



MAX WEBER'S "SCIENCE AS A VOCATION" THROUGH THE PRISM OF HISTORY AND TIME

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ABSTRACT

Max Weber's famous lecture "Science as a Vocation" (1918) has aroused debates not only among his contemporaries, but also in generations to come, dwelling on the nature of science and its theoretical and methodological applications. The paper reflects on issues discussed in Weber's famous lecture anchored in the immediate context of its production, but also its interpretation and implications for contemporary audiences. More particularly, the problem arises from the question, whether science should be treated as a tool for achieving technical progress or as a means for producing meaningful knowledge. Weber's key argument concerns whether science is in a position to decide what is worth knowing, as well as whether the scholar should maintain a position of value neutrality. For this end, the figures of the scientist and the politician are juxtaposed in the particular roles prescribed to them. What is the contemporary calling of scientists and whether it should remain separate from reality is a discussion continued among contemporary sociologists, dwelling on the vocation of sociology and the need to expose the hidden or obscured power interests and issues regarding social inequality, obstructing democratization processes, human rights, environmental problems or the different forms of violence. Finally, issues regarding public sociology and sociology as a social movement are discussed in times of a deepening social, economic and moral crisis, as current trends in the international scholarship reflected in the work of the International Sociological Association (ISA).

Key words: science, sociology, vocation, value neutrality, public sociology, sociology as a social movement.

When shortly before his death Max Weber delivered his lecture "Science as a Vocation" (1) to an audience of students in Munich, he was hardly aware of the fact that it would arouse a debate not only in his immediate audience but also for generations of scholars who would ponder on the true nature of science and its theoretical and methodological applications. The two real and implied audiences of the lecture can be assumed as a starting point for the discussion of Weber's particular perception of the field of academic work, the nature of scientific

institutions and the figure of the scholar in the context of Weimar Germany and academia in general. Weber illustrates the distress and anxieties, but also the fervour and pathos of the academician devoted to his work, which being taken as the two opposite extremes, may quite often produce a dramatic split of values and beliefs in those who have taken science as a vocation.

In this paper I would like to discuss to what extent Weber's lecture on the vocation of science is anchored in issues related to his immediate context and experience, and to what extent his understanding of science and the vocation of the true scientist can be adequately interpreted by a more contemporary audience. This endeavour presupposes an elucidation of Weber's comprehension of the nature of science in the

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temporal divide between present and past, the geographical distinction and the process of Americanization in German and European academia in terms of bureaucratization, rationalization and intellectualization, and the figure of the scholar/teacher as contrasted to that of the politician. An underlying assumption that has to be considered is that the image of the scholar, he sets about to construct, is directed to a special audience. In contrast, Weber's own personality provides an example of the duality and the complementary nature of both vocations. It is also important to discuss Weber's concern about objectivity and value-neutrality. At the same time the "disenchantment" of the world in which we live, according to Weber, as he sets forth to explain, can be confronted only by developing a sense of clarity and responsibility in science.

In the late years of his career Weber was particularly concerned with some pedagogical implications related to academic teaching. It is considered that "Science as a Vocation" was designed as a reply and defense against the glorification by the young generation of students of such concepts as "personality" and "experience" in the career of the scientist. For this reason, it can be deemed necessary to analyse Weber's understanding of science and subsequently that of scientific vocation. Science, as it is discussed in the pamphlet, is presented along the axis *past vs. present*. Weber opposes the previous treatment of science as a tool for achieving technical progress. For him, it is more important to comprehend whether the type of knowledge that is produced by scientific endeavours is meaningful and worth knowing. In the past, it was falsely assumed that science could be interpreted as "the way to the true being", "the true way to art", "the way to true nature", "the way to the true God", "the way to true happiness" (2:17). For Weber, science can no longer serve as an answer to the great Tolstoyan question concerning the meaning and direction of life. Science can be meaningful, he digresses, only for those who know what the right question to ask is. From this point, as Kohler contends (cited in 2:37), arises the more important question, whether it is within the power of science and whether science is in a position to decide and prescribe what is worth knowing. The answer, which Weber provides is namely that science, should not do this. Such an

answer is also one of the points on which Weber met the criticism of some of his contemporaries who defended the traditional values of the scholar and the advantages of German culture (2: xiii). Kohler (cited in 2:37) criticizes Weber on three points in his evaluation of science. He implies that it is necessary to question the need of the existence of science as such. Second, he considers that it is important to decide whether it is worthwhile for us to further its existence, and finally, the form and degree to which science deserves to be known by us. Similar queries resemble contemporary debates on postmodernism and the relativisation of knowledge and truth.

The controversy over the contemporary capacity of science is subsequently developed by Weber in his distinction between the vocation of the scientist and that of the politician. The teacher, as seen by Weber, lives in a world of pure science and should not interfere in practical political matters. He should refrain from evaluation and practical instruction in the classroom. His teaching of science should be value-free under the assumption that he is aware of the competing extant hierarchies of values. The teacher for Weber is a highly moral personality raised to the heroic status of ultimate denial and devotion to work. He gives the best of himself to the young generation being led by love and trust. The purpose of a true academician is to develop skills, build the character of his students, and infuse a sense of responsibility. This is why Weber vehemently reacted to the new Americanization of German academia, in which the ability of a lecturer to attract large audiences is seen as the single valid measure for his intellectual and scientific capacity. For him the teacher is the diametrical opposite of the figure of the leader or the politician. The politician can be characterized as a prophet and a demagogue and is in his understanding, one, who can openly be criticized. The teacher in the classroom has the ultimate mastery over his students but should not impose his values and beliefs on them. The invasion of American bureaucratization and specialization has turned German academic life into a "wild gamble" (2:8). According to Lassman and Velody (2:179), the position of the academic worker, as described by Weber in Germany, is one in which he is separated from the means of production and has become dependent on his professor or head

of the research institute similarly to the proletarian in any economic enterprise. It is worth noting that similar concerns about academic independence, bureaucratization, privatization, value of university ranking and dependence on large businesses of the academia worldwide, are expressed by the International Sociological Association (ISA)¹.

Going back to the distinction between the scholar as a person of knowledge and theory and the politician as a person of action, it is necessary to point out that Weber himself could serve as an illustration of both of the above mentioned social roles. For him it was important, as Rickert writes (cited in 2:85), to follow this distinction of roles when acting as a scholar and a public speaker, or when writing for newspapers. Nevertheless, Rickert considers that Weber was not a split personality in this sense (2:85). Moreover, in his dramatic pursuit of unity in both social roles, he is seen as an embodiment of the very ancient and very modern quest to resolve the problem between “*vita activa*” and “*vita contemplativa*” (2:86).

The special vocation for scientific work as understood by Weber can be seen as a development of the idea of calling for the Puritan in *The Protestant Ethic* (3). For Wolin (cited in 2:182), this Puritan actor was the prototype of such ideal Weberian types as *the man of politics* and the *man of science [sic]*. Wolin calls *the man of science* a “renunciatory hero” (2:183), since he cannot follow the Renaissance ideal of a versatile personality, because of the strict demands for specialization and almost pious devotion to his scientific vocation. The impossibility to define clear and objective values is a source of anxiety for the scholar, concerning the value of science and his scholarship. Wolin compares this anxiety to the anxiety of the Calvinist who is no less certain for his election (2:183). For him, Weber’s idea of the commitment to science is a reaction against the uncertainty, arbitrariness and relativisation of scientific practice. In this sense, it has often been pointed out, that Weber stands in between modernity and postmodernity, voicing the existential tensions and anxieties of *the man of science*, the uncertainty of values and the inability to sustain further any grand narratives. What is the contemporary calling of scientists and whether it should remain separate from

reality is a discussion continued within the paradigm of contemporary sociology. Nowadays, the vocation of the sociologist is mostly related to the need to expose the hidden or obscured power interests and issues regarding social inequality, democratization processes, human rights, environmental problems or different forms of violence. The International Sociological Association (ISA) finds the continuation of the tradition of the classics, such as Weber, as vital for delineating current trends in developing global sociology. “Sociology as a Vocation” is also the name of a new discussion topic on the pages of the ISA Newsletter *Global Dialogue*, in which scholars from different sociological traditions share their knowledge and experience. For Professor André Béteille, one of the leading sociologist in India working within the Weberian tradition on caste, social class, power and inequality, “[t]he adoption of sociology as a vocation requires one to acquire and maintain a sense of sociology as a distinct intellectual discipline” (4:4). Sociology has to distinguish itself from common sense, although it may be grounded in it, but as a discipline it has its own body of concepts, special methodology and theoretical apparatus (4:4). It is an empirical, systematic and comparative science (4:4). Its empiricism requires to “distinguish between value judgments and judgments of reality, or between “ought” questions and “is” questions” (4:4). Even when studying norms and values, they are analysed in a descriptive and not prescriptive manner (4:4). Similarly, sociology studies social processes and interconnections among them systematically, without making any presumptions, if they are harmonious or discordant in nature (4: 5). The comparative tradition in sociology also studies different societies and cultures, own or other, applying the same methods of observation and enquiry, which constitute its methodological apparatus (4: 5). Advocating the unity of sociology and anthropology, Professor André Béteille accounts for prior hierarchies and divisions in social sciences between more “advanced” and less “advanced” societies as subjects of inquiry. In such divisions, India remained generally a subject of enquiry from the perspective of the assumed “advanced” European sociological thought (4: 5). At the same time, he is skeptical about certain ideas prescribing how Indian sociology needs to free itself completely from the existing Western framework to develop as a

separate discipline (4:5). Therefore, in his long teaching career he has learned to combine elements of the western tradition, the grate work of the classics in sociology in a flexible manner, directing the attention to specific problems and social structures existing in Indian society (4:5). Similarly, he considers the sociological approach or “sociological reasoning” as important to bring new insights in the study of politics or religion, for example (4:5). This “sociological reasoning” he applies to academic, but also non-academic audiences in writing, as his view is that “the sociologist should write for his profession, but not for his profession alone“(4:5). To complete the portrait of the sociologist as a professional, and his academic and public vocation, Professor Bêteille insists on the pragmatic attitude and not the moralistic in studying social problems, such as the different forms of inequality (4:5). The academic and public life of this Indian scholar is a good example of the public sociologist, which is the contemporary vision of sociology as a vocation.

A good example of engaged sociology is Professor Jacklyn Cock, a pioneer South African researcher of violence and inequality in various forms, spanning from feminist analysis of inequalities in domestic work, gender and war to environmental injustice. Speaking of the need to uncover the hidden social structures frequently masked or obscured by conventional beliefs or various power interests and official explanations, she insists that we need to study violence in a new way (5: 6). This is not the immediate and explosive nature of violence, but the “insidious, undramatic and relatively invisible” violence, which she calls “slow violence” (5:6). As examples of such “slow violence”, which can be extremely destructive, but are often not viewed as violence at all, she gives environmental pollution and malnutrition (5:6). Food shortage, malnutrition, environmental pollution as forms of “slow violence” have strong social class implications, since the poor are most vulnerable to them (5:7). Referring to C.R. Mills and his idea of the “sociological imagination”, Professor Jacklin Cock highlights that sociology needs to engage with the ordinary people and the way their individual lives and struggles are shaped by broader processes, regarding their access to food and water supply (5:7). This is an engaged form of sociology, which is expressed in two ways, as explained by Professor Michael Burawoy,

current ISA President (5:7). The first is “the extended case method”, which means getting in closer contact for long periods of time with ordinary people, being “respectful, sensitive and reflexive” of their experience (5:7). In such a way, it is considered that “social processes from below” should be viewed, exposed and discussed (5:7). The second is “public sociology”, which has a moral obligation “to make the invisible visible” through collective efforts of sociologists worldwide (5:7). It is considered that “in this highly individualized neoliberal world, sociologists have to stand in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed” (5:7). This is the role envisioned for sociology – to become committed sociology, strengthening social movements and mobilizing collective action around such causes for social justice, as “food sovereignty” and “environmental justice” against corporate power (5:7).

In other words, the vocation of sociology can be viewed from a contemporary perspective not only as involved in studying collective mobilization and social movements, but becoming a social movement itself (6). The Second ISA Forum held in Buenos Aires in 2012 dealt extensively with such problems as social justice, democratization and public sociology. A strong commitment to more engaged sociology and exploring its new paradigms was demonstrated in the words of ISA Vice-President, Professor Margaret Abraham:

“As sociologists, it is critical for us to consider the multiple ways that our sociological research, pedagogy, policy and practice can substantively address the complex issues and formidable dilemmas of our time” (7:16).

The task of the Forum, was therefore perceived as playing a vital role in the “proactive engagement” of sociologist in the “international dissemination, exchange and global dialogue”, contributing to social change and transformation (7:16).

Discussing the vocation of “global sociology” as “public sociology” and “sociology as a social movement” in times of a deepening social, economic and moral crisis - current trends in the international scholarship reflected in the work of the International Sociological Association - is a clear sign of the need to develop more socially committed scholarship that addresses the

numerous forms of inequalities, power abuse and the need for social justice.

Returning to Weber's fervent pamphlet on the meaning of the vocation of a true scholar, we can perceive it not simply as a reaction to the false perceptions and delusive cults of the young generation of students of his time, but also an illustration of the dissatisfaction and distress faced by young scholars confronting the particular conditions of modernity. Turning their gaze to the classics, such as Weber, and reinterpreting their enormous contribution to the development of the discipline, contemporary sociologists seek a more engaged collective form of commitment to social justice, aiming to transform society and diminish the multiple forms of social inequality. By such means, in the very choice of problems for analysis, careful involvement with bottom-up approaches and collective visions for social change, current global sociology demonstrates strong moral commitment and agency to change social structures, which in no way compromises its objectivity as a scientific discipline.

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ⁱ See ISA website "Universities in Crisis" (8).