

The Cost of Discipleship

Weber's Charisma and the Profession of the Humanities

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Max Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*. Edited by Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon; translated by Damion Searls. NYRB Classics, 176pp., \$16 paper.

ACCORDING TO MAX WEBER, charisma is the supernatural, or at least extraordinary, power that disciples ascribe to their leader. It may be a good thing or a bad thing. Jesus had it; so did Napoleon. We can see it today in Oprah Winfrey and Donald Trump. Academics have had it too: Michel Foucault, Paul de Man, and Edward Said have all been credited with charisma. But Weber would caution that charisma properly belongs to the sphere of politics, not scholarship. In making that argument, ironically, Weber constructed a new and adaptable model of the charismatic professor: not the gifted seer behind the lectern, but the stoic who faces a disenchanted world and refuses to promise salvation.

Weber's two lectures on vocation, recently reissued by NYRB Classics under the title *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, carefully distinguish the work of scholarship from the work of politics. For Weber, politics requires dealing with the devil;

the scholar keeps his values out of the classroom, sticking to the facts. Great politicians have charisma; great scholars eschew the cult of personality. Charismatic leaders empty their followers' personalities; good teachers inspire their listeners to choose their own gods.

Weber gave these talks in Munich in 1917 and 1919, amid war and pandemic. The editors of the reissue, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, with translator Damion Searls, present these lectures as a resource for practicing scholarship in hard times. The bad conditions of the job that Weber lamented then certainly resemble ours now. For the students who gathered to hear him in 1917, Weber set a dismal scene: the job market is awful; if you even get a job, you'll be overworked and underpaid; your teaching will be drudgery; you'll see mediocre people rise to the top. Conditions are such that "only the rich can pursue an academic career under the German system." That system had become irrevocably rationalized, rendering education a numbers game and a popularity contest. Universities were bound to a "ridiculous competition for enrollment" that had college-town "property owners" "throw[ing] a party" to "celebrate the thousandth" or "two-thousandth" student who matriculated.

Weber opens with this bad news, but his lecture does not prescribe solutions to these structural problems. The best you can do, Weber tells his student audience, is to pursue the passion of scholarship knowing that it won't change the world and accepting that you aren't a prophet with all the answers. Reitter and Wellmon offer their own dismal update, noting that current student activism takes place "mostly outside of the classroom" while university presidents "spend their days overseeing multibillion-dollar global enterprises." "Who but a blessed, tenured few," they ask, "could continue to believe that scholarship is a vocation?" They don't directly answer that question. Reitter and Wellmon do propose Weberian vocation as a universal possibility which, if we all acted on it, would grant us more meaningful lives. But an equally plausible conclusion is that there is something wrong with Weber's ideal of vocation. At the very least, we have maladapted it by turning ourselves into his disciples. That discipleship is partly why the bad conditions of higher education have persisted over the last hundred years.

The very grimness of Weber's vision—his view of politics as the exercise of violence, of scholarly insights as tiny and quick to expire—exerts a charismatic force. Even more potently attractive is his narrative of decline: long ago, thinkers and artists could pursue capital-t Truth; today, there is no authority that can validate such universal truth. Striding into this rationalistic and relativistic world is Weber's existential hero, exemplified by Martin Luther declaring "here I stand, I can do no other." Anyone making such an assertion must recognize that his commitment is finally unprovable and yet irresistible. This is what finding one's vocation looks like, and Weber insists that we all have the capacity to do it.

This modern hero is the figure that Weber's academic disciples have used to build a false but durable relation to the university. And his disciples include most of us, since a version of

his model of vocation has become an academic default setting. The university is our necessary institutional shelter, but we disdain it as fatally flawed. Weber's narrative of disenchantment allows us to regard ourselves as the saving remnant reluctantly lodged in a corporatized structure. We represent the wisdom and clarity that are perpetually under threat by capitalism's ever-expanding reach, a crisis we claim to be uniquely capable of handling and one that maintains our job security forever. We have, in short, made Weber guilty of being what he tells scholars not to be: a charismatic leader who spins a magical story through which his followers maintain power. Little wonder that the bad working conditions that Weber described have not improved.

This outcome accords with Weber's analysis of the routinization of charisma. Charisma itself is essentially unstable. A charismatic leader initially breaks with tradition. But if he succeeds, his disciples create their own tradition, entrenching their "authority and social prestige" and their "power over economic goods." The power offered by a charismatic leader may be illusory. But it is emotionally effective, if nothing else. Analyzing Trump and Winfrey through the lens of Weber's theory of charisma, Natasha Zaretsky observes that both figures rose to power by giving their followers a sense of control in the face of late-twentieth-century cultural and economic shifts. Trump provides a bracing confirmation of capitalism's winner-take-all reality; Winfrey provides a fantasy of healing within that reality. Neither offers any strategies for redressing injustice, but they do model an attitude of self-possession in the face of economic predation.¹

Weber can be seen to offer his faculty followers all that and more: self-possession

¹ Natasha Zaretsky, "The Odd Couple: Donald Trump, Oprah Winfrey, and Contemporary Charisma," *The Hedgehog Review*, Spring 2020, hedgehogreview.com/issues/monsters/articles/the-odd-couple.

plus genuine economic and cultural stability. For Weber, there is no turning back the capitalism that has corporatized the university. In a disenchanted modernity, professors must abandon old pretensions to teach the path to universal wisdom. But they can maintain authority, and a sense of vocation, as guides to a relativistic moral landscape. Weber does not promise to make the university great again. He urges carrying on scholarly ideals inside academia's faulty structure. The promise that Weber's disciples have made is to guard the jewels in a house that is permanently on fire.

Charismatic leaders empty their followers' personalities; good teachers inspire their listeners to choose their own gods.

In telling this decline-and-fall story, Weber may be seen as improving on Matthew Arnold's initial job description for humanities professors: to claim cultural authority by pointing to a lost past that only the scholar can properly curate and preserve. So argues Bruce Robbins, who sees such a "professional myth" of decline as having "allowed criticism both right and left the luxurious anomaly of being both established and oppositional."² We are the disruptors in the corner office. Reitter and Wellmon admiringly call Weber an "insider outsider": after an early promotion to full professor, Weber burned out and quit academia. But to deny one's insider-ness, to bark at the hand that signs your paycheck, is a false position. It makes us adversarial but not confrontational, and its valorization of distance covers our own self-interest.

² Bruce Robbins, Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (New York: Verso, 1993), p. 126.

A declinist myth posits freedom somewhere outside the apparently blighted institution in which the scholar works. It seeks a putative haven which is only actually available because of others' servitude—for instance, in a library whose tranquility is made possible by custodians who lack union protection or health care.

This disenchantment narrative is the key to Weber's charismatic appeal. But it is certainly possible to exaggerate the degree of disenchantment he preached. Both charisma and vocation are terms grounded in religious life, and they manifest Weber's recognition of our modern faith in transcendence. If Weber laments that we can no longer believe in a real sun outside the Platonic cave, he does not imagine there was a time when faith was pure and simple. Even a supposedly pre-secular age of Christendom had its faith "forced into... compromises and accommodations." Weber worries that we have been "blind" to "our polytheistic past." And he suggests that we are not so different, after all, from the premodern souls who offered sacrifices to Aphrodite. The difference is in name only: what we used to call gods, now we call "impersonal forces." But "the behavior is the same, through stripped of its magic and its mythical (but psychologically true) trappings. Fate determines the outcome of this battle of the gods—in any case, certainly not 'science' or 'scholarship.' All the latter can do is explicate *what* is divine for this or that system, or rather, *in* this or that system." The scholar here is a modest observer on the sidelines, analyzing the logic of other people's faith and the fights they pick over what they deem transcendent. This is a useful position to occupy insofar as it prevents overt moralizing in the classroom. But by ascribing to fate the role of the referee, and by dismissing the work of scholarship as mere explication of the system, Weber opens the path to complacent spectatorship.

Further, leaving the outcome to fate is a way of not acknowledging that scholarship

is one of the gods in the battle. Reitter and Wellmon acknowledge the common critique that Weber offers a “bleak liberalism, a hopeless capitulation to modernity made up as a heroic realism.” Such a reading of Weber, they say, overlooks the tension in his thinking, “the double bind that is both the burden and the possibility of living” in a world with no final answers. No one can tell us our belief is wrong, and that is freedom; on the other hand, we can never know if we’re right, and that is awful. The scholar negotiates this double bind by combining a valiant faith in making footnote-sized gains in knowledge with an ascetic self-denial that forbears preaching that faith. Again, we are the sideline explicators. Unlike the charismatic demagogue, the scholar must not attempt to re-enchant the world (or his students’ minds) with claims to have the one right answer. Instead, the scholar helps others navigate a polytheistic world, to “find and obey the daemon that holds in its hands the threads of our *own* life.”

The trouble is that one can authentically choose, or be chosen by, a bad daemon. Faculty who pretend to think there is no such a thing as a wrong commitment are doing their students no favors. Weber observes that in reading the Bible, one can equally well find a god of mercy and a god of vengeance, and “it is up to the individual to decide which is God and which is the devil *for him*. And that is how it goes with every other decision about how to conduct one’s life.” One problem here is the way Weber imagines such a clean decision-making zone inside a person’s head, as if we didn’t make such judgments with an eye toward what social status might follow a given choice.

Another is that not everyone gets to make such decisions. The kind of liberalism Weber is espousing here wants to put people in conversation in a room and let the best ideas win. It trusts those two people will be equal individuals confronting one another respectfully—or at least that the format of

respectful debate will make those individuals come to recognize each other as equals. But this fully accessible, evenly balanced public sphere has never existed anywhere yet, certainly not in a nation where armed white people storming the state capital in Lansing are “exercising their rights” whereas unarmed black people protesting police brutality in Minneapolis are “fomenting criminal unrest.”

Yet another problem is that Weber seems not to recognize such agnosticism as its own tendentious governing claim. To urge others to choose their own gods is already to promote choice as the only god. To advocate, as Weber does, that we forbear proclaiming our own values is to advocate something quite specific. It privileges a particularly detached way of being in the world. It might indeed be worth winning converts to irony and disinterest. But we should own up to proselytizing for these virtues. Weber can appear to overlook the interestedness of disinterest. His sharp distinction between politics that pursues power and uses words as weapons versus scholarship that pursues clarity and uses words as plowshares looks like a dodge of the fact that a university and the scholars who work in it are all political agents.

No doubt Weber’s concept of vocation favors self-discipline over social activism. But Reitter and Wellmon argue that Weber is neither an elitist nor a quietist. For one thing, the basic vocation of finding and obeying one’s own god is not reserved for intellectuals. Weber tells his student audience that people in “factories or laboratories” work with their whole souls, and even the “industrialist” needs “commercial imagination.” For another, Weber himself participated in politics: before the war, he publicly objected to the state picking favorites for faculty hires; after the war, he helped draft the Weimar Constitution, and he spoke out when the assassin of Bavaria’s socialist leader was pardoned. Wellmon writes that, if Weber urges students to think less about institutional problems and

to think more about “the character, habits and virtues that might sustain” their lives, Weber is not thereby counseling people to ignore “the material conditions of intellectual work and cultural authority.” Weber specifies that professors are duty-bound to protest injustice. They just need to express their political convictions in the right place and time. At public debates, yes; one-on-one with a student, okay; but not in the classroom, where the audience is captive.

It is important for scholars to keep out of politics, in Weber’s view, because politics ultimately relies on violence. Weber’s view of political possibility ranges from the “leaderless democracy” of faceless technocrats to demagogues who turn their followers into a spiritual proletariat. The only way to avoid that trap is to be a Jesus or a Buddha, who “didn’t work with the means of politics, which is violence: their kingdom was ‘not of this world,’ and yet”—Weber does not wish to dismiss the value of earthly life—“they had and have effects in this world.” Such leaders produced good unintended consequences. But most charismatic politicians want to convince us that the violence they unleash will be the last hurtful act required to usher in a realm of peace and justice. Weber perhaps did not count on these lectures providing his own disciples with the means to maintain power with nonviolent ease. But by reiterating a version of Weber’s disenchantment thesis, academics have been able to point to the crisis of humanistic faith to maintain our roles as crisis managers.

Weber’s allergy to what he calls the “politics of personal conviction,” and his deep suspicion of charisma, follow from his diagnosis of cosmic disenchantment. Because there is no longer a transcendent authority we all agree on, we must practice values neutrality, that is, the strict segregation of fact from value. Weber overstates the case when he says that “wherever the scholar lets his own value judgments intrude, he ceases to understand the facts.” He also overstates the case for the loneliness

that he sees as the only way to be intellectually honest in this world of competing values. What makes Weber’s “here I stand” hero so heroic is that his faith cannot be shared. With the waning of real religious faith—now that we all know we can explain things rationally—so has waned the possibility of true fellowship. Weber accordingly puts hope only in small brotherhoods, not big collectives. He has no faith in “new religious forms,” and he sees only “wretched monstrosity” produced by efforts to create big public art. He warns that “prophecy from the podium can only lead to fanatical sects, never to genuine communities.” The only genuine community possible now is “in the smallest circles, between individuals”; only there “something pulses corresponding to what once blazed through large communities as the breath of prophecy, fusing them together.”

True faith is lonely, but it is also what inspires followers. Just as it is the devotion of the disciples that empowers the charismatic leader, so it is the witness of spectators that authenticates the “here I stand” moment. You know an authentic human choice when you see it, because watching that choice moves you. An authentic choice has a style: it is not showy or loud, but dignified. Weber dismisses all those “windbags... getting drunk on sensationalized Romanticism.” He 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.” That once-in-a-lifetime moment, which Weber sees as potential in every human being, reconciles fact and value. It shows a person committing to a given value even as he fully accepts the facts that constrain him.

It may be our own fault if we have adopted the style of Weber’s heroic cynicism, as Fredric Jameson called it, without much of the substance that Weber tried to imbue it with. We can repurpose Weber’s theory

toward better ends. His declinist narrative does not diminish the merit of his call to help students give an account of the ultimate meaning of their actions. In its essence, what Weber is advocating aligns with what Bruce Robbins, following Edward Said, calls the “secular vocation” of the humanities. Robbins maintains that we owe “reverence” to any work that seeks to “change the world,” provided it holds itself open to public accountability by making its sources of authority transparent. For Weber too scholarship is a secular vocation. Education is work “done by professional experts in the service of both self-understanding and increased knowledge of objective facts—it is not a gift of grace with seers and prophets dispensing holy objects and revelations.” When we teach religiously faithful students, we have to insist they accept empirically grounded explanations in the classroom. Good teachers push “students to recognize *uncomfortable* facts...that go against their own partisan opinions.” Weber’s hard split between facts and values may seem the relic of an Enlightenment faith in objectivity that we no longer share. We are right to present facts as discovered and disseminated within particular value hierarchies. But we can acknowledge that without conceding in despair that everything is fake news. It feels more than ever necessary today to insist on the objectivity of research and data as a value itself.

It is because we live in a world of competing values with no final way to adjudicate them that professors are obliged to help their students sort those values. But again, in doing so, we should recognize that we are proselytizing for values neutrality. Robbins writes that when, in a secular age, we “recogni[ze] that the space of an ultimate judge must remain empty,” the correct response is not to quit debating whose values have authority. The correct response is to make that debate “more self-conscious, more

troubled, more dramatic.” The scholar is not a lone figure with a thousand-yard-stare, nor just a sideline analyst. And values neutrality does not represent a sad and lonely decline from collective belief, but the fought-over ground of our faith in the debate of values. For Robbins, we can call scholarship a vocation precisely because it is political, because it wants through its practice to change public values. This reads to me like a less charismatic restatement of Weber’s own description of the scholarly vocation.

If we need not be lonely in our faith, we also need not regard ourselves as adversaries of the universities that house us. Weber’s scholarly vocation is compatible with Lisi Schoenbach’s “radical institutionalism.”³

Schoenbach urges faculty to see the university both as a strategic ally, a potential and sometimes actual bastion of free thought that we depend on, and also as a thoroughly compromised tool of neoliberalism. This view emphasizes action more than detachment

But that’s how Weber concludes his lecture on scholarly vocation. He tells his listeners to quit hoping for a superman to save them; “waiting and yearning is not enough,” and instead “We should set to work and meet ‘the demands of the day.’” Weber depicted the work of the politician in much the same terms: as “a slow and difficult drilling of holes into hard boards, done with both passion and clear-sightedness.” The first part of that line is often quoted, and it sounds characteristically liberal: reform from within that is so patient as to be imperceptible. But the virtues of the second clause—passion and clarity—are what we need to recuperate from Weber if we want to make the scholarly vocation available to more than a few lucky ones over the next hundred years. **A**

³ Lisi Schoenbach, “Enough With the Crisis Talk! To salvage the university, explain why it’s worth saving,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 16, 2018, www.chronicle.com/article/enough-with-the-crisis-talk/.