**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 23: The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**

* Today we begin looking at Weber’s most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* written between 1902-03 and published in 1905.
* Showing his keen interest in both religion and capitalism, this represents one of the two great historical theories of capitalist development
* Weber’s aims in this study were:

1. To show how patterned beliefs influence social action;
2. To show a connection between religion and commercial activity (i.e. that capitalism was largely shaped by religious forces).

* Such a claim was controversial as:

1. Nobody had looked at this, and most people thought there was no connection;
2. Economic reasoning had claimed that commercial activity/capitalism was based on logic;
3. The focus of commercial life was seen as manipulating the material world for profit/exchange;
4. The world of business stood in sharp contrast to the world of faith and belief.

* Weber took on these commonsense views by reformulating the idea of economic activity. He made two central observations:

1. Many commercial centers in Europe had shown intense commercial activity at the same time that Protestantism was taking root; and
2. Western capitalism had been characterized by both a devotion to amassing wealth beyond one’s personal needs and avoiding its use for personal pleasure and enjoyment

* Thus, Weber argued, if an ascetic attitude based on self-denial and renunciation of worldly pleasure had found its way into early commercial activity, then a religious ethic must underlie capitalism.
* To provide evidence of this pattern, Weber attempted to identify what he called the “spirit” of capitalism. He identified it as comprising 3 central imperatives/demands:

1. Devotion to amassing wealth/profit beyond the individual’s personal needs;
2. Commitment to unrelieved toil and work coupled with self-denial; and
3. The avoidance of the use of wealth for the purposes of self-enjoyment.

* Weber turned to the work of Benjamin Franklin, a successful entrepreneur he believed embodied this classical spirit. Franklin had published two self-help guides: *Necessary Hints to Those Who Would be Rich* (1736); and *Advice to a Young Tradesman* (1748). These included advice such as:

1. Time is money (i.e. don’t waste opportunities to earn);
2. Money can begat money (i.e. save, put it to use, don’t waste it, and it will pay off);
3. The good paymaster is lord of another man’s purse (i.e. pay accounts punctually and others will be helpful);
4. The most trifling actions that affect a man’s credit are to be regarded (i.e. creditors seeing you at work early/late will be easier to deal with).

* What struck Weber was not Franklin’s practical advice, but how emphasis on moral *virtues* like promptness, prudence, honesty, and saving occur in the context of a *duty* to earn more capital. Failure to do so is seen as forgetfulness of duty.
* This is an *ethic*. While containing practical advice, Franklin’s maxims contain a “surplus of virtue” (indeed Frankin thought these divine in origin, leading “to the path of righteousness”). Something more than mere utility was clearly involved.
* Thus, Weber asserted that the central spirit of capitalism saw work as a moral duty, failure to work as an infraction of that duty. This involved the introduction of a religious ethic into everyday commercial activity not seen before.

**Distinctiveness of the “Spirit” in Modern Capitalism:**

* Weber distinguished what he called “traditional” and “modern” capitalism to further illustrate his point.
* In modern capitalism, employers price jobs at different rates to get as much out of the worker as possible, even raising piece rates as incentives when necessary - benefitting both employers and workers by maximizing profits and wages. The employee asks “how much can I earn in a day if I do as much as possible?”
* In traditional capitalism, conversely, raising piece rates create less incentive to work. The worker is more interested in working less while meeting the same needs: “How much must I work to earn the wages I earned before and take care of my traditional needs?” (e.g. Early China, India, European Middle Ages).

**Calvinism and Capitalism:**

* Weber turned to look at the origins of Protestant religious ideas, focusing on the role played by John Calvin who, in 1534, took a critical stance against Catholic theology for failing to sufficiently stress the rejection of worldly pleasures and for its “permissive” doctrine of salvation.
* Calvin’s writings from Geneva, based on his study of the Bible, had an impact in Western Europe. He stressed restrictive rules regarding personal freedoms and brought on a wave of reforms unparalleled in its anti-humanist nature.
* In all of this, Weber zeroed in on Calvin’s doctrine of predestination as key. This took the view that:

1. Before the world began, God had already divided people into the Saved and the Damned;
2. No believer could truly know their fate until they died;
3. Nothing could be done to relieve, forgive, or reverse the decrees (even by priests);
4. God had abandoned all but the elect, since Christ had endured suffering only for them.

* In order to contain believer’s anxiety, Calvin imposed two basic obligations on them:

(1) An absolute duty to assume they were among the elect;

(2) To stave off personal doubts as this would be loss of faith

in God;

* Moreover, Calvin emphasized that there was no exemption from this doctrine, no hope of appeal through traditional means such as penance and prayer, indeed the inability of believers calling upon or approaching the transcendent God.
* Weber saw this doctrine as having two broad effects:

1. Creating an unprecedented feeling of “inner loneliness” and anxiety in Protestants by taking away their hope of eternal salvation (“Am I one of the elect?”); and
2. Denying believers the opportunity to beseech God through prayer/sacrament resulted in a crisis of faith (“How can I interpret my relationship to God?”)

* This resulted in a new self-reflectiveness among Protestants, who had to invent a way of being with themselves that would both enable peace of mind and proclaim worthiness in the face of strict doctrine
* Anxiety over salvation produced such insecurity it undermined solidarity with others and the world. Feelings of separateness and isolation manifested in lack of trust, of “me against the world”
* As time went on Protestants became more anxious, individualized, and ascetic, they threw themselves into their work – both as their religious obligation and as a means to take their minds off their fears. It also had the unanticipated effect of conferring the feeling of grace being earned in the struggle against the world
* This sense of “pulling oneself together,” of daily struggling to feel closer to God simultaneously created contempt for others lacking the outward signs of internal discipline, an intolerance toward the weaknesses of others.
* We will elaborate further on these themes next class.