

Max Weber and the Neo-Weberian State: A workshop and a *Max Weber Studies* theme issue

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We live in a Weberian world – and now with Covid-19, more so than ever (see Drechsler, 2020). This world is an administered one, and the global paradigm of bureaucracy remains in significant respects Weberian: Public administration (PA) is still largely organized in hierarchies and long-term careers, driven by competences and governed by rules and files; it is PA that aims to get things done, effectively and efficiently; the same PA that was an indispensable feature of vocational modernity, in business, state, voluntary organizations, and charities.

Since the 1980s, however, the New Public Management (NPM) has carried out a sustained attack on this paradigm, advancing business values and using the Weber label as its *bête noire*. In addition to some nuanced critique, NPM also led a mostly ideological battle against PA: public-service ethos was declared dead and government part of the problem. Continental European countries that did not comply with the reforms were pronounced “laggards”. In the early 2000s, Geert Bouckaert and the late Christopher Pollitt then conceptualized these countries as following their own model of bureaucracy – the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) – a Weberian paradigm updated by NPM insights. Since then, the NWS has evolved from a descriptive model of European to a normative model of global significance.

Some reservations against Weberian PA are not invalid: its rigidity, impersonality, imperviousness to substantive ends and to human social interaction are rightly criticized. Beyond Weberian PA, in the face of societal challenges, we increasingly look to bureaucracy for an impetus for change. Can the NWS, as the updated version, drive innovation, shape markets and steer inclusive green transformation? How can civil society hold bureaucracy accountable without taking away the necessary level of autonomy? At a time when the public sector is perceived to be in serious crisis, the NWS may provide a highly policy-relevant answer to all these questions, especially given NPM’s failure to deliver on its key promises and Weberian PA’s tentative success in withstanding the pandemic challenges. Is, then, the

NWS a suitable model to deal with our societies' challenges beyond Covid-19, such as climate change and social justice?

Here we must differentiate between the NWS, Weberian PA generally, and what Weber wrote – three largely different things. “Weberian PA” has come to designate traditional global-Western PA generally, and rightly so, but this is very different from the much more specific kind of PA that Weber portrayed and analyzed. Dismissing contemporary forms of Weberian PA because of the alleged obsolescence of Weber’s views (Sager and Rosser, 2021) is therefore not convincing. Weber was hardly a Weberian, in the sense that he especially liked the kind of bureaucracy that “Weberian PA” signifies today. He also was highly context-sensitive to the time and place he was writing in.

Weber scholars, especially those with a more sociological background, and PA experts have in recent decades not communicated sufficiently with each other, arguably to the detriment of Weberian PA theory and practice. An example for this gap is that for Weber scholars, it is rightly *de rigueur* to cite the now completed, standard *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* in 47 volumes (Weber 1984–2020 – soon to be digitized, see <https://mwg.badw.de/das-projekt.html>), not least as a standard that unambiguously locates a quote; PA experts, on the other hand, often use translations of excerpts in college textbooks. Bridging that gap and initiating such a conversation might thus be a timely and fruitful idea.

Wolfgang Drechsler, for University College London’s Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP), and Sam Whimster, for the journal *Max Weber Studies*, therefore organized a workshop on the topic of “Max Weber and the NWS” to be held in London, with subsequent publication of a theme issue in *MWS*. This was supposed to be launched with a keynote by Geert Bouckaert and to culminate in a high-level practitioner panel. Unfortunately, Covid-19 made an in-person workshop impossible, both when originally scheduled and during the alternate date, and the organizers then decided not to move online, seeing the general Zoom fatigue, but to focus on a shorter event, “only” with the keynote, comments, and discussion. This took place on Friday, 14 January 2022. The event was chaired and convened by Drechsler and co-organized by Lukas Fuchs (see Fuchs, 2022).

In Geert Bouckaert’s lecture, “The Neo-Weberian State: From Ideal-Type Model to Reality?” (2022), revisiting and updating his own theory, he argued that the NWS is not just an

interesting descriptive insight, but needs to be, and is being, transferred from “ideal type” to reality. The most novel insight of his talk was perhaps the focus on three concepts (hierarchy, network and market) to map this discussion. Using these as parameters, he showed how different public administration paradigms differed along them and which implications this had for their likely success. NWS was identified to be initially driven by hierarchy, as opposed to the NPM reform drive based on the market as the leading organizational form. For Bouckaert, NWS is the most plausible PA model to ensure the central functions of the “Whole of Government” strategy. This includes service delivery that is inclusive, resilience in the face of crises, as well as innovation for government and society (Bouckaert, 2022).

Afterwards, a panel of scholars commented on Bouckaert’s talk: Camilla Stivers – providing also a link with the current issue of *PPMG* and the workshops on which it is based –, Nadia Monira Mohamed Taib, and Sam Whimster. Their reflections demonstrated diverse approaches towards the subject matter and challenges and opportunities for the NWS. Stivers highlighted the need to incorporate democratic inclusivity and accountability into any public administration model. The problem of inclusivity has loomed large for Weberian PA and any updated model must be supplemented by bold institutional reform that can ensure that PA does not solely work for a small elite (we may add here, however, that for Weber, a non-inclusive PA would just not have met the criteria of “working” from today’s perspective). Taib, who has worked in senior positions in the Malaysian civil service, discussed some of the practical concerns in transferring administrative ideas from one cultural context to another. Finally, Whimster brought the discussion back to its intellectual roots and compared the present discussion to the debates at the time when Max Weber published his seminal insights on bureaucracy.

All three of these discussions are scheduled to be published in the July 2022 *Max Weber Studies* theme issue, together with Bouckaert’s keynote and several additional scholarly and professional articles and reflections (Drechsler and Whimster, 2022). The future of the civil service is of prime importance when we consider the steps necessary to tackle grand challenges through a rethinking of the role of the state and mission-oriented policy for the creation of public value, and it is hoped that both for theory and in practice, the discussion of Max Weber and the Neo-Weberian State will present an important contribution.

Works Cited

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