

Weber, Max. *The Vocation Lectures: “Politics as a Vocation.”* Edited by David Owen and Tracy B. Strong. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004.

Max Weber (1864-1920) deeply influenced sociological theory and political theory with his empirical analysis of the relations between Protestantism and capitalism. The German academic also fundamentally influenced the sociology of religion, small group behavior, and the philosophy of history. Weber opposed German expansionism in the years preceding World War I. “Politics as a Vocation” was first published in 1919.

Politics encompasses all leadership activity, but Weber limits himself in this essay to governments. States dispense violence. States monopolize that activity within a specified territory. The term “politics” describes groups seeking a share in the right to use violence. People rule others, and ruling depends upon acquiescence of the ruled. Why do people submit?

Three justifications predominate. State authority may be legitimated by 1) custom and habit, 2) personal charisma, and 3) legal structures (such as statutes and rational schemes). Ultimately, compliance of the masses depends upon their hope of benefit and fear of violence.

Weber wishes to focus in this essay on the second legitimizing factor: charisma. The charismatic leader needs a populace predisposed to submit, and the administrative structures required to employ violence effectively. The bureaucrats obey their state because of legitimacy, but also because of money (gained by legally exploiting the ruled majority) and prestige.

In one form of administration the minions own the means of administration (e.g., medieval vassaldom), in the other the leader himself (or the state) owns the means of administration (modern corporations). Modern states rid themselves of bureaucrats who own the means of administration, creating of every bureaucrat a worker in capital owned by the rulers or the state itself. [Weber nicely summarizes these thoughts at page 38.] In the West there emerged political professionals who wished to serve the rulers occupationally.

One may engage politics as a vocation for politics or from politics. The “for” politics individual lets politics give his life a direction. These persons usually own independent wealth or have work that does not require their attention. Civil servants serve “from” politics. If government is not to be the bastion of the wealthy, then a way to make one’s living from politics must be open. Weber considers forms of compensation for bureaucrats in various locations. Governments need stable bureaucracies to moderate the destabilizing effects of nepotism. In England, these pressures eventuated in a prime minister, who negotiated with the legislature and represented all administrations and provided cover for the sovereign. Bureaucrats differentiated into two groups: civil servants whose jobs endured policy changes and political officials whose jobs came and went with shifting political tides. The civil servants administer government. Political officials give them direction and make policy. Civil servants were clergy, educated men, nobility, gentry, and lawyers. Lawyers created a natural law rationale for the absolute state, and defended its interests with their effective rhetoric. Civil servants should practice impartiality; the opposite is the politicians’ task.

Journalists are also professional politicians of a type. They are society’s primary political apologists, subject to high ethical standards. Their work exceeds the scholar’s in importance and difficulty. Successful journalists run considerable risks of being fatuously flattered or descending into perpetual banalities.

Party officials emerge from the fact that electoral politics divides all citizens into involved and uninvolved groups. The politically active guide the uninvolved. Parties evolved from feudal relationships. Subservient classes followed their lords as the lords pleased. This structure persevered until the very recent past, when the expansion of suffrage required full time politicians outside the political structure. Party officials expect reward from elected politicians whom they support. Eventually, party officials came to control elected officials, to some degree, and the party machine was born.

Weber considers the example of Britain, where expansion of the franchise led to increased party influence. The primary values of a British parliamentarian are not debate and

decision, but voting and adhering to the party line. The British prime minister has become an elected dictator, whose primary skill is rhetoric aimed to exploit public emotion.

Weber considers American political party history. The federal spoils system allows victorious candidates to fill federal offices with cronies. The result was a collapse of political values, the only principle left standing was finding votes. The spoils system meant amateurish government, a state supportable only in a nation with no identifiable budget boundaries. The political “boss” emerges, who captures votes by his own resources, to exert self-interested power. Bosses tend to seek power alone, not office, and money as a power gateway and surrogate. They are politically unprincipled, seeking only to gain influence over votes. America is beginning to replace spoils nepotism with a civil service system.

Weber considers German politics. German parliaments have been powerless. Power lay with bureaucrats of the civil service. German parties evidence political convictions, though some opt out of the parliamentary system. Germany could escape rule by the civil servants if it allowed its Reich President to be elected popularly.

The choice is stark: charismatic leaders come with a party apparatus; civil service leadership is colorless, and amounts to rule by a clique of unelected bureaucrats.

For a political vocation, one becomes either a journalist or a bureaucrat of the civil service. A political career provides a sense of power. Ethically, the political professional must have heartfelt conviction, feel responsibility, and be able to sort the important from the unimportant. Vanity challenges every politician; power loses its cause, and comes to be focused on the politician. A vain politician feels indifference toward human meaning, and loses the inner sense of tragedy that all political action entails. Political activity often becomes a caricature of its intentions. Still, one cannot do without political action.

There is much dissembling in ethical questions. In war, ethics may devolve into assessment of blame to the loser, even though the only constructive path lies in laying the conflict to rest. Politics may be amoral. No single ethical scheme can encompass the breadth of human activity. Beneath its veneer, politics is the administration of violence. How does that square with the Sermon on the Mount? One cannot adopt Jesus only to shuck him off when inconvenient. Jesus demands poverty and nonviolence. His is an ethic for saints, not politicians. Politicians use force to prevent anarchy. They do not turn their cheeks. At best, politicians make peace under particular circumstances for a period of time. Attempting more, in the end, discredits peace, not war. Germany made a unilateral confession of guilt regarding the instigation of World War I.

An ethic of conviction acts without concern for consequences, blaming negative results on human stupidity or God. An ethic of responsibility asks about likely outcomes and adjusts to them, countenancing from the outset the usual shortcomings of normal people. No ethic can achieve its ends without running the possibility of evil outcomes. And none can say when such risks are warranted, and when they are not. Any ethic of conviction founders on its failure to address outcomes. It will require rejection of morally-deficient means, and revert to wild-eyed prophetism. The actor under an ethic of conviction finds the irrationality of ethical endeavors unbearable. The real world is too messy for his giant ideas. Foerster wishes to do away with this problem by saying that only evil comes from evil and only good from good. This is a child’s view of the universe. The problem of theodicy, which has driven all religious development, pinpoints the irrationality of life’s outcomes in ethical life. Often good suffers while evil prospers. The Greeks sacrificed to many bickering gods to appease these cosmic forces. Hindus segregated castes each with its own rules (*dharmas*) to permit divergent response to ethical irrationality. Christianity created its own castes (monks, burghers, and knights), but these fit badly with the ethic of conviction presented in the Sermon on the Mount. Luther removed the ethical strains of war to the state alone, leaving the individual only to obey. Calvin adopted religious violence as a policy. Islam always endorsed violence.

Every political actor agrees to use violence. He requires a human tool in his quest, and acquires it by promising slander of those who resist with adventure and power to those who join. Grave psychological dangers attend exercise of political power. One has, in the exercise of violence, made a deal with the devil.

Political activity is rational, but also emotional. Most political agents of ethical conviction are blowhards, and lack gravitas. A mature person addresses political questions with recognition of the evils entailed. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, he says, echoing Luther.

Here, the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility meet in a person capable of the vocation of politics.

Taking the world as it really is proves daunting. We overreact, retreat into mysticism, grow bitter or provincial or morally corrupt. Most lack the inner resources to cope with everyday politics. Those should just go home and live a normal life. A true politician does hard labor with intensity and balance. One possesses a vocation for politics if what one hopes collapses because of the world's corruption or ignorance, and nevertheless one stands firm.