

The Origins of the Puritan Capitalist and the Vocational Politician – a Series of Just-so Stories? Or Why is Weber’s Genealogy of the Vocational Politician So Uncontroversial?

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Abstract

This article seeks to answer a rarely asked question about Max Weber’s political sociology: Why has there been so little controversy about his account of the origins of the vocational politician in *Politics as a Vocation* when there has been so much debate over his account of the origins of the ascetic accumulating entrepreneur in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*? In particular, I ask why his peculiar narrative in which he connects the demagogue of the Athenian polis, the renaissance prince, the Gladstonian dictator of the parliament to the modern vocational leader of parties and states has drawn so little attention while scholars continue to fight over his narrative of the formation of the vocational capitalist? I advance some contextual reasons and then some theoretical reasons for the neglect of this political genealogy of the vocational politician. Finally, I examine the incorporation of Weber’s vocational politician into political science and why political science was not interested in his political genealogy. In conclusion I argue that the two narratives are fictions of a sort, but they serve quite different purposes in Weber’s inquires.

Keywords: Bryce, Naumann, political entrepreneur, political genealogy, Protestant ethic, Sombart, vocational politician, Weber.

This article seeks to answer a rarely asked question about Max Weber’s political sociology: Why has there been so little controversy about his account of the origins of the vocational politician in *Politics as a Vocation* when there has been so much debate over his account of the origins of the ascetic accumulating entrepreneur in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter *PESC*)? In particular, I want to ask why his peculiar narrative in which he connects the demagogue of the Athenian polis, the renaissance prince, the Gladstonian dictator of the parliament to the modern vocational leader of parties and states has drawn so little attention – except for the use of Gladstone – while scholars continue to fight over his narrative of the formation of the vocational capitalist? This question is all the more salient as the socio-

logical narrative of the origins of the vocational politician is even more arbitrarily constructed than that of the vocational capitalist in *PESC*. A collateral question I want to ask is why Weber's vocational politician was so seamlessly integrated into modern political science, but the answer to this question has something to do with the answer to the first one.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism
as a just-so story of historical origins

I have argued elsewhere that *PESC* is in fact a hypothetical narrative seeking to locate the originary point of systematic capitalist accumulation in the West, when an appeal to pure historical narrative would give us multiple points entangled with one another. I have further argued that Weber's hypothetical narrative constructs such a moment ideal-typically to give a historically plausible answer to the failures of both Adam Smith and marginal utility theory to account for the original source of accumulation that started the rational capitalist market based on deriving profits from prior profits (Breiner 2005). Here I would like merely to focus on one aspect of this argument, its peculiar hypothetical, self-referential, and constructed quality.

To begin with, I would like to examine the tentative way Weber constructs an historical and conceptual affinity between his ideal type Calvinist as the embodiment of the Protestant ethic of calling and the secular entrepreneur as the embodiment of the 'the spirit' ('Geist') of capitalism. The Calvinist on Weber's account is driven to order life methodically precisely because God has set a plan for the world but will not reveal it. Weber famously claims that this doctrine encouraged in the Calvinist an irrational fear that he was not among the elect (Weber 2002: 72-73). And so to discharge this fear, the Calvinist had to engage in some worldly activity, but what kind is left completely open. The content of the activity was filled in by one's vocation or calling, which is God's purpose in this world. To prove, however, that he is one of the 'called,' the serious Calvinist must devote himself relentlessly to 'the calling,' whatever that calling may be. This unleashes a restless organized energy and methodical organization of one's time based on proving one's ability to deny oneself worldly pleasures. Specifically this means fulfilling one's religious duties and working ceaselessly in one's calling: '*tireless labor in a calling* was urged as the best possible means of *attaining* this self assurance. This and this alone would drive away religious doubt and give assurance