



## Rationalization and Disenchantment

The world of modernity, Weber stressed over and over again, has been deserted by the gods. Man has chased them away and has rationalized and made calculable and predictable what in an earlier age had seemed governed by chance, but also by feeling, passion, and commitment, by personal appeal and personal fealty, by grace and by the ethics of charismatic heroes.

Weber attempted to document this development in a variety of institutional areas. His studies in the sociology of religion were meant to trace the complicated and tortuous ways in which the gradual "rationalization of religious life" had led to the displacement of magical procedure by *rational* systematizations of man's relation to the divine. He attempted to show how prophets with their charismatic appeals had undermined priestly powers based on tradition; how with the emergence of "book religion" the final systematization and rationalization of the religious sphere had set in, which found its culmination in the Protestant Ethic.

In the sphere of law, Weber documented a similar course from a "Kadi Justiz," the personalized dispensing of justice by wise leaders or elders, to the codified, rationalized, and impersonal justice of the modern world. He traced the development of political authority from kings endowed with hereditary charisma and dramaturgical powers, to cool heads of state, ruling within the strict limits of legal prescriptions and rationally enacted law. Even so private an area of experience as music, Weber contended, was not exempt from the rationalizing tendencies of Western society. In his writings on the sociology of music Weber contrasted the concise notations and the well-tempered scale of modern music--the rigorous standardization and coordination that governs a modern symphony orchestra--with the spontaneity and inventiveness of the musical systems of Asia or of non literate tribes.

In his methodological writings, as we have seen, Weber strenuously objected to any interpretation of human history that subjected such history to an ineluctable driving force. He argued that society must be considered as a delicate balance of multiple opposing forces, so that war, a revolution, or even an heroic leader might succeed in throwing the total balance in favor of a particular outcome. This is why he almost always made his statements in probabilistic terms. Nevertheless, when it came to the trends toward rationalization and bureaucratization of modern society, Weber tended to throw much of his usual analytic caution to the winds and to assert that the chances were very great indeed that mankind would in the future be imprisoned in an iron cage of its own making. In this respect, his message is thus fundamentally at variance with that of most of his nineteenth-century forebears. He is not a prophet of glad tidings to come but a harbinger of doom and disaster.

It would be pointless to attempt to summarize a work that is as amazing in its diversity as it is overwhelming in its breadth. It suffices to state explicitly what must already be apparent: Weber's work is a crucial landmark in the history of the social sciences.

There is a pre-Weberian and a post-Weberian sociology. All contemporary or near-contemporary sociology shows the impact of his genius. Even those who cannot share his pessimistic prognosis or his somewhat romantic beliefs in the saving grace of charismatic heroes can profit from the fruits of his powerful analytical labors.

**From Coser, 1977:233-234.**



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