

**Max Weber.**

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

**New Translation and Introduction by Stephen Kalberg.**

Roxbury Publishing, 2001, 353 pp.

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**Max Weber.**

**The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism and Other Writings.**

**Edited, translated, and with an introduction and notes by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells.**

Penguin Books, 2002, 392 pp.

\$24.00 paper (0-14-043921-8)

The *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* stands as an enduring tribute to the influence of Talcott Parsons on North American sociology. Thanks to him, sociology curricula have been organised around a canon of classical texts, and while there may be much debate about which theorists and which of their texts belong in that canon, there has been little about this one. The text has served several purposes: theoretical, as a gateway into Weber’s comprehensive sociology; ideological, as a tribute to the creative capacity of the form of sectarian religiosity that has flourished in North America; and pedagogic, as a short text whose basic sociological features are easily presented and around which several debates can be constructed. Unfortunately, the Parsons version has not served these purposes at all well. The *Protestant Ethic* is severed from its companion piece on the *Protestant Sects*. The status of the Author’s Introduction is misrepresented. There are serious deficiencies in the quality of the translation which misses much of the pathos and subtlety of the original, and actually distorts the thrust of the argument.<sup>1</sup> The footnotes are presented in a font too small to command the attention they warrant and placed at the end where they are easily overlooked. Given the depth of historical ignorance among contemporary students and faculty, there are too many references that require explanation.

The two versions under review attempt to remedy these and other weaknesses. Both include the same core texts, *Protestant Ethic*, *Protestant Sects* and the *Prefatory Remarks to the Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion* (= Parsons’ Author’s Introduction) and arrange them in that order. They differ in which versions of these texts to include. Kalberg follows Parsons in using the 1920 version of the *Protestant Ethic*; Baehr & Wells have translated the original 1905 version and then added several of Weber’s ripostes to his critics to bring the argument closer to where he left it in 1920. Kalberg simply reproduces Gerth’s translation of the *Protestant Sects*; Baehr & Wells have translated an earlier version entitled “Churches and Sects in North America.” While both editions provide an extensive scholarly apparatus, they differ considerably in the quality and integrity of that commentary. Kalberg also offers a long summary of the argument and its significance.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed critique of the technical deficiencies of the text see Peter Ghosh, “Some Problems with Talcott Parsons’ Version of *The Protestant Ethic*,” *Archives européennes de sociologie*, No 35 (1994).

Kalberg has cleaned up several problems,<sup>2</sup> though many of the distortions in interpretation remain. A few examples will have to suffice. Where Weber uses broad terms, *Betrieb*, *Arbeit*, Parsons narrows them to “capital” and “labour,” suggesting a quite unwarranted reference to Marxist class analysis. Although Kalberg correctly translates the latter as “work,” he reinforces the narrowness of the former by translating it as “company.” In spite of the apparent care with which Kalberg has considered the technical problems of translation, the most serious howler in the Parsons text remains uncorrected. This is a misreading of *Ältestenamt* as *Altes Testament*, which leads to the absurd statement: “attribution of the Old Testament to Christ.” Where that can be discounted as simple carelessness, the failure to reproduce accurately the original table of the relation between religious affiliation and type of secondary school suggests an excessive concern to protect Weber's reputation in the face of an obvious error.

These limitations might well be tolerated, were it not for the introductory material. An extensive introduction, summarising the argument, with detailed page references to the text, may well provide students with an easier way of dealing with the argument. Not only it is likely to serve as a substitute for the kind of engagement with the text that Weber expected, but it exaggerates Weber's own argument, often to the point where it becomes preposterous. Failure to grasp some of the elementary features of the history of Protestantism (e.g., Calvinism as a sect) and Germany (e.g., homogenous and unchanging agrarian relations) and the exclusion from the bibliography of any reference to the extensive body of critical literature on the text mean that students will get a very distorted perspective on Weber and the standards of scholarship in sociology.

In view of the serious deficiencies of both Parsons and Kalberg, it is fortunate that Baehr and Wells have produced another translation. This is technically flawless, paying particular attention to the need to remind readers of the some of the original terms which do not translate easily into English (e.g., *bürgerlich*) and to the importance of the original typography with its emphatic italics and distancing quotation marks. The introductory material serves to place the text in the context of its formation and reception, and in its commentary on the significance of the rejoinders to his critics, reveals an important, but neglected, aspect of Weber as a “pugnacious literary street-fighter.” However, major difficulties arise from the requirements of a Penguin production. A text like this invites the reader to make marginal comments, which is impossible given the size of the font, the narrowness of the margins and the flimsiness of the paper. It should adopt the convention used in the original and place the footnotes at the bottom of the page, so that the flow of the argument can be followed. Above all, it needs a proper set of headings to guide the reader around the book. It is bad enough when the page headings in the Protestant Ethic section do not identify the particular chapters, but it becomes very confusing when the same heading is used for virtually all other sections of the book.

So there are two choices to be made, between two versions of Weber's argument, and between two standards of scholarship. Although Weber himself did not consider that he had made any significant alterations, and therefore saw little point in returning to the earlier version, it has recently been republished in German in an edition which identifies all the differences between this and the 1920 version. Most are quite trivial, but the tone is rather different. While Baehr does not make a case for

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Kalberg, “The *Spirit of Capitalism* Revisited: On the New Translation of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (1920), *Max Weber Studies*, November 2001.

the superiority of the 1905 version, he cites Lehmann: “in the first version of the text Weber sounds as if he is presenting an interesting argument ... By contrast, in the second version he appears to speak with an authoritative voice. He writes as if he is presenting the final results of a study that allow no objection.” There are therefore good reasons to return to the 1905 version to see an interesting argument, stripped of some of its more dogmatic formulae, and which may allow both its strengths and weaknesses to be more fully appreciated.

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