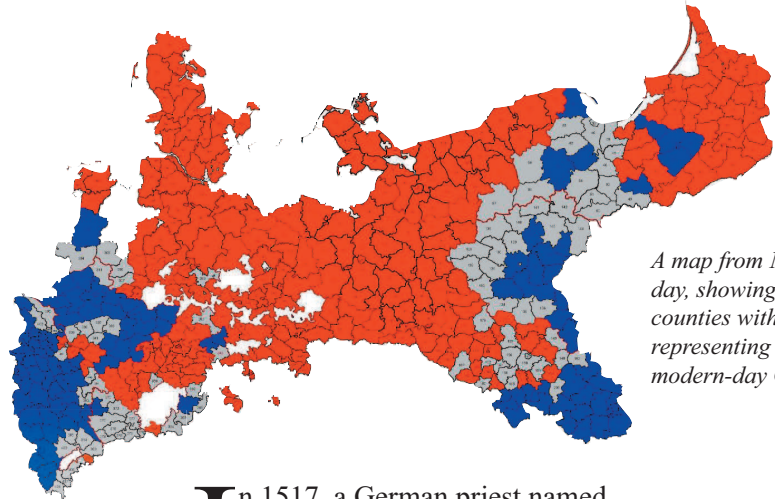


It's Not About the Work Ethic *By Alana Conner*

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A map from Max Weber's day, showing the 452 counties within Prussia, representing most of modern-day Germany.



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In 1517, a German priest named Martin Luther sparked the Protestant Reformation when he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Since that time, regions that adopted Protestantism have grown more affluent than did regions that maintained their Catholic roots—a trend that another German, the sociologist Max Weber (pictured left), attempted to explain in 1905. In his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber contends that Protestants' harder-working ways are responsible for their greater wealth. But a recent article by two German economists challenges Weber's venerable theory. "Protestants started education efforts earlier than Catholics," notes Sascha O. Becker, a professor of economics at the University of Stirling (Scotland) and the study's lead author. Over time, it was this jump on schooling, not a religion-driven love of labor, that ultimately drove Protestants' higher productivity. "Researchers have long known that education matters for prosperity and well-being," says Becker. "Education helps

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you to get a better understanding of how the world works, helps you go beyond subsistence to do bigger things.”

Luther was big on education.

Opposing the Catholic practice of relying on priests to read and interpret the Latin Bible, Luther insisted that people read and interpret the Good Book for themselves — a feat that required Bibles in local languages and an elementary education. To these ends, Luther translated the Bible into German, encouraged towns to build schools, and urged parents to educate their children. In contrast, Weber did not have much to say about education.

Instead, he linked the greater economic development of Protestants to their belief that every person has a calling — a God-selected job whose profitable performance both attracts and indicates God’s favor. To signal to other mortals that they are among God’s chosen people, the theory says, Protestants work harder, save more, and therefore accumulate greater wealth. “I never knew what to make of the Protestant work ethic,” Becker admits. “How do you measure it? Is it how many hours people work? The way they work? It’s an elusive concept.” To test the more modern idea that education, not ethics, fueled Protestants’ financial success, the coauthors mined data from Weber’s day for the 452 counties within Prussia (much of which is modern-day Germany). By using county-level data, the researchers avoided

confounding religion with geography, politics, and other social institutions. They first showed that the higher the percentage of Protestants in a county, the greater its literacy rates. They next revealed that more Protestant areas were also wealthier— a pattern that persists to this day. Finally, they demonstrated that differences in literacy could explain the differences in the wealth of counties. “But these were not differences that education couldn’t overcome,” says Becker. “When we compared Protestant regions to Catholic regions that for some historic reason ended up with the same level of education”—

say, areas such as Münster, where Jesuits pushed education during Germany’s Counter-Reformation—“the two regions had no difference in economic success.” “And so education matters a lot in economic development,” says Becker. Attempting to synthesize his message with Weber’s, he concludes, “If anything, the Protestant work ethic makes people think ahead and realize that they need to educate themselves.”

Sascha O. Becker and Ludger Woessmann, “Was Weber Wrong? A Human Capital Theory of Protestant Economic History,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 2009.

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