

Max Weber's thesis

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Max Weber published his essay in two instalments, in 1904 and 1905, in a social science journal that he co-edited, and later revised and expanded it in his works on the sociology of religion.¹ His starting point is a statistical observation: in the Germany of his day, Protestants appeared to be over-represented among business owners, managers and skilled workers. Weber looks for a cultural explanation of this finding.

He first defines what he calls the “spirit” of capitalism: an attitude that makes methodical gain and accumulation an end in itself, pursued in a rational and disciplined manner, independently of any enjoyment of the goods acquired. To illustrate it, he quotes at length the maxims of Benjamin Franklin, which recommend saving, work, punctuality and credit founded on reputation.² This mentality is distinguished, according to Weber, from mere greed, which is present in all societies, by its methodical character and by the moral value attached to it.

Weber then seeks the origin of this mentality in religious ethics. He relies on two notions. The first is that of vocation, which Luther applied to secular occupations: the conscientious performance of one's daily task becomes a way of serving God. The second is the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, according to which God has chosen from all eternity those who will be saved. This doctrine, Weber contends, created in the faithful a deep anxiety about their salvation. To overcome it, believers looked in their conduct for signs of their election. Success in work, achieved through a disciplined and sober life, became one of those signs.³

The result, according to Weber, is an “inner-worldly asceticism”: a discipline of life which, unlike monastic asceticism, transforms the world through methodical work while refusing the enjoyment of riches. Individuals who work a great deal and spend little necessarily accumulate capital, which they reinvest. Religious ethics thus produced, without having intended it, an economic behaviour favourable to capitalism. Once

established, this system no longer needs its religious foundation: it imposes itself through the pressure of competition.

It should be stressed that Weber is concerned above all with the English and American Puritans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in particular with the pastoral writings of Richard Baxter, rather than with Calvin himself.⁴ Weber in fact distinguishes between Calvin's doctrine and the way in which his successors lived and transformed it. The image of Calvin as the "father of capitalism" is a simplification that Weber himself would not have accepted.

Key point. Weber argues that the religious practice of certain Calvinist and Puritan circles, marked by vocation, discipline and the refusal of enjoyment, produced without intending to a mentality favourable to the methodical accumulation of capital.

1 Notes

1. Max Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus", Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, vol. 20 (1904) and vol. 21 (1905); revised version in the Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie, vol. I, Tübingen, 1920; Wikipedia (en), art. "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (published in two instalments in 1904 and 1905). ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), art. "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism": Weber quotes Franklin at length, "Remember, that time is money. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day...", stressing that it is "a statement laden with moral language". ↩
3. Wikipedia (en), art. "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism": the Calvinist doctrine creates psychological pressure, believers "considered it an absolute duty to believe that one was chosen for salvation" and seek outward confirmation in success. ↩
4. Wikipedia (en), art. "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism": Weber makes Richard Baxter the central figure for understanding the economic implications of ascetic Protestantism and the Puritan legitimization of profit as morally sanctioned work. ↩

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