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A 'class-conscious bourgeois': two notes about Weber and Marx.

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RESUMEN

The article attempts to illuminate the work of Max Weber (in particular *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) from the perspective of Weber's relationship to Karl Marx. It has two basic aims. Firstly, it is argued—against a pervasive line of interpretation—that *The Protestant Ethic* is not a refutation of historical materialism, but a nuanced qualification that underscores cultural aspects that are compatible with (and augment) Marx's position. Secondly, the article shows a further complementarity by suggesting that Weber's theory of the "iron cage" represents a counterpart to Marx's theory of alienation constructed from different anthropological and class perspectives. Throughout, the influence of Nietzsche is said to mediate Weber's reception of Marx.

PALABRAS CLAVES

Weber.
Marx.
Capitalism.
Protestant Ethic.
Iron Cage.

RESUMEN

El artículo busca iluminar la obra de Max Weber (en particular *La Ética Protestante y el Espíritu del Capitalismo*) desde la perspectiva de la relación de Weber con el pensamiento de Marx. Tiene dos propósitos. En primer lugar, y a contrapelo de una influyente línea de interpretación, se sostiene que *La Ética Protestante* no representa una refutación del materialismo histórico, sino una sutil calificación que enfatiza aspectos culturales que no sólo son compatibles con la posición de Marx, sino que también la enriquecen. En segundo lugar, el artículo muestra otra relación de complementariedad sugiriendo que la teoría weberiana de la "Jaula de Hierro" representa una contraparte—elaborada desde distintas premisas antropológicas y de clase—a la teoría de alienación de Marx. Se propone también que la influencia de Nietzsche media en la recepción weberiana de Marx.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Weber, Marx, Capitalismo, Ética Protestante, Jaula de Hierro

Acknowledgment of major intellectual debts is rarely explicit among great thinkers, least of all in the very texts where a significant influence is at stake. It can sometimes be read between the lines as an unmistakable presence, but one is never sure. Recognitions are more likely to be found in retrospective interviews and conversations, those conducted towards the end of an intellectual journey. From this vantage point, the significance of other thinkers is all too evident for the author in question, which is why the acknowledgement is usually made in passing, as if it were too obvious to require explicit formulation. Consider for instance Michel Foucault's telling declaration that 'for me Heidegger has always been the essential philosopher. … My entire philosophical development was determined by my reading of Heidegger' (Foucault, 1990, p. 250). For us readers, such more or less sudden realizations can be an opportunity for reassessing and shedding new light on somebody's work.

Another thought-provoking instance, exemplary in its frankness, can be found in the observation Max Weber made to a student in the last years of his life: 'One can measure the integrity of a modern scholar, and especially of a modern philosopher, by how he sees his own relationship to Nietzsche and Marx. Whoever does not admit that he could not accomplish very important aspects of his own work without the work that these two have performed deceives both himself and others. The world in which we ourselves exist intellectually is largely a world stamped by Marx and Nietzsche' (Mommsen, 1989, p. 54).

What does this tell us about Weber's own intellectual outlook? In what follows I wish to outline the rudiments of an answer. In particular, the focus of this article is on the question of Weber's relationship to Marx. I have two basic aims. With a focus on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, I try first to clarify Weber's relationship to historical materialism. After rejecting the conventional view that pits Weber and Marx against each other, I show that their works are far more compatible than usually assumed. Secondly, I further substantiate this point by arguing that the last pages of *The Protestant Ethic*, in which Weber deploys the famous image of the "iron cage," outline a liberally inflected counterpart that complements Marx's theory of alienation. Throughout, I suggest that Nietzsche's figure mediates Weber's reception of Marx.

I. Qualifying historical materialism.

Marx's contributions were of utmost importance in the development of Weber's intellectual outlook, in his scholarly writings no less than his political interventions. And yet the relationship between them that prevails in our sociological imagination is one of opposition or outright incompatibility.

There are ideological, methodological, and theoretical reasons supporting such consensus. To begin with, Weber was a liberal who consistently opposed socialism, especially as the latter became a significant political force in Germany, leading to the Spartacist uprising of 1919 that preceded the formal establishment of the Weimar Republic. By that time, his studies on the nature of social domination had convinced him that the source of modernity's dehumanizing tendencies was the process of bureaucratization in the economy and the state, and not the private ownership of the means of production. Socialism, he believed, was bound to foster, not eliminate,

bureaucratization (Weber, 1978a).[1] As Wolfgang Mommsen has shown, 'Weber did not share Marx's conviction that the contradictions of capitalist society could be done away with a proletarian revolution which abolished the private appropriation of the means of production. He did not think that socialism offered a solution to the pressing problems which mankind was confronted with' (Mommsen, 1978, p. 105).

A different set of divergencies appears when we consider the methodological premises behind Weber's sociology. As readers of his famous lecture on "Science as a vocation" (Weber, 1958a) know very well, Weber strongly criticized all kinds of "scientific prophecy." And for him the *Communist Manifesto* was, above all, a 'prophetic document' (Weber, 1978a, p. 256). In particular, he rejected constructions of the historical process that claim to have discovered objective laws on the basis of a supposedly intrinsic meaning in history. As W. G. Runciman argues, 'one basic assumption… underlying Weber's thought which distinguishes it from that of Marx… is the assumption deriving from the joint influence of Kant and Nietzsche that reality cannot be objectively grasped by the human mind as a meaningful whole. Any view of the world must… be limited and partial, and such meaning as it has is given to it only in terms of the observer's values… [The] sociologist's conceptualization of the world is, and can only be, formed and directed by what is of historical and cultural significance to him' (Runciman, 1978, p. 4). Thus, instead of objective laws, which presuppose an objective meaning, the German sociologist employed 'ideal types' as logical *constructions* that give meaning and coherence to history from the particular perspective of what Weber himself took to be historically and culturally significant. As we know, he made the "interpretive understanding [*Verstehen*]" of the *subjective* meaning of social action the object of his sociology (Weber 1978b, p. 4).

Substantively, a main arena of confrontation has been around the problem of social stratification. Not only did Weber propose a decisively non-marxist concept of class, in which the life chances of individuals are determined by their situation in market exchange, as opposed to Marx's focus on the realm of production; he also argued that social class was but one, historically recent source of the distribution of power. Alongside class, Weber identified parties and status groups as major determinants of life chances (Weber, 1958c). The latter, in particular, highlighted a series of issues around consumption and cultural lifestyle that came to challenge the hegemony of Marx's materialist orientation. Pierre Bourdieu's criticism of the marxist tradition and its neglect of the symbolic dimension underscored by Weber (Bourdieu, 1985), as well as the contemporary distinction between neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian analyses of social stratification (Wright, 2005), are further indexes of the oppositional nature that the Weber-Marx connection exhibits in our field.

But the most famous locus of encounter between Weber and Marx has arguably been the argument put forward in *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, a set of two essays originally published in 1905/06 (Weber, 2002).[2] The standard reading of this work portrays it as a study of the origins of capitalism that emphasizes the historical and autonomous force of (religious) ideas. And according to an influential and long-established line of interpretation, by highlighting the historical efficacy of ideas, *The Protestant Ethic* ought to be interpreted as a substantial rebuttal of historical materialism. Thus, early in his career Talcott Parsons claimed that *The Protestant Ethic*

[1] See also (Weber, 1978b, Chapter II, section 23)

[2] The best English translation of this work is the edition by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002). Baehr and Wells's edition is based on the original essays of 1905, and not on the revised edition of 1920. It also contains a valuable selection of Weber's rebuttals and responses to critics of his study.

stood as a 'refutation of the Marxian thesis in a particular historical case' (Parsons, 1929, p. 40). Decaed later, he insisted that Weber 'recoiled from [Marx's theory] and became convinced of the indispensability of an important role of "ideas" in the explanation of great historical processes. The first document in this new conviction was the study of the Protestant Ethic as an element in the genesis of modern capitalism' (Parsons, 1947, p. 6). In the 1980s, Jonathan Turner and Leonard Beeghley reprised this account by stating that all of Weber's works 'are an attempt at refuting Marxist thought… Thus… in The Protestant Ethic Weber's analysis… showed how cultural phenomena circumscribe social action and, in so doing, refuted the Marxist emphasis on economic factors as the primary causal agents in history' (Turner and Beeghley, 1981, pp. 257, 245, 243). More recently, in the introduction to his translation of Weber's book Stephen Kalberg asserts that 'a "spirit of capitalism" could play no part in the historical materialism of Marx. Had he been alive to address the Weber thesis, Marx surely would have viewed this ethos as arising directly out of the economic interests of the bourgeoisie; the set of values it implied would be understood as nothing more than an expression, in abstract form, of their economic interests. . . [In *The Protestant Ethic*] Weber rejected this analysis completely. He insists that economic interests did not give birth to the spirit of capitalism' (Kalberg, 2002, p. xxiv).

This line of interpretation, I will argue in this section, obscures the relationship between Weber and Marx instead of illuminating it. Despite many differences, I contend, their theories are more compatible than antagonistic, with Weber augmenting Marx's view of history.

Let us begin with Weber's own declarations. Even though he did reject "naïve" historical materialism, that is, the one-sided and totalizing materialist interpretation of culture and history, the fact is that he never wanted to *refute* the idea that material factors are historically relevant; least of all to replace it with an equally one-sided *spiritualist* thesis (Weber, 2002, p. 122). As he repeatedly stressed, *The Protestant Ethic* was an attempt to grasp *the other side of the causal chain*: 'I emphasized very strongly that if I were to complete my essays, I should then, instead of being accused of "exaggerating the influence of religious factors," probably be accused of "surrendering to historical materialism," as I should then be giving prominence to the effect of economic conditions on the religious sphere (the reverse causal relationship)' (p. 275). The key for understanding the affinity between Weber and Marx is this notion of a reverse casual relationship. What does it mean? And how does it relate to Marx's historical materialism?

Although Weber does not have, as Marx, a general theory of the influences between the "material base" and the world of ideas (what he sometimes called "the spiritual content of an epoch") he did put forward a substantive theory about these relationships *in modern western capitalism*: a relation of reciprocal conditioning and influence. Weber saw his work as concerned with one side of the causal relationship, namely, the impact of religious ideas on the economic order, without for that reason rejecting the plausibility of the reverse argument (which in the book remains bracketed or "held constant"). In this light, the stakes behind the arguments put forward in this classic of the sociological literature become clear.

The Protestant Ethic is largely a study about the meaning of the *capitalist* spirit: that 'attitude toward moneymaking as an *end in itself*, a "vocation" [*Beruf*], which one has a duty to pursue.' (Weber, 2002, p. 25) In this context, the vexing question for Weber was the following: how is it that this 'way of conducting one's life, whereby a man exists for his business, not vice versa,' (p. 23) came into being? This "style of life" demanded a genealogy not only because of its ascendancy and pervasiveness within capitalist societies, but also because it 'runs counter to the moral feeling of

entire eras.' Indeed, it constituted a veritable "revaluation of values," a radical break vis-à-vis pre-capitalist culture. As Weber shows, the Church's ban on usury was but one of the manifestations of that "traditional" way of life in which a person 'does not "by nature" want to make more and more money, but simply to live… in the manner in which he is accustomed to live, and to earn as much as is necessary for this' (p. 16). Weber is adamant in declaring that from the perspective of pre-capitalist man the duty of accumulating wealth was utterly 'incomprehensible,' 'puzzling,' 'sordid' and 'contemptible.' And again taking up a central Marxian theme, he writes that 'moneymaking is no longer merely the means to the end of satisfying the material needs of life. This reversal… of what we might call the "natural" state of affairs is a definitive leitmotiv of capitalism, although it will always be alien to anyone who is untouched by capitalism's aura' (p. 12).

The break with "traditionalism," so the argument goes, had been possible on the basis of a religious ethic that sanctioned profit making as a duty towards God. Among the Calvinists sects of the seventeenth century moneymaking was linked to an ultimate value and emerged in the eyes of certain strata as part of a subjectively meaningful style of life. In order to fully appreciate the complexity of Weber's argument, however, it is fundamental to introduce a distinction between two relations of "elective affinity" at stake in his account. The one that has been prominent among interpreters, perhaps due to the title of the work, is the one between the Protestant ethic of inner-worldly asceticism and the capitalist spirit of relentless strive for profit. Here Weber's claim is that the "ethos of the capitalist economic form" was *partially* determined by religious ideas, whose historical evolution he traces from Luther's moral qualification of work as *Beruf*, to Calvin's doctrine of predestination and the practical consequences derived from fear and the need for a *certitudo salutis* among the Puritan sects. Religious ideas turned an attitude towards economic activity that in the eyes of a "traditionalist spirit" was 'morally no more than tolerated' into a duty (Weber, 2002, p. 25). As Weber bluntly put it in *General Economic History*, the Protestant ascetic communities were a "refined organization for the production of capitalist individuals" (Weber, 2003, p. 368). Put differently, his intention was 'to establish whether and to what extent religious influences *have in fact* been *partially* responsible for the qualitative shaping and the quantitative expansion of that "spirit" across the world, and what concrete aspects of capitalist culture originate from them' (Weber 2002, p. 26). Needless to say, Weber denied thesis that 'the "capitalist spirit"… let alone capitalism itself, *could only* arise as a result of certain influences of the Reformation'; such a view, he declared, was 'foolishly doctrinaire' (p. 36).

There is, however, a largely neglected distinction and affinity which is more important for grasping Weber's relationship to Marx, namely, that between the *form* of an economic organization and its spirit or *ethos*. Weber makes the point systematically in his response to a critic in 1910:

> A historically given form of "capitalism" can be filled with very different types of "spirit"; this form can… have different levels of "elective affinities" to certain historical types of spirit: the "spirit" may be more or less "adequate" to the "form" (or not at all). There can be no doubt that the degree of this adequacy is not without influence on the course of historical development, that "form" and "spirit" tend to adapt to each other, and finally, that where a system and a "spirit" of a particularly high "degree of adequacy" come up against each other, there ensues a development of… unbroken unity' (Weber, 2002, pp. 263-264).

In Weber's analysis, then, there are *three* not *two*, phenomena in play. In conventional appraisals, only two (cultural) elements, and their connection, are considered: an *ethos* or economic

disposition ("the spirit of capitalism") and a set of religious beliefs with a strong motivational power ("the Protestant Ethic); the former partially being determined by the latter. But in the book (and elsewhere[3]), Weber deploys a third element as well: the *form* in which a capitalist enterprise is conducted.

These are perplexing terms, for we have that one and the same economic system can be capitalist in one sense, and non-capitalist in another. In the *Protestant Ethic* Weber gives the example of certain forms of economic activity present in the continental textile industry of the nineteenth century. The latter 'was in every respect a "capitlist" *form* of organization: the entrepreneurs were engaged purely in commerce; the use of capital stocks in the conduct of business was essential; viewed objectively, the economic process was capitalist in form' (Weber, 2002, p. 21). However, the enterprises were run with a traditionalist spirit: the operation of business and the spirit of entrepreneurs was dominated by 'the traditional way of life, level of profit, and amount of work; the traditional style of running the business and of relations with workers; the essentially traditional clientele, the traditional way of obtaining clients and sales' (p. 21). Hence it is important to understand that Weber's purpose in *The Protestant Ethic* was not to study what different capitalist systems have had in common in different times and places, but rather 'the specifics of a particular historical system of this type,' namely, modern capitalism.

This represents a major departure from Marx's substantive claim about capitalism being a *modern* mode of production (the one replaced feudalism). The profit motive, as Weber emphasizes in his works, has been present throughout history. Weber's claim is that capitalism *as form* had been around for centuries before it became what it is today. And this is an empirical claim. Indeed, the reason why "capitalism itself" could not have been *caused* by the Protestant ethic is the historical fact that 'certain important *forms* of capitalist business are considerably *older* than the Reformation.' (Weber, 2002, p. 36)

What does he mean by this "form"? "Capitalism *itself*" or capitalism *qua* "economic *system,*" he writes, is 'a form of economic behavior toward people and goods that can be described as "utilization" of "capital"' (Weber, 2002, p. 263). This formulation fits very well with Marx's own emphasis that a central feature of capitalism is the transformation of human labor and its products into commodities. What Weber is saying, however, is that such utilization of capital is a necessary condition for the emergence of modern capitalism, but not a sufficient one. Something else has been in play, namely a peculiar spirit or economic disposition: moneymaking as duty. For as Marx himself was the first to point out, this system is not simply about the "utilization" of capital; what defines it is its relentless *accumulation*. Whereas Marx's theory of exploitation accounts for the material determinants of capital valorization, Weber directs our attention to its motivational impulse: that 'attitude toward moneymaking as an *end in itself*, a "vocation" [*Beruf*], which one has a duty to pursue' (p. 25). It is the elective affinity between capitalist spirit and capitalist form that pushes the commodification of the economy in the direction of capital accumulation.

I have dwelled on the distinction and affinity between capitalist *form* and capitalist *spirit* because this is how Weber qualifies Marx's view. The issue at stake here is not the religious determination of the capitalist spirit (the first affinity), but the high degree of adequacy and fateful intertwinement of that spirit with the capitalist enterprise *qua* form of organization. Like the first one, this second affinity was not preordained. Weber follows Nietzsche's genealogical path by

[3] (Weber, 2002, p. 366)

stressing that this affinity was historically contingent, and therefore 'not governed by any law' (Weber, 2002, p. 19), again departing from Marx and his dialectical vision of history. At any rate, for Weber it was clear that without the (religiously influenced) capitalist spirit, the "economic base" studied by Marx would have evolved differently. Conversely, it is also clear that without a pre-existing and culturally "neutral" orientation to capital, the spirit of the Protestant sects would have had no socio-historical consequences.

Ultimately—and this is decisive—Weber conceives the spirit of capitalism as part of our modern 'material culture' (Weber, 2002, p. 36). Such a notion would be entirely paradoxical from the viewpoint of extant interpretations in line with Parsons. The paradox disappears when we realize that the affinity between spirit and form theorized by Weber constitutes the point of access for the influence of religious ideas on the economic base. In this sense, "cultural" or "spiritual" elements are part and parcel of our *material* interests and conditions of existence because they help determine the *direction* in which those interests and conditions affect social action. In a later essay Weber used the metaphor of tracks and switches in rail transport to distinguish between the interests that motivate action and the subjective beliefs along which those interest have historical efficacy: 'Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest" (Weber, 1958b, p. 280).

We have seen that far from rejecting interests as a determining cause of human action, Weber set out to investigate the other side of the causal chain and show that "ideal interests" have had an autonomous impact in the development of capitalism by pushing the capitalist *form* of organization away from its traditionalist variants and towards the accumulation of capital. The view according to which *The Protestant Ethic* is an iconoclastic rebuttal of Marx's historical materialism obscures this aspect of Webers's work.

For this interpretation to be plausible, though, Marx's own position has to be compatible with Weber's insistence on the *reciprocal influence* between the material base and cultural phenomena. Admittedly, this goes against the grain of some conventional perceptions about Marxism. Marx himself is partly to blame for the proliferation of vulgar readings of his work in those occasions in which he claims that the economic base *determines* everything else, foreclosing the possibility of a reciprocal conditioning. Thus, for instance, in *Capital* Marx asserts that 'the religious world is *but* the reflex of the real world' (Marx, 1990, p. 173). However, there are many places where he displays a different perspective by deploying a more nuanced language, as in his most famous statement of historical materialism in the "Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*": 'the mode of production of material life *conditions* the social, political, and intellectual life process *in general*' (Marx, 1976, p. 3, emphasis added).[4] This leaves the door open for a reverse "general conditioning" like the one Weber identified, whereby religious ideas helped shape the economic

[4] In his famous letter to J. Bloch Friedrich Engels endorsed this non-deterministic interpretation of Marx's thought: 'According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. … Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise the main principle *vis-à-vis* our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction to come into their rights' (Engels, 1972, p. 294-296).

disposition of actors towards capital accumulation. Without its "men of the calling," that is, capitalism would have remained confined within a traditionalist framework.

The conciliatory account I am proposing here is in line with such diverse authors as Joseph Schumpeter and George Lichtheim, one a staunch critic of Marx, the other a reputed historian of the marxist tradition. Barely one generation after Weber, Schumpeter could celebrate the achievement of *The Protestant Ethic* and declare that 'the goal to which the entire effort of the author is directed is to give the reader a total impression of the nature of the relations between sociopsychological processes and economic states. Consider the type of view of history for which Marx's economic conception of history provides the great landmark. Here for the first time it is substantially *advanced* from the level of an impression and a mere demand to the level of fulfilment' (Schumpeter, 1991, pp. 224-25). Schumpeter's interpretation was predicated on a nuanced and non-reductionist account of Marx himself: 'Marx did not hold that religions, metaphysics, schools of art, ethical ideas and political volitions were either reducible to economic motives or of no importance. He only tried to unveil the economic conditions which shape them and which account for their rise and fall. The whole of Max Weber's facts and arguments… fits perfectly into Marx's system' (Schumpeter, 1950, p. 11n2). This is the position that Lichtheim had in mind when he remarked that 'the whole of Weber's sociology of religion fits without difficulty into the Marxian scheme' (Lichtheim, 1961, p. 385n).

In conclusion, I have tried to show how Max Weber counteracts Marx's tendency to portray a one-directional relationship between the material base and cultural phenomena. This augments Marx's view rather than reject it, because it calls attention to the reciprocal character of those influences. As he put it elsewhere, 'an economic ethic is not a simple "function" of a form of economic organization; and just as little does the reverse hold, namely, that economic ethics unambiguously stamp the form of the economic organization.' (Weber, 1958b, p. 268) What Weber did reject was the naïve historical materialism according to which the ideas and attitudes characteristic of the spirit of capitalism 'come about as a "reflection" or "superstructure" of the economic base' (Weber, 2002, pp. 13-14). By showing how cultural phenomena circumscribe social action, Weber was not *refuting* Marx, but *qualifying* him by emphasizing the role of ideas as a different causal agent. As I have tried to show, "Weber's side" of the causal relationship makes little sense unless we understand that the affinity between the spirit and the form of capitalism is as significant as the more familiar affinity between that spirit and the Protestant ethic. After all, what rules today's secularized economy—according to Weber—is the "development of unbroken unity" that resulted from the "high degree of adequacy" between system and spirit.

In the next section I enter a more philosophical terrain to consider one further sense in which Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic* complements Marx's view, this time by stressing some significant human consequences of that inexorable development that were not accounted for by Marx.

II. Capitalist economy and human destiny

In the existentially charged passages towards the end of *The Protestant Ethic* Weber augments Marx's ideas about the situation of the modern individual within capitalist society. In adopting this perspective I follow a line of inquiry first advanced by Karl Löwith in his illuminating *Max Weber and Karl Marx*. Löwith convincingly argued that both thinkers 'questioned the totality of the contemporary life situation under the rubric of "capitalism". Both provided… a critical analysis of modern man within bourgeois society in terms of the bourgeois-capitalist economy, based on the recognition that the 'economy' has become human destiny' (Löwith, 1993, p. 48).

Specifically, I want to suggest that Weber's metaphor of the "shell as hard as steel"[5] represents a theoretical counterpart—articulated from a bourgeois perspective—to Marx's theory of alienation. That a convergence obtains between these two theories is not a very original idea; we are familiar, for example, with the ease with which Weber and Marx have been fused in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. My contribution will be to flesh out the differences in perspective through which Weber and Marx approach the question.

An important caveat is in order here. I do not claim that Weber himself ever considered his own work in these terms. Indeed, a historian of ideas would retort that because Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* were never published during Weber's lifetime, and given that Marx rarely returned to the concept of alienation in his later (and more available) writings Weber could not have possibly been engaged in a conversation with Marx on that topic. My point is rather that from *our* vantage point it is difficult to deny the philosophical affinity between their views about human existence under capitalism. A space of interlocution between these two giants can be cleared because they were largely talking about the *same* thing or object, namely the totality of human and social life that was forged in the 19th century; a world where the economy, as Löwith put it, has become destiny. Alienation and the "shell as hard as steel" are parallel because both theories try to make sense of what capitalism does to human beings. At the same time, Weber and Marx do say *different* things, mainly because they stand on different "philosophical anthropologies" and class perspectives. Weber views the whole from a bourgeois or liberal standpoint, combined with a Nietzschean pathos of heroic individualism, and Marx from a proletarian perspective linked to a conception of human beings that stresses their "communal essence." So, within these parallel concepts that address the *same* situation, there is an opposition of class perspective and philosophical outlook.

It is important no to exaggerate the significance of these intellectual and social cleavages.[6] In particular, I do not mean to endorse a sort of class-based segregation according to which Marx's

[5] Despite its stylistic awkwardness the term "shell as hard as steel" is far more accurate for translating the German *stahlhartes Gehäuse* than the "iron cage" popularized by Talcott Parsons in his influential English rendition of *The Protestant Ethic*. On the one hand, the notion of a "shell" better captures the organic quality of the condition diagnosed by Weber, for it is more like a "second nature" than a cage one can in principle escape. On the hand, as distinguished from "iron" (a chemical element as old as the universe itself) "steel" refers to a human invention of the Industrial Revolution, and thus stresses the *modern* character of the capitalist spirit (see Baehr, 2001).

[6] Alternatively, enthusiasts of Weber the advocate of the ideal of a "value-free science" could judge my approach inappropriate or too "normative"; a violation of Weber's own dictum that a scholar should never enter the area of value judgments. In response I would contend that if such methodological injunction—based on his complete disillusion concerning the existence of objective meaning and values—had actually held sway

theory has nothing to say about the condition of the capitalist and Weber's diagnosis ought to be confined to the upper classes. Neither account withstands textual scrutiny. In the case of Weber, the "shell as hard as steel" is not confined to the owners of capital, for it constrains the situational determinants of employees and workers as well. Recall that for Weber the "mighty cosmos" of capitalism 'determines, with overwhelming coercion, the style of life not only of those directly involved in business but of every individual who is born into this mechanism.' Furthermore, not even the argument about Protestantism was confined to the capitalist strata. In *The Protestant Ethic* Weber writes that 'the power of religious asceticism made available to [businessmen] sober, contentious, ans unusually capable workers, who were devoted to work as the divinely willed purpose in life' (Weber, 2002, p. 119). And in *General Economic History* Weber asserts that the concept of the "calling" (*Beruf*), which 'expresses the value placed upon rational activity carried on according to the rational capitalistic principle, as the fulfilment of a God-given task… gave to the modern entrepreneur a fabulously clear conscience—and also industrious workers; he gave to his employees as the wages of their ascetic devotion to the calling and of co-operation in his ruthless exploitation of them through capitalism the prospect of eternal salvation' (Weber, 2003, p. 367). Like the entrepreneur, whose economic ethic "produced" the certainty of his state of grace (the argument of *The Protestant Ethic*), the working class "accept[ed] its lot [by holding to] the promise of eternal happiness" (p. 369). Ultimately, then, Weber's theses are more universal in scope than one could be led to assume.

Turning to Marx, while it is true that the manuscript on "Estranged Labor" is abruptly interrupted right when he announces his intention to discuss the alienation of the capitalist, there are in his oeuvre a few passages that remark on the dehumanizing position of the owners of capital. Indeed, even though the proletariat were the privileged subject of his theory of alienated labor and the heroes of his conception of history, Marx was keenly aware of the predicaments and alienated existence of the moneymaking capitalist. Elsewhere in the *Paris Manuscripts,* for instance, Marx observes the paradoxical and alienating connection between asceticism and wealth, in striking anticipation of Weber's argument:

> Political economy, this science of wealth, is . . . simultaneously the science of renunciation, of want, of *saving*… This science of marvelous industry is simultaneously the science of *asceticism*, and its true ideal is the *ascetic* but *extortionate* miser and the *ascetic* but *productive* slave… Self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and of all human needs, is its principal thesis. The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save*—the *greater* becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour—your *capital*. The less you *are*, the less you express your own life, the greater is your *alienated* life, the more you *have*, the greater is the store of your estranged being (Marx, 1964, p. 150).

Likewise in the *Grundrisse*: 'The cult of money has its asceticism, its self-denial, its self-sacrifice—economy and frugality, contempt for mundane, temporal and fleeting pleasures; the chase after the eternal treasure. Hence the connection between English Puritanism, or also Dutch

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in Weber's writings, his work would not be half as interesting and thought provoking as it actually is. We should be thankful that Weber failed to comply with that restriction at crucial points throughout his works, for it is precisely in those passages where he indulges us with "value judgments" (if only to recoil in the following page) that we get a glimpse at his gloomy diagnosis of the existential condition of the bourgeois individual, and thus gain a space for a comparison with others like Marx.

Protestantism, and money-making' (Marx, 1973, p. 232). And in the chapter of *Capital* where Marx describes the general formula (M-C-M') we find the following commentary on the capitalist's subjection to capital: 'As the conscious bearer of this movement [the circulation of money as capital], the possessor of money becomes a capitalist. His person, or rather his pocket, is the point from which the money starts, and to which it returns… the valorization of value… is his subjective purpose, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract is the sole driving force of his operations that he functions as a capitalist, i.e. as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will' (Marx, 1990, p. 254). Despite the material benefits the system bestows upon it, then, the bourgeoisie is as alienated from its species being as the proletariat. From a Marxian perspective, it could be said that Weber's Puritan had an alienated existence both as a religious devout kneeling before an inscrutable God and as "capital personified." From Marx's perspective, the Puritan's accumulated wealth was not a sign of his state of grace, but the "store" of his "estranged being."

But apart from these scattered reflections, we do not find in Marx a systematic treatment of alienation from the viewpoint of the capitalist. Weber's discussion of the "shell as hard as steel," I wish to suggest, can be fruitfully interpreted as running parallel to Marx's treatment of the human condition under capitalism, albeit from different premises and perspectives. It is not simply a question of "filling a gap" (not all gaps are worth "filling"), but more importantly of *augmenting* our intellectual tools, including those of the Marxist conceptual repertoire.

Given that the view Marx articulates in his theory of alienated labor rests on anthropological premises about human beings as conscious, creative, and communal self-objectifiers, it is advisable to see whether or not comparable premises can be found in Weber's thought. Here I want to claim that event though he certainly does not have a conception of human beings as philosophically elaborated as the one Marx articulated in his early writings, Weber does offer some strong claims about how a genuine life should be conducted; a "perspective" from which he passes judgment on the human situation under capitalism. What is that anthropological conception? And how does it differ from Marx's?

This, I believe, is the point at which Nietzsche's influence mediates Weber's reception of Marx. Indeed, Nietzsche is central for understanding Weber's intellectual outlook. Although he rejected the philosopher's aristocracy of the spirit, Weber's conviction that an individual's orientation to (re)fashioned values can set new goals for their actions and infuse society with new drives and directions was a broadly Nietzschean one. The innerworldy asceticism of the Puritans and the leadership of charismatic politicians—two of Weber's heroic figures—expressed personal convictions which, according to one commentator, 'are not simply a reflection of given conditions, but are rather rooted in fundamental value-orientations [that stand] in a position to give society the force needed to go beyond the routine of everyday life' (Mommsen 1989, p. 127).

In order to unpack the main elements of Weber's ideal of humanity, it is essential to consider his argument in *The Protestant Ethic* that the Puritans where main characters in a "heroic age of early capitalism" that is now gone. Today, the chrematistic way of life has ceased to be meaningfully linked to an ultimate value. For the Puritan sects of early modern Europe, the accumulation of capital happened to be the way in which the individual interpreted his religious duty: he chose renunciation and methodical work as a way of glorifying God, and interpreted his success in accumulating wealth as a *sign* that he was one of the elected by the omnipotent Calvinist deity. His everyday life and work were meaningful *to him* because they were connected with an

"ultimate value": his individual salvation. What Weber found significant and worthy of respect was the heroic quality of a form of life that was freely chosen and meaningful, no matter how irrational it may seem from other perspectives. Weber himself thought the Doctrine of Predestination was "inhuman" and endorsed Milton's indictment: '"May I go to hell, but such a God will never compel my respect."' (Weber, 2002, pp. 71, 73). The point is that Weber could celebrate this heroic pathos without subscribing to the value in question.

At stake here is the conception of humans that Weber expressed with his notion of "personality" (*Personalität*). In the context of a methodological discussion from the time he was working on the *Protestant Ethic*, he claimed that '[the] "freer" the "action" is in the sense described here, i.e. the less it has the character of a "natural event," the more the concept of "personality" comes into play. This concept of personality finds its "essence" in the constancy of its inner relation to certain ultimate "values" and "life-meanings"' (Weber, 1975, p. 191). Similarly, in a discussion about the freedom of the will, Weber asserted that 'we associate the strongest empirical "feeling of freedom" with precisely those actions which we know ourselves to have accomplished rationally, i.e. in the absence of physical or psychic "compulsion"; actions in which we "pursue" a clearly conscious "purpose" by what to our knowledge are the most adequate means' (Weber, 1949, p. 124).

As we can see, Weber interpreted our humanity and freedom in terms of our capacity freely to set ourselves ends and to bind our existence to them. The Nietzschean provenance of this view has been pointed out, among others, by Wolfgang Mommsen: 'Weber's contention that every individual has to choose his own values, and to put them to the proof in the way in which he conducts his own life, is deeply indebted to Nietzsche's philosophy' (Mommsen, 1974, p. 106). Unlike Nietzsche, however, Weber does not seem to be demanding that individuals *create* their own values (the Puritans, for instance, were not theologians); for him it seems to suffice that they *choose* them and conduct their lives accordingly. The Puritan was exemplary of this free personality: a hero—not because of the *content* of his action, but because of its *form*.

Although it is felt throughout many of his texts, and nowhere more forcefully than in the Vocation lectures, Weber never articulated in detail the notion of "personality" and the way human being are meant to live and act. As hinted before, his notion of humans as value-choosing and value-pursuing beings is certainly short of the anthropological and philosophically grounded conception of human beings we find in the early Marx. However, there is indeed an important affinity between Weber's conception of human freedom as resting in the existential choice and rational pursue of values, on the one hand, and Marx's idea of human beings as creative and self-expressive objectifiers, on the other. In the "Paris Manuscripts" Marx writes that 'free, conscious activity is man's species character […] Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he merely merges' (Marx, 1965, p.115). Weber was making a similar claim when he said that 'the "freer" the "action" is… the less it has the character of a "natural event."' Conversely, Marx's notion of "free, conscious activity" can plausibly be interpreted in terms of the Weberian concern with meaningful action.

At the same time, however, there is a fundamental difference based on the marked *individualism* of Weber's conception. As we saw, the "essence" of a "personality" is 'the constancy of its *inner* relation to certain ultimate "values" and "life-meanings."' The Puritan did not care for the salvation of his fellows, and his relationship to God took the form of a strictly inner monologue. Ultimately, in Weber's conception man is certain of his humanity by evaluating his individual "style

of life," by looking inside himself, so to speak. This is broadly a liberal conception. Marx, by contrast, posits an individual who realizes his essence in the objects he creates as a *social* producer. This is clearest in the *Paris Manuscripts*, where the young Marx relies heavily on the concept of "species-being" and the idea of a "communal essence." Thus, 'in creating a world of objects by his practical activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as its own essential being, or that treats itself as a species being' (Marx, 1964, p. 113).

The contrast with Weber's individualistic stance is most apparent in a passage from the notebooks Marx kept at the time he was writing the *Manuscripts*. There he frames (what would be) the *human* way of producing in terms of a mutual recognition of everybody's essence and needs:

> Supposing that we had produced in a human manner; each of us would in his production have doubly affirmed himself and his fellow men. I would have: (1) objectified in my production my individuality and its peculiarity and thus both in my activity enjoyed an individual expression of my life and also in looking at the object have had the individual pleasure of realizing that my personality was objective, visible to the senses and thus a power raised beyond all doubt. (2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have had the direct enjoyment of realizing that I had both satisfied a human need by my work and also objectified the human essence and therefore fashioned to another human being the object that met his need. (3) I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species and thus been acknowledged and felt by you as a completion of your own essence and a necessary part of yourself and have thus realized that I am confirmed both in your thought and in your love. (4) In my expression of my life I would have fashioned your expression of your life, and thus in my own activity have realized my own essence, my human, my communal essence. In that case our products would be like so many mirrors, out of which our essence shone. Thus, in this relationship what occurred on my side would also occur on yours. (Marx, 2000, p. 132)

Whereas Weber and Marx coincide in the idea that one's work should be a free expression of one's life, they differ with regard to what it is about one's life that should be freely expressed: one's individual essence, or one's "communal essence."

Beyond this philosophical or anthropological divergence, a further difference has to do with their class perspectives. Max Weber considered himself to be 'a member of the bourgeois class' who was 'educated in their views and ideals' (in Mommsen, 1989, pp. 53-54). Unlike Marx, who went from philosophy down to the proletariat, and made the latter's cause the aim of his intellectual life, Weber explicitly wished to be regarded as a 'class-conscious bourgeois,' as he put it in a letter to famous sociologist and political scientist Robert Michels.[7] Such self-description could not have been a mere rhetorical gesture to mark his distance from contemporary Marxists like Georg Lukács. Significantly, Weber had an acute awareness of the existentially meaningless condition of the class to which he belonged.

In the last and particularly condensed pages of *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber addressed the condition of the "last men" (he uses Nietzsche's expression) who inhabited the modern economic order. Meditating on the existential situation of the capitalist individual of his time, Weber argued

[7] Letter to Roberto Michels, November 6, 1907, quoted in (Mommsen, 1989, p. 54)

that the "heroic age of early capitalism" had ushered in a "monstrous development": the forging of the "shell as hard as steel" of unbridled capitalism. 'The Puritans *wanted* to be men of the calling—we, on the other hand, *must be*' (Weber, 2002, p. 120). The typical bourgeois individual had become a moneymaker who exists *for* his business without any real or substantive motivation. The essence of this "monstrous development," then, is intimately linked to Weber's concern with the individual's choosing and pursuing of clearly conscious, i.e. meaningful, purposes.

In what is arguably the most grandiose example of the sociological argument about the "unintended consequences of action," Weber claims that the idea of the *calling*—which shaped the kind of free personality he vindicates in the Puritan—helped engender, without intentionality, the modern economic order. Two aspects of this order are relevant in our context. On the one hand, that it rests on the systematic pursuit of wealth as its basic objective condition: 'The capitalist economic order needs this uncompromising devotion to the 'vocation' [*Beruf*] of moneymaking… an attitude towards outward possessions… so appropriate [*adäquat*] to the economic structure, and… so very closely linked with the prerequisites for success in the economic struggle for existence' (Weber, 2002, p. 24) Weber claims that a way of life once willed by men of religious convictions let capitalism grow into a dominant form and, most famously, that 'this mighty cosmos determines, with overwhelming coercion, the style of life not only of those directly involved in business but of every individual who is born into this mechanism, and may well continue to do so until the day that the last ton of fuel has been consumed' (pp. 120-121). The claim that the economic cosmos determines the style of life of *every* individual can be misleading, unless one understands that it does so in different ways. There is no doubt that workers and capitalists fare quite differently under capitalism. The plausibility of our thesis that Weber is offering a diagnosis of the *bourgeois* class, a sort of counterpart to Marx's theory of the alienated proletariat, depends on this qualification. Indeed, "moneymaking," "concern for outward possessions," and "devotion to one's business," the chracterizations Weber deploys in the passage on the "iron cage," can hardly be regarded as a description of the proletarian condition.

On the other hand, this "mighty cosmos" not only requires moneymaking as a way of life, but soon proved capable of functioning without its original (religious) motivational impulse. This process is what explains the severe and gloomy character of Weber's picture of modernity. Here Weber assumes a more or less triumphant process of secularization; the latest phase of what he would later call the "disenchantment of the world." He observes that already in the seventeenth century the "spirit of capitalism" was at work without its religious foundation, and that today 'victorious capitalism has no further need for this support now that it rests on the foundation of the machine' (Weber, 2002, p. 121)

What confabulates against Weber's ideal of human freedom is that the bourgeois individual is now born into a mechanism that prescribes for him a predetermined style of life. This way of conducting one's life, which in the past was *willed* by certain groups because of religious motives, is now imposed from the beginning as a "default" option or "in-built" structure, without anyone having opted for it. As Mommsen puts it, 'in an almost Marxist fashion [Weber] describes the modern capitalist system as an irresistible social force which coerces men to subject themselves quasi-voluntarily to its objective conditions, regardless of whether they like them or not' (Mommsen, 1974, p. 55). In Weber's view, such individuals can only describe their attitude towards wealth in tautological ways: "I live this way because I have to live this way." 'If one were to ask him what is the *purpose* of their restless chase and why they are never satisfied with what they have acquired…, they would answer… that business, with its ceaseless work, had quite simply become

"indispensable to their life." That is in fact their only true motivation, and it expresses at the same time the *irrational* element of this way of conducting one's life, whereby a man exists for his business, not vice versa' (Weber, 2002, p. 23).

The condition of the "last men" of advanced capitalism is one in which anxiety over material goods governs everyday life and work without them being capable of finding any meaning or linking their action to values willed by themselves. With secularization and the ability of the "machine" to keep functioning without substantive individual motivations, human action indeed acquires "the character of a natural event," and the strong notion of personality so dear to Weber recedes further and further from the picture of modernity.

Weber's image is one of an inescapable and spiritless machine into which (bourgeois) individuals are born, and which prescribes for them a fixed route of march: the pursuit of wealth 'divested of its metaphysical significance.' It is a cage haunted by 'he ghost of once-held religious beliefs,' where alternative routes or styles of life seem almost impossible to envision. As he writes:

> In Baxter's view, concern for outward possessions should sit lightly on the shoulders of his saints 'like a thin cloak which can be thrown off at any time'. But fate decreed that the cloak should become a shell as hard as steel [*stahlhartes Gehäuse*]. As asceticism began to change the world and endeavored to exercise its influence over it, the outward goods of this world gained increasing and finally inescapable power over men, as never before in history... Where 'doing one's job' [*Berufserfüllung*] cannot be directly linked to the highest spiritual and cultural values… the individual today usually makes no attempt to find any meaning in it. (Weber, 2002, p. 121)

Weber thought that the traditionalist culture to which the capitalist spirit appeared so sordid and incomprehensible had practically vanished from the industrialized Western world. In order to criticize moneymaking as a way of life, therefore, he needed his own standpoint. And precisely, when he speaks above of the "irrational element" of the capitalist's conduct he does so from the perspective afforded by his own conception of man. For Weber was convinced that "rationality" was a matter of perspective. In a significant passage that again bears the imprint of Nierzsche, and which can be found in an appendix to *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber asserted that 'Nothing is ever "irrational" in itself, but only from a particular "rational" point of view. For the irreligious man every religious conduct of life is "irrational," and for the hedonist every ascetic conduct of life is "irrational," *even if it should be a "rationalization" when measured by* its *ultimate value*' (Weber, 2002, p. 345) In other words, from Weber's perspective a conduct is rational, i.e. meaningful, when it is organized around a subjectively posited value, no matter how irrational that value may appear from other particular or "natural" points of view. Pushing Weber's insight to its most extreme conclusion we could say that the Puritans "wanted" to be alienated. The tragic fate of the bourgeois heirs of these "saints" is that they *must* be so.

This, I believe, is one of the significant contributions of *The Protestant Ethic*, one that provides a ground for regarding Weber as a "bourgeois Marx" (Mommsen 1974, p. 47). To the extent that Weber and Marx were both convinced that the social arrangements governing the world in which they lived were fundamentally hostile to the realization of their respective views of humanity, it can be argued that alienated labor finds its bourgeois counterpart in the famous image of the "shell as hard as steel."

III. Conclusion

Max Weber's signature contribution to the sociological tradition could not have been accomplished without the work of Karl Marx. As Weber himself pointed out, we should not deceive ourselves by thinking otherwise. *The Protestant Ethic* is not a refutation of historical materialism, but a largely compatible augmentation of Marx's views. By studying "the other side of the causal chain," Weber's work completes a picture of reciprocal influences between the economic system and cultural phenomena. It is also an insightful meditation on the meaninglessness haunting the spirit that animates our capitalist civilization, that goes beyond what Marx had said without contradicting it.

I have tried to show that Weber and Marx were reflecting on the same conditions and situational determinants of human social life. Their akin, and at the same time distinct perspectives on this question serve to enrich our understanding of the "mighty cosmos" of capitalism, whose recent neo-liberal phase has ushered in an epoch of permanent crisis. 'No one yet knows who will live in that shell in the future,' wrote Weber, perhaps addressing *us*. 'Perhaps new prophets will emerge, or powerful old ideas and ideals will reborn at the end of this monstrous development' (Weber, 2002, p. 121). In either case, Weber's peculiar sensibility for the role of cultural factors in transforming our socio-material reality may very well help us see our current situation anew.

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