

Introduction

In this book the fundamental aspects of Max Weber's political sociology are discussed in the light of his personal views about the course of world history. The central issues of his sociological works as well as of his political thought are without exception related to his growing anxiety about the future of the liberal societies of the west, in an age of rapidly expanding bureaucracies. He was convinced that the universal advance of bureaucratic forms of social and political organization was bound to place the principles of individual liberty and personal creativity in jeopardy. He perceived that the slow but steady ossification of the social systems in the west could only be prevented by social and political institutions which would guarantee maximum dynamism and leadership.

In the first chapter it is shown that Weber's sociological work is based on a specific concept of world history which is characterized by his liberal individualism as well as by an almost Nietzschean pessimism about the future of mankind. In fact, his sociological work and his political activities have a common origin, namely the passionate endeavour to fight for the preservation of a humane world endangered on the one hand by anachronistic political institutions, and on the other by the rise of all-powerful social forces which would allow less and less room for the autonomous individual and would render his personal set of values socially meaningless. Weber's encyclopaedic knowledge of world history enabled him to see the great social trends of his own age in a truly universal perspective, and to assess correctly their significance for western civilization. Although he gradually abandoned the historical approach, which is dominant in his earlier writings, in favour of a strictly formalized ideal-typical analysis of social phenomena, his scholarly work is substantially a historical sociology, as he in fact intended it to be. However detailed and sophisticated his various sociological studies are, they always reflect the socio-cultural sig-

nificance of the respective social phenomena in a truly universal-historical perspective.

Max Weber's passionate championship of a German national imperialism seems at first sight to have little in common with his views about the future of western societies. In fact it even stands in strong contrast to his own conclusions about the nature of imperialism. Yet a close inspection reveals that Weber's imperialistic convictions are also embedded in this broad perspective of the future course of world history. In the final analysis Weber's liberal convictions strengthened his imperialistic zeal, at least in the 1890s. Weber thought that in the foreseeable future the nation state was likely to remain the basic unit of world politics, and hence he never hesitated as a citizen to identify himself with the political fortunes of his own nation. This was, in fact, totally compatible with his views about the role of nation states in history. The permanent struggle of the nation states against one another, whether through diplomatic or through economic means, was not only inevitable, but also a major source of political dynamism. However, he considered a high degree of dynamics and mobility to be essential ingredients of free, or, as they would be termed today, 'open' societies. Hence it was not unreasonable to identify himself with German 'world politics' on the one hand, and simultaneously to analyse the nature of imperialism in a thoroughly scholarly manner.

Absolutely central in Weber's thinking is the question of the social and cultural consequences of modern capitalism which he himself described as one of the great revolutionary forces in world history. Weber carefully researched into the origins of capitalism, and discovered that its rise was inseparably connected with those bourgeois values which were to be found in their purest form in Puritanism. He, indeed, was proud of this, and at times he demonstratively called himself 'a member of the bourgeois classes'. Yet, as is shown in the third chapter, Max Weber was anything but a blind partisan of modern capitalism. He analysed elaborately the social consequences of modern industrial capitalism, and he did not try to pass over its dehumanizing aspects. He pointed out that 'formal rationality' of capitalist institutions is necessarily associated with 'substantive irrationalities'; in this respect he largely anticipated Herbert Marcuse's criticism of the capitalist order. Yet he was firmly convinced that an easy alternative was not at hand. The solution suggested by Karl Marx was, in his opinion, incapable of solving the essential problem of how to preserve a maximum of individual freedom in industrial societies. Contrary to Marx he argued that the key issue was not the distribution of property, but the actual control of the managerial positions, for the latter rather than the former are the actual source of economic power. Therefore the nationalization of the means of production was unsuitable for the emancipation of the workers from 'alienation'; on the contrary it would make things worse, in as much

as the workers would become the helpless prey of impersonal bureaucracies. Whatever the shortcomings of his position may have been otherwise, the truth of part of Weber's criticism of traditional Marxism has been shown by historical developments since his sudden death in 1920. It follows from this that Max Weber was a staunch defender of a competitive capitalist system. Although he did not deny that capitalism was very far from being the best of all possible systems, he thought that for the time being at least it deserved preference over all other possible economic systems, for it alone guaranteed maximum social mobility. Under given conditions capitalism presented the best chances for the preservation of individual freedom and creative leadership in a bureaucratic world.

In his political sociology as well as in his political writings Weber was, for much the same reasons, primarily concerned with the problems of leadership. His famous ideal-typical theory of 'three pure types of legitimate domination' classifies the various forms in which political authority is considered legitimate in the opinion of the ruled; yet it also shows that no government can altogether dispose of an element of personal rule. In the fourth chapter the problem is raised of how Weber's concept of parliamentary democracy fits into the theory of the 'three types of legitimate domination'. Surprisingly it turns out that democratic rule is defined by Weber in his context as an anti-authoritarian version of charismatic domination rather than as a value-rational version of legal domination. This has important consequences for the evaluation of Weber's concept of democracy.

In the last chapter these observations are integrated in a comprehensive interpretation of Max Weber's political philosophy. He considered the main question of his day to be how to check the rise of impersonal bureaucracies, and thus how to provide for effective leadership. Therefore he eventually turned to the extreme device of advocating what he called a 'plebiscitarian leader-democracy'. Great politicians with charismatic quality should help to preserve a maximum of mobility in bureaucratic structures. They ought to keep democracy alive in spite of bureaucratic institutions, and to infuse new aims into the social process on the basis of the confidence of the masses in their charismatic qualities. In other words, they ought continuously to challenge the thoughtless routine of the 'politicians without a calling', and thereby help to keep the 'open society' open, in the face of various social trends which pointed to the eventual emergence of omnipotent bureaucratic structures. Weber's recourse to the 'otherworldly' power of charisma was by no means incidental; it was deeply rooted in his philosophy of history. He sincerely believed that there was no other means of fighting for a maximum of individual liberty and humanity in a bureaucratic age. It may well be that not all of his suggestions on how to solve the basic problems of western civilization will

be accepted today. But he certainly raised key problems which have lost none of their importance during the five decades which separate us from his own lifetime.