Political theory

The wheel of history

A century after he formulated them, Max Weber’s ideas about the

challenges of democratic politics are still illuminating

I

n january 1919 Munich was in turmoil.

Revolution in November of the previous

year had swept away the King of Bavaria, in-

stalling a ramshackle regime headed by a

messianic journalist of the radical left,

Kurt Eisner. As in much of Germany in the

aftermath of the first world war, rival fac-

tions of left and right battled for power on

the streets. In Berlin the communist lumi-

naries Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxem-

burg were murdered as Social Democrat

party leaders used Freikorps paramilitaries

to assert the authority of their fledgling

government. Eisner himself would soon be

shot dead by a reactionary nationalist.

The Weimar Republic was being born,

as it would die, in blood. On January 28th,

in this febrile atmosphere, Max Weber

made one of the most important contribu-

tions to modern political theory, in a lec-

ture titled “Politics as a Vocation” (“Politik

als Beruf”). Eerily relevant in today’s age of

demagoguery, it is as valuable a map to the

contemporary political landscape as it was,

100 years ago, to Weber’s.

A towering figure of 20th-century Ger-

man intellectual life—and a founder of the

modern discipline of sociology—Weber

gave his talk to an association of liberal-

leaning students on the theme of political

leadership and political life. Politics, he

told them, is a distinct form of activity,

with its own brute imperatives. It “means

slow, strong drilling through hard boards”,

a ceaseless struggle between leaders and

party elites. Anyone who gets involved

makes a pact with “diabolical powers”;

there is no moral authority to guide them,

and no option but to get their hands dirty,

sometimes even bloody. Famously Weber

defined the state as the body that claims a

monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

His audience could expect no comfort from

this unyielding reality. Ahead lay “a polar

night of icy darkness and hardness”.

The trouble with saints

Weber’s stern realism was not merely aca-

demic. He was contemptuous of Eisner,

whom he numbered among the “literati”,

and considered an exemplar of the type of

leader guided solely by a determination to

stay true to his principles, whatever the

consequences. This “ethic of conviction”,

Weber argued, was the hallmark of saints,

pacifists and purist revolutionaries who

could blame the world, the stupidity of oth-

ers or God himself for the impact of their

deeds, as long as they had done the right

thing. He contrasted that with an “ethic of

responsibility”, which demanded that poli-

ticians own the results of their actions,

making moral compromises to achieve

those results if necessary. Evil things can

flow from good deeds, Weber knew, just as

much as the other way round.

For Weber, the true political leader—

one for whom politics is a vocation—is

characterised by three qualities: passion, a

feeling of responsibility and a sense of pro-

portion. The leader has a cause; he or she is

not a “parvenu-like braggart with power”,

whose baseless policies lead nowhere. On

the contrary, those marked out for political

leadership have ethical backbones and an

inner sense of purpose. But these are com-

bined with sober judgment and a deep

sense of responsibility. Together these

qualities produce politicians who can

place their “hand on the wheel of history”.

It is “genuinely human and profoundly

moving” when (like Martin Luther) such

leaders say: “Here I stand, I can do no oth-

er.” Modern readers may wistfully agree.

Weber was a liberal nationalist who be-

lieved that the fate of Germany was the cen-

tral raison d’être of politics. His preoccupa-

tion with the character and ethics of

politicians reflected his belief that his

country faced a moment of great peril and

needed strong, capable leadership of the

kind he celebrated in his Munich lecture.

Germany had been badly led in the war and

was threatened with subjugation by its vic-

tors. Weber was not above calling on his

students to resist occupation by force; he

gave succour to irredentist sentiments. But

he was chiefly interested in how Germany

could produce statesmen able to guide it

out of the turmoil of defeat and civil con-

flict. It might have lost its place as a world

power, but it still had its honour.

Appeals to the power of tradition would

no longer work, however. The Kaiser had

abdicated and the monarchy was gone. A

modern nation following the democratic

path, Weber argued, had two options: rule

by bureaucrats and parliamentary cliques

acting from self-interest and “living from”

politics; or a “leadership democracy” in

which a charismatic leader, “living for”

politics, commands a party machine that

can mobilise voters. Mass democracy, We-

ber knew, always meant rule by elites. But

voters had a choice between responsible

and irresponsible kinds. He admired Wil-

liam Gladstone’s ability to dominate both

Parliament and the Liberal Party; but for

Germany he advocated a directly elected

president who would stand above the petty

factions of parliamentary politics and the

fiefs of the federal territories.

This was to become one of the most

contentious of Weber’s legacies to German

politics. He was active in public debates

about the Weimar constitution and was re-

cruited to an official commission given the

task of framing it. His support for a “Cae-

sarist” president, or “plebiscitary dictator

of the masses”, would later draw criticism

that it prefigured the overthrow of the Wei-

mar Republic by the Nazis, despite the fact

that Weber’s proposals mixed parliamenta-

ry and directly elected elements, and re-

mained liberal, not authoritarian.

The iron cage

Weber died of Spanish flu in 1920, but “Poli-

tics as a Vocation”, and the newspaper arti-

cles he wrote at the same time, remained

touchstones for German debates on de-

mocracy and constitutional law for the rest

of the 20th century. In Anglo-American

thought, his talk became a classic of politi-

cal theory after it was translated into Eng-

lish and published in America after the sec-

ond world war. It has commonly been read

as a lecture in two parts: one a scientific

study of modern parties and leaders, the

other a meditation on the ethics of political

leadership. It has been hugely influential

in the realist tradition of political theory,

which emphasises the role of states and in-

terests over values and has experienced a

revival in recent years.

A century on, Weber’s insights still help

make sense of politics. In democracies gov-

erned by elites who struggle with each oth-

er for power, while paying lip service to

equality or liberty—and who sometimes

deploy violent means to pursue their

goals—his arguments remain grimly com-

pelling. His cool appraisal of demagoguery

is useful for understanding the rise of char-

ismatic authoritarians who command obe-

dient party machines. The antics of Vladi-

mir Putin, Viktor Orban or Recep Tayyip

Erdogan would not have surprised him.

Nor would the recent fall from grace of

“responsible” leaders of the centre ground,

for whom pragmatism and technocratic

management have proved unequal to the

demands of a turbulent age. Weber, after

all, insisted on the centrality of passion

and the struggle for power in politics. Do-

nald Trump, meanwhile, is a brittle com-

posite of Weberian types—not obviously

possessed of an ethic of conviction, but

sustained in power by a Republican Party

machine and his own peculiar charisma.

He would doubtless have repulsed and fas-

cinated Weber in equal measure.

“Politics as a Vocation” continues to in-

spire those who want to understand poli-

tics as it is, not as they might wish it to be.

Yet realism like Weber’s can also seem like

acquiescence in the status quo. His left-

wing critics believed he was trapped in an

iron cage of his own making, unable to see

how the tides of history might open up pos-

sibilities of radical change.

One of the students who attended his

lectures in Munich in 1919 was Max Hork-

heimer, a founder of the Frankfurt School

of critical theory. Many years later he

would remark of a Weber lecture: “Every-

thing was so precise, so scientifically aus-

tere, so value-free, that we went home

completely gloomy.” That charge has ech-

oed down the years, and points to a dilem-

ma that still faces all practitioners of demo-

cratic politics: can you be realistic and

radical at the same time?