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Max Weber is Alive and Well, and Living in Guatemala: The Protestant Ethic Today

Max Weber's essay, whose centenary is being celebrated here, must surely be the most discussed piece of writing in the history of social science. It has been the ship that launched a thousand dissertations, and it has created a cottage industry of exegesis. Needless to say, this is quite a tribute to Weber's intellectual stature. It seems to me that there are four equally valid approaches to this discussion.

- The obvious first approach is to explore the validity of Weber's historical argument: Did Protestantism really play the role he assigned to it in the genesis of modern capitalism? This question has occupied several cohorts of historians, from R.H. Tawney on.
- Secondly, the essay can be placed within the overall context of Weber's opus, especially if one sees this opus, at least in part, as a debate with the ghost of Karl Marx -- "just what is the role of ideas in processes of social change?" (In Marxist terms, if you will, this is the question about the relation of "superstructure" and "sub-structure", which pre-occupied Gyorgy Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci, among others.)
- Thirdly, Weber's treatment of the Protestant ethic can be seen as a key element of a sociologically inspired philosophy of history, especially in terms of the unintended and unanticipated consequences of action -- both Luther and Calvin must have been turning in their graves as they

contemplated what latter-day Protestants made of their teachings on vocation and predestination.

- And fourthly, one can, with all due respect, leave all the preceding issues aside and rather ask a very empirical question -- “To what extent is Weber's notion of the Protestant ethic helpful in understanding developments in the world today?” It is this question I intend to take up in what follows here.

More specifically, the question revolves around Weber's concept of "this-worldly asceticism". This concept delineates a distinct pattern of human behavior:

- a disciplined attitude to work (not just hard work, which one finds in many very un-Protestant places, but what Weber understood as the "rationalization" of work);
- an equally disciplined attitude to other spheres of social life, notably the family (Weber's notion of "life-discipline");
- a deferral of instant consumption, resulting in saving and, eventually, capital accumulation and social mobility (if you will, what psychologists call "delayed gratification");
- and all of this in the context of a worldview at least relatively free of magic (Weber's "disenchantment of the world").

To this list of traits one should add two that Weber did not enlarge upon:

- a strong interest in the education of children (originally based on the Protestant insistence that the Bible should be read by everyone),

- and the propensity to create voluntary associations of non-elite people.

This last trait, of course, has not been characteristic of classical Protestantism, but gained enormous importance in what David Martin has called "the Amsterdam-London-Boston bourgeois-Protestant axis" - the principle of voluntarism bred by Dutch sectarianism, English Nonconformity and, most explosively, American "denominationalism" (the vast progeny of New England Congregationalism).

Where is such a constellation to be found today? And what is its relation to economic development?

I will allow myself a self-advertisement here: Since its inception in 1985, our research center at Boston University has pursued these two questions in a series of projects in different parts of the world, beginning with two pioneering studies - by David Martin on the colossal explosion of Pentecostalism in Latin America (first described in his book, *Tongues of Fire*, published in 1990 - since then he and others have studied the phenomenon in other parts of the world), and by Gordon Redding on the values and lifestyles of Overseas Chinese entrepreneurs (reported on in his book *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, also published in 1990).

The obvious first place to explore the contemporary presence of the Protestant ethic is in Protestantism itself. As Weber himself pointed out, this ethic declines after it has had its effect in the early stages of modern economic development. Thus it is present only in a very attenuated form in, say, mainline Protestant

denominations in America. One must look rather at what is arguably the most dynamic religious movement in the world today - the wildfire expansion of Pentecostal Protestantism in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, parts of east and southeast Asia, and in pockets of marginalized people in the most unlikely places (as among European Gypsies and low castes in Nepal). The phenomenon is vast: Martin estimates that there are at least 250 million Pentecostals in the world today, and possibly many more; 50 million is the estimate for Latin America.

How does the behavioral profile of these people compare with the 17th- and 18th-century Protestants discussed by Weber? And how does it relate to economic development?

I feel most confident in answering this question as far as Latin America is concerned -- The attitudes and behavior of the new Pentecostals bear a striking resemblance to their Anglo Saxon predecessors (hence the title of this paper - Guatemala, for reasons I don't fully understand, has the highest concentration of Protestants, most of them Pentecostal - about a quarter of the population country-wide, and about a third in the area of the capital). What takes place here is nothing less than a cultural revolution, sharply deviant from traditional Latin American patterns. This new culture is certainly "ascetic". It promotes personal discipline and honesty, proscribes alcohol and extra-marital sex, dismantles the *compadre* system (which is based on Catholic practice and, with its *fiestas* and other extravagant expenditures, discourages saving), and teaches ordinary people to create and run their own grassroot institutions. It is a culture that is radically opposed to classical *machismo*, and indeed is in many ways a

women's movement -- while most preachers are men, women are important missionaries and organizers. Even more important, women take on leadership roles within the family, "domesticating" their husbands (or, alternatively, kicking them out if they refuse to adhere to Protestant moral standards) and paying attention to the education of their children. And here is a factor that was outside Weber's horizon - that of gender. It is, incidentally, very important in comparing the social and economic effects of Pentecostalism with the effects of that other explosive religious movement, that of resurgent Islam.

It should not be surprising that these patterns produce what I like to call a "comparative cultural advantage" in terms of social mobility and economic development. Where the macro-economy is in very bad shape (for example, in the northeast of Brazil), this advantage is more or less dormant. But where people with these characteristics have a real chance (as, for example, in Chile or in southern Brazil - Sao Paulo has been called the world capital of Pentecostalism), one can observe a positive correlation with social mobility and with it a truly novel phenomenon in Latin America - a growing Protestant middle class, economically productive and increasingly assertive politically. A word of caution, though: Latin American Pentecostalism is not a monolithic phenomenon. There are strands which deviate from the Weberian concept (for example, groups that promote a so-called "wealth gospel" - God providing benefits to people who have to make little effort beyond having faith). But the overall picture fits neatly with Weber's description of the Protestant ethic and its effects.

Does Pentecostalism have the same effects in other parts of the world ?

Our Institute is now engaged in a research project in southern Africa, asking this very question. The results are not yet in. Anecdotal information and preliminary results suggest a positive answer. But Africa is very different from Latin America. For one thing, Pentecostalism in Africa frequently intersects with an important phenomenon that has no real analogue in Latin America - the so-called African Independent Churches, which combine a charismatic Christianity with elements of traditional African religion. But if we should discover that this type of religion has developed differently in Africa, this would simply suggest that it has not produced the Weberian constellation, and we could then explore how this fact impinges on social mobility and economic development.

I cannot resist the temptation of telling two personal anecdotes here. When I was a graduate student at the New School for Social Research I chose as the topic of my Master's thesis religion among Puerto Ricans in New York City. I had stumbled on this topic - this was in the 1950s, when not much attention was as yet paid to this new wave of immigration - and I had been struck by the then-surprising fact that many of these people were not Catholic. There were almost no available data and I spent about a year wandering, usually in the evening, from one storefront church to another in East Harlem and other areas of Puerto Rican concentration. Biographically, this was the period when I previously enumerated above. This leads to the exploration of what sociologists would call the "functional equivalents" of the Protestant ethic. An interesting case in this connection is that of eastern Asia. The rapid economic ascendancy of this region has led to the question of whether specific cultural elements have

been a factor in the ascendancy. Such a factor, some have argued, has been the Confucian heritage which has been important in all the countries of the region - Japan, the earliest and most dramatic case of a non-Western society successfully modernizing - then what used to be called "the Four Little Tigers" of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore - and then the economies of southeast Asia, in which ethnic Chinese minorities have played a leading economic role. The so-called "post-Confucian hypothesis" proposed that the Confucian heritage fosters values and behavior similar in important ways to the Protestant ethic - disciplined lifestyles, frugality and soberness, a consuming interest in education, and, last not least, a disdain for magic (that is, an Asian version of "disenchantment"). Weber, of course, had also discussed Confucianism at great length. He saw it as a case of this-worldly *non-asceticism* and thus not conducive to modern economic development. But Weber studied the worldview and the institutions of the literary bureaucracy of imperial China, where his interpretation was in all likelihood valid. However, leaving aside Japan (where Confucian ideas combined with a martial ethic of very different antecedents), the ethnic Chinese "carriers" of the "economic miracle" were mostly people who had never read the Confucian classics and whose lifestyle was vastly different from that of the imperial Mandarins. Robert Bellah coined the term "bourgeois Confucianism" to describe this value system. Others have suggested that the operative values here were not so much Confucian, but rather rooted in Chinese folk religion - a highly pragmatic (if you will, "rational") worldview and practice, which indeed provided the cultural matrix of "high" Confucianism. Be this as it may, it is quite clear that analogues to the Protestant ethic can indeed be found in eastern Asia and that these may be looked upon as "functional equivalents". As the lustre of the east-

Asian economies has diminished somewhat in recent years, there has been less talk about the "post-Confucian hypothesis" (apparently Confucianism is not a sufficient antidote to potential bankruptcy). This does not change the fact that cultural facts must be taken into account in the still amazing achievement of these societies in moving large numbers of people from abject poverty to a reasonably comfortable level of living. Redding demonstrated this in his study of Overseas Chinese entrepreneurs and he has more recently enlarged the scope of his research to other groups in the region, notably in Japan and South Korea, and he has been exploring the cultural factors in the remarkable development of mainland China since the onset of its economic reforms.

Sinologists have disagreed for a long time on whether Confucianism is to be understood as a religion or as an essentially secular system of ethics (non-Sinologist though I am, I favor the former view). In any case, the quest for analogues to the Protestant ethic will bring up both cases of other religious traditions and cases of clearly secular values. In the spirit of self-congratulation, I will take the liberty of mentioning three other projects of our Institute.

If there is one religious tradition conventionally viewed as inimical to modern capitalism, it would be that of Iberian Catholicism. Yet out of its most conservative circles has come a movement which has played a crucial role in the move toward a market economy in Spain, and which may play a similar role in some other predominantly Catholic countries (such as the Philippines). It is Opus Dei. It originated in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s, allied to the most conservative wing of Spanish Catholicism. It was organized as a strictly hierarchical order, containing both priests and lay people, and has had as its

particular focus the penetration of political and economic elites. It propagated a rigorously ascetic, quasi-monastic lifestyle, and adherence to strict doctrinal orthodoxy. Yet at the same time its mission was conceived as taking place in the world, not confined to monasteries or other ecclesiastical institutions. In other words, it rather closely resembled Weber's concept of "this-worldly asceticism", and his famous description of Protestantism as having "abolished the monasteries and turned the world into a monastery". From the beginning it was closely associated with the Franco regime. In the final years of this regime it attained great political prominence. Somewhere along the line its leadership decided that Spain should embark on a capitalist course. Opus Dei not only founded two prestigious business schools, but it used its influence within the government to induce market-friendly economic policies. Its religious mission in Spain has hardly been successful; in the wake of the Franco regime, Spain underwent a dramatic process of secularization, greatly weakening the status and influence of the Catholic church. But the economic success of Opus Dei has been brilliant in that, (this is another case supporting Weber's notion of unintended consequences) Opus Dei set out to make Spain into a suburb of Fatima, it succeeded in making Spain into a suburb of Brussels. (Our study of Opus Dei was summarized by Joan Estruch, *Saints and Schemers: Opus Dei and its Paradoxes*, 1995).

For obvious reasons, one of the most timely questions concerning the relation of culture and economic development is that of the compatibility of Islam with the latter and with democracy. A widely held view maintains that there is an inherent incompatibility. Even if that were so (which I tend to doubt), there is one significant example of the contrary - that of Indonesia (significant, in that

it is the largest predominantly Muslim nation in the world). Our Institute has conducted research on this question, under the direction of Robert Hefner (as reported in his book, *Civil Islam*, 2000). There has been a similar view as to the alleged incompatibility of Eastern Christian Orthodoxy with modern economic and political institutions (I'm skeptical about that allegation too). We are presently engaged in studying this question as it affects Russia, under the direction of Chris Marsh, and we are planning a wider cross-national study, being designed by Elizabeth Prodromou. To be sure, different religious traditions have different degrees of "affinity" (another Weberian term) with modern capitalism and modern democracy. And I would argue that the type of Protestantism represented by contemporary Pentecostalism has an exceptionally high "affinity". This does not mean, however, that other traditions are under some ancient curse which prevents them from adapting to new circumstances. At times these adaptations are dramatic and surprising. Opus Dei is one such case. Another, which I must confess I don't know much about at this point, is that of Old Believers in Russia -who are about as "reactionary" as can be in their religious character, who yet produced a surprising number of successful capitalist entrepreneurs since the 19th century. Unintended consequences indeed!

Analogues to the Protestant ethic can also be found in other "carriers" (yet another Weberian term) of modern capitalist culture. A fertile area of research is that of the military in developing societies (this area, alas, our Institute has not, or not as yet, touched). In many of these societies the military is one important institution that fosters "this-worldly asceticism" in its members - soberness, frugality, rationality, a disciplined life. To be sure, the military can

also be the locale of corruption and ruthless power manipulations. But where an honorable military ethos prevails, it is plausible to hypothesize that it may carry over into economic and political life.

All in all, I would propose that something like the Protestant ethic is a necessary though not sufficient causal factor if a population is to move successfully from poverty to a reasonably decent standard of living. This is true both for entire societies and for groups within a society that have been left behind, such as marginalized groups in America or Europe. The prescription for attitudes and behavior conducive to economic development in, say, Bangladesh is not essentially different from that in an inner-city slum in this country. The "carriers", of course, will be very different in these different locations. There are two more points I want to make here - about "vanguards", and about "expiration dates".

It is not necessary, I think, for an entire population to evince the traits of "this-worldly asceticism" for development to take place. It often suffices if a highly active minority, which does have these traits, serves as the vehicle for development. As development takes place, other groups, even if they do not share the same traits, will benefit. As they do so, their own culture will inevitably change. The metaphor to describe this is not the much-maligned "trickle-down effect". Rather, it is the metaphor of "the rising tide which lifts all ships" - and this lifting can be speedy and dramatic, as has been nicely shown by the economic success stories of eastern Asia. Both historically and today, these "vanguard" minorities can be religious or non-religious. Examples of religiously defined "vanguards" are, of course, the aforementioned

Protestants (such as the Huguenot refugees which were invited into Prussia and were very instrumental in its ascendancy), but also Jews in Poland (also invited), Armenians in the Middle East, and Jains in India. The "vanguards" can also be ethnic, with Overseas Chinese being a prime example. And they can be Indian castes or sub-castes, such as the Marwaris, who originated in Gujarat and became successful entrepreneurs throughout India. Clearly all of this creates significant political problems. The visible economic success of minorities, while the majority is still left behind, is likely to create severe and potentially violent resentments. Inevitably, the benefits of economic development will not be equally distributed, and (as shown by the trajectory of the Gini coefficient) inequality is likely to increase sharply in the earlier stages of economic growth. It requires very skillful political leadership to control this looming turbulence, especially under democratic regimes where the rhetoric and the policies of populist redistribution (inevitably harmful in terms of economic consequences) are very tempting.

Some time after the democratic transition in South Africa I had a conversation with a group of black intellectuals. They expressed strong resentments over the fact that whites continued to have a dominant position in the economy, reaping supposedly unfair benefits obtained during the apartheid era. I said that I fully understood their feelings, but I suggested a mental experiment: Let them imagine for a moment that this dominant group were black rather than white. The difference in standards of living between it and the majority of the population could be just as large, and consequently deemed to be just as unfair (as indeed is the case in many developing societies where there are no racial differences between the elite and the rest). But it would be easier in that case to

think instrumentally and to view this privileged group as an economic asset, to be *used* for the development of the society as a whole. Could they not view South African whites in the same pragmatic way? Not surprisingly, they could not. The next few years will show to what extent the present government in South Africa (like governments in many other developing countries) will be able to balance productive economic policies with popular demands for social justice.

A very intriguing question is whether the Protestant ethic, so important in the earlier stages of capitalism, continues to be important in later stages. Where capitalism is successful, the productivity of the economy increases enormously. Put simply, much less hard work and discipline are necessary to keep the economy going. Some individuals (again, a sort of "vanguard") continue to work very hard (though even they tend to be less ascetic in their lives outside the workplace), often for very large rewards. Most of the population, though, can afford to be much more relaxed. Not surprisingly, then, the general culture becomes much more hedonistic, permissive, even lazy. A recent French bestseller nicely expresses this attitude - *Bonjour, paresse* - "Hello, laziness" (in allusion to Françoise Sagan's famous novel, *Bonjour, tristesse*).

What this suggests is that any constellation of attitudes and behavior, should, in terms of its economic functionality, have attached to it an "expiration date" - as it were, valid until a certain level of GDP has been reached. What is more, attitudes and behavior seen as economically dysfunctional at one time, may paradoxically become functional at a later time. A comparison of Japan and India is instructive in this regard.

It has been plausibly argued that the modernization of Japan was animated by a sort of de-militarization of the *samurai* ethos, and indeed many of the early capitalist entrepreneurs were members of the samurai class forced to find new occupations after the Meiji regime dismantled the institutions of feudalism. Here was a "this-worldly asceticism" with a vengeance - iron discipline, rigorous devotion to the tasks at hand, frugal living, and total loyalty to one's superiors, the loyalty now being transferred from one's feudal overlord to one's company. As Japan first industrialized in the Meiji era, and as Japan recovered from the devastation of World War II, this was a highly functional ethic. It is much more doubtful whether it is still so today, when Japan has entered a post-industrial phase, with a largely knowledge-driven economy. Again not surprisingly, the culture has become more hedonistic, individualistic, less respectful of all hierarchies. This change has been deplored by traditionalists, but arguably the change is not only tolerable but may actually be necessary in the new economy. By contrast, the much less driven, even dreamy culture of traditional India has been interpreted as a dysfunctional factor for the development of the Indian economy. Yet it is precisely these features that may be conducive to success in a knowledge-driven economy. The amazingly successful Indian computer industry can illustrate this point. Put differently, asceticism may be a sin (or a virtue) of youth.

If this argument is valid, it implies a poignant human drama: The children rejecting the values and the lifestyles of their parents, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the easier life of the children was made possible by the sacrifices of the parental generation. And this would be but a modern reiteration

of an age-old phenomenon. As "hard" societies become "soft", there occurs an inter-generational cultural shift. Traditionalists will interpret the "softness" as deplorable decadence. And where the earlier "hardness" was of a martial character, the "softness" may make the society more vulnerable to aggression from peoples of hardier temperament. Generations of historians have so understood the decline of Rome, and perhaps this applies even today as the societies of the West confront violent aggression by groups that are very hardy indeed. But the same logic may not apply to economic behavior. If left alone by outsiders, the lazy may indeed inherit the earth - or rather, that patch of earth which has been made prosperous by the ascetic efforts of earlier generations.