The City: Rationalization and freedom in Max Weber

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Abstract Weber's piece on the development of the north-European Western city has not commanded attention in the recent theoretical literature. This article argues that it can however provide fresh insights into some key problems of Weber's diagnosis of modernity and into his general sociological theory, especially as to his theory of action and creativity. A more open-ended conception of modernity can be gained from its analysis, which is more compatible with Weber's own methodological assumptions. A different relationship between freedom and rationality may be derived as a theoretical and political consequence from the discussion of *The City*.

Key words collective subjectivity · creativity · freedom · modernity · rationalization · Weber · Western city

The City and the Weberian project

Although it is acknowledged as an important piece by Max Weber, *The City – Non-legitimate Domination* has received almost no attention in the recent theoretical literature about this classical author in the social sciences.[1] However, much can be gained from a study of its most general hypotheses, not only in historiographical terms (which will not be my goal here), but especially for a deeper understanding of Weber's methodology, of his conception of western rationalization and also as to the limits of his diagnosis of modernity. *The City* makes evident the truthfulness of Benjamin Nelson's (1974) statement that Weber strove to grasp the development of the West in a way far more complex than one

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might suppose should we abide by a simplistic contraposition between ideas and material life, or between Weberianism and Marxism. This seminal piece on the urban phenomenon will afford us a less teleological view of modernity than Weber's, which, regardless of his methodological perspective, results in pessimism and resignation in the face of the possibilities open for the development of that civilization.

A reference to Weber's theory and typology of action is unavoidable in this case. The reading of *The City* shows, in a particularly vivid manner, its inadequation within the presuppositions of his own work, as authors such as Parsons (1937: 640 ff.), Aron (1967: 558) and Habermas (1981: I, 239 ff.) have already pointed out. In a general way, I shall draw attention to an aspect of that process of rationalization which does not have an instrumental character – resuming in part Habermas's (1981) emphasis. Finally, I will try to bring out the necessity of tackling Weber's questions from an angle distinct from his own, but also from Habermas's, introducing a theory of social creativity which, I believe, allows for the stress on some features of Weber's indeterminism in particular and of his comprehensive sociology in general. Thereby we can rescue his view of a (foreclosed) possibility of a specific sort of democratic development in the West, which his rigid conception of the rationalization process and a restrictive notion of creativity tend to block off.

The Western city

Weber (1921: 727) warns the reader at the very start of his piece that the city must be understood as a 'settlement' (*Siedlung*, *Ansiedlung*) which was not to be taken in quantitative terms: this would not do as the criterion for outlining a typology. On the contrary, he set off with the definition of the city as a market place of a certain magnitude, around which the life of its inhabitants is organized (and which does not therefore merely furnish the products needed by the prince, his court, its officials, nor is it simply the place of a fortress or garrison). Nevertheless, more than that, the city properly understood is for Weber a phenomenon that is characteristic of the West, more precisely of the European Middle Ages. In his own words:

> A city-commune (*Stadtgemeinde*), in the full meaning of the word, was known as a massive phenomenon only by the West. Along with it, a part of the Near East (Syria and Fenicia, perhaps Mesopotamia), but only temporarily and in a proximate way. Since, for that, a settlement has to be, at least in a relative manner, commercial-artesanal, and be equipped with the following features: 1) the fortification; 2) the market; 3) own court of justice and, at least in some part, autonomous justice; 4) associative structure, and

> therewith connected; 5) at least partial autonomy and autocephaly, therefore also administration by some authority in whose definition the burghers (*die Bürger*) as such somehow take part. (Weber, 1921: 736)

Without any doubt, we must consider that, even in the West, those features did not appear everywhere, and not always with the same strength. What is in fact at stake in that definition is, more precisely, an *ideal type*, built with some relevant features for Weber, which, as we shall see later on, are revealing of some of his axiological ideals (almost normative ideals, we could say, were he not so pessimistic *vis-à-vis* the stalemates he detected in the development of the West). In any case, as Weber (1921: 741) notes, the city, in its ideal type, in its 'purity' (*in idealtypischer Reinheit*), and in opposition to what can be found in Asia, is concretely found in the reality of north of the Alps, during the Middle Ages. Its historical emergence was characterized by many empirical variations, though. In turn, the city from the south of medieval Europe, as well as the old city of the West, share concretely the middle ground in the transition from the ideal type of the European city and the Eastern city (Weber, 1921: 743).

There are many contrasts to be explored in Weber's depiction. In Asia, in the East by and large, the settlements that could be brought closer, from an economic viewpoint (especially as regards commercial and craft development), to Weber's ideal type, as was the case in China, fall far from it on the political plane. On the one hand, they have as a vehicle of organized action (*Verbandshandeln*) – i.e. of the collective movement of a group specifically defined, of what I shall later on discuss drawing upon the concept of *collective subjectivity* (Domingues, 1995) – only clans and, sometimes, occupational associations; they have never witnessed the organized action of 'urban citizens (*Stadtbürgerschaften*) as such' (Weber, 1921: 736 ff.). This was a phenomenon peculiar to the West. Moreover, in the East – and we face here a decisive question – *there is no urban autonomy*: the 'city' (if we can call it so) is merely a centre of administration and power. That is, it is included in the scheme of patrimonialist 'traditional domination', to which it is subordinated. Only in the West has it acquired a proper juridical personality (*Rechtpersönlichkeit*) as a corporation. Its officials became 'organs' of the city (Weber, 1921: 748).

Therewith we can mark out two crucial features of the Weberian perspective on the city: *citizenship* and *autonomy*.

The breakdown of traditional domination (by feudal lords and the Church) and its substitution by the authority of the inhabitants associated in the urban space stand out even in the subtitle Weber conferred on his text – 'non-legitimate domination' (*nichtlegitime Herrschaft*). They serve as the *leitmotiv* for his argument and typology. Weber develops

those characteristics in the following terms, with respect to the genesis of the Western city:

> The urban citizens then usurped the right to break with lordly law – and this was the great innovation, in fact the revolutionary innovation in the medieval cities of the West in the face of all others. In the centre and north-European city originated the well-known saying: 'city air makes man free'.

Furthermore:

> The differences of status disappeared in the city – at least to the extent that they meant the ordinary differentiation between freedom and lack of freedom. (Weber, 1921: 742)

The rupture of traditional domination, in its feudal variant, yields therefore a particular political-administrative status for the Western city, generating an aberrant situation indeed within the typology of forms of domination acknowledged by Weber. It must be clear here that 'domination' does not mean merely the 'authority' of some over others, but rather a 'relationship of men dominating other men' by means of the legitimate exercise of violence (Weber, 1919b: 507–8). Whereas he spoke of three types of domination – traditional, charismatic and rational-legal – the city evaded them all. In addition, Weber postulated a taking of turns between traditional and charismatic domination – which furnished, via an individual endowed with extraordinary 'gifts' (Weber, 1921–2: Ch. 3, plus 140 ff. and 654 ff.), the principal mechanism of change in by far most of human societies. It was at least to a great extent substituted by piecemeal change, of an almost systemic character, in the context of rational-legal domination. The city took an utterly different path. It stemmed from a collective movement that entailed a far-reaching social and political democratization. A collective creativity was then exerted, which, in this specific juncture, constituted the mechanism of social change – without recourse either to a charismatic personality or to the bureaucratic rationality of an increasing adequation of means to ends.[2] I will return to all that in the conclusion.

The legal status of the city inhabitants, who were emancipated from the feudal clutches, was also peculiar to the West (Weber, 1921: 737). The Conjuratios (Weber, 1921: 750 ff.), the 'sworn fraternity', the association, in guilds or similar entities, of individuals free from clans and castes (Weber, 1921: 753), in contrast to what used to take place in the East, was the key-element of the constitution of the Western city. The growing individualization of social subjects had been decisive for that configuration, which culminated in the 'Christian congregation', an 'association of individual believers' – Christianity decisively contributed too to the dissolution of clans (Weber, 1921: 744 and 746).[3] This gave rise to a community from which Jews were, by the way, excluded.

Moreover, Weber (1921: 739 ff.) identified in the development of urban markets a fundamental contribution to the dissolution of the feudal bondage and for the appearance of the free individual. Weber is thereby connected to a long German tradition, with pristine roots in Romantic conservatism, according to which the individual is not as such given, since it is a product of historical development. On the other hand, law underwent a particular development, creating a community wherein equal subjects join together (Weber, 1921: 743, 748–9, 752). Thus, in the first place, there is not as yet the 'disenchantment of the world', which culminates in the rationalization of the West and leads to a situation in which individuals do not share a common meaningful fate (Weber, 1919a). The Other of the medieval city is not the Other of the Protestant ethic, who is to be treated as an equal from whom, however, one finds oneself entirely apart (Weber, 1904–5; see also Nelson, 1969); the Other of the medieval city community is inserted in a constellation of meaningful interests, which is mediated by Christianity. This cultural meaningful fabric was linked to a development and a particular shape of power relations, as well as to a specific configuration of material interests.

We face here, once again, a 'decisive difference' between the Western city and its almost-kin in the East. In the former, there was no control by a traditional administration that looked after the interests of a broader political association, which would transcend and harness the dynamics of the city. Urban law as such showed a universality and procedurality which evinced its rationalization – which corresponded directly to the city dynamics, and was geared against the patrimonialist forces against which it fought for its autonomy (Weber, 1921: 752). In the East, on the contrary, patrimonial centralization brought about the separation of the soldier from the means of war (similarly to what he does with respect to modern rational bureaucracy, Weber thus borrows from Marx's theory of capitalist economic expropriation so as to make clear how the concentration of means which facilitate action reduces the power of those who are deprived of them). In the West the central fact is the existence of self-armed citizens. This inverts that power relationship: now it is the suzerain who is dependent upon the power of his own subjects (Weber, 1921: 756–7). 'Non-legitimate domination' has its final and stronger colours canvassed precisely by such a situation – whereby, in passing, it is evinced that legitimate domination is by no means merely the hermeneutic process of acceptance of a position of subordination, but also a situation of inequality and imbalance of power of rather a material character, at least in a number of cases.

If we furthermore recall his definition of the state, which is close to the 'rational-legal domination', as that sort of political power which legitimately holds the monopoly of the means of violence in a given

territory (Weber, 1919b: 506 ff.; 1921–2: Part I, Ch. 3), we can see how peculiar the situation of the city of the European medieval period was. So peculiar that it was possible only because the rural aristocracy did not as yet possess an administrative staff capable of guaranteeing their interests in the cities (Weber, 1921: 803–4). The patrimonial state that *en suite* emerged in the historical landscape eventually curtailed the autonomy of the cities (Weber, 1921: 790), bringing to a close the concrete and historical experience which corresponded to the ideal type of the city such as constructed by Weber.

The city has, finally, as a characteristic the fact that it consists in a crucial element in the process of rationalization that the West underwent (Freund, 1982: 11–12). Social stratification was, according to Weber (1915a: 259), determining in the process of rationalization, by conditioning the values which underpinned it. In this connection, in another seminal passage, grasping, however, only one aspect of the process of rationalization, Weber suggests that

> The tendency towards practical rationalism in behaviour was common to all civic layers, being conditioned by the nature of their way of life, very disconnected from economic links with nature. Its total existence was based on technological calculations and the control of nature and of man, regardless of how primitive were the means at its disposal. (Weber, 1915a: 256)

A radical difference singles out the city of the Middle Ages in relation to all others, including the city of ancient times, insofar as the former was the 'terrestrian city of artisans', geared 'towards acquisition via rational economic activity'. The medieval man was a '*homo oeconomicus*' (Weber, 1921: 805). The 'sworn fraternity' had even taken roots in opposition to traditional domination due to the economic interests of the city inhabitants (Weber, 1921: 753). The very possibility of ascension from serfdom to freedom, by means of monetary acquisition, consisted in a deliberate politics of the Western burghers, aiming – by all means, including migration – at the enrichment of the city (Weber, 1921: 743).[4] In this sense, Weber (1921: 796 ff.) underscores that in antiquity the lower classes comprised 'decayed' people, and the electoral districts followed the territorial principle; in the medieval West, in contrast, the lower classes comprised poor artisans, and the electoral districts were constituted according to the artisan guilds (which they all joined), although we must also bear in mind an ascension of 'notables' and the differentiation of wealth in the city (Weber, 1921: 743 – see also Freund, 1982: 14). But whilst the families, in particular in Italy (Weber, 1921: 757 ff., 775 ff.), formed a patriciate (which did not derive its own wealth from production) that kept control to a great extent over urban politics – the emergence of the '*popolo*' notwithstanding – in the north, as seen above, greater democratization took place.

In fact Weber points in those passages to two forms of rationalization: the first instrumental, stemming from economic interests; and a second one, on the plane of morals and legal institutions, which allows for a blossoming of rights of equality (especially civil, but in part political) and for the establishment of a universalistic mentality in relation to individuals; nevertheless, he underplays the latter, in particular as regards its potential for development, mirroring conclusions that can be found in other passages of his work, and which are related to the unfolding of the processes of rationalization in the West. His overall conception will allow us to move beyond this narrow standpoint, though.

The ideal type and the city

Let us now look into some main elements of Weber's methodological standpoint.

As is well known, cultural signification and the meaning of action are crucial for his conception:

> The transcendental premise of any science of culture is not the fact that we attribute value to a certain 'culture' or to 'culture' in general, but rather on the circumstance of us being persons of culture, endowed with the capability and will of taking up a conscious position in relation to the world and lending it meaning. (Weber, 1904a: 61)

The very typology of action, which Weber presents in the opening pages of *Economy and Society*, is based on this almost axiomatic statement. 'Rational-action-in-relation-to-ends' (instrumental), 'rational-action-in-relation-to-value', 'traditional action' (which is placed on the limits of social action, for it implies routine and lack of intentionality) and 'affective action' (which overflows the bounds of the social character of action, since it is not meaningful) are outlined according to that postulation. However, Weber does not give in to intuition when he defines the method of understanding: it is on the manifest – and therefore feasible to grasp empirically – 'relationship' between social subjects that the researcher must focus attention, in order to get hold of the meaning they lend to their action. He defines those relationships as of *domination* (Weber, 1921–2: Ch. 1).

As Cohn (1979: 80, 88, 128) notes, two things are at stake here: on the one hand, in the construction of the ideal type we must recognize the regularity of individual behaviour; but on the other, this does not exhaust the issue, insofar as we 'need to have the conditions for a "internal reproduction" of the motivation of those people'. Ideal types facilitate precisely that, since they do not rest content with the external character of phenomena; they are cast with an eye to understanding the

values that bring action forth. He synthesizes the process through which Weber arrives at the formulation of his methodological device:

> The ideal type is a fundamentally *characterizing* concept. It does not apply to the average or generic features of a multiplicity of phenomena, but aims at making as univocal as possible the singular character of a particular phenomenon. His basic principle is genetic: such and such features of reality are selected and associated in the type exactly to the extent to which that order of phenomena to which it refers is meaningful for the researcher, since it allows for the formulation of hypotheses about the causal influence on the manner whereby contemporarily a number of values to which the researcher is attached are presented; in short, the examination of the historical *responsibility* of the type regarding that which matters to the researcher holds centre stage in the ideal type. (Cohn, 1979: 128)[5]

It is worthwhile noting that the methodological positioning in the Weberian field, should the researcher follow it strictly, demands the construction of ideal types according to his or her own individual values. That would not cancel out their scientific value, insofar as it is the possibility of logical analysis and empirical demonstration that makes them understandable even for a Chinese – although the ethical imperatives of the latter are distinct from those of an European (Weber, 1904a: 32–3).

Scientific knowledge cannot decide about ends. Its reach is defined in accordance with the following possibilities and tasks: (1) to establish clearly the axioms of value in opposition; (2) to deduce the consequences of taking a position with evaluative intentions; (3) to determine the practical consequences taking into account (a) that its realization is connected to a number of means and (b) which subsidiary and non-desirable consequences are inevitable (Weber, 1917: 198). In short, these are the basic perspectives with which Weber orients his undertakings: we must look at history, from the point of view of scientific knowledge, drawing upon understanding, and thus trying to grasp – not in a psychological sense – the meaning of social action; that is possible precisely because we can also lend meaning to our own action. The ideal type is built therefore via a selection of features, as an abstraction guided by the values of the researcher. It establishes a concept which, according to Jaspers (1932: 42 ff.), can be taken as a yardstick with respect to reality, to which a cognitive approximation is possible. A number of other questions must be nevertheless considered so as to complement our balance of the ideal type.

There are ideal types that, on the one hand, are more specifically sociological in that they are general and those that, on the other, refer to 'historical individualities'. Both have a genetic character. But it is mandatory to underscore that the level of historical content they possess varies (Aron, 1967: 519 ff.; Cohn, 1979: 132). The ideal types that are empty from a historical standpoint are an example of those of a more

sociological character – although they appear in distinct space-time coordinates. The ideal type of the city is a radical instance of that other, more historical concept. It is necessary to ask, however, whether the idea of 'non-legitimate domination' should be included, as their opposite, alongside the ideal types of domination; or whether it should be taken, as Weber actually does, as a mere historical accident, as non-generalizable, since it was circumscribed to the specific space-time coordinates of the North-European medieval urban life. As it happens, Weber bet on the concept of domination as the expression of a universal phenomenon. The direct influence therein, in contraposition to Marxism, was Nietzsche (cf. Fleischmann, 1964). Thereby Weber assumes a 'realist', disenchanted perspective, and breaks free from the limits of liberalism in the analysis of society, in particular of contemporary Europe, when he moves beyond the formal aspects of equality. Nevertheless, not only does he in general rescue the idea of the subject, whereupon the principles of autonomy and liberty rest, which are so crucial for that doctrine, at least in its most optimistic versions, but he goes further: in *The City* he crafts an ideal type that is based on the rationalization of law, of morals and of social interactions, which surpasses, in a really democratic guise, the very idea of domination. In this case, as throughout, the selection of features he carries out to craft the ideal type, in accordance with his own values, is warranted only because they mirror empirical reality. *The City* reaches therefore the bounds of his general theory and Weber, bringing up a tension that is built into his work and is hence almost insoluble, arrives at the limits of his conceptual framework.

In what refers to history, it is also necessary to note Weber's careful methodological steps:

> Because one can construct ideal types of development and such constructions can have a considerable heuristic value. However, in this case there appears the impending danger of confusing ideal type and reality. (Weber, 1904a: 87)

This danger lurks in particular when the type has to be displayed making recourse to a selection of the empirical material, whereby historical knowledge can be subordinated to theory, and we run the risk of mistaking the latter for the former. Development would then take on the aspect of a 'necessary' law-like development (Weber, 1906b: 89). The consequences of such an instance and how it is in fact deployed will be revisited below.

Finally, let us observe that whilst science for Weber possesses an eminently critical character, it is powerless in the face of the (profoundly irrational) definition of the 'idols' of the human species, which are highly individualized in modernity; it can do even less against the 'iron cage' in which instrumental rationalization, of which rational-legal domination

is a decisive feature, had us imprisoned (Weber, 1919a: 266–7). Science does not therefore have, in any hypothesis, a transforming critical role, nor can it orient social actors axiologically. To criticism only the appropriation of the factual-analytical findings of social scientists by lay actors can follow, within the strict limits of the relationship between means and ends; the other possibility is hence resignation, since intellectuals are impotent *vis-à-vis* developments that do not bow to their aims and values. And, as pointed out above, the iron cage of instrumental rationalization and rational-legal domination is among the most unshakeable prospects of modernity, according to Weber.

Rationalization, freedom and creativity

Weber's fears regarding the future of the West are well known, evincing a position which Gerth and Mills (1946: 72) have depicted as 'defensive pessimism for the future of freedom'. Weber is explicit in this respect:

> In the face of all this, those who constantly fear that in the world of the future too much democracy and individualism may exist and too little authority, aristocracy, esteem for office, or such like, may calm down. Only too much provision has been made to see to it that the trees of democratic individualism do not shoot into the sky. (quoted in Gerth and Mills, 1946: 71)

Weber's praise of politics, of charisma, of vocation, within the elitist limits of his work, is a consequence of that frame of mind. The disenchantment of the world, the extreme economic individualism plus, in particular, bureaucratization, the salient aspect of the process of rationalization that carved Western society out, all upset him. The pessimistic tenor is clear:

> Precisely the ultimate and more sublime values retired from public life, whether to the transcendental realm of mystic life, whether to the brotherhood of direct and personal human relationships. . . . If we try to build new religions intellectually, without an authentical prophecy, then, in an intimate sense, something similar will come out, but with even worse effects. And academic prophecy, finally, will create only fanatical sects, but never an authentic *community*. (Weber, 1919a: 272–3)

Weber refers to the impasse which, he believed, was intrinsic to Western society. Rationalization, the disenchantment of the world, economic individualism, along with a social atomization which would have as a corollary the superimposition of an all-mighty bureaucracy onto the social fabric, entailed a fragmentation of human community. Eventually nothing would be left of common meaning. And science, he noted with resignation, could do nothing about that, except to advance a criticism which, due to its own nature, did not enjoy political efficacy. Liberty and

autonomy, the constitutive values of Weber's axiological vision, were therefore crushed, since they had been deprived of their social foundations. That meant that it would be ludicrous and dishonest if academic intellectuals pretended to substitute true prophets, trying thereby to elude the 'fate' of our time and the exigencies of the moment; that would be the same as to give up on the only virtue of science – its 'intellectual integrity'. The return to religious life was not possible, but we would condemn ourselves to Judaism's 2000 years of erring, should we wait for new prophets – today there is neither prophet nor saviour, the only one capable of freeing us of our burden and answering to the ongoing struggle between multiple values and idols (Weber, 1919a: 258 ff.).

The city configured a space of liberty and autonomy precisely because it flourished in an extremely peculiar moment of the historical development of the West. It emerged within a feudal context, already as such based on contract. It established precisely a contract between its citizens, who made up a *community* on all planes, also in terms of cultural meaning and of action. Its essence was the defence of freedom shared by equals. It had thereby escaped, alongside its insertion in the fabric of the feudal world, the logic of domination which structured that social formation. It constituted a moment absolutely singular in universal history: it established its autonomy *vis-à-vis* the ruling classes in the context of overall feudal social life, turning traditional domination into a non-legitimate phenomenon. At the same time, it bloomed in a moment previous to the development of the patrimonial state, which brought its subordination about, to rational-legal domination and, finally, to the loss of that unique historical opportunity for the realization of freedom. The collective creed of the city, in turn, had woven the communion amongst the citizens without, on the other, the actual sphere of autonomy of each individual being crushed, irrespective of the already considerable depth of the rationalization of their behaviour as to economic issues. Furthermore, social action had not lost its collective significance. We can therefore say that the city is an extreme example of the historically saturated ideal types we have formerly discussed. This example was crafted drawing precisely upon the values of autonomy and liberty which Weber had taken up from 'humanist and cultural liberalism rather than economic liberalism', of which Schiller was the key figure (Gerth and Mills, 1946: 93). Weber saw those values as somehow subjectively shared by the urban inhabitants of medieval Europe. It might perhaps be possible to question the description and the idealization which Weber offers of the egalitarianism and freedom of the citizen of the medieval city. The general features of the rationalization of morals and of law in an egalitarian and democratic direction in the development of the medieval North-European city cannot, however, be denied therewith; one can hardly overestimate the importance of the description and

conceptualization Weber makes of that city as regards what it can intimate with respect to the whole of his work.

I do not want to say that Weber perceived the possibility of a society without domination. In fact, he suggested something of the sort, when, in a public conference, he introduced, in straight connection with the development of the medieval city, a fourth principle of legitimation: 'democratic legitimation'.[6] Nonetheless, he drew back from that and subsumed its features under the transformation of charisma and 'plebiscitary democracy' – as such an already problematic concept. Beyond his, say, 'conjunctural' pessimism, linked to his diagnosis of modernity, he held a deep-seated conviction about domination as a universal phenomenon. The medieval North-European city was therefore a specific and, to say the least, rare phenomenon – thence that it be included in his *trans*historical conceptualizations was not appropriate. His nationalism and proposals for the reform of the German liberal political system, already active during the First World War and later on in the Weimar Republic, have been widely discussed. He aimed at *perfecting*, not superseding, rational-legal domination. He looked for an intertwinement of the growing modern bureaucracy with plebiscitary democracy, which might allow for a controlled revival of charismatic and Caesarist leadership, plus the appearance of some collective social meaning. He was of course far from any socialist perspective (and he believed its victory would in fact entail greater, not less, bureaucratization) and held as an alternative that parties led by genuine leaders might operate as a counterweight to the 'iron cage'.[7] If we focus on *The City* and relate Weber to the traditions of political thought (Habermas, 1992: 360–1), it is feasible, however, to suggest that, at least to a certain extent, he had some sympathy, tempered by his historical sensibility in particular regarding religion, for the values of republicanism, but that he circumscribed its validity to the past: the self-determination, the construction of the citizen's opinion and will were the means through which society as a political totality was constituted, always establishing checks to the power of the state. The emergence of absolutism, as aforementioned, would end up with that practice of citizenship. Whereby, *vis-à-vis* the present, Weber supposed thus the validity of a liberalism which acknowledges the specific role of state power, already marked moreover by a realism which believes in the inevitability of the pre-eminence of elites in mass democracies (Avritzer, 1996: Ch. 1). Scientific resignation as regards the loss of the medieval city had as its other face realism in political action, with the search for the best way to connect means and ends in a context of very narrow possibilities.

Nevertheless, such a diagnosis, notwithstanding how tough are in fact the limitations of modernity, holds together only by banking on a double reasoning: the first, already underscored, about the universal

inevitability of domination – whereby the city takes on the countenance of a factual aberration, of a limit case, of a 'residual category' in Weber's thought; the second being that which implies the historical inevitability of processes of rationalization, in particular in the instrumental direction that was characteristic of the Western historical singularity. In other words, the latter would bring up strong elements of historical teleology, whose presuppositions are highly arguable as such, and made even more so by Weber himself, regardless of other clues coming up in his own writings, including *The City*. The issue here is extremely complex and I intend only to outline some main problems.

A reading of Weber's work marked by Piagetian genetic structuralism and systems theory taken by Luhmann – both strongly teleological – has become highly influential. Habermas (1981: Vol. II, Chs VI.1 and VII.1), who presents a *universalist* view of social evolution, has shown that Weber had elaborated the unfolding of two distinct processes of rationalization: one instrumental, the other being articulated to the development of universal law and forms of moral universalism, in short 'communicative', in that the alterity of the other is founded in his recognition as an equal. Irrespective of being put forward as merely a 'reconstruction' of developmental logic which was not necessary, the criticisms of that interpretation were legion. Schluchter (1979: Ch. 1 and 183 ff.) prefers, resuming what would purportedly be Weber's position, to treat his 'developmental history' (*Entwicklunggeschichte*) as ideal typical sequences, which have, however, a multilinear character.[8] Moreover, the basic configurations of the ideal types present, he thinks, more delimited variations, which in any case do not break free from the possibilities present in the broader matrixes (as in the case of the concepts of domination, for instance).

If Weber's work is likely not to warrant effectively evolutionist interpretations, its operationalization seems to diverge somewhat from its theoretical presuppositions, which were explored above. We saw that he treated directional developments as merely ideal types. He repeats that at the beginning of his '*Zwischenbetrachtung*' in *The Economic Ethics of World Religions* (Weber, 1915b: 536–7). But his interpretation of processes of rationalization in the different spheres, which all follow, to start with, *the same direction*, makes evident immanent logics of rationalization which allow us to think that some sort of *necessity*, which must not be conceived of in an absolute form, results from historical development, as if, once posed to people, dilemmas demand a solution which can be unfolded in only two directions – ascetic or mystical. Of course, Weber shows reservations regarding the validity of such a scheme in empirical terms; his language evinces, though, great confidence in the universal meaning of his findings (transitions 'regularly' carried out, 'imperatives', ethical 'demands', capitalism 'immanent

laws', etc.). In another piece, although once again with reservations, he points to the universal validity of the Western brand of rationalism, which affirms itself in *all spheres* of its differentiated social life (Weber, 1904b). A weak notion of necessity comes to the fore also in the conclusions of his study of Protestant 'inner-worldly asceticism'. In principle, we do not know whether, after asceticism broke free from its religious embroidery, we are doomed to live in the cage of instrumental rationality and the rule of material wealth. Weber (1904–5: 204) even suggests the possibility of the appearance of new prophets or the revival of old doctrines. Nonetheless, this might happen only *after* we had traversed the *whole* path that leads to the 'last men', for whom life has no meaning whatsoever. It is as if we were teleologically condemned to suffer *the plight of the unfolding, to its ultimate consequences, of the internal logics triggered by the blooming of instrumental rationality*. Thence the inevitability of the 'iron cage', his refusal to perceive alternative developments in the present, his criticisms in particular of the Russian Revolution and his acceptance, however moderated by the praise of parliamentary leadership, of bureaucracy; this seemingly explains also his scepticism regarding any other alternative to romantic love and traditionally modern marriage (Schwentker, 1996). Finally, it must be noted that the process of rationalization of the West, a process unifying the great many phenomena of this civilization – even because it was articulated to rational-legal domination – presents itself as a complication for what Weber considered as the autonomy of spheres of individual existence, spheres which might be in contradiction with one another (Cohn, 1979: 147). The fact is that neither this widespread character nor the necessity of expansion to the full of a number of societary principles of organization seems to be justified within the framework of Weberian philosophy of science.

Moreover, as has been often noted, Weber's work is shot through with ambiguities, in particular as to the role of modern reason and liberalism (see Raynaud, 1987: 155ff., 297). In this regard, without aiming to suggest either compromises or easy solutions, and without overlooking the tragic nature Weber attributed to the situation of modern 'man', it is reasonable to stress the aspects of his work that help us still to think the emancipatory potential of modernity – although it may lead us beyond it – and even the possibility of an opening for the transformation of the ways of life, by means of, at least in some measure, an emphasis on the forms of social solidarity that he saw as operating in the 'city'. Thereby we can in addition think of *The City* as a piece that brings up, in a less straightforward and optimistic manner, tensions which on the other hand come up in his suggestion of fields open to the vocations of politician and scientist, as well as to aesthetic and erotic expressions, irrespective of the predominance of the 'iron cage' (Souza, 1997: 112 ff.). If, however, hopes

and possibilities that are phrased in the present are at stake, little would be left of the axiological universe embedded in the fabric of the medieval urban community beyond the emergence of charisma and the centrality of modern parliament. They alone would stand as a counterweight to the power of rational-legal bureaucracy.

But it must be borne in mind that the theme of *contingency* comes forward as a crucial one for the historical-evolutionary understanding of human social formations in contemporary sociological knowledge, and Weber has been a crucial supporter of this point of view. *The City* seems to make that especially clear, breaking free from specific ideal types of development and mitigated 'necessities' that are present in most of Weber's other pieces, insofar as it implies *a peculiar type of rationalization* which emerges in that specific space-time. Therefore, in what refers to society, even if social complexification (which is cut across by processes of both differentiation and disdifferentiation) plus a number of manifold processes of rationalization can be recognized, the inevitability of present forms of social organization is brushed aside. This way the Weberian diagnosis of modernity, already made more complex by Habermas's arguments (although he concentrates excessively on the theme of reason, whereby he overlooks some important aspects of Weber's thought – cf. Souza, 1997: 74) has to be revised, if not in its own empirical and descriptive terms, at least in what concerns future, however *contemporary*, possibilities of development – in both analytical and normative terms. The idea that a social formation can be organized without domination implodes also the basic 'configurations' which, according to Schluchter (1988: 473), as pointed out above, are suggested as a limit for the application of concepts: the medieval northwestern city does not fit in any of them.

Nothing prevents in principle that form of societary organization – wherein domination was not far-reaching – from arising in other historical coordinates. Nothing tells us that it will, but this is no reason to give in to resignation. This, however, brings problems for a typology of general social forms – insofar as non-domination can be positively conceptualized, rather than being abandoned to a residual status. The problems reach, moreover, into Weber's typology of action, since it does not bear the attribution to action of a creative character, which is confined to rationalization and traditionalism. The reformulation of his typology therefore to include, in all cases, creativity as a crucial and permanent aspect of action cannot be overlooked, otherwise we miss a fundamental instrument for the analysis of the concrete social transformations which the human species underwent in the past and will undergo in the future. In addition, this evinces the need to rethink the types of social transformation defined by Weber as being those produced by an individual endowed with extraordinary 'gifts', the charismatic leader, or those

systematically administered by rational bureaucracy. Processes derived from *contingent social creativity*, exerted by *collective subjectivities*, must receive the attention they deserve, the same being true as regards reflexivity conceived of in a broad manner, and not therefore reducible to rationality. Neither individuals and their causality alone nor structures or systems taken as reified entities should be held responsible for that exercise of creativity, but rather the *movement* and the *collective causality* exerted by social systems seen *qua systems of interaction* would be at the centre of the explanation of social change (Domingues, 1995 and 2000). If historical change has no previously defined direction, i.e. if neither does it assure us freedom nor does it condemn us to domination, it is in the collective processes of creation of social forms that social action, in individual and collective terms, takes on meaning. It is Weber himself who, by the way, shows that in the medieval city. Its repetition may be unlikely indeed. That is not to say, however, that it is out of reach for us to try to emulate it collectively – even though in very different social and historical conditions. Much the less should we suppose that the forms of solidarity and democracy that 'communities' can develop are lost and blocked for good. At worst the pessimism of the analysis might thus be validly brought together with the optimism of the will. At best we could direct our energies to contribute to a truly democratic development.

That said, it must be stressed that Weber was by no means wrong when he refused an apology of direct democracy, of radical republicanism in the contemporary world, which one might carelessly derive from his description of the medieval city. And that is not what is at stake here, in any event, for I believe that Weber had good reasons for that refusal. Hence it is worthwhile asking, by way of conclusion, if we cannot go beyond the retrospective utopia of *The City* and the disenchanted 'realism' of Weber's political writings. Would the widespread character of bureaucratic rule in the contemporary world be incompatible with democracy and the shared meaning of a community? Would they, in the face of the complexity of contemporary social life, be possible only within the bounds of the 'life-world', of civil society and of a democratic civic culture which would influence politico-administrative and economic systems from without, or at most would be inserted as limited 'censors' inside them, as supposed in a Habermasian perspective (Habermas, 1992; Cohen and Arato, 1992; Avritzer, 1996)?

I do not wish here to resume the themes of charismatic leadership and plebiscitary democracy in Weber, nor do I intend to take on the issues related to elite theory and mass democracy, its polemics with pluralism, although it seems possible to me in fact to think about a more positive and rational articulation between leaders, parties, social movements and citizens. This is true if we leave behind in particular a somewhat naive view of politics that refers to Greek, rather than to modern,

citizenship, and reckon with the actual and *specific challenges* which were thrown up by modernity in its already long development (Thompson, 1995; Avritzer, 1996). The question I want to underscore is related not only to the necessity of recreating the space for participatory democracy, but also to the possibility of rethinking the articulation between the private and public spheres, via the establishment of what I have elsewhere called a *social* sphere, constituted in the weaving of networks of solidarity and participation. Precisely the complexity of the contemporary world can suggest the possibility of a *re*differentiation of social spheres that may open up room for daily participation that might extrapolate the rigid limits of the distinction between private and public matters as it stands today. Collective undertakings, which are not controlled by the state but which are not, properly speaking, private, and should often be publicly financed, might bring together people to organize their life in common and autonomously from powerful bureaucracies. Freedom and common meaning might be to an extent the outcome of this sort of engagement, which might introduce a different principle of social organization (see Domingues, 2000: Chs 4, 6–7). Weber's concerns in *The City* would be thereby somehow addressed.

At last, the issue of intellectuals may be phrased differently from Weber, if what has been hitherto argued is taken into account. To be sure, in all social spheres of a democratic society, including the 'social' sphere, the power of specialists should be subordinated to the will and desires of those who in the end are to be served: in all dimensions we must find ways to make productive the relationship between 'experts' (Giddens, 1990) and 'lay' actors, whether as 'politicians' (in the role of citizens or of their representatives) or as simply the organizers of that which I have called the social sphere. Specific competencies of experts must not be disqualified, much the less demonized (although they are often problematic), in particular when they are open to public scrutiny. But intellectuals must somehow bet also on utopian thinking, on devising 'objective possibilities' by means of 'thought experiments' (Weber, 1906b), in order to help us think different possible worlds (which it would be very far-fetched to equate with an attempt at prophecy). Weber did that in relation to the past. We must learn with him and project those worlds and possibilities into the future. Sociology then might not be polarized by the melancholy and 'realism' which are seen to be two tendencies within Weber's body of work and would productively combine scientific analysis with a creative engagement with the contemporary world.

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Notes

1 Partial exceptions in this regard are Alexander (1983: 50–5), Turner (1993: 4) and Kalberg (1994: 90–1).

2 See Domingues (2000: especially Ch. 2) for a broader discussion of those questions, with reference also to Weber, albeit in the bounds of a broader conceptualization. The issues that come up regarding Weber's typology of action will be dealt with at the end of this article.

3 Mann (1986: 301 ff., 397–8 and 412) identifies in the conception of the individual in Christianity – and not in the Protestant 'inner-worldly asceticism' – the element that, by energizing human undertakings, finally differentiated the West from the East. Developed in explicit disagreement with the theses of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5), this viewpoint notwithstanding is close to arguments found in other passages of Weber's work, namely, in part, in those of *The City*.

4 One must not mistake, however, this medieval strategy for the capitalism that later on developed, including what refers to the collectivities upon which it at least in part rested. Guilds brought together competitors, Protestant sects companion believers. The former were against the capitalist *ethos*, raising therefore obstacles to the differentiation of its members, and thus preventing their individualization; the latter favoured capitalist success as a proof of worthiness and state of grace, stimulating also individualistic impulses that could be connected to the sects' prestige and their propaganda. Cf. Weber, 1906a: 235–6.

5 A recent approach to the problem of ideal types is to be found in Kalberg, 1994; for additional methodological observations, see Domingues, 1995: Ch. 6. In particular the problem of the supposed homogeneity as to the underlying reality of the ideal type is therein raised, especially when one wants to grasp something with a high level of heterogeneity; of course, this must also be referred to historical sequences reconstructed in ideal typical terms.

6 Cf. *Neue Freie Press* 19102 (26 October 1917): 10 – quoted in Schluchter, 1988: 473. See also Weber, 1921–2: 156.

7 Weber, 1918; 1919b: 423 ff. See also Giddens, 1971: 180–1, 190; plus Mommsen, 1981: 24–5, 28, 30 ff. All the same, the perspective pointed to by Bendix (1960: 497 ff.) when he portrays Weber within a Hegelian tradition that deals with society as an object of government, must thus be seen with some reservations. Nietzsche's influence, stressed by Fleischmann (1964) and Cohn (1979), must be taken into account also in this respect. As regards the perspective taken by Giddens (1971: 180), according to whom democracy implies the universalistic criteria that characterize modern bureaucracy, from the point of view both of action and of the selection of personnel, it must be underscored that the democracy of the city was so decisive for Weber precisely because it *separated* those two elements.

8 I have discussed the relationship between history and evolution in Domingues, 2000: Ch. 4.

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