

Introduction: "Science as a Vocation" as a Spiritual Exercise

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Abstract

This brief essay is an invitation to today's sociologists to go back to Weber's "Science as a Vocation" with Keith Tribe and Ian Hunter as guides. We highlight two main aspects of their readings. First, "Science as a Vocation" appears as an exemplary exercise of the sociology of academic life. Weber's lecture is not only a diagnosis of the conditions of the early Twentieth century scientist. It formulates also a set of key questions that could guide the sociological diagnostic of the conditions of social research in contemporary universities. Second, "Science as a Vocation" is Weber's spiritual exercise. It could be read as providing a stance that sociologists should follow in order to live up to the demands of their academic office.

Keywords: Science as a Vocation; sociology of academic life; value free; Weber; spiritual exercise.

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It is just over a hundred years since Max Weber delivered his lecture "Science as a Vocation". This special section of *Sociologica* celebrates this important anniversary by revisiting the lecture. Two main texts comprise the section: Keith Tribe's "Max Weber's Science as a Vocation: Context, Genesis, Structure" (2018) and Ian Hunter's "Science as a Vocation, Philosophy as a Religion" (2018).

Hunter and Tribe are two of the most inspiring historians of ideas working today. For those interested in exploring their work further, we recommend starting with Hunter's series of articles charting the "turn to theory" in the humanities and social sciences during the second half of the last century (e.g. Hunter, 2014; 2009; 2006), as well as Tribe's analyses in conceptual and intellectual history included in the book *The Economy of the Word* (Tribe, 2015). Tribe is also a translator of Weber's work, including a new English translation of *Economy & Society* forthcoming with Harvard University Press.

Tribe and Hunter are scholars whose work constitutes an exemplar of what Weber understood as the disciplined pursuit of knowledge. Neither is motivated by the construction of "big" theoretical schema nor the lure of the publications game and other symbols of contemporary academic fame. They are both scholars who exhibit a concern with painstaking descriptive empirical work, a controlled but passionate detachment in relation to the content and problems of analysis, and a desire to elaborate clear, empirically grounded results.

In their texts for this section, Hunter and Tribe apply their method of analysis to understanding the context and structure of Weber's lecture (Tribe) and the way in which readings and mis-readings of the lecture have marked the development of the critical social sciences after Weber (Hunter). We didn't, though, decide to prepare this section only because we think that the two texts provide new historiographic evidence in relation to the context and appropriation of Weber's lecture. Rather we did so, because we believe they help us and the readers of *Sociologica* to understand why Weber's lecture remains so important right here, right now. We use our editorial texts to indicate why we think this is the case.

Alongside the papers by Hunter and Tribe, we have added two editorial texts: this introduction, in which we review the propositions of both texts, closing with some questions regarding the contemporary relevance of the lecture; and Paul du Gay's closing remarks, which, starting from Tribe's and Hunter's reading of "Science as a Vocation", defends the centrality of Weberian "characterology" for sociology today.

1 "Science as a Vocation" as a Sociology of Academic Life

Tribe's text guides us into the context and rhetorical structure of Weber's lecture. The latter was delivered in a small theatre in Munich at the invitation of *The League of Free Students*. The students' plan was to organize a series of lectures, titled "*Geistige Arbeit als Beruf*", with the aim of provoking critical reflection on the consequences of professionalization and specialization. In the view of the students' representatives, the increasing role of the specialized "*Beruf*" — a German word that as Tribe explains contains a plurality of meanings including "occupation", "vocation", and "calling" — ought to be challenged with a position that does not aim to differentiate but rather to integrate inner sensual experience and knowledge. In the end, the series was never completed and only Weber delivered his two famous lectures, "*Wissenschaft als Beruf*" and "*Politik als Beruf*". "Science as a Vocation" is Weber's emphatic response to the students' diagnosis of the "spiritual" malaise at the heart of the modern university and scientific practice.

Weber's argument, Tribe explains, follows a double path; it starts with the "external", or institutional conditions, in which science is situated, and then moves to discuss the "internal" dimension, the particular motivation for and conduct of scientific life. The lecture begins:

You wish me to speak about "Science as a Vocation". Now, we political economists have a pedantic approach, which I should like to follow — that is, that we always begin with the external circumstances. In this case, that means beginning with the question: how is science set up as a vocation in the material sense of the world? Nowadays, that means in practice: what is the position of the graduate, who has decided to devote himself [sic] to science as an academic career? (Weber, 1922/1989, p. 3)

Following the "political economic approach", which seems to echo what we would call today the sociology of organization, the lecture begins with a very sombre description of the material conditions of

academic work, in particular that facing what we now term "early career scholars". Contemporary universities, either in their German or North American variants, Weber explains, are complex bureaucracies, where the means of intellectual work is centralized and the conditions of employment and the division of labour are increasingly similar to other modern organizations, like the firm or the army. At the same time, universities exhibit distinctive elements that make the life of those who pursue a career there especially challenging. In Weber's words:

Pure chance determines whether a lecturer, let alone an assistant, ever succeeds in becoming a full professor or even the head of an institute. Luck is certainly not the only deciding factor, but it does play an exceptionally large role. I can think of hardly any other career in which it plays such a role. I can say that all the more because I personally owe it to pure luck that I was appointed at an early age to a full professorship in a subject in which people of my own age had at that time undoubtedly achieved more than I had. (Weber, 1922/1989, p. 6)

The situation is no better in relation to what constitutes the key task of teaching and, to use contemporary parlance, "the performance metrics" that are applied to this task:

But the question as to whether he is a good or a bad teacher is answered by the numbers of students who decide to honour him with their attendance. Now it is a fact that purely superficial things — such as temperament or even inflection of a lecturer's voice — determine, to a greater degree than one would have thought possible, whether students flock to a given teacher. After somewhat extensive experience and sober reflection, I am deeply mistrustful of courses which draw large crowds [...] It is admittedly true that to present scientific problems in such a way that an uneducated but receptive mind can understand them and can come to think about them independently (which is the only important point for us) is perhaps the most difficult pedagogical task of all. But what is certain is that the popularity of a course does not decide whether this task has been successfully accomplished. (Weber, 1922/1989, pp. 7–9)

Weber supplements his sombre organizational description with a quick but devastating review of the history of science. In a rationalized and differentiated modern world, science is not expected to deliver what was expected of classic Greek knowledge or in the Renaissance. What modern science can deliver is much more humble: knowledge that can be useful in the development of technologies, conceptual and logical clarity, and a formation based on methodological thinking and in the posing of problems but not solutions or ultimate values.

By beginning with "external conditions" Weber is in effect attempting to sober up his idealistic young student audience. Weber seeks to indicate that a key element to be considered by those seeking to practice science is the location in which this will be undertaken: an institution — the university — that bears almost no material relation to the "Humboldtian" ideal that did and still does provide the horizon for so many (would-be) scholars. What Weber seems to be saying to the students attending his lecture is that universities are simply not the place to match the aspiration to integrate inner life, sensual experience and knowledge. Universities are specialized institutions in a differentiated world.

But, the argument does not end here. In the second part of the lecture, Weber shifts perspective from the external sense of "*Beruf*" — as in a professionalized occupation — to its "internal" sense of a "calling" and "vocation". As Tribe explains:

Hence the opening structure of both lectures ["Science as a Vocation" and "Politics as a Vocation"] conform to the duality "order" — "conduct" external structure and internal motivation. This is itself an anthropological problem — what type of individual can conform to these demands? (Tribe, 2018)

Here, Tribe is following in the footsteps of Wilhelm Hennis. In fact, Tribe is owed a considerable debt for the time and effort he has expended in translating Hennis's work and in indicating its significance not only for the field of "Weber" scholarship, but its exemplification of the power and reach of really engaging with Weber's work and stance in new ways and historically specific circumstances.

In a series of detailed path breaking studies, Hennis (1988; 2000) has convincingly argued that the work of Weber can be viewed fundamentally as a comparative study of the different type of *personae* (du Gay, 2007) enabled by the systematization of the conduct of life in areas such as religious practices, work, trade, politics or government. Weber's interest, for instance in his studies of religion, bureaucracy and entrepreneurship, is oriented to identify how existing forms of conducting life are challenged by new conditions, and how people in different times and situations construct new modes of existence to make sense of these, in turn transforming their life-conduct.

The key questions of "Science as a Vocation" seems to be: what are the particular conditions of contemporary university existence and "what type of conduct can follow for those who chose to participate in this particular life-order?" In other words, "Science as a Vocation" is the answer, for the case of the university, of the basic question Hennis identifies in Weber's work: "what does this order, this type of social relationship imply for the *human type* to which it sets limits or open up chances?"¹ There is an important difference though. As Tribe suggests, "one can read 'Science as a Vocation' as a 'confession' of Weber's own self-understanding. What he explains is his own motivation as a scholar." Unlike his accounts of other life-orders, in the discussion on the "internal conditions" of "Science as a Vocation" Weber does not present a study of how other actors, for instance, Calvinist entrepreneurs, orient their life. Here, Weber presents his own attempt to solve the particular "theodicy" of the modern scholar, his own way of constructing an ethical life within the specialized institution of the university. What Weber tells the students gathered in the theatre in Munich is that even though modern universities are not the place for their aspiration of fusing sensation and knowledge, there is space in universities for passion, but a passion of a particular kind. It is this particular spiritual disposition, the famous *value free* stance, which is the main object of Hunter's text in this issue.

2 "Science as a Vocation" and the Value of the Value Free Stance

An important issue that can impair our understanding of the work of authors such as Weber is that we receive them through a long chain of mediators and sometimes the latter can make our access to Weber rather difficult. As Tribe (2007) has explained elsewhere, the fact that Parsons played such a central role in establishing Weber as a classic in the sociological cannon has produced its own problems. In short, Parsons's Weber seems to reflect more Parsons' own concerns than it does Weber's. European readers, while facing different mediators, have encountered similar problems. A key intermediary in this context is the very influential work of the Frankfurt School, for instance that of Adorno and more recently Habermas. What Hunter does in his text in this issue is to separate the portrayal of Weber developed by Habermas from the Weber we find through a more careful historical interpretation of his work.

As Hunter explains, a key issue to consider here is that the conception of the social sciences and humanities defended by the authors of the Frankfurt School is in fact not that dissimilar to those of the students that invited Weber to give his vocation lectures (it is not coincidental that Walter Benjamin was part of the same intellectual milieu). The scholars of the Frankfurt School have, in different ways, attempted to construct a stance in which research can be both scholarly, humanist and normative. It is from this perspective that authors such as Adorno and Habermas have developed a critical and very influential reading of Weber's conception of scientific practice as "value free". The ideal of value free is seen in this context as a positivist idealization and politically naive conception of science. The key problem, Hunter claims, is that this is simply not the case and says more about the particular stance developed by the critical theorists than Weber's understanding of scientific conduct. Hunter vividly summarizes his argument as follows:

In what follows it will be shown that rather than being based in a scientific or scholarly investigation of Weber's intellectual sources and methods, the Frankfurt School critique of his conception of "scientific" (*wissenschaftlich*) value-freedom was in fact the brute assertion of a radically opposed "spiritual" outlook grounded in a sectarian cultural politics. (Hunter, 2018).

1. The full quotation reads: "It would do not harm to write the two sentences down on a small piece of paper and then, whenever Weber referred to 'Institution', 'Grouping', 'Enterprise', 'Association', 'Sect', 'Acquisitive activity', 'Exchange', 'Market' and so on, to take out the piece of paper and ask: what does this order, this type of social relationship imply for the *human type* to which it sets limits or open up chances?" (Hennis, 1983, pp. 169–170).

Once Habermas's representation of Weber's position is distinguished from Weber's own stance, the key task then is to understand what Weber's conception of scientific practice is. A key clue here can be found by exploring the particular role of religion in Weber's work. First, Weber's position is simply aeons away from a positivist faith in the role of science in the modern world. As already indicated, for Weber modern science cannot provide a secularized replacement for religion. Second, and more importantly in the context of the "internal" discussion of science as a vocation, it is central to understand Weber's solution to the problem cultural objects such as religious experiences pose to the social researcher. As Weber puts it in the Lecture:

I ask only: how should one bring a devout Catholic (on the one hand) and a freemason (on the other) to the same *evaluation* in a course on the forms of church and state or on religious history? That is out of the question. And yet the academic teacher must wish and demand of himself [sic] that he is useful to both with his knowledge and methods (Weber, 1922/1989, p. 21).

Weber's value free approach could be characterized in terms of a particular relation with the content of objects of analysis such as religious practices. In Hunter's words:

ethical, intellectual, and social phenomena could be approached independently of their normative validity — that is, value-neutrally — by transforming them into forms of human conduct or comportment open to historical and sociological investigation and description. (Hunter, 2018).

Researchers do not expect to normatively assess the content of their object of study, but to construct an angle from which this content can be studied sociologically. The social scientific method works by transforming "normatively valid truths" (for instance, a particular religious or moral conduct) into objects of analysis that are not value judged but inscribed in the context of the explanation of a particular scientific problem. This position is not positivist. It is, as Hennis (1998) argues elsewhere, closer to the pragmatist approach to religion developed by James in his famous lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The researcher is a collector of forms of life. As Hunter puts it:

Weber was thus signaling that his value-free sociology of religion could be regarded as borrowing the methods of empirical historicization and distantiation that had permitted early modern ecclesiastical and theological historiographies to approach religions in terms of their existence rather than their truth, under conditions of radical religious conflict. (Hunter, 2018).

The Weberian value free position does not require only a transformation of the object of analysis, but a particular transformation of the persona that conducts research. Scientific practice, like music performance, is a type of disciplined conduct. The modern scientist is in this sense like other figures studied by Weber, such as the bureaucrat of the Calvinist entrepreneur: actors whose life is characterized by a disciplined detachment and a particular type of passion. But, while the bureaucrat is attached to rules and the Calvinist entrepreneur to his work, the scientist is attached to the methodical pursuit of inquiry. Hunter puts it, scientific rationality is a form of intellectual conduct and its methods are:

practices of the self whose combined ethical and technical disciplining of intellectual activities [...] permitted the objectification of particular fields of phenomena (Hunter, 2018).

This is the internal part of Weber's answer to the students in Munich. As Hunter makes clear, Weber had no time for the student movement's demand that the scholarly vocation should be valued to the extent that it permitted cultivation of an authentic "personality" or gave expression to a heightened "experience" of life. Weber encouraged the students to renounce the pursuit of integrated personality and overarching experience in the scientific domain; and to refrain from preaching cultural and political values in the lecture hall. In the domain of science, Weber argued

is quite certain that the man [sic] who steps up on to the stage as an impresario of the subject to which he is devoted, seeks to justify himself through "personal experience" and asks, "How

can I manage to say something in form or content which nobody else has said?" — such a man has no "personality". Such behaviour is to be seen on an enormous scale nowadays and in each case it detracts from and debates the man who asks such questions instead of letting an inner devotion to the subject and only to the subject raise him to the height and dignity of the subject which he claims to serve (Weber, 1922/1989, pp. 11–12).

It would be a mistake however to assume that in dismissing the cult of personal experience Weber therefore ascribed no value or meaning to the conduct of science. As we signaled earlier, for Weber undertaking scientific enquiry "as a vocation" requires a particular comportment and training, one in which the transmission of ascetic norms permitting the methodologically ordered and empirically grounded conduct of life is crucial. As Hunter indicates, Weber summarized these norms as: to fulfill a given disciplinary task in a workmanlike fashion; to recognize facts, especially those inconvenient for one's own position, and distinguish them from value-judgments; and to subordinate oneself to the scientific task at hand and to thus refrain from pushing one's own values, tastes and sentiments.

3 "Science as a Vocation" Today

To defend the contemporary relevance of Weber's "Science as a Vocation" lecture today is not such a hard sell. It is in fact enough to re-read the text to realize that it asks so many questions that are very relevant to sociologists today. If we re-read the lecture with the help of Tribe and Hunter, as we have done here, we can narrow down the range of issues regarding the practice of sociological inquiry. To conclude we propose some of the many questions this exercise has opened to us and that we think are at the core of some of the problems of sociology today.

A first thing to note is just how relevant the description Weber provides of universities as the institutional context of scientific research continues to be. Surely, scholars working in universities in almost any country today will quite easily feel a sense of recognition when they read Weber's description of the role of chance in academic careers and appointments and the centrality of performance metrics that do not measure core tasks, like teaching and learning, but indirect indicators such as teachers' popularity. But, of course, 100 years later, the context in which we work is not necessarily the same. University management today, certainly depending on different countries and institutional context, is a particular mix that combines elements of bureaucracy with models deemed to oppose it. University administrators at different levels routinely attempt to introduce competition — between units, departments or researchers — imitating an idealized version of the market. University employees are not only assessed in terms of their popularity with students (now through the ubiquitous student survey), but also, in terms of metrics that assess the popularity and status of different academic outlets and publications. A first question — that we certainly cannot answer without proper empirical research — is how valid are the external conditions described by Weber today?

A second issue, but one also related to the first, has to do with the status of the "internal" disposition. If we follow the description of Weber's method as explained by Hennis, Weber's forms of conducting life are essentially historic. They are certainly a scientific idealization, an abstraction in the sense of an "ideal type" constructed as an analytical device by the social researcher, but aimed at describing historically specific phenomena. As is well known, Weber ends his analysis of the protestant ethic with the claim that the particular conduct of life, the mundane ascetics, which characterized the early Calvinist entrepreneur does not exist anymore. It was a historically situated answer to the particular problem created by the question of salvation. Similarly, we can ask today, then, about the status of the "value free" scholar described by Weber.

To devise a method to answer this last question, however, would be much more difficult than the first question, and this has to do with a central difference between "Science as a Vocation" and Weber's other studies. As Tribe points out, Weber's value free scientist is not only an analytical description of historically situated forms of conducting life. The lecture strongly formulates the particular conception of the social scientist that Weber has been pushing for years in his various academic enterprises, including his method essay that sets the editorial rules for the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* or his remarks in relation to the German Sociological Association, that he actively helped to form. The value free scientist

is not a description of the scientific conduct of his contemporaries, it is Weber's own proposal to solve the potential crisis, the theodicy of the scientists that work in the context of the specialized modern university. It is in this sense that "Science as a Vocation" is also what Ian Hunter has called a "spiritual exercise". It is a document whose validity is not simply based on the empirical accuracy of its descriptions, but also in terms of the particular type of conduct that it inspires. In the end, the answer to the question of the contemporaneity of "Science as a Vocation" is in our conduct as sociologists working today. Does our work enact the ideal of the value free scientist proposed by Weber?

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