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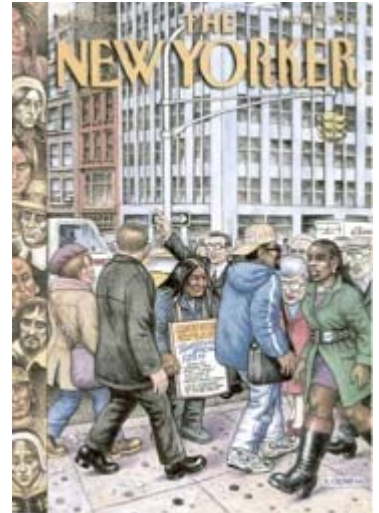
BOOKS

WHY WORK?

A hundred years of “The Protestant Ethic.”

by Elizabeth Kolbert

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In the fall of 1897, Max Weber suffered a nervous breakdown. He was thirty-three years old—still quite young, in the rigidly hierarchical world of German academia—and occupied a prestigious chair in political economics at the University of Heidelberg. Over the previous decade, routinely working until 1 a.m., he had assembled a list of publications that filled several pages and ranged from the agrarian history of Rome to the deficiencies of the German stock market. Following his breakdown, according to his wife, Marianne, who also happened to be his cousin, “everything was too much for him; he could not read, write, talk, walk or sleep without torment.” A slight improvement in his condition was followed by a relapse, another improvement, and then an even more serious breakdown. By October, 1903, he had given up teaching altogether; apparently, the idea of having to prepare lectures and deliver them at a predetermined time was more than he could bear. The following year, he recovered sufficiently to write what would become his most celebrated work and one of the founding texts of the emergent discipline of sociology, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.”

Originally published as a two-part essay in the scholarly journal *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, “The Protestant Ethic” is brief (at least by Weberian standards), dense, and completely idiosyncratic. Nominally, it is a work of cultural history; why, Weber asks, did the institutions of modern capitalism come into being in a particular region (northern Europe) at a particular time (the seventeenth century) even though “the *auri sacra fames*,” as he puts it—the greed for gold—“is as old as the history of man?” Weber was not the first to pose this question; in German academic circles, it was the subject of running debate. Nor would he be the last. But the answer he came up with—in effect, that Donald Trump is the spiritual heir of Martin Luther—probably still ranks as the most perverse.

Almost immediately, “The Protestant Ethic” became a target of criticism, which Weber, alternately aggrieved and irascible, spent years trying to answer. (By the time he republished the work, shortly before his death, in 1920, the footnotes he had added had grown longer than the original essay.) In the century since then, there is hardly a claim made in “The Protestant Ethic,” either about the history of religion or about the history of economics, that hasn’t been challenged; one Weber scholar recently dubbed the ongoing debate “the academic

Hundred Years' War." The reason that Weber's essay remains so compelling despite all the controversy is that it isn't really a work about the past; it's an allegory about the present.

Everyone who is part of the modern capitalist economy—whether he's employed flipping burgers, writing code, or putting out a weekly magazine—has at one point or another considered that his efforts had an ascetic cast. We all accept the notion that our jobs ought to be more than just a way to sustain ourselves and acknowledge working to be our duty. But we don't quite understand why this is the case. Post-nervous breakdown, Weber appears to have felt with peculiar intensity both the compulsion to labor and its fundamental motivelessness. And, if he didn't actually come up with a resolution to the problem (either a good reason to work or a way to stop doing so), he did invent in "The Protestant Ethic" a myth to explain his, and our, befuddlement.

From early on, Weber's drive was apparent. As an adolescent, he spent his Christmas holidays writing essays on subjects like "the course of German history with particular reference to the position of Kaiser and Pope," and entered into a lengthy correspondence with an older cousin on Homer, Virgil, Herodotus, and Cicero. By the time he graduated from the *Gymnasium*, he is supposed to have made his way through all forty volumes of Goethe's collected works. (His teachers thought he had an attitude problem.)

Weber was trained not as a sociologist—there was no such field until he helped to invent it—but as a lawyer, and he began his academic career lecturing on legal history. Virtually nothing that he wrote before his breakdown is still read today. (Typical of his early works is a nine-hundred-page report on the condition of agricultural workers in the German regions east of the Elbe.) In time for the centenary of "The Protestant Ethic," Fritz Ringer, professor emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh, has published "Max Weber: An Intellectual Biography" (Chicago; \$19). The book opens with Weber as he is emerging from his convalescence and never looks back.

With "The Protestant Ethic," Weber seems to have discovered his calling: the study of rationality. This is, for him, a capacious term. One Weber scholar counts sixteen different senses of "rational" in "The Protestant Ethic" alone, among them "systematic," "impersonal," "sober," "scrupulous," and "efficacious." In Weber's view, modern Western society is the product of increasingly rational forms of organization. Its institutions are governed by "systematic" rules and "impersonal" procedures, rather than by custom or religious obligation, and this sets it apart from virtually all other world cultures. Weber intended his assessment to be value-neutral; indeed, he spent much of his career arguing that aesthetic and moral evaluations had no role to play in the study of the social sciences. True to his word, he deems the highly rationalized order of modern society to be, as far as those who inhabit it are concerned, deeply irrational. What he sees as the fundamental mystery about the origins of modern capitalism is not why it took so long to be established but, rather, how, given actual human needs and desires, it ever came into being at all.

Near the start of "The Protestant Ethic," Weber illustrates this puzzle with a nineteenth-century version of a business-school case study. In agriculture, he notes, nothing is more important than the gathering of the harvest, and, owing to the uncertainties of the weather, the speed with which this is accomplished can spell the difference between profit and disaster. In an effort to encourage greater efficiency, some farmers have tried paying their workers more at harvest time. This tactic, however, has "with surprising frequency" yielded a result precisely opposite that which had been hoped for:

Raising the piece-rates has often had the result that not more but less has been accomplished in the same time, because the worker reacted to the increase not by increasing but by decreasing the amount of his work. A man, for instance, who at the rate of 1 mark per acre mowed 2 1/2 acres per day and earned 2 1/2 marks, when the rate was raised to 1.25 marks per acre mowed, not 3 acres, as he might easily have done, thus earning 3.75 marks, but only 2 acres, so that he could still earn the 2 1/2 marks to which he was accustomed... A man does not "by nature" wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose.

In order for capitalism to succeed, everyone had to believe that earning more money, even if he had no particular need for it, was a good thing. But why would anyone believe that?

This is where Martin Luther and, perhaps even more pertinently, John Calvin come in. Weber's argument has several steps—or, if you prefer, leaps—and in a highly summarized form his reading of Reformation history runs as follows. Thanks to the doctrine of predestination, early Puritans believed that there was no way to affect—or even to know—one's eternal fate. At the same time, they believed that the faithful were obligated to

live as if they knew themselves to be among the elect. Constant, uncomplaining labor came to be seen as the way to banish doubt. In this way, work acquired an ethical dimension.

Deeply opposed to sensual pleasure, the Puritans and members of other ascetic Protestant sects toiled away but didn't spend. Instead, they acquired capital, which, prudently invested, produced still more capital. Nothing, of course, was further from their minds than refashioning the world to suit Mammon, but, as is so often the case, their zeal had unintended consequences. "What the great religious epoch of the seventeenth century bequeathed to its utilitarian successor was ... an amazingly good, we may even say a pharisaically good conscience in the acquisition of money," Weber writes. Subsequent generations lacked their forebears' spiritual commitment to labor, on the one hand, and to self-denial, on the other, but by this point it didn't really matter. Once the system was put in place, it carried all before it. "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so."

Weber's wife, Marianne, was his first biographer. Her "Max Weber: A Biography," published in 1926, runs to more than seven hundred pages in the English translation, and is a deeply odd book. Marianne consistently refers to herself in the third person, as in "When Marianne read this letter, she was profoundly shaken by a sense of the ineffable and eternal." In a chapter entitled "Breakdown," she relates that she was secretly gratified by her husband's psychological problems: "If Weber's sovereign self-sufficiency had occasionally made her wonder whether he needed her, she now did not doubt it." Marianne suggests that her husband's illness was prompted by his father's death; the two men had had a falling out a couple of months earlier, and had not reconciled when Weber senior died. Others have suggested that Marianne herself was to blame. The Webers' marriage lasted for nearly thirty years but was never consummated; eventually, the long-suffering Weber had an affair with a friend of his wife's. As one Weber scholar has dryly observed, the couple's asexual relationship "certainly did not contribute to Weber's mental stability." Weber wrote a detailed chronicle of his illness, which must have offered some insight into the source of his suffering, but Marianne destroyed it in the final months of the Second World War, supposedly out of fear that the Nazis would use it to discredit him.

A social theorist in her own right, Marianne was an early leader of the German feminist movement. After organizing a march in the fall of 1910—a "beautiful and encouraging" march, in her words—she was mocked, or at least so she believed, by a young docent at the University of Heidelberg, with which Weber was still affiliated. In a newspaper article, the docent declared that all feminists were either widowed, unmarried, Jewish, or sterile. Weber's response—fairly typical of his dealings with the world—was "systematic," "scrupulous," "efficacious," and, at the same time, completely nuts. He offered to fight a duel with his wife's antagonist, demanded a retraction of a newspaper account of the contretemps, and, eventually, after a series of increasingly baroque charges and countercharges, was sued for libel by the paper's editors. The dispute resulted in the filing of three lawsuits in two cities and ended only when Weber, having ruined the career of a colleague in the university's history department, discovered that he felt sorry for all the casualties he had produced. (After the last of the trials, Marianne wrote to Weber's mother, "It is gruesome when things take their own course, detached from the initial impulse of the person who set them in motion.") But no sooner had Weber declared his remorse—"Never again!" he wrote to the dean of the faculty—than he plunged into another protracted and highly public battle, this time over a new edition of a handbook of political economy that he had written. In the course of this to-do, he challenged his opponent to a duel with sabres "under the most stringent conditions permitted in academic practice." (The duel never came off, because of Christmas vacation.)

Even as all this wrangling was taking place, Weber continued to write dense, voluminous meditations on rationality. (His magnum opus, "Economy and Society," spans well over a thousand pages, although it was never finished.) Weber's investigation of Protestantism led him to undertake studies on the "economic ethics" of other world religions, including Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, and his interest in the origins of the modern Western society produced works on, among many other topics, the evolution of cities, the sociology of law, the decline of feudalism, and the rise of bureaucracy. This last development was, for Weber, particularly significant; he saw bureaucratic institutions as technically more effective than other forms of administration, just as he saw mechanical means of production as more efficient than nonmechanical means and capitalist economies as destined to outcompete traditional ones. Weber's vision of bureaucracy is different from the one you might get by standing in line at, say, the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles. In his view, only a well-ordered bureaucracy is capable of supporting a modern technological society, and this fact is problematic precisely insofar as those running the machinery are actually competent. The Germans, of course, have always had a peculiar talent for *Ordnung*—the passion for bureaucracy among German students "is enough to drive one to despair," Weber once declared. Still, the conflict between organizational efficiency and individual needs has

universal implications. Bureaucracy is central to the rise of capitalism because bureaucracies, at least according to Weber, make decisions that are predictable and, hence, amenable to calculation. Indeed, he writes, bureaucracy becomes more useful to capitalism the more it “depersonalizes” itself; “i.e., the more completely it succeeds in achieving the exclusion of love, hatred, and every purely personal ... feeling from the execution of official tasks.”

The contrast between Weber’s scholarly pursuits and his personal behavior struck many of his contemporaries as bizarre, even comical. But the incoherence of modern life could be said to have been Weber’s great subject. Weber used the term *Entzauberung*—“dis-enchantment”—to describe the way in which science and technology had inevitably displaced magical thinking. The new rationalism had the instrumental advantage of allowing the world to be mastered. But what the new thinking couldn’t provide was, in terms of lived experience, hardly less important. Rationality could do everything but make sense of itself.

The most famous passage of “The Protestant Ethic” comes at the end, when Weber, who has struggled—not always successfully—to maintain a dispassionate stance toward his subject, finally gives up the effort:

For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.

This analysis, with its grim determinism, is reminiscent of many of Marx’s most sweeping pronouncements. (Weber has been called, not particularly kindly, but also perhaps not inaccurately, “a bourgeois Marx.”) For all of his insistence on the importance of abstract ideas in the inception of capitalism, Weber follows Marx in viewing alienation as the essential experience of the modern economic order. In certain respects, Weber’s critique is the more thoroughgoing. By his account, *all* of us—the wealthy and the poor, owners and workers—lead economic lives of quiet desperation. And while Marx imagines a liberating crisis at the end of history, Weber pictures a future that is apt to be as unsatisfactory as the present. Materialism has become, in his words, “an iron cage”:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance.

These days, to go by self-description, there are still many more Marxists rattling around than there are Weberians—the French philosopher Raymond Aron once wrote, “Weberism does not lend itself to the elaboration of an orthodoxy, unless one gives that name to the rejection of all orthodoxies”—even though, it could be argued, it is Weber’s brand of fatalism, rather than Marx’s, that has been vindicated. His writings anticipate both the rise and fall of the Soviet Union—Weber saw planned economies as leading, more or less inevitably, to tyranny—and also the steady, soulless spread of global capitalism. Since 1904, working conditions, at least in the West, have markedly improved, while market efficiencies have produced wealth and comfort on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, every year brings more evidence that the system obeys its own logic, regardless of what anyone, or for that matter everyone, might wish. The triumph of Wal-Mart, the death of the family farm, the flow of blue-collar jobs to Juárez and white-collar jobs to Bangalore: all are developments that in their equivocal character—from one perspective supremely rational and from another self-defeating—are consistent with Weber’s notions of progress and the futility of trying (or even wanting to try) to resist it.

“It is true that the path of human destiny cannot but appall him who surveys a section of it,” Weber writes in the introduction to “The Protestant Ethic.” “But he will do well to keep his small personal commentaries to himself, as one does at the sight of the sea or of majestic mountains.” ♦

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