# The Protestant Hypothesis and the Spirit of Weber

Gene Callahan  
New York University

## Introduction

In his most renowned book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (henceforth *PE*), Max Weber famously explained the rise of “modern capitalism” as partially due to the “Protestant ethic,” which, he claimed, was a new attitude towards work and towards capital accumulation. (It is the former aspect, of course, that justifies examing the book in a volume devoted to thoughts about work.) But while this thesis is (in)famous, it has often been dismissed, sometimes as a nice attempt that on examination failed, and at other times as simply preposterous.

In this paper, I will attempt to offer a summary of some highlights of the debate on Weber’s thesis, with the goal of indicating whether that it is still viable. In the course of doing so, it will become apparent that in many prominent cases, as Stephen Kallberg argues in the introduction to his translation of *PE*, “Weber’s critics never mastered his complex argument” (2011: 50).

Of necessity, this paper can only examine a small sample of those misinterpreting Weber. As Kallberg notes, quoting Chalcraft, “Every year sees new contributions in various fields [of *PE* scholarship] and it would undoubtedly take a lifetime to become fully conversant with all the literature germane to PE” (2011: 57). Nevertheless, this sample will provide evidence that the problem is as pervasive as Kallberg contends. We will also see that this problem was clearly highlighted in a decades-old summary of the *PE* debate (Marshall, 1982), and yet the lacunae clearly described at that time persist to this day.

But before we turn our attention to Weber’s thesis on the rise of modern capitalism, it will be helpful to briefly examine the theoretical presuppositions of the work.

## The Theoretical Background

It may be of interest to some readers that Weber’s work can be understood as a salvo in the *methodenstreit* occupying much attention in German-language social theory during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, in that it stresses careful examination of historical circumstances in explaining economic phenomena.

Furthermore, in *PE*, Weber is engaged in “ideal-type history”: he attempts to isolate certain conceptual complexes, e.g., “the *ideal type* of the capitalist employer…” (93), and use them to explain particular historical passages. These complexes are *ideal* in that they are distilled essences of characteristics found to a mixed degree in real people or institutions: no actual person is thought to have perfectly embodied the ideal type “capitalist employer.” Other ideal types employed in *PE* include:

* The traditional businessman
* The traditional worker
* The capitalist worker
* The Puritan saint
* The modern rationalist

Lastly, I will note that history by invocation of ideal types has been criticized as “an unstable level of historical understanding” (Oakeshott, 1999: 65): see Callahan (2007) for more on this point. It may be worth examining, in another paper, to what extent this instability has contributed to the confusion over Weber’s hypothesis.

## Weber’s Thesis

Weber begins his work with an observation that raises a question: in Germany at that time (1905), Protestants held more high positions in industry than Catholics, even in places where Catholics are in the majority. Here, he is acting as a proper “social detective”: given a curious situation, let us search for an explanation. Furthermore, Weber suspects that solving this mystery might help us understand the origins of modern capitalism.

He begins by evaluating and ultimately rejecting several popular explanations of this discrepancy. Along the way, Weber rejects, at least in this instance, the Marxist concept that the ideas of an era are those called for by its “material base”: much more materially developed Florence and Venice were “behind” the backwoods of Pennsylvania in regard to the development of capitalist attitudes. (36)

In the interest of brevity, I now offer a highly compressed outline of Weber’s thesis:

1. Traditional societies were extremely suspicious of money lenders, speculators, middlemen, and so on. The unchecked pursuit of wealth was definitely a vice. In Cathlocism, in fact, the (theoretically) most admired life was that of a monk with no possessions who might spend his life praying.
2. Luther rejected monasticism as self-indulgent, and stressed the idea of a worldly vocation, elevating the status of “secular” work.
3. But Luther was still very conservative here: one’s calling was one’s inherited station in life. In economics, he was still a Scholastic.
4. Calvin accepted contemporary economic developments, rejected this-worldly pleasures, and stressed predestination.
5. The emphasis on predestination led to a search for evidence as to who was saved, and worldly success came to be seen as good evidence in this regard.
6. Combined with the rejection of worldly pleasures, the result was an ethic that justified the acquisition of wealth, but condemned the enjoyment of the wealth so acquired.
7. The end result an ethic very favorable to the building up of capital.

## The Blinkered Critics

So what is wrong with Weber’s thesis, for those who rejected it completely or in part? As mentioned in the introduction, no attempt will be made here to do an exhaustive survey; hopefully, however, it will be an interesting one.

### Acemoglu and Robinson

Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, in their acclaimed book *Why Nations Fail* (2012), reject Weber’s theory for the following reason:

“What about Max Weber’s Protestant ethic? Though it may be true that predominantly Protestant countries, such as the Netherlands and England, were the first economic successes of the modern era, there is little relationship between religion and economic success. France, a predominantly Catholic country, quickly mimicked the economic performance of the Dutch and English in the nineteenth century, and Italy is as prosperous as any of these nations today. Looking farther east, you’ll see that none of the economic successes of East Asia have anything to do with any form of Christian religion, so there is not much support for a special relationship between Protestantism and economic success there, either.” (60)

But in *PE*, Weber very explicitly states that, once the “spirit of capitalism” was *birthed* in Protestant countries (for the reasons he explains), its material success would naturally result in its spreading to non-Protestant areas: “Victorious capitalism, in any case, ever since it came to rest on a mechanical foundation, no longer needs [Protestant] asceticism as a supporting pillar” (2011: 177).

So Weber had already offered an explanation for the facts that Acemoglu and Robinson suppose refute him.

### Braudel

Fernand Braudel’s (1977) criticisms of Weber are both brief and insubstantial. He first states that “For Max Weber, capitalism in the modern sense of the word was no more and no less than the creation of Protestantism, or, to be even more accurate, of Puritanism” (65-66).

But what does Weber actually say on this point? Is modern capitalism the creation of a single factor? No, for Weber, it is “a development that grew out of innumerable, fragmented historical forces” (2011: 108). In fact, Weber goes so far as to state the idea that “capitalism as an *economic system* was a creation of the Reformation” is a “foolish and doctrinaire” thesis (2011: 108). So Weber explicitly ridicules the very idea that Braudel claims to be his central thesis!

Braudel continues:

“All historians have opposed this tenuous theory, although they have not managed to be rid of it once and for all. Yet it is clearly false. The northern countries took over the place that earlier and so long and so brilliantly been occupied by the old capitalist centers of the Mediterranean. They invented nothing, either in technology or in business management.” (66)

But… Weber explicitly acknowledges the existence of large, capital-intensive enteprises before the Protestant Reformation. And he made no claims about the northern countries inventiveness. So although Braudel’s assertion that the northern countries “invented nothing” seems absurd on its face, it is will be neither necessary nor helpful to explore it here, since it has nothing to do with Weber’s thesis.

Braudel concludes his discussion of Weber by writing, “I believe Max Weber’s error stems essentially from his exaggeration of capitalism’s role as promoter of the modern world” (67). It is hard to know what to make of this, for, after all, Weber did not write a book called *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of the Modern World*: he was exploring the origin of capitalism, so naturally, his focus was on… capitalism. And this last claim does not even dovetail well with Braudel’s earlier one, which is that Weber simply got capitalism’s origin story *wrong*: here it seems he just placed too much emphasis on it!

### Campbell

Colin Campbell’s under-appreciated *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* is, in general, complementary to Weber’s book, in that Campbell largely accepts that Weber offers a good explanation for the origins of the production side of ther modern economy; he sets out to do the same for the change that occurred in consumption.

Nevertheless, Campbell offers a minor criticism of Weber that is still worth addressing. Noting that Weber’s survey of Protestant thought essentially stops at around 1700, Campbell claims:

“This means that Weber’s position must be taken to be one in which Protestantism as he outlined it constituted its fully develop form, and that all that subsequently happened was a process of slow decline and decay in the face of the forces of secularization and rationalization…” (165).

However, no, such thing “must be taken”: all of that this shows is the Weber did not consider developments in Protestantism after that time to be particularly relevant to his thesis. There simply is no implication that subsequent developments were not important theologically or socially: Weber simply doesn’t find them relevant for explaining the *spirit of capitalism*.

### Becker: Weber as Protestant Partisan

George Becker, in his paper “The Continuing Path of Distortion” (2009), implies that Weber had a partisan interest in reaching the conclusions he did in *PE*:

“Weber’s idealist interpretation of Offenbacher’s school enrollment statistics provides a foremost example of a scholarly claim with decided political overtones that are closely in line with Weber’s and the liberal Protestants’ cultural agenda… Weber’s idealist interpretation of Offenbacher’s data is also a statement of cultural criticism with partisan overtones and decidedly political implications” (199-200).

I am not a mind reader, and certainly cannot read the mind of the long-gone Max Weber. But if what he was up to was really a pitch for Protestantism, he did not make a very good job of it, to wit:

“Entirely realistically, the Catholic Church concluded that the human species was *not* an absolutely and clearly determined unity to be valued as such” (2011: 128).

Or:

“There was no mention [in Calvinism] of that genuinely humane cycle, followed by the Catholic, of sin, repentance, pentinence, relief, and then further sin” (2011: 129).

Or, contrasting the Calvinist attitude towards sinners with the Catholic one:

“Hence, in light of his sinfulness, an attitude of compassionate helpfulness towards one’s neighbor – coming from an awareness of one’s own weakness – could not be the appropriate response of the elect who, because chosen by the grace of God, were saints. More suitable instead was a hatred and contempt for the sinner as an enemy of God…” (2011: 132-133).

If the above statements were intended by Weber as “partisan” endorsements of Protestantism as superior to Catholicism, I would recommend against hiring him as a marketing consultant.

### Weber’s Mirror-Image: Marxists and the Protestant Ethic

Interestingly, Marxists represent a significant body of commentators who agree with Weber on a close relationship between Calvinism and capitalism. But for them, the causality runs (almost?) entirely *from* capitalism *to* Calvinism, in keeping with the Marxist principle that religions, philosophies, and political positions are mere “superstructure,” produced by material, economic “forces.”[[1]](#footnote-1) H.M. Robertson writes, on this point, “I wish to show that the spirit of capitalism has arisen rather from the material conditions of civilization than from some religious impulse” (1959:10).

Talcott Parsons wrote a paper responding to Robertson, noting:

“Though Dr. Robertson does not explicitly deny that Weber introduced qualifications into his thesis, he continually writes in a vein which allows the reader to think that Weber was putting forward a ‘monistic’ view of capitalistic development such that the demonstration of the importance of any factors other than the Protestant ethic was quite sufficient to refute Weber’s position. Obviously such is not the case. Even the demonstration of the importance of the influence of capitalistic interests on the Protestant ethic itself is not in the least conclusive unless it goes so far as a proof that this influence completely accounts for it. Though he sometimes seems to claim this, I am sure a disinterested reader will agree with me that Dr. Robertson has furnished no such proof” (1935: 689)

As Raymond Aron put it:

“it was not Weber’s intention to reverse the doctrine of historical materialism in order to substitute a causality of religious forces for the causality of economic forces” (2019: 201).

In short, Weber never undertook to state just how important he found the “Protestant factor” to be in the rise of modern capitalism, and explicitly stated that should be the topic of a separate study.

### Tawney

In some ways, R.H. Tawney’s 1926 work, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, is the most interesting of all the critics we have examined. Tawney was writing a couple of decades after the original publication of *PE*, and much of his material on Luther and Calvin strongly supports Weber’s conclusions. A few quotes here should suffice to demonstrate this:

**On Luther and the idea of a calling:**

“The honest smith or shoemaker is a priest” (92).

**On the importance of Calvin:**

“No contrast could be more striking than that between [Luther’s] social theory and the outlook of Calvin. Calvin… accepted the main institutions of a commercial civilization, and supplied a creed to the classes which were to dominate the future.” (94)

“Calvin, and still more his later interpreters… [unlike Luther did not] regard with suspicion the mere fact of capitalist enterprise in commerce and finance” (104).

**On this-wordly asceticism:**

“Monasticism was, so to speak, secularized” (98).

[Calvinism’s] enemy is not the accumulation of riches, but their misuse for purposes of self-indulgence or ostentation" (105).

**On good works in Calvinism:**

“The aim is not personal salvation, but the glorification of God, to be sought… by action – the sanctification of the world by strife and labour… Good works are not a way of attaining salvation, but they are indispensable as a proof that salvation has been attained.” (109)

**Calvinist values and economic success:**

“The very qualities which economic success demanded – thrift, diligence, sobriety, frugality – were themselves, after all, the foundation… of the Christian virtues…” (110).

“[The Swiss reformers] seized on the aptitudes cultivated by the life of business and affairs, stamped on them a new sanctification, and used them as the warp of a society…” (110).

“the Christian must conduct his business with a high seriousness, as in itself a kind of religion” (111).

"Such teaching… was admirably designed to liberate economic energies, and weld into a disciplined social force the rising bourgeoisie…

**The Puritans**

“[The Puritan movement] had at once given a whole-hearted *imprimatur* to the life of business enterprise, which most earlier moralists had regarded with suspicion, and had laid upon it the restraining hand of an inquisitorial discipline” (234).

“The enemy, however, was not riches, but the bad habits sometimes associated with them…” (240).

(**Weber:** “What is actually morally reprehensible [to the Puritan] is… the *resting* upon one’s possessions and the *enjoyment* of wealth” [159].)

“The labour which he idealizes… is itself a kind of ascetic discipline, more rigorous than that demanded of any order of medicants…” (242).

“What is required of the Puritan is not individual meritorious acts, but… a system in which every element is grouped around a central idea, the service of god, from which all disturbing irrelevancies have been pruned…” (242).

“The transition from the anabaptist to the company promoter was less abrupt than might at first sight be supposed. It had been prepared, however, unintentionally, by Puritan moralists.” (248)

(FOOTNOTE: We might note, at this point, the Tawney’s work gives lie to Braudel’s claim that “All historians have opposed this tenuous theory…”)

And finally, I offer a quote which would serve as an excellent one paragraph summary of *PE*:

“Among the numerous forces which had gone to form [the new economic ideal], some not inconsiderable part may reasonably be ascribed to the emphasis on the life of business enterprise as the appropriate field for Christian endeavour, and on the qualities needed for success in it, which was characteristic of Puritanism. These qualities, and the admiration of them, remained, when the religious reference, and the restraints which it imposed, had weakened or disappeared.” (273)

Indeed, any one of the above quotes could be slipped into a new edition of *PE*, and only the most assiduous reader would notice the addition. So what comes as a real surprise is that, when Tawney actually addresses Weber, he voices these complaints:

**Tawney:** “Weber seems to me to explain by reference to moral and intellectual influences developments which have their principal explanation in another region altogether. There was plenty of ‘capitalist spirit’ in fifteenth-century Venice and Florence…” (319).

“But it seems a little artificial to talk as though capitalist enterprise could not appear till religious changes had produced a capitalist spirit” (320).

**Weber:** “How is it to be explained historically that in Florence, the center of capitalist development in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the marketplace for money and capital for all the great political powers, striving for profit was viewed as either morally questionable or at best tolerated?” (96)

Here we see Weber noting that “capitalist enterprise” most certainly *did* appear before “religious changes had produced a capitalist spirit,” but that what changed was the *esteem* in which such enterprises were held.

**Tawney:** “[Weber] speaks as though all English Puritans in the seventeenth century held much the same view of social duties and expediency” (320)

**Weber:** “Certainly, in the midst of these considerations, we should not forget that Puritanism contained within itself a world of contradictions” (PE, 168).

**Tawney:** “Weber ignores, or at least touches upon too lightly, intellectual movements, which were favorable to the growth of business enterprise and an individualist attitude towards economic relations, but which had little to do with religion” (320).

**Weber:** “In turn, it must be recognize that these vantage points… by no means constitute the only ones possible in reference to which the historical cases under consideration can be analyzed. Other vantage points would identify other features of our historical cases as ‘essential’…” (76-77).

And Weber states that after his study (*PE*), “an attempt can be made to estimate to what degree the historical origin of the values and ideas of our modern life can be attributed to religious forces stemming from the Reformation, and to what degree other forces” (109).

In other words, in *PE* Weber is only attempting to show that there is *some* connection between the Reformation and “our modern life,” and is specifically delegating to future studies how important that connection was compared to other factors.

### Various and Sundry

Here I will take up a number of authors who only provide limited examples of misinterpreting Weber, and thus do not require a section of their own.

Let us begin with Winthrop S. Hudson, who first asserts, “Weber set forth the thesis that Calvinism was the parent of modern capitalism” (1959: 56). But, as we have seen, this was quite defintely *not* what Weber “set forth”: he thought that Puritanism was a *factor* in the birth of modern capitalism. He further contends that when the modern capitalist spirit was fully embraced, “Puritanism ceased to be Puritanism” (1959: 61). But, of course, Weber knew this, and described it. Hudson actually gives the whole game away when he writes “Emphasizing as they did the economic virtues of diligence and thrift as religious duties, it was inevitable that the Puritans should prosper and advance in economic status” (1959: 61). Yes, and that is Weber’s main contention, along with the idea that, having so advanced, gradually Mammon would win them over, and Puritanism would cease “to be Puritanism.” Hudson has affirmed Weber’s thesis in attempting to refute it.

Meanwhile, Henri Sée contends that “For Max Weber… economic and social life are determined to a decisive degree by psychological elements in historical development” (1959: 63). But I cannot find anything in *PE* that supports this contention at all. He then complains that “one should not ignore… political and social circumstances… Max Weber, it may be noted, refers rarely enough to general history” (1959:64). But, as we have seen, Weber does not *ignore* thse factors any more than someone researching the effect of lead pipes on Roman decline *ignores* barbarian invasions: no, they are just focusing on something else.

## Some Problems with Weber’s Thesis

It’s not the purpose of this paper to pretend that Weber’s thesis is without blemishes. To that end, I will note a few here, although again, the list is far from comprehensive.

### The Idea of a “Calling,” or *Beruf*

Weber makes a great deal of Luther’s introduction of the idea of a calling (in German, *Beruf*). For him, who adds religious sanction for devoting oneself to secular work. He sees this as a step towards the infamous “Protestant work ethic” (although it took Calvin and then the Puritans to complete the move, since for Luther the calling meant acceptance of one’s given station in life).

Robertson (1959: 68-75) vigorously rejects Weber on this point, claiming that the latter is wrong to see Luther’s usage as an innovation, claiming it goes back at least to St. Paul. However, in the same volume of essays, Kemper Fullerton (1959: 10) argues that “Luther’s conception of secular life as a”calling" involved a complete break with [previous Christian] theory." Adjudicating this disagreement would require a deep plunge into Hebrew, biblical Greek, ecclesiastical Latin, and German, something clearly beyond the scope of this paper. But given that Robertson was an economist, while Fullerton was a specialist in the languages of the Old Testament, my Bayesian prior is going to be that Fullerton would emerge victorious after one surfaced from such a dive.

### The Validity of the Education Study

Both Hamilton (1996) and Becker (2009) point out that there are outright errors as well as possible data collection problems in the school enrollment study of Offenbacher (1900), which Weber cites as supposedly showing that in Baden, Protestants were much more concentrated in training for commercial careers than were Catholics, who focused more on the humanities.

That being said, Weber’s thesis does not actually depend on any contemporary differences between Catholics and Protestants in terms of economic performance or educational choice. Since Weber has stated that the capitalist spirit no longer relies on the Protestant ethic, all this study is supposed to show is that the Protestant ethic still had some lingering effect at that time. If it turns out to be completely mistaken, Weber could easily (and honestly) respond, “Well, that effect dissipated sooner than I had thought.”

### Is the ‘Spirit of Capitalism’ a Cause or a Feature of Capitalism?

The problem here is that Weber seems to both treat the “spirit of capitalism” as one of the causes giving rise to modern capitalism, while at the same time, defining “modern capitalism” as capitalism that exhibits such a spirit. To the extent that he is actually doing this, he is guilty of a vicious circularity, because, of course, if “modern capitalism” is *defined* as an economic system exhibiting such a spirit, then it cannot possibly come about in the absence of that spirit.

As Gordon Marshall puts it, “Weber fails to specify whether the ‘spirit of capitalism’… [is an attribute] of the phenomenon of modern capitalism or [an] empirical [condition] which favoured… its development” (1982: 57).

Exploring this issue could easily contribute several more papers to the lifetime’s worth of literature on *PE*.

## Conclusion

Weber’s thesis, while certainly not “proven” (as if social theory were like mathematics!), is still a plausible story today. Those who contend that it has been debunked generally have in mind some caricature of what Weber wrote. As Baechler put it:

“[Weber] shows that Protestantism is *one* of the currents that has contributed to the expansion of capitalism, and that it has influenced *certain* aspects of Western capitalism. In a word, without Protestantism, there still would have been capitalism, but it would have been different. If this interpretation of Weber’s argument is accepted, most of the controversy, which his essay has for decades sustained, is found to be beside the point.” (1975: 28)

Or, per Marshall:

“the masterly argument of the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism has but sporadically been matched in quality during the course of the debate occasion by this text. Despite certain quite significant weaknesses in Weber’s essays, he presents a thesis that is sociologically sophisticated, historically specific, and – within the practical limitations imposed by the extant data – open to empirical discussion.” (1982: 168)

There are many valid criticisms of Weber’s work. However, as we have seen, many critics have “had a go at him” without, apparently, carefully reading his work. Why have so many people been anxious to dismiss at work of which they knew little?

Once again, we must agree with Marshall, who wrote: “we might see the whole ‘Protestant ethic controversy’ to have been dogged from the outset by the grinding of particular religious, political, or theoretical axes…” (1982: 169).

In particular cases:

* Many Marxists did not like Weber’s thesis because religion is supposed to be a mere superstructure that is the byproduct of economic conditions, and not their (even partial) cause.
* Progressive Protestants did not like his thesis, because it seemed to “blame” them for capitalism.
* Liberal Catholics did not like his thesis, because it seemed to imply the Catholicism was somehow “backwards.”
* Secular liberals did not like his thesis, because liberalism was supposed to be the outcome of enlightenment rationalism, not “religious superstitions.”

Marshall adds another problem with the dicussion, namely, “A widespread tendency to over simplify Weber’s argument through increasing reliance, an inaccurate secondary expositions of it” (1982: 169). For example, although Acemoglu and Robinson cite *PE*, it is hard to believe either of them ever thoroughly read the work: It is much easier for me to believe the two such intelligent people became a little careless in the research, then it is to believe that they understood so little of what they were reading.

In any case, although there are problems and puzzles, and Weber’s work, this survey of his critics demonstrates that the “Protestant hypothesis” is still alive and kicking.

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1. Engels himself was much more sophisticated on this point than many subsequent Marxists, writing: “Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that younger writers sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasize this main principle in opposition to our adversaries… And we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to allow the other elements involved in the interaction to come into their rights.” (1942: 477 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)