

## THE PARKING ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF BUREAUCRACY

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A recent article in the San Francisco [Chronicle](#) reports that that fair city's Municipal Transportation Authority (MTA) is facing a \$19.8 million deficit. There would be nothing particularly newsworthy in this report, if we restrict ourselves to the observation that deficits of this magnitude are now pretty much expected of large municipal bureaucracies.

However, what has precipitated a not insignificant response of public ire and angst is the MTA's proposed method for funding its more than trivial shortfall. In a display of managerial arrogance and creativity that seems endemic to California – and especially San Francisco – the MTA proposes to climb out of its budgetary abyss by generating yet more revenue from parking citations. Of course, there is little reason to believe that MTA management would have the slightest qualms about funding a mere \$19 million deficit in this manner, when indeed its existing budget base includes \$86 million in revenue already derived from the same source.

At this point, before really looking at the consequences of this Orwellian fiscal strategy, let us pause and consider a seemingly irrelevant but nonetheless related subject.

It has been eight years and a century since the publication of Max Weber's classic work on social theory, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. So, you ask, what does that have to do with parking citations -- did Weber, who died in 1920 from the Spanish influenza, even know how to drive an automobile? This may prompt some wags to respond, well, if he did and he came to San Francisco, he most assuredly would get a parking citation – a proposition which will undoubtedly next appear as the subject of some plodding graduate sociology dissertation.

Nonetheless, Weber's theory of the protestant ethic directly bears on the MTA's inability to address both morally and ethically its budgetary failure.

From *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* it will be remembered that Weber proposed that Calvin's theology of the elect and the reprobate fueled the emergence of capitalism throughout the West – with its most successful forms being the British mercantile and American free-enterprise political economies. His thesis was simple; the acquisition of capital demonstrates personal success, and personal success in turn demonstrates that, if you play by the rules, you cleanse yourself of Adamic sin and the prospect of eternal damnation – something akin to trying to find a parking space in downtown San Francisco.

Unfortunately, many Weberian scholars tend to focus on the elements of Calvinism inhering in the protestant ethic, and neglect its theological antecedents – especially the part about playing by the rules. Playing by the rules, prior to Saul becoming Paul, was simply a matter of keeping Yahweh happy. The Pauline contribution upped the ante a bit by adding eternal damnation into the stakes, Muhammad thankfully contributed some virgins, and Calvin ensured that the house won most of the bets.

The point here is not that Weber's theory of the protestant ethic employed Calvinism as an explanative tool to justify the success of Western capitalism, but rather that it provides a path by which we see how Western *moral theology* became in fact a highly secularized *moral ideology*. Playing by a commonly agreed-upon set of rules would get you into heaven, make you rich, and possibly even elected to public office.

In America the ideological secularization and resulting influence of the protestant ethic grew incrementally from the birth of the republic, and culminated in the nostalgically labeled Eisenhower years of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. More generally, many would argue that, in the decades that followed, the ideological core values of the Western democracies were eaten away by burgeoning populations consuming an inversely decreasing set of finite resources. As a result, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century it has become inordinately difficult to play by the rules we once knew so well. Nietzsche peeked over the wall and saw it first; we are all beyond good and evil, god is dead, and so is the protestant ethic.

So – along with the absence of mom, apple pie and the protestant ethic -- is this nihilistic view of the world the reason underlying the San Francisco Municipal Transit Authority's draconian budgetary strategy?

No, the situation is even uglier. For by proposing to fund a budget deficit from parking citations, the MTA has taken poor Rev. Calvin and, as Marx did to Hegel, turned him on his head. The proposed MTA budget strategy is predicated on deriving revenue from illegal human activity. It invidiously reminds the citizens of San Francisco that not only do their votes not count, but that they are inherently evil and, by whatever god there is, the MTA shall profit from that evil.

So much for ethics, morality and public policy formation in the City and County of San Francisco.

With some concluding thoughts about Max Weber, although not clearly documented, it is understood that as a student at the University of Heidelberg in the early 1880's he became quite accomplished at fencing. He was known to carry his foils, sabers and other fencing equipment in a small cart, which he would push about the campus to his fencing lessons, matches, etc.

In this light and a follow-up to our previous speculation regarding Weber's hypothetical visit to San Francisco, it can reasonably be said that if he came to the City, he not only would have received a parking citation, but that additionally the poor young man would probably have...left his *cart* in San Francisco.