Introduction

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is a remarkable essay that has had an even more remarkable history. It was first published in 1905 as two articles in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, a journal in which Weber had an editorial interest. This structure, consisting of two parts, was preserved in a later and amended, or revised, version that Weber prepared in 1919 and which was published in a posthumous collection of his papers on the sociology of religion, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, in 1920. The first part of the *Protestant Ethic* consists of three chapters which respectively indicate a contemporary correlation between Protestant religious affiliation and capitalistic involvement, that describes the capitalist spirit as the motive of money-making for its own sake through rational means, and which shows that this spirit was an unintended consequence of the Protestant Reformation and especially the Calvinist form of the notion of calling. The second part has two chapters; one of which focuses on the psychological sanctions of religious belief that influences and directs practical conduct, while the other documents the impact of religious teaching in the seventeenth century on social and economic affairs. Weber is clear that these chapters do not add up to an account of the origins of modern capitalism. Rather, he says, they attempt to ascertain the way in which religious forces have been expressed in the formation of capitalist motivation (Weber 1920: 90–1), or to put it slightly differently, to indicate the basis of the irrational element in capitalistic culture (Weber 1920: 78).

Soon after its first appearance in 1905 the *Protestant Ethic* attracted sufficient critical reaction to generate a secondary literature of debate that included assessment, interpretation and defence (Baehr and Wells 2002; Chalcraft and Harrington 2001). This is a pattern that has been repeated and augmented enormously since the first appearance in 1930 of the English, or more properly American, translation of the

Protestant Ethic by Talcott Parsons. Parsons' translation of Weber's later revised edition effectively established the *Protestant Ethic* as a classic source of the sociological canon. This was not the first English-language translation of a Weber text, as Frank Knight's translation of *General Economic History* preceded it by three years. But the Parsons translation presented a Weber that American (and British) readers quickly made their own and which led Weber, through the *Protestant Ethic*, to become assimilated into a broad sociological consciousness. This is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, the *Protestant Ethic* was not originally a work of sociology at all insofar as Weber saw himself in 1905 as a social economist writing cultural history. Too much can be made of this, however. Certainly by 1919 Weber was not embarrassed to accept the title Professor of Sociology and, in any event, through Parsons' translation the *Protestant Ethic* has been responsible for contributing to the constitution of American sociology from the mid twentieth century, and through it sociology of a more global nature. Second, on the surface the *Protestant Ethic* is an unlikely candidate for classic status. Its basic contention, that the motivational force or 'spirit' of modern capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was an unintended consequence of the intensity of strict Protestant devotion, is arguably obtuse, practically impossible to confirm or demonstrate, and remote from twentieth-century concerns. And yet the very audacity of Weber's argument, the methodological novelty of the 'ideal-type' conceptions in which it was delivered, and elements of its ambiguity – which generated the prospects of innumerable interpretations – all contributed, in fact, to its appeal to students and scholars alike. There are other reasons why the *Protestant Ethic* has continued to enjoy enormous appeal since Parsons' translation.

Although undeniably a German text, Parsons' translation of the *Protestant Ethic* gave American readers, and non-Americans who saw themselves as part of or swept along by the American century, access to what was taken to be an appreciation of a culture and personality type that resonated with an American self-image. More than anything this led to an immediate and integral acceptance, indeed absorption, of the *Protestant Ethic* with an English-language readership. The *Protestant Ethic* makes a number of more-than-passing references to American virtues. Not only does Weber locate the archetypical presence of the capitalist spirit in the quintessential

historic American Benjamin Franklin, but he wrote the second part of the *Protestant Ethic* in the afterglow of an immensely satisfying American visit (Marianne Weber 1926: 279–304; Scaff 1998) through which he had first-hand experience of the 'quiet self-control' that distinguishes the 'best type of . . . American gentleman today' (Weber 1920: 119). The Protestant virtues that Weber points to in the *Protestant Ethic* were ones that American readers believed they possessed in abundance. To be reminded of such attributes when they most needed confidence in their institutions and the mentality those institutions reflected, in emerging from economic depression during the 1930s and ideological conflict with alien systems, especially international communism, from mid-century, American liberal academics embraced the *Protestant Ethic* as an implicit portrayal of their strongest attributes. It is no accident that all major English-language translations of Weber up to the close of the twentieth century are American: in addition to Knight's translation of *General Economic History* and Parsons' *Protestant Ethic*, already mentioned, there is Edward Shils' translations of the methodology essays (Shils and Finch 1949), Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills' translations of sociological essays (Gerth and Mills 1970) and Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich's translation of the monumental *Economy and Society* (Weber 1921), to mention only the most obvious. The Americanization of the *Protestant Ethic* was not absolute, of course. It cannot be ignored as a compelling element in the history of its appeal, but there were resistive readings. Thorstein Veblen, for one, held to an independent vision, as we shall see in chapter 5.

The importance of the *Protestant Ethic* to American self-confidence suggests a further basis for the success or appeal of the work and of Parsons' translation: the *Protestant Ethic* was to serve as a ready antidote to the Marxist materialist view of economy, society and history. It is true that Weber's references in the *Protestant Ethic* to Marx and historical materialism are gentle rebuttals, not harsh critiques (Weber 1920: 55, 75, 91–2, 183), and in fact it is unlikely that Marx was of much concern to Weber in the period 1903–5 when writing the *Protestant Ethic* (see Oakes 1975: 21–3). It is also important to notice that with some exceptions (Grossman 1934), Marxist writers have historically been remarkably accepting of the *Protestant Ethic* (Bukharin 1920: 154–5, 291–2; Gramsci 1978: 338–9; Hobsbawm 1965: 17 note 2; Lichtheim 1961: 385 note 3;

Lukacs 1923: 95, 318). Nevertheless, the focus on cultural and ideational forces as opposed to economic structures and institutions as motivating profit seeking in Weber's account, and his treatment of capitalistic practices premised on religious devotion and moral impulses, all stand as alternatives to and an implicit critique of Marxist theory. But more than that, the ideal-type conceptualization that Weber applied in the *Protestant Ethic* and the cultural interpretive apprehension of his material, were taken as an alternative to Marx's model of economic causation. Indeed, this is how Weber himself took them. At the University of Munich in 1919, Weber presented much of the content of the *Protestant Ethic* in a lecture series called 'A positive critique of the Marxist theory of history' (Löwith 1960: 100). In Albert Salomon's famous and apt phrase, English-language readers of the *Protestant Ethic* believed that Weber was engaged 'in a long and intense debate with the ghost of Marx' (quoted in Zeitlin 1968: 111).

There is a further basis of the appeal of the *Protestant Ethic* to an English-language readership during the last two-thirds of the twentieth century that is seldom mentioned but all the more powerful for being implicit. This is the insistence in Weber's discussion of both the Protestant ethicists and the early capitalists that in order to succeed in a rationally chosen course of action it is necessary to suppress the emotions. Weber associates the Calvinist idea of proof of faith by objective results with rejection of emotion from religious life, for emotion distracts from constancy and steadiness of application to worldly activity (Weber 1920: 114, 119). Indeed, emotions are seen by Weber in the *Protestant Ethic* as inherently anti-rational (Weber 1920: 136, 224 note 30). To the idea that Weber regards the Calvinist doctrines as contingent precursors of the capitalist spirit it must be added that he believed that the efficacy of these doctrines required the absence of emotional religious expression: Calvinism and Pietism are doctrinally indistinguishable (Weber 1920: 128–9) and yet by emphasizing the 'emotional side of religion' Pietist groups, unlike the Calvinists, were unable to 'engage in the ascetic struggle for certainty about the future world' (Weber 1920: 130). The *Protestant Ethic* as a Cartesian text in this sense resonates perfectly with the suppressive emotional style of twentieth-century America (Stearns 1994), indeed of the Anglo-western world in general. This theme will be discussed extensively in chapters to follow.

As with the *Protestant Ethic* itself so the flaws and not only the virtues of Parsons' translation have generated interest in it and led to a subsequent literature of complaint and critique (Cohen, Hazelrigg and Pope 1975; Eliaeson 2002: 63–74; Ghosh 1994; Hinkle 1986). About the technical failures of Parsons' translation it is necessary to no more than acknowledge the growing sophistication and sensitivity of linguistic technique and scholarship since the 1930s. In part a consequence of recognition of Parsons' limitations, readers of the *Protestant Ethic* in English today have a choice of texts. Against the monopoly position Parsons' translation held during the twentieth century, twenty-first century readers of the *Protestant Ethic* in English have alternative options that shall continue to extend over the next few years as even more translations currently in preparation become available. At the present time, in addition to the Parsons translation of the 1920 edition of the *Protestant Ethic*, there is a new translation by Stephen Kalberg (2002). There is also now available a translation of the 1905 edition, by Peter Baehr and Gordon Wells (2002). It is no comment on the intrinsic value of these new translations that the chapters below refer to and quote only Parsons' translation. In spite of its faults this latter text is the established source of the *Protestant Ethic* in English and has earned its place as a literary basis of sociological thought through its use by numerous authors, many of whom are also referred to in the present text. For simplicity and consistency of cross-referencing it seemed necessary, therefore, to continue relying upon Parsons' translation in the present work.

This latter element of the present book indicates something else about it that needs to be made clear. Whereas Parsons consolidated Weber's reputation as a sociologist, the dissatisfaction with Parsons' translation of the *Protestant Ethic* is at least in part connected with and parallel to a move that operates in some of the current Weber discussion to place Weber in a context that is not exclusively sociological. Indeed, interest in Weber today goes well beyond a sociological constituency and includes writers who not only want to provide a more biographical and historical dimension to consideration of Weber than sociologists in the past have shown interest in, but some who even wish to rescue Weber from the sociological frame in which Parsons so effectively placed him (Hennis 1988, 2000). There is no doubt that there are themes in Weber's thought that transcend sociology as a discipline even after acknowledging that what

constitutes 'sociology' changes over time and is frequently different in different societies or cultures. One would expect that a thinker with interests as broad as Weber's would attract the attention of philosophers, cultural theorists, literary scholars, historians, political theorists, and others, in addition to sociologists. The chapters to follow are not indifferent to the broader contexts of Weber's concerns and experiences, but they are designed to address largely sociological questions in the broadest sense and this book is principally directed to a readership that is engaged by the sociological concerns that the *Protestant Ethic* raises.

It is not unfair to say that much Weber scholarship today is intensive in the sense that it relates Weber's writing to his life, his milieu, and his intellectual project and the various ways in which this latter might be constructed. The *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* [Complete Works] have become available in instalments since 1984 and the publication of Weber's correspondence especially has given enormous impetus to the formation of an understanding of the internal detail of his work, his own understanding of his intentions and his relationships with contemporaries. That these form the cutting edge of current Weber scholarship is not only to be expected, therefore, but welcomed. At the same time, why we should be interested in Weber at all must relate to what might be called his extensive connections, which is his apprehension of the material that he treats in his writing and also his intellectual and not necessarily his personal relations with the arguments of others who have addressed the same subjects. It is an underlying assumption of the present book that earlier periods of Weber scholarship were incomplete in their discussion of the extensive connections of the *Protestant Ethic* argument and also that the current dominant approach to the study of Weber is in need of a continuing attention to the objects of Weber's argument and how that argument compares with those of others who have also addressed the subjects that Weber treated. The context of the *Protestant Ethic*, then, is both the intensive matter of Weber's intentions that form out of the concerns of his experiences and also the extensive matter of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century market formations in Europe, for instance, and the treatment of these formations by comparable thinkers. It is this context, both intensive and extensive, that is referred to in the sub-title of the present book.

Given the *Protestant Ethic*'s relatively long history and the large secondary literature that surrounds it, it is reasonable to ask whether there is any need for another book on the *Protestant Ethic* and whether anything new might be said about it. Indeed, familiarity with some key sources over the last twenty years could arguably be seen to exhaust information about and interpretation of the *Protestant Ethic* (Lehmann and Roth 1995; Marshall 1982; Poggi 1983; Ray 1987). Yet, as we shall see, much does remain to be said, for instance, about why Weber wrote the *Protestant Ethic* and how it relates to his thought, both preceding this work and subsequent to it. Also, Weber's argument about the foundations of original capitalist motivation covers ground that other luminaries of social and economic analysis have addressed but which at best has been only glancingly touched upon in the existing literature on the *Protestant Ethic*. In particular, much can be learned about Weber's account of the sources and make-up of the capitalist 'spirit' by comparing it with the detailed and important but relatively neglected contributions of the eighteenth-century pioneer of economic analysis Adam Smith and the twentieth-century firebrand of economic critique Thorstein Veblen, as different chapters below will show. Because the *Protestant Ethic* is still the singular principal text of exposure to sociology at university level – anyone enrolled in a sociology course will not only have heard of but would be expected to have read at least part of the *Protestant Ethic* – it is the source of a pervasive historical image of early modern Europe. Most sociologists, including those who write about Weber and know his sources, typically assume that his historical understanding presented in the *Protestant Ethic* is sufficiently sound to deserve repeating. It has been necessary in the present book, however, to provide a view of early modern market society that is not derived from Weber's vision and which incidentally challenges it. Indeed, the method itself through which Weber apprehended early modern European capitalism and especially the relationship between religious thought and economic activity, is shown throughout the present book to be open to challenges seldom indicated in the existing secondary literature on the *Protestant Ethic*. In the final chapter, in which Weber's treatment of the Jews and pariah capitalism is discussed, the limitations of Weber's historical perspective and methodological assumptions become starkly apparent.

From what has just been written it may appear that the present book is essentially a negative appraisal of the *Protestant Ethic* and its author. Just such an approach to the work has a history as long as the *Protestant Ethic* itself. Indeed, Weber responded to criticism with a style that is robust, combative, even cruelly aggressive and dismissive. He did not take criticism well and was not inhibited from mixing evidence and argument with derogatory personal attacks on his detractors. The present work is not purely critical and destructive and when limitations and defects in Weber's logic or factual presentations are indicated, then corrective and alternative material restores the narrative account, so that at worst Weber's writing is a point of departure for consideration of not only his but other points of view. Thus the discussion that he presents, and which is considered here, is augmented so that our understanding may be enlarged. Serious scholars treat Weber with a good deal of respect. His contribution to our intellectual heritage is enormous. Perhaps the justifiable regard for Weber's overall importance has tended to encourage an accepting attitude to the *Protestant Ethic* when a more testing and sceptical approach is readily justified by the nature of the work itself and its place in Weber's intellectual development. The present book is not a summary of or a guide to the *Protestant Ethic*, but rather a close examination of a number of issues that it raises. This examination not only illuminates Weber's intentions and the formation and development of his ideas, but also places them in a context seldom found in the existing literature.

The first two chapters of the present book place the *Protestant Ethic* in the context of the larger body of Weber's writing. Chapter 1, 'From the inaugural lecture to the *Protestant Ethic*', considers the arguments of the *Protestant Ethic* in the context of Weber's preceding and largely ignored writings on agrarian questions and especially his inaugural lecture of 1895, 'The National State and Economic Policy'. The inaugural lecture was written from the point of view of a social economist committed to articulating and advancing the German national interest, as he saw it, under conditions of Catholic Polish farm labourers displacing Protestant German farm workers. A clear programmatic concern is expressed in the lecture about tasks for the political education of future defenders of German national interest in the face of middle-class impotence, and in particular the needs of a vocation for leadership. Connectedly, the lecture also presents a case

about the independence of fact and values and the capacity of persons to choose the values that serve and advance their collective or national interests. The association of religion and economic interest, spelled out in the 1895 lecture, the value question, and the proper foundations of vocation or calling, are all continued, although in a different key, in the *Protestant Ethic* first published a decade later. Indeed, Weber's treatment in the *Protestant Ethic* of the unequal capacities of Lutheranism and Calvinism to furnish differentially the content of a modern form of calling and a commensurate personality that could rationally pursue a constant programme of purposes is readily seen to be the solution to the problem of fully competent social agency and political leadership that Weber first set himself in the inaugural lecture. By placing it in the context of the inaugural lecture, the *Protestant Ethic* ceases to be primarily an historical narrative of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century developments, and becomes instead an allegory about Weber's Germany and its alternative possible futures, based on different prospects of political education, one following the traditional Lutheran form of calling and one following the modern and more dynamic Calvinist form that Weber believed was at the heart of British and American national ascendancy and success.

Chapter 2, 'From the *Protestant Ethic* to the vocation lectures', continues to place the *Protestant Ethic* in the context of Weber's other writings, in this instance those subsequent to it, and also maintains the focus on his account of vocation or calling in the *Protestant Ethic* and later writings. The concept of 'vocation' or 'calling' (*Beruf*) refers to the practice of systematic self-control in pursuing constant goals or purposes, which Weber, in the *Protestant Ethic*, found in its modern form in Calvinist religious practice and capitalistic entrepreneurship and labour. But he does not confine the term to only these applications; it is also central to his lectures 'Science as a Vocation' and also 'Politics as a Vocation', delivered in 1917 and 1919 respectively. The general significance of the idea of *Beruf* is that it accounts for the mechanisms required to realize in action the quality of rationality, another of Weber's characteristic terms. The connection between rational activity and calling is constant throughout Weber's different discussions. In the *Protestant Ethic*, however, practices of *Beruf* achieve rationality through the suppression of emotion. In the later vocation lectures, on the other hand, *Beruf* is achieved through and expresses passion and emotions. This turn about in Weber's various

statements of the foundation of *Beruf* has considerable importance for an understanding of the concept and practice of rationality, and also for Weber's own biography and calling as a sociological theorist. In tracing Weber's retreat from ascetic rationalism after the writing of the *Protestant Ethic*, the chapter shows that Weber provides a serious and detailed albeit implicit critique of that work in subsequent writings that is parallel to and paradoxical with his continued presentation of the Protestant ethic argument. This fact gives additional weight to the interpretation of the preceding chapter that the importance of the *Protestant Ethic* is not primarily in its intellectual apprehension of early modern historical developments so much as its addressing the programmatic concern of German political education.

Having shown that Weber's underlying intention in the *Protestant Ethic* was to advance an argument primarily concerned with elite recruitment on the basis of a historical metaphor of the Protestant reformation as providing a model of calling, the next three chapters consider the veracity of the historical vision that is his vehicle for conveying the argument about the religious ethic and capitalist motivation.

Chapter 3, 'Passions and profits: the emotional origins of capitalism in seventeenth-century England', continues the discussion of the preceding chapter that considered the approach to emotions in the *Protestant Ethic* and shows that rather than reject or suppress emotions the early modern capitalist economy required articulation of and attention to emotions. Reliance on credit and also commerce between virtual strangers meant that formation of trust for market relations required a sense of the intentions and feelings of the other and a consciousness of a market actor's own relevant emotions. During the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a large number of books on the passions were published in London that offered reflection about and instruction on emotions. Some of these were clearly directed to readers engaged in economic activity. Drawing upon the method Weber recommends, the chapter goes on to explore one of these books in particular and demonstrates not only that it provides an operative account of emotions but also that it encourages commercial activity and profit making as an end in itself through religious argument. This inducement to capitalistic practices was delivered a generation before Richard Baxter's sermons, which Weber focuses on in the last chapter of the *Protestant Ethic*, and unlike Baxter its author, Thomas Wright,