

Whatever Happened To the Protestant Ethic?

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If you could live anywhere, what country would you choose to live in? Back in August, Newsweek compiled a ranking of the 100 best countries in the world¹. They looked at five factors, for each of which they constructed a scale: Education, Health, Quality of Life, Economic Dynamism, and Political Environment. When they had added it all up, they ranked them in order. Which country do you suppose came out on top as the best country to live in? Wanna guess? Finland, Finland was the best country to live in.

I'll give you the top ten, in order: Finland, Switzerland, Sweden, Australia, Luxemburg, Norway, Canada, the Netherlands, Japan and Denmark. Those are the countries, which, measured by objective standards, are the best places to live. And where, you are asking, is the USA? We rank just below the top ten, at number 11.

This was a shock to many people. There is still a strong current of American exceptionalism in our way of thinking – Sarah Palin makes it an official part of her political position – and since the end of the Cold War we have been used to the idea that the US is the world's sole superpower. To think that we are not only not in first place but not even in the top ten best places to live is disturbing.

The New York times columnist Thomas Friedman published a column in early September looking at the meaning of this rating. He linked the Newsweek story to a recent piece by the economist Robert Samuelson on the failure of educational reform in which Samuelson said that the biggest reason why all the money put into schools has failed to show results is that the students today are not motivated to learn.

Friedman asserts that the lack of student motivation is part of a larger problem that no one is talking about, a breakdown in values: “We had a values breakdown — a national epidemic of get-rich-quickism and something-for-nothingism. Wall Street may have been dealing the dope, but our lawmakers encouraged it. And far too many of us were happy to buy the dot-com and subprime crack for quick prosperity highs.”

He contrasts the Baby Boomers unflatteringly with the World War II generation which preceded them. The Greatest Generation, forged in the trials of

¹<http://www.newsweek.com/2010/08/15/interactive-infographic-of-the-worlds-best-countries.html>

the Depression and the fight against Hitler knew the meaning of sacrifice and deferred gratification, while the Boomers, raised in the relative prosperity of the postwar country, sought only instant gratification, and wanted to get things without paying for them or paying on credit.

He holds up India and China as countries which have the right stuff that we no longer have:

“China and India have been catching up to America not only via cheap labor and currencies. They are catching us because they now have free markets like we do, education like we do, access to capital and technology like we do, but, most importantly, values like our Greatest Generation had. That is, a willingness to postpone gratification, invest for the future, work harder than the next guy and hold their kids to the highest expectations.”

And he ends by saying:

“In a flat world where everyone has access to everything, values matter more than ever. Right now the Hindus and Confucians have more Protestant ethics than we do, and as long as that is the case we’ll be No. 11!”

So we have this supposed American decline, we have the supposed lack of motivation of American students, part of a larger crisis in values that has inflicted us since the Baby Boomers, and this is all due to the Protestant Ethic declining except in countries which were never Protestant or even Christian to begin with. All of these are highly debatable propositions, but I think they raise some questions about the value of work which are relevant in this congregation as well as the rest of the country.

Work is not one thing, nor is there one set of attitudes towards it. Many of you in this congregation are retired, and your attitude towards work probably took a big shift when you left the work force. Others in this congregation did not work outside the home, and principally concentrated on raising children and supporting a wage-earner. Some people have defined themselves by what they do for money; others do one thing for money but another thing altogether for their satisfaction or passion. I have a dentist who is a surfing nut; he gets me with my mouth open and all kinds of things stuck in it and then tells me about the great waves he’s been riding.

The work of the world, Marge Piercy tells us, is common as mud. In the Presidential campaign of 1960, John Kennedy visited a coal mine in West Virginia and stood in a crowded room among the miners and took their questions. One grizzled old fellow, black with coal dust, stepped forward and said, “Mr. Kennedy, I understand you’re a rich man’s son and have never worked a day in your life.” Kennedy replied, “well I have served my state as a congressman and senator, but I guess compared to coal mining, that’s not work, so I guess you’re right, I haven’t had to work a day in my life.” The old miner was taken aback by this admission, but thought about it a minute and then said, “You haven’t missed a damn thing.”

We extol the value of work officially, but we have all this anxiety about

losing the work ethic, and that is exemplified by Friedman's column.

But let's return to the term that Thomas Friedman used for this lost value – the Protestant Ethic. What he refers to is Max Weber's classic of sociology, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. That book was published in 1904, a time often called the Gilded Age, a time much like today when unchecked wealth seemed destined to gobble up the political system. Weber's thesis was that a set of religious values was conducive to an economic movement. The Protestant Reformation and particularly its Calvinist branch held that only the elect were going to heaven, and one sign of who were in the elect was the accumulation of worldly success. This gave a great incentive for people to work hard and invest money, delaying gratification and downplaying the consumption of wealth. Those who were industrious were deemed holier than those who sat on their duffs or spent what money they had. Work of all kinds was glorified in Protestant values.

Weber was a German writing in German, but he had an eye towards the United States as an example of a place exemplifying the Spirit of Protestantism. Of course, the archetype of that spirit is the Puritans who founded Massachusetts. Though liberals broke theologically with Calvinism in the Eighteenth Century, the Universalists over the existence of Hell and the Unitarians over the inherent depravity of humankind, we are all heirs to this ethos.

Weber quotes Benjamin Franklin who, though identified with Philadelphia, was actually born in Boston of a strongly Puritan family. Here's a passage of Franklin's on making money which Weber quotes as an example of the Protestant Ethic:

"Remember, that time is money. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides.[...]Remember, that money is the prolific, generating nature. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on. Five shillings turned is six, turned again is seven and threepence, and so on, till it becomes a hundred pounds. The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker. He that kills a breeding sow, destroys all her offspring to the thousandth generation. He that murders a crown, destroys all that it might have produced, even scores of pounds.²"

I don't know if Ben Franklin's writings are still read in our schools; I think I read them in high school, but my memory is dim. Maybe that is why I never

²Weber, Max "The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism" (Penguin

Books, 2002) translated by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, 9-12, quoted in

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Protestant_Ethic_and_the_Spirit_of_Capitalism

completely imbibed the spirit of deferring gratification. I remember cashing in a whole life life insurance policy in my mid-twenties to finance law school, and thinking that it might be a mistake. My uncles and aunts on my father's side of the family, Calvinist Presbyterians all, were always urging me to take any spare money I had and invest it in the stock market. But I am much closer to the grasshopper than the ant, and would always rather spend a fine day fiddling than going over my portfolio. Had I played my cards right, I might be out there among you retirees by now instead of preaching sermons on thrift.

I don't know about you, but I find the work ethic quite alive and healthy in America today. Certainly compared to the countries who were ahead of us on that list, we work harder. Most Europeans consider it an inalienable right to take a month vacation and work a 35-hour week and have free health care from the government, and particularly is that true for the Scandinavian countries which top the Newsweek list. I don't think they got to the top of the heap by working harder.

I think they got there by being smaller. If you look at the interactive website for the Newsweek ranking (<http://www.newsweek.com/2010/08/15/interactive-infographic-of-the-worlds-best-countries.html>), you can sort the countries on the list by population size. Of the ten countries ahead of us on the list, seven are in the small category, that is, less than 20 million population. These are the Scandinavian countries and Luxemburg, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Besides being small in population, all of these except Switzerland are ethnically homogeneous, and we might argue that Switzerland is too, despite its three language families.

Of the Medium-sized countries, those between twenty and fifty million population, only two, Canada and Australia, are above us on the list. Of the large countries, with over 50 million population, the only one above the US is Japan and there are many below such as Germany, the UK, France and Italy.

In other words, we're only number 11 because the list compares apples to oranges. But at a deeper level, I am skeptical view of Friedman's conclusion that the problem with the United States is a crisis in values. It sounds a little too much like the criticism I've been hearing all my life. In the 60's, my allegiance was with the Counterculture, and we thought we were fomenting a youth revolution against middle-class values, one part of which was the Protestant work ethic. My father was always trying to talk to me about discipline, and I would listen respectfully and then go read some poetry which extolled me to stop and smell the daisies. We hippies didn't invent instant gratification, but we certainly tried to give it respectful philosophical coloration. Do it now! Do what feels good! Free Love! Why don't we d-do it in the road? And our parents all said, "the kids today, they don't know the value of work, the value of sacrifice."

But it was not just the counterculture; the larger forces of commercial capitalism were also pushing instant gratification. The whole structure of commercial advertising was geared towards selling us products we didn't need on the premise that they were the path to happiness – buy new White Rain Shampoo

tonight and tomorrow your hair will be Sunshine Bright. While we counterculture types liked our gratifications sooner rather than later, we were also skeptical that nirvana could be achieved through the purchase of products.

Commercial advertising grew with the expansion of entertainment, particularly television. Television was a medium which had the capacity to inform and to entertain, but over the years under the steady pressure of getting good ratings the informing function has been shouldered aside by the entertaining function to the point where most news organizations are mere appendages of the sitcoms and variety shows on most networks.

When personal computers came along, most of us first saw them as business tools, as the large mainframes had been. The internet first offered the promise of unparalleled access to information and communication. It is still that, but entertainment and advertising have made strong inroads there, also, on the informing and connecting functions. I don't know whether I read Facebook more for my own amusement or to keep in touch with people I know.

In other words, I'm skeptical that there has been a substantial erosion of the work ethic, but insofar as there has, I have to acknowledge that the Sixties youth counterculture of which I was a part stood to some extent for instant gratification, but also was critical of the larger advertising scheme which has sold instant gratification before, during and after the counterculture and which I hold principally responsible if there has been an erosion of the work ethic.

Let's step back a moment. Weber's thesis in its day was contrary to Marxism. Weber was saying that an aspect of religion, the Protestant Work Ethic, was the engine that allowed the economic development we call capitalism. Marx, a generation earlier, had maintained that the economic organization of society is what determines everything else, and that culture and religion are just frosting on the layer cake. Most economists would lean towards Marx rather than Weber.

Weber's thesis has also not fared well with the facts. His native Germany shows a patchwork of Protestant and Catholic areas, but there does not seem to be any systematic difference between them in the development of capitalism³.

But even if you grant Weber's thesis for the purpose of argument that the Calvinist ethos encouraged the thrift and deferred gratification necessary for capitalism, the subsequent development of capitalism has seen the economic tale wag the spiritual dog. The pursuit of wealth went from a sign of election to an end in itself, and in fact became an object of worship. So the Protestants effected a revolt against the excesses of the Roman Catholic church, the Calvinist Puritans revolted against the excesses of the Church of England, the early Unitarians and Universalists revolted against the harshness of Calvinist doctrine, the hippies revolted against corporate capitalism in the sixties. What is the next revoltin'

³“The Calvinist Manifesto” Francis Fukuyama, The New York Times March 13,

development?

I can't speak for the rest of the country or for today's youth generation, but I don't see either frugality or the work ethic in short supply around here. Our sales arm is called the Thrift Shop for good reason, and our sales force pitches in without monetary compensation to work long hours and recycle products which are not advertised on TV or the Internet.

The point of Friedman's article is political; he says the evidence for the values crisis is that American voters want to have their cake and eat it too: they have shown a great propensity to vote for politicians who promise to balance the budget and cut taxes and cut spending at the same time. To me this is not giving in to instant gratification or an abrogation of the Protestant Work ethic; it is just magical thinking. I agree that we need politicians who will tell the truth and propose solutions instead of sound-bites, but with the sad state of the media and the influence of money, I don't know how we're going to get there.

But the factor Friedman doesn't mention, which has been surprisingly absent from the whole economic debate this political season, is John Maynard Keynes. Keynesianism, the idea that government must engage in deficit spending in times of recession, is directly counter to the Protestant ethic; it says you must borrow money you don't have in order to spend it, a prescription that would be disaster on the household level. But at the national level, Keynesianism works, as just about all economists who have studied the subject agree. The problem is that the residual Protestant ethic among the electorate means that there is not the political support for sustained Keynesian remedies when the economy takes a severe downturn as it has in the past two years. It is too easy for politicians to start shouting about the deficit to deflect attention from the fact that the stimulus was insufficient to get us out of the recession.

Work is something to value. As Marge Piercy says, "The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real." A good life balances work and pleasure and knows that what is most worthwhile is often most worth waiting for. We have our work cut out for us to restore some sanity and realistic thinking in the public arena. Let us roll up our sleeves.
Amen.

Reading

We're No. 1(1)! By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN New York Times September 11, 2010

Ask yourself: What made our Greatest Generation great? First, the problems they faced were huge, merciless and inescapable: the Depression, Nazism and Soviet Communism. Second, the Greatest Generation's leaders were never afraid to ask Americans to sacrifice. Third, that generation was ready to sacrifice, and pull together, for the good of the country. And fourth, because they were ready to do hard things, they earned global leadership the only way you can, by saying:

“Follow me.”

Contrast that with the Baby Boomer Generation. Our big problems are unfolding incrementally — the decline in U.S. education, competitiveness and infrastructure, as well as oil addiction and climate change. Our generation’s leaders never dare utter the word “sacrifice.” All solutions must be painless. Which drug would you like? A stimulus from Democrats or a tax cut from Republicans? A national energy policy? Too hard. For a decade we sent our best minds not to make computer chips in Silicon Valley but to make poker chips on Wall Street, while telling ourselves we could have the American dream — a home — without saving and investing, for nothing down and nothing to pay for two years. Our leadership message to the world (except for our brave soldiers): “After you.”