higher meaning. Clearly, this argument that infused commercial activity with a ethic of the ambient Protestant culture an uncertain future. It was the religious required a readiness to defer gratifica -
cance it would otherwise have lacked. 

Weber, argued, now runs on its own, with machine-like indifference to all spiritual values, while the idea of a calling "haunts our lives like the ghost of once-held religious beliefs." Meanwhile, those who are caught in its mechanism are left with little more than a sense of mindless compulsion. The "puritans wanted to be men of the calling," Weber wrote; "we, on the other hand, misuse his categories. In the US in particular, the pursuit of wealth had been "divested of its metaphysical sig-
nificance" and was now linked with "purely elemental passions."

In the closing lines of The Protestant Ethnic, Weber described the typical cap-
talists of his own time as mediocrities much like the stunted creatures that Nietzsche had called "the last men." A world populated by such soulless beings ran not on individual initiative but on the imperatives of the system: "Today, Weber wrote, this mighty cosmos determines, with overwhelming coercion, the style of life not only of those di-
rectly involved in business but of every individual who is born into this mechanism, and may well con-
tinue to do so until the day when the last ton of fossil fuel has been consumed.

Those final lines were prescient. Although Weber could not have ant-
picipated the unfolding catastrophe of climate change or the environmental ravages that have attended the process of industrialization, he understood that capitalism’s unstrained expansion across the planet could hardly be taken as a sign of social betterment or histori-
cal progress. In documenting the rise of the modern world, he sustained an at-
titude of cool skepticism. The purpose of sociology was not to discover general laws but to understand human action in all its complexity. This emphasis on the unique rather than the universal made his work difficult to categorize. Not a few of his colleagues were tripped up by his arguments—errors he attacked in print with lacerating criticism. Es-
pecially common was the mistaken view that he had written The Prote-
sstant Ethnic as an idealistic corrective to Marxism, as if he had meant to sug-
gest that religious ideas rather than the forces of production were the primary engines of historical change. Weber dismissed this as rubbish. Replacing a "one-sided" and "materialist" expla-
nation of historical causality with a "one-sided" and "spiritual" explana-
tion would only exchange one fallacy for another.

After his resignation from Heidel-
berg, Weber gradually regained his ability to work, and by 1903 he had commenced a new phase in writing. Alongside The Protestant Ethnic he also produced the major essay “Objectivity” in Social Science and Social Policy. In 1904 he traveled to the United States, accompanied by Marianne and the his-
torian of religion Ernst Troeltsch. Man-
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