

THE PROTESTANT ETHIC THESIS: AN INTERNAL CRITIQUE

FRANK J. SPARHAWK
Cornell University

Mid-American Review of Sociology, 1976, Vol. 1, No. 1:27-40

Max Weber's thesis of a relation between a Protestant ethic and a spirit of capitalism is examined. The Calvinist calling is taken as the central notion of Weber's thesis. Weber fails to demonstrate that the doctrine of the calling would channel the motivational force of religious interests into ascetic, economic activity that could be innovative in the face of traditional patterns of behavior. He fails in two ways: (1) he does not demonstrate a strict logical, meaningful relation between these elements; and (2) he does not account for the changing historical dynamics of Calvinism itself. If the configuration of events occurred as Weber argued, then nonreligious factors would be crucial in bringing it about. Yet, such factors take us outside of the framework in which Weber was working and, more seriously, they contest the very basis of his argument: the influence of religious forces on the capitalistic spirit.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a critique of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The critique is logical and internal; it is not a critique of his facts. We focus on Weber's treatment of Calvinism as the clearest and most distinctive expression of his thesis. Furthermore, our critique has nothing to say about the "idealist-materialist" controversy over the role of ideas in history or in psychological motivation. Ideas indeed may be the switchmen of our interests. The question is whether Weber logically and meaningfully demonstrates that ideal Calvinism necessarily transfers religious interests into mundane orientations. Also, we treat Weber as concerned with explaining the role of religious forces in the formation of the specific, historical configuration called Western capitalism. Weber states (1958:90):

We are merely attempting to clarify the part which religious forces have played in forming the developing web of our specifically worldly modern culture, in the complex interaction of innumerable different historical factors. We are thus inquiring only to what extent certain characteristic features of this culture can be imputed to the influence of the Reformation. (All unspecified page references are to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.)

After a short summary of Weber's argument, we will comment on the notions of the calling and the "proof of salvation." We make three points in relation to the calling. First, as a doctrine of Calvinism it need not lead people to pursue innovative economic activity. Instead, it can serve to support the traditional social order. Second, if the calling does lead to innovative worldly activity, this activity need not be expressed in economic activity. Third, the notion of the calling as a mechanism of arriving at certainty of grace (through observing the external results of one's activity) is contradictory to the basic tenets of Calvinism. It is, indeed, a later development of Calvinism. This shows the historical change of Calvinism.

This implicit recognition of the historical dynamics of Calvinism points to the importance of nonreligious factors in the Protestant ethic thesis. This conclusion is strengthened by the absence of a strict, logical, meaningful relationship between the calling and ascetic, economically oriented work. Hence, if the conjunction of the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethic did occur, it must be the product of nonreligious factors external to the religious elements that Weber delineates as Calvinism. Note that we are not evaluating the idea of a spirit of capitalism; we are looking only at the proposed religious antecedents of such a spirit.

WEBERS ARGUMENT

Weber begins his ideal type with "practical religious interests." For the epoch in question this was an interest in salvation. Concern with the afterlife "absolutely dominated the most spiritual men of the time" (p. 97). It is because of this concern that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination is so important. Predestination placed the believer in complete

aloneness before his God. For the most important thing in his life, his eternal salvation, no one could help him. He was alone. There was no way around this doctrine. It developed as a "logical necessity" from the transcendental character of God. In this connection, Weber underscores the rationality of the doctrine and the religion.

Instead of splitting the community into individual atoms oriented toward the "other world," Calvinism fused the religious community together in an orientation toward this world. This resulted from the Calvinist use of the notion of Christian brotherly love. The world exists only to serve the glorification of God: the elect work in the world to fulfill His commandments and, thereby, glorify God. One of His wills is that social life shall be organized rationally in accordance with His commandments. God requires this "social achievement." Thus, as the elect labor in the world for the glory of God, they focus on the community and on approximating the ideal organization of a Christian community. The elect fulfill the injunction of brotherly love by laboring for the general social good. Thus, the commandment can be fulfilled without the emotional experience of or attachment to our fellow man. An emotional experience of "the flesh" was abhorrent to Calvinism (pp. 105-6, 122). Further, this social labor is oriented toward achieving a community organized according to His commandments. Hence, traditional, "merely human" social patterns must be overcome if they conflict with the furthering of the Divine plan. There is a religious justification for innovation in the face of traditional patterns. Since this social activity of the elect is work for the glory of God, a sacred character is given to the mundane labor of the community. The Calvinist "calling" emerges. Weber observes (pp. 108-9):

Brotherly love, since it may only be practiced for the glory of God and not in the service of the flesh, is expressed in the first place in the fulfilment of the daily tasks given by the *lex naturae*; and in the process this fulfilment assumes a peculiarly objective and impersonal character, that of service in the interest of the rational organization of our social environment. For the wonderfully purposeful organization and arrangement of the cosmos is, according both to the revelation of the Bible and to natural

intuition, evidently designed by God to serve the utility of the human race. This makes labour in the service of impersonal social usefulness appear to promote the glory of God and hence to be willed by Him.

Quandaries concerning the meaning of the world, life, good and evil were avoided: one worked for the glory of God.

The motivation driving this religious-worldly labor derived from a question of proof: How can I know that I am among the elect? Rightly speaking, and according to Calvin, one cannot know and it is nonsense to ask. Such stiff drink, however, is not the stuff of the masses. Weber concludes (p. 110):

For them the *certitudo salutis* in the sense of the recognizability of the state of grace necessarily became of absolutely dominant importance. So wherever the doctrine of predestination was held, the question could not be suppressed whether there were any infallible criteria by which membership in the *electi* could be known.

Two "responses" developed to this tension, one contingent and one internal to Calvinist doctrine. The response of pastoral work was to stress the duty to consider oneself among the chosen and to labor away cheerfully at one's calling. Activity reduces anxiety and strengthens the spirit. On the other hand, God was absolutely transcendental; there was an abhorrence of the emotional experience of God. To claim that He would traffic with the flesh was to idolize the flesh. Thus, grace could not be proved by an inward emotion, it had to be shown by objective results. If the *certitudo salutis* was to be found, it would be found in the real world (pp. 111-2).

The Calvinist sought to identify "true faith" by ascertaining that conduct which served to increase the glory of God. The proper conduct was to be found by "his own will" either directly in the revelations of the Bible or indirectly in the "purposeful order of the world which he has created (*lex naturae*)" (p. 114). The individual was made aware that his conduct, "at least in its fundamental character and constant ideal," was founded on a "power" within him that was thereby the grace of God and

worked for the glory of God. He could examine his worldly conduct for signs of salvation (p. 115):

Thus, however useless good works might be as a means of attaining salvation . . . they are indispensable as a sign of election. They are the technical means, not of purchasing salvation, but of getting rid of the fear of damnation.

The chief characteristic of this notion of good works was that it formed a rationalized system of life. A good work could not be treated as an individual act conducted against the backdrop of one's life but had, instead, to be woven into the very cloth of one's existence. The quality of the life of an elect, it was believed, would be expressed in all of his conduct. There could be no discrete act of goodness as there could be no discrete part of the soul that was elect. One was either of the elect or he was not. The upshot was that (pp. 117-8):

the moral conduct of the average man was thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole. . . . For only by a fundamental change in the whole meaning of life at every moment and in every action could the effects of grace transforming a man from the *status naturae* to the *status gratiae* be proved.

The result was a rationalized worldly life carried on in an ascetic manner. Man labored rationally for the glory of God and not for the flesh.

The relation of Weber's argument thus far to the capitalistic spirit is direct. The logical working out of the concept of a transcendental God focused attention on ascetic activity in the mundane world rather than on emotionalism or consumption. The tension generated by the doctrine of predestination provided the dynamics to rationalize life around the calling and overcome the barriers of traditional ways. In a way, religious idealism was brought into the market place. Man must not only avoid impulsiveness and sensualism; he must also conduct himself uprightly and honestly. His belief that he was among the elect was at stake.

Weber states (p. 172):

Asceticism looked upon the pursuit of wealth as an end in itself as highly reprehensible; but the attainment of it as a fruit of labour in a calling was a sign of God's blessing. And even more important: the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have here called the spirit of capitalism.

When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save.

DISCUSSION

Our critique hinges on Weber's treatment of the calling: what is its relation to other elements of Calvinism? Does it logically and dogmatically follow that the calling emerges from a concern with the commandment of brotherly love? For instance, if brotherly love is not explicitly united with the calling, then a dogmatic, religious motivation to rationally pursue mundane work is removed. Nonreligious factors would then have to be used to explain the existence of a capitalistic ethos. But if we concede the causal connection of brotherly love and the calling, does Weber demonstrate that the calling would find sole expression in explicitly economically oriented activity? Furthermore, is there a logical relation between the calling as an expression of brotherly love and the calling as a mechanism of ascertaining one's state of grace? Might these two conceptualizations of the calling be contradictory, in principle, and, in fact, be more appropriately treated as two conceptualizations of the concept of the calling at different points in time? If so, then when they are juxtaposed within a single framework (which then is called Calvinism), the historically changing dynamics of the institution of Calvinism are ignored. This is a systematic bias in Weber's analysis. The preoccupation with meaningfully related internal elements of

Calvinism leads to the systematic exclusion of nonreligious events and elements.

The Calling and Brotherly Love

As we have seen, the calling provided a solution to the fulfillment of the duty of brotherly love without one laboring "in the service of the flesh." One worked for the general good of the community in accordance with His commandments. God was glorified without men laboring for the glory of men.

The difficulty arises in Weber's use of the terms brotherly love and social achievement. The elect are in the world to increase the glory of God by fulfilling His will. One will is the commandment of brotherly love and another is to achieve a social organization in accordance with His commandments. If brotherly love does not entail social organization (or, vice versa), then there are two "commandments" that must be fulfilled. Weber explicitly recognizes their separation (p. 108), but quickly passes over it. He treats the terms as if they were almost synonymous. In so doing, he obfuscates the real question: In what way are the two duties to be related? There are two polar options. Brotherly love may be seen as primary. It provides the "reason" for the social achievement. Brotherly love and His will (as the directing goal of the social achievement) stand outside of the earthly social order. In contrast, one's obligation may be oriented toward the existing social organization. The social order is considered as given, at least for the purposes of salvation. One fulfills the obligation of brotherly love within the structure of the society.

The import of this distinction emerges in the degree of traditionalism that the doctrine of the calling manifests toward the society. In the Calvinist calling as construed by Weber, the doctrine of brotherly love serves as a motivation for the construction of the social achievement: it is external to the society. The individual is the tool through which God works. One labors to realize Christian brotherly love in the world by trying to achieve a social organization that approximates the Divine plan. This, of course, is not a consciously revolutionary plan vis-a-vis the "earthly institutions" of man. Nevertheless, since the focus is on the glorification of God, one is led to be innovative in the face of

misguided earthly social patterns: one must seek to rationalize his own life in accordance with and in pursuit of the Divine will. If, however, primacy is given to the social organization, one fulfills the obligation of brotherly love *within* the society. One accepts the existing social order and his role in it; one seeks to honor the commandments within the framework of the social order. The orientation is inherently conservative.

The latter position is identified with Lutheranism. The conservatism of the Lutheran calling sets it apart from the Calvinist calling. Both of these notions are grounded in the Lutheran insight that (p. 81):

The fulfilment of worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way to live acceptably to God. It and it alone is the will of God, and hence every legitimate calling has exactly the same worth in the sight of God.

Of course, Luther deduced a different conclusion than Calvin. Weber states about Luther (p. 85):

The stronger and stronger emphasis on the providential element, even in particular events of life, led more and more to a traditionalistic interpretation based on the idea of Providence. The individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God had placed him, and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life.

Both of these radically different notions of the calling are equally "logical" solutions to the expression of brotherly love and the legitimacy of earthly labor. They both begin with a similar insight: the religious value of work. From this common base they deduce different notions of the calling. Either notion is an equally logical solution to the Calvinist "problem" of brotherly love: How may it be practiced for the glory of God without being in service of the flesh? The idolization of the flesh, the emotional experience of God, is equally avoided whether one fulfills the duty of brotherly love by work within the God-ordained social order (as in Lutheranism) or by work oriented to achieving a social order in accordance with His will (as in Calvinism). Since they are equally acceptable, doubt is cast on the logical, meaningful connections of

the ideas involved. Logically-meaningfully, it could just as well be one outcome as another. Hence, the rational formulation of the ideal type approach is undermined.

Furthermore, Weber explicitly mentions that in Luther's development of the calling he hit upon the justification of the calling in terms of brotherly love (pp. 81, 108). However, this notion remained for Luther a "purely intellectual suggestion." It was not developed as in Calvinism; it remained a "suggestion." Evidently, it did so in response to essentially nonreligious factors (p. 85). Thus, for Weber, this conjunction of Lutheran ideas is "causally" related in terms of forces external to religion instead of logically, meaningfully related in terms of religious forces. Weber does not offer such an analysis for the Calvinist calling. Nevertheless, the situation is the same. If Calvinism did unfold as Weber suggests, then nonreligious forces would seem to predominate in this process for there is no strict, logical, meaningful relationship between them. This is a substantive oversight as well as a methodological weakness: substantive because important causal factors are not examined; methodological because the ideal type approach, by definition, would exclude crucial causal factors.

The Calling and Economic Activity

Our second critique is that there is nothing in the Calvinist calling that would lead it to be especially expressed in mundane labor. The calling is oriented toward the rational organization of the social environment; this derives from labor "in the fulfillment of the daily tasks given by the *lex naturae*" (p. 109). The *lex naturae* refers to the moral order of the world that ultimately exists because of the fundamental nature of God's cosmos. As such, it would seem that the calling, as a religious orientation, need not find its expression solely, or even predominantly, in economically useful activity. The objective results needed by the Calvinist as signs of salvation may logically be found in religious and political spheres of life as well as the economic sphere.

Two Conceptualizations of the Calling

Our third critique concerns the development of the doctrine

of a "proof of salvation." Weber's formulation of Calvinism is essentially ahistorical; yet, the doctrine of proof needs historical treatment. The doctrine of proof was neither explicitly contained in early Calvinism nor implicit within it. The attempt to treat proof of grace within the ahistorical framework of Calvinism leads to difficulties, because the historical inadequacies of the treatment of Calvinism become apparent. Calvinism was not developing in a historical vacuum nor was it unilaterally affecting behavior. In addition, there is a rational inconsistency between a doctrine of proof and the rest of Calvinism. This is a hard blow for an ideal type schema which is based on a rationally related set of elements. There is, however, an even more fundamentally damaging element. The dynamic motivation for the calling comes ultimately from the transcendentality of God and predestination doctrines. The resulting anxiety over salvation is channeled into the calling through the doctrine of a proof of grace. If it is shown that the doctrine of proof either did not exist with, or is inconsistent with, the other elements of Calvinism (e.g., predestination; the transcendentality of God and, therefore, the repudiation of emotionalism, sensualism), then the major motivational syndrome for the calling has been removed. Without the utterly transcendental God, asceticism in practical activity (as a norm of practical life, not as an ideal) and the need for objective signs of grace become superfluous; without predestination, the anxiety over salvation is greatly reduced.

Weber observes that the calling did not emerge in Calvinist thought until after the interest in a proof of salvation had developed. It was the "development which brought the interest in proof of salvation to the fore" that brought the Lutherans' calling into Calvinism (p. 210; compare with pp. 108-9). This notion of the calling developed in an attempt to gain the certainty of salvation and not in response to the fulfillment of Christian brotherly love (and/or the social achievement). It would seem that one sought not to realize God's will in his daily tasks, but to crack His eternal secret and wisdom. This bifurcation of religious motivation indicates that there are two concepts of the calling in use by Weber: calling-as-proof-of-salvation and calling-as-expression-of-brotherly-love (or social achievement).

This split is underscored by the fact that the latter notion of the calling requires elements of Calvinism in its formulation (especially the transcendentality of God, predestination and a strict rationalism) which contest the doctrine of proof. Furthermore, these elements are presumably needed in the conception of the calling-as-proof-of-salvation if this activity is to be expressed in socially useful work, yet they are logically inconsistent with this conception.

The historical point, as Weber indicates, is that the doctrine of proof developed in later Calvinism and is not "pure" Calvinism (p. 110). By juxtaposing these two concepts of the calling together, Weber obfuscates the historical nature of the proof of salvation: A static picture is arranged of parts that do not exist together at the same time. Change in the doctrine need not be accounted for. We will argue below that this change cannot be treated as a logical development of Calvinism. Hence, recourse must be had to nonreligious explanations. The explanation of the capitalist spirit is not furthered, for the main explanatory element (i.e., Calvinism) is itself problematic even within the focus of the study. In addition, the psychological motivation in Calvinism at different points of time need not be the same. This point is neither accounted for nor raised.

The rational inconsistencies between a doctrine of proof and the rest of Calvinism emerge in the logical development of the doctrine of proof. Strictly speaking, this doctrine would never have developed for Calvin or early Calvinism. The things of the world could never reveal God's will (p. 124). Such an orientation, however, could never be held by the mass of ordinary men. The *certitudo salutis* would be of extreme importance for them, evidently because of their lower moral development (this element, for example, cannot be explained within the religious framework). So, if the doctrine of predestination was still maintained, the question would arise as to the existence of infallible criteria to ascertain one's state of grace. The difficulty, however, is that to ask this question and to seek an answer for it, requires a pattern of thought that moves beyond and out of the earlier Calvinist framework and, in so doing, contests the earlier thought pattern. For, to assert the doctrine of proof is to deny both the

transcendental quality of God and thus, by implication, the very basis for the doctrine of predestination. This almost completely eliminates the orientations that are to produce the dynamic motivation for the calling.

This comes about in the following way. The underlying basis for the whole Calvinist ethos-capitalistic spirit thesis is the utter rationality of Calvinism (p. 232). It is a force and drive of almost "locomotive" proportions. If this rationality leads us into paradoxes, then the entire system is called into question. Yet if God is transcendental and if the strict logical interpretation is that of the uselessness of the things of the world before God and the complete aloneness of the individual, then the riddle of salvation can never be "cracked" by worldly results or human social activity. One cannot be a Calvinist and ask about salvation. If the doctrine of proof of salvation is maintained, then either a mistake has been made in the reasoning (which Weber does not hold) or else God is not transcendental. But, if God is not transcendental, then the world may not be predestined. Hence, this particular problem of salvation becomes superfluous. This problem is made somewhat more embarrassing to Weber's position because he maintains that emotionality never entered into "the psychological basis of Calvinistic social organizations." This basis always rested on individualistic, rational motives which remained above the "threshold of consciousness" (p. 223). Presumably, then, for Weber's thesis, the actors consciously and rationally knew what they were about. Such actors could never rationally draw the conclusions that a doctrine of proof would require.

As has been pointed out above, recourse cannot be made to irrational or emotional motivation syndromes. To do so moves us beyond the frame of reference: Weber's version of Calvinism and his ideal type schema as a rationally related set of elements.

The rational inconsistencies can be seen in Weber's treatment of the *Westminster Confession*. This document assures the elect of "indubitable certainty of grace" (p. 228). Without modification of Calvinist doctrine, this assertion leads to certain inconsistencies. These inconsistencies are not accounted for in Weber for he holds to an ahistorical notion of Calvinism. Besides the rational inconsistency which was mentioned above, much depends upon

what the proof of grace is taken to be. If it is merely the subjective feeling of certainty, then the proof becomes somewhat irrelevant to Weber's thesis and may definitely detract from the kind of economically useful activity that he wants to establish. If the proof is taken to rest in works that are loosely deemed holy (as opposed to mundane labor), then the proof becomes positively damaging to Weber's thesis. If the proof is to be found in objective results, then Weber's thesis will be supported, yet an additional problem has been created and must be faced. Our Calvinist actors cannot be naive observers of the world and must observe that the objective signs of grace sometimes accompany people of, at best, doubtful character. (This reintroduces the theodicy problem that Weber sought to avoid: Weber, 1958:109; Weber, 1946:275, 359.) Presumably, this would have to be explained away. To do so would involve either doubting the Divine order in some way or else doubting the sign of grace. The latter course would probably be chosen for the former would cast doubt upon the whole enterprise. In working out the latter position, if the problem is to be avoided again, then some sort of non-objective proof of grace must be chosen. This moves the problem back to one of the earlier options and does not strengthen Weber's case. And, if the entire difficulty is ignored, we have an indication of the presence of arational elements which would be damaging to the basic rationality of his thesis.

CONCLUSION

In our critique, we have focused on Weber's argument and its logical interrelations. We have treated Calvinism as the most important and clearest example of the Protestant ethic thesis. We have examined the logical, meaningful relationship between the elements that Weber delineates as Calvinism and their relation to ascetic, mundane work. Note that we have not critiqued the spirit of capitalism notion nor argued that such a "spirit" is problematical in itself. Instead, we have argued that the thesis that there are religious antecedents for such a spirit is problematical.

There is no strict, logical, meaningful relationship between the elements treated as Calvinism nor between these elements and

the spirit of capitalism. If, however, it is maintained that the Calvinist configuration did occur as claimed, then nonreligious factors would have to be introduced to account for this conjunction of elements. Recourse to a nonreligious explanation is mandatory, for there is no logical, meaningful relationship between these elements in the purely religious sphere. These nonreligious factors may be idealistic as well as materialistic. The point simply is that they must be used and they are not. Thus, it appears that disparate elements are taken from various points in time and blended together to form a static picture. This picture appears to form a Protestant ethos that is related to a spirit of capitalism only if the historical dimension with its implicit interaction between elements and forces is ignored.

REFERENCES

- Weber, Max
1946 *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Tr. and Ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford University Press: New York).
1958 *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Tr. Talcott Parsons (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York).

INTERDISCIPLINARY VARIATIONS IN THE PERCEPTION OF POWER: A STUDY IN IDEOLOGY

DAVID DICKENS
MICHAEL LACY
DON LANDON
BOB RUCKER
University of Kansas

Mid-American Review of Sociology, 1976, Vol. 1, No. 1:41 - 70

There have been marked disagreements in the literature on the structure of power in American society. The authors suggest that this controversy is an artifact of ideological differences between sociologists and political scientists. This hypothesis is tested through the use of a pluralism-elitism scale. Political scientists are found to score toward the pluralistic end of the spectrum, while sociologists are concentrated toward the elitist end, thus providing preliminary support for the hypothesis.

The structure of power in American society constitutes an unresolved problem among social scientists (Ricci, 1971). While research into the structure of community power has moved beyond the ideologically based clashes of Hunter (1953) and Dahl (1961) so that today the question is no longer "who governs" but rather "who governs under what conditions, where, and when," still the ideological components of the issue remain to whet the curiosity of the researcher. Why is it that when sociologists investigate the structure of power they tend to discover a "power elite" (a small integrated group of power holders who rather undemocratically dominate decision making), but when political scientists investigate the structure of power they tend to discover that power is dispersed among many groups in a rather democratic way (in essence, a "pluralist" structure)? Moreover, why is it that sociologists are strongly inclined to employ a "positional" or "reputational" approach in locating power holders while political scientists are more inclined to employ a "decisional" approach?

While research has moved beyond the ideological stage of "power elite" vs. "pluralist" orientations so that Clark (1968) can