NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

CHARISMA AND DISENCHANTMENT

MAX WEBER (1864–1920) was born in Erfurt, near Weimar, Germany, the eldest of seven siblings. His father was a civil servant who played an active role in politics. Weber studied philosophy and history at the University of Heidelberg, completed a dissertation on medieval commercial law at the University of Berlin, and rose quickly through the academic ranks, becoming a full professor of economics at the University of Freiburg in 1894. At the same time, his relations with his father grew increasingly contentious, and when, in 1897, after quarreling with his son, his father died, Weber developed a severe nervous condition that led him to abandon academia. Supported by the inheritance of his wife, Marianne Schnitger, he continued to pursue a career as an independent scholar, and, in 1903, the publication of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* made him widely known as a bold and controversial analyst of the nature of modern society. Weber was initially an enthusiastic supporter of Germany's aims in World War I, but his views changed as the war dragged on, and after the German defeat he helped to found the liberal German Democratic Party, stood (unsuccessfully) for a seat in parliament, and served as an adviser to the committee that drafted the constitution of the Weimar Republic. *Economy and Society*, his magnum opus, appeared shortly after his unexpected death from the Spanish Flu.

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CHARISMA AND DISENCHANTMENT

The Vocation Lectures

MAX WEBER

Edited and with an introduction by

PAUL REITTER *and* **CHAD WELLMON**

Translated from the German by

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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

nyrb

New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS
435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
www.nyrb.com

The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Weber, Max, 1864–1920, author. | Weber, Max, 1864–1920. Wissenschaft als Beruf. English | Weber, Max, 1864-1920. Politik als Beruf. English.
Title: Charisma and disenchantment : the vocation lectures / author, Max Weber ; introduction by Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon ; translated by Damion Searls.
Other titles: Lectures. Selections. English | On being a scholar today.
Description: New York : New York Review Books, 2019. | Series: New York Review Books classics
Identifiers: LCCN 2019025136 (print) | LCCN 2019025137 (ebook) | ISBN 9781681373898 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781681373904 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Science—Philosophy. | Political science—Philosophy. | Learning and scholarship—Philosophy.
Classification: LCC Q147 .W413 2019 (print) | LCC Q147 (ebook) | DDC 320.01—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019025136
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019025137

ISBN 978-1-68137-389-8
Available as an electronic book; ISBN 978-1-68137-390-4

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

I

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 on the work of the scholar. He was, in a way, an odd choice. Fifty-three at the time, Weber hadn't held an academic job in almost two decades. His career had begun promisingly, but in 1899 Weber 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 had spent years going from clinic to clinic in search of relief, while continuing to work on two of his lifelong interests—the individual and collective meaning of religion, and universal forms of rationalization—and contribute articles to scholarly journals and essays and opinion pieces to the press. Yet after a public career of close to twenty years, 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.

But it was understandable why the students in Munich were drawn to Weber. They belonged to the Bavarian chapter of 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—at a time when those ideals appeared to be imperiled by disciplinary specialization, state intervention, the influence of industrial capitalism, and now a world 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 that in some important ways aligned with the institution that the members of the alliance wished for.

In 1908, for example, Weber had challenged the powerful minister in charge of higher education in Prussia, Friedrich Althoff, accusing him of violating the ideals of academic freedom and merit. The case in question concerned the appointment of the economist Ludwig Bernhard to a full professorship at the University of Berlin, the largest and most prestigious institution of higher learning in Germany. The Ministry of Culture and Education, and in practice Althoff himself, had long exercised final authority over all faculty hires, but it typically consulted closely with faculty members before making an 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 fit with the state's material interests.

Even more to Weber's dismay, many academics had supported Althoff. In 1909, Conrad Bornhak, a historian at the University of Berlin, wrote an essay that stressed the importance of hiring university instructors with patriotic views—who else could be trusted to train young people to serve the state and the church loyally? For conservative academics like Bornhak, there was no tension between patriotism and a stated commitment to the scholarly ideals and virtues of free

inquiry. In the tradition of Prussian historians such as Leopold von Ranke and Heinrich von Treitschke, they regarded the German state as an agent of history's underlying purpose. To oppose the state was to oppose reason itself, and to emphasize the state's greatness was to stress what was objectively true.

Weber for his part dismissed such thinking as absurd and dangerous. In response to Bornhak, he wrote that cultivating "political obedience among university students" on behalf of the state was sure to prove catastrophic for German universities and scholarship. Funding and advancing academic studies on such grounds 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 were used to pursue something other than money and power.

What had happened next had only borne out his fears. Weber had initially been a strong supporter of the war. The day after Germany declared war against Russia on August 1, 1914, he was so excited that he reported for duty to the garrison in Heidelberg where, much to his disappointment, he was judged too old and physically unfit for the battlefield. He accepted a position in the military bureaucracy, and sought through his writings to sway Germany's war policy on everything from the occupation of Belgium to the escalation of submarine warfare and voting rights for returning soldiers. Yet by the summer of 1917, he had concluded that the war was essentially lost. The failing that proved to be Germany's undoing was that Germans couldn't think for themselves. "The familiar structure of bureaucratic paternalism," he wrote, had habituated Germans to act as "objects,

not agents." Neither the credentialed experts of Germany's 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 education had helped to cause the situation. Emerging from universities that set out to be "sites of real political formation" and moral education, academics, intellectuals, and bureaucrats had all been guilty of an unreflective compliance with the state and its institutions and had directly contributed to the disasters that now faced the country and the German people.

All this must have been very much in the forefront of Weber's and his audience's minds when, on November 7, 1917, he stepped to the podium to address nearly a hundred students in a small theater connected to the bookshop where the Free Student Alliance met. Germany was enduring a severe food shortage because of the war, 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 a 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 moral 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, refused to endorse

Humboldt's exalted sense of purpose. He 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, that ideal community, was riddled with structural problems: terrible teaching, workplace discrimination, the adjunctification and exploitation of the labor force, an arbitrary hiring process, and an ever more specialized and businesslike and, thus, uninspired, understanding of the scholar's vocation.

All of which his audience was no doubt well aware. Yet Weber didn't offer any suggestions about how to reform academic 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 it here to stay but Weber appeared actually to affirm the values of specialized research at the expense of moral education. He went so far as to say that specialization was less of a threat to German scholarship than those who used the idealism of the past to call the present order into question. If before the war Weber had worried about conservatives aligning scholarship too closely with the state, now, as Germany's political and social order teetered, he 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 sermonized and 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 actually 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, there was too much pluralism in too many areas for any responsible scholar to hold out a hope of integrating them all. Weber, in saying this, was effectively declaring that the mission of the Humboldtian university—to lead people to a higher level of moral consciousness, the mission German scholars had fretted over and yet clung to for years—was now no longer viable.

What was to be done? To lead the life of the mind within the context of academia, at this particular historical moment, Weber argued began with the duty to recognize that universities cannot provide more than a limited moral instruction or deliver ready-made worldviews. Universities are not institutions for the inculcation of ultimate moral values. Their purpose is to advance scholarship and to educate students in doing so, and they 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 the duty, and Weber considered this an obligation, to exercise self-restraint and instill an unflinching honesty in their students.

Anything else would be a violation of professional ethics, an abuse and undermining of the legitimacy of academic authority and freedom while closing off precisely the space students needed to develop their own intellectual and moral capacities and commitments.

A form of asceticism was necessary to sustain the integrity of scholarship and, by extension, the modern university. For Weber, this moral asceticism has the force of an obligation,

the commitment of faith. Even—indeed, especially—if the choice to follow the scholarly calling can't be grounded through scholarly deliberation alone, a measure of faith is necessary. The moral purpose of the university is to inculcate character by forging this scholarly asceticism. Universities are uniquely well-equipped to form students into mature, independent, self-reflective subjects with "the capacity to think clearly and 'know what one wants.'" For this reason, too, universities must not tell a student how to live. They can teach students to understand how values conflict with one another, and that acting in accord with their values will have specific social consequences, which is a part of having "genuine character," as Weber had put it in an earlier essay. The "ideals he should serve," "gods he should bow before" are ultimately a matter for the individual conscience and should come down to where one's passion lies.

It is in this light that Weber introduces his famous and much contested term "the disenchantment of the world." This disenchantment is not simply a question of subjective disposition but, more fundamentally, a historical process that stretched over centuries. One might mistakenly think this is a question of the loss of religious belief, that it is another name for secularization. But intensely pious Calvinists helped to disenchant the world, as Weber argued in *The Protestant Ethic*, by denying the Catholic sacraments their "magic." By refusing to accord explanatory power to ultimately unknowable forces, humanistic scholarship and the natural and physical sciences act as agents of disenchantment. Modern scholarship, whether philology or physics, strips the world of certain forms of magic and mysteries; it de- or unmagics, as the German term *Entzauberung* literally suggests.

Weber was aware that rationalization and disenchantment could weigh heavily on the soul. Rational frameworks, such as the taken-for-granted habits that oriented the students' daily lives, could accumulate over time and become entrenched and alien. What were once personally meaningful disciplines or structures for living could become impersonal, meaningless, and simply coercive. It was in this way that modern life could be experienced, as Weber wrote in *The Protestant Ethic*, as a "steel structure" in which free, conscious, meaningful action was an exceptional achievement. A disenchanted world could be "dark" and "wintry."

Modern scholarship and the sciences had helped to cause a crisis of meaning, and it was this crisis of meaning that was driving the students' yearning for "authentic experience" and their professors to pose as prophets in the classroom. People were in fact trying to reenchant knowledge within the university. Weber spoke of "all the hunting after 'authentic experience'" in academic culture as deriving from "weakness." "For," he went on to say, "it is weakness to be unable to face the destiny of the age head-on." The crisis of meaning could not simply be wished away.

In response Weber offered a corrective, a bleak but bracing analysis of the state, purpose, and prospects of education and intellectual work in the uncertain modern world. He told his audience that if scholarship and "science can do anything, it is precisely to uproot and destroy the belief that the world has *any such thing* as a 'meaning'!," that purpose and meaning inhered in the world independent of human action. One student who was present later wrote that Weber had transformed scholarship and university study into "respectable suicide, a path to death that leads through stoic heroism."

2

Weber delivered his lecture on scholarship on the day Vladimir Lenin seized control of the Russian Revolution. A year later, the Free Student Alliance invited Weber to return to Munich to deliver a second lecture about politics. By the time he did so, on January 28, 1919, World War I had ended with the defeat of Germany and Austria, and both the Second Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire had collapsed. Revolution had broken out in Berlin, though it would be rapidly and brutally suppressed there, and had spread to Munich, where Kurt Eisner, a former philosophy student, journalist, and leader of the independent socialists, declared the Bavarian Socialist Republic.

Weber was keenly interested in the question of what kind of shape the new postwar Germany should take. Politics, he had once written in a letter to a friend, was his "dear, secret love." After Germany's surrender in 1918, the German domestic secretary, the liberal Berlin politician Hugo Preuss, invited him to serve on a commission to design a new German constitution, and for a few weeks, he had even sought his own seat in the National Assembly, only to find his path blocked by party leaders. The war, Weber felt, had revealed the severe limitations of Germany's political and social order. It was not just a question of the Kaiser's inept leadership. Weber became convinced that Germany's state bureaucracy had replaced political traditions, educational cultures, and social ideals with a "credentialing machine" whose purpose was not to educate for democracy and self-government but rather to maintain the authority and power of the bureaucratic system. In order to build a new democratic political order, Germany needed a leader with revolutionary legitimacy;

it needed a "monarch who was elected" by the people, or a *Reichspräsident*.

If Weber was dismissive of the status quo of the past, he was no less so of the new revolutionary program and its leadership. Who, he asked in a lecture titled "Socialism" that he delivered in Vienna in June 1918, could lead postwar Germany? What kind of character was required? He lambasted many of the best-known socialists of the day—Trotsky, most notably—as utopians who wanted "war in the interest of revolution" and as a means to "a higher form of development of civil society," even as the current catastrophe of violence and death had not yet ended. He also poured scorn on several German socialists, the onetime journalist Eisner among them, depicting them as "literary dilettantes" who had stumbled into politics with nothing to offer except salvific rhetoric. "A new Germany," Weber wrote, required "well-trained business minds" who could ensure an ample supply of raw materials and foreign financial credit, especially from America. Germany's revolutionary socialists were hardly equipped to handle "the naked and ruthless power of foreign capital" or the ascendance of reactionary forces on the right.

It was, indeed, only after hearing that the Free Student Alliance intended to invite Eisner to lecture to them if Weber did not accept their invitation that Weber agreed to return to Munich. Standing in the small theater where he had delivered "The Scholar's Work," he once more told the students in the audience that he was certain to disappoint them.

The students may have hoped that Weber would weigh in directly on the political turmoil just outside the auditorium and across Germany. He took, instead, a broader view. What was "the *meaning* of political activity in one's life"? Why, he

asked, do those who are governed and ruled accept claims to authority by those who govern and rule? This led him to begin with a historical account of the development of political authority and legitimacy. Weber sketches a history of the types and characteristics of political leaders and structures, from magicians and prophets to warlords and chieftains, but he focuses on the distinctly political figures he claims are "specific to the Western world," including the demagogues, party leaders, and parliamentarians who are not leaders but rather cogs in the growing political machine. They are members of an active political class distinct from the castes of pre-political societies. This machine and this class are defining features of modernity. It is among this second group that the first "professional politicians" emerge, that is, people who engage in politics "both to earn a living in the material sense and to give meaning to their life in an ideal sense." Weber then makes his most important distinction. He argues that there are two ways of doing the work of politics. A person can either live "for" politics or "from" politics. Someone living for politics makes politics his life's work and seeks meaning from it; someone living from politics simply earns income from it. It can be your vocation or your occupation.

Those people for whom politics is a vocation must have the qualities of leadership: passion, a sense of responsibility, and clarity of vision. Such leaders, Weber argued, had emerged in both England and the United States. The political systems of those countries had brought forth men who had proved capable of developing and controlling the machine of modern mass party politics. However, the top-down structure of Bismarckian Germany, the power of the state bureaucracy and civil service, and the political impotence of the parliament

had combined to ensure that no real political leaders could develop. But now Germany faced a choice: "You either have a democracy with leaders and 'machines,' or a leaderless democracy, meaning the rule of 'professional politicians' with no vocation—with none of the inner charismatic qualities that make someone a leader."

Weber positions the ideal politician at the ethical mean between, on the one hand, utopian hope and revolutionary fervor and, on the other, the unconstrained pursuit and exercise of pure power. Socialists like Eisner he slots into the former category, attributing to them a belief in the historical inevitability of a future in which no human exercises authority over another, of a politics purified of power. He slots politicians in the mold of Bismarck into the latter category, attributing to them and their so-called realpolitik the desire for power for its own sake and lack of any orienting purpose or meaning. Neither of these views promises to form true political leadership, since realist political leaders fail to take responsibility for or even to care about the consequences of their actions in the present beyond simply wanting their actions to keep them in power. The promise of salvation or the lust for power absolves them of responsibility and justifies, to their minds, almost any action.

By contrast, Weber's ideal politician needs clear-sighted rationality and professionalism. But he also needs something more than that. He needs charisma, a word that has become a cliché for the compelling politician with a certain je ne sais quois, but which Weber introduced as a political virtue. It is originally a religious term, meaning "gift of grace," and Weber uses it to describe the politician who acts freely within the constraints—social, economic, etc.—that circumstances

inevitability impose on his actions. This is the basis of the devotion of his followers, who enjoy the psychological satisfaction of believing in not just an abstract set of principles or an anonymous bureaucracy but in a person who can be known, and so forms the basis of his authority. This gift can neither be taught like a technical skill nor entirely robbed by rational structures. As such, it defies rational grounding and marks a person as extraordinary. Weber chooses this historically religious term in order to escape the apparent circularity of his claim: that the charismatic politician makes an extraordinary impression on his followers, which marks him as extraordinary. Despite its seemingly super-rational grounds, charisma is real. Weber chooses the term, that is, to make it clear that even in a disenchanted age, knowledge and action are grounded in conviction, in faith, in a fundamental ethical commitment, a passion, which sets the charismatic politician apart from and above others but which is also the source of his responsibility. Like the scholar, the politician acts in a world without a guaranteed future or fixed values. Politics, like scholarly research, is open-ended and uncertain, and its fruits are likely ephemeral. Like the scholar, the politician proves his true mettle by recognizing this without evasion. Thus Weber writes:

> What does move me, immensely, is when a *mature* human being—whether old or young in years—takes real responsibility, with his whole soul, for the consequences of his actions and, following an ethics of responsibility, stops at some point and says: "Here I stand. I can do no other."...To that extent, the ethics of personal conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolutely opposed: they complement each other,

> and only in conjunction do they define the true human being who is *capable* of doing the true "work of politics."

The politician, or the scholar, Weber is saying to his audience, who offers you a vision of complete and universal redemption is misleading you.

There were enormously challenging practical problems facing Germans after the war. Weber, however, was convinced that Germany's political crisis was an ethical one. Indeed, the question that was foremost on his mind was, given the social necessity of the politician's calling and work, how could idealism and realism be combined to preserve the ethical integrity or the moral legitimacy of the pursuit of power?

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 third term of religious derivation to modern times, the word that appears in the titles of both lectures: *Beruf*, or what in this volume 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 left, fallen silent, 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 one's job or employment. Vocation referred to both an individual form of specialization and a social category or form of organization. In the terms of Weber's reading of the

sixteenth-century French theologian John Calvin, to fulfill one's calling was to act on an individual belief (that one had, in fact, been called to do and serve something in particular) but also to fit into an extra-individual, specialized, and rational organization of the social world. This distinctly Western conception of vocation emerged as a possible solution to the problem of meaning. The problem of meaning, or its absence, was not an effect of some grand, inevitable process of secularization or a general atrophy of religious belief and practice. Glossing Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), Weber wrote in *The Protestant Ethic*:

> To apply the standards of earthly "justice" to [God's] sovereign order is meaningless . . . because He, and He alone, is free, that is, bound to no law, and His decrees are only intelligible to and can only be known by us as He deems it good to share them with us. It is upon these fragments of the eternal truth alone that we can hold ourselves. Everything else—the meaning of our individual fate—is shrouded by dark mysteries, which are impossible and presumptuous to plumb.

With any transcendent life-ordering meaning shrouded in mystery and the free gift of grace wholly independent of human action, Calvinists adapted ancient ascetic ideals and practices to a new order of life: an inner-worldly asceticism whose purpose was not to extract humans from this world but to enable them to serve God actively and faithfully by exercising rational control over and reflection upon their actions and their lives in this world.

As the grip of Calvinism and Western Christianity loosened on the world, people across Europe and North America

began to use "vocation" to refer to particular ways of ordering a life through activity in the world or work. 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.

3

The audiences who witnessed the two lectures are said to have been rapt, riveted, but also repelled by what many considered to be Weber's emptying of scholarship and politics of any sense of true meaning and value. Some thought that he had reduced scholarship to a value-neutral positivism and politics to a calculating realism unmoored by any convictions. Both of these readings, endlessly repeated over the past century, seem to us wrong and to misapprehend the concept central to both lectures: vocation. Like charisma, vocation returns the work of the politician and scholar to the realm of religion.

In Weber's disenchanted world values cannot be avoided, and the importance of vocation and a life's work in the lectures has everything to do with what he described as the "polytheism of values." He considered this phenomenon

particularly acute among intellectuals for whom the problem was not a lack of meaning but a surfeit of it. The gradual erosion of shared universal meanings and comprehensive accounts of the good and true had encouraged powerful and dangerous cravings for fixed universal knowledge and values, but vocation could constrain these.

Recognizing the amoral actuality of the world—that no natural moral order will be revealed, that no providential good will be made manifest, that no reason will work through history to reconcile moral conflicts—is the beginning of ethical responsibility for both the politician and the scholar, two exemplary albeit ambiguous figures. Weber considered them to be moral agents in a world where meaning was always questioned and contested. They practiced the intellectual work necessary to create and cultivate the rational disciplines, practices, and institutions that could sustain meaningful lives in a modern age. But as vocations—distinct, meaning-making orders of life—they needed attentive, careful cultivation and devoted resources lest they be completely absorbed by economic and state interests or the pure pursuit of power or prestige.

In the summer of 1919, the prestigious Berlin press Duncker and Humblot published *The Scholar's Work* and *The Politician's Work* as two separate volumes. By 1933, more than two dozen essays or books responding to the former had appeared in print, not to mention countless asides, footnotes, and comments in other texts. Max Scheler, postwar Germany's leading Catholic philosopher and intellectual, called Weber's lecture "the most devastating document of an age we have the misfortune to call our own." At stake, he contended, echoing a common claim in 1920s Germany, was nothing less than "the human." For most of Germany's cultured elite,

Weber's vision of politics and scholarship amounted to a bleak liberalism, a hopeless capitulation to modernity made up as a heroic realism, or a soulless technical rationality. 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 of what ways of living and working in the modern world—and, in particular, a postwar Germany in which an entire intellectual, moral, and political order had collapsed—could be meaningful.

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

Max Horkheimer, the German philosopher and leading member of the Frankfurt School, read Weber this way too. Responding to Parsons at conference in 1962, he described how as a student he had attended both of Weber's lectures and said this about *The Politician's Work*: "The lecture hall was filled to capacity. And the frustration and disappointment were almost palpable. For two to three hours, we listened to finely balanced definitions of the Russian systems, astutely formulated ideal types of how different kinds of apolitical advisers could be organized. Everything was so precise, so rigorously scholarly, so value-free that we all went dolefully home." Weber's refusal to use his scholarly acumen to construct a better society, Horkheimer continued, 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 American critique from the left, that of the German émigré Hans Gerth and the young American 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 vocation lectures: the double bind that is both the burden and the possibility of living in a disenchanted world. In a world permeated with values and moral claims, 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.

As the short twentieth century began, Weber was trying to figure out how politicians and scholars should understand their institutions and lives together in light of their responsibility to a future that seemed highly uncertain. A hundred years later the questions he faced are still with us. Our own liberal institutions and democracies 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 inevitability of liberal democracy. 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, 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 hall and within a bureaucratic system of moral management. While some scholars try to accommodate them, many more simply try to keep these higher-education factories running on 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?

Meanwhile, what Weber termed the "polytheism of values" remains a central challenge of social and political life. Our social media are platforms for moral performances that, to borrow a phrase from Weber, fan "the flame of pure conviction" and confirm our disdain for those who are different or simply less certain. These same media have helped make vanity and irresponsibility into political virtues as climate change and disinformation campaigns threaten our very survival. Who could confuse politics with vocation?

But to read the vocation lectures today is also to be reminded of our responsibility to the future, since Weber, in following his passion for scholarship, determined this to be the politician's first and last responsibility.

—Paul Reitter *and*
Chad Wellmon