

## **MAX WEBER The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**

abbreviations: MWC = modern, western capitalism

### Introduction

Though knowledge and observation of great refinement have existed elsewhere, only in the West has rationalization in science, law and culture developed to such a great degree. The modern West absolutely and completely depends for its whole existence, for the political, technical, and economic conditions of its life, on a specially trained organization of individuals, so that the most important functions of everyday life have come to be in the hands of technically, commercially and above all legally trained government officials. Nowhere else does this exist to such a degree as it does in the West.

The most fateful force in modern life is capitalism. The impulse to acquisition has existed always and everywhere and has in itself nothing to do with capitalism. Capitalism is the pursuit of profit, and forever renewed profit, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise. This enterprise must be continuous, because in a capitalistic society, anyone who did not take advantage of opportunities for profit-making would be doomed to extinction.

A capitalistic economic action rests on the expectation of profit by the utilization of opportunities for exchange, on (formally) peaceful chances for profit. Where this is rationally pursued, calculations in terms of money are made, whether by modern bookkeeping or more primitive means. Everything is done in terms of balances of money income and money expenses. Whether the calculations are accurate, or whether the calculation method is traditional or by guess-work affects only the degree of the rationality of capitalistic acquisition.

Characteristics of modern Western capitalism: rational industrial organization (that is, attuned to a regular profit and not to political nor irrational speculative opportunities for profit); separation of business from the household; rational bookkeeping. Capitalistic adventurers (in search of booty, whether by war or exploitation) have existed everywhere, but only in the modern West has developed... the rational capitalistic organization of (formally) free labor.

The rationality of MWC is dependent on the calculation of technical factors, and so is dependent on the development in science of the exact and rational experiment. C'ism did not cause this development: but, the continuing development of this type science is supported by capitalistic interests in practical economic applications.

The peculiar rationalism of Western culture extends to many fields -- science, mystical contemplation, military training, law and administration. Each of these fields may be rationalized in terms of very different ultimate values and ends, and what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another. The development of economic rationalism is partly dependent on rational technique and law, but it also requires people

to have a favorable disposition toward adopting certain types of practical rational conduct.

In this book, we will treat ONLY ONE SIDE OF THE CAUSAL CHAIN, the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism.

### **Religious Affiliation and Social Stratification**

Catholics show a stronger propensity to remain in their crafts, and become master craftsmen, while Protestants are attracted to a larger extent to the upper ranks of skilled labor and administrative positions in factories. Protestants own a disproportionate share of capital. All other things equal, Protestants have been more likely to develop economic rationalism than Catholics. Weber seeks the explanation in 'the permanent intrinsic character of their religion,' and not only in their temporary external historico-political situations.

The Reformation meant not the elimination of the church's control over everyday life, but a substitution of a new form of control for the previous one. While the Catholic church was fairly lax, Calvinism 'would be for us the most absolutely unbearable form of ecclesiastical control of the individual which could possibly exist.'

Protestantism must not be understood as joy of living or in any other sense connected with the Enlightenment. Early Protestantism (e.g., Luther, Calvin) had nothing to do with progress in an Enlightenment sense. Not all Protestant denominations had an equally strong influence on the development of members' business acumen and spirit of hard work.

### **The Spirit of Capitalism**

The spirit of capitalism is "an historical individual: a complex of elements associated in historical reality which we united into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of their cultural significance" (47).

Ben Franklin is an example of someone who espouses a philosophy of avarice which is: the ideal of an honest man of recognized credit. It includes a duty on the part of an individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself. It is not mere business astuteness, it is an ethos; infraction of its rules is not foolishness or bad business, but forgetfulness of duty.

In this ethic, economic acquisition is no longer considered a means of subsistence: it is the ultimate purpose of a man's life. This is combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life. (NOTE: From the standpoint "of the happiness of, or utility to, a single individual, this ethic appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational" (53)).

People now are born into a capitalistic economy which presents itself to them as the unalterable order of things in which they must live. In so far as a person born now is involved in the system of market relationships, he must conform to capitalistic rules of action. Today's capitalism selects the subjects it needs through economic survival of the fittest. The interesting question, according to Max, is WHERE DID THIS SITUATION COME FROM?

It did NOT arise as the superstructure or reflection of economic situations. For example, the spirit of capitalism such as espoused by our buddy Ben Franklin was present before capitalistic order.

In order to arise, the spirit of capitalism had to struggle with its 'most important opponent,' traditionalism. For instance, workers will respond to an increase in piece rates by doing less work, collecting the usual amount of money, and going home early. Men do not "by nature" wish to earn more and more money, they simply wish to live as they are accustomed to and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose.

Another way of attempting to increase productivity is to lower wages or piece rates, so that workers must work harder and longer to earn the same amount as before. This method has its limits. It (and capitalism) requires a surplus population which can be hired cheaply in the market. Also, too large a surplus population can encourage the development of labor intensive methods, rather than more efficient methods: low wages do not equal cheap labor. And, if you pay people too little, their efficiency and attentiveness decreases.

Thus, it would be better if labor were performed as if it were an absolute end in itself. This can only be the process of a long and arduous education (for example, being raised Pietist). Capitalism "now in the saddle" can fairly easily recruit the required workers, but this was not always the case.

Capitalism can exist with a traditionalistic character. The animating spirit of the entrepreneur may be the traditional rate of profit, the traditional amount of work, the traditional manner of labor-management relations, and the essentially traditional circle of customers and manner of attracting new ones. Take the example of the putting out system.

In such a system, this leisureliness can be destroyed, without any essential change in the form of work organization (such as vertically integrated factories). The spirit of capitalism is the cause of this change. Where the spirit of capitalism appears and is able to work itself out, it produces its own capital and monetary supplies as the means to its ends, but the reverse is not true (69).

Protestantism was not merely a stage prior to the development of a purely rationalistic philosophy, however. Rationalism shows a development which by no means follows parallel lines in the various departments of life. Since life may be rationalized from fundamentally different basic points of view and in very different directions, we must ask

the origin of the irrational element which lies at the basis of this particular concrete form of rational thought: the conception of a calling.

### **Luther's Conception of The Calling**

The idea of a calling -- a life-task, a definite field in which to work -- is peculiar to Protestants. Protestantism had a further new development, which was the valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of an individual could assume. The only way of living acceptably to God was solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world (his calling), NOT by trying to surpass worldly morality by monastic asceticism (80).

Remember important part of Reformation: By faith, not works, shall ye be saved. You are justified by faith, etc. So all those indulgences earned by crawling on your knees up stairways, etc. don't get you anything.

For the time being (before Calvin et al. got hold of it), the idea of the calling remained traditionalistic and its only ethical result negative: worldly duties were no longer subordinated to ascetic ones; obedience to authority and acceptance of things as they were, were preached.

### **The Religious Foundations of Worldly Asceticism**

However, this idea of the calling was not sufficient for the development of the spirit of capitalism. We needed the effects of forms of ascetic Protestantism: Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism and the Baptist sects.

An important thing to keep in mind is that these folks were not motivated by acquisitive lusts, but rather by salvation of the soul.

Calvinists believed in predestination. God designated before the creation of the world who would be saved and who would get to rot in hell. All creation exists for the sake of God, and has meaning only as means to the glory and majesty of God. Human merit or guilt plays no part in the possession of grace, since that would make God's decrees subject to human influence. This doctrine 'must above all have one consequence... a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual' (104). The individual was forced to follow the path of his own destiny decreed for him from eternity without help from others or from the Church -- complete elimination of salvation through the Church and the sacraments (which Lutheranism retained). This meant the elimination of magic from the world. [It also meant the doing away with a periodical discharge of the emotional sense of sin (confession).]

Now, the elected Christian should glorify God in life by fulfilling God's commandments to the best of his ability. This requires social achievements of the Christian because God decrees that social life shall be organized according to his commandments.

Fear and lack of knowledge of whether or not one is going to rot in hell led to a need for ordinary men to find certitudo salutis (certainty of salvation). Pastoral advice to these poor, tortured dudes contained two themes: 1) an absolute duty to consider oneself chosen and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil, since lack of self-confidence is the result of insufficient faith, hence of imperfect grace. 2) Intense worldly activity as the most suitable means to attain that self-confidence [thus we eliminate the free rider problem]. The Calvinist sought to identify true faith by its fruits: a type of Christian conduct which served to increase the glory of God. Good works do not affect salvation, but they are indispensable as a sign of election. In practice, this means God helps those who help themselves. The Calvinist creates a conviction of his own salvation.

For Catholics, good works were not a part of a rationalized system of life -- they could be performed sporadically, to atone -- whereas for Calvinists they are. The God of Calvinism demanded not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system. The moral conduct of the average man was subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole. The end of this asceticism was to be able to lead an alert, intelligent life: the most urgent task the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment. The most important means was to bring order into the conduct of its adherents. Hence we have methodically rationalized ethical conduct.

The Calvinistic doctrine of predestination was only one of several possible motives which could have supported the methodical rationalization of life. However, it had not only a unique consistency (by virtue of being based on logical deduction, rather than religious experience) and was psychologically extraordinarily powerful.

### **Pietism**

This sect sought to make the invisible Church of the elect visible on this earth. By means of intensified asceticism these folks hoped to enjoy the blissfulness of community with God in this life. Sometimes this latter tendency led to displays of emotion, which were antithetical to Calvinist restraint. Other than that, however, the practical effect of Pietistic principles was an even stricter ascetic control of conduct in the calling:

- 1) Methodical development of one's own state of grace to a higher and higher degree of certainty and perfection in terms of the law was a sign of grace.
- 2) a belief that God's Providence works through those in such a state of perfection.

Since some of these folks believed grace subject to repentance, by the creation of methods to induce repentance even the attainment of divine grace became in effect an object of rational human activity.

### **Methodism**

Though rebirth, an emotional certainty of salvation as the immediate result of faith was an important factor, the emotional act of conversion was methodically induced. Emotion, once awakened, was directed into a rational struggle for perfection. This provided a

religious basis for ascetic conduct after the doctrine of predestination had been given up by these folks.

Nothing new was added to the idea of the calling.

### The Baptist Sects

The church was viewed as a community of personal believers of the reborn. Salvation was achieved by personal, individual revelation; it was offered to everyone, though not everyone took it.

The injunction was to be in the world but not of it, so worldly enjoyments and unnecessary social intercourse with non-reborn folks was avoided. The Holy Spirit worked in daily life, and spoke directly to any individual who was willing to hear. This leads to an eventual elimination of all that remained of the doctrine of salvation through the Church and sacraments. This accomplished the religious rationalization of the world in its most extreme form.

Conscience is the revelation of God to the individual.

The rationalization of conduct within the world, but for the sake of the world beyond, was the consequence of the concept of calling of ascetic Protestantism.

### **Asceticism and The Spirit of Capitalism**

In Puritan thinking, the real moral objection to possession of wealth is to relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequence of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, above all distraction from the pursuit of a righteous life. It is only because possession involves this danger that it is suspect at all. Not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God. Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. Thus, inactive contemplation at the expense of work is right out.

Labor is an approved ascetic technique, but is also considered in itself an end of life as ordained by God. Unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace. Wealth does not exempt anyone from this.

The division of labor, which has a providential purpose in the thought of the Puritans, leads to qualitative and quantitative improvements in production, and thus serves the common good. But, in addition, specialization is encouraged by the calling, to which it provides an ethical justification; for, "outside of a calling the accomplishments of a man are only casual and irregular and he spends more time in idleness than in work." If God presents to His elect a change for profit, he must pursue it: the Christian must follow the call by taking advantage of the opportunity. The acquisition of wealth in the performance of a calling is morally permissible and enjoined.

-- Asceticism turned against the spontaneous enjoyment of life. So, sport, for instance, is acceptable only if it serves a rational purpose, say, increasing physical efficiency.

-- The powerful tendency toward uniformity of life, which today so immensely aids the capitalistic interest in the standardization of production, had its ideal foundation in the repudiation of all idolatry of the flesh (eg, non-ascetic, flashy or attractive clothing).

The Puritan outlook on life 'stood at the cradle of modern economic man' (174). This religious epoch bequeathed to its utilitarian successors "an amazingly good... conscience in the acquisition of money, so long as it took place legally" (176). In addition, the power of religious asceticism provided owners with sober, conscientious and industrious workmen. And, it provided comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of goods in the world was ordained by God.

The religious basis had died away by Ben Franklin's time. Limitation to specialized work is now a condition of any valuable work in the modern world. "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production and today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force."