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Velde, H. te

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# Politicians: Vocation, profession and history

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**Henk te Velde**

Leiden University, The Netherlands

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He could have taken the position that Justin Trudeau is now occupying. For a few years (2008–2011), he was the leader of the same liberal party and was connected to the same political families—Pierre Trudeau was *his* political father, too. In 2011, he could have become Prime Minister of Canada; however, it was not to be. After suffering defeat at the elections and stepping down, Harvard professor Michael Ignatieff published an impressive and fascinating memoir of his experiences as a politician in 2013.<sup>1</sup> The book is more about failure rather than about success, but, as Ignatieff says, it was written ‘in praise of politics and politicians’. This approach is rare. There is the earlier and famous example of *In Defence of Politics* by Bernard Crick (1962), and the species of the politician has indeed generally been so unpopular that it certainly was in need of a defence, but it rarely got one.<sup>2</sup>

A ‘professional politician’ has often been regarded as a tautology, and cynical professionalism as the greatest sin of politicians, but Ignatieff writes that he learned (the hard way) that he should not pose as or be a ‘gentleman amateur’ if he seriously wanted to play a role in politics. But instead of becoming a professional politician, he had made it easy for his opponents to paint him as an elitist outsider who had spent most of his life at Ivy League universities: Their slogan was ‘Michael Ignatieff. Just visiting’, and ‘He didn’t come back for You’. His experience taught Ignatieff that politics ‘as a vocation, as a way of life’ is both a serious business that calls for professional dedication as well as something more than that, and ‘I miss it still’.

Politics is, strictly speaking, not a profession, but rather a ‘charismatic art’; it necessitates a ‘calling’, perhaps even in the strong religious sense of the word. Ignatieff concludes by quoting the famous ending of ‘Politics as a Vocation’, where Max Weber writes that politics is ‘a strong and slow boring of hard boards’, asking for determination, perseverance, and a persevering passion or

1. M. Ignatieff, *Fire and Ashes. Success and Failure in Politics*, Cambridge, MA 2013, following quotations from 3–4, 89, 120, 181–182.
2. See K. Palonen, *Rhetorik des Unbeliebten. Lobreden auf Politiker im Zeitalter der Demokratie*, Baden-Baden 2012.

## Corresponding author:

Henk te Velde, Institute for History, Leiden University, Doelensteeg 16, 2311 VL Leiden, The Netherlands.

Email: h.te.velde@hum.leidenuniv.nl

‘calling’.<sup>3</sup> A century after the publication of Weber’s piece, Ignatieff posits the essay as still ‘the best lecture ever given about politics’, and he refers to it at three different pages of his book.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Ignatieff is by no means the only politician quoting Weber. Former leader of the Dutch Labour party, Jacques Wallage, for instance, used as the subtitle for his memoirs ‘politics as a craft’ (*ambacht*, in German probably best rendered as *‘Handwerk’*), and referred five times to Weber.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of Weber in contemporary memoirs by politicians is striking and significant in at least two ways. First, Weber can still be used to argue that a politician is neither a ‘pure’ impartial and impassionate administrator, nor a ‘pure’ idealist and passionate activist with clean hands.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the politician is an ‘impure’ intermediate type who is muddling through in the difficult realities of life, trying, often in vain, to combine the qualities of both pure types. Second, for the historian, it is particularly significant that everyone always refers to Max Weber as if nothing had happened since the famous sociologist gave his speech in 1919. In a way, however, historiography confirms this idea. Given the importance and ubiquity of politicians in the modern world, you would expect to find many historical studies of ‘the politician’, yet, in fact, they are rare. That is why we offer in this issue of the *Journal of Modern European History*, also as an incentive for future research, a number of possible avenues to study the development and the nature of the politician, and most of the essays concentrate roughly on the period of Weber’s essay.

Of course, this is not the first study on the topic of the political figure since Max Weber. There are some, mostly German, conceptual histories of *Politik*, from the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* to *Politik, Situationen eines Wortgebrauchs im Europa der Neuzeit*. However, a conceptual history of the politician—or *der Politiker*—does not exist, and certainly not in an international comparative sense.<sup>7</sup> As concerns the politicians themselves, it is probably their ‘professionalization’ that has attracted the most attention of researchers, even though the literature on this topic is not abundant either. The countries that were singled out as examples of professionalization in Weber’s time, Britain and, mainly, the United States, have hardly contributed to the literature.<sup>8</sup> In the tradition of Weber, political sociologist Jens Borchert (2003) tried to determine the special nature of the political ‘profession’, and his French colleague Michel Offerlé edited an important collection of essays about *‘la profession politique’* (1999).<sup>9</sup> They are not historians, and their original work has not led to a new wave of literature by historians, even though the extensive new epilogue to the re-edition of Offerlé’s collection in 2017 shows that there is new literature about the contemporary sociology of politics.

Ignatieff also uses Weber’s famous distinction between living ‘off’ and living ‘for’ politics, and his legacy has first and foremost been his analysis of the combination of, and also the tension between, the professional and the idealist side of what a politician does. The popular English translation that has been more frequently used than the original German version does not do justice

3. For the use of this famous expression by politicians from different countries, see K. Palonen, ‘Parlamentarisches Bretterbohren. “Max Weber” in Plenardebatten’, in: idem, *Max Webers Begriffsgeschichte. Aufsätze aus zwei Jahrzehnten*, Baden-Baden 2019.

4. Ignatieff, *Fire and Ashes*, 148, 170, 182.

5. J. Wallage, *Het land achter de heuvels. Politiek als ambacht, 1968-2018*, Amsterdam 2018, 22, 61, 69, 94, 362.

6. M. Walzer, ‘Political Action. The Problem of Dirty Hands’, in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1973), 160–180.

7. V. Sellin, ‘Politik’, in: O. Brunner / W. Conze / R. Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* IV, Stuttgart 1978, 789–874; W. Steimmetz (ed.), *‘Politik’. Situationen eines Wortgebrauches im Europa der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt, New York 2007. My Finnish colleagues Kari Palonen and Pasi Ihalainen, as well as Rosario Lopéz from Malaga, and I are now starting to organize a comparative European conceptual history.

8. J. Borchert, *Die Professionalisierung der Politik. Zur Notwendigkeit eines Ärgernisses*, Frankfurt, New York 2003, 118.

9. Ibid.; M. Offerlé (ed.), *La profession politique*, Paris 2017 (1999).

to Weber's study of politics as a profession. For instance, the translation of '*Beruf*' as 'Vocation' does not really render the double meaning of the German word, which was already mostly used at the time for 'profession'.<sup>10</sup> Borchert argues that historians and other researchers could still use Weber's classical text as a starting point for their discussion on the uniquely modern profession of the politician. Yet, in this issue, we will not focus on modernization, but on different historical forms of professionalization, public perceptions of professional politicians, the interaction with common citizens, and the question of when it would be profitable *not* to be, or to pose as, a professional politician.

It is obvious that Weber wrote his lecture at a time when the rather new bureaucracy of political parties was an important aspect of professionalization. Had he presented his lecture a hundred years later, he would probably have said much about text writers, media advisors, and politicians as media experts (see in this issue Luuk van Middelaar's article on the importance of the spoken word in current politics). Had he written his text a century earlier, he could have looked back at an earlier failed attempt at 'professionalization' by court 'politicians'.<sup>11</sup> It could be argued that this was not a professionalization in the strict sense of the word, but the experts agree anyway that if politics has ever been a 'profession', it was definitely a peculiar one that deviated from the others. What is important here is that there might be continuities in the way that political professionals operate and the qualities that they need, but that, each time, the profession has to adapt to what society demands. This need to adapt to the times means that speaking about professionals in the nineteenth century might be different from speaking about those of today—and more fundamentally, different from other professions that, of course, change over time as well.

Partly inspired by the classic works by Moseř Ostorgorski and Robert Michels, Weber was fascinated by party bureaucrats who seemed to be part of a linear story of modernization and professionalization. But we now know that the dominance of the party bureaucrats during the period of 'party democracy' was linked to a historical phase that has not completely passed, but which is certainly not as dominant as it used to be. Moreover, modernization and professionalization are not necessarily a zero-sum game: The emergence of the modern politician who has to win elections does not necessarily mean the disappearance of the *Honoratioren* from politics. In fact, *Honoratioren* could be modern politicians at the same time.<sup>12</sup> Neither were ordinary citizens simply passive recipients of the work of scheming politicians who adapted to the realities of modern mass societies. As Marnix Beyen shows in this issue, they wrote letters to their representatives and influenced them; in a word, they put forward their own conceptions of politics. In a certain sense, these conceptions seem to belong to 'older' clientelist or deferential forms of politics, but they were simultaneously the way in which constituents made sense of the world and of their place in it.<sup>13</sup>

They could also go a step further, and try to become part of the world of politicians, just as the applicants to a post as publication manager in the Dutch social-democratic party did and whose

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10. J. Borchert, 'From Politik als Beruf to Politics as a Vocation: Translation, Transformation, and the Reception of Max Weber's Lecture', in: *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 3 (2007), 42–70. Also see K. Palonen, *Eine Lobrede für Politiker. Ein Kommentar zur Max Webers 'Politik als Beruf'*, Opladen 2002.
  11. W. E. J. Weber, 'Die Erfindung des Politikers. Bemerkungen zu einem gescheiterten Professionalisierungskonzept der deutschen Politikwissenschaft des ausgehenden 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts', in: L. Schorn-Schütte (ed.), *Aspekte der politischen Kommunikation im Europa des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, München 2004, 347–370.
  12. Most clearly perhaps in É. Phélippeau, 'La fin des notables revisitée', in: Offerlé (ed.), *Profession politique*, but also in his É. Phélippeau, *L'invention de l'homme politique moderne. Mackau, l'Orne et la République*, Paris 2002, even though the title of the book seems to point in the direction of pure modernization.
  13. Also in M. Beyen, 'Clientelism and Politicization. Direct Interactions between Deputies and "Ordinary Citizens" in France, ca. 1880-ca. 1940', in: *TEMP. Tidsskrift for Historie* 8 (2014), 17–32.

applications are examined in this issue by Dennis Bos and Anne Petterson. Looking at it from below, being a party bureaucrat appeared quite different: Instead of Michels's petty oligarchic tyrant who stifled democracy, being the party bureaucrat presented an opportunity to realize one's ideas and dreams about life and politics. For the applicants, living off politics would very literally be the only way to be able to live for politics, and for some of them, that was exactly the reason for their applications.

The money that politicians earn is still a burning issue today, but it is hardly controversial anymore that they should at least to some extent be able to live off their work in politics. That was different in Weber's time. It was only in 1911 that some financial compensation was introduced in the British House of Commons. In Germany, the debate on the issue had been going on for decades—Bismarck had been obstructing remunerations for a long time—and the need for compensation only reached consensus in 1906. In the same year, the remuneration of French parliamentarians was considerably augmented (from 9000 to 15,000 francs). In 1917, very shortly before Weber's lecture, the Netherlands parliament witnessed a row between a right-wing liberal entrepreneur and the socialist leader about the issue. Historians have analysed these cases.<sup>14</sup> However, they have also paid scant attention to what was for Weber perhaps the most striking innovation: that not only government institutions such as parliaments, but also political parties, were paying functionaries and representatives to live off politics. Weber saw the cynical American party bosses as a real threat for Europe too, but socialist leader August Bebel defiantly said that he did not care much about parliamentary remuneration because the socialist party members would pay their representatives anyway.<sup>15</sup>

Politicians have often been accused of not only squandering public money but also profiteering personally. They are on stage, in the spotlight, and hold public offices. The image of the politician as careerist, sometimes struggling with moral demands, but also verging on cynical opportunism, has always been fed by fiction, in Britain from Benjamin Disraeli and Anthony Trollope to Jeffrey Archer in the late twentieth century, and in France from Stendhal and Honoré de Balzac to Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, and Georges Simenon.<sup>16</sup> In particular, popular fiction such as Archer, and, more recently, television series such as *House of Cards* (but *Borgen* less so), have contributed to spreading the image of politicians as manipulators but have not often portrayed them as just plain corruptible.

However, politicians have been vulnerable to accusations of corruption, which have also been an additional way of holding them accountable in a representative system, as Toon Kerkhoff is showing in this issue. In Britain, due to the fame of the House of Commons in the nineteenth century, the reputation of the professional politician perhaps used to be better than on the Continent. And at the end of the nineteenth century, Herbert Asquith still called 'professional politicians in the better sense of the word' men 'who make politics the serious business of life as distinguished from the amateur or dilettante'.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, social democrats in particular not only in Britain but

14. A recent overview by a political scientist is N. Dickinson, 'Tocquevillian Restraint or Millian Profiteering?: Parliamentary Remuneration in Long Term Comparative Perspective', <http://wroxtonworkshop.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2019-Dickinson.pdf> (accessed 31 January 2020). See also Palonen, *Rhetorik des Unbeliebten*, chapter 3; C. Jansen, 'Selbstbewusstes oder gefügiges Parlament? Abgeordnetendiäten und Berufspolitiker in den deutschen Staaten des 19. Jahrhunderts', in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 25 (1999), 33–65; A. Garrigou, 'Vivre de la politique. Les 'quinze mille', le mandat et le métier', in: *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique* 20 (1992), 7–34; E. Tanja, *Goede politiek. De parlementaire cultuur van de Tweede Kamer, 1866-1940*, Amsterdam 2011, 178–182 ('Van roeping naar beroep').

15. Jansen, 'Parliament', 50 footnote 44; 57.

16. See J. Wolfreys, 'The Nineteenth-Century Political Novel', in: W. Baker / K. Womack (eds.), *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Westport, London 2002, 49–67; C. Harvie, *The Centre of Things. Political Fiction in Britain from Disraeli to the Present*, London 1991; M. Mopin, *Littérature et politique. Deux siècles de vie politique à travers les œuvres littéraires*, Paris 1996.

17. Quoted by Palonen, *Rhetorik*, 63 (1889).

also in other countries defended that view; however, the equivalent of the very word of 'politician' became more commonly a pejorative term in many countries, imported from the United States with its alleged 'bosses' with deep pockets.<sup>18</sup> Weber's lecture should also be read against the background of the classic works by James Bryce and Moseř Ostrogorski about (the pernicious) American politics. The expression 'living off politics' was already used by Bryce.

Weber was not the first either to speak about politics as 'Beruf' or 'profession', but it was really new to analyse this occupation thoroughly. Taking politics seriously as a job also went against the image of politicians as first and foremost 'passionate' or '*leidenschaftlich*', which was the way historians distinguished what politicians were doing from their own 'impartial' and 'rational' academic work, as Herman Paul shows. Weber underlined this charismatic side as well, but as a counter-argument, he emphasized the professional part of the politician. However, political outsiders and newcomers have not often boasted their professionalism, because this would imply that they had become part of an established world, which was exactly what they did not want to do. For some categories such as women, it was at first especially risky to be a politician. As Margit van der Steen argues in her contribution, women had to present their work as a form of social motherhood, even if they in fact practised professional politics. That it was so difficult for women to enter politics, shows, of course, how masculine the definition of the trade was. Masculinity could, on one hand, take the guise of professionalism: The politician as apparatchik was supposed to be a man. On the other hand, politicians could fulfil many 'masculine' roles or images: father of the fatherland, tough tireless protector of the people, passionate prophet, ruthless and rough fighter for his own people, and many others. The importance of gender is obvious.

Partly on the basis of his own experience as text writer for Herman van Rompuy in the European Union, Luuk van Middelaar analyses the importance of the spoken word for politicians and addresses questions regarding contemporary politics. In doing so, he bridges the gap between the present and Weber's time, the latter of which forms the focus of the other contributions in this issue. However, these contributions also address perennial questions concerning the politician's trade. Some of them have to do with the *practice* of being a politician. This changes over time, and politicians must be able to adapt to what (a part of) society asks from them. There is no school or examination for politicians, which makes it immediately clear that their work is not an ordinary profession. Perhaps it is closer to a 'craft', as for instance the Dutch Labour politician whom I quoted at the outset has called it. A craft is something that you have to learn on the job; this means 'learning by doing',<sup>19</sup> just as politicians do. Politicians need practical skills and should be able to adapt to practical circumstances. Weber says that politicians need '*Leidenschaft*' as well as '*Augenmaß*'. It has proved to be notoriously difficult to translate that last word, but according to different translations, it has to do with (approximate) judgement, a sense of proportion and perspective, and a certain (objective) distance. '*Augenmaß*' has, among other things, been translated into Dutch as '*timmermansoog*', the proverbial 'eye of the carpenter', who has learned in practice to gauge the objects she or he has to work with and who has developed through practice the skills that are needed to do the job. Politicians are thus carpenters whose trade changes all the time.

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18. See, for instance, D. Damamme, 'Professionel de la politique, un m tier peu avouable', in: Offerl  (ed.), *Profession politique*, and T. Mergel, 'Gegenbild, Vorbild und Schreckbild: die amerikanischen Parteien in der Wahrnehmung der deutschen politischen  ffentlichkeit 1890–1920', in: D. Dowe / J. Kocka / H.A. Winkler (eds.), *Parteien im Wandel vom Kaiserreich zur Weimarer Republik*, M nchen 1999, 363–395.

19. H. Scheer, *Die Politiker*, M nchen 2003, quoted by Palonen, *Rhetorik*, 125.