The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: and Other Writings

Weber, Max, Baehr, Peter (Ed.), and Wells, Gordon C. (Ed.) (2002). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: and Other Writings*
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"The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism is one of those audacious and robust texts for which the term "classic" could have been invented. Ever since its publication in 1905, the essay has provoked controversy, prompting successive generations of readers to wrestle with the paradox at its core. Many authors might have welcomed such notoriety, but not Max Weber (1864-1920); who bitterly complained that the critics had misunderstood him and that the ensuing debate was both obfuscating and sterile. To prevent further confusion, he revised the essay in 1919, modifying some of its formulations and increasing further an already massive apparatus of footnotes. But all attempts at definitive clarification were to no avail; Weber's revision, published in 1920, served only to generate new problems and ambiguities. And herein, ironically, lies the secret of The Protestant Ethic's fame. If Weber's "thesis" were self-evidently true, simple, or translucent, it would never have engaged a critical audience in the first place or survived to become a classic. "Mere" solutions to a problem impede a text's ascent to greatness for the simple reason that they offer no challenges for contemporaries to embrace and succes-sors to ponder. Weber's achievement was not to definitively answer a riddle but to stake out a territory fertile of new puzzles at the heart of which is the claim that religious forces, not simply economic ones, paved the way for the mentality characteristic of modern, Western capitalism. On Weber's account, our secular and materialistic culture is partly indebted to a spiritual revolution: the Protestant Reforma-tion of the sixteenth century. That Weber's argument raises—or begs—a hundred questions is inseparable from its eminence and renown." (From Editors' Introduction, p. ix)