

Joining the Underdogs? Weber's Critique of the Social Democrats in Wilhelmine Germany

Max Weber's views about the character and role of the German Social Democratic Party in Wilhelmine Germany are of considerable interest in many respects. He considered the Social Democratic Party to be one of the most advanced examples of a bureaucratic mass party of the type which in his opinion was about to become dominant in modern parliamentary government. More importantly, he was interested in the Social Democrats as a political party which had tied its political fortunes to a considerable degree to the Marxist theory of historical materialism. But paramount in his views about the Social Democrats were considerations regarding the concrete role they played within Wilhelmine politics. Above all he concentrated on one issue, namely whether the policies of the Social Democrats were likely to promote or retard a democratization of the political system. In his opinion the middle classes and the working classes ought to operate jointly in the political arena in order to put an end to the rule of the aristocracy and its fellow travellers within the governmental bureaucracy. Weber considered this to be necessary not only because he believed in the superior qualities of democracy but also for nationalist reasons; only an Imperial Germany whose policies enjoyed the full support of all sections of society including the working classes would be able to play a major role in future world politics. It is this viewpoint which was paramount in Weber's assessment of the German Social Democrats.

It should be noted to begin with that Weber never hesitated to declare that his own views were conditioned not least by his own personal class status; he repeatedly stated that he was a member of the bourgeoisie, even in the literal sense of this term, since his wife Marianne drew on income from her co-

ownership of a small family owned textile mill in Westphalia.¹ None the less his views on Marx and Marxism were perhaps never quite as biased as he himself was ready to admit, as was shown above in some detail though a radical critic of Marxism, his own sociology was in no small degree developed in a perpetual intellectual debate with Karl Marx and his theories.²

Indeed, I have already demonstrated that Weber integrated important elements of Marx's theories into his own 'interpretative sociology'. The ideal-typical assessment of the capitalist system in its pure form which we find in *Economy and Society* in many ways parallels Marx's own analysis half a century earlier. The 'formal rationality' of fully developed capitalism is not all that far removed from Marx's notion of the 'alienation' of the workers as a result of their disappropriation of the means of production. Weber described just as Marx did, and in a similar language, the subjection of workers to a strict discipline of work in the factory. Work contracts entered into on the basis of the principle of 'formally free labour' are, according to Weber, tantamount to subjection to the domination of entrepreneurs. The modern industrial system is based just as much as older socio-political systems - and possibly even to a larger degree - on the 'domination of man over man', and the fact that it is formally based upon free decisions in the market-place rather than on any kind of forced labour does not make it less so.

These few remarks may indicate that a large area of consensus is to be found in the theoretical thought of Marx and Weber, as far as their assessment of the nature of the modern industrial system is concerned. However, while there are striking similarities in their *diagnosis* of the evils of capitalism, Weber did not in the least consider Marx's suggestions for how to cure these evils to be valid. In his opinion, they were neither theoretically sound nor a suitable programme for practical political activity in advanced industrial societies. On the other hand, Weber was prepared to pay tribute to Marxism in its original form as propagated by Marx from 1847 onwards as a heroic, albeit utopian creed which in the first place had helped the working class to establish itself as an independent political force in a society which utterly rejected workers' claims to a fair share of the social product and to a decent living. Weber considered the *Communist Manifesto* as well as the so-called *Katastrophen-theorie*, which predicted an inevitable and indeed early end to capitalism, as prophecies of considerable suggestive power. In his view they provided the backbone of the early fervent, semi-religious socialist creeds; they believed that theirs was a fight for a just new society and that victory was not far off.

By contrast, however, Weber found that in his own day this socialist creed had deteriorated into a sort of self-perpetuating mechanistic ideology which assumed that history was on the side of the working classes and that they would

be swept to victory by the automatic operation of the laws of economic development. In his view socialist ideology had become a mere ritual of abuse directed at all the social institutions within capitalist society, which were summarily dismissed as bourgeois without any serious attempt to assess their true nature. In other words, what in the early days had been a heroic creed had become merely radical rhetoric devoid of any rational assessment of social reality. This refers of course in particular to the Social Democrats in imperial Germany. To put it in a nutshell: the Social Democrats had failed to get rid of the ideological modes of thought typical of a political sect but entirely unsuitable for a political party. Hence they were incapable of facing up to present-day reality. Accordingly they were unable and unwilling to work for the improvement of the workers' lot on the basis of a realistic assessment of existing conditions. The opportunities for moving forward in specific areas by means of political alliances with the progressive sections of the bourgeoisie were therefore ignored.

Already in his inaugural lecture of 1895 Weber had argued, though characteristically as an aside, that the German working class was in no way ready for political leadership, however advanced it had become in economic terms: 'Politically the German working class is infinitely less mature than is maintained by a clique of journalists who aspire to monopolize its leadership.'³ It was above all the lack of any sense of power which he considered the most critical deficiency of the German working class, in marked contrast, as he pointed out, to the British and French working classes; in this respect he referred to the support given to British imperialism by important sections of the British working class who allegedly fully understood the need for empirical and power politics, whereas their German counterparts excelled in a doctrinaire anti-colonialism. For the leaders of the Social Democratic Party – 'those declassed bourgeois' – he felt little more than contempt: 'They are pathetic experts in political triviality: they lack the deep instinct for power that a class which is called upon to take over the political leadership in a society ought to possess.'⁴

Since the turn of the century Weber's imperialist convictions were no longer as powerful a determining factor in his opinion of the Social Democrats. But, in principle, his views had changed little. In his opinion the Social Democratic Party had in no way substantially matured. It continued to pursue an orthodox Marxist strategy devoid of any real revolutionary spirit, a strategy which totally relied upon the mechanistic process of history to eventually bring victory. As a matter of fact, the revolutionary propaganda of the Social Democrats was not followed up by revolutionary deeds; instead they were content to denounce the existing social order in vitriolic language. It was seen as totally unjust, wretched and bound to collapse in due course, for the gradual unfolding of the capitalist

process of production and its immanent contradictions would dig capitalism's own grave. In his view this mental attitude was merely a variety of petty-bourgeois thinking that was guided above all by the idea to be on the winning side, come what may. To put it bluntly, Social Democratic agitation amounted to merely a verbal radicalism which stood in sharp contrast to what may be termed the 'propaganda by deed' of anarchism.

Between 1906 and 1909 Weber discussed these issues at considerable length with Roberto Michels, who had attracted his interest as a young scholar of remarkable gifts notably because he was a devoted left-wing socialist with strong syndicalist leanings and a convert from a wealthy bourgeois family.⁵ Weber took considerable interest in Michels's work on socialism and socialist parties and it is significant that Michels published widely in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, although he could not at that time be considered as an established scholar. Michels's famous book *Political Parties* (which was based largely upon an analysis of the German Social Democrats) originated in a series of essays all of which had been published in the *Archiv*.

Michels belonged to a dissident group of left-wing socialists in Marburg with moderate anarchist views; though a convinced socialist, he soon became a bitter critic of the German Social Democratic Party. This may be attributed partly to the fact that he felt ostracized by the party, being an intellectual from a bourgeois background. Indeed, Michels was never fully at home with the German Social Democrats, even though he was a party member until 1907. His own passionately moralist approach to socialism as an ethical duty, which was combined, as it were, with a deep-rooted belief in fundamentalist democratic principles, was not shared by the bulk of party members. Neither were his leanings towards anarchist thought well received in a party in which pragmatic views prevailed and in which solidarity was considered obligatory. Admittedly, Michels was a moral fundamentalist (*Gesinnungsethiker*) and a syndicalist rather than an ordinary socialist. Both of these aspects of Michels's personality fascinated Max Weber. In some ways he saw in Michels an *alter ego* following paths which he forbade himself to enter upon, but which he would none the less have liked to follow. Hence a lifelong, asymmetrical partnership developed between the two men.⁶

Weber's and Michels's initial assessments of the German Social Democrats were not all that different. In 1906 Weber attended the Social Democratic Party Congress at Mannheim. His account to Michels of the proceedings was utterly devastating:

Mannheim was very depressing. I heard Bebel and Legien refer at least ten times to 'our weakness'. Furthermore this extremely petty-bourgeois demeanour, all these complacent publicans' faces, the lack of dynamism and resolution, the inability to decide in

favour of a 'rightist policy', as the way for a 'leftist policy' is blocked, or at least appears to be so. . . . These gentlemen don't frighten anyone any more.⁷

With considerable acuteness Weber observed that under the prevailing conditions the German Social Democratic Party was not a political force that could be taken seriously. It was neither prepared to opt for a constructive reformist policy nor willing to embark upon genuine revolutionary struggle against the established order, whatever its revolutionary rhetoric might suggest. The Social Democrats might have found considerable support for a reformist policy among the progressive sections of the liberal parties. This would, however, have required abandoning the policy of 'the revolutionizing of minds', that is to say, concentrating upon agitation to paint a rosy picture of the socialist revolution to come, while doing next to nothing to actually improve the workers' lot and not opting for a genuine revolutionary strategy, as envisaged at the time by Rosa Luxemburg, for instance. Weber was appalled to see that the party was unable to agree on any realistic political strategy, and that the Social Democrats indulged instead in a mixture of self-pity and utopian expectation that the capitalist system would eventually collapse virtually without their own help, resulting in a victory for socialism without a single shot having been fired.

According to Weber this was utter nonsense. In his view there were only two strategies open to the Social Democrats:

- 1 A reformist strategy which should aim at attaining gradual reforms in social and constitutional matters. This would require putting an end to the meaningless repetition of ritualistic formulas about the socialist *Endziel* (final goal).
- 2 Revolutionary struggle against the established system with no holds barred and regardless of the immediate consequences for those engaged in it. This was tantamount to a radical *gesinnungsethisch* (moral fundamentalist) approach, which, though perhaps impracticable, was at least honest and straightforward.

In Weber's opinion there were no compromises possible between these two ultimately mutually exclusive strategies.

It goes without saying that, while Weber respected the second alternative as a plausible one for those who sincerely believed in socialist ideas, he himself was in favour of a reformist policy. Not surprisingly he sought to establish personal contacts with some leading 'revolutionists' like Eduard Bernstein or Karl Renner. When in 1907 Roberto Michels argued in an article to be published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft* that strikes were justified whether they were won or lost, thereby partially following Rosa Luxemburg's argument that revolutionary mass strikes were paving the way for the eventual triumph of the

working class by increasing working-class consciousness, Weber objected sharply. He considered this attitude to be a crude piece of 'success ethics': 'Syndicalism is either an idle whim of intellectual romantics and something for undisciplined workers who are not willing to make any financial sacrifice or else a *Gesinnungsreligion* [religious conviction] which is justified even if it never provides an ideal for the future that is "attainable".⁸

In other words, in Weber's opinion it was not possible to refute anarchism on scientific or ethical grounds, provided that those who sincerely believed in its tenets were fully prepared to act regardless of whether it might have disastrous consequences for themselves. While he did not think such a heroic stance to be sensible, and advocated instead an evolutionary strategy, he fully respected those who thought that a genuine revolutionary struggle for a society should be conducted under whatever circumstances.

Seen from this vantage-point the Social Democrats did the worst possible thing. They tried to avoid clear-cut decisions regarding the two policy options open to them. Instead they immersed themselves and their followers in a socialist utopia, merely reiterating the traditional socialist liturgy according to which capitalism would meet its deserved death in due course, whatever happened, and that eventually socialism would triumph. In fact this amounted to a quietist policy masked by verbal radicalism and revolutionary rhetoric. This policy in effect forestalled any constitutional reforms in Imperial Germany, since under the prevailing circumstances the bourgeois parties felt obliged to unite against the Social Democrats. Weber pointed this out perhaps most effectively in his essay on the Russian Revolution of 1905, written in 1906:

There is not a trace of plausibility in the view that the economic development of society, as such, must nurture within it the development either of inwardly 'freer' personalities or of more 'altruistic' ideals. Do we find the slightest hint of anything of the sort in those who, in their opinion, are borne forward to inevitable victory by 'material development'? 'Correct' Social Democrats drill the masses to perform a sort of spiritual goose-step. Instead of directing them towards the otherworldly paradise (which in Puritanism *also* showed respectable achievements on behalf of this-worldly 'freedom'), they point them to the terrestrial paradise and thereby turn the Social Democratic Party into a sort of shot in the arm for the existing order. They accustom their followers to a submissive attitude towards dogmas and party authorities, in other words to indulgence in the fruitless play-acting of mass strikes or the idle enjoyment of the enervating howls of their hired journalists, which are as harmless as they are, in the end, laughable in the eyes of their enemies. In short they accustom them to a 'hysterical wallowing in emotion', which replaces and inhibits economic and political thought and action. The only plant which can grow on this infertile soil, once the 'eschatological' age of the movement has passed and generation after generation has vainly clenched its fists in its pockets or bared its teeth at heaven, is that of spiritual apathy.⁹

In his analysis of the role of the Mensheviks during the Russian Revolution of 1905, he inserted some very unfavourable asides about the German Social Democrats: 'Their need to hurl abuse (at their opponents) is . . . politically futile, and, more importantly still, it stifles all changes for the better which might bring about a configuration which would provide the opportunity to embark upon effective political action.'¹⁰ Neither Bebel nor Rosa Luxemburg escaped Weber's scathing criticism; he flatly rejected the former's intelligence, while being sceptical about the latter's political judgement. At the meeting of the Verein für Sozialpolitik at Magdeburg in 1907 Weber summarized his diagnosis of the German Social Democrats as follows: 'The party has lost all the revolutionary energies which it formerly possessed. Instead it has taken to mere grumbling and complaining.'¹¹ From such a political party, motivated as it was above all by self-pity, the bourgeoisie had nothing to fear whatsoever.

In 1908 and 1909 Weber conducted an intensive debate with Roberto Michels about parties and party organizations, and in particular about the German Social Democratic Party. Michels, who was working at what was to become his famous book on 'modern political parties', bitterly criticized the Social Democratic Party for having become an oligarchic organization which had effectively departed from the democratic path altogether. Weber took a radically different line. He was not worried about the fact that the German Social Democratic Party was about to become a bureaucratic mass party much like the American party machines. In any case he thought it useless to criticize this development, which was apparently inevitable and irreversible, from the vantage-point of a fundamentalist position, as Michels had done.¹²

Referring to Ostrogorski's studies on the American political system, Weber predicted that the German Social Democratic Party would turn into a 'ganz kommune Parteimaschine' - an ordinary party machine - in the American sense of the term. It would no longer be a threat to the existing social order. In due course it was bound to become a pragmatic working-class party pursuing reformist policies. This assessment of the character of the Social Democratic Party in Imperial Germany was matched by contempt for bourgeois fears about the alleged 'Red Peril'. Instead, Weber pleaded again and again for the Social Democrats to be given a fair share of influence and power in the political arena, whether in local government, in the federal states or at the level of the Reich. He welcomed the participation of Social Democrats in local government. Likewise he wanted the trade unions to be acknowledged as equal partners of the entrepreneurs and as the legitimate representatives of the workers' interests in all matters regarding industrial relations. He strongly condemned section 153 of the *Reichsgewerbeordnung* (the German industrial and commercial legal code) which made any intimidation of strike breakers even of an entirely peaceful

nature a legal offence. This was, in his view, 'ein Recht für alte Weiber', a law fit only for old women. Likewise he argued against the patriarchal rule of management in the large plants of heavy industry.¹³ He would have nothing to do with the authoritarian attitude of many German entrepreneurs *vis-à-vis* their employees. He had much the same contempt for the unions which refused to affiliate and denied their solidarity with the rest.

Instead Weber pleaded strongly for a liberal system of industrial relations in which the trade unions would be free to fight for the economic and social interests of the workers as best they could, as was the case in Great Britain at the time. Neither did he favour any semi-official arbitration boards designed to forestall or restrain strikes. It was the duty of the state to provide for a fair legal framework within which the unions and the entrepreneurs could conduct their struggle about wages and working conditions from roughly equal starting positions and without outside interference. Weber considered that the official government policy of hampering the growth of trade-unionism wherever possible by all sorts of legal and administrative measures would greatly impede the development of harmonious industrial relations in an advanced industrial society like Imperial Germany.

Late in 1912 Weber was actively engaged in assembling a group of progressive academics interested in social reform.¹⁴ He planned to launch a Sozialpolitische Vereinigung outside the Verein für Sozialpolitik, since the latter was dominated by conservative academics. This new association was to revive public interest in social reform and halt the tendency towards reducing or even scrapping parts of the social welfare system which had come into being in the last decades. However, this new venture did not get off the ground, largely because a personal rift developed between Max Weber and Lujo Brentano over the issue of whether Social Democrats should be asked to join this new academic association from the start or whether it should restrict itself for the time being to rallying support among bourgeois academics and politicians, as Weber thought advisable for purely tactical reasons. This was all the more regrettable since Weber had otherwise consistently denounced the discrimination against scholars holding socialist convictions as was practised by the German academic community and, in particular, by the government authorities. He had, notably in the case of Michels, privately and publicly demanded that the ban against the *Habilitation* (qualification for university teaching) of scholars of socialist conviction be lifted. He had also offered publication in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft* to socialist scholars wherever possible, though with limited success, since there were so few of them prepared to publish in a bourgeois journal. All in all Weber's attitude was straightforward enough; he wanted Social Democrats to be treated on an equal basis in all spheres of public life, and

certainly he would have welcomed a policy ranging 'from Bassermann to Bebel', as canvassed by Friedrich Naumann in 1913, namely, the formation of a parliamentary coalition of all progressive forces in German society ranging from the Social Democrats to the National Liberals.

After the outbreak of the First World War Weber became a staunch supporter of Reich Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's policy of 'reorientation', which proposed even-handed co-operation with the Social Democrats and envisaged constitutional reforms which would satisfy the legitimate demands of the working classes, though only after the end of the war. He welcomed the loyal attitude of the Social Democrats who rallied behind the government and joined the other classes in a common war effort, on the assumption that this was a defensive war.

During the first World War Weber's views on the Social Democratic Party mellowed a great deal; he tended to view their policies in a far more positive light than before, undoubtedly influenced by their loyal support for the government headed by Bethmann Hollweg during the early years of the war. The policy of the Social Democrats, or at any rate a large majority of the party, was largely motivated by feelings of national loyalty, but also by the expectation that the working classes would eventually be able to reap the benefits of this co-operation and become accepted as an essential part of the body politic.

Weber was strongly in favour of a policy placing the Social Democrats on an equal footing with the other political parties rather than treating them as outcasts, as had been official policy right up to July 1914. He thought it necessary to strengthen the fragile partnership between the working classes and the government which had developed as a consequence of the momentous events of 4 August 1914. Comparatively early on he recognized that the official policy of 'reorientation' did not go far enough, holding out vague promises of concessions to the working classes after the war as a *quid pro quo* for loyalty in matters related to the war effort. By the spring of 1916 Weber became one of the most outspoken critics of the Prussian three-class system of suffrage, and he effectively supported the Social Democrats' increasingly insistent demands for immediate electoral reform. Weber's public campaign against the existing electoral system in Prussia culminated in an article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* late in 1917 in which he argued that, whatever else happened, suffrage had to be given to the soldiers returning from the war, echoing similar arguments which led in Great Britain to the Electoral Act of 1918.¹³ Part of Weber's argument, though for obvious tactical reasons this was not explicitly stated, was that the Social Democrats could not be expected to remain loyal to the government indefinitely if there were no immediate reform of the Prussian electoral system.

The second issue where Weber joined forces with the Social Democrats was

his determined opposition to far-reaching annexationist policies. Unlike the Social Democrats he did not oppose annexations on principle – in eastern Europe he was in favour of establishing semi-autonomous nation-states under the loosely defined overlordship of Imperial Germany. But he agreed with the Social Democrats that the war should be conducted as a defensive war and should not be carried on even a single day longer for annexationist objectives. He also rejected the policy of unrestricted submarine warfare which the German government had been considering since March 1916 and eventually declared in January 1917, thereby provoking the United States to join the Allies as an active belligerent. In Weber's opinion the entry of the United States into the war ended all hopes for a speedy conclusion of a negotiated peace of whatever sort. He now no longer hesitated to co-operate directly with Social Democrats in order to counteract the extremist propaganda of the German Fatherland Party. On 5 November 1917 he spoke jointly with the Social Democratic deputy Wolfgang Heine – albeit a member of the right wing of the party – during a public rally in Munich, 'for a peace of conciliation and against the danger of Pan-Germanism'. This rally had originally been scheduled for July 1917.¹⁶

During the later years of the war Weber's confidence in the reliability of the Social Democrats in matters of national interest grew steadily. On the occasion of the Stockholm Peace Conference which had been called by the Second International in May 1917, Weber even considered whether he should personally offer his assistance to Scheidemann, who was to become the head of the German delegation. Eventually he suggested that Scheidemann be accompanied by Dr Gurtmann, one of his Russian friends. Admittedly Weber thereby hoped to bring his view across that 'if the German Social Democrats were to conclude a bad peace we will have the reactionary rule of the Pan-Germans after the war, and they [i.e. the Social Democrats] will lose all influence.'¹⁷

This particular example reveals Weber's increasing concern that under the impact of the Russian February Revolution the Social Democrats might drift further and further to the left. His essays on the revolutionary events in Russia published in January and February 1918 were to a large extent addressed to the Social Democrats in an attempt to immunize them against the revolutionary slogans emanating from Petrograd. Weber eventually went so far as to argue that the Soviet regime was actually nothing more than a rather ordinary military dictatorship and that Russian imperialism would soon resurface once again. Weber strongly pleaded with the Social Democrats and the leaders of the free trade unions for them to remain loyal to the German national cause; he considered this a matter of national duty, however bad the situation might still become. He publicly condemned the mass strikes of April 1917, and even more

so the strikes of January 1918, even though he was himself furious about the outrageous manner in which the peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk had been conducted. On the other hand he had a great deal of sympathy for the strikers' motives. He even defended the conduct of the leaders of the Social Democratic Party when they joined the central strike committee in Berlin in January 1918, in defiance of the law. Although they thereby publicly demonstrated their solidarity with the strikers, which could be seen as a flagrant violation of the joint national war effort, they actually brought the strike to an end without fuelling further unrest among the working class. In these weeks Weber privately confided that revolution was likely to develop if the war was not brought rapidly to a close, especially since there was still no indication that the constitutional reforms which were so long overdue would be implemented in the near future; instead, the conservatives in the Prussian parliament continued to fight the electoral reform tooth and nail.

Weber was fully aware of how difficult it had now become – since the rifts in the Social Democratic Party had resulted in a breakaway of its left wing – for the leaders of the Majority Social Democrats to maintain their policy of national loyalty, faced as they were with the organized opposition of the Independent Social Democrats, even though the suffering of the working classes had become almost unbearable given the steadily deteriorating economic conditions.

The crucial test for Weber's views on the Social Democrats came, however, with the outbreak of the Revolution in November 1918. Weber's initial reaction was negative in the extreme; in a violent emotional outburst he called the revolution an 'irresponsible bloody carnival' which dealt a death blow to Germany's few remaining chances of still obtaining reasonable peace conditions. He added, not without an element of tactical reasoning, that the Revolution was bound to destroy any chance of introducing socialism for many decades to come. He was enraged at the utter chaos allegedly created by the workers' and soldiers' councils. Only when he eventually joined the Heidelberg Workers' and Soldiers' Council as a representative of the middle classes did he realize that most of its representatives were actually respectable people who were working for the common good! He also had nothing favourable to say about the Rat der Volksbeauftragten (Council of People's Delegates), even though he had nearly been appointed Secretary of State for the Interior. A little later he had briefly been considered for the post of German Ambassador to Vienna. Admittedly Weber reserved most of his criticism for the Independent Socialist members of the Rat der Volksbeauftragten, in particular Haase and Barth, but the Majority Social Democrats fared little better, largely because he considered their policies as catastrophic in view of the necessity of achieving a tolerable peace. It was only somewhat later that he began to restrain his pole-

mics against the revolutionary government. By January 1919, after the Independent Social Democrats had left the revolutionary government, he was prepared to concede that, while the Independent Social Democrats were irresponsible demagogues or, at best, utopian romanticists harbouring revolutionary dreams of a just society free of all violence, the Majority Social Democrats were 'honest people' doing their best under difficult circumstances.

Already by December 1918 Max Weber had demanded publicly that the middle classes ought to join forces with the Social Democrats in order to create a new democratic order. He participated in the foundation of a new, decisively liberal party behind which the bourgeoisie was to rally in order to put an end to the Revolution and to establish a parliamentary democracy. He actively engaged in the preparations for founding a local liberal party organization in Frankfurt, and became engaged almost from the beginning in founding the German Democratic Party, the first initiative having been taken in early December 1918 by Theodor Wolff and some prominent liberals in Berlin, notable among them being his brother Alfred. In a widely publicized speech at a public rally in Frankfurt on 1 December 1918 Weber pleaded for the middle classes to shake off the political apathy to which they had succumbed in the initial stages of the Revolution, and to participate in establishing a new democratic order jointly with the Majority Social Democrats.¹⁸ Under the circumstances wholehearted co-operation with the Majority Social Democrats appeared to be the only viable line of action for the liberals and, indeed, for the middle classes as a whole. He stated emphatically: 'All honest, unreservedly pacifist and radical bourgeois democrats and Social Democrats could work side by side for decades to come until their ways eventually might have to part again.'¹⁹ He also declared, in somewhat ambiguous terms, that his own views were 'very close to, if not identical with, those of many academically trained members of the Social Democratic Party'.²⁰

In the following weeks Weber became deeply involved in the electoral campaign of the German Democratic Party for the National Assembly. He spoke at more than twenty public rallies, mostly in southern Germany. Here he argued again and again that the German Democratic Party, and indeed all progressive sections of the bourgeois classes alike, ought to co-operate with the Majority Social Democrats in a joint effort to establish a stable democratic order. In this context he went so far as to suggest that some degree of nationalization of the means of production might be unavoidable under the circumstances. Its principle, however, he always stuck to his conviction that only a dynamic capitalism could rescue the German economy from utter ruin. He opposed all concrete socialist measures, arguing that this would be detrimental to the chances for the establishment of socialism in the future. The half-hearted and ill-considered

nationalization policies of the Council of People's Delegates he considered absolutely futile, since they would endanger the economic recovery that was so desperately needed; besides they were merely playing into the hands of the Allied powers, who would find it easier to extract reparations from state-owned, as opposed to privately owned, industries.²¹ He denounced the policies of the Rat der Volksbeauftragten, somewhat tongue in cheek, as 'digging the grave of socialism' and jeopardizing any serious socialist politics in the foreseeable future.

Weber's belief in the fundamental superiority of dynamic capitalism became evident once again when the German Democratic Party invited him to represent them on the second Commission on Socialization, formed in 1920. Weber rejected this request with unusual harshness:

At all meetings, everywhere, both private and public, I have declared 'socialization', in the sense now understood, to be 'nonsense'. We are in need of entrepreneurs (like Herr Stinnes or others of his calibre). I have said about the Law on Factory Organization: 'Erasetz Finfame.' *From the standpoint of the possible future of socialism it is disastrous.* Politicians should and *must* make compromises. But I am by profession a scholar. . . . The scholar dare not make compromises to cover up such 'nonsense'.²²

This statement reveals a considerable degree of self-doubt about whether such a rigid stance was justified. As a consequence of this step, Weber left the German Democratic Party and withdrew entirely from active politics.

Yet there remained an element of ambiguity in his attitude. He would not tolerate socialization in any form, but this verdict did not necessarily include Social Democratic Party politics. There was something more than tactical reasoning behind his recurring, although always ultimately rejected, thoughts of joining the Social Democrats - namely, a sympathy, in principle, with their efforts to win a position of equality for the proletariat within existing society.²³ But he remained a passionate adherent of a revitalized capitalist market economy, and it was only within these limits that he was prepared to support Social Democratic Party politics. He was always a fair antagonist of the socialist movement. He had the greatest respect for those Social Democrats who fought honestly for their socialist cause, however wrong he considered it to be. In this respect Weber's attitude differed substantially from that of the great majority of his contemporaries in Imperial Germany.