This book is a defense of a certain way of reading Max Weber. It interprets Weber as a theorist of political judgment, indeed as one of the few theorists of modern politics to have met the requirements of all good accounts of political judgment. A strong notion of political judgment should provide a map to navigate the unstable seas of politics, a guide to destinations we might reach and those we might not, and above all a rough assessment of the costs of reaching these destinations. Weber does all this and more.

Viewed under the concept of political judgment, Weber’s ideal-types and typologies do not merely help us understand the meaning and consequences of the modern culture in which we are embedded or provide a comparative developmental history of different social formations within and outside of that culture. They also serve to construct the contexts, the logics, and the consequences that we will be exposed to in deciding on a course of social and political action. This feature of Weber’s sociology is not hidden in his work. Weber recurrently emphasizes that sociology, especially an ideal-typical sociology of economics, culture, and politics, can help agents clarify the meaning of the fundamental ends that they seek and the necessary means and likely consequences of realizing them. He also emphasizes that no amount of sociological clarification can take away from the agent the ethical responsibility to exercise judgment and make fundamental choices of political projects. What remains obscure is precisely how Weber’s abundant typologies and conceptual accounts of central matters of politics—such as power and legitimate domination, the development of the modern political party, state, and vocational politician, the tension between methodical discipline and charismatic leadership, and the power struggle endemic to the capitalist market—are operating to sharpen judgment and enhance responsible political choices.

In particular, there is a fundamental ambiguity in Weber’s use of such accounts to establish the seemingly objective and subjective features of action. On the one hand, Weber uses his sociology to develop long-range, inexorable tendencies toward methodical rationalization; on the other, he
uses it to underscore the uncertainty, contingency, and fortuitousness of all systematic political conduct. Weber deploys his typologies, especially in his magisterial but fragmentary *Economy and Society*, in both directions, intensifying objective causal forces at one moment and subjective contingency at another. By understanding Weber’s combination and recombination of type-concepts as a mode of political judgment, I think it may be possible to make sense of one of the most elusive features about his work: its subjective stance toward the understanding of irresistible causal forces and its objective stance toward the sociological assessment of the subjective possibilities for action. More substantively, it will enable us to appreciate how at his best Weber provides us with the terms and concepts that we need in order to understand political situations in their full breadth—as constellations of power and domination manifested in parties, states, and forms of leadership, but also as broad convergences of cultural values, economic conduct, and political conduct, sometimes clashing and sometimes fusing to produce unexpected social formations. Even when well-known formations such as bureaucracy or rational capitalism are the outcome, Weber wants us to understand the role that unintended outcomes of social and political conduct play in producing them and what judgments about future action such development might imply.

But this book is more than an attempt to shift the angle on reading Weber from social science to political prudence. It also involves a critical engagement with him over the meaning his political prudence might have for participatory democrats. This latter purpose may seem curious. Weber was anything but a proponent of direct forms of democracy, and he saw the practical clarification provided by his political sociology and his political ethics as a firm chastening of all those who might entertain such a hope for modern politics. Yet, it is precisely his lack of sympathy for such a political project that makes him so important for those who might want to deepen democracy beyond routine party politics. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, his political sociological account of the logic of power and domination in general, and of the routine business of party politics in particular, sets the conditions that a realistic participatory democrat has to answer. If there is a possibility for deeper and more egalitarian participation, it will have to be found not by denying Weber’s account of power and routine politics, but by teasing out the overlooked instrumental logics contained within it, as well as the fissures between its subjective construction and its objective claims.

Second, like participatory democrats, Weber argues that a central feature of both the economic and the political spheres is the separation of the means of power from those over whom it is exercised. Weber argues
that the reappropriation of such means of power can at best be a temporary phenomenon and in the main is unfeasible. It is a challenge to democrats to give some answer to this problem, especially in light of Weber's claim that such reappropriation collides with the unceasing power struggle that characterizes both economy and polity.

Third, Weber is concerned with a question that is at the heart of all theories of democracy: Who within the business of everyday politics is to exercise political judgment and responsibility? Weber thinks that citizens can be educated to accept certain political forms, but he does not think that collectivities can exercise the requisite responsibility to make adequate political judgments.

Fourth, and closely related, Weber provides a consequentialist account of political ethics that no participatory democrat can ignore. Weber places responsibility for the moral and practical paradoxes of deploying power for one's ultimate projects squarely in the hands of the vocational or leading politician. It is the job of the participatory democrat to show that participatory associations can practice such an ethic of responsibility. And it is an evasion to assume that participatory democracy will make this responsibility easier to bear by extirpating the paradoxes of power from political action.

Fifth, Weber complicates the choices of political forms in modern politics by extending the conflict between routine competitive party politics and direct forms of democracy to include a third alternative, his famous plebiscitary leadership democracy. Weber shares many of the criticisms that participatory democrats level against routine professional politics. These include its tendency to dilute conflict over fundamental ends in favor of competition among sectional interests, the weak way in which it resists the transformation of politics into administration, and its propensity to substitute patronage for actual participation. To overcome these tendencies, Weber proposes a form of democracy, plebiscitary democracy, whose central feature is the testing of leadership and values through power struggle among charismatic leaders, rather than the democratization of state and economy through direct citizen involvement. A participatory democrat must have an answer to this model—or, at least, the logic of power that necessitates it—if the case for participatory politics is to be made adequately. Perhaps this answer lies not in another model but in a notion of participatory associations in constant and irresolvable conflict with the institutions of routine politics. In any case, such a politics will ignore Weber's sociologically informed political judgment and his political ethics only at its own peril.

The first three chapters of this book develop the foundations of and the tensions within Weber's account of a sociologically informed practical
prudence. The first chapter revisits Weber’s account of explanatory understandings in the social sciences. Its purpose is to show how Weber’s attempt to gain certainty in the midst of an interpretive view of social inquiry opens out both toward an objectified account of social practice (which critics have noted) as well as an intensely subjective one, which until recently has not been adequately appreciated. The next two chapters take up in turn the conflicting objective and subjective sides of Weber’s notion of practical judgment.

The second chapter examines how Weber applies the notion of interpretive understanding to produce an objective account of practical political clarification distinct from the demands of partisan political argument. Here Weber claims against his own methodological perspectivism that his notion of sociology as *Wissenschaft* can interpret, and logically and instrumentally reconstruct, the meaning of fundamental political choices in the midst of irreconcilable value conflict.

The problems of this claim are revealed in the third chapter, which draws out the account of practical clarification of the previous chapter as it is applied to Weber’s methodological and substantive criticism of marginal utility theory in economics as a model of inquiry and guidance. Out of his criticism of this most lawlike of social sciences, he develops an account of practical clarification that emphasizes ambiguity, contingency, and the situation-bound nature of a sociologically informed political judgment. In a sense, these two chapters provide contradictory pictures of Weber’s notion of practical judgment.

The fourth and fifth chapters lay bare the ways in which this fundamental tension in Weber’s account of sociological prudence is played out in his sociology of politics and his political ethics. In the fourth chapter, I discuss how Weber deploys the subjective-objective tensions in his explanatory understanding of the modern “business” of politics to open and restrict the possibilities for democracy.

In the fifth chapter, I show how Weber’s famous political ethic of responsibility for the consequences of using power is one that all political actors should adhere to given the conditions under which political judgments have to be made; yet his deployment of this ethic against egalitarian democratic possibilities contains many of the problems already seen in his sociological account of politics. One can agree with his ethic and yet still want to ask how politically irresponsible citizens would hold vocational politicians to an ethic of responsibility.

The sixth chapter and last chapter looks backward and forward. First, it takes stock of the arguments Weber has provided and proposes two criticisms of his arguments against direct forms of democracy.
cisms acknowledge his logic of power while finding within his subjective and objective notions of political judgment an entry for participatory democratic political alternatives that he rejects. Second, it draws out the implications of Weber's political ethics and sociologically informed prudence for strong participatory politics. In this chapter I provide an account of what participatory democratic theory and practice must look like if it is to meet up to Weber's demand for realism in the understanding of power and responsibility.

The idea for this book began quite a long time ago when I was awarded a German Academic Exchange Service Grant to study Weber's political writings in Germany. Since then, I have incurred some debts that I am pleased to acknowledge. Charles Drekmeier, Gabriel Almond, and Robert North read and commented on a very early version. Later on, Carole Pateman provided an encouraging reading. Tracy Strong, David Kettler, and Ron Jepperson gave me helpful advice on parts of the project as it developed. Two readers for Cornell University Press offered outstanding substantive and structural suggestions. My colleague Greg Nowell gave an acute reading of the manuscript. Special thanks go to my friend and colleague Jack Gunnell. Although he is a well-known critic of the practical pretensions of political theory, he has been an unfailing supporter of a project that in parts makes claim to precisely such pretensions. Our dialogue is an important part of this work. Thanks also go to Marty Edelman, who helped arrange some valuable free time for me to revise this book. My research assistant, Kevin Cameron, not only dutifully helped with references but also cheerfully allowed himself to be pressed into service as a discussion partner. Roger Haydon, my editor at Cornell, has been a wise and reassuring presence. My wife, Christiane von Buelow, kept reminding me that there is a difference between constructing schemes and engaging in interpretation. My daughter, Lizzie, both diverted me from this task and made me feel that something terribly important was going on at moments when I thought that finding a way through the logic of the Weberian world was next to hopeless. It is to Chris and Lizzie that this book is dedicated.

Preface


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