

“An Icy Hand Has Set Me Loose”:

Max Weber Reads Ibsen’s *John Gabriel Borkman*

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Max Weber is widely considered one of the most influential sociologists of this century. His view of the modern world as an “iron cage” forged by capitalist rationality was introduced in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and has since become classic. Sam Whimster and Scott Lash write, “As we enter the closing decades of the twentieth century there is a growing recognition that Max Weber is our foremost social theorist of the condition of modernity.”¹

I examine Weber’s personal and intellectual relationship with a text by another great modern, *John Gabriel Borkman* by Henrik Ibsen. Weber seems to have used Ibsen’s 1896 drama as a sort of mirror that reflected a personal crisis, his mental breakdown of 1898. Close reading reveals striking parallels between *John Gabriel Borkman* and Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic* (1904-05) and “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority” (1921). These texts by Weber shed light on the complexities of Ibsen’s protagonist and the contradictions of his “calling.” Called to be both an ascetic capitalist and a charismatic leader, John Gabriel Borkman combines features of two separate and often opposed sociological types. In conclusion, I consider the implications of this study for Ibsen research generally, and the view of modernity Ibsen and Weber share.

Max Weber reads *John Gabriel Borkman*

Weber’s intellectual production falls into two separate periods, divided by approximately five years of psychological and physical collapse.² Between 1898 and 1903, he suffered a nervous breakdown probably triggered by the death of his father in 1897. During this period of acute sensitivity and mental instability, Weber encountered Ibsen’s *John Gabriel Borkman*. In an 1898 letter to his wife, Marianne, he speaks about the surprisingly salutary effects of his illness:

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Such a disease has its compensations. It has reopened to me the human side of life, which mama used to miss in me. And this to an extent previously unknown to me. I could say, with John Gabriel Borkman, that ‘an icy hand has set me loose.’ In years past my diseased disposition expressed itself in a frantic grip upon [scholarly] work. . . . Looking back, this is quite clear. I know that sick or healthy, I shall no longer be like that again. The need to feel crushed under the load of work is extinct. I want, above all, to live a full personal life with my *Kindede* [baby] and to see her as happy as it is given me to make her.³

Unfortunately, it is not clear how or precisely when Weber encountered *John Gabriel Borkman*: the play was performed in January 1897 at theatres in Frankfurt-am-Main and Berlin, and was published by Albert Langen in German translation later that year.⁴ Regardless of whether he saw or read Ibsen’s play, however, Weber clearly perceived in the text something that helped him interpret his personal crisis. “I could say, with John Gabriel Borkman,” he writes, “that ‘an icy hand has set me loose.’” To understand precisely what John Gabriel Borkman and the “icy hand” mean to Weber, let us examine his response to the play in closer detail.

The letter to Marianne establishes a series of thematic oppositions between marital (presumably sexual) happiness and compulsive labor, between health and disease. Weber claims that the breakdown has “reopened to me the human side of life,” that he desires “above all, a full personal life with my baby, and to make her as happy” as he can. In contrast to this newly reawakened humanness and interest in personal happiness, Weber poses a former self who experienced a compulsion to labor, “the need to feel crushed under the load of work.” “My diseased disposition expressed itself in a frantic grip upon [scholarly] work,” he claims, though now that “icy hand” has set him loose. In short, Weber draws strong distinctions here between an old self obsessed with work and a new self that seeks tender love, between an old self afflicted with the diseased need to labor in the lonely academic trenches, and a new self that aims to make his wife happy. These sharp contrasts parallel similar thematic oppositions in Ibsen’s text.

More than twenty years before the start of the play, John Gabriel Borkman was a bank manager obsessed by the vision of an enormous empire he alone could create. In order to turn this vision into a reality, Borkman had to win the support of a lawyer friend named Hinkel; this required him to sacrifice his love for Ella Rentheim, to whom Hinkel was also attracted. Borkman renounced his desire for Ella, married her twin sister, Gunhild, and misappropriated bank

funds, confident that he had secured his friend's support. Ella Rentheim refused Hinkel's advances, however, and, frustrated by her rejection, the lawyer told authorities about Borkman's illegal actions. The bank manager's dream of empire came crashing to the ground and his career was ruined. After years of trial and incarceration, Borkman moved with Gunhild to the Rentheim mansion where, for the eight years prior to the start of the play, they have lived in isolation from each other: he upstairs, ensconced in a delusion that bank officials will arrive at any moment, ask his pardon and invite him to return; and she downstairs, where she plots redemption of the Borkman name through her and John Gabriel's son, Erhart. The play's central conflict centers on this twenty-something year old man. The play opens when, stricken by a fatal illness, Ella Rentheim returns to the family estate. She tries to persuade her sister and Borkman to renounce their claims upon Erhart that she might bestow upon him the Rentheim name and fortune. Although John Gabriel readily agrees, Gunhild vehemently opposes Ella's request. Ultimately, the issue is moot: Erhart rejects the claims of both elderly women and leaves with a sexy divorcee, Fanny Wilton, for points south. "I'd absolutely suffocate in the stuffy air of [this] place," the young man cries, "All I want is the chance to live my own life for once!"⁵ Spurred by Ella Rentheim, John Gabriel likewise leaves a stultifying interior, the upstairs gallery which he has paced every day for eight years. This trajectory away from suffocating indoor space culminates in the play's final act when he leaves the house entirely in order to reenter "the storm of life." Accompanied by Ella, Borkman climbs to a vantage point where he envisions the enormous kingdom for which he has sacrificed his love and career. On the wintry heights, he is suddenly stricken by a heart attack which he describes in the terms Weber recalls: "Ah!" he says, "now it's set me loose" [*Jetzt liess sie mich los*].⁶ "What was it, John?" asks Ella, and he replies, "A hand of ice clutched at my heart."⁷ Borkman then slides down onto the bench, dead. Over the lifeless body, Ella and Gunhild close the play with a gesture of reconciliation, "(MRS. BORKMAN, behind the bench, and ELLA RENTHEIM in front of it, take each other's hands)."⁸

Ibsen's play establishes oppositions between work and love, disease and happiness like those found in Weber's letter. As the summary suggests, these thematic polarities are associated with certain characters. John Gabriel and Gunhild Borkman are clear examples of the kind of "diseased disposition" that Weber associates with his own "need to feel crushed under the load of work." Gunhild shares Weber's "frantic grip" on work, though it is not her own but Erhart's work on behalf of the Borkman name to which she cleaves. Her diseased disposition is nowhere more apparent than at the end of the first act when it looks like she might lose her son to her twin sister: "MRS. BORKMAN: (*throws*

herself on the floor, writhing in pain and whispering in grief.) Erhart! Erhart! Be loyal to me!”⁹ If Gunhild’s frantic grip on her son’s labor leads to hysterical convulsions, John Gabriel’s obsessive labor on behalf of his kingdom has led to years of pacing like “a sick wolf” in the upstairs great room, as well as to Ella Rentheim’s fatal illness which was caused by his rejection of her.¹⁰

In contrast to the “diseased disposition” of these work-obsessed characters, Erhart Borkman and Fanny Wilton exemplify the desire for health and human happiness that animates Weber’s reading of the play as a whole. Indeed, Weber’s statement that “the need to feel crushed under the load of work is extinct. I want, above all, to live a full personal life with my baby and to see her . . . happy” almost exactly parallels the movement of young Erhart’s thought in his last scene, “I don’t want to work. I just want to live, live, live! . . . for happiness,” the happiness he has found with his lover, Fanny Wilton.¹¹ Thus, although Weber explicitly identifies with the protagonist—he says “with John Gabriel”—Erhart Borkman appears to be the true object of his identification.

I suggest that the young professor saw in Ibsen’s protagonist an extreme version of his own obsessive work habits. Prior to the breakdown, Weber was lecturing twelve hours a week, conducting two seminars, continuing his East Elbian researches, and frequently accepting out of town speaking engagements. As a rule, he worked until after midnight; when Marianne scolded him for staying up so late, he would reply, “If I don’t work till one o’clock, I can’t be a professor.”¹² This single-minded devotion to scholarly labor strongly resembles John Gabriel Borkman’s single-minded attempt to realize his visionary kingdom. In this view, when Weber says “an icy hand has set me loose,” he means that, like the dying Borkman, he has been released from a diseased need to work: just as death frees Ibsen’s protagonist from his vocational project so nervous breakdown liberates the young scholar from an addiction to labor.

This interpretation of “icy hand” is not exactly literal—when Borkman uses the phrase, he refers to the spasm of a cardiac arrest. Nor is it entirely fair—more than diseased labor, Borkman’s “icy hand” refers to work legislated by one’s spiritual vocation like, for example, the vocation for scholarship Weber acknowledges as his own in “Science as a Vocation” (1919). At this point in his career, sick and disoriented, however, Weber emphasizes the negative connotations of the “icy hand” image and especially its suggestion of unhealthy emotional coldness. In the final scene, Borkman looks out across the wide spread landscape and describes for Ella his “vast, infinite, inexhaustible kingdom.” “But it’s an icy blast that blows from that kingdom, John,” the dying woman responds.¹³ As this one example indicates, and there are many more, Ibsen associates Borkman’s visionary empire with emotional and literal frigidness. The “icy hand” image clearly falls within this network of associations.

In short, Weber perceived in Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* an image of his own diseased attitude toward work and, like Erhart Borkman, responded by rejecting it. The drama functioned as a sort of mirror that reflected back to Weber the cause of and a solution to his personal crisis.

Given the drama's importance for the young scholar, we may ask about its impact upon his later intellectual development: did Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* help shape Weber's perception of his society in the same way it helped shape his perception of himself? Possibly, but we can never know for certain. Even direct parallels between works by these writers are plausibly explained by appeal to their shared cultural situation: both late nineteenth century liberals, raised in Protestant homes, taught to esteem yet be critical of bourgeois values, etc. Rather than offer an influence study, then, I outline below some striking affinities between Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* and Weber's sociological theory that shed light upon the society they shared. Specifically, Ibsen and Weber draw attention to the idea of the "calling" and its contradictory significance for modern Europe. On the one hand, stripped of spiritual meaning, the calling fuels the engines of capitalism and furthers the process of alienation described by Marx. On the other hand, as the charismatic leader's "gift of grace," it explodes all conventions of rational economic behavior and so frees the individual from an impersonal modernity. Weber theorizes this contradiction in *The Protestant Ethic* and "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority." Ibsen dramatizes it in *John Gabriel Borkman*. A soulless capitalist and a charismatic leader, John Gabriel Borkman both builds an iron cage and points a route of escape from it.

***John Gabriel Borkman* and the Spirit of Capitalism**

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber seeks the origins of "the spirit of capitalism" which he defines as "the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life . . ." ¹⁴ The last clause is crucial: identifying the capitalist spirit with avoidance of life's joys, Weber is able to locate its roots in the ascetic practices of the Christian church. The first Christian ascetics were, of course, Catholic divines who withdrew from the world and its spontaneous joys in order to contemplate God more purely. The Reformation, however, produced a change: the monk's otherworldly asceticism became the Puritan businessman's worldly version. In this view, most emphatically asserted by Calvin, God calls the faithful to achieve material success because it helps them achieve certainty of spiritual election. Since wealth has religious importance for the Puritan, it cannot be wasted upon idle enjoyments or the "sensuous and emotional elements in culture and in religion [which] are no use toward salvation and promote sentimental illusions and idolatrous superstitions." ¹⁵ Hence, the Calvinist is a worldly ascetic called to two related

tasks: the earning of money and “the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment” or, more simply, “the joy of living.”¹⁶

Between the time of Calvin and the time of Weber, the religious matrix that birthed and nourished this worldly ascetism broke down. Although the spiritual value of wealth disappeared, the practices that had proven effective for its attainment continued to flourish. The Puritan’s rational, ascetic conduct was stripped of its spiritual significance and took on a life of its own, forging the iron cage of modernity. Weber writes,

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when ascetism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production. . . . In [the Puritan divine’s] view, the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the “saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.” But fate decreed the cloak should become an iron cage.¹⁷

The modern economic order has evolved from the Catholic monk’s otherworldly ascetism through the Puritan businessman’s worldly ascetism to a soulless ascetism enforced by the “technical and economic conditions of machine production.” Although its spiritual significance has changed over the centuries, the practice itself remains basically constant, avoidance of “the joy of living.”

This opposition between ascetism and the joy of life is the opposition between compulsive labor and human happiness that Weber saw in *John Gabriel Borkman* and his own life, only phrased in slightly different language. In the 1898 letter, Weber uses Ibsen’s image of the “icy hand” to characterize a personal ascetic tendency—his compulsive need to work. In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber uses the image of an “iron cage” to characterize a broader social and economic form of ascetism enforced by Western capitalism. The “icy hand” of 1898 becomes the “iron cage” of 1904-05. In both texts, Weber opposes images of frigid containment to the warmth of sexuality. The illness made clear to Weber the value of conjugal happiness; he wants “to live a full personal life with his *Kindele* [baby] and to make her as happy” as he can, a statement that at least intimates sexual tenderness. The Puritan’s goal-oriented view of sexuality is much different: “sexual intercourse is permitted, even within marriage, only as the means willed by God for the increase of his Glory according to the commandment, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’”¹⁸ There may be babies in a Puritan

marriage but, Weber implies, there is no “baby” in the tender sense he uses to address his spouse.

Given the thematic continuity between *The Protestant Ethic* and Weber’s letter to Marianne, what about the connection between this text and *John Gabriel Borkman*? One feature that distinguishes *The Protestant Ethic* from Weber’s previous work is the link he establishes between capitalism, ascetism and the notion of the calling. Weber had investigated the causes, appearance and effects of capitalism in earlier works but not from a religious perspective.¹⁹ In *The Protestant Ethic*, however, he views the spirit of capitalism as a descendant of the Puritan’s calling. The question is, “How did Weber come to pose this connection between a religious ethic and economic conduct?” In Käsler’s view, Weber here builds upon Werner Sombart’s 1902 *Modern Capitalism*.²⁰ Four years before Sombart’s book appeared, however, Weber had already encountered and, by his own admission, had found deep personal meaning in a text that makes just this connection. Ibsen’s play tells the story of an ascetic who denies himself, his wife and Ella Rentheim all hope of human happiness because he feels called to construct a vast capitalist empire. Borkman is a capitalist ascetic with a vocation as the painful scene of reunion with Ella Rentheim in Act II makes clear. The reunion after nearly twenty years of separation occurs in the upstairs great room, the “cage” that John Gabriel paces like a “sick wolf.” Ella enters quietly, bringing a lighted candle into the gloomy and oppressive interior. John Gabriel barely recognizes his former love at first and, once he does, there is neither joyful embrace nor tears of remorse. The two old people shift positions politely while, like a metronome, the word “wasted” counts the measure of their lives. Speaking “in a cold, businessman’s tone,” John Gabriel begins to lay blame for the waste upon Ella who, in his view, was wrong to reject Hinkel’s advances, resulting in the ruin of his plans for empire, especially since he had spared her wealth while misappropriating the money of every other bank depositor. “I’ve often thought about that,” Ella says, “why in fact you spared everything belonging to me? And only that? . . . Tell me.”²¹ John Gabriel replies that he spared her money because “one doesn’t take what one holds most precious on a journey like that.” Confused, Ella asks for clarification: “. . . I was what you held most precious?” Borkman answers, “Yes, I have an idea . . . it was something like that.”²² Apparently wishing to be kind, Borkman’s admission that he had actually loved Ella while rejecting her only underscores the hideous brutality of his action. Ella makes this point in one of the play’s most memorable speeches,

You have killed love in me. Do you understand what that means? The Bible speaks of a mysterious sin for which there is no forgiveness. . . . The great sin for which there is no

forgiveness is to murder love in a human soul. . . . I see it all now! You broke faith with the woman you loved! Me, me, me! The thing you held most precious in all the world—and you were prepared to dispose of it in the interest of profit-making. You are guilty of double murder. The murder of your own soul and of mine!²³

Ella's outburst characterizes the protagonist as an extreme and cruel example of Weber's worldly ascetic. Rejecting his tender emotions and any eudaemonistic ambition, Borkman has slain both his and Ella's power to love—not to mention her joy in life—for the purpose of "profit-making." She describes her dead emotions this way:

If a poor starving child came into my kitchen, frozen and crying and asking for something to eat, I got the kitchen maid to see to it. I never felt any urge to pick up the child, to warm it at my own hearth, to sit and enjoy watching it eat its fill. And I was never like this when I was young—I clearly remember! It's *you* who have created this emptiness, this barrenness within me—and all around me, too!²⁴

Ella's inability to extend charity toward a starving child underscores the soullessness of Borkman's asceticism. Unlike the Puritan, whose ascetic practices have spiritual meaning, the protagonist acts for purely selfish economic reasons, at least in Ella's view. Her claim that John Gabriel has committed "the great sin for which there is no forgiveness . . . the murder of your own soul and of mine!" is a powerful condemnation of Borkman's activities on spiritual grounds. And the protagonist's statement, "I wanted to gain command of all the sources of power in this land. Earth, mountain, forest, sea—I wanted control of all their resources. I wanted to build myself an empire. . . . Don't you see, I simply could not control this desire for power," gives a decidedly materialist cast to his project.²⁵ Here Borkman seems to embody the spirit of capitalism which holds "acquisition as the ultimate purpose" in life.²⁶ In keeping with this materialist imperative, Borkman reifies and commodifies his own soul, his capacity to feel love and to inspire tender emotions in others. Ella exclaims, "Yet you made me part of your cheap bargain, all the same. Traded your love with another man. Sold my love for . . . a bank directorship!"²⁷ According to Marx, capitalism treats workers as commodities, objects of exchange; seeking to create his vast empire, the capitalist John Gabriel treats Ella Rentheim in just this way. Such inhuman treatment of the woman he loved is a product of Borkman's unusual vocation. Weber

identifies the Protestant notion of the call with devotion to a life-task. Borkman's attempt to build his vast empire is thematized in exactly these terms. Explaining why he renounced his affections for Ella, the protagonist says, "You know very well it was higher motives . . . well, other motives, then . . . that forced my hand."²⁸ In the next act, these mysterious motives are further clarified: "I had the power! And the indomitable sense of ambition! All those millions lay there, imprisoned, over the whole land, deep in the mountains, and called to me! Cried out to me for release! But nobody else heard it. Only me."²⁹ In the 1897 German version, this call is a "*riefen nach mir*" rather than the Lutheran "*Beruf*," but the basic point is still the same: Borkman kills all human happiness in himself, Ella and Gunhild because he was called to exploit untapped sources of wealth.³⁰ In this view, it is the spirit of capitalism who calls Ibsen's protagonist, demanding the "earning of more and more money" (that is, release of the metal millions), combined with "the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life" (that is, renunciation of love). In the last pages of *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber envisions the modern world as an iron cage barring creativity and the joy of life. Forged through the complex interaction of ascetism, capitalism and the Protestant notion of the calling, Weber's iron cage resembles in striking ways the emotionally frigid and spiritually cramped world of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*. A capitalist called to cruel ascetism, Borkman has constructed for himself and others a steel-hard world unsoftened by love or joy. Life is impossible in this iron cage and escape—Erhart Borkman and Mrs. Fanny Wilton's flight to the erotic expanse of the South—seems the only answer.

To read *John Gabriel Borkman* exclusively in terms derived from *The Protestant Ethic*, however, is to constrict consideration of the play's central figure. In effect, it is to read the play solely from Ella Rentheim's perspective. Borkman is a capitalist ascetic who kills "the joy of living" in himself, Gunhild and Ella in order to create his empire. But he is more than this: as Orley Holtan, Charles Leland and Errol Durbach have demonstrated, there are genuinely spiritual dimensions to Borkman's project. To emphasize his rejection of Ella and his investment schemes is to risk missing the "inner worldly" or "charismatic" nature of his calling. While *John Gabriel Borkman* and *The Protestant Ethic* both stress the religious/ethical aspects of modern capitalism, the play exceeds the theoretical categories advanced in that text. An interpretation based on the later "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority" helps rectify this oversight by celebrating the singularity of the protagonist's calling—his gift of charisma.

Charisma and Escape from the Iron Cage

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Weber began to explore more fully the theme of rationality he introduced in *The Protestant Ethic*. He

came to view the Puritan's worldly ascetism and the soulless spirit of capitalism as two moments in a much broader process of rationalization. Gerth and Mills characterize rationalization in this way:

Weber thus identifies bureaucracy with rationality, and the process of rationalization with mechanism, depersonalization, and oppressive routine. . . . In thinking of the change of human attitudes, and mentalities that this process occasions, Weber liked to quote Friedrich Schiller's phrase, the 'disenchantment of the world.'³¹

This progressive disenchantment of the world produces increasingly rigorous constraints upon the individual's spontaneity and creativity: "Rationality, in this context, is seen as adverse to personal freedom" for the process of rationalization generates and esteems "petty routine creatures" like "[t]he narrowed professional, publicly certified and examined, and ready for tenure and career."³² In other words, the process of rationalization produces a type of person who enjoys the modern world's material comforts and forsakes all capacity for critique. In his late theoretical work, however, Weber points a route of escape from this state of "mechanized petrification."

Charisma (literally "gift of grace") requires a special kind of calling, and is available to only a select few. Weber perceives a world historical trend toward increasing rationality; occasionally, however, this process is ruptured by the appearance of the charismatic leader. Such a leader may work in any field—religious, political, economic, etc.—but must express such profound conviction in a special calling that others are compelled to follow: "Charisma knows only inner determination and inner restraint. The holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission."³³ The unusual source of charismatic authority produces an unusual structure of domination: "In contrast to any kind of bureaucratic organization of offices, the charismatic structure knows nothing of a form or of an ordered procedure of appointment or dismissal. It knows no regulated 'career,' 'advancement,' 'salary,' . . ."³⁴ In short, charisma breaks all the rules of bureaucratic behavior, including the imperative that one earn money through rational means: "But charisma, and this is decisive, always rejects as undignified any pecuniary gain that is methodical and rational. In general, charisma rejects all rational economic conduct."³⁵

I have discussed John Gabriel Borkman as a capitalist ascetic; I now supplement that view by showing how Ibsen's protagonist may be read as a type of charismatic leader. These categories are not mutually exclusive: in "The

Sociology of Charismatic Authority,” Weber suggests that one can be a capitalist, a charismatic leader and an ascetic all at the same time.³⁶ One cannot be both a rational economic actor and a holder of charisma at the same time, however, and this is the point at which Borkman parts company with his fellow businessmen: unlike the conventional investor who calculates every economic move and works comfortably within a framework of fiscal years, interest rates and dividends, Borkman dreamed of a vast empire, opened the vault one night and stole the depositors’ money.

Obviously, there are important differences between Ibsen’s protagonist and the conventional businessman. Borkman may share certain goals with a rational economic actor, for example, he can say, with contemporary venture capitalists, “Earth, mountain, forest, sea—I wanted control of all their resources.” He may also share certain behavioral traits with his peers, for example, “the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life.” And yet, there is enormous difference between Ibsen’s protagonist and Weber’s calculating, temperate, reliable and shrewd businessmen.³⁷ The principal difference is summed up by Ella’s line, “You criminal!”³⁸ Breaking the law, Borkman separates himself from the scrupulously careful capitalist and enters the company of figures like the “pirate genius” and the “charismatic political heroes [who] seek booty.”³⁹ Such charismatic leaders share contempt for the conventions of rational economic practice: “‘Pure’ charisma . . . is the opposite of all ordered economy. It is the very force that disregards economy. This also holds, indeed precisely, where the charismatic leader is after the acquisition of goods. . . .”⁴⁰

Although Borkman provides a model for certain aspects of modern economic practice, he violates the spirit of capitalism in other ways. Weber describes the “ideal type of the capitalistic entrepreneur” as a man who “avoids ostentation and unnecessary expenditure, as well as conscious enjoyment of his power, and is embarrassed by the outward signs of the social recognition which he receives.”⁴¹ In contrast to this ideal type, John Gabriel Borkman consciously enjoyed his power, lived in a large house, wore expensive clothing and, as his name itself suggests, sought precisely those outward signs of social recognition the conventional entrepreneur eschews. Gunhild bitterly recalls,

Yes, always the talk of having “to create an impression.” Oh, he created his impression all right! Drove around in his coach-and-four as though he were a king. Had people bowing and scraping to him as if he were a king. (*Laughs.*) And they called him by his Christian names—all over the country—just as if he *was* the King. “John Gabriel.” “John Gabriel.” Everybody knew what a great man “John Gabriel” was!⁴²

Borkman may have killed the joy of life but, as this passage shows, he savored expensive displays of splendor. Where Borkman's treatment of Ella Rentheim places him squarely in the camp of the capitalist ascetic, his attention to "the outward signs of the social recognition he receives" makes him more a feudal aristocrat or, rather, a charismatic leader.

John Gabriel's conspicuous display of wealth in the past resulted from and signified his status as a holder of charisma. Weber writes, "[The leader's] charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their master—so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through 'proving' himself."⁴³ Riding through Norway in his elegant carriage, John Gabriel Borkman was allowing himself to be recognized by the masses to whom he had been sent: he says he wanted to "bring light and warmth to the hearts of men in many thousands of homes. That was what I dreamed of achieving."⁴⁴ Once Borkman had failed to prove himself, however, once the promised wealth failed to materialize, his charismatic claim broke down, the people turned away and he became the isolated, self-deluded figure of Ibsen's play. "By its very nature, the existence of charismatic authority is specifically unstable . . . because pure charisma does not know any 'legitimacy' other than that flowing from personal strength. . . ."⁴⁵ Once John Gabriel lost his strength, his charismatic authority evaporated and his vocational project died.

Then again, Borkman's vocation may have been doomed to fail from the start. As the protagonist confesses in his final scene, the ones to whom he considered himself sent were not sentient human beings, capable of recognizing him as leader, but inanimate veins of ore lying deep in the mountains of his youth. John Gabriel describes their calling,

To me it is the breath of life. To me it comes like a greeting from loyal subject spirits. I sense their presence—those captive millions. I feel the veins of metal reaching out their twisting, sinuous, beckoning arms to me. Standing that night in the vaults of the bank, a lantern in my hand, I saw them as living shadow . . . [who] wanted to be freed.⁴⁶

The protagonist's tragedy centers around this powerful vision of inanimate ore as "living shadows," captive, striving, desiring human beings. Ironically, the charismatic spirit that called Borkman may have been the spirit of capitalism itself which not only objectifies human beings as Marx says, but also grants subjectivity to material objects. To the imprisoned invisible millions, Borkman cries, "I love

you: you who lie in a trance of death in the darkness and the deep. . . . I love you, love you, love you."⁴⁷

Conclusion

In the years between *The Protestant Ethic* and "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," Weber's view of the calling shifted. What had been the root of capitalist ascetism became the spring of charismatic authority. The tension between these two points of view is evident in Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*. An ascetic capitalist and a charismatic leader, John Gabriel Borkman is called both by "the spirit of capitalism" and by "those captive millions" who, like himself, are discontent with the rationalized and bureaucratically managed world of modernity.

Introduction of Weber's dual perspective on the calling is perhaps this paper's main contribution to the broader field of Ibsen studies. The calling or vocation is one of Ibsen's central themes and thus has given rise to a variety of interpretations. For Charles R. Lyons, the Ibsen protagonist's vocation is "an attempt to create a formal reality within his own imagination which will order and control the processes of experience."⁴⁸ Errol Durbach argues that the vocation is the attempt to recover a lost Edenic identity through "construction of an elaborate symbol system to immortalize the self."⁴⁹ Charles Leland explores the Biblical and existential dimensions of the Ibsen protagonist's calling: "[T]hese admirable and tormented persons are called to . . . transcend themselves, for only in transcendence can they find their true beings, achieve perfect freedom, and realize the vocations for which God has marked them out."⁵⁰ Leland is right to trace the vocation to its Biblical origins but neglects the transformations this concept has undergone over time, implying instead that Ibsen had a socially and historically unmediated understanding of it. Of course, the dramatist's personal experiences with nineteenth century Protestantism must have affected his concept of the calling. As the title of *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* itself suggests, Weber offers a view of the vocation which is at once sensitive to its religious roots, to its changing historical meanings, and to its economic and ethical consequences. As such, I believe this and other works by Weber provide a powerful theoretical position from which to examine the notion of the calling in Ibsen's plays generally.⁵¹

In this view, the Ibsen protagonist is called to overturn bureaucratic frameworks which, founded originally by a charismatic leader, have since been rationalized. Externalization is a useful metaphor here. The charismatic leader is specially called and internally moved: "Charisma knows only inner determination and inner restraint." Once the leader dies, however, the inner determination and restraint of charisma is translated by followers into the external

determination and restraint of bureaucratic governance; similarly, the Puritan's internal call has become the external coercion of modern capitalism. Ibsen's protagonists are called to overthrow such external, bureaucratic constraints in an effort to recreate the original, internally-charged charismatic moment. Thus, Brand explodes the conventions of the Lutheran church as he struggles to recreate Man, "His greatest masterpiece, his heir,/ His Adam, powerful, and tall, and young!"⁵² In the more secular *Hedda Gabler*, the protagonist's charismatic project is denoted by Dionysian imagery—e.g. "vine leaves in the hair"—and unfolds against a background dominated by the university and the law, two of the most powerful bureaucracies in the modern world.

While Ibsen is critical of bureaucracies, however, he is also careful to qualify the protagonist's charismatic project. First, the protagonist's calling almost inevitably produces intense human suffering. To assert himself as charismatic leader, Borkman has to destroy the emotional life of Ella Rentheim not to mention the financial lives of persons like Vilhelm Foldal. Second, Ibsen suggests that this individual vocational project can never really achieve its aim: the establishment of a genuine charismatic community like, for example, the "Third Empire" proposed by Julian in Ibsen's 1873 *Emperor and Galilean*. Errol Durbach thematizes this failure in Romantic and Christian terms: Ibsen's protagonists try and fail to redeem the post-Edenic world. Weber's texts give Durbach's Romantic schema a sociological coloring. In this view, bureaucracy is a measure of the Fall. Ibsen's protagonists are crushed beneath the wheels of rationalization, a world historic process exemplified by the rise of Torvald Helmer, Jørgen Tesman and the lawyer Hinkel, Borkman's mortal enemy. In response to this progressive "disenchantment of the world," Ibsen's protagonists are called to take up a charismatic project which, like the Romantic's attempt to recoup Eden, almost inevitably fails.

Like Ibsen, then, Weber is a post-Romantic who "smuggl[es] the explosive Romantic powers into the pragmatic bourgeois world that had turned its back on them."⁵³ These "explosive Romantic powers" include the gift of charisma which, briefly, stems the tide of rationalization upon which "the pragmatic bourgeois world" continues to rise. The charismatic project may be painful and merely temporary but, as the door of mass society swings shut, it opens perhaps the only space where individuals can determine and express themselves. A type of charismatic leader, John Gabriel Borkman enacts his vocational project in response to the grey world of rules and repetition bureaucrats have mastered. Ironically, the warmth he aimed to bring others wraps an "icy hand" around his own heart. Tragically, the attempt to birth a revolutionary economic order casts Borkman into a cage strikingly like the one Weber identifies with the modern world.

Notes

1. Scott Lash and Sam Whimster, *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987) 1.

2. This biographical account is based on information from several sources: Marianne Weber's standard biography of her husband, *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. and ed. Harry Zohn (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975) 105-230; Arthur Mitzman's *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970) 38-47; and *Max Weber: A Bio-Bibliography* by Peter Kvisto and William H. Swatos, Jr., (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1988) 3-5 and 11-27.

3. This passage is based upon the translation that appears in the Introduction to *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans., ed. and intro. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford UP, 1946) 12. I have supplemented this version of the letter with passages from Marianne Weber's biography where ellipses appear, 236. I also use this version for the last line where translator Harry Zohn renders *Kindele* as "baby," in contrast to the more generic "my love" offered by Gerth and Mills or the more literal but awkward "little child" given by Russell Berman, *The Rise of the Modern German Novel: Crisis and Charisma* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1986) 38.

4. Information about the German premieres comes from Michael Meyer's *Ibsen: A Biography* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971) 751-2. The earliest German version I have been able to locate is Henrik Ibsen, *John Gabriel Borkman: Schauspiel in Vier Aufzügen* (München: Albert Langen, 1897). Unfortunately, the translator's name is not listed. I use this text when discussing the version of the play Weber encountered.

5. Henrik Ibsen, *The Oxford Ibsen, Volume VIII*, ed. and trans. James Walter McFarlane (New York: Oxford UP, 1977) 212 and 217.

6. The line appears on page 171 of the above-mentioned *John Gabriel Borkman: Schauspiel in Vier Aufzügen*. I have altered the Oxford Ibsen version to accord with Gerth and Mills' translation of the German "*Jetzt liess sie mich los.*" McFarlane renders the Norwegian "*Nu slapp den meg*" as "Now it's let me go" (232).

7. Ibsen, *Oxford Ibsen: Volume VIII* 232.

8. 233.

9. 178.

10. 202.

11. 215.

12. Marianne Weber 202.

13. Ibsen, *Oxford Ibsen: Volume VIII* 231.

14. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1930) 53.

15. Max Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 105.

16. 119 and 41.

17. 181.

18. 158.

19. Dirk Käsler, *Max Weber: An Introduction to his Life and Work*, trans. Philippa Hurd (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 74.

20. Käsler 75.

21. Ibsen, *Oxford Ibsen: Volume VIII* 195.

22. 196.

23. 197.

24. 200.

25. 198-9.

26. Max Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 53.
27. Ibsen, *Oxford Ibsen: Volume VIII* 196.
28. 196.
29. 207.
30. Ibsen, *John Gabriel Borkman: Schauspiel in Vier Aufzügen* 117.
31. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Introduction, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, by Max Weber (New York Oxford UP, 1946) 50-1.
32. Gerth and Mills, Introduction 50.
33. Max Weber, *From Max Weber* 246.
34. 247.
35. 247.
36. 245-52.
37. Max Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 69.
38. Ibsen, *Oxford Ibsen: Volume VIII* 196.
39. Max Weber, *From Max Weber* 247.
40. 248.
41. Max Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 71.
42. Ibsen, *Oxford Ibsen: Volume VIII* 158.
43. Max Weber, *From Max Weber* 246.
44. Ibsen, *Oxford Ibsen: Volume VIII* 230.
45. Max Weber, *From Max Weber* 248.
46. Ibsen, *Oxford Ibsen: Volume VIII* 231.
47. 231.
48. Charles R. Lyons, "The Function of Dream and Reality in *John Gabriel Borkman*," *Scandinavian Studies* 45.4 (1973): 293.
49. Errol Durbach, '*Ibsen, The Romantic*' (Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1982) 28.
50. Charles Leland, "The Idea of Vocation in Ibsen," *Modern Drama* 29.2 (1986): 172.
51. Raymond Williams and Wolfgang Sohlich are especially sensitive to the kinds of cultural pressures a Weberian critical perspective would discover. Williams links the Ibsen protagonist's vocation and liberalism, a political philosophy closely tied to capitalism, in his classic *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968) 25-74. In *JDTC* articles on *Brand* and *The Wild Duck*, Wolfgang Sohlich argues along something like Weberian lines that capitalism warps and eventually destroys traditional family structures. See his "Ibsen's Brand: Drama of the Fatherless Society," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 3.2 (Spring 1989): 87-105 and "Allegory in the Technological Age: A Case Study of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 6.2 (Spring 1992): 99-118.
52. Henrik Ibsen, *The Oxford Ibsen: Volume III*, gen. ed. James Walter McFarlane (New York: Oxford UP, 1972) 93.
53. Brian Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975) preface, n.p.