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Why should we read Max Weber today?
His conception of *Wissenschaft*

Peter Ghosh

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Abstract

In 1964 the question of Weber's present-day significance was an open one which was passionately debated, but in 2014 his canonical position is so secure that it seems superfluous. Nonetheless, the question should be asked, because if it is not, then any view of Max Weber as an integral thinker recedes into the distance, and he dissolves into a series of specialized fragments. The lecture suggests that Weber is important above all because he is a universalist thinker capable of operating under modern conditions, such as specialization and cultural difference, that are radically hostile to universalism. How could he do this ? To answer this question, we should consider, first, the more obviously universalist areas of his thought (academic "science" or *Wissenschaft*, religion, law) and then the one that is not (politics). However, this is matter for four lectures at least. So here we shall begin at the beginning: with *Wissenschaft*.

Keywords

Weber, *Wissenschaft*, methodology, values, value-freedom, universities, politics, intellectual freedom, students

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It is a notable fact that in the anniversary year of 1964 the question of the contemporary significance of Max Weber's ideas was very much open to doubt and was accordingly debated with some passion. In the anniversary year of 2014 the significance of his thought can be taken for granted; and so although the anniversary has been marked by a large number of publications, there has been no explicit discussion of just why, and by how much, we value him — where “he” means “the whole Max Weber”, the thinker in his entirety, and not just his disciplinary parts. But while his totemic and scholastic status is secure, the failure to analyse this is a cause for regret. As Wilhelm Hennis remarked in 1996, ‘it is by no means certain what Weber “signifies” within academic inquiry [*Wissenschaft*] today’,¹ and as the juggernaut of literature on him expands, it is by no means certain that the answer to this question is growing any clearer. By definition this is not a gap which can be filled single-handedly, but in what follows I offer a personal testimony to the views of 2014.

I. The Anarchy of Values

I suggest that the underlying reason why Weber exercises such a powerful hold on such a wide range of academic inquiry today is that he is in principle a universal thinker. When set within a tradition of European thinkers that goes back from Hegel and Leibniz to Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, this is hardly unusual; what is distinctive is that he is still capable of upholding or reinventing universal categories under a set of modern conditions, which are radically hostile to universalism. Viewed in this light Weber may be seen as the first modern universal thinker; he may even be the only one we can recognise as such, for he has had no obvious rivals or successors.

The single most important contextual element shaping Weber's thought is the fact that he grew up within a German-speaking *Kultur* where belief in universal values – norms that held good for all people in all times and places – was being undermined more thoroughly and more explicitly than in any other part of Europe. Self-evidently universal and uniform values have been exposed to challenge for as long as they have been deemed to exist. In a European context they had certainly been under pressure since the Reformation, when the idea of an agreed right religion, then the formal source of all values, was challenged *de facto*. Nonetheless the late 19th century German states represent the tipping point at which the defiant assertion of uniformity regardless of actual difference began to retreat. This was the era of what in a famous phrase, palmed off onto Wilhelm Dilthey, Ernst Troeltsch called ‘the anarchy of values’.² This is what is to be understood by modernity here: a world where universally agreed ideas about values, hence agreement as to the meaning of life and the world, do not exist; there is only individually constructed meaning, which must however function within an agreed social context.

The forms of difference which emerged were multiple. Politically, the creation and early history of the Bismarckian *Reich* laid bare the gulf between alleged national unity and an insoluble value-plurality between Liberals, Catholics, Socialists, and a variety of rural and traditional groups, to say nothing of the different status of Austrian Germans. In Weber's own words ‘[Bismarck's] life-work ought to have led not only to the external but the inner unification of the nation, but as we all know: this has not been achieved.’³ Secondly, Nietzsche's literary and philosophical assault on traditional values and – more tellingly – the enormous vogue he enjoyed after 1890, had laid bare a similarly disintegrative effect at work on the level of individual lifestyle and life-choices. Weber was not at all in sympathy with this trend, but he recognised its existence: his age was ‘an age... of subjectivist *Kultur*’,⁴ or, as we would say today, there was a widespread preoccupation with personal identity, most obviously in regard to religion, aesthetics, and sexuality. A third development that was

¹ *Max Webers Wissenschaft vom Menschen* (Tübingen, 1996), 175.

² On Troeltsch and the ‘anarchy of values’: see my *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories* (Oxford, 2014) [hereafter *Twin Histories*], 105.

³ *MWG I/4.567*. [See the list of Abbreviations used in citation at the end.]

⁴ *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen, 1924), 420.

of the utmost importance to Weber, was ‘the awakening of the historical sense’.⁵ The force and prestige of historical inquiry throughout the humanities, which had been growing throughout the century, led to the recognition, again in the 1890s, that if the results of historical inquiry were to be accepted at face value, then all values throughout history were temporally and spatially relative. This was *Historismus*, ‘the cold breath of historical mutability’.⁶ A fourth idea, which might be described as Weber’s personal construction of modern fragmentation, was that of developing specialization of function over time. The tyranny and constraint of the *Beruf*, the narrowly specialised ‘calling’ or ‘profession’, is after all the foundation of the argument of the ‘Protestant Ethic’ (1904-5), and this is what, in a strict sense, the famous ‘steel housing’ (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) signifies.

Although this predicament was widely recognised, Weber was unique in his own day because of his frank acceptance of the collapse of universal values: he was ‘the representative (or spokesman) for value-collision’.⁷ Not only this, but he responded to the absence of any firm ground of eternal and immutable values in a positive light. If values were historically mutable, this meant that they always had been, and the mere realization of this fact did not cause him to throw up his hands in horror. Instead he responded positively to the challenge:

... the new urge awakes,
I hurry forward to drink the eternal light [‘of the great problems of *Kultur*’],
Before me the day, behind me the night,
The heavens above me, and beneath me the waves.⁸

Modern life might have no stable foundation; and yet a life on the ocean wave could be exhilarating. To contemporaries (who neither would nor could understand him) this made him a moral sceptic or desperado,⁹ but we can see that Weber is simply the first European thinker who has recognised the fundamental fact of ineradicable cultural difference, recognition of which is accepted today as a necessary foundation for any conduct we regard as educated or civilised. However, this did not make him a relativist: that was ‘the crudest misunderstanding’ of his position.¹⁰ Weber was quite as much a value-absolutist as his more conventional contemporaries, and for all of them relativism was a confession of intellectual bankruptcy. But how then did he retain universalism and absolutism in such an alien context?

In answer to this question, I suggest that his *oeuvre* falls into three broad areas. First, he remained committed to a universal *Wissenschaft*, which was also his own personal vocation after c.1895. His conception of *Wissenschaft* was significantly adjusted as a result of modern conditions, but it was not abandoned or rendered meaningless as a result. Secondly, there were further, social sources of universalism to consider: the substantive root of universalism in ethical religion; and a formal root in law. The principal question here was what had happened when ethical religiosity died out, and to this the ‘Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism’ (1904-5) offered an answer: the external ‘cosmos’ or ‘housing’ imposed by the operation of formal and technical rationality within an impersonal society had replaced the inner ‘cosmos’ of universal ethics. Thirdly, there was an area where there could never be, and had never been, any universalism – politics – and where the most that could be required was a set of palliatives: compromise, reciprocity, responsibility. So here, as in the case of law, where the roots of a formal and rational universalism could be traced back to the law of ancient Rome, there had been no change. Having written much recently about these other areas in Weber’s thought,¹¹ I am going to concentrate today on his novel conception of *Wissenschaft*.

⁵ WL 148.

⁶ MWG I/4.567.

⁷ WL 508.

⁸ WL 214.

⁹ *Twin Histories*, 278.

¹⁰ WL 508.

¹¹ *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories* (Oxford, 2014).

II. *Wissenschaft* and ‘the struggle of ideals’

Perhaps the best-known and most widely accepted of Weber’s attempts to reconcile modern cultural difference with universal categories lies in the sphere of *Wissenschaft* (Latin ‘*scientia*’). Indeed if there was any one Weberian text one would wish to place in the hands of all university students, and all politicians and administrators in higher education, it is the famous lecture on ‘Science (*Wissenschaft*) as a Vocation’ (1917/19). Here we need to recognise, first, just how capacious his conception of *Wissenschaft* was. *Wissenschaft* is the entire realm of disciplined knowledge about man and the world, and the conditions under which it is generated and communicated. The weight and substance of Weber’s conception of *Wissenschaft* is evident from the fact that he traces a unique tradition of *Wissenschaft* all the way from classical Greece down to his own day in unbroken continuity. It is a corporate, impersonal activity, which spans all times and all peoples; it comprises both teaching (or the communication of tradition) and research; its goal, the establishment of “objective” or ‘valid’ knowledge is universal by definition, and by the same definition it is independent of both religion and politics.

Of the ‘modern’ conditions that were affecting *Wissenschaft*, two stand out in this context. First, those who participate in the pursuit of knowledge, like people in everyday life, have fundamental value-commitments, which are irreconcilably different, as between the Freemason and the Catholic, the French and the German, the Occidental and the Chinese, and so on. How should one respond to this situation? Mere appeals to goodwill, to soften one’s convictions so as ‘to allow all practical value-questions... to retreat into the background’,¹² could not overcome these differences and one should not try. This is the principal root of Weber’s famous pronouncement that the idea of compromise is alien to *Wissenschaft*.¹³

A second modern condition tending towards the fragmentation of knowledge was quite different: specialization and the loss of ‘a unitary “perspective”’.¹⁴ This process was precisely ambivalent. The loss of a unitary “perspective” was compensated by the fact that in research (as Weber tells us) the only lasting results are achieved by specialists; and for the same reason specialised knowledge was the proper object of university teaching: ‘the academic lecture halls today only produce truly valuable effects through *specialized* training by people with *specialist* qualifications’.¹⁵ This was evidently fragmentation and limitation of knowledge; but it was also a form of homogenization, since specialization connoted essentially uniform and standard procedures, which produced beneficial technical results which were hardly disputed. Technical achievement, though humanly limited, was felt to stand outside the realm of personality and subjectivity in modern Occidental *Kultur*, and it was this which represented the lasting achievement of *Wissenschaft* throughout recorded history: this was the ‘intellectualist’ component within an overall tradition of European ‘rationalization’.

A further source of rationalization in *Wissenschaft* derived from its institutional structure. In the case of *Wissenschaft* this structure was ‘capitalistic and at the same time bureaucratized’.¹⁶ One obvious cause of this lay in the enormous expenditures required by research in medicine and the natural sciences; and Weber supposed that even for an ‘artisan’ such as himself, who could as yet still control the books he used, would sooner or later be separated from his tools. As a matter of detail we may say that this prediction has not come true (so far!), but here was another rationalizing force, pointing to the development of impersonal and technical structures.

Faced by these conditions, he made a series of responses. The most elementary point has already been noted: that for all other German-language writers on ethics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Nietzsche, Dilthey, Troeltsch, Rickert, Simmel) the collapse and ‘anarchy of values’ was extremely worrying, a disintegrative threat that would have to be overcome; but for Weber *this was*

¹² WL 490.

¹³ eg. to Carl Petersen 15.4.[20], *MWG Briefe*.

¹⁴ WL 302.

¹⁵ WL 491.

¹⁶ *MWG I*/17.74.

not so. Now this eminently modern thinking derives from some thoroughly conventional roots. His premiss was that any authentic human conduct must arise from a foundation in ultimate values: the capacity of the individual to perceive the world in terms of *Kultur*, and hence values, was the ‘transcendental presupposition’ that underlay all Weberian social science.¹⁷ This is the crucial offset to the impersonal and supra-personal processes of rationalization that Weber saw as “housing” and constraining personal identity. But if this ethical premiss was conventional and traditional, what was not conventional was the way in which Weber developed it. For him the discordant plurality and historical impermanency of values did not mean that they had been undermined or radically degraded in themselves, as it did for his contemporaries.¹⁸

the *belief* which lies within us all in some form or other in the supra-empirical validity of ultimate and most high ideas about value, in which we ground the meaning of our existence — this does not exclude but rather includes the constant mutability of the concrete perspectives which confer significance on empirical reality...

Why was this ? Weber’s emphasis on the autonomous individual, untouched by social and historical flux, is readily recognisable as an extension of another conventional and uncontested feature of 19th century thought: the liberal conception of the ethically autonomous individual. This he traced back to the ‘unillusioned... individualism’ of the 17th century Puritans,¹⁹ and he continued to regard the personal development that was encouraged by Anglo-American education, which he saw as descended from the Protestant sects, as admirable in its own way: this was the ‘development of the personality so as to learn to assert itself within the circle of like students who were adults’.²⁰ Now in most respects Weber regarded Puritanism (or ‘ascetic Protestantism’) as impersonal, rationalizing and specialising; but still impersonality and rationality were not the whole story, and its individualism was an outstanding example of the “free”, personal and in fact charismatic element in Puritanism. Even so, in its educational practices, which remained tied to agreed religious values, Puritanism was pre-modern, and this type of personal formation was impossible in principle within a modern, rationalized, specialised, technical context. For the professor to try to inculcate values in the lecture hall (for example) was an abuse of power at the expense of the ordinary student who in the German system (like most university systems except perhaps the British) was the passive and dependent recipient of lecture-content.²¹ (Weber’s sympathy for the student in this predicament is notable and admirable, though it may also help explain why he detested lecturing so much.) Thus any attempts to practise character development in a modern university context could only be authoritarian and reactionary. Hence his assault in 1917-18 on professorial “prophets”, the class of *literati* who preached pseudo-religion from their professorial chairs, and who were utterly out of touch with modern, rationalizing and impersonal reality.²² But this did not mean that individualism and self-assertion had ceased to exist, or that character development should not take place; only that it should take place outside formal education. (How and where this should be is unclear. Weber simply says that ‘the individual must conquer for himself the whole *substantive* content of what he strives for in the struggle with life’.²³ These remarks no doubt reflect the veil of silence he cast over his own personal formation; but their theoretical premiss is that modern value-formation is too plural and chaotic to be discussed in any meaningful fashion.)

So authentic Weberian conduct is always driven by values, which means that there remains a considerable place for personal values within *Wissenschaft*, however rationalised and specialised. The

¹⁷ WL 180.

¹⁸ Ibid., 213.

¹⁹ MWG I/9.261.

²⁰ Dreijmanis, 124 cf.125.

²¹ WL 493.

²² See my essay ‘Max Weber and the *literati*’ in *Max Weber in Context* (Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 2015).

²³ Dreijmanis, 82.

progressive squeezing of the free and personal realm by impersonal, rational, specialising and technical structures is a familiar theme running throughout Weber's thought, but still he sees at least as much room for "free" personal action here as in any other sphere. This is most obvious in the person of the professor who would, amongst all his other values, adhere to "science" as a vocation, as a value in its own right, a personal commitment: 'For nothing is worth anything to a person as a person, if he or she *can* not do it with *passion*.'²⁴ In principle this also held true of all academic staff, from the doctoral level upwards (and again we will, I suppose, consider Weber's consideration for the ethical freedom of all levels of the academic community to be admirable). Thus he was 'proud that [doctoral] pupils from my seminar have represented every conceivable standpoint in life, from the extreme agrarian to the extreme left'.²⁵ This was not so much the 'anarchy of values' as 'the struggle of ideals'.²⁶ Struggle or competition was an invigorating and meritocratic procedure standing outside any rationalized and impersonal framework, one which should operate in every walk of public life: 'the highest ideals, which move us most powerfully, work themselves out across all time only in conflict with other ideals, which are just as sacred as our own.'²⁷ For the same reason it was important to him that amongst the academic members of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* there had 'long exist[ed] the sharpest conceivable conflicts of views and ideals, incomparably stronger than those existing between members of the *Verein* and outsiders'.²⁸ Faced by cultural difference, one should not try to hush it up; one should make the most of it.

III. "Value-freedom": students and the state

Weber's belief in the fundamental importance of personal values and ethical commitment to the pursuit of *Wissenschaft* will be clear. Nonetheless, this is only half of his thinking here. The other half lies in his famous doctrine of "value-freedom". This sends out a very different message, and it is precisely his combination of value-commitment with "value-freedom" that contemporaries found so perplexing. What then was he saying? By definition "value-freedom" was designed to set a limit to the disintegrative workings of value-pluralism in *Wissenschaft* (however positive this might be in many respects). It governed the relationship between the academic – the practitioner of *Wissenschaft* – and the external recipients of the fruits of *Wissenschaft* (politicians and students); and it regulated the nature of academic work. I suppose that the idea that there must be an irreducible "value-free" component in academic work is relatively uncontroversial, and so I shall concentrate today on the external recipients of *Wissenschaft*.

It is a notable fact that Weber's description of the function performed by the academic for the recipients of *Wissenschaft* was essentially the same in relation to the student in the lecture hall as it was for the politician or bureaucrat. His premiss here was that *Wissenschaft* could not, and had never been able to, generate ultimate values or ideals: it was neither a religion (the traditional source of such values) nor a modern religious surrogate. The pursuit of truth and the generation of values were 'absolutely heterogeneous',²⁹ and in a modern situation where there were no agreed values, this meant that while academic inquiry might begin with value-commitment, it could not end with it. It required instead a profound act of psychological renunciation: the '*elementary duty of academic self-control*', a duty of which all too many modern academics were unaware.³⁰ Nonetheless, given the fundamental importance of values to Weber, the interconnection between a "value-free" *Wissenschaft* and individual values remained very close. The duty of self-control required by "value-freedom" was still a moral duty, as was 'the *duty to observe intellectual honesty and integrity* [*Rechtschaffenheit*]' which,

²⁴ MWG I/17.81.

²⁵ Resp. Dreijmanis, 86, 85

²⁶ Ibid., 83.

²⁷ WL 154.

²⁸ Dreijmanis, 89.

²⁹ WL 501.

³⁰ WL 200.

though it could not prescribe a *Weltanschauung* or ethically founded “world-view”, nonetheless remained a core ‘element in all “authentic” *Weltanschauung*’ and ‘the only specific virtue’ that should be taught in a university.³¹ To deny such moral duties was ‘to rob the [academic] “calling” [*Beruf*] of the one truly significant meaning it still retains today’.³²

The most fully worked out description of the functions of “value-free” *Wissenschaft* occurs in the 1913 memorandum submitted to the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*:³³

- a) Working out the ultimate, inwardly “consistent” value-axioms, from which mutually opposed opinions derive. One deceives oneself often enough, not only regarding those of an opponent, but one’s own. This procedure is by its nature a purely *logical* one...
- b) Deduction of the “logical consequences” [*Konsequenzen*] for the *evaluative* position [adopted] which derive from specific, ultimate value-axioms...
- c) Establishment of the *factual* consequences which the practical execution of an evaluative position would have for a problem... Finally
- d) *new* value-axioms and their consequential demands can be presented, which the representative of a practical demand had not noticed, and in relation to which he had not, as a result, adopted a position...

It will be clear from this that “value-freedom” has nothing to do with the absence of values, or its correlative, the primitive empiricism of “letting the facts speak for themselves”.³⁴ On the contrary, one of its primary functions is to lay bare to the modern value-context within which empiricism and its users (the student and the politician) must operate: this is the ‘struggle’ of a plurality of ultimate values and value-axioms once more. So for Weber the problems of *Wissenschaft* were still ‘*problems of Kultur!*’, where *Kultur* was defined by him as a value-concept.³⁵ By the same logic we should understand that his thoroughly modern dictum: ‘No politics in the lecture hall’³⁶ is not just a conventional negative or a blank, but rests on the assumption of ethical plurality and difference. The student might be in an intellectually dependent and unfree position, but it was the duty of the professor to *compensate for this*, by displaying and reminding the audience of the full range of value-plurality and conflict, and in all its logical purity. (A high but admirable doctrine!)

In a political context Weber was an outspoken defender of intellectual freedom in academic teaching (*Lehrfreiheit*) to the exclusion of any state intervention. In principle this was a wholly conventional position, but what distinguished Weber was the purity and clarity with which he upheld it. In particular this meant combating political intervention in academic appointments. The specific case he took up was that of the syndicalist Robert Michels, a man whose combination of intellectual brilliance and political extremism made him peculiarly well suited to illustrate Weber’s views. Michels had been excluded *de facto* from the German universities by the norm set out in the Prussian state law, *lex Arons* — a law passed in 1898, which excluded Socialists even from the body of lecturers (*Privatdozenten*), although they were paid no salary by the state. Weber was well aware that informal discrimination and exclusion were practised worldwide within university systems, but he was angry that the German universities should deny themselves the intellectual resource offered by Michels’ work, and angry, too, that in a context where “Germany” claimed to be a world leader, it should be assumed that it maintained an untarnished intellectual freedom while in fact practising legal discrimination. It followed that this freedom was ‘so-called’ only, and any international comparison must lead to the negative conclusion that ‘there is no “*Kultur-state*” which in this respect [academic freedom] *even remotely compares* with the established practice of Prussia today.’³⁷

³¹ Resp. Dreijmanis, 82; WL 491.

³² WL 494.

³³ ed. H.H. Nau, *Der Werturteilsstreit* (Marburg, 1996), 165-6.

³⁴ WL 498.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁶ MWG I/17.95.

³⁷ Dreijmanis, 121.

The more fundamental point is that he defines a qualitative gap between the realm of *Wissenschaft* and ephemeral state power. Hence this proposition: ‘After all it is obvious that one cannot, in the same breath, demand that value judgements be allowed from the professorial chair and also – if the logical consequences are to be drawn – point to the fact that the university is a state institution for the preparation of bureaucrats who will be “loyal to the state”. For in that case one would not be making the university into a “specialist training school” [as it was in Weber’s view] ... but into a seminary’.³⁸ Even the most ardent supporter of intellectual freedom today will I think be impressed by the absolutism of his position here. It is a reminder of how Weber could adopt positions, which we can recognise as eminently modern, on the basis of a deep historical sense, which we have now largely abandoned.

He is appealing (first and foremost) to conceptions of *Wissenschaft* and religion as universal-historical powers which wholly transcend the ephemeral, local and morally reduced realm of the state, and this is both a theoretical as well as a historically founded position.³⁹ But there is also a significant local context here, in that he reflects an established German view where the greatness of German cultural achievement, including that of the universities, far exceeded that of the states in which they were situated, and long preceded the creation of a nation-state. Hence his instinctive appeal to *Wissenschaft* as a totality; his conception of the German-speaking academic body as a corporate body or *Stand* which still possessed a ‘moral authority’,⁴⁰ and of *Wissenschaft* as a single profession or vocation in itself, regardless of the fact that he also conceived of it as a set of specialisms and so (by analogy with the division of labour within society) as a set of distinct occupations. Weber was clear that ‘the old university constitution [had] become a fiction’, due to the rise of specialised education, but this did not prevent him from appealing to ‘the old university traditions’ when criticising the ethical frailty of modern professors.⁴¹ But (again) the fact that there is a local origin to these views, in no way prevents us from understanding them in modern or deep historical terms. For though these are inherited German views, they are also part of a much wider tradition which has been operative throughout the history of the European universities since their medieval foundation, where again the community of learning had an identity distinct from the state (though much less so from the church). Thus today, notwithstanding obvious limits, it remains reasonable and plausible to conceive of the personnel of the universities and cognate bodies as constituting a transnational community, however diffuse and irregular its layout and dimensions; one which exceeds and outstrips the reach of any single state or nation-state, and where the single most effective and legitimate exercise of local state power lies not in intellectual intervention, but in funding constraints. Weber’s interests in the American, Dutch, Italian, English and Russian universities, as well as the German-speaking ones, attest to his internationalism here.

Nonetheless, direct political intervention by the state was ultimately a marginal concern only. Weber was not living in a post-1918 totalitarian state. His chief concern, here as elsewhere, lay with values: not with their anarchy or plurality – as we have seen this did not dismay him – but with the fact that they were not being adhered to with sufficient strenuousness. This is the principal burden of his complaints regarding the “Althoff System”. Friedrich Althoff, the bureaucrat primarily responsible for Prussian higher education policy for the years 1882-1907, was a near legendary figure. One half of the legend was his extraordinary gift for identifying and promoting persons of intellectual merit; but the other half was the cynicism of the means he used in doing so: ‘he proceeded from the view... that everyone with whom he had to deal was either a rogue, or at the very least had an ordinary regard for their own self-advancement.’⁴² In plainer language, everyone could be bought. He was not, of course, single-handedly responsible for the kind of moral decay that accompanied this, but still his attitude was symptomatic of an overall development whereby academics did not pursue *Wissenschaft* as an

³⁸ WL 496.

³⁹ Cf. *Twin Histories*, 218-23.

⁴⁰ Dreijmanis, 62.

⁴¹ Resp. MWG I/17.75; Dreijmanis, 128.

⁴² Dreijmanis, 127.

ethical vocation, but viewed it instead as a means of earning a comfortable and insulated living: they were the class of *beati possidentes* or ‘satiated existences’.⁴³ In short, the real alternative to the value-freedom or ‘so-called “relativism”’ of which Weber was sometimes accused was in fact a ‘philistine descent into convention on the way towards an entrenched cynicism’.⁴⁴ This mental focus on a regular salary – paid by the state and not dependent on the invigorating ‘struggle’ of the market – was part of a process of bureaucratization which, whatever its advantages and inevitability in daily life as a whole, was emphatically to be repudiated within the academic vocation: ‘Out with all views that recall the bureaucracy, the pattern of the upwardly mobile NCO, sergeant etc., or even that of uniform law: in short, out with any bureaucratic perspectives of any kind.’⁴⁵

It will be clear that Weber was well aware both of the enormously expanding costs of education and of the monetarization or commercialization of academic personnel — both highly relevant concerns today. But the ultimate danger he identified here was that the “state” might use its control of funding as a form of intellectual control:⁴⁶

If the “state”, that is to say the holders of political power that govern the nation at any one time, was to adopt a standpoint of the kind that “he who pays the piper calls the tune”; if in other words it conceived of the power laid in its hands by the material situation [i.e. dependency] of the universities not as an assumption of *tasks of Kultur*, but as a means to instil a particular *political conditioning* into student youth, then the interest of *Wissenschaft* would be accommodated not better, but in many respects *worse*, than by the earlier dependency on the church. The consequences of such a castration of the freedom and want of limits on university teaching, something tending to annihilate the development of personalities with character, could never be made up in any way by the finest research institutes; the highest number of students in attendance; or any number of dissertations, prize-winning works and examination successes.

However, as this quotation makes plain, he did not foresee the specific terms of the debate over the commercialization of *Wissenschaft* in the late 20th and 21st century. Weber supposes that the realm of possible danger lay in the desire of the state to establish greater intellectual control over the universities; and that to secure this end, it would be prepared to pay a great deal. But this inverts the modern position, where in principle the question raised by politicians (and less certainly, electors) is not a question of intellect or *Kultur* but one of money. Modern democratic politicians can have no declared interest in intellect — a sphere that is understood as infinite is by definition beyond them; their concern lies only with the proper use of public money, even if saving or prioritizing the expenditure of money necessarily has major consequences for intellect and *Kultur*. Weber could not have foreseen this state of affairs since, whatever the deficiencies of the Althoff System, the German states before 1914 provided the most lavish system of funding for higher education the world had yet seen, while the earliest consideration of student education as a social and public cost (rather than a matter for private individuals and families) did not emerge until after 1918. But then Weber never aspired to the irrational status of a prophet; his concern lay with ethics and values, and here the note he sounds is entirely recognisable to us.

To conclude: Max Weber is the first modern thinker about the nature of *Wissenschaft* because he accepts, quite unflinchingly, the conditions of value-plurality and irreconcilable difference under which we operate today. His principal deficiency is (as he might have said) ‘purely historical’:⁴⁷ that, while fully aware that it was impossible to consider the pursuit of *Wissenschaft* without reference to its

⁴³ Dreijmanis, 79.

⁴⁴ To Karl Voßler 5.5.08, *MWG Briefe*.

⁴⁵ Dreijmanis, 86-7.

⁴⁶ Dreijmanis, 80-1.

⁴⁷ Cf. *MWG* I/9.214, 423.

Why should we read Max Weber today? His conception of Wissenschaft

institutional and public context, he could not know the extent to which the fortunes of research and education would become dependent on material and non-intellectual considerations. On the other hand, the want of legitimacy in any direct challenge by states and politicians to the *intellectual* freedom of universities today is a vindication of a Weberian as of any traditional conception of education and research. He is otherwise an outstanding thinker because he renews the traditional ideal of an independent *Wissenschaft* and suggests realistic ways in which it can be maintained as a meaningful universal pursuit in a modern context. This is partly through the maintenance of traditional doctrines — of *Wissenschaft* as a corporate, transhistorical power worthy of unconditional ethical valuation; the continued rooting of all academic conduct in ethics; continued adherence to the elementary importance of empiricism; and partly through the generation of modern ideas — a conditional “value-freedom”, which remains tied to a conception of ethics; the idea of *Wissenschaft* as not merely protected by traditional corporate freedoms, but as supra- and impersonal; and the recognition of the fundamental ambivalence of specialization, as both indispensable *and* limiting. There are enormous and in principle insuperable difficulties in the situation we inhabit and which Weber describes: besides the dilemma posed by specialization, there is no eternal truth in the human sciences; there is only conditional “value-freedom” and “objectivity”. But these difficulties are not created by human weakness or incapacity, they are ‘iron facts’ created by rationalizing evolution; and regardless of these difficulties, the aspirations to be intellectually honest; to be ethically committed; to do good specialist work; to convey and to control empirically founded reality; to transcend specialism; to communicate between different *Kulturen*; to maintain “value-freedom” and respect difference — all these goals remain. In short, Weber tells us that *Wissenschaft* has not been subverted by modernity but continues to be a valid, ethical vocation. Must we not agree with him ?

Abbreviations used in citation:

MWG: *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* ed. Horst Baier et al. (Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 1984–)

WL: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* ed. J. Winckelmann (Tübingen, 1968³)

Dreijmanis: ed. John Dreijmanis, *Max Webers vollständige Schriften zu Akademischen und politischen Berufen* (Bremen, 2010)

All **translations** from German are my own.

