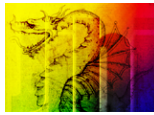


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**Elective Affinities and *liaisons dangereuses***

Luther's Heritage and the New Spirit of Capitalism

by  
Debora Spini



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# Elective Affinities and *liaisons dangereuses*

## Luther's Heritage and the New Spirit of Capitalism

Debora Spini \*

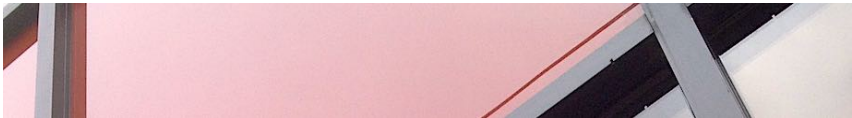
*The role of the Protestant Reformation in promoting the spirit of capitalism has been a crucial theme in sociological and philosophical debates for more than a century. This paper will consider whether these “elective affinities” still exist, in a context marked by profound transformations of both capitalism and Protestantism: in particular, the notion of Beruf seems hardly compatible with the current economic transformations. The chapter will analyse, relying on the critical perspectives of authors such as Boltanski and Chiapello as well as Honneth, how the “new spirit of Capitalism” is successfully re-appropriating other important aspects of the heritage of the Protestant Reformation, primarily the notion of individual autonomy.*

The 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's 95 theses has surely revived the scholarly attention on the Reformation, which in most cases focused on its role in the affirmation of modernity. The historical assessment of the Reformation, of its heritage and of its destiny has often merged with that of modernity itself: which does not come as a surprise, given the many symptoms of crisis of the latter. Oftentimes, Luther has been alternatively blamed or hollowed as an herald of modernity, for causing or at least promoting the emergence of the characteristic features of modernity, among which capitalism has undoubtedly pride of place. Needless to say, a too hasty identification of Reformation with modernity do not do justice to either: nonetheless, insofar as Luther's Reformation may be considered the origin of that “great disembedding”, as per Taylor's expression (Taylor 2007), that triggered so many of these social transformations that are gathered under the name of modernity, Luther can in fact be connected to capitalism or rather to its ‘spirit’. This “elective affinity”, as in Weber's definition,

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has been often rephrased in terms of a dangerous liaison, especially by a cluster of authors who, in the wake of Marcel Hénaff, looks at modernity and its pathologies in quest for alternatives, such as the gift paradigm.

This essay will begin by engaging with the literature that identifies the Protestant conception of vocation the source of many crucial pathologies of modernity. The chapter will then move on to discuss whether the elective affinities that connected Protestantism and Capitalism at the time of Weber are completely faded away. Given the transformations undergone by Capitalism, the thread could be expected to be quite immaterial: the category of ‘vocation’ does not seem relevant in the age of flexibility and liquidity. Nonetheless, the chapter will argue, relying on the critical perspectives of authors such as Boltanski and Chiapello as well as Honneth, that the new spirit of Capitalism is actually thriving off other important aspects of the heritage of the Protestant Reformation, primarily the notion of individual autonomy, showing in the process its peculiar capacity of re-appropriating the most diverse forms of critique.



## 1. Grace and the End of Virtue

The couple formed by Protestant Ethics and the spirit of capitalism cannot, for good or bad, be easily separated. Since the publication of *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1905, the connection between the Reformation’s theological and moral heritage and the rise of Capitalism has been the object of countless debates. Reference to Weber has been used sometimes—rather, oftentimes—out of place, to hastily identify Protestantism and the mode of production that was soon to dominate the world. As it is well known, Weber saw only an indirect connection between Luther and the early Reformation and the rise in the spirit of Capitalism (D’Andrea 2014). Equally well known are

the many objections that have been moved to Weber's reconstruction. Sombart is a point of reference for all those who minimised the role of Protestantism in favouring the development of capitalist mentality, sharing the credit with other Christian denominations as well as with the Jews. Along this line, Trevor Roper identified in diasporic groups, as exemplified by the Flemish Diaspora, the real heralds of capitalism, assigning but a secondary role to their confessional identity (Trevor Roper 2001). On another note, Michael Walzer does see an important role of Protestantism in promoting some key aspects of modernity, but reduces its connection to a Capitalist ethos and prefers to connect Puritans' theology to a psychological condition which inclines to radical politics rather than to capitalist entrepreneurship (Walzer 1982). Michael Novak is one of Weber's proudest antagonists, as he claimed for Catholicism the primacy in promoting the spirit of Capitalism: an important strategic move, as in his view Capitalism is inseparable from the affirmation of democracy (Novak 1982).

Others have engaged in the effort of disentangling the legacy of the Reformation from the immediate identification with the Spirit of Capitalism—the reference is evidently to André Biéler (Biéler 1959) and to Mario Miegge who, whilst stressing Weber's choice to assign Luther only a propedeutic role, concentrates his efforts to bring back to light other aspects of Calvin's thought that would somehow balance the role of his theology in the emergence of the Spirit of capitalism, such as the to the common utility as the justification of economic exchanges (Miegge 2001). Given its relevance, his contribution will be further evoked in the course of the present reflection.

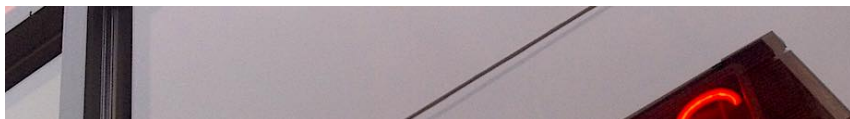
Other authors instead stressed the elective affinity between Protestantism and Capitalism from a decidedly critical point of view, following Marx's footsteps, who, in the wake of Hegel identified in Protestantism a formidable obstacle for the development of a revolutionary perspective. Weber's line surfaces in a critical light also in a heterodox Marxist like Ernst Bloch, who, in his *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution* (1960) charges Lutheranism and even more Calvinism with having replaced Christianity with the religion of Capitalism, the God of Mammon, and fiercely opposes to Luther Müntzer's theology for liberation. The bad name of Protestantism as a forerunner in developing Capitalism's spirit is not restricted to more or less heterodox Marxists. An important tradition of Catholic anti-capitalist thought winds through a long succession of authors—to make by one example, Émile Mounier – involving also a long-

standing stream in the more ‘magisterial’ social teaching of the Catholic Church to be traced back from *Rerum Novarum* onwards<sup>1</sup>.

Among those who highlight Protestantism’s *liaison dangereuse* with Capitalism a group of contemporary authors stick out for their engagement in the quest for alternatives to capitalist hegemony by exploring the potential of the gift paradigm. Such is the case of Marcel Hénaff, a leading member of the MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales) and ice-breaking theorist of the *paradigme du don*. His work can be grouped with that of the anglo-catholic philosopher and theologian John Millbank, of the American catholic historian Brad Gregory and of the Italian economist Luigino Bruni. In his theological reflection Millbank has often engaged with the gift paradigm and more in general with the heritage of the MAUSS in order to develop his ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ approach. Luigino Bruni openly acknowledges his debt with Millbank, and in his quest for an economy of communion looks for alternatives to the paradigm of political economy<sup>2</sup>. Bruni re-proposes both the theme of the end of the ethics of virtue, and the stark juxtaposition of two radically alternative social models as developed by Hénaff. Gregory, in his reconstruction of the unintended consequences of the Protestant Reformation shares most of these themes, namely the interest for the end of the ethics of virtue, as well as the overall assessment of the Reformation as a key factor for the development of capitalism and of its evils. The choice of engaging with them as a sort of collective voice, however artificial, is motivated by the many direct and indirect connections that bind together their research as well as by their sharing, in spite of their coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, the same point of departure. They are in fact united by a quite critical assessment of Luther’s heritage: they all find the point of origin for the decadence or even the disappearance of the ethic of virtue in the separation between salvation and morality caused by the doctrine of salvation by Grace. Furthermore, they also take their reflection on the Reformation and its relationship with capitalism well beyond its ‘classic’, industrialist version to embrace also its most recent neo-liberal and post-industrial avatars.

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of this tradition see Lowy 1996, 19-31.

<sup>2</sup> In fact Bruni (2015, 157) connects the rise of such paradigm with Adam Smith, defined as a former “docente del clero calvinista” and to the cultural *milieu* of “luteranesimo scozzese” and to Smith.



Marcel Hénaff may be taken as a sort of *Q source*, as his work poses the terms of the question by addressing the very core of Reformed theology, the notion of salvation for Grace; and it is exactly this notion that is the target of Hénaff critique. As it is well known, Hénaff identifies three notions of gift; the ceremonial, the unilateral, typical of a sovereign, which corresponds to *charis*, and finally the individual and therefore moral gift, depending from the free decision of the donor. This gift can be reciprocal or not; it is above all the expression of generosity and compassion (Hénaff 2003, 23). Grace, in Reformation's theology, is a gift; the gift of God, undeserved, free, unilateral. As only God can ("Seul Dieu peut donner"), the Protestant conception of gift ends up having a paralysing, rather than a motivating effect. "The theology of salvation by Grace replaces the relationship of gift with the blind confidence in an impersonal power" (Hénaff 2002, 351-380); human beings have essentially no way to reciprocate this divine gift, and they remain exclusively passive beneficiaries deprived of agency. The emphasis on God's unilateral power—so typically Reformed—motivates Hénaff's assessment of Protestantism as an opposing force to the development of generous, meaningful and gift-originated relationships among human beings, and in the long run provides the ground for his diagnosis of its proximity with capitalism.

As the focus of Salvation is God's gift, Protestantism, "ramenant tout le don du côté de Dieu" makes the horizontal gift among men impossible. "C'est le don généreux—le don sans retour—des hommes entre eux qui est en cause" (Hénaff 2002, 367). This third kind of gift, which Aristotle made into a virtue and which Seneca recommended all should practice" is at the root of that "religious ethic of fraternity" (Hénaff 2003, 23) which Puritan ethics wiped out. In Hénaff's view, Weber did not dedicate sufficient attention to the relationship between gift exchange and Grace, and to the replacement of the ethic of fraternity with professional vocation. Insofar as in Protestant theology makes horizontal gift impossible, and undermines the very possibility of developing a fraternal generous ethics, the only space open for human agency is that of

professional vocation. *Beruf*, the ethic of profession, ends up replacing charity and social solidarity, “and so the Protestant ethic finds itself in accord with the spirit of capitalism which prospers at the moment when the system of gift exchange is fading away. By restricting the power of giving to God, the doctrine of predestination leaves it up to the world of work and business to manage social relations” (Hénaff 2003, 22). In this perspective, the Protestant notion of *Beruf* is deprived of its liberating potential and is re-interpreted essentially in the terms of

devalorization of the generous act supposedly essential to salvation and finally its presentation as an economically irrational act. What is involved here is the form of social relations itself. If the latter are supposed to be generated by the complementarity of tasks instead of the reciprocity of gifts, then the transformation mentioned by Weber is even more radical. Hyperbolically, this is indeed what Calvin’s thought shows. (Hénaff 2003, 9)

Hénaff’s reflection on gift has a more or less direct influence on many others, and is quite central to the work of the Anglican theologian John Millbank, characterised by a radical critique of modernity, encompassing both capitalism and liberalism, in his views inseparable, as well as by a quite bold re-appropriation of pre-Reformation Catholicism. Instead of attempting a reconciliation between Catholicism and modernity in the wake of Novak, Millbank finds in the essentially anti-modern character of the Catholic tradition a possible breeding ground for alternatives to modern individualism and to its latest avatar, *homo oeconomicus* (Millbank 2005). Following Hénaff’s footsteps, Millbank focuses on Grace as a undeserved gift so typical of the Protestant conception (Calvin is of course included), sharing the diagnosis whereby such a gift does not create an easy flow of gift and exchange, exactly for its coming unilaterally from God without any active human participation; the final touch comes with the elimination of free will (Millbank e Pabst 2016 p. 22-29). Millbank words follow very closely Hénaff’s itinerary, affirming that the Protestants first of all

compromised Grace by substituting whimsical ‘election’ for unilateral charity (albeit for a true view this ‘gives’ the reality of our thankful and meritorious return), and secondly they compromised reciprocal charity as the organising principle of society, opening the path to the general sway of capitalist contract”. (Millbank 2013, 64)



Bruni joins Millbank and Hénaff in seeing a special responsibility of Protestantism in bringing about the end of the ethic of virtue, by separating salvation and morality. The announcement of Salvation by grace introduces a substantially pessimistic view of the human being and makes the adoption of one specific way of life completely irrelevant, thus sweeping away the traditional ethic of theological virtue (Gregory 2012, 285): “One’s actions—including buying, selling, acquiring, borrowing, lending, and financing—did *not* contribute to one’s salvation, which was entirely and exclusively God’s free gift by faith alone through grace alone to his elect alone”. Exactly in this perspective Gregory calls attention back to Weber’s thesis, extending its validity for the earliest stages of Protestantism as well. In that phase, the expression of one’s vocation through disciplined and zealous work is a sincere attempt to answer to God’s gift: nonetheless, in the course of time, “busyness becomes simply business”, and in Gregory’s narrative from that to the imperative of “minding one’s business” and the celebration of greedy acquisitive passions the distance is immaterial (Gregory 2012, 284). The experience of receiving the gift of Grace leads to an almost anomic condition:

The extraordinary experience of passively being plucked from the depths of depravity was precisely what produced (or was supposed to produce) the overwhelming gratitude, clarity, and zeal to act in ways sanctifyingly consonant with God’s will, which of course implied the shared building and social sustenance of moral communities. To claim that one’s actions influenced one’s status with God was the self-regarding error of ‘works righteousness’, the popish lie that Christians cooperated with God or somehow otherwise contributed to their salvation, arrogating to themselves what was strictly God’s achievement. (Gregory 2012, 269)

Bruni reconnects the end of the ethics of virtue also to Luther’s embracing of the doctrine of the two Kingdoms: this sharp dichotomy triggers not only a theory but, most of all, a praxis that sharply separates the sphere of the market from the sphere dominated by the logic of gift—so that *business is business* and *gift is gift*, so that the pace and the logic of gift are separated from that of enterprise (Bruni 2015, 162).



This divorce helps in explaining “the great irony” (Gregory 2012, 272) of the involuntary consequences of the Reformation, and here is how Gregory solves this incongruity:

What needs explanation is how Western European Christians, whose leaders in the Reformation era condemned avarice across confessional lines, themselves created modern capitalism and consumption practices antithetical to biblical teachings even as confessionalization was creating better informed, more self-conscious Reformed Protestants, Lutherans, and Catholics. (Gregory 2012, 189)

Evidently this ‘great irony’ does not concern solely protestants but encompasses the whole of Christendom: nonetheless, Gregory identifies in the Reformation the point of origin of such a process insofar as it promoted a “disruption” that not only brought to the gradual separation of the economic sphere of action from the institutionalised ethic “worldview” that was typical of late medieval Europe but also paved the way to the western consumerist and capitalist mind as it created hostility and disagreement among Christians. The never ending conflict on the interpretation of the Bible “liberated market practices from traditional Christian morality and produced a market society” and disagreements about the substance of the good legitimised “the typical Western notion that a ‘standard of living’ refers neither to a normative human model nor even to ethical precepts, but to the quantity and quality of one’s material possessions and the wealth that accompanies them” (Gregory 2012, 272-273).

Hénaff frames the question of the relationship between Protestantism and Capitalism for the whole of this group of authors also in identifying two ideal-typical and antithetical models of society. Following the legal historian Bartolomé Clavero, Hénaff concludes his analysis affirming that an enduring opposition continues to exist between two ethical models: an essentially Catholic model of society, grounded upon gift and on personal relationships of generosity, opposed to an essentially Protestant social model, focused on cold impersonal relationship of contractual exchange. This dichotomy did not only survive

the theological controversies that originated it, but has trespassed the borders of confessional disputes to become a marking feature of all contemporary societies (Henaff 2003, 323). Needless to say, Millbank and Gregory also share this conclusion. Luigino Bruni as well continues along this line in *Mercato e dono*, recognising the protestant Reformation as the promoting factor or rise of that modern individualism which, unable to generate solidarity, is the source of those “sad passions” that Bensayag indicated as marking feature of our time. In spite of that, Bruni is not blind to the pathogenic potential of both, and is willing to acknowledge that if on the one hand Protestant-derived capitalism is a “humanism of individuals without community” (translation mine), on the other hand the Counter-Reformation has produced a social and economic model of community where individual responsibility is left uncultivated. The spirit of Capitalism is today fuelling loneliness and anomy, the typical diseases of Latin-Mediterranean-Catholic model are fascism, mafia and amoral familism, hypertrophic and debt-oppressed States (Bruni, 167-168).



## 2. Something old, something new

Giving justice to the debate which has been so skeletally mentioned is well beyond the scope of possibilities of this essay: the conversation on vocation, responsibility and community could continue almost ad infinitum, summoning names such as Troeltsch, Biéler, and Miegge. Nonetheless, a few reflections on the relationship between Grace, vocation and capability of gift to balance this position are called for, not in order to “make things right”, but to provide further elements to appreciate the profound changes in the conditions that framed this debate. In fact, notwithstanding their different angles, all the authors mentioned above find in the Lutheran concept of *Beruf* a marking feature to the

spirit of ‘old Capitalism’, as it was capable of generating the ethos of methodical conduct of life as well as a series of personality traits functional to that particular mode of production. Hénaff has many a good reason to stress the ‘vertical’ character of Grace as God’s gift, and he is unquestionably right in stressing how professional vocation cannot aspire to establish any reciprocity between God and Human beings; but on the other hand, others have highlighted the enabling and motivating aspect of Grace and its essential role in opening up a dimension of horizontal relationships among human beings; a network of interaction which could be branded as a gift of second level, free by any hope of reward or fear of punishment and stemming simply from thankfulness. As briefly recalled earlier, Mario Miegge emphasizes the social and communitarian dimension of the Protestant ethics. Miegge shows how even Calvin’s thought on professional life, often assumed as the definitive seal on the connection between Protestant ethics and Capitalism, presents many aspects which on the contrary stress the “horizontal” dimension of mutual help (Miegge 1989 and 2001). And a closer look to Calvin’s texts confirms Miegge’s view. As this passage of *Institution* demonstrates, Calvin considers being active in the world—which is made possible primarily, but not exclusively, by work—as the possibility of “being of help” to other human beings,

C’est une chose de belle apparence qu’un homme se retire des compagnies communes pour philosopher en secret; mais cela ne convient point à la dilection chrétienne, qu’un homme, comme par haine du genre humain, s’enfuit en un désert pour y demeurer solitaire, en s’abstenant des choses que notre Seigneur requiert principalement de nous tous: c’est à dire, de nous aider l’un à l’autre. (*Inſt.* IV, XIII, 16)

The central place occupied by the professional calling in Calvin’s thought goes in a way even beyond ethics as the meaning of *vocation* needs to be assessed for the role it plays in the overall economy of the relationship between human beings and God. Human life deploys itself in a sort “space in between”, the *saeculum*, defined on the one hand by the here-and-now of historical temporality and on the other by eschatological expectations: a space which indeed “disenchanted” as void of God’s presence, where human beings have to find their way through (Gauchet 1985). Calvin often mentions as typical features of human condition a feeling of *inquiétude* and inclination to *voltiger*, flying about without purpose; such elements do not come as a surprise given the poten-

tially limitless freedom this kind of Middle Earth that human beings inhabit. In this framework, the *vocation*, which materialises primarily but not exclusively through work, plays a crucial role, as it provides a way to handle an otherwise paralysing condition through some form of self-government:

Il nous suffit de connaître que la vocation de Dieu nous est comme un principe et fondement de nous bien gouverner en toutes choses [...] Enfin si nous n'avons notre vocation comme un règle perpétuelle, il n'y aura point de ferme tenue ni de correspondance entre les parties de notre vie. (*Inst.* III, X, 6)

Individuality thus becomes a project, to be achieved by means of a relentless effort to assemble all the scattered pieces of one's life into a life narrative that makes sense. This self-government is not simply equivalent to self-repression; the calling is the pivotal element in the construction of a subject that may handle liberty exactly because is capable of self discipline in view of an engagement with others. These traits of the Protestant conception of *Beruf* had to be recalled, however scantily, as they will have to be further considered in light of the transformations of Capitalism.

And in fact, Capitalism has changed profoundly from the mode of production investigated by Weber, and it has done so according to a post industrial, financialised model that has managed to divorce profit from production. The category of neoliberalism—however elusive it may be—does capture one of the crucial features of this New Model Capitalism, i.e. the capacity of its specific rationality of permeating and re-shaping every possible social interaction. In the narrative of late modern Capitalism, freedom ends up essentially re-absorbed in the category of 'choice', which in turn is essentially identified with the possibility of buying, selling, renting and lending, whereby everything—time, bodies, emotions, ideas—becomes 'disposable' and therefore commodified (Brown 2015, Harvey 2005). This shift from liberty into freedom of choice (which means purchasing), trickles into the most unexpected quarters, permeating the public spheres of democratic societies, hindering the effectiveness of alternative discourses, as Nancy Fraser showed *à propos* feminism (Fraser 2013), penetrating at an even deeper level into personal identities. The conclusions traced by the authors of *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme* in their study of managerial culture in France are applicable way beyond their original scope and illustrate the specificity of the new spirit of Capitalism, whose most remarkable feature is the ca-

capacity of re-absorbing and metabolising even the most radical forms of critique, turning them from adversaries into assets. Such has been the destiny of the anti-authoritarian and liberating impetus of the *critique artiste* with its aspiration to authenticity and autonomy, on the other hand, the *critique sociale*, focusing on justice and redistribution has remained stuck on the old schemes of production, and finds it hard to read the structures of dominations that shape the connexionist world. Metaphors of flexibility and liquidity (Sennett 2013, Bauman 2000) are in fact often evoked to describe the nature of late modern capitalism, whose self narrative privileges fluidity, innovation, creativity, and connectivity. This vocabulary captures but one face of the coin, whilst on the other hand making it harder to read the other and darker side. This ‘connexionist’ world is structured around a complicated network of relationships of exploitation. As observed by Boltanski and Chiapello, it is along “the lines of flight of mobility [that] innumerable relations of exploitation are to be charted: financial markets versus states, financial markets versus firms; multinational corporations versus states, large principals versus small subcontractors; the firm versus the casual workforce; the consumer vs the firm and so on” (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 371). This affirmation sounds all the more convincing when confronted with the morphology of contemporary global capitalism, marked by the contradiction between a developed North and the immense South, the world of ‘sweatshops’, where locality is a life sentence and ‘work’ is heavy, dehumanising labour: two entities that often coexist within the same continent, country, or city. The successful appropriation of the claims to individuality and autonomy undermines the capacity of critique of performing exactly that work of chartering and mapping that is so needed to disentangle the knot of structures of domination that shape late modern capitalism.

A connexionist world needs a connexionist individual: “This ‘ideal-typical’ figure is a nomadic ‘network-extender’, mobile, tolerant of difference and ambivalence, realistic about people’s desires (and weaknesses), informal and friendly, with a less rigid relationship to property (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 107 ff.) In their seminal work Boltanski and Chiapello found it at work in managerial culture where “the positive models are no longer the ‘organization man’ [sic] of the 1960s, the stable organization, planning, and the separation of conception and execution, or some derivation thereof, but the charismatic leader of an often intangible organizational process framed as a ‘project’ [...], developing a

‘culture’ inspired by a ‘vision’ shared with ‘partners’ each of whom is seen as a self-actualizing individual, with their own unique contribution to make (du Gay, and Morgan, 2013. 24). If ‘the connexionist’ is undoubtedly the winner of new capitalism, its loser alter-ego is Sennett’s flexible man, an isolated individual who cannot situate the narrative of life in a collective perspective and thus forced to resolve it in the purely individualistic terms of personal failures and responsibilities.

Perhaps even the last element of the trio should also be explored in its ‘new’ morphology: and in fact as Capitalism and its spirit have changed so did Protestantism as well. Five hundred years after Luther’s 95 Theses, Protestantism does thrive all over the world, but in a form that bears but a tenuous connection with the theology of its founders: the multifarious and complex galaxy of Evangelicals. This evangelical Protestantism re-interprets creatively some features of the Reformed heritage, to begin with the direct, personal and un-mediated relationship with God and the principle of the individual perusal of the Scriptures; ecclesiologically, this Protestantism is fiercely Congregationalist and sectarian (in the Weberian sense). This new way of being Protestant also has major consequences in terms of the “Spirit” it produces. As in the case of “old” Protestantism, many of these consequences are unintended, and surely it would be a major mistake to hastily gather its diverse reality under a superficial label. Nonetheless, its emphasis on the transformative, effective power of Salvation perfectly fits with the pace of late modernity, as demonstrated by its exponential growth. Not only does it satisfies the imperative of here and now; its highly individualised view of Salvation and Grace can be easily decoupled from any imperative of social transformation and political commitment and easily operationalises into ready-for-use anthropotechnics, which end up by promoting a model of performing and ‘fit’ individual. In his fizzling essay Debray captures the correspondence between the *genie du néo-protestantisme*, thanks to its “light” version of theology and its “mise en scène kitsch”, and the *génie du temps* (Debray 2017, 22), a correspondence which explains its enormous vitality and capacity to spread on a global scale at an amazing speed.

This fluorescent way of being Protestant (within which, it should be noted, the Prosperity Gospel, still is a minority phenomenon) is normally associated with the American context; this perception is not ungrounded, as the American version of evangelicalism is surely thriving. Nonetheless, it may not be

irrelevant to consider that this Protestantism is spreading fast all over Africa, Asia and Latin America, and surely looks much more vital than the historical Churches more directly connected with the heritage of the Reformation. This sheer fact gives substantial food for thought, as it may be read as a writ-large, proof of its being particularly suitable to the present late modern condition. The ultimate version of this Salvation ready-to-use is the Prosperity gospel, that openly couples poverty with sin and economic success with heavenly reward to hard work. Although some of these themes were already part of a Weberian world, this proximity is only apparent. This gospel of wealth identifies personal enrichment and enjoyment of consumption as God's plan for humanity and explains economic success as a direct result of faith (Bowler 2013), bypassing swiftly all kind of ethical mediation.

These developments seem to prove the substantial obsolescence, for good or for bad, of 'historical' reformed Protestantism. The task ahead is therefore whether this new spirit of Capitalism has at all anything to do with the aspects of Protestantism which have been so befitting the emergence of modern capitalism. Is there if not an elective affinity, at least a *liaison dangereuse* between Protestantism and this new spirit of Capitalism, which is not limited to its relationship with this new, non-Reformed Protestantism?

*Prima facie*, the answer could be short and clear: nothing at all. First of all, the material conditions defined by post industrial Capitalism are drastically different from those which framed Weber's reflection as well as many of the subsequent debates. In Western advanced economies work is not only becoming flexible, but oftentimes even superfluous; in a condition correctly described as that of the end of the *arbeitsgesellschaft* (Beck 2000) 'work' hardly provides a ground for constructing individual or collective identities. In this framework, debating whether the *vocation* that materialises into work and professional calling has a liberating, communitarian potential (as in Miegge) or is the sworn enemy to the ethics of virtue as in Hénaff and Millbank sounds like a purely academic dispute, if not as a bitter irony. Not only the material conditions, by the spirit of this new Capitalism seems to be quite removed from a genuinely Protestant, even more, Reformed ethos. Undoubtedly, the new spirit of Capitalism incarnates many element of Walter Benjamin's vision of Capitalism as a religion in itself, and more specifically of its purely cultic character (Benjamin 1996, Löwy 2009) as it expects from participants a convinced, enthusiastic participation. The excite-



ment that is so crucial for the cult of Capitalism can hardly be reconnected to a Reformed ethos and mindset. Even without going that far, it is not hard to see how the Puritan virtues of sobriety, consistency, frugality leading to that methodical *lebenserfahrung* so suitable to capitalist economic activity can hardly be accommodated within the glittering post industrial world: rather, they seem to be in quite open conflict with its imperative of flexibility—which to Calvin would sound a great deal as that *voltiger* that he was frowning upon so gravely.

In spite of that, the seduction potential of the new spirit of Capitalism is still active and strong, as it works on a somehow subtler, and yet deeper level, that mobilises mental and spiritual resources that cannot be easily dismissed such as the spectacular preaching of Gospel megachurches. In both cases, the connectionist winner's and the flexible loser's, the sirens' song of the new spirit of Capitalism resounds of categories that are absolutely crucial to the ethical heritage of the Reformation, such as the emphasis on personal responsibility as well as the quest of autonomy. In a social context shaped by the imperatives of new capitalism, individuality and autonomy are no longer terrain of conquest, rather become an obligation. This impressive operation of appropriation plays a crucial role to enclose Sennett's flexible man into his prison of isolation and personal failure; Honneth explores further the striking paradox of institutionalisation of individualisation, a process whereby the constant demand for self-realisation ends up strengthening capitalist productivity:

new post-Taylorist strategies of business enterprise are having the quite different effect of comprehending labour more and more as a 'calling', so as to present employees with a set of entirely changed expectations: workers' motivations have to match whatever their job may require, they must be ready and willing to present every change of position at work as flowing from their own choice, and their involvement is to benefit the business as a whole. (Honneth 2004, 9)

The constant, institutionalised demand for self-realisation places on the individual an unbearable burden: the individual becomes a project, and as such, in a world where the logic of market shapes all interaction, consequently becomes also a product (Sloterdijk 2016). This way of life as shaped by these practices may rightfully claim an ascetic character, as it has been brilliantly highlighted by Dario Consoli, although in the case of post fordism such a trait does not lie in the self-imposition of sobriety, postponement of enjoyment and renunciation

as in the case of the Puritans as much as in the constant effort and dedication a kind of “upgrading” of the self, enshrined in terms such as “enhancing” and “empowering” (Consoli in Donaggio 2014: 156 and 165). This ascetic anthropotecnics draws a distorted mirror image of the *règle perpetuelle de vie* recommended by Calvin. The chance of achieving genuine individual autonomy—aiming at *bien se gouverner*—through a process of construction of an meaningful identity narrative is turned into a process commodification of individuality, aimed primarily at producing an individual capable of economic performance.



### 3. Concluding remarks

Although it has grown out of the grey flannels of Quakers, Puritans, and Fordism, to take up the fluorescent colours of the society of information and connectivity, the long story of the relationship between Protestantism of the spirit of Capitalism is evidently not yet over. The incredible metabolic capacity of contemporary Capitalism, so magisterially highlighted by Boltanski and Chiapello, has not spared the promises of autonomy and responsibility opened up by the Protestant reflection on vocation, such as Miegge explored it. On the contrary, it has proved capable of turning to its advantage many of the liberating promises of modernity, through manipulating spiritual and mental energies for purposes that had little or nothing to do with their original ones, as in the case of the appropriation of individuality as highlighted by Honneth. This talent for re-appropriation makes all the more hard the work of any critical perspective, be it in philosophy or social sciences, originating from within the whale’s belly. This work of critique should also be carried out on the other hand of the spectrum, that of the self-understanding of contemporary Protestantism in its relationship with the Reformation’s legacy. Five hundred years after the beginning of the Reformation, Protestantism is evidently confronted with the task of

conducting a critical appraisal of its century-long *liaison dangereuse* with Capitalism, but is also given the chance of mobilising endogenous resources within the protestant theological tradition in order to counteract the subtler, and thus more challenging, appropriation by the spirit of new Capitalism. Although a full exploration of such future itineraries is evidently out of its reach, especially as far as theological research is concerned, this short contribution may at least indicate some possible lines of reflection, concerning primarily vocation, autonomy and responsibility. Evidently, the reformed notion of calling as it emerged from the protestant *Beruf* or *vocation* must be re-assessed in light of the end of the work society, as professional activity cannot any longer represent the immediate channel for social responsibility. Categories such as personal autonomy and individualisation also need to be reconsidered within a wider critical framework, so as to prevent them from being turned into weapons of turbocapitalism and, on the contrary, to regain their importance in sustaining projects of collective emancipation. All of these considerations point toward the need to engage with the paradigm of gift as a viable alternative to the spirit of new capitalism and its metabolic power, without necessarily embracing a perspective of ethics of virtue.

The best conclusion for these scanty remarks can thus be found turning to a theologian—Karl Barth—who found in the very root of Reformed theology the source of inspiration to oppose the structure of domination of his time:

Fundamentally, the command of God [...] is self-evidently and in all circumstances a call for counter-movements on behalf of humanity and against its denial in any form—and therefore a call for the championing of the weak against every kind of encroachment on the part of the strong. The Christian community has undoubtedly been too late in seeing this in face of the modern capitalistic development of the labour process, and it cannot escape some measure of responsibility for the injustice characteristic of this development [...]. The main task of Christianity in the West is [...] to assert the command of God in face of [capitalism], and to keep to the 'left' in opposition to its champions, i.e., to confess that it is fundamentally on the side of the victims of this disorder and to espouse their cause. (Barth 2010, 544)

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