

MAX WEBER STUDIES

Kalberg, "Iron Cage" ⁿ

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The Modern World as a Monolithic Iron Cage?
Utilizing Max Weber to Define the Internal
Dynamics of the American Political Culture Today

Stephen Kalberg

Abstract

If derived from the overall thrust of his sociological writings rather than his political essays, Weber's view of modernity is characterized by attention to the unique features of various advanced industrial societies rather than by a monolithic 'iron cage' vision. This study first demonstrates this point by briefly discussing central differences in the political cultures of Germany and the United States, and then by reconstructing, following Weber, the classic dualism in the American political culture: a 'world mastery' and self-reliant individualism stands opposed to—though also intertwined with—a public sphere penetrated by civic ideals. Although Weber's expectations regarding the fate of this classical dualism in the twentieth century can be seen today to be largely incorrect, the utilization of an axiom central to his comparative-historical sociology yields a powerful conceptualization of the present-day American political culture: pendulum movements across a 'tripolar constellation' are identified. This application of Weber's sociology reveals its analytic power even today.

Keywords Weber, iron cage, civic ideal, American political culture.

Max Weber is well known for his depiction of the modern world as an 'iron cage' ('stahlhartes Gehäuse'). Along with most of his German colleagues at the fin de siècle, he viewed the coming of modern capitalism with trepidation and foreboding. How does Weber define the iron cage and does this metaphor accurately capture his view of modernity? More generally, do Weber's distinguished sociological writings assist Americans today, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, to understand their own society and, in particular, its 'political culture'?

The Iron Cage

In his most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930/2000), Weber argued that the 'inner-worldly' asceticism of

Calvinism had given birth to the notion of a 'vocational calling'. This methodical orientation toward work, as it spread widely in the American colonies, lost its religious foundations after several generations. Nonetheless, this *spirit* of capitalism, now simply a 'practical-ethical' constellation of values, or ethos, had assisted in giving birth to an industrial and highly organized form of capitalism. However, we who are born into this 'cosmos of the modern economic order' are no longer motivated to work systematically on the basis of a calling; rather, we do so simply because '[this cosmos]... tied to the technical and economic conditions at the foundation of mechanical and machine production' coerces us to do so in order to survive (Weber 1930: 181/203; trans. altered).¹ A mighty structure founded in an 'instrumental rationality' of technical, administrative, and market contingencies 'determines our lives'. 'Mechanical foundations' and 'overwhelming force' now anchor capitalism; whereas 'the Puritan wanted to be a person with a vocational calling; today we are *forced* to be' (Weber 1930: 182/204; trans. altered). Once intricately linked to work, values are no longer crucial to or cultivated in 'modern industrial labor', even though work has become elevated to the very center of our lives: 'The idea of an "obligation to search for and then accept a vocational calling" now wanders around in our lives as the ghost of beliefs no longer anchored in religion' (Weber 1930: 182/204; trans. altered).

Moreover, the advance of modern capitalism in the West occurred parallel to the development of a specific organization supremely adapted to its functioning, one which affirms an indispensable value: technically superior administration.

The bureaucratic organization, with its specialization of trained skills, its delineation of competencies, its rules and hierarchical relations of obedience...is...in the process of erecting a cage of bondage which persons—lacking all powers of resistance—will perhaps one day be forced to inhabit, as the fellahs of ancient Egypt. This *might happen if a purely technical value—a rational civil service administration and distribution of welfare benefits—becomes viewed as the ultimate and single value in reference to which the organization of all affairs ought to be decided*. The bureaucracy achieves this result much better than any other structure of domination (Weber 1968b: 1402; trans. altered).²

1. All references to Weber's texts give the page numbers of the English translation first, followed by the page numbers of the original German; information regarding the latter appears in the bibliography.

2. 'die bürokratische Organisation mit ihrer Spezialisierung der geschulten Facharbeit, ihrer Abgrenzung der Kompetenzen, ihren Reglements und hierarchisch abgestuften Gehorsamsverhältnissen...ist...an der Arbeit, das Gehäuse

In this iron cage model, the domination of bureaucracies calls forth a caste of functionaries and civil servants who monopolize power. To the extent that this takes place, 'a fettering [of] every individual to his job...his class...and maybe to his occupation' occurs, as well as the imposition upon the ruled of a 'status order' tied to the bureaucracy (Weber 1968b: 1402/332). Opportunities for the development of genuine entrepreneurs and political leaders vanish in this rigidly stratified society 'as austerly rational as a machine' (Weber 1968b: 1402/333). If the 'inescapable power' of the bureaucracy's functionaries reigns, a 'pacifism of social impotence', a loss of all societal dynamism, and a thorough stagnation throughout the society will result (Weber 1968b: 1402-403/333-34; see 1978: 281-83/62-65).

Devoid of brotherhood, compassion, and heroic ethical action, this iron cage society becomes more and more dominated by the impersonal and cautious values of the functionary on the one hand—duty, punctuality, reliability, respect for hierarchy, and so on—and instrumental calculations of interests and advantage on the other. A retreat into the private realm of intimacy where emotion and person-oriented values are still pulsating—and the *cultivation* of this private realm—is viewed as the single means of survival with a measure of dignity intact. 'Home and hearth' become the refuge; here alone warmth and deep bonds are found. In this portrait, all civic virtues and public ethics are absent and, as well, most values overarching the private domain exist as mere moribund legacies from earlier—mainly religious—epochs. They are now threatened with extinction by the mighty, inexorable expansion of calculation, manipulation, and instrumental rationality (Weber 1930: 181-82/203-204; 1946b: 155/612; 1946a: 128/560).

Innumerable interpreters to this day have taken this depiction as Weber's actual characterization of our times. He is then portrayed as a dour and haunted figure, fatalistic and despairing, yet also heroic and stoical—a brooding giant who carried the bleak burdens of the twentieth century upon his broad shoulders.

It must be acknowledged that his view of modernity was a distant cry from the many fin de siècle Anglo-Saxon, Social Darwinist

jener Hörigkeit der Zukunft herzustellen, in welche vielleicht dereinst die Menschen sich, wie die Fellachen im altägyptischen Staat, ohnmächtig zu fügen gezwungen sein werden wenn ihnen eine rein technisch gute und das heisst: eine rationale Beamtenverwaltung und -versorgung der letzte und einzige Wert ist, der über die Art der Leitung ihrer Angelegenheiten entscheiden soll. Denn das leistet die Bürokratie ganz unvergleichlich viel besser als jegliche andere Struktur der Herrschaft' (1968b [1971]: 332).

theorists who hailed the coming of the industrial age as 'progress', a new advance of civilization, and a further stage in the triumphant evolution of mankind. Weber also clearly parted ways with all 'theorists of democracy' who discovered in the industrialized world a broad and deep *civic* realm of open participation, public ideals and public ethics, and citizenship and personal liberties. Had he still been writing in the 1950s, he would have sharply disagreed with the 'modernization' theorists, all of whom asserted (in one way or another) that capitalism itself calls forth democracy and that democracy's advance proceeds roughly parallel with the march of industrialism (see Parsons 1966, 1971). To Weber:

It is utterly ridiculous to attribute an elective affinity between present-day advanced capitalism, as it...exists in America..., and 'democracy', or indeed with 'freedom' (in any sense of the word). The only question to be asked is: where it prevails, how are all these things, in general and in the long term, possible? (Weber 1978: 282/333; trans. altered; see 1968b: 1403).³

Nonetheless, the iron cage metaphor fails to encapsulate Weber's complex view of the twentieth century. First, rather than a reality, or even a short-term scenario, the iron cage constituted to Weber a nightmare vision that *might be* on our horizon. The subjunctive case, qualifying expressions (see the quotation at p. [178]), and multiple preconditions are almost always attached to his usage of this phrase (1968a: 960-61/554, 969-71/559-60, 991/572; 1968b: 1403-1404/333-35; Mommsen 1974b: 86-87).

Second, in central ways Max Weber *welcomed* the modern world—in particular the freedoms and rights it bestowed upon individuals and the very notion of the autonomous individual—and scorned the past, as well as the naive romanticism of most of his colleagues: 'After all, it is a gross deception to believe that without the achievements of the age of the 'Rights of Man' any one of us (including the most conservative) can go on living his life' (Weber 1968b: 1403).⁴ He spoke and wrote tirelessly in support of strong and contending political

3. 'Es ist höchst lächerlich, dem heutigen Hochkapitalismus, wie er...in Amerika besteht,...[eine] Wahlverwandschaft mit "Demokratie" oder gar mit "Freiheit" (in irgend einem Wortsinn) zuzuschreiben, während doch die Frage nur lauten kann: wie sind, unter seiner Herrschaft, alle diese Dinge überhaupt auf die Dauer "möglich"' (1968b [1971]: 63-64).

4. 'Denn schliesslich ist es eine gröbliche Selbsttäuschung, zu glauben, ohne diese Errungenschaften aus der Zeit der "Menschenrechte" vermöchten wir heute (auch der konservativste unter uns) überhaupt zu leben' (1968b [1971]: 333)

parties, the constitutional division of powers, an 'ethic of responsibility' for politicians, constitutional guarantees of civil liberties, and an extension of suffrage (see Weber 1968b: 1462/406; 1946a: 115-27/545-59). He argued vehemently that democracy would be possible only where strong parliaments existed, which he saw as a training ground for the political leaders of the 'plebiscitary leadership democracy' he advocated (Weber 1968b: 1409-14/341-50; Mommsen 1974a: 44-71; 1974b: 72-94). And he sought to erect various mechanisms that would sustain pluralistic, competing interest groupings in order to check the power of bureaucracies, for 'we "individualist" and party member partisans of "democratic" institutions...are swimming "against the tide" of material constellations' (Weber 1978: 282; see 281-82/63).⁵ Rather than the fatalism and despair so prominent among his contemporaries in Germany, particularly Nietzsche and Georg Simmel, skepticism mixed with appreciation characterizes his position. Indeed, he believed that, if dynamic, industrial societies offered an opportunity for the development of the autonomous individual guided by *ethical* values (Weber 1946a: 115-27/545-59; 1968a: 960-61/554, 979-80/565; 1207-10/724-26; 1978: 282/64; see Löwith 1970; Mommsen 1974b: 21-43, 86-87, 93-95; Kalberg 2000b).

Thirdly, this common portrayal of Weber as a social theorist who saw the twentieth century as an iron cage is derived largely from his political and social-philosophical essays rather than his sociological writings. Weber's comparative-historical sociology presents a far more differentiated portrait. His posture regarding modern industrial and urban societies, if extracted from these writings, is both *more dynamic* and *more differentiated* than the iron cage metaphor suggests. Cases capture his attention—specific nation-states—rather than putatively global, irreversible, and monolithic developments.

More Dynamic and More Differentiated

Weber's understanding of 'societies' as only loosely held together and as constituted from an array of competing, reciprocally interacting domains of action unfolding at varying speeds—the religious, economic, legal, domination ('Herrschaft'), status groups, and family domains (see Weber 1930: 75-78/60-62; 1968a; Kalberg 1994: 104, 149-51; 1998: 221-25)—persuades him that past developments were extremely important for any explanation of the present. It convinces

5. "Wider den Strom" der materiellen Konstellationen sind wir "Individualisten" und Parteigänger "demokratischer" Institutionen" (1968b [1971]: 64).

him as well that customs, conventions, laws, relationships of domination, and values originating in the distant past deeply permeate the present in multiple, though often obscure, ways. He rejects as far too global all modes of conceptualization that view societies as either 'traditional' or 'modern', as a 'Gemeinschaft' or a 'Gesellschaft', as does today the structural-functionalist school of modernization and political development. Weber also opposes the view that past action, if influential in the present at all, remains circumscribed in its impact and endowed with little long-term, significant consequence. The past may live on for millennia within the interstices of the present, he asserts, and even within its central core. Even the abrupt appearance of 'the new'—even the extraordinary power of charismatic leadership—never fully ruptures ties to the past: 'That which has been handed down from the past becomes everywhere the immediate precursor of that taken in the present as valid' (Weber 1968a: 29; trans. altered).⁶ Far from being banished, history interacts with the present to such an extent that, unless its influence is acknowledged, any attempt to explain the uniqueness of the present remains a hopeless undertaking (see Kalberg 1994: 158-67, 187-89; 1997).

Weber calls attention, for example, to the many ways in which the values of ascetic Protestantism, originating in seventeenth-century colonial America, endure in weakened and secularized forms in American daily life to this day: an unambivalent support of capitalism and a self-reliant individualism, a distrust of the state (especially the strong state), a basic orientation to the future and the 'opportunities' it offers, an intolerance of perceived evil, a high rate of regular giving to charity organizations, a quick and nimble capacity to form civil associations, and a strong belief in the capacity of individuals to set goals, shape their own destinies, and even to be upwardly mobile. Despite vast structural transformations—bureaucratization, urbanization, and the rise of modern capitalism—such legacies from the past endure today, he argues, penetrating into and interweaving with the homogenizing 'structural constraints' of industrialism (see Weber 1930: 155-183/63-206; 1946c; 1985). Rather than being understood as new and radically divorced from the past, modern societies are best conceptualized as mixtures—even *dynamic* mixtures—of past and present. Indeed, his mode of analysis advocates an examination of each particular country. The focus, he insists, must remain upon single cases and an assessment of each nation's *uniqueness* (Kalberg 1994: 81-84).

6. 'Überall ist das tatsächlich Hergebrachte der Vater des Geltenden gewesen' (1968a [1976]: 15).

Although both Germany and the United States, for example, were quite advanced industrial societies at the fin de siècle, they were separated by many significant differences. Whereas in Germany a strong social welfare state, a powerful elite of state civil servants, an authoritarian centralization of power and a weak parliament, a passive citizenry 'governed like sheep', a state church highly supportive of state authority, and a 'formal-rational' – Continental – legal system anchored exclusively in a constitution prevailed, as well as hierarchical social conventions and industrialization directed 'from above' by the state (see Weber 1968b: 1381-469/306-443; Mommsen 1974b: 83-86; Kalberg 1987), a quite different configuration became prominent in the United States: a decentralized and 'weak state', a division of political powers, an activist citizenry and ubiquitous voluntary associations, egalitarian social patterns, a separation of church and state, anti-authoritarian religious institutions, industrialization 'from below', and a legal system (although based in a constitution) strongly indebted to the emphasis in English Common Law upon precedent (see Weber 1988: 438-48; 1946c; 1968a: 1197-1210/717-26; 1985; Mommsen 1974b: 79-86, 92-95; Kalberg 1997). Finally, the social prestige of civil servants, so high in Germany and so central to the iron cage model, is seen to be unusually low:

Usually the social esteem of the officials is especially low where the demand for expert administration and the hold of status conventions are weak. This is often the case in new settlements by virtue of the great economic opportunities and the great instability of their social stratification: witness the United States (Weber 1968a: 960).⁷

Hence, again, the common depiction of Weber as upholding a monolithic 'iron cage' vision of the modern epoch must be rejected. His sociological writings assert that the political culture of each industrial nation is distinct unto itself.⁸ Weber insists upon case-specific contextualization even in respect to 'bureaucratization':

7. 'Die soziale Schätzung der Beamten als solcher pflegt besonders gering da zu sein, wo – wie oft in Neusiedlungsgebieten – vermöge des grossen Erwerbspielraums und der starken Labilität der sozialen Schichtung sowohl der Bedarf an fachgeschulter Verwaltung wie die Herrschaft ständischer Konventionen besonders schwach [entwickelt] sind. So namentlich in den Vereinigten Staaten' (1968a [1976]: 553).

8. See, e.g., Weber 1930; 1946c; 1985; 1968a: 889-92/509-11, 1059-69/616-24, 1204-10/721-26; 1968b: 1400/329-30, 1381-469/306-406; 1978; 1994. See also the overview discussion at 1946a: 87-114.

One must in every individual historical case analyze the special direction in which bureaucratization develops. For this reason, it must remain an open question whether the power of bureaucracy is, without exception, increasing in the modern states in which it is spreading... Thus whether the power of bureaucracy as such increases cannot be decided *a priori* (Weber 1968a: 991; trans. altered).⁹

How, then, in his comparative-historical writings, did Weber portray the United States?¹⁰ Can his analysis offer helpful insight even today into the internal workings of fin de siècle American society and, in particular, its political culture?

Max Weber on the Political Culture of the United States

Weber saw an unusual dualism as specific to the American heritage. An initiative-taking, activity-oriented, and entrepreneurial 'world mastery' ('weltbeherrschende') individualism relatively uncircumscribed by traditions was juxtaposed with its seeming opposite: a prominent *civic sphere* of ideals and values that pulled and guided individuals beyond self-interest calculations and toward the betterment of their communities. Although he recognized that both the civic and world mastery components of the American configuration had become distinctly weakened at the dawn of the twentieth century, this intertwining of forces otherwise so incompatible fascinated Weber.¹¹ His investigations led to the conclusion that, far from hap-
penstance, *both* orientations – to self and to community – had planted deep roots in the American soil, particularly in its religious history (see Weber 1930: 155-183/163-206; 1946c; 1985; 1968a: 1204-11/721-26).

9. 'Stets ist also der einzelne historische Fall daraufhin zu betrachten, in welcher speziellen Richtung gerade bei ihm die Bürokratisierung verlief. Es soll daher hier auch unentschieden bleiben, ob gerade die modernen Staaten, deren Bürokratisierung überall fortschreitet, dabei auch ausnahmslos eine universelle Zunahme der Macht der Bürokratie innerhalb des Staatswesens aufweisen... Ob die Macht der Bürokratie als solcher zunimmt, ist also *a priori*... nicht zu entscheiden' (1968a [1976]: 572).

10. On the United States, see further Weber 1930; 1946c; 1968a: 1198-210; 1985; see also Mommsen 1974b; Roth 1985, 1987/717-20; Scaff 1998.

11. Roth (1985; 1987: 165-200; 1997) and Mommsen (1974b) offer summary portrayals of the significant ways in which Weber's generally positive views on the United States varied from those of his German colleagues. He admired in particular the self-reliant individualism of the Americans and their unwillingness to attribute exaggerated authority to the state. He found Germans sorely lacking on both counts (see Mommsen 1974b: 83-86; Roth 1993; 1997: 665-70).

The Religious Origins of World Mastery Individualism and Civic Sphere Ideals

American ascetic Protestantism—the Calvinist, Pietist, Methodist, Baptist, Quaker, and Mennonite churches—called forth an intense, task-oriented individualism. These believers were expected to keep an especially vigilant ‘watchfulness’ over all creaturely impulses, for the corrupting enticements of worldly pleasure were abjured to an unusual degree; however, an exclusive reliance upon the believer’s own inner resources was also expected. The sacraments or other rituals could not assist the devout, even though ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ became understood in rigidly moral terms. Nor could a clergy provide assurance regarding salvation. Standing alone before a wrathful, omnipotent and vengeful Old Testament God and responsible solely to him, the devout had to rely exclusively upon themselves to create ‘evidence’ of their predestined status and thereby to ameliorate anxiety regarding the most important question: ‘Am I among the saved?’ (Weber 1930: 104-105/94, 123/122; 1968a: 1198-1200/717-19).

Yet the injunction of asceticism—to focus the individual’s energies, through heroic discipline, on behalf of a taming of the creaturely impulses—was only one demand placed upon ascetic Protestants. In addition, the faithful were expected to ‘master’ worldly evil by undertaking the creation on earth of the Kingdom of God. Because neither tolerance of nor separation from evil could be allowed, a religious obligation of world mastery became an imperative to the devout: to act in accord with God’s commandments and *against* worldly evil, even against secular authority and popular opinion if necessary. Hence, these believers never practiced an individualism inclined toward compromise, caution, and contemplation; instead, a steadfast, ‘world-oriented’ individualism was cultivated that endowed early Americans with resoluteness and a robust optimism regarding their capacity to confront traditions. The alteration of society as a whole—the creation of the Kingdom of God—constituted its aim (Weber 1930: 108-109/99-101, 223 n. 27/96 n. 3; 1946c: 321/234-35; 1985: 10-11/392-94; 1968a: 1207-09/724-26).¹² Thus, the improvement of the community became viewed by ascetic Protestants as part and parcel of one’s religious obligation and as a service to God.

This occurred in another manner as well. As noted, the devout were alone responsible for seeking alleviation of the excruciating anxiety

12. On the elective affinity of this set of values even today—now fully secularized—with an American foreign policy in part anchored in a missionary consciousness, see Kalberg 1991.

that accompanied uncertainty regarding the central question for believers: their *personal* salvation status. Yet Calvinists in particular could convince themselves, through their actions (*‘Bewährung’*), of their status among the saved. Weber emphasizes a particular mechanism for doing so: if worldly success—defined as material prosperity—is attained, the faithful can conclude that an omniscient and omnipotent God has bestowed his favor. And this Deity, of course, would offer such a ‘sign’ *only* to the predestined. Unusually strong ‘psychological premiums’ became awarded in this manner to methodical work; only through systematic labor might material prosperity be attained (Weber 1930: 172/192; 1968a: 572-73/346-47, 1197-200/717-19, 1203-210/721-26).¹³

Remarkably, even though ultimately motivated by the search to clarify the *individual’s* salvation status, precisely this intensification of work had the effect of accentuating the commitment of believers *to a community*. For, although left alone by ascetic Protestant doctrine to create ‘evidences’ of their membership among the saved, the methodical work of the devout in a calling (*‘Beruf’*)—the means of doing so—never served only the individual. Instead, God’s glory required the faithful to labor on His behalf and to create the humane earthly Kingdom in His honor. Hence, labor became methodical, yet also oriented in part away from the egocentric individual’s interests and toward far broader tasks. This Mission constituted a *religious obligation*. In this way, work *tied* believers into a community and took place for a purpose larger than utilitarian calculations aimed at accumulating material goods. A clear dualism is apparent: a world mastery individualism focussed upon individual rights and the capacity of individuals to shape and re-shape their personal destinies, yet an equally strong thrust toward engagement in a community and its improvement.

Furthermore, a delineated organization crystallized as the ‘social carrier’ (*‘Träger’*) for the psychological rewards placed upon community participation by ascetic, ‘this-worldly’ Protestantism: the congregation. Because a *family* of trust and helpfulness existed in this organization, it served as a viable and natural ‘training ground’ for group participation skills. Here, in a secure milieu of fellow believers, the rules of ‘self-government’ and a notion of service to the group could be taught. A push toward civic activism, yet also toward a goal-oriented individualism, crystallized from this religious experience

13. Only aspects of Weber’s extremely complex analysis can be noted here. See Kalberg 1996: 57-64; 2000a.

and left a broad imprint upon colonial America and the early United States (see Weber 1946c, 1985).

Owing to the centrality of work and the religious significance of successful trade and profit, and the ascetic's strict vow to respect God's commandments, trust, truthful advice, and the ethic of fair play became constituted as firm ideals even for commercial relationships. Once established in this domain, these ideals carried over, although to a varying extent as a consequence of regional differences, into the political sphere and erected strong *ideals* of truthfulness, social trust, good will, and fair play for public life generally. Occurring long before the onset of industrialism in the mid-nineteenth century, a strong penetration of the public realm by these ideals took place. A *civic sphere* of 'public ethics' came into existence and elected officials were expected to abide by its high standards.¹⁴

Strong civic ideals appeared in the political cultures of nations, according to Weber, only rarely; they cannot be understood as simply evolutionary concomitants of industrialization (see Parsons 1966, 1971; Kalberg 1993, 1997).¹⁵ Moreover, their juxtaposition with a world-mastery individualism was, he believed, extremely unusual. Indeed, on the basis of a common foundation in ascetic Protestantism, civic values were reciprocally intertwined with this activist individualism. As it became substantial and broad in scope, the civic realm became empowered to direct individualism, pulling it away, as asceticism became weaker and failed to do so, from an exclusive focus upon an egocentric striving for material prosperity and toward the improvement of community standards. Civic ideals also prevented this individualism from readily following a course of decline into merely instrumental, self-oriented calculations of interests and advantage. On the other hand, because it endowed persons with the strength and self-confidence to act 'in the world' and to defend—in moral terms if necessary—values, principles, and rights, even against great obstacles, activist individualism in the colonial era and early United States repeatedly rejuvenated public ethics. Indeed, this 'world-oriented'

14. Wherever such a civic sphere becomes well-developed, the violation of its values by elected officials will be noted. In egregious cases (e.g. Watergate, Monicagate) the public will react strongly. For an expanded version of the argument presented in the last few paragraphs, see Kalberg 1997: 212-16.

15. Hence, the position taken here is fully analogous to Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic: the origin of an 'economic ethic'* (the spirit of capitalism) cannot be explained by reference to an 'economic form' (a modern capitalist economy). See Weber 1930: 64-67/49-52, 75-78/60-62. The particular social context of each case must be attended to.

individualism might be said to be a social-cultural necessity if a viable notion of the individual's right to oppose authority and power is to exist in a sociologically significant manner (Weber 1968a: 1204-11/721-26; 1988: 438-49).¹⁶ In turn, owing to the high demands civic ideals placed upon persons to reform communities—to *act*—on behalf of ethical values, world mastery individualism was perpetually invigorated. A mutually sustaining dynamic congealed (Kalberg 1997: 209-16).

Weber saw that a quite unusual dualism, when viewed from a comparative perspective, characterized *this* political culture. Moreover, it broke assunder the iron cage dichotomy in which a public sphere pervaded by technical, administrative, and market constraints, devoid of civic ideals, and dominated by raw power and calculations of interests unbounded by values, called forth its polar opposite: an apolitical, deeply private refuge in which intimate relations of warmth and compassion were cultivated. In the colonial era and early United States, on the contrary, *civic ideals* of honesty, fair play, social trust, good will, and equality of treatment—an *ethos*—penetrated the public domain and directed an activist individualism away from sheer interest-oriented pursuits, power-seeking machinations, egocentrism, and indulgence in the unlimited temptations of daily life.

Of course, Weber knew well that corruption and a 'spoils system' remained widespread in the America of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, and that power and crass calculation frequently prevailed over public ethics. Indeed, he sees ethical action in reference to a public ethos as the exception and the corrupt politics of city machines as unusually widespread (Weber 1946a: 108-10/538-40; 1968b: 1401/331; 1978: 281-82/63). Nonetheless, because deeply rooted in American religious history, civic virtues remained to him of significant sociological impact, even if now mainly as legacies. Quite different parameters and dichotomies characterized the iron cage model, as well as those political cultures in which civil servant functionaries, the state's laws, and closed political parties largely encompass—even monopolize—all understandings of the civic domain.¹⁷ The unusual pendulum movement placed into motion by the

16. Thus, Weber found this aspect of the American political culture to have specific religious roots—all of which he found to be lacking in Germany. The work of Jellinek stimulated his early interest in this theme. See Jellinek 1901; Roth 1971; Mommsen 1974b: 76.

17. As in the case of Germany (Weber 1946a: 103/533, 111-14/541-45; 1968b: 1994).

uniquely American dualism—a broadened civic sphere penetrated by ethical values interweaving intimately with a world-mastery individualism—in large part accounted, Weber argued, for the dynamism and restlessness characteristic of the American political culture.

Applying Weber's Analysis: American Political Culture Today

Although Weber adequately charted the American political culture's classic dualism, he failed to identify the manner in which it would become weakened. It appeared likely to him that large-scale bureaucratization would eventually accompany industrialization in the United States, as it had in Europe, and thus an enhancement of the power and prestige of civil servants and managers would likely occur. As functionaries in possession of specialized knowledge and capable of concentrating power in large organizations intruded into domains of policy-making appropriately ones of open political debate and conflict between parties, the few remaining legacies of public sphere ideals would, Weber feared, disappear. Massive 'ossification' would then proceed and a closed, rigid, and inward-looking society devoid of noble ideals, pluralistic and competing values, and ethical action would come into being. The civil servant 'type of person' ('Menschentyp')—risk-averse, cautious, and petty—would become the dominant figure (Weber: 1946a: 88/516-17; 1968a: 971/560; 1968b: 1398/327-28, 1400-405/329-36; 1978: 281-82/61-62; Mommsen 1974b: 86-89, 92; Roth 1985).

As social commentators in the United States in recent years have lamented, a 'loss of the civic' and a weakening of public ethics appears to have taken place (see Etzioni 1997, 1998; Bellah *et al.* 1985; Putnam 1995; Selznick 1994). However, this transformation has occurred for reasons Weber never identified. Up to the immediate present, American political history has repeatedly been marked by waves of populist protest against bureaucratization—of both the state and political parties—and a cohesive caste of prestigious functionaries has not crystallized.¹⁸ Instead, civic values have weakened more as a consequence of a ubiquitous, intense consumer culture and an

18. Both Roth and Mommsen have argued that Weber's prediction—the USA would follow the European path toward ever greater bureaucratization—has been proven erroneous. Roth offers an extended analysis (Roth 1985: 224-28; 1987: 15-57; Mommsen 1974b: 89). The continuous discussion in the German press over the last twenty years on the 'disappearance of the entrepreneurial spirit' in Germany, and the lack of such a discussion in the American press, might offer a suitable point of departure for the empirical investigation of this theme.

extraordinarily vibrant entertainment culture. Both are highly attractive domains that oppose, and compete with, the ideals of the civic sphere.

The American world-mastery individualism appears directed less and less to both self-oriented material prosperity and a constellation of civic values, and more and more to both self-oriented material prosperity and the consumer-entertainment cultures. An intensity unrivalled in other post-industrial nations is apparent. Originally thoroughly interwoven with and invigorated by the civic realm, activist individualism has become severed from this guiding force to a significant degree and is now systematically courted and cultivated by Madison Avenue executives with social science degrees. Civic ideals have been rendered more narrow in scope by a 'public sphere' now penetrated widely by the consumer and entertainment industries. Both offer friendliness, comfort, excitement, images of romance, and hope for the individual's prosperity.

The new political culture differs from the old in yet another manner. While the earlier dualism implied a strong civic component that held in check a decline of task-oriented individualism into egocentrism, the recent dualism places very different barriers against all self-orientation: a contribution to community improvement and a civic community, let alone an overcoming of evil on behalf of God's greater glory, now seems eviscerated as a force capable of pulling and directing activist individualism; rather, both subtle and overt pressures to conform to 'the fashionable', 'the hot', and 'the trendy' do so. Whereas the earlier individualism/civic dualism invoked a mutually sustaining *dynamism* that invigorated *both* individualism and civic components across a society-wide spectrum, the individualism/consumer-entertainment dualism pursues a different agenda: rather than in the end erecting obstacles against the individual's exclusive orientation to material prosperity, the consumer-entertainment cultures are closely aligned with this orientation. While perhaps not immediately apparent, the long-term outcome is clear: a weakened individualism and civic sphere, as well as societal dynamism and openness, and an unequivocal drift toward greater social conformism.

Although Weber only vaguely foresaw this metamorphosis (Weber 1930: 181-82/203-204), he would not have been fully surprised at this paradoxical turn in which a single factor originating from an orientation to transcendent commandments and religious values—a self-reliant and world-mastery individualism—in a later historical epoch subverted its indispensable sustaining counterpart: substantial and demarcated civic sphere ideals. He had discovered such ironic twists

and unforeseen consequences of this order of historical magnitude throughout the histories of the East and West.¹⁹ They stand at the very foundation of his comparative-historical sociology.

However, this depiction of the new American political culture, which assumes the near disappearance of civic ideals, stands opposed to a further basic axiom at the center of Weber's empirical sociology — one which casts a different light upon this monumental transformation. He argued repeatedly and vehemently that significant developments, once firmly anchored sociologically, do not precipitously fade from a nation's social landscape, and surely not as a consequence of short-term challenges.²⁰ Firmly rooted legacies from the past remain viable, especially if a societal shift occurs that calls to the fore new groupings and organizations to serve as the 'social carriers' of these action-orientations rooted in the past.²¹ Even if dormant for longer periods, legacies live on, awaiting only altered contextual constellations to become strongly influential once again. Past and present are, to Weber, intimately intertwined.²²

Cognizance of this major tenet in Weber's sociology forces revision of the above analysis; the individualism/consumer-entertainment dualism must be acknowledged as incompletely capturing the new American political culture. Rather, a *triumvirate* of forces now prevails: world mastery individualism, the consumer-entertainment industries, and civic sphere ideals. Though threatened, these ideals live on owing to their deep rootedness in long-term, religion-based patterns of action.²³ Sometimes, amidst the cascading fluctuations of the present, these *three* realms retain delimited boundaries and, in varying degrees, oppose one another; at others each becomes, in varying degrees, interpenetrated by and interwoven with the others.

19. The most prominent example is from *The Protestant Ethic*: anchored in religious values, the Calvinist's methodical organization of life ('*Lebensführung*') created riches that ultimately undermined just these religious values. One way in which Weber documents unforeseen consequences is by reference to the 'routinization of charisma', which reappears throughout his comparative writings.

20. See the list above (p. 182) of values originating out of ascetic Protestantism that remain prominent in American society even today (see also Kalberg 1997).

21. The successful shift from churches and sects ('the Protestant ethic') as carrier organizations to civic and voluntary associations ('the spirit of capitalism') as carriers stands as a central component in Weber's 'Protestant ethic thesis' (Kalberg 1996: 62-64). On social carriers, see Kalberg 1994: 58-62.

22. I have repeatedly discussed the manner in which this occurs in Weber's sociology. See Kalberg 1994: 158-68, 187-89; 1997: 212-16; 1998: 232-35; 1999: 233-36.

23. Indeed, the classic American dualism is, in those more religion-oriented regions of the nation (e.g. the Midwest), overtly sustained to this day.

Sometimes these domains ceaselessly compete with one another; at others they fall into firm alignments; at still other times a single domain appears dominant.²⁴

Hence, a tripolar constellation now defines and pushes the pendulum of the American political culture. Although thoroughly severed from the old dualism, this new configuration is also unique and unlike that of any other post-industrial nation. It continues to stand as well in stark contrast to the iron cage model. Nearly one hundred years later, fundamental aspects of Max Weber's sociology have assisted the identification of its content, parameters, tensions, and internal dynamics.²⁵

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24. The endurance of civic ideals is evident in a variety of ways, from, for example, the comparatively high levels of participation by Americans in volunteer and charitable activities to the continuing discussion of communitarianism (see Etzioni 1997, 1998). Further evidence can be found in the continuing attempts by politicians to assert the viability of civic ideals into American foreign policy — and hence to endow them with a universal validity (Kalberg 1991).

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