**Politics and Science as a Vocation: Can academics save us from post-truth politics?[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract**

In an apparently post-truth era, the social science scholar, by disposition and training committed to rational argumentation and the pursuit of truth, appeals as the ideal bulwark against excessive politicization of facts and expertise. In this article, we look to the experience of four prominent social scientists who have recently left the academy to enter politics with the aim of using their academic expertise to reshape policy. We use these cases to explore fundamental dilemmas derived from a close reading of Max Weber’s seminal vocation essays of a century ago. Weber observed that politicians were driven by a will to power, whereas academics were driven by a will to truth. We argue that these two competing dispositions create four tensions for the academic turned politician: 1) between calling and commitment; 2) between means and ends; 3) between rationalization and professionalization; and 4) between facts and values. Analysing memoirs written by four of the most prominent academics-turned-politicians in recent times, we explore how Weber’s tensions manifest in contemporary practice. Our account reveals that these actors face a daunting, but not impossible, task. Their success depends on wedding the relentless pursuit of ends with the prudent application of political means.

**Key words**

Political elites; post-truth; politicians; Weber

**Introduction**

A recent profile in the *Times Higher Education* tracked the stories of several U.S. scientists who decided to run for Congress in 2018 in response to Trump’s election. Yet as the article noted despite numerous academics expressing interest in running for office, few eventually filed paperwork to run, and none of the academics made it past the campaign stage (Basken, 2018). As the article notes:

“’The scientific background did not carry as much weight as probably we all anticipated,’ says Madden . . . “It surprised me. The theory was that people would take us seriously, believe that we are honest and truthful, and that we’re smart and capable” (Basken, 2018)

Madden laments that expertise and a commitment to evidence based policy making were not the antidotes to anti-politics and post-truth populism that he thought they would be.[[2]](#footnote-2) Part of the reason for the failure of academics as politicians are structural barriers such as lack of campaign experience, deep ties to political parties, and fundraising ability, all of which are significant factors in candidate success as the primary stage in U.S. elections. However, a more significant reason for the failure is a fundamental disjuncture between the kind of knowledge generated by academics and the kind of knowledge deployed by politicians.

The disjuncture between these two modes of knowledge was most prominently explored by Max Weber in his vocation lectures. Weber famously argued that there was a sharp divide between the two professions and so he would not have been surprised by the dilemmas confronting academics who turn their hand to politics. He warned that the pursuit of truth (in ‘science as a vocation’) and the will to power (in ‘politics as a vocation’) required very different sets of commitments and ethics. He suggested there are inherent tensions in doing something to gain and exercise power (politics) vs. doing something to uncover a new truth (science). Something that is true may not be politically viable. Because academics are concerned with uncovering and sharing the truth, their natural inclination when entering politics is to assume that qualities that make them good academics—including a capacity to discover truths about politics¬— will prepare them for being effective politicians. Yet Weber’s vocation essays warn us that this view of the relationship between knowledge and power is bound to end in tragedy, as the two vocations require different skills, different motivations, different ethics, and operate according to the logics of two different worlds. Furthermore, Weber was deeply contemptuous for “literati”, writers, public intellectuals, and academics, who tried to enter politics, defending instead the modern professional politics of parties, mass elections, and parliaments as a necessary bulwark against the increased bureaucratization of the modern state (Palonen 2006). On Weber’s view the academic turned politician was likely to lack the necessary political expertise to translate evidence based policy into political action.While, of course, much about politics and the academy is barely recognisable from the context in which Weber was writing, his reflections on the fundamental tension between science and politics take on contemporary salience in light of recent calls to traverse the ‘two worlds’.

We analyse recent memoirs of prominent academics in the social sciences who have tried their hand at politics full-time. We canvas four in total, including: *Fire and Ashes* (2013) by Professor of Politics and Canadian Prime Ministerial Candidate Michael Ignatief; *Politics in a Time of Crisis* (2015) by political science academic and charismatic leader of leftist Spanish party Podemos, Pablo Iglesias; *A Fighting Chance* (2014) by Professor of Law and US Senator Elizabeth Warren; and *Adults in the Room* (2017)by Professor of Economics and Greek Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis. Not all make explicit reference to Weber, but we find that each account resonates with his insights. We therefore argue that the truths uncovered via painstaking scholarship do not translate easily into the realm of politics and policy, and that in our contemporary ‘post-truth’ era the risks and costs associated with this transition are high. However, our survey of these academics turned politicians pushes back against Weber’s dichotomy as being potentially too rigid. In three of the four cases we survey (Warren, Varoufakis, and Ignatieff) the academics turned politicians were surprised by how their political opponents distorted their academic findings and by their inability to persuade the public of the truth of their academic insights, While this supports Weber’s main contention against academics turned politicians, it is worth noting that in three of the four cases (Warren, Varoufakis, and Iglesias) the academics were eventually able to adjust to this new reality and transition into a political career. Indeed only Ignatieff’s political career failed for the reasons that Weber predicted and, as we discuss below, part of this failure stems from shortcomings in Ignatieff applying his academic work on human rights to support the war in Iraq.

To substantiate these claims the article is divided into the following sections. Next, we discuss Weber’s vocation lectures and the core propositions that underpin his claim that science and politics are incommensurable vocations. The core of the article revolves around four sections dedicated to the propositions that Weber advances. In each, we uncover how the memoirs we canvass shed light on these themes and note areas where Weber’s insights do not necessarily apply. Finally, we conclude by returning to the argument that we stated at the outset: that the distinctive ethic required to pursue either vocation makes moving between these worlds incredibly difficult, but that it is possible for an academic to make this transition if they learn how to translate the truths from their academic research into truths that shape political ends.

**Politics or Science as a Vocation?**

Weber’s distinction between the academic and political life emerges out of comparison of two famous lectures he delivered towards then end of his career. Central to the two lectures is the idea that each career is a calling – in German he uses the term *Beruf* – which very deliberately evokes the Protestant idea of a career as responding to God calling you to do his work. Weber’s question is what kind of a person is called to politics and what kind of a person is called to academia? Looking at the two essays side by side, we identify four key tensions that we might expect to afflict any academic who transitions into politics.

First is that because these vocations are callings, to jump ship from the academy to politics immediately betrays a kind of dilettantism – if one is called to either politics or science, one must give ones entire life over to it. If one is called to either science or politics, “it is expressive of the person” (Owen and Strong, 2004: xii); the commitment required to succeed in one vocation necessarily precludes success in the other field.

Second is that Weber, while not explicitly contrasting the two vocations, lists different ethics that are compulsory for each. In the “Science as a Vocation” lecture he described the ethical demands of the scholar as having a “passionate epiphany”, embracing the “blinkers of specialization”, “working diligently”, and acknowledging that passion and hard work do not in and of themselves guarantee the development of significant ideas (Weber, 2004, 8). Conversely the two great ethics for the political actor are the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction. The ethic of responsibility demands that the political actor pay attention to and accept the consequences of any action he or she undertakes as leader, regardless of whether the outcome was intended or not (Owen and Strong, 2004, xli). The ethic of conviction demands that the political actor pursue the course of action that they believe is right, and in the extreme is prepared to let the world perish so that their convictions be upheld. The mature political actor, according to Weber, is one who is able to balance these two ethics against each other. “In this sense an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute antitheses but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who is capable of having a ‘vocation for politics’” (Weber 2004, 92). The scholar needs the passionate epiphany, the blinkered mentality, and the diligent work ethic in order to pursue the truth. The political actor needs the prudential ability to balance conviction and responsibility in the exercise of power.

Third a theme running through both of Weber’s essays was how the rise of rationalization was changing both professions. In the “Science” lecture, Weber begins by bemoaning how the increased professionalization of the academy was threatening the classic pursuit of knowledge. Oddly this would seem to create more room for the academic ruler, as the rationalism of the sciences would seem to translate well into an increasingly bureaucratic and technocratic form of politics. But Weber cautioned us about these developments in politics (Weber, 2004: 93), and we should be similarly cautious about this in the case of academics transitioning to politics. In the academic realm, Weber noted that the increased rationalization and bureaucratization of the University was leading to a situation where Professors were increasingly compelled to act like managers and assistant professors (in UK Lecturers) were increasingly in the position of “quasi-proletariat” (Weber, 2004: 4). Similarly in the realm of politics, Weber identifies three types of legitimate grounds for authority – traditional (where one rules based upon custom); charismatic (where one rules based upon the personal qualities of the leader); and rational-legal in which one’s legitimacy rests “practical ‘competence’ based on rational rules” (Weber, 2004: 34). Weber’s concern is that in both the University and the State that the drive for rationalization is leading to an ever greater expansion of bureaucratic rule that is simultaneously dehumanizing and inescapable. Weber felt that the only type of politician who could redeem such a system from its tendency to disenchant and alienate the public is one who could rule charismatically. Only a ruler with the personal charisma to persuade the public to support the state could wed personal legitimacy for his or her rule to the awesome powers of the modern bureaucracy. While the academic might be intellectually suited for an age of rationalization, they usually lack the necessary charisma to legitimate their rule.

Fourth, Weber raises an important epistemological issue about the relationship between politics and science (Owen 1994, Strong 2013). This is often paraphrased as the fact/value distinction – i.e. the difficulty, if not impossibility of deriving values from facts. But for Weber the issue was more fundamental. Since politics takes place in the world of values, and science is concerned with the world of facts, this points to two different mental activities – what Kant described as pure reason and judgment. One major point that Weber makes throughout his work is that science cannot operate as a foundation for politics or any human activity. Plato’s image of the philosopher king is very much a call for politics to be grounded in science, with the strong normative claim that any political order that is not organized in such a way is likely to be unjust (1992, 473d-e). Weber, however, casts doubt on this view. If values cannot be deducted from facts, and science cannot ground politics, then the discoveries of science offer limited guidance to the practical politician. In the “Politics as a Vocation” lecture, Weber argues that the mature political actor must own up to the demands of this situation. A political actor seeking to manifest his (or her) values through politics has no ground upon which to rest his (or her) values, and be certain that they are the right ones. Instead, he or she must take responsibility for his convictions (Weber 2004: 92). To the academic, an appeal to personal conviction as the ground for knowledge is simply dogma. Scientific truth depends upon rigorous reasoning, clear evidence, and the proper use of scientific methods. Because the modes of reasoning in science and politics are so different, it should not be surprising when academics who turn to politics are so quickly frustrated that the arguments that carry the day in the seminar room fall upon deaf ears from the political pulpit.

**Inner Life, Life History and Memoir**

In addition to adapting Weber’s analytic distinction, we also adopt his interpretive method, which aims to elucidate *Verstehen* (understanding). This approach to political science has been revitalised in recent years by scholars who have embraced an ‘interpretive turn’ (e.g Bevir and Rhodes 2006; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2010). Interpretive research is based on the ontological conviction that actions and practices are shaped and framed by ideas held individually and collectively about the world. Actors, in this view, encounter the context in which they find themselves through a veil of ideas, in the same way that the scholars of politics do. For interpretivists, the study of political life thus entails interpreting the beliefs and desires of human actors from within existing governing traditions or webs of beliefs rather than attempting to sit outside and make objective judgements.

The data we draw upon for this study is four memoirs by academics who recently sought to enter the political realm. Typically, the memoirs of political actors serve many purposes (Smith and Watson 2010). In their study of leadership narratives, which used biography and memoir as primary sources, Shamir et al (2005: 21) find that career pathways and foundational experiences fill these volumes, as do descriptions of victorious election campaigns. Defeats, by contrast, generate relatively fewer sentences and paragraphs; they are rarely glorious and unless they form part of a ‘struggle’ narrative (i.e. an obstacle to be overcome), most political actors would prefer they are forgotten. Academics are the opposite: they exhaustively rake over their defeats in an attempt to make sense of why it all went wrong. It is this post-hoc justification that makes them ideal sources for our purposes – they are deep and nuanced reflections on the challenges and tensions associated with seeking to achieve political impact in a post-truth age.

A key difference between an interview and memoir is that we do not get to choose the questions and the storyline is dictated by the author. But, this important difference aside, for an interpretive researcher the two forms of data function in much the same way. Rhodes (2012), for example, argues that it is the insight into the formation of political identity, albeit subjective or inter-subjective, provided by memoir that underscores its great benefit to interpretive research. Regardless of whether or not the narrative is objectively ‘True’, reflections are nevertheless revealing in that they represent a vision of how the subject wishes to portray themselves and an image of how they seek to be remembered (Mahler 2006). In doing so they reveal both individual considerations, choices and challenges, *and* collective norms, conventions and customs (see also Richards and Mathers 2010).

**Weber’s Propositions and Academics Turned Politicians**

*On Calling and Commitment*

The first tension we can tease out from Weber’s Vocation essays is one surrounding the nature of a calling and its requirement of a total form of commitment to science or to politics; the impression being that a shift from one calling to the other necessarily betrays a lack of requisite commitment. While still debatable as a normative claim, this is not a tension that seemingly afflicts the modern academic turning to politics, nor one that threatens their perceived legitimacy. In the realm of professional work more generally, we see a much greater appetite and tolerance for careers shifts; in the realm of politics in particular, increasing popular distaste for the political class sees a greater emphasis on political actors having varied experience and skills drawn from other professional spheres (Campbell and Cowley 2014; Lamprinakau et al. 2016; Allen and Cairney 2017). What Weber saw as dilettantism our protagonists, perhaps predictably, portray as a natural progression or journey.

Yet to do so, in a contemporary age of unprecedented access and mediatization, there are heightened demands around the public *performance* of commitment. The private will to power that troubled Weber naturally takes a back seat in the public realm, albeit our protagonists do occasionally concede a minor role to personal ambitions. Instead, the emphasis is on crafting a narrative and persona which both makes sense of their academic background and justifies their transition to the political realm – the common thread being a firm and unshakeable *commitment* to their cause.

This contemporary performance of commitment is clearest in Elizabeth Warren’s *A Fighting Chance*. It is important to state at the outset that *A Fighting Chance* reads as if it is meant to lay the groundwork for a future Presidential pitch (much as Obama’s auto-biographical accounts had underpinned his run). For our purposes, what is interesting about this is that central to Warren’s appeal is an effort to distance herself from both the ‘beltway’ and the ‘ivory tower’. She transitions from one to the other not because of any particular commitment to either vocation. To be clear, we do not mean to cast aspersions on Warren’s academic track record (where she was a leading authority in bankruptcy law) or her work in political office (where she is a widely respected legislator and potential Presidential candidate in 2020). We mean that in the narrative she presents about herself – in her *performance* of commitment - her calling is not to science or to politics but to a unifying cause.

As such, Warren’s story begins in childhood in small-town Oklahoma – the day her father filed for bankruptcy, and her mother strode off to find work. She explains that as her mother squeezed into a dress to attend a job interview at Sears that day:

The dress was too tight - way too tight. It pulled and puckered. I thought it might explode if she moved. But I knew there wasn’t another nice dress in the closet.

And that was the moment I crossed the threshold. I wasn’t a little girl anymore. (p8)

It is this experience that sets the foundation for her future career as an academic expert in bankruptcy law. Her story is not one of a vocation for the life of the mind. She presents her academic career as a difficult one of juggling domestic duties, balancing career ambitions (her partner Bruce is also a law academic), and delivering hard grind and passionate endeavour. But while Warren acutely exhibits the single-minded focus that Weber describes of the academic vocation, she never plays the role of detached scholar that he imagines to go hand in hand with this focus. Instead, she retains a visceral passion for her subject matter – in the classroom, in outreach activities and perhaps above all in her research programme. For instance, she reflects on an early project in this programme:

I still remember sitting down with the first stack of questionnaires. As I started reading, I’m sure I wore my most jaded, squinty-eyed expression.

The comments hit my like a physical blow. They were filled with self-loathing. (p35*)*

Washington first comes into view when Warren takes on an advocacy role in the ‘bankruptcy wars’ of the mid-1990s, continuing through her role in oversight of bailout money during the Global Financial Crisis, to the founding of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and her eventual run for the Senate seat of Massachusetts. Warren is at pains to stress her reluctance to move into politics – it is not something she wants to do, but something she feels she has to do out of a passionate desire to give everyone ‘a fighting chance’.

Yet the flipside of this emotional or personal attachment is an immense sense of frustration at what she calls a ‘rigged system’. Her story of transitioning into politics reflects the difficulty in coping with the discrepancy in norms and practices we might expect. She expresses surprise at how her academic publications were disingenuously used against her. She is endlessly frustrated at the closed and clandestine nature of ‘beltway’ policymaking. She shows her discomfort at the ‘play the man, not the ball’ tactics that pervade campaigning. But the overriding message is stronger still, speaking more to something of a culture shock. She presents herself as someone with strong moral convictions coming up against cynical machine politicians and lobbyists. She takes it personally. They treat it like a game. She explains, for example, how depressing she found her work on the bankruptcy commission in the mid-1990s. It slowly dawned on her that the Commission would not seek out or listen to the human stories of the debtors affected. Testimony was to be dominated by a travelling band of banking mercenaries. She observes:

To most of the people who attended those hearings, the families in bankruptcy were little more than abstract numbers. There was hardly anyone to talk first hand about what it was like to lose a job or face overwhelming medical bills and how the bankruptcy system had given them a chance to get back on their feet. Commissioners might talk about debtors “gaming the system” but they almost never had to look at a real person and make that accusation. The whole process made me gag. (Warren 2014, 57)

To an extent, Warren’s critique of these extreme ‘mercenaries’ resonates with Weber’s own belief the political actors should take responsibility for the consequences of using power while still adhering to long run commitments. But she goes much further. She derides the game, not just the players. The ‘mercenaries’ and ‘machine men’ are short-hand exemplars of a life consisting of posturing and horse-trading. That ‘game’ is precisely what she disdains.

In essence, Warren is at pains to present herself as a perennial outsider. Her more or less successful transition from one sphere to another, then, is down to never possessing the sort of single-minded commitment to either that Weber demands. She presents hereself as being as ill-suited to Harvard as she is to Washington, drawn into one after another only because of her passionate conviction.

*On Distinct Ethics*

Weber’s second tension between science and politics is the distinct ethics that are required for success in each realm. The scholar must have the work ethic of a *Stakhanovite*, spending years, decades even, slaving away on a narrow research topic in the hope of one day discovering a new insight that advances human knowledge. The politician, conversely, must react daily to a shifting landscape of interests and events, honing a keen sense of judgment about how to act in a given moment all while maintaining a resolute determination to bring to fruition his or her ultimate political goal. The academic ethic demands uncompromising rigour and determination wedded with an acknowledgment that years of research may in the end yield nothing of consequence; whereas the political ethic, while guided by an ultimate end, must be flexible and pragmatic to respond to the circumstances, and act in a way that makes the possible actual. This tension—at the heart of contemporary debates about evidence-based policymaking (see Smith and Stewart 2017) and the impact agenda in academic research (see Cairney and Oliver 2018)—plays out most clearly in Michael Ignatieff’s candid political memoir, *Fire and Ashes*.

Ignatieff had spent most of his career as an academic and public intellectual, and had carved out an identity as one of the world’s leading scholars of nationalism and human rights. This book, however, examines his five-year political career. It begins with Ignatieff recounting how “three men in black” visited him and his wife in Cambridge, Massachusetts to persuade him to return to Canada and run for the Liberal Party with the ambition of making Igantieff Prime Minister (Ignatieff 2013, 1). The scene that Ignatieff describes is the fantasy of every academic ‘impact’ champion: the political movers and shakers of the world want to draw upon the intellectual’s expertise in order improve their country. Yet as Ignatieff recounts throughout this book, his expertise about politics and public affairs did not translate smoothly into the actual practice of being a politician.

Ignatieff discovered the limits of translating his intellectual expertise into political practice almost immediately. His tale begins with a rather rocky nomination meeting in the riding of Etobicoke, where what was supposed to be a coronation turned into a political street fight. His opponents had dug up passages from his writings and quoted them out of context to make it appear as if Ignatieff had supported the Bush administration’s torture policy and was hostile to Ukrainians. As he observes:

I exuded righteous indignation at the bad faith of my accusers. I had yet to learn that good or bad faith doesn’t come into it. In politics as combat, any stick will do, and in combat what matters is not proving your faith but winning (Ignatieff 2013, 38).

The insight that this initial experience hints at is one of incommensurable skills and temperaments. Making a distinction between “men of action” and thinkers, Ignatieff observes that “men of action” possess other attributes, such as cunning, political timing, and “the noble capacity to lead, charm, and inspire” (Ignatieff 2013, 171) that are often lacking in academics. Perhaps then the image of the philosopher king – the idea of a single great political thinker being able to reshape a polity is his or her image – is not something to be desired. Ignatieff’s message is that the exact types of attributes that make one a great thinker get one into trouble in the world of politics, and the attributes of a great politician often make one suspect as a scholar.

However if we consider what Ignatieff leaves out of his memoir, most notably a discussion of his support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and his subsequent recanting of this support. He has elsewhere conceded: “So I supported an administration whose intentions I didn’t trust, believing that the consequences would repay the gamble. Now I realize that intentions do shape consequences” (NYTimes Mag, Ignatieff). Under Weberian terms this failure is both an academic and a political failure. As Weber argues in “Objectivity in the Social Sciences”, one end of proper scholarship is to provide clarification about the possible consequences of your commitments. Ignatieff the human rights scholar should have known that an invasion and occupation was likely to exasperate rather than minimize the safety and security of the citizens of Iraq. Ignatieff the politician fails to take heed of Weber’s warning that part of a politician’s responsibility is accepting that the consequences of your actions will shape whatever meaning the politician gave to them. The politician cannot appeal to good intentions as an excuse for poor consequences. For Ignatieff his failures as a scholar to adequately anticipate the consequences of the Iraq War tied him as a politician to that disaster. His attempt as a politician to escape the responsibility of that decision failed precisely for the reason that Weber gives: in politics it is only the outcome of a policy decision, not the intention behind that decision, by which the public will judge that politician.

In the concluding chapters of the book Ignatieff further ruminates on the tensions between the intellectual and the politician. As he observes, many of the greatest writers about politics – a list that includes James Madison, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, Edmund Burke and even Weber himself – were failures in their political careers. Ignatieff’s point here is not that academics necessarily make mediocre politicians, rather it is that the temperaments required for success in these two enterprises of scholarship and politics are distinct. He observes:

Why theoretical acumen is so frequently combined with political failure throws light on what is distinctive about a talent for politics. The candour, rigour, willingness to follow a thought wherever it leads, the penetrating search for originality – all these are virtues in theoretical pursuits but active liabilities in politics, where discretion and dissimulation are essential for success (Ignatieff 2013, 170).

Interestingly, Ignatieff is alone among our protagonists in explicitly turning to the writing of Weber to make sense of his experiences. He draws on Weber to observe that those politicians who are guided by an “ethic of ultimate ends” are likely to have short political careers, as they will not be able to adapt to changing political circumstances, or their fickle interests of their constituents. Conversely if a politician pursues an “ethic of responsibility”, Ignatieff argues that “you can’t accomplish anything if you value your conscience more highly than you value their interests” (Ignatieff 2013, 148). This passage is interesting for two reasons. First, Ignatieff observes that whereas an academic might be more motivated by the “ethic of ultimate ends”, by the desire to take his or her ideal image of what politics ought to be and turn it into a political reality, this ethic quickly comes into conflict with both the interests of voters and the inherent difficulties in converting a political ideal into a political reality. Secondly, Ignatieff misreads Weber slightly in this passage. Ignatieff presents these two ethics as irreconcilable, whereas in fact Weber (2004: 83) argues that the great leader must be able to balance both of these ethics against each other. His point is that there is a peril for the politician in letting either ethic dominate the other – a peril seemingly exemplified by Ignatieff’s (unsuccessful) efforts to wipe his hands of the Iraq affair.

*On rationalization and professionalization*

Weber’s fears about rationalization and professionalization are given furthest exploration in Pablo Iglesias’s *Politics in a Time of Crisis*, which sheds light on his transition from political scientist to leading figure in the radical Podemos party in Spain. It is important to foreground that Iglesias’s account is not a traditional autobiography. Its basis is an academic manuscript largely written before his sudden and spectacular rise to prominence as *Podemos* leader. The new context in which he resurrected the project meant that the book became inflected with auto-biographical detail, and augmented with a series of reflections and an extended interview – changes that both extended the audience but magnified his personal discomfort in the transition from one vocation to the other. In the Preface to the book, Iglesias (2015, p xiv) explains:

[The] rejoicing at the success of Podemos, and the hopes for change the party has opened up for our country, are nonetheless inversely proportional to the feelings they give me as an ‘essayist’. Writing can no longer be simply the fruit of my humble labour as a political scientist, let alone an expression of the rebelliousness I’ve always tried to project in a style that sought to be rigorous, but also irreverent and provocative. Nowadays, whatever I write is scrutinized under a microscope.

Iglesias’s account is grounded in frustration at the traditional Marxist left in Spain, where the academy, long an intellectual refuge from fascism, has remained critically detached from the world of genuine influence. Explaining at the outset that Podemos’s mantra is ‘[if] you want to get it right, don’t do what the left would do’, the book offers a wide-ranging polemic on the state of contemporary Spanish and European politics which draws on international political economy, radical democratic theory, communication and media studies, and beyond. The purpose, contra the aloof leftist tradition, is to lay out a forthright and forensic account of how Podemos and the left can win power by putting political science into action.

Iglesias explains that his personal drift from the academy to politics - first into media commentary, then as leader of the nascent Podemos party – came about through a concerted interest and emphasis on pragmatic strategy. He presents the Global Financial Crisis and its devastating impact on the Spanish economy as a window of opportunity for the left. The emergence of the 15M protest movement and dramatic rise of antipathy towards the Caste of economic and political elites in its wake provided a moment for what he calls, following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), ‘transversal solidarity’. It was an opportunity to move beyond the ossified left-right ideological debate, and reimagine and recontest the centre ground where real political influence is won and lost. In this process, Iglesias reflects that his growing media profile as ‘the pony-tail professor’ became an important symbol around which Podemos could gain traction and marshal resources – most notably and controversially when his face was used on the ballot. Although this decision would later backfire in the internal machinations within Podemos[[3]](#footnote-3), he justifies these manoeuvres not as some sort of natural political instinct (or personal hubris) but as strategic decisions based on rational calculation of media consumption and voter behaviour. On the use of his image, for example, he explains:

The ‘People of the Television’ – *el pueblo de la television*, or the TV nation, so to speak – didn’t know about a new political party called Podemos, but they knew about the guy with the ponytail. This populace, politically socialized through television, was not ‘representable’ within the traditional left-right categories of the political space. In the context of high dissatisfaction with the elites, our objective of identifying a new ‘we’ that included the TV Nation initially came together around the signifier ‘Pablo Iglesias’ (Iglesias 2015, p 190).

Perhaps the primary focus of the extended interview with Iglesias in the final appendix of the book – and one that is of particular importance in relation to Weber’s account of politics as a vocation – is a concern with how to sustain the momentum behind Podemos now that it has penetrated the establishment. Iglesias reflects, again rationally rather than emotionally, on the difficulties of thwarting the return of politics as usual by continuing to keep the terrain or terms of debate away from the traditional left-right clash that has long defined Spanish politics. The example he turns to in this discussion concerns dealing with the monarchy. Though Iglesias and Podemos more broadly are staunch Republicans, he views the traditional leftist approach – publicly snubbing the monarchy – as self-defeating. Doing so would reaffirm the old terms of debate on which the left always loses, alienating potential allies and supporters of Podemos’s broader goals and policies. But participating in ceremonial rites in the normal way, alongside all the other privileged members of the Caste, would undermine everything Podemos stood for. So instead he opted to participate, albeit in ways that attempted to subtly subvert the ceremonial process by turning up in casual dress and presenting the King a *Game of Thrones* DVD as a gift:

Our aim is to dance with this contradiction, within these positionings, with an ironic message that is at the same time a plebeian gesture – and which is so far working very well in the media, by the way – that allows us to shift the axis of discussion (Iglesias 2015, p 200).

Iglesias is phlegmatic enough to accept that his and the party’s success in walking this fine line is neither guaranteed nor straightforward. Nevertheless, his account suggests that, at least in the right circumstances, the tension we identify in Weber between rational technocracy and charismatic legitimation can melt away. In the eyes of Iglesias, Podemos and the left can draw on the academy to learn and adopt the science *of* charismatic legitimation.

*On facts and values*

At the heart of Weber’s distinction between the logics that underpin a life dedicated to science and a life dedicated to politics is a tension between a world that privileges the pursuit of truth (facts) and one primarily concerned with values. Of the stories we canvas, none is more illustrative of this tension than the memoir of economist Yanis Varoufakis, who for five short months in 2015 became Greece’s Minister of Finance.

The aim of Varoufakis account is to expose the hypocrisy of Europe’s ‘insiders’ or ‘deep establishment’ for understanding the causes and consequences of the Greek bailout but refusing to act. If Varoufakis were a run-of-the-mill jilted politician we might have expected his account would deliver a series of character assassinations, targeted at his political adversaries both inside and outside Greece, and their vested interests. But he is restrained – he continues to play the academic all the way through:

Beneath the specific events that I experienced, I recognise a universal story—the story of what happens when human beings find themselves at the mercy of cruel circumstances that have been generated by an inhuman, mostly unseen, network of power relations. This is why there are no ‘goodies’ or ‘baddies’ in this book. Instead it is populated by people doing their best, as they understand it, under conditions not of their choosing. Each person I encountered and write about in these pages believed they were acting appropriately, but, taken together, their acts produced misfortune on a continental scale. (p. 2)

To be sure, *Adults in the Room* still contains a rich smorgasbord of loaded character assessment that flatter some more than others. And, make no mistake, this book is also desperate to settle political scores; Varoufakis is at pains to document when he feels betrayed, scapegoated and misrepresented, and why. But, he also goes to greater lengths than we might expect to explain the motivations of those who let him down, the pressures they were under, and how they might have rationalised their choices. In the end, as the above quote indicates, the problem is rarely them but rather the position they are in and their inability to think their way to a more productive solution. For Varoufakis, this even handedness is an alibi for the truth.

Varoufakis frames his miscalculation slightly differently to Ignatieff. He saw his main challenge as convincing others, on both the right and the left, that his *Modest Proposal* is a credible policy alternative capable of reforming both Greece and Europe. He concludes that the reason he couldn’t convince them is that nobody who mattered was actually listening. But, despite this, he retained an academic’s faith in the power of sound ideas:

On the assumption that good ideas encourage fruitful dialogue and can break an impasse, my team and I worked very hard to put forward proposals based on serious econometric work and sound economic analysis … I would take them to Greece’s creditors. Then I would sit back and observe a landscape of blank stares. It was as if I had not spoken, as if there was no document in front of them. It was evident from their body language that they denied the very existence of the piece of paper I had placed before them … In academia one gets used to having one’s thesis torn apart, sometimes with little decorum; what one never experiences is dead silence, a refusal to engage, a pretence that no thesis has been put forward at all (p 308-309)

Or, in the words of his friend and confident, fellow academic economist and policy entrepreneur, Jeff Sachs:

Having sat in your meetings … I must tell you I have that I have never seen anything like this in my decades of experience with meetings between debtor governments and creditors such as the IMF, the US government, the World Bank… In every meeting you were positive, bristling with ideas regarding practical solutions. And they kept knocking your ideas down, even though they were good ideas, without proposing a single one of their own. Unbelievable! (p. 339)

This impasse was in part created by a clash of ideas: Varoufakis’s propounded a version of Keynesianism whereas the German government and European Commission advocated for “internal devaluation” based on “expansionary austerity”. But his more significant problem was that this ideological disagreement could not be adjudicated by the relevant facts because he was in a weak political position due to the unwillingness of the Syriza government to sanction ‘Grexit’. Varoufakis could therefore neither live up to his scientific nor his political vocation: that is, he could neither pursue his academic understanding of the facts nor take responsibility for foreseeable political consequences under an ethic of responsibility. The result: Varoufakis had some early wins at the negotiating table but in the end, he became isolated and was dumped the moment he was no longer useful to the Syriza government who appointed him.

This approach to politics is the opposite of the type of Weberian incrementalism Ignatieff extols. Indeed, perhaps fittingly, in Varoufakis’ account Merkel is the Weberian:

Angela Merkel’s position is clear. She wants a pseudo-solution that muddles through, does nothing to resolve our insolvency but keeps Greece in the Eurozone (p. 364).

And, so far, this is exactly what has eventuated. By contrast, Varoufakis sees more of himself in Merkel’s finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble:

At that point it hit me: he and I had something important in common. We disagreed on everything, Grexit included, but there was one thing we shared: a leader who was muddling through. (p. 410)

What makes this comparison especially interesting is that Angela Merkel is perhaps the most successful example of an academic turned politician. A key difference, however, is that she is a scientist by training, and so had no illusion that her technical knowledge could transition into politics. This nuances Weber’s claim, indicating that it is actually only a certain kind of academic, the social scientist, who thinks his or her knowledge is useful for politics. And so, the lesson we can draw from Weber is that even if a scholar can uncover a good policy proposal through academic research, the nature of politics means that the “force of the better argument” will not carry the day. Varoufakis’s overarching claim is that Europe’s ‘deep establishment’ are unwilling to adopt the truth. By contrast, Weber might argue that all this proves is that a faith in facts is naïve in the realm of *realpolitik*.

**Conclusion**

It seems that there is an inevitable trade-off between speaking the truth and having access to power. The academic disposition is to argue one’s truth to others with the goal of inviting critique and improving knowledge over time. In an ideal sense, democracy should work in this way too. The four academics turned politicians that we survey in this piece all entered politics to counter this trend. Warren wanted to draw upon her expertise in bankruptcy law to protect the American working class from predatory financial practices. Varoufakis became Greece’s finance minister in part hoping that by demonstrating an alternative economic plan he could end the crippling effects of EU imposed austerity on the Greek economy. Iglesias wanted to draw upon the insights or radical democratic theory to reshape left-wing politics in Spain. Ignatieff entered politics hoping in part to draw upon his liberal political theory in shaping the future of Canadian politics.

Yet as Weber cautioned there are significant tensions between the life of the scholar and the life of the politician. We have identified four core tensions in Weber’s work and explored how they played out in the political careers of four academics turned politicians. The first tension is that each vocation requires a distinct calling – the academic to the relentless pursuit of truth, the politician to the relentless pursuit of power. The pitfall, exemplified by Ignatieff’s career, but also present in Warren’s account, is that the academic-politician appears as a dilettante. On the one hand this might seem surprising. Surely in an era of anti-politics a non-career politician motivated by evidence-based policy-making is exactly what the public is calling out for? But in both Warren’s and Ignatieff’s cases their opponents quickly seized upon passages in their scholarly writings as the basis for potent political attacks. The lesson here seems to be that if an academic wishes to enter politics he or she must leave the academy behind entirely, and fully embrace the political calling. In the four careers we survey here, Iglesias was the most successful in making this transition.

The second tension emerges in Weber’s classic distinction between the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of absolute end. Academics tend to be driven more by the ethic of ultimate ends given their commitment to the truth. Weber’s point, however, is not that one ethic is better than another, but that successful politicians possess both the judgment and courage to continuously make the decisive trade-offs between these two ethics. Most academics tend to err on the side of prioritizing the ultimate ends over acting responsibly. Indeed Warren and Varoufakis both express frustration that neither the elites nor the general public embrace their academic expertise. Iglesias seems to be most comfortable in making the trade-offs between the two ethics.

The third tension is between increased rationalization in political life and the demands that political leaders in mass democracies be charismatic. Charisma based leadership is in many ways antithetical to the academic enterprise. Academics, given their commitments to evidence and rationality, are naturally more inclined to prefer a political system that produces reasonable and predictable outcomes. Yet the danger is that over emphasis on rationalization feeds back into the bureaucratic and technocratic “rigged system” that is fuelling anti-politics. Once again Pablo Iglesias seems to provide a potential remedy for this problem by turning the nerdy academic into a charismatic figure. As his memoir clarifies, Podemos adopted a deliberate strategy of branding the party around Iglesias as the pony-tailed academic. In this instance the scientific-rational persona becomes charismatic. The lesson here is that rather than running from their academic backgrounds – as Warren and occasionally Ignatieff do – the key is to embrace this identity.

The tension between academic truth and professional political pragmatism is not new. In the early 1900s the German academic Werner Sombart wrote a series of articles calling upon German academics and *literati* to engage in politics as a counterweight to the cynicism of professional politicians and party machines (Palonen 2006, 33). Weber’s writings on politics as a vocation can be read in part as critiquing this call for academics and intellectuals to participate in politics. Weber, for the reasons outlined in this essay, was highly sceptical that academics could make the transition into mass democratic politics, and was interested in defending the virtues of the professional politician against the anti-politics sentiments of his time. While our survey of four contemporary academics turned politicians gives credibility to Weber’s claims that academic truths do not easily translate into political actions, there is also good evidence to support some of Sombart’s position. Of the four that we have surveyed, Warren and Iglesias were both successful at navigating the transition from academia to politics by learning the crucial political skills of judgment and persuasion to build political coalitions that support policy positions grounded upon their academic research. Conversely Ignatieff’s failure as a politician was due in no small part to his failure as an academic to foresee the consequences of supporting the 2003 invasion of Iraq on humanitarian grounds. While many of Ignatieff’s academic contemporaries (see for example the “realists against the war”) did foresee the consequences of the war and opposed it for precisely these reasons, Ignatieff’s failures of judgment as an academic ultimately foreshadowed his failures as a politician. Weber’s distinctions between the academic and political vocations and the kinds of logics and skills necessary for success in the two are useful for understanding the tensions in translating academic knowledge into political practice. Weber's ideal typical distinction between the vocational academic and the vocational politician points to a fundamental difference in the skills and commitments of the two roles. Yet if we look at the success of such disparate figures as Elizabeth Warren and Pablo Iglesias, to say nothing of the structural barriers faced by Varoufakis, the relation between the two roles is much more fluid than one might expect.

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1. We thank David Owen and two anonymous reviewers at *Political Studies Review* for comments on earlier drafts of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For recent discussions of post-truth populism and anti-politics see Baron (2018) and Havercroft et al (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Iglesias’s side of the story is hotly disputed. The branding move angered other Podemos leaders who felt he had turned the party into a cult of personality. Moreover, it made his personal life more of a target for the party’s message, which became problematic when press reports revealed that his private lifestyle does not always reflect the public persona. (For example, it was reported that he moved into a bourgeois neighbourhood in Madrid so that his children could attend elite schools). Internal rancour continues to inhibit the party’s electoral success. According to this version of events, Iglesias’s successful translation of political “science” into the logic of politics may have met its limits in what Weber’ calls in *Politics as a Vocation* the greatest “sin” of the politician: vanity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)