

Classical Social Theory Essay - rationalisation

Rationalisation is the tendency of humans to think in terms of rational choice theory. Max Weber explains it as the spirit of modern capitalism which gives people an "attitude which seeks profit rationally and systematically"¹. He contrasts this with other forms of social action which he identifies as affectual, traditional, value-oriented and goal-oriented². Value-oriented (*wertrationalität*) and goal-oriented (*zweckrationalität*) actions are both presented as different levels of rationality. The distinction between the two is that value-oriented action is guided by an 'ultimate meaning' whereas goal-oriented action is guided by "maximizing results at minimum cost"³

Weber hints at the way in which both levels of rational action can complement each other by commenting that the 'spirit' and the form of capitalist enterprise are related. In Weber's analysis of capitalist society the 'ultimate meaning' of value-oriented action can be compatible with the instrumental self-interest of rational action. The example Weber gives for this is that the protestant capitalist Benjamin Franklin can be proud of "having provided employment to numerous people" while also being proud of having extracted a modest profit from his enterprise. Franklin's value-oriented action is totally compatible with the goal of rational action: to make money. There's a potential conflict between the two where they contradict each other. Weber answers this by taking his point further to argue that under capitalism the 'ultimate meaning' of value-oriented action in society will change to become the goals of rational action. Or, to put it another way: the universal value of capitalist society will be the rational pursuit of wealth, this is rationalisation.

Rationalisation is a secular process⁴, and in this way it is indicative of modernity. The 'protestant work ethic' Weber refers to is burdened by religious traditions. Through the process of rationalisation it is transformed into the spirit of capitalism and disassociates itself from its religious traditions.

Weber's analysis of modern capitalism shows a clear progression from the feudal, pre-modern society, to the modern capitalist society. For Weber the notion of modernity goes beyond Marx's economic analysis of a change in the mode of production, it signals a change in the way people think and act. He attempts to distinguish between modern capitalism and pre-modern capitalism by explaining that

*"individualistic capitalistic economy... is rationalized on the basis of rigorous calculation, directed with foresight and caution toward the economic success which is sought in sharp contrast to the hand-to-mouth existence of the peasant, and to the privileged traditionalism of the guild craftsman and of the adventurers' capitalism, oriented to the exploitation of political opportunities and irrational speculation."*⁵

Adventurers' capitalism and industrial capitalism both follow the same economic mode of production, but the mercantile spirit of adventurers' capitalism is oriented to 'irrational speculation', whereas the individualistic spirit of industrial capitalism is one of rational calculation. For Weber modern capitalism would be impossible without the rationalisation of society which accompanied it. Furthermore this rationalisation came about not through economic forces but through social action, it is primarily concerned with how the behaviour of people affects the economy.

When rationalisation is taken to its logical conclusion it results in what George Ritzer termed McDonaldisation, Ritzer defined it as "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world"⁶. The principles of the fast food restaurant can be briefly summarised as predictability⁷, efficiency⁸, calculability⁹ and control¹⁰.

I agree with Douglas Kellner that McDonaldisation shows a form of rationalisation which is both modern and postmodern, and is unique to late capitalism¹¹. McDonaldisation as mathematically rational action results in logically irrational outcomes; for example derivative speculation in the food market is rational in that it provides massive short-term profit. It's also irrational because as a result the price of food is artificially inflated and poor people starve while good food rots in storage.

In this way rationalisation has come full circle: from irrational mercantile capitalism, to rational industrial capitalism, to irrational late capitalism.

- 1 Weber, M. (1930) *the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. Psychology Press, chapter 2, Retrieved March 13, 2012, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/protestant-ethic/ch02.htm>
- 2 Weber, M. and Heydebrand, W. (1994) *Max Weber, Sociological Writings*. Continuum, "Objectivity" in Social Science, part 3, Retrieved March 13, 2012, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/weber.htm#s2>
- 3 Parsons, T. (1965) *Theories of Society*. The Free Press, pg. 970.
- 4 Elwell, F. (1996) *The Sociology of Max Weber*, Retrieved March 13, 2012, <http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/users/f/felwell/www/Theorists/Whome.htm#Rationalization>
- 5 Weber, M. *the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, chapter 2.
- 6 Ritzer, G. (2010) *the McDonaldization of Society*. 6th ed. Pine Forge Press, pg. 1. Secondary source, Introduction to Sociology, retrieved March 13, 2012, <http://www.umsl.edu/~keelr/010/mcdonsoc.html>
- 7 Ritzer, G. *the McDonaldization of Society*, pg. 9.
- 8 Ritzer, G. *the McDonaldization of Society*, pg. 36.
- 9 Ritzer, G. *the McDonaldization of Society*, pg. 9.
- 10 Ritzer, G. *the McDonaldization of Society*, pg. 101. Secondary source, Mcdonaldization.com (2000), Retrieved March 13, 2012, <http://www.mcdonaldization.com/control.shtml>
- 11 Kellner, D. (1998) *Theorizing/Resisting McDonaldization: A Multiperspectivist Approach*. University of Texas, Retrieved March 13, 2012, <http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell30.htm>