THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM is a brilliant study of the psychological conditions which made possible the development of capitalist civilization. The book analyzes the connection between the spread of Calvinism and a new attitude toward the pursuit of wealth in post-Reformation Europe and England, an attitude which permitted, encouraged—even sanctified—the human quest for prosperity.

"What really emerges from a reading of Weber's essay is the feeling that economic facts and institutions are cultural phenomena, more or less responsive to the ethical aspirations of men."

—The New Republic

"Professor Weber's brilliant analysis and broad grasp of cultural values make this book valuable to both speculative and practical discussion of the fundamental relationships between specific religions, or phases of the same religion, and the ethical, economic, political, and general social life of peoples and nations."

—The Churchman

MAX WEBER

Max Weber was a leading figure in the development of sociology and modern social science. His work on rationalization, the Protestant ethic, and the concept of the 'ideal type' has had a profound influence on a generation of economists, sociologists, and political scientists. Weber's contributions to the sociology of religion, the history of legal institutions, and the theory of rationality and action have made him one of the most important social theorists of the 20th century.

Max Weber was born in 1864 and died in 1920. He was a professor at the universities of Heidelberg and Munich, and a member of the German Social Science Congress. His major works include "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," "Economy and Society," and "The Theory of Social and Economic Organization."

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WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY ANTHONY GIDDENS
INTRODUCTION

_The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism_ undoubtedly ranks as one of the most renowned, and controversial, works of modern social science. First published as a two-part article in 1904–5, in the _Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik_, of which Weber was one of the editors, it immediately provoked a critical debate, in which Weber participated actively, and which, some seventy years later, has still not gone off the boil. This English translation is in fact taken from the revised version of the work, that first appeared in Weber's _Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie (Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion)_, published in 1920–1 just after Weber's death, and thus contains comments on the critical literature to which its initial appearance had given rise.

Weber wrote _The Protestant Ethic_ at a pivotal period of his intellectual career, shortly after his recovery from a depressive illness that had incapacitated him from serious academic work for a period of some four years. Prior to his sickness, most of Weber's works, although definitely presaging the themes developed in the later phase of his life, were technical researches in economic history, economics and jurisprudence. They include studies of mediaeval trading law (his doctoral dissertation), the development of Roman land-tenure, and the contemporary socio-economic conditions of rural workers in the eastern part of Germany. These writings took their inspiration in some substantial part from the so-called 'historical school' of economics which, in conscious divergence from British political economy, stressed the need to examine economic life within the context of the historical development of culture as a whole. Weber always remained indebted to this standpoint. But the series of works he began on his return to health, and which preoccupied him for the remainder of his career, concern a range of problems much broader in compass than those covered in the earlier period. _The Protestant Ethic_ was a first fruit of these new endeavours.

An appreciation of what Weber sought to achieve in the book demands at least an elementary grasp of two aspects of the circumstances in which it was produced: the intellectual climate within which he wrote, and the connections between the work itself and the mass programme of study that he set himself in the second phase of his career.
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1. The background

German philosophy, political theory and economics in the nineteenth century were very different from their counterparts in Britain. The dominant position of utilitarianism and classical political economy in the latter country was not reproduced in Germany, where these were held at arm's length by the influence of Idealism and, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, by the growing impact of Marxism. In Britain, J. S. Mill's System of Logic (1843) unified the natural and social sciences in a framework that fitted comfortably within existing traditions in that country. Mill was Comte's most distinguished British disciple, if sharply critical of some of his excesses. Comte's positivism never found a ready soil in Germany; and Dilthey's sympathetic but critical reception of Mill's version of the 'moral sciences' gave an added impulse to what came to be known as the Geisteswissenschaften (originally coined precisely as a translation of 'moral sciences'). The tradition of the Geisteswissenschaften, or the 'hermeneutic' tradition, stretches back well before Dilthey, and from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards was intertwined with, but also partly set off from, the broader stream of Idealistic philosophy. Those associated with the hermeneutic viewpoint insisted upon the differentiation of the sciences of nature from the study of man. While we can 'explain' natural occurrences in terms of the application of causal laws, human conduct is intrinsically meaningful, and has to be 'interpreted' or 'understood' in a way which has no counterpart in nature. Such an emphasis linked closely with a stress upon the centrality of history in the study of human conduct, in economic action as in other areas, because the cultural values that lend meanings to human life, it was held, are created by specific processes of social development.

Just as he accepted the thesis that history is of focal importance to the social sciences, Weber adopted the idea that the 'understanding' (Verstehen) of meaning is essential to the explication of human action. But he was critical of the notions of 'intuition', 'empathy', etc. that were regarded by many others as necessarily tied to the interpretative understanding of conduct. Most important, he rejected the view that recognition of the 'meaningful' character of human conduct entails that causal explanation cannot be undertaken in the social sciences. On the level of abstract method, Weber was not able to work out a satisfactory reconciliation of the diverse threads that he tried to knit together; but his effort at synthesis produced a distinctive style of historical study, combining a sensitivity to diverse cultural meanings with an insistence upon the fundamental causal role of 'material' factors in influencing the course of history.

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It was from such an intellectual background that Weber approached Marxism, both as a set of doctrines and a political force promoting practical ends. Weber was closely associated with the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Association for Social Policy), a group of liberal scholars interested in the promotion of progressive social reform. He was a member of the so-called 'younger generation' associated with the Verein, the first group to acquire a sophisticated knowledge of Marxist theory and to attempt to creatively employ elements drawn from Marxism - without ever accepting it as an overall system of thought, and recoiling from its revolutionary politics. While acknowledging the contributions of Marx, Weber held a more reserved attitude towards Marxism (often being bitterly critical of the works and political involvements of some of Marx's more zealous followers) than did his illustrious contemporary, Sombart. Each shared, however, a concern with the origins and likely course of evolution of industrial capitalism, in Germany specifically and in the West as a whole. Specifically, they saw the economic conditions that Marx believed determined the development and future transformation of capitalism as embedded within a unique cultural totality. Both devoted much of their work to identifying the emergence of this 'ethos' or 'spirit' (Geist) of modern Western capitalism.

2. The themes of The Protestant Ethic

In seeking to specify the distinctive characteristics of modern capitalism in The Protestant Ethic, Weber first of all separates off capitalistic enterprise from the pursuit of gain as such. The desire for wealth has existed in most times and places, and has in itself nothing to do with capitalistic action, which involves a regular orientation to the achievement of profit through (nominally peaceful) economic exchange. 'Capitalism', thus defined, in the shape of mercantile operations, for instance, has existed in various forms of society: in Babylon and Ancient Egypt, China, India and mediaeval Europe. But only in the West, and in relatively recent times, has capitalistic activity become associated with the rational organisation of formally free labour. By 'rational organisation' of labour here Weber means its routinised, calculated administration within continuously functioning enterprises.

A rationalised capitalistic enterprise implies two things: a disciplined labour force, and the regularised investment of capital. Each contrasts profoundly with traditional types of economic activity. The significance of the former is readily illustrated by the experience of those who have set up modern productive organisations in communities where they have not previously been known. Let us suppose such employers, in order to raise productivity, introduce piece-rates, whereby workers can
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improve their wages, in the expectation that this will provide the members of their labour force with an incentive to work harder. The result may be that the latter actually work less than before: because they are interested, not in maximising their daily wage, but only in earning enough to satisfy their traditionally established needs. A parallel phenomenon exists among the wealthy in traditional forms of society, where those who profit from capitalist enterprise do so only in order to acquire money for the uses to which it can be put, in buying material comfort, pleasure or power. The regular reproduction of capital, involving its continual investment and reinvestment for the end of economic efficiency, is foreign to traditional types of enterprise. It is associated with an outlook of a very specific kind: the continual accumulation of wealth for its own sake, rather than for the material rewards that it can serve to bring. 'Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs.' (p. 53) This, according to Weber, is the essence of the spirit of modern capitalism.

What explains this historically peculiar circumstance of a drive to the accumulation of wealth conjoined to an absence of interest in the worldly pleasures which it can purchase? It would certainly be mistaken, Weber argues, to suppose that it derives from the relaxation of traditional moralities: this novel outlook is a distinctively moral one, demanding in fact unusual self-discipline. The entrepreneurs associated with the development of rational capitalism combine the impulse to accumulation with a positively frugal life-style. Weber finds the answer in the 'this-worldly asceticism' of Puritanism, as focused through the concept of the 'calling'. The notion of the calling, according to Weber, did not exist either in Antiquity or in Catholic theology; it was introduced by the Reformation. It refers basically to the idea that the highest form of moral obligation of the individual is to fulfil his duty in worldly affairs. This projects religious behaviour into the day-to-day world, and stands in contrast to the Catholic ideal of the monastic life, whose object is to transcend the demands of mundane existence. Moreover, the moral responsibility of the Protestant is cumulative: the cycle of sin, repentance and forgiveness, renewed throughout the life of the Catholic, is absent in Protestantism.

Although the idea of the calling was already present in Luther's doctrines, Weber argues, it became more rigorously developed in the various Puritan sects: Calvinism, Methodism, Pietism and Baptism. Much of Weber's discussion is in fact concentrated upon the first of these, although he is interested not just in Calvin's doctrines as such but in their later evolution within the Calvinist movement. Of the elements in Calvinism that Weber singles out for special attention,

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perhaps the most important, for his thesis, is the doctrine of predestination: that only some human beings are chosen to be saved from damnation, the choice being predetermined by God. Calvin himself may have been sure of his own salvation, as the instrument of Divine prophecy; but none of his followers could be. 'In its extreme inhumanity', Weber comments, 'this doctrine must above all have had one consequence for the life of a generation which surrendered to its magnificent consistency... a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness.' (p. 104) From this torment, Weber holds, the capitalist spirit was born. On the pastoral level, two developments occurred: it became obligatory to regard oneself as chosen, lack of certainty being indicative of insufficient faith; and the performance of 'good works' in worldly activity became accepted as the medium whereby such surety could be demonstrated. Hence success in a calling eventually came to be regarded as a 'sign' - never a means - of being one of the elect. The accumulation of wealth was morally sanctioned in so far as it was combined with a sober, industrious career; wealth was condemned only if employed to support a life of idle luxury or self-indulgence.

Calvinism, according to Weber's argument, supplies the moral energy and drive of the capitalist entrepreneur; Weber speaks of its doctrines as 'having an iron consistency' in the bleak discipline which it demands of its adherents. The element of ascetic self-control in worldly affairs is certainly there in the other Puritan sects also: but they lack the dynamism of Calvinism. Their impact, Weber suggests, is mainly upon the formation of a moral outlook enhancing labour discipline within the lower and middle levels of capitalist economic organisation. 'The virtues favoured by Pietism', for example, were those 'of the faithful official, clerk, labourer, or domestic worker' (p.139).

3. The Protestant Ethic in the context of Weber's other writings

For all its fame, The Protestant Ethic is a fragment. It is much shorter and less detailed than Weber's studies of the other 'world religions': ancient Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, and Confucianism (Weber also planned, but did not complete, a full-scale study of Islam). Together, these form an integrated series of works. Neither The Protestant Ethic nor any of the other studies was conceived of by Weber as a descriptive account of types of religion. They were intended as analyses of divergent modes of the rationalisation of culture, and as attempts to trace out the significance of such divergencies for socio-economic development.

In his study of India, Weber placed particular emphasis upon the period when Hinduism became first established (about four or five
centuries before the birth of Christ). The beliefs and practices grouped together as 'Hinduism' vary considerably. Weber singles out as especially important for his purposes the doctrines of reincarnation and compensation (Karma), each tied in closely to the caste system. The conduct of an individual in any one incarnation, in terms of the enactment of his caste obligations, determines his fate in his next life; the faithful can contemplate the possibility of moving up a hierarchy towards divinity in the course of successive incarnations. There is an important emphasis upon asceticism in Hinduism, but it is, in Weber's term, 'other-worldly'; that is to say, it is directed towards escaping the encumbrances of the material world rather than, as in Puritanism, towards the rational mastery of that world itself. During the same period at which Hinduism became systematized, trade and manufacture reached a peak in India. But the influence of Hinduism, and of the emergent caste system which interlaced with it, effectively inhibited any economic development comparable to modern European capitalism. 'A ritual law,' Weber remarks, 'in which every change of occupation, every change in work technique, may result in ritual degradation is certainly not capable of giving birth to economic and technical revolutions from within itself... The phrase 'from within itslself' is a vital one: Weber's concerns were with the first origins of modern capitalism in Europe, not with its subsequent adoption elsewhere.

As in India, in China at certain periods trade and manufacture reached a fairly high level of evolution; trade and craft guilds flourished; there was a monetary system; there existed a developed framework of law. All of these elements Weber regards as preconditions for the development of rational capitalism in Europe. While the character of Confucianism, as Weber portrays it, is very different from Hinduism, it no more provided for 'the incorporation of the acquisitive drive in a this-worldly ethic of conduct' than did Hinduism. Confucianism is, in an important sense, a 'this-worldly' religion, but not one which embodies ascetic values. The Calvinist ethic introduced an activism into the believer's approach to worldly affairs, a drive to mastery in a quest for virtue in the eyes of God, that are altogether lacking in Confucianism. Confucian values do not promote such a rational instrumentalism, nor do they sanctify the transcendence of mundane affairs in the manner of Hinduism; instead they set as an ideal the harmonious adjustment of the individual to the established order of things. The religiously cultivated man is one who makes his behaviour coherent with the intrinsic harmony of the cosmos. An ethic which stresses rational adjustment to the world 'as it is' could not have generated a moral dynamism in economic activity comparable to that characteristic of the spirit of European capitalism.

Weber's other completed study of the 'world religions', that of ancient Judaism, is also an important element of his overall project. For the first origins of Judaism in ancient Palestine mark the nexus of circumstances in which certain fundamental differences between the religions of the Near and Far East became elaborated. The distinctive doctrines forged in Judaism were perpetuated in Christianity, and hence incorporated into Western culture as a whole. Judaism introduced a tradition of 'ethical prophecy', involving the active propagation of a Divine mission, that contrasts with the 'exemplary prophecy' more characteristic of India and China. In the latter type, the prophet offers the example of his own life as a model for his followers to strive after; the active missionary zeal characteristic of ethical prophecy is lacking in the teachings of the exemplary prophets. Judaism and Christianity rest on the tension between sin and salvation and that gives them a basic transformative capacity which the Far Eastern religions lack, being more contemplative in orientation. The opposition between the imperfections of the world and the perfection of God, in Christian theodicy, enjoins the believer to achieve his salvation through refashioning the world in accordance with Divine purpose. Calvinism, for Weber, both maximises the moral impulsion deriving from the active commitment to the achievement of salvation and focuses it upon economic activity.
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bureaucratic officials, beyond anything achieved in the Eastern civilisations. The rational-legal system of the Western state was in some degree adapted within business organisations themselves, as well as providing an overall framework for the co-ordination of the capitalist economy. 5. The development of double-entry book-keeping in Europe. In Weber’s view, this was a phenomenon of major importance in opening the way for the regularising of capitalist enterprise. 6. That series of changes which, as Marx emphasised, prepared the way for the formation of a ‘free’ mass of wage-labourers, whose livelihood depends upon the sale of labour-power in the market. ‘This presupposes the prior erosion of the monopolies over the disposal of labour which existed in the form of feudal obligations (and were maximised in the East in the form of the caste system).

Taken together, these represent a mixture of necessary and precipitating conditions which, in conjunction with the moral energy of the Puritans, brought about the rise of modern Western capitalism. But if Puritanism provided that vital spark igniting the sequence of change creating industrial capitalism, the latter order, once established, eradicates the specifically religious elements in the ethic which helped to produce it.

When asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order... victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer... the idea of duty in one’s calling prows about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.’ (pp. 181–2)

Here The Protestant Ethic, concerned above all with the origins of modern capitalism, connects up with Weber’s sombre indictment of the latter-day progression of contemporary industrial culture as a whole. Puritanism has played a part in creating the ‘iron cage’ in which modern man has to exist – an increasingly bureaucratic order from which the ‘spontaneous enjoyment of life’ is ruthlessly expunged. ‘The Puritan’, Weber concludes, ‘wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so.’ (p. 181).

4. The controversy

The Protestant Ethic was written with polemical intent, evident in various references Weber makes to ‘Idealism’ and ‘Materialism’. The study, he says, is ‘a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history’, and is directed against economic determinism. The Reformation, and the development of the Puritan sects subsequently, cannot be explained as ‘a historically necessary result’ of prior economic changes (pp. 90–1). It seems clear that Weber has Marxism in mind here, or at least the cruder forms of Marxist historical analysis which were prominent at the time.6 But he is emphatic that he does not want to substitute for such a deterministic Materialism an equally monistic Idealist account of history (cf. p. 183). Rather the work expresses his conviction that there are no ‘laws of history’: the emergence of modern capitalism in the West was an outcome of an historically specific conjunction of events.

The latent passion of Weber’s account may be glimpsed in the comments on Puritanism and its residue with which The Protestant Ethic concludes. The ‘iron cage’ is imagery enough to carry Weber’s distaste for the celebration of the mundane and the routine he thought central to modern culture. He adds, however, a quotation from Goethe: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved.’ (p. 182) Such sweeping evaluation contrasts oddly with the cautious way in which Weber surrounds the main theses of the book with a battery of qualifications. Perhaps it is this contrast, unexplained in the book itself, although clarified when the work is regarded as one element in Weber’s project as a whole, that helped to stimulate the controversy to which its publication gave rise. But what explains the intensity of the debate which it has aroused; and why has the controversy been actively carried on for so long?

The most important reason for the emotional intensity provoked by the book is no doubt the fact that the two major terms in Weber’s equation, ‘religion’ and ‘capitalism’, were each potentially explosive when applied to the interpretation of the origins of the modern Western economy. Weber argued for the transformative force of certain religious ideas, thus earning the opposition of most contemporary Marxists; his characterisation of Catholicism as lacking in mundane discipline, and as a retarding rather than a stimulating influence upon modern economic development, ensured the hostility of many Catholic historians; and his analysis of Protestantism, emphasising the role of the Puritan sects (whose influence is in turn linked to the ‘iron cage’ of modern culture), was hardly likely to meet a universal welcome from Protestant thinkers. Finally, the use of the term ‘capitalism’ was controversial in itself: many were, and some still are, inclined to argue that the notion has no useful application in economic history.

The very diversity of responses thus stimulated by The Protestant Ethic helps to explain the protracted character of the debate. But there are other significant underlying factors. The intellectual power of Weber’s arguments derives in no small part from his disregard of traditional subject-boundaries, made possible by the extraordinary compass of his own scholarship. Consequently, his work can be approached on several levels: as a specific historical thesis, claiming a
correlation between Calvinism and entrepreneurial attitudes; as a causal analysis of the influence of Puritanism upon capitalistic activity; as an interpretation of the origins of key components of modern Western society as a whole; and, set in the context of Weber's comparative studies, as part of an attempt to identify divergent courses in the rationalisation of culture in the major civilisations of West and East. The controversy over The Protestant Ethic has moved back and forward between these levels, embracing along the way not only such substantive themes, but also most of the methodological issues which Weber wrote the book to help illuminate; and it has drawn in a dazzling variety of contributors from economics, history and economic history, comparative religion, anthropology and sociology. Moreover, through the works of others who have accepted some or all of Weber's analysis and tried to extend elements of it, secondary controversies have sprung into being – such as that surrounding R. J. Merton's account of the influence of Protestantism on science in seventeenth-century England.\(^9\)

It would be difficult to deny that some of the critical responses to The Protestant Ethic, particularly immediately following its original publication in Germany, and on the first appearance of this translation in 1920, were founded upon either direct misunderstandings of the claims Weber put forward, or upon an inadequate grasp of what he was trying to achieve in the work. Some such misinterpretations by his early critics, such as Fischer and Rachfahl, were accepted by Weber as partly his responsibility.\(^10\) These critics, of course, did not have the possibility of placing The Protestant Ethic in the context of Weber's broad range of comparative analyses. They can perhaps be forgiven for not appreciating the partial character of the study, even if Weber did caution his readers as to the limitations on its scope. But it is less easy to excuse the many subsequent critics writing in the 1920s and 1930s (including von Below, R. H. Tawney, F. H. Knight, H. M. Robertson and P. Gordon Walker) who almost completely ignored Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie und Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Economy and Society).\(^11\) Some of the literature of this period is quite valueless, at least as relevant to the assessment of Weber's own arguments: as where, for instance, authors took Weber to task for suggesting that Calvinism was 'the' cause of the development of modern capitalism; or where they pointed out that some contemporary countries, such as Japan, have experienced rapid economic development without possessing anything akin to a 'Protestant ethic'.

This nonetheless leaves a considerable variety of potentially justifiable forms of criticism that have been levelled against Weber, incorporated in discussions which stretch from those that dismiss his claims out of hand to those which propose relatively minor modifications to his work. They can perhaps be classified as embodying one or more of the following points of view:\(^12\)

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1. Weber's characterisation of Protestantism was faulty. Critiques here have been directed to Weber's treatment of the Reformation, to his interpretation of the Puritan sects in general, and to Calvinism in particular. It has been held that Weber was mistaken in supposing that Luther introduced a concept of 'calling' which differed from anything previously available in scriptural exegesis; and that Calvinist ethics were in fact 'anti-capitalistic' rather than ever sanctifying the accumulation of wealth, even as an indirect end. Others have argued that Weber's exposition of Benjamin Franklin's ideas, which occupies a central place in The Protestant Ethic, as well as other aspects of his analysis of American Puritanism, are unacceptable.\(^13\) This is of some significance, if correct, since Weber regarded the influence of Puritanism upon business activity in the United States as being a particularly clear and important exemplification of his thesis.\(^14\)

2. Weber misinterpreted Catholic doctrine. Critics have pointed out that Weber apparently did not study Catholicism in any detail, although his argument is based on the notion that there were basic differences between it and Protestantism in respect of economically relevant values. It has been held that post-mediaeval Catholicism involves elements positively favourable to the 'capitalist spirit'; and that the Reformation is in fact to be seen as a reaction against the latter rather than as clearing the ground for its subsequent emergence.\(^15\)

3. Weber's statement of the connections between Puritanism and modern capitalism is based upon unsatisfactory empirical materials. This was one of the themes of Fischer and Rachfahl, and has been echoed many times since, in various forms. It has been noted that the only numerical analysis Weber refers to is a study of the economic activities of Catholics and Protestants in Baden in 1895 – and the accuracy even of these figures has been questioned.\(^16\) More generally, however, critics have pointed out that Weber's sources are mainly Anglo-Saxon, and have claimed that research into economic development in the Rhineland, the Netherlands and Switzerland, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, does not reveal any close association between Calvinism and capitalistic enterprise.\(^17\)

4. Weber was not justified in drawing as sharp a contrast as he tried to do between modern, or 'rational' capitalism, and preceding types of capitalistic activity. It has been argued, on the one hand, that Weber slanted his concept of 'modern capitalism' in such a way as to make it conform to the elements of Puritanism he fastens upon; and on the other, that much of what Weber calls the 'spirit' of modern capitalism was indeed present in prior periods. Tawney accepts the differentiation between Lutheranism and the later Protestant sects, but argues that it was the prior development of the 'capitalist spirit' that moulded the evolution of Puritanism rather than vice versa.\(^18\)
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5. Weber mistakes the nature of the causal relation between Puritanism and modern capitalism. It is, of course, the conclusion of many of the authors taking one or other of the points of view mentioned above that there was no such causal relation. At this point, however, the debate broadens out into one concerned with abstract problems of historical method, and indeed with the very possibility of causal analysis in history at all. Marxist critics have tended to reject Weber's case for a 'pluralistic' view of historical causation, and some have attempted to reinterpret the thesis of The Protestant Ethic, treating the Puritan doctrines Weber analyses as epiphenomena of previously established economic changes. Other authors, not necessarily Marxist, have rejected the methodological framework within which Weber worked, and have tried to show that this has consequences for his account of the origins of the capitalist spirit. How much of Weber's account survives the tremendous critical battering it has received? There are still some who would answer, virtually all of it: either most of the criticisms are mistaken, or they derive from misunderstandings of Weber's position. I do not believe, however, that such a view can be substantiated. It is obvious that at least certain of Weber's critics must be wrong, because the literature is partly self-contradictory: the claims made by some authors in criticism of Weber contradict those made by others. Nonetheless, some of the critiques carry considerable force, and taken together they represent a formidable indictment of Weber's views. The elements of Weber's analysis that are most definitely called into question, I would say, are: the distinctiveness of the notion of the 'calling' in Lutheranism; the supposed lack of 'affinity' between Catholicism and regularised entrepreneurial activity; and, the very centrepiece of the thesis, the degree to which Calvinist ethics actually served to dignify the accumulation of wealth in the manner suggested by Weber. If Weber were wrong on these matters, tracing out the consequences for the broad spectrum of his writings would still remain a complicated matter. To be at all satisfactory, it would involve considering the status of the companion studies of the 'world religions', the general problem of the rationalisation of culture - and the methodological framework within which Weber worked. No author has yet attempted such a task, and perhaps it would need someone with a scholarly range approaching that of Weber himself to undertake it with any hope of success.

Anthony Giddens
Cambridge, 1976

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7. The Religion of India, p. 337.
10. Max Weber: 'Antikritisches Schlusswort zum "Geist des Kapitalismus", Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, Vol 31, 1910. See, for example, the following footnotes in the present work: Chapter 1, footnote 1; Chapter 2, footnotes 10, 12, 19 and 20; Chapter 3, footnotes 1 and 3; Chapter 4, footnotes 3 and 4; Chapter 5, footnote 27; 58 and 84.
11. For the best survey of the debate up to the early 1940s, see Ephraim Fischoff: 'The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism: the history of a controversy', Social Research, Vol 11, 1944.
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20. For a recent version, see Alasdair MacIntyre: ‘A mistake about causality in the social sciences’, in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman: Philosophy, Politics and Society, Vol 2, Oxford, 1962. (Certain of the views expressed in the article have however been subsequently abandoned by its author.)

21. See, for instance, Little; op.cit.; Sprinzak: op.cit.

22. Weber’s detailed reply to Brentano’s criticism on this point appears below, in footnotes 1-3, Chapter 3.

NOTE

The Author’s Introduction, which is placed before the main essay, was written by Weber in 1920 for the whole series on the Sociology of Religion. It has been included in this translation because it gives some of the general background of ideas and problems into which Weber himself meant this particular study to fit. That has seemed particularly desirable since, in the voluminous discussion which has grown up in Germany around Weber’s essay, a great deal of misplaced criticism has been due to the failure properly to appreciate the scope and limitations of the study. While it is impossible to appreciate that fully without a thorough study of Weber’s sociological work as a whole, the Author’s Introduction should suffice to prevent a great deal of misunderstanding.

Talcott Parsons (1930)

AUTHOR’S INTRODUCTION

A PRODUCT of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value. Only in the West, does science exist at a stage of development which we recognize to-day as valid. Empirical knowledge, reflection on problems of the cosmos and of life, philosophical and theological wisdom of the most profound sort, are not confined to it, though in the case of the last the full development of a systematic theology must be credited to Christianity under the influence of Hellenism, since there were only fragments in Islam and in a few Indian sects. In short, knowledge and observation of great refinement have existed elsewhere, above all in India, China, Babylonia, Egypt. But in Babylonia and elsewhere astronomy lacked—which makes its development all the more astounding—the mathematical foundation which it first received from the Greeks. The Indian geometry had no rational proof; that was another product of the Greek intellect, also the creator of mechanics and physics. The Indian natural sciences, though well developed in observation, lacked the method of experiment, which was, apart from beginnings in antiquity, essentially a product of the Renaissance, as was the modern laboratory. Hence medicine, especially in India, though highly developed