

Eugen Richter and Max Weber on Bismarck's Legacy (1890 and 1917/18)

Abstract

Most liberals did not share Hans Delbrück's recognition of Bismarck's greatness or his confident assessment of Germany's future. The leader of the left-liberal German Radical Party, Eugen Richter (1838–1905), was frankly pleased by Bismarck's resignation in 1890. Here he stresses the detrimental effects of the former chancellor's ruthlessness and the "blind cult of authority" he fostered. The sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), writing from the perspective of 1917, charges that Bismarck left the German people wholly lacking in political education. Weber has nothing good to say about those who tried to fill the political void after Bismarck's departure: they did so, he writes, with "an astonishing lack of self-doubt." But Bismarck's attitudes and policies while still in office emasculated parliament, fostered the growth of suffocating bureaucracy, and left Germans utterly unprepared to take the reins of power should the opportunity arise—as it finally did on November 9, 1918.

Source

I. Eugen Richter on Bismarck's System of Government (March 1890)

The dismissal of Reich Chancellor Prince Bismarck is a fait accompli. Thank God he's gone! We say this today with the same honesty that we have always shown towards him. It would have been a blessing for the Reich if he had been removed much earlier. We are not saying this on account of his person but because of the system of government to which Prince Bismarck adhered. [...]

It is our deepest conviction that a continuation of the domestic policy pursued up to now, especially of the kind initiated in 1877, would actually have brought Germany to ruin, had it been followed by another such period. The fact that in the last elections one-fifth of the German people declared their support for a Republican party^[1] is mainly the product of the Bismarckian system of government; it was all too suited to the artful rearing of Social Democracy by offering the carrot one moment and applying the stick the next. Additionally, existing confessional differences were exacerbated, on the one hand, through the battle over church policy, carried out by way of the police and criminal regulations, and, on the other hand, through the chancellor's attitude towards the development of the antisemitic movement. The rampant growth of interest parties, striving ruthlessly to exploit state authority at the expense of the general good, can be traced to the policy of protective tariffs and the kind of agitation for protective tariffs that the chancellor personally called for and fuelled. The incitement of the parties against each other, the suspicions cast upon people's patriotism, and the denial of patriotism to any political dissident all result from a press corrupted by the Guelph Fund;^[2] they also stem from the tone that the chancellor's press adopted against all those who just once expressed views differing from his.

The chancellor's misguided policy is solely to blame for the tax burdens of the Reich having risen by nearly 400 million over the last ten years, above all to the disadvantage of the less well-off classes. [...]

Parliament was always treated in the most ruthless manner, and its reputation was belittled whenever the representatives of the people did not vote to the chancellor's liking. [...]

Only a later generation will be able to pass a completely unbiased judgment on Prince Bismarck. We believe that posterity will be less inclined to sing the praises of his twenty-eight-year activity in public life than the contemporary world has often done. Before the eyes of the world, what he did to unify the

Fatherland was shown to the fullest advantage; but only later generations, those destined to suffer the consequences of his flawed domestic policies, will become fully aware of how these measures have sinned against national life.

Those statesmen who must inherit his legacy are truly not in an enviable position. Many things will have to change in the German Reich if we are to have the opportunity to overcome the evil consequences of long-standing misgovernment. But once the blind cult of authority that has built up around the figure of Prince Bismarck has lost its central object, all segments of the population will hopefully discern much more sharply the damage that kind of politics has wrought. Above all, we hope that strong, confident political activity will now come to life everywhere in Germany. Instead of obeying with apathetic passivity whatever may come from above, we must once again draw inspiration from the idea that the people [*das Volk*] themselves are called upon to participate in their own destiny. In the long term, people get only the kind of government they deserve.

Source: *Freisinnige Zeitung*, no. 68, March 20, 1890; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 260–62.

Translation: Erwin Fink

II. Max Weber on “a Parliament utterly without Power” (1917/18)

What interests us here is the question of the *political legacy* bequeathed by Bismarck [...] He left behind a nation *entirely lacking in any kind of political education*, far below the level it had already attained twenty years previously. And above all a nation *entirely without any political will*, accustomed to assume that the great statesman at the head of the nation would take care of political matters for them. Furthermore, as a result of his misuse of monarchic sentiment as a cover for his own power interests in the struggle between the political parties, he left behind a nation accustomed to *submit passively* and fatalistically to whatever was decided on its behalf, under the label of “monarchic government,” without criticising the political qualifications of those who filled the chair left empty by Bismarck and who seized the reins of government with such an astonishing lack of self-doubt. It was in this area that the most severe damage by far was done. *In no sense* did the great statesman leave behind a political tradition. He did not recruit, nor could he even tolerate, men with an independent caste of mind, to say nothing of men of character. [...] At the same time his enormous prestige had the purely negative consequence of leaving *parliament utterly without power*. It is well known that, after leaving office, he accused himself of having made a mistake in this respect, and was then made to suffer the consequences as part of his own fate. The powerlessness of parliament also meant that its intellectual level was very low. Admittedly, the naively moralizing legend of our *littérateurs* would have us believe that cause and effect were in fact the other way round, namely that parliament deserved to remain powerless because of the low quality of parliamentary life. The true state of affairs, self-evident on any sober reflection, is indicated by some very simple facts and considerations. Whether a parliament is of high or low intellectual quality depends on *whether great problems* are not only *discussed* but are *conclusively decided* there. In other words, it depends on *whether anything happens in parliament* and on *how much depends on what happens there*, or whether it is merely the reluctantly tolerated rubber-stamping machine for a ruling bureaucracy.

NOTES

[1] Richter refers here to the SPD, which received just under 20 percent of the popular vote in the Reichstag elections of February 20, 1890—ed.

[2] The *Welfenfond* of about forty-eight million marks was sequestered by the Prussian government in 1868 from the fortunes of King Georg V of Hanover, whose troops had fought the Prussians in 1866. Bismarck used the interest generated by this fund mainly to hire, bribe, and otherwise influence journalists who toed the government line and attacked liberal opponents like Richter—ed.

Source of English translation: *Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order: Towards a Political Critique of Officialdom and the Party System*, in Max Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 130–271, here pp. 144–45. © Cambridge University Press. Republished with permission.

Source of original German text: Max Weber, *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland. Zur politischen Kritik des Beamtentums und Parteiwesens*. Munich and Leipzig, 1918. This brochure was based on five articles that were first published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* between April and June 1917; reprinted in Max Weber, *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann, 2nd rev. ed. Tübingen: Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1958, pp. 307–08. Original German text also reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 262–63.

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