

Issues of Language and Translation in Max Weber's Protestant Ethic Writings

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Abstract

The author previews the translation by Peter Baehr and himself, due for publication early in 2002, and preceded by a substantial Editors' Introduction, of the early (1905) versions of Max Weber's celebrated essay on *The Protestant Ethic*, together with other related writings by Weber, in particular his robust defence of his thesis in response to critical articles by Fischer and Rachfahl. Reasons for the selection are given. Problems of terminology and syntax encountered by the translators are discussed, and literary and philosophical overtones in the writing are highlighted. Finally, the author presents samples of the translation itself.

Keywords Protestant ethic, spirit of capitalism, sociology of religion, churches and sects, translation, terminology, syntax, literary and philosophical connotations, critique, polemics

In November 2000, Peter Baehr and I submitted a manuscript to Penguin Books of a new translation of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism* (1905 edition), together with other writings, chiefly: the *Vorbemerkung* to the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, the essay *Churches and Sects in North America*, and the rebuttals of the critiques penned by H. Karl Fischer and Felix Rachfahl. It is our hope that the pieces we shall present convey a rounded picture of Weber's thinking on the Protestant ethic theme and something of his full-blooded personality.

In addition to Weber's own voluminous footnotes, we have provided some of our own, although these lay no claim at all to being exhaustive. Our translations are preceded by a substantial introduction, which is almost entirely the work of Peter Baehr. On the other hand, I must bear the principal responsibility for the translations, although Peter's careful scrutiny and suggestions were absolutely invaluable.

The *Vorbemerkung* (which Parsons calls the *Author's Introduction*) is, of course, actually the introduction to the entire collected essays on

the sociology of religion, and not merely to the PE essays – the misleading impression that can be gained from Parsons' positioning of it in his version. We felt, though, that through this positioning it has become a more or less indispensable adjunct to a study of the PE at universities and colleges, and therefore took the decision to include it in our volume, as its absence might be sorely missed by student readers in particular. It also serves a useful function of placing the debate in the wider context of rationalization. By relegating it to an appendix, however, we highlight the fact that it should in no way be regarded as an introduction to the PE essays themselves, which receive only a brief mention towards the end of Weber's *Vorbemerkung*.

The *Churches and Sects* essay has been included for the way it illustrates the other side of Weber's argument, viz. the institutionalized pressures on sect members to live an ethically impeccable life (and enjoy the commercial benefits that flow from the reputation thus acquired) or jeopardize their position within the sect. In line with the choice of the 1905 version of the main essays, we have selected an early version of this essay (the one that appeared in two parts in the *Christliche Welt*.)

H. Karl Fischer and Felix Rachfahl were the first two critics of Weber's (1905) thesis to go into print, each with two articles (1908-1910). In our forthcoming book, we briefly summarize these and then present translations of Weber's replies, in which he responds in robust terms to what he sees as ill-conceived criticism arising from a misunderstanding of his argument. In doing so he further defines and explores some of his key concepts, such as that of *Prämien* (premiums or rewards) in the final rebuttal of Rachfahl.

Why did we choose to tackle the 1905 version? This, we felt, though not necessarily 'better', had more of the force and immediacy of Weber's original vision. This (rather than the later one) is the essay that provoked the original critical response from both the relatively obscure scholar H. Karl Fischer, of whom otherwise little is reliably known, and from Professor Rachfahl, with his more weighty academic credentials. In the later version Weber brings in more of the critical baggage acquired in the process of defending his thesis. We were struck by the number of differences there are between the two versions: Lichtblau and Weiss¹ have discovered no fewer than 448, including both inserts in the main text and additional footnotes. In our edition, we have tried to give a flavour of some of this additional

1. K Lichtblau and J Weiss: *Die protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus*, (Bodenheim: Athenäum·Hain·Hanstein, 1993)

material by adding, in an appendix, the footnotes relating to criticisms expressed by Sombart and Brentano.

Anyone attempting a fresh translation of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (even of the earlier, and shorter, 1905 version) cannot fail to be aware of the ghost of Talcott Parsons hovering in the background. True, in his classic version he obscures or fails to highlight some of the connotations, literary and philosophical, contained in Weber's multi-layered text, and makes some egregious errors, e.g. on page 135 of his translation he apparently misreads *Ältestenamnt* (= *the office of elder*) as *Altes Testament* (= *Old Testament*); he has also been rightly accused (e.g. by Peter Ghosh) of lacking consistency in his translation of some of Weber's key terms. It is undeniable, however, that Parsons achieved an admirable level of readability and brought Weber's text to a wider public. It is, of course, a truism to say that every translator is fallible.

Some of the problems of translating Weber are of course common to German scholarly texts in general (words notoriously difficult to translate like *bürgerlich* or *sachlich*) but Weber does present the translator with special challenges. He is, as is well known, renowned for his dense and convoluted prose. A single sentence can run on for as much as a page, as Weber adds qualifying clauses, and hedges his statements with provisos and subtle distinctions. The translator must first disentangle the syntax, and then, having done that, decide whether to re-cast the sentence, or split it up, bearing in mind the danger that Weber's emphases may be subtly shifted in so doing.

Regarding terminology, we did, of course, have to make decisions on how to render certain key words and expressions. We hope in our published version in many instances to include the German term itself in brackets, following the translation. In the case of a few of Weber's key terms, we aimed to employ the same English term on each occasion. For example:

Lebensführung, which is at the core of the thesis, we consistently render as either *conduct of life* or *manner of conducting one's life*, emphasising the pro-active quality of the concept. There are also a range of related words, such as *Lebensauffassung* or *Lebensmethodik* (*attitude to life* and *the methodical life* respectively).

Innerweltliche Askese, the concept which unites the ascetic principle with world-changing activity. We considered Parsons' choice: *worldly asceticism*, but rejected it, (partly on account of associations with the unspiritual superficiality of Bunyan's Mr Worldly Wiseman). We decided instead to stay with *innerworldly asceticism*, preserving the striking paradox of the original German.

In the main texts as well as the polemics with Fischer (in particular), we noticed a preoccupation with psychological terms, such as *Trieb*, and felt that, in the age of Freud, this was significant. We know too that, together with Marianne, he was fascinated by the psychology of sex. See, for instance, the intriguing footnote, most conveniently accessed in Parsons' translation, p. 262, commencing 'A sober pro-creation of children'. We therefore normally used the term *drive*, (while also occasionally preferring *instinct*).

One of the key phrases in the PE is, of course, the one translated by Parsons as 'iron cage' (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*). In brief, we felt that Parsons' famous phrase, although it will undoubtedly continue to resonate, was due for replacement, as neither element is sufficiently true to Weber's original. We reverted to Weber's 'steel'. Amongst other factors, steel is the product of *human fabrication*. It is both extremely hard *and* flexible, and is associated in the European context with modernity; accordingly it has more in common with rational bourgeois capitalism than the iron of which it is a refinement. We translated *Gehäuse* by *shell*, which is one meaning of the word (*casing* is another). A shell has an organic quality, and symbolizes something that has not been externally imposed, but has become integral to human existence. Whereas a cage confines human agents, a shell suggests that modern capitalism has created *a new kind of being*. Our final rendering was *shell as hard as steel*.²

Beruf is also at the heart of the thesis. Since the Puritans (and Luther) regarded the everyday occupation as divinely sanctified, it has *both* the mundane sense of occupation as well as being one to which the 'saints' are called. We therefore normally translated it as *calling* but occasionally, when the focus is exclusively on the nature of the work, as *occupation*.

Religiosität: we were at first sight disinclined to translate this by the obvious *religiosity*, because of the pejorative connotations of this word in English. However we were finally persuaded, partly by Peter Ghosh's article, that any other choice of rendering would distort the meaning, and that the word would have to be understood in the

2. On this complex expression, readers are referred to P. Baehr, 'The "Iron Cage" and the "Shell as Hard as Steel". Parsons, Weber and the *stahlhartes Gehäuse* metaphor in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*', *History and Theory* 40 (2000), pp. 153-69 and the excellent article by D. Chalcraft, 'Bringing the Text Back In: On Ways of Reading the Iron Cage Metaphor in the Two Editions of "The Protestant Ethic"', in L.J. Ray and M. Reed (eds.), *Organizing Modernity: New Weberian Perspectives on Work, Organization and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 16-45.

neutral sense of 'the nature of one's religious commitment'. Other terms we translated variously according to context, for example *Erwerb* and its compounds: acquisitive, but also commerce, gain, business, business life, procurement of temporal goods, pursuit of wealth (*Erwerbsstreben*), economic activity, profit, money-making.

Moving on to the language as such, translating Weber brings home to one the extent to which his language carries literary and philosophical overtones, and we have attempted to give due weight to these in our translation. Peter Baehr and Charles Turner respectively have pointed out to me some references to Nietzsche (*the last men*)³, and Kant (*Eigengesetzlichkeit, transzendent*), and the influence of Goethe is evident in a number of places. For example, the word *Wahlverwandtschaft* (= *elective affinity*), originally a term from chemistry, is used to signify the close relationship between innerworldly asceticism and the spirit of capitalism, and appears to be an allusion to Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), in which an unexpected spiritual affinity develops between Eduard and Otilie, and between Charlotte and the Captain.

There are quotations from *Faust*. For example, in his second rejoinder to H. Karl Fischer, Weber implies that his critic is following the cynical advice given by Mephistopheles to the student and 'clinging to words' to fill the void left by the absence of ideas.

There is also an oblique reference to Goethe's philosophy of *Entsagung* (*resignation*), which informs his later work, such as *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Journeyings*), where Weber seems to employ a deliberate misquotation to highlight the Protestant work ethic: 'Erwerben sollst du, sollst erwerben' instead of 'Entsagen sollst du, sollst entsagen'. I have been unable so far to track down the source of the actual quotation. I have a dim recollection of it from my student days, but cannot locate it. Weber similarly gives a deliberate twist to the words of Mephistopheles (in *Faust*) ('der stets das Böse will, und stets das Gute schafft'). He applies them in inverted form to the Puritan, who seeks only to obey God, and unintentionally achieves material prosperity.

Weber's polemical replies to Fischer and Rachfahl undoubtedly provide further insights into aspects of Weber's argument, but they also reveal Weber as a vigorous and vituperative controversialist,

3. For a comment on the translation of 'die letzten Menschen' in Nietzsche's, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, see S. Whimster, 'Introduction to Weber, Ascona and Anarchism', in S. Whimster (ed.) *Max Weber and the Culture of Anarchy* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 1.

prepared to use fair means or foul to refute and denigrate his critics. Rachfahl, incidentally, appears unimpressed by Weber's onslaught, accusing him at one point of 'setting up a man of straw that supposedly expresses the argument of his opponent, and then launching an all-out assault on it'⁴. In our translation, we have attempted to reproduce the abrasive tone of these academic fisticuffs without resorting to anachronism. The following examples should convey some of the flavour of these exchanges, although it would be beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the substance of the controversy.

...Rachfahl's remarks on this point are only a further proof that he is *either* disinclined to conduct a controversy with the good will that assumes *any* good sense in his opponent's argument (let alone the best possible sense), *or* that at the moment of writing his 'critique' he can no longer remember what the work he is criticizing says.⁵

...a quite sterile critique, typical of the worst kind of academic sneering and *deliberate* misunderstanding⁶

And in another place he professes to believe that he (Rachfahl) must appear *to me* as 'the vulture that feeds on the carcass of the opponent'. This 'carcass', as we shall see, is still very much alive, and Rachfahl appears to him to bear no likeness to a bird of prey [Adler=eagle] or anything of the kind. On the contrary, to judge by how he presents himself in this 'critique' and 'reply', he continues to appear as a rather lightly feathered and at the same time unduly schoomasterly author. One can only shake one's head over such a man; yet one cannot really bear him any ill-will, because his often quite unbelievable deficiency in literary integrity is due to the awkward spot he has got himself into, and is exceeded by the naivety of his self-justification, which evidently makes him convinced he is right—however hard it is to believe this at times.⁷

I prefer to merely shrug my shoulders at a man who is afflicted with a mania to prove himself in the right at all costs, even the cost of literary integrity.⁸

4. '...einen Popanz herzustellen, als Meinung des Gegners auszugeben und wacker drauf los zu pauken'. F. Rachfahl, 'Nochmals Calvinismus und Kapitalismus', *Internationale Wochenschrift für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technik* 4 (1910). Column 756.

5. M. Weber, 'Antikritisches zum "Geist" des Kapitalismus', *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 30 (1910), pp. 176-202 (193).

6. Weber, 'Antikritisches zum Geist', p. 202.

7. M. Weber, 'Antikritisches Schlusswort zum "Geist des Kapitalismus"', *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 31 (1910), pp. 554-599 (554).

8. Weber, 'Antikritisches Schlusswort', p. 557.

But should I myself employ 'harsh words'? I am merely amused, and sincerely regret ever having taken as seriously as I did a critic so confused (5) as to suffer anxiety when confronted with *his own* assertions. R. can clearly not conceive of a dispute as having any purpose other than that of *appearing* to be in the right in the eyes of the public.⁹

Finally we include two excerpts of our translation of passages that have become well known through Parsons' translation.

First Paragraph of What Parsons Calls 'Author's Introduction'

The child of modern European civilization (*Kulturwelt*) will inevitably and justifiably approach problems of universal history from the standpoint of the following problematic (*Fragestellung*): what chain of circumstances led to the appearance in the West, and only in the West, of cultural phenomena which—or so at least we like to think—came to have *universal* significance and validity?

The Two Paragraphs Before the Last One in Protestant Ethic

No-one yet knows who will live in that shell in the future. Perhaps new prophets will emerge, or powerful old ideas and ideals will be reborn at the end of this monstrous development. Or perhaps—if neither of these occurs—'Chinese' ossification,¹⁰ dressed up with a kind of desperate self-importance, will set in. Then, however, it might truly be said of the 'last men' in this cultural development: 'specialists without spirit, hedonists without a heart, these nonentities imagine they have attained a stage of humankind (*Menschentum*) never before reached'.

Here, however, we are getting into the area of judgments of value and belief, with which this purely historical study should not be encumbered. The task before us is rather to indicate the significance (only touched on in this sketch) of ascetic rationalism for the content of the *ethic* of the *social* economy, that is, for the type of organization and the functions of social communities, from the conventicle to the

9. Weber, 'Antikritisches Schlusswort', p. 562.

10. Eds.' note: In the 1920 edition of the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber replaced 'Chinese' with 'mechanized'. The association of Chinese history with immobility and petrification was a *topos* of nineteenth century European thought. Consider, for instance, J.S. Mill, 'On Liberty' (1859), in *Essential Works of John Stuart Mill*, edited and with an introduction by Max Lerner (New York: Bantam, 1961), pp. 315-19. More generally, see J.D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent. China in Western Minds* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

state. Then its relationship to humanist rationalism and its ideals and cultural influences, to the development of philosophical and scientific empiricism, and to technological development and the arts must be analyzed. Then finally its growth from its beginnings in the inner-worldly asceticism of the Middle Ages to its dissolution into pure utilitarianism must be charted *historically* and through the individual areas of expansion of ascetic religiosity. Only then will it be possible to discern the significance of ascetic Protestantism in relation to other formative elements of modern culture.