

Social science and politics: From Max Weber to Brexit

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Biographical note

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Abstract

In 1919, a period of turbulence for Germany and for Europe, Max Weber asked what were the tasks of responsible political leaders and social scientists? This report re-visits his answers and their relevance for the turbulence of today, in the UK and Europe. It questions simplistic interpretations of Weber's approach to historical change and brings centre-stage his interest in the complex dynamics of social change that emerge from the 'elective affinities' that social actors discover. From that standpoint it examines Weber's confrontation as a social scientist with the political leaders of his day and his exposure of their ill-preparedness to address the desperate situation in which Germany found itself.

Thus armed, this report exposes the irresponsibility of those who in the UK and in the EU officiated over the Brexit crisis. It is appropriately cautious as to what social science can predict for the post-Brexit world, but delineates some of the lessons that responsible social scientists and political leaders can draw.

Introduction

In 1919, Max Weber published two public lectures, given during the latter part of WW1 and the immediate aftermath. This was a period of political tumult in Germany; as a leading social scientist he was expected to bring a voice of wisdom and objective insight. *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation* came to figure among the best known of his writings (Gerth and Mills, 1948)¹.

In these two essays, Weber examines the vocational ethics of social science and of politics. He draws upon a lifetime of research and teaching but he also speaks to the turbulence of the immediate times. Some of his listeners, indeed, had come in from street demonstrations, where they were exposed to violent clashes with their political opponents. There was turbulence also in Europe at large, with the break-up of old nations and the emergence of new – and with widespread civil unrest and mass migrations, across the new borders. Meanwhile at Versailles, Germany would – but on terms yet to be clarified – pivot to a new relationship with the dominant powers. Weber poses the question: what, in such times, is the task of responsible political leaders and what is the role of the social scientist?

In 2019, Europe was again in a state of turbulence, under attack from oligarchs in Moscow and Washington intent on undermining its peace, and struggling with the backwash of distress from regions to the south and the east, as manifested in flows of refugees and economic migrants. Street demonstrations against immigrants, mixed with distress at the harshness of austerity, served to alienate communities from the post-war settlements, by which capitalism and welfare states had hitherto ensured social peace.

Now however it was in Britain that this tumult reached fever pitch, with a narrow referendum victory for those wanting to leave the EU. Now it was the turn of the UK – but again on terms to be clarified – to pivot to a new relationship with the European powers. How should responsible European and especially British political leaders address the turbulence of Brexit? What is the role and contribution of social scientists? And what if any re-reading do Weber's essays merit, as the conflicts over Brexit reach their climax?

This report puts in question simplistic interpretations of Weber's approach to the explanation of historical change and his view of the strategic responsibility of political leaders. It argues nevertheless that Weber's efforts to wrestle with the political turbulence of 1919 offer distinctive insights into his views of both social science and politics; and that these insights in turn pose novel but fundamental questions about the quandaries of our own times.

1. The two essays appear in Gerth and Mills (1948), which also supplies an extended introductory essay by the two editors. In this paper, the introductory essay will be referenced as G&M and the page, while the two essays by Weber will be referenced as SaV and PaV.



Science as a Vocation

Weber wanted social science to be empirical and dispassionate. The social scientist should interrogate social actors as to the rationale for their actions and the ends and values towards which they are oriented. On this basis causal explanations can be constructed, across a population of actors, explaining the social regularities observed. The social scientist must expect also however to interrogate him or herself as to the assumptions underpinning the research, so that as far as possible these are explicit and visible, while being careful not to argue for any specific social and political values on the basis of that research. For Weber, therefore, *Science as a Vocation* involves far more than the choice of research questions and methods. It involves a courageous and perpetual self-questioning and an unflinching refusal to find refuge – psychologically or politically – in religious or philosophical comforts which are not themselves submitted to that same relentless interrogation².

Weber's own research involved a wide variety of empirical studies. Some dealt with agricultural workers in eastern Germany, their value orientations and their economic interests³. These were times of major economic change, undermining their established livelihoods. Weber wanted to confront the landowner class of Prussia with the negative consequences of their economic and political choices for this population, and its replacement by non-German wage labourers from further east (G&M: 34).

Weber also undertook many wide-ranging historical and comparative studies of religious worldviews and their economic correlates (Weber, 1930; 2013). This, again, focused on periods of major economic change, in particular the spread of Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. His research highlighted the 'elective affinity' between the religious ethic of the former and the economic interests entailed by the latter. This then took him into studies of other world religions and their economic ethics, and the role of charismatic religious leaders - but then also charismatic political leaders. The latter concern, as we shall see, re-appears as a strong theme of *Politics as a Vocation*, with Weber recognising that charismatic leadership was essential in modern mass societies; but intensely concerned as to whether Germany's political system was such as to train and select such leaders, adequate to the task, and ready to behave responsibly.

In all of this research, Weber was centrally concerned with the meanings which these different actors gave to their central life interests, whether as peasants, businessmen, politicians or scientists. He highlighted the role of leaders offering new value orientations, especially in times of social and economic turbulence; and the elective affinities their followers discovered between those values and their specific economic interests.

This interest in elective affinities is a leitmotif of his work⁴. A set of new and

2. This has generated a vast scholarly literature, concerned with value neutrality in social science and the dangers of positivism. See for example Hunter (2018).

3. See for example the essay, '*Capitalism and Rural Society in Germany*', also included in the Gerth and Mills collection. See also Tribe (1983).

4. The term 'elective affinity' was originally used in German chemistry of the 18th Century, to refer to the way in which compounds interact and combine selectively with each other (Howe, 1978). Goethe took this idea into his novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, applying it to sexual attraction, with two couples who become acquainted, only to re-couple. Kant applied the idea to relationships among concepts; Weber to relationships between ideas and the interests of social actors. Perhaps surprisingly however, it does not seem to have been used much, if at all, in relation to biological co-evolution. Nor have sociologists interpreting Weber's work given it much attention (Runciman, 2004; McKinnon, 2010).

emerging economic interests will differentially attract the attention of different social groups, with those whose work ethic best chimes with these new opportunities tending to colonise them disproportionately. This will then have implications for the re-working of social, economic and political power. This however involves complex dynamics, which cannot, for example, be adequately handled by any simple equation of class interests and political values (G&M: 34).

Within Weber's sociology, 'elective affinities' serve as a foil to cruder forms of Marxist economic determinism. Material interests do not explain how social actors see the world and the imperatives that drive their courses of action. In particular, the work ethic of the Protestant religion, grounded in its teachings on salvation and justification before God, played no small part in the development of capitalism. More generally, Weber was interested in how social actors make sense of the opportunities and demands of their economic situation by reference to their ethical commitments; how in doing so, they reveal the affinities between particular ethical beliefs and the material interests that they variously pursue; and how these affinities can thereby prove consequential for social regularities and dynamics. This is a process of co-evolution. It is not just a matter of complementarity or similarity; it is a dynamic synergy, where those elements that are especially favourable to each other enable the ensemble as a whole to flourish. It offers a dynamic of mutual selection, reinforcement and change⁵.

Weber was here providing an account of social change that foreshadows the models of complex dynamics that have flourished over recent decades (Room, 2011; 2016). Consistent with those models, Weber recognises - indeed insists - that outcomes may be counter-intuitive and evil outcomes may come from well-intentioned deeds. Political actors need therefore to have the strategic imagination to appreciate this complexity and to take responsibility for the results (PaV: 122).

This makes for an interesting dualism in Weber. On the one hand, he points to the radically different cosmological views that the major world religions embody and enforce on their adherents, obliging them to carry its dictums into their everyday life. This implies a strong path dependency. So does Weber's account of the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy and the formal rationalisation and disenchantment of the modern world. On the other hand, he points to the diversity of religious and ethical values that are held forth, and the elective affinities that may then develop, with different fractions of the population. If on the one hand he resists the economic determinism of the cruder forms of Marxism, he also insists that no system of belief can maintain its grip on all of the people all of the time, especially as the material conditions of their existence change.

This suggests an openness to change and a great variety of possible evolutions of values and interests. Yet Weber cannot say where an alternative will come from and what form it will take. The new elective affinities that may form are as innumerable as the new variants thrown up in biological evolution; across a shifting landscape, prediction is hardly possible. Nevertheless, this is not a biological but a social landscape; instead of blind evolution, we have purposeful struggles for

5. A recent critical article by Eich and Tooze (2017) misses all of this. They describe Weber's account of elective affinities as no more than 'the alchemical formula through which the genealogy of capitalism could be traced back to the psychodynamics of Calvinism' (p.208). They go on to argue that Weber has a 'flat' or empty view of history, which becomes 'merely an axis of comparison and a repository of data'. The view they themselves advocate is then deceptively simple and linear: 'we need a systematic account of the relationship between the deployment of means in the present toward goals in the future' (pp 202, 206).

positional advantage. Power and political economy call the shots; uncertainty is off-loaded onto the common people; denied any real choice, many just hunker down and wait in forlorn hope, for things to get better.

2

**Politics as a
Vocation**

Just over a year after lecturing on *Science as a Vocation*, Weber gave his lecture on *Politics as a Vocation*. This is in one sense an expression of those same research interests, now applied to the political realm, in Germany in particular: a study of the constellation of actors inhabiting the political arena, their value orientations and their interests, the rationales for what they do and the ethics they follow. Weber wants to interrogate them as to the choices they face, in terms of both ends and means, and the likely consequences of their actions. He wants to examine the internal consistency of those choices, and confront them with the findings of relevant research. He wants political leaders to be held to account and to act responsibly in the vocation they have chosen.

We start therefore with Weber's scientific analysis of the political systems of his day - an analysis that is strongly comparative, setting nationally specific forms of politics in their respective institutional and historical contexts. Central to Weber's thinking on politics is the role of the 'charismatic' political leader, able to articulate the alternative futures that the country in question faces, and the trade-offs and consequences they involve. This is the more essential in turbulent and uncertain times, when strategic commitment and imagination are needed, to see beyond the here and now.

Such a political leader must have certain personal qualities. As seen already, Weber describes the vocation of social science as involving unflinching self-questioning and the critical interrogation of all religious, political and philosophical commitments. That same unflinching courage, mental and moral, is what Weber also asks of the politician, but now in relation to the strategic defence and survival of the nation. Nevertheless, it is not enough for a political leader to have a strong personal commitment to particular values, and the personal force to win the support of the masses; he or she must also carefully weigh the consequences. The former Weber characterises as the 'ethic of ultimate ends', the latter as the 'ethic of responsibility'. It is in these terms that he scrutinises the political leaders of his day.

The charismatic politician must be able to appeal to and connect with the masses. The model Weber takes is Gladstone, championing the question of Irish home rule and in doing so ousting the Conservative Prime Minister Disraeli. Such strategically intelligent political leaders can emerge from a well-functioning Parliament; it can also hold them to account. Again, it is to Britain that Weber looks as his model (PaV: 107).⁶

Nevertheless, in Germany the emergence of such leaders was hindered by other developments. Mass political parties had developed to mobilise and engage the public. Party machines were readily captured by those eager to live 'off' not 'for' politics, and to secure the 'fattest material opportunities' afforded by municipal politics (PaV: 105). Lists of candidates for Parliament were organised around local notables; tight discipline stifled opportunities for those with leadership potential to develop and ascend (PaV: 112). So also, while modern officialdom enabled the politician to exercise imperative coordination over vast resources and masses of citizens, in Germany officials also 'claimed cabinet positions for themselves' (PaV: 96, 111), further detracting from Parliament and its role in developing

6. For all Weber's enthusiasm, Gladstone's victory over Irish home rule led to party realignments in London and the creation of the Conservative and Unionist Party, which dominated British politics for the next two decades and pushed Irish independence into the next century.

mature political leadership.

If in 1919 Germany was to pivot to a new relationship with the dominant powers, it needed leaders with strategic commitment and imagination, the capacity to win the support of the masses and the administrative support of officialdom to enforce the new direction of national policy. Without those however, Germany, with its demagogues and their ethic of irresponsibility, was quite unprepared for the challenge.

3

**Science
confronting
politics in
turbulent times**

Weber surveys the political landscape at a highly fateful moment. Germany, only a few decades earlier, had been unified under Prussian hegemony and Bismarck's leadership. Her rapid industrialisation had transformed her economy and her communities within little more than a generation. An industrial working class was pressing for democratic political voice (Beetham, 1974; Mommsen, 1984).

Prussia was still however in the grip of the landed aristocracy and the military. That had, at least, been true until recently. Meanwhile, a few hundred kilometres to the west, the Versailles conference was bent on dismantling Germany's industrial strength, with little regard to its democratic future.

Weber deplored how poorly Germany was equipped, to address these political challenges. The Kaiser had gone into exile, but the political actors, who now found themselves tasked with domestic reconstruction and the demands of the victorious Allies, were ill-prepared and lacked coherent leadership. This Weber blamed principally on Bismarck and 'the horrible destruction of independent convictions' he had left as his legacy (G&M: 33).

Weber dissected the dilemmas and choices that Germany confronted. This was not so much the science *of* politics as science *for* politics: not so much telling political leaders what works well in democratic political systems, but illuminating the turbulent landscape they were now seeking to navigate.

Weber also insisted that Germany's political leaders be unflinching in their honest recognition of Germany's post-war situation, and accept responsibility for whatever course they now chose. The ethic of responsibility does not imply small-scale and timid incrementalism. It can just as well encompass a major change of direction and a certain audacity. Assuredly however in turbulent times the stakes are higher; the temptation may be to hunker down and avoid hard decisions.

Thus Weber did seek to 'speak truth to power.' But what does this entail? In stable times, it is possible for the social scientist to study the typical courses of action in which social actors engage and the social regularities these produce. In more turbulent times and places however, how are the effects, costs and consequences of political decisions to be established, in relation to complex and 'wicked' problems, and the alternative trajectories that may present themselves to political leaders?

Here it is again by reference to the new 'elective affinities' that may emerge, that Weber frames his response. This involves identifying the interplay of political ideas, ethical commitments and material interests, and discovering their mutual affinities for the variety of actors involved - the political leaders and their party machines, the business leaders and trade unions, the citizens and the forces of the old order. It involves watching them discover shared interests and forge new alliances and seeing what dynamics of mutual reinforcement then develop. It also involves watching as they abandon some old couplings and established patterns of dominance.

The task of the social scientist is here not that of producing an evidence-based assessment of some policy intervention or comparing alternative ways of acting on some specific policy problem. Nor is it to guess at the future political configuration of the country, and imagine what settled regularities this is likely to produce. It is, rather, to illuminate interlocking and complex problems; to model the dynamics of emerging change; to read the 'weak signals' of the shifts that are underway and that may give early clues, as to the new elective affinities that are coming to dominate the policy landscape. Here again, Weber foreshadows the models of complex dynamics that have come to the attention of policy sciences

in recent decades (Cairney, 2012; Colander and Kupers, 2014; Room, 2016).

For Weber as a social scientist therefore, the aim was to enable political leaders to think through the tensions, conflicts and ambiguities of the projects they were pursuing and to exercise strategic intelligence. As seen earlier, he calls for unflinching courage, mental and moral, from the political leader, articulating the alternative futures that the country faces, the trade-offs and consequences they involve, and pivoting to the new international situation. They can then be held to the ethic of responsibility; while those who would thoughtlessly follow the ethic of ultimate ends can perhaps be held in check.

Of course, even in turbulent and uncertain times, much remains more or less stable. The political struggle may involve moments and places of intense activity, but these in general unfold over time and cannot be entirely predicted. The politician must wait and watch and intervene only when he or she judges the moment is right - on the one hand watching what new elective affinities social actors discover, in this latest round of the political dance, on the other intervening to re-configure them, modifying the rhythm and the tune.

This sort of politics involves vigilance, agility and strategic imagination by the political leaders involved. It also requires passion and patience, what Weber describes at the end of *Politics as a Vocation* as 'the slow boring of strong boards'. This however is without the comfort of knowing that sooner or later, things will come right. Weber, writing at a desperate time for Germany, could as a social scientist offer no trace of such comfort or hope - what he therefore described as a 'polar night'. Nevertheless, as seen earlier, he never closes off future possibilities, springing if not from political leaders then perhaps from the streets; although even then, the question will remain, to what sorts of political ends those new social forces are attuned.

4

**Science and
politics in the
age of Brexit**

Germany in 1919 faced turbulent times. A century later, the same is true for the UK. In both cases this national anguish is set against a wider European drama.

In 1919, German politicians struggled to craft a political future, knowing that they were doing so in the shadow of Versailles and the assembling of the Great Powers. They hoped to go to Versailles as delegates of the new and democratic German republic, benefitting no less than any other delegation from the benign new international order promised by Woodrow Wilson. Clemenceau soon put an end to that hope (Macmillan, 2001). Worse than that, and deplored by Keynes, they faced a hard economic reckoning, with large-scale war reparations deliberately intended to break Germany's industrial strength (Keynes, 1919).

In the years leading up to Brexit, Eurosceptic politicians in London painted leaving the EU as a new independence, 'taking back control' (Hawkins, 2015). They were confident that the UK would quickly and easily establish the conditions for a bright economic and political future with their erstwhile partners on the Continent, who would be grateful for whatever they were offered. They soon learned better, although some proved to be slow pupils (Richards, 2019).

Weber was distressed in 1919 that Germany had become a pariah nation (G&M: 27; PaV: 118). Now it is the turn of the UK⁷. What the grandiloquent but vainglorious Kaiser had left as his legacy for Germany, the no less grandiloquent and vainglorious Brexiteers have left for the UK.

Weber has something to say to political leaders today but also to social scientists. He helps us in viewing the political conflicts over Brexit, as they reach their climax. He also helps us see how social scientists should practice their craft in this turbulent situation.

The social science of Brexit

Some social scientists have ventured to write about the UK post-Brexit. It is questionable what is the basis of such somewhat futuristic studies, when the new relationship with the EU is still not agreed, nor therefore the whole range of the relationships between the UK and the EU27, which permeate all aspects of their social, economic and political life.

Rather different are studies of the political debates which Brexit has provoked and the arguments advanced by social and economic actors, from across the country, voicing the challenges and maybe the opportunities that Brexit is liable to bring them, depending on how it works out. This sort of real time commentary gives direct insight into the strains and conflicts within the social, economic and administrative tissue of the country, and the interests affected, for good or ill. It also exposes the array of competing political and social values and identities that people espouse. Here is a goldmine for viewing the state of Britain today, blasted open by the outcome of the 2016 referendum. When Brexit has long dropped off the news agenda, researchers and students will be mining this seam for decades to come.

Some of those who are gathering such information are journalists bringing back

7. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/23/one-thing-now-unites-britons-a-sense-of-national-humiliation-brexit>

insights from local communities that otherwise have been largely been ignored⁸. Weber himself salutes the value of good journalism: ‘It is almost never acknowledged that the responsibility of the journalist is far greater, and that the sense of responsibility of every honourable journalist is, on the average, not a bit lower than that of the scholar’ (PaV: 97). Also important are those who run social surveys, tracking samples of voters⁹. The same goes for the voices of professional associations and trade bodies, pointing to the very specific supply chain problems that a no-deal Brexit would bring and the likely bottlenecks of badly needed skills.

Academic studies also focus on these process issues, as illustrated by the recent edited collection by Kelly and Pearce (2019). Some contributors take stock of the resilience of different communities, in face of the shock of Brexit. Weaker regions will struggle more, unless government pursues a vigorous industrial policy (Carter and Swinney – Chapter 8). The City of London however looks resilient, whatever form Brexit takes (Schenk- Chapter 4). Some consider the fiscal shock of Brexit after almost a decade of austerity and cut-backs in public services (Tetlow – Chapter 10); and the need for strong measures to boost economic activity if the economy is not to suffer lasting scars (Wren Lewis – Chapter 5). Keating (Chapter 16) examines the differentiated effects on the constituent nations of the UK, and the ways that Brexit could strain their interrelationships, and not just in the context of Ireland.

Such studies are crucial if we want, in the spirit of Weber, to map and understand the new elective affinities that are emerging in this turbulent context and how these are re-shaping the political map. For this, it is not enough to know how opinions are shifting between leave and remain. What is also needed is to understand the reasons for those opinions, the fears and hopes they embody and the implications for loyalties to the traditional political parties. Much is being written about the new lines of political allegiance that are being forged, around identities associated with Europe and nationhood, as against more traditional divisions of social class, although how long-lasting they will prove remains to be seen¹⁰. But other lines of division are also emerging: Bell and Gardiner, in the Kelly and Pearce collection (Chapter 13), focus on the generational gap and the likelihood that Brexit will only intensify its political salience.

This might also provide clues as to what new social settlement might heal the social divisions that have opened over the last few years and re-build confidence in political decision-makers. Those divisions have been a major factor in generating popular dissatisfaction with the ‘political elite’, even if displacing that blame onto ‘Europe’ is misconceived (Room, 2017: Ch 1). ‘Taking back control’ may persist as a slogan directed against metropolitan and European elites by those who feel left behind, but it could also be re-woven into a powerful programme for tackling the gross social inequalities that have developed in recent decades and the stripping of resources out of local communities.

8. See for example John Harris in The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/series/anywhere-but-westminster>

9. See for example John Curtice, ‘*Could A Soft Brexit Provide A Soft Landing?*’ <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/could-a-soft-brexite-provide-a-soft-landing/>

10. See: <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/a-nation-of-remainers-and-leavers-how-brexite-has-forged-a-new-sense-of-identity/>

Responsible politics - Britain

Despairing of Germany's domestic politics, Weber took refuge in celebrating the merits of the British political system. Its Parliament was his model of an effective training ground for responsible leaders exposed to public criticism; Gladstone demonstrated the power of the charismatic politician, persuading the mass of the population to make a strategic shift on the Irish question. The chaos produced in the British Parliament by Brexit, and the wild and irresponsible behavior of its champions, make Weber's judgment seem rather dated; while the continuing tendency of the Irish question, to dog British politics, is also noteworthy.

Among Brexiteer politicians, the ethic of ultimate ends has been more evident than the ethic of responsibility. This is evident in regards to the Irish border; the consequences of a no-deal Brexit for industry and for essential supplies; and the risks for EU citizens within the UK and British citizens in other EU countries. It is also evident in their denigration of 'experts' - the expertise of social scientists but also that of civil servants - who might usefully illuminate the likely consequences of the actions they propose. As has been argued with growing frequency, any future public enquiry into this whole process is likely to unearth a quite shocking chronicle of such irresponsibility¹¹.

Weber deplored how poorly Germany was equipped, to address the political challenges of his time. Political actors were ill-prepared and lacked coherent leadership. The failure of the UK to produce leaders equal to the present challenge will also no doubt be included in any such enquiry: whether this is linked for example to the elite backgrounds of too many members of the British cabinet, or the disconnect between the mass membership of the two main parties and their Parliamentary leadership¹².

More sinister however has been the use of the referendum result to minimise the role of Parliament or the need to open a debate with the people of the UK and its constituent nations, over the future relationship with the EU. It took an initiative by private citizen Gina Miller, to secure a UK Supreme Court ruling that Parliamentary approval of a withdrawal deal was indeed necessary; and the UK government has consistently insisted that the referendum result trumps any Parliamentary discussion. It has also insisted that to have any confirmatory referendum would undermine the democratic basis of that earlier exercise, even if there were strong evidence that the electorate had changed their view. It has repeatedly referred to the referendum result as expressing 'the will of the British people', requiring no further discussion with those who voted remain or indeed those who voted leave. Much of the tabloid press has endorsed that position.

This has - in intention if not yet entirely in execution - been a very British coup d'état. The 'polar night' of little comfort that Weber left for his listeners was, as we now know, soon to be populated by sinister forces from the far right. For them, the

11. Ivan Richards was the UK's ambassador to the EU until he resigned in January 2017. He has written a devastating critique of this irresponsibility, in terms which resonate with Weber's efforts to call political leaders to account, especially in times of national crisis and decisions as to the nation's place, for decades to come, in the international system (Richards, 2019).

12. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/apr/01/uk-silver-spoon-mps-will-escape-brexit-fallout-says-german-minister-michael-roth>

election of 1933 and the ascent of Hitler to the Chancellorship was a clear expression of the will of the German people, which they could take as irrevocable. The parallels should not of course be overdrawn; the situation of the UK is very different from that of Weimar Germany. Nevertheless, the foreshortening of democratic discussion, both in Parliament and in the country, place the common wealth at the mercy of powerful predators, not least through the US-UK trade deal on which Brexiteers place so much of their hope for the future.

Responsible politics - Europe

In comparison with the UK government, the political leaders of the EU27 have been a model of civility and reasoned argument. Nevertheless, the European powers have not been without their own limitations and the European political system has demonstrated major failings in face of the Euroscepticism, of which Brexit is just one expression.

In 1919, the German delegation hoped for much from the Versailles peace conference, alongside the delegations of other nations that had risen from the ashes of the Central Powers. Weber shared those hopes, expecting that the vanquished and the victors would together frame a new political order appropriate to a Continent at peace. He was shocked that the focus was instead on establishing Germany's guilt and its status as a pariah nation (PaV: 118-120).

The parallel with Keynes' view is striking. The Treaty of Versailles imposed heavy reparations on Germany and restrictions on how it might re-build its industrial base. Keynes famously condemned the Treaty in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919). This was in part on grounds of justice - and the need to build a peace in which the new and democratic Germany would feel included. It was however primarily in relation to the rebuilding of the European economy that Keynes advanced his case. Europe's national economies were highly interdependent and the German economy was central. Restoring prosperity to Europe would be impossible if Germany remained devastated.

Today the German economy is no less central to the economies of Europe. Now however the boot is on the other foot. Over the post-WW2 period, German industry has enjoyed a 'virtuous circle' of exports, investment and productivity growth. Following the global financial crisis however, and within the corset of European monetary union and discipline, the economies of the European periphery have weakened. This helped to drive a rapid increase in the number of migrants from Southern Europe, pushed northwards by cuts in public spending on education and health services at home. Many are young and highly skilled, including doctors, engineers and IT specialists. This has brought further benefit to core EU member states, in terms of a highly educated workforce trained at the expense of Southern European taxpayers (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2015).

Meanwhile those southern governments have lost the capacity to steer their economies and ensure balanced economic development and social cohesion. For the moment, austerity and sound finance remain the order of the day, imposed on the weaker members of the Eurozone through the multilateral surveillance mechanisms of the EU institutions and underpinned by German *ordo-liberalism* (Varoufakis, 2017; Lux, 2018). This is politically destabilising.

For the UK, outside the Eurozone, this may seem of less salience. Nevertheless, the EU commitment to austerity has chimed well with that enforced by successive

British governments. Both failed, in terms of ensuring social and economic justice in hard economic times. All but the wealthiest suffered; working-class communities suffered most of all. It was moreover to many of these communities that foreign workers came, increasing their sense of insecurity and fuelling the Brexit vote.

This raises the larger question of how national and European policies can support local communities, especially those facing major social and economic change. Leaving them at the mercy of global markets risks community disintegration – as much through the exit of secure jobs, as through the arrival of incomers. This argues for a proactive European policy to support social and economic development across all of its regions, going well beyond the limited regional and structural policies of the past. This would also reduce much of the ‘free movement’ that is today enforced by the loss of employment in the peripheral and older industrial regions (Room, 2019). To address these challenges and tensions will require reforms to the European project going much further than those foreseen by the European Commission, in its White Paper on the Future of Europe (European Commission, 2017). Nevertheless, European political leaders show little sign of seriously embracing such reforms, notwithstanding some modest ideas for tinkering with EU governance.

Conclusion

In despair at the proceedings in Versailles, where he was an expert adviser to the German delegation, Weber returned home. Should he now advise against accepting the treaty, even if it meant that the Allies would occupy and administer Germany as a dependent territory; or was it better for Germany to maintain its own government, albeit implementing a deal which left it as a vassal state (Eich and Tooze, 2017: 203-6)?¹³

Gerth and Mills (p. 30) seem surprised that Weber identified so strongly with Germany, notwithstanding his criticisms of much of German social and political life. Germany however was a nation state only recently established, even if the German people had long shared a common culture. Its defeat in 1918 – and the surrender of territory only recently acquired – must have made Weber and his generation feel keenly how fragile that nationhood was. And yet this nation was what had given the German people a stable ground, after centuries of fragmentation and vulnerability to the despoliations of more powerful nations.

It is therefore unsurprising that Weber has such a strong focus on political leadership at national level and the State – the German State – in particular. That however conditioned and limited his political vision in at least two respects. First, it meant that he could hardly look beyond the unhappy situation in which the German state found itself in 1919 – he himself was dead within a year. Eich and Tooze (2017: 212-5) trace how the debate within Germany was subsequently taken forward by his compatriots Meinecke and Troeltsch. In particular, they trace the latter's engagement with the new debates around the League of Nations and the scope for transnational governance that would transcend the era of rival nation states. Weber's error and limitation was simply to die too soon.

Second, it meant that Weber focused upon the State as political actor to an extent that neglected others that might also play significant roles. He acknowledged the rise of the working class movement, the unions and the SPD, but it was the failings of the State that most preoccupied him. Here too Troeltsch widened the canvas to other communities and identities in which citizens were involved; asking that the ethical choices being presented as absolutes – in Weber's words, 'which of the warring gods shall we serve?' – instead be viewed as the fashioning of novel compromises and trade-offs in an ethically more complex world.

If we are to benefit from Weber's insights a hundred years on, we need to take account of those limitations. In particular, they suggest the need to examine forms of European governance, seen not as an assembly of national states but as *sui generis*; and as involving a wider variety of social and political actors, embedded in the multiple communities of Europe and not simply gathered together at the apex. If one of the major deficits of the European Union has been its failure to ensure forms of social and economic governance orientated to the well-being of citizens and communities generally, another is its failure to ensure democratic oversight other than from that apex (European Commission, 2017).

The EU has affirmed its four freedoms and its principles of fiscal governance as immutable principles. The Brexit debate in the UK has been framed as a binary choice of leave or remain. Both ignore the need for a thoughtful debate at a

13. One resonance today is with the multilateral surveillance of Greece and the other indebted economies of the periphery, struggling to stay within the Maastricht rules on public sector deficits, their governments caught between implementing the requirements of the troika and responding to the desperate needs of their electorates (Varoufakis, 2017). There may be no army of occupation, but there is nevertheless economic occupation by the troika.

European, national and indeed local community level as to how these principles and choices can be blended into ways of living that respect the well-being of the citizens and communities involved, and build rather than undermine social cohesion. Political leaders in both the UK and the EU have failed in their responsibility to address these questions. The chaos in the Westminster Parliament may have exposed the UK to international ridicule and *Schadenfreude*; the institutional stasis within the EU is no less tragic¹⁴.

14. This paper has juxtaposed Germany in 1919 and the UK in 2019, in the context of their respective relations with Europe. No less illuminating is O'Toole's juxtaposition of Brexit and a variety of earlier versions of British – more specifically English – nationhood, as articulated in relation to Europe and the wider world. Britain alone in 1940 but victorious in 1945; Britain as global super-power but stripped of that role in the post-war period; Britain caught now between vassalage to Berlin or to Trump (O'Toole, 2019). Such imaginative juxtapositions are not, I suggest, a betrayal of rigorous social science; on the contrary, and true to Weber, they are disciplined attempts both to enlarge our political imagination, revealing the political possibilities inherent in the turbulence of the present, and to expose the fake futures conjured up by political leaders.

The background is a solid yellow color with a white grid pattern. The grid consists of two vertical lines and one horizontal line, creating a 3x2 grid of rectangular sections. The word "References" is centered in the bottom-right section of this grid.

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