

Session 8 – Religion

Benjamin GILBERT

Sciences Po

benjamin.gilbert@sciencespo.fr

53882 (Monday, 3.30 – 5.30 p.m.)

53883 (Monday, 5.40 – 7.40 p.m.)

21/01/2023 – 24/04/2023

Overview of the session

- 1) Presentation of a classical excerpt in sociology (20 min)
- 2) Discussion by the designated discussants (10-15 min)
- 3) Opening of the discussion to the whole class (15 min)
- 4) Short break (10 min)
- 4) Overview of the second mandatory excerpt (40min)
- 5) Remarks and questions about the midterm (10 min)



Allocation of presentations and discussions

Date	Session	Text excerpt
24/01	Sociological approaches	
31/01	The individual in social context	Douglas (Mary). Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. 2003.
07/02	Norms and deviance	Becker (Howard). Outsiders. 1963.
14/02	Stratification and inequality	Marx (Karl) and Engels (Friedrich). The Communist Manifesto. 1848.
21/02	Identity and identification	Brubaker (Rogers). Trans. Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities. 2016.
07/03	Urban sociology	Venkatesh (Sudhir) and Levitt (Steven). History and disjuncture in the urban American street gang. 2000.

Allocation of presentations and discussions

Date	Session	Text excerpt
14/03	The family	Edin (Kathryn) and Kefalas (Maria). Promises I Can Keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage. 2005.
21/03	Religion	Snow (David) and Machalek (Richard). "The convert as a social type". 1976.
28/03	Education	Khan (Shamus). Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St Paul's School. 2001.
04/04	Economic sociology	Esping-Andersen (Gøsta). 'Hybrid or Unique?: The Japanese welfare state between Europe and America'. 1997
11/04	Society and the state	Dubois (Vincent). The bureaucrat and the poor. Encounters in French Welfare Offices. 1999.
18/04	Movements and revolutions	McAdam (Douglas). The Biographical Consequences of Activism. 1989.

Presentation of a classical excerpt in sociology

Today's presentation is on:

Snow, D., & Machalek, R. 1976. "The convert as a social type", Sociological theory, 1, p.259-289.









The parable of the capitalist and the fisherman

An American investment banker is lying on the beach, on vacation in a fishing village in Spain, when a small boat with just one fisherman docks. Inside the boat are several large yellowfin tuna. The banker compliments the fisherman on the quality of his fish and asks how long it took to catch them.

“Just a few hours,” he says.

The banker asks why he doesn't stay out longer to catch more fish. The fisherman responds that with this, he has enough to support his family's immediate needs.

The banker then asks, “but what do you do with the rest of your time?”

The parable of the capitalist and the fisherman

The banker then asks, “but what do you do with the rest of your time?”.

The fisherman replies: “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siestas with my wife, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine, and play guitar with my friends. I have a full and busy life.”

The parable of the capitalist and the fisherman

The banker scoffs: “I have an MBA from Harvard. Let me help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat, you could buy several boats. Eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing, and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Madrid, and later, London or maybe New York, where you will run your expanding enterprise.”

The parable of the capitalist and the fisherman

The Spaniard responds: “But, how long will this all take?”

To which the banker replies, “Oh, 15-20 years, give or take.”

“That’s a long time!”, answers the fisherman.

The American laughs and says: “But wait till you hear the best part: when the time is right, you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich, you would make millions!”

The parable of the capitalist and the fisherman

“And then what?” says the fisherman.

“Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siestas with your wife, stroll into the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your friends.”

What do you think of this parable?

Sahlins (Marshall). Stone Age Economics. 1972.

Marshall Sahlins seeks to expose the ethnocentrist view taken by classical political economy which sees hunter-gatherers as the poorest possible people.

According to Adam Smith in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), the paupers in Europe would be richer than the Indians of North America. But Marshall Sahlins shows that hunter-gatherers see themselves as rich because nature provides them with far more resources than they consider to be normal needs (i.e., what they have a right to expect).

Sahlins (Marshall). Stone Age Economics. 1972.

In these societies, social norms limit needs and therefore working time (activity time and activity period). For instance, in some societies in Southern Africa, young people do not work until they are 30 years old.

By our Western standards, hunter-gatherer societies are not societies of abundance: they have very high mortality rates, for example. But this high mortality is not seen as a problem in these societies; on the contrary, some do not hesitate to get rid of useless (elderly) mouths in order to keep the labour rate low.

Why did capitalism emerge in Europe and not in other parts of the world?

Weber (Max).

Max Weber was born on 21 April 1864 in Erfurt, Thuringia, into a middle-class Protestant family. His father was a magistrate and he embarked on a political career that took him all the way to the German Parliament, the Reichstag.

A scholarly academic

Weber began his law studies in Heidelberg in 1882, while at the same time taking courses in economics, history, philosophy and theology. For two years he led a rather debauched student life, before returning to Berlin in 1884. From then on, he adopted an ascetic way of life, based on intense work.

Weber (Max).

In 1893, he obtained a position at the University and taught political economy at various German universities. In his work, he shows the importance of norms and values for understanding economic actions. The values of society give legitimacy to work.

An aborted political career

In parallel to his academic research, Weber always showed a strong political commitment. However, the diversity of his views made him look like an opportunist, which hindered his access to political positions of responsibility for a long time.

Weber (Max).

A founding-father and supporter of comprehensive sociology

Max Weber began by taking a stand in a debate that animated the intellectuals of his time: could the scientificity of the social sciences be based on the same criteria as those of the natural sciences?

With other academics, Max Weber tried to define a scientific method specific to the social sciences, which would not be considered *inferior* to the experimental method of the natural sciences.

Weber (Max).

Max Weber's major works are:

- *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) which is his first real study of sociology, in which he developed his famous method of analysis by ideal-type;
- *The Politician and the Scientist* (1919) in which he clearly distinguishes the functions of the researcher and the politician, the former having to be content with making proposals where the latter decides;
- *Economy and Society* (1921) in which he builds the project of a comprehensive sociology: the sociologist must understand the motivations of social actions.

What did you understand from the book?

IDEALTYPE \neq REALITY

social scientist ideatype

Comte theological stage

Tocqueville democracy

Marx



What is an ideal-type?

An **ideal-type** is an abstract intellectual construction which aims to highlight the essential characteristics of a reality by accentuating them: it is a conceptual model which simplifies reality by retaining only a few features considered essential by the sociologist.

It is a *type* in the sense that it accentuates certain specific features chosen by the researcher from reality.

It is *ideal* in the sense that it exists only in the sphere of ideas: no ideal-type is observed empirically.

Can you give examples of ideal-types?

Examples of ideal-types

Microeconomics is an ideal type, in the sense that it constructs a simplified representation of the behaviour of individual agents in order to be able to study the functioning of markets.

Likewise, new form of work organisation such as **taylorism, fordism, or toyotism** are ideal-types too: they do not exist as the quintessential definition given to them by economists, it is rather that organisations can be seen as adhering more to one of these forms than the others.

Historical context

By publishing his *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517), Martin Luther rebelled against the Pope and was excommunicated. In short, he rejected the authority of the clergy over individual faith: catholic worship is organised in a hierarchical manner where religious truth comes from above and descends (in Latin) to the faithful. Faith is thus mediated by the Catholic hierarchy. Luther advocated reading the Bible directly.

To this end, he translated the Bible into German. This translation benefited greatly from the invention of the printing press at the same time. He also opposed the practice of the Catholic clergy, who were endowed with *magical* powers.

Historical context

In 1531, King Henry VIII of England converted to Protestantism because the Pope refused to annul his marriage. He founded a new official Protestant church: the Anglican Church, which retained the hierarchical organisation of the clergy. Some Protestants found the organisation of the Anglican Church too close to that of the Catholic Church; they are called Puritans.

The different forms of Puritanism are not organised in churches but in cults. The members of a cult recognise the same doctrine, but the worship is organised in a decentralised way by the religious communities themselves.

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism (1905) is the work which made Weber known as a sociologist. It was originally published in two parts in 1904 and 1905 and was then republished after Max Weber's death as a book with new material.

It shows the influence of the Reformation on the perception of:

- the legitimacy of gain;
- the legitimate means to achieve it.

THE DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION



Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

Introduction

PART I – The Problem

1. Religious Affiliation and Social Stratification
2. The Spirit of Capitalism
3. Luther's Conception of the Calling: Task of the Investigation

PART II – The Practical Ethics of the Ascetic Branches of Protestantism

4. The Religious Foundations of Worldly Asceticism
5. Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

Max Weber's aim was to explain the influence of religion on social stratification.

He starts by showing that there is an over-representation of Protestants in the upper classes in Germany at that time.

The interest of the Max Weber study lies not in showing facts but in opposing the commonly accepted explanations of these facts.

There were two main interpretations put forward by the scholars of the time.

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

1. The Reformation would have eliminated the domination of the Church over everyday life hence the Protestant would be more *modern* and detached from the weight of tradition. According to Max Weber, this hypothesis is false: on the contrary, Protestant community groups are extremely present in framing the actions of the faithful.
2. Catholic doctrine would be more detached from the world and turned towards the afterlife. According to Max Weber, this hypothesis is not rigorous, as religious doctrines should not be considered intrinsically but only in relation to the social groups that carry them.



Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

Max Weber starts from a text by Benjamin Franklin, with the famous expression stating that "time is money". For Max Weber, **the spirit of capitalism** corresponds to a moral justification of accumulation behaviour: there is a moral obligation to reinvest the agent earned and not to spend it for pleasure.

For a long time, it was the pursuit of gain (greed) that was morally condemned. In Benjamin Franklin's discourse, on the contrary, taking action to achieve economic success is seen as a moral duty: it provokes a sense of duty done. **In short, Max Weber asks how this inversion came about.**

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

He starts by noting that the German term **Beruf** was originally a religious concept which meant vocation i.e., a calling. Luther transposed this term into the intramundane domain: Beruf then took on the meaning of profession, trade.

According to Max Weber, **one of the consequences of the Reformation is to assimilate the two concepts of profession and calling**: the concept of Beruf conceives the practice of one's profession as a moral duty, in other words the profession is lived as a vocation.

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

For Max Weber, the ethics of the vocational profession and the spirit of capitalism have an **elective affinity** : they share a lot of **ideal-typical** features. Both advocate **intramundane asceticism**: work is a moral duty; laziness and luxury are condemnable.

Asceticism is a search for perfection through voluntary discipline of body and mind, which implies renunciation (e.g., of pleasure). Max Weber speaks of intramundane asceticism, as opposed to those who withdraw from the world (monasticism).





Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

Max Weber defines an **ethos** as a system of internalised norms and values that guide the life conduct of a social group.

Weber's research question is the following: **how has the profession-vocation ethic come to be an ethos?** In other words, how did the *profession-vocation man* (*berufsmenschentum*) emerge?

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

Weber's thesis is that groups carrying this ethos emerged in Puritan groups.

“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.” (Weber, 1905).

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

According to Max Weber, Lutherans did not make the ethics of profession-vocation their ethos. He was thus only interested in his thesis in the ascetic forms of Protestantism, that is Puritanism, and in particular Calvinism and the evangelical currents.

Calvinism is characterised by the dogma of predestination: God being almighty, he knows in advance who will be chosen and who will be damned. According to Jean Calvin, the goal of human existence is the glory of God.

In Calvinism, there are three signs of one's election (or confirmation): having faith, living virtuously and persevering in faith.



Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

Max Weber's interpretation of why Calvinists adhere to the profession-vocation ethic is very famous and much discussed. **He gives a central role to the dogma of predestination.**

Calvinism professes that man cannot change his status in the hereafter by his works on earth, in contrast to Lutheranism and Catholicism. The Calvinist is thus in a situation of psychological tension since he knows that his fate is already sealed but does not have access to this information. All he knows is that the elect cannot be notorious sinners. He is therefore driven to look for the sign of his election in the way he lives his life.

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

It is through the theory of confirmation that the sociological study of actions differs from the theological study of doctrines. Calvin of course never advocated enrichment as a religious commandment. **Max Weber, on the other hand, makes a study of religion and the links between religion and social organisation.**

Max Weber shows that Calvinist pastors advocated intramundane asceticism through work as a moral duty. Personal enrichment through business was thus considered by the faithful as an action to the glory of God.

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

In other words, there is an **elective affinity** between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism: this elective affinity means that the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism have intramundane asceticism as a common **ideal-type**.

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

In other words, asceticism left the monasteries where it was withdrawn from the world in the Middle Ages to become a norm that frames our conduct of life: we are all men of the profession-vocation for whom work is a moral duty.

Today, this ethos appears to no longer require religious justification.

Weber concludes his text with a question: does the ethic of the vocation still have a meaning today or is it only a pure constraint of the economic system? In this case, what will give meaning to our actions?

What do you think of Max Weber's opening question?

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

Intramundane asceticism thus leads to the process of **disenchantment of the world** (entzauberung der welt): **meaning is no longer given; on the other hand, modern man must now find the meaning of his life himself.**

The disenchantment according to Max Weber is a *de-magification of the world*, a repression of magical explanations of reality.

From an *enchanted garden* the world becomes a *mechanism subject to causality*. The disenchantment of the world is a typically Western reality.

Weber (Max). The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism. 1905

“The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world.” (Weber, 1905).

Is Max Weber saying that capitalism's origins are found in Protestantism?

Reception

The original article provoked a great debate. Marxist authors and many historians wanted to oppose Weber's thesis that Protestantism was the cause of capitalism.

According to them, Max Weber's thesis lies in historical idealism (according to which ideas are the cause of history) as opposed to the historical materialism of Karl Marx (according to which it is the material conditions of existence that determine history).

They point out that **capitalism did not emerge in the Puritan countries but in Venice, Genoa and the Hanseatic ports** (independent Baltic ports).

Reception

But the idea that Protestantism is the cause of capitalism is not Max Weber's doing; on the contrary, it is to these interpretations that Max Weber opposes at the beginning of his thesis. The idea that capitalism is a consequence of the Reformation is in his view ridiculous and doctrinaire.

Max Weber's response to the critics is that they have not understood his research question. Max Weber stresses that **capitalism** (an economic system) and **the spirit of capitalism** (an ethos) should not be confused.



General comments and remarks about the midterm

For next time...

- Read Bourdieu, P. & J.C. Passeron. 1979 [1964]. Selecting the elect. The Inheritors: French Students and their Relation to Culture. University of Chicago Press
- Read Khan, S.R., 2001. Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St Paul's School. Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 77-101.
- When reading, remember to note the important elements of the text: question asked by the author(s), (hypo)theses of the author(s), methods used, references, writing style, argumentative construction, etc.
- Prepare the presentation and discussion (if concerned)