The Protestant Ethic and Nature

1132 words

The Protestant Ethic had a profound impact on the emergence of capitalistic societies and the way in which they treated the natural environment. In the first comprehensive study of the significance of this Ethic for the growth of capitalism, Max Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, sought to establish a relationship between Calvinistic religious beliefs and a capitalistic mentality of which the bourgeoisie from Calvinistic churches were the leading exponents. While there have been various criticisms of his position, what is often missed is that Weber was not claiming that religion was the *only* important factor in the rise of capitalism, but that he was singling out this religious element for examination in *his* explanation.

According to Weber, these religious beliefs produced a certain type of personality with a high motivation to achieve success in worldly terms by working diligently to create and accumulate economic wealth. But this wealth was not to be pursued for its own sake or enjoyed in lavish consumption, because the more possessions one had, the greater was the obligation to hold these possessions undiminished for the glory of God and increase them through relentless effort. A worldly asceticism was at the heart of this ethic, which gave a religious sanction to the acquisition and rational use of wealth to create more wealth.

This notion of the Protestant Ethic was of particular importance in American society as capitalism developed. It was an ingenious social and moral invention that offered a moral framework for the early stages of capitalism, emphasizing both the human and capital sources of productivity and growth, and in this sense offering the first supply side theory. It
emphasized the human side of production through hard work and the aspect of the calling, but it also advocated that people should not only work hard, but that the money they earn in the process should also be put to work. Inequality was thus morally justified if the money earned on capital was re-invested in further capital accumulation which would benefit society as a whole by increasing production and creating more economic wealth.

The Protestant Ethic proved to be consistent with the need for the accumulation of capital that is necessary during the early stages of industrial development. Money was saved and re-invested to build up a capital base. Consumption was curtailed in the interests of creating capital wealth. People dedicated themselves to hard work at disagreeable tasks and justified the rationalization of life that capitalism required. All of this was a major shift away from the behavior and general type of conceptual frame that informed medieval agrarian society.

Embedded in the Protestant Ethic is the moral imperative both for the maximization of production and for the minimization of consumption. The new ethic thus pressured equally towards effective production and efficient consumption, which while sustaining maximum productivity also maximized savings and potential investment capital. But, of perhaps even deeper significance is the fact that while the Protestant Ethic contained a moral limit on consumption in the interests of generating more economic wealth and building up a capital base to increase production, it made the pursuit of wealth an end in itself, and allowed for exploitation of both humans and nature in the interests of increasing economic wealth. In a practical sense, this Ethic may have served as a moral cover for behavior motivated by nothing more than greed. While obviously consumption had to increase with the production of more and more goods and services, the emphasis was on the production of wealth rather than consumption.
And, as religious ties were loosened, as the Protestant ethic gave way to the more
general work ethic, even a religious justification lost its moorings and with it whatever moral
constraints on consumption it may have provided. With the purposes and meanings provided
by this moral matrix no longer relevant to a consumer culture that emphasizes instant
gratification and increased consumption, not only production but also consumption became
ends in themselves divorced from any broader or larger moral purposes. Thus there has been
progressively more waste produced needing disposal, more pollution generated, and more
resources used, all to support a growing consumer culture.

The Protestant Ethic thus constituted a moral framework that informed the development
of capitalism and provided a legitimacy for its existence by offering a moral justification for the
pursuit of wealth and the distribution of income that were a result of economic activity within
this system. This Ethic contributed to rapid economic development and exploitation of
resources, both human and natural, in the interests of increasing economic production.
Weakening of this ethic and its inherent restrictions on consumption, resulted in both
production and consumption becoming ends in themselves, with little or no thought given to
the environmental consequences of such activities. This ethic emphasized the accumulation of
material capital and provided no restriction on the depletion of natural capital, and this
disregard of natural capital pervaded the consumer culture to which it contributed. Only in
recent years, when the consequences of such depletion of natural capital could no longer be
ignored, have environmental concerns emerged as important considerations.

However, environmental concerns about resources that are becoming more and more
depleted and waste material that is becoming more and more difficult to dispose of run
headlong into the cultural values related to increased consumption and immediate gratification.
The ethics of production, consumption, and economic growth, with their own self-justifying ends, seems on a collision path with an environmental ethic related to conservation and preservation of the environment. These conflicts take many forms whether it is an endangered species versus the logging industry battling over further logging of public lands or preservationists versus the mining industry over setting aside more public lands in trust for future generations.

Many people are turning to nature itself for self-gratification, finding meaning in closeness to the natural environment and viewing it less in instrumental terms. As a result, more and more people are seeking to preserve parts of nature in something of a pristine state, and use resources in a sustainable manner in order to leave something for future generations. Business organizations themselves are slowly beginning to focus on sustainability concerns and their impacts on resource usage and the natural environment. An environmental ethic tied to the enrichment of human existence in all its fullness and recognizing our ties to nature has the potential to bring both the concerns of individuals seeking less materialistic self-gratification in nature itself, and pressures from the marketplace to direct production and consumption into more sustainable paths, into an evolving relationship that can provide a new moral framework for capitalism. The Protestant Ethic with its emphasis on material capital and exclusion of natural capital from moral concern is further eroding in the face of growing environmental concern.

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Further Reading


