

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Ghosh, Peter**, *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 2014. 424 pp., \$49.95 hardcover (9780198702528)

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In this remarkably erudite but mean spirited and one-sided book, Peter Ghosh argues that *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter, *PE*) was Max Weber's key work, encapsulating all Weber had done before its publication as well all that came afterward. Indeed, demonstrating that Weber and the *PE* share a "twin history" is the fundamental goal of the book, which is less concerned with explicating the *PE* and more concerned with arguing that its themes and concepts resonate within all of Weber's *significant* social scientific writings, especially from 1902 on. Despite the book's length and the depth of scholarship Ghosh demonstrates, his assertion remains no more than a matter of conviction, and as Weber told us in "Politics as a Vocation", conviction needs to be tempered with "distance" and perhaps as well by some humility; neither of which Ghosh seems to demonstrate.

Indeed, this is a very frustrating book, precisely because there is so much in it both to admire and to deplore. In this and previous works Ghosh provides the most substantial contribution to the existing literature on the *PE*, certainly in the English language. That makes this book essential for the specialist but equally invaluable for anyone who takes Weber's work seriously. Nevertheless, Ghosh profoundly distorts Weber's thought, while mocking and denigrating most other major commentators on Weber; above all Weber's wife Marianne, but also singling out for particular disdain such notable Weber scholars as Friedrich Tenbruck, Reinhard Bendix, and Wolfgang Schluchter.

Still, there are two substantial contributions this book makes to the existing literature on Weber. One is in identifying crucial intellectual influences on Weber, particularly the literature Weber used when conceptualizing and writing both the *PE* and his essays on the "Protestant Sects". Based on careful scholarship, Ghosh makes it clear what was and what was not adopted by Weber from such influences as Rudolf Sohm (credited as the original source of the concept of "charisma") and what was and was not rejected in the thinking of such contemporaries as Werner Sombart (who preceded Weber in addressing the issue of the "spirit" of capitalism). Ghosh excels at explaining the connections between

Weber's thought and that of his contemporaries, while also successfully demonstrating that their influences notwithstanding, Weber's work was uniquely his own.

Ghosh's second contribution, however, is even more fascinating, at least to this reviewer. It is Ghosh's recognition that while Weber made use of multiple disciplinary sources, he cannot be characterized as a historian, sociologist, economist, political scientist, jurist, or philosopher. Ghosh effectively demonstrates that Weber charted his own path in trying to make sense of the social world, that he was quite willing to make use of whatever discipline or set of concepts would be useful to him in achieving his task. This is intellectual history at its best.

The major weakness in the book, indeed perhaps the source of most of its problems, is Ghosh's insistence that there was no fundamental change in Weber's perspective or method after he wrote the *PE*. Ghosh admits that Weber added somewhat to *PE* in 1907 but affirms that, despite some later "revisions", Weber's ideas and approach were essentially complete by about 1908. This claim generates a peculiar point of view: Ghosh considers those works closest in time to the *PE* to be the purest expression of Weber's ideas, with later work merely an extension – and in Ghosh's opinion often an *overlaboration* – of that earlier work. This means that the vast majority of Weber's later writings can be largely ignored. Thus in looking at Weber's sociology of religion, Ghosh's focus is on the unfinished essay written in 1913 for *Economy and Society* rather than the later, published, volumes of Weber's "Economic Essays", which Ghosh largely treats with disdain. Indeed, the last of those essays, 'Ancient Judaism', is described by Ghosh as suffering from "elephantiasis". This also allows him to insist that Weber's supposed turn to sociology in 1910 had little substance; that Weber's later sociology was simply an (unfortunate) extension of the historical approach Weber utilized in the *PE*.

The biased reading of Weber's work that results can easily be illustrated by the following comment: "Weber allowed himself to be sucked into the historical and empirical study of Indian religiosity, and there is an obvious falling-away from the purity of the Occidental model, epitomized by the *PE*, where the conceptual and historical approaches are perfectly integrated" (230). What Ghosh is saying is clear: whereas the conceptual and historical approach found in the *PE* was "pure", Weber was later "sucked" into an unnecessary and defective sociological account of Indian religiosity. The implication is that Weber's writings on India, as well as his other essays on the world religions, can be safely ignored. The point of these claims by Ghosh with respect to Weber is that the sociological writings produced after 1910 are of little scholarly value and of limited use in understanding Weber. Ghosh is particularly

scathing in his comments with respect to Marianne Weber, whom he condemns as never having understood her husband's work and whom he blames for perpetuating the myth that Max Weber was a sociologist.

This issue, that sociologists have falsely appropriated Weber by claiming him to be a "founding father", is one that seems to generate much heat in the contemporary literature on Weber. I would suggest, however, that it is an irrelevant issue. Weber described much of his work from 1913 on as sociology, but only by giving sociology an extraordinarily wide definition, and without any strong vocational commitment to sociology per se. Nevertheless, Weber found understanding certain aspects of social life to require what he considered a sociological approach. Those aspects may not interest the historian Ghosh, but in no sense is Weber's work debased – and certainly sociology is enhanced – by sociologists looking to his work for inspiration.

To conclude, what Ghosh provides is an essential book for anyone seriously interested in understanding Max Weber's work, especially the *PE*, but the reader should be warned that the historical facts Ghosh provides are encased in a highly idiosyncratic and highly biased reading of Weber. As Ghosh himself noted at the very beginning of his book, "the way in which the materials are read is at least as important as their availability" (vii). This book serves as an illustration of that very point.

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