**Humanities 5696:**
**The Culture of Capitalism**
[Draft based on Fall 2018]

Instructor: Dr. Joshua Derman  
Office: Rm 3352  
E-Mail: hmderman@ust.hk

**Course Description**

This course explores classical European social thought on the nature of capitalism and its relationship with culture, where culture is understood in both its anthropological and aesthetic senses. What is capitalism? What kind of culture—attitudes, human relationships, values, and habitus—does it promote or presuppose? This semester 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 historians, sociologists, and economists 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 historians, social scientists, and writers 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%
4 response papers: 20%
Mid-term paper (ca. 7 pp.): 30%
Long paper (ca. 15 pp.): 40%

Students may choose to submit response papers, of min. 1 full page each, on any four weekly reading assignments. Response papers should not simply describe the content of that week’s reading, but rather aim to raise questions of interpretation, identify sources of difficulty, or connect the week’s readings and themes to earlier ones. Generally speaking, the mid-term paper ought to focus on the meaning and interpretation of Weber’s argument in *The Protestant Ethic*, whereas 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. Neither the mid-term nor the final paper is intended to be a research paper. While students are encouraged to avail themselves of helpful secondary literature, the primary focus is the close analysis of the challenging readings that have been assigned and discussed in this course. Students are invited to choose their own topics for the mid-term and final papers. The instructor will provide a list of possible topics for those who would prefer to write on a set question.

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 other assigned articles or book chapters on the syllabus are available as PDFs on the course’s Canvas web page.
Recommended Works of Reference

Richard Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). An excellent source of information and further reading suggestions. If you come across a term in *The Protestant Ethic* that seems unfamiliar or especially important, this is a good first place to look.


Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). *The Protestant Ethic* is difficult to comprehend without some basic background in the history and theology of the Protestant Reformation. If you are confused about who Luther and Calvin were, or what “predestination” means, please consult this book for brief but lucid explanations.

Suggested Further Readings


Class Meetings and Assigned Readings

Week 1: Introduction and Orientation

No assigned readings

Week 2: The Protestant Ethic in its Time and Place

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 1–8, 43–47 (Denomination and Social Stratification)


Week 3: What was Weber Trying to Explain?

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 8–28, 47–52 (The “Spirit” of Capitalism)

Week 4: No class

Week 5: The Reformation and the Concept of the Calling

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 28–36, 52–66 (Luther’s Conception of the Calling)

Week 6: Ascetic Protestantism


Week 7: “A Shell as Hard as Steel”

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 105–22, 176–202 (Asceticism and the Capitalist Spirit)

Week 8: Protestantism and Economic Development


**Week 9: Max Weber's Idea of the Occident**


**Week 10: The Comparative Case of China**


**Week 11: Confucianism and the Spirit of Capitalism**


**Week 12: Capitalism and Chinese Institutions**

