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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*¹

PETER BAEHR

ABSTRACT

In the climax to *The Protestant Ethic*, Max Weber writes of the *stahlhartes Gehäuse* that modern capitalism has created, a concept that Talcott Parsons famously rendered as the “iron cage.” This article examines the status of Parsons’s canonical translation; the putative sources of its imagery (in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*); and the more complex idea that Weber himself sought to evoke with the “shell as hard as steel”: a reconstitution of the human subject under bureaucratic capitalism in which “steel” becomes emblematic of modernity. Steel, unlike the “element” iron, is a product of human fabrication. It is both hard and potentially flexible. Further, whereas a cage confines human agents, but leaves their powers otherwise intact, a “shell” suggests that modern capitalism has created a *new kind of being*. After examining objections to this interpretation, I argue that whatever the problems with Parsons’s “iron cage” as a rendition of Weber’s own metaphor, it has become a “traveling idea,” a fertile coinage in its own right, an intriguing example of how the translator’s imagination can impose itself influentially on the text and its readers.

“. . . Look within my Vail,
Turn up my metaphors . . .” (John Bunyan)

I. INTRODUCTION

Few concepts in the social sciences are more instantly recognizable than the “iron cage.” Seemingly integral to the powerful denouement of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the metaphor sums up, graphically and dramatically, the predicament of modern human beings trapped in a socioeconomic structure of their own making. Let us recall the context in which this striking image appears:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will

1. For their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, I am indebted to Judith Adler, Charles Camic, Randall Collins, Richard Hamilton, Hartmut Lehmann, Volker Meja, Stuart Pierson, Guenther Roth, Lawrence A. Scaff, Richard Swedberg, Keith Tribe, and Gordon C. Wells.

so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment". But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.²

This passage, first published in English in 1930, established the "iron cage" as one of the key *topoi* of the social sciences, versatile enough to animate investigations ranging from scientific management³ to the men's movement,⁴ or to invite literary pun⁵ and oxymoron.⁶ Asked to name its author, most social scientists will immediately reply "Max Weber." Yet the real author of the "iron cage" is not Weber, but one of his first translators, Talcott Parsons. What I propose to show in this article is that the metaphor Weber himself employed—*stahlhartes Gehäuse*, or "shell as hard as steel"—is more complex and more modern than Parsons's alternative.⁷ Two preliminary sections furnish the context for this argument. The first reviews some general criticisms of Weber translations in order to show the peculiarity of Parsons's "iron cage." The second section examines the inconsistent reasons Parsons gave for *choosing* the expression that has since become canonical, for here, too, there are clues as to why his interpretation of Weber is problematic.

II. WEBER AND HIS TRANSLATORS

Translators of Weber are frequently taxed for at least four kinds of inadequacy, each of which has interpretive consequences for the reception and understanding of his work. First, and most obviously, they are charged with simple incompetence, rendering terms incorrectly, eliding them or omitting them altogether. Thus Guenther Roth⁸ points out that Gerth and Mills's⁹ translations of "Science as a Vocation" and "Politics as a Vocation" are defective in at least two respects, both of which have led to "great confusions." To begin with, "Weber does not

2. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, transl. Talcott Parsons, with a foreword by R.H. Tawney. (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1930), 181.

3. Ed Andrew, *Closing the Iron Cage: The Scientific Management of Work and Leisure* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1981).

4. Michael Schwalbe, *Unlocking the Iron Cage: The Men's Movement, Gender Politics, and American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

5. Michael S. Roth, *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

6. Andrew Gamble, *Hayek: The Iron Cage of Liberty* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996).

7. Weber wrote two versions of *The Protestant Ethic*, both of which employ the *stahlhartes Gehäuse* metaphor. See Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus, II. Die Berufsidee des asketischen Protestantismus," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 21 (1905), 1-110, at 108; and Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Vol.1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1920), 17-206, at 203-204. Parsons translated the 1920 version. For a survey of the major differences between the editions, see Lichtblau and Weiß's introduction to *Die protestantische Ethik und der "Geist" des Kapitalismus*, ed. Klaus Lichtblau and Johannes Weiß (Bodenheim: Athenäum Hain Hanstein, 1993), vii-xxxv.

8. Guenther Roth, "Interpreting and Translating Max Weber," *International Sociology* 7 (1992), 449-459.

9. Hans Gerth was the real translator. On the moral dynamics of the Gerth and Mills collaboration, particularly with respect to the *From Max Weber* project, see Guy Oakes and Arthur J. Vidich, *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life: Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 15-56.

speak 'from' the standpoint of rejecting intellectualism, as many young contemporaries did, but 'exactly in relation to' it. 'Science as a Vocation' is nothing but a defense of intellectualism."¹⁰ Equally, through the omission of an all-important qualifying adjective, Gerth and Mills make Weber's concluding remarks to "Politics as a Vocation" appear much more apocalyptic than in fact they were. In the original German, Weber says that what "at present" or "for the time being" (*zunächst*) lies ahead "of us" (that is, German citizens) is "a polar night of icy darkness and hardness," an allusion to the Versailles Treaty and to the difficulties the fledgling Weimar Republic will strenuously have to overcome. This is not, then, Spenglerian cultural pessimism, but rather a bracing call for realism, sobriety, and stamina to face the specific demands of the day. The omission of the adjective (*zunächst*) appears to suggest the opposite: an impending catastrophe of civilization itself.¹¹ In a similar vein, Peter Ghosh documents the "continuous stream of individual mistranslations, misprints and omissions of up to clause-length which can destroy the meaning of entire paragraphs" in Parsons's version of *The Protestant Ethic*.¹²

These kinds of errors are largely attributable to simple and ubiquitous human failings: carelessness, negligence, rashness. A second criticism of Weber's translators concerns not simple mistakes, however, but something deeper and more sociologically problematic: an inability to understand, or at least convey, the conceptual matrix in which the original terms are located. In her paper on "The Americanization of Max Weber," Gisela Hinkle puts it this way:

By "Americanization" we mean an interpretive transformation of Weber's writings through the process of translation. Translation from one language to another and more specifically from one intellectual and linguistic context to another, entails not merely a substitution of words but a transformation of ideas, styles of thinking, modes of expression, indeed a whole context of mental imagery and assumptions many of which may be unnoticed by the writer, the translator, and the reader¹³

Hinkle's particular worry is that "insufficient awareness of [Weber's] neo-Kantian inclinations has repeatedly distorted the meaning of the text,"¹⁴ an argument she supports by examining translations of Edward Shils, Henry Finch, and Talcott Parsons. A characteristic objection of hers is to the opening paragraph of the "Author's Introduction" to *The Protestant Ethic*¹⁵ in which Parsons ignores the logical, propo-

10. Roth, "Interpreting and Translating Max Weber," 455.

11. For two such ominous readings, see George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Pine Forge Press, 1993), 162; and Jane A Rinehart, "It May Be a Polar Night of Icy Darkness, but Feminists are Building a Fire," in *McDonaldization Revisited: Critical Essays on Consumer Culture*, ed. Mark Alfino, John S. Caputo, and Robin Wynyard (Wesport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 9-38.

12. Peter Ghosh, "Some Problems with Talcott Parsons' Translation of 'The Protestant Ethic,'" *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 35 (1994), 104.

13. Gisela J. Hinkle, "The Americanization of Max Weber," *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 7 (1986), 89.

14. *Ibid.*, 89; cf. 101.

15. More precisely, the "Vorbemerkung" (Preliminary Remark) to the first volume of Weber's *Religionssoziologie*.

sitional structure of the essay's "problematic" (*Fragestellung*), and recasts it into a formulation that is much more idiosyncratic and personalized in complexion. Similarly, Hinkle castigates Shils and Finch for a series of mistranslations that make it seem that Weber was far closer to modern empiricist or, alternatively, philosophical realist traditions than in fact he was. The fairness of these scholarly judgments is not our concern here, though let us note in passing that Weber's neo-Kantianism was never pristine, and that it coexisted with many other intellectual currents of thought. This complicates any reading of Weber, whose adaptations of other traditions and thinkers are both prodigious and astonishingly creative. Nonetheless, Hinkle's broader argument is fully warranted: a clash of philosophical perspectives between translators and authors can have major consequences for the latter, pulling a work into an interpretive orbit that disturbs the original constellation of themes, idioms, and emphases. A salient example occurs in *The Protestant Ethic* where Parsons's hostility to behaviorist psychology, and his determination to enlist Weber in the pantheon of thinkers similarly averse to it, leads him to downplay radically Weber's emphasis on psychological *Antriebe* (drives, impulses).¹⁶

A third, related deficiency in Weber translations is an underestimation of the literary qualities and philosophical allusions of the author's texts. This is yet another aspect of that "transformation of ideas, styles of thinking, modes of expression, indeed a whole context of mental imagery and assumptions" that Hinkle objected to previously, except that in this case it is a specific kind of thinking that is being transformed. The most famous example in *The Protestant Ethic* is Parsons's translation of "elective affinities" (*Wahlverwandtschaften*) as "correlations," a social scientific domestication that extinguishes the compressed imagery of eroticism, attraction, and alchemy that pervade the Goethian evocation. Another instance occurs toward the end of *The Protestant Ethic* where Parsons substitutes "last stage" (of cultural development) for "last men" (*die "letzten Menschen"*), thereby obliterating the Nietzschean resonance of the original.

Finally, received translations are likely to prove defective as scholars become more conscious of the total configuration of Weber's language or train new perspectives onto it. Hence, commentators may highlight neglected but "central" terms of Weber's *oeuvre*, offering a gloss on a German word but more often inviting Anglophone readers to familiarize themselves with the peculiarities of the German language itself, especially where no clear English equivalents are available. Random examples include *Lebensführung*,¹⁷ *Sinnzusammenhang*,¹⁸ *Arbeitsverfassung*,¹⁹ and *Gehäuse* itself. Equally, as Roth acknowledges:

general readability is the best that can be achieved in a translation, because it becomes outdated whenever new theoretical issues arise. Translators cannot anticipate which terms

16. Ghosh, "Some Problems with Talcott Parsons' Translation of 'The Protestant Ethic,'" 118.

17. Keith Tribe, "Translator's Appendix," in Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber's Science of Man* (Newbury: Threshold Press, 2000), 205-216.

18. Martin Albrow, *Max Weber's Construction of Social Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 214.

19. Lawrence Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 40 ff.

will become important in a few years. For each specific purpose new choices must often be made. Terms that were not standardized previously suddenly are in need of uniform rendering. An example is *Eigengesetzlichkeit*, literally "autonomy," but the noun gets adequate meaning only as part of a theory of social development and modernity, indicating the emergence of separate value and institutional spheres. (I find that I must often change my own translation of Weber and others, and that includes texts I revised previously.)²⁰

Where does the "iron cage" stand in relation to the four perplexities I have just enumerated? It is not a *simple* textual error or omission because *stahlhartes Gehäuse* is a metaphor of great complexity allowing a range of possible interpretations. Neither can the "iron cage" be said to be a solecism induced by a cavalier and uninformed attitude to the sources. As we will see, Parsons claimed to be immersed in the Protestant texts Weber was describing. Equally, there is no lost philosophical allusion at stake here, nor the *ex post facto* need to retranslate the term as a result of some major shift of intellectual horizon; on the contrary, most Weberian commentators appear happy enough with Parsons's rendition.²¹ The chief problem with the "iron cage" is rather that it is hermeneutically superficial, possibly modeling itself on a false literary analogy, and failing to capture a disturbing nuance of Weber's argument. Yet Parsons's interpretation is not so easily "corrected." For the most intriguing peculiarity of the "iron cage" is that it has become canonical; it now has a vibrant career of its own.

III. PARSONS'S PROGRESS

Why did Parsons choose the "iron cage" as a rendition of *stahlhartes Gehäuse*? He offered at least two explanations for his preference. The first appears in a letter written to Benjamin Nelson on January 24, 1975, in which Parsons wrote:

20. Roth, "Interpreting and Translating Max Weber," 457.

21. The term "iron cage" is endorsed by Harry Zohn in his translation of Marianne Weber's *Max Weber: A Biography* [1926] (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1975), 342; by Guenther Roth, in "Weber the Would-Be Englishman: Anglophilia and Family History," in *Weber's Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts*, ed. Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 83-131, at 87; and by Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* [1976] (Twentieth Anniversary Edition, with a new Afterword) (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 291, n. 11. It also appears prominently in the titles of books by Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber*, and Arthur Mitzman, *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber* (New York: Knopf, 1970). However, when Mitzman translates the passage from which, purportedly, the "iron cage" metaphor is drawn, he departs from Parsons's interpretation. Mitzman quotes Weber as stating, "But fate decreed that the cloak should become a housing hard as steel." For Mitzman, the "'housing hard as steel,' of course, recalls the 'secure house' of his father's generation that Weber had publicly refused to enter in 1893. But Weber now recognized the ascetic mien of his mother as well as the bureaucratic spirit of his father as a threat to his autonomy" (172). For some pertinent comments on Mitzman's usage, see Edward A Tiryakian, "The Sociological Import of a Metaphor: Tracking the Source of Max Weber's 'Iron Cage,'" *Sociological Inquiry* 51 (1981), 27-33, at 28-30.

Eric Matthews's translation in the W. G. Runciman anthology has "casing as hard as steel," *Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman, transl. Eric Matthews (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 170. That phrasing is also preferred by Stephen P. Turner, "Bunyan's Cage and Weber's Casing," *Sociological Inquiry* 52 (1982). For a helpful discussion of some of the problems in rendering *Gehäuse*, see Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs's remarks in *Weber: Political Writings* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 68, n. 57; 90, n. 11; 374.

I cannot remember clearly just how and why I decided when more than 35 years ago I was translating Weber's Protestant Ethic essay to introduce the phrase "iron cage." . . . I think "iron cage" was a case of rather free translation. I do not remember being aware at the time of the use of the phrase by John Bunyan. However, as you know, I was brought up deeply steeped in a puritan background, and whether or not I intentionally adopted the term from Bunyan seems to me probably secondary. The most likely explanation of my choice is that I thought it appropriate to the puritan background of Weber's own personal engagement in the Protestant Ethic problem.²²

However, just over four years later, Parsons's emphasis is somewhat different. Responding to a query of Edward Tiryakian, Parsons remarked, "I am pretty sure that I did look up *Pilgrim's Progress* at the time I was working on the translation and that this influenced my choice of the phrase iron cage."²³ Parsons went on to say that *The Protestant Ethic* was one of the easier Weber translations he attempted because "Weber chose to write particularly about 17th Century English Puritanism and the basic language was English. *Therefore, in a sense, all I had to do was to translate Weber's German back into English with which of course he was thoroughly familiar*" (my emphasis).

It transpires, then, that Parsons wondered whether "iron cage" may have come to him, subliminally or directly, as a result of his reading John Bunyan, the great Puritan preacher who was himself imprisoned, first from November 1660 to March 1672, and then for a six-month period some time—no one is quite sure—between 1675 and 1677. *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) was the fruit of that first confinement.²⁴ In the allegory, the chief protagonist, Christian, has left his city and family, both doomed to hellfire, to make his way toward the Celestial City. On his journey, Christian suffers various self-inflicted setbacks before his final apotheosis, meeting a cast of characters who seek to deflect, destroy, or instruct him. The junction in the story that concerns us is the moment Christian comes to the House of the Interpreter, who proceeds benignly to show him various personages. The man in the iron cage is one of them.

Now, said Christian, let me go hence: Nay stay (said the Interpreter,) till I have shewed thee a little more, and after that, thou shalt go on thy way. So he took him by the hand again, and led him into a very dark Room, where there sat a Man in an Iron Cage.

Now the Man, to look on, seemed very sad: he sat with his eyes looking down to the ground, his hands folded together; and he sighed as if he would break his heart. Then said Christian: What means this? At which the Interpreter bid him talk with the Man.

Chr. Then Said Christian to the Man, What art thou?

The Man answered, I am what I was not once.

22. Talcott Parsons, "Letter from Talcott Parsons to Benjamin Nelson, January 24, 1975," Harvard University Archives (HUG [FP] 42.8.8, Box 10, 1975). Cf. Richard Swedberg, *Max Weber and the Idea of Economic Sociology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 262-263, n. 44.

23. Talcott Parsons, "Letter from Talcott Parsons to Edward Tiryakian, March 2, 1979," *Sociological Inquiry* 51 (1979), 35-36.

24. The language of confinement is also a prominent motif in the tracts of Martin Luther. See, for instance, his discussion of "the iron bars of ceremonies" (which Luther considered necessary for an ordered life) in "The Freedom of a Christian Man" (1520); and of "the prison of sin and death" in "Preface to the German Translation of the New Testament" (1522). See *The Protestant Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 3-29, 37-42, at 28, 40.

Chr. What wast thou once?

Man. The Man said, I was once a fair and flourishing Professor [i.e., one who openly professes his religion], both in mine own eyes, and also in the eyes of others: I once was, as I thought, fair for the Celestial City, and had then even joy at the thoughts that I should get thither.

Chr. Well, but what art thou now?

Man. I am now a Man of Despair, and am shut up in it, as in this Iron Cage. I cannot get out; O now I cannot.

Chr. But how camest thou in this condition?

Man. I left off to watch, and be sober; I laid the reins upon the neck of my lusts; I sinned against the light of the Word, and the goodness of God: I have grieved the Spirit, and he is gone; I tempted the Devil, and he is come to me; I have provoked God to anger, and he has left me; I have so hardened my heart, that I cannot repent . . .

Chr. Then said Christian, Is there no hope but you must be kept in this Iron Cage of Despair?

Man. No, none at all . . . God hath denied me repentance; his Word gives me no encouragement to believe; yea, himself hath shut me up in this Iron Cage: nor can all the men in the World let me out. O Eternity! Eternity! How shall I grapple with the misery that I must meet with in Eternity.²⁵

I have quoted this passage at length to show that in *The Pilgrim's Progress* the iron cage is a metaphor of the deepest dejection. Man has turned away from God, and God has turned away from him. Man is now left to "grapple with the misery" that he will meet in the eternity of hell. In the critical edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress* from which I have been quoting, a footnote directs readers toward the multiple sources of the iron cage imagery. Specifically, Bunyan had in mind the example of John Child, an apostate of the Bedford congregation who, having joined the Church of England, later committed suicide in a fit of contrition. Bunyan was also alluding to one of the great engravings of Francis Quarles's *Emblemes*²⁶ which depicts a man in an iron cage, an angel in attendance, and an open cage above the man from which a bird has just flown and which represents his soul. In the original emblem (Book 5, number x, 280), Quarles inserts, just below the picture, the first clause of Psalm 142 "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name" (the Psalm continues: "the righteous shall compass me about; for thou shalt deal bountifully with me"). Opposite the picture is a long quotation from Saint Anselm (1033–1109) that begins "My Soule is like a Bird; my Flesh, the Cage."

Weber's reference in *The Protestant Ethic* to the "shell as hard as steel" has a rather different target. This becomes clear when he speculates on those members of bourgeois civilization who, in the future, will come to live within this shell, and whether "entirely new prophets will arise, or [whether] there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last men [Parsons has "last stage"] of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists

25. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World to That Which is to Come*, ed. James Blanton Wharey and Roger Sharrock [1678] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 34-35.

26. Francis Quarles, *Emblemes and Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man* [1635] (Hildesheim, Zurich, and New York: G. Olms, 1993).

without spirit, sensualists without heart'; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved" (182).

While Weber himself may have been in despair about some aspects of the modern condition, his summoning of Nietzsche's Last Man has precisely the opposite thrust: a ringing Zarathustrean indictment of a humanity that is "happy," sated, mediocre, and philistine: "The earth has become small, and upon it hops the Last Man, who makes everything small. His race is as inexterminable as the flea; the Last Man lives longest." "I tell you," Zarathustra says a few lines earlier, "one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: you still have chaos in you."²⁷ Chaos was no stranger to Weber, or to the Puritans who struggled heroically to contain it within their doctrines. That its eclipse was to be feared more than the inner conflict it provoked was a typical Weberian sentiment. In contrast, the "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" are too vacuous to lament, believing they have "attained a level of civilization never before achieved." While their *Gehäuse* has not been freely chosen, it is willingly accepted, and is by no means a punishment. However, while Bunyan's Man must confront an eternity of misery and hopelessness, Weber's view of the future, dominated by the Last Man, is not quite so desperate, for the possibility arises that "entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals." "Mechanized petrification" is avoidable. I conclude from this analysis that "cage" as a translation of *Gehäuse* is inappropriate because the despairing Man of Bunyan's creation, and the inane specialist of Weber's, are asymmetrical figures.²⁸ The former suffers and is being punished; the latter is a hedonist motivated by the quest for materialistic consumption and confident of his superiority. *Dum Coelum aspicio, Solum despicio* ("I aspire to heaven and despise the ground") reads the motto of Francis Quarles's *Emblemes*, on which Bunyan imaginatively drew. Weber's bourgeois philistine, in contrast, has his nose so close to the ground that he is incapable of aspiring to heaven or to any nonutilitarian value. Knowing Weber's familiarity with the English Puritan sources, Parsons believed that he had properly translated the German *stahlhartes Gehäuse* into an English idiom. Parsons's justification is ingenious, and the "iron cage" metaphor is remarkable in its own right (a point to which I will return presently). There are a number of reasons to believe, however, that the German original required more attention than Parsons gave to it.

IV. FROM IRON TO STEEL

Stahlhartes Gehäuse is a difficult expression to translate, largely because of the many meanings that *Gehäuse* can assume, but it does not present the English translator with the intractable difficulties posed by words for which there are no

27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, transl. R.J. Hollingdale [1883] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), 46.

28. I thus take a very different view to Edward Tiryakian ("The Sociological Import of a Metaphor," 30) who remarks: "I suggest both that Weber was inspired by this passage and that he strongly identified not only with 'the Man' of despair but also with Christian."

strict English equivalents. Under those circumstances, translators are compelled to improvise, as they must with Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit*²⁹ or, even more so, with the noun *Vorleser*, the title of Bernhard Schlink's recent novel. Since English makes no clear distinction, in a single word, between a person who reads and a person who reads aloud to others, *Der Vorleser* was rendered simply as *The Reader*. But this was not Parsons's predicament; the English language offers a number of words that will adequately translate Weber's German phrase.

We might begin by noting that Weber wrote not of iron, but chose instead to invoke an adjectival compound—*stahlhartes*—that directs the reader's attention to steel. Iron is a metal that is ancient (the earliest objects of smelted iron date back to around 3000 BC) and elemental.³⁰ Accordingly, the "Iron Age" denotes the third of an archaeological, archaic sequence (Stone, Bronze, and Iron), and the "kingdom of iron" (and of iron and clay) is the last of the four kingdoms revealed by Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar.³¹ Yet iron, and in particular the "Age of Iron," is also associated with the industrial revolution and modernity.³² Like steel, iron evokes hardness and unbending resolution: Bismarck was the "Iron Chancellor" (as Mrs. Thatcher was the "Iron Lady"), the *Kaiserreich* the era of "Blood and Iron" (yet also of "Steel and Rye"). But steel has more complex and even more modern connotations³³ than its metallic counterpart. Steel, unlike iron, is an invention rather than an "element"; although pre-modern in origins, the breakthrough in steel came with its mass industrial production during the 1850s, a result of the pneumatic Bessemer process.³⁴ As such, steel is the product of

29. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [1927] (New York: Harper, 1962), §§29-30 = 172-182. For an illuminating discussion of the difficulties of this term, see Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 64-68.

30. Iron appears in Group VIII of the Periodic Table, and is distinguished by the atomic number 26, the atomic weight of 55.847, and the chemical symbol Fe.

31. Daniel 2:1-49. The first three ages are of gold, silver, and bronze ("brass"). "And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise" (2:40). The sequence of bronze and iron is touchingly reversed in J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron: A Novel* [1990] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1998), 50. See also 73, 75, 82, 124-126.

For another ancient myth of ages (composed in the early seventh century BCE) in which iron figures prominently, see Hesiod's *Works and Days*, lines 106-201. Hesiod's degenerative succession of metallic "races" culminates in the miserable men of iron of which he himself is a member. "Not ever during the day will men cease from labor and grief; not even at night will they cease from being oppressed . . . And Zeus will destroy this race of mortal people too, when they turn out to be grey-templed at birth."

32. For Weber's analysis of iron ("the most important factor in the development of capitalism") see *General Economic History*, transl. Frank H. Knight [1927, 1923] (New York and London: Collier Books, 1961), 227, 275. I am grateful to Charles Camic for directing my attention to this source.

33. Both iron and steel have strong masculine (and martial) overtones. Popular iconography is full of images that link iron and steel to forms of manhood; consider Iron John, John Henry (the "steel driving man"), Superman, The Man of Steel, etc. For more subtle connotations of iron, see Primo Levi's portrait of Sandro in *The Periodic Table*, transl. Raymond Rosenthal [1975] (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 37-49.

34. For a brief overview of the revolution in steel production unleashed by the Bessemer process, see Robert Kanigel, *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency* [1997] (New York: Penguin, 1999), 155-160. Writing for the *New York Evening Post's* "Review of the Century" (Jan. 12, 1901), Andrew Carnegie anointed the new era thus: "Farewell, then, Age of

human fabrication: steel is an alloy of iron. Increase its carbon content, and you increase its strength. Add other materials—manganese, silicon, tungsten—and steel becomes harder. Yet while steel can be made extremely hard, its hardness can vary along a continuum of “mild,” “medium,” and “high.” This permits steel to be both rigid (enabling high-speed drills) and flexible (consider steel sheets and wire). Hence, as a metal that is associated in the European context with modernity, fabrication, ductility, and malleability, steel appears to have much more in common with rational bourgeois capitalism than the iron of which it is a refinement. Just as steel involves the transformation of iron by the mixing of carbon and other elements, so capitalism involves the transformation of labor power into commodities. It is thus appropriate that the father of scientific management, Frederick Winslow Taylor, began his working career (in 1878) in the Midvale Steel Company of Philadelphia; that he invented high-speed steel in 1898 while working for the Bethlehem Steel Works; and that his ideas for the rationalization of labor proceeded from his experience with metal.³⁵ As Siegfried Giedion observed “[t]he stretching of human capacities and the stretching of the properties of steel derive from the same roots.”³⁶

If Weber had wanted to deploy the imagery of the “iron cage,” he could have exercised that option in German with the expression *eiserner Käfig*.³⁷ His contemporaries might then have caught an allusion to John Bunyan, but are far more likely to have remembered a fable closer to home: the Brothers Grimm story of

Iron; all hail, King Steel, and success to the republic, the future seat and center of his empire, where he is to sit enthroned and work his wonders upon the earth.” To which Carnegie’s biographer aptly adds, “This was a curiously belated *vive* from one who had been largely instrumental in enthroning steel as monarch some thirty years earlier. . . .” John Frazier Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* [1970] (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 307.

35. See, especially, Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* [1911] (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1998), 51-60.

The totemic identification of steel with fortitude, efficiency, and modernization is nowhere more evident than in the Communist experiments of the twentieth century. Lenin eagerly embraced Taylorism: “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government” (1918), in *Lenin: Selected Works Vol. 2* (Moscow: Progress, 1968), 695-732. Stalin means “man of steel.” The subject is too complex to pursue here in any detail, but one of its more tragic manifestations was the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), Mao’s catastrophic attempt to outstrip Great Britain in steel production within a fifteen-year period. Exponentially increased steel production was one of his “two generals” (the other, far more disastrous, was the *Lysenkoist* campaign to accelerate grain production). On the backyard furnace campaign during the Great Leap, see Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: China’s Secret Famine* (London: J. Murray, 1996), 63-64; cf. William Henry Chamberlin, *Russia’s Iron Age* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1937).

36. Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* [1948] (New York: Norton, 1969), 98.

37. As Nietzsche did in his scabrous comments on “the priests” in *The Will to Power*, section 397: “Morality is a menagerie; its presupposition is that iron bars can be more profitable than freedom, even for the prisoners; its other presupposition is that there exist animal-trainers who are not afraid of terrible means—who know how to handle red-hot iron. This frightful species which takes up the fight against the wild animal is called ‘priest.’ . . . Man, imprisoned in an iron cage of errors, became a caricature of man, sick, wretched, ill-disposed toward himself, full of hatred for the impulses of life. . . .” *The Will to Power*, transl. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale [1901] (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 214.

"Iron Hans"—the Wild Man who, dredged up from the bottom of a deep pool, is exhibited in an "iron cage" in the courtyard of a King's castle.³⁸ (The myth is the centerpiece of Robert Bly's 1990 theory of masculinity in *Iron John: A Book about Men*.)

V. DEAD AND LIVING MACHINES

"Cage", as a translation of *Gehäuse*, raises other problems. *Gehäuse* is a noun that Weber repeatedly employs in his writings; its connotations include shell (or carapace), casing, housing, dwelling, and conceivably, "cage." But for "cage" to be appropriate Weber would have had to mix a metaphor that begins with Baxter's contention that worldly goods should be like a cloak that can be thrown effortlessly aside. A cage, in contrast, is not something that is worn; it is something in which one is trapped.³⁹ Now, to the degree that "the technical and economic conditions of machine production"⁴⁰ offer us no real escape from the world they permeate, the metaphor of confinement works—but only in part, since iron bars can be filed down; cages can be opened; people can escape from them: images that contradict the notion of indefinite captivity. Further, the specter of people trapped within a cage implies that they are being punished, usually for an act *they* have committed or are believed to have committed;⁴¹ and punishment itself is typically an experience associated with suffering and anguish (we might consider the fate of the Münster Anabaptists, Jan van Leyden prominent among them, whose hideously disfigured remains were suspended in three iron cages from the tower of the Lamberti Church).⁴² We have already seen why this state of lamentation does not characterize the Last Man.

Moreover, as David Chalcraft has argued in an article that exhaustively considers the linguistic options, the most convincing rendering of *Gehäuse* in *The Protestant Ethic* is "shell." Only this term captures the range of associations that Weber wishes to convey. In particular, "shell" suggests a living space both for the individual who must carry it around and a macro environment ("the universal world order of capitalism") within which individual experience is lived out. As

38. Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm, "Der Eisenhans," in *Kinder-und Hausmarchen, gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm (Grimms Marchen)*, ed. Heinz Rolleke [1850] (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), 757-765.

39. See Marianne Weber's characterization of her husband, impatient about wasting time on his visit to New York: "Only when he was bored and wasted time needlessly—as on a streetcar ride of several hours through New York that was undertaken in the protective custody of a hospitable American colleague . . .—did the lion secretly rage in his cage, and then it was hard to restrain him from breaking out," *Max Weber: A Biography*, 281.

40. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 181.

41. Of course, cages can also be occupied by people who are just doing a certain kind of job: for instance, postal workers in the late nineteenth century and later for whom the wood and wire lattice "cage" was a means of protection from thieves. For a play on "cage" as both protective and confining simultaneously, see Henry James, *In the Cage* [1898] (London: Martin Secker, 1919), 5-6, 17, 51-52, and *passim*.

42. A history of this incident can be found in one of Weber's sources, E. Belfort Bax, *Rise and Fall of the Anabaptists* (London and New York: S. Sonnenschein; Macmillan, 1903), 282-331.

Chalcraft observes, “the steel shell of the capitalist order” conditions the priorities of modern society, and impresses these priorities on each of us as individuals. Our own shell, in which we live and breathe, is our shelter and constraint, yet it allows choices of various kinds, movements and directions that are our own. Chalcraft also remarks percipiently that the image of a shell symbolizes something that has not just been externally imposed (as in the iron cage metaphor), but that has become “part and parcel of [our] existence.”⁴³ This observation is worth developing.

For social scientists familiarized to the “iron cage,” Weber’s metaphor of the shell as hard as steel is likely to appear anticlimactic; it is certainly less arresting and sonorous than Parsons’s creation. Yet, on closer inspection, it is more troubling. The habitation of a steel shell implies not only a new dwelling for modern human beings, but a transformed nature; homo sapiens has become a *different* being, a degraded being. A cage deprives one of liberty, but leaves one otherwise unaltered, one’s powers still intact even if incapable of full realization. A shell, on the other hand, hints at an organic reconstitution of the being concerned; a shell is *part* of the organism and cannot be dispensed with.⁴⁴ The steel that composes the shell is not that summoned up by Ernst Jünger in whose martial “storms of steel” ordinary people become heroes, and where “passive forces [are] melted down in the crucible of war,” an “incomparable schooling of the heart.”⁴⁵ For Weber, on the contrary, the steel shell is the symbol of *passivity*, the transformation of the Puritan hero into a figure of mass mediocrity. True, we have not yet reached the terrifying dimension of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* in which the chief protagonist, Gregor Samsa, wakes to find himself transformed into a giant bug lying on his “hard, as it were armor-plated, back” (*panzerartig harten Rücken*), and whose first thoughts and worries are about his job and his timetable, rather than his fantastically changed state.⁴⁶ But Weber’s metaphor places *The Protest-*

43. David Chalcraft, “Bringing the Text Back In: On Ways of Reading the Iron Cage Metaphor in the Two Editions of ‘The Protestant Ethic,’” in *Organizing Modernity: New Weberian Perspectives on Work, Organization and Society*, ed. Larry J. Ray and Michael Reed (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 16-45, at 29-39.

44. Again one recalls Marianne Weber, this time describing Max Weber *senior*’s last days: “It was not given to the aging man to break through the shell (*Gehäuse*) of his own nature” (*Max Weber: A Biography*, 232).

45. Steel is a vital metaphor not only in *Storm of Steel* (*In Stahlgewittern*, 1920), but also in Jünger’s *Battle as Inner Experience* (1922)—“we are at once the smith and the flashing steel” . . . “steel forms, whose eagle gaze seeks out the clouds above the whirling propellers, who are cramped into the apparatus of tanks, who venture Hell’s journey through rolling minefields”—and *The Worker* (1932) where the coming “steel order” is ardently prophesied. See Thomas Nevin, *Ernst Jünger and Germany: Into the Abyss, 1914–1945* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996); the quoted remarks come from 65, 72, 126. For a while, Jünger had close associations with the *Stahlhelm* (the steel helmet was introduced to German infantry in 1916), the largest and most influential nationalist-conservative veterans’ organization of the Weimar Republic. In 1934 it was renamed the *Nationalsozialistischer Frontkämpferbund* and, proving itself to be insufficiently Nazi, was dissolved shortly thereafter. The image of steel, however, continued to find employment in the Third Reich: see Goebbels’s evocation of “steely romanticism” (*stählernde Romantik*) as discussed in Jeffrey Herf’s *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 195-196, 220.

46. Franz Kafka, “The Metamorphosis,” in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, foreword by John Updike [1915] (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 89.

ant *Ethic* within a lineage that stretches past Kafka,⁴⁷ to embrace Hannah Arendt's concern that "watched from a sufficiently removed vantage point in the universe . . . modern motorization would appear like a process of biological mutation in which human bodies gradually begin to be covered by shells of steel"⁴⁸; and beyond her to those contemporary writers who speculate on cyborgs and the "posthuman" or "transhuman" condition.⁴⁹

Nor is *The Protestant Ethic* the only place where Weber invokes the steel shell and reflects on the new being that modernity is creating. In one of his most powerful analyses of the "inescapability" of "rational" bureaucratic forms of organization, Weber argued that "wherever the trained, specialist, modern official has once begun to rule, his power is absolutely unbreakable, because the entire organization of providing even the most basic needs in life then depends on his performance of his duties."⁵⁰ The elimination of private capitalism, if that should come to pass, would not mean "that the steel shell of modern industrial work would break into pieces,"⁵¹ but in fact quite the reverse, since then the state-bureaucracy would rule alone, unimpeded by its private counterparts. "Is there," Weber asked rhetorically, "any appreciable *difference* between the lives of the workers and clerks in the Prussian state-run mines and railways and those of people working in large private capitalist enterprises?" Indeed, Weber considered the former less free because there was no countervailing power to which they could appeal or with which they could align. Weber continued:

A lifeless machine is *congealed spirit*. It is *only* this fact that gives the machine the power to force men to serve it and thus to rule and determine their daily working lives, as in fact happens in factories. The same *congealed spirit* is, however, also embodied in that *living machine* which is represented by bureaucratic organization with its specialization of trained, technical work, its delimitation of areas of responsibility, its regulations and its graduated hierarchy of relations of obedience. Combined with the dead machine, it is in the process of manufacturing the *Gehäuse* of that future serfdom to which, perhaps, men

47. In aphorism 13 of *Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope and the True Way*, Kafka wrote that "A cage went in search of a bird." (Franz Kafka, *The Basic Kafka*, ed. Erich Heller [New York: Pocket Books, 1946], 237.)

48. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 322. Though Arendt was a markedly anti-Weberian thinker along a number of axes, the conclusion to *The Human Condition* has some uncanny parallels with Parsons's translation of *The Protestant Ethic's* finale. She remarked (322): "The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning. . . . It is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known."

49. Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Keith Ansell Pearson, *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (London: Routledge, 1995).

50. Max Weber, "Parliament and Government in Germany Under a New Political Order," in *Weber: Political Writings*, ed. and transl. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs [1917] (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 156-158.

51. I have modified Speirs's translation. Weber writes: "Etwa ein Zerbrechen des stählernen Gehäuses der modernen gewerblichen Arbeit? Nein!"

may have to submit powerlessly, just like the slaves in the ancient state of Egypt, *if they consider that the ultimate and only value by which the conduct of their affairs is to be decided is good administration and provision for their needs by officials (that is “good” in the purely technical sense of rational administration).*⁵²

One possible objection to the analysis I have offered here, and especially to my interpretation of the *stahlhartes Gehäuse* metaphor in *The Protestant Ethic*, is that it lends credence to a caricature of Weber as an opponent of modern capitalism and as an apostle of *Kulturpessimismus*. It is important that such a parody be avoided. Guenther Roth points out that *The Protestant Ethic* was intended, at least in part, as a wake-up call to Weber’s German contemporaries, and especially to “other worldly,” naive *Kulturprotestanten*: it was meant to impress on them the inevitability of capitalism, the backward condition of Germany compared with Great Britain, and the need to employ the new industrial order to promote the interests of Imperial Germany’s position as a world power.⁵³ “The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so” is an affirmation of the modern world, not an invitation to flee from it; a counsel of realism, not despair.⁵⁴ A blanket condemnation of capitalism or a prophecy of the decline of the West was never part of Weber’s agenda.

At the same time it is undeniable that Weber *was*, to put it mildly, wary, troubled, and disconsolate about the human prospect—in the Occident as a whole—and in that sense “pessimistic.” The passages I have already quoted from *The Protestant Ethic* should make that plain enough, but if they do not there are many more to draw on. As Weber remarked: “How is it *at all possible* to salvage any remnants of ‘individual’ freedom of movement *in any sense*, given this all-powerful trend towards bureaucratization? . . . In view of the growing indispensability and hence increasing power of state officialdom . . . how can there be any guarantee that forces exist which can impose limits on the enormous, crushing power of this constantly growing stratum of society and control it effectively?”⁵⁵ What Weber feared was not private capitalism per se but its rentier parasite, not individualism but “the accustomed *Gehäuse* of bureaucratic regimentation,”⁵⁶ not democracy but rule-governed conformity, not administration in its place but

52. Weber, “Parliament and Government in Germany Under a New Political Order,” 158 (Weber’s emphasis).

53. This final desideratum also comes across forcefully in the conclusion to Weber’s 1896 pamphlet on the stock and commodity exchanges (*Die Börsenverkehr*) that he penned for the *Göttingen Worker’s Library* (edited by Friedrich Naumann). See Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1924), 289–322, at 320–322. His argument is that so long as nations carry out a “ruthless and unavoidable” economic struggle, a strong German stock and commodity exchange is vital, though inescapably in tension with demands for “ethical culture” and “welfare institutions.”

54. I am drawing on a letter from Guenther Roth to me, March 6, 2000; cited with Roth’s permission.

55. Weber, “Parliament and Government in Germany Under a New Political Order,” 159. See also Max Weber, “Bourgeois Democracy in Russia” and “Russia’s Transition to Pseudo-Constitutionalism,” in Max Weber, *The Russian Revolutions*, transl. and ed. Gordon C. Wells and Peter Baehr [1906] (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 1997), 109, 233.

56. Weber, “Parliament and Government in Germany Under a New Political Order,” 268.

the bureaucratic stultification of all sectors and spaces of life—made even worse by a protective welfare-state orientation that would, he thought, deprive the individual of responsibility, initiative and the willingness to take risks.⁵⁷

Another possible objection to my interpretation of the *stahlhartes Gehäuse* is that it misidentifies the primary object of Weber's concern. I have argued above that what exercised Weber most was the possibility that modern capitalism would produce, perhaps in abundance, the Last Men of Nietzsche's withering depiction. But is this too narrow? Wasn't Weber more worried, instead, about the fate of the ordinary person, the ordinary worker, under capitalism?⁵⁸ I doubt it. For most of his adult life, Weber showed very little solicitude for the condition of the ordinary person, though he cared a great deal for the fate of humanity (*Menschentum*).⁵⁹ This is not a contradiction in (Weber's) terms. Weber typically spoke from the perspective of the *Bildungsbürgertum* (the educated elite of the middle class), a stratum that saw itself as the bearer of German culture and, with the officer corps and nobility, the custodian of German honor.⁶⁰ From this elevated standpoint, the ordinary people were little more than "masses" to be mobilized on behalf of the nation and, optimally, educated in economic, political, and geopolitical realities.⁶¹ Weber's chief concern was not with the average fate, if that means with the mundane and banal, but with a society's modes of *selecting* the best or the worst.⁶² His priorities were above all "aristocratic," concerned with the conditions of excellence, by definition only achievable by the few.

Was Weber, then, an insensitive man? His nervous breakdown, and his acute awareness of human tragedy and the existential dilemmas of life, show conclusively otherwise. But even those who admire Weber's work are constrained to

57. "Whether in the shape of American 'benevolent feudalism,' the German 'welfare institutions,' or the Russian factory constitution—everywhere the empty shell (*Gehäuse*) of the new serfdom stands ready; it will be occupied to the degree that the pace of technical-economic 'progress' slows down and the victory of 'income' over 'profit' together with the exhaustion of what remains of 'free' lands and the 'free' markets, renders the masses 'compliant,'" "Bourgeois Democracy in Russia," 108.

58. This is the view of Richard Swedberg who argues that the image of "the iron cage" (the designation Swedberg prefers) is "an attempt to capture the fate of the 'common man' in capitalism—in particular the suffering felt by the industrial worker in the inferno of the modern machine and all the ills that come from that. . . . The image that to my mind best expresses Weber's idea of the iron cage . . . is one of the etchings of Max Klinger which portrays a skeleton smashing skulls, with the kind of iron contraption with which you produce gravel for roads"; letter from Professor Swedberg to me, January 23, 2000; cited with Swedberg's permission. The etching referred to is no. 10 of Klinger's "Eve and the Future" cycle (Third Future).

59. Karl-Ludwig Ay discerns some change in Weber's attitude towards the end of the Great War when he campaigned for universal and equal suffrage of the returning soldiers. "Max Weber: A German Intellectual and the Question of War Guilt after the Great War," in *Max Weber and the Culture of Anarchy*, ed. Sam Whimster (Basingstoke: Macmillans, 1999), 110-128, at 114.

60. *Ibid.*

61. For an extended discussion of Weber's concept of "the masses," and especially their putative "irrationality," see Peter Baehr, *Caesar and the Fading of the Roman World: A Study in Republicanism and Caesarism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 236-242.

62. "Selection" (*Auslese*) and its cognates (e.g. "struggle for existence") is a recurring theme of Weber's work carrying both Darwinesque and Nietzschean connotations. See, for example, Lassman and Speirs, *Weber: Political Writings*, 2, 16, 84, 134, 180, 225, 267, 283, 306. For a sociological definition of "selection," see *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich [1922] (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 38-40.

admit that his code of honor and stringent standards promoted a disdainful attitude toward everyday life which, from another perspective, is rich precisely for the compromises it requires. It is telling that Weber's greatest, and frequently ventilated, anxiety is not about a lack of abundance or contentment but their *fulfillment*; and that it is not suffering that agitates him but the prospect, adapting an unlikely combination of Nietzschean and classical republican motifs, of a civilization that is "sated," "replete," and lacking in dignity and freedom.⁶³ As he observed in an essay written shortly after *The Protestant Ethic*:

What is not won for the individual now, or in the course of the next generations, in terms of the inalienable sphere of personality and liberty, as long as the economic and spiritual "revolution," the much reviled "anarchy" of production and the equally reviled "subjectivism" continue undiminished (and these things *alone* can take the individual out of the broad mass and throw him back on himself) will *perhaps* never be won, once the world is economically "sated" and intellectually "replete." So it appears as far as our feeble eyes are able to peer into the impenetrable mists of the future of the human race.⁶⁴

VI. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

"In this translation, I must admit, I have not been altogether faithful . . ." (C. Wright Mills)⁶⁵

What, then, are we to conclude about the "iron cage"? The first duty of the translator is to be faithful to the author, so "shell as hard as steel" and not "iron cage" is the expression that an interest in precision requires us to adopt.⁶⁶ Yet something important remains.

It is one of the great ironies of sociology that the man so often excoriated for the ungainliness and density of his own prose could produce a translation that is rich in stylistic pathos. Parsons's discreet infidelity to Weber inspired an expression that has proved remarkably productive and resonant. The "iron cage" would never have been quoted and adapted as much as it has been unless it had struck some deep vein of intelligibility and recognition. It is a great coinage in its own right, a triumph of the imagination, one of those "traveling ideas"⁶⁷ that has

63. "The question which stirs us as we think beyond the grave of our own generation is not the *well-being* human beings will enjoy in the future but what kind of people they will *be*, and it is this same question which underlies all work in political economy. We do not want to breed well-being in people, but rather those characteristics which we think of as constituting the human greatness and nobility of our nature"; "The Nation State and Economic Policy (Inaugural Lecture, 1895)," in Lassman and Speirs, *Weber: Political Writings*, 1-28, at 15. Weber goes on to say that the quest for "social justice" is a lesser standard of value for political economy than "the quality of the human beings reared under [certain] economic and social conditions of existence" (emphasis omitted).

64. Weber, "Bourgeois Democracy in Russia," 110.

65. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 29 on his selective "translation" of Parsons's *The Social System*.

66. Accordingly, that is the rendering settled on in the first English translation of the 1905 version of "The Protestant Ethic." The edition will appear in early 2002 as Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism: The Essay of 1905 Together with Weber's Rebuttals of H. Karl Fischer and Felix Rachfahl*, ed., transl., and with an Introduction by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Books).

67. Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226-247.

steadily gathered a momentum of its own.⁶⁸ To the degree that many social scientists associate Weber with his ruminations on the "iron cage," and associate modern capitalism (or "technical rationality" or "modernity") with the image Parsons evoked, it is evident that author, translator, and object have become miraculously compounded. Keith Tribe has written ruefully of the "agenda setting nature" of Parsons's reading of Weber.⁶⁹ It appears that the agenda was even broader than that, encompassing the interpretation of modernity itself. This explains the tendency of scholars to suggest erroneously that Weber wrote about the "iron cage of bureaucracy,"⁷⁰ a usage that probably elides Parsons' "iron cage" with Robert Michels's "iron law of oligarchy."⁷¹ And it also explains the curious fact that Parsons's "iron cage," an English rendering of German, has been adopted by German translators of English texts⁷²: the Parsonian resonance in Zygmunt Bauman's *Der Mensch im Globalisierungskäfig* is unmistakable.⁷³ Moreover, if, as Walter Benjamin once remarked, the "task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original,"⁷⁴ can we really say in good faith that an echo of the original is lacking in "the iron cage?" I think not: cages are stultifying, confining, and claustrophobic, and these are certainly among the ideas that Weber was trying to impress on his readers. Our translations can seek to make these echoes more, rather than less, audible by translating *stahlhartes Gehäuse* as "iron cage." But by so doing certain important misconceptions are introduced that mislead readers about Weber's fears for human life under capitalism. "Shell as hard as steel" avoids these misconceptions and better captures the subtleties of Weber's thought.

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68. One of its more recent manifestations is George Ritzer's distinction among the three major attitudes toward a "McDonaldized society" as a cage of iron, velvet, and rubber. See *The McDonaldization of Society*, 160-163 and *The McDonaldization Thesis: Explorations and Extensions*. (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 4, 77-78, 164.

69. Keith Tribe, "Translator's Introduction," in Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 7.

70. Alexandra Maryanski and Jonathan H. Turner, *The Social Cage: Human Nature and the Evolution of Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 145-167; Bernard S. Silberman, *Cages of Reason: The Rise of the Rational State in France, Japan, the United States, and Great Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity, Liberty and Discipline* (London: Routledge, 1994), 64, 89-103.

71. Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, transl. Eden and Cedar Paul [1915] (New York: Dover Publications, 1959).

72. And by the French translator of *The Protestant Ethic*. Thus Jacques Chavy follows Parsons in rendering *stahlhartes Gehäuse* as "une cage d'acier." *L'éthique Protestante et l'esprit du Capitalisme*. (Paris: Plon, 1964), 246.

73. The German version of Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 1998). Volker Meja pointed this out to me.

74. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, transl. Harry Zohn [1923] (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1973), 76.