R.H. Tawney, Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber
on Puritanism and Capitalism

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Abstract
The social reform, theological and political backgrounds of R.H. Tawney and Max Weber are compared. These background influences are traced in respect to Religion and the Rise of Capitalism and The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Troeltsch’s account of Protestantism and progress is considered. Weber’s view of Puritanism and capitalism is considered as particularistic in terms of validity even though modern capitalism would seem to be universalizable. In contrast, Troeltsch and Tawney are seen as arguing for a more universal image of Protestantism.

Keywords: Ernst Troeltsch, ethical socialism, Evangelical Social Congress, Max Weber, modern capitalism, Puritan revolution, R.H. Tawney, Toynbee Hall.

This paper starts by charting the social, political and theological formation of R.H. Tawney and Max Weber, respectively. The paper will demonstrate the remarkable congruence and similarity of their backgrounds and how these contributed to two key works in the historical and social sciences: Max Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1st edn, 1904–1905; 2nd edn, 1920) and Tawney’s Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (1926). These two works are often, and justifiably, bracketed together, for both pursue the theme of the influence of religion on the formation of a capitalistic society. Tawney acknowledged the stimulus of Weber’s writings on Puritanism and capitalism and for a long time into the twentieth century Tawney was seen within Anglo historiography as the English face of the ‘Weber thesis’.

These similarities are striking enough to make an exploration of their differences not only instructive but also valid as a comparative exercise. There is a consistency and continuity to Tawney’s life-interests and career that is not duplicated in Weber’s own development. The paper will establish the principled differences between Tawney and Weber, and then interrogate Weber in the light of Tawney’s standpoint. This will not presume that Tawney is scientifically superior to
Weber, but rather that his positions—morally, politically and historiographically—have a clarity and depth, taken together, that is sometimes difficult to follow in the case of Weber. Tawney’s Christian and theological background underlies the questions he raises concerning the validity of modern capitalism. In this sense the paper can be seen as one facet of a complex and difficult debate within current social theory about the nature of modernity: should its origins and causation be regarded as singular or multiple, and does singularity raise problems for the universal validity claims of modern capitalism? This latter question will be deepened through a short consideration of Troeltsch’s position on religion and progress.

**Social reform and religious renewal in England and Germany**

I will start by mentioning the association of R.H. Tawney and Toynbee Hall.¹ The link to Toynbee Hall is more than fortuitous for it tells much about the particular lineage of thought that Tawney brought to the historical and social sciences. Richard Henry Tawney (1880–1962) was Oxford educated (Greats and Moderns) and he emerged from an influential grouping that had amalgamated Oxford’s tradition of philosophical idealism (T.H. Green) with a socially aware Christian belief and a particular form of socialism that placed cooperation above competition (F.D. Maurice).

Tawney was a resident at Toynbee Hall for the period 1903 to 1906, where he worked as a teacher in adult education. He became involved in labour questions through the Trade Boards, and also helped and organized recreation for local children. Toynbee Hall was founded in 1884 as a result of a project put forward by Canon Samuel Barnett to an enthusiastic following within the University of Oxford. It was the first of a much-copied model of Settlement Houses. It was named after Arnold Toynbee, a charismatic young Oxford don who died young in 1883 (born 1852), not least because he endangered his frail health with residential stints in Whitechapel. It was Arnold Toynbee who first articulated the concept of the ‘industrial revolution’ in English. (He should not be confused with his namesake, and nephew, Arnold Joseph Toynbee who wrote on civilizations.) Toynbee Hall was, how-

¹. This paper in its first draft opened the conference ‘Max Weber and the Spirit of Capitalism—One Hundred Years Later’ at Toynbee Hall, 11-12 June, 2004. The conference was only made possible through the hospitality of Luke Geoghegan and his staff at Toynbee Hall and also funding from the British Sociological Association.
ever, strictly speaking Canon Barnett’s creation, and he was the Hall’s Warden until his move to the canonry of Westminster in 1906.

Barnett came to Whitechapel as vicar of St Judes, a tumbledown church with empty schoolrooms, one of the worst dioceses in the then bishopric of Bedford. Whitechapel was the poorest, meanest, foulest, most overcrowded and criminal, most illiterate, most unreligious quarter in Great Britain. It was the shantytown of its age—no sanitation and an irregular water supply, rookeries, pervasively polluted by dust and soot, the place the poorest migrants ended up—9,000 souls on the margins of physical existence. Charles Booth, who set up a tent on the Mile End Waste in 1865 for his Salvation Army (non-conformist), counted them all in his *Life and Labour of People of London*.

The influences Barnett tapped into and helped form throw up a number of similarities to the work of the Evangelical Social Congress in Germany. Barnett’s Toynbee Hall shaped the outlook of the young Tawney, and the Evangelical Social Congress influenced (one can not quite say ‘shaped’) the development of the young Max Weber’s thinking.

Thomas Carlyle in *Past and Present* (1843), Ruskin as Slade Professor of Art at Oxford, and Matthew Arnold had started the critique of industrialism: ‘England is full of wealth…yet dying of inanition’. By the 1880s the horrors and social unrest of the East End were becoming the issue of the day and the pamphlet *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Conditions of the Abject Poor* (1883) had a major impact on opinion (and was not for the squeamish). Barnett capitalized on this change in mood, travelled up to Oxford, collected subscriptions with the support and name of the Toynbee family, and signed up academics to become full time or temporary residents at Toynbee Hall, which was built over the site of St Judes.
Toynbee Hall was not an explicitly Christian mission house. It was secular, or rather non-denominational. Barnett didn’t want to exclude the non-conformists (then still outside the pale of the Anglican establishment) and he obviously was aware that the migrant populations of Whitechapel were Irish and Jewish. Barnett also wanted to escape from the idea of charity—the rich giving to the needy poor that in practice led to the undignified and disorganized Doles of the East End. Toynbee Hall was committed to the ideals of educating the newly enfranchised citizen (following franchise reforms of 1867 and 1884), ‘educating our masters!’ as Barnett expressed it. His ideal was a working man’s university, and in the 1880s around 500 people attended the University Extension lectures.

When Tawney volunteered as a resident in 1903 (along with his friend William Beveridge) the educational environment had progressed. The rise of the polytechnics offering evening classes had reduced demand for Extension lectures, and the reform of local government in the early 1900s had facilitated the development of standardized primary and secondary levels of an educational system.

Tawney left Toynbee Hall in 1906 to work as a tutor/lecturer for the Workers Educational Association, which again embodied the idea of a working man’s university, but this time run by the workers through their representatives, in conjunction with academics.

Tawney joined the atheistic Fabian Society in 1906 but in his beliefs he was a staunch Anglican. He is described as left wing and a Christian socialist. But these labels provide only a general indication of his political orientation. A series of quotes indicate the depth of his thinking. ‘Poverty is an Industrial problem, the Industrial problem is a moral problem’; ‘the social problem is a problem not of quantities, but of proportions, not of the amount of wealth, but of the moral justice of your social system.’; ‘we need to choose (after the bosses are off the back of the workers) between less and more wealth and less and more civilisation.’ Above all, he held to Canon Barnett’s principles that education is there not only to liberate the subjugated mind but to tell...

5. Sean Glynn, London Guildhall University: From Polytechnic to University (London: London Metropolitan University, 2003), pp. 56-64.

us how to live—which, of course, is one of the great themes of modern English humanism, from Matthew Arnold through to D.H. Lawrence and beyond.

The German equivalent of Oxford’s Christian inspired social reform was the German Evangelical Social Congress (Evangelisch-sozialer Kongress), the first of which was held in Berlin in 1890. The 1890s in Germany were the decade of the ‘social question’. The 1880s had been marked by the repression of the labour movement and of the Social Democrats. The Evangelical Social Congress was a much larger, more conflicted movement than its Oxonian counterpart. The Protestant High Consistory (Evangelischer Oberkirchenrat), which was accountable to the head of state, pronounced to the clergy that they were to continue the fight against Social Democracy, but ‘they were’ as Rita Aldenhoff writes, ‘to recognize and take account of the legitimate social needs of the workers. The improvement of material welfare was declared one of the pre-conditions for raising religious and moral standards.’

One can see in this statement the source of many conflicts; from its inception the Evangelical Social Congress had compromised the clergy politically as well as religiously. Using religion as a political instrument begs many questions concerning the role of the church and the interpretation of the gospels. In England Charles Gore, spiritus rector of the Anglican Church’s social and theological conscience, had treated these questions in an intense and agonized way. Gore was the founder of Pusey House—a retreat in Oxford devoted to the reform of the Christian conscience made appropriate to the new industrial age. Gore later became Bishop of Birmingham, and was closely associated with Scott Holland, another Oxford man greatly affected by T.H. Green’s idealism and by Christian thought. Charles Gore wrote the Prefatory Note to Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, which started life in 1922 as a series of lectures sponsored as a memorial to Scott Holland. Tawney was the uncompromised beneficiary of their theological and sociological wrestlings, in the sense that moral, political and educational goals became clear to him once he had joined the Workers’ Educational Association (and left the somewhat religious paternalism of Toynbee Hall).

Weber associated with the progressive wing of the Evangelical Social Congress. The progressive wing itself had a number of ten-

dencies, which analytically should probably be kept separate. In the previous generation Ritschl (1822–1889) had laid the theological foundations for the possibility of re-integrating the church into society. This was Lutheran in inspiration and expressed a hostility to the Calvinists and Pietists who, not content to combat sin—enough for any church—sought combat with the human condition, seen as creaturely, corrupt and unworthy. This, for Ritschl, was a characteristic alien to the Christian Church (deriving ultimately from Hellenic mysticism) and led to the improbable religious community of world-deniers and asceticism. Of Weber’s generation Adolf von Harnack (1851–1931) made a similar point about Hellenic importation in his History of Dogma (1885). The message of the gospels, which offered the possibility of living an authentic personal life, was obscured by doctrine, ritual, and the institutionalization of the sacred, all of which functioned as a rationalistic guarantee of salvation.

Weber, according to Harry Liebersohn, respected Harnack. Weber personally was closest to Otto Baumgarten (1858–1934), Paul Göhre (1864–1928) and Martin Rade (1857–1940) in the Evangelical Social Congress. These three represented very much the Canon Barnett tendency. They established contact with the working classes, their conditions and problems, and they were committed to social research as an evidenced-based platform for social reform. Göhre threw away his dog collar and worked anonymously as a factory worker for three months, his subsequent book of the experience (Drei Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerkbursche, 1891) causing a sensation in the press. Göhre was also an expert on the crisis in farming. Christianity for Göhre concerned not only the personal life of the individual but community ethics, and the new industrial era represented Christianity’s greatest challenge and opportunity. Martin Rade was the editor of Die christliche Welt, the paper of choice for progressive Protestants. Die christliche Welt championed both Ritschlian theology (in an anti-Catholic form) and the social question. Otto Baumgarten, who was a chaplain in an orphanage in Berlin at the start of the 1890s became the editor of a series committed to contemporary issues, and he even-

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tually went on to become professor of practical theology at Kiel. Baumgarten was motivated to awaken the liberal Protestant social conscience among the educated middle class (but was probably less inclined to interact directly with the working class). Like Barnett, who had swung Toynbee Hall behind the dock strike of 1889 and the match girls’ strike of the same year (and where Charles Gore debated with Tom Mann, the dockers’ leader, in Oxford), so Baumgarten argued the case for supporting the Hamburg dockers’ strike of 1897 among progressive opinion.

There is no doubt that Weber worked closely with the Evangelical Social Congress. He undertook research on the farming problem with Göhre in 1892–1893, he contributed to Rade’s Christliche Welt, he attended most of the annual meetings in the 1890s of the Congress, he was co-opted on to its executive committee in 1892, and he was in close communication with Otto Baumgarten, as he had been since his early teens—Baumgarten, as we know, was his cousin. Weber was heavily involved in the educational side of the ESC, giving courses and lectures to pastors and to the Protestant Workers’ Association. In October 1893 he gave a two-week course on the rural question, filling a large lecture hall with a public of 500 people, again in 1896 with up to 100 participants; in Karlsruhe in 1897 to an audience of 280. Mommsen and Aldenhoff document Weber’s numerous lecturing commitments to regional Evangelical Congress meetings between 1895 and 1897 in Frankfurt, Baden, Württemberg, and Giessen. Like many of the lectures given at Toynbee Hall, the intention was to explain the economic realities of the new industrial system and the causes of contemporary problems such as the flight of farm-workers from the land and into the cities.

The question that is difficult to answer adequately is why Weber became an active participant in the ESC. Unlike Tawney, Weber was not religious, and, we should add, he was not socialist—not for him F.D. Maurice’s privileging of cooperation over competition. He had an interest in many aspects of religion—he would discuss liturgy, sermons, and theology with Otto Baumgarten—but he displayed no active religiosity and certainly none of the brand of missionary, social Christianity which defined Baumgarten, Rade and Göhre and which would seem to be a sine qua non of participation in the progressive

wing of the ESC. One answer to this question is that he was so embed-
ded in the networks of the ESC, it would have been hard for him to
avoid participation. The network centred on his mother Helene Weber,
who supported the work of the ESC, especially that of Pastor Naumann
(1860–1919), who married Rade’s sister. These people were all in close
contact with the Weber family home in Charlottenburg, and so with
Max himself, who still lived in the family house in the early 1890s.¹⁰
Weber was most impressed by Naumann’s outspoken commitment to
the social position of the workers and his involvement in the work of
a church mission in Frankfurt am Main.

This is not, however, a complete answer. We need in addition to
examine his contribution. As already said, this included doing social
research and advising on research studies. But it also included some
quite alarming contributions, so much so that had Weber not been
regarded as a friend he would have been taken as hostile. In 1894, in
the pages of the christliche Welt, Weber criticized Naumann’s weak
grasp of the realities of private property. Presenting the findings of an
1894 ESC survey of rural conditions to the ESC, Göhre addressed the
theme of Christian community, whereas Weber informed his listeners
that ethical norms were no longer possible under conditions of capi-
talistic agriculture. ‘We do not busy ourselves with social policy to
create human happiness.’¹¹ Weber went further in his inaugural lec-
ture at Freiburg later that year where he said that German and Polish
peasants were engaged in a life and death struggle (a statement tan-
tamount to social Darwinism). The German worker was castigated
for his primitive idealism, economics was derided for making policy
prescriptions according to the utilitarian notion of the greatest happi-
ness of the greatest number, and the middle classes were lambasted
for their abdication of political responsibility to the Bismarckian
political elite. The lecture was even more forceful for being delivered
at the University of Freiburg—a beleaguered outpost of cultural Prot-
estantism amidst a strong Catholic milieu. He spoke again at the 1897
Congress, where he rubbished Karl Oldenberg’s call for a return to the
culture of pre-industrial Prussia. What was needed, said Weber, was a
self-sufficient individualism and a middle class with its own sense of
autonomy.

¹⁰. Guenther Roth, Max Webers deutsch-englische Familiengeschichte: 1800–1950,
¹¹. Quoted in Harry Liebersohn, Fate and Utopia in German Sociology: 1870–1923,
We should also note that while Weber criticized what he took to be the unrealistic expectations of the social gospel in the face of the realities of an industrializing society, he did also consistently defend, in the press, Göhre and Naumann from critics on the conservative right (both theological and political).\textsuperscript{12}

So, there is a similarity of context for both the young Weber and the young Tawney: in social reform, sociological research, education, and a progressive social gospel. And, of course, both went on to write seminal accounts of the Puritan revolution. With Tawney, it is not too hard to follow the steps that led from Toynbee resident to celebrated historian. Tawney possessed an essential, moral position from which he assessed both past and present. His *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (1912), the precursor to *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, was, he admitted, influenced by the workers he taught in the Workers’ Educational Association, while the book investigated how poverty co-existed alongside riches. At root this was a moral problem for Tawney, and it determined his outlook in history writing and dictated his approach to politics and social reform. Tawney, through patient and clear conviction, became arguably the most important ideologue of the Labour Party (viz. *Equality*, 1920 and *The Acquisitive Society*, 1931) and its most important policymaker in the field of education. Tawney was very much an ‘organic intellectual’ and in helping to shape the Labour Party we should look to his context: Oxonian progressive theology, Toynbee Hall and teaching within the workers’ education movement.\textsuperscript{13}

While context, background, and belief come together in a coherent and agreeable way with Tawney, the same cannot be said of Weber. In a sense Weber was a dissident within ESC and his radicalism, which as we have seen in the Freiburg lecture he presented as realism, addressed matters of economic and political power. Weber was a social reformer as part of the ESC and as a member of the wider formation of what is called ‘cultural Protestantism’ (i.e. the secularizing tendency), but his intellectual attitude to modern, rationalizing capitalism was that it could only be ameliorated to a limited extent. Modern capitalism, as becomes increasingly clear as one reads PESC, operates according to its own dynamic (of rational goal attainment) and demands forms of behaviour that are not only impersonal but

\textsuperscript{12} See Aldenhoff, in *Max Weber and his Contemporaries*, p. 197.

also indifferent to ethical criteria. The linkage between Weber’s involve-
ment in the ESC in the 1890s and the writing of \textit{PESC}—a linkage that
expert commentators have found hard to specify (not least because
\textit{PESC} has the feeling of coming out of nowhere), could be sought in
Weber’s radical attitude to modern capitalism. This is his intellectual
standpoint both in the 1890s and in \textit{PESC}. When we reach the end
of \textit{PESC} there is an element of fatalism. After the depiction of the
impersonal, giant economic cosmos and the steel-hard shell, there
is little room or prospect for a reform agenda to humanize what
Sombart termed the moloch of capitalism. Both in his prognoses in the
1890s and at the end of \textit{PESC} Weber is pretty adamant that capital-
ism’s onward successful dynamic is dependent on its hard-edged
impersonality, which in \textit{PESC} of course is traced back to its origins in
Puritan asceticism.

The issue on which I wish to enlarge, in this paper, is the particular-
ism of Calvinism (in Weber’s \textit{PESC}) and the more universal role of
Puritanism (in \textit{RRC}). Looking at the respective theological influences
of both men, Weber tended to emphasize the irreconcilable elements,
whereas Tawney tended to search for higher unities of purpose. In
Germany, as already mentioned, the progressive theology of Ritschl
and Harnack argued for a discontinuity between the Puritan revolu-
tion and Protestantism in the nineteenth century. Ritschlian theology
attempted to de-valorize the metaphysical as a way of equilibrating
between denominations. The emphasis was placed on activity in the
world, the combating of sin, and not the abnegation of self in the
world through asceticism. The peculiarity of the Calvinist sects his-
torically, for Ritschl, was their exaggerated sense of the fallenness of
man, an over-reverential sense of unworthiness, and an unhealthy
concern with fleshly corruption. This exaggerated sense was linked to
the sects’ morbid acceptance that God would always see (‘all-seeing’) the
corruption in the Christian soul and body, and the hope of salva-
tion reduced to the wager of predestination. For Ritschl, a more pro-
gressive theology placed the emphasis on ethical conduct in the world,
for standing for good and against evil in one’s fellow humans.

Ritschl was moving theology in a direction that could claim a
greater social rationality, whereas Weber seizes upon the irrationalist
features of Puritan conduct for his historical sociology of economic
life.\textsuperscript{14} For Ritschl the sectarian deviations that he found so pronounced

\textsuperscript{14}. This is a distinction worth insisting on. Weber cannot be claimed for progres-
sive Protestantism through an expanding social rationality, as Habermas would have
in the Pietists of the seventeenth century should be smoothed out as a progressive theology reacted to the changes of nineteenth-century society. For Weber—and this is a key point in my argument—ascetic Protestantism was deliberately distinguished from mainstream Lutheranism, and its distinctive legacy was locked into modern capitalistic forms of economic life. Weber calls the modern capitalistic form ‘distinctive’ or ‘peculiar’ (‘eigentümlich’); he made no presumption of moral progressiveness. My argument is that Weber regarded the Puritan origins of capitalism as singular, as unique, and that modern capitalism could not be normalized towards the ethical and humanist standards of what is termed ‘cultural Protestantism’. The ESC and cultural Protestantism sought a convergence of religion to modern society and of capitalism to the ethical norms of community and humanism. The reason why Weber strikes such a dissonant note in his collaboration with the ESC is more than his sense of realism about capitalism (also of politics). Capitalism, just like the modern state, was distinctively constituted to resist ethical reform. What had made capitalism modern were features of Puritan conduct: a fundamentalism of individual conscience indifferent to traditional norms of community, and a ruthlessness in the execution of purpose rather than any grounding of purpose in institutional or family life. Modern capitalism grew out of a radical impersonality, so escaping the bonds of traditional community, and then developed into a system—a mighty economic cosmos—that stayed resistant to any interpersonal norms of an ethical character.

**Troeltsch’s Protestantism and Progress**

It is interesting to see how Weber’s almost exact contemporary and close colleague Ernst Troeltsch handled the theme of the long-term influences of Puritanism on the modern world. He gave a lecture to the 1906 Historians’ Congress in Stuttgart, entitled ‘The significance of Protestantism for the origin of the modern world’, which was translated and published as *Protestantism and Progress* in 1912.15 This smallish book drew on Troeltsch’s ongoing study of the social teachings of the Christian churches and groups that was being published in instal-

ments in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. This research was establishing Troeltsch as the leading theologian of his generation and, as his illustrious career was to demonstrate, one of the leading academic figures of his day.\(^{16}\) Troeltsch was also an expert on Weber’s *PESC* of which he was unstinting in his praise. From around 1900 onwards the two men had been discussing intensively together, in Heidelberg, the issues of Puritanism and its social, political and economic ramifications.

The ‘essential characteristic’ of *Protestantism and Progress*, as Troeltsch says in his preface for the English edition, is ‘to treat the questions which it raises not merely on dogmatic and metaphysical, but also on practical grounds—ethical, political and economic ’ (p. ix). And Troeltsch’s big question was to gain

an insight into the intellectual and religious situation of the present day, from which the significance and the possibilities possessed by Christianity might be deduced. That has lead me to engage in historical investigations regarding the spirit of the modern world, for this can only be understood in the light of its relation to the earlier epochs of Christian civilisation in Europe. As Adolf Harnack has described the genesis of and the disintegration of Christian dogma, so I should like to examine the present situation and its significance for the fate of Christianity in the modern world. For anyone who holds the opinion that in spite of all the significance which Catholicism retains, the living possibilities of development and progress are to be found on Protestant soil, the question regarding the relation of Protestantism to modern civilisation becomes of high importance (pp. v-vi).

Troeltsch, broadly speaking, was going in the same direction as Ritschl and Harnack in taking the stress away from metaphysics and dogma and investigating, at a more detailed level than anyone before, the convergence of religious belief and the dynamics of the modern world.

Troeltsch’s second question was why Christianity and its associated European system of civilization could be considered superior to the religions of the East (p. vii). Troeltsch was determined that the grounds for such an argument had to be sought in validity claims of a social and philosophical nature rather than on the assertion of revelation and statements of religious dogma. That second and very large question led Troeltsch on an intellectual journey throughout his career,


which requires further attention than can be provided here. Given these concerns, though, this is why Troeltsch’s treatment of Weber in *Protestantism and Progress* becomes so interesting. They had overlapping analyses of Puritanism and its historical origins and significance, but Troeltsch’s whole enterprise is oriented to the reconciliation of religion and society whereas Weber’s insists on the particularizing character of modern capitalism because of its Puritan roots.

In summary, Troeltsch draws a distinction between early and late Protestantism. The early Protestantism of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin was intolerant, short-sighted and vicious in relation to other strands of reforming groups (Anabaptists, Socinianism and Arminianism) that stood for humanistic, critical philological, and philosophical theology and were movements that furthered the separation of church and state and fostered an individualistic spirit. Later Protestantism, however, was able to re-connect with those progressive elements.

It was not until modern Protestantism had lost sight of the idea of a universal Church-civilisation [Troeltsch means by this an equivalent structure to the Roman Church] that it could characterise as genuine Protestant principles, the duty of historico-philological criticism, the organisation of Churches formed by voluntary association, independent of the State, and the doctrine of revelation by inner personal conviction and illumination.

These were traits that mainstream Lutheranism and Calvinism had tried to crush, depicting what for Troeltsch was inherently progressive as ‘naturalism’, ‘fanaticism’, ‘enthusiasm’, and ‘sectarianism’. Troeltsch therefore introduced a discontinuity into the history of Puritanism, allowing its more universalizing and modernist features to return at the end of the seventeenth century.

Troeltsch does accept Weber’s thesis:

> The real significance of Calvinism for the modern economic development which culminates in the all-embracing capitalistic system of the present day lies much deeper. It has latterly been pointed out by Max Weber, who, in the course of his investigation of the great main problem

17. See Ernst Troeltsch, ‘The Ideas of Natural Law and Humanity in World Politics’, in Otto Gierke, *Natural Law and the Theory of Society: 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), p. 203. This essay raises the spectre that Christianity *tutu court* is insufficiently inclusive and it sought to find a wider basis for the natural possession of each human being to reason and dignity and a reform programme for an acceptable modernity.

18. These groups continued an older stoic and natural law tradition.

of present-day economic history, the problem of the character and the origin of capitalism, raised the question regarding the spiritual, ethical, and philosophical pre-suppositions of this system (p. 132).

Troeltsch then gives a perfect rendition of the thesis:

The ‘spirit of calling’, which does not reach out beyond the world but works in the world without ‘creature-worship’, that is, without the love of the world, becomes the parent of a tireless systematically disciplined laboriousness, in which work is sought for work’s sake, for the sake of the mortification of the flesh, in which the produce of the work serves, not to be consumed in enjoyment but to the constant reproduction of the capital employed (p. 136).

In breaking down of the motive of ease and enjoyment, asceticism lays the foundations of the tyranny of work over men (p. 137).

Troeltsch quite evidently grasps the critical thrust of Weber’s thesis and comments, ‘Weber has, in my opinion, completely proved his case’ (p. 138).

But Troeltsch does point out this achievement is the responsibility not of ‘Protestantism as a whole’ but ‘primarily to Calvinism, Pietism and the Sectaries, and that even with them this contribution is only indirect and consequently an involuntary one’ (p. 139). When one turns to Protestantism as a whole in its indirect and unconscious effect on society, Troeltsch’s wider prognosis strikes a more optimistic note.

But it is a different matter when we turn to the theoretic ethical and metaphysical conception of society, and of the relation between the community and the individual, organisation and freedom. This is the proper sphere of the social significance of a religious movement, and here there are in fact important influences of Protestantism to be traced (p. 149).

The inviolability of personal conviction lays the foundation of individualism; spiritualistic mysticism for unbounded subjectivism; the reconstruction of society in the interests of the individuals.20 These are all positive (and non-Lutheran/Calvinist) notes of the wider Protestant movement whose effects are beneficial for the development of modern education, politics, and the press.

So by isolating asceticism in the economic sphere Troeltsch manages the benign convergence of the consequences of Protestantism with a progressive understanding of modern social developments. That does leave the ethical reform of the economic sphere as a ‘diffi-

20. One might almost say, the sources of self.
cult problem’ (p. 140). ‘Even within the domain of Anglo-Saxon Calvinism, the problem begins to be felt, in face of a completely secularised capitalism. It was, indeed, precisely here, where the development had proceeded furthest, that the counter-movement of Christian socialism first arose’ (p. 141).

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism as a ‘Whig’ theory of history

This cues us directly back to Tawney and raises some interesting questions about how Tawney should be aligned vis-à-vis Troeltsch and Weber. In a Gramscian sense Tawney was something of an ‘organic’ intellectual. He has a clear sense of a nation’s history and how his views of reform and socialism fit into that picture. There is a clear sense of continuity with confidence placed on a progressive solution and with no embarrassing parts of reformation history having to be explained away (in the manner of early versus late Protestantism). Indeed right from the start there is little attempt to adjust religious convictions to the modern age. The Christian socialism of Gore and Holland that was taken into the East End was metaphysically enhanced. As Gore wrote in the Preface to RRC,

I am thankful to feel that the first series of Holland lectures is a worthy tribute to the memory of a man who set his brilliant faculties to work in no cause so fully and heartily as in that of re-awakening the conscience of Englishmen to the social meaning of the religion of the Incarnation (p. xi).

For Gore the Incarnation was experiential, not existential, it was lived in community and not simply thought through individual preference. Statements like these cannot really be intellectually elucidated — their meaning and impression must have been strongest in direct contact.

Religious conviction for Tawney was inspired by the English reformation. History for Tawney was a dramatic narrative. While Religion and the Rise of Capitalism borrows from the Weber thesis, in methodological respects it is very un-Weberian. I do not think Tawney understood the heuristic and instrumental nature of Weber’s ideal types. He accuses Weber of simplifying the characteristics of Calvinism that in reality over the course of 200 years and in differing countries produced very different outcomes of the influence of religious thought on everyday economic behaviour.

Weber tended to treat it [Calvinism] as more unique than it was... he exaggerated its stability and consistency. Taking a good deal of his evidence from a somewhat late phase in the history of the movement, he
did not emphasize sufficiently the profound changes through which Calvinism passed in the century following the death of Calvin (p. viii).

Weber’s *PESC* is the working up of a set of ideas about ascetic Calvinism and it is not about embedding those ideas in the histories of specific countries. Those variations, of course, are exactly what Weber assumed would be the task of historians. He did not expect the ideal type to be proved; rather it was an orientating and clarifying device. Weber would also not have found fault with Tawney’s desire to write a narrative history. That was the task of the historian: to put and pull together the chain of events on the ground.\(^{21}\)

And that is certainly what Tawney does. *RRC* is almost Shakespearian, sometimes even in its language, in its enactment of a nation’s history. It has a Prologue where Bishop Charles Gore sets the scene:

> We have been for many years feeling our want of such a study, sufficiently documented and grounded upon an adequate knowledge of the literature of the period, as we have watched the modern battle between zealous mediaevalists impugning the Reformation as deeply responsible for the sins of modern industrialism, and no less zealous Protestants rebutting the charge or throwing it back.

So, this is to be a metaphysical history play.

The First Act is pre-Reformation society whose underlying theory was hierarchy, organism and the idea that the activities of politics, economics, and learning are legitimate only insofar as they are governed ‘by the end which is common to all’ (p. 28). But the sixteenth century was breaking apart with expansionist energies, and the Anglican Church and Archbishop Laud increasingly failed to achieve adherence to this theory.

Act Two is the Puritan Revolution. Within the bosom of religious theory itself, writes Tawney

> a new system of ideas was being matured, which was destined to revolutionize all traditional values… On a world heaving with expanding energies, and on a Church unsure of itself, rose, after two generations of premonitory mutterings, the tremendous storm of the Puritan movement. The forest bent; the oaks snapped; the dry leaves were driven before a gale…amid the blare of trumpets, and the clash of arms, and the rending of the carved work of the Temple, humble to God and haughty to man, the soldier-saints swept over the battlefield and scaffold their garments rolled in blood (p. 155).

\(^{21}\) Tawney’s own views of the Reformation had not wholly beneficial consequences for the reception of Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis in English. See the article above by Lawrence Scaff, ‘The Creation of the Sacred Text’.

Tawney’s explanation for the rise of individualism and the consequent unfettered economic activity is less dependent on the psychological theory of salvation anxiety, used by Weber, but instead argues and traces an institutional separation of church and private morality.

Act Three is after the revolution. ‘In the great silence which fell when the Titans had turned to dust, in the Augustan calm of the eighteenth century, a voice was heard to observe that religious liberty was a considerable advantage, regarded “merely in a commercial view”’ (p. 155). The Augustan calm is more than the aesthetic balm of rhyming couplets but of reason, rights, autonomy of property and what C.B. Macpherson has termed possessive individualism— in short, John Locke.

Tawney’s moral purpose in marshalling this national history of modernity is to remind his many readers that community, ethics, and commerce for large stretches of the past were all of a piece. A later historian, Trevor-Roper, objected strongly to this appropriation of the nation’s history. He called it, following Herbert Butterfield’s coining of the term, a Whig theory of history, that is, the assumption of an inherently progressive narrative. Usually this narrative culminated in liberal democracy. In Tawney’s appropriation of the narrative it would culminate in the moral reform of industry and society. The twentieth century was about re-inserting a moral and communal purpose into the now established industrial system. Tawney’s purpose was sharpened by the experience of the Great War but it was not until 1942 onwards that his vision, embodied in welfare citizenship, was attained by the Beveridge/Tawney/Atlee generation of Toynbee reformers. (And I would guess sales for RRC peaked in these same years when it was made available in paperback in a Pelican edition in 1938.)

Tawney, therefore, could align his ideas for the future within a dominant conception of a nation’s past. Weber could never have written a book like RRC, simply because for Weber ‘Germany’ had the ‘wrong’ history. Germany in the nineteenth century was a verspätete


23. Stefan Collini writes, ‘It [the Whig interpretation of history] is an account that celebrates the unbroken continuity of representative institutions and the legal protection of individual freedom, an account that identifies a deep political wisdom in the English, expressed above all through the wise moderation of those statesmen who adapted to changing circumstances without falling into either rigid reaction or unbridled revolution’, London Review of Books 27.14 (2005), p. 24.
Nation and this was in part because the German states had imbibed rather too much Lutheranism with its strong sense of tradition and reverence for authority. Germans had not experienced a genuine Puritan revolution in which self-abnegation and belief had driven the Cromwellian ‘soldier-saints’ to an act of regicide; that is, the road to modern rights and individualism goes through not just reformed religion but an ascetically schooled reform. Weber’s involvement in the ESC in the 1890s is always over-shadowed by this incompleteness of a national history.24 Weber could never be the organic intellectual like Tawney; rather he was always the abrasive dissident intellectual.

Validity criteria

In this last section I will attempt briefly to frame an issue that concerns the validity criteria of modernity. In the case of religions, their grounds for validity are rooted in criteria confirmed through revelation—the word of God or the word of Allah as revealed by prophets. World religions, to varying degrees, also claim to be universal, justified by the normative superiority of their revelatory content. But the sociology of religion examines diffusion in terms of factors such as the accessibility of religious message and types of missionary behaviour. In The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches Troeltsch provides a clear example of the distinction between validity criteria and universalizability. In his discussion of St Paul Troeltsch points out that the validity of the Christian message is based on the authority of revelation and as practised and preached by Jesus of Nazareth; secondly Paul was able to universalize this message by arguing for the removal of the criterion of ethnic exclusivity. The sociological membership of religion would be determined by matters of faith alone that would cut across the previous ethnic criteria of religious community, that is faiths particularized by birth as an Essene, Palestinian, Roman, Jew, and so on.25


In the case of capitalism, the following example can be used. Microsoft performs across the world with a particular software platform. In empirical terms it can certainly make a strong claim to being a universal form for software, simply because it is the most successfully marketed product throughout the world. But this is not the same thing as claiming validity. For instance the proponents of Linux or Apple argue that the nature of their software is superior to that of Microsoft’s. This could be thought of as an argued and reasoned claim for greater validity of one software platform over another. So, Microsoft claims validity through universal extension, whereas Linux or Apple might claim validity on inherent rationality criteria. In the two cases of religion and software, the validity content and the process of diffusion are, of course, interrelated. That is clearly vital for what can be roughly termed ‘success’. But the two—substantive validity and universalizability—are not reducible to one.

This distinction underlies, but is not explicit, in Weber’s *PESC*. Modern capitalism has triumphed universally (or globally as we now say) but the validity grounds are in one crucial sense rooted in ascetic Puritanism. At the end of *PESC* Weber registers a profound unease with the constraints imposed upon the conduct of life under modern capitalism. He lets himself go in a very un-value-free way painting an almost apocalyptic vision of capitalism as a vast, impersonal machine that imprisons the individual in a ‘casing as hard as steel’. He invokes Nietzsche’s ‘letzten Menschen’ saying that the modern individual has professional vocation but no spirit and he or she pursues hedonism without feeling from the heart. And in his wider analysis he makes it quite clear that modernity is a procedural and formal achievement that is successful precisely because of its capacity of disregarding substantive values. Modernity is built upon a disconnect between conscience and community, justice and legality, the exercise of power and brotherhood, economic utility and social justice. Modernity succeeded because it broke the hegemony of natural law. Weber gives us the history of how this occurred—through the particularism of Calvinism, sects and predestination and the blithe self-sufficiency of economic individualism. He is warning us that modernity carries within it a


27. These passages also raise the problem that Weber is addressing the ‘high capitalism’ of the end of the nineteenth century and not early modern developments. See the Weber of 1920 in the ‘Author’s Introduction’ where he adopts a more rationalist approach to modernity and its history.
trait of the narrowing outlook of Puritan asceticism. For example, today’s obsessive work ethic is an outcome of this trait. Modern capitalism, to use a life science idiom, has an enormously effective replication mechanism but this should not obscure the fact that its originating cultural component or ‘genes’ were highly particularistic.

Tawney had the confidence within the framework of British society to assert the overcoming of means (wealth) through the pursuit of moral ends. The acquisitive individual for Tawney possessed a limited moral validity even though this materialist type had predominated throughout the nineteenth century. Ends that stood beyond the individual could claim a higher validity, and the politics of social reform would enable their universal acceptance (and only in retrospect do we realize what a massive undertaking that politics entailed).

In conclusion perhaps an obvious truth should be acknowledged and reflected upon. This essay was triggered by the circumstance of holding a conference on Weber’s *PESC* at Toynbee Hall in 2004. The genus *moderner Kapitalismus* is alive and well in a way that Weber would perfectly understand. Weber was unflinching in the clarity and analytic depth he brought to the subject. Tawney would be both amazed and dismayed. His analysis tended to assume the earthly powers of capitalism could be tamed within a moral vision of progress, in which a philosophical idealism was buttressed by a national tradition. His was a vision of Laudian ‘socialism’ secure at the centre that overlooked and took for granted the dissenting periphery. For Weber the dissenting periphery represented the power of reform in both economics and politics. It was the innovating force of modernity that Weber would, in the absence of a satisfactory national tradition, have placed at the centre.  

28. I am grateful for the comments on this paper supplied by Maurice Glasman, Duncan Kelly, Mohammad Nafissi, Guenther Roth and Keith Tribe.