

Jere Cohen.

Protestantism and Capitalism: The Mechanisms of Influence.

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Although almost a century has now elapsed since its original publication, Max Weber's celebrated essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (originally written in 1905 and revised and expanded in 1920), continues to inspire academics to take issue with its central thesis, according to which Protestant, and more particularly Puritan, beliefs were the chief driving forces behind the rise of the spirit of capitalism in 17th century England.

Over the years Weber's thesis has been subjected to a remorseless battering, with criticism being directed at almost all aspects of the thesis. The most outstanding recent contribution to the debate must surely be the volume entitled *Weber's Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts*, although the contributions are not necessarily polemical in style.

Jere Cohen has devoted many years to the study of Weber's classic, and this substantial monograph has much to commend it. This is by no means the first time he has gone into print to question the validity of aspects of the Weber thesis. In the 1980s he was involved in a debate with R. J. Holton, in which he (Cohen) argued "that modern capitalism, *in Weber's sense*, existed in pre-Reformation Catholic countries". Holton challenged him and Cohen defended his views in a subsequent article². In the present book, too, there are hints of ongoing controversies with other scholars, including Malcolm H. MacKinnon, who is cited where his views conflict with Cohen's.

In his new book, Cohen's approach is systematic. With formidable scholarship, he presents a well-documented outline of Weber's arguments, and lists nine hypotheses, representing the various mechanisms of Protestant influence on capitalism (with headings such as The Work Ethic, the Spirit of Capitalism, Wealth and Profit, and Religious Anxiety) derived from Weber's thesis, each of which is further subdivided. He then proceeds in the course of the book to examine each of these hypotheses against the evidence of the teaching of Puritan 17th century divines. Every substantive statement the author makes is backed up by references to several sources. While some of the source material lends a measure of support to the hypotheses, he finds that the balance of the evidence tends to disprove Weber's propositions in every case.

For example, contrary to what Weber says, Benjamin Franklin, although he did practice a form of Puritan work ethic, did not exemplify the spirit of capitalism, since he did not advocate moneymaking as an end in life, one of the criteria for the spirit of capitalism. Instead, he employed such wealth as he had in a life of service to the community. And since Franklin is Weber's sole exemplar of this key concept, this finding is quite damaging to the thesis as a whole.

Let us consider another hypothesis, namely that Puritanism approved of the acquisition of wealth. Certainly, William Perkins (1606) judged wealth to be "a good thing", and said that "it is the blessing of God to be rich." Yet Baxter saw wealth as "a trouble, and burden, and interruption of your better work." Rather than thinking about God, glory, Christ, and the angels and saints, Baxter complained, some spent their time "in looking over thy bills and bonds, in viewing thy money, thy goods, thy cattle, thy buildings or large possessions."

Or to take the theme of religious anxiety, Weber argued that salvation uncertainties produced extreme anxiety that gave life a restless, active quality, which was just what capitalism needed for continuous operation and steady growth. However, argues Cohen, Weber's analysis of Puritan anxiety was quite one-sided, as Puritanism was also able to comfort the anxious, to some extent alleviating doubts and fears.

And so it goes on. When we come to the signs of salvation, Weber (says Cohen) clearly exaggerated work in the calling as a means of attaining certainty. In fact, it played a very secondary role in identifying the elect.

A frequently heard criticism of Weber's argument is that it is based on church dogma (such as the Westminster Confession) and on advice in devotional manuals by Puritan divines, especially Richard Baxter, whereas we have very little idea of how such dogma and such advice was received and acted upon by the laity. In this book, Cohen has gone some way toward filling this gap, by examining the diaries of two 17th century Puritan merchants, Nehemiah Wallington and Elias Pledger. Of these, the former has previously been studied, though less systematically, by Seaver, as Cohen acknowledges³.

He finds that the evidence fails to provide convincing proof of Weber's thesis. Certainly, these two merchants do exemplify the ethical qualities of Weber's "new type" of entrepreneur, and he concedes that Puritan religion can have power over the economic behavior of its adherents. It "dragged Wallington to his shop despite his weak personal interest in business." On the other hand it also kept him from pursuing profit strategies that violated traditional market ethics. And Pledger, a successful businessman, felt guilty about his prosperity. Neither sought economic success to enhance their certainty of salvation. The author concludes that there were sharp differences between the Puritan ethic and the spirit of capitalism, and that the affinity between them was, at best, partial.

Part of the difficulty of criticizing Weber is that his thesis does not lend itself easily to the kind of clinical dissection that Cohen attempts in his analysis of its different elements. However, in his final assessment Cohen deals with broader themes as well. Chief among these is the fundamental problem of the logical weakness in Weber's argument. This problem has previously been well stated by Gordon Marshall, who suggests that the central thesis may be tautological.⁴ In his 1920 revision of the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber refers to a similar objection to the concept of the spirit of modern capitalism by his colleague Lujo Brentano, namely that the concept includes in its assumptions what is supposed to be proved, although Weber professes to find this objection "incomprehensible".⁵ Cohen himself refers to the ambiguity of Weber's concept of the "spirit of capitalism". "The idea of modern capitalism is poorly conceptualized because it is ambiguous. The rational firm, rational organization of labor, calculable law, and so on may be *characteristics* of it, but may simply be *preconditions* of it; Weber stated the relationship both ways." Cohen goes on to pose the question "Could the spirit of capitalism have caused modern capitalism if it had been *part* of modern capitalism?"

Further points of criticism include the charge of empirical inaccuracy and problems with ideal types. More generally, Cohen draws out the helpful distinction between behavioral and cultural mechanisms of influence, the former operating on the individual level under the direct influence of Puritan tenets and the latter coming into force once capitalism had become the dominant culture and secularization had taken root.

In sum, then, this book represents the fruits of meticulous research into the works of the Puritan divines. Cohen positions himself somewhere between Weber's defenders and his detractors. In terms of details there can be little doubt that he is closer to the latter, but he recognizes the importance of Weber's achievement in combating economic determinism by showing religion's economic influence. Cohen's work will undoubtedly be greatly appreciated by all serious students of Weber's enduring thesis.

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Gordon Wells's most recent publication is Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism, and Other Writings*. Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction and Notes by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells. New York: Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics. 2002.

Notes

¹ Malcolm H. MacKinnon. "The Longevity of the Thesis: A Critique of the Critics," in Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth (eds.). 1993. *Weber's Protestant Ethic. Origins, Evidence, Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

² J. Cohen. 1980. "Rational Capitalism in Renaissance Italy," *American Journal of Sociology* 85: 1342.

R. J. Holton. 1983. "Max Weber, 'Rational Capitalism' and Renaissance Italy," and J. Cohen, "Reply to Holton," *American Journal of Sociology* 89: 168 and 181.

³ Seaver, Paul. 1985. *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

⁴ Gordon Marshall. 1982. "In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism. An essay on Max Weber's Protestant ethic thesis." (London: Hutchinson): 119 ff.

⁵ Max Weber. 1920. "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," translated by Talcott Parsons. 1930. (London: Unwin University Books), Chapter 2, note 13, 198.

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