

the economic decline of Rome. His investigation of the east German agricultural workers is one part of a massive survey carried out by the members of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, and was generated by a concern with problems of practical political significance, which turned in large part upon the role of the Junker 'aristocracy' in German society.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it is true to say that the conclusions which Weber reaches in these early studies increasingly channelled his concerns into avenues which brought him into direct relation with the areas in which Marxist thought was concentrated: in particular, the specific characteristics of modern capitalism and the conditions governing its emergence and development.

The origins of the capitalist 'spirit'

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, which Weber published in the form of two long articles in 1904 and 1905, marks his first attempt to confront certain of these issues on a general plane.²⁰ Some of the principal features of the ethos which occupies Weber's attention in the book are already indicated in his study of the agricultural labourers. The contrast between the conditions of life and the outlook of the bonded and the day-labourers is largely one between acceptance of traditional patterns of deference and patronage on the one hand, and an attitude of economic individualism on the other. This latter attitude is, however, clearly not merely an outcome of the economic circumstances of the day-labourers, but represents a part of an ethic which is itself helping to break down the old traditional structure of the landed estates.

Weber opens *The Protestant Ethic* by posing a statistical fact for explanation: the fact that in modern Europe 'business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labour, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant'.²¹ This is not merely a contemporary, but also is an historical fact: tracing the association back, it can be shown that some of the early centres of capitalist development in the early part of the sixteenth century were strongly Protestant. A possible explanation for this is ready to hand: that the break with economic traditionalism which occurred

¹⁹ cf. Dieter Lindenlaub: *Richtungskämpfe im Verein für Sozialpolitik* (Wiesbaden, 1967). See also below, pp. 190–1ff for a description of Weber's political assessment of Germany in 1895, as expressed in his Freiburg inaugural lecture.

²⁰ *The Protestant Ethic* first appeared in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, vols. 20 & 21, 1905, and is reprinted as the introductory part of *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Tübingen, 1920–1). In this latter version, Weber makes some revisions, and adds comments on some of the criticisms given in the literature to which the first appearance of the work gave rise. cf. his 'Antikritisches Schlusswort zum "Geist des Kapitalismus"', in the *Archiv*, vol. 31, 1910, pp. 554–99. A description of the debate with Rachfahl is given in J. A. Prades: *La sociologie de la religion chez Max Weber* (Louvain, 1969), pp. 87–95.

²¹ *PE*, p. 35.

in these centres produced a sloughing off of tradition in general, and of religious institutions in their old form in particular. But this interpretation does not stand up to close scrutiny. It would be quite wrong to regard the Reformation as an escape from the controls of the church. In fact, the surveillance of the Catholic church over everyday life was loose: the movement to Protestantism involved acceptance of a very much higher degree of regulation of behaviour than that which was demanded by Catholicism. Protestantism adopts a resolutely stringent attitude towards relaxation and enjoyment – a phenomenon which is especially pronounced in Calvinism. The conclusion can be reached, therefore, that we must look to the specific character of Protestant beliefs if we are to account for the connection between Protestantism and economic rationality.

The novelty of Weber's interpretation, of course, did not lie in the suggestion that there is a connection between the Reformation and modern capitalism. Such a connection was assumed to exist by many writers before the appearance of Weber's work. Thus the characteristic Marxist explanation, deriving mainly from the writings of Engels, held that Protestantism is an ideological reflection of the economic changes which were incurred with the early development of capitalism.²² In rejecting this as an adequate viewpoint, Weber's work begins from an apparent anomaly, the identification and explication of which constitutes the real originality of *The Protestant Ethic*. It is usually the case that those whose lives are bound up with economic activity and the pursuit of gain are either indifferent to religion, or positively hostile to it, since whereas their actions are directed towards the 'material' world, religion is concerned with the 'immaterial'. But Protestantism, rather than relaxing the control of the church over day-to-day activities, demanded of its adherents a much more vigorous discipline than Catholicism, and thereby injected a religious factor into all spheres of the life of the believer. There is clearly a relationship between Protestantism and modern capitalism which cannot be wholly explained by seeing the former as a 'result' of the latter; but the character of Protestant beliefs and codes of behaviour is quite different from that which might be expected, *prima facie*, to stimulate economic activity.

The elucidation of this anomaly demands not only an analysis of the content of Protestant beliefs and an assessment of their influence upon the actions of believers, but also the specification of the particular characteristics of modern western capitalism as a form of economic activity. Not only does Protestantism differ in certain important respects from the religious form which preceded it, but so also does modern capitalism display basic characteristics which separate it from prior sorts of capitalistic activity. The various other forms of capitalism which Weber distinguishes are all found within societies characterised by 'economic traditionalism'. The attitudes towards

²² cf. below, pp. 189–90 & 210–11.

labour characteristic of traditionalism are illustrated graphically by the experience of modern capitalist employers who have attempted to introduce contemporary methods of production into communities where they have not previously been known. If the employer, interested in securing the highest degree of effort possible, introduces a piece-rate whereby workers can potentially increase their earnings well above those they are accustomed to receiving, the result is often that the amount of work done decreases rather than the reverse. The traditionalistic worker does not think in terms of maximising his daily wage, but rather considers only how much work he has to do in order to meet his usual needs. 'A man does not "by nature" wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he lives and as he is accustomed to live, and to earn as much as is required to do so.'²³

Traditionalism is by no means incompatible with the greed for wealth. 'Absolute and conscious ruthlessness in acquisition has often stood in direct and close connection with the strictest conformity to tradition.'²⁴ Selfish avarice is found in all societies, and is in fact more characteristic of pre-capitalist than of capitalist society. Thus 'adventurers' capitalism', for example, involving the pursuit of gain through military conquest or piracy, has existed at all periods of history. This is quite different, however, from modern capitalism, which is founded not upon the amoral pursuit of personal gain, but upon the disciplined obligation of work as a duty. Weber identifies the principal features of the 'spirit' of modern capitalism as follows:

the acquisition of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment... is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that vis-à-vis the happiness of, or utility to, the particular individual, it appears as quite transcendental and wholly irrational. Man is dominated by acquisition as the purpose of his life; acquisition is no longer a means to the end of satisfying his material needs. This reversal of what we might call the 'natural' situation, completely senseless from an unprejudiced standpoint, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all peoples not under capitalistic influence.²⁵

The spirit of modern capitalism is thus characterised by a unique combination of devotion to the earning of wealth through legitimate economic activity, together with the avoidance of the use of this income for personal enjoyment. This is rooted in a belief in the value of efficient performance in a chosen vocation as a duty and a virtue.

A traditionalistic outlook, Weber stresses, is not wholly incompatible with modern forms of economic enterprise. Many small businesses, for instance, have been run according to traditionally fixed modes of procedure, traditional rates of exchange and profit, etc. 'Now at some time', Weber says, 'this leisureliness was suddenly destroyed...';²⁶ and this often happened without any technological change taking place within the enterprise. Where such

enterprises have been restructured, what has occurred is a rational reorganisation of production, directed towards maximising productive efficiency. Such a change cannot be explained, in most cases, by a sudden influx of capital into the industry in question. It is the result, rather, of the introduction of a new spirit of entrepreneurial enterprise – the capitalist spirit. Hence the dominant characteristic which distinguishes the modern capitalist economy is that it

is rationalised on the basis of rigorous calculation, directed with foresight and caution towards the economic success which is sought in sharp contrast to the hand-to-mouth existence of the peasant, and to the privileged traditionalism of the guild craftsman and of the adventurers' capitalism, oriented to the exploitation of political opportunities and irrational speculation.²⁷

The spirit of capitalism cannot simply be inferred from the growth of rationalism as a whole in western society. Such a way of analysing the problem tends to assume a progressive, unilinear development of rationalism: in fact, the rationalisation of different institutions in western societies shows an uneven distribution. Those countries, for example, in which rationalisation of the economy has proceeded further are, in respect of the degree of rationalism of law, retarded by comparison with some of the more economically backward states. (England is the most notable instance here.) Rationalisation is a complex phenomenon, which takes many concrete forms, and which develops variably in different areas of social life. *The Protestant Ethic* is concerned only with discovering 'whose intellectual child that particular concrete form of rational thought was, from which the idea of a calling and devotion to labour in the calling has derived...'²⁸

The concept of the 'calling', Weber shows, only came into being at the time of the Reformation. It is not found, nor does any synonym for it exist, in Catholicism, nor in Antiquity. The significance of the notion of the calling, and the mode in which it is employed in Protestant beliefs, is that it serves to bring the mundane affairs of everyday life within an all-embracing religious influence. The calling of the individual is to fulfil his duty to God through the moral conduct of his day-to-day life. This impels the emphasis of Protestantism away from the Catholic ideal of monastic isolation, with its rejection of the temporal, into worldly pursuits.

The influence of ascetic Protestantism

But Lutheranism cannot be regarded as the main source of the capitalist spirit. The Reformation played an essential role in the introduction of the notion of the calling, and thereby in placing the dutiful pursuit of mundane activities at the centre of the stage. Luther's conception of the calling, how-

²³ PE, p. 60; GAR, vol. 1, p. 44.

²⁵ PE, p. 53; GAR, vol. 1, p. 36.

²⁴ PE, p. 58; GAR, vol. 1, p. 43.

²⁶ PE, p. 67.

²⁷ PE, p. 76.

²⁸ PE, p. 78.

ever, remained in some respects quite traditionalistic.²⁹ The further elaboration of the conception of the calling was the work of the later Protestant sects which make up the various branches of what Weber calls 'ascetic Protestantism'.

Weber differentiates four main streams of ascetic Protestantism: Calvinism, Methodism, Pietism, and the Baptist sects. Of course, these were closely related to one another, and cannot always be clearly separated.³⁰ Weber's discussion of ascetic Protestantism is not concerned with an overall historical description of their dogma, but only with those elements in their doctrines which are most consequential in affecting the practical conduct of the individual in his economic activity. The most important part of the analysis is concentrated upon Calvinism: not, however, solely upon Calvin's doctrines as such, but rather upon those embodied in the teachings of Calvinists towards the end of the sixteenth century and in the seventeenth century.

Having made these qualifications, Weber proceeds to identify three major tenets as most important in Calvinism. Firstly, the doctrine that the universe is created to further the greater glory of God, and only has meaning in relation to God's purposes. 'God does not exist for men, but men for the sake of God.'³¹ Secondly, the principle that the motives of the Almighty are beyond human comprehension. Men can know only the small morsels of divine truth which God wishes to reveal to them. Thirdly, the belief in predestination: only a small number of men are chosen to achieve eternal grace. This is something which is irrevocably given from the first moment of creation; it is not affected by human actions, since to suppose that it were would be to conceive that the actions of men could influence divine judgement.

The consequence of this doctrine for the believer, Weber argues, must have been one of 'unprecedented inner loneliness'. 'In what was for the man of the age of the Reformation the most decisive concern of his life, his eternal salvation, he was forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him from eternity.'³² In this crucial respect, each man was alone; no one, priest or layman, existed who could intercede with God to produce his salvation. This eradication of the possibility of salvation through the church and the sacraments, according to Weber, is the most decisive difference which separated Calvinism from both Lutheranism and Catholicism. Calvinism thereby brought about a final conclusion to a great historical process which Weber discusses elsewhere in detail: the gradual process of the 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung*) of the world.³³

²⁹ PE, p. 85. An important part of Weber's concern is to demonstrate the contrast between Lutheranism and Calvinism, rather than solely between Catholicism and Calvinism.

³⁰ Weber states that Methodism and Pietism were both derivative movements, while the Baptist sects represent an 'independent source of Protestant asceticism besides Calvinism', PE, p. 144.

³² PE, p. 104; GAR, vol. 1, p. 94.

³¹ PE, pp. 102-3.

³³ See below, pp. 214-6.

There was not only no magical means of attaining the grace of God for those to whom God had decided to deny it, but no means whatsoever. Combined with the harsh doctrines of the absolute transcendentality of God and the corruption of everything pertaining to the flesh, this inner isolation of the individual contains... the reason for the entirely negative attitude of Puritanism to all the sensuous and emotional elements in culture and in religion, because they are of no use toward salvation and promote sentimental illusions and idolatrous superstitions. Thus it provides a basis for a fundamental antagonism to sensuous culture of all kinds.³⁴

The enormous strain to which this exposed the Calvinist is evident. The decisive question which every believer must eventually have felt compelled to ask himself – am I one of the chosen? – could not be answered. To Calvin himself, this presented no source of anxiety. Since he believed himself to be selected by God to carry out a divine mission, he was confident of his own salvation. But no such certainty was possible for his followers. Consequently Calvin's doctrine that there are no external differences between the elect and the damned quickly came under pressure on the level of pastoral care. Two related responses developed. Firstly, that the individual should consider it as obligatory to deem himself one of the chosen: any doubts as to the certainty of election are evidence of imperfect faith and therefore of lack of grace. Secondly, that 'intense worldly activity' is the most appropriate means to develop and maintain this necessary self-confidence. Thus the performance of 'good works' became regarded as a 'sign' of election – not in any way a method of attaining salvation, but rather of eliminating doubts of salvation.

Weber illustrates this by reference to the writings of the English puritan, Richard Baxter. Baxter warns against the temptations of wealth, but, according to Weber, this admonition is directed solely towards the use of wealth to support an idle, relaxed way of life. Idleness and time-wasting are the foremost sins. This doctrine 'does not yet hold, with Franklin: "time is money"', but the proposition holds to a certain degree in a spiritual sense. It is infinitely valuable because every hour lost is lost to labour for the glory of God.³⁵ Calvinism demands of its believers a coherent and continuous life of discipline, thus eradicating the possibility of repentance and atonement for sin which the Catholic confessional makes possible. The latter effectively sanctions a haphazard attitude to life, since the believer can rely upon the knowledge that priestly intervention can provide release from the consequences of moral lapse.

Thus labour in the material world, for the Calvinist, becomes attributed with the highest positive ethical evaluation. The possession of riches does not provide a man with any sort of exemption from the divine command to labour devotedly in his calling. The Puritan conception of the calling, in contrast to the Lutheran, places a premium upon the duty of the individual to

³⁴ PE, p. 105.

³⁵ PE, p. 158; GAR, vol. 1, pp. 167-8.

approach his vocation in a methodical fashion as the instrument of God. The accumulation of wealth is morally condemned only to the degree that it forms an enticement to idle luxury; where material profit is acquired through the ascetic pursuit of duty in a calling, it is not only tolerated, but is in fact morally recommended. 'To wish to be poor was, it was often argued, the same as wishing to be unhealthy; it is objectionable as a glorification of works and derogatory to the glory of God.'³⁶

It is crucial to Weber's analysis that these characteristics are not 'logical', but 'psychological' consequences of the original doctrine of predestination as formulated by Calvin. These subsequent developments in Puritan doctrine stem from the phenomenal isolation experienced by believers, and the anxieties to which this gave rise. The belief in predestination is not unique to Calvinism, and its consequences for human action vary according both to the other beliefs it is associated with, and the social context in which it occurs. The Islamic belief in predestination, for example, produced, not the worldly asceticism of Calvinism, but 'a complete obliviousness to self, in the interest of fulfilment of the religious commandment of a holy war for the conquest of the world'.³⁷

The origins of the capitalist spirit thus have to be sought in that religious ethic which is most precisely developed in Calvinism. It is to this ethic that we may trace the unique qualities which distinguish the attitudes underlying modern capitalistic activity from the amoral character of most previous forms of capital acquisition. 'One of the integral characteristics of the modern capitalist spirit, and not only of this, but of modern culture: the rational conduct of life on the basis of the idea of the calling, was born – that is what this exposition has sought to show – from the spirit of Christian asceticism.'³⁸ The other varieties of Protestant asceticism, in general, have less of a rigorous discipline than Calvinism, which Weber speaks of as having an 'iron consistency'. Weber suggests, however, that there may be a historical relationship, in the origin of the capitalist spirit, between the forms of ascetic Protestantism and the social strata at different levels in the capitalist economy. Pietism, for example, which tended to induce, rather than the persistent energy of the Calvinist, an attitude of humility and renunciation, may have been most widespread among employees in the lower ranks of the industrial order, while Calvinism was probably more directly influential among entrepreneurs.³⁹

What to the Puritan was compliance with divine guidance, increasingly, for the world of contemporary capitalism becomes a mechanical conformity to the economic and organisational exigencies of industrial production, at all levels of the hierarchy of the division of labour. Weber is careful to disclaim the suggestion that the Puritan ethos is a necessary component to the function-

ing of modern capitalism, once it is established upon a broad scale. On the contrary, the specific conclusion of *The Protestant Ethic* is that, while the Puritan, because of his religious faith, deliberately chose to work in a calling, the specialised character of the capitalist division of labour forces modern man to do so.⁴⁰

Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work itself out in the world, the external goods of this world have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. Today its spirit – whether finally, who knows? – has escaped from the cage (*Gehäuse*). But, in any case, victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs this support no longer... the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our life like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.⁴¹

Weber intends *The Protestant Ethic* to be a programmatic work: it is a preliminary exploration of a complex set of issues, and his claims for the range of its application are modest and restricted. The main accomplishment of the work, according to Weber,⁴² is that it shows that the moral instrumentality of the spirit of capitalism is an unintended offshoot of the religious ethic of Calvin, and more generally of the conception of the worldly calling whereby Protestantism broke with the monastic ideal of Catholicism. But ascetic Protestantism is nonetheless in part simply the culmination of tendencies which stretch far back into the history of Christianity as a whole. Catholic asceticism already had a rational character, and there is a direct line of development from the monastic life to the ideals of Puritanism. The main effect of the Reformation, and the subsequent history of the Protestant sects, was to transfer this from the monastery into the everyday world.

The Protestant Ethic demonstrates that there is an 'elective affinity' (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) between Calvinism, or more accurately, certain sorts of Calvinist beliefs, and the economic ethics of modern capitalist activity. The distinctive feature of the work is that it seeks to demonstrate that the rationalisation of economic life characteristic of modern capitalism connects with irrational value-commitments. This is a prefatory task to the assessment of causal relations, but is not in itself sufficient for the isolation of causes.⁴³ Weber explicitly states that, for this to be achieved, two broad tasks have to be undertaken: firstly, the analysis of the origins and spread of rationalism in other spheres besides that of the economic (e.g., in politics, law, science and art); and secondly, the investigation of in what ways Protestant asceticism was itself influenced by social and economic forces. None-

³⁶ PE, p. 163.³⁸ PE, p. 180; GAR, vol. 1, p. 202.³⁷ ES, vol. 2, p. 573.³⁹ PE, p. 139.⁴⁰ 'Der Puritaner wollte Berufsmensch sein – wir müssen es sein' (GAR, vol. 1, p. 203). Weber stresses that the Puritan emphasis upon the importance of a fixed calling provided an initial moral validation of the specialised division of labour (PE, p. 163). cf. also Weber's discussion of the decline of 'church-mindedness' in American business, in 'The Protestant sects and the spirit of capitalism', in FMW, pp. 302–22.⁴¹ PE, pp. 181–2; GAR, vol. 1, pp. 203–4.⁴² cf. 'Antikritisches Schlusswort', pp. 556–7.⁴³ PE, p. 54, pp. 90–91 & p. 183.