

## The Buddenbrooks' Ethic and the Insanity of the Spirit of Capitalism: Reflections on Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* through Max Weber's Thesis on Protestantism

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Thomas Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family* (1901) presents the paradoxical view of Max Weber's thesis *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-05), that is, the contribution of the vocational concept and inner-worldly asceticism in Protestantism to the development of modern, profit-seeking capitalism told through the story of a merchant family over four generations. As the novel preceded Weber's work, Mann would, naturally, not have read Weber's thesis before writing his novel and he only noticed the similarities later. He proudly commented on this when he said: "I perceived and discovered, through direct examination, completely on my own, without reading, the idea that the modern capitalist businessman, the bourgeois with his ascetic idea of duty in a calling, was a creation of the Protestant ethic, of Puritanism and Calvinism [...]." This paper re-examines how the two works correspond with each other and considers how they came to be related so.

Despite the dominance of secular Lutheranism in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Lübeck, the northern German port city where the novel is set, there also existed within the Buddenbrooks family Pietism (as represented by Jean, the second-generation head of the family) and Calvinism (Thomas, the third-generation head of the family), where they devoted themselves to their calling in an ascetic and rational conduct of life. The family's cereal company is basically run according to traditionalism in Weber's sense, but Thomas enlivens the business with the spirit of modern capitalism. Eventually, however, Thomas becomes a workaholic, working for the sake of work, concerned only with how he appears to others just like an actor, and finally traps himself in his own *stahlhartes Gehäuse* ("iron cage") of the hardened capitalistic spirit.

It is thus possible to fully follow Weber's thesis through reading Mann's novel, not merely because between them there are some overlaps in the Protestant denominations, but also because both works consider religion at a daily practical level rather than at a dogmatically theoretical level, while the interest of both works lies not so much in the economic as the mental aspects of capitalism.