Hans J. Morgenthau and the Legacy of Max Weber

The definitive version of this paper has been published in *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme*, edited by Duncan Bell, 2009. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 63-82. Ltd, all rights reserved.

Stephen P. Turner
Department of Philosophy
University of South Florida

I. Introduction

To begin to understand Max Weber’s significance for Hans Morgenthau it is necessary to read Morgenthau in the light of the situation of the émigré scholar in the 1940s. Many of the emigrants failed to adapt, while others thrived, and thrived spectacularly, in their new setting. Morgenthau was one of the success stories, but it is important to see what success consisted in, and what needed to be done to succeed, especially at the crucial point of the transformation into an American scholar writing in English. For almost all of the most successful emigrants, it rested in both the utilization and the transformation of the skills and ideas which they had acquired in Germany, very often in a different academic discipline.

The required transformations were multiple: not only was the American setting one with a strong disciplinary structure, with less deference to the Professor, but it was an academic setting in which different forms of writing were prized, which involved a different structure of academic publishing and demanded a different kind of book. But most important was the fact that the common points of reference between writer and reader were dissimilar. Communicating with an American audience required appealing to a new set of philosophical, literary, and historical sources, as well as historical experiences. Ironically, though not irrelevant to the discussion of political morality, one of the pre-existing common points of reference between Germany and the United States was the literature of intellectual Protestantism. German immigrants of earlier generations had preserved their ties to the theological language and traditions of Germany, and in several cases, had become prominent American theologians.

If one considers merely a few individuals closely related to Morgenthau himself, one can see some patterns in the process of transformation. A standard strategy was to give a series of lectures in English at the New School. Lectures of this kind, and there were many, were the means by which European, primarily German scholars, began or resumed an academic career in the new and not terribly hospitable setting of the American university. They were documents of

---

1 This chapter is an abridged and modified version of ‘Morgenthau as a Weberian’ originally published in G. O. Mazur (ed.), *One Hundred Year Commemoration to the Life of Hans Morgenthau (1904-2004)* (New York: Semenenko Foundation, 2004), pp. 88-114.
2 On the importance of the émigré experience for classical realism, see Duncan Bell’s introduction to this volume.
Americanization, in which the key scholarly ideas of the lecturer were presented in a cleansed, de-Germanized, form. Morgenthau’s *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (1946) is in many respects a characteristic emigration document. The book was based on a series of lectures at the New School. It represents Morgenthau’s critical encounter with American foreign policy thinking yet also performed the necessary task of shedding the German roots or form of his thinking and finding an alternative set of historical references and examples in support of his arguments. Recruiting Lincoln, and counterposing him to other figures often invoked in the discussion of foreign policy, such as Wilson, gave Morgenthau a means of expressing for an American audience ideas which otherwise would have been associated with the German enemy. *Politics Among Nations* (1948), which began life as a series of lectures at the University of Chicago, continued this process of Americanization, as did many of the essays that Morgenthau wrote in this period, such as his review of the books of E. H. Carr.

This process of transformation is especially important to understand in relation to Morgenthau’s use of Weber. Weber’s thought came to have a somewhat different role in academic discourse at the time Morgenthau wrote *Politics among Nations*. Although it was a role of quite extraordinarily prestige, Weber’s political writings, from which Morgenthau drew, were largely unknown among American academics. Only a few of them had been translated in Gerth and Mills’ influential *From Max Weber* (1946), and they did not suffice to give a sense of the political thought of Weber as a connected whole. Instead, during the post-war period and through the early 1950s, Weber appeared as a founding father of sociology whose greatest text was *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958), which in turn was understood as an alternative to the Marxist account of the origins and consequently the moral nature of capitalism. The demotic Weber (one might even say the Harvard Weber, since it was under the influence of Talcott Parsons that this image of Weber flourished in the curriculum) was Weber as a sociologist and godfather of the emerging specialization of political sociology.

Weber’s ideas about value-freedom in social science, similarly, were imported and at the same time transformed into another support for American social science disciplines’ self-definition in terms of objectivity and the post-war quest for a ‘behavioral science’ stripped of its lingering pre-war reformism. In the course of this transformation Weber’s ideas were shorn of much of

---

their moral content, and especially their tragic and quasi-nihilistic or Nietzschean elements, elements that of course Leo Strauss stressed in his *Natural Right and History*. As Allan Bloom recalled in *The Closing of the American Mind*, the atmosphere in the social sciences at Chicago was suffused with Weber, who was taught in the famous Social Science sequence in the College, and he had this influence in mind. Yet at the University of Chicago, people close to Morgenthau, such as Edward Shils, who is thanked in the preface to *Politics Among Nations*, were well aware of the whole of Weber. In the 1940s, Shils was producing his translated selections from Weber’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, including the crucial paper on value-neutrality, which outlines his value ideas ([1917]1949). Strauss, of course, delivered the lectures that were the basis of *Natural Right and History*: Weber and the radicalization of Weber represented by Heideggerianism, are the central antagonists. Max Rheinstein, who was producing his translation of Weber’s writings on the sociology of law at the time that *Politics Among Nations* was written, also knew the political side of Weber very well. Frank Knight, the doyen of the Economics department and the founder of Chicago sociology, was an admirer of Weber, translated his *General Economic History* in the 1920s, and brought Weber’s last assistant to the University. Knight was thanked for his help with *Scientific Man and Power Politics*. Chicago, in short, was the setting in which the greatest knowledge of Weber was concentrated.

The role of Weber in Morgenthau’s thought, however, is not apparent to the casual reader until much later. In the early editions of *Politics among Nations*, Weber is not mentioned explicitly. In the first chapter of the fifth edition of *Politics among Nations*, however, we find one of Weber’s best known sayings: ‘Interests (material and ideal), not ideas, dominate directly the actions of men. Yet the “images of the world” created by these ideas have often served as switches determining the tracks on which the dynamism of interests kept actions moving.’ The ‘interests’ quotation is an easily interpreted clue to the sources of Morgenthau’s thought. But Morgenthau was never tagged with the label ‘Weberian’, and from the point of view of the conventional, student-oriented understanding of Weber before Morgenthau’s death, the quotation and its source – indeed its meaning – must have been something of a puzzle to many of Morgenthau’s readers. Weber is not discussed further in the text itself. The quotation is from Weber’s writings on the sociology of religion, rather than his political writings, though it is from a passage on worldliness and religion that is central to his understanding of the nature of politics, and is indeed one of the most central and powerful expressions of his thinking on those relationships between politics and morality. His peers at Chicago would have known this. But none of this would have been apparent to Morgenthau’s ordinary American readers, and, in this period, Weber was neither a standard source in political theory nor in international relations.

Morgenthau’s own understanding of Weber, of course, owed nothing to the American reception

---

of Weber. His was an understanding of the original texts in the context of their political origin. Moreover, Morgenthau had a special kind of introduction to the thinking of Weber, and this bears directly on the problem of understanding his relation to Weber. Morgenthau tells us that while preparing for his first legal examination in Munich ‘I attended Professor Rothenbücher’s seminar on Max Weber’s political and social philosophy, based upon the latter’s political writings,’ that is the recently collected *Politische Schriften* (1921), which in the first edition contained not only published material but letters, some of which proved to be too strong for the tastes of the editors of the 1950s’ version.\(^{11}\) ‘It was a great experience,’ Morgenthau says. ‘Weber’s political thought possessed all the intellectual and moral qualities I had looked for in vain in the contemporary literature inside and outside of the universities.’\(^{12}\) The fact that he encountered Weber in a seminar meant that he began his encounter with Weber in a synthetic mode. He did not pick up scraps here and there, or read isolated texts. He was guided by Rothenbücher, whom Morgenthau admired, into a synthetic grasp of Weber as a political thinker.\(^{13}\)

In what follows I will discuss *seriatim* some of the Weberian ideas that are the sources of Morgenthau’s thought by considering what Weber said and explaining how these ideas appear in a transformed way in Morgenthau’s writings. My aim is not to consider ‘influence,’ though I think it will be evident that there is a great deal of influence, but to provide materials for the understanding of aspects of Morgenthau’s thought and politics that have proven so puzzling, especially to American scholars who have attempted to locate his thought within the co-ordinates of American liberalism and American foreign policy thinking and politics. I will do this informally, by explaining the Weberian ideas that Morgenthau had access to in the texts that Morgenthau tells us influenced him, and by showing how they reappear in Morgenthau. The transformation that Morgenthau was compelled to make to establish these ideas in the American setting was immense, his sources were various, and Weber was one source among many. But Morgenthau, I will suggest, was largely a consistent Weberian, and this clarifies some puzzles about his thought, and enables us to correct some mis-impressions. I do not want to point fingers at specific erroneous interpretations of Morgenthau here. But the impressions that I will try to correct are each found in the secondary literature on Morgenthau, often in prominent places.\(^{14}\)

---


What I will not do is to engage in the misleading procedure of matching quotations from Weber with quotations from Morgenthau. Morgenthau’s experience of Weber was Weber as a systematic and coherent thinker. So in what follows I will describe the systematic structure of Weber’s thinking as it bears on various issues, and explain how Morgenthau’s thought may be understood in relation to it.

II. A Note on the Sources

At the time Morgenthau was a student, during the early Weimar era, certain writings of Max Weber had achieved the status of touchstone in the intellectual controversies of the time. His speech ‘Science as a Vocation’ (1917), which has echoes in both Morgenthau’s writing on scientism in Scientific Man and Power Politics and in his later Science: Servant or Master (1972) was perhaps the most important of these texts. It was reprinted as a pamphlet and widely circulated, and became the subject of anguished reactions and responses by the Frankfurt School and by Heidegger, who regarded it as a disappointment – and Max Scheler, who quipped that Weber was the representative of his time, but that these were the worst of times – and which produced its own rather interesting literature of critique and response. Weber had clearly struck a nerve with this speech. It was interpreted by most of his hearers as a failure or refusal on Weber’s part as a scientist or a scientific leader to provide a resolution to the master questions of the time, especially what was known as the Crisis of the Sciences. It is an anti-scientistic text, a denial that science has the capacity to resolve the master questions of the time. But it is also a rejection of the idea that some sort of overarching intellectual synthesis could be provided by philosophy or Wissenschaft in the broadest sense. The message was instead that specialization was the condition of advance in the sciences, and that specialization precluded the offering of world-views.

The companion to this speech was ‘Politics as a Vocation’ (1919), another postwar lecture to


students, which Morgenthau also knew well. More will be said about this speech below, but its form is very striking. Like ‘Science as a Vocation,’ it is a text which dashes the hopes of its audience, in this case hope for a new kind of politics that would provide an escape from the moral dilemmas of political life. Much of it is taken up with a general historical characterization of politics, focusing on parties and the deep (and pre-democratic) roots of party politics and party rule. Weber told a story about the development of liberal democracy that omitted the constitutive notions of liberal democracy. It was not the story of rights, or popular sovereignty, or the fulfilment of ideals. It was instead a lesson in the tough and deeply rooted realities of political action, explicitly directed against any kind of utopian optimism. It was a brutal assault on the idealism of its student audience, and was received as such. It instructed them in what political leadership consists, and the qualities of genuine leaders. The text concluded with the argument that neither science nor biblical morality can deliver us from the necessity of fundamental and fundamentally irrational value-decisions in politics, and with the suggestion that the pursuit of national values was the only remaining ennobling or meaningful this-worldly political choice in the present.

A third text was Weber’s newspaper writing, toward the close of the war, about the post-war constitution. The text is a classic of constitutional thinking, but it is oriented to a very specific problem, the question of who in the German polity can be used as a reliable resource in the pursuit of national interest. The essay includes an extended reflection on Bismarck and his constitutional role and the unfortunate consequences of this role for constitutional development — a string of mediocre successors incapable of serving the national interest and a collection of party politicians unable or unwilling to either articulate or prosecute the national interest, and a bureaucracy that produced ‘leaders’ who were incapable of making the kind of decisions that pursuit of the national interest required — and incapable of legitimating their decisions with the public. The aspect of this important text that bears on Morgenthau in particular may be put in the form of a question, the question which implicitly loomed for Weber, who recognized that the constitutional structure of the future regime had to be fundamentally democratic: namely how is it possible to defend and pursue the national interest in a democratic polity?

Weber played with fire in his discussion of leadership, in that he believed that a national interest-oriented constitutional solution for Germany required the maximization of the possibilities for charismatic leadership. Weber believed that only a President who could rise above the parties and came to office in an election that tested his charisma could overcome the bureaucracy’s

---


limited capacity for decision and the limited vision of interest-oriented parties and interest-driven domestic politics. Weber’s political anxieties were closely related to this. As Weber surveyed the various class parties for their capacity for producing leaders, a capacity that a post-war democratic constitutional settlement would depend on, he was unremittingly pessimistic. The missing element in each was what he called the Catalinarian energy of the deed – the drive for power and willingness to act that he took to be necessary for the defence of national interests. As he repeatedly comments, what was needed was leaders who were genuinely political, rather than merely spokespersons for the short term interests of the groups that their parties represented. But the bureaucracy would not produce real leaders either. And this meant that national interests could not be served.

In addition to these texts, Morgenthau knew at least parts of Weber’s *Sociology of Religion*, including the ‘Die Wirtschaftethik der Weltreligionen’ from which the ‘interests’ quotation was taken, and would also have known something of the methodological writings, including ‘The Meaning of “Ethical Neutrality” in Sociology and Economics,’ which presents Weber’s views on the relation of theory to practice and the limitations of science in connection with policy.¹⁹ We can assume that he would have known, as a good student would have known, the contents of the first edition of the *Politische Schriften*, including ‘Between Two Laws,’ which discussed the notion of national responsibility, and had been written for a newspaper in response to a contribution by a Swiss pacifist, which contrasts, and places in radical opposition, the law of the Gospel and ‘our responsibility in the face of history.’²⁰

It is perhaps also important to note what Weber’s political writings do not include, and what they include alternatives to. Weber was not an adherent to the standard account of the rise of liberal democracy – to Whig history. The political writings point to an alternative but never fully articulated account of the development of modern politics, in which the various elements of the modern state arise in different historical periods and come together with the modern phenomenon of mass society to produce the need for a certain modern kind of demagogy in the framework of parliaments and parties. Not ‘the people,’ but parties and their evolution, and the practical ineliminability of parties, is the focus of the bulk of the text of ‘Politics as a Vocation.’ One can see from this emphasis alone why the text was a disappointment to those of its hearers who aspired to an escape from politics into a post-political *Gemeinschaft*. For Weber then, the rise of mass democracies is not a matter so much of noble sentiment and the virtues of public discussion as a product of successful and ineliminable organizational forms, notably state and party bureaucracies. Politics in the present is necessarily party politics, and to become a leader


one must make one's way in a party. Even the SPD (German Social Democratic Party), as Weber’s friend and associate Robert Michels famously put it, was subject to the Iron law of Oligarchy, in contrast to, and in spite of, its egalitarian aims – a revealing example of the problem of realism and utopianism.\textsuperscript{21}

\section*{III. Utopianism, Fundamentalism, and Responsibility}

In Weber’s methodological writings, as well as in the Vocations essays, he developed a complex conception of the nature of value choices and the interplay between value choices and facts.\textsuperscript{22} ‘Ultimate Values,’ a term that Morgenthau also used, cannot be grounded in facts, justified factually, and are not matters of scientific truth – they must be decided for or committed to. Nevertheless, reason and fact is relevant, in several ways. If one is attempting to reconcile one’s commitments, whether they can be reconciled is a factual matter. It is also a factual matter as to how and whether one’s values are achievable in this world. Science can contribute causal knowledge, which is also knowledge about the relation between real world means and real world ends. Causal knowledge thus enables one to distinguish that which is a this-worldly or a realisable ultimate value and that which is not.

Because the achievement of many ultimate values requires the achievement of various steps in the causal process, or has many causal conditions, there are intermediate ends that are also, in effect, values or interests, and some of these intermediate ends, notably the values of the legal sphere, are intermediate ends that are shared by many people who have different ultimate ends. Political stability and action thus do not require agreement on ultimate values, or a common ideology. The nation-state is the locus of common intermediate ends, as is the law – a stable legal order is a condition for the achievement of many ultimate values, but of course it may conflict with many ultimate values as well. Weber (like his follower the legal theorist Gustav Radbruch) was fascinated with the case of the consistent anarchist, the Tolstoyan Christian who rejects the state, and with similar cases, for these were instances of ultimate values outside of and in conflict with the intermediate values of the state, and indeed with politics itself. These are not people who are confused about the realisability of their ideals in this world. Theirs is an ethic of conviction or intention, whose standards are not this-worldly success. Historically, of course, as Weber’s own \textit{Protestant Ethic} showed, the pursuit of such ideals can have powerful this-worldly consequences. And the Lutheran ‘here I stand, I can do no other,’ which is the classic assertion that one must sometimes act in ways that do not bring success in this world, is relevant to politics as well. It appears at the end of ‘Politics as a Vocation’ to make a point about leadership and


\textsuperscript{22} The best treatment of the topic of Weber’s value theory remains H. H. Brunn, \textit{Science, Values and Politics in Max Weber’s Methodology} (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1972). As it happens, Bruun spent his career as a Danish Diplomat.
political morality – that deep conviction, even if it leads to failure, may be a personal condition of political greatness.

Weber’s critique of the political alternatives of the time were directed at the sorts of positions, such as Christian pacifism, that mixed up this-world ends with other-world ends, and promoted delusory notions, such as the idea that from good acts only good comes. He professed genuine admiration for consistent other-worldly moralists, such as the anarchist who acknowledged that bomb-throwing would not end the state, or the Christian saint who left the consequences to God. This is the context for the many references in Morgenthau to the notion that leaders, who are responsible for the this-worldly good of the nation, cannot act justly and let the skies fall, and for the comments he makes on E. H. Carr’s attempt – probably inspired by R. H Tawney’s contemporary writings – to reconcile idealism and realism. By its very nature, if idealism is other-worldly and realism is this-worldly, there can be no mixture which in the end sacrifices the this-worldly ends to the other-worldly ones. To be a Christian statesman whose Christianity gets in the way of his statesmanship is simply to risk failure.

The nation, in Weber’s terms, can be an ultimate value as well as being an intermediate end, a necessity for those pursuing other ends. Indeed, in principle there is no limit on what can be an ultimate value, though of course some values – Weber gave free trade as an example – are ridiculous as ‘ultimate’ value choices. One of the themes of ‘Politics as a Vocation’ was the consideration of what, now, is a possible political value choice that is not illusory, ignoble, or other-worldly, and Weber’s answer (which implies that it is the only ennobling answer) was the nation. The nation is a this-worldly goal. Ethical positions that have this-worldly goals Weber called ethics of responsibility, because they imply that the agent is responsible for the this-worldly consequences of his actions. It is, de facto, because of its centrality as an intermediate goal, the locus of an unusually powerful set of consequential relationships. We cannot have this-worldly goals and ignore the central causal significance of the fact of the nation-state. Yet the character of the state, and of the political, is morally problematic. The thing that states have in common is not ends, a point that Morgenthau also underlined, but the means of violence. And here the Tolstoyans are right: to engage in politics, as Weber said, is to contract with diabolical powers. Politics is morally dangerous, precisely because it is intrinsically connected with the means of violence. With the means of violence, one cannot be sure that the consequences of one’s actions will be entirely good: the achievement of good ends is mixed up with bad consequences. The tragic character of politics is a result of the pacte diabolique that the political agents makes with the intrinsically violent power of the state. This is not, however, a plea for ‘power politics.’ On the contrary, power is a means, or an intermediate end. When taken as a goal (by a politician, for example) Weber said, it ‘leads nowhere and is senseless.’


Morgenthau used different terms to deal with these distinctions, but much of what he said maps on to Weber exactly. He used the Weberian language of ultimate values, a language which makes sense as ethical theory only in the context of a particular concept of valuation as a matter of decision. In an unpublished 1937 paper, he reiterated Weber’s notion that in our time, having eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, as he put it, we are faced with the fact that there can be no metaphysical foundation of morality, but that we must choose. As Morgenthau put it, ‘We live in a crisis of metaphysical consciousness ... This insight bans morality into that realm within which it alone can still exist in objectivity today: the human soul.’ For both of them, decision is necessitated by the antinomic character of the choices – between power and the absolutism of the Christian Gospels for Weber (in ‘Between two Laws’ and in ‘Politics as a Vocation’), between ‘Love and Power’ and ‘natural aspirations’ and the Christian Gospels for Morgenthau. The distinction between realism and utopianism in Morgenthau worked to make the same point that Weber made – that particular ‘goals’ and programs appear to their followers to be realistic and this-worldly, but are in fact utopian escapes from the realities of politics. Morgenthau, it might appear, has a much more restrictive conception of what goals are realistic – so restrictive that there are, for great powers, no real options in international politics: every nation is bound to pursue its interests through power politics or fail. But this is a misreading, as will become evident in the next section.

Morgenthau was obliged to comment on a number of other traditions as well, notably those that were foundational to American liberal democracy. Needless to say, it would have been self-defeating to announce himself as a philosophical critic of these foundations: prudence required something else. So we do not find among Morgenthau’s works anything like the dramatic texts in which Weber presented his views. But the views are nevertheless given explicitly, as when he said that ‘the moral problem of politics resolves itself into the question: Given the essential incompatibility between politics and Christian ethics, how must moral men act in the political sphere?’ Morgenthau’s answer was not quite the same as Weber’s, who stressed the conflict more than the resolution. Morgenthau’s answer was ‘to try to choose the lesser evil’ and do ‘as little violence to the commands of Christian ethics’ as one can. The dilemma is nevertheless the same for both, and the difference in Morgenthau’s response is not one that necessarily has any practical significance. The political ‘sphere’ – the term is used by both men – is governed by its own considerations, notably the this-worldly consideration of consequences. Moreover, it is unclear precisely what ‘ultimate or absolute’ status Christian morality can have for a thinker who affirms the reality of the antinomian conflicts, resolvable only by decision, that both Weber and Morgenthau placed in the centre of ethical consideration.

Morgenthau seemed to have adopted the solution of his colleague Leo Strauss and his followers, of treating the dogmatic foundations of liberal democracy and the adherence of the American people to them, in a utilitarian way, as a donné of history which is better left publicly unquestioned.\textsuperscript{30} Morgenthau found a surrogate for the acceptance of liberal dogmatism in a Herder-like notion of the purpose of American politics, an exercise that resembles comments by Weber on the civilizational differences between France and Germany, which Weber said cannot be rationally judged or decided between, but are like different gods. Morgenthau did not say this. Instead he discussed a distinction between ‘the absolute good’ and ‘the relative good’ that allowed him to bracket the question of absolute good – leaving it, as he said, ‘to a seminar in political philosophy,’ and to speak in a utilitarian manner about the political effectiveness of communist and democratic ideology in the setting of actual political contestation. He suggested that a fascination with the idea of ‘the truth’ in politics, combined with a ‘disregard for the actual aspirations of human beings’ gets in the way of political success, much as, one might say, Christian doctrine gets in the way of sound political action.\textsuperscript{31} In ‘the sphere of political action’ itself, Morgenthau suggested, we must accept that ‘there is no such thing as one and the same truth for everyone,’ and that good policies, those which respond to people’s aspirations, are the condition for the success of propaganda, not the other way around.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{IV. Interests, Power and ‘Pragma’}

The ‘interests’ quotation in \textit{Politics Among Nations} is not an affirmation of some sort of reductive thesis to the effect that a small set of particular (power-political) interests rule the world. It is the opposite – ‘ideal’ interests are ‘real’ interests as well, and they include the ideals of a culture, religious ideals, and indeed, all the goals that it is possible to have fall in either the category of ideal or material interests. So a theory of international politics based on the idea that there are common human interests would not be a Weberian one. Yet this is precisely the idea that has often been thought to define ‘realism,’ and to define Morgenthau himself as a ‘human nature realist.’ But it has often puzzled commentators that Morgenthau repeatedly contradicted this claim. His use of this quotation and the related commentary indicates that he took the same view that Weber did on the matter. Political goals of all kinds – ideal and material – have been the object of states and leaders. Weber defined states not in terms of ends, which he said have, historically, been exceedingly various, but in terms of means: the use of physical force and the successful creation of a monopoly of legitimate violence. It is no accident that the same language appears in Morgenthau. But there is another issue, that Weber spoke of under the heading of the \textit{pragma} of power, that qualifies this diversity of possible ends. The state, as an intermediate end to the achievement common of virtually all actions – to the individual goal of getting rich as well as the goal of helping the poor – is governed by considerations of power that seem to be autonomous.

\textsuperscript{30} See also the discussion of Morgenthau’s America in Vibeke Schou Tjalve’s chapter in this volume.
\textsuperscript{31} Morgenthau, \textit{The Restoration of American Politics}, p. 243.
\textsuperscript{32} Morgenthau, \textit{The Restoration of American Politics}, p. 244.
V. Laws of Politics, Scientism, Policy Science, and Verstehende Soziologie

One area in which Weber and Morgenthau seem to be radically different, indeed poles apart, is in respect to the possibilities of social science as a discoverer of ‘laws’ of social life. There is also what is at least a puzzle about the notion of a policy science. Morgenthau’s model of international relations theory and advice seems to be a form of policy science; Weber fought a pivotal struggle against policy science and the policy of the German Historical School of Economics, which was also fond of the language of ‘laws,’ in a dispute over value-freedom in the Verein für Sozialpolitik. In his methodological writings on Rösch and Knies, he went out of his way to attack two thinkers of the older generation of the Historical School, in part because their use of the language of laws, in the context of laws of development, was historicist and epistemic. The so-called ‘laws,’ he argued, were teleological constructions that mixed up fact and value and represented the historical perspective of their authors, a critique that resembled Butterfield’s critique of the Whig conception of history. He went on to argue that the terms of description of the historical events that interest us are necessarily and intrinsically laden with the values of our culture, and that the idea of a final or scientific vocabulary for the historical sciences was an illusion. A chemistry or astronomy of social life, as he put it, even if it could be constructed, would fail to answer the questions that interest us, precisely because it would not explain the facts that we want to explain, which come in the language of life, which is intrinsically valuative, or as we would now say, cultural.

Weber also had a related argument about abstraction, which suggested that supposed laws, such as the abstractions of economics, were better understood as ideal-types than as representations of reality. Their first purpose is to aid in the understanding of action, and they are only secondarily of interest for their predictive power. Like Morgenthau, he was trained in the continental legal tradition, and his notion of abstraction reflected his background: the application of the abstract categories, as in the law, was, as he put it, a matter of casuistry. The notion of causality he employed was also drawn from the legal tradition, and it was not the causality of scientific ‘law’ but of causal responsibility, which he understood in terms of an increase in the probability of an outcome that could be attributed to some act by comparing the (necessarily hypothetical) probable outcome without the act to the probable outcome with the act. Models of rational action (which he regarded as ideal-types as well) were valuable for explicating action, or making it understandable, even when the point of the analysis was to show how emotion and error produced the outcome.

This was Weber’s Verstehende Soziologie. His view of policy science was that policy could never be ‘scientifically’ grounded. For Weber the younger German Historical School, especially such figures as Gustav Schmoller, who served as government advisors and sought in the Verein to do studies that provided direct advice based on a scientific consensus with respect to policy, were committing a kind of fraud because they mixed up fact and value and presented conclusions as ‘scientific’ which were necessarily valuative. In this case a particular set of values was

---

concealed – values which he himself did not share, and which he argued served to promote the bureaucratization of human life and the parcelling out of the human soul that bureaucratization produced.

Morgenthau, it would appear, was by contrast an anti-relativist with respect to social science and an anti-historicist who believed in ‘laws’ of power in the politics of nations, rooted in universal truths about human nature, that not only can be discovered or identified, but that can ground a policy science, or as he put it, the ‘rational principles of sound foreign policy.’ Advising the state on policy, and independently criticizing policy when necessary on the basis of knowledge of the laws of power, is the proper business of the International Relations specialist. Morgenthau’s listing of the Six Principles of Political Realism is certainly unlike any list to be found in Weber. Though Weber was also fond of lists, the lists were typically of types or causal conditions, consistent with his general methodological ideas, not lists of principles or laws.

Nevertheless there are some important surface commonalities that point to a possible resolution of the apparent conflict. Both Weber and Morgenthau opposed the kind of single-factor law that writers like Marx, in Weber’s case the energeticist Wilhelm Ostwald, and in Morgenthau’s case E. H. Carr, represented. They opposed these as reductivisms, particularly attempts to reduce politics to something outside the sphere of politics. This was another way of saying that the sphere of politics had a kind of de facto autonomy, that to explain politics required considerations special to politics. And in this special context, Weber himself, in his political writings, spoke of laws, as when he said that ‘whatever participates in the achievements of the power-state, is entangled with the laws of the “power-pragma” that rules over all political history.’ This is a remarkable formulation. It seems to at least open the door to precisely the kind of interpretation Morgenthau later developed.

Morgenthau’s theoretical constructions, of which the discussion of the balance of power in Politics among Nations is perhaps the paradigm case, are ‘universal’ in a peculiar sense. They more closely resemble Weber’s ideal-typifications – which after all represent causal processes, as well as casual processes taken together to represent phenomena such as the state, or systemic forms, such as the Greek city-state – than they do laws of physics or principles of engineering. They do not explain and predict in an unconditional way, as ‘scientific’ laws do. Statesmen routinely fail to act in accordance with them: otherwise there would be no point to advising them and no occasion for criticising them for failing to act in accordance with these laws.

From the point of view of Weber’s own methodological writing, the phrase ‘the laws of the “power-pragma” that rules over all political history’ is anomalous. It of course appears not in

---

an academic text but a wartime newspaper exchange on pacifism. Nevertheless, it is intriguing to raise the question of consistency. If one does not make too much, or the wrongly scientistic thing, of the language of ‘laws,’ it can be reconciled to Weber’s general methodological position in a way that also sheds some light on Morgenthau. If we consider the ‘power-pragma’ as the more or less stable realities of state action, and consider, in the light of the discussion of intermediate ends above, that there is a common ground of intermediate ends or interests which come together in the ‘power-praga’ facts of the state’s ability to act, and we further grant that the problem of preserving and producing the effective state has complex ramifications that are distinctive to states and to the sphere of the political, it makes sense to say, as Weber said, that participating in the achievements of the Machstaat entangles one in these causal and moral realities and thus in the complex ramifications that they produce. The anarchist, or the consistent Tolstoyan, whom Weber had discussed a few lines before the phrase appeared, are right to think that with respect to the Machstaat one is in for a penny, in for a pound, and cannot free oneself from the entanglement of consequences implied by any ‘participation in the achievements.’

The stable complexity of these power-praga allows us to typify them. For Weber this would mean that we could reason about the typifications as though power pragma belonged in the domain of fact. He would nevertheless remind us of the valuative or cultural conditions of our construction of this domain as meaningful. It is a construction that reflects our practical and valuative interests, and a selection from the infinite complexity of reality which has no transhistorical validity. This is as real as it gets in the social sciences, and enough ‘reality’ for us to speak, loosely, about ‘laws,’ at least in a non-scholarly context. And it is reasonable to think that in the special context in which Morgenthau operated, the policy-oriented domain of international relations, which as Weber would have said takes the basic elements of international politics as presuppositions, this use of the notion of law is also unproblematic. It only becomes problematic when we forget how the domain was constructed and treat it transhistorically.

But here, in a central part of Morgenthau, we do find a striking (though again practically insignificant) difference with Weber. Although much has been written about Weber’s implicit philosophical anthropology or conception of man, there are few texts in which Weber made transhistorical generalizations about man as such. One of them is a comment to the effect that the desire for freedom is part of fundamental humanity. Morgenthau, however, went far beyond this by asserting that the desire for power is universal.\(^{37}\) Weber was more cautious, and indeed, in his constitutional writings, emphasized the problem of putting into authority people who had the necessary power-instincts.

---

What are we to make of this? It is difficult to see what sort of account can be given of Morgenthau’s theoretical constructions other than one that is consistent with Weber’s form of historicism: they are not transhistorical, if only because they presuppose state-forms that are not universal. They are policy-relevant only because they are not true in the sense that laws of physics are true. When Morgenthau spoke of ‘uncertainty’ he was using a term derived from his colleague Frank Knight at the University of Chicago, who famously distinguished uncertainty (randomness with unknowable probabilities) from risk (randomness with knowable probabilities). The term is appropriate. In a practical sense, international relations as an area of expertise operates in a domain of uncertainty, just as statesmen do, in part because the de facto causal autonomy of the political sphere is always incomplete, so the political is not a domain with fully knowable probabilities, and thus not capable of being made fully subject to predictive laws, even of a probabilistic kind. Weber captured this feature with his notion of ideal-type.

Morgenthau, not surprisingly, used a different language to make the point in a way that had the same practical implications. Nevertheless, Morgenthau himself appears to endorse the kind of interpretation I have given here, when he said, that, because of uncertainty, we can only judge correctness retrospectively, and that this inherent feature of the subject matter

...erects insuperable limits to the development of a rational theory of international relations. It is only within these limits that theoretical thinking on international relations is theoretically and practically fruitful. Within these limits, a theory of international relations performs the function any theory performs, that is, to bring order and meaning into a mass of unconnected material and to increase knowledge through the logical development of certain propositions empirically established.38

The two-step phrasing of this account of the function of theory, beginning with meaning and continuing to empirical propositions, is suggestive of Weber’s model of Verstehende Soziologie, and in the following paragraph Morgenthau expanded on this hint in a striking way:

While this theoretical function of a theory of international relations is no different from the function any social theory performs, its practical function is peculiar to itself. The practical function of a theory of international relations has this in common with all political theory that it depends very much on the political environment in which it operates. In other words, political thinking is, as German sociology puts it, “standortgebunden,” that is to say, it is tied to a particular social situation.39

Treating international relations as a social theory and making political theory a subcategory of

social theory bound to specific historical situations, and emphasizing that ‘science conveys not only objective knowledge but also the image of a meaningful world worth knowing selected from the many available,’ brings us back to the model of ideal-types in Weber, which perform, for a particular historical epoch with particular cultural constitutive interests, the function of organizing a mass of material – a selection from the infinity of facts, as Weber said, and also provide a means of making empirical sense of the facts.

Morgenthau’s philosophical anthropology, however, particularly his ideas about the universality of power-seeking, takes us beyond Weber. Weber framed the kinds of fundamental conflicts that Morgenthau addressed in “Love and Power” in his sociology of religion in terms of what he called the religious rejection of the world, and he associated rejection of the world with the problem of theodicy. In ‘Politics as a Vocation’ he argued that anything short of complete abstention or Saintliness produced entanglement. Morgenthau was more philosophically ambitious, or incautious, when he attempted to argue that love and power have a common root in the desire, impossible to fulfil, to overcome loneliness. And he went on, intriguingly, to characterize the relation of charismatic subject and ruler in terms of love. This is a real difference. But what is the practical significance of the differences? It is difficult to find any. For the statesman, who lives in the world of power pragma and consequences, and the ethic of love of the Gospel is not an option.

VI. Leaders and Statesmen

Any consideration of the nature of statesmanship presupposes a consideration of the nature of the political and political choice. We may summarize the results of Weber’s account of political choice as follows. Pure power politics leads nowhere and is senseless, since power is at most an intermediate end, or a means, rather than an end in itself. This is true for the domestic politician, but it is equally true for national leaders and for national policy. If each beneficiary of the power-state is entangled in its power-pragm, the statesman is most entangled of all. Although, in theory, the leader is free to choose whatever ultimate value he wishes, and to try his program out on the field of charismatic competition with other potential leaders, the complex ramifications of the consequences of political action have the effect of limiting possible political programs or international policies very sharply. The category defined by what is both meaningful and achievable is very limited: this is why the nation, understood in a particular sense to be something beyond a machine of power, comes to be the single answer to the question ‘what should I choose?’ that Weber can offer at the close of ‘Politics as a Vocation’.

The notion of responsibility, together with the need for goals to be other than mere power, points the leader who is governed by the this-worldly consequences of his actions toward a particular relation with the nation in its larger sense as a bearer of a cultural contribution to the world, its legacy or message. It was of course a major element of the German identity at the time,

contained in the ‘Ideas of 1914,’ that Germany was the land of poets and thinkers. Along with this went a belief in the inferiority of other national cultures, notably that of the ‘nation of shopkeepers’ and its ‘night-watchmen state.’ Weber reviled the ‘Ideas of 1914’ and was largely free of the illusion of cultural superiority in its extreme forms. He would never have written a book like Sombart’s *Heroes and Hawkers* (1915). Nevertheless, he did believe that Germany had a special contribution to make to world culture, and preserving this contribution implied that international political struggle was the ‘responsible’ course of action. As he put in a much quoted passage:

> Future generations, our own descendants in particular, will not blame the Danes, the Swiss, the Dutch, the Norwegians if, without a struggle, the rule over the world – and that ultimately means the determination of the character of the civilization of the future – should be divided between the ordinances of Russian officials on one side and the conventions of Anglo-Saxon society on the other – perhaps with some touch of Latin *raison* added for good measure.

The phrasing recalls a contemporary discussion, in which Weber participated, of the profound historical consequences of the battle of Marathon. Implicitly, the magnitude of the consequences – the determination of the character of civilization – have the effect of dictating the task of the leader and his value ‘choice.’ His task is to take on the burden of these consequences and to commit to the fulfilment of the nation’s historical responsibility as his own value. To succeed requires that this be done in a way that attracts the kind of public support that enables him to succeed – and in the modern setting this means attracting a following with one’s charisma. Since charisma is dying at the moment of its birth, always and inevitably collapsing into a system of payoffs to followers, which limits the leader’s range of action, the moment of effective action has to be seized. Moreover, it is characteristically the case that the leader needs to be ahead of the led. The leader can only lead by taking chances, committing himself to some goal, and pulling the followers along. The character of the leader is thus critical. His commitment may well need to take on the same emotional character as the utopian in order to persuade his followers to follow, and to act with sufficient resolution in the face of danger and uncertainty.

One can scarcely trace out this logic without thinking of Bismarck, and of course neither Weber, the son of a National Liberal politician in the era of Bismarck, nor Morgenthau, who told us that he was impressed by Oncken’s seminar on Bismarck’s diplomacy, thought about leadership without thinking about the Iron Chancellor. Bismarck was the model of successful leadership. He

---

knew what his goal was, and when the opportunity arose he seized the moment, saw beyond the limitations of the political situation he was in, attracted support and cowed his parliamentary opponents through the success of his bold actions, and showed that political forms – parliament- and legalities could be overcome by the plebiscitary leader who derived support directly from public legitimation. Weber’s constitutional writings, which were designed to create a space for a plebiscitary strong President who could act above the heads of the parties, were an attempt to take the lessons of Bismarck and use them to overcome the problems with Bismarck himself – notably the catastrophic consequences of his rule for the development of successor leaders. Weber saw this as a direct consequence of Bismarck’s sidelining of parliament, which prevented it from serving as a nursery for leaders. The later Chancellors, who came from the bureaucracy, not only lacked his political instincts, they had the deficiencies of the bureaucratic mentality as well, despite being competent experts from a much-admired bureaucratic system.

Weber’s conception of leadership is contained in his discussion of the question of what sort of person has the inner qualities to have the calling of the genuine politician. It was, in a sense, a description of a Bismarck without the flaws. But it was composed out of elements that were part of his ongoing wartime polemics against the Pan-Germans to whom he was politically opposed, and employed much of the same language. The three pre-eminent qualities are ‘passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion’ where ‘passion as devotion to a “cause” makes responsibility to this cause a guiding star of action,’ which in turn requires a sense of proportion, and an ‘ability to let realities work upon him with inner concentration and calmness.’ ‘Lack of distance per se is one of the deadly sins of every politician’ and the one to which intellectuals in politics are most susceptible.

These notions reappear in Morgenthau’s discussions of the qualities of statesmen and in his critical comments on political leaders. In the case of ‘proportion,’ the same term was used in a discussion of the American obsession with the trial of Cardinal Mindszenty and in the reactions to the acquisition of the atomic bomb by the Soviets. What Weber called ‘distance,’ Morgenthau, quoting Churchill, called the absence of illusions. Passion, in Weber’s sense, is largely what is meant by Morgenthau’s many remarks on moral purpose, and have the same structural place in their arguments: for Weber, passionate devotion to a cause is what lifts the politician above the pointless pursuit of power for its own sake, as ‘moral purpose’ does for Morgenthau.

Morgenthau’s complaints about American self-aggrandizement are parallel to Weber’s similar comments about the Pan-Germans. His specific critiques of various politicians, such as Kennedy,

50 Morgenthau, The Impasse of American Foreign Policy, p. 167.
51 Morgenthau, The Decline of Democratic Politics, p. 130.
whom he faulted for vacillation and unwillingness to lead, and diplomats, such as Dulles, and even of the work-products of the state department bureaucracy, call to mind Weber’s critiques of the bureaucratic mentality and of the personal diplomacy of Wilhelm II. But the parallels are especially evident in Morgenthau’s discussions of Lincoln. Morgenthau organized the material on Lincoln in terms of Lincoln’s personal qualities, and used much of Weber’s own language in his characterizations, such as ‘objectivity and detachment,’ ‘the union as the ultimate value,’ and touches on themes familiar from Weber, Lincoln’s humility or freedom from vanity, what Weber would call his sense of proportion, toughness, practicality, his sense of the nation’s uniqueness, and of course, his passionate devotion to the cause.

Much could be said about the judgments involved here, and the differences in shading between the two. But even to construct the problem of statesmanship or leadership in this way reflects the acceptance of a common model for the problem of leadership, a problematic that is itself unusual, and points to a more basic commonality. The great theme of Weber’s political thinking, which appears most fully in his constitutional writings, is the problem of conducting an effective foreign policy in the face of the de facto reality of democracy – the reality that without broad public support no policy can be effective. This is Morgenthau’s great theme as well, and the place it leads him is the same: to the problem of leadership understood as a problem of character and a problem of overcoming the temptation to capitulate to the short term advantages of domestic politics, represented for Weber by the parliamentary parties, and for Morgenthau by the American constitutional structure itself.

The focus on leadership, shared with Weber, is perhaps the distinguishing mark of Morgenthau’s realism, and the aspect of his thought that is at once the most compelling and challenging. Morgenthau was very far from thinking of the realm of international politics as a depersonalized security system governed by mechanical laws or rational choice calculations. The problem of leadership that occupied Weber also occupied Morgenthau. That Morgenthau reflected on Lincoln for forty years, eventually reading and analyzing his letters with an eye to assessing his character and virtues as a leader, without a definite agenda for publication, but out of an almost obsessive concern with making sense of the morality of great leadership itself, speaks volumes. Morgenthau’s realism was about understanding the concrete world – and the inner world – of flesh and blood humans who were faced with responsibility before history.
