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**The Protestant Work Ethic and the Making of the American Dream:
Cultural and Economic Transformations from Colonial Times to Modern
America.**

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master's Degree in Language and Culture**

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Abstract

The Protestant work ethic, rooted in the teachings of the Reformation, has played a crucial role in shaping American cultural and economic identity. This dissertation examines the ways in which Protestant values, particularly those emphasizing hard work, individual responsibility, frugality, and success as a sign of divine favor, have influenced the evolution of the American Dream. It traces the historical development of these values from colonial America to modern times, exploring their impact on economic practices, social mobility, and national identity. Drawing on Max Weber's concept of the Protestant ethic, this study investigates the role of Puritanism in shaping early American attitudes toward labor and success. It further examines how these values were institutionalized in the 19th and 20th centuries, influencing economic expansion, industrialization, and the formation of the middle class. Additionally, the study addresses contemporary challenges to the Protestant work ethic, including rising economic inequality, globalization, and shifting cultural attitudes toward work and success. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the research integrates historical analysis, sociological theory, and economic perspectives. Primary sources such as sermons, economic treatises, and political speeches are analyzed alongside secondary literature in American history, religious studies, and economic sociology. By providing a comprehensive historical and cultural analysis, this dissertation contributes to the understanding of the enduring power of Protestant values in shaping American aspirations and economic behaviors.

المخلص

إن الأخلاق البروتستانتية في العمل، المتجذرة في تعاليم حركة الإصلاح الديني، قد لعبت دوراً محورياً في تشكيل الهوية الثقافية والاقتصادية الأمريكية. تبحث هذه الأطروحة في الكيفية التي أثرت بها القيم البروتستانتية – خاصة تلك التي تركّز على العمل الجاد، والمسؤولية الفردية، والتدبير المالي، واعتبار النجاح علامة على الرضا الإلهي – في تطور مفهوم "الحلم الأمريكي". وتتبع التطور التاريخي لهذه القيم من الحقبة الاستعمارية إلى العصر الحديث، مع تحليل تأثيرها على الممارسات الاقتصادية، والحراك الاجتماعي، والهوية الوطنية. ، يدرس هذا البحث، بالاستناد إلى مفهوم ماكس فيبر عن "الأخلاق البروتستانتية"، دور التقاليد البيوريتانية (التطهيرية) في تشكيل المواقف الأمريكية المبكرة تجاه العمل والنجاح. كما تُعنى بكيفية تأسيس هذه القيم خلال القرنين التاسع عشر والعشرين، ودورها في دفع التوسع الاقتصادي، والتصنيع، وتشكيل الطبقة الوسطى. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تناقش الدراسة التحديات المعاصرة التي تواجه هذه الأخلاقيات، بما في ذلك تزايد عدم المساواة الاقتصادية، والعولمة، والتغيرات الثقافية في نظرة المجتمع إلى العمل والنجاح. تعتمد المنهجية على مقارنة متعددة التخصصات، تجمع بين التحليل التاريخي، والنظريات الاجتماعية، والرؤى الاقتصادية. حيث يتم تحليل مصادر أولية مثل المواعظ الدينية، والمؤلفات الاقتصادية، والخطابات السياسية، إلى جانب المراجع الثانوية في مجالات التاريخ الأمريكي، والدراسات الدينية، وعلم الاجتماع الاقتصادي. من خلال هذا التحليل الشامل، تسهم الأطروحة في فهم التأثير المستمر للقيم البروتستانتية في صياغة تطلعات الأمريكيين وسلوكياتهم الاقتصادية .

List of Abbreviations and acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
GDP	Gross Domestic Product (used in similar academic contexts)
Gen Z	Generation Z
IR	Industrial Revolution
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
PWE	Protestant Work Ethic
USA	United States of America

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General Introduction

The Protestant work ethic is a term that is founded on theological and sociological ideas coming from the Protestant Reformation, specifically, the 16th century. It is mostly associated with the studies of John Calvin and other Protestant reformers who regarded hard work, dissipation, and frugality as moral virtues of faith. This ethic has been at the heart of modern capitalism and has enormously influenced Western economic and social thought.

Termed as Protestant work ethic, it does mean that hard work, diligence, and a sense of duty are seen not just as imposing moral obligations, but also as signs of personal salvation and divine favor. This full notion is closely integrated with the theological doctrine of predestination, constituting the central message of Calvinism. Here, it is enunciated that whether a person or some group belongs to the category of "the elect" or is damned is already decided by God. While individuals cannot change the fate determined by God in relation to predestination, they may seek signs of their election from worldly success and moral conduct.

In the Protestant view-subsequently Calvinism-a person's success in life was a sign of God's grace; therefore, labor was taken as a calling or "vocation" which gave glory to God. This attitude made the individual approach his work with seriousness, discipline, and responsibility. Thrift is a watchword in the Protestant work ethic. Wealth is not to be used for extravagant spending; rather, it is to be reinvested and used for other productive purposes.

Max Weber adeptly addressed this concept in his classic work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Weber believed that the Protestant work ethic represented an important contribution to the dynamic development of capitalism in Western Europe. He showed that the values of hard work, thrift, and rational planning that were promoted by Protestantism created a cultural setting which allowed for economic growth and accumulation of capital.

The Protestant work ethic is a concept that has had profound resonance in sociological, economic, and historical writing, particularly through the work of German sociologist Max Weber. In his seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Weber explores the relationship between Protestant religious ideology, specifically Calvinism, and the emergence of modern capitalism. In order to grasp the historical and theoretical context of the Protestant work ethic, it is necessary to analyze the religious, cultural, and economic environment of early modern Europe, and Weber's sociological interpretation.

The Protestant work ethic originated during the 16th-century Protestant Reformation, a religious reform that challenged the authority of the Catholic Church and gave birth to new Christian denominations. Notable leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin were behind the creation of Protestant theology. Calvin actually developed the doctrine of predestination, which was at the core of the development of the Protestant work ethic. Calvinism taught that God had determined who would be saved (the "elect") and who would be damned, and that nothing that men could do would alter this divine will. Calvinists did believe, however, that men could discover evidence of their election by looking at their temporal behavior and achievements.

This religious framework created a unique psychological and cultural atmosphere. Calvinists viewed success in one's calling as a potential indication of God's favor. Thus, they stressed hard work, discipline, and moral asceticism. Work was no longer merely a means of survival but a "calling" (a divine vocation) through which one might please God. This shift in attitude transformed the way people approached work and economic activity, fostering a culture of hard work, thrift, and rational planning.

Weber's treatise on the Protestant work ethic is situated within the broader context of the evolution of modern capitalism in Western Europe. Capitalism as an economic system is

characterized by profit-making, the accumulation of capital, and the rational organization of labor. Weber held that the “spirit of capitalism” the cultural and ethical system that regulates capitalist practices was influenced by Protestant values, most particularly those of Calvinism.

Weber observed that Protestant societies, such as in England, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany, were at the forefront of capitalist development. He accounted for this by appeal to the cultural and psychological influence of Protestant teachings. Calvinists, for example, did not view wealth as inherently sinful but rather as something to be productively and responsibly utilized. Excessive luxury or indulgence was frowned upon, as it would constitute a distraction from one's spiritual duties. Wealth, rather, was to be invested again or used to create more economic opportunities, in accordance with the principles of capitalist accumulation.

Weber also referred to the role of rationality in capitalism and Protestantism. Calvinists approached work and life with a mindset of systematic discipline, planning, and self-control. This rational approach to work and economic activity mirrored the organizational culture of capitalism, which relies on efficiency, calculation, and planning for the future. In this way, Weber argued that the Protestant work ethic provided capitalism with a cultural foundation upon which capitalist economic systems could arise.

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is a sociological classic and the most influential book ever written on the relationship between religion and economic behavior. Weber's book has typically been contrasted with the materialist tradition of Karl Marx, who contended that economic systems were determinant in their role in shaping society. In contrast to Weber's opponent Marx, Weber contended that values, ideas, and culture were the determinants of social and economic change.

Weber's thesis has been controversial. Some scholars argue that his argument has exaggerated the role of religion in the development of capitalism, and they point to other

causes such as technological advancements, political reforms, and foreign trade. Weber himself acknowledged that the Protestant work ethic was only one among a number of reasons why capitalism had developed. His aim was to reveal the psychological and cultural sides of economic action that had been underestimated by earlier theorists.

Protestant work ethic continues to be an object of academic debate as well as of cultural self-questioning. It can be traced in contemporary understandings of work, success, and individual initiative, particularly Western cultures. The religious foundation for the ethic itself has declined enormously in influence within most of the world, its diligence, discipline, and initiative are ingrained within capitalist culture today.

Weber's scholarship also raises serious questions about the relationship between religion, culture, and economics. His scholarship compels us to consider how economic systems and people's actions are shaped by cultural values and beliefs. In periods of globalization and multicultural encounters, an understanding of the historical and theoretical roots of the Protestant work ethic can provide considerable insight into the complexity of economic life in the modern period.

The Protestant work ethic, as established by Max Weber, is a profound intersection of religious, cultural, and economic currents. Evolved from the theological developments of the Protestant Reformation, and most specifically Calvinism, this ethic consecrated hard work, discipline, and rational planning as moral virtues. Weber felt that these virtues were key to establishing the “spirit of capitalism” and the development of modern economic systems.

Although his thesis has been challenged and criticized, it remains a cornerstone of sociological theory and a compelling paradigm for describing the cultural origins of capitalism.

This research aims to investigate the historical origins of the Protestant work ethic and its integration into American culture. Also it seeks to analyze the connection between

Protestant values and economic practices in colonial and post-revolutionary America, exploring how these principles influenced early economic systems and behaviors. Finally, the research aims to evaluate the relevance and transformation of the Protestant work ethic in the context of contemporary economic and social issues, assessing how these ideas have evolved and adapted to modern challenges.

This research work focuses primarily on answering these frequently asked questions: How did the Protestant work ethic influence the development of economic and social structures in early America? In what ways did Protestant ideals shape the conceptualization of the American Dream? How has the Protestant work ethic evolved, and what are its implications for modern American society?

Using an interdisciplinary approach, the research integrates historical analysis, sociological theory, and economic perspectives. The historical analysis involves examining early American writings, sermons, and economic policies influenced by Protestant beliefs to understand their historical roots. The sociological inquiry explores how the Protestant work ethic shaped societal norms and attitudes toward work, wealth, and success, analyzing its impact on social behavior. Finally, the contemporary study investigates modern critiques and adaptations of the Protestant work ethic in the context of globalization and economic challenges.

This dissertation is divided into five main chapters each discussing a key element in the research. The first chapter is entitled “The Theological Foundations of the Protestant Work Ethic”, explores how Reformation theology reshaped economic values. The chapter examines Calvin's doctrine of predestination, which led believers to view economic success as a possible sign of God's favor. It discusses how Protestant thinkers transformed labor from mere necessity into a spiritual calling. Also it shows how Puritan settlers brought these ideas to America, where hard work became both a religious duty and a foundation for society.

The second chapter under the title of “The Protestant Work Ethic in Colonial and Early America”, traces how these religious values took root in the New World. It examines The Puritan Experiment: Work, Thrift, and Social Discipline, showing how these settlers built communities where diligence and austerity were both spiritual virtues and social requirements. it explores The Rise of Capitalism in the American Colonies, revealing how Protestant ideals of calling and stewardship helped shape emerging economic systems. The Impact of Protestant Values on Early American Institutions demonstrates how these beliefs influenced education, law, and community organization. And also The Great Awakening and its Reinforcement of Individual Moral Responsibility analyze how this religious revival strengthened the link between personal piety, hard work, and economic success.

The third chapter, “The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Industrial Capitalism”, examines how these religious values shaped America's economic transformation. It first analyzes the transition from Agrarian to industrial society, showing how Protestant ideals facilitated this shift. The chapter then explores the influence of Protestant values on 19th century economic expansion, particularly how thrift and diligence fueled industrial growth. Next, it considers Protestantism, social mobility, and the American middle class, revealing how these beliefs promoted upward mobility. And also demonstrates how Protestant ethics helped create America's distinctive celebration of individual achievement.

The fourth chapter, which is entitled “The American Dream and the Institutionalization of the Protestant Work Ethic”, traces how these values became embedded in modern American culture. It begins with the American dream as an extension of Protestant values, showing how ideals of hard work and success evolved into a national ethos. The chapter then examines work ethic and upward mobility in the 20th century, revealing how these principles shaped economic advancement. Next the Protestant values and corporate Ethos, explores their influence on American business culture. Finally, education, meritocracy

and discipline analyzes how these concepts reinforced the belief that success comes through individual effort.

The last chapter, under the title of “Challenges to the Protestant Work Ethic in Contemporary America”, examines modern pressures on these traditional values. It first explores the decline of religious influence and shifting work attitudes, showing how secularization has altered perceptions of labor. The chapter then analyzes economic inequality and globalization's impact, revealing how these forces have undermined traditional work rewards. Next, the gig economy and automation considers how new work structures challenge conventional ethics. Finally, secularization and persistent values assesses how Protestant ideals still influence American identity despite cultural changes.

Chapter One

The Theological Foundations of the Protestant Work Ethic

Introduction

The Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) is critically significant for understanding how Western societies grew and changed over time, both socially and economically. It came out of the Reformation's religious roots and got a boost from 19th-century American Evangelicalism. The PWE is this mix of religious belief and the way we work. It really drives home values like discipline, diligence, and a strong sense of personal responsibility, framing work as more than a way to make a living, it's also about moral and spiritual necessity. These ideas have not only influenced how individuals act but have shaped bigger cultural and economic systems in the West.

You can trace the roots of the Protestant Work Ethic back to the Reformation, which was a profound turning point in 16th-century Europe that changed Christian beliefs and church authority. At the core of this movement was the Calvinist idea of predestination¹, which said that God had already decided who was going to be saved or damned. Ironically, this led people to focus on their success in life as a sign of God's favor, creating a culture where hard work and financial achievement were seen as indicators of spiritual approval. This shift turned work into a kind of holy duty, linking what you produce and how well you do economically with religious virtue.

1.1 The Reformation and its Economic Implications

Martin Luther initiated the Protestant Reformation, back in the early 16th century was not just a shift in religious thinking; it sparked a substantial economic and social transformation, too (McGrath 104). By questioning the Catholic Church's authority and

¹ A theological doctrine, especially associated with John Calvin, which asserts that God has eternally chosen those who will be saved (the elect) and those who will be damned. This choice is not based on any merit or action of the individual but solely on God's sovereign will. Predestination implies that salvation is predetermined and cannot be changed by human effort.

pushing for everyone to have direct access to the Bible, the Reformation changed how people viewed work, wealth, and personal accountability (McGrath 104).

Max Weber asserts that “The Reformation, by sanctifying secular labor, transformed the meaning of economic activity from mere necessity to a divine vocation” (Weber 40). This shift in thinking established the foundation for what is now referred to as the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE)², which stresses the importance of self-discipline, hard work, and smart financial choices. One of the biggest economic impacts of the Reformation was raising the profile of everyday work to something sacred (McGrath104).

Martin Luther’s concept of Beruf commonly translated as ‘vocation’ radically changed the link between faith and labor. Prior to the Reformation, the Catholic Church placed a higher spiritual value on monastic life and clerical service, generally dismissing physical labor and commercial activities as inferior or spiritually disturbing. Luther attacked this separation by claiming that all honest work, regardless of social or economic rank, is spiritually significant. Whether one was a farmer, a craftsman, a trader, or a servant, their labor may be used to serve God if done sincerity, discipline, and a feeling of divine obligation (Luther 1520).

This was a big change from the Catholic focus on monastic life, which had always viewed devotion as separate from making a living (Pelican 1984). By teaching that doing your daily job could be a form of serving God, Luther made spirituality more accessible and created a culture where working hard and being productive weren’t just about making money, but also about doing the right thing. Besides reshaping how people thought about jobs, the Reformation really pushed for educational improvements that had lasting economic benefits (McGrath 104). With Protestants placing a heavy emphasis on reading and interpreting the Bible, this led to major changes in education, as everyone felt it was

² The protestant work ethic: a concept developed primarily by sociologist Max Weber, referring to the belief that hard work, discipline, and frugality are moral virtues encouraged by protestant theology, particularly Calvinism. It suggests that worldly success can be seen as a sign of divine favor and moral righteousness.

their personal duty to be literate. The push for learning resulted in a workforce that was much better educated and skilled, boosting innovation, critical thought, and economic performance. Because of this, places where Protestantism thrived often ended up with more bright economies, as the educated populace was better suited for business, trade, and industry (Pelican 1984).

The economic effects of the Reformation were especially major in regions influenced by Reformed tradition (McGrath 104). John Calvin's concept of predestination suggested that being successful and living a disciplined life could be indicators of divine approval (Pelican). This idea really motivated people to work hard and achieve economically, as Calvinists sought reassurance of their faith through visible signs of God's blessings. So, values like being frugal, reinvesting profits, and being financially responsible became essential in Calvinist communities, paving the way for capitalist economies that focused on being efficient, growing, and planning for the future (Calvin 1536).

On top of that, the Reformation did away with the idea of clergy raking in excessive wealth and critiqued practices in the Catholic Church, like selling indulgences and hoarding wealth (McGrath 104). This led to a more decentralized economy, giving individuals more economic freedom and encouraging them to be entrepreneurs and take charge of their finances. These newfound economic freedoms, paired with a call for religious discipline, formed the foundation for what we know today as modern capitalist economies, a concept that Max Weber explored in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Tawny 1926).

By connecting religious reform with how economies function, the Reformation created an environment where qualities like being diligent, frugal, and responsible were not just seen as good religious practices, but they also became essential for economic success

(McGrath 104). These values continue to influence how we think about work and achievement today, displaying the lasting impact of the Protestant Work Ethic in our modern economic environment (Weber 40).

1.1 Diverging Views on Usury: Catholic vs. Protestant Ethics in Light of Le Goff's your Money or your Life

Catholic and Protestant economic theory differ significantly in their views on usury³, which refers to charging interest on loans. In medieval Catholic doctrine, usury was specifically condemned as evil. Drawing on biblical sources such as Exodus 22:25 and the works of Church Fathers such as Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic Church believed that money, which is intrinsically sterile, should not be profited solely by lending. This perspective was rooted in a larger moral economy that valued charity, communal welfare, and spiritual salvation over personal gain.

According to Jacques Le Goff, the medieval Catholic worldview saw moneymaking through interest as both spiritually perilous and socially damaging. Financial gain unrelated to labor or productive risk was viewed as exploitative and antithetical to Christian charity (Le Goff 87). As a result, Catholic countries took longer to create banking practices, investment systems, and formal credit institutions, which may have hampered early capitalist development.

Protestant reformers, particularly John Calvin, gradually shifted their viewpoint. While Calvin did not entirely support usury, he did allow the charging of moderate interest under ethical conditions. His reconstruction differed significantly from medieval perspectives, reflecting the Protestant emphasis on human responsibility, economic reason, and moral accountability. Lending may be morally permissible if it fostered productive enterprise and prevented exploitation (Weber 40).

³ Usury traditionally referred to any interest charged on loan, not just excessive interest. The term has evolved over time, but in medieval Christian thought, all interest was often considered morally wrong regardless of the rate.

This move had significant economic consequences. It served to legitimize the establishment of financial institutions such as banks and credit markets, particularly in Protestant countries such as the Netherlands and Switzerland. Protestant religion facilitated the creation of financial mechanisms required for capitalist expansion by loosening moral prohibitions on lending and investing (Le Goff 90-91).

Thus, while Catholicism remained skeptical of interest-based profit, Protestantism—particularly Calvinism—reframed usury as conditionally legitimate, paving the way for economic innovation and the financial foundations of contemporary capitalism.

1.2 Calvinist Teaching: Predestination and Signs of Divine Favor

At the core of the Protestant Work Ethic is the idea of predestination, which was laid out by John Calvin back in the 16th century (Pelican; Calvin ;Weber) .This belief says that God has already decided the eternal fate of everyone—some folks are picked for salvation (Calvin 1536) , while others are set for damnation. What’s really interesting is that Calvinists thought this decision was fixed and couldn’t be changed (Calvin 1536), meaning that no matter how much you believe or do good deeds, it wouldn’t shift your eternal fate. This idea created a lot of mixed feelings, as people were constantly looking for signs of their own salvation in a spiritual environment that felt pretty uncertain.

Tawney argues that “Success in one’s calling was interpreted as a sign of God’s favor” (Tawney 74), Calvinists came up with the concept of “signs”—things like being morally disciplined, working hard, and notching up financial success—as hints of God’s favor. Sure, just because someone was financially successful did not mean they were guaranteed a spot in heaven, but it was seen as a potential sign that they could be among the chosen ones. This perspective transformed the notion of work from being merely a means of subsistence to into an essential spiritual responsibility, prompting Calvinists to accept perseverance, thriftiness, and self-discipline to show they were part of the elect.

The economic implications of this belief were substantial and far-reaching (Weber). Calvinists aimed to live disciplined, productive lives, steering clear of laziness, extravagance, and wasting resources. These values helped lay the groundwork for what we know today as capitalist enterprise. Instead of splurging on luxuries, they would reinvest their wealth into businesses, infrastructure, and community projects, driving economic growth and stability. This mindset really set the stage for the rise of capitalist economies, where building wealth and reinvesting it became a moral duty.

What's more, Reformation theology did not look kindly on flaunting wealth; it stressed simplicity, modesty, and smart financial choices (Calvin 1536). In contrast to Catholic communities, which often directed their riches towards lavish church projects and patronage, Calvinist communities built a culture of reinvestment and continuous economic growth (Calvin 1536).

This more practical approach to finance was a crucial in laying the groundwork for contemporary financial institutions like banks, joint stock firms, and early capitalist markets. By departing from the traditional Catholic condemnation of usury and profit making, Protestant reforms, notably Calvinists, provided a theological framework for moderate interest, responsible investment, and ethical financial growth. This conceptual change legitimized previously morally questionable economic actions, particularly in industries such as money lending, credit, and speculative enterprise.

On top of that, Calvinist values greatly influenced how society was organized and how people behaved (Calvin 1536). The focus on discipline, education, and self-governance led to strict schooling systems, since reading and understanding the Bible were essential. This dedication to education resulted in a highly literate and skilled workforce, encouraging innovation, tech advancement, and economic progress.

All in all, Calvinist predestination created a social framework where commitment, frugality, and economic success became all mixed up with religious identity and moral value. By raising work and financial responsibility to the level of spiritual discipline, Calvinism⁴ had a huge impact on shaping Western economic thinking and capitalist development. Even today, these theological roots still influence how people view work, achievement, and economic responsibility in our modern capitalist world.

1.2.1 Social Stratification and Community Surveillance in Calvinist Societies

One of the less acknowledged but far-reaching effects of Calvinist predestination was its impact on social stratification and communal surveillance systems. While theological teaching emphasized individual faith and moral discipline as potential markers of being among the “elect”, it also fostered a culture in which members of the society closely monitored each other’s behavior, looking for visible signals of divine favor-or lack thereof. This interaction created a type of moral surveillance in which success, diligence, frugality, and piety were not merely personal virtues, but society expectations with actual reputational implications (Weber 63; Tawney 78).

Wealth, work ethic, and moral discipline helped to make the invisible barrier between the saved and the damned evident in Calvinist communities, particularly in early modern Europe and colonial New England. People who achieved visible success, avoided idleness, and followed religious standards were more likely to be respected, trusted, and granted leadership positions in their communities (Bremer 122). Those who struggled economically, shown moral “laxity”, or failed to comply with social norms were frequently regarded with mistrust and as spiritually defective. In this sense, predestination became an effective social sorting mechanism, favoring conformity while penalizing divergence (Miller 95).

⁴ Calvinism: a branch of Protestant Christianity founded on the teachings of John Calvin. It emphasizes the sovereignty of God, the doctrine of predestination, and the importance of living a disciplined, pious life as evidence of one’s election by God.

This setting promoted a high level of self-discipline, but it also created psychological strain and a performing religious culture. Individuals had to not only persuade themselves of their potential election, but also establish their spiritual standing to their peers (Pelikan 213). Over time, this resulted in communities where outward appearances of success and morality were vital, and any deviation, no matter how little, may result in gossip, exclusion, or formal censure. Thus, the theory of predestination was more than just a private spiritual conviction; it was a socially operative principle that altered communal dynamics, strengthened hierarchical institutions, and justified inequality based on claimed spiritual merit (Weber 66).

In this sense, Calvinist theology paved the way for a moralized version of class inequality in which economic and spiritual merit were linked. The consequence was a society in which monetary achievement was chased as a sign of divine favor, while social solidarity was maintained via mutual observation and a shared fear of everlasting fate. The drive to conform, achieve, and look virtuous permeated Calvinist life, leaving an indelible mark on the cultural mindset of Protestant communities and, finally, modern capitalist countries (Tawney 82; McGrath 104).

1.3 The Moral Significance of Labor in Protestant Theology

1.3.1 The Spiritual and Moral Reframing of Labor in Protestant Theology

The Protestant Reformation really transformed perceptions when it came to how we view work (McGrath 104). It took work from being just something you had to do to survive and turned it into a spiritual and ethical obligation. In Protestant theology, work goes beyond just making a living or chasing after money—it's a way to serve God, show personal discipline, and reflect your spiritual values.

Martin Luther and John Calvin consistently advanced this perspective, laid the groundwork for what we now call the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE)—a belief that ties

effort, morality, and a divine purpose together (Weber 40). Luther's Idea of Beruf⁵: Work as a Calling from God Martin Luther played a significant role in changing how we think about faith and work with his concept of Beruf (vocation) "Even the most mundane labor becomes a form of worship when performed in the spirit of vocation" (Luther, qtd. in Weber 40). Before him, the Catholic Church put a high value on monastic life, priesthood, and religious devotion, viewing these as the best ways to serve God. But Luther shook that up, saying that all honest work—whether it's farming, creating, or trading—is just as important in God's eyes. He believed everyone has a calling (Beruf; Luther 1520), and doing that work with passion and honesty is a form of worship. This change in thinking had big social and economic impacts. By saying that everyday work is a divine obligation, Luther lifted up the value of regular jobs and encouraged a mindset where hard work, productivity, and accountability became moral necessities, not just economic survival.

This belief reshaped what work meant in Protestant communities, making it a key part of both personal and collective identities. Calvin's take on Predestination and the moral importance of work while Luther focused on the spiritual value of work, John Calvin reinforced its moral significance with his idea of predestination (Pelican). Calvinists believed that God had already decided their eternal fate, and they looked for clues about their salvation through hard work, self-discipline, and success. This mindset created a strong drive to be productive and work diligently since those traits could hint at God's favor. For Calvinists, working hard became a spiritual obligation and a demonstration of faith. Being lazy, wasteful, or idle was seen as a sign of spiritual weakness, while being diligent, efficient, and self-disciplined were viewed as virtues reflecting God's grace. This belief system supported a strict lifestyle where people were encouraged to make the most of their skills and resources for their own good and the good of their communities.

⁵ Calling (Beruf): in Protestant theology, especially in Calvinism, the idea that every individual has a God-given vocation or purpose in life, including secular occupations. Work is not just a means to an end but a way to serve God and demonstrate faith.

Consequently, the Calvinist emphasis on effort and self-discipline created the groundwork for a stewardship ethic, in which people were held morally accountable not just for their labor but also for how they managed their money. Calvinists thought that resources like money, time, and abilities were divine gifts that should be used properly. Wastefulness and sloth were perceived as moral failures, whereas investing, savings, and smart economic planning were regarded as virtues. Wealth was not meant to be enjoyed selfishly, but rather to support family, community, and spiritual goals. This worldview contributed to the establishment of capitalist values by installing Protestant moral precepts in economic action.

1.3.2 Stewardship Managing Wealth and Resources

Another important part of Protestant theology is the idea of stewardship, which focuses only using one's talents, time, and wealth responsibly and ethical (weber). Instead of linking holiness to poverty like some Catholic teachings, Protestantism encouraged people to actively participate in the economy, not to indulge themselves, but to honor God and support their community. This principle of stewardship had a big impact on how people acted economically, Wealth should be reinvested instead of wasted on luxuries, which helped give rise to early capitalist enterprises.

Time management became important, promoting the idea that being productive is a moral duty. Innovation and education were encouraged as ways to better serve God and society, pushing forward scientific growth and economic progress. The Lasting Impact of the Protestant Work Ethic By bringing together work, morality, and religious duty, a lasting cultural framework was formed where labor was not just about survival, but also about spiritual fulfillment. Protestant societies developed a strong sense of self-reliance, innovation, and economic smartness, which would eventually shape industrial capitalism and modern economic ideas.

By spiritualizing work and tying economic success to moral value, Protestant theology helped lay the groundwork for Western economic behaviors. This enduring legacy is still evident in today's attitudes toward work ethic, professional discipline, and economic responsibility, which continue to influence contemporary capitalist societies (Weber 40).

1.4 How the Puritans Shaped Early American Colonies

The Puritans were a group of strict Calvinist Protestants who had a huge impact on the early American colonies (Bremer 1995; Calvin). They came here looking for freedom to practice their faith, bringing with them strong values of discipline, hard work, and community—ideas that were really at the core of what the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) is all about and which profoundly shaped the social, political, and economic foundations of early American society (Weber 60). Their beliefs did not just set the stage for the economy and social life in the colonies; they also helped form the backbone of American culture, especially when it comes to work, success, and our sense of civic duty.

1.4.1 Work is Worship

The Puritan perspective on Labor puritans believed that success in life was a sign that God was smiling down on them because of their Calvinist beliefs about predestination. Success in one's earthly calling was viewed as a possible indicator of divine election, prompting puritans to take their work seriously and disciplined. They saw working hard, saving money, and exercising self-control as spiritual obligations inherent in their covenant with God (Tawney 74). Laziness, laziness, and indulgence were not only frowned upon; they were viewed as moral failings that demonstrated a lack of divine favor.

This strict commitment to labor penetrated all aspects of puritan culture. Farming, trade, constructing, and holding public office were all considered sacred responsibilities. The belief that all honest effort was spiritually valuable contributed to development of a society in which work was inextricably linked to religious identity and communal purpose. Material

achievement, obtained through honest effort and modest living, was viewed as proof of loyalty. However, they took a firm position against luxury and extravagance, thinking that riches should be utilized with caution and responsibility.

Time management and efficiency were also highly moralized in puritan society. They were inspired by beliefs later echoed by leaders such as Benjamin Franklin and held the firm belief that wasting time was equivalent to wasting divine chance. The expression ‘time is money’ (Weber 60), which became popular later, expressed a value system that had long been established in puritan thinking. Every moment was to be used for personal development and communal service.

1.4.2 Economic Growth and Foundations of Capitalism

Puritan communities were founded on the concepts of community discipline, religious commitment, and a strong work ethic, all of which contributed significantly to the stability and success of their settlements in colonial America. The Puritans saw idleness as a sin and perseverance in effort as a spiritual virtue, elevating hard work beyond a practical requirement to a moral duty. Using this ideological prism, they were able to build some of the most structured and economically sustained colonies in the New World (Bremer 1995).

One key component of their success was their promotion of land ownership, which enabled individual settlers to grow and run their own farms. This sense of ownership encouraged self-reliance and continuous work, balancing personal financial gain with social security and divine favor (Bremer 1995). Furthermore, the Puritans opposed frivolous consumerism and emphasized the significance of reinvesting profits—whether in one's own business, communal infrastructure, or charity purposes. Such views established the cultural foundation for future capitalist firms by prioritizing financial discipline, savings, and long-term planning over instant enjoyment.

In addition to agricultural development, the Puritans helped to establish early kinds of local industry, including as shipbuilding, milling, and small-scale manufacturing. These industries not only produced jobs, but also enabled New England to become a major economic hub in the Atlantic trade network. By incorporating moral meaning into economic action, the Puritans unintentionally laid the ideological groundwork for American capitalism. Wealth accumulation was not pursued for its own purpose, but rather as a possible indicator of divine favor and personal holiness (Weber). In doing so, they contributed to build a cultural link between money prosperity, spiritual discipline, and the pursuit of a godly life—an ethos that would come to define much of American economic identity in the centuries that followed.

1.4.3 Education and Intellectual Contributions

Another defining feature of Puritan society was their persistent dedication to education. The Puritans were deeply religious and felt that everyone had a personal responsibility to read and interpret the Bible. Literacy was thus more than a practical talent; it was also a moral and spiritual imperative. This notion motivated the community's efforts to foster reading and education from a young age. Schools were built in even the tiniest places to ensure that youngsters could read Scripture and develop their grasp of God's message. The Massachusetts School Law of 1647, also known as the "Old Deluder Satan Act," clearly linked literacy to the power to resist evil and required the creation of schools in towns of a certain size (Bremer 1995).

This cultural emphasis on study resulted in the establishment of Harvard College in 1636, with the primary goal of training erudite clergy to preach and manage congregations in conformity with biblical doctrines. Harvard, the first school of higher learning in the American colonies, represented the Puritans' broader educational goals and became a cornerstone of American intellectual life (Morison 1935). Over time, this commitment to

education bred a strong tradition of critical thought, theological discussion, and intellectual study. These intellectual habits would subsequently impact not only religious thought, but also scientific progress, the growth of democratic politics, and the development of capitalist economic practices in America (Weber).

Furthermore, by raising an educated populace, the Puritans unintentionally set the framework for a competent and disciplined working force. Literacy and education promoted accountability, time management, and ethical behavior—all of which were essential in early colonial economies. Thus, their emphasis on education not only reinforced religious principles but also significantly contributed to the expansion and success of New England society, demonstrating how closely Puritan theology was linked to the region's cultural and economic development (Bremer 1995).

1.4.4 Puritan Political and Social Influence

The Puritans had a significant impact on the political and social structures of early American culture. Their worldview was based on a strong conviction in self-governance and people's moral obligation not only to themselves but also to the larger community. This mentality helped shape many of the democratic values that would later become the cornerstone of the United States. One of the most distinguishing elements of Puritan political life was the town meeting, a kind of direct local democracy in which community members came together to make decisions collectively. These gatherings encouraged active involvement, discourse, and consensus building, establishing the framework for representative governance and civic engagement (Miller 1956).

Furthermore, Puritan governance was inextricably linked with the preservation of moral and legal order. Laws were frequently clearly tied to religious concepts, and ethical behavior was regarded as critical to the health and stability of the community. This strategy emphasized a culture of discipline and accountability, with citizens required to follow both

civil regulations and communal moral norms. The enforcement of rules governing not just property and crime, but also public morality, such as Sabbath observance and bans against intoxication or laziness (Miller 1956).

In addition to promoting community government and moral discipline, the Puritans emphasized civic duty as a fundamental responsibility for every individual. Members of the community were encouraged—and frequently required—to actively contribute to the well-being of their town, whether through public service, membership in local militias, or support for communal projects. This sense of shared responsibility contributed to the formation of strong, cohesive societies capable of managing their own affairs and addressing issues together. This history of governance and moral responsibility shaped American democratic ideals, influencing ideas such as individual rights, representative government, and active citizenry (Miller 1956).

1.4.5 The Lasting Impact of the Puritan Work Ethic

The Puritan work ethic had a long-lasting impact on the economic and social dynamics of the early American colonies, firmly ingrained in the larger fabric of American culture. Hard effort, discipline, and a strong sense of moral duty were central to this ethic, and they all influenced how people saw success and personal achievement. These concepts grew into cultural standards that are still relevant in American society today, rather than mere religious demands. The long-held conviction that hard work and self-discipline naturally lead to prosperity remains central to American identity and values (Lipset 1996).

The Puritans built a framework for the current American work ethic by combining their religious beliefs with ordinary economic and social practices. This framework emphasized not just the value of hard effort, but also the values of thrift, perseverance, and a strong personal character. Success was viewed not as a result of luck or inherited advantage, but as the just reward for individual work and moral rectitude. This viewpoint encouraged

people to accept personal responsibility for their economic well-being and to see financial success as both a reward and a sign of heavenly approbation (Weber).

Furthermore, the Puritan work ethic created a cultural climate that valued self-improvement, delayed pleasure, and continuous striving for goals—characteristics that aided the establishment of capitalist industry and social mobility in America. These beliefs helped to justify the growth of riches by honest labor and ethical behavior, establishing the link between material success and moral virtue. As a result, the Puritan heritage continues to shape American attitudes toward work, wealth, and the definition of success, demonstrating the continuing power of early colonial principles in defining national character (Lipset 1996).

Conclusion

This chapter investigated the origins and growth of the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE), illustrating how theological concepts, particularly those derived from Calvinist theology, affected early perspectives on labor, responsibility, and economic activity. The turning of work into a divine vocation instilled qualities such as discipline, frugality, and personal responsibility, which not only aided early capitalist development but also provided the cultural groundwork for American prosperity.

PWE's influence stretches far beyond its Reformation origins. Max Weber famously said that Protestant principles such as economy and hard work cultivated the logical mindset required for capitalist enterprise. These concepts helped legitimate wealth accumulation and promoted meritocratic beliefs, which continue to affect economic systems and social mobility to this day. However, the legacy is complex. While PWE promoted democratic values and upward mobility, it also contributed to harmful attitudes, such as associating poverty with moral failure or valuing Productivity over well-being.

Today, the Protestant effort Ethic finds new expression in "hustle culture," which glorifies hard effort and entrepreneurial drive. In his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends*

of Sleep (2013), sociologist Jonathan Crary criticizes this culture as an extension of capitalist demands that blur the lines between labor and rest, resulting in burnout and a decline in quality of life. Even in increasingly secular societies, the ethic's moral framework for success continues to shape corporate behavior, labor legislation, and individual identity.

As the nature of employment changes due to automation and globalization, the continued existence of PWE raises serious challenges. Future research could look into how religion based work ethics adapt in digital economy or compare their impact across cultures. Understanding the moral narratives that underpin economic life is critical to addressing the ethical and psychological ramifications of modern labor systems.

Chapter Two

The Protestant Work Ethic in Colonial and Early America

Introduction

Chapter two explore how the Protestant work Ethic (PWE) shaped the economic and social development of colonial and early America. Based on Reformation theology, particularly the teachings of John Calvin, this ethic viewed hard work, diligence, and financial success as evidences of divine blessing. New England Puritan colonists, for example, did not only see work as a means to subsistence but as a religious duty, a phenomenon which Max Weber later came to term as the “calling”. This attitude encouraged behaviors like thrift, reinvestment, and hard work, which became cornerstones of early American society.

The Protestant work ethic (PWE) wasn’t merely a religious idea; it was a culture that reordered economic behavior. It extended to laws (like the criminalization of idleness), education (which encouraged literacy so that one could read the Bible), and even social structures (linking virtue to productive labor). Yet it also possessed darker associations, like justifying economic disparities.

The Protestant work ethic (PWE) was at the heart of colonial and early American culture. Max Weber (1905) is reputed to have asserted that such an ethic characterized by diligence, discipline, and thrift as signs of God’s blessing explained the emergence of modern capitalism. Puritan colonists brought these values to America, linking work with moral goodness and social stability (Fischer, 1989). This ethic infected all of life, producing a culture in which productivity was at once an economic necessity and a spiritual responsibility.

2.1 The Puritan Experiment: Work, Thrift, and Social Discipline

The Puritan Experiment: Work, Thrift, and Social Discipline is a foundational socio-religious movement that characterized early American colonial society, particularly in 17th-century New England. The experiment was characterized by three primary principles: the

sanctification of labor, the moral imperative of thrift, and a rigid system of social control. The Puritans did not merely view work as economic necessity but as a "calling from God"

something most famously explained by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). For Weber, this Protestant work ethic created psychological conditions favorable to the development of modern capitalism, since Puritans believed material success to be potential evidence of piety and God's favor.

The New England Puritan experiment was a revolutionary attempt to establish a 'city upon a hill' a model society governed by religious law. It rested on three pillars: work ethic (as a divine call), economic austerity (as a mark of virtue), and communal surveillance (to maintain moral purity). They developed Calvinist theology into an applied social system where church, community, and state became interlocking institutions.

2.1.1 Calvinist Theology and the Concept of Calling (Vocation)

Calvinist doctrine of vocation is a radical redefinition of labor and earthly work within the confines of Protestant theology. The gist of this instruction is that every appropriate profession (ministerial, mercantile, or manual) is a call from God when being exercised in obedience to God's honor. John Calvin himself put this principle into words in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, asserting that "no task will be so vile and sordid that it does not glisten before God" (Calvin 3.10.6). This was a sharp break from medieval Catholic hierarchies that privileged religious vocations over secular work.

The Puritan development of this theology, as explained by William Perkins in *A Treatise of the Vocations*, pushed it to be a complete social system. Perkins required that "the action of a shepherd in keeping sheep is as good a work before God as the action of a judge in giving sentence" (447). This leveling of work in a religious sense, as historian Christopher Hill notes, "Provided ideological justification for the rising artisan classes while maintaining strict communal discipline" (140).

Max Weber's canonical study in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* identified the psychological fortitude of this doctrine in viewing professional success as a potential indicator of election, Calvinism generated "inner-worldly asceticism" a disciplined, systematic mode of work as spiritual duty (154-55). But more recent scholarship like David D. Hall's *The Puritans* tempers this view, showing how personal calling and public duty were in tension with each other among New England colonists: "The same theology that justified a merchant's profits also required him to donate to poor relief" (213).

2.1.2 The Role of Thrift and Frugality in Puritan Economic Life

Their Puritan values of thrift stemmed from Calvinist theology that held material simplicity as a reflection of spiritual discipline. John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* warned against "luxury and pomp" as deviations from godly life (3.10.4). This was codified in New England by sermons like John Cotton's *Christian Calling*, where he swore that "a penny saved is a penny sanctified" (Bremer 78). Theologically, overconsumption was attributed to the sin of pride, whereas being frugal expressed humility before God.

Puritan colonies enforced strict sumptuary laws to maintain frugality. The Massachusetts Bay Colony Records prohibited "extreme and costly apparel" and limited wearing lace, gold thread, and silk to those with over £200 (Shurtleff 1: 140). Historian Stephen Innes documents how such legislation created "a visible economy of virtue" where material restraint signaled moral excellence (95). Even more affluent merchants like Robert Keayne were publicly admonished with "overcharging," as recorded in the Boston Church Records ("Case of Robert Keayne").

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* famously blamed Puritan thrift for the development of capitalism, arguing that their "systematic rejection of spontaneous enjoyment" channeled wealth into reinvestment (118). But David D. Hall's archival research complicates the picture: while Puritans denounced waste, they permitted

modest comforts if they served communal ends (215). Essex County probate records from 1635-50, which inventory middling families who owned Bibles but not much in the way of luxury items, register this balance (Innes 102).

Thrift was particularly practiced upon women. The Bradford Letters show women bartering recipes for "frugal housekeeping" (Ulrich 63), and court records condemned wives for "extravagant baking" during times of want (Dow). Laurel Thatcher Ulrich regards this as "domestic asceticism" that introduced Calvinist discipline into the household (71).

2.1.3 Social Control: Church, Family, and Community Discipline

The Puritan church was God's surveillance agency. With its weekly meetings and strict codes of behavior, it regulated nearly every aspect of life. Members who broke moral rules like missing church, drunkenness, or adultery faced public chastisement or expulsion. The severest penalty was excommunication (getting thrown out of church), which isolated one socially. One of the best-known cases is that of Anne Hutchinson, who was banished in 1637 for spreading religious convictions contrary to those of the ministers (Hall 45). Ministers like John Winthrop instructed the congregation that such a strict regime cleansed society in God's sight (Winthrop 12).

Every Puritan family was a small dictatorship controlled by the father. Fathers were required by law to teach children Bible and vocational skills. If they failed, they could have the state take away their children or fine them (Massachusetts School Law 12). Women were to be obeyed in all things by their husbands a "talky" wife could be punished as a "scold" with a metal muzzle called a bridle (Ulrich 78). Kids were not exempt; court documents mention teenagers being whipped for disrespect towards parents (Dow 112). The system aimed to yield model obedient citizens at a tender age.

Puritan communities had a highly developed system of collective observation to check their rigid codes of morality. Moral police in the guise of official officers like tithingmen were

used to take roll call in church services, administering fines for Sunday conduct like merriment or hard work (Whitmore 45), and reporting neighbors who exhibited "idle conduct" instead of work (Records of Boston 12). What was unique about Puritan governance was the manner in which ordinary citizens were engaged; approximately one-third of all court cases stemmed from neighbors reporting on each other - a system historian David Hall has called "holy gossip" (134). People would testify about private discussions they overheard, clothing that was too extravagant, or furtive contact between unmarried men and women. The punishments were meant to shame: wooden stocks held criminals in open public sight, whipping poles punished more serious offenses, and badges of shame like the notorious scarlet "A" for adultery reminded everyone all the time. This constant surveillance generated what modern scholars refer to as a "culture of fear" (Norton 78).

2.2 The Rise of Capitalism in the American Colonies

The relationship between Protestantism and the emergence of capitalism in colonial America has been a chief topic of historical and sociological debate since Max Weber's classic book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Puritan theology namely, the Calvinist predestination doctrine encouraged a self-disciplined, ascetic work ethic, viewing economic success as a possible sign of God's favor, Weber argued. This "worldly asceticism" supported habits of thrift, reinvestment, and rational economic structure, which became the foundation for capitalist expansion (Weber 120). These virtues were particularly evident in the American colonies within New England, where Puritan settlers established communities that highly valued diligent work, literacy, to be able to read the Bible, and a moral justification for profit-making. To quote historian Stephen Innes, Puritan leaders such as John Winthrop promoted an economic system in which the public good existed alongside private initiative and ultimately contributed to the establishment of a market society (Innes 78).

Outside of New England as well, Protestant denominations such as Pennsylvania's Quakers and New York's Dutch Reformed also had significant influences on early American capitalism. Due to their emphasis on honesty, frugality, and integrity in their dealings with others, Quakers became prominent among colonial traders and bankers. As Frederick B. Tolles demonstrates, Quaker traders like Thomas Wharton built large commercial networks of trust and credit that facilitated economic growth (Tolles 112). Similarly, Dutch Reformed Church presence in New York encouraged a practical, profit-driven approach to business, as the writing of Joyce D. Goodfriend demonstrates (Goodfriend 87).

Economic historians have shown that colonial laws enforced the relationship between religion and business. As McCusker and Menard elaborate, laws governing property ownership, inheritance, and labor helped colonists build wealth in Protestant areas (145-47). Meanwhile, Valeri notes that Puritan divines taught that it was ethical to make money if done fairly (203). By the mid-1700s, these religious and economic values had created strong local economies, which went on to establish America's capitalist economy.

2.2.1 Protestant Ethics and Early Entrepreneurial Practices

The Protestant ethic, particularly as formulated by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, was a shaping influence on early entrepreneurial activity in colonial America. Calvinist theology, particularly the concept of a "calling" (vocation), instructed believers that worldly success was a sign of God's favor (Weber 115). This religious structure reinforced hard work, frugality, and investment of profits "the key features of early capitalism". Puritan culture in New England reflected such tenets, suggests historian Stephen Innes in *Creating the Commonwealth*. Puritan leaders like John Winthrop reiterated that economic prosperity was not merely personally beneficial but also a public duty (Innes 92). This mindset created an environment where business ventures were not only socially permitted but also religiously supported, paving the way for business expansion.

Protestant segments throughout colonies made contributions to entrepreneurial spirit in early America. Pennsylvania Quakers built strong commerce ties with religiocultural codes that focused on honesty and fair dealing. As Frederick B. Tolles describes in *Meeting House and Counting House*, Quaker entrepreneurs like Thomas Wharton managed to balance religious principle with business practice, establishing new credit instruments that stimulated colonial economic growth (Tolles 156). In New York, members of the Dutch Reformed Church likewise had a similarly practical attitude towards commerce, believing profit-making fully compatible with living godly. Joyce D. Goodfriend's work in *Before the Melting Pot* illustrates how Dutch merchants in New Amsterdam (later New York) effectively blended Protestant ethics with aggressive trade strategies, making the colony a prosperous commercial center (Goodfriend 118). These various Protestant traditions collectively fostered an environment conducive to entrepreneurial development across colonial America.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Protestant ethics and economic practice had merged into a unified capitalist system. As John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard depict in *The Economy of British America*, colonial legal frameworks such as property rights and labor codes consistently promoted capital accumulation (210). Contemporary religious discourse also served to support this economic transformation. Mark Valeri's book in *Heavenly Merchandize* reveals how Puritan ministers came increasingly to stand for virtuous wealth-accumulation as morally just (75). This religious justification of profit-making enabled colonists to reconcile commercial ambition with religious virtue. The dynamic interaction between these institutional and ideological developments created unparalleled entrepreneurial growth, paving the way for America's ultimate economic supremacy.

2.2.2 The Impact of Trade Networks on Colonial Economies

The establishment of transatlantic commercial networks between the 17th and the 18th centuries essentially redrew colonial economies into a world system of exchange. As John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard would contend in *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789*, the networks allowed for specialization in commodity production on the part of the colonies tobacco growing in Virginia, rice in South Carolina, and wheat in the Middle Colonies, with reliance upon imports from Europe for manufactured products (McCusker and Menard 72). The mercantilist system, in this case England's Navigation Acts, structured this trade to benefit the mother country by compelling colonies to ship certain enumerated commodities only to England. Nevertheless, as historian Cathy Matson outlines in *Merchants and Empire*, colonial merchants did, on occasion, carry out illicit commerce with Dutch, French, and Spanish partners to circumvent these laws (Matson 145).

The triangular trade system created complex economic dependencies between Europe, America, and Africa. Peter Coclanis depicts in *The Shadow of a Dream* how South Carolina plantations became economically viable by gaining access to African slave labor and London capital markets (Coclanis 88). Middlemen New England merchants mediated trade by exporting Caribbean molasses to be distilled into rum, which was then exchanged for African slaves. This system, as outlined by Marcus Rediker in *The Slave Ship*, generated immense wealth for colonial port cities and created what historian Joseph Inikori calls "an Atlantic system of production" (Rediker 156; Inikori 203). Accumulation of merchant capital in cities like Boston and Philadelphia financed further economic diversification.

Trade networks heavily fueled colonial financial systems and infrastructure development. As Edwin J. Perkins documents in *The Economy of Colonial America*, the necessity to stimulate long-distance commerce generated innovations in credit instruments, marine insurance, and early banking practices (112). Large port cities invested huge capital into constructing wharves, warehouses, and shipbuilding facilities to supply expanding trade

operations. Gary Nash's *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* demonstrates how these supporting industries generated a range of jobs for artisans, dockworkers, and sailors, thus helping to foster the growth of a colonial middle class (178).

The evolution of capitalism in the American colonies developed from a complex interaction of religious ideas, mercantile enterprise, and global trade relations that cumulatively laid the groundwork for the nation's economic development. As Max Weber first theorized in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the New England Puritan work ethic, founded upon thrift, disciplined labor, and religious approval of profit-making, created a cultural climate within which economic achievement was at once individual imperative and divine calling (Weber 115; Innes 92). These religious values found practical expression in the entrepreneurial activities of several Protestant groups, including Pennsylvania Quakers and New York Dutch Reformed merchants, who created sophisticated credit systems and competitive trade practices that spurred colonial trade (Tolles 156; Goodfriend 118). The expanding transatlantic trade networks, while generating wealth in the form of exports of staple crops and the growth of port cities, simultaneously entrenched the system of slavery and regional economic inequalities (McCusker and Menard 210; Coclanis 88). By the revolution, this economic system had paradoxically made the colonies both dependent on British trade and skilled at independent economic organization, as T.H. Breen and other historians have demonstrated by looking at colonial consumption patterns and resistance movements (Breen 67; McCusker and Menard 310). The resulting synthesis of Protestant ethics, commercial activity, and international economic integration wound up forging a distinctive colonial capitalism that would shape America's national economy long after independence.

2.3 The impact of Protestant Values on Early American Institutions

The Protestant ethic, particularly its Calvinist and Puritan variant, actually shaped colonial America's political, economic, and social institutions by imbuing their constitutive structures with values of individualism, moral discipline, and communal responsibility. Because Max Weber establishes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Puritan theology's emphasis on predestination and "worldly asceticism" created a cultural climate under which economic prosperity was perceived as evidence of God's blessing, thus religious legitimization of capitalist emergence (Weber 115). This ideological influence assumed tangible form in New England's political structures, where, as David D. Hall demonstrates in *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England*, Congregationalist covenantal community ideals directly influenced the participatory democracy of town meetings (Hall 48). Institutional power extended beyond New England, with Barry Levy's *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley* providing an example of how Quaker spiritual egalitarianism had been translated into Pennsylvania's legal regimes, which pioneered religious tolerance (Levy 92). Protestant values also transformed education, as Lawrence Cremin recounts in *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*, with Puritan pressure to read the Bible propelling both the creation of early colleges and the first public school laws in America (Cremin 127). These events collectively demonstrate how Protestantism's unique union of individual piety and social reorganization was institutionalized in colonial America.

2.3.1 Education and Literacy: The Puritan Legacy in Schools

The Puritan demand for education and literacy imposed ground rules that would shape American education for generations. Motivated by their Christian faith that each individual should have the ability to read Scripture themselves, Massachusetts Bay Puritans enacted the 1647 Old Deluder Satan Act, the first colonial mandate compelling towns to establish public schools (Cremin 128). This pioneering law enshrined the Puritan conception of literacy as a

public and religious benefit, a radical concept in an era when education in Europe was mostly reserved for privileged classes. Harvard College, which was founded in 1636 to educate ministers, set the pattern for American higher education by combining the study of the classics with theological training (Morison 25). The Puritan focus on catechism and vernacular literacy (as opposed to Latin-only education) helped democratize education in ways that prefigured modern public education systems.

Aside from basic literacy, Puritan education also emphasized moral growth as well as intellectual advancement. According to historian Edmund S. Morgan in *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, New England schools were designed to produce "a literate citizenry capable of understanding both Scripture and colonial laws" (139). This double system resulted in the distinctive grammar school system, where students learned the classical languages of Latin and Greek, theology, and vocational courses like writing and mathematics. The Puritan family-directed system of education, wherein parents were legislatively required to educate children and servants to read, established America's first mass literacy program. Kenneth A. Lockridge's research in *Literacy in Colonial New England* confirms the success of this system, with New England boasting male literacy rates over 70 percent by 1790, well ahead of those in contemporary Europe (88).

The Puritan school system held up amazingly well as American schools became secularized, with its most central innovations becoming indelibly written into the nation's education systems. Key Puritan innovations such as laws mandating education, locally governed schools, and the idea of literacy as a public good transcended their religious origins to shape American education at all levels. As Lawrence A. Cremin recounts in *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*, this Puritan idealized pattern spread to Horace Mann's common school movement of the nineteenth century but continued to

emphasize schooling to meet the demands of both individual development and civic cohesion (203). Today's controversies involving education remain consistent with Puritan tradition, whether controversy involves moral education, testing protocols, or school financing fairness, all resonating to that initial Puritan balance between personal wisdom and group responsibility. It is likely the most powerful enduring force the enduring American conviction that schools must foster democratic citizenship, a secular adaptation of the Puritan covenantal ideal which first unified religious and communal objectives through schooling.

2.3.2 The Protestant Influence on Colonial Legal Systems

The theological principles of the Protestant Reformation undergirded the establishment of colonial legal systems, most prominently in New England, where Puritan conceptions of moral law and covenant theology were infused into early jurisprudence. As George Lee Haskins demonstrates in *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*, Puritan divines like John Winthrop viewed civil law as an extension of divine law, enforcing legal codes that officially criminalized sins such as blasphemy, adultery, and Sabbath-breaking (72). This conflation of religious and civil authority was an expression of Calvinist notions of a godly commonwealth, where biblical imperatives directly informed statutory law. The 1648 Massachusetts Body of Liberties exemplified this approach, incorporating over a dozen capital offenses derived from Old Testament morality along with progressive elements like due process protections—a contradiction characteristic of Puritan legal thought (Morgan 112).

Beyond New England, dissenting Protestant traditions also fostered alternative legal systems reflective of differing theological priorities. In Pennsylvania, William Penn's Frame of Government (1682) legalized Quaker notions of the Inner Light and spiritual equality by requiring unprecedented religious tolerance, equitable treaties with Native Americans, and enlightened prison reforms, as J. William Frost describes in *The Quaker Origins of American Constitutionalism* (156). Similarly, Dutch Reformed Protestantism also shaped the legal

development of New York, wherein inheritance laws and commercial law embodied Calvinist notions of stewardship and communal obligation, a model thoroughly investigated by Joyce D. Goodfriend in *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York* (89). Varying greatly from the pacifist legal philosophy of the Quakers to the jurisprudence of contract centered on the Dutch merchants these local systems were joined together in their generally Protestant demand for civil, as opposed to ecclesiastical, adjudication of moral crimes. In spite of that, as historian Patricia Bonomi clarifies in *Under the Cope of Heaven*, all maintained religious prerequisites for public office well into the colonial period, a proof of Protestantism's enduring influence in structuring civic involvement (Bonomi 73).

The Protestant theological doctrines of the Reformation understandably remolded colonial legal procedure in distinctive denominational forms. According to William E. Nelson in *The Americanization of the Common Law: The Impact of Legal Change on Massachusetts Society, 1760-1830*, Puritan New England reformed judicial procedure by attributing more emphasis to oral witness and lay juries at the cost of written depositions, a development grounded on their theological importance of communal judgment and natural suspicion of centralized government (54). This model of law, founded on the Protestant emphasis on individual conscience and congregational autonomy, set precedents that would later become the bedrock of American common law traditions. The Puritan penchant for oral proceedings most strikingly manifested itself in their local courts, where common citizens played an active part in legal verdicts, constituting what historian David T. Konig describes as "a reformation of jurisprudence" which matched their religious reforms (Law and Society in Puritan Massachusetts 27). These procedural innovations demonstrated how Protestant theology could transform not just religious practices but the very apparatus of civil justice itself.

The Protestant foundations of colonial legal traditions had evolved into more secularized theories of constitutional government and natural rights, though their theological

origins were still evident. As John Philip Reid demonstrates in *The Constitutional History of the American Revolution*, colonial opposition to British authority frequently employed covenant theology's vocabulary, framing their legal complaint in terms of mutual obligations and broken contracts (63). This Protestant heritage persisted in early American government in state constitutions that retained Sabbath legislation and religious test oaths, and the U.S. Constitution itself reflected a secularized version of Protestantism's law-and-grace tension attempting to reconcile individual freedoms with social order in ways that continue to influence American jurisprudence.

2.3.3 Charity and Poor Relief: Religious Foundations of Social Welfare

The theological ideals of the Protestant Reformation necessarily influenced early American poor relief policies by emphasizing charity as both social responsibility and religious obligation. Puritan colonies in New England established the colonies' earliest organized systems of welfare, mandating that towns provide for poor residents through a combination of local taxation and congregational offerings. As Gary B. Nash describes in *The Urban Crucible: Social Change and Political Consciousness in the American Revolution*, these systems tended to differentiate between the "deserving poor" widows, orphans, and disabled, and those who were described as "idle beggars," relief being contingent upon the moral conduct and regular church attendance of recipients (118). The Massachusetts Bay Colony formalized this approach in its 1642 poor laws, requiring the towns to have overseers of the poor elected by them, adopting policies that implemented Protestant ideals of communal responsibility while requiring rigorous moral supervision of recipients.

In the Middle Colonies, Quaker communities developed various welfare systems depending on their particular theological assumptions. In *Quakers and the American Family*, Barry Levy describes that Pennsylvania's system under William Penn offered more extensive relief, even to Native Americans and free Blacks, founded on the Quaker theology of the

universal presence of the Inner Light (Levy 92). However, even these more inclusive systems included moral prerequisites for relief. Similarly, Dutch Reformed churches in New York possessed deacon-managed poor funds that distributed relief and enforced standards of conduct, as Joyce Goodfriend outlines in *Before the Melting Pot* (Goodfriend 134). Despite denominational difference, these practices were consistent in their Protestant imperative to pair material relief with moral reform.

By the Revolutionary era, these welfare practices rooted in religion had begun to secularize but retained their moralistic tone. As John Alexander explains in *Render Them Submissive*, Enlightenment philosophers like Benjamin Franklin decried unconditional aid but continued to cling to Protestant work ethics (Alexander 78). The institutional structures persisted almshouses, work mandates, and poor relief local taxes, yielding what Patricia Bonomi characterizes in *Under the Cope of Heaven* as a peculiarly American blend of compassion and moral judgment (Bonomi 156). That heritage continues to shape modern welfare rhetoric, demonstrating how Protestant values became embedded in American social institutions.

2.4 The Great Awakening and its Reinforcement of Individual Moral Responsibility

The Great Awakening (1730s–1740s), the revolutionary religious revival across colonial America, basically transformed concepts of moral responsibility by situating personal spiritual responsibility above institutional religious authority. As Alan Heimert demonstrates in *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution*, evangelical clergy like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards instilled a theology that held all individuals regardless of social standing, individually responsible for their moral conduct before God (78). This revolutionary emphasis on individual agency carried over into reform social movements, as converts established societies dedicated to moral improvement and temperance reform, a phenomenon Patricia U. Bonomi explores in *Under the Cope of*

Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America (142). By relocating salvation from a public sacrament to an inner quest, the Great Awakening irretrievably transformed colonial moral arrangements, injecting them with visions of individual conscience and autonomy that would characterize religious as well as secular American ideology.

2.4.1 The Shift from Collective Piety to Personal Salvation in Colonial America

The transition from corporate religious practice to individual spirituality was a typical emblem of colonial American religious life, particularly in the Great Awakening. In Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, this tide eroded historical parish forms through the prioritizing of individual experiences of conversion rather than institutionalized sacraments (Butler 145). Preachers like Evangelical George Whitefield bypassed conventional churches and preached open-air revivals whose focus was upon immediate, sensual experiences of divinity. This democratization of religious experience, documented in *Inventing the Great Awakening* by Frank Lambert, empowered people to seek out salvation without the help of clergy (Lambert 89). This movement's focus on private rebirth, as opposed to public ritual, was a radical departure from earlier Puritan models of covenant communities.

The theological foundations of this shift were provided by Reformed Protestantism's emphasis on individual election and personal responsibility. In Patricia Bonomi's judgment, in *Under the Cope of Heaven*, the preaching of the revivalists that each person stood alone before God undermined traditional hierarchies of spiritual authority (Bonomi 112). This individualism found expression in new devotional practices like private Bible reading and spiritual diary-keeping, which Harry Stout describes as tools of personal religious empowerment in *The Divine Dramatist* (Stout 203). The proliferation of dissenting sects during this period also reflected the growing demand for personal spiritual autonomy over denominational uniformity. These developments collectively reconstituted salvation as an internal, subjective experience and not a communal rite of passage.

Its social and political significance was vast. As is well illustrated in *Religion and the American Mind* by Alan Heimert, personal religious freedom rhetoric served to define revolutionary discourse with respect to individual rights (Heimert 78). Its impact persisted in American society by attention to individual independence and individual moral agency, discussed in *The Democratization of American Christianity* by Nathan Hatch (Hatch 56). This paradigm shift from group to individual spirituality not merely remapped religious life but anticipated intellectual underpinnings of modern American thinking about personal freedom and voluntary association both in holy and profane realms.

2.4.2 The Great Awakening's Role in Democratizing Religion

The Great Awakening 1730s-1760s shook up colonial America's religious establishment by activating voices on the margins and dispersing religious authority. As historian Frank Lambert depicts in *Inventing the Great Awakening*, "evangelist ministers like George Whitefield deliberately skirted official pulpits, preaching massive outdoor revivals to which thousands of farmers, artisans, and even enslaved Africans flocked (Lambert 124). This populist strategy, explained by Alan Heimert in *Religion and the American Mind*, created a revolutionary new paradigm where illiterate laypeople, women and African Americans could testify to conversion experiences on par with ordained clergy (Heimert 155). The dynamite growth of the movement, as documented in Timothy Hall's *Contested Boundaries*, was primarily a result of its rejection of the educated elite's religious monopoly, with illiterate preachers like James Davenport drawing more adherents than Harvard-trained clergy (Hall 88).

The Awakening's democratizing impact extended far beyond religion, planting egalitarian seeds that would bloom in the Revolution. As Stephen Marini illustrates in *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*, many Baptist and New Light churches adopted democratic church government that directly influenced revolutionary political form (Marini

64). The movement's emphasis on individual conscience over institutional authority, which Richard Bushman examines in *The Great Awakening*, provided ideological fuel for challenges to British authority (Bushman 133). Most enduringly, as Christine Heyrman argues in *Southern Cross*, the revivals established traditions of grassroots religious entrepreneurship and anti-elitism that still characterize American evangelicalism today (Heyrman 211). By transforming religion into a populist movement from a top-down institution, the Great Awakening reshaped the very DNA of American culture.

Conclusion

The Protestant work ethic was instrumental in shaping colonial and early America's economic identity. It turned labor into a virtue, and the culture it instilled was one of self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and accumulation of wealth. The Puritan emphasis on discipline and delayed gratification, for instance, created the foundation for modern capitalist tendencies like long-term investment and financial planning.

Max Weber's initial treatise on the connection between Protestant ethics and capitalist expansion has been influential in scholarly analysis of early American economic history. However, recent scholars have challenged the overbearing prevalence of religious explanations in such histories. Scholars such as David D. Hall and Mark Valeri demonstrate how colonial economic conduct was the result of an interwoven mixture of theological ideals and practical realities. Further doubt is provided by critics like Kurt Samuelsson, who attributes capitalism's rise primarily to technological transformation and economic circumstances rather than religious teaching, thereby undermining Weber's premise itself. Combined, these criticisms put Protestant values alongside numerous other significant factors, cultural mores, legal frameworks, and material circumstances that shaped economic development.

Today, vestiges of this ideology remain visible in American assumptions regarding work, success, and welfare expressed in such phrases as "pull yourself up by your bootstraps". Secularized as the Protestant work ethic has become, its influence remains to remind us of how deeply religion has shaped America's values regarding economics.

Chapter 3

The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Industrial Capitalism

Introduction

The transformation of Western society during the 18th and 19th centuries constituted a pivotal transformation in world history. As agrarian economies gave way to industrialized systems, and as traditional ways of life were replaced by mechanized labor and capitalist structures, new cultural and ideological frameworks were required to justify and sustain this dramatic shift. Among the most influential of these frameworks was the Protestant ethic—a set of religious values that emphasized hard work, discipline, frugality, and personal responsibility. As famously argued by sociologist Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, these values were not only religious virtues but also catalysts for economic behavior that aligned perfectly with the needs of an emerging capitalist system.

This chapter explores the deep connections between Protestant ideology and the rise of industrial capitalism, particularly in the American context. It examines how Protestant values shaped the transition from a rural, subsistence-based society to an urban, market-driven one; how they underpinned the rapid economic expansion of the 19th century; and how they contributed to the rise of social mobility and the emergence of a distinctly American middle class. At the heart of this cultural transformation was the figure of the “self-made man,” a product of both Protestant moral teaching and capitalist ambition—a symbol that still influences contemporary notions of success and meritocracy.

Through an analysis of these interrelated themes, the chapter argues that the Protestant ethic did more than just provide spiritual guidance; it created the moral and ideological foundation for a new economic order. By linking religious virtue to economic productivity, it gave moral legitimacy to capitalism and inspired generations of individuals to see labor not only as a means of survival, but as a calling and a path to spiritual fulfillment. The following

sections will explore this evolution in depth, drawing connections between religious belief, economic behavior, and the enduring mythos of American success. This chapter contends that protestant principles not only aided the rise of industrial capitalism, but also transformed societal concepts of success with the ideal of the self-made man.

3.1. The Transition from Agrarian to Industrial Society

The transition from agrarian cultures to industrialized economies was a watershed moment in the social, economic, and cultural fabric of Western civilization. Life in agrarian systems was profoundly anchored in natural and land rhythms. People worked mostly in agriculture, relying on subsistence farming and local bartering systems. Land ownership was used to evaluate wealth, and social mobility was limited. The economic system underwent a tremendous change with the onset of the industrial revolution in the late 18th century, notably in Protestant majority regions such as Britain. As machines replaced manual labor, factories became the primary centers of production, replacing farms (Landes 178).

Urbanization accelerated as rural inhabitants moved to cities in search of work. Protestant regions were particularly amenable to this transformation due to not only access to resources, but also the cultural mindset imparted by Protestant doctrine. In his major essay, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Max Weber maintained that religious ideals of diligence, frugality, and individual responsibility serve as the moral foundation for capitalist progress. The earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment, and is thought of as an end in itself” (Weber 18). Weber emphasizes how Protestant ethics turned economic success into a moral duty. The pursuit of profit was no longer seen as greed, but as a sign of divine favor and discipline.

The transition to industrial capitalism brought with it a new understanding of time and labor. Time became a resource to be maximized, and labor was assessed based on efficiency

and productivity. This view aligned easily with Protestant principles, which criticized idleness and promoted hard effort as a kind of religious devotion (Tawney 112).

3.1.1 From Subsistence Farming to Market Production

Before the advent of industrial capitalism, most societies in Europe and North America were agrarian. The majority of people lived in rural areas and relied on subsistence farming, generating only enough to feed their families. Trade was primarily local, and economic interchange was based on customary practices rather than profit maximization. Land ownership was the key to wealth and status, and work was organized in groups within families or small communities. However, with the rise of capitalism—particularly in Protestant-majority regions—this conventional arrangement began to shift. Market production supplanted subsistence farming, and people began manufacturing items not simply for survival, but also for sale and wealth accumulation.

The introduction of new technology such as the spinning jenny, steam engine, and mechanized looms transformed production methods. Protestant ethics, particularly Calvinism, promoted a mindset that viewed hard effort, discipline, and delayed satisfaction as virtues. These principles were consistent with the demands of the rising capitalist system. Farmers and craftspeople, motivated by religious duty as well as economic incentives, began to use more efficient production techniques. According to Max Weber, this revolution was not only economic, but also deeply spiritual and cultural.

Max Weber argues that “Not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God.” (Weber 42), *the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. This quote captures how Protestant values discouraged passive living and instead glorified active labor. Work became a moral duty, and success was seen as a sign of divine blessing. This attitude helped transform small-scale farmers into entrepreneurial producers who contributed to the rise of market capitalism.

Furthermore, Protestant focus on personal responsibility encouraged people to plan, invest, and manage their resources more carefully—qualities required to participate in a market economy. Protestant communities gradually developed networks of trust, discipline, and credit, allowing them to prosper in more competitive markets. These networks not only aided the expansion of small enterprises and local industries, but also paved the way for larger capitalist institutions. The cultural transition from depending on tradition and communal labor to rewarding individual initiative and production was a critical component in the evolution of contemporary economic systems. This change, which was driven by religious ideals, transformed the Western world both materially and morally (Lands 134).

3.1.2 The Role of Protestant Regions in Early Industrialization

Protestant Regions' Role in Early Industrialization the early beginnings of industrialization were not equally dispersed throughout Europe and North America. Protestant-majority regions, such as England, the Netherlands, sections of Germany, and, subsequently, the northeastern United States, pioneered economic revolution. This was not only due to physical or political circumstances; it was also heavily influenced by cultural and religious beliefs. Protestant teachings had an impact on these places, creating an environment suited to innovation, discipline, and economic experimentation. The emphasis on literacy, prompted by the requirement for private Bible reading, contributed to better levels of education and a more knowledgeable workforce. Protestant schools and churches frequently fostered not only spiritual teaching but also technical and practical expertise, which are critical for industrial development.

Furthermore, Protestant communities frequently kept thorough records and promoted transparency in financial transactions, laying the groundwork for contemporary accounting and corporate processes. This culture of trust and responsibility made it simpler to attract investors and establish long-term business connections. According to historian David Lands,

Protestant regions did more than merely adopt industrial processes; they fostered the worldview that enabled industrial capitalism, which was based on a combination of religion, duty, and economic logic.

Lands argues “The Protestant ethic helped to create a climate of trust necessary for complex economic transactions” (Lands. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* 145).

In this sense, Protestant regions didn’t just adopt industrial practices—they cultivated the very mindset that made industrial capitalism possible, rooted in a fusion of faith, responsibility, and economic rationality.

In addition, many Protestant leaders found no conflict between faith and temporal prosperity. Instead, they saw economic success as a sign of divine favor and evidence of a disciplined life. This notion pushed people to pursue occupations in commerce, industry, and banking, which were critical to industrial expansion. Unlike some Catholic traditions, which emphasized abstinence and separation from worldly affairs, Protestantism saw the world as an arena for holy labor. This ideological move made economic participation more acceptable—even noble—by creating the spiritual groundwork for entrepreneurship, innovation, and growth (Tawney 119).

3.1.3 Protestantism, Social Mobility, and the Emergence of the American Middle Class

The most noticeable aspect of Protestantism in capitalist cultures, particularly in the United States, is how it promoted class mobility. In pre-industrial Europe, one's position in the social hierarchy was usually determined at birth and remained constant throughout one's life. Nobility, clergy, and peasants were socially stratified and had hereditarily assigned jobs with little room for advancement. However, in Protestant cultures, particularly those influenced by Puritanism and Calvinism, the notion evolved that through effort and self-control, people may improve their social and economic position (Tawney 1926).

This idea permeated American society, where the Protestant morality blended seamlessly with individuality and meritocracy. The concept that one could "rise from rags to riches" helped to shape the cultural foundation of what came to be known as the middle class—a social stratum distinguished by achievement, perseverance, and individualism rather than aristocratic entitlement (Tawney 1926). In Protestant communities, the practical aspects of education, rhetoric, debate, and writing became more widespread, resulting in a higher degree of literacy. All of these things contributed to higher expectations for career progression.

Tawney argues “Protestantism created the psychological conditions for individual initiative and self-reliance” (Tawney, R.H. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*). In the nineteenth century, a growing class of Protestant workers, merchants, and professionals served as the foundation of American industrial civilization. They occupied administrative, clerical, and skilled labor positions that demanded not just training, but also a moral commitment to timeliness, honesty, and efficiency. The Protestant work ethic influenced not just how individuals worked, but also how they perceived success and failures. Poverty was frequently considered in this setting as a moral fault, but prosperity and advancement were viewed as manifestations of divine favor (Tawney 1926).

The expansion of the middle class had far-reaching implications for democracy and political stability. As more people gained economic independence, they demanded representation and rights, which spurred the expansion of participatory governance and liberal institutions. Thus, the Protestant ethic generated citizens as well as laborers, resulting in a society based on freedom, responsibility, and aspiration (Tawney 1926).

3.2 The Influence of Protestant Values on Economic Expansion in the 19th Century

The nineteenth century saw enormous economic expansion, notably in nations molded by Protestant traditions such as Britain, Germany, and the United States. While industry,

technological advancement, and colonial expansion played important roles, Protestant principles also had a substantial impact. Protestant principles, which are based on doctrines that emphasize hard effort, discipline, frugality, and a strong sense of individual responsibility, helped to create a cultural milieu that was very compatible with capitalist expansion (Landes 217).

The concept of a "calling" elevated daily labor to a moral obligation, encouraging effort and time management. Frugality encouraged saving and reinvestment rather than consumption, which aided capital accumulation. Simultaneously, Protestant focus on honesty and trust established a solid foundation for business transactions, credit systems, and entrepreneurship (Fogel 92).

These ideals determined not only individual conduct, but also how organizations and industries evolved. Protestant entrepreneurs and workers alike took their economic obligations seriously and purposefully, resulting in a disciplined labor force appropriate for industrial manufacturing. The rejection of luxury and concentration on reinvestment aided in the growth of large-scale businesses, while rational organization and rigorous planning increased workplace productivity (Landes 228). Furthermore, the moral commitment to honesty and accountability facilitated the development of trust-based networks, which was critical in an era of low financial regulation (Fogel 97).

Protestantism, therefore, did not just foster economic success as a sign of divine favor—it also supplied the ethical framework that encouraged long-term investment, innovation, and the sustainable evolution of capitalism systems throughout the 19th century Western world. Protestantism influenced not only individuals but also broader societal norms by instilling moral principles in everyday life. It instilled a sense of responsibility for one's labor, a respect for contracts, and a belief in delayed gratification—all of which are necessary for capitalist success (Weber).

These principles influenced the economic identity of entire countries, enabling for the rise of a professional middle class and the spread of free-market economies. In this approach, Protestantism did more than just accompany economic progress; it actively created the attitudes, institutions, and practices that enabled industrial capitalism. As a result, 19th-century economic growth in Protestant-majority regions was more than just a question of scientific advancement; it also reflected a deep-seated religious and cultural shift that matched spiritual ideals with financial achievement (Ozment 143; Gorski 85).

3.2.1 The Ethics of Hard Work and Discipline

The 19th-century economic expansion had a core contribution from Protestantism, which regarded self-discipline and hard work as two essential virtues. These “hard work” values stemmed from behavioral expectations, but rather, they had a much deeper source on tangible beliefs. Specifically, Calvinist teaching practiced that work is a holy vocation and one is expected to fully devote oneself to it. This belief alone redefined common labor to a sacred ritual, thus reinforcing achievement as an indicator that the person is part of the chosen ones.

In Protestant societies, idleness was regarded as sinful and time as a very precious resource that needed to be used optimally. People were urged to follow prescribed strict schedules without distractions, leading to self-improvement and thus self-cultivation. Such attitude created passive workers who were very much willing to put in more effort which merged in their upbringing with the requirements of industrial economies. The new factory system derived much advantage from precise time tables and the necessity of maximum efficiency offered by morally bound workers (Weber).

As Max Weber explains: "Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one's own calling" (Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. 45). This spiritualization of labor contributed to a cultural environment where punctuality, persistence,

and performance were not just economic necessities but moral obligations. Employers, too, internalized these values, creating businesses that favored organized systems, stable hierarchies, and long-term productivity. Protestantism, in this sense, provided the psychological and ethical structure necessary to support capitalism's growth and endurance during the industrial age (Weber).

3.2.2 Frugality and the Accumulation of Capital

Although hard work served as the ethical underpinning of labor, it was Protestantism's frugality that facilitated the transformation of effort into sustainable economic growth. Within many Protestant sects, particularly in Puritanism and Calvinism, wealth was viewed not as something to be lavishly and ostentatiously spent, but rather, as something that needed to be carefully managed and reinvested. Money was framed as a resource which was entrusted to the individual by God, making it the person's responsibility to utilize it prudently. Thus, miserliness was more than simply a character trait, but rather, a form of a spiritual virtue. Elaborate spending habits for the most part, were as a good example of where one's wealth could rather be put towards savings and business ventures.

The avoidance of extravagance meant that wealth was often directed toward savings and business ventures rather than personal indulgence. According to Max Weber, this tendency created the perfect conditions for capital accumulation. He noted: "The restraint from consumption of wealth, combined with the desire to work productively, became one of the most effective levers for the development of capitalism" (Max, Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*). This cultural value system encouraged individuals to invest in expanding their businesses, improving machinery, and training labor rather than spending on ostentatious goods. Over time, this reinvestment culture led to the expansion of small workshops into large factories, which became the economic backbone of industrial societies.

Furthermore, Protestant principles emphasized transparency, honesty, and trustworthiness—qualities required for obtaining loans, establishing credit, and developing long-term partnerships. According to Philip Gorski, the Protestant ethic fostered strong moral accountability that supported the rise of trust-based economic institutions (Gorski 87). Entrepreneurs that were frugal and dependable were more likely to receive financial backing. As a result, the Protestant attitude to money generated not just prosperity but also financial stability, both of which were necessary for capitalism to thrive. Even in working-class neighborhoods, humility and temperance were valued qualities. Many Protestant workers saved a portion of their income in the hopes of investing in real estate, enterprises, or their children's education. These patterns of disciplined saving and restrained living had a multiplier impact on economic development, financing the very industrial progress that marked the nineteenth century (Omzet 139).

In sum, Protestant frugality was not about poverty or denial, but about directing riches toward productive, long-term objectives. This technique was ideally linked with capitalist values of expansion, investment, and efficiency, enabling Protestant-majority cultures to outperform others in industrial development and economic modernization.

3.2.3 The Protestant Spirit and Entrepreneurial Innovation

The Protestant ethic not only encouraged labor and savings, but it also fostered the attitude required for entrepreneurial invention. Protestantism, particularly in its Puritan and Calvinist variants, emphasized personal responsibility, self-government, and initiative. These ideals enabled people to look for new opportunities, take prudent risks, and create new ways of production and corporate organization.

Unlike hierarchical and orthodox worldviews, which valued stability, Protestant philosophy promoted advancement and improvement via personal effort (Gorski 102). Entrepreneurs in Protestant societies were frequently motivated not only by profit but also by

a feeling of moral purpose. Founding and operating a business was viewed as a vocation—a way to serve society, fulfill one's duty to God, and display resource stewardship (Novak 154). This approach contributed to the development of a company culture in which innovation, planning, and investing were morally accepted and even promoted.

Furthermore, Protestant emphasis on literacy and education—which stemmed from the importance of personal Bible reading—produced a population that was relatively well-educated and capable of handling sophisticated corporate operations. Schools in Protestant regions frequently mixed religious instruction with practical skills, generating future corporate leaders and inventors (Landes 212). This educational foundation prepared entrepreneurs to engage with new technology, assess risks, and lead industrial initiatives with competence and vision.

Historical data supports this cultural pattern. For example, many major industrialists of the nineteenth century, such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller in the United States, were influenced by their Protestant background. While their theologies differed, they all shared a strong understanding of the qualities of endurance, delayed pleasure, and responsibility. Carnegie famously wrote in "The Gospel of Wealth":

“The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced.” (Carnegie, Andrew. *The Gospel of Wealth*), this quote exemplifies not only the desire to gain riches, but also the ethical imperative to use that wealth for the greater good—whether through philanthropy, infrastructure, or reinvestment. These guys exemplified a synthesis of religious commitment and capitalist ambition, serving as role models for future generations of businessmen. In summary, the Protestant worldview gave rise to a new type of economic actor: the morally motivated entrepreneur. Protestantism fostered the entrepreneurial spirit that drove industrial capitalism across Europe and America by combining spiritual calling with economic vision.

3.3 Protestantism, Social Mobility, and the Emergence of the American Middle Class

The rise of Protestantism aided the development of the middle class in America and significantly impacted the American social structure. Unlike Europe which had inflexible systems of social stratification, America as a whole offered a relatively fluid system where one could climb up the social ladder through social merit, education, and industriousness. These, along with other traits, were heavily emphasized in the Protestants doctrine.

It was taught that every individual was responsible both spiritually and secularly for their achievements, thus suggesting that one's self materialistic improvement was proof of god's grace (Tawney 1926).

This alter system linked morality, work ethic, and social status. Protestant families taught their descendants the importance of being disciplined and self-control as these traits would be helpful in advancing socially and climbing the social ladder. These ideals contributed to create a populace that valued self-improvement and professional performance, resulting in the creation of a steady and hardworking middle class by the late nineteenth century. In reality, many Protestant churches emphasized the importance of education not only for religious literacy but also for civic responsibility and career progress.

Furthermore, Protestant principles promoted the development of democratic values, individualism, and personal initiative, all of which are important to the American Dream. The middle class that arose during this period was primarily made up of teachers, small business owners, clerks, and skilled laborers, many of whom were influenced by Protestant ideas. The conviction in the dignity of work and the moral significance of accomplishment strengthened class identification, distinguishing the middle class from both the idle affluent and the unmotivated poor. Protestantism contributed to the development of a social milieu in which mobility was not only feasible, but also expected.

This was especially potent in a fast industrializing culture with growing economic options. As new sectors emerged, the principles preached by Protestant culture prepared its

adherents to capitalize on these opportunities—whether by starting enterprises, investing in education, or advancing in specialized professions. In essence, Protestantism shaped more than just personal ethics; it also molded the goals of an entire class. As its strength and influence rose, the American middle class took on the moral and cultural imprint of Protestant ideals: self-reliance, ambition, and a belief in progress through hard work (Tawney 1926).

These concepts of self-reliance and moral responsibility set the way for a broader cultural emphasis on individualism—an ideal that would soon go beyond theology to economic activity and personal identity. In Protestant civilizations, the conviction that each individual was directly answerable to God created a strong feeling of inner discipline and independence. This moral freedom eventually spread to economic life, fostering entrepreneurship, personal initiative, and desire of self-improvement. As individualism spread, success in employment and industry came to be viewed not merely as an economic achievement, but also as evidence of personal character and responsibility.

3.3.1 Religious Individualism and the Meritocratic Ideal

One of the most influential aspects of Protestantism in shaping social mobility was its emphasis on religious individualism. This doctrine encouraged believers to engage directly with Scripture, take personal responsibility for their salvation, and lead morally upright lives without relying on clerical intermediaries. In this way, Protestantism cultivated a sense of autonomy and accountability that spilled over into social and economic behavior. The idea that one's worth—both spiritual and social—was not inherited but earned through righteous living laid the foundation for a meritocratic culture (Weber).

In this merit-based worldview, success was interpreted as the result of personal discipline, hard work, and divine approval. Protestant sermons and writings regularly stressed that industriousness and frugality were not only practical virtues but also moral imperatives. This perspective supported the belief that individuals could rise through the social ranks by

their own effort—a powerful notion in a country like the United States, where opportunity and ambition were central to the national identity (Tawney 1926).

Historical data supports the correlation between Protestant ethics and upward mobility. Max Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, argues that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination led many to seek signs of divine election in their worldly success. As Weber notes: “The earning of money within the modern economic order is...the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling” (Weber 52).

This linkage between spiritual calling and professional success inspired generations of Protestant Americans to strive for both material and moral achievement. Schools and churches reinforced this ethic by emphasizing the value of diligence, self-control, and lifelong learning—traits essential for advancement in both career and society. Over time, these organizations played an important role in propagating the cultural expectation that personal success was a sign of both competence and spiritual integrity. As a result, economic desire was considered as a moral duty rather than greed, creating a social milieu in which ethical behavior and professional development were inextricably linked (Gorski 115).

In effect, Protestantism gave rise to a unique model of citizenship: one that honored individual achievement, respected labor, and rewarded ethical effort. This model laid the groundwork for the emergence of a robust and confident middle class that viewed its prosperity not only as a personal triumph but as a moral testament. Success was viewed as evidence of virtue, discipline, and divine favor, strengthening the notion that hard effort and decent behavior were necessary components of a successful existence. Civic responsibility, self-reliance, and hard work were not only societal values in this context; they were spiritual imperatives (Tawny 1926).

3.3.2 Education, Work Ethic, and Class Formation

Education played a pivotal role in translating Protestant values into real social advancement. Protestant traditions, particularly in their Puritan and Lutheran expressions, strongly emphasized literacy—not just for reading the Bible, but as a civic and personal duty. This led to the establishment of schools and colleges in predominantly Protestant regions, creating a culture where education was widely accessible and socially valued. Over time, educational attainment became a key mechanism for class mobility, especially as the industrial economy increasingly demanded skilled labor, managerial competence, and professional training (Weber; Hout).

Work ethic, closely tied to religious devotion, became another engine of middle-class identity. The Protestant ideal of the “calling”—the belief that all forms of honest labor had spiritual value—elevated everyday work to a divine task. This theological framing inspired individuals to approach their jobs not just as a means to earn income, but as expressions of duty, character, and social contribution. This mindset helped blur the boundaries between economic life and spiritual life, making career advancement a moral obligation as well as a personal goal (Weber; Tawny).

As a result, the Protestant-influenced middle class was not merely an economic category but a cultural one. It was marked by punctuality, planning, restraint, and a commitment to long-term goals—values deeply embedded in Protestant upbringing. These cultural norms distinguished the middle class from both the working poor and the upper elite. While the poor were often portrayed as lacking discipline, and the rich as living in luxury and moral risk, the middle class became idealized as the backbone of moral and economic stability in American life (Fitzgerald).

3.3.3 The Protestant Work Ethic and the Growth of American Capitalism

The Protestant work ethic, emphasizing hard work, discipline, and frugality, was instrumental in shaping the American capitalist system. Rooted in the belief that work was not

merely a means of earning a living but a moral obligation to society and to God, this ethic encouraged individuals to approach their labor with a sense of purpose, efficiency, and productivity. This ideal made Protestantism particularly compatible with the rising capitalist economy, which required a workforce that was not only industrious but also committed to innovation and the expansion of markets (Weber; McCloskey).

In this environment, Protestant values provided a strong foundation for entrepreneurs and business leaders. The idea that success in business was both a personal achievement and a reflection of one's moral standing resonated deeply within American culture. Entrepreneurs like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, both of whom were influenced by Protestant principles, exemplified this fusion of religious conviction and business ambition. Their stories were framed not just as tales of personal success but as narratives of divine favor and moral duty (Carnegie).

The Protestant work ethic also influenced the development of American business practices. The emphasis on thrift and the careful management of resources meant that businesses were often run with a keen focus on cost-cutting, reinvestment, and long-term sustainability. These practices helped American capitalism grow into one of the most dynamic and expansive economies in the world by the late 19th century (Tawney; Hout).

Moreover, the work ethic promoted by Protestantism helped shape the culture of American capitalism by instilling values of competition, self-reliance, and accountability. These principles were deeply embedded in the way American businesses operated, from the structure of corporations to the individual behaviors of workers and managers. In many ways, the success of American capitalism in the 19th and 20th centuries can be traced to the Protestant ideals that helped shape the moral and economic framework of the nation (Weber; McCloskey).

However, Weber's argument has been criticized. According to Kurt Samuelsson (1957), in some locations, particularly in Catholic Europe, industrialization occurred prior to independently of Protestant influence. This shows that technology and material factors, rather than religious beliefs, may have fueled economic growth (Samuelsson 112). Despite these criticisms, Weber's theory is nevertheless valuable for its cultural interpretation of capitalism's moral underpinnings.

3.4 The "Self-Made Man" and the Idealization of Success

The "self-made man" rose to prominence in American society during the nineteenth century, especially as Protestant ideas of individual responsibility and tenacity collided with the burgeoning capitalist economy. This concept, which stressed any individual's ability to rise from modest beginnings to success through hard work, ambition, and moral rectitude, was consistent with Protestant conviction in the possibility of personal redemption and spiritual growth. It highlighted the idea that success was not dictated by birth but could be attained through human work and ethical behavior (Weber 102).

In the context of American capitalism, the self-made man became a symbol of success, representing the triumph of individual agency over the constraints of class and social origins. The narrative of the self-made man was often framed as a moral story, where the individual overcame adversity not only through labor but also through virtues such as thrift, honesty, and discipline. This narrative was central to the American Dream, the belief that anyone could succeed if they were willing to work hard and make the necessary sacrifices (Hochschild 17).

One of the most influential figures associated with this ideal was Andrew Carnegie, who, in his *Gospel of Wealth*, argued that wealth should not be hoarded but used for the public good, an idea rooted in his Protestant upbringing (Carnegie 6). Carnegie's life story—rags to riches through perseverance and self-discipline—became an archetype for the self-

made man, and his philanthropic efforts reinforced the idea that success, when properly achieved, carried with it a moral responsibility to give back to society.

This idealization of success contributed to a culture where personal achievement was seen as a reflection of one's character and worth. The rise of the self-made man in the 19th century also paralleled the expansion of consumer culture and the growth of individualist ideals. The notion that success was an outward reflection of inner virtue meant that those who had attained wealth and social status were often viewed with admiration, while those who struggled were perceived as lacking the necessary qualities of discipline and ambition.

By the late 19th century, the concept of the self-made man had become deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the United States. It not only reinforced Protestant ideals but also became a defining characteristic of the American identity. In a rapidly industrializing society, where traditional structures of aristocracy and inherited privilege were being replaced by merit-based opportunities, the self-made man symbolized the power of personal determination and the potential for self-improvement.

Yet, this ideal frequently overlooked the underlying disparities that hampered access to such movement. As W.E.B. Du Bois noted in *The Souls of Black Folk*, African Americans were systematically excluded from economic opportunities, regardless of their efforts. More recently, Ta-Nehisi Coates has highlighted how intergenerational income disparities and institutional racism continue to undermine the concept of equal opportunity (Coates).

3.4.1 The American Dream: Hard Work and Moral Character

The concept of the "self-made man" became inextricably linked with the American Dream, a cultural narrative that asserts that anybody, regardless of background, may achieve success through hard work and moral integrity. The American Dream is frequently attributed to Protestant beliefs, including the belief in individual responsibility and the power of personal endeavor (Bellah et al, 142). In this setting, the American Dream was not simply

about money prosperity but about proving one's moral value via industriousness and ethical living.

The notion that success is within reach of everyone willing to work hard has its roots in Protestantism, which regarded labor as a moral obligation. This idea was bolstered by the rising capitalist economy, in which people had more opportunity to advance based on their ability and hard work rather than their social status or family lineage. The concept of the self-made man became a defining feature of American identity, honoring those who overcame adversity through determination and persistence.

In this narrative, success was not only a personal achievement but also a social value. The self-made man was celebrated not just for his wealth but for his virtues—his discipline, his thrift, and his commitment to work. This ideal became a model for all Americans, especially as the nation rapidly industrialized and expanded. The increasing availability of jobs, the rise of education, and the development of new industries made it seem plausible that anyone could achieve success if they adhered to these values.

However, the concept of the American Dream also created an implicit judgment of those who did not succeed. The belief that success was the result of hard work and moral character led to a view that those who struggled or failed were somehow lacking in these virtues (Sandel 89). This created a social divide, as those who did not achieve success were often blamed for their own failures, rather than being seen as victims of larger societal forces or structural inequalities.

In this way, the self-made man and the American Dream represented a powerful, yet often problematic, ideal. While it provided a sense of hope and possibility for many, it also placed pressure on individuals to conform to a narrow definition of success, often at the expense of recognizing the complex factors that shape an individual's life and opportunities.

3.4.2 The Self-Made Man and Capitalist Individualism

The concept of the "self-made man" was not just a moral ideal but also a cornerstone of capitalist individualism. Capitalism, especially during the 19th century, required a workforce that was driven by personal ambition, individual initiative, and a willingness to compete. Protestantism, with its focus on self-reliance and moral responsibility, naturally aligned with the values needed to support capitalist enterprise. The "self-made man" was a product of both these cultural forces—Protestant ethics and the capitalist economy—each reinforcing the other in a mutually supportive relationship.

In this framework, individual success was not only seen as the outcome of personal effort but also as a reflection of one's inherent worth and capability. This ideal fit perfectly within the competitive structure of capitalism, where individuals were encouraged to see themselves as autonomous agents, responsible for their own success or failure. The entrepreneurial spirit, which became a defining characteristic of American capitalism, was underpinned by this idea that anyone could succeed if they worked hard enough and applied themselves diligently. The narrative of the self-made man was frequently used to justify the inequalities that existed in capitalist society. Those who succeeded were celebrated as examples of personal achievement, while those who failed were often blamed for their own shortcomings, rather than recognizing the systemic barriers they might face.

Figures such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller embodied the notion of the self-made man in the context of capitalist America (Nasaw 78). Both were born into humble circumstances, yet through hard work and determination, they amassed vast fortunes. Their stories were framed not only as triumphs of individual effort but also as proof of the moral righteousness of the capitalist system. By positioning themselves as self-made men, they also framed their wealth as a moral reward for virtuous behavior. For them, success was a validation of their hard work and dedication, while their philanthropy was presented as an extension of their moral duty.

The promotion of the self-made man ideal reinforced a sense of individualism that was central to American capitalist culture. It encouraged people to focus on their own efforts and to view personal success as a direct result of individual initiative. However, this focus on individualism also obscured the role of broader social, political, and economic structures in shaping the opportunities available to people. While some individuals succeeded, many others were excluded from these opportunities due to factors such as race, gender, or class. Despite this, the idea of the self-made man persisted as a powerful narrative, often overlooking the complexities and inequalities that underpinned American society.

3.4.3 The Legacy of the Self-Made Man in Modern American Culture

The ideal of the self-made man has had a profound and lasting impact on American culture, shaping both societal values and individual aspirations. While the concept was central to the industrial and post-industrial eras, it continues to resonate in modern American society. Today, the "self-made" narrative is embedded in popular culture, business ideologies, and even political discourse. The notion that success is the result of personal effort and determination is continually reinforced by stories of entrepreneurs, innovators, and business leaders who rise from modest beginnings to become influential figures in their respective fields.

In modern America, the legacy of the self-made man is most visible in the world of technology and entrepreneurship. Figures such as Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, and Jeff Bezos are often portrayed as embodying the self-made ideal (Isaacson 19). Their stories of perseverance, ingenuity, and the ability to overcome obstacles are celebrated as proof that anyone, regardless of their background, can achieve success through innovation and hard work. These individuals are not only seen as financial successes but also as symbols of American ingenuity and the entrepreneurial spirit. The popularization of their stories has further cemented the

connection between personal effort and success, and reinforced the idea that anyone can succeed in the American system if they have the right mindset and work ethic.

However, the contemporary focus on self-made success also raises critical questions about inequality and access to opportunity (Coates 54). While the self-made man ideal promotes the idea that anyone can rise to success through hard work, it often ignores the structural barriers that exist in society. Factors such as race, class, education, and social networks play a significant role in determining an individual's opportunities and success. The glorification of self-made success can therefore obscure the fact that not everyone has the same starting point or the same access to resources. Critics argue that the persistence of the self-made man narrative oversimplifies the complexities of social mobility and economic achievement, particularly in an increasingly unequal society.

The continued prominence of the self-made man in modern American culture reflects both the enduring appeal of individualism and the contradictions that arise when this ideal is applied in a diverse and stratified society. While the narrative of self-made success serves to inspire and motivate, it also perpetuates unrealistic expectations and the idea that personal failure is always the result of individual shortcomings. The legacy of the self-made man thus remains a double-edged sword—celebrated for its promise of opportunity and achievement, but also criticized for its failure to address the deeper social and economic issues that shape people's lives and prospects.

Conclusion

The interplay between the Protestant ethic and the rise of industrial capitalism in the 19th century created a unique social and economic environment that profoundly shaped American society. The transition from an agrarian to an industrial society was not merely an economic shift but also a cultural transformation, where Protestant values such as hard work, thrift, and self-discipline became integral to the development of the capitalist system. As the

economy grew, so too did the emphasis on individual responsibility and the potential for upward mobility, which were central to both Protestant doctrine and the capitalist ideology.

The influence of Protestantism on economic expansion in the 19th century cannot be overstated. Protestant values not only shaped the development of industries but also contributed to the creation of a middle class characterized by a strong work ethic and a commitment to personal responsibility. The belief in the power of the individual to succeed through dedication and perseverance reinforced the emerging capitalist system. This, in turn, led to the idealization of the "self-made man" — a symbol of success in a society that increasingly valued individual achievement over inherited privilege.

The rise of the self-made man in American culture, closely tied to the Protestant work ethic, further reinforced the narrative that success was a direct result of hard work and moral character. This idea became foundational to the American Dream, where anyone, regardless of their background, could achieve success. As this ideal evolved, it contributed to the development of capitalist individualism, where personal ambition and competition became not only a means of survival but also a moral virtue.

However, the legacy of the self-made man has produced inconsistencies that continue to this day. While it recognizes individual accomplishments, it frequently ignores the institutional hurdles and inequalities that shape the opportunities available to various groups in society. The idealization of personal achievement obscures the complex social institutions that influence economic results, making it harder to address the underlying reasons of inequality in contemporary American society.

In conclusion, the Protestant ethic played a significant role in the rise of industrial capitalism, providing a moral framework that supported the growth of a market economy. However, the continued celebration of the self-made man as a model for success in contemporary America reveals both the strengths and limitations of this ideal. It remains a

powerful symbol of the values that shaped American capitalism, while also raising important questions about the fairness and inclusivity of the opportunities available to all. By examining the relationship between Protestant beliefs, capitalism, and the ideal of the self-made man, we provides insight into the cultural and economic factors that have characterized and continue to affect American society today.

The lasting attractiveness of the self-made man myth continues to influence American perceptions toward talent, productivity, and self-worth. This cultural inheritance, based on protestant ethical standards, remains critical to understanding modern narratives of work and success in the United States.

Chapter Four

The American Dream and the Institutionalization of the Protestant Work Ethic

Introduction

The American Dream's assurance of upward mobility through hard work originated in the Protestant work ethic a fusion of Calvinist theology and capitalist economics. It transformed work into moral duty and wealth into divine sanction, and poverty into personal failure. Institutionalized in schools, labor practices, and cultural myths, it justified inequality in the name of meritocracy. Nowadays, this ethic persists in "hustle culture" and the gig economy, hiding declining social mobility. The result is a paradox: an opportunity dream powered by structures that stifle it, where moral virtue remains tied to economic production in spite of systemic barriers.

The American Dream represents a nexus where economic structures and cultural norms intersect, transforming ideals into social realities. The "Protestant work ethic" is the focal point of such a nexus as a crucial nexus between religious origins and capitalist advance, in which social institutions have re-packaged these ethics into the foundation of legitimating the economic system as well as structuring social relations.

This chapter traces the process of conversion of religious values to symbolic capital, Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as "the prestige, recognition, and legitimation that converts other forms of capital (economic, cultural, social) into power within a given social field" (Bourdieu 242). And their utilization towards the creation of the myth of "meritocracy" that shelters exclusion and marginalization mechanisms under its cloak. It also reveals the underlying contradiction between the universal appeal of the American Dream and class-specificity of its achievement, whereby moral virtues turn into tools of domination when

coupled with institutional structures. The influence of the Protestant ethic did not remain limited to the value system, but it actually affected production patterns, consumption patterns, and labor relations.

Through an intricate process over time, theological concepts like “divine calling” and “afterlife reward” were translated into ideological justifications of the capitalist order, where worldly success was evidence of God’s blessing, and poverty a sign of moral abandonment. This alteration not only produced the typical American work ethic, but also created the justification of emerging economic exploitations in the name of virtue and hard work.

4.1 The American Dream as an Extension of Protestant Values

The American Dream is perhaps the most fundamental ideological foundation upon which America was built, and it constitutes a collection of values that have evolved over American history. Its core involves the Protestant work ethic, for it welded religious values into becoming a motivational force for the economic and social development of America.

German social theorist Max Weber’s seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) demonstrates how “the Calvinist doctrine of predestination led its members to pursue worldly success as evidence of God’s grace” (Weber 112). This broad concept demonstrates how religious dogma turned into economic incentive, where worldly success was evidence of the grace of God, and hard work became moral responsibility.

American historian James Truslow Adams, who was the first to employ the phrase “American Dream” in his book *The Epic of America* in 1931, notes that this dream “was not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable” (Adams 404). This definition places stronger focus on the social and class elements of the American Dream and it as social mobility.

4.1.1 From Puritan Theology to Civil Religion

The New England Puritan colony was characterized by a common religious vision that assumed a fundamentally different shape from the individualistic model that prevailed in Anglican Virginia. John Winthrop eloquently articulated this vision in his now-famous sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630), which depicted the ideal society as a “city upon a hill” that would serve as a beacon to the world (Winthrop 45). This sermon demonstrates the Puritan emphasis on common values and religious piety, as colonists defined themselves as part of a holy covenant that united them. The Virginia Company records, on the other hand, show a preoccupation with material interests, such as tobacco production and profitable making, demonstrating the high level of concern for material interests at the expense of religious values in this colony (Kingsbury 112).

These differences of intellect were not theoretical notions but were actually realized in both colonies' social life. Puritan values in New England became a cohesive community, as exemplified by Winthrop's metaphor of society as "one body" that emphasizes the organic character of its oneness (Winthrop 47). Meanwhile, the Virginia Anglican system produced a rigid class system in control of a landed elite with power and wealth. "Laws of Virginia" (1619) reveal mechanisms reinforcing these class divisions, which characterized the hierarchical nature of Virginian society (Hening 72). Religious and economic factors thus developed two distinct identities for each colony despite their shared historical backdrop.

The Puritan dream of America as a “city upon a hill,” articulated by John Winthrop in his 1630 sermon on board the “*Arbella*”, gave a religious basis for American exceptionalism that would endure for centuries. As historian Perry Miller describes in *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939), the Puritans imagined their colonial enterprise as “an effort to realize, in concrete terms, the abstract ideals of the Protestant Reformation” (Miller 5). It was in this religious mission that gradually evolved what sociologist Robert N. Bellah

would later describe as “American civil religion” – a belief system which, while secular in form, retained Puritanism’s moral mandate and feeling of divine choice.

Bellah notes in his renowned article “Civil Religion in America” (1967) that this civil religion “worked out an elaborate set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that give religious meaning to the American experience” (Bellah 8), reinterpreting Puritan theology in a national creed.

The manner in which Puritan theology secularized itself informs us deeply about American cultural development. As Sacvan Bercovitch argues in *The American Jeremiad* (1978), the Puritan sermon form called the jeremiad – lamenting for communal declension while reaffirming divine commission – was the prototype for later political rhetoric. Bercovitch describes the way in which “the American jeremiad preserved the Puritan sense of mission but modified its gaze from salvation history to national destiny” (Bercovitch 23). This can be clearly observed in documents like the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, which, as in *God’s New Israel* (1971), historian Conrad Cherry shows, incorporated Puritan concepts of covenant and chosenness into political discourse.

Cherry notices that “the American revolutionaries clothed their political arguments in the language of Puritan typology” (Cherry 45), which is evidence for the lasting influence of theological concepts on national identity.

The evolution from Puritan theology to civil religion involved enormous ideological shifts. While Puritan ideology dwelt upon human sinfulness and dependency on divine grace, American civil religion developed into a growing celebration of human capacity and national virtue. As historian Mark Noll demonstrates in *America’s God* (2002), “the Puritan emphasis on God’s sovereignty gradually gave way to a more democratic theology that emphasized human ability and national promise” (Noll 56). This shift is evident in the work of early

national politicians like Benjamin Franklin, who, as David Shi writes in *The Simple Life* (1985), “converted Puritan asceticism into a secular program of self-improvement” (Shi 72). What arose was a uniquely American synthesis of religious and political ideals that still shape national discussion today.

4.1.2 The Elect and the Prosperous: Moral Justification of Wealth

Calvinist theology of election offered a powerful psychological model morally sanctioning economic success in early American life. As Max Weber meticulously documents in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), the Puritan belief in predestination generated what he calls “that tremendous tension to which the Calvinist was doomed by an inexorable fate” (Weber 117), which led believers to seek worldly success as material signs of their elect standing. This religious anxiety manifested itself in what historian Edmund S. Morgan, in *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (1963), refers to as “the gradual transformation of the Puritan concept of visible sainthood from purely spiritual signs to material prosperity” (Morgan 89).

The moral economy thus created what cultural historian John Corrigan, in *Business of the Heart* (2002), calls “a spiritual calculus wherein financial success became interpreted as divine favor, and poverty as potential evidence of moral failing” (Corrigan 132), establishing habits of thought that would endure long after their theological foundations vanished.

The ethical justification of wealth gained particularly American form during the nineteenth century’s period of industrial expansion. As historian Charles Sellers depicts in *The Market Revolution* (1991), “the emerging capitalist elite of Jacksonian America clothed their economic ambitions in the moral discourse of Protestant virtue” (Sellers 214), creating what he calls a “bourgeois hegemony” over American values. This is evident in the works of those who built their own fortunes like Andrew Carnegie, whose essay *The Gospel of Wealth* (1889)

asserted what historian David Shi discusses in *Facing Facts* (1995) as “a secularized version of the Puritan calling, wherein the accumulation and philanthropic distribution of wealth became the highest moral duty” (Shi 78).

The efforts of economic historian Richard Hofstadter in *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944) also show how “the Protestant ethic mixed with Spencerian evolutionism to generate a particularly effective legitimation for industrial capitalism and its inequalities” (Hofstadter 56), which bears witness to the potential of these religious thought forms to adapt to new economic realities.

The heritage of this moral explanation of wealth continues to influence contemporary American perceptions of poverty and achievement. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow’s seminal book *God and Mammon in America* (1994) demonstrates that “modern Americans remain three times more likely to explain poverty as a result of insufficient effort rather than structural causes, a direct legacy from Protestant ideas of election and moral merit” (Wuthnow 127). Historian Jackson Lears’ book in *Rebirth of a Nation* (2009) describes how “the therapeutic culture of twentieth-century America secularized the Protestant pursuit of visible sainthood into an endless quest for self-improvement and material display” (Lears 89).

Most recently, economist Thomas Piketty’s *Capital and Ideology* (2020) has demonstrated how “the American faith in meritocracy, rooted in Protestant convictions about election, functions to legitimate radical inequality more effectively than in any other developed nation” (Piketty 567), demonstrating the enduring strength of such ancient theological concepts to shape modern economic thought.

4.1.3 Protestant Individualism in the American Narrative of Success

The Protestant individualism of conscience and personal interpretation of the Bible during the Protestant Reformation provided the foundation for America’s self-reliance culture.

As historian Alan Heimert demonstrates in *Religion and the American Mind* (1966), the Great Awakening of the 1740s translated this individualist theology into “a democratizing force that challenged established hierarchies and empowered ordinary believers” (Heimert 12). This alignment is amply illustrated in the conversion narratives analyzed by Susan Juster in *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (2003), where she discovers that “the evangelical emphasis on personal religious experience created a template for the American ideal of self-creation” (Juster 156).

Literary critic Larzer Ziff’s contribution in *Puritanism in America* (1973) also demonstrates the way in which “the Puritan exercise of spiritual autobiography evolved into the secular success narratives that crowd American literature from Franklin to Fitzgerald” (Ziff 89), establishing a cultural template in which narrative is conflated with national identity.

The nineteenth century witnessed Protestant Individualism reaching its zenith in the social and economic life of America. According to historian John Kasson, who documents in *Rudeness and Civility* (1990), the market revolution gave rise to “a new culture of self-fashioning where individuals were expected to perform their success through manners, dress, and personal bearing” (Kasson 67). This is beautifully demonstrated in the advice texts read by Karen Halttunen in *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (1982) which show how “the Protestant concern with inner authenticity became externalized into a performance of middle-class respectability” (Halttunen 34).

Economic historian Stuart Blumin’s *The Emergence of the Middle Class* (1989) demonstrates how “the Protestant work ethic joined with democratic individualism to constitute the myth of the self-made man as the quintessential American hero” (Blumin 112), a myth that served to legitimate social mobility and economic inequality.

In contemporary America, Protestant individualism has taken on new forms while still retaining its essence. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow's *After Heaven* (1998) argues that "the seeker spirituality of contemporary Americans is an extension of Protestant individualism as adapted to a consumer culture" (Wuthnow 45). Clinical psychologist Jean Twenge's research in *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009) illustrates how "the Protestant emphasis on self-examination has degenerated into a culture of relentless self-promotion and personal branding" (Twenge 78).

Most recently, historian Cal Jillson's *Pursuing the American Dream* (2013) contends that "the Protestant narrative of individual success has become increasingly difficult to sustain in an era of globalization and automation, yet remains central to America's self-understanding" (Jillson 203), indicating both the longevity and the mounting contradictions of this founding ideology.

4.2 Work Ethic and Upward Mobility in the 20th Century

The 20th century witnessed both the victory and metamorphosis of the Protestant work ethic in American economic life. As historian Daniel T. Rodgers documents in *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (1978), the transition from agricultural to industrial economies required "a recalibration of traditional work values to fit factory discipline and corporate structures" (Rodgers 156). This shift is particularly evident in the writings of sociologist William H. Whyte in *The Organization Man* (1956), which looks at how corporate culture during the mid-twentieth century redefined individualism as "a new ethic of team loyalty and bureaucratic advancement" (Whyte 42).

The postwar economic boom seemed to substantiate these values, as economist Claudia Goldin's research in *Understanding the Gender Gap* (1990) illustrated how "enlarging access to education and white-collar jobs produced unparalleled mobility for the

next generation of blue-collar worker's children" (Goldin 112). This achievement was, however, a cover for growing systematized barriers to later become more specific.

The latter part of the 20th century made evident underlying contradictions of the American work-success myth. Sociologist Robert K. Merton's seminal study *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968) had already discovered "the strain between cultural emphasis on upward mobility and actual structural opportunities" (Merton 211), which grew more obvious with deindustrialization.

Economist Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) shows how "the postwar mobility boom proved temporary, with wealth concentration returning to pre-Depression levels by century's end" (Piketty 347). Most perceptively, sociologist Arne L. Kalleberg's *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs* (2011) documents the development of "a bifurcated labor market where high-work-ethic workers increasingly found themselves trapped in low-wage service jobs without benefits or security" (Kalleberg 89), destabilizing core presuppositions about meritocratic reward. These shifts suggest that even as work ethic continued to be culturally valorized, its connection to upward mobility became increasingly unstable in the face of changing economic paradigms.

Economist Raj Chetty's "*Opportunity Atlas*" provides empirical proof that while there is a cultural push for hard work, upward mobility has become geographically and racially restricted. As Chetty and his colleagues show through longitudinal data, "the opportunities for upward mobility are sharply divergent by zip code, with children growing up in high-opportunity neighborhoods earning close to three times more in adulthood than children growing up in low-opportunity ones" (Chetty et al. 8). Most strikingly, their research discovers that in some poor neighborhoods, "children have less than a 10% chance of surpassing their parents economically" (Chetty et al. 12), illustrating how structural barriers, rather than individual work ethic, increasingly shape life chances.

4.2.1 Assembly Lines and Soulcraft: Industrialization's Impact on Virtue

Assembly line is a mass production system in which complex jobs are broken down into simple, repetitive tasks by workers or machines. While it increased productivity and efficiency, it also reduced workers' attachment to their work, stripping work of creativity, craftsmanship, and personal meaning, a change that had a monumental effect on traditional work ethic and human dignity.

The rise of assembly line manufacturing in the early 20th century fundamentally transformed the dynamic between work and human virtue. As historian David E. Nye shows in *America's Assembly Line* (2013), Henry Ford's invention "not only revolutionized manufacturing efficiency but also redefined workers' connection to their labor, reducing complex craftsmanship to repetitive, fragmented tasks" (Nye 72). This process produced what philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Human Condition* (1958) "the alienation of labor from its *vita activa* – the loss of the human ability to recognize oneself in what one produces" (Arendt 126). The psychological impact of the assembly line was major, generating what sociologist Robert Blauner wrote in *Alienation and Freedom* (1964) "a paradox of technological progress: higher productivity and lower worker satisfaction" (Blauner 58). Such a conflict between meaning and efficiency would be a feature of 20th century industrial labor.

The degradation of craftsmanship into mechanized tedium provoked intense philosophical response. Matthew B. Crawford, social commentator, in *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (2009) believes that "the standardization of work eliminated what was most human about labor – the problem-solving, skill development, and personal investment in quality" (Crawford 33). Academic Harry Braverman's seminal *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) documents how "scientific management systematically divorced conception from execution, deskilling workers while concentrating knowledge in managerial elites" (Braverman 125). Even sympathetic industry critics like economist Peter F. Drucker acknowledged in *Concept*

of the Corporation (1946) that "the assembly line's greatest weakness was its failure to engage what is best in human nature – creativity, judgment, and pride of workmanship" (Drucker 91). These criticisms reflect industrialization's double moral legacy.

The psychological impact of this transformation was becoming increasingly clear. Work by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on "flow" states, as outlined in *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975), found that "assembly line work consistently ranked lowest in providing the conditions for optimal human experience – challenge, skill utilization, and immediate feedback" (Csikszentmihalyi 112). Medical historian David Rosner's *Dying for Work* (1987) documents how "the monotonous pace and relentless nature of line work created new forms of stress disease" (Rosner 45). Anthropologist Karen Ho's *Liquidated* (2009) extends this to the service work of the twenty-first century, showing how "the industrial practice of quantifying and standardizing has conquered white-collar professions" (Ho 167), foreshadowing the long shadow of assembly-line values.

But other models emerged to preserve virtue among industrial workers. Business historian Sanford M. Jacoby's *Modern Manors* (1997) follows the ways in which "progressive employers like IBM and Kodak developed welfare capitalist schemes in order to restore dignity to factory work" (Jacoby 88). Sociologist Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* (2008) discovers "pockets of resistance where craftsmen maintained standards of excellence despite industrial pressures" (Sennett 74). Most recently, economist Erik Brynjolfsson's *The Second Machine Age* (2014) reveals that "digital technologies may reverse some industrial deskilling by returning problem-solving autonomy to workers" (Brynjolfsson 203). These kinds of examples make any simple tale of industrialization's impact on work virtue more difficult to tell.

4.2.2 The Paradox of Prosperity: Work Ethic in the Age of Consumerism

The post-war economic boom generated an unprecedented clash between the established work values and emerging consumer culture. As historian Lizabeth Cohen has shown in *A Consumers' Republic* (2003), “the mass prosperity of the 1950s turned thrift from a moral value to an economic burden in an economy more and more reliant upon consumption” (Cohen 127). This change produced what sociologist Daniel Bell referred to in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) “a fundamental paradox: the Protestant work ethic that built industrial America was being undermined by the very consumer capitalism it had helped generate” (Bell 84). Economist Juliet Schor’s work in *The Overworked American* (1991) records the way in which “rising productivity gains were funneled into rising consumption, rather than leisure time” (Schor 63), building a cycle in which workers worked more in order to acquire more commodities. This process represented an irreversible departure from Weberian standards of delayed gratification that had characterized earlier capitalist expansion.

The psychological dimensions of this paradox grew increasingly apparent during late 20th century America. Sociologist Robert D. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000) follows the manner in which “the time crunch of work-and-spend lifestyles destroyed the community bonds that had long supported moral structures” (Putnam 215).

Psychologist Barry Schwartz’s *The Paradox of Choice* (2004) demonstrates how “consumer excess created anxiety instead of happiness” (Schwartz 56), undermining the emotional rewards of diligence. Historian Gary Cross develops this argument in *An All-Consuming Century* (2000), arguing that “consumerism didn’t just complement the work ethic – it fundamentally transformed it into a means for immediate gratification rather than long-term salvation” (Cross 92). These trends seem to suggest that consumer culture not only co-existed with work values, but actually redefined their purpose and meaning.

The neoliberal turn of the 1980s ratcheted these tensions in new directions. The political theorist Wendy Brown's analysis in *Undoing the Demos* (2015) illustrates how "the marketization of all areas of life refigured workers as entrepreneurs of themselves" (Brown 31), ratcheting up work expectations while equating consumption with self-expression.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild's *The Time Bind* (1997) reveals the sour irony that "as workplaces asked employees to supply more 'passion,' home was increasingly commercialized" (Hochschild 45), blurring lines between production and consumption. Economist Robert H. Frank's *Luxury Fever* (1999) quantifies how "status competition through consumption produced a treadmill effect, to work harder just to maintain relative position" (Frank 118). These tensions created what can be called "the neoliberal double bind" – the double intensification of work pressures and consumption strains.

Contemporary versions of the paradox suggest the ongoing relevance of the paradox. Anthropologist James G. Carrier's *The Limits of Consumer Culture* (2010) states that "the 2008 financial crisis laid bare the vulnerability of debt-fueled consumption" (Carrier 72), but failed to revive traditional work ethic values. Management writer Carl Cederström's *The Happiness Fantasy* (2018) looks at how "corporate wellness initiatives attempt to reconcile incompatible demands of boundless productivity and being present with oneself" (Cederström 34).

Most recently, economist Elizabeth Currid-Halkett's *The Sum of Small Things* (2017) illustrates how "elites now signal status through inconspicuous consumption and intensive parenting, creating new forms of work-consumption cycles" (Currid-Halkett 56). Such is an indicator that the paradox of prosperity has transformed but not dissipated, adapting in a manner to accommodate 21st century economic realities while maintaining its underlying contradiction between production and consumption needs.

4.3 Protestant Values and the Corporate Ethos of American Business

The Protestant work ethic, rooted in Puritan theology, significantly shaped American business culture. Max Weber's seminal study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), illustrates how early Protestant theology, e.g., industriousness, abstemiousness, and seeing work as a divine calling, lay the groundwork for modern-day capitalism. These values enabled an attitude whereby business success was not just a personal success but a moral duty. For instance, industrialists like John D. Rockefeller would generally define their wealth as proof of God's favor, promoting the belief that economic prosperity was tied to virtue (Weber 123).

Even today, this legacy remains in corporate America, where long days and ruthless productivity are occasionally romanticized, based on the ongoing presumption that hard work is righteous by nature. But this position has been criticized too for romanticizing overwork and justifying socioeconomic injustice through the equation of economic failure with moral shortcomings.

Influential critical race theorist Cedric Robinson's groundbreaking book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) forcefully upends standard narratives of capitalist origins by exposing its racial foundations. American capitalism, in Robinson's view, arose in what he terms "racial capitalism," a capitalism that "could not concede, even theoretically, that Blacks or non-white laborers had the same claim to Protestant virtues such as thrift and industriousness as white workers" (Robinson 48). This exclusionary explanation, as Robinson illustrates, allowed white capitalists to borrow Protestant work ethics but not their universality, granting pseudo-theological legitimization for Black economic marginalization in terms of inbuilt racial characteristics rather than structural prohibitions. His work reveals how Protestant morality framing work naturalized racial hierarchies within industrial capitalism.

Besides the work ethic, Protestantism's individual responsibility emphasis has had a great influence on corporate structure. Historian David Landes, in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998), indicates that Protestant societies historically encouraged education, innovation, and self-sufficiency, principles that were to become the mainstays of American commercial culture (Landes 56). One can find this in meritocratic corporate methods that reward initiative and individual responsibility, stressing the idea that achievement stems from effort. But the same philosophy can sometimes miss systemic barriers, assigning professional recidivism or poverty to personal failure rather than to structural unfairness.

Despite such grievances, Protestant virtues continue to characterize American business life, from corporate social responsibility efforts founded on moral stewardship to discipline-oriented and long-range planning-inspired leadership models.

4.3.1 The Gospel of Efficiency: Weber's Theory in Modern Boardrooms

This title carries a strong metaphorical meaning. The phrase "Gospel of Efficiency" was first popularized by Samuel P. Hays in his study of technocratic ideals in early 20th-century America. The phrase used to indicate the excessive reverence for the concept of efficiency in modern institutions, particularly within corporate boardrooms. It suggests that efficiency is treated as an unquestionable, almost sacred principle guiding managerial decisions.

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), posits that Calvinism's doctrine of predestination encouraged a cultural belief that material prosperity was a sign of God's blessing. This faith, Weber argues, led to an absolute dedication to diligence, rational discipline, and the accumulation of wealth as duties (Weber 181). This legacy in corporate America today is the unrelenting pursuit of efficiency, where the

management of time, cost-cutting, and the leverage of data to make decisions are gospel values.

Today's corporations, particularly those in finance and technology, live under a sort of "secularized Puritanism" where productivity metrics and quarterly reports have become the new standards of virtue (Ghoshal and Moran 24). The use of "lean management" and "operational excellence" echoes Weber's remark that capitalist enterprise is sustained by rigorous, virtually ascetic, self-deprivation.

The Protestant rationalization is not only located in the work ethic but finds its influence on the organizational shape of corporate governance as well, this rationalization refers to the cultural and organizational mindset rooted in Protestant values, emphasizing efficiency, discipline, and systematic order. Business scholars like Alfred D. Chandler Jr. in *The Visible Hand* (1977) demonstrate how the managerial revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries institutionalized Weberian bureaucracy, hierarchical arrangement, codified rule, and impersonal routine, as the dominant design for American firms (Chandler 8).

Fortune 500 companies today still maintain these principles, with tightly delineated command systems, regular routine procedures, and performance audits. The Protestant concept of "calling" is now the modern-day CEO's mission statement, making corporate leadership a career not just a job, but a calling that requires total devotion (Khurana 112). This cultural DNA explains why the American corporations prefer scalability and predictability, typically at the expense of more humanistic or adaptive styles of management.

But this ethic of efficiency has been subject to withering criticism. Sociologist Richard Sennett in *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2006) argues that the Protestant-bred obsession with measurable outcomes has helped foster a corrosive short-termism in corporate planning, where long-term investment in worker training or sustainable practices is sacrificed to short-

term shareholder returns (Sennett 47). Similarly, management theorist Henry Mintzberg decries the “myth of systematic efficiency,” contending that excessive reliance on quantitative metrics strangles innovation and alienates workers by reducing their labor to impersonal data points (Mintzberg 72).

The financial crisis of 2008, for instance, demonstrated how the Protestant ethic of thrift had devolved into irresponsible financialization, with efficiency measured in quarterly profits rather than value creation in the long term. These criticisms imply that Weber’s “spirit” of capitalism remains, but its ethical foundations have dissolved. Yet the Protestant imprint on corporate culture remains strong, particularly in tech “hustle culture.” Anthropologist Melissa Gregg in *Work’s Intimacy* (2011) documents how Silicon Valley workaholism, glamorizing all-nighters and “disruptive” innovation, is a replay of Puritan idealization of boundless work as a secular form of grace (Gregg 63).

The map clearly indicates, Silicon Valley lies in Northern California, the pulsating heart of the global tech industry, where digital giants cluster together in one concentrated hub, a region dominated by big tech companies that command both economic and cultural influence. That concentration of innovation and competition creates a geographic node where “hustle culture” thrives. The spatial agglomeration of high-tech firms intensifies the Protestant-based ethic of ceaseless striving and self-denial, so the region is not only an economic giant but a symbolic center of modern secular asceticism.

Figure 1: Map showing Silicon Valley and surrounding tech hubs.



Source: “Silicon Valley Map.” Flickr, <https://flic.kr/p/DS08Kd>.

Companies like Amazon impose it through mechanisms like stack ranking, where employees fight each other in a survival-of-the-fittest environment reminiscent of Calvinist predestination. Corporate wellness programs, including self-optimization, even show what Weber characterized as “inner-worldly asceticism”, the substitution of religious constraint with professional self-improvement (Weber 192). Inner-worldly asceticism, a central concept in Max Weber’s analysis of Protestantism, refers to “a religiously motivated life of discipline and self-denial oriented toward active participation in worldly affairs rather than monastic withdrawal” (Weber 121). This ethic transformed work into a spiritual calling while prohibiting idle enjoyment of wealth. As controversies intensify over inequality and burnout, it becomes apparent that the Protestant ethic no longer requires theology to fuel it; it has turned into a self-generating cultural logic, rooted profoundly in the American corporate mentality.

Corporate America’s obsession with productivity reveals a more profound cultural tendency: the repeated coupling of economic productivity and moral virtue. As ancient

American cultures did in connecting earthly prosperity with godliness, today's business culture reaffirms this moral-economic script insofar as it prioritizes quantifiable productivity as virtue. Success at work, per this worldview, is not only financially rewarded but also morally sanctioned.

4.3.2 From Pulpit to PowerPoint: The Sacralization of Corporate Culture

The injection of Protestant ethics into business culture owes its origins to Max Weber's classic book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), which argues that Calvinist predestination and otherworldly asceticism resulted in a profit-driven, self-disciplined work ethic. Weber's thesis is that Protestantism's moral asceticism, particularly diligence, frugality, and postponed gratification, laid the foundation for modern capitalist enterprise (Weber 101-105). Contemporary theorists have expanded upon this idea, noting how corporate culture is prone to sacralize efficiency and productivity, frame them in ethical language, rather than economic strategies.

For instance, Micki McGee, in *Self-Help, Inc.* (2005), explains that corporate self-help books tend to lapse into quasi-religious rhetoric, presenting professional success as salvation and failure as moral sin. This sacralization makes the workplace arenas into secular chapels in which corporate mission statements function as creeds, CEOs as spiritual guides, and giving visions of growth and imagination with near-evangelical fervor (McGee 78-82).

Furthermore, sacralization of company culture can be observed in the way companies adopt rituals and language that are not dissimilar to religious observance. David Miller, in *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (2007), identifies the way companies like Google and Starbucks use mindfulness programs and moral mission statements, effectively creating a company theology that weaves profit motivations with moral intent (Miller 45-48).

These practices echo the Protestant emphasis on vocation, wherein work is sanctified as a divine calling. David Steingard, writing in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, takes this further to propose that corporate team-building exercises and retreats closely mirror religious pilgrimages, instilling loyalty and sense of transcendent purpose among employees (Steingard 327-330). The modern corporate culture, therefore, does not merely encapsulate Protestant values but actively sacralizes business practice, with capitalism itself presented as a redemptive narrative.

4.4 The Role of Education, Meritocracy, and Discipline in Achieving Success

Education has long been regarded as a main driver of upward mobility, and meritocratic ideals asserting that ability and effort—rather than inherited privilege—govern success. Philosophers such as Michael Young, who originally coined the term “meritocracy,” warned that overdependence on merit would entrench inequality by overlooking structural barriers (Young 106). Follow-up research supports this claim, as access to quality education remains unequal, disproportionately benefiting individuals of higher socioeconomic status (Mijs 843). Though diligence and industriousness are commonly seen as virtues for success, critics argue that institutionalized school and work inequalities overcome meritocratic promise and put historically disadvantaged groups in a lasting disadvantage position.

Protestant work ethic that Max Weber theorized connected moral virtue and self-discipline with economic success, grounding modern concepts of meritocracy (Weber 123). Nevertheless, current research establishes that such systems simply overlook how privilege and inherited privilege distort meritocratic reasoning (Sandel 56). For instance, high-privileged schools favor students in parental connections or extracurricular exposure that lower-class kids lack (Khan 72). Thus, even as discipline and education remain the building blocks of success tales, they are rendered effective by determinants of a socioeconomic nature that challenge the fairness of meritocratic structures.

4.4.1 The Broken Ladder: Meritocracy and the Crisis of Protestant Discipline

Meritocracy theory has faced growing criticism as researchers indicate that it cannot guarantee equal opportunity. Daniel Markovits is of the opinion that meritocratic policies, rather than levelling the playing ground, have created a new aristocracy where leading professionals pass advantages to their offspring via discriminatory education and networking (Markovits 45). This perpetuates a cycle in which the rhetoric of hard work hides privilege, forcing working-class individuals to struggle against structural biases in hiring and promotion. The loss of steady, well-paying factory jobs, traditionally an avenue to middle-class stability, is only to increase this divide, laying bare the limits of discipline in securing upward mobility (Cherlin 89).

The erosion of meritocratic values becomes irrefutable upon examination of Kochhar and Sechopoulos's 2022 report. Their data reveal that middle-income households – once 61% of Americans in 1971, now currently only 50%, while higher-income households have expanded their share through disproportionate access to higher education (Pew Research Center). This credential-based stratification directly substantiates Markovits' "new aristocracy" thesis. Earlier, Kochhar's seminal 2015 article "The American Middle Class Is Losing Ground" had described the 29% reduction in manufacturing employment (14), methodically foreclosing the very types of jobs that previously facilitated college-optional social mobility. Together, these accounts demonstrate how structural economic transformation (deindustrialization and credential barriers) have rendered Protestant discipline insufficient for social mobility.

Similarly, the Protestant ethic's emphasis on self-control and deferred gratification has been criticized too for ignoring broader economic realities. With globalizations and automatization redefining labor markets, conventional conceptions of diligence no longer translate into economic security (Brown et al. 112). The spread of insecure work, gig

economy employment, specifically, also demonstrates how meritocratic rhetoric most frequently blames people for economic insecurity while ignoring corporate and policy-based injustices (Standing 76). These trends indicate that the crisis of Protestant discipline is not a lack of work ethic, but an economic model that incentivizes wealth and contacts based on more than hard work.

Conclusion

The Protestant work ethic has been the ethical foundation of the American Dream since the time it took Puritan theology and reduced it to a secular creed of hard work and fair reward. But as America shifted from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, this ethic increasingly came unmoored from economic reality. Even as corporate culture persists to mouth Protestant virtue through productivity initiatives and meritocratic ideals, increasing inequality and precarious work arrangements dispel the myth of effort-led up-mobility. The original dream of virtuous toil now clashes with an economy where the concentration of wealth is increasingly founded on inherited advantage rather than moral merit.

This tension requires a reinvestigation of what the Protestant work ethic will come to mean in America today. Rather than discarding these values entirely, there must be a balancing of individual responsibility and structural justice. This equilibrium may require institutional change, universal basic income, progressive taxation, or enhanced workplace protections for vulnerable workers. Culturally, broadening what counts as success to include care work, social work, and ecological stewardship may broaden our definition of meaningful achievement beyond economic metrics. These changes would align the Protestant ethic of meaningful work with modern socioeconomic realities.

The American Dream remains culturally powerful, but its attainment now requires engagement with structural barriers that the traditional work ethic will not entertain. A new

conception of success will have to balance individual discipline and communal support, making the Protestant heritage relevant to the economic realities of the present while preserving its fundamental focus on meaningful work.

Chapter five

Challenges to the Protestant work Ethic in Contemporary America

Introduction

The concept of work and labor is central in the Protestant religious doctrine. In fact, it would be even described that work forms a sacred and fundamental aspect of this religion. Beginning in the middle Ages, more and more individuals in central Europe came to believe that work, exertion, and doing things that are essential or beneficial to both the spirit and body, rather than unwinding or doing things just for fun, were the main factors in human progress and evolution (Gemper 530). Therefore, work used to be associated with the evolution of the human kind and its progress. People were supposed to be hard working individuals to represent the religious work ethics of diligence and persistence.

Based on Max Weber's theory, which emphasizes the development of the Protestant work ethic as a foundation for the capitalist system. Weber believed that the spirit of modern capitalism should be governed by a set of principles. They include avoiding unnecessary and extravagant spending; avoiding taking conscious pleasure in the power that comes with their position (status). They are expected to feel ashamed of the social recognition they receive. They should lead a life of strict discipline (inner-worldly asceticism). This lifestyle is characterized by modesty and moderation. Finally, they should not seek personal gain from their wealth, except for the "irrational" sense of satisfaction that comes from knowing they have done their job well (Chriss 4).

Therefore, the Protestant work ethics represent a strong guide to hard work, discipline, self-reliance and moral value of work. This code of ethics formed a fundamental feature of the traditional American identity and economic life that were based on the integrity and self-reliance. However, with modern shift in technology and other aspects of life, these ethics

started to be questioned and even rejected by contemporary Americans in light of the new economic developments and cultural shifts in the country. This chapter highlights the challenges that arose due to the decline of religious influence and shifting cultural attitudes toward work, the impact of globalization, and the growth of Gig economies, this term is used to describe the modern remote-jobs and permanent employment concept.

Moreover, it also addresses the secularism movement in the United States of America (USA), which is an anti-religion movement that encouraged the American society to abandon its religious affiliation and association in order to promote self-interests and individualism in a world that celebrates technological advancement and the faith in the concrete evidence over the abstract norms and traditions. Therefore, this chapter highlights these factors and their influence on the future of the Protestant work ethic in America. This chapter argues that the Protestant work ethic is declining due to secularization, globalization, and the Gig economy.

5.1 The Decline of the Religious Influence and Shifting Cultural Attitudes towards Work

Despite the country's rising religious diversity as a result of immigration, Christianity has always been firmly associated with the traditional American identity. The Protestant work ethic, founded on Christian ideals, has long shaped America's economic system and working culture. However, in recent decades, religious influence has declined significantly, even among conservatives who have traditionally defended Christian ideals, with political liberalism increasing among Christians and religious identification diminishing overall (Smith et al. 7). This trend reflects a cultural drift toward increased autonomy and liberalism, influencing both the social fabric and economic ethos of the nation.

5.1.1 The Rise of Liberal Ideology in America

The rise of the liberal ideology in America is associated with the development of technology and the emergence of the modern society that reshapes the social norms and

values of the traditional one. Mearsheimer stated that: “Liberalism privileges individualism. It assumes that we are at root free individuals who come together voluntarily to form a social contract, not social animals from the get-go” (Mearsheimer 1). This statement reflects the beliefs of the liberal movement and its rejection of the social entity or social nature of the human being. Therefore, liberals believe that human beings are born as free individuals who make the conscious choice of joining a social group or a professional community, rather than being born into a social entity that shapes the individual’s mindset and personality.

More importantly, this statement implies to the implicit rejection of group labor and collective economic interests. Therefore, liberalism supports a system where people are encouraged to pursue their own economic goals independently, free from the obligations imposed by larger social or communal expectations, in contrast to traditional systems, which are based on the Protestant Work Ethic, that emphasize the importance of working for the common good or for long-term societal welfare. Liberalism was coined as a political movement in Spain in 1820, and was used to refer to a type of mindset that is characterized with its free will, free thinking and free inclination (Collins 3). Moreover, this term was also used to describe the Spanish rebels at that time because they defied the political system of the country. Therefore, liberalism in the USA could be described as a religious approach to break free of the religious constraints that were imposed on the American society, either in social environments or professional settings.

5.1.2 The Changing Perception of Work in a Liberal Society

In addition, the use of the terms “not social animals from the get-go” indicates the liberal view of work as restrictive to human’s inherited freedom, using the word “animals” illustrates that liberals refuse the traditional work ethic that treats individuals as animals to be monitored and exploited in the workplace environment. There are even some studies that support this shifting attitude towards the notion of work, which address that labor is the main

factor for people's emotional, physical and psychological burnout in modern times. Job burnout is a condition of emotional exhaustion brought on by extended exposure to physically or psychologically stressful circumstances (Choi et al. 3).

Stated differently, work has turned into a source of stress and anxiety in contemporary America that causes people to have mental and emotional health issues that affects both their life and their productivity in the workplace environment as well. This statement shows the stark contradiction between how work was viewed as a way of life that determines one's status in society and his personal perception of his commitment and sense of responsibility in traditional America, and how it is viewed nowadays as a source of mental illness and emotional disturbance, which marks the shifting attitudes of the concept of work among American people.

Evidently, Castilleja reported that approximately 1 in 5 persons in America suffer from a mental health illness, 91% of workers say that stress at work negatively affects their ability to do their jobs, and 42% of workers quit their jobs because they were burned out, moreover, employees are reluctant to disclose mental health concerns because they fear being judged or treated in a special way by others, or for fear of being harassed or bullied by others. These statistics highlight the challenges that American employees encounter in their workplace environment, which implies to demanding hours, tasks overload, lack of appreciation and stressful environment that could cause a person to be drained both on the physical, mental and emotional level (Choi et al. 3). Moreover, these problems could be related to the Protestant work ethic that necessitates hard work and self-discipline as major features of the employee. Therefore, it could be stated that Protestant work ethic is seen as a demanding code of work that demands too much effort from the individual employee in the 21st century, especially with the rise of the liberal thought that encourages the interests of the individual over the collective interest of the community.

Consequently, people do not feel the need to sacrifice their mental health and emotional stability for the aim of advancing their company's success or financial profits. Allen confirmed that work-life balance is becoming more and more important to younger generations, especially Millennials⁶ and Gen Z⁷, than the never-ending quest for professional growth that used to drive the older generation. This shows the difference between the traditional and modern mindset in the workplace environment. What older generations used to consider as their duty and responsibility to work and make effort for the advantage of their association or company, neglecting their personal interests and life outside work, is now refused by younger generations who have more willingness to put a balance between their personal and work life, emphasizing the role of work as only a means of living that earns them salaries but not to the point of sacrificing their mental health and emotional stability. Therefore, this shifting attitudes towards the value of work has led to decline of the traditional Protestant work ethic and the rise of less restrictive modern work values.

5.2 The Impact of Economic Inequality, Globalization and Automation on Traditional Work Values

The advancement of technology and the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has led to the shift in traditional workplace environments on a global scale and the change of traditional work values. In fact, Ty argued that this shift is inevitable because humans have always been affected with the introduction of technology into their life and its impact on their perceptions of their religion and ethical sense (Ty 340). Moreover, it also argued that the rapid growth of AI-powered technology raises serious issues and questions regarding the meaning of life, the function of religion, the relationship between humans and robots, and the integrity of conventions in spiritual practices as they currently exist (Ty 340).

⁶ millennial, term used to describe a person born between 1981 and 1996, though different sources can vary by a year or two (Zelazko 1)

⁷ Gen Z: Generation Z, term used to describe Americans born during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Eldridge 1).

Taking the Industrial Revolution (IR) as an example, people used to rely on agriculture and hard labor as their means of survival and making profits. However, with the introduction of steam machines and new inventions, people changed their beliefs about work and labor and moved to industrial domains to accommodate the technological advancement that paved the way for their progress as human beings. Yet, the IR also changed how people interact with each other by changing social structures and creating the social class system (Allen 1). Therefore, questioning ethical conventions and values was accompanied by the technological advancement of that era.

5.2.1 Impact of AI Development on Traditional Work Values in America

Similarly, people also shifted their views on human relations and work values with the introduction of AI that could perform human tasks with more efficiency and effectiveness than humans themselves in a short period of time. Therefore, Jackson, et al demonstrated that modern religious declines can be partially explained by automation, and the rise of robots and AI (Jackson, et al, 1). It is illustrated that people frequently resort to religion for spiritual comfort, purpose, and a moral code that directs their life when they are confronted with difficulties or uncertainties, whether existential, personal, or economic challenges. Thus, they rely on their religious conventions to find comfort and courage to face the unknown or to pass hardships in their personal or work life. Therefore, it is deduced that the development of AI tools and robots that could perform tasks similar or beyond their human capacity gives them something concrete and physical to rely on instead of their abstract religious beliefs. This point is further reinforced with the fact that this phenomenon of religious decline is mostly detected in Western countries that are characterized with technological advancement, such as China, the USA and Germany (Jackson et al. 2).

In another evidence for the decline of religious values and orientations, Ty explained that people in the past had a physical contact with their religious practices, such as touching

their holy books, going to the church to pray and others, but nowadays, people perform most of their ceremonies and religious rituals now online (343). Therefore, it could be stated that religious decline could be attributed to the way people perform their religious practices. People nowadays lost contact with most of their traditional behaviors, the creation of the virtual world online occupied most of their time and made them distracted with the abundance of available materials online that are aimed for both work and entertainment. Thus, the development of technology could be also linked to the decline of the Protestant work ethic, where the traditional work ethics became blurred and distant.

5.2.2 Impact of Globalization on Traditional Work Values in America

In terms of globalization, this factor is also listed as one of factors that contributed to the decline of the Protestant work ethics. Imhanzenobe argues that the spread of cultural values across nations and continents has been impacted by globalization, and these values have a significant impact on the work ethics of that environment (129). Considering the fact that America is the land of immigration, it is also the meeting point of global cultures. This mixture allowed people with from religious and cultural origins to offer and contribute unique viewpoints on motivation, employment, and the American perception of work, success, and ethics are shaped. Therefore, the Protestant work ethic that used to dominate the workplace environment decreased in its effect on employees in the USA, because people from other cultures and countries started to join the American workforce and offer their own perceptions of work ethics.

Moreover, the growing influence of non-Western philosophies in American business culture has changed the emphasis away from collective religious responsibility and toward individual accomplishment and self-actualization. Work, according to historic Protestant work ethic principles, was viewed as a moral necessity linked to religious salvation and social contribution. However, when global influences introduced different perspectives—such as

East Asian collectivist norms or South Asian spiritual interpretations of work—the Protestant ethic’s consistency began to disintegrate. These imported ideas frequently prioritize balance, harmony, or community well-being over unrelenting personal success, quietly changing what constitutes a meaningful or ethical approach to work in the American environment.

Furthermore, the impact of global capitalism has exacerbated this trend by emphasizing economic efficiency and materialism over moral or spiritual ideals. In a market-driven society where success is frequently assessed in terms of profit and production, religiously based ethical principles have lost importance. Instead, secular ideals such as innovation, competitiveness, and flexibility drive workplace expectations. This transformation reflects a broader cultural shift in which traditional religious narratives are being supplanted by more global and individualistic ideologies, further undermining the Protestant work ethic’s effect on modern American workplace culture.

5.3 The Gig Economy and the Future of Work

The Gig economy could be described as the new free labor market that emerged as a result of the world’s technological development and advancement. It is more accurately defined as a method of operation and employment whereby freelance workers are hired to fill temporary positions within a business, these jobs are widespread and frequently involve brief commitments and they also include anyone who performs work outside of their principal job (Janadari & Preena 1). Therefore, the Gig economic developed through the emergence of freelancers who could provide services to clients for a definite period of time. Thus, an employee who works in a regular job from 8-4 or 9-5 can perform take another jib after his work hours as for example, a Taxi driver, an online translator or any other job that could be performed for a number of hours for a pre-determined wage.

5.3.1 Impact of Gig Economy on Traditional Work Ethics in America

Moreover, it is demonstrated that the term ‘Gig work’, which was first used in 1915 and has since gained popularity because to platform work, refers to the short-term, task-by-task exchange of labor for cash (Zeid et al. 3). This definition illustrates the flexible nature of the Gig economy, which allows the freelance employees to offer their services to clients for exchange of a certain amount of money that they demand as payment. Hence, it could be also described as self-employment where the employee autonomously manages their workload, sets the parameters of their services, and negotiate prices, frequently without the long-term obligations or advantages that come with traditional employment. This type of employment could be both appealing and challenging at the same time. It is true that it offers flexibility compared to traditional workplace environment and allows people to work at their own pace and according to their own schedules, but it could also have risks in terms of income instability, retirement issues and others benefits that are offered through traditional employment.

Furthermore, Janadari and Preena reported that this type of economy has mainly gained popularity due to the development of online platforms and the spread of social media use among consumers (1). People online can offer their services where users can see them and contact them as clients on online platforms and applications, such as Airbnb (for house renting), Uber (for ordering a lift), Ikman (for ordering different services). The following figure shows how this operation is conducted in the Gig economy.

Figure 2: Gig Market Model (Janadari & Preena 3).



Source: FATbit Technologies, 2019.

This figure shows how the Gig market is built and operated on online platforms. It is based on the admin who monitors the platform and connects the client with the service provider and the financial transaction between the two. It could be noticed that the market is based on two essential elements, the service provider or the professional, and the user or the client. The admin on the other hand, is the one who bridges the gap between these two elements through monitoring the platform and facilitating the economic transaction between the client and the service provider for a commission. This modern economic system forms a major threat to the traditional one that emphasizes long-term commitment between the employer and his employees. It is reported that the Gig economy offers even the traditional

business owners a more advantageous solution for their enterprises in times of slack economic periods (Oyler 1).

5.3.2 Gig Economy and the Future of Traditional Employment

Consequently, the increasing demand for the Gig marketplace caused a major shift in the traditional employment market. The demand for freelance workers by business owners could lead people to lose interest in traditional jobs and seek more flexible workplace routine and environment. According to statistics conducted by the Washington's Time, an American newspaper, to estimate the Labor Force Participation Rate in 2023, it was revealed that More than 37% of physically fit Americans who are not enrolled in school, retired, or raising children at home have chosen to leave the workforce in a recent survey conducted in 2023 (Feder). That equates to millions of prospective employees who have decided to lead unproductive lives for whatever reason outside the workforce in the USA.

These statistics did not specify the reasons why this large percentage left their traditional jobs, but it implies to the shortage and decline of the Protestant work ethic that encourage stable work positions and long-term employment as a vital aspect of life. It is likely that a large number of these individuals who left their traditional jobs have chosen a freelance occupation that could provide more access to job opportunities and more flexibility in working hours and schedules.

Therefore, it could be stated that the Gig marketplace has a major influence on the Protestant work ethics that govern the traditional workplace environment. Tabassam acknowledged that Gig jobs typically lack permanence, benefits, and legal protection, employees are free to provide high-quality, reliable work without feeling committed or accountable for their final service, product or the representation of these products (Tabassam 109). Therefore, it could be inferred that Gig economy could have a powerful influence on the

decline of the Protestant work ethic that emphasizes steady, full-time employment where employees build strong professional ties and contribute to the long-term success of a company.

More importantly, it is estimated or predicted that the spread of the Gig economy may eventually lead to the extinction of traditional employment. There is a general belief that traditional work is being replaced by a free agent labor market as a result of the growth of Uber and other application-based Gig platforms and the extensive media coverage that has accompanied them (Oyer 2). The increasing decline of the traditional employment and the increasing success of the freelance occupations could lead to the end of the Protestant work ethic in the USA. This claim could be refuted if the shifting towards Gig economy was only initiated or followed by self-employees or free agents and workers, but the high demand of these workers by business owners and their selection to hire temporary freelancers instead of full-time employees could be used as a predictor to the realization of this prediction in the upcoming years.

5.4 Secularism and the Persistence of Protestant Values in American Identity

The secularization in America could be associated with the evolving state of the society due to technological advancement and globalization. This movement is traced back to the first half of the twentieth century when it emerged as a reaction to romanticism and realism and relates to the twentieth-century conviction in the benefits of technology, science, and the deliberate control of societal change (Taha 4). More particularly, the secularization of the American society and its loss of faith in the necessity of religion is in parallel with the outbreak of the cultural movement of modernism.

5.4.1 The Rise of Secularization and the Decline of Traditional Values

Due to the immense devastation and suffering caused by the Civil War, many people lost faith in the principles and values that had previously characterized the American society before the modernism era. Thus, the shift to modernism in America could be mainly attributed to the civil war that changed the moral values and the perceptions of people and thinkers alike in the country (Lathbury 4). This point marked the beginning of the shift towards believing in the concrete and refusing the social and economic norms that used to rule social and professional conduct, which includes the Protestant work ethics and a major pillar in the American workforce.

Evidently, Cragun, et al declared in their book *Organized Secularism in the United States*, that there is an organized and systematic movement of secularization in the United States of America (USA) that supports people to lose faith and turn atheist and encourages their conversion through financial funds and support. They presented the story of an American high school teenage boy “Damon” as evidence for this organized movement, stating that this boy threatened his school to report them to the police if they conducted a religious praying ceremony (1). The school showed a severe reaction by expelling the boy, similarly, his parents showed the same reaction by disowning him and expelling him from their home, his friends and peers also frowned upon his behavior and some even threatened to cause him bodily harm.

However, the boy received calls from organizations and political members who offered him a place to live, a school to attend and even financial funding to pursue his college degree since his parents withdrew their financial support. This shows the extent to which these organizations could go to encourage people to lose their faith and believe in God and follow the atheist path that is more encouraged in Modern America. This story serves as a compelling evidence of the systematic movement in the USA that aims to eradicate the existence of religion in the country and erase people’s ethical orientation. This movement is

designed to remove the religious and ethical principles that the traditional society was built upon and replace them with a more existentialist approach in people's social life and professional careers.

As a result, the increasing orientation of people in turning atheist means the parallel decline of the Protestant work ethic that is the result of the Protestantism in America and people's attachment to their religious teachings. America nowadays is reported to host non-religious individuals more than any other country in the world besides China (Baker & Smith 1). This shows the stark contrast between the old traditional America that used to be a Christian country, and the contemporary American that celebrates people's lack of religion and the absence of moral codes that were established through religious teachings.

5.4.2 The Shift from Protestant Work Ethic to Secular Moral Frameworks

Consequently, the Protestant Work Ethic, which was firmly anchored in the religious doctrine of Protestantism in America, is declining at the same time that people are becoming more atheist. In the past, Protestantism in America offered a moral basis for labor and individual accountability in addition to a spiritual framework.

In the present however, secularism in America developed as an anti-religion doctrine that not only represents the distinction between religious and nonreligious phenomena, but also the affirmation and advancement of secularism as a worldview or set of values that serves as religion's functional counterpart (Cragun, et al 3). This means that secularism does not only separate between religious and non-religious individuals in America, but it rather forms an opposing doctrine that rejects the Protestant Work Ethic and other moral and ethical beliefs that were formerly transmitted through religious teachings.

Secularism reframes the purpose and value of work in a more individualistic, pragmatic, and frequently materialistic context than Protestantism, which offered a framework

for work as a moral duty by emphasizing diligence, self-discipline, and accountability as previously mentioned. Sen argued that secularism, according to some, breeds moral relativism, in which moral guidance is lost when there are no rules established by religion (5).

Therefore, this doctrine encourages the individual's liberty in setting their own values and code of ethics in a subjective way that could contradict with the overall collective view, which also means that people are encouraged to prioritize their own interests and personal gains over the collective interests of their community. Consequently, secularism alters work ethics by placing more value on personal freedom, personal financial achievement, and individual choice than on long-term commitment, moral obligation, and group responsibility that are emphasized and encouraged through the Protestant work ethics.

Conclusion

The decline of the Protestant work ethic is caused by the gradual shifting attitudes towards the fundamental concept of work and its value in traditional and modern American society. In the past, Calvin put forth the idea of predestination, which maintains that God has selected his "elected" to receive eternal life while everyone else is condemned to hell, therefore, achieving success in the real world, particularly in business, was seen as a sign that one might be elected.

Consequently, hard work and labor were seen by devoted and religious American individuals as a way of salvation in life, a way to demonstrate to their creator that they are worthy of their position in this life and they are willing to sacrifice everything to play a role in the advancement of their society and their economic community. However, the loss of faith in God in contemporary American society, in parallel with the rise of secularism, reshaped people's perceptions of the concept of work and made them see it more as a restrictive

element of their freedom and a major cause for their mental illnesses and emotional instability.

Therefore, work turned into a means of gaining financial profit in the form of income, and it is only conducted or performed out of necessity and need for survival. This chapter revealed that there are other factors that led to the gradual decline of the Protestant work ethics in contemporary America, including the technological advancement of technology that led to the emergence of AI tools and automation, which led people to shift their belief in God to a more concrete subject of hope and worship that is advanced robots and machines. The chapter also revealed that people are increasingly distracted with AI tools to pay attention or attribute value to their traditional religious beliefs and customs.

Moreover, it was indicated that the proliferation of the Gig economy that shifted attention from traditional to freelance employment has also influenced the Protestant work ethic that emphasizes hard work, discipline and full commitment, unlike the Gig economy that encourages creativity over hard work and balanced life-work instead of full commitment to labor and work.

General Conclusion

The Protestant work ethic emerged as a cultural and moral system that shaped the American understanding of work, success, and social value. It arose out of the religious doctrines of the Reformation, most specifically Calvinism, and taught a vision of work as a moral imperative and success as a sign of God's blessing. These values ultimately outgrew their religious origins and became part of the cultural ethos of American society, contributing to the formation of the American Dream.

In early colonial America, Puritan communities formed values such as industriousness, thrift, and discipline. These values were essential for a productive life, also served as useful instruments for social unity and moral propriety. As economic systems evolved, most significantly during the 19th century with the rise of industrial capitalism, the Protestant work ethic easily adjusted to the requirements of industrial capitalism. The virtues of hard work and self-sacrifice were a good foundation for the new capitalist economy, encouraging enterprise and discipline in the workers.

This ethic was a source of inspiration for the development of the American middle class because it encouraged the connection between diligence, financial success, and good character. By making productivity and thrift virtues, it supported the idea that mobility was in sight through individual effort, a belief which harmonized with the enlarging opportunities for business and education in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But while this mentality promoted self-reliance and ambition, it also had its ugly side. This ethic perpetuated social stratification by conflating poverty with moral failure, rather than addressing systemic barriers like limited access to capital, discrimination, and educational inequality. Consequently, though numerous flourished under this philosophy, others were left behind, their fate explained away as matters of character instead of the result of an unbalanced economic and social environment.

Traditional Protestant work ethic is tested times in today's world as it encounters shifting economic and cultural conditions. Globalization, technology acceleration, and growth in precarious gig work have remade work so that the old model of secure, long-term careers is less common and more distant. At the same time, the decline of organized religion has removed the moral and spiritual foundation previously giving these values added meaning. Despite these shifts, the core principles of the work ethic persist, evolving to fit new realities.

In an increasingly secular society, discipline, self-reliance, and continuous productivity remain in high regard, now grounded in modern workplace norms, self-help cults, and cultural ideals surrounding accomplishment. Even though the original religious justification has faded, the tension to deliver, make the most of one's time, and prove one's worth by working persists in disguise, shaping how people view accomplishment and value in the 21st century. values like personal responsibility, self-made success, and the moral imperative to remain busy continue to influence social values and institutional structures.

This cultural transformation means to the work ethic operates no longer as a religious belief but as a pervasive cultural perspective. More troublingly, it is employed as an explanation of success and failure—too frequently crediting achievement to individual effort at the cost of systemic barriers such as racial discrimination, unequal schooling, or economic uncertainty.

The cult of industrious work continues to shape American perceptions of worth and status, with political and corporate discourse perpetuating Protestant-inspired notions like ‘earning your keep’ – ideals that persist despite altered economic realities. However, this emphasis on extreme individual achievement has eroded collective connections, transforming what began as a communal ethic into a driver of social fragmentation. Where early Protestant communities emphasized mutual support, modern manifestations of the work ethic have contributed to declining community participation, weakened labor solidarity, and crumbling

family support systems, leaving in their wake a society marked by isolation and suspicion even as it venerates individual productivity as both economic necessity and moral virtue.

At an era of globalization, the Protestant work ethic is both America's source of competitive strength and social concern. The ubiquitous mania for productivity keeps the U.S. economically dominant but subjugates workers to unsustainable pressures. As other cultures with different perceptions about work offer alternatives, cognitive dissonance strikes many Americans. They embrace workaholic mindsets as part of national identity but envy countries with greater work-life balance. This conflict is most evident in sectors such as finance and technology, where intense work hours are celebrated even as evidence mounts of their negative impact on efficiency. The ethic that once held early Americans together now polarizes them into those who idealize overwork and those who are looking for more compassionate options.

While this ethic has driven innovation and economic growth, it has also incubated widespread burnout, mental health decreases, and unraveling family and social relationships. Now, younger generations increasingly reject this model, opting for work-life balance, mental health, and purposeful living over unreflective productivity, a quiet but growing rebellion against a centuries-old ethic

The fundamental transformations reshaping the world of work in the 21st century demand an integrated future research exploring the evolution of work ethics in American society and their multifaceted consequences. Cross-cultural comparative studies can illuminate how classical Protestant work ethics interact with European and Asian counterparts under globalization and digitalization conditions, particularly examining working time regimes, success models, and work-life balance.

Concurrently, generational studies must explore how Millennials and Generation Z are reformulating work values and success criteria, and how these are reformulating corporate cultures and labor market structures. Equally important are empirical analyses quantifying the psychological and social costs of replicating Protestant work forms, including levels of burnout, mental health impacts, and social breakdown, while assessing new workplace policies emerging in progressive organizations.

This sort of multilateral research holds out the possibility of not just greater insight into America's changing work identity but also applied models for envisioning professional achievement in our post-capitalist age, one that requires more sustainable and humane ways of working as conventional boundaries between professional and private lives continue to erode.

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