The Creation of the Sacred Text: Talcott Parsons Translates

*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the social circumstances and construction of Talcott Parsons’ translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Parsons’ early reading of Weber was conditioned by his interest in the problem of capitalism. His conceptual choices as a translator often reflected this interest. However, the translation of Weber’s most famous work attributed to him, a complicated three-year project, was not his original submission and intended text, but rather a version modified by editorial fiat and correction under the guidance of Stanley Unwin and R.H. Tawney. The result of the intervention was actually an ‘incorrect correction’, a less satisfactory published translation than Parsons’ original, diminished in subtlety, texture, emphasis and meaning, with an indeterminate effect on the reception of Weber’s ideas. Some of the criticism of Parsons’ work, though not all of it, has thus been misplaced. Notwithstanding the vagaries of ‘authorship’ illustrated in this episode, translation is both a social and a conceptual act and an opportunity for rereading and on occasion creatively misreading canonical texts.

Keywords: Capitalism, Edgar Salin, Marianne Weber, Max Weber, Oskar Siebeck, Protestant ethic, R.H. Tawney, sociology of knowledge, sociology of translation, Stanley Unwin, Talcott Parsons.

Max Weber’s present reputation depends importantly on his reception in the Anglophone world, and that reception over the years has depended crucially on one major text:*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*(hereafter *PESC*), a truly canonical work, published in 1930 with Talcott Parsons as the translator. This text was the second of Weber’s works to appear in English, following Frank Knight’s translation of the Munich lectures, the *Wirtschaftsgeschichte* or *General Economic History* (Weber 1927)—the only translated works available until the post-war cascade of translations beginning with the selection of writings translated and edited by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills.

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From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (1946). Not only did PESC appear early, but it achieved impressive longevity as well: for 72 years the version attributed to Parsons reigned as the sole authority for the English language readership. The situation changed only with the publication in 2002 of new translations by Peter Baehr and Gordon Wells, based on Weber’s original Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik essays (Weber 1904/1905, 2002a), and by Stephen Kalberg, using Weber’s 1920 revised text favored by Parsons (Weber 2002b).

Translation is a risky affair, as devotees of narrative fiction, poetry, and social theory well know. As someone once remarked, all translations are in some measure a distortion of the original; if one wants to know what an author really meant to say, one must read the original works. But the discussion and dissemination of ideas would be a slow and uninspired labor if we were to follow such advice rigorously. Translations, however imperfect, are an indispensable aid to communicating knowledge, even if, as with Max Weber’s work, they may contribute to what Guenther Roth has aptly called ‘creative misinterpretations’ (Roth 2002: 509; Bendix and Roth 1971: 35). Indeed, misinterpretations just as much as faithful readings have always played a role in the reception of an author’s work and the development of a reputation.

Nowhere among Weber’s writings has the disputation over translation been more sharply joined than with PESC, centered, of course, on the text’s alter ego: the young Talcott Parsons. Acknowledgment of Parsons’ accomplishment, combined in varying degrees of generosity with reservations and complaints about his translation have been commonplace for some time. Revisionist readings have been encouraged as well by reactions against the ‘Parsonizing’ of Weber that began with The Structure of Social Action (1937), written with the unfortunate guidance of Alexander von Schelting’s methodological critique of Weber (Gerhardt 2001: 368-74, 431-33; 2002: 27). These matters have been given greater urgency recently as the work of translation has expanded in new directions and to new circles of scholars having interests rather different from those of Parsons and his generation.1 In

1. The wide-ranging recent discussion can be followed in Ghosh 1994, 2001; Kalberg 2001; Wells 2001; Chalcraft, Harrington and Shields 2001: 20-21; Baehr 2002: 185-204; Kaelber 2002/2003, 2003: 38-40; and Whimster 2002. In view of Parsons’ later authority, it is worth remarking that success came slowly to compensate his struggles with PESC. Three years following its publication only a few more than a thousand copies had been sold, with the Director of the press at Allen & Unwin concluding, ‘There is now very little demand for the book, and it is unlikely that we shall ever sell
sum, though the issues of translation will always defy consensus, there is surely agreement, citing recent representative judgments, that this first translation of ‘sociology’s most famous study’ (Kaelber 2002/2003: 133) ‘has been enormously influential in the reception of Weber’s work in the English-speaking world. Today, however, most scholars accept that Parsons’ translation is seriously defective’ (Chalcraft, Harrington and Shields 2001: 20). The presence of a text that is both influential and defective, widely authoritative and deeply flawed, should in itself provoke curiosity and demands for an explanation. How could such a situation come about?

The discussion that follows tells the story of the first translation and publication of PESC. This chapter in the sociology of knowledge, or more specifically the politics and sociology of Weber translations, is unusually complicated and has not been told before. The history of the translation provides a lesson in the social construction of a text, and equally important, a precise answer to the questions that are central to any general sociology of translation: Who translated the work? Why? When? and Where? As we shall see, the text we know as PESC is a product, to be sure, of intellectual decisions Parsons arrived at as translator, but it is also significantly the result of social forces and relationships at work at the time. Indeed, strictly speaking, it is not actually Parsons’ intended translation tout court, but rather his proposed text as influenced by social circumstances and modified by editorial fiat and ‘correction’. The effect of these circumstances and modifications, I shall suggest, was to create an English-language Weber text that from a contemporary perspective was less satisfactory than Parsons’ original. Thus, some (though not all) of the criticism of Parsons has been misdirected. Those aspects of the translation regarded as ‘unsatisfactory’ today had to do, in part, with a context and relationships beyond the control of the designated ‘translator’. Ironically, aspects of the subsequent criticism only echo some of Parsons’ own concerns and criticisms at the time he struggled with the challenges of producing a reliable and readable manuscript.

Talcott Parsons’ effort to translate Weber’s work in the sociology of religion dates from late 1926 and began in earnest early in 1927, as he was writing his dissertation while on a temporary year appointment

as many as 2,500 copies’ (quoted in Roth 1999: 521) — an estimate wildly off the mark in light of postwar developments, when the translation became essential for the long-term promotion and dissemination of Weber’s work. Although exact figures are lacking, by now it has surely sold several hundred thousand copies.
in economics at Amherst College, MA, his undergraduate institution. It ended three years later, following extended negotiations and complications, with the publication of the text in London and New York.

For the young Talcott Parsons in the decade of the twenties, whether as a student in London or Heidelberg, or as a young instructor at Amherst or Harvard, the problem was, in a word, capitalism. It was not a problem unique to his perceptions, needless to say, but one that was widely shared by many others, including Frank Knight and Allyn Young among leading economists (e.g. Knight 1928). Parsons’ own encounter with Max Weber on this multifacted ‘problem’ came about as it did entirely as a matter of chance. Having graduated from Amherst and spent a year at the London School of Economics, attending lectures by R.H. Tawney, Morris Ginsberg, L.T. Hobhouse and Bronislaw Malinowski, he was fortunate to receive a fellowship in a new postwar exchange program with Germany for the 1925–1926 academic year and was simply assigned to the University of Heidelberg, having no say in the matter and knowing little about the faculty (Parsons 1976: 3-4; 1980: 38). He acknowledged later,

The decisive turning point for me was going to Germany and falling under the aegis of Weber. If I had gone to either Columbia or Chicago in the late 1920s, I don’t think I would have absorbed Weber, at least not for another ten or fifteen years. Among other things, I wouldn’t have known German well enough to read Weber in German, and the translations would not have begun coming out for quite a while (1976: 5).

Arriving in the fall after language preparation in Vienna, not having read Max Weber’s work before, he was thrown into courses with Alfred Weber, Karl Jaspers (on Kant), and Karl Mannheim, who was teaching a seminar on Max Weber. During the year he also studied with the two economists, Emil Lederer and Edgar Salin, eventually choosing the latter as his major advisor for a dissertation on the concept of ‘capitalism’, a degree opportunity he had not even imagined during his first months in residence. Advised early-on by Arnold

2. In a 1978 comment Parsons declared, ‘I am quite confident that when I left London after a full academic year at L.S.E., I had never heard the name of Max Weber. To be sure, R.H. Tawney was at the time working on his book Religion and the Rise of Capitalism. Though I attended Tawney’s lectures, they were on other topics and I do not remember him mentioning Weber’ (Parsons 1980: 38-39). On another occasion he remarked, ‘I had never heard Weber’s name mentioned during the whole year I was in London, but he still was clearly the dominant figure at Heidelberg and I got extraordinarily interested in him very fast’ (1976: 4; also Parsons 1959, and the discussion in Camic 1991).
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Bergstraesser, he immediately got the point that Max Weber was the person to read.

Parsons started reading Max Weber when the university semester began, first during long hours in the library. But he quickly purchased the first edition of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1922), the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (1922), and at least the first volume of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (also the 1922 printing). The marginalia and extensive underlinings in these books, and his notes from the period suggest that Parsons was a voracious and careful reader, devouring the Weber texts in short order and establishing the direction for his early labors, if not for his entire career. As he later commented, through such texts a spiritually present Max Weber ‘served, in a very real sense, as my teacher’ (1980: 38). Like Edward Shils, Parsons carried with him a vivid memory of this initial encounter:

I don’t think it was mere chance that the first of Weber’s works which I read was his study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. I don’t know how surprising it will be for others, however, that this reading had an immediate and powerful impact on me. It gripped my intense interest immediately and I read it straight through...as if it were a detective story (Parsons 1980: 39; my italics).³

Whose footprints and which clues was Parsons following? In his personal copy, among the marginalia that he wrote, one in particular points to the answer—a simple ‘Uncle Frank’ that he scribbled alongside a sentence Weber quoted from Benjamin Franklin, which Parsons had underlined: ‘Neben Fleiß und Mäßigkeit trägt nichts so sehr dazu bei, einen jungen Mann in der Welt vorwärts zu bringen, als Pünktlichkeit und Gerechtigkeit bei allen seinen Geschäften’ (Weber 1920: 32; 1930: 49).⁴ Parsons was on the trail of the people he knew, their ethos,

³ Shils similarly recorded his enthusiasm at the first encounter: ‘I was overpowered when the perspectives opened up by Weber’s concepts brought together things which hitherto had never seemed to me to have any affinity with each other. I could not assimilate it all or bring it into a satisfying order. But reading Max Weber was literally breathtaking. Sometimes, in the midst of reading him I had to stand up and walk around for a minute or two until my exhilaration died down’ (1981: 184).

⁴ ‘After industry and frugality, nothing contributes more to the raising of a young man in the world than punctuality and justice in all his dealings’ (from Franklin, *Advice to a Young Tradesman*). In his original typescript translation of PESC Parsons reproduced Weber’s italics, but added a note that they were Weber’s emphasis, not Franklin’s. As we shall see, the published text eliminated the italics and the footnote, following the editorial recommendations of Tawney.
their moral personalities, himself among them. The author’s message to his detective-reader should have been, de te narratur fabula, this story is about you, a line Weber actually did use elsewhere (1896: 76). The cultural significance of the ‘Protestant Ethic’ and the ‘spirit of capitalism’ for Americans like Parsons, this retelling of the most compelling narrative of the founding of ‘America’, is one of the essential clues to understanding the Weber phenomenon in the United States.

For Parsons what emerged from this extraordinarily productive year, most obviously, was the DPhil dissertation under Salin, defended on a return to Heidelberg the following year on 29 July, 1927, and the publication in 1928–1929 of its third chapter (in two parts), ‘“Capitalism” in Recent German Literature’, in the *Journal of Political Economy*, edited at Chicago. But the foundation for translating Weber and working toward *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) was laid in Heidelberg as well. The proposal to translate Weber had surfaced even before completing the dissertation, with the stimulus coming not from a publisher, but from Professor Harry Elmer Barnes, the sociologist-historian then at Smith College and later on the New School faculty. Parsons’ serious interest in the idea was first expressed in an informative letter he sent to Marianne Weber (with whom he was already well acquainted from the year in Heidelberg) that contained a courteous and important request for support—one he was to repeat seven months later, and worth quoting in its German original:

5. The DPhil degree was actually awarded in April 1929, a year and a half after Parsons had joined the Harvard faculty as an instructor and tutor in economics. The Harvard Sociology Department, where he held a similar position, was not created until the fall of 1931.

6. On 7 January, 1927 Barnes wrote to Parsons, ‘Ogden and Knopf have the matter of Weber under consideration but have not as yet arrived at any definite conclusion. As soon as I get any word from them I will let you know. If their decision is negative we will tease up somebody else’—as indeed they had to! The account that follows relies extensively on the lengthy correspondence, covering some 179 pages, 1927 to 1930, in the Talcott Parsons Papers, Harvard University Archives (TPP), where Barnes’ letter is stored, and the Verlag Archiv Mohr/Siebeck (VAMS). Citations are courtesy of these archives. I am grateful to Edith Hanke, who has pursued a parallel line of inquiry, for assistance with the Mohr/Siebeck holdings and for discussions concerning the early efforts to translate Weber’s writings into English.

7. ‘Several months ago it was proposed to me to translate something from Max Weber into English. The proposal was extremely attractive to me and I started negotiations with several people. A series of books with the title “History of Civilization Series” will be published now in England by Kegan, Paul & Co. Ltd, London, and in the United States by Alfred Knopf, New York. They are proposing to print as a single volume Max Weber’s “Protestant Ethic” with the “Introduction” and probably also the
Sehr verehrte Frau Professor:

Vor mehreren Monaten ist mir vorgeschlagen worden etwas von Max Weber ins Englische zu übersetzen. Der Vorschlag war mir ausserordentlich angenehm und ich habe Verhandlungen mit verschiedenen Leuten darüber aufgenommen.


essay “The Protestant Sects etc”, i.e. the first 236 pages of volume I of the Sociology of Religion. Recently I have spoken with the series editor, Mr C.K. Ogden, and also with Knopf Publishers, and both have approved the proposal. Now everything depends on how the matter will be viewed from the German side. Would you like to see this work of Max Weber appear in English? I do not know whether I am sufficiently well-versed in Max Weber’s work and the German language to be equal to the task. Nevertheless I will do my best, as I believe that precisely this text is extraordinarily important for us in America and deserves to be more widely known. The matter of translation rights remains, as I understand, in the hands of the English firm, Kegan Paul. The firm is prepared to pay the amount of about $100 for the rights to a scientific work. More than that is not possible, as this is not a commercial undertaking. Do you think that Mohr Publishers will agree to this? And if you would like to see the translation appear, would you perhaps be good enough to send a supportive note to the publisher? I believe it would make the negotiations a lot easier.’ The handwritten letter in German is undated, but the contents suggest April 1927 (TPP). C.K. Ogden, the well-known author (with I.A. Richards) of The Meaning of Meaning; A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism (1923), then an editor with Kegan Paul, was in the United States at the time, giving Parsons an opportunity to meet him personally and to urge proceeding with a translation. Parsons also discussed the project with Paul B. Thomas, head of the text-book department at Alfred A. Knopf in New York.

Mit vorzüglicher Hochachtung
Ihr Ergebener, Talcott Parsons

Parsons threw himself into this project with enthusiasm and determination. He already sensed that difficulties might arise and therefore enlisted Marianne Weber’s assistance, perhaps with the knowledge that earlier in 1922 a proposal from Routledge had foundered on the Siebeck/Mohr preference for an English-language edition of all three volumes of the Religionsoziologie. The other obvious weakness was his status and bona fides: just out of formal graduate study in 1927 at the age of 24, an unknown and very junior scholar, not a published word to his name, without a doctoral degree, without permanent university employment. Under the circumstances it is remarkable he was considered at all! And in fact, at first, he barely was, and even to the very end other unnamed ‘expert translators’ were invited by the publishers to intervene.

For her part, when Parsons informed her, Marianne Weber was interested in moving the project forward, inviting him to Sunday afternoon tea when he arrived in Heidelberg that summer to complete and defend the dissertation. Their meeting occurred on 26 June, and it led Parsons to a follow-up conversation with Oskar Siebeck, who reportedly ‘had a very good impression of him’ (22 August, 1927, VAMS). Both Marianne Weber and Oskar Siebeck were committed to finding the best possible translator, with Marianne especially concerned about using someone unschooled in the sociology of religion discussions and fretting over the dismal experience of her friend Marie Luise Gothein, whose book, A History of Garden Art, had been mangled in translation. Siebeck considered himself not only a representative of the firm, but also an advocate for Marianne Weber’s editorial and financial interests. Parsons quickly became Marianne’s candidate and her support was strong and consistent; indeed, she spoke of him with great warmth to the end of her life. What they shared throughout decades of contact and friendship, interrupted only by the war, was the love for Max Weber and his work. Without
this special relationship, without Parsons’ stubborn dedication and Marianne Weber’s unwavering support, accepted by Siebeck, it is highly improbable the translation would have appeared at all, and certainly not when it did.

Aside from the obvious matters of the choice of a translator, legal rights and financial terms, the questions raised for translating the text that has come to be known as PESC were set very early: Which text or texts would be translated? Who would write the introduction, and what kind of introduction to the work and the author would it be? Who would have overall editorial control? The publication rights had to be negotiated with English and American firms: Kegan Paul and Allen & Unwin in London, Alfred A. Knopf in New York, and eventually at the very end, Charles Scribner’s Sons in New York. The first three publishing houses figured in the discussions with Mohr/Siebeck from the very beginning. Among the editors from these firms, it is important to note that Oskar Siebeck had close ties only with Stanley Unwin, a factor that turned out to be decisive.

As for the text itself, Oskar Siebeck had for some time favored translating all three volumes of Weber’s Religionssoziologie, and interestingly enough, Parsons agreed with him on scholarly grounds, commenting later to Frank Knight that ‘The Protestant Ethic is quite impossible to understand apart from its place in the wider framework’ of Weber’s Religionssoziologie (5 June, 1936, TPP), a view he always held and repeated over the years. From his standpoint, the more of the three volumes one could translate, the better. But repeated attempts to convince Kegan Paul and Knopf ended in failure, marked finally in the summer of 1927 by an apparent agreement on a reduced format of GARS volumes I and II in Kegan Paul’s series, the publication outlet favored initially by Harry Barnes and proposed to C.K. Ogden, the series editor, now back in London: ‘We shall be willing to publish in English translation (with the American market) at least the equivalent of the two volumes out of the three volumes of Max Weber’s “Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie” in the History of Civilization Series on the terms you name’ (26 July, 1927, VAMS) read the press’ communication to Oskar Siebeck.

A series of tortured negotiations through the rest of the year led to the collapse of this apparent agreement. The reasons for the failure are difficult to fathom, as the parties were not far apart.8 One factor was

8. C.K. Ogden (Kegan Paul) wrote to Paul B. Thomas (Alfred A. Knopf): ‘Mohr won’t let the Weber go except in the three volumes as a whole with a 12½ per cent
certainly the collision between ‘material’ commercial and ‘ideal’ academic interests. The correspondence also suggests that the politics of inter-war publishing played an important role. There was a certain amount of obfuscation and ‘buck passing’ among the English and American firms. Caution was combined with scarcely concealed hostility concerning the translation of continental authors, especially German and French. Explaining the situation to Parsons, Ogden once remarked, ‘it is impossible to pay more for a German book than an English one as we do at present, except on a non-commercial basis (“in order to have some of these foreigners”)’ (23 June, 1927, TPP)! Misgivings persisted about using an American translator. To make matters worse, Ogden eventually concluded that Siebeck was a ‘hopeless’ negotiating partner. It is true that Oskar Siebeck made every effort to negotiate the most favorable terms, partially to protect Marianne Weber’s financial interests during this period of economic uncertainty. While in the process he may have sacrificed some good will, there is no evidence he was incapable of reaching a reasonable agreement. In the end he did exactly that, acceding to terms with Allen & Unwin close to those initially proposed by Kegan Paul, with one key exception: the decision concerning what to translate.

This failure and the backtracking by Kegan Paul and Knopf could have terminated the entire project. Instead, Parsons persisted, urging that the proposed translation be scaled back to GARS I, pp. 1-275 (the ‘Vorbemerkung’ or introduction from 1920, the two ‘Protestant Ethic’ essays, the essay on the Protestant sects, and the ‘Einleitung’ to the royalty and the £150 advance. This is ridiculous, but Kegan Paul’s are writing to ask you what your order would be and for what price(s), to make sure. My own idea is that Mohr makes the book almost impossible’ (excerpted in Thomas’ letter to Parsons, 3 November, 1927, TPP). But in his letter to Parsons (22 October, 1927) Ogden wrote that an acceptable offer would be a 10 per cent royalty, an advance of £50–75, and a 1000 sheet order from an American publisher — terms like those Mohr/Siebeck eventually accepted with the competitor, Allen & Unwin. The real disagreement seemed to be over how much to translate, and ownership of translation rights. In his reply to Thomas, Parsons commented: ‘I still think that he [Oskar Siebeck] is right on that [not publishing PESC alone in translation]. I do think that the work as a whole is essentially a unit, and that for the proper understanding of Weber’s work it would be too bad to break it up. Also I think that it would prove to be popular and that when the one part became known there would be a considerable demand for the rest. Around here people are talking about it a good deal and I think it would be widely read’ (12 November, 1927, TPP). On the same day he wrote to Oskar Siebeck urging a ‘more reasonable’ proposal, and to Marianne Weber requesting her assistance in moving the proposal forward with Siebeck.
subsequent series of essays on the world religions). But the ‘Einleitung’ was eventually dropped, and then the essay on the sects—a process of textual ‘downsizing’ under editorial and financial pressures that left what we now have. Even retaining the ‘Vorbemerkung’ required a special defense. With Marianne Weber arguing the case, and Oskar Siebeck using his relationship with Stanley Unwin to advantage, finally in September 1928, nearly two years after the idea surfaced, Parsons submitted a rough draft (or as the publisher called it, a ‘specimen’ or ‘sample translation’) of the first ‘Protestant Ethic’ essay (GARS I, pp. 17-62) to Allen & Unwin in London. He explained that he was aiming for what we could call a ‘semantic’ translation, urging that the unavoidable problems of textual meaning and the work’s larger significance be addressed in a critical introduction:

In general I have tried to be faithful to the text rather than to present a work of art as far as English style is concerned. It would be impossible to do anything else without almost completely recasting the whole manner of exposition… It also seems to me it would be very undesirable to have the thing published without a critical introduction which set forth its significance for Weber’s sociological work as a whole and Weber’s place in the social thought of Germany. In Germany itself it has been very gravely misunderstood, and I fear that without such a safeguard the same process would be repeated for English readers (24 September, 1928, TPP).

Because of R.H. Tawney’s reputation and following, assisted by the publication in 1926 of his Holland Memorial Lectures as Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, Stanley Unwin had from the beginning viewed him as the best choice for the introduction or foreword, urging Siebeck that Tawney’s presence ‘should help materially in securing an adequate reception for the book both in the press and scholastic circles’ (22 July, 1927, VAMS). So the nod went to Tawney, who unfortunately appears not to have kept abreast of developments in German scholarship.9

Furthermore, Tawney paid little attention to Weber’s actual arguments, with his own interests ascendant instead in the uninspired and

9. In his 22 July letter to Siebeck proposing Tawney, Stanley Unwin conveyed Tawney’s question ‘whether any biography or memoir of Weber has been published, as it would help him materially in writing his introduction’, revealing that he was unaware of Marianne Weber’s Max Weber, Ein Lebensbild (1926) published by Mohr (Siebeck), which in turn provoked Oskar Siebeck’s surprise (letter to Marianne Weber, 4 August, 1927, VAMS). The exchange confirms Parsons’ memory of having never heard Max Weber or his work mentioned during the 1924–1925 year he spent at the London School of Economics.
modest 14-page foreword he did produce at the last minute, delaying publication of the translation while Stanley Unwin waited impatiently for his introductory comments.10 Indeed, Tawney appears to have been slow to grasp Weber’s significance, with his most incisive commentary on Weber coming not in the foreword to Parsons’ translation of PESC, but in the 1937 preface to the second edition of his own book (Tawney 1963: 3-9). This outcome confirmed Parsons’ fears about the consequences of not publishing a critical introduction. As Lutz Kaelber has noted recently, ‘Tawney’s misrepresentations set a precedent of careless reading of Weber’s work among sociologists and scholars in neighboring disciplines alike, especially until other writings by Weber became available in English translations and Tawney’s foreword became replaced with one that actually presented Weber’s argument in its strengths and weaknesses and addressed the argument’s contexts’ (2002: 137).

Notwithstanding successful completion of a first installment, the nourishment and birth of Parsons’ complete translation was still far from assured. Stanley Unwin had initially consulted Tawney about a suitable translator, had ruled out Frank Knight, whose translation of the General Economic History he had agreed to distribute in Britain, and then wondered about other possible ‘expert’ translators. Despite his favorable impression of Knight’s achievement, ‘It is not our intention’, Unwin had written to Siebeck, ‘to turn to America for a translator of “Die Protestantische Ethik”’ (25 July, 1927, VAMS). Nevertheless, that is what occurred. But Unwin never reconciled himself to Marianne Weber’s choice of Parsons, as becomes evident through the continuous patter of questioning and complaints, as if to remind her and Oskar Siebeck of the risk of acceding to her wishes and his generosity in doing so.11 Parsons must have sensed the doubts and conflicts, as

10. The correspondence between Unwin and Tawney, 4 February to 18 June, 1930, is in the George Allen & Unwin Archive, University of Reading, England. Tawney asked to see the proofs of Parsons’ translation before writing his foreword, and they were mailed to him on 4 and 6 December, 1929. But he forgot about them until reminded two months later, then recovered the proofs, finally submitting his handwritten text on 5 April, 1930. The exchange of letters strongly suggests that he wrote the foreword in the week between 28 March and 5 April. I am grateful to Mike Bott of the University of Reading Archives for providing this material.

11. As late as 29 October, 1929, when Allen & Unwin sent Tawney’s report on the translation to Oskar Siebeck, the accompanying letter said the purpose was ‘to show you some of the difficulties with which you have presented us by insisting upon an American translator. It bears out our repeated experience, viz. that a knowledge of the technique of translation is necessary as well as a knowledge of the subject and a...
he took the highly unusual step of having his friend and London School of Economics compatriot, the economist Arthur R. Burns, appear at the Allen & Unwin offices while traveling in England to check on the situation. Burns provided some measure of reassurance, although he acknowledged to Parsons having been quizzed about his friend’s reputation and accomplishments. On his side, to protect editorial discretion, Unwin recruited R.H. Tawney as the final arbiter of any disputes that might arise, actually writing that provision into the contract Parsons signed, and in addition reserving the right to revise the text at the translator’s expense.12

Parsons’ ‘sample translation’ in typescript was in reality a test of his merits. It was read by at least six people: three unidentified ‘in house’ readers for Allen & Unwin, plus Stanley Unwin himself, Oskar Siebeck, and most surprisingly, Marianne Weber. The publishers’ response was at best grudging acceptance of a rough draft badly in need of revision, at worst a challenge to the entire enterprise. A translator with less fortitude and thinner skin might have walked away at this point. Marianne Weber’s reply to Oskar Siebeck (forwarded to Unwin) revealed her own frustration, which must have been matched by that of Parsons:

It is very difficult for me to judge Parsons’ translation, as I read it with a feel for the German rather than the English language. For me it is thoroughly readable and stylistically acceptable, and in any case it should be considered a basis for a revision. In a number of places better formulations might be found, but doubtless only with a translator who is at home in history and political economy. I notice immediately on p. 1 of section 2 a question mark about the concept ‘historical individual’. The German word ‘historisches Individuum’ is a familiar philosophical concept in Germany, given its character by H. Rickert, that in my view

mastery of the language. We shall no doubt eventually pull through, but we think you will now more readily understand our reluctance to employ translator[s] of whose work we have no previous experience’ (VAMS). Siebeck also forwarded this complaint to Marianne Weber.

12. Paragraph seven of the contract, signed by Parsons on 19 January, 1929, read: ‘The Publishers reserve the right to have the work revised at the Translator’s expense if in the opinion of their advisers the translation as delivered is not in satisfactory shape for the printers, but the cost of such revision shall in no case exceed 2/6 (two shillings and sixpence) per thousand words, and in case of dispute as to whether revision is called for, the verdict of Mr R.H. Tawney shall be accepted by both parties as final’ (copy in TPP). The completed translation was due 15 June, 1929, a deadline Parsons almost met, submitting the final pages about two weeks late. This was actually a revised second contract, as Unwin had drafted a first version in July 1927, which had reserved for Allen & Unwin the right to specify contents and choose a translator.
Such questioning of standard conceptual language says a great deal about the level of skepticism concerning the quality of Parsons’ work. But Unwin had made his point and agreed to proceed, though with the insertion of Tawney for protection.

When the completed translation arrived at the offices of Allen & Unwin in mid-1929, criticism resumed, of course. By now, well into the third year after Barnes’ initial contact, Parsons was aiming for a readable and reliable text, avoiding complex formulations and conceptual terminology that might be misunderstood and lead to further delay. Even the previous summer he had become frustrated, writing to Ogden, ‘it has dragged out so long that I shall be willing to take any publisher who will bring the matter to a decision’ (10 June, 1928, TPP). But he also sought accuracy, so was careful to include almost all of Weber’s many italicized words and phrases, as well as his legendary and copious use of inverted commas around key words and phrases. Whenever possible, he kept Weber’s paragraphs intact, and for good measure he included in the margins the page references to the original GARS I text, thus facilitating a kind of dual-language comparison by the curious reader.

Tawney read the typescript first, followed by two more professional translators. (Copy editors were an invention for the future.) The
American publisher of record, now Charles Scribner’s Sons, was thankfully absent from these discussions, as arrangements with that firm had been initiated not by Allen & Unwin, but surprisingly by Ralph Barton Perry, Parsons’ senior Harvard colleague in philosophy and a series advisor for Scribner’s, who was on the look-out for an inexpensive student-friendly ‘Weber source book’ in a new social science series.14 In any case, for contractual reasons it was Tawney’s judgments that were binding. ‘With regard to Parsons’ translation of Weber’, he wrote,

I have read more of this. I cannot, as I told you, assume responsibility for the accuracy of the translation, as to compare the English and German sentence by sentence would be a very long job.

I think that, as a piece of English, it will pass, provided that certain alterations are made, viz. (1) The translator has reproduced the German italics throughout. This, I fear, must be altered. German writers use italics for emphasis where they are unnecessary, and, indeed, would appear quite out of place in English. The effect on the English reader of finding them in every other line, on some pages, would not be good. I suggest that the translation should be read by someone who will delete them, wherever, in English eyes, they are unnecessary.

(2) Somewhere the same comment applies to the use of inverted commas, though not to the same extent.

(3) The paragraphing and stopping require attention.

(4) Sometimes, though not very often, Mr. Parsons’ English appears to me shaky. Here, again, the changes required are usually quite simple. The alteration of the order of the words would, in some cases, put the matter right.

Much the weakest part of the translation, as a piece of English, is the Introduction, the reason presumably being that the German of it is the more abstract and difficult. I think this needs particular attention.15

14. Professor Perry initiated the discussion in a letter to Parsons, 7 December, 1928 (TPP). In the ensuing correspondence it is clear that Perry had in mind a Weber book for classroom use, noting that Scribner’s tries to price volumes in the series at an affordable $1.00 for students. (Parsons would have signed a contract with Scribner’s, but it appears not to have been saved in his papers.) The idea of a ‘source book’ was realized only two decades later with From Max Weber (Weber 1946).

15. From the readers’s report Tawney submitted to Stanley Unwin, 28 September, 1929, including a page of references for recommended changes (copy sent to Parsons on 7 October, 1929 in TPP). It is debatable whether Weber’s first 16 pages were actually ‘more abstract and difficult’ than, say, his discussion of the calling, or the last synthetic chapter on asceticism. If Parsons’ early pages were less polished, it is surely because they were composed last under the time pressures of a full teaching schedule.
With the advantage of hindsight, Tawney’s alarm over ‘Mr. Parsons’ English’ and the 1920 ‘Introduction’ appears somewhat overstated. As a representative example of the issues, consider the original typescript from 1929 and Parsons’ rendition of Weber’s first two sentences:16

A child of modern European civilization will necessarily and rightly treat problems of universal history in terms of this question: [to] what combination of circumstances may the fact be attributed that in western civilization and only in it, cultural phenomena have appeared, which—nevertheless as we like to think at least—lie in a line of development having universal significance and value?

Only in the west does ‘science’ exist at a stage of development which we recognize today as ‘valid’ (Parsons 1929, Introduction, 1).

The editorial correction in the actually published text then read:

A PRODUCT of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value.

Only in the West does science exist at a stage of development which we recognize to-day as valid (Weber 1930: 13).

What is the result of this intervention? One simple change in syntax introduces a first sentence that is easier to scan, but Parson’s more precise statement of Weber’s central question, the all-important Fragestellung, is needlessly sacrificed. Equally telling, the carefully crafted typography or form of Weber’s text, faithfully reproduced in Parsons’ second sentence, has now been seriously compromised.

The changes to the typography of Parsons’ draft were indeed considerable and extensive. Most significantly, following Tawney’s suggestions, nearly all of Parsons’ faithfully rendered italics and inverted commas were eliminated.17 Paragraphs and sentences were divided

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17. For example, in the ‘Vorbemerkung’ alone, to use a quantitative measure, Weber had italicized 83 words and used inverted commas 50 times, nearly all reproduced by Parsons. But the published text retained only ten of the former, and it eliminated all of Weber’s and Parson’s use of inverted commas.
and simplified further. And finally, the marginal pagination references to the German original were dropped, on the grounds that by shifting Weber’s voluminous footnotes to endnotes (an editorial decision that seems not to have been discussed with Parsons at all!), such a reference system became confusing. Alteration of Parsons’ intended textual typography was not a trivial matter, for in the end PESC that was published, compared with his original submission, had lost something of the emphasis, qualification, nuance and meaning of Weber’s text that it otherwise would have had, as present-day scholars have noted (Ghosh 1994: 114-15).

As for the celebrated conceptual terminology, after all these readings—probably at least nine people altogether orchestrated by the press, plus unspecified others Parsons said he consulted—the basic vocabulary for which Parsons is so famous remained intact: typically ‘conduct’ or simply ‘life’ for Lebensführung, ‘life’ or ‘way [also: type, manner] of life’ for Lebensstil, ‘elimination of magic from the world’ for Entzauberung der Welt, ‘historical individual’ for historisches Individuum, the egregious ‘correlations’ for Wahlverwandtschaften (‘elective affinities’), and of course most importantly, ‘iron cage’ for stahlhartes Gehäuse. The familiar concise and powerful drum-beat cadences, such as those found in the concluding pages, were authentically Parsons’ invention as well: for example, ‘The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so’; or ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved’ (Weber 1905: 108, 109; 1920: 203, 204; 1930: 181, 182; Parsons 1929: [ch. 5] 25, 27). No editor would want to revise that language, steeped in pathos. For once even the inverted commas survived, though not the italics. But all readers still overlooked with the translator Weber’s crucial philosophical-cultural reference to Nietzsche’s ‘last men’ who ‘invented happiness’, an integral part of his argument, with Parsons’ revisionist phrasing (viz., ‘the last stage of this cultural development’) signaling the limits of his imagination and interests. It remains a striking paradox, nevertheless, that Parsons’ English prose often achieved a level of clarity, power and concision while engaged with Weber’s German text that was unmatched in the much-maligned leaden style of his subsequent work. It is as if Weber’s language and thought had fired his imagination. The fortunate beneficiaries in this specific respect were, of course, Weber and his English-language audience.

When considering what we regard today as key Weberian concepts, it is important to point out that in his reading notes from his
student days in Heidelberg, written in German, Parsons often enough (but not always!) wrote out phrases like ‘Systematik der Lebensführung’, ‘Entzauberung der Welt’, or ‘Methodische Lebensführung in USA’. when reading PESC or the ensuing essay on ‘The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism’ (see Weber 1920: 114-15, 214). It is not as though he missed this terminology altogether, or failed to see it as part of the text. Rather, his problem from the very beginning was ‘capitalism,’ the ‘concept’ of capitalism, or as he wrote in his notes, the problem of the ‘breeding of capitalist qualities’ (‘Züchtung kapitalistischer Qualitäten’), and much later in print, ‘“capitalism” as a socio-economic system’ (Weber 1920: 234; 1946: 320; Parsons 1980: 40-41).

Parsons’ central question was thus framed unsurprisingly through the intellectual discourse and economics of his time, instead of through formulations such as ‘the discourse of the modern’ or the problematics of the cultural sociology and cultural criticism of our own age.

More specifically, Parsons suggested in his dissertation chapter that one rationale for making Weber’s text available was to explore an alternative to the ‘individualistic’, ‘rationalistic’ and ‘unilinear’ evolutionary assumptions operative in Anglo-American economic thought, a framing of the issue derived from the work of his dissertation director, Edgar Salin (Parsons 1928/29: 3, 36; Salin 1923; Camic 1991: xxi-xxvi). However Salin, a grand nephew of Jacob Schiff who as a teenager had sojourned with the wealthy in New York at his uncle’s invitation, was known not only as an economist, but also as an esthete and follower of Stefan George. The aesthetic sensibility becomes apparent in his overdrawn distinction between two mutually exclusive points of view in economics: one abstract and individualistic, the other concretely historical and ‘organic’ with roots in German romanticism. For Salin both Marx and Weber emerged from the latter orientation. Yet neither could be squeezed into such a highly schematic format without considerable distortion, and indeed, Parsons completely abandoned it a few years later when writing *The Structure of Social Action*. When translating PESC, moreover, these framing dichotomies could hardly have assisted his choice of language and categorical distinctions.

With respect to the problem of capitalism itself, Weber’s treatise had two major advantages for Parsons. First, it critically addressed the ‘economic interpretation of history’ and demonstrated that the problems of modern capitalism must be grasped not only with the tools of

18. Guenther Roth alerted me to these aspects of Salin’s intellectual biography.
abstract economic theory, but also with the intellectual resources and methods of comparative history and sociological investigation. Second, it gave a clarifying answer to the ‘problem’ of capitalism itself, which for Parsons (as for Weber) was a matter of understanding modern capitalism’s ‘peculiar rationality’. That rationality consisted in Parsons’ brief retelling of Weber’s account in (a) rational organizational and institutional forms, such as bureaucracy, rational law, rational bookkeeping, and the rational organization of formally ‘free’ labor; and (b) the distinctive ‘adaptation of the whole way of life of modern man to a particular set of values’ summed up in the phrase ‘the spirit of capitalism’ (Parsons 1928/29: 27). The result was a socioeconomic system that Parsons described in his dissertation as ‘objective’, that is, existing independently of our individual will; ‘mechanistic’ or based on contractual relationships; ‘ascetic,’ in the sense of affirming supra-personal norms of action, such as ‘productivity’ and ‘service’; autonomous because it followed its own laws of development; and ‘rational’ in the dual sense of adapting means to ends, and demanding ‘the extreme discipline and self-control of the whole life of every individual’ (Parsons 1928/29: 31).

The more ‘psychologically’ and ‘culturally’ resonant language that Weber sometimes used was thus subordinated to the purpose of ferreting out modern capitalism’s special features and rationale, as Parsons’ own notational outline of the ‘Vorbemerkung’ (GARS I: 1-12) reveals, complete with page references to the German text: 19

| Staatsbegriff: 4 |
|-----------------
| Kap. die schicksalsvollste Macht unsres modernen Lebens, 4 |
| Unmittelbar danach |
| Charakteristik des Kapitalismus 4-5 |
| Anmerkung gegen Brentano—4-5 |
| Simmel, Sombart |
| Begriff des Kapitalismus überhaupt 6 |
| Spezifische Eigenart des modernen Kapitalismus 6-7 |
| Rationale Organisation 7 |
| Trennung von Haushalt u. Betrieb 8 |
| Rationale Buchführung 9 |
| Kap. Arbeitsorganisation 9 |
| Rat. Sozialismus 9 |
| Das Zentrale Problem 10 |

19. The format duplicates Parsons’ own, in one of two files of handwritten notes on half-page ring binder paper (in TPP 42.8.2), containing numerous reading notes in German on Karl Marx, Werner Sombart, Lujo Brentano, and Max Weber, all oriented to the topic ‘capitalism’.

The concept of ‘Lebensführung’ does indeed appear in these pages that Weber published in 1920, though in this instance not in Parsons’ notes, where it is implicitly subordinated to the ‘rationalism of occidental culture’. In this respect the modern objections to Parsons’ intellectual choices are important and correct: they alert us to a level of meaning he obscured. For instance, the rich conceptual language Weber constructed in compound nouns based on ‘life’, so essential to the fifth chapter of PESC—life-conduct (‘Lebensführung’), lifestyle (‘Lebensstil’), life-ideal (‘Lebensideal’), life-outlook (‘Lebensanschauung’), life-conception (‘Lebensauffassung’), life-atmosphere (‘Lebensluft’), life-mood (‘Lebensstimmung’) — was played down in Parsons’ more muted vocabulary. Perhaps it was the Simmelian cast to this terminology, a reminder of the last chapter on the ‘Style of Life’ in Simmel’s Philosophy of Money, that suggested to Parsons the advisability of sharpening a theoretical boundary, in these instances by using a less culturally and psychologically suggestive terminology or by ignoring Weber’s inventions altogether.

Notwithstanding such choices as translator, it is also the case that Parsons’ reading captured accurately the overarching terminology of rationalism, rationality and rationalization that was central to Weber’s account of asceticism and the capitalist ‘spirit’. This was the theoretical language that has survived as one of the most distinctive signposts of Weberian thought, having achieved by now a life of its own. In this respect Parson’s orientation was perspicacious: it remained true to what Weber would have called the ‘culturally relevant’ problem-complex of the modern world, namely, the ‘peculiar rationalism’ of Western capitalist culture and the problematic character of modern capitalism as a dynamic socioeconomic system in the age of, as we now say, ‘globalization’.

For Parsons the translation of PESC was an episode at the very beginning of his career, like a military boot-camp best forgotten and left behind. His only later reflection on the three-year project was dramatically understated: after receiving Marianne Weber’s support and introduction to Oskar Siebeck, he noted, ‘I went to see Siebeck and worked out the arrangement. He in turn arranged publication of
the English version by Allen and Unwin of London. It appeared, after a few vicissitudes, in the early summer of 1930’ (1980: 40).

The result of these ‘few vicissitudes’, however, was a text, strictly speaking, that was not Parsons’ intended version, but rather an intervention that had made matters worse, a true Verschlimmbesserung, an ‘incorrect correction’ or ‘disimprovement’ in the fine German oxymoron. But the text had been created, an enduring accomplishment, though an untimely one. For just as it was published its problem-focus—capitalism and its ‘spirit’—seemed headed for self-destruction. The New York stock market crashed in October and November 1929, coinciding with the final proofreading, complaints from the typesetters, and Parsons’ last attempts to correct the corrections, provoking a warning ‘that your allowance of 10 per cent for author’s corrections will be exceeded’ (Allen & Unwin to Parsons, 27 January, 1930, TPP). While the worldly problem of capitalism had arrived in full force, a scholarly exploration of the ‘work ethic’ and its cultural-religious sources by a German author may well have seemed a distraction with excessive panache. Capitalism’s ‘spirit’ had assumed too sinister a form. Parsons’ work of translation, also representing an unintended interpretation, awaited a new generation of readers in vastly changed circumstances.

Thus, we should reassess Parsons’ PESC, but not simply because it is riddled with ‘errors’. We should do so because it is important as a socially constructed artifact, an exemplar of the vagaries of ‘authorship’. Of course, each generation reads a text with its own problems in mind, and a new generation will read it differently and feel the need understandably to render the original more intelligible, more vivid and more accessible to the Zeitgeist. But what does this adverb ‘more’ conceal? Are new readings to be preferred to their predecessors? Would a different text with fidelity to Parsons’ original italics, inverted commas, and pagination to GARS I in the margins have altered the understanding and interpretation of Weber, even to a slight degree? In the actually existing translation attributed to Parsons, Weber’s text certainly lost something in subtlety, texture, emphasis, conceptual precision, and meaning. It became accessible to new English-language readers, but as a simpler and more mechanical treatise than it otherwise would have been. The careful reader could not be alerted to the kind of linguistic qualifications, problematic or borrowed notions, and authorial distance that Weber wished to convey in developing his cultural history and ‘explanation’ of the relationship, the ‘elective affinity’ between the ‘Protestant Ethic’ and the ‘spirit’ of capitalism.
Side-by-side comparison of original and translation was rendered extremely difficult, as anyone knows who has made the effort to find, say, the four places in which Weber used the phrase ‘Entzauberung der Welt’ that Parsons actually translated in slightly different ways.\(^{20}\) Perhaps with Parsons’ original and more faithful typography we would have come sooner to the kind of questioning that has breathed life into Weber’s ideas. Perhaps we would have avoided fruitless debates over positions attributed to Weber that he actually never advocated and sometimes explicitly repudiated. Perhaps, perhaps…

But hold on! Since we have Parsons’ original typescript, bearing an anonymous archivist’s scribbled notation, ‘This should be preserved as an historical document of considerable value’, some enterprising spirit could even now issue the authentic Parsons translation of Weber’s text, which with truly minor alterations in response to his posthumous critics—a word here, a phrase there—might well become the definitive version of sociology’s most famous work. And why would we want to do this? What purpose—intellectual, scientific, social, cultural, historical, or personal—would such an exercise serve? In defense of the labor of translation, long on labor and short on appreciation, perhaps it is enough to answer, paraphrasing our authors, that even the detectives among us can never know with certainty when the light of the great cultural problems will shift and move on, and with which as yet unexpressed textual resources and innovative readings, misreadings, and rereadings.

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\(^{20}\) To be complete, the four passages on the ‘disenchantment of the world’ are to be found in Weber 1920: 94, 114, 156, 158; and 1930: 105, 117, 147, 149. Parsons varies the English words slightly in these passages.

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