

WORK ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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ABSTRAK

This article examines the relevance of Max Weber's work ethic in contemporary capitalism, focusing on the transformation of work values in the digital and globalization era. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argues that modern capitalism developed from the internalization of Protestant religious values, which emphasize discipline, rationality, and efficiency in work. This article examines how the work ethic, which initially supported industrial capitalism, has undergone significant transformations amid the gig economy and flexible work arrangements. Using a qualitative, discursive approach, this article also identifies a shift in the work paradigm, from a high-productivity orientation to a search for work-life balance and individual well-being. Furthermore, this article analyzes the phenomena of *burnout* and capitalist expectations of workers, as well as alternative movements such as *slow work* and *the post-work society*, which offer resistance to an increasingly exploitative work system. In conclusion, although Weber predicted that capitalism would lead to an "iron cage" of rationality, the contemporary world shows the potential to build more balanced and humane working relationships by adapting the spirit of capitalism to the social needs and welfare of workers

Keywords:

Work Ethic; Capitalism;
Max Weber

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji relevansi etos kerja Max Weber dalam kapitalisme kontemporer, dengan fokus pada transformasi nilai-nilai kerja di era digital dan globalisasi. Dalam *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber mengemukakan bahwa kapitalisme modern berkembang dari internalisasi nilai-nilai religius Protestan, yang menekankan kedisiplinan, rasionalitas, dan efisiensi dalam kerja. Artikel ini membahas bagaimana etos kerja tersebut, yang pada awalnya mendukung kapitalisme industri, mengalami perubahan signifikan dalam konteks *gig economy* dan kerja fleksibel. Dengan

menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan analisis diskursif, artikel ini juga mengidentifikasi pergeseran paradigma kerja, dari orientasi produktivitas tinggi menuju pencarian keseimbangan hidup-kerja dan kesejahteraan individu. Selain itu, artikel ini menganalisis fenomena *burnout* dan ekspektasi kapitalistik terhadap pekerja, serta gerakan-gerakan alternatif seperti *slow work* dan *post-work society*, yang menawarkan perlawanan terhadap sistem kerja yang semakin eksplorasi. Kesimpulannya, meskipun Weber memprediksi kapitalisme akan mengarah pada "kandang besi" rasionalitas, dunia kontemporer menunjukkan potensi untuk membangun hubungan kerja yang lebih seimbang dan manusiawi, dengan menyesuaikan semangat kapitalisme dengan kebutuhan sosial dan kesejahteraan pekerja.

Kata Kunci:

Etos kerja; Kapitalisme;
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INTRODUCTION

Throughout social history, work has not only been an economic activity but also an expression of cultural values, moral identity, and a force that shapes civilization. Max Weber, in his monumental work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/2001), traces how the transformation of religious values underlay the emergence of modern capitalism. Weber shows that Protestant asceticism, particularly Calvinist ethics, instilled self-discipline, control over desires, and dedication to worldly work as manifestations of faith. According to Weber, this ethos—especially in its most rational form—became the main driver of capitalist growth in Western Europe, leading to high productivity and an efficient division of labor. Weber's ideas are an important foundation for understanding why work—more than just a means of fulfilling basic needs—became a calling (*Beruf*) in modern society. This rational and efficiency-oriented work ethic, according to Weber, has shaped what he calls the "iron cage" of instrumental rationality, in which humans are increasingly trapped in bureaucratic structures and economic systems without being able to control them (Weber, 1905/2001). In this regard, Weber describes a condition in which humans live in a world full of routines and controls governed by an impersonal economic system, thereby reducing individual freedom and creativity.

However, in the 21st century, Weber's legacy endures, albeit undergoing profound transformations due to globalization, digitalization, and shifts in social structures. Phenomena such as flexible work, the gig economy, mass burnout, and shifts in the meaning of productivity indicate that the capitalist work ethic remains dominant but faces new pressures and resistance (Sennett, 1998; Han, 2015). The increasingly globalized capitalist system creates a dependence on technology and production

efficiency, but this often comes at a high social cost, such as increased stress, job insecurity, and a decline in workers' quality of life. The emphasis on flexibility and productivity in the digital age further exacerbates the conditions of workers, who are often faced with unrealistic work demands and no clear boundaries between their professional and personal lives. In this context, researchers such as Sennett (1998) and Han (2015) argue that, although the capitalist system has evolved, its impact on individuals continues to have serious emotional and psychological consequences. Sennett, in *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), describes how post-industrial capitalism creates fragmented workers who lose their sense of identity and job stability. This makes workers more vulnerable to feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction, which, in turn, increases the prevalence of *burnout*.

On the other hand, Byung-Chul Han (2015) in *The Burnout Society* describes how information capitalism, which relies on digital efficiency and personal data, has created a "society of exhaustion," in which individuals feel burdened by the demands to be productive and to optimize themselves constantly. In this type of capitalism, individuals are considered entrepreneurs of themselves, who not only work to earn a living, but also to create a perfect and competitive self-image. This paper aims to explore how Weber's conceptualization of the work ethic and spirit of capitalism has persisted and evolved in the contemporary world. This article will analyze the interaction between work values, the structure of global capitalism, and the social responses to the work crisis, using a narrative approach that links theory, social phenomena, and critical reflection. Specifically, this paper will examine how capitalist values such as productivity, efficiency, and flexibility in work, which were originally rooted in the Protestant ethic, have been transformed by modern work, which is more fragmented and flexible. In addition, this article will examine social movements and critiques of work capitalism, including *slow work* and the idea of a *post-work society*, which seek to offer alternatives to an increasingly exploitative and destructive capitalism. By understanding the relationship between Weber's work ethic and the dynamics of contemporary capitalism, this article aims to offer insights into how individuals and societies can navigate the challenges of modern capitalism, while considering possible alternatives for creating a more sustainable and humane world of work.

METHODOLOGY

To discuss the relevance of Weber's work ethic in a contemporary context, this study adopts a qualitative approach, employing discursive analysis and case studies. In understanding the dynamics of changes in work ethic, a qualitative approach offers the flexibility to examine complex social phenomena in which variables interact and shape one another. The qualitative approach allows for a deep understanding of social and cultural phenomena, such as changes in the work ethic in modern society. This study emphasizes a contextual understanding of the work values that have developed in society, accounting for the accompanying social, political, and economic dimensions. With this approach, the author attempts to capture nuances that may not be reflected in quantitative data, such as workers' perceptions of work pressure, the implications of the gig economy, or the psychological impact of increasingly flexible work systems. Discursive analysis examines how narratives and social representations of work are formed and maintained in contemporary society. This involves analysing media texts, political discourse, and corporate

policies that influence how society views work and the spirit of capitalism. For example, by analysing job advertisements, lifestyle marketing trends, and news articles discussing “burnout” or “work-life balance,” we can identify how capitalist values such as productivity, success, and efficiency are constructed in contemporary discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Max Weber argues that modern capitalism was not born solely out of the pursuit of profit, but rather from the internalization of religious values that shaped a rational work *habitus*. Weber highlights that, in Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, the doctrine of predestination gives rise to existential anxiety. This anxiety drives individuals to seek signs of salvation in the profane world, one of which is through economic success and hard work (Weber, 1905/2001). In Weber’s view, hard work and material success are not only seen as a means of survival but also as a sign that a person may belong to the group chosen for salvation. In contrast to Marx’s materialistic view, which places economic change as the engine of social change, Weber emphasizes the relative autonomy of cultural values. For Weber, cultural change can be an independent factor that influences economic structure. Weber explains that the Protestant work ethic, which emphasizes self-discipline, delayed gratification, and perseverance, was a factor in the birth of modern capitalism. This ethic motivates individuals to work hard not only to meet their basic needs but also as a form of responsibility to God and to gain certainty about their spiritual destiny (Weber, 1905/2001).

In *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1978), Max Weber developed the concept of rationalization, which refers to the process by which social, political, and economic actions are increasingly based on calculations of efficiency and rationality as a means to achieve goals, replacing traditional ways that are more influenced by affections, values, and habits. This rationalization applies not only in the economic sphere but also to broader social structures, such as bureaucracy, law, and markets, which are objective and impersonal (Weber, 1978). These rational systems are designed to optimize efficiency and control, but often neglect the humanistic dimensions inherent in social life. Bureaucracy, as a concrete example of rationalization, is the result of the need to organize increasingly complex activities and to achieve clearly defined goals. Weber describes bureaucracy as the most rational form of organization because it prioritizes efficiency and clear rules (Weber, 1978). However, while bureaucracy offers advantages in terms of operational effectiveness, it also has adverse effects, including individual alienation, in which workers or members of the organization are seen only as part of a larger system, thereby losing their personal freedom. However, Weber also issued a profound warning about the effects of extreme rationalization. In his famous work entitled *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/2001), Weber warns that excessive rationalization can plunge individuals into what he calls an “iron cage.” In this context, the “iron cage” refers to a situation in which modern humans, despite living in a highly rational and organized society, lose their personal freedom and existential meaning. As a result of excessive rationalization, individuals no longer act autonomously but rather as part of a larger system that forces them to follow rules and regulations, leaving no room for reflection or action based on personal values (Weber, 1905/2001).

A. Work Ethic in Industrial Capitalism: Between Progress and Crisis

The work ethic developed by Max Weber in the context of industrial capitalism focuses on two main things: rationality and hard work as a moral calling. Weber’s concept of the spirit of capitalism is the result of a combination of Protestant asceticism and rational economic logic that encourages productivity and efficiency. In his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905),

Weber argues that work that is carried out regularly, efficiently, and with a focus on results is an expression of moral perseverance. This principle of asceticism encompasses not only self-control in spiritual matters but also in worldly matters, especially in work aimed at achieving greater goals, such as economic progress and social welfare (Weber, 1905). In the industrial society of the 19th and early 20th centuries, this ethos was highly relevant because it supported the creation of significant added value through organized, divided, and efficient work. This efficient work system encouraged high productivity, and rapid economic development became a symbol of the success of industrial capitalism. In Weber's view, the work ethic instilled by Protestants accelerated the development of modern capitalism by making hard work a goal in life and a moral fulfillment. In other words, this ethos not only encouraged individuals to work hard but also to view work as a means of achieving personal salvation and well-being (Weber, 1905).

Entering the 21st century, especially after globalization and the digital technology revolution, the dynamics of the world of work have changed. The emphasis on relentless productivity has become increasingly problematic. In the context of *the gig economy*, for example, jobs that were once permanent and structured have now turned into short-term projects with no long-term certainty. This phenomenon creates uncertainty that not only affects individual economic stability but also worsens workers' social conditions. Many workers are now trapped in a cycle of continuous work without adequate social security, creating what Richard Sennett, in *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), calls "work without commitment." In the gig economy, workers are often treated as mere transferable resources, without consideration of the long term, leading to declines in their quality of life and well-being.

The presence of flexible work brings another interesting shift to observe. The idea of creating *work-life balance* is gaining attention as a form of criticism against the spirit of capitalism driven by endless economic demands. Amidst technological developments that enable communication and work to be carried out without time and space constraints, many workers find it difficult to separate their personal and professional lives. In large technology companies such as Google and Facebook, despite offering a more relaxed, creativity-supporting work environment, there is still pressure to remain "perfect" and productive. This highlights the tension between the need to innovate and the demand to work continuously, which often leads to burnout (Han, 2015; Putra, 2021; Ananda, 2023). Han (2015) in *The Burnout Society* describes that although flexibility provides freedom, it often leads to greater internal pressure, as workers feel compelled to achieve high productivity consistently.

Furthermore, Shoshana Zuboff discusses this phenomenon in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), revealing that, with technological advances and digitalization, workers are now not only required to work harder but also to continuously optimize and control themselves within the framework of surveillance capitalism. Systems designed to continuously monitor performance reduce workers' autonomy at work by turning them into objects to be monitored and controlled. This process creates greater tension between the capitalist work ethic, which prioritizes efficiency and productivity, and the social reality that leads to declines in workers' psychological and social well-being. Thus, although Weber's work ethic essentially supports economic progress through increased efficiency and rationality, in the modern context, it has become increasingly problematic.

On the one hand, the development of technology-based capitalism introduces flexibility and freedom. Still, it requires workers to sacrifice more, at the expense of their personal well-being. This condition calls for a deeper reflection on how contemporary capitalism manages productivity expectations and their impact on social and individual life.

B. Digitalization and Affective Capitalism: Between Self-Entrepreneurship and Economic Alliances

One of the most significant transformations in the spirit of contemporary capitalism is the shift from industrial capitalism, which focuses on the production process, to affective and information capitalism, which focuses on the management of personal identity and the use of data. Information capitalism, driven by technology companies such as Amazon, Apple, and Netflix, utilizes personal data to create highly personalized products. Through deep data processing, these companies create experiences fully tailored to user preferences, encouraging individuals to continue interacting with the platform, thereby giving rise to consumption and production patterns that are increasingly connected and controlled by digital systems (Zuboff, 2019; Sihombing, 2020; Pratama, 2022). This phenomenon transforms the relationship between work, consumption, and personal identity, as individuals not only work to earn money but also to build and manage their online self-image.

In affective capitalism, individuals are seen as entities that not only manage their time and labor but also manage their identity and personal image that can be sold. This phenomenon is known as *self-entrepreneurship*, in which individuals are seen as their own entrepreneurs who must always be connected, consistently productive, and constantly optimizing themselves to create value. This concept is rooted in the idea that personal identity is now a tradable asset, generating economic value for large companies that collect user data. In this case, Weber's work ethic, which emphasizes rationality and efficiency, has transformed into an ethic that prioritizes self-optimization, *personal branding*, and a marketable digital image (Illouz, 2007; Heryanto, 2020; Wulan, 2021). This phenomenon involves not only the use of data but also the creation of value through social interactions in the digital realm. Users of social media or content-sharing platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are under pressure to produce content that is relevant, interesting, and ultimately profitable.

Amidst the enormous influence of affective capitalism, new challenges have emerged regarding how individuals experience their personal lives. As stated by Byung-Chul Han (2015), affective capitalism has significant adverse impacts, especially the pressure on individuals to constantly produce images of themselves, both physically and psychologically. Han describes this phenomenon as a form of "internal tyranny" originating within the individual, in which they feel compelled to continuously produce and consume images of themselves to meet existing social expectations. This phenomenon exacerbates burnout caused by the pressure to always appear perfect and productive. As noted by Sennett (1998), in modern capitalism, individuals are often caught in a contradiction between the desire for personal freedom and the reality that this freedom is constrained by the demands of capitalism, which increasingly requires individuals not only to work hard but also to optimize their self-image continuously.

Meanwhile, the development of affective capitalism is closely related to the concept of the "attention economy," proposed by Harold Innis (1951) and further developed by George Ritzer (2010). In this context, individual attention becomes a highly valuable commodity because the more attention a platform can gather, the greater its potential profits. In this case, individuals are

forced not only to be passive consumers but also to produce content that continuously attracts others' attention. Digital workers, such as influencers or content creators, are clear examples of how individuals have become productive resources for generating attention, which is then capitalized on by digital companies (Ritzer, 2010; Setiawan, 2020; Ayu, 2022). Within this framework, affective capitalism not only transforms personal identity but also makes attention the primary currency circulating within the global economy.

However, as noted by Fuchs (2017) in *social media: A Critical Introduction*, although digitization provides freedom in content creation and social interaction, it also creates a deep dependence on digital platforms, leading to the concentration of economic power in a handful of large companies. The use of personal data by these companies not only creates economic profits but also leads to new forms of exploitation that increasingly blur the boundaries between personal life and the digital economy. Thus, affective capitalism driven by digitalization and social media creates a paradox in individual experiences. While they are encouraged to manage their self-image and personal identity, they also have to deal with internal pressures that often lead to emotional and psychological exhaustion. As a result, the concept of self-entrepreneurship driven by affective capitalism poses significant challenges to individual well-being and to social relations in contemporary society.

C. Resistance to Work Capitalism: The Slow Work Movement and the Post-Work Society

The work ethic developed by Max Weber in the context of industrial capitalism focuses on two main things: rationality and hard work as a moral calling. Weber's concept of the spirit of capitalism is the result of a combination of Protestant asceticism and rational economic logic that encourages productivity and efficiency. In his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Weber argues that work that is carried out regularly, efficiently, and with a focus on results is an expression of moral perseverance. This principle of asceticism encompasses not only self-control in spiritual matters but also in worldly matters, especially in work aimed at achieving greater goals, such as economic progress and social welfare (Weber, 1905). Weber emphasizes that this work ethic gave birth to modern capitalism, which is oriented towards rationality, efficiency, and the accumulation of wealth.

In the industrial society of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Protestant-based work ethic proved highly relevant, supporting the creation of added value through organized, specialized, and efficient work. This system resulted in high productivity, which in turn accelerated economic growth and became a symbol of the success of industrial capitalism. According to Weber (1905), the spirit of hard work promoted by Protestant ethics contributed significantly to the development of modern capitalism, because hard work was seen not only as an economic activity but also as a moral calling. This perspective is reinforced in a recent analysis by Joas (2022), which highlights how traditional religious values continue to shape work motivation in the modern era, albeit in a more secular form. Furthermore, Thompson and Paterson (2021) assert that during industrialization, work was not only a means of earning a living but also a measure of an individual's moral identity, reinforcing the concept of work as a social obligation and personal goal.

However, with the advent of the 21st century, especially in the wake of globalization and the digital technology revolution, the dynamics of the world of work have changed. The emphasis on relentless

productivity has become increasingly problematic. In the context of *the gig economy*, for example, jobs that were once permanent and structured have now turned into short-term projects with no long-term certainty. This phenomenon creates uncertainty that not only affects individual economic stability but also worsens workers' social conditions (Sennett, 1998; Wirawan, 2020; Hasanah, 2021; Lestari, 2022). Many workers are now trapped in a continuous cycle of work without adequate social security, creating what Richard Sennett, in *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), calls "work without commitment." Sennett emphasizes that in the modern world of work, it is increasingly complex for workers to build a strong identity because their jobs are temporary and unstable. In the *gig economy*, workers are often treated as mere transferable resources, without consideration of the long term, leading to declines in their quality of life and well-being.

Meanwhile, the presence of flexible work brings another interesting shift to observe. The idea of creating *work-life* balance is gaining attention as a form of criticism against the spirit of capitalism driven by endless economic demands. In an increasingly digitally connected world, workers are required to remain productive even outside traditional working hours. Amidst technological developments that enable communication and work to be carried out without time and space constraints, many workers find it difficult to separate their personal and professional lives. In large technology companies such as Google and Facebook, despite offering a more relaxed, creativity-supporting work environment, there is still pressure to remain "perfect" and productive. This highlights the tension between the need to innovate and the demand to work continuously, which often leads to burnout. Han (2015) in *The Burnout Society* describes that although flexibility provides freedom, it often leads to greater internal pressure, as workers feel compelled to achieve high productivity consistently.

This phenomenon is also discussed by Shoshana Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), which reveals that with technological advances and digitalization, workers are now not only required to work harder but also to continuously optimize and control themselves within the framework of surveillance capitalism. Systems designed to continuously monitor performance reduce workers' autonomy at work by turning them into objects to be monitored and controlled. This process creates greater tension between the capitalist work ethic, which prioritizes efficiency and productivity, and the social reality that leads to declines in workers' psychological and social well-being (Zuboff, 2019; Kartika, 2022; Nugroho, 2021). Thus, although Weber's work ethic essentially supports economic progress through increased efficiency and rationality, in the modern context, it has become increasingly problematic. On the one hand, the development of technology-based capitalism introduces flexibility and freedom. Still, it demands that workers sacrifice more for their personal well-being. This condition calls for a deeper reflection on how contemporary capitalism manages productivity expectations and their impact on social and individual life.

CONCLUSION

In an increasingly complex digital world, as described in analyses of the gig economy and flexible work, the traditional work ethic that emphasizes discipline and seriousness often faces a dilemma between productivity and individual well-being. The phenomenon of *burnout*, as well as the pressure to always be "perfect" and productive in the virtual world, is a significant challenge that requires serious reflection on the goals and impacts of modern capitalism. On the other hand, movements such as *slow work* and the idea of a *post-work society* offer alternatives to the exploitative capitalist work paradigm, providing space to create a more balanced society among work, life, and leisure. Although Weber considered rationalization to be a force that led society

towards an “iron cage,” he also gave us the understanding that this rationalization is not an unchangeable destiny. In the contemporary world, we see the emergence of various forms of resistance to an increasingly harsh capitalist work system. Technology, which on the one hand accelerates and exacerbates work pressures, also opens the way for a possible future in which work is no longer the center of existence, but rather part of a more balanced and meaningful life. Through a qualitative, in-depth discursive analysis, this article asserts that although Weber’s work ethic remains highly relevant, ongoing social and economic transformations open opportunities to rethink our relationship with work. Capitalism, which began as a spirit of rationality and efficiency, has now evolved into a system that demands more than just hard work; it also requires workers to become “self-entrepreneurs” under constant pressure to continue performing. Therefore, there needs to be an effort to balance the spirit of capitalism by paying attention to humanity, worker welfare, and a healthier social environment. The future of the work ethic may not only be about working more, but also about working in a more meaningful and sustainable way.

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