

Protestantism and Capitalism: The Mechanisms of Influence. *By Jere Cohen*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2002. vii + 296 pp. Index, notes, bibliography. Cloth, \$53.95; paper, \$26.95. ISBN: cloth 0-202-30671-2; paper 0-202-30672-0.

By Michael Lessnoff

Max Weber's famous thesis positing that modern capitalism received a major, perhaps indispensable, boost at a formative stage from "ascetic Protestantism" comes under renewed scrutiny in Jere Cohen's new book. Cohen concludes that Weber, though not wholly wrong, greatly exaggerated a relatively minor influence. He does so after reviewing a great deal of source material drawn from the writings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English Puritans—mainly divines, but also (Cohen highlights this) a couple of businessmen, Nehemiah Wallington and Elias Pledger. In fact, the book is bursting with quotations from all of these sources. The mass of data is very useful, but Cohen's handling of it raises a number of doubts.

Cohen stresses that the "Weber thesis" is not just a single causal claim, but needs to be disaggregated. True enough, but Cohen surely overdoes it. He divides the thesis into nine "hypotheses," which he further subdivides, ending up with a total of thirty-one subhypotheses. The nine hypotheses are the work ethic; saving and investment; the spirit of capitalism; the rationalization of life; wealth, and profit; the legitimation of capitalism; religious anxiety; the quest for salvation; and religious premia, or rewards. Cohen concludes that his data contradict Weber in six of the nine areas: he finds qualified support for him only in regard to the work ethic and savings and investment, and (to a very minimal degree) the legitimation of capitalism.

One sign that Cohen has overdone his disaggregation of Weber is that it leads to considerable repetition. Puritan teachings on "wealth and profit," for example, are revisited in his discussion of "legitimation of capitalism" (under the subheading "Protestantism legitimated profits as the fruits of an ascetic life") and rehearsed again when he examines the hypothesis regarding "the quest for salvation" (under the subtopic "Neo-Calvinists sought wealth to prove that they were saved"). Nevertheless, Cohen's treatment of Puritan attitudes to wealth is often convincing. He demonstrates that Puritan attitudes to wealth-seeking and possession, as to other issues, were more complex, even more contradictory, than Weber allowed, illustrating, as he rightly remarks, the dangers of Weber's ideal types methodology. On the whole, the sources show Puritans to be more hostile than friendly to economic acquisition. (I made similar points in my book on the Weber thesis—not listed, sad to say, in Cohen's seven-page bibliography—but with an important qualification, to which I shall return.) Cohen also argues convincingly that

Puritanism was ethically more traditionalist and less inclined to rationalize life than Weber alleged.

Cohen is least satisfactory—in fact, he is downright misleading—in his treatment of the last three hypotheses: religious anxiety, the quest for salvation, and religious premia. These cannot be separated, since Weber’s argument is that anxiety among the Protestant faithful about eternal salvation induced a quest, not for salvation, which was ruled out by the doctrine of predestination, but for the *assurance* of salvation—surely the greatest “religious premium” possible. Cohen, however, criticizes Weber regarding religious anxiety, suggesting that Puritan divines were as likely to offer reassurance to their flock as to induce anxiety in them. He does not realize that this is precisely what the Weber thesis predicts. Weber did not argue that hard work and profit-seeking arose simply out of religious anxiety but rather that they grew out of the attempt to *overcome* that anxiety. Cohen’s argument regarding the quest for salvation (he should have said for assurance) is further weakened, if not vitiated, by the way he interprets his “discovery” that Puritans were concerned with other aspects of behavior besides the economic. Of course they were! It does not, however, follow, as Cohen infers, that their influence on economic behavior was trivial. Contrary to Cohen’s interpretation, Weber did not portray the Protestant ethic as “worldly,” but as linking behavior in the world to the fate of one’s eternal soul. Cohen also takes Weber to task for trading on the double meaning of the word “calling,” as referring both to “one’s occupation [and] the call to serve God”: “Puritans,” he claims, “kept these two means quite separate” (p. 262). This is simply false. The two were commonly linked *and* distinguished as the “special” and “general” calling. The leading English Puritan William Perkins advised men to seek assurance from their performance in the two callings together (quoted in my book, *The Spirit of Capitalism and the Protestant Ethic*, pp. 31–2). Probably the weakest point of Cohen’s argument is its charge that Weber neglected the “moral” element in Puritan economic prescriptions and overemphasized their threats of negative sanctions and promises of rewards, or else that he inconsistently combined the two aspects. (Cohen is himself inconsistent here, as elsewhere.) Either way the charge is absurd.

Of all the themes into which Cohen separates the Weber thesis, he is most critical on the “spirit of capitalism,” which, he says, did not exist. At one time I would have agreed with this verdict, but I have changed my mind. Like Cohen, I have disaggregated Weber’s Protestant ethic, but unlike him, I have divided it only into two parts, primary and secondary: respectively, a “work ethic” and a “profit ethic.” On the work ethic, which has forerunners in pre-Reformation Christianity, Weber was unquestionably right; on the profit ethic, which appears to contradict traditional Christian excoriation of covetousness and avarice, the evidence is more mixed and,

indeed, weighs quantitatively against Weber's theory. As Weber noted, pursuit of wealth can be perilous to the soul, but it could also enable a good man to fulfill the duties of divine stewardship by godly use of wealth (which includes investment in one's economic calling, a point missed by Cohen). The Puritan divines thus tended to lay down strict conditions regarding both means and motive of economic acquisition, and they usually added limits to the amount. However, Cohen has missed a most material point, which I discussed in my book. The Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, which became a sort of epitome and handbook of ascetic Protestantism, remarkably glosses the Eighth Commandment ("Thou shalt not steal") as requiring "the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others." In my book I sought to explain the canonization of this rather untypical and unqualified prescription to seek wealth. Whatever the explanation, it must significantly modify Cohen's dismissal of the Weberian "spirit of capitalism" and his general skepticism about the Weber thesis.

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