

## R.H. Tawney, Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber on Puritanism and Capitalism

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### Abstract

The social reform, theological and political backgrounds of R.H. Tawney and Max Weber are compared. These background influences are traced in respect to *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Troeltsch's account of Protestantism and progress is considered. Weber's view of Puritanism and capitalism is considered as particularistic in terms of validity even though modern capitalism would seem to be universalizable. In contrast, Troeltsch and Tawney are seen as arguing for a more universal image of Protestantism.

Keywords: Ernst Troeltsch, ethical socialism, Evangelical Social Congress, Max Weber, modern capitalism, Puritan revolution, R.H. Tawney, Toynbee Hall.

This paper starts by charting the social, political and theological formation of R.H. Tawney and Max Weber, respectively. The paper will demonstrate the remarkable congruence and similarity of their backgrounds and how these contributed to two key works in the historical and social sciences: Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1st edn, 1904–1905; 2nd edn, 1920) and Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926). These two works are often, and justifiably, bracketed together, for both pursue the theme of the influence of religion on the formation of a capitalistic society. Tawney acknowledged the stimulus of Weber's writings on Puritanism and capitalism and for a long time into the twentieth century Tawney was seen within Anglo historiography as the English face of the 'Weber thesis'.

These similarities are striking enough to make an exploration of their differences not only instructive but also valid as a comparative exercise. There is a consistency and continuity to Tawney's life-interests and career that is not duplicated in Weber's own development. The paper will establish the principled differences between Tawney and Weber, and then interrogate Weber in the light of Tawney's standpoint. This will not presume that Tawney is scientifically superior to

Weber, but rather that his positions – morally, politically and historiographically – have a clarity and depth, taken together, that is sometimes difficult to follow in the case of Weber. Tawney's Christian and theological background underlies the questions he raises concerning the validity of modern capitalism. In this sense the paper can be seen as one facet of a complex and difficult debate within current social theory about the nature of modernity: should its origins and causation be regarded as singular or multiple, and does singularity raise problems for the universal validity claims of modern capitalism? This latter question will be deepened through a short consideration of Troeltsch's position on religion and progress.

*Social reform and religious renewal in England and Germany*

I will start by mentioning the association of R.H. Tawney and Toynbee Hall.<sup>1</sup> The link to Toynbee Hall is more than fortuitous for it tells much about the particular lineage of thought that Tawney brought to the historical and social sciences. Richard Henry Tawney (1880–1962) was Oxford educated (Greats and Moderns) and he emerged from an influential grouping that had amalgamated Oxford's tradition of philosophical idealism (T.H. Green) with a socially aware Christian belief and a particular form of socialism that placed cooperation above competition (F.D. Maurice).

Tawney was a resident at Toynbee Hall for the period 1903 to 1906, where he worked as a teacher in adult education. He became involved in labour questions through the Trade Boards, and also helped and organized recreation for local children. Toynbee Hall was founded in 1884 as a result of a project put forward by Canon Samuel Barnett to an enthusiastic following within the University of Oxford. It was the first of a much-copied model of Settlement Houses. It was named after Arnold Toynbee, a charismatic young Oxford don who died young in 1883 (born 1852), not least because he endangered his frail health with residential stints in Whitechapel. It was Arnold Toynbee who first articulated the concept of the 'industrial revolution' in English. (He should not be confused with his namesake, and nephew, Arnold Joseph Toynbee who wrote on civilizations.) Toynbee Hall was, how-

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