

WEBER'S PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC AND UNIONS: ARE THEY COMPATIBLE?

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Abstract

From the 19th century onwards, the Western world witnessed the existence of two completely different dynamics at play: the rise of capitalism and the formation of unions. While the former was a result of the Protestant work ethic put into practice as argued by Weber, the latter was inspired by Marxist ideas, and they still exist to a certain extent together. Even though the existing literature on both the Protestant work ethic and unions is abundantly rich, the area of the relationship between the Protestant work ethic and unions is rather understudied. This essay aims to question the companionship of capitalistic Protestant work ethic and labour unions and argues that unionisation is in general not compatible with Weberian arguments as unions have a serious potential to undermine the justifications, principles and objectives of the Protestant work ethic, and they are products of completely different perspectives which share little in common.

WEBER'İN PROTESTAN AHLAKI İLE SENDİKALARIN UYUMLULUĞU: MÜMKÜN MÜ?

Öz

19. yüzyıldan itibaren Batı dünyası, tamamen farklı iki yaklaşımın eşzamanlı olarak varlık gösterdiği bir döneme tanıklık etmiştir: kapitalizmin yükselişi ve sendikaların oluşumu. İlki, Weber'in savunduğu üzere Protestan iş ahlakının pratikte uygulanmasının bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıkarken; ikincisi, Marksist düşünceden ilham almıştır ve bu iki yapı, belirli ölçülerde günümüzde de bir arada varlığını sürdürmektedir. Protestan iş ahlakı ve sendikalar üzerine mevcut literatür oldukça zengin olmasına rağmen, bu iki olgu arasındaki ilişki büyük ölçüde ihmal edilmiş bir çalışma alanı olarak kalmıştır. Bu makale, kapitalist Protestan iş ahlakı ile işçi sendikalarının birlikteliğini sorgulamayı amaçlamakta ve sendikalaşmanın genel olarak Weberyen argümanlarla uyumlu olmadığı, hatta Protestan iş ahlakının gerekçelerini, ilkelerini ve hedeflerini zayıflatma potansiyeli taşıdığı savını ileri sürmektedir. Zira sendikalar, büyük ölçüde farklı dünya görüşlerinin ürünü olup, Protestan iş ahlakı ile çok az ortak paydaya sahiptirler.

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Introduction

While the Western liberal democracies achieved their current level of economic development through following their unique path, shaped by their distinct history and culture, they all had one thing in common: the voluntary exchange of goods and services in which prices are determined by competition in a free market, simply known as capitalism. In a macro-level analysis, it is no exaggeration to say that, to a great extent, today's developed nations owe their wealth, industrial production, technological innovations, and trade capacity to capitalism (Stark, 2007). As for the micro-level consequences, capitalism not only strengthened liberal ideas such as individual liberty, the protection of private property, and a limited government, but also unprecedentedly raised the standard of living for the common man. To put the achievements of capitalism into perspective, the 19th century USA witnessed the highest economic boom in the history of mankind, and average income in Britain tripled during Karl Marx's lifetime (Jones, 1981, p. 382), and poverty worldwide has declined from 94% in 1820 to 17% by 2011 (Klein, 2015). Naturally, the most effective economic system ever devised to elevate poverty, encourage innovation, and spread welfare to the working classes did not emerge coincidentally but was an outcome of systematic contemplation.

Max Weber observed the dramatic change that the industrial revolution brought to late 19th-century Germany as cities grew, the number of companies multiplied, and a new elite rose (Weber, 2003). In 1905, in an endeavour to explain the rationale of this transformation in his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he concluded that the development of capitalism was an accumulated result of the Protestant work ethic, which was directly influenced by the set of ideas advanced in Protestantism, more specifically Calvinism. Despite its critiques, few theories in the field of social sciences have reached a level of influence similar to that of Weber's theory linking Protestantism and its unequalled work ethic with capitalism (Spenkuch, 2010).

However, not all regarded capitalism as a success or necessarily a force for rapid economic development, as the rise of capitalism during the 19th century also created its theoretical rivals, the most effective one being communism. Marx, in his famous "Communist Manifesto" of 1848, argued that capitalism was a system created by the bourgeoisie to exploit the working class and was responsible for the dramatic inequalities between the rich and poor (Marx, 1996). Moreover, contrary to Weber's thesis that people embraced capitalism as a result of practicing their religion, Marx claimed that people tolerated capitalism because they were tranquilized by religion. It is no secret that Marx's vision of a communist revolution failed in the capitalist developed world. However, his ideas affected the socio-political situation in the developed world, which can be seen in the creation of collective labour and trade unions to safeguard working-class interests.

Hence, from the 19th century onwards, the Western world witnessed the existence of two completely different ideologies at play in terms of the rise of capitalism and the formation of unions. While the former was a result of the Protestant work ethic put into practice as argued by Weber, the latter was inspired by Marxist ideas. How can we explain the co-existence of these strange bedfellows? Even though the existing literature on both the Protestant work ethic and unions is abundantly rich, there is virtually no serious research done about the relationship between the Protestant work ethic and unions. This essay aims to question the compatibility of the capitalistic Protestant work ethic and labour unions, and argues that unionisation is, in general, not compatible with Weberian arguments as unions have a serious potential to undermine the justifications, principles, and objectives of the Protestant work ethic.

1. The Genesis of the Protestant Ethic

Weber claims that the spirit of modern capitalism is indeed the secularized version of the spirit of Christianity, precisely Protestant asceticism (Weber, 2003; Whimster, 2006). What made the Protestant values so revolutionary, to a degree of subsidizing a new economic system, was the unique encouragement, justification, and glorification of hard work while simultaneously emphasizing thrift and a person's calling. This was, to a great extent, possible by distancing Protestant teachings from Catholic ones. For example, Protestantism reversed the traditional understanding of labour as a curse (or at least inconvenience) and replaced it with the teaching that it is, in fact, a virtue. It denounced the claim of the Catholic Church that the accumulation of wealth is desirable only for charity purposes, and announced that seeking an ever-increasing profit is not a sin but, on the contrary, the will of God, not only legitimizing capitalist ideas but also rationalizing them. At the same time, however, Protestant teachings did not tolerate greed and luxury as a trap that could derail the believer from hard work and God's commands, hence encouraging savings (Weber, 2003). Moreover, Protestantism differed significantly from Catholicism in the way that it viewed not only the work of missionaries, priests, etc., but all work as holy as long as it was executed to serve the glory of God.

The most influential sect of Protestantism, however, in fostering a work ethic was Calvinism as its idea of a "calling" that humans have a separate task set by God and one can only prove their loyalty towards God's destiny through unconditional commitment eventually created strong motivation for Protestants to work hard whatever the labour might be, fostering a culture of self-responsibility. Furthermore, the uniform lifestyle that Calvinism and especially Puritanism encouraged, such as dedication to work and avoiding unnecessary consumption, not only established the capitalist vision for standardizing production, but it also made ever-increasing investment possible. Additionally, the Calvinist teaching of prosperity as not something mysteriously ordained by God but a realistic result of discipline, knowledge, and hard work helped the predominantly Protestant communities to control their own destiny. Weber called this "the disenchantment of the world" and asserted that it contributed to the scientific and technological booms in Protestant lands (Weber, 2003).

2. The Raison D'être of Trade Unions

The Marxist vision of the world divided people into separate, often conflicting classes, in which the working class was prone to exploitation. Thus, the rationale behind the creation of unions was to safeguard the collective interests of the workers against the employers, who were not to be trusted if there were no checks and balances. Naturally, the unions presented themselves as the organized voice of the common working people who would be defenceless without them. The advocates of unionisation argued that such collective entities can act as an arena to unite and mobilize the workers in the most effective ways possible. This power created through collectivism was especially used during employment agreements and negotiations for a higher wage. Furthermore, unions worldwide struggled for more holidays, better working conditions, safety regulations, and increased benefits such as pensions.

Since the mid-19th century, unions have utilized a variety of different methods to achieve their goals, but the most effective ones have been the call for state regulations as well as their potential to go on strike. The perception of unions as successful in protecting their members' interests by being an essential factor in civil society helped them gain popularity, particularly during the Cold War era, as the percentage of workers belonging to a union made up 28% of the total in the USA in 1954 (Mayer, 2004, p.4) and over thirteen million workers were unionized in the UK in the late 1970s

(Lewis, 2010). While it remains controversial for many scholars, today's unions want to take credit for being instrumental in creating the developed world's middle class and making the humane and safe working conditions that are now largely taken for granted in the West.

3. Protestant Work Ethic and Unions

Both the Protestant work ethic and unions have originated in Western civilisation and have been undeniably effective in shaping the economic and political structure since roughly the mid-19th century. However, it is important to note that they are a product of completely different perspectives that share little in common. In fact, the international socialist movement that has been the most significant ideological contributor to unionisation was a reaction to the product of the Protestant work ethic, capitalism. To be more precise, the Protestant Work Ethic relies on individualism and individual responsibility, while unions rely on collectivism and collective strength. The Protestant work ethic does not differentiate between the employee and the employer as long as they are working for the glory of God, while the proponents of unions are prone to be sceptical of employers and trustful towards employees. The Puritans, among the pioneers of the Protestant work ethic, were famous for their anti-authoritarian ascetic tendency, arguing that the State should not be excessively involved in issues concerning society, while unions historically encourage State intervention for the sake of protecting working-class interests.

In the context of contemporary politics, the advocates of the Protestant work ethic are administratively libertarian and socially conservative/libertarian as they call for a limited government where individuals take self-responsibility and the society is united under common values (Levine, 2011). On the other hand, the unions' leaders tend to have a socialist approach administratively and socially as they support government interventions “for the sake of the greater good” while believing that society is inherently divided between economic and social classes (Furnham, 1984). Thus, the severity of theoretical differences between the two perspectives renders a constant conflict of ideologies and principles remarkably likely, putting the future of the Protestant work ethic at risk.

While the origins of the Protestant work ethic have a theological basis as explained above, it essentially offers a distinct secular vision of principles at the workplace as well as in the free market. Self-responsibility is the first principle of the system of Protestant work ethics. A follower of this system of ethics is well aware that the first step to success in life is taking responsibility for their actions, no matter the consequences they might have. This leads to a mindset that attributes a person's achievements to themselves, while not tolerating scapegoating and playing the victim in the face of failure. The unions' collectivism, however, can blur the virtue of individual responsibility as it directs its focus to a collective identity, such as the working class or middle class, rather than individual identity. To be more precise, in the companies where unions established standardized raises, merit-based increases have been abandoned. This puts the most and the least successful at the same basket, undermining individual responsibility for collective gain while punishing those who had worked harder than the average. Moreover, the ontological scepticism of the unions for the employer and the view of the workers as a group that needs outsiders' protection can easily pave the way for scapegoating and a narrative of victimhood.

Once one feels responsible for his or her life decisions, the Protestant Work Ethic emphasises the value of hard work and the belief that an individual will eventually succeed in life by sticking to the principle of hard work. In the past, the believer in this ethic typically worked hard for the sake of serving God's glory, while the contemporary secular rationale for this behaviour is working hard to

fulfill the responsibility of getting paid as well as providing for the family. The Protestant Work Ethic holds that whether one is an employer or an employee, hard work is the key to a better life and, most importantly, the only moral way of achieving economic gain. While the unions theoretically value hard work as well, they significantly differ from the Protestant Work Ethic since they tend to divide people into employers and employees while regarding each of them as monoliths. To be clear, unions do not pay attention to whether the employer is dedicated to hard work; instead, they only focus on his or her relationship with the employees. As for the workers, the unions have a tendency to view them as natural, hard-working individuals who, simply due to their status, deserve protection. Moreover, while unions might effectively create a web of checks and balances for companies, they have a serious capacity to diminish the checks and balances, ensuring workers work hard at all costs. The safety nets unions provide for workers are theoretically and empirically open to misuse, which is a recipe for creating an environment that paradoxically rewards laziness and punishes honest hard work (Colon, 2000). If, as a consequence of unionisation, a number of workers work less hard than they otherwise would, relying on the union that protects them, this would lead to a chain reaction where honest workers will lose their motivation for working hard as well. In an environment where unions fail to install a work ethic, the rationale for hard work is destroyed, and the gates for laziness, unproductivity, as well as endemic moral corruption are wide open.

Since work was seen as a virtue and each labourer had the potential to be holy, it is no surprise that one of the main principles of the Protestant work ethic is the glorification of work. Naturally, this theological viewpoint has been secularised as capitalism was institutionalised and now remains as a cultural understanding focusing on the importance of one's labour regardless of the profession. Just like the Protestant Work Ethic, unions glorify work. However, they differ from the former in that it does not glorify the employer's work as they do with the employee, as the theory behind unionisation assumes the employer to be exploiting the working class. Due to the fact that unions chose to be selective in glorifying work, it does not totally reflect the Protestant work ethic.

Thrift, the philosophy that forbids unnecessary spending and luxury while calls for saving for tomorrow, is surely among the pillars of the Protestant Work Ethic. Similarly to the other teachings of this ethic, it has lost its religious tone and is now ingrained into Western consumption culture. Unlike the Protestant Work Ethic, the unions do not have a positive attitude towards thriftiness. Even though individual thriftiness is not discouraged, being thrifty at the macro level is strongly opposed. To be more precise, unions are categorically against austerity policies (especially during economic crisis), limiting the government, cutting welfare, shrinking the size of civil servants, and so on. This again demonstrates a conflict of ideas and priorities between the Protestant Work Ethic and the advocates of unionisation.

As discussed above, the Protestant Work Ethic, with its unique vision, was instrumental in creating the spirit of capitalism, which is essentially the pursuit of ever-increasing profit by means of rational, nonviolent, and systematic enterprise. In other words, the Protestant objective is the moral and perpetual accumulation of wealth. While the Protestant Work Ethic pays significant attention to this "ideal," the unions do not have it either in their narrative or their objectives. Actually, the unions are not concerned with the individual accumulation of wealth but rather the collective redistribution of it, finding themselves at odds with the Protestant Work Ethic. Moreover, unions have the potential to risk an individual worker's accumulation of wealth in a direct way since they function as labour cartels (Sherk, 2009, p.2). Unions limit the number of newcomers to the company in a bid to raise the wages of the already employed. This results in fewer jobs in the market, fewer

people employed, and more people postponing the Protestant ideal. Furthermore, since unions negotiate higher wages for their members and halt direct negotiations with unionised employees, the companies have the risk of becoming less competitive and flexible. Once the company is less competitive and flexible, its profits decline (less accumulation of wealth), which results in, at best, less investment (fewer employment opportunities) and, at worst, bankruptcy (more unemployment), which is supported by empirical evidence.

Among the teachings of the Protestant work ethic, being sceptical towards government regulations is the most political one by nature. Weber argued that this scepticism of the State can be first observed during the early 17th century with the Puritan refusal to obey the English King, which was deemed to be a disturbance of the Sabbath, but even more importantly, a spontaneous act of pleasure with no real rationale behind it (Whimster, 2006). Thus, the secularized and modernized version of the Protestant Work Ethic favours a limited government in which the State exists not to manage people's lives but to preserve their liberty. The unions, on the other hand, prefer an interventionist government that regulates the "lifeworld" (lebenswelt) in a way that it sees fit. Unions ask for more bureaucratisation, which will monitor the companies from mandatory unionisation to standardized increase of wages to safeguarding the interests of the working class. In other words, the unions want to use state institutions as a "force for good." Moreover, the bureaucratisation of the workplace conflicts with the concept of individual liberty for both the employer and employee, as policies like government-mandated unions make an agreement between the two impossible. Since the Protestant work ethic traditionally does not trust a big government that has too much power in too few hands, the arguments that unions present are again completely at odds with it.

4. Conclusion

With a complete set of different traditions, perspectives, and priorities that often contradict each other fundamentally, the Protestant work ethic and unionisation cannot go hand in hand theoretically. Unionisation decreases companies' overall profits while increasing the potential of companies becoming less flexible and competitive in the free market. Thus, unionisation is ultimately self-defeating since it strengthens the branches by securing better deals for workers while paradoxically destroying the roots by undermining the efficiency of companies, which at best results in fewer new job opportunities and at worst bankruptcy. Moreover, the unionisation of the companies carries the risk of normalising sloth and unproductiveness since the safety net created by the unions (such as complicating the procedure of sacking) reduces the incentive for honest hard work leaving the Protestant work ethic at the mercy of individual workers conscious and/or the unions willingness to install the work ethic that was there before their arrival.

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