

Capitalism and the Protestant Reformation

The 16th century Protestant Reformation changed Europe’s cultural identity and the establishment of the Catholic church. Before the Reformation in Europe, the dominant form of Christianity was Roman Catholicism. Protestantism arguably arose out of the increasing humanist resentment of various aspects of the Catholic church during and after the Middle Ages. As early as the 12th century, writers such as William Ockham, John Wycliffe and Jan Hus started to tackle the establishment of the Catholic church. English Franciscan William Ockham’s famous Occam’s razor or law of parsimony has arguably given value to more, simple and practical thinking, which might have set the stage for increased pragmatism and rationalism. John Wycliffe’s English translation of the Bible must have been significant to enable one’s increased faith and reliance in the Bible as the sole and ultimate source of truth. His criticism on the wealth of the Church earned him the unfortunate name of ‘Master of errors’. The Czech priest, Jan Hus began to confront the divergence between the way of the Church and the teachings of the Bible. His critical view of the Church was expressed against certain members amongst the priesthood in specific. “Hus was stubborn and disinclined to submit to authorities he felt were inconsistent with the law of God.” (Fudge, 2017) Hus’ position would eventually lead him to a horrible death by fire which would come to shake the nation in 1415. “Within a hundred years of Hus’ fiery death the force of Martin Luther’s ideas and personality acted like a high-powered drill on the multiple worlds of European culture.” (Fudge, 2017) Ockham, Wycliffe and Hus amongst others, can be seen as a forerunner to the revolution which was about to start.

Martin Luther took over the torch in the fight against the closeness of the priesthood and the Catholic church when he nailed his ’95 theses’, against indulgences, on the door of the Wittenberg Castle church on October 31st, 1517. “Indeed, thanks to Luther, as the medieval period gave way to the modern age, for more than a century dictated the path taken by Germany and Europe.” (Schilling, 2017) Luther was born in 1483 during the mining boom in the Harz mountains, in an socially ambitious and entrepreneurial family. In 1505, Luther was overcome by fear and horror due to a thunderstorm, which supposedly set him on a path to become a monk rather than a lawyer. “The young law student was not forced to adopt a new life under pressure from the Roman Church, he went willingly, motivated by an inner desire to find meaning for his life beyond a future determined by worldly and material concerns.” (Schilling, 2017) A few years later, Luther became horrified once again when seeing the corruption during his diplomatic mission to Rome, which took him across the Alps in 1510. Luther was shocked by the lack of morality amongst the people and the luxuriousness of the priesthood and the Pope. After being sent to Wittenberg University to teach Christian scripture, he soon took the opportunity to spread his criticism against the Church in 1517. Luther argued that the Church did not have the means to save souls and were themselves subject to various errors of morally, inapprehensible proportions. By denying the spiritual powers of the Church, Luther called for a ‘priesthood for all believers’. Between 1517 and 1526, many of Luther’s publications would be spread across Europe. The most revolutionary of these was the translation of the Bible into German, allowing the common people to read the Bible and discuss its meaning for the first time.

UPF
The one single truth was now brought closer to the people and enabled the integrity of individual conscience and an immediate relation to God. As Luther enabled the public to uphold their individual belief and perspective on the Bible, boosting individualism and self-discipline (asceticism), various different interpretations and groups were formed such as the Pietists, Calvinists, Methodists, and Baptists. “Luther was the figure of David who stood up to the might and tyranny of Goliath, who challenged authoritarianism and presented a cogent defence of the authority of the faith of the believer, and the relationship between the individual and God over the traditions and superstitions of the medieval Church.” (Parish, 2018) Although the Protestant revolution led to a social revolt in 1525 led by a peasant uprising, Luther chose to side with the elite and the Royal class. Luther interestingly argued that, although promoting equality in the spiritual world, it was not necessarily to be extended to the material or physical world. He furthermore argued that Kings were placed upon the earth by God. It is understandable that Luther would opportunistically side with the power of Royalty but why would Kings chose to side with Luther or the ideas of Protestantism?

Before the Protestant revolution, the Church was owning one third of the land in Europe and becoming increasingly powerful. By the 16th century, Kings arguably sought incentives to break with the Church and cease wealth by collecting taxes and land. At a time of naval exploration in the new world, technology, economy and humanism were on the rise in various corners in Europe. The voyages to the New World and flourishing of trade across the Atlantic have arguably further increased the complexity and individual nature of the state together with the rise of private institutions and entrepreneurs. The interest in the oversea worlds was not limited to intellectuals but a growing, diverse group of people such as geographers, biologists, merchants and sailors whom arguably contributed to the spread of information. “Yet right up until his death, Luther’s sense of the world remained focused on the European continent, with remarkably little engagement with these new worlds.” (Schilling, 2017)

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Max Weber interestingly links the previously discussed changes in the Church and society to the rise of Capitalism in the Europe. It was not due to the sudden influx of investment capital but rather the ‘spirit of capitalism’ which drove the revolutionary process. The ‘spirit of capitalism’ is that man is dominated by making money. “The capitalist economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live.” (Weber, 2013) The ‘spirit of capitalism’ is used as a way to describe the inclination to seek profit, economic action, through rational means. Weber defines capitalistic economic actions as “one which rests on the expectation of profit by the utilisation of opportunities for exchange, that is on (formally) peaceful chances of profit.” (Weber, 2013) Weber focuses on the specific and peculiar form of rationalism of Western culture. He argued that rational industrial organisation without ties to political opportunism was key together with the separation of business and household, and a rational method of book-keeping. Weber adds that this peculiar form of Western capitalism has been strongly influenced by technical developments, “especially natural sciences based on mathematics and exact and rational experiment.” (Weber, 2013) Furthermore, Weber adds that Western capitalism would not have been possible without its rational organisation of free labour. Weber briefly mentions “the desire for the power and recognition which the mere fact of wealth brings plays its part.” (Weber, 2003) However, it is possible that this part is more fundamental to the changes in time than Weber deems fit. For it is possible that the accumulation of wealth as a means to acquire power and recognition were key to the spirit of capitalism.
What drove the ‘spirit of capitalism’? “The ability to free oneself from the common tradition, a sort of liberal enlightenment, seems likely to be the most suitable basis.” (Weber, 2013) Weber argued that capitalism was made possible by a peculiar set of ideas coming out of Protestantism and mainly, Calvinism. “Calvinist believers were psychologically isolated. Their distance from God could only be precariously bridged, and their inner tensions only partially relieved, by unstinting, purposeful labor.” (Weber, 2013) Prior to the Protestant revolution, purifications were part of life. Catholics performed confessions and saw their sins washed away by the established priesthood. Protestants however, rejected the spiritual powers of the priesthood and believed one could find redemption only through faith and hard work. “The complete elimination of salvations through the Church and sacraments, was the absolutely decisive difference from Catholicism.” (Weber, 2013) Due to the lack of purifications, there grew an increased sense of spiritual isolation, anxiety and guilt in the face of God. By enabling the individual to take responsibility for his life in both the material and metaphysical world, “he was forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him from eternity.” (Weber, 2013) Weber concluded, in what he calls the Protestant work ethic, that these ideas and feelings were translated into an intensification of labour. “The old leisure and comfortable attitude towards life gave way to a hard frugality.” (Weber, 2013) Prosperity was feasibly by means of productivity and organisation. There grew a “necessity of proving one’s faith in worldly activity.” (Weber, 2013) With the slow disappearance and diminishing importance of certain superstitions such as miracles, people began to focus increasingly on science. Karl Marx saw religion as the opium of the masses to drug people into the pyramid of the capitalist system. Weber added that people not only tolerated capitalism due to religion but became capitalist as a result of their religion. Finally, to reduce poverty, Weber concludes one has to start by focusing on a set of ideas rather than an amount of capital or range of tools.

The Protestant calling was “the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could consume.” (Weber, 2013) The calling was furthermore placed under personal authority and accepted the limits imposed by the state of things. It thus had a traditionalist aspect to it. Luther for instance argued that the individual could and should remain in the position God had placed them in. “Obedience to authority and the acceptance of things as the way they are were preached.” (Weber, 2013) However, this sense of traditionalism seem to contradict the spirit of capitalism which enables the individual to break the restraints imposed by what Luther would call God. Nonetheless, driven by faith, the calling would come to serve as a moral justification of labour activity and other worldly affairs. “Not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God.” (Weber, 2013) Waste became sinful and time was money, which was true in a spiritual sense as “every hour lost is lost to labour for the glory of God.” (Weber, 2013) Indeed even from a rational sense, leisure and spontaneous joy were seen as a distraction from the calling. What was rational was that which stood in relation to God.

The Protestant Reformation and its ascetic educative influence formed the stage prior to the rise of rationalism and is thus arguable an important factor and phase of transition into increased rationalism, materialism and eventually, capitalism. However, as the history of rationalism is not a linear process, there must be various other factors which paved the way towards the capitalist way of life. Weber therefore adds that the peculiar form of Western capitalism has been strongly influenced by technical developments, “especially natural sciences based on mathematics and exact and rational experiment.” (Weber, 2013)
American Sociologist Robert Merton “attempted to account for shifting patterns of interest in different scientific and technological problem areas or disciplines.” (Shapin, 1988) He furthermore tried to explain the growing interest in the fields of science and technology. “The elevation of science to a place of high regard in the social system of value.” (Merton, 1973) Merton highlighted that Puritanism, English protestants who sought to purify the Church of England, were important for the development of science but not indispensable nor was it the sole element in the way to enhance the cultivation of science. “Ascetic Protestantism, Merton said, is a powerful motive force to science, but not so powerful that its action cannot be masked by other factors.” (Shapin, 1988) He furthermore adds that the multitude of factors, cultural, social and economical, might outweigh the religious component. Merton thus argues that science can flourish within a Catholic environment. Merton furthermore talked about certain sentiments being the ultimate motive forces behind social action. “Sentiments are to be regarded as socially patterned psychic structures that lie behind, give form to, and animate more or less coherent body of cultural expressions, such as those articulated by the publicists of the ‘Protestant Ethic’.” (Shapin, 1988) However, “we are obliged to acknowledge the explanatory limits Merton placed upon these considerations” (Shapin, 1988)

Economic Historian Joel Mokyr argued that the growth of culture and its role on generating new ideas in Europe, was the foundation of the explosion of technological innovation, scientific advances and economic development which set the West apart. If culture is indeed important for economic development as Weber suggests, we should arguably look back at those who have significantly influenced the growth of Culture to the point where it started to have a significant effect on scientific and economic development. How significant were Wycliffe and Luther’s translations of the bible to contribute and spread useful knowledge? How significant were Hun and Luther’s criticism towards the spiritual powers of the Church for the increased focus on science? 16th century philosopher Francis Bacon can be noted for his contribution to the idea that ‘truth’ and ‘utility’ are complementary, leading to the increase of ‘science and technology’. “Bacon’s work reinforced the trend in the West to build bridges between the realm of natural philosophy and that of the artisan and farmer.” (Mokyr, 2016) Bacon insisted on the fact that technological progress can only last when shared with the collective. He was thus crucial for the shaping of a shared culture of innovation and progress after the 16th century. How important were the previous contributions of Copernicus or Galileo in diffusing and spreading knowledge? Isaac Newton’s work in physics was for instance highly influential for both culture and science. “His insights more than ever confirmed the belief in a mechanistic, understandable universe that could and should be manipulated for the material benefit of humankind.” (Mokyr, 2016)

We can argue that the various factors which contributed to bridging the gap between man and nature, and the spread of useful knowledge, have contributed to the more horizontal, economic development in Europe. Without the Church’s monopoly on knowledge and salvation, their power was slowly starting to transfer to the individual and the state. Before the state and church managed to separate, we arguably had to attribute an increase in sovereignty to the individual and the state. In the end, besides establishing its relation with capitalism and genuine importance in the History of science, we can ask whether the Protestant Reformation was necessary to enable the shift from an extensive growth model towards an inclusive model of growth and modernisation of life.
References


