

Humanities 5696: The Culture of Capitalism

Fall 2018
Tuesdays 7:00 – 9:50pm
Rm 5562

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Course Description

This course explores classical European social thought on the nature of capitalism and its relationship with culture, where culture is understood in both its anthropological and aesthetic senses. What is capitalism? What kind of culture—attitudes, human relationships, values, and habitus—does it promote or presuppose? This semester we will focus our attention on *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism* (1904–5), a seminal text by the German scholar Max Weber. Our aim will be to understand the nature of Weber's arguments in this work, their context in early twentieth-century social science, and the enduring relevance of this text for historians, sociologists, and economists who seek to understand long-range patterns of social change. The course presupposes no prior background in European social thought or history.

The initial weeks will be devoted to a close reading of *The Protestant Ethic* itself. We will then proceed to consider Weber's institutional history of the development of modern capitalism in *General Economic History*, and his comparative analysis of Puritanism and Confucianism in the *Economic Ethics of the World Religions*. Finally, we will evaluate how contemporary historians, social scientists, and writers have engaged with Weber's arguments and attempted to validate or critique them through empirical research.

Intended learning outcomes:

1. Students will gain familiarity with some of the fundamental arguments of modern social theory and understand their relevance for contemporary social science.
2. Students will improve their ability to read and comprehend theoretical texts in English.
3. Students will improve their ability to write thesis-based analytical essays in English.

Assessments

Participation (attendance is mandatory): 10%
 4 response papers: 20%
 Mid-term paper (ca. 7 pp.): 30% (**due Nov. 6** via e-mail)
 Long paper (ca. 15 pp.): 40% (**due Dec. 18** via e-mail)

Students may choose to submit response papers, of min. 1 full page each, on any four weekly reading assignments. Response papers should not simply describe the content of that week's reading, but rather aim to raise questions of interpretation, identify sources of difficulty, or connect the week's readings and themes to earlier ones. Generally speaking, the mid-term paper ought to focus on the meaning and interpretation of Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic*, whereas the final paper should address the ways in which Weber's work has served as a jumping-off point or inspiration for the writers discussed in the second half of the course. Neither the mid-term nor the final paper is intended to be a research paper. While students are encouraged to avail themselves of helpful secondary literature, the primary focus is the close analysis of the challenging readings that have been assigned and discussed in this course. Students are invited to choose their own topics for the mid-term and final papers. The instructor will provide a list of possible topics for those who would prefer to write on a set question.

Expectations

Incompletes will not be granted in this course. Please also note that this course enforces a zero-tolerance policy on cheating. If a student is found to have cheated or committed plagiarism, the case will be immediately referred to the head of the Humanities division for further action. If you have any questions about what constitutes proper scholarly practice, please do not hesitate to ask during class or in office hours.

Assigned Readings

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002). This book contains an English translation of the first edition (1904–5) of *The Protestant Ethic*, the core text in our course. It is essential that we all read the same translation. Please do not use any other translation of this text.

Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951). Different editions of the same translation are OK.

Max Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003). Different editions of the same translation are OK.

Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

All other assigned articles or book chapters on the syllabus are available as PDFs on the course's Canvas web page.

Recommended Works of Reference

Richard Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). An excellent source of information and further reading suggestions. If you come across a term in *The Protestant Ethic* that seems unfamiliar or especially important, this is a good first place to look.

“Introduction: The Man and his Work,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 3–74. An old but still (for its length) unsurpassed survey of Max Weber’s biography, his early twentieth-century German context, and the varied fields of intellectual inquiry to which he contributed.

Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). *The Protestant Ethic* is difficult to comprehend without some basic background in the history and theology of the Protestant Reformation. If you are confused about who Luther and Calvin were, or what “predestination” means, please consult this book for brief but lucid explanations.

Suggested Further Readings

Gordon Marshall, *In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism: An Essay on Max Weber’s Protestant Ethic Thesis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). The clearest and most accurate overview of Weber’s chain of reasoning in *The Protestant Ethic*.

Wilhelm Hennis, “Max Weber’s Central Question,” *Economy and Society* 12, no. 2 (1983): 135–80. Argues that *The Protestant Ethic* isn’t really a thesis about the origins of capitalism, but mainly a political-anthropological inquiry into the nature of modern “life conduct.”

Peter Ghosh, *Max Weber and The Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). An immensely erudite history of the composition of *The Protestant Ethic*, combined with an interpretation of its place in Weber’s oeuvre.

Richard F. Hamilton, *The Social Misconstruction of Reality: Validity and Verification in the Scholarly Community* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), chapter 3. An exhaustive enumeration of Weber’s errors of fact and interpretation in *The Protestant Ethic*.

Randall Collins, “Weber’s Last Theory of Capitalism: A Systematization,” *American Sociological Review* 45, no. 6 (1980): 925–42. A clear reconstruction of Weber’s institutional theory about the preconditions for modern bourgeois capitalism, based on a reading of his *General Economic History*.

Thomas C. Ertman, ed., *Max Weber’s Economic Ethic of the World Religions: An Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). A useful collection of essays evaluating the relevance of Weber’s writings on the religions of China, India, and ancient Israel, in light of recent scholarship.

Class Meetings and Assigned Readings

Sept. 4: Introduction and Orientation

No assigned readings

Sept. 11: *The Protestant Ethic* in its Time and Place

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 1–8, 43–47 (Denomination and Social Stratification)

George Becker, “Replication and Reanalysis of Offenbacher’s School Enrollment Study: Implications for the Weber and Merton Theses,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 4 (1997): 483–95.

Sept. 18: What was Weber Trying to Explain?

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 8–28, 47–52 (The “Spirit” of Capitalism)

Sept. 25: **No class**

Oct. 2: The Reformation and the Concept of the Calling

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 28–36, 52–66 (Luther’s Conception of the Calling)

Oct. 9: **No class [make-up during reading period]**

Oct. 16: Ascetic Protestantism

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 67–105, 128–76 (The Religious Foundations of Innerworldly Asceticism)

Oct. 23: “A Shell as Hard as Steel”

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 105–22, 176–202 (Asceticism and the Capitalist Spirit)

Oct. 30: Protestantism and Economic Development

Philip Benedict, “Faith, Fortune and Social Structure in Seventeenth-Century Montpellier,” *Past & Present* 152 (1996): 46–78.

Gordon Marshall, "The Weber Thesis and the Development of Capitalism in Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Sociology* 3, no. 2 (1979): 173–211.

Margaret C. Jacob and Matthew Kadane, "Missing, Now Found in the Eighteenth Century: Weber's Protestant Capitalist," *American Historical Review* 108, no. 1 (2003): 20–49.

Nov. 6: Max Weber's Idea of the Occident

General Economic History, pp. 275–369.

"Prefatory Remarks to *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*," in *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 356–72.

Nov. 13: The Comparative Case of China

The Religion of China, focus on pp. 13–32, 47–64, 84–170, 196–249.

Nov. 20: Confucianism and the Spirit of Capitalism

Ying-shih Yü, "Business Culture and Chinese Traditions—Toward a Study of the Evolution of Merchant Culture in Chinese History," in *Dynamic Hong Kong: Business & Culture*, ed. Wang Gungwu and Wong Siu-lun (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1997), pp. 1–84.

Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), introduction, chaps. 3 & 5.

Timothy Brook, "Weber, Mencius, and the History of Chinese Capitalism," *Asian Perspective* 19, no. 1 (1995): 79–97.

Nov. 27: Capitalism and Chinese Institutions

Economy and Society, pp. 212–241, 356–84, 1006–1069.

Gary G. Hamilton, "Why No Capitalism in China? Negative Questions in Historical, Comparative Research," in *Max Weber in Asian Studies*, ed. Andreas E. Buss (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 65–89.

Gary G. Hamilton, "Patriarchalism in Imperial China and Western Europe: A Revision of Weber's Sociology of Domination," *Theory and Society* 13, no. 3 (1984): 393–425.