

Sociological Theory I

Week 8. Weber: Religion, Protestantism, Capitalism

1. What does Weber mean by the “spirit of modern capitalism” (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, especially chapter 2)? How does he contrast this spirit with traditionalism, adventurism, or simple greed as motivational bases of economic action? What arguments does Weber present against the historical materialist viewpoint that sees the material conditions of capitalism as sufficient to explain the emergence of the spirit (ideology or ethic) of capitalism? What counter-arguments might a Marxist present against Weber on this point? Which view do you support and why?

2. In the final chapter of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber comments on the profound transformation that religious asceticism and the concept of a calling have undergone in the transition to modern capitalism. He describes the modern era as an “iron cage” in which are all forced to work in a calling and where asceticism, once it has bound itself to the technical and economic conditions of machine production, “imposes itself on “the lives if all the individuals who are born into this mechanism . . . with irresistible force” (p. 181). Explicate and critically evaluate Weber’s concept of the “iron cage” and his implicit sociological explanation of how this “irresistible force” has come to dominate modern society.

3. Contrast Weber’s “last” theory of the rise of capitalism in *General Economic History* (Collins 1980) with his earlier theory in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In what ways does his later theory move toward an accommodation with certain aspects of Marxist theory. What do you see as the most significant remaining differences between Marxist theory and Weber’s last theory of capitalism? Which view do you support and why?

4. In *The Social Psychology of the World Religions* (Gerth and Mills, p. 269), Weber says that “It is not our thesis that the specific nature of a religion is a simple ‘function’ of the social situation of the stratum which appears as its characteristic bearer, or that it represents the stratum’s ‘ideology,’ or that it is a ‘reflection’ of a stratum’s material or ideal interest-situation.” Nevertheless, Weber also says that religion provides legitimation to the good fortune of privileged strata and the sublimation of resentment and hope for redemption to the less privileged strata, and he also describes distinctive theological tendencies that are characteristic of intellectuals, businessmen, warriors, peasants, and other social strata. The first statement can be read as an implicit criticism of Marx’s ideas about religion, whereas the latter statements would seem to share more in common with Marx’s ideas. What do you see as the main similarities and the main differences between the ideas expressed by Weber in this essay and those of Marx? Which theorist do you find most persuasive and why?