

REVIEW ESSAY

New and Old Spirits of Capitalism

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BARBALET, JACK. Weber, Passion and Profits. ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’ in Context. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2008. 264 pp. Ill. £52.00; \$92.00.

GHOSH, PETER. A Historian Reads Max Weber. Essays on the Protestant Ethic. [Kultur- und sozialwissenschaftliche Studien, Band 1.] Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2008. xii, 302 pp. € 58.00.

RADKAU, JOACHIM. Max Weber. A Biography. Transl. by Patrick Camiller. Polity, Cambridge [etc.] 2009. xix, 683 pp. Ill. £25.00; € 28.80.

The reorganization of labour relations and production that has occurred in the past few decades has been accompanied by a shift in the set of values, or ethics, that are supposed to guide the lives of individuals. Just as Fordism shaped its own working ethic, in which industriousness and specialization, rigidity, and the monotony of the labour process were compensated by the incentives of security and the guarantee of a new consumption pattern, post-Fordism, or “a more flexible form of accumulation” as David Harvey puts it,¹ has also forged its own *homo faber*. Under the latter regime, “the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life” in particular are emphasized, “rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism.”²

Such a new “humanist” project, so to speak, of capitalist reorganization was the theme of the now classic *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by the sociologist Luc Boltanski and the management theorist Ève Chiapello, originally published in French in 1999, with an English translation

1. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, 1989).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

appearing in 2006.³ By undertaking a comparative analysis of management documents from the 1960s and 1990s, Boltanski and Chiapello show how the changes in management techniques, in the terminology employed, and in the set of motivations used to propel people to work are symptomatic of the rise of a new “spirit”: namely, a new “ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism”, calling for “workforce participation” in a new way.⁴

Beside the undoubted relevance of the topic, reference to the novelty of this “spirit” gained instant attention and consideration for a second important reason. For it immediately recalled the “old” and most famous “spirit” of capitalism that Max Weber analysed and made internationally famous over a century before the English translation of its French sequel.

As is well known, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905) Weber conceived the work ethics developed under the new mode of production as the outcome of a very peculiar elective affinity (*Wahlverwandschaft*): the affinity between what Weber conceived as a rational economic system *in fieri* and a new religious doctrine initiated by the Protestant Reformation and its aftermaths. Whether or not directly shaped by this “affine” values-set rooted in religious beliefs – an issue that monopolized most of the commentaries on the book – in Weber’s view the emergence and increasing dominance of the capitalist mode of production greatly benefited from Protestant and in particular Puritan principles: sobriety, self-discipline, honesty, preciseness, accomplishment of one’s *Beruf* in business, and the search for professional success as a possible sign of God’s grace. According to this account, Protestantism provided not only capitalist entrepreneurs with a *Lebensführung*, but also workers, who were thus taught in the virtues of specialization, rationality, and industriousness.

Hence, Boltanski and Chiapello’s volume has revived Weber’s theoretical approach in social history studies by emphasizing that “people need powerful moral reasons for rallying to capitalism”, and that capital’s organic intellectuals are always ready to find new ways to provide such reasons.⁵ However, far from being a simple restatement of Weber’s overall thesis for the present, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* represents the tip of an iceberg, an indicator of the complex ways and forms in which Weber’s famous essay continues to exert an influence on contemporary debates.

One cannot properly talk of a Weberian renaissance; rather, what we are seeing is the perennial nature of one of the undoubtedly most classic and

3. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (New York [etc.], 2006).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

enduring texts of the social sciences. The reasons for this longevity – perhaps comparable only to that of Karl Marx, Weber’s own imagined antagonist – reside not only in the wide spectrum and depth of his work in general (from ancient economic history, to religious studies, political theory, sociology of rights, and so forth), but also to the Parsonsian operation of exporting Weber’s manifesto to the United States. It was here in the 1930s, and particularly after World War II, that the fortunes of the German “sociologist” began to flourish. The homeland of Henry Ford and of the myriad of Protestant sects constituted the ideal environment for the reception of the thesis of the historical influence of ascetic Protestantism in shaping modern capitalism. The admiring portrayal of American society not only played a role in making the fortune of Weber’s *oeuvre* worldwide, it also favoured the dissemination of his original idea: namely, the thesis that capitalism is primarily a Christian ideology that found its place of election in the land of the Christian diaspora.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism has still not lost its initial appeal. The new wave of interest, however, does not seem to be based on the historical plausibility of its thesis, but rather on the image of Max Weber as the “Marx of the bourgeoisie”, in Salomon’s evocative phrase, to which it gave rise.⁶ In the past two years alone a number of important studies have appeared in English that promise to lead in the near future to a deepening of the revived interest in Weber’s famous thesis.

Peter Ghosh’s *A Historian Reads Max Weber: Essays on the Protestant Ethic* is certainly one of the most prominent outcomes of this recent wave.⁷ The collection of essays that constitutes the book springs from the author’s own forthcoming translation and commentary of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic*; a new rendition that – as Scott puts it – “is a spin-off of what promises to be his definitive translation of the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* with full scholarly apparatus and all textual variations”.⁸

A lecturer in modern history at the University of Oxford, Peter Ghosh announces his essays and his new translation as a “revenge” of the historian against the “a-historical elevation” and “canonical status” of the *Protestant Ethic*. With the aim of “escaping inherited stereotype and the mortal inertia inherent in the belief that the text is ‘well-known’”,⁹ Ghosh employs a “deconstructive” and “disintegrative” method which enables him to shed new light on Weber’s work.

6. Albert Salomon, “Max Weber”, *Die Gesellschaft*, 3 (1926), pp. 131–153.

7. Ghosh, *A Historian Reads Max Weber*.

8. Alan Scott’s review of Jack Barbalet, *Weber, Passion and Profits: ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’*, *Context, Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*, 34 (2009), pp. 903–905.

9. Ghosh, *A Historian Reads Max Weber*, p. 1.

Owing to such an approach, the subject of Ghosh's analysis becomes the text itself and the trajectory of its author in his "contribution to German and European ideas".¹⁰ Ghosh's promise to demonstrate how the *Protestant Ethic* is still *terra incognita* begins with the scrutiny of one of Weber's central concepts, Puritanism. By considering Weber's sources on British Protestantism, Ghosh reconstructs in detail the ways in which Weber employed such a concept as a "synonym for 'ascetic Protestantism' in its English, Dutch and (in fact) American heartland".¹¹ It is here that, according to Ghosh, it is possible to see Weber's "originality relative to his German contemporaries" and his prominent "Anglophilia".¹²

Ghosh offers too a detailed and cautious reconsideration of the role played by Dutch Protestantism and capitalism in the development of his ideas, which in many respects runs counter to the widespread idea that tends to accord a much greater centrality to Weber's "Dutch moment" than it deserved. Maintaining this detective-like "method of commentary" that goes "through [the] text page by page, word by word",¹³ Ghosh's remaining chapters sustain the initial promise, for they provide crucial and novel information on the different aspects involved in the composition of the work Weber considered to be his *Hauptarbeit*.¹⁴ From the analysis of the neglected Address to the St Louis Congress of Arts and Sciences of 1904, an original consideration of the role played by Weber's interest in Judaism – to which he devoted one of the studies that comprise the collected essays in the sociology of religion¹⁵ – to the very detailed reconstruction of Weber's debt to the German theological tradition and the Austrian school of marginal utility theory, Ghosh's 300-page study constitutes a font from which older and younger scholars can fruitfully draw.

However, apart from the mainly informative status of his reading, Ghosh does not fail to offer his own interpretative perspective. Thus, he not only questions the idea that Weber was "as much a politician *manqué* as a thinker",¹⁶ he also considers Weber to be "unrepresentative". With respect to the *Kultur* of German-speaking countries in the late nineteenth century, Ghosh's Weber stands out as an oddity and, as such, as "extraordinary". It is perhaps in light of this "extraordinariness" that

10. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

14. In a letter Weber sent to Heinrich Rickert on 14 June 1904; Nachlass Max Weber, 30/4 B1.94; (cited in Ghosh, *A Historian Reads Max Weber*, p. 4).

15. Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Tübingen, 1923).

16. Ghosh, *A Historian Reads Max Weber*, p. 3.

Ghosh interprets Weber's essays on Protestantism as a break with his previous work.

Until we grapple with this text there can no be intellectual biography of Max Weber, because the PE is in a very real sense the centre point of his life. It is the central text [...] of a middle, essayistic phase of his career which spans the years c. 1902–09. This ill-determined period follows on from the evident hiatus created by his nervous collapse to create the sense of something like a total rupture – or so it would seem.¹⁷

Constituting a very different reading in many respects is Jack Barbalet's *Weber, Passion and Profits: 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' in Context*.¹⁸ Currently professorial fellow in sociology at the University of Western Sydney, Barbalet presents his book as a critical inquiry into Weber's most renowned work. From the emphasis upon the Weberian notion of *Beruf*, his remark on the similarities between the thesis presented in the *Protestant Ethic* and Adam Smith's as well as Thorstein Veblen's work, Barbalet's general attempt is to unravel Weber's essay as centred on the question of emotions and self-control in the period of transition to industrial capitalism. Yet, by analysing the *Protestant Ethic* in its biographical and political context Barbalet aims in particular to articulate the reasons for its composition in light of Weber's previous research programme, rather than in opposition to it. Unlike positions such as Ghosh's, which have tended to read the *Protestant Ethic* as the expression of a *coupure* in Weber's work – almost recalling the way Althusser read the *German Ideology* in Marx's intellectual development – Barbalet advocates its continuity. Such a counter-current approach is well worth attentive scrutiny.

Barbalet reads Weber's most famous work as primarily an allegory about "Germany and its alternative possible futures".¹⁹ Weber's depiction of the Protestant personality, of the rational, sober, disciplined entrepreneur and worker imbued with capitalist *Beruf*, is in his account nothing but the depiction of those virtues that Weber regarded as the ones that could enforce German national interests. In this regard, the first chapter of the book – "From the inaugural lecture to the *Protestant Ethic*: political education and German futures" – is particularly convincing. Here the author traces the main reasons behind the composition of the *Protestant Ethic* back to the intellectual and political agenda that Weber outlined ten years earlier.

In his inaugural lecture delivered in 1895 on the occasion of his appointment as Professor of Economics at the University of Freiburg,²⁰ Weber famously diagnosed the problems of the German state as rooted in

17. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

18. Barbalet, *Weber, Passion and Profits*.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

20. "The National State and Economic Policy", in Max Weber, *Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1994).

the backwardness of the *Junkertum* as well as in the political immaturity of the bourgeois class. Both social blocs were accused of being unable to lead Germany to its due *grandeur* particularly because of their failure to defend its national interests. In Weber's view, these were neglected both outside Germany's borders, as the bourgeoisie seemed unable to push for a more aggressive imperialist politics, as well as domestically, as agrarian interests favoured inflows of cheap labour from Poland, which, for Weber, threatened German identity. In this context, however, Weber attacked Polish immigrants not only as an economic threat to national workers, but also for their supposed cultural inferiority as a "Catholic-educated" workforce. By addressing the differences in working ethics between German and Polish workers, Weber thus entered into the German *Kulturkampf* of the end of the nineteenth century with his own peculiar agenda. As he put it:

[...] the political immaturity of broad strata of the German bourgeoisie does not have economic causes [...]. The reason is to be found in its unpolitical past [...] there is an immense work of *political* education to be done, and there is no more serious duty [...] than to be aware of this *task* of contributing to the *political* education of our nation.²¹

As Barbalet highlights, Weber clearly identified the task of German intellectuals as the political education of the bourgeois class in order to teach them how to lead the country rationally and in a modern fashion. However, Weber also argued that the lack of political *Beruf* of the German bourgeoisie was due to the limits of German Protestantism itself. Lutheranism lacked that level of abrupt rationality, impersonality, and specialization that was, instead, the main trait of Anglo-American Puritan personalities. For Barbalet, then, the *Protestant Ethic* should be read as the work that accomplishes the task Weber had set in his inaugural lecture, for it deals with the formation and appraisal of a type of *berufliche* personality and with the attempt to promote it as the ideal that German political leaders had to achieve. As Barbalet recalls, "it was not the promotion of capitalist expansion that *primarily* interested" Weber, "but the development of the *type of humanity (Menschentum)* that was created by the coincidence of religiously and economically determined components".²² For Weber, that type of humanity was first and foremost an autonomous, individualist, and specialized *Fachmann*. In his disdain for feudal, seemingly Catholic-like relations of dependency, mediation, and irrationality, and in its apology of the modern Puritan promotion of

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–27.

22. Max Weber, "A Final Rebuttal of Rachfahl's Critique of the 'Spirit of Capitalism'", in *idem, The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*, Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (eds and trans.) (London, 2002), pp. 299–300.

individualism, Weber spoke the language of the liberal ideology, particularly American ideology, of his time. As Barbalet puts it:

Parsons' translation of the *Protestant Ethic* gave American readers [...] access to what was taken to be an appreciation of a culture and personality type that resonated with an American self-image. [...]. The Protestant virtues that Weber points to in the *Protestant Ethic* were ones that American readers believed they possessed in abundance.²³

The focus upon Weber's political concerns as constantly underlying his work enables Barbalet to reveal a key for reading the *Protestant Ethic* as a politico-pedagogical pamphlet. While perhaps not as philologically focused as Ghosh's work, Barbalet is nonetheless able to highlight the political dimension of Weber's work, which was not only crucial for its composition but also constitutes one of the reasons for the longevity of its influence.

Surprisingly, it is this latter dimension which characterized the "intellectual Max Weber" to such a strong extent, that seems to be overlooked in the final recent publication that I am going to consider, namely Joachim Radkau's *Max Weber: A Biography*.²⁴ First published in German in 2005 – and already confirmed as a fundamental reference work – the 2009 English translation of Radkau's biography immediately drew international and interdisciplinary attention. Weber scholars as well as those interested in his work had already had access to a privileged source of biographical information in the work of his wife, Marianne Weber. However, unlike Marianne's *Ein Lebensbild* of 1926, Radkau's portrayal was able to benefit not only from Guenther Roth's 2001 enormous work – *Max Webers deutsch-englische Familiengeschichte 1800–1950*²⁵ – but also from a more "distanced" perspective. As a historian with a psycho-clinical approach, Radkau has read Weber's life and work as symptomatic of that "nervous disturbance" of German society between the Wilhelminian era and the Third Reich he had already explored in a previous work.²⁶

Radkau's biography pursues a rather prurient red thread. It is through the motif of Weber's own troubled nature, particularly his "sexual misery", that we are led to explore his scientific interests, his political concerns, and the difficulty in reconciling the two. The emphasis Weber seems to put upon the concept of "nature" (which appears almost 3,600 times in the electronic edition of Weber's work) leads Radkau to draw out

23. Barbalet, *Weber, Passion and Profits*, pp. 2–3.

24. Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography*.

25. Guenther Roth, *Max Webers deutsch-englische Familiengeschichte 1800–1950, mit Briefen und Dokumenten* (Tübingen, 2001).

26. See Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität. Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* (Munich, 1998).

the intimate link between his private struggle and his theoretical work. It is in light of an interpretation of nature and particularly “human nature” as the centre of Weber’s work that Radkau also reads the *Protestant Ethic*. Weber’s mental breakdown, which occurred at the action-packed turn of the twentieth century and after which he published the work that made him famous, is seen as the key for revealing Weber’s private trouble in general, and his interest in Protestantism and capitalism in particular.

Without failing to connect Weber’s interest in the relationship between capitalism and religion to well-established sources of inspiration, from Werner Sombart’s similar approach as developed in *Der moderne Kapitalismus* (1902) to Weber’s aim of challenging the Marxists’ supposed mono-causality and economicism,²⁷ Radkau nonetheless reads *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as ultimately a psychotherapeutic and perhaps even psycho-analytical operation.

Feeling quite unable to exercise a regular profession, or even to submit to any discipline governing his work and time [...] [Weber] came to see the rise of a modern discipline of work as a great puzzle and tried to solve it with an intensity he had never shown before.²⁸

How people started subjecting themselves to such an anti-eudemonistic discipline and entered the “iron cage” of this hyper-rationalised world seems to be the question that Radkau attributes to Weber. Yet it is the historical persistence rather than the origin of the “modern discipline of work” that appears to Radkau as the most ingenious and important discovery of Weber’s work. “Weber’s cage”, for Radkau, “had its most durable foundation inside man. For this very reason it was able to survive changes in society and even the process of secularization.”²⁹

Weber’s Protestant asceticism, in Radkau’s passionate reconstruction, was primarily that “sense of restless labour for the purposes of gain” that became “a permanent pressure which, though conflicting with human nature, passed down through the generations to the present day”.³⁰ Radkau’s Weber grasped the power of Protestantism, in connection with capitalism, in its sadistic nature, i.e. in the understanding that “people get a kind of pleasure out of torturing themselves”.³¹ Ultimately, Radkau’s Weber recognized how the “external pressure of competition”, together with its “internalization” in the form of a pathological structure that

27. Radkau emphasizes a number of less explored paths too. For instance, he highlights the impact on Weber of William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902), and of Marianne Weber’s study of the history of marital law and her attention to the Puritans’ conceptions of marriage.

28. Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography*, p. 199.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

denies pleasure and recreation was the most enduring trait of capitalism precisely because it became a second nature.

Though this argument seems to concord with similar interpretations, such as E.P. Thompson's acknowledgement of Weber's insights in relation to the internalization by Methodist labourers of the rewarding function of suffering and sacrifice at work,³² Radkau's interpretation has different implications. By means of a pre-eminence accorded to the concept of nature in Weber's work, Radkau risks "naturalizing" Weber's intellectual life itself. On the one hand, his account properly acknowledges how Weber's attention to the "inner drives" of human action, particularly economic action, revealed an essentialist dimension, often overlooked, of his theoretical approach. This was, for instance, Edward Said's awareness of how "Weber's studies of Protestantism, Judaism and Buddhism blew him [...] into the very territory originally charted and claimed by the Orientalists".³³ By assessing different personalities, or "second natures", religiously forged in different geographical areas, Weber's approach contributed in no insignificant way to disseminating the myth of the industrious Christian labourer against the lazy "Oriental" native.³⁴ On the other hand, by overemphasizing Weber's psychological life Radkau runs the risk of ignoring his political drives. As Barbalet suggests, Weber was a conscious "member of the bourgeois classes" and his intellectual contributions were not detachable from his "partisan" concerns.³⁵

In light of this remark, we can better understand the role of Weber's historical studies on Protestantism and world religions more generally as not so much aiming to provide a precise historical account of the rise of a working ethic between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but rather to answer questions posed at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Weber, the latter task required, as Jan Rehmann puts it, unifying "an ethical mobilization of the economic subject with the ideological formation of *Kulturprotestantismus*".³⁶ In what is still perhaps one of the most subtle reconstructions of the political background to the *Protestant Ethic* – unfortunately not yet translated into English – Rehmann suggests that we need to bear in mind Weber's "addressee and political project". In Rehmann's words, Weber aimed "to liberate the forces of self-moralization

32. See E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963).

33. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), p. 259.

34. This stereotype of "Western" thought was highlighted for instance in the title of Syed Hussein Alatas's, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London, 1977).

35. Weber famously defined himself in this way in his inaugural lecture of 1895. See Weber, *Political Writings*.

36. Jan Rehmann, *Max Weber. Modernisierung als passive Revolution* (Hamburg, 1998), p. 205.

in the bourgeoisie, forces that he considered essential for a Fordist rationalization". Weber then had to "emphasize, with all his strength and at risk of speculation, the 'inner specificity' of the subject". In a Weberian approach, thus, the subject becomes the centre of scientific attention, but in a very particular way. It is not an indeterminate subject, but the "ruling" subject, namely, the bourgeois class as the social group called to undertake the tasks of political leadership. As such, the bourgeoisie, for Weber, must be able to harmonize the needs of the economic system with an adjusted type of work ethics.

It thus remains important to reassess the *Protestant Ethic*. By shedding new light on its content and the reasons behind its composition, we can also better understand, and subject to critique, the link between the mobilization of new working values and the changes in labour organization that so strongly mark the present.