

DERIVING A THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT FROM WEBER'S PROTESTANT ETHIC THESIS

Marc A. Olshan,
Cornell University

The Protestant ethic thesis has provided the theoretical foundation upon which numerous theories of development have been based. Yet any attempt to derive a theory of development from the Weberian thesis must first reconcile Weber's antipathy toward the process of modernization with the positive connotations now generally associated with development.

The concept of development contains a strong normative element. Development, as a goal, may be variably defined but regardless of its content it is a valued characteristic. It is perceived as worth the sacrifices made in its name. It is evaluated as better than the condition of underdevelopment. The concept of modernization, as employed by Weber, was devoid of this normative element. Modernization simply meant increased rationality and the bureaucratization of increasingly more aspects of social activity. To the extent that such phenomena are consciously fostered, development and modernization may at times denote the same process. The terms remain, however, conceptually discrete.

Weber himself never addressed the "problem" of achieving development. He viewed the process of modernization as inexorable, at least in the context of the Western world. It was therefore something with which to come to terms rather than to be encouraged. Like many of his contemporaries, including Durkheim (Tiryakian, 1975:10) and Tonnies (Heberle, 1973:65), Weber was more concerned with the negative consequences of modernization.

For Weber modernization constituted a threat to human dignity through "...the enslavement of individuals to anonymous organizations" (Aron, 1967:300). He feared that bureaucratization would give rise to a "new despotism" (Bendix, 1960:451) which would threaten individual autonomy and generate "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" (Weber, 1958:182).

If development is taken to mean the

realization of values held, then Weber is quite explicit as to how he would define it:

"We do not strive for man's future well-being; we are eager to breed in them those traits with which we link the feeling that they constitute what is humanly great and noble in our nature... In the last analysis, the processes of economic development are struggles for power. Our ultimate yardstick of values is 'reasons of state,' and this is also the yardstick for our economic reflections..." (Gerth and Mills, 1946:35).

Weber's view of development (i.e. that condition for which men ought to strive), is reflected in his advocacy of a nationalism strong enough to instill feelings of pride and dignity. Weber felt that such feelings must be fostered if men were not to be battered into anonymous, spiritless beings by the forces of bureaucratization.

Thus, those conditions which ought to be fostered (what might be interpreted as Weber's development goals) are to some extent antithetical to the conditions Weber associated with the process of modernization. It would then appear to be paradoxical to utilize Weber's explication of the non-normative process of modernization as a foundation for normatively defined theories of development.

If such a utilization involved nothing more than the derivation of an "ought" from an "is" then the procedure is unjustified as well as paradoxical. The normative elements of development are in this case, however, derived independently. They originate from a tradition of liberalism of which Weber might have been a part but which did not serve as a basis for his view of development. To the extent that Weber successfully understood and explicated the process of modernization, his thesis may be useful in guiding contemporary efforts to foster modernization (i.e. to achieve development as it is typically defined). Thus, the concept of development is not logically derived from Weber's concept of modernization. At times, however, the two terms may refer to the same process, valued by some, a source of suspicion and perhaps regret for others.

The Protestant ethic thesis has been the subject of so many articles, books, and discussions that it has become a cultural artifact in its own right. The arguments and counter-arguments compose an intricate structure that stands independently of the validity of the original thesis. However, despite its well-established nature and a general familiarity with the thesis, there continues to be serious disagreement over what Weber was saying. Consequently a brief outline of the thesis is in order before proceeding with an examination of some problems in its application.

THE PROTESTANT ETHIC. The most abbreviated version of the thesis that Weber himself was willing to offer is as follows:

"...the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as 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 called the spirit of capitalism." (Weber, 1958:172)

The anxiety which gave rise to this search for proof of one's salvation was born out of a combination of the doctrine of predestination (i.e. that man is incapable of altering the fate that God has already assigned) and the absence of any formal religious institutions such as indulgences, absolution, or confession for alleviating the tension of one who feels himself to be a sinner. Whether one is of the elect or not is evidenced by (but definitely not determined by) one's calling. In short, the hand has already been dealt but one can only tell if it is to be a winning hand by playing it out. One plays the hand skillfully, confidently, and according to the rules not in the hope that such behavior can influence the ultimate outcome but because that is the way a winner plays.

The pursuit of one's calling through the rational, systematic seeking of profit as an end in itself is consistent with, in fact partially defines, capitalism. Profit as an end rather than a means meant that efforts would

not end even when all possible worldly needs had been met. Ascetic limitations on consumption resulted in the accumulation of capital, further strengthening the process. Additional elaboration of the thesis is not necessary here.

It is clear that Weber had no intention "...of maintaining such a foolish and doctrinaire thesis as that the spirit of capitalism... could only have arisen as the result of certain effects of the Reformation, or even that capitalism as an economic system is a creation of the Reformation." (Weber, 1958:91). This disclaimer is taken one step further by Benjamin Nelson (1973:82) when he asserts that the Protestant ethic is most fruitfully seen as a generic term. Says Nelson: "Weber is not talking about the 'Protestant ethic' in the idiographic sense as much as the role it played as the paradigmatic illustration, crucial for the West, of inner-worldly vocational asceticism—a structure of sentiments and disciplines, incentives and religious rewards spurring people to systematic conscientious, methodical conduct in this world." In the most abbreviated fashion Nelson sees Weber as maintaining that "...the roads to modernity were paved with 'charismatic' breakthroughs of traditional structure." (Nelson, 1973:82, 78).

IMPORTANCE OF DOCTRINAL CONTENT: AFRIKANER CALVINISM. The claim that Weber saw the 'Protestant ethic' as a generic term implies that he did not believe that the doctrine of Calvinism contained some kind of inherent power to generate worldly activity. Calvinism, as interpreted in the context of sixteenth century Europe, did ultimately have that effect but the successful demonstration of how that took place has unfortunately been misinterpreted as an attempt to demonstrate the efficacy of Calvinism (or analogous ideologies) for development in all times and places. By looking at the impact of Calvinist doctrine in a different historical and geographical context we may be able to determine how important doctrinal content is to the Weberian thesis and whether we are justified in using the term 'Protestant ethic' in a generic sense.

The Afrikaner population of the Republic of South Africa offers an unusual opportunity to examine the impact of Calvinism in a context other than that of Western Europe. Afrikaner Calvinism is theologically identical to European Calvinism of the eighteenth century yet it exerted a highly conservative influence on Afrikaners who for the most part remained outside the modern economy, well into the twentieth century (Stokes, 1975).

The conclusion must be either that Weber was simply wrong regarding this hypothesized connection between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism or that in some contexts Calvinism itself may not serve as a 'Protestant ethic' in the generic sense. Randall Stokes demonstrates how the latter conclusion is justified not only by analyzing the particular mechanisms involved in the Afrikaner case but by invoking Weber's more general thesis that "...the secular impact of religion rests on understanding the meaning of religion as perceived by the individual" (Stokes, 1975:80).

Weber believed that understanding social reality was impossible without an understanding of the subjective meanings that men assigned to their culture and their existence. With regard to the importance of doctrine Weber concluded that "...it is not the ethical doctrine of a religion, but that form of ethical conduct upon which premiums are placed that matters" (Gerth and Mills, 1946:321).

It is important to establish that Weber held such an orientation to preclude the charge that we are merely creating an escape hatch for an otherwise inadequate theory. By demonstrating that Weber was fully aware of the importance of the subjective interpretations of men, one can legitimately claim that Weber would not have taken exception to the argument that Calvinism may not be interpreted in the same fashion in all times and places.

Furthermore, Stokes' explanation of why Calvinism exerted a conservative influence on economic activity in South Africa is itself more of a confirmation of the original thesis than a denial. Predestination coupled with the knowledge that one was definitely one of the elect would not generate anxiety and

thus would remove much of the motivation for worldly activity. Such activity would be made nugatory since evidence of one's salvation would no longer be required. In the case of the Afrikaners, knowledge of one's election came with the belief that as a group they constituted a Chosen People and thus "were collectively elect of God." (Stokes, 1975:73).

Another consequence of the Afrikaners' belief that they were chosen of God was "the idea that theirs was a sanctified society, one that God had taken a direct hand in shaping..." (Stokes, 1975:73). This in turn meant that "... traditional behavior, attitudes, values, and institutions were reified and made moral imperatives" (Stokes, 1975:75). One's calling would be limited to traditional (mainly agricultural) occupations. The doctrine of Calvinism thus becomes a reactionary doctrine inhibiting the development of new forms of social organization.

These explanations of how Calvinism came to have the opposite impact in Afrikaner culture from that which it had in Europe are perfectly consistent with the Protestant ethic thesis and with Weber's general orientation. But if even the Protestant ethic (i.e. Calvinism) itself is not always equivalent to the "Protestant ethic" (in the generic sense of an ideology compatible with development) then how is the generic ethic to be defined? Clearly no particular doctrine will be universally applicable since its interpretation will be subject to an infinite number of contextual and idiosyncratic factors. We are left with a tautological definition of the generic "Protestant ethic" as that ethic which positively influences development.

THE PROTESTANT SECTS. The problem of how individual perceptions and anxieties are manifested on a social level (as opposed to an unrelated series of individual responses) in the institutions of capitalism is answered by the growth of the Protestant sects. The sects represented an organizational innovation - autonomous religious groups which acted as agents of socialization for the new ethic. The sects inculcated new values and in fact institutionalized a new status system

(Berber, 1971:496). Yet despite Berger's insistence that the sect was a central part of the Protestant ethic thesis there is very little connection established by Weber between the existence of the organizational type known as sect and the development of the spirit of capitalism. The sect, as an alternative status system, acts as a greenhouse for whatever ideology grows in it. There is no logical or functional connection between the organizational structure of the sect and the direction of its influence (i.e. whether reactionary or revolutionary) as is witnessed by the existence of fundamentalist and Anabaptist sects for example. Weber himself is aware of this lack of relation between structure and impact as is shown by his comments on the effects of medieval guilds which were in some ways similar to the sects (Garth and Mills, 1946:321).

We are left with the same dilemma as in the case of the role of doctrine in development efforts. No one would deny in principle the efficacy of establishing alternative status systems to allow for the nurturing of ideologies compatible with development. But the establishment of such systems (even aside from the question of what ideology would be selected as appropriate) does not insure what the direction of their influence would be.

Weber's arguments that 1) there existed a congruence between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism and that 2) the sects acted as the institutionalized articulation between that ethic and spirit, are two parts of the same argument rather than alternative explanations of the rise of capitalism. The first part of the argument reveals the source of the drive for worldly activity; the genesis of the raw power fueling modernization. The second part explains how that force was reinforced and channeled by particular institutions so that it came to change the organization of social life. The arguments are clearly complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

APPLYING THE THEORY. Attempts to use the Weberian thesis in an applied situation, that is, to stimulate development, are potentially wasteful as well as risky. We have no way of knowing

how the message we so confidently present will be interpreted or even if it will make any sense at all. The archetype of this situation may be taken to be Robinson Crusoe's theological discussions with Friday. Crusoe is master and teacher. He tries to do exactly what he wants to, yet he cannot prevent his words from being interpreted by Friday in light of Friday's own subjectively created and culturally conditioned reality. Eventually Crusoe gives up, concluding that only God can properly instruct the soul (Defoe, 1945:159).

Before coming to the same conclusion, there is one other possibility to explore; the use of Wallace's theory of revitalization movements. Revitalization movements are very close to Weber's charismatic breakthroughs and in fact Wallace includes the Pentecostians as one example of such a movement. We are interested here in those revitalizations which Wallace feels lead to the generation of a revitalization movement. Such movements may be characterized as "...those which bridge the discrepancy between a population's aspirations and its conditions and the suitability of the present social and cultural system for realizing these aspirations" (Wallace, 1967:433). The introduction of a social and cultural system in Wallace's scheme, however, differs from the same kind of ambiguous step which the introduction of a new doctrine or an alternative status system. It is in the manner in which doctrine or social reality is perceived that its significance lies. The presence of military units on remote Pacific islands in World War II certainly served to raise the aspirations of the inhabitants of those islands as well as to lead them to doubt the effectiveness of traditional methods. The result was that natives "...destroyed their usual ways and customs, arranged their houses like a military camp, and regarded with sticks for guns. They had never grasped in a general way the idea of institutional reform, but they had no idea of how to go about it" (Wallace, 1970:124).

CONCLUSION. Stokes' conclusion that "There is no isomorphism between..."

particular religious tenets and actions flowing from those tenets..." (1975:66) may have pushed Weber too far. Not only did he believe that the "...impediments to rational economic development must be sought primarily in the domain of religion..." (Weber, 1968:630) but that certain religious, specifically the mystical, contemplative, and ecstatic varieties, were "hostile to economic life" (Gerth and Mills, 1946:289). Despite this qualifier, which may be of some help in eliminating certain doctrines as incompatible with worldly striving, we are still left with an endless variety of religious and ideologies and for each of them a range of possible interpretations limited only by the world views of the societies and even individuals to which they are introduced.

The same might be said for the impact of alternative status systems such as sects, radical political parties, or special interest organizations. Their impact is for the most part unpredictable. The "Protestant ethic" and the "alternative status system" as generic terms cannot be identified by concrete characteristics but only by their eventual impact. The admission that they are tautological concepts is not, however, reason for discarding them altogether. They are merely unsuitable for deriving specific measures designed to implement development. To the extent that they accurately portray and make comprehensible those processes that characterize development they are still extremely valuable. At the very least we are left with the realization that ideology and religion cannot be carelessly relegated to the category of "dependent variable".

Certainly Weber never intended that his thesis be treated as a source of development techniques. Nor did he address the problem of the unanticipated consequences of attempts to apply the Protestant ethic thesis to development efforts. Ironically this inability to fully anticipate the consequences of such action is one barrier against the growth of the totally rationalized, dehumanized society that Weber found so repugnant. It is doubtful that Weber would be disappointed with the conclusion that his thesis does not lend itself to the kinds of

methods that might make such a society possible.

REFERENCES

- Andreski, Stanislaw 1968 "Method and substantive theory in Max Weber." *The Protestant Ethic and Modernization*, S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.). New York Basic Books.
- Aron, Raymond 1967 *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. Garden City New York Doubleday.
- Bendix, Reinhard, 1960 *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*. Garden City New York Doubleday.
- Bendix, Reinhard and Guenther Roth 1971 *Scholarship and Partisanship: Essays on Max Weber*. Berkeley University of California Press.
- Berger, Stephen D. 1971 "Sects and Breakthrough into Modern World." *Sociological Q.*, 12, 486-499, Autumn.
- Calvez, Jean-Yves 1973 *Politics and Society in the Third World*. Maryknoll New York Orbis Books.
- Defoe, Daniel 1945 *Robinson Crusoe*. New York E. P. Dutton.
- Gerth, H. H. and C. Wright Mills 1946 *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York Oxford University Press.
- Heberle, Rudolf 1973 "Sociological system of Ferdinand Tonnies: An introduction." *Ferdinand Tonnies: A New Evaluation*, Werner J. Cahnman (ed.). Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Nelson, Benjamin 1973 "Weber's Protestant ethic thesis: Its origins, wanderings and foreseeable futures." *Beyond the Classics? Essays in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Charles Y. Glock and Phillip E. Hammond (eds.). New York Harper & Row.
- Portes, Alejandro 1976 "On sociology of national development: Theories and issues." *American Jour of Sociology*, 82, 55-85, July.
- Stokes, Randall G. 1975 "Afrikaner Calvinism and economic action: Weberian thesis in South Africa." *American Jour of Sociology*, 81, 62-81, July.
- Tiryakian, Edward 1975 "Neither Marx nor Durkheim... perhaps Weber." *American Jour of Sociology*, 81, 1-33, July.
- Wallace, Anthony F. C. 1967 "Revitalization movements in development." *The Challenge of Development*, Richard J. Ward (ed.). Chicago Aldine Publishing (Concluded on page 182)

Krishnan P. and Kayani 1974 "Estimates of age specific divorce rates for females in the United States." 1960-1969 Jour of Marriage and Family, 36, 72-75, Feb.

Kunzel, Renate 1974 "The connection between the family cycle and divorce rates: An analysis based on European data." Jour of Marriage and Family, 36, 379-388, May.

Lopata, Helena Znaniecki 1973 "Self-identity in marriage and widowhood." Sociol Qt, 14, 407-418, Summer.

Maddox, George L. and Douglass 1973 "Self assessment of health: A longitudinal study of elderly subjects." Jour of Health and Social Behavior, 14, 88-93, March.

Palmore, Erdman and Luikart 1972 "Health and social factors related to life satisfaction." Jour of Health and Social Behavior, 13, 68-80, March.

Reynolds, W. Jeff, Rushing and Miles 1974 "Validation of function status index." Jour of Health and Social Behavior, 15, 271-288, Dec.

Scanzoni, John 1972 Sexual Bargaining Power in Politics in the American Marriage. Englewood Cliffs New Jersey Prentice-Hall.

Schoen, Robert and Nelson 1974 "Marriage, divorce, and mortality: A life table analysis." Demography, 11, 267-290, May.

Spicer, Jerry W. and Harpe 1975 "Kinship interaction after divorce." Jour of Marriage and Family, 37, 113-119, Feb.

Sweet, James A. 1972 "The living arrangements of separated, widowed, and divorced mothers." Demography, 9, 143-157, Feb.

Tousignant, Michel, Denis and Lachapelle 1974 "Some considerations on validity and use of the health opinion survey." Jour of Health and Social Behavior, 15, 241-252, Sept.

Townsend, Peter 1968 "Isolation, desolation and loneliness." Old People in Three Industrial Societies, Shanas, Townsend, Wedderburn, Friis, Milhoj, and Stehouwer, 258-287. New York Atherton Press.

US Dept of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1971. US Health Interview Survey, Washington DC US Govt Printing Office.

(Continued from page 168)

Vaught

Hodgson, J. & E. Richards 1975 Improvisation. London, Eyre Methuen.

Jung, C.J. 1958 Psyche and Symbol. Ed. V. de Laszlo, New York, Anchor.

Kelly, P.K. 1975 Death in Mexican folk culture. In Death in America, Ed. D. Stannard, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Matse, J., M. Nevejan, H. Faber 1971 Bereavement. Suffolk, GB, Chaucer Press.

Nisbet, R.A. 1969 Social Change and History. London, Oxford Press.

Puckle, B.S. 1968 Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development. Detroit, Singing Tree Press.

(Continued from page 173)

Olshan

Co.

Walzer, Michael 1965 The Revolution of the Saints. Cambridge Harvard University Press.

Weber, Max 1958 The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New York Charles Scribner's Sons.

_____ 1968 Economy and Society. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (eds.). New York Bedminster Press.

(Continued from page 177)

Munson

REFERENCES

Handler, Ellen 1975 Residential treatment programs for juvenile delinquents. Social Work, 20, 217 May.

Munson, C.E. 1977 Consultation in an adolescent home using a role theory perspective. Offender Rehabilitation, 2, 65-75 Fall.

Pearlin, L.I., C. Schooler 1978 The structure of coping. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 19, 2-21 March.

Redl, Fritz, and David Wineman 1971 Children Who Hate, New York, Free Press

_____ 1952 Controls from Within: Techniques for the Treatment of the Aggressive Child. New York, Free Press.