

Writing Social Facts

Some Observations on Max Weber's Concept of Modern Politics

Harro Müller (Columbia University in the City of New York)

Since this article on Max Weber is an essay, I would like to start with some personal remarks. In the 1960s, I studied German Literature, History and Philosophy at the University of Kiel. If I remember correctly, Max Weber was no topic during my studies. Just once, on the occasion of an introduction to modern history, Weber was mentioned briefly because of his application of typological argumentation. Nevertheless, I decided to buy the Kröner-edition¹ (first published in 1956), read some texts, but for a long time this was the only text of Max Weber in my private library. In 1973, I started to work at the Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Studies of the University of Bielefeld which was equipped with a famous History Department where eminent professors like Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Reinhart Koselleck, and Jürgen Kocka were teaching. Hans-Ulrich Wehler often mentioned that his design of modern social history had two founding fathers ("Säulenheilige"): Karl Marx and Max Weber. Later in 1991, I started to teach at Columbia University, met Guenther Roth, talked with him several times about Max Weber and read some of his texts on Weber. Fairly soon, I offered a class called "Theories of Modernity" for graduate students of various departments and repeated this class with some changes in the syllabus quite often. One session had always been reserved for Max Weber and a discussion of his "Science as a Vocation." My teaching of Weber was always met with great interest by the students and was quite a success (as, somewhat surprisingly, also the teaching of Carl Schmitt), although many students did not know anything about Max Weber. I retired in 2018. The emeritus status has its advantages and disadvantages. One huge advantage is that

¹ Weber 1956.

you have much more time for reading books you could not deal with before. So, at a certain point, I started going through the many volumes of the Georg Simmel-edition² by Otthein Rammstedt and wrote an article on the German author.³ After Simmel, I chose Max Weber and read him in an intensive way. Even if I did not finish all the 47 volumes of the new edition,⁴ I got a much better insight into the importance of Weber for the understanding of modernity and the modern social sciences. His discussion of what to understand by facts builds a decisive point in modernity.

The focus of this essay is on the analysis of Weber's practice of writing which builds the basis for his theoretical and methodological choices. After some general observations on the problem of writing facts in its theoretical and methodological implications, I will discuss two texts: Weber's inauguration lecture from 1895 "The Nation State and Economic Policy"⁵ and his late talk "The Profession and Vocation of Politics" (1919).⁶ Of a certain importance is that the work of Max Weber is a torso. During his lifetime, he published two books (his dissertation and his habilitation) and a large number of articles which he often qualified as sketches ("Skizzen") or attempts ("Versuche"). More or less all of his writings are concerned with the three dimensions of scientific work: the *context of discovery* (how to formulate the problem?), the *context of justification* (how to legitimate the claims of truth?), and the *context of application* (what are the functions of the scientific findings concerning their different social relations?). In the following, I will discuss Weber's scientific project in its approach to these three contexts.

1.

Let me start with some introductory remarks on Max Weber's general project by stressing the problem of writing facts. It seems very helpful to locate his project within a semantic-pragmatic model which not only concentrates on the dimension of meaning and arguments (in our case concerning 'fact') but also on writing texts as doing. Weber himself did not use the term 'Faktum/

2 Simmel 2015 [1989].

3 Müller 2020.

4 Weber 2021.

5 Weber 1994a: 1–28.

6 Weber 1994b: 309–369.

Fakt,' he prefers the term 'Tatsache' which combines a practical side ('Tat') with an empirical dimension by including its referential implications ('Sache'). At the same time, he did not differentiate between the term 'fact/Tatsache' and 'data' – another term he sometimes uses – in a systematic way. Since for Weber reality is definitely indefinite, from a systematic perspective there is always so much data that in the end one has to reduce the information to facts. Now, the interesting point here is: Within the context of discovery, facts are always the effect of questions/problem formulations concerning the way of *how* you want to formulate your object field. Facts are never just given. Contrary to Adorno,⁷ I want to stress that Weber was not a positivist in a strict sense who starts with facts and continues with the construction of inductive rules. Rather, for Weber a fact could also have a negative connotation. He despised "men of fact/Tatsachenmenschen"⁸ who only follow seemingly given facts and are unable to produce their own responsible decisions which for Weber are necessary to live a life that deserves the predicate 'human.' But more interesting concerning facts is, that for Weber one cannot deal with *the* or *a* fact in singular. As a starting point, one always has to think of facts in plural inserted in a relational field with its inferential and referential dimensions. Such an approach has massive consequences. Talking about facts here is to locate them within a semantic-pragmatic model which in its results cannot be reduced to one single and conclusive fact. As a consequence, there is no Archimedean point to be found within the social sciences. If, as for Weber, your aim is to produce a science of reality ("Wirklichkeitswissenschaft"), you always need different forms of scientific perspectivism which can never be homogenized. Just to quote the Bible exemplarily, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and God was the word." For Weber, this is a form of prescientific or metascientific religious talk that can never be scientifically proved. No one can verify if this sentence is right or wrong. As opposed to this, within the context of discovery you have to start with questions and problem formulations by using words which are facts themselves and which are selected out of an infinite amount of data. Such selections are constructions with certain referential dimensions on the one hand, and a certain reliance on excluding or complementary relations to other word fields on the other. Thus, Weber is a nominalist *cum grano salis* when it comes to the

7 Adorno 2003: 133–136.

8 Mommsen 1974: 119.

construction of facts. At the same time, he is a realist concerning the referential dimension. Therefore, my argument is that his position is much more complex than often formulated in the “Weberi.”⁹

2.

Weber's science of reality is, in a strict sense, a science of realities. His perspectivism does not relate to a *universum* but to a *pluriversum*. Concerning the context of discovery, the latter depends on paradigms that were different in the past and will be different in the future. As for the context of justification, within the social sciences the writing (of) facts obeys the rules of scientific discourse and therefore includes the clarity of concepts, internal logical consistency, empirical and argumentative consistency, evidence, and, last but not least, plausibility. Weber adds the value of neutrality because for him only neutrality allows for the value of objectivity within the social sciences. Thus, there are value relations in the context of discovery that can always be transformed within the social scientific discourse concerning facts. Consequently, facts can be described, interpreted, and explained without any form of foundational normative discourse. On the methodological level, Max Weber resolves such an approach of nearly unlimited possibilities of facts through a construction of ideal types for which he is famous and which he later called pure types or just types (e.g., modern capitalism, types of legitimization, etc.). These ideal types are constructions stressing important points of the questions at issue and neglecting unimportant points. At the same time, they are methodological tools located on the level of heuristic, historical and systematic procedures. It is these ideal types that allow a comparison of the gained scientific evidence with reality data. But where in these procedures is objectivity to be found?

In a neo-Kantian way, Max Weber always asks a transcendental question: What are the conditions that make science possible, especially the social sciences? His Kantian answer: a theory of concepts combined with a theory of causality. But his concepts are always historical/changing concepts, his form of causal argumentation is a pragmatic form of argumentation for which professional skills are needed to terminate the plurality of causal explanations.

9 Knöbl 2022: 89.

At the same time, there is no fixed methodological rule for this ending. Therefore, in a certain sense, Max Weber pleads for a restricted form of objectivity which is a form of objectivity beyond any value presuppositions. In retrospective, though, one might not accept Weber's assumption. Because concerning the context of discovery the Weberian value relations also implicate value judgements which, to a certain degree, always influence the context of justification.¹⁰ On the other hand, concerning the context of application, Max Weber opts for an openly normative approach. As a teacher, he is engaged in a humanistic program with the telos to educate mature people who follow their own individual laws and make responsible and autonomous decisions concerning a life within the different value spheres of modern capitalistic society. A life that, on the political level, can only be organized in a liberal-democratic way. This at least was the perspective of the late Max Weber.

All three dimensions – *the context of discovery*, *the context of justification* and *the context of application* – constituting Weber's scientific project concerning the foundation of the social sciences can be described as an empirical-normative project applying semantic-pragmatic models. In fact, Weber's project is a strictly historical-systematic project which reflects its own historicity. Therefore, it negates all forms of teleological philosophy of history, of essentialism, of substantialism, of naturalistic or organic holism, including all forms of theodicy and of cosmopolitanism, by offering an ambivalent form of anthropodicy on the level of philosophy. In his scientific project with its empirical and normative implications, Weber is a social scientist, a philosopher and at the same time an educator.¹¹

Concerning his writing choices, Max Weber was a strong member of the Gutenberg galaxy. His scientific texts are handwritten and then published in the form of printed articles or books. In his role as a German citizen and a public intellectual, he also published non-scientific texts, especially during and after the First World War. The best example of such a form of writing seems to be the political treatise "Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order". It presents "a reworked and extended version of articles which appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the summer of 1917."¹² In general, theoretical reflections and ways of practical writing do not build a homogenous field. There may be tensions, sometimes also contradictions. Let

10 Oakes 1990: 143.

11 Marty 2019: 37.

12 Weber 1994c: 130.

us see how Weber proceeds and approaches such tensions in the two chosen examples.

3.

In 1894, Max Weber moved from the University of Berlin to the University of Freiburg to accept a chair of Political Economy (“Nationalökonomie”). In the following year, he delivered his inaugural lecture “The Nation State and Economic Policy” on May 31st which he published in a rewritten version as a brochure of 34 pages by the end of June. In German university tradition, the inaugural lecture is a specific genre with a specific function. The new colleague introduces him-/herself not only to the university public but also to the general public, with a lecture presenting the respective way of doing research and giving hints on how to proceed in the future concerning one’s own discipline. Max Weber fulfilled these expectations in a superb and courageous way. He exemplified his empirical approach combined with a massive intervention regarding the present and future role of political economy within the political and economic spheres of the German state. How did he structure his lecture? The solution is twofold:

What I intend is firstly to illustrate, just *one example*, the role played by physical and psychological racial differences between nationalities in the economic struggle of existence. I should then like to add some reflections on the situation of states which rest on national foundations – as ours does – in the framework of a consideration of economic policy.¹³

After a preface, he continues with the presentation of a series of dry and uncomfortable facts concerning the present economic, political, and cultural situation between German and Polish people in West Prussia. He discusses the economic quality of land, the social stratification of the population and especially the differences between German and Polish people when it comes to their economic, cultural, religious, and political status which he characterizes in a racist neo-Darwinian way. Weber’s point is the following: Economic and cultural problems must be discussed in political terms, there being a massive contradiction between the economic class interests of the landed gentry and

13 Weber 1994a: 2.

the political interests of the nation in the Eastern provinces. At the time, Germany was a powerful national state which, in the opinion of Weber, played an important role within world politics. Therefore, he sees the necessity of accelerating German industrialization in order to be able to maintain its function as world power within a capitalistic society. Now, Weber was always interested in the history of the present as well as in a scientifically oriented diagnosis of the present political, economic, and cultural situation. He diagnoses in his lecture an eminent lack of political leadership: The landed aristocracy is an economically declining class that can no longer exercise any political role in a responsible way (21), the German bourgeois class lacks political maturity. Even if it had a political vocation, it would not follow the call, while, at the same time, the working class is even more immature than the bourgeois class. (25) Weber confesses: "I am a member of the bourgeois (*bürgerlich*) classes, and I have been brought up to share their views and ideals." (23) He notices a situation of crisis in political leadership at the end of his century. This is even more precarious, since for Weber power struggle and power conflicts are necessary qualities of politics within and especially between national states. The national state as a power state (like Germany) has to continue its power policy with the necessary ingredients of different forms of violence and has to do so in a responsible way. For there is a permanent competition in peaceful or non-peaceful ways between powerful national states, which meant that there is always the possibility of war for which the state has to be prepared. Therefore, for Weber anarchism, pacifism, socialism, utilitarianism, universal happiness, even universal human rights and forms of democracy as proposed by Rousseau are off limits. He describes the function of political economy within the present situation as follows: "The science of political economy is a *political* science. It is a servant of politics, not the day-to-day-politics of the persons and classes who happen to be ruling at any given time, but enduring power-political interests of the nation." (16) Thus, regarding the context of justification in political economy, Weber negates all values like, e.g., happiness. In his historical argumentation, he implicitly favors value neutrality combining empirical, interpretative, explanatory and to a certain degree narrative sentences. Later he stresses such an approach in an explicit way. As one can see in retrospect, the Weberian plea for the national power state has massive normative implications, and attributions like 'power state' would need further empirically tested evidence.

In the context of application, the situation is quite different and the program explicitly normative. Weber states in his role as educator: "We do not

want to breed well-being in people, but rather those characteristics which we think of as constituting the human greatness and nobility of our nature.” (15) Here, he favors a form of bourgeois aristocratic individualism which underlies the code noble/rough and which in its exclusivity negates all forms of moral argumentation with an egalitarian approach. Weber’s plea for human greatness implies different possibilities. One is heroism during wartime: to sacrifice your life. Or to put it bluntly: to be prepared to kill or to be killed in national wars. The other one concerns his own way of thinking which makes him run one *syntagma* that seems most interesting: the “magic of freedom.” (8) During his whole career as an academic, Weber was totally fascinated by this “magic of freedom.” Freedom in the sense that one has to live one’s own responsible, autonomous life is for Weber a main normative assumption decisive for all three contexts.¹⁴ It is the central motivation for his extremely ambitious scientific project aimed at reflecting the historic present and future dimensions. Concerning the present and concerning the future dimension, especially political economy can play an important intervening role when it comes to increasing freedom. Or in other words: For Max Weber, it is not the charm of equality, fraternity, or the pursuit of happiness, but the charm of freedom that offers a normative starting point.

This inaugural lecture was the highly ambivalent beginning of an astonishing scientific career. There are continuities between its beginning and its end: the massive nationalism and apology of the national state, politics as struggle, conflicts with its necessary ingredients rule, power, and violence, the problem of responsibility concerning history, aristocratic individualism, heroic forms of existence, and, last but not least, the magic of freedom. But for the later Weber, all forms of racism and Neo-Darwinism no longer had any cognitive power. He also changed his political role. He started as a staunch conservative with liberal connotations and ended as a liberal who favored parliamentary democracy.

4.

In retrospect, Max Weber qualified his inaugural lecture as immature but provocative. A mature discussion of the concept of politics with its scientific, sociological, philosophical, and pedagogical implications can be found in his

14 Marty 2019: 35.

talk "The Profession and Vocation of Politics" from 28th January 1919. In the summer of the same year, he published the talk in a massively rewritten form compared to the stenographic version of his oral talk (67 pages). Contrary to his inaugural lecture, this text has no footnotes, does not discuss the state of the art of research and shows some stylistic hints to its original oral presentation. He starts his texts with the question: "What do we understand by politics (*Politik*)?"¹⁵ The answer is similar to his earlier texts: "In our terms, then, 'politics' would mean striving for a share of power, [...] whether it be between states or between the groups of people contained within a single state." (311) And further: "The state is a relationship of rule (*Herrschaft*) by human beings over human beings, and one that rests on the legitimate use of violence." (Ibid.) Weber introduces a threefold typology of forms as to how the state could be legitimated: traditional, charismatic, and legal. (311–312) He then continues with a well-informed genealogical reconstruction of tendencies in Europe and America leading to the modern state with its form of rational administration, its party system, its forms of parliamentarianism. Regarding types of politicians, he introduces two. Either one lives for politics (mainly valid for the 19th century) or one lives from politics (mainly valid for 20th century). (318) This genealogical reconstruction of the modern political system reveals Max Weber to be a historically oriented sociologist who with the help of his typological procedures produces superb overviews concerning midterm and long-term periods of history in relation to the present. As such, the typologies are extremely convincing, although Weber does not discuss certain omissions and the form of selection. Since too complicated typologies are often unsuccessful, Weber limits his typology of forms of legitimation to three and the typology of politicians to two possibilities. As for the political situation, he constructs another binary opposition: "But the only choice lies between a leadership democracy with a 'machine' and democracy without a leader, which means rule by the 'professional politician' who has no vocation, the type of man who lacks precisely those inner, charismatic qualities which make leaders." (351)

What are the presuppositions, then, for a politician's successful career? First of all, there must be a feeling of power. (352) But as a politician you have to do justice to this power. And this is not only a question of power but also a question of ethics. In the perspective of Max Weber, three qualities are decisive for a politician: "passion, a sense of responsibility, judgement. [...] The

15 Weber 1994b: 309.

passionate commitment to a ‘cause’” (352–353) is one requirement, but even more important is a “*responsibility* for that cause. [...] This requires [...] *judgement*, the ability to maintain one’s inner composure and calm while being receptive to realities, in other words, *distance* from things and people.” (353) The enemy of all political personalities is vanity leading to a lack of objectivity and responsibility. (354) The result would be the mere power politician whose actions steer into absurdity. He does know “nothing of the tragedy, in which all action, particularly political action, is in truth enmeshed.” (354–355) This sentence about the tragic quality of all actions is an empirical statement, but it is also a massive philosophical-anthropological statement which demonstrates how Weber combines an empirical with a philosophical approach by also including pedagogical implications. The following citation explains this “fundamental fact” in an interesting way: “It is certainly true, and it is a fundamental fact of history [...], that the eventual outcome of political action frequently, indeed regularly, stands in a quite inadequate, even paradoxical relation to its original, intended meaning and purpose (*Sinn*).” (355) Now in the perspective of Max Weber, it is most interesting that the nature of the causes a politician seeks to serve by striving for power is a question of faith. These causes are values that belong to different spheres: religious, political, cultural, aesthetic, erotic, etc. Although the theory of value spheres is not elaborated by Max Weber in a systematic way, the consequences of this presupposition are evident. There is no hierarchy between the different values, and their validity cannot be scientifically proved. They just have to be chosen and defended.¹⁶ The relations between these values – and this is the tragedy and a fundamental fact in this world as irrational *pluriversum* – are antagonistic. This not only concerns the relationship between different value spheres but is also active within a single value sphere.

Regarding the ethic of politics, Weber discusses two alternatives: the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility. The ethic of conviction presupposes a dominant value and does not care about the consequences. The ethic of responsibility reflects consequences and side effects and makes decisions based on such reflections. Even after having opted for a decision, you have to take responsibility for your choice and to reflect the amount of guilt following the decision, because the problem of guilt is a massive problem in the political sphere. It has a “diabolic dimension” because politics cannot do without its essentials power and violence.

16 Bruun 2017: 292.

Now, what are the relations between the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility? They can be paradox or mutually exclusive in a strict sense. But in the perspective of Weber – and this is the much better way of treating the dilemma – a form of cooperation between the ethic of conviction and ethic of responsibility seems possible. For such a form of cooperation, a quick reference in the sense of Luther and Kierkegaard is necessary:

On the other hand, it is immensely moving when a mature person (whether old or young) who feels with his whole soul the responsibility he bears for the real consequences of his actions, and who acts on the basis of an ethics of responsibility, says at some point, 'Here I stand, I can do no other.' This is something genuinely human and profoundly moving. For it must be *possible* for *each* of us to find ourselves in such a situation at some point if we are not inwardly dead. In this respect, the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolute opposites. They are complementary to one another, and only in combination do they produce the true human being who is *capable* of having a 'vocation for politics'.¹⁷

Thus, even in the sphere of politics with its demonic dimensions, it is possible for mature people to lead a form of life which could reclaim the predicate of authenticity.

At this point, I want to come back to the question of facts. The beginning of the last paragraph of Weber's essay contains the most famous citation of "The Profession and Vocation of Politics": "Politics means slow, strong drilling through hard boards, with a combination of passion and a sense of judgement." (369) Not so famous are the following sentences which reclaim factual empirical knowledge:

It is of course entirely correct, and a fact confirmed by all historical experience, that what is possible would never have been achieved if, in this world, people had not repeatedly reached for the impossible. But the person who can do this must be a leader, not only that, he must, in a very simple sense of the word, be a hero. (Ibid.)

Thus, at the beginning of his career as social scientist and in his inaugural lecture "The Nation State and Economic Policy" Weber starts with the apology of great men. At the end of his career as social scientist, philosopher, and educator, he ends with an apology for political heroism. Therefore, it seems

17 Weber 1994b: 367–368.

quite correct to locate Weber within the period of tragic modern heroism with its catchwords of nation, sovereignty, charisma, and sacrifice.

Conclusion

My excursion into the concepts of Max Weber concerning his ideas on the discipline of Social Sciences and the possible ways to treat them within this paradigm on politics brings me to the following conclusion. It is the view of the question of writing facts that allows to locate Weber within a semantic-pragmatic model. The way he treated *the context of discovery*, *the context of justification* and *the context of application* in his role as social scientist, philosopher, and educator allowed him to formulate an empirical-normative theory which reflects its own historicity and fallibility.¹⁸ When looking at this approach in retrospective, one can state that as far as the context of justification is concerned, Weber reclaims a form of restricted objectivity and a form of restricted value neutrality. This postulated form of restrictive objectivity treats facts produced from data with typological procedures, mixing an empirical-factual with a constructive approach in such a way that this form of typological argumentation presents massive pragmatic implications. Weber's postulated restricted form of value neutrality enables his main normative assumption of freedom to be not only constitutive for the context of discovery (how to formulate the problem?) and the context of application (how to relate to social dimensions of reality?) but also for the context of justification (how to legitimize the claims of truth?).

At the end of this essay, I allow myself one more personal remark. In "Profession and Vocation of Politics", Max Weber offers the following perspective concerning the immediate future after the end of World War I: "What lies immediately ahead of us is not the flowering of summer but a polar night of icy darkness and hardness."¹⁹ From a metaphorical perspective, this image might work. From a factual, empirical perspective, it is not correct. Polar nights are cold but have a magic light darkness, extremely clear skies with sparkling stars, and moreover, there is always the possibility of polar lights.

¹⁸ Weber 2012: 138.

¹⁹ Weber 1994b: 368.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. (2003): *Einleitung in die Soziologie*, Frankfurt am Main.

Bruun, Hans Hendrik (2017): "Politics and Ethics, and the Ethic of Politics", in: *The Oxford Handbook of Max Weber*, ed. Edith Hanke/Lawrence Scaff/Sam Whimster, Sam, Oxford, 294–309.

Knöbl, Wolfgang (2022): *Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte. Zur Kritik der Sozialtheorie*, Frankfurt am Main.

Marty, Christian (2019): *Max Weber. Ein Denker der Freiheit*, Weinheim.

Mommsen, Wolfgang (1974): *Max Weber. Gesellschaft, Politik und Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main.

Müller, Harro (2020): "Schreibszene, Schreifeld, zwei Kriegsreden und *Lebensanschauung*", in: Knaller, Susanne/Pany-Habsa, Doris/Scholger, Martina (eds.): *Schreibforschung interdisziplinär. Praxis – Prozess – Produkt*, Bielefeld, 157–174.

Oakes, Guy (1990): *Die Grenzen kulturwissenschaftlicher Begriffsbildung. Heidelberg Max Weber-Vorlesungen 1982*, Frankfurt am Main.

Simmel, Georg (2015) [1989]: *Georg Simmel*, ed. Otthein Rammstedt, Frankfurt am Main.

Weber, Max (2021): *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Horst Baier et al., Tübingen.

— (2012): "The 'objectivity' of knowledge in social sciences and social policy", in: *Max Weber. Collected methodological writings*, ed. Hans Henrik Bruuns/ Sam Whimster, London, 100–138.

— (1994): *Weber. Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman/Ronald Speirs, Cambridge.

— (1994a): "The Nation State and Economic Policy", in: *Weber. Political Writings*, 1–28.

— (1994b): "The Profession and Vocation of Politics", in: *Weber. Political Writings*, 309–369.

— (1994c): "Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order. Towards a political critique of officialdom and the party system", in: *Weber. Political Writings*, 130–271.

— (1956): *Soziologie, weltgeschichtliche Analysen, Politik*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann, Stuttgart.

