

MASTER-MIND LECTURE

Max Weber

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I

MARIANNE WEBER RECALLED A VISIT that she and her husband had made to the theatre in Munich in the summer of 1919. They saw *Brand*, the play that Ibsen had written against what he saw as the narrowness of Norwegian life in the 1860s and the complacency of the Norwegian character. She wrote in her usual third person. The play,

stirred them deeply, though they did not express it. Brand, who was filled with an exacting God, put his obedience toward the absolute into radical practice. He not only demanded every sacrifice of himself but also wished to bring other mortals up to the level he had attained. However, they were not made to follow him. They wanted to live happily first and serve God afterward . . . They drove the leader who constantly made inordinate demands upon them into an icy solitude. Only in the hour of his death did he experience the God whose mercy was higher than the law.¹

Max Weber was himself to die within the year. On the evening on which he had read aloud to his wife for the last time, from François Jammé's *Le Roman du Lièvre*, a tale of St Francis and the animals, he was moved by the fact that the hare, the only animal that had slipped into paradise without having suffered death first, was not happy there. One had to strain to succeed; as he had put it in his proposal of marriage to Marianne twenty-seven years before, to come 'out onto

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¹ Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: a biography*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York, 1975), pp. 666–7.

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the high seas, where men grow in the struggle of souls and that which is transitory is sloughed off'.² One strained, often failed, and always suffered. Weber's own strains and sufferings pervade his political thought. His tensions, amounting to all but open contradiction, are its quality. Few since Thucydides and Machiavelli have understood so well why politics is necessary, and necessarily fails.

Weber had been ill since his thirties, weakened perhaps by childhood meningitis, perhaps by some less definite disorder. In 1899, he resigned the chair he had taken at Heidelberg three years before, but continued to read and write, and in moments of better health, to engage in disputes on matters of scholarship and policy in a variety of associations. He recovered his energies at the start of the First World War. He worked in the last ten years of his life at his treatise on *Sozialökonomik*, wrote his sociologies of the eastern religions, and argued as vigorously and insistently as he had about anything against the policies of the government in Berlin and its high command and against the revolutionary socialists who were to seize the moment of defeat in 1919. In 1918, he had felt well enough to start teaching again, which he did from a chair in Vienna, and, on his return to Heidelberg, to re-engage with politics. He spent several hard and humiliating weeks in the late spring of 1919 in the German delegation to Versailles. From the many invitations to return again to academic life, he accepted one from Munich. (He had for some years had a close relationship with Else Jaffé, who now lived in the city. Marianne moved there with him, but the Webers kept the house overlooking the river in Heidelberg into which they had moved, with Ernst Troeltsch, in 1910.)

Weber, like Brand, had by this time worn himself out. His newspaper articles, particularly those he wrote for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the war, did have some purchase. (So 'this is your highly praised democracy!', complained Ludendorff, who had resigned in 1919 when the armed forces were subordinated to the Reichstag. 'You and the *Frankfurter Zeitung* are to blame for it!')³ Weber's lectures, which often lasted for two or three hours, also had a certain renown. But no-one in power took notice, and his frustrations were great. 'To restore Germany to her old glory,' he was eventually provoked into declaring in private in 1920, 'I would ally myself with any power on earth, even the devil incarnate, but not with the force of stupidity. So long as madmen carry on in

² Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: a biography*, p. 179.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 653.

politics from the right to the left, I shall stay away from it.’⁴ In Munich, conservative colleagues hounded him, at one point even sending students from the Veterinary School to disrupt his lectures. He had hoped to talk about his sociological categories, but his students wanted his views on the economic history of the West. And they came in such numbers that he had to shout: ‘the most strenuous thing’, he complained, ‘of all’.⁵

II

To the students, as one of them said, he was the hero of realism. They admired his insistent *Sachlichkeit*, his matter-of-factness, his remorseless injunction on himself and others to face things as they were, not as one might have liked them to be, although some regretted that in carrying this quality into his personal supervision, he offered more strength than comfort. They were drawn by his detachment from the contending parties, and by his readiness, no doubt, to scorn them all.

The arguments about the ‘elective affinity’ that Weber had claimed to see between Calvinism and the spirit of seventeenth-century capitalism continue still in Europe, despite attempts by many scholars to move beyond them. In the United States, as his editor and translator there, Guenther Roth, has observed, his appeal has been different. Talcott Parsons, then a young congregationalist, discovered the essays on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as a visiting student in Heidelberg in the early 1920s. In the sociology he was to develop at Harvard in the 1930s Parsons was drawn, he said, by Weber’s ‘“spiritualist” construction of the modern economy’.⁶ In the 1950s and 1960s, the translations of Weber’s studies of the eastern religions and his insistence on the human sciences as *Geisteswissenschaften*, sciences of meaning as well as natural causality, served to reinforce a wider enthusiasm in American sociology for explanations of an ideal rather than a

⁴ Ibid., p. 673.

⁵ Ibid., p. 664.

⁶ Talcott Parsons, ‘The circumstances of my encounter with Max Weber’, in *Sociological traditions from generation to generation*, edited by Robert K. Merton and M. W. Riley (Norwood, NJ, 1980), p. 39, cited by Guenther Roth, ‘Introduction’, in *Weber’s Protestant Ethic: origins, evidence, contexts*, edited by Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth (Cambridge, 1993), p. 3.

material kind. In Europe and the United States, some were also attracted to his sociological typologies.

It is in his politics, however, that his qualities of mind are most apparent. Many, in Europe and the Americas and in Japan, have continued to be fascinated by these. Weber was a realist, certainly, and a liberal, of a kind. In the gathering dismay of the Weimar years, the disposition was to dismiss him. He had been responsible for the article in the new republic's constitution that allowed the direct election of the chancellor, and had thereby contributed, it was said, to the disorder. (Wolfgang Mommsen was to repeat the charge in a celebrated monograph in the 1970s).⁷ In the 1950s and 1960s, the years of the Cold War, some liberals were inclined to think that he had been too strongly tempted by the thought, as he had put it in one of his pieces for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1917, that 'only nations of masters are called upon to thrust their hands into the spokes of the world's development'.⁸ In the 1980s and 1990s, intellectual historians, not least in Germany, looked more closely and usually more coolly at the contexts in and for which he was writing. (And a few postmodernists have found in his 'meta-narrative' of the progressive 'disenchantment' and 'rationalisation' of life in the West an excellent target for their deconstructions.)

The intellectual historians have shown how Weber's interest in the force of Calvinism had its impulse in the later nineteenth-century *Kulturkampf* in Germany between a Catholic Church, a Lutheran monarchy and a liberal bourgeoisie, and have suggested that his essays on the subject should be read as one of the last polemics in that battle, which legally, at least, had been settled in 1887.⁹ They have drawn parallels between the 'monastery of freer spirits' that the young Friedrich Nietzsche and his friends created in Switzerland, dedicated to an ideal of ascetic self-control with which to face the end of faith, and Weber's insistence that this was an ideal that should be turned to

⁷ Wolfgang Mommsen, *Max Weber and German politics, 1890–1920*, translated by Michael S. Steinberg (Chicago, 1984).

⁸ Max Weber, 'Parliament and government in Germany under a new political order', in *Political writings*, edited by Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1994), p. 269. See, among many others, Raymond Aron, 'Max Weber and power politics', in *Max Weber and sociology today*, edited by Otto Stammer, translated by Kathleen Morris (Oxford, 1971), pp. 83–100.

⁹ Friedrich Wilhem Graf, 'The German theological sources and Protestant church politics', in *Weber's Protestant Ethic: origins, evidence, contexts*, edited by Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 27–49.

the national good.¹⁰ They have argued that his enthusiasm for a strenuous asceticism in public life was directed not only against what he regarded as the turpitude of the ruling aristocracy (and his own complacent father) but also at what he and others—Nietzsche, Georg Simmel, Ernst Troeltsch, Thomas Mann—regarded as the futile, even dangerous emphasis in the ideal of *Bildung*, of self-creation in a culture whose strengths lay in the past, on passive self-perfection rather than active self-denial. More critical commentators have insisted that ‘the spirit of capitalism, to the extent that it was a seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century phenomenon, was less the product of ‘asceticism’ than [of] what was called at the time “public spirit”’, a public spirit that ‘reflected not the “individualist” doctrines of predestination and calling, but the “collectivist” Calvinist doctrines of covenant and covenanted communities’. They have suggested that in his distinction between law of a ‘traditional’ and ‘rational’ kind his typologies got the better of him; in common and in Roman law, there had been a constant evolution.¹¹

Weber’s thoughts on politics, however, owe little to his economic and legal history or his studies of the other religions. They were prompted by events in Germany. They crystallised in the last years of the First World War and the turbulence that followed. The choice, he had decided by 1919, was between a ‘leadership democracy’ and democracy without a leader, which means rule by ‘the type of man who lacks precisely those inner, charismatic qualities that make a leader’. ‘For the time being, only the latter exists here’. This he regretted. ‘I don’t care a fig about the form of government’, he had written to a correspondent two years before, ‘if only politicians and not dilettante coxcombs like Wilhem II rule the country.’ ‘To me, forms of government are something technical, like any other machinery. I would equally strike out against the parliament and for the monarch if he were a *politician* or showed promise of becoming one.’¹² But parliamentary democracy was the only machinery, he believed, that Germany could sensibly have at the end of the war. The franchise should be extended to those who had fought in the war, and

¹⁰ Hubert Trierer, ‘Nietzsche’s monastery for freer spirits and Weber’s sect’, in *Weber’s Protestant Ethic: origins, evidence, contexts*, edited by Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 133–59.

¹¹ Harold J. Berman, and Charles J. Reid, ‘Weber as legal historian’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Weber*, edited by Stephen P. Turner (Cambridge, forthcoming).

¹² Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: a biography*, p. 585. The emphases in this and later quotations are Weber’s own.

civil servants should serve the government, not guide it. But even in a democracy directed solely by elected representatives in parliament, it would still be easy for the leadership to be thwarted by the machine itself. A leader who could be free of such machination, he believed, was essential. In the democracy he had in mind, he explained to Ludendorff, 'the people choose a leader whom they trust. Then the chosen man says "Now shut your mouths and obey me"'. The people and the parties are no longer free to interfere in the leader's business.'¹³

This seemed clear. Ludendorff certainly thought it was, and said that he 'could like such a democracy'. But it does not reveal the strains in what Weber thought politics was and was for, and what such a leader could do for it.

III

Weber gave his first answers to these questions in lectures in Frankfurt and at the university in Freiburg in 1895. He had accepted the offer in 1894 of a chair in *Nationalökonomie* at Freiburg, he said, because economics, although not his subject, was an 'elastic' discipline. It would give him an opportunity he had not had in teaching law in Berlin to think and write about philosophical problems and the history of ideas. It was also more suitable, he said, to someone of 'a political and sociopolitical orientation'.¹⁴

Weber's political concern was first focused in the later 1880s on the government's 'Germanisation' policy. It was a concern for what he thought of, conventionally enough, as the 'nation-state'. The heart of 'Germanisation' was what came to be known as the 'homesteading act' of 1886. The intention of this, in the drafting of which Max Weber senior had played a part, was to stem the immigration of foreign labourers onto the land, especially in the east of the country, by helping native farmers to settle there. The labourers were Russians, Poles, and Italians, Russian Orthodox and Catholic in confession. They were an offence to the ethnic nationalism of the National Liberal Party, in which Weber's father was active, and would take the wrong side, the government and both Webers believed, in the *Kulturkampf*.¹⁵ In lectures

¹³ Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: a biography*, p. 653.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 200.

¹⁵ Guenther Roth, 'Global capitalism and multiethnicity: Max Weber then and now', in *The Cambridge companion to Weber*, edited by Stephen P. Turner (Cambridge, forthcoming).

to an evangelical workingmen's association in Frankfurt on 'The national basis of economics' and in his inaugural at Freiburg, the younger Weber elaborated:

'... the free play of the forces of selection does not always operate, as the optimists among us believe, in favour of the nationality which is economically the more highly developed or better endowed. Human history contains examples both of the victory of less developed types of human being and the disappearance of fine flowers of intellectual and emotional life when the human community that gave rise to them lost its ability to adapt to the conditions of its existence, either because of its social organisation or its racial qualities. In our case the economically less developed nationality is being helped to achieve victory by the transformation of forms of agricultural enterprise and the tremendous crisis in agriculture. The forced growth of sugar-beet cultivation and the unprofitability of cereal production for the market are parallel developments pulling in the same direction: the former breeds the Polish seasonal worker and the latter the small Polish peasant.¹⁶

Weber did not venture to guess—it was 'an immensely difficult question'—'where the limit of variation lies for the physical and psychological qualities in a population'.¹⁷ Nonetheless, from the perspective of what can loosely be described, and often has been, as his Social Darwinism, he was anxious. What could be done?

One had to start, he argued, from 'the circumstance that our state is a *nation state*'.¹⁸ And 'the question that stirs us as we think beyond the grave of our own generation is not the *well-being* human beings will enjoy in the future but what kind of people they will be'. 'We do not want to breed well-being in people, but rather those characteristics which we think of as constituting the human greatness and nobility of our nature'. 'We do not have peace and happiness to hand down to our descendants, but rather the eternal struggle to preserve and raise the quality of our national species.' 'It cannot be our ambition', he continued, 'to impose our ideas of greatness on the future'. 'But we *can* want the future to recognise the character of *its own ancestors* in us. Through our work and our nature we want to be the forerunners of that future race. The economic policy of a German state, and, equally, the criterion of value used by a German economic theorist, can therefore only be a German policy or criterion.' 'As an explanatory and analytic

¹⁶ Max Weber, 'The nation state and economic policy', in *Political Writings*, edited by Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1994), p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

science', he was careful to say, 'political economy is *international*, but as soon as it makes its value judgements it is tied to the particular strain of mankind (*Menschentum*) [that] we find in our own nature.'¹⁹ And this nature, Weber believed, and was to say again often, was being badly served in German politics. The Junker aristocracy was in command of the state, but was rooted in the past and losing its economic base on the lands east of the Elbe. The bourgeoisie were visibly 'wilting as the bearers of the *power-interests* of the nation'. And there was as yet no sign that the workers were sufficiently mature to take their place. 'There is', he said, 'an immense work of political education to be done.'²⁰

Weber, it seems, was at this point clear about the point of politics. It was to use power to save a breed of men for the nation. He made the point clearer still on the stump in Saarbrücken in 1897, in his first attempt to get into politics. 'Whoever makes it possible for an alien race, Polish or Italian, to accommodate itself to lower wages in Germany, thus acting against the justified desire of German workers to earn a living appropriate to German expectations, is an enemy of German-ness (*Deutschtum*). We shall always fight him, be he a professor, journalist or minister—not as professors, but as Germans, to the death.'²¹

IV

Weber would certainly have agreed with Hegel, who irritably remarked in 1814 that whatever *Deutschtum* might be, it was not the song of the *Nibelungen*, Imperial treasures, the woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer, or the reverential preservation of King Robert's shoes.²² He too had no time for atavistic romanticism. Nor, within a few years, did he have time for talk of 'race' or a national psychology.

'The appeal to a national character', he wrote in 1904 in his essay on the Protestant Ethic and its corollaries in early modern Europe, 'is generally a mere confession of ignorance . . . To ascribe a unified

¹⁹ Max Weber, 'The nation state and economic policy', p. 15. As the translator says, Weber deliberately used the word, *Art*, into which 'species' had been translated in the title of Darwin's *Origin*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 27.

²¹ Guenther Roth, 'Weber's political failure', *Telos* 78 (1988–89), 136–49.

²² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The letters*, translated by Clark Butler, and Christine Seiler, commentary by Clark Butler (Bloomington, IN, 1984), p. 312.

national character to the Englishmen of the seventeenth century would be simply to falsify history. Cavaliers and Roundheads did not appear to each other simply as two parties, but as radically different species of men . . . These were not, however, the 'species', the Darwinian *Arten*, that he had talked of in 1895. In one of his rare and heavy jokes, Weber said he was surprised that no-one had yet thought to ask whether Roundheads 'were round-headed in the anthropometric sense'. 'It was the power of religious influence,' he now insisted, 'not alone, but more than anything else, which created the differences of which we are conscious today.'²³

By 1912, having travelled in the United States and thought about his experience—'in spite of all,' he thought, like Tocqueville in the 1830s, 'a marvellous people'—and having read more about the alleged causes of national character, he had changed his mind again. Men were not the passive creatures of this character, but its creators. 'We would do well', he told the second meeting of the German Association of Sociology, 'to ignore completely the mystical effects of blood community.' He added that since almost all the other speakers at the meeting had not, and thereby neglected their statutory duty to be 'value-free' (he had himself written the statutes) this meeting of the association, only the second, was the last he would attend. The nation, he said to the assembled sociologists, was 'a community of feeling whose adequate expression is a state of one's own and which normally has the tendency inherently to bring forth one'.²⁴ By the end of 1915, he had moved even further. 'A state', he wrote in a piece for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on Christmas Day, 'must not necessarily be a "nation state" in the sense that its policies are oriented exclusively to the interests of a single, predominant nationality. The state can serve the cultural interests of several nationalities . . . In view of the changed historical condition we must demand in the very cultural interest of the German nationality that our state turn increasingly toward this task.'²⁵ Power could create a nation-state of several nations.

Weber did not, in the event, pursue this thought. When he seems first to have had it, he was already insisting that if Germany were to continue her expansion in Europe, it would prompt all the other powers

²³ Max Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (London, 1930), pp. 88–9.

²⁴ Harry Liebersohn, 'Weber's historical concept of national identity', in *Weber's Protestant Ethic: origins, evidence, contexts*, edited by Hartmut Kehmann and Guenther Roth (Cambridge, 1993), p. 130. Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: a biography*, p. 424.

²⁵ Roth, 'Global capitalism and multiethnicity: Max Weber then and now'.

to combine against it. 'It is against German interests to force a peace of which the main result would be that the heel of the German boot would stand on everyone's toes in Europe.' And the sinking of the *Lusitania* by German U-boats, he was sure, would turn the United States against the country also. Much better, he suggested, to sue for peace now on the map of 1914.²⁶

This was not to say that German politicians had no responsibility to history. No-one, Weber wrote in an open letter to a women's magazine, *Die Frau*, in February 1916, would come to hold the Norwegians, Danes, Dutch, or Swiss to account if their territories were to be parcelled out between Russia, the Anglo-Saxon powers, and Italy. Germany, however, is a power (*ein Machtstaat*), and 'has the accursed duty and obligation to history and to the future', the 'tragic' obligation, 'to resist the inundation of the entire world by Russia and the United States'. The Christians' talk of peace, he continued, echoing Machiavelli, and the associations of well-meaning ladies, he added for the readers of *Die Frau*, dedicated to promoting it, were all very well in their place. But the laws of the Sermon on the Mount are not the laws of the world. The foremost worldly law is 'the inevitability of wars fought for power'. That is the destiny of the *Machtstaat*, 'inextricably enmeshed in the law of the "power pragma" that governs all history', irrevocably committed to 'the historical obligations imposed on one's nation by fate'.²⁷ The point, he was writing in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1917, is to make the nation vigorous (*tüchtig*). (It was a word that he often used.) Changes in the machinery of government cannot inject vigour. No institutional arrangement can in itself force men to address 'the great substantive issues of *Kultur*' that confronted them.²⁸

These great issues were not those of high culture, which Weber had long since agreed was in Germany too inward and too passive, nor those posed by idly romantic *Literaten*, nor those of *Deutschtum*. Indeed, Germans should be pleased, he had written to *Die Frau*, that a *Deutschtum* exists in Switzerland, outside the boundaries of the national *Machtstaat*. 'Only communities which renounce political power are able to provide the soil on which other virtues may flourish: not only the simple, bourgeois virtues of citizenship and true democracy, which

²⁶ Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: a biography*, p. 552.

²⁷ Max Weber, 'Between two laws', in *Political writings*, edited by Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 76–8.

²⁸ Max Weber, 'Parliament and government in Germany under a new political order', p. 134.

have never yet been realised in any great *Machstaat*, but also much more intimate and yet external values, including artistic ones.²⁹ 'The prestige of culture and the prestige of power are clearly linked', he wrote in a note to himself at the end of the unfinished section on international politics in his systematic treatise. 'Every victorious war has promoted the prestige of culture.' But 'whether it does the development of culture any good', he added, 'is a separate issue, incapable of value-free solution'.³⁰ The *Kultur* that mattered to politics was honour, glory, greatness, *Machtprestige*, the standing in its own eyes and those of others of the power of the nation-state itself.

The nation, therefore, is 'a community of feeling whose adequate expression is a state of one's own', the boundaries of the community are defined by the state, and the territorial boundaries of the state itself, Weber came to accept as the war continued, were variable. But this community of feeling is not spontaneous. It is a political creation, and the wrong sort of politics can create the wrong sort of feeling. 'National pride', he was writing in 1917, 'is simply a function of the degree to which the members of a nation, at least potentially, are *actively* involved in shaping the politics of their country.' The political 'immaturity' of the Germans 'results from the uncontrolled rule of officialdom, from the fact that the ruled are accustomed to submit to this rule without taking an interest in the conditions and procedures of the officials' work. *Only a politically mature people* is a nation of masters (*ein Herrenvolk*) . . . a people controlling the administration of its affairs itself, and, through its elected representatives, sharing decisively in the selection of its political leaders.' This control and choice is 'the political aim of parliamentarism'. But the men capable of leadership will not be those who merely 'strive for an official position and the pensionable salary accompanying it'. That would be office without control. The potential leader will seek 'political power, [which] means *politically responsible* power', and he will find 'support and trust in the following of *a party* in which he must therefore want to remain when he becomes a minister, so that he may retain his influence' on it. 'The fight', Weber concluded in his last article in that year for the Frankfurt paper, 'is about whether *our* nation has a decisive say' over those 'universal trends' that will decide the fate of the masses. 'The internal structure

²⁹ Max Weber, 'Between two laws', pp. 75–6.

³⁰ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: an outline of interpretive sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, translated by Ephraim Fischhoff and others (New York, 1968), p. 926.

of the nation, including its political structure, has to be adapted to this task. Our previous structure was not suited to the task, but only to technically good *administration* and outstanding *military* achievements. That these things suffice for a purely *defensive* form of politics, but not for the political challenges presented by the world—*this is the lesson we have learned*’ from the war.³¹

The point of politics, Weber appears to have been saying in these pieces, is to sustain the state, the site of power without which leadership is not possible. To sustain the state, the leader has to create and sustain that ‘community of feeling’ without which, in a modern, parliamentary regime and perhaps in any, he cannot lead. But was the point of leadership itself given by fate, decided as it may be for a Germany, or a Switzerland, or—a country that was of some concern to him in the war—a Poland, by the past and where the state in question found itself in relation to others? If it was, could there be choices? If there could be, what were they? And how were leaders to make them?

V

Weber’s last extended word on these questions was in the lecture *Politik als Beruf* (most precisely translated, given what I take to be his intended irony, as ‘Politics as a profession *and* a vocation’). He gave this to the left-wing Union of Free Students in Munich in the middle of the short-lived socialist republic of Bavaria in January 1919. ‘Anyone wishing to practice politics of any kind’, he wished this excited and expectant audience to understand, ‘especially anyone who wishes to make a profession of politics’, has to be aware of a double conflict.

Weber had explained the first part of this conflict in an earlier lecture to the Union on the question of *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, ‘science, reasoned knowledge, as a vocation and a profession’, which he gave on 7 November 1918. This was the ineradicable and irresolvable conflict between ultimate values, ‘the impossibility’, as he put it, ‘of “scientifically” pleading for practical and interested stands’ beyond ‘discussing the means for a firmly given and presupposed end’. ‘Just as the Greek sacrificed to Aphrodite and then to Apollo, and particularly to the gods of his own town, so it is still today, disenchanted, and divested of the

³¹ Max Weber, ‘Parliament and government in Germany under a new political order’, pp. 251, 268–9.

mythical but inwardly sincere form of that behaviour. And over these gods and in their struggle fate rules, but certainly no “science”. Beware, therefore, he said to the students, the ‘swindle and self-deception’ of new cults to false gods. In the *Wissenschaften*, in the calling and the career of inquiry, one should abjure the kingdom of ends and concentrate on the means, conceptual clarity, technical efficacy.³²

In politics, by contrast, he told them a few weeks later, they should be aware that he who has a true vocation for politics will always be torn between an ‘ethics of conviction’ and an ‘ethics of responsibility’, between the inner dictates of the cause for which he acts and a regard for the consequences of his actions. The conflict will be at its sharpest when the politician understands, as Machiavelli had put it, that he has to put ‘the greatness of his native city’ above the salvation of his soul, and to use ‘diabolical’ means to do so.³³ His audience should therefore beware of that ‘romanticism of the intellectually interesting’ which was again exerting its appeal in that ‘carnival . . . graced with the proud name of a “revolution”’ which was being celebrated outside the lecture theatre even as he spoke. ‘That is the politics of people who are intoxicated with romantic sensations but who do not truly feel what they are taking upon themselves’, a politics that is ‘directed into the void’ and ‘lacks all objective (*sachlich*) sense of responsibility’. ‘Simply to feel passion, however genuinely, is not sufficient to make a politician unless, in the form of a service to a “cause”, *responsibility* for that cause becomes the decisive lode star of all action. This requires’—indeed, it ‘is the decisive psychological quality of the politician’—‘*judgement*, the ability to maintain one’s inner composure and calm while being receptive to realities, in other words *distance* from things and people’. At the same time, ‘the *nature* of the cause the politician seeks to serve by striving for and using power is a question of faith’. There is no way of deciding between one faith, one ultimate value, and another. But the true politician must have one. Otherwise he will fall prey to vanity, or a search for power for power’s sake, and ‘be cursed with the nullity of all mortal undertakings’.

If the students had been aware of what Weber had been saying earlier in the decade, they might have detected two tensions, contradictions even. Between ultimate values, they would have heard him

³² Max Weber, ‘Science as a vocation’, in *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*, edited by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (1991), pp. 147, 148.

³³ Max Weber, ‘The profession and vocation of politics’, in *Political writings*, edited by Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 365–6.

saying in the lecture on politics, there is an almost infinite choice: between those of the nation or of the whole of humanity; those of religion or morality; or values of a more mundanely 'social' sort, the 'external goals of everyday life'.³⁴ Having chosen, one joins the struggle and faces the consequences of trying to succeed. The outcome, they would have heard him saying in the lecture on disinterested inquiry, is ruled by fate. But fate, he had said elsewhere, the fate 'imposed on one's nation' by 'historical obligations', rules one's choices too. For Weber himself, this was the *Machtprestige* of a German *Machtstaat*. The Germans who could not see this had not merely made a different choice, a choice one could respect but not accept. They had made a mistake. 'The demands placed on a people organised as a *Machtstaat* are inescapable.'³⁵

The tension, Weber's first, is plain. But it did not detain him. He saw the occasion slipping away, and became increasingly pessimistic about the prospect of there being a leader capable of seizing it. In the threats of defeat, there was little choice and even less time. Beneath this first tension, however, there lies a second. Weber's later thoughts on politics may owe little to his reflections on economic and legal history and the religions of Europe and Asia. But these reflections were themselves informed by his convictions. They had been shaped by his youthful hostility to Catholics and Lutherans. He believed that what was most admirable in European culture was the legacy of Calvinism. It was that belief which had led him to argue against both conservatives and Marxists that, in its inspiration at least, European capitalism was not an amoral force. But he had long since rejected Christ and Kant as guides for politics. He had first encountered the suggestion that they were, Marianne Weber recalled, in essays on war by William Channing, a Boston preacher, who was much read in the Weber household in the 1880s. Channing, he soon decided, was 'a man far removed from practical life'.³⁶ Unlike the Christians and the Kantians, certainly unlike the contemporary neo-Kantians, with whom he has sometimes been connected, Weber was an ineradicably historical thinker. The good could only be known from the past, the conditions for realising it were given by the past to the present, and it was only in understanding this that men could act prudently. A politics not guided by ultimate

³⁴ Max Weber, 'The profession and vocation of politics', p. 355.

³⁵ Max Weber, 'Between two laws', pp. 76–7.

³⁶ Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: a biography*, p. 89.

values is a politics for politics' sake, a moral void. Yet a politics guided by such values is a politics in which political judgement itself is at risk.

Weber's own judgement in 1919–20 was that to be redeemed, merely indeed to be rescued, Germany had to have strong leadership. For this to be effective, citizens must be actively involved. His constitutional solution was that they should directly elect the chancellor. They would activate him, and he, in his faith, would activate them. In all but his most impatient moments, Weber's hope was that leader and nation would be at one, striving perhaps for that 'greatness' for which he still longed, perhaps for some other 'ultimate value', but striving, not submitting. The Thucydides in him, one might say, triumphed over the Calvin.

Weber the historian conceded the fact of fate. It is 'a fundamental fact of history that the eventual outcome of political action frequently, indeed regularly, stands in a quite inadequate, even paradoxical relation to its original, intended meaning and purpose'.³⁷ Therein lies the tragedy. Like Brand in Ibsen's play, one must strive, will fail, and so suffer in the outcome of events as well as from the 'inner tension' of one's attempt to direct them. Weber's liberal commentators have concluded that he brought this tragedy upon himself. Like Thucydides, he understood the importance of leadership; unlike the Greek historian, he was insufficiently attentive to the importance also of free opinion, freely expressed in an open politics.³⁸ His 'aristocratic liberalism', as Mommson described it, was bound to lead to a but 'formally democratic Caesarism'. In putting the 'power-prestige' of the nation-state above all else, Raymond Aron suggested, in making power itself the purpose of power, Weber had slipped into the nihilism he had himself warned against.³⁹ In the light of events in Germany after his death, such conclusions are tempting. If a people grants its leader the power to strive on its behalf, it leaves itself open to the demand to submit. If its leader's purpose is power itself, it can find itself having to submit to a nihilistic terror.

The events in Germany were, of course, peculiarly terrible, and Weber was a very consciously German German. It is difficult still to

³⁷ Max Weber, 'The profession and vocation of politics', p. 355.

³⁸ Cynthia Farrar, *The origins of democratic thinking: the invention of politics in classical Athens* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 126–91.

³⁹ Aron, 'Max Weber and power politics', pp. 98–9.

abstract from that connection. I nevertheless believe that one should. It is true that Weber was not, in the way that we would now expect, a liberal political theorist. He had no elaborate and considered conception of individual rights or the individual good. But although he was not a Kantian in his politics, he never doubted that the autonomy of the individual was what mattered. His culture was Kant's, he believed that the roots of this culture lay in Calvinism, and he seems not to have doubted that the highest purpose was to sustain it. And sustaining it, he believed, was a political matter. The examples of Britain and the United States showed to him that it could be done, and how. His thinking about what power could do for culture, however, did slip too quickly from an unreflective nationalism in time of peace to an anxious and eventually desperate urgency in time of war. Aron said that he thereby betrayed himself, that 'politics for power was never his aim, neither for himself nor for the nation'. 'His thought and his life obeyed two values: truth and nobility.'⁴⁰ This is at once too generous and too harsh. Weber did come close to insisting that *Maachtprestige* was its own end, and, in his franker private moments, would admit that it was power itself, not the 'machinery' that sustained it, that mattered. But it was events that drove him to such thoughts.

We might therefore wish that Weber had been Weber in calmer times. He could then have had the peace and leisure to reflect at length and develop his political sense. But if he had, then like Thucydides and Machiavelli, he might not have conveyed such a sharp sense of the conflicts and confusions that contingency brings, and of the tragedy that can follow from trying to master them.

Nor, one might suggest, if not on purpose, the comedy. In November 1918, Weber decided that he should himself try once more to enter politics. He joined the Heidelberg chapter of the left-wing Council of Workers and Soldiers. He did not share their enthusiasm for the socialisation of the economy. (He had had an argument about that with Joseph Schumpeter in a coffee house in Vienna that summer, the mischievous Schumpeter suggesting that it would be an interesting thing to try, Weber insisting that in the present political circumstances, it would court catastrophe.⁴¹) Nonetheless, the Councils of Workers and Soldiers, he believed, were serious men. He soon discovered, however, that their headquarters in Berlin 'was an amateurish operation of

⁴⁰ Aron, 'Max Weber and power politics', p. 100.

⁴¹ Richard Swedberg, *Joseph A. Schumpeter: his life and work* (Cambridge, 1991) p. 93.

the worst kind', and decided instead to let himself be drafted for his brother Alfred's new German Democratic Party. This was an attempt to connect the more moderate social democrats with the old National Liberals. It rejected economic experiments in favour of national unity. And it was more professional. For all his insight, however, Weber himself was not. He stood aloof from the horse-tradings and was displaced on the slate by a local nonentity. He realised, he explained in his letter of resignation to the chairman of the party, that his vocation was, after all, that of scholar.⁴²

The irony however was not lost on him. Early in the same November, he had remarked in a letter to the editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 'the peculiar fate of the world', as he put it, that its 'first real ruler', Woodrow Wilson, 'should be a professor', a professor, moreover, who appeared to be informed by Christian conceptions. 'One hundred and ten years ago' he wrote to a friend later that November, 'we showed the world that we—*only* we—were capable of being one of the very great civilised nations under foreign rule. *That*', under the rule, he now envisaged, of the Americans, 'we shall now do once more. Then history, which has already given us—*only* us—a second youth, will give us a third. I have no doubt of it, and neither have you—despite everything. What one now says in public is, of course, in the present state of things, not forever. Always keep that in mind.'⁴³ In the event, Germany's third youth was its own, and a disaster. It was in its fourth that it found itself divided between the Americans and, as Weber had feared, the Russians. Now, in the European Union, it has claimed its fifth, a power-state of a different kind, deploying a power he could not have seen, but in a way that he would surely have admired.

Note. I am grateful to Stefan Collini, Helen Thompson, and John Thompson for comments on the first draft of this lecture.

⁴² Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: a biography*, translated by Harry Zohn, reprint, 1926 (New York: Wiley, 1975), 643–4. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German politics, 1890–1920*, p. 310.

⁴³ Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: a biography*, p. 637.