CHAPTER SEVEN

Politics as Vocation

Introduction

The questions Weber asks are, “Why and under what circumstances will the people submit? And on which intrinsic internal legal justification, and what external means does domination rely?”

Weber’s “Politics as Vocation” is the capstone to this translation because it brings together Weber’s thoughts about power, bureaucracy, politics, charisma, and discipline. It was first delivered as a speech on January 28, 1919, when Weber spoke from notes (which are preserved in the Collected Works of Max Weber), and was then recorded by a stenographer sitting behind him as he spoke. The notes and the stenography were then organized into an essay over the next several months, which was then published in German.

Weber was invited to speak at the Munich University because the students wanted to know how to answer the “calling” to the “vocation” (Beruf) of politics. The students were excited with the revolutionary activity in Germany and wanted to hear from a “master,” and so they asked Weber to address them. Weber at first declined—he was too busy campaigning for the DDP and a seat in the Reichstag. So, as an alternative, the students proposed Kurt Eisner, the president of the newly proclaimed Bavarian Republic, who was also Weber’s political nemesis. To block the invitation to Eisner, Weber changed his mind and accepted.

The students were apparently expecting Weber to give a rousing campaign-type speech that would offer comment on the political issues of postwar Germany, and also feed their idealism. Weber instead offered them a philosophical speech, which meditated on the very nature of government, and the inherent tensions found in the “calling”
of politics. Weber’s conclusion for the students is a gloomy one, in which he points out that even one meant for politics will at times use evil means to achieve a greater good. This is not the speech that the students contracted for (see Dahrendorff 1992).

The result is that, more so than the other essays here, this “essay” is a speech. Weber is sarcastic and at times flippant in this speech/essay. He uses it to deliver barbs to contemporary political opponents, including Bavarian president Kurt Eisner, communists, and other “little dictators of the street.” (p. 178). The pacifist philosopher Friedrich Förster does a little better—but then Förster never crossed swords with Weber’s DDP party, as Eisner and the Spartacists like Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht did. The deposed Kaiser Wilhelm II, and the victorious Allies (especially Woodrow Wilson) who were demanding an onerous peace of Germany and admissions of guilt do not fare as well either (see pp. 184–185). But for the purposes of “Politics as Vocation,” this is beside the point. In Weber’s mind, what all of these politicians share in common is a naïveté for what politics can offer in terms of reform and the conduct of human affairs.

While these contemporary staples of 1919 politics are littered throughout the essay (particularly toward the end), Weber’s main point is still that politics is an endeavor with inherent ethical tensions that sap the soul of whoever practices it. The soul is sapped because inherently politics is about the wielding of coercive power (Gewalt) that is at times violent. The effective politician must wield this violence with a “sense of proportion” as decisions are made about who will be taxed, fined, restricted, coerced, flattered, demagogued, and even executed. Maintaining this sense of proportion is of course extremely difficult for a “true human”—as power-bearers they are constantly dealing with appeals to their vanity, and the temptations of power—a precise condition that leads them to lose any “sense of proportion.”

The ethical conviction needed to do this, Weber writes, is difficult because the politician is always balancing the ethics of decisions rooted in moral convictions (Gesinnungsethik) with the consequences actions have on the immediate responsibilities being aware of the consequences of actions (Verantwortungsethik).

Much of the point of “Politics as Vocation” is made at the beginning and end of the essay. The first part of the essay defines the inherent relationship between government and violence. The end of the essay discusses the ethical tension this definitions presents. The middle is more of a philosophical/historical excursion through the vast terrain of Weber’s reading and thinking about the exercise of power throughout history.