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Good Bureaucracy: Max Weber and Public Administration Today

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Max Weber passed away on 14 June 1920 at the early age of 56, from consequences of the last pandemic—the Spanish Flu (Kaesler 2014: 15-16). During the last 100 years, Weber's position as one of the world's great economists, sociologists, social science theorists, and public administration scholars has been secure, if with ups and downs. I will in this short tribute focus on public administration, because Weber's eminence is probably the least contested there—not uncontested, for sure, as eminence must attract criticism. There are, even within the pages of *Max Weber Studies*, complaints that Weber has to be rediscovered—but these complaints are themselves part of the reason why this is not so, and *a fortiori* in public administration. Ups and downs yes, but Weber remains central in public administration. At a minimum, we may say that he is the most important public administration thinker of his time, even of modern public administration. One can think with or against Weber in public administration, but by and large, not really without him.

This centrality has oscillated not only in time, but also in space—he is famously said to have returned, with greater prestige, to Europe from the United States, as a kind of reimport (Rosser 2018). But even if Weber, or what he stands for, is disliked, that too is often a tribute. In the GDR, for instance, the former East Germany, research and publishing on Weber and Nietzsche was heavily curtailed, because specifically these two were seen as dangerous, providing as they did a comprehensive challenge to the Marxist world view (cf. Busch 2006).

Weber is most often associated with Weberian bureaucracy, i.e., hierarchical, career-organized, competence-based, rules- and files-based public administration of the now traditional type (when he conceived of it, this was public sector innovation), outlined by a short but powerful segment of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1922: 124-30). However, Weber was a Weberian only to the extent that Luther was a

Lutheran or Marx was a Marxist: somewhat, but certainly not totally so. In fact, Weber did not particularly like what we understand today as Weberian public administration, often used interchangeably with the term 'bureaucracy'. He just thought it was the optimal administrative form, in the sense of rationalization, for the time and society he was analyzing (Germany at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century—both for the public and for the private sector). Nobody would have been more surprised than him that his framework is still the most used—and best—a 100 years later. Indeed, it is often applied to systems for which it was never intended. But what is important is that, as in the case of Lutheranism and Marxism, both what Weber meant and for what he stands, Weber's actual thought and what 'Weberian' stands for, in public administration and otherwise, are interesting areas of scholarly inquiry.

In fact, Weberian public administration in the wider sense has been, and still is, much maligned; bureaucracy is an easy target, and whining about it is a steady feature of complex human societies which always need and automatically generate it. And Weberian public administration has its systemic faults—slowness, process-orientation, a slippery slope to authoritarian, mindless hierarchization and shirking. However, this bureaucracy is in its optimal form ethics-based, high-capacity, and motivation-driven. It is meant to be both responsible—to a state that is above and beyond particular interests –, as well as responsive—to groups and citizens, but not at the cost of the commonweal.

But neoliberal ideology never believed that this kind of civil service was real, or pretended not to. So Weberian public administration became the *bête noire* of the New Public Management (NPM). NPM transferred economic principles and management theories into the public sphere without recognizing the crucial, fundamental differences between public and private, not least as regards value creation. It was a direct reaction against what was felt to be the excesses of the Weberian public administration of the 1970s and beyond, as well as a product of fundamentalist anti-state ideology. We still stand in front of the smoldering ruins of a capable, responsible state because of the NPM onslaught, and we are still paying a high price for it. It is true that imperial civil servants of the Sir Humphrey Appleby—of *Yes, Minister* and *Prime Minister* fame—type exist that do not act in the public interest, and they exist a lot. There are plenty of incompetent civil servants as well, and the worst are those who combine both features. But the responsible, responsive civil service of the Weberian

type existed and exists, and if there is an alternative to it in its best form, it would be interesting to learn what that could be.

There are valuable contributions of NPM, such as citizen participation, co-production, a managerial orientation, and a few more. Society has changed since 1920, too, even if public administration not as much with it as we often like to believe (Drechsler and Kattel 2019). These aspects have been distilled into an updated model of Weberian public administration that the late Christopher Pollitt and Geert Bouckaert have called the Neo-Weberian State (NWS; 2004: 96-102). Importantly, the NWS starts with the classic Weberian variant and incorporates the lessons learned from NPM—not the other way round.

Regarding the other side of the traditional political spectrum, approaches that rail against Weberian public administration and any form of civil service, especially central civil service, from the perspective of Community Action, the Commons, or other forms of grassroots, bottom-up decision-making, need to remember that Weberian bureaucracy—with all its faults—is also something like an insurance against the loudest, the richest, the most powerful in society dominating the discourse and gaining their rents. And sometimes central coordination is necessary, as is a cadre of well-motivated, competent civil servants that can actually accomplish such feats—not least for the moonshots at the center of mission-oriented innovation policy today (Mazzucato 2017). However we decide to manage the transition to a CO_2-neutral world—via Green Growth or Post-Growth—that process will have to be implemented by competent, motivated, and yes, Weberian civil servants.

This leads us to three aspects of Weberian public administration that are of utmost relevance for 2020 and beyond.

First, in innovation policy, the most successful systems, perhaps all successful ones, are marked by agile stability, as Rainer Kattel, Erkki Karo and I have been arguing (Kattel, Drechsler and Karo 2021; 2019). Innovation bureaucracies are necessary because no policy implements itself, and innovation bureaucracy ecosystems need to be calibrated towards meeting the needs of the specific situation within the national innovation process, sometimes reacting in an agile manner, sometimes giving the stability the system needs. It is not the point of an innovation bureaucracy to imitate the kind of innovative organization of the day that the private sector sports; rather, it may be wise to fulfill those needs not covered by the latter. Stability is always associated with Weber; agility, however, more often with Schumpeter—yet

Weber actually theorized both approaches as well as their interplay, which is why we call these types Weber I and Weber II.

Second, as I have just argued, in line with this train of thought, in this journal (Drechsler 2020), it was actually Weber who, in his book on Confucianism, recognized why the Chinese empire could be as economically successful as it was, dominating the global economy across many centuries, even though its Neo-Confucian bureaucracy was geared towards stability. (The answer is the concept of the Mandate of Heaven which provided the mandarins on all levels, up to the emperor, with an overall, severe performance indicator of which economic success was a key part.)

What is important in today's context is that Weber was very careful to think in categories of non-Western civilization and Non-Western Public Administration. I would argue that overall, he was not a one-size-fits-all Western imperialist, although he was certainly not free from orientalism, in line with his times. But he did acknowledge his own deficiencies, yet did not use those as an excuse not to study cultures beyond what he recognized to be the Western model. For him, Confucian public administration was the most similar model to 'his', although based on a different mindset and thus with different effects regarding Capitalism. Because of this, Weber has remained a focus of scholarly attention in all of his fields especially in Asia, and many of the conferences planned for the centennial of his death were actually scheduled to take place in mainland China.

Third, it was often surmised that the rise of Information and Communication Technology, the ascendancy of e-Governance and what we call digital transformation, would lead us to either to NPM—or at least to some specific form of digital-era governance (Dunleavy *et al.* 2005). Not so: in fact, what we see is that e-governance has been implemented the best and most successful mostly in those countries that at their core have a Weberian bureaucracy, now again in the wider sense. Some of them, such as Finland, seem NPM-like but underneath are very Weberian; others, such as Singapore, are Weberian in that wider sense, while uniting a well-working Westminster bureaucracy with Confucian public administration. Others again, such as New Zealand, which used to be the poster child of NPM, have long learned their lesson and are now again Weberian. I would go so far to say that there is no country today that is more Weberian in a functional, ethical sense than New Zealand, and that this is part of the reason of why that country is doing so very well (see Ideasroom 2019), including the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The latter is an observation that, at least at the time of writing, can be generalized. Overall, the countries that have dealt with the crisis in a good way are the Confucian and the directly Weberian ones, from Taiwan (even if this is changing), South Korea and Vietnam to Germany, that are built on administrative competence and state resources (Mazzucato and Quaggiotto 2020). In contrast, those countries where administrative capacity has been dismantled by NPM, first and foremost the United States and the United Kingdom, are failing. This is of course not the only reason for a good pandemic response, nor is it apparently sufficient. It is also true that many East Asian countries were successful because they were prepared due to the SARS epidemic and its response, but the quality of that response, and institutional memory, rested on a high-value, high-capacity civil service. It would therefore hardly be frivolous to say that today, to live in a place with Weberian public administration or not may be a matter of life and death.

Weber, as a person and as a thinker, was not perfect and beyond reproach. Nobody is. And Weberian public administration, normatively and empirically, is not the only framework through which to understand the public sector. Yet these are caveats that do not distract from the crucial importance of Weber's public administration theory and its legacy.

June 2020 not the best month for statutes, and Weber never had one anyway. But he has a better *Denkmal*—as the epitaph to Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul's cathedral reads: 'If you search for a monument, look around you'. We still live in a Weberian world, and there is no reason to think this will fade anytime soon. The 100th anniversary of Max Weber's death reminds us to critically and constructively engage with his thought, as his thought remains one of the best frameworks to approach the challenges of the next 100 years to come, intellectually as well as for the improvement of one of the key features of human existence today.

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