

Rationality, Romanticism and the Individual: Max Weber's "Modernism" and the Confrontation with "Modernity"

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Introduction

Three hundred years ago the Enlightenment promoted an optimistic faith in the future and a fundamental belief in the power of reason. It was believed that reason, defined as the "objective" power of the mind, would uncover the universal principles that govern the world. Reason would free humankind from ignorance and superstition.¹ Applied to human events, reason would uncover the universal character of human history.²

Almost from the beginning, the stress on reason sparked currents of discontent and uneasiness. A romantic movement emerged to challenge the primacy of "rationality" in the Enlightenment view of human nature. The romantics expressed the fear that a "rational-scientific" ontology negated the emotional character of life. For this group a purely rational existence negated life itself.

This article explores the ways in which this tension between rationalism and romanticism influenced the character of Max Weber's work. Along with Georg Jellinek, Alfred Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Wilhelm Windelband and others who were part of Heidelberg's "Eranos" circle, Weber was interested in developing a framework for comparative analysis of social phenomena. This group, who along with Heinrich Rickert constituted the core of the southwestern Germany Neo-Kantian movement, had Weber as its methodologist. Weber had to

- 1 Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment," in Carl Friedrich, ed., *The Philosophy of Kant* (New York: Random House, 1949), 132-39.
- 2 Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent," in *ibid.*, 116-31.

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confront the issue of how “rational” and “scientific” the study of social phenomena could be. It is Weber, therefore, who had to confront the demands of Kant’s rationalism and reconcile those demands with the strongly romantic context that was part of the Heidelberg environment.

The writings of Weber are marked by a tension between the requirements of Kantian rationalism and the demands of Weber’s personal value commitments. (Weber referred to these as “substantive values.”) When systematically examined it is clear that both of these elements are inseparably linked, and that the “rationalist” elements of Weber’s methodology serve the substantive ends of Weber’s value commitments. In that sense my argument will be similar to those of Lawrence Scaff, Reinhard Bendix, Wolfgang Mommsen and numerous others.³ Weber’s often quoted criticisms of capitalism and bureaucracy are but two manifestations of his more general criticism of modern rational culture, reflecting the conflict between his commitment to both modern rationalist epistemology and a romantic ontology.

This ontological commitment caused many of Max Weber’s friends and associates to describe him as a romantic. However, and contrary to the works of Eden, Mommsen and Warren,⁴ I will argue that it is a mistake to assume that Weber’s romantic roots lie with Nietzsche. As Warren and Eden admit, some elements of Weber’s romanticism are not altogether consistent with Nietzsche. Specifically, unlike that of Nietzsche, Weber’s criticism did not take the form of a confrontation with the foundations of Enlightenment epistemology. In that sense, Weber’s romanticism is thoroughly “modern.”

This article asserts that Weber’s romanticism is closer to that conveyed in the writings of the “Sturm und Drang.” The “Sturm und Drang,” unlike Nietzsche, did not confront the underpinnings of the Enlightenment, but rather criticized the stress on “reason” in the Kantian ontology. Weber further refined the general claim of the “Sturm und Drang” by distinguishing different types of “reason” in order to argue that substantive claims can also represent a form of reason. This methodological strategy allowed Weber to defend the concerns about modern society and its effect on the “complete” individual while remaining generally within the Kantian epistemological framework.

- 3 Lawrence A. Scaff, “Fleeing the Iron Cage: Politics and Culture in the Thought of Max Weber,” *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987), 737-55; Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (New York: Doubleday, 1965); and Wolfgang Mommsen, “Max Weber’s Political Sociology and His Philosophy of World History,” *International Social Science Journal* 17 (1965), 23-45.
- 4 Robert Eden, “Bad Conscience for a Nietzschean Age,” *Review of Politics* 45 (1983), 366-92; Mommsen, “Max Weber’s Political Sociology”; and Mark Warren, “Max Weber’s Liberalism for a Nietzschean World,” *American Political Science Review* 82 (1988), 31-50.

Abstract. Max Weber's writings convey a tension between a commitment to Enlightenment rationalism and a romanticism that was largely shaped under the influence of the "Sturm und Drang." The tension is represented in the claims that modernity unleashes forces that erode the spontaneous, creative elements of human life. This study argues that Weber has correctly identified some of the problematic substance of modernism, but that he failed to explore alternative sets of assumptions by which the modernist paradigm could be critiqued. As a result, Weber was forced to see the world as a place full of bifurcated conflicts between such elements as: reason/emotion, modern/traditional, science/mysticism. This epistemological framework led Weber to the pessimistic conclusions about the fate of humanity in the modern world.

Résumé. Les écrits de Max Weber communiquent une tension entre un engagement envers le rationalisme du Siècle des Lumières et un romantisme qui se forma en grande partie sous l'influence de « Sturm und Drang ». La tension est représentée dans les revendications que la modernité déchaîne les forces qui érodent les éléments créateurs spontanés de la vie humaine. Cette étude argumente que Weber a identifié quelques-unes des substances problématiques du modernisme, mais qu'il a omis d'explorer des ensembles alternatifs d'hypothèses par lesquels le paradigme du moderniste pourrait être critiqué. Il en résulte que Weber fut obligé de voir le monde comme une place pleine de conflits bifurqués entre des éléments tels que : raison/émotion, modernité/tradition, science/mysticisme. Ce cadre épistémologique a amené Weber aux conclusions pessimistes sur le sort de l'humanité dans le monde moderne.

The analysis concludes by arguing that Weber's pessimism about the fate of the individual in modern society results from his adherence to the "modernist" conception of knowledge. The Enlightenment view of knowledge stresses the tension between objective reason and human emotions. By maintaining this essential opposition Weber is drawn to the only conclusion possible. Emotion, passion and creativity are supplanted when rationality influences an ever greater sphere of human activity.

Weber did not fully accept the priority of "rationalism" in human life, but at the same time he was not willing to give up the modernist paradigm of rational science. He sought a synthesis that would explain both the rational process of human understanding and the emotional commitments that he defined as essential components of the human personality. However, by maintaining the modernist position, that science produces "objective" knowledge, while social inquiry produces only "interpretive understanding," Weber's synthesis suggests the priority of "rational science" over social interpretation. Weber is forced to conclude that the superior power of science is generated from its ability to turn human subjects into objects of study and manipulation. Thus, this understanding of knowledge produces an irreconcilable tension between science and human values. By making these assumptions, Weber was forced to conclude that tension, anomie and dehumanization are the result of modernity and the march of "objective" reason.

1. The Origins of Synthesis

A. *The Romantic Influence: The "Sturm und Drang"*

The environment in southern Germany at the turn of the twentieth century had a strong undercurrent of romanticism. In Munich there was the "Kosmische Runde" (cosmic circle), a group that opposed the rationalism of Kant in favor of "instinct" and "intuition." In Heidelberg there was the Stephan George Circle, whose members sought an aesthetic rather than scientific understanding of the world. Also in Heidelberg was Weber's circle, a group dominated by the personality of Max Weber and his concerns for the fate of the individual in the modern, industrial, bureaucratic society.

These groups shared a romantic heritage from a seventeenth-century movement known as the "Sturm und Drang." The "Sturm und Drang" included Johann Merck (1741-1803), Johann von Herder (1749-1803), Johann von Goethe (1749-1832), Friedrich von Klinger (1752-1831) and several less famous authors. Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) is also sometimes included in this group. These authors stressed the importance of the individual as the creator of life and culture. If the essence of mankind is creativity, then the human quest is for free, creative expression. Anything that inhibits that expression is an affront to human essence.

The "Sturm und Drang" reacted against a mechanical world view that had emerged from the Enlightenment. They argued that the natural harmony and unity of the earlier enlightenment (specifically Classical Greece) was disrupted by the fragmentation of human faculties, the division of labour and the separation of humans from nature. Since Descartes, reason was treated as a faculty separate and distinct from emotion. And, what was worse, reason was set against emotion in the rationalist ontology. This is particularly true in Kantian rationalism, where reason has the role of controlling the spontaneous and impulsive side of life.

As Schiller put it, the Kantian system is technical and devoid of feeling.⁵ It fails to understand the balance and "harmony" that must exist between "feeling" and "reason." There are two instincts that drive human beings: the formal and the sensual.⁶ The formal is that side of the human character that seeks the universal and unchangeable ideals in nature. It is that part of ourselves that can transcend what is immediate and sensual. The sensual connects one to material existence. The cultivation of both sides of the human character is necessary in order to maintain a truly human existence.

5 Friedrich Schiller, *Complete Works*, vol. 8 (New York: Collier and Sons, 1902), 34.

6 *Ibid.*, 68-69.

While expressing the need for ontological unity, the "Sturm und Drang" argued that the requirements for intense personal experience remained incompatible with the social demand for order and conformity. The individual, defined in this manner, cannot avoid conflict with social institutions. Johann Herder stated that society degrades the individual.⁷ To live a life that is truly creative and spontaneous is to live outside of the conformity and stagnation of society. The sentiments conveyed by Herder clearly expressed the view of the "Sturm und Drang" on the difficulty faced by the individual confronting modern rational culture.

The political and social ideas of the "Sturm und Drang" were clearly opposed to the historical tendency of their time. Small communities were presented as an ideal at the very time the modern nation-state system was emerging. On the eve of the industrial revolution Herder warned against the uniformity and obedience that results from "living life like a cog" in a bureaucratic machine.⁸ Weber made the same claim at the end of both *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and *Economy and Society*.⁹

The contrast between the "Sturm und Drang" and the rationalist ontology was clearly not lost on Weber. In defining his own task as a sociologist Weber once described his fate as "seeing what he could endure" given his understanding of the world. To Weber, the world was moving toward "mechanized petrification,"¹⁰ rule by administrators rather than "complete" individuals,¹¹ and control by the "rational" "organic" "machine" known as bureaucracy.¹² In this essentially "modern" condition, individual worth was lost. The individual was turned into a "cog" in the social mechanism.¹³

B. The Influence of Kantian Rationalism

Weber's romantic vision of modern life is combined with an epistemology that is essentially Kantian. As Weber stated so emphatically, "the fundamental ideas of modern epistemology . . . ultimately derive from Kant."¹⁴ Along with Heinrich Rickert, Wilhelm Windelband, Georg

7 Roy Pascal, *The German Sturm und Drang* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1953), 226.

8 *Ibid.*, 190-91.

9 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 181-83, and *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978), 1402-03.

10 Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 182.

11 Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. by E. Shils and J. Finch (New York: Free Press, 1946), 95.

12 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1402.

13 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 228.

14 Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. by E. Shils and H. Finch (New York: Free Press, 1949), 106.

Jellinek and several others, Weber was a part of the Neo-Kantian tradition at the end of the nineteenth century.

Kantian epistemology asserts a distinction between the senses and the intellect. The senses put the subject "in touch" with the world of object, and it is the intellect that "represents" those impressions as objects of thought.¹⁵ There remains, however, a distinction between the objects as they are "in themselves" and the representations that are formed by the human intellect. "What objects may be in themselves, and apart from this receptivity of our sensibilities, remains completely unknown to us."¹⁶ We never have complete knowledge of objects; we only know the impressions they leave on our sensory apparatus.

The intellect is not, as suggested by the empiricists, a blank slate. Kant posits an intellect that contains "faculties" to process the information that comes from the senses. Kant called these faculties "categories." Human beings sense what is "there," but only according to those modes of perception and categories of thought which are present in the human intellect.¹⁷ To Kant, there is an interaction between the senses and the faculties for understanding. This interaction produces the representation of experience called "knowledge." But this "knowledge" is limited to the world of objects, what Kant called the phenomenal world.

Science is the study of those objects. Science has as its goal the uncovering of the principles that govern the regularity of occurrences among objects. Science gives us knowledge because "reason" allows us to create "synthetic" statements about the objects of experience. (A synthetic statement is one that provides "observational" information about an object.¹⁸) Scientific "principles" reflect the laws that govern the interaction of objects in the phenomenal world. To Kant, such principles have the status of a priori statements; a statement that is outside of and not dependent upon experience. Scientific principles have the status of a "synthetic a priori." Therefore, such statements give knowledge but are not dependent on immediate sensual verification. In fact, Kant claimed that in order for the knowledge represented by a scientific principle to be "pure" it must not be affected by or dependent upon "sensation."

However, Kant was not only interested in the principles of science. Kant was also concerned with the foundation of human morality and values. But there is a problem. Ethical systems, moral commitments and personal values have their foundations in metaphysics, not

15 Kant, *The Philosophy of Kant*, 39.

16 *Ibid.*, 54.

17 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Random House, 1958), 54.

18 Kant, *The Philosophy of Kant*, 30.

science. For Kant, this means that statements about morality cannot produce the same quality of statement produced in the study of the phenomenal world. Metaphysics cannot produce "synthetic a priori" statements.¹⁹ As a result, ethical systems are not grounded in "knowledge" but in an assumption. That assumption is the "freedom of the will." Coupled with the assertion that ethics and morality cannot be "deduced" from actual practice, Kant's position suggests that there can be no "knowledge" of values, as there is "knowledge" of the principles that govern the phenomenal world.

Kant's claim is very important for Weber. In constructing a methodology for "social science" Weber was forced to confront the roles played by morality and value commitments. He concluded that human beings cannot conduct "social science" with the same methodological "purity" that one finds in the natural sciences. The study of society requires the assignment of "meaning" and "significance." As Weber put it, the investigator chooses the object for investigation out of an infinitely complex stream of events by reflecting upon his or her own values. A "point of view" is also essential in the formulation of the concepts to be used in conducting the investigation. At every stage in an investigation the values of the investigator are going to shape the conduct and the outcome of an inquiry. There is no such thing as simple, objective, descriptive analysis.²⁰

"Social science" is limited to an "interpretive understanding" because it lacks the concrete foundational premises upon which objective analysis can be conducted. To use Kant's terminology, because inquiry into human beings is dependent upon metaphysical assumptions rather than synthetic a priori judgements, the quality of the statements in the "social sciences" must remain speculative. "Social science" is, therefore, qualitatively different from the natural sciences.

However, while accepting the basic parameters of Kantian epistemology, Weber was less convinced by Kant's optimism regarding modernity and the rational culture. Kant stressed the role of reason in human progress. The externalization of reason in the legal and political realm would protect the individual from the irrational, impulsive side of human nature. Rationality is, therefore, a positive force for change in society. In what is little more than a logical extension of his optimistic appraisal of rationality, Kant suggested that human history is revealing a teleology: the movement of humanity toward an ever more perfect constitution of social life.²¹ Weber believed none of this. Weber was quite pessimistic about the conditions of modernity. Western civilization had undergone technical development, but to Weber this in no way

19 Ibid., 35.

20 Weber, *The Methodology*, 84, 94.

21 Kant, *The Philosophy of Kant*, 448-49.

implied a corresponding “moral progress.” The externalization of reason, what Weber called the “mind objectified,” can produce negative consequences in the social realm. The residue of rationalization, industrial production and bureaucratic organization depletes the individual of the spontaneous, creative character of human existence. Institutional life is rigid. Rigidity reproduces itself in the process of social reproduction. Modernity comes to represent conformity and petrified existence. The complete individual, as Goethe suggested, is something left to a bygone era.

On this question Weber aligned himself with the romantics. He gave a comprehensive explanation of the way in which the “complete” individual is displaced in modern culture. In a diverse set of writings on capitalism, bureaucracy, religion and history, Weber defended the worth of the individual against the petrification of institutional life. To carry out his analysis, however, Weber required a set of conceptual tools.

2. Creating “Interpretation” in Weber’s Analysis of Culture

A. *Values and “Interpretive Sociology”*

Weber was interested in explaining the relationships among various ideas, historical events and social phenomena. To this end, Weber argued for an “interpretive” understanding of social phenomenon. By “interpretation” Weber meant that all social events require some intellectual context, values, norms and structures against which occurrences could be compared. And, said Weber, the analysis of social phenomena, history and culture always involved the assignment of human values.

Values cannot be separated from the process of cultural analysis. “Culture” is a value concept; “Culture is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which ‘human beings’ confer meaning and significance.”²² The meaning given to culture is a reflection of the values of the investigator and his or her age. “Empirical reality becomes ‘culture’ to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas.”²³ “The transcendental presupposition of every cultural science lies not in our finding a certain culture or ‘culture’ in general to be valuable but rather in the fact that we are ‘cultural beings,’ endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it significance.” However, added, Weber, our values may lead us to the conclusion that any empirical cultural creation is a “mortal enemy” of our evaluative ideals.²⁴

22 Weber, *The Methodology*, 76, 81.

23 *Ibid.*, 76.

24 *Ibid.*, 81.

B. Affinity, Tension and the Problem of Causality

In order to conduct his romantic critique of modern culture, Weber created a methodological strategy that would allow him both to stay within the general Kantian epistemological framework and to criticize the emerging social tendencies. But Weber had to confront a problem. Weber believed an exhaustive causal explanation of any event was impossible. To speak of "causality" in more than a limited sense was, therefore, highly suspect. Weber concluded that there was a concept that could explain how two phenomena can have reciprocal influence on one another without, necessarily, representing linear causality. Interestingly, such an idea can be found in the work of the "Sturm und Drang."

In a novel entitled *Elective Affinities*, Goethe defined a method for understanding social life in his explanation of the different characteristics of men and women. He described women as having an understanding of "how things hang together in life." Women understand the "interdependence" of concrete events, ideas and the relationship of the past to the present.²⁵ In Goethe's novel the female characters examined the "interconnectedness" of their lives with those of others with whom they come in contact. Weber was to use this notion of interconnectedness in his study of social phenomena. "Elective affinities" became a central feature of Weber's methodology. Weber used the term "affinity" to describe a condition of symbiosis, or mutual support, among two or more ideas, practices or institutions. It represented a soft alternative to the "hard facts" of natural scientific causality. For example, an affinity exists between the substantive components of Calvinist belief and the instrumental calculation of capitalism.²⁶ The term "affinity" conveys the mutually reinforcing nature of these two practices.

Phenomena that are not mutually supporting may either have a neutral relation to one another, or they may exist in logical opposition to one another. This antagonistic relationship is most often described by the terms "tension" or "conflict." Tensions, as logical contradictions and conflicts, also exist among institutions, ideas, or practices. For example, the concept of "brotherliness" is in conflict with the demands of instrumental calculation found in the capitalist economic system. Art and eroticism, in their "this worldly" orientation are in conflict with the "otherworldliness" of religion.²⁷ There are, of course, numerous examples in Weber's writings of how social life reflects an array of affinities and tensions.

25 Johann von Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (New York: Holt and Williams Publishing, 1872), 5-6.

26 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*.

27 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 331, 342-45.

The idea of support or conflict among ideas and institutions replaced “causality” in much of Weber’s work. Weber saw no purpose in trying to reduce history to a monocausal teleology. He was very critical of Marx’s methodology on this account.²⁸ Weber argued that history was the interplay of an infinite variety of forces, each exercising some small influence on shaping culture into what it “is.” Sometimes even small events could be significant in shaping historical outcomes.²⁹ The affinities and tensions among the various social forces convey the subtlety and the richness of cultural development and provide a method to explain the course of history in Western society. The goal of social inquiry was to explain the “uniqueness” of an existing social condition, not to reduce it to a generality.³⁰

Weber used the concepts of “affinities” and “tensions” to explain cultural development without resorting to a linear notion of causality. Adopting this idea from Goethe, along with the concept of the “ideal type” from Herder,³¹ Weber augmented the Kantian epistemology. Historical and cultural analysis need not seek to produce reductionist causal “laws.” The investigator can create concepts and typologies that can then be shown to exist in complex interrelationship to one another. The concepts of “affinities” and “tensions” allow this method to function.

3. Rationality and the Institutions of Modern Culture

A. *The Typology of Rationality*

Weber created the framework for his romantic critique of modern institutions through the fabrication of a fourfold typology of rationality. After defining the various usages of the term “rationality” in the abstract, Weber showed the ways in which the four types of rationality were represented in social life. To Weber, the implications of “rationality” had many facets. Rationality had been the foundation for an improved understanding of the environment. It had assisted in the production for human needs. However, the march of “rational culture” was diminishing the worth of the individual and eroding the prospects for social development. These rather diverse consequences rely on the different meanings Weber applied to the use of the term “rationality.”

The clearest elaboration of the multiple ways that Weber used the term “rationality” is found in *The Social Psychology of the World Re-*

28 Weber, *The Methodology*, 68-71.

29 Max Weber, *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 103.

30 Weber, *The Methodology*, 80.

31 Otto Stammer et al., *Max Weber and Sociology Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 217.

ligions. Here Weber suggested that the term "rationality" could be assigned a variety of meanings. "We have to remind ourselves in advance that 'rationalism' may mean very different things." It may mean "an increasing mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts." It has another meaning as the "attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means." Rationality "may also mean a systematic arrangement." This involves the creation of "forms" and the adherence to "practices" in one's life. Finally, the term rationality "may be applied to that process which distinguishes between valid norms and that which is empirically given." This form of rationality is expressed as the belief in a canon, or a view of life, which is then applied to one's experience. Examples of this form of rationality are found in the ethics of religious practice, or in the Renaissance commitment to a supreme artistic ideal.³² For convenience, these types of rationality will be referred to as "conceptual," "instrumental," "formal" and "substantive," respectively.

There has been some debate as to whether or not Weber conceived these forms of rationality in any type of a hierarchy. Joachim Israel argues that Weber's praise of the efficiency of modern bureaucracy and capitalism would indicate his preference for formal order and organization.³³ Donald Levine suggests that because science cannot confirm the validity of value judgments within Weber's epistemology, the individual is therefore released from considerations of an ultimate value position.³⁴ Stephen Kalberg suggests that for Weber substantive rationality, the ordering of the world according to one's ethical commitments, provided the essence of personality in the individual.³⁵ This view is echoed by Ed Portis and by Wolfgang Mommsen.³⁶

Looking at Weber's work as a whole, and particularly his attacks on bureaucracy and all other social forms that threaten the worth of the individual, it is clear that Weber used his own substantive commitments to organize his critique. Weber's attack on bureaucracy at the end of *Economy and Society* leaves little doubt that "formalism" was perceived by Weber as a threat to humanity. It is also clear, contrary to Donald Levine, that Weber's understanding of the role of values in so-

32 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 293.

33 Joachim Israel, *Alienation: From Marx to Modern Sociology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971), 120-21.

34 Donald Levine, "Rationality and Freedom: Weber and Beyond," *Sociological Inquiry* 51 (1981), 19.

35 Stephen Kalberg, "Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Process in History," *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1980), 1165.

36 Ed Portis, "Max Weber's Theory of Personality," *Sociological Inquiry* 48 (1978), 113; and Mommsen, "Max Weber's Political Sociology."

cial science would never suggest that value commitments are not rational. History and culture have no meaning without values. Substantive rationality unifies and gives meaning to the entire personality. It is precisely this essence of the personality which, to Weber, was being eroded in modern culture.

Weber used his typology of rationality, the concepts of “affinities” and “tensions,” and the romantic individualism of his own substantive value system in order to create a critique of modern rational culture. While accepting the methodology of the Kantian epistemology, Weber rejected the optimistic faith in reason, progress and universal culture. In place of those values Weber asserted a set of values closer to the romantic tradition of the “Sturm und Drang.”

B. The Tension Between the Individual and the Requirements of Institutional Life

Weber saw modern life as an interplay of the various types of rationality as they became manifest in particular institutional forms. All social life was characterized by the formation and adherence to institutions. Institutions were, for Weber, defined as patterns of behaviour carried out by human individuals. Collective concepts such as “state” were simply the concepts used to describe the patterns of individual behaviour within a large social context; only individuals were capable of performing subjectively meaningful behaviour.³⁷ As patterns of behaviour, institutions were external, empirical arrangements in social life. They reflected the rationality innate in the human being manifested as external norms and procedures.

However, Weber’s typology of rationality is not unidimensional. It has four facets. In carrying out the analysis of existing society Weber showed how the different facets of rationality were represented in the various institutions of modern culture. He used these concepts in order to characterize modernity and to demonstrate the mechanism by which modern culture was in conflict with the “individual.”

To Weber, the institutions of modern culture contained all the elements of rationality: instrumental, formal, conceptual and substantive. Each may, however, have a different emphasis. Capitalism represents the means-ends calculation of instrumental reason. Bureaucracy reflects the organized pattern of behaviour found in formal rationality. Both science and religious prophecy reorder man’s relationship with the natural order, as conceptual rationality. Religious doctrines and ethical systems contain the norms representative of substantive rationality. Capitalism, religious institutions and state bureaucracies all have some structural characteristics representative of formal rationality.

37 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 13, 14.

In studying these institutions of modern life, Weber sought to show how the various institutions of modern society are a reflection of human reason. However, Weber also wanted to convey something more. Through the linkage of institutions to specific facets of the human personality Weber was able to convey the process whereby institutional development affects the character of "being," in an ontological sense, for the individual. Society is constantly in transition. Weber was disturbed by the logical implications of the trends he saw emerging as he conducted his analysis of these modern embodiments of rationality.

C. Capitalism and Instrumental Reason

Capitalism, in Weber's work, is not characterized by a stronger economic interest, but by its rational organization. Capitalism is present where the procedure of capital accounting is present.³⁸ Rational accounting is, in its essence, instrumental calculation, "economic planning," in which the goal of profit maximization is carried out.³⁹ As a network of interrelated factors, capitalism also represents a set of formal and substantive components. Reflecting formal rationality, capitalism has formal legal structures that make its predictability possible.⁴⁰ Some of capitalism's substantive features include a free labour force, freedom of contract and free markets.⁴¹ However, despite the affinity of capitalism with certain formal structures and substantive ideals, capitalism remains essentially instrumental in nature.

In its instrumental character, capitalism is also in conflict or tension with other elements found in contemporary culture. It focusses on commodities and profits, not people.⁴² In that regard capitalism is in conflict with one of the substantive tenets of religion, "brotherliness."⁴³ In fact, capitalism is "indifferent" to the overarching claims of all substantive values. For this reason, Weber claimed that capitalism, itself, is substantively "irrational."⁴⁴

At this point the logical implications of the forms of rationality found in contemporary society give way to a romantic critique of instrumental culture. Weber repeatedly used the term "machine" when referring to the instrumental organization of society for the purpose of profitability.⁴⁵ The "machine" was contrasted with the concept of "in-

38 Max Weber, *General Economic History* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), 275, 355-56.

39 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 63.

40 *Ibid.*, 75, 161-62.

41 *Ibid.*, 108.

42 *Ibid.*, 631.

43 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 331.

44 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 94, 138.

45 Max Weber, *Max Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. by W. G. Runciman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 101; Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1156; and Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 181.

dividuality." The individual is a creature defined by values. The individual takes a stand toward the world.⁴⁶ However, instrumental reason diminishes our ability to orient our behaviour to substantive values, thus diminishing the importance of the individual personality.

Capitalism represents an economic system based on competition and struggle.⁴⁷ However, unlike Marx, Weber did not oppose capitalism because it caused the "struggle of man against man." "Struggle" was natural to the human condition. Through struggle great individuals emerged.⁴⁸ Therefore, the idea of "struggle" was not the problem Weber had with capitalism.

Kant, Nietzsche and the "Sturm und Drang" all shared the idea that there is an historical dynamic that emerges from struggle. But Weber did not share the optimism about the rationalization of culture that was part of the Kantian legacy, nor did he argue, as did Nietzsche, that the culture could find a solution through the radical reordering of the Enlightenment itself. Weber's conclusions were more pessimistic about the fate of the human being in a rationalizing culture. On this point Weber was clearly closer to the perspective of the "Sturm und Drang."

D. Bureaucracy and Formal Rationality

Weber defined "bureaucracy" as a "rationally regulated association."⁴⁹ It represents formal patterns of behaviour, rules of conduct and organized procedures. Bureaucracy is an external rational construct formed to organize information and activity. Due to its ability to organize and use information, bureaucracy is "the most rationally known means of exercising authority over human beings." Activity within a bureaucracy conforms to rules, those organized and written procedures that give the bureaucracy its form. Bureaucracy is that aspect of rationality that makes a "systematic ordering of reality." It is, therefore, representative of formal rationality. In practice this systematic ordering of reality has penetrated every aspect of human association. It is found in the state, the army, economic enterprises, political parties, the church and many other areas of modern life.⁵⁰ It was for Weber the defining characteristic of contemporary social organizations.

Bureaucracy has a strong affinity with the features of modern industrial capitalism. The bureaucratic form of organization is the most efficient way of organizing an economic enterprise. As Weber sug-

46 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 127.

47 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 108.

48 Max Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (München: Drei Masken Verlag, 1921), 18, 20.

49 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 954.

50 *Ibid.*, 223, 956.

gested, the development of both the bureaucratic state and modern capitalism have been mutually supportive. Capitalism depends on the formally rational structures found in the state for predictability in operation. The bureaucratic state is enhanced by capitalism's need for predictable calculation. Thus capitalism and bureaucracy promote the centralization of all coercive power in one institution, the state.⁵¹ The formal institutionalization of power within the state enhances the formalization of law. However, the tendency toward bureaucratic formalism in the law collides with the substantive notion of "justice."⁵² There is, in the final analysis, no guarantee that bureaucracy serves either justice or democracy.⁵³

Despite bureaucracy's affinity with certain formal requirements of instrumental capitalism and its "efficiency" as a method of social organization, Weber was very critical of bureaucracy's influence on the individual. This was due to the tension that characterizes the relationship between formal and substantive types of rationality. Weber conveyed this tension in a discussion of the types of individuals present in modern society.

The expansion of bureaucracy requires ever more specialists. The "specialist" is oriented to a task. The specialist is "chained to his activity by his entire material and ideal existence." He is a single "cog" in an ever-moving human mechanism that is prescribed a fixed routine. But the "cog" is not a complete human being. He is a "specialist without spirit." The bureaucrat follows orders and does not act according to individual substantive values. Bureaucracy engages "experts" with "specialized knowledge." In modern society these experts are in conflict with the "older type of cultivated man."⁵⁴ The "cultivated man" is a person whose "bearing in life" is nurtured and developed. The "cultivated man" is a complete individual, one whose life is oriented and directed by substantive values. The message of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* is clear. The complete individual, the "cultivated man," retreats before modern "rational culture."

To judge ourselves, said Weber, we must look at the self-reinforcing nature of the bureaucratic order.

[E]very type of social order, without exception, must, if one wishes to evaluate it, be explained with reference to the opportunities which it affords to certain types of persons to rise to positions of superiority through the operation of the various objective and subjective selective factors.⁵⁵

51 Ibid., 225, 337.

52 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 221.

53 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 990.

54 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 228, 243.

55 Weber, *The Methodology*, 27.

Modern society gives the advantage to the bureaucratic mentality. This results from the reinforcing nature of rational culture as it pervades every aspect of human existence. Individuals adjust themselves to external reality.⁵⁶ The externalization of order, as bureaucratic formalism, changes the social environment. The individual is transformed by contact with an environment in which bureaucracy has become the dominant form of organization.

By altering social conditions bureaucracy is replicating itself in the psyche of individuals. The individual internalizes the operative norms in the environment. In modern culture, the norms of rational formalism are a disfigured substitute for human values. Specifically, the internalization of the substantive aspects of formalism, "order" as a substantive value, reinforces a culture of domination. The individual of "culture" increasingly confronts formal culture as something alien and hostile to its own ontological completeness.

4. Modernity, Anomie and Social Transformation

A. *Disenchantment and Conceptual Rationality*

In order to complete the picture of how Weber used the typology of rationality to critique modern culture it is necessary to examine the idea of "disenchantment" and to show the impact of this idea on the individual and historic change. "Disenchantment" is a term borrowed from Friedrich Schiller.⁵⁷ Weber used it to convey the general impact of rationalization on the individual and society. "Disenchantment" indicated that the world was undergoing "demythification" as rational science replaced magic as the means of understanding the empirical world.

In all times there has been but one means to breaking down the power of magic and establishing a rational conduct of life: this means is great rational prophecy. Not every prophecy by any means destroys the power of magic: but it is possible for a prophet who furnishes credentials in the sphere of miracles and otherwise, to break down the traditional sacred rules. Prophecies have released the world from magic and in doing so have created the basis for our modern science and technology, and for capitalism.⁵⁸

Weber used the word "prophecy" in a general sense to describe a process by which an individual introduces a new conceptual ordering of the world. In religion this may take the form of the introduction of a new transcendental aesthetic. But here Weber did not talk of "prophecy" in a strictly religious sense. "Prophecy" referred to a new con-

56 Weber, *Selections*, 232.

57 Weber, *From Max Weber*, Introduction, 51.

58 Weber, *General Economic History*, 265.

ceptual orientation to the world. "Rational prophecy" is that conceptual reorientation that occurs as sciences replaces magic as the basis for explanation of natural phenomena. Disenchantment is, therefore, a result of what Weber termed conceptual or theoretical rationality.

By reducing the influence of magical explanations in the world, rational prophecy removed religion from ever increasing facets of human life. Religion was pushed into the domain of the irrational. Thus there is tremendous "tension" between religious orientation and the rational orientation given by mathematics and science.⁵⁹ This is the case because "science encounters the claims of the ethical postulate that the world is a God-ordained, and hence somehow a meaningful and ethically oriented, cosmos. In principle, the empirical as well as the mathematically oriented view of the world develops refutations of every intellectual approach which in any way asks for a 'meaning' of inner-worldly occurrences."⁶⁰ The conceptualization of the world as "meaningful" is in conflict with the conceptualization of the world as a valueless "mechanism."

While accepting the problems created by disenchantment, Weber did not suggest a return to the religious mysticism of the past. Yet the problem is clear. Rationalism reduces the role played by substantive values. Substantive values are the essence of the individual. Therefore, the disenchantment of the world seems to be moving humankind toward cultural anomie and alienation. For this reason Weber claimed that "culture's every step forward seems condemned to lead to an ever more devastating senselessness."⁶¹

B. Charisma and Historic Change

At the end of the *Protestant Ethic* Weber indicated three possible paths for the future in discussing the emergence of the "iron cage." "No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or if there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance."⁶² The "rebirth of old ideas and ideals" could only mean one thing in the modern context, the reassertion of past religious doctrines. But, as Weber already suggested, the religious doctrine of prior periods retreated because they were in conflict with the scientific, conceptual understanding of the world. Therefore, their re-emergence without the corresponding disintegration of the scientific world view is unlikely.

59 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 350-51

60 *Ibid.*, 351.

61 *Ibid.*, 357.

62 Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 182.

Weber did not favour a return to the ecclesiastical domination and mysticism of the Middle Ages. The mechanized petrification of formally rationalized, institutional culture was equally abhorrent to him. The third possibility mentioned by Weber, new "prophecy," defined as a conceptual reorientation of humankind to the environment, became his only alternative. It is new "prophecy" that in the past has "swept through communities," welding them together.⁶³

Nevertheless, there is a problem. Prophecy is not the sole component in the process of social change. Prophecy is one element in the process which transforms society. The "revelation" of the creative individual is transformed into historic change through the emotional bond the prophetic individual forms with those who adhere to the new "prophecy." To this process which links the creative, intuitive revelation of individuals to the emotional longing of followers for change, Weber applied the term "charisma."

Charisma has a central role in Weber's conception of social change. Charisma is a "special gift of body and mind" that is perceived in an individual by others.⁶⁴ Charismatic figures tend to rise in a time of great social, economic, religious, or political distress. The followers seek a means to adjust themselves to the new conditions. The charismatic leader provides that means by breaking the old norms, values and orientation to the environment. "In this purely empirical and value-free sense charisma is indeed the specifically creative revolutionary force of history."⁶⁵

Charisma is the creative force in history because the origins of its revolutionary character stem from an act of creative human intuition that is free from the confines of environmental necessity.⁶⁶ The formal and instrumental character of modern mass society also generates a revolutionary impact on the individual, but this force is of an entirely different character from that of charisma.

Bureaucratic rationalization . . . has been a major revolutionary force. . . . But it revolutionizes with "technical means," in principle, as does every economic reorganization, "from without": It first changes the material and social orders, and through them the people, by changing the conditions of adaptation. . . . Charismatic belief revolutionizes men "from within" and shapes material and social conditions according to its revolutionary will.⁶⁷

Individuals may adjust themselves to the institutional structure but this does not constitute revolutionary "will"; it may merely be the in-

63 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 155.

64 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1112.

65 *Ibid.*, 1117.

66 Mommsen, "Max Weber's Political Sociology," 29.

67 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1116.

strumental calculation of the best means of survival within an already existing social order. Charismatic transformation contains the substantive elements lacking in a purely instrumental adjustment to formal circumstance. However, every step forward for formal and instrumental culture diminishes the role played by charisma in social life.⁶⁸

"It is the fate of charisma . . . to recede with the development of permanent institutional structures."⁶⁹ This is the case because of the process of adjustment that must occur in rational culture. Adjusting to the exigencies of the external instrumental and formal culture requires discipline. Discipline prepares people to carry out orders. To the extent that it contains a substantive component, discipline instills the value of "duty and obligation" as one conforms to the rules of the mass organization that rational discipline makes possible.⁷⁰ Rational discipline is the most "irresistible force" opposed to charisma.

Weber suggested that all discipline was born of military discipline. However, modern society was characterized by two great agencies of discipline, the large-scale economic enterprise and bureaucracy. "[The] organizational discipline in the factory has a completely rational basis. With the help of suitable methods of measurement, the optimum profitability of the individual worker is calculated."⁷¹ The implications for the individual are clearly stated. "The psycho-physical apparatus of man is completely adjusted to the demands of the outer world, the tools, the machine—in short, it is functionalized, and the individual is shorn of his natural rhythm as determined by his organism; in line with the demands of the work procedure. . . ."⁷² In this process the worker is turned into a "cog" in the service of the instrumental logic of corporate capitalism. Therefore, the modern form of economic enterprise is in a state of conflict with the process that could transform society: charismatic inspiration.

However, Weber found the greatest tension between modern culture and the individual in the formalism existing in "all" large-scale bureaucracies, economic and political. Individuality is negated as formal rules and procedures replace personal contact. This condition has the most profound impact on those who form the components of the state "machine." "The individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of the apparatus in which he is harnessed. . . . [H]e is only a single cog in an ever moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed

68 Ibid., 1148.

69 Ibid., 1133.

70 Ibid., 1149.

71 Ibid., 1155, 1156.

72 Ibid., 1156.

route of march.”⁷³ In this system each of the little “cogs” seeks to become a bigger cog in the social mechanism.⁷⁴

Here the contrast between what Weber termed the “cultured man” and the “spiritless specialist” becomes evident. As people adjust themselves to the requirements of an external structure of domination they become psychologically dependent on it.

The passion for bureaucracy . . . is enough to drive one to despair. It is as if in politics the specter of timidity . . . were to stand alone at the helm: as if we were deliberately to become men who need “order” and nothing but order, who become nervous and cowardly if for one moment their order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it.⁷⁵

As individuals adjust themselves to the requirements of external, formal, structures, and become dependent on those structures for their new identity, there is only one political outcome that is possible. The adherence to an internal set of norms and substantive values is replaced by the substantive requirements of the external culture. “Order,” “control,” “duty” and “discipline” replace the more “sublime values” that are now in retreat before the march of rationalism in modern culture.

The formalism found in the economy reinforces the formalism found in the state bureaucracy. Weber concluded: “The whole process of rationalization, in the factory as elsewhere, and especially in the bureaucratic state machine, parallels the centralization of the material implements of organization in the hands of the master.”⁷⁶ Modern rational culture erodes the possibility for freedom as it destroys the possibility for truly individual conduct.⁷⁷

The authoritarianism that characterizes bureaucratic formalism reduces the role played by charisma in modern culture. The march of this “human machine” destroys all structures of domination which are not formally structured.⁷⁸ But charisma is *the* creative, revolutionary force in history. The waning of charisma in modern rational culture also indicates a diminished capacity for the society creatively to adapt and transform itself. Therefore, Weber ultimately responded with a pessimistic answer to the question he posed in *The Protestant Ethic*. Who will live in this “cage” of the future if the creative individual has become subordinate to the requirements of rational culture? The answer is “everyone.”

73 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 228.

74 Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sociologie und Socialpolitik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1924).

75 *Ibid.*, 414.

76 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1156.

77 *Ibid.*, 1149, 1155.

78 Weber, *From Max Weber*, 244.

5. Conclusion: Weber's Place within "Modernity"

Weber's work reflects a tension characteristic of modern Enlightenment epistemology. Since the beginning of the Enlightenment "reason" has been represented as the dichotomous contrast to human emotion. Within this paradigm, reason is treated as the source for objective knowledge. Science is the human activity that applies reason to sense impression in order to discover the regularly recurring patterns of causality in the world. Science unmasks the objective character of the world. Emotion, passion and even sense impressions distort the ability of objective reason to uncover the universal principles that govern the activity of the world.

This view of science and knowledge led Weber to conclude that science was moving humanity toward an ever increasing senselessness. Reason has the ability to create the social environment that give structure and control in human life. To Weber this was represented in the types of rationality used to orient human life, particularly instrumental and formal rationality. However, within the Enlightenment paradigm an augmentation had occurred to the subject-object dichotomy. Reason had come to represent "subject."

Within the Kantian epistemology, the externalization of reason in the form of institutional laws, structures and practices represents the subjectification of the objective form. Human beings are reduced to "objects" for control and manipulation by "externalized reason." To Weber, this meant that "complete" human nature, that is both reason and emotion, was subordinate to the objectification process in modern rational culture. By not challenging the paradigm of "modernism" itself, Weber was forced to conclude that the march of "science" and bureaucracy were inevitable and that "modernity" itself represented a valueless, nihilistic void.

Ultimately, Weber took the Enlightenment epistemology to its logical conclusion. Science produces "objective" knowledge. Weber believed that because "social science" could not escape the influence of human values, substantive commitments and cultural influences, the "social sciences" were qualitatively different from the natural sciences. "Social science" can only produce "interpretive understanding." By making this distinction Weber relegated the discourse about human beings to secondary status. "Social science" cannot escape human values and values cannot be proven scientifically. As subject, however, human beings have a problem in this modern scientific culture. Science cannot tell us how to live.⁷⁹ According to Weber, we are trapped between the epistemological demands of enlightenment rationalism and the ontological pressure for a complete human existence.

79 Ibid., 143.

It should be clear that Weber's pessimism about modernity was determined by the assumptions he made regarding science, knowledge and the "essence" of the human personality. Unlike Nietzsche, Weber was not willing to scrap the Enlightenment view of knowledge. Nietzsche rejected the dichotomous opposition between subject and object. Nietzsche rejected the universalism that served as the foundation for the Enlightenment view of knowledge. Nietzsche relegated the entire Enlightenment project to an exercise in metaphysical speculation.

Had Weber given up the idea of science discovering "universal principles," and had he held the view that science is also an "interpretive" enterprise, he might have reached a different conclusion about the fate of humanity. Weber saw his analysis reflecting a universal description of the results of modern, rational, scientific culture. Weber held onto the modern definitions of "science" and "logic" and took them to their limits in his attempt to explain the conditions of human existence in the modern industrial age. There is no escape from the pessimism that has come to characterize Weber's work given his beliefs about science and human nature. Every step forward is a step deeper into the abyss.