

CHAPTER 8

DON'T BEAT UP THE LITTLE GUYS

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Those who write about persecution and discrimination, whether ethnic, religious, class, or sexual (gender), are usually and rightly concerned with the negative effects on the victims. Insofar as such oppression deprives the oppressed of opportunity to work and earn, there is an obvious cost to the economy. Much less noted, perhaps because less obvious, is the cost to the oppressors.

Yet history abounds in examples. One of the best, because of its importance and the persistence of negative consequences is the Spanish persecution, first of Jews, then of Moors and Protestants, from the fourteenth century on. The story of these wicked (I use the word advisedly) campaigns, particularly the first, is well known. The Spanish, in the course of centuries of intermittent external crusade against the Muslims, pursued comparable internal measures against the outsiders in their midst -- the Jews to begin with, because they refused to adopt the true faith, because they tempted and seduced those of their former co-religionists who had accepted Christianity, because their very presence contaminated. Even where local Christian rulers chose to protect their Jewish subjects for good economic reasons, popular uprisings, often fomented by Christian dogmatics and fanatics (what we would now call pogroms), could force the ruler's hand, the more so as the growing number of (forced) converts raised the stakes of salvation.

No sooner then had Christian Spain completed the conquest and extrusion of the last Moorish ruler (Granada, January 1492), than it turned to completion of the process of inner purification. The Jews were given the choice of apostatizing or leaving. Many did accept Christianity, willy-nilly; even more left and scattered throughout the Mediterranean. Spain was now nominally *Judenrein*. Shortly after, Spain presented the Muslims with a similar alternative. Purity at last.

At least purity in name. Once, discussing the cost of purification, someone objected to me that Spain was not the only country to expel Jews. England had done so in 1290; France, in 1394. To be sure. But the English and French had done the dirty deed and got it over with. Their Jews were gone, and with them the whole issue. The Spanish made the mistake of trying to win their Jews over to Christianity, perhaps with apocalyptic designs, forcing conscience in the process, which meant they could never be sure of the sincerity of their converts/victims. Hence persistent disquiet, prying prurience, persecution, and inquisition.

On the heels of these religious coups, Spanish discoveries in the New World paid off in extensive booty and, much more important, in the exploitation of major deposits of gold and, even more, silver ore. Some saw these gains as the reward for religious zeal and virtue. In

fact, windfall wealth proved disadvantageous: an encouragement to costly political ambitions and anti-productive complacency. Why work and make if you can let others do the work and you can hire or buy?

So over a period of decades, even centuries, the Spanish spent too much, earned too little, succumbed to the burden of royal debt. By the seventeenth century, Spain was a basket case of bad habits and cherished vices.

This relative and even absolute Spanish decline was part of a larger retreat of Mediterranean Europe, of the “South” by comparison with the “North.” The transformation, indeed inversion, of earlier relationships that had Venice and Genoa at the head of the commercial parade has given rise to considerable speculation and analysis. Among the most influential theses: that of Max Weber (1930) as expressed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.¹ Although the book was not to appear in English translation for a quarter of a century, in French not until a quarter-century more, the Weberian analysis became an immediate focus of controversy. The debate, almost unique in its passion and tenacity, continues even now, with sublime and absolute conviction on both sides.

Weber argued that Protestantism, more specifically, its Calvinist branches, promoted the rise of modern capitalism, that is, the industrial capitalism that he knew from his native Germany. Protestantism did this, he said, not by easing or abolishing those aspects of the Roman faith that had deterred or hindered free economic activity (the prohibition of usury, for example); nor by encouraging, let alone inventing, the pursuit of wealth; but by defining and sanctioning an ethic of everyday behavior that was conducive to business success.

Calvinistic Protestantism, wrote Weber, did this initially by affirming the doctrine of predestination. This held that one could not gain salvation by faith or deeds; that question had been decided for everyone from the beginning of time, and nothing could alter one’s predestined fate.

Such a belief could easily have encouraged a fatalistic attitude: if behavior and faith made no difference, why not live it up? Why be good? Because, according to Calvinism, goodness was a plausible sign of election. Anyone could be chosen, but it was only reasonable to suppose that the great majority of those chosen would show by their character and ways the quality of their souls and the nature of their destiny. This implicit reassurance was a powerful incentive to proper thoughts and behavior. As the Englishwoman, Elizabeth Walker, wrote to her grandson in 1689, alluding to one of the less important but more important signs of grace: “All cleanly people are not good, but there are few good people but are cleanly.”² And while hard belief in predestination did not last more than a generation or two (it is not the kind of dogma that has lasting appeal), it was eventually converted into a secular code of behavior: hard work, honesty, seriousness, the thrifty use of money and time (both lent us by God).³ “*Time is short*,” admonished the Puritan divine Richard Baxter (1615-1691), “and *work is long*.”⁴

All of these values are helpful to business and capital accumulation, but Weber stressed that the good Calvinist did not aim at riches. (He might have easily believed, however, that honest riches are a sign of divine favor.) Europe did not have to wait for the Protestant Reformation to find people who wanted to be rich. Weber’s point is that Protestantism produced a new kind of businessman, a different kind of person, one who aimed to live and work a certain way. It was the *way* that mattered (compare the Chinese *tao* and the Jewish *halachah*), and riches would be at best a by-product.

A good Calvinist would say that that was what was wrong with Spain: easy riches. Nothing corrupts so much as unearned wealth. Compare the Protestant and Catholic attitudes

toward gambling in the early modern period. Both condemned it, but Catholics condemned it because one might (would) lose, and no responsible person would jeopardize his well being and that of others in that manner. The Protestants condemned it because one might win, and that would be bad for character. It was only much later that the Protestant ethic degenerated into pat maxims for material success and smug, smarmy sermons on the virtues of wealth.

The Weber thesis, understood or misunderstood, gave rise to all manner of rebuttal. Roman Catholics did not know whether to accept it as praise or denounce it as criticism. Some scholars saw it as a stain on their national escutcheon. Materialist historians generally rejected the notion that abstractions such as values and attitudes, let alone those inspired by religion, could motivate and shape changes in the mode of production. This refusal was the stronger for Weber's sacrilegious intention to rebut Marx on this score. To get cart and horse in proper order, some argued that the rise of capitalism had generated Protestantism; or that Protestantism appealed to the kinds of people -- tradesmen, craftsmen -- whose personal values were already conducive to hard work and business success.⁵

We need not take the time here to review this extensive anti-Weberian literature in detail. Suffice it to say that most historians today would look upon the Weber thesis as implausible and unacceptable: it had its moment and it is gone.

I do not agree. Not on the empirical level, where records show that Protestant merchants and manufacturers played a leading role in trade, banking, and manufacture. In manufacturing centers (*fabriques*) in France and western Germany, Protestants were typically the employers, Catholics the employed. In Switzerland, the Protestant cantons were the centers of export manufacturing industry (watches, machinery, textiles); the Catholic ones were primarily agricultural. In England, which by the end of the sixteenth century was overwhelmingly Protestant, the Dissenters (read Calvinists) were disproportionately active and influential in the factory industries and forges of the nascent Industrial Revolution.

I am convinced by Weber's argument that the heart of the matter lay in the making of a new kind of man -- rational, ordered, diligent, productive. These virtues, while not new, were hardly commonplace. Protestantism generalized them among its adherents, who judged one another by conformity to these standards. This is a story in itself and one that Weber did surprisingly little with: the role of group pressure and mutual scrutiny in assuring performance -- everybody looking at everyone else and minding one another's business.

Two special characteristics of the Protestants reflect and confirm this link. The first was stress on instruction and literacy, for girls as well as boys. This was a by-product of bible reading: good Protestants were expected to read the Holy Scriptures for themselves. (By way of contrast, Catholics were catechized but did not have to read; and they were explicitly discouraged from reading the Bible.) The result: greater literacy and a larger pool of candidates for advanced schooling; also greater assurance of continuity of literacy from generation to generation. Literate mothers matter.

The second was the importance accorded to time. Here we have what the sociologist would call unobtrusive evidence: the making and buying of clocks and watches. Even in Catholic areas such as France and Bavaria, most clockmakers were Protestant; and the use of these instruments of time measurement and their diffusion to rural areas was far more advanced in Britain and Holland than in Catholic countries.⁶ Nothing testifies so much as time sensibility to the "urbanization" of rural society, with all that that implies for rapid diffusion of values and tastes.

This is not to say that Weber's "ideal type" of capitalist could be found only among Calvinists and their later sectarian avatars. People of all faiths and no faith can grow up to be

rational, diligent, orderly, productive, clean, and humorless. Nor do they have to be businessmen. One can show and profit by these qualities in all walks of life. Weber's argument, as I see it, is that in that place and time (northern Europe, sixteenth to eighteenth centuries), religion encouraged the appearance in numbers of a personality type that had been exceptional and adventitious before; and that this type fostered a new economy (a new mode of production) that we know as (industrial) capitalism.

To this I would add that the growing need for fixed capital (equipment and plant) in the industrial sector made continuity crucial -- for the sake of continued maintenance and improvement and the accumulation of knowledge and experience. These manufacturing enterprises were intrinsically very different from mercantile ones, which often took the form of *ad hoc* mobilizations of capital and labor, brought together for a voyage or venture and subsequently dissolved. This was the way the English East India Company operated in the early years; although it was soon apparent that a more continuing mobilization and installation (immobilization) would be necessary.

But this is only one side of the coin. It takes two to raise the one and humble the other. The other side is what was happening in the South, or more exactly, what the South was doing to itself. Here I would single out the thesis of Trevor-Roper (1963), in my opinion the most persuasive amendment to Weber's Protestant ethic. According to Trevor-Roper, it was not the Protestant achievement that made the difference, but the Roman Catholic surrender to luxury, dispendious art (however beautiful), and anti-heretical, counter-Reformation dogmas (bigotry). However important the proliferation of Weber's new business ethic, then, it was only one aspect of a larger process. Not only did money move north, but knowledge (and power) as well; and it was knowledge, specifically scientific knowledge, that dictated economic possibilities.

In the centuries before the Reformation, the Mediterranean lands were centers of learning and intellectual inquiry: Spain and Portugal, because they were on the frontier of Christian and Islamic civilization and had the benefit of Jewish intermediaries; and Italy, which had its own contacts. But first is not forever. Spain and Portugal lost out early, even before the Reformation, because religious passion and military crusade drove away the outsiders (Jews and then the *conversos*) and persecuted the strange and potentially heretical. These were bad habits, which the Iberians had the misfortune to see as virtues. Italy held out longer, continuing to produce some of Europe's leading mathematicians and scientists. It was not an accident that the first learned society (the Accad mia dei Lincei, Rome, 1603) was founded there.⁷

The Protestant Reformation, of course, changed the rules. It gave a big boost to literacy, spawned dissents and heresies, and promoted the kind of skepticism and refusal of authority that is at the heart of the scientific endeavor. The Catholic countries, instead of meeting the challenge, responded by closure and censure. In the Habsburg dominions, which included the Low Countries, persecution measures came hard on the heels of Luther's defiance. The salient presence there of Marrano refugees, feared and hated as enemies of the true church and accused of deliberately propagating the new doctrines, aggravated the hysteria.

A rain of interdictions followed (from 1521 on), not only of publishing heresy, but also of reading it, in any language. The Spanish authorities, both lay and clerical, viewed Lutherans (for a long time all Protestants were seen as Lutherans), not as dissenters, but as non-Christians, like Jews and Muslims enemies of the faith.⁸ Any thoughts of retiring the Inquisition were shelved, and the Church and civil authorities joined forces to control thought, knowledge and belief. In 1558 the death penalty was introduced for importing

foreign books without permission and for unlicensed printing. Universities were reduced to centers of indoctrination; unorthodox and dangerous books were placed on an *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1557 in Rome, 1559 in Spain), and safe books appeared with an official *imprimatur* ("let it be printed"). Among the books on the Spanish list were a few scientific works banned because their authors were Protestant. Despite some smuggling, hazardous to the health, the diffusion of new ideas to society at large slowed to a trickle. (Recall the bibliographical review and purge at the beginning of *Don Quixote*: the point is not only the condemnation of books on a whim, but also the books themselves -- the trivia that were at risk in a fantasy-ridden, knowledge-starved society.)

Nor were Spaniards allowed to study abroad, lest they ingest subversive doctrine. That same year (1559), the Crown forbade attendance at foreign universities except for such safe centers as Rome, Bologna, and Naples. The effect was drastic. Spanish students who had long gone to the University of Montpellier for medical training now just about stopped: 248 students from 1510 to 1559; 12 from 1560 to 1599.⁹ (One wonders about those dozen mavericks. Did they ever come back?) Subversive scientists were silenced and forced to denounce themselves. Regimes that exercise thought control and enforce orthodoxy are never satisfied with prohibitions and punishments. The guilty must confess and repent -- both for their own salvation and that of others.

Indeed. Persecution led to an interminable "witch hunt," complete with paid snitches, prying neighbors, and a racist blood mania (*limpieza de sangre*). The victims were not only Jews, Moors, and Protestants but also the Spanish and Portuguese peoples. Worse yet, the Spanish and Portuguese thought themselves better off for their religious purity and piety. The only thing worse than self-impoverishment is unawareness.

So Iberia and indeed Mediterranean Europe as a whole missed the train of the so-called scientific revolution. In the 1680s Juan de Cabriada, a Valencian physician, was conducting a running war with doctors in Madrid, trying vainly to persuade them to accept Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood in the face of antique Galenist tradition. What, he asked was wrong with Spain? It is "as if we were Indians, always the last" to learn of new knowledge.¹⁰

For all the damage done at home, Spanish and Portuguese might have saved themselves by opening their new colonial possessions to all manner of men and ideas. What was forbidden in Europe might have been tolerated, even encouraged, overseas. But that is precisely what did not happen. The Church, quick to see these virgin lands as a testing ground (the true faith must win) alert to the danger posed by foreign heretics, concerned for the vulnerability of idolatrous, credulous natives, sent missionaries and inquisitors abroad with the *conquistadors*. Principal targets: Marranos and Protestants. Against this alliance of the religious with the secular arm, the dissenters had little to offer, whether in influence, numbers, or brute force. On the contrary: they found themselves torn between conviction and an irrepressible need to prove their loyalty. Loyalty won, and they lost.¹¹ There, indeed, is the key weakness of the nonconformist: he wants to be taken in. Once there, he's finished.

The French, be it noted, followed a similar strategy in Quebec, with similar negative consequences. Quoting Alain Peyrefitte (1996, p. 412):

The restriction of immigration to Catholics and the exclusion of Protestants did irreparable damage to the colony. The immigrants that came brought with them an agrarian, manorial mentality, which ended by paralyzing trade. All that was left, as Governor Frontenac put it, was 'the conversion of souls and the hunt for beaver.'

Centuries later, the prime minister of Quebec sighed to Peyrefitte: "How unfortunate that Richelieu stopped the Huguenot emigration to Canada! Had he not done so, the first men on the moon would have spoken French."¹²

This reactionary, anti-Protestant backlash, more than Protestantism itself, sealed the fate of southern Europe for the next three hundred years.¹³ The one-time leader became the follower, a world of backwardness, illiteracy (especially of women), piety, and poverty. (Admittedly, some saw poverty as a path of salvation, both for the poor and those who give to them.) This retreat was not predestined; it was not required by orthodox doctrine. But this path once taken, the Church, repository and guardian of truth, found it hard to admit error and change course. How hard? One hears nowadays that Rome has finally succeeded in rehabilitating Galileo after almost four hundred years. That's how hard.

Notes

1. The original German version, *Die Protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus*, appeared in the *Archiv f. Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 20 (1904), pp. 1-54, and 21 (1905), pp. 1-110. An English edition did not appear until 1930, translated by Talcott Parsons.

2. [Anthony Walker], *The Holy Life of Mrs. Elizabeth Walker* (1690), cited in Thomas (1994, p.56).

3. The best analysis of the Weberian model is still Parsons (1968). Elaborating the paradigm, Parsons divides action into three categories: rational (appropriate to ends), irrational (unrelated to ends), and non-rational (action as an end in itself). A good example of this last: "Father, I cannot tell a lie; it was I cut down the cherry tree." Weber's Calvinist ethic falls in the realm of the non-rational.

4. Baxter (1707, p. 228), I owe this reference to Keith Thomas. The aphorism goes back to *The Ethics of the Fathers*, ch. 20.

5. Cf. H. M. Robertson (1933).

6. Landes (1983, pp. 92-3). Cf. de Vries (1974, p. 219): on the basis of household inventories, possession of clocks in the Leewardadeel district rose from 2 percent in 1677-1686 to 70.5 percent in 1711-1750. Of course these were households sufficiently well off to make an inventory after death.

7. Lincei = lynxes. The animal was chosen for its reputedly keen sight.

8. Benassar (1994, pp. 289-90). Once again Spain's reaction was shaped, to its own cost, by its long history of uncompromising religious conformity and the passions it engendered. Cf. Goodman (1992, pp. 163-4) who suggests that the dearth of Old Catholic physicians in sixteenth-century Spain may have reflected the racial (congenital) link that some Spaniards made between Jewishness and medicine. "It could well be that, in a society which gave esteem to those who could establish freedom from Jewish or Moorish descent, the Old Christians avoided the medical profession in case success there might arouse suspicions of Jewish blood." Poisoned bread upon the waters.

9. Goodman (1992, p. 172). Some Spanish historians, seeking to defend the indefensible, have argued that outside universities were so poor and hidebound that Spanish students were not missing much. Perhaps, although Protestant universities, in England and Holland, for example, were substantially better. But drinking at the fountain of heresy was simply out of the question. Cf. Smith (1937, book V, ch. i, part 3, article 3d) on the drain of talent from university teaching to the Church in Catholic countries.

10. In his *Carta filosofica, medico-chymica* (Madrid, 1687), cited by Goodman (1992, p. 173).

11. See the paper by Lestringant (1988) delivered in the University of Paris-Sorbonne in March 1998 at a French-Brazilian Conference on "Brésil, L'Europe et les équilibres internationaux, XVIe-XXe siècles." The papers presented at the conference will be published by the Centre d'Etudes sur le Brésil (University of Paris-IV) and the Department of History at the University of Brasilia.

12. Peyrefitte (1996, p. 412).

13. Trevor-Roper (1963). The paper was originally delivered in 1961 to the Fifth Irish Conference of Historians in Galway. It must have upset many listeners.

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