
Protestantism - Capitalism - Sports

by

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1. With the dawn of the Reformation era a new concept of work was developed in both Lutheranism and Calvinism. Work was considered of religious significance and on equal footing with “purely” religious acts. In Calvinism work assumed a new role as it was one determining factor of a person’s “effectual calling” within the framework of a theology of predestination. The German sociologist Max Weber concluded that this Calvinist/Puritan work ethic helped bring about the “spirit of capitalism”.

2. The Puritans are often depicted as people who did nothing but work and pray (one’s general and particular calling). This is a popular and scholarly misconception, however. Enough evidence can be found in many devotional and practical works (“moral theology”) of Puritan divines to show that Puritan theology called for some refreshing (recreating) moments in life. Manyfold activities are recommended, for sport is necessary just as it is necessary for the mower to “whet his sythe”. As this simile suggests, however, a Puritan must avoid any excessive indulging in leisure activities. He must use his critical judgement to select an activity that meets his individual needs most appropriately. A Puritan may not over-exert his body, spend too much time or money on sports, participate in or watch cruelties and, above all, must refrain from sport activities on the Christian sabbath. On weekdays it is a necessary duty of a Puritan to strengthen his body, to uphold and maintain life, to preserve health and to prevent an untimely death. Recreational activities helped the Puritan to fit him for his wordly duties on weekdays and his holy duties on the Sabbath.

Sports within the framework and restrictions of Puritan work ethic and Puritan ascetic life is part of what Weber called the “spirit of Capitalism”

3. Within the Puritan system of values a new consciousness of time emerged. Time is conceived as a precious gift from God which must be redeemed. This attitude toward time explains the early use of objective measurements (e.g. clocks) in England, accounts for the keeping of records and even a tendency toward professionalism and competition (as reflected also in Puritan literature). The Puritans’ “this-worldly asceticism” helped bring about these components of modern athletics which remained constituent factors even when the religious ceased to be a viable frame of reference.

4. It is, therefore the contention that modern sports is not simply a reproduction of the underlying pattern of the fully-developed socio-economic system of capitalism. This system was but of secondary significance. The course which modern sports was to follow was determined earlier in history. Both the socio-economic system of capitalism and modern athletics can be traced back to the setting of ascetic Protestantism which acted as a “cultural catalyst” to help bring about modern capitalism and modern sports.