

# Between sociology and theology: the spirit of capitalism debate

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## Abstract

This paper revisits the debate on the Spirit of Capitalism in order to show how this well-known sociological theme might be revitalised through an encounter with themes from theology. The paper seeks to offer some of the resources by which it might be possible to think about the 'moral texture' of the German tradition of sociology. In so doing, it seeks to compare and contrast the general theme of the Spirit of Capitalism in the work of the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich with debates raised in the neo-Kantian sociology of Georg Simmel and Max Weber. Tillich's discussion of the Spirit of Capitalism is discussed in detail and it is used as the basis for some concluding speculations about the relationship between the disciplines of sociology and theology.

## Introduction

The theme of the Spirit of Capitalism is a lodestone for the social theory which locates itself by reference to the heritage of the sociological tradition. As Nisbet notes, that tradition contains within itself a definite 'moral texture' which draws upon the commitment of founders such as Weber to affirm certain moral aspirations and values despite the conflicts and processes of their times (Nisbet, 1970: 18). Yet there has been something of a flattening of that moral texture. The debate about the Spirit of Capitalism has become largely identified as a technical problem of economic history or sociological historiography (see for example Campbell, 1987; Marshall, 1982).

However it is arguably the case that the debate about the Spirit of Capitalism is more deeply and perhaps even overwhelmingly concerned to understand the existential and moral implications for human being of the constituted present, than it is concerned with the rather drier stuff of the establishment of scientific categories or rigorous history. This is clear from much of the tone and temper of Weber's work (Lowith, 1993; Turner, 1996). It is a reflection of what is, perhaps, the central moral insight of the German tradition (Levine, 1995) in sociology. That temper has been summarised by Kieran Flanagan, drawing on the insight of Lepenies. The German tradition is

organised around the contention that: 'The spirit of calculation and predictability, the property of power of science, which sociology sought to emulate, became a mechanism for the despiritualisation of culture and also its dehumanisation'. Flanagan makes the apposite contention that: 'In this division, sociology was divided against itself, seeming to be implicated in the advance of what it despised' (Flanagan, 1996: 105–106). The tension is clear in Weber's famous 'Vocation' essays (Weber, 1948). It is also a guiding principle of Simmel's account of the tragedy of culture (Simmel, 1950). The work of both sociologists can be interpreted as a sustained meditation upon the melancholy realisation that the emancipation of humanity from the weight of superstition and compulsion has only led to the domination of the abstraction and calculation of rationality to such an extent that the philosopher's ideal of the freedom of humanity has led, instead, to entrapment and diminution. Typically, Weber said that the limitation of the individual to the abstract and calculable demands of specialisation means, 'a renunciation, a departure from an age of full and beautiful humanity, which can no more be repeated in the course of our cultural development than can the flower of the Athenian culture of antiquity' (Weber, 1930: 181).

This distinctive theme and temper of the German tradition is almost certainly a result of the debt that it owes to Kantian philosophy. The debt goes much deeper than the fact that Weber or Simmel engaged in work that might be labelled neo-Kantian (Turner, 1996). Rather, the German tradition is Kantian in two more fundamental ways. First, it is Kantian at an epistemological level in that it focuses upon the ideal types (Weber) or the forms (Simmel) which are the basis of understanding and which are, moreover, the principle of the organisation of empirical experiences (Milbank, 1990). The consequence of this strand of Kantianism is that German sociology is always aware of the non-rational which escapes – or at least does not adequately fit with – the rational categories of the sociological understanding. Ultimately, German sociology reveals aspects of the empirical which it cannot understand. For Weber, those non-rational aspects were forced into the category of charisma and for Simmel they were collapsed into the purportedly motivating principle of life. Second, German sociology is Kantian at an ethical level. Kantian philosophy established the ethical centrality of the freedom of humanity from external compulsion (Kant, 1998). That freedom is reflected in the definition of Enlightenment as the courage to use one's own understanding (Kant, 1991) and it is also reflected in the non-naturalism of the epistemological position that experiences need to be ordered and rendered intelligible through theoretical constructions. This strand of the debt to Kant leads directly to the melancholy temper of the German tradition and to its profound sense of the entrapment of humanity in abstraction and calculation. The point is that the sociological concentration on ideal types or forms necessarily led to a methodology which centralised the categories that make humans who and what they are. But if those types or forms are put at the centre of the sociological agenda, then they are likely to be lent an integrity of their own, in such a way that *they* become the principles of explanation rather

than the voluntaristic action of social actors. Consequently, those potential actors become identified as the prisoners of the types or the forms. The types or the forms which the sociologist constructs in order to interpret the empirical thus become external to the empirical and they become obstacles in the way of human freedom (this problem can be seen in Weber's typology of social action as well as in Simmel's revelation of the formal regularity of dyadic and triadic relations; Weber, 1968; Simmel, 1950). Human freedom becomes something which needs to be emancipated and released from the prison that sociologists construct in the attempt to interpret and to understand nothing other than human freedom.

It is the concern of this paper to outline an account of the Spirit of Capitalism which has an ambivalent relationship to the sociological tradition. That account is offered by the German theologian Paul Tillich. It is not the contention of this paper that Tillich was *causally* influenced by Weber or Simmel. Indeed it is noticeable that when Tillich discusses the Spirit of Capitalism, references to Weber are absent and to Simmel are fleeting. Rather, it is suggested that all three analysts share the moral insight that humanity has become a prisoner in a world of rational abstraction and calculation. They share the attitude of the German tradition of sociology rather than references to one another. Yet Tillich wrote as a theologian rather than as a sociologist and, thereby, unlike Weber and Simmel, he was able to point to a way out of that entrapment.

The contextualisation of Tillich with Weber and Simmel is legitimate because his intellectual horizons were deeply marked by a sociological awareness. First, Tillich worked in an environment which was heavily marked by the discipline of sociology. He taught at the University of Frankfurt until he was dismissed by the Nazis in 1933 (for the relationship between Tillich and the Frankfurt School, see Champion, 1986). He subsequently went into exile in the United States, where he died in 1965. Second, it is possible to follow Erhard Stölting and suggest that Tillich's work is, 'situated at the borderline between German Protestant theology and social theory' (Stölting, 1985: 181). In this way, the case of Tillich might also be taken as casting an interesting sidelight upon the issue of the relationship between social theory and theological procedures of thought and analysis (a relationship which is dealt with rather too easily perhaps in Milbank, 1990. Compare Milbank's discussion of the emergence of social theory as an inversion and opposition to theology, with the very different arguments of Bryan Turner and Kieran Flanagan according to whom it is possible to detect the resonance or recollection of theological themes in social theory; Turner, 1996; Flanagan, 1996, 1996a).

## Definitions and concerns

When Weber confronted the problem of defining exactly what he meant by the Spirit of Capitalism, he entered into something by way of a methodological digression in the text of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Weber said that the meaning of the Spirit of Capitalism could only be established as a general statement after all the relevant historical and empirical material had been synthesised: 'it must be gradually put together out of the individual parts which are taken from historical reality to make it up. Thus the final and definitive concept cannot stand at the beginning of the investigation, but must come at the end' (Weber, 1930: 47).

It is more than a little questionable whether Weber did in fact carry out the tacit promise of that methodological statement. Weber's text seems to be rather too willing to use Benjamin Franklin as the representative of all the 'individual parts'. The text is more concerned with what seems to have really interested Weber, the analysis of the specific personality formation which he took Franklin to express most clearly. This was a kind of historically contingent personality which was marked by a focus on: 'the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life'. Weber goes on to say that Franklin illustrates the subordination of humanity to abstraction and calculation: 'Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs' (Weber, 1930: 53). As such, Weber takes the Spirit of Capitalism to be one of the strands of the rationalisation of life and conduct. It is an aspect of the process through which life and conduct is organised more and more tightly, according to principles of rationality, even though the ultimate values which justify that organisation are themselves non-rational (Weber, 1930: 78).

Within Weber's definition it is possible to identify a narrative of the bifurcation of the meaningfulness of the world. For Weber, the Spirit of Capitalism is completely meaningful in its own this-worldly terms, but the basis upon which that rational meaningfulness is established is itself non-rational. Put simply, Weber is showing that there is no rational justification for the principle that it is virtuous to work hard in order to make money other than the justification which is offered by the principle itself.

With Tillich, it is possible to identify a similar recognition of bifurcation. Weber sees the constitution of the modern world in terms of the processual domination of rationalities. As such, he tends to identify the possibility of a critique of that process with the non-rational impulses of the aesthetic or with the aestheticisation of politics which is implied by the sociology of charisma. But Tillich's recognition of the bifurcation of the world is rehearsed in a different frame. He sees the Spirit of Capitalism in terms of the domination of the temporal over the infinite.

Tillich's most precise and sociologically nuanced discussion of the Spirit of Capitalism is developed in his book *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart*. The book was published in Germany in 1932 and issued in an English translation by H. Richard Niebuhr under the title *The Religious Situation* in 1956. It is to this text of Tillich that this paper will pay attention. What Tillich tries to do in that book is develop and justify the thesis that, contrary to the then popular

diagnoses of writers like Spengler, the West is not experiencing a period of cultural dissolution but that, rather, the events of the time are signs of a widespread revolt against capitalist society.

What writers like Spengler took as signs of decay and of portentous times ahead, Tillich identified as signs of hope. It must be said, however, that Tillich was not ignorant of his times and, therefore, he did not pretend that this revolt of hope would be justified or come to pass in the immediate future. He operated on a broader terrain than that. He believed that the signs of the times substantiated a thesis about 'the shaking of our time by eternity' (Tillich, 1956: 27). For Tillich, the revolt is fundamentally religious, and therefore a significant part of his book consists in an attempt to examine the contemporary situation of the churches and of the spiritual life outside of those institutions. But in order to develop that analysis and examination, Tillich was first of all required to establish the meaning of capitalism. This is where the concept of the Spirit of Capitalism becomes important. The concept runs all the way through the analysis that is developed in *The Religious Situation* although its clearest statements are to be found in the initial pages. He conceptualises the Spirit of Capitalism rather than capitalism more narrowly, because he wants to make the point that the revolt that he identifies in the contemporary present is of a general cultural order and significance (hence Tillich talks about art and aesthetics) and not just simply economic or local. Tillich made this clear when he wrote that:

the *spirit of capitalist society*, which occupies a central place in the following discussion does not mean the spirit of individual men or of a class or a party. It is rather a symbol for an ultimate, fundamental attitude toward the world. It is, to be sure, a very real symbol and in our situation it is most concretely visible in actual, capitalist society, whence it derives its name. But it means something far wider than this society. (Tillich, 1956: 27)

The breadth of Tillich's appreciation of the definition and stakes of the theme of the Spirit of Capitalism is made clear in passages like the following:

the fundamental virtues in the ethics of capitalist society are economic efficiency, developed to the utmost degree of ruthless activity, on the part of the leaders, submissive acceptance of their place in the great machine of the whole economic life on the part of those led, obedient subjection on the part of all to the conventions of bourgeois custom and, along with these, impersonal charity for the support of the economically helpless. (Tillich, 1956: 44)

This is a passage which moves with some rapidity across concerns and, for that matter, across areas which have emerged as sub-disciplines within the wider enterprise of sociology. Tillich is saying that the Spirit of Capitalism certainly shares an identity with the needs and exigencies of rational capitalist

production. But he is also showing how the Spirit has a determining impact upon relationships of power, authority and legitimacy as well as moral codes and the organisation of such emotions as compassion (compare Tillich on the Spirit of Capitalism and charity with the account of the relationship between Protestantism and charity which is provided in Watt, 1957).

It has to be admitted that there is the ghost of a certain reductionism about Tillich's account. Yet it is also clear that even if Tillich is prepared to argue that the capitalist relationships of production are determining in the last instance, he is actually more concerned with the broader social and cultural context. For Tillich, the requirements and processes of capitalist production are only interesting in relation to their moral and existential implications. That is to say, for Tillich, the Spirit of Capitalism ought to be defined as a *situation*.

### **The situation of the spirit of capitalism**

As William Nicholls notes, when Tillich refers to a *situation* he is concerned to do much more than register simply empirical, temporal, phenomena. Indeed, it is in the way that Tillich conceptualises the situation that the bifurcation he identifies between the temporal and the infinite comes to the centre of the analytical frame.

When he analyses the situation, what Tillich is concerned to do is examine how the temporal questions of existential meaning and value correlate (or in fact fail to correlate) with the infinite and existentially overwhelmingly meaningful truths of Revelation (Nicholls, 1969: 255–256). This bifurcation becomes clear when Tillich specifies that any understanding of the religious situation must have two sides. The first refers to 'the temporal and human'. He says that analysis in these terms, 'will speak of tendencies in specifically religious affairs, of churches, sects, theologies and all sorts of accompanying religious movements' (Tillich, 1956: 36). Yet Tillich believes that such analysis is not enough. This leads to the second side of his appreciation of the meaning of situation. It can be illustrated if Tillich's case of religion is followed through. He says that while the analysis of the 'temporal and human' is valuable, 'the questionable element in this procedure is that attention is given to just those things with which religion itself is not concerned ... while the real meaning ... the eternal to which all things refer, is neglected' (Tillich, 1956: 36). Thus, for Tillich, the concern of analysis is not just the temporal and human. Rather, Tillich wants to relate what is temporal and human to the infinite. In so doing, he wants to try to gain some understanding of the eternal significance of that which is of the here and now. This typically Protestant dialectical thesis leads Tillich to the methodological position that 'Every spiritual phenomenon of a period expresses its eternal content and one of the most important characteristics of a time has been defined when we have discovered which of the various aspects of culture is most expressive of its real meaning' (Tillich, 1956: 37). The procedure which Tillich therefore adopts is one which examines social and cultural phenomena in order to try to understand what real meaning they

express. That real meaning is itself not reduced to the temporal and human (to the this-worldly here and now) but is instead referred to ultimate and eternal meaningfulness. These are precisely the terms in which Tillich attempted to understand the significance of the Spirit of Capitalism and, moreover, precisely the terms through which he felt able to condemn it.

For Tillich, the religious situation typical of the situation of the Spirit of Capitalism is one which is threatened by the abyss of meaninglessness (and in these terms, the Nazism which Tillich saw on the very near horizon would be identified as a product of meaninglessness). The Spirit of Capitalism has led to meaninglessness because it has destroyed the possibility of the spiritual. Consequently it has demolished the horizon of the eternal. Tillich says that: 'to live spiritually is to live in the presence of meaning and without an ultimate meaning everything disappears into the abyss of meaninglessness'. This ultimate meaning is 'unconditioned' by the temporal. In fact, it underpins the temporal. Tillich goes on to say that 'To speak of an unconditioned meaning is to speak of that which transcends the process of mere becoming, the mere transition from past to future; it is to speak of that which supports the times but is not subject to them. If any present has meaning it has eternity' (Tillich, 1956: 35). By extension, if a present has no eternity it has no meaning. It is an opening up to meaninglessness. It is in this context that Tillich launches his condemnation of, 'The spirit of a finitude which lives within itself [which] is, for our time, the spirit of capitalist society' (Tillich, 1956: 105).

According to Tillich the Spirit of Capitalism implies meaninglessness precisely because, as Weber would also propose, it is so closely entwined with processes of rationalisation. With that rationalisation, Tillich believes, the horizon of the eternal has been clouded or turned into something too trying. Instead, the temporal orients itself to itself through a focus on calculation and abstractions which are underpinned by nothing. This is the source of meaninglessness. The unconditioned foundations of meaning are repudiated and value becomes identical with consumption. For example, Tillich contends that the free market is the principle which is most defining of the Spirit of Capitalism but that: 'In the free market economy the attitude toward material things comes to be dominating, loveless, without the sense of community with them'. He continues to argue that: 'Things become wares – objects whose meaning lies in the production of profits in transactions of buying and selling, not in the enrichment of personal life. They are acquired and disposed of by their masters, not by beings who have some kind of community with them' (Tillich, 1956: 106). It becomes impossible to have any full and existentially overwhelming relationship with things become wares and with the entirely finite.

Tillich believes that this market rationality has serious existential implications for human being and, in particular, for the personality of individuals. Yet he is not totally dismissive of it. He is quite open about the fact that, as a liberal Protestant, he is happy to see the market eroding the pretence that things themselves can possess sanctity (that is, Tillich is prepared cautiously to accept that logic of the market which dissolves the Catholic position that the

encounter with God is mediated in part through historical objects. The market achieves this in so far as it attacks permanence and instead promotes obsolescence). Tillich expresses his cautious embrace of the market when he says that 'It emancipates men from finite holy things which claim for themselves the holiness of the eternal; it releases them from sanctified bondage to things and exalts personality above the whole realm of things' (Tillich, 1956: 107). For Tillich, the way the market 'exalts personality' is important. This is because he identifies personality with conscience and it is precisely there, in the personality of the individual, that Protestantism locates the encounter with God. But Tillich finds it impossible to embrace completely the kind of personality which is typical of the Spirit of Capitalism since market rationality, 'confines personality by pressing it into endless service in the rule over impoverished things; thus personality itself is impoverished and devoted to the world of the finite'. He announces that, 'that is the effect of the capitalist spirit in liberal economy' (Tillich, 1956: 107–108).

The consequences of the Spirit of Capitalism for personality formation constitute one of the main areas of Tillich's concern. He says that because market rationality deprives things of any infinite meaning, they are incapable of bringing about any sense of satisfaction. As such, personality is fundamentally dissatisfied: 'Things which have lost their meaning do not satisfy; they drive men on from one thing to another and there is no possibility of satisfaction. Impoverished personality is left without a definitely directed love'. Tillich speculates that this quest for a satisfaction which can never be attained is exacerbated and exploited by advertising. As such he is suggesting that it is not advertising and what Haug was later to call 'commodity aesthetics' that creates the obsessive personalities of consumerism. Rather it is the Spirit of Capitalism that generates a personality type which commodity aesthetics subsequently exploit and promise dishonestly to satisfy (Tillich, 1956: 108; Haug, 1986).

According to Tillich, this situation has far-reaching implications. At one level, he almost seems to embrace the quest for satisfaction which the Spirit of Capitalism introduces into personality formation. After all, it implies, 'the emancipation of man from an earthbound, unambitious dullness; it is the civilizing release of personality from the bonds of animal existence and from the merely fortuitous satisfaction of needs' (Tillich, 1956: 108). Dissatisfaction gives individuals possessed of the personality of the Spirit of Capitalism something to aspire towards which is beyond the present. This makes it seem that Tillich is suggesting that the Spirit of Capitalism gestures towards the infinite despite its closure of meanings and ambitions to within the confines of the finite questions of rationality. However, he quickly recoils from such a conclusion. Certainly, Tillich says, the quest for satisfaction 'emancipates' humans from the dull facts of existence and lends them horizons beyond the here and now towards which to aim. But, 'this emancipation implies coercion to engage in unending, ever-increasing, life-consuming activity in the service of unlimited wants' (this comment recalls Durkheim's account of anomie; see Durkheim, 1952). Tillich continues: 'It means the domination of the economic



functions of life; its consequence is bondage to time and hence also the lack of time for attention to the eternal ... It drives the spirit about within the inescapable and unending circle of the finite' (Tillich, 1956: 108–109). The consequence is, 'a self-seeking, time-fettered existence' (Tillich, 1956: 50).

With these comments on personality formation, Tillich is once again pointing towards the central bifurcation between the finite and the infinite. Tillich understands the infinite in a normative way through the prism of a theological consciousness. For him, the infinite is that which is beyond and behind the temporal and human this-worldliness of the finite. It is known through its overwhelming and engulfing existential meaningfulness. Moreover, Tillich identifies the spiritual focus of the individual as being properly oriented towards that unconditioned infinity. But, Tillich is proposing, the Spirit of Capitalism locks the individual and all of her or his ambitions and desires into a frame which is only oriented towards this world. Consequently the abyss of meaninglessness opens up.

Furthermore the individual almost becomes incapable of grasping the possibility of any realm of the unconditioned, of any realm of meaning beyond the superficialities of the present, because she or he is too seduced by advertising or, much more simply, perhaps, too busy thanks to time-discipline, to be able to care and concentrate. All the individual is left with is her or his own unsatisfied desires and an 'impulse to seek one's own interests at the expense of others'. Individuals turn inwards, upon their own finite existence and desires. Conflict becomes dominant. Tillich writes that 'The peculiarly demonic element in the situation of capitalist society is this, that the conflict is not the expression of individual arbitrariness or of chaotic anarchy but is necessarily bound up with the maintenance of the capitalist economic system and is the result of that system itself' (Tillich, 1956: 109). This contention links to Tillich's interpretation of evil; see the discussion in Schwarz, 1995). Yet despite everything it is possible to *hope*.

## **The disturbance of the spirit**

For Tillich, the grounds for hope are substantiated by the questions which are being put against the Spirit of Capitalism. These questions are represented in two forms. First, in political attempts to release men and women from the 'war of all against all' which capitalist rationality and individualisation produces. Second, in the struggle of cultural production to try to find some infinite meaning from out of the finite meaninglessness of the present and its forms of understanding. Tillich believes that these questionings are indicative of nothing more than the irruption into the Spirit of Capitalism of the spirit of humanity emancipated from the finite. In a long passage Tillich writes:

The self-sufficient this-worldliness of capitalist culture and religion is being disturbed. Questions and doubts are arising on all sides; they point toward

something beyond time and threaten the security of a present which has cut itself loose from the eternal. Doubt is cast upon the complete rationality of the three great powers, science, technique and capitalist economy; abysses are opening on all sides and everywhere the souls of men are struggling for fulfillments which must arise out of the deeper strata of life. (Tillich, 1956: 52)

With this passage, Tillich gestures towards the work of Simmel. There is no doubt that Tillich himself was aware of the work of Georg Simmel. In *The Religious Situation* he claims that Simmel had demonstrated an awareness of 'the irrationality of the existent'. According to Tillich, Simmel stands with Nietzsche and Bergson in showing that there is a crucial distinction to be drawn 'between creative life and petrifying calculation' (Tillich, 1956: 58). That distinction mirrors the one Tillich emphasises between the finite and the infinite. Elsewhere, in a lecture delivered in 1919 entitled, 'On the Idea of a Theology of Culture', Tillich applauded Simmel for engaging in 'cultural-theological tasks' through his sociology of culture. This was despite the fact that he also felt that it was appropriate to criticise Simmel's account of the significance of Expressionist art. According to Tillich, Simmel was wrong to see it as the mere destruction of bourgeois petrification. Tillich saw what he called, 'the cosmic sense of the guilt of sheer existence' in Expressionism (Tillich, 1987: 4546; see Simmel, 1971, 1997a).

What Tillich obviously took from Simmel was that latter's explicit and highly developed sociological account of the conflict of modern culture. For Simmel, the concept of culture refers to the processes whereby, 'life produces certain forms in which it expresses and realizes itself; works of art, religions, sciences, technologies, laws, and innumerable others' (Simmel, 1971: 375). According to Simmel, it is possible to identify a conflict in culture precisely because those forms come to stand apart from life. They petrify and ossify and become meaningless from the point of view of the expressive meaningfulness which is understood in the concept of life. It should be clear that this conflict is a further reflection of the temper of the German tradition in sociology. After all, Simmel is suggesting that one of the defining traits of the contemporary present is the tendency of humanly produced forms to come to stand over and above their erstwhile creators. In other words, Simmel's sociology is temperamentally similar to Weber's (and of course to Tillich's theology of culture) in that they share a concern with the analysis of the prison that the world has become to humanity.

Indeed, there is also a similarity between Tillich's more general concerns in his diagnosis of the religious situation and themes in Simmel's rather unjustly neglected sociology of religion. As we have seen, Tillich saw the contemporary situation as one of a revolt against the domination of abstraction, calculation and rationality which he identified as synonymous with the Spirit of Capitalism. What that thesis does not adequately spell out, however, is the source and the motivation of that revolt. Tillich has to identify that source in some yearning or desire to find meaning in the context of the trap of rationalised meaninglessness

that the world has become. It might be said that for Tillich the revolt against the Spirit of Capitalism is an expression of a human need for the transcendental and ultimate.

If those conjectures are valid, they serve to connect Tillich to Simmel. In an essay which was first published in 1911 – that is, at more or less the time that he was writing about Expressionism and therefore in a body of work that Tillich knew – Simmel spoke about: ‘the whole predicament in which an enormous proportion of civilized humanity finds itself today: it is beset once more by powerful needs’. Those are the needs for ultimate meaning and meaningfulness, but Simmel believes that the sources which have historically offered satisfaction have been undermined: ‘humanity ... sees the historical and the sole existing means of fulfilling those needs as mere fantasy, and thus is left with the needs themselves completely unanswered’. This is due in no small part to the Enlightenment which, Simmel contends, criticised the content of religion whilst leaving intact the almost anthropological needs that religion resolves. For Simmel then, the Enlightenment has indeed released humanity from aspects of the past, but without the humility to recognise that some aspects of the past served important needs and, moreover, without being able to offer anything in their stead (Simmel 1997b: 9). Indeed, Simmel went on in a way which remarkably anticipates some of Tillich’s contentions. He said that:

The real gravity of the current situation is that not only this or that particular dogma but the object of transcendent faith per se is characterized as illusory. What survives is no longer the form of transcendence seeking new fulfillment but something more profound and more desperate: it is a yearning, once fulfilled by the idea of transcendence, and now – although it is a concrete reality within the soul – paralyzed by the withdrawal of the content of faith and as if cut off from the path to its own life. (Simmel, 1997b: 9)

As Eugene Rochberg-Halton has noted, Simmel’s approach can be labelled as neo-Kantian: ‘Simmel, as a neo-Kantian formalist, saw life as a sensory manifold, needing to be organized by something outside of itself (Rochberg-Halton, 1989: 325). The recognition of the relationship between Simmel and Kant takes on extra layers of resonance when it is recalled that Tillich too embraced aspects of Kantianism and, in particular, the association of Enlightenment with maturity. Strangely then, Tillich adopted a more one dimensional embrace of the Enlightenment than Simmel. Tillich’s debt to Kant actually goes beyond the borrowing of the meaning of Enlightenment. It also underpins his whole methodology. It is certainly reasonable to propose that Tillich’s central bifurcation of the temporal and petrified on the one hand and the infinite and the spirit on the other can be read as a variation of the division between the phenomenal and the noumenal, mediated through Dilthey (see in particular, Dilthey, 1988).

Now, one of the major problems with Simmel’s sociology of culture is that it tends to see the conflict of culture in fairly ahistorical terms. He identifies a

general process and pays relatively little attention to its temporality. He was more interested in the forms of the understanding of the process. Tillich overcomes this problem by connecting the analysis of disturbances to the finite by the infinite to special historical moments of what he calls *kairos*. He takes the inspiration for his concept of *kairos* from the New Testament and, in particular from the Gospel of Mark where it refers to Christ's statement after the arrest of John the Baptist that 'The time is fulfilled' (Mark 1: 15, Revised Standard Version). However, Turner and Factor have proposed that Tillich derived the concept from Max Scheler (Turner and Factor, 1984: 112). Unfortunately, they do not really substantiate this claim although it is worth noting that in so far as sociology is a discipline of secular reason (Milbank, 1990), it is not surprising that sociologists will tend to identify the roots of concepts in the secular rather than the theological.

Tillich defines *kairos* as: 'fulfilled time, the moment of time which is invaded by eternity' (Tillich 1956: 176). Or, as he put it immediately after the First World War: 'Kairos ... signifies a moment of time filled with unconditioned meaning and demand'. He went on: 'Kairos is the fulfilled moment of time in which the present and the future, the holy that is given and the holy that is demanded meet, and from whose concrete tensions the new creation proceeds in which sacred import is realized in necessary form' (Tillich, 1987: 57). As such, *kairos* refers to a historical moment in which there is a movement towards the transcendence of the bifurcation between the finite and the infinite: 'In a *kairos*, the on-going dialectic is heightened and speeded up, so that society has the opportunity to become significantly less estranged' (Nicholls, 1969: 271).

This might make it seem as if *kairos* is therefore the moment in which the eternal becomes contained in the forms of this-world. But Tillich denies this possibility. Instead, he once again confirms the extent to which he is able to hope: 'Kairos is not perfect completion in time. To act and wait in the sense of *Kairos* means to wait upon the invasion of the eternal and to act accordingly, not to wait and act as though the eternal were a fixed quantity which could be introduced into time, as a social structure which represents the end and goal of history for instance' (Tillich, 1956: 176. This passage clearly contains an attack on messianic Marxism. Wallerstein has attempted to operationalise the concept of *kairos*, although in a way that is not directly relevant to the concerns of this paper; see Bulman, 1996).

For Tillich then, *kairos* is a moment when the eternal swamps the temporal. Consequently, *kairoi* are not produced through voluntaristic social and cultural action. Rather, moments of *kairos* happen when the time is ripe and it is the obligation of the individual to remain ready to receive and accept them. Moments of *kairos* require a personality on the part of the individual which is oriented towards the infinite and not deluded into accepting that the temporal and the finite is all that there can possibly be. *Kairos* is a moment in which the eternal that no social and cultural forms can possibly contain overwhelms those forms. That overwhelming validates not just opposition to the this-worldly but, also, a more meaningful being in the world. Tillich was able to

confirm his commitment to aspects of the Enlightenment when he interpreted it in just this way: 'There was the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Everything ... was a preparation for the great *Kairos*, the great moment in which mature reason is reached in mankind' (Tillich, 1987: 317). Tillich also believed that the years immediately after the First World War were a moment of *kairos* in Germany. He wrote about 'the contemporary *Kairos*' in which it was possible to confront the existent world in the name of something more (for an attempt to relate Tillich's interpretation of the significance of the First World War to his own experiences on the Western Front, see Stone, 1980).

The attempt to tie *kairos* to specific historical moments like the Enlightenment or the First World War makes the point that for Tillich it is not an abstract concept. Rather, *kairos* instantiates very clear and definite ethical obligations. In 1923, Tillich wrote: 'the idea of *Kairos* ... does not lead to rational utopianism or to the mystical negation of the world but, rather, to a new and creative fulfillment of forms with an import borne by power and eros but penetrated by obedience to unconditioned form' (Tillich, 1987: 64). Meanwhile, towards the end of his life, Tillich spoke about the 'basic *kairos*' which establishes the 'centre of history' and is the principle of the establishment of a, 'religious cultural group ... [in] an existential encounter with the central event' of the 'appearance of Jesus as Christ'. *Kairos* compels community (Tillich, 1963: 149, 150).

## Conclusion

From a sociological perspective, Tillich's emphasis on *kairos* as the moment of revolt against the Spirit of Capitalism is little more than mysticism. Moreover, it would be sociologically illegitimate because it interprets social and cultural action as due in some measure to extra-social compulsions. Weber would have probably condemned Tillich as one of those who are unable to, 'countenance the stern seriousness of our fateful times' (Weber, 1948: 149). Simmel, meanwhile, likely would have been better disposed towards Tillich's hope although in the end he would have probably rejected it as an inappropriate formalisation of that yearning which is beyond the categories of sociological understanding.

Yet perhaps it is there, in the different attitudes towards these 'fateful times' that it is possible to identify what sociology and theology can offer to one another. What sociology offers to theology is a commitment to understand and to interpret the present as an inescapable social and cultural reality that determines what humanity might or might not be able to desire and accomplish. Sociology lends theology a substantive awareness of dehumanisation. By contrast, what theology offers to sociology is a faith in the ability of humanity to revolt against dehumanisation and thus become the source of a moral sense of community which will take individuals beyond the petty and narrow personalities of abstraction and calculation. Theology can lend

sociology a hope that might replace Weberian despair (and as recent sociology has demonstrated, there is absolutely no necessary reason why that hope should be tied to Protestantism; Flanagan, 1996).

But such an optimistic conclusion is only viable if it is presumed that sociology and theology are disciplines which can talk to one another. The issue of hope indicates that such a dialogue might be more difficult than it appears at a first glance. The point is that when theology and sociology refer to hope they mean different, and perhaps even incommensurable, conditions. When Tillich refers to hope he wants indicate an openness to the possibility that the coming future will witness the swamping of the abstract, calculable, temporal and rational by the unconditioned infinite. Tillich's hope is one that operates on a historical and possibly even millenarian canvas. Sociology understands hope quite differently. For the sociology that builds upon Kantian foundations, hope is removed from the terrain of the historical and, instead, it becomes an individualistic act (it becomes a product of the personality). For Simmel and Weber then, hope is something the individual feels and experiences rather than which history or the times might substantiate. And once again, Weber's condemnation of those who cannot stare these fateful times in the face comes to the fore.

However, simply because the dialogue with theology might be difficult, that is no reason for sociology to turn away from it. Sociology has much to learn, and much moral nourishment to receive, from a discipline which is at once so near and so very far away. In particular, such a dialogue would serve to restore the melancholy moral texture that Simmel and Weber represent so well. This is because it would force sociologists to recommit themselves to the Kantian promise of the freedom and dignity of humanity and thus once again transform the world that is ordered by the categories of the sociological understanding into the prison from which humanity needs to escape. Despair will be all that is left to sociology and the sources of hope will be put where they belong; in the realm of freedom and thus beyond sociological comprehension. Only the theologians will be able to hope.

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