

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Jack Barbalet, *Weber, Passion and Profits: 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' in Context*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 264 pp. \$US 99.00 hard-cover (978-0-521-89509-5)

Despite its appealing cover — a cartoon of a rather bemused looking Weber in place of one of those stern and grainy photographs — I approached this volume with a degree of suspicion. This is a book about a book, using a single translation at a time when alternatives are at last available. And what a translation: Talcott Parsons's much criticized, indeed maligned, translation from 1930. Furthermore, Barbalet explicitly addresses Weber the sociologist when Wilhelm Hennis, probably the leading living Weber scholar, has spent a lifetime showing that Weber was *not* a sociologist at all and that reading him as such has been the major source of his false reception (see *Max Weber's Central Question*, 2nd ed. 2000). Furthermore, there is no reference to the mass of material and scholarship in German, and Barbalet brings back no gems from the archives. His book is at the other end of the spectrum from another work on the *Protestant Ethic* coincidentally published in the same year: Peter Ghosh's *A Historian Reads Max Weber: Essays On 'The Protestant Ethic'* (2008). Even Barbalet's subtitle reference to "in context" looks like a hostage to fortune: whose context? Ghosh would reply: not Weber's! Ghosh's book is a spin-off of what promises to be his definitive translation of the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* with full scholarly apparatus and all textual variations. If you want, for example, to find out about the influence of, to us obscure, theological debates in Germany upon Weber's thinking, then it is to Ghosh and not to Barbalet that you must turn. The latter offers what Ghosh rather dismissively calls an "everyday" or "ordinary" reading, in opposition, of course, to the kind of detailed, historically informed understanding of context that he himself presents.

But to dismiss Barbalet's book on these grounds would be too hasty. If Weber's intentions in context are significant, so too are Barbalet's. My own initial skepticism was largely dispelled half way through the first essay which argues, I think rightly, that the *Protestant Ethic* is, put crudely, as much — perhaps, more — an intervention into German political concerns than an account of the emergence of capitalism in terms of "spirit"

and ideas. On this view, the work is at one with the nationalist values Weber set out in his Freiburg inaugural lecture of 1895, and is thus part of “his attempt to encourage a politically inexperienced German middle class, culturally predisposed to romantic collectivism, to strive for self-assertive and self-directed commitment to nation-state building and political leadership” (p. 216). This is a theme Barbalet returns to frequently, particularly towards the end of the volume.

His other main theme is the shortcomings of Weber’s account of the inner emotional life of the early capitalist in comparison to what social theory has to offer elsewhere. There is something refreshing in Barbalet’s refusal to be intimidated or browbeaten by Weber. Rather than sink in awe at the master’s feet, he occasionally treats him like a precociously bright but misguided postgraduate student and takes him to task for sloppy argumentative shortcuts. The book’s central chapters, 3–5, examine late 16th and 17th century English thinkers, then Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and finally more recent social theory — notably, Veblen — as foils to the Protestant ethic thesis. Here Barbalet demonstrates scholarship of his own as many of these early figures lie well outside the range of most social theory and sociological debate. Here too he is on home ground: the sociology of emotions. He finds in Smith’s work in particular a richer account of the intimate relationship between emotion, motivation, and action than in the Weber thesis. In the “conversation between Max Weber and Adam Smith” (p. 143) that he constructs in Chapter 4, it is Smith who carries the day, leaving the religious basis of the capitalist ethic — i.e., Weber’s core thesis — in doubt. Nor, for Barbalet, does the *Protestant Ethic* match the standards set by Weber’s other works on religion, which provide a less one-sided account of the relationship between belief and economic action.

Chapter 5 reconstructs what Weber says or implies about the role of Jews in emergent capitalism. The context here, of course, is the dispute with Werner Sombart, but Barbalet considers what was at stake in that debate — “whether the Jews or Protestants founded the spirit of modern capitalism” — to be of little sociological significance. What concerns him instead is Weber’s “understanding of the social and economic processes in which Jews participated” (p. 186). Weber associates Judaism with premodern — “pariah” — rather than modern capitalism. It was Calvinism, not Judaism, which forged out of Old Testament texts a modern capitalist ethic. By explaining the “pariah” status of Jews in terms of their beliefs, Weber implies that their exclusion was a form of self-exclusion and fails to locate its relation to what Barbalet, perhaps a little anachronistically, calls the “host society.” Weber thus misses the opportunity to develop a sociology of ethnic exclusion in which the wider

society is implicated. More specifically, he fails to develop a sociology of anti-Semitism. Barbalet traces these problems not merely to Weber's concern with separate value spheres, but to the limits of the ideal type as a methodological tool. The broader point echoes the conclusion of the comparison between Smith and Weber: the latter fails to clinch the argument that specifically religious beliefs underpin (modern) capitalist virtues and practices.

In some respects, this book remains a slightly odd enterprise: neither quite a scholarly reconstruction, nor a sociology of bourgeois emotions, or emotions as such. With respect to the former, there is some discussion of Albert Hirschman's passions vs. interests argument; both a supplement and partial alternative to Weber's; with respect to the latter, there is, for example, no real engagement with Jon Elster, although this is very much Elster territory. Thus, in trying to pull off both feats, there is the danger of falling between stools. But there is more than enough here for the reader to learn both about Weber (at least the sociologists' Weber) *and* about the sociology of emotions, particularly as these have shaped the contemporary world of work, and thus our "life orders" in general. For this purpose, there is scholarship enough in Barbalet's book, and even the overcrowded book market and the swelling ranks of Weberiana are large enough to accommodate both a Barbalet and a Ghosh. Whereas the latter meets our need for a deeper understanding of authorial context, the former keeps open a conversation about the culture, the inner life of capitalist modernity.

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