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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, MAX WEBER, AND THE ELUSIVE “SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM”

I concluded at length, that the People were the best Judges of my Merit; for they buy my Works; and besides, in my Rambles, where I am not personally known, I have frequently heard one or the other of my Adages repeated... ; this gave me some Satisfaction, as it showed not only that my Instructions were regarded, but discovered likewise some Respect for my Authority; and I own that to encourage the practice of remembering and repeating those wise Sentences, I have sometimes *quoted myself* with great gravity.

Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1890: 268–269)

This argument will consider the implications of bringing together and reading alongside one another two – each in their own way – foundational texts. One is Benjamin Franklin's autobiography (1771–90), an unfinished but fascinating record of proto-national self-imagining, an engrossing and frequently amusing story of self-promotion and self-making. The text's centrality for American culture is appropriately elucidated by Christopher Looby: “Franklin's *Autobiography* is in large part an explicit record of an individual's accession to language,” and moreover, it is “also an account of the nation's self-constitution in language” (1986: 73). The other is Max Weber's classical but not undisputed study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.¹

That Weber's influential thesis as expressed therein, despite its numerous shortcomings (some of which will be treated here), still captures the recent scientific imagination is clear, for example, from Richard Roberts's introduction to *Religion*

¹ The German original *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* came out in 1904 and 1905; its English translation by Talcott Parsons was published in 1930 based on the expanded 1920 edition. Anthony Giddens, for one, acknowledges the book's “renowned” and “controversial” status in “modern social science” (2001: vii).

and Transformations of Capitalism. This 1995 collection of essays on the “convergence” of capitalism and religion still makes a valid use of Weber’s paradigmatic model, even as it points to the need for “revisions of Weber’s comparative-historical sociology of religion,” thus confirming, despite the banging it has received, its “extraordinary resilience” (1995: 1).

Joseph Lough’s study, to give another example, is useful for a metacritical perspective on Weber’s theory, and for offering a perspective from which to grasp the underlying theoretical premises in Weber’s entire opus. This 2006 study recognizes Weber’s enduring significance for the study of modernity. Eugene McCarraher, in yet another direct engagement with his scholarly predecessor, takes as a central idea that of the narrative of the disenchantment of the world, pushed by the arrival of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and industrial capitalism, a shorthand for Weber’s thesis (2019: 7).² It is the drift of McCarraher’s argument, however, to dispute the notion that modernity, grasped as the twin effect of technology and industrial capitalism, portends disenchantment; rather, it generates its own entangled forms of enchantment. As a counterpoise to the notion of inevitable, progressive, and thoroughgoing secularization, Terry Eagleton, for one, posits that other forms compete “for the crown of the King of Kings: reason, science, literature, art, nationalism, but especially ‘culture’” (2019: 18), as summarized by McCarraher. Time and again, from the French revolution’s idea of *laïcité* to the Nietzschean hyper-romantic proclamation of the death of God, we see the glimpses of “counterfeit theology” (Eagleton, qtd. in McCarraher 2019: 19), instituting new deities instead of the demoted transcendental being, suggesting that our conditioning by enchantment continues by other means despite the reign of the secularization narrative.

As is well documented, Weber read and used Franklin’s autobiography and his other writings to illustrate “the archetypal example of the ‘spirit of capitalism’” (Dickson and McLachlan 1989: 81).³ My argument here intends to show that, inasmuch as Weber is correct to harness Franklin’s layered text to his sociological and cultural purposes, so is his reading reductive, instrumental, and, ultimately,

² For a more thorough account of the concept of the enchanted universe, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

³ Cf. Dickson and McLachlan 1989; van Kessel 2006; Kolko 1961; Moses 2008; Pangle 2007: 16–29; Spanos 2016: 105–143. In the second, expanded edition of his study, Weber provides detailed and scrupulous footnotes, which themselves read like separate essays responding to his critics and detractors in the wake of the first edition (Weber).

deficient in encompassing the literary and rhetorical strategies of Franklin’s text, therefore drawing from it implications that might be amiss. Certainly, from a literary critical point of view, Weber commits a misreading of Franklin’s complex self-narrative and even other occasional pieces. Specifically, the implications derived from the encounter of the two texts are two-fold. The first implication is that Weber misconstrues some significant facts about Franklin’s texts (his autobiography and other writings that will be discussed) and fails to appreciate the complexity of their representational strategies to the extent that Franklin cannot be taken as supporting for his thesis (whereas some other authors and their texts still could). Therefore, this also calls for a reevaluation of Weber’s famous but nowadays probably too simplistic thesis. The second implication rests less on the status of Weber’s thesis and more on the status of Franklin as promulgated in the context of it, a view of Franklin which, as this discussion aims, among other things, to show, is not compatible with the “historical” Franklin mediated to us by his writings and the critical archive assembled around his work. I will be more interested in arguing for the second proposition and will go from there to show how one might also engage with the first proposition. Weber’s misconstructions notwithstanding, his view is probably recuperated by the indisputably valid insight that Franklin represents and elucidates “the exemplary figure of modernity,” as pointed out by Michael Warner (1990: 75).

Why is Franklin of interest to Weber – and nowadays consequently to us? Weber’s early twentieth-century appropriation of Franklin follows in a long line of like-minded interventions. So historian Gordon Wood in his assessment claims that Franklin’s “symbolic significance” would change in unforeseeable ways in the early nineteenth century (2004: x). Wood’s second claim is that Franklin’s domestication and his embedding in an American context is a belated development, an added construct not available during Franklin’s long life (*ibid.*). As pointed out by Nian-Sheng Huang and Carla Mulford, it was in the course of the nineteenth century (so, as an after-effect) that certain utilitarian and commercial aspects of Franklin’s life began to take root and assume precedence over the other aspects of his biography (2008: 149–152). Still, his stature in the American cultural memory (Mulford’s apt phrase) is guaranteed one way or another. Proverbially, Dave Crockett clung to a copy of Franklin’s autobiography at his death at the Alamo (Wood 2004: 3). In the national narrative aimed at the resurgent waves of immigrants, Franklin’s story of social rise by dint of his own wit, talent, and hard work, would be used as an incentive aimed at newcomers to shepherd them toward acculturation and assimilation (*ibid.*). Then, in the late-nineteenth

century, another oversimplification of Franklin would reach its apotheosis, as some features of his persona taken out of context and transmuted were used as a badge of recognition for the new class of super rich capitalists of the Gilded Age, as contended by Wilson J. Moses (2008: 136–138). Consequently, Franklin's utilitarian morality was duly mocked by F. Scott Fitzgerald in his classical representation of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as one of its ingredients going stale (Watkins 1954; Rohrkemper 1985).

Additionally, Franklin's fame does not circulate only in the American cultural memory but has subsisted in an international context, the case being that Franklin's image was at first boosted in pre-revolutionary France, where he was lionized and glorified more than in the Anglo-American frame. The French were eager to turn Franklin into an American symbol, hoisting on him their projections of America as the uncorrupted New World (Wood 2004: 175). Furthermore, Franklin's high standing in Masonic circles certainly helped establish and consolidate his French connections (Hackett 2014: 49; Van Doren, qtd. in Dodson 2009: 430; Wood 2004: 179; Wright 1997: 264, 269–270, 271). Franklin's cultural influence in Japan, of all places, is also well documented, as his practical wit and ingenuity and his propagation of enlightenment values were used to bolster a modernization process on the Western model in the empire (Forde 1992: 357; Franklin 2012: 308).

What is of note is the periodical reviving of Franklin's personae in their various guises, their reactivation in different socio-cultural contexts for manifold purposes and serving different audiences in the process, thus confirming the fascinating volatility of his life and work philosophy. In that sense, and perhaps somewhat incongruously, Franklin indeed stands as an epitome of Ralph Waldo Emerson's self-reliant man who spurns conformity and consistency to give vent to the waywardness of his genius (2006: 213, 216). Therefore, Franklin's self-presentation both embodies the spirit of capitalism in the semi-periphery of America, where, as Weber contends, it could be seen in sharper relief (2001: 36), as well as belies in its self-construction precisely the precepts that Weber would like to affix to it. Franklin's text (and by extension, Franklin himself) both *is* and *is not* what Weber would want to make of it.

Part of the problem is, which Franklin does Weber have in mind? Is it the Franklin in his eighteenth-century context, to the extent that we can nowadays reconstruct it, where, even as he stepped outside his modest and circumscribed world, he still had to take notice of its firm status rules that he honored in the breach

(Bunker 2019: 6)? Is it the Franklin of the first post-revolutionary generation, who set out to materialize the promises of the Revolution and raise the middling sort into a position of national prominence and civic and political authority, and used Franklin’s ideas and lessons of his own social mobility as their banner (Wood 2004: 239)? Franklin’s many faces and his ability to accommodate to varying circumstances would make him a propagator of different, sometimes conflicting, sets of values: from plebeian ingenuity to gentlemanly exclusivity; from royalist to republican sentiments. All of these figures are Franklin, at different points in his life and career, and none is necessarily false or contrived, but a result of his rational and pragmatic disposition, sometimes driven by necessity. Why do I stress these variations? To argue that, insofar as Max Weber promotes “the modern image of Franklin as the bourgeois moralist obsessed with the making of money and getting ahead” (Wood 2004: 245), he himself engages in creating and perpetuating yet another image of Franklin rehashed for his own purposes.

To outline my argument, I will first present some basic features of Weber’s much-quoted account of the Protestant ascetic sects and their vital contribution to the rise of modern (Western) capitalism, especially as codified in the so-called Puritan thesis within American Studies. I will concurrently illustrate how Weber proposes to insert Franklin’s texts into his model, and then I will conclude by pointing to other possible readings of Franklin’s construction of his own life and the apology for his ideas, and its bearing on the idea of the ethos of capitalism.

WEBERIAN AFTEREFFECTS

In Weber’s broader study on the history of world religions – specifically, their influence on “human behavior” in history – a special place belongs to his culturally imbued account of the impact that some sectarian (ascetic) forms of Protestantism had on the development of modern capitalism, as a methodical and organized form of economic behavior in terms of investing profit and organizing labor (2001: 3–4; Giddens 2001: xi). Intent on grasping cultural and epistemological rather than historical-materialist drives of human behavior, Weber’s approach focuses on the major concepts that would foster the nascent ethics of capitalism. This is explicitly not to claim that Protestantism (i.e. the Reformation) unilaterally or even primarily caused capitalism but it is to argue that the upheaval of religion in North-Western Europe in the sixteenth century was driven by and itself

fostered conditions favorable to the idea of “rational organization” of human economic activity (Weber 2001: 36); that it seriously encouraged a “systemization of ethical conduct” (2001: 76); introduced and imposed a certain idea of time and the use thereof (2001: 104), in short that it ushered in a new form of economic behavior that would much later, in the 1830s, be nominated as capitalism. According to Weber, Benjamin Franklin, mentioned fairly early on in his study as an illustration of the foregoing orientation, serves as an “ideal type” of what the capitalist entrepreneur should be like (2001: 33).

At this point I should reiterate that the principal bent of my text is not to berate Weber for his shortsightedness and oversight of cultural, geographical, or factual specificities that certainly haunt his thesis. The idea is to offer a more rigorous reading of some aspects of his ideas in the context of early- to mid-eighteenth century American colonial culture, itself in turmoil over any number of aspects of its own make-up. In addition, Weber’s thesis is nowadays usable not only in terms of its valid claims about the nature of modernity (and capitalism within it) as also for the questions and debates that it helps raise even where it is demonstrably invalid. These qualifiers are in place insofar as, for instance, Kolko has voiced some serious reservations regarding the application of Weber’s theory in the colonial American context, citing repeatedly Weber’s insufficient appreciation and misinterpretation of American conditions (1961: 244, 245, 247, 250, 255, 259). For one thing, it could be argued that Weber overplays the idea of New England undergoing rampant secularization so that the elements of the religious order easily carry over to the new (secular) order of things. On the contrary, the religious atmosphere of New England of Franklin’s youth is still very dense, as testified by the fact that Jonathan Edwards, a great Puritan preacher and key leader in religious revivals, was Franklin’s contemporary (Edwards b. in 1703; Franklin b. in 1706; cf. Oberg and Stout 1993: 3–4). As Charles Taylor points out, this certainly does not obviate the end point, the decline of religion, but we should not assume that it had already happened at this point nor that it was as inevitable or as definitive as it is made out to be (2004: 423–437).

Furthermore, Kolko revises Weber’s summary assertion of Protestantism’s systematic and rational application of labor and profit accumulation and investment (1961: 252), in as much as, if looked at the history of the economic life in American colonies, it suffered from uncertainty, volatility, and occasionally hostile economic decisions by the colonial center (1961: 252–253). Where Weber posits certainty, a steady accumulation of capital, and the organization

of essentially free labor, reality rather points to the unpredictable forces at work shaped by illegal, hasty, opportune, or speculative decisions. In addition, as Kolko argues, the Puritans did not particularly care to distinguish between free and indentured labor (1961: 254). Another historical simplification is to assume the ideological unity regarding the facets of economic life in the colonies (even in New England), where in fact one had to contend with conflicting and diverging interests (church leaders, colonial administration, merchants, artisans, etc.), which complexity is muted in Weber's account of American conditions, at least (Kolko 1961: 246).⁴ What we would like to do here is draw in particular relief some of the shortcomings, inconsistencies, or historical fallacies of Weber's simplified and misinformed view of early American capitalism.

Not only that, but we probably need to take a longer view, expand our vision, and consider Weber's mystification of the historical origins of capitalism, particularly the way in which he dismisses the South of Europe (since it is embedded in Catholicism) and resorts to unavoidable generalizations in order to foster his views. I will summarily present a few points by way of illustration.⁵

As critics point out, Weber's thesis stumbles over at least two major obstacles. One is the fact that Weber does not produce conclusive evidence that Catholic areas of Western Europe significantly lagged behind the Protestant areas so as to conform to his contention that the Protestant ascendancy in capitalist practices is attributable specifically to religion (Giddens 2001: xxii, xxiii–xxiv). The other correction to his thesis is that capitalism did not arise with the beginning of the Reformation because it was already in existence in the southern (and therefore, Catholic) European regions, which again deserves a closer look and invites further re-examination of Weber's idea that specific ideological, social, or practical underpinnings to the development of capitalism arose only with the support of Protestantism. As Stark contends, for instance, when the capitalist form of economy took off in the centers of Northern Europe, this was still before the Reformation, and they were Catholic at the time (2019: 221).

⁴ All of this even on the assumption of relative homogeneity – social and ethnic – in New England. As we browse through Franklin's autobiography, centered on his life in Philadelphia, we are aware of an even greater diversity of interests playing out in the colony of Pennsylvania, which was a hive of diversity of all sorts: religious, ethnic, and social. There is a lot of levelling to be done if an ideal type is to be extracted from this variety.

⁵ In the following paragraphs, my discussion is indebted to Braudel, Beaud, Jessua, Stark, and Tawney.

The early forms of the market economy (if still not capitalism) inaugurating an integrated system of production, accumulation, labor, exchange, and financial circuits taking place in a “relatively (unregulated) market” go back to medieval Europe and were first detected in the complex local economies of monasteries (Stark 2019: 222, 225). As a symbol of the urban revolution, as Jessua contends, Florence was able to flourish from the late twelfth century, while the essential technical tool of efficient commercial exchange, double-entry bookkeeping, was codified in Venice by the end of the fifteenth century (2008: 20) not to mention the fact that the first to take advantage of the new geographical discoveries in the late fifteenth century were Italian merchants, shipowners, and bankers from Genoa and Venice, in particular (Jessua 2008: 23). Florence was able to develop a system of commercial routes along which it conducted bank and exchange services in the Mediterranean basin, all this before the weight shifted to the Atlantic trade (Jessua 2008: 23, 25–26). Rather, we admit that it is impossible to demarcate the beginning point of the new dispensation arising from the feudal system in its “long journey” toward capitalism (Beaud 2001: 13); we can ascertain its appearance only from hindsight.⁶

If the transition to capitalism by way of the market economy, as suggested by Fernand Braudel (1989: 37), is a continuum of transformations from the twelfth to the eighteenth century, at least (Jessua 2008: 26), then where we decide to place the emphasis is of vital importance. Weber’s view coheres with Beaud’s, who states that “the conditions for the future developments of capitalism were put into place” in the sixteenth century (2001: 21), coming closer to the kind of social and cultural factors that Weber would highlight in his model. For instance, Weber correctly notes that the Protestant (Calvinist) recuperation of the notion of labor would be instrumental for the rise of capitalism: namely, in classical antiquity and centuries later, the idea of working for a living could only elicit contempt (Stark 2019: 229) and would inevitably be a sign of lowly origin. This specific “ethic,” to use Weber’s term, flourished even earlier and was ingrained in medieval forms of the market economy, helping drive it to its achievements

⁶ Jessua correctly observes the broad validity of, specifically, Weber’s and Tawney’s observations in their linkage of Protestantism and economic behavior that would be construed as capitalist but he goes on to qualify their “general applicability” precisely by summoning evidence from other regions and cultures of southern Europe, offered by the Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese seamen, bankers, and merchants (2008: 28). The tension observed here is between the levels of abstraction and generalization at which the discussion obtains, but there is also the question at which point we need to entertain the particularist view since generalities lack explanatory power.

(*ora et labora* was the Benedictine motto from the sixth century, as Stark reminds us (ibid.)). Weber’s thesis is useful, however – not in offering a comprehensive historical outlook, but in showing us the breaks and ruptures where the old ideas migrate to their new abode.

Weber does not accentuate enough the fact that a certain form of rationality required by capitalism in order to regulate the flow of money through new forms of accounting was circulating even before the period that would bear out his emphasis on the Protestant impetus for that rationality, as manifested in the Low Countries in the early seventeenth century (even then interestingly mixed in religious, national, and social terms, possibly featuring this mixture as the secret of their success) and then soon enough in England’s formidable pursuit of “colonial expansion and mercantilism” (Beaud 2001: 23, 26). Again, his shorthand approach elides the longer period of gestation for some of these transformations occurring already in the Middle Ages and implemented in the form of “religious capitalism” (Stark 2019: 228). Monetary exchange, borrowing, and lending (with interest) were not invented with the Reformation but were in place even before Luther’s theses rocked the religious landscape of Europe (Stark 2019: 231). Earlier Catholic theology was demonstrably involved in solving the conundrum between the growing monetary economy and the constraints placed on commerce and credit (usury) in the Bible (Stark 2019: 232; Braudel 1989: 78; McCarraher 2019: 32–62; Tawney 1922: 16–39).

Therefore, Giddens suggests that Weber’s pronouncements crystallize also the problem of capitalism: how should we define it? What are its specific determinants? Should we consider Weber’s study a depiction of a local, historical variant of economic development (2001: xxviii; 2001: 17)? Should we perhaps be talking about capitalisms as networks, processes, and eco-systems which percolate through different cultural and spatio-temporal domains, and not as a single, once-for-all entity? If so, we should then acknowledge a particularism of Weber’s thesis considering “Western modern Capitalism” (2001: xxxi; Kessel 2006: 160, 163). Beaud interestingly talks about “national capitalisms,” arguing that in each country the capitalist mode of production nestles in particular socio-cultural and socio-historical conditions (2001: 4–5) even though, in the next sentence, he then recognizes that capitalism has found sustenance in continuously shuttling between the nation-state and an international, global context (2001: 5). America – due to its embeddedness in market practices which from its beginnings had structured socio-economic relations – might have seemed to Weber a

good model, but we have endeavored to show how, particularly in that aspect, his thesis seems thin.⁷

Another conceptual conundrum to address is the elusiveness of the notion of capitalism conjured by Weber precisely by means of terms which, if we go back to McCarragher, seem to bring us back to the idea of enchantment, since Weber uses the term “spirit.” Certainly, at a time when Franklin so proficiently trod the way of a new economic paradigm, neither he nor his compatriots, nor for that matter any of the theological authorities quoted by Weber for the purposes of his study, had any inkling that they were engaging in or debating “capitalism,” only that they were negotiating the kind of economic behavior that had earlier been of interest to Church scholars and was now making additional demands on them. Tawney already speaks about “the expanding capitalism of the later Middle Ages” (1922: 34). All this makes us wonder not *whether* something like that had existed before, say, the eighteenth century as the period we are focused on, but, conceptually, *how* the people (a specific cohort in terms of Weber’s model) would understand their moral, social, religious, and other obligations in the midst of changes attending their situation in the colonial semi-periphery of America.⁸

THE PURITAN THESIS

The particular group singled out by Weber were the ascetic Protestant sects – namely, Calvinists, Quakers, and Methodists. Of these, we will here be predominantly concerned with Calvinists, or Puritans in the Anglo-American context, to which we mainly refer. Tapping into the Puritans, Weber certainly opened

⁷ The context of Weber’s reception is also not to be disregarded. Talcott Parsons’s discovery of and fascination with Weber helped disseminate Weber’s theory in the Anglo-American academic sphere, popularizing it (Stark 2019: 220). However, critical remarks were voiced from the beginning of its circulation.

⁸ In fact, the deployment of the globalist perspective such as effected by Braudel, which he takes over from Immanuel Wallerstein, further complicates the localisms of Weber’s thesis and showcases its overly narrow focus. According to Braudel, it is the simultaneous existence of the center, the semi-periphery, and the periphery that sustains capitalism, which subsists thanks to gradual alignments between the foregoing (1989: 100). It thus becomes clear that, for such a development, a vast area, an international economy, and, very likely, the use of slave or indentured labor were all requisite (1989: 101).

a treasure trove, since American culture had by the time of his thinking about the problem of capitalism and its American form enshrined the Puritans as the forefathers of the nation.

The transfer and commerce of ideas across the Atlantic yielded immense profit for the humanities and social sciences across the board. In the case I am concerned with here, it would seem that not only Weber but other European scholars, too, were attracted by the study of the United States and by forms of its culture, society, and manners in a way to comprehend the problem of modernity and the immense changes it had ushered into world history. Like Weber, for instance, another European scholar, Alexis de Tocqueville, seemed to acknowledge the attraction of studying “America” – it being a society that apparently lends itself to the observer’s gaze: “America is the only country in which it has been possible to witness the natural and tranquil growth of society...” (1981: 23). So muses Tocqueville notwithstanding that the society whose transformation he witnesses during his several-months-long sojourn in the United States in 1831–2 was the product of a bloody confrontation between the mother country and the rebellious colonies, whose revolutionary secession dealt a considerable blow to British supremacy in North America.

The Frenchman, a scion of an aristocratic family demoted by the French Revolution, could not help but admire and evince a deep curiosity about another nation forged in an earlier revolution. His miscellaneous observations and interpretations from his U.S. travels collected in his classic *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) reverberate with subtle descriptions of the manners and morals of the Americans, which Tocqueville, unlike Weber, intends to attribute to a plethora of causes (making his model more diversified and thus more versatile than Weber’s). I will briefly refer to two of Tocqueville’s observations, which will subsequently help us shed some light on Weber’s concepts in a similar context of using and considering the American material.

As Tocqueville considers the foundational events in the history of North America, he correctly notes the “English foundation” onto which particular colonial events and developments grafted their own mark. However, it is precisely the “two or three main ideas,” as Tocqueville contends, “that now constitute the basis of the social theory of the United States” and that arose specifically in New England (1981: 27). The first is the distinctive character of the settlers who chose New England as their abode, and not any of the previously founded settlements or plantations further down south. They, Tocqueville continues, “belonged to the

more independent classes of their native country,” forming “a society containing neither lords nor common people, and we may almost say neither rich nor poor” (ibid.). This fact of relative equality in the material circumstances of the settlers is an important facet that Tocqueville will have ample opportunity to draw upon in establishing the primacy of the democratic principle in America. This would mean in particular the absence – albeit only in some parts of America – of the acute social differences then plaguing the societies of Europe.

The second salient fact noted by Tocqueville is the ideological strain of immigration undertaken by the Pilgrims to New England, that is, by the Puritan dissenters (it ought to be noted that Benjamin Franklin’s family, importantly for our current discussion, originated from this stock, as Franklin drives home in his autobiography (2012: 10–13)). They belonged to an educated, relatively homogenous, and socially well-placed group of people whose aim was more ambitious than merely the acquisition of material status, as Tocqueville adds in poetic manner: “in facing the inevitable sufferings of exile their object was a triumph of an idea” (1981: 28). Continuing to elaborate on the salience of Puritanism, as an ideological underpinning of the American project from early on – that is not exclusive but that overshadows other, less spectacular or less well-documented endeavors simultaneously going on in other colonies (Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania...) – Tocqueville is one in a line of observers who contribute to the rise of the Puritan myth, flowing into and inflecting much of twentieth-century study of the United States.⁹ Weber would himself draw on some aspects of Tocqueville’s shrewd observations but would obviously take them in different directions (Van Engen 2020: 260).

As Van Engen argues in his 2020 study of the Puritan myth in relation to the notion of American exceptionalism, the idea took shape, while drawing upon a rich trove of documents and self-descriptions left by the Puritans themselves, in the course of the nineteenth-century and as a result of that century’s joint impulse of historicizing and inventing traditions that would subtend the idea of a nation. For Americans, that factor was crystallized in the notion of the Pilgrim’s “City upon the Hill,” taken from the Gospel according to Matthew (5:14). Tocqueville, closer to the source, still unmistakably identifies the potency of the narrative to

⁹ Classical studies of the impact of the Puritan origins myth include Perry Miller’s and Sacvan Bercovitch’s oeuvre. Spanos has consistently voiced an oppositional perspective to the more celebratory facets of the narrative, while twenty-first century scholars are better able to consider the complex reverberations of the myth (Van Engen 2020).

serve as a foundational motif, while Weber, at a greater distance, registers the already extant appeal of the Puritan hypotheses, but now twists its meaning to suit his own aims. Of these, it is the two-pronged nature of the Puritan myth, both religious and secular, as Tocqueville rightly points out, suffused by “the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of liberty*” (1981: 36), that has accounted for its long-lasting effects (Van Engen 2020: 262–263). This crossroads of religion and secularism will continue to imbue the significance of the myth and to underlie its capaciousness.

“POOR RICHARD” AND FRANKLIN’S RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Let us look further into Weber’s narrative, in particular as he engages this two-pronged effect of Puritanism. At the beginning of the second chapter of his classical study of the influence of religion on the rise of modern capitalism in the West, Weber strings together a series of quotes from Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, while considering it “a document of that [i.e., capitalistic] spirit which contains what we are looking for in almost classical purity, and at the same time has the advantage of being free from all direct relationship to religion” (2001: 14), thus seemingly providing a (near) perfect specimen of the thesis that is about to evolve on the strength of this assertion. To remind the reader, Weber accentuates that he is about to prove what has already been present, i.e., contained, and should thus be self-evident. And, secondly, even though he argues that some forms of (ascetic) Protestantism would be especially congenial and open to harboring the values conducive to modern capitalist behavior in the West (Weber 2001: 17), the above-mentioned specimen thereof is advantageously, as Weber puts it, free of religion. We thus continue to sit astride the two currents, as it were.

Weber’s analysis of Franklin’s texts’ import continues. Weber uses the terms, in describing the tenor of Franklin’s text, as follows: “the philosophy of avarice” and “the duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself” (2001: 17). I think this deserves some further looking into. The question is, how should we understand this self-evident nature of Franklin’s particular text as a device for propping up the theory? Is it at all as self-evident as Weber would have us believe, especially after our first-hand encounter with Franklin’s Poor Richard?

Early glimpses of Franklin offered us by Weber apparently show Franklin in the persona of Poor Richard merely as an exponent of utilitarianism (2001: 17, 234). This is the first stumbling block that we encounter, giving rise to numerous disclaimers and modifications. That this is so is a result of the unfortunate squeezing together for the purpose of providing a concise and cogent argument, the strategies, styles, traditions, and genres that have been used by Franklin precisely to allow him to mask, obfuscate, or mitigate his claims. When in October of 1729 (at the age of 23) Franklin takes over as a new co-owner of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, he is well aware of the novelty and challenges of his undertaking; however, he must have gauged his chances and seen this as a sound business proposition (Bunker 2019: 234; Pencak 1992: 184). Even so, in a facetious announcement to his readership, his complex understanding of the new mass medium emerges, as well as his penchant to play up to public expectations, although he intends to mold them relying on his obvious accomplishments (1945: 29). According to Tarantello, Franklin's use of personae was a literary-political device congruent with the idea of anonymity and impartiality (2016: 2). Franklin's personae, so Thompson suggests, spoke in particular to "modest citizens" and "the middling People," ultimately seeking "to unsettle clerical authority on civil and social matters by mockingly claiming it" (2011: 455, 456). Confidently and craftily deploying the "invented personality" (Tarantello 2016: 3) of Poor Richard, Franklin was able to reach an ever wider continental and intercolonial audience, and begin to carve for himself a place in the bustling and dynamic eighteenth-century American society. As Tarantello informs us, Franklin's almanac featuring Poor Richard may not have been the most popular at the time, but "it was the only almanac of its time circulated intercolonially" (2016: 4), thanks to Franklin's business networks (Frasca 2006; Pencak 1992: 195).

Poor Richard or Richard Saunders of *Poor Richard's Almanack*, is just one of Franklin's manifold personae in the course of his long publishing, printing, and writing career. Before Franklin invented Poor Richard, though, he experimented with a variety of aliases, his first personification – undertaken by Franklin at the age of 16 – being that of Silence Dogood, a middle-aged clergyman's widow dispensing worldly wisdom in a chatty but polite style (Wright 1997: 22). Being merely a printer's apprentice at the time, it is not Franklin's industry or his way with money (of which he had very little at that point) that launch Franklin towards his first successes and show him an alternative to the world of toil – it is rather his writing and his clever manipulation of literary conventions that set him up in public. At that early stage, according to Thompson, "Franklin [...], in developing

and sustaining personae like Silence Dogood and Poor Richard, integrated traditionally marginalized voices into the republican sphere of print” (2011: 451). His publicity begins by way of reading, writing, rhetoric, and argumentation – in short, the tools of politeness and gentility, the markers of a higher status that Franklin and his ilk are only beginning to master and claim for themselves.

Another facet of Franklin’s style is his landmark irony, which permeates his columns, the *Almanack*, his political pamphlets, his autobiography, indeed most of his writings, and enriches their derivable meanings. In his preface to the last issue of the *Almanack* for the year 1758 – when he is commissioned by several colonies to act as their agent in London – Franklin saucily remarks through Poor Richard’s mouth: “I have sometimes *quoted myself* with great gravity” (1890: 269). Not refraining from boosting his own status in order to thicken his purse but also to gratify his vanity (another thing that Poor Richard shares with his creator), Franklin then goes on to create, or rather collate, a hodgepodge of proverbs, sayings, and advice, distilling his popular philosophy through another authoritative figure, that of Father Abraham, who supposedly seconds Poor Richard’s sound moral advice dispensed on the pages of the *Almanack* in previous years (the publication successfully ran from 1732 to 1757). Notably, this last address by Father Abraham is singled out as a separate pamphlet entitled “The Way to Wealth” and thought of as a sum of Poor Richard’s (and consequently, of Franklin’s) attitudes towards virtue, religion, work, and money – or so Weber claims; Moses, however, correctly undercuts such assumed authorial intentions, wherein the character’s (or narrator’s) worldview is ascribed to the author (2008: 136; Ross 1940: 794).

Father Abraham’s speech reads like a litany of desirable virtues to secure one’s good material and moral standing, and from that vantage point, it is indeed a textbook example of the conjunction of Calvinist (Puritan) ideas and the spirit of capitalism, as Weber would have it (2001: 17, 33, 77). Weber is hardly alone in noting somewhat disparagingly the programmatic and derivative style imbuing Father Abraham’s speech (2001: 16; Bunker 2019: 262; Cahill 2016: 545; Pencak 2011: 279). In addition to hard work, an article of faith in the Puritan theology of calling, Father Abraham favorably quotes Poor Richard’s exhortation on how to profitably use time. Indeed, in the new rationality that underwrites the spirit of capitalism in the West, Weber argues, the management of time is of utmost importance (2001: 104), while idleness – or sloth, to come closer to theological vocabulary – is no longer just sinful but ruinous from the business point of view.

During the publication of the *Almanack* from the early 1730s to the late 1750s, Franklin transitions into several roles. Starting out as a young printer beset by credit and competition, eager to provide for his growing family, at the end of this period, Franklin leaves business altogether on a decent income, finds himself involved with more and more civil and political affairs, and makes his name in science by the time he gets appointed the colonial assembly's agent in London. Yet all this while, his ventriloquist powers are in full evidence, and he faithfully keeps in mind who his standard audience is, i.e., the middling sort, the common people of the colonies (Pencak 2011: 276, 280). The symbiosis between Poor Richard's voice and his worldview, so masterfully assumed and kept up by Franklin, and that of his intended audience is a matter of some interest to Weber. He claims that Franklin's initial lowly, parvenu status provides a strong incentive to rise (and hence adopt and adhere to the "spirit of capitalism"). Furthermore, it was not the commercial aristocracy that would need or heed Poor Richard's maxims, but "the rising strata of the lower industrial middle classes" (Weber 2001: 28).¹⁰

If we assume that Franklin's discourse as presented in the *Gazette* indeed constitutes a *novum*, we should ask, How so? McCarraher argues that colonial almanacs were a curious blend of the practical concerns addressing the needs of husbandry and "astrology and the *anima mundi*" (2019: 149), a blend easily perceived in the themes and content of Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*. It is therefore observable, as McCarraher suggests, that "[m]any New England farmers adhered to an enchanted and increasingly mercantile economy" (ibid.), needing some reassuring guidance to navigate new waters. The changes besetting traditional agricultural production merely reinforce the notion of the eighteenth century as a turbulent age. Registering a new economic order hovering on the horizon, Franklin adapts an accessible language, appealing to his not-too-bookish audience (Tarantello 2016: 6), while he sustains a vibrant interest in Poor Richard and his life by creating a running narrative (Tarantello 2016: 4; Pencak 1992: 191).

Franklin tries to teach and inform his audience, very often in a beguiling and entertaining way, and to inculcate the ideas that would enable the men of his or similar social background to exercise financial independence and some control

¹⁰ Another issue of historical interpretation opens up with the notion of "class" and "the middle classes" at this point in time; for a more tentative view of the case in Franklin's America, see Dierks 2011, Newman 2009, Waldstreicher 2011.

over their affairs, not simply as a goal in itself, but as a sign of their civic status, that of a freeholder, “a freeborn *Englishman*” (1890: 280). In addition, Franklin’s audience would appreciate his subtle point, which is that “ability and hard work rather than birth or inherited wealth” should prevail in a society where that was still largely not the case (Pencak 2011: 288; Pangle 2007: 20). Thus Franklin’s semi-jocular address is also deeply political and subversive of the then colonial order, leading Pencak to surmise that “Franklin and the almanac makers that succeeded him [...] played a more important role in spreading Whig ideology to the common man than did the more learned pamphlets...” (1992: 194). Not far behind, however, is a second goal, that of securing commodities for a more comfortable life, a tainted desire which in the *Almanack* is often displaced by Poor Richard onto his consort, his shrewish wife Bridget (1890: 33, 79–80). Again, and in contrast to the presumably economically straightforward reading of the text, Poor Richard secures a more leisurely life and the comfort of luxury items not by hard work (if he ever did any, it didn’t amount to much) but by his penmanship and by humoring his sundry readers. Despite Franklin’s plagiarism and extensive borrowings, his pseudonymous polemicists, cropping up for every imaginable occasion whether to opine on the suspect moral probity of shopkeepers or on the dangers of social presumption, bore unmistakable traces of the local colonial and provincial context and shed some of their English high-mindedness (Bunker 2019: 230). This local color obviously sat well with the readers, since, as Michael Gilmore points out, the *Almanack* sold up to 10,000 copies annually (1977: 60; Franklin 2012: 91–92).

With this in mind, it seems that Weber misrepresents also the kind of audience that Franklin aims at, particularly in *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. Weber makes it seem as if Franklin launches his sermonizing to an audience of extant or prospective “capitalistic entrepreneur[s]” (2001: 33), whereas Franklin’s intention is more of an educational and didactic vein, an exhortation to the largely agricultural or urban middling sort, of as yet unclear social status: “I consider’d it [the *Almanack*] as a proper Vehicle for conveying Instruction among the common People, who bought scarce any other Books” (2012: 91). Emphatically, as observed by Thompson, “What many of the readers whom Dogood [and] Saunders [...] represented did share was a sense of exclusion from political and social decision making and even from political and social debate in the public sphere” (2011: 455). The point here is not that some of Franklin’s auditors could not take his words to heart but that it is nowhere near conclusive that even most of them would do it in the way assumed by Weber. Franklin understands as much about the audience

when he mocks their adherence to the economic precepts just expounded – they go and do exactly the opposite: “Thus the old Gentleman ended his Harangue. The People heard it, and approved the Doctrine, and immediately practiced the contrary, just as if it had been a common Sermon...” (1890: 282). When in his autobiography he looks back on his achievement with the *Almanack*, he sounds more self-congratulatory: “In Pennsylvania, as it discouraged useless Expense in foreign Superfluities, some thought it had its share of Influence in producing that growing Plenty of Money which was observable for several Years after its Publication” (2012: 92). This view, however, is itself qualified and perhaps misguided. As Curti points out, there is a level of Franklin’s economic theory and a level of applied “‘Poor Richard’ philosophy” (1964: 110), testifying to the flourishing of different audiences in the public print sphere to which Franklin cannily catered.

We have seen that, by the end of his journey as Poor Richard, Franklin has experienced a considerable shift in status: he is no longer a tradesman, an artisan, a leather-apron man, but moves into a different sphere, where he can afford to exercise leisure and dedicate himself to more gentlemanly pursuits. However, by moving up, Franklin has to tread carefully so as not to cause disturbance in the colonial hierarchy, which he navigates admirably (2012: 113–114). One of the miscellanea from his paper the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, titled “Blackamore, on Molatto Gentleman” from 1733, uses another telling pseudonym to discuss the issues of social climbing, warning his middling readers to avoid the appearance of usurpation and presumption but offering a lesson in a viable social mobility. The assumed persona of an underling flirts with the risky undertone of racial transgression (Blackamore, Molatto), but is equally repulsive and punishable. The strength of Franklin’s argument again rests on an exquisite blend of the authentic and the performed (textualized) self: “I am an ordinary Mechanick, and I pray I may always have the Grace to know my self and my station” (1987: 219).

So his verbal and rhetorical skills are, especially as applied in the context of many and acrimonious political disputes in the colony of Pennsylvania and beyond, also illustrative of his status anxiety of a man who attempts to break into the gentlemanly sphere and occupy himself with public work. Franklin retires from his business since the eighteenth-century concept of a gentleman was incompatible with his being employed in a trade or exercising any kind of labor (even as a printer). Still, Franklin, as a wannabe gentleman and the eminent man of the public sphere, could figure as an elder dispensing advice for the rising class of men (tradesmen, artisans, farmers).

A NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

At the beginning of his expose on the ethics of modern capitalism, Weber does note that it is a peculiarly Western form due to the forms of rationality needed to sustain capitalistic behavior. He then quotes Franklin at length, and does so from Franklin’s miscellanea, his oft printed and widely disseminated advice and manual books for the general population in as yet proto-capitalistic colonial and semi-peripheral America (*Necessary Hints to Those That Would Be Rich; Advice to a Young Tradesman*). It is these kinds of writings that made a staple of Franklin’s burgeoning and blossoming newspaper and printing affairs. His business was additionally boosted by Franklin’s appointment as the deputy colonial postmaster general (1737–53), securing him not only a monopoly on the colonial (Pennsylvania) government’s printed matter, but providing his own printing business with a steady channel of distribution of popular prints at the time of the rising public print sphere.¹¹ Weber also appropriately highlights the most effective sections wherein Franklin cannily dissipates his precepts, which are no longer Calvinist but have already migrated to a more secularized public sphere. And yet, it is in these occasional pieces that Weber asks us to reconstruct the religious edifice from which Franklin’s idea of time management, credit, money-making, frugality, labor, moderation, and temperance should be derived.

To remind ourselves, the argument in this section intends to highlight the idea of the public sphere and concurrently expanding print networks, of which Franklin inevitably partook and which he learned to use to his advantage. It was this channel, together with his careful and crafty negotiation of the abiding social restrictions posed to a man of his standing, that gave Franklin his first taste of success and prompted him to launch a lengthy, lifelong process of self-creation by writing and public engagement. It is consequently through a mirage of publicity that we

¹¹ As my discussion in this section will show, the question is, among others, how much Franklin initially owed to his powerful gentleman patrons, as Bullock puts it (1996: 75). Bullock contends that Franklin becomes a Freemason at about the time of his being patronized as the Pennsylvania Assembly’s official printer (1996: 75); Franklin also drew on Judge Allen’s patronage (of whom more hereafter) in 1737, when he was appointed deputy post-master general, a major boost to his printing business (ibid.). For the concept of the public print sphere, as a key relay of new political and cultural ideas in the eighteenth century, see Taylor 2004, *Modern Social Imaginaries*; Warner 1990, specifically for American conditions.

should see his proverbial and allegedly sincere locutions that would be used by Weber as grist to his theoretical mill.

The next relay, to paraphrase Stephen Shapiro, is the new associational nature of the colonial society, boosting the rise of different “parainstitutions” to gradually displace and diminish the institutionalized religion (“the church”) and the royal authority (“the regal state”) (2008: 172). Franklin, as is obvious from the record of his life and in particular of his political engagements, from the start of his public career contributed to both goals as shown by his associationist instinct, ranging from his membership in the Junto club, the Freemasons, various civic associations, the scientific republic of letters, and political associations.

In the next few paragraphs we shall be looking into different kinds of formal and informal associations and incipient institutions hailing a new social dispensation, of which Franklin was an active, effective, and committed agent. Eighteenth-century England, straining to overcome the divisive, bloody, and tumultuous seventeenth century, put a great premium on values such as sensibility, benevolence, sympathy, tolerance, and politeness (Chaves 2007: 557; Hackett 2014: 29, 30). In the course of the century, one could note how these essentially gentlemanly virtues were disseminated across a wide spectrum so as to encompass also the middling strata, the people abounding in American colonial society, short on nobility and aristocracy but teeming with ambitious and rising professionals, artisans, and merchants like Benjamin Franklin.

It is to be surmised that Franklin’s sociable and “club” instinct would not be exhausted by his establishing the Junto club, a semi-private and semi-exclusive society of the young artisans of his circle, who sought to cultivate themselves by attaining the gentlemanly virtues of rational, sensible, and polite demeanor in their reading, discussion, and rhetorical exercises, “a Club, for mutual Improvement” (2012: 57). The young and eager Junto members still rather improbably joined the notion of skilled labor and gentlemanly, leisurely pursuit of liberal arts (“any Point of Morals, Politics or Natural Philosophy” (ibid.)), the only combination, however, that held a ticket for their access to the higher strata. Yet obviously, the leverage provided by the Junto was not sufficient for Franklin’s ambition and capacities, so he concomitantly joined other societies, the Freemasons in particular, in whose ambit he would manage to achieve a fantastic and remarkable professional, political, and scientific career (Bunker 2019: 251–255). The blurry and indistinct but steady background of Franklin’s life-long involvement with the Freemasons, as one of the key societies in his rich portfolio, surely contains at least

some valuable information which should complement both some deliberately fleeting and sweeping assertions in his autobiography, as well as the scanty interpretations offered by some Franklin scholars. In particular, we might wonder if Weber’s broadly encompassing but nebulous “spirit of capitalism” has something to do with particular forms of sociability, social mobility, print and business networks, and the system of patronage obtaining in British and colonial societies.

As pointed out above, these social upstarts were spurred to achievement (intellectual or business) in order to challenge the extant social hierarchies, still very strong in the mother country but perhaps less entrenched in the colonial periphery, but also to access the places of social prestige and power that were still largely unavailable to them. As we know from Franklin’s early career, he well understood, probably from his first longer stay in London (1724–26), the strong and beguiling influence of various clubs and associations organized by sundry groups from different ranks joined by common interests (2012: 43–44, 50; Bullock 1996: 28). To some degree, these clubs were the places where social distinctions would be alloyed by bringing together the honor of the social rank (the old order) and the power of new money or new skills (the new commercial and professional strata), eager to seize a role in society. As pointed out by Bullock, these societies, the Freemasons in particular, whose birthplace and fertile ground was London and post-Restoration England, undertook to carefully regulate the shape of shifts and transformations attending the social order and hierarchy by guarding the access to power of the social wannabes (1996: 37–38; Hackett 2014: 8).

This regulating function was in evidence, but perhaps more difficult to obtain in colonial society, away from the controlling pull of the center, so that, from the beginning the colonial Freemasons, whom Franklin joined early on in Philadelphia, flourished unhampered by the rules from London. (Franklin was a life-long member of Philadelphia’s St. John’s Lodge, probably the first in the colonies (Bullock 1996: 46).) The exigencies of colonial society were shaping the rules and dynamics of American Masonic fraternities. It is remarkable, for one thing, that Franklin, in his then capacity as “a struggling printer,” would ascend in the early 1730s to the position of the grand master of the Philadelphia lodge (Bullock 1996: 65), a lapse of decorum that would not occur very frequently. It is difficult to say whether this achievement is to be chalked down to Franklin’s well-known ingenuity or to some other reason.

As a text that juggles the ideas of publicity and self-promotion, it is a common critical refrain to contend that *Autobiography* artfully combines self-exposition

and rhetorical dissimulation; that Franklin reveals only so much as he wishes to unveil to the reader as regards different intended audiences of each of the four parts of the text (Arch 2008: 159–161; Chaplin 2012: xiii–xvii; Looby 1986: 72–74). The notion of *errata* in his text is particularly telling in view of the text’s representational strategies, the presumable concession Franklin makes to his readers by pleading lapses from his attained position (of virtue, fame, status, etc.). The reader’s imagination, however, is not tickled by Franklin’s avowed mistakes, mishaps, or misdeeds (he pointedly and characteristically avoids the Calvinist, and therefore Christian, notion of *sin* to refer to these), but by Franklin’s omissions that can be observed by a reconstruction of his life. I will illustrate the gap between the stated and the omitted by three episodes thus making them resonate in a larger debate about the merits of Franklin’s *Autobiography* as a literary (rather than simply historical) text circulating in the public print sphere.

In or about 1728, as can be reconstructed, Franklin was employed as a skilled printer at one of Philadelphia’s few printing offices as he proudly recounts how his type-setting skills enabled the shop owner to secure a lucrative job. While being engaged on this job, which was commissioned by the colonial administration, Franklin regularly came in contact with the senior administrators of the colony, most certainly men of rank and esteem, “principal People of the Province” (2012: 54). What is remarkable is how the young printer was able to secure their company and admiration through his politeness, civility, and learning (2012: 54; Chaves 2007: 557). We should not therefore downplay Franklin’s previous and on-going efforts at educating himself and acquiring the social skills necessary to navigate the changing social climate of the early eighteenth century and more importantly to gain access to the higher ranks, to the kind of men who would later on secure for Franklin even more lucrative public jobs and political appointments.¹² The very opportunity to break into the ranks of men who figured as colonial aristocracy and gentlemen offers to Franklin a pattern by which to build upon his obvious talent, knowledge, and skills, but poor social

¹² When he successfully completes the project of “commencing a Public Subscription Library,” he readily makes use of it: “This Library afforded me the Means of Improvement by constant Study, for which I set apart an Hour or two each Day; and thus repair’d in some Degree the Loss of the Learned Education my Father once intended for me” (2012: 75, 76). Wood, Chaves, Hackett, and Shapiro, in their different ways all make a similar argument about the rise of a new sociality and the new institutions of what later would be termed a “bourgeois society.” Charles Taylor more broadly depicts these developments as new social imaginaries for the modern West in *Modern Social Imaginaries*.

capital: “polite self-display,” as Chaves contends, gains in importance in a system of social relations “that are neither customary nor [...] personal” (2007: 557). The intricate system of patronage begins to work in his favor as his further business and political breaks will testify. However, Franklin slips here by stating that all of these “Friends” “continued their regard for me as long as they lived” (2012: 54). As pointed out by his biographers, this was not the case as regards one of these powerful and influential friends, Judge William Allen, one of the leading administrators in Pennsylvania, who indeed started out as Franklin’s patron (as well as a friend and Masonic brother) but later on turned into his enemy and detractor, which transformation Franklin leaves unexplained (2012: 54; 1987: 1728; Bullock 1996: 74–75).

Another *erratum* that is glaringly absent from Franklin’s account of his life is the much more pernicious Rees incident, a mock Masonic initiation ritual in which he was involved and that resulted in the unfortunate death of the presumable initiate, Daniel Rees. The incident, laid out in detail by Steven Bullock, could have had serious detrimental repercussions on Franklin and his budding business career, as well as the image of social respectability that went with his burgeoning status in 1737 (Bunker 2019: 280).¹³ By that time, Franklin had been a Freemason for six years; moreover, he had even been elected “grand master” of the Philadelphia Freemasons in 1734. This rise is quite astonishing, given that “Colonial Masonry was not a middle-class order that embraced a wide range of members. Instead, membership was restricted almost exclusively to men of rank” (Bullock 1996: 51) – precisely the kind of men with whom Franklin was hobnobbing due to his special commissions. As Bullock explains, “Franklin’s involvement in Masonry suggests his shrewd understanding of the social and cultural boundaries being constructed by colonial elites” (1996: 52; Bunker 2019: 253; Wood 2004: 43).

Having weathered the storm that might have at least besmirched him and undermined his claims to virtue if not brought him to trial, Franklin continued his “involvement” with the fraternity, significantly taking part in a 1755 procession of Masons to celebrate “the opening of the first Masonic hall in America” (Bullock 1996: 53). Together with “some of the most prominent and influential

¹³ That this accident indeed gave Franklin cause for serious concern is shown by his response and the self-vindication that he undertakes both in private, to his family, and in the forum of public opinion (1945: 38–40).

men in Pennsylvania” there marched Franklin (“the deputy grand master”); William Allen (“grand master,” the Chief Justice of Pennsylvania’s Supreme Court, one of Franklin’s staunchest patrons and friends before their rift); and, to affirm the line of succession, William Franklin (“grand secretary,” “now holding his father Benjamin’s former position of clerk of the Assembly” (ibid.)).

From this perspective, the third and final unacknowledged *erratum* stalking Franklin’s text (and life), is all the more poignant – his cutting off of his son William, the presumed heir and beneficiary of his father’s social and political achievements. Their bond, however, was shattered by their taking opposing sides in the Revolution, where William, as the royal governor of New Jersey, took the Tory position and so committed symbolic parricide. What is still unfathomable is the irrevocability of Franklin’s decision to disown, humiliate, and punish his first-born, as shown by Shurr (1992: 447). Certainly, in this case, no arguments of enlightened tolerance, inclusiveness, or politeness, nor the ban on political and religious sectarianism required by the Masonic creed (Bullock 1996: 31–32; 63), would mollify Franklin’s deeply hurt feelings as a father, probably mixed with a great deal of pride and vanity as a public figure and a revolutionary icon (Wood 2004: 162; Shapiro 2008: 198). Textually, this *erratum* is conveyed by a break between part one of the Autobiography, specifically addressed to William, and part two, in which the latter is simply erased from the text without a word of explanation.¹⁴

Even this brief selection suggests a cozy cohabitation of the principal civic, political, and business offices with the Masonic fraternities in colonial America, but also the way the fraternities could be used as networks of securing and extending patronage to an exclusive but also widening circle of “brothers” still controlled by the elites (Bunker 2019: 253). Therefore, Franklin’s disquisitions on his religious attitudes at about this time owe less to Enlightenment Deism or inchoate atheism and much more to the founding principles of the Masonic order (Bunker 2019: 167). This is particularly true of his nebulous idea of the international “united Party for Virtue” (2012: 89), a goal compliant with Masonic cosmopolitanism,

¹⁴ The addressee changes from part one (“Dear Son”) to a more abstract and general readership, just as Franklin has changed the scope of the text from family memoirs (“my Posterity may like to know” (2012: 9)) to an account of a representative and heroic public figure. The change is perhaps fathomable if we consider that part one was composed in 1771, and part two, in 1784. Looby correctly notes Franklin’s pose of assuming and holding on to the idea of paternal authority, transferring it from his prodigal son to the entire nation (1986: 73, 74).

as shown by critics (Bullock 1996: 52–63; Bunker 2019: 254–255; Fiering 1978: 223 n. 63).

THE ELUSIVE SPIRIT OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY¹⁵

As summed up by Esmond Wright, one of his numerous biographers, Benjamin Franklin is “the most modern-minded of all the Founding Fathers” (1997: viii), and, therefore, the one we can still connect to. As Gordon Wood puts it in yet another biography, Franklin is the most “democratic” and “folksy” of all the founders, the man who improbably transmuted from “an artisan” to a political grandee in the bosom of the middling sort (2004: 2). Franklin’s copious writings, accompanying each stage of his long and adventurous life, evince a fascinating mix of both performativity and sincerity (Wright 1997: ix), and continue to pose challenges to interpreters. This is especially evident in Franklin’s unfinished and sketchy autobiography, the text following his ascent in the colonial periphery, and later, in the imperial center of London just prior to the American Revolution. Textual and generic conventions, however, complicate the idea of an authentic self that should emanate from the text and put us in mind of a carefully constructed artifice.

To suggest the scope of the project in this section, two examples will have to suffice at the beginning, both outlining the scope and delimitations of Weber’s construction of Franklin, specifically as he found him on the pages of the autobiography. The first comes from Franklin’s birthplace, the colony of New England. Eugene McCarragher mentions an example illustrating the nature of the economic order of New England in the early seventeenth century, astraddle the older ethics

¹⁵ From the start, even the generic type is disputed, critics reasonably arguing that the designation of autobiography would be unfamiliar to Franklin, who would probably prefer other categories as suggested by his correspondence where the following are mentioned: the “Memoirs,” “the personal History,” “the History of my Life,” and “the Memoirs of my Life” (2012: 229–230). This is a moot point, since the manuscript was not published during his life and this title was appended. Secondly, the text’s fragmentary nature (the generative study has confirmed four distinct parts composed at mutually relatively distant and unconnected points in time – and in space, one might add) begs questions of authorial intention, consistency, and unity of purpose, even when the historical context is duly considered (Looby 1986: 83, 84). For early modern English generic predecessors of Franklin’s narrative of upward mobility, see Cahill.

imposing restrictions on profit accumulation (in particular by usury) and a new mentality, which increasingly sought to contravene or openly defy those restrictions as untenable and even contrary to the new business orientation. In fact, as observed by Tawney, by the late sixteenth century in England, religion was already seen as “a Utopian morality” and likely construed as an unreasonable obstacle to be placed on commerce (1922: 94), an attitude which transferred to the colonies, too. So there is some historical irony in the fact that a certain Keayne, a merchant, was chastised by the ecclesiastical body for his profit-minded conduct of trade, and consequently was one of the first colonials to invoke the sanction of the Protestant ethic (*pace* the clergy), that God rewards virtue also by riches (McCarragher 2019: 147). This example portends “the fundamental dilemma of the elect: their quest for a beloved community build on the foundations of capitalist enterprise,” as suggested by McCarragher (*ibid.*), and sets up figures like Keayne as Franklin’s predecessors.

The other example, bookmarking another period of resurgent interest in Franklin and his legacy, and an attempt to once again reshape it in accordance to contemporary concerns, is Andrew Carnegie’s late nineteenth-century take on Franklin. As Wilson J. Moses points out, Carnegie felt affinity with Franklin, “his fellow Pennsylvanian” (2008: 137), in many respects. Not only could Franklin appeal to one of the richest capitalists of the times as a paragon of the shrewd way of accumulating wealth and displaying a sound business instinct, but could also motivate Carnegie to embark on his later career as a philanthropist, where again he only needed to emulate Franklin (*ibid.*).

In a recent economically minded reading of the text, Jennifer Baker in her study *Securing the Commonwealth* ascribes Franklin’s self-construction as eminently reputable in his autobiography, not only so that he may bolster his credit status, but also, and more importantly, to underwrite “American credibility” (2005: 72), dovetailing his search for capital to set himself up in business with the constant colonial lack of currency, and then even more dramatically, with the young nation’s desperate need of credit. Similarly, Andrew Lawson argues that, “rather than offering up the homilies on wealth accumulation [...] the *Autobiography* is concerned with the conduct of a particular form of life, an ethics adapted to the life of the colonial trader, who must wrestle on a day-to-day basis with his financial obligation” (2020: 465).

The delight of the story lies in the familiar plot, showing how Franklin gets to become a representative colonial by the time he decides to pen down “the

Circumstances of *my Life*” (2012: 9), or, in the second part of the text, a new nation’s statesman and advocate in France, whose life story would be “so pleasing and profitable a Work, [...] which would be useful and entertaining not only to a few, but to millions,” especially to “the American Youth” (2012: 69). These frames, as a reminder of his present stature, enclose Franklin as a young, struggling tradesman in desperate need of capital and thus obliged to borrow, foreshadowing, in Baker’s words, “the nation’s experiments with public debt” (2005: 84). Even though in *Poor Richard’s Almanack* the lesson to be learned is to economize and pinch so as to avoid the debtor’s servitude (1890: 279), in the course of his autobiography, the lessons imparted by Franklin are slightly different, suggesting that there is, according to Baker, a prudent (since necessary) debt, the financial boost that could be beneficial to individuals (Franklin) and communities (the fledgling colonial economy, the economy in the Revolutionary war, the post-war national economy – neither of which could survive and obtain without credit and debt).

Besides being a sort of a manual of new economic realities and practices, the autobiography portends another important revolution (before the Revolution), “the rise of civil society” (Shapiro 2008: 177). If what is at stake is to mediate and facilitate the rise of the public sphere, and allow for a freer circulation of ideas and the greater participation of the middling and lower orders, then the autobiography has to find ways to be political without explicitly saying so (Shapiro 2008: 180). Of course, Shapiro’s Marxist approach prefers the concepts of power and struggle as a backdrop against which to critically examine Franklin’s rhetorical strategies precisely as a way to diffuse these. Warner is one among an array of critics who rightly ascribe to the text of the autobiography a difficult task, possibly generating its loose and fragmentary structure, that of vacillating between a new form of sovereignty, lodged in between the people (itself a murky concept) and a representative individual, “a republican statesman,” who can legitimize himself only in print, in texts (1990: 73). Therefore, the informal and practical education that he has received, enables Franklin to intuit the new code and innovate upon it.

This newly articulated subjectivity, however, is still besieged on all sides – by the hierarchies of church, (royal) state, aristocracy, literacy, learning, culture, and, prosaically, the Indians, thus circumscribing the limits of early eighteenth-century social sphere for an ambitious colonial such as Franklin. The cultural value of Franklin’s text is that all these intersecting challenges are shown to impact on Franklin’s development, such as he construes it in his text.

As Shapiro points out, the novelty of Franklin's autobiography rests among others on its straddling the two spheres. While it is palpably secular in that Franklin consciously flirts with the popular new genre called the novel, with its yet unstable boundaries, he nevertheless uses the recipe of one of the most popular works of the Puritan worldview, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where its author Bunyan uses dialogue and narration instead of exhortation, hectoring or sermon, "a Method of Writing very engaging to the Reader," says Franklin admiringly (2012: 26). Franklin is aware of the new genre's growing popularity among the reading public, since as a printer, he published and sold English novels and would readily avail himself of the potential of the genre's openness, its indeterminacy, and its sympathy for new types of subject, evincing his knowledge of Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, and their very popular fictional creations (ibid.).¹⁶ This generic framework creates additional layers of meaning that would impair a simplistic reading of the text's features. Moreover, as Bunker observes, Defoe must have been an enduring influence on Franklin with his other writings as well, in particular by his "technical book," *An Essay Upon Projects* (2019: 56).

In his autobiography, Franklin, though famously reticent and on his guard lest he disclose too much of his deepest inner feelings (Bunker 2019: 65, 69), still reveals quite a lot of the mechanics of assertive individualism and self-interest, relatively new traits in a moral universe colored by Christianity. His "controlling voice," according to Schueller (1987: 105), allows us to get fleeting glimpses and intuition of the background of humanist Christian and then increasingly a-Christian thinkers, imbuing his outlook on life already in his teens (certainly by the age of 16 and his first experiment in public writing) and maturing in his later years into what is nowadays called Enlightenment rationalism (Kelleter 2008: 78). As pointed out by Kelleter, this did not obviate religion, but it certainly put it in a secondary role as a utilitarian tool for propping public morality and manners, even though Franklin did not remain fixed in this position but sought to integrate it into his shifting disposition in the course of his life (2008: 83–84). Franklin informs the reader that he lost religion in his adolescence and drifted towards (rational) atheism, only to explain how he retrenched from that extreme position and found it necessary, in fact indispensable, to assume religion anew after his repudiation of it (2012: 55). Certainly, the religion he retrieves is no

¹⁶ It is a historical curiosity, but illustrative of Franklin's foresight, that he brought out the first published novel in colonial America, precisely Richardson's best-seller *Pamela* (Bunker 2019: 315).

longer the same as that of his Calvinist forebears, nor is it quite the reformed belief practiced by Quakers or other denominations in pluralist and tolerant Pennsylvania.

Whereas we need not doubt the father's, Josiah's, Calvinist credentials, these came about principally in the assiduous and faithful dedication to one's trade (calling) embedded in the notion of service to God in the form of helping one's neighbor, and thus contributing to the community (congregation).¹⁷ These precepts in and of themselves were, as Josiah's case shows, not conducive to wealth accumulation. By extension, this latter could not thus be in any way illustrative of the state of one's soul (elect or damned). Service to God and men, family, community, steady labor in a calling, virtue – these were the pivots of the Puritan worldview.

What might be a more intriguing supposition is that Franklin developed his (dormant, incipient) “capitalist” way of thinking in the process of his intense, dedicated, and fervent self-formation against the backdrop of orthodox Calvinism. But that already suggests, as Fiering points out, that Franklin's ethics is no longer Puritan (1978: 200). As his narrative shows, had he stayed in Boston, New England, the cradle of Puritanism, hampered on one side by his autocratic and Calvinist father and, on the other, by his equally stern and authoritarian brother, Franklin's traits could hardly have found expression in new modes of social being; rather, it was his transfer from “antediluvian Boston” to “cosmopolitan Philadelphia,” as Steven Shapiro points out, that made all the difference (2008: 175). Philadelphia also meant thick Quaker surroundings, but not such that would claim Franklin's unconditional religious allegiance as a precondition to setting up a business or succeeding in one. His geographical mobility from the more stagnant and authority-oriented New England to the more cosmopolitan, Quaker-influenced Philadelphia obviously gave wings to Franklin's incipient talents, leading us to surmise, as Shapiro does, that it was not New England

¹⁷ How much of this congregationalism, decidedly Christian in its outlook, still abides uncorrupted and undiluted in Franklin's generation and in the wider intercolonial sphere beyond New England, is a matter of dispute. Schueller, otherwise critical of Franklin's “moral-utilitarianism,” grudgingly admires his pseudo-dialogic capacities (1987: 97, 95) and argues for a more complicated reading of Puritan ethics, in which usefulness is not merely a conduit for other aims but is linked “with the service in the Kingdom of God” (1987: 105). According to Fiering, Franklin's ethics is not Puritan (1978: 200), offering us a *mélange* of classical, Protestant-bourgeois, and broadly conceived Christian virtues, even though, as mentioned by Pangle, he omits the key Christian virtues of hope, faith, and charity, alongside the aristocratic ones (2007: 66, 73).

Calvinism that created the social conditions to foster a market economy, but an urban motley mixture of sects, nationalities, and social strata under a non-Puritan, fairly tolerant, imperial dispensation that created a new “social imaginary,” as Charles Taylor uses the phrase (2004: 23). Moreover, Franklin’s mobility only begins in Philadelphia, since a year from his landing in the city he is off to London, where he intends to learn the printing trade, cultivate himself, and nurture acquaintances and contacts that would come useful later in his life. It is undeniable that his two-year stay in the imperial center was beneficial to his printing career and his burgeoning intellectual development, but it clearly bore traces of deism, a scientific worldview, and plain secularism, as demonstrated by Bunker (2019: 178, 184).

Franklin was a lapsed Calvinist (Presbyterian), who refrained from joining any church, even though he would make a point of attending local congregations in Philadelphia so as not to alienate his neighbors. It was evident from an early age, when he began to make an argument against the precepts of institutionalized religion, that he would submit religious dogmas and orthodoxies to the same kind of scrutiny that he accorded to issues in natural sciences or practical morality, thus joining in a rising chorus of dissenting voices (Bunker 2019: 70). Weber wryly, and, according to some, misguidedly labels Franklin as “a colorless Deist” (2001: 19), opening up another interpretative rift (cf. Weintraub 1976: 230, 232, for a refutation of this view; Walters 2008: 102).¹⁸ Yet why would Weber still assume that Franklin professed these values, thus re-opening the enigma of sincerity and performativity, so often revisited in the context of the autobiography?

¹⁸ Franklin’s religious policy spans public and private pronouncements during his lifetime and is notoriously difficult to pin down, sometimes depending mostly on the particular stage of his life under discussion. Generally, his wavering on the issues of religion can be placed in the context of the long-term processes of, what Taylor terms, “modern moral order” and the “great disembedding” (2004). Even as Franklin early on boldly questioned the idea of “God’s providence and the order he has established among humans and in the cosmos” (Taylor 2004: 5), in the course of his later life, he modifies and complicates the initial proposition, perplexing his critics and biographers. This befuddles Weber, as well, who moves from divesting Franklin’s writing “from all direct relationship to religion” (2001: 14), to conceding, in the context of the *Autobiography*, that there is a more complex portrait of Franklin and of his layered motivations, while being obliged to re-introduce the idea of religion (“a divine revelation,” “a path of righteousness” (2001: 18)) into the range of Franklin’s motifs. Cf. McCarragher 2019, “Errand into the Marketplace”; Oberg and Stout 1993.

As Weber has pointed out, the key concepts that the capitalist ethic borrowed from Protestantism are the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and inner-worldly asceticism (Gilmore 1977: 11–13; Adair-Totef 2014: 90–91). These two notions importantly intersect in the idea of *calling* (or, vocation, especially as it can be discerned in the Old Testament and the epistles of St. Paul). Perhaps better known of the two, the doctrine of predestination, argued that only a select number of people would attain salvation relying on God’s absolute will, thus seemingly reducing the Calvinists’ effort to naught. Countervailing it, the notion of “innerworldly asceticism” (thus rendered by Weber’s translator, Talcott Parsons) urges, even in the face of the shadow of damnation, a form of self-regulating moral behavior of methodical and steady application to one’s profession (wherever God’s will would ordain it) that would eventually lay the basis for middle-class, bourgeois social and economic practice. In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor explains how this re-sanctification of the common life that came to imbue work, marriage, and sensuality had an enduring impact on the modern mentality (1996: 211–233).

Besides its indisputable religious connotations, the idea of calling, as William Spanos insists, needs to be considered in the American context as being tied to the Puritan origin thesis, as described above by Tocqueville and reiterated by an array of scholars in American Studies according to a foundational potential. Spanos, however, does not see the need to revise the Weberian thesis; for him, specifically, Franklin’s is a case of the secularized version of the idea of calling (bypassing the question of how and why it should simply migrate from one context to the next and remain unchanged). What we can profitably retain for our argument is the idea that the secularized “Puritan ethos” considerably impinges on “the American national psyche” (Spanos 2016: 110), even though we still lack the precise means to ascertain this relation as being that of cause and effect.

True, the elements of “service” and “the warrantable calling” shorn of their theological aura (Spanos 2016: 110–111) are still locatable in Franklin’s numerous and various writings, as well as observable in his life; they are, however, entangled not simply in the economic networks, but in a broader social revolution unfolding in the course of the eighteenth century encompassing different levels, from the individual to the people (Shapiro 2008: 177; Taylor 2004: 3–4). Effectively, Shapiro reads Franklin’s autobiography as a text experimenting with this momentous transformation, the “one involving the shaping of mass response to consensual ideas as a means of establishing sovereignty” (2008: 180). This seems to be

the key relay from the old to the new social dispensation bypassing the question of the unadulterated diffusion of the Puritan spirit in the market economy of New England, let alone other American colonies, even less susceptible to it.

Franklin is certainly knowledgeable about the term *calling* and operates under its wings, inheriting it from his religious forbears, his father in particular. However, even here he does not follow the beaten path, as he delightfully narrates his wayward and undisciplined way of finding his calling. First of all, he pointedly refuses to abide by his father's wishes to take up the family trade (tallow chandler). Then, he fails to perform as a dutiful and obedient apprentice at his brother's printing shop; moreover, he commits a serious offence when he breaks his indenture by escaping from the arrangement and finds himself first in New York and next in Philadelphia as a free but fugitive apprentice, flouting paternal authority, violating the status hierarchy, and even more seriously, breaking the laws of indenture (Waldstreicher 2011: 215–217; Dierks 2011: 95–96). These breaches of the traditional social order hardly amount to a dutiful, persistent, and law-abiding performance of one's job for the sake of godly life. What we witness is an inchoate process of calling, subtracted by a new sense of individualism and self-assertion, taking place in a wholly secular ambit. Pangle sees Franklin at this early point in his professional life being actuated by "enlightened self-interest" and "energetic self-help" (2007: 50), even though the latter would be mitigated by different social and business networks towards which he steered all his life, as the previous discussion has shown.

The trait that still remains in Franklin's various and passionately pursued ventures is that the morality (honesty) of conduct is proportionate to its being applied as a useful and communal action, benefitting the entire community, and thus only very vaguely connected to the idea of asceticism, which in the Protestant doctrine becomes an "activity within the world" (Weber 2001: 73). However, Franklin never scruples as to the possible indication of his state of election: his motivation is, as his detractors would say, utilitarian (but which Shapiro fends off (2008: 203)) or as his proponents would insist, that of "secular perfectionism" (Fiering 1978: 213). Franklin's minute descriptions of different designs that he was involved in as a distinguished citizen of Philadelphia, from setting up a first colonial circulating library to leading the initiative to pave the city streets to establishing a permanent city fire company, show him acting on purely rational principles of science and management, intent on improving the living conditions of his peer citizens and himself. It is a sheer expression of what Hannah Arendt

has called “a feeling of happiness,” the pursuit of a common good in the public sphere, and thus an entirely worldly concern (2006: 110). In that sense, it claims as its nucleus not so much the spirit of ascetic Protestantism but rather that of nascent scientific rationalism, as Franklin indeed shows when he quits his business (again, an atypical move for a more straightforward follower of the accumulation ethos) in his prime (in September 1748, at the age of 42) in order to dedicate himself to science, experiments, and the pursuit of a public career.¹⁹ Delightfully, as on other occasions in his life and in his texts, Franklin hides his trail, since he announces that he would be “taking the proper measures for obtaining leisure to enjoy life and my friends more than heretofore” and presumably wishes to excuse himself from “public affairs,” or so he avers (1945: 55).

At this point, the Weberian model is no longer a useful frame through which to read Franklin’s life or derive his worldview – he transcends the bounds of his birth, his acquired status, and even his geographic locus, and launches himself into an international and cosmopolitan sphere, seemingly detached from economic concerns. But this is only for a time, since the unfolding events would force him to go back to politics, which, in the time of revolutions, is also as much about the economy, as Franklin’s wrangling with the colonial administrators show in the last part of his unfinished text (2012: 156–160). At that point, however, Franklin has come a long way from his Poor Richard persona or even from manifold transformations recorded on the pages of his autobiography.

Granted, we cannot say that Weber was entirely off the mark when he recruited Franklin and a fragment of his writings as an example of the instantiation of the modern Western capitalist form of rationality, but – given the canonical status of both authors and their works – this brief examination intended to show how Franklin’s texts (as the presumable extension of his historical essence) cannot be taken as either a typical or definitive proof of Weber’s famous thesis. It would therefore seem that Weber’s understanding itself was beguiled by Franklin’s

¹⁹ So that, in a sense, humanism was an unwitting companion to ascetic Protestantism, as Taylor shows: “the Reformation played a role in the disenchantment of the world, and the creation of an exclusive humanism” (2007: 85); “The Reformation as Reform is central to the story I want to tell – that of the abolition of the enchanted cosmos, and the eventual creation of a humanist alternative to faith” (2007: 77). In his pivotal study *A Secular Age*, Taylor further shows that the strands of religious reforms, going off in unexpected directions, lay the ground for a steady process of reducing the impact of religion (especially in its idea of an “enchanted universe”) from our everyday horizon and increasingly giving way to science pretending to be a new “religion.”

rhetorical prowess and by layers of reading and interpretation which have meanwhile accrued to the autobiography and occasional writings. Franklin's *Autobiography*, understood as literature and rhetoric, however, remains as a testament of quite a few novelties: a new subject, new power alliances and institutions, and a new sensibility to go with the new order. Franklin's influence, moreover, will certainly not be depleted by Weber's either correct or unfair readings, since even nowadays, thanks to Franklin's Codicil to his last will and testament (2012: 249–254), young entrepreneurs in Boston and Philadelphia might avail themselves of his both rational and benevolent disposal of money to help fund their start-up businesses. As pointed out by Yenawine, Franklin could be said to have invented “the global microfinance movement” (2010: 5), projecting the ideas and ideals of an eighteenth-century man of sensibility onto the twenty-first century cultural and economic landscape, thus showing his uncanny capacity to transcend his time and place. That, we could argue, has been the enduring spirit of Franklin's life and work.

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin Franklin, Max Weber, and the Elusive "Spirit of Capitalism"

Max Weber's classical study of the origins of capitalism makes a strong claim about the vital nexus between ascetic Puritanism and the rise of capitalism, which he importantly illustrates by drawing on the American context, specifically the role of Benjamin Franklin in fostering new forms of economic behavior creating the market economy. To reiterate his argument, Weber ascertains that the doctrine of predestination and the concept of calling – taking place in a worldly environment but alien to it – pushed the men at the forefront of the Protestant Reformation, in the New World and elsewhere, to adopt a new rationale of economic behavior which in the course of time led to the emergence of capitalism. The argument acknowledges the general validity of Weber's much rehearsed thesis but examines in more detail its weak points insofar as it intends to harness Franklin, his persona, and his texts (in particular his autobiography but also a number of his other writings) to uphold the hypotheses. The examination proceeds by considering the multifaceted social world of the semi-peripheral and colonial American society, which Franklin successfully navigates, sometimes breaking the rules and sometimes obeying them. The consideration

of the rising public sphere, in which Franklin importantly participated as a printer, writer, and agile citizen, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the importance of social networks – both bottom-up and top-down – in the formation of a new economic system. The next stage considers the generic, rhetorical, and discursive analysis of Franklin’s texts cited by Weber so as to demonstrate the inconclusiveness of tagging them as clear-cut examples of Weber’s thesis. Additionally, this requires that we also reconsider the secularization thesis as a much less straightforward process than is suggested by the theories of modernity. The textual analysis encompasses several of Franklin’s texts, beginning with his long-standing and hugely popular colonial almanac, in which he adopts the enduring and performative literary persona of Poor Richard. The next key point of analysis refers to Franklin’s autobiography – more accurately memoirs – as a multi-focal and polyvalent text reflecting different points in his life and foregrounding concurrent strategies of self-presentation, confirming the autobiography’s status as a proto-national text, but thereby also complicating and reframing the explicit uses that Weber puts the text to. The conclusion is that, on the strength of Franklin’s example and its high status in Weber’s socio-cultural model, the thesis deserves to be re-examined and modified when we take into account the dynamic dialogue with the ineluctable Franklin and his rhetorically seductive, polyphonic texts.