

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

tpavone@princeton.edu

March 13, 2015

Citation

Weber, Max. 2001 [1930]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Abstract: In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber seeks to explicate the emergence of the now hegemonic instrumental rationality of the capitalist West. He posits that Utilitarianism is unable to explicate the origins of capitalism, for early capitalists did not exhibit any drive to maximize their happiness. Furthermore, Marxism is unable to explain how a bourgeoisie espousing the instrumental rationality of modern capitalism existed across Northern Europe and the United States before the emergence of a capitalist mode of production. Weber thus proposes that the origins of the spirit of capitalism – conceptualized as a worldly calling to act in a frugal, moral way vis-à-vis work and to maximize capital accumulation – holds “elective affinities” with, and can be traced to, the Protestant ethic, particularly to the Calvinist notion of predestination (that one’s salvation has been determined, or that one has been elected, since eternity). As individuals began searching for signs of their election, what slowly began to function as this indicator across Northern European and American Protestant communities was being a successful person of property: If God shows one of his elect an opportunity for profit, the logic goes, he must labor to be rich for God (rather than for the flesh and sin). When combined with the simplicity and frugality of puritan life, this generated a propensity for massive capital accumulation across many communities of Northern Europe and the United States.

I. The Goal: Explicating the Triumph of the Capitalist West’s Instrumental Rationality

While the emergence of modern Western capitalism was a process of economic rationalization, it was not prompted by the rationality we often associate with capitalists today. Indeed, elsewhere Weber distinguishes between four types of rationality that have existed at different times and within various cultures, both European and non-European (Weber 2001 [1930]: xxxviii-xxxix).¹ So why is it that the instrumental rationality of the West came to dominate and colonize the world? In other words, “[w]hy did not the scientific, the artistic, the political, or the economic development there [in India or China] enter upon the path of rationalization which is peculiar to

¹ These include: (1) Instrumental (or practical) rationality: This constitutes the methodical attainment of an end by a precise calculation of means. This conception is most proximate to that espoused by many contemporary rational choice accounts. (2) Conceptual (or theoretical) rationality: This rationality is espoused by a systematic thinker who composes a theoretical representation of the world via a theoretical mastery of reality and by means of increasingly abstract concepts. (3) Substantive rationality- This type of rationality is based in one’s devotion and belief in a valid canon (such as a systematic acceptance of the Bible, the Koran, etc.) from which we should derive laws for practical action. (4) Formal rationality: This is the most encompassing and thin conception, which requires only that an individual act in accordance with a plan.

the Occident?” (Ibid: xxxviii). Weber proposes exploring this question in part by assessing the origins of capitalism.

II. The Puzzle: Utilitarianism and Marxism Cannot Explain the Origins of Capitalism

The puzzle is that existing social theories – particularly Marxism and Utilitarianism – cannot account for the origins of capitalism.

First, Utilitarians conceive individuals as driven to maximize their utility – to get the most of what they want. Yet the attempt to maximize profit has nothing to do with capitalism’s origins. For one thing, unlimited greed for personal gain is not capitalism-specific – it can be found in feudal and ancient civilizations as well. Furthermore, although capitalism begets instrumental rationality, instrumental rationality does not explicate its origins (Ibid: 30-31). Indeed, Weber posits that the origins of capitalism required an ethos to specifically refuse to enjoy the product of one’s labor.

Marxist fares no better than utilitarianism in this regard. The mode of production, argues Weber, is only one part of the fabric of civilization: While materialist considerations dominate social behavior during some historical moments, at other times ethical factors, religious factors, or social norms dominate instead. History cannot be subject to a blanket law. Furthermore, the bourgeois capitalist ethos pre-existed the emergence of a capitalist mode of production, and hence it cannot be dismissed as an ideological “superstructure” that is epiphenomenal of material conditions (Ibid: 20). In other words, capitalism is as much a creation of an ideology as it is a product of a transformation in the economic mode of production.

III. The Argument: From Protestant Ethic to the Spirit of Capitalism

Weber asserts that a set of institutional pre-requisites was necessary for the emergence of capitalism - particularly the emergence of the free labor market. Of course, small free labor markets existed outside of northern Europe, and so we might even posit that “Capitalism existed in China, India, Babylon, in the classical world, and in the Middle Ages. But in all these cases [... a] particular ethos was lacking” (Ibid: 17). In short, what was necessary for the triumph of the instrumental rationality of Western capitalism is a set of moral, emotionally powerful dispositions. Hence for Weber, the fundamental question is: How is it that the instrumental rationality so frequently despised throughout history and associated with modern capitalism began to be accepted and to eventually “command” capitalist accumulation “in the name of duty?” (Ibid: 36).

This spirit of capitalism is best exemplified by the ethical writings of Benjamin Franklin, for whom it is one’s duty and calling to work hard: time is money, Franklin reminds us, and one must be as efficient as possible in not wasting time. Hence a moral Puritan businessman “gets nothing out of his wealth for himself, except the irrational sense of having done his job well” (Ibid: 33). This calling to work and accumulate capital is not a religious calling – it is a worldly calling, and it was being expressed by Franklin in the pre-industrial age, absent of factories and capitalist markets!

Weber then traces the origins of the spirit of capitalism to Protestant ideology, particularly as espoused by Calvinists. Of course, the ideal-typical spirit of capitalism is not synonymous with the ideal-typical Protestant ethic, and it would be a simplifying mistake, Weber cautions, to assert that the Protestant reformation caused capitalism (Ibid: 49). Rather, developments in the purely religious sphere had an accidental – that is, contingent and unintentional - impact in the economic sphere. Yet the “elective affinities” between these two value systems cannot be denied, as “business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labour... and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant” (Ibid: 3).

Weber posits that the most important component of the Protestant ethic in explicating the emergence of a capitalist spirit is the Calvinist theology of predestination, whereby an individual’s salvation is pre-determined, and hence God has already decided whether one is destined to ascent to heaven in the afterlife (Ibid: 56-57). If one believes in predestination, ponders Weber, how is one supposed to act in daily life? Acting recklessly and having fun is not an option, because it would be contemptuous and fundamentally contrary to Puritan teachings to commit “sins of the flesh.” Furthermore, Calvinists did away with confessions and with indulgences, such that a regular and cathartic excise of sin was no longer an option. Hence a predestination-believing Protestant craving for salvation was sure to feel an “unprecedented inner loneliness [...] to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him from eternity” (Weber : 60-61). Psychologically, and in a way that is not at all endorsed by Calvinist doctrine, one means to cope with this inner loneliness was to scout daily life for signs of predestined salvation: “Thus, however useless good works might be as a means of attaining salvation [...] nevertheless, they are indispensable as a sign of election. They are technological means, not of purchasing salvation [as with indulgences], but of getting rid of the fear of damnation” (Ibid: 73).

What gradually began to function as that sign of election across Northern European and American Protestant communities was to become a successful person of property, “of proving one’s faith in worldly activity” while resisting the “spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment” of the fruits of one’s labor (Ibid: 73-74). Indeed, “[l]oss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health, six to at most eight hours, [was deemed] worthy of absolute moral condemnation” (Ibid: 104). The harder one worked, the more capital accumulated, and the more this became perceived as an indication of one’s salvation. After all, if “God, whose hand the Puritan sees in all the occurrences of life, shows one of His elect a chance of profit, he must do it with a purpose [...] you may labor to be rich for God, though not for the flesh and sin” (Ibid: 108).

What ultimately emerged, then, was “an extraordinary capitalist business sense” in “favor of sober utility as against any artistic tendencies” and “combined in the same persons and groups with the most intensive forms of piety which penetra[ted] and domina[ted] their whole lives” (Ibid: 9; 114). In short, “the greater simplicity of life in the more seriously religious circles, in combination with great wealth, led to an excessive propensity to accumulation” (Ibid: 116). The ethos of modern capitalism had thus emerged.