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CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

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28. PESOC, part 1

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Part 1

“Time is money.” – Benjamin Franklin

NOTE ON SOURCE: *These passages are from Weber’s most known and influential work, first published in German in 1905 as Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus. It was first translated into English by the sociologist Talcott Parsons and published in 1930 as The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism by Allen and Unwin. Parsons’ translation was reprinted in 1958 by Scribner’s. This translation is probably the one most English-speaking sociologists have read. In 2002 Penguin published a new translation by Baehr.*

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below uses the more widely-known phrasing of Parsons. Otherwise, readers will find much that is different from Parsons translation, which tends to be somewhat creative at times.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

In this book, Weber offers a culturalist (or idealist) interpretation of history, counter to the historical materialist approach taken by Marx. In an ingenious argument, he demonstrates how particular beliefs (in this case, beliefs associated with some strains of the Protestant religion) led to particular kinds of conduct (the “work ethic” and disposition to save and invest rather than spend) which eventually helped produce capitalism as we know it today. This is not a book about religion, but rather a book that uses religion and religious ideas as an example of how change happens, through a chain of unintended consequences. It is also a book about people as agents, bearing culture and ideas with them into new settings and circumstances. The entire book is less than 100 pages (not including footnotes). What you have here is a much-abridged form of the first of two parts.

Part I: The Problem

Chapter 1. Religious Belief and Social Layering

A look at the occupational statistics quickly shows us that many business owners and capitalists are Protestant rather than Catholic. This is also true for more higher skilled workers in industry. While it is true that this may be for historical reasons, as more industries developed in regions in Europe that were Protestant, that merely

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Once we look at details of the Protestant reformation movement, we also note that it was not every variant of Protestantism that seemed to have a connection to habits and practices conducive to industrial development. Calvinism, for example, seems to be more strongly correlated with these habits and practices.

Weber refers to these habits and practices as “the spirit of capitalism.” We could consider these the essential qualities that arose out of particular beliefs (more on this below) and that supported the growth of industry. In particular, in order to have a system dependent upon investment for future gain, you needed to have people willing to save and invest, rather than spend and consume. This is really what defines the spirit of capitalism, for Weber.

This spirit of hard work, of progress, or whatever else we want to call it, which we are linking to Protestantism and its particular beliefs, should not be understood as a joy of living or desire for progress. These early Calvinists had little interest in either. If we are going to trace back the cause, we have to look more deeply, at the religious beliefs themselves, and see what it was that induced these early industrialists to work hard and invest their capital.

Chapter 2. The “Spirit” of Capitalism

“Time is money.” That is the spirit of capitalism. We hear it in the aphorisms of Benjamin Franklin. It is very different from the case of Jacob Fugger, the early wealthy industrialist of Germany, who, when asked why he didn’t retire, as he had enough money and then some, replied that he could always make even more. In the case of Fugger, working to make more money was about enrichment; in the case of Franklin, it is a moral duty. This is what we mean by “spirit of capitalism.” Or, to be clear, modern capitalism, which exists in America and Europe. Capitalism has existed elsewhere, in China, India, Babylon, and at other times, in Rome and in the Middle Ages,

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the money you make. The highest good of this Protestant work ethic is to earn more and more money. One works to make more money, not to enjoy it. Acquisition of money becomes the ultimate purpose of life.

How did this come to be? Where did this compulsion come from? Weber goes back to the example of Benjamin Franklin, whose strict Calvinist father drummed into him the idea that hard work was virtuous, not for the making of money, but for itself. Thus, the seeking of gain was, at least at the start, connected to certain religious ideas.

A way of life suited to the development of capitalism had to begin somewhere, not just for one person alone but for a community of people. This origin is what needs explaining. The fact that in America, New England developed more industry than the South even though the South was settled by would-be capitalists and New England by religious persons is the opposite of what materialist thinkers propose.

that ideas follow circumstances rather than circumstances following ideas.

The origin and history of ideas is much more complex than those who theorize that a “superstructure” is built on a pre-existing material base. In reality, the spirit of capitalism had to fight its way to acceptance against great hostility.

For years, in the places which would see the birth of Protestant ideas, greed and acquisitiveness were frowned upon. That a compulsion to make and amass money could be good, that it could be moral, was unheard of. So, what we need to understand is how activity that could scarcely be tolerated could turn into a “calling” or moral duty in the sense used by Benjamin Franklin. What was the background of ideas underlying activities directed to-

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preneur is moral not in spite of his money-making but because of it? For that, we have to go deep into the Protestant mindset.

Chapter 3. Understanding Luther's Conception of Beruf (Calling)

A note on the German word "Beruf." Der Beruf means "job, profession, or occupation, but in a way that is difficult to translate into English. The verb from which it is derived, berufen, literally means to be summoned, appointed or called, which is why it so frequently translated as "calling" in English. In the German, however, it does not carry the same religious connotation as "calling" does in English. Perhaps a better translation would be "vocation" (which also carries with it a meaning of being called and can be read either with a religious or non-religious meaning, depending on context). The translation here will sometimes use any one of these terms, as appropriate.

In the German word *beruf* but even more in the English "calling" there can be a religious sense, a suggestion of a task set by God. In neither the Catholic nor Classical culture do we find a similar sense, a sense which is common to all Protestant peoples. Like the word itself the idea is new and comes out of the Protestant reformation, from German translations that were made during this period. The concept of the calling was what was used to differentiate Protestants from Catholics. Rather than monastic ascetism, the way to live acceptably to God was by fulfilling one's worldly obligations. This was the notion of the calling or vocation. In contrast, Luther saw withdrawing from the world, in monastic isolation, as a selfish turning away from one's obligations. God summons everyone to his or her appointed task. Every vocation has the same worth in the sight of God. This meant that as a consequence of the Protestant Reformation was, the moral emphasis on worldly labor and the religious approval of such increased.

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Weber examines Paradise Lost, by Milton, and finds an accord between the tenor of the poem and the Puritan's attention to work in the world. Weber disagrees that we can trace this to "national" character. More often than not, pinning something on national character is just another way of saying one doesn't know why there are these differences. In any case, Puritans like Milton were vastly different from Royalist Catholics, so the difference can not lie in Milton's Englishness

Religious influence played the largest part in creating the differences of which we are aware today. Since that is the case, we start our investigation of the relationship between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism in those religious differences, in the works of Calvin, Calvinism, and the other Puritan denominations. For these groups, the soul's salvation was the center of their life and work. Their ethics and practices were all based on that alone and were the consequences of purely religious motives. And so, we must also admit that the cultural consequences of the Protestant Reformation were actually unforeseen and unintended by those early Reformers.

This study is a contribution to the understanding of the way in which ideas become effective forces in history. We will try to clarify the part religious forces played in forming our specifically worldly modern culture. At the same time, we are not saying that the spirit of capitalism could only have arisen as a result of the Reformation. Instead, we want to know whether and to what extent religious forces have taken part in the growth and expansion of that spirit over the world. What concrete aspects of our current capitalistic culture can be traced back to these religious ideas? We will look for correlations between particular religious beliefs and the practical ethics that follow from these beliefs. We will try to clarify the means and direction in which religious movements and ideas have influenced the development of material culture.

1. What is the importance here of Ben Franklin's aphorism, "time is money"? What does Ben Franklin represent for Max Weber?
2. Explain how Weber's approach to explaining the development of capitalism differs from Marx and the materialist explanation?
3. Why do you think Puritans developed a strong work ethic? Do you think this work ethic is specific to Protestants? Why/why not?
4. What is the connection between the Protestant Work Ethic and "greed"? What does the example of Jakob Fugger tell us?
5. Diagram Weber's argument for the development of today's capitalism and its material culture.

Concepts

Protestant Ethic

Spirit of Capitalism

Beruf(Calling; Vocation)

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