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The Weberian Foundations of Modern Elite Theory and Democratic Elitism

*Jan Pakulski**

Abstract: »Max Weber als Vorläufer der neueren Elitetheorie und der Theorie der demokratischen Elitenherrschaft«. Max Weber's portrayal of modern elites shows clear proximity to "classical elite theory," modern "elite perspective," and "democratic elitism." This portrayal – stressing power concentration in the state apparatus, legitimacy of rule, centrality of leadership groups, and the capacity of these groups to form cohesive power actors – anticipates many central themes in the work of contemporary elite theorists, such as John Higley, whose theoretical attention focuses on patterns of elite integration and ruling consensus as the key "elite variables." Higley's seminal studies, especially those linking such elite integration and ruling consensus with political outcomes and regime types, combine the classical elite-theoretical heritage with the Weberian "supplements," the latter stressing the variable internal structure of "ruling minorities" that form in modern nation states. The Weberian elite perspective and theoretical model have been substantiated, elaborated and extended in research undertaken by John Higley and his collaborators.

Keywords: elite, elite theory, Max Weber, democratic elitism.

Introduction

Max Weber is seldom treated as an elite theorist, and even if he is, his work is typically excluded from the ranks of "classical elite theorists," in spite of the obvious proximity of his views on social change (propelled by cultural, political and economic elites), distribution of power, domination, organization, charismatic leadership, modern bureaucracy, state and politics, and mass democracy to what became known as "classical elite theory," "elite paradigm," and "democratic elitism" (Bottomore 1991; Parry 1969; Putnam 1976: 3-4; Best and Higley 2009 and 2010). Moreover, the similarity of his analyses of charismatic leadership and "ruling minorities" to what Pareto (1935) and Mosca (1939) called "ruling" or "political" class, his intellectual links with Robert Michels (1958), as well as his influence on Joseph Schumpeter's (1942 and 1959) formulations of competitive elitism, give him a rightful place among the founding fathers of elite theory and modern sociology of elites (cf. Pakulski and Körösiényi 2012). This is in spite of the fact that he did not use the term

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“elite,” but referred instead to “leaders,” their “staff” and “ruling minorities,” which in modern nation-states he identified as being at the apex of bureaucratized state apparatus. Here, Weber’s (1972 and 1978a, b) analyses of the structure, integration and dynamics of these “ruling minorities” are particularly important. He saw these minorities as semi-formal networks of groups and individuals monopolising legitimate power of command, with the latter increasingly concentrated at the apex of the state apparatus, but also open to influences of dominant class and status interests, especially those articulated by charismatically-led movements.

This perspective – stressing power concentration, legitimacy of rule (and therefore mass consent), and the capacity of ruling minorities to form cohesive power actors, that is, to act in a solidary, coherent and deliberate manner – is a trademark of the elite theoretical camp. Like Pareto (1935), Weber saw power as both socially “structured” and deployed in an actor-like manner by small “ruling minorities.” Unlike Pareto, though, he portrayed power and elite configurations as historically contingent and highly variable, and he saw politics, including modern politics, as power struggles not only between established and challenging power minorities, but also between different charismatic leaders and elite groups. In many ways, his studies anticipated the work of contemporary elite theorists, whose theoretical attention focuses on modern nation-state-based elites, especially taking patterns of elite integration and ruling consensus as key “elite variables.” Higley’s (Higley, Deacon and Smart 1979; Field and Higley 1980; Higley, Pakulski and Wesołowski 1998; Higley and Burton 2006; Higley and Pakulski 2007; Best and Higley 2009 and 2010) seminal studies, especially those linking elite characteristics with political outcomes and regime types, combine the classical elite-theoretical heritage with Weberian (and Schumpeterian) theoretical “supplements,” the latter stressing the variable internal structure of “ruling minorities.”

I would like to focus here on these “supplements,” especially on the themes of elite structure and ruling consensus in order to highlight Max Weber’s three central theoretical “clues:” on the increasing centrality of state-based political elites, including the leadership groups; on the importance and variability of political elite structure; and on the importance of elite ruling consensus in sustaining effective politics and “working democracy.” These Weberian theoretical “clues,” formulated mainly in Weber’s late (and more “politically engaged”) writings, closely parallel contemporary elite theory and “democratic elitism,” including John Higley’s model of the relationship between elite integration and consensus on the one hand, and the nature of political regime (“type of democracy” in the Weberian argot) on the other.

Affinities with the Elite Theoretical Camp

No contemporary student of politics would deny the influence of Weber's ideas on modern political sociology, especially the sociology of power. Yet, Weber's contribution to elite theory and on the sociology of elites is less widely recognised for at least three reasons. First and most obviously, Weber never identified himself as part of the classical elite theoretical camp (as represented by Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels) perhaps mainly because of his anti-positivistic orientation and his scepticism concerning the nomothetic model of emergent political sociology. He embraced a philosophical-methodological standpoint that differed starkly from the resolutely anti-Marxist and positivistic-naturalistic-nomothetic orientation of the leading "elite theorists," especially Vilfredo Pareto. Unlike Pareto, Weber promoted interpretive sociology, maintained a critical, but also respectful attitude towards Marxism, and he saw modern "mass" democracy as not only compatible with political domination, but also as a "working" – that is, politically viable – modern political system.¹ While Pareto (1935) and Mosca (1939) focused on status-based elites and "ruling classes" that combined political "aristocracies" and economic "plutocracies," Weber analysed modern power configurations mainly within the organised apparatus of the modern bureaucratic or constitutional state (*Rechtsstaat*). Social and political orders, as seen through the Weberian lens, are relatively independent, contestable and fragile, maintained by the key social power actors, and not – as Pareto saw it – as reflections of some "eternal regularities," "natural laws" and "psycho-social propensities." Last but not least, Weber's sociology of elites is embedded in his sociology of power and organisation. Pareto, by contrast, anchored his theory of elite formation and cyclical change (circulation) in both psychology *and* sociology, especially his vision of "residues" and "derivations." Moreover, as mentioned before, Weber shunned the very concept of "elites" referring instead to "leaders" and their "staff," as well as other descriptors. What betrayed his affinity to modern elitism in a most revealing way was his frequent reference to "the masses," seen as increasingly structured, organised, and politically enfranchised due to ("mass") democratisation.

Weber also stressed the political impotence of "unorganised masses," especially *vis-à-vis* the centralised and organised power of modern states. This centralisation *cum* organization assured the regular and effective domination of the state apparatus, and the centrality of state-based political elites in all modern societies, all "social and political orders," especially in the rapidly modernising West. The key processes of this peculiar Western *political modernisation* included not only the centralisation of power, but also legal rationalization of

¹ Even though he criticised the radical visions of participatory democracy as "pipe dreams" (1978b, 1212).

authority, autonomization *cum* professionalization of politics, and formation of bureaucratic apparatus and “machines” that enhance the effectiveness, and public acceptability and accountability, of state domination.

While focusing on state apparatus as an institutional foundation of modern elites, Weber remained faithful to portraying “ruling minorities” as relatively autonomous social-political actors. He simply embedded modern political actors theoretically within the complex modern social fabric: the warp of class relations, the weft of status relations, and the embroidery of organizational forms. This opened the way for an (at least partial) reconciliation between elite and class analysis. Weber embraced the notion of “class” as the equivalent of “market position,” thus paving the way for depicting broader configurations of social power, especially those pertaining to “economically dominant interests” and socio-culturally constituted “status groups,” as the field of action for political leaders and elites. Perhaps most importantly, Weber identified and analysed a shift from pre-modern domination (by *notables or honoratiore*s) resting on tradition and generalised social status, to new forms of systematic domination resting on mass confidence derived from democratic electoral authorisation, and on political organisation, especially on organised political “parties” that “reside in the sphere of power” (1978b, 938). This is why one may also credit Weber with combining structural analysis of power distribution (class, status and party) with an “actionalist” analysis, emphasizing the prime importance of the actions of leadership groups and elites, the latter seen as the key social-political actors.

Thus the similarities between Weber and the Italian elite thinkers seem greater than their differences. Both Weber and Pareto were polymaths, well-versed in history, sociology, economics and law; both were fascinated by historically changing forms of power and elites; both were sensitive to the increasing complexity of power relations in modernising nation-states; both aimed at constructing the “big picture” comprising a synthetic historical overview of Western developments; and both were highly critical of the social and political developments in their countries. One may also add that both brushed – unsuccessfully – with applied politics at the end of their lives, thus gaining valuable experiential knowledge (and disappointment).² Unfortunately, they also shared another feature – the unsystematic and incomplete presentation of their ideas. Their comments on power and “ruling minorities” are unsystematic and dispersed throughout their voluminous works, being more woven into the fabric of complex historical analyses than discussed directly, which poses serious difficulties when trying to interpret exact meaning.

² See, in particular, Weber’s (1972; 1978b, 1375-462) critical analysis of contemporary German politics. This historical context is described by Bendix (1962), Beetham (1974), Mitzman (1970), Mommsen (1974), and more recently by Radkau (2009).

Weber's Sociology of Power, Elites and Mass Democratisation

As mentioned earlier, Weber's sociology of elites rests on his sociology of power, domination and authority. He makes an important distinction between *domination through control* (exerted mainly in the economic sphere, "by virtue of constellation of interests") and the increasingly prevalent domination "by virtue of authority," that is through direct authoritative commands accompanied by systematic and voluntary compliance. The legitimated (normatively justified) authority forms a foundation of modern bureaucratic hierarchies of complex organizations, especially the modern state and its instrumentalities. This distinction, as pointed out by Wesołowski (1964) and more recently Poggi (2001), provides an analytical link between the social and political orders, and opens the way for theoretical reconciliation between class analysis, focusing on economic domination through capital control and market closure, and political domination, exercised through organised and legitimised authority within the state (cf. Domhoff 1979, 2009), which is the domain of modern elite theory that focuses on the distribution and exercise of authority. Such reconciliation was possible because Weber rejected some major tenets of Marxism: the economic-deterministic view of history, the centrality of class conflict, and the assumption of universal subordination of politics as an element of the "superstructure" to the economic "base" (the property/class relations).

The sociology of elites, especially modern nation-state-based elites, is also embedded in his account of mass democratisation – a seemingly incompatible concept to that of elites, yet also theoretically reconciled with the Weberian perspective.³ Weber was fascinated by two seemingly contradictory modern trends: (i) towards the centralisation of power, especially within the modern state, and the seemingly centrifugal tendency evident in mass democratisation; and (ii) towards reliance on the executive "machines" of the bureaucratized organisations, especially in modern mass democracies, and a persistent de-

³ "The political concept of democracy, deduced from the 'equal rights' of the governed, includes these further [to popular sovereignty] postulates: (1) prevention of the development of a closed status group of officials in the interest of a universal accessibility of office, and (2) minimization of the authority of officialdom in the interest of expanding the sphere of influence of 'public opinion' as far as practicable. Hence, wherever possible, political democracy strives to shorten the term of office through election and recall and to be relieved of a limitation to candidates with special expert qualifications. Thereby democracy inevitably comes into conflict with the bureaucratic tendencies, which have been produced by its very fight against the *notables*. The loose term 'democratization' cannot be used here, in so far as it is understood to mean the minimization of the civil servants' power in favour of the greatest possible 'direct' rule of the *demos*, which in practice means the respective party leaders of the *demos*. The decisive aspect here ... is the *levelling of the governed* in the face of the governing and bureaucratically articulated group, which in its turn may occupy a quite autocratic position, both in fact and in form." (1978b, 985)

pendence on charismatic leaders who generate mass confidence and consent. His attempt at resolving these contradictions through a complex argument – subsequently embraced by contemporary theorists of politics – formed the foundations of “democratic elitism” further elaborated by Schumpeter and contemporary students of elites and democracy. Modern mass democracy⁴, Weber argues, does not restrict, dilute or weaken the power of state (political) elites. On the contrary, it contributes to further centralisation of authority in the hands of elected leaders and their organised “staff.” But this does not prevent or arrest mass democratisation, which is understood as an exercise in popular sovereignty through democratic representation, that is, through competitive elections in which leaders struggle for political supremacy by winning votes. Such mass democratization, involving multiplying elections, extension of popular franchise, and the social “opening” of political elites, gives voters influence and a sense of dignity. Authorised elites gain the autonomy that is necessary for rational, consistent and responsible ruling. Citizen-voters are equalised legally and politically, and they gain the dignifying status of king-makers. Their actual political involvement, though, is clearly circumscribed to casting votes.

All these processes are compatible with the concentration and centralisation of power in the hands of “ruling minorities.” While enfranchising and granting dignity to the mass voters, mass democratization hardly empowers them, and it hardly dilutes central power and state prerogatives. On the contrary, mass democratisation typically accompanies power concentration and centralisation, as well as the strengthening of state prerogatives and control. Nor does democratisation eliminate elites. Instead, it changes their character. Democratic elites are increasingly concentrated in “mandated” state executives, they acquire power by winning electoral contests, and they exert power within legal-constitutional limits and in accordance with professional norms. Most importantly, modern politicians who win electoral contests gain broad mandates by exercising “oratory charisma” (read: demagogic talent), but they may rule responsibly mindful of public accountability through electoral cycles.

This portrayal of modern mass democracy as managed by responsible elites scandalised those democrats who believed in “government of, for and by the people.” But such a direct form of democracy (rule by the *demos*), Weber argued, while prevalent in smaller social groups, organisations and communities, is impractical on the national level in a large scale complex society.⁵ Moreover, attempts at instituting direct forms of mass rule had already ended in chaos and disaster of revolutionary “democracy of the street.” Direct and responsive

⁴ Weber always stressed the representative character of modern democracy, thus highlighting the importance of “numbers” and indirect influence of the “masses.”

⁵ It may be added that the entire Chapter 10 of Weber’s *Economy and Society* (1978b) is devoted to the analysis of “direct” democracy in small social settings.

(plebiscitary) forms of rule proved less rational, and less effective than the representative-parliamentary forms, the latter found in the most successful modern states and regimes, such as Great Britain and the United States. Weber's concern about rationality and effectiveness of rule, and his reliance on the "test of practical application," are worth stressing. Like all elite theorists, he was concerned mainly about effective (working) governance, and saw the principal "test" of mass democracy as the capacity to maintain a working social and political order, and to deliver national strength, prosperity, stability and a sense of (individual and collective) dignity. Therefore he also stressed the importance of leaders' and elites' autonomy, but also of public *responsibility* (rather than responsiveness), *effectiveness* (rather than popularity) and political *will cum determination* (rather than sensitivity to public opinion). Competitive elections, in other words, served as means towards a more general end: of assuring effective government and stable political order (and ultimately, dignified life). This is another trademark of a "democratic elitist" and elite theorist.

From Aristocracies to State Bureaucracies

Weber placed much more emphasis than his Italian counterparts on the *novelty* of modern Western power and elites. While Pareto peppered his analyses with endless exemplifications from ancient Greece, Rome and the medieval period, Weber stressed a *radical* social and political change in Western Europe caused by modern (post-Reformation) rationalisation and organisation, although both aided the formation of centralistic state apparatus and the evolution of these apparatus into the bureaucratic constitutional state (*Rechtsstaat*).⁶ Modern power and elites evolved together with this type of increasingly modern state. They had gradually "detached" themselves from the traditional status order, the latter articulated in hierarchical *estates* and their *aristocratic* monopolies, and became progressively organised, specialised and professionalised. Modernisation was accompanied by an increasingly rationalised organisational environment that was dynamic (versus stable), legalised (versus traditional), deliberately constructed (versus emulated, inherited), differentiated (versus uniform), professional (versus amateur), complex (versus simple) and efficient (versus wasteful). The new political professionals were gradually replacing amateur and dilettante *honoratiros*.

The new elites were not only more complex, institutionally embedded and specialised than the old ones, but also more efficient; they were the carriers of the Western spirit of modern rationalism. The elites were embedded in a pro-

⁶ This is a paradox – one of many in Weber's texts – because Weber also remains uniquely sensitive to social-historical continuities. But he clearly demarcates modern power and elite configurations from their pre-modern forms (e.g., 1978b, 983 and 1260).

gressively rationalised political culture that followed the norms of duty, merit and professionalism. Legal frameworks, complex rules and arcane procedures “bound” modern rulers, but this “binding” did not reduce their power. On the contrary, rational organisation and norms – as Weber stressed tirelessly – enhanced elite and state power. Elite autonomy increased, legitimacy was strengthened, and influence over largely unorganised masses widened. In their hands, modern elites combined the legitimacy of tradition (represented by old institutions) with law and charisma, the latter always being injected into political processes by great leader-statesmen. All were enhanced by elite’s privileged access to the means of mass persuasion used effectively by professional (and inevitably demagogic) politicians.

Modern elites were also increasingly differentiated, culturally heterogeneous and socially fragmented. The unity and autonomy of such elites became problematic – and sustaining this unity *cum* autonomy was seen as an elite accomplishment. Whenever unity was successfully achieved and sustained – and Weber looked at examples of such achievement in Imperial Britain, as well as the rising power of the United States – it was mainly thanks to prominent political leaders. Leadership vacuums, by contrast, were the key sources of social dissipation and political decline, as illustrated by his native Wilhelmine Germany (1978b, 1375-462).

Modern British and American politics provided Weber with the most celebrated examples of effective modernisation, mass democratization and elite integration through firm leadership. David Lloyd George, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson – political leaders praised by Weber as modern charismatic-democratic “great statesmen” – all played a central role in successful elite integration and nation building. They also strengthened mass democracy by cultivating mass trust, public confidence and national support. By contrast, Germany was criticised as a laggard in the modernisation stakes and as “leaderless.” The country was left behind not only in terms of economic development and political professionalization, but also with regard to political integration. It was paralysed by a combination of archaic political institutions, social tensions and political gridlocks resulting from the “immaturity” of the major classes, the scarcity of good professional politicians, and a lack of effective political leadership. This made Germany vulnerable to both radical-anarchic drift and autocratic impositions.

According to Weber, therefore, the quality of leaders and elites varied widely, and the unity of the ruling minorities was more precarious under the modern condition. The quality depended primarily on political selection and grooming, especially the testing and training within the parliaments, state apparatus and party machines. The unity within the modern ruling minorities was accomplished and maintained in four ways: by hierarchical coordination and centralisation of authority in “leadership groups,” by normative unification, that is by proliferation of professional norms and vocational ethos, by the

spread of nationalism, especially the modern loyalty to nation-states, and – last but not least – by social cohesion built through dense interaction within the “ruling minority.” Thus, the waning of social proximity and shared lifestyles had not undermined the unity of modern elites, but it had altered the way in which unity was achieved and sustained. It was sustained through *organization* and it was concentrated in the modern *state* apparatus – the largest, most resource-rich and most privileged (in terms of a monopoly on coercion) of modern organisations. The powerful executives of the nation-state apparatus commanded the combined means of coercion (monopolised by the state), administration and persuasion, something that gave them the appearance of an “irresistible force.” But they were also highly differentiated, and they faced masses that were capable of spawning not only mass movements, but also organised parties, thus multiplying the challenges to the “ruling minorities” and increasing elite social mobility.

We can sum up by saying that Weber draws from his analysis of modernisation two conclusions that increase his proximity to the elite theoretical camp. First, the largest and most power-endowed organization – the modern state, which monopolizes coercion and commands massive financial resources – becomes the *power hub* of modern society and the central locus of modern elites. On this point, Weber contradicts Marxists, who predict the subordination of the state to capitalistic plutocracies. He also rejects the views subsequently popularised by the Burnhamian prophets of “managerial revolution,” who anticipated the shift of power towards corporate business elites. In contrast to both these groups, Weber anticipates the increasing *etatisation and legitimation of power as state authority*. His second conclusion is that the modern masses form a “social-political community” – an unorganised and therefore largely powerless but influential and proud citizenry (proud nationals and enfranchised voters), structured along class and status lines, allied with power elites, and capable of spawning organised groups and new power contenders. The central political task faced by modern elites is management of the state and the enfranchised masses so they form a working alliance, which can only be done through organised domination and effective leadership – both showing worrying signs of decline in Wilhelmine Germany.

The Composition of Modern Political Elites

Weber portrayed modern political elites – the core element of national elites – as complex and institutionally differentiated, and therefore highly variable in their organisational forms and vulnerable to fragmentation. While the Italian elite theorists saw the unity of modern elites as relatively unproblematic – derived mainly from shared power interests and social backgrounds – Weber recognised the unity of modern elites as always problematic. This is not only because modern elite are socially open and mobile, but also because they con-

tain quite different elite groups and categories, often incompatible in their mode of operation. The most celebrated – but not the sole – ‘modal’ incompatibility was, of course, a perennial tension between ‘bureaucratic’ and ‘elective-democratic’ components. Let us look at these intra-elite tensions, as seen by Weber, and the ways in which they are resolved and reconciled.

Modern state-based political elites formed a quadrangle of power; they included party-state leaders (often charismatic or populist), professional parliamentary politicians, top governmental bureaucrats (“mandarins”), and the expanding party “officialdoms.” Political leaders, including gifted orators-statesmen, were central figures in the modern state-based quadrangles of power. They were the main goal- and direction-setters of state politics, and the increasingly important integrators of political elites. Leaders played a crucial role in maintaining the dynamic *élan* and autonomy of the political sphere, and they provided the counter-balance to governmental and party bureaucracies by preventing bureaucratic ossification of the state apparatus. If leadership failed and/or parliaments weakened, there was the danger of “leaderless” politics. Similarly, when party officials “castrated the charisma of leaders” and subordinated the parliament to partisan interests, “party-bureaucratic” regimes emerged that combined bureaucratic rigidity with partisan patronage (Weber 1972; Körösiényi 2005; Pakulski and Higley 2008; Pakulski and Körösiényi 2011).

The top bureaucrats were also key figures in modern political elites. They were portrayed as apolitical impartial administrators who operated under the authority of political masters.⁷ Their knowledge, governmental expertise and administrative skills were crucial in securing orderly and effective administration. The top bureaucratic officials were key members of political elites and the essential guarantors of orderly and efficient administration – but they were subordinate to top politicians. These politicians, in turn, were increasingly professionalised, mobile and socially open. Good politicians lived “for” and “off” politics (i.e. they had political convictions, and financial independence thanks to a secure salary) and performed the role of “public representatives” in relation to the masses, as well as “political masters” in relation to governmental apparatus. Struggle for power was their vocation and paid full-time paid job. They served political leaders as government ministers, parliamentary colleagues and party officials. Unlike the top bureaucrats, all politicians were expected to take a partisan stand, a position based on strong conviction tem-

⁷ “According to his proper vocation, the genuine official ... will not engage in politics. Rather, he should engage in impartial ‘administration.’ This also holds for the so-called ‘political’ administrator, at least officially, in so far as the *raison d’état*, that is, the vital interests of the ruling order are not in question. *Sine ira et studio*, ‘without scorn and bias,’ he shall administer his office. Hence, he shall not do precisely what the politician, the leader as well as his following, must always and necessarily do, namely, fight.” (Weber 1972, quoted from the online version).

pered by a “sense of proportion,” and by the sober calculation of social benefit *cum* “national interest” (1919/1972). Good politicians – and this judgement was implicit in Weber’s analysis – also followed the “ethics of responsibility.” Hence the importance of commitment, balanced judgement, sense of proportion, and foresight, all combined with a readiness to accept individual responsibility for the championed course of action, as the foundation of “working” democracy.⁸

With the development of political parties – political organisations that linked politicians with major “material and ideal interests” in society, translated these links into consistent programs and disciplined politicians – the political elite was enlarged by the third important category: party directorates, “big shots,” “big wheels,” “party bosses” (U.S.), and top party “officialdom” (Europe). Bureaucratised party officials headed the European ideological-programmatic parties. The American patronage/spoils parties spawned influential party “bosses” – political entrepreneurs adept in political wheeling and dealing. They were “clients” of leadership groups or candidates and counted on patronage as the reward for good service. This politicised (and sometimes corrupted) state administration, but it also generated strong political loyalties to the leader – an important social glue.

Modern politics, noted Weber, became increasingly party-centred in Europe, and leader-centred in the United States. In the bureaucratised European “ideological parties,” power was concentrated at the apex of party officialdom and in the hands of party leaders-ideologists (1978b, 1398). In contrast, the major parties in early 20th century America were locally organised, more interest-than mass-oriented, less disciplined and less ideologically coherent than their European counterparts; they were also increasingly leader-centred.⁹ They organised local interests, wooed the votes, “managed” public opinion, collected money and acted as talent spotters by identifying aspiring leaders. American “big wheels” also acted as distributors of patronage, especially the spoils of

⁸ “To take a stand, to be passionate – *ira et studium* – is the politician’s element, and above all the element of the political leader. His conduct is subject to quite a different, indeed, exactly the opposite, principle of responsibility from that of the civil servant. The honor of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction. This holds even if the order appears wrong to him and if, despite the civil servant’s remonstrances, the authority insists on the order. Without this moral discipline and self-denial, in the highest sense, the whole apparatus would fall to pieces. The honour of the political leader, of the leading statesman, however, lies precisely in an exclusive personal responsibility for what he does, a responsibility he cannot and must not reject or transfer. It is in the nature of officials of high moral standing to be poor politicians, and above all, in the political sense of the word, to be irresponsible politicians.” (Weber 1978b, 1390)

⁹ They were described as “unprincipled”, that is opportunistic, non-ideological and programmatically vague. Such parties, according to Weber (1972), fitted well the more “capitalistic” form of mass democracy in America.

political-electoral victory, in the form of key administrative, advisory and judicial appointments.¹⁰

Yet, in spite of this growing diversity of elite roles and components, political success depended on “ruling minorities” acting in unison, on political elites forming cohesive collectives – power *groups*, rather than mere power *categories*. Elite integration formed social foundations of effective ruling and “working” democracy. This integration, according to Weber, could be achieved in a variety of ways, depending on elite structure.

The Variable Structure of Modern Political Elites

Modern political elites included political leaders, especially those with a charismatic gift, as well as professional parliamentarians forming partisan alliances and factions, the apex of party officialdoms, and the top bureaucratic figures. The pattern of relations between these four components constituted a structure of political elite. And this structure, according to Weber, was highly variable.¹¹

The main fault lines within modern political elites, in Weber’s view, are always those between bureaucratic and democratic components, and the main tensions in modern politics emerge between charismatic and routine modes of action. Political leaders, especially those gifted with “oratory charisma,” play a crucial role. The relationship between political leaders and top governmental bureaucrats is ridden with tensions because of the general incompatibility between political-democratic and bureaucratic roles and *modus operandi*. Politicians are elected on the basis of public popularity, they are committed partisans and political fighters, and they have to take a political stand. Bureaucrats are appointed, selected by expertise and merit, trained in following correct procedures and political impartiality, and promoted for acting *sine ira et studio*. Yet both are indispensable for an effective government. Politicians cannot sustain their authority without orderly administration and the bureaucratized state apparatus need direction and political guidance from their political “masters”;

¹⁰ “After all, 300,000 to 400,000 official appointments lie in the hands of the President, appointments which are executed by him only with the approval of the senators from the separate states. Hence the senators are powerful politicians. By comparison, however, the House of Representatives is, politically, quite impotent, because patronage of office is removed from it and because the cabinet members, simply assistants to the President, can conduct office apart from the confidence or lack of confidence of the people.” (Weber 1972, quoted from the online version)

¹¹ For more detailed analysis, see Pakulski and Körösiényi (2011, Chapter 2). Weber’s assessments of elite configurations are also qualified. What works in one set of circumstances, may not work in different social-historical conditions.

otherwise they ossify in procedural routines. The two perform different but complementary roles.¹²

The power relations between the two may take many forms, including the *de facto* domination of experienced administrators over novices and dilettante politicians (one may call this the “Yes, Minister” syndrome). Bureaucratic mandarins usurp political power – a scenario Weber saw as likely in Wilhelminian Germany. Effective elite relies on the professionalism and responsibility of politicians, and on loyal, competent and effective state administration. However, in a working, democratic elite, political leaders control the bureaucratic machines through trusted ministers, and they – the elective ministers and leaders – take responsibility for political and administrative outcomes. They are, in turn, responsible and accountable to parliaments, and they discharge public responsibility through the electoral cycles (competitive elections). Governance without competent bureaucratic administration is chaotic; but governance by bureaucrats, with parliamentarians playing subordinate role, degenerates into directionless and ossified administration.

The danger of bureaucratic domination is highest when a leadership vacuum develops. Such a vacuum is dangerous because leaders become the key energisers, goal-setters and unifiers of modern elites. With the proliferation of direct mass elections, they are also the main generators of the “confidence of the masses” and therefore the key repositories of democratic authorisation. Leaders are expected to chart the “public/national interest,” and “direct the nation.” Effective governance, in other words, is synonymous with effective leadership; it relies on the overall synergy within the elite, but above all it rests on a combination of political prudence, commitment, oratory charisma and professionalism of leadership groups.¹³

Professional parliaments, in turn, play a key role in providing mass representation and in “grooming” potential leaders. Parliamentary elites also set the legal framework for the operation of government administration and in training professional politicians. Professional parliamentarians, who replace part-time amateurs, acquire political skills during careers in legislatures and parliamentary committees. This mode of political grooming helps in producing “all-rounder” politicians, those with the will and skill to govern effectively. Parliamentary recruitment is also an important means for sorting committed, independent and strong-willed politicians from sectional lobbyists, opportunistic demagogues and complacent “party hacks.” Finally, the work in parliamentary

¹² “[P]olicy-making is not a technical affair, and hence not a business of the professional civil servant.” (Weber 1978b, 1419)

¹³ Such an effective (“working”) elite configuration is rare; it is more an ideal than the actual accomplishment. However, Weber identified good leaders in both Britain and the USA, the two countries most often mentioned with approval as examples of “working” politics and “strong nations.” (1978b, 1312)

committees establishes strong networks among politicians, and between politicians and top bureaucrats.¹⁴

The other important aspect of elite structure is the relation between political leaders and party officials. The two are key competitors for prominent positions within political elites. Leaders do this through personal and charismatic appeal, while parties rely on ideological loyalty and commonality of interests. The charismatic origins of all political parties, even the most modernised ones, make them vulnerable to periodic takeovers by leaders with oratory talent.

Since all emotional mass appeals typical of mass democratic campaigns have certain charismatic features, the bureaucratisation of the parties and of electioneering may at its very height suddenly be forced into the service of charismatic hero worship,

notes Weber (1978b, 1130). This is likely to happen, one may add, when the hero promises electoral victory and a share of the accompanying spoils, and when a party is in the state of demoralisation following previous defeats. Under such conditions, party officials who resent charisma submit relatively easily to strong leaders. The officialdom allows such leaders to alter party programs, reshape electoral platforms, and forge new electoral alliances with “social forces.” Alternatively, conflicts between leaders and officialdom are settled by party machines “castrating the charisma” of aspiring leaders, and drifting towards a “leaderless” configuration, in which the bureaucratic interests (of party and administrative apparatus) predominate – and party politics ossifies.¹⁵ In a nutshell, when party officialdom gains the dominant position, we have “party democracy;” when trusted and popular leaders dominate, the power configuration gives us “leader democracy.”

¹⁴ “[T]he highly developed system of committee work in the English Parliament makes it possible and compelling for every politician who counts on a share in leadership to cooperate in committee work. All important ministers of recent decades have this very real and effective work-training as a background. The practice of committee reports and public criticism of these deliberations is a condition for training, for really selecting leaders and eliminating mere demagogues.” (1972, quoted from the online version)

¹⁵ “In normal times ... bureaucratic [party] apparatus... controls the party’s course, including the vitally important nomination of candidates. However, in times of great public excitement, charismatic leaders may emerge even in solidly bureaucratized parties, as was demonstrated by Roosevelt’s campaign in 1912. If there is a ‘hero,’ he will endeavour to break the technician’s hold over the party by imposing plebiscitary designation and possibly by changing the whole machinery of nomination. Such an eruption of charisma, of course, always faces the resistance of the normally predominant pros, especially of the bosses who control and finance the party and maintain its routine operations, and whose tools the candidates usually are.” (Weber 1978b, 1132) Also see (1978b, 1453).

The Dynamics of Modern Political Elites

The political outcomes discussed in the previous section vary with social conditions and historical circumstances. As Weber stresses, charismatic takeovers of parties are facilitated by the very nature of modern democratic elections. Mass elections are plebiscitary or populist in nature, and they are increasingly conducted through public (and mass mediated) oratory contests. This turns them into “heroic battles” that are won by those who are “most spectacular, most convincing, and most trustworthy” (1972, 111). Parties, especially patronage parties, are desperate to find such “spectacular” leadership candidates – and they are ready to submit to such candidates’ will. Therefore, modern parties adjust to democratic electoral politics by becoming both *mass* and *leader* parties in one. They do it by momentarily (and temporarily) shifting their *modus operandi* from bureaucratic cultivation of organised interests to serving “their” charismatic candidate for leadership – thus forming what Weber described as “leader democracy” (cf. Pakulski and Körösiényi 2012).

This is an important theoretical pointer. Under the conditions of social stability and calm, strong party bureaucracies tend to gain control of the selection of political leaders, stifling leaders’ charisma and resulting in party democracy. The charismatic takeovers and the resulting shifts toward leader democracy are more likely under the extraordinary conditions of social turbulence combined with the organisational decline of party machines. Yet, while labelled as “extraordinary,” such conditions were seen by Weber as relatively frequent, one is even tempted to say “normal,” under the conditions of rapid modernisation. In fact, Weber seems to subtly alter the argument about the “extraordinary” circumstances of charismatic takeovers, and to suggest that such takeovers can occur even under conditions of relative social calm, simply because the imperative of winning mass elections makes parties increasingly ready to submit to a leaders’ will as the acceptable price of electoral victory.

Perhaps the best way to combine these theoretical hints is by saying that the relations between political leaders and officialdom – or between charisma and bureaucracy – can take many different forms. Party democracy emerges when party officialdom manages to “castrate” the charisma of leadership aspirants, when party officials and factional bosses call the shots, and when political leaders turn into loyal “party agents.” By contrast, under the crisis conditions, when electoral competitions turn into “heroic battles” for mass vote, political leaders with a “gift of grace” gain the upper hand, heralding a shift towards leader democracy.

To sum up, Weber highlights the wide variability in modern elite structure and the accompanying elite configurations, and outlines the “imbalanced” elite structures, including centralistic “leader democracy,” erratic “plebiscitary democracy,” “leaderless” bureaucratic rule (“party democracy”), negative and sterile parliamentary squabbles, fractious partisan rule, and disorderly “democ-

racy of the street.” Moreover, he also highlights an ever-present danger of elite fragmentation and therefore of political weakening and decline – a danger he diagnosed in his native Germany under the “leaderless” condition.¹⁶ Bureaucratisation of political elites is inevitable and beneficial in the sense of increasing organisational effectiveness, predictability and stability. The superiority of bureaucracy over the collegial, patriarchal and patrimonial forms of organisation makes bureaucratisation “irresistible.” However, bureaucracies benefit the elite only when they take their proper role and the right place – in the domain of administration, and not in politics. Politics proper, that is struggle for power and strategic policy-making, are the domain of political leaders who represent independent action and struggle for ideals. The bureaucratic mandarins, by contrast, are the cornerstones of political stability.

Conclusions

The structure of modern elites, according to Weber, is complex and diverse. It can take many forms. Charismatic leader-politicians (typically statesmen with the gift of oratory) play central roles in modern political elites as political integrators, strategic goal-setters and, above all, the cultivators of mass trust and confidence. Democratic electoral contests make leaders the key repositories of mass confidence and trust. Small leadership groups that form around such leaders dominate and direct political strategies, even in democratised regimes; they are a normal part of all elites, including modern democratic elites. The small size and internal unity of leadership groups, in turn, gives them organisational agility a “superior political manoeuvrability.”¹⁷

Weber describes elite change as cycles in which “flare ups” of charismatic leadership are followed by gradual “routinization” and structural shifts. Each cycle always involves elite re-alignment and institutional cum structural reshuffles. Charismatic flare-ups are quite frequent, but irregular and historically contingent. They generally accompany periods of social upheavals, crises, “collective excitements,” mass anxieties and mobilisations of mass protest movements.¹⁸ While the charismatic leadership gradually becomes routine, the

¹⁶ See Weber (1978b: 241-71, 985-6, 1111-55, 1439-52, 1460). Weber’s warning about demagogic plebiscitarianism anticipated the tragic and fatal “Weimar syndrome” (the term not used by Weber) that opened the way to a “Caesarist” Hitlerite rule.

¹⁷ “Political action is always determined by the “principle of small numbers” that means, the superior political manoeuvrability of small leading groups. In mass states, this *caesarist* element is ineradicable.” (1978b, 1414)

¹⁸ “As these examples show, charismatic domination” – stresses Weber – “is by no means limited to primitive stages of development, and the three basic types of domination cannot be placed into a simple evolutionary line: they in fact appear together in the most diverse combinations. It is a fate of charisma, however, to recede with the development of permanent institutional structures.” (1978b, 1133)

elite adopts a new configuration, a new structure and a new pattern of elite-mass alliance. It may result in erratic “plebiscitary democracy” led by a populist leader and leader-appointed “staff.” Or it may evolve into a leader-centred democracy; or a “party democracy” dominated by party officialdom, usually in coalition with top governmental “mandarins.”

Contemporary elite theorists, such as John Higley and his collaborators, extend and elaborate this elite theoretical model in three respects. For a start, they extend the boundaries of elites to incorporate all power positions, all key sectors and organisations. This is an important and consequential amendment. Weber’s analyses prove too confined to specialised political actors. As stressed by Pareto and more recently by Mills (1956), Dahl (1961), Keller (1962) and Putnam (1976), such “power elites” always include not only the state-political elite, but also business-corporate segments, as well as leaders of other large organisations, such as churches, unions and the military. While political elites remain at the centre of their attention, Higley and his colleagues stress the centrality of elite “central circles” and networks, and the importance of elite integration cum consensus. The effectiveness of elites thus depends on securing a wide integration whereby all major elite groups are represented, and all major interests are harmonised within the power elite.

The second corrective is even more important and theoretically consequential. Higley and his collaborators identify the major sources of elite unity as either the dominant ideology – the shared ideological vision and strategy – or normative-procedural consensus, whereby elite members share commitments to norms regulating their competition, the proverbial “rules of the game.” Ideological unity is constraining and typically imposed on elite members, thus resulting in exclusions and suppressions of dissenters; the elites that develop this type of unity are illiberal and non-democratic. Consensual elites, by contrast, can operate with a wide range of programmatic disagreements, as long, of course, as their consensus restrains partisanship and allows for differences to be resolved peacefully. Above all, the democratic rules of the game involve commitment to the legal and political order, and to open electoral competition for leadership. They also involve consensus about the way authority is exercised.

Finally, modern elite theorists, especially John Higley and his collaborators¹⁹ specify more precisely the conditions and patterns of elite change. This aspect of Weber’s sociology of elites (elite dynamics) was left underdeveloped – probably due to Weber’s historicism (attention to specific historical configurations) and his untimely death. Modern elite theorists supplement the charismatic cycles with more elaborate schemes of elite settlements, replacements and transformations, the latter involving negotiated elite succession. These

¹⁹ See, in particular, Higley and Burton (2006).

formulations increase not only the theoretical sophistication of the elite-theoretical model, but also widen its application and utility.

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