Protestant Ethic

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The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (henceforth PE), Max Weber’s (1864–1920) classic study, was perhaps the most widely read and enduring book published in the social sciences in the twentieth century. It set off a vehement debate immediately upon its original appearance in two journal articles in 1904 and 1905. Remarkably, the controversy continues even today.

A task was nothing less than an explanation for the rise of modern industrial capitalism in the west. In dialogue mainly with Karl Marx and the economic historian Werner Sombart, Weber insisted that the familiar explanations they offered for the transformation from age-old and universal “political” and “adventure” capitalism to modern capitalism would not suffice. Their focus upon the introduction of innovative banking and finance techniques, the gradual expansion of commerce and a class of entrepreneurs, the introduction into Europe of huge supplies of precious metals from the New World, the general advance of technology, the growth of populations, and “the greed of the bourgeoisie” omitted “the other side of the causal equation,” Weber held: beliefs, values, and ideas.

In arguing in favor of the notion that beliefs, values, and ideas had considerable impact, Weber called attention to the role of culture. An “economic ethic,” or the spirit of capitalism, played a significant part, he maintained, and its roots are to be discovered outside the realm of interest-oriented utilitarian action, namely in the ascetic Protestant — or “Puritan” — sects and churches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Calvinists, Methodists, Baptists, Pietists, Quakers, and Mennonites. This is “the Weber thesis” as examined here. The entry first sketches the contours of Weber’s position as presented in PE. It then summarizes the ways in which this volume’s analysis is complemented by arguments offered in two short essays on the American sects. The manner in which Weber’s massive post-PE comparative agenda relates directly to PE will be then briefly addressed. Finally, the major positions articulated by his opponents and the impact of PE will be discussed.

In the most general sense, PE aims to demonstrate that the search of Puritan believers for answers to the crucial question at the time — “am I among the saved?” — ultimately influenced their economic activity. It did so in an unexpected way: The faithful came to understand their capacity to work methodically, to pursue profit, and to acquire wealth as evidence of their salvation, Weber insists. His reconstruction of the religious world within which they lived, and hence of their subjective meaning, explains how these sincere believers arrived at their conclusion.

The Doctrine of Predestination and Revisions by the Puritan Divines

The doctrine of predestination must be seen as the point of departure for Weber’s analysis. As formulated in the sixteenth century by the Swiss theologian John Calvin (1509–1564), it condemned the vast majority of believers for all time, by God’s decree; only a tiny minority would be saved. Not even extremely devout conduct and perpetual charitable deeds would alter God’s judgment.

Now alone before their deity and without the assistance of priests endowed with the capacity to forgive sins, Calvin’s followers fell into states of severe and unrelenting anxiety, all the more as a consequence of the adoption of the vengeful, angry, and wrathful God of the Old Testament in Calvin’s theological thinking. Yet the faithful could not withdraw from the world’s activities, Calvin maintained, for to do so would nullify their single purpose in this short life: to build on earth God’s kingdom of affluence and justice. Owing to its abundance and to the rule of God’s commandments, the community of the faithful would praise his majesty and glory. Thus labor
became required by God as a means to serve him (Weber, 2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 118, 122–123). Furthermore, followers of Calvin in the sixteenth century argued that God also demanded a systematic orientation to work: labor must be manifest as a sincere calling that involves dedication to an occupation (Beruf). This posture toward work on the one hand ameliorated the believer’s doubt and anxiety and, on the other hand, instilled in the devout a self-confidence regarding his or her salvation (Weber, 2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 125).

In these ways work now directly acquired a religious meaning, Weber emphasizes. Its accustomed utilitarian orientation was lost and methodical work now became sanctified as a religious calling. Nonetheless, the direct link of labor, profit, and wealth to the urgent quest of the faithful for evidence of their favorable salvation status was not yet immediate and powerful.

Weber stresses that the revisions undertaken by Calvin’s seventeenth-century successors in England, the “Puritan Divines,” placed additional “psychological premiums” upon methodical labor, profit, and wealth, and a general organization of life in accord with his commandments. These ministers, theologians, and lay faithful also concluded that, even though the devout could never be certain of their salvation, signs of redemption coming from God could be identified.

First, as a consequence of the extreme difficulty of performing sustained and methodical work throughout the life course, as well as of adhering to his ethical injunctions, the Puritan Divines arrived at an important position: those successful in these ways, they held, must have been given their unusual strength by an omnipotent and omniscient deity. And the faithful knew that this God surely would bestow his energy only on the saved. Second, the Divines argued that a further sign of one’s positive salvation status was apparent: if business endeavors met with success and great wealth was acquired as a consequence of labor in a calling, this outcome surely did not happen by chance. Given God’s extreme powers and knowledge, nothing occurred randomly in his universe. Hence the devout could logically conclude that their “worldly success” must have occurred with his blessing – and surely this deity would deem worthy of assistance only the ones chosen to be saved. Profit, wealth, and methodical work now moved to the center of the believer’s life and testified (sich bewahren) to a state of grace.

Weber contends that in this manner unusually powerful psychological premiums came to be placed directly upon systematic labor and the acquisition of profit and riches. A methodical–rational organization of life oriented to the fulfillment of these goals became widespread among the faithful. An asceticism capable of mastering problems and of comprehensively directing activity arose, and believers now led goal-oriented, disciplined, and planned lives. In other words, through methodical labor and concerted entrepreneurial activity, the devout could convince themselves of their own salvation. Indeed the faithful could now create their own redemption. With these revisions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Calvin’s bleak and depressed believers, now as God’s “tools,” became engaged in world-mastery activity (Weltbeherrschung).

To Weber, the introduction of this providential element clearly separated the activity of believers from all utilitarian striving for mundane political and economic goals. It also prompted the intensification of human activity to a systematic level: Activity acquired the staying power that rendered it capable of uprooting the age-old and rigid “traditional economic ethic,” according to which labor was a necessary evil and avoided as much as possible. Thus, carried by innumerable groups of people organized into churches and sects, this Protestant ethic banished what even charismatic entrepreneurs could not banish. As Weber stresses, there followed a reversal of the age-old derogatory image of the successful capitalist: He appeared now in a favorable light. Suspected since antiquity of being manipulative and disingenuous, he now acquired a reputation for fairness, reliability, and honesty (Weber, 2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 164, 170, 173–174).

Weber contends that, as a consequence of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, of revisions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and of the impact of Puritan churches and sects, this-worldly asceticism crystallized and set in motion a particular “push” toward a more organized and a more dynamic economy. This thrust became all the more intense as Puritans recognized that their worldly success could not be
attributed to their efforts alone. Rather God’s all-powerful hand had been at work – and clearly all profits belonged to him. Profits must be invested, the devout knew, according to his will, namely into creating the abundant kingdom that served to praise his glory and majesty. Hence successful workers and entrepreneurs could never rest upon their fortunes. Moreover, only a modest lifestyle was allowed, for all ostentatious consumption would surely distract believers from the exclusive allegiance to God required by asceticism.

From the Protestant Ethic to the Spirit of Capitalism

A Protestant ethic arose in this manner, Weber argues. However, although of course the energetic and methodical economic activity that this ethic elicited influenced particular regions, Weber perceives its impact as geographically limited. And, as secularization proceeded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and as the question of one’s personal salvation became less urgent, this “modern” economic ethic tended to lose its providential foundation. Nonetheless, Weber insists, far from its simply fading into insignificance, there arose in its wake a powerful secular successor: the spirit of capitalism. The source of its constellation of work-, profit-, and wealth-oriented values and of its capacity to organize life in a disciplined and directed manner could not be located in an expansion of commerce and new banking techniques, technological innovations, general evolutionary processes, and a mobilization of political interests by powerful groups: For Weber, its origins were to be found, at least in part, in the religious realm.

Weber described this spirit – which he perceived to be vividly manifest in Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography – as existing in an “elective affinity” (Wahlverwandschaft) relationship with the Protestant ethic (Weber, 2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 77–78, 109). Importantly to him, it spread widely in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly in the United States. Furthermore, its values penetrated significantly into a variety of realms: families, schools, neighborhoods, the government, and the military, for example. Not least, this spirit imbued the workplace with discipline, dedication, and energy.


The Protestant Sects in America: “Breeding” Ethical Action

Weber’s commentary on the economic culture of the United States brings his audience up to date in a systematic manner on the subject of the fate of the Protestant ethic 250 years after its origin. Through a depiction of major American customs, conventions, and values, he seeks in the essays on sects to provide an explanation for the entanglement of doctrinal-based ethical action in a social dynamic – one that facilitated the wide influence of work- and business-oriented ethical conduct.

Thus, the sects essays turn away from a discussion of the economic activity that ascetic Protestant doctrine requires from the devout and move toward an explanation of how this conduct came to be cultivated, and even demanded, by a group of believers. In the sect, Weber argues, a particular social configuration had the effect of extensively “breeding” ethical qualities among the faithful. His concern now centers on how the religious beliefs of the Puritans became so deeply anchored in the activities of the devout. In his view, the sects fulfilled this task in a remarkably effective manner. Religious belief, ethical action, and the Protestant ethic now permeated the believer’s entire being even to a higher degree. How did this happen?
Because membership in a sect occurred only after an investigation into the candidate’s moral conduct and only after the voting procedures had yielded a favorable outcome, sect members became widely recognized throughout their communities as honest and respectable. Moreover, to protect the sect’s prestige and reputation in its region, all members must practice ethical conduct. Hence, to prevent any weakening of the ethical fiber, members’ behavior was monitored strictly and admonishment occurred frequently. Members must now testify to the sincerity of their belief through upright activity “before God” and “before men.” However, such rigorous scrutiny brought clear benefits: Reputations for honesty were maintained, thereby ensuring the sect’s social prestige and the likelihood that its members would acquire customers. Once it became widely known that all members upheld the rules of fair play, residents far and wide preferred to engage in business with sect-owned enterprises.

Indeed, in Weber’s view the sect’s impact was to intensify activity even beyond the realm of business. Within this encompassing and monitoring social group, a necessity arose to demonstrate one’s moral character generally, or to “hold one’s own.” Thus all sect members felt intense social pressure to abide by strict standards of good conduct; ethical action became indispensable, for it alone testified to the believer’s deep faith. For all these reasons, among sect members high standards of ethical conduct accompanied methodical work and the search for wealth and profit. Rewards were apparent, as were punishments. A halo of respectability came to surround the Puritan entrepreneur, and those in search of bank loans and financial opportunities were viewed as creditworthy and honest. This aura must be maintained, for customers otherwise would abandon their preference to conduct business with sect members (see Weber, 2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 211–212, 219, 228; 1968: 1204–1206). Both the “fair play” reputations of members and their social existence were at stake. Specifically American forms of social trust, ethical action, and respectability developed (Kalberg, 2014).

Weber contends that these dynamics within the Protestant sect intensified the Protestant ethic. As members became goal-directed, they became oriented to overarching tasks. In the process, the sect assisted the introduction of patterns of action that were to be the cornerstone of formal legal equality, abstract norms, and bureaucratization, as well as of modern capitalism’s instrumental mode of utilizing persons: “this-worldly asceticism … and the specific discipline of the sects bred the capitalist frame of mind and the rational ‘professional’ [Berufsmensch] who was needed by capitalism” (Weber, 1968: 1209–1210; see Weber, 2005: 286; 2011: 327 n34).

Hence the sects proved central in several ways to Weber’s thesis. They conveyed a “modern” economic ethic to the arena of labor and commerce more efficiently than either charismatic “adventure capitalists” or the sermons delivered by Calvin, the Puritan Divines, or other ascetic Protestant preachers could have done. Manifest in secular form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this ethos expanded throughout communities, and new carrier groups – varieties of
organizations, social clubs, and civic associations – congealed. They extended the values of the Protestant ethic’s direct successor – the spirit of capitalism – across entire regions and through generations. Weber’s thesis can be fully grasped only if the complementary character of PE and the sect essays is acknowledged.

Abandoning a “Single Formula”

In these multiple ways, Weber (2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 108) investigated whether “religious influences co-participated” in giving birth to this spirit and in pushing its expansion. As captured through religious sources and values, the subjective meaning of devout believers remains pivotal throughout his analysis – more so than social structural factors, rational choices, economic interests, domination and power, or “evolutionary progress.” Weber held that the spirit of capitalism provided a significant push to modern capitalism, albeit one unquantifiable in the end. He leaves its “exact influence” open and uncharted (Weber, 2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 271).

As a “case study” of how the origins of this spirit derived from the realm of religion, PE offers a powerful analysis of the way in which noneconomic forces may significantly alter economic activity. Its message is clear: even when directed toward an understanding of putatively instrumental activities, sociological research must not neglect action oriented toward values. However, in PE’s concluding pages Weber also insists that investigations must avoid an exclusive focus upon values. The search for a “single formula” must be abandoned; “both sides of the causal equation” must be addressed. PE concludes with just such a warning in a passage that forms a strong bridge to his broader agenda: “of course it cannot be the intention here to set a one-sided religion-oriented analysis of the causes of culture and history in place of an equally one-sided ‘materialistic’ analysis. Both are equally possible” (Weber, 2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 178–179).

The Broader Agenda

PE did not pursue another of Weber’s topics of interest: the rise of modern capitalism in the west. Although, as is now apparent, in his view values may influence economic interests and provide the “content” for “economic forms,” he also stresses that the origins of modern capitalism will not be understood without the utilization of a more complex methodology: A series of wide-ranging multicausal and comparative studies was needed. Any demonstration of the spirit of capitalism’s viable impact upon modern capitalism’s origin and development would require an examination of the extent to which this economic ethic interacts with configurations of political, economic, stratification, legal, and other factors (Weber, 2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 178–179; 390–391 n96).

Thus PE and the sect essays must be acknowledged as constituting simply the first steps in a massive project: to investigate the multiple causal origins of modern western capitalism. Weber’s Economic Ethics of the World Religions (henceforth EEWR) with its volumes on China, ancient Judaism, and India (Weber, 1951, 1952, 1958), his three-volume Economy and Society (henceforth E&S; Weber, 1968), and his General Economic History (Weber, 1927) all offer rigorous analyses to this end. E&S provides the conceptual tools and research procedures – the theoretical framework – for the investigation of this theme and EEWR provides indispensable comparative studies that assist in isolating modern western capitalism’s uniqueness. Unlike PE, each of these volumes offers highly multicausal analyses. Each study abjures a search for a single, all-encompassing formula that promises to unlock history’s causal pathways.

Despite its unusually thorough research, PE has been the subject of enduring criticism. Had scholars paid heed to Weber’s larger project, many common criticisms of PE would have been avoided.

The Critical Commentary

Generations of scholars have commented critically upon PE. Unfortunately, the vast majority have misunderstood both Weber’s goal and his mode of research, which was based on ideal types and the subjective meaning of actors. Only several of the more common criticisms can be addressed here (see Kalberg, 2011: 50–56).
Many interpreters have failed to recognize Weber's basic distinction between capitalism, which he sees as universal, and modern capitalism, which he regards as specific to the modernizing west. These critics locate capitalism in the Middle Ages and therefore dismiss Weber. Other opponents have understood his goal in PE as one of explaining the rise of modern capitalism rather than of evaluating the extent to which religious factors played a role in calling forth a spirit of capitalism (Weber, 2011 [1904–1905/1920]: 108–109, 177–179).

Still other commentators have understood PE as an effort to derive modern capitalism, in a monocausal manner, from Calvin's writings; hence they both misunderstood Weber's goal and neglected the revisions undertaken by the Puritan Divines. As noted, all such alterations gave hope to the devout that signs of their predestined status could be discovered.

Only a very few critics have understood that the Protestant ethic crucially introduced a methodical–rational organization of life. This development assumed a pivotal place in Weber's argument: rooted in values rather than in the utilitarian action of charismatic “adventure” and “political” capitalists, this mode of life alone proved capable of shattering the age-old traditional economic ethic. Other interpreters proclaimed that “asceticism” could be found in the medieval period, thereby ignoring Weber's pivotal distinction between “other-worldly” asceticism (monks in monasteries in the medieval era) and “this-worldly” asceticism (ascetic Protestant believers who sought to act in the world).

More Marxist-inclined opponents discovered a “capitalist spirit” in the Middle Ages and traced its origins exclusively to the expansion of trade and commerce engineered by the bourgeoisie. Whereas these commentators dismissed the Puritans' quest for salvation as exclusively the successful imposition by a dominant class of its ideology, Weber maintained that its sources could be traced to a significant extent back to developments inside the domain of religion. Finally, very few critics have been aware either of the relationship of Weber's EEWR comparisons to PE or of his focus upon the creation of subjective meaning by the faithful. Repeatedly, Weber's complex arguments have been simplified.

Despite these and other criticisms, the fascination with PE has endured; the reception of this work has expanded over the last thirty years throughout Asia, Latin America, and Africa. An interest in testing its hypothesis remains strong to this day, as does its capacity to generate research across a series of themes and subfields. Its impact can now be addressed.

The Impact of PE

The distinguished study of seventeenth-century Scotland by Gordon Marshall sought directly to evaluate Weber's conclusion on the basis of massive archival data. Presbyteries and Profits (Marshall, 1980) first investigated the exhortations of Scottish “pastoral theologians.” They advocated a mode of organizing activity that placed this-worldly asceticism, a monitoring of one's use of time, and systematic work in a calling at the center of life, Marshall discovered. He then examined the “economic practices and beliefs” of a variety of capitalists in Scotland. An ethos “of at least sections of the Scottish business community” identical to Weber's spirit of capitalism was apparent (Marshall, 1980: 221). Marshall concluded: “we have demonstrated an 'elective affinity' between the ethic of Scottish Calvinism and that of Scottish capitalist enterprise during [the seventeenth century]” (1980: 222). Three recent empirical studies by Henretta (1993), Knowles (1997), and Jacob and Kadane (2003) also confirm Weber's thesis.

PE has been widely influential in yet another manner: it has stimulated a broad range of investigations across the social sciences throughout the twentieth century. According to Chalcraft (2001: 2), "every year sees new contributions in various fields." PE's impact upon the sociology of development, religion, and work, for example, can scarcely be underestimated. A vast array of studies have identified Catholic–Protestant distinctions, including ones on voting behavior, levels of education, rates of occupational mobility, and advances in modern science. The predominantly Protestant backgrounds of American entrepreneurs has often been addressed.

In recent decades comparative research in a Weberian vein has moved forcefully in the
direction of multicausal and conjunctural–causal case studies – albeit ones that often place cultural forces, including economic ethics, at the forefront. All weathervanes point to the continuation, as is now undertaken by researchers across the globe, of this PE-inspired research.

SEE ALSO: Capitalism; Culture, Economy and; Economic Development; Industrialization; Modernization; Religion, Sociology of; Theory; Verstehen; Weber, Max

References


Further Readings