

MAX WEBER'S PROTESTANT ETHICS VERSUS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO CAPITALISM: CAPITALISM AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

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Abstract

The association between capitalism and Protestantism has invoked much controversy, as well as ingenuity. This paper compares Weber's analysis against a much more contemporary theoretical framework also known as social constructivism. Constructivism as a present-day social theory offers a compelling evaluation of how capitalism may have risen. While Weber offers the Protestant work ethic as a potential catalyst for his approach, his insights argue that capitalism can only be limited to a specific theology, rendering the rest of the world incapable of capitalism. Although Weber's insights do function as Occam's Razor, his explanation for how capitalism may flourish in other parts of the world remains restrained. As an alternative social constructivism emphasizes a much better theoretical frame for capitalism that offers a better explanation for how cultures may construct capitalist norms and relations.

Keywords: Protestant Ethics, Max Weber, Social Constructivism, Capitalism, Culture

JEL Codes: P16, B31

MAX WEBER'İN PROTESTAN AHLAKI İLE KAPİTALİZME SOSYAL İNŞACI YAKLAŞIM: SOSYAL KONSTRAKT OLARAK KAPİTALİZ

Öz

Kapitalizm ve Protestanlık arasındaki ilişki büyük tartışmalara yol açarken aynı zamanda yapıcı fikirlerin ortaya çıkmasına da sebep olmuştur. Bu makale, Weber'in analizini, sosyal inşacılık olarak da bilinen çok daha aktüel bir teorik çerçeveye mukayese etmektedir. İnşacılık güncel sosyal teoriler arasında, kapitalizmin yükselişine dair anlamlı değerlendirme sunmaktadır. Weber'in yaklaşımı Protestan iş ahlakını potansiyel bir katalizör olarak sunarken, kapitalizmin sadece belirli bir teoloji ile sınırlı olduğunu ve dünyanın geri kalanının kapitalizmi gerçekleştiremeyeceğini öne sürer. Weber'in içgörülerini Occam'ın Usturası işlevi görse de kapitalizmin dünyanın diğer bölgelerinde nasıl gelişebileceğine dair açıklamaları da sınırlıdır. Alternatif olarak, sosyal inşacılık, kültürlerin kapitalist normlar ve ilişkiler inşa etme biçimlerini daha iyi açıklayan, kapitalizm için çok daha iyi bir teorik çerçeve sunar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Protestan Ahlakı, Max Weber, Sosyal İnşacılık, Kapitalizm, Kültür

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INTRODUCTION

Max Weber argues in his book “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” that specifically the Western civilization stumbled upon cultural, and historical circumstances that have had universal significance (Weber, 2005a). Weber argues that these circumstances connect modern society, bureaucracy, and work ethics, which are deemed essential for the efficient functioning of modern organizations (Cockerham, 2015). Weber is known for his writings on politics, society economy and culture as he was a big proponent of rational scientific methods, observing objectively founding his views on observation rather than subjective considerations (Norkus, 2001). Marx’s central thesis regarding capitalism is the argument that different types of trade may exist side by side in different cultures. Weber acknowledges that different cultures have been developing ways of making profit in different cultures. However, Weber also makes a note that not every culture was or is able to transform its cultural trade skills into contractual freedom, which is basically the freedom to offer, choose one’s labour and wage (Streeck, 2010). Weber argues that trade everywhere around the world was inherently capitalistic, as the intent of any man in any condition whether a farmer or a baker was to acquire money, yet only in the West were the conditions ripe for a rational-legal, systematic, specialized model with rational laws (Collins, 2002). In this respect the question is how Weber’s approach may account for why other cultures such as the Japanese culture have achieved rational-legal characteristics.

Central to Weber’s views is the notion that ideas about property rights, economic competition, and individual legal achievements are not universal truths but Western constructs. Social constructivists, drawing on the work of Berger and Luckmann (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), argue that such ideas are socially created and sustained through social interactions and shared meaning. In the context of capitalism, these ideas come to be seen as natural and inevitable, legitimizing the system itself (A. E. Wendt, 1987). For example, the concept of private property, a cornerstone of capitalism, is not inherent but a product of historical and cultural processes that define what can be owned and how it may be owned (Harvey, 2006).

Furthermore, the rise of capitalism is often intertwined with specific historical events such as the Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on hard work and worldly success (Delacroix & Nielsen, 2001). Such historical events may have fostered a mindset conducive to capitalist accumulation. Similarly, the Enlightenment's focus on reason and individual rights could have created an environment receptive to the principles of competition and market exchange (Garrard, 2003). However, shared beliefs in constructivism though crucial are not enough and the role of institutions and legal frameworks are needed to set capitalist norms (A. Wendt, 1999a). Among institutions are property rights, laws enforce ownership and exchange,



economic transactions, financial institutions, such as banks and stock markets, that reflect but also actively reinforce capitalist ideology.

This focus on social constructivism allows a renewed insight on how capitalism manifests across different geographies. Countries may adopt capitalist principles but adapt them to local contexts. For instance, state capitalism, prevalent in some Asian economies, blends market mechanisms with strong government intervention (Kurlantzick, 2016). Similarly, welfare capitalism, which once used to be a characteristic feature in many European nations, used to integrate market mechanisms with robust social safety nets (Hicks & Kenworthy, 2003). These variations highlight the way capitalist ideas are interpreted and implemented within specific cultural and political frameworks. Social constructivism also critiques traditional narratives that portray capitalism as an inevitable outcome of human progress, by highlighting the historical contingency and by showing that capitalism is a dynamic system shaped by ongoing social and cultural processes.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a comparative historical methodology to analyse Max Weber's arguments in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* with social constructivism. The initial phase involves an extensive literature review to establish a theoretical foundation for the study. Key texts include Weber's primary works, particularly *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, along with secondary sources that critique and expand on Weber's theories. Utilizing the social constructivist framework, this study will critically evaluate how capitalist norms and institutions are socially constructed and maintained through cultural and historical processes. It also explores the role of institutions and legal frameworks in shaping and sustaining capitalist norms. This framework will help contextualize Weber's arguments within broader socio-cultural and institutional developments, providing insights into the variability of capitalist systems.

The final phase involves synthesizing the findings from the comparative analysis and the social constructivist framework to address Weber's approach account for the emergence of capitalism. This synthesis will highlight the historical contingency and cultural specificity of capitalist development, critique traditional narratives that portray capitalism as a universal and inevitable outcome of human progress and provide a nuanced understanding of how different cultures have interpreted and implemented capitalist principles. By comparing Weber's theories with social constructivist insights, this study offers a compelling evaluation of the diverse manifestations of capitalism across different cultural and historical contexts.



WEBER'S PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM

Weber's work on how capitalism in the Western parts of the world came about is primarily characterized by human qualities such as diligence, hard work embedded in protestant theology which once used to be a focal part of certain European cultures (Weber, 2005b). The Weberian rationale of capitalism is one that progressed forward in time and commenced with the rationalization of labour as conditioned labour in a regulated market that eventually demonstrated diligence that was able to separate personal property from the business property in legal terms. Such an economic aptitude for Weber would require the ability to organize labour in a way that would affect social order, it would imply that the Western rationale required a rational and civic economy. On the contrary unlike protestants, Weber concluded that Catholics whether they be wealthy or poor did not develop a special tendency toward economic rationalism, which was why for Weber peculiarities of rational capitalism needed to be sought in Protestantism (Weber, 2005a, p. 7). What according to Weber lacked in other cultures was not the existence of capitalism, but the character, in other words a particular ethos, a strict Calvinistic biblical and therefore legal reference:

'Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings'

For Weber such is a biblical *calling* that has transformed the legal order and the law-abiding spirit that was able to make money-making not only as an economic effort, but also as a theological ambition that needed to be achieved through hard work (Weber, 2005a, p. 19). In here lies also the idea of prudence to make money in a way that strictly avoids spontaneous enjoyment of life. Weber regards this combination to be the fundamental basis of the hard-working individual to make money as an obligatory duty, as one's *calling*. This virtuous daily life is a hard-working professional who is a law-abiding tradesman. For Weber this was the origin of the modern capitalistic market economy that became the social and economic norm for every new individual born into this order. Every new born individual needed to comply in such a society to survive or the individual was to remain jobless (Weber, 2005a, p. 20). Weber attains that every culture historically possessed a form of money-making mechanism where in some cases making money was a ruthless effort and almost always irrational.

Max Weber in his vast body of work demonstrates culture's centrality in shaping societies and driving social change and as a system of meaning (Roth & Weber, 1976). For Weber the term culture constitutes a web of ideas, beliefs, values, and symbols that individuals utilize to interpret the world around them. Culture for Weber is a phenomenon that influences social structures, economic behaviour, and even individual actions placing ideas and values at the forefront of social transformation. Weber argues in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, how the values of ascetic Protestantism (frugality, industriousness,



rational planning) fostered the emergence of capitalism (Alloa, 2017). The emphasis on hard work and worldly success, embedded in Protestant theology, created a workforce imbued with the very mindset conducive to capitalist expansion. Weber's ideas on culture are aligned with that of social constructivism, where the latter replaces Protestantism as a cause with the term culture.

The term capitalism refers to the free market mechanism wherein the economic system of individuals, pursue self-interest, with an efficient allocation of resources and ultimately benefit society as a whole (Aydin, 2010). The capital market in this respect is one with limited government intervention, allowing unfettered competition to drive innovation and keep prices low (Trebing, 1969). With capitalism the free markets, have a primary focus on monetary policy, were the most efficient way to allocate resources and generate economic growth. Friedrich Hayek, for example asserted that markets emerge organically through the independent decisions of millions of individuals and not through central planning (Hayek, 2009). For Hayek economic knowledge is dispersed throughout society, and no central authority could possess the information necessary to efficiently manage an entire economy.

According to Weber all these insights and ideas could be derived back to a new interpretation that was lacking in almost all cultures, but present in Luther's interpretation of the holy text (Lehmann & Roth, 1995). It was not in the bible, but the new insight was in the words of the interpreter. This new insight was 'the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume' (Weber, 2005a, p. 40). It was the *duty* of men to fulfil one's obligation on the basis of their standing in the world. Even though neither Luther nor his biblical interpretation were directly responsible for the emergence of rational capitalism, it were the later Protestant puritan ideas such as those of Calvin that further developed a negative attitude toward sensuous and emotional elements in Western culture (Weber, 2005a, p. 62). The aversion toward emotional bonds for Weber also meant a divorce from the emotional bondage of the idea of sin and *private confession*. The idea of Predestination meant that individuals could only trust God and not even one's close ones. The latter is explained by Weber to be the source of the pessimistically inclined individualism in Western culture.

Weber then brings about the connection that it was this idea emanating from the Calvinist faith that the world existed to serve and glorify God alone (Weber & Kalberg, 2013). To be able to glorify God there needed to be a social organization. This religious notion for Weber formed the basis to have a world that needed to be socially organized by labour and fulfilling daily tasks and systematic organization of the social world (Swedberg, 2018). Such a rational labour and an organized world would serve the glory of God. In a way the purpose of men or the meaning of life would be fulfilled by way of rational organization of labour and environment (Müller, 2006). As emotionality was suspicious, Calvin believed that a believer could only



show to be among God's selection by providing *objective* results (Weber, 2005a, p. 68). By demonstrating such worldly activity, one could demonstrate to be a vessel of God and demonstrate to be in grace of God. This would mean to come down to the accumulation of individual good work, as a result of rational asceticism, which for Weber is of historical importance for the world. It transformed irrational men, into rational purposeful men, who pushed themselves to bring their actions under constant self-control (Arnold, 2005). According to Weber the connection between the two lies in the following words:

'and the specialized worker will carry out his work in order while another remains in constant confusion, and his business knows neither time nor place... therefore is a certain calling the best for everyone' (Weber, 2005a, p. 107)

If men were to receive God's gift, then one must accept his divine *calling* and serve God (Smith, 1998). Wealth is only bad when used for one's own worldly pleasures. Even those with wealth must obey God's laws, which is to eat one must work. Working is in this context a duty and a good deed in the service of God. The irrational and impulsive enjoyment of life was an enemy of the rational asceticism of the man who wanted to work. The work for the puritan needed to be his true calling that would only serve the glory of God and therefore every penny earned could only be spent for the Glory of God and nothing else. For Weber this asceticism formed the ethical foundation that seeped so thoroughly into the soul of man that extended itself into the world of rational capitalism. While capital acquiring was permitted, the social consequence for Weber was the rise of a new social strata, the rational bourgeois (Mueller & Weber, 1982). Weber argues to only point out how Protestant asceticism has come to influence the rational capitalist economic order, all the while he is aware that such an asceticism is difficult to maintain, in the words of John Wesley:

'I fear wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore, I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches' (Weber, 2005a, p. 118).

Weber provides an explanation based on Western historical and religious factors in understanding of modern economic world order in the international arena by emphasizing the importance of hard work, professionalism, and bureaucracy, and highlights key values and principles that are necessary for effective and efficient values in the modern world. There are accounts in published literature arguing that Hans J. Morgenthau would have employed (S. P. Turner, 2009) Weber's methodological ideal-type models, namely in favour of realism (S. Turner & Mazur, 2009, p. 477). Besides Morgenthau, there are other accounts that



argue that Talcott Parsons (Ghosh, 1994) was influenced by Weber's hypothesis of Protestant ethics as the cultural inspiration for modern economy. One such study (Morcillo Laiz & Schlichte, 2016, p. 1448) argues that Parsons' studies on Weber had culminated in what Parsons later called his *modernization theory*. In the previous section it has become clear that Weber's maxims are the rationalization of hard work, inner discipline, frugality, abiding by the law and the Protestant ethic of individual freedom. For Weber these values were fundamental to how institutionalization is to execute duties as meaningful activities. The idea further builds and emphasizes meritocracy, legalization and accountability within and between states.

Rationalization for Weber as we have seen was primarily used to glorify God, but turned out to be an integral part of Protestant individuals who now have accustomed to efficiency and effectiveness in all areas of life, including state affairs. The question thus begs answers for why various cultures in various geographies have varying degrees of rationalization in the use of power and resources in pursuit of national interests. Weber's theory explains further the importance of divisions of labour and specialization in the process of standardization for how states beyond organizations ought to function. In this regard the Weberian model is able to explain why states promote economic growth and development.

Weber's argument provides an explanation for why Western nations were able to transform inspired by Protestantism in developing and modernizing by means of rationalization of the own social and economic life. This connection seems relevant to how some nations are regarded as having successful international organizations, while others still struggle with modernization and development. This also makes the connection significantly important for how regional nations interact with each other and prioritize their national interests with respect to modernization in other parts of the world.

In this regard the Western way of transforming into ethical work ethos, efficiency and effectiveness is one that was rationally organized versus the Eastern way of traditional understanding nature (Weber & Kalberg, 2013). Weber's reformation is also the reformation of man's perception regarding the control of nature in one's own benefit, and to control nature, one must exert energy, meaning one must work and to work one must have discipline and motivation. Both discipline and motivation for Weber were derived from religious ethics that culturally were connected to worldly existence and divine salvation. For Weber Western societies transformed their *given* theological traditional views into practical, mouldable sciences and technologies. Technology was thus the new instrument replacing life after death, with mouldable heavenly life on earth, without having to die for it first (Dahlberg, 1973, p. 61). Men's ability to perfect life here on earth was achievable by means of change, innovation and thus technology.



Weber's views on Protestant ethics and rationalization point toward processes of standardization and specialization. According to Kenneth Dahlberg both outcomes are considered to possess dehumanizing tendencies (Dahlberg, 1973, p. 65). The more technological advances there are, the more modes of production are standardized alienating the worker further from nature and specialization dehumanizing the agent from work. Such alienations create conflicts in universalistic and egalitarian perceptions, creating hierarchical structures and modes of exploitation that it is well known from Karl Marx's objections regarding the exploitation of the *arbeiters*.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

According to Alexander Wendt dominant systems such as capitalism and democracy in the global world are erroneously treated as inevitable outcomes of human progress, whereas these should be treated as social constructs (A. Wendt, 1999b). For Wendt capitalism has aided the construction of the international system that has led to the differentiation of institutional spheres of social, political and economic interactions. In the old days, historically dominant international systems were homogenous spheres of relations that was not institutionally distinct, meaning that the set of rules in one sphere of relations were also in effect in other spheres of interactions (A. Wendt, 1999a). Wendt argues that the case for capitalism was different as it caused an institutional separation between the spheres leading to a transposition of differentiation on a global level. Such a spread of capitalism brought about a differentiation as well as a more complex international system, with different spheres of social life having their own distinct logic.

Wendt argues that both institutionally undifferentiated as well as differentiated systems have their own logic of relations. In this respect states have been in economic interaction for centuries. During this long period of intermittent economic relations mercantilist and military in the beginning have been subjugated to substantial institutional differentiation of global civil society (A. Wendt, 1999b). These changes for Wendt may be found in the spread of capitalism, which unlike other modes of production is constituted by institutional separations between spheres of social life. From the perspective of Social Constructivism capitalism is a social construction that has been able to create distinct political and economic rules and institutions. These separations are due to interactions and shared values where distinctions between political, economic, and other social spheres each with its own structure and rules are a result of the spread of capitalism.

Social constructivism criticizes Marxist materialist arguments to be founded on ideational factors such as ideas and cultural values constructing it as a non-material superstructure with explanations by reference to economic factors (A. Wendt, 1999b). For social constructivism either of the two ideologies



depends on ideational factors. In both cases both modes of production and destruction are within the spheres of relations. Ideational phenomena are basically institutions or rules made up of shared ideas that constitute property and exchange relationships. As relations of production are ideational induces for Wendt that capitalism is a cultural form, not material constructed by ideas. Therefore, it makes more sense to define capitalism in terms of particular cultural forms (A. Wendt, 1999b).

Social constructivism pursues an idealist account and an inquiry into the discursive conditions as neo-realists offer multipolarity as an explanation for war, inquire into the discursive conditions and may constitute poles as enemies or friends, which for purposes of waging war would require poles to be enemies (Dudău, 2006). Liberals for example found their arguments for peace on economic interdependence among states and discursively labelled states with typical understandings of identities that support free trade and economic growth (Rampton & Nadarajah, 2017). On the other side Marxists explain capitalism discursively pursues capitalist relations of production among elites and those who are exploited. All these discursive accounts are from a social constructivist perspective of cultural forms, and thus are vulnerable to idealist critique (A. Wendt, 1999b).

At the base of the social constructivist perspective lies culture as a shared knowledge and if capitalism differentiates and separates the relational spheres, it is because culture constitutes them as such (A. Wendt, 1999b). For Wendt culture is constituted by beliefs explaining intentions and is also in regard to Durkheim a “collective” representation of knowledge structures held by groups of patterns affecting individual behaviour over time such as with Westphalian system, apartheid or capitalism and states (Ceri, 2003). Shared knowledge may be common or collective depending on one’s social perception and particular members of a social existence. However, Wendt makes a distinction between collective knowledge as being different than common knowledge in its effects. The relationship between collective knowledge and the beliefs of individuals is one of supervenience and thus multiple realizability (A. Wendt, 1999b).

This means that collective representations, like cultural norms or societal values, cannot exist or have an impact without the underlying beliefs of individuals. Collective knowledge structures rely on people believing certain things that lead them to engage in practices that maintain and reinforce those structures (De Long & Fahey, 2000). If such processes were ignored one would be treating culture as an independent entity, separate from the actions and practices that create and sustain it. However, the effects of collective knowledge are not simply the sum of individual beliefs. Even if people's beliefs about capitalism are incorrect or incomplete, their actions based on those beliefs can still contribute to the continuation of the system known as capitalism. Therefore, constructivism argues that structures of human association are cultural rather than material, and these structures regulate behaviour and construct identities and interests



(Onuf, 2012). This understanding does not exclude material forces as material factors are very much relevant and people attached to these material factors as intentional actors, where meaning and content come from shared ideas embedded in culture. For Wendt analysis must begin with culture and then move to power and interest. In the Wendtian term constructivism is an open-ended frame that is applicable to any social form as long as the unit of analysis as an actor and structures (levels) are specified (A. Wendt, 1999b).

While Weber emphasizes the unique cultural and historical context of the West, particularly the Protestant ethic, as the driving force behind the development of modern capitalism, constructivism places the rise of capitalism in a much broader set of factors. Weber argues that the discipline, rationality, and emphasis on hard work instilled by Protestantism fostered a conducive environment for the emergence of a rational and efficient capitalist system, which may indeed be the case, yet does not account for how and why capitalism may flourish in non-protestant societies. For Weber, the cultural and religious arguments are the very foundation upon which the capitalist mode is built. Wendt, argues that capitalism itself is a cultural construct, shaped by shared ideas and social interactions over time (A. Wendt, 1999b). The differentiation between the economic, political, and social spheres, a hallmark of contemporary capitalism, is not a natural evolution but a product of this social construction process. While Weber sees Protestantism as a catalyst, Wendt argues that it is just one element within a broader cultural narrative that helped shape the development of capitalism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Max Weber's theory on the *Protestant ethic* provides a compelling explanation for the variation observed among regional organizations around the world and proves to be an insightful instrument that highlights historical and cultural circumstances specific to Western civilization. The theory argues and offers a compelling argument for the emergence of a rational, systematic, and specialized model of capitalism as the Protestant ethic has a strong emphasis on hard work, discipline, and the fulfilment of an individual sense of duty as a crucial factor in shaping the work ethics and values of Western societies. Weber's thesis continues to provide valuable insights into how cultural, economic, and political landscapes can be influenced by internalizing qualities such as rationalization, efficiency, and meritocracy. Even though Weber's model may not provide an absolute explanation, as scholars still need to develop meaningful Weberian indicators, it remains to be an interesting viewpoint that shed light on the challenges and complexities of rationalization and standardization.

On the other side, Weber's argumentation has been criticized for its emphasis on Western exceptionalism as he suggests that only the unique cultural circumstances of the West facilitated the rise of



a rational, systematic form of capitalism. Wendt's social constructivism on the other hand, highlights the variability and constructed nature of capitalist practices across different societies. Capitalism, according to Wendt, can exist in various forms, shaped by the specific cultural and historical contexts within which it emerges. Weber uses his theory to explain the observed efficiency and advancement of Western states in international relations. He attributes their success to the cultural and ethical foundations that facilitated the rise of a rational and productive capitalist system. Wendt, however, sees the differentiation and institutional separations brought about by capitalism as social constructions influencing the functioning of international systems. For Wendt, these separations are not inherent to the international system, but rather products of the social construction of capitalism itself.

The analysis in this article shows that Max Weber's and Alexander Wendt's perspectives on capitalism's origins are complementary yet quite unique. While Weber's cultural approach emphasizes the transformative power of religious ethics, particularly the Protestant Ethic. Weber's ideas indicate that the capitalist mindset is a unique way to rationalize economic activity. Wendt's constructivist framework contrasts and de-emphasizes religious argumentation and argues that capitalism is a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by shared ideas and meanings. It is all the more worthwhile for future research purposes to pursue the study of capitalism in relation to contemporary challenges and developments such as digitalization, artificial intelligence, but also the growing demand for sustainability and governance. Research on the foundations of various economies around the globe whether religious or socially constructed may bear fruitful for increased sustainability of socio-political as well as economic understanding of human endeavours.

AUTHOR STATEMENT / YAZAR BEYANI

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