

William H. Swatos, Jr. and Lutz Kaelber, eds.

The Protestant Ethic Turns 100: Essays on the Centenary of the Weber Thesis.

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Max Weber's classic, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (henceforth *PESC*), first appeared as two articles in 1904 and 1905 in the *Archive für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, the editorship of which he, Werner Sombart and Edgar Jaffé had recently assumed. In 1920 a second, revised edition of the book became part of his three-volume sociology of religion. This collection of essays examines various aspects of *PESC* including the contexts in which it originated, its place in the larger Weber corpus, its reception up to the present, and the historical validity of the thesis. As one might expect, the essays vary not only in approach but also in quality.

Philip S. Gorski's excellent essay provides a new take on an old issue, the historical accuracy of Weber's thesis. Forsaking the question of the "great divergence" between Europe and Asia for the "little divergence" between the North Atlantic and continental Europe in the early modern period, he finds that Reformed Protestantism contributed mightily, but not by creating a new capitalist "spirit" as Weber claimed. Rather it gave rise to four important forces: 1) the migration of Protestants, redistributing human capital to the advantage of the countries that received them; 2) the decrease in the number of religious holidays in Protestant countries, increasing the supply of labor; 3) the dissolution of monastic properties, changing the structure of landholding and providing a Keynesian injection of capital into the economy via state spending; 4) Protestant insurgencies, fostering less predatory and more predictable forms of government. Like Weber he argues that this process was not a simple causal one but was complex and contingent.

Only two of the essays focus primarily on the meaning of the text itself. Both offer new insights, if not complete reinterpretations, and both are tightly organized and forcefully argued. If Gorski reduces the scope of *PESC* spatially, Donald A. Nielsen expands it temporally. He argues that the work can only be understood as part of a "grand narrative" of the transformation from the medieval world to the modern one. He denies that this progression is teleological, as others have implied. Rather, Weber used different temporal strategies, such as cyclical images, to depict a series of "fluid" inner changes. The medieval separation of monastic asceticism from the world and the laity underwent a series of transformations, two of which were initiated by the religious challenges of Martin Luther and John Calvin and a third exemplified by the secular ethic of Benjamin Franklin. Weber believed that the entire ethical dimension, whether religious or secular, was lost in the reified "iron cage" of modern capitalist culture.

Stephen Kalberg examines Weber's characterization of America as an unusual dualism of two seemingly contradictory elements, both of which arose from the same religious roots. While one, rational, entrepreneurial and individualistic world mastery, is common to all discussions of *PESC*, Kalberg highlights the other, a civic sphere of ideals that directed individuals beyond pure self-interest to concern for their community. The individual felt validated within an ethical community and was responsible in turn for policing the boundaries of the ethical communal norms. The result

was a set of strong civic ideals rarely found in other political cultures. Kalberg qualifies Weber's belief that these ideals would disappear in the iron cage of bureaucratized capitalism in two ways: the decline has not been as complete as Weber anticipated, and also it was due not so much capitalism as to an intense consumer and entertainment culture.

Three essays examine aspects of the German and American contexts of *PESC*. In their essays on the German context, Hartmut Lehmann and Martin Riesebröt offer some new insights and rehearse some familiar material. Lehmann focuses not so much on the 1904-05 work itself as on the problem that initiated it and Weber's amplification of it through responses to his first critics. In 1902, his fellow editor Werner Sombart's *Modern Capitalism* appeared without the broad attention Weber felt it deserved. Reluctant to write a review himself, he tried to convince the respected scholar Lujo Brentano to write an appreciative yet critical review, without success. Having been spurned by Brentano, Weber took up the task himself, not directly as a review but indirectly as the 1904 essay. The work was then refined in long responses to critics. Riesebröt argues that the 1920 edition of *PESC* was framed differently than its predecessor in that it addressed the more general condition of Western rationalism. The first edition addressed a set of specific issues: 1) the major publications of four of his friends, Sombart, Eberhard Gothein, Georg Jellinek and Georg Simmel, 2) the political assessment of the importance of capitalism in defining the era, both positively and negatively, and 3) his own personal crisis and family situation.

More novel is Lawrence Scaff's discussion of a previously neglected part of Weber's American travels in 1904. Weber used the invitation to deliver a paper at the Congress of Arts and Science at St. Louis as the occasion to see the land that had fascinated him since boyhood. While in St. Louis, Weber decided to embark on a weeklong journey without his wife to Oklahoma and the Indian Territory. His interest in these territories came from his belief, akin to that of Frederick Jackson Turner, who delivered a version of his frontier thesis at the Congress, that the frontier had helped shape American democracy. There he encountered the clash of bureaucracy with views of democratic accountability, traditional tribal authority with modern law and charismatic individuals, issues that served as a counterpart to *PESC* and would appear in his later writings.

The two weakest essays, ironically by the two editors, examine the reception and application of *PESC*. Both offer brief surveys of the literature with little insight or cohesiveness. William H. Swatos and Peter Kivisto look at the early American reception of Weber's work. Typical of the entire essay is their attribution of "considerable importance ... [as the] only pre-Parsonian assessment" to a 1924 article, which they then minimize in importance as "primarily simply a summary" with an emphasis on Weber's distinction between Lutheranism and Calvinism. Lutz Kaebler provides a loose assemblage of sections about the recent use of Weber, from a discussion using Guenther Roth's recent book on Weber's family history to indicate which acquaintances and relatives were and might have been included in *PESC* to accounts of works on the spirit of capitalism in colonial America, nineteenth-century Ohio and British Puritanism.

In sum, this collection contains a spectrum of interpretation ranging from novel insights to pedestrian rehashings. Despite its weaknesses, the stronger essays and parts of others make this work useful although not path-breaking.

Colin Loader
Department of History
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
loaderc@unlv.nevada.edu

Colin Loader's primary interests lie in the history of German sociology. He has authored two books and edited one on Karl Mannheim and written articles on Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Alfred Weber and Mannheim. He is currently working on a book-length study of Alfred Weber.

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