

# Karl marx and weber

Philosophy



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A strong discrepancy in interpretation of religions exists between the two great thinkers, Marx and Weber, in that Marx saw religions as “ the opiate of the masses” (Marx, 1843: 42) meaning that religions justify believers’ bitter lives and make them passive whereas Weber saw religions as having power to bring about not just social but economic changes (Jong Seo, 2005: 231).

On top of that, Marx believed that the religion is a dependent variable determined by the substructure- materialistic and economic conditions. Weber, in contrast, assumed that the religion played a role in enlightening or changing people’s thoughts and behaviors unconsciously, causing them to embrace a new way of living such as capitalism. These contrasts derive from the fact that these two intellectuals approached the religions from different perspectives.

Most of Marx’s reasoning reveals the characteristics of methodological holism while Weber focused more on individuals and held on to the idea that individuals’ motives and philosophy are the source of changes and revolutions- methodological individualism. To begin with, it is critical to understand Marx and Weber’s sociological perspectives beforehand in order to grasp a comprehensive understanding with regard to the two thinkers’ ideas on religion. I believe that Marx revealed methodological holistic characteristics more from his study rather than methodological individualism. The opposite goes with the Weber’s perspective toward society.

Marx’s approach tries to accept that fact that there are unseen things that are present such as relationships between individuals. The thing is that society enables itself to have control over individuals and tries to govern

them with the unseen things. It is clear how Marx was on the methodological holistic stance in terms of his emphasis on economic determinism. Marx believed that society is composed of two dominant structures-sub and super. He explained that the upper-super structure such as religions is determined by the substructure which is mainly about economic elements such as relation of production and force of production.

Mark concluded that materials are the ones that bring about social changes (Turner, 2005: 17). We can argue that his ideas were mainly centered on methodological holism because he put more emphasis on the role (power) of economy and substructure than individuals and superstructure. Under the given interpretation, religion has almost nothing to do with social or economic changes because it belongs to the super structure. Religion seems to be reduced to a mere dependent variable or by-product caused by the substructure in accordance with Marx (M. Argyle & B. Beit-Hallahmi, 1975: 174-177).

In contrast, methodological individualism was introduced as a methodological precept for the social sciences by Max Weber, most importantly in the first chapter of “Economy and Society” (Weber, 1968 [1922]). It amounts to the claim that social phenomena must be explained by showing how they result from individual actions, which in turn must be explained through reference to the intentional states that motivate the individual actors. In other words, it can be described as the claim that explanations of “macro” social phenomena must be supplied with “micro” foundations, ones that specify an action-theoretic mechanism (Alexander, 1987).

With this approach, Weber was able to value individuals as their own and tried to decipher what constituted people in terms of intangible elements such as ideas, motives, values, and beliefs. What strikes is that he had a great opportunity to go through the process of development of capitalism with the help of this approach. His most well-known and intuitive book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit Capitalism*, is a great culmination of his approach and shedded new light on the importance of spiritual and moral values, with providing remarkable insights on how humans' abstract ideas and values can affect the society in a massive way.

These two different ways of 'making sense of society' led them to conclude what religions could do in their contemporary societies. As stated above, Marx perceived economic factors or issues to be central and primary rather than marginal. It was inevitable that he saw religions as being marginal and of lesser importance. In his contemporary society, workers-proletariats were treated less than as they were supposed to be and exploited enormously. The workers had no choice but to succumb to the haves'-bourgeoisies- order or demands with the floods of workers when there were a few jobs available for them.

They were, as Marx reasoned, about to take action to take over the capitalism in which they were subordinated. He asserted and hoped that communism would take over the capitalism's place and people would live in a society where alienation and private ownership are nowhere to be seen. It was only possible with the combined power of proletariat. However, religion played a role in soothing the wrath of the exploited class and made it almost

impossible to accumulate certain level of collective behavior. Religion acted as a refuge from a suffering life for the proletariat.

There comes Marx' view on religion that the religion was a refuge from a suffering life. It is famously quoted that " Religion is the opiate of the masses" (Marx, 1843: 42). In other words, religion teaches people to give up materialistic conditions and procrastinate worldlyhappinessand rewards to spiritual world (Giddens, 2011: 580). Even though it is tough to live in the society, one is encouraged that the post-life would be much promising according to Marx's view. People have an imaginary refugee to which they would escape from their harsh real life.

They are more likely to succumb to the social pressures or injustice because it will be okay in the spiritual world. They would endure socially and morally wrong actions and stick with their life no matter how hard it is. As these people take part in religious activities or listen to the preaching, they are unconsciously justified that their bitter lives might be what they were supposed to be, which led to class-in-itself being unable to reach the next step-class-for-itself with class consciousness. As stated above, no-communist revolution would be accomplished in terms of religions' impacts on the exploited.

According to Marx, this process must be changed or stopped since it has a negative influence on people's awakening or realizing their real situation in which they are exploited (Swatos, 1998: 499). Weber, on the other hand, pursued answers of how the pivotal spirit ' ethos' in the contemporary western societies emerged and where the western the societies were heading in terms of religion. His initial interest was sparked by the fact that <https://assignbuster.com/karl-marx-and-weber/>

most of the highly achieved and skilled superior workers are from protestant background (Weber, 2006: 233). Weber considered that there was an apparent relationship between certain religious affiliations (particularly Protestantism) and business success, and suggests that this association might indicate an elective affinity between the two. In his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit Capitalism*, he asserted that there are two determining factors that contributed to the development of capitalism in western societies. First, Calvin's doctrine of predestination played a significant role in upbringing people's ascetic attitude or way of life. According to Calvin's doctrine, one's possibility (destination) of salvation is beyond the reach of humans' knowing.

Not only the ordinary, but also the priests are excluded in the 'knowing' process. Furthermore, humans are not able to change their pre-destined salvation acceptance or rejection. No one but God knows who will be redeemed. Humans are powerless before God and expect or hope to be chosen as one of the 'lucky' ones. It is possible that we can conclude humans in that era were too hopeless and powerless to advance their lives with enthusiasm. But it isn't. The thing was that humans were not aware of their pre-destined salvation but can be aware of signs of salvation in the pursuit of worldly success only with frugal and ascetic attitude.

That is to say that they are justifying their material success and imposing responsibility at the same time (Jong Seo, 2005). Under the given circumstance, people are always in the pursuit of 'working hard', 'not wasting money', and 'accumulation of wealth' in order to know if they are to be redeemed or not. Even with excessive amount of money, they would not

stop themselves from working hard and ascetic life because that's what they were striving for: proof of salvation. Second, Calvin's religious calling played an important role in making people set the attitude stated above.

Every vocation is valued and by all means worthy of God's calling. The thing is that not only sacred priests but other menial workers are also valued and sacred under the Calvin's religious calling. It encourages people to accept the idea that "no matter what you do, you should make an effort in your job because it's valuable, divine, and godly". Also, as people were more aware of the notion or values, they were more likely to be committed to their jobs and lives (Weber, 2006: 120). These two characteristics of protestant ethics led to more accumulation of wealth and rational management and work ethics (Weber, 2006). This is noteworthy that even with the enormous capital, one is not tempted to taste his or her rewards which is highly unimaginable in modern societies. This goes further that these protestants participated in their daily and worldly activities with ascetic attitude which in turn boosted capitalism in western societies. In other words, protestants' ethics, Weber argued, have a positive influence on building the spirit of capitalism.

Although society has improved and developed the way never witnessed before with firm establishment of capitalism, it is unlikely to find this kind of protestant ethics sustaining in the modern society because a row of inherited property without the essence of spirits and ethics gifted the sons and daughters of the protestants with no responsibility, making them 'fat pigs' rather than 'dissatisfied Socrates', figuratively speaking. John Wesley, the founder of Methodist church, was also concerned with the likeliness of 'earning more money with less religious spirit' (Weber, 2006: 189).

From my point of view, I personally believe that Weber's idea on religion is more suitable compared to that of Marx in explaining the modern society. First, I agree with Weber's main argument on religion that religious (Protestant) ethics are one of core factors bringing out changes in our lives. This is because Protestant ethics such as 'diligent, hard-working, and ascetic' are related to the idea of merit system which is, in our modern lives, believed to be 'the way' for equality and fairness. We live in a society where unfairness flourishes and hope to diminish whatever exists between the reality and the ideal world.

The reason why this unfair world is justified is that we believe that the world values and approves those who try really hard in their field with diligence (Sang Jin, 2011: 3). The protestant ethics, I believe, played a role in leading the meritocratic ideas to our lives. Those protestants proved the fact that people with hard-work and abstinence were surely able to achieve 'success' in lives, and looked up to as 'worthy of praise'. It's likely that people have gradually believed that the society where these protestant people are successful is just and fair because they try harder than the majority of people.

This leads to the idea of merit system through which humans can justify their world. In other words, by proving success with hard-work, protestant ethics paved the way for meritocracy. Second of all, the abstract religious spirits can play an important role in maintaining the society. The religions have a tendency to lead to people's voluntary and active participation in social and political issues which is different from Marx's expectation. Marx believed that religion has an influence on making people submissive and obedient.



However, we now see that religions are spread out massively to help out those who need attention, care, and assist.

When one is involved in any activities in religion, they are more likely to act and behave than people with no religions. As they take part in the religious activities voluntarily, their community or religious area is bound to be more strongly integrated because they have something in common: religious spirit and altruistic mindset. We can infer from Durkheim's study on suicide that those with religions have less likeliness to commit suicide than those without because they are more integrated and associated in society which leads to a more sustainable society (Durkheim, 1952[1897]).

Finally, despite the fact that the original spirit of capitalism might have been diminished or in decline, it already provided an 'image' of religious people and acts as a criterion for those. Some say that the religious or protestant ethics are already faded away, but it's still true that we have a some sort of image towards religious people that they would be more 'upright' and 'ascetic' than non-religious people. For example, when Koreans hang out nowadays, they often ask one another if they drink alcohol or not. And we usually take it for granted that the people believing in God do not drink alcohol.

Likewise, these people mainly Christian-Protestant are expected not to drink 'alcohol' or do 'drugs'. This is because we know by experiencing a bunch of these people that "These guys are not (mostly) bad guys". Even if they do not possess the mindset as their ancestors did, the society already formed some sort of 'image' toward these religious people throughout the history. Therefore, the society enables and enforces the religious people to act and

behave in accordance with ‘ the protestant’. In other words, “ their ancestors’ image still lives within us and affects our lives”.

Even though I believe that Weber’s idea on religion is more proper when it comes to explanations of modern world, it would be more reasonable and wise to make a leap with both of the great thinkers’ explanations. This is because these so-called sociologists seem to lag behind the other in some field and some not. For example, Weber’s reasoning was not sufficient in explaining Eastern countries huge development even with the religion-Confucianism which considered to be negative in capitalism’s improvement (Weber, 2006: 243).

And Marx’s reasoning would require additional explanations of modern religions in that religions are diversified and playing roles as many. These two dominant thinkers’ ideas are not contradictory but supplementary to some extent because both of the arguments can replace and be replaced by the other (Giddens, 2011: 584). In conclusion, these great thinkers had different approaches on religion and elicited their unique conclusions based on their observations.

Marx saw religions as “ the opiate of the masses” and perceived it as a ‘ negative thing’ for humans’ freedom from alienation and revolutions through workers’ collective angers whereas Weber saw religions as somewhat ‘ positive influencer’ in that flourish of capitalism in western countries was based on protestant ethics which was the direct movement of ‘ religion’(Calvinism, to be exact). In their analysis of religions, they showed the ways they regard religions as somewhat dependent variables-Marx and somewhat independent variables-Weber (Jong Seo, 2005).

Controversy exists over whether who provided more reasonable and relevant insights to our world because both of the reasoning has some weak points and strong points. However, I believe that Weber's idea on religion is more suitable in order to explain the modern society due to, social maintenance, and religious criteria, and the rise of meritocracy. No matter what one says, we are not certain which one came first between the chicken and the egg due to uncertainty. There is no absolute answer for this question.

Marx and Weber's observations of religions as dependent or independent variables are reminiscent of this never-solving causality dilemma. A circular cause and consequence like ' seeing religion as the starter' and ' seeing religion as the result' make us wonder the question of " Which came first, X that can't come without Y, or Y that can't come without X? " We would be trapped in an endless process of logics and pursuant of definite answer. Maybe it's not the answer that matters but the understanding in the process that matters.

The understanding that the somewhat contradictory views can, in actuality, be used as a supplement to the other so that it can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of not just religion but society in general, which as learners of sociology should pursue. All in all, the comparison of Marx and Weber on religion tells us that there is no categorical answer but understanding through which we gain our own perspectives of life.

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