

Sandro Segre

A Comment on a Recent Work by Heinz Steinert on Max Weber

Abstract: A Comment on a Recent Work by Heinz Steinert on Max Weber.

The article is a comment on a recent book concerning Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis by Heinz Steinert. After producing a summary of its contents, the article raises a number of objections to Steinert's critical comments, bearing in particular on the clarity, methodological correctness and historical accuracy of the Weber's thesis; and also on the adequacy of the arguments produced by the secondary literature on this thesis. The article concludes by calling into question Steinert's scholarship in a number of fields that are related to it, such as theology, history, and his knowledge and understanding of Weber's own works. Finally, Steinert's contention that there was a bourgeois cultural hegemony in Fin-de-siècle Vienna is shown to be untenable.

Key Words: Weber's Protestant Ethic Thesis, Origins of Modern Capitalism, Methodology of the Social Sciences

The late Austrian sociologist Heinz Steinert (1942–2011) will be perhaps remembered for his contributions to sociological criminology or the sociology of the culture industry; hardly, however, as a Weberian scholar or as an expert on theology. Still, his last work purports and purposes to be an assessment of the well-known Weber thesis of a causal relation between the introjection, on the part of bourgeois and petty bourgeois strata, of what Weber called the Protestant ethic, on the one hand; and the rise of Western capitalism on the other. It should be remarked beforehand that the Author was – like his fellow Catholic religion scholars, Felix Rachfahl (1867–1925) and Werner Stark (1909–1985) – critical of the so-called Weber-Troeltsch thesis. But – in contrast to Stark, who considered Weber along with Durkheim still a most significant figure in this field of studies¹– Steinert's unrelenting criti-

Sandro Segre, Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali, Università degli Studi di Genova, L.go della Zecca 8/16, 16124 Genova, Italia; Segre@unige.it

cism has questioned Weber's relevance to our times, while confining him to his own historical, social and cultural times.² In this comment, Steinert's work will be first presented in some detail, and then evaluated in terms of its argumentation cogency.

A Recapitulation of Steinert's work on Weber

The main title of this work – *Max Webers unwiderlegbare Fehlkonstruktionen* (Max Weber's unconfutable and erroneous constructions) – does no justice to its content; for it is precisely a lengthy attempt to confute the Weber's thesis by using a variety of epistemological and historical arguments. A summary of Steinert's work will be here reported; it will be commented upon later. That Weber's thesis is immune to confutation attempts is argued as follows: Any confutation attempt has been dismissed as the result of misunderstandings, or can be answered by some reformulation of this thesis. The thesis itself – as Steinert concludes – is therefore unclearly and contradictorily formulated. There are, moreover, significant differences between the 1904/1905 and the 1920 editions of this work; in particular, only the latter could consider some critical discussions, which the former edition had elicited.

Max Weber's question – in Steinert's view – was whether a spirit of capitalism originating from ascetic Protestantism had any significance for the rise of capitalism. Steinert finds this thesis objectionable from a methodological viewpoint; for, the economically and educationally privileged position of Protestants could have resulted from other causes, such as a higher proportion of them, as compared to Catholics, living in urban centers and other areas in which education was relatively high. Further, the statistical tables produced by Weber contain computational mistakes. It is, moreover, conceivable that the causal relationship could be reversed, to the effect that ascetic Protestantism originated from privileged strata. As Steinert remarks, Weber himself had close family, cultural, and social connections with German Protestantism. Weber's research on the Protestant origins of capitalism is related to the political and cultural orientation of German Protestant intellectuals.

The concept of the spirit of capitalism is essential to his thesis, and yet Weber provides only the instance of Benjamin Franklin as the embodiment of such a spirit. According to Steinert, this instance is not correct for several reasons. One objection is philological. Weber's interpretation of the original text by Franklin is given as self-evident; the text itself has been inaccurately cited. Steinert calls attention to a few passages drawn from Franklin's work, and quoted by Weber. As Steinert shows, Weber either added emphasis to, or omitted or otherwise modified them. A second objection is substantive. As Steinert contends, Franklin provided no moral teaching, for the theme and concept of work as a profession are absent in Franklin's work; but

merely practical advice on the conduct most suitable to life enjoyment. Benjamin Franklin, as Steinert sees him, was rather a statesman and supporter of the American Revolution and a cultivated representative of the American Enlightenment.

Franklin's economic success was the result of good social connections, rather than of capitalistic virtues such as industriousness and diligence. On the other hand, Jacob Fugger, a pious Catholic, was a much better instance than Benjamin Franklin of an entrepreneur permeated by a capitalist spirit, or business mind, driving him to the pursuit of gain without ethical or religious constraints.³ The origin of the spirit of capitalism was not therefore embodied in the life and deeds of Protestant figures such as Franklin. As Steinert observes, Catholic countries and regions also provide examples of rationalism, as evidenced by their reception of Roman law. What is more, Weber does not clarify the relations, historical or otherwise, between traditional and rational capitalism. The debate on the origins of capitalism, which was conducted within the fold of German economists of Weber's time, is mentioned in this connection.

Steinert touches on the contributions by Sombart, Brentano, and Schmoller, and concludes that the causal relevance of the Protestant ethic – as emphasized by Weber and Troeltsch – cannot be found in the writings of the former authors. Also, Weber investigates the meaning of the German word ‚Beruf‘ (profession) by making exclusive reference to a particular passage in Luther's translation of the Bible.⁴ Weber himself states that Luther's concept of Beruf does not correspond to the modern usage of the term. Additional sources would then have been preferable. However, this is apparently not Steinert's most important objection to the Weber's thesis. Weber's whole research question, according to Steinert, has been formulated with so much caution and so many reservations, and the fundamental concepts of capitalist spirit and profession with such a lack of clarity, that it is not apparent what Weber has actually set out to investigate.

If the capitalist spirit is reduced to an ethical principle prescribing the duty of disciplined and regular work, and the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism so unclearly stated, then Weber's question can receive no answer at all. The ideal type of the ascetic Puritans is considered by Steinert a piece of Weber's own imagination.⁵ Weber himself was unsure as to whether theological texts had any influence on conducts. He preferred to rely on written advice dispensed by Protestant Ministers to their parishioner, considering the great influence religion then exerted on the individual consciences. As Steinert points out, however, the existence of such an influence can be assumed, as Weber does, but cannot be proved. For, frugality and discipline is not necessarily produced only by the Protestant Ethic; it may have different origins, such as the Fordist organization of industrial production.

Still, Weber was (in Steinert's opinion) interested not in the workers' economic ethic, but rather in that of the entrepreneurs and managers.

Workers have shown with strikes and in other ways their opposition to the capitalist work ethic. What is more, Weber himself in his Munich lessons on economic history has pointed to a number of different factors accounting for Western capitalist development. Therefore, Weber has performed no empirical investigations on the historical origin of capitalism or of the Protestant Reform. Rather, he has conducted a theological research on the differences between Lutheran and Puritan Protestantism, pursuing a number of different aims: a reply to theses put forward in Sombar's *Modern Capitalism*; a contribution to an oppositional movement to the Lutheran Protestant Church, and also to Bismarck's end of the so-called *Kulturkampf* against the Catholic Church; an essay on asceticism and self-discipline; an explanation of England's superior achievements; and finally, a diagnosis of cultural life in Prussia at the end of the 19th century.

Weber's discourse – Steinert concludes – cannot serve so many different research goals, the relevance of which, furthermore, is asserted rather than persuasively argued. For instance, the discipline of both the labor force and the manufacturers can be accounted for by coercion exerted on labor in the workshop and the competition constrains on the manufacturers, in addition to the functional needs of large-scale enterprises. Steinert takes then issue with the Weberian notion of Calvinist asceticism as opposed to Lutheran Protestantism, but also to the teaching of the Catholic Church. As he contends, this notion should be distinguished from Calvin's own doctrine; but also from Calvinist asceticism, as a consequence of the doctrine of predestination. Weber presupposes that the asceticism of the Calvinist sects is something entirely different from the asceticism of the Catholic cloisters. Steinert holds a different view.

Weber – he maintains – has overestimated the importance of cloisters as sources of morality and discipline for the elite of the Catholic faithful; but he has underestimated the sacrament of the Confession as a source of moral guidance to the average Catholic. Steinert objects, furthermore, to Weber's thesis of a direct influence of Protestantism on capitalism by uniforming life styles; and also by encouraging saving propensity. Accordingly, the uniformity of life styles may be found in a variety of different historical phenomena; the propensity to saving can be found only among small-business owners who are forced to reduce their consumptions because of competition. In neither case Protestant religion plays any role. Steinert also objects to the remarks Weber made on the continuous importance of Calvinist Protestantism in the United States as a source of mutual trust and social capital.

These benefits – he argues – can be obtained by other means, such as joining associations that are not religiously characterized. Moreover, in past times the pre-

destination doctrine provided legitimation to local authorities in America to persecute, even with death penalty, those whose conduct was considered sinful and subversive. Steinert has also raised some methodological issues, which bear on ideal types as a methodological instrument, and on Weber's logic of causal explanations. Attention is especially paid to the Weber's epistemological contribution insofar as the construction of ideal types is concerned. Steinert remarks in this connection that, on the one hand, the construction of models is necessary to the pursuit of all knowledge, as Kant had already argued, so there is nothing new in Weber's epistemological assumptions. On the other hand, Weber's notion of cultural values, as providing a selection criterion of the subject matter, leaves out the issue of how power influences this selection, and therefore which concepts and models are employed, and how they are.

What is more, Weber employs such a plurality of models and metaphors of causality, that a reconstruction of concrete examples of causal dependence becomes difficult. A case in point is the causal connection between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. The connection is described not as a causally adequate relationship, but as an elective affinity, which is a metaphor borrowed from chemistry. This metaphor derives from the conception of the bourgeois individual. Other historical relations between these phenomena are also plausible, however; therefore, the elective-affinity metaphor precludes a rigorous proof of their causal connection, and is unsuitable to a structural inquiry into what historical forces operate without the actors' awareness. The afore-mentioned relationship has been often misunderstood in several ways. One instance would be the contention that Protestants are more industrious and disciplined than Catholics, and therefore the Protestant countries are economically more successful than the Catholic.

In fact, as Steinert maintains, Weber's whole research project is more complex, and cannot be formulated in these terms. Weber has attempted to clarify it in other writings, in which this thesis is reiterated; he added, however, a consideration of the social, economic, and technical-scientific contexts in which the capitalist spirit originated. As the Weber thesis stands, it has been – according to Steinert – so unclearly formulated that it cannot be refuted on empirical grounds; for any objection may be countered with the remark that the thesis has not been properly understood. Protestant inner-world asceticism, as Weber employs the term, can mean a God-pleasing life conduct, but also renouncement of body pleasure or comfort. Also, Weber has used the concept of rationality in a variety of ways. As a consequence, the secondary literature has variously interpreted its meaning.

As for the Weber-Troeltsch relationship, Steinert opines that Weber focused on the origins of modern capitalism; whereas Troeltsch was rather interested in modern culture and in the Enlightenment in particular. These two authors, however, concur-

red in imputing to Protestantism an important, though not unique, role in producing the modern individualistic culture through a life conduct connoted by intra-world asceticism. Steinert also touches in this connection on the polemical exchange Weber and Troeltsch had with the German historian Felix Rachfahl and the philosopher Karl Fischer. These two scholars attacked them by questioning their historical knowledge, and therefore the validity of their Protestant ethic thesis. Steinert gives more space to the replies of Weber, than of Troeltsch, in his summary account of this discussion, and points to its inconclusive result.

More recent secondary literature, both qualitative and quantitative, on the Weber-Troeltsch thesis is then assessed. Steinert observes that this thesis can be hardly corroborated by current interpretations of, or empirical research on, it; for the thesis has been variously interpreted, and cannot be operationalized anyway. Steinert dwells in this connection on some of the best-known critical contributions to the debate, such as those by Tawney and Robertson, and also on some of the replies to their critical remarks. These replies are not found persuasive, as they fail (in Steinert's judgment) to show that the Protestant prescriptions on the proper life conduct were actually followed not only by the powerful, but by ordinary people as well, and that therefore Protestants were more than others inclined to pursue entrepreneurial activities. Even if they were so inclined, it does not follow therefrom that laboriousness and a concept of one's activity as a profession (*Beruf*) were not to be found among Catholics.

They were in fact – Steinert contends – found among them, as had already been conclusively shown by the 1940's, though historical research has continued thereafter. Steinert mentions in this regard Fanfani, Barbalet, Hamilton, Marshall, and Trevor-Roper. None of these authors has given unqualified endorsement to the Weber-Troeltsch thesis, deemed to be based on ill-founded speculation. Research, which purportedly supports this thesis, does not achieve this result. For, this relies on religious texts, which by themselves are not in this sense adequate; laboriousness, furthermore, is also compatible with a traditional life style, which Weber himself does not causally relate to the rise of capitalism; and trust, rather than inner-world asceticism, promotes capitalism. What is more, historical investigations have shown that by the late seventeenth century the predestination doctrine was no longer an object of faith, and that Weber's spirit of capitalism was nowhere to be found. Accordingly, in the light of historical research Calvinist or Puritan Protestantism may then have had at most an irrelevant residual influence on the rise of capitalism.

Steinert provides then a brief outline of a research program, which Weber might have followed if he had lived longer (this program would have presumably included the completion of *Economy and Society*). The reception of his writings has been marked by Parsons' English translation of the *Protestant Ethic* and by the Weber-

inspired (and excessively emphasized, in Steinert's opinion) thesis of Western rationalism as a condition to successful capitalism. Steinert wonders if this thesis would have been so well-known without Parsons' support. Other important sources of contemporary Weberian scholarship have also been Schluchter, Tenbruck, and Habermas along with the other representatives of the Frankfurt school. *The Journal of Classical Sociology* and *Max Weber Studies* are also mentioned in this connection. Weber's consolidated reputation as a classical author has brought about his incorporation into the culture industry; and therefore the practice, which Steinert deplors, to quote his works even when it is not necessary. The theme of Western rationalism became prominent, as Steinert maintains with reference to Schluchter and Eisenstadt, only in Weber's last years, and its current relevance has been the result of Parsons' interpretation of Weber, according to Steinert.

The Weberian concepts of ideal type and elective affinity have never been clearly defined, and now have an historical interest only. The *Protestant Ethic* is a text the significance of which can be understood if placed in the historical context provided by the intellectual milieu of Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century. Vienna's multi-cultural milieu was dominated by a class-conscious bourgeoisie and a Freudian conception of the person. It was accordingly opposed to Berlin's, which was under the political hegemony of the aristocracy, but also to Heidelberg, in which the ideal of the ascetic personality prevailed. The liberalism of the bourgeoisie, of which Weber was a representative, was challenged in Berlin and Vienna by the rampant anti-Semitism and anti-liberalism of the uneducated masses. Heidelberg, in Steinert's view, provided an alternative to both cities. The life-style theme, so important in the *Protestant Ethic*, was represented at the turn of the 19th century in Vienna by the ideal of artist life as well as Freud's psychoanalysis, with its stress on individuals and their psychic mechanisms, super-egos, and impulses. Weber's own life-style was less connoted by a conflict between his super-ego and impulses than by a strong asceticism, the absence of which he lamented in his German fatherland along with a lack of political education. In his mind, Germany was a country that had never had a proud class-conscious bourgeoisie imbued with the Protestant ethic, and the ideal of profession as a life conduct. This absence was indicated by the propensity of the German bourgeoisie to conduct an existence of rentier capitalist, rather than one of active entrepreneurs or of politicians with a vocation. Traditional capitalism, in other words, had prevailed in Germany over what Weber called the spirit of capitalism.

A discussion of Steinert's work in the light of some literature on the Weber-Troeltsch thesis

Steinert's above-presented work raises a number of different issues. They share a critical appraisal of the so-called Weber-Troeltsch thesis⁶ on the rise of Western capitalism. These issues may be summarized as follows:

- a) The unclear and inconsistent formulation of this thesis makes it irrefutable. To this lack of clarity and consistency has contributed the fuzziness of the concepts of ideal type and elective affinity, even though Weber has relied on these concepts to maintain the existence of a causal relationship between Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism;
- b) the thesis is also objectionable on methodological grounds;
- c) the contention that a capitalist spirit has ever existed may be disputed for philological and substantive reasons. Moreover, Weber's choice of Franklin, rather the Fugger, as close to the ideal type of individuals permeated by such a spirit is inappropriate;
- d) ascetic tendencies may be found, outside of Puritan Protestantism, also in Catholicism. At any rate, a disciplined life conduct, which according to Weber is characteristic of modern capitalism, has more persuasive explanations which are not based on religion; Weber himself has pointed in other texts to non-religious factors accounting for the rise of capitalism;
- e) the vast secondary literature on the Weber-Troeltsch thesis has rejected or strongly qualified it, or – when it has supported it – has done so with inadequate arguments;
- f) of the two capitals of the German-speaking world, it was Vienna, an intellectual bourgeois city, rather than Berlin, still dominated by the aristocracy, that best suited Weber's life style of a class-conscious bourgeois.

These points will be now briefly discussed, starting with the allegedly irrefutable character of the Weber-Troeltsch thesis (hereafter referred to simply as the Weber thesis).

a) An unclear and inconsistent formulation of the Weber thesis?

The variety of its interpretations since its first formulation, at the onset of the past century,⁷ may indicate a lack of clarity of this thesis. It also indicates, however, that the Protestant Ethic has maintained an enduring interest to this day. Along these lines, it has been stated that “the number of papers”, which Sociological Analysis has abstracted and which address the Protestant Ethic, “has never been higher, at least

insofar as the ones written in English”⁸ The Weber thesis may then not have been formulated with perfect clearness, but generations of scholars have found it stimulating to this day. By putting forward different interpretations and evaluations in their disputes, they have implied that the thesis can be refuted or confirmed, and that is accordingly far from non confutable.

Steinert was familiar with Weber’s replies to his early critics Fisher and Rachfahl.⁹ It would indeed be surprising if Steinert had not been, for Weberian scholarship has dwelt extensively on these replies.¹⁰ Weber made a sustained effort to clarify his Protestant Ethic thesis after it first came out in the form of scholarly articles, which elicited the criticisms of Fischer and Rachfahl. His effort was apparently not quite successful, as previously stated. Still, his fundamental thesis seems clear enough: firstly, the new inner-worldly ascetic spirit, which originated from Puritan religious life, and from a religiously conditioned family tradition and life style, made the life conducts of those who were imbued with it compliant in with the requests of early modern capitalism;¹¹ further, the typical representatives of this Puritan conception of life were the members of the rising bourgeois middle classes who were carriers of an ascetic conception of life;¹² finally, and as a consequence, the acquisition of wealth by means of disciplined work became fully legitimated, paving the way to the rise of capitalism.¹³

b) Is the thesis objectionable on methodological grounds?

The substantial amount of exegetic effort spent to clarify the meaning of the concepts of ideal type and elective affinity indicates that these Weberian concepts have not been considered so vague that they cannot be put into use. Steinert, unfortunately, was not thoroughly familiar with the literature bearing on these concepts, even when it would have been quite relevant for his discussion of the Protestant Ethic. In particular, Steinert cited Burger’s study on Weber’s theory of concept formation;¹⁴ but he neglected to mention further important exegetic sources. Among others, those by Swedberg, Turner and Factor, and Weiss might have been cases in point.¹⁵ Swedberg has brought light on the causal connection which Weber posited between the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and the evidence he produced to support his thesis.¹⁶ According to other interpreters of Weber,¹⁷ the ideal type of the Protestant Ethic may render scientific services by clarifying the meaning of religious actions in this particular historical case. These services would be provided even if historical reality diverged from this ideal type, as Steinert has contended.¹⁸

Steinert, moreover, did not make full use of the literature he quoted and presumably knew. Reference is made in this connection to the previously mentioned

Burger's study on Weber's epistemology; and also to Howe's article on Weber's concept of elective affinities.¹⁹ Steinert preferred to disregard Burger's detailed methodological indications on how an ideal type should be constructed according to Weber.²⁰ As for Weber the ideal type is a very special model, used in the social sciences for heuristic purposes of their own, it should not be confused, as Steinert apparently does, with any scientific model. The procedure of formulating an ideal type in no way, furthermore, leaves out generalizations that bear on power constraints. Burger provides two examples of how social scientists formulate a generalization in situations in which there are power and normative constraints: "a) in politics, individuals try to optimize their control over others; b) when undergoing changes in social status, people seek refuge in radical ideologies".²¹

Moreover, the concept of elective or inner affinities (*Wahlverwandtschaften*) is a metaphor, which Weber employed to illustrate the relation he had established between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, as Steinert has correctly pointed out. Steinert's narrow interpretation of this metaphorical term is debatable, however. This term should not be construed as to merely indicate "an important instrument of knowledge" on the relation "between the Puritan and the capitalist conception of work".²² Weber borrowed the term, according to Howe, from Goethe, Kant, and eighteenth-century chemistry.²³ Elective affinities bind social actors who share "the universality of the meanings to which those actors orient their actions". While intersection of meanings makes their interactions possible, interactions choices are bound by the inner affinities of such meanings. Accordingly, "the actors' choices of possible actions are given by the elective affinities of their universe of meanings". In the case of Calvinist Protestantism, elective affinities are premised on a common language between the Reformation work ethic and its faith.²⁴

The existence of such affinities is accordingly not simply a matter of plausibility, as Steinert has it,²⁵ but must be rather shown persuasively. The methodological assessments of Weber's Protestant Ethic, though not consistent, have been generally speaking not as negative as Steinert's. An early methodological evaluation called attention to a fundamental ambiguity of the key proposition of the Weber thesis, and has argued, in line with Steinert, that this ambiguity has produced "much confusion". For, its title contains four elements (Protestantism, ethic, spirit, and capitalism). While the first couple of elements is somehow related to the second couple, the author wondered what causal relationship is the object of inquiry if each element of the first couple is considered in its relationship to each element of the second couple.²⁶

Moreover, the Weber thesis has also been considered ambiguous because it "permits conflicting interrogations" of the text, and the past practices it refers to. These interrogations bear on whether the causal factors were the social-psychological conditions of the Protestant faithful, or rather the social organization of the Protestant

life.²⁷ It should be remarked, however, that Weber's fundamental thesis, as previously presented in a condensed form, causally relates two ideal types, the Protestant ethic as embodied in consistent life practices, and the spirit of capitalism; rather than their conceptual components when separately considered. As is the case with ideal types in general, in this case, too, "certain empirical phenomena are grouped together and named by the same term".²⁸ The construction of this ideal type has been, generally speaking, considered a methodological achievement on the part of Weber.

"The vigor and subtlety", and also the brilliance, with which the ideal-typical has been applied by Weber's Protestant Ethic, have been emphasized by a contemporary author.²⁹ Another methodological evaluation also praised the "brilliant insights" contained therein.³⁰ Along similar lines, Weber's "superior grasp of the methodological problems which he had to face" has been stressed. Weber's methodological achievements remain to this day, it has been argued, despite the "fundamental change" which "the logic of science has undergone".³¹ As for the ideal type of the capitalist spirit, the comments of Dirk Kaesler – a reputed Weber scholar – on the early and subsequent reception of the Weber thesis seem to apply well also to Steinert's contention that this spirit is nowhere to be found as a motivation source of capitalist development. This sort of criticism only shows, according to Kaesler, the critics' lack of knowledge and understanding of Weber's ideal type.³²

c) Has a capitalist spirit ever existed? Is Benjamin Franklin a good instantiation of this spirit?

Whether Franklin, rather the Fugger, was close to the ideal type of individuals permeated by such a spirit has been discussed in Gordon Marshall's balanced appraisal of the Weber thesis.³³ Marshall has raised a number of points, some of which are critical of the Weber thesis. In particular, as Marshall remarks, the Weber thesis is affected by a fundamental ambiguity; for, it is not apparent whether Weber's object of inquiry was the relationship between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, or rather the relevance of this spirit as one factor among others of the rise of capitalism.³⁴ However, Marshall does not criticize Weber's thesis, as Steinert does, on the ground that the great cautiousness and the many reservations with which Weber conducted his investigation, and the lack of clarity with which his ideal type of the spirit of capitalism was formulated, make his research question unintelligible. The thesis has been variously interpreted, often considered contentious and in need of clarification;³⁵ but not deemed unintelligible on these or other grounds.

Steinert, as will be recalled, took issue in particular with Weber's portrait of Benjamin Franklin as a representative of the Protestant ethic, having introduced "a stern

and honest morality into economic life”;³⁶ and suggested that the Catholic Fugger would provide a better instance. Steinert was not the first scholar to make this point as it had been previously raised by other authors, in Weber’s own time and thereafter.³⁷ It has been observed, however, that Weber accurately perceived in Franklin an “ethically infused spirit as rooted in the soil of earlier Protestant asceticism”, which no longer had “its religious hull”.³⁸ If Franklin’s life style had evidenced the pursuit of gain without ethical or religious constraints, as Steinert has contended, it would be difficult to understand why Franklin kept a daily moral bookkeeping in order to develop his character and use time efficiently.³⁹ This practice was customary among the Puritans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁰ In contrast to Steinert, but in accordance with Weber, this fact provides evidence that the methodical attitude of the Puritan life style “introduced a stern and honest morality into economic life”.⁴¹

As Weber argued, the secular life style of Franklin’s times indicated that, in the United States at least, “The pursuit of gain [...] has become most completely unchained and stripped of its religious-ethical meaning”. Contemporary capitalism has taken a further step in the direction of secularism, for it does not need “asceticism as a supporting pillar”.⁴² As for the Fugger family of bankers, Weber considered their activities, along with those of the great Florentine bankers, as an instance of “a purely political undertaking”. This sort of undertaking, as Weber saw it, was beset by extreme uncertainty and very high risks.⁴³ It was therefore incompatible with “a sober and systematic approach to life”, such as Franklin’s.⁴⁴

d) May ascetic tendencies be found outside of Puritan Protestantism?

As Weber argued, anticipating Steinert’s objections, Catholicism outside of the monastic communities failed to provide “specific psychological premiums for the ascetic regulation of life”.⁴⁵ For, “the Catholic’s good works and duties were surely not of necessity rationalized into a life-system”, remaining rather “a series of isolated actions that the faithful could carry out as the situation required”.⁴⁶ Precisely the Catholic sacrament of the confession provided an instance of such a series of isolated actions on the part of the faithful, by means of which they received from an outside source – the priest – authoritarian guidance for their life conducts. “The systematization of a life organized around ethical principles, as common to both Calvinist Protestant asceticism and the rational forms of life within the Catholic monastic orders”,⁴⁷ was not present among most Catholic faithful.

Other sources of industriousness, uniformity of life styles and a disciplined life conduct, such as business competition and the Fordist organization of industrial

production, were absent before the rise of capitalism, and cannot therefore have contributed to its origin and initial development. Traditionalism, moreover, was adverse to rational capitalism, and did not therefore possess some causal elements which were, according to Weber, of crucial importance for the rise of modern capitalism;⁴⁸ namely, “the necessity of testifying to one’s belief in this-worldly vocational calling”, and also “a positive motivation toward asceticism upon broader strata of persons endowed with religiously oriented natures”.⁴⁹

e) A more comprehensive explanation of the rise of capitalism?

Weber’s explanation of the rise of capitalism is broader than the so-called Weber thesis, as Steinert himself correctly remarks.⁵⁰ Weber himself has pointed in other texts to non-religious factors accounting for the rise of capitalism. As some interpreters have persuasively argued, this explanation is nonlinear; for, any linear explanation stressing one factor only, whether religious or not, “distorts Weber’s position”,⁵¹ and should be accordingly avoided. Rather, this explanation is multicausal and complex,⁵² and also includes economic, political-institutional, and social conditions. It has been the object of scholarly inquiry, and also of a few reconstruction attempts,⁵³ which have apparently escaped Steinert’s attention.

f) Has the secondary literature on the Weber-Troeltsch thesis rejected or strongly qualified it, or – when it has supported it – has done so with inadequate arguments?

Steinert touches, it will be recalled, on the secondary literature concerning the so-called Weber-Troeltsch thesis. Its reception and discussion have been in some cases conducted by authors who, like Steinert, cannot claim any special competence as experts on theology or history of religion. There is, on the other hand, no question on the expertise in these fields of Troeltsch, who was a professor of theology at Heidelberg, but also of Weber himself.⁵⁴ The Weber-Troeltsch thesis has been debated to this day. Still, even some authors who have objected to it on several grounds have concluded that Weber’s interpretation of the Protestant ethic is empirically plausible and acceptable in principle, though it cannot be considered as demonstrated.⁵⁵ Also, recent critics have qualified the Weber thesis, rather than outright rejecting it. Qualification is, of course, not synonymous with rejection. Finally, objections on the part of some scholars have been met with replies which seem persuasive on the part of scholars who are at least equally competent.⁵⁶

g) A bourgeois cultural hegemony in Vienna?

Finally, Steinert has made the quite dubious assertions that in Vienna a class-conscious bourgeoisie exerted cultural hegemony in Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century; and that Vienna's life style and intellectual environment was especially consonant with Weber. Liberalism in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, especially in Vienna, had been challenged by reactionary, anti-Semitic and anti-liberal Catholics such as the political leaders Schönerer and Lueger, and by other powerful and hostile forces. Their hostility to bourgeois liberalism and to Vienna's intellectual milieu was uncompromising. These far-right forces were active in civil and political society. Karl Lueger, the anti-Semitic politician, represented them in the Parliament and the local government. Lueger had the support of different social classes, including part of the aristocracy.⁵⁷ The Emperor's veto against Lueger and his party, which held the majority of votes in the Parliament,⁵⁸ could not forestall these forces, or limit their power.

Weber spent a relatively short period in Vienna in the autumn 1917 and spring 1918. He enjoyed the beauty and the cultural life of the city – “the culture-laden human atmosphere”⁵⁹ – without however taking full advantage of scholarly encounters there. Vienna could not offer him “a homeland”, as he put it; for, in his wife Marianne's words, “Weber definitely belonged to Germany”.⁶⁰ Even disregarding the fundamental political-institutional differences between the German and the Austrian Hungarian States, to which Weber himself called attention,⁶¹ he could hardly fit into Austria as a liberal Protestant. For, Austria had become in the first decades of the past century a Catholic, anti-Semitic, and non-Liberal society. By then, Vienna's cultural milieu was no longer dominated by a class-conscious bourgeoisie, the social class to which he felt to belong. Weber, moreover, disliked the Freudian movement, which he largely identified with Otto Gross. Gross was Freud's unorthodox pupil whose ethical ideas Weber had found completely unacceptable.⁶²

Instead, Weber drew a large and attentive audience in Heidelberg, where he was the influential leader of a circle of intellectuals. As “the mythos of Heidelberg”, his only competitor there was the poet Stefan George, whose circle intersected with Weber's.⁶³ It is not therefore apparent at all in what sense Vienna could have provided a “wider context”⁶⁴ to Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis, even if only in the sense of a distinct cultural and political context. The available historical evidence suggests rather that Weber was not interested in Vienna as a foil to his thesis, but merely sought to enjoy whatever the city had to offer him from a cultural viewpoint.

Notes

- 1 Werner Stark, *Grundriss der Religionssoziologie*, Freiburg 1974, 7.
- 2 Heinz Steinert, *Max Webers unwiderlegbare Fehlkonstruktionen. Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, Frankfurt am Main 2010, 17.
- 3 Steinert also touches on Sombart's works dealing with modern capitalism, and finds them objectionable on several accounts, *ibid.*, 148–150.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 74–86.
- 5 See for example *ibid.*, 306.
- 6 The part each of these two authors had in the formulation of the Protestant Ethic thesis, and also of some fundamental categories such as Church and Sect, which both used in their sociology of religion, has been controversial; see Roberto Cipriani, *Sociology of Religion*, Hawthorne, N.Y. 2000, 214–215; Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *The German Theological Sources and Protestant Church Politics*, in: Hartmut Lehmann/ Guenther Roth, eds., *Protestant Ethic. Origins, Evidence, Contexts*, Cambridge 1993, 32–34; William H. Swatos, *Weber or Troeltsch? Methodology, syndrome, and the development of church-sect theory*, in: *Journal for the Scientific study of Religion* 19 (1976) 2, 129–144. As Wilhelm Hennis, *The Spiritualist Foundation of Max Weber's 'Interpretative Sociology'*, in: *History of the Human Sciences* 11 (1998), 85–106 has argued, the Varieties of Religious Experience by William James exerted a significant impact on the inquiries of Weber and Troeltsch into the psychological and social significance of religion.
- 7 Hartmut Lehmann, *Friends and Foes: The Protestant Ethic Thesis*, in: William H. Swatos/Lutz Kaelber, eds., *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100*, Boulder 2005, 1–22; Malcolm MacKinnon, *The Longevity of the Thesis: A Critique of the Critics*, in: Lehmann/Roth, *Weber's Protestant Ethic*, 211–215.
- 8 Lutz Kaelber, *Rational Capitalism, Traditionalism, and Adventure Capitalism. New Research on the Weber Thesis*, in: William H. Swatos/Lutz Kaelber, eds., *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100*, xxxii.
- 9 Max Weber, *Kritische Bemerkungen zu den vorstehenden ‚Kritische Beiträgen‘*, in: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 25 (1907), 243–249; *ibid.*, *Bemerkungen zur vorstehenden ‚Replik‘*, in: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 26 (1908), 275–283; *ders.*, *Antikritisches zum ‚Geist des Kapitalismus‘* in: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 30 (1910), 176–202; *ibid.*, *Antikritisches Schlusswort zum ‚Geist des Kapitalismus‘*, in: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 31 (1910), 554–599.
- 10 See Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber's ‚Central Question‘*, in: *Economy and Society* 12 (1983), 135–180; *ibid.*, *Il problema Max Weber*, Rome 1991, 18–29; Dirk Käsler, *Einführung in das Studium Max Webers*, München 1979, 200–201; Lehmann, *Friends and Foes*, 7–20; MacKinnon, *The Longevity of the Thesis*, 223–225.
- 11 Weber, *Antikritisches Schlusswort*, 592–593.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 188.
- 13 Max Weber, *General Economic History*, New Brunswick, N.J. 1981, 366–368; *ibid.*, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with other Writings on the Rise of the West*, Oxford 2009, 151–152.
- 14 Thomas Burger, *Max Weber's Theory of Concept Formation*, Durham 1987.
- 15 Richard Swedberg, *Max Weber and the Idea of Economic Sociology*, Princeton, N.J. 1998; Stephen P. Turner/Regis A. Factor, *Max Weber. The Lawyer as Social Thinker*, London 1996; Johannes Weiss, *Max Webers Grundlegung der Soziologie*, München 1975.
- 16 Swedberg, *Max Weber*, 119–132.
- 17 See Burger, *Max Weber's Theory*, 181–227; Turner/Factor, *Max Weber*, 158–159; Weiss, *Max Webers Grundlegung*, 65–80.
- 18 Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 187.
- 19 Burger, *Max Weber's Theory*.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 160–167; 180–187.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 22 Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 201.
- 23 Richard Herbert Howe 1978.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 382.
- 25 Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 201.

- 26 Hans Zetterberg, *On Theory and Verification in Sociology*, Totowa, N.J. 1965, 67–68, as quoted by Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act*, Chicago 1970, 43–44.
- 27 Gaye Tuchman, *Historical Social Science: Methodologies, Methods, and Meanings*, in: Norman K. Denzin/Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, London 2000, 231–233.
- 28 Burger, *Max Weber's Theory*, 157.
- 29 Hans Henrik Bruun, *Science, Values and Politics in Max Weber's Methodology*, Aldershot 2007, 41, 236.
- 30 John Madge, *The Origins of Scientific Sociology*, New York 1962, 4.
- 31 Burger, *Max Weber's Theory*, xiv. For an evaluation of Weber as an empirical methodologist, see Robert Michael Brain, *The Ontology of the Questionnaire: Max Weber on Measurement and Mass Investigation*, in: *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 32 (2001), 647–684.
- 32 Käsler, *Einführung*, 201.
- 33 Gordon Marshall, *In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism*, London 1982.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 35 For a careful attempt to clarify the causal links implied by the Weber thesis, cf. Donald A. Nielsen, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism as Max Weber's Philosophy of History*, in: Swatos/Kaelber, *The Protestant Ethic Turns* 100, 71–72.
- 36 Swedberg, *Max Weber*, 126.
- 37 See Malcolm H. MacKinnon, *The Longevity of the Thesis: A Critique of the Critics*, in: Lehmann/Roth, *Weber's Protestant Ethic*, 235.
- 38 Donald A. Nielsen, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism as Max Weber's Philosophy of History*, in: Swatos/Kaelber, *The Protestant Ethic Turns* 100, 53–75, here: 67.
- 39 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 120.
- 40 K. von Greyerz, *Biographical Evidence on Predestination, Covenant and Special Providence*, in: Lehmann/Roth, eds., *Weber's Protestant Ethic*, 273–284.
- 41 Swedberg, *Max Weber*, 126 f.
- 42 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 158; see also Nielsen, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism as Max Weber's Philosophy of History*, 65–71. Weber's reading of Franklin has been subject to several critical appraisals. See Roth, *Introduction*, in: Lehmann/Roth, *Weber's Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts*, 16–24.
- 43 Weber, *General Economic History*, 260–261; see also MacKinnon, *The Longevity of the Thesis*, 226 f.
- 44 Swedberg, *Max Weber*, 130.
- 45 MacKinnon, *The Longevity of the Thesis*, 224.
- 46 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 114; see more in general: Weber, *General Economic History*, 364–366; Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 114–117.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 119; see also Harvey S. Goldman, *Weber's Ascetic Practices of the Self*, in: Lehmann/Roth, *Weber's Protestant Ethic*, 161–177.
- 48 Kaelber, *Rational Capitalism, Traditionalism, and Adventure Capitalism. New Research on the Weber Thesis*, in: Swatos/ Kaelber, *The Protestant Ethic Turns* 100, 141; Swedberg, *Max Weber*, 69.
- 49 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 118.
- 50 For a concise introduction to Weber's theory of causality, see Richard Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary*, Stanford 2005, 28–31. For an application of this theory to Weber's *Sociology of Religion*, see Andreas Buss, *The Concept of Adequate Causation and Max Weber's Comparative Sociology of Religion*, in: *British Journal of Sociology* 50 (1999), 317–329.
- 51 Stephen Kalberg, *General Introduction: Max Weber and The Modern West*, in: Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, xiii–xviii, here: xii.
- 52 Stephen Kalberg, *Max Weber lesen*, Bielefeld 2006, 21 f.; Kalberg, *General Introduction: Max Weber and The Modern West*, xv–xvii; Martin Riesebrodt, *Dimensions of the Protestant Ethic*, in: Swatos/ Kaelber, *The Protestant Ethic Turns* 100, 23–51, here: 33–38.
- 53 See Daniel Chirot, *The Rise of the West*, in: *American Sociological Review* 50 (1985), 181–195; Randall Collins, *Weber's Last Theory of Capitalism: A Systematization*, in: *American Sociological Review* 45 (1980), 925–942; Sandro Segre, *Max Webers Theorie der kapitalistischen Entwicklung*, in: Johannes Weiss, ed., *Max Weber heute. Erträge und Probleme der Forschung*, Frankfurt am Main 1989, 445–460.

- 54 Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, The German Theological Sources and Protestant Church Politics, in: Lehmann/Roth, *Weber's Protestant Ethic*, 27–49.
- 55 Marshall, *In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism*, 94–96.
- 56 See for instance the replies to MacKinnon, *The Longevity of the Thesis*, by Guy Oakes, *The Thing That Would Not Die: Notes On Refutation*, in: Lehmann/Roth, *Weber's Protestant Ethic*, 285–294 and David Zaret, in: Lehmann/Roth, eds., *Weber's Protestant Ethic*, 245–272.
- 57 Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna. Politics and Culture*, New York 1980, 116–179.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 59 Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, New Brunswick, N.J. 2009, 611.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 605.
- 61 Max Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands. Schriften und Reden 1918–1920*, hg. von Wolfgang J. Mommsen/Wolfgang Schwentker, Tübingen 1991, 31.
- 62 Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, 373–380.
- 63 Martin Green, *The Von Richthofen Sisters*, New York 1974, 55–5, 141–145, 162–163; Guenther Roth, *Introduction to the Transaction edition*, in: Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, xl-xli.
- 64 Steinert, *Fehlkonstruktionen*, 295.