Social Discipline and State Formation: Weber and Oestreich on the historical sociology of subjectivity

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Abstract

The concept of discipline has come to be associated with the work of Michel Foucault, but Max Weber and Gerhard Oestreich also made extensive use of it, and this paper explores their contribution to our understanding of the historical sociology of subjectivity in terms of an increasing disciplining of subjectivity. For Weber the discipline associated with ascetic Protestantism played a crucial role in the development of Western capitalism, and this central concern with the historical psychology of capitalism and the disciplined character of the modern self makes Weber’s work the intellectual precursor of the more recent discussions. Gerhard Oestreich provides a different kind of analysis by drawing our attention to the role of both the intellectual movement of neo-Stoicism and its associated forms of state intervention in spreading the discipline of the newly reformed armies in Western Europe throughout the rest of European society. The paper concludes with a discussion of the difficulties that remain in the work of both writers, and the implications of some more recent historical research for their theoretical orientations.

How in fact could the machine take possession of European society until that society had, by an inner accommodation, surrendered to the machine?

The idea that subjectivity is socially constituted is one which most, if not all social theorists will subscribe to, despite the arguments about the nature and extent of conflict between social demands and supposedly individual needs and desires. The further observation that there can be different ways in which selves are socially constructed, that socialisation varies across cultures, is common enough among anthropologists: The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures.

However, this anthropological problem is also one of historical anthropology; one can be aware that the ways one can have a ‘self’ vary not only across cultures, but also across history, that they change and develop over time. The historical sociology of subjectivity, the question of the history of processes of socialization, their greater subordination to an
increasingly centralised state apparatus, and their place in an adequate understanding of European ‘modernity’, has received a good deal of attention in recent years, and the work done in this area often makes extensive use of the concept ‘discipline’.

Michel Foucault has done a great deal to promote the coupling of the concepts ‘modernity’ and ‘discipline’ in contemporary social theory and history, with the argument that one of the definitive characteristics of European state formation since the early modern period was the transition from a sovereign state power which operated negatively by setting limits and constraints, to a disciplinary power which penetrates our souls and minds, transforming them and producing positive effects which turn us all into self-managing citizens. However, we need not regard Foucault’s work as the only source of support for the use of the concept ‘discipline’ in understanding the development of subjectivity in the course of European history since the Middle Ages. A number of commentators have remarked that Foucault’s writings revolved around the question of ‘what constitutes modernity’, as well as an analysis of how human beings are made ‘subjects’, but these concerns are not unique to Foucault. For Weber the discipline associated with ascetic Protestantism played a crucial role in the development of Western capitalism, perhaps even constituting its uniqueness in world history, and this central concern with the historical psychology of capitalism and the particularly disciplined character of the modern self makes Weber’s work the intellectual precursor of the more recent discussions of discipline.

Increasing use is also being made in contemporary social history of the work of the German social historian, Gerhard Oestreich, who analysed the ways in which early modern European society was overtaken by a process he called ‘social disciplining’. He stressed the role of both the intellectual movement of neo-Stoicism and its associated forms of state intervention in spreading the discipline of the newly reformed armies of Western Europe throughout the rest of society. The parallels between Oestreich’s examination of social discipline and Foucault’s more widely-known work on the changing forms of government under Absolutism have already been noted by Pasquale Pasquino: Oestreich also concentrates on the period after the 16th century, and similarly perceives a radical change in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries in both the theory and the practices of the relationship between a government and its subjects. Like Foucault, Oestreich offers a counter-argument to Weber’s discussion of the historical significance of Protestantism, by emphasising the origins of modern discipline in the development of a particularly instrumental political rationality, a ‘reason of state’ that had little to do with religious belief, but does so on the basis of quite different historical evidence. Our understanding of the concept discipline, and how it can be used in historical sociology, would thus be greatly enhanced if we were to look beyond Foucault’s analyses of the disciplinary society, examine how it is put to work by Weber and Oestreich, and begin to explore the arguments raised by both the similarities and the differences in their approaches.

Max Weber: discipline, the military and the Church
Most discussions of Max Weber’s work concentrate on his analysis of the processes of rationalisation and disenchantment in the West, especially as it is manifested in bureaucracy, and his argument about the affinity between ascetic Protestantism and the ‘spirit’ of modern capitalism. Recently a debate has emerged among some commentators about whether the study of the rationalisation of Western society should be seen as the central theme of all of Weber’s work. What is less commonly focused on, however, is that Weber’s account of disenchantment, the evolution from primarily magic and charismatic religious beliefs and practices to increasingly routinised and instrumentally-rational activity locked into secular reality, is at the same time an account of the evolution of discipline from its confinement to the military and monasteries, to its universal extension throughout society. The historical significance of the inner-worldly asceticism of Calvinism lay in its promotion of a methodical regulation of life which is based on the disciplining of individual needs, desires and inclinations. Throughout his discussions of the development of both rationalisation and the spirit of capitalism there is in fact a parallel argument about the transformation of individual personality in the form of the development of discipline, and as a category it is perhaps as central to his work as it is to the work of later writers.

Weber discussed discipline in two different but related senses. First, he described it as an institutional form, as a way of organising social relations. In this sense he examined how we are the objects of a social process or organisational form in which we are increasingly subordinated to impersonal routines, drills, exercises, procedures and rules, in opposition to the personal imperatives of charismatic or traditionally authoritative leaders. Rational discipline was for Weber ‘the most irresistible force’ before which charisma and the importance of individual action recedes, becoming integral to the rationalization of social relations. The content of discipline ‘is nothing but the consistently rationalised, methodically prepared and exact execution of the received order, in which all personal criticism is unconditionally suspended and the actor is unswervingly and exclusively set for carrying out the command’. Specifically routinized skills and capacities become valorized above loyalty and personal devotion to a charismatic leader, and the decisive characteristic of discipline is that the behaviour of a plurality of people becomes rationally and predictively uniform.

For Weber, modern discipline originated in the military and the conduct of warfare, and he saw its spread as essential to any explanation of the historical development of the West. It was not technological development in the form of the sort of weapons used or the type of metal introduced which Weber regarded as most decisive in the transformation of the structure of warfare, but military discipline, which he argued was the cause and not the effect of the kinds of weaponry used. He mentioned in this regard the discipline of Greek and Roman foot-soldiers, the co-ordination and order required to wage war on horseback, and the decisive significance of the discipline of the armies of the House of Orange and Oliver Cromwell. Once established on a military foundation, discipline then ‘had even greater effects upon the political and social order,’ playing a central role in the development of ‘the bureaucratic states of Egypt, Assyria and modern Europe’, through both the direct influence of the military on political life and the influence of a disciplinary way of life on the world beyond the barracks. It also characterizes the organisation of the Church bureaucracy
and, more intensively, the monastic orders, so that the communistic Spartan warrior ‘is the perfect counterpart to the monk, whose garrisoned and communistic life in the monastery serves the purpose of disciplining him in the service of his other-worldly master (and, resulting therefrom, perhaps also his this-worldly master)’.

Ultimately the discipline of armies and monasteries extended throughout society in the form of bureaucracy in large-scale organisations. Discipline was the one element linking ‘the Pharaonic workshops and construction projects,...the Carthaginian-Roman plantation, the mines of the late Middle Ages, the slave plantation of colonial economies, and finally the modern factory’. Military discipline was the ‘ideal model’ for the modern capitalist factory, and enabled the productive capacity of individual workers to be calculated as precisely as any of the inanimate means of production, as well as being increased through the improvement of work discipline. This was the aim of scientific management, which Weber described as ‘triumphantly’ conditioning and training individual work performance, ‘thus drawing the ultimate conclusions from the mechanization and discipline of the plant’.

In addition to examining the ways in which particular forms of social organization - the army, the monastery, the office and the factory - have varying forms of discipline built into them, Weber secondly discussed the ways in which individual psychology is correspondingly transformed, the ways in which we become disciplined as subjects. This was how he formulated the psychological impact of scientific management and the rationalization of work:

The psycho-physical apparatus of man is completely adjusted to the demands of the outer world, the tools, the machines - in short, it is functionalized, and the individual is shorn of his natural rhythm as determined by his organism; in line with the demands of the work procedure, he is attuned to the new rhythm through the functional specialization of muscles and through the creation of an optimal economy of physical effort.

Weber deplored the ‘passion for bureaucratization’ among even the students of his day. It is, he wrote, ‘as if, consciously and deliberately, we want to become people who need ‘order and nothing but order, who become nervous and timid when this order falters for an instant,’ and he argued that the important issue was ‘to oppose this machinery in order to preserve a vestige of humanity from this fragmentation (Parzellung) of the soul, from this absolute domination of bureaucratic ideals of life’. Anticipating Reich, Weber remarked that once established, this ‘settled orientation of man for observing the accustomed rules and regulations’ possesses a reality and continuity of its own, which he sees as surviving the possible destruction of the social organisation based upon such a disciplined orientation to the world.

This transformation of individual psychology also occurred within and, was encouraged by, the more general ideological development of the spread of religious inner-worldly asceticism, which encouraged the rejection of everything dependent on one’s own emotional response to the world around in favour of ‘the alert, methodical control of one’s own pattern of life and behaviour’. The aim of this religious asceticism was ‘the disciplining
and methodical organisation of conduct,' and appeared typically in 'the "man of vocation" or "professional" (Berufsmensch)’. Weber argued that this kind of methodical subordination of one’s self to the imperatives of work discipline was only partially apparent in Antiquity, being without the support of ‘the essentially religious idea of "vocation" and the ethic derived from it’, which only spread throughout European society during and after the early modern period; first ‘in the broad strata of the middle class’, and ‘finally also among the masses which the capitalist mechanism incorporated’, through ‘re-education’. Christian asceticism ‘strode into the market-place of life, slammed the door of the monastery behind it,’ and began to penetrate the previously untouched ‘naturally spontaneous character of daily life in the world’ with its ‘methodicalness’, and this meant that modern capitalism encountered an ‘adequate lifestyle’ through which it ‘gained massive control over life in the manner that it has.’

It is in this sense that he saw the spread of Protestantism as having paved the way, albeit unintentionally, for the extension of rational discipline from within the confines of a military, religious and administrative elite throughout all of daily life. Unintentionally because as Wolfgang Schluchter emphasises, ascetic Protestantism’s approach to religious and ethical salvation ‘must be viewed at first as traditional,’ and it was, ‘strictly speaking, accidental...that it became a constitutive factor in the transition to Western modernity’. The effects of the Reformation, wrote Weber, were ‘to a great extent...unforseen and even unwished for results of the labours of the reformers. They were often far removed from or even in contradiction to all that they themselves thought to attain’. This unintentionality of the impact of ascetic Protestantism parallels that of the paradox of monastic asceticism, which Weber also noted had the effect of generating great material wealth within the context of its rejection.

The element of discipline is crucial too for Weber’s distinction between power and domination. Power refers simply to the diverse range of situation where one person or group imposes their will on the behaviour of another, whereas domination refers to the stabilisation and routinisation of power relations. As Weber put it, situations of domination, which more commonly characterise the modern world, are those where ‘the manifested will (command) of the ruler or rulers’ influences ‘the conduct of one or more others (the ruled)...in such a way that their conduct to a socially relevant degree occurs as if the ruled had made the content of the command the maxim of their conduct for its very own sake’. Disciplined obedience is in this sense both an element and the outcome of successful domination, in which the dominators can rely on automatic, unreflective and therefore predictable responses and behaviour on the part of the dominated. The disciplined/dominated person does not reason, discuss or argue, they obey under the motivation of ‘dull’ custom, with the uniformity and predictability of a machine. Domination can only operate successfully when it can go beyond external coercion, so that ‘the command is accepted as a "valid" norm’, with the dominated having internalised their own subjection, so that their psychology has become so thoroughly penetrated that they react in conformity to the dominant group’s wishes. If bureaucracy and disenchantment were for Weber the external manifestations of routinised domination and the iron cage of modernity,
discipline was its internal, psychic component.

It should be added here that Weber did not see discipline in itself as unique to any particular historical period or part of the world, and much of his argument concerned the precise distinctions between the different forms of discipline found in Confucian Chinese bureaucracy or Christian monasteries and that of Western capitalism. Discipline in Confucian China, for example, was a characteristic of the behaviour of only a small administrative elite, and they tended to avoid the mechanization and de-individualisation one finds in their later Western counterparts; the Chinese bureaucracy tended to produce educated gentlemen with aristocratic qualities rather than mere functional cogs in a bureaucratic machine. The impact of discipline was limited by its location within an overall framework of ‘tradition’ and ‘charisma’, and a rationalism of adjustment to the world, as opposed to that of ‘asceticism’, ‘disenchantment’ and a rationalism of mastery of the world. In Weber’s terms, discipline and charisma still existed side by side, whereas in the West the former came to dominate all aspects of daily life.

The discipline of Christian monasteries went further towards the rational form which was later to be encouraged by ascetic Protestantism; both rejected the pursuit of earthly pleasures, in the form of either material goods or personal emotional attachments, and they ‘converge in the method of exercise, a stringent use of time, work and silence as a means of suppressing instinctual urges’. However the major difference in terms of their historical impact was that monastic discipline was only expected of monks, leaving everyone else to what Weber regarded as the far less rigorous expectations of the Catholic Church and the medieval state, whereas Protestantism made the same demand of every believer, and for Weber this constituted the revolutionary impact of the evolution of discipline in the West. This religion, wrote Weber, demanded ...not celibacy, as in the case of the monk, but the avoidance of all erotic pleasure; not poverty, but the elimination of all idle and exploitative enjoyment of unearned wealth and income; not the ascetic death-in-life of the cloister, but an alert, rationally controlled patterning of life, and the avoidance of all surrender to the beauty of the world, to art, or to one’s own moods and emotions. The clear and uniform goal of this asceticism was the disciplining and methodical organization of conduct.

Here Weber was stressing the breakthrough to the very specific form of discipline found in the West, the transition from a discipline held in check by tradition and belief in magic and charisma, and its confinement within monasteries and other-worldly concerns, to a methodical discipline which locks in all aspects of daily life, a transition which came about when the organisational principles and modes of conduct of armies and monasteries connected up with the larger historical movements of ascetic Protestantism and the emergence of bureaucratic rationality. There is thus a sense of contrast and discontinuity, a revolutionary change from a world dominated by magic and other-worldly religious beliefs and - apparently - a relative absence of internalised discipline, to one in which magic and other-worldly beliefs play only a marginal role, where the boundaries between religious belief and everyday life are dismantled, and where everyday life is dominated by a goal-directed and rational self-discipline adapted to the demands and requirements of a capitalist secular
reality, based on the suppression of emotion, mood and impulse.

However, just as Weber found modern rationality to be the heir of that of ancient Judaism, and driven by complex of historical factors - European geography, the peculiarly occidental city, the inheritance of Roman law, the Roman Church’s concept of ‘office’, the formation of a capitalist market based on ‘free’ labour - there are also various forms of discipline to be found throughout history and in various cultures, and its origins cannot be explained in simple terms. It is thus not a question in Weber of a transition or transformation from completely discipline-less forms of social organization to one totally dominated by ‘the disciplinary and methodical organization of conduct’, or one form of discipline to a completely different one, and he did not even attempt to identify a ‘cause’ for the spread of discipline in the West. Methodologically Weber was not concerned with causes or ‘real motive forces’; as he put it, ‘an exhaustive causal investigation of any concrete phenomenon in its full reality is not only practically impossible - it is simply nonsense’. His concern was rather with investigating the ‘causal significance’ of particular historical developments, with the precise and unique role that, say, Protestantism, among other factors, played in the history of specifically Western European capitalism. Central to his explanation of the evolution of discipline was Weber’s clear sense of its origins in the rationalism of Judaism, in Hellenic and later Christian intellectual culture, the military, the bureaucracy of the Church, and the formalization of Roman law. The specific character of the medieval city he also regarded as especially significant.

The capitalist economic activity of their merchants and its associated political power generated a dynamism which enabled the destabilisation of traditional authority so essential for the spread of discipline, for they constituted ‘strong and independent forces’ with which ‘princely power could ally itself in order to shatter traditional fetters; or under very special conditions, these forces could use their own military power to throw off the bonds of patrimonial power’. The historically specific combination of these various aspects of European state-formation with the peculiar cultural development of Judeo-Christianity (culminating in ascetic Protestantism), and the demands of capitalist and bureaucratic forms of work organisation, is thus ultimately what lay at the heart of Weber’s explanation of the movement toward the rational discipline of the specifically Western bureaucratic state.

Gerhard Oestreich: Neo-Stoicism and social discipline

Weber’s account of the processes by which the discipline of monks and soldiers came to play a major role in everyday life tends to operate at the more general level of conceptual and theoretical argument, and one of the major aims of Gerhard Oestreich’s work was to identify with more historical precision the details of the rationalisation of European social life. In the process he was led to modify Weber’s perspective considerably; in particular, Oestreich questioned the emphasis placed on ascetic Protestantism, arguing that the kind of psychology and world-view promoted by Protestantism was in fact the product of a more general, non-confessional cultural and ideological change. He also differed from Weber in a second sense, in that he paid much more attention to the regulatory interventions of the
absolutist state in everyday life which aimed specifically at producing the kind of rational
discipline Weber saw as essential to modern bureaucracy.

For Oestreich the ‘disciplining of society’ stood even more at the centre of the
historical stage than for Weber, arguing that the prime cause of the expansion of state power
was not so much rationalization, centralization and institutionalization as the ‘spiritual, moral
and psychological changes which social discipline produced in the individual, whether he was
engaged in politics, army life, or trade’, changes which were ‘far more fundamental, far more
enduring than the institutional changes in politics and administration’. In this sense
Oestreich’s work is an example of what Charles Taylor has recently called a ‘cultural’ theory
of modernity, one based on particular changes in culture, in conceptions of the self and the
nature of social relations, rather than on sets of transformations such as rationalization,
increasing functional differentiation, technological change, industrialization, and so on,
which can be regarded as ‘culture-neutral’ or ‘culture-independent’ in the sense that all
cultures undergo them, and any culture could serve as ‘input’ for them. Weber’s writings, on
the other hand, contained both a cultural theory of modernity - the Protestant ethic thesis
and an acultural theory of rationalization and bureaucratization.

Oestreich traces the origins of social discipline to the police ordinances of the early
modern West European town councils, which he saw as a response to two developments.
First, the population drift from the countryside to the city generated a problem of social
order, in that the newcomers ‘all had to adapt to new lifestyles for which rural customs and
traditions were an inadequate preparation’. This point is one commonly made about the
dissolution of feudal society - the picture usually painted by most scholars of early modern
Europe is of a society of increasing population, ravaged by war and famine, increasingly
concentrated in urban centres, with large sections of that population unable or unwilling to
find a stable niche in their unstable surroundings, and constituting a social problem for
respectable town burghers in their resort to vagabondage, thieving, and begging in order to
survive. In words which reveal the influence of Norbert Elias, Oestreich argued that the
increasing density of urban population itself ‘led to stresses which had not been felt hitherto
and which lowered the threshold of tolerance towards the unrestricted development of
personal lifestyles and towards diversity and deviation from a certain norm’.

Second, Oestreich points to the failure of existing forms of social organisation,
particularly the Church, in maintaining social order in the face of these changes. Town
councils were acting within an atmosphere of crisis, of ‘something has to be done’, as the
moral authority of the Church and - more importantly - its organisational means of policing
that authority, appeared inadequate to the task of dealing with the new problems of social
order, especially vagrancy and the establishment of a work discipline appropriate to the
developing forms of urban production. By the end of the 16th century, wrote Oestreich, one
can speak of ‘regulation mania’ in Western European towns, with police ordinances laying
down rules and regulations for ‘every conceivable area’ of private life - Sunday observance,
blasphemy, expenditure on weddings, christenings and funerals, as well as the time spent on
them, the upbringing of children, breaches of the peace, begging and alms-giving, etc.
He referred to this surge of policing activity during the 16th century as being concerned with the ‘regulation of society’. The point at which it became ‘social discipline’, as he understood it, was when medieval Christianity was transformed by the new conceptual and philosophical framework provided by the renewed study of Roman philosophers and lawyers by humanist intellectuals, generating a neo-Stoicist philosophical orientation to the world which stressed ‘good order’ based on obedience to a central, secular authority - the state - and a rational self-discipline. The object of neo-Stoicism was ‘to educate a new kind of man, the individual with a civic sense who would go beyond the Christianity of the Middle Ages, embrace the old Roman values, and demonstrate the importance of rationality in character, action and thought’. This task was to fall to the ‘rulers’ of Europe, whom neo-Stoicist thinkers encouraged ‘to assume an educative role and to bring many areas of public life under the control of the state for the first time.’ The actual means by which social discipline was meant to be imposed was a disciplined ordering of one’s external environment - drill, routine, regime - which would then order one’s internal psychic life. Here Oestreich goes beyond Foucault, who also referred to the 16th century revival of Stoicism and its ‘ritualisation of the problem of how to conduct oneself’, without going into Oestreich’s detail about neo-Stoicism as an intellectual movement.

Oestreich sees the focal point of this intellectual shift as lying in the person and work of Justus Lipsius (1547-1606), a Flemish professor of history and law at Leiden University. Lipsius wrote prolifically on army reform, the conduct of politics and administration, and the law, and all of his work is an argument for a psychology, an ideal individual,

...who acts according to reason, is answerable to himself, controls his emotions, and is ready to fight...the Lipsian view of man and the world, carried over into the realm of politics, entails rationalization of the state and its apparatus of government, autocratic rule by the prince, the imposition of discipline on his subjects, and strong military defence. As important as Oestreich’s outline of the nature of Lipsius’s ideas, however, is his painstaking tracing of their transmission throughout Europe - Germany, France, England, Scandinavia, Spain, Italy and Switzerland in the form of what he called the ‘Netherlands movement’.

The starting point for the spread of Lipsius’s ideas and the Netherlands movement was their role in the reform of the House of Orange’s army and its subsequent military successes against the occupying Spanish army. Lipsius’s work on military ethics provided an answer to the question exercising the minds of Europe’s military commanders - ‘how to establish and maintain good order and military discipline in the unruly armies of the day’, and increasing proportion of Europe’s intellectual elite came to be educated either by Lipsius himself or teachers of ethics, philosophy and law who shared his views on rationality and self-discipline. The crucial aspect of Oestreich’s treatment of neo-Stoicism, the Netherlands movement and their impact on the budding science of politics is that he argued that those characteristics of modernity which, under the influence of Weber’s work on the Protestant ethic, among others, we have come to see almost exclusively in relation to ascetic Protestantism - self-disciplined control of emotion and affect in pursuit of calculatively rational ends - can be more accurately said to derive from the reinterpretation of Roman
philosophy and legal principles by humanist intellectuals like Lipsius. Oestreich identified the intellectual networks of support and discipleship which spread the neo-Stoicist argument for rationality in everyday life among Europe's university-trained elite and court society. Neo-Stoicism was far more this-worldly and practically-oriented than Calvinism, had a discernable effect on the thought processes and conceptual apparatuses of bureaucrats and lawyers, and while it may be said of Calvinism that many of its disenchanting and rationalising effects were unintended, it would be impossible to say this of Lipsius and the Netherlands movement.

Weber also pointed to the roots of modern self-discipline in army life, and like Oestreich saw discipline as having spread from the barracks (and the cloister) throughout society. Oestreich, however, places much more emphasis on the militarization of social and political thought from the turn of the 16th century onwards, as well as the particular direction military philosophy took under the influence of the humanist revival of Roman philosophy and law - namely the focus on the transformation of individual psychology towards the internalization of discipline and the personal acceptance of the centralisation of authority in the state. Oestreich saw the practical education received by Europe’s administrative, legal and political elite as being the primary mechanism by which the acceptance of self-discipline took place. He placed neo-Stoicism alongside Calvinism and Jesuism in terms of its impact on changes in philosophical attitude, but he saw it as being of greater historical significance in relation to its practical effects on the transformation of psychological dispositions, in particular the disciplining of everyday life.

It is in the area of a transformation of ideas among the intellectual elite that Oestreich was at his most persuasive, but his analysis of the eventual broader impact of the neo-Stoicist emphasis on rational self-discipline remains more suggestive than conclusive. His argument seemed to be that the policing activities of the Absolutist state did in fact transform the psychological dispositions of workers and peasants, as well as that of soldiers, lawyers and administrators, by the end of the 18th century. However, Oestreich’s remarks here are ambivalent, almost to the point of being contradictory. On the one hand he emphasised the problematic character of centralisation under Absolutism, the fact that the absolute power of the state operated more in theory than in practice, and that in reality ‘monarchic authority had only a partial influence on what came to be known as the provincial level and hardly any, or none at all, in local government’. At the same time, however, he also asserted that private life was nonetheless effectively invaded: ‘the attitudes and conduct of even the simple subject were shaped, controlled, and regulated by the process of disciplining’. For Oestreich a neo-Stoicist commitment to self-discipline, obedience to state authority and devotion to work, and restraint of impulse and emotion, was thus spread throughout the intellectual elite by the sheer persuasiveness of the practical example set by neo-Stoicist ‘men of action’, but among the rest of the populace by more coercive means - even if imperfectly administered, and later, during the 18th century.

At this point ascetic Protestantism re-enters the picture and we return to a position somewhat closer to Weber’s, for Oestreich argued that the educative efforts of Protestant preachers and writers constituted one of the primary mechanisms by which the essentially
non-confessional notion of rational self-discipline came to have an effect on the larger population. As Heinz Schilling puts it, two ‘spiritual forces’ lent themselves to the development of social discipline: ‘neo-stoicism, which addressed itself mainly to the political, military and intellectual elite, and a catalogue of Christian virtues specifically assembled for this purpose, which was intended mainly for the subjects’. At the same time, the interventions of the State during the 17th and 18th centuries into areas such as schooling, the organisation of public space (parks, gardens, streets), and prisons and workhouses, all had as at least one of their goals the re-education of the working population for orderly and methodical work, although Oestreich left it to later writers such as Robert Jütte to provide the substantial historical detail about how these attempts to inculcate social discipline actually operated. The establishment of social discipline in court society, the military, monasteries, the church and state bureaucracies, as well as prisons, workhouses and orphanages, thus formed a ‘bridgehead’ in the 16th and 17th centuries for its later, more extensive impact on social life in school and factories and as a more diffuse ‘orientation to the world’ which became part of everyday culture and psychology in the working class as well as the bourgeoisie by the middle of the 19th century.

The spread of social discipline throughout European society, argued Oestreich, again in agreement with Foucault, also laid the foundations for and made possible a characteristic of 19th century Europe which at first glance appears antithetical to it: democratization. As Oestreich put it, ‘beside freedom of information and debate, democracy presupposed discipline on the part of the citizen, a discipline which serves the common good.’ The development of social discipline ‘is a pre-requisite for the fundamental democratization of the bourgeois community for the modern state and its society’. Democracy, so the argument goes, could only have arisen on the foundations of self-disciplined political subjects committed to at least a notion of rationality in social intercourse and an acceptance of the centralisation of political and military power in the state. Oestreich is here in agreement with Hobbes’ dictum that humans are not fitted to society, and we could add here to the nation-state and modern democracy, by nature, but by discipline. Disciplina is often translated into English as ‘education’, but it also means discipline, and the whole point of the Roman view of education and human psychology was that the two were one and the same.

**Discipline and Historical Sociology**

The central point which emerges in both Weber’s and Oestreich’s work is the importance of the role played by a particular psychological transformation, a change in both behaviour and disposition, in the history of Western society and culture, which paralleled the larger-scale developments usually pursued in the historical sociology of state formation. In general terms they agree that one can trace a developmental trend towards increasing self-discipline, a regularisation and routinisation of the psyche, so that one’s inner ‘economy of the soul’ coordinates with the outer economy of an increasingly bureaucratised, rationalised and individualised social world. Their work converges on the notions that there has been ‘societalization of the self’, a transition in European history from a social order based on external constraint (fundamental disciplining, traditional power) to one dependent on the
internalisation of constraint (social discipline, rational domination). In relation to how the development of a modern self-discipline took place and how it is to be explained, there are various ways of approaching the timing and rhythm of the history of discipline, and its routes, the means by which an increasingly internalised discipline came about. There is an opposition or tension, at some times between writers, at others within the work of an individual writer, between a perception of social history in terms of turning points or watersheds, where a set of events or changes in a relatively short period bring about a ‘great transformation’ in the way social and self-discipline operates, and one in terms of a more gradual process of transformation, with one change building on the other, so that one is less able to say that any given period is more historically significant than the other.

This question is a general historiographical one arising, *inter alia* from the breadth of one’s focus: concentrate on the historical material concerning a relatively short period, which professional historians usually feel they ought to do, in order to do justice to the complexity of social history, as Oestreich and Foucault in his earlier work did, and one will tend towards the former perspective, emphasising a radical break. Look further afield, as Weber and Foucault in his later work did, and one perceives longer waves of development, the repetition of patterns over longer periods, and the continuities in, say, child-rearing practices, or individualism. Weber attempts a combination of both styles of historiography, emphasising both the long-term development of bureaucratic-legal principles from Roman law, the differences between Western culture since the Ancient World and Eastern cultures, and the revolutionary impact of capitalism and Protestantism, and Oestreich too could be said to at least have an eye for continuity, given that neo-Stoicism was precisely a revival of Roman philosophy.

The different historical material used by Weber and Oestreich also leads to different portrayals of the routes that the development of a more disciplined subjectivity took. In Weber the picture of medieval society is one of relatively small islands of disciplined activity among monks and soldiers, with Protestantism, capitalist forms of work organisation and bureaucracy then breaking down the walls of the monastery and the army barracks, as it were, to include all members of society within a methodical conduct of life. Oestreich concentrates more on the interventions of the state through sumptuary and welfare legislation, cutting across confessional boundaries, while for Foucault the development of discipline was more dependent on both the appearance and mobilisation of a range of disciplinary techniques within particular institutional settings - schools, workhouses, hospitals, the confession - and the impact of the knowledge developed by the human sciences themselves, which together were more instrumental than Protestantism, and joined with the impact of capitalist work organisation and bureaucracy to transform our sense and experience of self. However, it is conceivable that one simply combine their approaches and perceive their different historical emphases as a product of focusing on different aspects of the same, complex and differentiated process of development towards a particular kind of social discipline. Both the Weber/Foucault and the Oestreich/Foucault comparisons imply this approach, and certainly there are a number of common themes running through all their work, particularly the importance of monasticism as a model for a methodical conduct of
life, and the practices of the Church, Catholic and Protestant, in implementing that model within the general population.

However, there remain a number of problems with their understanding of the development of discipline and the transformation of human subjectivity in European history. First, although there is a good deal of support for the view that both the state and the church played a central and interventionist role in the making of the modern subject, there is also good reason for skepticism about the correspondence between the aims of state and church disciplinary strategies and their actual outcomes. Robert Scribner has highlighted the difficulties state authorities experienced in establishing and maintaining social order, and how heavily dependent they were on co-operation and support among local communities. The striking thing about sumptuary legislation, for example, is the number of times the various laws had to be re-issued. Similar evidence can be found for the Absolutist State’s lack of penetration into local communities in pre-Revolutionary France: Le Goff and Sutherland have pointed out how much the policing of law and order remained in the hands of ‘individual and community initiative’, and while ‘the king’s servants in Versailles and his agents in the provinces did have a great deal of authority over some regions, municipalities and village councils, most ordinary people could still live almost entirely outside the influence of the state’. It is also possible to dispute the real impact of Church-based attempts at christianization and social discipline. John Bossy has argued that although the transition from medieval to modern Catholicism involved a process of ‘turning collective Christians into individual ones’, the attempt ‘was very commonly a failure’; the thought of Catholic clergy was often ‘magicalised’ by popular beliefs in the process of attempting to Christianise the rural populace, so that the relationship between elite and popular culture should be seen as more of a two-way process of mutual interaction than a one-way one of acculturation.

If ordinary people did indeed become Christians and self-disciplined, and Aron Gurevich has emphasised that ‘we cannot ascertain how and to what extent homo naturalis was in fact transformed into homo Christianus, it was not necessarily or only because of the Inquisition, the sermons and confessional-box exhortations of the clergy, or the impact of workhouses and schools, but also for quite different reasons, to do with the fabric of their everyday experiences and a ‘rational’ response to the problems emanating from that experience. As Giovanni Levi has argued in his examination of Italian peasant life, the logic or rationality specific to the peasant world was both expressed in resistance to the spread of the new society, the laws and regulations of the modern state, and also ‘actively engaged in transforming and utilizing both the social and the natural world’, and this is a line of argument that can also be pursued in relation to the general question of ‘social control’ emanating from state agencies.

Second, the social origins both of Protestantism and neo-stoicism require a great deal more attention than they receive at the hands of both Weber and Oestreich. Numerous scholars have addressed themselves to the question of idealism in Weber’s treatment of the Protestant ethic, and the role of ideas in social change, and it requires little sociological imagination to recognize that these debates affect not only Weber’s and Oestreich’s
understanding of the role of Protestantism and neo-Stoicism respectively, but any ‘cultural’
theory of modernity: the problem remains how one explains changes in culture, belief and
perception. Elias’s critique, for example, of Weber’s work on the Protestant ethic is
essentially that it is idealist, that changes in ideas have to be explained in relation to changes
in surrounding social conditions - for Elias, more specifically changes in patterns of
interdependency. As Elias puts it, the Protestant Ethic is ‘more a symptom than a cause of a
change in people’s social habitus’, a product of the changing social position of 17th century
merchants rather than itself an autonomous force of social change. The ‘rationalisation
which slowly become increasingly perceptible from the 16th century onwards...is only one
expression of the change in the whole personality that emerges at this time, and of the
growing foresight that is from now on required and instilled by an ever-increasing number of
social functions’.

This criticism has recently been echoed by Paul Piccone, who argued that Weber’s
attempted demonstration of the connection between belief systems and personality types
‘was predicated on the...dubious causal relation between beliefs and character structure,
rather than on a more concrete grounding of character structures within a broader socio-
historical context of which religious beliefs are only a part, along with all sorts of other
considerations also responsible for the constitution of those particular religious beliefs
themselves’. Similarly, S.N. Eisenstadt has pointed out that the question of explaining why
Protestantism arose and spread as it did is one least addressed by either Weber or Weberians.
Oestreich is even more affected by these arguments than Weber, as he lays heavier emphasis
on transformations in consciousness, beliefs and ideas, without attempting to explain the
social foundations of the turn to neo-Stoicism among Europe’s ruling and administrative
elite.

Sadly, however, this does not constitute any kind of conclusion or point us in a definite
direction, it merely leaves us with a problem, for it is not clear how easy it is to find such an
explanation. The sociological concern to explain human action in terms of social conditions
is problematic to the extent that one allows for human choice, error and downright sullen
inertia in the face of the apparent (to whom?) requirements of a given constellation of
conditions, structures and events. This is the foundation of Taylor’s critique of the neglect of
culture in sociological theories of modernity, as it leads one to misinterpret changes very
peculiar to Western societies and their modes of perception as the inevitable consequences
of a particular process of social change, such as industrialisation, urbanisation, functional
differentiation, and so on. A neglect of culture can also lead one to overlook the significance
of the role that changed understandings of, say, the self and subjectivity, had in edging social
change in one direction rather than another. Michael Mann is thus led to regard ideology as
one of the major sources of social power, along with the economy, the military and the state.
The mere fact that sixteenth- century administrators and military leaders had the cultural
resource of Roman Law and Stoicist philosophy to draw on, in both comprehending and
dealing with the world around them, can be regarded as itself of explanatory significance in
the development of particular ways of organising the state and its relationships with its
subjects. The consequences of a neglect of culture concern not only an adequate
understanding of European history, but also how we approach the non-Western world, for one is led to see only one route to modernity, the Occidental one, without being able to comprehend ‘the full gamut of alternatives modernities...in the making in different parts of the world’. Perhaps the more interesting and demanding task in historical sociology is not the explanation of neo-Stoicism, but Stoicism, not Protestantism, but Christianity, not the disciplinary society, but the very idea of ‘discipline’.

Bibliography


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