Max Weber and Judaism: 
An Insight into the Methodology of 
The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

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Abstract
Max Weber’s perennial classic, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, contains an argument not simply about the significance of Calvinist theology for the ethos of modern capitalism, but also concerning the necessarily limited role of post-exilic Judaism in the development of capitalism. Indeed, the most significant difference between the first edition of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905) and the second edition (1920) is the development of the idea that the Jews are a ‘pariah people’ capable of contributing no more than a ‘pariah capitalism’. Weber felt compelled to develop this case in response to Werner Sombart, The Jews and Modern Capitalism (1911), in which an alternative to Weber’s argument concerning the Protestant sources of modern capitalism is presented. Weber’s conceptualization of the Jews as a ‘pariah people’ has attracted much criticism. Yet what the concept reveals of Weber’s methodology has not been explored in the literature. Once the limitations of Weber’s method, as revealed by consideration of the ‘pariah’ concept, are clear, then the main thesis of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism can also be re-evaluated.

Keywords: Jews, Max Weber, modern capitalism, pariah people, Protestant Ethic, Werner Sombart.

Introduction

When Weber published The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (hereafter PESC) in 1905 he had the benefit of Werner Sombart’s Modern Capitalism (1902) and The German Economy in the Nineteenth Century (Die deutsche Volkswirtschaft im Neunzehnten Jahrhundert) (1903). Weber agreed with Sombart’s promotion in these works of the importance of the idea of the ‘spirit of capitalism’ but disagreed with him about where this ‘spirit’ is to be socially and historically located. Against Sombart’s position Weber’s view is that the German national character, because Lutheran, is traditional and therefore not linked to the spirit of capitalism, which is modern. Rather, it is the national...
character of the British and American peoples, Weber argues, through their exposure to Puritanism and Calvinism, which are instead linked to the spirit of capitalism. In a similar way Weber accommodates Sombart’s view of the Jews as a religious group associated with trade, although not entrepreneurship, and in that sense implicated in the emergence and history of capitalism in an entirely subordinate and ancillary position.

While Weber’s account owes much to Sombart, so Sombart’s continuing work was a stimulus to Weber’s further researches. In a book first published in 1911, *The Jews and Modern Capitalism (Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben)*, Sombart developed further the arguments of his earlier publications, giving increased prominence to the role of the Jews in the development of capitalism. This was cause for Weber to consolidate his original differences with Sombart on the religious sources of modern capitalism, and it led Weber to conduct an exhaustive investigation and interpretation of Judaism and the basis of its inability, as Weber saw it, to contribute to the formation of modern capitalism. These investigations were conducted during the period 1911-1913 and were incorporated in what became *Economy and Society* and also, from 1916, published as *Ancient Judaism*. The conclusions of this research are summarized in the second edition of the *PESC* completed just months before Weber’s death in 1920.

In what follows I shall outline the relevant parts of Weber’s discussion of the Jews. My purpose is to show that Weber’s characterization of the Jews demonstrates something crucial about the form of his argument concerning the Protestants.

*Jewish rationalism, Protestant rationalism*

In *PESC* Weber holds that the ascetic rationalism of the Puritans and Calvinists has Old Testament sources in so far as these groups selectively emphasized ‘those parts of the Old Testament which praise formal legality as a sign of conduct pleasing to God’ (Weber 1991: 165). Weber goes on to say that this appropriation gave ‘a powerful impetus to that spirit of self-righteous and sober legality which was so characteristic of the worldly asceticism of this form of Protestantism’ (Weber 1991: 165). Indeed, the ‘rational suppression of the mystical’ typical of Puritanism and Calvinism was a feature ‘of the God-fearing but perfectly unemotional wisdom of the Hebrews’ (Weber 1991: 123; see also Weber 1991: 222 n. 19 and Weber 1981: 360-61). While Weber presents this overlap between Judaism and Protestantism, he is care-
ful to indicate that the relationship is not continuous, through historical or cultural causation, but primarily reflective of religious doctrines of the Protestants themselves and not the Jews. He says that ‘in the last analysis [it was] the peculiar, fundamentally ascetic, character of Calvinism itself which made it select and assimilate those elements of Old Testament religion which suited it best’ (Weber 1991: 123). Indeed, while Protestant rationalism was able to carry the ethos of rational organization from religious belief to the mundane practices of everyday life and especially those associated with modern capitalist production and labour, Jewish rationalism could lead no further than ‘the politically and speculatively oriented adventurous capitalism; their ethos was, in a word, that of pariah-capitalism’ (Weber 1991: 166).

Weber’s judgment, then, is that because of the nature of their religious beliefs the Jews could not be responsible for modern capitalism and could only be associated with a primitive and limited form of capitalism, what he calls ‘pariah capitalism’. A detailed exposition of his argument is developed in a section of Economy and Society, ‘Judaism and Capitalism’ (Weber 1978: 611-15), in which the concept of pariah capitalism is more fully outlined.

The ‘distinctive economic achievements of Judaism in the Middle Ages and in modern times’ are listed by Weber as ‘moneylending from pawnbroking to the financing of great states; certain types of commodity business, particularly retailing, peddling, and produce trade of a distinctively rural type; certain branches of wholesale business; and trading in securities, above all the brokerage of stocks’ (Weber 1978: 612; emphasis in original). Weber goes on to extend this list, providing greater impact to his concluding assessment that:

...of all these businesses only a few, though some very important ones, display the forms, both legal and economic, characteristic of modern Occidental capitalism (as contrasted to the capitalism of ancient times, the Middle Ages, and the earlier period in Eastern Asia). The distinctively modern legal forms include securities and capitalist associations (Weber 1978: 613).

While a portion only of Jewish economic activity might be called modern capitalist, then, Weber immediately continues that these latter ‘are not of specifically Jewish provenience’. Indeed:

[T]he characteristically modern principles of satisfying public and private credit needs first arose in nuce on the soil of the medieval city. These medieval legal forms of finance, which were quite un-Jewish in certain respects, were later adapted to the economic needs of modern states and other modern recipients of credit (Weber 1978: 613).
Weber’s assessment here is in clear contrast to Sombart’s argument concerning the importance of the Jews to the development of modern capitalism.

Not only are the economic activities of Jews predominantly associated with non-modern forms of capitalism, those that are within the orbit of modern economic and legal forms are not particularly Jewish. Weber goes further still:

Above all, one element particularly characteristic of modern capitalism was strikingly—though not completely—missing from the extensive list of Jewish economic activities. This was the organization of industrial production in domestic industry and in the factory system (Weber 1978: 613).

Thus, according to Weber, ‘the Jews were relatively or altogether absent from the new and distinctive forms of modern capitalism, the rational organization of labour, especially production in an industrial enterprise of the factory type’ (Weber 1978: 614). The issue of concern here is not with Weber’s argument that the Jews did not found modern capitalism, but with his characterization of the Jews and his subsequent account of their economic situation.

The reason that the Jews, unlike the Protestants, were quite alien to the development and operations of modern capitalism, according to Weber, is to be located in the fact that ‘they retained the double standard of morals which is characteristic of primordial economic practice in all communities: what is prohibited in relation to one’s brothers is permitted in relation to strangers’ (Weber 1978: 614). In a nutshell, ‘the religious law prohibited taking usury from fellow Jews but permitted it in transactions with non-Jews’ (Weber 1978: 615; emphasis added). Whereas the Protestants were able to maintain a religiously based ethical commitment in all of their activities, including acquisitive behaviour in the market place and in production for the market, according to Weber’s argument, the Jews maintained ethical commitments only within their religious community but had simply pragmatic and therefore unrationalizable economic relations with non-Jews. Thus the ‘ultimate theoretical reasons…that the distinctive elements of modern capitalism originated and developed quite apart from the Jews, are to be found in the peculiar character of the Jews as a pariah people and in the idiosyncracy of their religion’ (Weber 1978: 614; emphasis added).

Weber does consider a non-religious explanation of the Jewish situation, but only to dismiss it. He says in PESC, for instance, that ‘[n]ational or religious minorities which are in a position of subordi-
nation to a group of rulers are likely, through their voluntary or involuntary exclusion from positions of political influence, to be driven with peculiar force into economic activity’ (Weber 1991: 39). Thus migrant and minority status account for the economic and occupational configurations of ‘Poles in Russia and Eastern Europe... Huguenots in France under Louis XIV, the Nonconformists and Quakers in England, and, last but not least, the Jew for two thousand years’ (Weber 1991: 39). Weber says that consideration can be given to the way in which traditional relationships tend to break down under the influence of exile, for instance (Weber 1991: 43). But against this reasoning is the caution that minority status through exile ‘has been a universal occurrence and has nothing to do with our problem [for it] …is not peculiar to modern capitalism’ (Weber 1991: 190 n. 13). The curiosity of this statement lies not only in its essentialism but also its rejection of multicausal for monocausal explanation. In considering the different economic situations of distinct minority groups Weber bluntly insists, ‘the principal explanation of this difference must be sought in the permanent intrinsic character of their religious beliefs, and not only in their temporary external historico-political situations’ (Weber 1991: 40). The notion that religious beliefs have a ‘permanent intrinsic character’ is one to which we shall return.

The Jews as a ‘pariah people’

The religious basis of Jewish pariah standing, according to Weber, which explains both the Jews’ moral double standards and the limited nature of their economic activity, is in their covenant with God as a chosen people through which the pious voluntarily segregate themselves from the surrounding or host society. Weber refers to the ‘segregation from the outer world as a result of taboos, hereditary religious obligations in the conduct of life, and the association of salvation hopes with their pariah status’ (Weber 1978: 493). For Weber, then, the category ‘pariah people’ denotes a distinctive hereditary social group lacking autonomous political organization and characterized by internal prohibitions against commensality and intermarriage...[as well as] political and social disprivilege and a far-reaching distinctiveness in economic functioning’ (Weber 1978: 493).

As with many of his formulations, Weber presents the concept of ‘pariah people’ as an ideal-type construction that in this case he applies to both Judaism and Hinduism. Hindu castes and Judaism show the same characteristic effects of a pariah religion: ‘the more
depressed the position in which the members of the pariah people found themselves, the more closely did the religion cause them to cling to one another and to their pariah position and the more powerful became the salvation hopes which were connected with the divinely ordained fulfilment of their religious obligations’ (Weber 1978: 493; emphasis added). The difference between Judaism and Hindu caste religion, according to Weber, ‘is based on the type of salvation hopes entertained’ by each group (Weber 1978: 493). In particular, the salvation hopes of the Jews but not caste Hindus take a form coloured by resentment, as described by Nietzsche. Weber put some importance on this last point for he devotes six pages to it (Weber 1978: 494-99).

Weber’s characterization of the Jews as a ‘pariah people’ has stimulated a largely negative critical literature. There is not space here to review this literature but it is possible to indicate some of the complaints against Weber contained in it:

- The Jews never accepted an inferior status in the framework of an alien belief system, and the loss of political independence did not entail renunciation of self-government (Momigliano 1980)
- The comparison of the Jews and the Hindu castes is entirely forced, yet Weber attributes the utmost importance to it (Taubes 1971)
- As Weber uses the term, the Jews are not a pariah people: socially, the Diasporic Jews were limited neither in their occupational choice nor in their class membership; psychologically, there is a great difference between the pariah’s acquiescence in and the Jews rejection of their degradation (Maier 1971)
- Weber’s characterization of the Jews, consistent with his conception of historical social science methodology, is self-consciously grounded in contemporary value ideas, which makes him impervious to factual criticisms (Abraham 1992)
- The particularism of pariah peoples and the fundamental opposition between pariah and privileged, upon which Weber insists, ignores their mutual interdependence and coterminous formation (Dumont 1980).

One aspect of Weber’s treatment of the Jews as a pariah people to be focused on here is that in his account the social circumstance of the Jews is an unintended consequence of their religious beliefs. In that sense Weber holds that the Jews have an active acquiescence in their
own degradation. Such a statement would avoid being ethically and politically questionable only if it was sociologically unavoidable.

We have seen Weber argue that the pariah status of the Jews derives from their religious beliefs. It is not that the Jews are persecuted for their beliefs, according to this argument, but that adherence to these religious beliefs leads Jews to social separation and marginalization. Indeed, Weber says ‘no proof is required to establish that the pariah condition of the Jews, which we have seen resulted from the promises of Yahweh, and the resulting incessant humiliation of the Jews by Gentiles necessarily led to the Jewish people’s retaining a different economic morality for its relations with strangers than with fellow Jews’ (Weber 1978: 615). Thus while Weber agrees that the Jews suffer persecution he holds, at the same time, that this persecution is a consequence of pariah status rather than a primary factor in the separation, marginalization and ghettoization of the Jews. To the extent that Weber’s account of the Jews as a pariah people is a sociology of the Jews it has no meaningful role for anti-Semitism or some similar interactive phenomenon in explaining the historical experience of Jewish degradation.

Anti-Semitism and Jewish marginalization

When considering the economic activities of the Jews, Weber asks rhetorically why ‘no pious Jew thought of establishing an industry employing pious Jewish workers of the ghetto…when…areas of industrial activity uncontrolled by guild monopoly were open’ (Weber 1978: 613-14). Before considering how this question might be answered, Weber’s implicit acknowledgment in his statement, that guilds were simply not open to Jews, can be considered. Weber’s position is that the circumstances of the Jews have to be explained in terms of Jewish religious doctrine and practices. Thus he says that ‘Jewish law…prohibited the participation of Jews in the banquets of the guilds’ (Weber 1978: 618). The implication is that Jewish exclusion from guilds arose through incommensurability arising from Jewish religious dietary prohibitions. But this is to ignore the constitution and operations of the guilds themselves and their discriminatory exclusion of Jews irrespective of the latter’s dietary preferences.

The guilds, both merchant and craft, were established in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to exclude strangers from local activities and restrict foreign competition that had been growing through Europe since the ninth century and conducted by Syrian and Jewish
traders. The guilds forbad relations with strangers so that a ‘gildsman could not enter into partnership with a non-gildsman to trade with his money or sell his goods for part-profits’ (Lipson 1915: 242-43. See also Weber 1981: 141). Not only did the guild operate as a closure mechanism against strangers through control of trade, but also ‘the merchant gild served other functions which exhibit in a strong light the core of fraternalism inherent in the gild system’ (Lipson 1915: 246). These included not only town administration but also religious functions. Lipson says:

Many craft gilds seem to have originated as religious fraternities whose members were drawn together by ties of common devotion, and the religious duty of the gild is often placed foremost among its functions (Lipson 1915: 303).

Weber, on the other hand, insists against the tendency of historical evidence that ‘the guilds were secular in origin’, and immediately adds that they ‘laid claim to religious functions only in the late middle ages’ (Weber 1981: 146). This latter claim is true with regard to responsibility for the Mystery or Passion Plays, which went ‘out of the hands of the clergy in their naves and choirs…[into] those of the laity in their market-places and guild-halls’ (Chambers quoted in Lipson 1915: 303-304), but it is not true of the function of observance, for instance, including the guild’s maintenance ‘of lights upon the altars of its patron saint’ (Lipson 1915: 303). One index of the weakening of the guild system was indeed the failure of guild members to support the costs of the Christian pageant, an ‘outward symbol of the religious and social life of the fraternity’ (Lipson 1915: 365). The Christian character of guilds is more positively indicated, though, in the common stipulation that members take an oath to adhere to guild ordinances so that ‘disobedience would thus expose the offender to penalties in spiritual courts’ (Lipson 1915: 314).

Thus it is not self-exclusion of Jews through inability to partake in the compulsory feasts of guilds, which are important only toward the end of the guild system in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Lipson 1915: 367-68), but the exclorsory and Christian nature of the guilds that forcefully prevented Jewish participation at all. Indeed, Benjamin Nelson writes that ‘almost all occupations of any consequence in the Middle Ages were so thoroughly connected with the Christian religion, that the entire guild structure was so completely religious through and through that it is totally inconceivable…that any occupation was open to [Jews]’ (Stammer 1971: 197). The inference to draw
from this statement is that Jews were excluded from guild membership by the religio-cultural structure of the guilds themselves. Rather than explain Jewish conditions in terms of the tenets of Jewish religion, it is necessary to consider the relations between the Jews and the communities with which they related.

This point can be reinforced by consideration of Weber’s suggestion that Jewish religious prohibitions on intermarriage (Weber 1978: 493), mentioned above in connection with his characterization of pariah status, were responsible for the segregation of Jews from non-Jews. And yet the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, convened by Pope Innocent III, promulgated the requirement, in Canon 68, that Jews be distinguished from Christians by ‘the character of their dress’, a practice enforced at least until the sixteenth century and infamously reintroduced in 1933 under Nazi authority. The reason for the Jewish badge imposed by the Lateran Council was to prevent sexual relations between Christians and Jews that existed even in the face of clerical anxieties and religious prohibitions.

Let us return to Weber’s curiously phrased claim that ‘one element particularly characteristic of modern capitalism was strikingly—though not completely—missing from the extensive list of Jewish economic activities...[namely] the organization of industrial production in domestic industry and in the factory system’ (Weber 1978: 613). Weber goes on to claim that relevant resources and opportunities were available to Jews but not taken up by them (Weber 1978: 613-14). ‘The ultimate theoretical reasons for this fact’, he explains, ‘are to be found in the peculiar character of the Jews as a pariah people and in the idiosyncracy of their religion’ (Weber 1978: 614). In particular, the ethical consequences of their religion and the pariah status it imbued meant ‘what is prohibited in relation to one’s brothers is permitted in relation to strangers’ (Weber 1978: 614). In particular, Weber holds that Jewish religious precepts prevented Jewish capitalists employing Jewish labour and lending for interest to fellow Jews. Such an explanation, however, makes it difficult to account for those cases — acknowledged by Weber — in which ‘industrial production in domestic industry and in the factory system’ organized by Jews did occur.

One example not referred to by Weber in which appropriate facilitating political and economic conditions permitted Jewish industrial production is the textile industry in sixteenth-century Safed. At the time Safed was within the Ottoman Empire but subject to claims from neither Islam nor Christianity and it thus became a congenial place of settlement for Jewish craftsmen and traders expelled from Spain.
Economic relations with Syria to the north and the local rural hinterland encouraged the community to develop a broad economic and social base on which developed, among other things, a successful textile industry. Jewish workers were employed in the large Jewish owned textile workshops and Jews gave credit for interest to Jews (Ben-Sasson 1976: 634-35). When this type of development did not occur social, political and economic rather than religious factors might be considered in explaining it. Indeed, Weber did acknowledge that the ‘legally and factually precarious position of the Jews hardly permitted continuous and rationalized industrial enterprise with fixed capital’ (Weber 1978: 614). This kind of consideration must weigh significantly in explaining the limited incidence of Jewish industrial capitalists.

As Weber in fact suggests, the history of expulsion, confiscation and destructive persecution produced a cultural legacy of inhibition and insecurity dissuading Jews from holding their assets in or investing in fixed capital. But even if these dispositions were overcome other material constraints operated. By the nineteenth century in central and western Europe, for instance, Jewish financiers contributed to the development of industrial enterprise but were not direct participants within it. Even at this time Jews did not attain importance in industry because of the restrictions of guilds and government officials (Ettinger 1976: 738). In England, for instance, Jews ‘as aliens were precluded from purchasing real estate and shipping vessels’ and were ‘able to become freely naturalized only after the annulment in 1826 of the Christian oaths and ceremonies surrounding the naturalization procedure’ (Ettinger 1976: 759). Thus, added to cultural factors deriving from historical experience of forced movement and confiscation that inhibited investment in fixed capital, political interference also inhibited Jewish industrial capitalist development. Added to this is an economic organizational factor that when conditions constraining Jewish industrial activity abated, industrial production had already proceeded and opportunities for newcomers simply did not obtain. In those economies in which industrial expansion occurred after Jewish capitalists had achieved economic influence, Jews did play a part in developing capitalist industrialization, including in southern Germany and the Rhine region in the 1830s and 1840s and in Germany, England, and the United States at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries (Ettinger 1976: 798, 865-66). Whether Jewish capitalists employed Jewish workers is also a matter that requires
empirical investigation and cannot be answered simply on the basis of religious principle. It was more likely in industries in which small workforces predominated rather than large, and was affected more by the instability of the Jewish working class than the religion of employer or employee (Ettinger 1976: 798, 868).

The foregoing raises again the question: is it possible to have a sociology of Diasporic Judaism without consideration of anti-Semitism? Explaining social outcomes of a group in terms of their religious beliefs is a bone that makes very thin sociological soup.

Exclusion of Jews through incommensurability, as Weber suggests in the case of the guilds, does not in itself amount to anti-Semitism, although even that case does imply that Jewish exclusion or marginalization is not merely an unintended consequence of Jewish religious belief alone. No doubt exclusion through incommensurability may account for aspects of Jewish segregation, but the responsibility of active anti-Semitism in limiting the social and economic horizons of the Jews is much more significant than simply religious differences between Jews and a Christian host society.

Weber’s failure to contribute to a sociology of anti-Semitism is a significant omission. Significant because he was aware of anti-Semitism and opposed to it when it touched him, and also because he did concern himself sociologically with current issues of the day, even if not this one. Indeed, an historically important episode of anti-Semitism occurred in Berlin in the 1880s during the period of Weber’s attendance at Berlin University. One of Weber’s teachers at the University, Heinrich Treitschke, led a campaign for legislative exclusion of Jews from prominent positions in social life in defence of the Christian character of German state and society. Student fraternities, cultural associations, political parties and state bureaucracies all engaged in exclusionary practices against Jews; Jews were assaulted on the streets of Berlin and other cities with impunity and Jewish property was vandalized (see Pulzer 1964).

Weber was aware of anti-Semitism as a social and political force in the Germany of his day. He was aware of its consequences on Jewish opportunities and aspirations. However, in his sociological treatment of the Jews he regards the pariah concept and its corollaries as not only necessary but sufficient in explaining Jewish economic marginalization. That is to say, in Weber’s view, the conditions of the Jews are to be explained only by reference to the particulars and peculiarities of their religious beliefs.
Weber’s account of the Jews as a pariah people capable of contributing only to pariah capitalism functions in terms of an argument that adherence to religious principles of distinctiveness were responsible for Jewish social segregation. It has been show above that the conditions of the Jews can be explained not in terms of endogenous religious belief but in terms of the relationship between Jews and the social groups that persecuted them. The exemplary sociological statement of this approach is Lewis Wirth, *The Ghetto*, first published in 1928. Wirth (1966) accounts for the separation of the Jews, physically or spatially manifest in the form of the Jewish ghetto, in terms of a narrative of conflict relationships leading to institutionalization of social distance. Church councils from the very beginning of Jewish dispersion officially expressed Christian suspicion of the Jews as anti-Christ. The persistence, organization and level of persecution reached unprecedented heights during the first crusade in 1096. Political rulers from that time gave protection to the Jews in exchange for a monetary tribute collected from the community as a whole rather than from individuals. This arrangement of protection in return for payment, which could be rescinded at any time, was the basis of new persecution as religious authorities used the Jews as an issue in their disagreements with political authority. It also reinforced the commercial and financial activities of the Jews, as under the arrangements of protection they were effectively imperial tax collectors. Indeed, it has been argued that the fortunes of the Jews declined with the growth of capitalism as their value to the Nobility diminished with the rise of a Christian merchant class (Sharot 1976: 29). Finally, Wirth notes that the political and social structure of the Jewish community was shaped by the dual factors of persecution and communal payment of tribute. These consolidated Jewish separation and solidarity, which was completed by the fifteenth century in the form of the ghetto.

Weber does not reject the type of account later developed by Wirth, indeed, he provides a statement of religious anti-Semitism and its effects on the Jews in *General Economic History* (Weber 1981: 217, 270, 359) and in the last chapter of *Ancient Judaism*, chapter 16, ‘Judaism and Early Christianity’. Nevertheless, he continues to give priority to Jewish ritualistic segregation and holds that the ‘social isolation of the Jews, this “ghetto” in the intimate sense of the word, was, indeed, primarily self-chosen and self-willed and this to a constantly increasingly extent’ (Weber 1952: 417). This Weber takes from the religious pre-
scription of taking interest from compatriots and its permissibility from foreigners (Weber 1981: 267-68, 359-60. See also Weber 1978: 615). It is appropriate, then, to briefly consider the veracity of this claim.

Weber was aware that biblical prohibitions did not prevent loans on interest between Jews. Indeed, these practices were responsible for encouraging, within Jewish communities, re-interpretations of Talmudic law at least from the twelfth century because of internal economic necessity (Ben-Sasson 1976: 390). While Jewish writers of the period maintained an outward loyalty to scripture, the practices of monetary transactions and the ‘efforts to find a legal method for authorizing loans’ testify to the absence of dual attitudes among Jews to loans for interest (Ben-Sasson 1976: 391. See also Ben-Sasson 1976: 400, 471-75, 643-44). Again, Weber acknowledges these facts, which had been pointed out by Sombart, but dismisses them as ‘amount[ing] merely to concessions to laxity, whereby those who took advantage of them remained far behind the highest standards of Jewish business ethics. In any case, it is certain that such behaviour was not the realm in which a Jew could demonstrate his religious merit’ (Weber 1978: 615). Weber’s claim here would be true only if ethics, including business ethics, were necessarily drawn from theological principles.

In his discussion of values and value spheres Weber distinguishes the religious, economic, political, aesthetic, erotic, and intellectual spheres, each with its own internal distinctiveness, consistency, rationalizing tendencies and imperatives for subverting the other spheres (Weber 1970; Weber 1949a). He says that the ‘tension between brotherly religion and the world has been most obvious in the economic sphere’ and that the ‘more the world of the modern capitalist economy follows its own immanent laws, the less accessible it is to any imaginable relationship with a religious ethic of brotherliness’ (Weber 1970: 331). The only possibilities Weber identifies for escaping this tension between religion and economy are the ‘Puritan ethic of “vocation”’ and ‘mysticism’ (Weber 1970: 332-33). As neither of these is available to adherents of Jewish religion, the Jewish religious value sphere must undermine Jewish adherence to values commensurate with capitalist economic practices. The difficulties for Weber’s sociology drawn from this late-nineteenth century German neo-Kantianism are well known (see Turner and Factor 1984), but they remain the undisputed basis of Weber’s argument concerning Jewish derogation to pariah capitalism. And yet Weber’s account of value rationality and value spheres suffers ‘irredeemable weaknesses’ (Oakes 2003).
According to Weber (Weber 1949b: 84-85) every human action is either a manifestation of a value position or an unintelligible element in an indeterminate flow. It is for this reason that Weber believes that merely pragmatic actions are unrationalizable. But utilitarian and pragmatic economic relations between Jews and non-Jews are no different than those between Puritans and non-Puritans. There are two broad forms of economic activity: plunder and trade. The practical requirements of the economic exchanges characteristic of trade generate their own normative demands that lead to particular standards of conduct that must be maintained if trust in the participants and confidence in the objects of exchange and the exchange relationship itself are to continue. The idea that Jews did not ethically rationalize their relations with outsiders and that Jewish religious beliefs necessarily countermand the possibility of ethical business dealings between Jews and non-Jews is an artefact of Weber’s philosophical presuppositions and not a coherent analytical or empirical statement concerning economic relationships. Additionally, Weber is committed to the view that it is possible to treat a social group’s historical experiences and proclivities in terms of its religious affiliations because he assumes that the religious precepts and principles of social groups are enduring, self evident and without need of selection or interpretation. But this is simply to beg the question.

Conclusion: Religious belief as a social cause

The conclusion to be drawn from the preceding discussion is that, among other things, the formal structure of Weber’s argument concerning the Jews as a pariah people requires close critical attention; for it holds that the social circumstances of a group are to be explained in terms of its intrinsic belief system rather than its relations with others. Yet this argument is important to Weber because it compliments his larger argument concerning the links between Protestant religious beliefs and the ethos of modern capitalism. Sombart’s claim, that Jewish religious marginalization is the source of Jewish economic progress, is rebutted by Weber’s argument that Jewish religious beliefs are responsible for moral double standards that in turn lead the Jews to a cul-de-sac of pre-modern capitalism. Puritan and Calvinist beliefs, it is claimed on the other hand, lead to ethical conduct in market exchanges that in turn ensures vocational commitment to moneymaking, the sine qua non of modern capitalism.
The formal structure of Weber’s arguments concerning the Jews is identical with that concerning the Protestants:

RELIGIOUS BELIEF → ETHICAL ORIENTATION → ECONOMIC OUTCOME

Sociologists have become so familiar with Weber’s argument concerning Protestantism that the limitations of its structure have gone unnoticed, even though so apparent when its form is applied to the Jews. In particular is the problem concerning the supposed causal nature of religious belief. This is not to engage the philosophical discussion of whether ideas can be causes. Rather the issue is whether it is possible to draw sociological conclusions from the state of an individual’s soul, as Weber supposes. A requirement for such a prospect is a statement of mechanism that translates religious belief to social outcome. This Weber notoriously fails to provide in the case of Protestant religious beliefs (Hamilton 1996; Marshall 1982; Samuelsson 1961).

There is an additional but connected problem, namely the effective content of religious belief. Weber seems to be alert to this issue to the extent that he attempts to overcome its problems by referring to the ‘permanent intrinsic character’ (Weber 1991: 40) of religious beliefs. Again, this is a question begging formulation. Indeed, it is much more reasonable to believe that religious beliefs are necessarily without ‘permanent intrinsic’ content. The Anglican Church, for instance, is currently divided on the correct religious understanding of homosexual practices. The scriptural text, in Leviticus, that castigates homosexuality as an abomination, also contains dietary proscriptions. That the relevant Christian religious find textual support for their beliefs in the Old rather than the New Testament raises one type of question concerning the selective as opposed to the intrinsic nature of religious belief. That the dietary prescriptions of these scripture have no purchase on those seeking support for their beliefs concerning homosexuality raises another type of question. The fact that there is social selection of one religious tenet for continued faithful adherence and social declassification of another suggests that the content of religious beliefs has to be regarded sociologically as a dependent and not an independent variable and therefore they are without a ‘permanent intrinsic character’. This acknowledgement implies that Weber’s claim that Jewish—or Protestant—religious beliefs can adequately explain social outcomes and economic proclivities must be regarded accordingly.
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