



## Book Reviews

### Max Weber's Politics of Civil Society

Sung Ho Kim

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, x + 214pp.

ISBN: 0 521 82057 X.

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2006) 5, 91–93. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300213

Sung Ho Kim is a Korean scholar who has returned to his homeland (to Yonsei University in Seoul) after some years of study and teaching in the United States. *Max Weber's Politics of Civil Society* is based on a prize-winning dissertation presented to the University of Chicago in 1998, and has some faults attributable to this origin — parts of it rehearse familiar material, there is sometimes a loss of focus as the author demonstrates the breadth of his knowledge of source material, and so on. Nevertheless, the book offers an interesting and original angle on Weber. It has a dual focus, only one part of which is indicated in the book's title: equally central is the fate of the individual in modern society.

Everyone knows the pessimistic side of Weber's analysis of modernity — disenchantment and loss of meaning; ever-increasing bureaucratization; the 'iron cage'. What prospect, in this setting, for individual freedom, integrity, fulfilment? Weber, Kim tells us, pinned his hopes on the ideal of vocation, of the *Berufsmensch*, a secularized version of that character which, in its Puritan form, paradoxically, was implicated at the birth of the modern world. If the Protestant ethic begat modernity, modernity has undermined the Protestant and every religious ethic, indeed every objective value, leaving modern man struggling with 'value fragmentation and pluralism' (p. 15). Likewise natural science, prized in the early modern period as a revelation of the mind of God, has become utterly destructive of any 'belief that there is something like a meaning of the world' (p. 101). Nevertheless, the scientist, for Weber, can and should be a paradigm of the modern *Berufsmensch*, in whom 'subjective value and objective rationality are wilfully brought together' (p. 25), enabling the individual to act on a conception of moral duty to which he has committed himself totally (somewhat like Kant's self-legislating moral person, but without Kant's confidence in objective moral truth), necessarily a specialist but not a bureaucratic 'specialist without spirit' because he is dedicated to his calling for its own sake. Somewhat similarly, as Weber argued in his other famous essay on modern vocation, the genuine politician, the politician who is a *Berufsmensch*, must be dedicated to a cause, but has to combine the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility, 'hot passion and cool judgment' (p. 115).



Is Weber's character-ideal, the *Berufsmensch*, too individualistic, too focused on his own integrity at the cost of social responsibilities? Kim argues to the contrary. The most interesting section of his book highlights Weber's response to America, to which he made an extended visit in 1904. In striking contrast to most of his German colleagues, Weber reacted to America with enthusiasm and fascination, seeing in it a phenomenon he called *Sektengesellschaft* (sect society or sect-like society). The term applies, in the first instance, to the Puritan sects which proliferated in America and which to Weber offered a remarkable and original fusion of individualism and sociability, a sociability neither primordial like Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* nor merely instrumental like his *Gesellschaft*; they were voluntary associations that, however, imposed strict admission conditions, demanded high ethical standards from members, and did not hesitate to discipline and even expel them if they fell short. Sect members were not 'atomized' individuals but rather at the same time *Berufsmenschen* and intensely social beings. The Puritan sects, Kim argues, were in this way seen by Weber as the basis of a strong civil society (to use contemporary terminology), having provided the model for the many clubs and associations of America, secular as well as religious, private yet fulfilling a vital public function, a 'school of public spirit' (in the words of J.S. Mill) and of democratic participation. In 1910 Weber sought to persuade the new German Sociological Association to conduct a research project on voluntary associations, but nothing came of this.

Kim is eager to enlist Weber's ideas on sects and their secular descendants to defend him against the charge that, politically, he was an authoritarian nationalist. Nationalist he certainly was, authoritarian he was not. As Kim reads Weber, he envisaged *Sektengesellschaft* and nationalism as two sides of a coin, functioning together to elevate the life of the individual above narrow self-interest and make him a moral being. This reading of Weber's nationalism will not convince everyone, although it admittedly derives support from his championing of independent trade unions and serious political parties, and his consistent hostility to corporatism. Kim is right to stress, moreover, that German nationalism was never for Weber a matter of ethnic exclusiveness but rather of participation in a particular culture, open (e.g.) to Jews just as much as Aryans.

Despite his enthusiasm for America's *Sektengesellschaft*, Weber was not optimistic about the future of modern society. Rather than conquering Europe or the world, the American model was likely, in his view, to succumb to more powerful forces of rationalization and bureaucratization in the state, political party, and economic corporation (Weber's well-known nightmare was the fusion of all three in the name of Leninist socialism). Weber might be surprised by the state of things as of now, the early 21st century. In America, unprecedented economic rationalization, including bureaucratization, has



proved compatible with a curious and unexpected process of social de-secularization, a revival of puritanical religiosity and (presumably) a reinvigoration of religious associations. The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism have joined forces again, and in coalition seem ambitious to rule the world.

Michael Lessnoff  
University of Glasgow, UK.

### **Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement**

Stephen Eric Bronner

*Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, 167pp.*

*ISBN: 0 231 12608 5.*

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2006) 5, 93–95. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300214

Here Stephen Bronner sets himself the task of recovering a politics defined by justice and practical engagement. A first step towards this is to discredit Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that the Enlightenment ideal of the 18th century *philosophes* was doomed to conclude in 'barbarism, Auschwitz and ... "the totally administered society"' (pp. 3, 110). Dismissing this as self-indulgent 'cultural pessimism,' Bronner insists that far from leading us to barbarism, the Enlightenment remains a living project to which we must return if we are to stave off those neo-conservatives and religious fundamentalists currently undermining the ideals of 'autonomy, tolerance and reason' (pp. xi, 2). But Bronner is not just concerned with the false turns of the early Frankfurt School or the iniquities of the contemporary right. Indeed, his (p. 17) more fundamental purpose is to challenge that 'motley crew' of deluded leftists who, in the guise of post-structuralists, communitarians, and multiculturalists, unwittingly embrace the reactionism of the historical Counter-Enlightenment and all that it entailed: privilege, tradition, particularity, myth and, ultimately, cruelty. Bronner's aim, therefore, is both to lash the contemporary left for its attachment to fashionable fallacies and to realign it towards a socially conscious liberalism, the fulfilment of Kant's maxim, *Sapere Aude!*

The scope of this re-alignment is ambitious, demanding a comprehensive rehabilitation of Enlightenment philosophy, science, and politics. As to Enlightenment philosophy, its best practitioners, Voltaire as much as Locke and Kant, were motivated not by abstract rationalism but a 'pragmatic idealism' concerned to change the world through 'critical reflection on society, its traditions, its ideologies, and its institutions' (pp. 7, 73). The ideal of transparency underlining this egalitarian philosophy and its key institution, the