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*The Protestant Ethic and
the Spirit of Capitalism*

新教伦理与资本主义精神



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The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

新教伦理与资本主义精神

马克斯·韦伯 原著

Max Weber

塔尔科特·帕森斯 翻译

Talcott Parsons

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二〇〇〇年一月

简介

马克斯·韦伯(1864 - 1920)是现代社会学的奠基人和主要学者,著名的经济学家。韦伯生于德国的埃尔福特,父亲是当时一位具有自由主义思想的政治活动家,母亲则信奉加尔文教。在大学就读期间,他主攻法律,博士论文研究的是意大利和西班牙中世纪的贸易组织。1894年和1896年,他先后获聘弗莱堡大学和海德堡大学政治经济学教授。1898至1903年他因病而无法继续从事研究和写作,他最重要的作品,均是1904年后直至他去世这段时间的成果。

《新教伦理与资本主义精神》(1905)是韦伯最著名的作品,也是西方经济和社会理论著作中最著名的作品之一。在此书中,韦伯令人信服地证明,先前被认为与资本主义精神相抵触的新教(清教)思想,实际上却是现代资本主义精神的基石,新教关于抵制物质利益的言论实际上是促使人们去获取物质利益的推动力。韦伯认为,尽管新教倡导人们接受自己卑微的地位,要人们致力于日常平凡的艰苦劳作,而不去考虑诸如获取物质利益、改变社会地位、奢侈的生活等,正是这样的教喻,产生了“勤劳节俭”的伦理原则。韦伯的结论是,“资本积累”的观念虽然并非直接来自新教伦理,但该伦理原则对勤劳和节俭的推崇却在不经意中为资本主义奠定了精神基础。韦伯这一关于资本主义起源的论断在学术界引起了不同反响,并引起很大的论争,但依然是对资本主义精神和起源的经典解释之一。

韦伯对经济学和社会学的其他主要贡献还在于他的“阐释”社会学和实证主义理论。他的主要著作还包括:《社会学和社会政治知识的客观性》(*The Objectivity of the Sociological*

and Social-Political Knowledge, 1904)、《经济与社会》(*Economy and Society*, 1914)、《作为职业的政治》(*Politics as Vocation*, 1918)、《普通经济史》(*General Economic History*, 1923)、《社会科学方法论》(*The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 1949)等。

FOREWORD

Max Weber, the author of the work translated in the following pages, was a scholar whose intellectual range was unusually wide, and whose personality made an even deeper impression than his learning on those privileged to know him. He had been trained as a jurist, and, in addition to teaching as a professor at Freiburg, Heidelberg, and Munich, he wrote on subjects so various as ancient agrarian history, the conditions of the rural population of Prussia, the methodology of the social sciences, and the sociology of religion. Nor were his activities exclusively those of the teacher and the student. He travelled widely, was keenly interested in contemporary political and social movements, played a vigorous and disinterested part in the crisis which confronted Germany at the close of the War, and accompanied the German delegation to Versailles in May 1919. He died in Munich in the following year, at the age of fifty-six. Partly as a result of prolonged ill-health, which compelled him for several years to lead the life of an invalid, partly because of his premature death, partly, perhaps, because of the very grandeur of the scale on which he worked, he was unable to give the final revision to many of his writings. His collected works have been published posthumously. The last of them, based on notes taken by his students from lectures given at Munich, has appeared in English under the title of

General Economic History.^[1]

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism was published in the form of two articles in the *Archive für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* in 1904 and 1905. Together with a subsequent article, which appeared in 1906, on *The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism*, they form the first of the studies contained in Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. On their first appearance they aroused an interest which extended beyond the ranks of historical specialists, and which caused the numbers of the *Archive* in which they were published to be sold out with a rapidity not very usual in the case of learned publications. The discussion which they provoked has continued since then with undiminished vigour. For the questions raised by Weber possess a universal significance, and the method of his essay was as important as its conclusions. It not only threw a brilliant light on the particular field which it explored, but suggested a new avenue of approach to a range of problems of permanent interest, which concern, not merely the historian and the economist, but all who reflect on the deeper issues of modern society.

The question which Weber attempts to answer is simple and fundamental. It is that of the psychological conditions which made possible the development of capitalist civilization. Capitalism, in the sense of great individual undertakings, involving the control of large financial resources, and yielding riches to their masters as a result of speculation, money-lending, commercial enterprise, buccaneering and war, is as old as history. Capital-

[1] Max Weber. *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight. Ph. D. (George Allen & Unwin). A bibliography of Weber's writings is printed at the end of the charming and instructive account of him by his widow. *Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild*, von Marianna Weber (J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1926). See also *Economistes et Historiens: Max Weber, un homme, une œuvre*, par Maurice Halbwachs, in *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale*, No. 1, January, 1929.

ism, as an economic system, resting on the organisation of legally free wage-earners, for the purpose of pecuniary profit, by the owner of capital or his agents, and setting its stamp on every aspect of society, is a modern phenomenon.

All revolutions are declared to be natural and inevitable, once they are successful, and capitalism, as the type of economic system prevailing in Western Europe and America, is clothed to-day with the unquestioned respectability of the triumphant fact. But in its youth it was a pretender, and it was only after centuries of struggle that its title was established. For it involved a code of economic conduct and a system of human relations which were sharply at variance with venerable conventions, with the accepted scheme of social ethics, and with the law, both of the church and of most European states. So questionable an innovation demanded of the pioneers who first experimented with it as much originality, self-confidence, and tenacity of purpose as is required to-day of those who would break from the net that it has woven. What influence nerved them to defy tradition? From what source did they derive the principles to replace it?

The conventional answer to these questions is to deny their premises. The rise of new forms of economic enterprise was the result, it is argued, of changes in the character of the economic environment. It was due to the influx of the precious metals from America in the sixteenth century, to the capital accumulated in extra-European commerce, to the reaction of expanding markets on industrial organisation, to the growth of population, to technological improvements made possible by the progress of natural science. Weber's reply, which is developed at greater length in his *General Economic History* than in the present essay, is that such explanations confuse causes and occasions. Granted that the economic conditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were, in some respects, though by no means in all, unusually favourable to an advance in economic technique, such conditions

had existed from time to time in the past without giving birth to the development of capitalist industry. In many of the regions affected by them no such development took place, nor were those which enjoyed the highest economic civilization necessarily those in which the new order found its most congenial environment. The France of Louis XIV commanded resources which, judged by the standards of the age, were immense, but they were largely dissipated in luxury and war. The America of the eighteenth century was economically primitive, but it is in the maxims of Franklin that the spirit of *bourgeois* capitalism, which, rather than the grandiose schemes of mercantilist statesmen, was to dominate the future, finds, Weber argues, its naivest and most lucid expression.

To appeal, as an explanation, to the acquisitive instincts, is even less pertinent, for there is little reason to suppose that they have been more powerful during the last few centuries than in earlier ages. "The notion that our rationalistic and capitalistic age is characterised by a stronger economic interest than other periods is childish. The moving spirits of modern capitalism are not possessed of a stronger economic impulse than, for example, an Oriental trader. The unchaining of the economic interest, merely as such, has produced only irrational results; such men as Cortes and Pizarro, who were, perhaps, its strongest embodiment, were far from having an idea of a rationalistic economic life."⁽¹⁾ The word "rationalism" is used by Weber as a term of art, to describe an economic system based, not on custom or tradition, but on the deliberate and systematic adjustment of economic means to the attainment of the objective of pecuniary profit. The question is why this temper triumphed over the conventional attitude which had regarded the *appetitus divitiarum infinitus* — the unlimited lust for gain — as anti-social and immoral. His answer is that it was the result of movements which had their source in the reli-

(1) Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight, pp. 355-6.

gious revolution of the sixteenth century.

Weber wrote as a scholar, not as a propagandist, and there is no trace in his work of the historical animosities which still warp discussions of the effects of the Reformation. Professor Pirenne,⁽¹⁾ in an illuminating essay, has argued that social progress springs from below, and that each new phase of economic development is the creation, not of strata long in possession of wealth and power, but of classes which rise from humble origins to build a new structure on obscure foundations. The thesis of Weber is somewhat similar. The pioneers of the modern economic order were, he argues, *parvenus*, who elbowed their way to success in the teeth of the established aristocracy of land and commerce. The tonic that braced them for the conflict was a new conception of religion, which taught them to regard the pursuit of wealth as, not merely an advantage, but a duty. This conception welded into a disciplined force the still feeble *bourgeoisie*, heightened its energies, and cast a halo of sanctification round its convenient vices. What is significant, in short, is not the strength of the motive of economic self-interest, which is the commonplace of all ages and demands no explanation. It is the change of moral standards which converted a natural frailty into an ornament of the spirit, and canonized as the economic virtues habits which in earlier ages had been denounced as vices. The force which produced it was the creed associated with the name of Calvin. Capitalism was the social counterpart of Calvinist theology.

The central idea to which Weber appeals in confirmation of his theory is expressed in the characteristic phrase "a calling." For Luther, as for most medieval theologians, it had normally meant the state of life in which the individual had been set by Heaven, and against which it was impious to rebel. To the Calvinist, Weber argues, the calling is not a condition in which the

(1) Henri Pirenne, *Les Périodes de l'Histoire Sociale du Capitalisme* (Hayez, Brussels, 1914).

individual is born, but a strenuous and exacting enterprise to be chosen by himself, and to be pursued with a sense of religious responsibility. Baptized in the bracing, if icy, waters of Calvinist theology, the life of business, once regarded as perilous to the soul — *summe periculosa est emplionis et venditionis negotiatio* — acquires a new sanctity. Labour is not merely an economic means; it is a spiritual end. Covetousness, if a danger to the soul, is a less formidable menace than sloth. So far from poverty being meritorious, it is a duty to choose the more profitable occupation. So far from there being an inevitable conflict between moneymaking and piety, they are natural allies, for the virtues incumbent on the elect — diligence, thrift, sobriety, prudence — are the most reliable passport to commercial prosperity. Thus the pursuit of riches, which once had been feared as the enemy of religion, was now welcomed as its ally. The habits and institutions in which that philosophy found expression survived long after the creed which was their parent had expired, or had withdrawn from Europe to more congenial climes. If capitalism begins as the practical idealism of the aspiring *bourgeoisie*, it ends, Weber suggests in his concluding pages, as an orgy of materialism.

In England the great industry grew by gradual increments over a period of centuries, and, since the English class system had long been based on differences of wealth, not of juristic status, there was no violent contrast between the legal foundations of the old order and the new. Hence in England the conception of capitalism as a distinct and peculiar phase of social development has not readily been accepted. It is still possible for writers, who in their youth have borne with equanimity instruction on the meaning of feudalism, to dismiss capitalism as an abstraction of theorists or a catchword of politicians.

The economic history of the Continent has moved by different stages from that of England, and the categories employed by Continental thinkers have accordingly been different. In France, where the site on which the modern economic system was to be

erected was levelled by a cataclysm, and in Germany, which passed in the fifty years between 1850 and 1900 through a development that in England had occupied two hundred, there has been little temptation to question that capitalist civilization is a phenomenon differing, not merely in degree, but in kind, from the social order preceding it. It is not surprising, therefore, that its causes and characteristics should have been one of the central themes of historical study in both. The discussion began with the epochmaking work of Marx, who was greater as a sociologist than as an economic theorist, and continues unabated. Its most elaborate monument is Sombart's *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*.

The first edition of Sombart's book appeared in 1902. Weber's articles, of which the first was published two years later, were a study of a single aspect of the same problem. A whole literature^[1] has arisen on the subject discussed in them. How does

[1] See, in particular, the following; E. Troeltsch, *Die Sozialen Lehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1912); F. Rachfahl, *Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus* (*Internationale Wochenschrift*, 1909, i. III); B. L. Brentano, *Die Anfänge des Modernen Kapitalismus* (1916) and *Der Wirtschaftende Mensch in der Geschichte* (1911); W. Sombart, *Die Fuden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (1911. Eng. trans. *The Feus and Modern Capitalism*, 1913), and *Der Bourgeois* (1913. Eng. trans. *The Quintessence of Modern Capitalism*, 1915); G. v. Schulze-Gaevernitz, "Die Geistesgeschichtlichen Grundlagen der Anglo-Amerikanischen Weltsuprematie. III. Die Wirtschaftsethik des Kapitalismus" (*Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Bd. 61, Heft 2); H. See, "Dans quelle mesure puritains et Juifs ont-ils contribué au Progrès du Capitalisme Moderne?" (*Revue Historique*, t. CLV, 1927) and *Les Origines du Capitalisme Moderne* (1926); M. Halbwachs, "Les Origines Puritains du Capitalisme Moderne" (*Revue d'histoire et philosophie religieuses*, March - April 1925) and "Economistes et Historiens; Max Weber, une vie, un oeuvre" (*Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale*, No. 1, 1929); H. Hauser, *Les Débuts du Capitalisme Moderne* (1927); H. G. Wood, "The Influence of the Reformation on ideas concerning Wealth and Property," in *Property, its Rights and Duties* (1913); Talcott Parsons, "Capitalism in Recent German Literature" (*Journal of Political Economy*, December 1928 and February 1929); Frank H. Knight, "Historical and Theoretical Issues in the Problem of Modern Capitalism" (*Journal of Economic and Business History*, November 1928); Kemper Fulbertson, "Calvinism and Capitalism" (*Harvard Theological Review*, July, 1928).

Weber's thesis stand to-day, after a quarter of a century of research and criticism?

The interpretation of religious beliefs and social institutions as different expressions of a common psychological attitude, which Weber elaborated in his *Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, is no longer so novel as when he advanced it. Once stated, indeed, it has the air of a platitude. The capacity of human beings to departmentalize themselves is surprising, but it is not unlimited. It is obvious that, in so far as doctrines as to man's place in the universe are held with conviction, they will be reflected in the opinions formed of the nature of the social order most conducive to well-being, and that the habits moulded by the pressure of the economic environment will in turn set their stamp on religion. Nor can Weber's contention be disputed that Calvinism, at least in certain phases of its history, was associated with an attitude to questions of social ethics which contemporaries regarded as peculiarly its own. Its critics attacked it as the sanctimonious ally of commercial sharp practice. Its admirers applauded it as the school of the economic virtues. By the middle of the seventeenth century the contrast between the social conservatism of Catholic Europe and the strenuous enterprise of Calvinist communities had become a commonplace. "There is a kind of natural inaptness," wrote a pamphleteer in 1671, "in the Popish religion to business, whereas, on the contrary, among the Reformed, the greater their zeal, the greater their inclination to trade and industry, as holding idleness unlawful." The influence of Calvinism was frequently adduced as one explanation of the economic prosperity of Holland. The fact that in England the stronghold of Nonconformity was the commercial classes was an argument repeatedly advanced for tolerating Nonconformists.

In emphasizing, therefore, the connection between religious radicalism and economic progress, Weber called attention to an interesting phenomenon, at which previous writers had hinted.

but which none had yet examined with the same wealth of learning and philosophical insight. The significance to be ascribed to it, and, in particular, the relation of Calvinist influences to the other forces making for economic innovation, is a different and more difficult question. His essay was confined to the part played by religious movements in creating conditions favourable to the growth of a new type of economic civilization, and he is careful to guard himself against the criticism that he underestimates the importance of the parallel developments in the world of commerce, finance, and industry. It is obvious, however, that, until the latter have been examined, it is not possible to determine the weight to be assigned to the former. It is arguable, at least, that, instead of Calvinism producing the spirit of Capitalism, both would with equal plausibility be regarded as different effects of changes in economic organisation and social structure.

It is the temptation of one who expounds a new and fruitful idea to use it as a key to unlock all doors, and to explain by reference to a single principle phenomena which are, in reality, the result of several converging causes. Weber's essay is not altogether free, perhaps, from the defects of its qualities. It appears occasionally to be somewhat over-subtle in ascribing to intellectual and moral influences developments which were the result of more prosaic and mundane forces, and which appeared, irrespective of the character of religious creeds, wherever external conditions offered them a congenial environment. "Capitalism" itself is an ambiguous, if indispensable, word, and Weber's interpretation of it seems sometimes to be open to the criticism of Professor Sée,^[1] that he simplifies and limits its meaning to suit the exigencies of his argument. There was no lack of the "capitalist spirit" in the Venice and Florence of the fourteenth century, or in

[1] H. Sée, "Dans quelle mesure Puritains et Juifs ont-ils contribué au Progrès Capitalisme Moderne?" (*Revue Historique*, t. CLV, 1927).

the Antwerp of the fifteenth. Its development in Holland and England, it might not unreasonably be argued, had less to do with the fact that they, or certain social strata in them, accepted the Calvinist version of the Reformation, than with large economic movements and the social changes produced by them. "Ce que MM. Weber et Troeltsch," writes Professor Pirenne, ^[1] "prennent pour l'esprit Calviniste, c'est précisément l'esprit des hommes nouveaux que la révolution économique du temps introduit dans la vie des affaires, et qui s'y opposent aux traditionalistes auxquels ils se substituent." Why insist that causation can work in only one direction? Is it not a little artificial to suggest that capitalist enterprise had to wait, as Weber appears to imply, till religious changes had produced a capitalist spirit? Would it not be equally plausible, and equally one-sided, to argue that the religious changes were themselves merely the result of economic movements?

If Weber, as was natural in view of his approach to the problem, seems to lay in the present essay somewhat too exclusive an emphasis upon intellectual and ethical forces, his analysis of those forces themselves requires, perhaps, to be supplemented. Brentano's criticism, that the political thought of the Renaissance was as powerful a solvent of conventional restraints as the teaching of Calvin, is not without weight. In England, at any rate, the speculations of business men and economists as to money, prices, and the foreign exchanges, which were occasioned by the recurrent financial crises of the sixteenth century and by the change in the price level, were equally effective in undermining the attitude which Weber, called traditionalism. Recent studies of the development of economic thought suggest that the change of opinion on economic ethics ascribed to Calvinism was by no means confined to it, but was part of a general intellectual movement, which was reflected in the outlook of Catholic, as well as of Prot-

[1] H. Pirenne, *Les Périodes de l'Histoire Sociale du Capitalisme* (1914).

estant, writers. Nor was the influence of Calvinist teaching itself so uniform in character, or so undeviating in tendency, as might be inferred by the reader of Weber's essay. On the contrary, it varied widely from period to period and country to country, with differences of economic conditions, social tradition, and political environment. It looked to the past as well as to the future. If in some of its phases it was on the side of change, in others it was conservative.

Most of Weber's illustrations of his thesis are drawn from the writings of English Puritans of the latter part of the seventeenth century. It is their teaching which supplies him with the materials for his picture of the pious *bourgeois* conducting his business as a calling to which Providence has summoned the elect. Whether the idea conveyed by the word "calling" is so peculiar to Calvinism as Weber implies is a question for theologians; but the problem, it may be suggested, is considerably more complex than his treatment of it suggests. For three generations of economic development and political agitation lay between these writers and the author of the *Institutes*. The Calvinism which fought the English Civil War, still more the Calvinism which won an uneasy toleration at the Revolution, was not that of its founder.

Calvin's own ideal of social organization is revealed by the system which he erected at Geneva. It had been a theocracy administered by a dictatorship of ministers. In "the most perfect school of Christ ever seen on earth since the day of the Apostles", the rule of life had been an iron collectivism. A godly discipline had been the aim of Knox, of the Reformed Churches in France, and of the fathers of the English Presbyterian Movement; while a strict control of economic enterprise had been the policy first pursued by the saints in New England. The Calvinism, both of England and Holland, in the seventeenth century, had found its way to a different position. It had discovered a compromise in which a juster balance was struck between prosperity and