

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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