Abstract
This article attempts to explain the problem with Weber’s ‘key’ to the ‘iron cage.’ First, using one of Erich Fromm’s concepts, the article summarizes the central factors that make up the social character of the Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit of Capitalism.’ Starting with Protestant Ethic, the reader will receive a brief review of 1. Martin Luther’s sola fide, sola scriptura, and his ideas concerning how to please God; 2. John Calvin’s predestination and code of conduct for those who are ‘saved;’ 3. Pietism—a movement born out of the ‘Thirty Year War’ in Germany; 4. John Wesley’s push towards imitatio Christi; and 5. Anabaptism and their religiously sanctioned separation practices. In addition, the reader will come to see (a) the differences between the social character of Catholics verses Protestants, (b) how the Protestant Ethic is driven by salvation anxiety, and (c) how the ‘Spirit of Capitalism’ “co-participated” in modern capitalism’s rise to global domination. This summary section ends with an explanation of how these new theological ideas tended ‘to stabilize and intensify the new social character’ and direct the believer’s actions like a gale wind blowing against a small sail boat. Next, the article succinctly defines the ‘Spirit of Capitalism.’ After this foundational review, the reader’s attention is focused on Weber’s concepts of the ‘iron cage’ (an internalized belief that one must have an economically driven, vocational calling), ascetic rationalism, and the charismatic leader. Finally, the article concludes with an explanation of how each new ‘key,’ which is created in the hands of a ‘new’ charismatic leader or human idol, only leads to another ‘iron cage.’

Keywords: Sociology of Religion, Comparative Religion, Social Psychology, the Frankfurt School, Erich Fromm, Critique of Max Weber.

The questioning of Weber’s theory
What is this ‘iron cage,’ as Max Weber (1864-1920) first described it in 1904-5, and can
we free ourselves from it? Can modern humans use the philosophies born out of our present economic system (i.e. capitalism) to free ourselves from the remnants of the social character of the ‘Protestant Ethic’ and the ‘Spirit of Capitalism’? Can Weber’s ‘key,’ ascetic rationalism, unlock the iron cage? This paper will attempt to address these questions by summarizing Weber’s descriptions of the social characters known as the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Once these two social character types have been addressed, I will attempt to articulate Weber’s ascetic rationalism and see if it has the potential to unlock the cage. In order to begin, the reader must understand what is meant by the phrase ‘social character.’ Let us turn our attention to Erich Fromm (1900-1980), a first generation member of the Frankfurt School.

**Social character**

In order to understand the focus of this paper, the reader needs to comprehend the “psychological motivations,” or, in the words of Fromm, the social character of faith based communities. In the appendix of Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* (1941/1994), he describes that

> The social character comprises only a selection of traits, the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group.

In other words, social character is not interested in “the peculiarities by which these persons differ from each other, but in that part of their character structure that is common to most members of the group.” It appears that Fromm agreed with Weber, to the extent that “ideas can become powerful forces, but only to the extent to which they are answers to specific human needs prominent in a given social character.” In Weber’s analysis, as we will soon see, the center of the social character of Lutherans, Calvinists, Pietists, Methodists, and Anabaptists was a rationality that attempted to completely eliminate one type of theodicy. In short, *to alleviate salvation anxiety*.

Before we begin, a few remarks concerning the form of this paper. For convenience and efficiency, the ideologies known as Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism will be shortened as PE and SoC, respectfully. In addition, I have enumerated the factors that define PE for reading convenience, something that Weber didn’t do.

**Max Weber**

Weber was a political economist who wanted to understand the relationship between religion and the work ethic. According to Kalberg, Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was Weber’s attempt
…to demonstrate that one important source of the modern work ethic and orientation to material success, which he calls the “spirit of capitalism,” is located outside the realm of “this-worldly” utilitarian concerns and business astuteness.6

To put it another way, Weber wished to ascertain

… to what extent, religious influences co-participated in the qualitative formation and quantitative expansion of the spirit [of Capitalism] across the globe. We wish further to assess which practical aspects of the culture upon which [modern] capitalism rests can be traced back to these religious influences.7

The modern work ethic that Weber is describing was the one that first appeared shortly after the Reformation and continued to the beginning of the 19th century. In short, Weber argues that the religious ideology of the ‘Protestant Ethic,’ as he coined the term, set the stage for the SoC. For Weber, several religious factors from these five Protestant theologies (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism, and Anabaptist) make up this PE.8 In other words, according to Weber, as people acted socially among the different Protestant faiths, these theologies, as understood by the laity, combined to create the PE.

**Martin Luther**

The first three factors of the PE come from the theology of Martin Luther (1483-1546). The first two factors are Luther’s world renowned dogmas: *sola fide* – ‘faith alone’ and *sola scriptura* – ‘scriptures alone.’ A dogma, be it religious or secular, as it was taught to me in WMU’s Comparative Religion program, is an assertion or set of assertions made with the highest level of certainty. Luther’s dogmas, like all other dogmas, instilled a particular orientation of action to ‘this-worldly’ reality in order to affect the ‘next-worldly’ reality. In Luther’s case, the quintessential elements in achieving salvation in the ‘next-world’ is declaring (in this world, of course) one’s faith in the ‘Risen Lord’ since the scriptures (and not the Pope) are the sole authority in the life of an individual believer. The third factor is Luther’s assertion that the fulfillment of one’s duties in ‘this-worldly’ reality constitutes the only way to please God, i.e. the assigning of vocational calling, meaning, “one’s task is given by God.”9 These three theological arguments were born out of Luther’s concern and fear for his own salvation.10 According to Weaver,

> Anxious about his own salvation, Luther thought that monastic life was the best way to overcome the doubts about his relationship with God … Luther came to see that one is saved by faith alone.11

In other words, Luther wanted to know, with certainty, whether he got into heaven before he lived his life.
These three factors, created by Luther, are counter to Catholic doctrine, which teaches that salvation is achieved by faith and ‘good works.’ To put it another way, Catholics rejected Luther’s theology which argued that the fulfillment of one’s duty in one’s vocational calling is the highest expression of moral activity. By adopting Luther’s theological argument, Lutherans avoided the salvation anxiety of Catholics (i.e. not knowing if one is heaven bound until after ‘Judgment Day’) and de-emphasized the importance of ‘good works,’ replaced Church authority with self authority, and, at the same time, allowed more time for other activities that did not involve ‘salvation,’ like capital accumulation.

**John Calvin**

The next two factors come from the theology of John Calvin (1509-1564). In Calvin’s theology, he keeps Luther’s *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* but adds to the mix the doctrine of predestination, the fourth factor of the PE. Weber refers to Calvin’s doctrine of predestination as “Calvinism’s most characteristic dogma.” Weber’s selective quotes from Westminster Confession of 1647 paint a vivid picture of predestination:

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation … By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and other foreordained to everlasting death.

Summarizing Calvin’s argument,

God elected those to be saved and predestined those to be damned, and then God saw to it that those on the road to damnation were sinners and those on the road to salvation were saints. God’s people—the elect—have been put on earth to work out the divine plan; election, therefore, is a calling and the Christian life a serious vocation.

From this argument, Calvin concludes that 1. everyone is born a sinner; 2. people are incapable of sinless acts; 3. God elects those who will be saved; 4. Christ only died for those who were saved; 5. the believer has no choice whether they are saved or not; 6. those who are not predestined for salvation are damned; and 7. it is impossible for those who are saved, i.e. the elect, to fall away once they are converted unless they fail to live saintly lives. In addition, if that does not paint the darkest of all portraits of human nature and its efforts, Calvin’s argument destroys what notions Luther kept from the Catholic Church’s theology of ‘good works.’ In short, why perform ‘good works’ or, for that fact, the sacraments, if they can’t assist the faithful into heaven?
Faith and salvation anxiety

The fifth factor of the PE is not a dogma like Calvin’s predestination but a way of behaving that allows the believer to testify to one’s faith and, at the same time, alleviate their own salvation anxiety. In the course of developing his new theology, Calvin created a code of conduct for those who were ‘saved,’ i.e. those living saintly lives. This code of conduct forced, by the will of the individual and not the Catholic Church, to deny all physical desires. In other words, as Weaver put it

The Calvinist system blended well with the demands of emerging capitalism: Calvin extolled thrift, hard work, sobriety, responsibility, and self-reliance, the very virtues that were crucial for those who wished to make substantial progress in modern mercantile society.

According to Weber, Calvin’s theology tried to free the Christian from the bonds of the Catholic Church but, in fact, it created a “spiritual isolation of each person.” In short, the social character of the PE started to resemble a cage.

Pietism

The sixth factor, Pietism, was born out of the reaction by German Lutherans to suffering that was caused by the ‘Thirty Year War.’ According to Brenner,

The leaders of Pietism saw a lack of piety in the state church and they wanted to correct it. They saw a lack of concern for the poor, the underprivileged, the pagan and the Jew, and they wanted to help their people develop genuine concern. They wanted to duplicate the conditions and successes of the early Christian Church. But they came up with the wrong answers to accomplish their purpose. Pietism departed from Lutheran orthodoxy in a number of areas. But we can group most of them under one or the other of the following two characteristics: 1) Pietism emphasized sanctification instead of justification; and 2) Pietism fostered subjectivism.

Weber argues that

The defining emphasis was so thoroughly shifted to the praxis pietatis [practice of piety in daily life] that dogmatic orthodoxy fell into the background and occasionally seemed merely a matter of indifference.

In other words, Pietists shifted from theological arguments that attempted to alleviate salvation anxiety by emphasizing charitable actions, i.e. a Protestant version of ‘good works.’ According to Weber,

Pietist principles had in the end two practical effects. They led to a still stricter ascetic control of the organized life in one’s calling, and they anchored in religion the ethical
significance of the calling even more firmly than did normal Reformed [Lutherans and Calvinists] Christians.22

In essence, the social character of Pietists was defined by a heartfelt or feeling-based religious devotion to ones vocational calling, charitable activities, and pastoral theology opposed to the guiding elements of the Catholic Church or the dogma of Luther’s or Calvin’s theology.

John Wesley

The seventh factor of the PE come from the theology of John Wesley (1703-91). Wesley’s theology is defined by sola scriptura – ‘scripture alone’ and imitatio Christi – “imitate Christ.” In other words, all authority comes from scripture alone and the purpose of scripture is to help the believer imitate Christ. Wesley argued that the life of Christ is marked by asceticism, directly giving aid to the poor, caring for the sick, and, like Luther’s, Calvin’s, and Pieties’ theologies, denying worldly reward for those rewards in heaven. According to Weber, Methodism increased the emphasis on the validity of scripture and the indispensability of testifying to belief through conduct but it also strengthen the anti-Calvinist doctrines that grace can be lost.23 Weber does not direct our attention to imitatio Christi but to Wesley’s methodological approach to religious action, the seventh factor. What is important to Weber, is that Methodism’s “regeneration” produced in the end only a complementary component to the pure idea of salvation through good works: a religious anchoring of the ascetic organization of life after the idea of predestination had been abandoned.24

However, “the emotional act of conversion was methodically induced.”25 In short, methodological religious action towards salvation, over time, became methodological secular action towards success in this world of the here and now.

Anabaptism

This brings us to the last social character type, Anabaptism. The Anabaptist theology is defined by its advocacy for 1. a ‘separation from the world’ because it was, and in their opinion still is, controlled by evil, e.g. the shunning of nonbelievers and outsiders; 2. refusal to swear oaths due to Jesus’ teachings26; 3. refusing to “fight evil with evil” because Jesus never did it27; 4. that baptism is an external witnessing of the believer’s conscious profession of faith and since infants could not understand the Gospel’s message, therefore, they should not be baptized; and 5. the belief in sharing one’s goods with everyone, i.e. communal property.28 Weber lists the Quakers and
Mennonites as Anabaptist. However, he categorizes them as “The Baptizing Sects and Churches.”29 Weber emphasized the point that Anabaptist saw their community as a “community of sincere believers and the elect” – and ‘only these people,’ causing these faith based communities to “practice a strict avoidance of ‘the world.’”30 This religiously sanctioned separation, the eighth factor in Weber’s PE, created and maintained a social inequality more rigid than previous Protestant theologies. In addition, Weber points out, due to the elimination of all other sacraments except baptism, the only

“inner light” of continuing revelation now enabled believers to acquire true understanding, even of the biblical revelations of God … [and] without the inner light, human beings, and even persons guided by natural reason, remained pure creatures of desires and wants.31

In short, a reemergence of Calvin’s code of conduct that advocated thrift, hard work, sobriety, responsibility, and self-reliance without Pietism version of ‘good works.’

The Protestant Ethic

To summarize, as the theologies of Lutherans, Calvinists, Pieties, Methodists, and Anabaptists interacted with each other, over the course of history, they converged to create, what Weber calls, the ‘Protestant Ethic.’ For Weber, the social character of the PE is marked by 1. a calling to fulfill one’s vocational duty; 2. a belief that one’s vocational calling was the highest expression of moral activity; 3. a belief that secular success (like fame, money, and/or power) are signs from God that the believer is doing the ‘Will of God’ and that the believer has been ‘saved;’ 4. that enjoyment of the fruits of secular success would cause one to lose salvation; 5. that acts of ‘good works,’ charity, and/or engaging in religious activities (even church attendance) were unnecessary for salvation; and last, but not least, 6. that the believer’s personal understanding and interpretations of the holy scriptures were the sole authority in the believer’s life. Putting it another way, using Fromm’s words, these new theological ideas tended ‘to stabilize and intensify the new social character and helped determined’ the believer’s actions.32 This stabilization allowed economic and secular forces to transform, over a period of time, the Protestant Ethic into the Spirit of Capitalism. In short, the SoC is the remnant or ghost of the PE. As a point of clarification, Weber does not argue that the SoC was the sole cause of modern capitalism. However, Weber does argue that the SoC “co-participated” in modern capitalism’s rise to global domination and wishes to show how modern capitalism can be “traced back to these religious influences.”33
If one had to give an alternative sub-title to Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, it would be ‘How fears stemming from the Book of Revelation and the Theology of Predestination helped give birth to the Spirit of Capitalism.’ I argue, based on their life stories and theologies that were born out of their anxiety concerning their own respective salvations, that Luther’s and Calvin’s theological extrapolations stem from their need to defend themselves from Revelation 14:1-3. According to the Bible, John of Patmos dreamt that,

… the Lamb appeared in my vision. He was standing on Mount Zion, and with him were the hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. I heard a sound from heaven which resembled the roaring of the deep, or loud peals of thunder; the sound I heard was like the melody of harpists playing on their harps. They were singing a new hymn before the throne, in the presence of the four living creatures and the elders. This hymn no one could learn except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been ransomed from the world.

In other words, heaven had a limited seating capacity and they, Luther, Calvin, and all those who hold dear their theological orientations, needed a sign to determine that they were one of the ‘chosen’ few.

**The Spirit of Capitalism**

Now, let us turn our attention to what Weber meant when he used the term SoC. According to Kalberg, the SoC is defined by

… a configuration of values that implied the individual’s duty to increase his capital, to view work as an end in itself to be performed rationally and systematically in a calling, to earn money perpetually (without enjoying it), and to view material wealth as a manifestation of ‘competence and proficiency in a vocational calling.’

But SoC is not industrial capitalism. For Weber, the ‘spirit of capitalism’ is the secular version of the ‘protestant ethic;’ In other words, thinking historically, SoC sits between the PE and industrial capitalism. Weber explains the SoC using the words of Benjamin Franklin, who stated,

The acquisition of money, and more and more money, takes place here simultaneously with the strictest avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of it. The pursuit of riches is fully stripped of all pleasurable (eudämonistischen), and surely all hedonistic, aspects.

What we, in the US and most of Europe, are currently experiencing is post-industrial capitalism—a shift from manufacturing jobs to service jobs and jobs that manufacture, sort, and/or disseminate information. Now that the reader has a good idea of the origins of the PE and the difference between SoC, industrial capitalism, and
Post-industrial capitalism, let us turn our attention to the question, Can Weber’s ‘key,’ ascetic rationalism, unlock the iron cage?

The Iron Cage

At the very end of the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber paints a picture that modern humans are born into a cage that was constructed by the ‘vocational callings’ of the PE. Weber states,

Tied to the technical and economic conditions at the foundation of mechanical and machine production, this cosmos today determines the style of life of all individuals born into it, not only those directly engaged in earning a living.\(^\text{37}\)

Originally, using one of Weber’s most famous sentences, “The Puritan wanted to be a person with a vocational calling; today we are forced to be”\(^\text{38}\) and borrowing Fromm’s definition of social character, the social character of Protestants wanted to be a people with a vocational calling so they could attain entrance into heaven because the salvation anxiety in the social character of Catholicism was too great to bear. Putting it another way, the social character of Protestants, at the time of Weber’s analysis, was based upon 1. wanting a ‘sure thing,’ when it came to salvation; 2. ‘knowing’ that they lived in an ‘iron cage’ but failing to understand that the cage was constructed by a) the economic forces that caused humans to sell their labor-power in order to live and b) the property and exchange laws that dictated who owned what, what was produced, and how it was to be sold; and, finally, 3) the key to the ‘iron cage’ was accepting ‘Jesus Christ as your Lord and personal savior,’ who would let you out of the cage (after you died, of course) because you were predestined to be ‘saved’ and live in Heaven for all eternity.

A cage with no key

As time moved on, the so-called ‘key’ disappeared. As the social character types of the PE and the SoC gave way to the social character types of industrial and post-industrial capitalism, religion was kicked out of the public realm and forced into the private realm of personal matters. This relegated religion to a minor philosophical/moral orientation with no social power. Now that ‘God is dead’\(^\text{39}\) and its counterpart religion is on life support with the new proletariat,\(^\text{40}\) all we are left with is the aphorisms of industrial and post-industrial capitalism (e.g. ‘There must be winners and losers,’ Gordon Gekko’s “Greed is good,”\(^\text{41}\) “…God helps those who help themselves,”\(^\text{42}\) ‘Only the strong shall survive,’ ‘He who dies with the most toys wins,’ ‘Let the poor die and
In short, we are now forced to find a vocation or suffer a life of poverty and an early death for ourselves and our families.

I believe that Weber knew that we could not return to religion and, for this very reason, Weber’s suggests, using Kalberg’s translation, that we should investigate or “chart the significance of ascetic rationalism” in order to find the key to the iron cage. In other words, Weber has no ‘key.’ However, he has an idea where to look for it. One gets the feeling that Weber sees the ‘key’ in the hands of a future secular charismatic leader that is ascetically orientated but still holds dear the current bourgeois ideology of capitalism.

A never ending cycle

Weber has shown in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, that the dissemination of a charismatic leader’s ideas (in this case, a theology that will assure you, before you die, that you are getting into heaven) causes the ideas to become ‘traditional thinking’ for his disciples and future followers. For example, Luther’s, Calvin’s, and Wesley’s ideas became religious traditions and then social institutions. Over time, increased membership, the need to have organizational direction, pressure from economic forces, and new technology caused these social institutions of ‘traditional thinking’ to take on a legal-rational orientation, e.g. a bureaucracy. From here, the bureaucracy continues until its authority is challenged and/or the bureaucracy can no longer perform its function, usually due to economic forces. This in turn creates a need for a ‘new’ charismatic leader who could ‘fix’ the bureaucracy. In short, a cycle of change that goes something like this: 1. economic failure allows for the; 2. emergence of a charismatic leader who gives ‘hope,’ challenges the established authority, and the way things are run; 3. the leader’s ideas become dominate and, therefore, the new traditional way of thinking; 4. then, over time, the ideas become institutionalized, i.e. a functioning bureaucracy, and, finally, returning back to the beginning; 5. the failure of the bureaucracy to maintain order, social stability, economic stability, and/or a ‘sense of fairness’ creates a need for a change and a ‘new’ charismatic leader or human idol. In summary, a never ending cycle, which only seems to get faster with each new set of technological advances, which is spurred on by the mantra ‘production for profit,’ and not ‘production for need.’

Breaking the cycle

Karl Marx (1818-1883) and the Frankfurt School, on the other hand, offer a different solution-breaking the cycle of bourgeois philosophy and its wasteful (due to over
production and a dishonest distribution of a worker’s surplus value), its deceitful (due to its ‘fine-print,’ ‘simple interest,’ and ridiculous maxims, like ‘let your money work for you’), and its irrationally organized economic system (i.e. profit over need). In other words, again quoting Erich Fromm, as he discussed social transference,

Even though man is helpless not only as a child but as an adult, this adult helplessness can be overcome. In a society which is rationally organized, which does not need to confuse man’s mind in order to deceive him about the real situation, in a society that encourages rather than discourages man’s independence and rationality, the sense of helplessness will have disappeared and with it the need for social transference. A society whose members are helpless need idols. 46

Notes
3. ibid, Pp. 275.
4. ibid, Pp. 279.
6. ibid, Pp. xi.
7. ibid, Pp. 49, first bracket added for clarification, second bracket added by Kalberg.
8. ibid, Pp. 53.
10. see “anfechtungen,” in particular, “Career of the Reformer IV” and “Table Talk,” found in Luther, Martin. Luther’s Works, transl. Jaroslav Pelikan, Volume 34 and 54, respectively, (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1955).
14. ibid, Pp. 56.
16. ibid, Pp. 96-99.
22. ibid, Pp. 82, brackets added for clarification.
23. ibid, Pp. 91.
24. ibid, Pp. 93.
25. ibid, Pp. 92.
27. This point ignores the fact that Jesus flogged the money changers and the merchants in the temple, see John 2:13-16.
30. ibid, Pp. 93-94.
31. ibid, Pp. 95-96, bracket added for clarification.
36. ibid, Pp. 17.
37. ibid, Pp. 123.
38. ibid, Pp. 123.


43. A paraphrase of Ebenezer Scrooge’s remark to two men collecting for the charity houses, see Stave 1, in Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. 1843.


References


