
Wendy BROWN, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber*
(Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2023, 132 p.)

Wendy Brown's beautifully written and warmly personal set of meditations on Weber's vocation lectures invites its readers to think anew the relationship between science (*Wissenschaft*) and politics, or more generally science and value. Like Weber, Brown suggests, we live in "nihilistic times" in which values are both relativized and sundered from claims to truth. Brown divides her analysis into four chapters. The first is a brief scene-setting introduction which identifies the problem that "thinking with Weber" can help to address [1–20]: a "pervasive nihilism that disinhibits aggression and devalues values" [Brown 2023: 9]. Weber, writing in the towards the end of the Great War which would have such disastrous consequences for his country, was struggling with an analogous problem as he sought to "combat nihilistic effects in both knowledge and politics" [Brown 2023: 10] in the twilight of the Kaiserreich and the cold dawn of Weimar.

This chapter is followed by "Politics" [21–59], which plumbs the tensions and contradictions in Weber's demand that the true politician ("a nearly impossible figure" [Brown 2023: 39]) be selflessly dedicated to values while at the same time recognizing them as contingent. As she puts it, the politician must combine [Brown 2023: 38]:

Passion for a cause, restraint, determination, a sense of proportion, and a pathos of distance [...] together these challenge the de-sublimated aggressions, petty pre-occupations, rancorousness, self-absorption, and desire for immediate satisfaction of nihilistic culture.

Brown finds this solution to the problem of nihilism ultimately unsatisfying because it places nearly impossible demands on those involved in the political sphere.

The third chapter of the book, "Knowledge" [60–89], examines Weber's attempt to insulate "the certainty of facticity" from the "undecidability of values" so as to repel "the nihilistic condition assaulting and degrading both" [Brown 2023: 69]. Paradoxically, as Brown shows, this attempt to protect *Wissenschaft* from nihilism is itself nihilistic. As she [Brown 2023: 80] puts the point:

The scholar as spiritless vessel of a meaningless cause requiring both self-negation and draining meaning from the world one analyzes—this is the ascetic practice Nietzsche predicted would culminate in “willed nothingness”, a nihilistic spirit in the scholar aimed at stilling spirit in everything it touches.

The fourth chapter of the book, “Afterword” [90–109], tries to reformulate the value/knowledge distinction in a more useful way. Weber, says Brown, is correct about “the obligation of faculty to teach students facts, including what he calls ‘inconvenient facts’” [Brown 2023: 95]. He is also right about the need to protect the university from “nihilistic boundary breakdown” [Brown 2023: 98]. It is vital “to have a moat between academic and political life” [Brown 2023: 98]. However this distinction is not the same as that between facts and values. In the first place, scholars must impart to students not just the facts but also knowledge about “facticity”: how “facts come to be and acquire legitimacy”, how they “are constituted and interpreted”, their connection to society and culture, and their “non-isolability from one another” [Brown 2023: 95]. These processes themselves involve values, so that even the most austere focus on the “facts” includes values. Furthermore, the Weberian strategy of shifting the perspective on values in intellectual life from being the “subject to the analytic object of knowing” is not quite workable either [Brown 2023: 76]. This is because “casting [values] as normative positions with analyzable precepts and logical entailments” violates their reality “by bracketing their psychic, religious, or affective dimensions” [Brown 2023: 77]. By treating values as facts one violates the pedagogical mission by failing to communicate their import to students: the point about values is that they are precisely not reducible to “points of view”.

What, then, does Brown offer? A modified Weberianism which rejects the self-defeating positivism of the original while preserving the distinction between science and politics so as to protect against anti-intellectualism and hyper-politicization. More specifically, she counsels the teaching of values as a way of helping students to “meaningfully craft [...] their own lives” and “to become intelligent participants in democracies” without “imbibing the existing order of hegemonic values or [...] shallow and hyper-polarized values” [Brown 2023: 106]. What to make of this analysis?

There is much to commend in this little volume, and it is especially pertinent to the craft of teaching. Brown is correct to insist that values, or perhaps more concretely ideologies, should be carefully taught as a tactic of breaking through the pervasive hypostatization of viewpoints and their confusion with lifestyles that pervades contemporary politics (particularly campus politics).

However, there are two analytic and political problems (problems that derive from Weber himself) that need greater discussion. The first is that Brown, although she offers a distinctive read on the value–knowledge or science distinction, seems to assume throughout the text that it is possible to analyze the relationship between them *in general* without specifying exactly what values are under discussion. The second problem is that Brown seems to endorse the basic Weberian idea that in modernity values are irreducibly plural and that the sphere of politics (but for her not only the sphere of politics) entails a struggle among these irreducibly plural values. As she puts the point, “value struggles” in the domain of politics “are eternal—cold comfort for those still invested in narratives of progress, not to mention harmony or epistemic universality” [Brown 2023: 19].

Both of these claims are pitched at a rather ahistorical level. As such they invite two questions. The first is, why should we think that all values, and particularly all political values, have the *same* relationship to facts, facticity, or science? Surely one of the most decisive differences among values consists precisely in their relationship to science broadly understood as knowledge? As I shall argue below, there are good reasons for thinking that the answer to the value/knowledge question must be made specific to the value in question. Weber himself tried to obscure this point, but it can easily be forced to the surface through an examination of his own work.

The second question is simple enough to pose, but quite difficult to answer. Where do values come from, and why is it that both Brown and Weber see them as irreducibly plural? What warrant is there, in particular, for thinking that value struggles are eternal, especially since according to Brown—and in this she seems to converge entirely with Weber—these struggles have emerged in the context of a post-traditional order in which values must be legislated since they are no longer exuded by an unreflective *Sittlichkeit* or form of ethical life.

Fact and Value in Weber

One way of approaching the problem of fact and value, as Brown poses it, is to discuss the idea of nihilism, by which she means two things. The first is the difficulty in establishing “criteria [...] for meaning and value without appealing to discredited sources for those foundations” [Brown 2023: 12]. These might take the form of appeals to “religion, tradition, or logic” [Brown 2023: 12]. The second is the difficulty of establishing political projects in a context in which “faith in progress is revealed as a secularized

version of the Christian millennium and as empirically confounded by modernity's failure to deliver generalized peace, prosperity, happiness, or freedom" [Brown 2032: 12]. This double condition, it seems, is what connects Weber to us. We, too, face the problem of justifying our beliefs in an age in which religion has been separated from truth, and in which the commitment to truth itself stands revealed as one value among others.

One might ask, however, whether this is an adequate description. The nihilism of Weber's time, or at least Weber's formulation of the problem of nihilism, was deeply linked to the particular developmental unevenness of capitalism and the nation state in Germany in the late nineteenth century. We could put the point simply in these terms. Germany had emerged suddenly as one of the two most advanced capitalist states in the world; but it had done so in a political context in which the bourgeoisie could not justify its claim to rule in terms of universal rationality. There were two main reasons for this.

Firstly, German capitalism faced from the beginning a militant industrial proletariat deeply penetrated by a socialist consciousness, in a Lasallian and then in a Marxian form. This mass movement, especially in its second form, claimed to root its politics in science. Scientific socialism presented itself as the heir to the French Revolution, whose project of the construction of a rational society had run aground on the grim counter-finalities of the Terror and the Napoleonic Wars.

Secondly, German capitalism emerged in a deeply hostile geopolitical environment. As a consequence, the German bourgeoisie was acutely aware of its national particularity; a particularity which it was never able adequately to overcome.

Weber's attack on the naïveté of the Enlightenment, and in particular his sundering of "fact" and "value" (a sundering that Brown rightly describes as a political move aimed squarely against both a domestic class enemy and a foreign geopolitical enemy. It was a rejection of both the universalistic rationalism of Marxism and the cosmopolitanism of the French and English bourgeoisie.

This political context is particularly relevant to the vocation essays, the historical context of which Brown spends almost no time developing; all that she says is [Brown 2023: 5]:

In these lectures, delivered at the request of the University of Munich students in 1917 and 1919, Weber draws the contours, predicaments and potentials of both domains [politics and science] in an era he regarded as rapidly draining of meaning and integrity, and threatened by descent into "a polar night of icy harshness and darkness".

But the context here is important. Weber produced the vocation essays at the end of a catastrophic war that he had fully supported in

the hope that Germany could assume its rightful place as a great power. He gave the first talk, “Wissenschaft als Beruf”, a month after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. He delivered the second, “Politik als Beruf”, just 13 days after the Freikorps’s double murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg following the end of the bloody suppression of the November Revolution of 1918.

Weber’s essays, in short, are not about values in general, but the specific value of German greatness against the threat of *internationalist* socialism and the Anglo-French enemy. It is revealing in this context that Weber instances as the most compelling example of the “called” politician “those citizens [discussed in Machiavelli’s *History of Florence*] who deemed the greatness of their native city higher than the salvation of their souls” [Weber 1946: 126]. Weber’s central point was that the inwardly called politician should be willing to use violence in defense of the *patria* while having the moral fortitude not to seek absolution in some overarching historical project or philosophy of history. The “responsible politician” could therefore be quite bloody and fanatical. What made him responsible was that he held *himself* accountable for condemnable acts and not “history”, “nation”, or “party”.

It is important to emphasize in this context that Weber’s commitment to German great power was unwavering, a central theme of his work beginning with the Freiburg inaugural address, and running right through to his writings on parliamentary democracy. Importantly, it is precisely at his most “progressive”, for example in his harsh attacks on the large German landholders east of the Elbe River, that Weber is at his most nationalist and imperialist. As Brown herself glosses Weber’s politics [Brown 2023: 7]:

He is identified with intense German nationalism, anxious masculinism, and early attraction to that peculiar strain of neoliberalism that would later come to imprint the European unification project with undemocratic principles and techniques. He glorifies *Machtpolitik* and praises politicians and states who embrace it. He is considered not only a realist, but an ardent anti-idealist in both political and intellectual life.

What makes Weber a great thinker is his striking awareness of the “contingent” nature of the value he embraced, his ability both to fully embrace the standpoint of German nationalism and maintain an ironic distance from it. What needs to be emphasized in this context is that the specific difficulty that Weber has in reconciling facts and values derives from the peculiar character of *nationalism* as a value, not from a general ahistorical problem of reconciling “facts and values”.

What I am suggesting here is that Weber was really concerned not with the general problem of reconciling fact and value (although he often wrote and spoke as if he was), but rather with the more specific one of reconciling knowledge (or science) and nationalism. To pose this reading a little more forcefully, one could argue that Weber illicitly extended *his* problem, which was the ultimate non-justifiability of nationalism as a value, to values *in general*.

If that is true, then it raises a question. Do all political values pose the same conundrum? It would seem odd to answer in the affirmative. At the very least, scientific knowledge will have a very different relevance depending on what political value is being adopted. Take the example of capitalism. If one adheres to some version of Marxism, then socialism as a value is interpreted as a consequence of the adequate analysis of capitalism. Whether or not one thinks this is a plausible argument, what is clear is that getting the analysis of capitalism right will have a relevance to socialist political values that it does not, for example, have from the perspective of nationalism. Some values, in short, do exist in an alternative dimension to knowledge. But for other values there are points of connection. If there is no “scientific politics”, surely there are types of politics that are more or less close to science. Brown, like Weber, seems to overlook the possibility that values might vary precisely in their relationship to politics.

Where Do Values Come From?

I now turn to a second issue. Where do values come from, and why are they plural in “modernity”? For Weber neither legal-rational bureaucracies nor science could produce values. These came, instead, from charismatic leaders who he interpreted as secularized prophets rather peculiarly endowed with extraordinary qualities. Weber was, of course, deeply concerned with maintaining enough space within a pervasively bureaucratized and rationalized world that such leadership could emerge. This was to happen above all in two spheres: the capitalist economy, and the competitive party system.

But what is Brown’s view? This is a difficult question to answer, for although values appear everywhere in the text, their origins are never really explained. It is clear enough that Brown wants to resist Weber’s treatment of value “as a matter of personal conviction” and wants to point toward the emergence of values in “political culture” [Brown 2023: 93].

This suggests a more democratic, and less deeply irrationalist approach to values than that of Weber himself. But it maintains the hiatus between science and politics that Weber erected, and in particular maintains the separation of values from historical narratives. It does not allow us to specify how values are linked to concrete historical situations containing “objective possibilities”, to use another Weberian term, possibilities that political forces can struggle either to carry through or to suppress. Here is another sense in which science and politics have an even more intimate connection than Brown wants to allow. For values come, in the first instance, from an analysis of what *is* the case and a program for bringing about what *should* be the case related to the initial diagnosis; it would seem, then, that political values have a cognitive component which neither Weber, nor Brown, fully recognize.

If we think about values as connected to concrete historical circumstances in this way, we might also be able to formulate a more adequate answer to the problem of value pluralism. As I have already suggested, it seems clear that this problem too has a very specific meaning for Weber. It is basically connected to the plurality of national cultures subtended by the European nation-state system as it had emerged in the late nineteenth century.

That then raises the question: what are the forces producing value pluralism today? Brown’s response to this question is somewhat hard to pin down. The main parallel she draws is with the general “crisis of liberalism and democracy”, analyzed by Weber in the first two decades of the twentieth century, an analysis that is “potentially illuminating for one we face a century later” [Brown 2023: 9]. But the contemporary political crisis, and the value pluralism that seems to go along with it, derives from a different historical syndrome than the Weberian one. The contemporary problem is not the division of the world into powerful and aggressive nation states (a form of political life under threat from several directions), nor is it exactly a problem of ever-expanding bureaucracy and rationalization. Rather, the problem of contemporary values is the lack of any popular subjectivity that might focus and order values. It is hard to escape the notion that the proliferation of values, the rise of nihilism, and the crisis of democracy reflects this void. In the place of mass politics, simulacra of the great ideologies of the twentieth century on both right and left face-off over a fundamentally disengaged population. Warring gods, or squabbling midgets? It is not clear which is worse.

DYLAN RILEY 