

Max Weber, Parliamentarism and the Rhetorical Culture of Politics

Kari Palonen

Abstract

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

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

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

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

I will not enter into a dispute on the question of the extent to which we should regard Weber's late stance for a plebiscitary *Führerdemokratie* with