

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

Weber: Protestant Ethic Causes
Origin of Capitalism

- Weber asks why capitalism begins in certain places at a certain time
 - In northwestern Europe (Germany, the Low Countries, England) and in American colonies established by the English and Dutch
 - In late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries
- What distinguishes “capitalism” from earlier forms of economic activity?

Two Requisites of Capitalism

- Continuing investments
 - No longer just a single investment followed by enjoyment of profits
 - Profits are continually reinvested in the enterprise
- Methodical comparison of income and expenditure
 - By entrepreneurs deciding how to invest
 - By workers comparing wages to effort
 - The result is “rational bookkeeping”

Effort and asceticism

- **Suppose some people acquire attitudes causing them to combine effort in their work with asceticism in consumption**
 - “Asceticism” means self-denial
- **These attitudes have consequences both for investment and for rational bookkeeping**
- **Where these attitudes exist, capitalism becomes more likely**

Consequences for investment

- People who work hard and spend little have more savings than people who work little and spend freely
- People who have saved more have more capital to invest

Consequences for rational bookkeeping

- Both effort and asceticism require a person to pay constant attention to his or her activities
- Am I wasting time, or concentrating on my work?
- Should I respond to momentary distractions such as desire to consume?
- Persons paying constant attention keep better records

Weber's Inference

- If capitalism is distinguished from earlier forms of economic activity by the twin traits of continuous investment and rational bookkeeping, capitalism will flourish where attitudes encourage combination of effort with asceticism
- More investments will be coupled with better-record keeping

Religion as the source of attitudes

- How do people acquire attitudes combining effort with asceticism?
- Weber says the sources of these attitudes in Europe were religious
- Protestantism replaced Catholicism in northwestern Europe beginning in the 16th century
- Protestants appeared in southern and eastern Europe but were suppressed by monarchs acting on behalf of the Catholic Church

Catholicism vs. Protestantism

- Three differences distinguished Catholicism in the sixteenth century from newly emerging Protestantism
 - 1) Orientation of human action
 - 2) Attitude toward consumption
 - 3) Need for systematic attention to behavior
- Founding of the Jesuit order to conduct the so-called Counterreformation encouraged the spread of these traits among many modern Catholics
 - Others acquired these traits in order to compete in a capitalist economy

Orientation of Human Action

- For Catholicism even today, daily activity is necessary to sustain life so that God can be worshipped
- For Protestantism, today mainly in the form known as fundamentalism, daily activity in a calling *is* one element of worship

Attitude toward consumption

- For Catholicism consumption is morally indifferent
- For Protestantism consumption beyond needs of survival is morally bad, distracting from devotion to God

Systematic attention to behavior

- Catholics can afford to sin from time to time
 - They are expected to backslide
 - They can repent their sins by committing a good work that cancels a sin
 - Or they can confess to a priest who is divinely empowered to grant absolution
- To assure the self of membership among the saved, a Protestant must ensure that he or she never sins
 - Protestants sin only if they are not saved
 - Because Protestants lack priests, no one can absolve them
 - Protestants must avoid sin not because refraining from sin earns salvation, but because refraining from sin is a sign that salvation awaits them

Effects of Protestantism

- Ergo, becoming Protestants motivated former Catholics to combine effort with asceticism
- Weber, 172:
 - “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 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.”

Spread of capitalism

- The reasons for the spread of capitalism differ from the reasons for its origin
- People who are not Protestants observe that capitalist practices are making Protestants rich
- Imitation driven by greed leads to spread of capitalism beyond areas inhabited by Protestants (Northwestern Europe and English and Dutch colonies)
- Presence of capitalism leads all individuals to couple effort with asceticism regardless of religious belief
- Original connection between capitalism and religious belief results in detachment of capitalist behavior from religious belief

How to Read Weber

- I've given you one possible reading of Weber
- There are many ways to read any text
- Now I want to talk about what I look for when I read Weber
- How I decide what I think he meant
- I am guided by Weber's deployment of certain common theoretical practices

Theoretical Practices

- Although Weber was a sociologist, he engaged in theoretical practices that have become, at least in large measure thanks to his influence, ubiquitous among political scientists
- Stylization
- Hypothesis
- Identification of an “ideal of natural order”
- Construction of dependent and independent variables
- Selection of a unit of analysis with an attendant conception of human motivation and an attendant resolution of the problem of collective action

Stylization

- “Stylization” is the reduction of complexity to a general proposition simple enough to contemplate
- Three kinds of stylizations
- The “stylized fact”
- The “stylized question”
- The “stylized answer” (known to you, imprecisely, as the “thesis statement”)

The Stylized Fact

- Stylized facts reduce the complexity of the social world to simple and general factual propositions
- They enable the theorist and the reader to think about the world without worrying about details
- Stylized facts are neither true nor false; they simply represent the world in some form simplified enough to be convenient to think about
- Of course, if the stylized fact is sufficiently misleading, the theorist thinks about some imaginary unreal world and the theory is unhelpful

Weber's Stylized Fact

- p. 35: “A glance at the occupational statistics of any country brings to light with remarkable frequency...the fact that business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labor, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant.”

Weber's Simplification

- The underlying complex fact is a tabulation of the numbers of protestants and catholics among capitalists, technical and commercial personnel, skilled laborers, and unskilled laborers
- Weber does not give us that count, he stylizes it

Weber's Implied Table

	Protestant	Catholics
Owners/Business leaders	Most	Fewest
Technical and Commercial Personnel	More	Fewer
Skilled Labor	Not as Many More	Not as many Fewer
Unskilled Labor	Fewer	More

Stylized definition of the problem

- 40: "It will be our task to investigate these religions with a view to finding out what peculiarities they have or have had which might have resulted in the behavior we have described."
- Reduces the complexity of the problem of the origin of capitalism to "peculiarities" of religion and to "behavior" of capitalists
- Notice that the sentence starts with "It will be our task..."
 - Such sentences starting "It..." with no referent are called "clefts"
 - A cleft is often but not always a marker of a stylized definition of the problem

Stylized answer

- 42: "the supposed conflict between other-worldliness, asceticism and ecclesiastical piety, on the one side, and participation in capitalistic acquisition on the other, might actually turn out to be an intimate relationship."
- Again Weber does not specify the relationship in question
- Rest of the book specifies the definition of the problem and the answer

Three Stylizations

- The Stylized Fact
- The Stylized Problem
- The Stylized Answer
- Stylization simplifies a complex problem enough that the social scientist can think about it

Hypothesis

- Every theoretical work in political science proposes at least one hypothesis
- Hypothesis: a proposition stating a universal association between two or more variables, each of which is defined in such a way as to be susceptible to observation
- A hypothesis offers a means to convince ourselves whether to accept a theory
- If the variables said to be associated are in fact not found together, then the theory appears less likely to be true
 - Hypotheses cannot be confirmed and do not confirm or disconfirm a theory
 - They can only be disconfirmed, and if they are, can only cast doubt on a theory

Criteria Identifying a Hypothesis

- Hypothesis: a proposition stating a universal association between two or more variables defined in such a way as to be susceptible to observation
- Universal association: if one variable is found, the other is always found too
- Susceptible to observation: we must be able to see, hear, touch, feel, or smell something associated with the variable

An example of something that is not science

- It is perfectly possible that creationism is true
- Creationists say Darwinism is only a theory, and they are quite correct
- But creationism does not offer any hypothesis
- Creationism proposes two variables
 - Division of life into species
 - Activity of God creating those species
- Species are observable
- God, however, is said to be ineffable or intangible: existence cannot be observed but must be accepted on faith
- This issue is often distorted by creationists who claim that science does not require exclusive naturalism
- They are correct, but science does require observability
- Because God is immanent rather than observable, because God cannot be seen and God's presence can only be known, "creation science" is an oxymoron

Weber's Hypothesis

- I cannot find any passage in Weber that explicitly states a hypothesis
- In fact he denies proposing two extreme versions of his hypothesis:
- 91: "we have no intention whatever of maintaining such a foolish and doctrinaire thesis as that the spirit of capitalism... could only have arisen as the result of certain effects of the Reformation, or even that capitalism as an economic system is a creation of the Reformation."
- The word "only" and the proposal that all elements of capitalism are attributable to the Reformation make these versions extreme

Asserting by denying

- Characteristic feature of scholarly prose: assertions take the form of denials
- What an author says he wouldn't assert is a version of exactly what he does assert
- Weber says in a later footnote: (217, n. 32) "I have again and again been accused of this."
- It is true that Weber refuses to state explicitly exactly which features of capitalism owe to Protestantism and which to earlier or other influences, but he does say there are other influences

Variables

- One variable here is the Reformation
- A couple lines later appears second variable:
- "the qualitative formation and the quantitative expansion of that [capitalist] spirit over the world."
- Why is this one variable?
- In Weber's mind the qualities of post-Reformation capitalism account for its quantitative expansion
- If someone wanted to think of it as two variables, I can't see why that would be wrong

Universality of Weber's hypothesis

- If we take it to be Weber's hypothesis that capitalism takes on new qualities that greatly invigorate it as the result of the Reformation, is this said to be a universal association?
- Does it couple variables that are observable?
- We can answer these questions by looking at Weber's discussion of his variables

Kinds of Variables

- It is customary to distinguish two kinds of variables
- The "dependent variable"
- The "independent variable"
- How do these differ?

Conventional language

- An independent variable is said to “explain” and to “predict” the dependent variable
- In ordinary language *predict* is synonymous with *forecast*, to tell ahead of time
- But Weber is writing about the past
- He cannot forecast capitalism on the basis of his knowledge of Protestantism, because by the time he writes, capitalism already exists

Predictions vs forecasts

- Predictions in science need not be forecasts in time
- Prediction in science means that knowledge of the independent variable informs the observer about the condition of the dependent variable
- Informing the observer is the meaning of “explanation”

“Explanation” in Weber

- Weber begins by describing the dependent variable in the chapter concerning the spirit of capitalism
- The next two chapters describe the independent variable: relevant features of Protestantism and particularly the doctrine of predestination
- The final chapter connects relevant features of Protestantism to the spirit of capitalism: the combination of acquisitiveness, frugality, hard work, and attentiveness
- Weber first describes the dependent variable, and only then “explains” it afterwards
- This is how we all proceed

Weber’s construction of the dependent variable

- In general dependent variables are “constructed” (or formulated)
- They are constructed as contrasts
 - What is observed
 - Contrasted against
 - What one would expect to see in the absence of the independent variable
- Weber sees capitalist acquisition
- What would he expect to see in the absence of Protestantism?

The “Ideal of Natural Order”

- This phrase is a name given to what we would expect to see in the absence of causes
 - “Ideal” contrasts with “real” (meaning “observed”), not with “imperfect” or “defective”
 - “Natural order” means the condition of nature in the absence of cause
- What does Weber think is natural?

Weber’s Ideal of Natural Order

- Weber tells us what he thinks is natural:
- (60) "A man does not ‘by nature’ wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose."

Weber’s Independent Variable

- To explain capitalism, then, Weber must tell why men would depart from their natural condition of indolence
- Why would men abandon the "old leisurely and comfortable attitude toward life" (68) and become “calculating and daring at the same time, above all temperate and reliable” (69)?

Consequences of Protestantism I

- Encouragement of effort
- 80: In Protestantism “at least one thing was unquestionably new: the valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume” – the calling
- In Calvinism the effect of the concept of the calling was reinforced by the doctrine of predestination

Predestination

- Calvinism's "most characteristic dogma" (98) expressed in the Westminster Confession of 1647: "Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God before the foundation of the world was laid... hath chosen unto Christ into everlasting glory... The rest of mankind God was pleased... to pass by" (100)
- Damned were many, saved ("the elect") were few
- No act of man could later change God's original decision: salvation through grace not works – *sola fide* (114)
- The *decretum horribile* (102) produced "a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual" (104)
- Loneliness could be overcome only through labor (108)
- More important: "The question, am I one of the elect?, must sooner or later have arisen for every believer and have forced all others into the background. And how can I be sure of this state of grace?" (110)
- The answer lay "in a type of Christian conduct which served to increase the glory of God" (114)

Conduct *in majorem gloriam Dei*

- Richard Baxter: "If God show you a way in which you may lawfully get more than in another way... if you refuse this, and choose the less gainful way, you cross one of the ends of your calling, and you refuse to be God's steward, and to accept His gifts and use them for Him when He requireth it; you may labor to be rich for God" (162)
- John Wesley: "We must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich [Weber's emphasis deleted]." (175)

Why get rich?

- Riches relieve anxiety about salvation by acting as a sign of God's grace
 - Donald Trump: "It's not about money. Money is just a means of keeping score."
- Relief of anxiety about membership in the elect overcomes the supposed tendency of man "by nature" to make only as much money as he is accustomed to make

Consequences of Protestantism II

- Sources of abstinence
 - (105): Protestantism reveals a "fundamental antagonism to sensuous culture of all kinds."
 - (157): "Loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health... is worthy of absolute moral condemnation."
- Coupling of abstinence with effort in the calling produces the wealth that reassures about membership in the elect

Consequences of Protestantism III

- Encouragement of methodical self-control
 - (117) “to the Catholic the absolution of his Church [performed by the priest] was a compensation for his own imperfection.”
 - But Calvinists have no priests
- For the Calvinist, “such friendly and human comforts did not exist... 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.”
- (161): “A man without a calling thus lacks the systematic, methodical character which is, as we have seen, demanded by worldly asceticism.”

Observability and Universality

- Observability: Concept of the calling discovered in the writings of Martin Luther
- Universality: (79) “If we trace the history of the word through the civilized languages, it appears that neither the predominantly Catholic peoples nor those of classical antiquity have possessed any expression of similar connotation for what we know as a calling.”
 - Note modern “vocation” and “profession”
 - In Catholicism, only the priest has a vocation

Weber's unit of analysis

- Weber analyzes the *meaning* of behavior
- “the attainment of [wealth] as the fruit of labor in a calling was a sign of God's blessing” (172)
- The important question was what people's behavior *meant* to them – of what was their conduct a “sign”

Attendant view of motives

- Actions are motivated by what they mean to the agent, not by what purpose the actions accomplish
 - “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.” (97)
 - Capitalism is not distinguished from its precursors by “the *auri sacra fames*, the greed for gold,” which is common both to Protestants and to others (56)
- Protestant belief acts as a restraint on *auri sacra fames*

Attendant view of collective action

- The “collective action problem” to political scientists: how can human individuals make themselves cooperate as groups?
- Collective action is stymied when gains can be achieved only by contributions
 - that are costly to each individual
 - that many individuals must contribute
 - that not every individual need contribute
 - that achieve gains not restricted to those individuals who have contributed

Weber’s solution

- Collective action is not a problem if people act on meaning rather than goals
- Collective action is also not a problem if people do not act as individuals
- Capitalism had to arise, Weber says, “not in isolated individuals alone, but as a way of life common to whole groups of men”
- Meanings are properties of collectivities
 - The term “individual” even means to Weber only historical groups

Implications of Weber’s solution

- The problem of collective action is inverted
- Not how do individuals combine, but how to meanings transmit to form individuals
- (155) “In order to understand the connection between the fundamental religious ideas of ascetic Protestantism and its maxims for everyday economic conduct, it is necessary to examine with especial care such writings as have evidently been derived from ministerial practice.”
- Weber looks at sermons read by the minister to the worshippers

Effects of communication

- Transmission from the minister to the congregation changed the meaning of Calvinism
- (89-90): Weber does not “expect to find any of the founders or representatives of these religious movements considering the promotion of what we have called the spirit of capitalism as in any sense the end of his life-work. We cannot maintain that the pursuit of worldly goods, conceived as an end in itself, was to any of them of positive ethical value... programmes of ethical reform never were at the centre of interest for any of the religious reformers... The salvation of the soul and that alone was the centre of their life and work.”
- (90) “the cultural consequences of the Reformation were to a great extent... unforeseen and unwished-for results of the labors of the reformers. They were often far removed from or even in contradiction to all that they themselves thought to attain.”

Integration

- Can Weber's ideas contribute to the theory of transition to democracy?
- Democracy is unmentioned in this work except one line in his introduction, although Weber wrote extensively about democracy elsewhere

The idea of origins

- Weber is writing about the appearance of a new behavior
- In his case "rational legal acquisition by virtue of one's own ability and initiative" as opposed to "politically privileged monopoly industries"
- Capitalism is behavior rather than an institution, although the behavior has institutional consequences

Implications for transition to democracy

- Democracy is often thought of as a set of institutions but it is also a new behavior
- The institutions of democracy are contested elections and elected legislatures and perhaps elected executives
- The behavior that distinguishes democracy is voting

Voting as collective action

- Voting is a choice between candidates for office
- This choice is costly to the voter: it takes time to go to the polls
- The chance that the voter's ballot will decide the election is slight or even nil
- In California, for example, there is no chance that any given ballot will affect whether the state's electoral votes are cast for the Democratic or the Republican candidate
- Regardless of whether a voter pays the cost of casting a ballot, the benefit or harm done by the policies of the winning candidate still occurs
- Why does anyone vote?

Weber's View of Costs

- Weber agrees that people consider costs
 - Everyone is driven by the *auri sacra fames*
- To Weber, consideration of individual costs and benefits obstructs the origin of capitalism
- Similarly, consideration of individual costs and benefits will prevent people from doing the behavior, voting, that distinguishes democracy from dictatorship or monarchy

Implications of Weber for Voting,

- In the case of capitalism, transmission of meaning from preachers to congregations overcomes people's concentration on individual gain or loss
- Preachers are to congregations as candidates are to constituencies
- Does transmission of meaning from candidates to constituencies during a campaign overcome the focus on individual gain or loss that would prevent voting?
- Here is one possible contribution of this book to the study of a topic that the book mentions only very briefly