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978-0-521-55829-7 - Weber's Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts

Edited by Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth

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Although Weber's path-breaking work on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has received much attention ever since it first appeared in 1904–5, recent research has uncovered important new aspects. This volume is the result of an international, interdisciplinary effort. It throws new light on the intellectual and cultural background of Weber's work, debates recent criticism of Weber's thesis, and confronts new historical insights on the seventeenth century with Weber's interpretation. Revisiting Weber's thesis serves to deepen our understanding of Weber as much as it will stimulate further research.

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The German Historical Institute is a center for advanced study and research whose purpose is to provide a permanent basis for scholarly cooperation between historians from Germany and the United States. The Institute conducts, promotes, and supports research into both American and German political, social, economic, and cultural history, into transatlantic migration, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and into the history of international relations, with special emphasis on the roles played by the United States and Germany.

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Preface

Both in German and in American historiography and intellectual life, in the humanities as well as in the social sciences, certain scholarly works have had – and in some cases still have – a particular impact that deserves the attention of those who are interested in the transfer of ideas from the Old World to the New and from the New World to the Old. Jakob Burckhardt's *The Culture of the Renaissance in Italy* is such a work of transatlantic significance; others are Erwin Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology* and *Early Netherlandish Paintings*, Ernst Kantorowicz's *Laudes Regiae* and *The King's Two Bodies*, and Erik H. Erikson's *Young Man Luther*. There is no work, however, that has been and is still the subject of such lively discussion on both sides of the Atlantic, and that has attracted and continues to attract the attention of so many scholars from so many different disciplines, as Max Weber's famous essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in 1904–1905.

In the past decades, research on this work has developed in three distinct directions. Historians of seventeenth-century history, and especially those involved in the history of countries in which Calvinism had taken root, used Weber's thesis in order to clarify whether, and if so how, ascetic Protestantism had indeed initiated and advanced the growth of capitalism. Although some of them found proof that supported Weber's thesis, others claimed that they could refute it. At the same time, Weber's essay, published in 1920 in expanded form, was taken as a milestone in Weber's intellectual development that seemed to reveal how he had gained a new level of scholarly competence while recovering from the illness that had forced him to give up lecturing at the University of Heidelberg before the turn of the century. Moreover, for biographers of Weber, his essay served to exemplify his theoretical remarks on the use of ideal

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types in writing history. Sociologists of religion, finally, used Weber's thesis on the relationship of ascetic Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism in order to gain arguments for constructing universally applicable laws of development that, in turn, could be used to strengthen the work ethic, and thus capitalism, in developing countries.

Although the members of these three groups used the same text as a point of departure, in the past decades the way they interpreted the text, and some of their conclusions, drifted further and further apart. Moreover, for American scholars compared to European students of Weber, as a result of the different history of Weber scholarship since 1920, his essay played a different role when they discussed its meaning and importance. Considering this, it seemed appropriate to assemble those Weber scholars who had occupied themselves particularly with the *Protestant Ethic* in recent years in order to confront conflicting interpretations and probe the possibility of gaining common ground. With Guenther Roth (from Columbia University) and myself acting as conveners, a group of historians, sociologists, and historians of religion assembled in the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., from May 3 to 5, 1990, for an exchange of ideas that was very lively, very intense and instructive, and sometimes controversial. The authors have attempted to incorporate whatever they had learned from the discussions into their papers, which are presented here in a revised form with the necessary notes.

Of the various results of our scholarly enterprise, several deserve to be noted. Most speakers agreed that Weber's insights and his conceptualization of the historical meaning of the influence of the *Protestant Ethic*, as well as his terminology, were very much determined by the level of scholarship of his own time. In this sense, Weber's thesis is clearly dated, and two generations after his death is only of relative importance. At the same time, many participants of the conference pointed out that Weber had articulated his thesis in a way that had stimulated research on the rise of capitalism in a most remarkable way and continued to do so, and that no one since him has had an influence on research that equaled his. Although the conclusions drawn by historians and sociologists from reading this text of Weber may be different, the conference served to underline the lasting importance of his work.

It is a most pleasant duty to thank all those who have supported this venture through the various stages of development. Without the

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help of Guenther Roth, without his expertise and guidance, we would not have succeeded. The Fritz Thyssen Foundation did not hesitate to give us generous financial assistance. Although the Institute had moved into new premises shortly before the conference, its staff labored hard to help provide a setting equally suited to doing hard work and getting some relaxation. Those who had contributed to the conference were quick and thorough in preparing their papers for publication. Dr. Kenneth Ledford helped us with much diligence in editing the volume. Guenther Roth and I trust that this volume is an expression of the commitment of all those who have supported us and to whom we are deeply indebted, and a fitting sign of gratitude to them.

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