

Biography and the nature of power. A new life of Bismarck

Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 592 pages

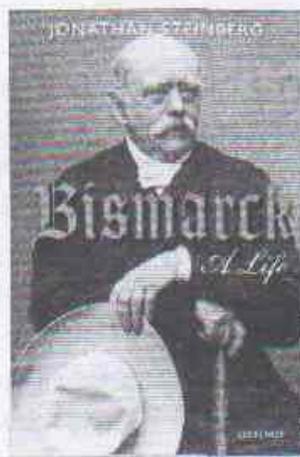
"The customary biographical form cannot capture the significance of a political figure of his stature", wrote American historian Otto Pflanze in the Introduction to his (quite conventional) biography of Bismarck¹. This consideration did not stop some fifty scholarly biographies of the Iron Chancellor and thousands of the more accessible kind to be published during the last hundred years². Ex-Cambridge historian Jonathan Steinberg's *Bismarck. A Life* is the latest addition to the inventory and it's probably the most "biographical" of all those biographies – and maybe the most unconventional.

At first, Steinberg's book seems almost to lack method – or rather to make use of a peculiar, 19th century-like method which sets it apart in the contemporary cornucopia of historical biographies: "to let those on whom the power was exercised, friend

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and foe, German and foreign, young and old, anybody who experienced the power of Bismarck's personality close up and recorded the impact, tell the story. I have changed the conventional balance between comment and evidence in favour of the latter"³. So, unlike the conventional narratives of Pflanze, A. J. P. Taylor, Erick Eyck or Lothar Gall (to list some of the best-known biographers of Bismarck), Steinberg's book looks very unconventional. In fact, it looks like a somewhat disjointed collection of extended quotations from Bismarck and his contemporaries, held together by a succinct narrative of the events in the Chancellor's life. Nevertheless, the final outcome is a vivid and memorable portrait of Bismarck and his times. This method has its shortcomings – mainly that Steinberg's choice of contemporary testimonies creates wonderful portraits of people, social classes and even institutions but proves extremely inefficient in dealing with complex events. Nevertheless, even the



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reader fails to grasp the historical situation (and there are lots of moments when the casual reader will be completely confused by the complexity of German and international politics in the 19th century) he can understand the human situation, the feelings and the reactions of those involved. Basically, Steinberg's method is a kind of biographical extremism, which the author defended by saying that "biography established itself, I think, because the social science models left out the power of human personality"⁴.

Nevertheless, this is not a conventional biography, about how Bismarck lived and thought; in the author's words, "the aim is easy to express and probably impossible to do: to explain to author and reader how Bismarck exercised his personal power."⁵ Jonathan Steinberg is interested not only in what made Bismarck tick, but, above all, in what made others tick to his tempo. In the Introduction, he asserts that "only biography can even attempt to catch the nature of that power", since it was personal in the extreme⁶. Therefore his biographical study of power builds on Max Weber's *idealtyp* of charismatic authority (the book uses "power" and "authority" interchangeably), as defined in the famous *Politik als Beruf*: "the authority of the extraordinary and personal *gift of grace* (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership[...], domination by virtue of the devotion of those who obey the purely personal 'charisma' of the 'leader'"⁷. However, Steinberg makes it clear that charismatic authority is only an *idealtyp*, incapable of fully explaining the nature of Bismarck's political domination over Prussia, over the Second Reich and over the international system. Consequently he tries to add to Weber's three types of authority a fourth one, the "sovereign self", defined as the command of those around Bismarck by the sheer power of his personality⁸. In fact, I believe this "sovereign self" and Weber's charisma are one and the same – "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities"⁹. It's irrelevant how Bismarck himself saw his power or that he might have had a unique kind of personality capable of crushing the wills of those around him, because Weber's types of authority do not allude to what the bearer of power has in mind or to how he acts to impose and maintain that power; they refer only to the general inner justifications of those who obey him¹⁰. So, it's back to charisma, one thing Steinberg is not very confident his hero ever had. In a matter of fact, "Bismarck lacked the attributes that we normally associate with the charismatic leader. He moved no crowds at mass meetings and in parliament he roused his listeners more by insults and scorn than by overwhelming oratory"¹¹.

That the Iron Chancellor possessed a very ugly side is one of the main points of the book. Steinberg shows him as a giant in public, but a pygmy in private – an impression Bismarck tried to dissipate during his lifetime (and even after) by strategic disclosures of his personal life, such as the printing of his loving letters to his fiancée and, later, wife¹². Steinberg is inclined to establish his hero's ghastly personality by a copious application of textbook psychology and psycho-analysis. This road, also taken by Pflanze¹³ and Taylor, sometimes leads to graceless results – as, for example, when Steinberg compares Bismarck's relation with his father and mother with his handling of the Prussian royal couple¹⁴. Every now and then he makes the reader regret the delicacy of Victorian biographers who spent as little time as possible in the bedrooms and bathrooms of famous figures. Take, for example, an episode which brings into attention the content of Bismarck's chamber pot¹⁵ and which, oddly enough, delighted some of the book's reviewers¹⁶.

This is probably the most unconvincing part of the book – rather because of Bismarck's brilliance than through any fault of his biographer. Steinberg tries to convey the impression that Bismarck was a very abnormal person surrounded by normal people; in fact, throughout the book the reader is left with the impression that Bismarck was a very brilliant person surrounded by half-wits and intriguers. It's quite hard to feel any regret that Bismarck broke with such friends as the bigot von Kleist-Retzow or the extremely boring Ludwig von Gerlach (with the latter, over an article where Gerlach maintained that "universal suffrage means political bankruptcy")¹⁷. Maybe this is a perverse effect of Steinberg letting the reader see the world too much through Bismarck's eyes. As Golo Mann once wrote, "Bismarck has said so many things of different meaning, and has always said them so strikingly well, [...] that there is almost nothing one could not make out of him with some truth: [...] the most brilliant, charming causeur and the most unlovable, hard, and greedy tyrant, a liar and a great winner of confidence through honest and straightforward consistency, a very healthy and strong and a very sick and pathological man, and so on"¹⁸.

But what is the use of this emphasis on Bismarck's petty side, "the greatness and misery of human individuality stretched to its limits"¹⁹? Steinberg tries to show how, despite all his nastiness, the Chancellor managed to dominate the political arena basically through his personality alone – and also how, in the end, his dark side led him to his fall from power. He talks about an ambivalent "demonic power of the sovereign self"²⁰ which might stand for Bismarck's charisma, a power "that made him an irresistible political figure and a disastrous one"²¹. Here, Weber's concept of charismatic authority - or Steinberg's version, "the sovereign self" - shows its limitations: Bismarck's charisma seems to have worked during his first years in power on one person William I (and maybe on Roon, who brought him to the attention of the king). Only after the Franco-Prussian War his successful streak made him a charismatic leader in the eyes of most Germans and even then his charisma wasn't more than a disincentive against being thrown out of power. Neither his fall was caused by the loss of charisma, as described by Weber: "if proof and success elude the leader for long [...], above all, if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear".²² So, what was the nature of Bismarck's power, if it wasn't based on his charisma?

Bismarck's authority seems to me to belong to a rather different type. He was more of a king's favorite, a chief minister who holds the monarch's trust regardless of public opinion or of his capacity²³. Some good examples would be Alvaro de Luna in 15th century Castile, Buckingham in Stuart England or, closer to Bismarck's age, the Spanish Manuel de Godoy. In fact even in his time he was compared to another brilliant favorite, Richelieu²⁴ and, four decades after his death, Hilaire Belloc wrote: "Were Plutarch to return he would find no better modern subject for a parallel of lives than those of Richelieu and Bismarck"²⁵. This means none of Weber's three types of authority is appropriate for explaining the nature of Bismarck's power, because he wasn't the legitimate ruler; that role belonged to the King (later, Emperor) and the Minister President (later, Chancellor) derived his authority from him. For all his tremendous power, he could and did fall on a whim of his sovereign. Popularity, parliamentary support, even political success had in fact no real influence on Bismarck's stay in power; the only thing that mattered was his personal relationship with the monarch and all his authority resulted from that relationship. When William I died, that mechanism of power broke down, since the new monarch had his own favorites – Philipp of Eulenburg and Friedrich von Holstein. Even Steinberg on one occasion calls Bismarck

an "experienced courtier"²⁶ and admits that he "exerted the force of that self on the King and it worked in August 1863 and continued to work until the day twenty-five years later that William I, by then German Emperor and King of Prussia, died. My explanation of how it worked may not convince the reader; that some mysterious personal power worked on the King cannot be denied"²⁷. Here, Weber once again provides us with a fitting description of the nature of the favorite's power: "Typical of patrimonialism is the determined rise from rags, from slavery and lowly service for the ruler, to the precarious all-powerful position of the favorite. In the interest of his domination, the patrimonial ruler must oppose the status autonomy of the feudal aristocracy and the economic independence of the bourgeoisie"²⁸. Although Bismarck did not exactly rise from rags, he wasn't born a high aristocrat either; otherwise, Weber's words fit him perfectly.

Of course, Steinberg's book is not simply a biography focused on Bismarck's exercise of power. It follows the intellectual genealogy of junkerism from the German translation of Edmund Burke's *Reflections* to Bismarck's "free conservatism" and finally to the last stand of the junkers, the conspiracy of 20 June 1944 against their ally of better days, Hitler - so it's also a book on the history of political ideas. It's a vivid, though occasionally confusing, account of the transformation of Prussia in the 19th century from a second-rate power, not unlike Sparta in its mores and also in its backwardness, to the most advanced - and feared - European empire. There might be better books for the reader looking for a diplomatic approach to Bismarck's life (Taylor's is the first that comes to mind) or for a better understanding of German politics (Pflanze); but Jonathan Steinberg's book will most likely remain for a long time the best written biography of Bismarck - and the one that sticks into a corner of the reader's mind for a long time.

Note

- 1 Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany: The Period of Unification, 1815-1871* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 1.
- 2 Karina Urbach, "Between Saviour and Villian: 100 Years of Bismarck Biographies", *The Historical Journal* 41 (1998): 1142.
- 3 Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9.
- 4 Jonathan Steinberg, "Is Biography Proper History?", *OUP blog*, < <http://blog.oup.com/2011/02/biography/>>.
- 5 Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 9
- 6 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 7 Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 79
- 8 Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 3
- 9 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 241
- 10 Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, 78
- 11 Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 479-480
- 12 Otto von Bismarck, *The love letters of Bismarck; being letters to his fiancée and wife, 1846-1889* (New York & London: Harper & Brothers Publisher, 1901)
- 13 Otto Pflanze, "Toward a Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Bismarck", *The American Historical Review* 77 (1962)
- 14 Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 34-36
- 15 *Ibid.*, 10
- 16 James McComish, "Through Sheer Force of Iron Will", *The Oxonian Review*. <<http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/through-sheer-force-of-iron-will/>>.
- 17 Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 243
- 18 Golo Mann, "Bismarck and Our Times", *International Affairs* 38 (1962): 9
- 19 Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 3
- 20 *Ibid.*, 343
- 21 *Ibid.*, 480
- 22 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 242
- 23 John Elliott, Laurence Brockliss, *The World of the Favourite* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999)
- 24 Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 201, 467
- 25 Hilaire Belloc, *Stories, essays, and poems* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1957), 192
- 26 Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 449
- 27 *Ibid.*, 197
- 28 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1107

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