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BYE BYE WEBER*

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*Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation', edited by Peter Lassman and Irving Velody. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989. pp. 213.

Here is a good critical strategy for editing a book: reprint a significant controversial essay, plus interesting commentaries on it, and add your own.

The critical strategy for reviewing such a book is this: discuss its contribution to the controversy; present criticisms that will (a) help readers enter into the act, (b) encourage the editor to prepare an improved edition, and/or (c) contribute to the controversy. The controversy which this book is devoted to centers on Max Weber's claim that social science should be value free, as formulated in his essay 'Science as a Vocation'.

The critical strategy for editing or for writing a book is far from being generally followed. The one generally followed rests on the classical view of science and its history as a solid, ever-growing body of knowledge, aloof from controversy. This allows inclusion onto the history of any science only those facts and theories which can be found in the current standard textbook of the science in question. The formula is this: find historical texts that introduce facts and theories from the textbook and add some information about their authors and their circumstances; any theory not part of the textbook should be mentioned, if at all, with disdain [Agassi, 1963, Ch.1]. For an example of the consistent application of this classical formula to the history of sociology, see Eisenstadt, 1957. The function of following the classical formula is the revalidation (the term is Weber's) of what is described [Agassi, 1963, Ch.2] the facts and theories it refers to are the repeatedly revalidated, and thus places them above criticism. Reviews of such books must also revalidate, perhaps in accord with the book under review perhaps contemptuously in its dismissal. Both tend to cause gentle criticism can be nipped in the bud. It is therefore important to fight the legitimating strategies. popularizing controversies along the

sovereignty strategy may help restrain the function (or rather dysfunction) of revalidation; the book under review may serve as an example for the sovereignty strategy, even though it strays from time to time to the revalidation strategy; it is thus useful--even though hard to read. The chief difficulty for the reader, the editors aver, comes from the received distortion of Weber's theory of social science as value-free. Let me explain: there are two variant of the theory that social science is value-free. Weber's version is austere: it allows minimal change in of values and no comparison between values; even some of Weber fans shuddered at the austerity of his 'Science as a Vocation', the locus classicus for his version of the view of social science as value-free. The version presented these days is genial, liberal, tolerant and democratic: its exponents stress their readiness to take as given every individual's preferences--as given and no questions asked. The editors regrettably mention the genial version as a mere confusion; they dismiss it out of hand as the 'Americanization' of Weber. This is an error on three counts: first, though not quite Weber's, the genial version is close enough; second, ascribing it to Weber is the mere application of the strategy of revalidating the standard textbook of sociology; third, the origins of the genial version is not the general sociological atmosphere in the United States, but the general atmosphere within economics, and more specifically, in the writings of Ludwig von Mises (see Mises, 1957). At stake in this book is the austerity of Weber's version, as expressed in the view that values are not comparable and not changeable except very rarely and radically (by a charismatic leadership) and as expounded in 'Science as a Vocation', his testament and the significant, controversial essay around which this book is set up. The endorsement of the Misesian view and the (mis)attribution of it to Weber has led to the neglect of this, once famous, essay, the blatant contents of which are ignored even though it has been in print in English for decades, including a Bobbs Merrill Reprint. The context in which the English version is usually read is the

sociology of science. Though I have described this essay as Weber's credo [Agassi, 198?], I too was surprised and impressed to read it in its historical context as presented in this book. The existence of controversial commentaries on this essay, written in Germany between the two World Wars, some of which are reprinted in this book, show that reading it as a (pioneering but minor) contribution to the sociology of science is an error: as such it could not have excited much controversy. Two of the comments reprinted here are post- World-War II; they illustrate the shift in reading Weber even in Germany. The book begins with Weber's essay and ends with the editors' survey of the history of its reading. So much for the difficulty on reading this book due to a strong switch in the way it is read. In addition, this difficulty for the reader is compounded by the writing style of most of the commentaries. The outstanding exception is Heinrich Rickert's essay, whose style glitters. I was also impressed with Eric Wolf's essay, as he clearly states there that value-free social science is a mere ideal in Weber's work, which, he adds, exhibits conflicting tendencies, including historicism and timelessness. Each item of commentary is interesting and enlightening, but their value is limited by the ambiguity that is prevalent in much of the text (which is well translated, I suppose). Consider the words `objective' and `subjective'. Orthodox Hegelians designate by `objective' the scientific, the proven, whereas their `subjective' is ambiguous: subjective friends regrettably speculate; subjective foes deceptively parade falsehoods as truths. Halfway Hegelian (see below) Weber usually equated `objective' with `proven' and rarely allowed `well argued' in lieu of `proven'. His `subjective' is even more ambiguous and some commentators attempt to explain it (see the index, which, incidentally, is too scanty) with little success. In addition, throughout the book there are metaphors that obscure meanings. (Ornaments in language, said Robert Boyle, should be like those on the telescope: they may be placed on the tube, not on the lenses.) Reading this book, I found myself

rechecking the beautifully written text of 'Science as a Vocation' and being repeatedly frustrated by metaphors that serve as tools for the evasion of difficulties that commentators later had to struggle with. In addition, some simple inconsistencies prevent going into matters in depth. For example, there are remnants of the revalidating strategy: every contributor here wavers between admiring only those with whom they are in some agreement while kindly overlooking disagreements and appreciating some errors (especially Weber's). Likewise, they tend to affirm and deny that scientific theories can be superseded. Contradictions are best ignored, settling them is rarely instructive. In addition, Weber is inconsistent on essentials, on which more later. His inconsistencies are due to conflicts which blocked his thinking, they are therefore usually marginal and can easily be overlooked, and this is always recommended when possible. Let me elaborate on the last sentence. Weber said he knew little philosophy. He said politics has no common ground with science. professors, he preached from his lectern, should devote their lecterns exclusively to specialized instruction: no preaching, no worldviews, no proselytizing. This was his worldview for which he tried to proselytize, since only charismatic leaders can implement new value-systems such as his own. His desires--for charismatic leadership, for developing his comprehensive theory, for preaching--accorded with his view of the leader and clashed with his view of the scientist as utterly and passionately dedicated to his specialized research, in fear that a thunderbolt would strike him if his next conjecture were defective (p.9)! Rather than criticize his own views, he tried to control his desire for worldly success by 'heroic' discipline. All this transpires from the comments, where the word 'heroic' occurs often in this book and raises pointless side issues. For my part, I think Weber's superficiality was his strength: his very superficial presentation, his very ambiguity, made his methodology seem acceptable to all except perhaps the Marxists [see my 1988]. His historical material was immensely influential because it seemed

separate from the historiography and methodology and grand theory behind it. Rickert's contribution here presents Weber's history as preceding his theorizing; this is true as chronology; objectionable as history since it deprives Weber's preoccupation with history of its rationale; and friendly in its intent to render Weber's contribution acceptable to all. And so, Weber's output is open to many readings. [Tradition has wisely taken from him--regrettably without proper acknowledgement--the epithet 'methodological' to mean, not ontological: prefer to stay superficial when possible.] In the essay, in question Weber repeatedly insists that different values, say, German and Russian, cannot be compared without demagoguery. Yet his last words there grant supreme value to [political] action: the Jews have 'waited for far more than two millennia, and we know their shattering fate.' Can facts about the Jews, whatever they are, prove traditional Judaism erroneous? Why? How does one compare [Hegelian] activism with traditional Jewish political passivism? [See Weiler, 1988.] What has happened to the autonomy of values? This question is about Weber's inconsistency. It is clear to non-Weberians that some Jewish values are as unsuitable to the modern world as are some of the Russian, not to mention some German. During the Holocaust, in November, 1943, 500 orthodox rabbis defied traditional Jewish passivism in matters political and marched on Washington--the first and trailblazing protest march!--and, accepting the awesome responsibility of breaking with tradition, they initiated a radical reform of values by allowing themselves to act politically, not to mention as a group. (See Wyman, 198?) [It is still taboo to discuss Jewish contemporary responses to the Holocaust.] (If we take value-systems as wholes, and this Weber demands, then all known value systems are washed out by the two World Wars.) To generalize, a change in values has to result from empirical criticism: in some conditions, some set of values may lead to conflicting recommendations and thus demand reform. This process is eminently rational; Joseph Roth's novel Hiob describes a traditional Jew going

West and learning this way. Weber considered change of values under the pressure of criticism marginal, not the main solution that it is to the problem, how can values improve? He thus doomed his program of science as a vocation to defeat. Before admitting his failure to defend his valuing science over religion, he makes a sharp turn: the last paragraph of 'Science as a Vocation'--whose ending I have quoted-- addresses the weak who cannot share 'the destiny' of scientific society ('cannot take' it 'like a man'): he permits them to rejoin the old church, and promises not to chide them if they do so quietly. Here Weber ordered people around, threatened them with 'chiding' if they confessed in public and denies that some of them might retreat to commitment out of honest conviction rather than out of cowardice. No value-free methodology here; only a broken-down professor playing preacher and ruler instead of admitting the irrationality of his rationalism. Weber's image of humanity is meager: everyone holds some ultimate values (namely, ultimate goals or ends); these justify immediate ones which are rationally followed; ultimate values are altered by charismatic leaders; when charisma will not do then destiny may help; the ultimate values of Weber's society are--or should be--Weber's own: its ultimate end is pure science and applied science is its means. All this is patently false: we do not have a logic to link ultimate and immediate values, only some vague notions, enough to enable us to use facts to repudiate values, and these two to repudiate ultimate values; applied research dwells between pure and applied science; and, most important, science helps find new possible ends to choose from. This is a whole significant area neglected due to Weber's influence: ultimate ends are our utopias; immediate ends are what we try to implement; in between there is a strong interaction between the discovery of new means and the adoption of new ends, yesterday out-of-reach and today almost-reachable, the adoption of new lifestyles and new, pluralist political systems. Bye bye, Max Weber. Today's doctrine of value-free social science is not the harsh and austere

version of Weber but a liberal- democratic one, popular because worse criticisms of science are available nowadays than ever envisaged, which this liberal-democratic doctrine neutralizes thus: the science used in Auschwitz and in Hiroshima is not evil but value- neutral. That this is a folly may be the view of a few people (this reviewer included), but it is incontestable that it is a far cry from the view of the Enlightenment, which held science to be inherently good, as the Way to God, and which is nostalgically discussed in 'Science as a Vocation'. Weber was more honest than most of his modern commentators: the parting shot of 'Science as a Vocation' is a capitulation to 'the daemon of the day', to the irrational (Max Scheler, p.95). Weber was certain that science was winning, religion losing, and the nation craving for the golden calf, for political power as a religion substitute. They say he opposed this; but he is more honest in his understanding of, and desperate submission to, 'the daemon of the day'. If any image of Weber emerges from this fascinating book, it is of the man who outdid Vincent Van Gogh, burning with the desire to work honestly, to hurt himself intolerably in the process and thus to prove himself. Honest he was, but not quite wise. Karl Lowith's essay is the most recent in the volume. It includes both the best and the worst in it. He presents scientific progress endearingly as the transcendence of current theories, thereby, he says, enhancing Weber's desperate view of science as a mere obsession. [This is a desperate view of the value of science; the despair it expresses, however, is superficial; see Russell's 'Free Man's Worship' and Borges' writings.] And he responds to a recent critic, who says, Weber's system of ultimate arbitrary values plants in our midst the worst hostilities, by mentioning Weber's intellectual honesty and that critic's Nazi past. (He does not ask, does the terrible experience refute Weber's Olympian value-freedom, maybe?) I think we should admit that science contributed to the rise of Nazism. physics lost its high aspirations and offered arms to all bidders; biology read value-freedom as action-orientation and sustained social

Darwinism by hair-raising eugenics; political thinkers advocated national uniformity not as an intrinsic value, contestable even if undebatable, but as a tool incontestably useful for the State; and philosophers argued that decision must be irrational because of the cleavage between thought and action, between rationally obligatory scientific opinions and free, irrational-ideology-laden decision. Where was Weber when things began to deteriorate? He had the ability for national leadership and after the defeat in World War I he acknowledged that he could lead; he waited to be called, he said. He was not called: leaders do not wait to be called. His two final lectures are his substitutes. They concern science and politics as vocations. They stress the cleavage between thought and action: Weber was telling himself publicly: there is no substitute for your having wasted the opportunity to lead. It is time to disenchant Weber and hear this self-addressed message of his. In the final essay the editors ask: is Weber's scientist an ideal type or an ideal? For, he described scientists as dedicated, and most of them are not. But this is merely the Bernard Shaw effect [preface to *Androclus*]: when a movement succeeds there is an external incentive to join its leadership. After Hiroshima science became exclusive, attracted more joiners than ever, and created a new norm--that of the normal scientist. Weber knew better: scientists are abnormal, he said. He concluded that they are irrational, and this is contested.

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