



Heart, Character, and a Science of Man

Max Weber's Central Question by Wilhelm Hennis; Keith Tribe; Max Weber's Science of Man: New Studies for a Biography of the Work by Wilhelm Hennis; Keith Tribe

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HEART, CHARACTER, AND
A SCIENCE OF MAN

MAX WEBER'S CENTRAL QUESTION, 2d ed., by Wilhelm Hennis. Newbury, UK: Threshold Press, 2000. 241 pp. Translated by Keith Tribe.
MAX WEBER'S SCIENCE OF MAN: NEW STUDIES FOR A BIOGRAPHY OF THE WORK by Wilhelm Hennis. Newbury, UK: Threshold Press, 2000. 220 pp. Translated by Keith Tribe.

I

There is something disconcerting about the motif that opens *Max Weber's Central Question*: "Each sees what is in his own heart." The statement is Weber's and its human pathos is undeniable. But if it is true, what are we to make of Wilhelm Hennis's claim to have restored the authentic meaning of Weber's fundamental problematic or *Fragstellung*? The epigraph and the hermeneutic claim appear to be in tension. Do Hennis's books reveal his heart rather than Weber's? Or, to put the question another way, what does Hennis's heart lead him to see?

To understand Hennis's approach to Weber, it is important to grasp not only the project that animates it but also its foil. The foil is sociology. The sociological appropriation of Weber as one of its "founders," Hennis argues, has perpetuated a myth of remarkable and damaging durability. Erroneously elevated to a figure keen to establish a new "value-free" discipline, with a distinct subject matter, the real Weber has sunk into oblivion beneath the weight of a thousand textbooks, monographs, and articles, each heaping parody upon platitude. Sociology was not the end point to which Weber's life's work was moving; there was no intellectual development from historical economy to sociology, as if one displaced the other. Instead, Weber's trajectory is best envisaged as an expansion and elaboration of themes that existed *in nuce* from the early 1890s onward. The subtitle to *Economy and Society*—"An

Outline of Interpretive Sociology”—was an invention of its editor, Johannes Winckelmann. For Weber, sociology was above all a method, a way of organizing and conceptualizing historical and other materials; it did not refer to a species of distinctive “social facts.” Even its key tool—the ideal type—had its origins in Weber’s work as a historian and social economist, and is firmly established in Weber’s repertoire by the time he wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism* between 1903 and 1904. (The word “sociology” does not appear in the text.)

One might imagine that Hennis’s animus toward sociology would lead him toward a particularly harsh judgment of Talcott Parsons and American structural functionalism. But in fact it is the German reception of Weber that most offends Hennis and sociology is not the only culprit. To be sure, Hennis considers the Parsonian interpretation and translation of Weber to be wildly misconceived. Parsons, on Hennis’s account, was less interested in understanding Weber than in commissioning him. Even so, it is in Germany, or, at least, among Germanophone thinkers, where the ultimate travesty is to be found. Postwar German political science and political theory, under the influence of either positivism or Marxism, largely divested itself of Weber’s legacy. In America, émigré writers such as Voegelin and Strauss also distanced themselves from Weber whom they considered brilliant and courageous, but philosophically confused, fragmented, and, at times, decisionistic. Thus, in the land of Weber’s birth, German sociology was left to hold a virtual monopoly of interpretation, with the dire results that I have already mentioned.

So much for the bugbear. What about the project? Hennis states it plainly: “After protracted dissection, fragmentation and reduction of the work to a few canonical masterpieces and key texts, serious effort must be directed to ascertaining which leading question and intention might lie at the foundation of the work as a whole.”¹ That Weber had such a fundamental question is the presupposition of all that follows; indeed, Hennis claims that, since Friedrich Tenbruck’s work of the mid 1970s, there is general agreement among informed commentators that a grand theme lies at the root of the corpus. The real controversy hinges on what precisely that grand theme is. Skirting Quentin Skinner’s famous injunction to avoid the fallacy of coherence,² Hennis homes in on what he believes to have been Weber’s *idée fixe*: the “anthropological” concern with the character of Man.

In his illuminating Translator’s Appendix to *Max Weber’s Science of Man*, Keith Tribe points out the difficulty of rendering in English the German term *Mensch*. The noun is obviously masculine but is not to be confused with the gendered “man” denoted by *der Mann*. “Humanity” is one possible synonym, but since Weber often preferred *Mensch* to the German *Humanität* or *Humanismus* the translator is still left pondering the correct equivalent. Be

that as it may, Weber's concern with the fate of *Mensch* and *Menschentum* is, for Hennis, the key to understanding the work as a whole, its *zentrale Fragestellung*.³ Weber's "science" was preoccupied above all, Hennis argues, with examining humankind's trajectory, particularly under modern capitalist and bureaucratic conditions: "the problems arising from the insertion of Man, a being capable of social action, in social constellations which in turn form these persons, develop their capacities or alternatively deform them up to and including the 'parcellization of the soul.'" ⁴ Weber's questions, dramatized by the sense of cultural malaise that pervaded his times, were: What are the origins of modern Man's character structure? What is Man becoming? What are the human qualities that the modern world selectively maximizes and rewards or, conversely, extinguishes? And Weber was prompted to ask these questions scientifically not because he wished to formulate some abstract, recondite scientific discipline, but because he wished to evaluate, from a comparative, historically informed standpoint, the qualitative human type that modern circumstances were creating. Social science, in Weber's conception of it, was a potent means of grappling with, rather than avoiding, ethical questions. Sociology was one language and medium among others that Weber employed to "make philosophical questions accessible."⁵

If the historical formation and shaping of human character is Weber's "central problem," the stimulus to his work as a whole, how is such a problem "thematized"? That is to say, how is it manifested or revealed in Weber's substantive writings? Hennis finds the theme, "the basic melody running through the works and recognizable whatever the particular variation might be," in Weber's scrutiny of the "tension between the human person, the endless malleability of human nature on the one hand, and 'life-orders' on the other."⁶ These life orders—science, politics, religion, law, eros, family, and others—make different and often contradictory demands on the individual, at least in the modern West. Furthermore, such life-orders or life-spheres do not simply present agents with multiple existential challenges; they also socially shape these agents, compelling them to adapt to circumstances as diverse as rural labor organization, the capitalist city or the nation state. Weber was especially keen to explore the gradual displacement of *ständisch* personal relations of domination—so evident in artisan and rural labor social arrangements, and in concepts such as honor, *noblesse oblige*, and tribute—by impersonal ones, such as bureaucracy and the market. In this transition, human beings find themselves ever more ethically perplexed because of the opacity and anonymity of the societies they inhabit. The typical industrial worker is not dominated by capitalists but by capitalism, the typical official not by a supervisor but by the formal rules of the organization. The stock exchange, in which "the possessor of interest-bearing bonds has no idea

whose income is taxed on his behalf,"⁷ is the quintessence of this system. So considered, Weber's "theme" stretches from his studies, during the 1890s, of Prussian and Polish farmers and farm laborers to his later comparative essays on the world religions and the consequences they have for the ways that people live their lives.

It is only in this context, moreover, that we can understand Weber's political writings. Hennis acknowledges Weber's deep commitment to the German nation. Germany was, for Weber, both a powerful source of personal identity and the "life order"—a community of fate—that makes the largest and most consequential demands on its citizens. But it is a mistake to view Weber's nationalism as a transcendental value, or as an end in itself divorced from other even more fundamental concerns. Weber claimed that he had no supreme value.⁸ Freedom, patriotism, scholarship, solidarity all competed within his personality. German culture, the German state, parliament, and "democracy" were valuable to the degree that they encouraged, or protected, the formation of human qualities that Weber thought worth cultivating: responsibility, self-reliance, passionate restraint, devotion, and the willingness to suffer; in addition, he valued a life of personal struggle where happiness was secondary to greatness, self interest secondary to dedication. Equally, Weber's implacable enemy was bourgeois satiation and the smugness and contentment that sprang from it. For these reasons, Weber is best considered not as a liberal in any conventional sense, Hennis avers, but as a figure who reworked Nietzschean and the classical or quasi-republican motifs of Machiavelli, Tocqueville, and Rousseau. As Hennis puts it:

Here it is not a question of securing interests and comfort, but rather the unfolding of the power of the soul, an unfolding that appeared to be possible not on an individual basis, but rather communally, associatively, ultimately in the ancient sense of *politics*. Central to their political theory was the forcing of the individual into the political order, allowing him to participate in the responsibilities and risks of these orders, in certain cases exposing these orders to artificial internal and external risks—hence not excluding struggle through institutional arrangements, but on the contrary provoking such struggle.⁹

II

Although I have presented the two books under review as modulations of a single basic argument, there are in fact significant differences of emphasis within and between them. Whereas part 1 of *Max Weber's Central Question* (the translation has been revised for the second edition) establishes the terms of the argument, the rest of that book, and the entirety of *Max Weber's Science of Man*, seeks to deepen it, adding materials and connections that will furnish

the discursive resources necessary for what Hennis calls a “biography of the work.” (A memoir by Hennis, documenting his wartime service in the German navy, his road to Weber, and his role as a legal adviser to the Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands caps the latter volume.) Hennis examines Weber’s engagement with German political economy, with Nietzsche, and with liberalism. He looks at—in what is perhaps the weakest and most conjectural chapter of *Max Weber’s Science of Man*—the impact of William James on Weber’s studies of religion. He describes Weber’s much misunderstood positions on “value freedom” and on the vocation of scholarship, emphasizing the cultural contexts, typically embattled, of the positions Weber adopted. In the background, however, of all these debates and yearnings is, Hennis insists, Weber’s concern with “the cultivation of character,” with “the ‘human type’ that is furthered or suppressed by the materiality of a life order.”¹⁰

The measure of an argument’s importance is not whether one agrees with it, for that would mean that one had learned little or nothing from the exercise, but what it stimulates one to think. By that measure, these two books are important. Obviously, the very notion that Weber *had* a central theme is questionable and Hennis’s dismissal of views contesting his own is brusque and irascible. Is the work of great thinkers really predicated on, or dominated by, one major problem? Many will doubt it. But my own doubts have themselves become doubtful by reading, concurrently with Hennis’s two books, Nadezhda Mandelstam’s evocation of poetic creativity in *Hope against Hope* (1970). Both Nadezhda and Osip Mandelstam were convinced that that a “basic idea” underlies any “real personality,” and that “every writer [is] represented not by a series of separate, word-for-word quotations, but by a kind of ‘composite quotation’ that summed up the essentials of his thoughts and words.”¹¹ Granted, a shared conviction is not a theoretical argument; it does not settle the matter of whether Weber’s own work was informed by a “basic idea.” But it does put the matter in a different light. Perhaps Hennis’s stance on Weber is best considered not as a claim that there was a central question from which all other questions emanated, but as a recognition of the poetic impulse that gave Weber the energy and stamina to pose certain questions at all. That interpretation is consistent with Hennis’s observation that “Weber did not plan his work; the topics accrued to him and no system can be detected in their [sic] entirety.”¹²

But what are we to make of Hennis’s attempts to debunk the received notion of Weber as a sociological “founder” or “classic” and to refashion him as a hybrid descendant of classical political republicanism (the “ancient sense of politics”)? Both attempts contain elements of plausibility but both

are exaggerated and poorly argued. Let us first take the case of sociology, because it forms the background of Hennis's attempt to restore Weber to his rightful politico-ethical position and because readers of *Political Theory* may be professionally disposed to take Hennis's account at face value.

It is true that the reception of Weber's work in sociology, in common with the other social sciences, has been historically insensitive to its original context and the motives that gave rise to it. But in a vital sense that Hennis only fleetingly acknowledges¹³ this is precisely what has saved Weber from obscurity. "Breathtaking appropriation" of Weber's ideas by social scientists—a treatment to which Hennis indignantly objects in his criticism of Niklas Luhmann, Jürgen Habermas, and others¹⁴—is what has kept Weber alive. Consider, in this regard, the reputation of *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism*, a text that, for Hennis, bears salient witness to Weber's characterological concerns and anxieties. In both economics and history, Weber's argument has typically been rejected, even when it has been understood. Sociology, in contrast, has been much more favorable to the text and not only because of the discipline's bias toward cultural types of explanation. One reason, to be sure, is a tendency toward highly ritualized citation and summary, reinforced by the fact that sociologists are in the main professionally ill equipped to make historically discriminating judgments. Another is the disciplinary firewall erected by specialization and compartmentalization shielding sociologists from the criticisms of colleagues in history and economics. But that is only part of the picture. *The Protestant Ethic* has perennially survived in American sociology, and in many other national traditions too, not because of its ostensible veracity but because of its utility: its protean aptitude to act as a catalyst of hypotheses or vehicle of multiple projects that have little to do with the impulse—characterological or otherwise—that originally inspired it. Accordingly, Weber's writings on Protestantism and capitalism have been employed to examine such diverse phenomena as the nature of social action, the character of trust relationships, the clash of civilizations, and the dangers of mass consumption, and to explain why some nations became wealthy while others remained poor.

Or to put the matter differently: sociology continues to accord *The Protestant Ethic* a singular standing not because of its putative historical accuracy—still less because of its existential meaning for Weber—but because of what it permits sociologists to do. It is the essay's suggestiveness, not its verisimilitude or biographical significance, its pliability, not its irrefutability that keeps it from becoming a museum piece. One could say the same about all of Weber's writings that have survived. If Hennis finds this

maddening, crass, and reprehensible, it is because he has conflated transgenerational theoretical reflexivity and abstraction—which important thinkers induce in their descendants—with intellectual impropriety. Bowdlerization and cannibalization is the fate of every great writer. Moreover, it is plainly false to believe, as Hennis does,¹⁵ that David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* is the sole testament in American social science to Weber's express concern with "characterological" questions. On the contrary, American social science—of both natives and émigrés—has shown ample concern for such matters, as the work of Erich Fromm, C. Wright Mills, Erving Goffman, A. R. Hochschild, Robert Bellah, Rupert Wilkinson, and Wilfred McClay, among many others, attests.

Does this, then, make Weber a "founder" of sociology after all? It does not, but this has less to do with the distance of sociology from Weber's authentic intentions as a theorist of character, than with the fact that no writer can actually "found" a discipline, the directions, emphases, and preoccupations of which are dependent upon the shifting horizons of subsequent generations. So-called disciplinary "founders" are actually created by later interpreters in an act of wistful and mistaken retrospection. Thus while Hennis is right to say that Weber was not a "founder" of sociology, he misses the key reason why this is the case. Equally, Hennis is correct to identify some scattered republican motifs in Weber's political commitments but he greatly overestimates their significance. One can concur that Weber wished Germany to be a nation of "citizens and not vassals"; that he "repeatedly spoke of 'sated' peoples for whom no future bloomed"; and that "strength and [the] capacity for dedication" were integral to his view of human nobility.¹⁶ But these are hardly rigorous grounds for inserting Weber into a "tradition of modern political thought" associated with Machiavelli and Rousseau, and hence with classical political republicanism (presumably, the "ancient sense of politics"). If one were to make that case, one would first have to describe "the tradition," something Hennis revealingly fails to do. For in that eventuality he would be faced with the theoretical embarrassment of seeing how distant Weber was in most respects from the lineage that Hennis would like Weber to join. Can a writer who polemically supported "Caesarism" join the "tradition" of Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Tocqueville, for whom "Caesar" was an abbreviation of the most hateful tendencies of political life? The parliamentary Caesarist leader was Weber's political answer not simply to Germany's travails but to the crisis of liberalism more generally. The major manifestation of that crisis was the rise of massive private and public bureaucracies that threatened to engulf and negate individual initiative. Responsible Caesarism or leader-democracy of the Anglophone variety (and

in contrast to Bismarckian Caesarism) offered the best bet for a world that was becoming increasingly rigid, conformist, and philistine. If Caesarism involved “demagogy,” then so be it; that was a price well worth paying to stave off bureaucratic stultification.

In contrast, wherever republicans had invoked “demagogy,” they had normally done so either as an insult or as a warning. Classical republicans may not have been radical democrats, but nor did they envisage politics as a largely acclamatory process in which a passive and incredulous “mass” endorsed a charismatic figure. The devotion, sacrifice, or dedication (*Hingabe*) inspired in the followers of the Caesarist leader, Weber argued, is for the *person* of that leader as he seeks singularly to project and realize his values. Republicans, conversely, were more likely to see service and duty owed first and foremost to the polity itself. Leaders were glorious and entitled to respect to the degree that they exemplified, and sacrificed themselves to, the greater interest of the commonwealth.

The key significance of *Max Weber’s Central Question* and *Max Weber’s Science of Man* is that they reassert a fundamental dimension of Weber’s thought. Whether “character” is the “central” problem of Weber’s oeuvre is debatable, but without these books that debate, which was visceral for Karl Löwith and Karl Jaspers, might never have been revived. We can be grateful for the tenacity with which Hennis has sought to identify Weber’s project and for what Hennis’s heart has led him to see. The heart, after all, has its reasons. It also has its prejudices for which the only corrective in intellectual life is a community of scholars that knows how easily the heart can lead us astray.

NOTES

1. *Max Weber’s Central Question*, 5.
2. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3-53.
3. *Max Weber’s Central Question*, 106.
4. *Ibid.*, 61.
5. *Ibid.*, 43.
6. *Ibid.*, 59, 63.
7. Weber, quoted in *ibid.*, 93.
8. *Ibid.*, 173.
9. *Ibid.*, 209.
10. *Max Weber’s Science of Man*, 132-33.
11. Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope: A Memoir*, trans. Max Hayward (1970; reprint, New York: Modern Library, 1999), 67.
12. *Max Weber’s Central Question*, 59.

13. *Ibid.*, 4.
14. *Max Weber's Science of Man*, 6.
15. *Ibid.*, 82.
16. *Max Weber's Central Question*, 209.

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