

Radicalism as Failure of Politics

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It is not known for certain when Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) read Max Weber (1864-1920) for the first time. It would hardly have been at the University of Marburg, where she began her studies in philosophy under the auspices of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) in 1924. Only when she came to Heidelberg in the spring of 1926 did this contact become unavoidable. Her thesis advisor, the psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers, had been a friend and remained a great admirer of Weber. Arendt's marginalia in her copy of 'Science as a vocation' reveals discomfort with the text and, perhaps, with its author. She questions the passages about the inevitability of specialization and the obsolescence of scientific knowledge. In the famous section in which Weber insists on the importance of a 'passionate dedication' to science, she writes in the margin: 'Is there an asceticism of the specialist?'

It should be assumed that something from this distance was due to Hannah Arendt's true philosophical master. In 1928, Heidegger writes to Jaspers that Heidelberg 'can no longer be Max Weber's old Heidelberg', and encourages his colleague to search for 'living examples'. Five years later, eager to gain influence in the Nazi regime, Heidegger fulminates the academic aspirations of Weber's nephew, Eduard Baumgarten, with a *Gutachten* in which he declares that the young academic 'has his family and spiritual origins in the circle of liberal-democratic intellectuals around Max Weber'. In the *Schwarze Hefte*, whose publication in Germany started only in 2014, Weber is characterized as a representative of an outdated science, whose assumptions would have to be turned upside down: 'We still need science - that is, what we understand by the term today?'; 'Does "science" always have to go "forward"?'; 'The end of the University and the beginning of a new knowledge' etc. Such ideas guide Heidegger's well known inauguration speech as rector in Freiburg, when he defended a 'German' science, immune to the march of specialization and organically attached to the 'people'. After 1933, the 'new' university would no longer be confused with a 'decrepit pseudoculture' or with principles such as scientific objectivity. Its highest mission should be 'conflict'.

In a subtle post-war movement of self-stylization, Heidegger claims that a thinker only leaves deep marks where he is fought. In fact, we should consider this possibility. But those words fit even more to the one whose legacy he once intended to 'destroy'. Indeed, Hannah Arendt herself confessed to Jaspers in 1956 that she was now reading Weber intensively. She finally discovers the 'incredible genius' of the 1904-1905 articles on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and concludes that

‘nothing in the literature has reached such a level’ ever since.

Ironically, for Max Weber the project of a ‘new science’ bound to Germany’s ‘spiritual mission’ was not the future, but a *futures past*. At the age of 31, when he assumed a chair of political economy at the University of Freiburg, in May 1895, he still believed that his discipline should become ‘a servant of politics’. His inaugural speech, *on that occasion*, is a nationalist libel that bears no resemblance to the classic author we all know.

There are of course several ambivalences in Weber, and also some unpalatable facets like Occidentalism, accentuated ethical rigorism, or his late and in some way instrumental support of parliamentary democracy. On the other hand, and although he said he was a ‘member of the bourgeois class’, Weber did not remain silent in the face of the misery of the masses ‘which weighs so heavily on the sharpened social conscience of the new generation’. The influence of his mother, Helene Weber, and the participation in the Evangelical-Social Congresses heightened his reformist concerns, and help to explain why he has always maintained good relations with several members of the Social Democratic Party.

As much as religion or the forms of domination, the theme of freedom runs through his work from end to end. In the extensive 1892 study on the situation of agricultural workers, he notes that in East Germany forms of itinerant work were preferred by the rural proletariat even when wages were lower. The reason was, he stated, a ‘deep-seated desire for personal freedom’. This ‘trend in the modern world is the product of general psychological development, and we experience it in ourselves’.

The Protestant ethic, as we know, ends with a dark prognosis of a humanity imprisoned in a lifestyle that sanctifies work, ‘until the last portion of fossil fuel ceases to burn’. But who sees here an expression of resignation is mistaken. As his writings on the Russian revolution of 1905 show, for him the highest task of the politician - and of the liberal politician in particular - was to force the doors of the ‘house of the new serfdom’. How would it be possible, Weber asks, to ensure ‘the persistence of democracy and freedom under the rule of modern capitalism?’ He himself answers, in the typical tone of his political texts: such ideals only thrive ‘where a nation’s resolute will is constantly opposed to letting itself be led like a flock of sheep’.

That old project of a science ‘servant of politics’ is replaced by a clear conviction, albeit sometimes exaggerated, that the freedom of human beings must correspond to a free science. His memorable debates in the *Verein für Socialpolitik*, between 1909 and 1917, and his dialogue with neo-Kantian philosophy revolve around this same nucleus. What was left of the Nietzschean in his thought (and it was not much) now gives way to the ‘fundamental imperative of scientific impartiality’. Historical reconstruction of problems, use of rigorous concepts and value freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) become the

pillars of what he calls the Science of Reality, the concept that guides both *Economy and Society* and the *Economic Ethic of World Religions*.

But the cultivation of freedom is also, and always, the cultivation of diversity. That is why what characterized his circle in Heidelberg (he lived there between 1896 and 1919) was less the preaching of 'liberal-democratic' ideas than the coexistence between different worldviews. Weber and his wife Marianne opened their beautiful house on the banks of the Neckar on Sundays for eminent teachers such as theologian Ernst Troeltsch, jurist Georg Jellinek, professor of literature Friedrich Gundolf and art historian Carl Neumann, as well as young Jewish intellectuals who would later become famous: Karl Loewenstein, Helmuth Plessner, György Lukács and Ernst Bloch. Neokantians talked with Marxists; aesthetics and philosophy, politics and history were discussed.

The beginning of the war in the summer of 1914 ended those meetings. As a reserve officer, Weber takes over the administration of Heidelberg's military hospitals. The detailed account he wrote about this experience should be considered a pioneering study of hospital sociology. The manuscript of this precious document, which would have so much to teach us at the present time, was published in volume 15 of the critical edition of his works, the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*, but remains inaccessible to readers unfamiliar with German.

However, as the defeat appeared on the horizon, an atmosphere steeped in mysticism and cultural pessimism spreads over Germany. In May 1917, invited by the editor Eugen Diederichs, Weber takes part in a famous meeting at Lauenstein Castle, where discussions about 'The meaning and task of our time' were promoted. There was a violent debate between him and one of the speakers, involving members of the Youth Movement as well. With the support of Diederichs, this group criticized the established cultural ideals and institutional politics, proposing its replacement by charismatic leaders. In his speech, which a witness called 'brilliant', Weber attacked the stance of young people and the political romanticism of those who opposed the democratization of Germany.

Just five weeks later, in Munich, he gives his talk on 'Science as a vocation'. Only few contemporary readers of this remarkable text know that the recipients that Weber had in mind were, above all, his Lauenstein opponents. Thus, he insists that science and faith follow opposite paths: aware of its limitations, the first is guided by the ideal of clarity, seeks understanding and a rational domination of the world. It does not offer truths of the soul, but exists for responsible decision-making. Those who nowadays choose the 'sacrifice of the intellect' may well do so on a personal level, but they must be aware that in subordinating to faith this driving force of the modern world, which is science, they are seeding the onset of ruin.

One hundred years after his death, it is inevitable that we wonder if Weber would

have anything to say about the current Brazilian tragedy. In fact, the political essays he published at the end of his life contain a precious trove of reflections that, despite being directed at his world and his time, still reach and illuminate us. In contrast to the conservatives and the ‘cowardice of the bourgeoisie’, Weber saw in the German post-war crisis a chance for democracy and parliamentarization. Neutralizing the tendency towards irrationalism typical of ‘street democracy’, a strong parliament would serve as a ‘school of leaders’. Only authentic leaders, legitimized by popular vote and forged in party struggles, would be able to competently guide the country. But not only legitimacy is needed. For Weber, the true leader must be endowed with a deep sense of honor and not with ‘an official's sense of subordination’. Vocation for politics demands not an immoderate ‘ethics of conviction’, unable to recognize the limits imposed by reality and, therefore, unable to transform it (for the better). Rather, it requires an ‘ethics of responsibility’, a balance between passion and a sense of proportion. In a word: radicalism is not an exacerbated form of the political, but its negation.

On June 14, 1920, at the age of 56, Weber died victim of pneumonia - and most probably not the Spanish flu, as has been reported in the last weeks. The headstone on his grave bears the following inscription: ‘We will never find one like him’. In an obituary published a few days later, Troeltsch characterized his deceased friend as a unique synthesis of ‘skepticism, heroism and moral rigor’. This portrait is confirmed by many stories.

One of Weber's last public interventions, carried out in a Munich threatened not only by left-wing revolutionaries, but also by a military coup, was aimed at anti-Semitic students who had disrupted his lectures at the university. Rebuking them in a courteous but also resolute way, Weber concluded with these words: ‘I would ally myself with *any* power on earth and even with the devil incarnate to restore Germany to its old splendor, if I still participated in politics. But not with the power of stupidity’.

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