subject to the same 'all-powerful trend towards bureaucratization'

as other modern institutions; without a nationally coordinated organization and cadre of full-time administrators, it would be impossible for them to compete for millions of votes. Based on his observations of contemporary British and American politics, Weber concluded that party leaders were invariably the politicians who were most capable of appealing to a mass electorate and mobilizing the party organization behind them. Parliament remained the forum where party leaders demonstrated their fitness and responsibility; it ensured that ‘mere demagogues,’ politicians whose *only* talent was the ability to command a mass following, would not occupy the leading positions in the state (182). But advancement would come through the support of the masses, not seniority in parliament or connections with party notables. This element of ‘Caesarism,’ a form of authority that ‘rests on the trust of the masses rather than on that of parliaments,’ was, in Weber’s view, an unavoidable and even desirable feature of democratic politics (220–1). The only alternative was to let party bigwigs handpick the leading candidates, which would likely result in dull, uninspiring politicians who lacked the ability to set new goals or command a mass following.³

A successful democratic system that constrained the bureaucracy and provided for dynamic leadership was thus composed of two elements that stood in a productive tension with one another: highly bureaucratized mass parties led by charismatic political figures, and a parliament endowed with significant powers. Weber coolly observed that this form of democracy exacerbated the difference between politically ‘active’ and ‘passive’ citizens, relegating the latter to the role of choosing among predetermined candidates every few years. In such a political system, initiative in national politics came primarily from party leaders, ‘for it is not the politically passive “mass” which gives birth to the leader; rather the political leader recruits his following and wins over the mass by “demagogy”’ (228). Successful party organizations helped pave the way for the rise of a plebiscitary leader, and having done so, put themselves at the service of promoting his political vision: ‘Wherever mass democratic parties have been faced with major tasks they have been obliged to submit more or less unconditionally to leaders who had the trust of the masses’ (222). If Germans wanted to be governed by politicians instead of officials, and keep the ever-advancing bureaucracy in its place, they would have to embrace both parliamentarism and plebiscitary democracy, warts and all.

One of the distinctive characteristics of Weber’s political thought, as illustrated in ‘Parliament and Government in Germany,’ consists in its nuanced evaluation of the possibilities for freedom under modern conditions. On the one hand, Weber paints a picture of the future of humanity that is darkened

with resignation. Unlike many classical liberal thinkers, he does not perceive an invisible hand or providential force guiding humanity towards greater autonomy. Weber admits that he cannot keep himself from ‘smiling at the anxiety of our *littérateurs* lest future social and political developments might bestow on us *too much* “individualism” or “democracy” or the like’ (159). Bureaucracy is on the march in all spheres of life, and even the ‘free’ market of mature capitalism, which combines independent entrepreneurs into ever-greater conglomerations, no longer possesses any affinity with individual ‘freedom of movement’. Weber sees liberal freedoms as ‘achievements from the age of the “Rights of Man”’, whose emergence in early modern Europe depended on a constellation of irreproducible factors: small-scale capitalism, an abundance of natural resources and land for expansion, the scientific revolution, and the novel attitudes towards work and self-determination engendered by the Protestant Reformation.⁴ The best that can be done today, Weber seems to suggest, is to ‘salvage’ some of these freedoms through new institutional arrangements. Yet he also makes the case that some irreversible trends of modernity, such as the expansion of rational bureaucracy, contain within them the solutions to their own pathologies. Individual freedom will not be served by the quixotic enterprise of dismantling bureaucracies, but by checking the expansion of one bureaucracy by means of another. In Weber’s telling, the highly bureaucratized political party of modern times presents an ideal vehicle for promoting a visionary leader who introduces new ideas, curbs the power of the state bureaucracy and clears a space in which all active citizens can enjoy greater ‘freedom of movement’, if only for a while.

One of the most problematic aspects of Weber’s political thought, at least from the perspective of many liberals, is his view that the fate of individual freedom depends – to a large and perhaps even predominant extent – on the action of singular leaders who know the ‘struggle for personal power and the acceptance of fully *personal responsibility for one’s cause* which is the consequence of such power’. Weber’s wartime journalism presented parliament as the institution that was best suited for safeguarding civil rights, training potential leaders and removing them if they overstepped their bounds. However, in the aftermath of the First World War and the revolution of 1918–19, he quickly grew disillusioned with the functioning of Germany’s new national assembly. Proportional representation, lobbying interests and the continued dominance of notables in party politics had created a ‘*parliament of closed, philistine minds*, in no sense capable of serving as a place where political leaders are selected’.⁵ The best way to enable gifted leaders to rise to the top, he advised the framers of

the new constitution, was to ensure that the new president was directly elected by the entire population (rather than by parliament), and endowed with the power to determine office patronage, call referenda, cast a delaying veto and dissolve parliament.⁶ Only a 'charismatic' leader, who could emerge from outside parliament and potentially outside the party system as well, could provide the kind of leadership that Germany needed.⁷

Weber disclaimed any intention of wanting an unchecked, authoritarian presidency. 'Let the power of the popularly elected president be subjected to whatever restrictions one will, and let us ensure that he is only permitted to intervene in the machinery of the Reich during temporary, irresolvable crises,' he declared.⁸ He never lived to experience the abuse of presidential powers under President Paul von Hindenburg, and the success of Adolf Hitler's racist demagoguery would have appalled him. These questions of historical responsibility aside, Weber's intellectual trajectory between 1917 and 1919 raises concerns about how we are to understand the connection between liberal freedoms and visionary leadership in his political thought. As the balance between parliamentarism and charismatic leadership shifted decisively in favour of the latter, we might wonder whose 'freedom of movement' the cultivation and promotion of 'leading spirits' was supposed to serve. Did Weber think that only a few titanic figures were capable of achieving creative autonomy in the modern world? If so, then the rest of humanity would seem to become 'passive' followers or, at best, the mere beneficiaries of elbow room cleared out for them by great politicians and entrepreneurs.

However, the case can also be made that Weber's journalism gives us only a one-sided picture of his political commitments. Weber was fascinated by the apparent successes of American democracy, which he regarded as a potential model for Germany's political evolution. His positive impressions were reinforced by a three-month trip he made to the United States with his wife Marianne in 1904.⁹ There he observed that American democracy was based on a dense web of voluntary associations and clubs that required members to constantly demonstrate their qualifications to one another. These associations, like the Protestant sects on which Weber believed they were based, were 'aristocratic' in the sense that only qualified individuals were allowed to join, but they also depended on the 'free consensus of [their] members', who stood before each other as equals.¹⁰ Though Weber portrayed the mass of citizens in a modern mass democracy as politically 'passive' in 'Parliament and Government in Germany', he may have been exaggerating to make a point in a particular polemical context. American democracy, he argued elsewhere, depended on a

vibrant civil society to cultivate leadership qualities and responsibility from the grass roots to the top of the political pyramid.

The questions that Weber raised in 'Parliament and Government in Germany' made a powerful impact on twentieth-century political thought.¹¹ Together with his sociological writings, they launched a wide literature on bureaucracy in its myriad forms, with the result that Weber's name has become almost inseparable from the concept. His vision of social transformation as effected by singular, visionary individuals who introduce new values and command a mass following – culminating in the writings on 'charisma' that he put forward in the last years of his life – pioneered a way of talking about leadership that has left a permanent mark on our language. Great thinkers are often remembered for their questions as much as their answers. Though the constitutional problems of imperial Germany no longer trouble us, the compatibility of liberal freedoms, bureaucracy, democracy and transformative leadership remain an urgent concern, nearly one hundred years after Weber's death.