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## The Stone in the Shoe: Weber Today<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Turner

Posthumous reputations are as tricky to understand, and as unpredictable, as the reputations of the living, so it is both something of a miracle and also a puzzle when a century after a scholar's death there is more controversy and importance attached to him than at the moment he died. This is all the more true for Weber, whose enormous importance has not only increased, but has migrated from discipline to discipline in a century which saw, as his own comments on the nature of science implied, greater and greater specialization. Moreover, the disciplines he influenced had a tendency to forget their past. One can earn a PhD in economics without ever much more than hearing the names of its 20th century titans.

One can imagine many candidates for an answer to the puzzle of his continuing importance. In the middle of the twentieth century it was the idea of the Protestant Ethic as the source or condition of modern capitalism and its wealth, imposed on Harvard students in the early fifties as the alternative to Marxism. But this role depended on it being paired with its opposed narrative of proletarian exploitation. Proletarian exploitation was subsequently replaced by the idea, memorably expressed Martin Luther King Jr.'s proclamation that it was the exploitation of slaves, not the protestant ethic, that was the foundation of modern wealth. Another answer would involve is the idea of charisma, the key to unlocking the appeal not only of Mussolini and Hitler, but of every popular politician afterwards. Yet another might be his stirring defense of the autonomous character of 'science'. One might add a list of more arcane issues salient to specific disciplines—*Verstehen*, legitimacy, bureaucracy, and so on. But the epithet 'Weberian' carries a somewhat different force rooted in a deeper

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concern. And it is perhaps here that we will find the source of the continuing resonance of Weber, and the resistance to it.

One apparent deeper source is a red herring, but a revealing one. Leo Strauss provided, in the middle of the twentieth century, and Allen Bloom a few decades later, a particular answer to this question: historicist relativism. It located Weber in a particular sequence of decline: he represented historicism; Heidegger's radical historicism. The difference was this: Weber purported to be 'scientific' in his approach to the historical diversity of values. But for Strauss this meant that he had smuggled in a philosophical doctrine of moral relativism as the foundation of his 'science', a foundation which could be critiqued for its own groundlessness. Heidegger would have agreed. But Heidegger's more radical turn went beyond what Strauss like to call 'science and philosophy'. For Heidegger, science (and philosophy after the pre-Socratics) was an enterprise that was itself historically relative. It could only be concerned with 'beings', as it constructed them, and not with 'Being', the more fundamental level.

Our relation to Being was not, for Heidegger, one of anything so mundane (or individualistic) as knowing; we were called instead to be its shepherds. What this meant is endlessly debatable, but it is clear enough what it meant for Heidegger. Heidegger was anti-liberal, as was Hitler and his revolution. The turn to Being was first and foremost a turn to listening, as opposed to the babble of *Das Man*. And for Heidegger this meant listening to the collective, the *Volk*, in which one attained authentic being, and being attuned to the distant voices in which it spoke rather than merely conforming to its routines. This is a species of romantic collectivism.

Romantic collectivism was the solution to the problem of relativism. This went beyond the Athens or Jerusalem, faith or reason, paradigm of Strauss. It was a secular solution to the problem of the loss of meaning formerly supplied by revealed religion. It replaces the self-transcendence formerly found in faith or reason with the self-transcendence of sacrifice to a social object: the state, the nation, society, the *Volk*, a race, an institution, a community of fate, or an identity. It is psychologically rooted in the same primal sources as tribal loyalty, the crowd, *asabiyya*, solidarity, nationalism, the exultation that comes from participating in a great cause, 'consciousness of kind', and so forth. But it goes beyond them and promises something more: genuine self-transcendence rather than a mere feeling of self-transcendence; authenticity through incorporation into a higher collective cause, rather than individually accessible truth, or individual choice.

The possibility of genuine self-transcendence depends, obscurely but significantly, on the power of collective identities to impose obligations—to tell you what, as a woman, a person of color, a Muslim, must do, and should be shamed for not doing. And this power depends on these identities being ‘real’ rather than fictions, that is to say something whose value and reality goes beyond the value individuals assign to through their value choices, something more than a confluence of personal opinions, or a Hobbesian bargain. The sense of rightness and destiny that absorption into this identity provides frees one of personal responsibility. One trades one’s defective liberal individuality, with its burdensome demand for decision in the face of relativism, for validation. And it was not just Heidegger that sought this kind of authentic being. When faith is no longer an option and reason is not enough, and relativism, which implies taking responsibility for one personal value choices, is too psychologically demanding—not unlike a consistent theodicy—variants on this kind of thinking become the surrogate source of moral certainty.

Weber, of course denied, or regarded as what we would now call a social construction, supra-individual moral validators. There was for him nothing to listen to other than the sounds of one another’s voices. There was no value that was not a product of our ascriptions of value. What Weber, and his successors such as Kelsen and Morgenthau, showed was that there was nothing to these validators but what we made of them—that they had no autonomous moral standing, only the standing we gave them, and no ontological standing, other than what we chose to grant them, relative to some purpose such as political science or law. They were, strictly speaking, fictions, and *our* fictions, rather than our moral and ontological superiors. This is the essence of a certain kind of liberalism.

One might have thought that romantic collectivism would have expired with the Nazis, or Stalin, but of course it did not. Rather its forms changed. It is the ur-ideology of virtually every anti-liberal movement. It has found its philosophical defenders, using the language of collective intentionality and social ontology. Weber’s relentless dissection of its core thought is the stone in the shoe of these intellectual variants of anti-liberalism. Weber is the stone personified; Weberianism is the epithetical form of the denial. And it is a stone that cannot be easily removed.