

Editorial

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The current geopolitical instability centred on the Middle East re-confirms the importance of Max Weber's studies of the world religions, specifically those founded on the revelations of a transcendent, all-knowing and all-powerful god, demanding obedience of its believers. These are Christianity, Islam, Judaism. The inflamed locus of these world religions is the al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem, the city sacred to the three Abrahamic religions. In their article on Hans Joas's *The Power of the Sacred*, Herbert De Vries and Guido Vanheeswijck remind us that the secular and the holy, in its migrations, exist side by side in the contemporary world. The current war between the Hamas-led statelet of Gaza and the Israeli state—a battle which is trampling on the rules of war and respect for civilian lives—has reached deep into the heart of universities across the world. Students in their coming of political age commit ostentatiously to a cause, and many from exilic diasporas embrace, argue about, and profess their loyalties. Academic staff in politics, sociology, history, area and cultural studies, law, and philosophy, who across the world must number of tens of thousands, are looked to by students to provide analysis and to give answers and opinions. The current events in the Middle East spill bloodily across their own syllabuses and into their classrooms. Suddenly academic positions take on the urgency of existential choices: what to think, what to say, whether to stay silent, whether to take a position? The academy can feel less like a safe place than a battleground, not just for students but also for leaders who are held accountable, in the most glaring public way, to diverse stakeholders.

Max Weber stood for the autonomy of the university and the freedom of learning and teaching for students and academic staff alike. He experienced a complete breakdown of these freedoms at Munich University in 1919, as recounted by Bertram Schefold in MWS 23.2.¹

1. Bertram Schefold, 'Planned Introduction to the Abriß der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte Mit- und Nachschriften 1919-1920 in the Max Weber Gesamtausgabe', *Max Weber Studies* 23.2 (2023): 149-155.

Munich was undergoing a civil war between socialism and right wing conservatism, with armed students and returning soldiers facing off behind barbed wire and barricades. Anti-semitism was rampant and Freikorps-supporting students disrupted his lectures.² Weber had refused to condone the assassination of the socialist Prime Minister, Kurt Eisner (of Jewish heritage), and said legal justice must be followed in the trial of the assassin. The university and its provost were powerless to stop violence and demonstrations engulfing the university, and the hostile views of conservative Catholicism were expressed by faculty staff against Weber.

In the worst of times even strong institutional autonomy is overwhelmed by civil and ideological conflict. After these events Weber reaffirmed his decision not to engage anymore in politics, a decision he first made after returning in May 1919 in disgust from Versailles and the imposed terms of its treaty. But as we know, politics was always his passion and turning his back on it was a double abnegation: on politics itself and what the academic could say about politics. This was a longstanding tension in Weber's life, stretching back to 1904 and his essay on 'Objectivity'. Observers like Karl Jaspers noted how Weber's personality was stressed to the limit by this self-imposed denial. Within the academic sphere he sought to impose similar protocols on his fellow researchers and teaching academics. Lecturers should not pontificate from the lectern but rather remain mute on their own political positions – including their deepest convictions. Stephen Turner in his article on the current situation, 'Max Weber and the Two Universities', terms this a self-denying ordinance, one that does not lay down new worldviews but demands the rights to speak freely within science.

The epistemological side is well known: what is factual, what is empirically the case, *should* remain separate from what should be and ought to be done (Weber was well aware of the irony in this assertion); the *Sein* must be logically set apart from the *Sollen*:

It is not the business of universities to teach a world view that is either 'pro' or 'anti' the state, or indeed any other world view. They are not institutions whose function is to teach ultimate beliefs. They analyze facts and their real conditions, laws and connections, and they analyze concepts and their logical presupposition and contents. They do not and cannot teach what should happen, for this is a matter of ultimate personal value judgements, a world view that cannot be 'demonstrated' like a scientific theorem'.³

2. Carl Levy, 'Max Weber, Anarchism and Libertarian Culture: Personality and Power Politics', in S. Whimster (ed.), *Max Weber and the Culture of Anarchy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999): 99-105.

3. Max Weber, 'Academic Freedom in the Universities', in Gordon C. Wells

In a highly politicised world, and one divided by conflicting moral values, this pronouncement is far harder to observe (in the double sense of to 'adhere to' and 'to notice'); and in a this-wordly sense it places an difficult obligation on the academic. Carlos Frade in a recent article has pointed out that, for Weber, the restraint on promoting or condemning worldviews amounted to subjecting oneself to a code of conduct, speech, and writing that, in its turn, drove the investigation of empirical reality.⁴ *Rerum cognoscere causas*, as the Webbs at the newly founded London School of Economics called it, was not a prosaic occupation, it was the scientific mission itself. Michel Coutu, in his article, notes that despite Weber's strong political views, even early in his career he maintained a steely objectivity in analysing the conditions and consequences of different labour contracts in his agrarian sociology of imperial Germany. Establishing the part of multiple causes, along with interpreting the effects of culture and religion on economy, and vice versa, requires passion and commitment, a responsibility to science; that is, this academic ethos must prevail if we are prepared to go beyond totalising speculations and scientism in Weber's day and all-encompassing 'structural' explanations today.

Weber's principle of academic freedom operated in practice across a kind of sliding scale: between the obligation to refrain from personal value-judgements in the university (specifically in the lecture hall), on the one side, and a demand for open discussion and impartial examination of factual statements and value ideals at the highest levels of academic life (especially in scholarly societies such as the German Sociological Society), on the other side.⁵ Throughout his career – from his early academic posts in Berlin, Freiburg and Heidelberg (1892–99) to his later appointments in Vienna and Munich (1918–20), with the extraordinarily productive years in between while on sick leave – Weber acknowledged that the intellectual work of the modern scholar is sustained by the historically and culturally specific *value of scientific objectivity*. The freedom to teach and to learn, which is related to yet distinct from freedom of speech and expression, is a personal as well as a professional commitment that must be protected by the university and other public institutions. Indeed,

(ed.), *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations* (trans. John Dreijmanis; New York: Algora Publishing, 2008): 72.

4. Carlos Frade, 'The Subversive Weber: Subjectivation and World-Confrontation in Max Weber's Teaching', *Cosmos and History; The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 19.2 (2023): 73-102.

5. Thomas Kemple, 'Academic Freedom Between Scientific Objectivity and Cultural Values', *The Routledge International Handbook on Max Weber*, ed. Alan Sica. London: Routledge (2012): 118-128.

Weber's point, these only exist through the demos of the university itself. In Weber's day procedures for the hiring and promotion of faculty were under constant threat of political interference by the Prussian Ministry of Education⁶ (he openly acknowledged the personal favouritism that led to his own appointment). Today university departments, research faculties, and a growing precariat of underpaid teachers are increasingly dependent on philanthropic and corporate donors, private and public grants, state-controlled budget allocations and commercial interests for their own job security. In this context, academic freedom entails the capacity, the right, and the responsibility to examine and criticize not only ill-conceived, unjust, and anti-academic policies of political and financial decision-makers, but also the complicity of university administrators in capitulating to such policies. Free thinking, open inquiry, and autonomous learning increasingly entail the difficult work of analyzing uncomfortable truths, posing hard questions, and acknowledging hypocritical evasions about how the modern university itself operates.

For Weber, value-freedom in research, teaching, and learning is one among many liberal values that a modern society with a capitalist economy and a bureaucratic state must embrace as a matter of principle and as a practical condition of its own survival. Heidelberg enrollment was under a thousand, mostly male and German-born students in 1900, and its faculty was small and for the most part from similar social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, in contrast to the 50% of populations now attending university in advanced countries and the shrinking professoriate employed to teach them. Despite the racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and gender diversity of today's university students, managerially minded administrators and careerist faculty tend to treat them as a homogeneous mass of paying clients and knowledge consumers. In addition, the boundaries of scholarly debate and academic discussion now extend well beyond the classroom and campus into online curricula and virtual forums, global platforms which are for the most part designed, created, and controlled by private companies for profit. Under these conditions, Weber's admonitions on pronouncing value-judgements in academic settings may seem old-fashioned at best or unrealistic at worst. Nevertheless, his postulate of value-freedom is not just a personal confession of professional modesty relative to the more consequential work of business and political leaders, but above all a pragmatic recognition of the institutional limits of intellectual spaces

6. Sam Whimster, 'Review Essay. On Academic Freedom. Max Weber, *Hochschulwesen und Wissenschaftspolitik. Schriften und Reden 1895-1920*', *Max Weber Studies* 19.2 (2009): 256-57. <https://doi.org/10.15543/maxweberstudies.19.2.246>

such as the university classroom, the scholarly society, and academic journal in promoting justice and fairness.

The refusal to engage in value judgements in these contexts is not based on any assumed consensus and should not be taken as an excuse for quiescence.

From the point of view of the demand for the 'value freedom' of empirical analysis, it is therefore far from sterile, let alone absurd, to discuss valuations: but if the discussion of the kind are to be useful, one has to realize what their true purpose is. The elementary precondition of such discussions is to understand that [certain] ultimate valuations may in principle and irreconcilably *diverge*: 'to understand all' is not 'to forgive all'; and in itself, an understanding of another person's position does not in any way lead to an acceptance of it.⁷

There is an intellectual imperative to discuss contentious ethical commitments, to investigate contradictory and inconvenient facts, and not simply to take their construed and false dissemination as given. At the very least, researching and analyzing the historical sources and consequences of religious ethno-nationalism and their relation to secular democratic constitutions are tasks that lie within the autonomous purview of the university, whatever outside stakeholders might think.

7. 'The Meaning of "Value-Freedom" in the Sociological and Economic Sciences', in H.H. Bruun and S. Whimster (eds.), *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings* (trans. H.H. Bruun; London and New York: Routledge, 2012): 312.