Economics 303Y: The Economic History of Modern Europe, to 1914

Topic No. 2 [6]: The Protestant Dissenters and the British Industrial Revolution: The role of religious factors in entrepreneurship and modern industrialization

A. Puritanism, Dissenters, and the ‘Protestant Ethic’ in the Industrial Revolution Era and Beyond: in chronological order of publication


** 6. Ralph Davis, The Rise of the Atlantic Economies (London, 1973). The subject of this topic is not treated as such, but the role of dissenting Protestant sects (‘Dissenters’), chiefly Calvinist, in the British Industrial Revolution, is given some prominence on pp. 309-10, in the concluding chapter 18: ‘France and England: Industrial Growth and Industrial Revolutions’, which (along with Landes) will put this topic in its proper perspective.


Note: the thesis is that the true origins of modern capitalist entrepreneurship came, not in Tawney’s century, but in the following century (1640-1740), and thus led directly into the Industrial Revolution era.


B. Puritanism, Science, and the ‘Scientific Revolution’ in the 17th Century: The Debate (in order of publication in Past and Present, with other relevant publications.)


A Marxist view. See also other publications of Hill in section D, on ‘Puritanism and the Scientific Revolution.’


QUESTIONS:

The issue for debate is fairly simple and straight-forward. At least half of the known entrepreneurs and scientists or inventor of the Industrial Revolution era were members of Non-Conformist or Dissenting...
Protestant congregations, even though they comprised only 5% to 10% of the English population. So what explains their extraordinary role in the English Industrial Revolution of the British economy of the 18th and 19th centuries?

* 1. Who were the Dissenters or Non-Conformists in early-modern England (from the mid 17th century) and in the Industrial Revolution era (18th - 19th centuries)? Why were they a minority that dissented from the official doctrines and dogmas of the established Church of England – a Protestant Church from the time of Henry VIII (from 1536). What specific religious, political, social, and economic conditions defined their minority status?

2. What unusual role did they play in the Scientific Revolution and in the Industrial Revolution, as businessmen and entrepreneurs? Was it because of their minority status or because of their religious status – or both? To what extent did Calvinism influence their beliefs and economic behaviours, in the context of the Weber-Tawney thesis (below)

* 3. Define and discuss the Weber-Tawney thesis on the ‘Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’ in the following terms, specifically involving Calvinism:
   (a) Why did they emphasize the psychological ramifications of Calvin's doctrine of Predestination as the essential element in the development of the modern ethos or ‘spirit’ of capitalism?
   (b) What significance did they ascribe to the Lutheran and Calvinist doctrines of the ‘Calling’? What did they mean by the term ‘secular asceticism’?
   (c) How did they define ‘capitalism’, and how did they evaluate the nature and significance of pre-Reformation capitalist enterprise?
   (d) How did they explain the ‘time lag’ in the impact of the Calvinist ethic upon capitalism: from the mid-16th to late 17th centuries? How else would you explain the differences in economic attitudes between the early ‘anti-capitalist’ Calvinist reformers, and the later ‘pro-capitalist’ Puritans and Dissenters of 17th- and the 18th-century England and New England?
   (e) What effect, in their view, did Calvinist doctrines ultimately have upon the social concepts of work and labour? What indeed is meant by the ‘Protestant Work Ethic’? What significance did it have, if any, in the early-modern and Industrial Revolution era? Does it have any significance today?

4. To what extent may the pro-capitalist attitudes of Calvinist-Puritans in England, Holland, and New England of the 17th and 18th centuries be explained by other, non-religious factors: by the social and economic forces of the times? In particular how much of what is called the ‘Protestant Ethic’ can be explained by the economic functions and attitudes of those social classes adopting Calvinism? If so, why did such classes adopt Calvinism as their religion?