

Self-Preservation and Salvation: How Democracy Functions in a Disenchanted World

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Abstract: The concept of "disenchantment" (Entzauberung) was first mentioned by the famous German poet Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller in his poem *The Gods of Greece*. In the poem, he mentioned that the gods in mythology ruled over man and all creatures, the world was full of beauty and love, and all things performed miracles. When Christ God became the only God, the miracles faded, and mankind was lost. Disenchantment theory and democratic institutions are central to Max Weber's theory. On the basis of combining the two, this paper studies how democracy functions in a disenchanted world from two perspectives: self-preservation and salvation. Findings suggest that democracy can inject some elements of quasi-charisma into an otherwise spiritually deadened situation. In a post-disenchantment world, a democratic system led by a strong leader will save people's spiritual world in a mutually empowering way through both self-preservation and salvation. Self-preservation within democracy signifies individuals' expression of free will through leader selection. Salvation in democracy entails placing trust in elected leaders to bring about happiness and national prosperity.

Keywords: Max Weber, Disenchantment, Democracy, Democratic system

1. Introduction

The well-known theory of disenchantment comes from Max Weber, a German sociologist, political scientist, and philosopher. Born in 1864, Max Weber was one of the three founders of modern sociology. He was the first to discover the important principles of modernity with a cool eye and launched a critique that influenced a generation of Western Marxist scholars. More than a hundred years after his death, Weber's dispassionate dissection of modern society is still not out of date. According to Weber, people's deep sense of powerlessness over reality comes from the iron cage constituted by the highly rationalized bureaucracy of modern society. What Max Weber called "disenchantment" can be understood as the dissolution of the integrated religious domination over the world, occurring during the transition of Western societies from religious to secular modernity. "Disenchantment" holds a central position in Weber's philosophical thought and can be translated as "de-magic" or "de-mystification." In Weber's usage, "disenchantment" carries complex meanings, as outlined in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, referring to the process of excluding magic from the world and rationalizing it [1].

In other words, with the rise of modernity, the meaning of all kinds of actions has been removed from the world. At this time, human beings are faced with the problem of re-establishing the value

and meaning of actions in a world that suffers from disenchantment. In the face of this dilemma, Max Weber looked to democracy as one way to inject some elements of quasi-charisma into an otherwise spiritually deadened situation.

Weber's advocacy for democracy underwent significant changes due to the German Revolution. Transitioning from a supporter of a parliamentary system to one of a plebiscitary president, Weber shifted from parliamentarianism to Caesarism, asserting that Caesarism under the rule of law was the only means to save Germany and unleash the power of its people.

In this paper, the author explores how Weber's democracy functions in a disenchanted world and how the elements of quasi-charismatic injected into democracy serve to redeem people's spiritual realms. The analysis is conducted from two dimensions: self-preservation and Salvation. "Self-preservation" is the act of individuals expressing their free will by choosing leaders, thereby asserting their values in societal life. "Salvation" is the trust individuals place in their choices, seeing reflections of themselves in their leaders, thus unwaveringly believing in the leaders' ability to save them and the nation. These two feelings are the spiritual strength that remains strong in a world where universal values have been abolished. This study is conducted to explore the connection between democracy and disenchantment and discover a new empowering way to save the modern disenchanted world with democracy. The significance of this research lies in providing a new interpretation of Weber's democratic proposition and the theory of expulsion, thereby offering new possibilities for the construction of a modern democratic system. Hopefully, it can call on more people to think deeply about the impact that a democratic system can have on people's spiritual world and, on this basis, make democratic leaders better realize what they can do to strengthen people's cohesion and spiritual power.

2. Weber's Diagnoses of the Disenchanted World

Weber's theory of disenchantment includes two layers of diagnosis of modern society, namely, the loss of meaning and the loss of freedom. The first diagnosis, the so-called loss of meaning, means that there is no monistic value theory to lead the way, and there is a plurality of values. The universal, absolute, and unified faith no longer exists, God no longer exists, and man is left alone. According to Weber, modern society is a picture of the collapse of the supersensible essence and the break between tradition and modernity. The great anxiety, confusion, and helplessness of the modern civilized man is: 'Which of these warlike gods shall we serve?' 'You will serve this God, and if you decide in favor of this position, you will surely offend all the other gods.' [2] Traditional society provided a standard of absolute truth and value, and the world was a totality of objective meaning and ethical values. In modern society, however, traditional certainty and objective meaning have lost their legitimacy, and the various spheres of cultural value are divided and in conflict with each other according to their logic. These contents are most centrally reflected in Weber's book *Zwischenbetrachtung* [3].

Many experts in Weberian studies have pointed out the significant value of *Zwischenbetrachtung*. Schlachter believes that it is still one of Weber's important documents. Eduard Baumgarten even regarded it as "the most classic and perhaps the most monumental of Weber's works". The theme of the *Zwischenbetrachtung* is the inner conflict, the tension between a redemptive religious ethic and a secular social order. Weber deduces through the ideal-type approach that there has always been a serious and constant tension between redemptive religion and the earthly world and its order. The gap between religion and the earthly world becomes wider as rationalization continues to ascend.

Another of Weber's diagnoses of the times is the loss of freedom. It is true that whatever the centrality of the concept of human freedom is to Weber's thought, it cannot be seen as a particular historical form of liberalism [4]. Instead of examining freedom in the traditional context of liberalism, Weber reveals the problem of freedom in modern society on the basis of a critique of liberalism and tries to give a post-liberal solution. Weber pointed out sharply that the rationalization of the order of

life (disenchantment) brought about not the autonomy of reason but the rule of others [5]. In Weber's view, reason is not opposed to power or domination. Instead, it leads to rationalized domination or power [6]. According to Weber, reason, as a ruling force, leads to the opposition to freedom in four aspects: the spirit of asceticism, the system of formal reason (the modern iron cage constituted by the bureaucratic system), the type of the rule of instrumental rationalization (the weakening of the authority of Charisma), the way of existence of the 'technological man', the 'professional man (soulless hedonists) [7].

On the basis of these two diagnoses of modern society, Weber proposed a solution to his quest for the salvation of the spiritual world, attempting to answer the question that concerns the fate of mankind: how is it possible to preserve the individual when rationality is gradually and inexorably encroaching on the life of mankind? This is also the question that this paper intends to explore. Together with Weber, the author focuses on the democratic system.

3. Democracy as a Charismatic Legitimacy

As is widely known, Weber proposed three types of legitimate authority: traditional authority, legal-rational authority, and charismatic authority. However, Weber's political advocacy of systems and his preference for the three types of legitimate authority underwent some changes.

The concept of 'leadership democracy' (Führerdemokratie) advocated by Weber saw significant changes following the German Revolution of November 1918. During the Second Empire period, Weber focused on constructing a parliamentary "leader" to constrain the increasingly expansive imperial executive power; during the Weimar Constitutional period following the revolution, Weber began to experiment with designing a charismatic president elected by the entire populace.

In other words, prior to the revolution, Weber leaned towards a parliamentary system of government, but post-revolution, he strongly advocated for the direct election of a president, turning to a plebiscitary leader rather than a parliamentary one.

The plebiscitary president ultimately chosen by Weber was essentially a charismatic figure. His acquisition of political power stemmed from his ability to stir irrational emotions among the masses through his personality and charm, garnering their support and ascending to the highest seat of political power. Therefore, the legitimacy of modern "democracy," in essence, is a form of charismatic legitimacy. This charismatic authority, in Weber's view, seems to possess a stronger spiritual force and deeper influence than legal-rational authority, which may be the remedy for the modern disenchanted world. Based on Weber's theory, the author proposes that democracy solves the problem of spiritual hollowness after disenchantment mainly in two ways: self-preservation and salvation.

3.1. Self-Preservation

One month after the outbreak of the revolution, Weber published an article titled *The Future Form of the German State*, strongly advocating for the establishment of a democratic republic. Weber believed that any other political system proposal was impractical at that time. Regardless of how deep people's sentiments towards monarchy may be, it had become a thing of the past. The delays by the royal court and the numerous political mistakes committed by the German emperor had tarnished the monarchy's reputation. Therefore, "the Prussian dynasty has so disgraced itself that from now on its maintenance, as well as that of the other [state] dynasties could no longer be supported."

Weber argued that only a republic based on popular sovereignty would be the viable path for the future of German politics. Weber asserted that the political destiny of Germany's future could only be decided by the sovereign, the people themselves—regardless of how politically immature this populace might be or whether the concept of "the people" in Weber's mind was merely rhetorical. It

should not be decided by a minority, whether that minority was a dynasty or a revolutionary committee.

Only through democracy and self-determination could as many Germans as possible be integrated into the framework of the future nation-state, enabling the German people to bravely break free from their reliance on the sense of security provided by the old authoritarian state system and to build their country with their pride, strength, and achievements.

At this point, Weber abandoned the mechanism of nurturing and selecting political leaders through parliament and turned to "Caesarism"—consolidating the power of the people through a charismatic figure.

This clearly shows how democracy saves people's spirituality in the form of self-preservation. Self-preservation within democracy signifies individuals' expression of free will through leader selection.

Fundamentally, a charismatic leader represents not just himself, but the power of the people who elected him. The people shape the leader, and they also see reflections of themselves in the leader, making it a mutually empowering process. The empowerment is both a process of self-preservation and salvation for the people.

3.2. Salvation

Salvation in democracy entails placing trust in elected leaders to bring about happiness and national prosperity. It is not that people need a leader's salvation, but they choose a leader to save their country. What legal-rational authority and traditional authority cannot bring is the involvement of "me" in charismatic authority. This subject participation is the most powerful aspect of democracy. Because even in a disenchanted world where all values may vanish, the trust in one's own choices remains unchanged. Weber once said in his book *Wissenschaft als Beruf und Politik als Beruf*, "In our time, the last and greatest danger to the course of rationalization and intellectualization inherent in our society is the danger that the ultimate and most sublime values might withdraw from public life. This would occur if they were to find refuge in mystic life or in a direct, personal love among human beings [5]."

In other words, even if universally agreed-upon values in public life are questioned and challenged, faith will still exist in personal life and in individual love. Charismatic authority may be a way to connect individual emotions with public life. In this context, values are no longer proposed by society and then internalized by individuals; instead, they are proposed by individuals and then unified by society. Human freedom and spiritual strength are manifested in this process. Just as Nietzsche's famous saying in *Also sprach Zarathustra* [8], "God is dead, I am God."

Certainly, it must be pointed out that Weber, in designing a charismatic-style system, never crossed the fundamental institutional bottom line of the rule of law. Even when he strongly advocated for "Caesarism," the parliament with the power of inquiry was still considered a powerful oversight body to restrict the arbitrary exercise of power by the executive branch. In Weber's conception, the activities of the imperial president must always be subject to various limitations of the rule of law and cannot arbitrarily control civil society with personal will. This can also be seen as emphasizing the unique nature of charismatic authority, which does not stem from the leader personally but from the people. This unique nature of charismatic authority determines that the elected president is by no means an entity that can do as he pleases. Leaders are chosen by people and can also be removed by people. The starting point of Weber's policy is the people, as well as the nation, but certainly not the rulers.

4. Conclusion

Facing a world suffering from disenchantment and highly-rationalized modern bureaucracy, Weber advocated for a strong elected leader capable of shattering the "iron cage" to save "any degree of freedom in any sense" and transferring personal feelings to the public values and thus saving spiritual lives.

This salvation operates through two dimensions: self-preservation and salvation from others. Self-preservation occurs because the process of choosing leaders instills courage, pride, and a sense of accomplishment in people. Salvation from others is based on the deep belief of the people that an elected president can bring happiness to them.

The disenchanting world manifests as a state of value vacuum, where universal values no longer exist, and instrumental rationality replaces value rationality. People can answer quantifiable questions like "how much" or "how many," but struggle to answer questions about what is "good" or "ideal" that involve values. People's spiritual worlds lack guidance, and they need some form of value to give them strength. The democratic system based on elected leaders can meet this need. This redemption of the spiritual world is actually a process of mutual empowerment. The electorate grants the president governing power, and the president grants the electorate the power of choice. The elected president serves as an intermediary, helping people transform personal values into universal values. Based on the trust people have in their own choices, a more solid and convincing value system is established than mere preaching or moralizing. God may have been removed, but people still need a god. At this moment, democratic leaders step onto the stage. But they do not represent individuals; they represent the people.

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