Max Weber, Parliamentarism and the Rhetorical Culture of Politics

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Abstract
In this article the concept of parliamentarism is extended to the concept of ‘government by speaking’ (Macaulay 1857), to a political form of rhetorical culture based on arguing for and against. Weber’s relationship to parliamentarism is reassessed in this perspective. The first part deals with his ‘parliamentary theory of knowledge’, which refers to his view that the competition of perspectives is constitutive of the human sciences. In this sense the Weberian ideal of scientific practices resembles politics in its openness to change and re-valuation of controversy. In the second part Weber’s critique of anti-parliamentarism is analysed as a rejection of political controversy and struggle. In the third part Weber’s theory of knowledge serves as a point of departure for re-reading his late writings on suffrage, parliamentarism and politicians. The opposition between bureaucracy and politics in particular can be rendered more intelligible in terms of Weber’s ‘parliamentary theory of knowledge’.

Keywords: Parliamentarism, rhetorical political culture, parliamentarization of Wilhelmine Germany, Max Weber’s ‘parliamentary’ theory of knowledge.

One of the remarkable differences between the British and German debates prior to and during World War I was the asymmetric relationship between parliamentary government and universal suffrage. In Britain, the parliament was accepted as the locus of high British political culture, while universal suffrage was regarded with suspicion. In Germany, the male suffrage of the Reichstag elections increasingly gained acceptance, whereas even liberals and socialists widely rejected parliamentarism.

Max Weber was one of just a few German proponents of parliamentarism during the war. In his pamphlet Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland, Weber also parodied those particularly fanatic ‘democrats’ who saw ‘parliamentarization’ as leading to corruption and the perversion of democracy (Weber 1917c: 186). His view regarding the democratization of suffrage and parliamentarism as complementary to one another was an exceptional position in the German context.

I will not enter into a dispute on the question of the extent to which we should regard Weber’s late stance for a plebiscitary Führerdemokratie with
a strong Reichspräsident as being a move away from parliamentarism (cf. Weber 1919a: 72; 1919b, for comments cf. Mommsen 1959/1974: 186-205 and Beetham 1974: 96-102). Nor will I ask whether Marcus Llanque, with his thesis that prior to the July crisis of 1917 Weber had not yet spoken of ‘parliamentary democracy’ and was only radicalized after it (Llanque 2000: 183, 237-39, 248-52), overestimates the differences between the versions of Weber’s texts.

My thesis is that an understanding of Weber’s position requires a broader view on parliamentarism as an expression of an eminently rhetorical political culture. It was precisely this rhetorical culture of speaking for and against, and seen as the crux of the British parliamentary tradition, that was so commonly despised in Wilhelmine politics, and it was this that Weber defended. In order to legitimate this view, I follow the procedure of Quentin Skinner (1978, 1996) and others who deny the distinction between major and minor works—in the case of Weber between his academic and his polemical writings. In reading Weber as a political theorist, the fragments on theorizing that are contained in his polemic writings deserve closer analysis. They become more intelligible when linked intra-textually to each other and con-textually to the contemporary political events, practices and claims.

1. Parliamentarism as a rhetorical political culture

The parliament has its etymological origins in the Italian parlare and in the French parler. This aspect, a polity of speech par excellence, is neglected in the histories of parliamentarism (for example, von Beyme 1970/1999; Kluxen 1983; Béranger 1999). Similarly, in terms of the histories of rhetoric, parliamentary speeches merely offer illustrations without providing any insight into the inherent link between the parliament and the speech as the paradigmatic mode of action. In recent years, however, the rhetorical dimension of parliamentary politics has attracted the interest of a number of scholars (Rousselier 1997, 2000; Goldberg 1998; Meisel 2001; Mergel 2002), and I will use this burgeoning literature in order to put forward a rhetorical revision of the concept of parliamentarism itself.

Among the critics of parliamentarism there is no lack of accusations regarding the parliament as being a talk-shop dominated by bavardage, the critique of the priority of words over deeds, rhetoric over reality, eloquence over substance and so on. This is a common topos in conservative, nationalist, populist, socialist or anarchist variants of anti-parliamentarism alike. However, especially among the nineteenth-century English politicians, we can identify some who are proud of the rhetorical dimension of
parliamentarism. In an essay on William Pitt (1857), Thomas Babington Macaulay uses the expression ‘government by speaking’, and Walter Bagehot’s Physics and Politics (1872) contains an eloquent chapter on ‘government by discussion’. In his Considerations on Representative Government, John Stuart Mill expresses the view that the accusations waged against bavardage are utterly misdirected:

Representative assemblies are often taunted by their enemies with being places of mere talk and ‘bavardage’. There has seldom been more misplaced derision. I know not how a representative assembly can more usefully employ itself than in talk, when the subject of talk is the great public interests of the country, and every sentence of it represents the opinion either of some important body of persons in the nation, or of an individual in whom some such body have reposed their confidence (Mill 1861: 117).

Mill also understands that the parliamentary procedure is based on the exchange of arguments and counter-arguments, the parliament being ‘[a] place where every interest and shade of opinion in the country can have its cause even passionately pleaded, [and] in the face of the government and of all other interests and opinions, can compel them to listen’ (Mill 1861: 117). In the parliament, open and public controversy amongst adversaries is the most basic procedure for dealing with political questions. As such, for Mill, the parliament is the paradigmatic locus of rhetorical politics.

This rhetorical character of parliamentarism can be better understood when the history of the parliamentary procedure is taken into account. One excellent old study, that of the Austrian jurist Josef Redlich’s Recht und Technik des englischen Parlamentarismus from 1905, is very illustrative in this respect. His main point is that parliamentarism is a regime of speech:

Die Rede ist es erst, die die verschiedenen Formen und Institute des parlamentarischen Apparats mit Inhalt und Sinn erfasst, die sie miteinander organisch verbindet; durch die Rede erst wird die Tätigkeit des Parlaments zweckbewusst gestaltet. Rede und Gegenrede sind erst die Mittel, durch welche die gesamten individuell-psychischen und die politischen Kräfte, wie sie durch den Prozess der Volkswahl im Hause der Abgeordneten vereinigt sind, zum Ausdruck und zur Wirksamkeit gelangen (Redlich 1905: 586-87).

1. ‘It is the speech which attributes content and sense to the different forms and institutions of the parliamentary apparatus and organically ties them together. Only the speech purposively arranges the activity of the parliament. Speech and counter-speech are ultimately the means by which the range of individual psychic and the political forces that assemble in the House of Commons through the process of
Redlich already insists on the co-presence of speeches for and against in the early phases of English parliamentary history (Redlich 1905: 46). He does not, however, mention the link between the parliamentary practice of speaking for and against and the lively rhetorical culture in the English Renaissance, as emphasized recently by Quentin Skinner (1996). By combining the independent insights of Redlich and Skinner, I claim that the parliamentary practices and procedures that mediate and accentuate aspects of this rhetorical culture were present in English politics well beyond the period, in which the fame of rhetoric came into decline.

The principles of parliamentary procedure that Redlich excavates from the history of the English parliament become intelligible in terms of the rhetorical culture of speaking for and against. This is the case for example with the ‘complete freedom of speech’ as a special privilege of the MPs (Redlich 1905: 37) and the parliamentary immunity of the MPs, (p. 38) both of which were already accepted in the fifteenth century. In the struggle against the Stuart kings, the independence of the speaker, the establishment of the specific parliamentary procedure, as well as the documentation of the proceedings of the parliament strengthened the privileges of the parliament against attempts to extend the royal prerogatives (pp. 55-66). The principle of equality between the MPs was directed against the attempt of the members of the Privy Council to obtain privileges in the parliamentary debates (pp. 66-67). The concern regarding minorities was another expression of the rhetorical understanding of parliamentary deliberations: it can be directly connected to the Protagorean principle of making a weaker case stronger through intra-parliamentary persuasion.

This rhetorical interpretation of the parliamentary procedure can be contrasted to the view put forward, for example, by François Guizot (1851/1880: 14) and Jürgen Habermas (1962: esp. 127-45) that the search for truth is the constitutive principle of parliamentarism. With an ironic nuance, Carl Schmitt parallels the truth-producing quality of parliamentary regimes to the ideology of a free market (Schmitt 1923: 45-46). When rhetoric has fallen into disrepute in the academic world, the authors mentioned typically fail to recognize or understand the distinct rhetorical legitimation of the parliamentary practices.

To sum up, neither ‘government by speaking’ nor ‘government by discussion’ refer to a kind of oratorical competition. The parliament, in
which political eloquence is assessed only in terms of artistic performance, is pre-political, subordinated to the politics of the cabinet, the bureaucracy or the party apparatus. The claims of the independence of the MPs from both parties and voters and the ideal that the parliamentary speeches themselves should be crucial aspects of the decisions that are taken up still allude to the parliament as a discussion club of gentlemen, not as a powerful political assembly.

The rhetorical point of parliamentary politics can be specified instead in terms of both the systematization of a procedure of speaking for and against and of the regularization of the controversy to present opposing points of views regarding any item to be discussed in the parliament. The formation of a specific parliamentary agenda of temporal items is intelligible only in the rhetorical terms of speech and counter-speech (for France cf. Pierre 1887; for the rotation between speakers for and against in early German parliaments see Botzenhart 1977: 472, 486 and Grünthal 1982: 372). The institutionalization of the opposition itself forms the next step in the creation of a political basis for criticizing the government.

The parliamentary style of politics is oriented toward the alteration of the views of an audience by means of speech. The number of adherents is the main Machtanteil of this kind of persuasive-dissuasive politics. Parliamentary rhetoric is, above all, a deliberative rhetoric of elected assemblies. The extension of the parliamentary style of rhetoric to the elections, through which the assembly is chosen, to assemblies with their popular audiences, as well as to analogical types of discussion and decision situations, can be understood as extensions of the parliamentary style of politics, not as alternatives to it.

2. Weber’s ‘parliamentary’ theory of knowledge

During the nineteenth century, the authority of science replaced tradition and monarchy as the main competitor of the parliamentary style of politics. Positivistic and other approaches longed to eliminate the rhetorical politics of controversy by means of the ‘scientization’ of politics. An alternative view, indebted to ancient rhetoric and the sophists, rejected the search for a certain kind of knowledge. The most prominent proponent of the perspectivistic view of knowledge was Friedrich Nietzsche. His relationship to rhetoric has recently been analysed and his Basel lectures on ancient rhetoric have been published for the first time (Nietzsche 1995). Here, however, I will only briefly mention his famous figure of Umwertung der Werte, which forms an exemplary case of a ‘paradiastolic’ rhetorical redescriptions of the normative dimension of concepts (cf. Palonen 1999 and Skinner 1999).
Max Weber refined the Nietzschean perspective of knowledge and the human sciences in his famous *Objektivität* article of 1904. By accentuating the rhetorical aspects of this article we can better understand the significance of the political dimension in Weber’s theory of knowledge and the human sciences. This is manifested in the following programmatic formulation of Weberian perspectivism.

As in politics, there is neither authority nor neutral instances in science. Objectivity is only possible within the competition between perspectives, and the concepts are the key instruments in this struggle: ‘die Begriffe [sind] nicht Ziel, sondern Mittel zum Zweck der Erkenntnis der unter individuellen Gesichtspunkten bedeutsamen Zusammenhänge: gerade weil die Inhalte der historischen Begriffe notwendig wandelbar sind, müssen sie jeweils notwendig scharf formuliert werden’ (Weber 1904b: 208-209). By rendering the analysis of the conceptual struggles an instrument of understanding the contestational character of academic research, Weber almost sketches a programme of *Begriffsgeschichte avant la lettre* (cf. Palonen 2000).

2. There is no simply ‘objective’ scientific analysis of cultural life or—although this perhaps implies something more restricted, but for our purpose certainly nothing essentially different—of ‘social phenomena’ independent of specific and ‘one-sided’ viewpoints from which they are—explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously—chosen, analysed and descriptively structured as the subject matter of the research.

3. The concepts are not the aim but rather the means to the end of the recognition of the relationships, which are significant from individual viewpoints—especially because as the contents of historical concepts are necessarily alterable, they must be formulated sharply in each case.

4. The apparatus of ideas, which the past has developed through reflective
Academic controversies are indispensable to ‘progress’ in the human sciences. For Weber, expressions such as Gesichtspunkte, Auseinandersetzung and Kampf are not metaphors but indicators of the presence of a rhetorical and political dimension within the research process itself. Weber’s view on conceptual change is analogous to the alternation in government through the shifting of electoral or parliamentary majorities. With an ‘einseitige Steigerung’ (Palonen 2000: 191), we could speak of Max Weber’s ‘parliamentary’ view on the human sciences as an extension of the parliamentary politics of controversy. This is the rhetorical message of the above-quoted Weberian paragraph.

Weber’s defence of the Wertfreiheit of academic research has a double edge. It is, of course, directed against the patronage-cum-exclusion system of the Prussian universities. More crucially, however, he emphasizes that it is up to the political agents themselves to choose the normative principles. The Schmollerian appeal to the authority of ‘science’ is illusory, but, above all, it denies the freedom of political agents. Weber expresses this idea in the first pages of the Objektivität article:

...so kann an der Abwägung von Zweck und Folgen des Handelns gegeneinander keine Selbstbesinnung verantwortlich handelnder Menschen vorbeigehen... Jene Abwägung selbst nun aber zur Entscheidung zu bringen, ist freilich nicht mehr eine mögliche Aufgabe der Wissenschaft, sondern des willenden Menschen: er wägt und wählt nach seinem eigenen Gewissen und seiner persönlichen Weltanschauung zwischen den Werten, um die es sich handelt. Die Wissenschaft kann ihm zu dem Bewusstsein verhelfen, dass alles Handeln, und natürlich auch, je nach den Umständen, das Nicht-Handeln, in seinen Konsequenzen eine Parteinahme zugunsten bestimmter Werte bedeutet, und damit — was heute so besonders gern verkannt wird — regelmäßig gegen andere. Die Wahl zu treffen, ist seine Sache (Weber 1904b: 150).5

thinking—which in fact means the reflective reshaping of the immediately given reality—and integration into those concepts that existed in accordance with its state of knowledge and the direction of its interest—is permanently confronted with the portion of new knowledge that we are willing and able to gain from reality. It is precisely in this struggle that the progress of the human sciences (Kulturwissenschaften) occurs.

5. ...so, no stocktaking of responsible acting people can fail to see the consideration of the end and the consequences of acting... But the culmination of this weighing itself into a decision is of course no longer a possible task of science, but, rather, of the willing person: he weighs the values in question and chooses between them according to his own conscience and his personal Weltanschauung. Science (Wissenschaft) can lead him to the awareness that all acting, and — according to the circumstances — certainly also not-acting, includes the consequences of taking a stand for certain values and — what particularly today is often missed — regularly against others. Making the choice is his own business.
On the performative level of activities, Weber sees research as more reminiscent of politics than is commonly acknowledged due to the key role of controversy in the scholarly activity itself. Of course, the scholar is relieved from the existential commitments of the politician and is not bound by the parliamentary majorities, which renders him or her much freer to conduct thought experiments than the politician, who is obligated to worry about the lives of other persons. But in a broader sense, both research and politics, at least in parliamentary regimes and universities respecting the principles of Lernfreiheit and Lehrfreiheit are practices carried out within a context that is appreciative of open controversy. Both are opposed to bureaucratic rule, and we may also regard the parliamentary view of knowledge as an instrument of the struggle against bureaucracy in the academic world.

3. Weber’s critique of anti-parliamentarism

The parliamentary government was a key element of Weber’s idealization of British politics. He repeatedly used Britain as a model example of a well-functioning and effective parliamentary regime. It served as point of contrast for the quasi-parliamentary politics of the German Empire. In 1904, he entered into a polemic against Eugen Jagemann’s call for the elimination of the parliamentary element from the imperial constitution. Weber saw this as a fashionable attempt to rejuvenate the old form of anti-parliamentarism (against Schmoller’s critique of Parlamentsgerede, cf. Weber 1905: 96):


6. The rumination of subaltern minds regarding the possibility of an extra-parliamentarian regime belongs to the system of pinpricks by which, year after year, certain courtly and agrarian circles produce propaganda about our parliamentary institutions. It is undeniable that the belief in the out-datedness of the parliament and the like—something one might have heard in the same way in England 250 years ago nowadays among us belongs to such an extent to ‘good form’ that it practically requires a certain level of courage to strictly oppose this fashionable babble (Weber 1904a: 17).
Weber’s second point was directed against the German system of government in the name of the efficiency of the parliamentary regime (Weber 1904a). Why did he consider a parliamentary regime to be more efficient than a constitutional monarchy? Evoking the Objektivität article from the same year, we could suggest that the lack of discussion surrounding the alternatives and the corresponding arbitrariness of the governmental decisions appear to him as weighty grounds for the decline of German efficiency and prestige. This was also the point of Weber’s critique of Wilhelm II in a footnote from 1906, in which he referred once again to the antiparliamentary Gerede: ‘Dieses Gerede ist zurzeit schon deshalb deplaziert, weil es zu kritischer Vergleichung der gegenwärtigen Leistungen der Länder mit parlamentarisch-demokratischem und denjenigen mit “persönlichem” Regiment auffordert’ (Weber 1906a: 19). Weber inverts the old accusation that parliamentarism, as a ‘demagogical’ regime, has a tendency toward arbitrary rule, against the ‘personal regime’ of a monarch. The latter is extremely arbitrary, whereas the deliberation between competing perspectives has the potential to reduce this arbitrariness, to lead to moderate and balanced results, not least of which in the sphere of foreign policy.

Weber’s seemingly modest writings on Russia are key to his political theorizing, which is always linked to an historical analysis of the situation. The rural semstvos were not parliaments, their powers were highly limited, although they did allow for political practice from below, and their national congress was experienced in 1904 as a threat to the Czarist regime. Following the revolutionary events of 1905 and the summoning of a national Duma, Weber saw the bases of the semstvos as undermined. He saw in the semstvos precursors of a parliamentary style of politics as suppressed by the bureaucratically controlled Duma. The political point of individual rights and the counterweight to bureaucratic and centralist rule and the defence of the ‘individualistic’ notion of ‘inalienable human rights’ was better realized in the semstvos than in the Duma (Weber 1906a: 98).

In Weber’s second article on Russia, one of the main chapters is dedicated to the ‘Konstitution’ and the Duma as the first Russian ‘Parlament’ – both in quotation marks (Weber 1906b: 172). According to him, many of the key principles of West-European parliamentary procedures were severely limited in the Russian ‘constitution’, primarily the parliamentary immunity of the members of the Duma and the decisions regarding

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7. This babble is currently already misplaced as it asks us to critically compare the present achievements of countries with a parliamentary democratic regime to those with a ‘personal’ regime.
the irregularities in the elections (Weber 1906b: 172). The parliamentary principles were violated even more gravely in the Reichsrat (Upper House), which was controlled by the Czar, in the merely consultative character of the Duma, its limited budgetary powers, the parliamentary rights of initiative and interpellation, as well as in the extraordinary powers left to the Czar (Weber 1906b: 174-88).

A monarchist and bureaucratic regime is so arbitrary that it can neither allow for even modest parliamentary control nor follow the procedures and practices of a parliamentary regime. The lack of self-government in the internal agenda of the Duma gave it much fewer powers than the semstvos in order to serve as a counterweight to the Czar and his bureaucracy. The concern surrounding the lack of a counterweight against bureaucratic rule (for Germany cf. Weber 1910: 128) serves as a further expression of Weber’s recourse to the parliamentary model, in the sense of the establishment of the possibility to argue both for and against.

In a debate in Heidelberg that opposed Weber to his own successor to the Nationalökonomie chair, Eberhard Gothein, he reiterated his insistence on the superior results of parliamentary regimes, including the stronger influence (Einfluss) of the king in England. He demanded the removal of the obstacles to parliamentarism: ‘Bremser brauche man also dem Parlamentarismus gegenüber nicht; dass seine Bäume in Deutschland nicht in den Himmel wachsen, dafür sorge man schon’ (Weber 1908: 134). In other words, Weber admits that perhaps parliamentarism does indeed also have a shadowy side (for the critique of Parlamentspatronage Weber 1905: 96), but the obstacles are all currently unsurpassable, and there is no time to be concerned with such shadows. Weber clearly uses the Protagorean argument in order to strengthen the weaker logos, thus illustrating the link between his pro-parliamentary politics and the parliamentary theory of knowledge (for a similar argument cf. Weber 1906a: 99).

At the end of his intervention against Gothein he affirms the need for parliamentarism by alluding to the ‘Daily Telegraph Affair’, which is a reference to an ‘interview’ with Wilhelm II:

Alles in allem: einen Parlamentarismus braucht Deutschland, denn es sei reif dafür. Und wenn von bestimmter Seite jüngst droben in Freiburg gesagt wurde, eine Erweiterung parlamentarischer Rechte führe Zersetzung herbei, so sei es unbegreiflich, wie sich die deutsche Nation so etwas gefallen lassen kann (Weber 1908: 134).

8. We do not need any restraints on parliamentarism — it’s already bad enough that this tree has failed to grow to its proper height.

9. All things considered, Germany needs parliamentarism because she is ripe for it. And when a certain quarter up in Freiburg said recently that an extension of
The introduction of a parliamentary regime was not unproblematic within the federal structure of the German empire, and Weber did not propose any distinct models of this type of regime. It is obvious that his sympathies lay with the English ‘parliamentary sovereignty’, with its two-party system and clear alternation in government rather than with the French practice of a coalition government, which tended frequently to be dismissed by the parliament during the electoral term (Weber 1906b: 20; for a reappraisal of the Third Republic practice cf. Rousselier 1997: 2000).

4. The parlamentarization of the German political culture

The preceding sections serve as a Verfremdungseffekt that enables me to broaden both the conceptual and contextual references in the analysis of Weber’s late detailed writings on parliamentarism in terms of the rhetorical paradigm. His essay *Das preussische Wahlrecht*, published in April 1917, ends with an apology for the ideal type of the leading parliamentary politician, whose source of power is the election by universal suffrage. ‘Heute bedarf es der freien Bühne der allgemeinen Volkswahl, um jene spezifisch politischen Begabungen an das Tageslicht zu bringen, die…gehindert werden, in die Höhe zu kommen’ (Weber 1917a: 100).10

The open competition in democratic elections forms the only possible counterweight to the rule of officialdom and their narrow Fachwissen. It is precisely the indispensable nature of this factual knowledge that causes the need for counter-knowledge to arise. The leading politician, elected by the citizens, whose daily life was dominated by the Fachmenschen, is the only type of human being that can effectively counter the rule of officialdom due to the specific competences created by the experiences of electoral competition and parliamentary deliberation (Weber 1917a: 100-101).

According to Weber’s historical analysis, the expansion of bureaucracy is an overwhelming tendency which requires political counterweights. The construction of such a counterweight is analogous to the construction of a competing theoretical perspective to a hegemonic viewpoint. The very notion of competing views on knowledge and, analogously, competing sources of power, is incompatible with bureaucratic rule. This is based not only on the Fachwissen but also on the Dienstwissen and parliamentary rights would be destructive, it is incomprehensible that the German nation could submit to this.

10. Today a free stage for universal popular election (Volkswahl) is needed in order to bring to light the specific political talents, which...are obstructed from appearing.
Amtsgeheimnis, as Weber puts it the same year (Weber 1917b: 119-20). In Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland, he formulates in explicit terms the link between this form of knowledge and the claim of uncontrolled power and insists that the powerlessness of the Reichstag is due to the lack of control over bureaucratic knowledge. ‘Je nach den Umständen kommen Akteneinsicht, Augenscheineinnahme, äusserstensfalls aber wiederum: das eidliche Kreuzverhör der Beteiligten als Zeugen vor einer Parlamentskommission in Betracht. Auch dieses Recht fehlt dem Reichstag’ (Weber 1918: 236). ¹¹ The core of bureaucratic rule lies in the official secrecy, Dienstgeheimnis, a means of protecting the administration from control (Weber 1918: 236).

For the Weberian ‘parliamentary’ theory of knowledge, the coalition of Fachwissen, Dienstwissen and Geheimwissen is a way of immunizing a definite viewpoint against the control of competing perspectives. Bureaucratic claims tend to doom any competing forms of power to inferiority and to regard the perspective of the offices as the only legitimate view — as a view based on facts as opposed to speculations. This is diametrically opposed to the Weberian ideal of a parliamentary style of competition in both politics and science. The bureaucratic perspective also tends to reduce politics to administration, and its absolutisation of factual knowledge devalues the constitutive role of chances, decisions and judgements for politics. For Weber, the main difference between the politician and the official concerns their responsibility. Similar to the responsibilities of entrepreneurs, the politicians’ responsibilities are based on the struggle with competitors:


From this perspective we can also understand better why, for Weber, not only bureaucratic but also academic knowledge can serve as a source of power. A further criterion for the priority of the parliamentary and electoral sources of power over those based on factual or academic knowledge can be seen in their publicity, one of the main points of

¹¹. According to the respective circumstances, the inspection of records, judicial inspection, and, again at the very outside, the cross-examination under oath of the persons involved as witnesses before parliamentary commission, come into question. The Reichstag lacks also this right.

¹². In reality, ‘above the parties’ means the official should remain outside (beyond) the struggle for power for its own sake. Struggle for personal power and the corresponding personal responsibility for his cause (Sache) is the very element in which the politician and the entrepreneur live and breathe.

A second main link between parliamentarism and rhetoric in Weber’s later writings concerns the relationship between the principles of numbers and compromise, as exposed in his pamphlet Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland. Weber describes the various contractual compromises that characterize the old estate regimes and concludes that it is here that we can detect a major break between the constitutional and parliamentary forms of government.

Im konstitutionellen Staat ruht in entscheidenden Punkten auch heute noch das staatliche Handeln...im Rechtssinn und politisch, auf dem Kompromiss... Nur als das Kompromiss die rechtliche Grundlage politischen Handelns war, war auch die ständische Berufsgruppenbildung ihrem Wesen nach am Platz. Nicht aber da, wo der Stimmzettel regiert: für eine Parlamentswahl (Weber 1917c: 169).13

This difference could also be described as concerning various forms of rhetoric. The regimes of compromise practice a kind of rhetoric of negotiations between given partners. The parliamentary and electoral regimes are based on persuasion and voting, as a final deliberative move, both in the assembly and in elections. Negotiation and compromise exist in parliamentary regimes, but they are subordinated to the principle of numerical majority, to the ‘ultima ratio des Stimmzettels im Hintergrund’ (Weber 1917c: 169). The competence of a parliamentary and electoral politician is based on her ability to count and anticipate votes, as shares of power, and those who are too romantic to want to engage in this practice should stay well away from politics (Weber 1917c: 169).

The majority principle and the Zifferndemokratie (Weber 1917c: 169) also express the individualist basis of parliamentary regimes. The partners and parties involved in the negotiations are constituted by elections and parliamentary deliberations, and the majorities are performative, that is dependent upon the speeches and votes of individuals. This is also expressed by Weber’s concept of the Staatsbürger, who is constituted into a political unit by means of her equal right to vote and an abstraction from her social being (op. cit. 170).

The rhetoric of parliamentary deliberations presupposes that the MPs are not mere delegates of the voters. Weber, in a sense, extends the parliamentary model to elections, particularly in his concept of the occa-

13. In the constitutional state the governmental action...rests, still today, in crucial points—juridically and politically—on the compromise... Only once the compromise was the legal basis of political action did the division of professions by estate (ständisch) have a proper place. But not where the voting slip rules: in parliamentary elections.
sional politician. ‘“Gelegenheits”politiker” sind wir alle, wenn wir unseren Wahlzettel abgeben oder eine ähnliche Willensäußerung: etwa Beifall oder Protest in einer “politischen” Versammlung, vollziehen, eine “politische” Rede halten usw.,— und bei vielen Menschen beschränkt sich ihre ganze Beziehung zur Politik darauf’ (Weber 1919: 41). Voting in elections is an individual act par excellence, and it is analogous to the decisions that are made through voting in the parliament.

The deliberative activity of weighing and ranking the alternatives forms one of the main focuses of Weber’s description of the performance of the parliamentarians. In the Wahlrecht pamphlet he writes:

Das ist die spezifische Leistung des Parlaments: dass es ermöglicht, durch Verhandlung und Vergleich das relativ Beste zustande zu bringen, und diese Leistung wird mit dem gleichen Opfer erkauft, welches der Wähler bei der Parlamentswahl in der Form zu bringen hat, dass er nur für die ihm relativ genehmste Partei optieren kann. Diese rein technische Überlegenheit parlamentarischer Gesetzgebung ist durch nichts zu ersetzen…

(Weber 1917c: 188).

The rhetorical point is that there are no pre-conceived alternatives in parliamentary politics. The items discussed and voted on ought to be judged in terms of their political weight, on which Weber writes: ‘dass …ein Parlamentarier im Kampf der Parteien zu lernen vermag, die Tragweite des Wortes zu wägen’ (Weber 1917c: 187). The assessment of the political ‘weight’ of words presupposes a detailed ranking of one’s own aims in relation to those of adversaries, as well as a preparedness to alter standpoints and priorities during the parliamentary deliberations. The above-quoted paragraph helps us to understand why Weber extends the situation of the parliamentarian to the voter—and not vice versa—and why he attempts to ‘teach’ voters to act in the ballot box as if they themselves were MPs.

Not all of Weber’s comments on parliamentary practices and conventions are positive at the outset. In the Parlament volume he distinguishes between Arbeitsparlament and Redeparlament. The lack of power cannot be compensated by oratorical qualities. The aim of Weber’s advocacy of a

14. We are all ‘occasional’ politicians when we post our ballot slips or express our will in some similar way, such as voicing approval or protest at a ‘political’ meeting, making a ‘political’ speech and so on, and for many people this is the entire extent of their involvement in politics.

15. That is the specific achievement of the parliament: it makes it possible to accomplish the relative best by means of negotiation and arrangement, and this achievement is purchased by the same sacrifice made by a voter in the parliamentary election insofar as he can only opt for the relatively most agreeable party. Nothing can replace this purely technical superiority of parliamentary legislation.

British-style working parliament, ‘solches, welches die Verwaltung fortlaufend mitarbeitend kontrolliert’ (Weber 1918: 234), is again to create a counterweight to bureaucracy. The power of the bureaucracy is indispensable and cannot be replaced by the parliament, but it is precisely for this reason that the power shares of the parliament shall be extended to the control of bureaucracy.

Weber by no means underestimates the power shares created by speech. On the contrary, in his discussion of the types of politicians, particularly of the advocate and the journalist, he emphasizes the decisive role of speech as a mark of the competence of the politician, for example in this passage commenting on the changing styles of parliamentary eloquence:


Oratorical competence appears to Weber as a common characteristic of the ideal type of politician. The criteria for a brilliant speech may vary greatly, but it is clear that it is impossible to become a leading politician without possessing a certain degree of eloquence. Weber speaks of demagogy in both a derogatory and appreciative sense. When he denounces Wilhelm II as a demagogue, he is referring to a demagogue in a negative sense (cf. Weber 1918: 210), although this does not prevent him from appreciating advocates as politicians precisely because of their demagogical competence (Weber 1919a: 53). Any politician must be a demagogue before a popular audience. He formulates this idea in ‘Politik als Beruf’ by accentuating the historical link between the ancient demagogos and the modern politician, even as an important aspect of the occidental Sonderweg (Weber 1919a: 38).

16. How, then, is this leadership selected? And first, on the basis of what ability? Here, what matters most—apart from the all-encompassing decisive qualities of will—is of course the power of demagogic speech. Its nature has changed since the times when, as Cobden indicated, the appeal was to reason, via Gladstone, a master of the technique of seeming soberly to ‘let the facts speak for themselves’, down to the present, where purely emotive means, like those employed by the Salvation Army, are often used in order to stir the masses.
Weber makes a direct connection between the figure of Pericles, the strategist whose power was based on elections, unlike other officials in ancient Athens, to the modern leading politician. The demagogic qualities are now extended by his emphasis on either speech or writing as a decisive instrument of the political leader, and especially that of a journalist as a politician (Weber 1919a: 54).

Max Weber’s writings are characterized by a provocative attitude toward the anti-political mood of his listening and reading audiences. This is, however, necessary for his project of rehabilitating politics and politicians. Such an Umwertung der Werte did not only concern the rhetorical qualities of politicians, journalists and so on, but also the rhetorical style of thinking itself, as it is paradigmatically represented by the parliamentary mode of acting politically (cf. Palonen 2002).

A provocative formulation on the real audience of parliamentary speeches is contained in the following passage of the Parlament pamphlet. ‘Reden, die ein Abgeordneter hält, sind heute keine persönlichen Bekenntnisse mehr, noch viel weniger Versuche, die Gegner umzustimmen. Sondern sie sind amtliche Erklärungen der Partei, welche dem Lande “zum Fenster hinaus” abgegeben werden’ (Weber 1918: 230). Here again we see that Weber is by no means an admirer of French parliamentarism, in which speeches had the potential to alter the fate of governmental coalitions (Weber 1918: 259, 273), but instead prefers the British style, in which the party discipline is taken for granted and parliamentary speeches seldom, if ever, change the entire political constellation. The perspectivistic controversy in the parliament does not require that governments be overthrown by the rhetorical qualities of parliamentary speeches. Weber’s illusionless view was, rather, that it was through the elections that the parliamentary majorities were created and altered.

The second point of the above-quoted passage focuses on the situation that in a parliament with a stable governmental majority, speeches are held for the electorate rather than for the other MPs. This by no means diminishes the value of the parliamentary paradigm of politics, but instead even accentuates it by extending the parliamentary-style audience to the electorate. Perhaps this requires more than Weber seems to assume, for the auditory and visual presence of the MPs, especially of the adversaries, should be regarded as a crucial condition of the parliamentary style of politics.

17. Speeches given by a member of parliament are today no longer statements of personal convictions, and far less are they attempts to change the opponents’ mind. Rather, they are official declarations of a given party, which are being addressed to the country at large ‘through a window’.
5. Toward a rhetorical redescription of parliamentarism

In his Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes (Skinner 1996: especially chapter 4), Quentin Skinner suggests the procedure of rhetorical re-description in order to facilitate the understanding of conceptual changes (cf. also Skinner 1999 and the analysis in Palonen 2003: chapter 6). The scheme paradiastole, in which virtues are devaluated and vices are perhaps not simply revaluated but rendered harmless, allows us understand the changes in the normative colour of concepts.

I have practised here a rhetorical redescription of the very concept of parliamentarism in order to reinterpret Weber’s relationship to it. I have extended its ‘range of reference’ (see Skinner 1979) by shifting its focus from constitutional law to rhetoric and from the mere statement of a majority to the procedure of persuading the audience by means of speaking for and against. This also allows for the extension of the range of parliamentary styles of politics from the national parliament to elections, party conferences and to public debate in general. In this perspective parliamentary politics appears as both the paradigmatic manifestation of a culture of controversy and a rhetorical style of politics par excellence.

Within the Weberian œuvre, this rhetorical extension of the concept of parliamentarism also allows us to specify the political point of his search for the counterweights to bureaucratization. It is not so much the legal rule of the officialdom as the tendency of the officialdom to monopolize and render their factual knowledge secret that he is against. What I have referred to as Weber’s ‘parliamentary theory of knowledge’ rehabilitates the value of competition and deliberation in the formation and assessment of knowledge. The parliamentary politician is an ideal typical figure who is competent to use such knowledge against the bureaucratic tendencies and toward monopoly and secrecy.

In the German context, it is this rhetorical concept of parliamentarism that Max Weber reevaluates. In his wartime writings this revaluation is expressed in the form of a conscious attempt to rehabilitate the British political culture as a culture of conducting controversies by speaking. He does not affirm the aesthetic value of parliamentary speaking but, rather, the efficiency of a rhetorical procedure in which questions are examined and dealt with from opposite sides. This also appears as his specific defence of the superiority of the government by politicians of the rule of the officialdom.
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