

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

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Abstract

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

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

Introduction

When Weber published *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter *PESC*) in 1905 he had the benefit of Werner Sombart's *Modern Capitalism* (1902) and *The German Economy in the Nineteenth Century* (*Die deutsche Volkswirtschaft im Neunzehnten Jahrhundert*) (1903). Weber agreed with Sombart's promotion in these works of the importance of the idea of the 'spirit of capitalism' but disagreed with him about where this 'spirit' is to be socially and historically located. Against Sombart's position Weber's view is that the German national character, because Lutheran, is traditional and therefore not linked to the spirit of capitalism, which is modern. Rather, it is the national

character of the British and American peoples, Weber argues, through their exposure to Puritanism and Calvinism, which are instead linked to the spirit of capitalism. In a similar way Weber accommodates Sombart's view of the Jews as a religious group associated with trade, although not entrepreneurship, and in that sense implicated in the emergence and history of capitalism in an entirely subordinate and ancillary position.

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

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

Jewish rationalism, Protestant rationalism

In *PESC* Weber holds that the ascetic rationalism of the Puritans and Calvinists has Old Testament sources in so far as these groups selectively emphasized 'those parts of the Old Testament which praise formal legality as a sign of conduct pleasing to God' (Weber 1991: 165). Weber goes on to say that this appropriation gave 'a powerful impetus to that spirit of self-righteous and sober legality which was so characteristic of the worldly asceticism of this form of Protestantism' (Weber 1991: 165). Indeed, the 'rational suppression of the mystical' typical of Puritanism and Calvinism was a feature 'of the God-fearing but perfectly unemotional wisdom of the Hebrews' (Weber 1991: 123; see also Weber 1991: 222 n. 19 and Weber 1981: 360-61). While Weber presents this overlap between Judaism and Protestantism, he is care-