

Max Weber's Pericles – the Political Demagogue

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Abstract

In discussions of Max Weber's conception of 'Herrschaft', there is virtually no mention of the great demagogic leader Pericles. This is unfortunate because, for Weber, Pericles came to be the embodiment of the charismatic leader whose 'authority' was derived from his speeches rather than from winning battles or performing miracles. After Germany's defeat, Weber returned to the Greeks' thinking from his youth and found in Pericles the right type of political leader. Pericles combined heated passions with cool rationality and did not suffer from vanity but acted in the best interests of the state. In this paper I discuss Weber's early interest in Greek thought, I show how he arrived at his mature conception of Pericles, and I argue that this notion is instructive in explicating key aspects of Weber's notion of 'Herrschaft'.

Keywords: authority, charisma, demagogue, Pericles, Weber.

Much has been written about Max Weber's political thinking in general and about his notion of 'Herrschaft' in particular.¹ There have been continuous debates regarding his nationalism as well as wide-ranging discussions over his legacy. Scholars have noted the affinities between Weber and Machiavelli and they have shown the similarities between Weber and Nietzsche. However, few scholars have examined the part that the Greeks play in Weber's political thought. While Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle play small but crucial roles in Weber's work, the particular Greek that I will focus on is Pericles. At first glance it seems that Pericles has little impact on Weber's thinking, or, to put it differently, Weber scholars have been almost totally silent about Pericles.² But I think that Pericles is especially important

1. 'Herrschaft' means 'domination', 'rule', or 'authority'. In Pericles' case 'authority' seems preferable.

2. There are a few exceptions. Wolfgang Mommsen quotes Weber's mention of him (Mommsen 1974: 202). Wilhelm Hennis refers to Fritz Baumgarten and two of Nietzsche's references (Hennis 2003: 27 and 34-35). Wilfried Nippel briefly discusses Pericles in relation to the city (Nippel 2001, 196-201).

for Weber as the best type of political demagogue. Before attempting to justify this claim, I need to address two connected and interrelated possible problems. First, Weber appears to deny that Pericles possesses any legitimacy. In one passage Weber specifically calls Pericles' 'authority' 'illegitimate' and even 'not legal'. Second, as a 'political demagogue' Pericles fits somewhat awkwardly in Weber's discussions of charisma. In Weber's opinion, Pericles' 'authority' derives neither from performing miracles nor from winning battles. Instead, it stems primarily from his ability to make speeches. I think that these two problems of Pericles the political demagogue can be resolved. Moreover, I think that Weber came to appreciate Pericles and considered him an 'ideal type' of the consummate realist who is committed to political and cultural ideals. Before discussing these issues, it will be beneficial to set out briefly the part that the Greeks played in Weber's life and then his conceptions of Greek philosophy and Greek politics.

Weber and the Greeks

Weber was trained in Roman law, he wrote extensively on Roman agrarian problems, and he often cited Roman writers. He wrote on ancient Judaism, ancient Christianity, and ancient Eastern religions. In contrast, Weber's writings on the ancient Greeks pale in comparison. In light of this, it is legitimate to ask: What did Weber know and think about the Greeks? We know from Marianne Weber that Helene, Max Weber's mother, was introduced to Homer early in her life and that his influence stayed with her into old age (Weber 1989: 513-14) and it appears that her interest in Homer was passed on to her son. We know from Marianne that young Max was also impressed with Homer. In his early letters, Weber contrasts his favourable image of Greek authors with Roman writers. The fourteen year-old Weber wrote to his cousin Fritz Baumgarten that he prefers Homer to Virgil (Weber 1935: 10). He comments that of all the writers that he has read, Homer is the best. While he concedes that it is not easy to establish why, he does suggest that it is Homer's great naturalness in describing heroic and tragic deeds (Weber 1935: 9). Weber also expresses a keen interest in Greek history. He notes that although Livy wrote four hundred years after Herodotus, they make the same mistakes but that Livy lacks the advantages that Herodotus has (Weber 1935: 11). Towards the end of the year Weber writes again to Fritz about his interests, indicating once more his

fascination with Greek history—having waded through Curtius' three-volume *Griechische Geschichte*.³

If Weber had virtually unreserved admiration for Homer and Herodotus, he had rather mixed responses to Socrates and Plato. He contends that Socrates gave the West one of the greatest gifts for knowledge—the concept (Weber 1992: 89). And he draws attention to Plato's doctrine of the cave for its setting out of knowledge of 'actual reality' in contrast to the play of shadows on the cave wall (Weber 1992: 88). But, in the same breath Weber claims that Plato's search for the 'eternal truth' and 'true being' was nothing more than the search that resulted in illusions (Weber 1992: 89). Because Plato's search was the first in a two thousand year-long search for various true entities (art, science, etc.), we can surmise that Weber not only holds Plato responsible for his own illusions, but is at least partially responsible for the continuing illusions (Weber 1992: 90-93). However, it is not Plato's cold truth that interests Weber as much as his less rational side. Weber speaks of the parable of the cave as a 'wonderful picture' and he draws attention to the 'passionate enthusiasm' of the *Republic* (Weber 1992: 88-89). And he insists that cool calculation alone is insufficient for results; it must be coupled with 'intoxication'—Plato's sense of 'mania' (Weber 1992: 83). Weber has a more single-minded opinion of Aristotle: while Indians attempted to discover logic and in all of the Asian countries there were doctrines of states, it was Aristotle who was conscious of the significance of logic and it was Aristotle who conceptualized and systematized political philosophy (Weber 1920: 2 and 1992: 89). As for Thucydides, in the 'Vorbemerkung' to the *Gesammelte Schriften zur Religionssoziologie* Weber maintains that it was Thucydides' 'pragmatic' approach to history that separated his work from all other attempts at history writing (Weber 1920: 2).

Weber, Thucydides and history

While Weber had considerable interest in historical issues, he did not write simple histories.⁴ Instead, he provided historical analyses

3. Weber (1935: 17). Hennis writes that Weber hurriedly read through the 2511 page work. This number is somewhat incorrect because it appears to refer to a later edition. However, the earlier edition is only slightly shorter. Hennis quotes Weber's letter to Fritz from 19 January 1879 where he referred to it as a 'solid' book (Hennis 2003: 22).

4. This remark is not meant to denigrate Weber's historical acumen. I only wish