

WEBER'S "PROTESTANT ETHIC" AND HIS CRITICS

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN HUMANITIES

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

MAY 2006

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge Dr. Hekman for her direction on this project. Without her professional attention and guidance this project might not have come to fruition.

April 12, 2006

ABSTRACT

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Publication No. _____

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2006

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This thesis focuses on Max Weber's "Protestant Ethic" Thesis. In his thesis Weber claims after the Reformation, Calvinism created the needed work ethic to produce modern capitalism. His critic's arguments against this claim are presented and compared with Weber's replies.

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CHAPTER 1

WEBER'S THESIS

Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, has created a great deal of debate since it was originally published in 1905. Only a work with such revolutionary claims can draw not only the volume, but the variety of criticisms that the "Protestant Ethic" has. There has been a great deal written on the "Protestant Ethic" and its criticisms, but very rarely are all of the criticisms addressed in the same body of work. Instead, most publications choose to address individual critics of Weber's thesis instead of an overview of the main criticisms proposed by several scholars. This thesis will focus on the four main criticisms of Weber's "Protestant Ethic" thesis. It is important to clearly state Weber's claim here. Since this paper addresses the criticisms of Weber's "Protestant Ethic" thesis, a consistent working definition is needed. Weber's claim is that rational capitalism is the source of the industrial revolution and the growth of capitalism as the preeminent universal economic system. Weber claimed that this rational capitalism came into being by a work ethic rooted in Calvinism. Weber's rational capitalism is capitalism that values growth and efficient production. It is different from previous versions of capitalism in that it is based on a concept of continual growth. Not spending earnings, but putting money to work to produce more money. To Weber Calvinism is the foundational doctrine of many of the Protestant sects originating in Western Europe. The details of how this doctrine

created a capitalistic work ethic are addressed later in this chapter. Now that a working definition is presented we can in a more detailed manner address both Weber's thesis and Weber's critics.

All four of the criticisms originated in the first twenty to twenty-five years after the original publication. All of the critics were other German intellectuals with the exception of R.H. Tawney who was a British historian. This thesis is organized as follows: Chapter One will address the statement of the original thesis, as well as some bibliographic information concerning the author and his motivation for writing in his chosen area of study in sociology. Chapter One will also address the main supporting evidence that Weber produces for his thesis. Chapter Two will address the four main criticisms of the thesis. Chapter Three will include the rejoinders Weber produced to his critics. Chapter Four, the concluding chapter, will analyze the arguments from both sides and take a position on the accuracy of either Weber or his critics.

In discussing Weber in general and the "Protestant Ethic" in particular it is important to note the personal and professional background of the author. After all, the assumptions that people make are based on the experiences that they have had in their own lives. Weber's life leading up to his writing the "Protestant Ethic" was no exception to this fact of human behavior. Kalsner, a biographer of Weber and his work, explains it best:

Max Weber is universally acknowledged as one of the most significant figures in the development of modern social science. The ideas that he pioneered and the avenues of research that he opened up, influenced scholars in the disciplines ranging from history to jurisprudence." (Weber 1905:ix)

Kalsner goes on to say the following concerning Weber's contribution to the discipline of sociology: "Among sociologists, Weber is recognized as one of the principle 'founding fathers' of the discipline" (Baehner 2002:x).

In his personal life Weber was exposed to the "Capitalist Spirit" at a very young age. His family owned a factory which his uncle operated. This early exposure to an entrepreneurial spirit planted in the young Weber the curiosity to ask the formative question for his thesis: What is it that created the growth of capitalism? His question was not concerning the creation of capitalism because there is evidence that it had existed before, but rather the growth of capitalism in Europe. His original education at the post secondary level was in law. His exposure to law created in him the curiosity to understand other areas of the humanities. After a short while in the German bureaucracy and then time in the German army as a commissioned officer, Weber made his way into academia. The ethic that Weber wrote about in his essay was very self evident to him because of the work ethic that his father had instilled in him as a child. Weber had the reputation of working long hours and publishing a great deal of work. He lived at home until he was twenty-nine and his father passed away. According to Kalsner, this was more than Weber could stand. His father's passing brought on a series of nervous breakdowns. It was after one of these breakdowns that Weber produced his most famous work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. This essay generated a great deal of criticism soon after its initial publication. This was in large part due to the place Protestant thinking held in the evolution of modern Capitalism. Protestantism was the main religion in Europe during the rise of the industrial revolution, and more industrialists were Protestant than Catholic.

The original thesis in the “Protestant Ethic” is as follows: capitalism, or at the least the “sprit of capitalism”, was created by a work ethic that is rooted in the doctrine of ascetic Calvinism. Weber saw the work ethic of the ascetic Protestant as the key. Prior to ascetic Protestantism the mentality of the working class was to make enough to live on, or enough to provide for basic needs. The change occurs when the mentality changed to making more than one needed for basic needs, thus making income above the subsistence level. In the religiously motivated work ethic of the ascetic Protestant Weber finds his answer. So, Weber claimed that there was not a change in the amount of materials that were available for production, but there was a change in mentality about work and the surplus that it produced.

To have a more thorough understanding of Weber’s thesis an expanded list of his supporting evidence is needed. After all, the most criticism for any given theory must by nature be directed at that data that supports the theory, and not the theory itself.

Weber starts his essay by comparing “Denominational and Social Stratification”, the title of the chapter. At the time Weber wrote his essay, the denominational majority in Germany was Protestant. Catholic was also a large denominational sector. However, at the time of Weber’s thesis, Catholics were the largest non-Protestant minority. Weber opens his essay with the following claim:

Business leaders and the owners of capital, as well as the skilled higher strata of the labor force and especially the higher technical or commercially trained staff of modern enterprises tend to be predominantly Protestant. (Weber 1905:1)

The claim here is that the Reformation and the demise of Catholicism was not the removal of ecclesiastical control over the population, but the exchanging of one control for

another. This sits well with what is generally accepted as the “power vacuum” theory in political science. The difference is that we are not replacing one dictator for another instead we are replacing one religious authority with another. Here is an example of Weber’s idea of the replacement of ecclesiastical authority:

Today, even peoples of thoroughly modern economic character can tolerate the rule of the Catholic Church- “punishing heretics, but treating sinners gently,” a principle that applied even more strongly in the sixteenth century than it does today: but the rule of Calvinism , as exercised in sixteenth century in Geneva and Scotland would be for us simply the most unbearable form of ecclesiastical control over the individual than would be possible to imagine. (Weber 1905:2)

One of the main points of the Reformation was the direct link between man and God. The Catholic Church acted as an intermediary for the individual, thus creating whatever communication it saw fit between the individual and God. With the removal of the Catholic Church and the lack of assurance of salvation under the Calvinist doctrine of salvation, the individual was under greater stress to please God without the buffer of the Church to ameliorate the sinner’s guilt. This fact is one that Weber pointed out to make clear that the mentality of ascetic lifestyles that valued hard work was the change needed at an individual, and thus cultural level to usher in capitalism.

The other area in which Weber made a distinction between Protestant and Catholic is in the education they choose. Weber makes the point that fewer Catholics attend secondary school compared to their numbers in the general population. This he attributed to less inherited wealth,

or less interest in business ownership, or capitalistic spirit. He makes the following claim as to the type of education Catholics choose:

Among those Catholics who do attend secondary school, the percentage of those educated in the modern institutions designed to prepare pupils for *technical* studies and *commercial and business* careers, or indeed Any of the middle class occupations [*bürgerlich*] occupation again falls well short of that of Protestants. (Weber 1905:3)

Even the career choices Catholics made compared to those of Protestants were indicative of the mentality towards work and occupational choice. Weber goes on to say:

Catholics prefer the education offered by the classic-based grammar schools. This is a difference that cannot be explained by differences in inherited wealth. (Weber 1905:3)

This shows the differences that Weber observed in the drive to find an occupation that led to capital gain, something that classics-based education is not known for. By this example Weber hopes to show that Catholics did not have the same mentality that Protestants did when it came to work. He states that the reason for a difference in mentality is based on the difference in work ethic, the “Protestant Ethic”.

Before addressing some of the key concepts and terminology that Weber used it is important to address the method that he used to draw his examples. This method is referred to by Weber as the “ideal type”. In an article written by Weber titled, “*Objectivity*” in *Social Science and Social Policy*, he addresses the reason for and the “ideal type” method:

The ideal typical concept will help to develop our skill in imputation in research: it is no “hypothesis” but it offers guidance to the construction of the “hypothesis”. It is not a

description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression of such a description. (Weber 1949:34)

In this statement Weber shows the need to use ideal typical information in creating his hypothesis. He continues by giving a concrete definition of his ideal type:

An ideal type is formed when by the one sided accentuation of one or more points of view and the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sided emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically in reality. It is a utopia. (Weber 1949:34)

Weber goes as far as admitting that in his description of the “ideal type” there will always be exceptions, something that his critics seemed to hang over his head. The truth is that Weber had already addressed the fact there were exceptions to the concept of the “Protestant Ethic”, there were exceptions to the writing of Franklin. This mattered little to Weber because he openly admits that the ideal type is a tool and in no way an absolute rule. The application of a scientific type absolute concept to any dealing with humanity in the social sciences is amiss. It is simply not possible. Weber knew this and simply stated that the ideal type was a method whereby he could create a hypothesis concerning the nature of conditions, ideologies, or social action based on generally understood concepts. In truth, every time a scholar proposes a research question they are using the “ideal type” as their initial catalyst. Since it plays a role in the initial conceptualization it plays a role throughout the thought of any thesis. Most of Weber’s critics

took issue with the ideal type because they found exceptions to his thesis, exceptions that according to his description were expected.

One of the main criticisms that Weber had to face was the way in which he defined the “capitalist spirit”. In fact, it seems he was clear on this idea in his mind, but the term at face value is so ambiguous, that his critics took issue with his use of the term. After all, how is one to define spirit? It is a bit like asking someone to define the word blue. It is up to interpretation, based on context, tone and timing of the use of the word. We face a similar problem when Weber uses the word “spirit” in his explanation of the effect of the Protestant work ethic. Despite Weber’s ambiguity in presenting a definition of the “spirit” of capitalism simply put the “spirit” was what Weber was generally considered true about economic behavior in Calvinist inspired cultures. Weber provided some examples of what he meant. What is unique about the time at which Weber was defining what the spirit of capitalism is, there are very few definitions or concepts as to what this, “spirit”, might have been. Weber created this term as part of his thesis. Prior to Weber, Marx’s definition of capitalism was widely accepted by academics such as Sombart, a leftist colleague of Weber’s. Marx claimed that work was the individual but that the individual was controlled and manipulated by the owners of capital. Owners of capital were controlling both the raw materials and the labor of the individual. In Marx’s view of capitalism, capitalism is not about work, it is about the exploitation of the worker. Weber is redefining capitalism, or at the least the essence of capitalism that he saw as the natural evolution of ascetic Protestantism. In the section of his essay titled, “The Spirit of Capitalism”, Weber makes clear that he is fully aware of the ambiguous nature of the word, “spirit” especially in the sense that he used it. He does come to the following conclusion in the process:

It will not be possible to arrive at the ultimate definition of the concept at the outset but only at the conclusion of the investigation. To put it another way only in the course of the discussion and as the essential outcome will it be shown how that which we understand as the 'spirit' of capitalism should best-that is, most satisfactorily for the points of view *which interest us here*- be formulated. (Weber 1949:9)

In essence, Weber is admitting that through his writing he intends to come to a conclusion on the definition of the "spirit of capitalism" Weber says the following concerning the process of defining "spirit":

If, then, we are to determine the object with which our analysis and historical explanations are concerned –as we must-then we cannot do this by means of conceptual "definition" but only by a provisional *illustration* of what is here meant by the "spirit" of capitalism. (Weber 1949:9)

Weber seems at first to make an odd choice for his example of the "spirit" of capitalism. Ben Franklin, an American founding father, inventor and author of several books on the topic of thriftiness, and frugality, was Weber's example of the "spirit" of capitalism. Franklin fit the definition of the "spirit" of capitalism for Weber because Franklin fit the generally accepted belief of what economic behavior should be. However, the choice seems odd for two reasons. First, Franklin was American. It seems that an example from the modern era in Germany would be a better example to use with his reading audience. The other reason is that despite a long life and some business ownership Franklin was the model of frugality, not of wealth above one's basic needs. Despite these shortcomings, it seems that there are a few very good reasons to have chosen Franklin. First, because he lived in the 17th century he was an example of where the

“spirit” existed in an ideal type setting. He lived in a period recent enough to the Reformation to still retain the ascetic lifestyle and work ethic despite his deistic leanings. The second reason, was that his literature was simply available and fit Weber’s thesis, as well as the fact that Weber had a genuine interest in America and the social forces that formed American society. What follows are some of the Franklin’s maxims that Weber used in his thesis to illustrate the “spirit” of capitalism:

Remember *time is money*. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversions or idleness, ought not to reckon *that* the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides. (Weber 1905:9)

What Weber wanted to show with this example is the value of time. Prior to the Reformation, the example given above by Franklin, there was no inclination to work long hours if one could produce the needed resources for basic survival. In saying, “Time is money” Franklin expressed what Weber would argue is the “spirit” of capitalism. That is the mentality of productivity, the evil of sloth and lazy behavior. Franklin goes on to bring up the idea of credit:

Remember, that *credit is money*. If a man lets his money lie in my hands after it is due, he gives me the interest, or so much as I can make of it during that time. (Weber 1905:9)

This point is very important to the argument that Weber makes. Capitalism is not only the change in mentality concerning production and wealth. It is also the idea that money is a tool and acts as a means to an end. That end is the creation of more money. Prior to application of the “Protestant Ethic”, under the feudal system this concept of making money with money did not exist, or at least not among the common people. Most people were only concerned with the bare

minimum and survival. The change of money from a means of purchase to a means of wealth generation is the underlying message of this maxim from Franklin. To further elaborate on this point Franklin said the following: “Remember that money is of the prolific, generating nature. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on. (Weber 1905:9) This is a clear indication of the change in the use of money from a simple means of exchange to a method of creating wealth. There are several more short maxims that Weber gleans from Franklin to illustrate the point of the “spirit” of capitalism. “For six pounds a year you may have the use of one hundred pounds, provided you are a man of known prudence and honesty. He that spends a groat a day idly, spends above six pounds a year, which is the price for the use of one hundred pounds”(Weber 1905: 10) All of these maxims are not only acted out of good conscience or as simply the correct thing to do, but because they are socially acceptable behavior. Weber goes on to explain that he thinks Franklin has multiple motivations for suggesting these behaviors.

All Franklin’s moral precepts, however, have a utilitarian slant. However, it is useful because it brings credit. So are punctuality, hard work moderation, etc... and they are only virtues *for this reason*. (Weber 1905:11)

What Weber in essence said is that this is the most economical behavior for achieving the greatest material wealth. Franklin mentions honesty several times in his maxims, and he also mentions prudence. To simplify this to the most basic level, any individual’s greatest asset is his/her reputation. If you were viewed as lazy, untrustworthy, or foolish, these behaviors were more detrimental to your income than how much money you began with. Franklin suggested behaviors in and of themselves are of a capitalistic behavior because they appeal to the socially

accepted norm of behavior for men in business during his era. You conform to the standard of your culture or society or you do not succeed. Weber addressed the concept of the useful virtue:

According to Franklin, these virtues, like all others are only virtues at all to the extent that they are 'useful' to the individual in concrete situations: the mere appearance of virtue is an adequate substitute whenever it serves the same purpose. (Weber 1905:12)

Despite what appears a simple self serving and egotistical behavior, Weber argues otherwise:

This is clear both from the character of Ben Franklin himself, as revealed in the rare honesty of his autobiography, and the fact that he saw his discovery of the "*usefulness*" of virtue as a revelation from God. (Weber 1905:12)

The fact that Franklin ultimately found virtue useful in no way lowered or downgraded it's origin or purpose; if a man is honest because he finds it useful does not change the fact the man was honest. Concerning Franklin's motivations, Weber goes on to say:

It is so completely devoid of all eudemonistic, let alone hedonistic, motives, so much purely though of an end in itself that it appears as something wholly transcendent and irrational, beyond the "happiness" or the benefit of the *individual*. (Weber 1905:12)

In the end, Weber sees the motivation in Franklin to make money not as a means to accumulate material goods, but as the fuel in the engine of capitalism, that is the motivation for effective production and achievement. He did come to a basic definition in the idea of capitalism's spirit:

The development of the "capitalist spirit" can most easily be understood as part of the total development of rationalism and must be derived from the latter's fundamental attitude to the ultimate problems of life. (Weber 1905:27)

In this statement, we can see the fundamental message Weber derives from his studies: the Reformation was a rejection of the old traditionalism and a move toward the rationalism of the subsequent centuries.

Weber as well as his idea on what the “spirit” is traced certain words to show the development of the idea of work as a calling from God. The word he traced was the word “*Beruf*”. He explained it as follows:

Now it is unmistakable that that the German word “*beruf*”, and even more clearly the word in English “calling”, carry at least *some* religious connotations-namely, those of a task set by God. (Weber 1905:28)

Weber went on to point out that the sense of the word in the original language of the Bible was not in fact the same as portrayed during the time of Luther, but that,

The word in its present meaning derives from the *translations of the Bible* in fact from the spirit of the translators, not from the spirit of the original. (Weber 1905:28)

What Weber is suggesting here is nothing short of biblical translation tainted and influenced by the mentality concerning work and calling at the time of the translation into German. Weber said, “The word corresponded to a new idea” (1905:28), and that it was generally recognized what that idea was. Weber sees this as fact and further evidence that the development of the idea of capitalism in its modern form can be traced to the translations of the Bible to German during the Reformation.

While Weber did consider the language indicative of the mentality of capitalism he also used the writings and doctrinal statement of Protestant leaders as evidence for his case. While Weber is careful to categorize all of the denominations that have strong dogmatic views

that are in line with Calvinism he used one speaker, an English Puritan by the name of Richard Baxter, as his primary example of Ascetic Protestantism. Weber chooses Baxter because of his, “Eminently practical and irenic position” (Weber 1905:106). Baxter was well known in his time as a pastor and supporter of Cromwell. He was also known for his clarity of message in his books on Christian theology. Baxter’s impression of wealth was as follows:

Wealth is such a serious danger, its temptations never cease, and the striving for it is not only pointless in the face of overwhelming importance of the kingdom of God, but it is also morally questionable. (Weber 1905:106)

What we seem to find here is an attitude that is at its very core the complete opposite of the “spirit of capitalism”. Weber suggested a closer look at what Baxter was actually opposed to:

What is really reprehensible is the *resting* on one’s possessions, *enjoyment* of wealth and with the consequences of idleness and the lust of the flesh, and particularly of distraction from the striving for a “holy” life. (Weber 1905:106)

Baxter is not in actuality opposed to the creation of wealth. What he opposes is the vices and behaviors that wealth can bring to the Christian seeking grace through action. Weber demonstrates the ascetic work ethic by using Baxter’s ideas, “The span of life is infinitely short and precious, and must be used to ‘secure’ ones own calling.”(Weber 1905:106) Weber lists behaviors such as, “idle talk, luxurious living, and even more sleep than is required for health” (Weber 1905:107). An example of the attitude that permeated the writing of Baxter, Weber goes on to say:

There is a thread of constantly repeated, and at times almost passionate, preaching of hard, constant, physical or mental *work* running through Baxter's writing. (Weber 1905:107)

In this, Weber seems to make the case that this work ethic along with frugal living had only the possible outcome of producing capitalism. The summation of Baxter's thought was that, "Work is *the* end and the purpose of life commanded by God" (Weber 1905:107) Weber went on to contrast this with the writing of Thomas Aquinas where, "Work is only necessary 'naturali ratione' for the preservation of the life of the individual and the community" (Weber 1905:107). We can see how this comparison makes the case for the change in mentality concerning work created the work ethic that in turn provided the cultural fuel needed to produce capitalism. The ascetic idea was that to not work is indeed a sin, and carried with it eternal damnation and hellfire. Baxter so strongly represents the idea of calling and work as decreed by God that he states the following:

Outside of a well marked calling, the accomplishments of man are only casual and irregular, and he spends more time in idleness than in work. (Weber 1905:109)

Calling and constant labor are the outward signs of an individual's striving for salvation and conversion of one's soul.

It is clear from this brief summary of the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber was very interested in a qualitatively created argument. He sought to provide support for his claim through examples of other's writings and through the change in the word's meanings. It would have been possible to spend a great deal of time deciding historically who the most prominent writers and historians in the Protestant Reformation were. However, qualitatively

Weber felt there were writers such as Franklin and Baxter that as “ideal types” exhibited the characteristics of the group and as such were sufficient for his thesis. His arguments are very compelling at first sight and seem to provide a thorough if not competent case. His critics took issue with practically every point of his argument believing it to be complete fabrication, and some even claimed historical fantasy.

CHAPTER 2

WEBER'S CRITICS

In the first chapter of this thesis I presented the basic ideas of Weber's "Protestant Ethic" thesis. Chapter one also provided the evidence Weber used to support his thesis. One of the reasons for the longevity of the thesis is not only the claim he makes but the responses that he received from other academics. If the topic that Weber addressed had been of little interest or concern there would not have been such a varied response to his work. Prior to and during the time of the writing of the original thesis the topic of capitalism and religion were one of great interest to the academic world, and that of the growing German middle class. *In Industrialization in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Tom Kemp, an economic historian, describes the character of the industrialization of Germany as follows:

Within the space of a generation Germany was transformed from a collection of economically backwards states forming a political patchwork in Central Europe into a unified empire driven forward by a rapidly expanding industry on an advanced technological base. (Kemp 1985:78)

As seen from this example we can understand why academics sought to explain the reason for the sudden change in Germany. The statistical evidence for this is overwhelming. In a book titled *Imperial Germany Economy, Society, Culture and Politics 1871-1914*, by Volker R. Berghahn, he provided statistics on the growth of the German economy during the time period in the title. There are two statistical tables that show the incredible capitalistic growth in Germany

prior to and during the time Weber was writing his thesis. The first table is, *Net Investments in Agriculture and Industry, 1870-1913*. Because Weber published his original thesis in 1905 information will be limited up to that date. In the area of investment in industry the percentage was 43.2% in 1905-1907 up from 10.6 in 1875. In the area of construction new investments were up 40.4% in 1905 from 33.2 in 1870-1874. There is clear growth in this time period. There was a move away from agriculture and toward industrialization. Just as indicative of this growth was the increase of taxpayers with higher levels of income. The table, *Growth in Wealthy Taxpayers and Their Average Wealth Per Capita in Prussia, 1895 and 1907*, provided this data. In the top tax bracket, there were 1,827 who were earning two million marks or more per year in 1895. By 1907 that number had almost doubled to 3,425 in twelve years. While it is true that the very wealthy do not provide an example of the middle class the fact this bracket doubled in twelve years shows that while the wealthy are making the investments there is a skilled workforce increasing the wealth of the investors. In the lowest bracket those earning six to one thousand marks a year, this is a middle class bracket, and there was an increase from approximately one million taxpayers to one point six million. This tax bracket was made up of the managers and skilled laborers that represented the “Protestant Ethic”. This growth shows the reason for great academic interest in why economic growth was happening at the rate it was occurring. This growth was historically unprecedented in Germany.

Weber was only one academic to propose a possible thesis. As can be expected, the historians and economists saw the rise of capitalism as an occurrence that was within primarily their disciplines area of study to explain. This is only natural given the still infantile state of

sociology in academia. Weber in his article, “Objectivity” in Social Science and Social Policy”, says the following concerning, “specialist”:

It is due to the naïve self deception of the specialist who is unaware that it is due to the evaluative ideas with which he unconsciously approaches his subject matter, that he has selected from an absolute infinity a tiny portion with the study of which he *concerns* himself.(Weber 1949:32)

Weber is in essence saying that historians will have an unconscious bias to block that which is not directly related to the topic; this is also true for an economist. Weber was looking at culture in a broad stroke and he felt his critics were looking at only particular disciplines within western culture. As individuals, his critics naturally chose areas that were very narrow compared to the overall topic of Weber’s “Protestant Ethic” thesis.

Naturally, the criticism that Weber drew from his thesis originated from the disciplines of history, economics, and psychology. All of the criticisms that he faced were based on the critic’s discipline and did not always involve operating with the same connotative meaning of words used in the argument. All of his early critics were fellow Germans with the exception of a British historian. There were three German professors that were the most critical of the “Protestant Ethic”.

The three early German critics of Weber were Fischer, Rachfahl, and Sombart. It is beneficial to cover their backgrounds briefly to explain their academic interests and basis for criticizing the “Protestant Ethic”. In the introduction of the *Protestant Ethic Debate* Chalcraft, provides brief biographical sketches of Fischer and Rachfahl. Concerning the identity of Fischer he said the following:

Little is known of H. Karl Fischer and we have not succeeded in identifying him. There were a number of Fischers active in the academic, literary, and professional life whose forenames render them just about eligible, but none have been discovered in the records who fit conclusively. The strongest candidate is probably Dr. Karl Fischer (born 1840) of Wiesbaden, who published a large number of works from 1870 onwards in German history. (Chalcraft 2001:7)

More is known about the second academic by the name of Rachfahl. Chalcraft says the following concerning him:

He was a historian who wrote extensively on Dutch and German history. His most important work was a three volume history of William of Orange and the sixteenth to seventeenth century Dutch revolt against Spain...In his medieval research he concentrated particularly on economic and constitutional questions. (Chalcraft 2001:8)

The third academic who was an original critic of Weber's "Protestant Ethic" is Werner Sombart. According to Kalsner, a biographer of Weber's, Sombart was a political economist and an economic historian. Sombart was known for his work involving capitalism and religion. He was aware of the tie between asceticism and capitalism just as Weber, but he still rejected much of Weber's thesis because he felt it did not go back far enough into the past. Sombart was very much of the opinion that the greatest shortcoming of Weber's claim was its narrow focus. He in fact wrote a book by the title, *Jews and the Rise of Modern Capitalism*. Sombart felt Weber did not give credit to the religious originators of the Protestant religion. Weber dealt with his own definitions of key words definitions such as asceticism. The reason there was such a great deal of confusion, and a breakdown of academic dialogue, was that Weber was working with his

methodological concept of “ideal type”. Looking back on the history of the criticisms and the replies to the criticisms there is no doubt that no single idea caused more trouble for Weber than “ideal type”. While “ideal type” was demonstrated in the first chapter of this thesis on Weber and his critics, a brief definition is useful here:

An ideal type is a conceptual tool with which to approach reality; and in this sense is a “conceptual construct”. When confronted with an empirical situation, it is often helpful to introduce a series of ideal types. In doing so, Weber argues, it is more important to capture what is essential about a phenomenon than to often reproduce the often confusing empirical situation. (Chalcraft 2001:120)

What Weber created was a way in which to handle the ambiguous nature of empirical data in its historical or sociological applications. This is of great value because without it there are infinite possibilities for the reasons and motivations that humans behave in the way they do. By creating an “ideal type” the process of creating an argument is greatly simplified. It is this simplification that caused the greatest deal of controversy for Weber. However, it is a very useful tool in the digestion of large amounts of empirical information.

There are four main points of Weber’s thesis on which he was attacked both by the first wave of critics and the subsequent critics as well. The first area is the assumptions that Weber made concerning definition or redefinitions in his thesis. This first point is directly connected to the “ideal type”. The second area of criticism is the alleged misinterpretation of Calvinism. More than one of his original critics had a problem with the way in which he interpreted Calvinism as the sole source of the ascetic work ethic and believed that he had overemphasized the role of Calvinism. The third area of criticism is the claim by his critics of an

alleged ambiguous and unscientific nature of his study, such as his use of texts from Baxter and Franklin as examples of ascetic Protestantism and the “spirit” of capitalism respectively. The fourth area of criticism was historical. This area alone has been the most common criticism due to the historical background of most of the criticizing academics. Sombart, and Rachfahl were both economic historians, It is believed that Fischer was a historian, and R.H Tawney was also a trained historian.

The first issue critics had was the cultural assumptions Weber made. In his “ideal type” concept Weber would use Franklin’s ideas as an example, because he read Franklin’s autobiography and was familiar with Franklin’s background and history, and most importantly his work ethic. In David J. Chalcraft’s article, *The Lamentable Chain of Misunderstandings: Weber’s Debate with H. Karl Fischer*, He addresses the specific issue that Fischer had with Weber: In his critiques Fischer raised questions concerning Weber’s treatment of Benjamin Franklin and his relation to the spirit of capitalism. (Chalcraft 2001:1)Fischer also took issue with the interpretation Weber gave of Luther’s use of words. Chalcraft said:

Fischer read Weber’s essays as an idealist construction of history and sought for a way out of the apparent impasse through a psychological investigation of the matter.

(2001:66)

A specific example of this is that Fischer takes issue with the Lutheran interpretation of the word “*Beruf*”. It is a clear argument on Fischer’s part that Luther would not have used that word if he had not already thought it commonplace. This does historically make sense because Luther’s historical purpose in translation was to make the Bible accessible to all Germans and not only those who read Latin. Fisher, as translated by Chalcraft, said the following:

Even assuming Luther achieved something original here, this is still not necessarily proof that his religious ideas generated the concept of the calling. For how did Luther arrive at the idea of using *Beruf* or his translation in Jesus Sirach? Presumably, he could not have meant his Bible translation to create a religious system in which even work in a worldly calling was to have a place. Rather he must have thought that by using this common expression, he was choosing the best, most easily understandable term for ordinary people. (Quoted in Chalcraft, 2001(1907):27)

We can see in this statement a challenge to the chronological timing of the claim Weber made concerning the use of the word *Beruf*. Fischer questioned his use of Luther's concept of calling and the use of Franklin as an example of the "spirit" of capitalism. The reason was not that he saw no causality in the historical nature and timing of the arguments made by Weber but that he believed Weber was only presenting information that advanced his thesis. This led to what Fischer saw as the, "idealist interpretation of history". Fischer was not the only critic to take issue with the evidence or the witnesses that Weber presents in his case for the "Protestant Ethic". Rachfahl also took issue with what might be called "anecdotal evidence", Franklin and Baxter being two examples of such witnesses. Chalcraft states in *Reading Weber's Patterns of response to the Critics of the Protestant Ethic* that

Weber's argument is that these observers and the recorders were able to see for themselves the connections he is posting and hence is misplaced to question what everyone takes for granted. (Chalcraft 2005:38)

It is clear that Weber sees the "ideal type" as an idea about some common empirical fact. For example it is a fact that Puritans are frugal. It is a fact that Amish shun technology. For Weber it

was a fact that Calvinism lead to the Protestant work ethic. This troubled his critics. Weber operates on the assumption that everyone sees the witnesses he provides as adequate and ideal for support of his thesis. His critics see it as Weber choosing, or interpreting history in a way that suits his thesis. Chalcraft explains in the following way as reference to the witnesses that Weber chooses:

They are part of a general (and historical) knowledge for which academic references are not given, no appeal is made to research, but rather a shared reality of inter-subjective experience, particularly the wearisome traveler and cultured person. The experiences here are presumed general, and in this way he appeals to “what everyone knows”. (2005:38)

From this explanation we can see that Weber does assume the acceptance of his claims as common knowledge. This fact alone is the greatest source of contention between himself and his critics.

The very foundation of Weber’s argument is ascetic Protestantism. To be more specific Calvinism is the vehicle for ascetic Protestantism. Any individual subject to the dogmatic interpretation of Calvinism would be under the constant weight of possible eternal damnation. They lived day to day with the uncertainty of whether or not they were “predestined” to go to heaven instead of hell. This enormous burden drove the Calvinistic individual to seek God’s favor with constant and devoted work. If this basic tenant of Calvinism were not true, or if it was followed in some other ways then the very foundation of Weber’s argument is shaken. This is the second argument against Weber’s thesis. The claim that his interpretation of ascetic Protestantism and Calvinism are incorrect is the argument that Rachfahl made. In *The Protestant Ethic Debate* Chalcraft translated Rachfahl’s argument:

Calvin condemned the amassing of riches for its own sake and would have preferred people stay in poverty, obedient and aware of their duties to God, than profit for their labor. (Quoted in Chalcraft 2001(1909):56)

Rachfahl also took issue with the definition of “inner worldly asceticism” (56) that Weber uses. Chalcraft says, “He (Rachfahl) questions whether rationalized conduct of life and self discipline should properly be called asceticism” (56). His case is made because if the definition Weber works with is that an individual who is self-disciplined, and has ascetic work principles at his/her calling in life, then we are no longer dealing with simply a religious dogma of Calvinism but a recommended way of living. There is no longer the fear associated with eternal damnation and pleasing God but only the proper way to live. For Weber’s thesis to have merit on this point the actions of individuals must be driven by religious motivation and not generally accepted roles of behavior for a few European cultures. The fear of damnation must be real to the individual.

Rachfahl, as translated by Chalcraft, said the following concerning Calvinism:

Certainly Calvinist ethics in its teaching and practice show various elements of a turning away from the world and the hostility to some material goods. We can call these features ‘ascetic’ insofar as they are already inherent elements of medieval Catholic asceticism: but they justify talk of asceticism in the sense of a fully developed style of conduct of life unless bound up with principled flight from the world and a certain kind of celebrated action. (Quoted in Chalcraft 2001(1909):56)

In this we can see the issue for Rachfahl was that he felt that Weber had portrayed Calvinism and, in particular, an ascetic life style as the beginning of the capitalist spirit. Rachfahl went on to explain that there were examples of the capitalist spirit prior to the mainstream thought and

acceptance of dogmatic Calvinism. Weber did reply to this allegation of incorrect historical application by Rachfahl. Rachfahl replied a second time to the reply Weber gave him. It is obvious from the literature that the longer Weber was involved in defending his thesis the less amiable the language. Both academics published papers accusing each other of making things up and of being fools. Chalcraft said it best when he explained, “without evidence or text to ‘get their teeth into’, the academic opponents got their teeth into each other instead.” (Chalcraft 2001:39)

The third area of criticism of the Weber thesis is on the grounds that his material and supporting evidence were of an ambiguous and unscientific nature. This differs from the first area of criticism, which were his natural assumptions. One assumption was that Weber interpreted Ben Franklin to be indicative of his “spirit” of capitalism. Weber presented his witnesses as the ultimate example of asceticism which leads to rational capitalism. His critics took issue with the fact that he did not use more, and varied examples in his essay. In his article, “Max Weber Goes Global”, Michel Novack addresses this point of contention directly:

Weber’s critics have often complained that he radically misunderstood reform theology.

They point out that for the crucial details of his thesis he relied not on creedal statements or formal treaties, but rather on the pastoral writings of such practical thinkers as Richard Baxter. (Novack 2005:26)

In his second reply to Weber, Rachfahl addresses the unscientific nature on two different points. First, was Weber’s claim of “inner worldly asceticism” (Chalcraft 2001:90).

On the question of inner worldly asceticism, Rachfahl still regards Weber’s use of this term as a misnomer. The idea that after the reformation, ‘every man was expected to lead

his life like a monk' remains only a figure of speech and cannot form the basis of a scientific hypothesis. (Chalcraft 2001:90)

We can see that the point of Rachfahl's argument was the unscientific nature of the claim Weber made to the influence of the Reformation on every man. In essence, Weber's claim that the Reformation so changed how European people were living that they were no longer under the idea of salvation through indulgences, but salvation through calling. Weber does not even make a claim that work was for salvation itself but to overcome "normal" anxieties about their election. This type of claim was subjective enough to create criticism about its unscientific nature. It seems that Weber could have saved himself a great deal of criticism in using methodology that included more sources and historical data in addition to the "witnesses" he used. It is clear that he felt that his "witnesses" were sufficient to make the case. He was not concerned with a quantification of the "spirit" of capitalism, and asceticism demonstrated after the reformation. What Weber felt sufficient were examples that were representative of the whole idea. This is why he chose Franklin and Baxter as his representatives.

The second area where Weber receives criticism, is on the exceptions to his thesis. In this, I mean those groups that were Protestant and Calvinist but did not follow the pattern of the Puritans that he claims lead to modern capitalism. Harold B. Barclay wrote an article by the title, *The Protestant Ethic Versus the Spirit of Capitalism*. Judging from the title it can be seen that what Barclay is proposing is an inverse relationship between the "Protestant Ethic" and the "spirit" of capitalism, not a relationship as Weber proposed it as the "Protestant Ethic" leading to capitalism. In his choice of examples deviant from the thesis, Barclay uses two Anabaptist sects. The first one is the Hutterite colony. Barclay refers to Karl Peter's argument of the Hutterite sect:

He sees this Anabaptist sect as a conservative peasant response to the reformation, which while embracing the above ethic, sought to return to an earlier social order by implementing a “community of goods” rather than encouraging capitalist enterprise. (Barclay 1986:151)

We can see from this the point if Weber had a more scientific model he could have accounted for such deviant examples to his thesis such as this one. The second example Barclay provides are the Holdeman Mennonites. This sect also believes in the Calvinist form of ascetic Protestantism. This group has become introverted and shuns the accumulation of any earthly possessions that are not needed, such as modern electrical devices. They still however do apply the “Protestant Ethic” to their lives. They are very efficient and productive but the benefit of that labor belongs to the group, not the individual. Weber must have been aware of these groups that were contrary to his thesis. Perhaps Weber thought his thesis narrow enough to exclude exceptions. Weber’s critics thought that as an academic work it should have accounted for groups that were contrary to his findings.

Most of his critics disagreed with his history. Many of them in some way felt that he had interpreted all or some portion of Protestant history in an inaccurate manner to support his thesis. There are several critics that make specific claims to his historical inaccuracy. This section will focus on two of those. The first is Sombart, not only a friend of Weber but also an academic to whom Weber himself gives some credit for his original “Protestant Ethic” thesis. Sombart was a historian who was already working on the question of religion’s affect on capitalism. After years of criticism and reply Sombart and Weber’s replies to each other disintegrated to mere name calling, just as Weber’s other academic exchanges ended. The second historical critic is R.H

Tawney. Tawney was a British historian whose area of academic interest was capitalism and religion. Tawney gave a series of lectures in 1922 on religion and capitalism. By that time Weber had already published the second edition of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1920, it was only natural that Tawney would mention Weber while addressing the topic.

Sombart and Weber, as mentioned above, were contemporaries. Sombart's writing on, "German economic history", (Lehman 1987:196) had caused him to be branded a leftist in the academic community. Sombart, like Weber had, because of his areas of study, shaped the modern debate in German academia. This was even the name of Sombart's publication on the subject, "Modern Capitalism". He published this in 1902, and this publication was used to some small degree in the work of Weber. Instead of seeing Calvinism and the work ethic that developed out of that belief system as causal, Sombart believed that the discovery of and desire for wealth had begun much earlier than the Reformation.

It was during the Middle Ages that people had come to cherish the value of money, and secularization and urbanization had strongly supported this notion. By the end of the Middle Ages, he argued, the desire to earn and possess money, especially gold, had turned into a mass phenomenon. (Lehman 1987:197)

Even if this statement is historically accurate it leads to the question of whether desire for gold and the "Protestant Ethic" are the same thing. The answer from Weber is a resounding no. However, this was the argument Sombart made. There was a second argument made by Sombart concerning the role of religion in the rise of capitalism.

First, he observed that the role of capitalism could not be explained fully by pointing out that economically productive groups have been affiliated with certain religious communities. (Lehman 1987:196)

It seems in this statement Sombart is suggesting that there is merit to Weber's thesis but his claim is too narrow. The second point made in this vein of thought is that Weber's argument for the influence of Calvinist thought, "was too well known a fact to require detailed explanation,"(1987:197)In this, Sombart admits to the very thing Weber relied on. Weber relied on a commonly accepted notion of the affect of Calvinism on capitalism. Sombart believed that the rise of capitalism was prior to the Reformation in the influence of the Jews.

The Jews had moved across Europe like the sun: Where they arrived, new life had blossomed: where they left, whatever had been in bloom fell into decay. (Lehman 1987:199)

There were areas of agreement between Sombart and Weber. Weber saw modern capitalism as rational. Sombart in his book *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* provided the following definition of capitalism. "I characterize the whole as "economic rationalism". In this we can see that they had very much the same definition of what they were studying. What they did not agree on was how modern capitalism came into being. Sombart provided four reasons for his belief that the Jews were the originator of modern capitalism. They are as follows:

I would therefore assign four causes for the success of the Jews:

(1)Their dispersion over a wide area, (2)Their treatment as strangers, (3)their semi-citizenship (4) their wealth. (Sombart 2001:119)

Sombart goes even further in acknowledging the work Weber had done on the topic.

Weber's researches are responsible for this book. For anyone that followed them could not but ask himself whether all that Weber ascribes to Puritanism might not be with equal justice be referred to Judaism, and probably to a greater degree. (2001:134)

There does seem to be some historical merit to this claim by Sombart. The question in this case was whether Weber was claiming that the "Protestant Ethic" is the origin of capitalism. It seems more likely that Weber was saying the "Protestant Ethic" grew the "spirit" of capitalism, and the causality of Jewish influence does seem likely given the historical connection of Jewish and Christian thought and therefore Calvinism. The problem with this claim is that Jewish influence even if the origin was not the catalyst to the growth of capitalism. Weber would claim this is not case because if Jewish influence were the catalyst that Calvinism was then it would have created a global economy prior to that of the industrial revolution. The Jews were in society in Western Europe far prior to the Reformation yet their presence did not have the affect of creating rational capitalism.

R.H Tawney's first reference to the Weber thesis is in the section titled, *A Godly Discipline Versus The Religion of Trade*. In his book, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Tawney addresses Puritanism in England as "The schoolmaster of the English middle classes," Tawney also goes on to say, "Weber in a celebrated essay, expounded the thesis that Calvinism, in its English version, was the parent of capitalism" (Tawney 1963:176). Tawney also discusses the nature of man's spirit as individualist, and socialist. His notes for the book are far more telling of his stance on Weber's thesis. Tawney admits that Weber's thesis is, "one of the most fruitful examinations of the relation between religion and the social theory, which has appeared" (1963:261), he proceeds to then explain why he disagrees with the thesis. He provided three

reasons: First, He believed that Weber attributes capitalism to a false source, that in fact the origins of capitalism are rooted in Medieval Europe prior to the Reformation. He addresses it in the following manner:

There was plenty of the 'capitalist spirit' in fifteenth century Venice and Florence, or in southern Germany and Flanders, for the simple reason these areas were the greatest commercial and financial centers of that age. (1963:261)

Tawney goes onto say that historically it is one-sided to suggest that one aspect of society such as religion can have the effect Weber claims of Calvinism. The second point of disagreement is an area that Tawney felt Weber ignores altogether.

Weber ignores or at least touches too lightly on, intellectual movements, which were favorable to the growth of business enterprise and to individualist attitude toward economic relations. (1963:262)

Tawney then points out the importance of ideas such as Machiavelli being of equal importance in social thought. The third point of disagreement is Weber oversimplified the nature of Calvinism. This is perhaps the most common criticism used against Weber. Tawney believed there were too many variations within the doctrine of various sects stemming from Calvinism to present the dogmatic form of Calvinism as the source of capitalism.

In conclusion, it is possible to summarize the criticisms of Weber to two basic but broad statements. The first is Weber's methodology. The critics felt his choice of historical presentation, interpretation of Calvinism, and choice of witnesses were shown in a way to be beneficial to his thesis. The second is that Weber's thesis is too narrow. Some critics admit that there is merit to the case made by Weber, but they believe his case is too specific in giving credit

to Calvinism alone, as the source of the “Protestant Ethic”. Weber never, at any point, admitted the premise of his “Protestant Ethic” thesis as being incorrect. He defends it against the use of false definitions, and idealistic historical interpretation, and unscientific methods.

CHAPTER 3

WEBER'S REPLY

In chapter two the critics of Weber and his “Protestant Ethic” thesis were given the floor to present their cases against the infamous argument Weber made. This chapter will give the replies Weber made to his critics. It is of great importance to understand the historical context and timing of the replies Weber made. For this timeline to be clear and of benefit we must return to the original publication of, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalist*. The original German publication was in 1905. The critics began to respond in journals and open letters within the first couple of years after the release of the “Protestant Ethic” thesis. Since academics were, and are, prone to discuss their current research, Sombart, who was friends with Weber at the beginning of the debate over the “Protestant Ethic”, was aware that the work was in progress, as were the works of other German academics. After publication of the original thesis in 1905 Weber did defend his argument but did not make any changes to the original for some time. In fact, Sombart and Weber were part of a group of German academics that traveled to America in 1904 when Weber was still writing his thesis. Peter Baehr who wrote the introduction to a current edition of the *Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*, wrote the following:

Soon after Weber completed the first part of *the Protestant Ethic* in the summer of 1904, he, Marianne, and a number of colleagues, including Ernst Troeltsch, Werner Sombart, Ferdinand Tonnies, and Paul Hensel embarked on a trip to America. (Baehr 2002:xiii)

This is important because it shows there was a friendship between Sombart and Weber but it also shows the relationship between Troeltsch and Weber. Rachfahl, in his criticism of Weber at one point accused Weber of doing nothing more than plagiarizing the ideas of Troeltsch, who was an academic also studying the rise of capitalism in Germany. This shows that the debate was not simply with other academics but friends. It serves as an example of the personal nature of the debate as it unfolded in particular between Sombart and Weber. After the initial publication in 1905 Weber's thesis weathered criticism for fifteen years. During this time the original critics of the thesis made their arguments. Weber began work on a second edition in 1919. It is safe to assume that academic life was greatly disrupted, if not stopped altogether, during the First World War. After Weber made some minor revisions he released it to be reprinted in 1920. While there are some changes to the second version of Weber's thesis they are minor and Weber stands by all of the main points of his 1905 edition. The medium of delivery for criticism and rebuttal is the same as it is in current academia. Scholarly journals, or at times because of the popular nature of the "Protestant Ethic" debate even common periodicals, with rebuttals in the form of open letters were used over the course of the debate. One important note: what this and the previous chapter address are the actual criticisms and rebuttals that happened during Weber's lifetime. There are a great number of criticisms that Weber did not have the opportunity to reply to. So, while the debate has continued, at least in the discipline of sociology, all that can be done to reply to later critics is to speculate, based on Weber's writings, how he would respond.

Prior to addressing Weber's reply to his individual critics it is important to have a larger picture of what Weber's defense of his thesis was:

There has been a great deal of misunderstanding of just what Weber was stating. Not only do many scholars fail to realize that Weber published much more complex theories of capitalism after the *Protestant Ethic* thesis, theories that fill in exactly the institutional economic factors the he was accused of leaving out. Even in the *Protestant Ethic* Weber stated that he was only spelling out one of many factors; he was conducting an ideal–type analysis, in the sense that he had isolated one ‘pure’ condition for capitalism, that was in reality mixed with other conditions in the complexities of history.(Collins, 1986:53)

It seems clear from this example that Weber did feel that he was correct. He did not present a complete theory of the rise of capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism* but instead a piece of the whole. He himself realized that he was not producing the reason for capitalism, but a reason for capitalism. Collins says the following:

Weber was not bothered by much of the criticism because those who expressed it missed the point he was making. He was not arguing that *capitalism in general* was caused by Protestantism. He was drawing a connection between a particular kind of Protestantism (the Calvinist belief in predestination) and a *particular kind of predestination*. (1986:53)

This realization alone would have saved his critics a great deal of time and ink. Once viewed in this manner there is no argument that can be made to disprove Calvinism’s affect on modern capitalism, or as Weber thought of it, rational capitalism. We now have an idea of the attitude and thoughts Weber had toward his critics. So, why did he reply? Why did he continue the debate if he knew they misunderstood him, and his thesis as he actually proposed it was valid? The answer is simple. He did not want to be remembered as the professor that could not

defend his work. After all what is the point of academic research if it cannot stand up to peer review?

The first critic Weber answered to was Fischer. A brief summary of his review of the “Protestant Ethic” is useful here to understand Weber’s reply. Chalcraft translated in *The Protestant Ethic Debate: Max Weber’s Replies To His Critics 1907-1911*, provided a synopsis of Fischer’s review:

Fischer’s central strategy is to dispute what he sees as Weber’s ‘idealist interpretation on history’. He considers some alternative material and economic factors for the spread of capitalism in early modern Europe, and concludes with what he claims is a more plausible ‘psychological explanation’ for the rise of capitalist mentalities.(Chalcraft 201:27)

We can see here the misunderstanding that Weber claimed his critics suffered from. At no point did Weber make a claim that Protestantism was the sole source for the rise of capitalism. Weber replied in a fashion that showed his belief in the misunderstanding of his first reviewer by opening his reply in the following fashion:

I am grateful to my two co-editors for agreeing to reprint the preceding comments. For however misleading a critical review might be- as I believe the present one is- it always highlights places where the misunderstandings are *liable* to arise which the author has not done to prevent, whether or not they are actually his fault. Indeed, with regard to almost all the objections raised by my critic, I must deny any fault on my part, and for some of these I must even reject all possibility of misunderstanding for the attentive reader.
(Quoted in Chalcraft 2001(1907):31)

It is obvious from this opening statement that he found little worthwhile in Fischer's review; in fact, in the last line of this excerpt, at the least he is calling Fischer an inattentive reader and at the most he is calling him a fool.

There were two cases where Fischer took issue with the "witnesses" that Weber used to make the case for his thesis. The first was the use of Franklin as an example of the "spirit" of capitalism. Weber replies to this point in Fischer's review in the following manner:

Despite my affirming the *contrast* in 'spirit' between the sayings of Jakob Fugger and Benjamin Franklin, my critic has me finding that spirit equally in *both*. I take Franklin as one of various illustrations for what in an ad hoc way I christened the "spirit of capitalism" and for this "spirit" and in another as different from it. (Quoted in Chalcraft 2001(1907):31)

In this part of Weber's reply he was seeking to make clear the distinction he sees between Franklin and Fugger as examples of the "spirit" of capitalism. It is important to understand why the contrast between Jacob Fugger and Ben Franklin is an issue brought up by Fischer in trying to discredit the use of Franklin as a "witness". Jacob Fugger was a merchant in the sixteenth century. He made great sums of money in mining, textile, and even funding wars between European states. One of the lucrative sources of income for Fugger was the collection of indulgences for the Vatican. Weber argues that Fugger, even though terribly wealthy, even by today's standards, did not display the ascetic lifestyle that Calvinist influenced merchants and workers did. What Jacob Fugger achieved was not through hard work but through manipulation of the rulers of Europe and the papacy itself. These were attributes that clearly exclude Fugger from being the same as Ben Franklin, who values achievement and money in a very different

way. However, Fischer saw them as the same. Weber saw them as different. Chalcraft explains it best in his notes:

Weber asserts that what in the former case[Fugger] was an expression of commercial daring and a personal inclination toward moral neutrality, in the latter [Franklin] takes on the character of an ethically colored maxim for the conduct of life. (2001:31)

In this we can see the frustration that Weber had for what he perceived as little more than misreading his work. He felt as if Fischer was creating a problem where none existed by claiming omission of “psychological” factors that Weber found of little importance to his thesis. Weber was, in the comparison of the two examples above, showing a different application of the “spirit” of capitalism. Fischer is quick to claim that Weber used the term exclusively in one manner that is quite the opposite from other writings by Weber. Weber was fully aware that the term capitalism was a changing term and based on the interpretation of a historian or economist. Weber understood that this would color their understanding of what Weber was actually claiming. In Collin’s book on Weber and sociology Collins addressed the view Weber had of the word, capitalism:

Capitalism Weber says, has existed at many times and in many places. It existed among the ancients of Babylon, in India and in China, and in the slave trade of the Roman Empire. There were merchants with powerful guilds in the European Middle Ages. But none of these is representative of what he called “rational capitalism”. (Collins 1986:53)

We can see Weber was aware of the historical existence of capitalism. He was not, however, interested in showing a connection to the early form of capitalism. He was interested in showing the connection of ascetic Calvinism and the rise of modern, rational capitalism. Rational

capitalism as Weber saw it was a brand of capitalism that existed not for profit alone, but for the very sake of production, a form that was concerned with growth as much as the immediate profits.

It is on the question of the true historical and doctrinal origin of Calvinism and its influence on capitalism that Rachfahl had the greatest problem with Weber's thesis. Rachfahl's original review did not come until 1909 four years after the first edition publication of Weber's "Protestant Ethic" thesis. Rachfahl felt Weber's thesis had shortcomings in three areas:

Rachfahl sees three areas of difficulty in Weber: (1) problems with the concept of 'capitalist spirit'; (2) Calvinism and the vocational ethic; and (3) the economic influence of Calvinism. (Chalcraft 2001:55)

Clarification of Rachfahl's particular problems with these points is beneficial to understanding Weber's reply. On the first point, of capitalist spirit, the particular problem Rachfahl saw was that he felt the term was too broad. It was too broad because he felt it could be applied to any situation where an individual was pursuing wealth in a way that provided a living beyond basic sustenance needs. This definition could also include a wealthy capitalist who owned factories and land. The term to Rachfahl was broad in this sense and he did not believe that both shoe cobbler and the factory owner in fact possessed the same spirit. To this claim Weber felt no need for a reply. He felt his use of witnesses to the "spirit" were in fact sufficient. He does however, take issue with the claim Rachfahl makes concerning Calvinism. Rachfahl made the following statement concerning "inner-worldly asceticism":

Certainly Calvinist ethics in its teaching and practice shows various elements of a turning away from the world and hostility to some material goods. We can call these

‘ascetic’ insofar as they are already inherent elements of medieval Catholic asceticism; but they justify no talk of asceticism in the sense of a fully developed sense of conduct of life unless bound up with the principled flight from the world...and a particular kind of deliberate action.(Quoted in Chalcraft 2001(1909):56)

In this excerpt from Rachfahl’s original review of the thesis in 1909 we can see why there is a discrepancy in the understanding of the term asceticism. Rachfahl makes the claim that asceticism cannot be used in the way Weber chooses to use it because it does not hold true to the original Catholic application. He is infact correct in his interpretation of the term as different. Historically, asceticism in the Catholic sense can be attributed to the monastic life. With Calvinism we see the application of asceticism to everyone claiming to be a believer. The individual belief that life after death was uncertain and that salvation could not be certain until death. As a Calvinist Christian one could only through proper living, or ascetic living, hope to find God’s grace. The Catholic version of asceticism is quite different in that the monks were seeking salvation not through the Calvinistic concept of redemption by faith, but salvation through good works, a historical tenet of the Catholic Church. A comparison cannot be made that monks of the Catholic faith lived under the same burden of grief and shame as the Calvinist. The term is the same but the definition is different. Because of Weber’s choice of the word asceticism in the place of frugality, or hard work Rachfahl makes a historical comparison of the original use of the word as a means to discredit Weber’s thesis. Weber responded to Rachfahl’s review. On the point of *inner worldly asceticism* he said the following:

According to Rachfahl, asceticism is ‘flight from the world’. Therefore, because of the Puritans (including all ascetic sects) were not monks or similarly contemplative beings,

what I call '*inner-worldly asceticism*' is in fact a 'false' concept that erroneously presupposes an affinity with Catholic asceticism. I can hardly think of a more sterile polemic than one about *names*. As far as I am concerned, the name can be changed for any other that fits better. If we are not to coin completely new words each time or invent symbols, like chemist or like the philosopher Avinarius, we must give every phenomenon to which no term has yet been accorded the nearest and most descriptive words from the traditional language and just be careful to define them unambiguously-as I believe I have done quite sufficiently with "*inner-worldly asceticism*". (Quoted in Chalcraft 2001(1909):63)

As can be seen from the reply Weber gave, he felt quite strongly that Rachfahl was playing games and not making a legitimate academic point. Weber even in a way seems to be accusing Rachfahl of pettiness, by stating that the best word for what, he, Weber, wants to portray is asceticism. Surely Weber would agree that the word had historical implications, but Weber also insists, as he said before, that he made the definition and the use of the word as unambiguous as possible. In this manner Weber dispenses with what he saw as a silly argument. The last point in Rachfahl's review to which Weber replied was the connection of Calvinism to economics. Rachfahl does not deny that there is a connection between Calvinism and economic success. However, he seeks to make the point that there are other sects that are not Calvinistic, and even Catholic businessmen that are part of the economy. Weber would not disagree. Weber does not see his "Protestant Ethic" thesis as an absolute; he sees it as the strongest influence on the development of modern rational capitalism. Weber said the following in reference to Rachfahl's claim that Calvinism was not the major influence in the growth of capitalism.

He remarked that everywhere ‘business’ lay in the hands of the heterodox, and that in countries dominated by the Roman church ‘three-quarters’ of all business lay in heretic hands. But now we come to the *fact* the really significant point I stressed from the outset- that disenfranchised or disadvantaged *Catholic* minorities *never, right until today*, demonstrated this prominence in business at all obviously. Nor have even the Lutheran minorities ever demonstrated it like the ‘ascetic’ denominations. By contrast, Calvinist, Quaker, and Baptist groups tend to display these cultural and economic characteristics both when they are in the minority and when they are the *dominant*. (Quoted in Chalcraft 2001(1909):66)

This excerpt from Weber’s reply shows he felt that Rachfahl is in some way simply dealing with old information, or that he simply does not know the actual historical facts that Weber uses to make his case.

There is one issue that particularly seemed to perturb Weber in his academic exchange with Rachfahl. Rachfahl was convinced, and wrote as much, that Weber took his ideas and much of his material from Troeltsch. If you recall Troeltsch was, with the exception of his wife, Weber’s closest academic friend. He was also one of the fellow German professors who traveled with Weber to America. Troeltsch was also a sociologist and interested in the same area of research that Weber was. In Weber’s first reply to Rachfahl he wasted no time in clarifying that he and Troeltsch were indeed very different people. He says the following in the opening of his reply.

And nor has he (Rachfahl) refrained from playing us off against each other so as to make this ‘Weber-Troeltsch’ collective appear in contradiction with itself. In view of this not

very honorable practice, I have decided to go my own way and expressly deny all responsibility for anything not said by *me*, as Troeltsch would undoubtedly do too. I might also be permitted to add the following. Anyone who has genuinely read both of our essays will know that Troeltsch does not need *my* results *at all* for *his* purposes and positions. (Quoted in Chalcraft 2001(1909):62)

This amounts to a denial on Weber's part of any collaboration on the "Protestant Ethic" thesis. The replies that Weber gives Rachfahl seem to indicate he was not pleased with the accusation of not producing his own original work.

Sombart was no doubt the closest of Weber's critics. Despite their friendship they were polar opposites in their view of the value of capitalism. Weber saw it as the natural outgrowth of the Reformation and Calvinism. Sombart believed Marx to be the most brilliant sociologist of his time and therefore thought religion little more than control of the masses by the Capitalist. So, it is interesting to note the arguments made by Sombart. First, he believed that the true origin of the ethic was not Christian but actually Jewish. This is something I do not think Weber would have denied since we know that Weber was aware and willing to admit that capitalism did exist prior to the Reformation. Collins said the following on Weber's concept of "rational capitalism" versus the pre-reformation version of capitalism that his critics subscribe to:

This kind of capitalism does not merely consist of market economy, the use of money, or the search for business profits. If greed were the main trait necessary for the development of modern capitalism, Weber declares, then there was plenty of that in the ancient world and in the Orient. But these places developed no capitalist 'take off', no industrial

revolution that transformed the whole world into a vast business enterprise. (Collins 1986:53)

In this clarification everything can be correct historically, and wrong as it applies to Weber's thesis. Even if it is true that the Jewish culture encouraged and even demonstrated similar attributes to that of Calvinistic asceticism it still does not explain that if they truly were the same why modern capitalism did not come into existence hundreds of years sooner. There is something inherent in the Calvinist doctrine that is unique in its affect on the individual's view of money, its uses and evils.

The second point Sombart made against Weber was his use of Ben Franklin, but more specifically the idea he used Franklin to prove his case. Sombart felt in fact that there were examples of the frugality and acetic concept of work and use of money prior to Franklin, and that the origin is not Calvinism, but Catholicism. The example Sombart uses is a Catholic priest by the name of Alberti whom he claims to be the originator of the very thoughts Franklin wrote. Weber chose to answer this claim in his second edition of the "Protestant Ethic" thesis published in 1920. Weber stated the following in his notes from the second edition:

Sombart is unjustified in claiming that this 'ethic' of Franklin is 'literal' repetition of the words of the great universal genius of the Renaissance, Leon Batista Alberti, who, alongside theoretical writings on mathematics, sculpture, painting, architecture (his chief interest), and love, also wrote a four-volume work on housekeeping.(Weber 2002(1905):346)

At first sight it looks like a sound rejoinder for Weber. However, Franklin was also a prolific writer and covered a multitude of subjects in his lifetime. His most famous works his

autobiography and *Poor Richards Almanac*, are what Weber used, but certainly not the limits of Franklin's writing. Weber's next note cast aside Sombart's argument:

The passage from Franklin is printed verbatim above, but where do we find the passages from Alberti's work which correspond to this, especially the maxim 'time is *money*', with which he begins, and the exhortations that follow. (2002(1905):346)

This reply is a counter-claim. The evidence is simply not there that Franklin was repeating Alberti. Franklin was far more vocal on the concept of the purpose and use of money, a topic, according to Weber, that Alberti only mention briefly.

In conclusion, Weber did not think a great deal of the criticisms made against his thesis. It is clear that in the majority of cases the crux of the problem was the definitions that Weber used, such as that of asceticism. Weber was no doubt convinced that he had explained both the reason for the use of the word, and its application in the context of his thesis. This explains the forceful language he chose to use in his replies, just stopping short of calling his reviewers complete fools. Capitalism is another word that caused problems. He was referring to what he saw as rational capitalism, the modern capitalism that builds factories and creates wealth, not just merchants but producers. His opponent saw the word capitalism and resorted to the first example in historical antiquity they could apply the definition of capitalism to. The concept of the "spirit" of capitalism was a word of great significance to the thesis. It was attacked on the grounds that his interpretation of English Puritanism, and of Franklin were narrowed to meet his needs. By "spirit" Weber is referring to the mentality that money was a tool, a concept that may have existed in a small minority of the population prior to the Reformation, but became commonplace with the introduction of the Calvinist work ethic to the marketplace. This introduction, through

Weber's definition of asceticism, produced rational capitalism, that is, capitalism that seeks to perpetuate itself. If approached from an-all or nothing point of view Weber's thesis has shortcomings. Given time every theory does. What Weber's thesis did was lay the groundwork for more in-depth and conventional research into the area for both himself and future sociologists.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE FOR WEBER'S "PROTESTANT ETHIC"

This thesis on Weber and his critics has so far presented Weber's thesis and his critic's responses to the "Protestant Ethic". Despite the number of academics that had strong and convincing criticisms of the "Protestant Ethic" thesis, Weber was of the opinion that his writing was as valid as he proposed it in the original publication. Often, as shown in chapters two and three of this thesis on Weber and the critics of the "Protestant Ethic" thesis, his critics accused him of distorting history and presenting terms and definitions that were adjusted to his thesis. Weber denied this in his replies and made clear the most important point in understanding his thesis. This important point was that Calvinism was a major factor in the growth of modern rational capitalism. Never did Weber claim that it was the only factor, nor did Weber claim that Calvinism introduced capitalism into the world. Weber would readily agree that forms of capitalism existed in the ancient world, and even in medieval Europe. Sombart's claim that modern capitalism came from the Jews is in fact both right and wrong. The Jews were very capitalistic and were driven to produce beyond basic needs. They were also willing to be frugal to achieve financial goals. However, they did not themselves produce what was necessary to instigate the growth of rational capitalism. What was necessary for that to occur was a change from the traditional form of thinking to the rational form of thinking that the Renaissance and then the Reformation brought into the mainstream of thought and the workforce.

The purpose of this chapter is to make a clear claim as to the accuracy of Weber's thesis. Weber's thesis has lasted one hundred years since its original publication in 1905. In that time it has been subjected to extensive scrutiny. Some in the discipline of sociology have said it is no longer valid, and other academics believe it is still acceptable. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze, with outside sources, two main areas Weber's critics focused on. The first area is that of Weber's claims concerning Calvinism. Calvinism, and the value that it created in work, is the foundation of Weber's thesis. The best outside source to verify its applicability is the Synods of Dort. The Synods of Dort is a religious document that is the basis of Calvinistic belief. So, in comparing it to Weber's claims concerning Calvinism we can see how accurate Weber is. This comparison will allow insight into how Weber made his case, and whether it was valid or simply confusing to his benefit. The second area is Weber's view of history. This is relevant since Fischer and Rachfahl argued that he had distorted history to make his case. This is a broad area and cannot be covered in depth. However, it is possible to reference Weber's overall view of history.

The first area to compare with the thesis is the religious claims that Weber made concerning Calvinism. The very foundation of the work ethic is dependent on the Calvinistic concept of salvation, or more accurately, election. In 1618-1619 a national synod was held by the Dutch reformed church. They met in a city by the name of Dordrecht, which gave way to the name the Synods of Dort, or Dordt. The purpose of this meeting was to clarify what the position of the reformed church was on the main points of Christian salvation and election. Arminianism had at that point begun to spread throughout Holland and was causing a great deal of trouble for the Dutch Reformed Church. The Synod, or the canons as they are often referred to, have five

heads. These are the main points that those writing the synod were striving to clarify. These five heads were later simplified to the five points of Calvinism that are commonly accepted to this very day by Calvinist based churches.

The first head is of the most importance to Weber's thesis. The title of the first head is "Of Divine Predestination" (Synods of Dort 1618:1). There are eighteen articles in this head and they all deal with the election of the saints. Now from the title of the head it is obvious that Weber's understanding of Calvinism is accurate. Divine predestination, not free choice, determines salvation for the Calvinist. It is not at the pleasure of the sinner but at the pleasure of God that the elect are saved. The first five articles focus on man's sinfulness and need for redemption through God. In article six a clarification of who is chosen begins:

He graciously softens the heart of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe, while he leaves the non-elect in his judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy. And herein especially displayed the profound, and merciful, and at the same time righteous discrimination between men. (1618:1)

We in essence do not choose God, but rather God chooses the elect. Article seven is even clearer on this point:

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, he hath out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of his own will, chosen, from the whole of the human race, which had fallen through their own fault, from their primitive rectitude, into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom he from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect. (1618:2)

The election is at the mercy of God and as such the individual has no control over his or her own salvation. One cannot be saved by any action they take. They can only hope to please God. There are not variations of the elect. One is elected or not. Article eight establishes this, "There are not various degrees of election, but one and the same decree respecting all those, who shall be saved." (1618:2) there is no back door to salvation for the Calvinist, and even more importantly to the thesis there is no assurance of salvation, or election. Article nine explains it:

This election is not founded upon foreseen faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness or any other good quality of disposition in man, as the pre-requisite, cause or condition on which it depended. (1618:2)

Nothing the individual does can guarantee salvation. Even their actions are foreseen and do not lead them to salvation. Article ten says, "The good pleasure of God is the sole cause of this gracious election."(1618:2) it seems that there is no tie to the Weber's thesis from what is seen so far. After all if the election is not sure and it is clear that our actions are foreseen and not counted as righteousness, then why work? Article twelve provided the best answer for that:

The elect in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures, attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election, not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves with a spiritual joy and a holy pleasure, the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God - such as a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a Godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting for righteousness. (1618:3)

It is here we have the greatest connection to the claim that Weber made concerning Calvinism's role in the growth of modern capitalism. The way of discovering election is through, "true faith

in Christ, filial fear, a Godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting for righteousness” (1618:3) So, while it is true to say that one’s actions are not the source of salvation, they are the source for discovering one’s salvation. These actions included “a Godly sorrow for sin”. Sin was what was enumerated in the Bible, and slothfulness, and laziness were some of those sins. This fear of sin and of not learning of one’s election in fact shows the reason for the “Protestant Ethic”. It was not just work for the sake of work; it was work because it pleased God. It was holy because it was not slothfulness, but productive. Therefore, if you see work as worship commanded by God, to not work is sin. The burden of grief and guilt motivated them to not sin and to live in complete obedience.

The second point, comparison to the history of capitalism with Weber’s claim of the “Protestant Ethic” is a monumental task. A clearer understanding of the thesis can perhaps be understood by an example of Weber’s “General Theory of History” (Collins 1986:94). Weber’s view of what history was and how certain movements such as capitalism came into being has a great deal to do with the thesis Weber proposed concerning the role of Protestantism in the development of rational capitalism.

Weber saw the rise of large-scale capitalism, then, as the result of a series of combinations of conditions that had to occur together. This makes world history look like the result of configurations of events so rare as to appear accidental. (Collins 1986:98) It seems that it is clear Weber saw Protestantism as only one element of the rise of capitalism. While it is possible to argue that Protestantism is not the only element, once familiar with the thesis it is clear that the “Protestant Ethic” does indeed have a place as one of the most important factors that affected the rise of capitalism in its modern form. In fact, Weber would argue that all

conditions had to be met in order for capitalism to become modern or rational capitalism. The needed conditions cannot be chosen in advance but simply can be analyzed as history.

Hence the original conditions necessary for the emergence of capitalism were not necessary for its continuation. The original ethic could fade, once the calculability of massive economic transactions had become a matter of routine. (Collins 1986:96)

Nowhere does this seem more obvious than in the writing of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin was a man who professed deism but at the same time lived and taught those calculable maxims about the use of money. Even today we can see in modern capitalism, if not the same attitudes, then at the very least similar attitudes about the place and role of work in life.

The greatest evidence that Weber was accurate against the claims made by his critics were the areas of his thesis they did not challenge. Fischer and Rachfahl both attacked terminology but did not question the claims Weber made at the beginning of his thesis about the ownership of capital by Protestants. Weber said the following:

Business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the skilled higher strata of the labor force, and especially the higher technical or commercial-trained staff of modern enterprises tend to be predominately *Protestant*. (Weber 1905: 3)

This information was fact and supported Weber's claim concerning the Protestant work ethic.

Weber made other claims to general knowledge of this work ethic that his critics also ignored.

"Even the Spanish knew that "heresy" (i.e, the Calvinism of the Dutch)"encouraged the spirit of trade," and Gothein rightly terms the Calvinist desporia the"seedbed of the capitalist economy."(Weber 1905: 7)

It seems here that Weber was using examples relating to the Dutch, but he proceeded to give an example from Germany.

The fact that even Frederick William I, recognized that the Mennonites in East Prussia were indispensable pillars of industry, left them alone despite their absolute refusal to do military service.(Weber 1905: 7)

These were areas that were not questioned by the critics because they were fact. The critics ignored these facts, even with disregard for the debate over terms such as asceticism, the Protestants were the skilled and educated workforce of the new modern economy, and had been the catalyst for that economy since the Reformation. There are other factors that brought about capitalism; Weber does not deny this. Location, population, wars, and other factors did play a part. However, religion formed the attitude toward work. That attitude the “Protestant Ethic” along with the other factors created capitalism in its modern form.

The longevity of the thesis can be summed up in one statement. The thesis is accurate against its critics. While it is true that Calvinism was not the only factor, there is no denying that it was an important factor. As in all things that involve human behavior and history there are no absolutes, but there are degrees of verifiability; Weber is verifiable. We see the origin in Calvinism, we see the continuation in Franklin, and we see it in the present day in every manager and executive that is in charge of other people’s productivity. What started as dedication to God and seeking to know ones election, has now become proving one’s worth and dedication by working with the values that made capitalism happen. As long as capitalism is around, the work ethic that was a major part of its growth will also be present. In an economic system that only

cares about the bottom line and productivity, there is no room for competitors that do not work with what began as the “Protestant Ethic” as their core value.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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