

PROTESTANT ETHIC THESIS

Formulated by Max Weber in a series of essays first published in 1904-1906, hence also known as “the Weber thesis,” the PE argument, although in Gordon Marshall’s words “unambiguous and breathtakingly simple” (1982:70), has been one of the most important and controversial topics in the sociology of religion.

Weber argues that Protestantism was part of the casual chain that led to the development of world-system dominance by Anglo-American capitalism. Specifically, Calvin’s doctrine of predestination—namely, that a person’s eternal fate as elect to heaven or damned to hell was determined by God before the person’s birth and could not be altered by any act the person performed while on earth—when superimposed upon Luther’s radical alteration of “vocation” (beruf) to refer to one’s daily occupation in the world (rather than a monastic withdrawal from the world), dynamically interacted with the social psychological condition of salvation anxiety to create conditions whereby people sought to determine whether or not they were among those elected to eternal life. Weber argued that among the English Puritans, epitomized by Richard Baxter, the tension of Calvin’s austere doctrine was resolved by a belief (based principally on the Old Testament book of Proverbs) that God would reward in this life those whom he had elected to eternal glory, who lived according to his laws. Thus the “rising parvenus” of the English middle classes were told that if they strictly followed biblical teachings for the conduct of life (as interpreted by the Puritans) and they succeeded in their businesses, this would be a sign of their election—but only if they also used the fruits of their labors properly. Specifically, they were to invest all their income beyond the necessities of a frugal lifestyle, in so doing making even more money, to invest similarly all the days of their life. This is the connection between the Protestant “work ethic” and capitalism, not merely as an economic philosophy but a lifestyle.

Origins *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in its present, generally used English translation by Talcott Parsons (Weber 1930, but see Collins 1996) is a 1920 revision by Weber of two essays he first published in 1904-1905. To these are prefixed the introduction (written c. 1920) to his entire world religions corpus, which was the context for his revision. When combined with Weber’s 1909-1910 reaction (translated 1978) to criticisms of the original essays by Felix Rachfahl, this introduction is extremely important for understanding what it was Weber thought he was (and was not) doing in his work. There is also a third Protestant ethic essay, related to his observations on the Protestant ethic in America, that appeared in 1906 and is translated separately in both its revised 1920 version (1946) and the original (1985).

In spite of occasional claims to the contrary, the work is accurately titled. It is an enthymematic argument about a religious way of acting and an economic world-view. Religious beliefs, as Gianfranco Poggi has aptly noted (1983:56), are “upstream” of Weber’s thesis; the thesis is not about belief but about practices that a specific social strata derived from those beliefs and how those in turn affected economics. The original context for Weber’s writing was his acceptance of the coeditorship of the journal *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, on the one hand, and his frustration, on the other, at finding a political solution to what he perceived to be a German national identity crisis. The “Protestant” in *The Protestant Ethic* properly contrasts to “Lutheran,” not Catholic (see Liebersohn 1988, Maurer 1924); although by the time of the 1920 revision this was altered, and a universal-historical dimension seeking to discern the impediments to the capitalist ethos in the action systems of the world religions was added. The essay remains basically historical in character, however, and offers an intentionally one-sided argument (1930:27) that the breakthrough to modern rational capitalism as a life-encompassing social system was facilitated by Protestant morality (the “work ethic”). It does not argue that Protestantism as a specific set of Christian dogmas was either necessary or sufficient to “cause” modern rational capitalism to appear, but that Protestantism, especially at the hands of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English Puritans, did create a system of meaningful action that functioned historically as the “last intensification” (Collins 1986:93) in a casual chain that led to modern capitalism, “the most fateful force in our modern life” (1930:17).

This historical point is all Weber needed to carry on not only a “dialogue with the ghost of Karl Marx,” as Albert Salomon phrased it (1945:596), but also with other theorists in the social sciences as well as Weber’s German political allies and adversaries. What Weber lamented in Germany and in himself (see Jaspers 1989:169) was “the fact that our

nation has never experienced the school of hard asceticism in any form.” On this cultural critique he lay tremendous weight as an explanation for the failure of Germany to attain the international political-economic stature of Anglo-America. This historical logic can be seen, for example, in a somewhat exasperated comment in Weber’s response to Rachfahl’s criticisms of Weber’s thesis when Weber writes that “the great centers of the Middle Ages such as Florence,...were, God knows, capitalistically developed to quite another degree than...the American colonies with their largely subsistence economy,” yet Anglo-America became the cultural center of the spirit of capitalism, while the centers of capitalism’s origin paled (1978:1119).

Extensions and Critiques The PE thesis has generated several kinds of extensions (see the literature reviews in Fischhoff 1944, Kivisto and Swatos 1988, Little 1969, Nelson 1973). Among the most fruitful is Robert Merton’s work (1970 [1938]) on religion and science in seventeenth-century England, where he applies a Weber-like analysis to British scientific acumen; this argument, now often simply referred to as “the Merton thesis,” has been so significant as to have generated a literature all its own.

Another line of research has been the search of PE “analogies” in favorable developmental contexts elsewhere in the world—particularly the new nations of Africa and Asia (see, e.g., Bellah 1957, 1970). The theoretical strategy of this approach is to find in the PE a constellation of action orientations that enhance the disposition toward capitalism; although it can overextend itself, the value of this type of study is to reinforce the crucial Weberian principle that the PE is not a specific theological doctrine but a generalizable system of action that can occur without any theological referent at all (as Weber himself pointed out in the somewhat apocalyptic conclusion to the 1920 revision of the 1905 essay).

A third valuable line of extension has been to use a PE-like analysis to assess other historical associations between action models and economic orientations in Western civilization; the most finely nuanced example of this approach is Colin Campbell’s work *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987).

Other critiques, which began with that of Rachfahl to which Weber himself replied, have been more misguided, hence far less helpful. In general, these critiques make either or both of two errors based on misreading Weber’s text: (1) They attempt to study theology rather than practice—for example, suggesting that Puritanism is a corruption of “pure” Calvinism (e.g., Hudson 1961, George and George 1955)—ignoring the fact that not theology, but the working out of theology in practical action, is Weber’s concern. This is why Weber can lump together such theologically diverse groups as Presbyterianism of the Westminster Confession, the Independents, Baptist sects, some Continental pietists, Mennonites, Quakers, and Methodists under the single rubric of the PE (see 1930:95-154, 217). (2) They fail to differentiate among types of capitalism, again ignoring Weber’s careful distinction of the character of “modern rational” capitalism (1930:17-27) and ignoring Weber’s reply to Rachfahl, which shows that Weber was well aware of the origins of capitalist thought and its varying historical appearances.

Early forms of this critique were those of Werner Sombart (1915), who associated capitalism with the Jews, to whom Weber himself replied, and H. M. Robertson (1933), who attempted to identify capitalism with the Jesuits (refuted by Broderick 1934). A more current, tendentious critique is that of Kurt Samuelsson (1961, reprinted 1993), which commits both of the errors noted here; as David Little notes, “Samuelsson’s book demands attention not because of its contribution to the general literature (which is negligible), but because it is the most recent expression of so many of the typical and wildly inadequate rejections of Weber’s thesis” (1969:228). A reader lacking historical sophistication in either religion or economics can, however, be greatly misled by the Samuelsson text.

Perhaps the strongest advocate for Weber’s thesis against these critics is an unwitting one, namely the Spanish author Jaime Balmes, who wrote well prior to Weber. In *El Protestantismo*, Balmes, who died in 1848, makes precisely the case that Weber does, that Protestantism is the principal engine of modern rational capitalism and all it entails, not least its peculiar work discipline. (The difference between Weber and Balmes is that Balmes bemoans the triumph of capitalism, while Weber generally celebrates it; Balmes’s book appeared in an English translation in the United States by 1850, *European Civilization*.)

Another line of extension and critique that has proved relatively valueless has been to study contemporary Protestants and Catholics (and others) for evidence of the presence or absence of the PE, usually using some form of survey research procedure. Weber himself indicates that this is not at all the context in which the thesis is to be applied (see 1978:1120), and that in fact the PE has been transvalued into a secular work ethic quite apart from, and perhaps even antithetical to, any religious considerations. Weber specifically points to Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac as early evidence of this process. The unproductivity of this line of research in the 1960s led Andrew Greeley (1964) to suggest a "moratorium" on further PE research in contemporary American society, although he later (1989) would offer his own comparative differentiation between current Protestant and Catholic life orientations.

A final, more difficult set of issues surrounds the phenomenon of Puritanism itself. Beginning with Michael Walzer's work (e.g., 1966) specifically, there has been increasing concern to assess the complexity of Puritanism. David Zaret (e.g., 1985) also has made contributions in this area, and each has drawn responses (e.g., Little 1966). With regard to any historical actions, the process of discerning and labeling a "movement" is a secondary objectivation of meaning; in Weber's case, this involves some form of typification. In other words, the PE comes to symbolize a collection of action orientations that only occasionally, if ever, coalesce in concrete cases. The PE thesis ultimately rests on making a convincing comparative case that one "type" of life orientation differs sufficiently from another type of life orientation that an "either this or that" argument may be drawn. In Weber's cases, for example, the role of holy days is particularly instructive; a quite clear line can be drawn between those groups in Western Christianity that historically observed the principal Christian holy days and those that did not. The groups Weber identifies with the PE did not. (This is connected, in turn, to the larger question of work discipline). The treatment of Sunday as festival or Sabbath similarly separates the groups, as does the role of the sermon in worship. In general, then, one can identify two types of Western life orientation, promulgated in the name of Christianity, that began to divide from each other in the sixteenth century, and suggest that these divisions has consequences beyond a narrowly "religious" realm; perhaps the finest small-scale illustration of this dynamic is Stephen Kent's study (1990) of the impact of the "fixed-price" policy of Quakers on all of subsequent economic history.

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