

## **Weber and politics\***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The essay deals with several political aspects of Weber's ideas, stressing both their continued interest for current debates in political science and the difficulties and negative consequences of some of them. In the first section, Weber's model of bureaucracy, recently attacked from a so-called "managerial" perspective, is defended from both the point of view of efficiency and of democracy. The next section, after relating Weber's views on legitimacy with certain assumptions and embarrassments of the rational choice approach, his ideas on the market are elaborated with regard to their analytic and doctrinaire contribution to an appropriate conception of political development and to the model of a pluralist society. In the last section, the discussion turns around Weber's confusions and inconsistencies on the themes of rationality and ethics.

**Key words:** Bureaucracy; Democracy; Legitimacy; Institutionalization; Market; Pluralism; Rationality; Ethics.

I would like to begin by pointing out that I am not a Max Weber scholar, nor do I lay claim to any special Weberian erudition. Thus, apart from some brief references to specific passages, instead of a "Talmudic" commentary closely attached to the richness of Weber's texts, I will focus on problems of current interest (or, at least, problems that are of interest to myself) and on the benefits to be extracted, in their discussion, from a reference to Weber. Let me warn from the start that the usefulness of turning to Weber is related, in my view, not only to

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the merits of his ideas, but also, occasionally, to the need to overcome misunderstandings that these ideas have helped to sustain and promote.

In this paper I revisit and review a presentation made years ago in a symposium on “The actuality of Max Weber”, organized by Jessé Souza and hosted by the University of Brasília (Reis, 2000a). But besides reformulating and deepening, to a higher or lesser degree, some of the issues treated then, a substantial part of the discussion below is directed at themes I did not have a chance to deal with on that occasion. I will divide the discussion in three sections: “Bureaucracy and democracy”, “Legitimacy, political institutionalization, and utopia”, and “Rationality and ethics”.

### **I- Bureaucracy and democracy**

Let us start with the theme of bureaucracy. This theme has recently become the object of more or less ambitious revisions in certain fields, including the technical international literature on public administration and, in Brazil, especially the ideas proposed by former minister Bresser Pereira in connection with the goal of state reform (Osborne and Gaebler, 1994; Bresser Pereira, 1996). The Weberian ideas on the phenomenon of bureaucracy tend to appear in such revisions as resulting in a ritualistic machine, stuck and stupid. As a consequence, it would be necessary to “reinvent” government or public administration, and to substitute the flexibility, agility, and efficiency of a “managerial” model for the stupidity of the bureaucratic one.

It is, of course, legitimate to pose the question of the extent to which different types of organization may be akin to the Weberian model of bureaucracy. The relevant literature in sociology has long been opposing the Weberian model to, for instance, the “human relations” model, which would better adjust to such organizations as schools and hospitals, whose operation involve, in certain important respects, forms of interaction less prone to standardization.

Recent revisions, however, focus on structures – in particular the state itself – that unmistakably belong to the traditional “Weberian” field. They tend to adopt a peculiar perspective, in which Weber’s idea of bureaucracy acquires the negative meaning it has colloquially come to bear, especially the alleged propensity of administrative agents to attach ritualistically to the means while losing sight of the ends of administration as an activity.

Now, this amounts to taking the exacerbation or degeneration of a trait for the trait itself. For the inspiration of bureaucratic administration in Weber's analysis, where it appears in an idealized or stylized form, is unequivocally efficiency; and it is in this sense, of course, that bureaucratic administration is a synonym for rational administration. The standardization of procedures is but an instrument for greater efficiency, especially when dealing with situations that involve routine decisions, applicable to a great number of cases and instances. After all, public administration is supposedly an auxiliary and instrumental structure whose role is to put into practice, in the monotony of everyday administrative activity, the decisions made within the state's political sphere – which are the ones having to do with the ends of state action and which, as such, necessarily demand conditions of greater flexibility.

But this unfolds into something else of great importance, namely, the link between bureaucracy and democracy. As an instrument, bureaucratic administration may of course associate with despotism or authoritarianism, in which case it will be serving the purposes of those who hold the authoritarian power. However, if one wishes to have democracy in any minimally complex society, bureaucracy is indispensable. For such traits as meticulous procedures, recourse to universalistic and impersonal rules, and observance of the appropriate definition of competences are necessary conditions for a responsible state, sensitive to the autonomy and equality of citizens, and thus for ensuring that flexibility in the political definition of the ends of state action does not result in arbitrariness. That is why the adjective “legal” adjoins “rational” in Weber's definition of the form of domination which perhaps most characteristically resorts to bureaucratic instruments.

This does not authorize, to be sure, the attempt to disqualify the struggle against bureaucratic ritualism. But the recommendations in favor of agility and managerial efficiency that crowd the above mentioned literature are, after all, trivial. The challenge consists in figuring out how to combine, in the name of the desideratum of having both efficiency and democracy, the classical forms of bureaucratic administration with the zeal in favor of agility wherever possible. It is worth noting that, whereas efficiency presupposes given ends, so that one may search for the most adequate means to achieve them, democracy, in turn, entails above all the problematization of ends – that is, the acknowledgement that there exist multiple and, at times, antagonistic ends, whose conciliation and implementation are necessarily problematic (and, consequently, morose to a certain extent) for a state that, being democratic, is also sensitive to the diversity of interests, committed to processing its decisions in a responsible way, and capable of accounting for them.

But the connections between bureaucracy and democracy are, in fact, a matter of much greater scope in Weber, expressing something that pervades his work as a whole. I have in mind a basic tension (and the corresponding effort of conciliation and synthesis) between analytical realism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the attention paid to the role of values, or even the clear philosophical attachment to certain values.

Thus, it is possible to highlight the deep link between bureaucracy and democracy as it is understood in several interpretative works, including, for instance, Paulo Kramer's paper on Weber and Tocqueville presented at the same symposium mentioned above (Kramer, 2000). In Tocqueville, we are warned against the danger of despotism associated with democratic leveling – “tutelary despotism”, as called by some, articulated in later analyses to the idea of the “mass society” (Kornhauser, 1959). In Weber, the “iron cage” of utilitarianism and bureaucracy is also portrayed as connected to democratic leveling and the equality of conditions, involving the neutralization of aristocratic ascendancy and at least the attenuation of the effects of arbitrary rule. But Weber's stance in this regard is peculiar, as it leads to the defense of a plebiscitary democracy wherein charismatic and Caesarist forms of leadership, capable of successfully turning to the masses, may be expected to prevail over just the bureaucratic spirit – although they should be institutionally controlled by the judiciary and parliamentary powers and actually emerge and mature through a parliamentary career.

A specific issue worthy of consideration in this regard refers to political parties and their role. The Weberian discussion of parties is markedly realistic. Weber distinguishes the “parties of notables”, centered upon noble families or intellectual circles of bourgeois origin and whose cohesion depends upon the performance of parliamentary delegates, from the “political machines”. Now, it is remarkable that the latter expression, referred to the leadership exercised by professional politicians outside the parliaments, is applied by him to two quite different experiences. First, the American experience of the pragmatic and unscrupulous “political boss” that secures positions and prebends for his clientele (actually, the experience in relation to which the expression was consecrated). Second, the experience of the electoralization of social-democratic parties in Europe, in which Maurice Duverger saw the model of the ideological mass parties – and which he *opposed* to the “cadre parties”, whose best example would be the American parties. In both the European social-democratic parties and the American political machines, the aspect underlined by Weber consists, equally, in the advent of *plebiscitary* democracy and in the role played by personal leadership of a charismatic and demagogic nature (Weber, 1958) – despite the tensions that may exist between the traits of realistic flavor suggested by the characterization and by Weber's positive view of charisma, on the one hand, and the parliamentary socialization of leaders, on the other. In any case, Weber's realism with

regard to political parties allows that his perspective be placed in clear-cut contrast with the idealized model of “ideological politics” that has prevailed, in Brazil as elsewhere, for a long time. Attached to such a model, political scientists, as well as journalists and the general public, conceive “authentic” politics as that kind of politics to be exercised in conformity with allegedly superior “values”, and believe themselves entitled to judge the real game of everyday political life as a sort of degenerate manifestation subject to moral condemnation.

## **II – Legitimacy, political institutionalization, and utopia**

The second topic I intend to deal with may have as a starting point the question of legitimacy. The theme of legitimacy is of special interest if considered from the point of view of the current efforts geared toward what may be understood as a broader facet of the same problem outlined above: that is, how to deal in a realistic and analytically rigorous way with the thorny issue of the *institutions* and of institutionalization, in connection with democracy and democratic consolidation. The decisive question is that around which the rational choice approach and “conventional” sociology confront each other, namely: would the consolidation of democracy demand the institutionalization process as it is usually understood in a sociological perspective, or would it be possible to obtain a stable democracy and the very production of the necessary institutions from the mere interplay of interests? On the one hand, the difficulties that the culturalism and perhaps even the moralism of the first option could face are quite clear. Still, the effort of rational choice followers to build a realistic alternative to those difficulties becomes itself entangled in apparently unsolvable difficulties and contradictions.

From the perspective of the conventional literature devoted to this theme, consolidation of democracy requires the dissemination and effective internalization of democratic norms by political agents, thus creating a proper “political culture”, and the corresponding process may be described as a process of democratic institutionalization. The alternative approach, inspired by “rational choice”, finds an outstanding example in a work by Adam Przeworski published a few years ago (Przeworski, 1995). Przeworski’s inquiry centers on whether the answer to the question of how democracy comes to endure (or how to obtain democratic consolidation) can be given merely in terms of an *equilibrium* supposed to result automatically from the agents’ free pursuit of their self-interests. Of course, the notion of institutionalization also implies “equilibrium” in some way; but Przeworski is, in principle, interested in a technical and “realistic” meaning of the expression. In that sense, the idea of equilibrium is contrasted not only with the condition that results from the operation of norms, but also with the intentionality involved in explicit bargaining, and emphasis is laid on the role played by mechanisms that are typical of the market, characterized by mutual adjustment of a spontaneous, automatic, and

“self-enforcing” nature, in which “everyone does what is best for herself given what the others do”. Can such mechanisms, by themselves, engender stable democracy?

Przeworski’s analysis leads him to give a positive answer to the question. However, it does not allow him to escape from important difficulties. To begin with, Przeworski ends up slipping into a different – and normative – meaning of equilibrium, which is introduced beside the meaning just indicated and which shows itself clearly in the acknowledgment that “some equilibria may be sustained by normative commitments, even if they would not be sustained by self-interest” (idem, pp. 20). Moreover, Przeworski cannot avoid exploring himself the idea of institutionalization in terms that involve the correspondence between norms and self-enforcing equilibrium and lead to the question of the effectiveness of norms. Thus, the problem of democracy would be “to write a constitution that will be self-enforcing”, i.e., whose norms correspond to the situation that is spontaneously obtained in the dynamics of self-enforcing mechanisms (idem, pp. 17).

The disjunctive that opens up is clear, although the author himself does not indicate to be properly aware of it in the text under discussion. First, Przeworski can remain faithful to the definition of equilibrium as something produced strictly in the play of “naked self-interests”. In this case, he will remain within the domain of his initial question and his perspective will retain its peculiarity vis-à-vis the conventional literature; but the correspondence that may eventually occur between norms and equilibrium will then be fortuitous, with no indication of an authentic effectiveness of the norms, since the equilibrium and the capacity to endure that democracy may reveal will not be due to them. Alternatively, Przeworski may incorporate in a consequent manner the meaning of “equilibrium” that includes the role of norms, in which case he will be standing on a terrain akin to the conventional perspective on institutionalization, where the problem of how to implant effective norms will come forward with full force. Now, what Przeworski’s hesitations reveal is, of course, the need to acknowledge that self-enforcing equilibrium is not enough by itself, since we may have “bad” equilibria as well as “good”, that is, equilibria which may either correspond or fail to correspond to normatively desirable situations, or turn out to be fitting or not from the point of view of relevant norms. In his conclusions, Przeworski himself explicitly stresses that “a democracy in which the real practices [that is, those resulting from the mechanisms of self-enforcing equilibria - FWR] diverge from the law may be quite nasty” (idem, pp. 20). This means that, regardless of the capacity of such a democracy to endure, the problem of appropriate institutionalization (understood in terms of the adjustment of the “real practices” to a normative desideratum, or of its conditioning by norms that may give expression to this desideratum) continues to pose itself. In truth, all things well considered, the great challenge of democratic institutionalization lies precisely in the need to

*break* an undesirable or negative equilibrium and replace it by a “good” one (institutional and democratic). This appears in a particularly clear way in analyses made by Samuel Huntington several years ago (Huntington, 1968). In such analyses, the condition corresponding to “civic” or institutionalized societies is contrasted with the “praetorian” condition, which distinguishes itself precisely by being a “vicious circle” – a perverse and stable equilibrium that permanently reinforces itself and cannot be expected to give way spontaneously to the “virtuous circle” of the process of democratic institutionalization.

It is thus possible to see how the basic problem underlying the issue of legitimacy as we find it treated in Weber remains alive and challenging. The characteristic feature of Weber’s treatment of the theme is the effort to conceive the legitimacy of a relationship of domination in empirical and realistic terms: the question is to what extent a relationship of this kind is characterized by the *belief* in its legitimacy on the part of those who find themselves subject to domination. What is at stake, therefore, is a psychological trait – the dispositions or motivations of those submitted to domination by others – which does not depend upon any claim of “objective” evaluation of the legitimacy of the relationship or of the order it sustains. Thus, a relationship of domination or a sociopolitical order may be “legitimate” in a way that has nothing to do not only with the evaluation that an observer could make of it with the help of a given arsenal of cognitive instruments or ethical categories, but also with the greater or lesser reflexivity or rationality that might eventually characterize the dispositions of the dominated themselves.

At this point, the problem that Habermas has been posing comes to the fore (Habermas, 1975b): how to articulate analytically, on the one hand, the fact that motivations conducive to the stability of a given order or relationship of authority are produced and, on the other, the question of the rationality of the motivation itself and the capacity of a justification to motivate *in a rational way*?

We stand here on swampy and slippery ground. The difficulties with which the rational choice approach is faced in its adherence to realism, which claims to be based on the rationality supposedly proper to interests and to abstain from resorting to norms, lead to emphasizing the latter’s role in the institutionalization process. However, the perspective brought forward by Habermas’ question allows us to discern an important connection and similarity between Weber and the followers of rational choice, which relates to assuming the occurrence of a certain automatism: in one case (rational choice) this automatism, treated as “equilibrium”, is given by the dynamics of the interplay of multiple interests; in the other (Weber’s “empirical” legitimacy) it occurs in the motivations of political actors, taken as “given”, that is, as

independent from the operation of a reflexive rationality, which is precisely that which is introduced by Habermas' question about the rationality of the motivation itself.

A closer examination reveals that we are dealing, in fact, with two conceptions of norms, whose decisive difference lies in the cognitive or intellectual factor. In the first place, norms can be understood as the result of conscious deliberation and, therefore, as involving the agents' ability to reflect. Of course, this conception corresponds to the sense in which norms are contained in the idea of "autonomy", or to the assumption that the norms followed by an agent are of her own choice and responsibility. Discussions of the process of moral development that one finds in such authors as Lawrence Kohlberg and Habermas himself, inspired by the works of Jean Piaget, point out "post-conventional" morality as its highest phase, in which we would have precisely reflexivity and autonomy on the part of the subjects, in contrast with the uncritical insertion in the conventional morality of the group.<sup>1</sup>

But norms can also be conceived rather in tune with the idea of conventional morality, in which case they would correspond to rules assimilated and internalized without reflection or questioning on the part of the agents. In this sense, instead of being the object or element of a process of intentional deliberation, norms emerge rather as factors prone to operate *causally* in conditioning the persons' behavior, as often pointed out by the adherents to the rational choice approach, who are inclined to stress the role of intentionality and rationality in behavior, instead of such normative causation. Seen from this point of view, norms may equally be described, following Piaget's suggestions, as phenomena marked by a stochastic aspect and characterized, to a large extent, as a blind outcome to emerge, at the aggregate level, from the interplay of multiple interactions among social agents (Piaget, 1973a).

There we have the elements of the most basic paradox involved in the idea of institutionalization of democracy. On the one hand, autonomy, in the most noble and ambitious sense (involving reflexivity and the capacity to determine one's own goals and norms), is a crucial part of the democratic ideal; on the other, it is the second type of norms – norms internalized without reflection, in a routine and ordinary manner – which turns out to be relevant when one speaks of a sense of "equilibrium" wherein the normative factor plays an important part. For it is to the extent that norms operate routinely and automatically that we can speak of institutionalization, if the latter is understood as involving the creation of a "tradition" or "culture" – or of a socio-psychological condition stably shared by the members of the collectivity, who are led to act naturally and effortlessly (without the need of reflection) within

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<sup>1</sup> See Habermas, 1979, wherein an extensive use of Kohlberg is made. Also of great interest is Schluchter, 1981a, wherein Kohlberg and Habermas are read in direct reference to Weber.



the molds prescribed by tradition. The existence of a tradition of civism or a “civic culture”, with widespread attachment to democratic mechanisms and values, would correspond to *consolidated* democracy, in which an “equilibrium” containing an unequivocally *normative* component would take place and provide effective normative parameters for the interplay of interests even in its “self-enforcing” feature. (Let us remark, by the way, that this normative and cultural aspect is essential for the efficient operation of the political-institutional state apparatus itself, in case enforcement *by the state* becomes necessary to fulfill shortcomings emerging from the regular self-enforcing dynamics and to lubricate the exchanges and transactions.) In this “civic” condition, each individual, even if moved by self-interest, while trying to “do what is best for herself given what others do” (in the terms of the definition of equilibrium formulated by Przeworski), would latently take into account the deaf but effective – or effective, to a large extent, *because* of being deaf – operation of norms in mitigating the negative effects of interest-seeking. The problem involved in consolidating and institutionalizing democracy would consist, under this perspective, in nothing but implanting efficiently the normative parameters of the self-enforcing play of interests, which would be successful precisely as long as the very operation of the normative parameters was made “automatic”.

In terms of morality and ethics, the interplay between the need to absorb socially given or imposed norms and the desideratum of “post-conventional” autonomy leads to the paradox elaborated by Wolfgang Schluchter on the basis of the contrast between morality, understood as pertaining to individuals, and ethics, understood as being of a collective nature. The goal would be to have in force a *reflexive* morality (at the level of individuals) sustained by a (collective) ethics *distinguished by traits akin to that morality*; in other words, a conventionalism (an ethics, which, as such, is necessarily conventional) that would stimulate moral autonomy, capable precisely of opposing and overcoming conventionalism in an *out-group morality* of a universalistic character (Schluchter, 1981b). The decisive consequence is that, instead of the immersion in and naïve identification with the collectivity, which frequently go hand in hand with a fanatic and belligerent spirit, civic virtue comes to mean, first and foremost, *tolerance* – and we are thus led to the question, to be taken up below, of the cognitive, psycho-sociological, and ethical conditions of the individualist and pluralist society, in the sense of some of the richest elements in the liberal tradition.

Such issues (market and automatisms, interests and given or reflexive norms, moral autonomy of the individual and “good” collective immersion) permit recapturing and highlighting something that I myself took from Weber, a long time ago, and that constitutes perhaps the core of my own reflection on politics and of a both analytic and normative perspective leading to a sort of “realistic utopia” (Reis, 2000c e 2000d). I am referring to the

Weberian conception of the market as a synthesis of “community” and “society”, or as *societal* action (oriented by the “rational” calculation of interests) founded on a *communitarian* substratum which involves a sense of co-participation or of constituting a whole in association with others and, consequently, the possibility of the existence of trust and of effective norms (Weber, 1964, pp. 33-35 e 493-497). In my own use of Weber’s ideas, the conciliation between community and society is expanded in terms of a general dialectics between solidarity and interests, which ends up being decisive in the characterization of politics as such. It becomes possible, furthermore, to found on the notion of the market the “realistic utopia” that serves as a guiding idea for a conception of political development capable of overcoming the simple-minded ethnocentrism of the literature dedicated to this topic which flourished in the United States a few decades ago. Instead of the usual “demonization” of the market,<sup>2</sup> the intuition of a general dialectic between solidarity and interests allows us to take the idea of the market as relevant at a level that goes well beyond the conventional economic sphere, thus sustaining, in sociological terms, the very model of the individualist and pluralist society. The point is to emphasize, in the “mercantile” type of exchanges to which every society whose dimensions and complexity surpass certain minimum limits must forcibly resort to, the form of sociability that is possible “among strangers”, to use the formula coined by Bruno Reis as a sort of rectification and generalization of Weber’s statement to the effect that market relations, in spite of the synthesis they represent between the elements of community and society, take place “between individuals who are not friends, that is, between enemies” (Weber, 1964, p. 496; Reis, 2003).<sup>3</sup> The solidarity one may expect in this case is certainly “thin” at the encompassing level, in contrast with the collective fusion and effusion of a more demanding communitarian ideal of problematic consequences; but it is, by the same token, compatible with the peaceful and continuous coexistence in conditions in which each individual will be free to pursue her own goals or interests in any domain, or to seek the “affirmation of self” (as the idea of interest is defined in Habermas, 1975a) inevitably present in the search for autonomy and personal self-realization.

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<sup>2</sup> A recent example of the old demonization of the market is found in Souza, 2003. In this small book, by the way, the state is also demonized, together with the market, and the author’s position ends up reduced to a bet on a sort of moral conversion. The general perspective is clearly inconsistent in the face, for instance, of the recourse to Norbert Elias in order to connect citizenship to bourgeoisie and work, and to point out the linkage between these aspects and the creation of a “primary habitus” (the “common emotional and valorative economy”) of which Brazil would supposedly be deprived due to our “selective modernization”.

<sup>3</sup> It might be interesting to stress the kinship between this conception of the market and ideas expressed by Jürgen Habermas, in *Between Facts and Norms*, on some crucial features of the “public sphere”. After highlighting the communicational elements needed for the control of conflicts and the egalitarian prerequisites of such elements, Habermas draws attention to a desideratum of “solidarity among strangers – strangers who renounce violence and, in the cooperative regulation of their common life, also concede one another the right to *remain* strangers” (Habermas, 1996, p. 308; Habermas’ italics).

Obviously, this does not mean that there is no room, in the model of society thus contemplated, for creating warm and long-lasting ties, be it at the strictly personal and intimate level or at the level of groups and associations of various natures and objectives. But such ties will not derive from socially imposed and sweeping ascriptions (the “primordial” attachments dealt with by Clifford Geertz and normally stressed in the “communitarian” perspective), which are linked to relationships of domination and subordination and, correspondingly, to the belligerent animus of identification and antagonism. They will be due, instead, to free personal choice, resulting, in the case of groups or associations, in *voluntary* and inevitably partial or *segmental* forms of participation, as highlighted by the extended line of pluralist reflection on politics which goes from a Tocqueville to names like Kornhauser, Dahl, and Gellner.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, in this line, we will have people being able to choose, to a large extent, their *personal identity* itself, an ability clearly implied by the idea of a post-conventional morality.

It seems appropriate at this point to still underline two aspects. The first relates to the component of normative “realism” involved in referring the condition to be sought to the idea of the market. In terms of current debates, the most obvious alternative corresponds, perhaps, to the idea of “deliberative democracy” and the line of thought that makes use of it. Jürgen Habermas is doubtlessly the most influential name here, and the model of deliberative democracy has as a central reference the Habermasian ideal of free communication and of the debate of unanimous outcome. In this ideal, nothing is supposed to count but the “force of the better argument”, whereas the autonomy of each participant, in the capacity of a subject engaged in a process of communication among equals (in which her instrumental or strategic manipulation and consequent transformation into an object would be banned), is assured by the veto right for every individual implied by the requirement of unanimity.<sup>5</sup> Now, emphasising mechanisms of a “mercantile” nature allows pointing out that autonomy is also assured in the condition wherein each one simply *acts* as she sees fit or *does* what she wants, providing only the limits of the psycho-sociological, ethical, and legal framing of the “sociability among strangers” are preserved. It is indispensable to acknowledge, of course, that such “framing” includes a fatal “deliberative” component: deliberation will take place in manifold spheres of the political-institutional apparatus of the pluralist state and society, or in the *organizational* efforts by means of which it will be attempted, in the language of economists, to “internalize” the “externalities” or negative consequences (including those related to power, such as monopolies and oligopolies) which tend to result, at the aggregate level, from the free operation of the market and the scattered decisions of many people (contrarily to the benign and inconsistent suppositions exemplified above with Przeworski). But, even if the problem of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Kornhauser, 1959; Dahl, 1982; Gellner, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> An introduction to and discussion of Habermas’ ideas may be found in Reis, 2000b.

costs involved is set aside, there is no reason to presume that, in order to guarantee autonomy and democracy, it is necessary, or even desirable, to “internalize” everything, organize everything, increase indefinitely the space of collective decisions, deliberate collectively about everything... After all, the liberal and privatist desire to be left alone and go home in peace is also an important part of the contemporary ideal of democratic citizenship, with its component of civil rights, in contrast – or at least as a complement – to the republican aspiration for civic participation.

The second aspect I would like to stress refers to the fact that the analytical and normative articulation of politics and market finds a strong empirical substratum in such studies as Giovanni Arrighi’s *The Long Twentieth Century*. In this work, with support in authors like Marx and Fernand Braudel, Arrighi succeeds in persuasively showing the articulation, in the development of modern capitalism, between the economic dynamics of markets and the political-territorial dynamics of states (Arrighi, 1996). Arrighi’s analysis culminates in what is certainly the decisive question of today, that is, how to balance solidarity and interest at the global or planetary level. In other words, in circumstances where current globalization leads market mechanisms to operate in a planetary scale, the challenge is how to face the task of transforming the enfeebled nation-states and the imperial facet of globalization we have in the disproportionate weight of United States’ power into the functional equivalent of the national state that might be capable to operate in an adequate way in the same scale as the markets, regulating them not only in their economic or “systemic” consequences, but in their social consequences as well. In the last analysis, the question is how to create a world government that might be effective and democratic – and the main difficulty consists, perhaps, in how to bring consistency, at the scale of the planet as such, to the precarious *community* factors supposedly to be found at that scale in association with the operation of markets, and which should serve as an important support for global institution-building.

### **III- Rationality and ethics**

Some readers may have noticed that the above discussion on norms and democratic institutionalization involves a dual conception not only of norms, but also of rationality. With regard to the latter, we have the contraposition between two types: on the one hand, the “shortsighted” rationality appearing both in the interplay of interests that draws the attention of the rational choice approach and in the “given” character of motivations or beliefs that lead, in Weber, to the subjective acceptance and the legitimacy of a relationship of authority; on the other hand, the reflexive and autonomous rationality that is introduced by Habermas’ problem. This permits us to proceed to the third topic I intend to consider, namely, that of rationality and

its connections to issues of morality and ethics. From the perspective set out by the question of to what extent Weber is still relevant nowadays, an aspect deserving emphasis concerns the fact that a considerable part of the current discussions on the theme of rationality, particularly with regard to the recourse to the analytical instruments of economics by the rational choice approach, involves a conception of rationality in which it is possible to identify, in some respects, a clear step backwards in relation to Weber.

In effect, we have seen before that the adherents to rational choice engage in separating in a clear-cut fashion the sphere of rationality from the domain that is proper to norms. This is certainly the case among more orthodox followers of the approach, who assimilate rational behavior, taken as a decisive category for the explanation of social phenomena of all kinds, to behavior oriented by the pursuit of interests, whereas interests, in turn, are understood as corresponding, in the exemplary form, to strictly egoistic goals, in relation to which, therefore, there is no room for the moderation of selfish appetites (or, with greater reason, for properly altruistic behavior) that norms would come to ensure. But the separation between norms and rationality remains even among less orthodox authors. This is the case, for instance, of Jon Elster, who, despite explicitly denying the possibility of explaining everything by means of the category of rationality, conceives the world as divided between phenomena which can indeed be explained by rationality and phenomena which should rather be explained by the operation of norms – without properly posing the problem of how rationality and norms can eventually come to articulate (Elster, 1989).

Weber's case is quite different. For at the very core of his main enterprise, i.e., the explanation of Western rationalism, we find the laborious and complex Weberian sociology of *religions*. And religions do not play, in the enterprise, the role of a contrasting element: on the contrary, Weber attributes to religious development a crucial importance as an *intrinsic* part of a secular process seen as one of rationalization. A central aspect of this conception is the structuring of a life project in the search for transcendental objectives that the great religions induce, bringing about discipline and methodic conduct as a consequence.

This perspective can unfold in disclosing the connections between rationality and *identity*, which results in stating in more adequate terms the very idea of rationality by highlighting its sociopsychological substratum. In the rational choice approach, rationality is understood so as to be made compatible with a sort of state of nature, wherein there are no norms or values, intergenerational connections, loyalties or solidarities, but only individuals who calculate guided by their self-interests. Now, if one acknowledges that the idea of rationality, even in the sociologically poor context visualized by the rational choice perspective,

always involves the idea of the capacity to pursue, with method and efficacy, goals located in the future, it is clear that the farther or remoter the goals, the greater the rationality required, given the more complex mediations with which the agent will have to deal. This leads to acknowledging that the agent's sense of identity is an indispensable requisite for the operation of rationality itself; and, since identity is, of necessity, socially conditioned, it is illusory to try to "retreat" to a pre-social state in search of "pure" rationality (perhaps with the additional chimera of deducing society in all its complexity from this pure rationality, as is the bet of the most orthodox strain of rational choice). We are dealing here with Rousseau's great intuition: in the formula used by Leo Strauss to synthesize it (Strauss, 1953), society coerces and corrupts men, but everything specifically human is social, so that coercion appears as a condition of human freedom as such. In this perspective, rationality emerges as an attribute of *social* man – and if the social nature of the human agent is, on the one hand, the condition for her to operate rationally and reflexively, it provides, on the other hand, the main object to be reflexively and selectively processed through the operation of rationality.

But the fact that Weber transcends certain shortcomings of the rational choice perspective does not mean that his treatment of the theme of rationality is adequate. Thus, one can find in Weber, particularly in the distinction between "means-ends (or instrumental) rationality" and "value rationality", the origin of what I repute to be a confusion of harmful effects in the discussions about the subject. Such confusion leads, in particular, to the attempt to counterpose an instrumental ("merely" instrumental...) rationality, taken in a negative sense, as somehow "vile" and deserving to be denounced, to a "substantive" rationality, conceived as superior to the former due to the nature of the ends ("values") involved, or to the fact that it concerns communication among human agents, and not the relation between human agents, on one side, and objects, on the other. The names connected to the so-called Frankfurt School, in particular, have made of the condemnation of instrumental rationality a paramount concern, while Habermas, a special member of the group, highlighted in his work, as we already saw, the importance of the distinction between instrumentality and communication, although with peculiar nuances.

Let us briefly examine certain important passages that Weber devotes not only to the distinction between the two alleged forms of rationality, but also to different kinds of ethics. Such passages reveal – in a curious manner, given the vitality and endurance of positions that Weber seems to have inspired in the recent literature – that what we truly have is nothing but a real mishmash from the conceptual point-of-view, despite the undeniable interest of numerous specific intuitions and suggestions present in his writings on these matters.

Let us consider, for instance, the passage of *Economy and Society* where Weber seeks to establish the meaning of value rationality. Says he: “Examples of pure value-rational orientation would be the actions of persons who, regardless of possible costs to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some ‘cause’ no matter in what it consists. In our terminology, value-rational action always involves ‘commands’ or ‘demands’ which, in the actor’s opinion, are binding on him. It is only in cases where human action is motivated by the fulfillment of such unconditional demands that it will be called value-rational.” (Weber, 1978, p. 25; Weber, 1964, p. 21)<sup>6</sup>

This passage invites several observations. In the first place, let us note the clear flavor of *irrationality* associated with the idea of an action oriented by “unconditional commands”, which, despite the nobility of the “causes” cited by Weber, takes us to the domains of fanatical behavior. It is easy to see the sense in which value-rational action, thus characterized, would represent a type of *action*; but it is difficult to see in which sense it would be a type of *rational* action. Let us also note that value-rational action, which many would be inclined to repute “superior” because in it the “instrumental” character of action would supposedly be denied, stands in clear *opposition* to the ethics that Weber names “the ethics of responsibility”, which tends to appear, in Weber, as superior to the “ethics of conviction” or of “ultimate ends” (this one, indeed, more in tune with the affirmation of “unconditional commands”), in spite of equivocal formulations and of the idea that the two should join in the politician of stature. Of course, the force or vigor of the convictions is relevant to the above mentioned question of the motivation of action, introducing important nuances with regard to the rationality of action, to be considered below. But Weber’s characterization fails to adequately apprehend just these nuances.

In the second place, Weber himself, in the immediately following paragraph, indicates that, “in the perspective of means-ends-rational action, value-rational action is always *irrational*, and this feature becomes more accentuated as the value that moves it raises to the level of absolute significance, because reflection on the consequences of action [allusion to the ethics of responsibility – FWR] will be smaller the greater the attention conceded to the value proper to the act in its absolute character” (Weber, 1964, p. 21). Of course, the clause according to which the irrationality of the action referred to values would emerge “in the perspective of means-ends-rational action” reiterates the general mistake on which the attempt to distinguish the two forms of rationality stand. But it is quite evident that the provision regarding the

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<sup>6</sup> This passage is here transcribed from Schluchter, 1996, pp. 289-290, footnote 73.

absolutization of the adherence to values turns impossible the attempt to make of that same adherence a criterion on the basis of which to distinguish a type of rational action as such. The adhesion to values would *define* value-rational action, but *intensifying* the adhesion renders the agent *less capable of reflecting*: how can we expect the agent, in this case, to continue being equally “rational” in any legitimate sense of the word, and not only “in the perspective of means-ends-rational action” as a supposed particular case? In other words, the more the attribute that supposedly distinguishes the action as a type of rational action is asserted, the *less* rational it becomes, which turns out to be patently illogical. The provision in question clearly implies that action will be rational only if it allows reflection, particularly reflection on the action’s consequences – that is to say, if it is balanced from the (instrumental) point of view of the relation between ends and means.

But there is more to it. Notwithstanding the already indicated merit of avoiding a clear-cut separation between norms and rationality, Weber’s confusions go beyond the distinction between two types of rationality and encompass, as suggested, the question of the relationship between rationality and ethics. And such confusions are due mainly to something quite visible: if, on the one hand, Weber seeks to distinguish the two types of rational action on the basis of, ultimately, their ethical character (greater or lesser attachment to considerations related to ethical or moral convictions), he symmetrically tries, on the other hand, to distinguish two types of ethics on the basis of, ultimately, their rationality... For the ethics of conviction involves, in the name of the sanctity and untouchability of moral convictions, a rigid lack of willingness to reflect and try to weigh and measure the consequences of the decisions and actions (*fiat iustitia et pereat mundus*), whereas the ethics of responsibility, in turn, has in a reflexive posture and in the concern for the consequences its crucial characteristics. What there is of confusing in Weber’s positions on the two ethics comes to sight in a quite sharp way in a certain passage of the well known essay “Politics as a Vocation”. Speaking of the man who is “aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct” and who, in such condition, “acts by following an ethic of responsibility”, Weber describes him, immediately after, as reaching a point where he says: “Here I stand; I can do no other” (Weber, 1958, p. 127). Now, such declaration expresses, simply and unequivocally, the adoption of a moral stance; it involves nothing but the display of a moral *conviction*. In fact, it can be seen as corresponding very clearly to the idea of the “punch on the table” that we sometimes demand of our political leaders as a sign of marking the moral limit beyond which the disposition to act in a “pragmatic” or “realistic” manner, supposedly in the name of responsibility and concern for the consequences, would become irrelevant or even improper. It helps little that Weber closes the passage by warning that the contrast between the ethics of ultimate ends and the ethics of responsibility is not “absolute”...



The general question concerning the relations between rationality and ethics is doubtlessly complicated. In any case, there is certainly a gain in understanding if we begin by acknowledging that *all rationality is instrumental*: the very notion of rationality inescapably involves the idea of the articulation between ends and means, and the nature of the ends is irrelevant for the characterization of rationality as such. Of course, this is not the same as saying that the ends are equivalent. They can be of utmost diversity and appear to our eyes as more or less desirable for equally diverse reasons, including those of a moral, philosophical or esthetic nature. But there is no basis for the attempt to characterize certain ends as intrinsically more *rational* than others (a stance which frequently results from the idea of a substantive rationality), for the claim to greater or lesser rationality of an end can only be made with reference to its condition as a more or less efficacious means for achieving other ends that we eventually praise as higher “values”. The very criticism of technocracy and of the technocratic society, carried out with ardor in the accusations against instrumental rationality, cannot dispense with indicating clearly the alternative condition to be reached (the end to be sought), nor disregard, if it intends to be consequent, the specification of the paths (or means) that lead to such condition. Rationality is conceived, under this perspective, as being first and foremost related to what can be called the *economy* of action, in contrast to its *energetics*, i.e., that which provides its motivation. For sure, without energetics or motivation there is no action, and we may have motivation of different sorts, more or less vile or noble, strong or feeble; but rationality concerns the way in which the agent processes “economically” the resources at hand, including those supplied by the more or less poor or powerful energetics of action, to reach the ends sought.<sup>7</sup> Let it be emphasized, moreover, that the instrumental character of rational action, thus understood, has nothing to do with the fact that goals of an abjectly “selfish”, “material”, or “economic” nature (in the conventional sense of “economic”) are shortsightedly pursued. Rather, the qualification of instrumental fits very well the case of the agent with whom we became familiarized in Weber’s religious sociology itself: the one who establishes complex hierarchies or chains of ends and means when striving for a moral ideal of life, and perhaps for an ideal of death or for transcendental goals – that is, when trying to be faithful to a reflexively assumed *identity* and pursuing a *vocation*.

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<sup>7</sup> An evident confusion in this regard is present in Elster, 1979 (especially in chapter 2), where the author treats as “imperfect rationality” the case of the agent who, like Ulysses, for “being weak and knowing it”, gets himself tied to the mast, thus restricting the possibilities of action in the present as a means of guaranteeing a more efficient pursuit of a future goal. Now, there does not seem to be any reason, except on the basis of an improper conception of rationality, for not seeing as “perfect” the rationality of an extremely weak agent who, in order to achieve her goals, seeks to mobilize all possible information on the conditions of action, *including* the information concerning her own weakness.

It would be possible to close these brief remarks on rationality and ethics by evoking the work of Jean Piaget. On the basis of a lifetime of careful empirical studies, Piaget, contrarily to Habermas' attempt to sharply counterpose a context of instrumentality to one of communication, conceives the process of intellectual (and moral) development as involving a peculiar balance between the instrumental or "operational" aspect of the successful relationship with objects, on one side, and, on the other, the interactional or communicational aspect of socialization, in which the individual gradually overcomes egocentrism (and, eventually, sociocentrism or ethnocentrism) and becomes capable of assuming the point of view of the other, of "decentering" – and of reflecting (Piaget, 1973b; Reis, 2000b).

But there is one aspect of Weber's formulations which still allows further elaboration, ramifying so as to bring some additional clarification regarding other aspects of the ideas here sketched. For if we intend to claim that the ethics of responsibility is in fact an ethics (or something that involves, in any way, *moral* considerations, putting aside Schluchter's distinction between ethics and morality), the crucial feature for characterizing it as such cannot be the cognitive feature, in itself, of paying attention to the consequences. The eventual adoption of a position guided by the ethics of responsibility, and supposedly resulting from that cognitive feature, will deserve to be characterized as "ethical" or "moral" only if the consequences are themselves appreciated from the point of view of *moral convictions*, revealing themselves adequate or unacceptable *from that point of view*. In this sense, the so-called ethics of responsibility is *not*, in that which defines it *as a form of ethics*, different from the ethics of ultimate ends or of conviction.

However, the relevant convictions in the realm of social and political life have to do crucially with the relationships between interests and solidarity, or between (individual) autonomy and social convergence or harmony. Carefully considering the dialectics and the eventual balance between both "sides" allows, I believe, that a more nuanced and selective position on the matter be taken, wherein not all convictions are seen as equivalent.

Many years ago, exploring the idea of autonomy in *The Nerves of Government*, Karl Deutsch suggested that the adequate model of autonomous behavior is neither the automaton (perhaps the fanatic or the impassioned), that rigidly seeks a predetermined end and is pure compulsion, nor the artifact or animal which, like the libertine, is adrift in its behavior for being pure impulsiveness and totally open to the changing stimuli that come from its own impulses and from the surrounding environment. Autonomous behavior is rather the behavior (or *action*) of the actor who, molded by memory and by the sense of identity (the "character") and guided by the more or less remote objectives they bring about (the above mentioned life ideal), is

capable of being flexible and selective in the face of particular stimuli and impulses of all kinds – in short, it is *rational* behavior (Deutsch, 1966, especially p. 107-108 e 206-207).

Weber's contraposition between the two ethics suggests (despite the idea of a rationality referred to values and its affinity to the greater rigidity present in the ethics of ultimate ends) that some loosening of the adhesion to convictions would be a necessary condition for an effective association between ethics and rationality, or for the possibility of an at once ethical and rational behavior to be found in cases guided by the ethics of responsibility. Nevertheless, in the perspective of Deutsch's suggestions, it is clear that moral determination, being part of the "energetics" of action, of one's identity and fidelity to remote objectives (avoiding the dispersion of the libertine, or imprinting a "methodical" character to the recourse to the cognitive elements of action and its application to actual conduct), can be crucially *instrumental* in the search of those objectives, and thus propitious to action oriented by remote ends, which is rational action *par excellence*. But it is worth noting two things. First, that this idea of moral determination implies nothing with regard to the intrinsic content of the convictions or their nature: the adhesion to principles of tolerance and sobriety, for example, may be determined and firm. Second, that the combination between morality and rationality ends up leading to the idea of autonomy as *self-control*, wherein identity or character, the search for remote goals and the observance of corresponding *norms* (themselves autonomous and "post-conventional", which does not prevent them from being the object of firm convictions) make possible the balance between impulsiveness and compulsion, and favor precisely sobriety and tolerance. And this allows us to see through unequivocally negative lenses the case, naturally also possible, of the moral determination which degenerates into fanatical rigidity and "blind" passion. Of course, this rigidity leads us to approach the domain of the automaton's behavior and jeopardizes the appropriate operation of the cognitive component of action, as well as the apprehension of the (instrumental) connections between its diverse elements or stages – that is to say, it jeopardizes the "economy" of action.

Given the ambiguities of Weber's formulations, I believe it is possible to conceive an "ethics of conviction" so as to make it compatible with this idea of self-control in a "post-conventional" context: certainly, "causes" related to the sense of duty or honor, the sentiment of loyalty, the quest for beauty or religious call, which Weber mentions in connection to value-rational action, do not necessarily involve stupid fanaticism. But a negative evaluation becomes mandatory when the type of ethics accounting for moral determination connects to social conditions in which we have the immersion in a given collectivity or subcollectivity (or "community" in the strong and demanding sense pointed out above) and submission to the demand of unconditional loyalty to its values (to its "faith"). *This* ethics, however one may want

to call it, doubtlessly endangers, on the one hand, individual autonomy by endangering its component of interest and “self-affirmation”. Note that this component of self-affirmation, involving the freedom to follow impulses or pursue personal goals of various natures, is inevitably present in the idea of autonomy, even in its noble sense of self-control and of post-conventional morality, which requires the capacity of “decentering” (Piaget) and of individual detachment in relation to the collectivity. Hence the need, as an upshot of the general dialectics stressed above, that the very idea of “self-control” be understood so as to permit the balance of compulsion with impulsiveness, of self-restraint and self-constraint with the search for self-expression and self-fulfillment, of solidarity with interest in the generic sense of self-affirmation. But if the ethics at issue endangers the possibility of individual autonomy thus understood, it also tends, on the other hand, to put tolerance at risk and to nurture a negative disposition toward the *out-group* or other collectivities, which assume, ultimately, the appearance of “unfaithful” to be confronted in bellicose terms. In a nutshell, one might perhaps just say that individualism and universalism touch each other and articulate with each other, and rationality cannot be dissociated from the link between them.

Thus, there is no denying the ethical content of politics, or its connection with a rationalist perspective. The above discussions hopefully allowed a clear enough grasp of how such content permeates the utopia (even if “realistic”) of the pluralist and egalitarian society of autonomous, and yet sober and tolerant, individuals, wherein the dialectics between interests and solidarity must have been taken to the point where the ideal of autonomy translates into self-control of a lucid and balanced sort regarding the values it seeks to achieve. As a matter of fact, this ethical content, as I have been proposing (Reis, 2000d), is necessarily implicit in the very *definition* of politics, with regard to which the “realistic” privilege that political science manuals grant to the idea of power will only be valid insofar as it refers to the *problem* of power, that is, to power as the crucial problem to be confronted and solved at the practical level – which presupposes precisely the values of autonomy and equality. But the perspective thus sketched seems to me to clash with Weber’s attempt to attribute a sort of peculiar status or nature to political ethics, which is linked by him to the view that politics deals with power and violence and, consequently, whoever gets involved with it is forced into “contracts with diabolical powers” (Weber, 1958, p. 123). I think it is possible to sustain that the need for the state and for the monopoly by the state over legitimate violence, of which Weber himself speaks, is due precisely to the fact that (as well known by the early Christians, remembered by him in the same passage) “the world”, and not only politics, “is governed by demons” – and that the clash of interests, conflict and the search for self-affirmation and power permeate, in general, the multiplicity of spheres, niches and recesses of social life. There exists, however, the alternative to see “politics” in the clash of interests occurring in any of these spheres or recesses,

in conformity with an analytical conception of politics which I myself have been sustaining and that challenges the frequent tendency to assimilate “politics” exclusively to that which takes place within the state or its immediacies. I leave to the reader the question of to what extent this analytical perspective may be compatible with the intentions of Weber, whose definition of politics, in spite of the explicit reference to the state, does not fail to point to the practical challenges that result precisely from the distribution of power in society, with the state monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force emerging as a critical instrument to tackle them.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the succinct formulation found in Weber, 1958, p. 78: “...’politics’ for us means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within the state.”

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