

**MAX WEBER'S *THE PROTESTANT ETHIC*
A COMMENTARY ON THE THESIS AND ON ITS
RECEPTION IN THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY**

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This paper is part of a chapter from a forthcoming book. The chapter assesses the major claims of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.¹ It continues with a review of the treatment of "the Weber thesis" in subsequent scholarly literature. Only a brief summary of that assessment is possible here. The conclusions, as presented here, are essentially a "backdrop" to the review of that subsequent literature. The review will consider the treatment of "the Weber thesis" in four fields--religious studies, general history, particularly that of Europe from the 16th to 18th centuries, economic history, and sociology.

Weber's Thesis

Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic* may be treated as involving twelve steps, each of which requires independent analysis, investigation, and assessment. An assessment of claims may yield four possible outcomes: support or confirmation (evidence that sustains the original hypothesis); rejection or disconfirmation (evidence that goes against the original hypothesis); non-support (evidence on the point is unavailable, or so fragmentary as to allow neither confirmation nor rejection); mixed results (contingent findings; or, another possibility, the association is confirmed but the causal argument questioned).

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons, translator, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930. The work first appeared in 1905. Weber's revision, published in 1920, was the basis for Parsons' translation. All references here are to that translation; page numbers appear in parentheses in the text.

The chapter will appear in my *The Social Misconstruction of Reality: Validity and Verification in the Scholarly Community*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

The twelve claims and assessments follow:

1. Martin Luther expounded a new and distinctive religious doctrine: the concept of "the calling," secular occupations were invested with God-given purpose.

Supported but with an important qualification. Luther did give a special meaning to this term, one that was important in his theology. Weber, however, provided a miscue on this point. He focused on economic roles and gave a very individualistic reading to the prescribed activity. But the term had much more general application and the activity was guided by a corporatist rationale. This was not an irrational effort as Weber argued. It was work for the collective good. Whether Luther's use of the term was unique, one appearing in no other major language or tradition, is best viewed as an open question, one in need of confirmation.

2. Transmission of the new doctrine to followers: The calling.

Supported, but with an important qualification: Luther's concept, not Weber's reading of the term, was built into Lutheran pastoral literature and widely communicated.

3. Calvin and his followers expound the doctrine of predestination.

Supported, but with an important qualification: The doctrine was central to "Calvinism" in all of its manifestations. As opposed to Weber's declaration, it was a doctrine of "magnificent consistency," an opposite conclusion, magnificent complexity, seems more appropriate. At all points the theological specialists had to grapple with an insoluble contradiction. The reconciliation of the eternal decree on the one hand, and free will, repentance, and God's grace on the other, brought diverse, and ever-changing solutions.

4. Transmission of the doctrine to followers: Predestination.

Supported, but with important qualifications: This was an important Calvinist doctrine, but there is some question as to its temporal and spatial extension. Weber portrays it as important in seventeenth-century England and suggests some continuity even into the eighteenth century. But the claims of extension are open to question. The use of Richard Baxter as the exemplary representative was inappropriate. Weber's use of the Westminster Confession was seriously misleading. The predestination doctrine was being replaced by covenant theology even before the Civil War. The "collapse," it seems, proceeded rapidly after the fall of the Commonwealth. Calvinism, at its strongest, had a limited presence in western Europe. Weber later, for good reasons, discounted its importance in the Netherlands. He presented no clear evidence as to its incidence in England or in the American colonies.

5. Among Calvinists, the predestination doctrine produced extreme salvation anxieties which were experienced in profound "inner isolation."

Not adequately supported by Weber; rejected in subsequent research. Kaspar von Greyerz's review of the limited evidence available for seventeenth century England showed predestination playing a "relatively minor role." Claims about the psychological outlooks of "the masses" in previous centuries, on the whole, are close to untestable. To assess Weber's claim, for example, one needs information on the "anxiety levels" of Puritans and those of some appropriate control groups. Confirmation or disconfirmation of such claims, therefore, is extremely difficult, a problem clearly indicated in Greyerz's sample of diaries and autobiographies.²

² Kaspar von Greyerz, "Biographical Evidence on Predestination, Covenant, and Special Providence," Ch. 12

6. Calvinists were told that "intense worldly activity" may be taken as a sign of salvation.

Not supported by Weber; he presented no documentary evidence on this point. A recent review of relevant Dutch materials found no support for the claim thus providing grounds for rejection. Unlike the question of salvation anxieties, it should be noted, this is a testable claim: if valid, one should be able to cite the documentary evidence.

7. To gain that assurance, Calvinists engaged in remarkably disciplined economic activity.

Not supported: For this, one would have to establish, for example, that Puritans worked significantly harder than equivalent Anglicans. Such "outcome" differences are central to the validation of the entire Weber thesis. No evidence is presented to support this claim.

8. Calvinists accumulated considerable amounts of capital which, following religious strictures, were reinvested.

Not supported: The argument assumes capital accumulation and reinvestment (as opposed to other uses, such as hoarding, tithing, philanthropy). No evidence is presented on these questions. This conclusion depends on deduction; it is an

inference following from the strictures against self-indulgence. No serious evidence is presented to support the point.

9. The ethic and the later spirit cause substantial economic growth in Protestant nations, specifically in those influenced by Calvinism and its derivatives.

Not supported. The most frequently presented correlations are, to say the least, somewhat crude. That the Netherlands and England showed outstanding economic performance does not establish "Protestantism" as the cause. A more detailed examination shows an unexpected relationship in the Netherlands (Catholicism in the higher ranks of Amsterdam; Calvinism in the lower classes or off on the Friesian fringes). The linkage of Puritanism (or Dissent) and economic takeoff in England is not demonstrated.

10. Sometime later, the original attitudes were transformed; the religious ethic disappeared and was replaced by the secular capitalist spirit.

Not supported. The support for this claim is extremely weak: one must assume that a few fragments taken from Benjamin Franklin's extensive writings do in fact represent "the spirit of capitalism" as defined by Weber. One must assume, furthermore, that the "spirit" is derived from Calvinist antecedents.

11. The argument of extension or of diffusion: the "spirit of capitalism" spreads out from the early centers and, later, has sweeping, general effects.

On the generalization of the spirit, on the Iron Cage, this too is unsupported. No evidence is presented to demonstrate the universal presence of the compelling work ethic. No evidence is presented to demonstrate the diffusion of that ethic in prior decades or centuries to those previously untouched by ascetic Protestantism.

12. Late in the 19th century, one finds substantial differences in the economic and occupational standing of Protestants and Catholics, this resulting from "the permanent intrinsic character of their religious beliefs" (40).

The claim of significant Protestant-Catholic differences of achievement in the late nineteenth century was not adequately supported. The support "found" in the Baden school attendance figures involved a copying error and a causal argument that proved to be spurious.³

³ Kurt Samuelsson, *Religion and Economic Action: A Critique of Max Weber*, E. Geoffrey French, translator, New York: Basic Books, 1961, p. 140.

Weber's argument, in short, appears to be badly flawed. The two claims about doctrinal innovation are supported but with important qualifications. The same, supported but with qualifications, holds with respect to the two claims about their transmission. The remaining eight propositions are not adequately supported, at least not in Weber's text. These conclusions accord with Gordon Marshall's summary judgment based on his earlier review. Weber's case, he wrote, "is empirically so thin that the only reasonable verdict for the moment would be one of 'not proven'."⁴ Not proven is not the same as wrong. Most of the main points of Weber's argument are, in principle, empirically testable. But for some, notably for the claims about psychological reactions, the possibilities for testing have long since disappeared.⁵ The best available evidence for a test of the thesis would involve

⁴ Gordon Marshall, *In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism: An Essay on Max Weber's Protestant Ethic Thesis*, London: Hutchinson, 1982, p. 13. Jacob Viner, author of another outstanding critique, concludes as follows: "I cannot find any reference in Weber to Calvinist correspondence and autobiographies, and neither my examination of a small sample of the available literature nor the writings of Weber's followers offer any persuasive indication that this literature would give significant support to Weber's thesis. Weber, like his followers, generalized freely about the actual economic behavior of Calvinists or 'Puritans' in the seventeenth century; but he seems to rely on common knowledge and gives no detailed historical evidence." From "Protestantism and the Rise of Capitalism," Ch. 3 of his *Religious Thought and Economic Society*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1978, p. 156.

⁵ Viner notes also that even the grammatical form of Weber's argument signals a problem: "In common with some of his most important followers Weber relies heavily on the results which particular beliefs 'might have had' on practice. This device entails the use of what has been called 'the conjectural preterite'; i.e., what a writer might 'logically' have gone on to say if he had extended his remarks or, as applied to behavior, what a person might have done if he had acted out the 'logical' conclusion of his beliefs. It is a species of argument from ignorance which is extremely difficult to answer except by drawing attention to its inherent subjectivity or by asking why the historian

ecological correlation, a demonstration of significant economic growth in areas having a specific "Calvinist" presence as compared with some appropriate control cases. Without such systematic tests, the case remains an unsupported hypothesis.

The Protestant Ethic thesis appears to be a social misconception, that is, a widespread agreement about facts or interpretation which is mistaken. In a footnote, Weber refers to his argument as a "sketch," a term which seems entirely appropriate. But in the text, in many confident statements, Weber moves far beyond that indication of the tentative or of the hypothetical and treats the thesis as a well-documented conclusion. This misconception, the transformation of the hypothetical into a well-confirmed conclusion, is found also in the work of subsequent scholarly (and not-so-scholarly) writers, the tendency being most pronounced among sociologists. Weber and his supporters have invested the *hypothesis* with validity and have accorded world-historical significance to "the Protestant ethic."

More than scholarly analysis is operating in such misconstruction. Scholarly analysis would mean criticism, analysis, and further research on the hypothesis. It would entail some cumulation, a drawing of lessons out of the long history of controversy. A scholarly analysis would recognize, cite, and deal with important criticisms. The complexities of the Dutch case, for example, should be indicated, especially the problematic relationship there of "religious affiliation and social stratification." The complexities of the English case ought to be noted and its outright rejection in Rubinstein's research should be reported.⁶ But this, by and large, has not been the case. The criticisms, as will be seen immediately, have been neglected.

The Reception of the Weber Thesis

Gordon Marshall's work opens with a play on a famous Crane Brinton sentence: "Who now reads *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*?" Marshall's answer: "Almost everyone it seems." The continuing controversy, he reports, is "one of the longest running and most vociferous in the social sciences...Most students of sociological theory, the sociologies of religion, industry, and development, of theology, and of the economic and social history of industrialization in the West are required, at some juncture, to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of Weber's case."⁷

⁶ W.D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain since the Industrial Revolution*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp. 145-163.

⁷ Marshall, *Search*, p. 9. Rubinstein writes along the same lines: "It is safe to say that virtually every economic and social historian of Britain writing in the last 30 years has accepted that there is at least some merit to the Weber Thesis in its post-1760 British context," *Men of Property*, p. 145. Both statements, those of Marshall and of Rubinstein, as will be seen immediately, are mistaken.

To some academics, that conclusion will seem entirely plausible but others will know there are grounds for doubt. The attention paid the Weber thesis by specialists in religious studies may be seen in an appropriate citation index, *Religion Index One*, which covers approximately 500 journals throughout the world. The four volumes for 1989-1992 contain a grand total of 32 citations of Max Weber, twelve of which, judging by titles, appear to deal in some way with the Protestant ethic. Under "Capitalism and Christianity" there were nine references that, again judging by titles, appeared to be on the Protestant ethic question, five of these repeating citations under Weber. In the four year period then, some sixteen articles were cited under those two headings. By this rule-of-thumb measure, the interest shown in the Weber thesis by the world's religion specialists amounts to about four articles a year.⁸

Philip Benedict has reviewed the treatment of the Weber thesis in the general historical literature. His conclusion reads:

"Weber's ideas have provoked a considerable amount of comment and criticism from historians of Calvinism ever since they first appeared. A substantial literature has grown up around certain questions growing out of the Weber thesis debate. Nonetheless, when one surveys the broad range of writings devoted to the subject of early modern Calvinism, what is most striking of all is that the thesis in its broadest form has had remarkably little influence in stimulating and directing the main stream of research on the subject, except in England. Since the Weber thesis would seem to confer great importance on the history of Calvinism by suggesting that it played a particularly crucial role in moving European society down the road to modernity, this may seem surprising indeed. It points up the extreme compartmentalization of knowledge in the twentieth century and the considerable gulf between the concerns and training of those who have written about Calvinism, on the one hand, and those of Weber and of latter-day Weberians housed generally in departments of sociology, on the other."

⁸ *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, Evanston, Illinois: American Theological Library Association, Volumes 21-24, 1989 to 1992. One of the sixteen references was to an article in a sociology journal, one appeared in a general history journal.

The index to a collection of articles by Reformation historians, a collection focused on social history, contains one reference to Weber and that to a fugitive, non-substantive comment, see Lawrence P. Buck and Jonathan W. Zophy, *The Social History of the Reformation*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972, p. 31.

The English exception, Benedict indicates, is due to the influence of R.H. Tawney, whose *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* gave rise to an influential school.⁹

⁹ Philip Benedict, "The Historiography of Continental Calvinism," Ch. 15 of Lehmann and Roth, *Weber*. The passage quoted is from p. 306. An important history published in 1954, Benedict writes, gave six pages (of 454) to discussion of Weber's argument. Some thirty years later, a collective volume written by specialist historians gave more pages, but less favor, to Weber's ideas, suggesting that they have "become more marginal yet." The two books (with the relevant page references) are: John T. McNeill, *History and Character of Calvinism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. 221-223, 418-421; and Menna Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism, 1541-1715*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1985, pp. 9-10, 269, 369-390 (a chapter by Herbert Lüthy based on a 1965 work).

The Weber thesis is generally neglected also in works of economic history. Many leading sources on the "history of industrialization" make no reference at all to "the Weber thesis." Phyllis Deane's comprehensive study of Britain's industrial revolution has no index reference to Max Weber, to Protestantism, or to religion. Her chapters, incidentally, review and document the importance of a wide range of other factors, ones neglected in most of the sociological literature. There is no reference to Weber in an older classic, in J.H. Clapham's study of French and German economic development. T.S. Ashton's brief popular account of the industrial revolution, another of the older classics, contains no reference to Weber. A later scholarly work by Ashton makes passing reference to the religious factor, touching on the Wesleyans for example, but made no reference to Weber. Another noted economic historian, John Ulrich Nef, had little positive to say about the thesis; in a summary work on the industrial revolution, he reviewed Weber's claims but, for the most part, rejected them. Kindleberger's study of France and Britain in the century after 1850 gives four pages to "religion" and there makes passing references to Weber and Tawney. His brief account is balanced (reviewing Samuelsson, for example) and is well documented. His last comment is negative: he has been "able to reject the hypothesis that changes in religious belief and practice played a major role in the course of British or French economic development after 1850." William H. McNeill's comprehensive study, *The Rise of the West* has only one index reference to Weber, that to a footnote on p. 590. There one finds a single noncommittal comment on the "famous thesis." Paul Kennedy's comprehensive study of economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, contains no reference to Max Weber or to the famous thesis. Of the authors reviewed to this point David Landes provides the most favorable judgment but even there the Protestant ethic thesis is given little attention, at best a few pages, in his 550 page history.¹⁰

¹⁰ The works discussed are: Phyllis Deane, *The First Industrial Revolution*, second edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979; J.H. Clapham, *The Economic Development of France and Germany, 1815-1914*, fourth edition, Cambridge: The University Press, 1936; T.S. Ashton, *The Industrial Revolution, 1760-1830*, London:

Oxford University Press, 1948, and, also by Ashton, *An Economic History of England: The 18th Century*, London: Methuen, 1955; John Ulrich Nef, *The Conquest of the Material World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, Ch. 5; Charles P. Kindleberger, *Economic Growth in France and Britain, 1851-1950*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964, pp. 94-97; William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 590n.; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York: Random House, 1987; and David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 31-23, 160.

The following works of economic history contain no index references to Max Weber: Roderick Floud and Donald McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, 2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. R.M. Hartwell, ed., *The Causes of the Industrial Revolution in England*, London: Methuen, 1967; Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation: An Economic History of Britain, 1700-1914*, London: Methuen, 1969; Joel Mokyr, ed., *The Economics of the Industrial Revolution*, Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985; E.A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988; and Rondo Cameron, *A Concise Economic History of the World: From Paleolithic Times to the Present*, second edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. The latter is a leading economic history textbook.

Mathias has two brief discussions of the role of religion, neither of them making explicit reference to Weber (pp. 160, 164). The first of these does however contain an oblique denigrating comment. A fugitive mention of Weber appears in Mokyr. It reads, in its entirety, as follows: "A well-known and highly controversial theory of entrepreneurship is the one somehow linking businessmen to religion. Originally proposed by Weber, the argument is more successful in explaining the differences between Western Christianity and the rest of the world than in explaining differences within the West" (p. 17). No references to Weber appear in Cameron's extensive annotated bibliography; it does contain a reference to Robertson's critique of Weber and his school (p. 415).

Three index references to Weber appear in Peter Kriedte, *Peasants, Landlords and Merchant Capitalists: Europe and the World Economy, 1500-1800*, translated from the German by V.R. Berghahn, Leamington Spa, UK: Berg, 1983. None of those references touch on the Protestant ethic thesis. The thesis is reviewed and discussed in Nathan Rosenberg and L.E. Birdzell, Jr., *How the West Grew Rich: The Economic Transformation of the Industrial World*, New York: Basic Books, 1986, pp. 129-134. These authors note it has been "hotly debated" since first publication and they review some of the major arguments. Reference is made to a wide range of commentators including Robertson, Tawney, Nef, and Landes. E.L. Jones's, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, contains an index reference to Weber, to a fugitive reference on the role of refugees in economic development. The bibliography refers only to the *General Economic History*.

Carlo Cipolla, another leading economic historian, has edited an important collection of essays on developments in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. I found no reference to Weber in this nearly 600 page work. The closest to a confirmation is a brief passage in a chapter by Hermann Kellebenz which tells of "a more thrifty attitude on the part of those of the nobility who had turned Protestant and had been influenced by the teachings of the Reformation." Some instances in which there is "exceptionally clear evidence" on the linkage of religion and technical innovation are provided. Several pages later Kellebenz reviews the secularization of Catholic church properties, noting one of the consequences--the classes that benefited "used their increased purchasing power, which in fact they often exceeded by obtaining credit, to demonstrate their new status by building houses and adopting a modern style of living worthy of them." A few pages later one learns that the social changes "brought about by the Reformation, especially secularisation, also stimulated consumer activity, as did fashion, particularly the vogue of the *nouvelle draperie*, Spanish fashions and, starting in the 1630s, the growing demand for French Fashions." No reference to Weber appears in his bibliography.

Another article in the Cipolla volume, this by Aldo De Maddalena, touches briefly on the Dutch experience. It too tells of the parcelling-out of land that followed the Reformation, much of it coming into the hands of "the rich bourgeoisie." Modern and remunerative methods of farm management followed along with short term leases which allowed easier adaptation to changing economic conditions. As opposed to asceticism, one learns that numerous "villas and gardens also grew up around the towns, representing not only a sop to their owners' social ambitions, but also a sensible policy of investment and agronomic innovation."¹¹

¹¹ Carlo M. Cipolla, ed., *The Fontana Economic History of Europe: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Glasgow: Collins, 1974, pp. 240, 247, 260, and 296.

The most positive reception of the Weber thesis, by a considerable margin, is found in sociology. Most introductory sociology texts are generous in their commendation of Weber, the man and the scholar. Most texts in the field review the thesis and give it credence. Some, to be sure, are noncommittal, providing only a report of its major claims. Neil J. Smelser's text, for example, introduces Weber as the "great German sociologist [who] used historical research to throw light on the link between religion and social change." Later, in a biographical profile, the student is told that Weber was "a prodigious scholar" who "profoundly influenced" modern sociology. A brief account of the Protestant ethic thesis follows. Weber, it is said, "showed that values can be a powerful force for social change." This was followed by statements about Calvinists and their work habits. The principal exposition of the thesis appears several pages later where a single long paragraph reviews the Calvinism-predestination-work ethic linkage. The initial statement is a simple report: "Weber believed this ethic had a major influence on the growth of capitalism...." A shorter second paragraph reports that Weber "noted other factors," specifically mentioning "the military budget and high consumer demand." Smelser's final statement is an unambiguous confirmation: "Still, the Protestant Reformation changed not only the economic structure but also a variety of institutions, including science, law, and education. The changes brought about by Calvinism combined to transform the social order." Not a single reference is provided to document the claim. There is not a single indication of any controversy about the thesis. And, clearly, there is no reference to any of the critics, none for example to Samuelsson or to Marshall.¹²

¹² From Neil J. Smelser, *Sociology*, fourth edition, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1991, pp. 14, 294, 300, and 309. Smelser's text has been singled out for attention because he is one of the most eminent of all current authors of introductory sociology texts. He has written many wide-ranging works, several of them dealing with economic history and economic sociology. He has edited a comprehensive review volume, *Handbook of Sociology*, Newbury Park: Sage, 1988. He would then, more than most such authors, be conversant with the entire Weber controversy. He is also the author of a relevant scholarly monograph, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution: An Application of Theory to the British Cotton Industry*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959. Weber is given very little attention in this 400 page scholarly work. The thesis is discussed on pp. 67-77.

A review of fifteen current sociology texts revealed that all of them provided brief summary accounts of "the thesis." Some authors accepted the basic claims, commending the argument to their readers. Others gave neutral descriptive accounts, saying that Weber had argued the Calvinist impact but offering nothing on the validity of the claims. None of those texts reviewed the problems with Weber's evidence. None report the inadequacy of Offenbacher's data or the copying error; none report the misrepresentation of Franklin and Fugger; none report the difficulties involved in the Dutch case. All of these problems, it will be noted, were signaled in the Samuelsson critique published some thirty years ago. Only eight of the fifteen texts indicate some controversy over the thesis. A couple of these are at best "trace" mentions; some others indicate unambiguous vindication for the thesis. Only three texts provided references to the book-length critical studies by Samuelsson and Marshall. Two of these citations proved to be inadequate. One made reference to "Marshall, 1982" but did not list the book among the references. One made reference to "Samuelsson, 1961," saying only that it was the source for a quotation, but not indicating that it provided a major critique; the critic's name in this case was misspelled in the references. VanderZanden's text signaled approval, Weber "marshalled evidence," but also cited Samuelsson accurately and listed four other critical studies. Those five citations were more than appeared in all of the other fourteen texts.

Many of those textbooks introduced the possibility of an opposite causal direction--that the rise of capitalism stimulated the appearance of Protestantism. In some of them the counter-thesis was given full credence even though no serious evidence was provided in its support. The documented account by Lewis A. Spitz makes this option implausible.¹³ The movement was led by theologians and clergy (that is, by intellectuals); their main support was from "the populace down below."

¹³ Lewis W. Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559*, New York: Harper & Row, 1985, pp. 164-165, and 180-191.

These university-level textbooks, in short, showed a near-complete indifference to evidence, both with regard to the original thesis and to this ad hoc alternative. Instead, glossing over the criticisms, most of the texts provided either enthusiastic approval or a brief unevaluated summary of what Weber said. For much of the 1980s decade, the best-selling sociology textbook in the United States was the work of Ian Robertson. He is a professional writer, not a professional

sociologist. His is the only textbook that signals doubt; he suggests that the Weber thesis is "probably unverifiable."¹⁴

¹⁴ In addition to Smelser, the introductory sociology textbooks reviewed were:

Brinkerhoff, David B., and Lynn K. White, *Sociology*, Third edition, St.Paul: West, 1991.

DiRenzo, Gordon J., *Human Social Behavior: Concepts and Principles of Sociology*, Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Farley, John E., *Sociology*, second edition, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1992.

Inciardi, James A., and Robert A. Rothman, *Sociology: Principles and Applications*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990.

Johnson, Allan G., *Human Arrangements: An Introduction to Sociology*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.

Kammeyer, Kenneth C.W., George Ritzer, and Norman R. Yetman, *Sociology: Experiencing Changing Societies*, fifth edition, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1992.

Light, Donald, Suzanne Keller, and Craig Calhoun, *Sociology*, fifth edition, New York: Knopf, 1989.

Macionis, John J., *Sociology*, third edition, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1991.

Popenoe, David, *Sociology*, eighth edition, Englewood Cliffs: PrenticeHall, 1991.

Robertson, Ian, *Sociology*, third edition, New York: Worth, 1987.

Schaefer, Richard T., and Robert P. Lamm, *Sociology*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992.

Stark, Rodney, *Sociology*, fourth edition, Belmont: Wadsworth, 1992.

Theodorson, George and Lucille, *Sociology: Principles and Applications*, St. Paul: West, 1990.

VanderZanden, James W., *The Social Experience: An Introduction to Sociology*, Second edition, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990.

None of the texts refer to Jacob Viner's chapter. Marshall's critique is mentioned (without the citation) in Light, Keller, and Calhoun, p. 529. The inadequate citation of Samuelsson is in Farley, p. 453. Smelser's text, incidentally, does not include *The Protestant Ethic* in its listing of references; it was also omitted in the third edition.

Samuelsson's work contained many telling criticisms of the Weber thesis. It also, to be sure, contained some serious errors. But for the general social science audience the work has been lost from view. It has long since been out of print. In 1976 Anthony Giddens wrote an Introduction to the *Protestant Ethic* which appears both in the Scribner's and in the later Routledge editions. His four page review of "The Controversy" contains a brief mention of Weber's use of "a study of the economic activities of Catholics and Protestants in Baden in 1895," this accompanied by an agnostic comment--"and the accuracy even of these figures had been questioned." Samuelsson is referenced at that point but few readers would be moved by that laconic statement to search out the source. Giddens could have easily pointed out the inaccuracy in the key row of percentages which add to 109%.¹⁵

Evidence showing the "disappearance" of Samuelsson's work may be gained from the *Social Science Citation Index* which covers a vast range of relevant literature. In the four years, 1989 to 1992, three articles referred to Samuelsson's critique. None of the three citations were accurate. All three misspelled the man's name; one, in addition, gave the English title but the date of the Swedish publication. Three references to Samuelsson appeared in the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* in those same years. One article was listed in both sources, which means the grand total for both literatures comes to five citations. Only one of these citations, that in a specialized sociology of religion journal, was accurate. Both indexes in those same years list many references to *The Protestant Ethic*.

¹⁵ Giddens, "Introduction," to Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. xxiv.

Marshall's critique fared somewhat better in the same period: a total of 21 citations were reported in the two indexes for the same four years. Five of these were repeated references, which means Marshall was cited in sixteen articles. None of those citations appeared in the three leading American sociology journals. One lesson is easy: the readers of social science and humanities literature are frequently told of "the Weber thesis." It is regularly commended but only rarely are they provided with references to works that challenge it.¹⁶

Those readers, typically, are told that Weber's many critics were mistaken, having failed to appreciate the basic argument, or have missed the "larger picture," or are attending to inessential details. In another academic setting, however, a student of religious history might read the following: "The imaginative hypotheses of Weber and Troeltsch have been undermined by a winding procession of revisionist scholars: Sombart, Lujo Brentano, Tawney, Henri Hauser, Henri See, H.M. Robertson, Albert Hyma, George Harkness, Conrad Moehlmann, and Andre Sayous, not to mention the more recent contributors."¹⁷

There is, clearly, a serious disparity in the treatments of the Weber thesis. It is highly commended in sociology but is given little attention in the two fields most likely to have expert knowledge of the subject, Reformation history and economic history. This disparity points to a problem stemming from compartmentalization within the universities. The non-specialist sociologists do not know what the specialists have said and done. The sociologists, accordingly, present the thesis as

¹⁶ Both citation indexes are from Philadelphia: The Institute for Scientific Information. The social sciences index covers approximately 2,800 journals. The arts and humanities index covers approximately 1,800.

¹⁷ John F.H. New, *Anglican and Puritan: The Basis of Their Opposition, 1558-1640*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964, p. 96.

well-founded despite its remarkably "hypothetical" character. Weber's "sketch" remains a sketch some 90 years after its first exposition. The transformation of the hypothetical into the confirmed and the presentation of the argument in bold disregard of historical evidence (that generated by two readily-accessible groups of academic specialists) points to the operation of some extra-intellectual factors or processes.

The operation of the extra-intellectual may be seen in use of "saving" devices, of arguments to protect the theory from challenge. One of these points to Weber's larger enterprise. The *Protestant Ethic* is only a part of his world-historical project, one that reviewed the religions of China, of India, and of ancient Judaism. The suggestion is that one cannot assess the Protestant ethic "part" without consideration of those other components. But the argument is inappropriate; it is an obvious non sequitur. Claims about Luther's teachings, about Calvinism, or about Puritanism do not in any way require inquiry (or assessment) of claims about Taoism or Confucianism. Each part must stand on its own logic and evidence. Marshall reviews this line of defense and offers an appropriate conclusion: "Sociologists simply cannot escape the problems of historical counter-evidence, or more accurately....of the lack of substantiating evidence, by pleading for 'the big picture'."¹⁸

A second saving procedure is to set stringent requirements for the testing of the thesis. If evidence on the psychological responses to specific doctrines were required, any test is effectively precluded, at least for historical experience. It is easy to locate centers of "Protestantism." But one cannot know with any certainty if predestination was accepted there, whether adherents felt a profound "inner isolation," whether they desperately sought a sign of their *certitudo salutis*, whether they, as a consequence, devoted themselves to their economic tasks, and whether they diligently accumulated and reinvested. The appropriate response, in the face

¹⁸ Marshall, *Search*, p. 140.

of that historical problem, would be a conclusion of "not proven" or, more precisely, not known (or perhaps, hardly likely to ever be known). But here, in a remarkable declaration of faith, many sociologists, authors of sociology texts for example, have treated the hypotheses, all of them, as proven.¹⁹

¹⁹ Jonathan Turner, a sociologist, has indicated some understandable concern about those who "genuflect at the sacred works of St. Marx, St. Durkheim, and St. Weber." See his *Herbert Spencer: A Renewed Appreciation*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1985, p. 7.

Some years ago a flurry of research activity designed to "test Weber" occurred, this through use of survey data from various American contexts. Most of those studies came up with negative findings. Those results were so persistently negative that one commentator, Andrew Greeley, appropriately, called for a moratorium. Some of Weber's defenders objected to the entire operation, this again on the basis of the stringent requirements. Instead "of examining the impact of specific beliefs," one commentator argued, "the researchers merely compared the members of two religious categories." Those researchers, it was said, had not "made the proper Weberian analytical distinctions among types of Protestants." They did not check, for example, whether those Protestants "believed in predestination [or] viewed their jobs as a calling." Those studies, accordingly, are judged to be "poor-quality research." They did not "take seriously the rich analytical detail" of Weber's argument.²⁰

This "defense" involves a double standard since those later sociological studies are identical in form to the procedure Weber used in the opening pages of the

²⁰ Andrew M. Greeley, "The Protestant Ethic: Time for a Moratorium," *Sociological Analysis*, 25 (1964) 20-33. The other quotations are from Gary D. Bouma, "Beyond Lenski: A Critical Review of Recent 'Protestant Ethic' Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 12 (1973) 141-156. Marshall, *Search*, pp. 165-66, and Zaret, in Lehmann and Roth, *Weber*, p. 245, also argue along these lines.

In a rare investigation of the sort Bouma recommends, Harold B. Barclay studied an ascetic Protestant sect, the Holdeman Mennonites, and found their beliefs impeded capitalist development. See his "The Protestant Ethic versus the Spirit of Capitalism," *Review of Religious Research* 10 (1969) 151-58. Another insightful case study is provided by Randall G. Stokes. Afrikaner Calvinism, he reports, was "theologically identical to European Calvinism of the 18th century" but had "a highly conservative impact on economic action." His explanation: this group dealt with the predestination doctrine and the resulting anxieties in a very different way. See his "Afrikaner Calvinism and Economic Action: The Weberian Thesis in South Africa," *American Journal of Sociology*, 81 (1975) 62-81.

monograph, that is, in his use of Offenbacher and others. He was examining behavioral correlates of religious affiliation, of Protestants and Catholics with no investigation of "specific beliefs." Having established, to his satisfaction, a strong association between the two, Weber then *read in* his conclusion: "Thus the principal explanation of this difference must be sought in the permanent intrinsic character of their religious beliefs" (p. 40). Weber, in short, is allowed an easy standard; his critics are held to a much more stringent requirement.

If an hypothesis is subjected to repeated test and not confirmed, a moratorium is one appropriate conclusion. If one argues that the tests are flawed, then more carefully designed tests are in order. But the common standard requires a recognition of the failed Weber-Offenbacher test. It requires recognition of Weber's persistent failure to take seriously the implications of the "rich analytical detail" of his own argument. It was, and is, necessary to control for the many factors that could affect the religion-work ethic relationship. Without that necessary investigation of the relationship with *ceteris paribus*, one cannot be sure there is any "Protestant ethic" effect at all, let alone one that is "important." And that means, until Weber's defenders work through those implications, the thesis will remain "not proven." A third defense involves the claim of a termination date: the Protestant ethic was an important factor earlier, but later it no longer had any distinctive influence. Marshall argues this point: "By the eighteenth century, Weber maintains, the new capitalist mentality has...become wholly independent of its religious origins." Some supporting passages appear in Weber's original, the most compelling of which announces that "today...any relationship between religious beliefs and conduct is generally absent." One must, however, reconcile that pronouncement with his opening claim, that of "overwhelming" differences in Baden and elsewhere in the late nineteenth century.²¹ Again a double standard is involved. Where later evidence appears to support the thesis, it is allowed and accepted. Otherwise, the possibility is excluded a priori.

²¹ Marshall, *Search*, p. 129; Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, pp. 54-55 and, for the quotation, p. 70.

If Protestant and Catholic work efforts were substantially different prior to the eighteenth century, that point needs to be established. If a subsequent "conversion" occurred, with Catholics forced to assimilate and adopt the more demanding Protestant standard, that process too needs to be demonstrated. Otherwise, the claim is merely an "easy out." One avoids a difficult problem, lack of support, by declaring a conversion, this without any indication of when or where it happened, and without any provision of supporting evidence.

Criticism is a normal feature of scholarly work. Where problems, or outright errors, are discovered, they should be signaled in subsequent comments and discussion. But that, as seen, has not been the case with "the Weber thesis." The work itself is canonized: it has become "a classic." And in a parallel procedure, the author is described as a "prodigious scholar." Here too one sees the double standard. That adjective, prodigious, says something about quantity or extent. But something ought to be said also about the quality of that scholarship, about the erratic relationship between text and notes, about the implications of one-person "samples"

for the depiction of world-historical movements, and about the absence of systematic evidence linking religion and economic development.²²

²² Another argument has appeared in recent sociological literature. This direction, *not* a defense mechanism, points to a later Weber formulation. One may always provide an improved or extended framework; it is a routine expectation in scientific work. If the later version is the "real" or "final" Weber position, then it is that case that should be presented, beginning with the sociology texts, not the flawed, or preliminary version of *The Protestant Ethic*. See Randall Collins, "Weber's Last Theory of Capitalism," Ch. 2 of his *Weberian Sociological Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. The chapter originally appeared in the *American Sociological Review*, 45 (1980) 925-942. The key text in this connection is Weber's *General Economic History*, translated by Frank H. Knight, New York: Collier, 1961 [original, 1927]. The work was out of print for many years but was reissued in 1981 by Transaction Books. Few of the sociology texts reviewed here make reference to this "later theory" option; few of them cite the *General Economic History*.

It is not possible to cover all of the many arguments dealing with "the Weber thesis" in a brief comment. Those interested in the earlier controversies, ones involving Brentano, Hyma, Pirenne, Rachfahl, Robertson, Fanfani, Tawney, and many others, might begin with Ephraim Fischhoff's review, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism--The History of a Controversy," *Social Research*, 11 (1944):53-77.

Another strand of the controversy has focused on scientific and technological innovations, this in the British context, the emphasis typically being on the dissenting churches. Much of this literature in this area has been quick to invoke Weber and "the Protestant ethic," but that conflates two distinct subject matters, a general work ethic and scientific aptitudes. Again, typically, much of that work has been indifferent to the *ceteris paribus* requirement and, accordingly, has failed to explore other possibilities, e.g. discrimination, disabilities due to the Test Act, and the simple matters of geography. For a brief discussion of this problem, see Rubinstein, *Men of Property*, pp. 146-149. For more detail, see the important study by George Becker, "Pietism and Science: A Critique of Robert K. Merton's Hypothesis," *American Journal of Sociology*, 89 (1984) 1065-1090. Merton's reply (same issue, pp. 1091-1121),

does not address the issues raised. For further relevant detail and discussion, see Becker's response in a later issue, 91 (1986) 1203-1218. For another important contribution, see Becker's article, "The Merton Thesis: Oetinger and German Pietism, A Significant Negative Case," *Sociological Forum*, 7 (1992) 641-660. On science in Geneva under Calvin and afterwards, see Viner, "Protestantism," pp. 186-187.

Alternative Hypotheses

Marshall's summary conclusion, that the only reasonable verdict is "not proven," seems entirely appropriate. The implication for Weber's defenders is easy: provide the necessary proof. In the process, the serious researcher should also consider (and, if possible, test) alternative hypotheses to account for the "rise of the West." Several alternatives will be reviewed here. All of these have appeared somewhere in previous literature. They do not ordinarily appear in discussions of "the Weber thesis."

Carlo Cipolla, the noted economic historian, argued the importance of two technological innovations. England and the Netherlands developed better ships, ones that were larger and more seaworthy. They also developed superior cannons. The combination of the two gave those nations a distinctive advantage. The large ship became a movable gun platform, one allowing the concentration of unusual firepower on targets that could be approached by sea. Nations facing the Atlantic adopted the innovations (with varying success and effectiveness). The two innovations made possible the "outreach program" known as the Age of Discovery. At the same time, however, Cipolla indicated, the new age began with a decisive defeat for "the West." The expansion of the Ottoman Turks disrupted the age-old trade routes to Asia thus, in part at least, stimulating the search for the Atlantic alternatives. The Turks moved into the Balkans, up the Danube, and into the heart of Europe, a movement that was not halted until the siege of Vienna in 1683. The technological advantages, the large ships and their guns, were of no use there.²³

The Age of Discovery and the Turkish advances occurred simultaneously with the Reformation. Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor (and king of Spain), dealt with the conquest of the New World, with the Turks, and with Martin Luther. The New World provided a rich source of income for the Spanish treasury. But the large

²³ Carlo M. Cipolla, *Guns, Sails, and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion* (New York: Minerva Press, 1965).

and complicated Empire had to pay heavy costs to maintain its hegemony. The bullion that, with intelligent direction, might have gone into economic development, went instead to the creation and provisioning of armies and to the construction of ships in Dutch shipyards.²⁴

A peculiarity of the entire Weber controversy is an unwillingness to face up to basic economic facts. A nation with major expansionist ambitions, such as Spain (and later, France), would have greater costs because of its sizable military establishment. Major continental powers, even if defensive in orientation, will ordinarily have more costly military requirements than nations on the periphery or those located behind natural barriers. Nations deriving much of their income through the sale of military services, mercenary nations, such as the German states, would also have high-cost government. The taxes required for the support of the military means a diversion of resources from other purposes, one of which could be investment for routine economic growth. Quite apart from the budgetary costs, it should be noted, men in the military are not producing goods. They are not developing productive skills. Officers are not learning entrepreneurial skills, at least not those required for economic development.

²⁴ For some sense of the difficulties facing the Hapsburgs, see Geoffrey Parker, "Spain, Her Enemies and the Revolt of the Netherlands 1559-1648," *Past and Present*, 49 (1970): 73-95.

England (and later the United Kingdom), because of its insular setting, had distinctly lower military costs. Its army was ordinarily smaller, both in absolute numbers and in per capita terms, than those of its chief continental rivals. The naval costs were clearly greater but still, on balance, total costs were lower thus, for the average citizen, "freeing" a larger portion of household revenues for other purposes, either consumption or investment. Some tens or hundreds of thousands of men, moreover, were "freed" for productive economic activities (as compared to, for example, the many hours of infantry drill). Given England's island location, surplus population could be "exported" to underdeveloped colonies where they could perform productive economic activities (versus idleness at home). England exported hundreds of thousands; France, with its different concerns and incentives, kept men at home to fill those military needs. As of 1759, the date of Montcalm's defeat at Quebec, British North America had a population of 1.6 million, most of it of English, Scotch, or Scotch-Irish origin. New France, in contrast, had roughly 60,000. Those figures take on even greater significance when one recognizes the imbalance in the populations of the home countries, the United Kingdom having roughly 7.5 million and France roughly 23 million. The English colonies had a sizable, growing, and diversified trade with the United Kingdom, a trade that continued to grow even after American independence.²⁵

Thus far, the discussion of the economic implications of military and geographic circumstances has treated only the "static" peacetime condition. But costs escalate dramatically in wartime. The outcomes also have economic implications. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Netherlands was part

²⁵ For a summary overview of army and navy expenditures, see John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), Chap. 2.

The figures on population, all rounded off, are from: A. Goodwin, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. 8, *The American and French Revolutions 1763-93* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1965), 714; Evarts B. Greene, *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 6; and C.P. Stacey, *Quebec, 1759: The Siege and the Battle* (London: Pan Books, 1973), xviii-xix. The climate and soil conditions in New France, to be sure, were not such as to encourage migration. For the problems of settlement, development, and defense, see Mason Wade, *The French Canadians, 1760-1967* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1968), Vol. 1, Chap. 1.

of the Spanish empire. But, in a long and stubbornly-fought struggle, the northern provinces gained their independence. After paying heavy wartime costs, Spain lost the Netherlands, its flourishing commercial center. The Dutch were also Europe's leading shipbuilders, a decisive fact for the outcome of the struggle. Because of the continued need for ships, Spanish silver continued to flow to Amsterdam even after independence.

The long military struggle in the Spanish Netherlands, according to one standard reading, stemmed from the underlying religious differences. Another reading was reported by Samuelsson. The Dutch historian Pieter Geyl, in 1955, argued the case for military determinants in the Netherlands outcome. The struggle with Spain did not involve an opposition of Dutch Protestants and Belgian Catholics. At the outset, according to Samuelsson's report, "the Protestants were no more numerous in the north than in the south." That geographic division was a result of the conflict, not a precipitating cause. The rivers that held up Field Marshall Montgomery's advance for months in 1944 had the same impact centuries earlier. The rivers, it was argued, "enabled the rebellion to entrench itself in the North provinces while Spain recovered those situated on the wrong side of the strategic barrier." Later, two large migrations occurred; Catholics moved south and Protestants moved north.

In the first half of the sixteenth century, Antwerp was the leading port city in the region, English merchants having chosen it as their major port of entry. The city "enjoyed a centrality in the economic activity of Europe that was nearly unique in history." But economic and political catastrophes followed. The settlement of the War of Liberation gave the Dutch control over the Rhine allowing access into the interior. The settlement blocked the mouth of the Scheldt, Antwerp's river, that city now being part of the Spanish Netherlands. That political fact "set the stage for" the subsequent advance of "Protestant" Amsterdam.²⁶

²⁶ Samuelsson, *Religion*, 106. He was drawing from the essay "National State and the Writers of Netherlands History," Chap. 9 of Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1955), especially pp. 182-184. On

A later major conflict began when Frederick of Prussia took Silesia from Maria Theresa of Austria. Tax revenues from that territory (with a largely Catholic population) then flowed into the treasury of a "Protestant" nation. A series of wars followed, these culminating in the Seven Years War in which Catholic Austria and Catholic France were defeated by Protestant Prussia and Protestant Britain. Britain acquired the entirety of New France. In 1763, France was left with a heavy debt burden, one which had far-reaching implications for the nation's economy and political stability.

Another key consideration, one rarely given adequate attention, involves public finance. In the early sixteenth century, Spain looked to have a promising future. But a series of disastrous government decisions effectively destroyed any possibility of a "take-off," producing instead four centuries of backwardness. Spain had the highest tax rates in Europe. A series of mistaken policies destroyed a flourishing woolen industry and ended some success in foodstuffs. France was favored with a large population, fertile lands, a central regime, and a powerful military establishment. But the government could not, or rather, did not successfully organize its finances. The sale of offices was inefficient, costly, and socially corrosive. The system of tax farming had similar consequences. By contrast, the Netherlands and England had low-cost and efficient tax arrangements. While still problematic from the perspective of modern economics, those two nations, through trial and error, made unusual progress. Rondo Cameron traces this to differences in the respective polities. The absolute monarchs of the age had little understanding of their developing economies; and they had unchecked power to implement their policies. The greater pluralism in the Netherlands and in England, especially after 1688-1689, meant more effective input from people with a knowledge of business and commerce. The creation of the Bank of England made government borrowing easier and less costly than was the case in France or Spain. The lower interest rates that resulted also aided English commerce.²⁷

Religions all have some kind of institutional apparatus which, depending on the size, could represent a significant or a modest charge for the supporting economy. Jacob Viner quoted Christopher Hill on this question: "The fact that Protestantism was a cheaper religion than Catholicism became a seventeenth-

²⁷ See Rondo Cameron, *Concise Economic History*, Chap. 6.

century commonplace." Viner noted that the observation "remained a commonplace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." But Weber, he added, avoiding an obvious economic fact, "makes no reference to this theme in his explanation of...the relative economic backwardness of Catholic countries."²⁸

²⁸ Viner, "Protestantism," 164. Several eighteenth-century authors commented on the number of holidays-- "Because Catholics had 120 per year and Protestants only 60, the latter were thus able to record a profit from the extra 60 work days." See Paul Münch, "The Thesis before Weber: an Archaeology," in Lehmann and Roth, *Weber*, Chap. 2, especially, pp. 64-65.

Sociologists influenced by the Weber thesis have frequently noted the link of Protestantism and cities and, making unwarranted translation, think automatically of "the bourgeoisie." But Spitz pointed up another option: "The clergy constituted a significant part of the population, in many cities, such as Worms, comprising at least 10 percent of the population." Six thousand of Cologne's 40,000 population were clerics. Hamburg had 450 parish priests for a population of 12,000.²⁹ The total population figures, it will be noted, would include children, hence the clerical presence among adults must have been much greater than even these figures suggest. With the Reformation and a dramatic shift of clergy into economically productive occupations, one would expect significant changes in economic growth, that quite independent of callings and predestination.

The confiscation and sale of church properties generated immense amounts of capital which, presumably, was put to more "productive" use than was previously the case. If so, that too would have had some positive economic impact. Again one has the question: how much weight, with *ceteris paribus*, should be assigned the calling? The "secularization" of church properties in Germany came at a relatively late point, in the early nineteenth century, an effort stimulated by the threat of Napoleon Bonaparte. This event, the *Secularization*, figures prominently in all serious histories of the period. With church income drastically reduced, many activities had to be abandoned, among them, the Catholic universities (18 of them)

²⁹ Spitz, *Protestant Reformation*, 50-51.

and church-sponsored schools. That had impacts for the Catholic population which, four score years later, were to be seen in Offenbacher's statistics.³⁰

A reform movement within an established church would continue to be supported out of public funds. The same would hold for a break-away movement which, as with Lutheranism or the Church of England, then became the established church. But a reform movement that chose independence had to be supported by its own members. For them, independence meant a new tithe to pay for the clergy, buildings, publications, transport, missions, and so forth. Those sums, obviously, were not available for reinvestment (at least not as conventionally understood). Those choosing independence, moreover, were doubly taxed since they ordinarily were required to continue paying the costs of the established church.

³⁰ See James J. Sheehan, *German History: 1770-1866* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 243-246, 269-272, 355. The change, Sheehan reports, was "one of the greatest territorial rearrangements in all of European history" (243). See also Rudolf Morsey, "Wirtschaftliche und soziale Auswirkungen der Säkularisation in Deutschland," in Rudolf Vierhaus and Manfred Botzenhart, eds., *Dauer und Wandel der Geschichte: Aspekte europäischer Vergangenheit* (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1966), 361-383.

The ethical teachings of any religion would also, presumably, have some impact on the use of personal or household economic resources. Diligence in work, Weber's single-minded emphasis, is only one of many possible economic impacts of "religion." Daniel's discussion of Wenzeslaus Linck's activity in Nuremberg, as indicated, supports Weber on a key theme, on the importance of the calling albeit in conjunction with a notion of social responsibility. One relevant consideration in this connection is "last wills and testaments and the execution of legacies." Linck held that "gifts to the church, as endowments for the recitation of death masses...was an exploitation of man by the church." The suggestion by the clergy that eternal benefits would follow the generous endowment were stimulated, not by freely willed choice, but by fear of damnation. He argued an opposite course, for economic and social reasons, it was "absolutely necessary" that goods be left to one's natural heirs "so that they would not be future burdens on society." His plea for "social justice and civic responsibility" was very popular and the sermon was reprinted and given wider circulation.³¹ What weight, if any, should be assigned the calling and what weight given the change in inheritance patterns?

³¹ Daniel, "Hard Work," 45.

It is easy to make the purely logical case for asceticism: less drinking, smoking, and carousing, would mean a greater "surplus" for capital investment. But have we seen a comparison of household accounts? Did the Puritans invest? Or did they hoard their money? Or did they give it to the church in regular tithing? For poor people, the choice of asceticism as against wayward living would have considerable impact on a family's well-being. But what of the wealthy? How much difference would it make for them? The rather ascetic Baptist, John D. Rockefeller, had a large Euclid Avenue home in Cleveland and, later, a large home in New York City just off Fifth Avenue. But how much difference did his--relative--asceticism make as compared, for example, to the luxury and extravagance of Episcopalian J.P. Morgan? Again, have we seen the accounts? How much of their respective fortunes went into the household and idle consumption? How much did Morgan lose economically because of his art works, the library, and his famous yacht, the *Corsair*? Most of these questions, it will be noted, are unanswered. Most, in fact, are unasked.³²

Apart from the Rockefeller and Morgan comparison, the hypotheses reviewed to this point touch on events occurring in the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, prior to what many would count as the decisive development--the "Industrial Revolution." Most accounts, for good reason, place the first of those transformations in the United Kingdom, basically in England. There is a long-standing struggle over the concept and the appropriate dates. Many focus on the period from 1750 to 1850. Most accounts focus on the cotton industry and, accordingly, on Manchester and surrounding Lancashire. If the latter limitation is accepted, an even later dating of "the Revolution" is appropriate. Cotton did not overtake woolens as the nation's leading export product until after 1800. The phenomenal growth of Manchester came in the 1830s and 1840s. This poses some problem for the Weber thesis. Almost

³² It is not entirely certain that those luxuries should be counted as losses or as "wasteful" expenses. Morgan concluded a major business agreement on board the *Corsair*. "Appearances," the show of wealth or of "solidity," can have real economic consequences. Again, one should not beg questions.

two centuries intervened between the Puritan triumph in seventeenth-century England and this economic takeoff.³³

³³ See N. F. R. Crafts, "British Economic Growth, 1700-1831: A Review of the Evidence," *Economic History Review, Second Series*, 36:(1983): 177-199. For more detail see Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Economic historians have provided a wide array of hypotheses to account for the development of "the West," only a small sample of which may be touched on here.³⁴ Early in the modern era England moved to eliminate internal trade barriers. Anticipating Adam Smith and the recommendations of liberal economics, a larger trade territory had been created. Geography also played a role, the island location and navigable rivers made possible a coastal trade which also meant a larger economic base. In addition, in the eighteenth century, an extended infrastructure was built to link up that territory, this with the construction of canals and highways. The industrial revolution, moreover, was preceded by a series of innovations collectively termed the agricultural revolution. That produced a healthier, longer-lived population which, other things equal, would ordinarily mean a more productive population. The demographic revolution, which began in the middle of the eighteenth century, produced a demand for food, clothing, and housing which, because of the prior innovations, could be met with reasonable success.

A series of five innovations in the cotton industry, the flying shuttle, the carding machine, the spinning-jenny, the water-frame, and the cotton gin, made possible the breakthrough that most people see as central to "the" industrial revolution. A parallel series of innovations led to the use of steam engines and coal as power sources and to the creation of the machine tool industry. The need for iron and steel, for frames in spinning and weaving, for the steam engines, and later for rails, brought a third series of innovations and the development of another major industry. Some notion of the timing is useful: the flying shuttle gained wide adoption in the 1750s and 1760s; the spinning-jenny was patented in 1770; Whitney's cotton gin was introduced in the last decade of the century; use of the

³⁴The "new economic history" (sometimes termed the new institutionalism) focuses on the long term, on facilitating conditions developed in the centuries prior to 1800. Europe had a system of states as opposed to the empires elsewhere, those of the Ottomans, of India, and of China. Other things equal, competing states encourage innovation and some transfer of procedures follows. Private property, eventually, came to be more secure in "the West" than elsewhere. The incentive to hoard capital was reduced and interest rates fell accordingly. The European states, those on the Atlantic, built large ocean-going ships and mastered the intricacies of navigation. The empires, in contrast, "stayed home." See especially North and Thomas, *Rise of the Western World*, Jones, *European Miracle*, and Rosenberg and Birdzell, *How the West Grew Rich*.

steam engine in textile manufacture "on a considerable scale" came only in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s."³⁵

³⁵ On the "industrial revolution," see Deane, *First Industrial Revolution*; Cameron, *Concise Economic History*; and Landes, *Unbound Prometheus*. The expression "industrial revolution" is problematic. For the details, see Cameron, 165-167.

The explanations provided by economic historians focus on technology, on the sources of the innovations, and on social organization, the ability to adopt and use the inventions. It is striking that Phyllis Deane's account of the industrial revolution in Britain makes no mention of the Weber thesis. Rondo Cameron's economic history of the world, which of course deals with central Europe in the Reformation period and in the centuries thereafter, also makes no reference to Weber, to the calling, or to a Puritan work ethic. Deane and Cameron did not find it either necessary or useful to give so much as a paragraph to Weber's cultural and social psychological argument. David S. Landes' economic history of Western Europe from 1750 provides a close parallel to Deane's and Cameron's in that his analysis centers on innovations and organization. It does, as noted above, give some attention to the Weber thesis, providing five paragraphs of exposition and two other paragraphs that give it some credence. The supporting evidence provided is very limited and scarcely compelling. In a work of 555 pages, "the Protestant ethic" does not appear to count for much.³⁶

³⁶ Landes provides the following: a brief exposition of the Weber thesis along with several other explanations (22-23); a paragraph-length exposition of the English experience, one giving credence to the Weber claim of a Dissent-entrepreneurialism linkage, this also accompanied by other explanations (73-74); and a paragraph discussion of the Calvinism-entrepreneurialism link in the Mulhouse region of Alsace (160). The English case is based on the crude ecological relationship ("surely no coincidence that Dissenters were more numerous in the North and Midlands") and a study that has been successfully challenged by Rubinstein. On those points, see Watts' on discussion of the frequency and location of dissent (reviewed above in the text), and Rubinstein, note 6 above. For the Mulhouse experience, see Landes, "Religion and Enterprise: The Case of the French Textile Industry," in Edward C. Carter II, Robert Forster, and Joseph N. Moody, eds., *Enterprise and Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 41-86.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch has advanced still another hypothesis, this in an important chapter entitled "Coffee and the Protestant Ethic." Prior to the seventeenth century, he reports, alcoholic beverages were standard fare for most European populations. English families began the day with a breakfast of beer soup. That was followed, in the course of the day, by the drinking of beer or ale which, on the whole, was healthier than water. The subsequent

Weber and the "Ghost of Marx"

widespread use of coffee transformed a generally beggared population, making it into a sober, alert, and active force. This change, understandably, brought about a dramatic improvement in work habits. See his *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants*, trans. David Jacobson, New York: Pantheon, 1992, Chap. 2.

Many writers and commentators have portrayed the Weber thesis as an argument against Marx, a claim that seems immediately plausible. Albert Salomon, in 1945, wrote that Weber engaged "in a long and intense dialogue with the ghost of Karl Marx." That figure of speech appears frequently in the textbooks. Marshall cites five commentators who saw Weber's essay as a direct response to Marx. Marshall, however, reports an entirely different intellectual history. It developed out of themes covered in Weber's earlier work and was also a response to a controversy within the German universities, specifically between classical economics (rational self-interested calculating individuals) and the historical school (unique values associated with different training and traditions).³⁷

A recent contribution supports Marshall's reading of the intellectual history and provides additional details. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf points to Weber's use of German theological sources and to his concern with issues of Protestant church politics. "This heavy dependence on the theological discussion," Graf argues, "indicates that more value judgments, and specifically denominational ideology, are present in *The Protestant Ethic* than Weber himself realized or present interpreters are aware." Weber's argument, unexpectedly, is centered on the work of the Bern theologian, Matthias Schneckenburger, who emphasized the differences between Lutheranism and Calvinism. He portrayed the former as generating passivity, the latter as generating activism. Schneckenburger also argued predestination as somehow the driving force.

Another much-cited author in Weber's monograph is Albrecht Ritschl, the "most influential German-speaking Protestant theologian of the late nineteenth century." Ritschl played down the denominational differences, arguing that Protestantism generally was "the religion of progress" and that Catholicism was

³⁷ The Albert Salomon quotation appeared first in an essay on "German Sociology," in Georges Gurvitch and Wilbert E. Moore, eds., *Twentieth Century Sociology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 596. Guenther Roth cites the passage, and questions it, in his account, "The Historical Relationship to Marxism," in Bendix and Roth, *Scholarship and Partisanship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 228. References to Marx's ghost appear also in the sociology textbooks, those of Macionis, 107; Robertson, 15; and VanderZanden, 20. For Marshall's comments, see *Search*, 203, n44, and 22-40, 150.

both backward and inferior. For Ritschl, Luther was "a true modernizer." In Weber's notes, Graf reports, no other author is "as frequently or contentiously [criticized] as Ritschl." Both theologians, clearly, assigned major importance to the "role of ideas" in human behavior. Their dispute was over the options--which ideas? Weber adopted the Schneckenburger argument for his purposes, taking Calvinism as the aggressive, driving force. For his argument about the development of capitalism, he had to focus on the English experience, on the role of Puritanism.³⁸

³⁸ See Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, "The German Theological Sources and Protestant Church Politics," Chap. 1 of Lehmann and Roth, *Weber*. The quotation re Weber on Ritschl appears on p. 42. Graf writes that: "*The Protestant Ethic* demonstrated that Weber became involved in theological discourse more than any other sociologist of the century" (48-49). Two other chapters in that volume provide important information on the "theological" and political background of the monograph, those of Paul Münch, Chap. 2, "The Thesis before Weber," and Thomas Nipperdey, Chap. 3, "Max Weber, Protestantism, and the Context of the Debate around 1900."

It was the *Kulturkampf*, Bismarck's struggle against Catholicism, that provided the context for the controversy, not the *Sozialistenkampf*. Ritschl was arguing that Protestantism was a better religion than Catholicism. Along with many others, he was making a case that the social impacts of Protestantism were more desirable than those associated with Catholicism. Ritschl, who supported Bismarck in the "battle of the creeds," has been described as a National-Liberal theologian.³⁹ Weber carried this "battle" one step further, making a crucial distinction within the Protestant camp.

Guenther Roth introduces his discussion of this issue with an unexpected observation: "The hatred [Weber] felt for his Lutheran heritage and the German authoritarian realities was so great that he modeled his notion of ethical personality and innerworldly asceticism to a considerable extent after an idealized image of English history, especially of Puritanism." In 1906, in a letter discussing *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber wrote: "The fact that our nation never went through the school of hard asceticism, in no form whatsoever, is the source of everything that I hate about it (and about myself)." The "radical idealism" of the Protestant sects, those of England and America, had produced the modern "freedom of conscience and the most basic rights of man," values he ardently defended. But that crucial formative experience was missing in Germany. In 1911, to another correspondent, he wrote that: "A people which, as we Germans, has never dared to behead the traditionalist powers will never gain the proud self-assurance that makes the Anglo-Saxons and Latins (*Romanen*)...so superior to us in the world." In her biography of

³⁹ On Ritschl as National-Liberal theologian, see Graf, 43.

her husband, Marianne Weber wrote that *The Protestant Ethic* "is connected to the deepest roots of his personality and in an undefinable way bears its stamp."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Guenther Roth wrote that "Weber greatly sympathized with the Puritan and liberal traditions of England. Sometimes he sounded as if he were half English." See his "Weber the Would-Be Englishman: Anglophilia and Family History," Chap. 4 of Lehmann and Roth, *Weber*, 83. Philip Benedict commented on the extent to which "Weber's essay was a product of the confessional rivalries and prejudices of the specific time and place in which it was written, not to mention Weber's own critical attitude toward Germany's Lutheran inheritance, to which the Reformed tradition constituted in his eyes a superior alternative." From "Historiography," 325. The Marianne Weber quotation is from her *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Wiley, 1975), 335.

The index to Marianne Weber's biography of her husband contains only six references to Marx, Marxism, or Marxists. Two of these are remarkably positive: "Weber expressed great admiration for Karl Marx's brilliant constructions and saw in the inquiry into the economic and technical causes of events an exceedingly fruitful, indeed, a specifically new heuristic principle that directed the quest for knowledge into entire areas previously unilluminated." And also: "Weber suspected all political metaphysics up to that time as a kind of mimicry by which the privileged classes protected themselves against a rearrangement of the spheres of power. In this respect he shared Karl Marx's conception of the state and its ideology."⁴¹

The "ghost of Marx" claim, although not entirely without foundation, seems somewhat exaggerated, an overstatement. It appears to be still another social misconception. For Marxists, it serves a useful purpose. That Germany's leading sociologist felt it necessary, supposedly, to mount such a challenge is proof of the importance of the Marxian theory.

⁴¹ Marianne Weber, *Max Weber*, 335 and 587. Fischhoff writes that Weber "was an admirer of the Marxian hypothesis, only objecting that it should not be made absolute and universal, a summary philosophy," in "Protestant Ethic," 67.