



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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[Suggest a correction](#)

Contents

Part I. Weber

1. PESOC, part 2

9

PART III
WEBER

I. PESOC, part 2

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Part 2

“Am I one of the Elect?”

NOTE ON SOURCE: These passages are from Weber's most known and influential work, first published in German in 1905 as *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. It was first translated into English by the sociologist Talcott Parsons and published in 1930 as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Allen and Unwin. Parsons' translation was reprinted in 1958 by Scribner's. This translation is probably the one most English-speaking sociologists have read. In 2002, Penguin published a new translation by Baehr and Wells, a translation that offered a shell as hard as steel in place of Parsons' well-known Iron Cage. Although this translation is more literal, your selection below uses the more widely-known phrasing of Parsons. Otherwise, readers will find much that is different from Parsons translation, which tends to be somewhat creative at times.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

In part two of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber traces the particular religious ideas that he argued gave way to the practices and behaviors he called the spirit, or essence, of capitalism (hard work, saving rather than spending, sobriety). He then goes forward, tracing the often unintended and unwanted consequences of the spread of these beliefs and practices, especially once the underlying religious beliefs fell away. This leads him to one of the gloomiest forecasts for modern society by any of the classical theorists.

Part 2: The Vocational Ethic of the Ascetic Branches of Protestantism

Chapter 4. The Religious Foundations of Worldly Ascetism

A note on the word “ascetic” (asketischin German). The word has come to mean living rigorously in self-denial, without luxuries or comfort. In the Middle Ages in Europe, there were a fair number of priests and monks who practiced ascetism as a way of living righteously, so the term carries a religious connotation. We can trace the word back to its Greek origin, ἀσκειν, which meant to train or practice, and came to signify monks in training. It was really during the period of the English Civil War, when Protestants fought Catholics, that ascetism came to mean austerity and sobriety, notable in dress (the unruffled simple black of the Puritan) and behavior.

Weber begins this chapter by setting forth a short description of four principal strands of Protestantism that embraced an ascetic form, what can be considered “Puritan.” These were (1) Calvinism; (2) Pietism; (3) Methodism; (4) those associated with various Baptist sects. The part of the chapter that focuses on Calvinism is included below. When discussing all those Protestants who followed the doctrine of predestination, Weber will refer to Puritans and Puritanism.

The greatest political and cultural struggles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fought in the highly developed regions of Northern Europe (the Netherlands, England, France), were over Calvinism. Then, as now, its most characteristic belief was the doctrine of predestination. To understand this, let us turn to the Westminster Confession of 1647 (*in which early Calvinists described their faith*). Here are the relevant passages:

Chapter IX (of Free Will), Number 3: Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

Chapter III (of God’s Eternal Decree), Number 3; By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.

Number 5: Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto: and all to the praise of His glorious grace.

Number 7: The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.

Chapter X (of Effectual Calling), Number 1: All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.

Chapter V (of Providence), Number 6: As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous Judge, for former sins doth blind and harden, from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes

occasions of sin; and, withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan: whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.

We can briefly tell the story of how the doctrine originated and how it fit into Calvinist theology. While for Luther the doctrine's significance decreased over time, for Calvin, it increased. It derives from the logical necessity of his thought. The interest of it lies in God, not in human beings; God does not exist for people, but people for the sake of God. Everything other than God, including the meaning of our individual lives and destinies, is shrouded in a mystery that would be both impossible and presumptuous to discern. We only know that some are saved, most are damned. To think that human merit, deservingness or undeservingness, plays in part in determining our fate would be to think God's decrees, which have been settled for eternity, are subject to change by human influence. This is an impossible belief.

In its emotional inhumanity this belief must have instilled a feeling of extreme loneliness in the individual who accepted it. No one could help her. No priest...No Church...No God, for even Jesus Christ had died only for the elect. This is what set Protestants apart from Catholics – the complete elimination of salvation through the Church and its sacraments. You were really all alone.

As all religions develop, they turn away from magic. Here we see this development coming to its logical conclusion. Puritans even rejected all signs of religious ceremony, burying their dead with neither song nor ritual, so that no superstitious belief should creep in. Not only was there no magical way of attaining God's grace, making you one of the Elect, but there was *no* way at all. It was out of your hands entirely. This helps explain the totally negative view of anything that would give pleasure or solace, as such was of no use to salvation and could promote illusions or superstition.

The world exists to serve God, to promote God's glory, and for nothing else. That means that the Elect were in the world only to increase God's glory by fulfilling His commandments. Everything done by a good Christian was for God and God alone, including his or her vocation, another way of saying what he or she was called to do to increase God's glory on earth.

Now, sooner or later, the question must arise to every person following this doctrine, "Am I one of the elect?" And more, "how can I find out?" Calvin apparently was never bothered by these questions, but he was an unusually confident man. For everyone else, the questions were important ones. Two different sets of pastoral advice arose to help parishioners. First, people were told it was an absolute duty to consider one's self as one of the elect, and to regard any doubts or anxiety as tricks of the devil. In contrast to the first, and perhaps more helpful, it was recommended that people work hard in their calling as a way of boosting their assuredness of being one of the elect. Work and work alone dispels doubt and gives the certainty of grace.

We can now ask further by what fruits the Calvinist could identify having been saved, and the answer would be fruits of labor which serves to increase the glory of God. In practice this means that God helps those who help themselves. The Calvinist creates his own salvation, or at least, the conviction of his own salvation. The God of Calvinism demanded a lifetime of good works, rather than single good acts scattered here and there. This meant that Calvinists were subjected to a consistent and constant method of work/life. Only a life guided by constant thought, constant planning, constant adhesion to one's vocation, could pull the Elect out of the state of nature into the state of grace. Active self-control was the most important practical ideal of Puritanism.

Like ascetics before him, the puritan tried to act rationally at all times, suppressing all emotions. The goal of this ascetism was to lead an alert, intelligent life and to reject all spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment. But the Puritan ascetic was different from the medieval ascetics in that the Puritan did not live outside of the world but very much within it. Medieval monks were driven farther away from everyday life through their ascetism. In contrast, by founding its ethic in the doctrine of predestination, the Puritans created their form of a spiritual aristocracy not outside the world but within it, as the predestined elected saints of God within the world. The consciousness of divine grace was often accompanied by an attitude of sin toward one's neighbor, of hatred and contempt for her as an enemy of God bearing the signs of eternal damnation....

Chapter 5. Ascetism and the Spirit of Capitalism

Weber begins this chapter by referring to the work of Richard Baxter, a Puritan leader and renowned minister of the 17th century, whose books on Puritan ethics were widely read and followed. He uses Baxter's writings on wealth to examine the Puritan relationship to wealth and the development of capitalism.

In Baxter, wealth is a great danger and temptation. But the real objection is to its enjoyment and the consequent temptation to idleness and pleasure. Above all, wealth can be a distraction from the pursuit of a righteous life. It is really only because having wealth can make us *relax* that it is objectionable. Remember, only activity that serves to increase the glory of God, through one's called-to occupation, is sanctioned. Leisure and enjoyment are proscribed.

Wasting time is above all the deadliest of sins. Losing time through socializing, idle talk, even sleeping more than is necessary is worthy of moral condemnation. Life is too short to do anything other than making sure of one's election. Every hour lost is lost to work for the glory of God. Sexual intercourse is permitted, within marriage, only as the means to "be fruitful and multiply."

Unwillingness to work is a sign that one is damned. God has called each and every person to a particular task or profession. These are not equal tasks in terms of reward or skill. Classification into social positions and occupations is a direct result of God's will. It is a religious duty to persevere in one's assigned lot. The world must be accepted as it is. As an added benefit, the specialization of occupations, the increased division of labor, makes possible a quantitative and qualitative improvement in production, which thus magnifies God's glory.

It isn't enough just to work hard, however. God demands that one work methodically and purposely in his or her calling.

Wealth is ethically bad only as a temptation to idleness and enjoyment. Unlike earlier (medieval) ethicists, Puritans saw nothing wrong with wealth in itself. In fact, as a performance of duty in a calling amassing wealth is not only morally permissible, but morally desirable. To wish to be poor was the same as wishing to be unhealthy. Seeing profit-making as a sign of God's providence had the effect of justifying the activities of businessmen, a relatively novel phenomenon in the world.

In many ways, then, the Puritan idea of vocation and the emphasis placed on worldly ascetism was bound to directly influence the development of a capitalist way of life. The Puritan's ascetism was directed against the spontaneous enjoyment of life. For example, sport was accepted if it served a rational purpose (improving physical efficiency through recreation), but prohibited if conducted for enjoyment, pride, or gambling. Anything appearing to be superstitious – Christmas festivities, the May Pole, even some religious art – was banned. The theatre was morally suspect. So was idle talk, vain ostentation, personal decorations, especially in clothing. Interestingly, that tendency towards uniformity, which today aids in the capitalistic standardization of production, had its roots in this rejection of all idolatry of the body.

When we combine this limitation of consumption with the moral approbation of acquisitive profit-making behavior, the inevitable result should be obvious: capital accumulation through an ascetic compulsion to invest (save). The Puritan outlook favored the development of rational bourgeois economic life. It helped birth modern economic man.

Now, the Puritan's ideals also tended to give way, over time, under extreme pressure from the temptations of wealth. They were not unaware of this tendency. Here is John Wesley, the founder of the great revival of Methodism,

I fear, wherever riches have increased, (exceeding few are the exceptions,) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore, do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. How, then, is it possible that Methodism, that is, the religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay-tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently, they increase in goods. Hence, they proportionably increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. Is there no way to prevent this? this continual declension of pure religion? We ought not to forbid people to be diligent and frugal: We must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich!

Wesley here expresses what we have been trying to point out.

A specifically bourgeois economic ethic had grown up. The bourgeois businessman, so long as he remained within the law and conducted his life and business correctly, could amass as much money as possible and feel that he was but following his duty. The power of religious ascetism also provided him with sober, conscientious, and unusually hard-working employees, who also saw their vocation as a calling from God. Last but not least, he had the comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of goods in the world was God's divine will.

Thus was born one of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism – systematic rational conduct in one's vocation. But with the withering away of the religious ideal we are left with the product, not the impetus. Where the Puritan wanted to work in a calling, we are forced to do so. By turning their ascetic impulses into the world, Puritans helped create the modern economic order, with its machine production which today determines all of our lives, even those who are not directly concerned with business. Perhaps

it will continue to do so until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. Baxter had thought that care for external goods should lie lightly on our shoulders, like a cloak that could be cast aside at will. Today that cloak is wrapped around us like an iron cage.

We are far now from the world of the Puritans. In the US, which is the most highly developed capitalist region today, the pursuit of wealth is stripped of all religious or ethical meaning, and is practiced almost as a sport. No one knows what the future will bring – if new prophets will arise, or old ideas will have a resurgence, or if the machine will keep fast. But we can say of these, our “Last Humans,” that they are now “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.”

Well, that brings us to judgements and values that are perhaps not appropriate here. Here we have merely attempted to trace and describe the influence of the worldly ascetism of the Protestants. It is also necessary to see what in turn influenced this-worldly ascetism, to examine the totality of the social conditions of its birth, even the economic. It hasn't been my aim to substitute simplistic one-sided materialist explanations for the development of capitalism with simplistic one-sided culturalist explanations, but only to show that each is equally possible.

Questions

1. What is the difference between Puritan ascetism (sometimes referred to as “worldly ascetism”) and the ascetism of medieval monks?
2. Weber makes an interesting and somewhat complicated case that the doctrine of predestination had some unintended consequences in terms of Puritan belief and behavior. Are you persuaded? How would you respond to the “inhumane” doctrine (that only a few are saved and there was no way to tell or change God's mind)?
3. What is the same (and what is different) between the early bourgeois produced by ascetic Protestantism and today's “businessman”?
4. What effect did Protestantism have on *workers*?
5. At the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber says he has tried to show that either a materialist or a cultural explanation for the development of capitalist is possible. How could we combine the insights of Marx and Weber into a more complete story of capitalism's development (or could we)?
6. Assess Weber's evaluation capitalism, as it is currently operating.

Concepts

Worldly Ascetism

Doctrine of Predestination

Beruf (Calling; Vocation)

Iron Cage