

**Max Weber and Civil Society:
An Introduction to Max Weber on Voluntary Associational Life*
(*Vereinswesen*)**

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Abstract

Civil society is a much neglected theme in making sense of Max Weber's political thought. Introducing Weber's 1910 speech on voluntary associational life (*Vereinswesen*), this essay aims at a reconstruction of his vision of civil society. To be more specific, it attempts to embed his discussion of civil society in this speech in the conceptual-historical, biographical, and intertextual contexts, while exploring its meaning in the light of his later political writings. Thus understood, the essay concludes, *Vereinswesen* reveals Weber's entrenched interest in socio-cultural foundation for a vibrant public citizenship for modern politics.

I

On 20 October 1910, Max Weber addressed the first convention of the newly founded German Sociological Society (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*) in Frankfurt am Main. Weber was treasurer of the new Society, and it was in this capacity that he gave this speech as a business report (*Geschäftsbericht*). Thematically, the speech proposes a collective investigation into the German 'public sphere' (*Öffentlichkeit*) and, in particular, the influence of the press (*Zeitungswesen*) and voluntary associations (*Vereinswesen*) on the 'making of modern man'.¹ The German original is available in two versions – one as a transcript of the actual speech, and the other as a preliminary memo. The transcribed version was published in *Verhandlungen des deutschen Soziologentages I* (1910) and reprinted in Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (1924; hereafter GASS). The memo submitted to the managing committee of the Society

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1. For the importance of this speech in understanding Weber's philosophical anthropology, see Hennis (1988: 55-58).

in April 1909 was never published and can be found in the archives of Ferdinand Tönnies and Werner Sombart. The first half of this speech on *Zeitungswesen* has been translated into English twice: one is based on the preliminary memo, the other on the actual speech.² My translation of the second half on *Vereinswesen* is from the transcribed version that can be found in the *Verhandlungen* and *GASS*.

In *Vereinswesen*, connecting his earlier writings on religion to his later works on politics, Weber makes clear his interest in what is now popularly called 'civil society'—a theme rarely articulated quite so explicitly in his other writings. The tenor of his comments is rather surprising, because it sits awkwardly with the conventional reading of Weber's political thought as an embodiment of turn-of-the-century liberal despair and a prefiguration of the later rise of National Socialism.³ Whatever the source of his allegedly authoritarian stance—whether it be rooted in a typical bourgeois ambivalence toward working-class enfranchisement, the long-held German desire for imperial power and the nation state as its instrument, or an aristocratic distaste for democratic mediocrity and Darwinian elitism à la Nietzsche—Weber's political thought is often seen to involve deep tension with more mainstream liberal democratic values. From this perspective, some argue that his advocacy of a plebiscitary presidency has an uncanny affinity with the Nazi *Führerprinzip*. Others contend more moderately that Weber was representative of German bourgeois liberalism, or a failure thereof, due to his lack of principled conviction in liberal political and social practices, if not liberal formal institutions and abstract values.⁴ The significance of Weber's 1910 speech becomes apparent against this background, for *Vereinswesen*, read in conjunction with his early essays on America and later political writings, reveals his thoughts on civil society as a sociocultural context that can foster robust public citizenship. *Vereinswesen* does not answer all critical charges, yet certainly provides a response by incorporating some of the usual suspects in his political repertoire (e.g. the inevitability of minority rule) into a discussion of his vision of pluralistically organized civil society.

For such a thematic thread to surface clearly, however, *Vereinswesen* needs to be understood in its proper biographical, intellectual and textual context, since it is after all a speech and research proposal underpinned by value-free restraints. In terms of context, the following introduction will focus on the situation surrounding Weber's participation and later

2. Weber (1998) and Weber (1979). For more textual details surrounding *Zeitungswesen*, see Hennis (1998).

3. Mommsen (1984); Aron (1971); Marcuse (1971). For more balanced evaluation, see Breiner (1996) and Beetham (1974).

4. See, for instance, Praeger (1981).

resignation from the Society, his complex encounter with America, and the discursive terrain around the concept of civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) in his contemporary Germany. In terms of themes, it will highlight Weber's concepts of 'sectlike society' (*Sektengeseellschaft*) 'man of vocation' (*Berufsmensch*), and the political as they bear upon his vision of civil society. Recast in this way, I hope, *Vereinswesen* will help illuminate this much-neglected theme of civil society in making sense of Weber's political thought.

II

To say the least, Weber was instrumental in founding the Society. In addition to his personal connections to Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel and Werner Sombart, who became co-chairs of the new Society, Weber's idea of value freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) was to be one of the ideological cornerstones, which found its way into the founding charter. In conscious opposition to the more conservative *Verein für Sozialpolitik* with which Weber had a long association, the new Society was supposed to represent those outside the academic establishment (whom Weber called *refusés*), an interdisciplinary approach, and 'modest' empirical research (as opposed to the philosophizing cultural criticism then popular among German social scientists). Seeing the chance to realize many of his scholarly ideals, Weber accepted the post of treasurer.

Weber's association with the new Society lasted barely two years, however. His withdrawal seems to have been prompted mainly by the internal disagreement over the principle of value freedom. Despite its statutory inscription, some of the participants in the convention explicitly rejected the principle of value freedom and vehemently injected into the scholarly proceedings what Weber considered to be personal values. In the second convention held in Berlin in 1912, for example, Weber's characteristically volcanic temper exploded in the course of discussing Paul Barth's nationalist presentation of the concept of nationality:

This is perhaps the last sociology convention I will participate in. But as long as I do, I will see to it that the separation of discussion of practical questions and the treatment of theoretical problems cultivated here is strictly observed, that separation which brought about the branching off of the Society from the *Verein*.⁵

Indeed, the Berlin convention proved to be his last sociology convention. Coupled with the distaste for personal 'exhibitionism' of many of the academic personalities he had to deal with, Weber withdrew from

5. *Frankfurter Zeitung* (22 October 1912); 3. *Morgenblatt* quoted in Liebersohn (1988: 116).

most activities associated with the Society by 1912, following his resignation from the executive position in January 1911. Weber's withdrawal could also be explained by the fact that he was overextended at this time; he was busy with the psychophysiological study of industrial labour, while also beginning editorial work on the *Grundriß der Sozialökonomik*, in which *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* would eventually appear. In addition to this, Marianne implies that Weber's frustration over the collapse of his ambitious project for *Zeitungswesen* and *Vereinswesen*, due to a shortage of financial means and a lack of support within the Society, had to do with his eventual disenchantment with the Society.⁶

Thematically, a more interesting context for this speech would be Weber's complex encounter with America. For his comments on *Vereinswesen* translated here make clear that civil society is synonymous with America—according to Weber, it is the 'land of associations [*Vereinsland*] par excellence'. Making sense of this statement requires a brief detour into the biographical context of his visit to America in 1904.

Six years before this speech, Weber had visited America as a member of the German academic delegation to the St Louis World Exposition. Weber's deep interest in America, dating from his early childhood, is now generally recognized.⁷ Unlike some of his colleagues, who viewed all things American with old-world condescension, Weber sustained a more nuanced interest in America throughout his life as well as during this trip. He published his personal recollections of America in a series of articles in 1906. *Kirchen und Sekten in Nordamerika* was published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (April) and later, in an essentially identical but more elaborated version, in the *Christliche Welt* (June). His later comments on America found a more theoretically developed form in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, and its most elaborate version in the 'Protestant Sect' chapter in the *Religionssoziologie*, which he was editing at the time of his death in 1920. Several discussions of these American texts exist, and, for the present purpose, it is sufficient to note that his interest centred on two points.⁸ First, religion fascinated him greatly, although the newly emergent secular modernism of America did not escape his attention either. Secondly, it was what he called the 'organizing forces of religious spirit' (*organisatorischen Kräfte religiösen Geistes*) that sustained his interest in America above all. Applying his sect-church dichotomy thus, he dubbed America a 'sectlike society' (*Sektengesellschaft*) in 1906, a neolo-

6. For more biographical details during this period, see Weber (1926: 425-30). For an analysis of Weber's activities in the Society, Libersohn (1988: 111-20).

7. Roth (2001); Diggins (1996); Rollman (1995); Mommsen (1974).

8. For Weber's American writings, see Scaff (1998), Kalberg (1997), and Alexander and Loader (1989).

gism that seems to capture the essence of his interest.⁹ In this 1910 speech, too, when he claims that the archetype of voluntary associations is the 'sect', the statement is immediately preceded by the assertion that America is its archetype.

'America as a sectlike society' occupied an enduring corner in Weber's political imagination. As late as November 1918, for instance, upon being asked his opinion of the political tasks facing a defeated Germany, Weber replied:

Foremost among these, too, is the restoration of that moral 'decency' [*Anständigkeit*] which, on the whole, we had and which we lost in the war – our most grievous loss. Massive problems of education, then. The method: only the 'club' in the American sense [*amerikanische Klubwesen*] (and associations of every kind based on selective choice of members), starting with childhood and youth, no matter for what purpose.¹⁰

Two themes stand out in this terse, yet unambiguous, template for the postwar reform of German politics. First is his insistence on the pressing need for associational pluralism and its critical role in moral characterology; the second is America as the model for such a civic educational project. Here we can detect the presence of a coherent agenda that has informed the long history of liberal political imagination. Linking civic education, civil society and America is hardly a novel idea; Alexis de Tocqueville's fame rests upon it. More puzzling is the fact that it was Weber who so expressed it, and not merely in passing – as we see in his persistent interest in the sectlike society-cum-America.

III

Despite this unambiguous focus on civil society, however, Weber chose not to use the term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in this speech or, to my knowledge, anywhere else. Although the term was not widely used at that time, it is worth considering why he preferred terms like 'bourgeois society' (*Bürgertum*) or simply 'the social' (*gesellschaftliche*) in describing what we would now call civil society.

9. Weber (1906): For an alternative rendering of the term, 'sectarian society' and 'society of sects' were also considered. 'Sectarian society', however, was quickly abandoned for its negative connotation in English, since Weber certainly wanted to cast *Sektengesellschaft* in positive light. 'Society of sects' was rejected after some deliberation, since it was less (religious) sects per se that Weber was interested in than (secular) associations that nonetheless shared certain sect-like principles. The hyphen was dropped to follow recent editorial conventions. I especially thank David Chalcraft and Sam Whimster for their generous consultation.

10. Mommsen (1984: 323); Baumgarten (1964: 536); Weber (1926: 647).

German use of the term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* was heavily overshadowed by its conceptualization by Hegel and Marx. Hegel maintained that civil society, which he located between the private family and the public state, contained two heteronomous instances 'in addition to basic legal institutions' – a 'system of needs', a purely economic sphere of market activities, and a 'system of integration', a social sphere of associations and corporations. While the former was driven by immanent conflict of private interests, Hegel considered the latter responsible for social harmony through the socialization of otherwise recalcitrant individuals.¹¹ This conceptual tension between two modes of civil society was resolved by Hegel through the invocation of the bureaucratic state. The state for Marx was merely an executive apparatus of civil society under bourgeois class hegemony, and this tension had no easy resolution. He took over from Hegel the concept of civil society with renewed emphasis on its economic aspect with a twist – it was now seen as a depository of false class ideologies perpetuated through constant socialization and dictated in the last instance by the economic logic of market and class interests. The system of integration was now subordinated to the system of needs as a thinly-guised veil for class exploitation, making mediating function of the state hopeless and total revolution all but inevitable.¹²

Another source of the term is the Nietzschean antinomy of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. This antinomy provided a conceptual and rhetorical tool with which turn-of-the-century German literati might articulate the German *Sonderweg* vis-à-vis English and French trajectories. This view sought to give a more definite form to German identity by creating the 'West' as an Other invested with all the perceived discontents of modernity. According to the so-called 'Ideas of 1914', its most flamboyant political manifesto, the 'West' signified a shallow, secular, mechanical and materialist civilization that contrasted sharply with the spiritual depth of Germanic culture. Once refashioned in terms of *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*, *Zivilisation* was identified with the quintessentially modern realm of atomized and materialistic individuals lacking a harmonious whole—the source of all malaise associated with the revolutionary social transformation that was taking place in Germany. By contrast, a *Gemeinschaft-cum-Kultur* stood for everything not modern in such a reading: family, home, church, neighborhood, community, race, nation, or anything that evoked stability, security and congeniality.¹³

Weber was of course familiar with the Tönniesian permutation of these Nietzschean categories and their popular meaning, and sought to dissoci-

11. See Hegel (1991).

12. See Marx and Engels (1970).

13. See Elias (1994: 1-28) and Riedel (1976: 839-59).

ate his vision of civil society from these more negative connotations.¹⁴ That this antinomy was unsustainable was clear to Weber, who saw that those very social forces German literati of his time considered as inimical to modern *Gesellschaft* – Protestant religious values as embodied in the church, the romantic ideal of *Bildung*, the Prussian bureaucracy and its moral self-glorification, and even junkerdom – were in fact the main protagonists of the modernization process that was rapidly undermining the supposed foundations of *Gemeinschaft*. Thus, for instance, he isolated the Protestant ethic as the womb of modernity, and bureaucracy as its tomb, while the Junkers were accused of providing the main driving force behind the rapid commercialization of East Prussian agriculture and consequent disintegration of the perceived peasant *Gemeinschaft* there. This connection of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* to *Gesellschaft-cum-Zivilisation*, together with all its negative baggage, was unacceptable to Weber.

While Weber could not use this negative conceptualization of civil society *pace* Nietzsche and Tönnies, he could neither have used the term in a Marxian sense lest his vision of civil society be imbued with an unduly economic tone. As Weber put it in *Vereinswesen*, he was interested in the social, that which could not be reduced simply to economic factors and which, inversely, determined the economic in some instances. This is exemplified by his frequent use of an anecdote about the social regulation of credit-worthiness in America. In this overwhelming emphasis on the social, Weber could have allowed his vision of civil society to be framed in Hegelian terms, yet the problem there was no less. For the social aspect of Hegel's civil society was primarily concerned with socialization towards a harmonious integration of society, and yet it was precisely this Hegelian function of civil society that Weber found most problematic in Germany. As we will see in the following section, Weber's civil society was to be, on the contrary, a sphere of struggle, competition and contestation. Weber also disagreed with Hegel's characterization of civil society on another score. The tension within Hegel's civil society was not only functional, but also temporal; the system of integration was inspired by feudal corporatism and its remnants, while the system of needs was resolutely modern in origin. By contrast with Hegel's system of integration, Weber's vision of civil society was firmly modernist in its genealogy. Thus he claims in *Vereinswesen* that 'the archetype of voluntary association is the [Protestant] sect'. In other words, modern civil society was born in the aftermath of the Reformation and the politico-social upheaval it brought about in social organization. It had little to do with Germanic feudalism. It was rather predicated upon the voluntary will and reason of individuals and a clear collective purpose agreed

14. See, for example, Weber (1979: 22).

upon by such individuals. It is little wonder that Weber's archetypical civil society was America, a society without a feudal past.

Although decidedly modernist, Weber's genealogy also contrasts sharply with an alternative modernist genealogy – for instance, Jürgen Habermas's 'French genealogy' in which voluntary associations are imagined after Enlightenment salons and clubs. Here Weber sided decisively with Georg Jellinek's genealogy of modern liberal institutions and rejected this modernist alternative. Put very simply, the *causa differentia* can be traced back to the question of discipline versus communication. For Weber, civil society is *not* a site in which identity is safely assumed (and set aside) and what matters is public arbitration of different ideas and interests through rational communication and public deliberation. Rather, it is a purposefully (trans)formative site in which certain moral characters and civic virtues are cultivated through discipline. We will discuss this point in the following section. Suffice it to say for the moment that, neither 'late modern' nor 'pre-modern', Weber's America-cum-civil-society operated within a unique conceptual space delimited on the one side by the French Enlightenment and on the other by Germanic feudalism.

IV

This last point concerning discipline provides the key to understanding Weber's sustained interest in various forms of voluntary associations and civil society in general. In *Vereinswesen*, as in the methodological writings, Weber sums up the moral character he deems to be ideal in terms of *Persönlichkeit*. His comments on the vocation of the politician and of the scientist turn upon this conception of a 'charismatic individual', or simply a 'man of vocation' (*Berufsmensch*). Whatever their title, the traits of this ideal moral character are predicated upon a sober confrontation with reality that facilitates an understanding of the responsibility of one's action and an unflinching value conviction in full knowledge of its lack of absolute certainty. Once formed, this empowered self refuses to turn away from the world despite a recognition of the uncertain ground of one's action, participating in it so that it might be transformed according to one's beliefs, no matter how subjective. In other words, faced with the debilitating fragmentation of values, a predicament that defines the modern condition, Weber prescribes a characterology that can deliberately (re)couple the ethic of conviction and of responsibility. Weber found the archetype of this kind of attitude in the Puritan 'innerworldly asceticism' in which self-knowledge and discipline are key virtues.¹⁵

15. Hennis (1988; 1996) and Goldman (1988; 1992).

Given this existentialist aspect of Weber's moral psychology, one would suspect a Nietzschean individual of solipsistic defiance in the man of vocation. As a keen sociologist, however, Weber does not fail to notice the social dimension of this Augustinian individualism, and he identifies the Protestant sects and their secularized form as its sociocultural breeding ground. The irony Weber sees in the formation of this kind of recalcitrant defiance is that it can only be fostered within tightly organized, small-scale voluntary associational life governed by ethical conformism. For this social mechanism to fulfil such a function, Weber believes that the sect principles of rigorous selection of members and strict supervision of daily activities coupled with a constant threat of expulsion have to be retained even by modern secular voluntary associations. Consciously opposing the ideal types of bureaucratic church and ascriptive communities into which one is born, Weber wanted to highlight the voluntarism and purposefulness of these associations. Harsh as he may sound, Weber is not alone in liberal political theory; contemporary liberal political theory still emphasizes 'gatekeeping' as a critical factor in robust civil society.¹⁶ Weber's civil society is composed of voluntary associations implicitly designed to discipline and (trans)form its members for active worldly engagement and participation.¹⁷

It is from this theoretical perspective that Weber finds German civil society unsatisfactory, despite its apparent vigour. In *Vereinswesen*, for instance, the various aesthetic sects, traditional choral societies, and even Freud's German followers are lumped together and given varying degrees of critical attention. For Weber suspects that they all contribute to the formation of personalities likely to renounce this world and withdraw into a purely private sphere of mystic contemplation (as in the Stefan George circle), or into conformism bred by congenial sociability (as in neighbourhood choral societies), or into a quietism based upon mental hygiene and emotional sublimation (as in Freudian sects). These all fail to discipline the individual citizen who readily adopts a principled, and even defiant, moral stance characterized by passionate conviction and a sober sense of responsibility—the virtues, in short, that characterize the man of vocation. What German civil society lacks is less a sufficient number of institutions of socialization than the guidance that this kind of civic education provides. Thus, he laments in *Vereinswesen*, 'quantity does not go hand in hand with quality' in Germany.¹⁸

16. See, for instance, Rosenblum (1998: 64).

17. For more, see Kim (2000: 203-208).

18. For more on Weber's use of *Vereinswesen* as a critique of Wilhelmine political culture, see Kim (forthcoming, 2002).

For a sectlike civil society to be reinvigorated, Weber suggests in his later political writings that the elements of struggle need to be amplified both 'within' and 'without' – a theme that already reverberates in *Vereinswesen*. In other words, associations should combine constant internal competition among members for the leadership position with an active external contestation against the associations of differing worldviews. Foreshadowing these points, *Vereinswesen* calls attention to the manner in which leadership is formed inside the voluntary associations, and what competition between associations, especially political parties, does to the individual members. Political parties count indeed among the the most salient components of Weber's civil society; he defines 'the essence of politics' as 'conflict, the recruitment of allies and a voluntary following', while political parties are associations 'directed at voluntary recruitment'.¹⁹ Political parties, especially ideological parties, are important for Weber since they present a selection process for leaders under whose direction the associations in turn become a medium for group dynamism in modern political society. The alternative in Weber's view is the triumph of a monolithic bureaucracy in both public and private spheres. Fully understanding that even these voluntary associations are not immune from bureaucratization, Weber nonetheless endorses a vigorous civil society to the extent that associational pluralism and the consequent elements of struggle can arrest the social petrification brought about by a bureaucratic Leviathan.²⁰

Thus articulated, we recognize in Weber's civil society a singularly *political* model. In its preoccupation with group struggle and competition, it is sharply opposed to a communitarian social model which emphasizes socialization toward social harmony and integration; it is no less opposed to a liberal-judicial model that is centred on a mechanism for the rational coordination and arbitration of the manifest interests of individuals.²¹ In the face of what he saw as the inevitable hegemony of bureaucracy, Weber proposed a unique model of civil society by which he strove to imbue the late modern 'iron cage' once again with vibrancy, enterprise and dynamism.

V

Read in its proper context, *Vereinswesen* permits a rare glimpse into Weber's vision of civil society conceived primarily as a site of civic

19. Weber (1988: 455, 481-83).

20. See Weber (1988: 614-15).

21. See Mouffe (1993) for this conceptual typology of civil society.

education for robust public citizenship. This political project required a proliferation of various voluntary associations at every level from 'bowling clubs' to political parties. They should resemble a secularized form of Protestant sect organization, establishing a high threshold for membership so that the man of vocation might be cultivated through discipline. No less important for this disciplinary mechanism was the constant competition within each association and contestation between associations that played out in the public sphere. This would enable individual members to remain alert to the purposive activities of their associations, which in turn would facilitate their discipline. One might say that here Weber imagined a social mechanism based on ethical conformism which nonetheless worked towards the cultivation of non-conformist individualism. In inaugurating this political project of civil society, one might even say, Weber tried to recouple the Machiavellian antinomy of statecraft and soulcraft.²²

By foregrounding the vision of pluralistically organized civil society, while making connections to some of the most salient themes in his major writings, *Vereinswesen* makes clear the significance of this theme for Weber and reveals it as one of the guiding threads of his political imagination.

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22. See Kim (2000: 214-19).

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