ECONSTOR
Make Your Publications Visible.

A Service of
ZBW
Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft
Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

Morcillo Laiz, Álvaro

Article — Published Version

Introduction: Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' as a Political Failure

Journal of Classical Sociology

Provided in Cooperation with:
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Morcillo Laiz, Álvaro (2019) : Introduction: Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' as a Political Failure, Journal of Classical Sociology, ISSN 1741-2897, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, Vol. 19, Iss. 3, pp. 223-228, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X19851372

This Version is available at:
https://hdl.handle.net/10419/218751

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.

WWW.ECONSTOR.EU

Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Check for updates

Editorial

JCS

Journal of Classical Sociology
2019, Vol. 19(3) 223–228
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1468795X19851372
journals.sagepub.com/home/jcs
SAGE

Introduction: Max Weber's *Science as a Vocation* as a Political Failure

Álvaro Morcillo Laiz
WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Germany

What can science do for us? Can it tell us how we should act? How do material conditions shape scientific work and scholars' lives? One hundred years after Max Weber raised these questions, they are still compelling ones. The four articles in this Special Issue offer four completely distinct, and new, perspectives on Weber's *Science as a Vocation* lecture, which their authors connect to current debates in the history, sociology, and anthropology of science. Inspired by Weber, the four contributors to this Special Issue raise new questions such as does a "scientific vocation" mean the same nowadays as it did a hundred years ago, despite the transformation of universities? What should we do when fact and value cannot be clearly separated, but we have to make decisions? Do modern science and religious faith oppose each other? Is it possible to describe what *is* without prescribing what *ought* to be done? The answers to these questions offered here possess a strong interdisciplinary character: this Special Issue is a conscious attempt to bring sociological theorists into contact with what the humanities and the sociology of science have to say on a key text by an author who is considered mainly as a sociologist.

To write on Weber in English implies making difficult decisions on matters of translation. In this case, the difficulties begin by the title of the lecture, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*. A recent translation has rendered the title as *Science as a Profession and a Vocation*, which rightly makes explicit the two meanings of the German term *Beruf* (Weber, 2012). It should also be added that the other noun in the title, *Wissenschaft*, usually translated as "science," in reality encompasses not only the natural and life sciences but also the social sciences and the humanities. This is why Joshua Derman (2012: 54 n. 28) has argued for translating its title as *Scholarship as a Vocation*. Here I have stuck to the convention established in the first English translation of *Science as a Vocation* (Weber, 1946), but it may occasionally be useful for readers to recall that Weber is not only talking about vocation but also about profession and not only about science but also of scholarship as a whole.

Before moving on to the next section of this introduction, I would like to note that earlier versions of the articles included in the special issue were first presented in a conference that John Torpey and I organized at the Graduate Center City University of New

York. I am grateful to him for offering me the opportunity to collaborate, to Eduardo Weisz and the other conference participants for their feedback, and to the colleagues who wrote the anonymous reviews on the four articles.

Science as a Vocation was one episode within Weber's broader charm offensive toward German students. Between 1917 and 1919, he tried to entice students into his view of university teaching and into the understanding of the relation between science and action, including political action that was embodied in his own life philosophy. Weber deployed this attempt to seduce students because he considered them to be the future of Germany and also because he thought that they were jeopardized by circumstances of their *modern* times and the radical ideologies propagated by a variety of prophets, in and outside the university. Weber was right in that the students had to reorient their lives. This reorientation was not only a result of their age; for many, it was also a consequence of having fought at the front. Young people frequently experienced the war years as bringing societal and individual disorder and sharpening the preexisting problems of the *Kaiserreich*. In the face of adversity, Weber wanted to show them *his* way of confronting such conditions. Accordingly, as he engaged with the young students, Weber deployed all his skills as an "educator" (Hennis). However, Weber's attempt can be counted among his *political* failures.

To be more specific, *Science as a Vocation*, just like its companion lecture, *Politics as a Vocation*, eminently attempts to attract *leftist and radical* students toward Weber's positions. Placed in the context of 1917 Germany, Weber was politically a moderate who had publicly criticized Germany's expansionist war goals and the monarch's vagaries, rejected annexations, and demanded the democratization of Germany. As a consequence of this "moderation," Weber and the national-conservative student group of which he once was part were on completely different wavelengths: he could only target the public on the center-left and the left, even if his skepticism on the question of public ownership of the means of production (*Sozialisierung*) separated him from the leftist parties. The war enthusiasm had particularly inflamed educated Germans, including professors and students. This enthusiasm was an added obstacle to Weber's pleas for separating fact and value in the classroom. In view of these circumstances, it is unsurprising that he failed to moderate the leftist students listening to him.

Weber's failure became evident in the part played in postwar German politics by the radical students. In 1917, he had made clear to the organizers of the conference on *Science as a Vocation* how important the presence of some "young poets of revolutionary convictions" was for him.[1] To counteract their radicalism was one crucial reason why Weber had agreed to give the talk in Munich on 7 November 1917, just as in the previous months he had participated in other events in which these and other youths were present. He continued accepting similar invitations during the following two years. Indeed, he only agreed to talk on *Politics as a Vocation* in early 1919 to preempt the participation of Kurt Eisner, the radical headman of the Bavarian government. A few weeks after Eisner's murder, Weber's admirers including Ernst Toller and Eugen Leviné made exactly what Weber wanted to prevent: they became the leaders of Bavarian Soviet Republic.

Since the late war years, Weber had been particularly worried about two problems affecting young Germans, particularly students: they seemed increasingly to believe that young people should accumulate ephemeral "experiences" (*Erlebnisse*) so that they could

become fully accomplished "personalities." In place of this search for "sensations," Weber invited students to ascetically renounce all those experiences and focus instead on one thing, on one task. Since the times of Goethe's "beautiful and accomplished humanity" had passed, specialization had become essential to science and to any other worldly undertaking. Specialization represented only a particular case within the general necessity of renouncing a range of possibilities and choosing one's task, one's *daimon*. Only the dedication to such a task elevates us as persons to the dignity of the chosen task.

The youths' emphasis on experience implied a devaluation of the intellect. Such "romantic views of the irrational" was in Weber's mind the second problem. Students increasingly rejected intellectual work and rationality as *the way* to understand and to shape their own world. Weber's response remains memorable: the most rational form of knowledge, the scientific one, is the instrument teachers should use to show students the final values from which their standpoints (*Stellungnahmen*) emanate. Only then will students achieve clarity about what they want, the means necessary to achieve it, and the values that they renounce when they pursue *one* end. Or, to use Weber's (1992: 104, 2012: 350) metaphor: "if you choose this point of view, you serve this god *and offend that one.*" Readers may conclude, as I do, that for the two problems Weber proposed unappealing, even if honest solutions: renounce the "experience" and criticize rationally your own standpoints and values.

In his lecture, Weber made a long detour, which I divide here into four phases. He began from the outward and inner conditions of scientific call and followed by drawing the boundaries of science and raising the question of science's own value. He then enumerated the services that science – and teachers – can render to students, provided that the latter are capable of rejecting the vain cult of personality and experience (*Erlebnis*). Finally, Weber stressed the absolute necessity of his listeners identifying the values to which they want to stick, in both their professional and personal lives, if they want their action *in this world* to be of any consequence. Just like in science, in personal life it is also necessary to specialize; a meaningful life requires choosing among values. Let me examine in some more detail what Weber did within each of the four phases of his talk.

Weber opened his lecture with a somber description of working conditions in higher education. As he compared German and US academia, he placed the recent and upcoming changes in scholarly careers within what he saw as two far broader, parallel developments: capitalism and bureaucratization. Since scholars, particularly in the natural sciences, lacked the "means of work," those who administered laboratories and other resources also controlled scholars; the latter had come to resemble proletarians. This bureaucratization was less pronounced in Germany, but the alternative was a plutocratic academia in which only those who could sustain themselves for long periods of time could become professors. In addition to money, chance also played a crucial role. After reflecting on academic life's material conditions, Weber explored its inner side: to follow the calling of science, individuals must be dedicated; they must experience *fever* (*Rausch*) when researching and writing; and they must also have inspired ideas (*Einfälle*), which depend on aptitude (*Gabe*). Since no method to conjure inspiration exists, this increases the significance of chance in an academic career. Finally, and most crucially, a scientific career requires specialization.

Closely connected to the idea of specialization is that of progress, which brings Weber to raise his *Gretchen's* question: if the destiny of every scientific achievement is to be

superseded, what is the meaning, the value, of science beyond its contribution to solving practical, technical problems? He first proclaimed the current invalidity of science's past meanings – to find true being (Ancient Greece), true art and true nature (Renaissance), true God (early modern Europe), or true happiness (modern Germany). Weber then further argued that while in his times every scientific discipline assumed the existence of a value that made its object of inquiry worthy of scholarly attention no single discipline could scientifically demonstrate its own validity. Even more, science could not prove any final value – that was a matter of personal choice – and, in any case, values are always valid only *within one life sphere* –politics or economy or art or eroticism, and so on. If values, which Weber equated to gods that reign over a sphere of human life, are enforced across the spheres, then they "resume their eternal struggle among themselves" (1992: 101, 2012: 348). A choice in favor of a value is akin to a choice between different gods. Because nobody can prove the superiority of a value, professors should refrain from propagating their own value judgments, worldviews, and preferred life conduct in the classroom. But this is exactly what students, including many among his Munich listeners, expected from their professors, and from Weber too.

While science did not possess a meaning in and by itself and could not prove the existence of values, Weber insisted that it could nonetheless accomplish a number of crucial tasks for students. Science provided them with knowledge about the world and human beings and on how, through calculation and other methods, to dominate them; science could be used to teach students the methods necessary to achieve that knowledge. But Weber went far beyond these two uses – knowledge and methods. He argued that science permits an individual to establish the necessary *means* to implement her given *preferences*. These may in turn reveal that in reality her dislike of the means makes those preferences unappealing. Finally, professors can show students that they arrived at a certain preference because of their attachment to a certain final *value*. In other words, rather than seducing students and encouraging them to adopt professors' preferences, teachers can and should help students understand the meaning of their actions and recognize the values underlying them. Once they have grasped this, it should not be difficult for the students to stop waiting for prophets and, obeying "the command of the day," tackle their task.

Just like *Science as a Vocation*, this Special Issue opens with a discussion of current conditions in academia and how they affect scholarship. Stephen P. Turner has organized this discussion around three types of universities that have existed since Weber's times – and Thorsten Veblen's, on whose writing on universities Turner also draws. While the universities Weber and Veblen knew were more humble institutions that imposed heavy teaching loads on scholars, they also offered some equality and a feeling of community among the learned as well as freedom to write – or not. This mythic university disappeared with the postwar "academic revolution." Extreme specialization surged, combined with compartmentalized disciplines and a new professionalization, whose mantras were reputation, research, and training for research. Nowadays, the postwar university with its hierarchies of disciplinary journals has fallen prey to the audit culture, which is one of pervasive quantitative indicators and grant accumulations. In the audit culture, bureaucratization has reached a new degree: bureaucracies, Weber warned us, favor quantitative measures: universities are not an exception and scholars are therefore increasingly assessed according to quantitative criteria. As universities have moved

away from the academic culture to the audit culture, the status of curiosity – and erudition – at universities has unavoidably decreased, making scholarly careers perhaps more pointless than they were.

For Weber, nothing existed between fact, on which the scientists can legitimately judge, and value, on which scientists' opinions were as worthy as the next person's. Accordingly, he made no explicit attempt to define an intermediate area. In his article, Gil Eyal argues that since Weber's times a vast intermediate zone has emerged in which factual problems – the realm of scientists – intermingle with matters of opinion – the empire of politicians, lobbyists, and citizens. Conflict characterized the activities aimed at distinguishing scientific facts from matters of opinion (sociologists of science call this activity "boundary-work"). While Weber neglected this type of conflict, Eyal sketches four possible solutions to regulate the intermediate lane, according to the different roles assigned to scientists, lobbyists, ordinary citizens, and the state. Every one of these four strategies produces distinct types and levels of legitimacy in the short term, but each also fails in the middle term, leading to a chronic crisis of legitimacy. Eyal expands Weber's hairline division between science and politics into the wide, but grimly disputed middle lane of trans-science, but there is more. He also elaborates on some of Weber's still-important reflections: the necessity of honestly acknowledging science's limits and the moral value of pointing students to the most inconvenient facts for their standpoint.

The strange creature that Weber presents to us as *the scientist* is at the center of Nicolas Langlitz's article. Weber described academic scientists as ascetic individuals who conduct research as a means of satisfying their curiosity, without interest in the utility of their findings, only focused on the problem they want to resolve. Such a combination of characteristics in an extreme degree suggests an ideal type – or perhaps Weber's view of himself. Keeping in mind what seems to be a sublimated self-portrait makes it even more fascinating to follow Langlitz as he compares Weber's description with his own ethnology of present-day scientists working on psychedelic drugs. For one of them, the value of science is "playfulness" and science is "not a calling but a game." For them, and for most natural scientists, mechanical objectivity has become uncontroversial, since they have devised – and accepted – methods "to overcome their differences." Even if for different reasons, scholars in the humanities consider another form of objectivity, namely Weber's plea for the absence of value judgments (*Wertfreiheit*) irrelevant: they have "formed a widespread consensus regarding the inseparability of description and prescription." Nevertheless, or perhaps for this reason, in the "critical humanities" even "disengaged" scholars like Langlitz are constantly asked to take a stance. (Incidentally, Turner, in his contribution to this special issue, reports the same about sociologists.)

In the last article of this special issue, Steven Shapin places Weber's lecture in the context of the scientific and cultural legacy he inherited. One way in which Shapin does this is by comparing Weber's views with those of Veblen on the place of science in the culture they partly shared. Both Weber and Veblen drew a sharp line between scientific inquiry pursued as an end in itself and the search for utility. Such a stance, however, denied the realities of Weber's and Veblen's day. In the late Wilhelmine period, those pertaining to industrial research conducted by scientific workers were vigorously challenging the norms of "disinterested inquiry"; these workers experienced nothing like the vocation described by Weber. In other respects, he was more sensitive to the intellectual currents of his times. His views on how science relates to religion were indebted to

scientific naturalism. On the shoulders of Charles Darwin, among other Anglo-Saxon authors, scientific naturalism enjoyed a widespread reception in Wilhelmine Germany. This is the origin of Weber's misleading suggestion about how scientists had become agnostic and stopped searching for "a proof of God's providence in the anatomy of a louse." Intimately linked to this issue is Weber's claim that science is unable to distinguish good from evil. His views on science were further connected to German *scientific materialism*, which, among other things, targeted "clerical concepts and authority" and became "a major resource for German … radical political thought." In his article, Shapin reveals how Weber's purported descriptions – and prescriptions – hide some polemical opinions held only by him and a minority among his contemporaries. Finally, Shapin also points at another dimension of the lecture: *Science as a Vocation* was also an academic performance in which Weber offered some "career counseling": the *is*, the purported description, is so unappealing, for so many reasons, that the prescription must be as follows: unless you can justify it through a *calling*, you *ought* not pursue an academic career.

At the beginning of this introduction I wrote that *Science as a Vocation* was Weber's failed attempt to moderate the *politics* of the "young poets of revolutionary convictions" in the public. I trust that these four articles, one hundred years later, make clear that Weber succeeded in at lesat one respect: in inspiring *scholarship*, and this until today. After all, despite his insistence that the essence of *Wissenschaft* was to be superseded, he also admitted that "obviously, as 'means of enjoyment,' out of their artistic quality, or as means to teach how to work, scholarship can retain some importance" (Weber 1992: 85, 2012: 341). And so has his lecture.

Note

1. Letter from Frithjof Noack to Marianne Weber, 26 October 1924, Max-Weber-Arbeitsstelle, Bavarian Academy of Science, Munich. All translations are mine.

References

Derman J (2012) *Max Weber in Politics and Social Thought: From Charisma to Canonization*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.

Weber M (1946 [1919]) Science as a vocation. In: Gerth HH and Mills CW (eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 129–156.

Weber M (1992 [1919]) Wissenschaft als Beruf. In: Mommsen WJ, Schluchter W and Morgenbrod B (eds) *Wissenschaft als Beruf 1917/1919: Politik als Beruf 1919*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 71–111.

Weber M (2012 [1919]) Science as a profession and vocation. In: Whimster S and Bruun HH (eds) *Collected Methodological Writings*. London & New York: Routledge, 335–353.

Author biography

Álvaro Morcillo Laiz employs social, mostly Weberian theory to understand how institutionalized power relations [*Herrschaft*] shape how norms or, to be more precise, *Ordnungen*, travel worldwide. Apart from contributing to conceptual debates on international domination, he has also published on Weber's reception in Latin America during the Cold War and on private donors' influence over the social sciences, which he calls "philanthropic domination."