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'Clapham Junction: the place of the *Protestant Ethic* in Max Weber's intellectual biography'

About the author

Peter Ghosh studied Modern History at Oxford as an undergraduate, and went on to do doctoral research on Victorian finance under the supervision of A.F. (Pat) Thompson; while doing so he was first a Student then a Junior Research Fellow at Nuffield College. In 1981 he was appointed a University Lecturer in Modern History at Oxford, and a Fellow and Tutor of St Anne's College, the post he continues to hold. Gradually, however, the attractions of Disraeli's budgets yielded to those of historiography, an interest aroused in his first term as an undergraduate, when studying for the Preliminary Examination in Modern History. This was still very much the Prelim of Hugh Trevor-Roper's design, centred on the reading of "classic" or canonical historical texts. The prescribed texts included Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* (chs 1-38) and Macaulay's *History of England* (Chs 3-10), Tocqueville's *Ancien Regime et la Révolution*, and Burckhardt's *Weltgeschichte Betrachtungen* – the last two studied in the original language, and all studied in the first term of the degree, with examination at the end of it. Trevor-Roper himself lectured to Gibbon & Macaulay and Burckhardt, the last making a particular impression on Ghosh; later, in his third year, he took the Third Reich Special Subject with Tim Mason. Where Trevor-Roper's conception of historiography was, in this context, pedagogic – the induction of undergraduate historians to their discipline as a great tradition – Ghosh responded to texts as historically conditioned and contextualised. He early applied what has become his distinctive brand of forensic historicism to Gibbon, demonstrating that the genesis of the *Decline and Fall* was by no means a seamless fulfilment of Gibbon's subsequently recollected moment of inspiration on the Capitol. From Gibbon he has gone on to interrogate and often radically revise our understanding of the intellectual development of a range of modern and contemporary historians, from Maurice Cowling, through Gramsci and Foucault, to Ross McKibbin and (most recently) Hugh Trevor-Roper himself. He has also intervened in contemporary public debate, most courageously in arguing, against the grain of overwhelming journalistic and academic opinion, that the public displays of grief over Diana's death were far from spontaneous, but were learned, re-hearsed performances. After c.1994, however, he came to focus ever more intensively on Max Weber, and the *Protestant Ethic* in particular. An interest first provoked by teaching with the Talcott Parsons translation and recognising its inadequacies has developed into an almost unique historian's engagement with Weber's intellectual development and the genesis of the *Protestant Ethic*. A collection of his essays on Weber was published in 2008 by a German publishing-house, recognition of the respect in which German scholars have come to hold him; his edition

and translation of the *Protestant Ethic*, with a preliminary volume of of biographical-textual introduction, is now approaching publication.

Select Bibliography

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Abstract of the paper

This paper will summarise some of the conclusions set out in the introduction to my forthcoming edition of the *Protestant Ethic* for OUP. My starting point in undertaking that edition was the complete absence of useful material assisting the comprehension of the text in a historical sense. Some years down the line, although the situation is clearly in process of change, historical understanding of Max Weber, and of the *Protestant Ethic* in particular, remains in a primitive state. Specifically, there is no understanding of Weber’s intellectual development as a whole – there is no intellectual biography which can be situated within a set of contexts – nor of the place of the *Protestant Ethic* within that evolution. Prevalent sociological wisdom remains that this is a text to be ignored or shunned, partly on the unspoken ground that it is full of religious matter, and then on the more specious one that *Economy and Society* contains the unique and sufficient essence of Weberian ideas. Of course, I did not start from the dogmatic (or even hypothetical) counter-position that the *Protestant Ethic* was a lynchpin of Weber’s oeuvre and intellectual life, but over the course of time I have come to the empirical conclusion that it is so in fact. I suggest that the text is of commanding significance in relation both to Weber’s “early” output before 1900, and his “later” output, particularly in the decade 1910-20. Together with the essay on “Objectivity”, also from 1904, it is a true *Mittelpunkt* or focal point.

The original publication of 1904-5 is (as readers have long been intuitively aware) the first “mature” Weberian text; the first time when themes central to any later reading of Weber come prominently to the surface: capitalism and rationality above all. Without depreciating the interest and quality of his earlier writings, there is a very real sense in which it marks an unexplained intellectual discontinuity, a parthenogenesis or rupture, albeit one aggravated and clouded in our minds by his mental breakdown 1898-1902. So the first and most obvious task of the historian of the *Protestant Ethic* is to examine and explain its content in regard to Weber’s previous intellectual output. It was not a conscious *telos* to which all else was building up, but still it requires scrutiny of his early output in its entirety, since it draws upon all of that output in one form or another. Where there remain gaps in explanation and understanding, as there do, this fact is itself of importance, in that it indicates the extent to which the *Protestant Ethic* was a deliberate transcending of anything Weber had previously allowed himself to say. Secondly, we must examine the relationship between the *Protestant Ethic* and his subsequent output. Sociologists are comfortable with the convenient assumption that Max Weber was always getting better as a thinker; thus that what came last (*Economy and Society* or *Soziologie*) is best, and that there is a chasm between this and the *Protestant Ethic*. The historian, however, is struck by the fact that any such division was unknown to contemporaries who automatically assumed the latter’s centrality. My alternative proposition (again, this was not a starting point or hypothesis, but the result of pennies slowly dropping) is that practically all the agenda of *Economy and Society*, as of the *Economic Ethics of the World Religions*, can be found in the *Protestant Ethic*. Weber’s ideas do change and develop in important and even fundamental respects after 1905; but the seeds of almost all his later thinking can be found in the 1904-5 text of the *Protestant Ethic*. It is in fact an extraordinarily compressed document which, far more than any other, comes close to encompassing Weberian thought in something like its entirety within a single utterance.

Preparatory reading:

Peter Ghosh *A Historian reads Max Weber. Essays on the Protestant Ethic* (2008), pp. 1-4: ‘A short manifesto by way of introduction’.

Max Weber: Elementary Chronology

Early life

- b. 1864. Father (d. 1897) lawyer & National Liberal; mother (d.1919) liberal Protestant-Christian socialist.
- 1884-94 Student (at various levels) of law.
- 1890-7 Attends (Protestant or) Evangelical-Social Congress.
- 1892-4 Teaches law at Berlin university (1893: *Extraordinarius* or Assistant Professor).
- 1894-1903 Full Professor in *Nationalökonomie* [Economics] at Freiburg, then Heidelberg.
- 1898 Nervous collapse; July 1900 – April 1902 spent chiefly in Italy. Extreme onset of a life-long depressive condition (with symptoms going back to 1884 at least).

The 'new phase'

- 1903 Resigns active Professorship & salary. He & Werner Sombart become senior editors at the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft*.
- 1904-5 'Protestant Ethic' first published in the *Archiv*.
- 1906-7 Some work on the *Protestant Ethic* for separate book publication; first composition of the 'Protestant Sects'; project abandoned.
- Winter 1907-8 Writes 'Agriculture in Antiquity'.
- 1907-10 'Anti-critical' writings defending the *Protestant Ethic*: by 1909-10 a tedious distraction.
- c.1910-14 Drafts for 'Economy and Society'. From January 1913 (at least) his principal intellectual project.
- 1913 Informal lectures to friends on 'The Economic Ethics of the World Religions' (Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam).

World War

- 1914-15 Serves in Heidelberg military hospital service.
- 1915-18 No major original composition apart from political journalism. However, revises & expands essays on 'Hinduism & Buddhism', 'Ancient Judaism' (a fragment) for 'The Economic Ethics of the World Religions'. A displacement activity.
- Spring 1918 resumes work on 'Economy and Society' during visiting professorship at Vienna.

Peace

- 1919 Moves to Munich as active Professor once more. (He needs the money).
- 1919 Revises 'Protestant Ethic', to appear alongside 'The Economic Ethics of the World Religions' in *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion* (1920-1). This entails (much more voluminous) revision of 'Confucianism'. Principal output at this time: rewriting 'Economy and Society' *ab initio*.
- 14 June 1920 Dies unexpectedly of pneumonia.