

## Weber's Use of Scholarly Praise and Scholarly Criticism in *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism*

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### Abstract

The article examines how Max Weber positioned himself in relation to the scholarship of his time as he wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism*. Some authors he praised and from others he distanced himself, and this provides insights into the tone and style of his arguments. In the first version of 1904/1905 he is cautious in his assessment of his sources, but in revising the essay in 1919 his comments show a new sharpness and self-esteem.

Keywords: Max Weber, Ritschl, scholarly sources of Protestant ethic thesis, Werner Sombart.

Before the issue raised in the title of this paper can be addressed, two preliminary remarks may prove helpful. First, in evaluating the way in which Max Weber, in his study *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism* (hereafter *PESC*),<sup>1</sup> positioned himself in the scholarly world of his time by expressing criticism and praise, one must remember that on total word count, the footnotes of this study are longer than the text. This in itself is remarkable. It demonstrates how much Max Weber had immersed himself in the scholarship on ascetic Protestantism and how hard he tried to document his findings as well as his conclusions. Most of the clues relevant to our topic are hidden in those long footnotes. Second, Weber expanded the footnotes considerably when he revised the text of his study in 1919. While he is, as we will see, remarkably cautious in addressing criticism to other scholars in

1. The qualification of the term 'spirit' by inverted commas in the 1904/1905 version of *PESC* was eliminated by Weber in the revised version of 1919/1920. All quotations in this essay follow the excellent English translation of the first version of *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism* by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York and London: Penguin Books, 2002). As of now, this is the first translation of the 1904/1905 essay into English. Both Talcott Parsons and Stephen Kalberg have translated the revised version of 1919/1920.

the first version of the *PESC* of 1904/1905, he is quite outspoken in his critical remarks 15 years later.

The first part of Weber's essay was published in volume 20 of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. Weber wrote this piece in the months before leaving on a trip to the United States in August 1904. The first part of *PESC* appeared in print after his return to Heidelberg in November 1904, at which time he had begun writing the second part of his essay.

In the first few paragraphs of the beginning of the essay Weber is rather generous with praise. He points out that the work of his student Martin Offenbacher on 'Konfession und soziale Schichtung' was very helpful (pp. 43-45), and while he ridicules Ferdinand Kürnberger's 'Der Amerikamüde' as 'corrosively witty' (p. 11), and as 'somewhat indigestible today' (p. 47), he applauds Werner Wittich's article on German and French culture in the Alsace as 'an exceptionally perceptive commentary' (pp. 45-46). It is in a similarly positive vein that he mentions recent works by Eberhard Gothein, Gerhart Schulze-Gaevernitz and Wilhelm Hasbach (pp. 46, 50).

In the first two sections of the first article, Weber refers to no one more often than to Werner Sombart, and he does so in a manner that is somewhat puzzling. On the one hand he gives credit to Sombart's work. He even speaks of Sombart's 'highly felicitous and effective writings' (p. 26), and he acknowledges that Sombart 'has by no means disregarded' the problem that he attempts to pursue, namely the 'ethical aspect of capitalist enterprise' (p. 48). A few footnotes later, Weber points out particularly that he hardly needs to stress how much his own work owed to 'Sombart's great writings, with their penetrating formulations'. This was, as he adds, especially true where their work parted company. Even if one felt 'constantly provoked to dissent most strongly from Sombart's formulations' and rejected 'some of his theses outright', one had the 'duty to take account of his work'. Weber went on to call 'the attitude of German economic critics' towards Sombart 'truly embarrassing' (p. 49, see also pp. 46, 50, 51, 62). One may correctly assume that Weber counted himself among those who may not have approved of Sombart's way of arguing or his conclusions, but who appreciated Sombart's work as a whole.

In this sense, then, in what may be called a kind of critical closeness, Sombart's book on the genesis of capitalism helped Weber to define his own approach. Weber cites Sombart on the difference between 'subsistence' and 'acquisition', only to conclude that Sombart's definition is insufficient. In contrast to Sombart, as Weber explains, one has to dis-