CHAPTER 29

Weber’s Perspective: Capitalist Spirit as a Popular Mass Movement

29.1 Renaissance Man or Reformation Man?

In the first edition of *Modern Capitalism*, the classic representative of Sombart’s ‘capitalist spirit’ is Jakob Fugger, who tells a salesman weary of his work and preparing for retirement that he (Fugger) has something else in mind and ‘wanted to make money as long as he could’.1 Weber responds to this quotation, but interprets it as no more than an ethically indifferent ‘expression of commercial daring’ and contrasts it with Benjamin Franklin’s ‘ethically coloured maxim for the conduct of life’.2 In his critique of the *Protestant Ethic*, Rachfahl responds by asking: ‘How does Weber know that Fugger did not feel an inner duty toward his profession, that he was not also taken with the notion that man has a duty to perform the task life has placed before him faithfully and conscientiously?’3

One could continue by asking how Weber knows that the pious, Puritan businessman, to whom he attributes an ‘amazingly good, we may even say a pharisaically good, conscience in the acquisition of money’,4 is not plagued by his conscience in much the same way as the Catholic businessman who bequeaths the greater part of his wealth to the church in the hope of obtaining salvation? The religious proviso against excessive acquisition of money [*Deo placere vix potest*], considered typically Catholic by Weber,5 was brought to bear quite forcefully on the Puritan salesman Robert Keayne, who was reprimanded by his congregation for his ‘profiteering’; plagued by his conscience, he bequeathed his money to the city of Boston so that it might build a parish hall. Kilian, who analyses Keayne’s testament, considers it a typical document of the early phase of American Puritanism, when the clergy was still strong

1 Quoted in Sombart 1902, p. 396.
2 Weber 1950, pp. 51–2. To Weber, there is nothing specifically modern about Fugger. Weber sees Fugger as representing a type of capitalist that has existed since the age of the pharaohs: ‘for as long as we have had a history’ (Weber 1987, p. 161; see Weber 2001, p. 69).
3 Rachfahl 1978, p. 108.
5 Weber 1950, pp. 64ff.
enough to ‘check the advance of possessive individualism’: the testament reflects a proximate power balance between clergymen and salesmen, theological precepts and worldly success, and it is ‘torn to and fro between economic rationalism and the strict social doctrine of New England Puritanism’.

These objections provide an indication that definitions of the spirit of capitalism that abstract from forms of social praxis and their associated relations of hegemony are built on the sand of ‘empathetic’ speculation. This is also evident in the subsequent development of Weber’s and Sombart’s controversy over the writings of the Italian architect and writer Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472).

Initially, the dual construct Sombart presented in the 1902 edition of Modern Capitalism—an acquisitive drive that takes on a life of its own combined with rational bookkeeping—provided Weber with the model with which to contrast his specifically ‘modern’, Protestant and ethical concept of the spirit of capitalism. In Der Bourgeois (English edition: The Quintessence of Capitalism), Sombart responded mainly by means of an ethical expansion of the second component of his construct. In 1902, he had spoken of an economic rationalism shaped by double-entry bookkeeping; now (in 1913), he speaks of the ‘bourgeois spirit’ [Bürgergeist] encompassing a broad spectrum of ‘bourgeois virtues’ over and above ‘the art of calculation’. In doing so, he integrates a previously neglected theme that Weber had articulated into his own model, albeit in such a way as to strip that theme of its Protestant and ethical character. One cannot trace the bourgeois virtues back to the Puritan and Quaker ethic, Sombart argues, for in Alberti’s I Libri della Famiglia, one already finds everything that Defoe and Benjamin Franklin later spoke of in English: the rationalisation and economisation of economic conduct, mercantile reliability and observance of contracts, bourgeois ‘respectability’ [onestà] and the mathematical ability to dissolve the world into figures and transform these figures into a system of earnings and expenses. Nothing has changed in the world of bourgeois virtue during the four centuries since the Quattrocento, Sombart concludes. As in the first, 1902 version of Sombart’s argument, the two components of the spirit

6 Kilian 1979, p. 38.
7 Kilian 1979, p. 36; compare Bailyn 1965, p. 41; Henretta 1993, pp. 329ff.
8 Sombart 1998, pp. 103ff; Sombart 1920, pp. 135ff.
9 Sombart 1920, pp. 136, 149, 334.
10 Sombart 1998, pp. 103ff, 125ff.
11 Sombart 1920, p. 157.