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Peter Ghosh on Max Weber and *The Protestant Ethic*

David Edmonds: *Max Weber was born in 1864 in Erfurt, Saxony, the eldest child in a large and affluent bourgeois family. The clash of values between his secular father and his devout Calvinist mother would shape his entire intellectual outlook. After studying law, he spent an eclectic career in academia and as a journalist. Several years of productive work were lost to severe depression. Of all his writings, it's The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, written in 1904 and 1905, for which he is probably best known. The Oxford historian, Peter Ghosh, has spent many years researching and writing about Max Weber, who is today acknowledged as one of the most influential figures in social science.*

Nigel Warburton: Peter Ghosh, welcome to *Social Science Bites*.

Peter Ghosh: Hi.

Nigel Warburton: The topic we are going to focus on is Max Weber and *The Protestant Ethic*. I wonder if we could just begin by sketching a little bit about his life?

Peter Ghosh: OK. He is born in 1864 in Germany, and actually he is run down -- dies in 1920 after the end of the First World War, so a little premature, mid-50s.

And the big mistake in many ways is to look at his life in terms of the political narrative - which is so obvious. We must remember that at least the hidden half of German history is an academic and intellectual history: that's crucial to him.

Nigel Warburton: Why is it a mistake?

Peter Ghosh: Well, shall we say in Germany 1871, at a super-structural level Bismarck is unifying Germany with blood and iron; but beneath all of that there's German life, and German life, in fact, has had a national identity which has rested on academic enquiry. The German states have more universities than the whole of the rest of Europe put together, and this is a massive part of their national identity, and still is today.

Nigel Warburton: As a thinker though, what was the main trajectory that he took?

Peter Ghosh: Well, that's a big question. If I was going to isolate one central feature it is that when he's growing up in his teens, twenties, thirties, the idea that there are agreed values and views about how you behave is breaking down. So, for example, in German politics, although Germany is notionally unified, in fact someone like Bismarck is going round sort of saying 'Well I hate socialists, I hate Catholics they are enemies of the Reich', but equally you've got someone like Nietzsche who is saying 'Well, actually as a matter of personal lifestyle, do we have to believe in God? No we don't, it has no public consequence at all', and so on. And in that sort of sense values are breaking down. And

Weber is in fact very exceptional: most people say when that's happening, 'Wow, this is a chaos, this is a crisis', but Weber says 'Well no, no, this is the reality, and you've got to live with it.'

Nigel Warburton: And in terms of intellectual discipline, what was his original area of study?

Peter Ghosh: One biographical fact: father is quintessential mainstream liberal bourgeois, mother is a reforming, what we would call a Christian socialist - and these are the really two crucial parts of his identity. So his academic training is in law, and this is immensely important; but, nonetheless, equally important is the whole engagement with his mother which goes on throughout teen-age and the 20s, on religious thinking.

Nigel Warburton: For most people, Max Weber is identified with an explanation of capitalism in terms of the Protestant Ethic. Now, for those who haven't encountered that idea, could we begin by giving a straightforward account of what he said about that relationship?

Peter Ghosh: Probably the simplest way to describe *The Protestant Ethic* is it's a historical description and explanation of what modern life is like. A tricky point about it for readers is that when you're looking at the text, in fact a lot of it is about 17th century theology, and this is very off-putting. But this is not, by any stretch of the imagination, simply a work of history: that is complete nonsense, although some commentators have gone down that road. This is without question an attempt to tell you what modern life is like; but he's taking a historical road into it.

Nigel Warburton: What, then was the importance of Protestantism in this journey that he took?

Peter Ghosh: The first thing to say biographically is, and this is what comes out of the engagement with his mother, is that he is not a religious believer, but he also gets on well with his mother, who is a very devoted, but thoroughly up-to-date, modern, socially-reforming sort of Christian. So Weber's analysis is to say 'I don't believe in God, and as a matter of fact, most people, like my Dad, don't believe in God, in the liberal educated Bourgeoisie. Nonetheless, if you think historically how the modern world was shaped, then I think Christianity is totally crucial.' Next step: the thing that interests Weber about religion is not in principle theology at all, but it's all about ethics. And again, rather surprisingly for a text that had been written about so much, *The Protestant Ethic* is indeed, as the title tells you, a text about ethics.

Nigel Warburton: *We have Protestantism and the ethics associated with Protestantism, but what's that being contrasted with?*

Peter Ghosh: Weber's idea is that traditional religions generate universal ethical schemes. This is precisely the world he thinks is not existing in the Germany he is growing up in, and traditional religions: it could mean Catholicism, or it could mean Lutheranism. So Protestantism and *The Protestant Ethic* title is not all brands of Protestantism. So then Weber has what is frankly, if you're a historian as I am, a bit of a wacko idea, but what's important here is the logic of his argument, rather than its historical correctness. Weber says, 'OK, so you've got traditional religions, and you've got the modern state where in fact, by and large, most educated people in the German Bourgeoisie do not believe in religion and so what is the transition?' And he says the transition comes, for example, with Calvinism: he's very interested in predestinarian or the theology of predestination. The Calvinist

God in predestination theology is not something that the individual on Earth can know, and Weber actually uses the Latin phrase *deus absconditus*, which means the hidden God, and Weber said, 'Ah yes, this theology is really the most excellent training for the modern world because we live in a world where in fact we have all these impersonal powers around us, which, again, we don't know exactly where they're coming from, and we can't control them.' So what he's saying is that in fact this theology is a terrific training ground for modernity and produces a modern sort of ethic.

Nigel Warburton: *You've mentioned these hidden powers, but what are they?*

Peter Ghosh: OK, again these are all things which are very recognisable to the ordinary citizen in the street, and indeed the fact that Weber thinks in these terms is one of the obvious reasons why he's canonically so fashionable. So, 'hidden powers' means things like bureaucracy, and it means capitalism: those are the two really obvious ones. It could also mean in fact the whole academic enterprise as well.

Nigel Warburton: *Well, let's take capitalism because that's one that Weber's most famous for discussing. What possible relationship could capitalism have with a religious outlook?*

Peter Ghosh: This is where we've got to go back to our ethical argument. Remember, start with the traditional religion, traditional ethics, and they give you obvious moral commands, things like 'love thy neighbour', and Weber says 'Well. Calvinism is rather different. Calvinism hasn't entirely jacked in 'love thy neighbour', but it's got a totally new reading of it, and according to Calvinism, 'love thy neighbour' means what you do is you serve the modern, specialised multifunctional community by doing your job.' And you can see that's taken you miles away from 'love thy neighbour'. He's actually saying the best way to love thy neighbour is to be efficient corporation man.

Nigel Warburton: *Well that gives a very clear link with capitalism, but what about the role of bureaucracy in relation to the Protestant outlook?*

Peter Ghosh: Bureaucracy is not one of the subjects that's much touched on in *The Protestant Ethic*, but nonetheless in Weber's life history, he has to work quite hard to decide which out of these two, capitalism or bureaucracy, is for him the most useful model in which to discuss modernity. And in fact he decides that bureaucracy is the most useful theoretical model, but that capitalism, and I'm going to quote here, is 'the most fateful power of modern life', i.e. as a unique historical force, then capitalism is in many ways the most distinctive reality of his own 20th century.

Nigel Warburton: *Just in passing, it would be really interesting to know how something as irritating as bureaucracy could be the key to understanding modernity?*

Peter Ghosh: Yes, not by any means the sole key. This is where you've got to go back to have a little stereotype about German life. If I'm speaking, for example to an English-speaking audience, this is a slightly curious one. What we have to remember is that whereas in this country and in America, our sense of how public life works revolves a lot round ideas of individual freedom, or if you like representative assemblies. In Western Europe, the foundation of public life lies in law, and a bureaucrat is a trained lawyer. The crucial point is the tight, tight intersection between bureaucracy and law. So, for example, Weber is a big, huge fan of things like human rights, for example. So, when

Weber's looking at ordinary German life in peacetime before 1914, he says 'Well actually we've got an excellent bureaucracy. And if what you need to do is simply run the society so that the people in it are, their basic needs are catered for, then in fact bureaucracy is a very, very good system': that's why it's so crucial for a German. So the obvious critical question is 'How does it look for an English person or an American person?' I would suggest that we do come from a rather different cultural background, obviously; but nonetheless, I'm sure I don't need to tell any listener that bureaucracy, even shall we say in, you know, ultra-libertarian America, bureaucracy is a massive presence. If you're a really right-thinking neo-con, what you do these days is you use the bureaucracy, you don't just sort of sit around and whinge about it; well, no, you *do* whinge about it, but you also use it.

Nigel Warburton: *Now, another important aspect of Weber's thinking revolves around rationality. What did he have to say about that in The Protestant Ethic?*

Peter Ghosh: This is a mega theme. And if you were going to say there was one Weber theme I want to take home, this is it. *The Protestant Ethic* is in fact the first Weber text actually to discuss this subject, and it's also without question the best description he gives of how rationality works in modern life. So this is where we need to go a little way back to religion. Traditional religion is giving you an ethical scheme about how to behave like a genuinely good person in your life. This is what Weber would say this is all about, in our language, 'real life'. He would say this is the substance of life, but what Weber wants to say, which again I think will be quite recognisable, is that as the modern world has evolved, we have had to evolve all of these impersonal technical, technocratic procedures to cope with the fact that we live in a mass society. We are back to impersonal powers here. The crucial thing to say about these powers is that actually they do control our conduct in quite important ways, and in that sense they're like ethics, but we don't read them as ethical, and let me give you an example, and the simplest one is capitalism: Weber says, 'Well', and he says this in *The Protestant Ethic*, however briefly, he says 'Well, do we or do we not think we have to obey market forces? We do. In that sense, our life is in some sense controlled by market forces, but do we read them as ethical, in the old-fashioned sense? No we don't.' There's a very important point here about the meaning of the word 'ethic', that Weber, therefore, has an idea about an old-fashioned, totally common-sensical right and wrong ethic; but he also has an idea about a modern ethic. And *The Protestant Ethic* is about the rise of these modern ethics, these impersonal, formal, functional ethics, and the person who can cope best of all with them, is the person who behaves, as he calls it, 'rationally.'

Nigel Warburton: *What does that mean, 'behaves rationally'?*

Peter Ghosh: OK. Now we're going to go back to Calvinist theology. Weber's idea, again, I said, I think is historically very dodgy, but never mind, Weber's idea is that the Calvinist is utterly shit-scared about eternal salvation. The Calvinists, according to Weber, organises literally every fraction and compartment of their life to make it clear to God that, you know, whether or not he's doing the right thing, he certainly looks like he's doing the right thing. It's like constructing a dam, you mustn't allow any water through anywhere which might for a moment give anybody the wrong idea that you were misbehaving. What interests Weber about this is not particularly ideas about sin or the afterlife, the point is that this is therefore an education on how to organise your life in its totality in a consistent systematic way, and that is modern rational conduct.

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Nigel Warburton: *So rationality is discovering the means to achieve a certain end, and in this particular case, Calvinists have a very clearly defined end, and they seek around for the most efficient means of achieving that end?*

Peter Ghosh: That's exactly right. If you then translate that back into the modern context, this is this underlying theme in *The Protestant Ethic*: the central preoccupation is what Weber calls 'the profession vocational calling', it's all the same word in German. And what interests Weber is that, yes, the Calvinist, as you rightly say, is totally focused on doing his best, at least, to secure salvation in the afterlife. Modern man has got a completely different goal, which is the calling or professional vocation, and I quote 'as an absolute end in itself', and that, as it were, has taken the place of the afterlife. So that modern corporate man, for example, has totally rationalised his or her conduct, with a view to maximising professional performance.

Nigel Warburton: *So, in Weber's world, once we've defined ourselves by our role in society, then it's almost as if forces, hidden forces in society, encourage us to become hyper-rational?*

Peter Ghosh: This takes us back to so-called impersonal forces. One good way to look at this is to take you back to his legal education. The law Weber was interested in was private and commercial law, and indeed actually, funnily enough, Roman law, which is actually the same thing. German law at that date, all the theoretical discussions about law, they're totally obsessed with the idea of the formal perfection of the scheme, they see law as a purely formal instrument, designed to fulfil the material needs and claims upon it that come from outside, and that's why Weber has this exceptionally strong distinction in his mind always between conduct that is, as he says, formally rational, and conduct which is in the material world, which may or may not be more or less rational. To give you an example, in the world of capitalism and bureaucracy, one of the things Weber says about capitalism, not in *The Protestant Ethic*, but elsewhere, is that capitalism is actually substantively quite rational, he thinks, and most of the history of the 20th century would support him, I'm not so sure about the 21st century, that capitalism was wonderful at producing mass goods for everyman. That's substantive rationality, that's a pure material output; but it's also formally rational, because it's operated by all these rationalising individuals who are hard at work, fulfilling their function within the division of labour to the maximum possible efficiency.

Nigel Warburton: *So Weber's describing this world, is there any room for somebody to step outside of these forces operating on them?*

Peter Ghosh: This, again, takes us then to a very, very famous passage in the conclusion because Weber is describing this assembly of formal networks around us, and here we have a little textual point that in German he calls it a 'housing hard as steel', briefly a steel housing. Famously this was mistranslated by Talcott Parsons in 1930 as 'iron cage', but this is unquestionably a mistranslation, and is known to be so. Clearly the implication of 'cage' is to say that the modern world we live in is in some sense a prison. That's not true, and that's not subtle at all, because in fact the world we live in is not a prison, we can leave it, there is no Berlin Wall stopping us. century. He's saying, 'ok, yes, the frameworks we inhabit, they're steel-hard: we may not like market forces, we may not like The image of the steel housing, I think, conveys his meaning very well, and I think is saying something quite interesting and I would suggest quite relevant about the world we do actually live in in the 21st

technology, we may not like technocracy, we may not like faceless individuals simply saying, you know, I'm going to put you on hold. There's all sorts of things we don't like, in a sort of ultimate human sense, we know that there's something slightly impoverishing about all these sort of mass-production techniques, all this technology, or whatever, but Weber says, he doesn't actually say 'is it a cage?' but you could say is it a cage, no it's not, it's a housing. He specifically says housing is a place where you live. The point is of course, is that because it's a house, you could always leave it. We all live in this world where we know there are imperfections, and in theory, although it's true that the space to flee to is running out, but nonetheless in theory if we wanted to, we could still go to the Amazon, or we could go to Patagonia or wherever. The question is, do we do it? And the answer is no we don't. For example, the hippies in the 1960s are quite an interesting example, you know, in a very modern affluent culture, you do get a movement like that for a brief moment, but was it sustainable? It was not, and that's really what the whole point of the steel housing is. It is a bit impoverishing, but the question is, it's also delivering things, it's delivering for example mass goods and services, or efficient bureaucracy.

Nigel Warburton: *For Marx, the point of describing the world was to change it. Is that how Weber saw his activity?*

Peter Ghosh: The relationship between Marx and Weber is a very interesting one, much discussed. Weber is growing up just actually when the diffusion of Marx in Western thought is really absolutely at a peak, so Weber is perfectly well aware who Marx is, you know, and has read a certain amount. Nonetheless, let's go back to his two parents. What do they give him? They gave him a religious heritage, and a liberal heritage, and those are the crucial heritages so that whilst, for example, when Weber puts a word like 'capitalism' in the title of *The Protestant Ethic*, you can tell there's some sort of Marxist echo there, nonetheless, Weber is not responding directly to Marx. Next question: did Weber want to change the world? Well, Weber isn't against changing the world, in fact in his ordinary day to day politics, Weber, by the sounds of his day was way to the left of centre, he wasn't a socialist but he was very, very left of centre, I mean today, you know, he would probably be prosecuted for being free-thinking, but Weber's problematic is all about, on the one hand we've got this huge heritage coming in from history of all these, as it were, gradually rationalising constraining forces, and he's desperate in fact to preserve free space, and for Weber therefore, the modern situation is not, as Marx said, 'oh you can have a revolution and in fact completely reform it.' For Weber, the crucial point for the modern world is to try to protect some small free personal space if you possibly can within all these forces of constraint. I mean, so for example you take something like capitalism, Weber simply says, realistically, if you think you're going to get rid of it, you're mistaken, and of course, the whole history of the 20th and 21st century tells us that he was bang right about that. That is an obvious difference from Marx.

Nigel Warburton: *Weber is usually held up as one of the great founding figures of the social sciences. Do you think that's an accurate picture of his place in history?*

Peter Ghosh: If you ask how he's rated today in the social sciences, and in many other sciences besides, unquestionably this is a man, you know, who is definitely top of the hit parade, no two ways about it. Whether people read him correctly or accurately is a slightly different question. What I would like to say about Weberian social science, or indeed for Weber, the academic enterprise in

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general, I think he's very relevant, and there are two very simple reasons I can give for this. One is that Weber understood very well that specialisation of function was not something that was just happening in society at large. Specialisation is something that's going on in the academic world all the time, and let us be honest about this as disciplines are perpetually divided up, that generally does mean a narrowing of horizons. Weber says, well on the one hand, actually you can't buck the trend. This is all part of rationalisation, but he also says, and this is equally creditable, 'hey guys, wake up, watch out, don't for a moment think that because you're really, really good at your little area, that this is somehow in itself an adequate perspective on the world'. So that was one thing. The second thing about Weber and social science, very important, coming back to a thing I was saying right at the beginning is that Weber understands that actually all academics, these days, are coming from quite different cultural backgrounds, and this makes them I think very, very well-suited to the modern world where this is undeniably true, and where in fact the academic community today, actually it's always been pretty international, but it is clearly very international, Indians in Chicago and Chinese in Cambridge, and so on, and this is where Weber's methodological insistence that it's possible to start from a particular value standpoint, you know, you can sort of say, ok, 'I'm coming from such and such a background, and therefore I want to have the following sort of enquiries', and Weber says, that's fine, but, he says, when you actually execute the enquiry itself, the results of the enquiry must be expressed in terms which are comprehensible and defensible to anybody from whatever background.

Nigel Warburton: *Peter Ghosh, thank you very much.*

Peter Ghosh: Thank you.