Weber, Max (1864-1920)
Max Weber is widely regarded as the greatest figure in the history of the social sciences, and as one of the founders of Sociology as a discipline. His most influential works include The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905-06 [trans.1958, New York]) and Economy and Society (1907-08 [trans.1968, Berkeley]). His writings on the economic ethic of the world religions (1915-16), which deal with ancient Judaism (Ancient Judaism [trans.1952, Glencoe, IL]), Buddhism and Hinduism (The Religion of India [trans.1958, New York] and The Religion of China [trans.1951, New York]), have had powerful influence on scholarship in each of these areas, as well as setting the agenda for the study of cultural influences on economic development. His writings on the modern bureaucratic state, the nature of political authority and leadership, charisma, and modernity as "rationalization" and "disenchantment" have also been influential. Moreover, Weber has had an influence in such diverse fields as international relations and political theory, in the history of law, and in philosophy and the philosophy of social science for his methodological writings, particularly in relation to the fact-value distinction and the idea of interpretive or Verstehende sociology.

Weber was born Karl Emil Maximilian Weber on April 21, 1864, into a family of wealthy industrialists and linen merchants with international connections, who had a linen factory in Oerlinghausen, in Westphalia, in the northwest part of Germany. On his mother's side there were professors as well as industrialists, of Huguenot origin. He grew up in an atmosphere not only of wealth, but of political power, intellectual distinction, and religiously motivated service. Weber's parents were, however, on the margins of wealth and power rather than at the center. Weber's father was a younger son in this family, and Max Jr. His father pursued a legal and political career, which Weber himself seemed poised to follow. His most famous book, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism contains thinly concealed elements of the business history of his family, as do passages of Economy and Society. His mother, Helene Fallenstein, was highly educated and influenced by the socially-conscious Protestant theology of the time.

Weber studied law, but also attended lectures in economics, ancient history, philosophy and theology. He enjoyed student life, joining a fraternity, drinking beer, and playing cards. He fulfilled his obligatory military service by training in the officer corps of the army. He settled down to his legal studies after returning to Berlin in 1884, concentrated on the law and legal history, briefly clerked at a District Court, took law exams, and completed more military service. He became a doctoral student under Levin Goldschmidt, and wrote a dissertation, "Development of the principle of joint liability and the separate fund in the public trading company from the household and trade
communities in the Italian cities" (1889), based on hundreds of Italian and Spanish sources. The text traced, in the form of highly elaborated series of legal citations, a long sequence of incremental developments in the European law of commercial contracts through a variety of legal jurisdictions. Like many histories of law it recorded the small, step-by-step, adjustments and extensions of the law to new circumstances and new kinds of cases over hundreds of years, in the course of which significant changes were produced in the meaning of the law itself. The puzzle that Weber wanted to solve by this incrementalist approach is the problem of the emergence of the modern law of corporations (which limits personal liability and allows fictitious persons or corporations to be liable) from the world of ancient law in which there were no corporations, and in which the only means for the accumulation of capital in support of a large scale project, such as the shipping of goods for sale in distant markets, required such things as personal guarantees and hostages.

To become a professor, he needed to complete a second dissertation (1891), which used a similar incrementalist approach and an unusual set of legal documents to address a long-term transformation, in this case the decline of the Roman empire and its slave-based economy and the rise of serfdom. The dissertation used his knowledge of medieval land tenure law to illuminate the Roman agrarian situation. It was characteristically bold and controversial, and, though, Weber later dismissed it, the argument is nevertheless interesting. Weber assumed that the Roman Colonial land surveyors mapped different types of land tenure differently, so that untaxed lease rights from public land were only roughly measured, while private (taxed) lots were more precisely measured. This was not an assumption that he could substantiate in the legal sources, though it made sense. He then argued that the private lots were too small for subsistence. This meant that the poorer landowners needed to plant on public land to survive, placing them in competition for this land with the rich, who could use slaves, and eventually were degraded to the status of slaves. But at the same time, as a result of the shortage of slave labor, slaves rose in status and were given serf-like privileges, producing a convergence between the two groups that led to the two-tiered order based on unfree, but privileged, labor that characterized the European agricultural system for the next millennium.

Serfdom was only abolished in Russia in the 1860's and had been, in one form or another, central to European agriculture at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its decline and transformation had profound consequences that were being worked out in Weber's time, and the historical debates over it had a strongly political character. He also became involved in the policy issues that arose in the course of the transformation of agriculture. Although Weber later became famous for his distinction between science and politics, the relation between his own activities as a scholar and as a person involved in politics were nevertheless close. The character and ultimate historical meaning of modern capitalism was a great theme of nineteenth century thought, and such questions as the legal origins of private property were hotly debated. It is characteristic of Weber's thought that these issues appear, but in a form that is different from the usual form, often because he has converted them into an incrementalist issue about the development of the relevant institutions.
The *Verein für Sozialpolitik* (Association for Social Policy) was a body that tried to produce an expert consensus to guide and influence state policy. Weber joined this association, and was employed to produce a study of “The conditions of the agricultural workers in East Elbian regions of Germany,” a topic of considerable political interest to him, as it involved the economic interests of the Prussian estates, which were reeling from the globalization of the wheat market, a source of world wide economic instability as well as class conflict between the producers, who wanted protective tariffs, the workers, who opposed them, and the agricultural laborers, who were leaving and being replaced by less costly Polish labor. The success of the study enabled him to change careers. He was given a professorial appointment in Economics at Freiburg in 1893.

At this point Weber was a legal historian, but the legal issues he was concerned with were institutional and economic in character, as he turned to economics and policy, his thought incorporated other traditions, and there is controversy over his response to various thinkers. He read the works of the German Historical School of economics and more generally in Socialist theory, historians of antiquity and ancient religion, and as a student had read neo-Kantian philosophy and theology. As an adult he encountered the works of Nietzsche, which figure in complex ways in his thinking. At Freiburg he learned from the probabilistic theorist von Kries.

Weber was later appointed in Economics at Heidelberg, the university with which he was most closely associated. Weber did not teach at Heidelberg for long. After the death of his father, with whom he had quarreled about his mother, he fell into a state of mental anguish, and quit teaching. After some recuperative traveling he returned to Heidelberg, and to an active role as an editor and author, and to the writing of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. During this time he had close relations to a circle which included the philosopher Emil Lask and the younger scholars György Lukács and Karl Jaspers.

The core problem of the essay is accounting for the disruption and replacement of traditional economic life. He argued that it was in part— the part being the distinctive human type of highly self-disciplined, ascetic, rational capitalist— the indirect effect of Protestantism. The connection was complex. Reformation theology, and particularly Calvinism, altered the problem of salvation. The doctrine was a development of issues deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. The omniscience and omnipotence of God implies that God knows who will be saved. These persons, the Elect, believed to be a small number, are thus predestined for salvation. Weber reasoned that the doctrine of predestination was psychologically intolerable and produced deep anxiety, which had to be allayed by pastoral assurances based on some ancillary doctrines, such as the idea of callings (“Science as a Vocation” 1917 [trans. in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* 1946, New York] and “Politics as a Vocation” 1919 [trans. in *Political Writings* 1994, Cambridge]). This anxiety, however, had to be deeply concealed, as feelings of doubt were held to be a sign that one was not among the elect. Pastors, however, needed something for their flock to relieve them of the terror produced by the doctrine of predestination.

“Calling” or “vocation” were originally terms that applied only to religious vocations. The Protestants, however, extended this notion to apply to worldly occupations (an example of
the same kind of incrementalist approach of his legal studies). Protestants taught that faithful work in a calling was a sign of election.

Weber argued that this combination of doctrines created a novel and powerful psychological sanction for conduct. To assure oneself that one was saved one could strive to live up the standard of doing one's daily work as though it was God's command, and (because predestination had the effect of making the idea of sin and forgiveness meaningless) to live one's life as a whole in accordance with God's particular assignment of a calling. A major element of this was asceticism, hostility to fleshly pleasures and entertainment, of which God would have disapproved. The theological premise thus had the indirect effect of producing a personality which, in the appropriate setting, becomes the austere, abstemious, rationalizing capitalist. These religiously motivated businessmen were economic revolutionaries, who transformed the areas of commerce and manufacturing they entered. They rationalized the workplace, invested for the long term, and sought to expand markets beyond traditional customer bases. The relation between capitalism and religion in this case is one of "elective affinity," as Weber put it. The two reinforced one another, with capitalism bringing religious success, and religion bringing capitalistic success.

There are many controversial features of this account, some of which result from the fact that the doctrinal element of the ideal-type which Weber constructed, which relied heavily on Calvinism, only imperfectly corresponded to the theological doctrine of much of Protestantism in Europe, especially where Lutheran national churches existed. Nevertheless the account is deeply compelling, in part because the depictions of the believer accord so well with a character type that unquestionably did leave a profound mark on western culture.

Weber closed the essay with some prophetic remarks about the course of western culture, and an important analysis of the cultural situation created by the secularization of the "ethic." He said that the rosy blush of the Reformation's "laughing heir," the Enlightenment, has faded, and that the inexorable demands of the modern, rationally organized economy, now enforce the organization of work into "callings" but strip them of their religious meaning. This process, in which rationalization strips the world of meaning, or disenchants it, in his phrase, was to become a major theme of his thought. The sacralization of work by the Protestants gave way as well, so that today in the United States, as he put it, even the accumulation of wealth takes on the character of sport. The people in the machine of capitalism become divided beings, "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1905-6]1958: 182).

In his late lectures on economic history (*General Economic History* 1919-1920 [trans. [1927]1981 New Brunswick, NJ]), Weber restated the thesis with some different emphases, resulting from his comparative studies of religion and economics. Weber came to see the rational organization of free labor as especially crucial, and indeed to be the distinguishing feature of modern capitalism in contrast to booty capitalism, trade, and political capitalism, all of which were found in the ancient world. The crucial moment came when the craftsman was replaced by the worker, and the owner of the firm supplied tools, exacted discipline, and assumed the risks. This change was, Weber thought, a precondition for the mechanization of work, with the goal of saving labor costs and in
this sense rationalizing labor. Rational accounting methods, rational price-setting for the purpose of profit, and a system of law with calculable results also developed at about this time, and were also necessary conditions for the development of capitalism. But the worldwide expansion and continued success of capitalism did not rest on the foundation of religious belief.

Nevertheless, Weber believed that in some settings the original influence of Protestantism on capitalism persisted. Weber traveled to the United States, where he spent several months, traveling widely, and participating (as an Agricultural Economist) in the scholarly meetings of the 1904 St. Louis World's fair. His American experience was the basis of his essay “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” (1906 [trans. in From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology 1946]), in which he describes how church membership served to assure conformity as well as to establish the credit-worthiness of its members, preserving the strength of asceticism into Weber's own time, and accounting for the puritanism and conventionalism of American life.

The 1903-1907 Methodological Essays
Weber was an important methodological thinker. His major 'methodological' essays, were published between 1904 and 1907, including Roscher and Knies: : The Logical Problems of Historical Economics (1903-1905 [trans.1975]), “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy" (1904 [trans. in The Methodology of the Social Sciences 1949, New York]) “Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences” (1905 [trans. in The Methodology of the Social Sciences 1949]), and Critique of Stammler (1907 [trans.1977, New York]). In “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy" Weber argued that to construct a historical explanation, or even an object of explanation, requires conceptualization, which he examined in terms of the concept of ideal-types, which he distinguished from mere classifications, which simply sorted objects into categories. He then argued that these conceptualizations have a number of problematic properties. One involves interests: what makes sense to us, in our historical setting, is the product of our values, experiences, and our own culture. History is thus a discipline that works on the small segment of the empirical that is meaningful to us, and that segment is already at least partly conceptualized.

This is a form of historical relativism: our concepts differ from the concepts of others, so the content of history is different. But history is also factual and causal, and to some extent, then, not subject to this sort of relativism. In “The Logic of the Cultural Sciences," he speaks of the “real causal processes" which our concepts give an intelligible form to. In “Objectivity' he argues that "genetic ideal-types,"are themselves relative to a culture-bound historical interest: the calculation of probabilities is fully objective, but the selection and conceptualization of the conditions cannot be. These are inherent limitations of social “science." The meaningfulness of its concepts derives from sources outside of the science itself, as he says in the “Objectivity" essay– these sciences must speak “the language of life"(Gesammelte Aufsatze zur Wissenschaftslehre [1922]1988: 209), a language which is itself necessarily bound to a historical moment and its values.
The Economic Ethics of the World Religions

During the years after The Protestant Ethic, Weber continued to write about religion, but in order to test The Protestant Ethic thesis by expanding it to a general study of the relation between religion and “economic ethics” focused especially on one puzzle-- the fact that a rational capitalism developed only in the west. This enlarged study had many results, and transformed the problem with which he had begun. To understand his approach in these diverse studies of the Asian religions and ancient Judaism, it is useful to begin with a much quoted passage written as part of the introduction he wrote to the collected studies of religion:

Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the “world images” that have been created by “ideas” have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. (Gesammelte Aufsatze zur Religionssoziologie [1920]1988 [trans. in From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology 1946])

His early legal studies were implicitly about interests: contract law is a means of reconciling the interests of the contractors. And the jurisprudential theory of the time emphasized the concept of interests. His approach in his later studies was to show the interplay of interests characteristic of particular institutional forms or orders, and to identify their effects on “rationalization” both within the sphere of religion and in other spheres. Religious ideas are both the source of interests, “ideal interests” that include salvation as well as honor and similar “interests” that we would now regard as “cultural,” as well as world-images. But they operate in a world of other kinds of interests, including material interests, with which they can combine, or be stymied, or develop in relation to other interests in a wide variety of ways. Particular combinations of institutional forms, feudalism, priesthood, monarchy, bureaucracy, kin relations, and so forth produce characteristic interests and conflicts for religion to relate to.

The theme of rationalization is both central and puzzling. Weber identified processes of rationalization internal to each religious tradition. In the case of ancient Judaism, for example, the prophets were the rationalizers, and their prophetic messages were designed to iron out internal conflicts in the religious tradition and its world-image. He noted that merchants tend to seek a kind of practical rationalization of their spheres, while the Priestly class tends to seek a theoretical rationalization: these are examples of “elective affinities." But interests, especially status interests, a powerful kind of “ideal” interest, often conflict with rationalization. And fully rationalized religious ideologies may prove to be difficult to live with, as was the case with Calvinism.

A general question which all salvation religions must answer, and which drives rationalization, is the issue of theodicy: the problem of the relationship between destiny and merit, or, put differently, the problem of why God allows evil. The Chinese solution was to reconcile destiny and merit by recourse to popular magical practice, which in turn...
produced a kind of fearful conservativism. Ancient Judaism, in contrast, devised solutions that excluded and repudiated magic, and this carried over into Christianity and consequently into the western worldview in a way that favored the eventual development of science and technology. Rationalization in the religious realm, of which reformation Protestantism is an example, can produce some peculiar historical results because producing new coherence or consistency in religious doctrines characteristically serves to produce conduct that is discrepant with normal conduct in other “spheres” of life, as it did with the early Protestants. Thus it is a potentially powerful source of change.

The larger puzzle about rationalization is this. The west developed a series of institutions, notably the law, that were also unusually “rational,” religions that had a minimum of magic, administrative structures that were also particularly rational, and science first developed fully in the west. Yet one can see processes of rationalization in the histories of non-western cultures. Why did they fail to produce the same kinds of effects? And why did the distinctive mentality associated with the rationalization of work arise only in the west?

The answer to this question in the studies of the economic ethics of the world religions is that each religious tradition produced an economic ethic that was inimical to the development—though not necessarily the reception—of capitalism. In the case of Chinese religion, for example, Weber shows how the Confucian religious tradition together with the bureaucracy and its exam system supported a dominant mentality that precluded the development of analogues to the western institutional structures of rational law, to western science, and to a state free of the constraints of family loyalties, and to promote values, such as piety and honor, that also had the effect of preventing their emergence.

Economy and Society
The work we know as *Economy and Society* (1907-08 [trans.1968]) was the second major effort of Weber's mature years. It consists of an extensive typology of forms of social action, especially institutional action. Weber said that the claim to be made on behalf of the typology was its usefulness. The elaboration of the typology is an extended demonstration of the uses to which the types could be put in analyzing actual historical forms, particularly of institutional structure, and characterizing their historical course of development as the product of its basic properties of the type, always with the caveat that these were idealizations rather than “real” types with a teleological character.

The most famous of these typologies involved beliefs legitimating authority and the forms that are characteristically produced by these beliefs. The categories were charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal, which were further subdivided in various ways to account for common forms of political order, such as patrimonialism. These were ideal types, which meant that they almost never appeared in reality in a pure form, but were typically mixed with elements of other types, or even combined with them. Weber was careful to point out the attenuated charismatic element in even such things as the modern monarchy and the jury.

Traditional authority was based on unwritten rules believed to be handed down from time immemorial while rational legal authority rested on the belief and the validity of written
rules produced according to written procedures; charismatic authority was the authority of the extraordinary person. Weber had in mind of course such figures as Napoleon and Jesus Christ, but he found many more modest and recurrent examples in Indian gurus and medieval battle leaders. In each of these cases the obedience of their followers rested neither on written nor unwritten rules but on the direct influence of the exceptional individual himself.

Political authority of this kind, Weber observed, is inherently unstable. Eventually the charismatic leader must support his followers by material benefits, and this marked the beginning of the transformation of charisma into everyday authority. Charismatic regimes also face problems of succession, and the “routinization” of charisma through ritual in order to pass on charisma to successors soon becomes transformed into something akin to traditional authority, or alternatively becomes rationalized into a bureaucratic system.

Weber as a Political Thinker
Weber was self consciously part of the generation that came after the unification of Germany under Bismarck, and, as an ardent nationalist, was deeply concerned about the problem of succession of leaders. Bismarck’s career had shown how forceful and successful leadership produced popular acquiescence and even enthusiasm. He was concerned that interest-faction parties, especially parties that inevitably were bureaucratically organized, would be effective electorally, but that this would assume the predominance of party hacks rather than figures who could act boldly as leaders. During the closing months of World War I he published an extensive newspaper article on constitutional form, which suggested a presidential system in which the president required support in the form of a plebiscite rather than party support, and thus stood above and outside of party structures. His political thinking is striking for its brusque dismissal of the core ideas of democratic theory: the will of the people he called a “fiction,” and “the Rights of Man” a rationalist fantasy. He based his defense of parliamentary government on grounds of Realpolitik, especially the fact that modern states required, in order to act politically, the mobilization of mass sentiment.