

## The Weber Thesis and Economic Historians

Matti Peltonen

### Abstract

One of the most exciting and most discussed economic theories is the one proposed by Max Weber in his essay *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism* (1904–1905). According to Weber, the Protestant ethic, a mode of behaviour whereby ascetic ways of life were motivated by Protestant theological ideas, had changed during the previous century into a 'spirit' of capitalism, a new lifestyle or ethos, in which hard work or accumulation could only be motivated with the most commonplace ideas about work and accumulation being their own rewards. Unfortunately, his argument was too complicated for his contemporary readers and was simplified along the lines of an older model to that of the theory which we nowadays recognize as the Weber Thesis. This simplified version claims that Protestant religion (or the Reformation) was the cause of (or at least the most suitable religion for) Western capitalism. For some reason this latter version, which has lost all contact with the historicity of Weber's concepts, has satisfied most social scientists. The case of economic historians is, however, quite different. The so-called Weber Thesis has been the target of criticism and protests from the ranks of economic historians throughout most the twentieth century. It is interesting to investigate how successful economic historians have been in their *long durée* criticism of the Weber Thesis and if they have succeeded in bringing into the open items originally included in Weber's own thought about the change from the Protestant ethic to the 'spirit' of capitalism. Especially interesting is whether economic historians have used the more historical categories already proposed by Weber instead of the more universal categories and concepts preferred by other social scientists. Furthermore, does the criticism of the Weber Thesis imply that economic historians have had a better idea of what Weber thought as compared with other social scientists? Recently, however, a more tolerant, even accepting, view of the Weber Thesis appears to have emerged within the economic historical literature. As well-known examples one could mention David Landes and Niall Ferguson, who have recently supported the idea that, because culture makes all the difference, also Weber's idea about religious attitudes as the catalyst for the rise of capitalism in the West should be given serious thought.

Keywords: capitalism and religion, economic historians, historicity of Weber's concepts, Protestant-ethic thesis.

### 1. Introduction: *The Weber Thesis and its origins*

One of the most exciting and most discussed economic theories is the one proposed by Max Weber in his essay *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism* (1904–1905) published more than a hundred years ago. According to Weber, the Protestant ethic, a mode of behaviour whereby an ascetic way of life was motivated by Puritanistic theological ideas, had changed during the previous century into a 'spirit' of capitalism, a new lifestyle or ethos, in which hard work and accumulation was motivated with the most commonplace ideas about work or accumulation being their own rewards. Weber criticized this situation as the 'Iron Cage' of capitalism and lamented the loss of spirituality in modern life.

Unfortunately, Max Weber's argument was too complicated for the contemporary Western mind and his views were simplified along the lines of an older model to that of the theory which we nowadays recognize as the Weber Thesis. This simplified version claims that Protestant religion (or the Reformation) was the cause of (or at least the most suitable religion for) Western capitalism. This idea had been popular since at least the eighteenth century. This interpretation of the essay also leaves Weber's concept of the spirit of capitalism in an awkward position: either it is thought to be redundant or it is given as a synonym for capitalism. Several readers of the essay give the spirit of capitalism as the cause of capitalism in the West. In contemporary German discussion concerning the nature of modern capitalism, such ideas about the connection between Protestantism and capitalism were proposed, for instance, by the social historian Eberhard Gothein and the economist or economic historian Werner Sombart.<sup>1</sup> Weber's essay on the Protestant ethic was, to a considerable degree, a criticism of the way his friend Werner Sombart used the concept of the spirit of capitalism. For some reason this simplified version of the Weber Thesis, which has lost all contact with the historicity of Weber's concepts, has satisfied the intellectual curiosity

1. Friedemann Voigt, 'Vorbilder und Gegenbilder. Zur Konzeptualisierung der Kulturbedeutung der Religion bei Gothein, Sombart, Simmel, Jellinek, Weber and Troeltsch', in Wolfgang Schluchter and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (eds.), *Asketischer Protestantismus und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus Max Weber und Ernst Troeltsch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 155–84. The early history of the Weber Thesis is also discussed in several interesting essays in Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth (eds.), *Weber's Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

of most social scientists. Especially sociologists have recognized Weber's essay in the post-war era as an eminent classic in their field and regard the Weber Thesis as his crowning achievement. The case of economic historians is, however, quite different.

2. *Economic historians criticize the Weber Thesis:  
The Tawney years – the 1920s and 1930s*

The so-called Weber Thesis has been the target of criticism from the ranks of economic and social historians throughout most of the twentieth century. This criticism that was initiated by R.H. Tawney's famous study *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* in the 1920s became quite widespread during the 1920s and 1930s. Tawney's book was an instant success and sold astonishingly well during the following decades.<sup>2</sup> It was immediately translated into several languages (French, German, Japanese, Spanish, Italian, Polish and Dutch).<sup>3</sup> It can be said that Tawney made Weber famous outside Germany and kept alive the reputation of his essay on the Protestant ethic. At first, however, Tawney understood Weber's ideas in the same way as the contemporary German reception. In an extensive note at the end of his book, Tawney summarized the criticism levelled against the essay into three points.

2. Of Tawney's career, see Ross Terrill, *R.H. Tawney and His Times: Socialism as Fellowship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973); Anthony Wright, *R.H. Tawney: Life on the Left* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1897); David Ormrod, 'R. H. Tawney and the Origins of Capitalism', *History Workshop* 18 (1984), pp. 138-59 and John Kenyon, *The History Men: The Historical Profession in England since the Renaissance* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983).

3. Terrill, *R.H. Tawney*, p. 59. Another important work which shifted opinions on the Weber Thesis in this direction was Werner Sombart's *Der Bourgeois. Zur Geistesgeschichte des modernen Wirtschaftsmenschen* (1913), which he wrote to meet the criticism of Weber's essay concerning his use of the concept the spirit of capitalism and which was quickly translated, for instance, into English (1915), Swedish (1916) and French (1926). Another hugely successful essay by Werner Sombart was *Die Juden* (1911), which was immediately translated into English by a Jewish economic historian R. Epstein (1915). See the highly informative article on Sombart's essay by Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Religion and Capitalism Once Again? Jewish Merchant Culture in the Seventeenth Century. (A Preliminary Inquiry)', in Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron (eds.), *Trading Cultures: The Worlds of Western Merchants. Essays on Authority, Objectivity, and Evidence* (Publications of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, Princeton University; Turnholt: Brebols, 2001), pp. 59-88. In his essay Sombart tried to show that the Puritan quality of Protestant movements was inherited from the Jews. Soon afterwards, however, Sombart wrote several other essays suggesting that, for instance, luxury and wars were important sources for the rise of capitalism.