

The Protestant Ethic

A Work in Translation

Filipe Carreira da Silva (ICS-UL)/Mónica Brito Vieira (York University)

Introduction

What would have American sociology been like without Talcott Parsons's translation of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*? To try to answer such a question inevitable takes us to the domain of counter-factual thinking, so pervasive and profound was the impact of that work of translation. If we are to remain within the realm of social-scientific inquiry, however, one should pose a different question.

Assuming that Parsons's rendering of Weber's words into American English created "world images" of Weber and his sociological significance that were to act "like switchmen" on a railroad, changing irrevocably the course of history (Weber, 1946: 280), how is this "cyclopean moment" (Foucault 1991: 77) to be explained? This is why this chapter is as much about Weber and his ideas as it is about Parsons's mediation of those ideas through the translation of the "sacred text" (Scaff 2005) of Weberian scholarship.

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) was one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century. His ideas and organizational skills helped make American sociology a global powerhouse in the post-war period: the general theory of action, structural-functionalism, systems theory, and modernization theory are but different and successive aspects of the highly abstract and supremely ambitious theoretical building

Parsons developed consistently in the course of his 42-year long career at Harvard, a period which coincided with the mature phase of institutionalization of sociology in American academia (Trevino 2001). However, in a piece about his retirement for the *New York Times*, when asked about what his greatest contribution to sociology had been, Parsons singles out neither his immense theoretical achievements, nor his contribution towards institutionalizing sociology as an academic discipline in the United States. Instead, Parsons points to the translation of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* he had published back in 1930. His justification for this choice was that, by translating Weber's seminal essay, he had acted "as an importer" of Weber's ideas about religion and capitalism into the Anglo-Saxon world.¹ This passing remark provides the starting point for our argument in this chapter. As we will try to show, Parsons's "importation" of Weber's ideas via the translation-interpretation of *The Protestant Ethic* turned out to be a pivotal event not only for his career, but to the very path of development of sociology in the twentieth century.

Parsons was only 23-years old when he read Weber for the first time, and embarked on the translation of *The Protestant Ethic* a little over a year later. The immediate motivation seem to have been to respond to a suggestion by a senior colleague interested in promoting Weber's ideas in America, but the most profound reason was intellectual. The young Parsons was convinced he had found in Weber the theoretical and methodological answer to understand the origins and implications of capitalism, the problem that afflicted him at the time. This is what explains both his interest in pursuing a doctorate in Germany on Sombart's and Weber's theories of capitalism, and his translation of Weber's essay. Contrary to what is widely assumed (e.g. Camic 1991: xxvii), however, Parsons's doctoral dissertation did not follow the work of translation. Archival research shows that Parsons wrote his dissertation while

he was translating Weber's essay (Gerhardt 2011). In fact, the translation stands right in between two different versions of the doctoral dissertation. The first written in German and almost universally ignored until now, and the second in English that was published in 1928-1929 in the form of two articles in *The Journal of Political Economy*. It is in this specific sense that we approach Parsons as a translator-interpreter. Parsons's early encounter with Weber's theories and methodology is a gradual process mediated by the edition, and translation from German to English, of *The Protestant Ethic*. This is why to ignore Parsons' German dissertation is to miss a crucial early step in the development of his sociological thinking, and the source of much misunderstanding.

One common mistake is to read the early work of Parsons as if it anticipates his later writings. This obfuscates rather than clarifies his thinking: the methodological suggestion is to look for "implicit" (e.g. Wearne 1989: 57) signs of positions Parsons was to adopt years later, rather than interpret them in their own right. More generally, as in the young Marx, this fails to do justice to his early work as an independent phase of intellectual development. Another mistake has been to reduce Parsons's theoretical efforts to strategic and materialistic career-oriented choices (Camic 1987). While the latter certainly helped frame some of Parsons's decisions at the time, the fact remains that this fundamentally lessens and misrepresents the intellectual labour involved in the interpretation of texts. This is especially true of formative texts, which often represent the most challenging hermeneutical encounter in one's career. Weber's writings seem to fit this exactly, but, again, Camic's reservations regarding "Parsons's Weber" may have reinforced even more his willingness to downplay this early intellectual encounter and stress instead materialistic considerations (Alexander and Sciortino 1996: 167). Our claim here stands closer to the more hermeneutical strand of the so-called "new Weber studies," which use detailed historical reconstructions to address questions pertaining to

the sociology of translation, sociology of knowledge, and sociology of academic disciplines (e.g. Ghosh 2014; Chalcraft 2008).

Our focus is on the translator² behind the author, i.e. on the work of translation as one involving a degree of interpretation but also of material composition of the work, which is especially the case when, such as to a certain extent in this case, the translator also happens to be the editor. Here, hermeneutics meets material culture studies halfway. Parsons' translation involves not just words, but also sentences and even the whole text, the text as a whole, and Weber's thinking as a whole. But *pace* Dilthey and contemporary Weberian experts such as Peter Ghosh (1994, 2001), no translator ever provides a full description of the whole. What any translator, Parsons included, can at best offer is "points of view, perspectives, partial visions of the world." (Ricoeur 2006: 27) This is why Parsons never ceased to make himself clear as to what Weber meant and what Weber's contribution was to sociology. In short, we will show the extent to which Parsons's coming to terms with Weber's ideas has been mediated by the editorial work of material composition of the book, including typographical features, the nature of the contents to be included as well as its order of appearance in the volume, as well as by his work as translator.

With the figure of the translator-interpreter at its heart, this chapter is also about the circulation and transmission of ideas. Weber's ideas about the religious origins of capitalism originate in turn of the century Germany, travel across the Atlantic via Parsons's translation and interpretation, return to post-war Germany as a sociological classic, and are eventually disseminated throughout the globe as they become part and parcel of the discipline's self-understanding (e.g. Gerhardt 2010; Lidz 2010; Scaff 2014: 17 ff.). The politics of the book will be shown to play a significant role in this process, for the struggle over the control of the material format that sustains those ideas is a key

component of their reception by any community of readers. Either by writing a new preface to a reprint of *The Protestant Ethic* in the late 1950s, a time when German historiography was actively trying to associate Weber's work with monarchist and plebiscitary political tendencies (Mommsen 1959; 1963), by highlighting the theoretical relevance of Weber's 1920 "Author's Introduction" in his work in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and by vehemently holding his ground as the editorial gatekeeper of the English-language version of the *Protestant Ethic* in a heated epistolary exchange with Anthony Giddens soon before his death, Parsons never waived in his belief that to control the Weberian legacy was to control the most widely read book in twentieth century sociology, the material embodiment of that legacy – the *Protestant Ethic*. In order to better understand Parsons's reasons, as well as the circumstances framing his choices, let us now return to the moment and place when Parsons' life-long engagement with the work began: the autumn of 1925 in Heidelberg, Germany.

The forgotten text: Parsons's German Doctoral Dissertation

A central problem drives Parsons's sojourn in Heidelberg in the academic year of 1925-1926, a transforming experience which will turn the young Parsons into a life-long Weberian (*pace* Camic 2005: 249). That problem is capitalism: What is capitalism, where does it come from, how should one account for its civilizational implications? Parsons approached this problem as a sociologist, bringing Weber with him away from the realm of economic history and into the annals of sociological theorizing. Parsons's response to this problem involves two interrelated intellectual tasks, which in turn will pave the way for his subsequent theorizing and canon-making endeavour in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). The first task is to write a doctoral dissertation on capitalism in the works of Werner Sombart and Max Weber. Contrary to what is widely

believed, this first task is divided into two separate stages, in which he writes two different versions of the doctoral dissertation. Separating these two versions is the second task: the edition and translation of Weber's essay on the religious origins of capitalism, *The Protestant Ethic*. The remainder of this chapter is organized around each of these tasks. In this section, we discuss the first version of Parsons's D.Phil.

Parsons's decision to pursue doctoral studies abroad was far from unusual at the time. Having graduated from Amherst magna cum laude in 1924, Parsons, who was unimpressed by the graduate programmes on offer in the United States, turned to the obvious and traditional context of higher learning – Europe. Parsons's first port of call in Europe was not Germany but England, though. Parsons spends the 1924-1925 academic year as a non-degree student at the London School of Economics (LSE). There L.T. Hobhouse introduces Parsons to the field of sociology, in the form of a broadly construed inquiry of the “social” encompassing both social philosophy and economic and political institutions (Parsons 1977: 18). In addition, it is the combination of his undergraduate studies on institutional economics (namely, the courses with Walton Hamilton and Clarence Ayres at Amherst) and Richard Tawney and Edwin Cannan's lectures on economic history at the LSE, which provides Parsons with the basic tools for understanding the problem of the age – the nature and origins of capitalism. That he eventually goes to Germany in the autumn of 1925 instead of returning for good to the United States, however, was entirely a matter of chance. As he will later recall (1980: 38), Parsons is awarded a fellowship in a post-war exchange program for the 1925-1926 academic year and, without having any say in the matter, is assigned to the University of Heidelberg. Enthused with the prospect of joining the oldest German university, which he visits in June 1925 and he hears about Weber for the first time (1980: 38), Parsons has one last problem to deal with. His command of

German, which had been good enough to study German philosophy at Amherst, was frankly insufficient to attend a German higher education program. The solution involves moving to Vienna, Austria and attending an intensive summer course in German. Finally, equipped with a satisfactory command of the German language and eager to learn what sociology had to say about the problem of capitalism, a youthful Parsons arrives in Heidelberg in the early days of the autumn of 1925.

Parsons's time in Heidelberg is marked by his encounter with two figures who will change his intellectual life forever. One was Max Weber, who despite having died five years before was very much still the dominant intellectual presence in Heidelberg, namely through the famous "Weber circle" that included names such as Alfred Weber, Marianne Weber, Karl Jaspers, Karl Mannheim and Alexander von Schelting. The very first of Weber's writings that he read was no other than *Die protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus*, which gripped his interest immediately: he later recalls having read it "as if it were a detective story" (Parsons 1980: 39). The other was Edgar Salin, who agrees to supervise his D.Phil. on capitalism. Based at Basel and temporarily at Heidelberg at the time of Parsons' visit (Gerhardt 2011: 71), Salin was an economist conversant with the German Historical School of economics and its critics.

Unsurprisingly, it is Salin who suggests the dissertation to focus on the theories of capitalism by Marx, Sombart and Weber. Parsons begins working on his doctoral dissertation – titled *Der Kapitalismus bei Sombart und Max Weber*³ – at the start of his second semester in Heidelberg, in early 1926.

The first noteworthy aspect of Parsons's doctoral project is the role of Marx. Contrary to what is widely believed, partly because of what Parsons led us to believe time and again, the fact is that in neither versions of the dissertation is there a chapter on Marx. This does not mean, however, that Marx is irrelevant for Parsons's argument. On

the contrary, Marx provides the young Parsons with the theoretical benchmark according to which Sombart's and Weber's theories of capitalism are evaluated. Marx is positioned next to Hegel as the two main exponents of a distinctively German philosophical approach to history and, by extension, to capitalism. This German tradition constituted, in the eyes of the young Parsons, the main alternative to the utilitarian, individualistic and rationalistic approach dominant in orthodox economics. Parsons's research question was: To what extent were Sombart and Weber viable alternatives to both orthodox economics and the German historical school? Answering this question amounted to identify the right theoretical-methodological approach to a key phenomenon of the modern age – capitalism. The structure of the dissertation reflects this concern. The dissertation, which is 140-pages-long, falls in six chapters. After a brief general introduction, there is a first substantive chapter on three contemporary German theories of capitalism (Richard Passow, Georg von Below and Lujo Brentano, respectively). This is followed by two lengthy chapters, which constitute the bulk of the dissertation. The first is on Sombart's analysis of modern capitalism (pp. 17-64), the other on Max Weber (pp. 65-106). The fifth chapter, entitled "The Facts of Capitalism," offers a synthetic analysis of key aspects of the capitalist system, such as market relations or the role of technology. The dissertation concludes with a general critical assessment of Sombart and Weber's theories of capitalism. The few scattered remarks on Marx in the text are there exclusively to help Parsons to frame his argument and help him evaluate Sombart's and Weber's achievements.

The main difference between Sombart and Weber in this regard was that while the former had articulated a theory of capitalism, the latter had only fragments and individual investigations. An "element of construction is therefore unavoidable, to a greater extent than in the case of Sombart," observes Parsons in the chapter devoted to

Weber's analysis of capitalism (1926: 66). Such "construction" involved a critical inquiry into a fundamental ambiguity in Weber's definition of capitalism.⁴ For Parsons, there were "two different meanings of capitalism present in the works of Max Weber, which have relatively little to do with each other." (1926: 66) One was "capitalism in general," which was supposed to encompass all historical instances of the phenomenon. The other was "modern capitalism," which referred to the historically specific experience of capitalist development in the West. The thrust of Parsons's argument in this chapter, indeed in the German version of the dissertation as a whole, was to investigate the origins of this conceptual ambiguity, document its implications for Weber's ability to explain capitalism, and eventually suggest an alternative approach.

The first instance of this ambiguity is found in Weber's discussion of the objectivity, in the sense of a methodical, rational and continual pursuit for profit, that Weber claims to characterize both capitalism in general and modern capitalism. For Sombart and Marx, Parsons notes, this is a specific trait of modern capitalism. Parsons ventures a possible explanation for this apparent contradiction in Weber's words "capitalist ordering of the entire society." "Capitalist businesses, and therefore capitalism, exist everywhere" Parsons writes, "but a 'capitalist ordering of the entire society' exists only in the West." (1926: 68) Objectivity, in other words, is a matter of degree. If traces of it can be found in all human societies, the fact remains that only in Western societies has it become a dominant feature. Of course, the analysis of the societal process of rationalisation is a key element of Weber's sociological diagnosis of our epoch, a diagnosis marked by an irreversible pessimism. It is also, as we soon shall see, one of the key issues around which Parsons's interpretation takes place.

"It can hardly be this capitalism of which Max Weber writes: 'the most fateful power of our modern life,'" Parsons observes. Here he is surely referring to modern

capitalism. After examining the non-economic pre-conditions of modern capitalism, which include science, bureaucracy, the judicial system and urbanization, Parsons discusses its main features. These include the separation of the household from the business environment, double-entry bookkeeping, and the rational organization of work. In its pure form, the rational organization of work amounts to bureaucratization. Its main characteristics include competencies, official hierarchy, monetary economy, rigid discipline (which Parsons connects to the spirit of capitalism), and education, namely the training of experts and specialists. In Weber's view, bureaucratization is the end result of rationalization and can thus be found in both capitalist and socialist systems. More important than its general character, however, are its ethical implications. Parsons notes that here "we are confronted with Weber's pessimistic fatalism." (1926: 84) Indeed, Weber is haunted by the prospect of an increasingly bureaucratized world, leading inexorably towards the fossilization and petrification of the human spirit.

For Weber, however, the tendency towards rationalisation is far from homogenous as there is no single, universal type of rationality. Instead, Weber stresses the relativity of all processes of rationalisation in the different societal domains: for instance, what is seen as rational in the domain of economics can be regarded as irrational from the domain of technology. The Weberian understanding of a "value-free science" asserting the full relativism of all rationality best emerge in *The Protestant Ethic*, to which Parsons devotes a 15-page-long discussion. This segment will not survive Parsons's revision, though. This has partly to do with its descriptive character, but also because of two implications of this study to Weber's overall theory of capitalism he will eventually abandon altogether or, as in the second case, refine.

The first implication refers to the utilitarian implications of the spirit of capitalism, and the subsequent materialism this has helped produce. In the German

dissertation, Weber's analysis of modern capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic* is said to portrait the capitalist system as primarily defined by its totalizing rationality and mechanistic quality, but also by its overriding materialism: "Things govern men, not the other way around." Despite Weber's criticism of Marx's materialist conception of history, "even presenting his theory of Protestantism as a counter-thesis," the truth was that "there is undeniably a tendency in capitalism itself to realize this idea. It will even happen if the development continues, that the mind actually plays no role in history and more will be reduced to mere servants." Parsons concludes: "Here the materialist conception of history is put into perspective and made the characteristic of the capitalist age." (1926: 102) Such a materialistic conclusion derives, in Parsons's view, from the way in which Weber had conceived of the character and historical role of the spirit of capitalism. Even though the social ethics illustrated by Benjamin Franklin is not concerned with the maximization of happiness (far from it: it is entirely irrational and the source of profound anxiety), it ultimately leads "into a utilitarianism." (1926: 89)

The second implication refers to the conceptual ambiguity between the two meanings of capitalism. *The Protestant Ethic* is a historical case, not a study of capitalism in general. Yet Weber ends up confusing the two "under the concept of the ideal type." (1926: 105) This is because of his "comparative method." As Parsons tries to explain, Weber "selects societal atoms and uses them to construct historical epochs and cultures. But the fact is that these atoms have a different meaning in different times and cultures. Here a 'change of meaning' takes place, in the sense of Karl Mannheim. That he neglects this, makes it impossible for him to elaborate a capitalist culture as a whole. Therefore, we think, he over exaggerates the importance of the rational organization of work and everything connected with it." Parsons believes the source of this theoretical difficulty to be of conceptual nature: "The spirit of capitalism is, of

course, a specific modern-occidental thing. It is certainly not the spirit of capitalism in general. The result of such use of the term is a bad conceptual ambiguity.” (1926: 104) Parsons’s verdict is clear. “The main reason for this confusion”, he assures us, “is that Weber is trying to accommodate two different things under the concept of the ideal type.” “One has to make a choice,” Parsons argues. Either “capitalism is a general ideal type” or “capitalism must be a ‘historical individual.’” Given this conceptual confusion on Weber’s part, “the attempt failed.” (1926: 105) Although Parsons would maintain this verdict in the English version of the D.Phil.,⁵ the fact is that its nature changes substantially, evolving from a matter of conceptual ambiguity in need of clarification to a more sophisticated argument regarding Weber’s employment of ideal types as a concept formation strategy.

Parsons concludes this German version of the dissertation by the end of the summer semester of 1926, submits it to Salin, and returns to the United States where he has a one-year post as instructor in Economics waiting for him at Amherst College. A few months later, in December, Parsons asks his 2-chapter doctoral dissertation to be returned to him by mail, with the argument he wanted to add a third chapter. As it turns out, he will never return the original manuscript in German. Claiming it had got lost in the mail, Parsons will in fact resubmit a revised version of his dissertation in English in July 1927 and accepted by Heidelberg’s philosophy department. This version was eventually published in two parts in 1928 and 1929 in *The Journal of Political Economy*.⁶ What happened in the second half of 1926 that made Parsons act like this?

Composing the *Protestant Ethic*

One finds evidence of the most likely explanation in a letter Parsons sent to Marianne Weber in April 1927. He begins by saying that: “Some months ago, I was asked to translate something from Max Weber into English. The proposal seemed exceedingly attractive, and I have started negotiations on it with several people.”⁷ Parsons then asks Marianne Weber’s opinion, letting her know about his opinion regarding this editorial project: “Would you like to see this work of Max Weber appear in English? I do not know whether I am sufficiently familiar with the work of Max Weber and with the German language, such that I would be qualified to the task. Nevertheless, I shall do my best, because I believe that especially this essay will be exceedingly important for us in America and would deserve to be much better known.”

As this letter suggests, the young Parsons’s involvement in the translation of *The Protestant Ethic* is a complex work in translation and editorial composition prone with consequences. Parsons’s translation choices, editorial decisions as to what text and by which order to include, and the paratext penned by him, offer us precious insight as to the dialectic between form and content through which his early sociological thinking unfolded. It was through editing, translating, and writing for the English version of Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic* that Parsons gradually reached what would be his mature understanding of Weber’s ideas. Quite literally, Parsons becomes a Weberian by immersing himself in the materiality of Weber’s ideas on the religious nature of capitalism, an intensive intellectual and manual labor of interpretation, translation, edition, and critical commentary between early 1927 and 1930, the time by which the book is eventually published in London and New York. A full understanding of this dialectic supposes answering a number of questions. To begin with, how did a 23-year-old exchange student like Parsons ended up translating Weber’s essay? What did this editorial and translation work entailed exactly? And how did it impact Parsons’s future

views and choices? These are the three main questions we will try to answer in what follows.

Behind the choice of Parsons to act as translator into English of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic*,⁸ along with the preface Weber had written for the entire collection of his world religion essays,⁹ lies not a publisher but a senior colleague, Professor Harry Elmer Barnes. It is Barnes, a historically-minded sociologist then based at Smith College, who first suggests that, with his language skills and academic training, Parsons would be the ideal person to translate Weber's essay (Scaff 2005: 210). Parsons' enthusiastic reply seems to have been motivated by at least two kinds of reasons. On the one hand, it seems to have been motivated by a genuine intellectual interest. As he will later recall, Weber's linking of Puritanism and capitalism exerted a tremendous fascination upon him. (Parsons 1980: 39) This intellectual reason was complemented by another factor of more pragmatic nature. Upon his return to America, Parsons worked as instructor in the Amherst Department of Economics, teaching both an introductory economics course and his own senior course on "Recent European Social Developments and Social Theories." Parsons' consideration of Barnes' proposal coincides with his preparation of the materials to give out to his students who did not read German, including *The Protestant Ethic*.¹⁰

Besides Barnes, there is someone else who will act as a crucial facilitator once Parsons decides to take forward this project. This facilitator is no other than Weber's widow and fierce gatekeeper of her late husband's intellectual legacy – Marianne Weber. This unlikely alliance between a young American exchange student and Weber's widow, an alliance that will only become more personal and stronger over the years, will prove invaluable in light of the exceedingly difficult negotiations with the German editor, Oskar Siebeck, and the English language publishers in London and New

York (see Scaff 2006: 70 ff.). It is Marianne Weber who mediates Parsons' proposal for translation, first by contacting Siebeck herself, then by arranging a meeting with Parsons and Siebeck.¹¹ This meeting led Parsons to a follow-up conversation with Oskar Siebeck, who reportedly "had a very good impression of him." As Lawrence Scaff summarizes, without "Parsons' stubborn persistence 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." (2006: 72)

Parsons's acting as editor and translator of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* takes place within a larger collective effort, involving over a dozen specialized academic and non-academic figures based in Germany, England and the United States over the course of three years, all sharing the same orientation towards the print publication of Weber's text in English. The translation of Weber's text was an international affair, with a German side keen on protecting both Weber's intellectual legacy and the financial interests of his widow, and an Anglo-American front divided into editors interested in the commercial side of the venture and academic figures with different appreciations of Weber's achievements. Caught in between this was a young Parsons, with no experience as translator and very little academic credentials.

This meant Parsons performed a limited role in the decision-making process of what to publish. This does not mean, however, that he was not kept informed of the decisions and consulted on occasion. But it does mean that the main editorial decisions were taken elsewhere. It were the editors Oskar Siebeck, on the German side, and at first Kegan Paul and Alfred Knopf and then Stanley Unwin, on the English side, to decide the essential features of this translation, a process of strenuous negotiation that went on for several months with editorial, typographic and commercial decisions often clashing with academic and intellectual considerations. Contributing to this was the

nature of the work. Originally published as a two-part article and later published in revised form as a book,¹² translating *Die protestantische Ethik* was always to be a difficult enterprise.

At first, Parsons was of the opinion that the essay should have been translated not as a one-volume book, but as part of Weber's 3-volume work on world's religions, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*.¹³ From a scholarly perspective, this would have been the most appropriate choice. The German editor, Oskar Siebeck, was of the same opinion. The problem was to convince the English and American editors, Kegan Paul in London and Alfred A. Knopf in New York, of the commercial viability and editorial interest of such an option. Kegan Paul and Knopf doubt that a massive three-volume work by a relatively unknown German scholar would sell, and insist in publishing only a segment: at first, there is an agreement to publish at least two out of the three volumes but this eventually flounders, putting the whole project at risk.

This is when Parsons intervenes. He puts scholarly considerations aside and believing it was preferable to compromise rather than not having any translation, he urges Siebeck to consider translating only the first of the three volumes with another publisher. It works. Siebeck reaches out to Stanley Unwin in London, with whom he had already worked, with the proposal of having the first volume of Weber's *Religionssoziologie* translated into English. Despite his reservations on working with an American translator, in July 1927 Unwin accepts Siebeck's proposal of editing a one-volume work composed of pages 1-275 of the first volume of *Religionssoziologie*. Upon further consideration of the commercial viability of the project, Unwin will backtrack and suggest the translation to be scaled back even further. The final round of negotiations between Unwin, on the one hand, and Siebeck, Marianne Weber and Parsons on the other, ends with an agreement that has been materialized in the book as

we know it today. The essay on the Protestant sects and the “Eileitung” to the subsequent series of essays on the world religions were dropped, but Weber’s 1920 “Author’s Introduction” survives. This eleventh hour decision, for which Parsons was co-responsible, will have momentous consequences. Combined with his own “Translator’s Preface,” this paratext will prove invaluable for Parsons’s interpretation and appropriation of Weber.

But before we consider these paratexts, let us examine Parsons’s involvement with the text, a sensuous dialectic of material-formal considerations and intellectual decisions. An aspect often overlooked by contemporary commentators when assessing Parsons’s translation is the degree to which this work was subject to the constant editorial oversight on the part of Allen & Unwin.¹⁴ For one, the typography of Parsons’s translation draft was profoundly changed as a result of this oversight and ensuing interventions. Contrary to the common criticism that Parsons’s translation failed to keep Weber’s frequent use of italics and inverted commas (e.g. Ghosh 1994: 114), thus doing violence to the author’s nuanced line of reasoning, the fact is that this was the result of an explicit suggestion by R.H. Tawney (Scaff 2006: 77). The same happened to Parsons’s decision to keep Weber’s paragraphs intact and include marginal pagination references to the German original: paragraphs and sentences were altered and the marginal pagination dropped, again following Tawney’s recommendation. Parsons does not seem to have been consulted regarding the decision of replacing Weber’s copious footnotes by endnotes, a decision that profoundly affected the interpretation of the text insofar as much of Weber’s more qualified and nuanced reasoning occurs precisely in the footnotes. Parsons’s translation choices, however, seemed to have been left untouched. His stated aim of trying “to be faithful to the text rather than to present a work of art as far as English style is concerned”¹⁵ is an obvious understatement. Despite

its obvious conceptual inconsistencies (Ghosh 1994; Tribe 2007; Scaff 2014: 25) regarding central Weberian concepts such as *Begriff* (“concept”), *Beruf* (“calling, vocation, profession”), *bürgerlich* (“bourgeois”), or *Lebensführung* (“spirit, way of life”), Parsons’s translation of Weber remains second to none in its pathos, with memorable passages that eventually become an integral part of the Anglo-American sociological vocabulary.

Parsons’s “Translator’s Preface” features four main arguments, after briefly presenting the main facts regarding the text that had been translated. The first argument concerns Weber’s voluminous footnotes. Distancing himself from the editorial decision of publishing them at the end of the volume, Parsons advises to his readers a “careful perusal of the notes” since “a great deal of important material is contained in them.” He then reinforces this point and makes clear that his interpretation of Weber’s text and the material form imposed by Unwin were anything but coincident: “The fact that they are printed separately from the main text should not be allowed to hinder their use.” (1930: ix) The second argument is about the philosophy of translation. Parsons reiterates his earlier position regarding the priority given to accuracy over style: “The translation is, as far as is possible, faithful to the text, rather than attempting to achieve any more than ordinary, clear English style.” (1930: ix) The two last arguments are the most important.

The first has to do with the “Introduction.” Crucially, Parsons does not mean Tawney’s 15-page foreword, written as an introductory text to *The Protestant Ethic* and that immediately follows Parsons’ preface. Indeed, he does not even mention Tawney’s text at all, a telling sign of his consideration of it. Instead, Parsons uses the designation “Introduction” – the main paratextual threshold of interpretation of any text – to refer to Weber’s 1920 “*Vorbemerkung*” (preface, introduction) to *Religionssoziologie*. This is one of the most controversial aspects of this edition. The editorial decision to compose

the work in this order – first, Parsons’s preface, followed by Tawney’s foreword, Weber’s introduction to *Religionssoziologie*, the text, and finally the endnotes – and Parsons’s argument that it “has been included in this translation because it gives some of the general background ideas and problems into which Weber himself meant this particular study of it,” led Weber’s 18-page long “Author’s Introduction” to be read by generations of English-speaking readers as the introduction to *The Protestant Ethic*. For some, the result of this dialectic between form and content was a serious confusion as the introduction outlines a broad question that the *Protestant Ethic* answers at best tangentially (Riesebrodt 2005: 25). Yet for Parsons this is to miss the point entirely. In his view, and this is a view Parsons will hold throughout his life (e.g. 1970; 1971a; 1971b), Weber’s “Author’s Introduction” is the key to understand the deep meaning and broader sociological relevance of *The Protestant Ethic*.

The last argument was about the relative worth of the text in the context of Weber’s sociological production. Parsons begins by recalling the omitted texts from the first volume of *Religionssoziologie*, which can only be read as yet another attempt of distancing himself from the editor’s decision. As a result, Parsons laments, what “is here presented to English-speaking readers is only a fragment.” But, he tells his readers, “it is a fragment which is in many ways of central significance for Weber’s philosophy of history, as well as being of very great and very general interest for the thesis it advances to explain some of the most important aspects of modern culture.” (1930: xi) With the stroke of a pen, and a limited yet crucial editorial influence on the material form of the work,¹⁶ Parsons positions *The Protestant Ethic* at the very heart of not only Weber’s *oeuvre* but of sociology itself.

Crucial for this positioning was the typographic positioning of Weber’s “Author’s Introduction” as the introduction to the translation of *The Protestant Ethic*

into English, as well as Parsons's critical commentary on its relative importance, first, as we have just seen, in his own preface, and subsequently in his D.Phil. dissertation, published around the same time as *The Protestant Ethic*. Parts of Parsons's dissertation can be read as a close, almost line by line, commentary of Weber's "Author's Introduction" and, to a less extent, of *The Protestant Ethic*. In the "Author's Introduction" Weber begins with the research problem of why only in the West have cultural phenomena appeared that have a universal significance and value (1930: 13). Weber then enumerates the pre-conditions for this development: science, law, arts, education, bureaucracy and the state. He then turns to the origins of modern Western capitalism, whose main distinctive feature is the rational organization of labor (1930: 21), although the separation of business from the household and rational bookkeeping were important too. Weber's conclusion points towards the explanatory role of the societal process of rationalization (1930: 26), and justifies the inclusion of *The Protestant Ethic* as an historical case that illuminates the unintended consequences of the long-forgotten religious origins of this process (1930: 27).

For Benjamin Nelson, the last writing to have been penned by Weber "offers us insights afforded only obliquely and intermittently elsewhere" and is the clearest example of Weber's "mature awareness that the realization of his master purposes as a sociologist was not possible without a definite commitment to a perspective he himself called 'universal historical.'" (1974: 271) For Parsons, the "Author's Introduction" had an even more personal meaning. It had provided him with the key to his coming to terms with Weber's sociology. This was the text through which he realized the methodological-historical significance of *The Protestant Ethic*, became a Weberian, and was to provide him with a stepping stone for a non-materialistic yet non-utilitarian sociological theory of action. Composed over three strenuous years, under severe

commercial constraints and involving an international team of collaborators centred around the unlikely figure of a young Talcott Parsons, the first English rendition of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is published by George Allen & Unwin in London in June 1930, and by Scribner's in New York a few months later.

From translator to interpreter: *The Protestant Ethic* and the second D.Phil. dissertation

This work of composition and translation had an immediate and lasting impact upon Parsons. It made him rethink his interpretation of Weber, an intellectual development that is most clear when one compares the two versions of the D.Phil. thesis. The German version, composed *before* Parsons embarks on the translation of *The Protestant Ethic*, concluded with critical notes regarding Weber's supposed utilitarianism and the conceptual ambiguity of his definition of capitalism. The English version, written *after* he begins his work of translation and submitted on July 12, 1927 in Heidelberg, is noticeably different. This means that, contrary to what has been widely believed, the English dissertation was not the starting point of Parsons's interpretation of Weber. Rather, it was the end point of an attempt at understanding Weber with the help of Weber's own methodological tools. How did Parsons arrive at this position?

To begin with, the English version is about half the length of the German one. Parsons's audacious move meant that he eventually submits only a revised version of the two main chapters of his first dissertation, dropping the preface, the introductory chapter on Passow, von Below and Brentano, as well as the last two chapters. The imaginary lost chapter on Marx remained only that, a myth Parsons fed over the years. More important, however, were the changes Parsons made to his argument in the

chapters on Sombart and, in particular, on Weber. One can almost picture Parsons at his desk at Amherst typing these two new chapters, with the German dissertation on one side, and his “translation sample” of *The Protestant Ethic*, including Weber’s “Author’s Introduction,” on the other.

The outcome of this was a new, more sophisticated understanding of Weber’s thinking. In the remaining of this section, we will follow Parsons’s interventions in his dissertation, sometimes in the form of deletions, sometimes in the form of additions, in others still Parsons’s interventions consisted in moving certain passages from one place in the argument to another. Parson’s “construction” of Weber emerges thus as a dialectic process triggered by the German dissertation, mediated by the translation and editorial composition of *The Protestant Ethic*, and concluded with the English version of the D.Phil.. It is in the differences between the two versions of the dissertation, which can be traced back to the Parsons’s work as translator-interpreter in the first half of 1927, that the evolution of Parsons’s appropriation of Weber comes out more clearly.

The first difference concerns the framing of the discussion. Whereas in the German dissertation Parsons begins by addressing what he designates as a problem of “conceptual ambiguity” between the notions of capitalism in general and modern capitalism in Weber’s writings – a theoretical dead end – now the angle is thoroughly theoretical-methodological. This is a crucial change. It allows Parsons to build upon Weber and start erecting his own approach. He maintains a critical attitude toward Weber (that Weber had confused modern capitalism with capitalism in general), but now this is framed within a detailed discussion of ideal-types as a theoretical-methodological strategy to gain “understanding” of historical phenomena, both in their uniqueness and in what they share with all other historical cases.

The uniqueness of “historical individuals,” that is, historical cases composed of a number of interlinked social agents, is expressed in the “infinite variety of facts from which a selection for purposes of analysis must be made.” (1929: 20) Given the historically contingent character of such historical cases, “the discovery of uniform relations and their formulation in terms of ‘laws’ cannot be the objective of such a science.” (1929: 20) For that, one needs to overcome the particular nature of historical “understanding” and reach the level of a general explanatory theory. This second type of “understanding” Weber attempts to attain by means of the ideal type.” An ideal type, Parsons explains, is “a special *construction* in the mind of the investigator of what social action would be if it were directed with perfect rationality toward a given end. (...) It is a picture of what things would be under ‘ideal,’ not actual, conditions.” (1929: 20-21) Equipped with this instrument of analysis, the investigator ceases to be a “mere historian” (1929: 5) and becomes able to produce (sociological) theory, i.e. “a consistent and unified system of concepts to be used in the analysis of social phenomena.” (1929: 5) The same is to say, in the eyes of Parsons, Weber ceases to be a mere economic historian and becomes a sociological theorist whose ideal-type methodology allows him to compare the “actual record of events in many different instances and thus attempt to ‘understand’ them, each in its individual uniqueness, by seeing how far they conform to action rationally directed toward the given ends, and to distinguish such elements as are not ‘understandable’ in these terms.” (1929: 21)

Bruce C. Wearne rightly called our attention long ago to the fact that the young Parsons “used this instrument himself in his investigation of Weber’s thought” (1989: 47) and that Weber’s “Author’s Introduction” acted as a “kind of ideal-typical representation of Weber’s sociology as a whole.” (1989: 48) But what Wearne fails to appreciate is the extent to which these hermeneutical moves by Parsons were the result

of a laborious rewriting of his German dissertation through a closer contact with Weber's writings – *maxime*, *The Protestant Ethic*, the 1920 “Author’s Introduction,” but also sections of *Economy and Society* regarding charisma and routine – that he was translating into English and teaching his students at Amherst.

All other differences result to a certain extent to this first, crucial difference. The second difference concerns Weber's concept of capitalism in general. First, whereas in the German dissertation, Parsons uses Weber's writings on “Agrarian Relations” and the 1920 “Author’s Introduction” to illustrate Weber's concept of capitalism in general, in the English dissertation this is replaced by a thoroughly methodological analysis of that concept. The references to Weber's writings are relegated to the endnotes. (1929: 22) Second, and more importantly, this leads Parsons to a different conclusion regarding this aspect of Weber's theory. In the German dissertation, Parsons had concluded that the difference between modern capitalism and capitalism in general was a question of degree. In the English dissertation, Parsons maintains this idea but adds: “But that is not the whole story, as will be shown presently.” (1929: 24) Parsons then offers a new conclusion to his discussion of capitalism in general. Whereas before it included a description of two characteristics (its peaceful and calculable character), which are now under the discussion of modern capitalism, the new conclusion is that Weber uses a characteristic feature of modern society – namely, “a thoroughgoing systematization and adaptation of practical life to a particular set of ideals” (1929: 24) – to define capitalism in general, which “indicates that he did not clearly distinguish in his own mind the two separate concepts of capitalism to be found in his work.” (1929: 24)

The third difference has to do with Parsons's examination of Weber's notion of modern capitalism. The first thing that changes is Parsons's depiction of modern capitalism as a “historical individual,” following his new theoretical-methodological

understanding of Weber's work. This paves the way to a whole new structure of Parsons's argument regarding modern capitalism. Showing the influence of a closer reading of Weber's "Author's Introduction," which is analysed by Parsons step by step in this segment of his dissertation, he begins by inserting the theme of rationalization right at the outset of the discussion of modern capitalism. This is absent from the German dissertation. In here, Parsons had discussed successively bookkeeping, socialism, bureaucracy, and concluded with a lengthy description of the argument of *The Protestant Ethic*. The result of this was a (misguided) criticism of Weber's materialism and a methodological criticism that failed to do justice to Weber's actual usage of the concept of the ideal-type. The structure of the English dissertation is very different: it discusses bookkeeping, bureaucracy, socialism, and the spirit of capitalism. This discussion of the spirit of capitalism replaces the description of *The Protestant Ethic* that can be found in the German dissertation. Parsons now offers his readers a methodological discussion of the relative place of that historical case within Weber's general theory. In particular, Weber is now credited for having developed a theory of modern capitalism, in the sense of a "historical individual," around two key contributions: the exclusion of capitalist adventurers because their irrationality directly contradicts the fundamental trait of modern society – rationality – and the concept of the spirit of capitalism, "which takes its departure from the dominant fact of rational bureaucratic organization." (1929: 27)

Like in the German dissertation, Parsons then questions the "significance" of "this theory of the spirit of capitalism for Weber's view of capitalism as a whole." (1929: 30) While in the German dissertation the answer involved criticizing Weber for having made materialism the distinctive feature of the capitalist age and conceived of the spirit of capitalism as a social ethics that led into utilitarianism, in the English

version all references to the alleged materialism and utilitarianism of Weber's thesis were dropped. All Parsons left after his revision was the much milder conclusion that Weber "does accept economic determinism as a characteristic of capitalism, and thus gives it a relative validity." (1929: 32) Parsons's new answer to the question of the significance of the (historically contingent) spirit of capitalism is that it allows us to see the main features of capitalism in general: the economic system as a whole, once refracted from the historical lenses of the spirit of capitalism, emerges as objective, rational, ascetic, mechanistic, and structural. (1929: 31) The significance of this change should not be overlooked. This is because of what Parsons had to say in *The Structure of Social Action* about utilitarianism (Lidz 2010: 45). Attesting the relevance of the German dissertation as an historical document, here we find material evidence of the development of Parsons's theorizing, from this early interpretation of Weber and *The Protestant Ethic* as proto-materialist and utilitarian, to the mature view (Parsons 1968: 87-125) that a key element of the Weberian legacy is the distinction between utilitarianism (anomic, selfish behaviour) and voluntarism, understood as normatively regulated community-oriented behavior.

The fourth difference lies in the way Parsons concludes the dissertation. Whereas Parsons had concluded the German dissertation pointing to Weber's tragic fatalism but offering no real alternative, as all that he asked from Weber was more conceptual clarity in the definition of capitalism, he concludes the English dissertation with a strikingly different note. This is a note of optimism, both ethical and theoretical. Offering a more substantial analysis of Weber's treatment of the relation between charisma and routine, which had led Weber to the pessimistic view that "the really vital human forces appear only in charismatic forms" and that capitalism "presents a dead, mechanized condition of society in which there is no room left for these truly creative

forces because all human activity is forced to follow the ‘system,’” (1929: 33) Parsons develops an alternative ethical-political scenario out of his new theoretical-methodological understanding of Weber’s work.

A crucial addition to the English dissertation is the insight right at the outset of the chapter on Weber that ideal types refer to one aspect or side of a historical case, and are a means to an end, while “historical individuals” cover the whole essence of the phenomena and constitute the end of the research itself. (1929: 21-22) Parsons criticizes Weber for not following through with this distinction between a historical and a methodological form of the concept of the ideal-type. This novel understanding permits Parsons to point to a way out of the rationalization conundrum envisaged by Weber under the Nietzschean spell: “Weber’s ironbound process of rationalization lies in the isolation of one aspect of social development and the attribution of historical reality to an ideal type which was never meant to represent it.” Parsons concluded: “If this error is corrected the absolute domination of the process of rationalization over the whole social process falls to the ground.” (1929: 35) His ethical-political alternative was clear too. “But is it not possible”, Parsons asked referring to the “either, or” terms in which Weber conceives of the charisma-routine relationship, “that all manner of combinations between them are possible, and that the present-day power of the bureaucratic mechanism is due to a very special set of circumstances which do not involve the necessity for its continued dominance over life, *but leave the possibility open that it may again be made to serve ‘spiritual’ aims?*” (1929: 34 – our emphasis)

Translating, editing and teaching *The Protestant Ethic* in 1926-1927 in Amherst gave Parsons the theoretical-methodological means to read Weber in a “progressive light” (Brick 1994: 372) and to realize that we were not condemned to Weber’s pessimistic fatalism – instead, one could use the creative power of theoretical reflection

to become optimistic again. (Wearne 1989: 56) This is the real origin of Parsons's famous "Agenda of 1927," (Brick 1994: 369 ff.) the social reformist and neo-Kantian epistemology agenda that Parsons will pursue after the submission of the English dissertation until the publication of *The Structure of Social Action* in 1937. The two basic premises of this agenda are Weberian, and can be traced back to this crucial juncture when Parsons revises his German dissertation and for the first time articulates his mature vision. The first premise is that sociology should be founded upon the study of social action in terms of the subjective motives that guide it. The second premise is the neo-Kantian emphasis on theory as guiding scientific research: this will push Parsons to develop highly abstract and general sociological theory. The next step was for Parsons to compare Weber's contributions to those from other theorists. This will eventually lead Parsons to consider the works of Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber and look for incipient traces of a common "voluntaristic theory of action." In time, this will coalesce into the "narrative of voluntarism" (Scaff 2014: 283), the image that will capture the imagination of American readers in the 1950s and 1960s around the idea of religious sects and their effects upon individual and social action. It is by selectively appropriating Weber for his purposes that Parsons, in combination with contributions from other seminal thinkers, will build the grand theoretical scheme that will reign supreme in American post-war sociology.

One should not forget, however, of the starting point of this theoretical pilgrimage. Out of the dialectic between form and content emerges a sort of interaction effect, namely between the translation work and theory building, and from theory building back to translation choices. Parsons's often commented but little understood choice to expurgate his English rendition of *The Protestant Ethic* from most

Nietzschean references, especially at the end of the text, have to be understood in this context. To allow Nietzsche's influence over Weber's thesis to remain a visible force would be tantamount of defeat to fatalism.¹⁷ On the contrary, having found the way out of Weber's self-imposed pessimism in a theoretically grounded optimism, Parsons was seemingly happy to sacrifice textual accuracy for theoretical solutions. If to translate is indeed a form of interpretation, and interpretation is also to be evaluated in terms of its world-making capacities, then the liberties Parsons gave himself in translating Weber are amply justified.

Conclusion

The tactile-intellectual sense of attachment Parsons felt to this little book should not be discounted. Next to Parsons's voluminous intellectual production, one may be tempted to think of it as juvenile episode of little consequence. Nothing could be more misleading, however. On the contrary, Parsons consistently thought of his first editorial project as a Janus-faced icon, a material signifier that provided a link to one of the "immortals" (1980: 43) in sociology while acting as an exemplary for future sociological research, as he emphasized in his last public lectures which he delivered virtually in the shadow of Weber's statue in Munich the day before his death. And he did not hesitate to act when he felt his bond with the work was either in need of renewal or somehow in danger. Two examples suffice to illustrate Parsons's strong heartfelt feelings of attachment to this work.

The first example is the new preface Parsons writes for the first paperback reissue of the work. In fact, *The Protestant Ethic* had a difficult reception in the period leading to the war¹⁸ and only started to gain traction after 1945. (Roth 1999: 521) It will

take a further decade and a new material form to finally reach the masses of undergraduate and graduate students of the post-war years.¹⁹ Published in the Scribner Library, a series of best-selling classics in paperback established in 1958, *The Protestant Ethic* gained a new life. Contributing to this new life was Parsons's "Preface to New Edition," where he begins exactly by expressing his "great satisfaction" with this new edition, "given the kind of status as a modern classic which, for serious scholarly books, comes with issue to the paper cover trade." (1958: xii) Thirty years had passed since the first English translation and the lessons to be learned from the work had changed accordingly. In typical fashion, Parsons equates the progress made by the social sciences in this period with the development of his structural-functionalist version of systems theory: "Weber's trend of interpretation of the modern industrial society was couched within the framework of a more general theoretical analysis of the structure and functioning of social systems." (1958: xv) Reiterating the "convergence thesis" of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons argues that "the important thing about Weber's work was not how he judged the relative importance or of economic factors, but rather the way in which he analyzed the systems of social action within which ideas and values as well as "economic forces" operate to influence action." (1958: xvi) The convergence of Weber's contribution with those from Durkheim, Cooley, Mead and Freud was obvious in Parsons's eyes.

The second example is the controversy²⁰ between Parsons and the British sociologist Anthony Giddens over the control of *The Protestant Ethic* and, by extension, of the interpretation of Weber's legacy.²¹ At the centre of the controversy is the Allen and Unwin 1976 edition of *The Protestant Ethic*, the first new edition since 1930.²² The controversy between Parsons and Giddens originates in the fact that neither the publisher, nor Giddens seek to get Parsons' consent before moving ahead. To make

matters worse, this new edition had been scheduled without Parsons's "Translator's Preface" of 1930 and also leaving out his "Preface to New Edition" of 1958. Parsons' translation of Weber's "Author's Introduction" was to be retained, however. Crucially, this new edition was to include a newly written introduction by Giddens. Giddens, then fellow of King's College, Cambridge, was a rising star in the sociological establishment partly due to his theoretical attempt to replace what he believed to be Parsons' idealist reading of Weber for an interpretation of Weber as a conflict theorist.²³

The controversy between Parsons and Giddens originates in the fact that neither the publisher, nor Giddens seek to get Parsons' consent before moving ahead. To make matters worse, this new edition had been scheduled without Parsons's "Translator's Preface" of 1930 and also leaving out his "Preface to New Edition" of 1958. Parsons' translation of Weber's "Author's Introduction" was to be retained, however. Crucially, this new edition was to include a newly written introduction by Giddens. An exchange of angry and apologetic correspondence between Parsons, Giddens, and the publisher in London, led to a compromise: Parsons's 'Translator's Preface' of 1930 would be reinstated.

The lesson to be drawn from these two examples is that crucial struggles over the control of meaning are played through socio-technical inscription devices such as the book. While the first case illustrates how Parsons used *The Protestant Ethic* as a mobile material outlet to promulgate his ideas, the second shows his willingness to react to any perceived threat to that editorial control over the work. Likewise, Giddens's career as social theorist is virtually impossible to understand in its scope and consequences without reference to his parallel work as editor and commentator. Translators, but also editors and commentators, are key agents in the politics of the book.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. and Giuseppe Sciortino. "On Choosing One's Intellectual Predecessors: The Reductionism of Camic's Treatment of Parsons and the Institutionalists." *Sociological Theory* 14, no. 2 (1996): 154-171.
- Brick, Howard. "The Reformist Dimension of Talcott Parsons's Early Social Theory." In *The Culture of the Market*, edited by Thomas Haskell and Richard Teichgraeber III, 357-96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Camic, Charles. "The Making of a Method: A Historical Reinterpretation of the Early Parsons." *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987): 421-39.
- "Introduction: Talcott Parsons before *The Structure of Social Action*." In *Talcott Parsons. The Early Essays*, edited with an introduction by Charles Camic, ix-ixix. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- "From Amherst to Heidelberg." In *After Parsons*, edited by Renée Fox et al., 240-63. New York: Russell Sage, 2005.
- Chalcraft, David. "Why Hermeneutics, the Text(s) and the Biography of the Work Matter in Max Weber Studies." In *Max Weber Matters*, edited by David Chalcraft et al., 17-40. Farnham: Ashgate, 2008.
- Connell, R.W. "Why Is Classical Theory Classical?" *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (1997): 1511-1557.

- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 76-100. London: Penguin, 1991. Originally published in 1971.
- Gerhardt, Uta. *The Social Thought of Talcott Parsons*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.
- Ghosh, Peter. "Some Problems with Talcott Parsons' version of the 'Protestant Ethic.'" *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 35 (1994): 104-23.
- 'Translation as a Conceptual Act.' *Max Weber Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001): 59-63.
- *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic. Twin Histories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Lidz, Victor. "Talcott Parsons and the Transatlantic Voyages of Weberian and Durkheimian Theories." In *Transatlantic Voyages. The Migration and Development of Ideas*, edited by Cherry Schrecker, 39-51. Avebury: Ashgate, 2010.
- Mommsen, Wolfgang. *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik, 1890-1920*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1959.
- 1963. "Zum Begriff der 'plebiszitaren Führerdemokratie' bei Max Weber," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 15: 295-322.
- Nelson, Benjamin. "Max Weber's "Author's Introduction (1920): A Master Clue to his Main Aims." *Sociological Inquiry* 44 (1974): 269-278.
- Parsons, Talcott. *Der Kapitalismus bei Sombart und Max Weber. Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde*. Harvard University Archives, Parsons Papers, HUGFP 42.8.2, box 1, 1927.

- “‘Capitalism’ in Recent German Literature: Sombart and Weber.” *The Journal of Political Economy*, 36-37: 641-44; 31-51, 1928-1929. Reprinted in *Talcott Parsons. The Early Essays*, edited with an introduction by Charles Camic, 3-37. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- “Translator’s Preface.” In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, ix-xi. London: Allen & Unwin, 1930.
- “Preface to New Edition.” In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, xii-xvii. New York: Scribner’s, 1958.
- *The Structure of Social Action*. New York: Free Press, 1968. Originally published in 1937.
- “On Building Social System Theory: A Personal History.” *Daedalus* 99 (1970): 826-881.
- *The System of Modern Societies*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971a.
- “Comparative Studies and Evolutionary Change.” In *Comparative Methods in Sociology*, edited by I. Vallier, 97-139. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971b.
- *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*. New York: Free Press, 1977.
- “The Circumstances of my Encounter with Max Weber.” In *Sociological Traditions from Generation to Generation*, edited by Robert K. Merton and Matilda Riley, 37-43. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1980.
- Reinhold, Robert. “A Mentor of Sociologists Retires after 42 Years at Harvard Post,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1973.

- Ricoeur, Paul. *On Translation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.
- Riesebrodt, Martin. "Dimensions of the Protestant Ethic." In *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100: Essays on the Centenary of the Weber Thesis*, edited by William H. Swatos, Jr. and Lutz Kaelber, 23-51. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2005.
- Scaff, Lawrence. "The Creation of the Sacred Text: Talcott Parsons Translates *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*." *Max Weber Studies* 6, no.1 (2005): 205-228.
- "Max Weber in the United States." *Società Mutamento Politica: Rivista Italiana di Sociologia*, 5, n. 9 (2014): 271-291.
- Stauth, George and Bryan S. Turner. *Nietzsche's Dance. Resentment, Reciprocity and Resistance in Social Life*. Oxford: Basil-Blackwell, 1988.
- Swatos, William H. and Peter Kivisto. "The Contexts of the Publication and Reception of the *Protestant Ethic*." In *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100: Essays on the Centenary of the Weber Thesis*, edited by William H. Swatos, Jr. and Lutz Kaelber, 111-137. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2005.
- Trevino, A. Javier (ed.). *Talcott Parsons Today. His Theory and Legacy in Contemporary Sociology*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001.
- Tribe, Keith. "Talcott Parsons as Translator of Max Weber's Basic Sociological Categories." *History of European Ideas* 33 (2007): 212-33.
- Wearne, Bruce C.. *The Theory and Scholarship of Talcott Parsons to 1951*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited and translated by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.

— “Author’s Introduction.” In *The Protestant Ethic*, translated by Talcott Parsons, 13-31. London: Allen & Unwin, 1930. Originally published in 1920.

— *Economy and Society*. Translated and edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

List of archives visited for this work:

Harvard University Archives, Papers of Talcott Parsons, 1921-1979, United States

Archives of Charles Scribner’s Sons, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, United States

George Allen and Unwin Archive, University of Reading, United Kingdom

Collection Max Weber-Schaefer, Bavarian State Library, Munich, Germany

List of editions of *The Protestant Ethic* consulted for this work:

1930. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons, with a foreword by R. H. Tawney. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. (reprints: 1948, 1950,²⁴ 1952,²⁵ 1956, 1958 (paperback), 1960)

1930. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and, the Evolution of the Capitalistic Spirit*. Translated by Talcott Parsons (includes 'The evolution of the capitalistic spirit', from *General Economic History*, translated by Frank H. Knight). Chicago: University of Chicago Bookstore. (Reprinted 1946)

1958. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Includes 'Preface to New Edition' by Talcott Parsons. Translated by Talcott Parsons, with a foreword by R. H. Tawney. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons Library Edition. First paperbound edition. Latest reprint by Dover Publications, 2003.

1958. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New Jersey: Pearson Education.

1976. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. A classic study of the fundamental relationships between religion and the economic and social life in modern culture*. (2nd edition) Translated by Talcott Parsons, with a Foreword by Anthony Giddens. London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

1977. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Pearson.

1985. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London & Boston: Unwin Hyman.
Translated: Talcott Parsons. Introduced by Anthony Giddens. (Routledge edited this version from 1992, and included it in Routledge Classics series in 2001; reprinted by Harper Collins Academic, 1991)

1996. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons, with a foreword by Randall Collins. Los Angeles: Roxbury. Reprinted, in revised form, in 1998.

2001. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated, introduced and edited by Stephen Kalberg. Includes Weber's essays 'The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism' and 'Prefatory Remarks' to *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*. Los Angeles: Roxbury (3rd edition). (Also issued by Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001; Wiley/Blackwell, 2001)

2002. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings*. Translated and Edited by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells. London/New York: Penguin.

2009. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: The Talcott Parsons Translation Interpretations*. Edited by Richard Swedberg. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Co.

2009. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with Other Writings on the Rise of the West*. Translated and Introduced by Stephen Kalberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2010. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. The Revised 1920 Edition*. Translated and Introduced by Stephen Kalberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹ ‘The importing, he explained, consisted of focusing the attention of American sociology in the nineteen-thirties on two great European social theorists, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, who, though very different, tended to think in grand theoretical terms. Until then, American sociologists, with one or two important exceptions, had been concerned mainly with empirical studies of rather localized phenomena.’ (Reinhold 1973: 80)

² In their study of the process of publication and reception of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic*, Swatos and Kivisto (2005) show that translators, reviewers and commentators acted as gatekeepers to Weberian sociology in the United States. Likewise, Connell argues that: “the process of translation is an important index of the formation of a canon.” (Connell 1997: 1543), but says nothing about the intricacies of the translation process itself. Ricoeur, on the contrary, has a lot to say about translation as an interpretive act: this is why we follow Ricoeur in this regard.

³ The dissertation survives today in the Harvard University Archives, Parsons Papers, HUGFP 42.8.2, box 1.

⁴ Parsons, of course, will use the same expression when referring to his synthetic narrative account of Durkheim’s sociological contributions in *The Structure of Social Action*: “...it is necessary to resort to a certain amount of construction” he says “and to put things somewhat differently from the way in which Durkheim himself did.” (1968: 400)

⁵ Contrary to what Uta Gerhardt suggests. See Gerhardt (2011: 69).

⁶ This was a requirement for obtaining the doctor in philosophy degree, which Parsons will eventually be awarded in April 1929. The best description of these events is in Gerhardt (2011: 71-72)

⁷ HUGFP 42.8.2, Box 2.

⁸ ‘Weber’s first work to be translated into English was, likewise, not the PESC but the posthumous *General Economic History* (German publication, 1923; translation 1927)’ (Swatos and Kivisto: 119)

⁹ The 1906 essay was subsequently translated and separately published by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills in the collection *From Max Weber*.

¹⁰ Parsons was asked ‘to give the students [of his introductory course on ‘Principles of economics’] some acquaintance with the doctrines of German sociologists and some knowledge of the developments of social institutions in Europe since the industrial revolution.’ (71) in ‘Memorandum re work of Parsons, from Professor Meriam to President Olds’, HUGFP, 42.8.2, Box 2.

¹¹ Parsons returns to Heidelberg and meets Marianne Weber. In 26 June, 1927 this crucial facilitator writes: “Dear Mr. Parsons! I would like to invite you to come to my house for tea at 5 o’clock this coming Sunday, 26th. We shall then also talk about your proposal for translation, which I have passed on to the publisher some time ago.” HUGFP 42.8.2, Box 2.

¹² There is a single essay, what we might call the “original” *Protestant Ethic*, that was published in German in two parts in 1904-05 in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, of which Max Weber was principal co-editor. Unfortunately, to complicate matters right off, the 1904 volume bore a 1905 date. In 1906, Weber published an additional essay on organized religion in North America, in two different German periodicals. During the years 1907-10, two critiques of the essays appeared in Germany, to which Weber also responded in the *Archiv*. These have become known as his “anticritical remarks.” In 1919, Weber reedited the 1904-05 and 1906 essays as a whole, and in 1920, they were published in the first part of a three-volume collection of studies on the world’s religions. (Swatos 2005: xiii) Contrary to Weber’s claim in

the first footnote to the second edition that he had not altered any sentence which contained any essential point (PESC 1930: 187), there are actually numerous and substantial enough changes to alter the meaning of the text: Lichtblau and Weiss (1993) have identified no less than 448 differences between the two versions, including both inserts in the main text and additional footnotes.

¹³ The second edition of *The Protestant Ethic* is included in Weber's *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*. Besides *The Protestant Ethic* and the essay on Protestant Sects, this collection contains the studies of the *Economic Ethics of the World Religions*. These texts were taken apart and published separately when translated into English, severing them from the theoretical essays in which they were originally embedded in. The introduction to the *Economic Ethics of the World Religions* and the theoretical chapter explaining the transition from Chinese to Indian religions were published separately. The major substantive studies have been published as *The Religion of China*, *The Religion of India*, and *Ancient Judaism* as if they were independent monographs. Readers would hardly be aware that they originally belonged to a series of studies called the *Economic Ethics of the World Religions*. Moreover, in order to fit *The Protestant Ethic* into this new context, Weber wrote an introduction, translated as 'Author's Introduction,' which attempted to explain how these different studies fit together. (Riesebrodt 2005: 24-5)

¹⁴ In total, Scaff suggests a total of nine people have read and commented on Parsons's "sample translation:" Stanley Unwin himself, three anonymous in-house reviewers, two professional translators, R.H. Tawney, Oskar Siebeck and Marianne Weber (2006: 75-77).

¹⁵ Letter of 24 September 1928 to Stanley Unwin. HUGFP 42.8.2 Box 2.

¹⁶ This crucial aspect is overlooked by Bruce Wearne who focuses exclusively in the ideational dimension of this process. Wearne writes: "Parsons' interpretative involvement in the writings qua translator, secondary analyst and critical theorist led him to conclude that 'The Protestant Ethic' is in many ways of central significance for Weber's philosophy of history." (1989: 58)

¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the “postmodern Weber” of the 1980s, a product of the revival of interest in Nietzsche (e.g. Stauth and Turner 1988), is fundamentally pessimistic.

¹⁸ In the first three years it will sell only 1009 copies. The governing director of Allen & Unwin wrote to J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) in Tübingen on July 30, 1934: “The total sales up to the end of last year were 409 copies, apart from 600 sold at a reduced price in sheets to an American publisher [Scribner], thus making the total sales up to 31st December last 1,009. There is now very little demand for the book, and it is unlikely that we shall ever sell as many as 2,500 copies.” (in Collection Max Weber-Schaefer, Bavarian State Library, Munich)

¹⁹ Uta Gerhardt writes: “(...) after World War II, the book became a bestseller, with a second printing in 1948, a third in 1950, and a fourth in 1952.” (2011: 62) Gerhardt’s mistake is to confuse reprints for sales. Archival research undertaken at the George Allen and Unwin Archive (herewith GAUA), University of Reading, UK, however, shows that such reprints often did not exceed 750 copies each. Scribner’s editor orders from Stanley Unwin 750 copies of *The Protestant Ethic* (letter May 26, 1950. GAUA). As proof of their appreciation for the continuing collaboration in publishing this title, Unwin suggests to have the book published as a ‘joint imprint’ with both publishing houses names in the title page and the jackets (letter 27 June, 1950. GAUA). On March 17, 1952 Scribner’s orders another 1,000 copies (letter 2 April, 1952. GAUA) Far from being a bestseller, the truth is that by the late 1950s the book was selling so poorly that was at the verge of going out of print. This *despite* the wave of new translations of Weber’s works of the 1950s (Gerhardt 2011: 63, n.29): the steady decline of sales of *The Protestant Ethic* reported by Allen & Unwin in 1958 suggests these new translations had little or no immediate effect in increasing the market interest in Weber.

²⁰ See HUGFP – 42.8.8, box 11.

²¹ The theoretical attack on Parsons’ Weber, of course, cannot be fully (or, even, primarily) attributed to Giddens. Crucial in this regard was, for instance, the highly influential essay “De-Parsonizing Weber: A Critique of Parsons’ Interpretation of Weber's Sociology” (1975), in

which the authors developed a devastating attack on Parsons' choices as translator and work as theorist. To which, characteristically, Parsons replied in kind: see Parsons (1975).

²² The 1958 edition and paperbacks from the 1960s were technically reprints of the original 1930 edition with the exception of the new preface by Parsons and some new graphic features.

²³ Decisive in this regard were two books in which Giddens framed Weber's contributions in a radically different way from that of Parsons. The first is *Capitalism and Social Theory* (1971), which "officially" identified Marx, Weber and Durkheim as thinkers who established foundational frameworks for contemporary sociology, despite the seemingly arbitrary nature of this choice. The second was the 1972 *Politics and Sociology in the Thought of Max Weber*.

Giddens will be eventually accompanied in his interpretation by figures such as Michael Mann or Randall Collins, the eminent Weberian expert and editor of the second Roxbury edition of *The Protestant Ethic* (1998).

²⁴ Scribner's editor orders from Stanley Unwin 750 copies of PESC (letter May 26, 1950. GAUA). As proof of their appreciation for the continuing collaboration in publishing this title, Unwin suggests to have the book published as a 'joint imprint' with both publishing houses names in the title page and the jackets (letter 27 June, 1950. GAUA).

²⁵ On March 17, 1952 Scribner's orders another 1,000 copies (letter 2 April, 1952. GAUA)