

# Max Weber on Russia: Between Modern Freedom and Ethical Radicalism

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The Weberian writings on the Russian Revolutions have been mostly overlooked by scholars, and treated as secondary within the large corpus of Max Weber's sociological and political texts. Nonetheless, they deal with a central question in Weber's work: the destiny of freedom in late modernity. While questioning the chances of success of the liberal struggle in Russia, Weber turns back to the moment in which modern freedom emerged in history, singling out the specific conditions that made it possible. Among these, a very central (although also very neglected) role is played by what Weber calls "a particular religious viewpoint." Instead of being a result of economic development (Weber refuses the thesis according to which capitalism is necessarily emancipatory and bounded to democracy), or of an idea of tolerance grounded on indifference (as a certain interpretation of liberalism would suggest), modern freedom has its central birthplace in religious radicalism, in particular in the puritan one. Weber seems to suggest that modern (that is, negative) freedom is born in a position of ethical intransigence, when religious *virtuosi* refuse to obey to political (i.e. worldly) authority in order to follow their own conscience, that is God's voice. In order to better comprehend this peculiar link, the article investigates the Weberian conception of modern freedom as it emerges from his writings on Russia, seeking to deepen the relationship between modern freedom and ethical radicalism.

*Keywords:* Max Weber, Russian Revolution, liberalism, religion, ethical radicalism, modern freedom

## The Burning Question

Written at the end of 1905, in the summer of 1906, and in 1917, the three main writings Max Weber dedicated to Russia offer a sharp report of the revolutionary events that shook the Russian empire.<sup>1</sup> As his wife Marianne Weber related, he followed the developments "in breathless excitement" (Marianne Weber, 1989: 342): he suspended his work on Rudolf Stammler (Mommson, 1989a: 5) and in a few weeks learned enough Russian to enable him to read Russian papers by himself. The result of this involvement is two long, dense essays, full of details and references, in which he tried to assess the chances of a

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DOI: 10.17323/1728-192X-2019-2-89-106

1. Weber dedicated to Russia two more minor writings, "On Germany and Free Russia," published in *Russkija Vedomosti* in March 1909, and "The Russian Revolution and the Peace," which appeared in the *Berliner Tageblatt* in May 1917, as well as a speech for the 50th anniversary of Heidelberg's Russische Lesehalle in December 1912.

liberal change in Russian society: “Bourgeois Democracy in Russia,” written at the end of 1905, in the middle of the revolutionary crisis, and “Russia’s Transition to Pseudo-Constitutionalism,” finished in the summer of 1906, after the dissolution of the first Duma by the Tsar. They were followed some ten years later by another, shorter text on the revolutionary events of February 1917, “Russia’s Transition to Pseudo-democracy.”

Despite their historical relevance, Weber’s writings on the Russian revolutions seemed to be condemned to oblivion. They received scarce attention in Germany at the time of their publication (in Weber’s words, they found “no consideration”),<sup>2</sup> and they have continued to be overlooked by scholars since, and treated as secondary within the large corpus of Weber’s sociological and political texts. As Wolfgang Mommsen noted in his *Preface* to the tenth volume of *Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe* (MWG), they remain “in the shade” [*Schattendasein*] (Mommsen, 1989b: VII).<sup>3</sup> More recently Dittmar Dahlmann, co-editor with Mommsen of the tenth volume of MWG, lamented the lack of a thorough analysis of Weber and Russia (Dahlmann, 2014: 82).

The marginality of Weber’s writings on the Russian revolutionary events within the huge secondary bibliography on Weber’s work is partly due to fact that they are largely considered occasional writings, being related to very particular circumstances and therefore lacking scientific value. Actually, Weber himself tended to underestimate his own writings, calling them mere “chronicles” (Mommsen 1989b: VII).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, starting from Beetham book *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics* (1974), the publication of the texts in two of the volumes of MWG in 1989 and their partial English translation in 1995, these writings have begun to emerge — at least partially — from oblivion. Both Beetham and the co-editors of the German and English editions have sought to highlight the theoretical and political meaning of these texts beyond their everyday political character: “His examination of Russian conditions is far more than a simple narrative

2. Letter to Friedrich Naumann, 17 May 1907 (Weber, 1990: 304).

3. Ignored for a long time by the Weberian *Forschung*, they gained a little attention mostly thanks to the Richard Pipes’s 1955 article and to the second edition of the *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* edited by Johannes Winkelmann in 1958. However, the attention was mostly negative. They have been criticized as affected by “obviously wrong judgements” (Mommsen, 2004: 276), since Weber would have looked at the Russian events through the lenses of his interest in German politics (Pipes, 1955: 373). Furthermore, Weber has been accused of being unable to comprehend what was really at stake during the Russian revolutions or even to foresee the relevance of the Bolshevik turn (Aron, 1965: 120). Even the sociology of revolution has widely ignored Weber’s writings on Russia, as it is the general view that his political sociology lacks a theory of revolution. See, for example, Peter Blau (1963: 309) or Theda Skocpol’s work on revolution, in which, although she cites Weber for his perspective on political change (1979: 304), she ignores his writings on the Russian revolution (see Wells, Baehr, 1995: 22). For a different opinion, see Chazel (1995), Collins (2001). For a thorough overview of the current state of research, see Dahlmann (2014).

4. As he writes to Sombart, “they are not ‘scientific works’” (Weber, 1990: 143). Weber conceived the first of these writings, “Bourgeois Democracy in Russia,” as a “few remarks” to the review, written by Zivago for the “Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik,” of the constitutional draft for the Russian Empire that was developed by the liberal Union of Liberation (Sojuz Osvobodežnija) and published some months earlier in Russian and French. The “few remarks” became something more, as Weber himself states that he wants to investigate the “bearers of the liberal and democratic movement” (Weber, 1995a: 41).

account; Weber seeks to uncover what is ‘significant’ about the ‘general situation’” (Wells, Baehr, 1995: 3).

Weber’s intent was to examine the chances of the success of the liberal movement in Russia and the possibility of the instauration of liberal democracy; yet, as a very acute commentator of his work notes, Weber saw “much more than the Russian present in these texts” (Scaff, 1996: 532). The Russian events have a “universal-historical significance” (Mommsen, 1997: 2) for Weber, representing one of “the ‘last’ opportunities for the construction of ‘free’ cultures ‘from scratch’” (Weber, 1995a: 111). Russia, together with the USA, appears to offer favorable conditions for the establishment of a liberal order, in contrast to Western and Central Europe, whose countries have already reached an advanced level of bureaucratization, economic development and social *Sättigung*.<sup>5</sup> Russia might in fact possess “the preconditions for a dynamic and potentially vast development, both economically and socially” (Mommsen, 1997: 2).

Among the detailed information on and references to the Russian situation, it is possible to find in Weber’s texts the traces of an essential question, through which Weber looked at Russia and which shaped his own view: as Mommsen put it, “whether and to what extent it is still possible in late capitalism to affirm the principles of individual freedom and democratic government” (Mommsen, 1989a: 4). As Beetham has shown, the destiny of freedom<sup>6</sup> in late modernity “in the face of the increasing rationalization of life, and the bureaucratization of economic and political structures” (Beetham, 1974: 44) was a constant preoccupation for Weber, as it occurs “in most of his writings and speeches in the years 1904–1910” (Ibid.). As is well known, Weber saw in this increasing rationalization and bureaucratization the fundamental process of modernity which leads to a progressive reduction of individual freedom — well depicted in the image of the “iron cage” in the famous passage at the end of *The Protestant Ethic*. This is why, despite allegedly being mere “chronicles,” Weber’s writings on the Russian revolutions are filled with a mixture of pessimism and emotional involvement (Weber, 1995b: 232; Wells, Baehr, 1995: 2). They are “imbued with passionate participation” (Mommsen, 1989a: 14), since they deal with the question of the possibility of freedom “under the condition of developed capitalism and modern bureaucracy” (Dahlmann, 2014: 83).

Starting with the “burning question” (Mommsen, 1989a: 4), which scholars have already brought to light, this paper aims to push forward the ongoing examination of Weber’s concern for freedom in his texts on Russia. In particular, I show how Weber addresses the question of freedom and the chances of liberal struggle in Russia from two

5. For a detailed analysis of this concept in Max Weber’s work, see Alagna (2011).

6. Weber never gave a concise exposition of his conception of freedom [*Freiheit*]: the concept has no univocal definition in his work, entailing as it does multiple semantic dimensions (Beetham, 1974: 47–48). For the aims of this essay, I will concentrate on Weber’s conception of modern freedom, whose key feature is that it entails a negative dimension (accordingly to Isaiah Berlin’s dichotomy: see Berlin 1969), that is, a limit to politics. It is “freedom from compulsion, especially from the power of the state. In this sense the concept was as unknown into Antiquity and the Middle Ages” (Weber, 1978: 1209). This understanding of freedom brings Weber near the liberal tradition (Beetham, 1989). For a systematic exposition of Weber’s concept of freedom, see Palonen (1999).

different — but not mutually exclusive — perspectives. First, I briefly touch on the manner in which Weber, from a realistic point of view, analyzes the social and material factors that could foster or impede the development of liberalism in Russian society. Then, I focus on the way he looks at the ideal factors underlying the liberal movement. In order to further our understanding of this level of Weber's argument, I focus on the first of his texts, "Bourgeois Democracy in Russia," where his reflections on idealism emerge more explicitly. In particular, I show how, through genealogical reasoning, Weber turns from Russian contemporaneity to Puritan early modernity, tracing the conditions of modern freedom back to the moment of its genesis. Also referring to other writings of Weber's where the question of liberalism and modern freedom is dealt with, in particular his *Sociology of Religion*, a *Nachlass of Economy and Society* called "Political and Hierocratic Domination" and his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, I deal with Weber's argument on the peculiar link between Puritanism and liberalism. Finally, turning back to his writings on Russia, I argue that Weber binds the question of freedom to the possibility of ethical radicalism in late modernity.<sup>7</sup>

### "The Tide of Material Constellations"

At the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber affirmed that a correct sociological analysis of historical and political change must refuse a mono-causal interpretation of reality, and must interlace material and ideal conditions: "It is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and of history. Each is equally possible, but each, if it does not serve as the preparation, but as the conclusion of an investigation, accomplishes equally little in the interest of historical truth" (Weber, 2001a: 125). From this perspective, Weber's writings on Russia have been considered the "empirical counterpoint" (Wells, Baehr, 1995: 16) to this methodological statement, since they show "the materialist side" of Weber's understanding of historical development, to which the "spiritualist" one of *The Protestant Ethic* can be juxtaposed (Scaff, 1996: 527). They help, therefore, to "erode further what remains of Weber's reputation as a writer biased towards 'idealist' explanations of social life" (Wells, Baehr, 1995: 22). In contrast to *The Protestant Ethic*, in the texts on Russia an analysis of material factors and in particular of class interests is prevalent. At the first level Weber judges the chances of a liberal movement from the point of view of the material interests of different classes and social actors in Russian society, looking for the factors that could promote the cause of freedom.

The main supporters of a liberal change of the autocratic state in Russia were the urban intelligentsia and the liberal landowners, who, in the years preceding the revolution,

7. I will not delve extensively into the distinction between *Verantwortungsethik* and *Gesinnungsethik* because they are later expressions in Weber's work (appearing for the first time the latter in the first edition of *Zwischenbetrachtung* in 1915, the former only in the last version of *Politics as Vocation*). At any rate, the expression "ethical radicalism" belongs to the field of the ethics of conviction, in that it refuses to make compromises with the world in the name of the rightness of its ideals: it implies an ethical intransigence in the face of the world. As we will see, in an important letter on this topic Weber uses a similar expression, "radical idealism."

had their core in the *zemstvos*, the organs of local government, “the most vital institution in Russian public life” (Weber, 1995a: 47). The *zemstvo* represented for Weber evidence of the falsity of the theories affirming that Russia was too immature for self-government.<sup>8</sup> But at the time of the revolution in 1905, the *zemstvos* were already very weak, since, starting from the last decade of the 19th century, their sphere of influence had been eroded by bureaucracy, and had become mere “passive associations” (Ibid.: 48).

Lacking an institutional basis — since the *zemstvo* were by that time too weak — the liberal movement also lacked a material basis. According to Weber, the bourgeoisie supporting the liberal movement was bourgeois in terms of their ideas and life-style, but not in terms of their economic interests: “From the economic point of view, the *zemstvo* liberals were in general ‘non-interested’ parties, representing a political and social idealism” (Ibid.: 45).

The liberal movement had even less support in the other social classes. The rising industrial bourgeoisie was explicitly reactionary, as it was only interested in maintaining order, and was able to achieve its own aims only by influencing the state bureaucracy. As for the urban proletariat, they could have supported the liberal movement provisionally but, apart from the fact that it was still very small, they were strongly influenced by social democracy, which was clearly contrary to the ideals of liberalism and individualism (Ibid.: 110).

Weber turns lastly to the peasants, regarding them as “most crucial to the [Russian] future political democracy” (Beetham, 1974: 186). Their importance is evident from the fact that agrarian reform was included in all the liberal reform programs. In particular, the liberals were convinced that, once their economic demands were satisfied, the peasants would give their support to the political part of the reform, that is, to a liberal transformation of society. Weber spends many pages contesting this assumption, showing how the peasants were far removed from both individualistic principles and an individualistic agrarian program. On the contrary, the demand for agrarian reform was not shaped in an individualistic form, but by the principle of “the equal right of all to a livelihood from the land” (Ibid.: 187), which finds its roots in agrarian communism and in the institution of *obščina*, the peasant village communities.

As Weber notes in his second essay, in which he analyses the tsarist regime and the tsar’s response to the revolution, the liberal movement had not succeeded in obtaining substantial change: the Tsar had allowed only “the outward appearance of ‘constitutional’ guarantees” (Weber, 1995b: 153), giving nothing at the level of real power. The result was a “profoundly false” (Ibid.: 184) pseudo-constitutionalism: “The Tsar himself never sincerely intended the transformation of Russia into a constitutional state [Rechtsstaat], with what the October Manifesto rather naively termed ‘real’ guarantees of personal rights; for the Tsar there were only police interests” (Ibid.: 152–153).

The victory was, in the end, one for bureaucracy, since the only significant change was the reorganization of the Council of Ministry, which sanctioned the end of classic autoc-

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8. A popular thesis in Germany: according to Mommsen, the aim of Weber’s writings was exactly to contrast this opinion in Germany and to stimulate a greater opinion support (see Mommsen, 1989a: 45).

racy and the definitive stabilization of centralized control typical of modern bureaucracy: “Anyone can see at once what has here been created: the definitive bureaucratic rationalization of autocracy over the whole area of domestic policy, which today really calls for the expert, and that means, given the deficiencies of local government: exclusively the bureaucrat” (Ibid.: 177–178). Weber ascribes the weakness of the liberal movement in Russia above all to a lack of material interests on the part of the social classes involved. The liberal movement fails because no social class has a real, economically grounded, interest in it: “The forces of liberalism failed, Weber shows, because they lacked potent bearers (institution, social strata) to carry forward, and resources to sustain, the liberal idea” (Wells, Baehr, 1995: 23).<sup>9</sup>

Analyzing the various social actors and their material interests and their relationship to the cause of liberal struggle, Weber has to admit that we cannot expect that liberalism will be defended by economic interests: “If it were *only* a question of the ‘material’ conditions and the complex of interests directly or indirectly ‘created’ by them, any sober observer would have to say that all *economic* indicators point in the direction of growing ‘unfreedom’” (Weber, 1995a: 109).

In this sense, Weber refutes the idea of an essential link between liberalism and capitalism: Weber argues that “the introduction of advanced capitalism could not be expected to bring liberal democracy to Russia” (Wells, Baehr, 1995: 27). Whereas at the time of early capitalism the economic and social structures showed an affinity with liberal values (although this affinity does not imply a causal relationship), at the present time advanced capitalism had “little in common either with individualism or democracy” (Mommson, 1997: 3). Indeed, late modernity shows how advanced capitalism jeopardizes freedom. As he writes in “Bourgeois Democracy in Russia,” “It is absolutely ridiculous to attribute to the high capitalism which is today being imported into Russia and already exists in America — this “inevitable” economic development — any elective affinity with “democracy” let alone with “liberty” (in *any* sense of the word). The question should be: how can these things exist at all for any length of time under the domination of capitalism?” (Weber, 1995a: 109)

## The Genesis of Modern Freedom

Weber’s pessimism about the liberal struggle is grounded on his political realism (Davydov, 1995: 82–85); on the finding that “all economic indicators” were pointing in the opposite direction. Yet, in particular in “Bourgeois Democracy in Russia,” Weber carries his reflection on freedom in late modernity to another level of abstraction, pertaining to the idealistic side of this process; that is, with the ethical resources that underpin the struggle for freedom and which are necessary for contrasting the stiffening and rationalization of life.

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9. Weber maintains the same disillusion also in face of the revolution of 1917, of which he declares: “So far, there has been no ‘revolution’ but merely ‘the removal’ of an incompetent monarch” (Weber, 1995c: 252).



The last paragraphs of “Bourgeois Democracy” are drenched with a striking enthusiasm for the liberal struggle, and in particular for the “uncompromising idealism, the relentless energy, the ups and downs of tempestuous hope and agonizing disappointment experienced by those in the thick of the fight” (Weber, 1995b: 231). This idealism, stresses Weber, is “of the [same] kind” as the “political ‘individualism’ of West European ‘human rights’” (Weber, 1995a: 65–66): in describing and applauding the radical idealism that fuels the Russian liberal struggle, Weber has in mind the “ideal factors” that have been at the origin of modern freedom in Western society. In this sense, Weber turns back to the moment in which modern freedom emerged in history, singling out the specific conditions that made it possible: “Modern ‘liberty’ arose from a unique, never to be repeated set of circumstances” (Ibid.: 109).

Weber maintains that four factors created the circumstances that led to the birth of modern freedom. Three of them are, according to Weber, material: the unexpected discovery of immense spaces in the New World, the economic structure of early capitalism, and the rationalization of life through science. The fourth is an ideal condition, which emerged from a “religious thought world” [*religiösen Gedankenwelt*] (Ibid.: 271): “Finally, there are certain ideal values, which, emerging from the concrete historical peculiarity of a certain religious thought world, have, together with numerous particular political constellations and in collaboration with those (aforementioned) material conditions, gone to make up the particular ‘ethical’ character and the cultural values of modern man” (Ibid.: 109). Here Weber is not so explicit, saying nothing about what type of religious thought world or what types of ideal values he means. Yet, shortly before in the essay, referring to the conditions of the “political ‘individualism’ of West European ‘human rights,’” he had already spoken of “religious convictions which rejected unconditionally all subjection to human authorities as atheistic worship of the creature” (Ibid.: 65–66).

To better understand what Weber means when he speaks of this “religious convictions,” it is useful to consider that when he began to take interest in the Russian events he had just finished writing *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Scaff is thus right when he notes that the categories Weber used in his essays on Russia were precisely those categories he had elaborated shortly before in *The Protestant Ethic* (Scaff, 1996: 527). The proximity between this book and the essays on Russia, thus, concerns not only, as mentioned, their methodological approaches, but also their theoretical content. As Beyer-Thoma has stressed, “Weber employs his individualistic model, rooted in the spirit of political and economic liberalism, to Russia as well” (Beyer-Thoma, 2003: 285). However, while Beyer-Thoma focuses his attention on the main thesis of *The Protestant Ethic*, which concerns the link between a religious ethic — the Protestant one — and a specific economical behavior — the capitalistic one,<sup>10</sup> the more useful reference here is to another line of reasoning, whose traces can be found in the footnotes of the second part of the

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10. Beyer-Thoma looks for protestant asceticism in Russia and reflects on a possible link between the Old Believers and modern enterprise. Although he affirms that Weber had not considered the Old Believers in his writings on Russia (Beyer-Thoma, 2003: 286), Weber dedicated a note to them, saying that “there are profound differences in their understanding of ‘worldly asceticism’” (Weber, 1995a: 130).

book, where Weber tackles the link between a religious ethic — always Protestant, and Puritan in particular — and another sphere of life, the political. The question to which Weber refers has to do with the effects of the Puritan ethic on politics.

It is exactly here that one can find the “religious thought world” of which Weber spoke in the first essay on Russia: Protestant asceticism, and specifically his Puritan and Baptist version, built a specific relationship with politics in which political, that is, worldly, authority is refused. Puritanism is for Weber essentially anti-authoritarian and as such constitutes the ideal birthplace of modern freedom. As he writes in a footnote of the first edition of *The Protestant Ethic*: “The *religious* foundation of the principle of the rejection of all *human* authorities as ‘idolatry’ and a devaluation of the *absolute* subjection of the will which is due to *God alone* and his law . . . — this *positive* religious motivation for ‘hostility to authority’ was the historically decisive ‘psychological’ basis for ‘liberty’ in the puritan countries” (Weber, 2002a: 157).

For the thesis of the particular link between Puritanism and political liberalism Weber was influenced by the work of Georg Jellinek (1927), who had shown the effect of Puritanism on the idea of human rights<sup>11</sup>. As Riesebrodt argues, “Weber was particularly taken by Jellinek’s claims that the declaration of human rights had a religious and not a political origin, and that the principles of the French revolution were actually the principles of the American Revolution” (2004: 38–39).<sup>12</sup> The idea was already present among Whig historians, who traced political liberalism back to Puritanism and whose works were well known to Weber. As Roth observed, “one of Weber’s sources was the great historian Samuel Rawson Gardiner, who propagated the notion . . . of a ‘Puritan Revolution’” (Roth, 1993a: 85). According to Roth, Weber was greatly interested in this thesis partly due to the “antagonism to France in Imperial Germany and the increasing hostility to the legacies of the Enlightenment in German culture” (Roth, 1993b: 22), as well as to the (related) “Anglophilia” among German liberals (Roth, 1993a).

In any case, for Weber, the relationship between Puritanism and liberalism is not linear at all, being more a *Wahlverwandtschaft* than a simple causal relation as asserted by Whig historians.<sup>13</sup> Weber’s observations on the anti-authoritarian effects of Puritanism is part of a wider reflection on the relationship between religion and politics, and, even more widely, between religion and various spheres of life (Schluchter, 1979). This is the main topic of the “Zwischenbetrachtung,” the short but fundamental essay in the middle of his *Sociology of Religions*.

11. According to Roth, “if Weber was provoked by Kiirnberger to misread some of Franklin’s writings, he wrote *The Protestant Ethic* also under the sway of Georg Jellinek’s *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens*” (Roth, 1993b: 20)

12. For this interpretation, Riesebrodt refers here also to Roth (1993b: 21–22).

13. As Walzer notes, for the Whig historians “the purely individualistic relationship of the saint to his God, the emphasis upon voluntary association and mutual consent . . . the extraordinary reliance upon the printed word, with each man his own interpreter — all this, we have been told, trained and prepared the liberal mind,” while “Max Weber credited Puritanism with a rather different character” (1963: 61).



For Puritanism, and in particular the Puritan and Baptist sects,<sup>14</sup> its relationship to politics depends on a mixture of different elements. The first element is the repudiation of all idolatry of the flesh, since the only one to whom our love must be directed is God (Weber, 2001a: 94, 182). This repudiation brings the Puritan believer to reject every homage to human authorities. An opposition between outer-worldly and inner-worldly (that is, political) authority is then introduced, according to the principle that “one should obey God rather than man” (Weber, 1953: 337).

A second element is the principle that God speaks to the individual conscience, without any worldly mediation. The certainty of salvation [*certitudo salutis*] “occurred through individual revelation, by the working of the Divine Spirit in the individual, and only in that way” (Weber, 2001a: 93). Obeying God means, therefore, obeying one’s own conscience. Consequently, the principle to obey God instead of human authority entails the unconditional refusal of all state orders that contradict personal conscience, which is — if well interpreted — God’s voice. Since every state interference in issues where only individual conscience should decide is considered illegitimate, “freedom of conscience [is demanded] as an absolute right of the individual against the state” (Weber, 2002b: 211).

A third element is ethical intransigence, since there is no adiaphora (Weber, 2001a: 248), that is, no ethically neutral sphere or action; every single act of every single day must be ethically irreproachable, since “every single sin would destroy every . . . merit” (Ibid.: 195). Therefore, the spheres on which worldly authority can legislate without being potentially in contrast with religious duties are drastically reduced<sup>15</sup>: demanding “the non-intervention of the political power” (Weber, 1978: 1208), Puritanism defines areas of social and personal life in which politics must not intervene.

The fourth element is an attitude of indifference towards others. The theory of predestination brings solitude and the individualism of the believer to their extreme, as the destiny of other people has been decided forever, and there is nothing one can do to change one’s destiny. There is, therefore, no reason for coercing others to change their way of living in order to save their eternal life: “The consistent Quaker applies the principle of the freedom of conscience not only to himself but also to others, and rejects any attempt to compel those who are not Quakers or Baptists to act as if they belonged to his group” (Ibid.: 1209). Furthermore, the idea present in Calvinism that the glory of God requires the subjugation of the damned was “gradually superseded by the other idea . . . that it was an insult to His glory to partake of the Communion with one rejected by God” (Weber, 2002a: 206).<sup>16</sup> This makes coercion not only useless, but also dangerous for those who

14. For the peculiarity of the sect in contrast to the Church and its affinity to anti-authoritarianism see D’Andrea (2017). For its importance for the development of American civil society see Kim (2004).

15. The main field in which this contrast emerges is of course the war, the first political activity the believer refuses in the name of his own conscience (Weber, 1953: 337). It is however not the only one: see Weber (2001a: 111–112).

16. For the difference between Calvinism and Puritan sects see Benedict (2003: 246). The indifference towards others and the fear of contamination are the two elements at the origin of the sect, in contrast to the Church: while the latter is universalistic and intolerant, the sects are characterized by voluntarism and particularism (or exclusivity): see Alexander (1989: 112), Kim (2000: 207).

exert it. The Puritan believer, therefore, refuses political power not only to the extent that he or she is an object of it, refusing to submit himself to political power, but also to the extent that he or she is a subject of it, namely, he also refuses to exert political coercion on others (D'Andrea, 2017).

Here are the religious roots of modern freedom, whose peculiarity it is to entail a negative dimension, a freedom from power. This arises primarily as religious freedom, as freedom of conscience: "it is the most basic Right of Man because it comprises all ethically conditioned action and guarantees freedom from compulsion, especially from the power of the state. . . . The other Rights of Man or civil rights were joined to this basic right" (Weber, 1978: 1209).

Modern freedom is therefore born from a specific religious intransigence, an ethically grounded unavailability to political power; when religious *virtuosi* refuse to obey political (i.e. worldly) authority in order to follow their own conscience, that is God's voice. It entails a mixture of the devaluation of political authority, individualism, ethical intransigence and indifference towards others. These are the "religious convictions" to which Weber refers in "Bourgeois Democracy in Russia" to explain the genesis of modern freedom. As he writes in a letter to Adolf Harnack: "Concerning American freedom I have a *completely* different opinion. [...] We shouldn't forget that we owe to the sects things that today *we all* perceive as essential: freedom of conscience and most basic human rights. . . . *Only radical* idealism could produce that."<sup>17</sup>

Weber gives a very specific interpretation of the genesis of liberalism and modern freedom, one in which ethical intransigence plays a key role. This, however, has been partly overlooked by scholars. In descriptions of the Puritan personality as "based on a complex form of rational conduct, a form which combined purposive rational action with adherence to values" (Alexander, 1989: 107) (and was therefore at the origin of modern freedom and liberal democracy), the intransigent, fanatical, character of this adherence as a necessary element for affirming freedom is partly overshadowed in favor of a greater attention to other elements, such as the horizontality and voluntarism of social relationships.<sup>18</sup> Those scholars, such as Michael Walzer (1963), who insist instead on Puritan fanaticism, refuse to see in Puritanism the cradle of liberalism, opposing liberal tolerance and Puritan fanaticism.<sup>19</sup>

But it is precisely on this singular link between religious fanaticism and tolerance that Weber grounds the *Wahlverwandtschaft* between Puritanism and liberalism: here we can see an example of a Weberian "heterogony of ends" (Erizi, 2014), where actions aiming at specific goals produce unintended consequences. The most famous is the capitalist economy, born from actions of men not at all interested in making profit, but only in their

17. Letter to Adolf Harnack, 12 January 1905, Heidelberg; see Weber (2015: 422).

18. Among many authors who refer to Weber's thesis on a *Wahlverwandtschaft* between Puritan sects and liberal democracy see Alexander (1989), Kalberg (1997), Benedict (2003), Maley (2011: 121–145), Kim (2000, 2004). In the article of 2000 Kim focuses on the "ethical rigorism" of puritans, recognizing it as a fundamental element of Weber's conception of personality (2000: 210).

19. On the contrary, Walzer contends that Puritanism leads to self-control, repression, suspicion, in short, to a society characterized by terror, not by freedom (1963: 88; for a similar thesis see Zafirovksy, 2010).

other-worldly salvation. In the same way, liberalism was born from religious fanaticism: from people who strongly believed in one faith and acted rigorously to find proof of their eternal salvation, and who developed “a paradoxical attitude that seeks with fanatical zeal to renounce and, moreover, to transform this world for the sake of the other world” (Kim, 2000: 202). In this way, Weber rejects the idea that modern freedom — which means, as we have seen, negative freedom — is anchored in indifferentism or relativism: from a perspective that affirms the equivalence of different opinions — their indifference for political power — one that asserts, for example, religious freedom because religion is not an important matter. On the contrary, for Weber “it is not a vague tolerance but a fierce commitment to the individual which . . . makes freedom possible” (Alexander, 1989: 112). Religious freedom is asserted precisely because it is the most important matter in an individual’s life, one about which the individual does not accept any compromise. “The autonomy of the individual became anchored, not in indifference, but in religious standpoints, and the struggle against all kinds of “authoritarian” arbitrariness assumed the proportion of a religious duty” (Weber, 2002b: 212).

### Freedom and Ethical Radicalism in Late Modernity

Neither economic development nor religious relativism, but religious-ethical radicalism: this is the thesis of the genesis of modern freedom that Weber bears in mind when he analyses the chances for a liberal movement in Russia. Turning from an analysis of the genesis of modern freedom in early modernity to the fights for freedom in his contemporaneity Weber was looking for a similar, ethically grounded, radical idealism: “In fact [democracy and liberty] are *only possible* where they are backed up by the determined *will* of a nation not to be ruled like a flock of sheep. We ‘individualists’ and supporters of ‘democratic’ institutions must swim ‘against the tide’ of material constellations (Weber 1995a: 109; first emphasis added).”<sup>20</sup>

As Davydov points out, “Weber is not looking for chances for freedom in Russia where the so-called ‘Realpolitiker’ were looking for them (and of course didn’t find them)” (1995: 81). It is neither in economic necessity, nor in material interests (Ibid.: 79), but in the *will* of a nation that the necessary condition to affirm and defend liberty lies.

In this sense, in contrast to the ‘Realpolitiker’, “the type of ‘complacent’ German who cannot bear not to be ‘on the side of the victors’, [and] can only look with pity on such a movement” (Weber, 1995a: 101–102), Weber affirms the greatness of the idealism of Russian liberals and applauds “the evident idealism and willingness to make sacrifices shown by these men, [something that] is one of the most ethically pleasing and estimable things that today Russia has to offer” (Ibid.: 45). In fact, he sees in the liberal struggle a radical idealism, a “desperate tenacity reminiscent of the age of Charles I” (Weber 1995b: 158).

Yet the longer the events went on, the more Weber must admit that the idealism of Russian liberals is not strong enough, and not rooted in radical convictions. For the Puri-

20. It is noteworthy that here Weber affirms his belonging to liberal individualism — the first-person plural clearly expresses it.

tan believer what was at stake in his claim for freedom of conscience and in his rejection of political authority was eternal life: by fighting for negative freedom, he was fighting for eternal salvation. In “a time in which the beyond meant everything” (Weber, 2001a: 102), this gave him the necessary strength.<sup>21</sup> Liberalism no longer has this strength because, having lost its religious motivational pull, it has lost its propulsive force: “This *positive* religious motivation for ‘hostility to authority’ was the historically decisive ‘psychological’ basis for ‘liberty’ in the puritan countries. However highly one may rate the historical significance of the ‘Enlightenment,’ its ideals of liberty lacked that foundation in those *positive* motive forces which were necessary to secure their continued existence” (Weber, 2002a: 157).

Weber, therefore, is forced to acknowledge that Russian liberalism is only an opinion movement, lacking a worldview that can provide the radicalism necessary to oppose tsarist autocracy. As he noted in the essay of 1917, after the defeat of the liberal revolution in 1905–1906, the urban intelligentsia abandoned the project of a liberal reform of the state, taking shelter in a romantic nationalism of Greater Russia, whose task was “the ‘liberation’ of every imaginable nation” (Weber, 1995c: 243). In the face of the failure of their movement, they just changed ideals and values to foster and defend.

In the circumstances of the Russian revolutions, there was another worldview, alternative to religion but playing a similar function and bearing likewise a strong idealism: socialism. Socialism is for Weber a surrogate [*Ersatz*] for religion (Erizi, 2011), in that it postulates a future of (inner-worldly) redemption, thus giving people the necessary radical idealism to fight against the world.<sup>22</sup> But instead of fostering individual freedom *against* the “tide of material constellations,” socialists believe they are “borne along by ‘material development’ to inevitable victory” (Weber, 1995a: 110), being in this sense unable to put up resistance to historical necessities and accustoming themselves instead to “the unquestioning acceptance of dogmas.” Indeed, it “drills the masses in the intellectual parade-ground step and, instead of directing them to an other-worldly paradise, which, in Puritanism, could *also* claim some notable achievements in the service of this-worldly ‘liberty,’ refers them to a paradise in this world, making of it a kind of inoculation against change for those with an interest in preserving the status quo” (Weber, 1995a: 110).

It is from the same perspective that Weber addresses the Orthodox religion: he wanted to see if the Russian religious tradition could constitute an anchor to idealism sufficiently strong to “swim ‘against the tide’ of material constellations.”<sup>23</sup> In order to examine what kind of relationship Russian religiosity has with the world, Weber considers the

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21. According to Weber the religious ethic has been the most powerful force against the “world as it is”: it can be one of the most transformative factors in the world, because it gives enough strength, in the form of subjective motives, to act ethically in the world, which means to act against the world (Weber, 1953).

22. This ethical intransigence is Weber’s target in *Politics as Vocation*: like every ethic of conviction, it is indifferent towards the consequences of its action and therefore inadequate to politics. Weber used this judgment to contest socialist revolutionaries during the 1918 revolutionary events in Germany. Nonetheless, even in *Politics as Vocation*, Weber recognizes the necessity for a good politician to interlace *Verantwortungsethik* and *Gessinnungsethik* (Weber, 1946: 127).

23. For Weber’s analysis of the Orthodox church, see Di Giorgi (1996: 176–179).

Orthodox church and its relationship with tsarist autocracy.<sup>24</sup> Despite the absence of a consideration of the Orthodox religion in Weber's whole *Sociology of Religion*, in the *Nachlass of Economy and Society* Weber classifies the Orthodox church as a type of Caesaropapism, which consists of "the complete subordination of priestly to secular power" (Weber, 1978: 1161). Accordingly, in a paragraph of "Bourgeois Democracy in Russia" Weber shows how, in contrast to Catholicism (in which the papacy constitutes a power able to counterbalance the secular one) and to the anti-authoritarianism of Puritanism, the Orthodox church works as "the religious foundation of autocracy" (Weber, 1995a: 64).<sup>25</sup>

In this sense, Weber does not see any ethical source capable of giving people the ethical radicalism necessary to take the fight against the tsarist autocracy in a liberal direction. Taken from this perspective, the Russian liberal struggle plays a fundamental role in Weber's view, as a warning to his contemporaries and posterity: the future of liberty does not lie in material conditions, nor will it be defended by economic interests; rather, freedom needs a strong, ethically grounded, radical idealism. This is something that Weber does not locate in the subjectivity of late modernity: rather, as he affirms in his *Science as Vocation*, disenchantment with the world and the end of transcendence seem to bring about a growing tendency for adaptation, the vanishing of the world's ethical tension, an "inertia of modern man, who fails to take principled moral action" (Kim 2000: 210).

However, because of this trend towards the depletion of ethical resources in late modernity, Russian liberal idealism has for Weber an important significance, regardless of its failure.<sup>26</sup> As Schluchter has pointed out, Weber's reflection on radical idealism in Russian writings will later flow into the category of *Gesinnungsethik* (Schluchter, 1988: 187). Although the word itself is not present, Weber speaks of "pan-moralism" (Weber, 1995a: 52) in order to describe the behavior of political idealism: that of those who "take the view '*fiat justitia, pereat mundus*' [and who say that] even if the masses reject all cultural advance or destroy it, we can only ask what is just, and we have done our duty" (Ibid.: 51–52). As Weber's later reflection on this category makes clear, a *Gesinnungsethiker* judges an action by its intrinsic value and not by its instrumental value. The "absolute rejection of the 'success ethic' here means, in the political sphere, that only the unconditional ethical imperative is valid as the guiding star of positive action" (Ibid.: 52). A just action has for the *Gesinnungsethiker* a value regardless of its consequences or its success. It may be

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24. More generally, Weber was convinced that Russian religiosity had mostly developed into a mystical version of Christianity. "Mystic" implies that the refusal of the world that religious ethic produces takes the form of an escape from the world, an apolitical retreat from it, which understands the search of salvation in the form of contemplation and non-action (Weber 2001b, 323–324) — that is, something that does not bring about a transformation of the political order. According to Schluchter, Weber's interest in mysticism was prompted initially by his work on the Russian revolution of 1905 (1989: 129; see also Adair-Toteff, 2002).

25. Weber also refers to some radical tendencies of the low Orthodox clergy, which had shown an active reformism, clamoring for the end of autocracy and a program of social reforms (Weber, 1995a: 127). Weber shows how these tendencies unfortunately produce the opposite effect, since they reinforce the organic relationship between ecclesiastic hierarchy and state power. Indeed, the Orthodox church does not have an "Archimedean point external to the state": in front of the choice between "either depending on believers from below through elections or on above, hierarchy won't have doubts about this last choice" (Weber, 1989: 355).

26. For a similar interpretation, see Davydov (1995).

shown to him, argues Weber, that his action is useless or even counterproductive, but “for him — if he is really faithful to his convictions — this proves nothing” (Weber, 1949: 23).

This is the same attitude which Weber sees — at least in part<sup>27</sup> — in the Russian liberals, and it is the same argument that he uses to defend them against accusations of having failed: the type of “sated” German *Realpolitiker* may complain that the main ability of the Russian liberals is “to miss opportunities” (Weber, 1995a: 106). But this realistic observation does not prove anything, or at least not everything (Davydov, 1995: 86): “whatever may be the ultimate success of their work” (Weber, 1995a: 41), they have fulfilled their mission (Ibid.: 107). Judged from a realistic perspective, the liberals have failed. Weber is obviously well aware of this and does not abandon the realistic perspective at all. However, he recognizes that, from a *gesinnungsethisch* perspective, they can be “right” (Weber, 1949: 23). They have still succeeded in asserting through their actions the value of freedom, regardless of the consequences and success, despite and against the tide of material constellations. And, according to Weber, only in this way “can ‘ideological’ liberalism remain, within its ideal sphere, a ‘force’ unassailable by outward violence” (Weber, 1995a: 107).

This praise of ethical radicalism may sound paradoxical for an author who strongly criticized the radicalism of revolutionaries such as the socialists, highlighting their disruptive nature and their unsuitability to politics (Weber, 1946). Weber was of course well aware that ethical radicalism could lead either to fanaticism — Puritan believers, after all, did likewise — or to a “holy renunciation,” as he writes in “Bourgeois Democracy in Russia” (Weber, 1995a: 52). Yet it is, at the same time, *conditio sine qua non* for the affirmation of freedom. As Weber himself writes at the end of *Politics as Vocation*, it is this ethical radicalism that gives subjects the strength not to “crumble when the world from [their] point of view is too stupid or too base for what [they] want to offer” and to say “in the face of all this . . . ‘In spite of all!’” (Weber, 1946: 128).

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27. Besides these “extreme ideologues” (Weber, 1995a: 52), Weber refers to others Russian democrats, who support liberal individualism on the basis of a reasoning closer to the ethic of responsibility: they affirm liberalism by virtue of its consequences, claiming that it has an “educational” effect (Ibid.) on the people. Yet, even in this case, Weber must admit the failure of this perspective: the hopes of these democrats are grounded in an “optimistic belief on natural harmony of interests of free individuals, a belief which has now been finally destroyed by capitalism” (Ibid.: 66).



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## Вебер о России: между современной свободой и этическим радикализмом

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Сочинения Макса Вебера о русских революциях в значительной степени недооценены в академическом сообществе и рассматриваются как вторичные в общем массиве веберовских социологических и политических текстов. Однако Вебер в них обращается к ключевому для него вопросу: судьбе свободы в эпоху позднего модерна. Критически оценивая шансы на успех русских либералов, Вебер возвращается к тому моменту, когда возникла современная свобода, и вычленяет особые условия, благодаря которым ее появление стало возможным. Ключевую роль сыграло то, что Вебер называет «специфически религиозной ориентацией». Свобода не является результатом экономического развития (Вебер отрицал представление, согласно которому капитализм ведет к эмансипации и связан с демократией) или же производным от идеи толерантности, основанной на индифферентности (как предполагалось в некоторых интерпретациях либерализма). Основным истоком современной свободы является религиозный радикализм (в частности, пуританский). Вебер предполагает, что современная (т. е. негативная) свобода возникает из позиции этической непреклонности, когда религиозный *виртуоз* отказывается подчиняться политическому (т.е. мирскому) авторитету, чтобы следовать своей вере, то есть голосу Бога. В данной статье исследуется веберовская концепция современной свободы, выстраиваемая в его работах о русских революциях в попытке углубить взаимосвязь между концепцией современной свободы и этическим радикализмом.

*Ключевые слова:* Вебер, Русская революция, либерализм, свобода, религия, этический радикализм, современная свобода