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Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*

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Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Stephen Kalberg, Roxbury Publishing Co., 2002

With so much interest today in encouraging and exporting democracy and capitalism around the world today, it may be a good thing to review how we came to be the most prosperous and most productive society in history. Can other societies with very different histories achieve this condition in the near term? I am optimist enough to think that they can eventually, but all the pieces are not there yet.

One scholar whose major work was published a century ago would be good reading for any of us today confronted with exporting democracy and capitalism. Not many works of social analysis published at the turn of the 20th century are still relevant today. Max Weber, the German sociologist who wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1904, never expected to be relevant a century after this writing, but he was wrong. Other giants of his time, including Karl Marx, have not fared as well. Weber was insightful, and his recognition of the role of religion in an economic system such as capitalism is even more relevant today, where globalization is being challenged and transformed by religion once again—this time negatively.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism was first published in 1904-05, revised in 1920 (just before the author's death), and translated into English in 1930. This work focuses on values and ideas as sources of social change, a notion that was very controversial in its time and probably still is. He wanted to demonstrate that one important source of the modern work ethic and orientation to material success (in his words, the "spirit of Capitalism") came from an "ideal" rather than a "material" origin, ascetic Protestant sects, all derived from Puritan

Protestantism, which placed work and material success in the center of their lives. Although Protestant Puritanism has declined since the 16th and 17th centuries, these values have been transformed into secular social values most identifiable in America, even today, a century after Weber's book was first printed.

The way capitalism is practiced in the United States, which Weber calls "modern capitalism," differs greatly from the "traditional capitalism" that had been with human history since the first merchant traders. Traditional capitalism has always had venture (or adventure) capitalists who seized opportunities and who gambled on making a fortune from risk. Other than such venturists, in most traditional societies people regarded work as a necessary evil—something one must do to have enough to eat. Work was never enshrined as a good in itself (with the exception of certain Catholic monastic orders)—nor was prosperity seen as a valuable evidence of a work ethic that benefits the entire community. This is the change that Puritan Protestantism brought to the table. These people recognized the virtue of hard work and prosperity, not only for the enterprise owners, but for the workers themselves, and for the entire community.

It is fascinating to consider how a theology as obsessive as Calvinism, with its belief in a god who condemns most of humanity to hell and offers salvation to an elite few, could take over the minds of so many literate and thinking human beings. This cruel theology filled its adherents with dread, and they lived in turmoil over whether they were among the saved or the condemned. Since nothing that they could do could make a difference in their standing with God, they came up with the idea that material success was a sign from God that they were among the saved. This belief fueled the work ethic that was totally unique in human history.

The modern capitalism that arose from this belief system was based on "a relatively free exchange of goods in markets, the separation of business activity from household activity, sophisticated bookkeeping methods, and the rational, or systematic, organization of work and the workplace in general. Workers are legally free in modern capitalism rather than enslaved. Profit is pursued in a regular and continuous fashion, as is the maximization of profit in organized, productive businesses." The key to this system is its notion of a "calling" involved in work, and a frame of mind that strives systematically and rationally in this calling, working toward legitimate profit. It certainly was an ethical system that demanded of its adherents that they not be lazy, greedy, or

dishonest in their work behavior, and that they not use the profits of their efforts for ostentatious display. The money was to be plowed back into the enterprise and community.

Weber tracked this system from its religious-obsessed beginnings in Puritanism to the American secular system embodied by Benjamin Franklin, who advocated these same ethical values without the Puritan fear of damnation. Weber saw, during his long visit to the United States at the turn of the 20th century, that this Protestant ethic was everywhere evident on a secular basis. His translator notes: “Wherever the spirit of capitalism reigned, work was perceived as a noble and virtuous endeavor; one who engaged in it was respected throughout the community and believed to be of good character. Work played a central role in the formulation even of a person’s sense of dignity and self-worth.” It seems obvious to me that it is this very work ethic that explains the difference in development between the United States and its Latin American neighbors, an observation that Weber would probably confirm.

Reading Weber today is an exercise in logical, rational analysis from which all sociologists could benefit. The wonder of this book is that such a rational man could comprehend and explain the workings of a religion-obsessed era that was markedly irrational.

This new volume also contains Weber’s “Prefatory Remarks” to *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion* (1920). He wrote this during a period in which it appeared religion was waning; his interest in the religions of the world was remarkably prescient. We are back in an era of religious saturation and some rational wisdom is welcome.

Laina Farhat-Holzman