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The Protestant Ethic

Daniel Bell

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, written in 1904–5, is probably the most important sociological work of the twentieth century. But its title—and the later mythmaking about "the Protestant ethic"—has obscured the intention explicit in the author's introduction, namely, to explain the historical puzzle of the past 500 years, the question why a total revolution in the organization of society—law, administration, the economy, the arts and religion, and the development of science—occurred only in the West, not in other sections of the world. That revolution was the *rationalization* of life.

The impulse to profit and gain is found in all societies, but only in the West did capitalism, as a rational organization of production and the calculable balance sheet of costs, take hold and develop in the extraordinary way that it did. It was the effort to explain "rational economic conduct" that led Weber to the study of religion. Weber's question was, How did modern economic life supersede the traditional mode, the Catholic ethic of a fixed order based on the scholastic theory of the just price and the just wage? And for Weber, the answer lay in "the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism."

What Weber was saying was that at its beginning, modern capitalism required a certain type of personality that matched the capitalist enterprise itself—the methodical, disciplined, work-oriented individual. To use Weber's phrase (adapted from Goethe), there was an "elective affinity" between character and material interests.

But personality alone could not break the bonds of the past. What was also required was a religious ethic that provided justifications for conduct and sanctions for lapses. In the Protestant world view, all work (from the highest to the lowest) was a "calling" and thus sanctified, as against the view that work was a punishment for man's sin of disobedience. The idea of a calling, then—which Weber argued did not exist in previous religious or ethical codes—is a moral obligation that projects religious behavior onto the everyday world.

But there was also another source, which Weber did not develop—the Puritan New Model Army of Cromwell. This was one of the most unusual armies in the history of warfare, one that emphasized self-discipline and asceticism and levied punishments for drunkenness, looting, or rape that were vigorously enforced. The discipline of this army, it may be said, passed over into the factory. The logic of industrial society, the purposeful rationality of means-ends behavior, established the boundaries for economic behavior.

The Protestant ethic as a way of life, then, was one of piety, frugality, discipline, prudence, the strenuous devotion to work, and delayed gratification. As to the stirrings of the body, "along with a moderate vegetable diet and cold baths, the same prescription is given for all sexual temptations as is used against religious doubts and a sense of moral unworthiness: 'work hard in your calling.'"

The restraint on consumption leads to capital accumulation, a way of life, as Weber pointed out, of moneymaking as an end in itself that "was contrary to the ethical feelings of whole epochs." Yet, as Weber stated, "The capitalistic system so needs this devotion to the calling of making money, it is an attitude toward material goods...which is intimately bound up with the conditions of survival in the economic struggle for existence." This is, however, not a description but an "ideal type."

The "Ordeal of Prosperity"

But such a methodology has its risks. For one, as has been evident in the United States in recent years, it has been invoked as an ideological weapon in the cultural wars, when polemicists decry the loss of the Protestant work ethic as if it had actually existed here. For another, any actual application shows how misleading the construct may be in dealing with history.

This mistaken use of ideal type for history is vividly exemplified in Simon Schama's brilliant *The Embarrassment of Riches*, a cultural exploration of the Dutch republic—the first capitalist nation in the world—during its "golden age" in the seventeenth century. The Dutch had been told by the humanists and Calvin that great wealth was a test of moral fiber. Yet in the "ordeal of prosperity," the Dutch burghers succumbed to the lure of pageantry and display. As Schama wryly noted, republics rarely live up to the innocence of their origins; if born in austerity, they invariably flourish amidst pomp:

> At the zenith of its power and brilliance, in the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch republic was no more immune than any other from acts of elaborate self-congratulation. The Flemish towns...had married the Burgundian taste for opulence with their own vernacular tradition of civic pomp to produce Renaissance ceremonies of unrivalled splendor in the north.

Thus, one part of Weber's proposition that the Protestant ethic restrained consumption to the advantage of capital accumulation, Schama concluded, "does not hold true for the Netherlands, the most formidable capitalism the world had yet seen."

What Weber thought might be true for the origins of capitalism, he knew did not hold true after its success. As he wrote, in a mixture of resignation and despair, in the concluding pages of his magisterial book,

> Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally, who knows? —has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer.... In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.

If this has been the fate of asceticism, one has to turn to the other chord in this polyphony to understand the cultural contradictions of American capitalism. The theme of acquisitiveness was the leitmotif of the other major early historian of capitalism and the antagonist of Weber—Werner Sombart. Sombart is rarely read today because of the sprawling, paradoxical, inconsistent, and contentious style of his works (and, perhaps, because his 1930 book, *A New Social Philosophy*, was pro-Nazi). Yet it was Sombart who coined the term "capitalism" (Marx never used it) to designate an interdependent system organized around the role of capital in accordance with a definite plan and applying definite technical knowledge in providing for material wants. Paradoxically, his own exposition of the development of capitalism and its central features was completely unsystematic and often contradictory.

For Sombart, greed and gold were the *fons et origo* of capitalism—as of all human endeavor: "The love of money is one of the founders of human society; it arranges marriage, produces treaties, sets up states and cities, provides honour and renown...stimulates commerce, alchemy, and medicine.... The art of war is likewise sustained by money-getting; and the discovery of new lands, too, as Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, no less than Columbus, found out."

But it was the discovery of gold in the New World that unlocked the floodgates to Western economic development. "If not the whole of European history, then surely at least the history of the capitalist spirit, must begin with the struggle...for the possession of the accursed thing, gold." And in *Der Bourgeois*, Sombart sought to limn the psychology of the new men who now roamed the new geography of the fabled lands of Cathay and Imago Mundi.

For him, these men—freebooters, adventurers, and entrepreneurs—were intermingled. The Elizabethan John Hawkins, the captain of a "pirate" ship and a trader, was no different than Cecil Rhodes, wielding sword and rifle, playing the stock exchange, and becoming a capitalist entrepreneur who exercised brute force. ("It is strange to find in [Rhodes] even one iota of the Puritan spirit.") The modern businessman he found in America "unites within himself...the freebooter, unscrupulous calculator, landlord and speculator all in one. Any trust magnate will serve as an illustration." And it is clear that the man Sombart had in mind was John D. Rockefeller, a man who knew "how to glide over every moral restraint with almost childlike disregard."

What is new in all this is its "boundlessness," the falling away of natural limits.

> There are no absolute limits to acquisition, and the system exercises a psychological compulsion to boundless extension.... The abstract, impersonal character of the aim indicates its limitlessness.... Profits, no matter how large, can never reach a level sufficiently high to satisfy the economic agent. The positive drive toward boundless acquisition is grounded in the conditions of management.... Acquisition therefore becomes unconditional, absolute. Not only does it seize upon all phenomena within the economic realm, but it reaches over into other cultural fields and develops a tendency to proclaim the supremacy of business interests over all other values.

The limitation of both Weber and Sombart is that they dealt primarily with the origins of capitalism, but not with its structural transformations. Modern capitalism began with the Industrial Revolution 200 years ago, with the technological changes of the creation of machinery for the mechanical production of goods, the laying of thousands of miles of track for the railroads, the invention of steamships that could move faster than wind, and the sociological migration—a total change of life—of hundreds of thousands of persons into cities. All these were a transformation of life hitherto unknown in human history.

The emphasis on production meant an emphasis on renewable enterprise: the greater need for capital and a closer measure of its return; the large-scale organization of labor, the attention to markets and distribution, and an awareness of technology as the source of change and heightened competition.

The "Subversive" Instrument

But twentieth-century capitalism wrought in some ways an even more startling sociological transformation—the shift from production to consumption as the fulcrum of capitalism. This was the rise of consumer durables: automobiles, refrigerators, television sets, washing machines and dryers, and the like. And all this created the revolution in retailing, particularly the invention of the installment plan, the most "subversive" instrument that undercut the Protestant ethic. Against the fear of going into debt, there was now the fear of not being creditworthy. Instead of saving for the good things of life, one could buy them now and pay later. Marketing and hedonism became the motor forces of capitalism. What we have seen here is the extraordinary change, far beyond the "civilizing process," that, as Schumpeter said, brought silk stockings to the shop girl and luxury to the masses.

In his marvelously fetching and quirky book, *Luxury and Capitalism*, Sombart made the idiosyncratic argument that illicit love and the style of life it produced gave rise to luxury—and capitalism. By "illicit love," he meant the mistress and the courtesan in the life of the court, particularly the Court of Louis XIV, with the deer park in which its courtiers gamboled.

An Empancipation of the Flesh

If these were only extravagances, astonishing as they may be, of a court grandly exhibiting its wealth to the world, it would be a curio for the history books. But they were not. What they signified was the transmutations in the history of sensibility. "This purely hedonistic conception of women," as Sombart put it, was in direct opposition to the religious and institutional restraints that the church had placed on women until those times. But the sensual encounters celebrated at court, sometimes in refinement, sometimes in debauchery, were "an emancipation of the flesh."

The sequel to the flaunting of illicit love was the establishment of fashion. The mistress was not just a figure at the court but the actress, the cocotte, the *amant*, the *demoiselles de moyenne vertu*, the kept woman, the woman of the town. In France, almost every grand politician (down to Mitterrand in our day) had an acknowledged mistress, and well-known authors, such as Chateaubriand, were famous for establishing the practice of *cinq à sept*. The *grandes cocottes* were often the featured attraction at the spring races in Paris; their costumes, vying with one another for striking display, were carefully observed by other women and, at a distance, by the wives who did not wish to be left out. A gorgeous theatrical version of this scene is in the musical *Gigi*, the education of a young courtesan.

The exigency of all this was that all the follies of fashion, luxury, splendor, and extravagance first exhibited by the courtesans became the style that was copied, albeit not in such flamboyant form, by the young women and middle-class wives who also wanted to be smart and join the fashion parade. And if these women could not go to the spring races, they could soon, in the twentieth century, peruse the huge number of women's and fashion magazines—with such names as *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Mademoiselle*, and even *Seventeen*—that would quickly bring the new styles to their audiences in full, gorgeous color by the smartest photographers, in a style that also became, in the work of Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, an "art form." And designers, such as Hubert de Givenchy, Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, Yves St. Laurent, and Oscar de la Renta, soon became celebrities and marketable names for cosmetics.

The Persuasions of the Witches' Craft

All modern advertising is geared to this task of selling illusions, the persuasions of the witches' craft. That is a contradiction of capitalism, one that remains true today. Two films exemplify these themes in different ways. Once is *Wall Street*, in which the protagonist, played by Michael Douglas, addresses a meeting of wary stockholders and proclaims the virtues of greed in a loud, triumphal voice. The other is Robert Altman's *Pret à Porter (Ready to Wear)*, in which a fashion show in Paris, exhibiting the latest styles of the great houses of fashion, ends with a display by a couturiere tottering on the verge of bankruptcy, who brings the house down by having her models walk down the runways—in the nude! These are the clothes of the emperor.

How far this is from the Protestant ethic!...

In the West, in the economic and cultural realms, the Protestant ethic (now a mythos) has been overwhelmed by acquisitiveness, and Modernism has ended in the morass of literary postmodernism and PoMo, its vulgar form of fashionable discourse. In the undertow of the global economy, capitalism has now been pulled east to the Pacific, where a new tide of acquisitiveness (and inequalities) and an ideology of neo-Confucianism (and political nationalism) have become the hallmarks of the new era. Standing proud on a stage of history may be a satisfactory-enough achievement for these Asian nations for the while—though the looming shadow of China may foreshadow a menace. But the deeper question remains: if one loses the anchorages of tradition and religion, what will be left of economic power and cultural syncretism for these "new" civilizations, if not some further contradictions of capitalism?●

Note

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