**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 24: The Protestant Ethic II**

* Last class, we introduced ideas on the relationship between the Protestant ethic and the growth of capitalism, including:
  + How Weber noted capitalism emerged most strongly in Protestant areas
  + How work and money-making was associated with an ascetic ethic
  + How this ethic was expressed in the work of Ben Franklin
  + The theology of John Calvin, most notably his rigorous concept of predestination
  + How believers became isolated, reflective, and threw themselves into work to deal with the resultant anxiety
* Today we continue with Weber’s elaboration on these themes

**Links Between Salvation and Work;**

**Religious Teaching and the Commercial Spirit:**

* Weber claimed that there were 2 broad links between Protestant teaching and commercial activity
* First, he saw a link between the withdrawal of knowable salvation and the emergence of self-denial:
  + Unlike in Catholic theology, where salvation is clearly marked in confession, renewal of belief, forgiveness, and atonement through good works, for Calvinists this path was impossible
  + Thus, intense worldly asceticism developed as an end in itself that served to separate Protestants from others and provide a worldly substitute for grace.
  + Meanwhile, toil and hard work became associated with a method to eliminate doubt over being one of the elect
* Indeed, Weber thought he had found the link between predestination, asceticism, work & sense of salvation in that:
  + Self-discipline and denial were seen as means to a higher ethical state
  + Protestant commercial activity was full of self-denying actions like prudence, frugality and thrift
  + A puritanical attitude toward work and self denial boosted wealth
  + Wealth became a sign that one had been successful in the ongoing struggle in the world
  + Thus, commercial success could help the believer interpret his relation to God: being closer to salvation
* In addition, Weber thought he had found the link between the Protestant commercial spirit and the secular extension of faith:
  + Unlike previous religious traditions which had *rejected* everyday life (e.g. monastic asceticism), Protestantism extensively *regulated* it – especially through work. Thus, Protestantism encouraged self-denial *in* the world, not separation *from* it
  + Weber thus distinguished two historical types of asceticism:

1. *Otherworldly asceticism*: this renounces the world as it presents temptation, believers formally withdraw from the world and seek salvation through religious devotion and self denial;
2. *Innerworldly asceticism*: requires believers to focus their activities in the world. The world is a test by God to show their ability to resist temptation and do good through self-denying toil. Their responsibility is to transform it in line with this ascetic ideal.

* This latter type of asceticism encouraged Protestants to practice self-denial in the world/separate themselves from others to thwart salvation anxiety.
* They could economize their energies through rationally organizing work and remaining in rational control of themselves.
* Meanwhile, in their thoughts they could conduct their lives so as to devote their energies to God through self-denial/prove themselves worthy of God’s attention.
* Essentially personal worth springs from self-denial, while self-denial brings redemption.
* Such hope and energy expenditure creates the inner asceticism necessary for capitalist activity.
* Weber also thought he had found another link: that between “good works” and the feeling of righteousness.
  + This was unlike the Catholic doctrine of “salvation by works,” essentially calculated on balance with room for backsliding and repentance along the way
  + In Protestantism, more consistency was required, a life of good works combined into a unified system.
  + Hence, Protestantism emphasized continuous alertness and vigilance, both internal and external, through rational planning, self-control, and careful evaluation of consequences lest one fall into sin
  + In effect, this separated Protestants from worldly morality while everyday life became pervaded with self-control and discipline.

**Asceticism, Capitalism, & the Transformation of the “Calling”**

* Beyond this, Weber turned to the idea of being “called” to a life task of serving God by performing ethical tasks as a vocation.
* By the 17th century, this idea had become important. Unlike the traditional monastic meaning that focused on withdrawal from the world, in Protestantism this came to be seen as a duty emphasizing service to the world, to invest the temporal world with value.
* Calvin made a distinction between *sola fide* and *consilia evangelica*.
* The latter (the traditional Catholic view) saw religious faith as collective, communal, and related to others in the social and religious context of the church. Even withdrawal from the world was a collective thing.
* The former, (the protestant view) emphasized practicing one’s faith *individually in the world*.
* Thus, for the first time there was moral justification for worldly activity, for transforming the world through self-discipline and labor.
* As well, for the first time, one could claim to be “called” to worldly economic pursuits, to exercise virtue in the world through work. This gave everyday worldly activity a religious significance.
* This could also be expressed internally, in the sense of an inner conviction that one had been “called to business.”
* This “calling” was the psychological equivalent of “conscience.” Fulfilling one’s ethical worldly duty could serve as a substitute for grace: the only way that Protestants could understand their actions as acceptable to God.
* There could be no relaxation, no relief from this worldly work lest one fall victim to spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment – “for that way lies hell-fire.”