

Weber's Protestant Ethic Thesis in Five Steps

Prof. James J. Chriss, PhD
Department of Criminology, Anthropology, and Sociology,
Cleveland State University, Ohio, USA

Abstract

As a result of many years of reading about and teaching Max Weber's famous Protestant Ethic thesis, I have developed an approach to covering this material in both my undergraduate and graduate theory courses which has been beneficial to students and has helped them make sense of the rather complex argument developed by Weber. I provide a working model of all such scholarly inquiries geared off the Science Triad, culminating in a five-step approach to organizing and explaining the Weber thesis. In addition, I provide an annotated bibliography of selected scholarly ruminations on Weber's work in general and the Protestant Ethic thesis in particular.

Keywords: Weber, Max; Protestant Ethic; idealism; political theology; Science Triad; sociological theory; calling.

Introduction

Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is one of the most prominently featured books in sociological theory courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Indeed, in their list of the top ten books of the twentieth century, the International Sociological Association lists *Protestant Ethic* fourth, right behind Weber's own *Economy and Society* (#1), Mills' *Sociological Imagination* (#2), and Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure* (#3). In this paper I share with readers an approach to teaching Weber's *Protestant Ethic* which I have developed over a number of years. My approach is to break down the theory into discreet parts, using a five-step approach. I include an accompanying figure which provides a summary of the theory in a format that students have found helpful (according to feedback from student evaluations of the undergraduate course). However, when teaching renowned works in sociological theory, we sometimes act too dogmatically in our support of them and lack engagement with works which criticize and find shortcomings in these sacred texts. Hence, I also include an annotated bibliography of selected critical analyses of Weber's theory. This critical discussion serves to engage students in the intricacies of what the theory is attempting to accomplish much more so than the unquestioned acceptance which typically passes for treatment of the theory within (especially) undergraduate theory courses.

The Beginnings

Science begins with a sense of wonder, that is, with noticing some regularity in the social or physical world which sparks curiosity about why and how that observed thing or process works (Stark, 2004). Weber's sense of wonder led him to note that, circa the late nineteenth century, occupational statistics in Germany and elsewhere suggested that in any country of mixed religious composition, those in the higher levels of capitalist enterprise—business leaders, owners of capital, as well as technically and commercially trained employees and managers—are overwhelmingly Protestant. Specifically, one finds substantial differences in the economic and occupational standing of Protestants and Catholics, with Protestants as a group accumulating far more economic resources than Catholics as a group. Weber's sense of wonder leads him to note something about modern capitalism, this being that certain religious groups (Protestants) accumulate more economic property than other religious groups (Catholics).

This, for Weber, is the original dependent or outcome variable which requires explanation. In essence, Weber is concerned primarily with explaining how certain religious ideas (primarily Calvinism) were compatible with a "capitalist spirit" and how this in turn contributed to the rise of capitalism. From this point on I will be referring to Figure 1. The top group of lines represents the real, messy, and typically nonlinear process of theory construction. These later will be reconstructed into a linear causal theory stretching from the early notion of the calling all the way to modern capitalism (as represented by the row of arrows pointing to the right in the middle of the figure).

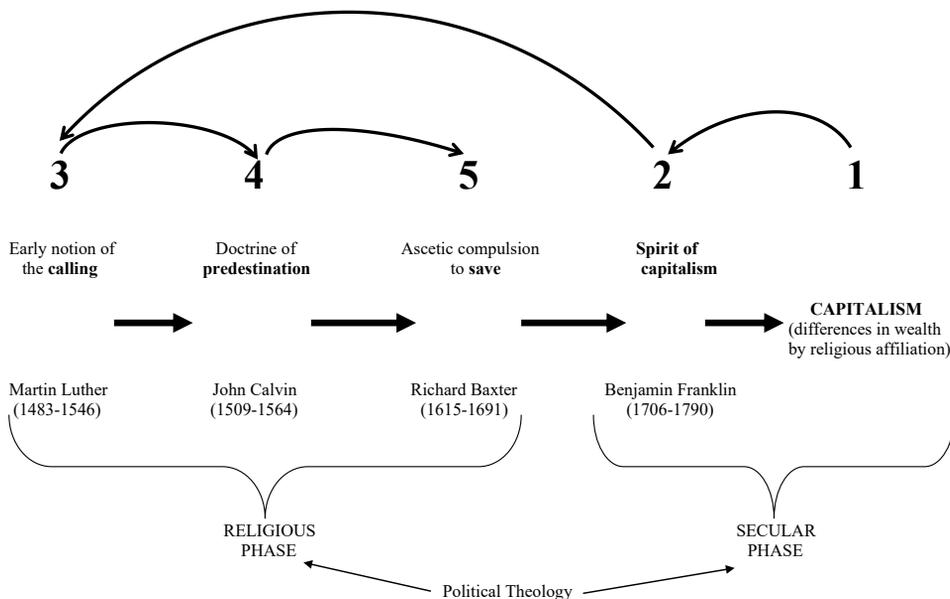


Figure 1. Weber's Protestant Ethic Thesis in Five Steps

The five numbers under the lines at the top of the figure represent the major steps in the construction of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis. Step 1, over to the far right, is Weber's sense of wonder in terms of his noticing differences in income between Protestants and Catholics. This is the thing to be explained, and the goal from this point is to discover the antecedent factors giving rise to the outcome or dependent variable. Notice that the line from step 1 stretches back in time to the Spirit of Capitalism, which is step 2. This is the process of Weber moving back in time seeking evidence of prior conditions for the development of modern capitalism.

Franklin and the Spirit of Capitalism

With step 2 Weber turns his attention to the concept of the spirit of capitalism. The spirit of capitalism is best explained with reference to certain historical documents. Specifically, Weber cites several of Benjamin Franklin's well-known sayings, such as "time is money," "credit is money," and other points of advice regarding money specifically and life in general. Franklin's writings are for Weber the embodiment of this spirit of capitalism.

Weber found that although Franklin was not a religious man, his father, a strict Calvinist, raised him to believe that the earning of money, if done legally, is the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling. Indeed, Weber suggests that this "peculiar idea," this notion of one's duty in a calling, is the social ethic upon which modern capitalism rests. Although Weber was interested in understanding the role of religious ideas in the production of capitalism, he also acknowledged that historical and material conditions, such as the industrial revolution, the rise of a free market, and the increasing commercialization of everyday life, were important as well.

Hence, Weber (1992, p. 64) argues that the spirit of (modern) capitalism describes that attitude "which seeks profit rationally and systematically in the manner which we have illustrated by the example of Benjamin Franklin." It is here that Weber utilizes his ideal type methodology to describe the (ideal) characteristics of the capitalist entrepreneur. He or she:

- avoids extravagant and unnecessary expenditure;
- avoids conscious enjoyment of the power that his or her position (status) brings;
- is embarrassed by the social recognition that he or she receives;
- lives a life of strict discipline (inner-worldly asceticism), marked by modesty and moderation;
- gets nothing out of his or her wealth personally, save for the "irrational" sense of having done his or her job well.

Weber also notes that for eons the Church frowned upon, or at best merely tolerated, the impulse toward acquisition of worldly goods. Traditional adventure capitalism was

especially likely to be condemned because it was seen as inimical to brotherly love and Christian charity. How, then, could activity which at one time was condemned or just barely ethically tolerated, turn into a calling in the sense of Benjamin Franklin? How is it that activity initially directed toward profit alone could now be understood as a calling toward which individuals have an ethical obligation?

Before addressing this question, in Figure 1, notice that above the names of the four historical figures from which Weber draws, I have provided the key concept associated with each. For Franklin, it is the Spirit of Capitalism. Notice also that at the bottom of the figure, the progression of ideas in the production of the theory is divided into two great movements, namely, an earlier religious phase (from the early notion of the calling to Baxter's ascetic compulsion to save), and a later secular phase (comprising Franklin's Spirit of Capitalism as the immediate predecessor of the development of modern capitalism). From this point, it is Weber's task to search for a system (or systems) of belief that both predated modern capitalism and embodied this key notion of duty in a calling. Since Franklin was raised in a Calvinist tradition, Weber sought evidence of the beginning of this idea of the calling within early Protestant doctrine.

Luther's Conception of the Calling

Regarding Figure 1, Weber makes a large leap backwards in time from step 2 to step 3 (see arrow at top of figure) in search of the earliest articulation of a religious conception of the calling. From this earliest historical point, Weber will progress forward until he reaches Franklin's secular notion of the calling (taking him through steps 3 through 5 in the process). The calling (*Beruf*), a religious conception defined as a "task set by God," was prevalent and even central within the Protestant sects, and virtually absent within Catholic doctrine. Where Catholics tended to view the exemplary life as embodied in monastic (i.e., other-worldly) asceticism, Protestants viewed true believers of the faith as ones who strove to fulfill their worldly obligations. Rather than retreating from the world, Protestants embraced the notion that individuals have the duty to work in this world to build the Kingdom of God on earth. This, then, is the ultimate embodiment of the notion of the calling.

To concretize this notion of the calling, Weber examined the writings of Martin Luther (1483-1546), a prominent German theologian who was the leader of the Protestant Reformation in Germany. However, even though Luther interpreted the Bible as providing religious sanction for the idea of duty in a calling, his interpretation was nevertheless rooted in traditionalism. As Weber (1992, p. 85) argues, Luther's economic traditionalism was evident in his suggestion that:

The individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God had placed him, and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life.

This traditionalism of Luther could never eventuate in the type of entrepreneurship typical of modern capitalism, hence Luther's early notion of a duty in a calling is a dead end. This means Weber must now look beyond Lutheranism to other Protestant sects to find a notion of the calling that fits more closely with the spirit of modern capitalism.

Calvin and Predestination

Weber found this better fit in the writings of John Calvin (1509-1564), a prominent French Protestant reformer, as well as other Puritans such as Richard Baxter (to be discussed shortly). (This is represented in the move from step 3 to 4 in Figure 1.) Through these writings of Calvinism and the Puritan sects it is possible to reconstruct connections between the "old" Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism. In this sense, Weber (1992, p. 90) states that, "The following study may thus perhaps in a modest way form a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history." This is emblematic of an idealist strand in Weber's thought, one which, contra Marx's materialism, argued that ideas may have a causal force in their own right, to such an extent that certain material conditions of our existence (for example, capitalism) were due in some measure to certain antecedent system of ideas (here, Calvinism).

The most characteristic dogma of Calvinism is the doctrine of predestination. Predestination is the idea that God has, for reasons unknown, chosen to bestow on a small proportion of men and women the gift of eternal grace. We cannot possibly comprehend God's majestic plan; we know only that a part of humanity is saved, while the rest is damned. Weber asked us to imagine the personal torment, the psychological anguish this imposes on true believers of the faith as they contemplated their fate. Since no one could know for certain whether they were among God's elect, Calvinists naturally searched for signs of grace. Rather than wallowing in uncertainty over whether or not one is among the chosen, Calvinists were instructed to throw themselves into their work, and to not let idleness and temptation lead them astray. Rather than absorption in the deity under Lutheranism, men and women under Calvinism would be known by their works, not by how much they prayed. Although criticisms of various aspects of Weber's thesis are covered in the annotated bibliography below, on this point—that Protestantism causes a stronger work ethic—there is recent empirical support (see, e.g., van Hoorn and Maseland, 2013).

In essence, the Calvinists thought themselves able to identify true faith by duty in a calling, which through such works thereby served to increase the glory of God. The conviction that duty in a calling serves the higher purposes of God and is also a sign of election instilled in Calvinists a systematic form of self-control and led to a rationalization of everyday life. Indeed, the God of Calvinism demanded of his believers

not single good works, but a *life* of good works combined into a unified system. As Weber (1992, p. 117) explains, under Calvinism “The moral conduct of the average man was thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole.”

Hence Calvinists and Puritans subjected themselves to intense self-control insofar as careful consideration was given to the ethical consequences of their action. Indeed, the most urgent task was the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment, while the most important means was to bring order into the conduct of their daily lives. In many ways, the conduct of everyday life for the Puritan began taking on the character of a business enterprise.

Baxter and the Ascetic Compulsion to Save

Referring to Figure 1, we are now ready to proceed from step 4 to step 5. Just as he earlier drew on the writings of Franklin, Luther, and Calvin, in this latter part of the argument Weber draws upon Richard Baxter, a 17th century English Puritan, to illustrate further the connection between the fundamental religious ideas of ascetic Protestantism, on the one hand, and everyday economic conduct on the other. Weber was especially struck by the emphasis Baxter placed on wealth and its acquisition. Although accumulating wealth for the worldly pleasures to be derived from it is morally suspect, staying active in a calling is tolerable and even laudable, according to Baxter. Indeed, this brings us to the first of eight principles Weber derives from Baxter’s writings concerning Protestant asceticism and its connection to business activity:

- *Waste of time* – the “first and in principle the deadliest of sins” is simply the wasting of time in such things as idle talk, luxury, getting more sleep than is necessary, and other leisure pursuits.
- *Inactive contemplation* – Baxter suggests that inactive contemplation about the world is valueless, and that, with the exception of Sunday, the day of rest, true believers should constantly be oriented toward the active performance of their duty in a calling.
- *Labor* – Weber notes that Baxter’s work is replete with admonitions that persons ought to be engaged in hard, continuous bodily or mental labor.
- *Sexual asceticism* – It follows from the previous point that sexual activity is valued only within the context of a marriage sanctified by the church.
- *Wealth is not an exemption* – Even those who accumulate great wealth must not allow themselves to be tempted into ostentatious displays of leisure or extravagant spending.
- *The calling as an ascetic virtue* – Labor in itself is not the key; rather it is “rational” labor in a calling.

- *Private profitableness* – If God shows one of his elect a chance of profit, he or she must follow the calling and take advantage of the opportunity.
- *Saving* – Believers of the faith are merely trustees of the goods God places in their hands. As a good servant, he should give an account of every penny entrusted to him. One must not spend foolishly or recklessly; indeed, one has a duty to one's possessions.

This last feature of ascetic Protestantism is especially significant for the development of capitalism. As Weber (1992, pp. 170-171) explains,

This worldly Protestant asceticism, as we may recapitulate up to this point, acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries. ...It broke the bonds of the impulse of acquisition in that it not only legalized it, but (in the sense discussed) looked upon it as directly willed by God.

Ascetic Protestantism's campaign against the temptations of the flesh, combined with its mandate to work in the world in a calling, directed followers to limit consumption. The inevitable practical result is obvious: the accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save (step 5).

Weber suggests that the original religious impulse toward asceticism and work embodied in Baxter's writings eventually faded away. However, the behaviors connected with these original ideas continued on beyond the 17th century, and showed up in more secular form, for example, in Franklin's writings and then on to develop into what we now know as modern capitalism. Weber (1992, p. 176) states that "Then the intensity of the search for the Kingdom of God commenced gradually to pass over into sober economic virtue; the religious roots died out slowly, giving way to utilitarian worldliness."

Weber's conclusion is that one of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism—namely, rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the calling—was born from the spirit of Christian inner-worldly asceticism. Weber also bemoans the fact that this original religious ideal has faded, because it has produced in the modern age a continuing fetish of the accumulation of private property, insofar as the idea of a calling has given way to raw calculation of advantage and the maximization of profit. It leads to the iron cage of bureaucracy, of instrumentalism, and of strategic calculation of profit as the overriding and fundamental value guiding our affairs. Weber (1992, p. 182) laments this turn of events with a paraphrase of Nietzsche: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."

Political Theology

In the early 20th century Carl Schmitt (2005, p. 36) launched discussions about political theology when he famously proclaimed that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” Although Schmitt did attend several of Weber’s courses at the University of Munich during the winter semester of 1919-20, because Schmitt later served as a jurist and political theorist for the Nazi party in the early 1930s, many observers understandably assiduously avoid drawing any connections at all between the two men (Derman, 2011; Mommsen, 1990 [1959]).

Nevertheless, it is likely that Weber influenced Schmitt’s thought on some level even as, for example, the theory of the state developed by each thinker diverges somewhat beyond their shared observation that states operate largely by monopolizing the legitimate use of coercive force (Magalhães, 2016). But one thing is certain: Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis is a type of political theology based upon Schmitt’s definition. The epicenter of all this is the crucial notion of the calling (*Beruf*) which Weber traces back to Luther, but where did Luther get it from? In various parts of the book—mainly in the footnotes—Weber touches upon this, and finds that Luther’s limited conception of the calling derives from the New Testament, and specifically Saint Paul’s indifferent attitude toward duty in a calling, reflecting a traditionalism which instructed true believers merely to wait for the coming of the Lord in the station they have been placed (Weber, 1992 [1930], p. 84). Indeed, the assertion by Weber of Pauline indifference went a long way toward differentiating Lutheranism from the later Calvinist notion of the calling via predestination (Zafirovski, 2018). Whether or not Weber interpreted Saint Paul accurately on the issue of duty in a calling (*Beruf* in German, *κλήσις* in Greek) is beyond the scope of this paper (see, e.g., Frey, 2008), but Giorgio Agamben’s (2005) analysis should be briefly noted.

Whereas Weber gave short shrift to the implications of the calling from the writings of St. Paul which were written in Koine Greek, in his hands *klesis* (from which the German *Beruf* is translated) is not understood as merely eschatological indifference (Agamben, 2005, pp. 20-24). For Paul, the church (*ekklesia*), or the messianic community, is the vocation or work taken up anywhere and everywhere, hence, later secularized notions of professional duty or even Kant’s *Grundnorm* (the Categorical Imperative) which seeks to tame or direct the raw play of the will (Schmitt’s decisionism), are essentially informed by the theological.

Even so, rather than Kant, the more direct German line of thought runs from Hegel’s earlier version of political theology which is essentially social critique grounded in a meta-theology (or an ontotheology) which seeks to understand the connection of universal spirit to the transcendental self in the unfolding becoming—more so than the being—of the world and of lived reality. This lineage runs from Hegel on through to

Weber and then to Schmitt (Heron, 2018, p. 138). This Hegelian “dialectical panentheism” posits that universal spirit is immanent in the self-transcendence of human will in the production of history (Agar, 2015, p. 1093). It should also be noted that preceding and consistent with this German line of development is the “new science” of Giambattista Vico developed in Italy in the early 1700s (for a summary, see Chriss, 2018; Milbank, 1991).

Conclusion: Some Critical Voices

The main reason Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis continues to be a staple in the teaching of sociological theory at both the undergraduate and graduate levels is that it is a model for how one’s sense of wonder leads one into the development of a systematic explanation of the object of that wonder or curiosity. The linear reconstruction of Weber’s theory (shown in the middle of Figure 1) is one of the more brilliantly creative theories ever developed by a sociologist. The argument that a particular religious idea — Luther’s early notion of the calling (even as it was stuck in traditionalism) — was the antecedent condition in the development of later Protestant sects (especially Calvin’s doctrine of predestination) which then led true believers to build the Kingdom of God on earth through focused economic activity, leading in turn to capitalist accumulation through the ascetic compulsion to save (Baxter), and then finally that these economic activities were dispersed across the general public culminating in the development of modern capitalism writ large, is a bold idea indeed. Taking sociological students through these key five steps may indeed inspire them to not only think theoretically, but also to appreciate the role of ideas in the human condition.

Having said all this, though, there is another thing to consider, and it is not trivial. Regardless of how revered a theory is in our discipline, it is always fair to ask, “Was Weber right?” Another way of asking this is, “Does the empirical evidence support Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis?” The short answer, is “No, it does not, at least not for the most part.” This raises an interesting quandary. Why should we go to all the trouble of teaching Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis when the empirical evidence supporting it is weak or nonexistent? This issue takes us back to Merton’s (1968) early statement on the distinction between the systematics and the history of theory.

According to Merton, the systematics of theory has to do with the standard positivist model of what any science should be doing, and that is explaining phenomena and assuring that methods are available by which to test these explanatory ideas against empirical evidence. This means that in the narrow sense of systematics, theory is a set of logically related statements which, taken together, purport to explain, predict, or postdict some range of phenomena. Indeed, at the beginning of my theory classes, I introduce theory in this way, and go on to talk about the importance of always keeping in mind the Science Triad. The Science Triad locates and defines the role of theory within any activity purporting to call itself science (see Figure 2).

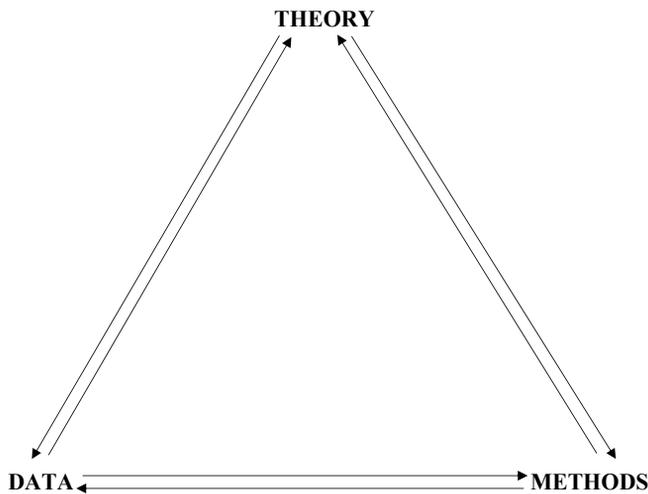


Figure 2. The Science Triad

The parts of the Science Triad are:

- *Theory* – a set of interrelated statements explaining some range of phenomena
- *Data* – patterns of empirical evidence regarding some phenomenon of interest to researchers
- *Methods* – techniques for gathering data (including experiments, survey research, ethnography, or what have you)

None of these elements of the Science Triad stand on its own. They make sense only as interrelated with each other in specific ways. In this sense of the systematics of theory, theory “makes sense” only in relation to its role in helping organize data into observable patterns. Theory on its own is relatively useless without data to show how it (the theory) gears into the world. Nevertheless, Merton raises the point that over time, especially within sociology and some of the other social sciences, systematics has been overtaken by history, that is, the project of teaching theory as the history of ideas. Here, the instructor may be warranted to spend quite a bit of time on the peculiar circumstances—biographical, cultural, historical, political, economic, and psychological—which contributed to the production of the particular theory or conceptual program. This is the project of the sociology of knowledge, its signal hypothesis being that theory is not “headless” but created by real, flesh-and-blood human beings striving to make their mark on the world. As such, theory is ideology, that is, a public project of persuasion marked by sometimes rancorous debate about the nature of its underlying, often tacit or hidden, assumptions (Gouldner, 1980).

This move toward treating theory as history, rather than as systematics, means that empirical verification or testing of theory plays a less and less prominent role in the

teaching of sociological theory. For better or worse, the history of ideas approach has won out and currently is thoroughly entrenched in how we teach theory in sociology today. Yet, even with this triumph of teaching sociology as the history of ideas there are still attempts, scattered here and there, to test or verify how well certain sociological theories comport with empirical reality.

Indeed, Bargheer (2017) has argued that the scholarly use and interpretation of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis has traversed three phases. The first phase corresponds with the largely German-language reception of the Weber thesis originally appearing as articles in the 1904 and 1905 editions of the journal *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (*Archive for Social Science and Social Welfare*). This first phase fit more the standard model of hypothesis testing within the project of empirical science.

This first phase gave way to a second phase launched in 1930 with Talcott Parsons' influential translation of Weber's thesis into English, which single-handedly introduced the work to a worldwide audience beyond Germany. For better or worse, this second phase of Weber scholarship became much more narrowly focused on theory per se, which was consistent with Parsons' attempt to create a general theory for sociology with Weber's thought playing a prominent role in it.

The third phase, according to Bargheer (2017), coincided with sociologists turning more attention to the so-called micro-macro problem, where now the Weber thesis is interpreted as an attempt to solve the problem of structure versus agency independent of any specific substantive questions. In other words, the specific focus of the solution that Weber propounded for explaining how Protestantism inculcated a particular work ethic giving rise to capitalism, prominent in the first two phases, was shifted in the third phase toward a focus on the general project of linking individual volition, along with cultural, cognitive, and motivational endowments to the social structures encompassing and shaping the micro-realm. This is similar to the original idealism-materialism divide evident from the beginning in terms of Weber's debate with the ghost of Marx, but now updated in the language of micro-macro.

Below I provide an annotated bibliography of selected books and articles which test or criticize various aspects of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis and which are accessible to undergraduate and graduate theory students. There is no necessary conflict in on the one hand praising Weber for the creativity and thoughtfulness that went into the development of his theory, while on the other hand rejecting its conclusions (Barbalet 2008, Greenfield 2001). Both are important pedagogical goals in the teaching of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis.

General Bibliography

1. Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, translated by P. Dailey. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
2. Agar, Jolyon. 2015. "Hegel's Political Theology: 'True Infinity', Dialectical Panentheism and Social Criticism." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 41 (10):1093-1111.
3. Barbalet, Jack. 2008. *Weber, Passion and Profits*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
4. Bargheer, Stefan. 2017. "The Invention of Theory: A Transnational Case Study of the Changing Status of Max Weber's Protestant Ethic Thesis." *Theory and Society* 46:497-541.
5. Chriss, James J. 2018. "Vico and the Divine Drama." *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 2 (3):31-58.
6. Derman, Joshua. 2011. "Max Weber and Charisma: A Transatlantic Affair." *New German Critique* 38 (2):51-88.
7. Ferrarotti, F. (2011). Bismarck's Orphan: The Modern World and Its Destiny, from "Disenchantment" to the "Steel Cage". *Academicus International Scientific Journal*, 2(04), 11-34.
8. Frey, Christiane. 2008. "κλήσις/Beruf: Luther, Weber, Agamben." *New German Critique* 35 (3):35-56.
9. Gouldner, Alvin W. 1980. *The Two Marxisms*. New York: Seabury Press.
10. Greenfield, Liah. 2001. *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
11. Heron, Nicholas. 2018. *Liturgical Power: Between Economic and Political Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press.
12. Magalhães, Pedro T. 2016. "A Contingent Affinity: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and the Challenge of Modern Politics." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77 (2):283-304.
13. Merton, Robert K. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*, enlarged ed. New York: Free Press.
14. Milbank, John. 1991. *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico, 1668-1744, part 1: The Early Metaphysics*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
15. Mommsen, Wolfgang J. 1990 [1959]. *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890-1920*, translated by M.S. Steinberg. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
16. Parsons, Talcott. 1935. "H.M. Robertson on Max Weber and His School." *Journal of Political Economy* 43 (5):688-696.

17. Schmitt, Carl. 2005. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, translated by G. Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
18. Van Hoorn, André and Robbert Maseland. 2013. "Does a Protestant Work Ethic Exist? Evidence from the Well-Being Effect of Unemployment." *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 91:1-12.
19. Weber, Max. 1992 [1930]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. By T. Parsons. London: Routledge.
20. Zafirovski, Milan. 2018. "Calvinist Predestination and the Spirit of Capitalism: The Religious Argument of the Weber Thesis Reexamined." *Human Studies* 41:565-602.

Annotated Bibliography of Criticisms of Weber

Ascher, Ivan. 2010. "Max Weber and the 'Spirit' of The Protestant Ethic." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 10 (2):99-108.

This is an interesting argument focusing on the selectivity of Weber's approach, insofar as Weber treats as self-evident the interpretation he puts forward that Franklin's writings indeed embody what he refers to as the "spirit" of modern capitalism. While making much of this "spirit" argument in allegedly tying Franklin's thought to the establishment of modern capitalism, Weber seems mute or unaware of the selectivity which guides the "spirit" of his own rendering of the Protestant Ethic argument, including of course the key spiritual component in Franklin's writings.

Becker, George. 2009. "The Continuing Path of Distortion: The Protestant Ethic and Max Weber's School Enrolment Statistics." *Acta Sociologica* 52 (3):195-212.

Becker claims that continuing on for more than a century now, observers of the Weber thesis have never questioned a glaring error early in Weber's argument. Weber claimed that Protestants earned more than Catholics, and also entered into the kind of schooling that predisposed them toward later successful entrepreneurship much more so than their Catholic counterparts. Becker argues that these errors in Weber's school enrollment statistics renders much of the remainder of the argument moot.

Chalcraft, David J. 2005. "Reading Weber's Patterns of Response to Critics of *The Protestant Ethic*: Some 'Affinities' in and between Replies to Felix Rachfahl and Werner Sombart." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 5 (1):31-51.

Chalcraft performs a valuable service summarizing two important lines of criticisms against Weber fashioned by Rachfahl and Sombart. (For more on Sombart, see below.) Rachfahl finds fault in Weber's assertion that Protestant's practiced an inner-worldly asceticism in opposition to the other-worldly (or monastic) asceticism of Catholics. Weber did not take kindly to the "sterile" debate Rachfahl had launched over his definition of asceticism, yet the core of this

argument between the two is something that could be of value in the coverage of Weber's thesis.

Dickson, Tony and Hugh V. MacLachlan. 1989. "In Search of the 'Spirit of Capitalism': Weber's Misinterpretation of Franklin." *Sociology* 23 (1):81-89.

Similar to Ascher's argument above, the authors claim not so much that Weber was selective in settling upon Franklin as embodying the spirit of modern capitalism, but that in many respects the interpretation of Franklin's key passages on money, time, and efficiency were wrong. According to the authors, Franklin was much more pragmatic concerning his orientation to thrift and accumulation than he was guided by a religious ethos, Calvinist or otherwise. The criticism is that Weber read too much into Franklin's words, a misinterpretation that was used as evidence of a religiously-informed "spirit" that was never really there.

Ghosh, Peter. 2014. *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Ghosh is not so much critical of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis per se, but notes rather that Weber's sociology of law, which emphasizes procedural law over substantive law (the former being more rational than the latter), does not square with the presumed effect of ascetic Protestantism's this-worldly effect in orienting true believers toward salvation via predestination anxiety. This tension presumably flowed from Weber's "English problem," to the extent that he was not trained in Natural Law during his jurisprudence studies in Germany, but instead learned law through the "historical school" of law prevalent in Germany in the latter 19th century. In other words, Ghosh's notion of the "twin histories" regarding Weber's work is that both his Protestant Ethic thesis and sociology of law do eventually arrive at a common endpoint—in the guise of the triumph of ascetic Protestantism in the production of capitalism—but took circuitous and tensionful routes in getting there.

Hamilton, Richard F. 1996. *The Social Misconstruction of Reality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hamilton finds lack of empirical support for many aspects of Weber's thesis, including lack of support that Protestants actually suffered anxiety over predestination as described by Weber; no evidence that Protestants viewed work as a sign of election; and no direct evidence—only a deduction—that Protestants, in response to Baxter's admonitions from the pulpit, engaged in higher levels of reinvestment and saving as opposed to other actions (e.g., hoarding, tithing, or philanthropy).

Lehmann, Hartmut. 2005. "Friends and Foes: The Formation and Consolidation of the Protestant Ethic Thesis." Pp. 1-22 in *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100*, edited by W.H. Swatos, Jr. and L. Kaelber. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Lehmann provides an excellent summary of Weber's responses to the first round of criticisms of his thesis occurring between the years 1907 and 1910. The key critics to which Weber responded were H. Karl Fischer, a psychologist, and Felix Rachfahl (who is discussed in Chalcraft

above). Fischer challenged Weber's methodology and his conclusion concerning how early Protestant asceticism informed the later, secular "capitalist spirit" embodied in the writings of Franklin. Fischer believed Weber lacked an adequate psychological mechanism to make this leap, as presumably salvation anxiety had disappeared as a motivator of economic activity with the dawning of the era of industrial capitalism.

Robertson, H.M. 1933. *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism: A Criticism of Max Weber and His School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robertson argues that Weber's notion of a calling which is found only in the Protestant sects and which led true believers into moneymaking enterprise, is simply too narrow. He provides multiple examples from the historical literature which refute the idea that the calling—continuous, rational labor in work which redounds to the glory of the Lord—springs only from Lutheranism and later Calvinism. For a vigorous defense of Weber against Robertson's argument, see Parsons (1935).

Sombart, Werner. 1913. *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, translated by M. Epstein. New York: Dutton.

Contrary to Weber, Sombart argued that it was Judaism not Protestantism which was much more strongly linked to the emergence of advanced industrial capitalism. Until his death in 1920, Weber engaged in vigorous debates with Sombart over this issue.

Stark, Rodney. 2004. "SSSR Presidential Address, 2004: Putting an End to Ancestor Worship." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (4):465-475.

Stark articulates general condemnation of scholars who tend to accept unreflectively the classic writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, and seeks to show how aspects of each of these authors' writings are wrong or misguided. With regard to Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis, besides it being little more than an anti-Catholic screed, Stark also cites critics who point out that capitalism developed in Italy centuries before the Protestant Reformation. Other critics are cited who argued that inner-worldly asceticism was not a product of Calvinism, but appeared much earlier, among monastic priests as far back as the 6th century (e.g., Saint Benedict who wrote among other things "Idleness is the enemy of the soul.")