

from the everyday struggle for the satisfaction of economic necessities.¹⁶⁴ In at least one place, he even claimed that the contemporary division of the population into active and (mostly) passive elements is a product of genuinely voluntary choices. It follows from this "will to powerlessness" thesis that attempts at increasing the degree and quality of citizen involvement (for example, through the enactment of compulsory voting) are doomed to failure from the outset.¹⁶⁵ Finally, and most plausibly, Weber observed that the depoliticization of the masses under contemporary bureaucratic conditions is simply a *condition* of success of disciplined, plebiscitarian, and machinelike political processes. Under state capitalist conditions, it is not the politically passive citizenry that produces leaders, but the political leaders who seek to organize, recruit, and win followers through demagogy. This is the most reliable of Weber's attempted explanations, indicating why those who demand radical democratization are always in turn spitefully repudiated by him as "windbags," "street crowds," "mob-dictators," and believers in the "anti-political heroic ethos of brotherhood."¹⁶⁶

This most honest of explanations is also the least implausible, for it accurately proposes that depoliticization is a fundamental organizing principle of bureaucratically organized relations of power within the realms of state and society. At the same time, however, Weber's explanation is self-limiting. It fails to grasp that, within all spheres of contemporary life, such depoliticization continually generates politicizing countertendencies, that is, demands for the autonomous discussion, reform, and reconstruction of bureaucratic organization. These autonomous demands and struggles are persistently generated by a fundamental disjunction or contradiction within the mode of operation of both public and private bureaucracies. All bureaucracies, it can be argued, are structured by principles of organization that negate their practical realization as such. Bureaucracies cannot regularly secure the discipline of their constituents and clients by relying on such impersonal mechanisms as the appeal to professional expertise, objective regulations, careerism, the payment of wages and salaries, and the sense of duty. As Weber correctly emphasized, bureaucratic organizations seek to discipline and depoliticize their constituents through the deployment of abstract, formally rational rules of command. Indeed, the greater the scope of any bureaucratic organization, the more its activities are diversified, specialized, and partitioned, the greater will be the scope of these mechanisms of administrative coordination and control.

Inasmuch as these disciplinary mechanisms continually estrange and provoke particular constituents at all levels, however, the commanders of bureaucratic organizations are continually forced to entreat or solicit the active, controlled involvement of these same dissident constituents whom the organization otherwise seeks to depoliticize as inactive, servile objects. The source of trouble in bureaucracies is that they must tacitly acknowledge that they are full of particular groups and individuals with initiative. Bureaucracies no doubt constantly tend to reduce their constituents and clients into pure and simple "executants." Given that this tendency cannot be fully realized – if only because of the active resistance generated, and because the typical dependence of the organization upon initiative at every level would be thoroughly thwarted – bureaucracies are obliged

to invite the participation of their executants, who are then forbidden all initiative and control. Bureaucracies require that their members and clients be subjects and objects at the same time; absolute reification is impossible. The intense circulation of reports and memoranda, the multiplication of *paperasserie*, the proliferation of meetings, the trends toward corporatist mediation of conflict, the phenomena of "participation," decentralization, and joint consultations, the media campaigns – all these are expressive of the fact that bureaucratic organizations subsist and expand upon their involvement of subordinates, whose genuine autonomy they in turn deny.¹⁶⁷ All bureaucratic organizations depend upon processes of pseudomutual recognition. Ironically, they simultaneously *presuppose, deny, and anticipate* the regulative ideal of autonomous public association.

In respect of this ironic disjunction and its associated conflicts, the machinelike features of bureaucracy highlighted by Weber are typically contingent. Bureaucratic domination is the always fragile medium and outcome of (potentially) public, democratic struggles over the distribution and credibility of power. Weber's concern that the spread of formally rational organization to all domains of life might induce a new age of machinelike serfdom staffed by *êtres inanimés* is misleadingly overdrawn. Bureaucratic systems of command cannot permanently suffocate forms of politically secured individuality and value-oriented conduct. From the standpoint of this conduct, these systems are highly contradictory forms of organization. Even when judged according to their self-declared standards of calculating, technical rationality, bureaucracies must also be considered highly irrational processes. Weber's conviction that autonomous public spheres are not feasible under contemporary bureaucratic conditions is therefore also unfounded. Within all spheres of contemporary life, to conclude, bureaucratic processes repress *and* incite the growth of autonomous public spheres of discussion and decision making.

Still to be discussed, finally, is a third and unresolved difficulty within Weber's defense of bureaucratic domination guided by the principle of nationally conscious, plebiscitarian leadership. This unresolved difficulty derives from his failure to analyze further the conditions of possibility of his advocacy of *this* and not *another* principle. As we have seen, he consistently argued that judgments about the validity of value judgments are always a matter of faith. It is impossible, from the point of view of his decisionism, to establish and scientifically demonstrate fundamental ethical principles, in accordance with which solutions to political problems can be derived unambiguously. So-called ultimate ends, and even the apparently certain knowledge generated by mathematics and the natural sciences, are always debatable and therefore subject to variation and transformation through time and space. Inasmuch as the range of possible ultimate values is inexhaustible, their struggle can never be brought to a decisive and final conclusion. "Which of the warring gods should we serve?"¹⁶⁸ is a question permanently posed for a bureaucratic age that has virtually debunked the validity of metaphysical systems of absolute knowledge. This question becomes more pressing and serious by virtue of the fact that the daily existence of individuals is more and more divided, fragmented, and routinely organized; ensnared within complex, bureaucratic divisions of labor, they are, in the here and now at least,

forced to sacrifice themselves first to this deity, then to that deity. Under modern conditions, then, the ancient plurality of gods reappears, but in a disenchanting and depersonalized form. These gods, Weber stresses, do not and cannot peacefully coexist. They vie for potential believers, entering into an eternal struggle with one another.

Precisely because their most treasured, ultimate ideals are precarious and transitory, the inhabitants of the modern world can no longer credibly afford to let life run on as if it were an event in nature. Weber was adamant: The resolution of the struggle between gods is ultimately a matter of power and politics. The highest ideals of our polytheistic epoch are always crystallized in the struggle with each other. "Every meaningful *value-judgment* about someone else's *aspirations*," Weber urges, "must be a criticism from the standpoint of one's own *Weltanschauung*; it must be a struggle against *another's ideals from the standpoint of one's own*."¹⁶⁹

Weber's advocacy of the antidemocratic goal of bureaucratic domination guided by nationally conscious, plebiscitarian leadership is no doubt in conformity with this polytheistic principle. It is curious, however, that he never systematically considered whether his opposition to democratic public life – his defense of the *necessity* of bureaucratic domination -- was in turn compatible with this principle of polytheism, struggle, and contestation. Further reflection suggests that it is not. His disavowal of autonomous public life, on the contrary, logically contradicts his avowed value relativism. This self-contradiction is evidenced by his failure to reflect critically on the institutional grounds or conditions necessary for the realization of the polytheistic struggle. Clearly, the principle of polytheism, the presumption that individual personalities must choose the meaning and direction of their own existence, implies a range of conditions necessary for its political realization as such. For example, the maxim that ideals can and must be crystallized in struggle with other ideals tacitly presupposes an opposition to all claims and contexts that deny this maxim. In this respect, conversely, Weber's polytheism rests upon the claim that, in principle, a minimal agreement or consensus can and must be reached in order to facilitate the permanent contestation of substantive principles. Actors must have already and always tacitly agreed to disagree.

Furthermore, this conditional agreement that every meaningful evaluation of another's ideals *must* involve a polemic against others' values from the standpoint of one's own presupposes institutional conditions in which this contestation can permanently and unrestrictedly take place. The private arbitrariness of substantively rational decisions cannot ultimately rest upon prerational decisions or solipsistic acts of faith, as Weber supposed. The decision to follow and defend rules privately, as he understood it, must rather always depend upon intersubjectively constituted, public spheres of discussion, argumentation, decision making, and disobedience. Only under conditions of unrestricted debate and a plurality of institutional mechanisms to ensure this debate could actors proficiently, competently, or even minimally defend their ideals. Weber's defense of bureaucracy becomes embroiled in a self-destructive paradox: The principle of polytheism (of which his polemic against substantive democracy is one instance) contains

the imputation of democratic, public life. This principle presumes a special type of institutional form about whose validity actors must already have come to agreement – it presumes, in other words, the availability of actually existing forms of public life, to which speaking actors can have recourse, and only by means of which they can express their opposition to (or agreement with) others' ideals. Spheres of autonomous public life, in short, serve as a counterfactual, as a condition that must be established if value relativism of the type Weber defends is to obtain. This condition is not a substantial "ought," which takes the form of a heteronomous principle recommended to struggling actors. It is not just one condition among others, in the sense that actors struggling to realize their ideals could decide to satisfy the condition for a while, only later to reject it. On the contrary, it is not possible to renounce the counterfactually anticipated condition of democratic, public life without contradicting and wholly rejecting the polytheistic principle as such.

Especially granted the implausibility of his ideal-typical account of the technical superiority and disciplinary capacity of bureaucracy, Weber's failure to recognize this imputation strengthens the general charge proposed by this essay: Weber conspicuously *failed* to demonstrate the impossibility of defending autonomous public life against the "forward progress"¹⁷⁰ of bureaucratic domination. At the end of Max Weber's life, it remained for others to elaborate this charge.