

**The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion**

Peter Clarke (ed.), Oxford: OUP, pp. 48-62.

**The Uses of Max Weber:  
Legitimation and Amnesia  
in Buddhology, South Asian History, and Anthropological Practice  
Theory**

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In this essay I ask what we can learn by looking at the different ways in which Weber has been used or not used in the study of South Asian religion and in social anthropology more generally. There is an interesting contrast in the reception of [p. 49:] Weber: what he wrote on Hinduism and Indian history has been largely ignored, whereas scholars of Buddhism have frequently drawn upon his writings on Buddhism for inspiration. The fact that Weber's influence is largely absent from works on Hinduism is paralleled by the way his name has dropped out of discussions of 'practice theory', at least in so far as its anthropological incarnations are concerned.<sup>1</sup>

**Weber's fundamental question**

As is well known, Weber undertook his long study of the economic ethics of Hinduism and Buddhism as part of a global survey of world religions. Originally published in German in 1920-21 as 'the economics of the world religions: Hinduism and Buddhism', it came out in English in the USA in 1958 as *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (henceforth ROI). As Kantowsky (1986: 214-16) has described, the translation is based on a draft that Don Martindale, then a graduate student, had done in order to practise his German. It is evident that Hans Gerth, the senior co-editor did not, as he promised Martindale he would, check the translation. The text as published contains many infelicities and downright inaccuracies, not to mention the fact that no one checked the bibliography or the South Asian terms used, so that it is riddled with inappropriate – because Germanic or simply incorrect – transliterations of technical terms. Clearly, a re-translation, ideally by a South Asian specialist, would be highly desirable. None the less, enough of Weber's original survives in ROI for the sheer daring of Weber's synthesis of South

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Lola Martinez, Ralph Schroeder, and David Chalcraft for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

Asian specialists' work, and the acuity of many of his sociological interpretations, to come through loud and clear.<sup>2</sup>

It is often not appreciated, especially by regional specialists, that Weber had a very particular question in mind. In search of the answer he devoted some evidently very intense periods of study to the best sources he could lay his hands on.<sup>3</sup> What he wanted to know was whether, at any point in their history, non-European civilizational traditions had within them the religious and cultural resources to give rise to a capitalist spirit as had happened with forms of Protestantism in Europe and North America. His studies of China, South Asia, and the Islamic world were a counterpart to his famous Protestant Ethic thesis [p. 50:] in the European context. He thereby launched enormous numbers of research programmes, many of them, from the strictly Weberian viewpoint, misguided. For Weber was not seeking to establish whether particular religions were or were not suited to capitalistic activity, once the practices and benefits of capitalism were widespread and well known. Rather, he was only interested in the emergence of a capitalist spirit where the 'substance' of capitalism was lacking, where, in other words, the spirit operated as its own reward in a hostile and unfavourable environment. The practical and political problem of transferring the benefits of industrialization and modernization to the places which lacked them once this new form of society was established "on mechanical foundations" was not of Weber's time and was not one that he faced.

This has not prevented many authors from seeing Weber's studies as relevant to 'development' and 'modernization'. Hence there are studies that attempt to identify something about Hinduism as key to India's backwardness or Confucianism as the key to the success of Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. (No doubt some are even now seeking the key to India's success in computer programming in some aspect of the 'Hindu spirit'.) Even the translators of Weber's work on Hinduism and Buddhism, Hans Gerth and Don Martindale, wrote in their prefatory note that "the central concern of this and other of Weber's studies of countries we today describe as 'developing' was with the obstacles to industrialization and modernization" (ROI: v).

This mistake is perhaps understandable – and must be understood – in the context of the the simple-minded, evolutionist developmentalism of the immediate post-WW2 period and of the Cold War in the 1950s. North American sociologists sought an emblematic and foundational sociological thinker to oppose to Marx; they were also trying to theorize about development and to explain why some countries developed faster than others. It was no doubt natural to press Weber into service on both counts. It was attractive, if simplistic, to be able to blame a lack of development on a single factor or 'cause', a mode of thinking that still flourishes in countries attempting to develop.

Such confusions about Weber have perhaps died away in the Western academy, but not because they are universally understood. Rather, Weber scholars, who nowadays have a much more nuanced understanding of their subject, have become denizens of a

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<sup>2</sup> For assessments of Weber's work, see Gellner (2001b, 2001c), Kantowsky (1986), Schroeder (1992). The passages quoted in Gellner (2001b) were checked against the original German.

<sup>3</sup> It is astonishing that at the very time when he was studying these sources on Hinduism and Buddhism so closely he was also much taken up with following and attempting to influence the course of the First World War (Weber 1988: 552).

specialized sub-discipline. And the large themes that Weber tackled have become identified with other thinkers – Giddens, Foucault, Bourdieu, and others – whose influence means that most working sociologists and anthropologists do not go beyond their brief undergraduate acquaintance with the classics. Sociology has become a fragmented discipline, with one wing believing that only humanistic, non-cumulative subjects waste their time reading the classics, and the other wing, while still believing the classics matter, tending to leave the interpretation of them to intellectual historians or other specialists.

[p. 51:]

### **Weber's answer**

So what was Weber arguing in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and in his studies of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, and Islam?<sup>4</sup> In the first place, as I have argued elsewhere (Gellner 2001b), it is a great mistake to take Weber's argument to be that the Protestant ethic (infused by the Calvinist predestination doctrine) was 'the' cause of the capitalism (as exemplified by Benjamin Franklin and his motto 'time is money'), in any strong sense of 'whenever A, then B'. However, there is another, much more sophisticated (yet paradoxically closer to everyday usage) sense in which the Protestant Ethic *may* be said to be a cause of the capitalism. That very specific sense of cause has been analysed by J.L. Mackie (1965), who argued that in much of everyday reasoning what we mean by 'cause' is an INUS condition. An INUS condition is an Insufficient but Necessary part of a set of conditions which taken together are Unnecessary but Sufficient to produce the result.<sup>5</sup>

The way in which this applies to the first appearance of capitalism may be seen as follows. There was a set of conditions ( $C_1, C_2, C_3, \dots, C_n$ ) which taken together were sufficient to produce the first, unplanned appearance of capitalist, industrial society.  $C_1$  may be taken to be a reliable banking system,  $C_2$  double-entry book-keeping,  $C_3$  a given level of technology,  $C_4$  a balance of power (both within states and between neighbouring states) such that merchants could not easily be appropriated by sovereigns, and so on.<sup>6</sup> The central point of Weber's theory was that the existence of these technical and economic conditions was not enough. China made many advances in banking and in science long before Europe. Marco Polo (assuming that he did in fact go there) was clear that in China he was visiting a much more advanced and impressive power what he had left behind in Europe.

The key condition lacking in China, according to Weber, was the 'spiritual' factor, some equivalent of the Protestant ethic capable of inducing entrepreneurs to live austere, endlessly (and from one point of view irrationally) reinvesting their profits in further capitalistic activity, rather than turning themselves (or their progeny) into gentlemen. Weber's survey of world religions isolated four key aspects of

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<sup>4</sup> On these, and on more recent interpretations of Weber's entire oeuvre, see Turner (this volume). Weber did not live to produce a book-length essay on Islam, but what it would have contained is discussed by Turner (1974). The literature on Weber is gigantic. For a recent, very short introduction to Weber, see Chalcraft (2006). For the debate over the Protestant Ethic, see Marshall (1982) and Chalcraft & Harrison eds (2006).

<sup>5</sup> More detail of this argument is given in Gellner (2001b). Mackie points out that in everyday life we name 'cause' that condition (of many) over which we have some control or are able to fix. I

<sup>6</sup> A good summary of these conditions is to be found in Collins (1986: 23-4, 28).

Protestantism: it was *active, rational, thisworldly, and ascetic*.<sup>7</sup> Protestantism thus [p. 52:] produced a very specific kind of personality – one driven to endless accumulation. In his examination of other religious systems he was particularly interested to enquire what kinds of ‘self-making’ were encouraged or enabled for those who took their messages seriously.

Other religious currents often displayed several of these characteristics, but rarely all four. Confucianism, for example, was rational and thisworldly, but it was not ascetic; mercantile activity was tolerated, but the successful merchant would always want his son to become a scholar. Islam was active and thisworldly. But the influence of a warrior ethic prevented it applying full rationality to its admittedly ascetic personal creed.

Buddhism was rational, but not very ascetic (it was specifically hostile to extreme asceticism); it did not encourage an active, thisworldly orientation on the part of its most dedicated followers. In traditional contexts its lay ethic was always inferior to the path of the monastic. Hinduism cannot be seen as a single religion, but in so far as it was ascetic it was otherworldly. In Jainism, Weber found a major parallel to Protestantism. Despite the fact that, like Buddhism, the hierarchical division between monastic and lay was fundamental to the organization of the religion, the laity were much more closely bound in to monastic discipline than in Buddhism, so that the lay ethic was indeed active, rational, ascetic, and yet – by virtue of remaining in the world and often in commercial activities – thisworldly. Jains were and often are highly successful merchants. In this case, Weber’s explanation of the lack of appearance of capitalism in India shifted to the absence other conditions (C<sub>1</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>, etc.). In effect, his conclusion was that in pockets a capitalist spirit may have appeared, but the overall extreme division of ethical, economic, and religious labour in South Asia, militated against its being taken up or having an independent effect.

Weber’s fundamental point was that the appearance of a new form of society – industrial capitalism – was anything but inevitable. It was not the ‘natural’ outcome of processes inherent in premodern forms of society but rather the surprising and unintended consequence of a combination of conditions, one of which was a peculiar and extreme form of ‘self-making’. Weber concludes ROI by reiterating that the ‘rationally formed missionary prophecy’ – i.e. the fully worked out and systematized versions of South Asian religions – had no consequences for the “ethic of everyday life” of ordinary people:

The appearance of such [consequences] in the Occident, however – above all, in the Near East – with the extensive consequences borne with it, was conditioned by highly particular historical constellations without which, despite differences of natural conditions, development there could easily have taken the course typical of Asia, particularly of India. (ROI: 343)

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Rational’ is here to be understood as systematic, relating all aspects of life to the given ethic and worldview. See Brubaker (1984) for an excellent introduction to Weber on rationality. For a massive reconstruction of Weber’s thought in terms of rationalization, see Schluchter (1989).

As others have noted, Foucault's interest in the 'self-making' project of Puritanism is but a reformulation of Weber's fundamental question about the emergence of a new kind of person at that particular period in history.<sup>8</sup>

[p. 53:]

### **Weber on Hinduism and India**

Specialists on South Asia are rarely motivated by a desire to answer such ambitiously large comparative questions about the origins of modernity. So it is perhaps not surprising that they do not engage with Weber's fundamental question. None the less, it is interesting that some find inspiration in aspects of his work, and others do not.

Few serious scholars of India or of Hinduism have concerned themselves with Weber's theories. Weber offered an overall picture of the development of Hinduism. He made many acute observations about the way in which Brahmins had transformed the bases of their religious pre-eminence over the centuries. He had a good understanding of the way in which Hinduism spreads into tribal areas and the role of Brahmin priests in that process (ROI: 9-21, 43-4). He also grasped intuitively the fact that Islamic dominance removed the Kshatriyas as a counterbalance and enabled Brahmin claims, till then often confined to the law books, to be enforced and put into practice (ROI: 125). He understood how priests were the bearers of Hinduism throughout South Asia (ibid.: 153). All these are themes which have received attention in recent years, but this has not led to any noticeable revival of interest in Weber. Weber also had interesting insights into the ways in which Brahminical teachings presupposed the individual (ROI: 169), a point which may anticipate the arguments of Louis Dumont.<sup>9</sup> Dumont, however, did not care to acknowledge Weber as a major influence.

Symptomatic of studies of the history of India is the recent *magnum opus* by Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (2006). This 684-page work takes in the whole sweep of South Asian history from the point of view of language use and the relation of language to power at different periods. It is highly sophisticated, both in its use of indigenous sources and in its handling of 'metropolitan' theory, thereby itself exemplifying the Sanskritic self-awareness, learning, and grasp of different idioms that is its own subject matter. Pollock's aim is ambitious: to understand the role of Sanskrit at different periods and to explain its relationship to power. The book offers a new periodization, or at least a entirely new way of thinking about the periodization of South Asian history. Furthermore, it is genuinely and skilfully comparative, invoking evidence from different periods of European history in comparison with South Asia. The richness of Pollock's documentation and the sheer number of diverse theoretical arguments being made may well limit the book's impact. Lesser mortals can only marvel at Pollock's skill in keeping so many balls in the air at the same time.

For present purposes the important point is that Pollock ignores Weber on South Asia and on South Asian religion completely. It seems to go without saying [p. 54:] (in a book where almost nothing goes without saying and every possible theoretical digression is pursued in a footnote somewhere) that nothing in ROI is worth

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. van Krieken (1990), Keyes (2002: 249-50).

<sup>9</sup> For other ways in which Weber anticipated Dumont, see Gellner (2001c: 86, 90).

discussing. On the other hand, Weber the sociological theorist of the state, of ethnicity, and – above all – of legitimation, most certainly is worth engaging with. Pollock is particularly concerned to attack the – as he sees it – crass way in which historians have explained the proliferation of high Hindu cults and rituals sponsored by Hinduizing kings, whether in the subcontinent or in Southeast Asia (what Geertz called ‘the theatre state’), as driven by the need for legitimation. Weber is here rejected in the name of a relationship between culture and power that is neither functionalist nor yet Marxist – but what exactly it is, is hard to specify. Though Pollock rejects Weber’s stress on legitimation, at least on these questions of sociological theory Weber is taken sufficiently seriously to be considered worth arguing with.

### **The influence of Weber on Buddhist studies**

While Max Weber’s observations about Hinduism have been largely neglected,<sup>10</sup> what he wrote about Buddhism has often been an inspiration to later scholars.<sup>11</sup> In so far as his writings on Buddhism have been used, it has rarely been in a context of his wider oeuvre.<sup>12</sup>

The anthropology of Theravada Buddhism is rich in excellent, theoretically sophisticated studies. In the first place, there is the psychoanalytically inspired study of Burmese Buddhism by Spiro (1970), then there is the textually learned and Popperian historical study of Sri Lanka by Gombrich (1971), and the structuralist anthropological work on north-east Thailand of Tambiah (1970). Alongside these are many others, including the numerous early articles by Obeyesekere on Sri Lankan Buddhism, which in their search for meaning might indeed be characterized as Weberian; he had not yet gone in for the person-centred and psychoanalytic style of interpretive anthropology that was later to make him famous.

In different ways, all of these works might be said to have been influenced, broadly and generally, by Weber. It was Tambiah’s works could be said to be fully Weberian in scope, expanding, as they did, from a single-village study to include the [p. 55:] whole history of Buddhism “as a civilizational phenomenon”, the history of Thai kingship and the relation of the Buddhist monastic community to it, and the ways in which charisma was routinized by monks in the form of amulets and relics (Tambiah 1976, 1984).

It was Obeyesekere who first coined the term Protestant Buddhism to refer to the kind of modernist, rationalizing, and political Buddhism propagated by the reformer Anagarika Dharmapala.<sup>13</sup> The term has been used in subsequent analyses by him and Gombrich (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988; Gombrich 1988) as well as by H.L. Seneviratne (1999). Although Seneviratne couches his argument as a criticism of

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<sup>10</sup> At least in major reassessments of the field; but see the contributions to Schluchter (1984) and Kantowsky (1996).

<sup>11</sup> This point has been made well by Keyes (2002: 246-7).

<sup>12</sup> For an assessment of Weber’s specific assertions about Buddhism in ROI, see Gellner (2001c).

<sup>13</sup> The spread of this ‘Protestant’ Buddhism to Nepal is discussed in LeVine & Gellner (2005). Outside of Sri Lanka, however, scholars have been reluctant to use the term Protestant Buddhism, preferring the more neutral ‘Buddhist modernism’.

Weber – for failing to see the modernizing and rationalizing potentials in Buddhism – this rather misses the point that Sri Lankan Protestant Buddhism only arose *after* influences from Christianity and Western anti-Christian trends like Theosophy. To count as a criticism of ‘the Weber thesis’ he would have to show that Theravada Buddhism – with its worship of relics, spiritual hierarchy, and scriptures preserved in a sacred language not available to the laity – had this potential before colonial influences.

As Keyes (2002: 246) points out, there are also many American students of Buddhism who absorbed a lively interest in Weber through their contact with Parsons’ Harvard school of sociology: Keyes himself (1978, 1983, 1993), Kirsch (1975), Spiro (1970), and Nash (1966). Coming from an interest in Weber first kindled by discussions with Steven Lukes and Mark Elvin, I myself attempted to apply Weberian framing ideas to a description of Mahayana Buddhism in Nepal (Gellner 1992, 2001).

### **The case of the missing theorist: Weber, Ortner, and practice theory**

I turn now to a different kind of influence, or lack of influence. Of course, Weber most certainly did influence Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. But by the time they came to influence Sherry Ortner, one of the most widely read cultural anthropologists in north America, Weberian influence had, it would appear, been almost completely bleached out. Weber was identified with Geertz, and Geertz was seen to be the problem.

[p.56:]

Now Geertz was a more interesting thinker and anthropologist than many assume.<sup>14</sup> His own anthropological work was by no means limited to the analysis of ‘discourse’, as his interpretive theory might imply (the locus classicus being his introduction to *The Interpretation of Cultures*). But – and Geertz himself must perhaps take part of the blame for this, because he downplayed his earlier interests in development, politics, and so on – Geertz was identified, even by those such as Ortner who were taught by him, with a straightforward interpretivist position. And, since Geertz himself invoked Weber to justify his position, it was assumed that Weber too was a Geertzian.

It is interesting to contrast Geertz with Louis Dumont in this regard. Geertz and Dumont appear as mirror images of each other, in so far as they are related to Weber. Geertz nails Weber’s flag to his mast (Geertz 1973: 5) – but he is actually very much more Durkheimian than he would have admitted at that stage, particularly in the key role he gives to collective ritual in producing the “uniquely realistic” “moods and motivations” that characterize religious experience on his definition (1973: 90). Dumont, on the other hand, more or less erased Weber from his genealogy, but – given his interest in the rise of the West, the religious origins of individualism, and the India versus the West contrast that dominates his thinking – he is in fact deeply Weberian. Exaggerating only slightly for effect, it is possible to say that Geertz claimed to be Weberian but was actually far more Durkheimian than he cared to admit (no doubt due to his education at Harvard with Talcott Parsons), whereas Dumont claimed to be a true descendant of the French school of Durkheim and Mauss (which

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<sup>14</sup> A point made by both Ortner (1999a, 199b: 138) and Keyes (2002: 242-3).

indeed he was) but was just as much, and arguably even more so, a follower of Max Weber.

Ortner began her academic career with a PhD at Chicago under Geertz. His influence was clear in her first monograph, *Sherpas through their Rituals* (1978 and still in print). It was published in a series called 'Cambridge Studies in Cultural Systems' of which Geertz was the general editor; few titles were published in the series and it is now defunct. It was a classic ethnography, in the sense that it provided a straightforward account of Sherpa life and their rituals. It was extremely well written and accessible. History was only introduced as part of the scene-setting or in the notes. Ortner pointed out that Sherpa society was relatively open to immigrants, such that many Sherpas had relatives in other ethnic groups or castes; but the permeability or problematic nature of the category Sherpa was not a central part of the analysis. None the less, the book cannot be put into a straightjacket of stereotypical functionalist monograph. Unlike in Fürer-Haimendorf's book, *The Sherpas of Nepal* (1964), the stress was not on the cheerfulness and good spirits of the Sherpas. Instead, Ortner provided a very detailed and subtle ethnography and analysis of hospitality, which brought out its highly problematic, coercive underside. She drew attention to the parallels with worship of the gods, which also attempts to [p. 57:] coerce them through offerings. In short, she focused on tensions within Sherpa society (including differences between 'big people' and 'little people') and on expelling evils, a major theme in Tibetan Buddhist ritual. The Sherpas are famous for their monastic exorcism ritual, Mani Rimdu, which has been much filmed and photographed. It is mentioned a few times in *Sherpas through their Rituals*. What is not discussed is that, far from being a traditional part of 'ancient Sherpa custom', it was introduced from Tibet only in the first half of the twentieth century and was part of a conscious attempt on the part of the monks to 'clean up' Sherpa popular religion. This was a theme that Ortner was to turn to later. She did so as part of her discovery of 'practice theory' and a move away from a purely Geertzian theoretical stance.

Ortner's position is best approached through her well-known article 'Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties' (1984). Ortner begins by identifying Weber with Geertz, as so many anthropologists do, and as Geertz encouraged them to do, as described above. Early on in the essay, she remarks that "much of the later practice-centered work builds on a Geertzian (or Geertz-Weberian) base" (Ortner 1984 130/1994: 375). Now this essay was both an attempt to define a field, and to push it in the direction she herself favoured; the history it offered was not dispassionate or objectivist, but by her own admission was a mythical charter.

What did it mean to be a 'practice theorist'? She allowed that the term 'practice' was extremely vague, so broad as to include anything human beings did. As with so many theories, it is best described in terms of what it was and is against, which was no doubt the point of constructing a historical dialectic from which it could emerge. It was, in the first place, against the pursuit of abstract social, historical, conceptual, or any other kind of structures divorced from the people who produce and reproduce them. In other words, there was an emphasis on *agency*, i.e. the actor's point of view, and attempting to capture what particular actors are striving to achieve. Second, it was against the notion that there is *the* Sherpa or Bongo-Bongo view of anything: rather it insisted that all conceptual schemes are, if you like, ideologies: they are held more firmly by some people than others, and serve some people's interests better than others. In other words, issues of *power* are an integral part of the analysis. We have seen that in her own

ethnography this was already the case, though she had not explicitly theorized it in that way. Thirdly, there is *history*. Ortner's practice approach insists that the cultures studied not be seen as static or unchanging.

These concerns were meant to be illustrated and worked out in *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism* (1989). While the theoretical aim of the book was to be an exemplar of 'practice theory', the main ethnographic problem was to explain the founding of celibate monasteries in the Sherpa area in the first half of the twentieth century. Sherpas are supposed to have migrated to the area just below (on the south side of) Mt Everest in what is now the state of Nepal around the end of the fifteenth century. For 400 years their priests were non-celibate, i.e. married lamas, [p. 58:] based in temples, attached to the Nyingmapa sect, and sometimes going for training in Tibet. Only in the twentieth century did Sherpas found celibate monasteries. Ortner begins by going back to the stories of temple foundings. She argues that underlying them is a *cultural schema*, a model if you like, that is widely understood by Sherpas, and that presents a solution to the problems that they face. This schema has to do with the competition for prestige and position between rivals, often brothers, who do not inherit equally. These stories relate events of opposition, both physical and ritual; the loser departs, and gains a powerful protector or patron; returns and defeats his opponent, wins over his followers, and founds a temple; the previous winner is now the loser and has to cede the field.

Ortner attempts to show, not only that the early temple foundings of the seventeenth and eighteenth century followed this schema, but that in the twentieth century the founders of the new celibate monasteries seem to have been following it too. The first two monasteries in Solu-Khumbu were founded by two rich brothers who were rival tax-collectors and headmen. Both, at different periods, had to depart and return. But why did they found celibate monasteries? This was a period of increasing centralization. The Sherpas were increasingly becoming incorporated within the state of Nepal. The Tibetan monks over the border who provided the spiritual leaders of the Sherpas were keen to expand their domain. The lay sponsors sought prestige. At the same time other Sherpas had increasing economic opportunities outside the Sherpa area, particularly in Darjeeling. She claims that the small people who migrated to Darjeeling, earned money, and returned empowered to participate in monastery foundings, could also be seen to be following the cultural schema in their relations to the big people "at least in a metaphoric sense" (p.167).

Sherry Ortner is, as she herself has described, engaged in the 'serious game' of convincing academic colleagues (1996: 217-18, 226-7); she is of course a highly skilful player, one of the best. In 'Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties' she recognizes, briefly, Weber's importance. Discussing the Marxist influence on 'the newer practice theory', she remarks

Yet to speak of a Marxist influence in all of this is actually to obscure an important aspect of what is going on: an interpenetration, almost a merger, between Marxist and Weberian frameworks. In the sixties, the opposition between Marx and Weber, as 'materialist' and 'idealist', had been emphasized. The practice theorists, in contrast, draw on a set of writers who interpret the Marxist corpus in such a way as to render it quite compatible with Weber's views. As Weber put the actor at the

centre of his model, so these writers emphasize issues of human praxis in Marx. As Weber subsumed the economic within the political, so these writers encompass economic exploitation within political domination. And as Weber was centrally concerned with ethos and consciousness, so these writers stress similar issues within Marx's work. Choosing Marx over Weber as one's theorist of reference is a tactical move of a certain sort. In reality, the theoretical framework involved [i.e. the 'new practice' position of which Ortner approves] is about equally indebted to both. (Ortner 1984: 147/1994: 391)

[p. 59:]

Having said this, Ortner moves briskly on.<sup>15</sup> One might remark that *not* making Weber one's theorist of reference "is a tactical move of a certain sort" on her part: better, far, to cite Williams, Foucault, and Bourdieu. Dumont also was less than fulsome in his acknowledgement of Weber, though he did not write him out so completely. Now it would seem that what Ortner is thinking of here is still Geertz-Weber. This is despite the fact that two of the theorists she frequently cites, Giddens and Bourdieu, have a much deeper knowledge of Weber, both of them being well aware that the idealist Geertz-Weber is a wholly inadequate view of his position; however, Ortner does not follow them in this. In fact, all the theoretical advances she claims for 'practice theory' are already there in Weber.

## Conclusion

The probable reason why social and cultural anthropologists tend to ignore Weber is that he is too closely identified with sociology, and in particular with the complacent, developmentalist, worthy, but ultimately rather dull, sociology of Talcott Parsons. In so far as anthropologists ponder on the inappropriateness of this view of Weber, they identify him with Geertzian interpretivism, which is now deemed out of date and inadequate. It is even possible to hold these two contradictory images of Weber – as Parsonian positivist and Geertzian interpretivist – simultaneously, primarily because anthropologists simply do not think about Weber very much.

Despite the fact that, from a purely intellectual point of view, Weber would serve anthropological purposes very well, there are too many sociologists engaged in the task of reclaiming Weber as an intellectual ancestor, of 'de-Parsonizing Weber'. Viewed in terms of ideological survival or product differentiation, Weber would be an unlikely choice for anthropologists. Allegiance to Weber would only muddy the boundary between social anthropology and sociology – a boundary that in most of the institutional contexts anthropologists find themselves in, whether in Europe or in north America (South Asia is different), it would be most unwise for them to pull down, since sociologists are always far more numerous than anthropologists, and always have a more plausible claim on the public purse than anthropologists.

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<sup>15</sup> The only other reference to Weber of comparable length that I am aware of in Ortner's oeuvre is in her essay 'Gender Hegemonies' (1996 [1990]: 143-5). Here she begins from Weber's key analytical distinction between prestige and power, notes the relation to Dumont, and recognizes that Weber's typologies have to be seen as processual and dynamic, that it is necessary to return to the "historical dynamism" of his argument, to avoid the theoretical impasses of the past.

[p. 60:]

In so far as anthropologists have come to Weberian themes, they have acquired them, unbeknown to themselves, from Foucault. Above all, Foucault's term, governmentality, for governmental rationality, might have come straight out of Weber (as others have noted: Gordon 1987: 297). The connection between power and particular schemes (or discourses) of personal conduct, the origins of the particularly Western and modern 'techniques of the self', and the way in which that emerges precisely at the time when a new form of statecraft is being evolved – these fundamental themes can be found in Weber before they were ever explored by Foucault.<sup>16</sup> Bryan Turner points out that Weber's philosophy of history suffers from exactly the same weaknesses as Foucault's (Turner 1992: 129). This is in fact an indication of how much they share.<sup>17</sup>

A similar story of constructed and neglected intellectual antecedents could be told about the academic study of Buddhism and Hinduism, though it is less plausible to relate the difference to questions of disciplinary self-definition and survival. Whereas students of Buddhism have been happy to mine Weber for insights and inspiration, and some have also been happy to see him as a sophisticated forebear capable of bearing the weight of their theoretical ambitions, in the study of Hinduism and in the history of South Asia, Weber is ignored or dismissed. He is identified with outdated Orientalizing tendencies. The fact that with unrivalled scholarship and sophistication he addressed the same issues of power, culture, history, and agency that are being tackled by currently fashionable figures is forgotten.

### Further Reading

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<sup>16</sup> This connection has been brilliantly explored by Gorski in *The Disciplinary Revolution* (2001), an attempt – in his own words – “to combine Weber's sociology of religion with Foucault's theory of micropolitics” (ibid.: 28).

<sup>17</sup> Turner (1992:138) concludes, “Neither Weber nor Foucault provided a phenomenology of the active body as an essential component of human knowledgeable agency.” Whether such a theory or phenomenology is indeed essential to an account of agency cannot be addressed here.

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