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"The Protestant Ethic" with Fewer Tears

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In much of current usage "the Protestant Ethic" is associated with the widely influential book of Max Weber (1864-1920), first published in Germany in 1904-1905.¹ No book of its kind has elicited such a wide range of scholarly discussion, much of it a vast misrepresentation.

One of the cruder oversimplifications is offered by William H. Whyte who, in a discussion of Weber, asserts that thrift and the survival of the fittest represent "the Protestant ethic in its purest form."² Another misconception epitomizes Weber's thesis by the formula, "Protestantism—or Calvinism—produced capitalism."³ By others, the slogan "Capitalism produced Calvinism" is recited as an incantation, as if to imply that Weber was a Marxist. As summaries of Weber's thesis these formulas are, at the most, quarter-truths. They overlook the fact that Weber vigorously rejected [175] any monocausal theory of history, whether idealistic or realistic (Marxist).

I have chosen to present this essay in honor of Erich Fromm, partly because he has had a long-standing and systematic interest in the role of Christianity, and especially of Protestantism, in Western culture. It is, of course, not my purpose to recapitulate and assess Weber's entire intention and accomplishment in his studies of "the Protestant ethic" (I shall place this term in quotation marks when referring to his conception). That task

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons, Foreword by R. H. Tawney (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930). Weber's views on the Protestant ethic are also set forth in a later, companion piece, "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," in H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (trans. and eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946). The former will be referred to hereinafter as *PE*.

² William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 14.

³ An exaggerated version of this stereotype appeared in a conversation I had years ago in Paris with the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev, who wrote extensively on religion and capitalism. Speaking of the Protestant ethic, he said, "One could have predicted that American civilization would one day collapse, for it is grounded in Calvinism. We see this collapse not only in your greedy businessmen but also in your gangsters. Legs Diamond is a spiritual descendant of John Calvin." Following upon a few minutes' discussion, Berdyaev said in astonishment, "What a surprise to me. Why has no one ever told me that those gangsters are not Presbyterians?"



has already been undertaken by a host of scholars.

My principal concern here is twofold: 1) to remind the reader that since Weber's study was concerned with "ascetic Protestantism" in its relation to economic behavior, he by no means intended a complete account of the Protestant ethic, and 2) to show that in Weber's presentation, even within this limit, he fails to take into account important aspects of "ascetic Protestantism," and that correspondingly he does not give attention to a significant influence of the Protestant ethic, particularly with respect to an indispensable feature of Anglo-American democracy, the voluntary association. In view of the fact that Weber with tears laments the end-result (as he sees it) of "the Protestant ethic," the import of this essay is to qualify his conception of that ethic and its influence, and therefore to view it with fewer tears.⁴ This evaluation must take into account Weber's philosophical presuppositions and especially certain value judgments.

Weber is not a sociologist if by that term one refers to the specialist who examines human groups only by means of surveys and statistics. Weber must be classed with such seminal figures as Marx and Nietzsche, Adam Smith and Hegel. In a letter of his earlier years he wrote: "One can measure the honesty of a contemporary scholar, and above all, of a contemporary philosopher, in his posture toward Nietzsche and Marx. Whoever does not admit that he could not perform the most important parts of his work without the work that these two have done swindles himself and others."⁵

Weber, trained initially in law and economics, was a man of strong moral convictions. He was fundamentally concerned with the values of civilization and the ways these values have been formulated and implemented or perverted. As a social scientist, however, he distinguished fact [176] statements from value judgments, asserting that the social scientist must confine himself to the former. Nevertheless, he not infrequently interrupts his exposition to render a value judgment, and then to apologize before returning to the matter in hand. Here we see an acute inner tension between commitment to scientific objectivity and the values of moral integrity and individual responsibility. A similar tension obtains between his concern for individual freedom and responsibility and his concern for a strong German state.

In examining civilizational values Weber presupposed a conception of man as a historical, social being. Indeed, in the end he developed a philosophy of history. Of crucial significance is his view that the sociologist, like anyone else who aims to understand human behavior, must be concerned with the *meaning* of that behavior. The sociologist, he says, examines behavior "when and insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it."⁶ For Weber, as for Wilhelm Dilthey before him, the concept of meaning—a sense of the relation between the parts and the whole—enabled him to probe beneath the symbolism of religious and cultural myths, in search of "a meaningful 'cosmos,'" that is, in search of fundamental social and psychological sanctions and ultimate loyalties. These ultimate loyalties he held to be "religiously conditioned" insofar as

⁴ The present essay is a considerably altered version of a lecture delivered at the University of Mainz, published in the *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik*, XII, Heft 4/5(1968), 247-267.

⁵ Eduard Baumgarten, *Max Weber, Werk und Person* (Tübingen, 1964), p. 554. Cited by Arthur Mitzman, see Note 7 below.

⁶ Max Weber, *Theory of Economic and Social Organization*, Talcott Parsons (ed. and tr.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 88.



they inform "a whole way of life." Precisely because of his concern with meaning (and meaninglessness), Weber as an "objective" social scientist dealt with the most "subjective" aspects of the human venture. In a special sense, then, he was a theological sociologist, though he spoke of himself as religiously "unmusical."

In explication of a doctrine of man, Weber held that ideas are not merely epiphenomena of social conditions and struggles, but decisively affect human behavior and history. At the same time, of course, he recognized that a reciprocal relation obtains between ideas and conditioning factors. His total work is, therefore, full of tensions, and it is a paradox that, despite his rejection of determinism and because of his recognition of conditioning factors (such as the unintended consequences of ideas), he was in contrast to Marx pessimistic in his assessment of present and future possibilities.

In examining "the Protestant ethic" Weber was mindful of his previous studies of the despotism of the Roman slave plantations, of the monopolistic practices of medieval trade associations, of the narrow self-interest and [177] political insensitivity of the Junkers, and also of Bismarckian authoritarianism. Indeed, in his view his own father was a well-kept lackey of Bismarckian authoritarianism as well as being an insensitive, domineering husband.⁷

All of these features figured in Weber's decision to study "the Protestant ethic," but as the book title indicates, his exclusive focus was to examine the relation between that ethic and "the spirit of capitalism." In his view, both this ethic and this spirit represent unique features in the history of religions and in the history of capitalisms; moreover, these historical entities enter into reciprocal relations. Without the ethic of ascetic Protestantism the spirit of modern capitalism could not have become so readily widespread. On the other hand, "the spirit of capitalism," in turn, affected the development, indeed the transformation, of "the Protestant ethic."

The unique features of the modern situation, as Weber views them, can be seen by examining his conception of "rational capitalism" and of "the Protestant ethic." These features of modern culture were but two aspects of an all-pervasive Western rationalism, manifest also in the arts, the sciences, and the forms of social organization. Rational capitalism came into being by cutting the moorings from the political capitalism and patrimonial order of the previous period. Rational capitalism not only promotes the free organization of labor and the idea of the intrinsic merit of work, but rejects the notion that acquiring money is a necessary evil. Instead, it views the earning of money as an ethical obligation; rejecting the notion that limits should be placed upon living standards, it promotes innovation by emphasizing impersonal considerations in accomplishing economic tasks efficiently. In these respects it is critical of the inherited tradition. In short, rational capitalism requires a functioning bureaucracy involving impersonal devotion to the task, specialized division of labor and a rationalized discipline. These ingredients call for, indeed they engender, a particular kind of mentality, which Weber identi-

⁷ Arthur Mitzman in *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970) gives a detailed depth-psychological account of the political and family struggles with which Weber was concerned in the period immediately preceding his work on "the Protestant ethic."



fies as "the spirit of capitalism."⁸

The uniqueness of this spirit Weber sees epitomized "in almost classical purity" in Benjamin Franklin's esteem for thrift and hard work, incumbent [178] upon men as a profound duty—and in his case "free from all direct relationship to religion."⁹ This sense of duty finds expression in virtue and proficiency in a calling. The calling demands rationality in the sense of relating means to ends, achieving a systematic, methodical performance, and subordinating personal to impersonal considerations. Rationality and calculation, then, become matters of duty. Moreover, ostentatious enjoyment of rewards of success must be eschewed; it can serve only to damage one's credit and one's standing. Similar characteristics are presented in Weber's essay "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," Jp describing Americans he encountered in the United States who "used" the church as an accrediting agency in the business community and as a place to "make contacts."

Alongside the already developing spirit of capitalism a new conception of meaning, "the Protestant ethic," comes onto the scene. Weber musters evidence to show that Calvinist theology and Anglo-American Puritanism were conducive to rationalized, individualistic activity (particularly in the economic sphere), activity undertaken not for the sake of gain but as a religious duty—to glorify God *in this world*. This vision of human existence—this "ascetic Protestantism"—was supported by an ethic of vocation or calling which issued in vigorous methodical activity, thus releasing a tremendous energy. This ethic was motivated by a doctrine of salvation predestined through grace, a doctrine that gave rise to an anxiety that led to a redoubling of effort. At least initially, the dominant motive was "interest" in the salvation of the individual rather than the acquisition of wealth.¹⁰

In Weber's view, the central motifs of this vision of life had an independent origin in an interpretation of the Bible and of the disciplines of the Christian life. Through the spread of these ideas in England when "the spirit of capitalism" was already developing, they present a new attitude toward worldly activity which, in essential features, is "congruent" with that spirit. Accordingly, the ideas of the Puritans provide a milieu that is both receptive to the spirit of rational capitalism and able to qualify that spirit in terms of the "interest" of the Puritan in individual salvation, wherein a sign of grace is righteous, industrious, methodical activity in the world—labor in a calling. In time, however, ascetic Protestantism lost its [179] powerful religious orientation and sanctioned a simple doctrine of work in the pursuit of wealth; indeed it even sanctioned the doctrine that wealth is a sign of grace, and finally that "piety is the surest road to wealth." These changes might be called Weber's account of the devil's toboggan slide of ascetic Protestantism.¹¹ To be sure, these developments are traced in detail and with considerable sub-

⁸ Weber's use of the term "spirit" (*Geist*) bespeaks not only his concern for meaning but also his awareness of a German semantic tradition in both religion and philosophy; we think especially of Hegel.

⁹ *PE*, p. 48.

¹⁰ Space does not permit our attempting even to summarize Weber's account of the theological foundations of the Calvinist system, the absolutely transcendent, supra-mundane God, salvation by grace, the theory of predestination, the consequent "inner isolation" of the individual before God and man.

¹¹ Having outlined the Weberian conception of the rise and decline of "the Protestant ethic," we should now observe that Erich Fromm's view of the advent and the consequences of Protestantism is quite different. For him Protestantism in the Reformation was not primarily a set of ideas initiating a new movement in history.



tlety, but much of the evidence offered has been challenged by other scholars.¹²

Three other aspects of Weber's intention remain to be stressed. First, Weber says that he is "interested ... in the influence of those psychological sanctions which, originating in religious belief and the practice of religion, gave a direction to practical conduct and held the individual to it."¹³ In the main, therefore, he was interested not so much in sociological, structural features of the societal changes taking place as in the psychological sanctions for the legitimacy of a new pattern of the individual's conduct, that is, for the legitimacy of rational economic activity considered as a duty. To be sure, social-structural changes occurred, as in the emerging independence of economic and other activities from political control, a precondition of a pluralistic society. Weber focuses attention on the personality types attracted to the new patterns and their motivations. He also [180] indicates ways in which individual conduct is constricted by social forces it has released.

Second, Weber attempted, as part of his method, to construct "ideal types." This method, he insisted, had long been used (indeed is inevitable in analyzing human behavior); but he felt that it required clarification. Here again the concept of meaning is of crucial significance. The ideal type is an intellectual tool, a unified analytical construct, devised by the historian or sociologist in order to characterize unique, meaning-oriented phenomena of human action, and in such a way as to give them a quality of generality whereby comparison and contrast with other meaning-oriented phenomena become possible. The concept of meaning is involved here in dual fashion. Being a construct, the ideal type in the first place reflects the value-orientation of the one who devises or uses it as a tool. In the second place, it selects and accentuates concrete, individual phenomena in a onesided way so as to achieve precision, a precision that combines generality with individuality in a context of meaning. Weber thus combines insights regarding generality and particularity which may be traced respectively to the Enlightenment and to Romanticism. Since ideal types are made up of highly abstract patterns, he speaks of their being "Utopian" (not to be found anywhere in concrete detail) and also of their "artificial simplicity." They serve as "conceptual points of reference" for "experiments" in comparative cultural analysis. Major illustrations of these ideal types are such concepts as

Rather, the breakdown of the feudal medieval system which gave life a meaning through nourishing "a sense of security and belonging," left the individual, especially in the middle classes, isolated and free, and hence economically insecure and anxious. Luther and Calvin rationalized, intensified, and systematized this attitude, teaching men to accept their impotence and submit. One of the components of this Protestant ethos was the individual's compulsion to work, and this became one of the productive forces in capitalistic society (Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* [New York: Rinehart and Co., 1941], Chap. III). Modern man, having been freed from the bondage of medieval economic and political ties, finds himself impotent and lonely in the midst of the supra-personal forces of capital and the market; he seeks escape from loneliness in the spurious and debilitating sense of belonging offered by Nazism or by the deceptions of "democratic" capitalism which make him into a compulsive, conforming automaton while seducing him into believing he is a free, self-determining individual. Although Fromm's view and that of Weber converge or overlap at certain points, their respective conceptions of the Protestant ethic and its role in the development of modern capitalist society differ quite markedly.

¹² See, for one example, Winthrop Hudson's documented critique of Weber's presentation (and distortion) of the ideas of Richard Baxter who serves as Exhibit A in Weber's "case": "Puritanism and the Spirit of Capitalism," *Church History*, 18:1 (March, 1949), 3-17.

¹³ *PE*, p. 97.



otherworldly and this-worldly asceticism; a patrimonial traditionalist social order and a rational, innovating capitalist order; and, of course, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of rational capitalism.¹⁴ In later writings Weber developed a whole series of ideal types, such as types of authority or domination (traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic) and types of prophetism (ethical and exemplary). It has been suggested that Weber's ideal types may be compared to Hegel's logically related concepts. Weber, to be sure, rejects any "emanationist" or dialectical theory of the sort espoused by Hegelian idealism. He was not only religiously but also metaphysically "unmusical."

Obviously, the particular form of an ideal type depends entirely upon the features chosen for accentuation. Hence, an ideal type is like a wax nose to be shaped in a variety of ways. Think of the protracted debate of the past generation regarding the question, What was the Renaissance? Similarly, Weber's ideal type of "the Protestant ethic," as we shall see, is not only made of wax; it is also a bone of contention. [181]

Third, we must stress what we have already hinted at, namely that in Weber's view a crucial feature of Western culture is the element of rationality. He sees an anticipation of it in the universal ethical prophetism stemming from the Old Testament which in both Judaism and Christianity has served in principle to combat magic. Of course, he finds it in Greek science and logic. He also points out that, along with an ethos of work, it appears conspicuously in medieval monasticism in its methodical features.

Rationality "covers a whole world of different things." Moreover, for Weber it possesses a markedly ambiguous value: it is capable of obstructing as well as of promoting human freedom and fulfillment. If we spell out here its positive and negative aspects, we shall the more readily grasp the character of Weber's doctrine of man and his philosophy of civilization.

In its more positive aspects rationality appears in: the deliberate weighing of a methodical course of action; the process of intellectualization for the sake of clarity; self-control that overcomes instinct and "everything impulsive and irrational"; the rationalization of mystical contemplation; the shaping of means to ends; the method of scientific investigation (including the mathematization of knowledge); machine production, technology, and the mastery of the world; the division and coordination of activities for the purpose of achieving efficiency and productivity (which requires, for example, rational bookkeeping); the stability and predictability of bureaucracy; the organization of free labor to create or appeal to a market; the rational-legal acquisition of wealth by virtue of one's ability and initiative; the limitation of occupational effort to specialized work; military training; the system of counterpoint in music; the establishment of rational-legal authority; the logical ordering and rearrangement of the contents of the law; the conceiving of different types of order in society; the carrying through of radical social change; and, of course, the construction of ideal types. In all of these forms of rationality we see the combining of order and meaning. Many of these expressions of rationality have appeared in modern "rational capitalism" in its conflict with traditionalism, while many of them antedate the modern period. But rationality appears in unique fashion in "rational capitalism" and in this-worldly "ascetic Protestantism"—in its methodical and ethical conduct of life motivated by a coherent system of doctrine and commitment

¹⁴ For references to ideal types in *PE*, see pp. 71, 98, 200.



which is able to overcome an inherited traditionalist system.

On its negative side, rationality can be severely restrictive. It can appear in the conservative philosophy calculated to resist social change; it can claim to understand everything under a single perspective; it can reduce almost everything to specialization and to the rigidity of bureaucratic [182] system, thus stifling individual decision and initiative; and it contributes to the "disenchantment" of the world and to the elimination of any vital sense of meaning and depth in existence. In these ways it becomes a threat to, indeed the destruction of, belief in the supra-empirical validity of an ethic rooted either in a humane sense of values or in a religious conception of the ultimate structure of things. Thus it can be the enemy of authentic personality and of commitment to "the daemon who holds the thread of its life." In these and in other ways rationality can lead to dehumanizing, compulsive behavior, to irrationality, and meaninglessness.

The positive aspects of rationality (along with individual freedom and responsibility) delineated by Weber are indispensable elements in civilization, and of course are cherished by him. The negative aspects, on the other hand, illustrate the axiom: the corruption of the best is the worst. It is no accident that the account given of the corruption of freedom and reason by Weber, a scholar learned in theological lore, should remind one of the Christian theologian's account of the corruption of the *imago dei*. In this respect one must say that Weber reveals a tragic view of history—in the Hebraic sense. Human freedom and reason are a heavy burden (as well as a gift) requiring constant vigilance; they are the pivot at once of meaning and of the possibility of the fall into unfreedom, irrationality, and meaninglessness. So fundamental for Weber is the negative dimension of rationality that it can be said to correspond to the concept of alienation in the thought of Karl Marx and Erich Fromm. Erich Fromm holds with Weber, however, that insofar as Marxism promotes monolithic bureaucracy it simply guarantees the continuation or creation of alienation. The dictatorship of the proletariat turns out to be the dictatorship of the bureaucrats.

Weber's most negative judgment on technical rationality and on the secularized, corrupted "Protestant ethic" appears in the famous passage near the end of his book:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine [183] them until the last ton of coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of "the saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage ... No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; and this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before



achieved."¹⁵

Then Weber goes on to make his usual apology for violating the principle that the social scientist should not inject value judgments into his presentation. "But this brings us," he says, "to the world of judgments of value and of faith, with which this purely historical discussion need not be burdened."

Despite the positive values of rationality, then, and despite the initial capacity of Puritanism to bring a new sense of meaning into life and to initiate a revolutionary process that displaced a restrictive social order, the outcome is an iron cage, a soul-less compulsive social system of specialization and bureaucratism without spirit and without heart—a nullity. This specialization and bureaucratism are closely linked with the joyless and impersonal character of work and with "its joyless lack of meaning." Moreover, capitalism, being today "in the saddle, ... is able to force people to labour without transcendental sanctions."¹⁶ The negative aspects of rationality have overwhelmed the positive.

In reading the long passage just quoted one is reminded of Nietzsche's prediction of the advent of "the last man," who will be a completely rationalized cog in a machine without creative vitality. This outcome, in Weber's view, is the working of the unintended consequences of initially noble impulses, and his comparative studies in the sociology of religion were intended to confirm this insight and to serve as a warning. In this connection one may think of Hegel's theory of "the cunning of reason." But whereas Hegel refers to the hidden instrument of the World Spirit unfolding and realizing a divine purpose, Weber's view is pessimistic—pessimistic also in contrast to the ultimate optimism of Marx. Weber leaves modern man [184] in the iron cage; he questions whether there is a way out, hinting only at a variety of foggy possibilities.¹⁷ Weber never loses his fear of perverted reason. It is strange, however, that despite his basic interest in economic forces, he says nothing here about poverty and the maldistribution of wealth. Nor does he explore the possible correction of bureaucratism. Yet, however dusty the answers he gives to the larger social issues raised, we must say with Benjamin Nelson that a major thrust of this whole study of "the Protestant ethic" is to be seen in his concluding protest against "conscienceless reason."¹⁸

While appreciating the immensity of Weber's accomplishment and the stimulus he has given to the study of the relations between religion and society, I want to offer three critical comments on his presentation of "the Protestant ethic."

First, let it be noted again that Weber's ideal type of "the Protestant ethic" is by intention a restricted one, in that by means of it he aims only to set forth the essential fea-

¹⁵ *PE*, pp. 181-182.

¹⁶ *PE*, p. 282.

¹⁷ In his later writings Weber works out one of these possibilities in his conception of a nonrational, charismatic authority (initially a theological concept) in contrast to rational-legal and to traditionalist authority. *Charisma*, he says, rests in part "upon the belief in magical powers, revelations and hero worship," but it is destined to be routinized in the direction of bureaucracy. For a discussion of Weber's probable dependence on the church historian Rudolf Sohm for this view see the present writer's essay on "Rudolf Sohm's Theology of Law and Spirit," in Walter Leibrich (ed.), *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* (Harper & Bros., 1959). The term *charisma* appears only once in *PE*.

¹⁸ From a paper read at the 1964 Weber Centenary Conference held in Heidelberg, Germany, published in *Max Weber und die Soziologie heute*. Otto Stammer (ed.), Tübingen, 1965.



tures of the relation between that ethic and economic behavior. On the last pages of the book he emphasizes this point and specifies the large areas of investigation which remain to be undertaken.¹⁹ The ideal type constructed by Weber, then, is not an ideal type of the Protestant ethic as a whole. It excludes from consideration those types of Protestantism which do not belong under the rubric of ascetic Protestantism. Nor is it an ideal type of ascetic Protestantism as a whole.

Second, Weber stresses the point that the meaning of life in Calvinism and Puritanism was rooted in a belief in "a supramundane God" who is [185] sovereign over the whole of life. Yet, due to his concentration on the "interests" and the conduct of the individual, Weber almost entirely ignores the Puritan concern for the social order as a whole. This deficiency in Weber's study is today receiving increasing attention. David Little, for example, has recast the Weberian thesis by directing attention to the Calvinist and Puritan demand for a new order of society.²⁰ In this connection we should add that Weber gives little attention to the internal life of the churches and the "pathos for order" rooted in the church fellowship.²¹ Thus he fails to take into account the Calvinist view that the church and its members have the obligation to work for the establishment of a society of justice and mercy. For Calvin and for many of the Calvinists of the period, the Christian bears a *general* vocation in the world as well as having a specific calling in his daily work. This outlook is today referred to as "the totalistic impulse" of the Calvinists, and a recognition of it has given rise to a new phase of the controversy over Weber's thesis.²² As a consequence of his not taking this "impulse" sufficiently into account, and of his centering attention on predestination and on the anxiety of the individual regarding his own salvation, Weber's finding with respect to "psychological sanctions" turns out to be inadequate.

The totalistic impulse of Calvinism is to be seen especially in the effort of the Puritans in England to take over the Establishment. When this effort failed, many of them became vigorous Dissenters, forming a variety of movements bent on reform. The totalistic impulse did not die. It was in wider commonalty spread (to adapt a phrase from John Milton). In this new situation sectarian doctrines of the church came to the fore, some of which developed into a proto-democratic doctrine of the free or voluntary church, but the demands for a new social order were not relinquished even [186] though they were fragmented. In the middle of the century John Lilburne and the Level-

¹⁹ Noneconomic areas excluded from Weber's study have been investigated by Robert K. Merton (in the sphere of science), Michael Walzer (in politics), David Little (in law), and Ernst Troeltsch. Indeed, Weber himself said later on that because of Troeltsch's subsequent, massive accomplishment he did not retain his initial intention to explore other areas of social life in relation to "the Protestant ethic." *PE*, p. 284.

²⁰ David Little, *Religion, Order, and Law: A Study in Pre-Revolutionary England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

²¹ Because of this gap in Weber's investigation of Puritanism, Roger Mehl in his work on *The Sociology of Protestantism*, James H. Farley, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), questions whether Weber's study of "the Protestant ethic" can be "qualified as sociology of religion," for it fails to interpret religion as an "emanation of the social group" (p. 18).

²² Cf. S. N. Eisenstadt, "The Protestant Ethic Thesis in an Analytical and Comparative Framework," in S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Protestant Ethic and Modernization* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). In his essay Eisenstadt traces the stages of the controversy, the first stage being concerned with the question of the direct causal relation between Calvinist ethic and the development of capitalism, the second with the discussion of Protestantism's influence after it had "failed to carry out its first totalistic impulses."



lers, for example, formed associations for political agitation, using rational techniques to appeal to public opinion. (Perhaps one can say that at that time "public opinion" as a factor in political life was born.) In some circles the idea of a democratic structure in the church was by analogy transformed into a demand for a democratic political order. Many of these efforts exhibit the continued working of the "totalistic impulses."

Of equal importance in this connection was another aspect of this development. The idea of the free or voluntary church, in order to vindicate itself in the face of the Establishment, called for a struggle for the freedom of religious association. In time this struggle was extended to a struggle for the freedom to form other voluntary associations. So noisy were some of these associations that Thomas Hobbes asserted that all such associations are subversive and dangerous—"worms in the entrails of the natural man" (Leviathan). Even the Anglicans began to form religious societies for the reformation of morals. These societies flourished for fifty years after the Restoration, and were able even to elicit cooperation from the Dissenters.²³ The Friends early in the eighteenth century refined the techniques of agitation toward the end of effecting legislation extending their religious and political freedom.²⁴

Here we encounter, then, one of the most significant features of the Protestant ethic which Weber ignored by reason of the limits of his study. Ernst Troeltsch has asserted that the Calvinists were given "to an organized and aggressive effort to form associations, to a systematic endeavor to mold the life of society as a whole, to a kind of 'Christian Socialism.'"²⁵ Protestants in England and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries formed associations to promote philanthropy, [187] educational reform, penal reform, factory reform, free trade, international peace, the extension of the suffrage, women's rights, the abolition of slavery and child labor, better working and living conditions, trade unions, cooperatives, the prohibition of alcoholic beverages, "municipal socialism," civil rights and liberties, lobbies, communitarian movements, know-nothing campaigns, and a multitude of other causes (including of course "antisocial causes" and "special interests").²⁶ Clearly, many of these associations have changed economic behavior.

In New England one can see the beginnings of these associations in the activities of the Friends in the seventeenth century, and later in the admonitions of Cotton Mather (*Bonifacius*, 1710) to form associations for philanthropic and moral purposes. Mather

²³ Dudley Bahlman, *The Moral Revolution of 1688* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

²⁴ Norman Hunt, *Two Early Political Associations* (Oxford University Press, 1961). The author shows that the Friends at this time invented the essential techniques we associate today with "pressure groups." Shades of rationality!

²⁵ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, tr. Olive Wyon (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), II, 602. We should note here that the earliest modern theorists of associations were Calvinists. Chief among them was Althusius. See Frederick S. Carney, "Associational Thought in Early Calvinism," in D. B. Robertson (ed.), *Voluntary Associations* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1966). D. B. Robertson in his chapter on "Hobbes's Theory of Associations" characterizes Hobbes as "the greatest and most formidable enemy [of voluntary associations] in modern times."

²⁶ Denominational histories abound with examples of these associations. I give only one example which stresses the activities of Protestant Dissenters: Raymond V. Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938).



reports that he belonged to twenty such associations.²⁷ Benjamin Franklin makes it clear that in forming voluntary organizations he was initially inspired by Cotton Mather's book. Early in the nineteenth century when the United States was rapidly becoming a "nation of joiners" fairly elaborate theories of association came from the pens of leading clergymen.²⁸

These associational movements for social change, anticipated in principle in seventeenth-century Puritanism, may be viewed as activities that in varying ways expressed a sense of vocation broader than that which Weber presents with respect to the vocation of daily work. They provide the citizen with the opportunity to emerge from the "iron cage" of specialization and to join fellow citizens in bringing under criticism economic as well as political and other institutions. They have served in both church and society as a principal means to promote criticism and innovation, individual and group participation and responsibility, and thus the dispersion of power. Although subject to manipulation and to rigid, soul-less bureaucratization, they have been a source of vital tension within the Protestant ethic. In the positive Weberian sense they represent a major form of [188] rationality in Anglo-American life, toward the end of "turning the flank of recalcitrant institutions."²⁹ Moreover, for more than three centuries these associations have provided a continuing critique of what Weber calls "the Protestant ethic." They represent the institutional gradualization of revolution.

Why does Weber leave this whole dimension out of his delineation of "the Protestant ethic"? The answer is that in tracing the development of individualism he left out of account the residues of the "totalistic impulses" of original Puritanism. But there is an additional reason.

In a lecture of 1911 entitled "A Proposal for the Study of Voluntary Associations," delivered in Frankfurt, Germany, at an International Sociological Congress, Weber said:

The man of today is without doubt an association man in an awful and never dreamed of degree. Germany stands in this matter at a very high point ... America is the association-land par excellence. In America membership in some middle-class association belongs directly to one's legitimation as a gentleman. The prototype of these associations is the sect, a union of specifically qualified people. Today the association furnishes the ethical qualification test for the businessman, certifying that he is worthy of credit. American democracy is no sand heap, but a maze of exclusive sects, societies and clubs. These support the selection of those adapted to American life; they support it in that they help such people to business, political and every kind of success in social life. In these associations the American learns to put himself over.³⁰

²⁷ Richard E. French, *Cotton Mather and the Development of American Values* (Harvard University Th.D. Dissertation, 1970), p. 163.

²⁸ For an account of three major American Protestant theorists of voluntary association, in the early nineteenth century, see the present writer's chapter on "The Voluntary Principle in the Forming of American Religion," in Elwyn A. Smith (ed.), *The Religion of the Republic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

²⁹ A. D. Lindsay, *The Two Moralities* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1940), p. 85. Lord Lindsay, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, has been one of the major scholars concerned to trace voluntary associational efforts back to the Puritans.

³⁰ Manuscript translation by Everett C. Hughes.



No one can deny that this kind of association has existed in wild variety. But the association concerned with the public weal or with public policy, so far from legitimating the qualifications of those who worship at the altar of the bitch goddess Success, often elicits obloquy rather than enviable status for its members.

We have already observed that Weber views Benjamin Franklin as a manifestation of the spirit of capitalism "in almost classical purity," devoted as he was to frugality and industry for the sake of personal success. But Franklin was also the association-man par excellence. He probably [189] formed more associations for the public good than any other American of his time: an academy for the education of youth in Pennsylvania, a voluntary fire department, the Pennsylvania Hospital, a society for the abolition of slavery, and the American Philosophical Society (which is still flourishing), and so on. If Franklin's secularized frugality and devotion to a methodical discipline of life and work were due to the influence of "the Protestant ethic," may we not say that his concern for the methodical discipline of associations calculated to promote the public good was also influenced by the Protestant ethic of "totalistic impulse"?

One might raise the question as to why Weber took such a narrow view of the voluntary association as we have just observed. The reason is perhaps that in Germany he could see few associations of the type concerned with public policy. In the lecture just cited he scores the singing academies for draining off the national energy into "warbling," thus distracting attention from public policies (a distraction which, he says, was much to the liking of the politicians in Berlin). Another reason is that in considering the sect as an agency certifying the qualifications of piety he selected characteristics belonging more exclusively to the *withdrawing sect* rather than to the Puritan *aggressive sect* bent on bringing in a new social order (the distinction is Troeltsch's).

We see, then, that "ascetic Protestantism" from the beginning possessed a more composite character than that which Weber attributes to it. No doubt it was because of the broad scope of the totalistic dynamic that Troeltsch spoke of Calvinism as the second social philosophy in the history of Christianity (the first being Thomism and medieval Catholicism). With similar perception Lord Acton was wont to say that the nerve of democracy as we know it was engendered in the small Puritan conventicles of the seventeenth century.

Weber has seen a different side of ascetic Protestantism. But by neglecting the features we have adumbrated here he has given us a lopsided conception of the Protestant ethic. With him we may properly lament the appearance of the degenerated, rationalized, "encaged" Protestantism he presents. But considering the vitalities he has failed to see, may we not be allowed to lament with fewer tears?

But that question is not the proper way to end this essay. Sixty-five years have passed since Max Weber published his study of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. The nullity of which he spoke is more [190] readily evident today than when he pointed to it. What Weber the prophet offers us is the shock of recognition—to enable us to see the cage of the so-called affluent society. Erich Fromm with more hope has for years effectively communicated the same shock, and has tried to find ways out of the cage for the authentic man whom Nietzsche calls the self-surpassing creature, the bride to the future.

The Protestant Ethic, Weber says, traces "only one side of the causal chain" connecting Puritanism to modern capitalism (p. xxxix). He certainly does not claim that differences in the rationalisation of religious ethics he identifies are the only significant influences that separate economic development in the West from that of the Eastern civilisations. The Protestant Ethic was written with polemical intent, evident in various references Weber makes to "Idealism" and "Materialism". The study, he says, is "a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history", and is directed against economic determinism. The Protestant work ethic, also known as the Calvinist work ethic or the Puritan work ethic, is a work ethic concept in theology, sociology, economics and history which emphasizes that diligence, discipline, and frugality are a result of a person's subscription to the values espoused by the Protestant faith, particularly Calvinism. The phrase was initially coined in 1904-1905 by Max Weber in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber asserted that Protestant ethics and values 4. Protestant work ethic. I. Title. BR115.C3 W413 2002 306.6—dc31 00-028098 *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Third Roxbury Edition) Copyright © 2002 by Roxbury Publishing Company. This new version of *The Protestant Ethic* should greatly improve upon its predecessor and clear up misunderstandings of Weber's meaning which the earlier translation may have engendered. Wes Sharrock, University of Manchester "This new translation of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic*, one of the most important social science works of the twentieth century, is a welcome and worthwhile enterprise. With only a few exceptions as required by context, the translation of all key terms has been standardized throughout the book. Summary. In this article, I critically analyze what is considered Max Weber's most relevant sociological contribution, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. I make an attempt to contrast his worldview with that of Marx and other authors in the historical materialist tradition. Protestant asceticism is considered by Weber a central ideological underpinning for the emergence of modern capitalism. Although he lays out a nuanced analysis "widely overstretched by many scholars following his line of thought" he explicitly criticizes historical materialism as a framework that is inadequate *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (German: *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*) is a book written by Max Weber, a German sociologist, economist, and politician. Begun as a series of essays, the original German text was composed in 1904 and 1905, and was translated into English for the first time by American sociologist Talcott Parsons in 1930. It is considered a founding text in economic sociology and a milestone contribution to sociological thought in general.