The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism A Mini-Tutorial

Prefatory Remarks

With this post, I begin, as promised, a mini-tutorial on one of the great works of Sociology, Max Weber's monograph, or extended essay, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The essay first appeared in two installments in a journal called *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, in 1904-5. Weber, who was born in 1864, was forty at the time [he would live only into his fifty-sixth year, dying in 1920.] Talcott Parsons, who would become one of the leading sociologists in America in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, translated it into English in 1930, thus bringing Weber's thought and work to the attention of the English-speaking world. [Yes, readers of my autobiography, that is the same Talcott Parsons who was the father of my fellow student, and later colleague at Columbia, Charles Parsons.] It is worth noting that in 1892 W. E. B. Du Bois, arguably America's leading social scientist, Black or White, travelled to Germany on a fellowship and met Weber.

In announcing my intention to do a mini-tutorial on Weber, I made some disparaging remarks about contemporary Sociology, suggesting that the works of the great figures of the classical period -- Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, among others -- are far more profound and valuable than the work of modern academics who self-identify as Sociologists. I have several times been asked to expand on those passing condescensions, and it occurs to me that these prefatory remarks may be the appropriate place to respond to those requests. In what follows, I shall call upon some things I said on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Social Studies program at Harvard, remarks whose primary target was the egregious Martin Peretz. I cannot now recall whether I posted those remarks on this website, but if I did, I must once again apologize for repeating myself.

Sociology is a relatively recent arrival in the Academy, dating from the second half of the Nineteenth Century. As I noted in my tutorial on how to study society, it was a response to social and economic changes in Western Europe that, for the first time in the intellectual history of the West, prompted the identification of a separate category of The Social or Society, and a decisive separation of that category from both the Physical and the Psychological. If I do in fact write a mini-tutorial on Emile Durkheim's *Suicide*, another of the great works of the classical period of Sociology, I shall expand upon that thought further.

The central analytical concept in the rise of Sociology is a modern version of the ancient philosophical distinction between *appearance* and *reality*. This fact is explicitly clear in the writings of Marx, especially in the early chapters of *Capital*, Volume One, and implicitly in the writings of Durkheim, Weber, Karl Mannheim, and the other Founders, as we may call them. This distinction is both extremely powerful and very problematic. It is, as the French used to like to say, "guilty." Let me illustrate both of these aspects of the appearance/reality distinction by means of a single extended example. This will seem to take us rather far afield, so bear with me and be patient. As lawyers say when arguing a case, I will connect it up with the matter before us.

In the November, 1955 issue of *Scientific American*, Solomon Asch published an extremely suggestive essay called "Opinions and Social Pressure." Asch, a member of the Swarthmore College Psychology Department, was reporting the results of an experiment he had conducted in an attempt to study the effects of social pressure on the opinions people express about seemingly objective matters of fact. The article says the experiment was "repeated" in Harvard's Social Relations Department [the department in which Talcott Parsons taught for many years], but does not say where it was originally conducted. The structure of the experiment was very simple. Between seven and nine male college students were brought into a seminar room and seated around a table. Only one of the group was a "subject." The others were secretly coached by Asch as to the answers they were to give to questions. A pair of cards were produced, on one of which a straight black line was drawn, on the second of which were drawn three parallel lines of varying lengths. One by one, going around the table, the students were asked to say which of the lines on the second card matched in length the line on the first card. The lines were drawn in such a way that the correct answer was immediately obvious and incontrovertible.

After a few go-rounds, during which all the men around the table gave exactly the same obviously correct answer, something very strange happened. Each man would give the same answer, and when the cards were handed to the actual subject, he would see that all of his predecessors had given an obviously incorrect reply. They had all identified a line on the second card as equal in length to the line on the first card, even though it was clearly longer, and even though there was in fact a line on the second card that was clearly equal in length to the line on the first card.

To Asch's dismay, a distressing number of subjects, confronted with this situation, gave the *incorrect* answer that had been given by the other supposed subjects. Interviewed later, these subjects explained their answers in two ways, the second even more distressing than the first. Some said that although they could see that the answers of their fellow "subjects" were wrong, they "did not want to ruin the experiment" or "did not want to make trouble," so they decided to "go along." But some of the subjects actually said that "although at first they thought the answer given by the other subjects was wrong, after looking more carefully they could see that it was right, so they gave the same answer."

Shades of *1984*!

Now, if you will reflect on the experiment for a moment, it will be obvious to you that in order for Asch to conduct the experiment at all, he was required, *as part of the construction of the experiment,* to take a position *as the scientific investigator* on the actual, true, correct lengths of the lines. Without that as the frame, the experiment has no point. It loses all its punch. But that is not a problem, you will reply. All he has to do is lay a ruler down next to the lines and measure them. Just so.

Although Asch published his report in 1955, I did not read it until the Fall of 1960, at which time I was co-teaching a Sophomore tutorial in the new Social Studies major at Harvard with Barrington Moore, Jr., the late great political sociologist, Soviet expert, and close friend of Herbert Marcuse. This was also the period during which John F. Kennedy was running against

Richard Nixon for the presidency. Harvard was rabidly pro-Kennedy. He was a Harvard grad, his wife spoke French, and he had even won the Pulitzer Prize for a book [only later did we discover that Ted Sorenson had actually written the book, *Profiles in Courage*.] Nixon, on the other hand, was pretty obviously a thug who had *not* gone to an Ivy league college. One day, shortly before the election, I ran into Moore on Massachusetts Avenue, and we stopped to talk. I gushed on about Kennedy, saying that I hoped he would win what was shaping up to be a very close election. Moore looked down his aristocratic nose [his grandfather had been the Commodore of the New York Yacht Club] and observed that there was not a hairsbreadth of difference between the two men. I thought he was mad. Kennedy won, and the next April, invaded Cuba. Somewhat belatedly, I realized Moore was right.

Here is the point of all this. Even in 1960, Sociologists were busy conducting polls, carefully analyzing in every possible way by their most sophisticated statistical methods the opinions of voters about Kennedy and Nixon. Because they conceived themselves to be scientists, these Sociologists were studiously neutral as between the two candidates, not allowing their own personal opinions to color their objective, quantifiable, scientific results. It would have been, from their point of view, an unthinkable breach of professional ethics to ask the only question about the election that was really interesting, namely *Why voters perceived Kennedy and Nixon as different [**in length**, as it were] when they were clearly the same*.

By this time, most mainstream Sociologists had given up the powerful but controversial distinction between appearance and reality. They could not permit themselves to ask why voters mistakenly saw Kennedy and Nixon as very different, or why workers failed to recognize that their real enemy is capitalism, or why Americans were able to pursue an imperial foreign policy while imagining themselves to be innocent defenders of democratic ideals, because to ask those questions would require them to take a position of what is real and what is merely appearance in the realm of society. And that, besides quite possibly being a career breaker, was contrary to their congratulatory self-image as *scientists*.

That, in 1500 words, is what is wrong with Sociology today. Now, let us move on to Max Weber.

The Tutorial

To Western scholars and intellectuals in the nineteenth century, the single development that dominated all else in their world was the extraordinary expansion of capitalism. As Marx had quite correctly observed, capitalism was the most revolutionary force ever let loose on the world. It invaded every corner of life and transformed it rapidly, brutally, irrevocably. Capitalism obliterated the age-old division between country and city; it eroded, indeed dissolved, ancient norms of deference and demeanor, of hierarchy and subordination; it called forth "new men" whose wealth and power enabled them to displace the traditional ruling classes of Europe; it brought into existence a new popular culture supported not by Princes and Kings but by merchants and manufacturers.

Scholars of every ideological persuasion were fascinated and puzzled by this sudden appearance of a social force entirely new in human history. Whether they welcomed capitalism,

detested it, or sought to make their peace with it, they wanted to understand what the causes and preconditions were that could explain it. These scholars were of course well versed in Biblical studies and Roman history, and as the century wore on, they became more knowledgeable about other cultures even farther afield -- Chinese civilization, the civilization of the Indian sub-continent, even the civilization of Islam, which flourished at a time when Western Europe was mired in poverty and ignorance. This acquaintance with things non-Western allowed them to undertake comparative studies designed to isolate the specific difference, the peculiar feature, of Western European society that might explain why capitalism developed there rather than anywhere else on earth and then rather than at any other time in history.

Viewed in the very simplest manner, Weber's essay is an attempt to answer the question: Capitalism -- why here and why now? Weber brought to this undertaking not only an extraordinary breadth and depth of historical, institutional, political, and theoretical knowledge [he was of the last generation of great scholars who could plausibly be described as knowing everything there was to know], but also quite specifically a long-standing theoretical interest in the phenomenon of the rationalization and bureaucratization of social life and institutions. His exploration of this theme dominates his masterpiece, his *hauptwerk*, *Economy and Society* [*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*], a massive two-volume work that has a legitimate claim as the greatest work of Sociology ever written.

Weber was quite familiar with the arguments of Marx, whose explanation for the emergence of capitalism focused on such economic factors as the primitive accumulation of capital, the creation of a landless proletariat available to serve as a "reserve army of the unemployed," and the slow development of mercantile activity leading finally to the crucial breakthrough, the production of goods for exchange and profit rather than for consumption and use, which is to say the emergence of *commodity production*.

But Weber, casting his eye over the entire world and five thousand years of history, was struck by the fact that so many of the elements seemingly required for the emergence of capitalism could be found in other places and other times, yet without for some reason stimulating the development of specifically capitalist modes of production and exchange. The scientific discoveries of the early eighteenth century, most particularly of the steam engine, had certainly played a role in the development of English capitalism, but the principle of the steam engine was known to the ancient Romans, who regarded it as little more than an engaging toy. The careful attention to cost and the use of double-entry bookkeeping techniques to track flows of money into and out of an enterprise were important in the rationalization of economic activity, but these techniques were well known to Renaissance Italian merchants, whose economic activities never matured into capitalist forms. The Chinese for more than a thousand years were world leaders in the development of science, the Hindus invented algebra, the Roman *latifundia* were as carefully and rationally managed as any English factory. And yet capitalism appeared in England, and later in France and Germany, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not at any other time or in any of those other cultures. Why?

Well, one answer that can be dispensed with immediately is that capitalism has anything specifically to do with *greed*. Weber writes in the Introduction to the essay, "The impulse to acquisition, pursuit of gain, of money, of the greatest possible amount of money, has in itself

nothing to do with capitalism. This impulse exists, and has existed among waiters, physicians, coachmen, artists, prostitutes, dishonest officials, soldiers, nobles, crusaders, gamblers, and beggars.... It should be taught in the kindergarten of cultural history that this naive idea of capitalism must be given up once and for all. Unlimited greed for gain is not the least identical with capitalism. Capitalism *may* even be identical with the restraint, or at least a rational tempering, of this irrational impulse. But capitalism is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever renewed *profit*, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise."

You will perhaps see what I mean when I say that there has been an actual *decline* in our understanding of the social realm. Weber dismissed contemptuously as not worth serious discussion, in 1904, what is now advanced as sophisticated wisdom by supposed experts claiming to explain our present economic difficulties.

To initiate his examination of the *differentia specifica* of the capitalism, Weber offers the following provisional definition: "We shall define a capitalistic economic action as one which rests on the expectation of profit by the utilization of opportunities for exchange, that is on (formally) peaceful chances of profit."

Before I launch into an attempt [however doomed to inadequacy] to summarize Weber's startling and fascinating answer to his question, I need to issue several *caveats* so that those of you who are reading this as it is written and posted *seriatim* will not be misled or drawn into unfruitful disagreements.

First of all, Weber was fully aware of the fact that many, many factors cooperated in the emergence of capitalism. His essay deals with only one of them -- the secularization of a religious ethic whose character was transmuted from a ceaseless quest for salvation into a peculiar and particular mode of economic activity. Nothing in Weber's essay is intended to deny, or even to diminish the importance of, all the other factors whose presence was required for capitalism to appear. I implore you not to make the mistake, as we proceed, of thinking that Weber is denying the importance of those factors or even merely ignoring them. The text is full of passages in which he acknowledges, indeed insists upon, their importance, but in this mini-tutorial, there just is not room for me to keep paraphrasing or quoting those passages. You must either take my word for this, or -- what would of course be vastly preferable -- obtain a copy of the essay and read it yourself.

Second -- and this is rather more complicated -- Weber developed and used a mode of analysis of social phenomena to which he gave the label "ideal types." Weber seeks not to formulate statements about average or, in the ordinary sense of the word, "typical" social phenomena, but rather to define internally logically coherent "ideal types" whose analysis enables us to understand better the endlessly variable and complicated phenomena we encounter when we look in detail at the facts. To get a handle quickly on this notion, think of the familiar use by psychiatrists and the general public of notions like "anal-retentive personality" or "narcissistic personality" or "bi-modal personality disorder." It may well be that few if any actual individuals perfectly fit these concepts, and yet they are useful for making sense out of the otherwise bewildering diversity of behaviors and personality traits we encounter in any population.

Weber takes as his subject for explanation "the origin of ... sober bourgeois capitalism with its rational organization of free labor." He notes that once capitalism is an established economic system, the behavior of capitalists is to a large measure determined by the forces of market competition. An entrepreneur who does not adopt rationally calculated methods of business will be driven to the wall by those who do. But it is a quite different matter to determine where this rather distinctive mode of activity comes from, how it arises. As we shall see, Weber will conclude that the answer to this question lies in "the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the ascetic ethics of rational Protestantism."

Two preliminary points, before we launch into Weber's argument. The first -- the relationship between the scholarly research of specialists and an interpretative essay like this one -- is not strictly relevant to this tutorial, but I cannot resist quoting what Weber has to say, because it speaks so directly to the pontificating of people like Thomas Friedman, who read a book and become instant experts. "The uninitiated," Weber says, "must be warned against exaggerating the importance of these [i.e., Weber's] investigations." Only those who know the languages and have made a study of China or India or Egypt can speak with any authority about those civilizations, and Weber is quite prepared to submit his suggestions to their evaluation. Then he writes, "Fashion and the zeal of the literati would have us think that the specialist can to-day be spared, or degraded to a position subordinate to that of the seer. Almost all sciences owe something to dilettantes, often very valuable view-points. But dilettantism as a leading principle would be the end of science. He who yearns for seeing should go to the cinema." Perhaps you can see why I love that man!

The second point is an important matter of information for those of you who are not as conversant with the struggle between The Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant reformers as you should be. This is going to take a while, so settle down. By the way, if you are not a devout Christian of some sort, and I rather suspect that very few of my regular readers are, you may be a trifle impatient with all of this theological business, but it is absolutely essential that you understand it, because otherwise you will simply not be able to make sense out of Weber's entire argument. You may be able to tell that I actually rather like this stuff, despite being an atheist. Go figure.

When Martin Luther, followed by John Calvin and many others, challenged the Catholic Church and eventually broke with it decisively, there were two great areas of contention between them: doctrine and church organization. Although issues of church organization were extremely important in the Protestant Reformation, touching on the authority of the Pope, the apostolic succession of the priesthood, and even such apparently worldly matters as church income and landed property, it is doctrinal matters on which Weber concentrates in his essay.

Central to the challenge to the official Roman Catholic doctrine was the question of the conditions or circumstances in which an individual soul could achieve salvation, which was to say eternal life in heaven rather than an eternity of hellfire and damnation. Catholics and Protestants agreed that as a consequence of Adam's disobedience of God's commands in the Garden of Eden, an Original Sin has been passed on to all of Adam's descendents, which is to say all mankind, who are born with this spiritual blemish on their souls, and hence are incapable

of obeying God's Law with the completeness and perfection that would earn them salvation. The point of the Incarnation, Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection is precisely that God offers his Only Begotten Son as a sacrifice to atone for Man's sinfulness, thus making salvation at least possible. Thus far, the Catholics and Protestants were in agreement. However, the Catholic Church maintains that through good works, contrition, confession, and atonement, a human being under the guidance of the Church can overcome Adam's curse and avail himself or herself of the free gift of Salvation made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who is called Redeemer precisely because his sacrifice *redeems* us, gives us an opportunity for a salvation that we have not earned. It should be obvious that if all of this is true, then the Church is crucially important, for it holds a monopoly on the means of salvation.

On just this point, Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers disagreed. Luther, famously, when reading a central passage in the Epistles of Paul, wrote in the margin of his copy that salvation is *by faith alone* [*sole fide*], **not** by faith and good works. If you are not of a religious turn of mind, you might imagine that this would be good news [i.e., literally *gospel*, or in the Greek *evangelion*], and officially it is. But psychologically, it is an almost unbearable burden. The problem is this: To have faith means to believe without the slightest hesitation or reservation that God will keep the promise of salvation that he brought to Man in the form of Jesus Christ. [By the way, "I believe in God" does not, to a Christian, mean "I believe that God exists." It means "I believe that God will keep his promise, despite the fact that there is not, and cannot be, and visible evidence that He will."]

Now, just as it is impossible for sinful Man to fulfill God's Commandments [Jesus and He alone among men is capable of perfect obedience to God's law]; so Man can have Faith only if God makes it possible for him to do so, and this capacity for Faith, which is a gift from God, is called Grace. But how am I to know whether I have been the recipient of God's Grace, hence capable of Faith, hence saved? My immortal soul and my eternal future depend on it and it alone. No good works, no contrition, confession, absolution, and atonement can wipe away the stain of Original Sin even for a moment and make me eligible for salvation. Hence, if I am a believing Protestant, I will be in a perpetual state of anxiety about whether I have in fact been the recipient of Grace, and hence am capable of Faith. And any inner doubts that I may find myself having merely intensify this anxiety by seemingly indicating that my belief is flagging, and hence that G God's Grace has in fact not shone on me.

To this religio-psychological situation, fraught with the most intense existential *angst*, John Calvin added one more element that ratcheted up the anxiety to a truly horrific level: the doctrine of *predestination*. Tomorrow, we shall confront this centerpiece of Puritan theology, whose secularized consequences, Weber will argue, gave us the distinctive form of ascetic rationalized economic activity that we know as *capitalism.*

Predestination is the claim that God has, from all eternity, determined who will be saved and who will be damned, a determination that is -- since God is perfect and immutable -- impossible to change by any human thought, deed, or ecclesiastical rite. If you think about it, this doctrine is really the only one compatible with the infinite perfection of the deity, and it is perhaps not surprising that the most logically rigorous of the reformers, John Calvin, made it the centerpiece of his theology. The philosophical/theological point is this: God is omniscient, omnipotent,

perfect -- all Christians agreed on that. Since God is perfect, He cannot change, because all change [Aristotle here] is a movement from potentiality to actuality, and God, as perfect, is perfectly actual. Hence, there can be no change in Him. Since He is omniscient, He knows from all eternity exactly what will happen at every moment in the universe He creates. Since He is also perfectly just and immutable, as well as perfectly benevolent, He knows from all eternity which souls he will, out of his bottomless mercy, admit to heaven for all eternity, and which souls He will, out of His perfect justice, condemn to eternal hellfire [just because all human beings, afflicted with Original Sin, fail in some way or other to obey God's Law, and hence deserve damnation.]

This is all a no-brainer from God's point of view, if I may speak somewhat disrespectfully of the Deity. And as a matter of theology, it really ought to be a no-brainer for any Priest, Bishop, Pope, or Minister whose livelihood consists of thinking about such things. How could it be otherwise? If one claims that an act of contrition, or a good work, or a priest's absolution can make any difference at all in God's plan, which has, as I keep repeating, been fixed from all eternity [God being unchanging and omniscient and all that], then one is saying that what we humans do can somehow change God's mind, make Him relent, persuade Him to scratch out some poor sinner's name from the rolls of the damned and enter it in shining gold in St. Peter's Book. But that is patent nonsense.

Well, you would think so. But by the time the Reformers came along, the Roman Catholic Church had for fifteen hundred years been making out like gangbusters by offering its communicants the opportunity the tip the balance scales of celestial justice. And Calvin was having none of it.

So much for the theology. Now let us talk about something a great deal more important, something that Weber makes the centerpiece of his essay: What was the psychological effect on the followers of Calvin and the other Reformers of the doctrine of Predestination? This is where things get really interesting. If you are a true believer, then clearly the most important single matter, trumping all else, is the answer to the simple question, *Am I saved or am I damned?* Faced with the hope of eternal bliss and the threat of eternal damnation, each follower of one of the Reformers, and most particularly each follower of Calvin, necessarily worried about this question day and night.

You see the nature of the problem. There was, according to this doctrine, nothing you could **do** to affect the answer to the question, for it had already been answered unalterably before the world was created! The most you could do was to examine yourself, your actions, your innermost thoughts, obsessively and incessantly in an attempt to discern signs that you had been chosen for salvation -- or, to use the terminology then current, signs of *proof of election*.

There were endless pitfalls in this process of rigorous self-examination. According to the theology attendant upon the doctrine of predestination, if you have been saved, then your thoughts and actions will be those of one reborn in Christ, of -- to use the language of the time -- a Saint. Now, one of the signs of election is humility, which means that if you find yourself taking pride in the righteousness of your thoughts and deeds, that in itself may be a sign of

damnation. ***And it is no good making resolutions to do better next time, because that cannot somehow persuade God to change his Immutable Mind***.

So much, in this brief and hurried mini-tutorial, for the doctrine of Predestination. Now let us turn to Weber's argument, and see how he connects up the emergence of capitalism with the distinctive teachings of the Protestant Reformers.

Although capitalism got its start in England, and came to Germany relatively late, Weber begins with a striking fact about Germany, though I cannot tell from the text whether it was this fact that first got him thinking about the connection between Protestantism and capitalism. As a consequence of the Thirty Years War [1618-1648], The Hapsburg Empire was fragmented, with a number of independent states -- Duchies, Counties, Principalities, etc -- emerging in central and northern Europe. The war was fought over religion, among other things, and under the agreements that ended it, each state adopted as its official religion the faith of its ruler. This made for a patchwork of Catholic and Protestant German-speaking mini-states, roughly but not entirely sorted out with the Catholic states in the south and the Protestant states in the north. When the region underwent unification in the nineteenth century, and became what we know today as Germany, these administrative boundaries were preserved, with the consequence that as economic and other statistics began to be assembled by the governmental bureaucracy, it was possible to see quite clearly differences between the degree and success of capitalist enterprises in the Catholic and the Protestant regions of Germany. To an quite extraordinary degree, it turned out that it was the Protestant regions in which capitalism took hold and flourished.

Now, Weber makes it clear that by the time he comes along, at the beginning of the twentieth century, capitalism has won the day, and is flourishing in Catholic as well as Protestant Germany. But this striking difference in Germany during the early period, coupled with the equally striking difference in England and the Colonies between the economic activity of Anglicans or Catholics and that of Puritan Non-Conformists, leads Weber to ask what it is about the religious ethic of Protestantism that made it so fertile a ground for the development of capitalism.

The first step in making the connection is looking at the nature of the earliest capitalist undertakings, and what Weber finds may come as a surprise to those whose impression of capitalism is derived from contemporary accounts of Wall Street fat cats giving themselves obscene bonuses and then using the money to stage twenty million dollar weddings for their children. The early capitalists exhibited three striking characteristics, all of which distinguished them markedly from landed aristocrats, the nobility, and others at the top of the economic food chain.

The first characteristic was an unceasing pursuit of profit. "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise," said Benjamin Franklin, whom Weber takes as emblematic of the mentality and practical ethic of the early capitalists. The entrepreneurs who defined early capitalism were relentless in their efforts to expand their business, and they viewed this behavior as a moral imperative, not as an unpleasant but unavoidable necessity imposed on them by the forces of competition. They took pride in their industriousness, having nothing but scorn for those who were too lazy or ne'er-do-well [as they saw it] to persevere at their chosen line of

trade. [Note the original meaning of the phrase "ne'er-do-well." We now use it to describe someone who is casual and lackadaisical in his or her habits, but the literal meaning of the phrase is that someone with that manner of action will *never do well*, i.e., never flourish, make a success of business, show a profit.] These early capitalists, Weber says, did not merely work hard. They showed the most profound moral disapproval of those who did not. Hard, relentless work was a virtue, and sloth a sin.

The second characteristic was a meticulous, precise keeping of records and making of economic calculations, what Weber calls a thoroughgoing *rationalization* of economic activity. In part this manifested itself in the use of double entry bookkeeping methods that allowed the entrepreneur to expenditures and receipts with an exactitude that was quite different from the record keeping of previous generations of merchants and farmers. But the rationalization of economic activity went beyond what was required for successful business and took on a quality of righteous virtue all its own,

To illustrate this idea, let me for a moment speak about a completely different sphere of activity in which exactly the same characteristics are revealed. When I taught at the University of Chicago in 1961-63, one of my colleagues was a Professor of Psychology named David Bakan, who was unusual in the field for being an expert both on the theories of Sigmund Freud and also on the statistical methods then being used by experimental psychologists. Bakan did a close examination of the publications and journals of the nineteenth century American proponents of what was called Behavioral Psychology, and made the following two fascinating discoveries. First, almost to a man [they were all men], they were religious Protestants from small towns who had come to big cities like Chicago and were struggling to adjust to the religious and cultural heterogeneity of big city life, so different from the homogeneity in which they had grown up. And second, the journals in which they published their results would routinely turn back their submitted academic papers because they had not done enough experiments to support their findings, *even though Bakan showed that their results were in fact statistically significant with the numbers of experiments they had performed.* The journal editors treated the doing of experiments not as a scientific necessity but rather as an evidence of virtue. Too few experiments meant shirking on the job, being lazy, falling short, regardless of the scientific validity of their claims! Bakan, who was of course quite familiar with Weber's work, was demonstrating that the influence of the Protestant mindset manifested itself in other areas besides business.

The third characteristic of the early Protestant businessmen, and to Weber clearly the most important, was the fact that they viewed their capitalist activities as the expression of what in religious terms is labeled "a calling." Tomorrow, I shall talk about the central idea of a calling [*ein Beruf*, in the German. Those of you who are familiar with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach will perhaps recall the beautiful Cantata 140, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*.]

There was in Christianity [and in other religions as well, but that is beside the point here] a long tradition and elaborate doctrine of the religious *calling*. Certain men and women felt themselves "called by God" to a life of intense, unremitting religious observance that took them out of the ordinary secular life and set them apart both in their behavior and even in their living circumstances. These especially religious men and women devoted their time to prayer and

meditation, and sometimes even to self-flagellation to quell the temptations of the flesh. Their lives and their actions were, the Church believed, glorifying God, and a number of religious orders or organizations of such persons came into being so that groups of men or of women [they were rigidly separated] could live together, completely cut off from ordinary secular life, in quiet, ceaseless prayer. Monasteries and convents were established for such religious heroes and heroines, and it was a source of the greatest pride to families when one of their children chose to follow the religious life.

These orders were guided by a *rule* that specified in detail how they were to conduct themselves in the religious communities, and the rule, as well as the order, was frequently known by the name of the especially religious individual who had established it -- the Franciscans, the Benedictines, and so on. As everyone surely is well aware, from movies if in no other way, these "regular orders" [as they were called because they followed a rule] were an extremely familiar feature of medieval and early modern life, as indeed they are even today.

The rules by which the religious orders lived varied. Some permitted verbal communication, others imposed a rule of strict silence. But virtually all of them agreed in certain respects. They demanded *chastity* of both men and women; they demanded *poverty* and an extreme *asceticism*, a denial of the temptations of the flesh, a simplicity of dress, a humility and self-control in all things. Needless to say, they demanded ceaseless prayer *ad majorem dei gloriam* [which is to say, "to the greater glory of God"]. And they demanded unceasing *work* in the calling. The monks and nuns rose early, slept little, ate lightly of simple food, and worked from before dawn until after dusk, tilling the fields of the Monastery or Convent, praying, copying holy texts, and in every way committing their entire energies to the glorification of God. Their holiness was thought not merely to glorify God and to make their own lives noble, but also to redound to the spiritual benefit of the larger society in which they were located. [Of course, the members of these orders often fell short of the demands of their calling, a fact so glaring by the sixteenth century that it became one of the principal complaints against the Church by the Reformers, but that fact, regrettable though it might be, did not alter the conception of the *calling* on which the orders were established.]

All Christians were enjoined to pray regularly, to attend Mass, to obey God's law, and to do what they could in their everyday lives to glorify God, but it was understood that ordinary men and women, enmired in marriage and procreation and the getting and spending of money, could not be expected to exhibit the truly heroic religiosity of those in regular orders. Secular men and women were not thought to have been *called to God* in that special fashion that distinguished monks and nuns. For ordinary folk, there was periodic confession, and penance, and absolution, but the Church took a realistic, even worldly view of what could be expected of the ordinary run of Christian.

The Protestant Reformers took this well-established notion of a *calling* and secularized it, took it out of the Monasteries and Convents [which they abolished when they could], and preached that *every good Christian must treat his or her ordinary secular endeavor as a sacred calling*. A silversmith, a cloth merchant, indeed even the owner of a small factory making straight pins [to invoke Adam Smith's famous example of the division of labor] was expected by the Reformed churches to exhibit that same dedication, rigor, and commitment to that secular task with which a

that monk or a nun was expected to commit to prayer and meditation -- **and for the same reason: ad majorem dei gloriam.**

There seems to be a certain manifest contradiction in this notion of a secular calling. A merchant or entrepreneur was supposed to work diligently from before dawn until after dusk expanding his business *for the glory of God*, but he was also expected to be modest, frugal, even ascetic in his personal consumption: No lavish multi-course dinners at which he was waited on by clouds of liveried servants; No expensive coach-and-four to take him to and from his place of business; No ribbons and bows and ornamental sword with bejeweled hilt to announce to the world the magnitude of his success. Success in business was seen as a sign of election -- a "proof" as it was called. But if the pious Calvinist or Baptist was expected not to *consume* what his hard work had earned, what then was he to do with his money? The answer was clear -- he must *reinvest* it so as to expand the scope of his business *ad majorem dei gloriam*.

Karl Marx, with characteristic brilliance, insight, and wit, captured in a phrase this peculiar merger of the religious and the secular, in *Capital* Volume One: "Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!" [Chapter Twenty-Four]. It is worth quoting the next several sentences, even though this is a mini-tutorial on Max Weber, not on Karl Marx: "Therefore, save, save, *i.e.*, reconvert the greatest possible portion of surplus-value, or surplus-product into capital! Accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake: by this formula classical economy expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie, and did not for a single instant deceive itself over the birth-throes of wealth. [24] But what avails lamentation in the face of historical necessity? If to classical economy, the proletarian is but a machine for the production of surplus-value; on the other hand, the capitalist is in its eyes only a machine for the conversion of this surplus-value into additional capital."

We might say that whereas Marx correctly identified the inner logic of capitalist accumulation as early as 1867, Weber in 1904 undertook to identify the sources of the psychological energy that was required to transform ordinary men and women into instruments of that accumulation process.

The English Puritans, in their zeal to examine their lives for signs of election [or damnation] went to extraordinary lengths, engaging in ritualized, rigorous self-examination. An entire literature sprang into life as a consequence of their obsessive need to ascertain their spiritual condition. The central document in this literature was the *Puritan diary*.

[And now, a personal interpolation. When I took down from the shelf my copy of *The Protestant Ethic* to re-read it in preparation for writing this mini-tutorial, I found in it, as I anticipated, my underlinings and marginal notes from half a century ago. But to my surprise, I also found notes and comments in a different hand, and after a moment's puzzlement, I realized that they were the product of my first wife. In the middle '60s, in the early years of our marriage, Cynthia Griffin Wolff was a young doctoral student in the Harvard English Department, writing her dissertation under the direction of the great scholar Harry Levin. She had chosen as her topic the influence of Puritan devotional literature on the early English novel, and as part of her background reading, she read Weber's essay, using my copy. Everything I know about this subject -- and about many other literary topics -- I learned from her. The dissertation was published as her first book, *Samuel Richardson and the Eighteenth Century Puritan Character*.]

Puritan diaries were not finely wrought literary productions, like the diaries of Samuel Pepys or Samuel Johnson. They were written to the minute, as the expression had it, which meant that the author wrote immediately and without reflection whatever thoughts occurred to him or her, or about even the most trivial events of the day. The author then read the diary later, looking for signs of backsliding, of sinful thoughts, of any details no matter how seemingly unimportant that might constitute the terrible evidences of damnation. The diaries were not intended to be read by others, but a number have survived to this day, and can be found, among other places, in Dr. Williams' Library in Gordon Square in London. They are rather difficult to read, by the way, because the diarists frequently employed the paper-saving technique of "cross-writing," which is to say first writing a complete page, and then rotating the paper ninety degrees and writing across what was already there. With practice, one can actually read both levels of text!

When a Puritan sought membership in a congregation, the applicant was expected to present a formal statement of his or her spiritual eligibility in the form of an Autobiography. After a member of the congregation died, others would often write a hagiographic "Saint's Life" detailing the many evidences of the subject's election. Saints Lives were collected and circulated, to be read by members of the congregation and others as exempla of deserving lives. Diaries, Autobiographies, Saints' Lives -- these literary genres, which for several hundred years played a central role in the religious lives of English and American Puritans, give testimony to the extraordinary impact of the theology of the Reformed Churches on the everyday lives of ordinary believers.

The core of Weber's argument is the claim that the same mentality, the same obsessive concern with salvation, found expression in the ideal of a secular calling, pursued with religious zeal, with ascetic self-control, and with rational attention to every detail of that calling. The result, he argues, was what we have come to know as capitalism.

I should like, in this penultimate Part of the mini-tutorial, to devote space to several extended quotations from Weber's essay, both to be sure that I have represented him correctly, and to give you some sense of the flavor of his exposition. What follows are a series of passages from Weber without comment from me. Tomorrow, I shall make some further remarks before concluding the mini-tutorial. The first passage comes from the very end of the long central chapter "The Religious Foundations of Worldly Asceticism." The remainder are taken from the final chapter, "Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism," and are quoted in the order in which they appear in the text.

1. "the conception of the state of religious grace, common to all the denominations, as a status which marks off its possessor from the degradation of the flesh, from the world. On the other hand, though the means by which it was attained differed for different doctrines, it could not be guaranteed by any magical sacraments, by relief in the confession, nor by individual good works. That was only possible by proof in a specific type of conduct unmistakably different from the way of life of the natural man. From that followed for the individual an incentive methodically to supervise his own state of grace in his own conduct, and thus to penetrate it with asceticism. But,

as we have seen, this ascetic conduct meant a rational planning of the whole of one's life in accordance with God's will."

2. "It is true that the usefulness of a calling, and thus its favour in the sight of God, is measured primarily in moral terms, and thus in terms of the importance of the goods produced in it for the community. But a further, and, above all, in practice the most important, criterion is found in private profitableness. For if that God, whose hand the Puritan sees in all the occurrences of life, shows one of His elect a chance of profit, he must do it with a purpose. Hence the faithful Christian must follow the call by taking advantage of the opportunity. "If God show you a way in which you may lawfully get more than in another way (without wrong to your soul or to any other), if you refuse this, and choose the less gainful way, you cross one of the ends of your calling, and you refuse to be God's steward, and to accept His gifts and use them for Him, when He requireth it: you may labour to be rich for God, though not for the flesh and sin." [The quotation is from Richard Baxter, whom Weber chooses as exemplifying the Puritan mentality.]

3. "The emphasis on the ascetic importance of a fixed calling provided an ethical justification of the modern specialized division of labour. In a similar way the providential interpretation of profitmaking justified the activities of the business man."

4. "As far as the influence of the Puritan outlook extended, under all circumstances-and this is, of course, much more important than the mere encouragement of capital accumulation-it favoured the development of a rational bourgeois economic life; it was the most important, and above all the only consistent influence in the development of that life. It stood at the cradle of the modern economic man."

5. And finally: "What the great religious epoch of the seventeenth century bequeathed to its utilitarian successor was, however, above all an amazingly good, we may even say a pharisaically good, conscience in the acquisition of money, so long as it took place legally."

Weber repeatedly uses the term "rational" to describe the approach to every aspect of life of the Puritans and other Reformed sects. "Rationalization" is the central concept of Weber's Sociology, informing and shaping his discussion not only of religion and the economy but also of politics, art, and science. To the philosophical ear, the term suggests conformity to the principles of formal logic, or perhaps guidance by the faculty of Reason alone, but that is not quite what Weber has in mind. The term "bureaucratization" sometimes carries the same meaning for him. A few words about "rational" and its cognates "rationalization" and "rationality" might be in order.

When Weber describes a person, a practice, or an institution as rational, he means to contrast it with the habitual, the natural, the haphazard, the unorganized, and, as he often says in this essay, the "magical." A government agency with defined roles, written regulations, and officials appointed on the basis of examinations or qualifications rather on the basis of family connection is, in Weber's sense of the term, "rational." An army organized into companies brigades, and divisions, led by professional soldiers who have been schooled in the art of war, rather than a collection of undisciplined bands each loyal to a different charismatic or traditional leader, is, in Weber's sense of the term, "rational." An economic enterprise that keeps written records of its

purchases and sales, carefully calculates profit and loss, and makes economic decisions on the basis of spreadsheets and double entry bookkeeping is, in Weber's sense of the term, "rational."

Weber's repeated allusions to "magic," by the way, refer to such Catholic rituals as the Mass, in which the miracle of transubstantiation takes place. For those of you who are not clued in to Catholic theology, the Mass is intended as a repetition of the Last Supper that Christ took with his disciples. As a consequence of the miraculous intervention of God during the ritual of the mass, the wafer and wine are transformed. The accidents of the bread and wine -- smell, taste, feel, weight, shape, etc. -- remain the same, but the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. Hence "transubstantiation." Marx, by the way, has great fun with this notion in *Capital*. He describes capitalist commodity exchange mockingly as a kind of inverted transubstantiation. The accidents change during commodity exchange -- wheat is exchanged for linen, shoes for coats -- but the substance, which is to say Value, or embodied socially necessary labor, remains the same, for in a capitalist marketplace, equals are exchanged for equals.

The "regular orders" of monks and nuns exhibited, in their cloistered devotions, many of the marks of this sort of rationality, but what sharply distinguishes the early Protestants from their Catholic lay brothers and sisters is the fact that they exhibit the same rigorous systematization of every aspect of their lives, even though they pursue their calling "in the world." The core of Weber's thesis in this essay is that this secularization of what is initially a religious rationality is the *differentia specifica* that explains the transformation of medieval economic activity into what we now know as capitalism.

Let me repeat here, as I conclude this mini-tutorial, something that I said as I began: You must not make the mistake of supposing that Weber is unaware of, or even is denying the importance of, all the other pre-conditions, causes, historical particularities, legal institutions, political circumstances , and economic factors that played a role in the emergence of distinctively Western capitalism. He is well aware of them and many times insists on their importance. But he is trying to explain why capitalism developed in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, and did not develop at other times and places where so many of these cooperating factors seemed to be present. [If I may make a philosophical allusion, we might compare what Weber is doing to Francis Bacon's "Tables of Presence and Absence" in the *Novum Organum*.]

Weber's emphasis on the distinctive Protestant ethic of the secularized calling might be called by some Marxists "idealist" rather than "materialist," but I myself do not put much store in those kinds of classifications. It seems to me that Weber is right to focus attention on the mentality, as it were, of the early capitalists, to observe how strikingly if differed from that of their predecessors or contemporaries, and to ask where it came from. Now, Marx [and many others] might object that the forces of competition would drive anyone seeking to survive in the marketplace to adopt the most efficient techniques of production and use the best available methods for calculating profitability. Weber agrees, and indeed says just that in his essay. But that is an explanation of the forces compelling new entrepreneurs to adopt the intensively rationalized mode of economic activity that they find in operation when first they launch their enterprises. It cannot also be an explanation of the choice of such novel and unusual modes of economic activity by the first men to enter the field.

The fate of Weber's thesis has been complicated, as one might expect, and much has been written either revising or even rejecting the central claim of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. But I believe that it remains a highly original, brilliantly argued work that demonstrates the great strength of the work that was done in the first generations of Sociology. If I were asked what more recent works exhibit a like scope and power, I think I would cite Barrington Moor Jr.'s *The Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World,"*

With that, I bring this mini-tutorial to a close. I hope you have found it useful, and that some of you perhaps will be stimulated to consult Weber's writings directly.