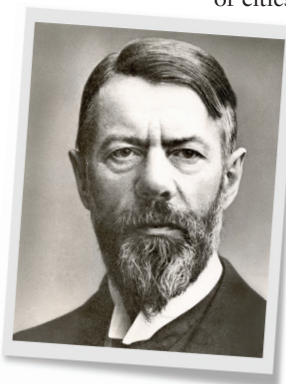


## GODLY BUSINESS

The end of the Protestant work ethic. BY DAVIDE CANTONI

IN 1905, GERMAN SOCIOLOGIST Max Weber published his landmark work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and no one has looked at religion or economics quite the same since. Weber's revolutionary thesis was that the Calvinist emphasis on worldly success drove Protestant countries to industrialize and reach higher standards of living, surpassing Catholic countries, whose citizens tended to focus on the hereafter.

Weber's ideas have been controversial from their birth. But only today do we have the tools to assess whether they



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were empirically true. To test his theories, I crunched the numbers, looking at population growth in 272 cities in the German-speaking world between 1300 and 1900. Economic historians have long argued that such growth is a useful indicator of a city's economic conditions; only cities with a productive labor force and good institutions expand over time. But according to my research, there were no differences in the growth of German-speaking Protestant and Catholic cities in the centuries before Weber published his famous book. The much-vaunted Protestant work ethic didn't seem to have made any difference.

Was Weber wrong about everything? Not necessarily. But the idea that modern-day capitalism evolved simply because some states or cities adopted Protestantism seems less likely when you remove the empirical backing. Some argue, for instance, that the spread of Protestantism in regions like Latin America and Africa today could fuel a dramatic economic boom. The boom could certainly occur. But it will be hard to argue that religious ideology has anything to do with it.

## CHARTED TERRITORY

### Border Control

Field mice may not carry passports, and nobody ever asked a tree frog for a green card, but do animals care about imaginary lines on a map? In fact, national borders can become natural borders over time, with significant consequences for the nonhumans living on either side.

After Israel normalized relations with its neighbor Jordan in 1994, University of Haifa biologist Uri Shanas studied how the fauna on either side of the border differed. He found that rodents in Israel were much more cautious than their counterparts in Jordan—a distinction Shanas attributes to Israel's more modern agricultural development.

Such differences can persist for decades. Scientists have observed that red deer in the forests on the Czech-German border are still stuck in the Cold War, avoiding the old boundary because a long-dismantled electric fence once ran along it. But the effect isn't always negative. The 390-square-mile demilitarized zone between North and South Korea has been a no-go area for humans for decades, which makes it a great place for rare red-crowned cranes and Chinese water deer. Now there is talk of making the de facto wildlife preserve permanent: a very rare case of animals benefiting from human conflict. —Joshua E. Keating



**Israel/Jordan**  
Border: Largely fenced  
Animals affected: Gerbils and red foxes

**Germany/Czech Republic**

Border: Open and unfenced since 1989  
Animals affected: Red deer



**U.S./Mexico**

Border: Nearly a third fenced  
Animals affected: Jaguars and ocelots



**North Korea/South Korea**

Border: Patrolled on both sides by nearly 2 million troops  
Animals affected: Red-crowned cranes, Chinese water deer, spotted seals, and lynx, among others

## INDEX

### The Debt Explosion

The Western world is in deep debt. Increasingly, those with the biggest bills to pay are not the profligate banana republics of old: Wealthy European countries and the United States now owe the most, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of GDP. Many of these countries poured billions in borrowed funds into their economies during the recent recession, and the IOUs are stacking up. Of the world's largest economies, only China, the world's top creditor, saw its total debt drop significantly in 2009.

Select countries by 2009 external debt as a percentage of GDP (arrows show change since 2008):

LUXEMBOURG  
**5,559%** ↑ 3%

IRELAND  
**1,346%** ↑ 9%

BRITAIN  
**420%** ↑ 5%

UNITED STATES  
**94%** ↑ .3%

MEXICO  
**12%** ↓ 5%

CHINA  
**4%** ↓ 20%

SOURCE: CIA WORLD FACTBOOK