Reconsidering Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

SOLOMON STEIN AND VIRGIL HENRY STORR

Since the initial publication of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (henceforth *TPE*) in 1905, Max Weber's arguments have been subjected to extensive debate concerning both the validity of the work's method and the accuracy of its substantive theses.[1] It has been both championed as an exemplary text of sociological analysis and condemned as inaccurate and indeed even subversive; its concepts have found application across a wide variety of contexts outside of Weber's original lines of inquiry; and it continues to be taught in universities (with a greater or lesser extent of fidelity to the various caveats and qualifications Weber included in his argument). *TPE*'s prominence is arguably sufficient to often overshadow the remainder of Weber's corpus.[2]

This article offers a reconsideration of *The Protestant Ethic,* beginning with a discussion of the book's central arguments and continuing with a brief discussion of its stature as a key text in economics and sociology and a review of the literature that has

Solomon Stein is a senior research fellow in the F. A. Hayek Program for Advanced Study in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at the Mercatus Center, George Mason University. **Virgil Henry Storr** is senior research fellow, the senior director of Academic and Student Programs, and Don C. Lavoie Senior Fellow in the F. A. Hayek Program for Advanced Study in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at the Mercatus Center, George Mason University, as well as research associate professor of economics in the Department of Economics at George Mason University.

1. See Peter Baehr and Gordon Wells's (2002) introduction to their translation of *The Protestant Ethic* for a review of this voluminous literature up to the end of the twentieth century. We use this translation (Weber 2002) throughout, and subsequent citations to it give the abbreviation *TPE* and page numbers only.

2. Particularly in the Anglo-American context, where Talcott Parsons's translation of *The Protestant Ethic* was the portion of Weber's work most readily accessible to non-German speakers and through which concepts such as the evocative (although perhaps somewhat imprecise [see Baehr and Wells 2002]) "iron cage" entered the lexicon of Anglophone social science.

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attempted to assess its key claims. We then conclude with a discussion of the text's key insights that might still speak to the modern social scientist.

Does Capitalism Have a Spirit?

Weber advances five core claims in *TPE*:[3] (1) capitalism takes on different forms; (2) each form is animated by a particular "spirit"; (3) the "spirit" in modern capitalism is one of this-worldly asceticism; (4) the features of this asceticism resemble in large part the ethical orientation within Protestantism, especially in its Calvinist and Puritan forms; and (5) it is this "elective affinity" (*TPE,* 36) that grounds the spirit particular to industrial capitalism as it emerged in the West in these forms of Protestantism.[4]

Weber's claim (1), that capitalism is capable of a multiplicity of forms, is far more conventional in the contemporary context, where stadial theories of economic development are all but extinct and there is an entire framework referred to as "varieties of capitalism."[5] Weber both employs a conceptual and methodological view in which capitalism is capable of variation and describes a few (ideal-typical) varieties.[6] As a conceptual question, acknowledging the possibility that there are "varieties of capitalism" begins with a rejection of deterministic histories of capitalism.[7] If the historical development of economic institutions involves contingencies, that relationship requires an understanding of those institutions as having (at least conceivable) alternative forms. Weber likewise argues against treating capitalistic modes of economic activity as exclusively a modern phenomenon. The features that are often invoked as unique to (or as the cause of) the contemporary capitalist era, Weber explained, usually existed in other eras. Modern capitalism, for instance, lacks a historical monopoly on greed and opportunism as human motivations (*TPE,* 14–15) or on the particular institutional forms associated with business organization (*TPE,* 19, 36),[8] nor was it the first domain of social activity to become systematically rationalized (*TPE,* 27). Recognition that, as

3. See Storr 2013 for a lengthier discussion of Weber's core arguments in *TPE.*

4. The way in which Weber poses the question as quoted is sensible only against the backdrop of the first and second propositions.

5. Although most research concerned with the institutional variation among market economies may be understood as studying varieties of capitalism in a broad sense, the phrase "varieties of capitalism" is also associated with work that builds upon the particular ideal-typical institutional configurations developed in Hall and Soskice 2001. For a recent examination of the state of this research program, see Hall 2018.

6. Weber does so despite his belief to the contrary at the time of the initial composition of *TPE;* these elements are drawn out more explicitly once Weber comes to adopt his later view embracing a multiplicity of historical capitalisms (see, for example, *TPE,* 278 n. 32).

7. "[W]e must of course reject any notion that economic changes could have led to the Reformation as a 'historically necessary development.' . . . On the other hand, however, we have no intention of defending any such foolishly doctrinaire thesis as that the 'capitalist spirit[,]' . . . let alone capitalism itself, *could only* arise as a result of certain influences from the Reformation" (*TPE,* 36, italics in original).

8. Modern capitalism does involve, however, a unique combination of those institutions compared with other societies (see Weber 1978, 379–80).

Weber suggests, at least some form of capitalistic organization of economic activity "has always existed . . . *from as far back as our knowledge of history extends*" (*TPE,* 256, emphasis in original),[9] we should consider not a dichotomy between precapitalist and capitalist societies but rather contrasts between alternative capitalisms.[10]

In *TPE,* Weber is concerned with the general orientation toward economic activity that existed alongside a given form of capitalism—that is, the "style of life" that individuals within a particular type of capitalism are engaged in. Weber conceptualizes these modes of conduct in terms of (any given) capitalism's *animating spirit*—an ideal-typical illustration of the interlinked modes of orientation that are conditioned upon and that reciprocally condition economic activity (claim [2]). Weber's "spirit" is methodological rather than metaphysical, marking out a certain locus of ideas as of particular importance in the development of the particularities that define a particular capitalistic form. In modern capitalism, Weber argued, the animating spirit involves an "attitude which, *in pursuit of a calling,* strives systematically for profit for its own sake" (TPE, 19, italics in original). In Weber's view, although this particular attitude was far from universal among historical capitalisms, the mutually supporting elective affinities between this orientation and capitalist institutions justified thinking of this attitude as "the" capitalist spirit. However, Weber also freely admits (as seen earlier) that there have always been activities that can be accurately described as capitalistic but were animated on the basis of quite different conducts of life and that there remain individuals whose economic orientations are best understood in terms of those other spirits, even in the contemporary case. We can thus conceive of the spirit of (modern) capitalism that Weber develops in *TPE* as an orientation with a particular elective affinity to (and thus relevance in) modern capitalism without upsetting any of Weber's other arguments.

The existence of multiple types of capitalism across space and time, each of which involves modes of conduct that reflect distinct animating "spirits," provides the analytical scaffolding upon which Weber develops his account of the spirit particular to modern capitalism (claim [3]). The modern spirit's emphasis on the unbounded pursuit of profit[11] is contrasted with a "traditionalist" (*TPE,* 15) spirit, which understands economic activity as the means to secure the resources needed to live in the style to which one is accustomed. As noted earlier, the spirit of modern capitalism shares with the historical forms of capitalism, which Weber saw as universally present, an alternative conception that favors pursuit of as much wealth as can be attained. Importantly,

9. The particular type of capitalistic activity Weber is speaking of here is large-scale international finance and is a distinct and contrasting type from the spirit Weber sees as distinctive to modern capitalism (see Weber 1978, 1118). Capitalism's variability is, as this suggests, possible within as well as among economies.

10. We should also remember that here the term *capitalism* is not being used as a metonym for economic activity in general but to refer to one set of ways in which that activity is organized alongside other ways, such as Weber's *oikos* (1978, 381–84), which is fundamentally not capitalistic in orientation.

11. That is, in terms of magnitude. With respect to *ethical* boundaries of acceptable behavior in service of profit making, the modern spirit of capitalism is, for Weber, far more rigidly devoted to the ethical-legal norms of commercial transactions than were its ancient counterparts.

however, the spirit of modern capitalism differs from what we might call this "profiteering" ethos of amoral opportunism typical in different spaces and places—for example, tax farming and the financing of colonial expeditions. The spirit of modern capitalism involves the adoption of profit making as a fundamental ethic whose systematic and rational pursuit imbues it with an ascetic character: the ideal-typical entrepreneurial actor of modern capitalism, Weber explains, "shuns ostentation and unnecessary show, spurns the conscious enjoyment of his power, and is embarrassed by the outward signs of the social esteem in which he is held. . . . He 'gets nothing out of' his wealth for his own person—other than the irrational sense of 'fulfilling his vocation'" (*TPE,* 24). The ascetic element of this orientation, which "shuns ostentation and unnecessary show," is more than just the presence of elements of self-denial on the entrepreneur's part. Asceticism in this sense, for Weber, is but one possible behavioral response suggested by the ascetic mindset, which conceives of religious salvation as the result of "active ethical behavior performed in the awareness that god directs this behavior . . . [and] characterized by a methodical procedure for achieving religious salvation" (1978, 541). Asceticism, Weber argues, inevitably involves an adversarial relationship with "the world," arising both from (what according to the ascetic's standpoint are) the ethically meaningless considerations that determine its structure and from the numerous alternatives (one might say "temptations") it offers that distract from the consistent adherence to a rational program of salvation. One possible ascetic approach is therefore a withdrawal as much as is necessary (or possible) from interactions that are devoid of (or are distractions from) the divinely prescribed modes of conduct: this is the "world-rejecting" asceticism reflected in monasticism. Alternatively, the ascetic could establish an alternative set of relationships appropriate to the systematic pursuit of salvation within the social world, insisting upon a systematic, religiously meaningful pattern of life within the extant context. These alternative patterns are inner-worldly forms of asceticism,[12] which include that of the modern entrepreneur.[13] Of course, the entrepreneur within modern capitalism is oriented toward the systematic and meaningful pursuit of profit and not of religious salvation. But, Weber suggests, the profit that drives the entrepreneur animated by the modern capitalist spirit is profit resulting from rigorous adherence to the market's ethical norms.[14]

12. The term *inner-worldly* is the literal translation of Weber's term *innerweltliche* into English, but the translation *this-worldly* might be less liable to mislead regarding the distinction at play here. This is particularly true within *TPE* itself, where the discussion of Protestant asceticism's inner-worldliness (82) is preceded only a few pages earlier by Weber's discussion of the "inward release" (75) of the individual from the world resulting from the doctrine of predestination, which Weber then links to the ethic of the calling—and so the believer's psychological "inner world" results in a manifestation that is "inner-worldly" precisely because it focuses upon conduct within the *outer world*.

13. Both forms of asceticism, for Weber, involve a definite rejection and opposition to the social relationships of the ordinary world, in contrast to a simple desire for retreat or escape from them, which he associates with mysticism (see Weber 1978, 545–46).

14. Part of what makes Benjamin Franklin's maxims the ideal illustration of modern capitalism's particular spirit is that he portrays the ethical system of entrepreneurial asceticism not as a code of conduct that is

It might be supposed that instead of entering into economic activity, the spirit of inner-worldly asceticism is drawn out from that activity as the inexorable consequence of competitive pressures on survivorship, much as Armen Alchian (1950) describes.[15] Weber in large part agrees that in societies where market institutions are already developed so that a market ethos is dominant, the institutions might select for and perpetuate the ethos, hence the "iron cage." But this point is reached only because of the prior adoption of a market ethos within a social context not already ordered in this fashion. Weber's proposes that *this* first adoption can be traced to primarily religious origins, within Protestantism and Puritanism in particular (claim [4]), as a consequence of which asceticism "would enter the market place of life, slamming the doors of the monastery behind it, and set about permeating precisely this secular everyday life with its methodical approach" (*TPE,* 105).

Weber's discussion of the theological and pastoral doctrines of various Protestant denominations accordingly attempts both to establish that this inner-worldly asceticism was an element (indeed, a distinctive one) of those religious orientations and to offer an explanation of why those doctrines led to the sort of meaningful reorganization of everyday activity's significance into the (ultimately self-sustaining) structures of modern capitalism. Weber's extended discussion of the conceptual and linguistic novelty of the "calling" as understood in Reformation thought is intended to address the first prong of this claim. In brief, Weber understands Martin Luther's introduction (via the translation of a particular passage in the Apocrypha) of the "calling" as part of Luther's elevation of conduct within the everyday over the retreat to monasticism. Weber contends that because Luther's conception of "the everyday" remained primarily traditionalistic, Luther did not personally associate the idea of the "calling" with an explicitly capitalistic orientation. In keeping with what Weber understands as the increasing importance of divine providence in Luther's overall theological outlook, the significance of attending to one's "calling" is recognition that conduct in one's assigned station and circumstance, being providentially ordered, must therefore be an ethically sufficient condition for salvation. Within Calvinism and other Reformed denominations, however, this same concept took on an alternative significance: the providential origin of one's inner-worldly occupational calling meant that this calling was itself of ethical significance, what Weber describes as the view that "work in a calling was a (or rather the) divinely appointed *task*" (*TPE,* 32, italics in original).[16] This second aspect of the idea of the calling, involving as it does "earnest Puritan worldliness, that is, valuing life as a task to be accomplished," Weber

ethically required and happens to be commercially useful, but as one in which the commercial utility of a particular code of conduct makes adherence to it ethically binding.

15. At least within those circumstances where this sort of ethically systematic approach is advantageous. See McCloskey 2016; Storr and Choi 2019.

16. We might therefore see Luther as having developed an inner-worldly theology, and only in Calvinism and other Reformed sects did this theology become a full-fledged inner-worldly *asceticism*.

argues, "would have been impossible in the mouth of a medieval writer. But neither is it in accord with Lutheranism" (*TPE,* 34).

Accordingly, when Weber pursues the second prong of his argument, his focus rests on the forms of Protestantism that in his formulation are most associated with the calling-as-task interpretation. Thus, we have now reached "the thesis" of the folk conception of *TPE* (but that on our reading is a single claim—claim [5]—within the overall argument of the work), concerning the relationship between the theological doctrines in particular Reformed sects and the spirit of modern capitalism. Weber's account begins from the doctrine of predestination, which, like the concept of the calling, underwent a profound change in significance between Luther and Lutheranism (in which it is, although not repudiated, of muted importance) and an elevation to a central dogma within Calvanism—thereby transforming the relationship between the faithful and religious salvation.[17] Because one's membership (or not) among the elect has already been determined for all time and the reasons for that determination are wholly transcendent, religious observance can hardly rest on a "transactional" basis in which sacramental conduct and adherence to specified ethical precepts will be rewarded by the divine being. This transformation of the relationship between the faithful and religious salvation did not result in the abandonment of ceremonial and ethical obligations but rather in the articulation of an alternative understanding of the meaning of their performance. Thus, in Calvinism, per Weber's interpretation, the significance of religiously oriented activity is as a reflection of divine majesty. As he writes, "The world was destined to serve the self-glorification of *God,* and the Christian existed to do his part to increase the praise of God in the world by obeying his commands. God willed the social achievement of the Christian, *because* it was his will that the social structure of life should accord with his commands and be organized in such a way as to achieve this purpose. . . . Labor in a *calling,* in the service of the secular life of the community, also shared *this* character" (*TPE,* 75, italics in original). This perspective readily lends itself to an inner-worldly rather than world-rejecting asceticism, given that the natural, everyday world itself is (on this view) teleologically ordered toward divine sanctification. Embracing one's obligation to effect the exaltation of God through one's assigned calling was, furthermore, recommended as the surest path to self-assurance as to the fact of one's election,[18] and, as a result, Weber explains, "the spiritual aristocracy of the monks, who stood outside and above the world, was replaced by the spiritual aristocracy of the saints *in* the world" (*TPE,* 83, italics in original).[19]

17. Weber's discussion of Calvin's intellectual development (*TPE,* 72) leaves it unclear whether Calvin's attention to the logic of the doctrine reflects its importance within his theology or if, alternatively, its (eventual) dogmatic significance stems from its relatively extensive development within a polemical context or if, indeed, the evolution of Calvin's theology is best described by a related but distinct third alternative case, in which the significance of predestination to intradoctrinal disputation resulted in recognition of the extent to which the entire doctrinal apparatus had been implicitly resting upon this issue from the outset.

18. As Weber notes, this acquisition of self-assurance was often seen not only as something to be desired as a source of psychological relief but also as among the duties incumbent upon the faithful (*TPE,* 75–78).

19. Weber points out that the fundamental affinity between alternative forms of asceticism as rational systems of conduct can be seen in their parallel adoption of practices such as ethical bookkeeping (*TPE,*

Protestant asceticism, Weber argues, regulated economic life in ways that have particular affinity with those appropriate to modern capitalism. Although Protestant asceticism shares with other Christian doctrines (and with the ethical teachings of religions of salvation in general) concerns about material wealth, unregulated consumption became the locus of its moral opprobrium—the paramount danger of riches is the resulting availability of luxuries that have the potential to distract from a meaningful orientation to the glorification of God. For the early Protestants, it was desirable (possibly even obligatory) that the providentially provided resources available be employed toward productive use so long as such employment was subordinate to the appropriate ascetic orientation.[20] In addition to being ethically obligatory, productive effort was commended to the believer on a prudential basis as the surest remedy for theological insecurities—and there could be no more definitive outward sign of one's election (or membership in the "true" Church, for voluntarist sects) than the successes emerging from that effort.

Within these forms of ascetic Protestantism, the combination of restrictive regulation of consumption, ethical impetus toward capital investment of the resulting savings, and the general insistence upon a rationally ordered life[21] meant that the natural result of religious adherence among those groups was economic success—and therefore what Weber describes as the "constant wrestling with the problem of the secularizing influence of wealth" (*TPE,* 118).

Within these final sections of *TPE,* as Weber traces the elective affinities between the ideal-typical spirit of modern capitalism and the ideal-typical ethic of ascetic Protestantism he has previously developed, there might appear to be little trace of the caveats and limitations through which he hedged in the entire project from the outset—and so the temptation to understand the final pages of *TPE* as aiming to provide a (indeed, *the*) definitive account of the rise of modern capitalism is understandable, particularly given the self-consciously literary style of composition.[22] We should recall, however, the element of deliberate amplification of certain features involved in the construction of ideal types, so we might therefore expect that a discussion

84–85). Given the close association between the keeping of accounts and commercial practices, one somewhat ironic consequence of the inner-worldly asceticism arising from the rejection of a transactional perspective on religious action is the resonance within Protestant devotional literature of the metaphor of God as shopkeep (albeit one with whom no genuine transaction can be made).

20. This attitude is diametrically opposed to that of feudal status groups, for whom commercial activity pursued in this fashion was stigmatized as undue "acquisitiveness," and ostentation was a social obligation (see *TPE,* 116; Weber states elsewhere, "'Luxury' in the sense of rejecting purposive-rational control of consumption is for the dominant feudal strata nothing superfluous: it is a means of social self-assertion" [1978, 1106]).

21. That is, in terms of purposive action oriented either by an ultimate value or by instrumental means–ends relationships: for Weber, these are only two of the several possible bases for action (see Weber 1978, 24–25). From a perspective that methodologically takes the means–ends orientation of action as universal, this claim regarding the nature of asceticism (which would, strictly speaking, be invalid) might have an alternative formulation as calling for action *consciously* directed toward certain ends and thereby obtaining a degree of intertemporal and cross-contextual consistency of plans atypical of "normal" individual conduct.

22. This is evident from Weber's drawing upon Goethe directly as well as upon Nietzsche via allusion.

of the constructive interactions between them would all the more so have a relatively suppressed treatment of potentially confounding factors. The apparent certainty of Weber's claims here can thus be thought of as no more definitive than the identification and description of the underlying ideal types and so as of an admittedly preliminary and incomplete character. Evaluation of Weber's description of the nature of modern capitalism, ascetic Protestantism, and their mutual affinities—what we have referred to as his claims (3),(4), and (5)—in terms of their adequacy as a causal theory for uniquely associating the emergence of modern capitalism with the influence of ascetic Protestantism imposes an argumentative weight upon them far greater than what they were originally, quite admittedly, intended to bear (and it is therefore unsurprising when, for a variety of reasons, *The Protestant Ethic* is judged to come up short).

This explanation is not intended to insulate *TPE* from criticism entirely because there are numerous ways in which Weber's substantive claims might ultimately be mistaken on their own terms—the spirit of modern capitalism or of ascetic Protestantism could be fundamentally mischaracterized, for instance. After a century of scholarship on the book, a substantial array of arguments are aimed at demonstrating exactly that sort of claim,[23] and it would be a mistake to treat Weber's interpretations of Protestantism, capitalism, or even Wilhemenian Germany as definitive—or perhaps even as correct at all (see, for instance, Storr and Stein 2019). We can note, however, that it is the substantive rather than the methodological elements of Weber's argument in *TPE* that have been the subject of critical attention, whether fair or otherwise. This literature offering assessments regarding *TPE*'s "thesis" now extends for more than a century, with no sign of coming to an end. Key works offering an overall assessment of both Weber and the secondary literature on *TPE* are the books by Gordon Marshall (1982) and Richard Hamilton (1996), with subsequent contributions including a book by Jere Cohen (2002) and the centenary volume edited by William Swatos and Lutz Kaelber (2016). A recent presentation of the case for a negative assessment of the explanatory value of *TPE* can be found in Deirde McCloskey's book *Bourgeois Equality* (2016, 27–84). Assessments of Weber's thesis continue to be an active and heterogeneous literature, something well illustrated by the contrast between just two (of many) strands within more recent work self-identified as testing the Weber thesis. One of these assessments, by Sascha Becker and Ludger Woessmann (2009) within economics (see also Nunziata and Rocco 2018), involves econometric estimation of the significance of religious affiliation for economic activity primarily within continental Europe, and several business historians (e.g., McKinstry and Ding 2013; Kininmonth 2016) have examined the documentary histories of individual family-owned firms in an Anglophone context as case studies to evaluate the correspondence between Weber's

23. One instance where this claim is well established concerns the statistics to which Weber refers regarding German schooling. The problems here include not only an obvious arithmetical error in both editions of *TPE* (*TPE*, 44 n. 7) but also inaccuracy when compared to the underlying data as well as Weber's reliance upon such flimsy statistical evidence (see Baehr and Wells 2002, xliv n. 14, drawing upon Hamilton 1996 and Becker 1997).

account of the economic character of Protestant inner-worldly asceticism and the behavior of Protestant managerial dynasties. Any attempt to produce a single "verdict" reflecting the entire available literature faces the daunting preliminary task of rendering these assessments (and the many other alternatives pursued) commensurable. Deciding whether *TPE* is "right" or "wrong" therefore becomes degenerate with interpretation of the relative importance, intended explanatory scope, and claimed causal power of its claims (3), (4), and (5) (as we have divided them here).

The Status of *The Protestant Ethic*

The Protestant Ethic's own stature offers us one context in which to situate it—that is, alongside the rare class of works in the social sciences that scholars continuously engage with for reasons outside of (and in addition to) the works' importance to the history of thought. In this sense, it is of a kind with Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Marx's key writings.[24] Each of these works and the thinkers who produced them were concerned with the perennially relevant question of the origins and characteristics of economic systems, particularly of industrial capitalism (whose beginnings were contemporaneous with Smith and which became the defining feature of modernity for Marx and Weber). Furthermore, their longevity and generative role within the social sciences is less a result of the particular conclusions they reach than upon the general analytical capacity of the frameworks in which those conclusions are embedded.[25] *TPE* derives its enduring interest less as result of its providing the right answers (if it can be understood to be providing "an answer" at all, as discussed earlier) than in asking the right questions: How do belief systems and societies interact? Why did modern capitalism emerge where it did and when it did? What is the significance of that history at present? And what might it portend for the future? In addition, as we have discussed, *TPE* offers an intriguing approach to answering these important questions.

Admittedly, it is not entirely clear that *The Protestant Ethic*, arrayed against the rest of Weber's work, would be the front-runner for inclusion in the sociological canon as his definitive contribution.[26] There are, of course, arguments in favor of elevating *TPE* to the status it has achieved—among them, the biographical significance of its publication in 1905 as Weber's "return" to scholarship following his period of breakdown; that Weber engaged in multiple rounds of responses to criticism of *TPE;* and that the revised

24. One hesitates to say that *Das Kapital* in its entirety receives (or merits) ongoing attention of this kind (i.e., the transformation problem), so making this comparison intends to capture the longevity of engagement (for better and worse) with the overall picture of social systems Marx develops. (The same sort of caveat could readily apply to some portions of *The Wealth of Nations* as well, most notoriously to the aptly titled "digression on silver.")

25. See, for instance, Smith's arguments against mercantilism or the epochal progression of Marx's historical materialism.

26. See Ghosh 2014 for a reading of *TPE* and of Weber as a whole framed in this way. This interpretation has, however, been subject to criticism from other Weber scholars (e.g., Rosenberg 2016; Whimster 2016).

edition of 1920 is among his last completed works. In addition, *TPE* represents a confluence between Weber's topical interests in comparative historical studies of alternative capitalisms, the relationship between religion and social (particularly economic) life, and the nature of the drive toward rationalization characteristic of modernity, while also touching upon the pressing political and social issues facing Germany in his day.[27] Finally, *TPE* is an example of a study in which Weber employs the "ideal types" associated with his methodological writings.

Yet *TPE* is also an odd choice as Weber's best contribution to the sociological canon. It is not and does not purport to be either a definitive magnum opus or a systematic outline of Weber's thought, which *Economy and Society* (Weber 1978) comes closer to providing. It is not his most developed contribution to the sociology of religion, for which his treatments of ancient China, India, and Judaism would be preferable (see Buss 2015). Nor is it the work that most directly embodies Weber's methodological and political commitments, for which we might instead turn to his "vocation" lectures (Weber 2004). We might also be concerned about the extent to which *TPE*'s stature places a stress upon its substantive thesis beyond what that thesis is intended to bear. Recall, Weber explicitly says that his descriptions are "provisional" and that he has laid them out in what he describes as a "sketch" (*TPE,* 9, 15, 121). That project, as Weber understood it, was "merely asking which of certain characteristic elements of this [modern] culture might be *attributable* to the influence of the Reformation as historical cause" (*TPE,* 36, italics in original).

What Remains of *The Protestant Ethic*?

TPE continues to be a work with ongoing potential value for social science as (*a*) a model for thinking through the potential of there being multiple forms of capitalism[28] and (*b*) the methodological prototype for the study of the relationship between society's cultural (in the Geertzian sense) and economic facets. This would be true even if *none* of the substantive claims Weber advances can be even partially sustained (and have already been exhausted of all possible suggestive value).

Weber's claims (1) and (2) also provide "a model for conducting culturally aware economic analysis . . . in a particular context: (i) identify the particular economic spirit, (ii) sketch out its probable historical and cultural roots, and (iii) describe how it impacts

27. The motivation Weber provides in the opening pages of *TPE* regarding the differential outcomes between sects within the German education system, for instance, is not merely an observational "puzzle" Weber looks to explain but rather is closely related to the sectarian political tensions of Wilhemine Germany in the wake of the *Kulturkampf* (see G. Becker 2000).

28. Although the arrival of the concept of a multiplicity of capitalisms into the comparative political economy (particularly following the fall of the Soviet Union) has multiple antecedents (see Jackson and Deeg 2006), including Weber, the variations considered in contemporary work are rarely, if ever, those that were of significance for Weber's analysis. Contemporary work predominately treats capitalisms at the level of cross-national institutional variations rather than in the form of activity of the individual economic actor, and so this distinction and others leave ample room for complementarity between analysis that returns to Weber's divisions and the present literature (see Aligica and Tarko 2015, esp. chap. 5).

economic life" (Storr 2013, 39). So much of this literature is indebted to Weber.[29] Given the inevitable interrelationship between cultural and economic reality and the thoroughly unsatisfactory treatment of those relationships resulting from the dominant approaches prevalent in current (particularly economic) studies (see Storr 2103), *The Protestant Ethic* has an ongoing role to play as an exemplar of this alternative approach. Although it should not be allowed to overshadow the rest of Weber's work, it nevertheless warrants continued engagement.

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29. The work included in the edited collection *Culture and Economic Action* (Grube and Storr 2015, esp. part 2), for instance, is informed by this approach to culture (although not always in the "templated" form quoted here). Along similar lines but drawing from Weber more broadly rather than exclusively from *TPE*, Ludwig Lachmann (1971) attempts to develop a framework for understanding economic relationships in general (of which *TPE*-style inquiries would be one subset), and Weber serves as a similar starting point for the general approach to culture that Clifford Geertz (1973) develops.

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