



CAPITALISM: DESPITE WEBER, LUTHER AND CALVIN CAME AFTERWARDS

Por Flavio Felice

7 de septiembre de 2012

Fuente:

<http://www.ilsussidiario.net/News/English-Spoken-Here/Economics-Finance/2012/9/7/CAPITALISM-Despite-Weber-Luther-and-Calvin-came-afterwards/3/319114/>

With the article by Massimo Franco in *Corriere della Sera* on September 5, one of the most worn out topics in the history of economic and political thought was revived to a wide audience: “‘rigorous’ Protestants of the North versus ‘lax’ Catholics of the South”. Let me be clear, the columnist of the *Corriere della Sera* should be recognized for the undoubted merit of having registered the birth of a controversy and told it with style and competence. It is the more than dated debate on the origins of the spirit of capitalism that takes on the improbable character of a political dispute, once it is assumed that the debt in countries like Italy and Spain is due to “Catholic laxity”, as opposed to “Protestant rigor”.

Short-sighted political opportunism and the shallowness of analysis can lead to arguments such as that of the director of the *Globalist*, Staphan Richter, according to whom, if Martin Luther had been present at Maastricht in 1992 he would have said: “No Catholic country that has not experienced the Protestant Reformation can enter the Euro”. In actuality, the Protestant (anti-Catholic) roots of the spirit of capitalism, in addition to not being demonstrated, have very little to do with the spread between German government bonds and Italian or Spanish ones. Germany is a rich and industrious country, where the Catholic Bavaria plays the role of locomotive to the distinctly Protestant Länder. Moreover, in the process of creating the European Union, the Catholic Adenauer felt no inferiority complex when confronted with the Protestant Erhard and both collaborated with economists such as Wilhelm Röpke and Alfred Müller-Armack to give life to the first communal economic institutions, highlighting the characteristics of freedom (market dynamics), solidarity (taking care of one another) and subsidiarity (responsibility) as a common element in the tradition of Catholic social teaching and the Protestant social theory.

At this point, I think it is more interesting to know the characters that are at the bottom of such clichés and to understand their weaknesses. From a historical perspective, the dispute saw its decisive moment with the publication of the famous work of Max Weber: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-1905). According to Weber, there is a substantial correspondence between the spirit of capitalism and the spirit of Calvinist Protestantism. He thought there was a correspondence between attitudes typical of Protestant Calvinists and those equally typical of the capitalist. Evidently he was speaking about correspondences between ideal types and not between empirical phenomena. The German sociologist also wrote that the argument that “‘the capitalist spirit’ is able to come out only as an extension of certain influences of the Reformation, or even that capitalism as an economic system is a product of the Reformation” is “madly doctrinaire”.



The works of authors apparently so distant from modernity highlights the continuing tension in reconciling the contemplative life with the working life, a man in the round that combines the *vir sapiens* with the *homo faber*.

This is the perspective from which it is possible to move to critically understand Weber's analysis, the merit of which is unquestionable. The Weberian thesis has been a stimulus to reflect on the relationship between values, culture and modernity, surpassing the Marxist distinction between "structure" and "superstructure". However, the cliché that arose proved misleading for the purposes of explaining how the spirit of capitalism really came forth, and it lends itself to being used as a cudgel to enforce national interests that were both legitimate and partial. What is worse, we must acknowledge with sadness, it has become an alibi to which our politicians and intellectuals have often resorted and continue to use because of intellectual laziness or for political expediency. It seems they do not want or do not know how to attack the problems in the area of quality and excellence of our governing class and the form and maintenance of our institutions, as well as turnover in the first and the continuous and necessary reform of the second, the answer that wise and intellectually honest men give, after having acknowledged their ignorance and their fallibility. This is exactly what Catholics and Protestants in Europe after the Second World War knew how to do, with all due respect to Martin Luther.

Traducido del italiano por María Bond