THE ALLURE OF DARK TIMES:
MAX WEBER, POLITICS, AND THE CRISIS OF HISTORICISM

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that realist invocations of Weber rely on an unrealistic reading of Weber’s realism. In order to escape the allure of Weber’s dramatic posture of crisis, we place his seminal lecture on “Politics as a Vocation” (1919) in its historical and philosophical context of a revolutionary conjuncture of dramatic proportions, compounded by a broader crisis of historicism. Weber’s rhetoric, we argue, carries with it not only the emotion of crisis but is also the expression of a deeper intellectual impasse. The fatalistic despair of his position had already been detected by some of his closest contemporaries for whom Weber did not appear as a door-opener to a historically situated theory of political action but as a telling and intriguing impasse. Although the disastrous history of interwar Europe seems to confirm Weber’s bleakest predictions, it would be perverse to elevate contingent failure to the level of retrospective vindication.

Keywords: Max Weber, politics as vocation, realism, crisis of historicism, Ernst Troeltsch, Friedrich Meinecke, Provincializing Europe

Today’s political realists come in many different shapes. They range from disenchaunted liberals to Nietzschean Leninists, from neo-Machiavellians to left-Schmittians. More often than not, however, what they have in common is a respectful nod toward Max Weber. A similar story of enchantment with Weberian disenchantment could be told if one were to follow the interwar roots of international-relations realism down to Hans Morgenthau or indeed, somewhat more complicately, those of Christian realism down to Reinhold Niebuhr.2

The turn to a renewed recognition of political action and history in the name of political realism is certainly a welcome one. But as we are going to argue in this article, the trust placed in Weber for such a realistic vision of history and

1. We thank Bruce Ackerman, Seyla Benhabib, Frederick Beiser, Peter Breiner, Chris Clark, Udi Greenberg, Melissa Lane, Karuna Mantena, Samuel Moyn, Tamsin Shaw, and the audiences at a conference on Means and Ends at Yale University, the Yale Law School Legal Theory Workshop, the New York University Intellectual History Workshop, and a panel on Weber at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Society for US Intellectual History, as well as History & Theory’s anonymous reviewers, for comments on this article.

politics is, at least in part, misplaced. Much of the recent realist turn to Weber has been underwritten by an all too often ahistorical invocation of history. ³ The heavy reliance placed on Weber and his essay “Politics as a Vocation” is a case in point. Short, pugnacious, and fierce in the conclusions it draws, the text always had the makings of a pedagogical classic. It provides an unforgettable account of the dilemmas of political life and a compelling sketch of Weber’s ideal political personality. But apart from the bleak Lutheran heroics of Weber’s rhetoric, what exactly does Weber have to offer readers seeking to enrich their understanding of political action? We are going to argue that the answer is surprisingly little.

If political realism means that we bring history to bear on politics, the same move must be applied to Weber’s political theory and its supposed realism. Weber delivered “Politics as a Vocation” in early 1919 in the wake of Germany’s epic defeat in World War I and in the midst of a revolutionary conjuncture of truly dramatic proportions. Weber, as we shall show, was profoundly shaken by this double crisis of the German state, of which he was critical, but to which he was attached as a nationalist and on whose existence the structure of his political thought depended. By building our vision of politics on Weber’s grim extrapolation of this moment of crisis, we do not get the sober and cool diagnosis promised by political realism but instead prolong a violently charged vision of heroic choice amid a “polar night of icy darkness and hardness.”⁴ Nor is it simply Weber’s despair at Germany’s defeat and revolution that we are imbibing, but his profoundly contorted relationship to history, a reflection of his lifelong effort to come to terms with the collapse of the Hegelian synthesis of philosophy, history, and political philosophy. Whereas a century earlier, the young Hegel had been energized by the defeat of the German-speaking powers at the hands of Napoleon and the sweeping away of the Holy Roman Empire, Germany’s defeat in 1918 exposed Weber as a political thinker shipwrecked by history, struggling to grasp the scale of the historical changes around him.

Ever since Wolfgang Mommsen’s seminal Max Weber and German Politics (1959) it has been tempting to reduce this Weberian impasse to his vitriolic outbursts.


of nationalism and his putative penchant for charismatic authority. But the difficulties in “Politics as a Vocation” cannot simply be set aside as mere expressions of Weber’s knee-jerk ethnonationalism. Nor can they be reduced to an unfortunate fetishization of ruthlessness of the ideal political personality. They are expressions of a more interesting intellectual impasse. If we push further from politics to philosophy, we encounter a deeper set of problems that trouble any unmediated reception of Weber by today’s political realists.

The crisis of Weber’s fixation on the German nation-state was compounded by the radical subjectivism of his methodological stance, already noted by Weber’s contemporaries but pinpointed more recently by Seyla Benhabib. The mediating link between Weber’s peculiar neo-Kantianism and his increasingly narrow nationalist political vista, we will argue, is a third factor, namely the crisis of historicism. Weber appears from this perspective not as a door-opener to a historically situated theory of political action but as an extremely significant impasse, an impasse whose political and intellectual implications continue to haunt social and political theorists down to the present day. As some of Weber’s contemporaries had pointed out already at the time, a realistic politics in the wake of World War I could not mean the denial of the war’s assertion of history and a romanticization of the European state system after its self-destruction. Instead, a realistic appraisal of the historical moment dictated a radical and self-reflexive embrace of experimentation in both political internationalism and the new historicity this demanded.

EMPTY HISTORY

The strange evacuation of history in “Politics as a Vocation” begins with a gesture that could easily be mistaken for a reference to history. Weber opens his essay by quoting Leon Trotsky at the climactic peace negotiations at Brest Litovsk in January 1918 between revolutionary Russia and the Central Powers. “‘Every state is founded on force,’ said Trotsky at Brest Litovsk,” Weber quotes approvingly, before adding: “That is indeed right. If no social institutions existed which knew the use of violence, then the concept of ‘state’ would be eliminated . . . Of course, force is certainly not the normal or the only means of the state—nobody says that—but force is a means specific to the state.” This identification of politics with the state and the state with force is the basis from which Weber develops his famously bleak conclusions about the impossibility of reconciling morality with the necessities of power.


To find an avid newspaper reader and commentator, such as Weber, quoting Trotsky at Brest Litovsk is not surprising. The peace talks at the fortress of Brest among the Central Powers, Russia, and Ukraine, which stretched from December 1917 till March 1918, confirmed Germany’s victory on the eastern front of World War I and became a subject of heated debates within Germany. Along with the disastrous decision to launch unrestricted U-boat war in the Atlantic in January 1917, the mishandling of the Brest negotiations became a touchstone for critics of Germany’s Imperial regime.8 And the interest of the controversies was only heightened by the verbal duel between Trotsky and the cerebral head of the German delegation, Secretary of State Richard von Kühlmann.

Trotsky’s comment came from one of the most revealing and famous exchanges at Brest. The discussions turned on the question of legitimate self-determination. The Bolsheviks challenged the model of self-determination that the German military authorities were claiming to have applied to the Baltic states they were occupying. General Hoffman, the principal German military negotiator, eventually lost his patience and sought to rebut the Bolshevik critique by pointing out that the Soviets themselves were in the process of violently asserting their control throughout the former territories of the Tsarist Empire. Trotsky was unabashed and replied with a statement that certainly, according to German reports, featured the sentence to which Weber would refer in “Politics as a Vocation” almost exactly a year later.

But as soon as we pause to think about the point that Weber attributes to Trotsky, the doubt begins to creep in. Is it probable that Trotsky really meant what Weber uses him to say? Would a Marxist dialectician of Trotsky’s caliber really have uttered such a blank ahistorical claim as, “every state is founded on force”? Once we turn to either the minutes of the Brest talks or to the newspaper account that Weber is most likely to have read, it becomes clear that Weber was, to put it kindly, performing a creative misreading. The precise wordings offered by various accounts differ, but in a particularly heated exchange on January 17, 1918 Trotsky appears to have said something like the following: “[T]he General is completely right when he says that our government is founded on power. In all history we have known only such governments.” But Trotsky then immediately added: “So long as society consists of warring classes the power of the government will rest on strength and will assert its domination through force.” Trotsky did not deny that the Bolsheviks had turned violent against the ruling class and its imperialist friends, but, he insisted: “We believe that the violence that we apply, the violence that is supported by millions of workers and peasants and that is directed against a minority which seeks to keep the people in servitude; this violence is a holy and historically progressive force.”9 Trotsky was in fact

offering not Weber’s ahistorical truism—every state is founded on force—but the standard Bolshevik justification for revolutionary violence, a justification that rested on a progressive philosophy of history.

Once we are alerted to this twist in Weber’s use of evidence, we realize that turning Trotsky from a revolutionary actor bent on transforming power relations into an ahistorical sociologist of power is just the first of a series of obstacles to acknowledging historically consequential political action that Weber erected both in his famous essay and in his wider political engagement in the aftermath of World War I. In fact, in “Politics as a Vocation” Weber is remarkably consistent in diminishing the space for any kind of meaningful political action. Having cited a Bolshevik as his star witness, Weber seems determined in the rest of the essay to diminish the significance of the historic drama unfolding around him.

Weber gave his lecture on January 28, 1919, thirteen days after the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin and nine days after the election for the Constituent Assembly of the Weimar Republic, to an audience of liberal, patriotic students in Munich. Though the federal election had delivered a resounding majority for the Republican project, the political situation in Munich was turbulent. The interim Bavarian Prime Minister, Kurt Eisner, who had been appointed by a workers’ and soldiers’ Soviet in November, had lost the Bavarian regional elections on January 12 in a vote that pitted Munich against the conservative countryside. Within a month of Weber’s lecture, Eisner would be assassinated, his killing giving rise to the short-lived attempt to install a Soviet Republic in Munich. But despite the tumultuous changes just outside the venue of Weber’s speech, Weber did his best to deny any real historic significance to either the Russian or the German Revolutions, including the radical socialist government that still ruled in Munich itself. He repeatedly employed deflationary comparisons, invoking the “objective” regularities of his own sociology to dismiss claims by political actors to have effected any kind of radical change. “This carnival,” Weber mocked the upheavals around him, “we decorate with the proud name of ‘revolution.’”

But “all the revolution [in Germany, 1918] has accomplished, at least in so far as leaders have taken the place of the statutory authorities, this much: the leaders, through usurpation or election, have attained control over the political staff and the apparatus of material goods; and they deduce their legitimacy—no matter with what right—from the will of the governed.”

Turning to Russia, Weber dismissed the Bolsheviks as nothing more consequential than a medieval court faction.

The “parties” of the medieval cities, such as those of the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, were purely personal followings. If one considers various things about these medieval parties, one is reminded of Bolshevism and its Soviets. Consider the Statuta della perta Guelfa, the confiscations of the Nobili’s estates. . . . Then consider Bolshevism with its strictly sieved military. . . . This analogy is still more striking when one considers that, on the one hand, the military organization of the medieval party constituted a pure army of knights organized on the basis of the registered feudal estates and that nobles occupied almost all leading positions, and, on the other hand, that the Soviets have preserved, or

11. Ibid., 82.
12. Ibid., 85, 99-100.
rather reintroduced, the highly paid enterpriser, the group wage, the Taylor system, military and workshop discipline, and a search for foreign capital.13

Amid the development of modern industrialism, the revolutionary party just as the medieval warlord “lives off booty, plunder, confiscations, contributions, and the imposition of worthless and compulsory means of tender, which in essence amounts to the same thing.”14 Weber’s sociological account of political power flattened historical time, licensing him to jump back and forth between the Soviet Politburo and medieval Italy. As Bruno Teschke remarks in his *Myth of 1648* with regard to Weber’s analysis of the transition from feudalism to seventeenth-century capitalism, Weber’s methodology turns history from an open and contingent process into a “database furnishing evidentiary material for a series of systematized taxonomies.”15 As Weber himself put it with truculent bluntness, “fighting is everywhere fighting.”16

But as Teschke rightly concludes, this “is the death of history as becoming.”17 By denying political actors any generative capacities, Weber empties history of meaningful content while his comparative method flattens historical time. History is no longer a contingent and open-ended process of transformative change unfolding in the tension between the past, the fleeting present, and a horizon of future expectation. Instead it becomes merely an axis of comparison and a repository of data.18 In Weber’s hands, history is either reduced to a developmental pattern or a static sociology of power that serves to undercut claims of historical agency on the part of political actors.

Of course, Weber’s failure to get to grips intellectually with the revolutionary moment that he faced may simply reflect his unwillingness to take the Bolsheviks seriously as a historically transformative force. This was a reaction widely shared at the time. Lenin and Trotsky were unknown quantities and the outcome of their revolution highly uncertain.19 But Weber’s problems go beyond the question of revolutions. His sociological critique of politics was hardly less contemptuous of the efforts of nonrevolutionary politicians of a liberal and social democratic ilk. As Peter Breiner has commented, Weber’s sociological science licenses him to “withdraw a claim to realism from political projects that he finds undesirable.”20 And these choices were consistently directed toward undercutting the transformative pretensions of revolutionary students, literati, and socialists.21 As John

19. Thanks to Melissa Lane for pushing us to make this important distinction.
Grumley pointed out, Weber’s “robust political realism and sober, scientific objectivity” served mainly “scientifically” to unmask emancipatory hopes as wishful thinking.22

In the same way that Weber cut down the politics of the Russian Revolution to the format of an Italian city-state, John McCormick has argued that Weber struggled to grasp the emerging welfare state of imperial Germany, the Sozialstaat, as anything other than an atavistic regression to medievalism.23 Through a historical reading of Weber’s sociology of law, McCormick shows how “Weber’s analysis of the emerging Sozialstaat was hampered by historical presuppositions not appropriate to his object of investigation” but rather reflections of Weber’s “anguish” and “panic” over the rise of Sozialstaat law.24 This blinding dread was combined with Weber’s specifically ahistorical analysis that applied insights from modern law to earlier legal developments and used these in turn to critique the rise of the welfare state. Weber was thereby led to a “desperate and ideological misrecognition of a dauntingly novel historical development” as nothing more than a retrogressive return to the Middle Ages.25

REFUSING A HISTORIC PEACE

Weber’s turn against history became politically explicit in his opposition to the Treaty of Versailles. In the months immediately following his “Politics as a Vocation” lecture, Weber traveled to the peace conference as an expert adviser to the German delegation. He returned to Germany before the negotiations were completed once he realized that his intransigent opposition was failing to gain traction. Clearly, Weber’s nationalism was at the fore of his frustration. But with regard to the treaty, as with regard to revolutions, there is a specific quality to Weber’s reaction that amounts to a systematic refusal of history. What Weber denounced was not just the specific terms imposed by Woodrow Wilson and the Entente, but their entire effort to turn the war into a historically consequential just war, a “war to end all wars,” rather than a classic great power struggle ending in a peace that restored the basic status quo ante. What Weber faulted about Versailles was its ambition to connect a diagnosis of the war’s specific causes to prescriptions for the future organization of international politics. Significantly, the Treaty of Versailles failed to include the “oblivion clauses,” which had been a feature of the Treaty of Westphalia that ended the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These required the rancor of the war to be laid to rest, bygones to be bygones, history to be made irrelevant. The liberal ideologues of America and the Entente, by contrast, wanted to draw moral and political consequences from history. For Weber this was nothing less than a character failing, and a specifically gendered one at that. If Weber had had his way, the war would have ended quite differently:

24. Ibid., 24, 37.
25. Ibid., 3.
Instead of searching like old women [nach alter Weiber Art] for the “guilty one” after the war—in a situation in which the structure of society produced the war—everyone with a manly and controlled attitude would tell the enemy, “We lost the war. You have won it. That is now all over. Now let us discuss what conclusions must be drawn according to the objective interests that came into play and what is the main thing in view of the responsibility towards the future which above all burdens the victor.”

To set aside the past and with it the question of guilt, to focus instead on social structure, objective interests, and the future, this is what distinguished a man with a controlled emotional make-up from fussy, hysterical, gossipy “old women.” Weber’s “true statesmen” did not tell stories or linger over the rights and wrongs of the past. In a Nietzschean twist, Weber believed that freeing yourself from history was a sign of manly strength, realism, futurity, and responsibility. But how, when faced with the reality of defeat, did Weber actually advise his fellow compatriots and students to respond? Already in the fall of 1918 he had expressed more than a modicum of sympathy for those like Walther Rathenau who seriously pondered and prepared for a levée en masse in case the peace negotiations broke down. At Brest Litovsk, when the peace terms offered by Germany were deemed unacceptable, Trotsky had walked away from the talks, responding to German provocation with his slogan: “No War—No Peace.” The results had been an existential crisis that almost tore Russia apart, but Weber nevertheless argued for a similar course. Would it not be preferable to let the Allied Powers try to occupy Germany and respond with an uprising of national resistance? In a letter from November 1918, Weber answered this question in the affirmative. “If Poles now move into Danzig and Thorn, Czechs into Reichenberg the first task must be to breed a German irredenta. I cannot do it myself as my health is too bad. But every nationalist must do it and in particular the students. Irredenta means: nationalism with revolutionary means of violence.”

This demand for violence was not confined to private correspondence. In a public speech to students in Heidelberg during the winter of 1918–1919, he called for suicidal resistance.

You all know what it means to face up to an invading enemy who can no longer be stopped with an army. You all know the methods from the Russian Revolution of 1905. This means: to abandon all hope for the future and for oneself. There is only one fate for the living: imprisonment and courts-martial. If it comes so far, if you have found the determination not to give grand speeches but rather to silently make sure that the first Polish official who dares to enter Danzig will be met by a bullet—if you are determined to follow this path, then I will be there for you: Come to me! [Her zu mir!] 30

Faced with a historical transformation fueled by unmanly liberalism and Slav resentment, it was better to go down fighting than to continue in an existence of unworthy bondage.

Even in July 1919, after the Treaty had been passed through the National Assembly and had been signed, Weber continued to mull over the question of whether it would not have been better to refuse. The catastrophic consequences of any such acts of resistance were obvious. In June 1919 the most serious faction in the cabinet advocating refusal of the Treaty, led by Philipp Scheidemann of the SPD, had recognized that this would involve abandoning German sovereignty altogether. Choosing occupation would mean a fundamental break in the historical continuity of German statehood, as in 1945, rather than the anguished choice of assuming political responsibility for Germany’s defeat. As Weber made clear to his wife, the attraction of such a vision was precisely that it would allow German patriots to escape without “dirty hands.” Even if the Reich were destroyed, its national integrity would have been preserved, thus ensuring that there was at least some possibility in the unspecified future of a new “awakening of national (inner) resistance.”

By the fall semester of 1919, the moment for such palingenetic visions of national revival had been put off. The Treaty had been signed and ratified. Weber now merely sounded like a truculent and irresponsible nationalist, demanding in his opening lecture of the term: “We can only have one goal: to tear the peace treaty to shreds.” Commenting on the decision to pardon Eisner’s assassin, the far-left interim Prime Minister of Bavaria, who had made himself into a target by publicly acknowledging Germany’s responsibility for the outbreak of the war, Weber boasted to his students that “[t]o return Germany to her former glory I would certainly form a bond with any power on earth or indeed the incarnate devil.” Endorsing assassination, invoking a pact with the devil to restore damaged national glory, dismissing the victors as “old women,” reducing the restoration of Poland to a racial insult, while demanding oblivion clauses—this is hardly the language of historically minded, realistic analysis of power politics. As Weber had to admit, the events of 1918–1919 had left him “politically supremely clueless [äusserst ratlos].”

Behind this impasse stood three interrelated facets of Weber’s thought: his essential fixation on a static and reified image of the nation-state, his philosophical subjectivism, and his refusal to think of history as a meaningfully interrelated social process. At a moment of crisis Weber could paint a picture of heroic

31. See the discussion in Tooze, The Deluge, 312-320.
32. Letter to Marianne Weber, July 1, 1919. Quoted in Mommsen, Weber und die deutsche Politik, 343, n. 144. For a brilliant discussion of this widespread intransigence on the German side in the final stages of the war, see Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare.”
33. As quoted in Mommsen, Weber und die deutsche Politik, 345.
34. Reprinted in ibid., 536. In the note, Weber criticized the decision not to execute Eisner’s murderer, Count Arco: “I would have rather had him shot!” Weber would have preferred to see Arco dead not because he disagreed with him—“Arco had been motivated by the great dishonor [Schmach] brought upon us by Eisner”—but because Eisner had become a martyr while the pardon would turn Arco into a Kaffeehaussehenswürdigkeit, a mere curiosity. “I would have wished him better.”
political agency, but suicide was for him easier to imagine than historically effective action. This undercuts Weber’s approach to the question of means and ends that is commonly taken to define his approach to politics. If that discussion is to gain traction, we need a systematic account of the relationship between the deployment of means in the present toward goals in the future. But that precisely is what is missing from “Politics as a Vocation”: the moment at which political action is allowed to form a historically consequential, purposive arc connecting past, present, and future.36

THE STATE AND HISTORY

Among modern readers it is Peter Breiner who has most deeply plumbed the dependence of Weber’s political thought on the frame provided by the nation-state.37 As Breiner has shown, the nation-state was for Weber a systematic necessity, his only way of reconciling a fundamental tension in his thinking about politics. This tension is expressed in “Politics as a Vocation” in the following famous passage:

It is immensely moving when a mature human being—no matter whether old or young in years—is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts according to an ethic of responsibility and at some point says: “Here I stand; I can do no other.” . . . In so far as this is true, an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements.38

Weber’s Lutheran commitment, the “here I stand, I can do no other” of his thought, was the nation-state. As Breiner argues: “The reason why the commitment to the nation state can reconcile both the ethic of responsibility and conviction is that it is,” for Weber, “the one ideal that is not injured when power backed by violence is deployed on its behalf.”39 Indeed, faced with the violation of German identity implied by the loss of Danzig to Poland, violence, even if suicidal, was redemptive.

Among Weber’s contemporaries, no one felt or understood the depths of Weber’s despair more deeply than two of his close contemporaries, Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Troeltsch. Both were mandarins of the Wilhelmine era, and both were energetic propagandists of German nationalism before and during World War I. Both, like Weber, were shaken by defeat. But if Weber’s reaction to World War I up to his sudden death in June 1920 was remarkable precisely for how little the war had altered the centrality of the nation-state in his thought, Meinecke, by contrast, responded to the crisis of the war by unpacking the historicity tied up in that pivotal idea and the way in which his generation had embraced it.

37. Breiner, Max Weber and Democratic Politics.
In 1922, Meinecke was among the first to review the posthumous collection of Weber’s political writings compiled by Marianne Weber, the collection that today still forms the staple of political-science reading lists. What these essays revealed, Meinecke announced, was one of the greatest German minds of his generation, but also a figure who appeared to come from another era altogether. Weber’s political writings were those of a modern Machiavelli. Unlike for many of Weber’s more recent readers, for Meinecke the comparison with Machiavelli was analytic rather than laudatory. It served to highlight the strange combination in Weber of intense patriotism and a highly mechanistic and disenchanted conception of power and politics. As Meinecke remarked, nineteenth-century historical thinking had dissolved that tension by insisting on the particularity of national political institutions and the values inherent to national cultures. The logic of power was thus rendered less naked.

The question was whether Weber was a throwback to a bygone age, or a harbinger of the future. It was possible, Meinecke conceded, that Weber’s ruthlessly mechanistic, functional, and ahistorical approach to the state might be the defining mood of a new epoch. But the nationalist passions stirred by the war and the current enthusiasm for *Lebensphilosophie* among the young hardly suggested as much. To Meinecke, Weber’s thinking was defined by its blind spots. Indeed, Weber seemed willfully blind to the degree to which he was himself caught up in the altercations of the Wilhelmine era. His image of a mechanistic state machine animated by a lone political charismatic was all too obvious as an unforgiving sociological caricature of Wilhelmine Germany. Here too Weber rejected history in favor of an emphatic embrace of the future. As Meinecke remarked: “Max Weber affirms, flaunting his rationalism: ‘The Fatherland is for me not the land of the fathers, but of their descendants.’” But as Meinecke responded: “The full idea of the nation state requires that it should be the land of both (fathers as well as sons).” The essential historicity of the nation involved inheritance as much as futurity.

Whereas Meinecke placed Weber’s position within the tradition of *raison d’état* and read him in generational terms as marked by a reaction against Wilhelmine pomp and ceremony, Ernst Troeltsch located Weber philosophically squarely within the general crisis of modern historical thought. As Weber’s close friend and interlocutor at Heidelberg, Troeltsch had long shared Meinecke’s reaction to the sublime spectacle of Weber’s political and intellectual impasse. As an idiosyncratic adept of the Southwest school of neo-Kantianism, Troeltsch explained, Weber had radicalized Heinrich Rickert’s logic of history beyond recognition by dismissing any remnant of what could amount to a philosophy of

history.44 This elimination of historical change mapped onto Weber’s hostility toward any residual Hegelianism. As Weber announced in 1909, “There are only two ways: Hegel’s or our own.”45 In characteristic fashion Weber had radicalized a dense net of philosophical references to a Manichaean dichotomy. Weber was left, Troeltsch explained, with “pure causal explanation on the one hand and violently subjective interpretation [Deutung] on the other.”46 Weber “expunged every single teleological-evolutionary moment and replaced them with his own personally engaged value-affirmation.”47 “The result was,” Troeltsch added, “that he had thereby pulled the rug from the possibility to conceptualize any form of historical development whatsoever.”48

As Troeltsch noted, Weber’s most brilliant historical insights had been generated out of a critique of Marx’s dialectical synthesis of political economy and Hegelian philosophy. In this act of creative destruction, Weber and his generation, including figures like Werner Sombart, had given social theory a great impetus. But what it left them with was a means “of permanently holding open the comparative gaze on the plenitude of the historical, but itself not a history.”49 When Weber delivered his most compelling historical vignettes, he did so by setting aside the limitations of his own professed method, relying “like everyone else” on plastic, holistic images, “inner continuities and only intuitively perceptible contexts of development [Werdezusammenhängen], into which individuals . . . are essentially incorporated.”50 Not for nothing Weber invoked “elective affinities,” the alchemical formula through which the genealogy of capitalism could be traced back to the psychodynamics of Calvinism.

The reduction of the Bolsheviks to a power-hungry medieval clique, the treatment of the welfare state as retrogression, and the dismissive treatment of efforts to build a new international order as the gossiping of querulous old women were not accidental derailments of Weber’s thought. Faced with a world-historical crisis, these were the reflexes produced by a Wilhelmine liberal imperialism frozen into sociological categories and set off against a stylized image of heroic masculinity, struggling if necessary by force to define a position for itself in the world. They were, as Troeltsch put it rather more kindly, the “desperate intellectual last resort of a heroic . . . positivism.”51

Sixty years later, inspired by the Frankfurt School, Seyla Benhabib produced a dissection of Weber’s method that provides a bridge between Meinecke’s and Troeltsch’s acute observations.52 Benhabib highlights the contradiction between

Weber’s efforts to produce a genealogy of modern rationality, which shows on the one hand how it emerged in a haphazard, contingent, and unique way out of the interaction among different impulses, and on the other hand his methodological writings, which reify the ontology that emerges from that process into a transcendental condition. The “dualistic ontology” in which the “infinite meaningless world sequence” is juxtaposed to an “autonomous individual” in whose actions, intentions, and interpretations all meaning is localized was both the product of the sociological process and presumed by Weber in his analysis of it.

It is tempting to see Weber’s position as harking back to a familiar problem of Kantian moral philosophy, namely Kant’s apparent denigration of political action and judgment by his two-world metaphysics—a weakness exploited by Hegel at length in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. But Benhabib points to a different and more interesting aspect in Weber, namely the very peculiarity and eccentricity of his neo-Kantianism. Weber, she argues, unduly radicalized a neo-Kantian view of moral autonomy that insisted that it was the duty of individuals to choose their moral ideals, by mistaking this moral autonomy for the epistemological claim that there was “nothing in the facts themselves,” whether they were “natural or social” to suggest one rather than another moral position. Weber then compounded the resulting voluntarist mode of value-generation with a supposedly objective sociological analysis of how the world had in fact been remade through rationalization and the process of “ontological reduction,” so that individuals did indeed confront the world as an infinite, meaningless, space-time sequence. And, at moments such as 1919, he was capable of further dramatizing this imperative as the choice between a heroic act of national suicide or a meaningless posthistorical existence.

Unsurprisingly, what emerged from this juxtaposition was a sociology that was fatalistic and a politics that was voluntarist—what Troeltsch called “heroic positivism.” “What is lacking,” Benhabib points out, “is the concept of materially embedded, generative, and transformative human praxis.” In radicalizing his neo-Kantianism and expunging all Hegelian influences from his philosophy, Weber explicitly turned himself into an adamantine obstacle to any holistic notion of historical social praxis. Instead of Weber’s dualism, Benhabib calls for a social ontology in which “all social interaction occurs in the context of an already constituted social world,” a social ontology that does not present itself as meaningless but acknowledges the way in which values are already embodied through interaction, communication, and labor. This means that history cannot be reduced to an empty developmental process fit for dissection and normative evaluation by the heroic social scientist. Instead, history is better conceived as one of the names that generative social praxis fed by collective political action has given to itself.

54. In the realm of *Wissenschaft*, Weber was able to avert the immediate impact of this position by clingling to the residues of a neo-Kantian belief in scientific method, though not without ambivalence about the effect of “disenchantment.”
55. In the twentieth century, this space would be mapped by a variety of traditions including various strands of Western Marxism, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Problem of Method* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1963); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, volume 1: *Theory of Practical
At the close of her remarkably thoroughgoing critique of Weber’s most basic categories, Benhabib makes one more crucial move. If the “way out of Weber’s iron cage is thus not laid out,” she admits, this had not in fact been the aim of her critique. Rather, the purpose of her critique was to show that “the structure is not so sturdy as it may at first appear. . . . [T]he claims of Weber’s methodological writings do not provide sufficient evidence to accept that the theoretical and practical structures of modern rationality constitute the transcendental a prioris of our social world.” An escape from Weber’s dilemmas may not, therefore, involve the kind of “apocalyptic reversal of the fate of the moderns” envisioned by post-Weberian critics like Strauss, Lukács, Horkheimer, or Marcuse. Indeed, to talk in terms of an “escape” is to grant too much to Weber’s artificial impasse.

Having subjected his position to historical and philosophical critique, we can walk free from what was in large part a self-incurred confinement. And this goes as much for Weber’s political theory as his social theory. In light of the aporia revealed by a close reading of the crisis out of which “Politics as a Vocation” emerged, there is little reason to take the dilemmas laid out there as an a priori frame. And the interest of returning to Meinecke and Troeltsch is not only that they diagnosed the entangled problems of Weber’s thinking about politics and history, but that both of them made remarkable efforts after 1918 to shed the Wilhelmine structures and their own former beliefs. In both cases this involved historicizing the nation-state as well as the conception of history entangled with it, the complex in which Weber had remained so agonizingly confined. Whereas Weber looked out despairingly on a “polar night,” Meinecke and Troeltsch took the crisis of 1918–1919 as the call to chart a new world.

WAYS FORWARD

The first fruits of Meinecke’s effort at reconstruction were published in 1924 in the form of The Idea of Reason of State, a sustained effort to historicize the “here I stand” of the nation-state on which Weber’s and Meinecke’s generation had staked their political thought. What Meinecke showed was that the late nineteenth-century fixation on the nation-state had its origin in the splintering of the Catholic synthesis of secular and spiritual power that had accompanied the formation of the European state system between the Renaissance and the eighteenth century. It was out of this conjunction that the modern political problem, the contingency and particularity of “here I stand,” had emerged along with all the moral dilemmas associated with it.
The early-modern formation of the state posed, in this narrative, a shifting problem of how to reconcile spiritual and secular power: “[I]t is apparently the case,” Meinecke remarked, “that the state must do evil. . . . It is the most frightful and staggering fact of world history, that there is no hope of making radically moral the human community itself which encloses and comprehends all other communities.” The first to articulate this openly was Machiavelli. But as the Machiavellian moment revealed, the dilemma was historical, not timeless. Machiavelli’s radical cynicism with regard to the security of the Prince had been appropriate to an embattled, fledgling republic uncertain of both its internal and external position. But once the power-state established itself on the basis of the rule of law, the problem was increasingly confined to the exterior of the state. “This was not always so,” Meinecke insisted. “So long as the state authority did not hold all the domestic means of physical power concentrated in its own hands . . . it was always being tempted (indeed, in its own view it was frequently obliged) to combat these forces by unjust and immoral means.” It was not inconceivable, therefore, that the problem might ultimately be alleviated by further extensions of the rule of law to the interstate sphere. It could, of course, also be aggravated by changes in technology, politics, or the breakdown of the divide between internal and external order.

To add to the dynamism of the forces unleashed in the Machiavellian moment, the dilemma of “dirty hands” was not merely located in history. It was, in fact, constitutive of the modern conception of history. Historical consciousness and modern political thought were for Meinecke intellectually inseparable. With the emergence of the secular state, the dilemma of raison d’état and the modern understanding of secular history were born together. And the first and most ambitious resolution of the dilemma therefore came with the radical historicization of philosophy and the philosophization of history, and with it of politics, attempted by German idealism. The staggering ambition of early nineteenth-century idealism had been to bring the dualism between might and morality created by the rise of the state into a new balance and to do so in and through history. Hegel, Meinecke explained, sharpened and radicalized this idea more than anyone else by recasting reason itself on the basis of a struggle for inner unity and identity. Individuality, it was recognized, could provide the bond with identity and universality. In politics this new form of historicized reason was then embodied in the nation-state as the one force able to bring together individual and general welfare.

Born in reaction to Napoleon’s cataclysmic triumph, the promise of unity was not destined to last. As the Hegelian synthesis faded from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, German political thought was left adrift. The historian Leopold von Ranke had been able to sustain a theologically inspired belief that the plurality of nations manifested a divinely inspired design, in which each national trajectory contributed a distinctive note that harmonized with all the others. As the nineteenth century progressed, Meinecke retraced how the

59. Meinecke, Machiavellism, 12.
60. Ibid., 13-14.
liberal optimism that had still sustained Ranke’s generation collapsed, leaving the field of international politics to appear as a disillusioned space dominated by conflict and devoid of inherent moral meaning. Faced with this disenchantment, the radical existential commitment to the nation-state had come to play a central moral and political role first for the generation of Heinrich von Treitschke and then for Weber and Meinecke. Weber’s radical anti-Hegelianism was a typically exaggerated effort to force the polarities of this era of disenchanted positivism and Realpolitik to their most extreme point. If Weber could not thereby reverse the effects of “ontological emptying out,” he could at least live disenchantment authentically.

The challenge Weber faced during World War I was that his commitment to “his” German nation-state was exposed not simply as a response to sociological fate but as a historical wager. The fiasco of that wager in 1918 left him vainly struggling to give meaning to a nationalism that, if translated into political action, could only mean personal and national oblivion. For Meinecke, by contrast, coming to terms with the failure of that project meant historicizing not just the state, but the ideal of the nation as well. Absolutist raison d’état had held the European state system in balance in the eighteenth century. It was the emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century, with its even grander claims on history, that had upset it fundamentally. Beyond the general processes of “progressive rationalization and technicalization of life,” which Weber’s sociology had focused on, Meinecke now identified the dramatic conjunction of “militarism, nationalism, capitalism” in the late nineteenth century as a truly new and lethal threat to the European order. They combined to explode the bounds of raison d’état and to cast the future of the European nation-state fundamentally into question.

During the 1920s, conservative critics such as Carl Schmitt were to charge Meinecke with seeking a romantic reconciliation of the conflict between ethics and power. But for Meinecke the defeat of the Central Powers by a coalition of global empires did not offer a sense of regained unity. Instead, it was a shock of world-historical proportions that threatened to bring to an end the entire narrative that had begun in the early modern period with the dual constitution of the questions of history and raison d’état. “[T]he character of the modern European state existence threatens to come to grief . . .,” he explained. “This would indeed mean that the historical role of Europe . . . was played out and that Western culture is in fact doomed to destruction.” With the historical and political logic that had once animated them exhausted, the European states would in due course “sink to the level of burnt-out volcanoes or (as it has been quite well expressed by Spengler) of Fellahen states,” quasi-natural formations whose active history lay behind them.

What the future held was uncertain. There were ample reasons, of course, to be skeptical about liberal talk of a new international order replacing the old European

62. Ibid., 410.
63. Ibid., 15.
65. Meinecke, Machiavellism, 423-424.
66. Ibid., 432.
concert of powers. “Justice,” Meinecke affirmed, “can only be upheld, if a power exists which is able and ready to uphold it.”67 In the international arena there was no such arbiter. But could one be made? Unlike Weber’s, Meinecke’s historical analysis of the modern state system prepared him to take seriously the liberal project of international reconstruction after 1919. Despite the fact that it formed the first chapter of the hated Versailles peace treaty, Meinecke acknowledged that “there is no alternative . . . but to strive honorably for a genuine League of Nations.”68 There was always the risk of sliding back into mutual distrust and antagonism.69 But it could not be denied that the League, with the dominant powers that stood behind it, was an intelligible response to the historical crisis of the nation-state.

In 1923, three years after Weber’s death, Troeltsch was scheduled to give an important series of lectures in London on his vision of the future of politics.70 The invitation, and the fact that Troeltsch accepted it, was an indication in itself of the progress of European reconstruction. Just days before his scheduled departure for Britain, Troeltsch succumbed suddenly to a lung embolism. But in the lecture script that was read in London and published posthumously, he went further than either Weber or Meinecke in making a determined effort to break the fixation on the nation-state that was, in his words, the “most dangerous monistic exaggeration” of his generation of German thinkers. Instead, Troeltsch took up the challenge of formulating a pluralist response to the crisis. As for Meinecke, so for Troeltsch too, the starting point was the collapse of the Catholic synthesis of spiritual and secular power, from whose disruption the secular state and the secular conception of history emerged. But unlike either Meinecke or Weber, Troeltsch refused to concede that the state had ever had an exclusive claim to moral authority. Instead, he outlined an entire schema of different spheres of meaningful social action, from the family to spiritual communities that had always retained a significant moral commitment. The responsibility of modern politics thus emerged not as Weber’s stark choice between one or another moral commitment, but as a constantly shifting challenge of coordinating the different spheres. Troeltsch even went so far as to identify this process of compromise as a historically specific challenge to German political thought. “Many of us in Germany regard ‘compromise’ as the lowest and most despicable means to which a thinker can resort. We are asked to recognize a radical disjunction here, and to choose either for or against. . . . But twist and turn the matter as you will the fact remains that all intransigence breaks down in practice and can only end in disaster.”71

67. Ibid., 14.
68. Ibid., 431. He also acknowledged two other forces of order in the international sphere: the forum of public opinion and an overwhelmingly powerful adversary.
69. Ibid., 15-16.
71. Ibid., 202.
For Troeltsch, as for Meinecke, this need for compromise and internationalism translated into a recognition of the crucial historical role of the League whose “indestructible moral core” Troeltsch had passionately defended in a prominent public lecture in Berlin in 1922.\(^{72}\) In addition to the League and offsetting global power imbalances, Troeltsch furthermore envisioned lower-level regional affiliations. He did not deny that the dwindling supremacy of European nation-states meant that a certain notion of history was also reaching its terminus. Echoing Spengler’s contemporary diagnosis, Troeltsch fully recognized that the crisis of the European state system called for a relativization of the history of the West in the most radical sense. But for Troeltsch, this meant not the end of history or the “decline of the West,” but the need to invent a new type of historicity organized around a radically redefined conception of Europe. The culmination of Troeltsch’s proposal was thus a remarkable sketch for a pan-European cultural synthesis, as both a political and historical project. What was required was a new conception of historical consciousness that did not abandon the universalist claims descended from the Reformation and the Enlightenment, but that was bounded by an awareness of its own particular Eurocentricity.

Not for nothing, it was the world scene as it presented itself from the vantage point of Weimar Germany that led the young philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer to exclaim that “Europe . . . since 1914 has become provincialized,” a slogan later taken up to such radical effect by postcolonial writers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty.\(^{73}\) A fascination with India had already fueled Weber’s efforts to break out of the grips of Western monotheism. But unlike either Weber or Spengler, Troeltsch studded his footnotes not with the travel diaries of Western orientalists, but with references to early twentieth-century Indian and Japanese intellectuals who were beginning to rethink Western historicity from a peripheral vantage point.\(^{74}\) As Troeltsch saw it, realism in the wake of World War I entailed not clinging to the wreckage of the European state system after its self-destruction, or inveigling against the historicity that it had necessarily entailed. What a realistic appraisal of the historical moment dictated was a radical and necessarily speculative act of self-reflexive resituation, a reinvention both of real political forms and the historicity that they entailed.

ESCAPING THE ALLURE OF DARK TIMES

In our current moment of uncertainty, the call for realism and historical awareness can only be welcome. But as the example of Weber’s “Politics as a Vocation” suggests on closer examination, such appeals raise as many questions as they answer. To invoke history and realism necessarily implies grappling with

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74. Troeltsch quotes, for instance, Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Chuichiro Gomyo. “There are many more all analogous to the European sciences but seen and felt from a different center.” Troeltsch, *Historismus*, 1031.
the contingency of politics and the way in which politics, history, and more or less politicized philosophies of history are mutually implicated. It is tempting to reduce this contingency and to massively simplify the relationship between politics and history by falling back on timeless, pessimistic prophecies of a “polar night of icy darkness and hardness.” The allure of the thinkers of dark times remains powerful, in moments of crisis more than ever. But the context that surrounds them also tends to dull the critical senses. A dark sensibility is not by itself a warrant for realism.

We do not deny, of course, that European history was to take a disastrous turn in the 1930s. Nor do we introduce Meinecke and Troeltsch as panaceas or recommend promoting them above Weber in a new canon of twentieth-century political thought—though they certainly deserve more attention than they commonly receive. Our point is different. In their enthusiasm for the League of Nations and a European cultural synthesis, Weber’s contemporaries of a more internationalist disposition can easily appear naïve by contrast with Weber’s timeless pessimism. Behind the neglect of Troeltsch and Meinecke stands surely also the sense that their attempts to find an escape from the impasse of their national political tradition were condemned by Schiller’s court of world history. By contrast, the disastrous history that followed has considerably assisted in the canonization of Weber’s “Vocation Lectures.” Weber’s bleakest predictions seem confirmed. But ought we not to wonder at the perverse “moral luck” that made Weber’s strained combination of deterministic sociology and fatalistic despair into a totem of political realism? A genuinely realistic account of politics would have to acknowledge the historical force of “idealism” and be sensitive to the perversity of elevating contingent failure to the level of retrospective vindication.

Arguably, it is only when we acknowledge the real historical potential of Meinecke’s and Troeltsch’s hopes that we get the measure of the shattering disappointment that they were to suffer. It should certainly give us pause, in particular once we recognize the parallels between their proposals and our current preoccupation with increasingly fragile normative orders. To become aware of the way in which politics and history were entangled for Weber and his close contemporaries should sharpen our awareness of how our own intellectual undertakings are at stake in the contingency of our own present and the success or failure of today’s practical political projects.

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