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# International organizations, their staff and their legitimacy: Max Weber for IR

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If the journal was to fulfil its given task, it obviously had to seek capitalism wherever it was available, without any consideration of national boundaries ... This systematic expansion towards the possibly broadest territory granted the *Archiv* an international character in even a higher degree than other publications within the discipline.

Werner Sombart, Max Weber and Edgar Jaffé

Foreword of the editors to the new series of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*

The burgeoning interest among international relations (IR) scholars in Max Weber's ideas and in social theory more generally can be considered a further instance of the tendency in IR to adapt theories generated in other disciplines. In the last few decades, scholars have increasingly made a use of microeconomic theory and rational choice, at least in the United States (US), while distinctly Euro-pean approaches to IR are frequently either historical, as in the English School, or sociological, as predominantly in France (Badie and Smouts 1992; Bayart 2004). Albeit more so in Europe than in the US, social theorists like Michael Foucault, Jürgen Habermas and Pierre Bourdieu have become increasingly important to IR (Adler 2013). The IR debate on the opportunities offered by dialogue within inter-national organizations is unthinkable without Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action (Risse 2000; Habermas 1984). Similarly, security studies would not be the same without the approach inspired by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu (Bigo 2011). While constructivism in IR does not draw directly from any of these major figures, its forefathers are eminent sociologists like Alfred Schütz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Behind them is, of course, Weber's 'understanding sociology' [*verstehende Soziologie*]. In reality, not only constructivists in sociology are in debt to Weber, but so are Foucault, Bourdieu and Habermas, albeit in different ways (on Bourdieu, see Galindo and Sabido 2015). If such is the case, we could do worse than go back to the source.

The increasing use of social and other theories generated outside IR has brought the gradual abandonment of IR-specific theories and paradigms. As a broader trend, this should be welcome, but we think that the application of theories developed with a clearly defined purpose, like microeconomics, to a wide range of problems obviates important aspects of what we study, at least in some cases. Conversely, the attempt to alter extant theories taken from other disciplines in order to devise *specific* theories to study IR threatens to isolate the subfield from the rest of the political and the social sciences. By contrast, we argue that Weberian thought constitutes a particularly valuable alternative, which may also help to mitigate the isolation of IR. It was devised for the social sciences as a whole, with the goal of illuminating all kinds of social phenomena, economic and non-economic, rational and irrational. The scope of Weber's thought encompasses questions, problems and social relations that are of great interest to IR scholars and that Weber simply considered a specific set of social phenomena. From Weber's perspective, most of what IR scholars study is simply a consequence of the expansion of modern capitalism, 'the most fateful power of our modern life' (Weber 1930, 17), rather than something separated from intra-state politics or from the economy. In brief, we leave aside the attempts to apply *one* theory to all types of phenomena as well as to devise a specific one for IR. Instead, we resort to Weber's comprehensive approach to social sciences.

Weber's strategy for conducting social enquiry was not to construct 'theory', a term of which he was weary. Weber was sceptical about the possibility of creating a comprehensive theory that could explain all facets of social life. His more 'modest' attempt consisted in proposing a number of 'basic concepts' that could be used as 'modules' in order to clarify specific empirical-historical problems like the rise of modern capitalism and its different components: the modern state, the life conduct of the 'professional human beings' [*Berufsmensch*], and rational law. The method he used—to build ideal-typical concepts out of an intense examination of historical-empirical material—is unfamiliar to us, but provides one of the arguments for using Weber in IR. He distilled his extensive knowledge of different civilizations into concepts that could be used to study human life in a comparative fashion, from its most 'simple' expression in social relations to complex modern states. Ironically, Parson's adaptation of Weber contributed to the decoupling of US social science from historical knowledge, but Weber himself did not proceed deductively, as Parsons did. Instead, he used vast amounts of mainly historical evidence and tried to subject it to the conceptual discipline that ideal types require.

Drawing from Austrian microeconomics, Weber tried to base the social sciences on a relational unit of analysis, 'social action'. Subsequently, he built upon this a typology of increasingly complex forms of social life, such as closed and open social relation, legitimate order, statute, validity, conflict and organization. The cumulative way Weber devised the noted 'basic concepts' [*Grundbegriffe*] in his *Economy and society* explains why he has played a significant role in the debate on the micro-macro link (Hedström and Swedberg 1998), as we discuss in our contribution to this special issue. Some of his 'basic concepts' contribute to a 'developmental history' (Schluchter 1981), that is, to study the middle- and long-term transformation of organizations and leadership, as in Guenther Roth's study of some US social movements during the 1960s (1975). However, only a few of Weber's concepts have made their way into IR scholarship, such as his definition of the state, while other possibilities of dialogue between his basic concepts and

IR theory have been discussed only more recently. Elsewhere, we have attempted to make clear how Weber's treatment of rationalization and bureaucratization goes well beyond the customary version of constructivist IR theory (Morcillo and Schlichte 2016). Put differently, from its most simple to its most complex aspects, Weber offers an overarching interpretation of past and present social life, of which international relations are an integral part.

Thus, the conceptual and methodological aspects of Weber's oeuvre offer arguments for employing his ideas in IR research. A further argument is his diachronic comparisons among civilizations, which may compensate for 'the retreat of IR scholars into the present', to paraphrase Norbert Elias (1987). Weber conducted wide-ranging analysis of economic ethics for major civilizations, some of them based on a detailed knowledge of primary sources and their languages (1986; the poor quality of the translations into English makes their use unadvisable, but see Weber 1951; 1952; 1958). Despite being dated, these multi-volume studies may help us to understand the differences among 'modernities' outside the West. Drawing from these five studies, Weber wrote several theoretical pieces that for decades were an inspiration for sociologists of religion like Robert Bellah (1963; 1999) and Martin Riesebrodt (1998; 2010). By contrast, postcolonial studies have disregarded him, despite Weber's serious interest in non-Western civilizations. Negative opinions in this literature ignore basic aspects of his thought (Go 2012, 36; Bhabra 2011, 6), but Parsonian modernization theory and area studies characterizing Weber as a prophet of capitalism and progress (Derman 2012, chapter 6) have not made postcolonial scholars curious about his work. Even if occasionally these criticisms are well informed (Zimmerman 2006), particularly about Weber's nationalism, less so on his alleged antisemitism, Roth's (2005a; 2005b) nuanced portraits of Weber as a cosmopolitan seem more accurate to us. If one considers his vision of the world under the spell of modern capitalism, his historically grounded concepts and his global, developmental history and adds to this the significance of his work for authors increasingly influential in IR like Foucault, Bourdieu and Habermas, we think it becomes obvious why historically and socio-logically oriented IR scholars should delve into Weber's oeuvre.

There is no Weberian approach to all IR problems, though. He wrote succinctly on a number of topics related to our discipline, but he never dealt with them thoroughly or in a systematic fashion. For instance, even if he made scattered comments on gender in different contexts, which feminist thinkers have used (Mitchell 2006; Bologh 1990; Hoffman 2000), feminist IR theory has not attempted a serious dialogue with Weber (although what he said about patriarchy may still be informative for the field; for a critical appraisal, see Adams 2005). Furthermore, a number of important IR topics are completely unrelated to Weber, despite the breadth of his scholarship. An obvious example is the implications of nuclear warfare for international security. Another issue is his unequal treatment of world regions: Weber tells us very little about the rise of China, since he fore-saw a world in which Anglo-Saxons and Russians would fight for supremacy. On modern Africa, Weber left only a few remarks on law and anthropology that are of little use to IR scholars.

Whilst on some IR problems nothing of substance can be said from a Weberian perspective, on many others new arguments can be made. This special issue focuses on two Weberian topics that are basic to IR, the state and international organizations. After placing the Weber-IR link in broader perspective, our piece

emphasizes the importance of legitimacy, rather than violence, to understanding how an organization wields domination. This, as we argue, allows one to consider the modern state to be not so different from other supposedly rational organizations. Questions of domination and legitimacy—both epistemic and political—are also at the centre of Philipp Lottholz's and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert's contribution, although they focus on how different strands in Weber's work have influenced the theory and practice of international state-building. The two remaining articles deal with international organizations; these were theorized by Weber's contemporaries, but, as Jens Steffek shows, these thinkers held some illusions about the promise of bureaucracies as instruments to solve, rather than create, problems. One of the reasons why a sceptical view is in order lies in the membership of the administrative cadre. Employees of international organizations stick to their own agendas. Stephen Hensell argues that officials employed by international organizations live a differentiated life and benefit from their relative autonomy in terms of promotion, rewards and credentials, as shown in his case study of the European Union. Differentiated life conduct and relative autonomy isolate the international staff, which in some cases explains why international organizations feel accountable to external actors, rather than to locals, which brings us back to the problem of legitimacy.

The reasons why Weber has received limited attention from IR scholars, and why this should change, are multifarious. Here we make an impressionistic summary of Weber's presence in IR, and then go on to criticize how the concept of the state has been understood. We begin by placing Weber's famous definition of the state as holder of the monopoly of violence within the broader frame of the 'basic concepts'. Then, we show that Weber's understanding of the state, even if linked to the characteristic monopoly of violence, can only be fully understood if the legitimacy of the leaders and the cadre of the organization receive due consideration. To pay more attention to Weber's concept of organization also throws new light on the worldwide process of rationalization, which is our second main point. Conventional approaches advanced by sociological institutionalists disregard that organizations, whether scientific, altruistic or professional, establish relations of domination between their leader and their members, and frequently third parties too. Because of this failure to reckon with this core trait of *any* organization John W. Meyer and his collaborators (Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer 2010), for example, tend to overlook the role of domination in organizational diffusion and isomorphism. In reality, trans-border international domination is ubiquitous, just like political conflict and resistance.

Along similar lines, Philipp Lottholz and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert argue that the reception of Max Weber's work in IR and social science generally is distorted and does injustice to the wealth of conceptual insight he offers to a sociological and post-positivist IR. They show how this 'exegetical bias'—most evident in the work of Talcott Parsons—is at the heart of neo-Weberians' narrow conceptualization of the state. Their understanding could be summarized as the monopoly of violence 'capacity' combined with 'legal-rational institutions', and accompanied by a conception of legitimacy tantamount to a population's acquiescence to coercive practices. Moving beyond the critique of neo-Weberian institutionalist state-building practice, our authors propose a relational understanding of the state, in which the distinction between state and society is not so clear-cut. In practice, they suggest, this re-focusing on the subjects of peace in post-conflict and developing countries

in the global South would necessitate serious engagement with the traditional and charismatic ideal types of legitimacy developed by Weber—a call that some organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, already seem to follow.

The earliest proposals for an international organization can be examined from a Weberian perspective. In his 'Max Weber, modernity and the project of inter-national organization', Jens Steffek reads the writings of functionalist IR authors like Paul Reinsch, James Salter and David Mitrany as proposals for 'societal and political modernization' by means of establishing rational bureaucracies. The superiority of transnational public administration would derive from formal law, bureaucratic organizations and scientific knowledge. While all three authors, Weber's contemporaries, share a modernist faith in bureaucracies as a solution for 'the asynchrony of progress between domestic societies and international society', their proposals differ in significant respects: coordination of national administrations (Reisch), trans-governmental links among national ministries (Salter) or supranational bureaucratic organizations (Mitrany). Accordingly, Mitrany assumed more dire consequences for national sovereignty than the first two. The other possibility, that sovereign nation-states would identify shared problems and agree upon solutions for them, has proved illusory, as foreseen in Weber's emphasis on conflicting values.

Weber's lasting contributions to the study of bureaucracies explain his — limited—presence in the literature on international organizations. However, Stephan Hensell claims that crucial Weberian insights have remained ignored, among them 'sociological' elements in Weber's description of a bureaucracy and its tendencies, in particular the characterization of bureaucrats as members of a status group. While subject to organizational discipline, officials employed within a bureaucracy live a separate, distinctive life and expect third parties to behave with respect for their special status, a claim that civil servants frequently base on the prestige of their educational credentials. Put another way, Weber zooms into bureaucracies and their employees in order to argue that not only do administrative cadres possess certain characteristics, but their members also do. Drawing from this claim, Hensell offers an improved understanding of the conflicts surrounding recruitment, promotion, and career advancement in an international organization like the European Commission. Through Weber's lenses, international organizations and their staff become actors of their own, rather than mere agents of nation-states.

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