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# Max Weber and the Clash of Objectivities

Max Weber's foundational contributions to the field of comparative politics and the social sciences in general have been so influential and timeless that it is almost impossible to speak of states, or a specific type of state, without giving him implicit recognition. The social sciences are fundamentally indebted to Weber for laying out the descriptive terms and prescriptive methods to standardize the field and allow for claims of scientific study of human endeavors to be backed up by empirically-tested results.

Works entitled "Basic Sociological Terms" and "'Objectivity' in Social Science" make explicit that a scientific approach is possible and establish precisely that the goals of any science are to make generalizable conclusions based on empirical observations, leading to theories with nearly as much explanatory power as in the natural sciences. But using the terms of this exercise, can phenomena such as the development of certain political systems be explained as a parsimonious process, drawing on systematized tidbits of individual and often messy, noisy cultures which refuse to "hold still" when placed under the microscope? This essay seeks to use the concepts Max Weber either coined or canonized to examine and evaluate attempts at synthesizing culture and politics in both normative and non-normative explanations of political development. The foci will be on scholarly objectivity, practical and theoretical implications, and

implications both positive and negative in taking such a synthetic approach.

The objectivity of which Weber wrote as appropriate to the social sciences is not absolute, as he asserts that "there is no absolutely 'objective' scientific analysis of culture"[1]. Value judgments inevitably creep into texts, and this is acceptable as long as it is "*constantly* made clear to the readers exactly at which point the scientific investigator becomes silent and the evaluating and acting person begins to speak."[2] This distinction must be made starkly, for "the analytical ordering of empirical social reality"[3] is presumed not to be aided by mere scholarly opinion, which in the end, is still subjective speculation.

Huntington wrote provocatively in the 1990's of a "clash of civilizations" as a final source of conflict after the Cold War "ended" history as the world knew it--at least for Fukayama. But each of these articles sacrifice their objectivity for dramatic effect, and rarely in either piece do the authors take a step back from their gripping narratives to say, "just my opinion, folks, take it or leave it." Do they nonetheless make contributions to the field, despite their contentious objectivity? Neither "civilization" nor "objectivity" is often pluralized[4], but I wish to argue that the

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[1] *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, pg. 72

[2] *Methodology of the Social Sciences,* pg. 60, emphasis added.

[3] Stated explicitly as "an unconditionally valid type of knowledge in the social sciences" in *Methodology of the Social Sciences,* pg.63.

[4] By definition, there can be only one objectivity, so my intent is to state clearly that what has been proposed as objective is in fact far from it--but still a "nice try" and very much

Western positivist outlook to comparative science, often assuming a singular scientific stance, is only one of several systematic options, and if by "history" Fukuyama meant secular history in the sense of political development, claims of an end have a clearly premature and narrow applicability.

It is likely that a self-centered view of the world stems from each individual's personal development--beginning with the transition from infantile solipsism, a step which some never take, to a realization that others exist beyond the self[5]. Similarly, a recurring theme in comparative politics is for each person to take a self-centric view of the world, based on the country of one's citizenship. Each wants to believe that one's own country is an, or perhaps *the* exception, and other countries must be generalized for convenience and aid in understanding them. This is not a great loss, for as much as we know about other countries which are not our own, they tend to conform nicely to ideal type typologies of varying levels of sophistication. It is thus only natural that an emergent scholar who is from a particular country outside the dominant western paradigm--the same taken to exemplary extremes by Huntington and Fukuyama--cannot help but exude an indignant air as s/he sets the record straight in extracting his or her motherland from the realm of two-dimensional theories. In these lies the threat of a return to single case studies,

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worth striving for.

[5] It is, of course, still another step beyond acknowledging others exist to being able to consider the perspectives of others, even those from different countries and cultures, as equally valid. This cosmopolitan step is impeded by lack of knowledge and personal experience outside one's own culture as well as by patriot/nationalism which has the unfortunate side effect of making other perspectives either not worth considering, for perceived inferiority, or for not being politically tenable in a given domestic environment.

widely viewed as of little scientific value, and more rarely undertaken by today's political scientists who disparage or fear the label of "area studies".

Yet developmental treatises which make a claim for universal applicability, and thus objectivity, can clearly diverge in claims that all developing countries will take a nearly identical path to a western-styled state of prosperity, as Rostow does, or make general claims which are more nuanced, as Wallerstein's world systems theory takes better account of the relationships of those states who have already achieved post-industrial stability and those which may be on a different path toward a non-Western "core". Both Rostow and Wallerstein provide typologies which are useful as analytical constructs, temporal stages and relative positions, but the structured definitions necessitated by having more categories in Rostow's model had the undesired effect of freezing the applicability of in his own era. Though unevenly, all states of the world have progressed in the time since he articulated his stages of development, and the fact that few states currently fit any of them perfectly adds momentum to the constant temptation, making cross-case generalization highly inconvenient or impossible, toward universal individual exceptionalism.

The use of Weberian ideal types in the subfield of political science is rife with both positive and negative implications of creating them in the first place and using them as baselines of comparison with actually existing systems and states.

On the positive side, as is often noted as the primary justification of their use, ideal type formation can compensate for an often limited population of a particular phenomenon one wishes to study. This allows for artificially large-N comparative studies, a greater ease of introducing

concepts to novices and laymen, and also greater depth of analysis by removing the limits of cases to those--often few--which actually exist or have existed. It is clear that ideal types open up the potential of the future, by showing the way beyond what even the most advanced cases have so far accomplished. If it is safe to say that *most* ideal types are also subjectively desirable by at least some states, they can serve as a goal toward which to strive, if the charismatic leaders of states make doing so a national priority.

Even if the notion of an "ideal" is divorced from any qualitative meaning[6] as "the best which could ever exist--in fact so good that it could perhaps never be realized"--thus allowing for apparently contradictory concepts as "ideal failed states" and ideal type totalitarian despots--when examined from a political developmental standpoint, real world examples of a certain phenomenon--which once were more than adequate as indeed the "best" examples--suddenly pale in comparison. The idea arises that these former paragons are in fact engaged in a conscious and constant process over time to become more like the ideal. Take the example of post-industrial democracies in the world today, presumably at the peak on the scale of political development. Without ideal types, the concept of development would seem to stagnate or at least become highly uncertain. Toward *what* would they be progressing or developing? Yet the imposition of a model also creates the presumption that such states are in fact expending great efforts and resources to move toward the ideal, which is almost never the case.

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[6] Giddens prefers to use the term "pure category", and others have suggested calling them "archetypes". Though the distinction is a subtle one--all three convey approximately the same and acceptable meaning--I believe calling the method "ideal type" comparison can indeed overcome its connotation of "highest quality" to be the most useful and accurate semantic iteration of Weber's concept. The other two can be firmly grounded in examples actually existing in reality (as in pure chemical elements and archetypal characters in history and literature) and do not match "ideal" in its meaning of that which does not exist and is unlikely ever to come into existence.

The reality of political development for both third world and post-industrial states is far more desultory than either pattern-seeking scholars or charismatic leaders would have us believe. Few, except self-centered citizens or those elsewhere who swallow our rhetoric of freedom uncritically, would now say that the USA is the most exemplary democracy in the world, and anyone observing its recent actions would be torn by the divergence of words and deeds. Even if every attempt is made to avoid placing normative values on ideal types, human nature does not allow us to refrain from labeling certain concepts as good and others as bad, then being puzzled when we see any actor not moving toward--or rather, developing--the preferred characteristic.

Clearly, there is an internal contradiction in judging other countries' levels of political development on the criterion of how close they are to an ideal-type democracy. Weber's admonition of social scientific objectivity is unashamedly unheeded by the majority of Western scholars--indeed it has become a defining characteristic of Western culture--who place the democratic ideal upon the highest governmental pedestal for the whole world to see. Nothing is ever likely to shake the foundations of this pedestal, but many a benevolent dictator would appreciate more credit for bringing "the good life" to their people.

Conversely, Weber's most enduring contribution as the first articulator of "a monopoly over the legitimate use of force" as the defining characteristic of a state--a concept which has come as close to universal acceptance and adoption as any in political science--creates many troubling consequences when the subjective ideal of "the good life" is but a distant utopian dream. This widely accepted definition is problematic in that many "undeveloped" or "Third World" states torn by almost constant strife and rebellion--along tribal, religious, class, or any other fault lines--have almost never throughout the course of history been states in the proper sense. Thus, to compare them with more stable states with "legitimate" governments cannot be proper either. States prone to government overthrow, predominantly in the developing world, also conflict with the concept of

a state, held by most among the general population and even many scholars, as a permanent entity, impervious to the ravages of time and certain not to change fundamentally within one's lifetime--let alone several times within it.

States prone to frequent rebellions, or indeed by the Western ideal types any state which is not a democracy, may never wield force legitimately, and thus it is in the defined interest of the world to support whichever side of a conflict most closely conforms to the rightful rulers of a territory. Just as the actors vying for control are subject to subjective assessment, so are their means of ascension, whether by birth, election, coup or other forceful violence--there can be no objective legitimacy in the use of the last. Many developing countries may only be able to achieve a competitive and destabilizing "oligopoly" of the legitimate use of force, yet these must for practical reasons be considered proper states. Ease of comparison requires these too to be labeled as unified nations, and more importantly, *dejury* statehood can be given as a token of appreciation for keeping the territory in question from devolving into a small-firm or individually-trading "stock market of coercion" for self-advancing causes.

This said, Weber's consideration of legitimate domination is essential for his definition of the state to be analytically useful. His types of legitimacy make every attempt to be objective, placing no normative judgments even upon the highly suspect form of domination by a "charismatic" leader. That even this kind can be legitimate, needing only the support of those under one's dominion for legitimacy, creates a rather hazy and subjective view of just what type of rule is just, modern, and less metaphysically, possible to endure with any stability. Legitimate dominance founded on charisma is clearly much more difficult to oppose on legal or moral grounds, which are almost certain to clash in terms of ideology, practice, and the jurisdiction of both. Even in supposedly backward LDC's, there have been many cases where the leadership has met at least one of the qualifications for legitimacy. This throws into serious question the right of more powerful states to intervene in such countries' sovereign territory, especially when regime

change is the target of the intervention, as it so often has been. Defining legitimacy in so many ways allows for widespread political modernity, and is a strong legalistic basis for maintaining the status quo of world governments, and of sovereign exclusivity itself.

Advanced and powerful "core" countries may say and do what they will about whether Weber's multiple legitimacies justify rogue states, cults of personality, and democratically-elected leaders we just don't like, but there is real practical value in considering the relationships between a charismatic leader the infrastructure supporting him or her[7]. As Giddens notes on pages 38-40, the positions as head of state and state bureaucracy are both essential to the modern state, especially democracies, and in his ideals are polar opposites in terms of objectivity[8]. Weber still takes great care, however, in finding a kind of minimal objectivity in the politician's charismatic passion: one who undertakes politics as a vocation must always be on guard against the "sin" of vanity, or more graphically, "purely personal self-intoxication" leading both to irresponsibility of action and a loss of focus on the cause which originally legitimized his pursuits[9].

While advanced democracies are by no means above occasional cronyism--a certain, exceptional U.S. administration comes to mind--they can at least be presumed to have a more independently-minded, rational bureaucracy than developing countries whose primary operating procedure is never to bite the hand that appointed it. This opens doors for the potential to study

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[7] I suspect feminists would have a field day expounding on the injustice and reasons why so few women have played this role in history. Separate from politics and on a context-free level, it is almost automatic to associate charisma with men.

[8] pg. 39, Giddens notes: The bureaucratic official had to carry out his duties in an impartial fashion…The political leader, by contrast, had to "take a stand" and "be passionate". On pg. 40 he notes the crucial role of charisma at the top to ensure "consistent policymaking" to maintain and propel forward the order of modern democracies.

[9] *Politics as a Vocation*, pg. 116.

political development with “bureaucratic rationality”, buttressed by the Weberian ideal, as a reliable indicator. If the relationship is perfect, it could be as accurate a marker as growth in GDP is for economic development[10]. Given that institutional, bureaucratic “stickiness” expects objective principles and functions to endure beyond temporary administrations--no matter how charismatic or powerful--an analysis of high-level bureaucratic actions and decisions over time would give a basic, and I believe useful, insight as to the level of political development within a country. For an example, it is clear that developing countries on the verge of joining Wallerstein’s “semi-periphery”, in the constant quest toward the “core”, have strived for this two-level opposition of orientations over time. Asian NIC-watchers are quick to point out that rather primitive political systems were able to lift their countries out of poverty in a very short time, but only while all levels of government, indeed almost the whole population, were united in the charismatic vision of their autocratic leaders. That most of these countries now have a degree of economic security appears to have allowed the political side to make steps forward toward development.

The situation of both the NIC’s and Weber’s own Germany, which he saw as making great strides of industrialization and economic growth--yet politically backward and polishing only a veneer of democracy, is seductive in concluding that a certain level of economic development is necessary before political development can occur--or is even appropriate at all. Yet to make this perfectly plausible conclusion, based on these empirical observation, leads too easily to a Rostow-esque easy path to development. Such a view neglects the roles of culture, the power of a state to shape or create itself, and the often whimsical decisions of charismatic leaders. There is no guarantee in scientific analysis of social actions, that the causal story one is telling is either complete or correct.

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[10] For comparison of theoretically sound but quite imperfect measurements, I believe GDP growth to be apt, but for the sake of the argument which follows, it would help if we

Another topic ferried into academic discussion by a Weberian ideal type, and which is considered by many in the affluent West as a measure of political development, is the extent to which state policies and programs allow for a de-commoditization of labor in post-industrialist societies[11]. In the midst of an industrial revolution, in which the whole of a population is united in an almost slave-like existence of toil and drudgery, it is easy to lose sight of such a utopian idea. However, numerous states are growing ever closer to realizing it, making a Marxist revolution almost redundant. Yet again, there is disagreement even in the West as to whether this represents the peak of political achievement. Liberal and with relatively market dependent on labor markets, the USA may look upon total de-commoditization of labor not only as unrealistic, but also as a return to an almost prehistoric society in which the population has no obligations to markets, leaders, or anything resembling a state. To many, this smacks of the often pejorative concept of anarchy, a word which without changing a letter can be the goal for some and the very ideal type of a dystopia for others. This consideration sheds considerable doubt as to whether there can be objective goals set for political development--if there is no universally accepted ideal-type democratic system and society, how can we be sure that democracy itself is the most highly-advanced and legitimate system? We are told by Weber very early on[12] that being objective involves analysis of "social action"--not whether an idea is "correct" in a metaphysical sense. Yet how more "correct" can one be in politics than both "legitimate" and highly

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assumed that both are, in fact, flawless measurements.

[11] A primary focus and criterion for the three-level typology of welfare states, again ideal types, as laid out in Gosta Esping-Andersen's *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. I won't cite it further except to say that one of its most basic, implicit, and less-than-objective assumptions is that the world's most economically advanced states, which also happen to be democracies, are also the most "highly developed" politically. I'm with most of the West in agreeing with it, but that don't make it right!

[12] pg. 4 of "Basic Sociological Terms"

"developed"?

Given Weber's scholarly strongman role in lifting the study of society and politics to the level of an objective, and later empirical science, his extensive treatment of religion as a factor in shaping the economic and political culture of a state is troubling and understandably his most contentious contribution. If one accepts the notion that politics and culture are deeply but nebulously intertwined, as many or even most scholars do, one is then led to wonder whether taking the religious angle of culture to analyze politics is not burdening Weber with a hopeless handicap. Religion is almost certainly the most difficult of subjects to study objectively--let alone scientifically--as its concepts and material and behavioral manifestations are almost inextricable from what one believes, one's supremely personal faith. Just as in political culture, one not sharing a background in a particular religious culture--and thereby much less likely to hold the doctrinal beliefs of a given religion--is at a considerable disadvantage in understanding the most basic concepts and implications of them. Indeed, when told to study the effects of a religion on political development, one must exercise considerable scholarly restraint not to dismiss the entire endeavor as absurd and unlikely ever to bear fruits palatable to an objective empiricist.

Weber makes frequent interesting attempts to bring objectivity to the study of religious influence on politics. In the closing pages of "Politics as a Vocation", after deriding the misuse of ethics to establish one side in a conflict as the more moral, argues that an absolutist, all-or-nothing ethics is the only objective kind. The only way to establish objective morality, in terms of good and evil, is for one side of a conflict to be completely saintly, neither resisting force and violence, nor responding to it in kind. This approach, while successfully difficult to call subjective, is not very realistic, as Weber notes that a politician must resist evil by force, "or else you are responsible for the evil winning out."[13] This has a rather nullifying effect on studying religious influence, for if no

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[13] *Politics as a Vocation,* pg. 119-120

truly moral side exists in such conflicts, one wonders again why he brings religion, as the vehicle of morality, into this particular picture.

The ethical issue in conflicts such as that above, as it relates to the literature on political development, could be related back to the IR theory of democratic peace, whereby democracies are thought to go to war less--at least with one another--due both to the fact of having to rally an entire population to support, fight, and die for a cause, and also because most democracies are constrained by laws which prohibit violent aggression beyond one's borders. Yet again, a charismatic leader devoted to a cause or end, for which war is the means, can often convince or bypass the supposedly well-developed and rational institutions put in place to prevent such impassioned action. This kind of legitimate domination creates a range of roles for agency over institutions in both breadth and depth. Clearly the state which is objectively developed politically will keep one aspect from dominating the other, preferring instead a constant tension which both on either side of an issue may bemoan as "state stalemate".

Both Giddens and Laitin are well-reasoned in finding real value and validity within *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, applying Weber's concept of a charismatic leader gaining a dedicated following to disseminate systems of belief, a process which is both empirically observable and having far-reaching objective consequences across all disciplines beyond mere politics. Yet both note that Weber is walking a fine line between the scientific approach he espoused earlier and the kind of speculative work--I don't dare call it pontification--done by preeminent and classical scholars who rather preceded empirical science in practice. It is no wonder that this is his most controversial work. While the thesis that protestants sought material prosperity to show that they are blessed by God is certainly plausible, it is also extraordinarily difficult to falsify. As scientists have yet to devise an empirical test to divine an individual's objective motivations, there is little reason his conclusions are any more validated by generalizing to an entire religious sect.

It would indeed be a very unique coincidence for the economic development of Western societies to skyrocket without any relationship whatsoever to Protestantism. Putting aside the means he uses to come to that conclusion, it takes rather more close attention to isolate and extract the influence which an objectively existing "Protestant Capitalistic Ethic" has had on the political development of Western states. Laitin's work takes on this topic at length, drawing a rather convoluted model[14] to explain his conclusions, and by immediate appearance models only the influence of religion on culture. The direct influence of culture remains ambiguous and individually variegated, and even when culture is used as a catch-all explanation for why a phenomenon did or did not occur, any chance of scholarly agreement goes out the window when it is invoked[15].

Neither the approaches of cultural emphasis nor of political development lend themselves easily to quantitative analysis, either rankling large-N number crunchers, causing often awkward imposition of their methods or more reprehensible neglect and dismissal of these important perspectives. Gabriel Almond and the structural functionalists appear to have minimal qualms about mechanizing the components of culture and their relations to politics. Well cognizant of the tension between the need respect uniqueness and identify patterns, an uneasy compromise which Giddens notes in both Weber's era, life, and work, Weber might overlook the tidiness of the relationships for the benefit of objectifying and restraining the ubiquitously intangible cultural

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[14] Laitin, pg. 572 charts "The three levels of analysis in studying the cultural influence of religion on political life"

[15] Harrison's summary of a Harvard conference on the topic of cultural influences on development is enough to dispel any notion that scholarly will soon converge on this central concern. The unexpected diametric disagreement between Western scholars and developing country elites as to whether cultural change is desirable (pg. xxx-xxxi) illustrates both the problems of "over- avoidance" of ethnocentric subjectivity and my earlier point of actual residents of non-Western countries calling for a better understanding of their uniqueness.

amoeba. Others might cry foul, citing the scholarly code against reification for ease of explanation. In any case, the objective observation can be made that qualitative supremacists and apologists who prefer their descriptions "thick" have a Perestroikan stronghold in cultural approaches, and to show numbers getting bigger and smaller is not nearly enough to make claims of political development or decay.

I close with the proposition that when scholars take a step back from rote scientific objectivity to express what they truly and deeply believe, they produce the eminently readable, engaging and provocative "lightning rod" works which secure their immortal niche in the scholarly canon. Even when the methodology of such works is rightfully critiqued as non-objective, there must be some value in gaining attention beyond the ivory towers and becoming a topic of popular discussion. Presumably a smaller number are incited to respond passionately by methodological pieces on objectivity and terminology than are piqued by plausible opinions and explanations supported by even the scantest of empirical evidence. In expressing their opinions, they are in fact becoming charismatic leaders, just as essential for the advancement of the field as are passionately cause-directed politicians to the continued development of state political systems. All texts pretending to scientific objectivity must be measured against an ideal type, but it is wrong, wrong, wrong to level normative judgments upon their scholarly contributions to knowledge based solely on how "well" they conform.

To the extent that one person can embody an entire approach to comparative politics, the tension and human divergence between theory and practice, Max Weber has a rival only in Marx, together, *uber alles* and related in ways upon which this already over-extended essay cannot hope to expound. Whether or not Weber's concept of charismatic dominance extends into the scholarly realm, the indelible mark he has left on the field would find comfortable comparisons in those that such archetypal political or religious leaders have given to society as a whole. And that mark of influence is objective, in the correct sense.

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