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Edited by Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth

Excerpt

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Introduction

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I

When Bismarck created Imperial Germany in 1871, the United States was not yet a world power, but the two states were rising Protestant empires with rapidly growing, religiously heterogeneous populations. In the age of imperialism the three Protestant empires, the third being Great Britain, were bound to compete with one another, France, and Russia, yet the form of the conflict, peaceful or military, and the kind of coalition were historically open. After the Spanish-American War of 1898 – an ascending Protestant power defeating a moribund Catholic power – Imperial Germany launched not only a naval armament program against Great Britain, but also a cultural offensive toward the United States aimed at containing the dominant Anglo-Saxon influence. At a time when German emigration had tapered off, academic travel to America became fashionable for German professors, exchange professorships were established – and many illusions were nourished. The St. Louis World Congress of 1904, attended by Max and Marianne Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and many other German academics, was a high point in this cultural endeavor. Part of this story is told by Hans Rollmann in this volume.¹ Few contemporaries would have believed that it would take

¹ See also my chapter, “Deutsche Ambivalenzen gegenüber den Vereinigten Staaten,” ch. 6 of *Politische Herrschaft und persönliche Freiheit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), esp. 175–200. It is indicative of Max Weber's strong interest in the United States that he planned to attend the 1893 Chicago World's Fair with his friend Paul Göhre. See the letters of Nov. 26, 1892, and Jan 7, 1893, to his sister Clara in *Jugendbriefe* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1936), 353 and 357. Weber's quick engagement to Marianne Schmitger in March 1893 prevented the plan. A catalyst of his youthful interest seems to have been the liberal Reichstag deputy Friedrich Kapp (1824–1884), a close family friend, who had lived in the United States from 1849 to 1870 and had been a major figure in New York Republican politics. See the, for Weber, extraordinarily warm appreciation at Kapp's death (letter to Hermann Baumgarten, Nov. 8, 1884, *Jugendbriefe*, 139ff.).

until 1987 before an institution like the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., would be established. Unavoidably, the intellectual transactions became entangled with the political ups and downs in the relations between the two countries that confronted one another in two world wars. The first war, fought by most German academics under the banner of *Kultur contra Zivilisation*, damaged the international prestige of German culture significantly. The second completely destroyed the claims once advanced by Max Weber's generation on behalf of Germany's global *Kulturmission*.

Paradoxically, the very fact that Nazism drove so many scholars, scientists, and writers into exile in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s helped preserve a modicum of German influence. Weber's reception in the United States, and to a lesser extent in England, is testimony to this paradox. Many different interests and motives had to intersect, however, in Weber's mind and among generations of readers to make the oeuvre internationally significant. Ironies abound. How could the writings of a committed German nationalist who cared passionately about his country's standing as a world power become, long after his death, so successful in the Anglo-Saxon world? On the most general level, of course, the answers involve the international entanglements of the United States after World War II and the parallel turn of American social science to one or another form of modernization theory. But why is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in 1904–1905, its thesis reaffirmed in 1920, the only German historical study from the years before World War I that is still alive and controversial in the English-speaking world? (Only a tiny number of American specialists now read German historians from that period.) Clearly, Weber's general standing in twentieth-century social science has helped keep the thesis alive. Moreover, from the very beginning, the study has been understood as an effective argument against historical materialism and for the importance, if not autonomy, of ideal as against material factors. It certainly served this purpose in the United States during the decades of the Cold War. But there are other reasons for the essay's long-range success in America.

One important ideological reason has to do with Weber's attitudes toward England and America. In the superheated nationalist atmosphere of his time, Weber proved to be one of the last liberal Anglophiles. He admired the Puritan and sectarian legacy, the democratic institutions, and the English and American roles in world politics. On this score he found ready resonance among an Anglo-American public that took the linkage of Protestantism, political liberty, and

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world power for granted. Weber embraced the exalted self-image English Whig historians had fashioned about the “Puritan Revolution” and its liberal consequences. He exaggerated the world-historical role of Calvinism and Puritanism to dramatize his cultural and political critique of Imperial Germany. In the 1920s a young American congregationalist and exchange student, Talcott Parsons, accidentally encountered *The Protestant Ethic* in Heidelberg. Its linking of Puritanism and capitalism fascinated him so much that he translated the work.² In due course Parsons made his Weber reading part and parcel of his structural-functionalist theory of normative system integration. Since he came to view the professions as crucial to the functioning of bureaucratic capitalism, Weber’s stated aim – to analyze “Protestant asceticism as the foundation of modern vocational civilization (*Berufskultur*) – a sort of ‘spiritualist’ construction of the modern economy” – fitted his mature paradigm very well. If Weber had not written *The Protestant Ethic*, the young Parsons might not have absorbed his later writings so eagerly, just as, without the prestige of American sociology, especially Parsonianism, Weber might not have been revived so successfully in Germany. (The young Wolfgang J. Mommsen’s famous 1959 dissertation on *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890–1920* could have contributed to burying Weber rather than being part of the resurrection.) As it was, the original Whig interpretation, adapted by Weber for polemical reasons, was reimported by Parsons and others into the Anglo-American realm and helped reinforce the American orthodox understanding of an inherent connection between Protestantism and liberal democracy.³ The exportation and reimportation of Protestant self-interpretation, if not self-congratulation, appears to me an important element in accounting for the American receptivity to the Weber thesis. If the thesis was, for the German side, a kind of negative foundation myth – the “birth defects” of Imperial Germany – it embellished the myth of America. In William McNeill’s term, it was a powerful instance of “mythistory.”⁴ Thus, Weber’s theory joined two other great myths of his generation: Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 frontier thesis and

2 See Talcott Parsons, “The Circumstances of My Encounter with Max Weber,” in Robert Merton and M. W. Riley, eds., *Sociological Traditions from Generation to Generation* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1980), 39. Citations to *The Protestant Ethic* (hereafter abbreviated “PE”) are to Talcott Parson’s translation (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958).

3 Only recently has this orthodox understanding been subjected to critical scrutiny within American sociology. See David Zaret, “Religion and the Rise of Liberal-Democratic Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England,” *American Sociological Review*, 54 (1989): 163–179.

4 See William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

Charles Beard's 1913 economic interpretation of the Constitution. By definition, myhistory is controversial, producing plenty of ideological heat and political hostility. There is always more involved than just a challenging historical proposition that stimulates further inquiry by adherents and critics.

It is customary to revisit major scholars and works in order to take stock of our knowledge and to search for novel insight. Sometimes a half-forgotten work continues to slide into oblivion in spite of much effort – through complete or critical editions, for instance; sometimes it is successfully revived for the benefit of another generation. In either case, “revisited” indicates some distance in time and perspective. In a sense, the Weber thesis needs no revisiting because it has refused to die in spite of many often exasperated efforts to be done with it once and for all. In the eyes of quite a few scholars it has become counterproductive; its very longevity appears a nuisance. It is true that for a specific historical thesis rather than a broad sociological theory it is by now rather old, having survived the half century Weber envisaged as a maximum for the life of a scholarly work. Inevitably, however, the passage of time removes the work more and more from our immediate grasp. Our very interest in the political, social, and cultural issues out of which Weber's preoccupations emerged demonstrates a shift to a larger context. The same is true for issues of reception in relation to recent interpretations of the seventeenth century.

Over the last decade there has been increasing interest in the background and origins of Weber's thought. In Germany this trend has been connected with a political need to reconsider the German past, especially the role of the bourgeoisie (*Bürgertum*) and of liberalism, although the debates on the German *Sonderweg* and the *Historikerstreit* have been overshadowed by the sheer fact of German unification, which is bound to change the parameters of historical discourse. In the United States and England, “ideas in context” (witness the Cambridge University Press series of that title) have found renewed interest. In social theory, in particular, there has been a spirited debate on the relative virtues of historicist readings as against presentist exploitations of classical authors.

For several years, then, some German writers have probed the philosophical antecedents and sources of Weber's work. In part this has to do with the decline of German social science and its presentist and activist concerns since the 1970s and the recovery of history, in a

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conservative period, both as subject matter and as a discipline. Moreover, some German political theorists and literary scholars have been busy bringing Weber home from America, in particular, wresting him away from American social science and its Americanized German counterpart. Mainly in France and the United States, poststructuralist and deconstructionist forces have attacked the “metanarratives” of the West, of which Weber’s theory of rationalization and especially of Protestant inner-worldly asceticism is an important part. As an editorial enterprise, our volume does not follow either tendency – neither the “repossession” nor the “postmodernization” of Weber – although individual contributors may see themselves closer to one or the other. The volume remains in the orbit of intellectual and cultural history. All authors stay within that broad realm, despite the appearance, in formal affiliation, of an even division between historians and sociologists. The contributors are evenly divided between Americans and Europeans, with some transplanted scholars standing in between. The Germans were selected more for the first purpose of the volume – origins and setting – the Americans more for the second – the viability and longevity of the Weber thesis in some areas, but also its ineffectiveness in others.

II

There are three biographical aspects to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. First, Weber reached maturity at the end of decades of bitter conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism, at a time when there still were some unhappy memories of the enforced union of Lutheranism and Reformism (Calvinism). Second, in his formative years Weber witnessed close up the defeat of political and economic liberalism and the triumph of authoritarianism in state and industry. Third, he grew up with and eventually involved himself in the *Methodenstreit*, the protracted struggle between natural and cultural science, positivism and hermeneutics, theory and history, a struggle complicated by crisscrossing lines of contestation.

The essays devoted to Weber’s origins and context explore these three aspects in varying combinations. The first four contributions share as an underlying theme the importance of religious conflict, not only for Weber but for historiography and social science in general. Besides being a conflict among Catholic church, Protestant monarchy, and liberal bourgeoisie, the *Kulturkampf* involved the whole

meaning of modern society and modern scholarship. Graf shows that Weber was the German economic historian most deeply steeped in theological discourse. He demonstrates the significance of Weber's main theological source, Matthias Schneckenburger, for the stark juxtaposition of Lutheranism and Calvinism, and examines the political context of the theological debates before and after the unification of the Protestant churches and of the nation. Influenced by Ernst Troeltsch – an influence Graf judges to have been much greater than was acknowledged by Weber himself and many others – Weber opposed Albrecht Ritschl, the leading Lutheran theologian of the time. Both Ritschl and Weber fought the orthodox and conservative establishment in the state church, but the former saw a historical continuity between outmoded Catholicism and the varieties of ascetic Protestantism, whereas to the latter, Lutheranism was closer to Catholicism. For Ritschl a National-Liberal *Kulturprotestantismus* was the Empire's proper ideological buttress; for Weber the absence of an ascetic tradition was a heavy political liability because Lutheranism had produced a mentality of authoritarian subordination. By taking the theological context of the time as his major point of reference, Graf can conclude that the question of the historical adequacy of Weber's analysis becomes relatively secondary.

Behind Weber's study lies, however, not only a debate within Protestantism but also a long history of mutual stereotyping and prejudice on the part of both Catholics and Protestants. Using popular literature, from religious tracts to travelogues, Münch presents an archaeology of the Weber thesis. He agrees with Graf that for a long time the denominations did not differ greatly in their traditionalist understanding of economic ethics – a point insufficiently recognized by Weber. Of course, the secularization of church lands and the closing of monasteries had a great impact, and to contemporaries the abolition of saint worship and saints' days made Protestantism appear a cheaper religion and Catholics less productive. Whereas the early modern state had a mercantilist interest in tolerating religious minorities, including Catholic ones, the Enlightenment diminished in both Catholic and Protestant eyes the perceived cultural importance of religious differences. The first third of the nineteenth century can even be seen as a period of relative religious accommodation, when Catholic and Jewish dignitaries sometimes participated in Reformation feasts. These were the decades when the dissolution of the ecclesiastic territories in the Napoleonic period turned out to have greatly

weakened the institutional supports of German Catholic culture. From the 1830s on, a new era of conflict began and revived the militant rhetoric of bygone days. In a Germany dominated by triumphalist Protestant nationalism, Catholics were increasingly marginalized and denigrated as an alien element, until the anti-Catholic propaganda reached its high point a decade before Weber wrote his study. Thus, to Münch, Weber appears at best as a giant standing on the shoulders of dwarfs – the manufacturers of anti-Catholic stereotypes and prejudices.

In the wake of the *Kulturkampf*, which was formally settled in the 1880s, Catholics vigorously pressed for equal treatment, especially in the civil service, but to liberals and Jews their demands appeared often enough not as universalist, but as a particularist interest in patronage. As Nipperdey shows, it is here that “moral statistics” achieved importance, not only as a new means of research but also of political discourse. Since it turned out that Catholics were also underrepresented in the free professions and the universities, even Catholic spokesmen such as Georg von Hertling, who became Chancellor in 1917, helped popularize the notion of a Catholic educational deficit. In general, however, statistical researchers paid little attention to religion as a factor in accounting for confessional differences. For that matter, the rise of nationalism changed the terms of the older debates and made French historians, for example, downplay the role of the Reformation in creating the modern world. In a secular climate that looked at religion increasingly as an irrational phenomenon, Weber insisted, however, on its causal importance. Nipperdey concludes that Weber’s study should be seen both as a contribution to German economic and social history and as part of the general debate on the nature of modernity.

Weber’s essay moves indeed from the social differences between German Catholics and Protestants to the fate of modern vocational culture, but his political and cultural critique holds up an Anglo-Saxon past as a mirror to the German present. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, many German liberals looked at England as a constitutional model. My own contribution tries to show that Weber stands at the very end of this tradition, to which he was linked through family ties. But since Imperial Germany had become a great power militarily and industrially, Great Britain appeared in Weber’s program of *Weltpolitik* not only as a constitutional and imperial model, but also as the main competitor. In his study Weber drew on

his Westphalian family history to illustrate the spirit of capitalism, but curiously, he omitted any reference to his extensive English family connections. On his maternal side he was descended from a wealthy Huguenot family clan that was as much at home in Manchester and London as in Frankfurt and Milan, and that embodied economic adventurism much more than his spirit of capitalism, not to mention any Protestant ethic. Weber's relatives were cosmopolitan Europeans and were not yet affected by the intense nationalism of his own lifetime. Some of his own political ambivalence may be traced to his ambiguous combination of Anglophilia and German nationalism.

Significantly, Weber's concept of national identity – Liebersohn's topic – contrasts strongly with the linguistic, ethnic, and racial theories so popular at the time. *The Protestant Ethic* discounts national character as an explanatory factor and insists on the autonomy of religious beliefs and on the believer's ability to make linguistic innovations. In other contexts, Weber emphasized the role of a shared political fate in forming a sense of nationhood. Thus, he did not anchor his notion of national identity ontologically but purely historically. For this reason, he also found descriptive ethnography useful while remaining highly skeptical of racial theories. It is true that he employed the Social Darwinist rhetoric of his time, but his preoccupation with the ethically integrated personality in all spheres of life made him hostile to scientific monism, of which eugenics was a part. It is here that Weber's relation to Nietzsche warrants clarification.

Treiber approaches the relationship between Nietzsche and Weber in terms of elective affinity rather than any causal connection, between the former's idea of a "monastery for freer spirits" and the latter's ideal type of the Puritan sect. Treiber demonstrates how the two men shared an intense interest in ascetic personality formation but differed radically in their understanding of science and politics. Nietzsche encountered the educational uses of asceticism in the famous Protestant boarding school of Schulpforta, which continued some of the traditions of its Cistercian past, and he also harked back to the friendship cult of the Romantic era. Given the crisis of Christianity, the goal of ascetic self-education among friends aimed at total intellectual liberation from the idols of the time and at the creation of a strictly empirical moral science, which was patterned after the most advanced notions of natural science. Treiber recounts the project of a monastery for freer spirits, which was tried out in Basel in the early 1870s but mostly dreamed about and idealized in later years, and the

role of the men and one woman – Louise von Salomé – whose names are still somewhat famous. Moreover, he recalls the mostly forgotten contributions of the preceding generation of scholars and scientists that attracted Nietzsche and his friends. This amounts to drawing up the “intellectual inventory” of the age by reconstructing the friends’ “monastic library” (including the books borrowed from the University of Basel). The comparative study of language, they believed, had become a strict science that could help create the “ethics of the future.” Weber, however, broke radically with a notion of monistic science that made the logic of geology or chemistry relevant for ethical reconstruction. Instead, he replaced laws with ideal types and turned to historical causality, the genesis of the Protestant ethic. Although Weber’s ideal type of the ascetic personality retained an elective affinity with Nietzsche’s ethical ideal, he sought the practical solution not among a circle of friends or in a new monastic or sectarian experiment, but on the level of the national community. In that regard, he remained closer to Treitschke’s patriotic state religion.

Drawing on Foucault’s “practices” of the self, Goldman analyzes the relation between Weber’s notions of self-mastery and world mastery in the face of rationalization and bureaucratization. The older bourgeois ideal of *Bildung* appeared no longer viable to Weber. Only ascetic specialization could save the individual’s autonomy and ability to cope creatively with the dangers of institutional ossification. Goldman recognizes a misunderstanding by Foucault: Weber was concerned not with the ascetic price of reason, but with the ways in which the “empowered self” can master rationalization itself. Just as the Puritan self had destroyed the fetters of tradition, so the modern secular self should control and guide rationalization. But in Imperial Germany the possibilities for an ascetic socialization of the self were undermined by the whole weight of economic, cultural, and social development that favored the dominance of a bureaucratic mentality. However, Weber’s political reform program, Goldman concludes, was marred by his very inability to conceive of an autonomous self that was not structurally identical to the Puritan’s self and to reconcile his ascetic ideal with the realities of modern mass democracy.

Given his powerful attraction to inner-worldly asceticism, it was inevitable that Weber would not only fight the conformist “law and order” types (*Ordnungsmenschen*) but react even more viscerally against the “new ethic” of sexual liberation, with its amalgam of neo-Romantic, anarchist, eugenic, and hedonist elements. Each compo-

ment was unacceptable in itself; the combination was anathema to him. The men and women who embraced “disorder” in their radical critique of the family, bourgeois society, and authoritarian state appeared to him as incapable as the “men of order” of coping with the motivational and institutional imperatives of modernity. Lichtblau shows that Weber’s concern with asceticism was closely related to the interest of men like Simmel and Freud in repression and instinctual sacrifice as conditions of cultural achievement and economic exchange. But ultimately Weber did not remain consistent, and his own inner conflicts came to reflect some of the general tensions brought about by the new currents. Moreover, his own illness can be explained in terms of such prominent diseases of the age as hysteria and neurasthenia. Fears of personal and collective decadence became mixed up with one another. Max and Marianne Weber had to face the new eroticism and the demand for free love in their immediate circle at a time when they actively defended an ascetic ideal of ethically buttressed monogamy. In depicting the rejection of sensual culture and the elevation of positive science by the Puritans, Weber’s study portrayed his personal ethos, but in the following years his evolving theory of separate and conflicting value spheres explicitly recognized the autonomy (*Eigenwert*) of erotic and aesthetic values. This made Weber aware of the great break between the aesthetic and hedonistic rationales of modernism and the continued ascetic requirements of institutional modernity. Thus, Lichtblau can rank Weber paradoxically among the “antimodernist modernists” of his time.

Next to the concept of autonomy (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) of value and institutional spheres, Weber employed the notion of elective affinity in order to relate heterogeneous phenomena such as the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. In contrast to his many careful definitions, however, he never defined elective affinity and thus allowed it to retain the connotations it acquired in Goethe’s novel. The term stems from alchemy and “the science of divorce” (*Scheidekunst*, an old name for chemistry) and denotes the “magical” dissolution and recombination of elements in terms of their “attractiveness.” Lichtblau reminds us that Weber harked back to the terminology of a way of thinking that Werner Sombart had set aside in his explanation of the awakening of the spirit of capitalism. After a period of intensified gold digging, treasure hunting, and alchemistic experiments, some people finally discovered that wealth could be accumulated through normal economic activities.