

Paper prepared for Conference on Civility and Trust,

Victoria College, University of Toronto,

May 5-8, 2005

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8,492 words, this draft

**Weber, Elias, and the Semiotics of Civility:
Pre-Modern, Modern and Post-Modern Capitalism and Trust**

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Very brief summary **ABSTRACT**: (100 words)

We can use ideas from Weber and Elias to study Pre-Modern, Modern and Post-Modern Capitalism (as Ideal Type Models) and thereby gain insights into the decline of civility and trust. But in making such an analysis we must remain aware of epistemological restrictions to our “semiotics of civility” with respect to “culture” and “power” (Barrett 2002). We can avoid simplistic analyses which represent the globalized future in harshly optimistic (Jacobs 2004) or naively optimistic terms (Bernstein 2004). Peirce’s Pragmaticist version of semiotics helps to gain a clearer notion of what an ITM can be considered to be in terms of the INSOP model of hermeneutic interpretative rules.

Abstract (longer version)

Max Weber's Comparative-Historical Sociology (CHS) utilizes Ideal Type Models (ITMs) to study various aspects of the inter-relationship between "culture" and "power" (Barrett 2002). But what Weber meant by an ITM has been subject to dispute. Furthermore, Weber's "mature theory of capitalism" (Collins 1980) is often misinterpreted in ways that represent a lack of hermeneutic sophistication (e.g. Bernstein 2004). Nevertheless, even a sophisticated interpretation of Weber's works makes it relevant to utilize insights from Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic epistemology in order to move beyond Cartesian dualism. Moreover, Norbert Elias' fascinating account of the emergence of civility can help to accomplish that goal. A Weber-Elias model of Pre-Modern, Modern, and Post-Modern Capitalism is a useful way to approach contemporary trends and issues. Our globalized version of capitalism has led to post-modernist versions of trust and civility. If post-modernism is the culture of late capitalism (Jameson 1984) then it is important to apply Peirce's semiotics to the study of post-modernity. The semiotics of post-modernity can be framed within a Weber-Elias CHS-ITM, thereby avoiding certain pitfalls of extreme versions of French Post-Modernist skepticism and nihilism but also avoiding simplistic, cartoon versions of history (e.g. Jacobs 2004). There has been a loss of trust and a degeneration of civility (Carter 1998) at many levels of social organization, but this does not mean that we face the "end of civilization." At the same time, it would be equally false to deny the ways in which the levels of prosperity which were created in the past (Bernstein 2004) cannot continue to be the norm. Social change in China, India and Europe in coming decades cannot simply replicate the trajectory of the last five hundred years of Modern Capitalism.

I. Introduction:

One way to understand a set of phenomena that we loosely call capitalism is to consider three major forms (or, figurations) of capitalism chronologically: pre-modern, modern and post-modern.¹ I would like to argue that to develop the “semiotics of civility” we need to make those chronological distinctions.

Instead of trying to discuss *generic* trans-cultural concepts like “integrity” and “civility” (Carter 1998) we need to subject the concept of civility (or any word or concept) to a historically-grounded, comparative analysis. Rauch (1999: 61-72) summarizes Peirce’s viewpoint on this topic, a version of the milder kind of linguistic relativism.² The rule of interpretation of theoretical and empirical materials should be the basic hermeneutic principle espoused by Dilthey (Bakker 1999, Newton 2004) that all terms should be seen as having meaning only in historical context. Unless our goal is to establish a foundationalist ontology based on timeless truths, we need to take historical social change into account.³

The path breaking work of Norbert Elias (1939) provides a very good window into the ways in which “culture” and “power” (Barrett 2002) have changed. If we also place Elias’s work into the broader *verstehende Soziologie* of Max Weber then we begin to approach a better comprehension.⁴ While Elias (2000: 469, 472, 475) criticizes a Parsonian version of Weber, it is nevertheless the case that Elias’ historical analyses of “sociogenic” and “psychogenic” aspects of the civilizing process in Europe do not have to be seen as ad odds with the Weberian approach. For example, the work by Charles Taylor (1989: 17, 146, 148, 186, 191, 203, 222, 225,

500, 510-512) utilizes Weber's ideas in discussing the modern self and the disappearance of enchantment.⁵ Ringer (2004: 40, 101-104, 177) provides a careful statement concerning Weber's ideal type approach. It is striking that Elias does not mention Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert or Simmel, despite their importance for the German tradition of historical investigation that so strongly influenced classical German-language sociology (Ringer 2004: 18-40). Indeed, the discussion of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* in German usage in the very first pages of Elias' *magnum opus* would seem to require some mention of his German predecessors. In any case, it is not impossible to conceive a blending of Elias' historical investigations with Weber's comparative sociology. Together they provide a better Comparative Historical Sociology than when we only read one of these towering intellectuals separately. They point clearly to the importance of understanding historical processes and figurations.⁶

To make this statement is to suggest a very controversial alliance. Although sociologists like Richard Sennett are willing to see a link between the historical sociology of Elias, with its focus on the Renaissance and absolutist courts, especially Versailles, and the comparative-historical sociology of Max Weber, not everyone would agree. As Gorski (2003: 30) indicates, "...there is no place for the Reformation in his [Elias'] periodization – or his theory." Gorski himself examines the Low Countries and Prussia and is careful to link religion, discipline and state power. He criticizes Elias for taking a "top down" approach. To fully grasp all of the complexity of the process of civilizing it is important to view state power as a process which also has many elements of the micro-analysis of the genealogy of power.⁷

The idea of a significant change in manners and morals is evident in the Dutch Republic during the Golden Age. This is the “Further Reformation of Society” (Israel 1998: 690-699). The Anabaptists (and particularly those Anabaptists called the Old Order Mennonites) were very strictly opposed to luxury. (Contemporary Old Order Mennonites in Canada retain some of the original beliefs.) During the First Anglo-Dutch War, a famous Dutch Reformed preacher named Petrus Wittewrongel (1609-1662) had an appreciable impact as a preacher and writer on life-style, at Amsterdam” (Israel 1998: 691). He insisted on a puritanical *habitus* that went far in the direction of the maxims of Ben Franklin’s Poor Richard. According to dogmatic fundamentalists like Wittewrongel, the reformation of life-styles required regulations against lack of observance of the Sabbath, heresy, fashion, display of luxury, extravagance, immodesty, dancing, smoking, drinking, swearing, profanation, blasphemy, cock-fighting, the theatre and whoredom. Unless they renounced their sinful ways the Dutch were sure to lose in the war against the English. All of this went hand in hand with the early stages of modern capitalism. While there were also some who defended a more tolerant attitude, the extreme circumstances during times of war tended to result in heavy-handed Puritanism. In 1667 and 1688, when fears of the French and the English were significant, many congregations even banned such festivals as the feast of St. Nicholas on December 5th (Israel 1998: 697), grandfather of our Santa Claus celebration on December 25th. (The Christmas celebration on the 25th was already separated from the gift giving of the 5th or 7th .) Giving children gifts to celebrate St. Nicholas was seen as superstition. (Some Puritans in the English colonies banned Christmas celebrations altogether.) The “disciplinary revolution”

(Gorski 2003) of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was also a time of the emergence of Modern Capitalism in the Low countries.⁸ Before that time, a generic form of merchant activity existed, but it was not disciplined through the same habitus. A “civilizing process” had to occur, a process that Weber analyzed in complex detail (Bakker 2003). A structural transformation took place in Northwestern Europe.

That is, there was a time when capitalism (as we have known it for a long time) did not exist and there are indicators that perhaps the capitalism that existed for a long time is changing in qualitatively dramatic ways. In making such an analysis, however, we have to pay more than usual attention to epistemological issues. We can be guided in our understanding of idealization in social scientific versions of historical analysis by certain key ideas articulated by Charles Sanders Peirce. That is, we can have a “semiotics of civility” that takes into account a Peircian reading of major contributors to sociological analysis of long-term trends in the nature of capitalism.

Many popular writers refer to capitalism as if the term does not require careful definition. However, this leads to errors. The concept is far too complex to be self-evident. Many writers seem to assume we all know what capitalism is. But how the term is used depends on the context of one’s semiotic interpretive community. That is, we use a complex umbrella term like capitalism in ways that seem acceptable to those we are likely to think of as a kind of reference group. A scholar writing for other scholars is likely to use a different set of terms than a public intellectual trying to reach a wider audience. That ordinary citizen will often regard the use of technical terms as an over-reliance on mere jargon. But when we discuss complex social phenomena we can only begin to approximate a greater degree of empirical validity if

we do not hesitate to make careful distinctions. That requires discussing those issues within the context of an intellectual network, a community of scholars. Within the context of academic discussion and debate there may be at least some semblance of agreement on the terms of debate. To put it more precisely, the pragmatics and semantics of the use of terms will be more heuristic.⁹

One important contribution to a better understanding of the process of semiosis is the approach advocated, although not always practiced, by Charles Sanders Peirce. I would like to briefly characterize Peirce's epistemological stance as the INSOR model.¹⁰ The Interpretive Network (**IN**) utilizes certain "signs" (**S**) to construct operational definitions or Operationalized Representations (**OP**). The **INSOP** process must always be taken into account.¹¹ Popular wisdom frequently provides only very partial insights since journalistic analyses do not take into account the merely heuristic nature of semiotic labels. They are idealizations, nothing more and nothing less. The full elaboration of these ideas would be out of place here, but it is very important to emphasize the way in which signs mediate between interpretive communities and representations of what we take to be real (see Bakker 2005).¹²

Hence, the labels "Pre-Modern," "Modern" and "Post-Modern" can be considered epistemologically to be **Ideal Type Models** (ITMs).¹³ That is, we cannot take such a huge mass of information covering hundreds of years and summarize it in a straightforward manner, concretely tying the abstract label to the concrete substance. Moreover, these particular ITMs are so abstract and general that it is even hard to argue that they are historically grounded. Nevertheless, as a first approximation, I would like to consider those three ITMs.

II. When Did Modern Capitalism Start?

The question immediately arises: “When did Modern Capitalism start?” That is, if we accept the notion of an ITM of Modern Capitalism, then when did the phenomena we are attempting to point to actually begin? One classic sociological argument about that was sketched by Max Weber in 1904 and 1905. He then wrote a third essay based in part on his travels in the United States (in 1904) that was published in 1906. When he prepared his “Prefatory Remarks” to his *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*, just before his death in 1920, he summarized his argument as it had developed between 1904 and 1920 (sixteen years). He makes it very clear (Weber 2002 [1920]: 152-153) that modern capitalism is not simply adventurous pursuit of the greatest possible gain such as exists “... in all epochs and in all countries of the globe...” among “... waiters, physicians, chauffeurs, artists, prostitutes, corrupt civil servants [!], soldiers, thieves, crusaders, gambling casino operators, and beggars.” Instead, it is “a systematic utilization of skills or personal capacities in such a manner that, at the close of business transactions, the company’s money balances, or ‘capital’ (its earnings through transactions), exceed the estimated value of all production costs...” This requires rational calculation and organized instrumental rational social action. To a moderate degree the rudiments of this have existed in *all* the world’s civilizations. Indeed, “... the capitalist enterprise has been an enduring, highly universal, and ancient organization” (Weber 2002: 154). But the out and out taming of irrational motives in the pursuit of profit only took a fully developed form indigenously at a crucial juncture in Western European history and “... in the *modern* era the West came to know an entirely different type of capitalism.” This modern

capitalism “...took as its foundation the rationalist-capitalist organization of (legally) *free labor*.” As Stephen Kalberg explains in an endnote (Weber 2002: 256 note 13): “Again, Weber is using ‘rational’ in the sense of a systematic, organized, disciplined, and economically-efficient manner of organizing work.” Weber’s 1904-1905 essays were a preliminary sketch (or, “draft”) of this important insight. But there is endless confusion about what he meant since he was also, at the very same time, working on his notion of what an ideal type is in terms of what German-speaking authors today call *Gesellschaftswissenschaft*.¹

The recent translation by Lutz Kaelber of Weber’s first doctoral dissertation (Weber 2003) is an immense step forward because many critics have misunderstood the Protestant Ethic thesis. Anyone who reads Weber’s dissertation will understand that far from ignoring the Italian city states Weber is actually quite knowledgeable about the forms of pre-modern capitalism that were just beginning to modernize in the fifteenth century in Genoa, Pisa and Florence. The almost total neglect of the very young Weber’s work (before 1892) in the scholarly work on Weber in English (and to some extent even in German) has resulted in simplistic readings of Weber’s ideas concerning the origins of a distinctly modern capitalism that is based to a large extent on trust and civility rather than adventurism and duplicity (Kaelber 2003).

I would like to argue that when we compare the historical evidence to the ITM of Modern Capitalism it is very useful to see the ways in which such modernity began to

¹ I have attempted to learn as much as possible about the emergence of social science in the German-speaking part of Europe. However, that topic is far too complex to discuss here at any length. Suffice it to say that Ringer (1997, 2004) has a very penetrating interpretation of Weber’s ideas.

take full force in the fifteenth century in northern Italy but particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in Holland and parts of England and what later became Germany, for the first time in human history. It was a kind of evolutionary mutation, a sort of “punctuated equilibrium,” which also had its oscillations (e.g. the tulip mania of the 1630s). The capitalisms which existed before the sixteenth century were all “Pre-Modern,” at least according to the model I am attempting to articulate.

A reading of Weber’s work as a whole reveals that his so-called Protestant Ethic thesis – despite all of its complexity (Cohen 2002) -- is merely one component of his “mature theory of capitalism” (Collins 1980). Many of the simplistic criticisms of the Protestant Ethic thesis are based on a reading of an English translation of a set of articles published for the first time in 1904 and 1905 merely as a *sketch* of an idea. A full appreciation of Weber’s *oeuvre* requires following the hermeneutic rule that one must read all of Weber’s work (preferably in the various editions, in German), including his first dissertation on early trade and commerce in the Mediterranean. Yet many critics (e.g. Bernstein 2004) do not take that elementary step.¹⁴ It is not a requirement to read the whole *oeuvre* in order to get a sense of its heuristic value; but, it is absolutely necessary to read most, if not all, of what Weber wrote before criticizing his theory of modern capitalism as harshly as many historians and others are wont to do.

III. The Word “Capitalism” as a Representation:

The word capitalism has created endless confusion since it is sometimes argued, particularly by some Marxists and Neo-Marxists, that capitalism did not exist at all before the sixteenth century. That would only be true if we were not able to use the

word capitalism in a more generic sense.¹⁵ Such arguments tend to ignore the importance of Peirce's semiotics. Words have meaning within the context of an Interpretive Community. The various types of Neo-Marxian thinking tend to use the word capitalism in different ways.

One version of the Marxian model is that before [modern] capitalism we have something called feudalism. Indeed, various remarks by Marx in the *Grundrisse* have given rise to a "dialectical materialism" or "historical materialism" that conceptualizing historical social change in terms of dialectical changes from Asiatic to Feudal Modes of Production (Anderson 1978). In that model the earliest Mode of Production was the simple Communist Mode of Production. Most academics are quite familiar with the stereotypical version of the Marxian model of dialectical change but have not bothered to examine it in any detail. The epistemological foundations of the terms used in Marx's sketch of historical social change have rarely been challenged by those Neo-Marxists who see that sketch as a completely deterministic evolutionary schema. Perry Anderson (1978: 8) does make a disclaimer that his presentation of the facts is "limited and provisional" and says: "The scholarship and skills of the professional historian are absent..." He also freely admits that Marx (and Engels) may not always be free of errors and misjudgments. But, he does not explicitly argue in favor of a Weberian (or, Neo-Weberian) epistemology consisting of the use of *Verstehen* and Ideal Type Models.

I reject the stereotypical "Marxian" (i.e. Marxist and Neo-Marxist) model, although not necessarily the specifics of the discussion of that model by Karl Marx himself.¹⁶ One reason that model is not adequate is that it tends to rely too heavily on a positivistic epistemology. The various "stages" are not seen as heuristic devices but

as real historical events. Hence, I reject the realist epistemology that promotes the notion that there was a real transition from feudalism to capitalism. Instead, I would like to offer an ITM which emphasizes the idea that Pre-Modern Capitalism gave way gradually in the sixteenth century to Modern Capitalism.

The advantage of an idealist rather than a realist epistemology in social sciences and history is that it allows us to escape the reification of historical categories. Max Weber intended his ITMs as heuristic devices and not as absolutely fixed categories. It is worth considering that there have been elements of “instrumental rational” capitalist activity long *before* the sixteenth century.

I will leave aside the archeological and anthropological problem of the existence of gathering and hunting societies for thousands of years, although some cultural-social anthropologists have argued persuasively that forms of instrumental rationality are characteristic of the earliest forms of human conduct. But with regard to the European history of the last three thousand years (a relatively brief moment in historical time, archeologically speaking) it is possible to consider than an idealized model (ITM) which includes elements of “early capitalism” is heuristic.

IV. Pariah Capitalism:

Weber calls Pre-Modern Capitalism a “pariah capitalism.” What he meant was that before Modern Capitalism a kind of instrumental rationality did exist to a limited extent in merchant activities, but it did not necessarily extend to other aspects of the political economic structures of power or the symbolic interactions of everyday life. It was one aspect of social action, but it was not as close to universalistic as it has been for several hundred years in the industrialized world. The objective of merchant

activity was to buy cheap and sell dear. When a merchant sold his (or her) goods on the marketplace there was a different price for the stranger or outsider than for someone who was recognized as a member of the same ethnic group or religious group. Those from the same “tribe,” so to speak, were allowed to buy for a considerably lower price than those who were regarded as outsiders. Co-religionists were given preferential treatment. Elements of such preferential treatment still exist in many poor countries and some traces of it can still be found in even the richest industrialized and technologized societies.

Weber stressed the “pariah” nature of Pre-Modern Capitalism because he wished to emphasize the way in which European modernity involved a significant change in social relations and symbolic interaction. In his ITM of Modern Capitalism he stresses the idea that a modern capitalist merchant is obliged, for the most part, to offer a very similar price to everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, religion or language. There is an element of trust in Modern Capitalism, at least according to the ITM, that does not exist in Pre-Modern Capitalism. Anyone can go to a market or store and buy a commodity or service for a relatively stable price, with due consideration for time of year and seasonal sales, and so forth. Prices do shift and there are ways in which merchants attempt to get around the basic rule of equitability, but the standard and ideal is a relatively transparent price, regardless of circumstances. A shop owner in Toronto cannot sell a standard commodity like a liter of milk or a newspaper for one price to a person who looks “white” and for another price to someone who looks “black.” When a real estate agent is negotiating the price

of a house he or she cannot blatantly show bias to a co-religionist, although subtle forms of bias are often tolerated.

The Weberian distinction between the ITM of “Pre-Modern Capitalism” and the ITM of “Modern Capitalism” is almost always ignored, even by those well versed in the study of Weber’s ideas. In most introductory textbooks the use of the ideal type is frequently illustrated by Weber’s ideas concerning modern, rational-legal bureaucracy, but the texts simplify this to “bureaucracy” in general. For Weber (1968) the modern, rational-legal bureaucracy of the nation-state goes hand in hand with the modern, rational-legal capitalism that started in the sixteenth century. Secondary expositions of Weber’s ideas, however, simply use the terms bureaucracy and capitalism, which leads to confusion. It is therefore no wonder that in semi-popular work by public intellectuals the idea of “Modern Capitalism” is not clearly differentiated from generic “market values” characteristic of pre-modern capitalist relations and interactions. Weber’s “pariah capitalism” is something that many writers seem to think of as characteristic of contemporary, modern capitalism. However, the term market is used to designate the generic aspect of capitalism at its worst. That is the uncivility that Elias (1978, 1982) was interested in understanding as the lack of civility that existed before the sixteenth century in Europe.

One writer, for example, says “Most important, while market values are intrinsically amoral, political values can be moral or immoral” (Gediman 1998). A sociologist comments on: “... the winner take all mentality that is rampant in the market place economics of late twentieth century and early twenty-first century America” (Kirshak 2001: 253).

The idea of trust in market transactions is, of course, not an absolute. We can all think of exceptions to the rule. But the exceptions tend to prove the rule. Blatant violations will be met with disapproval. Flagrant bias toward one racial or ethnic group is not considered appropriate. If I go to buy a commodity in a store I expect the store owner or sales clerk to treat me more or less the same way as she or he would treat another customer. For example, in a store run by Chinese people from Hong Kong it will cost the same, more or less, to buy a set of dishes regardless of whether my cultural appearance is “Chinese” or not. Modern Capitalism is based on a system of trust in negotiations that tends toward an instrumental rational form of symbolic interaction.

V. A Public Intellectual on Civility:

Stephen Carter (1998: 277-286) refers to Norbert Elias (1978, 1982) in a semi-popular book on *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*.¹⁷ Carter, a Professor of Law at Yale, is insightful about the importance of civil debate and develops fifteen rules for the “Etiquette of Democracy.” He combines his analysis with previous work by Cornell West, another African-American scholar deeply interested in religious values. But Carter is not writing a primarily scholarly book. He is writing as a public intellectual.¹⁸

Carter gets many points right and he has many valuable insights. For example, he refers to the fact that Erasmus wrote a treatise on civility and distinguished civility from barbarism. In the sixteenth century Erasmus promoted the idea of the use of the fork. But he does not actually cite Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus himself. Instead, he draws this fact from Elias. Elias (1978: 69) indicates that not only the fork but also

the napkin are highly symbolic of the new civility of the earliest stages of modern capitalism. The new middle classes in Holland and England (*the haute bourgeoisie* and *the petite bourgeoisie*) began to have dining rooms and use napkins and forks.

The best know specific discussion by Erasmus of manners and morals is his famous *Moriae eoncomium*, better known in English as *The Praise of Folly* (Erasmus 1986: 77-153). The first version of that justly famous work appeared in 1511 and before Erasmus' death in 1536 there were seven revised major editions. Thomas Chaloner's English translation appeared in 1549. Volumes 39 and 40 of the *Collected Works* (CW) contain the less well known essays collectively known as *The Colloquies*, including "A Lesson in Manners/ *Monitoria pedagogica*" (1522) (CW vol. 39: 70-73) and "The Cheating Horse-Dealer/ Hippoplanus" (1524) (CW vol. 39: 557-561).¹⁹

What Carter (1998) does not do, however, is link Elias' ideas concerning the origins of civility in the modern nation-state to the earliest stages of the development of modern capitalism. In his analysis of the lack of civility he blames "the marketplace" and he blames "Capitalism" for our acquisitiveness. and writes as if the market is always immoral. He says (Carter 1998: 169):

... markets are not particularly moral places either. It is a truism of economics that markets are immoral; markets brings together willing buyer and willing seller but are not capable of evaluating the moral worth of a transaction. If morality (or law) does not restrain their desires, the same free-market forces that respond to consumer demand by supplying breakfast cereal and razor blades will supply cocaine, hand grenades, and child prostitutes.

There is a grain of truth in that idea, of course. But to blame the market for the "linguistics of incivility," as Carter does, is to ignore another side of Elias' brilliant

analysis of civility. The actual root of the civil is from the kind of civil society that is urban-based and not just in terms of the generic city but in terms of what Weber calls the modern city. The modern city goes hand in hand with the modern state (nation-state) and the rise of modern capitalism. It is essentially a generic or pariah capitalism that Carter and others are complaining about.

VI. Transition From Pariah to Modern Capitalism:

During the course of the sixteenth century the transformation that took place was significant. In retrospect we can see this period of the Protestant Reformation as a period of significant economic and political change. Weber's ITM of "Modern Capitalism" is a useful device for beginning to sort out some of the key sociological trends. Since it was never meant to be more than a heuristic it is a misinterpretation to assume that everything Weber wrote about the historical facts is absolutely correct. Weber was not a historian in the narrow sense. He did not do much archival research and most of his generalizations are based on a reading of the work of other scholars, most of whom were European (e.g. German, French, Italian, even Dutch). He freely admits that he is using their detailed historical work in order to construct ITMs. He is not attempting to do idiographic description of specific historical periods or places.

VII. Idiographic Historical Description ?:

Weber was not a historian. He was roundly criticized for his lack of historical research by a contemporary named Felix Rachfahl, whose book on William of Orange (Rachfahl 1906-1924) is, interestingly, cited by Isreal (1998: 1174). Thus, for example, despite his genius, Weber never completed a work of the historical precision and depth that we find in Jonathan Israel's (1998) *The Dutch Republic*. Professor

Israel's magisterial work is a definitive account of the rise of the United Provinces of the [Northern] Netherlands. He provides excellent, detailed information about the Dutch Golden Age. Israel is a first-rate scholar and his work is both readable and authoritative. But, for better and for worse, it is not sociology. It has all kinds of implications for comparative-historical sociologists (CHSs) interested in the Dutch case (Bakker 2003); but, it does not mention Max Weber, Lucien Febvre, Barrington Moore, Immanuel Wallerstein, Theda Skocpol or any other sociologist (or sociological historian) of repute. Yet, he successfully places the Dutch Revolt (or, Revolution) and the Golden Age in a wider historical context, touching on many sociological aspects of the early modern period of European history.

Israel does depend on more than just idiographic facts, of course, and there are idealizations which are close to the historical materials which are, nevertheless, much like some of Weber's historically-grounded ideal types. But there are no over-arching Ideal Type Models (ITMs), historical or pure. The rise, greatness and fall of the Dutch Republic is analyzed through the lenses of a historian who is a master of the Dutch-language sources. He does not begin to speculate about general sociological principles that have to do with the emergence of modern capitalism.

VIII. The Low Countries (Nederlanden) and Modern Capitalism:

By utilizing historical information about Europe in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we can gain a great deal of insight into some sociological generalizations about the emergence of modern capitalism. The zenith of Dutch economic strength was between approximately 1640 and 1680 (or, 1647-1672) and

the who seventeenth century is regarded as the Dutch Golden Age. It is a time when the United Provinces of the Netherlands were a major military power. The symbolic end to Dutch power in Europe can be dated March 19, 1702, when *Stadhouder* William III, King William of England, died at Hampton Court.

Everything in Holland and other provinces of the Republic was "... permeated by party-factional rivalries and confessional tensions" (Israel 1998: 359). The importance of membership in a denomination was such that many Dutch sociologists have referred to Dutch society as existing on separate religious pillars, each one somewhat separate from the others. In addition to the Reformed evangelical religion there were a number of sects like the Mennonites. In 1578 Pope Gregory XIII had forbidden Roman Catholics from collaborating in the rebellion against King Philip II of Spain and drove a wedge between those who were Catholic but supported the revolt and those who rejected both the King and the Church (Israel 1998: 362). So during the Golden Age the Republic was tolerant of other religions but was mostly a mixed bag of different protestant sects. The Dutch Reformed Church (*Hervormde kerk*) was not a state church in the same sense as the Anglican Church was in England. There was a tendency for sects to further sub-divide into hardline and more moderate factions (e.g. the "Flemish" Anabaptists and the "Frisian" Anabaptists: Israel 1998: 397). Political blocks were associated with theological positions, such as the dispute between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants. At the Synod of Dordrecht (Dort) of 1618-1619 the Counter-Remonstrants won and this consolidated the power of the *Stadhouder* of that time, Prince Maurits of Nassau, who had taken power through a *coup d'etat* in 1618.. For some time the Dutch Reformed Church

was a bulwark of Calvinist orthodoxy and a center of international Calvinism (Israel 1998: 465).

We can read the idiographic history mainly for the detailed chronology of events, but we can also begin to develop ideas concerning “patterns.” Those figurations and trends that Elias (2000 [1939]) has so successfully articulated for an earlier period can be placed in an even more general sociological framework, without necessarily resorting to merely static notions of structure (as in certain versions of French Structuralism and American Structural-Functionalism). I will briefly illustrate this idea by referring to a few aspects of the situation in the Low Countries in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, relying heavily (in part for convenience) on Israel (1998) for his summary of the basic political and economic details and other historical facts (e.g. dates, names, battles).

The *Nederlanden* (*die Nederlanden*, *les Pays Bas*) emerged from a very complex set of events related to French history, events that ultimately require going back to the history of the Roman Empire and the various attempts to construct a political unit called the Holy Roman Empire. The rise of the Province of Holland to prominence within the Low Countries began in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in part as a result of technological innovations having to do with drainage and land reclamation (Israel 1998: 9-40). By 1290 Holland began to be a political power comparable to Flanders and Brabant. During the Black Death in Europe of 1348 Holland and Zeeland continued to prosper and expand. In 1425 the last independent count of Holland died and Holland became part of the Burgundian state.

The Duke’s representatives in Holland and Zeeland were called *Stadhouders*

(literally holders of the power of the *polis* or state).²⁰ By 1514 about 120,000 people (44% of the population of Holland) lived in towns of over 2,500 inhabitants. But cities in the southern part of the Low Countries (Ghent, Bruges, Antwerp, Brussels, Leuven) were still more important. During the course of the fifteenth century technological developments in ship building helped improve the economic situation for Holland. But it was the Revolution that started in 1572, especially in the northern provinces, that established Holland as a leading political figuration (Israel 1998: 169-360). In 1573 King Phillip II explored the possibility of ending the Revolt through negotiation but the rejection of Roman Catholicism by towns in Holland and Zeeland and the insistence on Protestant worship meant that the two sides were irreconcilable. William the Silent's leadership was in part a matter of siding with the Protestants and against those anti-Hapsburg factions which wanted to preserve Roman Catholicism (e.g. Gilles de Berlaymont, Baron de Hierges, since 1574 the King's *Stadhouder* of Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht and in the struggles in the Province of Utrecht in 1577). Without the Protestant Reformation the outcome of the Revolution, under the leadership of William of Orange, would have taken an entirely different form. (There were two significant fully republican periods when there was no *Stadhouder* :1650-1672 and 1702-1747, although the Dutch Republic was never a kingdom.)

In 1579-1585 the Hapsburgs re-conquered the southern part of the Low Countries. Many nobles who had felt the revolt against tyranny was legitimate were nevertheless not willing to give up their Roman Catholic faith. In effect, leaders had to choose between King or Calvinism. In the 1580s the northern and southern parts of the Low Countries were drifting apart politically and militarily. The militias and the citizenry

in some of the northern part of the Low Countries were strongly opposed to Hapsburg rule and Roman Catholicism, but it was not until 1594 that the city of Groningen and the territory that now forms the Province of Groningen (then called the Ommelanden) were forced through a military siege to abandon Catholicism. The importance of Calvinism was such that the city of Emden (now in Germany) was for many years Dutch-speaking and under the direct military and political sway of Holland, hence no longer completely Lutheran (Israel 1998: 241-275).

The military and political history of the northern part of the Low Countries in the late sixteenth century makes fascinating reading. However, we can take the idiographic details and place them in a broader sociological framework. Weber's famous "Protestant Ethic" thesis (Weber 2001 [1920, 1904, 1905, 1906]), which is just a small part of his *oeuvre*, is highly complex (Cohen 2002) and not easily summarized (Ringer 1997, 2004:113-142). However, a detailed analysis of Weber's arguments makes me believe that his analysis of the impact of Calvinism and Post-Calvinist sects on sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe is useful. His ITM of a "Protestant Ethic" is heuristic. We can compare his ideas concerning the ITM of a "Spirit" of [Modern] Capitalism" with the extent to which such an alleged "Spirit" (*Geist*) may be associated with the "Puritan Work Ethic" (which is also an ITM). For example, it is possible that to some extent the existence of a Puritan work ethic (where capitalist profit is an unintended consequence of frugality and diligence) is associated with a "Spirit" of profit-making as a goal and duty; but, it is also possible that such an association does not exist (Cohen 2002: 71-73).

The historical evidence from the Dutch case seems to suggest that a Puritan work ethic did tend to promote a Spirit of modern capitalism in Holland (and the Low Countries generally). Cohen (2002: 94-107) argues on the basis of the biographies of two English Puritans (Elias Pledger and Nehemiah Wallington), as well as other considerations (e.g. relevant to Ben Franklin, etc.) , that Weber got it wrong. But if we associate the Protestant (Puritan) work ethic with one's duty to one's calling (*Beruf*) and the Spirit of modern capitalism with a duty to one's capital assets then the two may not be as far apart as Cohen believes. The continuous work characteristic of sixteenth and seventeenth century Dutch merchants of both the haute and the petite bourgeoisie was both a matter of a belief in the idea of having a calling and a desire to increase the strength of business enterprises, large or small. It is useful to make an analytical distinction and it is always beneficial to compare the Ideal Type Model (and its ideal typical components) to historically-specific facts, but the importance of the Protestant Reformation for the rise of the Dutch Republic is such that we can see the work ethic and the *Geist* of modern capitalism as inter-related. It is not necessarily the case the "Puritan traditions were incompatible with modern economic rationality" (Cohen 2002: 104).

Between 1600 and 1740 the United Provinces of the Netherlands were technologically sophisticated compared to the rest of Europe. The Dutch Golden Age of seventeenth century (the period 1588 to 1702) can only be understood if we go back to the dramatic political and military events of the sixteenth century. The decline that took place during the eighteenth century was relative and in no small part due to the Anglo-Dutch Wars, which eventually resulted in English (and then British)

supremacy. The last major European war in which the Dutch participated as a major military force (along with Britain, Austria and Prussia) was the War of Spanish Succession (1702-1713), fought against France and Spain. The importance of world trade for the Dutch economy was a key factor in economic growth and in the decades after the 1720s Dutch control of trade started to decline. The value of imports and exports at Amsterdam remained static in the eighteenth century (Israel 1998: 1001). All forms of commerce and fisheries declined in the eighteenth century. Isaac de Pinto commented that by 1760 “every one of the main props of the Dutch Golden Age economy – long distance trade, Baltic commerce, the herring and whale fisheries, and industry – had been largely ruined, ...” (Israel 1998: 1002).

But during the Golden Age, when Dutch prosperity was at its peak, the foundation laid in the sixteenth century reached fruition. It would be impossible to understand the economic power of the Dutch Republic without mention of the break with Roman Catholicism and the consequent internal struggles among various Protestant factions. The general culture of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century was highly “reformed” in life-style and morality. During the period of Frederick Hendrik’s leadership (1625-1647) he played a balancing act between the desire by the Counter-Remonstrant group for more stringency and the general trend toward greater tolerance among Protestant sects. The just under two million inhabitants of the Dutch Republic were very much split along religious lines. Wages were relatively high and food costs were relatively low. But the total industrial work force (e.g. textiles, shipbuilding, brewing) was under 100,000. In the 1680s and 1690s the debate concerning toleration reached a high point, but anyone who denied the Trinity could still be sent to prison

and tolerance was only partial tolerance since Catholics and non-Christians (e.g. Jews and Spinoza-ists) were still treated as very separate. Dutch freedom was limited relative to twenty-first century standards, but it was, comparatively speaking, a blend of discipline with toleration. Dutch women had far more freedom than women in other countries. (Dutch brothels were tolerated as long as they stayed innocuous, much like the hidden churches of the Catholics.) The level of social discipline and social control was an outcome of the trends that Elias has discussed in such interesting detail, trends which go all the way back to Erasmus' time.

Without launching into a full scale presentation of the details of the Dutch case, it is safe to say that using a Weberian ITM of Modern Capitalism is a useful way to begin to get a feel for the complex inter-relationships among religious and political economic forces. The *habitus* of the ordinary small-scale businessman during the Dutch Golden Age should be studied more carefully. No one has yet done a study of the scale of Elias' major work for the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, although there are many useful hints in Philip Gorski's (2003) *The Disciplinary Revolution* and more popular works (e.g. Simon Schama). But sociological generalizations using Ideal Type Models of ideas like a "Protestant Ethic" and a "Spirit of Capitalism" will continue to be fruitful. In any case, there is no clear and direct evidence that Weber's account is incorrect, despite many criticisms. It remains stimulating because, if nothing else, it prompts many questions that require more detailed empirical investigation. As Alan Sica (2004) has argued, Weber's social theory is very relevant in the twenty-first century because he sought to answer several large, inter-related questions, especially after recovering from his breakdown of

August, 1897. His concern with the re-arrangement of personality (Elias' psychogenesis) is motivated in part by his own search for meaning, in partial spiritual accord with Nietzsche (Sica 2004: 174).

IX. Conclusion:

This brief essay has merely skimmed the surface of a complex range of problems. But what I have tried to do is to argue that we can utilize insights from Norbert Elias concerning the process of civilization to study the emergence of what Weber called "Modern Capitalism." Modern capitalism can be said to have emerged in parts of Northwestern Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even before the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century. It was largely a mercantile capitalism and involved a series of significant technological innovations in long-distance trade and navigation as well as a "rationalization" of book keeping and joint stock companies. The first major development of modern capitalism was during the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic, especially the mid-seventeenth century. There was a "reformation" of life-style that amounted to a significant transformation of habitus and a definite "psychogenesis" that accompanied this "sociogenesis" (Elias 2000).

When we think of capitalism we often forget that the modern capitalism of today had its roots in the sixteenth century and first came to flower in the new Republic of the Northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century. The Dutch fought a series of wars against England in the later seventeenth century and entered a period of relative decline in the eighteenth century. But the manners and morals of the Golden Age survived and even today the Dutch are often jokingly accused of excessive frugality,

like their Calvinist brothers and sisters in Scotland. If we think of the Netherlands as a whole (and not just one small part of Amsterdam) then even today it is to a large extent a “Puritanical” society.

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¹ Another representation might present Modern Capitalism as simply the “Capitalist Mode of Production” and discuss that M of P as a qualitatively new form of societal organization. That is the general tendency within Karl Marx’s work and with those who claim in some way to be utilizing his insights. Nevertheless, I suspect that if Karl Marx himself were still writing he would immediately recognize the value of the epistemological insights which make it much clearer that all labels are contextual and relative.

² See Rauch (1999: 70-72) on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which is sometimes seen as a stronger version of linguistic relativism and linguistic determinism combined. Sapir is quoted as mentioning “the tyrannical hold” that language can have upon our Worldview. Surely the rules of etiquette that Elias discusses are grounded in a kind of process of semiosis involving not only words but also gestures and body language.

³ One aspect of “Straussianism” is the belief that universal principles of Truth, Beauty, Freedom and Justice are part of “natural law” and transcend historical time and place. Many Straussians believe that principles such as “freedom” and “democracy” are universal, unchanging and “natural.” The belief in “natural law” is directly counter to an awareness of relativism and historicism. Strauss (1952) is directly critical of Max Weber’s epistemology. Certain groups within the Republican Party of the U.S. tend to adhere to a rough and tumble version of Straussianism. As with Marx, Aristotle and so many other major thinkers, it is not altogether clear whether the Straussians are completely true to the specific ideas of Leo Strauss (1899-1973).

⁴ I say “begin to approach” because there is a sense in which our knowledge is always somewhat asymptotic and we never get a full and complete understanding. We cannot really even fully grasp what happened yesterday in our own town or city, much less fully utilize *Verstehen* for a civilizational change that took place five hundred or so years ago! Dilthey’s “Romantic Hermeneutics” attempts to surmount that problem. See the recent Encyclopedia of Romanticism (Murray 2004).

⁵ “How could we drink up the sea?” wrote Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, “Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon?” (Quoted by Taylor 1989: 17) Taylor explicitly links this insight about the death of God to Weber’s notion of disenchantment.

⁶ If Elias had paid more attention to Simmel he could have utilized Simmel’s powerful analysis of the importance of money. Elias could also have drawn on Weber to indicate aspects of Pre-Modern Capitalism in Greek and Roman civilization (Weber 1976).

⁷ Gorski (2003: 23-26) relies to some extent on theoretical ideas he associates with Michel Foucault. After due consideration, I have dropped discussion of Foucault from this essay. That is not because his theory of power is not important, but because a comparison among Foucault, Weber and Elias would require a very complex series of considerations. Suffice it to say that a comparison of Foucault and Elias would be informative, as would a more thorough comparison of Foucault and Weber (Gorski 2003: 22-38).

⁸ Gorski 2003: 125-137) discusses the debate among scholars interested in the history of poor relief. He cites work by Natalie Z. Davis on Lyon and by Brian Pullan on Venice that seem to provide evidence that the stereotype of Roman Catholic poor relief put

forward by some Protestant critics and R. H. Tawney may be incorrect. But then he adds that in Castile there was something akin to the stereotype. It is safe to conclude that early modern social reform was not purely and solely a Protestant movement.

⁹ If we accept something akin to a Peircian triadic model then **Pragmatics** would refer to the relationship between the Interpretive Network and the sign while **Semantics** would refer to the relationship between the sign and the Operational Representation. But in most standard treatments of social linguistics the subject-object epistemological dualism allows for Pragmatics to be the study of the subject (ego's) relationship to the words of the language and Semantics to be the object's (thing's) relation to the words of the language. This same Cartesian epistemological bias is found in Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, where there is a strong desire to think of concepts as fully grounded in the objective reality of an interaction.

¹⁰ I fully recognize that this simplifies Peirce's complex approach. Moreover, it is an Ideal Type Model (ITM) of Peirce's approach. It is not entirely clear whether or not Peirce would have agreed with Weber's use of the term "ideal type," a concept rooted in Neo-Kantian philosophical thinking. But the details of what the historical Peirce might have believed about the historical Weber is a topic for another paper.

¹¹ The use of these terms is, of course, also subject to further interpretation by a scientific community willing to recognize it as a reasonable representation of one aspect of Peirce's very complex ideas. The Neo-Pragmatist movement within philosophy can be thought of as "traditional" American Pragmatism (James, Dewey, Mead) within the context of the

linguistic turn. I believe that it is very close to what Peirce calls *Pragmaticism*. See the papers in Egginton and Sandbothe (2004).

¹² Thus, it is still somewhat misleading to say, as a leading semiotician does, that a fundamental Peircian linguistic principle is that we come to see "... language as the mediator between *one's inner world* and *one's outer world*" (Rauch 1999: 72, emphasis added). The very notion of an "inner world" tends to echo the split between subject and object. (That is why an INSOP kind of approach is important.) Elias comes closer to this fundamental Peircian insight (concerning the need to break away from Cartesian essentialist assumptions) in his 1968 "Introduction," which is reprinted in the revised edition as a "Postscript." Elias (2000 [1968]: 449-483) criticizes the Cartesian notion of the *cogito* (thinking, cognizing subject) or closed personality and he argues that a conceptualization of the individual as *homo clauses* (or Leibnitz's "windowless monads") is too static. This is very similar to Charles Sanders Peirce's criticism of Cartesian dualism. There is no entirely self sufficient "self." Elias (2000: 475) points out that Weber's attempt to differentiate between "social action" and "non-social action" may be less than wholly successful. But I believe that Elias is incorrect when he places Weber in the same camp as Talcott Parsons with regard to static conceptualization of the social system. Elias' ideas can be reframed as essentially ideal typical constructions even though he himself is harshly critical of a stereotyped version of that idea (Elias 2000: 481). His notion of interdependent people in mobile figurations that can be exemplified by various genres of dance (like the mazurka, tango or rock'n'roll) tends to beg the question when it comes to fundamental epistemological decisions. Any conceptualization

of a “figuration” (e.g. the minuet or waltz) is still somewhat removed from the actual idiographic historical reality.

¹³ The scholarly literature on the precise meaning of Weber’s notion of an “ideal type” is enormous. Weber himself did not emphasize the idea that a set of ideal types can form an “Ideal Type **Model**.” Hence, my presentation of the ITM is Neo-Weberian. I am accepting Weber’s epistemological view that when we have generalizations which are not trans-historical and trans-cultural (trans-spatial) then we cannot have “real types” such as those which can be found in the Periodic Table of the Elements. However, I wish to supplement Weber’s Neo-Kantian formulation of ideal types with insights that I think come from Peirce. Weber did not use the term semiotics and cannot easily be considered a Pragmaticist.

¹⁴ Bernstein (2004: 302) does say that Weber’s analysis is “invaluable.” He points out that “The science of sociology he [Weber] helped to invent has shed much-needed light on the relations of religious and cultural factors that affect political structure and economic growth.” But Bernstein does not pick up on the important point that Weber also studied how economic and political factors affect “culture.” The same error of seeing Weber as one-sidedly “cultural” is implied by Barrett (2002) in an otherwise excellent book.

¹⁵ A similar argument occurs with reference to the words “class” and “labour.” An argument can be made that social class as such did not exist (in the Marxian sense) before the emergence of capitalism out of feudalism and that “labour” as such did not exist before capitalism, either. But many writers (including Marxists) still use the term

class and labour in a more generic sense, even while refusing to grant a generic status to at least one possible use of the word capitalism.

¹⁶ I believe that Marx was not a Marxist. He was certainly not a Neo-Marxist or Post-Marxist, either. A fundamental rule of hermeneutics is that all interpretation of a thinker's work must be situated within the historically-specific context of that writer's life. Marx was writing in the 1850s not the 1990s.

¹⁷ The book is not merely "popular" non-fiction but it does not attempt to be a thoroughly scholarly book. It is written for a mass market and Carter frequently uses quotations from the popular mass media. In using the label "semi-popular" I am attempting to point out that the book is not intended as a thoroughly scholarly publication. It does not reach the same level of scholarly sophistication as Elias' work but merely takes a few examples from Elias. There is no use of any of the CHS research which is based on Weber and Max Weber himself is never referred to in any way.

¹⁸ Other public intellectuals who have stimulated much discussion with semi-popular, non-scholarly books are Alan Bloom (1987) and Francis Fukuyama (1992). Both are students of Leo Strauss (1952). See the criticisms by Alan Sica (2004: 171-178).

According to Bloom, Strauss viewed Weber as "derivative." Sica explains that Weber's metaphysics is viewed by some Straussians as ultimately inconsistent in the sense that Weber stood intellectually between Nietzsche's concern for the construction of meaning and scientific ideas of materialism. In other words, Weber did not hold to an absolutist foundationalism, as Strauss seems to have done, mostly on the basis of his interpretation of Plato, Aristophanes, Maimonides and Machiavelli.

¹⁹ Erasmus also wrote an essay on “The Usefulness of the *Colloquies/ De Utilitate Colloquiorum*” (CW vol. 40: 1095-1117) which serves as a very good summary of the main points of many of those essays. Erasmus was a very good sociologist and student of semiotics and symbolic interaction in everyday life. For example, he defends having a young woman refer to her boy friend as her “cocky”. “A single word has upset some readers,” he writes, “for the immodest girl, playing up to the young man, calls him her ‘cocky.’ But this expression is very common among us, even with respectable ladies. Anyone who cannot bear it may write ‘my darling’ or anything else instead of ‘cocky’ if he prefers” (CW vol. 40: 1102 lines 25-29).

²⁰ The Dutch-Flemish term *Stadhouder* is often translated into English as “Stad-holder.” But that makes the term a bit mysterious, even though the Dutch “*houder*” does indeed mean “holder.” Professor John Smail, a noted historian who specialized in the study of the Indonesian archipelago, once warned me not to translate the Dutch *Prianger Regenschappen* as *Prianger Regencies*. Instead, it should be two English words (rather than one Dutch word and one English word): **Priangan Regencies!** If the term “Governor” were used instead of Stadholder it would clarify a great deal for students just beginning to learn about the Low Countries. Before 1815 the Netherlands never had a King and all of the aristocrats who represented the House of Orange were never considered Kings, only Governors (*Stadhouders*). In the Revolt of 1477-1492 there was no coherent leadership; but, in the Revolt (or, Revolution) of 1572-1590 the role of William of Orange (the Silent) and his willingness to defy the Stadhouder who had been appointed by King Phillip II and the Duke of Alva was crucial.