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Aspects of the

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Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism

A Criticism of Max Weber and his School

BY

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TO THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER

PREFACE

This book is an attempt to provide a more realistic treatment than has been found hitherto of a topic which has of late years been widely discussed. It is an attempt to use a historical instead of a sociological method to solve historical problems. It was first written in 1928-9 as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of Cambridge, from material mostly collected during the tenure of a research studentship at Emmanuel College. It was written in such leisure time as I was able to afford while lecturing at the University of Leeds, and has now been revised and rewritten in leisure moments at Cape Town. Access to libraries has been a little difficult during the actual period of writing, and I am conscious that there are some gaps in my bibliography. I regret especially my non-access to certain German works and Continental periodicals. Despite this, I venture to claim that my essay does make some new contributions to the literature of the subject.

My indebtedness in matters of detail is acknowledged in the appropriate footnotes. But I should like here to acknowledge some major indebtednesses and thank those who have played a leading part in my work. To Dr Maud Sellers, who gave me my early training, I owe whatever merit I may possess as an economic historian. I have gained much from contact with my supervisor of studies, Mr F. R. Salter, with my tutor, Mr E. Welbourne, with Dr G. G. Coulton, with Professor R. H. Tawney, with Professor J. H. Jones and with Principal J. F. Rees. Dr H. F. Stewart very kindly lent me a rare book of Jesuit casuistry. I am also tempted to add the names of the late Professor Unwin and of Professor Henri Pirenne, whose influence on my historical outlook has been so great that I cannot regard it in an impersonal light.

I regret that the work of Ernst Beins, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der calvinistischen Kirche der Niederlande, 1565-1650*, appeared

too late for me to be able to make use of it. I should like to draw attention to some of Dr Beins' conclusions. Readers of my book will realise the importance of what Dr Beins has to say of the doctrine of the "calling" in the Dutch Church—that it was to be regarded as an opportunity more for exercising love of one's neighbour than for gain; that unremitting toil was condemned as leaving no time or energy for the service of God, while the exercise of the desire for gain was the mark of the foolhardy who trusted in riches instead of the providence of God. The support given by the Dutch Church to state-authorised monopolies, particularly the East and West India Companies, should be noted, and also the demonstration that the economic thought of the Dutch Church was not specifically Calvinist, but was that common to all countries and creeds in the seventeenth century. Dr Beins concludes that we can assess the economic ethic of the Dutch Calvinist Church "only as a very rudimentary ethic of capitalism". I may add that Professor E. A. Johnson's recent *American Economic Thought in the Seventeenth Century* also provides no support for the view that the spirit of capitalism was a product of the ethic of the Protestant churches. While mentioning recent literature on the subject I should like to point out that the best guide to further reading is provided in an article by Dr P. J. Bouman on "Eenige beschouwingen over de historische betrekkingen tusschen godsdienst en kapitalisme" in *De Economist*, March 1932, pp. 181 ff.

I must thank a number of friends in Cape Town—Professor Leslie, Professor Walker, Mr J. G. van der Horst, Mr Arthur Sewell—for their kindness in reading my manuscript either in whole or in part, while many improvements are due to Professor Clapham's patient criticism, and his aid both in preparing my manuscript for the press and in correcting proofs. Professor Farrington checked a number of my translations from the Latin.

H. M. ROBERTSON

Cape Town
November 1932

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Dr Robertson's book contains the first thorough historical discussion in English, and the best discussion that I know, of a dogma much debated, though sometimes uncritically received, by economic historians during the last twenty-five years—the dogma which postulates a close, indeed a genetic, relation between Protestantism, or Puritanism, and capitalism, making the first the putative father of the second. This association of two widely unpopular “-isms” has naturally attracted the numerous enemies of both. Thanks in part to their controversial writings, it has sometimes been taken as an “established result of historical research” by literary people, the more readily perhaps because it clicks—if I may use the low word—with a current fondness for psychological explanations.

This dogma Dr Robertson criticises from many angles and, as it seems to me, with very great success. Those vague concepts “the Protestant Ethic” and “the Puritan Spirit” are analysed. Protestant economic teaching is shown in evolution. We see at close quarters the Puritan spirit not begetting capitalism but coming to terms with it. Christian makes agreement with Mr Worldly Wiseman. And so, on the Continent, does his Catholic fellow-pilgrim. Meanwhile, from a greater distance, we watch those tides in the human psyche and in human affairs, stronger and more persistent than any eddies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century teaching or practice, which drew the world into that open sea—or, if you will, that waste of waters—economic individualism, of which capitalism is only an aspect. The book contributes to the philosophy of economic history and so is fit to stand at the head of this series.

And here an Editor must acknowledge the series' debt to that Cambridge economic historian, Ellen Anne McArthur of Girton College, who bequeathed her whole estate to forward the study to which she had first devoted her life.

J. H. CLAPHAM

INTRODUCTION

MAX WEBER'S SIGNIFICANCE

Max Weber is responsible for the opinion, widely held to-day, that Protestantism, especially in its Puritan form, has had a very great influence in forming the "spirit of capitalism", and, therefore, in forming capitalism itself. In 1904-5 he published two articles under the title of "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist der Kapitalismus" in which this thesis was maintained. They not only inaugurated a whole literature, they gave a new direction to the whole of modern thought on a fundamental problem of economic history. I claim that they directed it on to the wrong lines.

It is not hard to understand why these theories should have been adopted so widely. They are the type of generalisation that would obviously have a popular appeal; and they can be made to form a convenient and serviceable weapon in religious controversy. They have been accepted in many cases because of their utility to the propagandist. Many writers have taken advantage of an unpopularity of capitalism in the twentieth century to employ them in attacks on Calvinism, or on other branches of religion. But the theories have also been accepted in other and less likely quarters.

It is remarkable that historians should have been so ready to accept the arguments of this piece of dialectic. For the reasoning employed is not that of the historian. Despite a wealth of references, its foundations have not been laid on a sound historical analysis. A philosophy of historical development which has been fashioned in the "constructional"¹ method of the sociologist might have been expected to have met with more opposition.

¹ "Constructional" because it constructs abstract ideal types instead of accurately describing facts.

Weber attempted to establish a reverse chain of causation from that advanced by Marx in the economic interpretation of history. He sought a psychological determination of economic events. In particular he saw the rise of "capitalism" as the result of the rise of a "capitalist spirit". What was this capitalist spirit?

To Weber it was hardly more than bilateral. It consisted first in a rationalist as opposed to a traditionalist outlook. It consisted also in the desire to seek profit continuously (by means of the rational organisation of free labour) for its own sake—even as a duty—and not for the purpose of enjoying the fruits. It cannot be denied that the ideal capitalist mentality is rational, if the spirit of capitalism is to mean anything more than that of acquisitiveness. It is probable, also, that Calvinism, created by a man whose favourite idea was considering "things in themselves, not words",¹ has led to the expansion of a rational methodising of life. It may be admitted at once that to this extent Calvinism has been favourable to the growth of a spirit of capitalism. But Weber's second criterion of the capitalist spirit is too narrow. It leads inevitably to the defect which I feel vitiates his whole argument; he hardly considers any capitalist other than the Puritan capitalist who seeks wealth for the fulfilment of his "calling".

This added refinement is quite superfluous. A realist like Marx, who originated the discussions on capitalism, would no doubt have been greatly astonished if he had been asked to consider only those whose money-making activities were promoted by religious or quasi-religious ends to be possessed of the true capitalistic spirit. This is what we are asked to do. The great renaissance financier, Jakob Fugger, a good Catholic, was urged by his nephew, Georg Thurzo, to retire from business on account of the involved state of the family affairs. He rebuked his nephew for his faint-heartedness and said that he "had quite another disposition, he would make money as long as he could". This is disregarded as an expression of the capitalistic spirit, as

¹ A phrase often employed by Calvin.

it had no ethical tinge.¹ Yet it was an example of precisely the type of "worldly asceticism", making earning an end in itself, which is put forward as the great contribution of the Calvinists and the Puritan sects to the rise of the spirit of capitalism.²

To most people to-day the typical "capitalist" is a purely secular creature who, far from regarding his daily occupation as a religious calling; sees no reason for religion to meddle with business affairs at all. He was the same in previous ages. Perhaps he resented the claims of religion to act as a moral witness in the affairs of everyday life, like the merchant Gromelgayner in Dr Wilson's *Discourse of Usury*:

Merchants doings must not thus be overthwarted by preachers and others, that can not skill of their dealings. And thys over great curiositie of some to meddle in other mens matter, I muste tel you plaine, it is even the verie right waye to undoe al in the ende.³

Or perhaps he behaved like the typical capitalist whom Milton described in *Areopagitica*:

A wealthy man addicted to his pleasure and to his profits, finds Religion to be a traffic so entangled, and of so many piddling accounts, that of all mysteries he cannot skill to keep a stock going upon that trade. What should he do? fain would he have the name to be religious, fain would he bear up with his neighbours in that. What does he therefore, but resolves to give over toiling, and to find himself out some Factor, to whose care and credit he may commit

¹ Max Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus", in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, I, p. 33 (Engl. trans. by Talcott Parsons, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 51).

² Yet Defoe, a good Nonconformist and the author of much sound economic moralising, gave a chapter of his *Complete English Tradesman* (II, ch. xli, in the edition of 1738) to retiring from business, in which he protested: "And indeed what temptation but that of mere Avarice, can lie in the way of a man possess'd but of 20,000*l.* to run into new adventures? What can he propose to himself better than what he already has?" (p. 206).

³ Thomas Wilson, *Discourse of Usury* (1572), ed. Tawney, p. 250.

the whole managing of his religious affairs; some Divine of note and estimation that must be. To him he adheres, resigns the whole Warehouse of his Religion, with all the Locks and Keys into his custody; and indeed makes the very person of that man his Religion; esteems his associating with him a sufficient evidence and commendatory of his own Piety. So that a man may say his Religion is now no more within himself, but is become a dividual moveable, and goes and comes near him, according as the good man frequents the house. He entertains him, gives him gifts, feasts him, lodges him; his Religion comes home at night, prays, is liberally supt, and sumptuously laid to sleepe; rises, is saluted, and after the malmsey or some well-spic't bruage, and better breakfasted, than He whose morning appetite would have gladly fed on green figs between *Bethany* and *Jerusalem*; his Religion walks abroad at eight, and leaves his kind entertainer in the shop trading all day without his religion.

Nothing could be further from the Puritan than either of these two types. In neither case was the conception of the "calling" of any influence; in neither case did it stir the merchant to activity. Neither fits in with a Puritan setting. The second, indeed, would be much more at home among the Jesuits with their system of expert casuistry. Yet Milton described him as a typical possessor of the commercial spirit—a man who was not interested in religion, but was in business. And Wilson's Gromelgayner was intended to be the typical merchant of 1569.

A quite unnecessary element has, then, been introduced into the definition of the capitalist spirit. Men do not need to be "called" to riches to devote themselves whole-heartedly to their pursuit without stopping to enjoy them. When King Pippin asked Alcuin, "Of what have men never enough?", he received the reply, "Of gain".¹ If men have the appetite for riches without a "call", they require no "calling" to organise a continuous striving after them.

¹ Lujo Brentano, *Die Anfaenge des modernen Kapitalismus*, p. 115.

The survey of the capitalist spirit inaugurated by Max Weber has also been unduly limited by a definition which excludes "Jewish pariah-capitalism" as something entirely alien to the real, respectable "bourgeois-capitalism".¹ This narrowness of definition, which dismisses every manifestation of the speculative or entrepreneur spirit from consideration, seems hardly suitable as a method of approach to the understanding of that frequently very eclectic person, the capitalist.

I do not, however, propose to press this line of criticism very far. To do so would involve me in a wider discussion of the growth of capitalism and the capitalist mentality than I am prepared to undertake. Though I criticise the theories connecting Protestantism with capitalism on account of the narrowness of their scope, I cannot do more than indicate alternative ways of approach to the subject of the rise of the spirit of capitalism. In the main, my criticisms will touch these theories on their own grounds.

My criticism must concern itself very largely with Max Weber's celebrated essay on "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus". It is a topic which he made peculiarly his own; and as I am concerned with the repercussions of his theories I must often refer to their origin. I hope to show that owing to Weber's adoption of a sociological, and not a historical, approach to the subject, his main argument, which deals with the Puritan doctrine of the "calling", cannot be sustained. I hope to show also that secondary considerations make it impossible to accept the argument that the capitalist spirit is a product of the Protestant Ethic. I hope briefly to indicate, therefore, another approach to the problem of the rise of the "spirit of capitalism",² which takes into account factors which religious sociologists have ignored, and gives a truer explanation

¹ Weber, *loc. cit.* pp. 8, n., 181 and n. 2 (Engl. trans., pp. 165-6, 186, 271).

² Instead of "spirit of capitalism" I shall often use "economic individualism". They are not co-terminous; but the latter expresses more exactly one of the most important elements of the former.

of the formation of the psychological elements in the historical development of economic forms, which I believe have been rightly (though over-) emphasised, but wrongly explained. I wish to show that the spirit of capitalism has arisen rather from the material conditions of civilisation than from some religious impulse.

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