1.2H: Protestant Work Ethic and Weber

Learning Objectives

- Summarize Weber’s view on the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism

Max Weber

Max Weber was a German sociologist and political economist who profoundly influenced social theory, social research, and the discipline of sociology itself. In 1919, he established a sociology department at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich.

Along with Marx and Durkheim, Weber is considered one of the three principal forefathers of modern social science. That being said, Weber developed a unique methodological position that set him apart from these other sociologists. As opposed to positivists like Comte and Durkheim, Weber was a key proponent of methodological antipositivism. He presented sociology as a non-empiricist field whose goal was not to gather data and predict outcomes, but instead to understand the meanings and purposes that individuals attach to their own actions.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, his most famous text, Weber proposed that ascetic Protestantism was one of the major “elective affinities” associated with the rise of capitalism, bureaucracy, and the rational-legal nation-state in the Western world. Although some consider Weber’s argument to be a study of religion, it can also be interpreted as an introduction to his later works, especially his studies of the interaction between various religious ideas and economic behavior. In contrast to Marx’s “historical materialism,” Weber emphasized how the cultural influences
embedded in religion could be a means for understanding the genesis of capitalism. Weber viewed religion as one of the core forces in society.

Weber proposed that ascetic Protestantism had an elective affinity with capitalism, bureaucracy, and the rational-legal nation-state in the Western world. By elective affinity, Weber meant something less direct than causality, but something more direct than correlation. In other words, although he did not argue that religion caused economic change, Weber did find that ascetic Protestantism and modern capitalism often appeared alongside one another in societies. Additionally, Weber observed that both ascetic Protestantism and capitalism encouraged cultural practices that reinforced one another. He never claimed that religion was the complete, simple, isolated cause of the rise of capitalism in the West. Instead, he viewed it was part of a cultural complex that included the following:

- rationalism of scientific pursuit
- the merging of observation with mathematics
- an increasingly scientific method of scholarship and jurisprudence
- the rational systemization of government administration and economic enterprise
- increasing bureaucratization

In the end, the study of the sociology of religion, according to Weber, focused on one distinguishing fact about Western culture, the decline of beliefs in magic. He referred to this phenomena as the “disenchantment of the world.”

Weber’s Evidence and Argument

As evidence for his study, Weber noted that ascetic Protestantism and advanced capitalism tended to coincide with one another. Weber observed that, after the Reformation, Protestant countries such as the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and Germany gained economic prominence over Catholic countries such as France, Spain, and Italy. Furthermore, in societies with different religions, the most successful business leaders tended to be Protestant.
John Calvin, the first capitalist?: Weber saw an elective affinity between capitalism and Protestantism, especially Calvinism.

To explain these observations, Weber argued that Protestantism, and especially the ascetic Protestant or Calvinist denominations, had redefined the connection between work and piety. Historically, Christian religious devotion had been accompanied by a rejection of mundane affairs, including economic pursuits. In contrast, Weber showed that certain types of Protestantism, notably Calvinism, supported worldly activities and the rational pursuit of economic gain. Because of the particularly Calvinist view of the world, these activities became endowed with moral and spiritual significance. In these religions, believers expressed their piety towards God through hard work and achievement in a secular vocation, or calling. Because of this religious orientation, human effort was shifted away from the contemplation of the divine and towards rational efforts aimed at achieving economic gain. Furthermore, the Protestant ethic, while promoting the pursuit of economic gain, eschewed hedonistic pleasure. Thus, believers were encouraged to make money, but not to spend it. This motivated believers to work hard, to be successful in business, and to reinvest their profits rather than spend them on frivolous pleasures. The Calvinist notion of predestination also meant that material wealth could be taken as a sign of salvation in the afterlife. Predestination is the belief that God has chosen who will be saved and who will not.

Protestant believers thus reconciled, even encouraged, the pursuit of profit with religion. Instead of being viewed as morally suspect, greedy, or ambitious, financially successful believers were viewed as being motivated by a highly moral and respectable philosophy, the “spirit of capitalism.” Eventually, the rational roots of this doctrine outgrew their religious origins and became autonomous cultural traits of capitalist society. Thus, Weber explained the rise of capitalism by looking at systems of culture and ideas. This theory is often viewed as a reversal of Marx’s thesis that the economic “base” of society determines all other aspects of it.
Key Points

- Max Weber was a German sociologist and political economist who profoundly influenced social theory, social research, and the discipline of sociology itself.

- In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, his most enduring text, Weber proposed that ascetic Protestantism was one of the major “elective affinities” associated with the rise of capitalism, bureaucracy, and the rational-legal nation-state in the Western world.

- Weber argued that Protestantism, and especially the ascetic Protestant or Calvinist denominations, had redefined the connection between work and piety.

- Weber tried to explain social action in modern society by focusing on rationalization and secularization.

- Weber also developed a theory of political authority and the modern state, defining three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal.

Key Terms

- **predestination**: The doctrine that everything has been foreordained by a God, especially that certain people have been elected for salvation, and sometimes also that others are destined for reprobation.

- **Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**: A book written by Max Weber, arguing that the rise in ascetic Protestantism, particularly denominations like Calvinism, was associated with the rise of modern capitalism in the West.

- **secularization**: The transformation of a society from close identification with religious values and institutions toward non-religious (or “irreligious”) values and secular institutions.

- **rationalization**: the process, or result of rationalizing