

Max Weber's Conception of "Rationalization" and the 21st Century *

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Weber's concept of "rationalization" is rightly seen as the core of his mature thought. At the same time, there has been increasing attention to his "ambivalence" towards the rationalization of economic, administrative and political processes, and of the conduct of life altogether. The themes of his nationalism and the irrational tendencies of his complex personality have also become increasingly prominent. While nationalism may not be *per se* irrational, any nationalist is logically compelled (at least in principle) to recognize the legitimacy of other — possibly opposed — nationalisms. Weber attempted to avoid this paradox of nationalism by stressing the particular responsibility of larger states, albeit with the problematic concept of the "Herrenvolk." This article explores Weber's nationalism and current nationalist and populist tendencies, in the light of his conception of sovereignty, democracy and plebiscitary leadership (Führerdemokratie). "Sovereignty," I suggest, has become a shibboleth in the twenty-first century, notably in the US, Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Poland, and in the current debacle in the UK. Although Weber uses the word "sovereignty" very rarely, the concept is at the centre of his sociology of the state and also, I suggest, of his conception of rationalization. There is a parallel with his use of the term "nation."

Keywords: Max Weber, rationalization, nationalism, sovereignty, democracy, populism

An epic struggle between globalization and a resurgent nationalism is changing political identities and conflicts across the world. (Crouch, 2019a: 1)¹

Weber's concept of "rationalization" is rightly seen by many as *the* core of his thought (see, for example, Brubaker, 1984; Käsler, 1979: 215ff.). At the same time, there has been increasing attention to his "ambivalence" (Alexander, 1987) towards the rationalization of economic, administrative and political processes, and to the conduct of life altogether.² Whereas he had earlier been seen (with considerable reason) as a liberal by many North American and West German sociologists, the themes of his nationalism and the irrational tendencies of his complex personality became increasingly prominent.

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1. See also Outhwaite, 2020; Diamond, 2019 and, on "EUropean" cosmopolitanism, Outhwaite, 2006.

2. The paradigmatic instance is the rationalization of law as analyzed by Ihering and, following him, Weber. On this, see Turner and Factor (1994: 92). See also Frisby (1987) for the comparison with Simmel, who focused more on the culture of modernity.

While nationalism may not be *per se* irrational, one cannot escape the paradox that any nationalist is logically compelled (at least in principle) to recognize the legitimacy of other — possibly opposed — nationalisms.³ (As Turner and Factor (1984: 56) note, “Weber adopted Treitschke’s commitment to the glory of the nation as his own and insisted that this commitment is ultimately not rationally defensible.”) He attempted however in part to avoid this paradox of nationalism by stressing particular responsibility of larger states, albeit with the problematic concept of the “Herrenvolk”

Ein an Zahl »größeres«, machtsstaatlich organisiertes Volk findet sich durch die bloße Tatsache, daß es nun einmal ein solches ist, vor gänzlich andere Aufgaben gestellt, als sie Völkern wie den Schweizern, Dänen, Holländern, Norwegern obliegen. Weltenfern liegt dabei natürlich die Ansicht: ein an Zahl und Macht »kleines« Volk sei deshalb weniger »wertvoll« oder vor dem Forum der Geschichte weniger »wichtig«. Es hat nur einfach als solches andere Pflichten und eben deshalb auch andere Kulturmöglichkeiten. < . . . > *Nur Herrenvölker haben den Beruf, in die Speichen der Weltentwicklung einzugreifen.* (Weber, 1988: 60, 259)

Any numerically “large” nation organized as a *Machtstaat* finds that, thanks to these very characteristics, it is confronted by tasks of a quite different order from those devolving on other nations such as the Swiss, the Danes, the Dutch or the Norwegians. There is of course a world of difference between this assertion and the view that a people which is “small” in numbers and in terms of power is thereby less “valuable” or less “important” before the forum of history. It is simply that such nations, by their very nature, have different obligations and therefore other cultural possibilities. < . . . > *Only nations of masters are called upon to thrust their hands into the spokes of the world’s development.* (Weber, 1994: 75, 269)

During or, as in this case, just after a world war, such nationalistic expressions are to be expected. (Durkheim, for example, wrote a polemic *L’Allemagne au-dessus de tout* (1915), in which he focused on Treitschke’s concept of the state.) Weber, who had long criticized Treitschke’s excesses (Weber, 1936: 174; see also Bendix and Roth (1971: 52)), had in 1911 somewhat self-critically referred to his own notorious lecture on the farmers east-of the Elbe:

Ich habe schon in meiner Freiburger Antrittsrede, so unreif sie in vielem gewesen sein mag, die Souveränität nationaler Ideale auf dem Gebiete aller praktischen Politik, auch der sog. Sozialpolitik, in der rücksichtslosesten Weise vertreten . . . (Weber, 1950: 454)

In my Freiburg inaugural address immature though it may have been in many respects, I most outspokenly supported the sovereignty of national ideals in the area of all practical policies, including the so-called social policy . . . (Weber, 1975: 411)

3. Separatist nationalisms are an exception, since they necessarily contest the nationalism of the state from which they aim to secede.

As Stephen Turner (2000: 17) writes, “Weber suggests that ‘the fatherland’ is . . . perhaps the only practical serious choice, because nationalism was the only plausible basis for a mass political party that could transcend the limitations of interest politics . . .” Guenther Roth wrote in similar terms that “Weber’s was a nationalism embraced in good conscience at a time when Germany had not yet committed the crimes that would permanently disqualify her from making any cultural claims to political leadership” (1971: 28). Behind this responsible (*verantwortungsethisch*) nationalism however lay Weber’s rather unreflective commitment to his “fatherland.” In 1912, for example, Weber was invited by Russian students in Heidelberg to join in celebrating the 50th anniversary of their library (Weber, 1950: 509–510). Even on this festive occasion he apparently raised the possibility of a coming war and the fact that in such an event he and they would need to support the military activities of their respective states.

This affirmation of the “nation” was something self-evident for Weber, but for Germany and other major European powers there was the further element of “historical responsibility or, in US terms, “manifest destiny.” This decisionist element of identification with his national state combined with what Troeltsch aptly called Weber’s “science-free value position.” This individualistic and in this sense modernist nationalism was shaped by what he came, in the second half of his active intellectual life, to conceptualize as the advance of rationalization and, in particular, bureaucratization:

Wie ist es angesichts dieser Übermacht der Tendenz zur Bürokratisierung überhaupt noch möglich, irgendwelche Reste einer in irgendeinem Sinn »individualistischen« Bewegungsfreiheit zu retten? Denn schließlich ist es eine gröbliche Selbsttäuschung, zu glauben, ohne diese Errungenschaften aus der Zeit der »Menschenrechte« vermöchten wir heute (auch der konservativste unter uns) überhaupt zu leben. (Weber, 1988: 152)

How is it *at all possible* to salvage any remnants of “individual” freedom of movement *in any sense*, given this all-powerful trend towards bureaucratization? It is, after all, a piece of crude self-deception to think that even the most conservative amongst us could carry on living at all today without these achievements from the age of the “Rights of Man.” (Weber, 1994: 159)

In terms of practical politics,⁴ this drove Weber’s critique of the reactionary class ideology of the Junkers (Schluchter, 1980), despite what they had earlier done for the country (in both senses of the word “country”), and his (qualified) support for democracy as a possible source of responsible and conscientious political leadership.

Die »Demokratisierung« im Sinne der Nivellierung der ständischen Gliederung durch den Beamtenstaat ist eine Tatsache. Man hat nur die Wahl: in einem bürokratischen Obrigkeitsstaat mit Scheinparlamentarismus die Masse der Staatsbürger rechtlos und unfrei zu lassen und wie eine Viehherde zu »verwalten«, — oder sie

4. See Giddens (1987: 187): “...it is difficult to resist the supposition that Weber’s preoccupation with bureaucratic administration was . . . strongly influenced by the circumstances existing in Germany.”

als Mitherren des Staates in diesen einzugliedern. Ein Herrenvolk aber — und nur ein solches kann und darf überhaupt Weltpolitik treiben — hat in dieser Hinsicht keine Wahl. (Weber, 1988: 322)

“Democratization” in the sense that the structure of social estates is being levelled by the *state run by officials*, is a fact. There are only two choices: either the mass of citizens is left without freedom or rights in a bureaucratic “authoritarian state” which has only the appearance of parliamentary rule, and in which the citizens are “administered” like a herd of cattle; or the citizens are integrated into the state by making them its *co-rulers*. A *nation of masters (Herrenvolk)* — and only such a nation can and may engage in “world politics” — has no choice in this matter. (Weber, 1994: 129)⁵

As Sven Eliason (2012: 148) wrote, “Weber understood that great political achievement ordinarily involved risky choices . . . perhaps Weber can be said to have miscalculated the risks of Caesarism. If so, the lesson is that politics as rational calculation may prematurely foreclose genuine and preferable possibilities . . .”⁶

For Weber rationalization meant, among other things, bureaucracy and the threat of what he called rule by officials (*Beamtenherrschaft*). In a much-cited passage he wrote:

Das Entscheidende bliebe doch: daß diese »frei« schaffende Verwaltung (und eventuell: Rechtssprechung) nicht, wie wir das bei den vorbürokratischen Formen finden werden, ein Reich der freien Willkür und Gnade, der persönlich motivierten Gunst und Bewertung bilden würde. Sondern daß stets als Norm des Verhaltens die Herrschaft und rationale Abwägung »sachlicher« Zwecke und die Hingabe an sie besteht. Auf dem Gebiet der staatlichen Verwaltung speziell gilt . . . der . . . spezifisch moderne, streng »sachliche« Gedanke der »Staatsraison«. . . Entscheidend ist für uns is nur: daß prinzipiell hinter jeder Tat echt bürokratischer Verwaltung ein System rational diskutabler »Gründe«, d.h. entweder: Subsumtion unter Normen, oder: Abwägung von Zwecken und Mitteln steht. (Weber, 1976: 564)

Decisive is that this “freely” creative administration (and possibly judicature) would not constitute a realm of *free*, arbitrary action and discretion, of *personally* motivated favor and valuation, such as we shall find to be the case among pre-bureaucratic forms. The rule and the rational pursuit of “objective” purposes, as well as devotion to these, would always constitute the norm of conduct. Precisely those views which most strongly glorify the “creative discretion of the official accept, as the ultimate and highest lodestar for his behavior in public administration, the specifically modern and strictly “objective” idea of *raison d'état*... The only decisive point for us is that in principle a system of rationally debatable “reasons” stands behind every act of bureaucratic administration, namely, either subsumption under norms, or a weighing of ends and means. (Weber, 1968: 979)

Here too rationalization and *raison d'état* go together in Weber’s analysis.⁷

5. See Lukács, 1962: 65; Schroeder, 1998.

6. See Palonen, 1998: 11.

7. In a little-known PhD thesis Maurice Weyembergh (1971) discussed the connection between rational-

The tension between bureaucratic rule and political leadership is a topos of the Weber-industry. Behind it is another tension: that between ethics and politics as a whole, confronting modern citizens with an existential choice. The Canadian theorist Richard Willen writes of Weber:

... contemporary philosophers have had to confront his view that Western culture has tied itself to a course of rationalization distinguished by the tension between ethics and the other spheres, and that out of this has emerged a dualism between the goods of individuality and those of power and organization. < . . . >

Max Weber proposed that a certain kind of victory had been achieved by liberalism in the process of rationalization that has brought about the disenchantment of the world. At the same time he described this as a hollow victory, since liberalism has survived in a world in which its moral claims have become less salient than its (possible) functional advantages . . . a culturally successful liberal democracy could at most provide a context for a struggle between bureaucrats and leaders. (Willen 1996: 57, 160)

Willen (Ibid.: 105) attempts, following Habermas, to develop a deeper legitimation basis for liberal democracy: “. . . it is important to see that communicative action, in Habermas’s sense, must be appreciated for its potential to foster normative demands — irreducible to those of strategic action — upon the rational development of social institutions and procedures.” It may indeed be possible to combine an active communicative public sphere with Weber’s vision, even if Weber himself could hardly imagine it (Shils, 1987). There is a report in the Viennese “*Neue Freie Presse*” of a lecture in which Weber allegedly presented the possibility of a democratic variant of his ideal types of legitimacy.⁸

My focus here is however on another dimension of this issue: Weber’s criticism of political “dilettantism” and his problematic concept of “leadership democracy” (*Führerdemokratie*). To put it briefly, the trend so far this century seems to be towards the combination of nationalism with plebiscitary and often populist appeals to the “will of the people” (Weale, 2018)⁹, as expressed in often manipulated but semidemocratic elections (Isaac, 2017). This cult of the “mandate” is taken to legitimate attempts to sweep aside legal and/or parliamentary obstacles. There are prominent examples in postcommunist Hungary (changes to the constitution, subversion of the media) and Poland (attacks on judges) but also in the more established and until recently apparently stable democracies of the USA (Trump’s obstruction of justice and declarations of states of emergency) and the UK (May’s attempts to exclude parliament from the Article 50 notification, with the

ization and his political views, as expressed for example in his earlier writings such as his Freiburg inaugural lecture and his first article on the stock exchange (1894), in which he saw speculation as a necessary evil: “Une fois de plus, la science est mise au service de la politique, sans pour autant lui être subordonnée . . . La bourse constitue en quelque sorte un mal regrettable auquel il faut se résigner” (p. 115). See also Turner and Factor (1989).

8. Ein Vortrag Max Webers über die Probleme der Staatssoziologie. *Neue Freie Presse*, 1917, no 19102, October 26, p. 10 (http://anno.onb.ac.at/pdfs/ONB_nfp_19171026.pdf).

9. On populism, see in particular Brubaker (2017).

judges who blocked this trick branded in the gutter press as “enemies of the people” and one of them suffering a homophobic verbal attack).

A relevant element in this context is the concept of “sovereignty.”¹⁰ Weber can serve again here as a guide:

Nur ein politisch reifes Volk ist ein »Herrenvolk«: ein Volk heißt das, welches die Kontrolle der Verwaltung seiner Angelegenheiten in eigener Hand hält und durch seine gewählten Vertreter die Auslese seiner politischen Führer entscheidend mitbestimmt. (Weber, 1988: 259)

Only a politically mature people is a “nation of masters” (*Herrenvolk*), which means a people controlling the administration of its affairs itself, and, through its elected representative, sharing decisively in the selection of its political leaders. (Weber, 1994: 269)

It is striking that Weber uses the word “sovereignty” very rarely, although the concept is at the center of his sociology of the state and also, I suggest, of his conception or rationalization. There is a parallel here, as Weichlein (2007: 105) notes, with his conception of the “nation,” which is so self-evident for him that he rarely very rarely invokes it explicitly. One of his rare explicit remarks, made in an informal conference contribution, is the following: “The nation is an experienced community, whose adequate expression would be a state of its own, in other words it normally tends to engender such a state”¹¹ (Weber, 1988: 486; Weichlein, 2007: 104). Perry Anderson (1992: 205), drawing the contrast with Ernest Gellner, wrote that “Weber was so bewitched by the spell of nationalism that he was never able to theorize it . . .”

Sovereignty has become a contemporary shibboleth (Conti, Di Mauro, Memolo, 2018), for example in the Brexit slogan “take back control,”¹² in Trump’s apotheosis of the already well-established US suspicion of multilateral obligations, and in the protests of the Polish, Hungarian, Russian and Chinese regimes against external criticism in relation to the rule of law and human rights.¹³ The importance of the concept was brought home to me as I edited a book on Brexit in the autumn of 2016. The only contributor who saw possible advantages in Brexit was Stefan Auer (who graciously described himself as the “dissident”). In his contribution Auer stressed this aspect and the possibility of Britain escaping from what he and Nicole Scicluna (2017) described as the “sovereignty paradox”: “. . . member states have ceded too much control to the supranational level to be able to set effective policies in important areas independently of each other and of the European

10. The Council of European Studies has chosen as its 2019 conference theme “Sovereignties in Contention: Nations, Regions and Citizens in Europe.”

11. “Die Nation ist eine gefühlsmässige Gemeinschaft, deren adäquater Ausdruck ein eigener Staat wäre, die also normalerweise die Tendenz hat, einen solchen aus sich hervorzutreiben.”

12. As I wrote this sentence (May 23, 2019), the latest Brexiteer minister to resign from Theresa May’s doomed cabinet cited as her first reason for doing so: “I do not believe that we will be a truly sovereign United Kingdom through the deal that is now proposed.”

13. On Russia, see, for example, Blakkisrud and Gasimov (2018).

institutions. Yet they retain enough initiative to resist compromise and thwart common solutions” (Auer 2017: 50).

Scicluna (2017: 113–114) illustrates this with the euro crisis:

... national governments cannot succeed alone, yet they struggle to effectively cooperate...the failure to bring EMU fully within the constitutional paradigm in which laws are made following the community method . . . undermined the ECB’s single monetary policy over a number of years, leading to the crisis. The crisis, in turn, has undermined the EU’s constitutional balance, insofar as solutions have been sought outside the framework of EU treaty law (e.g. the Fiscal Compact which was adopted as an international treaty, and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), which was established as an intergovernmental institution . . .

Other contributors took a more skeptical view. The sociologist of law Chris Thornhill (2017: 79), argued that “the classical doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty has lost much of its plausibility.” He and also Antje Wiener (2017: 145) stress that the Brexit controversy had opened up the contradiction in the unwritten British constitution between parliamentary and plebiscitary democracy. For Craig Calhoun (2017: 60) “[t]he Brexit campaign . . . played on an old idea of sovereignty, old English ideas about the difference between the island nation and the mainland of Europe, alarm over immigrants, and claims that the UK was somehow subsidising Europe.”

The contemporary controversy over the relevance of sovereignty has a longer history. One of the first contributions to the British discussion is by Noel Malcolm (1991), currently one of the few academic supporters of Brexit.¹⁴ It is interesting that a defender of state sovereignty, the jurist Dieter Grimm (2009) emphasizes the numerous limits put on it by the UN and WTO as well as the EU. For EU member states he sees Neil MacCormick’s “post-sovereignty” as a possible future, but also the disappearance of sovereignty altogether (Grimm, 2015: 117). For the moment, however, “sovereignty protects democracy” (Ibid.: 128). Martti Koskeniemi (2010: 242) also ends his rather skeptical discussion on a positive note: “. . . sovereignty points to the possibility . . . that one is not just a pawn in someone else’s game.”

Arjun Appadurai (2017: 2–3) has deconstructed the myth of sovereignty:

Economic sovereignty, as a basis for national sovereignty, was always a dubious principle. Today, it is increasingly irrelevant.

In the absence of any national economy that modern states can protect and develop, it is no surprise that there has been a worldwide tendency in effective states and in many aspiring social movements to perform national sovereignty by turning towards cultural majoritarianism, ethno-nationalism and the stifling of internal intellectual and cultural dissent. In other words, the loss of economic sovereignty everywhere produces a shift towards emphasizing cultural sovereignty.

14. Malcolm, 2019; see also MacCormick, 1999; Held, 2002; Walker, 2003; Kalmo, Skinner, 2010.

Against this, Appadurai suggests, we need a “liberal multitude’ as an answer to this “regressive multitude.”¹⁵ On the other hand, DiEM25 (Democracy in Europe Movement 2025) takes sovereignty seriously, as noted by Paul Blokker (2019: 345, 347): “Transnational populism lifts the struggle over popular sovereignty to the transnational level, where the action is . . . DiEM25 does not deny the national altogether, but rather calls for a democratic strengthening of sovereignty on both the national and transnational levels.” Monnet’s warning in 1943 however remains relevant:

Il n’y aura pas de paix en Europe si les États se reconstituent sur une base de souveraineté nationale avec ce que cela entraîne de politique de prestige et de protection économique . . . Les pays d’Europe sont trop étroits pour assurer à leurs peuples la prospérité que les conditions modernes rendent possible et par conséquent nécessaire.¹⁶

There will be no peace in Europe if the States are reconstituted on the basis of national sovereignty, with all that that entails in terms of prestige politics and economic protectionism . . . The countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their peoples the prosperity that modern conditions make possible and consequently necessary.

Richard Kuper (1996: 153–154) concludes: “The very desperation with which many nation states are clinging on to their “sovereignty” is, I believe, an indication of the extent to which it has already been eroded — from above and below as well as by the emergence of non-state forms of authority . . .”¹⁷ Colin Crouch (2019b: 3) agrees: “Sovereign nationalism can play with flags and anthems, and spend the time hating immigrants, refugees and international organizations, leaving the global economy free.” Richard Bellamy (2017: 228) aptly characterizes the way the Brexit government responded to Dani Rodrik’s trilemma (the difficulty of combining globalization, national sovereignty and democracy): “They have delivered a formal facade of national sovereignty, symbolized by certain immigration controls...combined with a total openness to global economic processes over which they will have little or no democratic control.”

Whether this delivery does in fact take place still remains uncertain. The reason for citing Brexit as an example is, I think, that it offers a particularly crass example of the contradiction between rationalization and an ethic of responsibility on the one hand and an ethic of conviction on the other. As in the (much more serious) case of climate change, manifest dangers are played down or simply denied. A century after his death, Weber’s core concepts and preoccupations, though not his answers, remain highly relevant.

15. See also Blühdorn and Butzlaff (2019).

16. Note de réflexion de Jean Monnet (Alger, 5 août 1943). Available at: https://www.cvce.eu/obj/note_de_reflexion_de_jean_monnet_alger_5_aout_1943-fr-b61a8924-57bf-4890-9e4b-73bf4d882549.html (accessed 20 June 2019). See Isikzel, 2017: 140–141.

17. See also Negri, 2010; Isikzel, 2017: 140–141; Patberg, 2019.

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Концепция «Рационализации» Макса Вебера и XXI век

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Веберовская концепция «рационализации» по праву считается основой его зрелой мысли. В то же время все большее внимание уделяется его «двойственному» отношению к рационализации экономических, административных и политических процессов, как и жизненного поведения в целом. Проблематика национализма и иррациональных тенденций сложной фигуры Вебера также выступает все более заметно. Хотя национализм сам по себе не может быть иррациональным, любой националист логически вынужден (по крайней мере, в качестве принципа) признать законность других — возможно, противостоящих ему — национализмов. Вебер пытался избежать этого парадокса в рассмотрении национализма, подчеркивая особую ответственность крупных государств, тем не менее включая проблематичное понятие *Herrenvolk*. В данной статье рассматриваются национализм по Веберу и современные националистические и популистские движения в свете его концепции суверенитета, демократии и плебисцитарного лидерства (*Führerdemokratie*). Автор полагает, что в XXI веке «суверенитет» превратился в предрассудок — в особенности в таких странах, как США, Россия, Турция, Венгрия и Польша, а также Великобритания в условиях текущего краха. Хотя Вебер редко использует понятие суверенитета, оно является центральным в его социологии государства, а также, как полагает автор, в его концепции рационализации. В статье также проводится параллель с тем, как Вебер использует понятие «нация».

Ключевые слова: Макс Вебер, рационализация, национализм, суверенность демократия, популизм