

Humanities 5696: The Culture of Capitalism

Fall 2020

Mon. 10:30am–1:20pm

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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 its anthropological and sociological senses. What is capitalism? What kind of culture—attitudes, human relationships, values, and habitus—does it promote or presuppose? What is the impact of cultural norms and institutions on economic behavior?

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 social scientists 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 scholars 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%

- Students are expected to attend all class meetings and keep their Zoom camera on at all times.
- Absences will be marked unless a doctor's note or equivalent is presented.

2 short presentations on the weekly readings: 20%

- Each student will give two presentations, each lasting approx. 10 minutes, on the weekly reading assignments.

Mid-term paper (7 pp. due Nov. 2): 30%

Long paper (15 pp. due Dec. 10): 40%

The mid-term paper focuses on the meaning and interpretation of Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic*. It requires students to read Weber's core text carefully and try to critically reconstruct its argument. Students may choose to write on any of the following topics:

1. What is the "spirit of capitalism," according to Weber? Why has it mattered, historically speaking? Why does he think there *has been* such a thing? When did it exist, and what has happened to it?
2. "Rational," "rationalization," and "rationalism" are key terms in *The Protestant Ethic*. Why do you think Weber is interested in them? What do they mean? And what role do they play in his argument?
3. How does Weber describe modern capitalism? What kind of an economic system is it? What are supposed to be its distinctive features? What future is in store for it? How do you think Weber feels about it?
4. What does Weber understand by "asceticism"? What role has it played in European religious history? Why does Weber think that religious asceticism helped shape or proliferate the "spirit of capitalism"?
5. What is Weber's method in *The Protestant Ethic*? What kinds of evidence or sources does he use to make his argument? Do you think he supplies enough evidence to make his case? If not, what do you think is missing?

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. Referring to the readings from the second half of the course, students should try to answer the following question: How has empirical research corroborated, challenged, or complicated the claims that Weber makes in his writings on capitalism and religion?

Neither the mid-term nor the final paper is intended to be a research paper. Students should demonstrate their mastery of the assigned course materials in their presentations and papers.

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

All the assigned readings for this course are available as PDFs on the course's Canvas website.

The core readings by Weber are the texts collected in the volume: 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). It is essential that we all read the same translation. Please do not use any other edition of Weber's *Protestant Ethic*.

Class Meetings and Assigned Readings

Sept. 7: Introduction and orientation

No assigned readings.

Sept. 14: Denomination and social stratification

Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism* (1904–5), pp. 1–8, 43–47.

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.

Optional: Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), ch. 1.

Sept. 21: The culture and history of "economic man"

Werner Sombart, "Capitalism" (1930), in *Economic Life in the Modern Age*, ed. Nico Stehr and Reiner Grundmann (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), pp. 3–29.

Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 8–28, 47–52.

Sept. 28: The Reformation and the calling

Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 28–36, 52–66.

Optional: McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, ch. 5–9.

Oct. 5: Ascetic Protestantism

Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 67–105, 128–76.

Optional: McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, ch. 10.

Optional: Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), ch. 1, 6.

Oct. 12: “A shell as hard as steel”

Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 105–22, 176–202.

Optional: McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, ch. 11–14.

Oct. 19: In search of the “spirit” of capitalism

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

E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38 (1967): 56–97.

Tony Dickson and Hugh V. McLachlan, “In Search of ‘the Spirit of Capitalism’: Weber’s Misinterpretation of Franklin,” *Sociology* 23, no. 1 (1989): 81–89.

Oct. 26: **No class**Nov. 2: Was there a Protestant ethic?

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.

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

James A. Henretta, “The Weber Thesis Revisited: The Protestant Ethic and the Reality of Capitalism in Early America,” in *The Origins of American Capitalism: Collected Essays* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), pp. 35–70.

Nov. 9: Max Weber’s idea of the Occident

Max Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1950), pp. 275–369.

Max Weber, “Prefatory Remarks to *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*” (1920), in *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 356–72.

Randall Collins, "Weber's Last Theory of Capitalism: A Systematization," *American Sociological Review* 45, no. 6 (1980): 925–42.

Nov. 16: The Comparative Case of China

Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (1920), trans. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951), focus on pp. 13–32, 47–64, 84–170, 196–249.

Nov. 23: Confucianism, Chinese Institutions, 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.

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

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), pp. 65–89.

Nov. 30: Weber and Eurocentrism

Andrew Zimmerman, "Decolonizing Weber," *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006): 53–79.

Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 62–89.

Joshua Derman, "Max Weber and the Idea of the Occident," in *The Oxford Handbook of Max Weber*, ed. Edith Hanke, Lawrence A. Scaff, and Sam Whimster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 519–33.