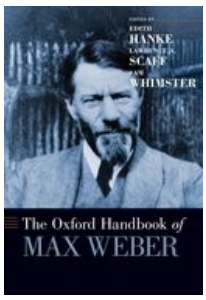

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CHAPTER

8 Weberian Social Theory: Rationalization in a Globalized World

Ralph Schroeder

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Abstract

This chapter gives an account of Weber's concept of rationalization and how it has been used by subsequent social thinkers. The argument of the chapter is that rationalization is a central thread in Weber's thought, and it explicates his ideas about how this process works in the realms of culture, the economy, and politics. It also discusses some thinkers who have made use of his ideas, including Ernest Gellner, Randall Collins, and Michael Mann. In Weber's time, a major debate was about the rise and distinctiveness of the West. More recently, the debate has shifted to the causes and consequences of globalization. The final part of the chapter locates Weberian ideas about rationalization, and its limits, in this larger debate.

Keywords: Weber, social theory, rationalization, globalization, disenchantment, rationality, consumerism, media

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WEBER is still thought to provide one of the most penetrating sociological accounts of our current condition—this despite the fact that his oeuvre does not contain a systematic theory but rather analyses of many separate topics in a number of disciplines. This chapter reconstructs some of his main arguments about the patterns of modern societies, centered on the concept of rationalization, and how his insights have been taken further by some contemporary theorists. The chapter will review Weber's conceptual apparatus, assess a number of thinkers who have taken his ideas forward, and evaluate the continued relevance of his ideas.

The chapter is organized as follows: after briefly arguing that rationalization should be seen as a master process in Weber's thought, the chapter examines rationalization in the societal orders of politics, the economy, and culture in turn (and culture, as we shall see, can encompass science and technology as well as

the media). Weber's thought sometimes differentiated between several additional societal orders or spheres of life, but I have simplified his schema in accordance with a more standard way of separating them. In the case of each of these orders, after summarizing Weber's position, the chapter analyzes some key thinkers who have built on or extended his ideas. In the concluding section the chapter examines Weber's ideas in relation to contemporary debates about globalization and geopolitics. This macro level is where the societal orders and Weber's ideas about rationalization come together—or fail to do so—even if there is also an overarching or "umbrella" sense of rationalization. The chapter ends with an outlook on Weberian sociological thinking.

We can begin, however, by noting the difficulty of understanding Weber's thought as a unified or systematic whole. Weber has been seen as a theorist of social action and as offering a multidimensional account of social change.[1] Yet these two interpretations do not by themselves show how his writings contain a
p. 152 substantive account of contemporary ↳ society and whether he assigns primacy to any particular social forces. One way to overcome this problem is indicated by the title of an early version of *Economy and Society*, which was titled "The Economy and the Societal Orders and Powers" (*Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte*). The notion of "societal orders" (*Ordnungen*) or "value spheres" (*Wertsphären*) and their logics also appears elsewhere in his work.[2] One theme of this chapter is how exactly these orders or spheres relate to each other.

I will refer here to "societal orders" and "spheres" interchangeably (and come back to the terminology used by those who build on his work). There are, however, certain processes that Weber saw as central to modern social change—"rationalization" foremost among them. To appreciate its centrality, we can turn briefly to one of his key texts. Discussion of "rationality" and "rationalization" can be found throughout Weber's writings, but the most systematic statement of his position can be found in the "Author's Introduction" to the *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*, which is worth recapitulating (in my own translation, emphases in the original): Weber says that in his "universal history of culture the central problem is … the emergence of *middle class* [*bürgerlich*] enterprise capitalism with its rational organization of *free labour* … this uniquely occidental capitalism is shaped … by its *technological* conditions. Its rationality is today mainly determined by the *calculability* of its technically crucial components: the foundation of which is exact calculation. In truth, this means: through the uniqueness of Western science, and in particular its mathematical and experimentally exact natural sciences."[3] He goes on to list the calculability of work and rational law and administration as part of this uniqueness and asks why China and India did not take this path of "rationalization" or toward the "unique 'rationalism' of Western culture."[4] He points out that there can be different kinds of rationalization in different spheres of life, which could, from a different vantage point, also be seen as irrational.

At that point, he turns to the topic of the *Protestant Ethic*, to explain the emergence of "economic rationalism" with particular reference to its emergence via "practical-rational ways of *life-conduct*."[5] He adds that his explanation in no way makes a value judgment about this development[6]; his only interest is in a causal explanation of this phenomenon. Weber's aim is thus to explain the pattern of history or the shaping of modern society. Rationality (a way of life), rationalism (the distinctive shape of culture and society), and rationalization (the process) are all aspects of this single object of explanation. One key to understanding how Weber presents a coherent account of the patterns of modern society is therefore to see how rationalization works differently and similarly across the various societal orders.

Before we do this, we can note that "rationalization" also has several meanings: most common is the growth of instrumental "rationality."[7] Yet Weber also saw rationalization, secondly, in terms of "calculability," or an intensification or extension of applying scientific knowledge (and "applying" scientific knowledge includes technology, so henceforth I will use "technoscience" when they are combined). Thirdly, rationalization means the routinization of charisma. Mastery over the environment—
p. 153 broadly conceived as both the social and natural environment—is part of all three, as is impersonality and

↳ organizational control. There is an additional meaning of "rationalization" in Weber's thought which is how there are certain "inner logics" to worldviews and religions themselves whereby they develop greater internal consistency. These different senses of rationalization will need to be borne in mind in the present discussion.

Weber thought that the process of rationalization is pervasive throughout the various societal orders. Rationalization for Weber produces increasingly impersonal relations, structures that become frozen and inescapable, leading to an "iron cage." In the realm of culture, science and technology increasingly dominate, disenchanting the world and displacing religious and other worldviews with "cold" but effective knowledge and displacing the management of social relations on a smaller intimate scale with managing them via large impersonal technological systems. In the economy, the personal ties of household and patrimonial relations are being displaced by impersonal market relationships and economic organizations as firms become more and more bureaucratic (and, as Weber noted, these impersonal relations govern both capitalist and socialist economies). Finally, politics too, in the modern world, is becoming dominated by bureaucracies and party apparatuses, both impersonal forms of rule which also extend the formal rule-boundedness (and so instrumental-rational nature) of social relations.

We will return to detail further manifestations of this process. Before we do so, it can be pointed out that his theory of rationalization has, with few exceptions,[8] not been systematically developed by social theorists. Weber counterposed the force of charisma against the process of an almost inescapable bureaucratization, a view of history which set the dynamic or creative role of individuals and their ideas against impersonal and stagnant structures. This suggests a pessimistic view of history, though this is also misleading since Weber was well aware of the positive side of a greater mastery over the world. He recognized the power and effectiveness of techniques that could extend the scale, scope, and penetrative capabilities of political and economic organizations and of science or knowledge. Yet, at best, Weber's idea of rationalization is double-edged, and Mommsen has aptly called him a "liberal in despair."[9]

Rationalization and Modern Culture

Weber's ideas about rationality and rationalization in the cultural sphere have been largely overlooked. One exception is Ernest Gellner, who argues, like Weber, that modern culture is characterized by the dominance of a particular type of rationality, instrumental rationality.[10] This type of rationality aims at the most efficient means to achieve given ends and operates without regard to persons and is therefore "cold" and "disenchanted." Yet Gellner rejected Weber's pessimism about this force, arguing instead that the benefits of increased technological and productive powers free up our lifeworld for an enchanted consumerism—a "rubber" rather than an "iron cage."[11] Again, we will come back to this point, but we can already register that Gellner in this way takes Weber's thought further in recognizing that science is the exclusively
p. 154 legitimate mode of thought in modern ↳ culture: for serious matters, Gellner argues, we rely on science. It may well be that in other matters, the cozy worlds of everyday life and of popular culture, relativism can reign.[12] Yet when culture needs to be effective—powerful—only scientific knowledge will do.

Gellner was mainly concerned with epistemology and the validity and legitimacy of modes of thought. A different direction of Weberian thought, which moves us somewhat away from the sphere of culture and into the economic sphere, is how Collins used Weber's ideas about technology to develop a Schumpeterian account of innovation.[13] Collins develops arguments about how innovations take place and become diffused with market and geopolitical competition. He has also argued that technological advances, especially in information and communication technology, are increasingly squeezing especially middle classes out of their jobs.[14] The core of Collins' argument is that Marx and Engels focused on the crisis which would be brought about by the economic conditions of the working class, but "they did not foresee the rise of the

massive middle class of white-collar employees" which saved capitalism.[15] Yet it is precisely this middle class that, in his view, is now in danger of being displaced by the mechanization of information and communication technologies, and he asks, "can capitalism survive this second wave of technological displacement?" And while he goes through a number of scenarios which might avert this danger, including the creation of new jobs in the realm of information and communication technologies and further credential inflation (more university education), he is pessimistic about these "escapes" and foresees major social upheaval.

The key point in the context of rationalization is that Weber's ideas, drawing on Gellner and Collins, can be developed into a fully fledged account of how scientific knowledge moves out of the laboratory and into consumer markets.[16] Sometimes this diffusion takes the form of stand-alone technologies, but the more permanent "cages" are large technological systems or infrastructures such as transportation, energy, and communication.[17] In this way instrumental rationality suffuses into everyday life both in lasting infrastructures as well as via a stream of new consumer devices. So even if technoscientific rationalization displaces certain types of work or professions on the side of production, it also leads to the transformation of leisure on the side of consumption.

There is another aspect to this form of rationalization which spills from the sphere of culture into the sphere of politics, where it leads to the use of new technologies for mass persuasion and surveillance.[18] Recently these technologies have become more powerful due to innovations in how digital networks enable ever more extensive and fine-grained control. The intensification of rationalization in this case, as elsewhere, has taken place via "calculability." Thus, the public's and consumers' preferences are being measured, now online, and products and services tailored and targeted toward them. The main current examples are social media, search engines, and online entertainment services, which maximize engagement for the sake of increasing attention to advertising and subscriber fees. Napoli has described this process of audience measurement as an ongoing "rationalization."[19] And although media have always sought
p. 155 information about their ↳ readership, viewership, and listenership, digital technologies extend and deepen the calculability of audiences and consumers.[20]

The reason the sphere of culture partly overlaps with the sphere of politics is that audiences are also citizens consuming news. Weber sketched a sociology of journalism where he was mainly concerned with the media of his day—newspapers—and their role in politics.[21] His plans for analyzing media fit with his notion that the tools of persuasion were becoming increasingly important in a mass society. The tradition of mass media effects or media as propaganda has waxed and waned in communication research.[22] But it is also apt to see Weber's ideas as foreshadowing the "mediatization"[23] of the world, whereby media increasingly become an apparatus that interposes itself between publics or consumers and elites. As Bastin has pointed out, "Weber is not so much interested in how the press affects the ideas of individuals but more their everyday life through the rationalization and universalization of the tools through which individual life worlds are interpreted."[24] In other words, Weber's sociology of journalism is part of a broader process whereby culture is ever more technologically mediated.

Mediatization furthermore highlights an important element that has been missing in the sociology of media, namely, as indicated earlier, that media are large technological systems with "logics" of their own and which impose particular formats on news professionals and their audiences.[25] One aspect of rationalization is therefore how publics and audiences are increasingly subject to measurement. Media have become barometers of policy preferences and of cultural tastes, and these measurements are, in turn, used by elites to enhance their legitimacy and as tools for marketing.

Media have become by far the largest component of culture, whether this is measured by time spent, proportion of the population reached, or influence. But the focus in media and communications research has until recently been on the content of media messages rather than on audiences. This focus has started to

shift in recent decades and now, with social media, has reached the point where the more effective targeting of audiences and tailoring messages to particular groups, as well as seeking to engage audiences in more powerful ways, has become paramount. Thus, a more balanced picture has come into view whereby there is an interaction between how elites shape and respond to the worldviews of audiences via media. Weber could not have foreseen these developments, but a Weberian perspective of rationalization, and a comparative historical perspective—since media had a much more limited reach and were confined to elites before the onset of modernity[26]—sheds important light on them. Yet we should remember that there are also limits to this process: the world is not, as some media theories would have it, entirely constructed by mediated worldviews[27]; instead, social development shapes how media represent the world, including new social forces and how these forces are able to use digital technologies, sometimes circumventing traditional media.

Most of media is consumer culture, so before we leave the realm of culture, it is worth noting that Weber's most widely known work is, of course, his analysis of how religion fostered modern capitalism. Here, too, his ideas about rationalization have been taken further: Weber's *Protestant Ethic* thesis continues to be debated, and so much is written on this topic that it can be left to one side here (though it can be mentioned
p. 156 that ↳ the focus on understanding the origins of modern capitalism has shifted away from cultural explanations). Yet one aspect of culture that still needs explanation is consumerism, which can be seen as the dominant cultural orientation in contemporary societies.[28] In this case, however, a convincing Weberian account of the rise of modern consumerism has been put forward by Campbell, whereby the restless drive for fulfillment has become an inescapable "cage" of constantly seeking novel experiences.[29] Like the *Protestant Ethic*, this transformation of a "romantic ethic" into the "spirit of consumerism" is a case of rationalization in the sense of development via an inner logic of worldviews. Combining the perpetual seeking of novel experiences with a Weberian understanding of the pervasiveness of new media technologies therefore provides, in this author's view, a penetrating account of modern consumer culture: after all, again, the vast bulk of leisure time in contemporary societies is spent with media.

Rationalization and Modern Politics

In political sociology, Weber's definition of the state, as the monopoly of legitimate violence, is still widely used. The problem is not his conception of the state but that the types of legitimacy are limited to charismatic, legal-rational, and traditional: Weber did not have a systematic account of democracy. Breuer[30] tried to make up for this shortcoming, and Collins has developed a Weberian account of democratization, based on a combination of decentralized power plus the reach or breadth of suffrage.[31] But the main Weberian tradition in political sociology that has been carried forward revolves around state capacity.[32] Bureaucratization, on this view, was largely driven by war, with states creating centralized apparatuses for military competition. But the state's penetration of society also gave rise to social movements. As Collins describes it, the effect of the second late nineteenth-century wave of bureaucratization "was to expand formal political participation, to make every individual a citizen of the state, and hence subject to state regulation"; but this also meant that "political and social movements now had a target for their actions."[33] Thus, Weber's ideas can be indirectly linked to democracy via the struggle to incorporate ever wider groups within the—growing—state, though arguably this movement toward democratization from below has recently stalled.[34]

Weber was closer to the "mass society" tradition which has regarded "the people" as providing legitimation for dominant leaders and parties. The tradition in political sociology just sketched, in contrast, is one whereby pressure from below, by different classes and citizen groups or social movements, democratizes the state (though it can also lead to authoritarian regimes of the left and the right). In this tradition, the forces of civil society progressively—though not unilinearly—gain rights from the state over the course of

time. The most systematic account of this arc of development can be found in the work of Michael Mann,[35] though here again it is useful to remind ourselves that this process is double-edged: in addition to
p. 157 democratization from below, the state, as Dandeker points ↳ out, has to develop large-scale bureaucracies in order to capture, quantify, and serve its citizens within modern welfare states.[36]

Beyond rationalization, Weber did not ignore the continuing role of conflict in society, both in domestic politics and in geopolitics. Weber's ideas about geopolitics have been developed by Collins, who proposed a theory of how great powers gain advantage by means of expanding territorial control and superior military technology.[37] Weber's ideas about geopolitics focused on the struggle among great powers for pre-eminence. This idea of a continuing struggle among nation-states sets Weber apart from world-society theorists who claim that states increasingly follow similar scripts or models, converging in a functionalist manner on a harmonious world order.[38] It also sets him apart from world-systems theorists like Wallerstein, who argue that there are economic contradictions in the world system of capitalism.[39] For Weber, instead, there continues to be a political struggle for pre-eminence among nations. The main reason for mentioning geopolitical conflict in this context, however, is that on this macro level, social change escapes rationalization so that the reach of rationalization does not extend to this level but in politics remains contained within nation-states, unlike in the cultural and economic spheres (though it can be mentioned that some, like Slaughter, have argued, that an increasingly dense web of bureaucratic rule-making also pervades international politics).[40]

Rationalization and the Modern Economy

Weber thought that modern capitalism operates quite differently from traditional forms of capitalism. Personalistic relations governed premodern household economies and predatory political capitalism, whereas modern rational capitalism has excluded all criteria apart from exchange for the sake of profit-making: "the production of goods was emancipated from all the bonds of inherited tradition, and came under the dominance of the freely roving intelligence."[41] Modern market exchange is open-ended, and firms ceaselessly seek to extend their control. Capitalist economies have become characterized by formally free (contractual) labor, exchange via money, and above all calculability. And calculability, as already mentioned, is at the core of rationalization. Mau has recently argued in a Weberian vein that "digitalization and economization of society … are two main driving forces of the quantification of the social."[42] These are extensions and intensifications of existing processes of applying scientific knowledge. Yet, as Mau notes, the quantification of social life, with its rankings and ratings, is also a way of promoting competition: when phenomena become measured, there are winners and losers, and there is always room for improvement. And quantification is a means of seeking objectivity in the service of mechanisms for steering social processes: in this sense, rationalization can be seen as the logic of control under the condition of seeking profits in a competitive market economy.

p. 158 The story of how top-down rationalization has grown, organizing capitalist enterprises and extending their scale and scope, has been told in a Weberian vein on a number of occasions.[43] As we saw with media, the most recent intensification of this process is data-driven. Large digital media companies in particular are increasingly able to measure consumers and tailor messages to audiences and target them.[44] There are limits to the global spread of these companies: the Chinese Internet, for example, has been until now largely separate so that, although social media companies like Google, Facebook, and Amazon can measure and tailor their offerings to billions of users across large parts of the globe, in the People's Republic their Chinese equivalents (Baidu, Tencent, and Alibaba) are dominant. And China is not the only territory that has boundaries around its social media users; Russia, Iran, and other countries to some extent do so too.

DiMaggio and Powell have described how Weberian organizations spread, via institutional isomorphism.[45] Economic power, in this case the diffuse and extensive power characteristic of modern capitalism,[46] entails that more effective—rationalized—firms increasingly dominate. Yet again, there are limits to the globalization of this process, which returns us to technologies: even the spread of technologies has taken different directions. India, for example, has a tradition of "small technologies," such as the spinning wheel, bicycles, and now mobile phones, whereas China (like the Soviet Union) has had a tradition of carrying out large infrastructural projects.[47] And these traditions continue to be partly reflected in the distinct economic organizations of the two countries. In any event, once established and embedded in everyday life, bureaucracies—economic and political—become invisible, as do large technological systems or infrastructures; and they mainly come into focus when there are controversies, such as over privacy or how the algorithms of government or private sector information systems shape people's lives, or if there are breakdowns, such as when energy systems fail or administrative errors occur on a large scale. We can remember here, finally, that Weber lived at a time when the dangers of large-scale organizational failures, such as nuclear energy disasters or massive data breaches, were not yet on the horizon.

Rationalization and Globalization

In Weber's time, instead of a debate about globalization, global change was seen from a longer-term perspective in terms of the rise and dominance of the West, on the one hand, and through the lens of great power rivalry, on the other hand. This is still the world in which we live, although the debate about the West has been subsumed in a wider debate about China's failure to "take off" during the nineteenth century and how the constellation of great powers has shifted toward the East in the twenty-first century. The most Weberian-scale attempt in regard to understanding globalization has been the work of Michael Mann, who positions himself halfway between Marx and Weber: unlike Weber (and similar to Marx), he wants to make generalizations about social transformations. Yet unlike Marx, he wants not to assign ultimate primacy to
p. 159 any one form of power ↳ in history but to chart their interplay.[48] But Mann is also closer to Weber in seeing people as increasingly "caged" by the sources of power and in arguing that the nation-state is still the main bounded unit that "cages" citizens. The question that can be addressed in this final section of the chapter is therefore whether the "cages" or rationalization are one or many; in other words, in what sense they are global.

Before we turn to this question, it can be noted that Weber's thought has been a strong influence in social theory but mainly among thinkers who have not been part of a school. In the 1960s and into the 1980s, social thought could be divided between followers of Marx and followers of Weber; but Marxism has been in retreat in the social sciences in the twenty-first century, and nothing has come to replace it in terms of macro social theory. But if there is no Weberian tradition in social science or social theory, there has also been no dominant alternative theoretical tradition: poststructuralism and its constructivist successors and rational choice theory have never provided coherent macro social theories, and the current turn to computational social science is atheoretical. However we answer the question of whether Weber and Weberianism provide a global or systematic social theory then, it should be borne in mind that little currently exists by way of a mainstream or dominant alternative to such a theory.

So far I have argued that Weberian thought still provides persuasive insights into several modern processes —technoscientific advance (which includes media), bureaucracy and struggles over democratization, and the ongoing disembedding or impersonalization of markets. What ties these together is rationalization—a globalizing process at a minimum in the sense that it spreads modernity. But rationalization, as we have seen, can be disambiguated into different forms in the cultural, political, and economic orders or powers. And apart from globalizing processes, we have found no single global system or single process except perhaps the (non-systemic) and non-rationalized conflict between the great powers, themselves shifting.

Ultimately, the lack of the several spheres or orders forming a whole in which all of the parts come together neatly therefore leaves Weber's thinking open-ended (recall the point made at the outset that many regard Weber's thinking as "multidimensional"). In this respect his successors have followed him in developing open-ended theories. This approach—a combination of ongoing globalizing processes on the macro level and several spheres intersecting orthogonally, plus geopolitical conflict—again, is still an accurate representation of a complex social world.

But there is a tension here: it may seem that an open-ended or multidimensional account of modern or contemporary society would be in keeping with a Weberian approach. Yet this is misleading since, as Gellner notes, social scientists and others inevitably have an implicit view of history.[49] It is also misleading since social science must have an overall framework for explaining societal development that includes the categories for analyzing macro social processes; methodological precepts alone cannot provide the concepts and relationships for analyzing these processes. So the picture just presented—different processes of rationalization in several orders that also intersect, plus an open-ended struggle and shift among global powers—should also be regarded as a coherent framework, even if not a systemic one, that must be
p. 160 improved upon. The way forward in a Weberian spirit should therefore be to continue to refine and sharpen
↳ the concepts pertaining to macro social processes, fitting them into an overall picture of their interrelationships insofar as this is possible. This idea is in keeping with Weber's idea of science, whereby the world—in this case, the social world—becomes increasingly disenchanted. Unlike more limited phenomena, particularly in the physical environment, however, macro societal development is not subject to mastery by means of disenchanted scientific knowledge (the exception here, tellingly, is climate change, where it may be necessary to achieve enhanced mastery of the whole of this planet's—physical—environment or even to curtail this mastery). Hence, unlike in other areas of (physical) science, there remains a disconnect between our social scientific representation of a phenomenon and our ability to control it. Still, it is useful to have a clearer and more useful picture of the options ahead, including an understanding of the limitations in shaping the forces that shape us.

Weber saw the greatest challenges for modern societies as laying in the political order, and we can follow him in this regard. Perhaps there are now other challenges, such as growing economic inequalities, that were not central to Weber's thought or environmental issues that came after his time. Weber's prescience about politics, on the other hand, is still with us. Politics is the arena where Weber personally intervened most closely in current affairs, also via his writings, and where he saw the rationalization process shaping mass opinion and making the public subject to the followership of elites or leaders. Unlike most political science, however, his analysis of politics is grounded in a wider account of social change.

Weber could not have foreseen the current rise of (especially right-wing) populism, though there are eerie echoes of Weber's conception of plebiscitary leader democracy legitimated by mass followings of "the people."[50] The current rise of populisms in many parts of the world can be seen as exemplifying Weber's idea of leadership in the face of mass politics, though it has been noted that populism is not always leader-centric but can be party-centric or movement-centric.[51] These new politics are also enabled by changes in communication, especially digital media, which disintermediate between leaders and "the people" (though they also add new forms of mediation). And although populism is not necessarily leader-centric, it does aim at more direct or non-mediated decision-making, either in the direct acclaim of populist leaders and parties by their followers or via referenda. It remains to be seen how right-wing populism strengthens economic and political borders and sentiment against cosmopolitan elites in the face of the force of increased globalization. In any event, populism can also be regarded not just in Weber's terms of leaders and mass followings but also in Weberian terms (as discussed in the section on Rationalization and Modern Politics above) as the latest instantiation of social movements seeking to change the direction of a state with growing bureaucratic and infrastructural capacities, especially seeking to keep "others" out of the cages of national welfare states.

Against this backdrop of a Weberian analysis of contemporary politics, we can return to Weber's followers. In a globalizing world, the rationalization process that Weber saw as the central dynamic of modern society takes several different forms and yet also provides some unity to a Weberian analysis. In this way, the
p. 161 thinkers that Weber has ↳ influenced, on the one hand, and the social reality they try to capture, on the other hand, mirror each other: there are only limited intersections between the ongoing bureaucratization of the state and the extension of disenchantment by technoscience and the growing depersonalization of markets, three processes that can be combined with open-ended competition at the level of geopolitics. The most Weberian element in the thought of contemporary social theorists is therefore not the tripartite schema of class, status, and power or the types of social action or the types of rationality. Instead, it is perhaps the separation between economic, political, and cultural power. There is some variation here: for example, Mann and Collins want to add geopolitics (or military power) as a fourth arena, so they follow Weber's "realism" in international relations, although Mann goes beyond "realism" in recognizing the force of regulatory and diplomatic "regimes." And Gellner (and Schroeder)[52] want to distinguish between culture and science, or between where Weber saw the force of value-rationality (or what he sometimes called the "intellectual sphere" or the "aesthetic sphere")[53] as against the "instrumental rationality" and "disenchantment" of science (again, going beyond three spheres by dividing one sphere into two distinct parts). The weakness here is that there is only limited agreement on these concepts or ways of delimiting different "orders" or "spheres"—or "the sources of social power." In other words, there is no uniform explanatory apparatus that could allow social science in the case of these concepts to cumulate as do some areas in the natural sciences and within the social sciences. The strength of this position, on the other hand, is that it allows for a non-reductionist but still powerful synthetic analysis. And perhaps the persuasiveness should rest here not just on theory but on accurately capturing a complex reality.[54]

All of this can be put differently if we reframe the problem of "spheres" in terms of power or domination in Weber's work (see also John Scott's chapter in this handbook): domination is clearest for politics where rule over others must be legitimated within nation-states and between states where there is a (non-rationalized) "realist" struggle between great powers. But domination is different in markets inasmuch as domination is based on resources and power is diffuse and fleeting except where monopolies can be established. The domination of science and technology over the environment is different again since it is not zero-sum, as with political power, but takes the form of greater control (with conflict where this control leads, for example, to resource problems) over the social and especially over the physical environment. These forms of power and domination were not elaborated systematically in Weber's work, but they fit closely with his substantive analyses and have been systematized in the writings of others.[55]

Weber has thus left a multifaceted legacy of long-term historical and comparative analyses of social transformations. Yet his ideas do not add up to a unified picture of modern or contemporary social change since the rationalization of the world operates differently in different domains. I have argued that we should nevertheless forge a Weberian account of social change as best we can. Weber saw rationalization overall as a unidirectional process, disenchanting the modern world. This process is not all-encompassing, nor does it work in one way—for example, in relation to states and their bureaucracies as against how scientific
p. 162 knowledge displaces "enchanted" cultural understandings and in ↳ contrast with how markets are becoming increasingly disembedded. Note too that these three processes have a different reach; bureaucracies are tied to nation-states, while scientific knowledge is global and the reach and depth of markets are globalizing (markets seek to become global but face barriers in practice).

Weber did not systematize or align these processes since he did not attempt a comprehensive macro sociology. And his successors have solved the problem of the relation between the different orders or powers operating differently. Mann, for example, in addition to his four intersecting and overlapping networks and sources of power, sometimes uses "orthogonality."[56] Gellner sought to put the relation between the different orders or powers into comparative-historical perspective, charting their interdependence or the

lack thereof.[57] In a similar vein, Collins has analyzed individual long-term trajectories without imposing the claim that they provide an overarching key to societal development.[58]

Weber's pronouncements about rationalization were rather pessimistic. These negative views can be partly attributed to the influence of Nietzsche. But on this point Weber is not just misleading because, as mentioned, he failed to see the re-enchanting side of a "rubber cage" of consumer culture. He also misleads because rationalization, as we saw, is a precondition for the provision of welfare and the comforts of new technologies as well as for continued economic growth. The main limits of rationalization in this regard are the limits of technoscience which strain physical—environmental—resources.[59] Otherwise, rationalization and depersonalization and how they promote the capacity of welfare states and market growth and how they may need to adapt to inflexible structures can be seen as trade-offs rather than limits. In the context of Weber's pessimism it should also be remembered that he was writing at the time of the emergence of a mass society when the costs of industrialization were more strongly in the foreground. Today, in contrast, it has become evident that societies have come much further in providing the means for the development of individual capacities, enabled by rationalization, on a large scale.

This brings us back, finally, to rationalization and globalization. As we have seen, rationalization can be seen as consisting of one pervasive or "umbrella" process that occurs throughout society or as taking different forms in the realms or "orders" of culture, politics, and economy. Weber did not make explicit whether he meant one or the other of these: a possible exception is his "Religious Rejections" essay, but this essay does not clear up confusion on this point since he also has an "intellectual" and "erotic" "sphere," for example, in addition to a "political" and "economic" one.[60] Hence, it is not clear how many "spheres" there were or whether the list is exhaustive. A brief comparison can be made here with those who promote Bourdieu's ideas of "fields"[61]; the problem with theories like this is that it is important to specify at any given point in history how many "fields" there are, which Bourdieusians fail to do.[62] Weber too fails on this score, except that he also uses the widely accepted tripartite schema of economy, culture, and politics, for example, in the chapter "Class, Status and Party."[63] Those who build on Weber's thinking, apart from those mentioned,[64] also distinguish only three (or four, in Mann's case) spheres or powers—for example, Luhmann and Habermas.[65]

p. 163 One way to understand the "umbrella" process then could be via the notion of "instrumental rational action" which displaces the other types of action, but this is of course an idea that applies to the individual level rather than a structural one or one which allows charting macro social change. The lack of consistency between the "umbrella" process and its different forms in the three spheres or orders can only be resolved by tracing and detailing the unity and differences (or overlaps or interrelations between) the forms of rationalization as closely as possible, on the one hand. And, on the other, a Weberian approach would specify the limits of these processes in each case. Specifying the limits of rationalization processes prevents us from regarding this process as some kind of master key to understanding the whole of history or of social change rather than as one among several other such main processes. Consider, for example, that disenchantment is limited by the fact that much of the social world is still "enchanted," as illustrated by the persistence of religion.[66] Or again, rationalization in the sense of the growth of state bureaucracies is limited as measured, for instance, by the plateauing number of staff or state employees in advanced societies.[67] Or finally we can think of how economic organizations have tried to become less "top-down" or hierarchical and more "networked" or horizontal by decentralization.[68] Finally, the limits of the "umbrella" process of rationalization are the limits of calculability across the three domains—though, as we have seen, even if there is one process, the limits of this overall globalization confine its reach and depth in different ways.

Limits, both geographically and for each of the rationalization processes substantively, thus leave room for identifying other more central processes apart from or outside of rationalization, such as geopolitical competition or cultural, political, and economic processes untouched or less affected by rationalization. Once the limits of the umbrella process and its three component processes have been thus specified, which

goes beyond the scope of this essay, we would be able to intone, with Weber, his pessimistic pronouncement on a rationalizing and modernizing, now globalizing and disenchanted, modernity: "culture's every step forward seems condemned to lead to an ever more devastating senselessness."[69] Doing so in the light of subsequent Weberian thought, however, and recognizing the limits of his ideas and without sharing his pessimism, leaves space for the other or remaining main globalizing and non-global processes and for social life outside the cages of rationalization.

Notes

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p. 164 3. ↳ Max Weber, "Vorbemerkung," in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus/Die protestantischen Sekten und der Geist des Kapitalismus. Schriften 1904–1920, MWG* I/19, ed. W. Schluchter with U. Bube (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr [Siebeck], 2016), 101–121, 114; *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter *PESC*), trans. T. Parsons (London: Unwin, 1967), 13–31, 23–24.

4. Weber, "Vorbemerkung," *MWG* I/18, 115–116; *PESC*, 24–26 (translation modified).

5. Weber, "Vorbemerkung," *MWG* I/18, 116–117; *PESC*, 26 (translation modified).

6. Weber, "Vorbemerkung," *MWG* I/18, 120–121; *PESC*, 30–31.

7. See Rogers Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), for a discussion of "rationality," and Ralph Schroeder, *Max Weber and the Sociology of Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), for the different senses of "rationalization."

8. Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1982).

9. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *The Age of Bureaucracy: Perspectives on the Political Sociology of Max Weber* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

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11. Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 152–165.

12. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992).

13. Randall Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

14. Randall Collins, "The End of Middle Class Work: No More Escapes?" in *Does Capitalism Have a Future?* ed. Immanuel Wallerstein et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 37–70.

15. Ibid., 39.

16. Ralph Schroeder, *Rethinking Science, Technology and Social Change* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

17. Thomas Hughes, "The Evolution of Large Technological Systems," in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*, ed. Wiebe Bijker, Thomas Hughes, and Trevor Pinch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 51–82.

18. Christopher Dandeker, *Surveillance, Power and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

19. Philip Napoli, *Audience Evolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

20. See also Joseph Turow, *The Aisles Have Eyes: How Retailers Track Your Shopping, Strip Your Privacy, and Define Your Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

21. Max Weber, "Towards a Sociology of the Press," *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 3 (1976): 96–101; "Vorbericht über eine vorgeschlagene Erhebung über die Soziologie des Zeitungswesens," in *Hochschulwesen und Wissenschaftspolitik. Schriften und Reden 1895–1920, MWG* I/13, ed. M. R. Lepsius and W. Schluchter with H.-M. Lauterer and A. Munding (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr [Siebeck], 2016), 211–228.

22. Russell Neumann, *The Digital Difference: Media Technology and the Theory of Communication Effects* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

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24. Gilles Bastin, "The Press in the Light of Modern Capitalism: A Planned Survey by Max Weber on Newspapers and Journalism," *Max Weber Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 151–175, 165.

p. 165 25. ↳ Ralph Schroeder, *Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology and Globalization* (London: UCL Press, 2018).

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30. Stefan Breuer, "The Concept of Democracy in Weber's Political Sociology," in *Max Weber, Democracy and Modernization*, ed. Ralph Schroeder (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1998), 1–13.

31. Randall Collins, "Democratization in World-Historical Perspective," in *Max Weber, Democracy and Modernization*, ed. Ralph Schroeder (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1998), 14–31.

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36. Dandeker, *Surveillance, Power and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

37. Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory*.

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41. Max Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1981), 306; *Abriß der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte. Mit- und Nachschriften 1919/20, MWG* III/6, ed. W. Schluchter with J. Schröder (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr [Siebeck], 2011), 343.

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55. By Michael Mann, Randall Collins, and Ernest Gellner; see also Schroeder, *An Age of Limits*.

56. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 4.

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