

Capitalism Calling

George Clark, May 2002

If the poor are to be with us always then, axiomatically, so are the rich. There is an argument, however, that being rich in modern capitalist systems is different from being rich in other economies. Capitalist wealth creation represents human greed rationalised, institutionalised, and writ ruthlessly large on our all too delicate globe. It is relatively new and first emerged in the West.

The following quotes trace its origins according to the thoughts of Max Weber (1864-1920) as summarised by Anthony Giddens. Although rooted in religious asceticism, the mechanical monster has now been cut loose and we are all forced to live in its iron cage.

“The desire for wealth has existed in most times and places, and has in itself nothing to do with capitalist action, which involves a regular orientation to the achievement of profit through (nominally peaceful) economic exchange. ‘Capitalism’ thus defined, in the shape of mercantile operations ... has existed in various forms of society ... but only in the West, and in relatively recent times, has capitalist activity become associated with the *rational organisation of formally free labour*. By ‘rational organisation’ of labour here Weber means its routinised, calculated administration within continuously functioning enterprises.” (Giddens p xi – his emphasis)

“The regular reproduction of capital, involving its continual investment and reinvestment for the end of economic efficiency, is foreign to traditional types of enterprise. It is associated with ... the continual accumulation of wealth for its own sake, rather than for the material rewards that it can serve to bring. *‘Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs.’* (p53) This, according to Weber, is the essence of the spirit of modern capitalism. (Giddens p xii)

“The entrepreneurs associated with the development of rational capitalism combine the impulse to accumulation with a positively frugal life-style. Weber finds the answer (to this paradox) in the ‘this-worldly asceticism’ of Puritanism, as focused through the concept of the ‘**calling**’ (which) refers ... to the idea that the highest form of moral obligation of the individual is to fulfil his duty in worldly affairs ... Weber singles out for special attention ... the doctrine of **predestination**:

... *‘In its extreme inhumanity this doctrine must above all have had one consequence for the life of a generation which surrendered to its magnificent consistency ... a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness.’* (p104).

‘When asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order ... victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer ... the idea of duty to one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.’ (pp181-2)

that only some human beings are chosen to be saved from damnation, the choice being predetermined by God ... From this torment the ... capitalist spirit was born ... (and) two developments occurred:

- it became obligatory to regard oneself as chosen, lack of certainty being indicative of insufficient faith; and
- the performance of ‘good works’ in worldly activity became accepted as the medium whereby such surety could be demonstrated.

Hence success in a calling eventually came to be regarded as a ‘sign’ – never a means – of being one of the elect. The accumulation of wealth was morally sanctioned in so far as it was combined with a sober, industrious career; wealth was condemned only if employed to support a life of idle luxury or self indulgence.” (Giddens p xii-xiii)

Puritanism has played its part in creating the ‘iron cage’ in which modern man has to exist – an increasingly bureaucratic order from which the ‘spontaneous enjoyment of life’ is ruthlessly expunged. Weber concluded that. *‘The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so.’* (p181)” (Giddens p xix)

Source:

Weber, Max (1930, 1991) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Translated by Talcott Parson, Introduction by Anthony Giddens) Harper Collins Academic ISBN 0 00 302070 3