

**The “Vocation” Redux:
A Post-Weberian Perspective from the Sociology of Knowledge**

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Abstract:

This paper engages the Weberian view on the scholarly vocation from a perspective informed by ‘strong reflexivity’. The reflexivist perspective is grounded in a sociological understanding of knowledge that calls for a coherent reformulation of the relation between the social nature and social function of science, and of the cognitive and axiological posture of scholarship understood as socio-political praxis. Drawing on the sociology of knowledge, the paper argues that Weber’s perspective is untenable conceptually and practically. Strong reflexivity, here illustrated through Standpoint Feminism and Bourdieusian sociology, permits a coherent delineation of the problem of the scholarly vocation, in a way that reconciles the social origins, efficacy, and responsibility of science, and hence allows for a more realist reformulation of the cognitive, social, and moral dilemmas we face as scholars, educators, and citizens.

Keywords: Bourdieu, Durkheim, Reflexivity, Sociology of Knowledge, Standpoint Feminism, Values, Weber

Introduction

Ever since the professionalisation and institutionalisation of science its practitioners have reflected on the principles guiding their actions and defining their specific identity as a differentiated social group. Within Western social-science and philosophy, these discussions are often framed by the concept of the scholarly 'vocation', following the influential perspective offered by Max Weber, whom sociologists claim as one of the founding fathers of their craft, and whose deontological position has had profound influences beyond sociology proper.

This paper proposes that it is time for a post-Weberian perspective on the 'vocation'. Weber's reflections accompanied the birth of sociology as an institutionalised field of knowledge, and as such offered useful problematisations for practitioners exploring the beginnings of their craft, understood as a systematic intellectual activity, but also as an emerging contender in the academic field of competing disciplines and in the larger social field of competing actors and discourses on reality. Sociology has now largely fulfilled its promise of illuminating important phenomena and dimensions of our social condition, including the determinants and constraints governing its *own* existence. We should therefore take stock of its insights and reconsider the question of the scholarly vocation accordingly.

While this question has never disappeared from scholars' concerns, localised socio-political crises and debates recurrently bring it to the forefront of academic discussions, thereby offering opportunities to reassess it in light of changing epistemic conditions and different social circumstances. Present concerns might be predominantly affected by such issues as the rise of 'post-truth' politics combined with a more or less implicit resurgence of the 'science wars', the colonial/imperialist character of university curricula, or the political targeting of intellectuals and academics in autocratic societies or in the seemingly liberal space of social media commentary.

Empirically oriented social-scientists would consider that this diversity of scholarly contexts, conditions, and experiences provides important grounding for a general, theoretical understanding of 'the vocation' as a socially multifaceted phenomenon. But simplistic conceptual frameworks that generate overarching, 'universal' principles are tenacious and appealing to the academic tribe – not least because they contribute to the rationalisation of academics' social identity from the inside-out, thereby providing a sense of normative autonomy. Reassessing such conceptual-normative frameworks on the basis of empirical social-scientific insights is therefore a necessary step toward the development of meaningful alternatives.

From this perspective, the Weberian position is a natural starting-point and addressing it requires some analytical engagement with its conceptual premises. The paper argues in that regard that, as opposed to the a priori categories Weber employed as philosophical parameters for the discussion of the 'vocation', the sociology of knowledge and science enables us to envisage a properly sociological conceptualisation and treatment of the many dimensions of the vocation question. Specifically, it explores how sociological reflexivity illuminates this question in theoretical and praxical terms. The starting-point of reflexivity being the acknowledgment of the socio-historical and material situatedness/boundedness of (social-)scientific knowledge (Hamati-Ataya, 2014a), the question becomes: how does embracing this sociological fact, as an intrinsic characteristic of the social objects

“knowledge” and “knowing,” affect the core aspects of the ‘vocation’ as an intellectual and social praxis?

To answer this question entails rethinking, beyond the classical philosophical and ideal-typical treatments of the problem, the links between different levels and realms of our scholarly praxis understood as a social condition. Reflexivity coherently unifies the ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and moral commitments of scholarship and reconciles them with its intrinsically social nature. The paper addresses these aspects by showing how reflexivity shifts the basis of the discussion away from the Weberian model and delineates new socio-cognitive *problématiques* for social-scientists. These are first formulated through two versions of ‘strong reflexivity’ (Smith, 2004[1974]) as developed and enacted by Standpoint Feminists and Pierre Bourdieu. They are further envisaged in the context of the recent attacks on French ‘critical sociology’, now accused of having lost its objectivity, and having thereby itself become a ‘danger’ to society rather than its presumed saviour (Bronner and Géhin, 2017).

‘Science as a vocation’ and ‘the vocation of science’: The Weberian perspective through a reflexive lens

Max Weber established an important framework for thinking about the scholarly vocation in his famous lectures on the vocations of science and politics, and more importantly in his treatment of the problem of values. Weber proposed a coherent axiology, wherein the ontological, epistemological-methodological, and normative statuses of values are clearly – specifically: *analytically* – identified in relation to one another. In what follows I argue that Weber nevertheless failed to develop a coherently *sociological* analysis of the vocation as a social phenomenon.

The Weberian Perspective

I begin with an exegetical effort that focuses on Weber’s lecture ‘Science as a Vocation’ (Weber, 2004[1918]) because of its referential status, and because it illuminates his analytical grounding of the problem as reflected in four core distinctions he makes, between ‘science as a vocation’ and ‘the vocation of science’; between the ‘external’ and ‘inner’ dimensions of ‘science as a vocation’; between science for ‘practical purposes’ and science ‘for its own sake’; and the distinction among three dimensions of the scholar’s social identity, namely, the scientist, the teacher, and the citizen.

Weber begins with what he calls the ‘external circumstances’ or ‘conditions’ of ‘science as a vocation’ in Germany (Weber, 2004[1918]:1-7). These are the institutional structures, rules, and practices governing the functioning of the German University, and all the constraints it thereby imposes on its members and their career. He then moves on to what he presumes his audience has been eagerly waiting for him to discuss: the ‘inner vocation for science’. Here, he starts with a seemingly sociological statement, according to which this inner vocation is ‘determined’ by the fact of ‘specialization’. But he quickly shifts to a different register, speaking of the necessary elements of ‘passion’, ‘conviction’, ‘inspiration’, ‘talent’, and ‘personality’, which he posits as ‘preconditions of our work’ (2004[1918]:7-11).

In describing these preconditions that are almost entirely related to the scholar's *character* and are dramatically contrasted with the harsh conditions he previously enumerated, Weber infuses a tragic tone that is further heightened by his statement of the core paradox of the vocation: because the destiny of science is 'progress', any scientist not only has to accept that her work will inevitably become obsolete, but has to desire it, too. The real problem of the vocation, then, becomes intimately tied to 'the problem of the meaning of science' itself. Not the meaning science has for 'practical purposes', which is 'to enable us to orient our practical actions by the expectations provided by our scientific experience'. This is meaning 'only for the practical man'. What is, rather, the meaning of science 'for its own sake', and 'the inner attitude of the scientist himself to his profession?' (2004[1918]:12).

In asking this question, Weber signifies a shifting of the problem from the vocation *for* science to the vocation *of* science, indicating that individual, singular interrogations on the scientist's attitude to her profession find meaning in the collective, *social* status of science. Here, Weber introduces 'the disenchantment of the world' as the existential characteristic of his (Western modern) age, namely, that condition which results from 'the intellectual process of rationalization through science and a science-based technology' that leads to the 'knowledge or conviction' that 'we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*' (2004[1918]:13).

This condition is lived at the individual, private level as a loss of the possibility of 'fulfilment', since 'progress' remains always beyond us, at a point ahead in infinite time, which renders it properly meaningless *existentially*. At the collective level, science has lost its ability to drive us towards a specific, 'ultimate end': while it was in the past thought to be the 'path to true existence', 'true art', 'true nature', 'the true God', or 'happiness', these vocations have now been shattered. What remains, then, is the Tolstoyan acknowledgment that 'Science is meaningless because it has no answer to the only question that matters to us: "What should we do? How shall we live?"' (2004[1918]:17).

Weber concludes with a categorical statement that draws, not on his *socio-historical* assessment of the transformation of science and of its meaning/vocation, but on an *analytical* proposition concerning the relation between values-as-means and values-as-ends. Using the example of medicine, he posits that science cannot help us make a choice among value presuppositions (values-as-ends): while medicine's vocation is to preserve life (a practical aim that can guide choices in terms of values-as-means; but an aim that *already* implies the positive value of life), it cannot prove or say why life should be preserved at all, what the value of life itself *is* (2004[1918]:18). This is where Weber draws on his axiology to delineate the difference between the scientific and political vocations, and the scholar's relation to 'politics' in the realm of two of her social identities – as a researcher and a teacher.

Weber's analytical-philosophical treatment of values is exemplified in what he posits as the difference and relation between the 'analysis of facts' and the 'statement of ideals' (1949b[1904]:60): the role of science is limited to the former, while the latter is the proper role of politics/policy. This brings us to the notion of *Wertfreiheit* ('value-freedom') or more explicitly *Werturteilsfreiheit* ('freedom from value-judgments'), a notion often mistakenly rendered as 'ethical neutrality' rather than the more accurate 'axiological neutrality'. *Wertfreiheit* requires that the scholar

keep unconditionally separate the establishment of empirical facts (including the “value-oriented” conduct of the empirical individual whom he is investigating) and *his* own practical evaluations, i.e., his evaluation of these facts as satisfactory or unsatisfactory (including among these facts evaluations made by the empirical persons who are the objects of investigation) (1949a[1917]:11).

The reason for this separation is that ‘to judge the validity of...values is a matter of faith’, and the adherence to given ‘ultimate standards is [a] personal affair’ that ‘involves will and conscience, not empirical knowledge’ (1949b[1904]:55, 54). ‘Ultimate standards’ or ends/norms cannot be *logically* deduced from our factual knowledge of the world – and surprisingly, it seems that for Weber this is so even for our *factual* knowledge of values-as-objects – and science therefore cannot guide our social praxis beyond the designation of how, *if* specific ends are preferred, *then* specific means can be successful in achieving them. Science cannot *causally* help us determine *categorically* what we should do or how we should live (i.e., *what* ends should be preferred) because ‘the validity of a practical imperative *as a norm* and the truth-value of an empirical proposition are absolutely heterogenous in character’ (1949a[1917]:12). This is the famous Humean analytical principle that underscores Weber’s Tolstoyan posture.

It is at this argumentative moment in his lecture that Weber raises the problem of politics in the academy. His concern pertains to instances of political activism in Germany that he finds problematic and dangerous. But Weber makes a general, a-contextual assertion that is offered (and commonly interpreted) as absolutely valid: politics ‘has no place in the lecture room’, both ‘as far as students are concerned’ – with no further explanation – and ‘as far as the lecturer is concerned’ (2004[1918]:19-20).

In the latter case, this is so for two reasons. The first is a direct consequence of the analytical distinction between factual analysis and normative judgment: ‘opinions on issues of practical politics and the academic analysis of political institutions and party policies are two very different things’. The second has to do with the very setting of the lecture room, where the lecturer enjoys institutional authority and the monopoly of speech: to allow oneself the freedom to express political preferences or promote specific political ideals, objectives, and policies to an audience that cannot respond because it lacks voice and authority (i.e., freedom, opportunity, equality, and security) is to abuse one’s position of institutional and contextual superiority (2004[1918]:20-1). Such expressions of value-preferences should, then, be restricted to that space where egalitarian mutual engagement, argumentation, and dialogue are (again, *ideally*) possible, namely, the space of public debate, the proper realm of *political action*.

The domain of politics, then, is ideal-typically mutually exclusive with two of the three domains defining the scholar’s social situation: research (knowledge-production) and teaching (knowledge-transmission). Politics is antagonistic to the scientific ethos and it is only in the realm of citizenship, so to speak, that the scholar can practice an explicit engagement with values-as-ends. This, Weber himself did extensively and passionately, as attested by his participation in several political debates and struggles of his time. Weber was, in contemporary parlance, a public intellectual – and one of the most prominent in Germany, too.

Reflexivity

In general terms, sociological reflexivity is an epistemological and praxical posture informed by the sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge acknowledges and interrogates the relations between the forms and content of thought on the one hand, and the material-ideational social conditions that preside over its emergence on the other (Mannheim, 1936, 1952; Scheler, 1980). It empirically shows how the very categories of our understanding (of reality) are themselves the products of social reality (Durkheim, 1915; Durkheim and Mauss, 2010; Mannheim, 1952; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Bloor, 1976; Sohn-Rethel, 1978), and that the way these categories come into being and acquire epistemic meaning is related to our social condition and situation, but also to our very engagement with the social world (Mannheim, 1952, 1986; Barnes, 1974, 1976; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990[1980], 2002[1984]).

This is not the kind of engagement we describe in our methodology textbooks and transmit to students as normative steps for the ‘conduct of inquiry’. It is rather an engagement grounded in our social *experience* of reality, which is never systematically apparent to us because it is precisely the medium through which the social order becomes inscribed in us (internalised, naturalised), thereby appearing as a “given” to our consciousness (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990[1980], 2002[1984]; Bourdieu *et al.*, 1983[1968]). To unmask *what* is hidden from our conscious experience of the world and *how* it shapes the very tools and representations we use to make sense of the world is the overarching mission of the sociology of knowledge. Reflexivity, then, is the posture of the knowledge-producer who draws on the sociology of knowledge as a source of understanding and a principle for her epistemological, methodological, and ethical reflection *and* practice.

How does reflexivity, thus understood, illuminate the problem of the scholarly vocation? The first requirement of a reflexivist treatment of this question is that it should be addressed *sociologically* as any other *social* question. In Weber’s account, both the ‘vocation’ and the ‘meaning’ of science are addressed in philosophical, a priori terms, in relation to values-as-norms or ‘ultimate ends’. Consequently, Weber has to make a formal distinction between ‘science for practical reasons’ and ‘science for its own sake’. The paradox resulting from his ‘disenchanted’ analysis is that science only has meaning for practical purposes governed by ultimate ends set by exogenous actors in the realm of politics, but has no meaning for its own sake outside of the inner dedication to a necessarily contextual truth whose meaning is condemned to be superseded with time. Specifically, the paradox is that Weber acknowledges only partially and asymmetrically the existential and praxical conditions of science: the *same* social condition that endows political actors with a choice among ultimate ends that give meaning, for them, to the purpose of science, is denied as a source of meaning for scholars qua social actors.

The only explanation for this oddity is that Weber imposes an a priori principle that implicitly posits that the purpose of science cannot be objectivated similarly, i.e., *in equally sociological terms*, for those placed inside and outside of it. This presupposition, in turn, is not based on a *sociological* understanding of science as a social product/phenomenon, but on Weber’s *analytical* distinction between analysis and opinion, or between explanation and value-judgment – a distinction he asserts independently of any empirical investigation of how explanations and value-judgments are *actually* constituted in the processes of social and academic life. Outside

of science, social agents can cope with the disenchantment of the world because they can adjust to any historical loss of meaning by creating meaning out of their extant condition. But science remains trapped in a predefined, abstract rule that extracts it from the social condition that makes it possible, thereby making it hermetic to any meaning-producing dynamics, and impotent toward the formulation of the social ends that define its own practical purpose.

To rethink this question as a properly social one amenable to sociological analysis, one needs to step out of the Weberian rationale and follow a coherent path that takes us from the *reality* of knowledge/science to the *problématiques* this reality brings forth. To adopt the reflexive posture is to start from the 'ideological' nature of thought and knowledge, in the Mannheimian sense of 'total-ideology': the 'ideology of an age or of a concrete historico-social group,...when we are concerned with the characteristics and composition of the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this group' (Mannheim, 1936:56). As mentioned previously, Weber divorces scholarly practice from the conditions that produce *any* social practice. This puts scholarship in a social vacuum ('science for its own sake') and renders it incapable of finding exogenous meaning to its existence. The dilemma that emerges from Weber's analysis, then, is specific to his portrayal of the scholarly condition, which is based on his analytical treatment of the relation to values. Going back to this treatment, it is easy to show how a reflexivist approach creates an altogether different perspective.

Let me quote, again, Weber's statement on *Wertfreiheit*: the scholar should

keep unconditionally separate the establishment of empirical facts (including the "value-oriented" conduct of the empirical individual whom he is investigating) and *his* own practical evaluations, i.e., his evaluation of these facts as satisfactory or unsatisfactory (including among his facts evaluations made by the empirical persons who are the objects of investigation).

Well, let us read Weber's quote *reflexively*: what happens when we apply his *verstehende* sociology *to the scholar herself*, i.e., to her 'value-oriented' scholarly 'conduct' as encompassing the different aspects of scholarship, including thought as such? To establish the 'empirical facts' about *our* value-oriented conduct is to engage in the sociology of knowledge. But such an engagement with the very values that orient our work can hardly remain 'unconditionally separate' from our 'practical evaluations' of those values, which are themselves the products of our social condition. This is so because once our unconscious motivations are unmasked to our consciousness through our very pursuit of 'empirical knowledge' (i.e., sociology) they are necessarily meant to affect our 'will and conscience'.

More importantly, 'will and conscience' are themselves the product of socialisation, which is why by subjecting our own thought to a reflexive investigation we are simultaneously turning our individual 'judgments on the validity of values' into objects of 'empirical knowledge'. In doing so we are simultaneously led to interrogate the social origins and collective character of our value-oriented scholarly conduct, beyond the individual "biases" and preferences with which Weber was rightly concerned. This collective dimension is more important than the individual one, for if we can easily be made aware of our individual biases through confrontation with facts or with the biases of others, those biases that constitute collective consensus (so-called intersubjective agreement, especially the epistemic/epistemological kind) are better

hidden/legitimised and more profoundly detrimental to the advancement of (social-)scientific knowledge.

On this point, Weber's description of the 'external conditions' and 'inner preconditions' of the 'vocation for science' precisely ignores the most crucial, *social* dimensions of the problem. First, sociological analyses of the 'inner' characteristics of the scholarly 'disposition' demonstrate that such a disposition is socially constituted, and that the very categories Weber uses (e.g. 'talent', 'dedication') are conceptualised along an idealist, a-social understanding of the social personality, and hence unknowingly reinforce the ideologically dominant meritocratic view that practically and symbolically works in favour of the socially dominant (Bourdieu, 2002[1984]; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964). Second, Weber's 'external conditions' ignore the wider social determinants that make possible and shape the social character and status of science, as well as scientists' professional dispositions. What is consequently missing from Weber's description of the 'external' and 'inner' aspects of the vocation is precisely that which *connects them socially*, rather than *opposes them analytically*. And this is directly linked to Weber's separation of the individual and collective *experiences* of the scholarly condition, that is, to his non-sociological treatment of 'science as a vocation'.

The reflexive posture consequently also contrasts with Weber's analysis of the practical dimension of the vocation, related to the place of politics in teaching and the political nature of pedagogy. Whether one practices her craft in a magisterial lecture hall where students gather silently to listen to her authoritative voice, or in a classroom where students actively and freely engage with her and the material at hand, a reflexive perspective that aims at unmasking that which our thought, knowledge, and teaching practices owe to their being socially situated/constituted suggests that Weber's position needs to be turned on its head, for it cannot be sustained without a heavy dose of obliviousness, hypocrisy, or sociological incoherence.

Such incoherence is explicitly targeted within 'critical pedagogy', which takes stock of the insights of Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial sociologies (Denzin, 2003; Freire, 2013; Giroux, 2011; Leonardo, 2005). Regardless of whether the thematic subject of instruction relates to politics explicitly, it is no longer possible to avoid the examination of the total-ideological and political dimensions of epistemic objects and practices, from concepts, theories, and paradigms, to epistemologies and methodologies, and the curriculum itself. Such reflexive approaches show that 'politics' is *de facto* in the classroom because the classroom is a socially constituted, socially authorised, and socially maintained space, and that to avoid 'politics' prescriptively neither removes its presence and impact, nor provides any guarantee of 'objectivity', 'neutrality', or epistemological 'rigour'.

By leaving existing political orders and consensuses thus unexamined and hence incontestable, a Weberian position can even end up legitimating them by providing an implicit acquiescence to their symbolic power/violence and practical authority. A reflexivist pedagogy that would complement the epistemological-methodological posture associated with 'unmasking' or 'deconstructing' techniques would rather require a very frontal and methodical engagement with, and examination of, 'politics' and total-ideology, including those involved in the teaching-learning interaction itself.

A reflexivist sociological analysis reveals that both our epistemic *and* political relation to reality is mediated by our socially constituted experience of the social world,

and hence a reflexive pedagogy requires a critical engagement with that experience, which needs to be manifested and enunciated before it can be unmasked or deconstructed. The point, however, is that this experience is not simply directly accessible to us in any *immediate* or objective terms: it is fundamentally expressed and enacted in our *value*-preferences/judgments, precisely because they are the end-product of the impact of the social order on our situated experience of it. For this reason, a systematic engagement with political values as epistemic objects of analysis is necessary and requires first to bring politics (back) into the classroom, however tricky and problematic this move might be – reflexivity produces not an *unproblematic*, but a *differently problematised* perspective on the vocation.

“Strong reflexivity”: Knowledge as situated, purposeful praxis

Weber’s justification for keeping ‘politics’ out is incoherent because it is grounded in a priori philosophical categories of analysis rather than empirically informed sociological ones; it is incomplete because by failing to apply systematically Weber’s own sociological approach to values, it misses its praxical *and* normative implications. The following sections delineate a reflexivist alternative through an account of ‘strong reflexivity’, which takes the insights of sociological analysis seriously as empirical *foundations* for conceptualising scientific thought and praxis.

I first show that a sociology-of-knowledge perspective illuminates the necessary convergence of the unmasking of total-ideology with the redefinition of purposeful (rather than neutral) objectivity and praxis, thereby reversing Weber’s analytical separation of knowledge on the one hand, and judgment and action on the other. This is illustrated through Standpoint Feminist sociology and the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. Taking the special case of social policies on science itself, I then discuss the relation between reflexivist knowledge and political engagement, by contrasting the tenets of the reflexivist posture with Weber’s untenable position on social ‘ideals’. This is then practically addressed in relation to the current debate on the social role of ‘critical sociology’.

‘Strong objectivity’ as the corollary of the situatedness of knowledge

Standpoint Feminist and Bourdieusian sociologies are based on a powerful critique of objectivism/positivism, grounded in a sociological understanding of the social situatedness/boundedness of knowledge and the social constitution of knowing subjects. Their commitment to reflexivity is also directly related to their ontological position, since it results from a consistent investigation of (social-)scientific knowledge as one instance of socially-situated knowledge, and of the scholarly subject as one instance of socially-constituted subjectivity (Harding, 2004; Haraway, 2004[1991]; Bourdieu, 1992, 2000[1972], 2007).

Their critiques of objectivist theory and practice similarly aim to show how objectivism is itself the oblivious product of total-ideology, and how by ignoring its social origins and the conditions of its social meaning and efficacy, objectivism merely enunciates, legitimates, and contributes to maintaining and reproducing extant social (power-)dynamics. Objectivism, then, fails to describe, understand, or explain the world ‘as it is’, despite its claims to be doing just that: objectivism’s objectivity is a ‘weak objectivity’ (Harding, 2004[1993]) that leaves unexamined (and hence illusory) its

posture of epistemological distancing/detachment. Through its erasure of the question of the *conditions of possibility and meaningfulness* of social representation, objectivism also imposes a false (total-ideological) distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, and thereby ignores the praxical meaning social agents invest in their representations and behaviour in the social world; it consequently remains oblivious to the social determinants of the practices that are invested in, and produced by, its own representations (Bourdieu, 1990[1980]).

Instead of surrendering to total-ideology by falling into a defeated relativism or endorsing an epistemic nihilism that renders science impossible and meaningless as a socio-moral endeavour, Standpoint Feminism and Bourdieusian sociology are on the contrary committed to a ‘strong objectivity’ (Haraway, 2004[1991]; Harding, 2004[1993]), which signifies their commitment to reclaim objectivity against its appropriation by positivism/objectivism and its denigration by postmodernists and epistemic/moral nihilists. This aligns with Mannheim’s (1936:5) view that:

Only as we succeed in bringing into the area of conscious and explicit observation the various points of departure and of approach to the facts which are current in scientific as well as popular discussion, can we hope, in the course of time, to control the unconscious motivations and presuppositions which, in the last analysis, have brought these modes of thought into existence. A new type of objectivity in the social sciences is attainable not through the exclusion of evaluations but through the critical awareness and control of them.

Reflexivity, then, is neither a logical or formal “bending back” of thought on itself (e.g. Ashmore, 1989; Woolgar, 1988), nor a solipsistic, introspective posture that turns the individual subject into an epistemic source of knowledge (Macbeth, 2001; Hamati-Ataya, 2014b). The “bending back” is rather reflected as a ‘causal symmetry’:

The fact that subjects of knowledge are embodied and socially located has the consequence that they are not fundamentally different from objects of knowledge. We should assume causal symmetry in the sense that the same kinds of social forces that shape objects of knowledge also shape (but do not determine) knowers and their scientific projects. (Harding, 2004[1993]:133).

Reflexivity thereby carries the social-situatedness of knowledge from ontology to epistemology, methodology, and theory. It guides the cognitive process through a cautious deconstruction of the taxonomies that constitute the foundations of our systems of thought and reinforce their social credibility. As Bourdieu (2004:89; emphasis added) puts it:

Understood as the effort whereby social science, taking itself for its object, uses its own weapons to understand and check itself,...[reflexivity] is not a matter of pursuing a new form of absolute knowledge, but of exercising a specific form of epistemological vigilance, the very form that this vigilance must take in an area *where the epistemological obstacles are first and foremost social obstacles*.

But precisely because knowledge is a situated practice that is performative as much as it is enunciative and descriptive, reflexivity is simultaneously adopted as a

political, moral commitment – a position Weber’s analytical model cannot accommodate. This commitment is not a choice one might or might not want to make. It is the necessary corollary of reflexivity as an epistemological standard. The connection between science and politics is manifested differently for Standpoint Feminists and for Bourdieu but it is essentially the same connection, “travelled” in opposite directions.

Because Feminism originated in political struggle before becoming an academic movement, it carried with it the political purpose that prompted Feminists to interrogate the epistemic structures that serve to institutionalise and internalise the categories of thought through which gender-based oppression operates. As their investigation of knowledge and science developed, they became concerned with all such socio-epistemic dynamics of oppression (Harding, 2004). Bourdieu’s engagement with politics and power (Bourdieu, 2008), on the other hand, was a product of his sociological investigations: as social science reveals the forms of inequalities and domination that are masked by ideology, discourse, and symbolic violence, it performs a political act of *subversion* of that social order to which it is itself subjected. Reflexivity becomes a political and moral posture because the scholar can no longer be oblivious to her own contribution to the performance of the social order, and insofar as reflexive social-science is emancipatory for the scholar herself, its beneficial effects cannot morally be withheld from the subjects of her investigations.

Standpoint Feminist and Bourdieusian sociologies have therefore drawn the reflexivist conclusions that follow from Weber’s *own* requirement that sociology actively investigate the values, experiences, and practices of social agents as social constructs. They have simply expanded this requirement to the knowing subject herself. By doing so, they have incorporated the sociology of knowledge as a core, integral part of social-scientific research, thereby challenging the distinction between first- and second-order knowledge that enables philosophy/epistemology to still claim a ‘foundational’ and ‘arbitrating’ position vis-à-vis sociology and hence deny sociologists their *potential* and *actual* philosophical autonomy (Hamati-Ataya, 2017).

‘Strong objectivity’ and political engagement

From the reflexivist perspective, it becomes obvious that politics is inscribed in all acts of knowing, and that one cannot address this *fact* by a mere analytical separation of the realms of science and society/politics and a pragmatic separation of the scholars’ social identities. By distinguishing science and politics on the basis of an analytical distinction between the values of ‘truth’ and ‘power’ – science and politics as instances of value-driven rationality (*Wertrationalität*) – Weber distracts us from *confronting* the fact that the enunciation of truths about the social world is itself the stake of political struggles – a fact he implicitly acknowledges. The notion of ‘science for its own sake’ becomes meaningless both sociologically and existentially, and increasingly so as one’s understanding of the social determinants and effects of science broadens and deepens. The question, then, is not how to protect science from politics, but how to reconcile the political and emancipatory nature/effects of knowledge.

What makes Standpoint Feminist and Bourdieusian sociologies especially appealing in that regard is that they resolve the problem emerging from the post-positivist critique, by transcending the false choice between the Cartesian anxiety that searches for an illusory Archimedean foundation for knowledge, and the relativist

anxiety that results from the acknowledgment of the historicity of knowledge (Hamati-Ataya, 2014a). They thereby embrace the cognitive-existential problem identified by Gramsci (1971:750) as inherent to social critique:

If the philosophy of praxis affirms theoretically that every “truth” believed to be eternal and absolute has had practical origins and has represented a “provisional” value (historicity of every conception of the world and of life), it is still very difficult to make people grasp “practically” that such an interpretation is valid also for the philosophy of praxis itself, without in so doing shaking the convictions that are necessary for action.

Feminists, Bourdieu, and Weber have all been intentionally and intensely involved in social struggles. The fact that the first two have *contributed* to (and not merely *used*) the sociology of knowledge/science *and* have engaged the public sphere as political activists is not a coincidence. I propose that this link between the objectivation/unmasking of total-ideology and the expression of value-preferences in the public sphere (i.e. the *causal* link between *understanding* ‘what is’ and *judging* ‘what ought to be’) is the defining aspect of the reflexivist ethos. To illustrate this notion I address a special instance so as to better capture the general case to which it pertains. The special instance is involvement in the public sphere with respect to issues concerning science itself, which highlights especially well the inconsistency of Weber’s position on the relation between ‘factual analysis’ and ‘statements of ideals’.

If the formulation of ‘statements of ideals’ falls outside the purpose of science, as Weber posits, then who *should* decide the policies that govern the social status, functioning, practical purposes, and ‘ideals’ of science itself? When Weber distinguishes science ‘for practical purposes’ from science ‘for its own sake’, he segregates its meaning for ‘practical man’ from its meaning for scholars, who are thus conceived as “non-practical” social actors. On this view, two possibilities can be envisaged. Either the social norms governing science and the academy are defined exclusively by policy-makers and others who are external to science, or scientists contribute to these definitions but exclusively in the realm of public debate, as ordinary citizens.

The first case poses the problem of the social autonomy of science: its ability to function according to its own self-identified rules, stakes, and purposes, rather than those of exogenous social actors. The Weberian model would address this case by allowing scholars to advise policy-makers and political activists only on the basis that they have ‘empirical knowledge’ that can guide the latter ‘practically’, that is, according to a Kantian *hypothetical* imperative: *if* such and such are the social ends desired or determined (by others) for science, *then* such and such policies and institutions are to be preferred. This would still limit public engagement to those scholars who actually have that knowledge. Scientists are here merely professional “experts” at the service of decision-makers or their political contenders. The distinction between ‘factual analysis’ and ‘statements of ideals’ produces, then, a social division of labour between the two vocations.

The second case is more akin to Weber’s own behaviour, since he was himself involved in political struggles. Here, the division of labour draws on the ideal-typical (not real) distinction between the two social identities, and the scholar serves as both advisor (to herself) and ideologue, but in two ideally (which is to say, illusorily)

separated social spaces. Presumably, this means that drawing on her own empirical knowledge (if she has it), the scientist determines the best means to achieve the ends of science she thinks best suited to the social situation.

In both cases, however, there is, according to Weber, no *causal* link between the enunciation of truths about reality and the expression of preferences about it. The process of determining which ideals should prevail remains restricted to the evaluator's 'will and conscience'. This implies that in the second case where, say, a sociologist acts in the public sphere, there is nothing that obliges her to actually use her 'empirical knowledge' according to a means-ends rationale, since she, like *any* scientist (say, a physicist), can engage the public sphere qua citizen only, and determine her value-preferences independently of any (and anyone's) prior knowledge, sociological or otherwise.

In either case, this raises the question of how such ideals *are* determined. What makes 'will and conscience' produce such ideals, if not a given social experience and understanding of reality? In the special instance where ideals are about science itself, the Weberian paradigm becomes problematic and even existentially absurd. If one considers the knowledge produced by the sociology of knowledge/science, Weber basically tells us that our understanding of the social origins, nature, and effects of knowledge cannot causally lead one to prefer specific social-cognitive configurations to others. For example, becoming empirically aware of how given material and ideational social structures distort scientific knowledge in given ways does/can/should not lead causally to fighting such distortions within science itself, which would entail rethinking a whole set of 'ideals/policies' *for science* such as the social organisation of research, public curricula, or pedagogy.

This principle annihilates the very rationale of social critique. According to Weber's paradigm, one can merely empirically establish the ideological tenets and consequences of, say, 'positivist' or 'colonial science', and then go home and continue to operate within the existing paradigm until a policy-maker asks one how this particular scientific finding could help reduce socio-cultural inequalities and improve the condition of society's less privileged groups. In which case, the scholar would probably have to suggest that this *can* be done by an alternative framework of knowledge-production that challenges not only the cognitive standards of the extant one, but also the whole socio-academic condition that sustains it and makes it socially efficient!

This posture is absurd, to say the least. And it is not only intellectually absurd, but socially, too: for it is precisely the intimate relation between cognitive and socio-political structures that produces the very total-ideology *from which* one thinks about knowledge and ideals for society. And this is so for scholars *and* policy-makers. In the case of scholars, it is unsurprising that positivism has thrived so well under the banner of Weber's propositions: as illustrated by the history of American political science, it provided it with both the unconscious (total-ideological) conditions to ignore values as objects of study, and the justifications ('ethical neutrality' as 'objectivity') for a morally unaccountable public behaviour (McCoy and Playford, 1967; Somit and Tanenhaus, 1967; Easton, 1969; Surkin and Wolfe, 1970; Gunnell, 2006; Hamati-Ataya, 2011).

In the case of policy-makers, to expect them to determine the need to emancipate oneself from ideology assumes that they have become aware of it (thanks, perhaps, to a Weberian "expert") *and* that they have interests in altering its effects. The naiveté and absurdity of such a position explains why scholars working on the

sociology of knowledge and science have so systematically taken their understanding of the politics of science to its natural sphere of action: the realm of public debates, struggles, and policies.

Concluding remarks: The situated sociology of situated values

The Weberian posture cannot reconcile our situated objective understanding of reality and our situated social praxis, a problem of which the case of science policy is merely one illustration. Standpoint Feminists and Bourdieusian sociologists are especially interested in the social norms governing the production and functioning of science and education, but they manifest their scholarly ethos in a range of social struggles. These are not randomly chosen. Feminists are active on issues concerning gender-based as well as *other* forms of oppression, marginalisation, disenfranchisement, and symbolic violence that operate in similar and interrelated ways. Bourdieu systematically refused to speak on socio-political issues about which he considered that he had no sufficient epistemic basis to form political judgments, and limited his public interventions to social phenomena he had investigated sociologically. These instances of activism are significantly different from the contemporary “expert,” the French “total intellectual” *à la* Sartre, or the public intellectual who intervenes on issues outside her academic expertise (e.g. Bertrand Russell, Noam Chomsky).

The reflexivist posture, then, produces a distinctive and *accountable* ethos of ‘political action’ that follows from the specialised understanding scholars have acquired about specific aspects of the social world, including science and the academy. On this view, an understanding of the structural processes of social life produces the moral obligation to improve the human condition whenever social determinants are revealed by sociological analysis to be contingent and transformable through social action (Bourdieu, 1990:14-15). Without this practical purpose, sociology would not be ‘worth the labour of a single hour’ (Durkheim, 1984: xxvi). The reflexivist ethos thus translates as an ethos of social responsibility, connecting Weber’s ‘two vocations’ in a sociologically coherent, existentially meaningful, and socially accountable way.

Such ‘moral obligation’ and the standards of life to which it assigns value are not those abstract principles about which moral philosophers speculate in hypothetical situations. They are social phenomena arising from social life processes, and their origins as well as the specific ways wherein they affect social reality can be understood through sociological analysis. Knowledge of them produces the possibility of judgment, and better knowledge leads to a heightened moral consciousness. As moral consciousness is itself a product of social life, an understanding of the latter is the only rational path toward the assessment of social ideals. This is precisely Durkheim’s sociological response to Weber’s speculative idealism: ‘a new purpose that science proposes to the will’; as sociology demystifies the sacred, it simultaneously carries the promise of a ‘science of morality’ – one that ‘does not make [scholars] indifferent or resigned spectators of reality’ (Durkheim, 1984:xxvii-xxviii).

Whenever it abstracts itself from its historicity the reflexivist position, too, risks becoming a rigid, sterile analytical model. The emerging public debate¹ among French

¹ At the time of writing (Autumn 2017), the debate is gaining prominence in French public (and social) media (*Radio France Culture, Le Point, Le Figaro, Nouvel Obs*) and involves a growing number of French

sociologists, triggered by attacks on critical sociology's perceived ideologism and activism (Bronner and Géhin, 2017), vividly illustrates the point that scholarly praxis generates socio-intellectual *problématiques* that require constant socio-epistemological vigilance and assessment. The debate illuminates the entanglement of thought and practice, since the analytical opposition between involvement and detachment typically brandished as a normative divide partly translates, in excessively antagonising terms, broader divisions arising within the French academy – including within the Bourdieusian “stable” itself – in a wider context of socio-intellectual malaise.

Once this dimension is captured sociologically two related points emerge. First, the meaningfulness of the social contexts wherein scholars' epistemic and value-oriented perspectives develop becomes erased in the process of their becoming model theoretical-deontological positions. This erasure of context reinforces the analytical authority of the misleading concept of 'the vocation' as referring to some universal, homogeneous condition. Weber's intervention was a structural response to a particular socio-historical situation and resonates for others experiencing similar configurations wherein keeping 'politics' out might be the most meaningful normative choice. By erasing this contextuality Weber failed to examine the impact of his social context on the production and meaningfulness of his epistemic categories and dichotomies. A similar problem arises for contemporary 'critical sociologists' when the enactment of social 'critique' becomes anchored in pre-defined intellectual preferences rather than aimed at *social consensuses*, including the ones grounding its own socio-epistemic possibility and authority.

Second, while the protagonists of the involvement-detachment debate have adequate knowledge to discuss social problems and their potential policy solutions (*à la Weber*), they are much less equipped to engage their moral and normative dimensions from an equally confident position that does not merely embody 'leftist dogmatism', 'right-wing collusions', or 'Western imperialism', as the common accusations have it. As opposed to general sociology and the sociology of knowledge, which have established themselves as convincing alternatives to idealist ontology and epistemology respectively, the sociology of values is yet to fully illuminate that domain of the social condition that remains under the authority of speculative ethics and religious doctrine. It is the co-development of these three sociological branches that would ultimately permit a coherent understanding of our 'vocation', which is the precondition for our moral autonomy.

sociologists and philosophers in addition to Bronner and Géhin, including Nathalie Heinich, Cyril Lemieux, Edgar Morin, and Alain Touraine (see: https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/le-journal-des-idees/la-sociologie-est-elle-un-sport-de-combat?utm_campaign=Echobox&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook#link_time=1506678228; <https://www.franceculture.fr/sociologie/sept-peches-capitales-sociologie-vieille-histoire>); <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/idees/20170929.OBS5360/la-sociologie-est-elle-depassee-le-debat-gerald-bronner-cyril-lemieux.html>; http://www.lepoint.fr/editos-du-point/sebastien-le-fol/edgar-morin-j-invite-bronner-a-me-lire-01-10-2017-2161240_1913.php#xtmc=sociologie&xtnp=1&xtr=3; http://www.lepoint.fr/editos-du-point/sebastien-le-fol/alain-touraine-une-etude-du-sens-pas-un-pseudo-sous-marxisme-30-09-2017-2161058_1913.php#xtmc=sociologie&xtnp=1&xtr=4; <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/politique/2017/08/04/31001-20170804ARTFIG00243-nathalie-heinich-la-sociologie-bourdieusienne-est-devenue-un-dogme-de-la-gauche-radicale.php>) <visited 21 October, 2017>

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