

Are Altaic Studies A Political Science? A Reflection on Weber's "Science as a Vocation" from the Perspective of Altaic Studies

Oliver Corff*
(Berlin)

Abstract: Since Altaic studies, or studies of Central Asia as they are perceived by some scholars, are frequently defined as the discipline that deals with the culture, history and languages of Central Asia, a simple answer to the question proposed in the title should be negative. If we look at Altaic (or, for this purpose, Central Asian studies), it becomes clear that the subjects mentioned above are purportedly non-political in nature, yet only as long as the objectives of those entities financing these studies or the political dynamics of the region during the last centuries are willingly ignored. While the perspectives of Central Asia as a centre of geopolitical potential may have changed in history, the general notion as such remains unabated. The Great Game has contributed to the advancement of Central Asian studies as much as Germany's endeavours to access China via air in the 1930's, and today the recent war in Afghanistan is equally promotional and detrimental for the field, be it for the motivation to finance research or for the difficulties to conduct field work. Certainly not all scientific work done on Altaic matters is political, but its political conditions and ramifications cannot be ignored.

Keywords: Political Science, Altaic Studies, Max Weber, Science as a Vocation, career path

Özet: Altay çalışmaları, yahut bazı araştırmacılar tarafından kabul edildiği üzere, Orta Asya çalışmaları, sıklıkla Orta Asya kültürü, tarihi ve bu bölgede konuşulan dilleri ele alan bir disiplin olarak tanımlandığı için, bu makalenin başlığına verilecek yanıt da ilk başta olumsuz olacaktır. Altay ya da Orta Asya çalışmalarına bakacak olursak, yukarıda bahsedilen konuların varsayım olarak doğası gereği siyaset dışı olduğu, ancak bu çalışmaları finanse etmekteki amaçlar

* oliver.corff@email.de

ya da bölgede son yüzyıllarda gözlemlenen siyasi hareketler bilinçli olarak görmezden gelindiği takdirde söylenebilir. Her ne kadar Orta Asya'yı jeopolitik bir güç merkezi olarak gören bakış açısı zamanla değişmişse de, Orta Asya hakkındaki genel kanı aynı şekilde devam etmektedir. "Büyük Oyun," Orta Asya çalışmalarındaki gelişmelere Almanya'nın Çin'e hava yoluyla ulaşması 1930'lara kadar katkı sağlamıştır; ayrıca günümüzde de Afganistan'daki savaş, Orta Asya çalışmaları için mali araştırmaları arttırması ile bir avantaj, saha çalışmalarını yürütmekteki zorluklar söz konusu olduğunda ise bir engel olmuştur. Şüphesiz Altay bölgesi ile ilgili yapılan araştırmaların tamamı siyasi değildir ancak bölgedeki siyasi durumlar ve ülkeler arası sorunlar da göz ardı edilmemelidir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Altay çalışmaları, siyaset bilimi, Orta Asya, Max Weber

Instead of an Introduction

The thoughts outlined below may look all too familiar to every reader of Max Weber's speech "Science as a Vocation", delivered at Munich University in 1918 and published in revised form in 1919.¹ Indeed the author of this paper is deeply indebted to Max Weber and his seminal speech because, virtually a century on, all the obstacles and hazards on the road to becoming a scientist described in vivid colours by Weber still hold true.

If anything, these obstacles and hazards appear even greater when viewed through the magnifying glass of Altaic Studies, a fascinating field of science which poses particular demands on everybody dedicated to the field, not only from an academic perspective but also from a viewpoint of employment.

Altaic Studies: The Field

There is no simple definition of the field of Altaic Studies. As the name indicates, Altaic Studies deal with subjects of the Altaic World, a wide area loosely defined by the Altaic group of languages comprising, among others, Mongolian, Manju and the Turkic languages. This group of languages received its name from the Altai Mountains in Central Asia; yet

¹ Max Weber: "Science as a Vocation" [Wissenschaft als Beruf]. Duncker & Humblot, München und Leipzig: 1919.

as the Altaic languages are spoken in a much wider area than the Altai region, it is reasonable to start from the group of languages rather than from the geographical definition.

Due to the wide geographical, political and ethnical distribution of speakers of Altaic languages (a fair number of them being official languages of contemporary states) the name of the field, Altaic Studies, is complemented by other terms with a similar focus, e.g. Central Asian Studies, Eurasian Studies, Inner Asian Studies, etc., very much depending on the particular institution that conducts research in and teaching of Altaic Studies. Going by the purely geographical name “Central Asian Studies”, it becomes possible to include nations, peoples and languages – even those which, in a strict sense, do not belong to the Altaic group of languages – in the broader picture of the field; thus research in matters related to Tibet is frequently included in the field. As far as the interaction and relation with e.g. Tibet, Mongolia, the Manjus and the Turkic people of Central Asia is concerned, even the study of Chinese affairs may be conducted under the umbrella of Altaic Studies.

The various names of our subject, Altaic Studies, Central Asian Studies etc., were coined during the years of the Great Game and the beginning systematic exploration of Central Asia. It became evident that a comprehensive research approach would be the most meaningful and helpful in order to deal with the multitude of regions, nations and ethnicities, be they part of huge and powerful nation-states or belonging to entities not exceeding the scale of a small tribe. The choice of scholarly disciplines and methodologies is equally broad and comprises a large share of the humanities: social sciences, anthropology, religion, language studies, history, archaeology, political science, economics, legal studies, and so on. Today, Altaic studies are taught in Bonn (here under the umbrella of Central Asian Studies), Bloomington (Indiana University, Inner Asian Studies or Eurasian Studies), University of Szeged, and the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, to name just a few famous institutions.

Personal and Scholarly Requirements

There is a twin challenge in devoting one's life to Altaic Studies: the academic requirements make the field a daunting challenge to the uninitiated, and future employment opportunities are unpredictable, to say the least.

Not only are employment opportunities in Altaic Studies subject to the usual uncertainty around advancing one's career; Max Weber describes the underlying mechanisms of the academic world in detail. In addition, changing trends in government funding, driven by politics rather than academical considerations, add further uncertainty to research and employment opportunities. Sarah Kendzior, an alumnus of the Central Eurasian Studies (CEUS) program at Indiana University, observes that almost nobody of her cohort of Central Asian scholars from the mid-2000s is employed in a field having to do with Central Asia, some of them ending unemployed or in totally different professions.²

The comprehensive nature of Altaic Studies, both in subject and methodology, makes it obvious that substantial personal dedication is required in order to achieve a meaningful degree of mastering a special subject while reaching and maintaining a broader understanding of the "big picture." The aspiring student of Altaic Studies thus should ideally have a Renaissance mind. For sure, the rigorous requirements of the field may shy away learners not willing to engage in such a broad and fathomless endeavour; persons with a narrow focus who excel in monodimensional disciplines are perhaps not ideally suited for a career in Altaic Studies yet there are also some comfortable niches for specialists. No matter whether a specialist or generalist approach is chosen, one must be driven by something far stronger than merely a professional commitment: it must be passion, without which there is no chance to achieve enduring results. Besides all passion, a gift, or at least some talent, for languages is essential. The field offers a fair share of languages with great diversity, such as the Turkic languages, Tibetan or Chinese, and

² Sarah Kendzior: *The Future of Central Asian Studies: A Eulogy*. March 8, 2015. <http://sarahkendzior.com/2015/03/08/the-future-of-central-asian-studies-a-eulogy/>. Looked up on March 8, 2016.

fluency in ideally more than one of these languages is essential for archive research and, of course, field work.

To make things even more complicated, career perspectives are precarious at best as, unlike in law, finance or medicine, there is no acknowledged professional discipline that offers an immediate career path for graduates of Altaic Studies. Besides all academic uncertainties, Students willing to devote their energy to this field must prepare themselves for highly unsecure, unpredictable employment opportunities. This is not to say that there are no employment opportunities; opportunities there are, yet they tend to show themselves in unexpected areas, sometimes dictated by historical, more often imposed by political circumstances. We will later return to this point when discussing the subject of profession and employment.

Altaic Studies from the Perspective of the Countries Being Studied

An interesting question arises when we look at the perception of Altaic Studies among those nations being the subject of our field. While it is not considered a danger to national security if e.g. a linguist of German origin pursues field studies in remote areas of a European country like Spain or if e.g. a Japanese historian conducts research in the historical archives of a German city, the reverse situation, e.g. a Western scholar doing dialect research or historical studies in remote areas of Inner Mongolia, is regarded with considerable suspicion, not only by local government but also by members of local communities. According to the author's anecdotal evidence even a most innocent visit of a local museum somewhere in Central Asia may be considered by museum guides as an attempt to steal national secrets. Scholars who could work relatively unimpeded in Tajikistan for years were shocked when University of Toronto political science PhD student Alexander Sodiqov, a native of Tajikistan, was detained and charged with treason and espionage on June 16, 2014 by Tajik security officials. This highly opaque and fragile personal security situation is more easily understood when one takes into account the long history of many Central Asian countries vis-à-vis the western world which combines most unfavourably with post-Soviet

processes of nation-building, a penchant for authoritarian rule and radical interpretations of statehood. In addition, as recently as the dawn of the 20th century, western explorers of Central Asia frequently also provided reconnaissance to their governments.

Worthiness of the Academic Endeavour

For those who have discovered the depth and breadth of Altaic studies, as well as the multitude of dimensions defining the field, there is nothing more rewarding than a profound immersion in the scientific endeavour. This immersion may last for years or decades before yielding results that justify to the outsider the hermit state one has voluntarily chosen for such a long time, perhaps at the price of neglecting day-to-day life and social bonds to the point of irreversible damage. This is to say that there is no objective and guaranteed measure to judge from an external point of view whether this immersion will really yield something acknowledged by outsiders; everybody has to answer this question again and again to oneself only. The choice of giving up or remaining persistent is in the hands of the scientist alone.

Employment Opportunities

A genuine interest (a more neutral term than Weber's *Leidenschaft*, "passion") for a subject is the essential driver for mastering it, but a promising career path might be equally helpful to finish a degree. Possible careers can be grouped into two categories, either belonging to pure or applied science. In the realm of pure science, the most probable employers will be universities and academies. Yet posts are limited, difficult to obtain and the salary situation often limits ambitions in terms of sustaining a family. Weber covers this aspect extensively so the author will not repeat his discussion.

The realm of applied science also offers limited, but broader employment opportunities. Limited in the sense of academic freedom, broader in the sense of positions and activities. Typical employers are state and government: besides the regional expertise which is needed by national libraries, diplomacy, intelligence, military and companies with

international operations, the ability to offer language services as a translator or interpreter also opens windows to employment opportunities albeit accompanied by a different, sometimes lower hierarchical standing without significant chance to grow into a leadership position.

Unfortunately, government-backed funding for Central Asian Studies is a highly political issue itself, determined by the ever-changing situational awareness and security perception of a government; the rise and fall of Central Asian Studies in the United States is directly linked to the national involvement in that region, as Sarah Kendzior laments.

Having undergone rigorous academic training, it can be difficult for some people to have superiors draw on their expertise in an unsensitive manner and even make far-reaching decisions based on the expert's input. Undoubtedly there is a personal dilemma: Does it befit a scientist to provide one's knowledge and expertise for purely political or economical purposes rather than for the sake of the ivory tower? Scientific insight and the power to decide are often subject to a social division of labour (and thus responsibility): the one who decides is rarely the one who is the ultimate expert, and the ultimate expert is rarely the one who decides in any major matter of policy, diplomacy or military affairs.

For the aspiring scientist, an employment scenario in public service can be accompanied by seemingly unsurmountable contradictions, in particular over where obligations and loyalties lie. Does one's loyalty lie with the subject under study (a state of mind frequently observable with those who just happened to discover their enthusiasm for a field and their emotional binding to a cause), or does loyalty stick primarily with one's company, alma mater, country, nation or state?

There is no simple recipe to deal with these conflicting bonds other than the suggestion to mature with the challenge. No matter what the environment is, despite all personal passion needed to excel, research should always be done in an objective manner, *sine ira et studio*, otherwise the intellectual outcome tends to be of dubious quality anyway (and would hence be useless). When accepting a post in any of the mentioned areas which, in the widest sense, is politically determined, one must prepare oneself for accepting the political responsibility that goes

with it. Whoever starts with an academic interest and becomes, for instance, a consultant to a government must also accept the responsibility of that government's acts and deeds. Even the innocent linguist who tries to determine whether a local community speaks a proper language or something labelled as a dialect of another language may be held responsible for the fate of that community when it comes to administrative measures.

The Scientific Community

Given all these dark clouds shadowing the individual prospects, Weber's word of the "individual demons hunting you" comes into mind. These demons must be fought, and the lone fighter can only engage in an uphill battle. It is one aspect of the scientific community that, beyond all scientific exchange, it offers hope: the scientist can realize that he or she is not the only one to fight these demons. The scientific community thus serves as an important source of collective reassurance: nobody is left behind. The Annual Meetings of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference offer exactly this reassurance: the masters of the field can share with the young talents not only their scientific knowledge, but also their understanding of the hurdles erected on the path to scientific achievement. No matter whether being from Germany, Russia, China or Mongolia, the United States, France or Japan, despite all cultural and political differences of these nations, the aspiring scientist's challenges are remarkably similar.

Closing Remarks

The reflections above focussed much on the personal requirements for conducting Altaic Studies and the willingness to accept politically determined employment opportunities, yet so far failed to answer the simple question posed by the title of this paper: Are Altaic Studies a Political Science? The answer undoubtedly is a two-fold positive one, once by nature of the discipline, once by nature of the region. The discipline includes the study of history, for which the following statement

holds true: “History is Past Politics, and Politics Present History.”³ The universal truth of this phrase is even more evident when we consider areas like Xinjiang which is now part of the People's Republic of China but which was firmly consolidated into the civil administration of the Qing empire only in the 1880s.

This has political repercussions to this very day, and the presence of Uighur fighters in the regional crisis hotspots of the Near East makes every foreign attempt to study anything related to Uighurs a politically sensitive topic from the perspective of the Chinese government while China is claiming her share of the War on Terror. The same problem arises from occupying oneself with studies of Turkey: the political implications of research cannot be escaped; anything touched has the potential to be interpreted in the light of the current political situation in Turkey, be it related to the Ottoman empire, religion or law. As a final word, it can only be confirmed: Altaic Studies is a field with all too many political implications. Against all looming professional perspectives, the aspiring scholar should feel encouraged rather than discouraged by this fact as it reveals that something mistaken for an ivory tower has a strong foundation in the real world.

³ Students of Johns Hopkins University should be well aware of this phrase coined by Edward Augustus Freeman (1823 – 1892), an English historian and Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford. For an investigation into the authorship of this phrase see Ian Hesketh: “‘History is Past Politics, and Politics Present History’: Who said it?” Oxford University Press: Notes and Queries 61:1 (March 2014), pp. 105–108.