CHAPTER THREE

THE PROTESTANT ETHIC THESIS AS AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

William H. Swatos, Jr., and Peter Kivisto

No essay in the sociology of religion has generated a greater output of research and debate than *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that Talcott Parsons’s translation brought to Anglo-America in 1930, something Parsons himself recognized when toward the end of his life he described his contribution to the discipline as that of acting “as an importer” (in Reinhold 1973: 80)—a few hundred pages yielding tens of thousands, perhaps even more, as it is virtually impossible to catalogue the entire range of “Protestant ethic” scholarship. A dominant chord in sociology today would interpret Weber in the context of European sociology and social movements. We would argue otherwise. Although himself only a visitor in the body, with the help of Parsons and others Weber and the American “way of life” became one in spirit—the dao of capitalism. Critics from Weber’s day until the present notwithstanding, Protestant Ethic scholarship continues only to grow, and despite Andrew Greeley’s unheeded call for a “moratorium” over forty years ago, neither detractors nor proponents seem wearied. How has this come to be so?

Perhaps this is because there is no other account that offers a more convincing explanation of the origins of the modern life-world, even if the “truth” of Weber’s account cannot be definitively established: Do we at some point want so badly to find a “cause” that can account for the fundamental changes in the social relationships and cultural developments we associate simultaneously with capitalism and modernity that we “will to believe” the Weber thesis? Is it that Weber offers us something more than a shoulder shrug, something essentially “spiritual” in a world of “mechanized petrification”—that is, a supremely ironic account of the way in which a religious ethic could be shaped by forces of “fate” to create “the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order,” a “nullity” that “imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved”? (1930: 181–82) The dialectic
between technical-economic progress and personal meaninglessness is mediated by a religious dynamic that is alternatively self-perpetuating and self-destructive as material success becomes the ultimate test of self-abnegation in a secular restatement of “not my will, but thine be done.” The pursuit of work for its own sake at once replaces and becomes the pursuit of the divine for its own sake.

As it stands today, the *PESC* is a preeminently American sociological text—a book that was largely ignored in Germany except by a few critics—“American” in the sense that underlying it was a fascination by Weber with an alternative way of doing and seeing social life from that of fin-de-siècle Europe, an American way by which Weber was simultaneously enthralled and repelled, but which ultimately won the day in light of subsequent developments in Europe. Specifically, Weber gives a religious account of American capitalism that resonated with Americans’ own sense of themselves as a chosen nation. His final champion of the Protestant ethic is neither Luther nor Calvin nor Bunyan nor Milton nor Baxter but Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard. With Parsons as his medium, Weber provided American sociology with a spiritual account of the origins of American capitalism and a prophetic warning against the dangers that accompany a loss of that higher moral vision. Sam Whimster may well be right in his recent assertion that the *PESC* essays are not in themselves sociology but instead represent at one level “descriptive psychology being applied to national-economy,” while they are at another level “a work of art” (2007: 11, 50), but their effect on American sociology—and not only sociology of religion, though especially sociology of religion—simply cannot be stressed strongly enough.

**Retrospective**

“Finally a monograph has been written by Dr. Max Weber…which has astounded all readers with its wealth of thought and profundity of insight. This work more than anything else has given me the feeling that our expertise is at an end, that we have to start learning afresh”

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1 We wish to emphasize that it is Poor Richard, not the historical person of Franklin himself, with whom Weber is concerned. Richard is a religious figure for Weber, symbolizing the coincident dynamics from ethic to spirit and back again. (Similarly with respect to Bunyan, it is Pilgrim to whom Weber refers.)