



MARCUS SIMON

**“VORSPRUNG” THROUGH BIBLE-READING**

**Protestants are more economically successful than Catholics because they have developed a specific religious work ethic. This theory of Max Weber’s still continues to intrigue the academic world a hundred years after he first proposed it. The two economists Dr. Sascha Becker and Professor Ludger Wößmann have now developed an alternative explanation and approach. They attribute Protestants’ economic pre-eminence to their higher levels of education, which in turn is rooted in Martin Luther’s appeal to his fellow believers to read the Bible.**

Max Weber does not beat about the bush. On page 1 of his famous enquiry into *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he launches a provocative assertion: that Protestants are more economically successful than Catholics. In his book, published in 1904, this social scientist claims occupational statistic show “that business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labour, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant.” He finds the reason for this phenomenon in the better preparation of Protestants – due to their ascetic lifestyle and their specific religious ethos – for the rational conduct which constitutes a major element of modern, capitalist economics. The Reformation led to a shift of emphasis, states Weber. Storing up worthy individual deeds which could later be redeemed in the hereafter was no longer as agreeable to God as a systematic self-discipline that could be demonstrated at any time and whose character specifically involved a view of one’s occupation as a duty. Unremitting and systematic professional occupation is evaluated in religious terms as the expression of the greatest asceticism, and at the same time as visible endorsement of the Christian and his authentic faith. The path to redemption thus leads through dutiful work – at least as urged by the Protestant variation on religious salvation. This is the view of life which Weber describes as the “spirit of capitalism”: the stimulus for a never-wearying Protestant “engine of acquisition”. He sums up by saying: “One of the constituent aspects of the modern capitalist spirit – a rational mode of life based on the idea of professional occupation – was born from the spirit of Christian asceticism”.

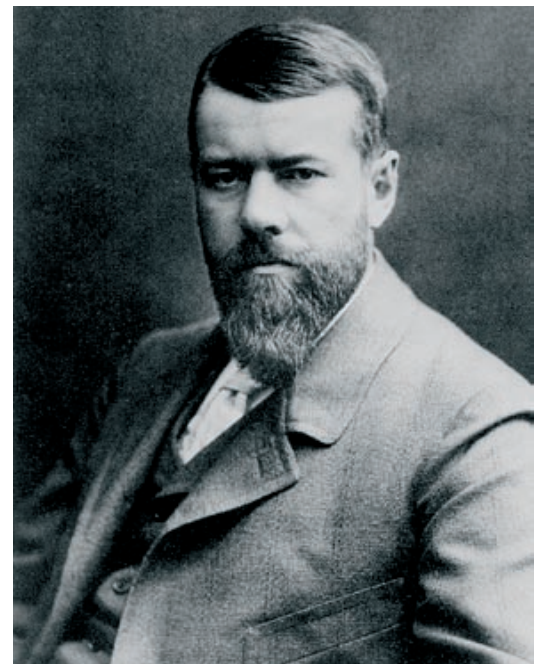
With this economic and sociological thesis, Weber was attempting to rationalise and provide an academic explanation for the uneasiness engendered by what was widely regarded as unbridled industrialisation. Today, when global interdependency prevails, it seems hard to relate to efforts to explain social and economic shifts at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of industrialisation. However, some ideas still obstinately persist in modern consciousness – such as that the Protestant work ethic provided a basis for successful economic progress. According to Ludger Wößmann, Professor of Economics and specialist in the economics of education at LMU's faculty of Economics, and Head of Department for Human Capital and Innovation at the Ifo Institute for Economic Research, "Weber's thesis keeps resurfacing, and anyone who has even the most tenuous involvement with social studies will have heard of it at some point." And he continues: "Drawing on current data we can demonstrate empirically that Protestants in Germany earn a higher income on average than Catholics." Ludger Wößmann, in collaboration with Sascha O. Becker, Reader in Economics at the University of Stirling, Scotland, and previously Assistant Professor at the Center for Economic Studies, has established an alternative theory to explain this variation between the two denominations. "In recent decades, education as investment in human capital has become a major theme in the economic sciences," explains Ludger Wößmann. "Luther translated the Bible into German and emphasised that every good Christian should be able to read it. Now, this involves learning and the development of skills. This in turn led us to set up the hypothesis that this was why Protestants were and still are more economically successful. In other words, according to our hypothesis, this has much less to do with differences of ethics than with education."

#### LITERACY IS A CLEAR ADVANTAGE

Sascha O. Becker and Ludger Wößmann cite Luther's appeal in his *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), as major foundation of the Protestants' economic success. Here, among other things, Luther calls for the setting up of schools, separately for girls and boys, to aid them in reading the Bible from an early age. This demand is explicitly elaborated in the text of *The Letter to the Councilmen of all the Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524) and is taken up again in Luther's text *Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School* (1530). This is the point of departure for the two LMU economists, who argue that better accumulation of so-called human capital is decisive for the higher economic standing of those affected. This idea can be traced back to the economic human capital theory formulated at the end of the 1950s. This describes the human aspect of companies' productivity and that of the whole of society, which can be enhanced through education and training. In this view, performance and productivity encompass an individual's sum of knowledge and capacities. Such skills, developed by Protestants in response to Luther's emphasis on education, equipped them to a greater degree than Catholics to meet the conditions which the escalating modern capitalism of the time was demanding of its protagonists. Essentially, the additional "human capital" was what provided the benefit in

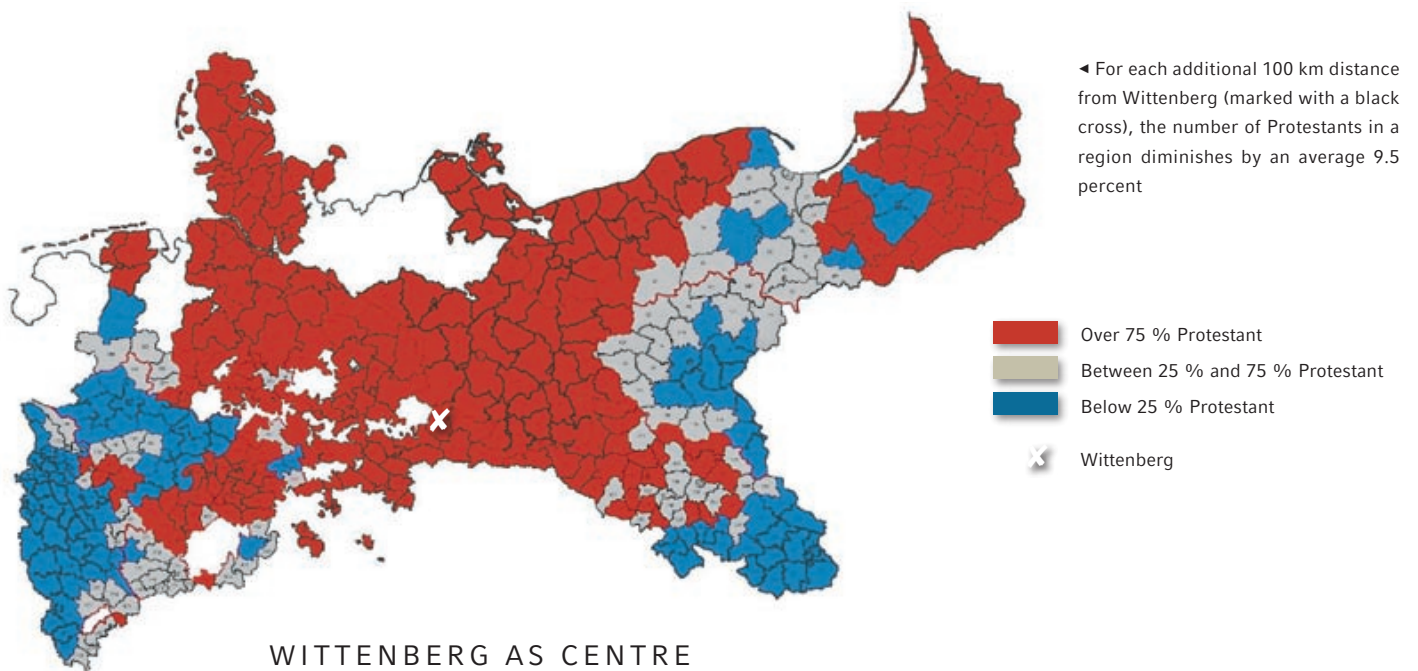
relation to capitalist and industrial production and marketing processes. A specifically Protestant work ethic played a subordinate role here, according to the two LMU economists. Having set up this working hypothesis, it now had to be rigorously tested. In his own thesis, Weber draws on a study by his student Martin Offenbacher, in which the latter compiled data from the southern Black Forest. "Weber however ultimately only compiled simple cross-reference tables, from which it is clear that Protestants in Baden enjoy higher incomes," explains Sascha O. Becker. "If one wishes to test the reliability of these data, one needs statistical tools which only became available in the 1930s." More detailed data material therefore had to be collected, initiating something of an academic adventure. The LMU researchers embarked on a year-long search for figures which could verify their thesis. It quickly became clear that, for a variety of reasons, they wanted to restrict the scope of their research to what was then Prussia: "We wanted to give our story a Prussian stamp since in other regions other reformers were at work, each with their own doctrinal slant, which may either have helped or hindered the spread of Protestantism," says Sascha O. Becker in justification of their research setup. In addition, Prussia was a relatively homogenous state towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had granted religious freedom and in Wittenberg had the centre of the Reformation within its borders. It was also the birthplace of Max Weber. The really decisive factor, however, involved the new data which the researchers discovered: "In the archives of the Bavarian state library we found old tomes whose pages had never yet been cut open," reports Sascha O. Becker. "In fact, we were the first people to hold them in our hands in 130 years."

The researchers found material from Prussian censuses from the years 1871, 1882 and 1886. In 1871, Prussia had around 24.6 million inhabitants, two thirds of whom were Protestant and one third Catholic. Administratively, Prussia was divided at the time into 452 counties, 35 districts and eleven provinces. In over 75 percent of the counties there was an 80 percent majority of either Protestants or Catholics, while 60 percent of the counties had a 90 percent majority of one or the other denomination. The distribution of literacy rates is the really interesting thing here. In Prussia in 1871, 87.5 percent of those over ten years of age could read and write. However, differences between counties are very great: there are some areas in which only 37.4 have mastered reading and writing, while in others it rises to 99.3 percent. The analyses revealed that reading and writing abilities were 9.9 percentage points higher in predominantly Protestant counties than in



▲ Max Weber was born on April 21, 1864 in Erfurt/Germany. In 1919, he was appointed to a professorship of Economics at LMU Munich. He died in Munich on June 14, 1920.

Catholic ones. But the researchers did not stop there: “We dug our way into the archive and discovered historical data which were already available in Weber’s time but which could only be properly evaluated using modern digital processing,” explains Ludger Wößmann. For instance, data were found which provide information about relative income levels, e.g. the average wages of day-labourers, on which contribution rates for the newly developing health insurance system were based; or also the income tax revenues for counties, enabling approximations of income levels. All these different data provide a reliable picture of the income levels in different regions and population groups in Prussia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And everywhere the same findings appear: in Protestant areas the higher literacy rate is linked with an average 6.3 percent higher income. The stronger the presence of the Protestant Church in any county, the more advanced this county was in economic terms. In addition, as further criterion, the two LMU researchers cite the fact that in such areas agriculture plays a lesser role while industry and the service sector are 4.9 percent more strongly represented than in predominantly Catholic regions. Ludger Wößmann finds confirmation of his thesis in the mass of figures and data: “Interestingly, if we base our explanation of economic success on Protestantism and literacy rates together, and subsequently discount the factor of education, no significant differences remain between the two denominations. Ultimately therefore, this does not show an effect of Protestantism as such. Instead, we can explain economic differences solely in terms of levels of education.”



#### WITTENBERG AS CENTRE

Now one could take the line that regions which had already been more advanced economically before the Reformation, were more likely to subscribe to the Protestant faith than others. Sascha O. Becker and Ludger Wößmann counter this by saying that the prevailing faith of a region – in line with the law of *cuius regio, eius religio* – was dependent on the ruler and thus not subject to free choice. For rulers, in turn, the choice of denomination was often less a question of belief than of worldly power: Was he on the side of the Pope or not, what stance did he have towards the Emperor or towards bordering states etc.? If a ruler



wished to take the Protestant faith, he first had to send students to Wittenberg, to learn about the new denomination from Luther – which involved huge cost and effort. And so a further aspect was involved, which also played a major part in the scope and spread of Protestantism: the distance of any county from Wittenberg. Like concentric rings, say the two researchers, Protestantism spread out from Luther’s focal site of activity and at some point lost impetus – irrespective of a region’s degree of economic development. They cite data from the Prussian census, showing that with every 100 km from Wittenberg, the number of Protestants in a region diminishes by 9.5 percent. Thus as you get nearer to Wittenberg, Protestant numbers increase, education improves, and economic productivity is higher. Drawing on these figures the researchers also find that in 1886, pupils in predominantly Protestant counties had a shorter journey to school and that there were therefore more schools per capita. This is associated in turn with higher literacy rates. The authors relate this back to Luther’s advice to Protestant rulers to establish more schools, thus giving parents greater motivation to send their children to school since lower schooling costs were involved and the journey to school was shorter. The Catholic minority in predominantly Protestant regions benefited from this, since they could likewise participate in the schooling infrastructure. As a result, the differences in literacy levels between these Catholics and Protestants were less than for those Catholics living in areas where their own faith was predominant. The researchers notably found that in today’s Germany too, Protestants are better educated on average, and earn more, than Catholics. They attribute this to the still prevalent cultural traditions which perpetuate differences of educational attainment between the denominations to this day. In the meantime several studies have shown that, given equal intellectual ability, the opportunities for a child from a so-called low-aspirant parental background to gain entry to a Gymnasium (grammar school equivalent), are much lower than for a child from the education-favouring middle classes. “This whole Weber thesis is not confined to a certain period,” says Sascha O. Becker. He is convinced that researchers will still be wrestling with it a hundred years from now. “Religion and culture concern us all. Even if the Churches are in retreat, a search for deeper meaning is always there. This is embodied, too, in Weber’s thesis that religious matters of this kind always also affect life itself.”

Since 2006, Dr. Ludger Wößmann has been Professor of Economics, specialising in the economics of education, at the Faculty of Economics and the Center for Economic Studies (CES). Since 2004 he has also worked at the Ifo Institute for Economic Research as Head of Department Human Capital and Innovation.  
<http://www.cesifo.de/woessmann>  
[woessmann@ifo.de](mailto:woessmann@ifo.de)



Between 2002 and 2008, Associate Professor Dr. Sascha O. Becker was an Assistant Professor at the Center for Economic Studies. In 2008 he gained his habilitation from the Faculty of Economics at LMU and is now Reader in Economics at Stirling University, Scotland. He is also Research Professor at the Ifo Institute at LMU Munich.  
<http://sobecker.de>  
[sascha.becker@stir.ac.uk](mailto:sascha.becker@stir.ac.uk)

