



Max Weber, Politics and the Crisis of Historicism

January 2012

Stefan Eich & Adam Tooze

(Yale University, Departments of Political Science and History)

stefan.eich@yale.edu

adam.tooze@yale.edu

Working paper. Comments welcome.

Please do not cite or circulate without permission.

Max Weber, Politics and the Crisis of Historicism

January 2012

Stefan Eich & Adam Tooze

I

Today, there are calls from many sides for a new recognition of the importance of political action and history in the name of a new political realism.¹ This is certainly welcome. But as we are going to argue in this paper an empty call for history can be just as unhelpful as a completely ahistorical analysis. More contentiously we will suggest that the most striking example of the dangers of such an ahistorical invocation of history is the common call for a return to Max Weber and his essay “Politics as a Vocation”. It is not hard to see why Weber’s text has become so widely read. If we take the central problem of political thought to be the question of means and ends and how to align them under the constraints of a moral code, then Weber’s text has the makings of a pedagogic classic. It is short, pugnacious and fierce in the conclusions it draws. The text provides an unforgettable account of the dilemmas of political life and a compelling sketch of Weber’s ideal political personality. But apart from the bleak Lutheran heroics of Weber’s rhetoric what exactly does Weber have to offer the reader seeking to enrich our understanding of political action? We are going to argue that the answer is surprisingly little. In fact, this reliance on Weber tends, if anything, to impoverish our understanding.

There are two types of “Weber problems” that we want to highlight in this paper. The easiest to diagnose and hopefully to immunize against is the allure of Weber’s dramatic posture of crisis. The way to productively tackle this problem, we want to suggest, is to read him with an extremely high degree of historical awareness. Weber delivered “Politics as a Vocation” in early

¹ Even Habermas, in what can only be described as a bewildering departure, is calling for a revival of democratic political leadership. Jürgen Habermas, 'Leadership and Leitkultur', *The New York Times*, 28 October 2010.

1919 in the midst of a revolutionary conjuncture of dramatic proportions and his rhetoric carries with it the emotion of that moment. By building our vision of politics on Weber's grim extrapolation of this moment of crisis we do not get the sober and cool diagnosis promised by political realism but instead prolong a violently charged vision of heroic choice amidst a "polar night of icy darkness and hardness". If Weber is placed in his historical context and if we focus on his understanding of history, he appears not as a door opener to a historically situated theory of political action but as an extremely telling dead end, a dead end whose political and intellectual implications were realized at the time. Rather than embracing Weber uncritically we would do well to appreciate the wider crisis in political and historical thought at the beginning of the twentieth century with which Weber grappled and which he himself deepened.

If we push further to try to grasp the origins of Weber's impasse we encounter a deeper set of problems. The crisis of Weber's fixation on the German nation state was compounded in a truly bizarre amalgam by the radical subjectivism of his methodological stance. An early essay by Seyla Benhabib proves extremely helpful in exposing the way in which Weber's peculiar neo-Kantianism left him unable to think constructively about social praxis. Benhabib was not addressing herself to political action per se. But as we will try to show, her point regarding Weber's neo-Kantianism can in fact be linked to his increasingly narrow political vista and his fixation on the nation state by way of a third mediating factor, namely the crisis of historicism. Once a major area of historiographical interest, the crisis of historicism has of late slipped from view.² Its effects on Weber, however, were profound. This becomes clear when we compare his essay on politics to the writings of two close contemporaries—Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Troeltsch. These two are neglected but pivotal figures in the intellectual history of early

² George C. Iggers, *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968).

twentieth-century Germany. Meinecke was a crucial foil for Carl Schmitt. Troeltsch provides a vital link between Dilthey and the discussions in the philosophy of history in the 1920s that spawned Heideggerian notions of historicity on the one hand and “the Frankfurt debates” on the other. If one wished to complete the circle one might say that whereas Heidegger and others in the 1920s were responding to Weber’s essay on “Science as a Vocation”, it was Meinecke and Troeltsch who were taking up the challenge laid down by Weber in “Politics as a Vocation”.

The difficulties in “Politics as a Vocation” should not therefore be set aside as expressions of Weber’s off the cuff xenophobia and chauvinism. They are expressions of a deeper intellectual impasse. And unlike Weber’s Lutheran posturing, the questions posed in these discussions of the philosophy of history in the 1920s cannot be dismissed as mere symptoms of crisis. They have haunted social theory down to the present day. Most social thought still moves within the parameters defined by those arguments. As we hope to show in the final section they speak directly to questions at stake between Habermas and his critics concerning the Weberian legacy and the current crisis of the European Union—*the* constructive political project of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, *the* project through which the continent has struggled to escape the crisis of the nation state that left Weber so distraught.

II

The evacuation of history in “Politics as a Vocation” begins with a gesture that could easily be mistaken for a reference to history. Max Weber opens his essay by quoting Trotsky at the climactic peace negotiations at Brest Litovsk between revolutionary Russia and the Central Powers in January 1918. “*Every state is founded on force*, said Trotsky...”, Weber quotes approvingly, before adding: “That is indeed right. If no social institutions existed which knew the use of violence, then the concept of ‘state’ would be eliminated, and a condition would emerge

that could be designated as ‘anarchy,’ in the specific sense of this word. Of course, force is certainly not the normal or the only means of the state—nobody says that—but force is a means specific to the state.”³ This identification of politics with the state and the state with force is the basis from which Weber develops his famously bleak conclusions about the impossibility of reconciling morality with the necessities of power, the contrast which gives such gloomy drama to his portrait of the politician.

To find an avid newspaper reader and commentator, such as Weber, quoting Trotsky at Brest Litovsk is not surprising. The peace talks at the fortress of Brest between the Central Powers, Russia and Ukraine that were supposed to confirm Germany’s victory on the Eastern front of World War I stretched between December 1917 and March 1918. Unlike at Versailles there was real argument between the three sides—the Central Powers, Russia, Ukraine—conducted according to the rules of the “new diplomacy” amidst the full glare of publicity. Near stenographic reports of the proceedings reached Germany through no less than three newspaper editions a day. Given that Brest is generally seen as a triumph for Germany, they caused far more controversy than has generally been recognized. Along with the disastrous decision to launch unrestricted U Boat war in the Atlantic in January 1917 they became a touchstone for critics of Germany’s Imperial regime such as Weber. Because of Trotsky’s participation and because of the cerebral bent of his German counterparts, above all Richard von Kühlmann, the German Secretary of State, the discussions at Brest were of genuine intellectual interest to political commentators.

³ Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation [1919]', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 78. For the German original see Max Weber, 'Politik als Beruf', in *Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe [hereafter MWG], I/17*, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Wolfgang Schluchter, and Birgitt Morgenbrod, eds. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

Trotsky's comment came from one of the most revealing and famous exchanges. The discussions at Brest turned on the question of legitimate self-determination. The Bolsheviks challenged the model of self-determination that the German military authorities were claiming to have applied to the Baltic states they were occupying. General Hoffman, the German principal military negotiator, eventually lost his patience and rebutted the Bolshevik critique by pointing out that they themselves were in the process of violently asserting their control throughout the former territories of the Tsarist Empire. Trotsky was unabashed and replied with a statement that certainly according to German reports featured the sentence to which Weber would refer in "Politics as a Vocation" almost exactly a year later.

But as soon as we pause to think about the point that Weber attributes to Trotsky, the doubt begins to creep in. Is it probable that Trotsky really meant what Weber uses him to say? Would a Marxist dialectician of Trotsky's caliber really have uttered such a blank ahistorical claim? Once we turn to either the minutes of the Brest talks or indeed to the newspaper account that Weber is most likely to have read, it becomes clear that Weber was, to put it kindly, performing a creative misreading. The precise wordings offered by various accounts differ but in a particularly heated exchange on 17 January 1918 Trotsky appears to have said something like the following:

"... the General is completely right when he says that our government is founded on power. In all history we have known only such governments. *So long as society consists of warring classes the power of the government will rest on strength and will assert its domination through force.* ... What other governments object to in our actions is the fact that we do not lock up the strikers, but the capitalists who lock out the workers, the fact that we do not shoot the peasants who raise their claim to the land, but that we arrest the large landowners and officers who want to shoot the peasants... We believe that the violence that we apply, the violence that is supported by millions of workers and peasants

and that is directed against a minority which seeks to keep the people in servitude; this violence is a *holy and historically progressive force*.”⁴

Trotsky was in fact offering not Weber’s ahistorical truism but the standard Bolshevik justification for violence. It was a justification that rested on history. Weber wrote the history out of Trotsky’s vision. Why does Weber push historicity out of the picture? Why does Weber refuse Trotsky the claim that political action could be justified by historical progression? What argument does Weber offer for this move?

Once we are alerted to this twist in Weber’s use of evidence, we realize that turning Trotsky from a revolutionary actor into an ahistorical sociologist of power is just the first of a series of obstacles to acknowledging historically consequential political action that Weber erects in his essay. Having cited a Bolshevik as his star witness, Weber seems bent in the rest of the essay on diminishing the significance of the historic drama unfolding around him. He repeatedly employs reductive and deflationary comparisons, invoking the “objective” regularities of his own sociology to dismiss claims by political actors to have effected any kind of radical change. These are not reasoned conclusions derived from a close historical analysis of the limits of agency under modern conditions, but axioms built into his account from the start. “Politics as a Vocation” is marked by this aporia throughout.

Having been invited to speak on “Politics as a Vocation” to an audience of liberal patriotic students in Munich on 28 January 1919—thirteen days after the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin and nine days after the election for the Constituent Assembly of the Weimar Republic, which delivered a resounding majority for the Republican

⁴ Werner Hahlweg, *Ein unveröffentlichter Band aus dem Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der deutschen Verfassungsgebenden Nationalversammlung und des deutschen Reichstages* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1971), p. 332. (Emphasis added.) John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Brest-Litovsk. The Forgotten Peace, March 1918* (London: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 161-163. Wheeler-Bennett had the privilege of confirming his account with Trotsky in Mexico. For the German newspaper reports see “Die Verhandlungen in Brest Litovsk. Die russische Antwort,” *Frankfurter Zeitung* (17 January 1918) Nr. 17, Zweite Morgenausgabe, Blatt 1.

project—Weber did his best to deny any real historic significance to either the Russian or the German revolutions, including the radical socialist government that still ruled in Munich itself.

“This carnival,” Weber despaired with reference to the revolutionary upheavals around him, “we decorate with the proud name of ‘revolution’.”⁵ But

“all the revolution [of Germany, 1918] has accomplished, at least in so far as leaders have taken the place of the statutory authorities, this much: the leaders, through usurpation or election, have attained control over the political staff and the apparatus of material goods; and they deduce their legitimacy—no matter with what right—from the will of the governed. Whether the leaders, on the basis of this at least apparent success, can rightfully entertain the hope of also carrying through the expropriation within the capitalist enterprises is a different question. The direction of capitalist enterprises, despite far-reaching analogies, follows quite different laws than those of political administration.”⁶

The Bolsheviks further to the East are similarly dismissed as nothing more consequential than a medieval court faction.

“The war lord’s following is just as little concerned about the conditions of a normal economy as is the street crowd following of the revolutionary hero. Both live off booty, plunder, confiscations, contributions, and the imposition of worthless and compulsory means of tender, which in essence amounts to the same thing.”⁷ “[P]olitical organization is necessarily managed by men interested in the management of politics. This is to say that a relatively small number of men are primarily interested in political life and hence interested in sharing political power. . . . The active leadership and their freely recruited following are the necessary elements in the life of any party. . . . For instance, the ‘parties’ of the medieval cities, such as those of the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, were purely personal followings. If one considers various things about these medieval parties, one is reminded of Bolshevism and its Soviets. Consider the *Statuta della perta Guelfa*, the confiscations of the Nobili’s estates. . . . Then consider Bolshevism with its strictly sieved military. . . . This analogy is still more striking when one considers that, on the one hand, the military organization of the medieval party constituted a pure army of knights organized on the basis of the registered feudal estates and that nobles occupied almost all leading positions, and, on the other hand, that the Soviets have preserved, or rather reintroduced, the highly paid enterpriser, the group wage, the Taylor system, military and workshop discipline, and a search for foreign capital.”⁸

⁵ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', p. 115.

⁶ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', p. 82.

⁷ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', p. 85.

⁸ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', pp. 99-100.

Quite explicitly, it is Weber's sociological account of political power that allows him to perform a back and forth between the Soviet Politburo and the Knights of the Round Table. Power and political violence stand outside of historical change.

“Do we not see that the Bolshevik and the Spartacist ideologists bring about exactly the same results as any militaristic dictator just because they use this political means? In what but the persons of the power-holders and their dilettantism does the rule of the workers' and soldiers' councils differ from the rule of any power-holder of the old regime? In what way does the polemic of most representatives of the presumably new ethic differ from that of the opponents which they criticized, or the ethic of any other demagogues? In their noble intention, people will say. Good! But it is the means about which we speak here, and the adversaries, in complete subjective sincerity, claim, in the very same way, that their ultimate intentions are of lofty character. ‘All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword’ and fighting is everywhere fighting.”⁹

Of course Weber's failure to get to grips intellectually with the revolutionary moment that he faced may simply reflect his unwillingness to take the Bolsheviks seriously as a historically transformative force. This was a reaction widely shared at the time. Many contemporaries did not take Lenin and Trotsky seriously. Weber may simply have been mistaken. But Weber clearly also had an intellectual problem with revolutions in general. While he was fascinated by them, the more closely he was exposed to revolutionary action the more he abhorred it and the more dismissive his tone became. The problem is not only that Weber is thereby unable to address what for much of the twentieth century was to be understood as the central moment of politics but this blindspot also extended into other forms of politics. Weber was hardly less contemptuous of the efforts of non-revolutionary politicians of a liberal and social democratic ilk.

A similar problem can be found in Weber's opposition to the Versailles Treaty. In the months immediately following his “Politics as a Vocation” lecture, Weber travelled to Versailles to accompany the negotiations as an expert adviser of the German side. He returned to Germany

⁹ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', p. 119.

before the negotiations were completed once he realized that his firm opposition was failing to gain traction. Clearly nationalism dictated large parts of his reaction to the Versailles peace treaty. But with regard to the treaty as with regard to revolutions there is a specific quality to Weber's reaction that amounts to a systematic refusal of history. What Weber denounces is the effort by Germany's opponents to turn the war into a historically consequential just war, rather than a classic great power war ending in a peace that restores the status quo ante and consigns the rancorous question of war guilt to oblivion. Specifically what Weber faults about Versailles was not just that it was anti-German but that its ambition was to draw historical consequences in fundamentally transforming international politics. "Instead of searching like old women for the 'guilty one' after the war—in a situation in which the structure of society produced the war—everyone with a manly and controlled attitude would tell the enemy, 'We lost the war. You have won it. That is now all over. Now let us discuss what conclusions must be drawn according to the *objective* interests that came into play and what is the main thing in view of the responsibility towards the *future* which above all burdens the victor.'"¹⁰ Significantly, the Treaty of Versailles failed to include the "oblivion clauses" that had been a feature of the Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the religious wars of the seventeenth centuries. These required the rancor of the war to be laid to rest, bygones to bygones, history to be made irrelevant. The ideologues of America and the Entente by contrast wanted to draw moral and political consequences from history. They refused to allow the distinction between structural causation and political responsibility, or the neat separation between past, present and future that Weber invoked.

How, when faced with this hostile new reality did Weber advise his fellow compatriots and students to respond? Already in the fall of 1918 Weber had expressed more than a modicum

¹⁰ Max Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Tübingen: UTB, 1988), p. 549.

of sympathy for those like Rathenau who seriously pondered and prepared for a mobilization of national resistance in case the peace negotiations would break down.¹¹ At Brest Litovsk when the peace terms offered by Germany were deemed unacceptable, Trotsky had walked away from the talks, responding to German provocation with his slogan: “No War – No Peace”. The results had been disastrous, but Weber nevertheless argued for a similar course.¹² Would it not be preferable to let the Allied Powers try to occupy Germany and respond with an uprising of national resistance, a full-blown *levée en masse*? In a letter from November 1918 Weber answered this question in the affirmative. “If Poles now move into Danzig and Thorn, Czechs into Reichenberg the first task must be to bread a German *irredenta*. I cannot do it myself as my health is too bad. But every nationalist must do it and in particular the students. *Irredenta* means: nationalism with revolutionary means of violence.”¹³ And this position was not hiding in private. In a public speech to students in Heidelberg the same winter he called on them to finally live up to the national task that now presented itself:

“You all know what it means to face up to an invading enemy who can no longer be stopped with an army. You all know the methods from the Russian Revolution of 1905. This means: to abandon all hope for the future and for oneself. There is only one fate for the living: imprisonment and courts-martial. If it comes so far, if you have found the determination not to give grand speeches but rather to silently make sure that the first Polish official who dares to enter Danzig will be met by a bullet—if you are determined to follow this path, then I will be there for you: Come to me! [*Her zu mir!*]”¹⁴

¹¹ For the broader debate see the excellent piece by Michael Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée en Masse* in October 1918', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (2001). For Weber's position see Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik, 1890-1920*, Second edition (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1974), p. 309.

¹² Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'Max Weber and the Peace Treaty of Versailles', in *The Treaty of Versailles*, Manfred F. Boemeke, Gerald D. Feldman, and Elisabeth Glaser, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 540-541.

¹³ Letter to Prof. Goldstein, 13 November 1918. As quoted in Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik*, p. 336.

¹⁴ As reported in Marianne Weber, *Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild*, third edition (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1926), p. 643.

Still in July 1919, after the Treaty had been passed through the National Assembly and signed, Weber continued to mull over the question of whether it would not have been better to refuse. The catastrophic consequences of any such acts of resistance were obvious. In June 1919 the most serious faction in the cabinet advocating refusal of the Treaty, led by Scheidemann of the SPD, had recognized that this would involve abandoning German sovereignty altogether. Choosing occupation would mean a fundamental break in the historical continuity of German statehood, as in 1945, rather than the anguished choice of assuming political responsibility for Germany's defeat. As Weber made clear to his wife the attraction of such a vision was precisely that it would allow Germany to escape without "dirty hands". Even if the Reich were destroyed, its national integrity would have been preserved, thus ensuring that there was at least some point in the unspecified future of a new "awakening of national (inner) resistance".¹⁵ By the fall semester of 1919 the moment for such mythic, ahistorical visions had passed. Weber now merely sounded like a truculent and irresponsible nationalist, advocating in his opening lecture of the term that: "We can only have one goal: to tear the peace treaty to shreds."¹⁶ Commenting on the decision to pardon the assassins of Kurt Eisner, the far left interim Prime Minister of Bavaria who had distinguished himself by his willingness to accept Imperial Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of the war, Weber boasted to his students that "[t]o return Germany to her former glory I would certainly form a bond with any power on earth or indeed the incarnate devil".¹⁷

¹⁵ Letter to Marianne Weber, 1 July 1919. Quoted extensively in Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik*, p. 343n144.

¹⁶ "Wir können nur ein Ziel haben: aus dem Friedensvertrag einen Fetzen Papier zu machen." As quoted in Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik*, p. 345.

¹⁷ Reprinted as "Anhang VII" in Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik*, p. 536. In the note Weber criticized the decision to pardon Eisner's murderer Count Arco: "I would have rather had him shot!". However, Weber would have preferred to see Arco dead not so much because he disagreed with him—"Arco had been doubtlessly motivated by the great dishonor [*Schmach*] brought upon us by Eisner"—but because by pardoning Arco only Eisner would be turned into a martyr whilst Arco himself would become a *Kaffeehaussehenswürdigkeit*, a mere curiosity. "I would have wished him better."

Endorsing assassination, invoking a pact with the devil to restore damaged national glory—this is hardly the language of realistic analysis of power politics in the early twentieth century. As Weber had himself to admit, he was now “politically supremely helpless [*äusserst ratlos*]”.¹⁸

In the aftermath of defeat and revolution a toxic combination of anti-socialism, nationalism and a penchant for Lutheran heroics poisoned Weber’s thought. But we want to go further than that. It seems to us that the aporiae in “Politics as a Vocation” point to a fundamental inability on Weber’s part actually to give an account of historically efficacious political action. He refused Trotsky’s revolutionary logic. But he was also unable to turn his own nationalist impulses in a more responsible and practical direction. The limited, ahistorical sociology of politics that had reduced the furore of democratic political change in the nineteenth century to a modification of the system for selecting elites, that had reduced the state to violence, revolutions to bloody carnival and Versailles to a mere duel for honor, this evacuation of any notion of historical development from politics left Weber stranded. If the question of means and ends is to gain serious traction there must be some systematic account of the relationship between the deployment of means in the present towards goals in the future. Weber sketched a compelling portrait of a masculine political personality. But where in “Politics as a Vocation” is the moment at which political action is allowed to be historically consequential? Given the dismissive way in which Weber treats the political choices and upheavals going on around him, how seriously can and should we take his subsequent effort to insist on the inescapably tragic character of political life?

All of these moments of impasse in Weber’s political thought are, we would suggest, not merely signs of his conservatism and nationalism but reflect a deeper problem in his thought

¹⁸ Letter to Marianne Weber of June 20, 1919. See Marianne Weber, *Lebensbild*, p. 668. Also quoted in Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik*, p. 344.

which concerns the conceptualization of political practice in general. Though Weber so often serves as a warrant for “historical realism”, his thought was defined by his determination to cut through the Gordian knot of historicism. Weber was attractive to twentieth-century social scientists because he distilled a radically autonomous science of sociology out of the confusing tangle of Germany’s nineteenth-century “historical schools”. But the self-perceived autonomy and value neutrality of this science was bought at the price of a detachment from history in the sense of progressive, intelligible change understood as the result of human action and the goal-oriented character of political institutions.

III

This may seem a provocative position to adopt with regard to the father of historical sociology but within the immense world of Weber scholarship there are in fact a number of contemporary readers whose critique, we would argue, point precisely in this direction.

The most straightforward reason why Weber’s thought found itself in such an impasse was that his sociological framework offered him no way of grasping the crisis facing the German nation state in 1918, the nation state on which his entire ethical and political position rested. This was a double crisis of revolution and defeat. Weber could deal with neither reality. As we have seen, he responded to the crisis of the German state with heartfelt anguish. But as Peter Breiner’s painstaking examination of Weber’s political philosophy in *Max Weber and Democratic Politics* reveals, Weber’s preoccupation with the nation state was more than a merely personal prejudice or a historical incidental. It was rather a systematic necessity. It was the only way of reconciling a fundamental tension in his thinking about politics. Weber’s political philosophy reaches its climax when he poses the question: How can the ethics of responsibility and conviction be reconciled? “Politics as a Vocation” arrives at its dramatic peak in the following famous passage:

“it is immensely moving when a mature human being ... who ... acts according to an ethic of responsibility at some point says: ‘here I stand, I can do no other.’ ...in so far as this is true an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts ...”.¹⁹ Martin Luther had made his famous stand on his 95 Theses at the Diet of Worms in 1521. Weber’s moment of “here I stand, I can do no other”, the pivot of his thinking, was the nation state. Breiner’s answer, with which we must surely concur, is that service to the nation state is the only substantive commitment that can resolve this fundamental dilemma for Weber. As Breiner argues: “The reason why the commitment to the nation state can reconcile both the ethic of responsibility and conviction is that it is”, for Weber, “the one ideal that is not injured when power backed by violence is deployed on its behalf.”²⁰

Whereas national defeat cast Weber into a mood of barely suppressed panic, in his attitude to revolution he displayed the cynical *sang froid* so prized by self-styled realists. But this position is once more acquired at a steep price. As Breiner shows, Weber repeatedly used his deterministic sociology to foreclose a serious discussion of political options. Not only was Weber’s political sociology highly selective in its accounts of phenomena such as democracy and socialism, but quite systematically, Weber collapsed the possible into the probable and the probable into the inevitable. In doing so, Breiner comments, “Weber can withdraw a claim to realism from political projects that he finds undesirable. ... Weber deploys this strategy on many fronts.”²¹ It is along these lines that Weber licenses himself to use “science” to oppose a number

¹⁹ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', p. 127. Quoted by Peter Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 192.

²⁰ Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, p. 196.

²¹ Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, p. 18.

of political projects including the extension of suffrage and equal participation.²² As Weber realized, the claim to objectivity and his insistence on the fact-value distinction recommended themselves as the most effective weapons to undermine the positions of his political opponents, in particular revolutionary students, literati and socialists.²³ Breiner's analysis finds support in many other assessments of Weber, for instance by the Australian social theorist John Grumley who also points to Weber's asymmetric application of social science to political thinking. "[Weber] prided himself," Grumley explains, "on his robust political realism and sober, scientific objectivity," which for him implied casting doubt and scientifically demasking emancipatory hopes as wishful thinking. But once more this self-styled realism was fundamentally geared in only one direction. As Grumley shows, Weber's "late assessments of the Russian Revolution manifest this caution. ... His stance was a resigned response engendered by historical conditions seemingly unfavourable to projects of socio-political experimentation. Weber failed to recognize the conditionedness of his own perspective. His diagnosis went further and eliminated all hope of modernity vitalizing new emancipatory social potentials."²⁴ Weber's radical subjectivation and his claims to objective science are systematically used to forestall certain political routes and modes of political thinking.

More recently, John P. McCormick reinforces these arguments in a brilliant critique. He has shown how Weber's anti-socialism left him unable to grasp the emerging welfare state of Imperial Germany, the *Sozialstaat*, as anything other than an atavistic regression to medievalism.

²² Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, pp. 18n20, 19, 141. The reference here is both to *Economy and Society* as well as his more partisan political writings.

²³ It is also in this sense that Guenther Roth comments: "Weber's return to single minded scholarship was not only an act of renunciation in an obvious sense but continuation of his political war by other means." Guenther Roth, 'Weber's Political Failure', *Telos* 78, Vol. 78 (Winter 1988-1989). As quoted by Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, p. 18n20.

²⁴ John Grumley, 'Weber's Fragmentation Of Totality', *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 21 (1988), p. 37.

Through a historical reading of Weber's sociology of law, McCormick shows how "Weber's analysis of the emerging *Sozialstaat* was hampered by historical presuppositions not appropriate to his object of investigation" but rather reflections of Weber's "anguish" and "panic" over the rise of *Sozialstaat* law.²⁵ This blinding dread was combined with Weber's specifically ahistorical analysis that simultaneously applied insights from "modern" law to earlier legal developments and used these in turn to anachronistically critique the rise of the welfare state. Weber was thereby led to a "desperate and ideological misrecognition of a dauntingly novel historical development".²⁶ Once more we observe how Weber's utilization of a rich array of historical examples embedded in an ahistorical analysis and claims to scientific objectivity become entangled with his more substantial value commitments in ways that were supposed to be foreclosed by his methodology.

Bruno Teschke in his *Myth of 1648* has highlighted these characteristic features of Weber's thought with regard to the analysis of the transition from feudalism to seventeenth-century capitalism.²⁷ Through his ahistorical ideal type analysis Weber reduces feudalism to a static ideal type of domination. History is turned by Weber's methodology from an "open process" into a "database furnishing evidentiary material for a series of systematized taxonomies. This is the death of history as becoming." While ideal types may sharpen our vision in some regards they necessarily exclude the possibility of conceptualizing any social change whatsoever. Having disavowed history and all forms of historical change Weber is merely left to endow structures of social action with certain "laws of their own" (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) that can only be

²⁵ John McCormick, *Weber, Habermas and Transformations of the European State: Constitutional, Social, and Supranational Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 24, 37.

²⁶ McCormick, *Transformations of the European State*, p. 3.

²⁷ Bruno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003).

retraced according to their own independent developmental logics.²⁸ The only possible link that Weber can grant between them was that these may or may not form “elective affinities”—an expression popularized by Goethe but ultimately a residual category taken from the magical realm of alchemist chemistry. At the core of his sociological account of social action Weber is forced to fall back onto alchemy. When his methodology is adopted unselfconsciously by “Anglo-American, neo-Weberian historical sociologies” the result, Teschke argues, is nothing more than “exercises in undertheorized eclecticism”.²⁹

In 1981 Seyla Benhabib in her brilliant early essay on “Rationality and Social Action: Critical Reflections on Weber’s Methodological Writings”³⁰ offers a reading of Weber’s sociological method which deepens the critiques offered by Breiner, McCormick and Teschke. Rather than seizing on Weber’s inability to come to terms with the phenomena of revolutionary or even simply reformist political practice, Benhabib helps us to understand how the aporiae of “Politics as a Vocation” are symptomatic of Weber’s inability to grasp historically consequential social practice in general. Ultimately the problem arises from the fact that Weber allows himself to be trapped in a “dualistic ontology” in which the “infinite meaningless world sequence on the one hand” is juxtaposed to an “autonomous individual” in whose actions and intentions all meaning is localized. How did Weber end up in this position? On one level it may seem initially that this harks back to a familiar problem of Kantian moral philosophy. Kant’s apparent denigration of political action and judgment by his two-world metaphysics was a weakness already exploited by Hegel at length in the *Phenomenology*. But Benhabib points to a different

²⁸ Max Weber, 'Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy [1904]', in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, eds. (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949). As quoted by Teschke, *The Myth of 1648*, p. 51.

²⁹ Teschke, *The Myth of 1648*, p. 51.

³⁰ Seyla Benhabib, 'Rationality and Social Action: Critical Reflections on Max Weber's Methodological Writings', *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XII, No. 4 (1981).

and more interesting aspect in Weber, namely the very peculiarity and eccentricity of his neo-Kantianism. Weber commits a category mistake, she argues, in confusing the normative dimension of individual autonomy with its epistemological implications. This is then mirrored by a related replacement of the inter-subjective generation of meaningful social values by a strictly individualistic and voluntarist mode of value generation. As a result,

“social relations and contexts of interaction against which both the ends of social action and its mode of orientation...must be defined, are dissolved at the methodological level into hypothetical acts of choice. Weber’s methodological and ontological assumptions lead him to deny the reality of social relations and contexts that cannot be reduced to the probabilistic concurrence of individual actions. Consequently, historically constituted and socially given contexts of interaction are reconstructed in terms of the statistical likelihood that a course of social action will occur.”³¹

Both of these related conflations stem from Weber’s “negative ontology” in the form of a rather stretched usage of a neo-Kantian conception of moral autonomy which leads him into a number of dilemmas when it comes to endowing social action with meaning.³² “Weber has attributed to the disenchanted universe of modernity the status of a transcendental *a priori*,” Benhabib summarizes.³³ For him, values can only derive from a voluntarist decision on the part of an individual. He thereby fails to account for the constitution of the world, the socially shared ideals within which that individual decision is framed. Meaningful social action must remain a conundrum for him. “What is lacking,” Benhabib points out, “is the concept of materially embedded, generative, and transformative human praxis.” What is lacking is a sense that “all social interaction occurs in the context of an already constituted social world,” a “materially

³¹ Benhabib, 'Rationality and Social Action', p. 369.

³² Among his methodological writings in particular Weber’s pieces on Roscher and Knies are central to this argument not least because it is here more than anywhere else that he develops his—usually hidden—attack on Hegel. See Max Weber, *Roscher and Knies. The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* (New York: Free Press, 1975). See also Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Johannes Winkelmann, Third edition (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Siebeck], 1968).

³³ Benhabib, 'Rationality and Social Action', p. 361.

embedded world of objects, significations, and symbols that has its own immanent logic, developmental constraints, and structures.”³⁴

In the realm of *Wissenschaft* Weber was just about able to avert the immediate impact of his position by clinging onto the residues of a once stern neo-Kantian belief in scientific method. Scientific work, he exclaimed in “Science as a Vocation” (1917), is “the most important fraction of the process of intellectualization which we have been undergoing for thousands of years ... [it] is chained to the course of *progress*”.³⁵ But Weber was of course deeply ambivalent in his relationship to that process. After all, progressive intellectualization had resulted in a disenchanted world. “Now, this process of disenchantment, which has continued to exist in Occidental culture for millennia, and, in general, this ‘progress’, to which science belongs as a link and motive force, do they have any meanings that go beyond the purely practical and technical?” Within the space of a single paragraph we are led from an assertion of scientific progress to “progress” in scare quotes. Science, as it turns out, has not just disenchanted our world it has also rendered this world (and thereby itself) meaningless, Weber explained by reference to Tolstoy.³⁶

The disenchantment of death and by way of the meaninglessness of death the meaninglessness of life were bleak themes. But at least Weber could acknowledge science as a cumulative process, the central cumulative process of his entire thought indeed. With regard to political action there was no similar progressive dynamic. Institutionally, Weber, of course

³⁴ Benhabib, 'Rationality and Social Action', p. 370.

³⁵ Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', pp. 138, 137. Weber's emphasis. Quoted in Georg Iggers, 'Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Jan. 1995), p. 141.

³⁶ “His [Tolstoy's] answer was: for civilized man death has no meaning. It has none because the individual life of civilized man, placed into an infinite ‘progress,’ according to its own imminent meaning should never come to an end; for there is always a further step ahead of one who stands in the march of progress. ... And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very ‘progressiveness’ it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness.” Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', pp. 139-140.

addressed the formation of the modern state apparatus. But as McCormick shows, once formed the state was then frozen into a timeless framework of power with regard to which politics was defined in an ahistorical way, precisely in the manner with which we began. From Weber's perspective, even a revolutionary actor such as Trotsky was essentially playing out a timeless drama that remained the same from Middle Ages down to the era of World War I. There was no scope in Weber's thought for recognizing the creativity of transformative historical consequences of particular historical actions or deeds beyond the formation of the state apparatus and the modern party system.³⁷ He gives us a psychological portrait of the politician, not politics, certainly not discursive, persuasive argument within processes of political decision-making with discernible and meaningful consequences.³⁸

The four critiques by Breiner, McCormick, Teschke and Benhabib all arrive at similar conclusions from different directions. But they are also related in ways that are not at first apparent. Only once they are combined and placed into conversation with each other do we begin to see the full force of the intellectual crisis in which Weber stands and whose deep marks characterize his political position and his extraordinarily long shadow in twentieth century social thought. To be able to show the full character and depth of this moment the next section will place Weber's thought in relation to two close contemporaries and their reactions to the crisis of historicism.

³⁷ What we are offered is not a structured account of political agency but a series of aporiae that often fall back onto strong Caesarist intonations that were themselves characterized by a deep-seated ambivalence. The complexity of the issue also comes to the fore in his famous exchange on democracy with Ludendorff in the summer of 1919 (MWG I/16, p. 553).

³⁸ This imbalance appears to have been even stronger in the spoken version of the lecture. Most of the few points in "Politics as a Vocation" hinting at a theory of politics as opposed to the ethical disposition of the politician were only worked in for the publication later in 1919 (MWG I/17).

IV

Through the foundational moves of his thought Weber maneuvered himself into an incapacitating impasse that was summoned up by the double crisis of the German nation state and historicism. Weber's contemporary Friedrich Meinecke (1862-1954) responded in a more constructive fashion. For Meinecke no less than for Weber the nation state remained the pivot of his political and historical thought, the moment of the "here I stand". But whereas Weber was remarkable precisely for how little the basic categories of his thought were affected by World War I and how unreflectively he clung to the nation state, Meinecke responded to the crisis of the war by unpacking the historicity tied up in that pivotal idea. The results of that struggle were published in Meinecke's "Idea of Reason of State" (*Die Idee der Staatsräson*, 1924) that was to appear in English only after World War II under the title *Machiavellism*.³⁹ In this work Meinecke produced a compelling narrative that accounted historically for the particular "here I stand" by which Weber and Meinecke's generation defined themselves.

Meinecke shared with Weber the fundamental commitment to the nation state as the one cause in which the ethics of responsibility and conviction could be brought into overlap. What Meinecke recognized was that this fixation was itself not timeless but the historical product of the splintering of the Catholic synthesis of secular and spiritual power that had accompanied the formation of the European state system between the Renaissance and the eighteenth century. It was out of this conjuncture, specific in time and place that the modern political problem, the contingency of "HERE I stand" had been constituted. This for Meinecke was the Machiavellian

³⁹ Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (Munich and Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1924). Translated as Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: the doctrine of raison d'état and its place in modern history*, trans. Douglas Scott (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). Meinecke continued his discussion of the crisis of historicism ten years later in "The Origins of Historicism": Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, 2 vols. (Munich und Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1936). Translated as Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. E. Anderson (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

moment. It was not just located in history, but constitutive of the modern conception of history, an imbrication which Weber's timeless account of politics was determined to sever. As

Meinecke put it in his introduction to the *Idee der Staatsräson*, there is an

“important connection between the idea of *raison d'état* and modern Historicism. Namely, that action prompted by *raison d'état* has helped to prepare the way for modern Historicism. At a time when thought about the State was still approaching the subject from the point of view of the ideal (of the Best State) set up by Natural Law, action prompted by *raison d'état* was to a certain extent already showing men how to pursue practical history. ... [A]ction in accordance with *raison d'état* developed relatively early into a form of reconnoitering and judgment, which was already closely related to modern historical judgment.”⁴⁰

Historical consciousness and modern political thought were for Meinecke intellectually inseparable. As he had insisted in an earlier essay, it was crucial to establish that link of the chain, “the connection between the development of the art of governing a state [*Staatskunst*] and the conception of history”.⁴¹ It was the emergence of the secular state that created both the entire dilemma of *raison d'état* and the modern understanding of secular history.

Meinecke's account of the moral dilemmas of power was no less dramatic than that of Weber “[I]t is apparently the case”, Meinecke remarked, “that the state must do evil. ... It is the most frightful and staggering fact of world history, that there is no hope of marking radically moral the human community itself which encloses and comprehends all other communities; yet it contains the richest and most manifold culture, and therefore really ought to be a guiding-light to all other communities by the purity of its essence.”⁴² But unlike in Weber, the problem is here relativized and historicized. The problem of politics, violence and morality was for Meinecke not a continuous and timeless dilemma. It was a fluid economy that had changed radically over time.

⁴⁰ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 19.

⁴¹ Friedrich Meinecke, 'Die Lehre von den Interessen der Staaten im Frankreich Richelieus', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 123, No. 1 (1921), p. 80.

⁴² Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 12.

Machiavelli's utter cynicism had been appropriate to an embattled, fledgling Republic uncertain of its internal and external position. But once the power-state established itself in the eighteenth century the problem shifted. From the end of the wars of religion onwards the fundamental dilemma now:

“lies in the state's action towards the outside, not towards the inside. Within the state it is possible for *raison d'état* to remain in harmony with justice and morality, because no other power hinders that of the state. This was not always so; it is only a result of historical development. So long as the state authority did not hold all the domestic means of physical power concentrated in its own hands ... then it was always being tempted (indeed, in its own view it was frequently obliged) to combat these forces by unjust and immoral means.”⁴³

Meinecke here historicizes the domestic monopoly of legitimate violence in a way Weber had foreclosed. And in further contrast to Weber, for Meinecke the path from Machiavelli to the trenches of the twentieth century was far from direct or necessary. As had been shown by German idealism and in particular Hegel's identity philosophy there were ways of bringing the dualism between might and morality created by the rise of the state into a new balance if not synthesis. The world and the state, seen from this vantage point, were filled with individuality which lent itself to a new identity between mind and nature. Individuality it was recognized could provide the bond with identity and universality. Hegel, Meinecke explained, sharpened and radicalized this idea more than anyone else by recasting reason itself on the basis of a struggle for inner unity and identity. In politics this new form of historicized reason was then embodied in the state as the one force able to bring together individual and general welfare. This was nothing less than the “greatest revolution in Western thought” Meinecke emphasized because it had given a new depth to historical thinking that could square individuality with identity and thereby do away with the previous dualism.

⁴³ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, pp. 13-14.

The moment of unity was brief, even in Meinecke's account. As the Hegelian synthesis faded from the middle of the nineteenth century onward German political thought was left adrift. Ranke had been able to sustain a theologically inspired belief that the plurality of nations manifested a divinely inspired design, in which each national trajectory contributed a distinctive note that harmonized with all the others. As the nineteenth century progressed this vision and the liberal optimism that had still sustained Ranke's generation also collapsed, leaving the field of international politics to appear, as it did to later generations, as a disillusioned space dominated by conflict and devoid of inherent moral meaning. It was faced with this disenchantment that commitment to the nation state came to play a central moral and political role for at least two generations of German intellectuals. Amongst the political and historical thinkers of mid-nineteenth century Germany, Meinecke's teacher, Heinrich Treitschke, with whom Weber's family was also intimate, was the classic exemplar of this turn towards the nation state.

In the fierce debates around the methodology and ethics of classroom practice that raged from 1890s onwards Weber and his generation were to distance themselves from Treitschke. But it is not sufficiently acknowledged how much like Treitschke the Weber of "Politics as a Vocation" actually sounds. In the hugely popular lectures on politics that Treitschke delivered from the 1860s onwards he addressed head on the question of the relationship between morality and politics. Of course Treitschke's tone was more upbeat than Weber's. He after all was the mouthpiece of the Bismarckian achievement and died in 1896 before the shipwreck of the Wilhelmine regime. But in passages such as the following it is hard not to see direct anticipations of the Lutheran heroics of Weber's "Politics as a Vocation":

"No man ever went through life with absolutely clean hands and no clashing of duties. In any case there is no walk of life more moral than the statesman's, who on his own responsibility guides his country through quicksands. No higher or harder moral task can be set for any man than to spend the whole strength of his personality in the service of his

people. We must not belittle or conceal the tragedy of guilt which sometimes clings to great names, but neither should we examine the leaders of the State with the eyes of an attorney. We are still suffering from the after-effects of the political cynicism which the miseries of the Thirty Years' War brought upon Germany. The statesman has no right to warm his hands with smug self-laudation at the smoking ruins of his fatherland, and comfort himself by saying 'I have never lied', this is the monkish type of virtue."⁴⁴

As Meinecke noted, there was a sharp break between Ranke and Treitschke precisely with regard to their stress on the heroic and individual element in politics. For Ranke a historical actor was significant only "to the extent that he recognized and promoted the true and properly understood *raison d'état* of his state".⁴⁵ In Treitschke, anticipating Weber, any traces of such Hegelian "universal world-relationships" were eclipsed by a radicalized focus on the individual. Meinecke saw Treitschke's historical writing as creating "great new ... uncommonly intellectualized, possibilities for the Hero-epic...".⁴⁶ In Treitschke, this was linked by way of Schleiermacher's critique of Kant to an attempt to formulate a personalized Christianity. Schleiermacher had shown for Treitschke's generation that "Kant's categorical imperative was unable to exhaust the content of Christianity, for it did not admit of the element of personal freedom. Since Schleiermacher, it has been universally admitted that every Christian is bound to know himself, to develop his personality and act in accordance with it."⁴⁷ Crucially this meant for Treitschke, unlike for Weber who built the central argument of "Politics as a Vocation" on the otherworldly standard of the Sermon on the Mount, that "The truly Christian ethic has no rigid standard." For Treitschke:

"Whoever, by the grace of God, is an artist, and knows it, has the right to develop his gift before all else, and may put other duties in the background. It is due to the frailty of human nature that this cannot be done without moral conflicts and tragic guilt. It is part

⁴⁴ Heinrich von Treitschke, *Politics*, vol. 1 (New York: MacMillan, 1916), p. 104.

⁴⁵ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 400.

⁴⁶ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 400.

⁴⁷ Treitschke, *Politics*, p. 93.

of the heavy burden of humanity that because man belongs to several communities at once the duties imposed upon him are bound to clash. It comes at least to this, that he attains the highest perfection possible when he has recognized and developed the most essential part of himself. When we apply this standard of deeper and truly Christian ethics to the State, and remember that its very personality is power, we see its highest moral duty is to uphold that power. The individual must sacrifice himself for the community.”⁴⁸

Writing in the aftermath of World War I Meinecke did not ignore the fact that for critics in France and Britain his former teacher had become the epitome of a self-serving “ethics” of power. And Meinecke admitted that Treitschke was a figure of contradictions. Though Treitschke could acknowledge that the “frightful thing” about Machiavelli was “not the immorality of the methods he recommends, but the emptiness of this State, which exists only to exist”⁴⁹, Treitschke himself was famous for hammering home to his students that: “In the first place, the second place and in the third place, the essence of the State is power.”⁵⁰ There was no more recognition in Treitschke of the progressive “moral purposes of rule” than he was able to find in Machiavelli. In a famous debate in 1874 Treitschke refused absolutely Schmoller’s point that the state like any unequal hierarchy of power “sprang from injustice and authority” and that this “as it were tragic guilt” ought to have implications for the state’s search for legitimacy.⁵¹ Treitschke responded simply by insisting that “power struggles with power and wherever the lesser stands in the way of the greater, he is subdued.”⁵² And yet as Meinecke pointed out, it ought to have been obvious to any inhabitant of Wilhelmine Germany that “The growing prestige of the State ...” to which Treitschke like his descendants Weber and Meinecke was so passionately attached, “was founded on this very point, that richer cultural and moral tasks were

⁴⁸ Treitschke, *Politics*, p. 94.

⁴⁹ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 399.

⁵⁰ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 399.

⁵¹ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 405.

⁵² Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 405.

being set before it”.⁵³ As Meinecke observed, Treitschke helped to reduce history to a “coarsened ... Darwinistic naturalism—all the more so when the Nietzschean doctrine of the *Übermensch* arrived.”⁵⁴ Treitschke never resolved the contradictions in his thought. In the “modern historian,” Meinecke remarked of Treitschke, “there is perhaps a natural resistance ... against taking up a consistent philosophical point of view.”⁵⁵

Max Weber did not allow himself that luxury. Making a clean sweep of the detritus left by the collapse of the Hegelian synthesis was Weber’s ambition. The consequence however was to heighten the intellectual impasse that Meinecke had already diagnosed in Treitschke’s thinking to an excruciating pitch. In 1922, shortly before he completed work on *Die Idee der Staatsräson*, Meinecke was amongst the first to review the posthumous collection of Weber’s political writings compiled by Marianne Weber, the collection that still today forms the staple of political science reading lists. What these essays revealed, Meinecke announced, was one of the greatest German minds of his generation but also a figure who appeared to come from another era altogether. Weber’s political writings were those of a modern Machiavelli.⁵⁶ This was not (just) a congratulatory elevation to the canon. It was also a sharp critique of Weber’s stance that had disavowed all elements of historicity and thereby all the historical forces that were surely necessary to comprehend the specific nature of the political problem as it posed itself in the wake of the war. What Meinecke found in Weber was a notion of *raison d’état* that had been severed from any full conception of history as individualized development. Weber had lapsed back into a now anachronistic Machiavellian position. As Meinecke had to admit, this applied in particular

⁵³ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 398.

⁵⁴ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 405.

⁵⁵ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 402.

⁵⁶ Friedrich Meinecke, 'Drei Generationen deutscher Gelehrtenpolitik', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 125, No. 2 (1922), p. 273.

to Weber's surprisingly unreflective nationalism that was now itself rendered anachronistic by the war. The dramatic sharpening of the problem of power in Weber's hands had only narrowed this perspective further. Buried away in Weber's political writings there was the curious contrast between his burning nationalism and his simultaneous calls for objectivity. Meinecke rendered this ruthlessly dramatic sharpening explicable in his review by embedding Weber's political essays into a historical narrative of three generations of German *Gelehrtenpolitik*. The irony was of course that Weber and his conception of the state denied precisely such a mode of historical explanation. In his furious critique of Wilhelmine institutions Weber seemed completely unaware of how far his own conception of politics was shaped by the singular figure of Wilhelm II and how deeply his commitment to the nation state was indebted to the grandeur of the Bismarckian achievement. By reducing the state to a machine and democratic transformation to a technical fix, Weber was in fact unable to realistically comprehend the forces at play in German politics in the early twentieth century.

In 1923, three years after Weber's death, Meinecke lost another contemporary, the theologian and social philosopher Ernst Troeltsch. As Weber's close friend at Heidelberg Troeltsch had long shared Meinecke's reaction to the sublime spectacle of Weber's political and intellectual impasse. Troeltsch agreed with Meinecke's assessment of Weber as a Machiavellian fish out of water. In his long and still untranslated summation of nineteenth-century historical thought, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* ("Historicism and its Problems," 1922) Troeltsch placed Weber squarely within the general crisis of modern historical thought. Whereas Meinecke pinpointed Weber's position within the tradition of *raison d'état*, Troeltsch closes the circle between Weber's political and philosophical, contemporary and modern critics.

Like Benhabib, Troeltsch traces the peculiar features of Weber's thought to the self-imposed limitations arising from his specific adaptation of the neo-Kantian position. Troeltsch introduced Weber into his narrative at two strategic places: first as confronting Marxist philosophy of history, secondly as an adept of the South-West neo-Kantian school who however radicalized Rickert's logic of history beyond recognition by dismissing what he saw as the remnants of Rickert's own philosophy of history.⁵⁷ This unhelpful reduction of the problem of social change also mapped onto Weber's dismissive hostility towards any remnants of the Hegelian synthesis. As Weber announced in a letter to Franz Eulenburg of July 1909, "There are only two ways: Hegel's or our own."⁵⁸ In characteristic fashion Weber had radicalized a dense net of philosophical references to a Manichaeic dichotomy. The result for Weber was, Troeltsch explained, that he was left with "pure causal explanation on the one hand and violently subjective interpretation [*Deutung*] on the other, ... the consequences can be seen in Weber's lecture on 'Science as a Vocation'."⁵⁹ The consequence of Weber's confused and radicalized Kantian position, Troeltsch argues, amounts to "pessimism as a heroic belief in the duty of having to control fate."⁶⁰ This is Weber's "Here I stand, I can do no other". And it also meant that Weber "expunged every singly teleological-evolutionary moment and replaced them by his own personally engaged value-affirmation."⁶¹ After all, this was the only move he had left for

⁵⁷ See Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme. Erstes Buch: Das logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie (1922)*, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf and Matthias Schloßberger, vol. 16/I and 16/II, Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), p. 594ff and 850ff.

⁵⁸ In a letter to Franz Eulenburg, July 1909. MWG II/6, p. 172f. Quoted by Grumley, 'Weber's Fragmentation Of Totality', p. 20.

⁵⁹ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 221n21.

⁶⁰ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 225.

⁶¹ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 854. In an earlier draft Troeltsch had here still used Weber's own term "value-relation" (*Wertbeziehung*). In the final version this was instead replaced by a "value-affirmation" (*Wertbejahung*) that had to be "sharply separated from merely factual 'value-relation'," as Troeltsch explained in brackets. There was thus a gap between Weber's claims to objectivity and his simultaneous uncritical affirmation of certain values.

himself. “The result was,” Troeltsch added in stating the obvious, “that he had thereby pulled the rug from the possibility to conceptualize any form of historical development whatsoever.”⁶²

Weber’s most brilliant historical insights derived like those of Sombart and others of their generation precisely from their critique of the remarkable dialectical synthesis produced by Marx’s smelting together of political economy and Hegelian philosophy. In this act of creative destruction they had given historical thought a great impetus. But they themselves were left with a descriptive comparative sociology, a means “of permanently holding open the comparative gaze on the plenitude of the historical, but itself not a history...”.⁶³ When Max Weber delivered his most compelling historical vignettes he did so by setting aside the limitations of his own professed method, relying “like everyone else” on plastic, holistic images, “inner continuities and only intuitively perceptible contexts of development [*Werdezusammenhängen*], into which individuals ... are essentially incorporated.”⁶⁴ When Weber confronted his timeless sociological analysis on the one hand with pressing political problems, the results were no doubt compelling in their fierce rhetorical power. But his deductions were, in the last instance, no more than the “desperate intellectual last resort of a heroic ... positivism.”⁶⁵

V

Having thus shown how Weber’s position in “Politics as a Vocation” can be situated within the wider field of the crisis of historicism, the obvious question to ask is whether

⁶² Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 865. Troeltsch observed that it was Georg Simmel who should be seen as attempting to remedy precisely this Weberian move. As a consequence, Troeltsch regularly taught a course on “Simmel’s Philosophy of History”, which was taken in 1920 by Walter Benjamin who had returned to Berlin for the semester. See Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: the story of a friendship* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2003), p. 113.

⁶³ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 599.

⁶⁴ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 852.

⁶⁵ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 355.

Meinecke and Troeltsch were able to respond more constructively to the crisis of the German nation state than was Weber. Whereas Weber hinted darkly at the grim future of “a polar night of icy darkness and hardness”⁶⁶ and leaves us to deduce that he cannot really see any scope for historically meaningful political action, were Meinecke and Troeltsch able to see beyond this impasse?

With his intense sense of the historical development of international politics since the early modern period, Meinecke saw the dangers of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century great power politics even more vividly than Weber. Beyond the general processes of “progressive rationalization and technicalization of life”, Meinecke identified the dramatic conjunction of “militarism, nationalism, capitalism” in the late nineteenth century as a truly new and lethal threat to the European order.⁶⁷ In this regard, whereas Weber in *Economy and Society* distinguished the concept of the nation as a value-concept from his purely functionalist definition of the state, he nonetheless remains comparatively unself-conscious in collapsing the two. For Meinecke, by contrast, the fusion of the nation and the state, which occurred at least a century after the emergence of modern *raison d'état*, was a major turning point. Before World War I in his *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* (“Cosmopolitanism and the Nation State”) of 1908 Meinecke had projected the teleology of the nation onto the nineteenth century. After the war he came to use this historicization to loosen the bond by drawing attention to the disruptive dynamic introduced by nationalism from the late eighteenth century onwards. “From Machiavellism to Nationalism,” Meinecke could thus summarize in the *Idee der Staatsräson*, “this could be

⁶⁶ Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', p. 128.

⁶⁷ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 15.

described as the theme of the whole sinister development of which we have tried to clarify the early stages.”⁶⁸

Conservative critics including both Carl Schmitt and the historian and political thinker Gerhard Ritter were to charge Meinecke with seeking a romantic reconciliation to the conflict between ethics and the logic of power.⁶⁹ In the very last pages of the *Staatsräson* book Meinecke did hint at the hope that a new and imminent synthesis might allow an escape from his otherwise bleak conclusion. Raison d'état, he explained, was not only one side of a tragic dualism it could itself also form a bridge, the summit that might once more be able to unite power and ethics. But these comments should not be torn out of context. Amidst the crisis of 1918-1919 Meinecke was certainly not optimistic about the establishment of any kind of supervening international order. “Justice,” he explained, “can only be upheld, if a power exists which is able and ready uphold it.”⁷⁰ In the international arena there was no such arbiter. Furthermore, it was not clear which laws should be the guiding rules since “the mutually conflicting vital interests of the states generally take advantage of the disorder that exists amongst the recognized legal principles.”⁷¹ This is a standard account of inter-state anarchy. The truly distinctive thing about Meinecke’s argumentation even at this moment of despair and crisis was his willingness to continue to think historically.

If a reconciliation was to be achieved it would come not through some romantic transcendence of the irreconcilable but only through the transition from an old to a new kind of

⁶⁸ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 410.

⁶⁹ See Carl Schmitt, 'Zu Friedrich Meineckes Idee der Staatsräson', *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Vol. 56 (1926). Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk. Das Problem des "Militarismus" in Deutschland* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1954-1968). Translated as Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, trans. Heinz Norden (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1969-73).

⁷⁰ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 14.

⁷¹ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 14.

raison d'état. Raison d'état had within it, Meinecke believed, an "inner duplicity and duality" which limited its release of force. Force, for Meinecke unlike for Weber, was not definitional of the higher ends of the state. Unleashed absolutely, force threatened to become an end in itself. Both the ethical ideas and technical rationales that grew up around raison d'état in its higher forms would find themselves in conflict with the absolute dominance of violence in inter-state affairs. So why then might it not be possible at a higher stage of raison d'état to find a common interest in the limitation and ultimately the abolition of unfettered inter-state violence?⁷² Unlike Weber, Meinecke recognized the new range of options that appeared possible after World War I. He acknowledged the League of Nations. Indeed, despite the fact that it formed the first chapter of the Versailles peace treaty he recognized that "there is no alternative ... but to strive honorably for a genuine League of Nations."⁷³ He also backhandedly acknowledged two other forces that could bring order to the international sphere: a "Forum" (presumably of public opinion) or an overwhelmingly "powerful adversary".⁷⁴

No such order could guarantee stability. There was always the risk that any such attempt to escape the force-field that had come to define the state system since the Machiavellian era might be set back by mutual mistrust. "[T]he first lapse back into evil ways on the part of one state (out of anxiety for its own welfare) and attended by success, would be sufficient to shatter the whole undertaking once again, and destroy the credit of ethical policy. ... [W]hat makes any reform apparently impossible is the profound and pessimistic conviction (rooted in the instincts, and borne out by historical experience) to the effect that it is not possible to improve the

⁷² Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, pp. 14-15.

⁷³ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 431.

⁷⁴ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 15.

character of state activity.”⁷⁵ Whereas Kant’s insisted precisely on these grounds that perpetual peace and progress must be upheld as regulative ideals of any rational position, the attitude of the likes of Weber worked in the opposite direction. But despite these hesitant expressions of hope and his deserved reputation as a *Vernunftrepublikaner* Meinecke himself was by no means immune to dark ruminations. It was the exhaustion of the European nation state in the wake of WWI, he ruminated, that was bringing to an end the entire narrative that had begun in the early modern period with the dual constitution of the questions of history and *raison d’état*. “[T]he character of the modern European state existence threatens to come to grief . . .,” he explained. “This would indeed mean that the historical role of Europe . . . was played out and that Western culture is in fact doomed to destruction.”⁷⁶ With the historical and political logic that had once animated them exhausted, would the European states, Meinecke asked, “sink to the level of burnt-out volcanoes or (as it has been quite well expressed by Spengler) of Fellaheen states”, quasi-natural formations whose active history lay behind them?⁷⁷

At the time, Meinecke’s book attracted widespread and largely positive attention. The up and coming Carl Schmitt prided himself on having written one of the few critical reviews. Indeed, he used his critique of Meinecke to develop lines of argument that were soon to become famous as the theses of *The Concept of the Political*.⁷⁸ Though Meinecke was clearly attempting something far more than a descriptive history, he had not produced a story of conceptually rooted dialectical development. Instead Meinecke had produced a history that relied on an empty

⁷⁵ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, pp. 15-16.

⁷⁶ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, pp. 423-4.

⁷⁷ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 432.

⁷⁸ Schmitt, 'Zu Friedrich Meineckes Idee der Staatsräson'. The piece was republished in 1940 in an appropriately entitled collection of Schmitt’s essays: “Positions and Concepts in the Fight against Weimar, Geneva, Versailles”. Carl Schmitt, 'Zu Friedrich Meineckes Idee der Staatsräson [1926]', in *Positionen und Begriffe im Kampf mit Weimar-Genf-Versailles, 1923-1939* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1940). Third edition printed in 1994.

dualism between morality and power that was itself ahistorical. By contrast, Schmitt demanded a mode of analysis that was even more radical and self-conscious in situating itself in the immediate historical situation. Due to Meinecke's hostility to any kind of legal thought, Schmitt insisted, Meinecke had ignored what had to be the basic presupposition of any serious political thought: the "question as to the normality or abnormality of the concrete situation". The problem of politics, morality and law could not be judged independently of whether one assumed a situation of normality or of exception—be it the "radical abnormality" of the world or a specific state of exception. This insight had been the great achievement of thinkers such as Hobbes and Pufendorf. Likewise one could not seek a reconciliation between *kratos* and *ethos*, neither in general nor on the basis of an oscillation between dualistic and monistic approaches without considering the basic question: *quis judicabit?*⁷⁹ Who decided in each specific situation what the rule was? Law could legitimate the privileges of the status quo or it could serve as a revolutionary principle with which to challenge the order of things. A merely historical exposition could avoid such choices. But Meinecke had in fact acknowledged the claims of morality and the need to take a decision. If this was the case, however, it raised Schmitt's final question, could the concept of "reason of state" really serve to illuminate modern realities. Under current conditions both the concept of reason and the concept of the state seemed to Schmitt to be in flux.

Schmitt's personal response to this crisis was to assert that the concept of "the political" was logically prior to that of the state, only then to reinstate the nation as the ultimate guarantor of homogeneity. But throughout his writings of the 1920s Schmitt grudgingly acknowledged at least one other distinctly modern possibility of thinking if not about politics as he defined it, then

⁷⁹ Schmitt, 'Zu Friedrich Meinecke', p. 50.

at least about power and government. That possibility was pluralism. As he put it in his review of Meinecke's book: "As soon as so-called dynamic representations of any kind become dominant, the concept of public order loses its meaning. To today's economic-technical thinking the concept [Eich and Tooze: of the state or public order] appears incomprehensible and 'unobjective'. This is why it is even possible today to reject its demands to represent social unity, as happens in Laski's 'pluralist' theory of the state."⁸⁰ For Schmitt this was not "Staatstheorie" but a symptom of dissolution. But even he had to grant "that it appears to me more interesting and more relevant to the present than the clichés of constitutional compendia or the products of methodological inflation."⁸¹

Though unacknowledged by Schmitt, Ernst Troeltsch took up the challenge of formulating a thorough-going pluralist response to the crisis. Furthermore, like Meinecke but in a more optimistic mode, Troeltsch realized that if the European state system was in question then this required a rethinking of the notion of historicity which since the early modern period had been tied to the adventures of the state. Troeltsch constructed his pluralism by embracing history. Unlike Schmitt, instead of falling back into a conflation of the national with the political, Troeltsch reached for a radically redefined conception of Europe.

In many ways of course Troeltsch was himself a creature of his times and shared a vision of the nineteenth century with Meinecke. During the age of Bismarck and Treitschke, Troeltsch contended, "the finest forces" of both sides of historicism could be brought into harmony. Only the subsequent generations had begun to drift off into the crisis of historicism. To Troeltsch, this opening up of the question of historicity offered an important missing link to respond to the

⁸⁰ Schmitt, 'Zu Friedrich Meinecke', p. 52.

⁸¹ Schmitt, 'Zu Friedrich Meinecke', p. 52.

dilemma of political action that had plagued Weber. It was the analysis of precisely this problem that motivated the extraordinary stocktaking of *Historicism and its Problems*. The stocktaking itself was only ever intended as the first of a two volume work that would culminate in a grand project of cultural “construction” (*Aufbau*). Troeltsch’s death from a lung embolism at the age of 57 prevented him from writing the planned second volume that would have developed his own solution to the double crisis of German politics and historicism. A number of lectures from the brief period between publishing the first volume in 1922 and his death in early 1923 give us however more than a glimpse into what that solution would have looked like.

In a lecture Troeltsch had intended to give to an audience in London in 1923, though he died just days before his scheduled departure for Britain, he made a determined effort to break the fixation on the nation state that was in his words the “most dangerous monistic exaggeration” and that was the characteristic problem of Weber, Meinecke and Schmitt. In the lecture script that was read and published posthumously Troeltsch outlined an entire schema of different spheres of meaningful social action, whereby the nation appeared only in third place with six more communities of values to follow.⁸² In each of these moral orders he saw different and appropriate ways of resolving the means-ends dilemma. Nationalism was forced to recede behind the community of humanity and the sphere of Western culture. In unfolding this plurality of value spheres, Troeltsch rejected any entitlement on behalf of one of these communities to fully synthesize the others. “Our lives are passed from the first not in a monistic, homogenous circle, but in a number of circles, each of which has its own ethical Common Spirit.”⁸³ Nor, taking aim

⁸² Ernst Troeltsch, *Christian Thought, its History and Application. Lectures written for delivery in England during March 1923, by the late Ernst Troeltsch*, Baron F. von Hügel (London: University of London Press, 1923). Reprinted in Ernst Troeltsch, 'Christian Thought, its History and Application', in *Fünf Vorträge zu Religion und Geschichtsphilosophie für England und Schottland. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Gangolf Hübinger and Andreas Terwey, eds. (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).

⁸³ Troeltsch, 'Christian Thought', p. 183.

once more at Weber, Tönnies and Simmel, would Troeltsch admit the fantasy that there ever had been a single unified order in some romanticized medieval past. The responsibility of politics thus emerges not as the false tragedy suggested by Weber of a stark choice between one or another moral god, but as a constantly shifting challenge of co-ordinating the different spheres. As agonizing as it may have been given Germany's particular political and intellectual history, the challenge of the present was to conceptually and practically decenter the nation, thereby opening the door to new forms of supra-national statehood and infra-national communities, beyond and within the burned out shell of the European nation state. Specifically, this meant both a call for a new world history as a self-consciously provincialized "European cultural synthesis" and an emphatic endorsement of the League of Nations.

In a prominent public lecture in Berlin in 1922 Troeltsch spoke passionately of the "indestructible moral core" of the League and its crucial historical role.⁸⁴ Since the League of Nations was not the world government that some had hoped for, this would be a compromise; above all a compromise with the over-weaning global power of Britain and America. But rather than adopting the truculent nationalism of Weber or Schmitt, Troeltsch recognized this as a historically specific challenge to German political thought. Unlike many of his contemporaries Troeltsch demonstrated a willingness to question the values of German political history. As he put it in the never delivered London lecture script: "Many of us in Germany regard 'compromise' as the lowest and most despicable means to which a thinker can resort. We are asked to recognize a radical disjunction here, and to choose either for or against ... But twist and turn the matter as you will the fact remains that all intransigence breaks down in practice and can

⁸⁴ Ernst Troeltsch, 'Naturrecht und Humanität in der Weltpolitik', *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv*, Vol. 18 (1922), p. 499. Reprinted in Ernst Troeltsch, *Schriften zur Politik und Kulturphilosophie (1918-1923)*, Gangolf Hübinger and Johannes Mikuteit, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, vol. 15 (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2002). .

only end in disaster.”⁸⁵ Regarding the League Troeltsch called for the global power imbalance to be offset by lower level regional affiliations. It is this rationale that led Troeltsch to endorse a pan-European perspective, resting on the need to construct a new European cultural synthesis that also fed his evaluation of meaningful political action by recourse to the resources of compromise. Where Weber’s restricted view of parliament as a mere pool for leadership selection reflected his limited conception of meaningful collective political action, almost exhausted by his treatment of party machines and their respective leaders, Troeltsch saw parliaments as indispensable arenas for compromise.

Rather than Weber’s schematic comparative formalism, Troeltsch accepted—indeed embraced—historicity, seeking to overcome history through history as he summed it up in the very last paragraph of his historicism book. Very much in the spirit of the young Jürgen Habermas, Troeltsch set himself to produce an account of how moral communities, Dilthey’s “emerging universals”, or what is now fashionably dubbed “normative orders,” are actually made. Such “communities of value” were for Troeltsch the mediating pieces which would act as “categories of individual totality”, within which past and future, means and ends could be bridged in meaningful ways.⁸⁶ Whereas Weber diagnosed the dilemmas of a “polytheism of values” as a tragic fate that grows more severe as modernity pushes the process of differentiation ever more systematically, Troeltsch attempted to formulate an escape by way of demonstrating how meaningful communities of value in fact have proliferated in modern society. Quite explicitly, this is an answer to both Spengler’s gloom and the unsatisfactory dichotomy that had

⁸⁵ Troeltsch, 'Christian Thought', p. 202.

⁸⁶ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 205. The term is also quoted by Otto Gerhard Oexle, 'Troeltschs Dilemma', in *Ernst Troeltschs "Historismus"*, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000), p. 41.

opened up in Weber's work between his scientific methodology of systematic comparativism and a tragic voluntarism in politics.

The culmination of the first volume of Troeltsch's unfinished magnum opus was a remarkable sketch for a pan-European cultural synthesis, as both a political and historical project. As Spengler had realized, the crisis of the European state system called for a relativization of the history of the West in the most radical sense. What was required was a new conception of historical consciousness. This must be universal but simultaneously conscious of its own eurocentricity and its own specifically European mission. Even more than Spengler, Troeltsch provides a striking precursor to the radical critique of Eurocentric history offered by post-colonial writers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*. And unlike either Weber or Spengler, Troeltsch studded his footnotes not with the travel diaries of Western orientalist but with references to Chakrabarty's predecessors, early twentieth-century Indian and Japanese intellectuals who were beginning to rethink Western historicity from a peripheral vantage point.⁸⁷ The condition of self-consciously historical existence, Troeltsch was convinced, was unique to European civilization. But what he also recognized was the hubris, violence and sheer delusion tied up in most modern conceptions of universal history. Far too often, "Palestine, Rome, Wittenberg and Geneva" were made the "centers of the world" from which European thinkers imagined there arose "one single flock with one single shepherd, the empire of absolute truth and salvation that modern man has transformed into the empire of a unitary culture, reason and science. The conqueror, the colonizer and the missionary are behind all European thought. That is a source of its practical power and fertility, but also many theoretical errors and

⁸⁷ See for instance Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 1031. Troeltsch here quotes Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Chuichiro Gomyo. "There are many more," he added, "all analogous to the European sciences but seen and felt from a different center."

exaggerations.”⁸⁸ The challenge of the postwar period was to accept a more limited and immediate cultural challenge: “to have the courage to profess one’s own historical fate ...”⁸⁹ Accepting this self-limitation would leave European intellectuals not with a “meager rest”, but with the task of “burning urgency to formulate a European identity [*Wesen*] and to work out a European future. This problem arose with modern European identity itself and has become, with its mounting development, ever richer and more urgent. It is today, at an obvious turning point in Europe’s fate, more urgent than ever and assists history [*Historie*] today, despite all the moaning about Historicism and memory overload, to a central philosophical importance.”⁹⁰

Troeltsch thought of this task as eminently practical. As a theologian he was only too well aware that the historical exploration of Christianity had given rise to a new idea of Christian religion. The same liberating effect he hoped would result from further historical exploration of the middle ages and “everything to do with Germanism. Its true historical exploration frees us from false sense of entitlement and misleading images ... to be able to free ourselves from history and to gain sovereign dominion over it, we plunge into an ocean of historical criticism and reconstruction.”⁹¹ There were risks of superficiality and dogmatism in this constant back and forth between past and present, but it was the “inescapable fate” of any culture like that of Europe that carried within it so many strands of multi-layered culture. And it was all the more urgent at the present moment since Europe clearly faced the end of a great epoch. In the Great War the military and bureaucratic state that Weber had raised to an ideal-typical standard had collapsed both internally and externally. But Europe was not ready to retreat from history into a

⁸⁸ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 1025.

⁸⁹ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 1027.

⁹⁰ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 1028f.

⁹¹ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 1042.

“peaceful old age”. By bringing the Great War to an end in November 1918 it had escaped complete self-annihilation. The task at hand was the “social and political reconstruction of the world of peoples” which could only take place through historical self-reflection.⁹² The current excitement and turmoil was no doubt passing, but unlike Weber, Troeltsch did not dismiss the postwar turmoil as irrelevant to the basic processes of rationalized modernity, either practically or intellectually. Instead, he compared the crisis of the aftermath of World War I to the defining upheaval of the late eighteenth century. The path towards the French revolution had been prepared by historical criticism and reconstruction. After a brief and violent moment of pure rationalism and enthusiasm it had been succeeded by a “dramatic deepening of historical thought.” German idealism and historicism were products of that moment. “This time,” Troeltsch suggested “will presumably be no different.”⁹³ The challenge was to achieve a new “synthesis of culture” that was neither “narrow” nor too “central European”, but understood as emerging from interaction with all of Europe’s neighbors, including the Islamic world, Russia and the United States.⁹⁴

VI

In his enthusiasm in the early 1920s for the League of Nations and a European cultural synthesis, Troeltsch can easily appear naïve by contrast with Weber’s timeless pessimism. Behind the neglect of characters like Troeltsch and Meinecke stands the sense that their attempts to find an escape from the impasse of their national political tradition were condemned by Schiller’s court of world history. By contrast, the disastrous history that followed has

⁹² Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 1043.

⁹³ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, p. 1044.

⁹⁴ Troeltsch, *Historismus*, pp. 1043-1048.

considerably assisted in the canonization of Weber's "Vocation Lectures". Weber's bleakest predictions seem confirmed. But ought we not to wonder at the "moral luck" that made Weber's strained combination of deterministic sociology and fatalistic despair into a totem of political realism? The allure of the thinkers of dark times remains powerful. But the context that surrounds them also tends to dull the critical senses. Acknowledging dark drama is not by itself a warrant for realism. We don't deny, of course, that European history was to take a disastrous turn in the 1930s. Our point is different. Recognizing the parallels between the position adopted by someone like Troeltsch and our current preoccupation with concrete normative orders, and facing up to the shattering disappointment that Troeltsch's hopes suffered in the 1930s, should give pause for thought. It should sharpen our awareness of how our own intellectual undertakings are at stake in the contingency of our own present, the stake our own thought has in the success of practical projects today. Does the current enthusiasm, for instance, for what Rainer Forst has dubbed "normative orders", not hang on the success of the European community? Could the latter, a skeptic might be tempted to ask, even owe an unacknowledged debt to the success of NATO? And where in Europe is the Federal Republic of Germany?

The thinker who has most persistently thought modernity as an unfinished project and has insisted on Europe's centrality and responsibility for that project is, of course, Jürgen Habermas, who traces the legacy of the European project by way of Kant down to the present. But as John McCormick showed in his fascinating critique of Habermas's writing on Europe, Habermas's thought is both an answer to and a symptom of the problems that we have raised in this essay.⁹⁵ It is not by accident that McCormick chose Habermas's relation to recent "transformations of the European state" as the terrain on which to issue a call for a revival of interest in the philosophy

⁹⁵ See McCormick, *Transformations of the European State*.

of history. The EU, embedded within an unprecedented transatlantic strategic network forged in 1945 can claim to be the most innovative political project of late twentieth and early twenty-first century. It stands as a tragically belated but nonetheless significant answer to the crisis of the nation state that stirred Weber, Meinecke and Troeltsch in the aftermath of World War I. It thus poses the fundamental challenge of how we can grasp truly fundamental political change. As McCormick shows, and as we discussed above, Weber's legal sociology falls short of being able to grasp this development and Habermas, to the extent that he embraces Weberianism, faces similar problems in moving beyond his reified and ahistorical conception of the democratic welfare state.

In light of our discussion of the crisis of historicism we can view the problems diagnosed by McCormick in Weber and Habermas's conceptualization of modernity in a different light. As Meinecke and Troeltsch both argued, any truly fundamental shift in the political order of Europe places in question the entire tradition of historically situated social and political thought. To his great credit Habermas has never been susceptible, unlike many of the self-styled political realists, to the tragic allure of Weber's political writings. In this respect Habermas is a highly self-conscious child of his time, scarred by the legacy of German nationalism. The idea of linking Weber to Lenin and Nietzsche as models of realistic political thinking, as recently suggested by Raymond Geuss, would no doubt strike him as an irresponsible gesture.⁹⁶ But Weber has been a touchstone for Habermas in ways one can better appreciate once we have the crisis of historicism squarely in view. As Troeltsch predicted in 1922, the revolutionary crisis of

⁹⁶ Not only does Geuss turn Weber's moment of panic-ridden crisis into an emblem of sober political realism but through the same grounding in Weber history enters into Geuss's analysis of "real politics" in a necessarily empty way. Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 32, 40. Geuss is far from alone in this regard. Most contemporary political realists appeal to Weber in order to advance their realist critiques of politics as applied ethics or political moralism, to use Bernard Williams's terminology, whose more subtle analysis sidesteps some of Geuss's pitfalls.

World War I and its aftermath did indeed lead to a dramatic deepening of historical thought in Europe, which from the 1920s through to the 1960s led two generations into an intense preoccupation with the legacies of nineteenth-century philosophy of history, from Hegel via Nietzsche to Dilthey and Heidegger. Habermas has spent much of the last half century seeking to extricate critical theory from the coils of that legacy, be they Hegelian, neo-Marxian or Nietzschean in inspiration. As McCormick, Benhabib and others have pointed out, a crucial moment in Habermas's thought occurs in the 1970s and 1980s when in search of an alternative account of social change he turned to theories of social evolution. What they have not stressed is the obverse of this, namely Habermas's highly self-conscious effort to differentiate his thinking from history. With his characteristic acuity Habermas himself openly characterizes this as a Weberian move.⁹⁷ Habermas recognizes Weber for what he is, an adamant obstacle to any holistic notion of historical development and of historical social praxis however conceived.

The consequences of Weber's dramatic effort to distance himself from Hegel were exposed by the critiques offered by Troeltsch and Meinecke. The consequences of Habermas's effort to draw a stark distinction between history and evolution are no less serious. As McCormick diagnoses from a neo-Hegelian perspective, Habermas's "flight from Hegel" towards Weber results in a "transhistorical, Kantian approach to law".⁹⁸ Habermas's "creeping Weberianism" relegates history and replaces it by a reconstructive science of social evolutionism. "The centrality of historical change," which had preoccupied Habermas in such early works as the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, McCormick explains, "...

⁹⁷ As he writes in the "Theory of Communicative Action" (1981), "Among the classical figures of sociology, Max Weber is the only one who broke with both the premises of the philosophy of history and the basic assumptions of evolutionism ...". Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society [1981]* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 143.

⁹⁸ McCormick, *Transformations of the European State*, p. 140. Having taken Benhabib's point on board we may of course want to complicate the precise nature of McCormick's association of Weber and Kant here.

[was] replaced by Habermas's fairly linear evolutionary communicative theory that explained little about the actual historical past and portended even less about the future."⁹⁹ Whereas the early Habermas offered a differentiated account of capitalist modernity his writings of the last twenty years operate with a blunt distinction between the medieval period and modernity with the gap spanned by a simple concept of rationalization. It is from this observation that McCormick poses his leading question: is Habermas, in his analysis of the EU, "able to free himself from the static historical paradigm that he adopted to better facilitate deliberative-judicial emancipation within a *Sozialstaat* model?"¹⁰⁰ How can Habermas encompass new types of state formation and structural transformations at the European level? Is Habermas intellectually stuck with the *Rechtsstaat* and *Sozialstaat* model or does he have the conceptual tools to conceive of a supranational corporatist *Sektoralstaat* that according to McCormick is coming to dominate the European Union?

The current crisis leads us to radicalize McCormick's question and forces us back to the Weber of the "vocation essays". McCormick mounted his challenge to the Weber-Habermas axis in peaceful times where the question of historical change in Europe could still be conceived in terms of a stage model of capitalist regulation. In questions of legal sociology at least Habermas could cleave to the "safe side" of Weber. But what happens to Habermas's Weberianism at a moment of danger when the question of history and political action is posed with irresistible force?

Habermas's decision in the 1970s to opt for social evolution led him to relegate the narrative practice of history and political judgment to a separate sphere. As a result, Habermas

⁹⁹ McCormick, *Transformations of the European State*, p. 8. In the realm of moral philosophy a similar point has been made by critics of Habermas's choice to exclude thicker ethical questions of the good life and *Sittlichkeit* from discursive deliberation.

¹⁰⁰ McCormick, *Transformations of the European State*, p. 9.

himself was left with a radically underdetermined account of political action and agency. In the 1980s in his battles with German historians over Reagan and Kohl's visit to the SS war graves in Bitburg, Habermas came to identify the historical profession with a neo-Treitschkean agenda to which he was, needless to say, profoundly hostile. This made Habermas into the central tribune of progressive opinion. But turning the point against him, we would argue that the distance he put between himself and history also makes itself felt in Habermas's truncated ability to account for the success of the Federal Republic of Germany, the polity in whose intellectual life he has played such a central role and which is now pivotal to the future of Europe. Casting our eyes back to the 1950s and early 1960s Habermas has not come to terms with the success of the politics of *Westbindung* initiated by figures such as Konrad Adenauer of whom he was bitterly critical in his youth. He has largely refused to acknowledge the cautious progressivism of key institutions of West Germany, such as the constitutional court, of which he has been a persistent critic. Where in Habermas's understanding of European politics since 1945 is the role either for Adenauer's politics of integration with Europe and NATO or Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr's extraordinary, but deeply morally ambiguous embrace of détente with the Soviets and their satellites in Eastern Europe in the 1970s?

In relation to the current European crisis, these questions of historical judgment take on a new urgency and highlight issues that were left unaddressed in McCormick's otherwise commendable call to revive the question of the philosophy of history. In McCormick's alternative account of Europe's development the absence of political action is no less marked than in Habermas himself. The only moment at which McCormick gestures to political actors comes in a brief reference to the founding fathers of Europe, in which Conrad (sic) Adenauer is misspelled. This is telling in a double sense. Not only does it trivialize the problem of the

founding, it reproduces on a shorter time scale Habermas's own simplistic model of modernity by downplaying the dramatic agency of more recent generations of European politicians.¹⁰¹ And yet if we are to pursue McCormick's call to revive the philosophy of history, the question of agency must surely be at this project's core. It was the activity of Willy Brandt and his successors from the late 1960s through to the early 1990s that gave the European project a new and dramatic impetus. What they exhibited was a kind of *raison d'état* that does not draw on stark simplicities of the Weberian type but on enormously complex models of democratic leadership embedded in political parties and social action. The problem they were struggling with was the legacy of World War II, the Cold War and German division, a direct result of the crisis of the European nation states, the German one in particular, that so preoccupied Meinecke, Weber and Troeltsch. The resulting restoration of Europe stands as a remarkable reversal of the bleak pessimism that for too long gave Weber the upper hand over Troeltsch. Ironically, by the end of the twentieth century the very European order that resulted from this political agency helped to make political leadership seem once more extraneous to the problem of a general theory of modernity. Habermas could limit himself to culture and social philosophy. McCormick in 2007 rightly insisted that more attention should be paid to the dynamics of capitalism. But for him this presented itself as a question of frameworks of regulation. The current crisis reminds us that the general problem of theorizing modernization and capitalist legitimation is not separable from the general problem of political action and *raison d'état*.

A month ago this essay would have ended here. But during the gestation of this paper Habermas has come forth with a compact and timely manifesto, *On the Constitution of Europe*,

¹⁰¹ As brilliantly described for instance by Timothy Garton Ash in "In Europe's Name", a work inexplicably slighted by McCormick, see Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Random House, 1993).

published in mid November 2011 and already in its third edition. It has been compared in the German press to nothing less than Kant's *Perpetual Peace* essay.¹⁰² In this little blue book Habermas synthesizes his previous theoretical analyses and opinion pieces on Europe to a three step critique. On one level he presents a now familiar legal argument that stresses two structural innovations of European law: the supremacy of supranational law over the national law of the "Gewaltmonopolisten" and the fact that constitutive power is shared or divided (depending on one's perspective) between the European peoples and all European citizens. Habermas celebrates the divided sovereignty that haunted Schmitt and was a major intellectual motivating force behind his involvement in the Prussian Coup of 1932 and his slide towards Nazism. But Habermas is not satisfied with spinning a dense web of legal theory, as he might well have been in calmer times. Writing in the midst of the current crisis he adds two distinct steps in which we recognize an echo of our wider argument: he turns to current political agency in the crisis and he faces questions of temporality. On the level of the former, he develops a harsh analysis of the failure of European political leadership and the "executive federalism" that he scents behind "Merkozy's" domination of the European Council, the EU's intergovernmental executive cabinet. But more striking than this predictable argument is the methodological shift in Habermas's approach. In making his case Habermas plunges without reserve into the dramatic narrative of the European project. The Habermas of 2011 explicitly fuses theoretical legal analysis and a political "narrative" and even "story-telling" (*Erzählung*) in a way that was supposedly foreclosed by the strictures of his evolutionary turn a generation ago.¹⁰³ He looks forward by extrapolating that narrative of the EU as a concrete step towards the goal of a world

¹⁰² Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas. Ein Essay* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011). The core of the book is a programmatic essay on "The Crisis of the European Union in the Light of a Constitutionalization of International Law". The essay is accompanied by three previously published articles and a short interview.

¹⁰³ Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, p. 82.

parliament. A new and “realistic” concern for agency is blended both with history and a utopian gaze into the future. His new posture, suspended as it is between an analysis of political agency and a utopian outlook, renders Habermas a utopian realist.

Facing a crisis far worse than the one facing us today, Troeltsch predicted that the 1920s and 1930s would see a revival in the philosophy of history. He was not to be disappointed. If Habermas is anything to go by, it seems that our current crisis has made the question of history inescapable once more. Given our long experience with the unfinished project of modernity, this connection between crisis and historical consciousness should not come as any surprise. But intellectually energizing as they may be, such moments of crisis also harbor the temptations both of eschatological escape and bleak Weberian *amor fati*. Though often clad in the rhetoric of realism such moves are instead symptoms of regression. If we are to have any hope of responding creatively to the reality that faces us, if we are not merely to repeat such well-worn patterns of thought, we should take up instead a vision like that of Troeltsch.¹⁰⁴ To assist in orientating a response to the specific crisis that he and his contemporaries faced, he issued an open-ended challenge to engage in a collective and dynamic process of historical construction and reconstruction, he proposed a new history of the problem of the philosophy of history, a new vision of history no less. In so doing he reminded them and us of the defining and framing role that the question of history continues to play in political thought right down to the present.

¹⁰⁴ For another neglected contemporary manifesto along similar lines, see John Dewey, *Logic. The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1938)..

Bibliography

- Benhabib, Seyla, 'Rationality and Social Action: Critical Reflections on Max Weber's Methodological Writings', *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XII, No. 4 (1981).
- Breiner, Peter, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Dewey, John, *Logic. The Theory of Inquiry*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1938.
- Garton Ash, Timothy, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- Geuss, Raymond, *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Geyer, Michael, 'Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a Levée en Masse in October 1918', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (2001).
- Grumley, John, 'Weber's Fragmentation Of Totality', *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 21 (1988).
- Habermas, Jürgen, 'Leadership and Leitkultur', *The New York Times*, 28 October 2010.
- Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society [1981]*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.
- Habermas, Jürgen, *Zur Verfassung Europas. Ein Essay*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011.
- Hahlweg, Werner, *Ein unveröffentlichter Band aus dem Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der deutschen Verfassungsgebenden Nationalversammlung und des deutschen Reichstages*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1971.
- Iggers, Georg, 'Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Jan. 1995).
- Iggers, George C., *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968.
- McCormick, John, *Weber, Habermas and Transformations of the European State: Constitutional, Social, and Supranational Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Meinecke, Friedrich, 'Die Lehre von den Interessen der Staaten im Frankreich Richelieus', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 123, No. 1 (1921).
- Meinecke, Friedrich, 'Drei Generationen deutscher Gelehrtenpolitik', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 125, No. 2 (1922).
- Meinecke, Friedrich, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte*. Munich and Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1924.
- Meinecke, Friedrich, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*. 2 vols. Munich und Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1936.
- Meinecke, Friedrich, *Machiavellism: the doctrine of raison d'état and its place in modern history*. Translated by Douglas Scott. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.
- Meinecke, Friedrich, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*. Translated by E. Anderson. New York: Herder & Herder, 1972.
- Mommsen, Wolfgang J., *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik, 1890-1920*. Second edition ed. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1974.
- Mommsen, Wolfgang J., 'Max Weber and the Peace Treaty of Versailles', in *The Treaty of Versailles*, edited by Manfred F. Boemeke, Gerald D. Feldman and Elisabeth Glaser. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Oexle, Otto Gerhard, 'Troeltschs Dilemma', in *Ernst Troeltschs "Historismus"*, edited by Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, 23-64. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000.

- Ritter, Gerhard, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk. Das Problem des "Militarismus" in Deutschland*. München: R. Oldenbourg, 1954-1968.
- Ritter, Gerhard, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*. Translated by Heinz Norden. Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1969-73.
- Roth, Guenther, 'Weber's Political Failure', *Telos* 78, Vol. 78 (Winter 1988-1989).
- Schmitt, Carl, 'Zu Friedrich Meineckes Idee der Staatsräson', *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Vol. 56 (1926).
- Schmitt, Carl, 'Zu Friedrich Meineckes Idee der Staatsräson [1926]', in *Positionen und Begriffe im Kampf mit Weimar-Genf-Versailles, 1923-1939*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1940.
- Scholem, Gershom, *Walter Benjamin: the story of a friendship*. New York: The New York Review of Books, 2003.
- Teschke, Bruno, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations*. London: Verso, 2003.
- Treitschke, Heinrich von, *Politics*. Vol. 1. New York: MacMillan, 1916.
- Troeltsch, Ernst, 'Naturrecht und Humanität in der Weltpolitik', *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv*, Vol. 18 (1922).
- Troeltsch, Ernst, *Christian Thought, its History and Application. Lectures written for delivery in England during March 1923, by the late Ernst Troeltsch*. Edited by Baron F. von Hügel. London: University of London Press, 1923.
- Troeltsch, Ernst, *Schriften zur Politik und Kulturphilosophie (1918-1923)*. Edited by Gangolf Hübinger and Johannes Mikuteit, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, vol. 15. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2002.
- Troeltsch, Ernst, 'Christian Thought, its History and Application', in *Fünf Vorträge zu Religion und Geschichtsphilosophie für England und Schottland. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Gangolf Hübinger and Andreas Terwey. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006.
- Troeltsch, Ernst, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme. Erstes Buch: Das logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie (1922)*. Edited by Friedrich Wilhelm Graf and Matthias Schloßberger. Vol. 16/I and 16/II, Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008.
- Weber, Marianne, *Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild*. third edition ed. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1926.
- Weber, Max, 'Politics as a Vocation [1919]', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- Weber, Max, 'Science as a Vocation [1917]', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- Weber, Max, 'Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy [1904]', in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, 49-112. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949.
- Weber, Max, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Edited by Johannes Winkelmann. Third edition ed. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Siebeck], 1968.
- Weber, Max, *Roscher and Knies. The Logical Problems of Historical Economics*. New York: Free Press, 1975.
- Weber, Max, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*. Tübingen: UTB, 1988.
- Weber, Max, 'Politik als Beruf', in *Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe [hereafter MWG], I/17*, edited by Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Wolfgang Schluchter and Birgitt Morgenbrod. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Siebeck, 1992.

Eich and Tooze 2011/2012

Wheeler-Bennett, John W., *Brest-Litovsk. The Forgotten Peace, March 1918*. London: Macmillan, 1938.