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The Relationship Between Talent Development and Civic Protestant Ethics in the Horthy Era

Introduction

The ideas articulated in Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2018) can be traced with remarkable precision in Rita Kattein-Pornói's doctoral dissertation, *The History of the National Hungarian Rural Talent Rescue* (2018). This dissertation explores the history of talent identification and development in Hungary from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. It provides an exceptionally detailed examination of the role of Reformed secondary schools in this process, as well as the state initiatives that emerged from these efforts under a predominantly Catholic state leadership.

As a historian of education specializing in religious history, I find this topic especially intriguing, as it reveals the religious-philosophical features that stem from the differences between Catholic traditions and the ethics of the Calvinist Reformation. Even without an explicit discussion of religious-philosophical frameworks, the dissertation provides a precise portrayal of the divergent approaches between the grassroots efforts of Reformed secondary schools and the initiatives of a Catholic-oriented state, which had not yet entirely abandoned feudal power structures. With the author's consent, I examine the religious aspects that expand and complement the interpretative framework in the present study. The relevance of this perspective is underscored by the fact that in the decades preceding World War II, religion, religious doctrines and teachings, faith-based principles, and ethics played a much deeper role in shaping society than contemporary perspectives might suggest.

In this study, using a comparative-analytical method, I juxtapose only these two works, searching for traces of Emil Maximilian Weber's (1864-1920) social philosophy in Kattein-Pornói's dissertation. The renowned German economist and sociologist lived and worked precisely in the period that this research examines. The retrospective analysis of his work serves as an explanation of his era. At the same time, the patterns that emerge from it reflect Hungary's close connections with German and Austrian culture at the time. For my analysis, I have used the most recent and comprehensive version of Weber's work – the critical edition published by L'Harmattan in 2018, translated by Zoltán Ábrahám – as it represents the most up-to-date and complete edition available.

The Value of Learning in the Context of Work and Vocation

Protestantism placed a high value on knowledge, as its religiously based ideological framework redefined work in civil society – not as a biblical punishment for sin, but as a life mission. The concept of "vocation" (*Beruf/calling*) first appeared in Martin Luther's 1522 translation of the Bible. Beyond serving basic bodily needs, it carried profound ethical significance and became part of realizing divine order. Thus, from the early modern period onward, the specific interpretations of religious education and instruction gave rise to psychological incentives, cultivated through the practice of religious discipline, that shaped the course of life and ensured that the individual – motivated by the hope of salvation – would always adhere to it. (Berzsenyi, 2024. 142-145.)

Traces of the doctrine of predestination can be found in fundamental aspects of lifestyle and worldview. Within Protestantism – particularly in the Calvinist perspective – every activity was to serve only and exclusively the glory of God, making it an obligation performed within the community to benefit society. (Weber, 2018. 150.) Rita Kattein-Pornói cites educational scholar and public education policymaker Árpád Kiss (1907-1979), who stated that "*the individual exists for the community, and the community exists for the individual.*" (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 30.) Kiss set the goal that the state should

educate honorable individuals for the leadership class – individuals who, possessing the proper knowledge, would be able and willing to act in service of the nation (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 30.).

In the Protestant ideological framework, every believer was obligated to regard themselves as chosen for salvation; failure to do so would signify a sinful lack of true faith and divine grace at work within the individual (Weber, 2018. 91.). Within the religious principles of child-rearing, learning was seen as the appropriate activity for a given stage of life. Education was to be pursued for the glory of God and as a means of attaining salvation. The notion of goodness and moral integrity was not viewed as a cyclical pattern of fluctuation punctuated by forgiveness, as in Catholicism, but rather as a continuous and rigorous pursuit of personal salvation. (Berzsenyi, 2024. 144.) It was an integral part of Protestantism's religiously grounded educational approach, which, from an early age, became ingrained in children's sense of self and shaped their strict worldview.

The Ethical Relationship Between Faith, Life Mission, Learning, and Teaching

At this juncture, Protestant teachings bring together the belief in the afterlife – considered more important than worldly happiness – with discipline in learning and work and with societal ethics. Poverty was not regarded as a sin; however, resignation, missed opportunities, and failure to seize possibilities were seen as manifestations of laziness and were unequivocally equated with sinful negligence and wastefulness. (Weber, 2018. 89) *"God helps those who help themselves. [...] The Calvinist [...] 'creates' their own blessed happiness. [...] However, this creation cannot mean the gradual accumulation of merits through individual achievements (as in Catholicism); rather, it is a systematic self-control, confronting the alternative of election or damnation at every moment".* (Weber, 2018. 96.)

As a result, there was no division between the individual and ethics, nor was there room for sinful inner conflict – this, in fact, was a distinctive feature of the Protestant ethic's concept of vocation (*calling/Berufung*). According to Protestant theologians, the constant practice of vocational work within the divinely ordained order was the means to dispel doubt and attain the assured state of divine grace. (Weber, 2018. 96.) The notions of fides efficacy (practical faith) and effectual calling legitimized divine order in a strict and puritanical form, upheld social and professional ethics, and, consequently, laid the foundation for civil society's work- and knowledge-based value system. (Weber, 2018. 95.)

According to István Harsányi (1908-2002), the Reformed educator who organized talent rescue efforts in Sárospatak, one of the most significant obstacles to the healthy functioning of the selection system ensuring the nation's strengthening during the Horthy era (1920-1944) was the caste-like nature of the leadership class. This elitist perspective, which permeated the entire Horthy era, created the social structure that historian and publicist Gyula Szekfű (1883-1955) called neo-baroque. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 31-32.)

Count Kuno von Klebelsberg (1875-1932), a Hungarian jurist, Member of Parliament, and Minister of Religion and Public Education of the Kingdom of Hungary from 1922 to 1931, played a crucial role in talent identification and development. One of his most significant decrees was the 1926 Act VII, which concerned *"the establishment and maintenance of rural schools serving the interests of the agricultural population."* (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 34.) This legislation laid the groundwork for the National Hungarian Rural Talent Rescue Program.

"The construction of rural schools provided the masses with the opportunity to acquire at least the most fundamental knowledge in educational institutions. This law was one of the most significant milestones on the road to eradicating illiteracy, as by 1931, 5,784 classrooms and 2,778 teacher residences had been built, enabling children from rural and lowland areas to acquire essential skills". (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 35)

The concept of sanctification through deeds, *Werkheiligkeit*, gave rise to today's pragmatic work ethic and established the ethical framework for work as a social obligation. This concept required a methodically rationalized ethical lifestyle – an organized and systematized sanctification of actions. In child-rearing and children's education, this meant conformity, moral excellence, and learning as the

appropriate life mission for each age group – what could be considered the age-appropriate level of *Werkheiligkeit*. These expectations were consistently imposed on children as well. (Weber, 2018. 98-109)

Kattein-Pornói echoes these ideas by citing János Cser, who argued that a nation can only keep pace with the development of other peoples if, alongside economic progress, it also addresses social welfare. Thus, it is necessary not only to enhance intellectual standards but also to improve moral values. Social conditions are closely interconnected with a country's overall economic situation. When examining talent development, it is essential to consider the societal, economic, and cultural factors – including religion as an institution and faith as an individual's internal orientation. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 93-94.)

The Relationship Between Faith and Knowledge

The inner light of revelation, the close connection between faith and reason, guides the individual toward proper understanding and, through their vocation, toward salvation. When accepted with the heart and grasped with the intellect, faith, and knowledge converge on the plane of insight. Their light illuminates a common path for the benefit of both the individual and society and, most importantly, for the glory of God. (Weber, 2018. 141.) Although not yet formulated in its modern sense, the idea that "time is money" had already emerged. *"Only action serves to increase the glory of God, and the wasting of time is the gravest of all sins."* (Weber, 2018. 150.) Intellectual work was thus also considered labor; knowledge, as theoretical understanding, found its place and recognition within the ethical order. Beyond mastering a vocation, it was the individual's duty to explore all its aspects, developing themselves for the greater glory of God and the benefit of society. (Weber, 2018. 145-150)

Citing educator and cultural policy scholar Sándor Imre (1877-1945), Rita Kattein-Pornói states that although talent is an intellectual quality, it cannot be fully realized without the guiding force of moral elements. Educating and developing children is not enough; they must also internalize fundamental ethical imperatives that profoundly shape their character, traditionally rooted in religious foundations. These include punctuality, diligence, responsibility, social awareness, and similar attitudes – qualities that, in an ideal case, define a responsible and talented individual. Without these, talent can easily be led astray and *"falling into the trap of recklessness and superficiality, may become more of a danger than an asset to society due to its lack of moral quality."* (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 92.)

Max Weber also considered laziness, wasted time, the indulgence of the body, and anything not serving the glory of God to be sinful. Even sports were justified only in improving physical strength and endurance, as life was divided between vocational practice, participation in religious life, and the necessary rest – nothing else was permissible under the expected ethical norms. (Weber, 2018. 150-151) *"God keeps us and our activities alive for action; work is the manifestation and natural goal of ability... Action best serves God and expresses the greatest respect for Him... Many's common good or well-being must take precedence over our welfare"*. (Weber, 2018. 150)

Within the concept and practice of vocation, a God-pleasing family life, the upbringing and education of children, any form of knowledge transmission, and learning itself were all included. Over the centuries, this perspective significantly elevated the prestige of teaching and learning. (Pornói, 2016) Only secular literature aligned with strict moral discipline – carrying social, economic, political, or professional information – was permitted. Consequently, learning processes became intertwined with the lifelong acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge and the mastery of associated intellectual content. Talent, which in the Middle Ages was barely considered valuable (Berzsenyi, 2024. 72-73.), under the influence of Protestantism came to be expressed by the German term *Begabung* (giftedness), referring to a divine endowment. Although this gift manifests in the individual, it belongs to the community and is part of God's work. It is a treasure that elevates both the gifted person and those who nurture their talent, but it cannot be considered a personal merit – it must be understood solely as a life mission. (Kattein-Pornói, 2023)

Narrowing the focus to the Reformed College of Sárospatak and Protestant ethics, it is evident that the Reformed Church had supported talented students from impoverished backgrounds since the 1500s. In this sense, every rural teacher, principal, and educator was also a talent scout, and schools functioned as talent-nurturing centers. However, the Sárospatak College was not supported by the Catholic-state ideology that dominated Hungary, nor by the fact that historically, Zemplén County was a stronghold of anti-Habsburg Catholic opposition. (Pornói, 2015) Many of the college's students came from the lower classes. While this approach could be called democratic in spirit, it was rooted in Protestantism's longstanding commitment to social responsibility, which had been passed on as a fundamental value to students for nearly five centuries. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 95-96.)

István Harsányi, who – as mentioned earlier – became a leading figure in this initiative, was born on January 20, 1908, in Sárospatak. His parents were deeply connected to Calvinist Protestantism, profoundly influencing his career path. His father studied at the local Reformed secondary school and theology faculty, later serving as a teacher in these institutions until the end of his life. During his university years, Harsányi received a scholarship to study at the European Center of the Reformation in Geneva. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 97-98.) Kattein-Pornói also cites the 1934 remarks of Sándor Novák, a former principal of the Sárospatak College, who stated that "*Protestantism remains an indispensable force in shaping Hungary's future.*" (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 100-101)

Advancement, progress, the cultivation of knowledge and skills, and the intellectual enrichment derived from talent became widely accepted ethical norms. At the same time, in the framework of *Werkheiligkeit* (sanctification through action), resisting the divine order – neglecting or squandering one's abilities and skills – was considered a sin. As the ideal of sanctified life evolved, a more profound sense of vocation and a faith-rooted sense of social responsibility strengthened. Teaching as a vocation, the transmission of knowledge, and lifelong learning became moral imperatives that elevated the practitioner to a higher ethical plane. (Weber, 2018. 159-160)

Talent Rescue as an Obligation Toward God and Society

"If God shows you a way in which you may gain more profit, in accordance with His laws, than by following another path – without harming your soul or others – and you still choose the less profitable way, then you nullify one of the purposes of your calling. This means you refuse to be God's steward, rejecting the gifts He has given you so that you may use them when He calls upon you. You are free to labour hard for wealth in service of God, but not for flesh and sin." (Weber, 2018. 159., quoting Baxter *Christian Directory*, I/10. 9 (I/378.))

This attitude toward learning became foundational to modern educational systems. It was no longer sufficient merely to perform; one had to understand, strive with dedication, progress, and ultimately become an exemplar within the professional framework of civil society. (Weber, 2018. 159.)

"[...] The Reformed Church's support for impoverished yet talented individuals has deep historical roots. However, there were certain periods when this mission became exceptionally crucial. One such era was the interwar period, burdened by numerous challenges". (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 126.)

Initially, talent rescue efforts in Hungary were carried out exclusively within Reformed Church-maintained secondary schools in Sárospatak, Hódmezővásárhely, Miskolc, Szeghalom, and Nagykőrös. These initiatives were funded solely by church resources, contributions from the faithful, donations, and other alternative financial sources. (Kattein-Pornói, 2022) The state program began in 1941 with Decree No. 57.436 issued by the Minister of Religion and Public Education of the Kingdom of Hungary, which provided subsidies for the secondary education of talented rural students from impoverished backgrounds. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 127.) In doing so, the Catholic state leadership adopted and institutionalized Protestant practices nationally. In 1940, under the governance of Miklós Horthy (1868-1957) – twenty years into his regency over a Hungary that remained primarily influenced by remnants of feudal society – a significant foundation was established to support the education of talented but impoverished children. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 129.)

Several questions arise concerning the fundamental differences between state-led and church-led talent rescue initiatives: Why was the Reformed Church's talent support work considered more effective? "*The Sárospatak initiative, which served as the model for the state program, was a bottom-up, faith-driven effort. That is, the support of underprivileged children was rooted in a faith-inspired humanitarian vision, which was reinforced by the active involvement of the church community*". (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 190.) Furthermore, its practical implementation and success often depended on a single charismatic individual who viewed it as their life's mission.

Kattein-Pornói also concluded that Klebelsberg's efforts played a significant role in the conscious development of an elite class and in establishing the institutions necessary for this purpose. However, these efforts did not focus on significantly improving the broader educational conditions of lower social classes. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Klebelsberg's rural school-building program significantly increased educational opportunities for this demographic. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 194.)

The ruling class, or gentry society, aimed to maintain control over governance. It was only willing to grant power to those who shared its values and beliefs or had assimilated them over time. A direct consequence was a societal phenomenon in which employment in various offices and positions largely depended on personal connections and patronage. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 195)

The Traditional Catholic Perspective on Talented Individuals from Poor Backgrounds

In this study, I intend to briefly touch upon the traditional Catholic perspective, as I feel that at least a fundamental explanation of its absence is necessary. The subject's most essential and accurate depiction can be drawn from two major papal encyclicals of the period under discussion. These are documents issued solely by the highest teaching authority of the Church—the reigning Pope. Their content consists of written decisions through which the Pope exercises his pontifical jurisdiction over the entire Church. (Bánk, 1982)

On May 15, 1891, Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903), known in secular life as Count Gioacchino Pecci, took a historically significant step by issuing the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. A social encyclical – an official ecclesiastical statement on the labor question – was published for the first time in the Holy See's history. The ideas expressed in this document faithfully reflect the views of the Catholic-oriented social leadership of the turn of the century regarding the fundamentally impoverished social classes.

According to the papal position, the Church must take a stance and encourage the initiation and transformation of aid for the poorest members of society, as state institutions, in the Pope's view, no longer manage their fate by religious norms. (Leo XIII, 30)

Looking back from a vantage point of more than a century, the papal perspective is intriguing and explanatory in many ways:

"We confidently and with full right take up the discussion of this matter, for it is a problem for which there is no suitable solution without the help of religion and the Church. [...] However, we state without hesitation that all human efforts will be in vain if the Church is disregarded. [...] The Church not only seeks to cultivate the minds of individuals but also strives to regulate their lives and value systems through its laws." (Leo XIII, 35)

The encyclical also mentions a perspective on labor—specifically, physical labor—that diverges significantly from Protestant religious philosophy, emphasizing its punitive nature:

"As for physical labor, man would not have been exempt from it even in the state of paradise; however, whereas before it would have been freely undertaken for the soul's delight, it is now imposed upon us as a burdensome duty, as a punishment for sin. 'Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.' (Gen 3:17-18). Similarly, the other earthly hardships will never cease, for they are harsh and difficult consequences of sin, which must be endured as such, necessarily accompanying man throughout his life." (Leo XIII, 35)

Another crucial idea in the encyclical is the still-prevailing aristocratic principle of divinely ordained rule. Power comes from God, making it a form of participation in divine authority; therefore, it must be exercised paternalistically, modeled after God's rule. (Leo XIII, 43) This spirit is reflected in state efforts to support talent, yet paternal care does not focus on individuals but instead elevates an opportunity for the sake of maintaining the system. Although only in a rudimentary form compared to today's child protection measures, the encyclical already calls for the protection of children and emphasizes the importance of their education:

"In the case of children, special care must be taken to ensure that they are not put to work before their bodies, intellectual, and spiritual faculties have sufficiently developed. The premature exertion of their budding strength in childhood will only weaken them, rendering all education and training futile." (Leo XIII, 46)

In his *Quadragesimo Anno* encyclical, issued in 1931, Pope Pius XI reexamined, interpreted, analyzed, and further developed the teachings of *Rerum Novarum* from the perspective of four decades. A fundamentally new standpoint, introducing significant reforms, would only gradually emerge with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). (Cserháti and Fábíán, 1971)

The Fate of Talented Individuals of Other Faiths: The Jewish Intellectuals in the Horthy Era

Both sources in my comparative analysis – Max Weber and Rita Kattein-Pornói – mention Jewish communities and their approach to learning and work. For this reason, I will briefly touch upon this issue without aiming for a comprehensive discussion.

According to Weber, Protestantism adopted from Jewish ethics the ethos of civic enterprise and rational work organization, whose fundamental characteristics bear similarities to the Puritan moral principles of Talmudic Judaism. The idea that success is a sign of God's blessing is not foreign to Jewish tradition either. (Weber, 2018. 164-165.)

In Hungary, after 1920, social tensions arose due to the disproportionately high number of intellectual workers, which became one of the factors fueling the antisemitism of the era. While the proportion of Jewish-born and Jewish-religious professionals – such as engineers and doctors – was increasing, the state-employed middle class, which had been predominantly Christian (mainly Catholic) due to the labor division of the Dualist period, faced significant layoffs and financial hardship. The Teleki government attempted to address this middle-class crisis with the 1920 Act XXV, known as the *numerus clausus* (law of closed numbers). This law sought to limit university and college admissions by ensuring that *"the proportion of youth belonging to different ethnic groups and nationalities among students should correspond to their proportion in the national population."* (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 195-196.)

Many public commentaries attempted to justify this policy as a social measure, claiming it aimed to provide the agricultural population's children with greater access to higher education. However, this argument was flawed from the outset, as no significant increase occurred in university enrolment among children of agricultural workers after 1920. In 1914, agricultural laborers, who constituted the majority of the rural population, comprised only 0,6% of university students – a percentage that remained virtually unchanged even after the introduction of Jewish quotas in 1930. The same trend applied to the children of landowning farmers. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 195-196.)

Until World War I, literacy rates among religious communities closely correlated with their regional and settlement-type distribution and their practiced faith. (Kattein-Pornói, 2018. 197.) Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish religious groups implemented different educational programs for children, which further divided and segregated society in yet another layer of social stratification.

Conclusion

A recurring theme in my lectures, courses, and publications is the assertion that religious threads can be traced in every social phenomenon. Naturally, not every scholar in the humanities is expected to analyze historical periods and social issues through the lens of theology and religious studies. However, it is worth considering the perspective of Marc Depaepe, rector of KU Leuven, who argues that general historians and cultural scholars often miss the opportunity to enrich educational history research with their specialized insights, new problem formulations, and alternative approaches. With its distinct viewpoint from religious philosophy, my study aims to contribute to a more complex understanding of Rita Kattein-Pornói's pioneering research, incorporating details, elements, and scholarly literature that were previously beyond the scope of her investigation. (Depaepe, 2013. 10.)

The contribution of this study is to examine the intricate background factors of early talent development and talent rescue in Hungary – factors that may help researchers answer specific key questions. These include the issue of illiteracy and children's willingness to learn, that is, their attitude toward education. In an environment where learning and knowledge are valued, where daily reading – if only at the level of biblical passages – is a norm, where parents, despite their poverty, provide a supportive setting for their children's studies and accept it as part of divine providence, the work of an educator with a mission becomes significantly easier. Such an educator can align a child's talent with available support, backed by the community's engagement and the ethical teachings of religious discipline. They do not impose unrealistic demands but create opportunities; they do not extract children from their environment but integrate them into a meaningful framework; and they are not distant outsiders but active members of the same community. As a result, children found it easier to integrate into the well-established system of Protestant Puritanism, experiencing divine assistance not as a burden but as a gift. Children could still find familiarity and spiritual continuity within this approach, even in significant transitions.

State-run talent rescue programs – as clearly shown in Rita Kattein-Pornói's research – attempted to harmonize a child's home environment with the conditions of educational institutions. Yet, they primarily viewed the process in terms of costs and demanded self-sacrificing, obedient adaptation. Their support was almost exclusively financial, but their expectations failed to accommodate the needs of the children. They did not regard these children as individuals entrusted to them by God, as part of a divine mission, but rather as instruments for achieving a goal comprehensible only to a select few. The state system lacked great pedagogical personalities, clear objectives, and a spiritual approach. Even though Protestant Puritanism subordinated the individual to the community within the context of its time and customs, it undeniably addressed the necessity of spiritual development.

For children from impoverished backgrounds placed in unfamiliar institutional dormitories, faith was often their only source of support. Its strength in fostering perseverance, resilience, and moral navigation in a complex ethical framework should not be underestimated.

While bottom-up, faith-driven Reformed secondary schools aimed to uplift the individual for the benefit of the community, state-led talent rescue efforts sought to save the community by elevating select individuals. The emphasis, the approach, and thus the treatment and care differed fundamentally. It makes a significant difference whether a child is the **subject** or merely the **object** of an educational program.

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