

MAX WEBER

THE PROTESTANT ETHIC
AND
THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM

TRANSLATED BY
TALCOTT PARSONS
WITH A FOREWORD BY
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

MAX WEBER'S essay, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, which is here translated, was first published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Volumes XX and XXI, for 1904-5. It was reprinted in 1920 as the first study in the ambitious series *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, which was left unfinished by Weber's untimely death in that same year. For the new printing he made considerable changes, and appended both new material and replies to criticism in footnotes. The translation has, however, been made directly from this last edition. Though the volume of footnotes is excessively large, so as to form a serious detriment to the reader's enjoyment, it has not seemed advisable either to omit any of them or to attempt to incorporate them into the text. As it stands it shows most plainly how the problem has grown in Weber's own mind, and it would be a pity to destroy that for the sake of artistic perfection. A careful perusal of the notes is, however, especially recommended to the reader, since a great deal of important material is contained in them. The fact that they are printed separately from the main text should not be allowed to hinder their use. The translation is, as far as is possible, faithful to the text, rather than attempting to achieve any more than ordinary, clear English style. Nothing has been altered, and only a few comments to clarify obscure points and to refer the reader to related parts of Weber's work have been added.

The Introduction, which is placed before the main

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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, this brief introduction should suffice to prevent a great deal of misunderstanding.

The series of which this essay forms a part was, as has been said, left unfinished at Weber's death. The first volume only had been prepared for the press by his own hand. Besides the parts translated here, it contains a short, closely related study, *Die protestantischen Sekten und der Geist des Kapitalismus*; a general introduction to the further studies of particular religions which as a whole he called *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*; and a long study of Confucianism and Taoism. The second and third volumes, which were published after his death, without the thorough revision which he had contemplated, contain studies of Hinduism and Buddhism and Ancient Judaism. In addition he had done work on other studies, notably of Islam, Early Christianity, and Talmudic Judaism, which were not yet in a condition fit for publication in any form. Nevertheless, enough of the whole series has been preserved to show something of the extra-

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ordinary breadth and depth of Weber's grasp of cultural problems. What is here presented to English-speaking readers is only a fragment, but it is a fragment which is in many ways of central significance for Weber's philosophy of history, as well as being of very great and very general interest for the thesis it advances to explain some of the most important aspects of modern culture.

TALCOTT PARSONS

CAMBRIDGE, MASS., U.S.A.

January 1930

PREFACE TO NEW EDITION

As translator of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* it is a great satisfaction to me to have it, with the present new edition, given the kind of status as a modern classic which, for serious scholarly books, comes with issue to the paper cover trade. When the English translation first appeared, in England in 1930, it was, though originally published in German in 1904-5, scarcely known outside very limited scholarly circles in the fields of religious and economic history. Furthermore there was a nearly complete dissociation, at least in the English-speaking world, between the reputation of Weber as the author of the *Protestant Ethic* and as the author of the comparative studies in the sociology of religion and of the relations of economy and society (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*).

Since that time the bulk of Weber's immensely ramified work in comparative and analytical sociology and a good deal in economic history has been published in English translation.* Though there are still

* Besides the *Protestant Ethic*, and the *General Economic History*, which was published shortly before it, there is *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York, Oxford University Press, 1946; *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, edited by Talcott Parsons, Oxford Press, 1947, Free Press, 1957; *The Religion of China*, translated and edited by Hans Gerth, Free Press, 1951; *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, translated and edited by E. Shils and Henry A. Finch, Free Press, 1949; *Ancient Judaism*, translated and edited by Hans Gerth and D. Martindale, Free Press, 1952; *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society*, translated by E. Shils and M. Rheinstein, edited by M. Rheinstein,

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considerable gaps, it can now be said that the main body of Weber's work has been made available to the English reader, certainly enough so that without going back to the original German it is now possible, if the reader will but take the trouble, to fit the *Protestant Ethic* into the wider context in Weber's research interests and thinking in which it belongs.

Besides sheer availability of his work in the literature, however, the passage of nearly thirty years and the development which has taken place in the social sciences generally in that period, have served to place this remarkable essay in a perspective quite different from that which tended to predominate under its initial impact.

The tone of early interpretation, it can be said, tended to be set by persons directly interested in the specific historical question of Weber's more immediate concern, the development of the family-firm type of "capitalistic" business enterprise in Western Europe from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. And within this framework the paramount problems seemed to concern the balance between "ideal" and "material" factors in historical change. This trend was partly invited by Weber himself speaking of "one side of the causal chain" and by the intellectual temper of the time; for example it is dominant in Professor Tawney's foreword (written in 1930) which follows.

In this connection relatively little attention was given to the question of what was meant by the system

Harvard University Press, 1954; *The City*, Free Press, 1958. I understand that a translation of *Hinduism and Buddhism* is to appear soon.

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of "rational bourgeois capitalism" which Weber made the focus of his analytical and explanatory attention. For understandable reasons he, like others, emphasized profit-making business enterprise, but he was careful to point out that it was not orientation to profit alone which was the crucial criterion, but such orientation in the context of careful, systematic rational planning and discipline, which connected profit-making with "bureaucratic" organization of the economy and with high technology which eventually, for the most part after he wrote, developed a scientific base.

On the level then, of descriptive emphases in describing the modern institutional and organizational order, Weber introduced a very important set of new emphases which were largely unfamiliar to the economic-historical discussion of the time. They were emphases which greatly facilitated understanding the elements of continuity between nineteenth century family-firm capitalism and the modern era of large-scale organization of industry, scientific technology and "big government." In particular Weber's influence on political scientists through the theory of bureaucracy within the context of his types of authority, has attested to the fact that, as a diagnostician of the modern industrial order he has been one main architect of what is perhaps the most important alternative to the strict or loose Marxist type of emphasis.

Weber's trend of interpretation of the modern industrial society was couched within the framework of a more general theoretical analysis of the structure and functioning of social systems. He was thus not merely one of the most eminent empirical analysts of

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society of his time, but one of the few great original theorists. His work in this respect was fragmentary and incomplete. But with his immense knowledge and careful structural analysis of comparative social institutions Weber was above all able to place the problem of the role of values in the determination of human social action in a theoretical light which made the older versions of the problem definitely obsolete. Thus just as in the case of the industrial order, in the general theoretical field, the important thing about Weber's work was not how he judged the relative importance of ideas or of economic factors, but rather the way in which he analyzed the systems of social action within which ideas and values as well as "economic forces" operate to influence action.

In this wider field Weber's contribution converged remarkably with those from other sources, notably the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, certain trends in American sociology connected with such names as Cooley and G. H. Mead, and on certain psychological borderlines of sociology, the work of Freud. The upshot has been, not only to raise important empirical problems, but to restate the frame of reference in which they can be approached. Empirically the attitudes toward profit-making business which have been associated with the ethic of ascetic Protestantism can now be seen to constitute only one major case within a wider field which includes above all, as Merton has so well shown, attitudes toward the development of science, and more generally the whole type of culture and social organization which emphasizes universalistic principles, in law, in large-scale organization,

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private and public, and perhaps most of all in the organization of the modern university and the modern professions, which form the main point of structural articulation, along with the churches, between the cultural components with which Weber was concerned and the actual structure of the society.

Weber, as one of the main founders of the modern phase of social science, has thus helped to shift the basic problem from the question of whether and how much religious and cultural values influence behavior and society, to that of *how* they influence them and in turn are influenced by the other variables in the situation. The essay on the *Protestant Ethic* is, taken by itself, only one building block in the much larger edifice which Weber himself built, and of course the still more extensive one to which many other contributions have been made in Weber's time and since. Read with discernment, however, it forms an excellent introduction to the immensely more sophisticated and refined analytical approach of the social sciences to problems of historical analysis and interpretation of society, which has developed during the present century.

TALCOTT PARSONS

SEPTEMBER, 1958

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FOREWORD

MAX WEBER, the author of the work translated in the following pages, was a scholar whose intellectual range was unusually wide, and whose personality made an even deeper impression than his learning on those privileged to know him. He had been trained as a jurist, and, in addition to teaching as a professor at Freiburg, Heidelberg, and Munich, he wrote on subjects so various as ancient agrarian history, the conditions of the rural population of Prussia, the methodology of the social sciences, and the sociology of religion. Nor were his activities exclusively those of the teacher and the student. He travelled widely, was keenly interested in contemporary political and social movements, played a vigorous and disinterested part in the crisis which confronted Germany at the close of the War, and accompanied the German delegation to Versailles in May 1919. He died in Munich in the following year, at the age of fifty-six. Partly as a result of prolonged ill-health, which compelled him for several years to lead the life of an invalid, partly because of his premature death, partly, perhaps, because of the very grandeur of the scale on which he worked, he was unable to give the final revision to many of his writings. His collected works have been published posthumously. The last of them, based on notes taken by his students from lectures given at Munich, has appeared in English under the title of *General Economic History*.¹

¹ Max Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight, Ph.D. (George Allen & Unwin). A bibliography of Weber's writings is

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The pioneers of the modern economic order were, he argues, *parvenus*, who elbowed their way to success in the teeth of the established aristocracy of land and commerce. The tonic that braced them for the conflict was a new conception of religion, which taught them to regard the pursuit of wealth as, not merely an advantage, but a duty. This conception welded into a disciplined force the still feeble *bourgeoisie*, heightened its energies, and cast a halo of sanctification round its convenient vices. What is significant, in short, is not the strength of the motive of economic self-interest, which is the commonplace of all ages and demands no explanation. It is the change of moral standards which converted a natural frailty into an ornament of the spirit, and canonized as the economic virtues habits which in earlier ages had been denounced as vices. The force which produced it was the creed associated with the name of Calvin. Capitalism was the social counterpart of Calvinist theology.

The central idea to which Weber appeals in confirmation of his theory is expressed in the characteristic phrase "a calling." For Luther, as for most mediæval theologians, it had normally meant the state of life in which the individual had been set by Heaven, and against which it was impious to rebel. To the Calvinist, Weber argues, the calling is not a condition in which the individual is born, but a strenuous and exacting enterprise to be chosen by himself, and to be pursued with a sense of religious responsibility. Baptized in the bracing, if icy, waters of Calvinist theology, the life of business, once regarded as perilous to the soul—*summe periculosa est emptionis et venditionis negotiatio*—

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acquires a new sanctity. Labour is not merely an economic means: it is a spiritual end. Covetousness, if a danger to the soul, is a less formidable menace than sloth. So far from poverty being meritorious, it is a duty to choose the more profitable occupation. So far from there being an inevitable conflict between money-making and piety, they are natural allies, for the virtues incumbent on the elect—diligence, thrift, sobriety, prudence—are the most reliable passport to commercial prosperity. Thus the pursuit of riches, which once had been feared as the enemy of religion, was now welcomed as its ally. The habits and institutions in which that philosophy found expression survived long after the creed which was their parent had expired, or had withdrawn from Europe to more congenial climes. If capitalism begins as the practical idealism of the aspiring *bourgeoisie*, it ends, Weber suggests in his concluding pages, as an orgy of materialism.

In England the great industry grew by gradual increments over a period of centuries, and, since the English class system had long been based on differences of wealth, not of juristic status, there was no violent contrast between the legal foundations of the old order and the new. Hence in England the conception of capitalism as a distinct and peculiar phase of social development has not readily been accepted. It is still possible for writers, who in their youth have borne with equanimity instruction on the meaning of feudalism, to dismiss capitalism as an abstraction of theorists or a catchword of politicians.

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The economic history of the Continent has moved by different stages from that of England, and the categories employed by Continental thinkers have accordingly been different. In France, where the site on which the modern economic system was to be erected was levelled by a cataclysm, and in Germany, which passed in the fifty years between 1850 and 1900 through a development that in England had occupied two hundred, there has been little temptation to question that capitalist civilization is a phenomenon differing, not merely in degree, but in kind, from the social order preceding it. It is not surprising, therefore, that its causes and characteristics should have been one of the central themes of historical study in both. The discussion began with the epoch-making work of Marx, who was greater as a sociologist than as an economic theorist, and continues unabated. Its most elaborate monument is Sombart's *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*.

The first edition of Sombart's book appeared in 1902. Weber's articles, of which the first was published two years later, were a study of a single aspect of the same problem. A whole literature¹ has arisen on the subject

¹ See, in particular, the following: E. Troeltsch, *Die Sozialen Lehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1912); F. Rachfahl, *Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus* (*Internationale Wochenschrift*, 1909, i. III); B. L. Brentano, *Die Anfänge des Modernen Kapitalismus* (1916) and *Der Wirtschaftende Mensch in der Geschichte* (1911); W. Sombart, *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (1911. Eng. trans. *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, 1913), and *Der Bourgeois* (1913. Eng. trans. *The Quintessence of Modern Capitalism*, 1915); G. v. Schulze-Gaevernitz, "Die Geistesgeschichtlichen Grundlagen der Anglo-Amerikanischen Weltsuprematie. III. Die Wirtschaftsethik des Kapitalismus" (*Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Bd. 61, Heft 2); H. Sée, "Dans quelle mesure Puritains et Juifs ont-ils contribué au Progrès du Capitalisme Moderne?" (*Revue Historique*, t. CLV, 1927)