Protestant Ethic

This entry discusses the Protestant Ethic thesis of Max Weber. The two major principles of the ethic are the new understanding of the universality of calling developed by Martin Luther and the doctrine of predestination of John Calvin. The secularization of the concept of "asceticism" is then connected to the "spirit of capitalism." The debates that continue to surround the thesis are discussed: methodological disputes, historical disagreements, and alternative interpretations of the thesis. Finally, the contemporary application of the thesis to Turkey and Japan and to work ethics in different social groups is noted.

Max Weber was born on April 21, 1864, in Erfurt, Germany, and died of pneumonia on June 14, 1920, in Munich. He was one of the founders of modern social science, and few texts in the social sciences or the humanities have achieved the fame of his The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism. First published in the Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik (volumes 20 and 21) in 1904-05 and reprinted with a number of significant changes (Weber 2000) in 1920 as the opening study of Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie, it has become a classic, if much debated, work of modern sociology.

The central thesis is that the ethical principles of Protestantism fostered the development of Western capitalism. "Fostered" is an appropriate term as the causal relationship for Weber between Protestantism and capitalism is not one of simple if P then Q but rather, as Weber variously describes it (Weber 1988: 83), one of "elective affinities" (Wahlverwandschaften) or of an "interior relationship" (innere Verwandschaft) (Weber 2000: 7). Protestantism does not cause capitalism in any direct sense. Rather, the ethic of Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism influence each other. They are compatible through positive feedback and encouragement (Swedberg 2005: 83-84).

Weber outlines two main principles of the ethic of Protestantism which significantly shaped the actions of individual followers. The first comes from Martin Luther's understanding of the Christian calling, or vocation (Lehmann 1996: 30-41). Departing from the Catholic hierarchical notion of vocation, in which only clergy and religious were believed to be called, Luther proclaimed that all Christians were called by God to work within the world and through their daily activities to build the Kingdom of God. This "affirmation of the ordinary" (Taylor 1989: 211-233) proved a decisive shift toward the creation of the modern world, in which worldly, or "inner-worldly," production and reproduction are valued over otherworldly contemplation and celibacy. God is believed to call all persons to live their ordinary lives in a methodical way which reflects the gospel values. Hence the Protestant work ethic. A moral justification for inner-worldly activity is thus provided by this religious ethic, so that performing one's duty to God is relocated from the sacramental realm of cultic
practices to the world of ordinary activity and family. All activities, condoned by God, are now deemed of equal worth in God's eyes (Weber 2000: 69-71).

Weber derives the second principle of Protestantism from his reading of John Calvin's doctrine of predestination. This position held that God in his infinite and inscrutable wisdom had selected the saved and damned even before their earthly existence. Whilst on the one hand successful human actions, as, for example, making profit in a business, could not thereby influence one's salvation in any positive sense, on the other hand such successful human actions became a sign that one had already been chosen by God to be saved. This sign was the only substitute for the lost sacramental reassurance of which Catholics had been able to avail themselves. Such a sign was necessary for the Calvinists because, left alone with their predetermined fate, they could no longer be assuaged by the sacramental support of priests, and the consequent uncertainty of whether they were saved or not weighed heavily on the shoulders of individual believers. Such 'salvation anxiety' made living according to Calvinist beliefs an especially stressful experience and one which Weber considers to have been an important motivating factor in promoting disciplined and intensive work. Only the sign of a systematic and methodical self-control of all of one's actions in which the fruits of one's labour were reinvested in the business and not selfishly squandered, something that Weber terms "asceticism" or "ascetical action" (Treiber 1999), could provide the believer with any reassurance that God had chosen them to be saved rather than damned. Of all of the four forms of Protestant asceticism analyzed by Weber--Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism, and Baptism (Weber 1988: 75, n. 2; 112, n. 1/ Weber 2000: 43, n. 50; 76, n. 115), Calvinists most of all felt the inner loneliness with which the loss of the sacraments left them. In Calvinism the strongest psychological sanction for ascetic action was therefore to be found, and it was the influence of these sanctions on the practical actions of individuals that so interested Weber the sociologist.

Combined, these two ethical principles of Protestantism provided a powerful motivation for the rational control of one's inner-worldly life. They transferred the rationalization of the former closed monastic discipline from behind the walls of the monastery to the open of the market place of daily life (Weber 1988: 163). If in the monastery, the focus had been on the inner cultivation of the individual soul, now in modern times the focus shifted to the outer world of business. It was this secularized version of religious asceticism that ties the Protestant ethic to the second of Weber's key terms, the "spirit of capitalism."

Weber turns to the term "spirit of capitalism" in chapter two of the first part of the Protestant Ethic. Here he draws on the writings of Benjamin Franklin, the eighteenth-century American politician and author, to show how the "ethic of Protestantism" and the "spirit of capitalism" share a Protestant understanding of asceticism (Treiber 1999). Weber uses some of the sayings of Benjamin Franklin to illustrate the "spirit of capitalism": "Time is money"; "The good paymaster is the lord of another man's purse"; "Remember, that money is of the prolific, generating nature" (Weber 1988: 31-32). These sayings capture the "spirit of capitalism": the embodiment of rational
action in entrepreneurship that emerges in the West in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Modern capitalism was guided by the principle of duty, which fostered profit and discouraged indulgence. The justification was the Protestant view of religious calling. Other traditional economies had simply lacked the motivation to pursue ever more profit (Weber 1988: 44-45). While forms of capitalism had existed in China, India, and Babylon long before the growth of Protestantism (Weber 1991: 300-315), it was the distinctive normative ascetic spirit, combined with institutions, that marked Western capitalism in the early modern period (Parkin 2002: 40-42).

The Protestant Ethic thesis has generated an enormous debate, both during Weber's lifetime and up through the present. Some have questioned Weber's methodology (Runciman 1972). Others have asserted that a Protestant meta-narrative directs Weber's work (Carroll 2007, 2009). Still others have questioned the place of Protestantism in early modern Europe (Lehmann and Roth 1993).

An invaluable source for understanding Weber's intentions in the Protestant Ethic is a series of criticisms and replies to these criticisms produced shortly after the initial publication of the work (Chalcraft and Harrington 2001). Weber's replies to the early criticisms of the historian Felix Rachfahl and the historical philosopher H. Karl Fischer indicate that many of the later misunderstandings of Weber's thesis could have been avoided if Weber's replies to these early critics had been considered. Central to these controversies has been the belief that Weber is arguing for direct causality between religion and capitalism (Winckelmann 1978: 8) As Weber makes clear in his replies, he is rather considering how religious orientations and economic developments have affinities with each another. Furthermore, he enlists the methodological tool of "ideal types" not to caricature or oversimplify but to capture the key features of a social phenomenon.

Yet part of the problem in understanding Weber's thesis is that he draws on so many fields--the history of economics, theology, sociological methodology, biblical exegesis, and the study of religions. And he sees all of these from the perspective of his own German liberal Protestantism (Carroll 2007: 43-81). We today are at a significant temporal and cultural distance from Weber.

At the time of the publication of the Protestant Ethic, the question of the importance of Protestantism in the rise of the modern world was already being debated. His friend Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), a major German Protestant theologian, wrote an important article on the significance of Protestantism for the rise of the modern world in 1906. His article struck a cultural chord with the religious historians and national economists who were then debating these issues. But it was theologians who sided with Weber and historians and economists who did not (Kaesler 1998: 202).

While in The Protestant Ethic Weber focuses on Europe, this work is part of a wider project to place Western rationalism in the context of the world religions (Schluchter 1981). In his other works on the study of the world religions it is clear that Weber
understands this specific form of rationality, which he considers to have arisen out of internal religious rationalization, to have achieved maturity in ascetic Protestantism. By this standard he judges other world religions, which he considers to be less rational than those in the West and often inhibited by a magical rather than a scientific outlook. This theme emerges in the second edition of the Protestant Ethic in the form of the addition of the concept of the “Entzauberung der Welt” (de-magification or disenchantment of the world) (Carroll 2007: 87-94), in which ascetic Protestantism rejects all forms of the sacramental mediation of salvation that are available to Catholicism. In removing sacramental conceptions of the world, Protestantism opens the way for science to explore the world free of religious blockage. Weber measures other world religions by how much they remove magic from their beliefs and practices. Capitalism involved the interplay of the Protestant "de-magification" of the world with the development of institutions that made possible the maximum exploitation of nature for profit.

The continued importance of the Weber thesis is shown by its application to new places like Turkey (Arslan 2001) and Japan (Bellah 1985) and also to the work ethics of different social groups over time (Lipset 1992, Furnham 1990). Deciphering the complex relations between deeply held, often religious beliefs and values on the one hand and social and economic developments on the other will always be an unfinished project, but one that will surely continue to be indebted to the Weber thesis.