

# Max Weber in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: interview with Stephen Kalberg<sup>1</sup>

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Stephen Kalberg<sup>2</sup>

**Interviewers**  
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<sup>1</sup> **Nota do Editor:** uma versão em português desta entrevista foi publicada dentro do Dossiê *Max Weber 100 anos depois*, organizado pela Revista Em Tese. Certos de que o trabalho de tradução é também um processo de transformação do material traduzido, consideramos válida e complementarmente enriquecedora a publicação da versão original da entrevista na língua em que ocorreu primeiramente.

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The period from 2020 to 2022 was memorable for the Weberian theory. In 2020, we looked back on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Weber's passing. In 2021, we celebrate the jubilee of the posthumous publication of his exceptional work *Economy and Society* [*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*] - considered the most important sociological work of the 20th century according to an opinion poll by the ISA (International Sociological Association) Congress Program Committee. Finally, in 2022, we will remember the centenary of the *Collected Essays on Sociology of Religion* [*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*].

A hundred years have passed since Weber's inaugural publications, and they are still an inexorable source of learning, either through the analysis of their historical-hermeneutic aspects or discussing current Weberian theory. The publications of Dr. Stephen Kalberg, an exponent of specialized exegesis, demonstrate Weber's ability to apprehend current phenomena. Stephen Kalberg is a professor in the Department of Sociology at Boston University and the author of numerous impact articles, among which we emphasize *Max Weber's types of rationality: Cornerstones for the analysis of rationalization processes in history*. In his recent book *Searching the Spirit of American Democracy: Max Weber on a Unique Political Culture, Past Present, and Future* (a work translated into French, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, and Korean), for example, the author employs the Weberian theory to reconstruct the specificity which characterizes the spirit of American democracy to highlight the relevance of Weber's work.

**1) The translations of Max Weber's writings into the English language represent a field of theoretical-conceptual dispute. Several experts often accuse Talcott Parsons (BENDIX, 1986; KALBERG, 2001) of translating some concepts of Weber in order to make them useful to his conceptual framework, like the translation of *Herrschaft* as an *authority*, which emphasizes the idea of balance in society. We know that you have several criticisms of Parsonian translations into the English language, straighten out in the article '*Spirit*' of *Capitalism Revisited: On the New Translation of Weber's Protestant Ethic* (1920). In fact, your new translation of *Protestant Ethics***

**seems to be an alternative to Parsons' translation, commercialized since 1930. Could you tell us about the impasses of the previous translations of *Protestant Ethics* and the innovations of yours?**

The translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Talcott Parsons (1930) is deficient in several ways. First, there is a loss of Weber's nuanced discussions in nearly every sentence and paragraph. In general, Parsons did not possess an adequate command of the German language, nor could he express Weber's complex and precisely formulated terms in English. Very frequently, he lost track of Weber's argument. This is particularly clear in chapter 4, where a discussion is found on Weber's general thesis and his analysis of doctrinal differences among the various ascetic Protestant churches and sects. The distinctions Weber makes in this regard are not clearly rendered. Nevertheless, let me be more specific (1).

- a) Parsons translates a single German term into various English terms. For example, *Arbeit* is translated as work, labor, and job; *Beruf* is translated as a calling, professional, and worldly affairs; *Berufsarbeit* is translated as work at a calling, worldly activity, and daily work; *Diesseitigkeit* as worldliness, worldly activity, and the workaday world; *Gesinnung* as attitude, mentality, temperament, outlook, and attitude of mind; and *Entzauberung* as evolution, elimination of magic, and rationalization.
- b) A single English term stands as the translation for several German terms. For example, attitude for *Gesinnung*, *Gebarung*, *Verhalten*, *Lebensstimmung*, *Lebensauffassung*, and *Lebensanschauung*; conception for *Gedanke*, *Auffassung*, *Begriff*, and *Begriffskonzept*; and worldly for *diesseitig*, *weltlich*, and *innerweltlich*.

Weber's profound concern with terminological precision is lost. Moreover, Weber astutely guides his reader to his key terms by the use of italics. Unfortunately, ninety-five

percent of his italicized words are not italicized in the translation by Parsons (e.g., *modern capitalism*). The same must also be said concerning Weber's use of inverted commas to indicate his awareness of the controversial character of a term (e.g., 'national character,' 'rational,' 'irrational,' 'ideas,' and 'calling').

These problems (and many more<sup>6</sup>) render the Parsons' translation of *The Protestant Ethic* extremely problematic. In addition, as you surmise, Parsonsian terminology too often appears in this translation (e.g., universalism, system, norms, attitudes, fact, opinion, sanction, and – as you note – authority). On the other hand, Weber's strongly causal vocabulary is seldom evident.

**2) The *status* of a classic author in Sociology attributed to Max Weber was, in part, consecrate in the seminal book *The Structure of Social Action* by Talcott Parsons, a study that established him as a great interpreter of Weber in the United States in the 1940s. One of the analytical legacies of this text is the interpretation of Weber as a theorist of the normative conduct of action: a normative and evolutionist. On the other hand, Reinhard Bendix and Guenther Roth emphasized the historical dimension of Weberian writings, with particular attention to the specificity of modern Western culture, a reading that seems to replace the "Weber sociologist" with the "Weber historian." In *Max Weber's Comparative Historical Sociology*, you criticize Bendix's interpretation using the methodological aspects of Max Weber's theory. Could you descant more about this interesting thesis?**

I agree with Bendix and Roth and oppose the (Parsonsian) emphasis upon Weber as a normative and evolutionist theorist. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that Bendix and Roth did not move far enough to explain Weber's (complex) *mode of analysis* or research strategies precisely. There are more "procedures" in Weber's *Economy and Society (E&S)*

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<sup>6</sup> Please see my article in *Max Weber Studies*, volume 2, #1 (November 2001), p. 41-58.

and *Economic Ethics of the World Religions (EEWR)* volumes in China, India, and ancient Israel than recognized by Bendix and Roth. However, this feature of his comparative-historical sociology did not lead him to a "normative theory" position.

I sought in part to convey Weber's mode of analysis (vs. Wallerstein, Tilly, and Skocpol) in my *Max Weber's Comparative-Historical Sociology* (1996). I continue to do so in *Max Weber's Sociology of Civilizations: A Reconstruction* (late 2021; Routledge).

**3) We know that the Weberian writings had different reception moments around the world, with Germany being the great source of Weberian studies. However, we cannot ignore studies carried out in the USA, for example. Taking this into account, how do you see Weber's place and importance in current American sociology?**

The reception of Weber's sociology in the USA has returned to a concepts-based reception. In the '50s and '60s, American sociology defined Weber as a strong theorist who offered non-Marxist macro sociology. Unfortunately, since the 1980s, the American reception has become "routinized", that is, it has moved to an exclusive concern with a series of clearly defined concepts that "resonate" in various ways with American society: status groups, charisma, and its routinization, bureaucracies, the state, the sect, authority, and power.

This hermeneutic reception became widespread regarding Weber's reception in the 1980s and 1990s, indeed to such an extent that the European discussion, at this time, focused upon Weber's big picture themes (the uniqueness of the West and the "ideas and interests" causal explanations for its unusual development; see the works by Tenbruck and Schluchter) was neglected on American soil. Thus, interest in Weber's large-scale themes seems to have nearly disappeared.

**4) It would not be wrong to say that Weber's writings are known worldwide, although at first his studies were widely read in Europe, largely because the author came from Germany, gradually, their reception grew. In her book *Max Weber in***

*times of transformation* [*Max Weber in Zeiten des Umbruchs*], Edith Hanke (2014) assesses the number of editions and translations of Weber's works by country. A curiosity raised in this study is the absolute leadership of Japan in works developed about Weber, with the production of 190 titles between the years 1925 and 2012 (DA MATTA, 2016). It is interesting to note that a non-Western country is one of the leaders in writing texts about Weber and that his work has been gaining ground notably in non-Western countries. Do you think that there is a particularity in this reception?

Yes, the interest in Weber seems especially vibrant today in nations outside of western Europe and northern America. The reception in Japan, as you note, has been intense. It seems now that the most active interest in Weber is to be found in southern America and China. However, it must be emphasized that the reception is especially intense in a variety of non-Western nations.

Perhaps the explanation is not complicated: Weber's *E&S* and *EEWR* volumes a) are extremely comparative, b) recognize the tight connection between the past and the present, c) contain a strong focus upon the reasons why some nations develop their economies intensely/ over the centuries, and others do not, and d) take cognizance of the complex interrelationships between economic growth and the development of stable democracies. The non-Western nations are clearly seeking answers, having on the one hand now dismissed the Marxian, neo-Marxian, and Structural-Functional approaches and acknowledged that the idiosyncratic character of American society renders "duplication" unlikely. The near-term future of the Weber reception, in my view, will be located mainly in non-Western nations.

5) You have written an interesting book that talks about the peculiarities of American democracy (*Searching for the Spirit of American Democracy: Max Weber's Analysis of a Unique Political Culture, Past, Present, and Future*). In it, your study points to a "symbiotic dualism" between individualism and community prospect.

**Would this union be what generates an exclusive form of American ethical-practical rationalism?**

Yes. American individualism clearly retains, even today in the post-Trump era (and I am aware of how difficult it must be for people worldwide to perceive this feature *now*), a *civic* component. The extent to which this component became deeply and broadly rooted in the United States over the last two centuries makes it unusual and quite distinct from the western European nations, as I tried to document in the *Searching* volume.

This "civic individualism" became located in the USA in this period, in a broad middle class and not simply, as in Europe, among elites.

The "public" sphere in the USA, because anchored in a constellation of widely acknowledged – and occasionally widely supported – *universal ideals*, became a *civic* sphere, indeed one that at times offered opportunity and upward mobility.

Yes, a *symbiotic dualism* appeared. The *Searching* volume summarized this development as described by Weber in a variety of works. He emphasized, in particular, the role played by the ascetic Protestant churches and sects in this unusual development followed by the American political culture.

**6) The distinction between individualism and holism (or collectivism) is a methodological issue that becomes increasingly controversial when linked to Max Weber. Most of the time, his work is confronted by questions about the so-called methodological individualism. According to Carlos Eduardo Sell (2016), the nature and specificity of methodological individualism is not only an exegetical - historical challenge but a theoretical necessity. However, interpretations like Gert Albert's, for whom Weber favors a position situated in methodological holism and not individualism, have gained strength in recent years, mainly within the micro and macro debate in Sociology. For Albert, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the theory's overlapping of action, guided by religious values located on the micro plane, and the genesis of a capitalist spirit, located on the macro plane**

would be a great example of this theoretical orientation. Do you understand that there is, in fact, a discrepancy between Weber's methodological and empirical writings? Could this matter be placed at some level within the micro/macro debate?

No, I do not see such a division in Weber's methodological and empirical writings. We must keep in mind that (as noted in chapter 1 of *E&S* in particular) that Weber emphasizes the terms *Regelmaessigkeiten des Handelns* (regularities of action, patterns of action) and *Handlungsorientierungen* (action orientations). People in groups always orient action; indeed, similarities of action orientations lead to the formation of groups, whether they are called sects, bureaucracies, or states, for example. Although Weber dislikes repeating the entire terms (e.g., patterns of action-oriented to the state or the bureaucracy's hierarchies) and prefers to note "the bureaucracy" and "the state," it is also the case that the translators into English have often omitted these awkward phrases and just substituted "bureaucracy" and "the state." Both Weber and his translators are to blame, yet this problem does not indicate a divergence of his methodological and empirical writings.

I agree with Albert that *The Protestant Ethic* volume constitutes a good example of how Weber brings together the micro and macro levels. However, the term "methodological holism" seems inappropriate, not least because it conjures up quickly a Durkheimian position – a position from which Weber's works must be strictly separated.

**7) Today, some theoretical efforts demonstrate the relevance of the epistemological-methodological elements of Weber's work – such as the discussions around the "Weber paradigm." They are interpretations that transfer the exegetical axis of analysis to the propositional one and, with this, recognize the vast explanatory capacity of Weber's theory. Focusing on Max Weber's analysis of the modern world, which elements do you find his contemporaneity?**

Weber's contemporaneity? Many sociologists in many corners of the globe have (finally) recognized that their studies must embrace multi-causal frameworks and



acknowledge that groups form configurations, and their conjunctural interactions introduce both larger-scale groups and push aside marginal groups. A societal dynamism – often characterized by elective affinities, but often characterized by conflict, too - must here be noted. Now, they also support the notion that the past relates closely to the present and that the uniqueness of the latter cannot be explained without reference to the influence of the former. They further recognize now that empirical studies require strong conceptual frameworks. Moreover, the omission of an empirical grounding of concepts, they acknowledge, now appears unacceptable. Finally, the importance of defining the subjective meaning of actors now seems self-evident in many quarters. All this is contained in Weber's sociology. Is there a more powerful "paradigm" to address the circumstances we now confront?

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