The present enterprise may appear more than bizarre given that it aims at comparing the work of Gyula Szekfű “The Spiritual Constitution of the Hungarian Wine Producer” with the “Protestant Ethic” by Max Weber published one hundred years ago. The author of the former work does not really mention the latter at all, or rather – without specification – it does once, when referring to the “Protestant Ethic” in a way that misinterprets its meaning. Moreover the name Weber can exclusively be read as referring to the other Weber, Alfred Weber. We hope, however, that our writing contains several acceptable arguments that can justify the comparison mentioned above.

In a scholarly journal like Acta Sociologica, it is not necessary to introduce the “Protestant Ethic”: in connection with Szekfű’s study it suffices to say that this work of 84 pages was published following World War I, in 1922. On the basis of the actual historical theme of the Wine Producer, the modern history of domestic wine-producing, it is not surprising that our first digression is a key concept of the “Protestant Ethic”, the “spirit of capitalism”. The “spirit of capitalism” is actually a member of a pair of technical terms, whose inverse is “economic traditionalism” and vice-versa. Although Weber does not define “economic traditionalism” with the typical meticulousness of his, he paraphrases and explains the concept. First of all, he characterizes it with the economic attitude according to which a man with this trait does not want to maximize his income “due to his nature”, but “simply wants to live the way that he got used to, and wants to earn as much as needed for that,” (Weber, M.: 1982. p. 62.) or to use a biblical expression, “what he confines himself to”. A further feature of the “traditionalist” manpower is that it wishes to provide the customary wage by maximal convenience and minimal achievement. (Weber, M.: 1982. p. 65.) An additional consequence of this “traditional employee maxmin” is that “...they are not able to give up the passed-down and acquired methods to more practical ways “and they are not even willing to learn and focus their attention, or just simply use their mind” (Weber, M.: 1982. p. 66.) Weber characterizes not only employees but entrepreneurs as well. What they are in want of is the “capitalist spirit”, meaning that they follow traditional farming. Their lifestyle is traditional – comfortable, the measure of their profit is traditional – providing a decent living, their working time is traditional, amounting to 5-6 hours per day, their course of business is also traditional.
goods to the exclusive demand of costumers, and he was good at producing to their
taste." (Weber, M.: 1982. pp. 72.- 73.) He introduced the principle of "small benefit,
large turnover". He did not pursue his economic activity by bringing new money into
it, and he reinvested the profit into the business. His primary aim was to "obtain" and
not to "consume". And his lifestyle was short of convivial pastime, since his lifestyle
was ascetic and reflected that "man is for the sake of business and not vice versa"
(Weber, M.: 1982. p. 75.) As a consequence of this view, a fierce competition started
p. 73.). 5 Apart from the expression "spirit of capitalism", the term "rational economic
ethos" appears in, in the "Economic History", although with a similar meaning.
(Weber, M.:1979. p.281) Naturally, the rational economic ethos is also a key category,
since, according to Weber, it is indispensable for the establishment of capitalism. As
the permanent traditional enterprise, the bookkeeping which is connected with the
accounts of capital, rational method, rational law and state, the evolution of rational
281). Weber introduced these factors required for the establishment of capitalism
not as isolated or sole elements but in structural connection with each other. With
the help of these functionally connected factors, the Western capitalism described by
Weber can be dissociated in an ideal-typical manner from other economic structures.
(cf. in: Kupa: 2002. pp 113-114.)

Coming at last to the "Wine Producer", in that the next conceptual construction
- based also on an inverse pair of terms - unfolds. Economic traditionalism can be
compared with the category of "economic indifferentialism", while its counterpart - the
expression that mostly reflects the spirit of capitalism - is "expedient treatment".

Szekfű describes "economic indifferentialism" in the following manner: the
Hungarian wine producer "...does not want to profit from the produce that he grows
at the expense of his work, he is short of the sense of the tradesman that does not aim
at private consumption, who simply does not want to gain money from his wine".

"Production itself... does not interest him", continues Szekfű, "he is unwilling
to work more and better neither for gaining more profit nor for satisfying his
own consumption by a crop of higher quality" (Szekfű:1922.(2002) p. 65.). But this image
can be supplemented by such features characterizing our domestic wine producers
as the rigorous affection for confirmed production habits and bringing their own
calmness into the foreground. 6 This production that results in low quality level, the
"production a lot" as well as the approaches going arm in arm with it, according
to which we intended to palm off the foreign market with our consumption habit,
moreover they occasionally swindle the foreign purchaser. This mentality is almost
the opposite of the "wirtschaftlich", and it is far from all "commercial talent"

Behind all these traits - according to Szekfű - lurks "one of the fundamental features
of Hungarian mentality", the "lack of mobilization" which manifests not only in the
fields of economy but in that of the culture as well (Szekfű:1922. (2002) pp 65.-66.).

The counterpart of "economic indifferentialism" is "expedient treatment". Szekfű
adopted the term from a viticulturist of the Reform Age, Ferenc Schams. The
that merely spiritual factors play a role in his conception. He adopts the mathematical formula concerning the agricultural production from the German economist of 19th century, Johan Heinrich von Thünen. According to Thünen’s formula the crop equals the sum of the cultivation of land, its quality and humus, and the cultural factors.7 All these developments prompt Szekfű to regard the cultural factors of the Thünen-formula as – mathematically speaking – an unknown X, i.e. their “quantity and sense change according to people, race, ages and individuals...” (Szekfű:1922. (2002.). p.19.). Since the formula is supposed to be transformed with an unknown X instead of the C of “cultural factors”, thus the X can be identified case by case only. Szekfű comes to the conclusion from this state of affairs that the question of the identification of agricultural production cannot be solved by the materialist natural-technical concepts of economy”... but it passes over to the field of intellectual history and the historical research on the effects of psychological factors...” (Szekfű: 1922 (2000). p. 20.)

Though as we have already mentioned, Szekfű decided to examine psychological factors but he also took the racial factors mentioned by Alfred Weber into account. Race therefore is “... primarily a historical configuration, says Szekfű, a configuration evolved and changeable in time...” (Szekfű:1922. (2002.), p. 21.), but racial change can only occur during a lengthier impact.

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

When Szekfű finally begins historical investigation, he places it into the following conceptual frame. According to the Weberian version of the Thünen-formula, Szekfű separates the “external”, “objective” and the “internal”, “subjective” factors of domestic wine production. Among the “external” factors he mentions the natural and the socio-political, which is in fact the history of Hungarian wine export and of the connected environment’s “economic policy”, with special attention to the customs policy of the Habsburgs, starting from the 17th century. (Szekfű:1922. (2002.). pp.33-43.). The “internal” factor is the “spiritual constitution” of the Hungarian wine producer. Naturally, he examines the latter in more detail. In this part of his study he cites several sources – naturally Széchenyi8 among others but Wesselényi9 and Bertalan Szemere10 are also present as the critics of the backwardness of Hungarian wine production. We do not have enough space for the detailed introduction of this topic but we should mention that this part is the most valuable and most lasting of Szekfű’s work. He selected his sources superbly, they reflect not the “capitalist spirit” of Franklin but just its opposite, that of “economic traditionalism”! Reading these lines of the “Wine Producer”, the statements of the “protestant ethic”, reflecting the traditional economic mentality seem to become alive in front of our eyes.

To tell the truth, there are hardly economic standpoints in the “Protestant Ethic” that could not be illustrated by the particular instances of the “Wine Producer” and vice versa. (We note that Szekfű wrote such a splendid work in this respect that the statements he referred to could be supported even today by examples of domestic wine production.)
As far as Szekfű’s theoretical foundation is concerned; it cannot be praised to an equally great extent. It is not only that he was not able to prove the history-making significance of “spiritual constitution” but also that some of his conceptually important statements may also be objected. We are not able to examine these objections in detail here; therefore we mention only a few of these. Above of all, there is the rigid dichotomy of “internal” and “external” factors, which resulted in Szekfű’s separating the “spiritual factors” from the other, “objective” elements of the formula with a division like “The Great Wall of China”. Therefore Szekfű magnified the history-making role of “spiritual factors” to such extent that the question arises whether he was guilty of following the cult of the “Great Cause”, just like reductionism, which he himself criticized. Following this track: is Szekfű’s solution acceptable, which regards the so called “objective elements” concerning the quality of the soil and production capacity regarding the formula belonging to two different historical era mainly unchanged? But even the adaptability of the Thünen-formula remains problematic. The formula stabilizes a static situation, while Szekfű wishes to grab some of the e.g. socio-political elements in a historical context. Because of this, he can only make some of the elements of his formula dynamic by using Vierkandt’s theory on real culture-change. Following this, Szekfű immediately starts to “actionize”! Although, as we have seen, he could have chosen an approach seeming more perspective form the point of view of the historiographer, when for example he used the rigid, Feudal socio-economic system of the Middle Ages as an example. In this case Szekfű could have interpreted the question of domestic wine production entirely in a historical context. This approach really would not have been hurt by the category of “spiritual constitution”, i.e. what Szekfű regarded as a mental factor difficult to mobilize and its “operationalized components” (“economic indifference”, “lack of mobilization”), it could have been captured in a more plausible way from the perspective of historical structure, of course without unintentionally internalizing the affected materialist notion of history. Since “spiritual constitution” can be captured from the point of view of history just as much as “the spirit of capitalism” or “economical traditionalism”. Such an approach, e.g. one similar to Weber’s, would have allowed him to grasp the different historical factors in a structural system of relations, and he could have avoided the rigid dichotomy of the “external” and “internal” sides.

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

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

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

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

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

One question is relevant here: how could it happen to such a qualified historian as Szekfű that he published an unfinished, theoretically easily debateable work. Ignoring the analysis of occasional production-psychological features, we do not believe that Szekfű could have been driven by the aim of hitting the progress-centred historical approach hard, as he “succeeded” in finding a category, i.e. that of spiritual constitution, which resists “quick-footed change”. (Szekfű: 1922 (2002), p.96.). Neither do we think that Szekfű would have voted for a national-characterological approach in a then not so receptive Hungarian mentality historical atmosphere. The most probable approach is that Szekfű, after Ranke, followed a history-political discourse in the Wine Producer, by the rigid demarcation of the “external” (objective) and “internal” (subjective) sides. This way, following several modifications of the Thünen-formula, the “internal” spiritual side could materialize as a completely independent factor, which could be mobilized and changed, despite all of its inertia, easier than e.g. the socio-political element of the external side, meaning of course the tendencies of the international market of the time. But we celebrated the centenary of the Protestant Ethic last year and not that of the Wine Producer! And from this point of view it is almost irrelevant why the emerging similarities or overlapping parallels are stated. This question could only be answered by a thorough research concentrating on philological issues as well. For us, here and now the conclusion is more important that Weber construed a conceptual network in the Protestant Ethic, through which the economic and socio-historical examples of another region, Hungary, can also be explained in a plausible way.

Notes
1 A work of a 20th century hungarian historian in the light of weber’s sociology
2 Szekfű mentions the “recent researches of German economic history which explain, for example, the material phenomena of capitalism by facts of religious history” (by the spirit of Puritanism). (Szekfű: 1922(2002) p. 11.)
3 By that time Szekfű had already written two hotly debated works such as “The Banished Rákóczi” (A számuzott Rákóczi) as well as “The Three Generations” but he had already published “The Biography of the
Hunyadi István (1791–1860), Hungarian aristocrat was the son of Ferenc Széchenyi, who founded the Hungarian National museum. He is recognized as a leading figure in the economic and cultural life of the 19th century in the Hungarian nation.

In the beginning of his study, Székfű analyses theoretical questions, where he focuses on the epistemological problem examined by Max Weber as well. His line of thought is characterized by a strong critical attitude, as Székfű’s critical historical approach is focused on the processes of the 19th century, including the transformation of the Hungarian state, and the social and economic life as well. In his work, the ideology of the Great Cause gives way to another critique, i.e. that the “analyzed factors” are not enough as a cause of social change, and other factors should be taken into account as well.

The belief in the omnipotence of the Cause, which is a characteristic of the social and economic life as well, is characterized as rationalist, liberal, positivist and materialist. One of these refers to a “quitesimplified form” of the already mentioned historical approaches, the almost cultic respect for the Great Cause. Basically Székfű describes a vulgarized causal approach, whose essence is that “the analyzed factors” are not enough as a cause of social change, and other factors should be taken into account as well.

Since 1848, the national movement and the political changes took place in Hungary. After the fall of the Revolution, he escaped abroad but hid the so-called “Sacred Crown” before. He was sentenced to death in 1851, in his absence. He lived in Turkey, Paris and London during his emigration as we have seen, he was troubled by financial difficulties. (He met Marx among others). He was reached by the “destiny of emigrants”. During his stay in Paris he turned so fiercely against some of the leaders of the Hungarian National movement, that some of the emigrants regarded him as a traitor. The signs of nervous breakdown were visible in the 1850s, and he became totally deranged in 1865. He could only return home after the Amnesty, insane, and died in 1869, (Tóth: 1978: pp. 311–312).

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they had proved the “determining” role of an economic-materialist cause, or had emphasized the exclusive role, usually regarded as everlasting, of a universally valid organizing idea or “substance” in connection with the different historical connections.

On the one hand Vierkandt distinguishes acculturation (external culture change i.e.: proliferation of spirit, tobacco etc.) and on the other hand “endogenous (real) culture change” Székfű sums up the conditions of the latter as follows: “1. the entire spiritual and moral constitution of the nation concerned needs to be prepared for the change, 2. and in the case of the same people the required nature of change has to emerge consciously. The initiative of the certain individuals, because the mass itself is short of the tendency of change, this can be provided most expediently, according to the experience, by great personalities.

Finally 4: Outward, external opportunity is also needed, such as the French Revolution and the reforms of Napoleon in case of the entire Europe…” (Székfű:1922. (2002). p. 26.)

Székfű’s booklet entitled “History-political studies”, containing seven essays, was published in 1924. To explain the title of the “volume”. Székfű wishes to introduce the history-political essay as a typical genre of the German historiography. He mentions the name of Ranke in this respect, who, according to him, tried to teach us political thinking, the understanding of the connection of the present state and the historical past. According to Székfű, the history-political essay “... is the realization of the historical connections of the current problems, the historical research adapted to the present situation.” (Székfű: 1924. 9. p.) Of course, according to this approach, the interest of the historian has to be aroused not only by the relations of the past but by those of the present as well. “The opposite of this would have been ab ovo compromised him”, emphasizes Székfű, “and would have caused doubts against the sensibility and realism of his judgements. (Székfű: 1924. 9. p.).

The history-political essay does great service for its author just in this respect: “...satisfying his, say, ... justified interest for current politics, keeping him for the examination of the past and preventing him from degrading his self destined for an inner life by descend to the political stage.” (Székfű: 1924. 9. p.). This way history-political essays work as valves used for “blowing off the steam”. (I have written about Székfű’s history-political approach more in detailed, cf. Kupa: 2002. 99-102. p.)

References


