



Max Weber Lecture

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**"The Dematerialization of Invention:
Revolutions in the History of a Legal Concept"**

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I trace the history of a legal object – the invention – and the features that have enabled it to be treated as intellectual property. Those features – and thus the very meaning of invention – have changed since the early modern period and continue to change quite rapidly. For example, living organisms or software were unpatentable forty years ago, but are commonly patented today. This paper, however, traces a different trend within the history of invention – one that focuses not on the expansion of the range of patentable material entities, but rather on the radical dematerialization of the concept of invention. From popular literature about scientific "geniuses" to academic history of technology, patented inventions are typically presented as things – Edison's light bulb, Morse's telegraph, or Bell's telephone. But we are now seeing a strong trend toward patented inventions that have ceased to be objects altogether: business models, abstract methods, and conceptual correlations. Setting aside the obviously important financial and political implications of this trend, I want to discuss the conceptual and philosophical implications of this trend, and in what it can tell us about the meaning of object, artifact, materiality, abstraction, tangibility, and property.