

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Peter Ghosh, *A Historian Reads Max Weber: Essays on the Protestant Ethic*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008. 302+xiii pp. □ 58.00 hardcover (978-3-447-05777-6).

Peter Ghosh's intention in this collection of essays, most of which had been previously published, is to provide an historical explanation of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [*PESC*]. This is a text that while widely celebrated Ghosh says has failed to attract a satisfactory historical account of its origins, genesis and meaning. Ghosh writes that history by exploring Weber's sources: in that sense Ghosh's research is entirely empirical in contrast with what he sees as the everyday interpretation of the text that characterizes sociological approaches to it. Ghosh defines sociology as "trans-historical", an understanding neither empirical nor historical.

The eight substantive essays that constitute this book have come out of Ghosh's research for an historical edition of the *PESC* which is still in progress, and which promises to be a monumental work of lasting significance. *A Historian Reads Max Weber* is enormously useful in providing background and context to much of Weber's best known but possibly most misunderstood text. Ghosh illuminates the *PESC* by examining less than obvious themes: Weber's experience and knowledge of the Netherlands (ch. 3), his neglected — indeed lost — St Louis address (ch. 4), and marginal utility theory and the *PESC* (ch. 9). These all contribute to situating and explaining the *PESC* and Weber's own development as a thinker.

The strengths and the weaknesses of the opening essay, "Max Weber's idea of 'Puritanism': a case study in the empirical construction of *The Protestant Ethic*," are emblematic of Ghosh's approach throughout. It reveals the diverse, obscure and neglected sources Weber drew upon in his construction of the concepts of "Puritanism" and "ascetic Protestantism." We typically assume that these latter were simply part of the religious formation of the seventeenth century subjects that Weber discusses in the *PESC*, but Ghosh demonstrates that in his selection and use of historical sources Weber literally forms afresh what are entirely novel categories. Ghosh's erudition and dogged scholarship are extremely impressive; the sense he provides of Weber's craft in shaping, even

distorting, the extensive and amorphous array of historical material into a coherent and clearly directed set of concepts is salutary.

But Ghosh fails to take his investigation of the creation of the text of the *PESC* into the text itself. For instance, Ghosh provides an extensive discussion of Edward Dowden, a Protestant Irish historian, and Weber's use of his work, noting that Dowden's books are among the *PESC*'s "most cited secondary works on religious history and ideas." Yet Weber's misreading of Dowden escapes Ghosh's comment: Weber's assertion of the individual Calvinist's deep spiritual loneliness is supported by a note quoting Dowden's discussion of John Bunyan, but where Dowden refers to social relations between man and man Weber takes him to refer to relations between man and God. This is no small slip. A treatment of the text of the *PESC*, which sees it only as point of departure for an investigation of Weber's sources and which neglects the argument of the text itself, has to be regarded as at least limited. Ghosh does consider Weber's argument, but selectively and largely to demonstrate authorial development: textual analysis is beyond Ghosh's brief as an historian — it is not empirical.

There are similar problems with Ghosh's treatment of Judaism in the *PESC*. The detailed biographical recovery of Weber's early interest in the Old Testament and of his family's contact with Jews is impressive. But Weber's claim regarding the absence of the organization of industrial labour by Jews is not historically investigated. When, as in Russia during the 1890s and in the US from 1890 to 1914, circumstances permitted a class of Jewish industrialists to emerge, they did employ Jewish workers (as Arcadius Kahan, for instance, has shown). Weber defined the Jews in terms of the Christian transcendence of Judaism, so that Jewish religious and ritual elements rejected in the Pauline invention of Christianity are reified by Weber into an ideal-type conceptualization of the Jews. That "Judaism" in Weber's writing is a methodological artefact can only be appreciated by examining the texts, which Ghosh does only incompletely, and not by examining their sources. If he had done so Ghosh might have saved himself the embarrassment of defending Weber's concept of the Jews as a pariah people and agreeing with Weber that religious observance was the agency of Jewish separation.

The most disappointing essay in the collection is on Weber and William James, a topic that contains a genuine historical puzzle that Ghosh fails to recognize, and which deserves attention. The animus of the essay is Wilhelm Hennis's claim that Weber owed an intellectual debt to James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Hennis's argument is flawed, as Ghosh shows. But in sketching the differences between Weber and James the image of James which emerges is almost unrecognizable,

based as it is only on a very limited reading of *Varieties*. Ghosh's essay opens with the claim that the "two men had met in Boston at the end of October 1904," a statement supported with a footnote claiming that the "record of the meeting comes in the Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism'." There is no such record.

In "The Protestant Sects" Weber argues that the origins of the American basis of credit worthiness is through membership of associations, because membership acquired through ballot testifies to a person's moral worth. Weber says that this proposition is either not understood or denied by "some cultured Americans," a fact, Weber immediately goes on to say, that "was affirmed to me by William James." Weber's reference to James here is not to report a meeting at all, although one is possibly alluded to, but to legitimate a view of American development that many Americans, Weber is concerned, would not recognize. In her discussion of their American visit, Marianne Weber not only neglects to mention Weber's supposed meeting with James but fails to refer to James at all. Weber's letters from America contain no reference to James. Neither is there anything in James's writing, including his correspondence, which refers to a meeting with Weber. Scaff's nomination of a date for the meeting, referred to by Ghosh, is a deduction concerning opportunity premised on a simplistic reading of the text. A closer engagement with the text could have led Ghosh to a more interesting historical exploration than has hitherto been provided.

The flaws of this book will not diminish its usefulness for the serious student of Weber and the *PESC*. Its scholarship offers new insight into Weber's sources. It complements but does not replace the "everyday" reading of Weber Ghosh contemptuously dismisses.

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