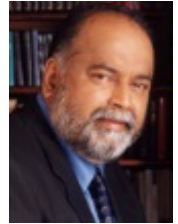


The books that inspired Arjun Appadurai: “I expect Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to be my companion for many more years to come”.

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Arjun Appadurai is a prominent contemporary social-cultural anthropologist who has contributed significantly to the field of globalisation studies. Arjun shares how Max Weber’s work still takes his breath away, and he also recommends a path-breaking study of the relationship between language, history and socio-cultural change in Tamil South India.

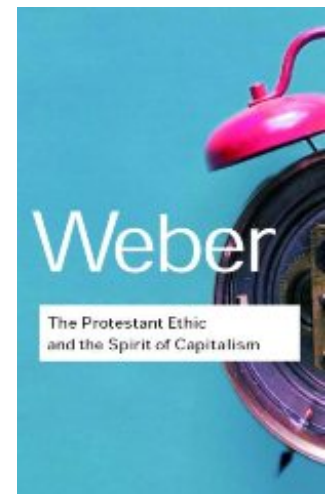


The book that influenced me most is Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which I read first in an introductory sociology class in the Fall of 1967, taught at Brandeis University by Lewis Coser, among the distinguished émigré social theorists from Hitler’s Europe and one of the founders of the Sociology Department at Brandeis. I was eighteen years old and an ignoramus, but I knew how to read and write English well. Even in translation, this book took my breath away, though I did not then quite know why.

It stayed with me throughout my undergraduate years at Brandeis, and through more serious classes on Marxism thought, Freudian psychoanalysis, German neo-Kantian historical sociology and more, each of which deepened my sense of the deep history from which Max Weber’s work had emerged. I am still backing up and filling in my sense of that history.

At the University of Chicago in the early 1970’s, when I was a Ph.D. candidate at [The Committee on Social Thought](#), I encountered a world that was deeply divided about Weber’s significance. I took two courses related to Max Weber with Edward Shils, who has the last major American thinker who had personally helped to make Weber’s work known to American audiences. These courses opened me to the fuller range and ambition of Weber’s writings and to the bigger canvas in which *The Protestant Ethic* was situated. I also began to read Durkheim, Simmel and other sociological greats. On the other hand, the anthropologists at the University of Chicago, from whom I took many courses, were engaged in a tradition of work that was consciously anti-Weberian. Clifford Geertz had just left Chicago for the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and with him ended a major tradition of interdisciplinary inquiry across the social sciences, focused in The Committee for the study of New Nations, which ceased to be an important enterprise after 1970. The major anthropologists after this time, especially Marshall Sahlins, who dominated the Anthropology Department after his arrival in 1973, had little interest in Weber and indeed some hostility to his grand sociologically-grounded comparative vision. Durkheim, Mauss and Levi-Strauss became the ancestors of choice for Chicago anthropology.

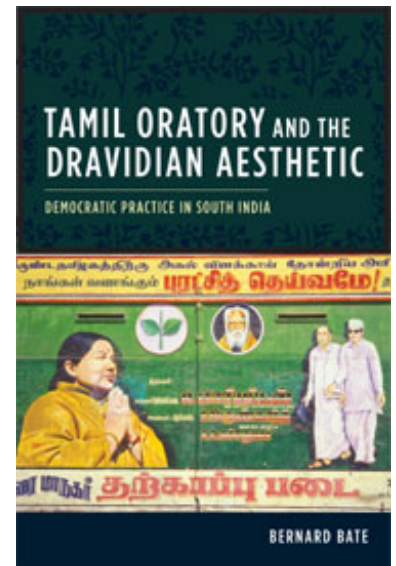
As a consequence of this divide in my graduate school milieu, Weber settled into my unconscious for some time, but never fully out of reach or awareness. The revival of my Weber interests began in 2008, when I first started to wonder about the global financial meltdown, and discovered a rich new conversation about this topic among sociologists, economists, journalists and, to a smaller extent, anthropologists. I quickly realized that my earlier readings of Weber were my best equipment for this



new interest. And what better text than *The Protestant Ethic*, about 40 years after I had first discovered it through Lewis Coser?

In the last four years, I have reason to read *The Protestant Ethic* many times and have also gone back to many of Weber's other writings on economy, history and society. Ideas inspired by this long acquaintance with it have helped me with two recent essays on Weber, both of which appear as Chapters in my most recent book (Appadurai, 2012). In addition, this time around, I have discovered a set of links between Weber, Joseph Schumpeter, Frank Knight and Clifford Geertz, which is ripe for deeper investigation. So I have begun a second life in the company of the book and I expect it to be my companion for many more years to come.

To recommend one title from the last five years, John Bernard Bate's [Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic](#) is a path-breaking study of the relationship between language, history and socio-cultural change in Tamil South India. It shows us the effort of certain non-Brahmin intellectuals to break the hold of Brahmins on Tamil society, and to build a political base for themselves among the low castes and classes of this region was based on a renewed effort to deploy a new form of spoken Tamil in their political speeches. This new form of oratorical Tamil drew on, and transformed, the resources of a language with a continuous history of several thousand years, with a great grammatical, poetic and religious tradition associated with the language itself. In this remarkable political mobilization of an ancient knowledge, the public speakers of the non-Brahmin movement, in the course of the twentieth century, transformed their constituencies, their public role and the very nature of Tamil culture. This process is brilliantly analyzed by Prof. Bate, with special attention to the nuances of this linguistic heritage and with equal attention to the highly heated and public nature of the political sphere that arose with it. This is a virtuoso book, which sets a new standard for the anthropological analysis of the relationship between language, culture and social change.



In my spare time I read as much fiction as I can and am especially addicted to Scandinavian detective novels. My favorites here are not the now iconic Stieg Larsson, but the more atmospheric Henning Mankell and the infinitely smarter plot spinner from Norway, [Jo Nesbo](#). I take care to avoid anything written by Salman Rushdie after [Midnight's Children](#).

Arjun Appadurai is Goddard Professor of Media, Culture and Communication at [New York University](#). He is a prolific writer having authored numerous books and scholarly articles. He is one of the founding editors of the journal *Public Culture* and was the founding Director of the Chicago Humanities Institute (1992-1998). The nature and significance of his contributions throughout his academic career have earned him the reputation as a leading figure in his field. His latest book will appear in September 2012 from Verso, under the title *The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*.

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