

## Patrimonialism

J.I. (HANS) BAKKER

University of Guelph, Canada

In essence, the term “patrimonialism” (from Latin *patrimonium*) in Max Weber’s work prior to the Great War of 1914–1918 summarizes a key aspect of traditional “domination.” The patriarchal patrimonial ruler is the only person who has legitimate authority. His legitimacy depends on notions of divinity and what came to be called “divine rulership”. A patrimonial ruler is an emperor. He may also be designated a king in English translations. On rare occasions a woman may take on the role, but she is still a patriarch. Think of the Empress of China or Catherine the Great of Russia. There is much confusion in the social science literature, in part due to the fact that Weber did not carefully review his draft material before his untimely death. His wife, Marianne Weber, and Johannes Winckelman made assumptions that have been challenged by the editors of the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*. However, the German-language version of *Economy and Society (Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft)* has not yet been translated into English, so most academics not fluent in German still use the 1968 English translation edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Meanwhile, there is a gap in understanding. While standard aspects of Weber’s oeuvre (e.g., on the Protestant ethic, on modern bureaucracy, etc.) can be found in every introductory textbook, the one major topic frequently ignored is Weber’s ideal type model (ITM) of patriarchal “patrimonialism” as the essence of traditional, premodern rulership. Weber’s theory of political structure (*Herrschaft*), including domination, legitimate authority, and coercive use of raw power, is often applied to modern societies, particularly modern goal-rational bureaucracies. However, his views on traditional domination are frequently ignored. Use of Weberian models of traditional authority can be more heuristic than old-fashioned use of the concept of “feudalism.” For example, Henry Kissinger’s book *On China*

(2011) could have utilized Weber’s ideas more thoroughly since he does reference authors who do use Weber’s ideas about ancient China being patrimonial. Kissinger works with a vague use of the concept of “feudalism” even though the literature on patrimonialism in ancient and modern China is extensive. For example, Zhao (2015) has carefully examined the generalizations made by Weber and concluded that while he got some historical facts wrong, he nevertheless comprehended the thrust of ancient Chinese history quite well. By not focusing on the importance of traditional patrimonial rulership, Kissinger ignores a central aspect of the nation-state we call the People’s Republic of China (PRC), with its oligarchy of nine rulers, the Politburo. In China the ideological justification for rule is not actually based on post-Hegelian, left-Marxist modernism. As Kissinger correctly indicates, there are many vestiges of premodern, nonwestern thinking. Yet when foreign officials negotiate, they forget some of the fundamental differences. Kissinger pays attention to them, but does not develop a general theoretical understanding of *why* they exist. Instead, he chooses to essentialize “the Chinese” as if they are unified by more than a historical legacy and a very powerful, quasi-traditional bureaucracy.

Weber’s discussion of traditional authority was summarized by Reinhard Bendix (1962). Bendix’s summary misleads slightly by contrasting “patrimonialism” with “feudalism” as two separate, reified entities. A wordier but more accurate synopsis involves the ITM of patrimonial prebendalism as contrasted with the ITM of patrimonial feudalism, or patrimonial prebendal and feudal (Pp versus Pf, or Ppf). Weber’s notion of the feudal era in western Europe is that it is to a large extent similar to the patrimonial general form, but differs in terms of the existence of independent landed estates, the feudal domains. A group of dukes has legitimate authority in a feudal system. Feudal lords are quite different from prebendal officials. Traditional prebendal bureaucrats have no legitimacy apart from the legitimacy of the ruler. They can never rule in their own right without themselves killing the

*The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Edited by George Ritzer and Chris Rojek.

© 2022 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2022 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

DOI: 10.1002/9781405165518.wbeos1845

legitimate ruler and then becoming the sole patrimonial authority themselves. The risk of that happening led to ways of trying to ensure the traditional officials had no legal, legitimate offspring, especially male heirs. Celibacy and eunuchism were used to try to guarantee no official would usurp patrimonial rule. A eunuch cannot have any children and a celibate clergyman can only have “bastard” children. The “evolution” of feudalism in western Europe depended on a unique set of circumstances related to the power divide between the Emperor of the Holy Roman Germanic-Italic Empire and the Pope of the (Holy) Roman Catholic Church. Weber analyzes the occidental city as a product of the existence of patrimonial feudal systems of domination. The analysis in *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1968) starts with “Patriarchy,” which he interprets in a historically specific sense as similar to what some anthropologists might call “big man systems” or “chiefdoms.” Patriarchy in Weber’s analysis is a historically based ideal type and not a universal, transhistorical “pure type” of traditional domination. Nevertheless, most sociologists pay little attention to Weber on patriarchy. It is also common to ignore Weber on patrimonialism. Bologh (1990) calls attention to Weber as a “masculine” thinker, but she treats his ideas on patrimonialism as incidental to her critique of Weber as a “patriarchal” thinker, comparing him to Freud in that respect. Bologh’s critique is somewhat one-sidedly feminist; hence, it sometimes deflects attention away from the valuable core of Weber’s work on patriarchy and patrimonialism. The limited patriarchal household is not an adequate basis for further development. It does not allow for the construction of a theory of hegemony. Yet such a theory in support of hegemonic power is necessary for the development of an ideology of legitimate authority. For example, such a theoretical formulation is necessary in a large, bureaucratically run, traditional empire. In modern nation-states it is sometimes the case that a modern bureaucracy can be found in the nation-state itself (e.g., “England”) but a traditional bureaucracy is the primary ideal typical characteristic of the empire (e.g., “India”).

In 2011 Julia Adams and Mounira Charrad edited a set of papers titled *Patrimonial Power in the Modern World*, and those papers are well worth examining. Some of the contributions do

not tackle Weber’s views so much as provide creative reinterpretations of Weber’s ITMs. At times the flexible use of terminology gets confusing, particularly in the paper by Randall Collins (2011) when he contrasts “patrimonialism” to “bureaucracy” in order to discuss a contemporary “[neo-]patrimonial” aspect of criminal gangs and the Mafia. (In Collins’s chapter the term “bureaucracy” should be read as “modern bureaucracy.”) Traditional legitimate authority, based on the world religions, stressed post-(Weberian) patriarchal, post-tribal “divine” forces and utilized traditional bureaucracies involving various kinds of traditional, prebendal officials (Bakker, 2010). The paper by Wang and Adams (2011) concerns Manchu-dominated Qing China (1644–1911) and is more in keeping with the thrust of Weber’s original use of the ideal types involved in the study of premodern authority, before the nation-state principle had been widely accepted. The use of bondsmen by the Qing Manchus during the later phases of the dynasty was an important additional patrimonial layer that was added to the patrimonial prebendal traditional bureaucracy of earlier dynasties. The Adams and Charrad (2011) collection of papers points in the right direction: a serious, scholarly attempt to re-examine Weber’s important work on patrimonialism. But it also rather leaves aside important arguments. Those arguments concern the transitions that took place over hundreds of years (in some cases indigenously) from patrimonial prebendalism to patrimonial feudalism, and then from patrimonial feudalism to modern capitalism and modern bureaucracy.

The key point about patrimonial prebendalism and patrimonial feudalism is that the two principles tend *to oscillate* in the history of any civilization. In Middle Eastern, Sinitic (East Asian), and Indic (South Asian and Southeast Asian) civilizations there has been an oscillation of the centralizing and the decentralizing tendencies. But centripetal and centrifugal trends have also characterized western European civilization, especially during the approximately one thousand years of the Holy Roman Empire (800–1800). The emergence of full-blown patrimonial feudalism is not so much due to a feudal mode of production as it is a significant change in the means of coercion and the elite structure of societies. In a fully traditional prebendal system there is no right

to inheritance of office and there cannot be any legitimate offspring. The main reason for celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church has to do with inheritance, not sexual intercourse per se. No priest could have legitimate offspring; but, many priests – and even bishops and cardinals – did have illegitimate children whom they recognized. In some instances such illegitimate offspring did rise to high power.

The eunuch system in imperial Chinese dynasties had the same sociological function. In his comparative historical sociological study of the archipelago of Indonesia (Bakker 2010, 2018), Bakker used Weber's ITM of patrimonial prebendalism in my analysis of the precolonial "Hinduized states" like *Srivijaya* (with the *Sailendras* in Java), *Majapahit* throughout the archipelago (Munoz, 2006), and patrimonial "princedom" in Bali (Geertz, 1980: 124–135). One weakness of Geertz's (1980) work on Bali is that he does not seriously confront Weber's arguments concerning traditional authority and real power (Schulte Nordholt, 1981: 476). Geertz's symbolic and interpretive anthropology is often linked to Weber's *verstehende Soziologie*, but Geertz relies too heavily on an abstracted notion of free-floating "symbols." He tries to make too much of the system of pomp ("theater state") and not enough of "legitimate authority" (which includes Balinese theater, music, and dance), while also diminishing the continued relevance of caste and *Macht* (i.e., coercive use of raw physical power for domination in the narrow sense). Geertz does not directly confront the relevance of Weber's ITM of patrimonialism for Java and Bali. Weber's ITMs are heuristic devices and do not fully describe all of the realities of any specific empire or nation-state. But ignoring Weber's ITMs of traditional authority results in the kinds of mistakes that even a Geertz can make.

The study of patrimonialism and vestiges of patrimonialism (sometimes called "neopatrimonialism") is worthwhile. It is a pragmatically useful, heuristic theory (Bakker, 2011). The sociology of the economic sphere, the political sphere, and the civil sphere can benefit from a deeper appreciation of the traditional patrimonial background in many settings around the world. Political sociology, economic sociology, and civic sphere sociology have suffered from a curious failure to incorporate Weber's broader insights

about traditional modes of coercion. Cultural sociology and the new functionalism would benefit from a full discussion of the issues involved since "culture" as a sociological or anthropological concept has to be disambiguated. The ITM of patrimonial prebendalism is relevant for Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and many other Middle Eastern countries. A fuller understanding of modern and postmodern aspects of globalized capitalism will benefit from the use of Weber's primary ideal types of premodern, traditional authority: patrimonial prebendalism and patrimonial feudalism. The comparative study of world religions and fundamentalist movements would benefit from a deeper appreciation of the fundamentally patriarchal-patrimonial nature of those religions. Notions of "God" are often premised on notions of patrimonial rulers receiving their authority directly from God (or some other Divine Authority that only He can fully comprehend). Those religious belief systems and ideologies have provided sources of almost unquestioned legitimate authority; yet, the authority structure is fundamentally patriarchal in the household and patrimonial in the state.

For example, the amazing success of the democratization process in Indonesia needs to be studied more carefully in order to clarify the ways in which the Republic of Indonesia, a "secular state," has managed to maintain balance among the various religious and secular factions and promote a high level of democratization and economic growth. Similar studies could be done in East and Southeast Asia. Patrimonialist traditional rulership has been important worldwide. Weber was not Eurocentric in his thinking about it, unlike Karl Marx who relied on the idea of a characteristically "oriental" system of "despotism" and did not equate that to the history of Europe or Great Britain. We can also take the kernel of the idea of patriarchal patrimonialism to gain insights like those found in Collins (2011), but in our efforts at being current and up to date we should not ignore the sweep of comparative historical sociology (CHS) writ large. In our efforts to analyze contemporary social, political, and economic relations, we should remain rooted in a CHS framework and in particular we should recognize the epistemological value of Weber's heuristic use of ideal type models of legitimate authority. One key distinction is the one Weber

made between prebendalism and feudalism. The internal oscillation of prebendal and feudal aspects of patrimonialism has been neglected; yet, it is a powerful, empirically grounded theoretical insight with great practical applicability in the world today. One quirk is that in very long historical periods the traditional prebendal bureaucracy and the more modern capitalist bureaucracy can stand side by side, as in the “dual economy” system of indirect rule in the Netherlands East Indies. Traditional rulers were still regarded as the key rulers by peasants, but the “power behind the throne” was a more modern bureaucracy organized by the governor-general but ultimately answerable to the king of the Netherlands (after 1815). It is noteworthy that there can be no “peers” in a strictly patrimonial prebendal system and that the “peers” in early patrimonial feudal systems are the most powerful dukes of the realm (not lower-level aristocrats like earls). Today, with notions of citizenship in modern capitalist nation-states like the United States (which has no House of Lords, only an elected Senate of citizens), the idea of a jury trial by one’s peers has extended to every legitimate citizen being regarded in principle as a “peer.”

SEE ALSO: Oligarchy and Organization; Patriarchy; Political Economy; Political Economy of Science; Political Sociology; Weber, Max (1864–1920)

## References

- Adams, J. and Charrad, M.M. (eds) (2011) *Patrimonial Power in the Modern World*. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, special issue 636 (1), 6–230.
- Bakker, J.I. (Hans) (2010) Deference versus democracy in traditional and modern bureaucracy: refinements of Weber’s ideal type model, in *Society, History, and the Global Human Condition* (ed. B. Zaheer and J.M. Bryant), Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, pp. 105–128.
- Bakker, J.I. (Hans) (2011) Pragmatic sociology: healing the discipline? *Sociological Focus*, 44 (3), 167–183 [Presidential Address, NCSA].
- Bakker, J. I. (Hans) (2018) Piketty and patrimonialism: a Frankfurt School critique of Piketty’s use of Marx, Weber, political economy, and comparative historical sociology in *Twenty-first century inequality & capitalism* (ed. L. Langman and J.M. Bryant), Brill, Leiden, pp. 109–133.
- Bendix, R. (1962 [1960]) Traditional domination, in R. Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, Doubleday/Anchor, Garden City, NY, pp. 329–384.
- Bologh, R.W. (1990) *Love or Greatness: Max Weber and Masculine Thinking – A Feminist Inquiry*, Unwin Hyman, London.
- Collins, R. (2011) Patrimonial alliances and failures of state penetration: a historical dynamic of crime, corruption, gangs and mafias. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, special issue 636 (1), 16–31.
- Geertz, C. (1980) *Negara: The Theatre State in 19th Century Bali*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Kissinger, H. (2011) *On China*, Penguin, New York.
- Munoz, P.M. (2006) *Early Kingdoms of the Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula*, Editions Didier Millets, Singapore.
- Schulte Nordholt, H. (1981) Negara: a theatre state? *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*, 137 (4), 470–476.
- Wang Liping and Adams, J. (2011) Interlocking patrimonialisms and state formation in Qing China and early modern Europe. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, special issue 636 (1), 164–181.
- Weber, M. (1968) *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, trans. and ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Zhao Dingxin (2015) *The Confucianist-Legalist State: A New Theory of Chinese History*, Oxford University Press, New York.

wbeoso009.pub2  
wbeosp010  
wbeosp034.pub2  
wbeosp035  
wbeosp042.pub2  
wbeosw006

---

**The abstract and keywords will not be included in the PDF or any printed version of your article, but are necessary for publication on Wiley's online publishing platform to increase the discoverability of your article.**

**If the abstract and keywords are not present below, please take this opportunity to add them now.**

**The abstract should be a short paragraph up to 200 words in length and keywords between 5 to 10 words.**

---

## ABSTRACT

As an ideal type model for comparative historical sociological research, "patrimonialism" provides a useful framework for comparing complex societies. Especially important is the tendency for an "oscillation" of centripetal and centrifugal forces. Max Weber's oscillation thesis makes it clear he was not Eurocentric. The patrimonial state is based on a ruler and a traditional bureaucracy (with prebendal officials). The logic of Magna Carta (1225) requires that the monarch also accept a baronial class as having legitimate authority in addition to his own, but that only applied to England. Thomas Piketty utilizes patrimony to refer to the "heritage" of a bourgeois family in capitalist societies whereas Max Weber was interested in societies that existed long before the emergence of "modern capitalism" in its incipient phases in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Those premodern societies had long-distance trade in luxury goods but only rudiments of modern capitalism. After the seventeenth century it became more and more common for the "imagined community" of the "nation-state" to dominate in capitalist societies. But those societies often had overseas imperial interests and some established European settler colonies, such as England which established parts of South Asia as British colonies. Some use the term "neo-patrimonial" to refer to contemporary societies.

## KEYWORDS

authoritarianisms; China; comparative and historical sociology; divine rulership; empires; Indonesia; legitimate authority; patriarchy; patrimonial feudalism; political economy; prebendalism; Weber, Max