

**Charisma and Responsibility:
Max Weber, Kurt Eisner, and the Bavarian Revolution of 1918**

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Abstract

Weber followed revolutionary change in postwar Germany closely, using his categories of charisma and responsibility to interpret developments. His views were especially affected by his attitude toward the leader of that revolution in Munich, the socialist Kurt Eisner. The history of Eisner's role in the revolution from October 1918 through his assassination in February 1919 illuminates Weber's theory of charisma and the role of the demagogue. Weber identified Eisner as a possible charismatic leader, and at the same time deplored his actions. The second part of the article examines two seminal texts of Weber from this postwar period. Contextualizing Weber's work enriches it and suggests a new understanding of the role of charisma in social change. Analysing Eisner's role in Weber's terms leads to a reinterpretation of that historical period, and also contains insights for other periods.

Keywords: charisma, demagogue, responsibility, revolution, truth, types of authority, war guilt.

Argument and background

Two key terms in Max Weber's work are 'charisma' and 'responsibility'. These terms took on added meaning in Weber's writings during the political and social turmoil of the First World War and its aftermath, a period known as the German Revolution. They continue to resonate in the present. Weber was able to test the usefulness of his notion of charisma (when people accept a leader because they attribute extraordinary qualities to him) against the collapse of the authoritarian German state at the end of the war, and especially to help account for the rise of new social and political movements in the period immediately following the end of the war in November 1918. The somewhat opposed concept of responsibility evokes the traits Weber believed ought to characterize a serious politician, who should carefully evaluate the consequences of his action, and act accordingly.

This is reflected in two texts in particular: 'Economy and Society', especially the postwar sections (Weber 1978: 1-307), and the well-known essay, 'Politics as a Vocation' (Weber 1958). Both were drafted between 1918 and 1920. Close commentators on these texts have already noted that Weber responded to his times. The editor of the English version of 'Economy and Society', Guenther Roth, has noted (1978: ciii) with regard to the postwar text, 'The many pages of seemingly dry definitions and comments owe some of their length—and hidden fervor—to Weber's political involvement with the problems of postwar economic collapse and in the face of the victor's harsh demands at Versailles'. Wolfgang Mommsen wrote (1989: 8) of Weber's key text on 'Politics as a Vocation' that it 'arose from a particular historical situation and... is unmistakably directed against the pacifist tendencies of the time'.

This paper examines the linkage between Weber's texts and the history and sociology of Germany during this period. Weber reacted strongly to the German revolution of 1918–19 and notably the events in Munich where he spent much of this period. Ever since the Russian revolution of 1905 he had showed a fascination with the social change implications of revolution, and the collapse of Germany in 1918 dropped him into the midst of a similar situation. An analysis of Weber's position and views reveals three interlocking sets of relationships: between Weber and the unfolding events, between Weber and the leader of postwar Bavaria (Kurt Eisner) as indirect political rivals, and the applicability of Weber's concept of 'charisma' to Eisner in the context of the Bavarian revolution.

Two protagonists: Max Weber and Kurt Eisner

The key figure in revolutionary Bavaria was the socialist journalist and politician Kurt Eisner, to whom Weber paid close attention. As a politician, Weber treated Eisner as a rival; as a sociologist, he used him as an example. Weber and Eisner represented two different approaches to the transition from war to peace and the reconstruction of a new German society. Both were politically active during this period. Weber's objections to Eisner's politics are spelled out in the famous essay 'Politics as a Vocation', as we shall see below. Weber the sociologist included Eisner in a somewhat eclectic list of possible charismatic leaders (1978: 242). In fact, Eisner was one of the few contemporaries Weber named in his discussions of charisma.

The Independent Socialist Kurt Eisner (1867–1919) was the first prime minister of the Bavarian republic (1918–1919). As a Prussian

of Jewish origin, Eisner was a double outsider to Bavaria. He was born in Berlin in 1867, and after university studies in philosophy he turned to a career in journalism to earn his living. From 1898 to 1905 he was the leading editor of the official newspaper of the Social Democratic Party, 'Vorwärts', published in Berlin. In 1910 he came to Munich where he was variously a foreign affairs correspondent, the parliamentary reporter covering the Bavarian provincial assembly, and a theatre critic for the local Socialist newspaper. His opposition to the First World War led the newspaper to cease publishing his political commentary, and only his role as theatre critic remained to provide him (and his wife and child) with a somewhat threadbare living (Grau 2001). His activities at the end of war and in the early postwar period will be examined later.

There are intriguing parallels between the life courses of Weber¹ and Eisner. Born into bourgeois circumstances in north Germany, both gravitated to the south where thought seemed more open. Both were committed to a strong Germany, though for Eisner that meant a socialist Germany, and for Weber a liberal democratic republic based on a dynamic capitalism. Both were associated with the Neo-Kantian school of philosophy. Both were considered dynamic public speakers. By the middle of the war both had come to oppose at least the conduct of the war, and were outspoken.² Both were comfortable at least with the idea of the dissolution of the imperial monarchy. There is no evidence that the two ever met, though they had mutual friends – such as Ernst Toller,³ Edgar Jaffé,⁴ and Robert Michels.⁵ There are direct and indirect references to Eisner

1. Biographical materials on Weber are available from many sources (e.g., Marianne Weber 1975; Mitzman 1985).

2. This is illustrated for Weber by his comments at the Burg Lauenstein conferences in 1917 when he had to be cautioned not to go too far; for Eisner by the weekly gatherings he organized in a Munich café from 1916.

3. Toller met Weber at Burg Lauenstein and later followed him to Heidelberg where he attended Weber's Sunday open houses (Fügen 1985); later he joined forces with Eisner in the Volksstaat, and after Eisner's assassination he joined in the leftward swing of the revolution (Toller 1963).

4. Edgar Jaffé was a collaborator of Weber's on scientific journals in the period before the War; he was Finance Minister in Eisner's government after 8 November, 1918.

5. Robert Michels was another former student of Weber's who later taught in Italy and Switzerland. He met Eisner first in 1904 through the Social Democratic Party. In 1919, Michels invited Eisner to Basel where he was teaching. See Michels (1929: 377-78); Mommsen (1981, 1989).