Max Weber Invented the Crisis of the Humanities

More than 100 years old, his landmark essay is more relevant than ever.

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In the summer of 1917, a group of university students in Munich invited Max Weber to launch a lecture series on “intellectual work as a vocation” with a talk about the scholar’s work. He was, in a way, an odd choice. Fifty-three at the time, Weber hadn’t held an academic job in over a decade. His career had begun promisingly, but in 1899 he suffered a nervous breakdown and gave up his position as a professor of economics at the University of Heidelberg. Supported by the inheritance of his wife, Marianne, he spent years going from clinic to clinic in search of relief. He continued to write about lifelong concerns such as the social effects of religion, contributing articles to scholarly journals while also writing journalistic essays for newspapers and periodicals. Yet in 1917, his last major publication was *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which had originally appeared as two separate essays in 1904 and 1905.

Still, it was understandable why the students in Munich were drawn to Weber. They belonged to the Free Student Alliance, an organization devoted to championing the lofty ideals of the German research university — the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, *Bildung* or moral education, academic freedom, and the democratization of all these goods — at a time when those ideals appeared to be imperiled by disciplinary specialization, state intervention, the influence of industrial capitalism, and the war. Writing over the years as a kind of insider-outsider, Weber had distinguished himself as an extraordinarily erudite and forceful defender of an ideal university.

In 1908, for example, he had taken on the powerful minister in charge of higher education in Prussia, Friedrich Althoff. The case in question concerned the appointment of the economist Ludwig Bernhard to a full professorship at the University of Berlin. The Ministry of Culture and Education had long exercised final authority over all faculty hires, but it typically consulted closely with faculty members before making an official offer. In this case, however, Althoff had, as Weber saw it, simply installed his preferred candidate for reasons that had nothing to do with quality and everything to do with the fact that Bernhard's research agenda advanced the state's interests.

Whether out of conviction or opportunism, many academics supported Althoff's appointment. But Weber insisted that allowing scholarship to be so closely aligned with the state's agenda meant, as he wrote a year later, cultivating "political obedience among university students," and this was sure to prove catastrophic for German universities. It would lead to the "castration" of academic freedom and stunt the "development of a genuine" scholarly character. Universities, he suggested sardonically, may have been better off under the church's influence; at least then they pursued something other than money and power.

The war years had only borne out his fears. Like so many German intellectuals, Weber celebrated the outbreak of hostilities. Yet by the summer of 1917, he had concluded that the war was essentially lost. What proved to be Germany's undoing was the failure of Germans to think for themselves. Neither the credentialed experts of the sprawling state bureaucracy nor the literary aesthetes of its cultural elite had shown any capacity to grapple intelligently and creatively with the problems of the day, and German universities had helped to cause the situation. Academics, intellectuals, and bureaucrats — those

formed by Germany's internationally esteemed universities — had all been guilty of an unreflective compliance to the state and its institutions and had directly contributed to the disasters that now faced the country.

All this must have been very much in the forefront of Weber's mind when, on November 7, 1917, he stepped to the podium to address an audience comprised mostly of students in a small theater connected to the bookshop in Munich where the Free Student Alliance met. Facing an uncertain future, the students, too, must have been thinking about the war. Germany was in the midst of a severe food shortage, and though defeat was by no means a foregone conclusion, a truce was the best that could be hoped for. In the meantime, millions of young men had died.

How, in this context, was one to think of the vocation of the scholar? Walter Benjamin, one of the leaders of an affiliated student group at the University of Berlin, had recently claimed that the vocation of university students was to be "authors of a transformation" of knowledge, the university, and, ultimately, "humanity." A radical call, but one that evoked, that was indeed rooted in, the grand sense of purpose that the architect of the modern German educational system, Wilhelm von Humboldt, had assigned to it some hundred years earlier, when he described the university as the "pinnacle" of the nation's "moral culture."

Yet Weber, to his audience's dismay, began his lecture not by articulating an ideal but rather by delving into the practical challenges and liabilities of academic lives and careers. The university was riddled with structural problems: terrible teaching, workplace discrimination, the exploitation of the labor force, an arbitrary hiring process, and an ever more specialized, businesslike, and consequently uninspiring understanding of the scholar's vocation.

> *Weber turned disciplined, specialized thinking into a distinctly moral example of how to commit oneself to intellectual work.*

All of which his audience was no doubt well aware. Yet Weber didn't offer any suggestions about how to reform working conditions, or much hope that the university as an institution could be transformed. As to specialization, he presented it as a basic feature of scholarly life. Not only was specialization here to stay, but Weber appeared actually to affirm its

value at the expense of more traditional moral education. He went so far as to say that specialization was less of a threat to German scholarship than were those who used the idealism of the past to call the present order in question.

If before the war he had worried about conservatives aligning scholarship too closely with the state, now, as Germany's political and social order teetered, Weber was just as concerned about professors posing as prophets, trying to shape students' souls in the classroom. Professors who sought to fill a void of meaning from the lectern had found an eager audience in Germany's zealous youth. They denounced disciplinary boundaries and intellectual fragmentation in the name of some lost, or future, harmony and wholeness. In doing so, they were undermining their own authority and the legitimacy of the university itself. They were overreaching. What they sought was simply no longer to be had, and had likely never existed. Expert knowledge had dramatically expanded over the course of the previous half century. There were too many disciplinary perspectives and too many competing moral ideals, too much pluralism in too many areas, for any responsible scholar to hold out a hope of integrating them all. Weber was effectively declaring that the mission of the Humboldtian university — to lead people to a higher level of moral consciousness — was no longer viable. So, what was to be done?

In "The Scholar's Work," typically known as "Science as Vocation" (first published in 1919), Weber argues that to responsibly lead a life of the mind in the academy, a person had to recognize that universities shouldn't provide more than a limited moral instruction. Nor should they impart ready-made worldviews. The purpose of universities is to advance scholarship and to educate students by pursuing knowledge in an open-ended way. Institutions of higher learning would be "going beyond the boundaries of scholarship if they were to provide not only knowledge and understanding but also beliefs and 'ideals.'" Scholars had to exercise self-restraint. Acting otherwise would violate professional ethics and undermine the legitimacy of academic freedom, and also close off precisely the space students needed to develop the highest intellectual and moral capacities and commitments.

Paradoxically, a form of moral asceticism was needed to protect the particular moral education that could sustain the scholar's calling within the modern university. One of Weber's names for this asceticism was *Wertfreiheit,* or "value freedom." Often translated as "value neutrality," the term has elicited much criticism. Since Weber's day, it has invited the charge that he was an epistemologically naïve positivist. Yet on more than one

occasion, Weber himself ridiculed the notion that a scholar could ever simply "let the facts speak for themselves" or muster complete disinterest. Scholarship required certain ideals, values, and virtues. In fact, the values that Weber identified as essential for scholarship turn out to resemble the ones that today's advocates of moral education tend to foreground as a counterpoise to research training: inclusiveness, intellectual integrity, courage, and a principled commitment to intellectual and value pluralism, among others. For Weber, research training should include imparting those values, which are at once scholarly and moral.

Weber considered universities uniquely well-equipped to form students into mature, independent, self-reflective subjects with "the capacity to think clearly and 'know what one wants.'" Universities shouldn't shy away from values; rather, they should induce students to reflect conscientiously on the values they presumed to be their own; they should teach students to understand how their own moral claims and values will conflict with those of others, and that acting in accord with their values will have specific social consequences.

For this teaching to happen in a scholarly way, students and university teachers alike need "value freedom," a concept oftentimes mistaken for value neutrality. As Weber understood it, however, value freedom functioned like an imperative to take responsibility for one's freedom and, thus, one's own ultimate commitments and values. Neither specialized scholarship nor the modern, disciplinary university could ground and sustain one's highest ideals and loves. The "ideals" a student "should serve," "the gods he should bow before" are, to Weber, ultimately a matter that students must figure out for themselves and should come down to where their passion lies. Even — indeed, especially — the choice to follow the scholarly calling and adopt its ideals and values can't be justified through scholarly deliberation alone. A measure of faith is necessary.

Weber's embrace of asceticism, empirically grounded scholarship, and value pluralism in "The Scholar's Work" invited immediate criticism. But a more prominent target in recent years has been Weber's account of disenchantment, which puts "de-magicking," or *Entzauberung,* at the center of a master narrative of the West. This narrative has become a popular foil in scholarly discussions of the tenacious persistence of myth, magic of all kinds, the occult, and religion in Western culture. That is, in identifying the continued existence of people who pray or claim to commune with spirits, scholars often claim to be unsettling a reigning comprehensive narrative largely attributed to Weber and "The Scholar's Work."

But Weber didn't suggest that disenchantment was simply another name for secularization. Intensely pious 16th-century Calvinists, he argued in *The Protestant Ethic,* had helped disenchant the world by denying the Catholic sacraments their "magic." Similarly, humanistic scholarship, such as philology, along with the natural and physical sciences, acted as agents of disenchantment by stripping literature and nature of certain mysteries and eroding the belief that the world has in itself, independent of any human activity, "any such thing as a 'meaning'!"

Often overlooked is that in the very lecture in which Weber developed his most extensive account of disenchantment, he also discusses the longing for re-enchantment, transcendence, and utopia — both inside and outside the university. As Weber understood it, the very agents of disenchantment, such as disciplinary, university-based scholarship, had created a desire for re-enchantment, leading to a cult of "authentic experience," especially among cultured elites and intellectuals, those most likely to be fully enmeshed in, if not enthralled with, the modernizing systems of rationality.

Nowhere was the desire for re-enchantment more evident than among those devoted to the modern humanities. German intellectuals and scholars had relatively recently begun to invoke "the humanities" as moral compensation for a world experienced as lacking meaning and value. Reflecting in 1930 on the debate Weber's lecture had provoked over the past decade, the philosopher Erik Wolk described Weber as "the model for the crisis of the modern humanities." Wolk did not mean that Weber had offered an exemplary analysis of the contradictions that characterized the study of art, history, literature, and philosophy in universities; rather, he meant that Weber himself was "the model;" he was the crisis personified.

By performing what the modern disciplinary humanities could offer, Weber embodied their "tragically tense ethos." He had turned disciplined, specialized, and ascetic thinking into a distinctly moral example of how one might choose to live and to commit oneself to intellectual work today. He embodied the contradictions of the crisis of the humanities — that they could be justified both as method and moral formation, as both knowledge and ethos. But for many of his contemporaries, Weber's insistence on a narrow, highly constrained conception of the ends of scholarship was precisely the problem, woefully inadequate to the demands of crisis.

Unlike many of his German contemporaries, Weber did not believe that the world, however disenchanted or rationalized, lacked meaning. The real problem was not a lack of meaning, but rather a surfeit of it, what he termed the "polytheism of values," the proliferation and increasing proximity of distinct values and value orders. As Freud would in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Weber enjoined readers to come to terms with the difficulty of modern life and avoid sham solutions that would make things vastly worse: professors affecting prophetic airs, political and otherwise, in the classroom, and thereby enfeebling the university. In effect, Weber went after the push for re-enchantment that many humanists took to be their vocation, suggesting such humanists lacked intellectual maturity and "manliness," and more than a few struck back.

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But Weber also offered a vision of scholarship as a meaningful and deeply moral way of life. He sought to combine idealism and realism to preserve the ethical integrity and moral legitimacy of the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Weber repeatedly tells his readers that without a visceral passion for scholarship that scholarship itself cannot entirely account for, it makes little sense for young people to subject themselves to the vagaries — indeed, the horrors — of the conditions of labor in the university. Given the poor pay and arbitrary hiring process, scholarship and intellectual work have to generate "passion" as only a not-entirely-rationalizable belief in an ultimate ideal can in order to make any sense as a profession. Scholarship may be an agent of disenchantment, and re-enchantment may threaten scholarship, but scholarship also requires enchantment, a passion that can't be fully accounted for.

Weber addresses the need for ideals as well as an empirically based assessment of the world — of an internal passion and a frank account of reality — by adapting a term of religious derivation to modern times, the word that appears in the titles of "The Scholar's Work," as well as in the second lecture Weber delivered in the Munich series, "The Politician's Work": *Beruf,* or what we translate variously as "calling," "vocation," or "work." In order to articulate the paradoxical notion of a true calling in a time when the gods who might issue it have absconded or been drowned out by modernity's rational structures, Weber draws on

the analysis of Calvinism that he had presented more than a decade earlier in *The Protestant Ethic* but had continued to return to as part of his wide-ranging studies of world religions in the final decade of his life.

For Weber, "vocation" had two meanings: a traditionally religious one, as in a calling from God, and a professional one, as in one's job or employment. Vocation referred to both an individual form of specialization and a social category or form of organization. Ultimately, vocation became an end in itself. One worked not only to earn money but also to be part of something greater than oneself. The division and specialization of labor were not problems to be solved; they were moral solutions for a new reality. To lead a meaningful life in the modern West was to commit to a vocation and be transformed by it. Weber considered scholarship and politics two such vocations. The scholar and politician lived, as he put it, not only "from" their vocation, earning a living from it, but also "for" it. They lived from it psychologically, deriving meaning and value from the role they served in a social world.

For most of Germany's cultured elite, Weber's vision of politics and scholarship amounted to a bleak, existential liberalism, a hopeless capitulation to modernity made up as a heroic realism. Weber had poked a hornet's nest that had formed over decades, unleashing a swarm of ideas about rebirth, renewal, and the recovery not just of scholarship and politics but about which ways of living and working in the modern world might be meaningful.

One of the questions raised in Germany in the 1920s that continues to be debated, and in our view misunderstood, is what Weber meant by value-free or value-freedom. American sociologists, led by Talcott Parsons, embraced the concept and celebrated Weber as its founding figure, as they sought to develop a scientific and methodologically rigorous social science that could serve the modern liberal state.

Max Horkheimer, the German philosopher and leading member of the Frankfurt School, remembered Weber this way too. Weber's refusal to use his scholarly acumen to help construct a better society, Horkheimer said in 1962, decades after hearing the politics lecture as a student, was a result of his commitment to value-freedom. This inhibited his thinking and trapped him in the values of a liberal "bourgeois society."

An influential critique from the left, that of the German émigré Hans Gerth and the young Columbia sociologist C. Wright Mills, by contrast, took Weber to be a nostalgist. In their introduction to *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, which included the first widely available English translations of Weber's two vocation lectures, they suggested that Weber

had been a reluctant advocate of technical rationality. He was ultimately an "old-fashioned liberal" for whom "the decline of the humanist and the ascendency of the expert" were further signs of the "diminished chances for freedom" in Western modernity.

All of these readings fall short. They misunderstand the tension at the center of "The Scholar's Work" and "The Politician's Work." This tension is the double bind that is both the burden and the possibility of living in a disenchanted world. In a world that abounds with competing values and moral claims, what Weber called "the polytheism of values," intellectual work is of paramount importance. If anything binds humans across space and time, it is, according to Weber, their capacity to create meaning. The purpose of intellectual work is to help make possible meaningful forms of life for this world.

More than a hundred years later, the questions Weber faced are still with us. Our own liberal institutions have proven not to be as robust as many imagined, with ascendant far-right movements, intensifying inequality, endless war, and feckless cultural and political elites undermining confidence in the durability of democracy itself. The invisible hand of history, the market, or Reason have failed to guide us to universal peace and prosperity. To read Weber's vocation lectures today is to be reminded of the moral urgency of sober, unglamorous, disciplined thinking in times of crisis. It is to be reminded, as Weber put it in "The Politician's Work," that ethics can be and often are "used in morally disastrous ways" in both the academic and political spheres, ways that preclude an honest and responsible reckoning with the world in which we find ourselves.

On the campuses of today's universities, especially in the United States, student activists are making moral demands and defending ideals, but mostly outside of the classroom and lecture halls and within a bureaucratic system of moral management. While some scholars try to accommodate them, many more simply work to keep these higher-education factories running on their own adjunct labor. And most presidents at our leading universities muster ceremonial acknowledgments of the institutions' past purposes but spend their days overseeing multibillion-dollar global enterprises. Who but a blessed, tenured few could continue to believe that scholarship is a vocation?

To read "The Scholar's Work," then, is to be confronted with the possibility that our own universities are, for many, inhospitable places for pursuing intellectual work as a calling. Since our duty as scholars is to understand our current conditions and to take responsibility for our own future, these are questions we have to answer for ourselves.

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