

# Why Socialists Are More Materialistic Than Capitalists

In his 1993 book [\*The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism\*](#), the late Christian philosopher Michael Novak wrote that certain cultures are more likely to favor capitalism. Among them were the following: Confucian, Jewish, Protestant, and Northern European Catholic.

These cultures, Novak argued, possessed certain commonalities that made them more likely to engage in capitalism successfully and responsibly. Among the commonalities cited by Novak were “a certain rigor and austerity, an almost Stoic sense of sobriety and responsibility, and a certain disdain for corruption.”

The idea that some cultures might engage in capitalism differently than other cultures sounds a bit presumptive to modern ears, but it’s also very capitalistic. Capitalism, after all, is a system that requires a level of comfort with inequalities in material outcomes.

People with skills and services that are scarce, valuable, and in high demand will naturally thrive more than people who lack such skills. The capitalist finds this arrangement perfectly natural, whereas the materialist finds it abhorrent.

Perhaps this is why Novak believed that capitalism, paradoxically, was a system suited for spiritual societies, not materialistic ones. “The only long-lasting foundation for a capitalist society is a moral, spiritual, and religious one,” he wrote.

This idea might sound paradoxical, but Novak was not the only adherent of this view. In their book [\*Common Sense Business\*](#),

authors Theodore Roosevelt Malloch and Whitney MacMillan write that the idea of work as a higher “calling” is very much engrained in the Western mind.

A concept introduced by Reformation leader Martin Luther and popularized by German philosopher Max Weber in his famous 1905 work [\*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism\*](#), the idea of work as a calling is a stark contrast to that proposed by Marx, who [called work](#) an “unfree, unhuman, unsocial activity.”

Malloch and MacMillan argue that the view of work as a noble, spiritual calling is held at some of the most successful corporations in the world—such as Germany’s [Miele](#), a domestic appliance company headquartered in Gütersloh—and is crucial to a healthy capitalist ecosystem.

“This idea gives powerful legitimations to the conduct of business,” Malloch and MacMillan write. “It’s not only the priest, nun, or preacher who has a religious ‘calling’ to fulfill. It’s everyone in all walks of life. Such a spiritual understanding encourages a deeply serious and conscientious attitude toward work.”

Malloch and MacMillan’s point would seem to buttress Novak’s argument that some cultures will favor capitalism and practice it better than others. A spiritual culture—Confucian, Protestant, etc.—is more likely to favor capitalism because it finds deep and lasting value in work, a value that goes beyond the material fruit it yields.

A materialist culture, on the other hand, will be more likely to reject capitalism because it will be more likely to ignore or reject the spiritual fruit work offers, and instead focus on inequalities in material outcome.

To sum it up (and to paraphrase Malloch and MacMillan), spiritual cultures will thrive under capitalism because they will embrace a powerful idea: work is spiritual.