

FOUNDATIONS OF CAPITALIST ECONOMIC THINKING ACCORDING TO MAX WEBER

Marius CUCU

*Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, 720229, Romania
mariuscucu35@yahoo.com*

Oana LENȚA

*Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, 720229, Romania
oanalenta@yahoo.com*

Abstract

The research proposed by Max Weber on the beginning of the capitalist economic thinking aims to transcend the appearances and conceptual surfaces that have been consolidated over the founding truths of this thinking. Thus, Weber is interested in the origin and evolution of key concepts in the capitalist economy such as computability, profit, investment, efficiency or economic capitalization. But what preoccupies him most in his studies is the basis of the capitalist economic mentality, the way in which the idea of free initiative and the motivation of its transposition in practice arose, a transposition that is only completely made in the Western civilization, the Orient keeping its openness to economic centralized elements, subject to the political factor. According to Weber, the spirit of capitalism and its economic choices are based on the vein of the Protestant theological thought. From this historical, theological and psychological foundation there is a possible understanding of capitalist economic thinking.

Key words: *capitalism, economic thinking, computability, protestantism, Occident, free initiative, entrepreneurial.*

JEL Classification: *A11, A12, A29*

I. MAX WEBER AND THE BEGINNING OF ANALYTICAL-CONCEPTUAL THINKING ON THE FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF ECONOMIC CAPITALISM

Max Weber is frequently mentioned when discussing the fundamentals and primary springs of sociology. Along with Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx, he is considered a pioneer of theoretical-analytical thinking on the social phenomenon, a thought that experienced an open resurrection of new horizons and understandings in the nineteenth century. But Weber remains in the history of humanistic thought not only through his exceptional contributions to the establishment of sociology as an autonomous discipline, but also through his unique research on the extremely complex phenomenon represented by capitalism. Trying to investigate the presuppositions of this social and philosophical reality alike, Max Weber was forced to turn to interdisciplinary perspectives, so that the appeal to philosophy or the history of culture and mentalities became natural in his writings dealing with the problem of capitalist ideology and economics. The starting point in his work, *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, perhaps the most representative text for Weber's approaches to this subject, is the attempt to understand the development of capitalist thought in the global context of the evolution of universal culture and history. Thus, the initial interrogation proposed by Weber aims at the universalization of certain concepts in culture and science that have crystallized in the field of research of the West. The very concept of science has been accepted in human history as proposed in its inaugural phase by Western civilization. China, Babylon, Egypt, and India had, long before the West, scientific knowledge and even terminology specific to certain subdivisions of nature research or the study of human behavior. But when we talk about science, we use this word in the sense and meaning given to it by Western thought and tradition. And in terms of theology, Weber points out, things are similar. It is obvious that the great religious traditions of mankind, situated before Christianity or significantly removed from the geographical area of the occurrence of its appearance and development, knew and applied multiple concepts and terminologies that were grouped in a well-developed system designed to organize the relationship between the profane and sacred. But one can speak of a systematic theology only in the sphere of Christianity, influenced by the thinking of the ancient Greeks. At the same time, Babylonian astronomical or environmental knowledge developed by the Indians lacks the spirit of geometry and arithmetic, which Westerners have taken from ancient Greece and perfected over the centuries. Weber notes that the non-Western tradition did not discover and widely use the rational experiment, a concept already known by

Antiquity but extended and applied to its true value at the unmistakable moment of the Renaissance, the laboratory being a representative innovation in this regard. In turn, the Chinese historiography, for example, did not operate with Thucydides' much more efficient analytical methods, and Eastern theories about politics and the state did not reach the stage of conceptual organization imposed by Aristotle's writings. Legal science or canon law, in turn, have known the most eloquent formulas, says Weber, also in the dimension of Western civilization, based on the foundations of the laws of Pericles and Roman law. Changing the register to the framework of artistic preoccupations, music first knew the full form of rational organization in the West when, after the Italian Renaissance, composers such as Bach or Mozart opened and proposed new formulas of composition and orchestral arrangement which allowed musical explorations and creations that were inconceivable centuries earlier. The Gothic vault in architecture or the literary creation intended only for printing, the concepts of press, daily or magazine, the term specialist trained in a university on a certain profile, in a specific faculty are ideas and realities created and put into practice by the Occidental civilization. All these data are also found in the world of Eastern spirituality, as Weber points out, but they are present here without the formatting of an applicative, concrete rationality. The most eloquent example that Weber brings to the discussion to illustrate the differentiation between the West and the East in the area of assuming this empirical rationality is the *professional civil servant*. The Orient, of course, knew this concept and frequently generated and used its applications, but at a rudimentary stage, not punctually correlated with different areas of the society, especially with the dimension of the economy.

II. TYPOLOGIES OF ECONOMIC CAPITALISTIC THINKING AND FOUNDING CONCEPTS FOR SUPPORTING THE FREE TRADE INITIATIVE

Weber insisted on the way in which the civil servants were organized, in the western economic and social mechanism, in a large system that generated efficiency and ordering of the energies operating at the level of the whole society. Thus, the entire economic, political, cultural and technological development was coordinated by this system of specialized civil servants who supported the new formula of the western state, namely *rex et regnum*, a formula that allowed the elaboration of the entire functional state mechanism that included parliamentary institutions as elected representative of the people, of the government, composed of ministers called to answer before the parliament, of the parties and of the political leaders. Based on the application of the laws, it was decided that the existence of a specialized civil servant, meant to ensure their observance and application, was necessary. All this social, political and economic mechanism has been assumed and applied, despite the many operational shortcomings, in the sphere of Western civilization and the concept of capitalism and especially the capitalist economy has its origins in attempts to stabilize such a system. Without a clearly defined view of economic dynamics and its typologies of concrete manifestation, capitalism risks remaining in an area or at a purely theoretical stage in relation to the Eastern tradition. Weber points out that the capitalist economy has been often interpreted, since the beginning of its promotion, as a phenomenon equivalent to the desire for excessive enrichment, an activity focused exclusively on the idea of immediate financial gain. Socialist rhetoric has insisted on the thesis that this individual impulse, which also manifests itself on a collective scale would be responsible for the oppression and unhappiness of other people who can not integrate into the harshness of a system of such inhuman magnitude. In fact, this desire for enrichment belongs to human nature and has been present in all political and socio-economic systems, in all social classes and categories. But capitalist economic thinking does not take into account this ancestral instinct, it does not revolve around such a universal-human psychic reality. On the contrary, the spirit of capitalism, according to the Weberian expression, intends to place this impulse under the control of reason, to direct its energies in a way organized by the intellect. Thus, the irrational drive to acquire as many goods as possible, to gain unlimited gain over or against the will of others is converted through genuine capitalist consciousness into a rational movement aimed at an ever-renewed but calibrated gain, measured in relation to society's ethical imperatives. The aim is not to extend the property by any means, but to acquire *profitability*. The central axis of capitalist economic thinking must be, in Weber's view, the expectation of gain through the correct use of the chances of trade. Therefore, it is not intended to obtain a major economic benefit by using the force of the already accumulated potential, but by constantly pursuing the idea of mutual transition, a transition in which the central place is occupied by the idea of *balance*. Balance is the act of permanent supervision, of a constant conclusion of the relationship between the resources used and the resulting gain. Based on this report, every capitalist economic entrepreneur can assess the chances of future success of his financial operations, of his business and parameters of adaptation, modification of this latter, in case of a major failure of its dynamics on the market and in relation to business partners. The target will be a constant movement over the previous level of benefits obtained so that real progress can be made in terms of investments and in terms of earnings. It must be estimated in concrete figures, in the parameters of mathematical calculation, regardless of what type of products or properties are at stake. Their financial capital is

represented in money that allows exchange and transit, in fact a much more complex and dynamic maneuverability than in the case of gross elements. The classic idea of *barter* is replaced by accounting records that can accurately quantify values and economic data. The scheme of financial evolution that a business has to follow is, in Weber's opinion, limited to three capital stages. It is, in the beginning, the operationalization of the *calculation* through which a balance of the budget start is made, an evaluation of the primary resources from which to start the respective business. Then follows the pre-calculation stage, the middle moment, when the business approach is evaluated in the middle of its progression, so that one can look to the past, to the financial basis from which it started but also to the future, analyzing the perspective, its chances to succeed and the possible final benefits. Depending on the expertise and *pre-calculation* conclusions, the business can be continued, improved by significant changes and adaptations, or simply stopped. The final phase is the *post-calculation*, the stage in which the balance is performed, the final gain is evaluated, the concrete amount resulting from the entire process of the business is calculated. The capitalist concept of *commission* also intervenes, a financial reality that must be regulated in relation to the entire business carried out, in correlation with the circular dynamics between investment and profit. Every business, every capitalist enterprise, considers Weber, bases its construction on the idea of economic calculation and that of free initiative, these features being defining for the economy and the free market. Even when there are businesses that do not fully comply with the principle of precise economic calculation, businesses that rely on intuitions and approximate predictions, on current guidelines and adaptations, we are not essentially witnessing a real lack of calculated economic thinking, but a reinterpretation of it, to a diminution or placement in other operative forms than those considered as standard for the capitalist economy. In this case, the appreciation, the intuitive evaluation prevail and the economic calculation is not excluded, but only a reduction of its degree of use is manifested. Putting together the expenditures consumed and evaluating the possible financial success of a business is not a relatively modern approach and it does not belong only to the capitalist economic mentality. As Weber points out, archaic societies, ancient civilizations in China, India, or Egypt knew the process of capitalist-type trading, they had assumed the socio-economic reality of the *business* concept. The calculation of capital, the rationalization and balancing of an enterprise between expenses and profit were already operational matters for these ancient societies. Also, the medieval states but also the oriental despotisms had a form of legalization of the commercial approaches that slipped on the primary schemes of economic capitalism. In contrast, Western capitalism, which can be said to be capitalism in the modern terminological sense, has not placed itself in the zone of tolerating liberal-commercial activities, but has assumed their encouragement and open financial support. Thus, in the West, the capitalist economy flourished in the sense of a development that branched out into extremely complex forms and structures. In such a context, financiers, banks and creditors have emerged, and they have been caught up in the capitalist economic dynamics, generating a certain type of mentality and perspective of understanding the way in which a business can be built. The key factor that was not present in non-capitalist societies is what Weber called the *rational-capitalist organization of free labor*. In these societies, the concept of initiative was extremely narrow and correlated with collective needs and imperatives so that the idea of personal initiative at the level of major, large-scale business could not be assumed. The stage of small traders who were inserted in the gigantic mechanism of the state economy, a term later excessively conceptualized by the socialist economic thinking, was not surpassed for systems which, in the modern interpretation, could be called totalitarian systems with centralized economies. Outside the Western world, therefore, there has been a limited degree of liberal rationality since the ancient or medieval centuries. Thus, we meet those domestic industries, serfs and slaves, craftsmen in the workshops of seniors, day laborers and other workers on land. Their activity was directed, centralized on clearly marked economic and social imperatives, and no personal initiatives or options were allowed. On the other hand, the capitalist liberal vision postulates *free initiative* as a fundamental concept, a vital article in the constitution of its basic theories and practices. At the same time, the political interventionist factor or the speculative-theoretical influences were rejected as elements that must decide over the business dynamics, the opportunities offered by the free market of goods being the landmarks recognized as a priority. Another characteristic approach to economic capitalist thinking is, in Weber's opinion, the emergence and consolidation of rational accounting, an economic reality that emerged with the detachment of the individual enterprise from the sphere of the collective household. The rudimentary forms of attempts to separate personal economic initiative and common decision were evident both in antiquity and in the historical period of the Middle Ages. Shops, craft associations, workshops have tried to develop and stabilize rudimentary forms of independent accounting in relation to the collective economic decision subject to totalitarian political dictatorship. But, as Weber observes, these movements lacked strength and internal systematization, they did not crystallize clear principles, they did not find and consolidate a clear socio-economic status. Due to these syncopes, they remained in the dimension of influence and decision of the authoritarian principle being incorporated in the economic mechanisms that were subordinated to the political will represented by the monarch or by the upper classes. The concept of *oikos*, that is, of social and economic family, has remained just as strong, so that enterprises,

economic initiatives have continued to be part of large elite communities. Only the capitalist organization of labor and trade dynamics was the first decisive step towards the thorough development of a sustainable economic capitalism. The rationalization factor determined the value transposition of the dynamics of the economic initiative in acts and figures so that the commercial speculation was organized generating the necessity of setting up the *stock exchange*. Unlike monopolistic societies in which commercial initiative was only tolerated, in modern capitalism the proletariat and the bourgeoisie were founded on the assumption of a free economy and the notion of citizen was correlated with the right not only to free speech but also to independent commercial initiative. The freedom of guilds, craftsmen, small industrial entrepreneurs or farmers was a decisive milestone in the establishment of modern capitalism. The much-acclaimed class struggle, the great conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat intensely ideologically evoked by Marxist philosophy, was, in fact, in Weber's opinion, a natural phenomenon of free society whose proportions were exaggerated to justify the imposition of Marxist socialism. The industrial revolution brought with it the emergence of a multitude of factories, with heavy machinery, which required the effort of an impressive number of workers, often forced to work in difficult conditions. But it was not an actual exploitation as communist propaganda has evoked triumphantly countless times, but rather an industrial, economic and social reality facing humanity that has reached that threshold of progress and accelerated transition to the age of the machine and of superior technologies.

III. ECONOMIC VALORIZATION AND APPLICATIONS OF THE PRINCIPLE OF COMPUTABILITY IN THE DYNAMICS OF WESTERN CAPITALISM. PROTESTANT MOTIVATION.

The phenomenon of the so-called class struggle is in fact a historical constant, considers Weber, a reality that has been constantly noticed in all human societies. Landowners and serfs, industrial entrepreneurs and workers, creditors and debtors, all these socio-economic classes have experienced multiple tensions, divergences, some more easily resolved, others degenerating into dramatic conflicts. But the incipient forms of these pressures and social differences did not cease to exist even in the moments of maximum economic and political calm. It is impossible to avoid the presence of such opposing situations, as they are inevitable components of the dynamics of the progress of all mankind. The bourgeoisie and capitalism have existed in primary forms since the early days of human society, they were not the product of resurrections with recent socio-political impacts such as the industrial revolution. But when we use the term capitalism, we are actually referring, as Weber points out, to industrial bourgeois capitalism, to the relations between social classes and the economic factors involved in this new reality and economic order. The free-capitalist organization of labor led to the emergence and delimitation of the bourgeoisie as a specific social class, but this organization, the imposition of such a socio-economic pattern was generated by the acceleration of technological progress and the supremacy of what Weber calls computability. The mathematics used in empirical experiments and the rigorous research of nature brought to the fore, for the western civilization, the fascination of the formula, of the mathematical calculus that were transposed and applied at the level of economic dynamics. Capitalism has been rationalized and has reached the stage of supporting a rationalized work and an economy that takes into account the relationships between free initiative and financial benefits, its pragmatic efficiency. The great difference between the East and the West, between the free market economy and the centralized economy, subject to the authoritarian political will, is, in Weber's opinion, that the Orientals, although they discovered mathematical calculus and had a considerable advance in the development of physical sciences, they stopped at the theoretical stage and constantly accepted the guidance of the imperatives of tradition, imperatives that have often proved to be a severe obstacle to socio-economic progress. (Weber, 1947, pp. 354-355) Instead, Westerners have consistently designed every calculation and new formula into practice, moreover, they have reached the level where the theory itself must adapt or follow the conditions dictated by the empirical area of research. This led to the concept of economic capitalization, with each theoretical discovery being attached to a corridor of correspondence with the areas of applied sciences. Weber believes that a rationalism typical of Western culture and civilization has developed, a rationalism that has penetrated and influenced not only economic and social mobility but also art, religion, justice, administration, education, the sciences of diplomacy and war. But what is the specificity of this Western rationalism, where does it come from and, ultimately, which collective psychic structure supports and amplifies it? In Weber's opinion, economic conditions are a particularly important term in the equation of Western rationalism. The question is whether they are responsible for the way of being and thinking rationally or, on the contrary, this existential and gnoseological way, this typology of understanding and assuming life has generated and sustained the economic conditions, contexts and structures that made possible the progress of Western civilization. Weber noticed that in this context the basis of the collective and individual feelings of Western man cannot be avoided, that is, religious experience, the relation, even the opposition, to the

possibility of transcendent-immanent and sacred-profane dualities. For a clear understanding of the phenomenon, Weber proposes a correspondence thesis that argues that where obstacles, blockages or overly religious control filters have been built, the economic life of that society has encountered strong evolving synopses as well. Thus, a significant restriction of the exercise of reason in the religious plan has generated a limitation of the aptitudes and constructive actions at the level of the economy of the respective nation or regions. Where, on the contrary, the experience of the sacred, of the transcendent assumption also involved the exercise of reason, considering it a defining element of the human being, the noblest trait by which man was given the chance to dominate nature but also to call the Divine, there the economic dynamics progressed substantially, freedom and reason giving an exceptional impetus to it. In the case of Western civilization and economics, Weber recognized in the Protestant ethics, in general in the whole Protestant religious view, the unreserved assumption of rationality. Once the reason accepted in the sphere of religion and balanced against the experience of Christian revelation, the concepts of efficiency, computability, gain, loss or benefit were imposed at the level of economic configurations. At the same time, trust in reason also meant trust in the free will of everyone, which was transposed, at the socio-economic level, through the attitude of freedom and independent initiative. Weber's conclusion supports the reality of a conditioning between the occurrence of the economic mentality of the capitalist ethos and the Protestant Christian faith, more precisely between the modern Western economic ethos and the imperatives of Protestant ethics. Without the assumption of the present-day Christianity, the capitalist economy as we know it would not have existed, the factor of religious rationality being the source of the factor of economic rationality. In its turn, the freedom of individual assumption of the Christian message, a freedom constantly recommended by Protestantism, was the basis of the free initiative of the capitalist entrepreneur. Weber does not seek an exclusive position on the phenomenon of capitalist economics only in the area or on the basis of Protestantism, but he emphasizes that it is only in these frameworks offered by Protestant ethics that the vision and applicability of capitalism have reached a higher level. In this respect, he emphasizes that the idea that capitalism and attempts to put into practice its economic configurations are realities encountered in ancient ancient civilizations. Thus, the merchant and craftsman of ancient China or the Islamic environment were motivated in their economic actions by what Weber calls the impulse to gain, the inclination to gain benefits, the tendency to enrich being present in the paradigm of human existence regardless of space and time. But the existence of such an impulse did not determine for the archaic and oriental societies the development of an authentic capitalist spirit, of a capitalist mentality. Thus, although there was an effort to rationalize economic dynamics, although the organization, the commercial order did not lack these traditions, they still remained inferior in terms of the evolution towards a genuine capitalism, towards a genuinely decentralized and free economy. (Weber, 2003, pp. 5-17) The explanation given by Weber slides the discussion, as shown above, in the area of understanding the religious phenomenon. How did these civilizations assume their relationship to the possibility of transcendence, and how did the economic outlook influence the decision to adopt religious faith? The center of gravity of religious experience has remained, for these ancestral civilizations, positioned in an intangible transcendence, in a virtual or meta-reality to which the access of consciousness is extremely limited. The dependence of the individual, of the human personality on forces and imperatives situated in an area other than terrestrial life, blocked, in Weber's opinion, the freedom and enthusiasm of economic and social action based on free initiative. Christian Protestantism has proposed reforming the whole approach to the dimension of religious experience from Luther and Calvin's new theological theses, which are based on the idea that only through one's own faith, assumed individually, without excessive and discretionary mediation of church dogma, one can obtain salvation. The Protestant principle sole credo, only faith will bring with it the re-evaluation of the concept of action, of concrete deed. Above the collective participation in the sacramental ritual, the Divinity demands from each human consciousness the action, the construction that must be realized in this life, for and together with the others through free initiative. Thus, a business that will bring a great profit is not a source of distancing from the Divinity or Christian axiomatic but, on the contrary, can be seen as a sign of goodwill or even divine blessing. The only condition that must be met is the absence of evil, the absence of any harm done to others through that business. If it is not a means of causing suffering to one's fellow man and, moreover, it is capable of giving support to others in addition to its own gain, then it must develop in the future, with the guarantee of a positive approach from the point of view of Christian ethics. Starting from this way of rethinking the religious phenomenon, based on a new theological and ethical vision proposed by the Protestant leadership, economic capitalism has risen. In Protestantism, the religious phenomenon of the nihilistic rejection of the world present in certain interpretations and assumptions of Buddhism or ascetic Christianity is reversed, so that the perspective of salvation becomes much closer to the space-time life. In order to obtain it, man must not reject the world, he must dominate it constructively, to imitate the initial creative effort of the Divinity through work and economic and social inventiveness. He argued that the true Protestant would constantly work with his fellow men, and that his work or business should be done in the spirit of his faith, not outside it, so it is a step toward appreciating and imitating the original cosmic Creation. This principle allowed the freedom but also the motivation to invest all

human energy in making the progress of Western civilization based on the dynamics of the capitalist economy. (Weber, 1998, pp. 263-264)

IV. VALIDITY OF WEBER'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEEP MECHANISMS OF THE CAPITALIST ECONOMY.

Max Weber's analyzes of the foundations of capitalist economic thinking continue to be a source of understanding of the conceptual and empirical springs of Western society. His works are not only an x-ray of the foundations that made possible the rise of capitalism but also an important reference that can help correct the slippage inherent to the transition processes from over-centralized economies, characteristic of totalitarian political and social systems, to economies of free markets that underlie developed capitalist societies in the West. (Strejcek & Zeman, 2017; Mihai, 2021) The junction between Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism on which Max Weber insisted remains one of the central pawns of advanced capitalist societies. On the opposite spectrum, we have the Eastern tradition of totalitarian societies, with economies subordinated to decision-making and centralized political mobility. Without making an apology for rationalism, on the contrary, taking into account the limitations and inability to propose an uncritical value system, (Turner, B., 2003, pp. 19-20; Ortega-Villaseñor, 2021) the presentation in opposition of these economic mentalities and mechanisms, with the capitalist vision, allowed, in Max Weber's writings, the understanding of both perspectives from their foundations of the order of religious mentality to social extensions. In today's world, the analyzes developed by this classical author prove to be extremely up-to-date not only at the theoretical level, but especially at the practical level, not only for the corrections of the slippages of societies in transition to capitalism but also for maintaining the dialogue between the two political-economic worlds that seem so incompatible. Today, many of Weber's themes remain equally open, some of them are economic, some others moral or political. For example, one of these dilemmas refers to the relationship between ethical and economic rationalization, to the way in which it is possible to control the tendency of the capitalist economy to rationalize, including the human being, to evaluate it as a commercial product. (Turner, C., 2005, p. 74; Terec-Vlad & Cucu, 2016; Terec-Vlad & Trifu, 2015, p. 85; Trifu & Terec-Vlad, 2013) How to avoid such a dangerous approach remains a challenge for the present but especially for the future of all societies.

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