From Agrarian Capitalism to the ‘Spirit’ of Modern Capitalism: Max Weber’s Approaches to the Protestant Ethic*

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Abstract
The article charts the emergence of The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism from Weber’s work as a National Economist in the 1890s. In particular, it points to Weber’s lectures on theoretical national economics and Weber’s acceptance of the postulates of marginalism. Alongside these, Weber insisted on the role of culture and ideals in the determination of human economic needs. Weber’s attitude to Werner Sombart’s moderner Kapitalismus is also discussed.

Keywords: Culture and religion, economic conduct, marginalism, methodological individualism, Protestant ethic, Sombart, spirit of modern capitalism.

Next only to bureaucracy, capitalism is a central topic of Max Weber’s scholarly and public work. It is worthwhile looking at Weber’s encounters with the phenomenon of capitalism in the period prior to and during the writing of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (hereafter PESC).

The first encounter with capitalism, albeit in its agrarian forms, is to be found in Weber’s studies on Roman agrarian history. His wide-ranging study, on which Weber embarked at the behest of August Meitzen in 1890, was supposed to analyse the impact of the Roman legal system upon the agrarian economy. However, Weber was soon driven beyond the confines of this somewhat narrow approach. He analysed the social structure of Roman society in its entirety, and soon discovered that aided by the legal system there had emerged a full-fledged system of agrarian capitalism. The somewhat clumsily entitled Die römische Agrargeschichte in ihrer Bedeutung für das Staats- und Privat-

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trecht\(^1\) (1891) (Roman Agrarian History and its Significance for Public and Private Law) focused above all on one issue, the consequences of agrarian law in ancient Rome for the economic system. Against the backdrop of a traditional economy Weber described the emergence, the dominance and, finally, the decline of what he described as a fully developed agrarian capitalism. The progressive spread of the principle of unconditional ‘freedom of disposal of land ownership and its total economic mobilisation’\(^2\) was in Weber’s view the key factor that more than anything had made possible the rise of a large-scale agrarian capitalism. Indeed, by abolishing all restrictions on the acquisition and the marketing of land there occurred, as Weber put it, ‘the most unlimited capitalism in land property that the world ever has seen’.\(^3\) The gradual implementation of the principle of unrestricted ownership of land during the Roman Republic was the backbone of a market economy which had made possible the rise of Rome to a huge political and commercial empire. According to Weber, the traditional communal structures as well as the relatively independent position of the smaller farmers were totally destroyed in favour of an agrarian economy dominated by large-scale estates. Admittedly, Roman capitalism displayed in many ways the features of what Weber called ‘Beutekapitalismus’.\(^4\) Its rise and its existence had been dependent throughout upon the boost that it had received by permanent wars and the acquisition of new territories; besides it required a regular supply of new slaves in order to maintain itself. Even so, it promoted the emergence of a capitalist mode of economic exchange throughout the Republic and the later Roman Empire based upon the unrestricted exploitation of landed properties.\(^5\)

As time went on, however, and the supply of slaves dried up, the system of agrarian capitalism gradually withered away and, finally, the free market economy was supplanted by the ‘Kolonat’. This was a

5. Cf. MWG I/2, pp. 1-54, in particular pp. 45-47.
system of huge landed estates that became self-sufficient economic units and no longer produced for the market. This eventually led to the destruction of the essential preconditions for dynamic economic growth and free market exchange. In the end agrarian capitalism gave way to a stagnant economic order that foreshadowed the economic conditions during the early Middle Ages. Even at this point we can observe the specific approach of Max Weber. He always concentrated on the question: what consequences do legal regulations have on the economy? In the background of this work, that is Römische Agrargeschichte, we discover the contours of a specific concept of world history, namely the recurrent rise and fall of world civilizations respectively caused by specific economic and/or cultural conditions.

Weber’s second encounter with capitalism occurred in his studies on the conditions of landed labour in the Eastern provinces of Prussia in the early 1890s. As a student of the well-known agrarian historian August Meitzen he had been considered qualified for the task. In addition, the fact that his father was a member of the Prussian Diet and had played an important role in implementing the ‘Settlement Laws’ (Ansiedlungsgesetze) in the later 1880s may have further contributed to this decision.6

When in 1890 he was asked to evaluate results of the most difficult section of a large-scale enquête by the Verein für Socialpolitik about the conditions of the agrarian working classes in Imperial Germany, namely those in the East Elbian provinces of Prussia, he was confronted with problems of a similar nature.7 Here again capitalism emerged as an irresistible economic force bringing about revolutionary change affecting not only the economy, but also the social order as a whole. The advance of capitalism was about to destroy the traditional landed economy, driving a large section of labour off the land and inducing them to migrate to the West.8 Max Weber extracted far-reaching conclusions from the statistical material. His main point was that the advance of capitalism had gradually undermined the traditional patriarchal patterns of employment of labour in the Eastern provinces of Prussia. The traditional manorial

type of work meant that the worker and his family were allotted a certain proportion of the arable lands of the estate for his own usage as compensation for the work on the estate owner’s land, and remuneration in money wages had become the exception. Under these conditions the estate owner and his workers essentially shared the same economic interest in the successful management of the estate and the production of agrarian goods for the market. However, with the advance of the capitalist mode of production this traditionalist economic partnership was progressively eroded. This was partly because, as the price level of agrarian products had come increasingly under pressure from cheap imports from overseas, the estate owners found it more profitable to employ cheap temporary labourers from nearby Poland, mostly recruited for the summer, rather than paying German labourers on a permanent basis. The economic forces appeared to be predominant.

All the same, Weber also discovered ideal factors at work in this context. Often the German agrarian workers themselves preferred to be paid in monetary wages rather than by being remunerated by the privilege of growing their own crops on the masters’ lands, because, for them, monetary wages meant more personal freedom. Under these circumstances the German farm labourers decided to move to the cities, and their places in the East were—as a rule—taken over by cheap Polish migrant labourers. Weber argued that in the last resort this was due to the irresistible dynamics of capitalism. The gradual internationalization—or should we say globalization—of agrarian economy had reached the East Elbian provinces. Rationalization and modern methods of calculation were required. Weber’s conclusion was radical: because the large landed estates were more and more dependent on efficient modes of production, and therefore on the employment of cheap Polish rather than German labourers, they had to be abandoned. As Weber put it, their existence was no longer compatible with the interests of the German nation state. He pleaded for subsistence farming in the East rather than farming for the market. Only a thorough policy of ‘internal colonisation’\(^9\) could help. The landed estates ought to be divided up into small peasant holdings which would produce largely only for their own needs, but no longer for the market. The political implications of these proposals which, if implemented, would have meant the elimination of the economic

\(^9\) See Max Sering, *Die innere Kolonisation im östlichen Deutschland* (Schriften des Vereins für Socialpolitik, 56; Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1893).
power base of the Prussian aristocracy, cannot be dealt with here.\textsuperscript{10} Suffice to say that Max Weber argued once again that modern capitalism was about to undermine the traditional agrarian economy in the East, creating social conditions that gave predominance to Polish over German agricultural workers precisely because the former came from a lower cultural level and were prepared to put up with a far more modest standard of living.

In yet another context, Max Weber observed the impact of the advance of capitalism, and the globalization of the market system, namely the attempts to insulate the German agrarian economy from the full impact of the international market by protective tariffs and by manipulating the market regulations for agrarian products. Early in the 1890s the Conservatives, and in particular the Agrarian League demanded that the trade in futures for agrarian products should be prohibited on the German stock exchanges. It was expected that by doing this the German agrarian markets could be protected against the overseas competition. This led to a passionate debate about the proposed new legislation, and the Reich parliament decided that a commission of inquiry consisting of experts had to be established in order to analyse these problems. Max Weber, being an expert in trade law, was appointed as a member of the aforesaid commission. He argued that a prohibition of futures trading for agrarian products would be exceedingly detrimental to the international standing of the German stock exchanges. Accordingly he strongly challenged the arguments of the agrarian interest groups who pleaded for a prohibition of the trading on the assumption that this would reduce the impact of foreign imports on the price level of agrarian goods. Such a prohibition would be both impractical and ineffective. He was convinced that the advance of capitalism could not be halted by such half-baked legislative measures. Likewise he objected to the emotional critique directed against the stock exchange as such, which was harboured by various leftist groups and was largely based upon vague anti-capitalist sentiments.\textsuperscript{11} Weber was convinced that the interests of the German nation state demanded the unrestricted development of capitalist modes of economic activity. Imperial Germany ought to continue the developmental path towards becoming an ‘industrial state’, rather than trying to sustain its traditional agrarian sector with all

\textsuperscript{10} Cf. Mommsen, \textit{Max Weber and German Politics}, in particular pp. 25-27.

sorts of contested legislative measures. Correspondingly the operations of the German stock exchanges should be given an almost free rein.\textsuperscript{12}

So far Max Weber’s approach to the phenomenon of capitalism had been largely motivated by political considerations. But it had become obvious that the rise of modern market-oriented capitalism was about to fundamentally change the societal order. When Weber, in autumn 1894, was appointed the chair of National Economics and Public Finance at Freiburg University the issue of capitalism was elevated to a theoretical level. In his lectures on ‘General ("theoretical") Economics’ as well as on ‘Practical Economics’ he was bound to deal intensively with the theories of capitalism and also — it goes without saying — with the practical implications of the modern capitalist economy.

His lectures were by and large arranged according to the then dominant approach of the German Historical School of National Economics. In terms of time, range and geographical dimension this covered a huge field, extending from antiquity to the present, with particular attention being paid to the developments of the occident, and encompassing the western world just as much as Central Europe. However, he also offered a systematic presentation of the modern market economy, and likewise a history of economic thought and an intriguing analysis of historical materialism. In doing so he transcended the conventional historicist approach to national economics — which was common at German universities around the turn of the century — and committed himself to the theoretical aspects of economic analysis. Likewise he discussed the claims and propositions which had been put forward by Marx and his followers at considerable length, largely relying on contemporary economic theory. What stands out in this context is that the issue of ideal versus materialist factors operating in the economy is taken up again and again.

It is often argued that Weber cannot be considered as an economist in the strict sense inasmuch as he had pursued only a historical approach to economics and he had not taken up the new developments of neo-classical economics. Joseph Schumpeter, who in many respects was a follower of Weber, has along with others pointed this out.\textsuperscript{13} But

\textsuperscript{12} See Mommsen, \textit{Max Weber and German Politics}, pp. 30-31 and particularly the introduction to MWG I/5, pp. 67-108.

on the basis of the manuscripts of Weber’s early lecture courses on theoretical economics this view cannot be maintained any more to the full.\(^{14}\) It is apparent that Max Weber took up the tenets of the Austrian School of Economics which had been established by Carl Menger, and which had led to a bitter struggle with the Historical School and in particular with Gustav von Schmoller in the so-called ‘\textit{Methodenstreit}.\(^{15}\) In particular he relied upon the writings of Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk and Friedrich von Wieser, and he paid only limited attention to the Anglo-Saxon representatives of neo-classical economics, notably William Stanley Jevons. Only Alfred Marshall is mentioned more often, perhaps because he took an intermediate position between neo-classical economics and historicism. The important work of John Neville Keynes escaped his attention.\(^{16}\)

The thesis by Keith Tribe, that Max Weber stopped halfway on his path toward modern neo-classical economic theory because he had no use for mathematical models, therefore deserves a reassessment.\(^{17}\) Max Weber came to be a strong defender of the marginal utility school. For instance, he objected to the interpretation of Lujo Brentano who considered the value of marginal utility theory primarily in the application of psychology to the economy.\(^{18}\) Weber took over in particular the individualistic approach of Carl Menger and his followers in economic affairs. The economic action of individuals must always be traced back to their individual motivations and interests, and not to economic laws of any kind. Weber was to maintain the position of a strict methodological individualism in a sometimes even pedantic fashion throughout his lifetime.

\(^{14}\) The lecture notes ‘\textit{Allgemeine (‘theoretische’) Nationalökonomie}’ are preserved in two segments. The first part can be found in the \textit{Geheimes Staatsarchiv der Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin)}, under the file number: GStA PK, VI. HA, NL Max Weber, Nr. 31, Bd. 1. The second part is stored in the \textit{Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München} under BSB München, Ana 446, OM 3. Quotations from the manuscript have additionally been noted by the author as \textit{B} for those in Berlin and \textit{M} for those in Munich. Max Weber’s lecture notes on ‘\textit{Allgemeine (‘theoretische’) Nationalökonomie}’ will soon be available in MWG III/1 (forthcoming 2006).


Max Weber did not consider marginal utility theory to be the magical tool by which all problems alike could be solved. But it did provide a wide range of clearly defined types and explanatory models that could help to go beyond the merely narrative approach of the Historical School. Max Weber discussed the issue of central importance here, namely the role and weight of economic versus non-economic factors, within the framework of the school of marginal utility theory.

Weber started from the premise that human beings live at all times under conditions of relative scarcity, and that their economic conduct is determined by their ‘needs’ (‘Bedürfnisse’). The economy is therefore concerned with the actions of man striving to satisfy these ‘needs’ in the future through purposively rational economic activity (‘planvollen Wirtschaftens’).\(^{19}\) In this sense rationalization is a built-in component of economic life. The intensity of these subjective needs depends upon the relative scarcity (or possibly the abundance) of the goods required to satisfy them. Weber accepted the model of marginal utility, as a means of theoretically explaining the economic options of human beings who have to make a choice between a variety of needs in concrete situations. However, at the same time he emphasized that needs are largely determined by the respective historical constellations. Already Carl Menger had recognized that human needs were subjected to historical conditions. But this aspect was not given particular weight. Max Weber again and again pointed out that the ‘needs’ which marginal utility theory considered the basis of its theoretical deductions were in fact determined to a very high degree by concrete historical factors. He argued that the disposition to rational economic conduct which dominates human behaviour in the advanced societies of the western world, and which is held to be normal, had been the result of an educational process that had been going on for thousands of years (‘das Wirtschaften ist dem Menschen durch einen jahrtausendelangen Anpassungsprozess anerzogen’).\(^{20}\) Besides, normally human beings were born into value beliefs (‘thatsächlich werden wir in die Werthvorstellungen hinein-geboren’),\(^{21}\) which play an important part in determining the preference according to which the satisfaction of needs is pursued. Max Weber argued that this was


also an historical element (‘historisches Element’).\textsuperscript{22} This is to say that the needs of individuals may well be very different according to the specific cultural conditions in which they find themselves. Historical analysis therefore was, according to Max Weber’s view, an indispensible part of general economic theory.

At this point it becomes clear that Max Weber wished to conceive the study of theoretical national economy also as a science of man (‘die Nationalökonomie ist Wissenschaft nicht von der Natur und ihren Eigenschaften, sondern vom Menschen und seinen Bedürfnissen’),\textsuperscript{23} inasmuch as it is intrinsically interconnected with the study of culture in all its respects. It goes without saying that Weber rejected in principle the Marxist view that all spheres of human activity, notably the state and the cultural sphere, are determined by the economy. The process of the unfolding of the needs of human beings (‘[die] Entfaltung seiner Bedürfnisse’)\textsuperscript{24} is determined by other than merely economic conditions, too. The human being is both the carrier of culture and of the economy via the different ways in which his needs progressively unfold.\textsuperscript{25} They are determined in particular by his views about his general position in the world, not least his religious convictions.\textsuperscript{26} At this point we come across for the first time the dichotomy between the formal rationality of economic action and the material rationality of those types of human action which are related to specific cultural or religious ideals. This dichotomy is later explicated in full in Weber’s essays on PESC and the ‘Economic Ethic of the World Religions’.

Indeed, here we find important elements of what somewhat later came to be premises of the thesis for PESC. For he pleaded from the very beginning that the sphere of subjective needs—that determine the economic action of man—should be defined in a wide-ranging manner. For the needs of man (‘Lebensbedürfnisse’) encompass in each individual case not only the material, but also the ideal goods, \textit{inter alia} religious or spiritual activities. The sort of needs which are

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\textsuperscript{22} Weber, \textit{Allgemeine (‘theoretische’) Nationalökonomie}, B 175.
\textsuperscript{23} Cf. Weber, \textit{Grundriß}, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{24} Weber, \textit{Allgemeine (‘theoretische’) Nationalökonomie}, M 49R.
\textsuperscript{25} BSB München, Ana 446 OM 3, Arch. Dok. 95, M 50: ‘Träger der Cultur, auch der Wirtschaft, stets der \textit{Mensch} mit der Art der Entfaltung seiner Bedürfnisse. \textit{Auf} deren Entwicklung aber \textit{zu\textsuperscript{a}ch}, aber \textit{nicht nur ökonomische} Verh\textit{ältnisse} wirksam, sondern \textit{Gesamt\textsuperscript{i}ffassung} seiner Stellung in der Welt/\textit{insbes[ondere]} Religion/gleiche ökonom[ische] Bedingungen erzeugen \textit{nicht} gleiche religiöse Reflexe’.
\textsuperscript{26} Compare the quotation above.
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dominant in any given society, are in the last resort a matter of culture, and not merely of the economic order. This is said explicitly,

\[\ldots\] die Organisation der menschlichen Bedarfsbefriedigung wird/ a) durch die Gesamtheit der Culturerscheinungen - bedingungen/ Klima, Rasse, Recht/ andere materielle Bedürfnisse/ auch religiöse Bedürfnisse: Pyramiden (dort: Glauben überwiegt alles andere/ Conservierung der Leiche/ Alles darauf zugeschnitten.)/ b) wirkt auf alle Culturerscheinungen (selbst Religion)/ züchtet ganz andere Menschen/Geldwirtschaft, Capitalismus, Sklavenarbeit.

27 (The organisation of the satisfaction of human needs is a) influenced by the totality of cultural phenomena and conditions, by climate, race, law, other material needs, religious needs, too: pyramids. Here belief is more important than anything else—the conservation of corpses. Everything is geared to this. b) has an effect on all cultural phenomena [even religion], breeds entirely…).

This passage indicates that Weber saw economics as part of a cultural science, or, as he puts it occasionally, a science about the living-together of human beings—social science (eine ‘Wissenschaft vom Zusammenleben der Menschen—Sozialwissenschaft’) within which economics was primarily concerned with the satisfaction of material needs and the provision for future needs. In doing this, it is throughout dependent upon neighbouring disciplines.

From these quotations it can be seen that Weber wished to extend the method of rational analysis that was practised by the Austrian School to the other spheres of social life as well, which, as he argued again and again, all play a crucial role in determining the conduct of life of the individual. As Zenonas Norkus has put it recently but less accentuated, Weber wished to apply the concepts of marginal utility theory to the social and cultural spheres alike. Somewhat later, in his essay on ‘‘Objectivity’’ in Social Science and Social Policy’ (first published 1904) Weber says this explicitly,

Our physical existence, just like the satisfaction of our most ideal needs, constantly encounters the actual quantitative limit and qualitative inadequacy of the appropriate external means. Their satisfaction requires careful forethought, effort, a struggle with nature, and the need to work in association with people…

Here we discover the outlines of his future research programme, namely the widening of economics into a discipline of social science that would ideally take into account all non-economic factors that determine the economic conduct of individuals, and would include, last but not least, the various world images (‘Weltbilder’). Obviously he wished to go beyond an economic sociology, contrary to Swedberg’s recent suggestion.\(^{31}\)

In this context Weber also developed the concept of the ‘ideal type’ as a theoretical instrument that allows us to assess rationally the conduct of human beings against the back-cloth of the ideally rational behaviour as ascertained by the models and rules of marginal utility. By emphasizing specific cultural values, ideal types allow the delineation of the cultural significance of empirical phenomena without embarking upon value judgements.\(^{32}\) The concepts of marginal utility theory are formed exclusively by rational reasoning. A sharp distinction always has to be drawn between the exclusively theoretical status of the types used to ideally reconstruct human action according to rational principles and the empirical assessment of the actual behaviour of economic agents. Theoretical national economy must be considered merely as a sub-discipline of a comprehensive cultural science (‘Kulturwissenschaft’). It focuses upon particular aspects of social reality, notably the formal rationality of purpose-oriented social action that is predominant in the field of economics. However, in doing so it opens up insights into the structures of the economic order and the forms of life-conduct favoured by it—namely the ‘education’ of man


to conduct his economic affairs in a rational manner. In this sense the findings of theoretical economics have great cultural significance.

To the extent that our science attributes economic cultural phenomena in a causal regression to their individual origins, whether they be economic or non-economic in character, it can be said that it seeks ‘historical’ knowledge. To the degree that it traces the cultural significance of one specific element of cultural phenomena—the economic element—through the most diverse cultural relations (‘Kulturzusammenhänge’) it seeks historical interpretation from one particular point of view. In doing this, it provides part of the picture that is the preliminary work for complete historical knowledge.33

Weber adapted for his purposes Rickert’s conception of ‘value-relationship’ (‘Wertbeziehungen’), although he gave it a different meaning.34 In Weber’s opinion values are strictly bound to the life-conduct of the individual and the value positions which an individual chooses to be personally binding determine his conduct of life. The concept of value relationship, however, gave the opportunity to widen the application of the ideal-typical method—which so far had only been applied to the instrumental-rational concepts of marginal utility theory—to the cultural sciences in general. After his recovery from his mental illness in 1902 his intentions moved more and more in this direction. In 1904 he became a co-editor of the Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, jointly with Edgar Jaffé and Werner Sombart. Here he saw the opportunity to reach a broader audience for his endeavour to heighten the study of historical national economics into a genuine ‘Kulturwissenschaft’ covering a much larger range of problems. He defined the task of the renewed journal as ‘the historical and theoretical study of the general cultural significance of the development of capitalism’.35 By this he meant the ‘process of fundamental change to which our economic system and our cultural existence in general are being subjected by the advance of capitalism’.36

34. Cf. Takebayashi, Entstehung, pp. 244-53.
35. Cf. the foreword of the editors in Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik 1.1 (1904), pp. i-vii. ‘Unsere Zeitschrift wird heute die historische und theoretische Erkenntnis der allgemeinen Kulturbedeutung der kapitalistischen Entwicklung als dasjenige wissenschaftliche Problem ansehen müssen, in dessen Dienst sie steht’ (p. v).
considered theoretical economic theory to be part and parcel of such an endeavour. This opened up the path for further research into those factors which had paved the way for the rise of capitalism as an economic system that was about to revolutionize all traditional forms of economic conduct.

In his lectures on ‘General (“theoretical”) National Economics’ Weber had repeatedly emphasized that the formation of economic life-conduct had been the result of a long-term historical process, and that it was in principle—even under modern conditions—not a given type of human behaviour but one subject to historical change. The attitude of modern man was in his opinion, as mentioned above, the result of an educational process of more than a thousand years. Cultural and religious factors played an important part in this process. The individual’s needs, which determine economic conduct, are in the last resort determined not just by the desires of individuals but by their fundamental views about their position in the world, and among those religious convictions are particularly important. Besides, as Marx argued, religious attitudes cannot be deduced straight from economic conditions. ‘The same economic conditions do not give rise to the same religious reflexes.’ On the contrary, ideal—or rather—religious attitudes usually are rather resistant to changes in economic conditions. ‘The formation of the world of emotions and of thoughts, their development, the interest of the individual in these has a compelling force.’ The independence of spiritual world-views vis-à-vis the economic conditions cannot be put more forcefully.

In the context of his critical assessments of the theories of Karl Marx which are a recurrent theme in his lectures, Weber always pleaded that the ideal and especially the religious ‘needs’ must be given particular attention, inasmuch as they usually determine economic behaviour to a substantial degree. It comes as no surprise to see that Weber had followed up the debate about the role of Protestantism as a factor promoting the emergence of the capitalist order, which had surfaced in the 1890s. In his Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Schwa-


Eberhard Gothein had already referred to the important contribution of the Protestant minority to the economic development of this initially fairly backward region. Likewise, Georg Jellinek in a compelling study had pointed out that the discovery of human rights had been due in the first place to the Puritans. A further stimulus to inquire into the relationship between religion and capitalism was provided by the publication of Werner Sombart’s work, *Der moderne Kapitalismus* which was first published in 1902. Sombart emphasized in particular the issue that the traditional pattern of artisanship had been progressively undermined by the rise of capitalism; the traditional economic conduct of the artisans had been dominated by theendeavour to attain and secure the traditional economic conduct of all its members geared to the maintenance of a modest but respectable way of life. Capitalism, however, had created a new economic mentality focused on acquisition *quand même* and therefore on the accumulation of money. Sombart localized the beginning of this new departure in the Italian and South German cities of late-medieval times. According to Sombart the new capitalist mode was in the first place determined by an ever growing desire for the acquisition of money that was about to gradually destroy the traditionalist patterns of economic life. But the continuous accumulation of money was dependent upon a new economic mentality, namely the ‘capitalist spirit’. Sombart considered this to be the embodiment of ‘all those inner emotions which are typical of the entrepreneur: the striving for profit (*per se*), a calculating way of thinking, economic rationality’. This amounted to a human embodiment of what classical National Economics describes as *homo oeconomicus* (J.S. Mill). Sombart, however, considered these ideal factors to be of comparatively limited relevance. Instead he attached great importance to the propelling force of the acquisitive attitude of the richer merchants and traders, and last but not least, of the Jews.

Weber regarded these explanations as insufficient. He took up the slogan of ‘the spirit of capitalism’ which corresponded with his view that non-economic factors play a major role in determining economic behaviour. Here he followed his own path, or rather his approach was based upon research which he had already undertaken. In his essay ‘Antikritisches zum Geist des Kapitalismus’⁴⁶ (1910) he was to emphasize that the inquiry into the mental preconditions and causes of the rise of the capitalistic spirit concerned issues which he had already dealt with 12 years before in his lectures in Heidelberg for the winter term 1897.⁴⁷ The lecture notes, which still exist, do not contain any specific references to this theme. But the theme is implicitly matched by his repeated emphasis of non-economic, notably religious needs, as important factors that determine the economic conduct of the individual. The public lectures which he held in Mannheim in 1897 contain references only to the resistance of the Catholic Church to the rise of capitalism, and Protestantism is not mentioned specifically.⁴⁸ But undoubtedly Weber had already been working for some time on these topics. For several days in September 1903 he stayed in the same hotel on Heligoland as Werner Sombart and Carl Hauptmann, and he conducted passionate debates with them about the origins of capitalism. Carl Hauptmann reports that Weber had been able to supply him on this occasion with ample literature on the issue of Puritanism and capitalism.⁴⁹

The comparatively thin correspondence of these years does not allow any further confirmation of this information. But it is certain that Weber considered Sombart’s _moderner Kapitalismus_ an important

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⁴⁸. In a series of lectures held at Mannheim in November and December 1897, Max Weber discussed the position of modern capitalism in historical perspective (‘Die geschichtliche Stellung des modernen Kapitalismus’). Here he did not yet mention the role of Protestantism in particular. However, he asked the question: ‘What has been achieved by the age of capitalism? It did not bring fortune into the world, however, it created modern occidental man.’ (‘Was hat das Zeitalter des Kapitalismus geleistet? Das Glück hat es nicht in die Welt gebracht, aber es hat den modernen Menschen des Occidents geschaffen.’) This included the ‘self-responsibility of the individual’ which was created by the money economy. Cf. Max Weber, _Landarbeiterfrage, Nationalstaat und Volkswirtschaftspolitik: Schriften und Reden 1892–1899_, MWG 1/4 (ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen with Rita Aldenhoff; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr,1993), p. 851.

work, even though he had many detailed reservations. Weber refused to write a review of the book in Braun’s Archiv, presumably mainly because he still had not yet recovered from his illness completely.\footnote{Lenger, Sombart, p. 125.} Later on, he did his best to have Sombart’s book reviewed by Lujo Brentano in the Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, in order to counteract the rather unfavourable reviews by several historians. At first Brentano was hesitant to accept this proposal. After meeting the still reluctant Brentano in September 1903, Weber wrote to him in early October that he considered it ‘on objective grounds absolutely necessary’ that Sombart’s book should be reviewed ‘by one of our leading scholars’.\footnote{Letter to Lujo Brentano, 4 October, 1903, BA Koblenz, Nl. Lujo Brentano, Nr. 67, Bl. 161-64.} Eventually he approached Brentano once again, also in the name of Edgar Jaffé, to write the review for the Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik: ‘[…] the value of the method as such, the main idea of the work for the great problem of the emergence of the modern economic spirit, make us believe that your reaction would be of the greatest value’.\footnote{Letter to Lujo Brentano, 21 May, 1904, BA Koblenz, Nl. Lujo Brentano, Nr. 67, Bl. 159-60.} All this shows that Max Weber appreciated Sombart’s work as a whole very much, even though he disagreed with it on many details and the latter’s general approach.

In this context Weber and Brentano got engaged in a discussion about the issue of Puritanism versus capitalism. Brentano harboured the plan to write an essay about the Franciscans and Puritanism, and he consulted Weber about the relevant literature concerning the role of the English moralists in the early history of capitalism. Weber recommended among other titles Ernst Troeltsch’s essay in the Realencyklopädie für Theologie und Kirche, which had just been published, with the comment ‘at any rate [Troeltsch] had got the essential things right’. He also promised to supply further literature which Brentano might consider relevant for his purposes: ‘I am familiar only with a part of the gigantic literature on the Puritans, but I would be pleased to forward to you relevant material as far as it is possible’.\footnote{Letter to Lujo Brentano, 10 October, 1903, BA Koblenz, Nl. Lujo Brentano, Nr. 67, Bl. 157-58.} This corroborates that Weber had already worked for some time on this topic, and that he was about to take it up again.

We may conclude that Max Weber decided to take up the theme concerning the relationship between Protestantism and modern capi-
talism for three reasons. For one, given the fact that lately the issue had found considerable attention both in the public and in the scientific community he wished as soon as possible to publish his own views, which he had already developed some years before. He assumed that it would be possible to prove the importance of ideal and religious factors on the economy in a concrete historical case. Secondly, as to the estimation of the role of religious factors in the rise of capitalism he disagreed substantially with Sombart. A third external factor of substantial weight came into play in June 1903 when Hugo Münsterberg visited Max Weber in Heidelberg and forwarded to him the invitation to take part in the ‘Congress of Cultural Science’, which was planned as a part of the forthcoming World Exhibition at St Louis in 1904. Weber was electrified by the prospect of a visit to the United States, and he immediately began to immerse himself once more in the rich literature about the relationship of Protestantism and economy. In the letter to Brentano of 10 October, 1903, Weber wrote: ‘During the winter I shall work through the sources once again for my lecture at St Louis and for an essay for the Archiv [für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik]’. We may gather from this that initially he had intended to present a paper on the theme in St Louis, but for reasons of time he eventually decided to use his work on the East Elbian agrarian workers’ question as the basis for the lecture in St Louis.

Apparently Weber wished to avoid any public criticism of Der moderne Kapitalismus, as it might have weakened the comparatively precarious position of Sombart within academia, given the fact that he had worked hard to get Sombart appointed to a professorship at Heidelberg University and he had tried to get a fair hearing for the book. Besides, in many ways he was in agreement with Sombart. For one thing he shared Sombart’s view that the ultimate causes to which social occurrences can always be traced back are the ‘motivations of living individuals’. This corresponded to the principles of methodological individualism to which Weber adhered unreservedly. Weber also concurred with Sombart’s argument that ‘Rechenhaftigkeit’, that is to say calculability, was an essential feature of the capitalist spirit.

56. Sombart, Kapitalismus, p. xviii.
However, as to the ways in which individual value attitudes are translated into economic action, Weber had an entirely different opinion. He disagreed with Sombart’s tendency to explain this causal link in psychological terms that cut short a far more complex relationship. His own reconstruction of the causal link between individual values and economic conduct followed the principles of theoretical economics. In the case of the Protestant ethic we come across specific religious ‘needs’, namely the salvation of one’s own soul, which give preference to certain ways of economic conduct. Not psychological dispositions, as for instance, the greed for money of the small capitalist which Sombart had identified as the key motive of capitalist action, but the creation of a new type of rational conduct of life had been decisive. Achieving economic success is in the first place pursued not by material but by ideal, that is, religious motives, and for this reason a maximum of rationality is demanded. Weber emphasized that the way in which he reconstructed the linkage between religious attitudes and the conduct of the individual in economic life was in the terminological respect more justified than Sombart’s approach. It is no coincidence that he advised Sombart to differentiate more clearly between the theoretical and the empirical-realistic approach. In later years he again objected to the view that his interpretation had been a reply to the one put forward in Sombart’s Der moderne Kapitalismus. We may confirm that Weber’s basic idea—that the roots of capitalism must be sought in the emergence of a specific form of rational life conduct—does indeed fundamentally differ from Sombart’s thesis.

Apparently Max Weber had tried to finish the essays on ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’ up until shortly before embarking upon his voyage to the United States. Some time after his return to Heidelberg he resumed his work and wrote to Rickert: ‘In June or July you will receive a culture-historical essay (asceticism of Protestantism as root of modern professional culture) which may be of interest to you. It is a sort of “spiritualistic” reconstruction of the modern economy.’


58. Letter to Heinrich Rickert, 14 June, 1904, GSTA PK, VI. HA, NL Max Weber, Nr. 25, Bl. 11-12.

Perhaps it is significant that Weber considered the treatise *PESC* an essay of cultural history, and not a sociological study as one might presume. This indicated once again that by writing the essay Weber intended to reinvigorate the programme of a combination of historical and theoretical approaches to social reality, in line with the objective which he had postulated only a few months earlier, namely ‘to ascertain the universal cultural significance of the rise of capitalism’. They represent Max Weber’s development from a theoretical economist with strong historical leaning to a cultural scientist (‘Kulturwissenschaftler’). His primary interest was to assess the cultural significance of economic systems and their impact upon the economic life conduct of the individuals, but even more so, how and with what consequences the value-attitudes of the individuals influence the economic processes.

culturgeschichtlichen Aufsatz (Askese des Protestantismus als Grundlage der modernen Berufscultur), eine Art “spiritualistischer” Construktion der modernen Wirtschaft.’

60. See n. 35 above.