

History and theory in Max Weber's 'Protestant Ethic'*

Peter Ghosh

St. Anne's College, Oxford

Abstract. It is an old cliché that Weber's 'Protestant Ethic' (*PE*) is historically wrong or deficient. Recent work by German sociologists has reinforced this view, with the aim of further demoting the text within Weber's oeuvre: as if it were a work of bad history and nothing more. This paper takes a contrary view. It argues that the text is neither 'wrong' (to say so is a category error) nor is it confined to the past. Rather, it is much misunderstood, and a principal reason for this is our ignorance of Weber's uniquely sophisticated historicism, an area of his thought that has hardly been examined hitherto. The *PE* must be read as a product of this historicism, and set within the comparative context of contemporary European historicism, which was then at its apogee. Seen in this light, it is not only a pre-eminent guide to Weber's modern social theory, but one of the most carefully constructed and original historical works in all of European thought.

Keywords: Weber, Protestant Ethic, history, historicism, sociology, modernity, social theory.

Max Weber's 'Protestant Ethic' is an evergreen object of interest and recent publications have opened up new directions for study and reflection upon it.¹ Nonetheless there are still many who hold that it is a dispensable text, which, if it must be discussed, should be taken up in order to bury it. This distaste has a great deal to do with arguments about history. The 'Protestant Ethic' (*PE*) presents an argument whose historical starting point is a religious construct, ascetic Protestantism, set in the 17th century, written by someone whose professional identity was that of a social scientist, not a historian. This disciplinary transgression (or what looks like it) is worrying to historians and social scientists alike: to historians who detect that the *PE* is no ordinary work of history, and to social scientists, because it stands apart from what they recognise as the present-day agenda of social science. Unlike many other works in social science with a significant historical component (where 'social science' must be understood in its full Weberian extent, as including law and theology), it is all too easily read as if it aspired to be (in Weber's own words) 'purely historical' [XX.53; XXI.109].² Consider, in this respect, the profusion of 17th century source materials in theology and moral casuistry on display in Part II of the text (the principal part), where the most hasty sample of cited authors would include Robert Barclay, Lewis Bayly, Richard Baxter, Johannes Hoornbeek, Philipp Jakob Spener and Gijsbert Voët. When we consider how few, even of specialist historians or theologians, have read these authors today, it is easy to see why the *PE* has come to seem historically problematic.

* E-mail address: peter.ghosh@history.ox.ac.uk. Abbreviations: *AfSS*: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*; *GARS*: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920) vol.i; *WL*: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1968); *WuG*: 'Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft' [1919-20]; *MWG*: *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* ed. Horst Baier et al. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984-); *Briefe*: letters by Weber in *MWG*, Abt.II.

¹ Note the volumes in the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*: *Asketischer Protestantismus und Kapitalismus. Schriften und Reden 1904-1911* (Tübingen, 2014), *MWG I/9*; *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus... Schriften 1904-1920* (Tübingen, 2016), *MWG I/18*, both ed. Wolfgang Schluchter in collaboration with Ursula Bube. Also Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Fachmenschenfreundschaft. Studien zu Troeltsch und Weber* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014); and my two books: *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories* (Oxford: OUP, 2014) [hereafter *Twin Histories*], *Max Weber in Context: Essays in the History of German Ideas c.1870-1930* [hereafter *Max Weber in Context*] (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016).

² References in this form are to the original text of the *PE* in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft* XX (1904), 1-54; XXI (1905), 1-110. These page numbers are entered in the edition of the *PE* in *MWG I/9*.

Paradoxically there has been a good deal of engagement with the text's historicity, but chiefly to prove its worthlessness. Ordinarily our faith in historical relativity is so secure that we assume that whatever texts from the past may say on historical subjects is itself historical. They are superseded, and it is simply a mistake to inquire whether they are 'wrong'. (Their theoretical use is of course a different matter.) Yet in the case of the hundred-year-old *PE* sociologists continue to rail at *Max Weber's False but Irrefutable Constructions* of the past.³ Here is an explicit allegation of historical falsity, and the feeling that drives such an accusation is still more evident in the case of those who speak of Weber's 'crime', 'dishonesty' and 'sin'.⁴ Evidently Max Weber, 'the sociologist [of sociologists] and one of the undisputed founding fathers of this academic discipline',⁵ is very much part of the social scientific present and the *PE*, though a "historical" text, has been caught up within this present-day agenda. By contrast, although religious and economic historians have paid considerable attention to the *PE*, their line of approach has been rather different. Unlike sociologists they have no commitment to Weber as a founding father, and so it has always been possible to ignore this most historical of texts, as is clear from the practice of German social historians in the late 20th century.⁶ Where historians have taken up the critical cudgels, the focus of their criticism has been distinct. Sociologists are more interested in the *PE* as a *Weberian* text, whereas social and economic historians have been more concerned with what the *PE* might say on particular historical *subjects*, such as 17th century theology or the pre-history of the industrial revolution. Unlike sociologists they need pass no judgement on the relation it posits between history and modernity. Yet since this is the central purpose of the text throughout, it cannot be said that they are discussing the *PE*, only selections from it.⁷ So, by another paradox, historians have been less relevant than sociologists to a discussion of the historical status of the 'Protestant Ethic'.

A principal consequence of this situation has been that, despite its canonical status, the *PE* is not "over-determined" or over-familiar.⁸ On the contrary, a text cast in a seemingly rebarbative historical form is too little known, and this has been true at any date since c.1960,

³ Heinz Steinert, *Max Webers unwiderlegbare Fehlkonstruktionen. Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2010) [hereafter *Fehlkonstruktionen*]. Compare Dirk Kaesler, *Max Weber: Preuße, Denker, Muttersohn* (Munich: Beck, 2014), 543-4.

⁴ Tatsuro Hanyu, *Max Webers Verbrechen* (Kioto: Minerva, 2002); idem, *Max Webers wissenschaftliche Sünde. Über seine „Unehrllichkeit“...* (Kindle ed., pub. Hanyu, 2014).

⁵ Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 20.

⁶ Detlev Peukert, 'Die Rezeption Max Webers in der Geschichtswissenschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland' in ed. Jürgen Kocka, *Max Weber, der Historiker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1986), 264. In this collection, a central statement by historians, the *PE* is simply omitted ('Vorwort', 8n.2). See similarly Thomas Kroll, 'Zur Max-Weber-Rezeption in der westdeutschen Historiographie' in ed. Christoph Cornelißen, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Geist der Demokratie* (Berlin: Akademie, 2010), 189-205. Of the principal German historians with some interest in Weber as a thinker (Peukert, Kocka, Mommsen) only Peukert touched on the *PE* as a subject, just once, in oblique (Nietzschean) fashion: 'Die „letzten Menschen“'. Beobachtungen zur Kulturkritik im Geschichtsbild Max Webers', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 12 (1986), 425-42. Since the waning of the prestige of social history, the attention devoted by German historians to Weber (rather than Weberian ideas), let alone the *PE*, has also been less.

⁷ A body of literature grouped around historical subjects rather than around Weber is difficult to reference adequately; but for an introduction and copious bibliographical citation see the essays by Malcolm MacKinnon, David Zaret and Philip Benedict in *Weber's Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts*, edd. Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth (Cambridge; CUP, 1993), cc.10, 11, 15. Since this date critical and empirical engagement with sections of the *PE* has become less common, although historians' interest in using Weber as a conceptual springboard remains lively. In short, the process of critical detachment is well advanced.

⁸ Cf. Klaus Lichtblau & Johannes Weiß (eds), *Max Weber, Die protestantische Ethik und der »Geist« des Kapitalismus* (Bodenheim: Athenäum Hain Hanstein, 1993), XII [hereafter: Lichtblau & Weiß (1993)].

by which point the contemporaries who intuitively shared many of Weber's historicist assumptions had largely passed away. Paul Honigsheim's 'Recollections of Max Weber' published posthumously in 1963 was *fin de ligne* in this respect.⁹ The principal exception to this want of interest was very much the exception that proves the rule, the attention directed at the part of the *PE* that was most obviously modern: its preliminary chapter on the "spirit" of capitalism. Yet even here the relevance and interest of the subject sprang not so much from what Weber had to say, but from what readers assumed was the primary meaning of 'capitalism'. It was either simple economism or materialism,¹⁰ or else, insofar as it was theoretically defined, it meant capitalism as understood by 20th century Western Marxism, running from the early Lukács through to Jürgen Habermas. Of course Weber was important to these authors, but the driving force here lay with Marxist and post-Marxist social theory. When interest in Marxism declined after c.1980, so did interest in the capitalism of the *PE*, and the amount of attention devoted to this subject today is slight.¹¹

Clearly the passage of time will bring about the detachment required for a more appropriate historical reading of the *PE* – that is, as part of the history of ideas in the early 20th century rather than as a comment on the religious or economic history of the 17th – and so it would seem that the immediate priority is to recover the actual meaning of the text rather than to spend time on false but refutable constructions of Weber's history. Such has long been my own view, and yet this underestimates the interest of the subject. The deviant reading of Weber at the height of his canonical elevation today is a fact of interest in itself. But it is much more important to consider what such deviant readings have passed over: Weber's views on the use of historical method in social science. Historians of historical thought are aware that central components of Weberian methodological writings – on "objectivity", "value-freedom" and concept formation (the "ideal type") – have historical implications; but the idea that Weber was a novel and original historical thinker in his own right, and in fact *the* most novel and original thinker within a wider European historicism at a most fateful moment — this idea has scarcely dawned.¹² Yet Weber was *both* a major thinker in the social sciences and a major historical thinker, and his historical or historicist thought will be the principal subject of examination here. The outstanding product of this thought was the 'Protestant Ethic' of 1904-5. Far from being bad history it is in fact the product of uniquely sophisticated historical reasoning, and its sheer originality is a principal cause of the incomprehension with which it has been received.

So I propose, first, to outline the way in which sociologists since c.1980 have demoted the *PE* within Weber's *oeuvre*, where a central strategy has been to identify it as a history text. Secondly, and principally, we must look at Weber's own historical assumptions

⁹ 'Erinnerungen an Max Weber' in *Max Weber zum Gedächtnis, Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, Sonderheft 7, (1963), 161-271. Another long-lived survivor was Karl Jaspers (d.1969), but he had little interest in Weber's ideas about history: *Max Weber in Context*, c.8 §§.II, V.

¹⁰ On the complex identity of Weberian capitalism see *Twin Histories*, 133-42 etc.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 294-6.

¹² For a conventionally limited view of Weber's historical thought, Friedrich Jäger & Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (Munich: Beck, 1992), 156-60, 191 and also works listed at n.72 below. Otto Gerhard Oexle is both more adventurous and more questionable. He sees Weber as the prophet of 'science' (*Wissenschaft*), hence 'historical science', 'as research', where research is by definition infinite; but still Weber does 'not [come] within historical science in the narrower sense': *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1996), 34. (In saying this Oexle was oblivious of what Weber meant by history in the narrow and broad senses.) Frederick Beiser's placement of Weber at the end of *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), c.13, flatters to deceive. Beiser, a philosopher and not a historian, has no interest in historicist tradition as such, and his book is a set of portraits of individuals.

and procedures, procedures that inform his *oeuvre* as a whole, but which are developed to a unique degree in the *PE*.

I. The “historicisation” of the ‘Protestant Ethic’

The *PE* has always enjoyed a rich tradition of reception, both positive and negative, not least in the English-speaking world,¹³ but it is clear today that a new phase in the reception and understanding of Weber, and hence of the *PE*, commenced c.1980 in West Germany. The great institutional embodiment of this lies in the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* (*MWG*), ‘a documentary edition [of Weber’s works] on historical-critical principles’.¹⁴ This became a definite project in 1976, began publication in 1984, and is now almost complete. It supplies the secure and comprehensive documentary foundation from which any authentic historical reading of Weber must proceed. The pre-eminent strategic voice that has accompanied it throughout is that of one of the senior editors, the sociologist Wolfgang Schluchter. Concomitant with his work on the nascent edition, Schluchter decided he must establish an outline of Weber’s intellectual production or what he called his ‘research programme’, which was mapped out in a series of major studies that appeared between 1979 and 1988.¹⁵ As the phrase ‘research programme’ suggests, this was not intended as the biography of a person – an apparently soft category alien to sociology – and the focus here as in social scientific reception generally was on ‘the biography of the work’ rather than of Max Weber.¹⁶ Nonetheless Schluchter’s work was an intellectual landmark which far exceeded what any other contemporary, sociologist or historian, was prepared to undertake.¹⁷ A central component of this picture was its siting of the *PE*. Schluchter did not assert an outright division between the *PE* and Weber’s other writings: there was no textual evidence to support such a view, and he was (and is!) far too good a scholar. Nonetheless, in his construction of Weber’s intellectual history, the *PE* appears as a starting point which was left behind in the course of the ongoing ‘research programme’. The thrust of this programme lay in an expanding conception of Western rationalism which meant that, so far as his religious-

¹³ The last major statement within this tradition prior to *MWG* was the two books by Gordon Marshall, *Presbyteries and Profits* (Oxford: OUP, 1981) and *In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Hutchinson, 1982).

¹⁴ Wolfgang Schluchter, ‘Einführung in der Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe’ in *Prospekt der Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981), 4-15, here 11.

¹⁵ *Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979), trans. Guenther Roth, *The Rise of Western Rationalism* (Berkeley: California UP, 1981), and the studies collected in *Religion und Lebensführung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), quotation from Part I, title (i.21-113).

¹⁶ Eg. Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Webers Fragestellung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), §.II ‘Zur Biographie des Werks’, cf. §.III: ‘Zur Einheit des Werks’. See similarly Friedrich H. Tenbruck, ‘Das Werk Max Webers’ (1975), now collected in *Das Werk Max Webers* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1999) ed. H. Homann, 59-98. Focus on the history of particular texts or works is of course the foundation of *MWG* as well as the occasional volumes of commentary published to accompany the edition.

¹⁷ Alternative voices to Schluchter include, first, the historian Wolfgang Mommsen. Yet though Mommsen was a great Weber scholar and a senior editor for *MWG*, he was not primarily a historian of ideas. So his interest in Weber as a thinker, set apart from historical problems, was limited, while his principal publications on Weber ceased in 1974 (*Max Weber. Gesellschaft, Politik und Geschichte*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp; *The Age of Bureaucracy*, Oxford: Blackwell). A more distinct alternative to Schluchter was provided by the political scientist, Wilhelm Hennis. However, Hennis’ central thesis – that Max Weber offered a “science of man” – was too general to be persuasive, and unlike Schluchter he never attempted to map out a conception of Weber’s oeuvre as a whole. On the contrary, beneath his umbrella proposition, Hennis’ readings of Weber were a series of fragments. On the subject of religion he was a candid secularizer. Under modern conditions (he held) it made ‘better sense’ to describe Weber’s work on the “sociology of religion” under the heading ‘contributions to the history of the human race’, which brings us back to the science of man: *Max Webers Wissenschaft vom Menschen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 73. Accordingly his interest in the *PE* was marginal.

historical writings were concerned, it was the ‘Economic Ethics of the World Religions’ (1912-20) which represented the crucial development in Weber’s thought, not than the *PE*. They were a part of a second great ‘breakthrough’ alongside ‘Economy and Society’ that (it was held) marked out the final decade of Weber’s life from 1910. It was only the accident of his death in 1920 which prevented him from writing a ‘missing book’ on the history of Occidental Christianity, which would have shown just how superseded the *PE* really was.¹⁸

Evidently this strategic vision did not betoken any great interest in the *PE*,¹⁹ and so the next step in the demotion of the *PE* came from another German source, the sociologists Klaus Lichtblau and Johannes Weiß, who republished the original 1904-5 text of the *PE* in 1993. The rationale behind this project is unclear. It was not a text-critical edition,²⁰ and would appear to have sprung from the conscientious desire of sociologists to clarify the history and present-day relevance of the pre-eminent founding father of their discipline. One might suppose that the first ever commercial republication of the original text was designed to promote its claims, but this was by no means the editors’ intention. On the contrary, they were cutting it down to size. Presentation of the original *PE* without the comparative setting provided by the ‘Economic Ethics of the World Religions’ or the introductory portal of the 1919 *Vorbemerkung* (‘Author’s Introduction’),²¹ convinced the editors of the essential modesty of the text’s claims. So their conclusion was much the same as Schluchter’s when they lauded the enhanced, universal-historical perspective of the final text of 1920; its inclusion of more developed sociological type-concepts; and its outline of ‘a process of the *rationalization* of structural images of the world that embraced a millennium and was by no means confined to the history of Western Christianity’. By contrast, this last idea had been an ‘alien body’ in the original version.²² But if the original *PE* was not central to Weber’s modern, sociological thought then its alternative relevance was that of a history text. Yet even as history Lichtblau and Weiß thought it was insignificant: ‘Weber’s study of Protestantism can only be understood as a genuine contribution to the economic and cultural history of modern capitalism in a very *limited* sense’. In support of this assertion they supposed that the next step should be a rigorous ‘examination of the theoretical foundations [of the text] with the aid of the relevant historical sources’, but they themselves had no enthusiasm for such a laborious and presumptively futile task.²³

The most recent and extreme attempt to historicise the *PE* was that of Heinz Steinert in 2010. Steinert assailed the text by almost all the routes known to him: as a sociologist

¹⁸ *Religion und Lebensführung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), i.102-7. The phrase ‘missing book’ appears in Schluchter, ‘Einleitung’, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus... Schriften 1904-1920* (2016), MWG I/18.57-9, but it derives from views he has always held: see *Religion und Lebensführung* ii.579, 587. I discuss Schluchter’s work more fully in *Twin Histories*, 223-46.

¹⁹ It was only an accident, the failure of Hartmut Lehmann (the originally designated editor) to produce editions of the *PE* for MWG, that caused Schluchter to take over responsibility for them: see n.1 above. He had not changed his view of the *PE*, but this was offset by loyalty to the edition and the desire to bring an exceptionally complex textual undertaking to completion.

²⁰ It included an ‘Index of the most important additions and alterations’ made in the second version of the text published in 1920: Lichtblau & Weiß (1993), 157-203 cf. xxv-xxvi. This was serviceable for most ordinary reading purposes, but it was not a complete listing and did not pretend to serve the function of a critical edition.

²¹ GARS i.1-16. ‘Author’s Introduction’ is not an accurate translation, but I use it since it is familiar to English-speaking readers of Talcott Parsons’ translation of the *PE* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930).

²² Lichtblau & Weiß (1993), xxiv, xxiii resp.

²³ *Ibid.*, viii, ix resp.

confronted with a classic text (11 etc.);²⁴ as a sociologist comparing the *PE* with a modern research project; as an ethnologist and participant observer (16-17); as a philologist comparing the text with its sources (64); and as the uniquely privileged reader who would decode and expound the text ‘through exact and unprejudiced reading’ (15). His primary aim was to demonstrate the worthlessness of the text to present-day sociology, and the best way to do this was to relegate it to the past. Thus his project is announced as follows: ‘The material will be assembled which is to be used for a comprehensive historicisation of the [Weber] thesis’ (25).²⁵ (In another version the book appears as ‘an exercise in the historicising of a grand narrative’, and the insinuation of post-modernist literary analysis here presents Steinert in yet another academic costume) (15). In Steinert’s view the *PE* should be “historicised” in at least two respects. First, it should be recognised that the subject matter of the text lay in a remote and detached past. Past readers were mistaken in receiving it ‘as if it was a current contribution to the self-understanding of the age and society at that time’ – the early 20th century – and the presence of sections of the text which contradicted this proposition, as for example its opening chapter or its discussion of the “spirit” of capitalism, simply reflected confusion on Weber’s part.²⁶ Secondly, and somewhat inconsistently, the *PE* ought to be explained by, and set in the historical contexts of the time of writing in the early 20th century. The first that came to mind (for the act of contextualization was arbitrary and intuitive, based on what appeared to him self-evident) was that of ‘the Prussian *fin de siècle*’ (13, 24).²⁷ However, here as elsewhere, Steinert could not confine himself to a single idea, and a whole series of supplementary contexts creep in such as the crises of late 19th century liberalism, nationalism, capitalism (the social question) and bourgeois manliness (275-96). But in any case the *PE* derived from ‘the era *before* the First World War’ (31), regardless of its post-war revision and republication. Here, then, was a clear message for his sociologist colleagues: it was obsolete as well as ‘historically false’ (20).

Unlikely though it may seem, the more sober analysis of Wolfgang Schluchter in his edition of the *PE* for the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* (2014) leads to a similar final outcome. In general (he supposes), the *PE* represents a state of intellectual “fragmentation” on Weber’s part, because ‘it runs along several tracks, largely without inner coherence’. If we examine the historical ‘track’ or component, we find that

Weber orientates himself in relation to a few works of secondary literature which he follows to a large extent, though at the same time he repeatedly goes back to the sources most frequently used there, in order to check them against the originals and in some cases to add a different accent or supplement. As a result, and not by chance, the impression arises from time to time that he has simply paraphrased the expositions of others.²⁸

²⁴ Page references in () are to Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*. Sadly he died shortly after the book was published and did not contribute to the discussion it provoked: see esp. the special number of the *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 23,3 (2012). Regardless of the journal’s title, social scientists are the vast majority of the contributors here.

²⁵ Remarkably Steinert thought that his ideas about the historicisation of the *PE* were the same as mine: see *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 32, 271 (also personal communication). Naturally I am most grateful for these generous remarks, but still they seem to illustrate an outsider’s conception of ‘history’ as a relatively simple activity, which can be practised according to a standard method, leading to an agreed result.

²⁶ Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 215 cf. 105, 207-8.

²⁷ The curious idea that one can understand Max Weber as a pre-1914 Prussian derives from Dirk Kaesler, who set it out most fully in *Max Weber. Preuße, Denker, Muttersohn* (Munich; Beck, 2014) eg.20-38. However, evidence of Weber’s hostility to institutions with a clear Prussian identity or root, such as the Hohenzollern monarchy and the “system” of Friedrich Althoff, is abundant; evidence of him celebrating a Prussian identity (as distinct from his appreciation of Berlin-Charlottenburg), nil.

²⁸ Wolfgang Schluchter, ‘Einleitung’, *Max Weber, Asketischer Protestantismus und Kapitalismus. Schriften und Reden 1904-1911, MWG I/9.87*, 60 resp. The authors that Schluchter points to (60n.37) as paraphrased and relied on by Weber comprise two important writers (Schneckenburger, Ritschl), with whom Weber has a

It should be said that Schluchter's work has almost nothing in common with Steinert's. Not only is it far more measured and controlled, but unlike almost all other critics of the *PE*, it is based on a profound knowledge of Weber's work in its entirety. Even so, he too wishes to demote the text. His premiss lies in the judgement that, 'The [*PE*] is concerned with a *historical* investigation (not a theoretical one), albeit with theoretical implications'.²⁹ This history may not be wrong – one of the principal results of this edition was to show that it was not wrong, as we shall see – but it is largely a paraphrase of a handful of theological authors. So his conclusion is essentially identical with his views of thirty years before: that insofar as the *PE* retains any interest it is derivative, a worked example of the methodological thinking Weber was developing at the same time (1903-7). Now Schluchter was quite right to locate the *PE* in the context of the methodological writings; but he used the link between them simply a means of demoting the *PE*, and so the obvious consequence of this proposition – close scrutiny of the novel methodological procedures employed in the *PE* – was never acted upon.³⁰

I make two comments on this body of work. First, *if* sociologists today are not interested in a mode of intellectual argument which presupposes that our understanding of the present is significantly dependent on a consideration of its historical evolution – that there is a real and instructive connection between past and present – then that is an entirely legitimate choice to make. Their view is not Weber's view; but if today's priorities and assumptions are different, then any counter-argument on his behalf is superfluous. One aspect of Weber's historicism which has certainly not dated was his profound sense of the remorselessness of historical change, and he took an extremely stringent view about the obsolescence of all academic work, including his own: 'Every one of us knows that in academic science [*Wissenschaft*], whatever one has done is becoming out of date in 10, 20, 50 years. That is historical fate, indeed that is the very *meaning* of academic and scientific work...'³¹ Thus for him the idea that the *PE* would be superseded was axiomatic, and he had reached this conclusion before it was published.³² However, dismissal of the *PE* can only be deduced from the current priorities of social science. It cannot be deduced from a critique of the text, and above all not by the tactic of trying to detach the *PE* from the rest of Weber's work — as if one could pretend that it had no significance for him, so saving embarrassment to a social science which today exalts Weber more than any other single thinker. Yet this is the tactic announced in Steinert's opening sentence: 'This is not a book about Max Weber. It is a book about... "The Protestant ethic and the ›spirit‹ of capitalism"'.³³ Here is a much cruder and more arbitrary version of the refined demotion performed by Schluchter. But Weber himself never supposed that the *PE* was in any way separate from the rest of his work. Any dismissal of the *PE* must reckon with the fact that in 1904 he thought that it was his 'principal work' (*Hauptarbeit*) at that time, standing above but not apart from the great essays on the nature of

significant intellectual relation going well beyond paraphrase, and two writers of limited significance (Scheibe, Hoennicke) who seem to have been selected at random from dozens of possible writers in this category. On the first two see my essays in *A Historian reads Max Weber* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), c.6, *Max Weber in Context* c.6; on the latter see my review article, *Max Weber Studies* 15 (2015), 131-42, here 140

²⁹ *Grundlegungen der Soziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2006-7) i.277.

³⁰ Schluchter's 2014 'Introduction' contains a synopsis of the 'logical-methodical' foundations laid by Weber's "Objectivity" essay of 1904, but there is only a single sentence touching its implications for the *PE*: a routine statement that it was a 'precondition' for the *PE* since the latter deployed ideal-types and was not dominated by the analysis of material interests: *MWG* I/9.12-22, here 12, 22.

³¹ 'Science as a Vocation' [1917/19], *MWG* I/17.85.

³² 'Die »Objektivität« sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis' [1904] *WL* 214 [hereafter »Objektivität«], cf. 'Vorbemerkung' [1919-20], *GARS* i.13-14.

³³ *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 11.

academic ‘science’ (*Wissenschaft*) and methodology which surround it,³⁴ and his commitment to its republication after 1912 shows that its significance was quite undiminished in his eyes. To dismiss the *PE* is in fact to dismiss Max Weber, and to criticise the *PE* in isolation from the rest of the relevant Weberian texts is a betrayal of the most elementary historical method. These facts alone tell us, even before the text has been opened, just how shaky are the foundations of this kind of critique.

Secondly, while it is clear that a number of social scientists dislike the *PE* and are not persuaded by it, I suggest that their allegedly historical critiques of the text are vulnerable precisely because they are not purely historical.³⁵ They may well promote the purpose they are designed to serve – demotion and relegation of the text within social science – but they are not historically convincing. This is not, of course, to derogate the historical aptitude of social scientists, but still work carried out in service of the present-day agenda of sociology and the social sciences is not the same as that of past-centred history, and differing priorities produce different results. Historical inquiry is not the sole or even primary concern of the social sciences – Wolfgang Schluchter, unquestionably the purest Weberian among sociologists, has always been quite candid that his expositions of the historical Weber must serve the purposes of present-day sociology³⁶ – and this has consequences for the nature of any alleged “historical” critique conducted on this basis. By contrast while history by no means excludes present-day concerns, its formal priority lies in the independent examination of the past: this is its principal contribution to the intellectual life of the present. A more specialized point is that the obvious instrument for a historically adequate study of Max Weber’s *ideas* lies in the history of ideas, using the techniques which are deemed proper to it. None of this is to say that the disciplinary divide between history and the social sciences cannot be passed: exceptional individuals have always done so and will, we hope, always continue to do so.³⁷ Nonetheless specialization is an empirical fact, and one with a powerful rationale. Modern social scientists and theorists have an absolute right to interpret Weber as they see fit for their own, present-day purposes. This is what Weber himself would have done, and in this respect social scientists will always be much more authentic Weberians than any historian can be. All I contend for here is that such a procedure is not the same as historical inquiry; and *if* what we are looking for is a historically accurate understanding of Weber, then combining it with an extraneous present-day agenda is not the best way to achieve it. Like Weber we may regret the degree of specialization that such reflections imply; but like Weber we may also say that ‘dilettantism’, the absence of specialization, ‘as the underlying principle of academic science [*Wissenschaft*] would be the end.’³⁸

³⁴ Weber to Heinrich Rickert 14.6.04 cf. Weber to Paul Siebeck 12.4.04 on his high expectations for the work: *Briefe*. See further my essay ‘Beyond Methodology: Max Weber’s conception of *Wissenschaft*’, *Sociologia Internationalis* 52 (2014), 157-218.

³⁵ The argument here is necessarily schematic. For a fuller guide to the literature, Lawrence Scaff, *Weber and the Weberians* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 30-43.

³⁶ This is clear throughout Schluchter’s work, from his description of Weber’s *oeuvre* as a ‘research programme’, to his use of diagrams, free incorporation of modern authors, and the autonomy he exercises in order to ‘improve’ Weber’s work: eg. *Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus*, 256 cf. 229 etc. See the synoptic treatment in, his *Grundlegungen der Soziologie* (2006-7), where Weber is but one building block, albeit a very important one (i.197-316), leading to a post- or neo-Weberian conclusion: ‘a structuralist-individualist sociology of *Verstehen*’ (ii.297-309).

³⁷ Guenther Roth and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf come instantly to mind.

³⁸ ‘Vorbemerkung’ [1919-20], *GARS* i.14. The dilettante or interdisciplinary thinker was a positive category for Weber, and ‘dilettantism’ here refers to his own work cf. ‘Science as a Vocation’ [1917/19], *MWG* I/17.82.

What is the empirical substance behind these remarks ? Note, first, that Weber's historical reading was enormous in its range and amount, and it far exceeds what any of his critics has been able or prepared to read. The bibliography of the *PE*, which in 1904-5 would have contained more than 200 titles, is a good illustration of this.³⁹ Accordingly, the more candid of his later readers have accepted that they cannot remotely match his historical knowledge. Here, for example, is Talcott Parsons, a man who had been educated by the act of translating the *PE*:⁴⁰

Anyone who attempts to understand his sociological work in its completeness to any degree cannot fail to be impressed, and to a great extent bewildered, by the enormous mass of detailed historical material which Weber commanded. Indeed so vast is this mass, and much of it so highly technical in the various fields from which it is drawn, that any ordinary human being is under very serious difficulties in any sort of critical analysis, since a real factual check on Weber's work as a whole would probably be well beyond the powers of any single living scholar. Weber's was, what is exceedingly rare in the modern age, an encyclopedic mind.

The amount of labour required for the primitive task of a 'factual check' of the *PE* against its 'sources' (and in an interdisciplinary work of this kind, this means not only what a historian would call primary sources, but all intellectual sources) is not quite an impossible demand – let us say, ten years' work⁴¹ – but it is impractical except for the very small number of persons who prepare editions of the text. It is also unattractive — the academic equivalent of manual labour. Accordingly all the alleged critiques of Weber's historical accuracy examine only the most narrow samples of his work, and compensate for this by the literalness and rigidity of their criteria, such that even the minutest deviation from modern scholarly practice is held to be conclusive. The results of such criticism are predictable, not to say banal. To take one of the most frequently recycled examples, it has established beyond doubt that, if one wishes to understand the life and ideas of Benjamin Franklin, one should read a specialist study of Franklin, and not the *PE*. But what it has not established is that the use Weber makes of Franklin for his own purposes is meaningless, dishonest or insubstantial.⁴² As a result analyses of this kind fail to persuade, and their want of impact is evident from the continuous use which an extremely wide range of disciplines make today of Weberian ideas as modern theoretical stimuli, including of course ideas from the *PE*. It is the perceived fruitfulness of these ideas, and not some peculiar oddity of the text, which makes the *PE* 'immune to refutation'.⁴³

In any case, the question of fidelity to sources is a primitive test: it is of use only to detect outright liars and falsifiers, whereas the principal grounds of intellectual difference in both the humanities and social sciences are of course more complex and intractable. A second and much more substantial deficiency of "historical" criticism of the *PE* is that it has been unable to grasp its central historical subject. Thus it cannot say what Weber's historical argument is, and to what end he is reading and deploying his sources. At first sight such an assertion will seem audacious in the extreme: can it really be that so many readers have been

³⁹ See the titles listed in *MWG I/9.843-68*, which however significantly understates the full range of Weber's known reading, to say nothing of all the books and authors that were in his mind but cannot be demonstrated securely. See my review essay, *Max Weber Studies* 15 (2015), 140-1.

⁴⁰ *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937), 500.

⁴¹ Ursula Bube spent six years working full-time on the *PE* for *MWG I/9*, but to her labours must be added a period of nearly thirty years during which Hartmut Lehmann and his assistant Michael Matthiesen worked on the text, however spasmodically.

⁴² Criticism which privileges Franklin goes back to Lujo Brentano, *Die Anfänge des modernen Kapitalismus* (Munich: Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1916), 148-53, Eduard Baumgarten, *Benjamin Franklin: der Lehrmeister der amerikanischen Revolution* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1936), 93-117, 135-45, and forward to Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 57-70, and Schluchter, 'Einleitung', *MWG I/9.51-2*.

⁴³ Cf. Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 19.

mistaken for so long? But here, as throughout, the reasons for any want of comprehension lie not in the incapacity of readers and commentators, but in the history of ideas. More specifically: in the unique and exceptional qualities of Max Weber and of his principal historical statement, the *PE*, which had no parallels even in its own day. Because it is so unusual, it has been less accessible to readers with distinct and different priorities.

The problems of understanding the *PE* have existed almost as long as the text itself, in the shape of arguments about what “the Weber thesis” might be. It was Felix Rachfahl in 1909 who first postulated a single, simple ‘Weberian thesis’ and reduced Weber’s ideas down to the interrelation between ‘Calvinism and Capitalism’, a conveniently limited, historically literal stereotype that has dominated criticism ever since.⁴⁴ Yet Weber strongly objected to ‘Rachfahl’s wholly arbitrary limitation of the subject to Calvinism’, just as he mocked his critic’s reference to ‘my *real* “thesis”’, which he instantly dissolved into a plural set of ‘features’, and it is this irreducible plurality which is reproduced in what he called a ‘Positive Resumé’ of his thinking.⁴⁵ For the same reason Paul Honigsheim, the young friend of the Webers in pre-1914 Heidelberg and someone who understood the true breadth of Weber’s agenda very well, was consistently dismissive of the ‘so-called capitalism-Calvinism theory’, ‘the thesis which in abbreviation was incorrectly named the Calvinism-capitalism-theory’.⁴⁶

We shall return below to the question of what was the argument of the *PE* – it is hardly different from asking “what was the genesis of modernity?” – but scrutiny of its contents page gives a minimal idea of its concerns. That is to say, this was a text which saw a significant historical relationship between two entities, a historical ‘ascetic Protestantism’ and modern ‘capitalism’; the central thread of this relation lay in a connection between the ‘ethic’ of the one and the “ethic” or “spirit” of the latter.⁴⁷ Now contained within this seemingly simple summary, there were some major difficulties for Weber’s readers. At the modern end, Weber’s novel understanding of capitalism as ‘modern *material Kultur*’ [XX.53], a materialism of values, was very different from Marx’s economistic ‘capitalist mode of production’, and this posed major problems of reception when the Marxist view or debased versions of materialism was hegemonic.⁴⁸ More important in our context is that the principal historical

⁴⁴ ‘Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus’ (1909), ‘Nochmals Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus’ in *MWG I/9.521-72*, 625-64. Quotation eg. 629, 630, 638. Weber did once refer to ‘my thesis’ prior to his confrontation with Rachfahl, but all he meant by this was the entirety of what he had said in the *PE*: ‘Bemerkungen zu der vorstehenden „Replik”’, *AfSS* 26 (1908), 278 (*MWG I/9.505*). Normally he referred to his ‘essay’ or ‘essays’ (or occasionally ‘works’, ‘remarks’, *Ausführungen*: eg. *MWG I/9.513*, 609). In the “anti-critical” writings the plural is much more common but ‘essay’ is not excluded. By 1919, the lapse of time and increasing psychological distance caused him to settle on the singular: *GARS* i.17n.1, 38n.1 (@ 40), 86n.2, 207n.1 etc. For reliance on the idea of a ‘thesis’ in recent criticism: egg. Lichtblau & Weiss (1993), XIII-XV; Hartmut Lehmann, ‘Friends and Foes: the Formation and Consolidation of the *Protestant Ethic* Thesis’ in William H. Swatos & Lutz Kaelber (eds.), *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100: Essays on the Centenary of the Weber Thesis* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2005), 1-22; Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, passim (eg. 19-25), Wolfgang Schluchter, ‘Einleitung’, *MWG I/18.40*, 43 (‘Ursprungsthese’).

⁴⁵ Resp. ‘Antikritisches zum „Geist“ des Kapitalismus’ [1910], *MWG I/9.584*, ‘Antikritisches Schlußwort zum „Geist des Kapitalismus“’ [1910], *MWG I/9.667* cf. 710 for pluralism of the Resumé. Note too the plural in ‘one of the fundamental theses of my essay’: ‘Antikritisches zum „Geist“ des Kapitalismus’, *MWG I/9.589*.

⁴⁶ ‘Erinnerungen an Max Weber’ in *Max Weber zum Gedächtnis* [1963], (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1985²), 210, 177 etc. Cf. *Twin Histories*, 269.

⁴⁷ Since the “spirit” of capitalism is a lineal descendant of the ascetic Protestant ‘ethic’, Weber frequently refers to it as an “ethic” eg. [XX.16-17, 26n.1; XXI.71]. It is however an “ethic” in “” because by the 20th century, though its prescriptions are internalised, its primary foundation is now mechanical and external: [XXI.108].

⁴⁸ To describe Marx’ thought as economistic is, I believe, reasonable for reception purposes, even if in fact his understanding of ‘production’ contains a mental universe in itself: see my ‘Constructing Marx in the History of Ideas’, *Global Intellectual History* 2 (2017), 124-68, here 132-4, 138-9, 153.

carrier of ideas about capitalism and rationalism was not a ‘Protestant ethic’ as understood in any recognised and established sense. There was in fact no pre-existing discourse around ‘the Protestant ethic’ in the two major faculties concerned with ethics: theology and philosophy. Because of their presumed universality Kantian and neo-Kantian ethics (the pre-eminent philosophical discourse) were not described as ‘Protestant’, while Lutheran theology was so focussed on the primacy of religious faith (*sola fide*), that ethics were ordinarily assimilated to this and became a secondary concern.⁴⁹ So Weber’s ‘Protestant ethic’ was a novelty. It was in fact the ‘ascetic Protestant ethic’, where ‘ascetic Protestantism’, the stand-out feature of the contents page and the backbone of the argument [XXI.1-110], was a complete unknown until Weber invented it. It was a 20th century conceptual innovation. Insofar as it had a disciplinary location, it lay in theology, whose connection to social science is today remote, while its temporal positioning was neither simply past nor present, since asceticism was seen by Weber as the parent of rationalism, the second modern subject of the *PE* alongside capitalism.⁵⁰

The sheer oddity of asceticism, the *PE*’s central historical subject, created a reception problem of an unparalleled kind, and criticism reacted by effectively ignoring it. Yet any criticism of the *PE* which ignores ‘ascetic Protestantism’ is criticism of Hamlet without the prince. Rachfahl was so astounded by Weber’s reworking of the idea of asceticism as a form of modern, rational conduct, that he felt he must at least to raise the question ‘What is asceticism?’ Even so he rapidly came to the conclusion that ‘If one wishes to call the Calvinist vocational ethic “asceticism” ... the best thing to do would be to drop [‘the name’]’, where dropping the name meant dropping any discussion of asceticism itself.⁵¹ This strategy of dismissing Weber’s modern-historical argument about asceticism in favour of a critique based on well-known past-historical entities such as Calvinism, was understandable, but it was obviously mistaken. And the same mistake – ignoring or sidelining ascetic Protestantism and substituting an alternative agenda – has been committed by all subsequent critics of the *PE*, sociologists as well as early modern historians, though in fairness to the latter they could have little interest in a 20th century concept constructed for 20th century purposes. For example, Steinert, insofar as he was prepared to discuss the subject at all, envisaged “inner-worldly asceticism” as a subject for Freudian speculation where, if Freud had ever lectured Weber on the subject, he would have revealed it as a form of fantastical repression.⁵² Schluchter is much more faithful to the text and reproduces Weber’s formal scheme of argument whereby ‘asceticism’ serves as an umbrella label. Even so, he has nothing to say about asceticism as such. It is evidently a matter of theological dogma, something ‘historical’

⁴⁹ On Lutheran neglect of the history of ethics see Ernst Troeltsch’s review of Gustav Hoennicke, *Studien zur altprotestantischen Ethik* (1902), the only title in the entire *PE* bibliography to refer to Protestant ethics: *Ernst Troeltsch Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin, 1998–) [hereafter *Troeltsch KGA*], 8.217-23 cf. *PE* [XXI.37n.74]. Troeltsch was interested in ethics; but he wished to chart the historical evolution of an ‘old Protestant ethic’ into a modern, universal ethic of *Kultur*. So his occasional references to ‘the Protestant ethic’ have no discursive centrality: eg. ‘Moralisten, englische’, *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, ed. A. Hauck (Leipzig; Hinrichs, 1896-1913³), xiii.436-61, here 438-40.

⁵⁰ *Twin Histories*, 133-42 etc.

⁵¹ ‘Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus’ [1909], pr. *MWG* I/9.521-72, here 540, 543 cf. ‘Nochmals Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus’ [1910], *ibid.*, 639-43.

⁵² *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 303-7. Steinert’s treatment of Weber’s ‘fourth chapter’ (‘the religious foundations of innerworldly asceticism’, [XXI.1-73]), is predictably entitled ‘The Calvinist doctrine of predestination...’, and contains just one, purely expository page on asceticism (136). Other fleeting remarks on this subject include a link between asceticism and ‘the oil crisis’ though ‘of course Weber was thinking rather about coal’ (155). Again, the rhetorical question, “‘Ascetic Protestantism’ is the answer, but what is the question?” occurs as a chapter heading treating a section in the *PE* (I.3) that is not about asceticism (94). No-one could accuse Steinert of being wanting in humour.

in the sense of past-historical and remote, not living-historical and modern; and he continues to privilege Calvinism as the solid centre of asceticism. It ‘serves as the heuristic criterion by which Weber judges the other Reformed movements’.⁵³ Here all the four components of Weber’s ascetic Protestant compound have been classified as ‘Reformed’ or Calvinist, and so Calvinism is the only one of the four that merits serious attention. Yet the assumption made here is evidently false. Not only were Pietism, Methodism and the *Täufer* not ‘Reformed movements’ (though the first two contained some Calvinists), but in Weber’s argument the sectarian *Täufer* ‘stand out as a second *independent* carrier of ascetic Protestantism alongside Calvinism’ [XXI.61]. Ascetic Protestantism is something much greater than Calvinism, and Weber is already looking forward to the scheme of the Sociology of Religion within ‘Economy and Society’ (c.1913) where he grounds the entire typology of ethical and salvation religion around the polarity between asceticism and mysticism.⁵⁴

Here, then, in the enigma presented by its principal historical subject, is a second justification of the apparently audacious thesis advanced above: that there has been no historically plausible or substantial critique of the *PE* prior to opening up the study of Weber and his text as subjects in the history of ideas.

II. Historicism in social science

Let us then consider the modern-historical methods of the *PE* and of Max Weber. Weber’s procedures in using historical argument are novel and original, and this has been overlooked. Insofar as he is a social scientist, he is evidently not an ordinary historian; but at the same time his interest in, and commitment to, historical method far exceeds that of most social scientists, whether in his own day or ours.

The starting point for any understanding of the *PE* must be that, contrary to received opinion, it is most emphatically a statement about modernity. When Weber summarises his argument at its close, he writes as follows: ‘A constituent component of the capitalist spirit, and not only of this but of modern *Kultur*... — this is what these discussions were intended to show.’ [XXI.107] In fact every short summary Weber made of the agenda of the *PE* stresses its modern telos: ‘Protestant asceticism and modern acquisitive life’, ‘Protestant asceticism as the foundation of modern professional *Kultur*’, ‘the connections of the modern economic ethos with the rational ethic of ascetic Protestantism’.⁵⁵ Invocation of the ‘modern’, of ‘now’, ‘today’, the ‘present’ is incessant throughout the text, as are the repeated emphases that it was written in accordance with ‘the perspectives that are important for *us*’: that is, for Max Weber in 1904-5 [XXI.3n.3].⁵⁶ It will be clear from such usages, as well as from a dating of the modern going back to the 17th century, that Weber had no connection to the literary and aesthetic discourse of the ‘modern’ which established itself in Germany in the

⁵³ ‘Einleitung’, *MWG I/9*.57-65, here 59 (‘historical’), 62. For another example of Schluchter’s reluctance to engage with asceticism see ‘„Wie Ideen in der Geschichte wirken“: Exemplarisches in der Studie über den asketischen Protestantismus’ in Schluchter & Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (eds), *Asketischer Protestantismus und der ‚Geist‘ des modernen Kapitalismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2005), 49-73. His concern here lies with his major title (How ideas work in history). The treatment of ascetic Protestantism is brief and schematic (63-8), and his conclusion (68) is to emphasise the range and importance of causal factors standing outside it.

⁵⁴ *Twin Histories*, 250-4.

⁵⁵ Resp. Eranos Minute 5 February [1905], *MWG I/9*.220; Weber to Heinrich Rickert 2.4.05, *Briefe*; ‘Vorbemerkung’ [1919-20], *GARS* i.12.

⁵⁶ None of the most relevant German words in this context such as ‘modern’, ‘neuere’, ‘Gegenwart’, ‘Gesichtspunkte’ appear as headings in the voluminous subject indices of the *PE* in *MWG I/9* and *I/18*. Whether or not this reflects a set of assumptions about the text as past-historical, it certainly reinforces them.

1880s and 90s;⁵⁷ but still he was drawing on some of the charge the term now possessed. The *PE* is not a work of history, *if* by ‘history’ we mean a statement about a detached past such as specialist historians commonly write.

Seen in this light Weber’s description of the *PE* as a ‘purely historical work’ could be misleading (although this phrase has not been in fact taken up by critics) [XX.53 cf. XXI.109]. Elsewhere in 1904 he had been more cautious about his use of the word ‘historical’, stating that ‘So far as our [social] science attributes individual causes to phenomena of *economic Kultur* in the causal regression [from the present day]... it strives for “historical” knowledge’, where “” clearly indicate a question-mark. At the same time he acknowledged that if (in an evident allusion to the *PE*) he had gone so far as to offer ‘a historical *interpretation*’ of the overall significance of the economic element in modern *Kultur*, then its status was only that of ‘a *work preliminary* to full historical knowledge of the *Kultur*’ or code of values by which modern men and women lived⁵⁸ — and this description resurfaces at the very end of the *PE* [XXI.110]. He made yet another attempt to define the historical status of his work when introducing the ‘Economic Ethics of the World Religions’ in 1915. What he was offering was ‘not... a historical work’; yet it was concerned with a set of ‘historical individuals’ (the world religions), and it was not ‘historically “false”’.⁵⁹ The meaning of these various statements is by no means immediately obvious; but what is clear is that Weber’s thinking about the historicity of his work cannot be taken for granted as has been the case hitherto. It needs to be decoded.

The most general and best established view of the relationship between history and social science in Weber’s work is that his career moved “from history to sociology”. This idea can be traced back to 1940, when it expressed the views of a disappointed Crocean philosopher, Carlo Antoni,⁶⁰ and has continued down to *MWG* today, where the final draft of ‘Economy and Society’ (1919-20) is pointedly entitled *Sociology*, to mark it out as the telos of Weber’s life.⁶¹ Such a teleology ignores the actual title of the work, the evidently sociological (or typological) content of the pre-war drafts of ‘Economy and Society’, or the fact that Weber’s death in his mid-fifties was an accident, not an end-point. Still it is true that Weber took up the label ‘sociology’ in 1908-9 having previously eschewed it, and since c.1970 the trajectory “from history to sociology” has been widely accepted by both sociologists and historians.⁶² Nonetheless, such a view has no contemporary foundation. It is an evident error to suppose that the Weber who wrote the *PE* in 1904-5 did not consider himself a social scientist, and the alteration in his position in 1908-9 was terminological, not substantial. ‘Social science’ was a general label he had used frequently before 1908, while his objection to ‘sociology’ – which he never abandoned – was quite specific: to an indefinite, encyclopaedist ‘*general social science*’ which could not possibly be a ‘science’.

⁵⁷ eg. George Brandes, *Moderne Geister* (Frankfurt: Rütten & Loening, 1882); Hermann Bahr, *Studien zur Kritik der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Rütten & Loening, 1894). For Weber’s considerable literary reading, *Max Weber in Context*, 197-8.

⁵⁸ »Objektivität« *WL* 163-4.

⁵⁹ ‘Einleitung’, *AfSS* 41 (1915), 26, 28.

⁶⁰ Carlo Antoni, *Dalla storicismo alla sociologia* (1940), trans. Hayden White as *From History to Sociology* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1959), c.IV.

⁶¹ *MWG I/23* (2013) cf. Wolfgang Schluchter’s consciously teleological presentation of the ‘Entstehungsgeschichte’ of ‘Economy and Society’: ‘From “Economy and Society”... to the “Sociology”’: *MWG I/24.47* etc.

⁶² Amongst historians see esp. Wolfgang Mommsen, ‘Soziologische Geschichte und historische Soziologie’, *Max Weber. Gesellschaft, Politik und Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 182-207, here 200-7.

This was what he took Comtean ‘sociology’ to be.⁶³ Thus his acceptance of ‘the unpopular name’ of sociology was purely pragmatic, a result of his commitment to working with and for the German Sociological Society,⁶⁴ and to the end of his life he continued to hold that ‘Most of what goes by the name of sociology is a fraud’.⁶⁵ At the same time, he oversaw the reissue of the ‘purely historical’ *PE* in 1920 alongside the historical and individualising ‘Economic Ethics of the World Religions’ in a set of volumes entitled *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*.⁶⁶ Whatever such usage might mean, there was certainly no switch from history to sociology.

Underlying the idea of the switch is the anachronistic assumption that history and sociology were equivalent and alternative entities, ‘two disciplines’. Thus more of one (sociology) meant less of the other (history).⁶⁷ Yet for Weber and his contemporaries, living in the last great age of European historicism, history was not just a discipline. Historical or genetic method was a generic procedure, which was almost universally applicable, and all the social sciences and humanities were ‘historical disciplines’.⁶⁸ So a specialist, faculty historian was a “historian” only ‘in the narrower sense of this word’, while Weber implicitly viewed himself as a historian ‘in the broadest sense’.⁶⁹ However, by the later 20th century, shorn of the historicist commitment that was once part of the common culture, history was commonly identified in terms of its narrow, specialist meaning. Within a university context particularly, it could be regarded as a discipline like any other, and so the historical component within Weber’s thinking then appeared as a local and separable concern. There was still a recognition that there were different components present in his work: a sociology based on conceptual types (without, however, any accommodation of Weber’s stipulation that ideal-types were frequently ‘genetic concepts’)⁷⁰ and the long-term evolutionary or developmental thinking underlying his macro-conception of Occidental history. But in this picture the second idea was less important, just as “history” was progressively less important than “sociology”; and if in the late 20th century when social historians and sociologists saw themselves as closely allied, there was still some place for the consideration of ‘universal history’ as a unit with its own laws and logic – was the master key of this history *The Development of Western Rationalism* or something else? – this view has been in marked

⁶³ Quotation: »Objektivität« [1904] *WL* 165-6. For Weber’s self-description as a practitioner of social science eg. *ibid.*, 170-1 (quoted in the next paragraph but one) or repeated assertions in the 1890s that ‘Economics is... a social science’: ‘Allgemeine („theoretische“) Nationalökonomie’ [1894-8], *MWG* III/1.273 cf. 367-70.

⁶⁴ ‘Geschäftsbericht’, 20.10.10, *Verhandlungen des ersten deutschen Soziologentages* (Tübingen; Mohr, 1911), 39. All Weber’s early uses of the word ‘sociology’ in connection with his own work arise from projects he planned under the auspices of the Society. See for example one of the earliest, the ‘Plan for carrying out a sociological investigation of the press’, which goes back to February 1908: *MWG* I/13.139-52.

⁶⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Max Weber. Deutsches Wesen* (Oldenburg: Stalling, 1932), 53, citing Weber’s farewell speech on leaving Heidelberg, 20.9.19. Cf. Weber to Siebeck, 8.11.19, to Liefmann 9.3.20 (II/10.946), *Briefe*.

⁶⁶ *GARS* i.204. The second reference in 1904-5 to the *PE* as ‘purely historical’ [XX.53] was only deleted because it referred to the original place of publication in the *Archiv*.

⁶⁷ Guenther Roth, ‘History and sociology in the work of Max Weber’, *British Journal of Sociology* 27 (1976), 306-18, here 306.

⁶⁸ ‘Knies und das Irrationalitätsproblem’ [1906], *WL* 82, 86, 88-9 etc. For the widespread nature of such thinking eg. Wilhelm Windelband, *Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft* (Strassburg: Heitz, 1894); for a snapshot of the last great age of historicism see *Max Weber in Context*, 251-3.

⁶⁹ Resp. ‘Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik I’ [1906], *WL* 216; »Objektivität« [1904] *WL* 179, 195.

⁷⁰ eg. »Objektivität« *WL* 191, 194, 202, 204, 208, but the entire discussion *WL* 190-214 rests on a negotiation of the relationship between concept formation and historical infinity. See also below after n.116.

recession since c.1980.⁷¹ In any case, the idea that Weberian social science might have historical procedures of its own, distinct from those of either specialist history or more conventional social science, did not arise either for sociologists or historians.⁷² And so it falls to the history of ideas to make up the deficit.

Weber's starting point is that historical or genetic analysis is necessary to social science, even though the concerns of that science lie in the present. Past and present are in principle a continuum, so that the present cannot be understood without reference to the past. This dual, past-and-present emphasis is set out in one of his most famous statements about the nature of Weberian social science:⁷³

The social science that *we* wish to pursue is a *science of reality*. We wish to understand the *particular character* of the reality of the life that surrounds us and in which we are placed: on the one hand, the interconnection and the *significance* for *Kultur* of its individual phenomena in their present-day formation; on the other hand, the historical reasons for their having-become-like-this-and-not-anything-else.

The present is the focus of attention, but it carries a *particular character* that can only be explained by reference to a past which is seamlessly continuous with it. A fact in 'the life of *Kultur* today' is also a 'historical fact'.⁷⁴ Thus for Weber the meaning of 'history' is not "the detached past" but "the genetic precursor of the present", and the 'purely historical' analysis offered in the *PE* must be understood in this way: it presents a necessary, genetic analysis of the modern. On the other hand, while historical method is indispensable to Weber, it would be a mistake to portray him as a historian. Not only is he not a historian in the narrow, specialist or past-minded sense, but he never described himself as a historian. By the same token he was sharply opposed to 'an all-consuming historicism', which he equated with supine relativism, and he insisted in the sphere of academic organization, that the ordinary structure of German academies of science was essentially flawed, since it consisted of just two divisions, the natural and historical-philological sciences, when there should have been a third: 'the *systematic sciences of the state and society*', which was where his own interests lay.⁷⁵ These views derive from his conception of an autonomous social science, which only looked to the past in order to reflect on the present, and which could not make use of the past without *systematic* or conceptual intervention in the present. This mindset is reflected in the interventions made by the *PE* – such as the creation of 'ascetic Protestantism' – and also its formal structure, which starts with two sets of primarily present-day reflections [XX.1-35]; locates its main historical inquiry in 'the most fateful epoch of the 17th century', which is

⁷¹ Resp. Wolfgang Mommsen, 'Max Webers Begriff der Universalgeschichte' in *Max Weber, der Historiker* (1986), 51-72; Wolfgang Schluchter, *Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus* (1979). However, although Schluchter once gave a prominent place to Weber's evolutionary history in this work, the features of Weber's thought that most interest him are not historical and do not derive from it. See eg. his recent survey of sociological thought, *Grundlegungen der Soziologie* (2006-7), ii.297-309.

⁷² See the collection *Max Weber, der Historiker* (1986) ed. Jürgen Kocka, where discussion of Weber's methods adheres to a conventional sociological agenda (*Verstehen*, value-freedom, the ideal-type, the nature of social action etc.) and there is no consideration of historical method as such. See further Günther Abramowski, who supposed that no treatment of Weber's historical method was necessary, *Das Geschichtsbild Max Webers* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1966), 9; and Pietro Rossi (a historical philosopher), who treated Weber's 'Methodology of the historical and social sciences' as a single bloc: *Vom Historismus zur historischen Sozialwissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), c.1.

⁷³ »Objektivität« [1904] WL 170-1. All emphases are original unless noted otherwise.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁷⁵ To Leo Königsberger 7.8.09, *Briefe*; quotations MWG II/6.220, 215 cf. 'Geschäftsbericht', *Verhandlungen des Ersten Deutschen Soziologentages* (1911), 40.

continuous with the present [XXI.1-107, here 36]; and then returns to the present in its famous conclusion [XXI.107-110].⁷⁶

In fact the text as a whole is a seamless mixture of past and present, and invocations of ‘the present’ or the ‘modern’ accompany its most historically erudite and apparently remote sections. For example, the miniature philological essays on the history of the word *Beruf* that go back to classical and (in 1920) Biblical usage,⁷⁷ are filled with reference to ‘today’s’ usage of the word, because Weber’s agendum is ‘the creation of the modern concept of the “*Beruf*” [XX.37n.2 cf. XX.36n.1]. The *Beruf* is both a past and a present subject: it is both a religious ‘calling’ and a modern ‘profession’, and it is the continuous evolution from the one idea to the other that is central to him. This in turn tells us how we should read Benjamin Franklin, introduced by Weber as a model proponent of the *Beruf* [XX.17]. It is evidently absurd to suppose that Weber wrote the *PE* in order to make an independent statement about Franklin as a subject in 18th century history. Indeed his initial point of reference is not the person of Franklin but (as Weber the trained academic tells us) the complex 18th-19th century discursive triangle of Benjamin Franklin (b.1706)-Ferdinand Kürnberger (b.1821)-Nikolaus Lenau (b.1802); and it was Kürnberger, the disappointed 1848 revolutionary who unlike so many others did *not* wish to emigrate to America, who supplied the original of Weber’s “sermon” text from Franklin [XX.14].⁷⁸ The text created by this route is no more than ‘a provisional *illustration*’ of the principal modern products of asceticism: the “spirit” or “ethic” of modern capitalism, which includes modern man’s subservience to his narrowly specialised professional existence as an ‘absolute *end in itself*’ [XX.12, 23]. A similar procedure underlies Weber’s relationship to all his historical “sources”. None is consulted in order to make a past-historical statement; all are being used in order to illustrate a modern conceptual agenda. This is not to say that Weber is untruthful or wilfully manipulative of past data – we shall come back to this – but still these are his priorities in the reading and selection of historical material.

Thus Part II of the text, for all its wealth of reference to 17th century sources, is never ‘purely historical’ in the sense of reading Spener, Voët, Barclay, Baxter et al. for their own sakes; nor, though he cites them, is he merely “paraphrasing” them. The collectivity of these apparently obscure and rebarbative authors, or at least the textual miscellany Weber draws from them, makes up a single, conceptually pure, past-and-present, modern-historical idea: ascetic Protestantism. Every word written about ascetic Protestantism is a word about the modern, because for Weber 17th century asceticism and 20th century rationalism are one and the same in their human consequences, even if the first has a ‘religious root’ in the minds of individuals and the second a ‘mechanical foundation’ [XXI.104, 106, 108]. (This is the sole difference between an ‘ethic’ and an “ethic” or “spirit”.) Hence an endlessly repeated equation: ‘the *rational character of asceticism*’, ‘*ascetic rationalization*’, ‘rational asceticism’

⁷⁶ This picture is a considerable simplification of Part I of the text, which omits the further oscillations between the 16th (Luther), 18th (Franklin), mid to late-19th (Carl David Weber), and late 19th centuries (East Elbean labour), that fill the rest of the prolegomena [XX.9-54]. Even a literary theorist of the utmost resource would be taxed to identify the “metahistorical” trope to which the *PE* might be supposed to conform cf. Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973).

⁷⁷ *GARS* i.63n.1.

⁷⁸ *Der Amerika-Müde* (Frankfurt: Meidinger, 1855), [Bk.I, c.1] 19-21. Kürnberger’s text is not quite the final version since the scrupulous Weber then corrected it by reference to Jared Sparks’ edition of Franklin’s *Works* (Boston, 1836-40, ii.80-1, 87-9); but he is the undoubted original.

‘ascetic i.e. *rational*’, ‘the rational ethic of ascetic Protestantism’.⁷⁹ So when Weber concludes his argument about the ascetic, rationalising character of Calvinism – the apparently remote, “theological” heart of the text – he takes care to remind us that, ‘The connection it posited... between belief in unconditionally binding norms, absolute determinism and the complete transcendency of the supra-sensual sphere, was... in principle much “*more modern*”, extraordinarily so, than the milder [Lutheran] teaching which subordinated even God to the moral law, and appealed more to the feelings.’ [XXI.34] This statement is a mirror of his previous discussion of the “spirit” or “ethic” of capitalism, where he also signalled the ‘transcendental’ force underlying the latter, a force beyond the power or control of individual human agency which renders it in his eyes an evident descendant of the inscrutable god posited by predestination:

the “*summum bonum*” of this “ethic”, the *acquisition of money* and ever more money on condition of the strictest avoidance of all uninhibited pleasure, is so completely stripped of any eudaemonist, let alone hedonist perspective, it is conceived so *purely* as an end *in itself* that in relation to the “happiness” or “utility” of the single individual (at least), it appears as something wholly transcendental and quite irrational. [XX16]

In short, the modernism, the seamlessly continuous historicist-modernism, of the *PE* is in no way a “mistake”. The only “mistake” to be found here is the attempt by critics to divorce Weber’s past from his present and to write off the *PE* as if it were a detached, remote-historical text. Weber is just as present-minded as any of his readers today, and the *PE* is in no way an intellectual aberration within his *oeuvre*. He only differs from some of today’s readers by grounding his present-mindedness in past-mindedness.

A second set of pointers to Weber’s historical thought is given by the unique format of the *PE*. The present-day object he seeks to illuminate here is of the very largest kind: ‘modern *Kultur*’ in its entirety [XXI.107]. This and nothing less was what interested him, and so it is clear why he rejected anything so pedantically precise as a ‘thesis’. Now in itself such ambition was not at all distinctive: something comparable had been the goal of historicist authors ever since the so-called philosophy of history became a genre in the late 18th century. What was remarkable was the format in which it appeared. The *PE*, Weber’s central statement on this subject, sought to investigate ‘modern *Kultur*’, the genetic origins of the modern value-system, in just over 40,000 words of main text.⁸⁰ This is not only unusual but unique. It bears no resemblance to the evolutionary sociologies of men such as Comte, Spencer, Tönnies and Durkheim, either in length – they are much longer – or in the thinking which lies behind it. Those works are all forms of schematic construction where history is seen to be working out ‘an evolutionary trend’ (*Entwicklungstendenz*) — something Weber vehemently repudiated along with his repudiation of ‘sociology’ [XXI.31, 56]. By contrast the incursion of ascetic Protestantism in the *PE* is a point of discontinuity, the shockwave supplied by ‘the most fateful epoch of the 17th century’ [XXI.36], albeit this contributes to a cumulative, empirical process of evolution towards greater rationalism that appears in the background, through allusions to phenomena such as Pauline Christianity and Talmudic Judaism.⁸¹ In conventional evolutionary sociologies, even those of university academics such as Durkheim’s *Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and Tönnies’ *Community and Society* (1887), the argument so far transcends the specific empirical materials it is based on,

⁷⁹ Resp. *PE* [XXI.3n.3, 37n.74, 47]; Eranos Minute, *MWG* I/9.220; ‘Vorbemerkung’ [1919-20], *GARS* i.12 etc. Given that Weberian capitalism is not purely rational, the connections between ‘Asceticism and capitalism’ that Weber tackles in the final section [XXI.74-110], are less straightforward.

⁸⁰ I estimate the 1920 German text at about 44,000 words (in my English translation 51,000), with another 38,000 words of notes or 82,000 words gross (95,000 in English).

⁸¹ See ‘The Place of Judaism in the Protestant Ethic’, *Max Weber in Context* c.5. Monasticism receives more extended treatment [XXI.28-32] because it is part of the history of asceticism, and not merely of rationalism.

that they are largely invisible.⁸² Such authors have their intellectual contexts, of course, but to spend time looking for particular historical components in their written works would be mistaken.⁸³ In Weber the position is quite different. ‘Ascetic Protestantism’ may be an invention, but the categories into which it is divided (Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism, *Täufer*) and the major theological texts on which the argument is founded, are entirely historical, and this is immediately clear to the reader. Here is another reason why Weber could describe the *PE* as ‘purely historical’ and why so many readers have addressed it as a work of history and nothing more. The interweaving of history and social science, of the individual and the conceptual, is dense and intimate.

Another part of the formal oddity of the *PE* lies in its gargantuan footnotes, which stand in an extreme and unlikely contrast to the brevity of the text. Overall they are almost as long as the text, and in Part II, the principal historical part, they are significantly longer.⁸⁴ Here we should remember that, although the *PE* was first published in a learned journal (the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft*), it is not comparable to a specialist article in a journal today. Any resemblance of this kind is deceptive and might blind us to its oddity. The standard of comparison lies with contemporary works of evolutionary-historical sociology, and once more we observe a stark contrast, since notes for the latter were at best short (as in the case of Durkheim) or, more commonly, absent (Spencer, Tönnies). The apparatus of the *PE* is variously: an ostentatious advertisement of the devotion to academic *Wissenschaft* (‘science’) and empirical nicety that marks out Weber’s entire career; a sign of his interest in historical specificity, and of the contrast between his work and the encyclopaedic “sociology” which ‘founds no science’;⁸⁵ and an alternative to the extraordinary tabular ‘form’ he gave to the final draft of ‘Economy and Society’, which he also resorted to in order ‘*finally* to treat “sociology” in a strictly specialist-academic manner, in contrast to the dilettante performances of ingenious philosophers’ such as Georg Simmel.⁸⁶ For Weber trans-historical and typological sociology did not require notes, whereas individualising history did;⁸⁷ but both must be presented as rigorous or *wissenschaftlich*.

The *PE*’s unique combination of textual brevity with an extravagant apparatus then reminds us of something obvious that is almost always overlooked: that it was a ‘*preliminary work*’ and by no means a ‘*conclusion* to the investigation’ [XXI.110]. For Weber the history of ‘the sciences of social life’ was a constant process of reciprocal interchange between concepts and data: ‘the *confrontation* of the empirical with the ideal-type’ or concept. New concepts were advanced; they were entrenched, modified or expanded by empirical testing; then the agenda of inquiry would change, new leading ideas would appear, and they would be

⁸² This is also true of Simmel, who presumes an evolutionary-historical structure in what he writes, even if he never wrote a major work in this form.

⁸³ This is not to deny that Durkheim, in particular, was a strong believer in a collectively researched, empirically founded sociology, to which he contributed monographs such as *Suicide* (1897) and the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Nonetheless, he supposed that all such research would tend to reinforce the evolutionary laws originally set out in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), and neither of his monographs examined or questioned his evolutionary-historical views.

⁸⁴ In the *PE* as a whole the ratio of words of text: words of notes is 53:47; in Part II it is 43:57. All English-language editions print Weber’s notes as endnotes, and so mask this feature.

⁸⁵ ‘Allgemeine („theoretische“) Nationalökonomie’ [1894-8], *MWG* III/1.370.

⁸⁶ To Siebeck 8.11.19, *Briefe*.

⁸⁷ Compare Weber’s instructions to contributors to the *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* in 1910 and 1914: *MWG* I/24.144, 164 with his practice in the three volumes of the *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*, and in particular the drastically expanded “apparatus” that accompanied the revised version of ‘Confucianism and Taoism’ (1920), on which he comments: *GARS* i.237n.1.

tested in their turn.⁸⁸ The *PE* of 1904-5 stood at the beginning of this cycle. It advanced a new conceptual agenda in the shape of ascetic Protestantism and the “spirit” of capitalism, and its ambition was no different from that which Weber expressed in ‘Science as a Vocation’ (1917/19) when he stated (by now from the vantage point of the sociologist) ‘that one supplies the specialist with useful *problematics*’.⁸⁹ But while (succinct) theoretical construction and innovation came first in Weber’s eyes, testing by specialists must follow, and the ‘terrible proliferation of footnotes’ in the *PE* was designed to facilitate such checking [XXI.5n.4]. So the original *PE* was neither a finished nor a specialist work, and Weber’s later “historical” critics have overlooked the fact that he *expected* to have his text checked and corrected, even if he supposed that the checking was to be done by qualified specialists, and not by just any interested party, in which respect he was no doubt naïve.

Again we see what an odd text the *PE* is, and again there is some excuse here for the failures of allegedly historical criticism to grasp the object it has sought to criticise. Nonetheless, after making every allowance, there can be no excuse in principle for responding to the oddity of the *PE* with criticism which is relentlessly conventional and indeed primitive in its assumptions. Criticism which supposes that the writing of history is purely inductive and excludes any present-day authorial intervention, hence that the *ultima ratio* of historical criticism lies in an idea of empirical testing “against the sources”, is misguided in any case, and above all in that of Weber.⁹⁰ By implication it adheres to a position he denied outright: that ‘There is... a simply “objective”, scientific analysis of the life of *Kultur* or... “social phenomena” *independent* of the special and “one-sided” viewpoints’ of present-day investigators.⁹¹ Of course, no modern historian or social scientist is so naïve as to think like this – we are all Weberians now – but criticism of the *PE* based on an apparently sufficient appeal to the sources suggests that this is what some sociologists *think* history is when practised in history faculties: a pre-eminently empirical and concept-free zone.

Still, let us indulge this primitivism for a moment. Anyone who is interested in the elementary assessment of Weber’s use of sources in the *PE* can now do so thanks to the editorial apparatus attached to the text that appears in *MWG*. Here, in contrast to the highly selective samplings of Weber’s critics, every one of his source attributions has been checked and compared with the originals. No one person is competent to check all of Weber’s reading with complete sympathy and understanding, but the bulk of the sources used in the *PE* are theological, and so *MWG* chose the best qualified of all specialists for this monumental labour: a theologian (Ursula Bube), not a sociologist or an economic historian.⁹² The result is that Weber appears as an extremely learned man with an exceptionally broad frame of reference; and though the accuracy of his citation practice can leave something to be desired by our standards, his failings are marginal only. They are no greater than those of the vast majority of scholars a century ago, when focus on original thought and expression was a

⁸⁸ »Objektivität« [1904], *WL* 207, 212.

⁸⁹ *MWG* I/17.80.

⁹⁰ For the construction of history and Weber as source-driven, see above at n.23 (Lichtblau & Weiß), after n.24 (Steinert), n.28 (Schluchter), n.40 (Parsons). An alternative view, equally alien to Weber, is that the *PE* is an example of postmodern ‘grand narrative’: Dirk Kaesler, ‘Vorwort’, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (Munich: Beck, 2004), 42-5, who is followed by Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 23, 35 (title). However, the *PE* shows the subversion of narrative carried to a unique extreme: see n.76 above.

⁹¹ »Objektivität« *WL* 170.

⁹² *MWG* I/9: *Asketischer Protestantismus und Kapitalismus. Schriften und Reden 1904-11* (2014) ed. Wolfgang Schluchter in collaboration with Ursula Bube, 97-215, 222-425. Cf. my review essay: *Max Weber Studies* 15 (2015), 138-42. A similar process is repeated for the revised text published in 1920 in *MWG* I/18.123-492, although the amount of new material cited here this is modest by comparison with the original.

higher priority than the kind of exactitude in citation we expect today with the assistance of mechanical aids.⁹³ (The evolution between these two states is practically a model example of the ambivalent process of Weberian rationalization.) And when further allowance is made for the interdisciplinary breadth of Weber's reading and the fact that he was consciously reading against the grain of his texts' avowed subject matter on behalf of 'the perspectives which *interest us*' [eg. XX.12], then his standards are extremely high — as one might expect from someone who was such a staunch supporter of academic *Wissenschaft*.

Setting aside primitivism, criticism of the historical argument of the *PE*, as of the historical component in Weber's work as a whole, begins not with the inert mass of his "source" materials but with the concepts he uses to organize those materials. It seems odd to have to stress the primacy of concept formation when this truth is universally acknowledged in any exposition of Weberian methodology, but in the present context it is apparently necessary. These concepts are present-day creations for present-day purposes, as he repeatedly tells us: 'just *what* is the object of investigation is determined by the value-ideas of the researcher and his age'; 'we cannot read off the *meaning* of what has happened in the world from the results of research into it, however complete, but must be in a position to create it for ourselves'. It follows that, while the ideal-type concepts created by the researcher today do not rule out approximation to, or overlap with, leading 'Ideas' (*Ideen*) that originated in the past, in principle 'the two are self-evidently fundamentally different things.'⁹⁴

Now such presentism undoubtedly exposes Weber to criticism by the specialist historian. Consider his procedure here. His starting point lies in 20th century modernity, where he believes that what he defines as rational conduct and a highly rationalised capitalism are central features. Accordingly he looks for antecedents to this, and finds one in Protestant discourse about 'asceticism', an idea he construes as proto-rationalism. Such a discourse undoubtedly exists in the Reformed theology of the 17th century,⁹⁵ but Weber then erects it into a master concept, which underlies a group identity called 'ascetic Protestantism'; and the group of ascetic Protestants (he holds) has had a formative impact on modern European (or 'Occidental') history as a whole. While there is an original empirical source – Weber is never knowingly anti-empirical – still the invented concept has no historical reality. There is no such entity as ascetic Protestantism known either to the historical actors of the 17th century or to any conventional, past-centred, history of Protestantism or the Reformation, even if Weber implicitly assumed that Puritanism – a much more recognisable, if still somewhat fluid historical entity – was broadly synonymous with his modern conceptual construct.⁹⁶ So if one wished to prove the historical "falsity" of the *PE*, the easiest way to do so would be to point to ascetic Protestantism – one of two central ideas (with the *Beruf*) which dominate the construction of the *PE* but which, as we have seen, "historical" criticism has ignored – and say: conventional empirical history knows no such concept. One will never read a *History of Ascetic Protestantism 1600-1700* written by a historian.

⁹³ Cf. 'Editorische Berichte', *MWG* I/9.108-120, 233-41. For a contemporary example of the conscious prioritising of authorial creativity over exact citation, Eberhard Gothein to Marie Luise Schröter 29.7.84, pr. *Im Schaffen genießen. Der Briefwechsel der Kulturwissenschaftler Eberhard und Marie Luise Gothein* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006), 68.

⁹⁴ »Objektivität« *WL* 184, 154, 196-7 resp.

⁹⁵ See eg. Gijsbert Voët, *TA ASKETIKA sive exercitia pietatis* (1664) cf. *PE* [XXI.3n.3, 75n.2]; *Twin Histories*, 134-5. Asceticism or 'ascetics' (*Asketik*), meaning the disciplined *praxis pietatis*, was also a genre heading in all theology down to Weber's day: eg. Matthias Schneckenburger, *Vergleichende Darstellung der lutherischen und reformirten Lehrbegriffs* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1855), i.48, 67, 100, 147, 159, 162-3, 172, 204 etc.

⁹⁶ See my essay 'Max Weber's idea of "Puritanism"', *A Historian reads Max Weber* (2008), c.2.

Yet in saying this one has done no more than demonstrate the truth of what Weber himself has already told us. He was not a historian ‘in the narrower sense of this word’, a specialist with a commitment to “the past for its own sake”. On the contrary, he repudiated the employment of “‘inductions” in the usual sense of the term’.⁹⁷ His starting point lies in the present and the concepts he uses – such as ascetic Protestantism and the root idea, asceticism – are avowedly his concepts rather than those of the historical actors. Hence the warning that appears at the beginning of Part II of the *PE* when ascetic Protestantism is about to be introduced: ‘we can of course only proceed by presenting religious ideas in a logically consistent fashion, compiled along “ideal-typical” lines, *such as was seldom encountered in historical reality*’ [XXI.4].⁹⁸ The warning that accompanies the introduction of the idea of the “spirit” of capitalism is equally stringent:

the perspectives which *interest us here*... are certainly not the only possible means of analysing the historical phenomena we have in view. Here as with *any* historical phenomenon, adopting *other* perspectives for observation would throw up *other* features as “essential”: from which it follows directly that it is by no means necessary to understand the “spirit” of capitalism *only* in terms of what presents itself to *us* as essential for our conception. That is the very *essence* of “historical concept formation”... [XX.12]

There are in fact upwards of forty references drawing attention to ‘*our special perspectives*’, ‘the perspectives which *interest us here*’ and so on [XXI.14n.21; XX.12]. Given the sheer volume of protestation that he could only be understood on his own, particular terms, Weber was surely entitled to assume that he had given a sufficient warning against unthinking criticism. And in his own lifetime this was largely true. He supposed that the persons he most needed to warn about his peculiar personal standpoint were theologians, so that they should not expect a conventional history of the Reformation: ‘For our purposes we are continually having to deal with sides of the Reformation that must appear peripheral and frankly external to the *religious* consciousness’ [XX.53 cf. XXI.3n.3]. They picked up on his message. Though he could hardly hope to convert them to a set of views decidedly hostile to Lutheranism, the *PE* still received a remarkably fair hearing during Weber’s lifetime, and his assessment that ‘from the theological side... the reception [of this work] was on the whole a friendly one’ was a reasonable one.⁹⁹ Self-evidently, he could not have anticipated later attacks on the text by sociologists with their own agenda,¹⁰⁰ but still he might have hoped that they would pay attention to the profusion of warning signals in the *PE* text that there was something unusual going on, and it is surely not his fault if they have not.

If concepts were one half of Weber’s historical method, empiricism was its counterpart. The present-centred and conceptually driven nature of his approach did not mean that he simply manipulated data to suit his own purposes. In this context his sharp dismissal of what he took to be Hegel’s violation of empirical historical process in the interests of ‘pan-logist’ philosophical construction is well-known.¹⁰¹ The *PE* adds to this type of critique

⁹⁷ »Objektivität« WL 150.

⁹⁸ My emphasis.

⁹⁹ *PE* [1920], GARS i.17n.1. See ‘The Lutheran Reception of the “Protestant Ethic”’, *Max Weber in Context*, c.7.

¹⁰⁰ Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, does this in a double sense. He writes about the *PE* as a ‘classical text’ in sociology (eg. Vorwort) rather than as a component of Weber’s *oeuvre* or thought; and he uses his own work, which has no relation to the *PE*, as a basis for interpreting the text (eg. Part IV). Jack Barbalet, *Weber, Passion and Profits. ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’ in Context* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008) presents a parallel Anglophone example of this approach. The ‘context’ in the title is no context of Weber’s, but is supplied by the tradition of post-Weberian, English-language sociology that Barbalet serves. Again, ‘passion’ derives from Barbalet’s previous work on emotion and social theory. Unlike Steinert, he is happy that the *PE* should stay on the teaching syllabus, but it will be clear that when the text is discussed on this basis, construction of its meaning becomes very free indeed. It serves the agenda of a branch of sociology, not of history.

¹⁰¹ ‘Roschers historische Methode’ [1903], WL 15-22.

when it dismisses the ‘view of naive historical materialism, that “Ideas”... come to life as the “reflection” or “superstructure” of economic situations’ — which may be read either as a general protest against formulaic Marxist construction of history or a particular hit against Karl Kautsky [XX.18 cf. XXI.71n.138].¹⁰² It also contains a set of fierce attacks on Karl Lamprecht (b.1856), the author of an evolutionary-historical *German History* (1890-1909), for his ‘wholly worthless’ attempts to ‘package... religiosity as a stage of “social-psychical” development’ [XXI.44n.79a, 52n.101a], where Weber’s disgust at the sacrifice of empirical reality to vacuous conceptual construction was in entire agreement with the longstanding critique of Lamprecht carried on by the narrowest of specialist historians.¹⁰³

Weber’s most extended reflections in this area appear in his theoretical commentary on the historian Eduard Meyer (1906). Outwardly Meyer (b.1855) resembled Weber in that he was an outstanding ancient historian who was nonetheless stringently modernist in his views about the relevance of history. But for Weber the theory expounded in Meyer’s little book *Zur Theorie und Methodik der Geschichte* (*On the Theory and Methodology of History*, 1902) was too smoothly teleological. For example, as a historical “presentist” Weber accepted the label ‘causal regression’ as a routine description of the direction in which historical inquiry moved. One started at a point of present-day interest and worked back or ‘regressed’ from there by a process of ‘causal attribution’ (*Zurechnung*), [eg. XX.53-4; XXI.6]. Yet regression need not always start from the present. That might be the most common case but present-day interest in the past, in aspects of the past that it currently found interesting, could start wherever it liked: the ancient Greeks were an obvious example in 1906, although Weber did not rule out the Incas and Aztecs. Furthermore, reference to subjects that were of concern in the present, meant taking up the subject as a whole and not an edited version. Thus it might include a significant body of extraneous data, which could not be controlled or selected according to present-day interest and valuation — a distinction Meyer overlooked.¹⁰⁴ Weber made a similar point in reply to the psychological critique of the *PE* made by H. Karl Fischer: ‘It would certainly be much more convenient when tracing causal regression in history, if we could simply deduce the origins of certain characteristic lifestyles from the abstractions of an [*a priori*] “psychology”. And yet historical reality absolutely refuses to be ordered about... theory has to align itself with the facts and not the other way round.’¹⁰⁵ Hence too the rugged empirical component in such famous dicta as that ‘I volunteer to demonstrate from the works of our historians that wherever the man of science [*Wissenschaft*] enters in with his own value-judgement, a full understanding of the facts ceases’; or that the ‘first task’ of any ‘decent teacher is... to teach his students to recognise *inconvenient facts*’.¹⁰⁶

Weber was unusual in that he believed that an accumulation of discrete factors (as for example, Pauline Christianity, Roman law, ascetic Protestantism) had combined to produce a

¹⁰² Weber was much more appreciative of the work of Kautsky’s literary partner, Eduard Bernstein [XXI.5n.4]: ‘Kommunistische und demokratisch-sozialistische Strömungen während der englischen Revolution des 17. Jahrhunderts’ in E. Bernstein & K. Kautsky eds., *Die Geschichte des Sozialismus in Einzeldarstellungen* (Stuttgart; Dietz, 1895), Band I *Die Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus*, Teil 2, pp.507-718. Cf. *Twin Histories*, 55, 151.

¹⁰³ See the fine study by Roger Chickering *Karl Lamprecht. A German Academic life (1856-1915)* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), Part II. Note however that due to historians’ desire to hail Lamprecht as a methodological progressive – a forerunner of later 20th century social history – Weber’s attacks in the *PE* have been overlooked and his views are too easily assimilated to those of Lamprecht: *ibid.*, 268-71, 300.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Kritische Studien... I’ [1906], *WL* 215-65, esp. 255-60.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Bemerkungen zu den vorstehenden “Kritischen Beiträgen”’ [1907], *MWG* I/9.489-90.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Science as a Vocation’ [1917/19], *MWG* I/17.98.

cumulative process of long-term rationalizing evolution in Western history. Because of the outward coherence of the result such a view of history might look like the philosophical, psychological or sociological schemas of his predecessors and contemporaries — this is most obviously so in the sketch of rationalizing Western (‘Occidental’) history that appears in the ‘Vorbemerkung’ (‘Author’s Introduction’) that precedes the revised, 1920 edition of the *PE*. Nonetheless, even this smooth and compact presentation rests on a listing of discrete phenomena — ‘the gothic vault’, ‘specialised *officials*’, the ‘rationally prescribed “constitution”’ etc.¹⁰⁷ — which show the empirical derivation of Weber’s thinking. Furthermore, the course of Western history sketched here was unique and unlikely when viewed in a world-historical context, even if Weber adds an ironic note here to cater for the Eurocentric prejudices of his audience: ‘it is specifically on the terrain of the Occident, and here alone, that phenomena of *Kultur* have appeared which lie within a path of development of *universal* significance and validity — or so we like to think, at least.’¹⁰⁸ Whether its outcome was universally significant or not, the course taken by European and Western history was the very reverse of necessary or normal. It would be unfair to say that Durkheim, Tönnies et alia were *a priori* thinkers, but still the hegemony of organizing concepts in their construction of historical evolution is clear. The contrast between Durkheim’s use of Australian evidence in order to produce a single, universally valid model of ‘religion’ as ‘an essential and permanent feature of humanity’,¹⁰⁹ and Weber’s insistence that separate *Kulturen* with separate histories produced irreducibly different ‘world religions’ and forms of ‘religiosity’, could hardly be more absolute.

In short, for all the emphasis he placed on concept formation, Weber meant what he said when he portrayed the social science he upheld as one ‘which strives for the “mental ordering of empirical reality”’.¹¹⁰ Concepts (mental ordering) were exactly half the story alongside empirical reality, and no more. One paradoxical consequence was that Weber’s facts could have as much force behind them as other men’s concepts. The present-day reality of his rationalising evolution was not a logical necessity but a set of ‘*iron facts*’, ‘the unyielding realities of the present’, facts which derived their strength from the sheer longevity of their accumulation over time, going back to classical Greece and ‘Ancient Judaism’.¹¹¹ Again, while historical development could be, and commonly was, described in theoretical terms, above all as rational and rationalizing, the very essence of Weberian rationality was its formal definition, which made it capable of application to in an unlimited variety of historical situations: ‘One can... “rationalise” life according to the most varied ultimate perspectives and in very different directions. “Rationalism” is *an historical concept* containing a world of antitheses within it’ [XX.35].¹¹² Where, however, conceptual definition violated empirical reality, then the concept must give way. Thus Weber refused to offer conceptual definitions of some quite fundamental components within his intellectual universe, such as the “spirit” of capitalism and religion, because their primary reality was historical and not conceptual. He would certainly have liked to have offered a generic, conceptual definition of the “spirit” of capitalism in 1904, but found he could not; it had to be understood instead as a “*historical individual*” which effected a discontinuity in capitalist evolution at a specific point in time

¹⁰⁷ GARS i.2-4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., i.1.

¹⁰⁹ *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* [1912] (Paris: PUF, 1960), 2.

¹¹⁰ »Objektivität«, WL 150 etc.

¹¹¹ Cf. resp. ‘Das neue Deutschland’ [1918], MWG I/16.381; ‘Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland’ (1917), MWG I/15.373. The vocabulary of facts, realities, the nature of things, *Sachlichkeit* is a common currency with Weber. — For an introduction to his ancient historical learning outside the Biblical and Judaic sphere, see the various versions of ‘Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum’ [1897, 1898, 1909], MWG I/6.

¹¹² Emphasis added.

[XX.12].¹¹³ Similarly “religion” was not, *pace* Durkheim, a definable concept but a label covering a diverse historical sequence: before, during and after the era of salvation religions.¹¹⁴

Weber adhered to the conventional, formal distinction between ‘sociology [which] forms *type*-concepts and seeks *general* rules... in contrast to history, which pursues the causal analysis... of *individual* actions’,¹¹⁵ and to this extent ‘history’ signifies a genre as well as a general approach; but still there is an open frontier between his work in either genre. Most obviously, the empirical materials he uses are identical in both cases, while the ‘purely historical’ *PE* contains the outlines of all the principal sociological typologies that emerged more explicitly in his later work (asceticism/mysticism, *Herrschaft*, legal formalism).¹¹⁶ Conversely, there is a palpable historical component within his sociological typologies. For example, ‘traditional *Herrschaft*’ signifies the rule of a person sanctified by tradition, as distinct from modern, legal-rational rule,¹¹⁷ and is descended from the implicit distinction between ‘*traditionalism*’ and modern, rationalised forms of behaviour in the *PE* [XX.20 cf. 25-9]. Again, the outline arrangement of all his major sociologies (*Herrschaft*, law, religion) follows an evolutionary-historical path.¹¹⁸ Weberian types are in principle trans-temporal, and yet they either have a distinct history (as for example, with the various forms of rationalism), or the frequency of their occurrence varies historically (as in the case of charisma).¹¹⁹ The open frontier between history and sociology is well-caught by a remark in the *PE* which stresses that the modern analyst who intervened by means of “historical [*historisch*] concept formation” should ‘not seek to pigeonhole historical [*geschichtlich*] reality within abstract, generic concepts, but to embody it within concrete, genetic connections which are always and unavoidably of a specifically *individual* colouring.’¹²⁰ This then takes us back to his continued and unresolved wrestlings in the “Objectivity” essay, also of 1904, as to whether concepts should be generic (and trans-temporal) or genetic.¹²¹

Insofar as he was a historian, Weber was pre-eminently a historian of the *longue durée*: he believed in the empirical accumulation of rational structures and behavioural forms over millennia. Such a long-term process was necessarily founded in continuity, even if moments of rupture and discontinuity or what Weber dubbed ‘the “eschatological” era of movement’ could make crucial rationalizing inputs.¹²² The fact that, for example, the 17th century era of belief in a religious afterlife or the formation of sects had now passed away, did not mean that these phenomena and their behavioural consequences could be discounted subsequently. On the contrary, only the descendants of those who had experienced such processes could be said to be fully developed products of historical evolution. As a result Weber had a higher present-day regard for the old Puritan countries such as England and America, as opposed to Lutheran Germany.¹²³ (However, given the ambivalent nature of

¹¹³ See further *Twin Histories*, I.4, 8; II.1, 7.

¹¹⁴ Sociology of Religion [c.1913], *MWG I/22-2*.121 cf. *Twin Histories*, 254-5; Durkheim, *Formes élémentaires*, Bk.I, c.1 ‘Definition of the religious phenomenon and of religion’.

¹¹⁵ ‘Economy and Society’ [1919-20], *WuG*, 9.

¹¹⁶ *Twin Histories*, eg. I.7, II.5-7.

¹¹⁷ ‘Economy and Society’ [1919-20], *WuG*, 133-40.

¹¹⁸ *MWG I/22-2-4*.

¹¹⁹ *Twin Histories*, 307 (on charisma).

¹²⁰ *PE* [1904/20], [XX.12]/*GARS* i.31. The only differences from the 1904 text are the insertion of the words ‘genetic’ and ‘specifically’. These strengthen and clarify Weber’s meaning but do not alter it.

¹²¹ See n.70 above.

¹²² ‘Zur Lage der bürgerlichen Demokratie’ [1905-6], *MWG I/10.272*.

¹²³ For a classical exposition of this idea: Weber to Adolf Harnack 5.2.06, *Briefe*.

Western historical evolution, he did not assume that experiencing it made a society or its members better or happier.) Here Weber found an obvious descendant in the French historians associated with the *Annales* journal, who produced their own versions of a *longue durée* thirty and forty years later. Yet by then historical horizons were narrowing, so that the *longue durée* had become in essence a linear, chronological vestige of the comprehensive, ‘universal’ and world-historical approach of Weber’s generation. Fernand Braudel’s famous rumination on this subject points up at least two more striking differences. Braudel’s frame of reference is unequivocally that of a historian, regardless of his reliance on the ultimate ‘convergence’ of the social sciences.¹²⁴ Thus he is deeply suspicious of sociology’s abandonment of ‘historical time’ (a trend already established by the 1950s), and unlike Weber he refuses to privilege the study of the present, which for him is a historical moment like any other.¹²⁵ On the other hand, Weber is more empirical than Braudel (on this point at least), since for Braudel the *longue durée* is not just a historical reality, but a methodological postulate, a ‘model’, ‘game’ or ‘strategy’ which is required to seek out the reality of ‘the unconscious history’ that prevails over long time-periods.¹²⁶ By contrast Weberian *Entwicklung* (historical ‘development’) has no connection with any concept or ideal-type. It is simply specific or an accumulation of specifics.

While the breadth and range of Weber’s historicism seem remote today, he was brutally radical in his own day and remains wholly contemporary in his understanding of the past in its totality as a pathless infinity: ‘the stream of immeasurable happening that rolls on endlessly into the face of eternity’.¹²⁷ Ultimately this is why any finite and practicable agenda for historical inquiry must derive from the present-day investigator relying on ideal-type constructs to order and master infinity. This view was then reinforced by his keen awareness of living ‘in an era of specialization’, which was both a social and an academic reality.¹²⁸ As we have seen, having advanced a summary ‘interpretation of history from a specific perspective’, Weber expected to have his work checked and corrected by specialists.¹²⁹ But in the case of the *PE* he did something more. He not only signalled his interest in having his work checked when it was published, he then promoted the process of empirical verification afterwards, and was able to greet it when it came to a conclusion.

Weber (like the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* in our own day) supposed that the best person to check a text based primarily on theological materials was a theologian, and in his eyes this pointed to his “sociologically” aware Heidelberg colleague, Ernst Troeltsch. In the original text of the *PE* Weber took care to advertise Troeltsch’s specialist advantage, superior

¹²⁴ ‘Histoire et Sciences sociales. La longue durée’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 13 (1958), 725-53, here 725.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, quotation 748-9. For suspicion of sociology, 735-8, 748-51; on the present as one moment like any other, 748 etc. — For an extended comparison between Weber and Braudel see the pioneering essay by Guenther Roth, ‘Duration and Rationalization: Fernand Braudel and Max Weber’ in Guenther Roth & Wolfgang Schluchter, *Max Weber’s Vision of History* (Berkeley; California UP, 1979), 166-93. My agenda and primary Braudelian text are slightly different. But as Roth points out (186) Braudel seems to have known little about Weber and taken little interest in him. Indeed Braudel, a great French patriot, was never going to pay much attention to any German author after 1940, and the virtual omission of Germans and the *Reich* from volume 3 of *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme. Le temps du monde* (Paris: Colin, 1979) is noticeable. If he had a kindred German spirit, the obvious candidate would have been Werner Sombart, since both shared a delight in discovering the hidden meanings contained within a cornucopia of data. Unlike Weber their empiricism was hedonistic.

¹²⁶ Braudel, ‘La longue durée’, 739 (‘unconscious history’) cf. 739-48 on models.

¹²⁷ »Objektivität« [1904], *WL* 184.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, *WL* 214 cf. *PE* [XXI.83]; ‘Science as a Vocation’ [1917/19], *MWG* I/17.80; ‘Economy and Society’ [1919], *WuG* 80..

¹²⁹ »Objektivität« [1904], *WL* 164.

knowledge, and long familiarity with all the theological subject matter of the *PE*, with the single exception of asceticism. For these reasons (he stated) many subjects had been treated ‘only fleetingly’, and he looked forward to Troeltsch going into these matters more thoroughly in his future work, matters which ‘he as a specialist will of course sort out better than I could ever hope to do’ [XXI.3n.3]. Subsequently Weber was almost certainly a godparent of Troeltsch’s major project, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches and Groups* (1912) which, though of course written by Troeltsch for his own reasons, did indeed traverse a great deal of Weber’s subject matter (including asceticism). So when the *PE* was reissued in 1920, he was pleased to be able to report that Troeltsch had reviewed and validated his “preliminary” work:¹³⁰

summary reference should... be made to the great book of E. Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der Christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (Tübingen, 1912) – in lieu of more frequent citations on every point of detail – as a work which... offers a most welcome supplement and confirmation in regard to our problem, although it treats the universal history of the ethics of Occidental Christianity from its own, very broadly conceived perspectives.

As this passage makes clear, Troeltsch’s idealist and Christian world-view was very different from Weber’s religiously “unmusical” one.¹³¹ Nonetheless, he had indeed offered support and ‘confirmation’ for the historical argument of the *PE*: ‘I could follow [Weber’s] portrayal of “ascetic Protestantism” on this point [the Protestant social ethic] exactly, because with each new working over of this subject, it has once more proved itself to me as a brilliantly penetrating piece of observation and analysis.’¹³² Now Troeltsch was not just an obscure or recondite figure, but one of the most eminent historicist theologians in the Protestant world, and his approval was backed up by that of a clutch of German contemporaries equal or almost equal to him in eminence. In contrast to our situation today, they were born into a *Kultur* which supposed that substantial knowledge of ‘universal history’¹³³ – a history still centred on Europe and Christianity, but no longer confined to it – was basic to any claim to meaningful education and acculturation. Accordingly they had some of the elementary qualifications necessary to judge Weber: men such as the historians Otto Hintze and Friedrich Meinecke, the lawyer Georg Jellinek, and the historical theologian Karl Holl, as well as Weber’s successor in historical economics at Heidelberg, Eberhard Gothein, and the other members of the ‘Eranos’ discussion group there who heard the first, oral delivery of Part II of the *PE* in February 1905 and who approved of it ‘on the whole’.¹³⁴ Weber also enjoyed the support of Georg von Below, by far the most relentless historian-critic of the vulnerable empiricism practised in the social sciences c.1900, who counted Gustav Schmoller and Werner Sombart among his scalps, as well as Karl Lamprecht among the historians.¹³⁵ None of these men ever suggested that the *PE* was deficient, let alone illegitimate, in its historical

¹³⁰ *PE* [1920], *GARS* i.17n.1. For Weber’s relations with Troeltsch: *Twin Histories*, 149-51, 169-74, 199-200.

¹³¹ On this term: Weber to Ferdinand Tönnies 19.2.09 *Briefe* cf. *Twin Histories*, 87, 218, 270-1.

¹³² *Die Soziallehren der Christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (Tübingen, 1912), 950n.510. In 1910 Troeltsch had declared that ‘For my part I consider... the whole [of the *PE*] to be a masterpiece of genetic-historical analysis’ and more to the same effect: ‘Die Kulturbedeutung des Calvinismus’ in *Troeltsch KGA* 8.149.

¹³³ Cf. ‘Vorbemerkung’ [1919-20], *GARS* i.1.

¹³⁴ ‘Die protestantische Askese und das moderne Erwerbsleben’, *MWG* I/9.221.

¹³⁵ For Hintze: ‘Max Webers Religionssoziologie’ [1922], in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1962-7²), ii.126-34; for Meinecke: *Strassburg–Freiburg–Berlin 1901-19* [1949] repr. *Erlebtes 1862-1919* (Stuttgart: Koehler, 1964), 186, 222, 258. For Holl and von Below: *Max Weber in Context*, c.7. Gothein, who was himself likened to a historical encyclopaedia, meditates repeatedly on the *PE* or themes central to it in his correspondence, but it never occurred to him to impugn its historical validity: *Im Schaffen genießen. Der Briefwechsel der Kulturwissenschaftler Eberhard und Marie Luise Gothein (1883-1923)* (2006) ed. M. Maurer et al., 7.3.06 (215), 29.8.08 (238-9), 16.6.09 (269 ‘alle Moral’), 18.2.11 (369 ‘der Beruf’), 28.2.11 (378-9), 23.11.11 (413), 16.5.13 (431 ‘die Berufsethik’), 27.10.20 (543).

procedures. Of course, their views and values were different to Weber's at many points, and in this sense they would disagree with him (and amongst themselves); but still they shared his understanding of the nature of historical argument and esteemed the *PE* accordingly.

On the other side of the account we might perhaps include the economist, Lujo Brentano, who added an appendix to his lecture on *The Origins of Modern Capitalism* (1916), on the subject of 'Puritanism and Capitalism', setting out his principal disagreements with Weber.¹³⁶ Note incidentally that Brentano's identification of 'Puritanism' rather than 'Calvinism' as Weber's historical subject shows that he was a better reader than Rachfahl and most of Weber's later critics, even if he too had nothing to say about asceticism.¹³⁷ However, the disagreement in this case was simply a typical example of the intellectual disagreement that is bound to arise in any developed academic culture. Brentano's first concern was to make a positive statement on capitalism, not to criticise Weber's *modus operandi*, which in its historical range and seamless melding of past and present was much the same as his own. His critical appendices – which included another on 'Judaism and Capitalism' criticising Sombart's book, *The Jews and Economic Life* (1911)¹³⁸ – were secondary, and were designed to support his original, substantive statement. So in fact there was only one person who attacked Weber's historical learning as such: Felix Rachfahl (b.1867).

Rachfahl was very much a historian "in the narrow sense", a political and intellectual conformist, who is only remembered today because of his encounter with Weber. He first appears as one of the pertinacious empirical critics of Karl Lamprecht in the 1890s, and then published the first two volumes of his (incomplete) major work on *William of Orange and the Dutch Rising* (1906-7) covering the years 1555 to 1567.¹³⁹ These studies (he felt) entitled him to speak with authority on the *PE*, or rather Calvinism, and 'to test [Weber's theory] from the standpoint of the historian in terms of its scholarly soundness [*Stichhaltigkeit*]'.¹⁴⁰ His 1909 critical review of Weber and Troeltsch conjointly led to Weber's well-known 'anti-critical' essays in defence of the *PE*,¹⁴¹ but otherwise it made little impression. The rebuttals by Weber and Troeltsch were copious and energetic, and only erred in that Weber's lengthy replies, though a testimony to the seriousness with which he took empirical criticism, were disproportionate and have tended to mislead those who take them at face value regardless of context. Setting aside his incomprehension of Weber on asceticism or his acceptance that there could be 'no doubt' of the 'inner connections' between Calvinism and capitalism,¹⁴² Rachfahl's arguments were actually vulnerable at this date in that they defended narrow specialization against breadth of view. A skilful defence of the 'outsider' against 'the historical "specialist"' was a centrepiece of Weber's essays, and even today we will be unimpressed by a criticism which is purely negative, where 'in truth [the author] has

¹³⁶ *Die Anfänge des modernen Kapitalismus* (1916), III. Exkurs, II. 'Puritanismus und Kapitalismus'. 117-57. For a detailed examination see *Max Weber in Context* c.2. The relationship of Weber and Sombart is more complex. They agreed on much and disagreed on much, but kept their disagreements largely under wraps – Sombart in particular – and so he can reasonably be omitted here. For an introduction: *Max Weber in Context* c.4.

¹³⁷ There is an expository paragraph, from which Brentano infers that asceticism can be equated with the idea of vocation and profession, and so ignored: *Anfänge des modernen Kapitalismus*, 127.

¹³⁸ 'Judentum und Kapitalismus', *Anfänge des modernen Kapitalismus*, 158-99 cf. Sombart, *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (Leipzig: Duncker, 1911).

¹³⁹ *Wilhelm von Oranien und der Aufstand der Niederlande* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1906-7).

¹⁴⁰ 'Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus' [1909], *MWG* I/9.523. Cf. 'Felix Rachfahl' [1925], 1-24, esp. 11-15, in *Die Geschichtswissenschaft der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen* ed. S. Steinberg (Leipzig: Meiner, 1926), vol.ii,

¹⁴¹ *MWG* I/9.573-619, 665-740. See further *Twin Histories*, 175-81.

¹⁴² 'Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus', *MWG* I/9.543.

regrettably *absolutely no* position of his own, with which one could engage in debate.’¹⁴³ A further consideration is that Rachfahl was almost certainly read by the Protestant majority (if he was read at all) as a secularised Catholic meddling in the history of Protestantism: someone who supposed that ‘the characteristic feature’ of the Weber-Troeltsch thesis was its ‘exaggeration of the influence of religious factors and doctrine on the real [historical] evolution’. Ernst Troeltsch was evidently delighted to find someone even further away from dogmatic Protestantism than he was, and he made this religious deficiency a principal thrust of his reply: Rachfahl’s downgrading of an allegedly ‘tolerant, non-dogmatic, ethical Christianity’ in early modern history was so far developed that it led in practice to ‘the crassest historical materialism’.¹⁴⁴ So the overall reaction to Rachfahl was a stony silence, and none of the eminent contemporaries mentioned above paid any attention to him. When von Below chose him as a colleague at Freiburg to replace Meinecke in 1914, it was very much *faute de mieux*, and he felt obliged to apologise to Weber when conveying news of the appointment.¹⁴⁵

In short, Rachfahl was an exceptional case, while the contrary evidence of the favourable reception of the *PE* by eminent contemporaries who possessed a comparable range of universal-historical knowledge and understanding, is overwhelming. Anyone who today thinks that Weber was historically ignorant or deficient also supposes that Troeltsch, Hintze, Meinecke, Jellinek, Holl, Gothein and von Below were blind or incompetent.

III. Conclusion

Weber’s historical thought is undoubtedly remote from ours in some of its assumptions: that genetic-historical analysis is a necessary rather than optional component of the analysis of present-day phenomena; that the full range of universal history might ordinarily be used in furtherance of this kind of inquiry. Yet though these views are dated, they are not necessarily wrong. They are simply impracticable in a world where the perceived scope and scale of universal history continually expands; educated people may well know less history; and (which is much more certain) a diminishing proportion of their historical knowledge is held in common and hence usable. Today’s ‘global history’, however extensive in its geographical extent, is just as selective in its filleting of subject matter as any other specialised field, and such ‘global history’ is evidently not the ‘universal history’ of Weber’s era. But none of this should obscure the fact that at a fundamental level Weber was a pioneering modern, who has not dated at all. Chronologically he stood near the tipping point when the unwieldiness of universal-historical method was beginning to become apparent – a long-term movement in European thought commonly linked to the so-called ‘crisis of historicism’ in religious study after 1918¹⁴⁶ – and the extreme brevity of the *PE* in contrast to contemporary

¹⁴³ ‘Antikritisches zum „Geist“ des Kapitalismus’ [1910], *MWG I/9.578*, 599 resp.

¹⁴⁴ Rachfahl, ‘Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus’ [1909], pr. *MWG I/9.557*, cited Troeltsch, ‘Die Kulturbedeutung des Calvinismus’, *Troeltsch KGA*, 8.162; further quotations 169, 161.

¹⁴⁵ This is the clear inference from Weber’s reply to von Below, 10.7.14, *Briefe*. Cf. Hans Cymorek, *Georg von Below und die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft um 1900* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), 65.

¹⁴⁶ In fact the label ‘crisis of historicism’ (*Historismus*) originally meant a crisis for religious thought, not of historical thought, which *de facto* was a *triumph* for subversive historical relativism over religious transcendentalism: Ernst Troeltsch, ‘Die Krisis des Historismus’, *Die neue Rundschau* 33 (192), 572-90; Karl Heussi, *Die Krisis des Historismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932). However, the triumph of historicism was also a setback. Infinite historical relativity might be true but it was hardly useful, and the result was a significant degree of withdrawal of religious thought from reliance on historical method, a movement which can be traced in many other areas of thought, even though they experienced no visible ‘crisis’. Like so much of the history of historical thought this is a subject that has never been adequately researched.

works of evolutionary-historical sociology was in part at least an early reaction to this emergent context.¹⁴⁷

Weber's principal achievement was to lay down a set of propositions that are basic to our thinking today: the pathless 'infinity' or 'chaos' of past 'happening' (*Geschehen*);¹⁴⁸ the inevitability of historical change and obsolescence; hence the need to construct finite and meaningful sections of the past in the present as the only possible response to that infinity; offset by the recognition that any such construction would be bankrupt if it overrode empirical reality and nicety. These axioms were first laid down in his essay on 'The "Objectivity" of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy' (1904), a companion piece to the *PE*, and in their originality, clarity and coherence they have no parallel before 1914. Nietzsche, the obvious precursor, had realised that academic history was becoming a blunt instrument 'for life'; but this meant no more than that historical tradition in society at large would be carried on in future with even less reference to the academy. (A generation later Weber was quite candid about the diminished significance of all academic work for life, and made no complaint about it.)¹⁴⁹ However, Nietzsche did not identify, let alone reckon with, the much more fundamental problems that diminishing returns on historical study were causing for 'science' and intellectual inquiry (*Wissenschaft*) — this was Weber's achievement.¹⁵⁰ The specialist historian today who chooses to study a tightly defined subject according to the principle of "the past for its own sake", may look askance at Weber's universalism and presentism. Nonetheless, their positions are not mutually exclusive, they are only different ends of a spectrum — something Weber anticipated when he postulated the distinction between history in the narrow sense (specialist and detached) and in the broad sense (genetic, universal and inter-disciplinary). Thus Weber the empiricist was also a fierce upholder of the necessity of 'strict specialization' (even if this was a case that did not need much pleading);¹⁵¹ but at the same time he understood that the most specialised historian, like the broadest synthesist, is the author or constructor of whatever they may write. Authorship should be subject to ethical imperatives; it should still be under 'the obligation: to seek the truth';¹⁵² yet it was an independent and extraneous contribution by definition. In this respect his remarks from 1904 can stand unaltered today:¹⁵³

Any attentive observation of the conceptual elements within historical representation shows that, the moment the historian undertakes to go beyond the mere establishment of concrete sequence or connections, so as to establish the *significance for Kultur* of an individual occurrence however simple..., he works with concepts and *must* do so...

The 'purely historical' 'Protestant Ethic' must be understood in this overall context. On the one hand, it is from beginning to end a study of the historical genesis of 'modern *Kultur*', and as a reflection on the nature of modernity, it is like all social theory today. Hence its evergreen fertility throughout the arts and social sciences. On the other, it has

¹⁴⁷ Note too that the greater length of the 'Economic Ethics of the World Religions' was largely accidental: *Twin Histories*, 228-34.

¹⁴⁸ »Objektivität« [1904], *WL* 171, 184, 207, 214 etc.

¹⁴⁹ eg. 'Science as a Vocation' [1917/19], *MWG I*/17.93.

¹⁵⁰ Nietzsche, 'On the use and drawbacks of historical writing [*Historie*] for life', *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* (1874), no.II. There is an ancillary question regarding the muffled reception of Weber's views on history when compared to the sharp debate provoked by his related views on "value-freedom". The obvious explanation, besides the fragmentary quality of his literary bequest, is that he identified himself as a social scientist and not as a historian or philosopher. Philosophy was the traditional, non-specialist seat of authority in regard to historical thought. Hence the attention enjoyed by men such as Dilthey, Windelband, Troeltsch and Croce.

¹⁵¹ 'Science as a Vocation' [1917/19], *MWG I*/17.80.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, I/17.98.

¹⁵³ »Objektivität«, *WL* 193.

dated because it was written at the height of the European commitment to historicism: that is, to understanding all phenomena historically, wherever possible.¹⁵⁴ Only in such a climate could Weber contemplate writing a work of social theory which mapped out the historical origins of ‘modern *Kultur*’ with its formal centre in the 17th century, where the conceptually driven hypotheses of the interdisciplinary ‘dilettante’¹⁵⁵ or ‘historian in the broad sense’ should be subject to the empirical checking of specialists. Furthermore, by his respect for the specificity of evidence in detail and faith in empirical testing (to say nothing of his acceptance of built-in obsolescence), he went far beyond the historicist commitments of a Durkheim or Tönnies, let alone Hegel and Marx. Yet here again Weber’s procedure was not necessarily wrong, even if it was extremely unusual. A large-scale, multi-disciplinary research effort devoted to analysing the historical origins of behavioural traits held to be distinctively modern was always a possibility, and the voluminous literature on the agenda of the *PE* down to c.1930 can be understood as a partial fulfilment of this idea.¹⁵⁶

However, as comprehensive historicist commitment waned, this strategy came to seem impracticable and the historical component in social theory declined. Theorists today are always free to invoke history if they wish, but the limited status of such argument and its subordinacy to the needs of the present are evident. Weber has had occasional successors. Michel Foucault is a notable example of a theorist who rejoiced in historical specificity even if, due both to the greater length of his books and the relative narrowness of their subject matter,¹⁵⁷ he could never quite rival the audacity of the *PE*. More typical, however, is a work such as Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981). Its historical content is considerable and it is an obvious successor to the *PE* as a meditation on the formation and nature of modern ethics; but no-one would spend time on a historical (or “historical”) critique of the text. So the *PE* may be seen either as an unusually framed work of modern social theory, which will continue to be read despite its unusual frame, because of the fertility of its insights about modernity; or else as a unique moment in the early 20th century history of ideas standing at the very apex of historicism. But far from being the shoddy or louche product that some critics have imagined, the *PE* is one of the most carefully constructed and original historical works in all of European thought.

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¹⁵⁴ Cf. *Max Weber in Context*, 251-3.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. ‘Science as a Vocation’ [1917/19], *MWG I*/17.82-3.

¹⁵⁶ For the 1920s note for example R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: Murray, 1926); Bernard Groethuysen, *Origines de l’esprit bourgeois en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927); Henri Hauser, *Les débuts du capitalisme* (Paris: Alcan, 1927).

¹⁵⁷ Cf. *Folie et déraison* (1961), *Histoire de sexualité*, three volumes (1976-84).