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On "Disenchantment," Work and Leisure

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Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Talcott Parsons; New York: Scribner, 1958).

Probably the most common reading of Max Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is that capitalism appeared for the first time with English Puritans (Calvinists) of the seventeenth century, as though the "impulse to acquisition, pursuit of gain, of money" began decisively at this time or with this people (17). Weber is sardonic in his dismissal of such a reading. The impulse to acquisition, he says, "has existed among waiters, physicians, coachmen, artists, prostitutes, dishonest officials, soldiers, nobles, crusaders, gamblers and beggars. One may say that it has been common to all sorts and conditions of men at all times and in all countries of the earth, wherever the objective possibility of it is or has been given" (17). He insists that "[i]t should be taught in the kindergarten of cultural history that this naïve idea of capitalism must be given up once and for all. Unlimited greed for gain is not in the least identical with capitalism, and is still less its spirit" (17). Weber's argument is centered rather on a more basic and interesting phenomenon: what he terms the "disenchantment" (*die Entzauberung*, or *Rationalisierung*, "rationalization") of life and work in Puritan theology.

"Disenchantment"

According to Weber, the first beginnings of the new "spirit of capitalism" can be traced to Martin Luther, in whose thought we find a profound shift regarding the nature of "*Beruf*" or "worldly calling." Luther rejected the traditional idea of a division between two calls to holiness or two states of life. According to this idea, the higher or more perfect state was the life of the evangelical vows (*consilia*), which Luther understood to involve solely the "heavenly" activity of contemplative prayer and withdrawal from the world. The less perfect state was the life of marriage, or the living of the commandments (*praecepta*) while remaining in the world. Rejecting the first state, Luther stressed the importance of "worldly" activity, the everyday work of the world. It was in the world, and not in any presumptuous flight from the world, that God and holiness of life were to be found (79-81).

Calvin affirmed the importance of this "worldly calling" even as he further transformed its meaning in light of a distinct theology of sin and predestination. For Calvin, only a small number of human beings were chosen for eternal grace and salvation, while the rest were destined for damnation. God's will in the matter of the ultimate destiny of the human being remains inscrutable. "To assume that human merit or guilt play a part in determining [one's] destiny would be to think of God's absolutely free decrees . . . as subject to change by human influence, an impossible contradiction." God is "a transcendental being, beyond the reach of human understanding, who with His quite incomprehensible decrees has decided the fate of every individual and regulated the tiniest details of the cosmos from eternity" (103).

The consequence of this strict theology of (double) predestination is an “unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual.” Each person has to follow his own path of salvation. No one can help him: no priest, no sacraments, no Church. Even God cannot help, because “Christ had died only for the elect, for whose benefit God had decreed His martyrdom from eternity” (104). The key here is Calvin’s denial of the sacramental principle. As Weber puts it:

This, the complete elimination of salvation through the Church and the sacraments (which was in Lutheranism by no means developed to its final conclusions), was what formed [Calvinism’s] absolutely decisive difference from Catholicism. . . . That great historic process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world [*die Entzauberung der Welt*], which had begun with the old Hebrew prophets and . . . had repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition and sin, came here to its logical conclusion. (104–105)

The “elimination of magic from the world,” then, consisted in the removal of any “mystical” sense of God’s presence from the inner meaning of things. This meant a loss of the sacramental nature of the Church—of the sacraments as “infallible” (*ex opere operato*) communicators of the presence of God.[1] At the same time, this “disenchantment” implied a world judged to be under the power of sin, a world, consequently, whose natural integrity had been lost. God is no longer symbolically (“pre-sacramentally”) present in his creation: creatures are no longer inherently true, good, and beautiful in their *givenness* as gifts of the Creator.

In summary, we may say that Puritanism’s peculiar God-centeredness, according to Weber, conceived God’s transcendence “negatively”: God was pervasively “present” in the world only through the influence of his “absence.” The human being never participates intrinsically in God’s goodness. On the contrary, man remains a subject to whom that goodness must be imputed, incomprehensively and from outside. Likewise the things of the world are drained of all intrinsic worth.

Work and Leisure

Puritan “disenchantment” thus involves an utterly utilitarian view of the world. Man’s purpose in the world is to be ever-active in “rationalizing” things *in maiorem Dei gloriam*. But the point is that this “rationalizing” process is conceived in a thoroughly instrumentalized fashion. Nothing in the cosmos really bears value—or salvific value in relation to God—save as “rationalized” via the power of human activity. And this human activity itself has value only as an external *sign* and never as a participatory *cause* of God’s favor (which remains ever a matter of God’s inscrutable “election”). In this light, “the most urgent task” for the Puritan becomes “the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment”—as a necessary condition for bringing “order into . . . conduct” (119). “Not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God” (157–58). Restlessness becomes a sign of God’s salvific action. Inactive contemplation is valueless, or even directly reprehensible insofar as it detracts from the orderly demands of daily work. What gives glory to God, in a word, is the incessantly active performance of his will in one’s “worldly calling” (157–58).

Profit or wealth in light of the above remains ambiguous for the Puritan. On the one hand, insofar as wealth is an expression of continuous work, it remains, *eo ipso*, a sign of God’s favor. On the other hand, insofar as the accumulation of wealth leads to restful enjoyment, it is to be shunned. Indeed, Weber states that Calvinism’s “real moral objection” is

to relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequence of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, above all of distraction from the pursuit of a righteous life. In fact, it is only because possession involves this danger of relaxation that it is objectionable at all. For the saints’ everlasting rest is in the next world. (157)

It is important to see that the Puritan ethos as described by Weber persists in America even when, over time, the strength of Puritan piety wanes.[2] Pious Americans and secularized Americans continue to occupy largely the same cultural space, insofar as they both presume a distant God who is most effectively present in and to the world in his “absence,” and insofar as they (consequently) approach the things of the world most basically as apt for rationalization—if not any longer as a sign (for the religiously inclined) of God’s imputed favor, then in the interest of enhancing comfort and advancing the (secular) human estate.[3] What is crucial to see is the link Weber’s book defends (here set forth in terms of Puritanism and America) between the ethos of a culture and its (acknowledged or unacknowledged) assumptions regarding God and the orders of creation and civilization.[4] This link remains even when one is unaware of these assumptions.

Weber’s argument, then, implies not only that those in America who faithfully follow Puritan theology embody this ethos, but that any who live in America are inevitably shaped by this ethos, even if unconsciously. They tend to presuppose a God who is distant from the world, or acts ungenerously (or not at all) in relation to the world, such that the world is no longer symbolic of God, bearing inherent truth, goodness, and beauty as given (*qua being*). Human freedom becomes a simple exercise of choice, absent of any naturally ordered love of God. Knowledge becomes a matter properly of power over things and their meaning, as distinct from first “seeing” or experiencing things as they are (contemplation). The world becomes neutral (“dumb”) stuff awaiting controlled manipulation (experiment). Leisure is identified with idleness and enjoyment of external-bodily pleasure. Work is reduced to ever-more efficient activity for the purpose of producing the ever-greater wealth that enables idle comfort. Deepening the truth, goodness, and beauty of things for their own sake and as symbols of the good God, and thus simultaneously toward liturgical service, is no longer the proper concern of civilized public—economic, political, academic—order.

Weber’s argument in the end implies that no religion has more thoroughly instrumentalized the world and work and leisure than has Puritanism. Never has instrumentalism so pervaded the social-cultural order.[5] For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said:

“Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” (182)

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[1] The sacraments “are not a means of grace, but only the subjective *externa subsidia* of faith” (*PE*, 104).

[2] In his introduction to Weber’s *Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), Talcott Parsons states that, for Weber, “rationalization concerns in the first instance the systematization of a pattern or program *for life as a whole*, which is given meaning by an existential conception of the universe, and within it the human condition in which this action is to be carried out” (xliii).

[3] Weber’s appeal to the worldly Benjamin Franklin, who had Puritan roots, as a prime example of the Puritan ethos, is instructive in this respect. It is interesting also to note here religious sociologist Will Herberg’s use of the phrase “secularized Puritanism” to describe “the American way of life” in his classic *Protestant Catholic Jew* (University of Chicago Press, 1983, first ed. 1955). Needless to say, there is clearly a difference in moral intentionality among secularized as distinct from pious Puritans. But in either case, worldly being is considered to be merely “neutral” in itself, as raw material apt for being made into what is (instrumentally) “true” and “good.”

[4]We should emphasize that Weber’s argument counters the Marxist or customary “secularist” approaches that would make the *material conditions* of a culture (economy and the like) the primary causal agent of its view of God and man. But it is important to understand that Weber does not thereby adopt a “traditional” (e.g., “Thomistic”) approach that would affirm a realistic causal relation between God and the cosmos. Rather, he proceeds in a more Kantian manner that emphasizes a “generic concept” (or *Idealtypus*: “ideal type”) that accounts for all the empirical data in the most complete manner (“ideally”). But this requires fuller exploration elsewhere.

[5] *PE*, 157-158. As the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has stated: “What Weber depicted was not only the secularization of Western *culture*, but also and especially the development of modern *societies* from the viewpoint of rationalization. . . . Weber understood this process as the institutionalization of purposive-rational economic and administrative action. To the degree that everyday life was affected by this cultural and societal rationalization, traditional forms of life—which in the early modern period were differentiated primarily according to one’s trade—were dissolved.” Habermas, “Modernity’s Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance,” in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p. 2.

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