

## Max Weber's contribution, theoretical and methodological aspects of his thought and his influences on contemporary political theory

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### ABSTRACT

This paper will address the importance of Max Weber's contribution to contemporary political theory, through an examination of some key aspects of his theory and his methodology for analyzing the social and political world. It will also attempt to establish some connections between Weber's contribution and some schools of thought that emerged later. The influence of this author on liberal thought and the pluralist current will be briefly highlighted. The current of what is now called pluralism will be given priority, perhaps because this is one of the main reflections of Max Weber's thought in contemporary times, or perhaps because it allows for a wider range of elements for discussing the theory of this social scientist.

**Keywords:** Max Weber, Weberian Thought, Contemporary Political Theory, Pluralism.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article will attempt to clarify the importance of Max Weber's contribution to contemporary political theory by examining some of the main aspects of his theory and his methodology for analyzing the social and political world. It will also attempt to establish some connections between Weber's contribution and some schools of thought that emerged later. The author's influence on liberal thought and the pluralist current will be briefly highlighted. What is now called pluralism will be given priority, perhaps because it is one of the main reflections of Max Weber's thought in contemporary times, or perhaps because it allows for a wider range of elements for discussing this social scientist's theory.

Talking about Max Weber is not easy, given that there is often a preponderance of orthodox Marxism in academia, which ends up simply suppressing Weber's thought. Despite this, one cannot ignore the great influence of this thinker on the social sciences, notably on liberal political thought.

## DEVELOPMENT

There is also a certain difficulty in analyzing Weber's contribution without contrasting it with Marx's thought. When Weber is discussed, the resource used is almost always to compare him to Marx, thus establishing, in most cases, the differences in their approaches and interpretations of social reality. It is true that these authors have quite divergent conceptions about the study and understanding of the social world, but what we will attempt in this essay is to demonstrate Weber's thought more strictly, emphasizing his contributions to political science. Of course, comparative references will sometimes be made regarding these authors, as this is a tool that in many cases contributes to the clarification of the topics discussed. Even so, what will be prioritized is Weber's social thought, its characteristics and its assumptions. Let us now move on to an outline of Max Weber's main concepts and the characterization of his sociological approach. To begin with, we can highlight some of the main concepts he used in his various works, such as: objectivity in the social sciences, ideal types, methodological individualism, the State and bureaucracy, types of domination and the issue of legitimacy.

To begin with, it would be essential to discuss the assumptions of his theory. And when talking about assumptions, we cannot ignore the fact that, for Weber, the sensible world, the world that the social sciences face, is a practically infinite world, infinitely complex and can never be grasped in its entirety by the scientist. For Weber, reality is composed of an infinity of causal relationships that manifest themselves in the world, but that in no way

can be captured in their entirety by the social sciences. At this point, we can say that Weber comes very close to Kantian thought.

Still on this issue, we can say that Weber believed that even despite this difficulty, it was possible to construct a rational and rigorous social science. In this way, he removed the sublime supremacy of historical and holistic thinking to emphasize a social science based on methodological individualism, which will be discussed shortly.

And, if the world is a polyhedron that is practically impossible to describe or study in its entirety, what remains for the social scientist is to look for a cause-and-effect relationship, among so many that exist, and try to understand it. But one might ask how to make such a choice if there are so many social phenomena to be understood? Well, Weber believes that it is precisely at this moment that the entire framework of values and subjective convictions of the researcher comes into play. It is at this moment that the individual's value structure serves as a balance for the social scientist. It is from this that the researcher will prioritize certain objects to be uncovered in the social world and will thus seek to establish some causal relationship between them.

In this context, objectivity should not be affected, much less should the search for causality be suppressed and replaced by intuition. Even though value judgments may interfere in scientific debate to some extent, they cannot be validated by scientific investigation. Weber rejects, in any case, the idea of considering history as having universal laws, especially single-factor explanations, such as the economic explanation. For Max Weber, history is an instrument that allows the identification of probabilities, nothing more than that. To corroborate this explanation, we can quote Weber's own words at the end of the book "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" in which the author says:

*"Here we have only attempted to trace the facts and the direction of its influence (of Protestant ethics) from just one, albeit important, point of view. However, it will also be necessary to investigate how Protestant asceticism was in turn influenced in its development and character by the set of social, and especially economic, conditions." (WEBER, 2002, p.132).*

In this short excerpt from the book, it is clear that Weber does not strive to find just one cause for the development of capitalism. In the case of the research above, he considered Protestant asceticism to be one of these causes. Although he considered Protestantism to be an important factor in the emergence of capitalism, a factor he favored, he did not consider this factor to be the only one to be considered in relation to such a context. He raised the importance of observing other factors that may have interfered, some more, some less, in such a social phenomenon.

It is to put an end to historical interpretation, which according to Weber is mistaken, that he constructs the so-called “ideal types” as a methodological instrument. Ideal types are “constructs” created by scientists in an abstract way, so that they can be compared with real facts. The ideal type is Max Weber's main methodological tool, and it contrasts with the method of studying societies from a historical perspective. The construction of ideal types ended up being the means by which a historical event could be related to its real causes. The Weberian ideal type is a kind of model created by the scientist, within which he lists the main characteristics of a given event, giving greater or lesser emphasis to each element to be studied. It is a kind of methodological guide, which allows this logically constructed model to be compared with real situations, thus trying to understand their similarities and/or differences between them.

It is from this heuristic instrument that the Weberian methodology is constructed, but other assumptions of the author about social reality are also added to this aspect, aspects that must be duly examined. Starting from the main classics of sociological theory, Durkheim, Marx and Weber, important differences can be observed with respect to the assumptions of each one's social analysis.

Durkheim takes into account the strong influence of institutions on the individual. He believed that society is something greater than the simple sum of individuals. According to this thinker, it (society) is a “thing” external to individuals, which imposes itself and in a certain way shapes and compresses the conduct of each one.

Regarding Marx, we could also raise a multitude of assumptions here, but for now it would be important to highlight that for this author the main emphasis is placed on social relations themselves, which derive from the way in which society produces. Thus, the focus of Marxist analysis lies in the relations established between individuals, based on the way in which they are organized to produce their material life.

Finally, and returning to what is of interest in this essay, it can be observed that Weber's analysis focuses on the individual, hence the so-called methodological individualism. While in Durkheim the focus is overall, for Weber the analysis starts from individualism, that is, it is by starting from the understanding of the individual that some result can be reached in the social sciences.

About methodological individualism, we can observe what the author Cohn says about it:

*“The fundamental importance of the reference to the individual agent, at this point, consists in the fact that he is the only entity in which the specific meanings of these different spheres of action are simultaneously present and can come into contact.”*

*That is, if the different spheres of existence run parallel... the analysis of the relations between them (or rather, between their meanings) is only possible with reference to this entity that sustains them through its action and is the simultaneous bearer of multiple of them: the individual agent.” (COHN, 1982, p.29)*

Within this concept, it is worth highlighting that there is an important difference between “social action” and “social relationship”. While the former refers to another individual and is significantly oriented towards that other (or others), the latter refers to a conduct that is meaningful and shared by many individuals. For example, the act of greeting a person is a social action, since it is directed towards another person and has an individual meaning, but the fact that people greet each other is a social relationship, since it is shared by multiple individuals in society.

As can be seen, methodological individualism is a major assumption for Weber. It is from this that we can understand another important part of his theory, the issue of the State.

Weber’s definition of the State greatly helps in the exercise of understanding this work. In his book, “Science and Politics: Two Vocations” he says:

*“However, nowadays we must conceive of the contemporary State as a human community that, within the limits of a given territory – the notion of territory corresponds to one of the essential elements of the State – claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence.” (WEBER, 2002, p. 60)*

If he considers the State as the element of society that has the privilege of the legitimate use of force in a given territory, there is something that cements this relationship of domination and he seeks to justify how this occurs. He defines three reasons that justify domination and consequently underpin its legitimacy. The first of these is “traditional power” validated by habit and tradition rooted among men over time.

The second type of domination is based on charismatic power, in which the charisma and extraordinary gifts of the individual stand out instead of the authority of traditional power. The charismatic leader is always someone prodigious, special or even exceptional, who has great devotion and trust from the people. Thirdly, and what can be considered the most important type of legitimate domination, one could even speak of something “more legitimate” according to Weber, which is the case of rational-legal domination, exercised by the State. For him:

*“there is authority that is imposed by ‘legality’, by the belief in the validity of a legal status and a positive ‘competence’, structured in rationally established rules or, in other words, authority based on obedience, which recognizes obligations concerning the established status. This is power, as it is exercised by the ‘servant of the State’ today and as it is exercised by all holders of power who approach it.” (WEBER, 2002, p. 61)*

For Weber, the State is the consolidation of a rational domination, based on rules. And its role is to be pluralistic (later on we will discuss the relationship between Weberian theory and pluralism), of physical force and legitimate domination, with the function of promoting competition and the distribution of power. It is because of its rational essence that it has functional and specialization differences and results in order, harmony and efficiency. It is in this context of order and rationality of the State that Weber highlights the role of bureaucratization as something positive.

According to Gerth and Mills, the “principle of rationalization is the most general element of Weber's Philosophy of History” (GERTH and MILLS, 1982, p. 68). They also add that “the rise and fall of institutional structures, the ups and downs of classes, parties and rulers implement the general trend of secular rationalization” (GERTH and MILLS, 1982, p. 68). Thus, the development of state bureaucracy is essential in this “secularization” of societies, as these mythical-magical-religious structures gradually disappear to make way for rationalized structures of domination based on efficiency criteria.

Unlike Marx, who considered the State as a kind of “executive committee of the bourgeoisie” and foretold in his theory a future without it, Weber believed that the State constitutes a unique element in the consolidation of modern societies, as it symbolizes the development of rationalization and the consequent replacement of “enchanted” forms of domination by more rational, secularized and, therefore, more legitimate forms.

After defining some essential concepts of Weberian theory, one could then ask what is the legacy of all this for contemporary political theory? What are the currents of thought engendered in line with Weber's thought?

Before attempting to answer this question, a brief explanation about Weberian theory and liberal analysis is necessary here. Analyzing this author's theory, one can find most of the assumptions of contemporary liberal theories. Although there is often an attempt to conceal the dichotomy that exists in theories, in a more general way, one cannot deny the existence of two basic currents in political studies, for many years, which is the opposition of Marxism, which favors a historical and holistic approach, and a theory based on Weberian assumptions and those of other authors, which takes into account more specifically the individual. This means that Weber's theory provides the theoretical framework for the construction of a study that favors the individual, and consequently this leads to the elaboration of a thought that advocates a liberal State, that is, the liberal State should be as small as possible, should interfere as little as possible in the freedoms of the individual. It acts only as a guardian of the freedom of its citizens. In the liberal State,

efficiency prevails, based mainly on market laws and its power of self-regulation. Methodological individualism is a concept that fits perfectly into this model of the State, since the individual is the main focus of this type of construction, and it is only from this individual that one can reach an understanding of modern society, thus minimizing the presence and interference of the State.

Returning to the attempt to answer the question above, it can be said that, if Weber's theory influenced most liberal theories, in contrast to Marxist theories, it also influenced other lines of research in political science. Therefore, in some of them, the assumptions of this author cannot be clearly found, and sometimes even some references to divergent theories are found. But what one wants to find is a theory that is derived, at least in large part, from Weberian theory.

Thus, pluralism stands out as a school that “maintains that democracy is premised on the diversity of interests and the distribution of power. Theories of pluralism derive from liberal economic and political thought.” (CHILCOTE, 1998, p. 377).

Pluralism takes into account the multiplicity of interest groups present in society and their intense dispute in the political arena. The State acts as a kind of “filter”, ensuring that this demand is met or not, in order to try to establish a consensual balance of power in society. Several authors stand out in the pluralist current, who often disagree with each other. Among them, we highlight Pareto and Mosca, with their theses on elitism and Robert Dahl's pluralism. It is not possible to explain the theory of each of these authors in detail here, since the main purpose is to demonstrate Weber's influence on contemporary political science.

It is clear that pluralist theory is in one way or another related to Weber's propositions, insofar as it prioritizes the interests of individuals, even if they are part of pressure groups. The main thing to be observed is the behavior of the State, as a space to resolve and optimize the demands of the various interests at stake.

It is also essential to understand pluralism as a kind of official ideology of modern democratic liberalism, since it is based on the understanding that there is a multiplicity of interests in society that must be duly weighed and adjusted. It is a fact that for Weber, unlike Marx, interests are subjective and idiosyncratic, and are not configured as something merely economic. According to Chilcote, “theories of conflict and consensus postulate that all societies are in a state of flux or mixture between the occurrence of conflicts and the occurrence of consensus.” (CHILCOTE, 1998, p.385). In this excerpt, Chilcote elucidates another important factor, consensus. It is the search for consensus, in the face of the

variability of conflicting interests, that also characterizes the pluralist approach. It is in pluralism that the various interests that come into dispute in the political field are taken into account, referring notably to the actions of groups. Hence the fact that it would be difficult to incorporate a Marxist view of social classes into this approach. Obviously, there are a number of criticisms that can be raised about the pluralist view, which would perhaps deserve another essay. But it is not difficult to highlight some of them here. First, the question is whether this plural model, which takes into account group interests, would not be insufficient for underdeveloped countries like Brazil? And what about individuals who are not part of any group? In a country with such a high level of poverty, where most individuals lack even the minimum conditions for survival, would this model be applicable?

Another question that remains in the air, also very important regarding the criticism of pluralism, is the following: does this model, applied to third world countries like Brazil, end up concealing the current social injustices, with an ideological discourse that there is a substantive democracy in society that takes into account the infinity of interests? Could this be a way of guaranteeing and corroborating the so-called democratic liberalism, which in most cases does not have much of a democratic aspect? These questions may be seen as a staleness of Marxist theory, but they must be properly weighed to allow for a clearer theory.

Other questions could be asked on this subject, but for now what has been said is satisfactory. It is from the set of ideas, assumptions and, one might say, Weberian theory that we have attempted to address in the best possible way some of the main concepts of this author's thought.

## CONCLUSION

As we move towards the end of this work, it would be important to provide a general overview of what was discussed and the appropriate conclusions about the issues raised. First, we attempted to clarify some of the main concepts of Weber's theory. This endeavor aimed to define more specifically some of Weber's essential concepts, insofar as they had some relation to political theory. Among them, some were highlighted and succinctly explained, such as the objectivity of knowledge in the social sciences, ideal types, methodological individualism, forms of domination and legitimation, and finally the question of the State.

By defining these terms, we sought to develop a small theoretical framework that would allow us to understand some of Weber's assumptions in the study of societies. After

doing so, we then set out to look for relationships between this set of premises and their influence on contemporary liberal political theories, which end up “borrowing” several of this sociologist's concepts in the elaboration of their theories.

Finally, a brief explanation was given of some aspects of the so-called pluralist theory, which considers the multiplicity of interests of groups in the political field. Some criticisms were raised about this school of thought and social approach. Of course, there is a huge range of theories that could be examined considering Max Weber's theory; group theory was chosen simply because it is a good representative of this subject. Perhaps what should be made clearer is the fact that Weber's theory has a strong influence on contemporary political theories, from the most liberal to more functional ones such as systems theory. But the most important thing about this whole story is that Weber left important contributions to political theory, providing assumptions for the various liberal theories that currently reign almost absolutely, especially on a global scale. This can be duly questioned and criticized, but that will be left for another time.

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