

THE BOURGEOIS SPIRIT

By BERNICE MARTIN

*Out of the noise and horror, the
Opinions of artillery
The barracks chatter and the yell
Of charging cavalry, the smell
Of poor opponents roasting, out
Of LUTHER's faith and MONTAIGNE's doubt,
The epidemic of translations,
The Councils and the navigations,
The confiscations and the suits,
The scholars' scurrilous disputes
Over the freedom of the Will
And right of Princes to do ill,
Emerg'd a new Anthropos, an
Empiric Economic Man,
The urban, prudent and inventive,
Profit his rational incentive
And work his whole exercitus,
The individual let loose
To guard himself, at liberty
To starve or be forgotten, free
To feel in splendid isolation.
Or drive himself about creation
In the closed cab of Occupation.*

*But at the very noon and arch
Of his immense triumphal march
Stood prophets pelting him with curses
And sermons and satiric verses,
And ostentatious beggars slept.
BLAKE shouted insults, ROUSSEAU wept,
Ironic KIERKEGAARD stared long
And muttered 'All are in the wrong',
While BAUDELAIRE went mad protesting
That progress is not interesting.*

From 'New Year letter' by W. H. Auden.¹

[Margaret Hale] rearranged her mother's worsted-work, and fell back into her own thoughts—as completely forgotten by Mr. Thornton as if she had not been in the room, so thoroughly was he occupied in explaining to Mr. Hale the magnificent power yet delicate adjustment of the steam hammer which was recalling to Mr. Hale some of the wonderful stories of subservient geni in the Arabian Nights . . .

'And this imagination and power, this practical realisation of a gigantic thought, came out of one man's brain in our own good town. That very man has it within him to mount, step by step, on each wonder he achieves to higher marvels still. And I'll be bound to say, we have many among us who, if he were gone, could spring into the breach and carry on the war which compels, and shall compel, all material power to yield to science.'

[After Mr. Thornton leaves, Mr. Hale explains his history.]

'His father speculated wildly, failed, and then killed himself, because he could not bear the disgrace . . . So [the family] left Milton. I knew he had gone into a shop, and that his earnings, with some fragment of property secured to his mother, had been made to keep them for a long time. Mr. Bell said they absolutely lived on water-porridge for years—how, he did not know; but long after the creditors had given up hope of any payment of old Mr. Thornton's debts (if, indeed, they ever had hoped at all about it after his suicide,) this young man returned to Milton, and went quietly round to each creditor, paying him the first instalment of the money owing him. No noise—no gathering together of creditors—it was done very silently and quietly, but all was paid at last.'

'That really is fine', said Margaret. 'What a pity such a nature should be tainted by his position as a Milton manufacturer.'

'How tainted?' asked her father.

'Oh, papa, by that testing everything by the standard of wealth. When he spoke of the mechanical powers, he evidently looked on them only as new ways of extending trade and making money. And the poor men around him—they were poor because they were vicious—out of the pale of his sympathies because, they had not his iron nature, and the capabilities it gives him for being rich.'

'Not vicious, he never said that. Improvident and self-indulgent were his words.'

From *North and south* by Mrs Gaskell.²

FOR THE LAST THREE HUNDRED YEARS the bourgeois spirit has decisively shaped the modern Western world: today it influences the structure of our social institutions and the system of taken-for-granted cultural assumptions through which our notions of normality are formed—a fact which applies just as much to the critics as to the apologists of capitalism. As the communist experiment crumbles, the spirit of the capitalist West seems poised to sweep over the whole of Eastern Europe too. This gives a sharper profile to this apparently invincible force and makes a re-evaluation of the bourgeois spirit and all its works an urgent political task. Furthermore, any realistic assessment of the prospect for a Christian vision of culture and spirituality in the newly emerging Europe must take serious account of the bourgeois spirit as one of the powerful givens of modern existence.

Few people today would deny that as a system of wealth creation capitalism is unrivalled in human history—even its strongest critics yield that point. The fabulous *material* legacy of the bourgeois spirit is not in question. It would also be widely, if not quite universally accepted that democratic individualism is part of its *political* heritage.³ Yet its *spiritual* legacy to the modern world is far from self-evident and even contentious. There are certainly people—some of them in high political office in Britain and the U.S.A.—who make a strong case for the *moral* virtues of the classic bourgeois spirit (virtues such as those of Mr Thornton) yet few of them would find it an easy task to define what is distinctive about bourgeois *spirituality*. Indeed to many of the left-liberal critics of capitalism, Christian as well as secular, the very idea of ‘bourgeois spirituality’ might be regarded as a contradiction in terms. And though, as W. H. Auden once remarked, the oxymoron is an indispensable grammatical form for expressing the profound paradoxes of the Christian faith, bourgeois spirituality is not a widely canvassed example. The calculating rationality of Auden’s Empiric Economic Man and that iron discipline and ungenerous materialism of which Margaret Hale accused John Thornton as type case of the Milton (that is, Manchester) manufacturer are far from being unequivocal recommendations of the bourgeois spirit as a spiritual resource.

In the section of the ‘New Year letter’ quoted above, Auden gives a masterly summary of the antecedents and nature of the bourgeois spirit—an issue to which I shall come presently—and then cites a list of anti-bourgeois prophets which includes Rousseau,

Blake, Kierkegaard and Baudelaire (who held that 'progress is not interesting'). These, he says, uttered curses and shouted insults in the face of modernity, science and the *bürgerlich* virtues of control, duty and moderation. One of the curiosities of the bourgeois spirit and its age is that in the name of free competition in ideas it tolerates and, indeed, materially subsidizes the publication of every kind of criticism. Where the mediaeval artist and craftsman served church and court or city for its greater glorification, the modern artist and the intelligentsia of the bourgeois age become unlicensed fools free to publish their 'insults, curses, sermons and satiric verses' in the open market. Meanwhile the true bourgeois, 'urban, prudent and inventive/profit his rational incentive/and work his whole *exercitus*' gets on with the job of applying science to the production of material wealth. It is not perhaps surprising, therefore, to find that the arts, even Christian art and writing, easily provide a dossier of charges arraigning the bourgeois spirit as the enemy of the spiritual life, but are rather sluggish in yielding a spiritual as distinct from a secular or material apology for it. The case for the prosecution is eloquent and familiar. Modern Christian poetry for example contains many reprises of Margaret Hale's complaints but few direct answers to them.

Adam had an idea.

He and the snake would share
the loss of Eden for a profit.

So both made the New World. And it looked good.⁴

The idea of profit as the product of original sin (and the occasion of the first business partnership) had a long pedigree before the Trinidadian poet, Derek Walcott, used it in this poem which presents the creation of modern America (apotheosis of the spirit of profit maximization) as a distorted copy of God's primal act of creation. From the mediaeval Church's condemnation of usury to Karl Marx's critique of 'surplus value' the profit motive has been held spiritually and morally dubious. The crucible of complaints and curses or rather of alternative values, which is most distinctive of the age of bourgeois industrial triumph is, of course, the Romantic movement. It has inspired innumerable condemnations of modernity *tout court*—science, industrial cities, machinery, measurement, material progress, all the works of the bourgeois spirit—as the antithesis of the spiritual. Such condemnations have

been both Christian and secular: they often romanticize (*sic*) the rural and an idealized mediaevalism. The basic idea is too familiar to require further illustration. The concept of the 'bourgeois spirit' is, of course, an abstraction which belongs to intellectual debate rather than to the kind of reflection in which the arts engage. The most influential of the academic debates about the ethos of capitalism centres on the challenge posed in this century by the German sociologist Max Weber⁵ to Karl Marx's account of the bourgeois revolution and the nature and dynamic of capitalism.⁶ It should be borne in mind, however, that politics, theology, the arts and popular culture have also in their different ways explored the moral and spiritual implications of capitalism from the time of its earliest stirrings: self-conscious reflection has been a feature of the bourgeois world even if the core bourgeois cadre—the economic movers and shakers—have largely left the task of reflection to other professions. It is not always recognized, for example, that the central political debates in England in the 1830s on such issues as factory legislation, trade unions or poor relief, were quite openly a public trial of what was referred to as the 'factory system'. Its early opponents, many drawn from older mercantile and agrarian elites, sought to represent it as an immoral and ungodly system which was inhumane to the weak and which severed the organic bonds of society. By the 1860s the bourgeois champions of the new order had largely shifted the terms of the debate away from the *moral* tendencies of the factory system into a secular and rational vocabulary based on statistical measures and the new bourgeois science of political economy which judged it by its *economic efficiency*. A *cordon sanitaire* had been erected around economic life which was perceived as having its own ('scientific') laws to which religion and morality were *irrelevant*. This is one of the reasons why the mainstream 'bourgeois' religion of the later Victorian age came to concentrate on *private* piety and personal morality rather than pass religious judgements on the economic order.

Nevertheless, the moral and spiritual implications of bourgeois capitalism were not so easily disposed of and continued to crop up, notably in that most bourgeois of art forms, the novel. It is a central preoccupation of Dickens for instance. Although he frequently pillories the principles of political economy—Malthusianism in *A Christmas carol* for example—he is in many ways a prime exponent of bourgeois values. Certainly he numbers capitalists prominently among his villains and boors, though the worst are

financiers and rentiers rather than manufacturers; Ralph Nickleby and Mr Merdle are true villains because they exploit the powerless whereas the failure of manufacturers like Mr Dombey and Mr Gradgrind lies in their narrow emotional sympathies and want of *imagination*—they are condemned for being nothing *but* Auden's Empiric Economic Man. But Dickens has capitalist heroes too, notably the Cheeryble brothers who run a counting house, and most importantly Arthur Clennam the philanthropic manufacturer of Bleeding Hearts Yard. These men create wealth for the community (there is a great deal in *Little Dorrit* which parallels Thornton's celebration of the romance of applied science), they exercise charity to the deserving (*sic*) poor and discharge their obligations to their employees and dependants at whatever cost to themselves. Dickens reserves his greatest disapproval for the dissolute aristocracy and corrupt politicians and office holders who oppose rational progress and demotic justice in order to protect the privileges of well-born drones. In all this Dickens is thoroughly in tune with the bourgeois spirit as he is also in his reverence for the bourgeois family as anchor of stability and civic virtue.

Mrs Gaskell's *North and south* is perhaps the most explicit of these mid-Victorian exercises in moral accounting. In this novel she personified the struggle between the old and the new orders, the rural, pre-industrial south and the urban industrial north, in the antagonism between Margaret Hale and Mr Thornton. Their ultimate union signals the symbiotic relationship which emerges out of their conflict. As in many novels of the period, the twin pivots of the narrative are a strike and a bankruptcy which provide the occasion for the moral testing of the protagonists. John Thornton's heroism resides in his response to adversity and above all in the moral integrity which leads him to shoulder all the costs of capitalist risk himself rather than sloughing them off on to creditors and dependants. In this he resembles Dickens's Arthur Clennam. He is shown as narrow and harsh through necessity but capable of being gentled—as the contemporary term put it—through association with all that the Hales stand for. In the marriage of south and north Mrs Gaskell has a perfect metaphor for what was in fact happening in England—the raw new bourgeoisie was being gentrified through amalgamation (intermarriage and common education) with the landed class. In all this Christianity has only a secondary role in creating the ambience out of which the new amalgam of virtues emerges; but, significantly perhaps,

Mr Hale is an ex-priest of the established Church who has lost his faith.

Bourgeois novels from *North and south* to current bestsellers like David Lodge's *Nice work*⁷ or Tom Wolfe's *The bonfire of the vanities*,⁸ continue to anatomize and judge the bourgeois spirit. However, in order to clarify the significance of such judgements and take further the puzzle of the relationship between the bourgeois spirit and Christian spirituality we need to turn to the Marx/Weber controversy which makes explicit what narrative treats obliquely.

Most of Marx's writings are concerned with the emergence and inner dynamic of capitalism. He saw capitalism as the outcome of the bourgeois revolution—the rise to power of a new class based on a new form of property. This revolution was fed by three historical events, the Protestant Reformation, the English Civil War and the French Revolution which shifted the ideological base of bourgeois culture steadily from a religious to a secular form. Marx was always clear that Protestantism was implicated in the rise of capitalism. Weber partially reversed Marx's causal sequence. Where Marx placed ultimate weight on material factors Weber argued that capitalism developed in Western Europe and nowhere else because only there the economic prerequisites (which had occurred at other times and places) were also matched by an appropriate system of motivation—Puritanism—which acted as the catalyst for capitalist take-off. Weber's central point is the anthropological *absurdity* of the imperatives of early capitalism. For serious capital accumulation to be possible large numbers of individuals must be motivated to *make* but not to *spend* money: the faces of the poor can always be ground without their consent⁹ (at least in the short run) but capitalists themselves must be restrained from dissipating their wealth in conspicuous consumption. The bourgeois drive to accumulate profit is far removed from any straightforward 'natural' greed, and can only be created *culturally* through a powerful system of motivation. By *historical accident* this happened to be provided by the Puritan version of 'inner-worldly asceticism' organized through the principle of 'the calling' (Auden's 'closed cab of Occupation') and given a final twist by the irrational but psychologically urgent resolution of the existential anxiety which arose from the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, through the conviction that God indirectly signalled his choice of the elect by granting them economic success. (Hence John Thornton's ability to dismiss the unsuccessful as failures through their own fault.)

Many observers have noted that this latter element is more a case of the capitalist spirit selectively moulding the Protestant ethic than vice versa.

For Weber as much as Marx the fusion of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism was a contingent and temporary matter. Like Marx he expected the bourgeois spirit to shed its temporary religious cover and emerge in all its naked secularity. The application of science to production and the rational alignment of means to ends, once thoroughly institutionalized, would make bureaucratic and routinized procedures universal and render the system self-perpetuating without need of recourse to religious motivations. Historically, the bourgeois spirit has in fact been expressed through all the *Protestant* virtues—Luther's (and Milton's) vision of industrious married life as the Christian norm, George Herbert's celebration of mundane worldly tasks as the Christian service of God, the equation of philanthropy with Christian duty, the 'inner-worldly' (as distinct from monastic) asceticism of the Protestant work ethic, the value placed on thrift and self-denial and the mistrust of easy pleasure. In purely historical terms these *were* the bourgeois virtues of mid-Victorian society and certainly (as well as sheer wealth) the dowry which the new bourgeoisie brought to marriage with the old landed interest was the Evangelical revival and the religiously inspired reform of manners and morals which it effected—not least in the monarchy itself. But was this fusion stable or did it disintegrate as Marx and Weber expected? To take the argument further we need to return to an element in Marx's characterization which we have not yet examined.

In a famous formula in *The communist manifesto* Marx and Engels declared that in capitalist society 'all that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned'.¹⁰ This is a graphic way of indicating the dynamic and radical nature of the bourgeois spirit of enterprise, adventure and innovation, animated by the profit motive. In brief, if you do not invent new and more efficient processes, create new products, find new markets, you will be sent to the wall by rivals who do. The bourgeois spirit must therefore hold *all* tradition (including religion) dispensable and institutionalize an endemic process of innovation. There is little doubt that the logic of this dynamic is as apparent in modern Western Christianity as it is in economic life. It has led missionaries to the ends of empire and, equally, has inspired the endless hermeneutic of biblical criticism and a St Vitus dance of liturgical reform. In Weber's view,

however, the heroism of bourgeois innovation is limited and contradicted by a more general process of routinization and bureaucratization—again, a feature of the Churches as clearly as it is of economic life. Thus by the end of the wonderfully economical re-telling of the Marx/Weber story in the section of Auden's 'New Year letter', the term '*bürgerlich*' no longer has heroic overtones but only connotations of respectability, repression and lack of imagination. Augustus Carp is perhaps its most telling example in satirical fiction.¹¹ Thus the bourgeois spirit of enterprise is gradually hedged around in the red tape of bourgeois bureaucracy.

Two further problems remain. First, the full secularization anticipated by Marx and Weber has still not happened. Though fragmented and loosened, the interpenetration of the bourgeois spirit and Western Christianity has persisted. It seems to me that one explanation for this is the fact that capitalism is an *incomplete* system. As Peter Berger has suggested,¹² it prevails because of its sheer capacity to deliver the (material) goods but it has never managed of itself to generate a system of ultimate values in the way that even the faltering communist ideology has done. Nationalism and religion have always been drafted in to fill this gap in Western capitalism. Furthermore, since the dynamic of competitive individualism which is central to the bourgeois spirit tends towards fragmentation rather than social cohesion (in spite of the Manchester school rhetoric about the Unseen Hand which is supposed to create harmony), religion has particularly been called upon to counteract these tendencies. This is the significance of 'bourgeois' appeals to 'Christian' family cohesion, 'Christian' patriotism and so on: piety as social cement. For this reason an uneasy alliance has continued between the Churches and the incipiently secular bourgeois spirit, though a sense of chronic tension between the city of God and the earthly city has never disappeared and should never be allowed to do so.

The final problem concerns the evolution of capitalism itself and consequent transformations in the bourgeois spirit. The conservative Protestantism which is spreading like wildfire in Latin America today seems to be giving a repeat performance (with variations) of the invention of the spirit of penny capitalism out of the pious conventicle.¹³ In North America and Europe, however, *consumer* capitalism is no longer constrained by the same need to create and motivate the process of capital accumulation which characterized the pioneer phase. Contemporary capitalist expansion is driven by

the consumption imperative. It works through the stimulation of ever new consumer 'needs' and their satisfaction through the market and it requires credit as much as it needs saving. The bourgeois spirit still involves enterprise, innovation and hard work but in the First World it has progressively dispensed with the moral and motivational brakes on spending and on pleasure which were classic features of the early Victorian variant. Tom Wolfe's *The bonfire of the vanities* is a merciless satire on the contemporary bourgeois spirit which in his view has shed the last tatters of its old Puritan covering: neither charity nor monogamy remain and civic service only continues insofar as it is expedient.

In the end we must recognize that there is nothing *necessarily* Christian about the bourgeois spirit. What remains of that spirit today is the central impulse to enterprise and innovation, a commitment to the productive application of science and technology and, in the West (though not in Asian capitalism), a high value set on competitive individualism and self-determination. This individualism of the West, its encouragement of free enquiry, its exuberant embrace of the new and, not least, its material abundance are attractive fruits of the bourgeois spirit, likely to appeal strongly to peoples struggling free from oppressive and impoverished regimes in the East. But none of these are *unequivocal* virtues and none are irreducibly 'Christian'. Individualism all too easily becomes narrow self-concern. Unrestrained economic expansion and technological development are no longer taken for granted as wholly benevolent, indeed they are increasingly seen today as one cause of ecological and even of geo-political imbalance. All social orders are part of the fallen world of Adam and though capitalism has probably made life materially comfortable for unprecedented numbers of people, it is not the Kingdom of God and it too has its characteristic sins and evils which Christians and secular thinkers have never ceased to lament and condemn. Every generation, the new Europeans included, has to be very vigilant lest it too easily allows its version of Christian belief and practice to take the form most convenient for the world as it happens to be. Margaret Hughes, writing of the 1890s, tells of a joke which Unitarians (Mrs Gaskell was the wife of a Unitarian minister and daughter of another) used to tell about themselves: a businessman says, approvingly, 'I don't know what Unitarians believe but I do know that they pay twenty shillings in the pound'.¹⁴ The bourgeois spirit is not the Holy Spirit. It may pose the *problem* for a Christian vision (a new theology

of wealth, for instance, or a Christian doctrine of the proper limit to the desire for consumption), but it cannot even begin to supply the answers.

NOTES

¹ Auden, W. H.: 'New Year letter', in Auden, W. H.: *Collected poems*, ed E. Mendelson (Faber and Faber, London, 1976), pp 184-5.

² Gaskell, E.: *North and south* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973), pp 80-1.

³ See e.g. Berger, P. L.: *The capitalist revolution* (Basic Books, New York, 1986).

⁴ Walcott, D.: 'New world', in Enright, D.J. (ed): *The Oxford book of contemporary verse 1945-1980* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1980), pp 240-41.

⁵ Weber, M.: *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1980).

⁶ Marx, K.: *Selected works* (Moscow, 1935).

⁷ Lodge, D.: *Nice work* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1988).

⁸ Wolfe, T.: *The bonfire of the vanities* (Bantam Books, New York and London, 1987).

⁹ Bishop Ken is reported as having coined the phrase 'who grind the faces of the poor' with reference to tradesmen in his diocese, Wells, who paid their employees too poorly for the latter to survive without charitable subsidy. See Hawkins, V.: *A short account of the life of Thomas Ken, D.D., sometime Lord Bishop of Bath and Wells* (London, 1713).

¹⁰ The sense in which this aspect of the bourgeois spirit is the central feature of Modernity is discussed imaginatively and provocatively by Berman, M.: *All that is solid melts into air* (Polity Press, London, 1985). The issue of scientist as moral hero is discussed in Hollinger, D. A.: 'Justification by verification', in Lacey, M. J. (ed): *Religion and twentieth-century religious life* (Cambridge University Press, New York and Cambridge, 1990).

¹¹ *Augustus Carp, Esq., by himself, being the autobiography of a really good man* (first printed 1924, reprinted Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1987).

¹² Berger, P. L. *op. cit.*

¹³ Martin, D. A.: *Tongues of fire: the explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1990).

¹⁴ Hughes, M. V.: *A London home in the 1890s* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1946).