

Sombart and Weber on Professional Politicians

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Abstract

Max Weber's concept of *Beruf* is manifested in his view on politics both as a profession and vocation. The democratization of suffrage led to the rise of new types of politicians living off politics, who were fiercely criticized in the early-twentieth century. Werner Sombart's series of articles in 1907 offers us a 'representative anecdote' of this criticism. He combines idealistic, positivistic and syndicalistic disgust for the parliamentary and electoral politics and condemns the professional politicians. Weber never refers to Sombart's articles, but at least one passage in *Politik als Beruf* offers a direct allusion to Sombart. With his idealization of experts and contempt for the daily practices of politicians, Sombart serves as a good example of those academics and *literati*, whom Weber criticized for not understanding the distinctive demands that a politician must face. The distinctive point in Weber's defence of professional politicians concerns their chance to act as counterweights to bureaucratization.

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Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus is most immediately linked to Weber's *Politik als Beruf* in the sense that in each case *Beruf* refers both to a profession and to a vocation, as Lassman and Speirs indicate in their translation (Weber 1994b). This distinction refers to the heated debates concerning the role and legitimacy of professional politicians. Among the fierce contemporary critics was the famous economist Werner Sombart. In 1907 he edited a short-lived journal entitled *Morgen*, in which he asked in a series of articles why German academics and *literati* ('die Gebildeten') turned away from politics and regarded the rise of professional politicians one of the main reasons for this disgust with politics.

Max Weber did not share his academic contemporaries' contempt for day-to-day politics and professional politicians. He grew up in a political home, took part in political debates from a young age, criticized Cicero's weak policy against Catilina at the tender age of 12 and read Machiavelli at 14. In his student days he entered into a

political correspondence with his uncle Hermann Baumgarten. Weber never shared the latter's (and his father's) conciliatory views toward Bismarck (see Baumgarten 1866), and he came to adopt the later Baumgarten's ironic distance from *Realpolitik* and the 'art of the possible' supported by Bismarck and his adepts (see Weber 1936).

Weber also broke with the political generation of Baumgarten and his father by accepting the conditions of democratized mass politics. His reading of James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* (1st edn, 1889), with its distinction between living for and off politics, was probably decisive (see esp. Bryce 1889/1995: 731-42). Weber adopted this distinction in a preface to an article on German Social Democracy (Weber 1905). He repeatedly refers to Bryce in the letters he began writing to Robert Michels in 1906 (see Weber 1990). Weber was disappointed by the fact that Michels never properly consulted Bryce's book in his famous work *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie*: 'Ich vermisse es, daß Sie nicht Bryce Am[erican] Commonwealth (*große* Ausgabe! nicht die kleine, die Sie zitieren) benutzt haben' (letter to Michels 31.12.1910, Weber 1994a: 761).

New kinds of professional politicians, who were actually living off politics, had been gaining ground in the United States since the Jacksonian presidency and the introduction of the spoils system. Weber was convinced that professional politicians were also becoming indispensable in Europe as a by-product of the process of democratization. He was disappointed with Michels' failure to analyse the rule of officialdom in the German Social Democratic Party in similar terms as Bryce had done with regard to the US party bosses.

Weber occasionally entered into explicit polemics with some of the critics of parliamentarism (Weber 1904a; 1908). Thanks to the work of Bryce and that of Ostrogorski (1903), he was aware of the movements against partisan politics in the United States, but he seems to have underestimated the anti-political trend among the academics and *litterati* in France and Britain in the early years of mass politics. In his later essays Weber discussed both the actions and opinions of politicians as well the empirical literature on politicians and parties but did not deal with the widespread anti-political literature. With the exception of the pedagogue F.W. Foerster (Weber 1919: 81), anti-political intellectuals are not mentioned in *Politik als Beruf* either. Upon closer examination, however, we can detect signs of a polemic against several anti-political thinkers of the time in his formulations.

I have found no mention of Sombart's *Morgen* essays in the works and letters of Weber that have been published thus far. We can be