



Traditional Vs. Rational Farming. A Less Known Study by Gyula Szekfű in the Light of Weber's Sociology

László KUPA

Department of Sociology
University of Pécs, Hungary
kupa.laszlo@t-online.hu

Abstract. Max Weber's famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was published in 1904-1905, wherein the author has emphasized the analysis of the radical differences between the 'rational farming' controlled by the 'spirit of capitalism' and 'traditional farming'. Weber described in detail those typical features which have prevailed in the mentioned farming types and in the 'economic ethos' being attached to them. These typical features do not emerge as isolated in Weber's concept, but in a complex manner, by forming structural relation systems with each other. Gyula Szekfű is considered to have been one of the leading personalities of Hungarian historiography and cultural policy. Between the two World Wars, he published his essay *The Spiritual Constitution of the Hungarian Wine Producer*, nearly two decades after the dissemination of the *Protestant Ethic* (in 1922). I make an attempt in my study to interpret Szekfű's mentality and historical criticism in the matter of the Hungarian wine production of the Age of Reform, and of the middle of the 19th century, along with the concept of Weber, mentioned above. In my analysis I showed that Szekfű has explained the deficiencies of Weber's interpretation of 'rational farming' with 'spiritual factors' revealing the 'Hungarian nation'. It could be an exposition of Szekfű's notion that he considered the Hungarian 'spiritual constitution' more easily transformable than the social, political, economic, and structural elements which have taken shape in Hungary following the First World War. In my opinion these approaches cannot only be interpreted in a historical context, but they are able to facilitate the exploration – at an ideological level – of why residues of 'traditional farming' still exist in the region's countries with a post-communist past.

Keywords: traditional society, sociology of religion, Protestant ethic, economic sociology

Introduction

In the present article I do not intend to provide a detailed discussion of the *Protestant Ethic* of Weber. In connection to the present study it suffices to say that this work of 84 pages was published following the First World War, in 1922¹. On the basis of the actual historical theme of the *Wine Producer* (the modern history of domestic wine-producing) it is not surprising that our first digression is a key concept of the *Protestant Ethic*, the “spirit of capitalism”. The “spirit of capitalism” is actually a member of a pair of technical terms, whose inverse is “economic traditionalism” and vice-versa. Although Weber does not define “economic traditionalism” with his typical meticulousness, he paraphrases and explains the concept. First of all, he characterizes it with the economic attitude according to which a man with this trait does not want to maximize his income “due to his nature”, but “simply wants to live the way that he got used to, and wants to earn as much as needed for that” (Weber, 1982: 62) or to use a biblical expression, “what he confines himself to”. A further feature of the “traditionalist” manpower is that it wishes to provide the customary wage by maximal convenience and minimal achievement (Weber, 1982: 65). An additional consequence of this “traditional employee maxim” is that “(...) they are not able to give up the passed-down and acquired methods to more practical ways” and they are not even willing “to learn and focus their attention, or just simply use their mind” (Weber, 1982: 66). Weber characterizes not only employees but entrepreneurs as well. What they are in want of is the “capitalist spirit”, meaning that they follow traditional farming. Their lifestyle is traditional – comfortable, the measure of their profit is traditional – providing a decent living, their working time is traditional, amounting to 5-6 hours per day, their course of business is also traditional (e.g. usually there is no fierce competition, they lay out capital at interest.) Their relationship with producers is traditional (it basically means the hoarding system), they have a traditional circle of customers (who are encountered via correspondence and not personally), the conquest of the market happens traditionally (e.g. by the hoarding of the traditional quality products, they are able to reach retailers through an intermediary chain only). A further feature is that they want to “obtain” less than to “consume” (Weber, 1982: 71-72).

What *changed* by the *proliferation* of the “spirit of capitalism”? First of all, the “social ethic” of the *capitalist culture* appeared; the not-so-evident idea of “professional obligation”. “It means”, says Weber, “that the individual has to feel

¹ By that time Szekfű had already written two hotly debated works such as *The Banished Rákóczi* (*A száműzött Rákóczy*) as well as *The Three Generations* (*A három nemzedék*) but he had already published *The Biography of the Hungarian State* (*A magyar állam életrajza*) as well. The *Wine Producer* had not been included amongst the “canonized” texts, but that is to say it had actually fallen into oblivion.

obligation – and does so – for the purport of his “professional” activity, whatever it is (...) This sense of obligation characterizes both the employee and the capitalist” (Weber, 1982: 52). (Weber adds his well-known thought at this point, according to which the capitalist order of the period is already such an “enormous universe in which the individual is born into” and the market imposes these economic norms upon him. “The mentality of big multitudes of people” has to be imbued with this obligation, and only those “economic agents” have the chance for economic selection, who practice this manner of lifestyle and profession.) Nevertheless, not the same kind of sense of obligation motivates the unscrupulous longing for acquisition, money-grubbing and the pattern of “adventure-capitalism” which characterizes the spirit of capitalism. In order to go beyond it, the disappearance of the difference between the “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” morale was essential, meaning, writes Weber in the *Economic History (Wirtschaftsgeschichte)*, that on the one hand the merchant principle had to enter the economy, hereby invalidating the old norms of mutual mercifulness characterizing the members of traditional organizations, while on the other hand the cruel money-making, which does not know any kind of norms and was applied against the outsiders of the traditional organizations on an entirely permissible basis, had also disappeared. As the longing for acquisition entered the internal economy, the “shameless gain-pursuing” slackened. The result of this process, according to Weber, is “the regulated economy that provides a moderate field for the instinct of acquisition” (Weber, 1979: 283).

As far as the employees are concerned, we have already seen it in connection with economic traditionalism that they are lacking the essential motive for the workings of capitalism, namely that they would like to earn “money and more money” by increasing their production (Aron, 1983: 218).

Such workers are characterized by an increased sense of responsibility and they consider work to be “an absolute end in itself”, a profession (Weber, 1982: 65)². We can pick up somewhat more about the capitalist-minded entrepreneur, since Weber compares it to the traditional one. To highlight some features: the capitalist entrepreneur transforms the peasants of the hoarding system into workers by subjecting both the work process and the workers themselves to greater subordination and supervision. He brought trade under his supervision, meaning that he established direct contact with the retailers selling the goods and he recruited his costumers personally. His most important innovation in this respect was that “(...) he adjusted the quality of goods to the exclusive demand of

² Weber, in his foundations of economic sociology, also dealt with the traditional variety of “management” on a conceptual level, setting it against rational management. (As we know, “primary economic disposition” constitutes one of the important conceptual frames of Weber's category of “management” (Weber, 1987: 81). The “economic disposition” mentioned above, according to Weber, “can be traditional or instrumental rational” (Weber, 1987: 86).

customers, and he was good at producing to then-taste” (Weber, 1982: 72- 73). He introduced the principle of "small benefit, large turnover". He did not pursue his economic activity by bringing new money into it and he reinvested the profit into the business. His primary aim was to “obtain” and not to “consume”. And his lifestyle was short of convivial pastime, since his lifestyle was ascetic and reflected that “man is for the sake of business and not vice versa” (Weber, 1982: 75). As a consequence of this view, a fierce competition started and the “long-standing convivial attitude gave way to strict sobriety” (Weber, 1982: 73)³. Apart from the expression “spirit of capitalism”, the term “rational economic ethos” appears in the *Economic History*, although with a similar meaning (Weber, 1979: 281). Naturally, the rational economic ethos is also a key category, since according to Weber, it is indispensable for the establishment of capitalism. As the permanent traditional enterprise, the bookkeeping which is connected with the accounts of capital, rational method, rational law and state, the evolution of rational spirit and the rationalization of lifestyle were likewise essential (ibid). Weber introduced these factors required for the establishment of capitalism not as isolated or sole elements but in structural connection with each other. With the help of these functionally connected factors, the Western capitalism described by Weber can be dissociated in an ideal-typical manner from other economic structures (Kupa, 2002: 113-114).

Szekfü’s approach. A discussion

Coming at last to the *Wine Producer*, it is there that the next conceptual construction – based also on an inverse pair of terms – unfolds. Economic traditionalism can be compared with the category of “economic indifference”, while its counterpart is the expression that mostly reflects the spirit of capitalism – “expedient treatment”. Szekfü describes “economic indifference” in the following manner: the Hungarian wine producer does not want to profiteer by the product that he grows at the expense of his work, he is short of the sense of the tradesman that does not aim at private consumption, “... who simply does not want to gain money from his wine” (Szekfü, 2002: 48).

“Production itself (...) does not interest him”, continues Szekfü, “he is unwilling to work more and better either for gaining more profit or for satisfying

³ We note here that the category "rational capital account" that is called the most general prerequisite of modern capitalism by Weber, and prevails as a norm, can characterize also the currently discussed traditional economy (Weber, 1982: 68-69). In his foundation of economic sociology, he likewise defines the concept "capital account". Confined to the substantial elements of the definition, Weber thinks it no different from the accession of the acquisition opportunity and the supervision of the results (Weber, 1987: 107). That is to say it is such an economic activity that characterizes the traditional enterprise with the object of achieving profit. In this case there is incongruence between the form of capitalism, traditional enterprises, and the spirit of capitalism.

his own consumption by a crop of higher quality” (Szekfű, 2002: 65). But this image can be supplemented by such features characterizing our domestic wine producers as the rigorous affection for confirmed production habits and bringing their own calmness into the foreground (Szekfű, 2002: 96). This mentality is utterly the opposite of the “wirtschaftlich”, and it is far from all “commercial talent”. Behind all these traits – according to Szekfű – lurks “one of the fundamental features of Hungarian mentality”, the “lack of mobilization” which manifests not only in the fields of economy but in that of culture as well (Szekfű, 2002: 65-66).

The counterpart of “economic indifference” is “expedient treatment”. Szekfű adopted the term from a viticulturist of the Age of Reform, Ferenc Schams. The quotation of Schams mentions only the following in connection with the explanation of the concept in the *Wine Producer*: “(...) let us fend for the expedient treatment during fermentation and in the cellars, and we won't be in need for customers” (Szekfű, 2002: 47). Szekfű's interpretation, however, is remarkable. Expedient treatment would have been needed “in accordance with the requests and angles of the foreign market (...)” although it only exists in case of own consumption, which reflects much more rudimentary angles and claims (ibid). Then he continues: “(...) in the work of Schams there is a permanent endeavour to raise the standards, satisfy the Hungarian producer and make these rudimentary methods appropriate for the foreign needs. He offers detailed advice concerning all phases of production from planting to the transportation abroad (...)” (Szekfű 2002: 48) and he naturally criticizes the practice of selling watered wine in foreign markets. In an earlier work of Schams the carelessness in the field of – with a term used today – “technological discipline” is interpreted by Szekfű as the lack of rational treatment. On the basis of these references we believe that although “expedient treatment”, even if it is a more limited expression than, say, the “spirit of capitalism” or the “rational ethos of economy”, its semantic content fits the latter.

The following question arises: did Szekfű fit the categories of “economic indifference” and “expedient treatment” into the structural relation-system of such historical factors as Weber did? The answer is negative, although Szekfű was aware of the possibility of this approach, moreover he referred to such a perspective, but he did not choose this alternative. Because according to him the existence of “economic indifference”, and the lack of “expedient treatment” characterizes not only the Hungarian wine producer. “It can be found in all those groups of people, who are short of capitalistic talent, who are neither able nor willing to win (...) But it can be found ... generally speaking among people who live in a bound medieval-feudal society where the aim of economic production is only to satisfy the basic needs of the population” (Szekfű, 2002: 65). But he refuses the opportunity of this approach at once. Since in the first part of the thoroughly examined 19th century, according to him, “(...) the joint??? social and economic system was already cracking, and the intense reform movement, the longing for the

abandonment of the ancient and the obsolete stand in diametrical opposition to the sense of satisfaction with himself that characterizes the Hungarian producer of inferior wines at that time rather than in the earlier centuries” (Szekfű, 2002: 65).

I believe that two short remarks are in order here: 1. Is it possible that the confirmed social and economic system was not cracking in every respect at that time? 2. Referring to the *Protestant Ethic*: it is not sufficient for the existence of the “spirit of capitalism” to evolve in isolated individuals only, but it must be established as an attitude of groups of people (Szekfű, 2002: 53).

At this point Szekfű definitively glues his train of thoughts to the explaining forces of “spiritual constitution” and “spiritual factors”. But let us see how he arrives at the category of “spiritual constitution” and “spiritual factors”. Though the approach favoured by Weber, examining the historical factors essential for the existence of capitalism, is absent, it does not mean that merely spiritual factors play a role in his conception. He adopts the mathematical formula concerning the agricultural production from the 19th century German economist, Johann Heinrich von Thünen. According to Thünen’s formula, the crop equals the sum of the cultivation of land, its quality and humus, and the cultural factors. All these developments prompt Szekfű to regard the cultural factors of the Thünen-formula as – mathematically speaking – an unknown X, i.e. their “quantity and sense change according to people’s race, ages and individuals (...)” (Szekfű, 2002: 19). Since the formula is supposed to be transformed with an unknown X instead of the C of “cultural factors”, thus the X can be identified case by case only. Szekfű comes to the conclusion from this state of affairs that the question of the identification of agricultural production cannot be solved by the materialist natural-technical concepts of economy “(...) but it passes over to the field of intellectual history and the historical research on the effects of psychological factors (...)” (Szekfű, 2002: 20).

Although, as we have already mentioned, Szekfű decided to examine psychological factors, he also took the racial factors mentioned by Alfred Weber into account. Race therefore is “(...) primarily a historical configuration, says Szekfű, a configuration evolved and changeable in time (...)” (Szekfű, 2002: 21), but racial change can only occur during a lengthier impact.

At this point he still mumbles on such concepts “slipped” into his explanatory line of thoughts as “people” and “nation” but the “deduction” of the use of spiritual constitution has already been finalized.

When Szekfű finally begins historical investigation, he places it into the following conceptual frame. According to the Weberian version of the Thünen-formula, Szekfű separates the “external”, “objective” and the “internal”, “subjective” factors of domestic wine production. Among the “external” factors he mentions the natural and the socio-political, which is in fact the history of Hungarian wine export and of the connected environment’s “economic policy”,

with special attention to the customs policy of the Hapsburgs, starting from the 17th century (Szekfű, 2002: 33-43). The “*internal*” factor is the “*spiritual constitution*” of the Hungarian wine producer. Naturally, he examines the latter in more detail. In this part of his study he cites several sources – naturally István Széchenyi among others but Miklós Wesselényi and Bertalan Szemere are also present as the critics of the backwardness of Hungarian wine production. We do not have enough space for the detailed introduction of this topic but we should mention that *this part is the most valuable and most lasting of Szekfű’s work*. He selected his sources superbly, they reflect not the “capitalist spirit” of Franklin but just its opposite, that of “economic traditionalism”. Reading these lines of the *Wine Producer*, the statements of the *Protestant ethic*, reflecting the traditional economic mentality, seem to become alive in front of our eyes.

To tell the truth, there are hardly any economic standpoints in the *Protestant Ethic* that could not be illustrated by the particular instances of the *Wine Producer* and vice versa. (It should be noted that Szekfű wrote such a splendid work in this respect that the statements he referred to could be supported even today by examples of domestic wine production.)

As far as Szekfű’s *theoretical foundation* is concerned, it cannot be praised to an equally great extent. Not only had he not been able to prove the history-making significance of “spiritual constitution”, but some of his conceptually important statements may also be objected. I am not able to examine these objections in detail here; therefore we mention only a few of these. Above all, there is the rigid dichotomy of “internal” and “external” factors, which resulted in Szekfű’s separating the “spiritual factors” from the other, “objective” elements of the formula with a division like “the Great Wall of China”. Therefore Szekfű magnified the history-making role of “spiritual factors” to such an extent that the question arises whether he was guilty of following the cult of the “Great Cause”, just like reductionism, which he himself criticized⁴. But even the adaptability of the

⁴ In the beginning of his study, Szekfű analyzes theoretical questions, focusing on the epistemological: a problem examined by Max Weber as well (Weber, 1970: 39). His line of thought is characterized by a strong critical attitude, as Szekfű states the following critical observations concerning the historical approaches that are connected to ideological currents he characterized as rationalist, liberal, positivist and materialist. One of these refers to: a “quite unjustified form” of the already mentioned historical approaches, the almost cultic respect for the “Great Cause”. Basically Szekfű describes a vulgarized causal approach, whose essence is that “the analyzed force, be it called as it may, is nothing else than an awkwardly huge Cause, a giant causality, which its followers regard as capable of determining the direction of the endless mass of personal acts, regardless of other motives, which are usually used for explaining terrestrial actions (...)” (According to the socialist historical approach, the Great Cause is the Economy, while in case of liberalism it is the Reason, the Freedom and the Democracy, as well as the “general, secret and equal Civil Rule.” The belief in the omnipotence of the Great Cause gives way to another critical finding, i.e. that “the general historical approach” is destructive according to Szekfű, “(...) with the possession of the Great Cause it attacks all other causes, it annihilates all other causalities and regards them as ineffective and worthless (...)” (Szekfű, 2002: 15).

Thünen-formula remains problematic. The formula stabilizes a static situation, while Szekfű wishes to grab some of the, for instance, socio-political elements in a historical context. Because of this, he can only make some of the elements of his formula dynamic by using Alfred Vierkandt's theory on real culture-change⁵. Following this, Szekfű immediately starts to "actionize". Although, as we have seen, he could have chosen an approach seemingly offering more perspective from the point of view of the historiographer, when for example he used the rigid, feudal socio-economic system of the Middle Ages as an example. In this case Szekfű could have interpreted the question of domestic wine production entirely in a historical context. This approach really would not have been hurt by the category of "spiritual constitution", i.e. what Szekfű regarded as a mental factor difficult to mobilize and its "operationalized components" ("economic indifference", "lack of mobilization"), it could have been captured in a *more plausible way from the perspective of historical structure*, of course without unintentionally internalizing the affected materialist notion of history, since "spiritual constitution" can be captured from the point of view of history just as much as "the spirit of capitalism" or "economical traditionalism". Such an approach, e.g. one similar to Weber's, would have allowed him to grasp the different historical factors in a structural system of relations, and he could have avoided the rigid dichotomy of the "external" and "internal" sides.

Conclusions

To sum up the comparison of the referred line of thought of the *Protestant Ethic* and the *Wine Producer*, we can make the following statements:

While Weber examines the problems of economic traditionalism in the light of social-economic-cultural-political structural connections, Szekfű accentuates the possibility of examining the structural connections to the concept of the "Hungarian spiritual constitution". Therefore the category of "economic indifference", which would have allowed the examination of the pre-capitalist economic mentality on the basis of "economic traditionalism", and as such, could have functioned as a structural element of pre-capitalism, became a concept rather with an emphasis on national character in Szekfű's interpretation.

⁵ On the one hand Vierkandt distinguishes acculturation (external culture change i.e.: proliferation of spirit, tobacco etc.) and on the other hand "endogenous (real) culture change". Szekfű sums up the conditions of the latter as follows: "(1) the entire spiritual and moral constitution of the nation concerned needs to be prepared for the change (2) and in the case of the same people the required nature of change has to emerge consciously. (3) The initiative of certain individuals, because the mass itself is short of the tendency of change, this can be provided most expediently, according to experience, by great personalities. Finally (4): outward, external opportunity is also needed, such as the French Revolution and the reforms of Napoleon in case of the entire Europe (...)" (Szekfű 2002, 26).

As it follows from the 1st point, while the longing for acquisition operating within the conceptual circle of economic traditionalism appears as an economic motif used in the general sense, “economic indifference” as a spiritual factor is defined as a Hungarian mental feature.

While Weber introduced both pre-capitalism and capitalism with such structural factors, which are bound by a structural relationship, Szekfű employs the Thünen-formula in such a way that he raises an almost-impenetrable wall between “external” (objective) and “internal” (subjective) elements.

The previous findings result in another important difference. The integral, “structural” relationship of the structural factors also means that significant change can only happen if the elements of the structure are modified significantly, while the rigid separation of spiritual factors should also emphasize that the considerable alteration of spiritual factors may result in the change of the structure.

One question is relevant here: how could it happen to such a qualified historian as Szekfű that he published an unfinished, theoretically easily debatable work? Ignoring the analysis of occasional production-psychological features, we do not believe that Szekfű could have been driven by the aim of hitting the progress-centred historical approach hard, as he “succeeded” in finding a category, i.e. that of spiritual constitution, which resists “quick-footed change” (Szekfű, 2002: 96). Neither do we think that Szekfű would have voted for a national-characterological approach in a then not so receptive Hungarian mentality historical atmosphere. The most probable approach is that Szekfű, after Leopold Ranke, followed a *history-political discourse*⁶ in the *Wine Producer*, by the rigid demarcation of the “external” (objective) and “internal” (subjective) sides. This way, following several modifications of the Thünen-formula, the “internal” spiritual side could materialize as a completely independent factor, which *could be mobilized and changed*, despite all of its inertia, *easier than e.g. the socio-political element of the “external” side*, meaning of course the tendencies of the international market of the time.

⁶ Szekfű’s booklet entitled *History-political studies (Történetpolitikai tanulmányok)*, containing seven essays, was published in 1924. To explain the title of the “volume”, Szekfű wishes to introduce the history-political essay as a typical genre of German historiography. He mentions the name of Ranke in this respect, who, according to him, tried to teach us political thinking, the understanding of the connection of the present state and the historical past. According to Szekfű, the history-political essay “... is the realization of the historical connections of the current problems, the historical research adapted to the present situation” (ibid). Of course, according to this approach, the interest of the historian has to be aroused not only by the relations of the past but by those of the present as well. “The opposite of this would have ab ovo compromised him”, emphasizes Szekfű, “and would have caused doubts against the sensibility and realism of his judgements (ibid).

The history-political essay does great service for its author just in this respect: “... satisfying his, say, ... justified interest for current politics, keeping him for the examination of the past and preventing him from degrading his self destined for an inner life by descend to the political stage” (ibid). This way history-political essays work as valves used for “blowing off the steam” (ibid, see also, in detail in Kupa 2002: 99-102).

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