

WRAP Exams · wrapexams.com

Prelims PYQ, Mains model answers, and copy evaluation. Write to the desk for this paper, a doubt, or the AI waitlist.

ask@wrapexams.com · +91 85951 84903 · wrapexams.com

Q3(b)

Describe the main idea of Max Weber's book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as a critique of Marxism

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- **State the main idea of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism:** elective affinity between this-worldly asceticism and rational capitalist conduct
- **Show it as a critique of Marxism:** ideas and religious ethics can steer economic action, not only reflect the base
- Note Weber's limits and his own care about causality
- Keep the book at the centre

Revision summary

Weber distinguished modern rational capitalism from ordinary greed.

Some Protestant ethics, especially Calvinist worldly asceticism, formed a methodical conduct of life.

The idea of calling made work a duty and success a possible sign of election.

Elective affinity, not a single cause, links this ethic to the capitalist spirit.

The argument criticises a Marxism that treats religion as mere reflection of the base.

Weber still accepted material interests; he denied that they exhaust explanation.

Introduction

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* asks why modern rational capitalism, with its methodical pursuit of profit and reinvestment, grew with particular force in parts of the Protestant West. His main idea is that a religious ethic, especially Calvinist this-worldly asceticism, formed a habit of disciplined work, saving and calling that fitted the capitalist spirit. The book is a critique of a one-sided Marxist claim that ideas are only a reflection of the economic base.

Body

The main idea of the book

- **Weber distinguished the adventurous greed of all ages from the spirit of modern capitalism:** a sober, continuous, rational organisation of labour and capital. He found in some Protestant teachings a worldly calling. Martin Luther's idea of vocation treated ordinary work as

a duty before God. John Calvin's doctrine of predestination, as believers lived it, produced anxiety about salvation. Methodical labour, frugality and success in a calling became signs that one might be among the elect. Inner-worldly asceticism turned away from monastery flight and toward disciplined conduct in business. Benjamin Franklin's maxims about time and credit illustrated the later, more secular spirit. Once capitalism stood on its own feet, Weber said, the religious root could wither, leaving a **steel-hard housing** of work without belief.

This is an argument of **elective affinity**, not a simple claim that Calvin invented factories. Weber used historical comparison with other world religions in later essays to ask why a similar spirit did not become dominant elsewhere in the same way.

As a critique of Marxism

Karl Marx treated religion as part of the superstructure and, in a famous phrase, as the opium of the people. Historical materialism, in its strong form, explains the rise of capitalism from forces and relations of production, primitive accumulation and class. Weber did not deny class, markets or technology. He denied that they were a complete explanation of the capitalist ethos. Ideas, for him, can switch the tracks on which interests run. The Protestant ethic thesis is therefore a critique of reduction: religious meanings helped form a type of economic actor. Friedrich Engels had already allowed some reaction of the superstructure on the base. Weber made that reaction historically specific and empirically argued.

The critique is limited in ways a fair answer must note. Historians have debated whether the chronology of Puritanism and capitalist growth is as neat as the essay suggests. R. H. Tawney and later writers gave more weight to politics and class. Marxist replies say that Protestantism itself needs a material explanation. Weber also never claimed that only ideas matter. In *Economy and Society* he kept class, status and party together. The book's force as critique is the demonstration that a cultural ethic can be a causal ingredient in economic history, which a base-only Marxism cannot fully absorb.

Flow diagram

Calvinist asceticism -> Calling work frugality
Calling work frugality -> Spirit of capitalism
Spirit of capitalism -> Rational enterprise
Marxist base-first -> Spirit of capitalism
Weber elective affinity -> Spirit of capitalism

Conclusion

The Protestant ethic thesis says that a disciplined religious conduct of life had an **elective affinity** with the spirit of rational capitalism. As a critique of Marxism it restores ideas and meaning to the explanation of economic action. Weber still leaves room for material interests. The book attacks one-sided materialism, not the study of class itself.

Facts & figures

This-worldly asceticism

Disciplined refusal of luxury and idleness, directed into worldly work rather than into monastic withdrawal.

Elective affinity

Weber's way of stating a historical fit between an ethic and an economic spirit, short of one-factor causation.

Steel-hard housing

Weber's image of later capitalism as a compulsory system of work after the religious root has faded.

WRAP Exams · Write. Read. Analyse. Practice. · <https://wrapexams.com/upsc/mains-answers/sociology-gs-1/2024/describe-the-main-idea-of-max-webers-book-the-protestant-ethic-and-the-spirit-of-capitalism-as-a-critique-of-marxism/> · ask@wrapexams.com · wrapexams.com

WRAP Exams