



## Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology



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# I. Politics as a Vocation

“Not summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from a 1918 lecture Weber gave at Munich University at the request of the student union, first published in 1919 as *Politik als Beruf*. It was included in a posthumous collection of political writings in 1921. The first English translation was made by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills in 1946. The section you have here owes much to their translation, with some modifications for contemporary readers, and heavily abbreviated. The entire Gerth and Mills translation can be found in their collection, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, published by Oxford University Press.

## Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

Weber’s speech has mostly been recalled for its definition of the state and its reference to the three forms of legitimation of authority. This is worth paying attention to, but there is much more here as well, including some harsh words about American party politics and a plea not to lose hope in the face of increasingly reactionary and venal politics. It is important here to recognize the date of the lecture, coming at the end of World War I, the events of the Spartacist Rebellion in Germany, and the early days of fascism.

## Lecture

This lecture, which I give at your request, will necessarily disappoint you in a number of ways. You will naturally expect me to take a position on actual problems of the day but instead, I will be addressing the more general question of what politics as a vocation means and what it *can* mean.

What do we understand by politics? The concept is extremely broad and comprises any kind of *independent* leadership in action. We wish to understand by politics only the leadership, or the influencing of the leadership, of a *political* association, of a *state*.

But what is a state? Sociologically, the state cannot be defined in terms of its ends. Ultimately, one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the specific means peculiar to it, as to every political association, namely, the use of physical force.

‘Every state is founded on force,’ said Trotsky. That is indeed right. If no social institutions existed which knew the use of violence, then the concept of state would be eliminated, and a condition would emerge that could be designated as anarchy, in the specific sense of this word. Of course, force is certainly not the normal or the only means of the state, but *force is a means specific to the state*. We have to say that today a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given

territory. Note that 'territory' is one of the characteristics of the state. Specifically, at the present time, the right to use physical force is ascribed to other institutions or to individuals only to the extent to which the state permits it. The state is considered the sole source of the right to use violence.

Like the political institutions historically preceding it, the state is a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence. If the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be. When and why do men obey? Upon what inner justifications and upon what external means does this domination rest?

To begin with, in principle, there are three inner justifications, hence basic *legitimations* of domination.

First, the authority of the past, 'traditional' domination exercised by the patriarch and the patrimonial prince.

Second, there is the authority of the extraordinary and personal *gift of grace*(charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership. This is 'charismatic' domination, as exercised by the prophet or, in the field of politics, by the elected warlord, the great demagogue, or the political party leader.

Finally, there is domination by virtue of legality, by virtue of the belief in the validity of law and functional competence based on rationally created *rules*. In this case, obedience is expected in discharging statutory obligations. This is domination as exercised by the modern servant of the state.

In asking for the legitimation of this obedience, one meets with these three pure types- traditional, charismatic, and legal.

These conceptions of legitimacy and their inner justifications are of very great significance for the structure of domination. To be sure, the pure types are rarely found in reality. And we are not going to deal with all three here. Today we are interested in the second type - domination by virtue of the devotion of those who obey the purely personal *charisma* of the so-called leader.

Devotion to the *charisma* of the prophet, or the leader in battle, or to great demagogue, means that the leader is personally recognized as the innerly-called leader of men. Men do not obey him by virtue of tradition or statute, but *because they believe in him*. If he is more than a narrow and vain upstart of the moment, the leader lives for his cause. The devotion of his disciples and his followers is oriented to his person.

Charismatic leadership has emerged in all places and in all times. *Political* leadership in the form of the free 'demagogue' who grew from the soil of the city-state is of great concern to us; for like the city-state itself, the demagogue is peculiar to the West and especially to Mediterranean culture. Furthermore, political leadership in the form of the parliamentary 'party leader' has grown on the soil of the constitutional state, which is also indigenous only to the West.

How do the politically dominant powers manage to maintain their domination? The question pertains to any kind of domination, hence also to political domination in all its forms, traditional as well as legal and charismatic.

Organized domination, which calls for continuous administration, requires that people be conditioned to obey those who claim to be the bearers of legitimate power. Organized domination also requires the control of those material goods which in a given case are necessary for the use of physical violence. Thus, organized domination requires control of the personal executive staff and the material implements of administration.

*First, the loyalty of the staff.* The administrative staff is bound by obedience to the powerholder and not alone by the concept of legitimacy, of which we have just spoken. There are two other means, both of which appeal to personal interests: material reward and social honor. The salaries of modern civil servants and the honor of knights, to give but two examples, comprise their respective wages. The fear of losing them is the final and decisive basis for solidarity between the executive staff and the powerholder. There is honor and booty for the followers in war; for the demagogue's following, there are 'spoils' (that is, exploitation of the dominated through the monopolization of office), and there are politically determined profits and premiums of vanity. All of these rewards are also derived from the domination exercised by a charismatic leader.

*Second, the material implements of administration.* To maintain a territory by force, certain material goods are required, just as with an economic organization. All states may be classified according to whether they rest on the principle that the staff of men themselves own the administrative means, or whether the staff is separated from these means of administration. This distinction holds in the same sense in which today we say that the salaried employee and the proletarian in the capitalistic enterprise are separated from the material means of production.

These political associations in which the material means of administration are autonomously controlled, wholly or partly, by the dependent administrative staff may be called associations organized in 'estates.' However, everywhere, reaching back to the earliest political formations, we also find the lord himself directing the administration. He seeks to take the administration into his own hands by having men personally dependent upon him: slaves, household officials, attendants, personal favorites. He seeks to create an army which is dependent upon him personally because it is equipped and provisioned out of his granaries and armories. In the association of estates, the lord rules with the aid of an autonomous aristocracy and hence shares his domination with it; the lord who personally administers is supported either by members of his household or by plebeians. These are completely chained to him and are not backed up by any competing power of their own. All forms of patriarchal and patrimonial domination, despotism, and bureaucratic states belong to this latter type. The bureaucratic state order is especially important; in its most rational development, it is precisely characteristic of the modern state.

Everywhere the development of the modern state is initiated through the action of a single monarch, who expropriates the power of those who in their own right possess the means of administration, warfare, and financial organization. The whole process is a complete parallel to the development of the capitalist enterprise through gradual expropriation of the independent producers. In the end, the modern state controls the total means of political organization, which actually come together under a single head.

During this process of political expropriation, which has occurred with varying success in all countries on earth, professional politicians in another sense have emerged. They arose first in the service of a prince. They have been men and women who, unlike the charismatic leader, have not wished to be in control themselves, but who have entered the *service* of political leaders. In the struggle of expropriation, they placed themselves at the leader's disposal and by managing the leader's politics they earned a living.

In politics as in business, politics may be one's avocation or one's vocation. One may engage in politics, and hence seek to influence the distribution of power within and between political structures, as an occasional politician. We are all occasional politicians when we vote, for example.

In contrast, there are two ways of making politics one's vocation: Either one lives *for* politics or one lives *off* politics. By no means is this contrast an exclusive one. She who lives *for* politics makes politics her life, in an internal sense. Either she enjoys the naked possession of the power she exerts, or she nourishes her inner balance and self feeling by the consciousness that her life has *meaning* in the service of a cause. She who strives to make politics a permanent *source of income* lives *off* politics as a vocation, whereas she who does not do this lives *for* politics. In a private property system, in order for a person to live *for* politics but not *off* politics, she must be economically independent of the income that politics would bring to her. She must be wealthy.

The leadership of a state or of a party by people who live exclusively *for* politics and not *off* politics means necessarily a plutocratic recruitment of the leading political strata. To be sure, this does not mean that such plutocratic leadership will not also seek to live *off* politics, and hence that the dominant stratum will not usually exploit their political nomination in their own economic interest. All that is unquestionable, naturally. There has never been such a stratum that has not somehow lived *off* politics. Only this is meant: that the professional politician need not seek remuneration directly for his political work, whereas every politician without means must absolutely claim this. On the other hand, we do not mean to say that the property-less politician will pursue private economic advantages through politics, exclusively, or even predominantly. A nonplutocratic recruitment of interested politicians, of leadership and following, is geared to the precondition that regular and reliable income will accrue to those who manage politics.

Either politics can be conducted honorifically and then, as one usually says, by independent, that is, by wealthy, people, especially those who live off investments only and do no other work or political leadership is made accessible to property-less people who must then be paid.

The development of politics into an organization which demanded training in the struggle for power, and in the methods of this struggle as developed by modern party policies, determined the separation of public officials into two categories, which, however, are by no means rigidly but nevertheless distinctly separated. These categories are "administrative" officials on the one hand, and "political" officials on the other. The "political" officials can be recognized by the fact that they can be transferred any time at will, that they can be dismissed, or at least temporarily withdrawn. The political element consists, above all, in maintaining the existing power relations. The second kind, the genuine administrative official, will not engage in politics. *Sine ira et studio*, 'without scorn and bias,' she shall administer her office. Hence, she shall not do precisely what the politician, the leader as well as his following, must always and necessarily do, namely, *fight*.

To take a stand, to be passionate *-ira et stadium (with scorn and bias)-*is the politician's element, and above all the element of the political *leader*. His conduct is subject to quite a different, indeed, exactly the opposite, principle of responsibility from that of the civil servant. The honor of the civil servant is vested in her ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with her own conviction. This holds even if the order appears wrong to her and if, despite the civil servant's remonstrances, the authority insists on the order. Without this moral discipline and self-denial, in the highest sense, the whole apparatus would fall to pieces. The honor of the political leader, of the leading statesman, however,

lies precisely in an exclusive *personal* responsibility for what he does, a responsibility he cannot and must not reject or transfer. It is in the nature of officials of high moral standing to be poor politicians, and above all, in the political sense of the word, to be irresponsible politicians. In this sense, they are politicians of low moral standing, such as we unfortunately have had again and again in leading positions.

Since the time of the constitutional state, and definitely since democracy has been established, the *demagogue* has been the typical political leader in the West. Like Athenian demagogues of yesterday, from which we get the name, demagogues make use of oratory, to a tremendous extent, if one considers the election speeches a modern candidate has to deliver. Naturally every politician of consequence has needed influence over the press and hence has needed relations with the press.

Now, on to parties...

The most modern forms of party organizations are the children of democracy, of mass franchise, of the necessity to woo and organize the masses, and develop the utmost unity of direction and the strictest discipline. Professional politicians *outside* the parliaments take the organization in hand. They do so either as party entrepreneurs (the American "boss"), or as officials with a fixed salary. Formally, a far-going democratization takes place. The parliamentary party no longer creates the authoritative programs, and the local notables no longer decide the selection of candidates. Rather assemblies of the organized party members select the candidates and delegate members to the assemblies of a higher order. Possibly there are several such conventions leading up to the national convention of the party. Naturally power actually rests in the hands of those who, within the organization, handle the work *continuously*. Otherwise, power rests in the hands of those on whom the organization in its processes depends financially or personally. It is decisive that this whole apparatus of people, characteristically called a 'machine' in AngloSaxon countries or rather those who direct the machine, keep the members of the parliament in check. They are in a position to impose their will to a rather far reaching extent, and that is of special significance for the selection of the party leader. The person whom the machine follows now becomes the leader.

The party members, following above all the party official and party entrepreneur, naturally expect personal compensation from the victory of their leader – that is, offices or other advantages. They expect that the demagogic effect of the leader's *personality* during the election will increase votes and mandates and thereby power, and, thereby, as far as possible, will extend opportunities to their followers to find the compensation for which they hope. Ideally, one of their mainsprings is the satisfaction of working with loyal personal devotion for a leader, and not merely for an abstract program of a party consisting of mediocrities. In this respect, the 'charismatic' element of all leadership is at work in the party system.

Such machinery requires a considerable personnel. In England there are about 2,000 persons who live directly off party politics. To be sure, those who are active in politics purely as job seekers or as interested persons are far more numerous, especially in local politics.

Now then, what has been the effect of this whole system? Nowadays the members of Parliament, with the exception of the few cabinet members (and a few insurgents), are normally nothing better than well-disciplined yes-men mobilized behind a strong leader. How does the selection of these strong leaders take place? At the present time, often purely emotional means are used. One may call the existing state of affairs a "dictatorship resting on the exploitation of mass emotionally."

What does this spoils system, the turning over of federal offices to the following of the victorious candidate, mean for the party formations of today? It means that quite unprincipled parties oppose one another; they are purely organizations of job hunters drafting their changing platforms according to the chances of vote-grabbing, changing their colors to a degree which, despite all analogies, is not yet to be found elsewhere. The parties are simply and absolutely fashioned for the election campaign that is most important for office patronage: the fight for the presidency and for the governorships of the separate states. Platforms and candidates are selected at the national conventions of the parties. In the primaries the delegates are already elected in the name of the candidate for the nation's leadership.

In America, the spoils system, supported in this fashion, has been technically possible because American culture with its youth could afford purely dilettante management. With 300,000 to 400,000 such party men who have no qualifications to their credit other than the fact of having performed good services for their party, this state of affairs could not exist without enormous evils. A corruption and wastefulness second to none could be tolerated only by a country with as yet unlimited economic opportunities.

Now then, the boss is the figure who appears in the picture of this system of the plebiscitarian party machine. Who is the boss? He is a political capitalist entrepreneur who on his own account and at his own risk provides votes. He may have established his first relations as a lawyer or a saloonkeeper or as a proprietor of similar establishments, or perhaps as a creditor. From here he spins his threads out until he is able to control a certain number of votes.

The boss is indispensable to the organization of the party and the organization is centralized in his hands. He substantially provides the financial means. How does he get them? Well, partly by the contributions of the members, and especially by taxing the salaries of those officials who came into office through him and his party. Furthermore, there are bribes and tips. He who wishes to trespass with impunity one of the many laws needs the boss's connivance and must pay for it; or else he will get into trouble. But this alone is not enough to accumulate the necessary capital for political enterprises. The boss is indispensable as the direct recipient of the money of great financial magnates, who would not entrust their money for election purposes to a paid party official, or to anyone else giving public account of his affairs. The boss, with his judicious discretion in financial matters, is the natural man for those capitalist circles who finance the election. The typical boss is an absolutely sober man. He does not seek social honor; He seeks power alone, power as a source of money, but also power for power's sake. In contrast to the English leader, the American boss works in the dark. He is not heard speaking in public; he suggests to the speakers what they must say in expedient fashion. He himself, however, keeps silent.

The boss has no firm political principles; he is completely unprincipled in attitude and asks merely: What will capture votes? Frequently he is a rather poorly educated man. But as a rule, he leads an inoffensive and correct private life. In his political morals, however, he naturally adjusts to the average ethical standards of political conduct. Thus, there exists a strong capitalist party machine, strictly and thoroughly organized from top to bottom, and supported by political clubs of extraordinary stability. These clubs, such as Tammany Hall, are like Knight orders. They seek profits solely through political control, especially of the municipal government, which is the most important object of booty. This structure of party life was made possible by the high degree of democracy in the United States. As the US gets older, however, the basis for this system is gradually dying out. America can no longer be governed only by dilettantes. Scarcely fifteen years ago, when American workers were asked why they allowed themselves to be governed by politicians whom they

admitted they despised, the answer was: “We prefer having people in office whom we can spit upon, rather than a caste of officials who spit upon us, as is the case with you.” This was the old point of view of so-called American democracy.

Today one cannot yet see in any way how the management of politics as a vocation, or profession, will shape itself. Even less can one see along what avenue opportunities are opening to which political talents can be put for satisfactory political tasks.

The career of politics grants a feeling of power. The knowledge of influencing people, of participating in power over them, and above all, the feeling of holding in one’s hands a nerve fiber of historically important events can elevate the professional politician above everyday routine even when he or she is placed in formally modest positions. But now the question for them is: Through what qualities can we hope to do justice to this power (however narrowly circumscribed it may be in the individual case)? How can we hope to do justice to the responsibility that power imposes upon us? With this we enter the field of ethical questions, for that is where the problem belongs: What kind of person must one be who is to be allowed to put their hand on the wheel of history?

One can say that three preeminent qualities are decisive for the politician: passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion.

Surely, politics is made with the head, but it is certainly not made with the head alone. In this the proponents of an ethic of ultimate ends are right. It is immensely moving when a person is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of her conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. She then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere she reaches the point where she says: “Here I stand; I can do no other.” That is something genuinely human and moving. And every one of us who is not spiritually dead must realize the possibility of finding herself at some time in that position. In so far as this is true, an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine person a person who can follow politics as a vocation, a calling, a noble profession.

Now then, ladies and gentlemen, let us debate this matter once more ten years from now. Unfortunately, for a whole series of reasons, I fear that by then the period of reaction will have long since broken over us. It is very probable that little of what many of you, and (I candidly confess) I too, have wished and hoped for will be fulfilled; little, perhaps not exactly nothing, but what to us at least seems little. This will not crush me, but surely it is an inner burden to realize it. Then, I wish I could see what has become of those of you who now feel yourselves to be genuinely politicians of principle and who share in the intoxication signified by this revolution. It would be nice if matters turned out in such a way that Shakespeare’s Sonnet 102 should hold true:

*Our love was new, and then but in the spring,*

*When I was wont to greet it with my lays;*

*As Philomel in summer’s front doth sing,*

*And stops her pipe in growth of riper days.*

But such is not the case. Not summer's bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group may triumph externally now. Where there is nothing, not only the Kaiser but also the proletariat has lost his rights. When this night shall have slowly receded, who of those for whom spring apparently has bloomed so luxuriously will be alive? And what will have become of all of you by then? Will you be bitter? Utilitarian? Will you simply and dully accept world and occupation? In every case, I shall draw the conclusion that they have not measured up to their own doings. They have not measured up to the world as it really is in its everyday routine. Objectively and actually, they have not experienced the vocation for politics in its deepest meaning, which they thought they had. They would have done better in simply cultivating plain brotherliness in personal relations. And for the rest: they should have gone soberly about their daily work.

*Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards.* It takes both passion and perspective. Certainly, all historical experience confirms the truth that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible. But to do that a person must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word. And even those who are neither leaders nor heroes must arm themselves with that steadfastness of heart which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes. This is necessary right now, or else we will not be able to attain even that which is possible today. Only they have been called to politics who are sure that they shall not crumble when the world appears too stupid or too base for what they want to offer. Only they who in the face of all this can say 'In spite of all!' has the true calling for politics.

### *Questions for Contemplation and Discussion*

1. What are the three forms of authority? On what do they differ?
2. In what way is power centralized in the modern state?
3. Should politicians be paid for their service?
4. What is the difference between political and administrative officials? What are their separate duties? Do you see examples of this in the current administration?
5. Weber paints a quite unflattering portrait of party politics and the spoils system. Is his description (still) accurate?
6. Weber provides a great number of details about the "party boss," a common figure at the time of his writing, especially in American politics. *We can understand this section as a portrait of an "ideal-typical" boss, in line with Weber's sociological method.* What institutions allowed for such a type of political entrepreneur to flourish?
7. What does it mean to engage in politics as a calling (vocation, profession)? How is this different from the kind of politics engaged in by the "boss"?
8. What does Weber mean by saying that politics is "a strong and slow boring of hard boards?" What is his advice to us in the final paragraph? Is this timely?



## Concepts

Power

The State

Legitimation

*Charisma*

Bureaucracy

Parties and Party Politics