

What were Weber's fears about socialism?

Weber's views on socialism were created partly by his priorities for the German state. While Marx had talked of the primacy of economics, with the rest of social science being merely the 'superstructure' built on the economic 'base', Weber seemed to be more concerned with the preservation of 'German culture'. For example, he was concerned by the notion that Polish workers in East Germany were overtaking the Germans in population growth terms – he saw them as being able to 'breed' and succeed because they were willing to work for a lower wage. While this may have made economic sense, Weber took it for granted that the Polish culture was inferior to the German one and was more concerned about the cultural than the economic impacts.

Like Marx, Weber did claim some kind of scientific objectivity for his conclusions, though he also argued that the social sciences must be 'value-relevant'. It has been said that while Marx offered a cure for society's ills, Weber offered only a diagnosis. This diagnosis did not explain what the cure should be, but certainly indicated that socialism would not be an appropriate one. Weber is especially concerned with the historical processes of secularisation, formalisation and bureaucratisation – collectively defined as 'rationalisation'. Throughout history there had been a move towards greater rationality, which Weber saw socialism as interfering with. Weber recognised that all political authority was based to some extent on force, but that this authority must be legitimate for the system to function correctly. Socialism required a collective decision to legitimise a group who would have great economic power over individuals – not a decision that capitalist society seemed willing to take.

Authority was defined by Weber as having three sources: traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic. Traditional authority was that passed down through the generations by custom. Socialism did not have the cultural basis on which such authority could be built – people were simply so used to living in a capitalist society that their modes of behaviour under socialism would probably reflect this. Rational-legal authority is created when a society trusts an individual or group with authority under the law, such as an elected president. This kind of authority rests on the continued belief by the people in the legal right of that individual or group to hold authority. Such attitudes change relatively slowly, and required greater political influence than the socialists actually had. Revolutionary socialists would obviously find it difficult to

achieve this authority, as they would take the law into their own hands rather than adapt it to the desires of the people. Weber has been criticised for giving too little account of revolutions, but this may have been because he did not consider revolution to be a major threat. He saw the revolutionary socialist Lukacs as an 'irresponsible politician', and claimed that the socialists were unable to justify their violence by promises of peace in times to come. Weber believed that the apparently violent tendencies of the socialists signified violence in the future as well, and it was hard to see how peace could be created by those who could not achieve power by peaceful methods.

Charismatic authority, finally, is caused by the devotion to one person as an icon. This was the model which revolutionary socialists normally worked on – a charismatic leader would inspire the people to cede authority. However, Weber saw this as being inherently unstable, as a crisis of confidence in the leader could cause the whole system to collapse. The only way for charismatic authority to last would be if it was transformed into one of the previous two forms of authority by 'routinisation'. However, it can be argued that this is a failing of democratic systems as well; party government is often subjected to the will of the party leader, who is the party's most important asset at elections. In fact, Weber was involved in drawing up the constitution of the Weimar Republic. Included in this constitution was a deliberate tension between presidential and parliamentary government, covering two strands of thinking – the democratic and the liberal – and establishing a delicate balance between them. However the third strand of thinking, the socialist, was seen as being in conflict with liberalism, and was included in parts of the constitution, but was not a major theme. It may have been felt that socialism, which was in conflict with liberalism, would upset the delicate balance of the constitution.

Weber did not see capitalism as a panacea by any means. He did not claim that it would benefit the proletariat, but simply could not conceive of a better alternative. None of the theoretically conceivable forms of socialism could realise those ideals championed by socialist theory. He disputed Marx's claim that socialism was historically inevitable and instead claimed the opposite – 'an inevitable and prolonged capitalist era'. He had similar arguments against Marx to many other commentators of the time. Marx was dismissed as utopian, and all discussions of revolution were seen as farce – Weber could not see Germany supporting a socialist revolution, and Germany was his major concern. Circumstances in Russia may have been more favourable to such a revolution, but this was not broached as a subject.

Weber criticised Marx's theory of the concentration of capital into the hands of fewer individuals over time, stating that this was only correct to a very limited extent.

The appropriation of the means of production was riddled with economic handicaps, not least the lack of rational management and accounting practices of entrepreneurial firms. Weber saw the firm as the distilled essence of rationality, and saw that this would not true of a state bureaucracy without expertise in specific businesses – described as the 'iron cage of the future'. In capitalist economies, the law is a type of coercion which helps stronger economic agents by guaranteeing their property. In socialist countries the coercion would have to be much more direct, and there would be a lack of 'freedom of contract'. Weber said of socialist countries that 'the more relentlessly can authoritarian constraint be exercised within them, and the smaller will be the circle of those in whose hands the power to use this type of constraint is concentrated.' Socialism's freedom from competition, speculation and recurring economic crises would be at the cost of 'a decrease in the formal, calculating rationality' of capitalism, only possible through 'the subjugation of the worker to domination by entrepreneurs'. It was precisely the same rationality, in Weber's view, which had caused capitalism to supercede all other forms of economic organisation. Socialism, which with its 'salvation from class rule' Weber could compare to religion, was not guided by this same rationality.

Finally, Weber doubted whether or not socialism could actually achieve its aim of improving the class position of the workers. He believed that the workers' class position would be unchanged as they would be subjected to an all-embracing state bureaucracy vastly more powerful than private owners ever were. Weber concluded that 'any rational, unified socialist economy would retain the expropriation of the workers. It would just go one step further in the expropriation of private owners as well.' Besides, workers were generally not in conflict with private owners anyway – it was 'not the rentier, the share-holder and the banker who suffer the ill will of the worker, but almost exclusively the manager and the business executives who are the direct opponents of workers in wage conflicts.'

Weber also disapproved of experiments in socialism, such as that planned by the SDP. As he had debunked socialism as a possibility, he suggested that the advancement of the working class within capitalism should be the focus, and this would be in the interests of the workers and the nation as a whole. He saw the activities of groups such as the SDP as doing nothing but retarding this development, without actually

achieving anything positive. The hardening of Social Democracy into Marxist dogma was a fundamental cause of the stagnation of Germany's political development. Weber saw only two genuine possibilities for politics – radical anarchism, or revisionism focusing on the current situation. He recognised a 'class struggle' but took socialism seriously only as an ethical point of view.

In conclusion then, Weber saw socialism as a utopia which could not, but also should not, be attained. He resented the violent revolutionary tendencies of the socialist parties, believing that this made them less legitimate and held back other political developments. Socialism was seen as a major threat to the culture of rationality which had caused capitalism to succeed in the first place, and would require the establishment of a vast, authoritarian but ultimately ineffective state bureaucracy.

Bibliography:

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