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THE FRANCISCAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE PROCESS OF RATIONALIZATION AND THE THESIS OF MAX WEBER

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SUMMARY:

This article analyzes the Franciscan contribution to the process of rationalization. Max Weber affirms that this process is a key factor of Modernity and a salient feature of modern economics. The rational way of facing practical problems, especially in the field of economics, would have favored the consolidation of the spirit of Capitalism. According to Weber, the 16th century Protestant Reformation, especially Calvinism, had a decisive role in this, something that has never been observed among Catholics. However, this article presents important Franciscan contributions in the previous centuries, thus contradicting Weber's affirmations. At the same time, this contribution shows the importance of the Franciscan intellectual tradition in the formation of Modern culture.

KEY WORDS: Franciscanism, science, rationalization, Modernity, Max Weber.

SOMMARIO:

Questo articolo analizza il contributo dei Francescani al processo di razionalizzazione. Questo processo, secondo Max Weber, sarebbe la chiave della modernità e dell'economia attuale. Il modo razionale di affrontare i problemi pratici nel campo economico avrebbe favorito il consolidamento del "spirito del capitalismo" e, in questo, Weber attribuisce un ruolo decisivo alla Riforma protestante del XVI secolo, principalmente al calvinismo, e sostiene che questo tipo di razionalizzazione mai si era visto tra i cattolici. Il notevole contributo dei Francescani, iniziato nei secoli precedenti, contraddice queste affermazioni e mostra l'importanza della tradizione intellettuale francescana nella formazione della cultura moderna.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Francescanesimo, scienza, razionalizzazione, Modernità, Max Weber.

RESUMEN:

Este artículo analiza el aporte de los franciscanos al proceso de racionalización que, según Max Weber, es la clave de la Modernidad y de la actual economía. Ese modo racional de afrontar

los problemas prácticos en el campo económico habría favorecido la consolidación del “espíritu del capitalismo” y, en esto, Weber atribuye un papel decisivo a la Reforma protestante del siglo XVI, sobre todo en su variante calvinista, algo que “ni se daba ni se da entre los católicos”. El notable aporte de los franciscanos durante los siglos XIII-XV contradice estas afirmaciones, a la vez que muestra la importancia de la tradición franciscana en la formación de la cultura moderna.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Franciscanismo, ciencia, racionalización, modernidad, Max Weber.

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This article analyzes the Franciscan contribution to the process of rationalization that, according to Max Weber, is a key factor in Modernity and a salient feature of the current economy.¹ Rationalization consists in setting goals well and methodically applying the most effective means. This rational way of facing practical problems, especially in the field of economics, would have favored the consolidation of the “spirit of capitalism”

“In the last resort the factor which produced capitalism is the rational permanent enterprise, rational accounting, rational technology and rational law, but again not these alone. Necessary complementary factors were the rational spirit, the rationalization of the conduct of life in general, and a rationalistic economic ethic”²

In this process, Weber attributes an important role to the 16th century Protestant Reformation, especially Calvinism. They get to the point of justifying a continuous and methodical pursuit of more and more wealth. According to this author, the Calvinist and Puritan faithful “have shown a special tendency to develop economic rationalism” in any place or condition, “both as ruling classes and as ruled, both as majority and as minority,” “something which cannot be observed to the same extent among Catholics”³ “and has never existed in any other church or religion.”⁴ The remarkable contribution that the Franciscan friars made to rationalization from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries contradicts these affirmations and shows the importance of the Franciscan intellectual tradition in the formation of modern culture.

In making these statements, Weber ignores not only the influence of the Franciscans, but also other contributions in the Catholic Church, such as the ethical reflection of the scholastic School of Salamanca, which was important

¹ “Economic rationalism as the salient feature of modern economic life as a whole.” M. WEBER, *The Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Dover, Mineola NY 2003, 75.

² M. WEBER, *General economic history*, Dover, Mineola NY 2003, 354.

³ M. WEBER, *The Protestant ethic...*, 41.

⁴ M. WEBER, *General economic history*, 368.

in the emergence of liberal theory. Some authors of the Austrian economic school have emphasized this influence. Joseph Alois Schumpeter, for example, affirms that, by the end of the fifteenth century, the Salamanca school had already developed many of the themes normally associated with capitalism, thus facilitating the social acceptance of the free market. He refers specifically to “big business, stock and commodity speculation, and high finance.”⁵

The first part of the article presents the process of rationalization and the important role that Max Weber attributes to the Protestant ethic in the consolidation of the “spirit of capitalism.”⁶ The second part focuses on some significant aspects of the Franciscan contribution to that process which are prior to the rise of Protestantism in the sixteenth century⁷.

1. THE PROCESS OF RATIONALIZATION

Since the Renaissance, Western society has undergone a process of disenchantment that has led to a disintegration of religious worldviews and to the current secular culture.⁸ Weber “described as ‘rational’ this process of disenchantment”⁹ and relates it to the Protestant ethic.

1.1. Max Weber’s thesis

While Karl Marx underlines the influence of economics on religion and society, Weber assumes that faith is one of the most decisive forces in social change. Accordingly, the cultural, ethical, and psychological dimensions associated with ascetic Protestantism, especially in its Calvinist and Puritan variants,¹⁰ would have been more decisive in the consolidation of capitalism than other technical or economic factors.¹¹

⁵ J.A. SCHUMPETER, *History of Economic analysis*, Routledge, New York 2009, 78.

⁶ We have presented the Franciscan contribution to economics more extensively in: M. CARBAJO NÚÑEZ, *A free and fraternal economy. The Franciscan perspective*, Tau, Phoenix 2017, 76ss.

⁷ Spanish edition of this article: CARBAJO NÚÑEZ, M., «El aporte franciscano al proceso de racionalización y la tesis de Max Weber», en *Liceo Franciscano* 209/2 (2017).

⁸ Cfr. C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, Belnap, Cambridge MA 2007, 221-298.

⁹ Weber “described as ‘rational’ the process of disenchantment which led in Europe to a disintegration of religious world views that issued in a secular culture.” J. HABERMAS, *The philosophical discourse of Modernity. Twelve lectures*, MIT, Cambridge MA 1990, 1.

¹⁰ Puritanism arose in England in the second half of the sixteenth century. It aims at “purifying” the Anglican Church from Catholic practices and it is quite close to the postulates of Calvinist theology.

¹¹ “Weber was engaged in a fruitful battle with historical materialism.” H.H. GERTH – C. WRIGHT MILL, ed., *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*, Routledge, London 1991, 63.

Anyway, it would be inaccurate to say that, in this respect, Weber's thesis is completely opposed to that of Marx.¹² The factors that intervened were many and not always had the same kind of influence. In fact, Weber never says explicitly that the spirit of capitalism is "a product of the Reformation" or that it would have not arisen without the Protestant ethic.¹³ He rather states that the Protestant faith was part of the socio-cultural context that served as breeding ground for the emergence of the spirit of capitalism.

Weber does not equate the spirit of capitalism with ambition, avarice, or greed, which have always existed and often lead to the sterile accumulation of material goods and to the ostentation of luxury goods. Rather than favoring ambition, capitalism holds it back.

"Unlimited greed for gain is not in the least identical with capitalism, and is still less its spirit. Capitalism *may* even be identical with the restraint, or at least a rational tempering, of this irrational impulse. But capitalism is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever *renewed* profit, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise."¹⁴

He does not equate it either with the obsessive pursuit of profit and the use of wealth to obtain other objectives (cfr. Aristotle¹⁵) or benefits, such as political power or cultural influence (patronage). Rather, Weber refers to a systematic, methodical, and rational pursuit of wealth as an end in itself and in the long term, devoting to it all energies, and constantly reinvesting the benefits; i.e. winning, saving, reinvesting.

"Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can."¹⁶ This phrase, which John Wesley pronounced in 1760, sums up the core of Calvinistic ethic, according to Weber. In other words, the core of this ethic would be "the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment

¹² "The whole of Max Weber's facts and arguments fits perfectly into Marx's system." J.A. SCHUMPETER, *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*, Routledge, New York 2003, 11. Cfr. I.M. ZEITLIN, *Ideología y teoría sociológica*, Amorrortu, 2ª ed., Buenos Aires 2006, 127-180.

¹³ M. WEBER, *The Protestant ethic...*, 91. Anyway, in this book, Weber presents two versions of his thesis, one moderate and one more radical. In fact, he also states that the Calvinist ethic was decisive. J.M. FORTE, "Religion and capitalism. Weber, Marx and the materialist controversy," in *Philosophy & social criticism*, 34/4 (2008) 427-448, here 432-433.

¹⁴ M. WEBER, *The Protestant ethic...*, 17.

¹⁵ "Wealth is not the good being sought, for it is a useful thing and for the sake of something else." *Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics*, edited by R.C. Barlett & S.D. Collins, book 1, ch. 5, Chicago UP, Chicago 2011, 7.

¹⁶ K.L. CARDER, *Sermons on United Methodist Beliefs*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1991, 70.