

The New Protestant Ethic

Alan Wolfe

Mayflower Madam by Sydney Biddle Barrows with William Novak. Arbor House, 1986, 291 pp.

The Triumph of Politics by David A. Stockman. Harper and Row, 1986, 422 pp.

Trading Secrets by R. Foster Winans. St. Martins, 1986, 320 pp.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism by Max Weber. George Allen Unwin, 1976. Originally published 1930, 292 pp.

Sociology, Robert Nisbet once wrote, is really an art form. Like Franz Hals or Honoré de Balzac, the great sociological theorists, he continued, were portrait artists. Max Weber, in particular, should be credited with implanting in our minds the ideal picture of the modern capitalist: sober, dour, hard-working, pious, respectable, in short, the Puritan divine writ large.

Something has happened to the Protestant Ethic. If recent autobiography is our medium, we find that the descendants of Weber's Puritans run prostitution services, lie to the American public, trade "insider" secrets on Wall Street in return for cash, have difficulty understanding the difference between right and wrong, are incapable of delaying gratification for long-term reward, and prefer simple rationalization for their misdeeds to complicated feelings of sin and guilt. Like capitalism, which once made things but now prefers to sell them, the Protestant Ethic that supports capitalism has changed.

The theme of Protestant uniqueness runs throughout these diverse accounts of politics, escort services, and Wall Street customs. Sydney Biddle Barrows, more commonly known as the *Mayflower Madam*, is a descendant of Elder William Brewster, one of the

religious leaders of the Mayflower expedition. Among her forebears were Peter Ballantine, of the beer business, and, on her father's side, The Philadelphia Biddles (one of whom fought Andrew Jackson over the Second National Bank and another of whom served as the liberal Attorney General during the New Deal). Although she grew up anything but rich, Sydney did have all the trappings of Philadelphia society: country day schools, a debutante ball, and a career in the fashion industry—until she found other work.

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R. Foster Winans grew up in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, attending Germantown Academy, getting into trouble, dropping out of college. Winans speaks very little of his heritage, implying in a number of places that he is Jewish, while at other times talking about his boat-building ancestors on Long Island. One of the main figures in his stock-selling scheme, David Clark, is a descendant of Windsors and Congers, married to a debutante, and listed in *Who's Who*. Another, Peter Brant, was

born Bornstein but, as his name change suggests, was desperate to be viewed as a WASP. The Wall Street world of Foster Winans is a world of appearance and image; wanting to be a WASP was sometimes more important than actually being one. Brant/Bornstein, it turns out, became a prototype of the insider trader recently indicted on Wall Street: Jews struggling to succeed in what had been a Protestant world.

David Stockman is the only one of our subjects who took his Protestant heritage seriously. Descended from Germans, Stockman has sharp memories of his grandfather, a fundamentalist Republican of remarkably strict moral views. Even when he was active against the war in Vietnam, Stockman's views were more religious than political; "our goal," he writes, "was not political revolution but social and personal redemption." Through the Rev. Truman Morrison of Michigan State University, Stockman imbibed Neibuhrrian ideals, learning how man is filled with sin that cannot be removed through ideological correctness. A tour at the Harvard Divinity School enabled him to merge the religious notions of Boston with the political connections of Harvard, a somewhat unusual, but in retrospect understandable, jumping off point to Washington and fame.

What unites these stories is the utter inability of Protestant morality to constitute moral guidelines in the realities of twentieth century American business and politics. Protestantism was matched to capitalism, Weber wrote, because investment activity depended upon saving, which in turn required delayed gratification. Of all the world's religions, Protestantism had the unique advantages of disdaining luxury, respecting hard work, and orienting its members toward future rewards. "The theatre was obnoxious to Puritans," he wrote, because of the Puritan "strict exclusion of the erotic and of nudity from the realm of toleration." All art was frowned upon. "This was especially true in the case of the decoration

Alan Wolfe teaches Sociology at City University of New York at Queens.

