

Max Weber (1864-1920)

Weber's father was a lawyer, judge and politician. Weber grew up in Berlin around some of the leading politicians and scholars of the day.

Weber's mother was a strict Calvinist and promoted hard work, morality and asceticism to her children.

Received Ph.D. from University of Berlin in economic and legal history in 1889

Was a professor at several German universities in political economy before a nervous breakdown (possibly caused by overwork and conflict with his father) resulted in his early retirement in 1900. Began writing again in 1903, this time as a sociologist.

Co-founded German Sociological Association in 1910

Re-entered academia in 1918

Key books:

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904-5)

The Sociology of Religion (1912)

The Religion of China (1913), *The Religion of India* (1916-17), *Ancient Judaism* (1917)

Economy and Society (Wirtschaft und Gessellschaft) (published posthumously in 1920s)

From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (English translation of selected works by Gerth and Mills, 1946)

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Unlike Marx, Weber believed that ideas can have an important effect upon society.

“Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.”

This work shows the connection between two ideas—the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism

The spirit of capitalism is not just greed. It is a moral system that stresses economic success.

Calvinists: Branch of the Reformation, founded by John Calvin, that emphasizes the sovereignty of God. (Current Calvinist denominations include Presbyterians and Reformed.)

Predestination: Before Creation God designated some people as “elect.” People can’t do anything to bring about their salvation.

Calvinists developed work ethic not to earn salvation (which was impossible), but because they were searching for signs that they were among the elect.

Wealth was earned from pursuing a “calling,” but asceticism restricted consumption. This resulted in the accumulation of capital (as explained in the summary).

Capitalism is part of the larger process of rationalization, e.g., science, bureaucracy, that in some ways is hostile to the religious ideas from which it arose.