

Editorial

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Max Weber sent his resignation letter from the Pan-German League in April 1899. It is not known exactly when he joined the League but he did attend its annual conferences in 1894 and 1895. Weber's political focus was Germany's eastern border with Poland where the large farm estates were just about maintaining their economic viability by employing immigrant Polish and Russian labour, which cost less than the traditional German farmworker. This made the border porous and increased the Polonization of the eastern provinces. Weber recommended closing the borders and a settlement policy of Germanization. Stefan Breuer in his article 'Max Weber in the Pan-German League' argues that Weber's politics were congruent with Bismarck's previous policy of closing the borders to immigration. This fell a long way short of the expansionist demands of other members of the League. Fellow speakers at the 1894 conference invoked what would today be called 'the great replacement theory'. The German people and its culture would be annihilated 'by the territorial, demographic and economic expansion of the Anglo-Saxons, on the one hand, and the Russia and Slavdom on the other' (18). What was required was the unification of all German speakers in Europe. Another speaker, Karl Kaerger, called for war and conquest against Russia and France, and then Anglo-Saxons, followed by the Germanization of Russian territory up to the Volga. This was described as a 'fantasy' by the head of the Pan-German League, Ernst Hasse, but also ominously as a welcome suggestion for the future (20).

In an intensive examination of the evidence for the period of the 1890s Breuer shows that Weber did not share these imperialistic fantasies. Weber's well-established economic nationalism should not be mistaken for the land imperialism of the Pan-Germans. Nor did Weber 'question the civic rights' of 'ethnically Polish citizens of Prussia', who were consistently discriminated against in the Prussian provinces (41).

The Pan-German League drew on Max Weber's research on his extensive studies of the economic and social organization of East Elbian agriculture and equally the League was one of the political outlets for

his policy views. Weber's sociological and policy research finds an overlooked comparator in Argentine agriculture. He published an analysis of the Argentine settler economy in 1895. Esteban Vernik in his article 'Max Weber on Argentina: Wheat and Semi-Barbarism' lays out clearly the challenge, as Weber perceived it, when he wrote: 'in order to compete with economies like those described, we would have to descend, not ascend, in the character of our social structure and our cultural level, reaching the level of a semi-barbaric people with a low population density, such as Argentina' (57). Where the Polish seasonal worker was paid on a piece-work basis, the cheapest option for the Junker landowners, Argentina had a history of enslavement of the indigenous population. Vernik explains that 'production is not by means of slaves, that do not exist in that country, but rather by means of a semi-nomadic and semi-wild workforce that arrives during the planting and harvesting seasons and then departs... This workforce, working under extremely precarious conditions, performs its tasks and then leaves, freeing the owner of the rural establishment from all responsibility for its upkeep and survival. This is the phenomenon that most impresses him' (45). A labour force that appears at planting and harvest time and then without any sense of mutual obligation drifts off into the wilds of uncultivated land. Vernik notes that for Weber 'this signifies a form of barbarism analogous to slavery' (46).

In 1894 Weber argued for moderate tariffs against Argentine wheat imports on the basis that it was impossible to compete with such low cost production, which was abetted by sharp devaluations in the peso — which continue to this day to the benefit of large landowners; even though this was contrary to Chancellor Caprivi's opening up of trade between Germany and Argentina. Weber presented, in surprising detail, a farming establishment in Entre Rios run by two settlers using Guarani speaking labourers.

In the policy forum of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* Weber addressed the question of cultural 'Niveau'. 'It is not possible for our workers to compete with Polish workers. Just as German workers must lower their cultural level to compete with Poles, similarly, our rural enterprises, precisely because of their higher level of culture, are not in a position to compete with those of Russia, Argentina, or America' (quoted by Vernik, 57). Was Weber indulging in social-Darwinism? Esteban Vernik suggests this was the case. But Stefan Breuer points out that this was not a matter of the survival of the fittest but rather a descent to the lowest cultural level (25). In writing on Argentina for the *Deutsches Wochenblatt* in 1894 Weber was addressing an audience of the *Freikonservative Partei* and the deeper currents of cultural conservatism. Moreover, in these years

in Berlin he was part of a seminar group that included Karl Kaerger, who became a personal friend of Weber. Kaerger was widely travelled in Africa and South America -and six years older than Weber. In the MWG I/4 publication of Weber's *Deutsches Wochenblatt* article, the editors speculate whether Kaerger was the source of Weber's information on Argentina. Esteban Vernik expands on the Bunge & Born family connection, first outlined by Guenther Roth in his *Familiengeschichte*.

There is little doubt that in the early 1890s Weber was mixing with conservative radicals. But as Weber ascended intellectually to be a leading social scientist from 1904 onwards, he developed a more strictly defined concept of capitalistic imperialism and his conceptualization of race and nation are non-essentialist. Conflict, competition and power remain part of his analysis as Breuer shows (24-25) but without any social-Darwinist underpinning.

The claims to world power and the need to restrict immigration around 1900 acquires an unwanted relevance as today we live through an era with a number of similarities. As Stephen Turner and George Mazur describe this in their article: 'The late nineteenth century up to the Great War was consumed with tariff issues, financialization and monetary issues, the control of trade via colonialism and its current analogues, and in the United States the use of immigration to disadvantage the working class and the "nativist" response, alliance instability, and issues of the distribution of wealth' (65).

Their article 'Democracy against Bureaucracy' connects to the attempts by the second Trump administration to dismantle the federal bureaucracy and to 'liberate' democracy. This, of course, is a long-running Weberian thematic, ever since the brothers Alfred and Max Weber turned up at the 1909 meeting of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* in Vienna and delivered a loud critique against the bureaucratizing tendency in German government, something they regarded as a threat to human freedom itself. It was at this time that Max Weber also wrote down his ideal-typical presentation of modern bureaucracy as both legal and rational, and indispensable for government and corporations. After 1946, in the Gerth and Mills anthology, the chapter became indispensable reading in social science and management studies.

Turner and Mazur continue that what is novel, 'and inspires fearful comparisons to the period between 1918 and 1940, is the inability of liberal democracies and its traditional political parties or elites ... to respond effectively ... (65-66). Bureaucracies can block just as much as it can deliver the egalitarian goals of democracy. The problem, at root, is principal-agent relationship. In absolutist regimes, the ruler is the principal and the agents could be punished for any transgression. In a

democracy the people are the principal and the bureaucracy the agents governed by laws. But within a democracy there are many principals and the room for agentic discretion is large though obscured by all manner of offramps from the ideal-typical monocratic, hierarchical bureaucracy.

This situation has constitutional implications and in their article Turner and Mazur focus on the sham constitutional democracy of Russia in 1905, of which Weber provided an extensive analysis. Self-governing local entities, *zemstvos*, provide an offramp to Czarist absolutist bureaucracy, as did the creation of parliamentary councils. But these lacked legitimacy and the Czar still retained absolute power. Turner and Mazur conclude: 'This is a lesson that generalizes: bureaucracies can ignore the will of the people where there is no united will and where disunity can be produced by the actions and policies of the bureaucracy itself' (71).

If the legal and rational legitimacy of democratic rule through government administration carries an inherent principal-agent conflict, what happens when the technology of files and information flows is revolutionised, as is the case now with digitalization and AI? Steve Fuller in his article 'Max Weber goes to Silicon Valley: From Dogelectrics to the Antichrist' combines the technology argument with theories of the state. Going back to Max Weber's assault on state bureaucracy in 1909, the question remains on how he proposed to implement his social liberal policies that characterize much of the output of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. It's a similar question that can be asked about Progressivism in the United States, prior to its incorporation into state and state-related institutions during the New Deal.

Fuller pushes the question back to the constitution of the early modern state. 'The historical narrative that underwrites the Weberian vision of bureaucracy starts with the Hobbesian Leviathan, the superordinate guarantor of security who comes into being once conflicting parties realize that their own self-interest is served by incorporating themselves as members of a common "body politic". Bureaucracy amounts to the articulation of organs that functionalizes the body politic, generating a physiology of state governance' (75). Weber's ideal type laid down the axiological principles of how bureaucracy performs this functionalization. As we know Weber wanted to wrench this mechanism out of the hands of autocratic rulers, above all the rulers of the Prussian state. He campaigned persistently for democratization of that state, but in many ways (I along with others would argue) he did not explain how democratic government would escape the bureaucratic mechanism (although Alfred Weber did have answers).

Fuller finds a pointer in the merchant cities of Renaissance Italy, and this argument can be buttressed by Weber's early work on medieval trading companies—a network that developed its own laws of contract out with the state. Neoliberals, through economists like Coase and Buchanan, have pursued this line. The visionaries of Silicon Valley have offered 'Seasteading'—a networked society outside the jurisdiction of territorial state boundaries.

Peter Thiel has characterised those who want to improve the technology of bureaucracy within the state as the 'Antichrist'. And Curtis Yarvin, Fuller writes, 'has called for the return of absolute monarchy, the abolition of democracy and the promotion of a new tech-based class (only loosely associated with academia) in charge of maximizing the freedom and opportunity of society's members to contribute to its flourishing' (89). In Turner and Mazur's terms, this could be understood as negating the principal—the sovereign people.

What would Max Weber make of the current situation Fuller concludes. 'God only knows' is his rhetorical answer. *Max Weber Studies* has already put out a call for papers for 'Bureaucracy and Democracy in the Age of Trump'. Elon Musk, brandishing a chainsaw in the White House, failed to deliver on DOGE, and President Trump seems to be reverting to the role of a welfare patriarch and would-be new Leviathan.

Klaus Lichtblau provides an affectionate obituary of Johannes Weiß who died in September 2025. Lichtblau brings out Weiß's important research in re-grounding Weber's categories in the sensibility of late twentieth century society. This included his unappreciated work, certainly in the Anglophone world, of the representative actor, which can be seen as an outgrowth of the principal-agent dilemma.