

# Habitus and Personality in the Work of Max Weber

Elisabeth Anderson

Division of Social Sciences  
New York University Abu Dhabi

*Abstract:* Weber's critique of modernity centred on how it shaped the habitus—life-conduct and motivations—of the modern individual. I explicate six habitus-types that appear in Weber's work: the early-modern Puritan *Berufsmensch*, the modern specialist, the modern industrial worker, the politician, the civil servant, and the citizen voter. In doing so, I identify the main characteristics of each type and the causal mechanisms through which Western modernity's core features—capitalism and bureaucracy—brought them into being. Further, I discuss two habitus-related problems that concerned Weber: the general failure of the modern habitus to achieve 'personality'; and the mismatch between habitus and occupational role in the Wilhelmine political sphere. I then explain the practical reforms through which Weber hoped to address these problems. Finally, I show how this analysis helps resolve two apparent contradictions which have long perplexed Weber scholars.

Throughout his economic and political sociology, Max Weber exhibited an abiding interest in how modern institutions shape the 'habitus'—life-conduct and its motivations—of modern individuals, and vice versa. This interest in habitus fits with Weber's commitment to methodological individualism and *verstehende Soziologie*: if individual action is the basis for society-level outcomes, and if causal explanation requires interpretive understanding of such action, then close attention to the locus where motive and action intersect is clearly necessary. As such, habitus becomes an integral component of Weber's understanding of modernity. The distinctly Weberian conceptualisation of the modern habitus—both as it was, and as it should be—therefore merits more systematic scholarly attention than it has received to date. In this paper, I fill this gap by explicating six habitus-types that appear in Weber's work, alongside an analysis of the deficiencies specific to each type as well as the solutions Weber prescribes for overcoming these deficiencies.

Alongside other scholars, foremost among them Wilhelm Hennis, I argue that one of Weber's primary concerns about capitalism and bureaucracy is how these impede the

modern habitus' ability to achieve 'personality'. For Weber, 'personality' requires disciplined life-conduct in the service of 'ultimate' values rather than instrumental ends. Although personality-formation is an individual accomplishment, inescapably grounded in subjective personal choices, its achievement can be facilitated by certain social conditions. Accordingly, Weber's vision for social reform is geared toward developing organisational settings where personalities can be cultivated through small-group socialisation, training and/or selection. As I will show, Weber prescribes or endorses different organisational solutions for the different habitus-types; for instance, in his political writings and addresses, he strongly advocates labour unions for the modern industrial worker and 'working' parliaments for the modern politician. Weber's thoughts on the necessarily subjective and 'decisionist' nature of value choices notwithstanding, his comments on how organisational settings facilitate such choices make clear that, when it comes to addressing the failings of the modern habitus, Weber's diagnoses and prescriptions are aimed at the social, not the individual, level.

Paying attention to Weber's theory of habitus also helps make sense of two seeming contradictions in his work. The first is a tension between his gloomy assessment of capitalism's so-called 'iron cage', on the one hand, and his pro-capitalist boosterism and rejection of its structural alternatives, on the other. Scholars have regarded Weber's stance on socialism, in particular, as puzzling; for example, Mommsen (1984: 108) notes that Weber is 'caught in a contradiction' when he dismisses socialism's revolutionary agenda while lamenting the German Social Democratic Party's lack of energy in the same breath. I argue that Weber's views on socialism become more coherent once we recognise that for him, socialism's primary task is *not* to advance macro-structural transformation or even to improve workers' material conditions, but rather to revitalise the working-class habitus. The second apparent contradiction is Weber's belief in the impossibility of universal meaning in a disenchanted modern world, alongside an exhortation that the modern individual strive to live a meaningful life. Weber scholars have attempted to resolve this paradox in various ways, including positing the survival of meaning in a bounded (Schluchter, 1979b) or diminished (Symonds, 2015), but still semi-universal, form. In contrast, I argue that, for Weber, the solution to modern meaninglessness lies not in preserving a limited sphere of semi-universal meaning, but in

transforming the individual habitus. The solution he proposes is practical, not philosophical: although the antinomy of values cannot be logically overcome, certain organisational forms *can* push individuals toward making subjective value choices and arranging their life-conduct accordingly. Such rehabilitation of the habitus has the potential to enable modern individuals to escape the ‘iron cage’ even while they continue to play by the rules of the modern capitalist order.

## Habitus and Personality

Weber’s concern with the modern habitus remains an undercurrent in his major works; however, as others have pointed out (e.g. Hennis, 2000),<sup>1</sup> he expresses it more directly in several less famous pieces, albeit using varying terminology. For example, in a lecture given for his inauguration at Freiburg University in 1895, he argues:

a science concerned with human beings—and that is what political economy is—is concerned above all else with the *quality of human beings* reared under those economic and social conditions of existence (PW: 15 [MWG I/4-2: 559], my emphasis; see also Hennis, 2000: 42).

Similarly, in response to critiques of *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber explains that the ‘spirit of capitalism’ was in fact a certain kind of ‘habitus’ (MWG I/9: 585)—one pioneered and personified by the ascetic Puritan economic actor—and furthermore, that his main goal was to explain the historical development of this habitus:

The progress of an expanding capitalism was not my central interest; rather, it was the *development of humankind* as it was produced through the confluence of religiously and economically determined factors (ALW: 1111 [MWG I/9: 709], my emphasis; see also Hennis, 2000: 19–20).

---

<sup>1</sup> Hennis (2000: 16) proposes that the main question addressed in *The Protestant Ethic* is religion’s impact on life-conduct or habitus, but he neither clearly defines nor distinguishes between the two, which I do; nor does he distinguish habitus from personality, as I do (see e.g. Hennis, 2000: 79). Hennis also does not precisely distinguish between various habitus-types, as I do. Neither does he pay attention to Weber’s proposed solutions to the problems of the modern habitus, which leads him to exaggerate Weber’s pessimism about the possibilities for individual liberation within the bounds of rationalised capitalism (see e.g. Hennis, 2000: 184–186). Despite the many gloomy pronouncements about the ‘iron cage’, the coming ‘polar night of icy darkness’ (FMW: 128 [MWG I/17: 251]), etc., there is also a strain of optimism in Weber’s work, though this optimism has nothing to do with a teleological conception of ‘progress’.

As the quote from the Freiburg lecture suggests, Weber's concern is not only sociological, but also normative. His insistence upon value-neutrality in the social sciences notwithstanding, Weber's sociological and political writings reveal a deep and ongoing concern about the *quality* of individual human beings under modernity in both the descriptive *and* evaluative sense of the word.<sup>2</sup>

Despite variation in the terms Weber uses to designate his object of interest—the quality of human beings, humankind, life-conduct, personality, habitus, character—the passages cited above and others running throughout his work reveal a sustained interest in how modern individuals live their daily lives and what they care about. I use the term 'habitus'—a term Weber also deployed from time to time (see e.g. GASS: 25, 67, 160; VAL: 206 [GASS: 446]; ES: 536 [MWG I/22-2: 314]; ALW: 1124 [MWG I/9: 730]; MWG I/9: 395, 585, 597, 614f, 675f)—to refer to two facets of Weber's problematic. First, habitus refers to *how individuals act*: their regular life-conduct (*Lebensführung*); the way they go about their day-to-day lives.<sup>3</sup> This life-conduct may be methodical and disciplined, or it may be scattered and contradictory. Second, it refers to the *motivations*

---

<sup>2</sup> This paper draws on Weber's ostensibly value-free sociological writings as well as his value-laden political writings and speeches. Weber's political writings are, of course, shot through with many passionate opinions, particularly denunciations of Wilhelmine German political institutions and actors. 'Politics as a Vocation', likewise, contains clear value judgements about the qualities of the ideal politician. From these pieces it is quite easy to discern what Weber thought the pathologies of the various modern political habitus-types were and what kinds of reforms were needed to rehabilitate them. Similarly, comments he made at meetings of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* provide insight into his opinions on the promise of unions for rehabilitating the working-class habitus. But while the sociological writings are ostensibly devoid of such judgements, they often seep through nonetheless, and these can be used to discern Weber's subjective evaluations of the modern economic habitus-types. Weber's lamentations about the iron cage of modern capitalism at the end of *The Protestant Ethic*, which give us a clear sense of the pathologies with which he diagnosed the modern specialist, are only the most obvious example of his inability to fully abide by his own dictate that social-scientific analysis remain value-free. Comments at the end of his study on factory workers, as well as passing comments in his essays on 'Churches and Sects in North America' and the proposal for the study on 'Voluntary Associational Life', also provide a window into his normative perspective on the promises of voluntary associations for personality-formation. Indeed, the concept of personality is in itself not value-neutral; as articulated in his sociological and methodological pieces, he obviously regards it as superior to the ordinary habitus that fails to rise above natural impulses and self-contradictory, incoherent life-conduct (see e.g. MSS: 5, 18 [MWG I/12: 452, 470]; ES: 536 [MWG I/22-2: 314]; RC: 232 [MWG I/19: 457]). His use of metaphors like 'mud' (ROI: 342 [MWG I/20: 543]) and 'vegetative underground' (CMW: 85 [MWG I/7: 362]) to describe that natural habitus unguided by conscious ethical ideals makes this quite obvious.

<sup>3</sup> This term has been defined in several different ways by Weber scholars. Some conflate 'lifestyle' and 'life-conduct', but it seems that by lifestyle, Weber means something along the lines of consumption practices associated with particular status groups, whereas life-conduct refers to individuals' regular and routine (though not necessarily rationalised or methodical) action in the service of particular ends (see Swedberg and Agevall, 2016: 192–193).

underlying this life-conduct. These motivations may be oriented toward ‘ultimate’ ideals or values, or they may be instrumental and utilitarian.

Habitus, in the Weberian sense, is thus different from more contemporary understandings of the term, notably that of Bourdieu, for whom it refers to a set of durable, historically situated and socially structured dispositions which organise cognition and generate action (i.e. practice), but do not include action itself. Weber, in contrast, foregrounds action (*Lebensführung*) in his conceptualisation of the habitus. As Camic (1986: 1046) notes, the classical sociologists, including Weber and Durkheim, use the term ‘habitus’ to refer to an ‘all-encompassing modality of action’. Furthermore, whereas Bourdieu posits habitus as an *alternative* to the neoclassical view of actors as purposively rational and goal-oriented, in Weber’s view it is through self-disciplined conduct that the modern habitus can achieve a meaningful existence. For Weber, the more methodically goal-oriented the habitus, the better. Finally, although Weber is interested in dispositions or attitudes (such as the matter-of-fact attitude that arose from the disenchantment of the modern world (FMW: 139 [MWG I/17: 86])), when it comes to *evaluating* the habitus, he is most interested in *values* or their *absence*. These peculiarities become clear when we consider his explicit definition of a related concept, ‘personality’.

Although Weber never explicitly defines habitus nor distinguishes it clearly from other similar concepts, one thing is certain: habitus is not the same thing as ‘personality’, or more precisely, only some habitus qualify as ‘personalities’:

‘Personality’ is a concept that finds its ‘essence’ in the consistency of its intimate relationship to certain ultimate ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ of life. These values and meanings have their effect by being forged into purposes and thereby translated into rational-teleological action (translated in Portis, 1978: 113 [MWG I/7: 150]).

As Mommsen (1965: 29) puts it, having a personality, in Weber’s view, entails a ‘rational pattern of life based on a responsible choice between various sets of values’. Similarly, Hennis (2000: 88) argues that personality, for Weber, requires ‘complete and inwardly motivated personal “dedication” . . . to a cause (*Sache*) . . . directed by *ethical* imperatives’. Personality can thus be contrasted with a habitus oriented toward purely instrumental ends and/or defined by conflicting motives and contradictory actions (PE:

70 [MWG I/18: 319–320]); a habitus marked by ‘the absence of an inward core, a unified way of life’ (RC: 232 [MWG I/19: 457]). It can also be contrasted with ‘the average *habitus* of the human body and the everyday world’, since that is ‘given by nature’ and thus lacks consciously chosen ethical ideals (ES: 536 [MWG I/22-2: 314]).<sup>4</sup>

For one’s habitus to qualify as a personality, then, one must meet three conditions: (1) there must be a coherent unity between one’s life-conduct and its underlying motives; (2) one’s life-conduct must be rational, purposeful and self-disciplined; (3) the motives for one’s life-conduct must be grounded in ultimate values which go beyond utilitarian self-interest in material acquisition and/or power for power’s sake. In short, people with personality pursue value-rational goals via instrumentally rational means.<sup>5</sup>

Personality is not something one is born with; Weber dismisses as ‘romanticist’ the bio-psychological conception of personality, which in his view denotes no more than the ‘diffuse, undifferentiated, vegetative “underground” of personal life’ (CMW: 85 [MWG I/7: 362]). Rather, personality is something one *achieves*, though as a side-effect of one’s life-conduct, not as a purposefully pursued end: “‘being a personality’ is something that cannot be deliberately striven for . . . there is only one way by which it can (perhaps!) be achieved: namely, the whole-hearted devotion to a “task” whatever . . . it may be’ (MSS: 5 [MWG I/12: 452]). Personality, in other words, is realised in action. It is less along the lines of something that one *has* and more along the lines of something that one *does* in the context of performing a task—typically, one’s vocation.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the achievement of personality is integral to individual self-respect: ‘in the final analysis we always have to ask: how does the individual . . . maintain his own self-respect and his own need to be a “personality”?’ (VAL: 203 [GASS: 444]). Thus, while everyone has a habitus, not everyone qualifies as achieving personality.

---

<sup>4</sup> As Sica (1988: 177) notes, Weber is more interested in studying this motivated, teleologically rational action than ‘life as lived’; indeed, he essentially dismisses action not directed by concrete motives as uninterpretable and thus outside the purview of social scientific causal explanation (CMW: 43–45, 86 [MWG I/7: 278–281, 363–64]).

<sup>5</sup> Although he valorises it, Weber characterises this type of social action as teetering on the edge of irrationality (PE: 26 [MWG I/18: 182]; see also Breiner, 1996: 125).

<sup>6</sup> Weber specifically criticises Karl Knies for his conceptualisation of personality as an inner ‘substance’ from which action ‘emanates’ (Oakes, 1975; CMW: 89 [MWG I/7: 369]).

As others have pointed out (Kim, 2004: 96; Brubaker, 1984), Weber's 'personality' is a neo-Kantian construct aimed at reconciling moral discipline and freedom by requiring that action be systematically oriented toward ultimate values that are *self-imposed*. Similar to Weber, Kant defines personality as the achievement of 'freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature . . . of a being subject to special laws—namely pure practical laws given by his own reason' (Kant, 2015: 71). Weber disagrees strongly with those who locate the freedom of the human personality specifically in conduct that is irrational and unpredictable (Sica 1988: 173–75; CMW: 30–32, 41–45, 85–86 [MWG I/7: 247–253, 273–281, 362]); for him, as for Kant, the personality's freedom is manifested in purposive, rational conduct in accordance with consciously chosen ideals. For both, personality requires rising above natural impulses and inclinations. Where Kant and Weber clearly differ, however, is that for the former, the choice of 'practical laws'—what Weber would call values—guiding action is a reasonable one, whereas for Weber it is necessarily arbitrary. Weber agrees with Nietzsche that as a consequence of the 'death of God', a universal cultural consensus around values can no longer exist; moreover, the correctness of values cannot be proven on the basis of scientific evidence or logic (MSS: 17–19 [MWG I/12: 469–71]). But although Weber's 'personality' is an accomplishment of the individual will—the result of an 'attempt to take the self by the forelock and pull it out of the mud' (ROI: 342 [MWG I/20: 543])—this individual achievement can be practically facilitated by certain *social* configurations epitomised by the ascetic Protestant sect. Consequently, one of Weber's core concerns is the survival of personality in the face of macro-social change, viz. the secularisation, bureaucratisation and shallow materialism of modernity (Gordin, 2006: 295). Integral to his ideas for social reform, then, is the development of organisational forms that could take the place of the sect in stimulating personality-formation in the modern world.

The claim that Weber was centrally concerned with the modern habitus (whether it qualifies as a personality or not) may come as a surprise to some readers, given the still-dominant view that he was primarily focussed on developing a macro-level account of rationalisation and the rise of capitalism in the West (e.g. Schluchter, 1979a; Whimster and Lash, 1987). But as Farris (2013), in her analysis of Weber's treatment of the

influence of religion on personality, points out, a long line of distinguished Weberians have noted the significance of these concepts for Weber's thinking. In their introduction to *From Max Weber*, for instance, Gerth and Mills note that Weber is deeply interested in how Protestant sects and secular voluntary associations shaped 'the personality structure of the free man' (1946: 18). In his seminal comparison of Weber and Marx, Karl Löwith treats Weber's views on personality as key for understanding his conception of how human freedom can be achieved in the face of the irrationality of the rationalised world (1993 [1960]: 70). Wolfgang Mommsen proclaims that 'the concept of personality' is the 'keystone of Max Weber's thinking' (1965: 28). Lawrence Scaff declares that, for Weber, political economy is 'a science investigating, above all, the "economic and social conditions of existence" . . . that shape "the quality of human beings"' (1991: 30). Most notably, Wilhelm Hennis has made a book-length case that Weber's 'central question'—the one underlying his explorations of capitalism, bureaucracy, religion and politics—is the development of modern mankind (*Menschentum*) with its distinctive rational life-conduct (*Lebensführung*) (Hennis, 2000: 21, 29).

Like many of these authors, I agree that Weber's critique of modernity is centred on how it transformed—and for the most part, degraded—the modern individual. In this reading, Weber's interest in Western rationalism is related to his concerns about how rationalisation, especially in the realm of science, has exposed the necessarily arbitrary and *non-rational* nature of value choices, making it harder for modern individuals to orient themselves toward ultimate ideals and to achieve personality.<sup>7</sup> I contribute to this

---

<sup>7</sup> I do not mean to suggest that all of Weber's work can be reduced to an underlying concern about the shortcomings of the modern habitus. Weber was interested in many things, and he usually did not make habitus or personality his explicit primary focus. (One clear exception is *The Protestant Ethic* and the responses to its critics. In the first *Anticritical* Weber states outright that the spirit of capitalism is in fact shorthand for a certain type of habitus (MWG I/9: 585), and that his primary aim in writing *The Protestant Ethic* was to explain this habitus' emergence. In these combined texts, explicit references to the Puritan capitalist 'habitus' or 'personality' appear at least twelve times (MWG I/9: 292, 316, 395, 406, 585, 597, 614f, 675f, 716, 720, 730, 731).) Nevertheless, there is a bright enough thread running through the wide selection of works used in this article to conclude that Weber, throughout his career, remained interested in the modern habitus and its general failure to achieve personality, which he saw as interrelated with the core facets of modernity (modern capitalism, rationalisation, bureaucratisation) on which he more explicitly focussed his attention. The essays on *Roscher and Knies* (e.g. CMW: 41, 85, 89 [MWG I/7: 247, 362, 369]), *The Meaning of Ethical Neutrality* (MSS: 5, 18 [MWG I/12: 452, 470]) and *Objectivity in Social Science* (MSS: 55 [MWG I/7: 150]), the study of industrial workers (GASS: 160), the research proposal on voluntary associational life (GASS: 446), the lecture on *Science as a Vocation* (FMW: 137 [MWG I/17: 84-85]) and many of the political writings and lectures (e.g. PW: 70–71, 166, 181-82, 191, 267, 352–53



literature by offering a more systematic synthesis of this strain of Weber's thinking than has been produced before. In addition to precisely defining the Weberian [early-]modern habitus in relation to related concepts, including life-conduct and personality, I explicate six habitus-types that appear in Weber's work, three each in the economic and political 'life-spheres', the two spheres on which Weber focusses the bulk of his analysis of modernity's discontents. I identify a) the key characteristics of each type, including its life-conduct and underlying motives and b) the causal mechanisms through which Western modernity's core features—capitalism and bureaucracy—brought the latter five types into being. It is necessary to carefully distinguish between these types because the problems of habitus that Weber associates with modernity vary from type to type. Moreover, the specific mechanisms through which habitus and personality are formed vary across types, in particular, the extent to which personality achievement is bound up with competitive selection versus socialisation. Furthermore, I explain the social reforms through which Weber hoped to address these problems. These, too, vary from type to type. Here, I contribute to discussions of Weber's so-called 'decisionism' (Habermas, 1971; Turner and Factor, 1987: 341; Oakes, 2001, 2003) by arguing that while he does see choices of values as inescapably non-rational and subjective, his prescriptions revolve around social reforms to generate small-group contexts in which these choices could be *practically* (not logically) facilitated. Finally, I explain how this analysis helps resolve the contradictions mentioned in the introduction.

### **Life-Spheres and Habitus**

Piecing together Weber's many passing remarks on habitus reveals that his conceptualisation of this subject is by no means one-dimensional. For one thing, as mentioned above, Weber's theory of habitus incorporates at least two interrelated facets: life-conduct and its motivations. Furthermore, Weber considers by-and-large separately the modern habitus as it pertains to the economic and the political 'life-spheres' (*Lebensordnungen*) (FMW: 123, 323–359 [MWG I/17: 242, I/19: 479–522]).

---

[MWG I/10: 271-72; MWG I/15: 474, 491–92, 502, 592; MWG I/17 227-28]) all explicitly foreground questions of habitus and especially personality, alongside other topics.

Analytically speaking, Weber's economic actor and his political actor operate in two distinct worlds, characterised by distinct modes of conduct and motivation, and susceptible to distinct social-psychological pathologies. However, even if most individuals are more deeply rooted in one or the other sphere—the one where they make their living—people do travel through multiple spheres (FMW: 148, 150 [MWG I/17: 100, 103; MSS: 18 [MWG I/12: 470]). This in effect means that any given individual may present more than one habitus: for instance, the habitus of 'industrial worker' when they are in the economic sphere, and the habitus of 'citizen voter' when they engage with the political sphere.

Within each of these two spheres, there exist several distinct, more or less coherent habitus-types. Weber's writings on the early-modern and modern economic sphere feature three: the Puritan *Berufsmensch* (person of calling), the modern specialist (*Fachmensch*), and the industrial worker. His writings on the modern political sphere introduce us to the civil servant, the politician, and—at least when participating in activities like voting or consuming political news—the ordinary citizen voter. This list has been constructed from Weber's writings on modern Western capitalism and politics, and is not meant to be exhaustive. The six habitus-types were chosen for analysis because they appear repeatedly and there is sufficient material to gain a clear sense of how Weber views each of them along the following four dimensions: its characteristic life-conduct (both as it is and should be), motivations (as they are and should be), pathologies (if any), and potential pathway to personality-formation. On these dimensions, taken as a whole, each type is distinct. Restricting the focus to those habitus-types that appear in Weber's writings on rationalised occidental modernity lends coherence to the analysis. All, except the early-modern Puritan *Berufsmensch*, feature prominently in his at times anguished commentary on the general meaninglessness and mediocrity of modern social life. Actors possessed of these habitus-types are the carriers of this meaninglessness and mediocrity, and so diagnosing their distinctive pathologies lends specificity to Weber's general critique of Western modernity, while identifying how he thought each could be rehabilitated clarifies his overall vision for social reform.

Whereas the first of these types, the Puritan *Berufsmensch*, is a personality *par excellence*, the latter five are each vulnerable to specific pathologies which make

achieving personality difficult. In the economic sphere, the main problem—best personified by the specialist—is a *lack of 'ultimate' values*: a habitus that embraces methodical, industrious life-conduct, but that is utilitarian and materialistic in its aims. In the modern Western, particularly German, political sphere, in addition to a lack of values, Weber sees two main problems. The first, personified by the habitus of the average Wilhelmine citizen voter, is pathological *passivity*: a willingness to succumb to bureaucratic domination and to eschew any shared responsibility for determining the political fate of the nation. The second is the mismatch between the habitus of Germany's politicians and that required for sound political leadership. To combat these problems—a lack of ultimate values, passivity, and the mismatch between habitus and role in the political sphere—Weber prescribes the development or expansion of certain organisational forms: unions, voluntary associations, and parliaments. By bringing people together in a spirit of solidarity as well as competition, these organisational forms would select and cultivate true personalities in the economic and political spheres.

### **Habitus-Types in the Economic Sphere**

#### *The Puritan Berufsmensch*

The connection between the Protestant ethic and the peculiar type of person it bred is the best-known of Weber's discussions of the modern—or in this case, early-modern—habitus. The Protestant reformers' religious doctrines unintendedly produced a particular kind of rationalised life-conduct which, alongside other factors, was a prerequisite for modern capitalism to take root (ALW: 1119, FMW: 321 [MWG I/9: 722, MWG I/18: 543]). Realised in the methodical pursuit of one's inner-worldly calling and a calculated effort to maximise wealth, this life-conduct was embraced by Puritan *Berufsmenschen* of all social strata. While entrepreneurs possessed of this habitus were the prime movers of the modern capitalist economic revolution (PE: 30 [MWG I/18: 189]), they were aided in their endeavours by 'the average man' (PE: 71 [MWG I/18: 322]): 'sober, conscientious and unusually industrious workmen' (PE: 120 [MWG I/18: 477]) and working girls whose diligence was owed to a 'feeling of obligation to one's job . . . combined with a

strict economy which calculates the possibility of high earnings, and a cool self-control and frugality which enormously increases performance' (PE: 26 [MWG I/18: 182]).

Weber respected the methodical self-discipline and tough asceticism of the Puritans' life-conduct, even lamenting his own failure to live up to these ideals (Mommsen, 1965: 32). Moreover, he interpreted their mode of conduct as not only rationally ordered and purposeful, but also subjectively meaningful. He emphasised that the Puritans' choice to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their vocations stemmed not from materialism or greed, but from a value-rational commitment to supra-mundane ultimate ends—viz., glorifying God and moulding the world according to His plan (PE: 64, 104, 108–109 [MWG I/18: 291, 417, 434–436]; FMW: 290 [MWG I/19: 113]). Furthermore, he noted that the Puritan sect, in spite of the spiritual isolation it imposed on members, operated according to an ethic of 'brotherly love', albeit an impersonal one (PE: 41, 64 [MWG I/18: 230, 291]; FMW: 318, 329 [MWG I/18: 537]; Symonds and Pudsey, 2006: 137–140). Most importantly, Weber appreciated the coherence among all aspects of the Puritan's life-conduct and his 'inner ethical core'—the way the external and the internal parts of the habitus formed 'one unbroken whole' (ALW: 1124 [MWG I/9: 731]). Puritanism inculcated in the believer a set of 'constant motives', which, if steadfastly acted upon within the world, transformed him into a 'personality' (PE: 73 [MWG I/18: 328]). In short, as Mommsen (1965: 32) contends, the early-modern Puritan *Berufsmensch* represented for Weber 'a personal ideal' and the measure by which he evaluated all other habitus-types.

According to Weber, the emergence and reproduction of the methodical, self-disciplined life-conduct of the early-modern Puritan *Berufsmensch* occurred through three mechanisms. The first was the impact of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination on the individual psyche, which compelled believers to alleviate their anxieties by manufacturing signs of their own salvation. The second was the strict surveillance and boundary-maintenance the sects used to ensure that members practised a pious and above all methodical way of life (CSNA: 8 [MWG I/9: 442]). This was a selection process whereby members had to consistently demonstrate their worthiness and those who failed to measure up were excluded; however, it was not a competitive, zero-sum kind of selection process. Anyone who qualified could join the aristocracy of the elect. Finally,

the third mechanism occurred through family and community socialisation, which exerted its effects because ‘there is no stronger means of breeding traits than the necessity of holding one’s own in the circle of one’s associates’ (FMW: 320 [MWG I/18: 542]). As a result,

. . . out of their religiously conditioned family traditions and from the religiously influenced life-style of their environment, there emerged a ‘habitus’ among individuals which prepared them in specific ways to live up to the specific demands of early modern capitalism (ALW: 1124 [MWG I/9: 729–730]).

Combined, these three mechanisms yielded an ‘elective affinity’ (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) between Puritan religiosity and methodical economic activity, and consequently between reformed Protestantism and the ‘spirit’ of modern capitalism (ALW: 1112, 1122 [MWG I/9: 710, 727–728]).

### *The Specialist*

For most participants in the modern capitalist economy, the qualities Weber so admired in the early-modern Puritan *Berufsmensch* have been lost. The outer part of the Puritan habitus—methodical and relentless activity in a worldly calling—prevails; but the inner part—a duty-bound commitment to the glorification of God—is gone. The unity once binding life-conduct with ethical motivation has dissolved (ALW: 1125 [MWG I/9: 731]). The Puritan *Berufsmensch* has been replaced by the specialist (*Fachmensch*), and the habitus of the average *Fachmensch* falls short of personality.

The mechanisms which produce the habitus of the modern specialist are forced adaptation and competitive selection, combined with the technical training required for success in the modern economy. Now liberated from its religious moorings, modern capitalism imposes its requirements indiscriminately upon all who have been born into its ‘tremendous cosmos’ (PE: 123 [MWG I/18: 486]); all must adapt, or else ‘go under’ (PE: 34 [MWG I/18: 194]). Contributing to capitalism’s coercive power is the bureaucratisation of the economic sphere, which places an ever-higher premium on technical competence for entry and promotion within the ranks of the firm or profession. Unlike selection into the ranks of the Puritan elect, this is a competitive, zero-sum process with winners and losers. In order to adapt to these stringent new demands, those

with the means to do so undergo a course of study which trains them narrowly in a specialised area (FMW: 240–243 [MWG I/22-4: 229–233], PW: 294 [MWG I/15: 623]). The credentials thereby gained grant them membership in ‘a privileged stratum in bureaus and offices’ (FMW: 241 [MWG I/22-4: 231]).

The narrow specialisation forced upon the modern *Fachmensch* is typically accompanied by a turn to utilitarian materialism. Whereas the religious values of the Puritan demanded that she pursue profit for ethical rather than material ends, the materialism of the person living under modern capitalism has transformed from a light cloak into a ‘shell as hard as steel’ (not an ‘iron cage’, as Talcott Parsons’ overly loose translation would have it).<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the ascetic religious foundation of rationalised economic endeavour ‘has escaped from the shell’ like the soul from a dead body. Money-making is still pursued with devotion, but as an end in itself. Thus, the pathology infecting the habitus of the modern specialist is *a lack of ultimate values* and an accompanying sense of *meaninglessness*. The spectre Weber holds up to be deplored most is that of Nietzsche’s ‘last human beings’, epitomised in Weber’s day by the Wilhelmine professional middle class, with its supposedly small-minded conservatism and stifling conformity (Wehler, 1985: 118–137). Believing they have discovered happiness, these ‘specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart’ pursue ‘little pleasures’ and take no risks; they work diligently, but strive toward no end other than material comfort (Nietzsche, 2006: 9–13).<sup>9</sup>

From the perspective of the Puritan, Weber concludes, these mundane and materialistic motives would seem ‘contemptible’ (PE: 33 [MWG I/18: 194])—and so they seemed to Weber, too. For him, achieving personality requires grounding one’s life-

---

<sup>8</sup> The term Weber uses in this passage is ‘stahlhartes Gehäuse’, which, as others (Baehr, 2001; Kent, 1983) have argued, refers to a ‘shell’ or ‘casing’ that is ‘as hard as steel’. The cloak of materialism (‘care for external goods’) cannot be thrown off once it becomes hard and welded to the body like a shell.

<sup>9</sup> Weber has less to say about the modern capitalist entrepreneur than the modern *Fachmensch*, but what he does say indicates the problem of meaninglessness extended to the ‘average businessman’, as well (PE: 149n28). What could possibly motivate the typical entrepreneur, now that members of this class ‘tend to be indifferent, if not hostile, to the Church’ (PE: 32 [MWG I/18: 192])? Weber concludes that it can only be that relentless profit-seeking has become an ‘irrational’ but ‘necessary part of their lives’— a matter of compulsive habit or an addictive ‘sport’ (PE: 124 [MWG I/18: 488]), perhaps, combined with the social climber’s crass ‘desire for the power and recognition which the mere fact of wealth brings’ (PE: 32 [MWG I/18: 192]). At worst, the modern entrepreneur abandons any attempt to understand or justify his activity at all (PE: 124 [MWG I/18: 487]).

conduct in ‘certain ultimate “values” and “meanings” of life’ (GAW: 132). To the extent that modern *Fachmenschen* lack such ultimate values and meanings, they cannot qualify as personalities.

This was not their inevitable fate, however. To understand why, let us turn our attention momentarily to the intellectual sphere, where Weber provides some fairly clear guidelines for the achievement of personality. Like any life-sphere, except religion, science cannot legitimately presume to issue universally valid pronouncements on the meaning of life or how one should live (FMW: 142–143 [MWG I/17: 92–93]). However, like every sphere, science is also a ‘value-sphere’ with ultimate ends specific to it (PE: xxxviii–xxxix [MWG I/18: 108–109], FMW: 323, 350–357 [MWG I/19: 512–518]). Intellectual integrity and the pursuit of knowledge on the basis of facts and logic are the ultimate ends around which the entire intellectual sphere orients itself (FMW: 143–144, 155–156 [MWG I/17: 93, 110]; MSS: 3 [MWG I/12 448–49]). But while these ends may be institutionalised and universally agreed-upon within the sphere, they alone cannot provide intellectuals with a clear sense of purpose and meaning. In fact, in the so-called *Zwischenbetrachtung*, Weber declares the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, or simply for the sake of cultivating oneself, to be no more than a ‘senseless hustle’ (FMW: 356–357 [MWG I/19: 519]).

Still, Weber’s lecture on *Science as a Vocation*, delivered only three years later, shows that he did *not* discount the possibility of finding meaning in scientific endeavour. A vocational scientist *can* work with passionate devotion; *can* accomplish something that will endure; *can* produce results; *can* achieve personality (FMW: 135–137 [MWG I/17: 80–84]). How can we make sense of this, given the supposed meaninglessness of scientific advancement more generally? It seems Weber wanted to distinguish the pursuit of knowledge out of a desire for self-perfection, or for the sake of advancing the culture, from the pursuit of knowledge in the service of one’s own, sincerely held inspirational idea or burning question. The former orientation treats knowledge purely as an end in itself: knowledge is pursued simply because one wants to be—or even just *appear*—knowledgeable, or because one is simply caught up in the perpetual knowledge-production machine that is the modern academy. There is a fine but important line between this kind of hollow, often showy intellectualism (‘the worst devil’ (FMW: 152

[MWG I/17: 105]) versus one that treats knowledge production as a *means* for achieving a more substantive, yet highly subjective, purpose—namely, answering questions on topics of *meaningful subjective value* to the researcher herself (MSS: 80–84 [MWG I/7: 186–193]). To the extent that researchers treat their subjectively chosen (yet culturally situated) question as their lodestar and devote themselves to the relentless pursuit of it, they attain the meaningful life that eludes the ‘mere “specialist”’ (FMW: 137 [MWG I/17: 84]). It is through unity between their motivating question or ‘idea’, on the one hand, and a ‘firm and reliable work procedure’, on the other (FMW: 136 [MWG I/17: 82]), that scientists can achieve personality.

*Science as a Vocation* is about scientists in the intellectual sphere, but its insights can be applied to specialists in the economic sphere. The overarching ultimate end around which the economic sphere orients itself is financial gain via free-market competition (FMW: 331–32 [MWG I/19: 488–89]). But while this end may be institutionalised and universally valid within the sphere, it need not be the *only* value to which individual specialists subscribe. Indeed, in itself it *cannot* lend meaning to life-conduct, since Weber rules out the pursuit of purely material ends as a way of finding meaning. Like the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, pursuing money for its own sake is *irrational*; it confuses something that ought to be a *means* and treats it as an end instead (Löwith, 1993: 62, 68–69). The economic sphere has institutionalised this irrationality. However, the determined individual can still find a way out. If the modern specialist learns to treat money-making as a means toward realising some substantive value—just as the Puritan entrepreneurs regarded it as a means of serving God’s plan—then economic activity, too, can attain meaningfulness. It can become a vocation, as opposed to just a job. The challenge lies in the fact that the modern specialist is not embedded in a total world like the Puritan entrepreneur was, and so she must choose for herself a value around which to orient her economic life-conduct. At the same time, this choice need not be an entirely lonely one. Even in the economic sphere, substantive values are institutionalised in meso-level organisations. Law, medicine, engineering, accounting, and even various branches of business each have their own set of value-rational goals and modes of conduct, often spelled out in professional ethical codes and reinforced by professional associations. To the extent, however, that a professional field is dominated above all else by utilitarian



ends—profit—meaning may be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. For the average specialist, then, the pathway to restoring meaning to life-conduct might better be found *outside* the context of the capitalist firm. I will return to these points in the section on solutions, below.

### *The Industrial Worker*

Weber was not only interested in the effect of modern capitalism and its institutions on the economic habitus of the middle-class professional. When his attention turned to the modern factory system, one of his central concerns became the effect of mechanised mass production on the habitus of the dependent industrial worker. In 1908 Weber drafted a plan for a massive study of German factory workers, one major purpose of which was to determine how the industrial mode of production selected and cultivated certain characteristics in them:

The current survey is trying to determine: on the one hand, what impact large-scale industry has on workers' personal characteristics, professional fate and extra-occupational 'lifestyle', what physical and psychological qualities it develops in them, and how these are expressed in the total life-conduct of the workforce—on the other hand: to what extent industry's capacity and direction of development is tied to the . . . qualities of the workforce (GASS: 1).

The report this study produced (GASS: 61–255) does not answer these complex questions, but it does give some sense of what interested Weber most about the industrial workers' habitus. This was their *diligence* and *productivity*, or what Weber, drawing on the work of the psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, termed 'psychophysics'. The report goes into minute detail about the effect of cognitive and physiological factors (e.g. fatigue, practice) and psychological factors (e.g. willpower, habituation, concentration), as well as factors related to the labour process (e.g. number and duration of breaks, wage rates), on the 'productivity curve' of the industrial workforce. In short, workers' on-the-job life-conduct and productive output received the bulk of Weber's attention.

However, the motives underlying this life-conduct are also sporadically addressed in the report. Was workers' diligence a matter of self-discipline, or was it externally coerced by the tireless rhythm of the machine and the 'ever-threatening whip of

“unemployment” (GASS: 127)? For most workers, it was undoubtedly primarily the latter. Large-scale industrial production exerted its effects on the typical worker’s habitus via two mechanisms. First, *forced adaptation*: in order to retain their source of livelihood, workers *had* to cultivate certain traits (e.g. concentration, diligence) in themselves while repressing others (GASS: 135). Second, *selection*: those individuals unsuited to a job—due to their inability to habituate themselves to highly monotonous tasks, for example—would be excluded from it (GASS: 108; PW: 283 [MWG I/15: 611]). Just as for the specialist pursuing a professional career, the limited number of factory openings meant that this was necessarily a competitive selection process with winners and losers. Thus, for most workers, the motive underlying their occupational life-conduct was simple ‘economic compulsion’ (PE: 124 [MWG I/18: 487]) rather than any sort of ultimate value. Consequently, these workers were without personality (GASS: 405).

Still, Weber’s curiosity was piqued by those workers whose productivity was far above average (GASS: 35). What motivated these workers to exhibit such extraordinary diligence? Was it simply the promise of a higher wage? Noting that such workers were often either Pietists or trade union members (GASS: 160–161), Weber surmised that their occupational life-conduct was inspired by a set of values that went beyond mere materialism. While the Pietists were most likely motivated by the same ‘ultimate’ values that had inspired the early-modern Puritans (GASS: 161), the trade unionists were, he guessed, motivated by socialist ideology, which served as a sort of ‘religious surrogate’ for them (GASS: 163).<sup>10</sup> Precisely how socialist ideals contributed to workers’ industriousness, Weber was not sure; but he believed there was a connection (GASS: 162–163). Although he did not say so directly in the report, the implication is that *these* workers, through the unity of their occupational life-conduct and a set of underlying ‘ultimate’ values, were capable of achieving personality.

Weber was interested in habitus as both an effect and a cause of social structure, including social-structural reproduction as well as social-structural change. Obviously, the personality of early-modern Puritan *Berufsmensch* had contributed, in his view, to an economic transformation of world-historical significance. While the modern *Fachmensch*

---

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in a 1914 letter, Weber notes that socialism ‘wanted . . . to be a religion’ (Weber quoted in Scaff, 1987: 747).

was for the most part too mired in materialistic acquisitiveness to accomplish much of anything beyond reproducing capitalism's all-encompassing hegemony, the modern industrial worker was a potentially different story. Under current conditions, Weber thought, workers were generally too isolated from one another, too subordinated to rigid shop-floor discipline, and too chained to the machine to mount any kind of challenge to modern capitalism's now predominantly instrumental spirit (GASS: 60). But, at the end of the survey proposal, he suggested that the development of 'economic solidarity' among workers—a solidarity which was already budding within the social-democratic trade unions—'would radically change the spirit found today in [capitalism's] great edifice', replacing its purely profit-oriented ethos with something new—though 'no one can even surmise with what consequences' (GASS: 60). In the economic sphere at least, any challenge to the meaninglessness of labour under modern capitalism was more likely to come from workers with personality than from the 'specialists without spirit' who populated the professional middle class.

### **Habitus-Types in the Political Sphere**

#### *The Civil Servant*

The value orientation and professional life-conduct of the ideal-typical bureaucratic habitus can be gleaned from Weber's discussion of legal authority in *Economy and Society* (ES: 217–226 [MWG I/23: 455–468]). This habitus is the product of extensive educational and on-the-job training, as well as competitive selection: only those with certain technical qualifications and a certain type of professional life-conduct can hope to be promoted through the ranks. The civil servant orients their conduct to an impersonal order; their daily tasks are rule-based, disciplined, and rationalised. 'The dominant norms [in a bureaucracy] are concepts of straightforward duty without regard to personal considerations' (ES: 225 [MWG I/23: 466–467]); thus, the ideal-typical state bureaucrat regards rule-following and competent execution of her assigned tasks as her highest ethical duties. They subordinate their personal opinions and values to these rules and responsibilities, which in turn become their 'ultimate values', at least in their professional context. Such dutifulness is not pathological in and of itself. Indeed, the loyal civil

servant, faithfully executing official duties in accordance with orders received from above, is to be admired:

An official who receives an order which, in his view, is wrong can—and should—raise objections. If his superior then insists on the instruction it is not merely the duty of the official, it is also a point of *honor* for him to carry out that instruction as if it corresponded to his own innermost conviction, thereby demonstrating that his sense of duty to his office overrides his individual willfulness (PW: 160 [MWG I/15: 467]).

The implication is that, to the extent that the conscientious and diligent bureaucrat is motivated by a value-rational commitment to the duties of her post—as opposed to mere careerism—they qualify as having achieved personality.

To diagnose the problems Weber associated with the habitus of the modern civil servant—as well as the other modern political habitus-types—I turn my attention to his political writings and lectures, which were more overtly value-oriented than his sociological and methodological writings. In his political pieces, Weber focussed much of his attention on Germany. He was both an ardent nationalist and a fierce critic of the contemporary political situation there. His great concern was the creeping encroachment of bureaucratic domination into all aspects of German political life—a concern that was very much based on his assessment of the bureaucratic habitus. Weber recognised the inescapable need for a large bureaucracy to administer the affairs of the modern state (PW: 156 [MWG I/15: 462]), but he believed its outsized influence, and especially the outsized influence of men of bureaucratic habitus, undermined not only the German citizen's political education and engagement, but also the German state's potential to achieve national greatness and to shore up its power vis-à-vis its European rivals.

The issue with modern German civil servants was not that they necessarily lacked personality. Rather, the problem arose from the fact that men possessed of a bureaucratic habitus had been put into positions of *political* decision-making authority (PW: 177 [MWG I/15: 486]). Bureaucrats, not politicians, occupied 'the highest positions in the state' (PW: 167 [MWG I/15: 474]), e.g. the Prussian ministerial positions and the top posts in the Imperial administration, including the Chancellorship. Because they had never developed a sense of *personal* responsibility for their actions—after all, they had always been expected to *suppress* their personal judgement—these men had proved

themselves incapable of making difficult but principled and sound policy decisions. This had, in Weber's view, contributed to several international relations disasters, producing a 'world constellation against us' that ultimately helped paved the way for World War I (PW: 206 [MWG I/15: 520]).

the nation must not be allowed to forget that all this was done by the *rule of conservative officialdom*. At decisive moments, this form of rule put people with *the minds of officials* into leading positions which ought to have been filled by *politicians*, in other words by men who had learned, through political struggle, to weigh the potential significance of *public statements* and who, above all, would have had the *leading politician's* sense of responsibility, rather than the official's feeling that his duty lies in subordination, something which is quite proper in its place but which was very damaging here (PW: 204 [MWG I/15: 518]).

Thus, Weber's concern about the limitations of the bureaucratic habitus was not with regard to whether it achieved personality. Rather, he was concerned about the mismatch between bureaucratic personality and political leadership, a worry that was couched in broader concerns about Germany's national and geopolitical interests. The solution was not a rehabilitation of the bureaucratic habitus, but rather institutional reforms to ensure that bureaucrats were confined to their proper domain while vocational politicians were put in charge of policy decision-making (PW: 207 [MWG I/15: 521]).

### *The Politician*

While obedience may be admirable in a bureaucrat, a politician who follows orders rather than his own judgement 'would deserve our *contempt*' (PW: 161 [MWG I/15: 467]):

If a man in a *leading* position performs his leadership function in the *spirit* of an 'official', even a most able one, if he is a man accustomed to performing his work dutifully and honourably in accordance with regulations and orders, then he is useless, whether he is at the head of a private firm or a state. Unfortunately, we in Germany have seen the proof of this in our own political life (PW: 160 [MWG I/15: 467]).

Germany's problem was not only that its bureaucrats were too politically powerful, but also that its politicians were too often bureaucrats in mentality, if not in title. Weber saw this not as a universal condition of modernity, but as a problem historically specific to

modern Germany (PW: 26 [MWG I/4-2: 571]) and, moreover, one of recent making. Its sources were Bismarck's 'Caesarist' legacy alongside certain institutional flaws in the German political system.

In *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber lays out the qualities of the ideal-typical political personality: passionate devotion to a cause, a sense of responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, a sense of proportion (i.e. sound judgement), and an instinct for power, *so long as it is in service to a substantive cause*. Just as money-making in a profession or factory job should not be an end in itself, but a means for pursuing something of subjective value, so power should be a means of serving some greater purpose derived from the politician's own value standpoint. Again, essential to the political personality is a coherent unity between life-conduct and the 'cause' which motivates it (FMW: 115–116 [MWG I/17: 227–229]) and imbues it with meaning (FMW: 84 [MWG I/17: 169]). Like the Puritan *Berufsmensch*, the *Berufspolitiker* (vocational politician) must exercise his calling through a certain kind of rational life-conduct: 'unremitting, strenuous work within a . . . career' (PW: 181 [MWG I/15: 491]). However, there is a caveat: unlike the Puritan, the vocational politician's devotion to a cause must *not* entail monomaniacal commitment to an overriding 'ultimate end'. Instead, to prevent undue burden to others (e.g. one's constituents), devotion to a cause must be tempered by an ability to realistically predict as well as take responsibility for the consequences of one's decisions (FMW: 120–121 [MWG I/17: 236–238])—particularly with regard to the use of violence (FMW: 126 [MWG I/17: 248]). In other words, the person with a true calling for politics must be able and willing to somehow *balance* an ethic of ultimate ends with an ethic of responsibility (FMW: 127 [MWG I/17: 250]).

How can a state ensure that vocational politicians, true political personalities, dominate its political life? Political personalities are both born and bred. Some people have an inner 'calling' for politics; they are '*born, natural leaders*' (PW: 172 [MWG I/15: 480]). Such people exist everywhere, even in Germany (PW: 171–172 [MWG I/15: 480–481]). However, in order to ensure that these true political personalities actually rise to the top of the political sphere, a nation-state must meet two conditions: first, it must have a people, or at least a class of people, that is 'politically mature'. Second, in order to attract, select and train political talent, it must have a legislature that possesses real

autonomy and power (PW: 218–219 [MWG I/15: 535–537]). Wilhelmine Germany met neither of these conditions, according to Weber.

Weber defines ‘political maturity’ as the capacity to grasp and act upon the nation’s political and economic power interests and to place these priorities above all other considerations (PW: 20–21 [MWG I/4-2: 565–566]) in an objective manner (PW: 226 [MWG I/15: 545]). In other words, it involves the ability to prioritise the national interest over the narrow interests of oneself or one’s group. It requires, further, the capacity to regard ‘things and men’ from a ‘distance’ in order to gain a calm, focussed, measured grasp on reality (FMW: 115 [MWG I/17: 227]). Once upon a time, the East Elbian Junkers had possessed this maturity, but they had become consumed by the pursuit of their own special interests (e.g. protective tariffs) and lost the capacity for objective political leadership (Scaff, 1991: 16). Who could replace them? Not the bourgeoisie:

. . . if I ask myself whether the German bourgeoisie has the maturity today to be the leading political class of the nation, I cannot answer this question in the affirmative *today* . . . After the struggle for the nation’s unity had been won, and its political ‘satiation’ was an established fact, a peculiarly ‘unhistorical’ and unpolitical spirit seized the rising generation of the German bourgeoisie, drunk as it was with success and thirsty for peace (PW: 23–24 [MWG I/4-2: 568]).

Not the working class either:

. . . there is not a spark of that Catilinarian energy to *act* in them, nor the slightest trace of that mighty nationalist passion . . . They are wretched minor political talents, lacking the great *power* instincts of a class with a vocation for political leadership (PW: 25–26 [MWG I/4-2: 571]).

So long as neither class was capable of political maturity, those Germans with an innate talent for political leadership would be unequipped to bring that talent to fruition.

Second, in order to produce vocational politicians, a state must also have a legislature with real power. If it does so, ‘born leaders’ thirsty for the chance to wield power and responsibility in the service of some ultimate cause will be able to act on their elective affinity for a career in politics. Campaigning and political struggle will select and distinguish these born leaders; the practical experience of parliamentary committee work will further train them to exercise power effectively and responsibly (PW: 180–181 [MWG I/15: 489–491]). But Germany’s parliament, the Imperial Reichstag, was weak,

little more than a ‘reluctantly tolerated rubber-stamping machine for a ruling bureaucracy’ (PW: 145 [MWG I/15: 450]). It played no role in selecting government ministers, and its lack of investigative power meant that it exercised no oversight over the executive and was, in effect, subordinate to the state bureaucracy (PW: 178–179 [MWG I/15: 488]). The Reichstag’s resulting impotence vis-à-vis the executive rendered it ‘[in]capable of attracting great political talents’ (PW: 139 [MWG I/15: 442]) of the sort that existed in parliamentary democracies like Great Britain (PW: 181 [MWG I/15: 491]). Germans with natural leadership capabilities thus rejected politics as a career path and instead went into business (PW: 172 [MWG I/15: 481]), where they might be able to pursue their power ambitions, but find less opportunity to realise any meaning in their work.

These institutional conditions had contributed to the exclusion of ‘natural, born leaders’ from German politics, but the situation had also been greatly exacerbated by the ‘legacy of *Prince Bismarck’s long years of rule* in Germany’ (PW: 135 [MWG I/15: 437]). ‘Unable to tolerate any kind of at all independent power alongside himself’ (PW: 140 [MWG I/15: 444]), Bismarck had actively worked to reduce the power of the Reichstag and its dominant political parties, for example by repeatedly dissolving it under frivolous pretexts, persecuting the Democratic Socialist party with his anti-socialist laws, and ramming through legislation that only allowed it to vote on the military budget every seven years (PW: 140–142 [MWG I/15: 444–446]; Scaff, 1991: 16; Baehr, 1988).

As a result, vocational politicians had been driven out of politics and Germany’s political life had become dominated by men possessed of one of three alternative types of political habitus. Most alarming to Weber were the ‘professionals’ who lived from politics, rather than for it; careerists who pursued politics for mundane instrumental reasons (FMW: 83–84 [MWG I/17: 167–169]; PW: 190 [MWG I/15: 501]) rather than in the service of some greater cause. Many were ‘men who were [bureaucratic] officials (in mentality)’ (PW: 161 [MWG I/15: 468]); many had in fact risen through the ranks of the civil service, or else through the ranks of the increasingly bureaucratized, machine-like political party apparatuses (PW: 149–150 [MWG I/15: 454–456]). The mechanisms that produced them were thus the same as those that generated the bureaucratic habitus: training and selection on the basis of rule-following and technical competence, not



natural leadership talent. The second type was the ‘dilettante’ who saw politics as little more than a source of amusement—‘frivolous intellectual play’—and therefore exhibited none of the disciplined life-conduct required of the vocational politician (FMW: 115 [MWG I/17: 227]). The third type was the ‘power politician’ who, devoid of any substantive purpose, was only concerned with the “‘impression” he makes’ and a ‘glamorous semblance of power’ (FMW: 116 [MWG I/17: 229]). With their ‘superficially blasé attitude toward the meaning of human conduct’ (FMW: 117 [MWG I/17: 229]), these vainglorious poseurs treated political power as an end in itself, rather than a means to achieving some substantive goal of subjective value to themselves. The pathologies infecting all three habitus-types were a *lack of ultimate values* as well as a lack of a *sense of responsibility*. All three types therefore failed to achieve the status of political personality.

### *The Citizen Voter*

The average citizen is not, from day to day, active in the political sphere. But any individual may be involved in more than one life-sphere (Löwith, 1993: 77); for instance, one may be a ‘specialist’ in the economic sphere most of the time, but become an actor in the political sphere in certain situations. As Weber notes in *Politics as a Vocation*, ‘[w]e are all “occasional” politicians when we cast our ballot or consummate a similar expression of intention, such as applauding or protesting in a “political” meeting’ (FMW: 83 [MWG I/17: 167]). What, then, is the nature of the average citizen’s political habitus insofar as it is manifested in these moments of political activity?

Weber’s political writings give us a sense of how he conceptualised the political habitus of the average German citizen, both as it was and as it should be. The ideal citizens of a democracy are politically educated, engaged, and mature. They are well-informed about political processes and the political issues of the day, and willing to scrutinise authority figures and hold them to account. As already discussed in the section on politicians, for Weber, political maturity requires objectivity, specifically the ability to place the national interest above the narrow interests of one’s self or group, as well as ‘distance’, the capacity to regard matters from a stance of emotional and intellectual reserve.

Weber's assessment of Wilhelmine Germans' capacity for objectivity and distance is characteristically gloomy. The working-class voter's ability to exercise objectivity had, for example, been sorely undermined by Bismarck's anti-socialist laws and attacks on the trade unions, 'the only institutions which could possibly represent the workers' interests in an objective manner, thus driving their members into the most extreme, purely party-political radicalism' (PW: 143 [MWG I/15: 447]). Suppression had, in other words, heightened workers' tendency to regard their interests narrowly and in opposition to the general interest. Indeed, the only group Weber thought capable of objectivity was the soldiers returning from WWI, for 'the tasks presented by modern warfare are objective in the highest degree' and the soldiers were therefore likely to be 'immune to the empty rhetoric of mere *littérateurs*' (PW: 107 [MWG I/15: 373]). In contrast, those who stayed home, particularly the *littérateurs* and the wealthy, exhibited 'a repulsive lack of objectivity'—viz. inability to grasp what was in the best interest of the country as a whole (Ibid.).

In place of objectivity and distance, the average German worshipped at the altar of Bismarck's memory while exhibiting blind obedience to bureaucrats. Weber traces this pathological passivity to three underlying causes: bureaucratic secrecy, the popular media, and Bismarck's 'Caesarist' legacy. Bureaucratic hegemony is Weber's chief concern: 'How is it *at all possible* to salvage any remnants of "individual" freedom of movement *in any sense*, given this all-powerful trend towards bureaucratisation?' (PW: 159 [MWG I/15: 465]). In his view, popular freedom 'in any sense of the word' is only made possible by 'the determined will of a nation not to be governed like a flock of sheep' (PW: 69 [MWG I/10: 270]). But bureaucratic secrecy and the parliament's lack of oversight authority meant that missteps were hidden from view and the public was rarely given the chance to hold the officialdom to account (PW: 226 [MWG I/15: 545]). For these reasons, German voters had not developed a critical stance toward their officials; they had instead been lulled into a state of political indolence and sunk into a 'beery compliancy which would do nothing to challenge the power of the *bureaucracy*' (PW: 88 [MWG I/15: 355]).

Second, the popular press had likely contributed to the German citizen's political miseducation. This concern is evident in Weber's 1910 proposal for a study aimed at

understanding how the press, as one of the means through which ‘modern society continually strives to assimilate and adapt individuals’, moulds the ‘*subjective* individuality of modern man’ (SSP: 111). Weber is interested in how the press produce ‘changes in forms of thought’ and alter readers’ intellectual horizons (SSP: 118–119 [MWG I/13: 149–150]). In the case of Germany, he suspects that the media’s glorification of Bismarck had turned the ordinary German citizen into a ‘philistine who prefers [a] wholly unpolitical brand of hero worship’, a person incapable of forming an independent political thought (PW: 144 [MWG I/15: 449]).

Finally, much of the blame for the German citizen’s lack of political education lay with Bismarck himself (Baehr, 1988). The Iron Chancellor had ‘left behind a nation accustomed to *submit passively* and fatalistically to whatever was decided on its behalf’; a people that had lost the habit of sharing political responsibility and was ‘*entirely without political will*’ (PW: 144 [MWG I/15: 449]). Bismarck had done this in two key ways. First, by means of his pathbreaking welfare policies (old-age pensions, sickness and accident insurance, health insurance, and unemployment insurance), Bismarck had encouraged the populace to trade freedom and striving for comfort and security. Weber believes that economic policy should *not* be eudaemonistic but should rather aim to produce a hardy populace capable of creating ‘elbow room in this earthly life’ in the ‘hard struggle of man with man’ (PW: 14 [MWG I/4-2: 558]):

The question which 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 (PW: 14–15 [MWG I/4-2: 559]).

Welfare, if handed down from above by a paternalistic state, is inimical to ‘human greatness’ and will eventually render the populace entirely impotent in the face of bureaucratic domination: ‘The *housing for the new serfdom* is ready everywhere . . . in Germany’s so-called “welfare provisions” . . . just waiting for certain conditions to make the masses “compliant” enough to enter it once and for all’ (PW: 68 [MWG I/10: 269]). Second, as already mentioned, Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws, in force from 1878 to 1888, had undermined the main institution—the trade unions—which *could* have fostered

intelligent political engagement and political maturity among ordinary German citizens. In smashing the unions, Bismarck had deprived workers of an organised means of representing their interests in an objective manner, thereby destroying ‘the only decisive moral forces for the [political] education of the masses’ (PW: 143 [MWG I/15: 448]).

Thus, the pathology infecting the political habitus of the ordinary German citizen was *passivity*: a willingness to be both coddled and dominated by the bureaucratic state, and a resulting inability to share political responsibility for the fate of the nation. This passivity was accompanied by a *lack of ultimate values*: a general inability to see past one’s narrow self-interest toward the common good of the nation as a whole. This passivity and lack of values were the outcome of social conditioning imposed by bureaucratic hegemony, media propaganda, and Bismarck’s authoritarian welfare state. Weber is dubious that the modern ‘mass state’ could ever support the level of popular political engagement exhibited by the citizens in direct democracies like the Swiss cantons (PW: 226 [MWG I/15: 544]). Perhaps something akin to a political personality is only possible for ordinary citizens in such small, self-ruling polities; or perhaps it can only be achieved by vocational politicians. Still, he believes that the German citizen’s political habitus has to be rehabilitated in order to contain the creeping power of the bureaucracy. At the very least, German voters have to acquire the level of political education and objectivity necessary to recognise, elect and rally behind plebiscitarian leaders capable of wresting power from the bureaucracy on their behalf. We will turn to Weber’s recommendations for how to accomplish this in the next section.

## **Solutions**

What, according to Weber, should be done to overcome the modern economic actor’s lack of ultimate values, the passivity infecting the political habitus of the ordinary German citizen, and the absence of true political personalities at the top of the German political sphere? What sort of state- and society-level reforms could help the modern individual embrace a self-disciplined and value-oriented life-conduct? How, in short, could the modern habitus-types be pushed toward achieving personality?

As Habermas (1971: 64) and others (Turner and Factor, 1987: 341; Oakes, 2001, 2003) have pointed out, Weber is a ‘decisionist’: he treats the choice of ultimate values as impossible to make on the basis of reason or evidence and hence as irreducibly subjective. The decline of religion as a universal organising logic and the rise of competing value spheres means that there is no way to rationally assess whether one’s own or another’s chosen values are good or bad (Turner, 1993: 18). The only imperative, for Weber, is to choose *something* and then live by it diligently. At the same time, however, characterising this choice as occurring ‘within the solitude of the individual “soul”’ (Breiner, 1996: 75) or as a decision to follow ‘an exclusively *individual* law’ (Schluchter, 1989: 32) does not do full justice to Weber’s views. The choice of values may have no ‘ontological anchor’ (Oakes, 2001: 199), but it *can* have a social anchor. That an individual’s ultimate values are not only personal but are typically grounded in a cultural community is something Weber takes for granted.<sup>11</sup> Ethical choices may be a ‘matter of *faith*’ (MSS: 55), but faith is learned within and reinforced by the group. After all, Weber’s personalities *par excellence*, the Puritan *Berufsmenschen*, had their ultimate values and life-conduct instilled in them by their sect, which socialised them from earliest childhood and then deployed every means to strictly surveil and discipline them accordingly. Like charisma, which depends on a charismatic community to take shape (Joosse, 2017), Weber views personality as something that is achievable in the context, and with the help, of relatively small, bounded social groups. Thus, even for the modern *Kultur Mensch* who has eaten from the ‘tree of knowledge’ and therefore understands that

---

<sup>11</sup> In *The Social Psychology of the World Religions*, for instance, he writes, ‘The various great ways of leading a rational and methodical life have been characterised by irrational presuppositions [aka values], which have been accepted simply as “given” and which have been incorporated into such ways of life. What these presuppositions have been is historically and socially determined, at least to a very large extent, through the peculiarity of those strata that have been the carriers of the ways of life during its formative and decisive period’ (FMW 281 [MWG I/19: 103]). In ‘*Objectivity*’ in the *Social Sciences*, he makes frequent reference to the researcher’s *cultural* values, which he says are ‘historically variable in accordance with the character of the culture’ (MSS: 84 [MWG I/7: 193]) and often correspond to class interests (MSS: 56 [MWG I/7: 151–52]). At the same time, he often characterises values as personal and as the result of an individual’s grappling with his or her private conscience. There is no reason to reject the possibility that values can be both culturally grounded and individually chosen. We may be introduced to our religious or political values by our communities or associations, for example, but for these values to be legitimate—not merely an ‘event of nature’ (MSS: 18 [MWG I/12: 470])—we ought to mull them over in our own conscience, hold them up to scrutiny and compare them against other options out there in the world.

the choice among antinomic values is inescapably arbitrary (MSS: 18 [MWG I/12: 470]), making that choice can be guided and supported by the group.

The community that guides and supports the habitus in choosing its motivating values cannot be that of the life-sphere as a whole. As mentioned above, the ultimate ends orienting action in the economic sphere (material gain via free-market competition (FMW: 331 [MWG I/19: 488]) and the political sphere (domination through control over legitimate force (FMW: 334 [MWG I/19: 491]) have been dismissed by Weber as meaningless in and of themselves. The challenge that everyone active in these spheres faces, then, is to repurpose these ends into means through which to work toward some more substantive end. Each individual must choose a set of motivating values to guide their economic or political action and imbue it with meaning. This is a choice that is necessarily arbitrary and yet should be deliberate and conscious, made with the fullest possible awareness of all the alternatives, implications, and likely consequences (MSS: 20–21 [MWG I/12: 473]). How can this be done? Surely not through solitary contemplation alone. To answer the question of how people can be *practically supported* in choosing ultimate values and learning the techniques of disciplined life-conduct, we must turn our attention from the life-spheres to the possibilities afforded by lower-level social units.

For Weber, the answer was voluntary associations. Particularly after his trip to the US, which he called the ‘land of associations par excellence’ (VAL: 201 [GASS: 442]), Weber was keenly interested in the potential for voluntary associations to transform members’ habitus (Scaff, 2011: 188–190). In a 1910 address before the newly formed German Sociological Society, Weber proclaimed: ‘Undoubtedly, contemporary man is, among other things, an associational man’, and so he urged the society to take up as its first task a sociology of modern associational life, ‘from the bowling club . . . to the political party and on to religious, artistic or literary sects’ (VAL: 200 [GASS: 442]). Weber saw the American voluntary association as the direct descendent of the sect, but it was unclear to him, given its less overtly disciplinary nature, precisely what type of person it produced. This was a question for empirical study: ‘How does a certain associational membership influence the inner life of the individual members or *the personality as such?*’ (VAL: 202, my emphasis [GASS: 443]). And several pages later,

‘How and by what means do these different types of voluntary associations affect the formation of particular individuals?’ (VAL: 207 [GASS: 447]).

Although he was never able to address these questions definitively, Weber surmised that, as far as Germany was concerned, the answer was that associational life, at least in its current form, merely reinforced passivity and instrumentalism. For example, ‘I believe that the thriving choral society scene in Germany has considerable influence even in areas not normally suspected—for instance, in politics. A person who is accustomed to releasing daily huge emotions from his chest through his larynx . . . will easily become a “good citizen” in the passive sense of the word’ (VAL: 205 [GASS: 445]). Similarly, he lambasted the university fraternities for inculcating a kind of “schoolboy subordination” that masqueraded as “training for the discipline of [bureaucratic] office” and “ritualised convention” (VAL: 203f [MWG I/15: 116–117]; see also PW: 115-17 [MWG I/15: 382-85]). The ever more bureaucratised and patronage-based German political parties were also a problem because they were increasingly oriented toward shallow instrumental ends and were therefore losing their capacity to attract vocational politicians (PW: 167–168 [MWG I/15: 474–476]).

Elsewhere in the text, however, Weber takes a more optimistic view. It is possible for voluntary associations to change people for the better (Kim, 2002, 2004). In reference to the US, he argues that associations ‘support the selection of those most fitted to American life . . . by supporting advancement to business, social, political and all other forms of authority (*Herrschaft*) in social life’ (VAL: 202, translation amended [GASS: 442]). This they do by making acceptance conditional upon some standard of worthiness: ‘Whosoever belongs to an organisation . . . has to “assert” himself among his fellow members’, for example by exemplifying a certain ‘ideal of “masculinity”’ (Ibid.). Especially when formed for political purposes, organisations can be sites of struggle, ‘*fighting* and *compromise*’ (PW: 98 [MWG I/15: 364]). Thus, through processes of competitive selection, some members develop qualities that allow them to rise to leadership positions (VAL: 203 [GASS: 444]).

Kim (2002, 2004) highlights the competitive selection processes through which Weber thought voluntary associations might spur self-development: in Kim’s interpretation, ‘associations should combine constant internal competition among

members for the leadership position with an active external contestation against the associations of differing worldviews' (2002: 195). Such contestation would have the added benefit of exposing members to competing ultimate values, helping them to clarify their own points of view.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, according to Scaff (2011: 190), Weber's ideal type of 'moral personality' is 'made possible only by a particular form of civil society, in which voluntaristic associational activity involves the self-governing selection and moral testing of group members'. These assessments are undoubtedly correct, but Weber *also* recognised the possibility for such associations to exert their influence through gentler means. Through processes of socialisation or 'unconscious influence', rank-and-file members could simply adopt an 'overall habitus' in line with the 'worldview' and 'practical life-conduct' promoted by the association (VAL: 205–206 [GASS: 445–446]). Associations could inculcate 'specific, firmly articulated ideals' which members learn to purposefully strive toward (VAL: 207 [GASS: 446]). In short, voluntary associations, like religious sects, had the *potential* to reform the values and behaviour of large numbers of ordinary individuals, not only those destined for leadership.

In keeping with these ideas, Weber's answer to the question of how to practically promote personality-formation in the modern world was decidedly *not* aimed exclusively at the 'individual "soul"' (Breiner, 1996: 75). It was in fact thoroughly *social* in its prescriptions and centred on the creation or further development of organisational forms that might select and cultivate new traits in people. More specifically, in the economic sphere, the continued growth of socialist labour unions was most important. Unions linked with ideal-oriented parties, as well as other types of voluntary associations, were also needed in the political sphere to educate and inspire the German public toward energetic and objective political engagement. For Weber, such associations had the potential to serve as functional equivalents of the early-modern religious sect and thus to spur personality-formation among ordinary citizens (CSNA: 8 [MWG I/9: 442–445]; Kim, 2002, 2004). Finally, ideal-oriented parties and 'working' parliaments were needed to ensure the selection and training of vocational politicians for leadership roles.

---

<sup>12</sup> For a similar point relevant to discussion and debate in the intellectual sphere, see MSS: 14 [MWG I/12: 465].



### *Personality-Formation in the Economic Sphere*

While Weber favoured far-reaching political reforms as a way of addressing modernity's habitus-related discontents, he categorically rejected the possibility of economic structural transformation: 'it is as plain as can be that the whole economic and political future of Germany . . . depend[s] in the first instance on there being no reduction in the intensity of productive economic work in Germany' (PW: 85–86 [MWG I/15: 352]). He certainly rejected socialism as a political or economic programme, arguing that state ownership of the means of production would thwart the 'development of "free" personalities' (PW: 70 [MWG I/10: 271]) and be even more oppressive than private capital, since it would feed the power of the state bureaucracy and be more—not less—difficult for workers to resist (PW: 90, 157 [MWG I/15: 357, 464]). Besides, he regarded Marx's prophesy of socialism's eventual triumph as highly unlikely (PW: 290, 294 [MWG I/15: 619–620, 623]). However, he did take socialist theory seriously as an ethical point of view (Mommsen, 1984: 102) and hence regarded it as a potential source of working-class *ethical rejuvenation*.

With regard to restoring ultimate values to productive labour, Weber's greatest hope, then, was the social-democratic labour unions. He was a firm supporter of unions and their rights, including the right to strike (Mommsen, 1965; GASS: 397). His support for unions stemmed less from a belief that they improved workers' material conditions than from the view that they were good for workers' habitus. He explicitly characterised socialism as it was practised in the unions as a potential 'surrogate' for Protestant religiosity (GASS: 163). He proclaimed that the labour unions were of 'intrinsic value' (GASS: 398) and the crucibles of energy, idealism and solidarity in the economic sphere. At a 1905 meeting of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, he declared:

The only refuge of idealistic work and idealistic sentiment within the Social Democratic Party is, and will be, under our German circumstances: the unions. That is why I reject any proposal that threatens their nature (GASS: 399).<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> The threat to which he refers here was a proposal by fellow *Verein für Sozialpolitik* member, Lujo Brentano, to turn unions into compulsory, state-sponsored organisations (GASS: 397).

As Weber later argued in a 1918 lecture on socialism, unions nurtured a sense of honour and comradeship among their members (GASS: 494, see also PW: 143, 275 [MWG I/15: 448, 602]). This they did through processes of socialisation and training, and decidedly *not* by means of competitive selection. The logic of the socialist labour union is, after all, to *overcome* the competitive struggle among atomised workers. Weber's support of unions makes sense only if he believed self-development could also be accomplished through means *other* than ruthless, zero-sum survival of the fittest.

Thus, by fostering 'ultimate' ideals such as honour, solidarity, and self-disciplined labour in specialised tasks, unions made it potentially possible for workers to transcend the dull instrumentality of industrial employment and to restore meaning to their daily life-conduct (GASS: 163, see also PW: 294 [MWG I/15: 624]). In other words, they made it possible for workers to achieve personality.<sup>14</sup> This would be good for the workers, of course, but it would also serve Germany's economic interests: Weber's concerns about the 'quality' of modern human beings were always bound up with his nationalist priorities.

### *Personality-Formation in the Political Sphere*

Voluntary associations—including unions, but also political parties, clubs, religious groups, and more—were also of great importance for rehabilitating the German political habitus. Weber thought that if Germany were to develop its voluntary associational life along the lines of the American model, then it might address the pathological passivity of the ordinary German citizen. As Kim (2002, 2004) persuasively argues, Weber believed that voluntary associations had the potential to socialise individuals according to certain ethical values and modes of conduct, while cultivating a 'non-conformist individualism' that would galvanise the German political habitus and civil society as a whole (Kim, 2002: 196).

---

<sup>14</sup> The voluntariness of union membership was crucial to this (GASS: 397–399; PW: 99–100 [MWG I/15: 365–366]). Compulsoriness of any kind would destroy the Kantian moral freedom that comes from self-imposed standards of conduct. Any attempt by the state to *force* members of an interest group to unite 'would be a purely mechanical compulsion which would put an end to their inner life' (PW: 99 [MWG I/15: 365]).

Once again, the trade unions had the potential to play a particularly important role in this regard. As we have seen, they were the ‘only’ institutions in Germany through which workers could promote their interests in an ‘objective’ (i.e. principled, not narrowly self-interested) manner (PW: 143 [MWG I/15: 447]). Only the unions could serve as the ‘decisive moral forces for the [political] education of the masses’; they therefore must be given ‘free rein’ (Ibid.). Only through them could ‘the chaos, which appears in the pure social-democratic movement, potentially be overcome’ (MWG III/4: 310). There was a caveat to this, however. In order to have their salutary effects on the political habitus of working people, unions needed to be actively engaged with Social-Democratic party politics:

I know very well that, *lacking political engagement*, the mere business-unionist . . . is just a terrible philistine and that *without any political activity*, the working class would completely disappear from the momentum of the [German] people’s upward striving (GASS: 405, my emphasis).

In order to orient themselves around the ultimate values articulated by socialism, then, unions needed to be politicised; at the same time, unions would anchor the party in local communities engaged in a self-disciplined and solidaristic form of life-conduct. They would prevent the party from degenerating into a purely instrumental political machine of the American mould (GASS: 399): ‘[T]he rise and the strengthening of the trade unions guarantees [a site of] . . . political, manly, free independence within the [Democratic Socialist] party’ (GASS: 405). Thus, Weber envisioned a symbiotic relationship between socialist unions and the Socialist party, with the unions supplying the party with a fount of energy and solidarity, and the party supplying the unions with a coherent set of ultimate values. For Weber, then, labour unions had the potential to play a critical role in the revitalisation of both the economic *and* political habitus of the working-class German citizen.<sup>15</sup> They could instil meaning and discipline in workers’ economic life-conduct,

---

<sup>15</sup> While this might be interpreted as a contradiction, since the ultimate ends of the two spheres are supposedly antinomic, Oakes (2003) has demonstrated that this supposed antinomy does not stand up to logical scrutiny. To this I would add that Weber a) claims that the value spheres he describes in the *Zwischenbetrachtung* are meant to be ideal types that do not necessarily exist in such stark opposition to one another in the real world; and b) explicitly does not rule out the possibility that the ultimate ends of the various value spheres might be reconciled and subordinated to a higher value that transcends sphere boundaries. ‘The theoretically constructed types of conflicting “life orders” . . . are not intended to show

while simultaneously pushing them toward value-driven and objective political engagement.

Finally, the solutions to Germany's lack of sound political leadership lay in the institutions of democratic politics. As Gerth and Mills argue, Weber 'did not believe in democracy as an intrinsically valuable body of ideas . . . He saw democratic institutions and ideas pragmatically: not in terms of their "inner worth" but in terms of their consequences in the selection of efficient political leaders' (1946: 38). Similarly, according to Lassman and Speirs (PW: xxiv), Weber thought that '[m]odern democracy . . . creates the conditions for the emergence of creative personalities, the plebiscitarian leaders who appeal directly to the people'. The development of personalities suited to vocational politics took place primarily within the context of two democratic organisations: the political party and the parliament. Because their task is to produce leaders, competitive selection processes are essential to the effective functioning of these organisations. However, in the German context, certain reforms were needed to generate the processes through which political leaders could be selected and cultivated.

Parties, for Weber, are voluntary associations oriented toward achieving goals in a planned and organised manner. These goals may be purely instrumental (e.g. power, status, offices and their material benefits), they may be ideal, or they may be a mix of the two (ES: 938 [MWG I/22-1: 269–270]; PW: 152 [MWG I/15: 457]). Although the German political parties of Weber's day were becoming increasingly bureaucratised and patronage-oriented, they still (if only for the sake of tradition) oriented themselves around the substantive values articulated by their founders (PW: 152 [MWG I/15: 458]; Schluchter, 1989: 378–380). They had not fully descended into the 'utterly unprincipled' state of the American political party machines (PW: 344 [MWG I/17: 213]; PW: 228 [MWG I/15: 548]). If they held on to their ideals without shrinking from the realities of political struggle, then they might attract people motivated not only by a will to power but also by a substantive cause. As sites of '*fighting and compromise*' (PW: 98 [MWG

---

that there is no standpoint from which the conflicts could not be held to be resolved in a higher synthesis' (FMW: 323 [MWG I/19: 480]). For example, union members might regard class solidarity as the ultimate value and orient both their economic and their political action around it. However, Weber holds firm in his argument that certain value choices must be subjective and arbitrary. Some values may be logically reconcilable, but not every value can be reconciled with every other value. Antinomies remain, and choices must be made.

I/15: 364]) and ‘train[ing] in the machinations of party struggle’ (PW: 163 [MWG I/15: 470–471]), they therefore had the *unrealised potential* to serve as selection and training grounds for vocational politicians.

A party’s ability to serve as an organisational setting for the selection of political personalities depends, however, on certain institutional conditions. For one thing, as just discussed, it requires a grassroots source of political idealism and energy to keep its foundational values alive. For another, parties must have a real share of power and responsibility in the state (PW: 166–167 [MWG I/15: 474]). This requires a powerful, ‘working’ parliament co-equal with the executive—a condition, as we have seen, that was decidedly lacking in Wilhelmine Germany. Weber, writing in 1917, argued therefore that at the close of the war, Germany would need to implement sweeping changes to its political institutions, foremost among them reforms to give Reichstag members a greater influence over the affairs of state. In particular, the Reichstag needed to be granted investigative authority over the bureaucracy, and Reichstag representatives needed to be allowed to simultaneously serve in the Prussian administration. The former move would put a check on bureaucratic domination and allow legislators to hold the executive to public account, and would also stimulate public attention to political matters and thereby contribute to the political education of the masses (PW: 179–180 [MWG I/15: 488–489]). The latter would make it possible for the Imperial Chancellor and the Prussian ministers to be drawn from the Reichstag and would therefore reward the most effective legislators with significant executive power while maintaining their status as party leaders (PW: 169–170 [MWG I/15: 477–479]; PW: 254 [MWG I/15: 577]). Together, these incentives would draw ‘born politicians’ into the Reichstag, where the best among them would be selected and trained for leadership roles:

[P]olitical training . . . can only be acquired through unremitting, strenuous *work within* a parliamentary career. None of the significant English parliamentary leaders has risen to power without being trained in committee work . . . *Only* this school of intensive work . . . in the committees of a powerful *working* parliament, and in which he has to prove his worth, turns such an assembly into a place for the selection of politicians who work objectively (PW: 181–182 [MWG I/15: 491–492]).

Political personality is thus not the isolated achievement of the extraordinary individual will; it is the outcome of particular social configurations which could be created in Germany through targeted political-institutional reforms.

### **Contradictions Revisited**

We are now in a position to return to the apparent contradictions mentioned in the introduction. The first is Weber's pessimistic assessment of capitalism's so-called 'iron cage', alongside an insistence that capitalist development continue unabated in Germany and a rejection of its structural alternatives, including socialism and the welfare state. Weber's concerns about modern capitalism centred on its corrosive influence on the modern economic habitus; in particular, the loss of values and meaning that accompanied the secularisation, rationalisation and depersonalisation of economic life. Unlike Marx, he did not view the structural dynamics of a free-market economy as inherently alienating; in fact, he regarded intense competitive struggle as character-building. Moreover, he saw clearly that capitalism was there to stay—any effort to fundamentally alter it was delusional wishful thinking. Thus, Weber's response entailed finding ways to resurrect some semblance of the value-oriented life-conduct of the Puritan economic actor, not ways to resist capitalism's inexorable advance. As we have seen, his greatest hope in this regard was the trade unions, where socialist ideology could serve as a kind of 'religious surrogate' (GASS: 163). Given Weber's dismissive attitude toward socialism as a political and economic project, these positive evaluations only make sense if we recognise that it was workers' habitus, not the economic order, that was Weber's intended object of reform.

This is what Mommsen (1984: 108) misses when he characterises Weber's attitude toward the Social Democrats—dismissing their revolutionary aims as impossible while deploring their lack of energy and confidence—as contradictory. It is also what Scaff (1987: 747–757) misses when he concludes that Weber addressed the 'paradox' of state socialism—its inability to mount practical alternatives to capitalism without reproducing capitalism's worst features—by pointing to socialism's value as a source of cultural criticism. For Weber, the value of socialism was neither its capacity for structural

change nor its cultural critique, but rather its potential to imbue workers' life-conduct with direction and meaning. The party leadership's lack of energy and enthusiasm bothered him because it failed to inspire personality-formation. The social-democratic unions, on the other hand, were a 'refuge of idealistic work and idealistic sentiment' and had the potential to regulate workers' life-conduct in accordance with socialism's ultimate values. In this way, the unions might make it possible for workers to achieve some form of emancipation *without* macro-structural change. After all, in *The Protestant Ethic* Weber metaphorically compares capitalist coercion to an individual-level shell, not a societal-level cage; it follows that individual liberation does not necessarily require structural transformation. It does, however, require the building of 'intense and confined communit[ies]' (Beetham, 1989: 318) *within* the framework of capitalism, and the trade unions were the most promising development in that regard.

Similarly, while Weber harboured no illusions about the hardship capitalism imposes on the proletariat, he also flatly rejected the Bismarckian welfare state. When it came to the so-called 'worker question', Weber's favoured policy approaches included granting workers the unrestricted right to organise themselves and denying employers one-sided rights or privileges that workers did not share (GASS: 394, 397). It was through voluntary unionisation, independent of the state, that workers would develop 'manliness', solidarity, discipline and political autonomy—in short, the values and life-conduct needed to achieve personality. Welfare, on the contrary, would only encourage laziness and complacency, and do nothing to equip workers to resist bureaucratic domination. Thus, while Weber was concerned about the condition of the proletariat under modern capitalism, his response was to promote reforms that would enable workers to help themselves rather than rely on paternalistic handouts. This, again, was because his primary concern and main object of reform was the working-class habitus, not the working-class conditions of life.

The second contradiction involves Weber's rejection of the possibility of universal meaning in a disenchanted modern world, which seems, at first, to stand uneasily alongside his insistence that each individual, in order to achieve personality, strive toward meaning in their own life. This is a paradox with which Weber scholars have grappled. Schluchter, for example, suggests that although there are no universal

values in Weber's modernity, each life-sphere presupposes an 'institutionalised' set of values specific to it (1979: 74, 81, 94);<sup>16</sup> thus, within an overall context of meaninglessness, there are bounded havens of shared meaning which imbue their members with the ethical ideals and standards of life-conduct required to achieve personality. This interpretation runs into problems, however. It is true that for Weber, certain ends achieve institutionalised universality within each life-sphere: financial gain by means of free-market competition in the economic sphere, domination through control over legitimate violence in the political sphere, and fact-based knowledge and intellectual integrity in the intellectual sphere. However, as already discussed, money, power, and knowledge for their own sake are each rejected by Weber as sources of meaningful purpose. To allow for the achievement of meaning via purposeful life-conduct in these spheres, then, there must be room for other ultimate values to coexist or even come into conflict with one another within each sphere. In the political sphere, for instance, actors may be motivated to 'serve national, humanitarian, social, ethical, cultural, worldly or religious ends' (FMW: 117 [MWG I/17: 229]). In the intellectual sphere, the values that actually *motivate* any given research programme can be highly individual and precisely *not* those that are universally accepted in the sphere; this is why Weber regards it as essential that academics make their value commitments plain to their audiences, whose members cannot all be assumed to share those values (MSS: 2, 55, 58–60 [MWG I/12: 448; I/7: 150, 154–157]). Whether any given line of inquiry is worth pursuing is not something the scientific sphere can adjudicate; this is up to each individual scientist to decide on the basis of their 'ultimate position towards life' (FMW: 143 [MWG I/17: 93]). Joining a voluntary association (or research group, perhaps) might help a person identify, clarify and strengthen their motivating values, but value pluralism within any sphere precludes any illusion of even bounded universality or objective truth.

Symonds (2015) has also grappled with the paradox of meaning in Weber's work. In his interpretation of how Weber resolves the paradox, he argues that Weber believed that devotion to a vocation generates meaning within universal meaninglessness (62; for a

---

<sup>16</sup> In later work, Schluchter shifts to a more individualistic interpretation of Weber's stance on value choices, but here he overlooks the contribution of small-group settings in facilitating the choice of values and commitment to a particular mode of life-conduct (Schluchter, 1996: 37–38; 1989: 32).



similar argument with regard to personality attainment, see Fitzi and Mele, 2017). However, labour in a vocation has become an end unto itself, and so the meaning produced by vocational activity is but a pale shadow of the meaning once bestowed by religion (Symonds, 2015: 43–44, 60, 66). This interpretation misses Weber’s insistence that, for the true personality, disciplined life-conduct in a vocation should *not* be treated as an end unto itself, but rather be coupled with some ultimate value derived from the practitioner’s subjective yet culturally situated value-standpoint.

Brubaker (1984: 97–98) proposes a third answer to Weber’s paradox of meaning. In his interpretation, Weber does not see the survival of meaning in the modern world as taking a bounded or diminished, but still semi-universal, form. Brubaker acknowledges that Weber, like Nietzsche, sees the meaningful life as the result of subjective choices—but choices that are only within reach of a few virtuosi who float high above an ‘all too human’ mass whose habitus remains mired in the natural impulses ‘of the human body and the everyday world’ (ES: 536 [MWG I/22-2: 314]).<sup>17</sup> This interpretation is unnecessarily elitist. It cannot be squared with the fact that Weber regarded the average Puritan workman or mill girl as no different, in a moral sense, from the most successful capitalist (PE: 26, 120 [MWG I/18: 182, 477]). Personality was possible for everyone; indeed, Weber explicitly urged democratisation as necessary for carving out ‘an “inalienable” sphere of freedom and personality . . . for the individual who belongs to the great masses’ (PW: 71 [MWG I/10: 272]). As Schluchter argues, ‘Weber strove for an aristocracy of the spirit, not a form of elitism. All people can . . . become personalities, and determine their own lives’ (1996: 38). Moreover, the Nietzschean interpretation fails to recognise that Weber thought of personality *not* as the isolated accomplishment of the extraordinary individual, but as an achievement made possible by certain social processes, particularly small-group selection and socialisation. His comments on the ethical promise of the trade unions and other voluntary associations indicate that he saw these as potential breeding grounds for personality-formation among large numbers of average people, even in a disenchanting modern world.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> See Beetham (1989: 320–321) for a similar interpretation.

<sup>18</sup> See also the essay on *Suffrage and Democracy in Germany*, where Weber, in advocating for democratisation, dismisses the Nietzschean urge to set oneself apart from the ‘all too many’ as ‘inauthentic’ (PW: 122-23 [MWG I/17: 389-90]).

For Weber, the ultimate values guiding life-conduct can never be anything other than an arbitrary and logically unsupportable individual choice; the meaning derived from this choice cannot be elevated to the status of objective ideal. For him, ‘it was self-evident that the absoluteness of concrete ideals could not be proved’; yet ‘for him it was an indubitable certainty that only the choice and recognition of ideals, tasks and duties give meaning and dignity to human existence’ (Marianne Weber, 2009: 325). The challenge is not to somehow revive meaning in a universal form, however bounded or diminished. Neither is it to find some logically coherent basis for resolving the antinomy of ultimate values. The task at hand is a practical, *not* a philosophical one. It is to create the social conditions needed to enable more people to make a conscious personal choice among competing values and thereby to bring subjective meaning within their reach.

## **Conclusion**

For Max Weber, modern capitalism and political bureaucratisation produce new habitus-types (the specialist, the industrial worker, the civil servant) while also making it harder for the modern individual to achieve personality. While bureaucratisation undermines personality-formation by breeding passivity and irresponsibility among political leaders and ordinary citizens alike, the so-called ‘iron cage’ of capitalism—better understood as a ‘shell as hard as steel’—entails a loss of ultimate values directing the economic life-conduct of both specialised professionals and industrial workers. At the same time, processes of secularisation and rationalisation force modern *Kulturmenschen* to confront an inescapable truth: there can be no cultural or scientific basis for making an objectively correct choice among competing ethical ideals. Modern individuals must face a world carved up into distinct spheres, each organised around ultimate ends—money, power, knowledge—that are insatiable and meaningless in themselves, and thus incapable of guiding their value choices.

The demise of personality is not entirely inevitable, however, and Weber’s writings point to how he thought it might be prevented. Although achieving personality is an individual accomplishment dependent on an irreducibly subjective choice of ultimate values, it is a choice that can be practically facilitated by certain social configurations

which can be actively furthered. While Weber regarded socialist ambitions for macro-level economic restructuring as hopelessly utopian and misguided, he nevertheless viewed the socialist trade unions, as well as other types of voluntary associations, as possible avenues through which personality could be nurtured among the general population. In the German political sphere, he favoured more thoroughgoing structural reforms to enable the competitive selection of political leaders capable of stemming the tide of bureaucratic domination. What these organisations offered was far more than social capital or solidarity, although these were certainly among their benefits. More important for Weber was their potential to transform the individual habitus and to cultivate personalities characterised by a unity of ultimate values and self-disciplined life-conduct. By selecting members with an elective affinity for their ideals and practices; by training and socialising them according to certain values and standards life-conduct; by subjecting them to the hardening discipline of intra- and inter-group competition, such organisational forms could foster personality-formation among individuals of every social stratum. Through them, modern individuals might break free from their personal ‘shells as hard as steel’ and restore meaning to their lives, even within an overall context of coercive capitalism and universal disenchantment.

## **Bibliography**

- Baehr, P (1988) Max Weber as a critic of Bismarck. *European Journal of Sociology* 29: 149–164.
- Baehr, P (2001) The ‘iron cage’ and the ‘shell as hard as steel’: Parsons, Weber, and the stahlhartes Gehäuse metaphor in the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. *History and Theory* 40: 153–169.
- Barbalet, JM (2000) ‘Beruf’, rationality and emotion in Max Weber’s sociology. *European Journal of Sociology* 41: 329–351.
- Beetham, D (1989) Max Weber and the liberal political tradition. *European Journal of Sociology* 30: 311–323.
- Breiner, P (1996) *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*. Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Brubaker, R (1984) *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Camic, C (1986) The matter of habit. *American Journal of Sociology* 91: 1039–1087.
- Farris, SR (2013) *Max Weber’s Theory of Personality: Individuation, Politics and Orientalism in the Sociology of Religion*. Leiden: Brill.
- Fitzi, G, Mele, V (2017) The corrosion of character: Work and personality in the modern age. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 17: 143–155.
- Gerth, HH, Mills, CW (1946) Introduction: The man and his work. In: Gerth, HH, Mills, CW (eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1–74.
- Gordin, C (2006) The soul of the citizen: Max Weber and Michel Foucault on rationality and government. In: Whimster, S, Lash, S (eds) *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 293–316.
- Habermas, J (1971) Discussion on value freedom and objectivity. In: Stammer, O (ed.) *Max Weber and Sociology Today*. New York: Harper & Row, 59–66.
- Hennis, W (2000) *Max Weber’s Central Question*. Newbury: Threshold Press.
- Joose, P (2017) Max Weber’s disciples: Theorizing the charismatic aristocracy. *Sociological Theory* 35: 334–358.

- Kant, I (2015) *Critique of Practical Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kent, SA (1983) Weber, Goethe, and the Nietzschean allusion: Capturing the source of the 'iron cage' metaphor. *Sociological Analysis* 44: 297–319.
- Kim, SH (2002) Max Weber and civil society: An introduction to Max Weber on voluntary associational life (*Vereinswesen*). *Max Weber Studies* 2: 186–198.
- Kim, SH (2004) *Max Weber's Politics of Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Löwith, K (1993) *Max Weber and Karl Marx*. London: Routledge.
- McKinnon, AM (2010) Elective affinities of the Protestant Ethic: Weber and the chemistry of capitalism. *Sociological Theory* 28: 108–126.
- Mommsen, W (1965) Max Weber's political sociology and his philosophy of world history. *International Social Science Journal* 17: 23–45.
- Mommsen, W (1984) *Max Weber and German Politics 1890–1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nietzsche, F (2006) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oakes, G (1975) Introductory essay. In: Weber, M, Roscher and Knies: *The Logical Problems of Historical Economics*. New York: The Free Press, 6–90.
- Oakes, G (2001) The antinomy of value spheres: Weber, Tolstoy, and the limits of scientific rationality. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 1: 195–211.
- Oakes, G (2003) Max Weber on value rationality and value spheres. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 3: 27–45.
- Portis, EB (1978) Max Weber's theory of personality. *Sociological Inquiry* 48: 113–120.
- Scaff, LA (1987) Fleeing the iron cage: Culture and politics in the thought of Max Weber. *The American Political Science Review* 81: 737–756.
- Scaff, LA (1991) *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schluchter, W (1979a) *Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus: Eine Analyse von Max Webers Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Tübingen: JCB Mohr.

- Schluchter, W (1979b) Value neutrality and the ethic of responsibility. In Schluchter, W, Roth, G, Max Weber's Vision of History. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schluchter, W (1989) Rationalism, Religion and Domination: A Weberian Perspective. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schluchter, W (1996) Paradoxes of Modernity: Culture and Conduct in the Theory of Max Weber. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Sica, A (1988) Weber, Irrationality and Social Order. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Swedberg, R, Agevall, O (2016) The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts. Second Edition. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Symonds, M, Pudsey, J (2006) The forms of brotherly love in Max Weber's sociology of religion. *Sociological Theory* 24: 133–149.
- Symonds, M (2015) Max Weber's Theory of Modernity: The Endless Pursuit of Meaning. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Turner, B (1993) Preface. In: Löwith, K, Max Weber and Karl Marx. London: Routledge, 1–32.
- Turner, S, Factor, R (1987) Decisionism and politics: Weber as a constitutional theorist. In: Whimster, S, Lash, S (eds) Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity. New York: Routledge, 334–354.
- Wallace, WL (1990) Rationality, human nature and society in Weber's theory. *Theory and Society* 19: 199–223.
- Weber, M (2009) Max Weber: A Biography. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Weber, M (1922) *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre [GAW]*. Tübingen: JCB Mohr.
- Weber, M (1924) *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik [GASS]*. Tübingen: JCB Mohr.
- Weber, M (1951) *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism [RC]*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

- Weber, M (1958) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* [FMW]. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weber, M (1958) *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* [ROI]. New York: The Free Press.
- Weber, M (1975) *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* [RK]. New York: The Free Press.
- Weber, M (1978) *Economy and Society* [ES]. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Weber, M (1978) Anticritical last word on the spirit of capitalism, by Max Weber [ALW]. *American Journal of Sociology* 83: 1105–1131.
- Weber, M (1981) Some categories of interpretive sociology [CIS]. *The Sociological Quarterly* 22: 151–180.
- Weber, M (1984–2019) *Gesamtausgabe* [MWG]. Tübingen: JCB Mohr.
- Weber, M (1985) ‘Churches’ and ‘sects’ in North America: An ecclesiastical socio-political sketch [CSNA]. *Sociological Theory* 3: 7–13.
- Weber, M (1994) *Political Writings* [PW]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, M (1994) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [PE]. London: Routledge.
- Weber, M (1998) Preliminary report on a proposed survey for a sociology of the press [SSP]. *History of the Human Sciences* 11: 111–120.
- Weber, M (2001) *Methodology of the Social Sciences* [MSS]. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Weber, M (2002) Voluntary associational life [VAL]. *Max Weber Studies* 2(2): 199–209.
- Wehler, H-U (1985) *The German Empire: 1871–1918*. Leamington Spa: Berg Publishers.
- Whimster S, Lash S (eds) (1987) *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*. New York: Routledge.