Work and the Conduct of Life: Weber’s Legacy

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Abstract
The article examines the role of work in Weber’s oeuvre. Work is not a central concept for Weber but he did write extensively on the subject, and the article organizes his writings into four domains: the organization of work, occupation and social stratification, work and political community, and finally, work, personality and lifestyle. This analytical and empirical interest in labor and labor regimes was embedded in his major problem—the rise of the West, and his analytical framework involved the study of economy, polity and culture. The article discusses Weber’s problem, sets out his analytical frame of reference, and reconstructs his major empirical studies as well as the famous ‘Protestant Ethic’ studies where the objective and subjective aspects of work and its meaning are particularly prominent. In conclusion, Weber’s legacy for sociological studies of work in the twenty-first century is outlined with respect to current problems and discourses in this sociological field.

Keywords: Labor, lifestyle, occupation, personality, Protestant ethic, rise of the West, stratification, work.


Max Weber, ‘Der Nationalstaat und die Wirtschaftspolitik’ (1895)1

1. M. Weber 1921/1971: 4; M. Weber 1996: 17. English translation: If our work is to retain any meaning it can only be informed by this: concern for the future, for those who will come after us. But there can also be no real work in political economy on the
1. Introduction

Work played a crucial role throughout the oeuvre of Max Weber. He was above all interested in the meaning of work, the emergence of a rational work organization and the relationship of vocation and personal identity. This preoccupation with labor and its correlates was however embedded in a larger problem set which defined his life as a scholar, namely the rise of Western capitalism and the uniqueness of occidental modernity.

Max Weber was probably one of the last universal scholars of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century who could equally be regarded as an economist, legal scholar, political scientist, historian and sociologist. His widely ranging scientific interests dealt with economic, juridical, historical and sociological studies of Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Modernity. Where other classics just looked at work, the division of labor and social differentiation, Weber studied the embeddedness of work in four domains: (1) with regard to the technical and economic structure, he analyzed the work organization and the structuration of labor through bureaucracies; (2) with respect to the social structure, he clarified the relationship of occupation and social stratification; (3) vis-à-vis the political structure, he was preoccupied with ‘Classes, Estates and Parties’ as forms of political community; (4) dealing with the cultural structure, he focused upon ascetic Protestantism and the culture of the West elucidating the intricate relationship of vocation, personality and style of life. Given this richness, it does not come as a surprise that the towering figure Max Weber became a multiple founding father. He inspired not only social and political theory, but helped establish many specialized fields of sociology: economic sociology, the sociology of work, occupation and industry, organizational studies, the sociology of inequality and stratification, political and cultural sociology as well as the sociology of religion.2

basis of optimistic dreams of happiness. In the dream for peace and happiness there is written above the door of the unknown future of human history: abandon hope all ye who enter here.

The question which leads us beyond the grave of our own generation is not how will human beings feel in the the future but how they will be. In fact this question underlies all work in political economy. We do not want to train up feelings of well being in people, but rather those characteristics we think constitute the greatness and nobility of our human nature.

Within the confines of this essay, we will exclusively deal with work in modernity and leave Antiquity and the Middle Ages aside. And within modernity we will concentrate upon domains one and four. We will discuss the technical and economic structure with respect to the work organization on the one hand, the cultural structure concerning work, personality and style of life on the other hand. The focus is thus on the structural side—society and its work organization, and on the cultural side—mankind (‘Menschentum’) and the implications for personality formation and style of life. Work in the oeuvre of Max Weber denotes a crucial and important notion, but not a key concept or ‘Grundbegriff’ like rationalization, organization or domination. Unlike Marx who has an anthropological, philosophical, economic and sociological concept of work, Weber studies the embeddedness of work in those four domains. Although a limitation, the focus on the structural and cultural side is substantially justified as Weber is typically interested in the societal configuration and its institutional makeup—and the work organization is one of the central institutions—as well as in the sense and meaning of work for the human personality.

In order to flesh out his complex idea and concept of work, we will proceed in five steps: first, I will highlight the rationale of Weber’s oeuvre, his ‘Problemstellung’, the rise of capitalism and the uniqueness of Western modernity; second, I will give a brief outline of his theoretical approach; third, I will turn to the emergence of an occupational ethic, his famous study of Protestantism; fourth, I shall look at his empirical work on modern labor organization; and finally, I will return to Weber’s crucial concern, the consequences of capitalism and modernity for the relationship between work, personality and style of life (‘Lebensführung’) by revisiting his essays on science and politics as vocations.

2. Max Weber’s ‘Problemstellung’

In his famous preface to the collected essays on the sociology of religion Weber asks why the rise of rational capitalism and the uniqueness of occidental modernity became possible only in the West. In a nutshell, this question defines Weber’s lifelong quest and the ‘Problemstellung’ of his oeuvre. How can this unique configuration be characterized and, furthermore, how is it possible to explain this peculiar configuration? What role does labor and the organization of work
play in this occidental scenario? There are four features which circumscribe the Western constellation of universal significance to the rest of the world.

1. The most important feature is capitalism, ‘der schicksalsvollsten Macht unseres modernen Lebens’ (‘the most fateful force in our modern life’) (Weber 1921/1971: 4; 1996: 17). Greed, the pursuit of gain, the lust for money pertains to ‘all sorts and condition of men’ at all times and in all places—these ‘motives’ are not at all specific or typical for rational modern capitalism. Rather, it is the rational tempering of greed in favor of a controlled pursuit of profit which is the hallmark of this new economic system. In other words, capitalistic economic action relies upon the peaceful pursuit of exchange chances based upon the expectation of profitability. Acquisition by force and not peaceful voluntary economic interaction mark all sorts of ‘adventure capitalism’ throughout the history of mankind. The rational Western type of economizing, however, rests upon four institutional developments of great significance: (a) the separation of household and firm: as long as family concerns predominate the business full rational economizing is impeded due to material aspects of provision of, and social justice for, family members and relatives; household or family work has to be separated from industrial or professional labor to enable the rise of institutions of labor markets and wage labor; (b) rational book-keeping allows not only a clear-cut separation of the fortunes of household and firm but inasmuch guarantees the rational calculation of gains and losses in the business. The balance sheet is the technical means to measure the success of an enterprise over time; (c) the existence of free labor, that is, people who in the famous phrase of Marx have nothing to sell but their labor power. Workers or proletarians in this sense are vital for the inflow of manpower into the capitalistic enterprises; d) the capitalistic work organization, the commercialization of everything into a commodity, requires a–c and thrives upon the stock market and profits from this social structuration of work. In sum then:

The emergence of rational occidental capitalism is closely connected to the other developments Weber sees as only taking place in their peculiar characteristics in the West.

2. *Science* in combination with *technology* based upon the rational experiment and rational proof is a unique product of the Occident.

3. *Art* is an expressive mode common to all people of the world. But harmony in music, the linear perspective in painting and certain principles in architecture can only be found in the West.

4. The *state* as a rational institution based upon a constitution, rationally ordered *law*, a rational *bureaucracy* and civil servants oriented toward these rules of law in this pure sense again emerged only in the Western hemisphere.

How can we account for this unique institutional configuration of the West, this peculiar structuration of the economy, culture and the polity? Where does this occidental rationalism come from and in which ‘Gestalt’ does it materialize? What is the key to discover the character of this rationalism? As we will see, the key to this puzzle is not labor *per se* but religion dignifying work as vocation. Rationalism and rationalization, however, are ambivalent terms. One can rationalize social life in different directions and in distinct forms. The task therefore is to determine which spheres of life were rationalized in which form and direction and how this connects to the rest of society.

‘Es kommt also zunächst wieder darauf an: die besondere Eigenart des okzidentalen und, innerhalb dieses, des modernen okzidentalen Rationalismus zu erkennen und in ihrer Entstehung zu erklären’ (Weber 1921/1976: I, 12).4 Such an explanatory attempt has to be

3. English translation: ‘Hence in a universal history of culture the central problem for us is not, in the last analysis, even from a purely economic viewpoint, the development of capitalistic activity as such, differing in different cultures only in form: the adventurer type, or capitalism in trade, war, politics, or administration as sources of gain. It is rather the origin of this sober bourgeois capitalism with its rational organization of free labour. Or in terms of cultural history, the problem is that of the origin of the Western bourgeois class and of its peculiarities, a problem which is certainly closely connected with that of the origin of the capitalistic organization of labour, but is not quite the same thing’ (Weber 1996: 23-24).

4. English translation: ‘It is hence our first concern to work out and to explain genetically the special peculiarity of Occidental rationalism, and within this field that of modern Occidental form’ (Weber 1996: 26).
based primarily upon the economic conditions and the rational work organization given the importance of capitalism as the most fundamental power of modern life. But despite the economic focus one should not abandon the other side of the correlation, that is, besides the structural one the cultural orientation. Modern economic rationalism surely depends on science and technology, and on law and the state as material conditions, but equally so on the ability and disposition of men to pursue an adequate type of practical conduct as spiritual prerequisites. Where this ‘fit’ between material conditions and cultural orientation was absent, Weber assumes, that thorough rationalization was obstructed by cultural resistance. Since in the past magical and religious powers were the main source of cultural orientations, it is religion that provides an answer to the puzzle of the rise of Western rationalism. Before we turn to his study of capitalism and religion, and the birth of a new sense of work as vocation, we need to understand the approach Weber uses in his studies.

3. Max Weber’s theoretical approach

Weber’s image of modern society is intimately linked to his predominant interest in understanding the rise of the West. Nowhere does he find such a high degree of structural differentiation, institutional specialization and autonomy of value spheres and life orders than in Western societies. But he certainly is not a typical differentiation theorist. In fact, he took great pains to distance himself from differentiation theorists like Comte and Durkheim in France, Spencer in England and Tönnies in Germany. Yet in studying the rise of the West he came close to a theory of institutional differentiation. If one tries to derive a theoretical frame of reference from his substantive studies, we find that Weber employed a theory of action, order and culture to analyze the ‘Economy and the Societal Orders and Powers’. Without going into details of his theory of institutional differentiation we can state that Weber usually operates with the distinction of economy, polity and culture.\(^5\) When looking at the societal orders Weber is interested not only in the institutional configuration and its power and impact on the individual way of life, but also, as an action theorist, he is curious to study the interplay of ideas and interests\(^6\) – that is, the interests of economic achievement, of political power, and of the


religious salvation interests of status groups and collective actors. The frame of reference with which Weber operates—one based upon the theory of action, order and culture and the focus on economy and the social orders and powers—can be seen in the architecture of *Economy and Society*. Starting from a set of basic categories, *Economy and Society* contains an economic sociology, a sociology of authority backed by a sociology of the city as the spatial and social site of power, a sociology of law as legitimation of domination and a sociology of religion. *Voilà!* economy, polity and culture are the core domains of a modern society with which Weber deals primarily. In this sense, the *differentia specifica* of his sociology of the economy, power, city, law and religion is its historical and systematic character. Historically, Weber orders the world-historical material into ideal types and comes up with specific, sharply tailored concepts; systematically, he makes a contribution— *nolens, volens* — to the societal history of occidental modernization. The paradox of *Economy and Society* is that Weber denies the claim to a comprehensive theory of society; yet in working on his lifelong project—to understand the specificity of the occidental development, this enables him to develop ideal types which are of significance for any theory of society.

The attractiveness and applicability of Weber’s approach has much to do with the two pillars of occidental rationalism which we have already encountered: capitalism, ‘the most fateful force in our modern life’ (Weber 1921/1976: I, 4; 1996: 17) and religion. Capitalism and religion are the two central powers which shape the individual’s way of life. Religion plays the most influential role in premodern societies since ‘modern man on the whole is unable to imagine the degree of importance which religious consciousness once had for way of life, culture and folk character as high as it factually had been’ (Weber 1921/1976: I, 205 my translation). Modern capitalism in conjunction with science and technology, bureaucratic organization and professional man leaves a powerful imprint on the character of contemporary societies. Above all, this configuration drives secularization and disenchantment of the world since it subjects more and more realms of society to the standards of technical-instrumental rationality. This process of rationalization has three grave consequences.

First, religion as the former central value sphere is ‘progressively driven from the realm of rationality into irrationality and now for the first time becomes the irrational or anti-rational superpersonal power par excellence’ (Weber 1921/1976: I, 564 my translation). Furthermore, religion loses its unquestioned priority in the everyday life of the
people and other secular objectives tend to replace the quest for religious salvation. Finally, the economy and polity as the proto-typical mundane powers gain in prominence and significance on the one hand; but on the other hand, at the level of culture, other forces than religion compete for the role as the predominant source of meaning. Whereas religion once defined culture, it has now become one player among others—and not necessarily the most important one. As is evident from his sociology of religion, the rationalization of life orders and the secularization of ideals bring in its wake the retreat of religious forms of life and the once almost hegemonic religious sphere is replaced by a differentiated ‘culture’.

4. Religion and capitalism: The rise of a modern occupational ethic

In his study, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1996) (hereafter PESC), Max Weber seeks to demonstrate that in the wake of the Reformation we find a spiritual upgrading of work, indeed the emergence of an occupational ethic, which formed a central component of the spirit of capitalism and favored the rise of capitalism in the West. Throughout the history of mankind, work received an ambivalent assessment. Labor is necessary for the biological and social reproduction of mankind and insofar it is an inevitable means of survival; yet it is heavy, burdensome and unwelcome from the viewpoint of a more rich and fulfilled life, the eu ben or the good life. This constitutive ambiguity is expressed in the strain between labor and work, between the inconvenient effort and exertion as well as the product of labor, an œuvre. This is a strain which can be observed in many European languages: ‘ponos’ versus ‘ergon’, ‘labor’ versus ‘opus’, ‘Mühe’ versus ‘Werk’, ‘travail’ versus ‘œuvre’. On the one hand, labor has the passive meaning of effort, pain and burden, particularly with respect to manual work. On the other hand, it refers to the voluntary, active and intentional effort and its product, an œuvre particularly with respect to brain work (cf. Conze 1972). This ambivalent, if not depre- ciative, assessment of labor prevailed in Antiquity and the Middle Ages—cum grano salis of course—with the result that minor or inferior types of labor were regularly attributed to the lower levels of the social hierarchy like slaves, laborers, peasants, women and children—in short: people without full citizenship. ‘Burgier’ or full citizens were preoccupied with nobler tasks like the governance of the polity, military warfare or spiritual welfare of the community. Weber stated this succinctly in his Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum:

The Judaeo-Christian impact transformed this overall picture and led to three major consequences: (1) manual labor is valuable as long as it is in the service of God – this in itself entails an upgrading of work; (2) since all human beings have to work in the name of and for the glory of God, they are equal – as Christians and religious people; (3) the counter-element of work is calmness, tranquility, rest and repose – the Sabbath or Sunday. Sabbath is not the same as leisure or ‘otium’ since it is free or spare time saved for the spiritual conversation with God. In the Christian understanding, the counter-concept for work becomes ‘otiositas’ or idleness. According to Saint Benedict, ‘otiositas inimicae est animae’—idleness is the enemy of the soul (cf. Conze 1972: 160). This gradual upgrading of labor in Christian thought was only interrupted by scholastic philosophy during the Middle Ages, insofar as Thomas Aquinus bluntly stated: ‘Vita contemplativa simpliciter melior est quam vita activa’ (cf. Conze 1972: 162)—a contemplative life is simply better or superior than an active life.

The Reformation removed this ambiguity in favor of the full-fledged recognition of work. Luther’s critique of idleness and the luxury of the Catholic Church as well as his attack on the hierarchy of church aristocracy and simple believer re-established the symmetry of rank between vita contemplativa and vita activa. His formula of ora et labora underlines the equality between these two ways of life. As Christians we all pray and work in the name of God. In his perspective, work is upgraded toward an occupation or vocation, even a ‘calling’ by and from God which obliges us to lifelong occupational labor in a conscientious, reliable and confident manner. The Christian works and leaves the consequences of his action to God. ‘Schuster bleib bei Deinen Leisten’ is the motto of Luther. If an occupation acquires the status of a vocation or calling, one is not allowed to

7. English translation: On the other hand there was no ethical glorification of acquisitive activity, at least only faint signs among the Cynics and the hellenistic-oriental petite bourgeoisie. The economic individual in antiquity had no support equivalent to the religiously motivated vocational ethic of early modernity and its contribution to the rationalization and economic ordering of life.
ignore God’s call or try something else in order to make more money or enter into a brilliant career. This rather rigid concept of occupational work has three lasting consequences whose impact may be observed in Germany to this very day. First of all, it motivates people to stay in and with their job once it has been chosen, and this explains the occupational durability of the attribution of job and job holder. Secondly, it places only a small premium on social or occupational mobility as a value in itself, and this accounts for the fact of comparatively low rates of regional and social mobility in Germany. Thirdly, the ideal of lifelong employment in one job and in one company translates into an occupational pattern that is empirically observable during the second half of the twentieth century in Germany. This pattern came to be called ‘Normalarbeitsverhältnis’ or lifelong full employment according to the male model.

Calvin’s accentuation is quite different. Although he shares Luther’s equalization of *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*—work as a Christian duty and the condemnation of all forms of idleness, he is much more radical than his German counterpart in at least three respects. First, occupational work should form a bulwark against laziness at the top and the bottom of the social ladder—against the idleness of the nobility and the begging of the destitute. Secondly, he or she who is not working, should not eat and therefore people have to be ‘educated’ or, frankly put, constrained to do work. This marks not only the advent of the so-called ‘Arbeitsgesellschaft’ or working society but prompts the establishment of prisons and penitentiaries in which labor is ‘trained’. Thirdly, work as occupational work or vocation becomes a duty for everyone regardless of rank or status.

‘Der Puritaner wollte Berufsmensch sein, wir müssen es’ (‘The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so’) states Max Weber (1921/1976: I, 203; 1996: 181). But how did the Reformation which erected a ‘unendlich lästige und ernstgemeinte Reglementierung der ganzen Lebensführung’ (‘a regulation of the whole of conduct which, penetrating to all departments of private and public life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced’) (Weber 1921/1976: I, 20; 1996: 36) contribute to the emergence and establishment of a ‘capitalist spirit’? This is the question Weber sets out to answer in his study. Starting from the empirical observation that protestant capitalists are more successful in quantitative and qualitative terms than catholic entrepreneurs in Germany around 1900, he illustrates the Puritan ethic with respect to the ethical maxims put forward by Benjamin Franklin. The *summum bonum* of this Puritan ethic seems to be the
acquisition of more and more money as an end in itself without any
temptation to enjoy the accumulated fortune as a source of happiness
or utility, as present day rational choice explanations would hold. It is
this irrational moment which is puzzling, the turning upside down of
the ‘normal’ means-ends-relationship. Acquisition and gain become
the ultimate ends in life. They are not, as in former and more tradi-
tional types of society, simply as a necessary means to the end of the
satisfaction of human wants and needs. Ability, proficiency and excel-
ence in a vocation define the alpha and omega of Benjamin Franklin’s
concept of religious morality. For Weber, the empirical facts and the
peculiar character of the Puritan ethic point out that monetary gain,
proficiency and the idea of occupational duty taken together provide

But how can this be precisely demonstrated and explained? Weber’s
approach in *PESC* employs an explanatory principle based upon the
notion of unintended consequences. According to his view, cultural
accounts of how ideas gain impact in social life are often of this type
of explanation. The aim of the Reformation did not consist in a contri-
bution to an ethical reform program, let alone was animated by the
intention to lend emerging capitalism in the future a solid base for an
occupational ethic in order to create good workers and successful
entrepreneurs. The objective was not materialistic and economic but
purely spiritualistic and religious: salvation and the ‘certitudo salutis’
was what mattered for the protestant reformers. To think that the
Reformation ‘caused’ capitalism therefore is simply wrong and mis-
conceives how religious ideas may have an impact on economic devel-
opment and the work regime. Quite to the contrary, one has to assume
that much of the cultural consequences of the Reformation were
unforeseen, largely unintended and even unwanted from the view-
point of Luther and Calvin. In order to work out this intuitive idea of
an unintentional impact Weber looks at the interplay of the material
foundations, the social and political organizational forms and the
spiritual contents. This is quite in line with his approach to studying
the relationships of economy, politics and culture.

In order to illustrate this syndrome of unintended consequences in
the relationship between Reformation and capitalism as well as the
rise of a favorable work ethic Weber proceeds in two steps: first, in
‘the religious foundations of innerworldly asceticism’ he shows how
the religious ethic gives birth to a new Puritan occupational ethic;
second, in ‘asceticism and capitalistic spirit’ he tries to determine in
what way the Puritan occupational ethic influenced capitalistic life.

The historical bearers of ascetic Protestantism were the religious movements of Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism and the Baptist Sects. Weber analyzes the belief systems and the religious life of those movements in order to find out the psychological incentives for a specific rational-methodical conduct of life (‘Lebensführung’). Paramount in his analysis is the doctrine of predestination of Calvinism. According to Calvin, God has decided from the beginning who of the believers will share in salvation and who will eventually be condemned. God is a ‘deus absconditus’ unreadable for human beings in his holy decisions and in the last instance not to be influenced by the religious conduct of the believers. The uncertain future of one’s own salvation must have put extreme pressure and anxiety onto its believers. The extreme inhumanity of the pure doctrine rendered the individual to extreme inner loneliness and fostered a religious individualism. There was no help to be expected, neither from God (deus absconditus), nor from the church (no relief through confession possible) or the religious community since every Puritan was in the same difficult situation and the members of the community were competitors for the scarce positions of salvation in heaven. The logical effect of this belief system would have been utmost fatalism but in fact it contributed to enormous innerworldly activism, busy-ness, unrelented work and world-mastery. How was this possible? Pastoral care gave two practical hints to the believers which had the far-reaching practical effect of turning around the incentive structure from fatalism to activism. First of all, everybody has the duty to believe in his own electedness. He who does not believe in himself, God surely will not believe in; and he who doubts seems to be lost to the devil anyway. Secondly, relentless vocational work is one means to acquire self reliance or self-evidence to be among the happy few of the electi. Mundane success in one’s calling is undoubtedly no firm proof for salvation but at least a promising sign. Taken together, this religious praxis provided a sub-optimal means with respect to the aim of gaining utmost evidence or security but it offered a potential way out of this impossible impasse which Calvin’s God had created for its followers.

Yet pastoral care fostered a steady control of the state of grace by the individual believer, not just through magical sacraments or relief in the confession or just by single good deeds, but by a rational ethical conduct, a kind of innerworldly asceticism in one’s calling or vocation. ‘Diese Rationalisierung der Lebensführung innerhalb der Welt im Hinblick auf das Jenseits war die Wirkung der Berufskonzeption des asketischen Protestantismus’ ('This rationalization of conduct
within this world, but for the sake of the world beyond, was the conse-
quence of the concept of calling of ascetic Protestantism’) (Weber

This Puritan idea of occupational work had enormous consequences
for economic life in general and for the capitalistic way of life in par-
ticular. In the theological discourses throughout Christianity money
and wealth were at worst seen as detrimental to a religious way of
life, at best they were met with indifferance. With Puritanism, money
and wealth experienced an almost Nietzschean Umwertung der Werte,
a re-evaluation of values as they are considered desirable as long as
wealth is not enjoyed and does not lead to idleness or outright lazi-
ness. Relaxation in the security of possession distracts from the pur-
suit of a righteous life to be sure. But mundane and materialistic
success, measured in monetary terms of an accumulated fortune, is a
sign of proof and surely an indicator for the rich man to be on the
right way to salvation. The poor and the beggar, however, are not
only outsiders in the Puritan community devoid of prestige and rec-
ognition but they seem to be either an oeuvre of the devil or bound to
become his easy booty given their idle and godless way of life. Work
in the Gestalt of a calling and vocation provide the institutional back-
bone for religious conduct. The capitalistic division of labor, occupa-
tional differentiation and specialization are unreservedly embraced by
Puritanism since this differentiation process is ad maiorem gloriam dei.

Die religiöse Wertung der rastlosen, stetigen, systematischen, weltlichen
Berufsarbeit als schlechthin höchsten asketischen Mittels und zugleich
sicherer und sichtbarster Bewährung des wiedergeborenen Menschen
und seiner Glaubensechtheit mußte ja der denkbar mächtigste Hebel der
Expansion jener Lebensauffassung sein, die wir hier als 'Geist' des Kapi-
talismus bezeichnet haben. Und halten wir nun noch jene Einschnürung
der Konsumtion mit dieser Entfesselung des Erwerbsstrebens zusammen,
so ist das äußere Ergebnis naheliegender: Kapitalbildung durch asketischen
Sparzwang [...] Soweit die Macht puritanischer Lebensauffassung reichte,
kam sie unter allen Umständen – und dies ist natürlich weit wichtiger
als die bloße Begünstigung der Kapitalbildung – der Tendenz zu bür-
gerlicher, ökonomisch rationaler Lebensführung zugute; sie war ihr
wesentlichster und vor allem: ihr einzig konsequenter Träger. Sie stand
an der Wiege des modernen ‘Wirtschaftsmenschen’ (Weber 1912/1976:
I, 192-95).8

8. English: ‘The religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a
worldly calling, the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and
most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful
conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have here

Innerworldly asceticism is a powerful and demonic force, paradoxical and in line with Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust*: it is the power ‘which ever seeks the evil but always creates the good’. At the end of *PESC* Weber draws a somber resume and gives a gloomy outlook. The Puritans sought a calling, we moderns have to work in an occupation if we like it or not. Established capitalism has long since shed its Puritan roots and has erected a worldwide mechanical system which leaves no one and no place unaffected and shapes everybody’s style of life. Globalized capitalism forms an ‘iron cage’.

5. *Modern work-organization: Rural and industrial labor*

The iron cage built in the wake of the Industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism placed the ‘social question’ on the agenda. The capitalised the spirit of capitalism. When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save... 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 1996: 172-74).

9. English: ‘Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history[...] No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved’ ’ (Weber 1996: 181-82).
talistic work organization had not only spiritual implications as it
degenerated occupations in the sense of vocations and callings to
mere jobs entailing the loss of a meaningful good life in the religious
sense of the Puritans. It had also grave material consequences as it
gave birth to a new class of the dispossessed, the workers or the prole-
tariat. The social question posed the central problem for early indus-
trial society in such an urgent manner that workers organized in social
movements, parties and unions. Consequently, a new ideology was
created and socialism became the third Weltanschauung besides con-
servatism and liberalism in the nineteenth century. It is no coinci-
dence that in those times of social strife and conflict, sociology as a
social science was born, dealing primarily with the subject-matter of
social inequality, stratification and class. In order to remedy those
glave societal problems social policy measures were called for and at
the end of the century first attempts were undertaken to form a
welfare state to provide social security for the social classes whose
existence was precarious.

Against this political and social background, the Verein für Sozial-
politik led by Gustav Schmoller and Adolph Wagner conducted empiri-
cal investigations into the social conditions of occupational groups,
particularly the workers, and tried to come up with practical propos-
als for social reform. This scientific and practical-political bent lent
the group around Schmoller and Wagner the nick-name ‘Katheder-
sozialisten’, since these professors of political economy used their
lectern (‘Katheder’) in the University to convey reform ideas to the
larger public.

In 1890, the Verein für Sozialpolitik asked its members to conduct a
survey on rural workers. In the Verein’s survey, Die Verhältnisse der
Landarbeiter in Deutschland, Max Weber undertook the empirical analy-
sis of the rural workers in the East of Germany comprising East and
West Prussia, Pommerania, Posen, Silesia, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg
and Lauenburg. In 1895 Weber presented his results in a lengthy study
of 891 pages. He focused on the social structure of agriculture in East
Germany and put forward the thesis that we can observe a massive
restructuring of the population’s stratification. Before presenting the
empirical evidence he analyzed the constitution of labor and the dif-
ferent social positions and roles in the agriculture of the East. Agricul-
tural production typically had to cope with the varying amount of
labor needed over the year according to seasonal variations and
the frugality of the soil. This problem is met by two types of rural
workers. On the one hand, there was contract labor divided into three
types: the domestic servants or Gesinde working on a manorial estate, servants or Deputatisten working for agrarian civil servants and the so-called Instleute or Gutstagelöhner who worked on the manorial estate. In contrast to them were the ‘free’ laborers, who were hired without contract for a varying period of time, and included in this category were many Russian-Polish migrant workers. If these types of labor and workers characterize the social structure of the rural work organization, how does this structure change over time? How do these developments affect the constitution of rural labor in East Germany? Weber’s main interest focuses on the significant role the Instleute play. They settle with their entire family and one or two servants on the land of the manor and the entire group works for the landowner. The remuneration consists of a wage, natural produce, land for own exclusive use and a certain share in the overall output and profit of the manor. This very peculiar work relationship prompted a very special social standing: on the one hand, the ‘Instleute’ did not have a pure labor contract but remained embedded in a power-relationship of domination since the landowner could dispose of the entire group for his purposes. On the other hand, it was not an exclusive wage labor relationship since the Instleute shared in the profits of the land. They were a combination of worker, petit entrepreneur and servant. But, given this heterogeneous motivational syndrome, they shared many interests with the landowner and this formed the basis for a cooperative relationship.

In his material analysis Weber investigates the frugality of the soil, the development of the ownership and the distribution of the different labor types over the manorial estates in the East. In addition Weber investigated in detail the working conditions and the social provisions to which the different categories of workers were entitled. Weber unearthed a dominant movement from patriarchal organization to a capitalist one, in short a shift from tradition to modernity. Economic forces, above all international competition on the agricultural markets, and social forces, among them foremost the ‘emancipation’ of the rural workers from patriarchal domination, both tended to undermine the old work constitution. Landowners more and more used migrant guest-workers since they were easily dismissed and not entitled to any social provisions (though they were not necessarily cheaper in wages). Agricultural estate workers increasingly preferred to be seen as workers and not as petit entrepreneurs sharing the risk in profit development. Interestingly enough, Weber states, although domestics, servants and Instleute are economically better off, on social terms they
tended to prefer ‘modern’ wage labor relationships and detested patriarchal domination. Against Marx’s immiseration thesis, Weber could show that for rural labor and the organization of their work, money took second place to the sense of freedom. Estate workers preferred a lower wage and free labor over a secure but patriarchal relationship. Material interests seemed to be outweighed by the normative quest for freedom and modern egalitarian relationships. The social question at the time was not a predominantly urban or industrial problem but above all a rural and agricultural issue; in 1881 47% of the working population were still engaged in rural occupations.

The Verein für Sozialpolitik did, however, also undertake a survey on industrial labor, since Germany was on the verge of turning rapidly into an industrial state. In addition, the political activities of the labor movement, the labor party and the unions on the one hand, and the fear of a revolutionary working class overthrowing the established social order of aristocracy and bourgeoisie on the other hand, lent the figure of the proletarian, a legendary demon haunting early industrial society, a prominence and visibility which his counterpart in the countryside could never muster. Unfortunately, the young science of sociology made its own contribution to the asymmetry of attention between rural-agricultural and urban-industrial labor since theory and social research unevenly focused upon the emerging proletariat.

From 1907 the Verein für Sozialpolitik conducted a survey into the main areas of industry and these were published in seven volumes between 1910 and 1915. Max Weber developed a manual for these investigations. The main themes can be summarized as follows:


10. English translation: The present inquiry seeks, on the one hand, to establish the effects of large scale factory production on the personal characteristics, occupational fate and extra-occupational life-style of the work force, including how the workers’ physical and psychological attributes develop and how these attributes manifest themselves in the overall life-conduct of the workforce; on the other hand, the
Weber narrowed this general way of posing the problem down to two questions. (1) Which category of workers with which kind of skills are favorably recruited and which category typically runs the risk of being excluded from the regime of large-scale industry? (2) In what ways are the typical recruitment patterns dependent on the extent and the kind of capital needed by the specific industry in question? Weber pointed to the crucial driving force that has always propelled the capitalistic rationalization of the work organization: the ‘organic composition’ of capital in a company—a term both Marx and Weber use to highlight this central point. The more capital is invested in the technical infrastructure, the more workers will be replaced by a machine. Quite in line with the results of industrial sociology, in general Weber assumes the pattern of a clear-cut bifurcation. The less skilled a worker the more he is prone to be replaced by a machine whereas more intelligent workers are indispensable and more protected against technological rationalization—an insight which Robert Reich recently expressed succinctly as the distinction between generic labor and symbolic workers (Reich 1991). Weber’s heightened interest in the relationship between the technical and the social division of labor in the firm as well as the characterological qualities of the working class thus produced led him to questions to do with the physiological and psychological conditions and consequences of issues like fatigue at the workplace, recovery, concentration, habitualization, practice and so on, and to explore the psycho-physiological conditions of labor productivity in more detail. Since he was so intrigued with this physiological and psychological side of the technical division of labor he wrote a ‘Psychophysics of Work’ (Weber 1924/1988: 61-225) which discussed the scientific literature of the time on these matters. In these writings Weber appears as a precursor of Taylorism, a Fordist avant la lettre. Yet, behind this rather technical side of the structuration of the labor process and the concomitant work organization stood always his firm humanistic interest in the type of human being the working class assumes in industrial capitalism.

6. Work, personality and the style of life

His studies on the reality of work organization and the fate of rural and industrial laborers showed convincingly that we have come a
long way since the sanctification of labor to a calling by the Puritans. Present day work conditions do not offer a vocation or a calling but an occupation or a job to provide the necessary means for living. Work means survival, not the opening up of a privileged avenue to lead a meaningful good life. Most of Weber’s writings, therefore, revolved around the question if and how far work indeed has lost its once inspiring quality for creating an autonomous personality—the famous self-reliance of the Puritans—and the sense of a meaningful rational-methodical style of life.

Despite the intimate connection between work, personality and style of life in his thought (cf. Goldmann 1988; Müller 1992; Seyfarth 2001; Voß 1991), Weber never came up with a typology of labor comparable to the trio of work, occupation and profession (Hartmann 1968). Work may indeed imply just a job, an occupation as ‘jene Spezifierung, Spezialisierung und Kombination von Leistungen einer Person’ (‘the mode of specialization, specification, and combination of the functions of an individual’) (Weber 1921/1971: 80; 1978: 140) requiring training, qualification and licensed skills; whereas a profession, in addition, lends considerable autonomy to an occupational group in defining their corporate identity, their social standing and their prestige. Therefore, the question eventually arising is, are Weber’s image of the iron cage and his formula of the ‘Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genußmenschen ohne Herz’ (‘specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart’) (1921/1976: I, 204; 1996: 182) his last say in this matter?

Late in his life Weber comes back to this problem with his two famous lectures on ‘Science as Vocation’ (1917) (1919/1988: 582-613) and ‘Politics as a Vocation’ (1919) (1919/1971: 505-60). Both these articles combine an almost prophetic outlook with a sober sociological analysis of these professions. Science and Politics circumscribe spheres in their own right and with their own dignity. In order to elucidate their character, Weber studies their institutional makeup and their inner constitution. Upon the solid foundation of such an analysis, one can ask which properties scientists and politicians need to develop in order to fulfill these vocations successfully and which meaning such selected ‘personalities’ have in the entire moral economy of the conduct of life (‘die sittliche Gesamtökonomie der Lebensführung’ [Weber 1921/1971: 635]).

In ‘Science as a Vocation’ Weber first analyzes the outer condition of the scholarly occupation by comparing the career organization in Germany and the United States; he then goes on to look at the inner
meaning of scholarship, the prerequisites of this occupation and discusses the problem of meaning in science for the scholar himself and the role of science for society in general. Weber proceeds in exactly the same way in ‘Politics as a Vocation’. He outlines the differentiation of an autonomous sphere of politics with the state as the embodiment of legitimate physical violence, reconstructs the different types of domination in their modes of organization and their kinds of legitimacy, and discusses the recruitment of political leaders who today do not only live for politics but from politics as well. What are the qualities of a politician who does not degenerate either into a career-oriented political opportunist or into a pure power politician? According to Weber only those who have the ‘calling’ for politics are able to discipline their political passion in favor of an ‘issue’ or ‘project’ and, at the same time, exert their power with responsibility and foresight.

Taken together, those two prophetic and sociological contributions reveal the inner coherence of work, personality and style of life in Weber’s thought. His basic idea relies upon the insight that today ‘vocation’ implies self-restraint quite in contrast to popular images of personality as the ‘can-do-all’ genius. Therefore, science as a vocation implies an ascetic life in the name of a cause and is restricted to specialized professional labor. What it does not offer is reconciliation or, like Goethe’s Faust, the Protean image of full-fledged self-realization. ‘Dies asketische Grundmotiv des bürgerlichen Lebensstils — wenn er eben Stil und nicht Stillosigkeit sein will’ (‘This fundamentally ascetic trait of middle-class life, if it attempts to be a way of life at all, and not simply the absence of any’) (Weber 1921/1976: I, 203; 1996: 180-81) is constitutive for the modern vocational man and is quite different from the degenerate version of ‘specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart’ (1996: 182). Where this fundamentally ascetic trait flowers and which stood already at the cradle of the bourgeois way of life, there is room for the vocation as a calling and the formation of an autonomous personality. Quite accordingly Weber defines personality as ‘Konstanz ihres inneren Verhältnisses zu bestimmten letzten “Werten“ und “Lebens-Bedeutungen”’ (‘the inner stability with respect to specific last and lasting values and meanings of life’) (1922/1973: 132 my translation). To set these last and lasting values is not the task of modern science. Rather, it is up to the free choice of each individual, a fateful decision certainly in which ‘jeder den Dämon findet und ihm gehorcht, der seines Lebens Fäden hält’ (‘each and everyone finds the demon and obeys him who holds the threads of his life’) (1922/1973: 613 my translation).
Like Marx’s specter of capitalism which still haunts us today, so does Weber’s specter of a Puritan work ethic. Despite the fact that thanks to the permanent enhancement of labor productivity working society provides fewer and fewer jobs and less and less meaningful work, an ever increasing majority of people want a job which promises money and identity. This situation today forms a true paradox and poses a nice irony, and yet it remains we are what we do.

7. Conclusion

What can be derived from Weber’s multi-dimensional approach and his fruitful analysis of labor relations of industrial modernity? What might be gained today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century and one hundred years after Max Weber, for the investigation of the information and knowledge society? Which theoretical strategy marks Weber’s lasting legacy? In my view, we can draw upon four empirical insights and one theoretical device which we should pursue in our studies today.

1. Work, work organization and bureaucracy: the rationalization of work that Weber already noted has continued without interruption. In the twentieth century, the amount of work was halved. The volume of labor per head shrank from 1350 to 686 hours and the individual working hours per year went down from 3000 to 1530 hours worked. In contrast, the gross national product per capita grew times six whereas the productivity per hour rose 12 times. In short, labor seems to become more and more obsolescent. According to some estimates the potential for rationalization through the use of digital technologies in public administration and services would allow the dismissal of one third of the employed. At the same time, Weber’s fear of an ‘Egyptianization’ has not come true and the iron cage alters its form without losing its function as a hegemonic configuration of domination. Instead of an ‘Egyptianization’ we observe the retrenchment of hierarchies in corporations, a growing self-organization of labor and the renaissance of project and teamwork. In order to delineate this complex process of ‘de-hierarchization’ and come up with a simplified formula, one could pose a master trend from hierarchical bureaucracy to heterarchic network organizations. Yet labor still is determined by demand and supply, the re-structuration strategies of firms and growing skills requirements. Empirically, one can state the erosion of the ‘normal employment pattern’ (‘Normalarbeitsverhältnis’) for which Luther’s concept of work laid the foundations in
Germany. The model of the typical full-time male worker in one and
the same occupation and firm is more and more replaced by part-time
work, flexible labor and project labor.

2. Work, occupation and social stratification: Weber described the reli-
gious upgrading of labor as occupation and its profanation in the wake
of disenchantment. What is left of this religious heritage is the habitus
of a methodological-rational conduct of life. The disenchantment of
labor as occupation has continued since then. In Germany after the
Second World War, labor as a calling was substituted by the ‘normal
employment pattern’ and quite successfully so as an accomplishment
of the unions. Labor offered lifelong employment, income and social
security but not necessarily the meaning component of individual
self-realization. This substitute proved to be successful until the crisis
of working society. Labor today is quantitatively insufficient and
qualitatively unsatisfactory. The differential distribution of qualifica-
tions builds a growing gap between the top and the bottom, intellec-
tual and manual labor, between the ‘symbolic analyst’ and ‘generic
labor’. ‘The knowledge worker against the superfluous’ would seem
to be the formula for the new social question in the twenty-first
century.

3. Work and political community: Weber put forward the clear-cut
image of a class society as the foundation for the political community.
Since then, classes and estates of the nineteenth and early-twentieth
century seem to have disappeared altogether. Today, we try to account
for the social structure of advanced societies by referring to processes
of ‘individualization’ (Beck 1986), social and regional mobility as well
as the pluralization of styles of life. Individualization, however, might
well be incompatible with images of class culture yet this does not put
an end to structured social inequality. The sociological model calls this
state of affairs classless inequality on the basis of class relationships
without classes. Such an amorphous social structure lacks the power to
form clear-cut political camps according to the old opposition between
left and right as the wings of a political community. In due course,
voter alignments seem to have loosened and the basis for affiliation
into political communities like parties have become amorphous.

4. Work, personality and style of life: Weber feared the loss of freedom
in the wake of ‘Egyptianization’ as well as the loss of meaning by the
depletion of work. ‘Professionals without spirit, hedonists without
heart’ populate today, above all the new economic class of managers,
controllers, and consultants. In the 80s, this old and always renewable
type of man was delineated in the discourse on ‘Yuppies’. In the 90s it
pertained to financial wizards and magicians who exhibited excessive greed, power and a sense for fast money even by illegal means, as a number of scandals in the US and Europe showed. What is interesting to note, though, is the dramatic resurgence of a Puritan work ethic in the era of the ‘new economy’ of global capitalism—to an extent of charismatic infectiousness. It is like a disease, fast spreading and all encompassing. It seems as if we encounter the paradox of an occupational ethic without work emerging. In the transition from industrial capitalism to informational capitalism for the broad masses of people willing to work this entails the shift from occupational work to project labor. In Germany, the term ‘Ich-AG’ was coined to express this trend. ‘Ich-AG’ simply means ‘individual enterprise’ or the self-employed as a one man or one woman firm, a social democratic creation of almost Blairite cynicism. In sociological studies, the re-structuration of labor was characterized as ‘subjectivization of work’ (Baethge 1991; Moldaschl and Voß 2002) and the advent of the so-called ‘Arbeitskraftunternehmer’ (Voß and Pongratz 1998), that is, entrepreneur of one’s own labor power. What is meant is the massive fate or the lot of the masses to turn into ‘flexible man’ (Sennett 1998) or to succumb to a ‘cité par projet’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999).

Weber would have been surprised to experience such a juvenile late-capitalism and this rebirth of old ideals in a new disguise. What remains unclear though is the canny resurgence of the cultural hegemony of an occupational work ethos in times where the old established working society seems to recede and leaves many people without a job. After the Puritans who wanted to be devoted to occupational vocation as a device for salvation, and after ourselves who faced the need of making a living, it is striking to observe new waves of groups being drawn into the regime of working society. For women, work has paradoxically become a device for emancipation; the influx of migrants in search of a good life in the West also contribute to sanctify occupational work. The gap between the objective condition—the economic and technological rationalization offering fewer and fewer jobs and the subjective widespread dissemination of a hegemonic occupational ethic pose difficult challenges for the emerging information and knowledge society (Honneth 2002; Kocka and Ofte 2002; Müller 2001). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the work regime and the attitudes toward work in the age of informational capitalism seem to be more and more removed from Hannah Arendt’s (1958) vision of a ‘Tätigkeitsgesellschaft’ or ‘vita activa’ opening up spaces for all types of activity beyond paid labor.
Yet, Weber holds a theoretical device for the social scientists today. Instead of trying to construct the holistic image of an information age (e.g. Castells 1996) we might be better off by following Weber’s analytical approach and investigate work and work relationships in the four domains (outlined above), and then try to reflect upon the intricate relationships between them. Such a procedure allows us to examine the main trends and tendencies as well as to state paradoxes and ironies. A holistic approach might be blind, for instance, to the inconsistency of the economic and technological rationalization of labor in a time of a hegemonic work ethic without work.

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