Max Weber and Plebiscitarian Democracy:
A Critique of the Mommsen Thesis

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Introduction

The English translation and publication of Wolfgang Mommsen's Max Weber and German Politics 1890–1920 is an important event for any American sociologist interested in making sense out of Weber's political sociology and controversial personal politics. The American critical reception of this volume (including prominent reviews by Guenther Roth, Fritz Ringer, Gianfranco Poggi and Steven Seidman), has been overwhelmingly favorable. However, to fully appreciate and evaluate what is regarded as a "standard work" on Weber one must recognize the context in which it was written, namely in a post-war Germany (1959) still seeking, as Mommsen frankly confesses, to lay down firm democratic roots and inspire popular belief in natural and inalienable rights and democracy. In the preface to the 1984 English edition, Mommsen honestly admits that his work was a part of a constellation of German historiography whose fundamental assumption was that the Holocaust was in part a product of the "alleged value neutrality of Weimar democracy." Their work was written from a point of view which involved a fundamentalist conception of democracy based on the inalienable rights of natural law. In the midst of such profound value concerns, the value relevance of Weber's political writings and political sociology was obvious. Predictably, given Mommsen's own value commitments, his value judgments, and moral evaluations of Weber's "politics" took a loudly negative turn. In such an intellectual and political ambience, Mommsen's work was implicitly a part of the process of political reeducation. Weber was depicted by Mommsen, no matter how equivocally, as part of a German political lineage which climaxed in Hitler and the Third Reich.

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However, "standard work" or not, there are profound problems and limitations in Mommsen's work. Although in the 1984 preface to the English edition, Mommsen claims that his work is based on "all available sources," this is obviously not the case. For although Mommsen exhaustively researched Weber's political writings, speeches, and correspondence, he selectively utilized Weber's substantive sociology to underline his political points. Mommsen selectively argues that Weber's sociology was decisively shaped by his passionate political involvement and that his political and theoretical view can be seen as a reaction against the political and social order of Wilhelmine Germany. But this one-dimensional and nondialectical view of Weber's work is open to question and in need of revision. One of the burdens of this review essay is to demonstrate that Weber's sociology was not only shaped by his passionate political involvement but also the reverse—his studies in universal history and comparative historical sociology decisively helped shape his own political involvement and personal choices and commitment. At times then, I will be turning Mommsen's argument on its head. In other words, the focus of this work will be on Weber's theoretical view and substantive sociology and on how their logic, evidence, and reasoning can be seen in his personal politics and controversial advocacy of plebiscitarian democracy. In the process, I would hope to contribute toward clearing up a major "muddle" in Weberian scholarship—the political reasoning behind Weber's advocacy of leadership or plebiscitarian democracy.* To date, that reasoning and its sources are anything but clear as Mommsen frankly admits. Part of the reason for the continuing muddle is the fact that Mommsen and other interpreters of Weber's position in this regard fail to systematically integrate the logic, evidence and reasoning of Weber's comparative historical sociology as part of their analysis. Instead, they fly from Nietzschean philosophy to the American presidency, to Germany's immediate post-war situation in search of a "plausible" basis for their admittedly speculative analysis. The result has been endless interpretations noteworthy only for their intellectual ingenuity. What these interpretations fail to do is to systematically incorporate the light that Weber's substantive sociology sheds on the questions at issue. Evidence from Weber's own work which incorporates and yet transcends in its logic, evidence and reasoning the problems of the immediate and

*Plebiscitarian democracy would involve a directly elected president, with the power to go directly to the people by means of referenda. Parliament could not remove the president. He could be removed by a popular referendum, if 10 percent of the population called for one.