

Revolutions without any Goal

Ethics and politics in a letter from Max Weber to Roberto Michels

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Wolfgang Mommsen described the relationship between Weber and Michels as an “asymmetrical partnership” (Mommsen 1981). This asymmetry was not only linked to the former’s academic position and age, but also to the fact that Weber sensed something in Michels’ views that he himself had distanced himself from, but at the same time continued to reflect on. It was a subtle mix of similarities and differences that allowed Weber to engage in a dialogue with himself, in which he was able to formulate his positions in an unusually explicit and direct way (Mommsen 1989: 88). The issues discussed in a correspondence which spanned many years, but was particularly intense and significant between 1906 and 1909, actually revolved around two central themes: one, a realistic analysis of political phenomena, processes and institutions which aimed, among other things, at defining the scope of what is politically possible and, two, a reflection on the subjective attitude to be assumed in dealing with the ongoing political transformations and the aspirations of various collective actors in the field. Precisely because of its ambiguity, this Weberian perspective constituted an anomalous political realism, which was anything but indifferent to the normative questions that a realistic diagnosis poses to subjectivity. Michels’ letter of August 4, 1908, presented here for the first time in its entirety in an English translation, enables us to grasp a crucial phase in the development of this particular Weberian realism in which the fundamental inspiration is already present but in the argumentation of which neither the categories (ethics of conviction, ethics of responsibility and, in particular, the acosmism of love), nor the conclusions that he would reach in a later phase (*Politics as Vocation*) are put forward. What the letter offers the reader is a glimpse of a work in progress, which is not just of philological-exegetical interest but also highly valuable in a theoretical sense, since it allows us to reflect on questions such as the connection between ethics and politics, the limits and conditions of a possible radical transformation of the world which, even after the end of the short Twentieth century, continue to be of burning relevance.

1. *Ethics without any goal*

The theoretical core of the letter is the description of an alternative, of a polarization between two ethical attitudes in confronting the world, and even more so in confronting specifically political facts. Weber's idea is that there only exist two internally and entirely coherent modes of relating to the world from an ethical standpoint – two alternatives of which one is to be selected: the extreme rejection of the world who “says No” to the world in the form of “being outside” or “being against”, of fleeing the world, or of world revolution vs. the positive acceptance of the world which recognizes the value of civilization, of material culture, of the acquisitions linked to improving the efficiency of means and proceeds to an adaptation (*Anpassung*) to its logic and the conditions of the possibility of its transformation. In principle, if one *wants* to be coherent – and it is implicitly assumed that this should be the case –, one can only select between extreme forms of denying the world or adapting (*Anpassung*) one's own transformative action to the logic of means and the range of possibilities. What is striking in this alternative is, above all, the heterogeneity of positions. There is, on the one hand, Christ who says: “My kingdom is not of this world.” (St. John 18, 36) and who practices brotherly love and the unconditional refutation of violence. Then, on the other hand, there is revolutionary syndicalism – described in the words of Eduard Bernstein as “the ultimate goal is nothing the movement is everything” – which, in turn, makes violence/coercion one of the privileged tools of its action. To sum up: Christ and Tolstoy on the one hand – Sorel and revolutionary syndicalism on the other – united and separated at the same time by an italicized “or” which highlights the difference.

What brings together such very different ethical positions is the adoption of a normative model, in which the ethical value of action does not consist in the effects that it has in the world but in its intrinsic quality, in its adequacy in response to a specific value. It has to do with an ethics of testimony and of exemplarity in which the ethical quality of action consists in the value rationality (*Wertrationalität*) of the single act, an ethics that is radically at odds with the logic of justification of the means by virtue of the ends because it has no goals, no strategies, nor puts forward ends. The effects of an action do not make for an ethically relevant argument. In this understanding, ethical action is an action without goal, indifferent to the consequences, focused exclusively on the meaning of action. Not only does there not exist a final goal, there are also no intermediary goals. Both positions – Tolstoy and revolutionary syndicalism – are examples of an absolute and unconditional ethics – an ethics that has neither exceptions, nor consequences, one that is indifferent to time and

uninterested in the future. “*Fiat justitia pereat mundus*” is the other maxim that defines it: it is an ethics of a radical rejection of the world.

Proceeding from the 1915 publication of his first version of *Zwischenbetrachtung* (Weber 1920), Weber calls this type of ethic *Gesinnungsethik* (ethics of conviction) and contrasts it with an ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*):

For there seems to exist no means of deciding even the very first question: Where, in the individual case, can the ethical value of an act be determined? Is it in terms of success or in terms of some intrinsic value of the act *per se*? The questions whether and to what extent the responsibility of the actor for the results sanctifies the means, or whether the value of the actor’s intentions justifies him in rejecting the responsibility for the outcome, whether to pass on the results of the act to God or to wickedness and foolishness of the world which are permitted by God” (Weber 1920: 339).

In his letter to Michels of August 4, 1908, it is a common normative ethical-convictional model that unites Tolstoy and revolutionary syndicalism. Now it is about understanding the relationship that exists between these two ethical positions – these two extreme forms of an ethics of conviction and all forms of ethics of conviction that do not lead to such radical results. Indeed, not all ethics of conviction deny the world in the same way and with the same intensity and radicalness as Christ of the Sermon on the Mount or revolutionary syndicalism. Calvinism and Lutheranism, or Catholicism could also be cited among the ethics of conviction. A number of questions arise: how and under what conditions can an ethics that can assume radically different forms appear to be such an extreme refutation of the world? Is there is a mode of rejecting the world that unites Tolstoy and revolutionary syndicalism or that distinguishes them, by contrast, from other forms that are always ethical-convictional?

In sum, if one adopts an ethical-convictional approach, are Tolstoy and Sorel only one option or are they something more or something different? The question is particularly relevant given that the link between the *e* and the adoption of a stance of radical unworldliness (*Weltfremdheit*) from the world is once again taken up in the last part of *Politics as Vocation* as an argument of a non-political nature – inadequate for politics – of the *e* tout court. The fundamental critique that revolves around the ethics of conviction in *Politics as Vocation* will be precisely the one to be taken outside of the world, “not being of this world.”

2. *Love without world*

To answer these questions one must follow the way in which Weber reconstructs the motives and the form of one specific process of the radicalization

of religious ethics. In this case, too, a passage taken from *Zwischenbetrachtung* offers particularly enlightening inspirations:

The absolutist sublimation of religious ethic will incline men towards the latter alternative: "The Christian does right and leaves success to God". In this, however, the actor's own conduct when it is really consistent, and not the lawful autonomy of the world, is condemned as irrational in its effects. In the face of this, a sublimated thoroughgoing search for salvation may lead to an acosmism increasing to the point where it rejects purposive-rational action *per se*, and hence, all action in terms of means-ends relations, for it considers them tied to worldly things and thus estranged from God. We shall see how this occurred with varying consistency, from the biblical parable of the lilies in the field to the more principled formulations, for instance, of Buddhism (Weber 1920: 339-340).

There are three central categories for understanding the form and nature of this process of the radicalization of religious ethics: sublimation, coherence, acosmism. For Weber sublimation is a process of the neutralization of materiality. At the end of this process what is relevant in an action is constituted not by the materiality of the good, the concreteness of doing, but by the meaning that the individual attributes to the action. Sublimation is the process of distilling meaning, the meaning intended by the actor like what decides of a quality of an action or of a good. The further sublimation proceeds, the more the instrumental-utilitarian attitude that is focused on the concreteness and the physicality of the objects and the acts recedes into the background. However, sublimation is also the process in which the commandments (in our case, the ethical ones) assume universality. In the case of religious ethics this means extending the commandments to brotherly love, to love of humanity, of the enemy. The uniformity of intention and the undifferentiated application of the principle are, ultimately, the necessary outcomes of a process in which all the differences, contingencies, exceptions are overcome in the direction of a pure intention now stripped of all ambiguity.

The coherent realization of this process is described as a form of the acosmism of love: the refusal to differentiate the duty of charity in relation to orders of life and the typologies of alterity and the exigency to subject one's way of life to an absolute fidelity and an unconditional coherence to one and the same principle, transcending all limitations of validity and all partial applications. Acosmism of love means brotherly love – an undifferentiated and undifferentiating love, an unconditional refutation of any form of rationality with regard to the goal – from work to a self-preserving activity: the lilies of the field (Matt. 6, 25-30) – an absolute refusal to respond to evil with violence. A distinctive trait of this attitude is the unconditional validity of these duties over and beyond any particular social circles or any specific life orders. Acosmism of love is a

world-denying love. (Bellah 1999): a love that does not construct world because the world is a web of differences, a coexistence of diversity, a co-presence of heterogeneous logics. The world as stably organized social coexistence is the product of violence and difference (diverse obligations, differences in ethical treatment, diverse spheres of value.)

In the Christian perspective, love in its acosmistic form finds its main manifestation in the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount and in the life of Christ, but also in Francis of Assisi and, most notably, Tolstoy. Weber, moreover, used the very concept of acosmism of love for the first time in 1910, referring precisely to Tolstoy, in the discussion following Ernst Troeltsch's lecture titled *Das stoisch-christliche Naturrecht*, at the first meeting of the German Sociological Association (Weber 1910).¹ For Weber Tolstoy is the one who in the last phase of his life most coherently put forward again the Christian ethics of love with all its implications: be it the renunciation of political and social institutions inevitably linked to violence and instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) with respect to the goal (economy) or be it the denial of worldly values.

The position of the Gospels is absolutely unambiguous on the decisive points. They are in opposition not just to war, of which they make no specific mention, but ultimately to each and every law of the social world, if this seeks to be a *place of worldly "culture"*, one devoted to the beauty, dignity, honor and greatness of man as creature of this earth. Anyone unwilling to go this far – and Tolstoy only did so as death was approaching – should know that he is bound by the laws of this earthly world, and that these include, for the foreseeable future, the possibility and inevitability of wars fought for power [...] (Weber 1916: 78).

Christ, Francis of Assisi and Tolstoy are representatives of a life conduct (*Lebensführung*) that leaves the world, is incompatible with the existing political and social order without being able offer an alternative that could guarantee the typical goods of civilization. The ideal of Christ and of Tolstoy is something different from a utopia: it is an ephemeral way of life, not fixed in time, and irreconcilable with any form of civilization (cultural and material) and of a stable and generalized political and social order. In sum, this form of ethical-convictional sublimation of Christian ethics leads to an acosmistic departure from worldly structures, to a way of life that is incompatible with any notion of social order, at a price that would, in the long term, prove unsustainable and incapable of producing anything that is both lasting and a real alternative.

From 1913 on – the period in which *Religiöse Gemeinschaften*, which later became part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Economy and Society) (Weber

¹ At least from 1906 on, Weber showed a consistent interest in the figure and biography of Tolstoy. Between 1911 and 1912 Weber even envisaged writing a book on him.

1913) and then *Zwischenbetrachtung*, was written – the acosmism of love is one of the categories that is part of the same constellation of mysticism and flight from the world. The acosmism of love is that mode of interpreting the ethical commandment of brotherly love where an unrelenting search for coherence and pure conviction is propelled to become a form of indifference towards the world: a dedication, a love directed not to one's fellow man but to itself. It is a product of intellectualism and of a search for salvation focusing on the search for absolute coherence, which can only be attained outside of the world, a purity of intention and of perception as a way of accessing the *unio mystica* with God. Acosmism of love is thus a way of life that stems from a search for coherence in applying the religious commandments, which basically serves to reassure the individual of his goodness and purity and not to change the world for the glory of God.

3. *Phenomenology of revolution: acosmistic violence and ascetic violence*

In the letter to Michels from August 4, the acosmism of love in Tolstoy's final phase of life, with his pacifist flight from the world, becomes associated with – and detached from – a social movement such as revolutionary syndicalism which, however, finds its privileged instruments of its action in general strike, violence and revolutionary terror. What seems clear here is the distance: whoever resorts to violence does not flee the world, transforms it. Violence also transforms whoever or whatever resists change. Revolution and flight from the world thus seem to be two completely different – and in a certain sense also opposing – logics. So what could this association between flight and world revolution be alluding to?

To answer this question it is necessary to proceed from a very general premise: there does not exist an absolute irreconcilability between religious ethics and violence and even less so between ethics in general and violence. Moreover, the recourse to violence is not only brotherly love and the imperative to not resist evil can be an ethical-convictional imperative. Violence can also be a religious duty or ethical imperative. For religious violence, Weber elaborates a typology, which proves illuminating for our subject, in which he distinguishes between ascetic violence and mystical violence. Examples of the first type of religious violence are not just the religious wars waged to promote the conversion of the non-believing – be it with the goal of saving their souls, be it, as in the case of Calvinism, to subject them *ad majorem dei gloriam* – but also, most notably, the army of the Saints of Cromwell, this particular form of religious

revolution which consisted in a rebellion against the power that ordered something contrary to the will of God.

Apart from this violence of ascetic revolutions, Weber also describes the conditions of the possibility and the form of a revolutionary violence of a mystical type:

It is a different matter with the Mystic. The psychological turn from possession of God to possession by God is always possible and with the mystic it is consummated. This is meaningful and possible when eschatological expectations of an immediate beginning and of the millennium of acosmic brotherliness are flaming up, hence, when the belief is dropped that an everlasting tension exists between the world and the irrational metaphysical realm of salvation. The mystic then turns into a savior and prophet. The commands, however, which he enunciates have no rational character. As product of his charisma, they are revelations of a concrete sort and the radical rejection of the world easily turns into radical *anomism*. The commands of the world do not hold for the man who is assured in his obsession with God [...]. All chiliasm, up to the revolution of the Anabaptist, rested somehow upon this substructure. For him who “possesses God” and is thereby saved, the manner of action is without significance for salvation (Weber 1920: 340).

The absence of rules (anomy) and recourse to violence as a direct form of justice is characteristic of millenarist revolutions. Violence is not a means to an end but an immediate expression of what is right. It is a violence without a remunerative goal, directly conforming with justice, precisely because it eliminates specific forms of evil – a form of evil based on an uncontested subjective perception of injustice and of what the perpetrators of evil deserve. Revolutions of this type and the mysticism of violence which manifests itself here does not have any order, nor does it create such, because it does not distinguish, does not differentiate nor does it assume form or procedure.

It has to do with a violence without goal, order or form that is not enacted for any goal other than justice in action, the first moment of the reign of the righteous on earth -- a type of violence that could be defined, by analogy, as acosmistic. Within religion, a pure type of this practice of violence could be found in the Anabaptist revolution, which was suppressed in the bloody battle at Münster. But an example of this type of revolutionary violence could also be traced in a more political-secular movement such as revolutionary syndicalism (*Syndikalismus*) with its typical forms of political action: general strike and terror (Weber 1918: 297). Here, too, we are confronted with a form of violence/coercion completely stripped of any rationality with respect to its goal. Violence essentially has the meaning of being an expression of revolt against an unjust order, a testimony of the unacceptability of a certain form of power – or of power tout court of man against man – all the way up to the violent revolu-

tion against something that has its own intrinsic value, even if it ultimately strengthens the power against which it revolted.

To conclude, Tolstoy and revolutionary syndicalism share, over and beyond the substantive differences regarding the respective ethical imperatives, an acosmist thrust which is the result of an obsessive search for coherence in relation to a principle, an exclusive preoccupation with the purity of conscience which ultimately translates into indifference towards the world, in the *incapacity of the world* to adopt/construct this web of distinctions and differences which allows the world as a place of goods and values. Within an ethical-convictional paradigm, the search for coherence leads outside of the world, forces one to renounce the goods of the world and the world for an ordered social coexistence. Within this same paradigm the desire to obtain or preserve the goods, even the merely material ones of the modern world (railways, newspapers, electricity, etc.) forces one to renounce all ideals, because it forces one to become incoherent regarding one's own ethical principles. Here we find in condensed form the leitmotif of this critique of the e in *Politics as Vocation*: the ethics of conviction, if one seeks to be coherent, leads one outside the world, by contrast, if one wants to be in the world, one is condemned to incoherence and to contradiction with one's own principles. Acosmism of love and mystical violence do not coincide with the ethics of conviction *tout court*, but constitute the only coherent forms thereof.

4. *Responsibility vs. utopia*

This coherence is indeed the main polemical tool be it against revolutionary syndicalism as a movement, be it against Michels' positions ("not even you", as one reads in the letter, "have thought through revolutionary syndicalism to its conclusion.") Revolutionary syndicalism and Michels as someone with an affinity to the positions of this movement do not show the same internal coherence as the Anabaptist movement; they do not limit themselves to the theory and practice of violence in general strike but question the future forms of organizing production after the insurrection will have sent home the capitalists (Weber 1918: 296/8). Their violence is not the first and last word on the evil of the world and does not, by itself, lead to the reign of the righteous. Revolutionary syndicalism also aspires to construct a different social order, a different structure and a management of production that is to be realized once the existing order is destroyed. The revolt against what the existing order is thus not coherently an end in itself but ambiguously mixed with an aspiration to a different order that is the one revolutionary violence is to foment: an order

that should be characterized by overcoming the “rule of man over man”.

Here the second polemical motive comes into play: that of the utopian nature of the aspirations of revolutionary syndicalism – the aspiration to transcend the rule of man over man is a utopia. Weber rarely makes use of the word utopia: his empirical approach to the study of social phenomena made him cautious of the categorical statement regarding the impossibility that cannot be superseded. And even in this case he does not hesitate: doing away with the rule of man over man is inconceivable, because such a rule is invariably linked to the diversity/inequality of human beings and is manifested in the totality of the orders of life and not just in politics and in the economy. The reproach of the utopianism of ends is joined by the critique of means, of democracy as an instrument of re-appropriating political power, the expression of public will or the will of the workers, socialization as organization capable of transcending the imbalances of power linked to an unequal distribution of knowledge.

It is precisely against this critical background that Weber brings into focus several aspects of his own ethical position – as opposed to the alternative of the ethic of conviction – which in those years was dubbed success-oriented ethics – and which, along with a series of integrations, elaborations, transformations, was to become the ethics of responsibility (Schluchter 1996: 53-59, 281). The decisive element of the ethical position which Weber defends in the letter is the recognition that the world – be it modern or not only – is an amalgam of good and bad: something which, precisely for this reason, has its own intrinsic value and which thus calls for caution, care and a sense of responsibility in any intervention. For this reason the ethical quality of action depends on the ethical quality of its effects in the world and not on its intrinsic adequacy in terms of a value (*value rationality*). This type of ethics involves planning transformations of the world under the sway of some realistic action: first, that it is not acceptable that justice leads to the end of the world; second, it is not legitimate to make the world pay the costs of an impossible search; finally, that the transformation of the world in a better place must be confronted with the double realism of what can possibly be changed and the means required for changing it. The adaptation (*Anpassung*) that is discussed in the letter is testimony to the inevitable confrontation with the question of means and their logic, with the problem of the conditions of the possible; for any effect/end there exists a finite range of means. Weber associates the definition of bourgeois politics with this serious, but not cynical realism.

Regarding this approach, Weber subsequently – especially from 1913 on – weighed by elaborating on several questions that had remained in the background – first and foremost, the meaning of *Realpolitik*. In his 1917 essay on “The Meaning of Objectivity in the Methodology of the Historical-social sci-

ences”, Weber was to focus on the difference between adaptation as adequacy of means to an end on the basis of its rationality with regard to value and adaptation as a selection of means on the basis of the chances of success. The idea of political realism advocated by Weber, one that centered on the ethics of responsibility, was to be one that adapts to the world only in the search for means for an end that draws its legitimacy solely from its rationality with respect to value. It would, however, be above all “*Politics as Vocation*” which would address the ethical irrationalism of the world as a decisive element for understanding the dilemmas and the definition of the functioning of the ethics of responsibility. The problem of justifying means by way of the end, which is characteristic of the ethics of responsibility, actually finds its basis in the following insight: “That it does not hold true of his actions that only good can come of good and only evil from evil, but rather that the opposite is often the case” (Weber 1919: 362). The question whether the end justifies the means originates in the fact that ethically good ends can often only be reached only through ethically dangerous means. And it is this awareness that activates the internal process of comparing ends, means and the undesired effects of the means that leads to an evaluation of the legitimacy of action by virtue of the positive effects being more prevalent than the negative ones. And it is this very process that can lead to the abandonment of a specific end, when it is verified that this can be realized only by virtue of terrible means that directly or indirectly produce an evil of much greater scope than the good they realize or seek to realize.

5. *The “return” of the ethics of conviction in politics as vocation*

In spite of the presence of many elements in keeping with the positions expressed in the letter, Weber’s position in ‘*Politics as Vocation*’ does not seem to be reduced to merely suggesting an ethics of responsibility as a normative proposal regarding the link between ethics and politics. It is one of the most frequent themes in all of Weber’s works and it is certainly not possible to retrace Weber’s argumentation in an analytical way. One still has to assess the significance of certain passages in which Weber’s position distances itself from the one sketchily outlined in the letter and to consider an interpretative hypothesis that overcomes several theoretical difficulties which the position taken in the lecture of 1919 ends up broaching.

With regard to the clear refutation of any ethical-convictional approach, which characterizes the letter, the change of course in *Politics as Vocation* seems evident:

“On the other hand it is immensely moving when a mature person (whether old or young) who feels with his whole soul the responsibility he bears for the real consequences of his actions, and who acts on the basis of an ethic of responsibility, says at some point, “Here I stand, I can do no other”. That is something genuinely human and profoundly moving. For it must be *possible* for *each* of us to find ourselves in such a situation at some point if we are not inwardly dead. In this respect, the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolute opposites. They are complementary to one another, and only in combination do they produce the true human being who is *capable* of having a “vocation for politics”.” (Weber 1919: 368).

The passage is too explicit to be misunderstood. Weber affirms that, if not to the same extent, the two ethics are both necessary for a politician to have the vocation (*Beruf*) for politics, be it that he/she is able to interpret politics in the sense, in which Weber sees as ethically imperative. The question addresses what politics has to be to maintain a dimension of meaning. The argument of the complementarity of the two ethics relates to the idea that not only each of the two has its limits but that also the other has the capacity to overcome them, be this as an antidote to its shortcomings.

Now it is clear – and this is consistently repeated in various parts of the text – that the limits to the ethics of conviction, as opposed to those to the ethics of responsibility, are more difficult for Weber to reconstruct. The polemical thrust of the text relegates to the background the “critique” of the ethics of responsibility found mainly in the passage, which is crucial, yet hardly explicit, on Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor and in several assertions made in the final part of the lecture.

There are three general limits to the ethics of responsibility and these all have a common denominator in the lacking capacity to transcend the existing order. One, like the Grand Inquisitor who adheres to the ethics of responsibility is not capable of saying a definitive and irrevocable ‘no’ to the use of terrible means. For whomever adheres to the ethics of responsibility there can only be means that are not justified on the basis of a specific end in a specific context, but never means excluded once and for all from the range of the politically possible. The ethics of conviction is the only that says a definitive ‘no’ to certain means. It is a central point because it bears witness to an idea of politics in which, besides the transformations linked to the realization of new ends, there is also another kind of innovation that plays a decisive role – innovations that consist in the definitive exclusion of certain means, in the identification of unacceptable behaviors independent of the ends that could be called upon to serve. This type is the revolution of human rights, the juridification of ‘jus in bello’ and, more generally the deontological ban of certain

practices over and beyond their possible rationality with respect to a goal.

The second limit to the ethics of responsibility is its being imprisoned by the possible. Here the distance of politics as vocation from the positions expressed in the letter is striking: "It is of course entirely correct, and a fact confirmed by all historical experience, that what is possible would never be achieved if, in this world, people had not repeatedly reached for the impossible." (Weber 1919: 369). Here the utopianism is no longer the reproach, which is meant to force the adversary into a corner, but an essential resource for a politics endowed with meaning. Politics is not the art of the possible and only the ethics of conviction grants political action the capacity to pursue an absolute goal whose value can be affirmed against all reality and all realism. In the later Weber, the realism of means and of political strategies can also be put to the service of unrealistic, but ethically imperative political ends.

Finally, the ethics of responsibility is too sensitive to the lessons of reality. Its connection to realism forces it to learn the lessons of facts from the world. By contrast, Weber seemed to be defending in his 1919 lecture the necessity of a dimension of persistence, of resistance to defeats and the torpedoing of all hopes as an essential part of a politics that does not want to limit itself to the possible, thereby becoming an accomplice to the existing order. Those who have a vocation for politics

must, even now, put on the armour of that steadfastness of heart which can withstand even the defeat of all hopes [...] Only someone who is certain that he will not be broken when the world, seen from his point of view, is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer it, and who is certain that he will be able to say "Nevertheless" in spite of everything – only someone like this has a "vocation" for politics (Weber 1919: 369)

It is, however, superfluous to indicate the distance between this idea of politics and the reality of the politics of liberal western contemporary democracies – just as it seems superfluous to attribute its profound crisis to this distance. It would make more sense to conclude with some remarks related to the essence of the Weberian reflections. It is difficult to shield off Weber's normative proposition from the reproach of incoherency, which even in his own lecture was deployed as a weapon against the ethics of conviction. It is difficult to blame politicians of the conviction of incoherency and then to suggest an idea of politics that holds together conviction and responsibility. Weber evidently thinks that it is possible to put forward and follow an idea of coherency that is different from pure fidelity to one and the same principle, the widespread and even extreme application of one and the same value. The idea is that coherency can be a function of the worldview (*Weltbild*) and that in a world "without God and without prophets", without fate and without

meaning, political experience, to have a meaning, must hold together also opposing and contradictory exigencies.

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