## Universal Rationalization: Max Weber’s Great Narrative

By Dirk Kaesler

Among the “classic” diagnoses of modernity, the German scholar Max Weber is often ascribed the role of the creator of a “theory of rationalization”. If there had to be one keyword for which Max Weber is constantly mentioned today, it would probably be “rationalization”. This term denotes the vast context in the history of ideas which comprises Weber’s alleged “theory” of a universal, occidental “rationalization”.

I myself do not really place this “theory”, which has been attributed to Max Weber, into the portfolio of sociological theories in the strict epistemological sense, but rather into the reservoir of “Great Narratives”, as Jean-François Lyotard has called them, “Les grands récits”. Max Weber has bestowed his great narrative of universal, occidental “rationalization” upon the self-understanding of humanity by sociology as a discipline during its roughly 150 years of history up to the present day. Whoever wants to refer to this Great Narrative by Max Weber cannot forbear to reconstruct it from his texts. At best, only the outlines of this Great Narrative can be indicated here.

We are talking about this vast context in the history of ideas which we contemporaries care to use for labeling Weber’s vision of modernity. The concept of “rationalization”, first emerging in Western and Northern Europe, followed by the transatlantic and universal rationalization for which Max Weber is so well known today, was in no way a guiding theme for the major part of his work. I will try to demonstrate this in the following five steps.

**1. If you are not willing to talk about capitalism, you better be silent about Max Weber’s “theory of rationalization”**

To understand the external and internal path of today’s sociological classic Max Weber, you have to embed him into the great figurational context of the capitalist global economy in the course of the 19th century, biographically as well as relating to his work. This figuration was the creation of the very same cosmopolitan bourgeoisie Max Weber came from.

Max Weber was born on the 21st of April 1864 in Erfurt, then Prussia, into the allegedly idyllic world of the German upper-class, a world of economic, political, social, cultural and technological advancement. With this combination of considerable economic welfare, a solid occidental education and cosmopolitan societal relationships, Max Weber could hardly have wished for more. He was the first-born, embedded in a widely ramified familial setting, descended from one of the richest German-English mercantile elites of the 19th century. His paternal grandfather was a prudent textile entrepreneur with international trade relations. His grandfather on the maternal side came from one of the most successful German-English merchant families of Frankfurt am Main. His father was a long-term member of the Prussian Chamber of Deputies for the national liberal party as well as a member of the German Reichstag for an extensive period of time, which makes him one of the more successful professional politicians of Wilhelmine Germany. His mother could have acted the part of a European high society lady and a wealthy heiress with great self-esteem – had she allowed herself to do so.

Despite the manifold familial interrelations with the cosmopolitan European bourgeoisie, Max Weber’s habitus was shaped by the standards of the Prussian Berlin upper-class as a social field at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. Perceptively analyzing himself as a *bourgeois scholar*, Weber knew all too well about his localization in the system of lifestyles with their specific way of thinking: *I am a member of the bourgeois class, I identify as such and was raised with its respective opinions and ideals*.

Since its establishment in 1871, the extensive societal context of the emergent capitalist society of the German Reich provided the biographical habitat where the first-born was influenced, whereas Max Weber’s scientific analysis of the consequences of capitalism constitutes the permanent leitmotif of his university education and the following periods of doctorate (1889), habilitation and lectureship (1892) and the seamless transition to his first professorship (1893).

At the beginning of the Wilhelmine Empire, the scientific examination of the consequences of capitalism was not a particularly inventive choice for a student of the political and social sciences. Capitalism was the defining manifestation of the increasingly industrialized Wilhelmine Germany during its “Gründerzeit”, to which Weber’s immediate male ancestors contributed substantially and against whose distortions his female ancestry had sought to perform their mitigating philanthropic work.

**2. If you are not willing to talk about Protestantism, you better be silent about capitalism**

After a longer period of illness lasting roughly from 1897 to 1904, Max Weber continued his scholarly work, initially during several extended stays in his much beloved Italy. Stimulated by the life-world experience of Italian Catholicism and the resumption of systematic scientific perusal, he was increasingly concerned with questions about the history, condition and economy of Christian monasteries.

In October 1903, at the age of 39, Max Weber finally withdrew from academic teaching for reasons of health: he became honorary professor in Heidelberg, including a teaching assignment but with no right to award doctorates, and with no say in his faculty. He lived as a freelance private scholar almost until the end of his life, financing his livelihood mostly from his mother’s and his wife’s capital yields. Liberated from what he always experienced as oppressive teaching duties and involvement in academic self-administration, he concentrated solely on his scholarly work.

Weber turned towards the origins of capitalism with increasing vehemence, after having dealt with its consequences for many years. In this period, he did not regard his own research as a fundamental alternative, much less a counterdraft to the Great Narrative of Karl Marx, namely the ultimate victory of the “proletariat” and the necessary establishment of a “classless society”, which was important for Weber too. He strived for a supplementary adjustment of the “materialistic” explanations that were prominent in his days as well as to the exclusively historical explanations of the origins of capitalism. Weber’s interrogation is markedly focused on the mental foundations of the capitalist organization of economic and social order.

Especially with Weber’s studies on the cultural significance of Protestantism and notably its relevance for the formation of those economic ethics that Weber called the *spirit of capitalism*, it is necessary to reflect upon the firm sociological core of the argument. In these essays from the period 1904 to 1906 – his most popular writings up to the present day – Weber advocates the complexly derived and elaborately reasoned argument of an *elective affinity* between certain versions and practical maxims of Protestantism and the occidental, modern and *rational industrial capitalism*. In the mental soil of Protestant and Calvinistic sects, Max Weber believed to discern essential roots of modern capitalism.

The first edition of the famous essays “The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism” (1904/05), in which Weber pursued the question of socio-structural as well as ideational origins of modern capitalism, was already written, when Weber exposed himself to the experience of America: the very culture in which modern, rational industrial capitalism, as researched by him, demonstrated its hitherto greatest elaboration.

In the fall of 1904 Max Weber attended the “International Congress of Arts and Science”, which was held on occasion of the world exhibition in St. Louis. Together with his wife Marianne, he travelled a considerable part of the USA from August to November. Among the strong impressions for his future work which he gained from this journey was the unmediated encounter of various Protestant sects, the perception of organizations of the political “machine” and the position of the American president, the direct confrontation with the US-American women’s movement, the “race issue” and the bureaucratization of both private and public domains in the USA.

**3. If you are not willing to talk about capitalism as shaped by Protestantism, you better be silent about the process of rationalization**

At first, religion served for Max Weber as the background for his interpretation of the origins of the triumph of the occidental, rational industrial capitalism as suggested in his studies about Protestantism. From about 1911 onwards he turned to the most influential world religions outside Europe, which he classified as the most significant *systems of life regimentation*. He began these studies as a standard of comparison for his thesis about the crucial relevance of the secularized, Protestant version of the Christian faith for the formation of the mental requirements of modern occidental capitalism.

However, in the course of his intensive and longstanding preoccupation with Chinese religions (Confucianism and Taoism), Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) and Ancient Judaism, Weber’s original question about the consequences and origins of capitalism changed drastically.

What Weber himself began as a check study – guided by the motto: where there is no Protestantism, there is no capitalism? – evolved into a constantly escalating and eventually unfinished analysis of the universal historical processes of “rationalization” within all spheres of life in all cultures. And for Weber, this primarily meant the total rationalization of human life in all its aspects.

In the course of several decades of partial studies about the effects and causes of capitalism, Weber gradually arrived at the notion of a universally active, comprehensive development in history: rationalization. In his previous examinations of the requirements and “cultural significance” of this development, Weber traced its manifestations in all conceivable segments of social and historical reality, like economy, politics, law, religion and culture. Rationalization, as the *fate of our time*, was Weber’s collective formula for all those numerous and far from identical sub-processes, which he alternately called “bureaucratization”, “industrialization”, “intellectualization”, “development of rational industrial capitalism”, “specialization”, “objectification”, “methodification”, “disciplining”, “disenchantment”, “secularization” or “dehumanization”.

The diversity of these labels alone reveals that Weber sought to integrate extremely heterogeneous phenomena from highly divergent perspectives into the category of his own choosing, “rationalization”. Hence, there appears to be little sense in formulating “the” concept of “the” rationalization in the work of Max Weber. With the exception of the famous “preface” (1920) to the first volume of the “Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion”, there is not one text by Weber in which he himself tries to systematically conceive something of this sort, and even there only a few of the central issues are addressed.

In the work of Weber, “rationalization” on the most general level primarily means order and systematization. A confusing, chaotic group of entities with an infinite amount of connections among each other is being ordered according to man-made criteria. The result of such systematic ordering leads to those processes which Weber calls “rationalization”.

Over the course of his numerous studies and drafts, Max Weber became increasingly convinced that the historical process of systematic ordering which he had termed “rationalization” is on the whole universal and inexorable.

Initially, he had created the hypothesis of “rationalization” for contexts that to him seemed more suited for approaches of systematization and order, most notably the areas of economy, law, technology, science and state order, in other words – as he called it – for the *external organization of the world*. During the development of his thesis about the rationalization of these very spheres of life, Weber concerned himself with three questions in particular, which essentially remained the same:

1. Why was it only the “Western world”, the “occident”, which produced a specific “rational” culture of universal historical scope? Why was there no similar process of “rationalization” in the non-European sphere, especially in Asia, where far older and more differentiated cultures compared to the occident existed?
2. Why did a “rational” science and technology, a “rational” industrial capitalism, a “rationally” bureaucratic organization of the state emerge in modern Western Europe only?
3. What advantages did this “rationalization” bring to the respective society and specific groups within it, and what price was demanded and had to be paid for this development by society, social groups, and single individuals?

In a parallel research, Max Weber also concentrated more intensely on exactly those areas that are generally considered “irrational” – like religion, ethics, arts, culture and sexuality. It is those spheres that – according to Weber – regulate the *internal organization of the world*. These sections of human, social and historical reality were – and are – regarded as safe domains of surprising ideas, of spontaneous notions, of supernatural powers, of mystery, of the inexplicable – briefly speaking: the irrational, disordered and chaotic.

But it happened again: here too Weber saw and established socio-culturally conveyed processes of ordering everywhere, which he subsumed under “rationalization”. Whether he

1. Investigated the specific “rationality” of occidental music, whose notation system, harmonics and instrumental technique seemed to supply evidence for the gradual dissolution of mystical and “irrational” qualities in the arts respectively the practice of art, and their gradual replacement by “rational” patterns.
2. Examined the most diverse religions, cults and salvation beliefs across time periods and culture areas, everywhere detecting supposedly obvious signs of a growing “rationalization” of magical wizardry towards systematic-rational theologies and churches. To Weber, rationalization applies to the contents (=theologies) as well as to the organization, such as the development from sects to churches.
3. Analyzed the historical development of the sexual behavior of people – this supposedly individual, chaotic and animal incitement of human conduct. Even this he considered an object of a socially driven rationalization. The gradual extinction of all orgiastic fertility cults by priesthood in all world religions and the systematic-rational canalization of sexuality. From the chaotic orgy, the ecstasy and the chaos towards “orderly” sexuality in solid partnerships within a marriage, a “quasi-marital” relationship, a “stable relationship” or a “love affair”. Regardless of whether monogamous, polygamous, matriarchal or patriarchal: there must be order.

No matter where Max Weber looked, everywhere he saw the irrefutable evidence of a great, world-historical process of rationalization.

However, Weber never depicted the processes of advancing rationalization, which he detected and examined, as unilinear developments following a set pattern. His repeated statements that historical reality can only be analytically described as a mixture of ideal-typical constructions, as well as his constantly recurring emphasis on contrary developments should suffice to refrain from making Weber a propagandist of blind euphoria for progress. A “theory of modernization” in the sense of an “evolutionary theory”, according to which the world – or at least the history of humankind – would be depicted as a constant ascent to the perfection of rational mastery of the world, would be a grotesque misapprehension of Weber’s work.

It was precisely the incredible, the “serendipity” of this process he called “rationalization”, and at the same time its constant interruption by “non-rational” developments, that fascinated Weber throughout his life and caused him to apply these questions on ever new areas.

Someone like Max Weber, who unrelentingly asked the question about the “costs” of those diverse rationalization processes and gave sober, skeptical-pessimistic responses, is not one to portray the “rationalization” of all human spheres of life as immensely positive and desirable in order to deliver an apology for the bourgeois era. Weber’s deep skepticism and his massive fears of the “irrationalities” – in the sense of “unreasonableness” and “inhumanity” – within those researched “rationalization processes” which not only bring along a boost in effectiveness but also a far reaching dehumanization, place Max Weber – this theorist for the rationalization of the irrational – above any accusation of having become an apologist of such developments. Whoever relentlessly emphasizes the “irrational” motives and consequences of “rationalization” as analyzed and partly only discovered by him, and warns about its potential “inhumanity”, cannot be righteously denounced as a blind worshipper of the solely, fatefully proceeding mechanics of “rationalization”.

**4. If you are not willing to talk about dehumanization through bureaucracy, you better be silent about the process of rationalization**

Someone like Max Weber, who asked the question of the “costs” of the rationalization processes as reconstructed by him and who answered it in a skeptical-pessimistic way, cannot portray the “rationalization” of all human spheres of life as a good development. His deep skepticism and his fears of the “irrationalities” of those processes he observed made him see the boost in effectiveness as sharp-eyed as their far reaching “dehumanization”, “objectification”, “depersonalization” and “exanimation”.

It was Max Weber’s dominant fear, given the inexorable advance of capitalism and bureaucratization, whether it is *even still possible to salvage any remains of some sense of “individualistic” latitude* and how “democracy” in the future will be possible at all.

This is where Weber’s concern for the state of culture in general as well as for the chances of free people’s life choices is articulated. And both suffused him with an increasingly pessimistic skepticism.

**5. Cultural criticism and diagnosis of time**

I am at the end of the recapitulation of Max Weber’s Great Narrative of the universal “rationalization” of all human spheres of life. Ultimately, this narrative was – and still is – what made Max Weber one of the paramount diagnosticians of modernity.

To conclude: Weber’s narrative of the inexorable, fateful and universal “rationalization” of all spheres of life, into which Weber’s vision of the development of human societies was encoded, was not set as a deliberate guiding theme for the major part of his work. Only near the end of his life and the sudden end of his scientific work did he develop this prominently dismal view of the future.

When briefly summarized, the Great Narrative of Max Weber is telling the story of an apocalyptic irony of unintended successes. The radicalized protestants of the 16th and 17th century, in search of worldly signs for their salvation from eternal damnation, participated in the creation of a cosmos of beliefs and behaviors which gradually established the enclosures of subjection and bondage of humankind across the whole globe.

Especially since that time when even the last remains of the original piety had escaped from the thus developed institutions and people carrying them, the “modern”, “rational” and “bourgeois” industrial capitalism of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th century reared its evermore ugly head. The inseparable connection between this system of capitalist order of the economic life and the universally emerging machines of bureaucratic order in all spheres of life caused the endangerment of the individual freedom of all people, if not their ultimate destruction.

The German scholar Max Weber composed this gloomy narrative during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, bit by bit and constantly suspicious of his own vision until the very end.

At the beginning of the 21st century, it has been attributed a suggestive explanatory power that makes it seem superior to other competing narratives.

Be that as it may, Weber himself died in the knowledge that it was not the *blossoming of summer*, but the *polar night of freezing darkness and hardship* that lay ahead of the generations following him.

Only history as it is created by humankind will show whether the dismal, terrible visions of Max Weber will have come true by the end of the 21st century or not.