

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

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 Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism was published in the form of two articles in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* in 1904 and 1905. Together with a subsequent article, which appeared in 1906, on *The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism*, they form the first of the studies contained in Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. On their first appearance they aroused an interest which extended beyond the ranks of historical specialists, and which caused the numbers of the *Archiv* in which they were published to be sold out with a rapidity not very usual in the case of learned publications. The discussion which they provoked has continued since then with undiminished vigour. For the questions raised by Weber possess a universal significance, and the method of his essay was as important as its conclusions. It not only threw a brilliant light on the particular field which it explored, but suggested a new avenue of approach to a range of problems of permanent interest, which concern, not merely the historian and the economist, but all who reflect on the deeper issues of modern society.

The question which Weber attempts to answer is simple and fundamental. It is that of the psychological conditions which made possible the development of capitalist civilization. Capitalism, in the sense of great individual undertakings, involving the control of large financial resources, and yielding riches to their masters

printed at the end of the charming and instructive account of him by his widow, *Max Weber, Ein Lebensbild*, von Marianna Weber (J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1926). See also *Economistes et Historiens: Max Weber, un homme, une œuvre*, par Maurice Halbwachs, in *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale*, No. 1, January, 1929.

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as a result of speculation, money-lending, commercial enterprise, buccaneering and war, is as old as history. Capitalism, as an economic system, resting on the organisation of legally free wage-earners, for the purpose of pecuniary profit, by the owner of capital or his agents, and setting its stamp on every aspect of society, is a modern phenomenon.

All revolutions are declared to be natural and inevitable, once they are successful, and capitalism, as the type of economic system prevailing in Western Europe and America, is clothed to-day with the unquestioned respectability of the triumphant fact. But in its youth it was a pretender, and it was only after centuries of struggle that its title was established. For it involved a code of economic conduct and a system of human relations which were sharply at variance with venerable conventions, with the accepted scheme of social ethics, and with the law, both of the church and of most European states. So questionable an innovation demanded of the pioneers who first experimented with it as much originality, self-confidence, and tenacity of purpose as is required to-day of those who would break from the net that it has woven. What influence nerved them to defy tradition? From what source did they derive the principles to replace it?

The conventional answer to these questions is to deny their premises. The rise of new forms of economic enterprise was the result, it is argued, of changes in the character of the economic environment. It was due to the influx of the precious metals from America in the sixteenth century, to the capital accumulated in

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extra-European commerce, to the reaction of expanding markets on industrial organisation, to the growth of population, to technological improvements made possible by the progress of natural science. Weber's reply, which is developed at greater length in his *General Economic History* than in the present essay, is that such explanations confuse causes and occasions. Granted that the economic conditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were, in some respects, though by no means in all, unusually favourable to an advance in economic technique, such conditions had existed from time to time in the past without giving birth to the development of capitalist industry. In many of the regions affected by them no such development took place, nor were those which enjoyed the highest economic civilization necessarily those in which the new order found its most congenial environment. The France of Louis XIV commanded resources which, judged by the standards of the age, were immense, but they were largely dissipated in luxury and war. The America of the eighteenth century was economically primitive, but it is in the maxims of Franklin that the spirit of *bourgeois* capitalism, which, rather than the grandiose schemes of mercantilist statesmen, was to dominate the future, finds, Weber argues, its naïvest and most lucid expression.

To appeal, as an explanation, to the acquisitive instincts, is even less pertinent, for there is little reason to suppose that they have been more powerful during the last few centuries than in earlier ages. "The notion that our rationalistic and capitalistic age is characterised by a stronger economic interest than other periods is

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childish. The moving spirits of modern capitalism are not possessed of a stronger economic impulse than, for example, an Oriental trader. The unchaining of the economic interest, merely as such, has produced only irrational results: such men as Cortes and Pizarro, who were, perhaps, its strongest embodiment, were far from having an idea of a rationalistic economic life."¹ The word "rationalism" is used by Weber as a term of art, to describe an economic system based, not on custom or tradition, but on the deliberate and systematic adjustment of economic means to the attainment of the objective of pecuniary profit. The question is why this temper triumphed over the conventional attitude which had regarded the *appetitus divitiarum infinitus*—the unlimited lust for gain—as anti-social and immoral. His answer is that it was the result of movements which had their source in the religious revolution of the sixteenth century.

Weber wrote as a scholar, not as a propagandist, and there is no trace in his work of the historical animosities which still warp discussions of the effects of the Reformation. Professor Pirenne,² in an illuminating essay, has argued that social progress springs from below, and that each new phase of economic development is the creation, not of strata long in possession of wealth and power, but of classes which rise from humble origins to build a new structure on obscure foundations. The thesis of Weber is somewhat similar.

¹ Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight, pp. 355-6.

² Henri Pirenne, *Les Périodes de l'Histoire Sociale du Capitalisme* (Hayez, Brussels, 1914).