Max Weber’s contributions to the social sciences remain at the heart of how we speak about ethics, status, ethnicity, class, bureaucracy, and politics. His definition of the state as being “the legitimated monopoly over the use of coercive force in a given territory” is a staple of journalists and social scientists alike. Weber is also credited with highlighting concepts such as “iron cage,” “bureaucracy,” “bureaucratization,” “rationalization,” “charisma,” and the role of the “work ethic” in ordering modern labor markets. Indeed, such concepts are so well known that they are often even cliché.

Other terms we hope can be added to this list include Weber’s description of modern courts as a “judging machine” should be read by every first-year law student, as well as the conditioned “discipline” that underlies modern factories, bureaucracies, and institutions. In Weber’s writings about politics, we would like to add terms of similar value: the “true human” who is meant for politics, and the “demon of politics” that grips humans heeding the call of political power. We also believe that Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, words well known in American sociology of the 1960s and 1970s, should reenter the sociological lexicon.

Max Weber’s writing is relevant in the twenty-first century because the issues of social stratification, power, politics, and modernity resonate just as loudly today as they did during the early twentieth century when he wrote, or for that matter the feudalism that Weber so aptly analyzed. In retranslating the essays presented here, we have often
marveled at how “today” his writings are. In our life at California State University, Chico, Weber’s writing echoes in the way the faculty senate is run, civil servants organize, campus politicians maneuver, information is guarded, and administrative units persist despite turnover in university leadership or even during the turbulence of the Great Recession of 2008. We see this at the national and international level too where the political institutions Weber so artfully described during 1918–1919 continue to shape humans in the same fashion they did then. And floating above this are the private and public bureaucracies that Weber said characterized modernity, even though they are deeply rooted in feudalism.

How powerful and dominant are bureaucracies? Weber’s ironic observation that the power of the modern German bureaucracy, which exceeded even that of its own creator, the Iron Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, should bring a smile to the face of anyone who has ever filled out a meaningless form or marveled at the inability of a powerful president to fulfill even the most basic campaign promise. Indeed, from such a context, we suspect that Mao Zedong would be rolling over in his Beijing mausoleum if he were to know how persistent China’s bureaucratic Mandarins are today despite war, invasion, revolution, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong, as well as his predecessors (and successors), destroyed much of imperial China—but not the imperial bureaucratic form and procedure, which persist as Weber wrote “in spite of it all!”

In these introductory remarks, there are summary descriptions of the key concepts found in the four essays presented here. This is followed by a brief discussion of how we believe Weber’s writings fit in with Marx and Nietzsche, both of whom Weber occasionally referred to in his writings, and which, we agree, provide a context for understanding Weber. Next, we examine the influences of three sources we think are underestimated with regard to Weber’s writings about politics and ethics: Ferdinand Tönnies, Martin Luther, and the Hindu Upanishads. Each wrestled with tensions within society in ways that are not found in either Marx’s materialism or Nietzsche’s nihilism.

A Summary of Weber’s Overarching Concepts for the Twenty-First Century

This section introduces what we think are among the most important themes of the four Weber essays presented here. A number of