The Specific and Peculiar Rationalism of Modern Western Civilization

A few months before his death in June 1920, Max Weber wrote a short introduction for his *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*. This 'preliminary remark', as he entitled it with deceptive modesty, contains what Benjamin Nelson (1974) has called the 'master clue' to Weber's lifelong scholarly intentions. For here Weber makes explicit the underlying universal-historical perspective that endows his vast, fragmented and apparently heterogeneous corpus of empirical studies with thematic coherence. Basic to this perspective are two ideas: first, that modern Western civilization differs from all others in its 'specific and peculiar rationalism'; and second, that the central task of universal history is to characterize and explain this unique rationalism (AI, p. 26).

Weber is quick to point out that 'rational', 'rationalism' and 'rationalization' are by no means unambiguous terms:

There is, for example, rationalization of mystical contemplation ... just as much as there are rationalizations of economic life, of technique, of scientific research, of military training, of law and administration. Furthermore, each one of these fields may be rationalized from many different ultimate points of view and toward many different ultimate ends, and what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another. Hence rationalizations of the most varied character have existed in various departments of life in all civilizations. (GAR, pp. 11-12; AI, p. 26)

The systematic ambiguity surrounding the notions of rationalism and rationalization makes it necessary to specify 'which spheres of social life are rationalized, and in what direction' (GAR, p. 12; AI, p. 26). Only in this way can the 'special peculiarity' of modern Western rationalism—and thus the distinctiveness of the modern Western social order—be made clear. And only in this way can one begin to fulfill what Weber identifies as the central task of social science: to understand the 'characteristic uniqueness [Eigenart] of the reality in which we move' (M, p. 72).

The 'reality in which we move', for Weber as for Marx, is dominated by capitalism, 'the most fateful force in our modern life' (AI, p. 17). And the most salient characteristic of modern industrial capitalism, according to Weber, is its thoroughgoing rational calculability. This chapter begins, then, with an analysis of the rationality of the capitalist economy. Next I discuss law and bureaucratic administration, characterized by Weber as rational because of their impersonal objectivity and their reliance on formalized rules and procedures. Common to the rationality of industrial capitalism, formalistic law and bureaucratic administration is its objectified, institutionalized, supra-individual form: in each sphere, rationality is embodied in the social structure and confronts individuals as something external to them. The development of rationality in this objectified form, according to Weber, presupposed the prior development within individuals of a certain highly peculiar kind of rational inner orientation (AI, pp. 26-7). This process of internal or subjective rationalization is discussed in Section 4, which focuses on the development among ascetic Protestants of a rigorously disciplined way of life (Lebensführung) based on constant self-scrutiny and methodical self-control.

Despite their historical interconnections, processes of rationalization in the spheres of economic life, law, administration, and religious ethics cannot be collapsed into a single overarching development. Rationalization, for Weber, is not a single process but a multiplicity of distinct though interrelated processes arising from different historical sources, proceeding at different rates, and furthering different interests and values. Still, these various processes of rationalization have notable structural similarities. I try to capture these common structural components in Section 5 by tracing three motifs—those of increasing knowledge, growing impersonality and enhanced...
control—that recur in all Weber’s discussions of the rationality of the modern social order. The chapter’s concluding sections examine another unifying theme: the idea that the rationality of modern capitalism, law, bureaucracy and vocational asceticism is purely formal, and that this rationality may be judged highly irrational from a substantive or evaluative point of view. Above all, it is this purely formal character, this indifference to all substantive ends and values, that defines what is unique—as well as what is morally and politically problematic—about Western rationalism.

**CAPITALISM AND CALCULABILITY**

The essence of modern capitalism, according to Weber, is its rationality. To begin with, exchange in the market, the basis of the capitalist economic order, is ‘the archetype of all rational social action’. Unhampered by sacred taboos, by traditional status-group privileges, or by any ‘obligations of brotherliness or reverence’, market transactions are determined solely by the ‘purposeful pursuit of interests’, by an ‘orientation to the commodity and only to that’ (E&S, pp. 635–6). They are rational in the negative sense of being free from the constraints of tradition and sentiment and in the positive sense of being purely instrumental (zweckrational), determined by an orientation to the set of opportunities for exchange and to these alone (E&S, pp. 82, 84). The market is the paradigm of rationality in this double sense, for market exchange, more than any other type of activity, is determined by the deliberate and calculating pursuit of self-interest and is free from the multifarious fetters of tradition and the capricious influence of feelings.

Here, as throughout his empirical work, Weber uses ‘rational’ in a non-evaluative sense. His characterization of market relationships as rational implies no moral approval of these relationships; he explicitly notes that the very rationality and impersonality of pure market relationships is ‘an abomination to every system of fraternal ethics’ (E&S, p. 637). Like ‘legitimacy’ in Weber’s sociology of domination and ‘validity’ in his sociology of law, ‘rationality’ is a neutral analytical concept, purged of the normative meaning it has in other contexts. This is not to deny that Weber harbors strong—though ambivalent—attitudes toward those aspects of the modern social order that he characterizes as rational. These attitudes, however, do not inhere in the term ‘rational’, which remains evaluatively neutral, conveying neither approbation nor condemnation.

Market exchange, then, is rational to the extent that it involves the calculating, purely instrumental orientation of economic action to opportunities for exchange and to these alone. But this is only one aspect of the rationality of modern capitalism. Just as important is the use of money accounting as a means of economic calculation and decision-making. While the social structure of market exchange elicits the subjective disposition to act on the basis of impersonal calculations, money accounting provides an objectified, supra-individual technology for carrying out these calculations, for determining unambiguously the ‘best’, meaning most profitable, opportunity for exchange.

Monetary calculation is inherently quantitative: every good and service, every asset and liability, every factor that is (literally) ‘taken into account’ is assigned a numerical money value. Quantitative calculation, for Weber, is a rational means of orienting economic activity because it is exact and unambiguous:

> From a purely technical point of view, money is the most ‘perfect’ means of economic calculation. That is, it is formally the most rational means of orienting economic activity. Calculation in terms of money is thus the specific means of rational economic provision. (E&S, p. 86)

Monetary calculation, like market exchange, is rational only in a purely formal, non-evaluative sense. Weber explicitly contrasts the formal rationality of money accounting with what he calls the substantive rationality of economic action, the latter an inherently evaluative concept denoting the degree to which an economic system provides for the needs, furthers the ends, or accords with the values of a given social group. Moreover, he stresses the irreconcilable tension between extreme formal rationality, which requires treating the individual worker purely as a means, as a calculable instrument of production just like any material means of production, and substantive rationality. (See
controls them. Monopolization of control by entrepreneurs presupposes the 'expropriation of the individual worker from ownership of the means of production' (E&S, p. 137). Weber of course follows Marx here. But for Weber, the expropriation of the individual from the material means of his activity and livelihood is not a phenomenon peculiar to the capitalist firm. It is just as characteristic of the modern state, army, church, and university (E&S, pp. 223, 980–3; Soc., pp. 197–9). This fundamental fact of the 'separation' of the worker from the material means of production, destruction, administration, academic research, and finance' (E&S, p. 1394)—conditioned partly by the nature of modern technology, which is typically too large, expensive or sophisticated to be controlled by the individual worker, and partly by the greater efficiency of centrally organized activity—is the cornerstone of Weber's theory of bureaucracy (see pp. 20–2 below). Thus the rationalization of economic activity, in so far as it depends on the centralization of control over the material means of production, is part of a much broader process of rationalization that Weber subsumes under the notion of bureaucratization.

Technical knowledge is the second factor on which the calculability of the production process depends. Effective control over the means of production, as distinguished from the mere power to dispose of them at will, itself depends on reliable technical knowledge. Highly refined technical knowledge, in turn, depends ultimately on 'the peculiar features of Western science, especially the mathematically and experimentally exact natural sciences with their precise rational foundations' (S Tr, p. 338; cf. AI, p. 24). (The 'practical and...methodical inclusion of natural science in the service of the economy', according to Weber, is important not only as a source of the exact calculability of the production process but also as 'one of the keystones in the development of the regulation of life in general' (ALW, p. 1129). Weber nowhere systematically expounds his views on the relation between the development of modern science and processes of rationalization in other domains, but it is clear that he regards the theoretical development and practical application of natural science as a central component of the distinctively Western course of rationalization, as much because
of its general effect in fostering a 'rationalist and antitraditionalist spirit' (ALW, pp. 1128–9) as because of its specific contributions to technical progress.)

Finally, the calculability of the production process depends on the uniquely Western system of formally free labor and on the disciplined control of workers by entrepreneurs. Maximum calculability, according to Weber, is achieved not with slave labor, but with labor that is formally free yet economically compelled—under the ‘whip of hunger’ (GEH, p. 277)—to sell its services on the market:

When workers are employed for wages, the following advantages to industrial profitability and efficiency are conspicuous [Weber is comparing formally free labor with slave labor]: (a) capital risk and the necessary capital investment are smaller; (b) the costs of reproduction and of bringing up children fall entirely on the worker. His wife and children must seek employment on their own account; (c) largely for this reason, the risk of dismissal is an important incentive to the maximization of production; (d) it is possible to select the labor force according to ability and willingness to work. (E&S, p. 163; cf. pp. 113, 129, 150–1)

Labor must be subject to strict—and strictly rational—discipline. Weber cites the Taylor system of ‘scientific management’ as the limiting case of discipline and control based on knowledge:

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 like that of any material means of production. On this basis, the American system of 'scientific management' triumphantly proceeds with its rational conditioning and training of work performances, thus drawing the ultimate conclusions from the mechanization and discipline of the plant. The psychophysical apparatus of man is completely adjusted to the demands of the outer world, the tools, the machines—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 work procedure, he is attuned to a new rhythm through the functional specialization of muscles and through

the creation of an optimal economy of physical effort. (E&S, p. 1156)

The fact that maximum calculability in economic (and other) organizations requires the disciplined control of some human beings by others is another instance of the antagonism—endemic in the modern social order—between formal and substantive rationality.

Industrial capitalism is characterized not only by the exact calculability of the production process, but also by the calculability of the legal and administrative environment within which economic action takes place. Modern capitalism, Weber argues, presupposes this calculability:

The modern capitalist enterprise... presupposes a legal and administrative system whose functioning can be rationally predicted, at least in principle, by virtue of its fixed general norms, just like the expected performance of a machine. (E&S, p. 1394; cf. pp. 1094–5)

Industrial capitalism could not have developed in the context of a legal system in which decisions were made on the basis of a judge’s sense of equity in a given case (E&S, pp. 976–8), on the basis of revelation (by oracle or ordeal), or on the basis of strict adherence to sacred tradition. Nor could modern capitalism have developed in the context of a patrimonial political system in which administrative decisions were carried out in accordance with the inflexible requirements of tradition or the arbitrary discretion of the ruler. Earlier forms of capitalism, particularly those Weber groups under the heading 'politically oriented capitalism' (E&S, pp. 164–6), could and did flourish in such unpredictable legal and administrative environments. But modern capitalist firms, run on the basis of an accounting technique requiring precise calculation, are 'much too vulnerable to irrationalities of law and administration' (E&S, p. 1395) to develop or survive outside a predictable legal and administrative environment. Thus the rationalization of law and administration, according to Weber, is a prerequisite for the rationalization of economic life.

Quite apart from its significance as a precondition of capitalist
development, the rationality of the modern legal and administrative order deserves discussion in its own right. For if capitalism is one of the two main empirical referents of Weber's conception of the 'specific and peculiar rationalism of Western culture', rational law and bureaucratic administration together comprise the other.

**LEGAL FORMALISM**

Modern capitalist rationality is rooted in calculability; modern legal rationality in formalism. Like many of Weber's most fruitful notions—bureaucracy, charisma, and the spirit of capitalism come immediately to mind—legal formalism is not a concept with a single unambiguous meaning but a complex, multifaceted conceptual construct that resists encapsulation in a definition. One aspect of legal formalism can best be grasped by contrasting the highly articulated and differentiated structure of the modern Western legal order with the undifferentiated structure of the Asiatic legal order. In Asia religious prescriptions were never differentiated from secular rules, and the characteristically theocratic combination of religious and ritualistic prescriptions with legal rules remained unchanged. In this case, there arose a featureless conglomeration of ethical and legal duties, moral exhortations and legal commandments without formalized explicitness, and the result was a specifically non-formal type of law. (E&S, p. 810; all references in this and the next section, unless otherwise identified, are to Economy and Society.)

In the West, by contrast, a differentiated legal order emerged gradually and unevenly out of an originally undifferentiated amalgam of legal, religious, ethical and conventional regulations. The modern legal order is based on a series of explicitly formulated distinctions. One of these is the distinction between substantive and procedural law—between 'rules of law to be applied in the process of law-finding [legal decision-making] and rules regarding that process itself' (p. 654). A second is the distinction between questions of law and questions of fact, the latter to be ascertained through a specialized rational procedure involving written documents and the examination of witnesses (pp. 811, 817, 830). Third, and most important here, is the distinction between law-making and law-finding: between the establishment of general legal rules and the application of those rules in particular cases.

Modern law-making, in the form of the deliberate enactment of legislation, is rational in a double sense. First, legislation consists in the self-conscious, deliberate enactment of new legal norms. Weber contrasts this both with the unconscious emergence of new legal norms through 'unperceived changes in meaning' (pp. 754–5) and with the idea, prevalent in traditional societies, that legal norms cannot be created through conscious enactment (pp. 227, 760). Secondly, the procedure whereby new legal norms are created is itself governed by legal norms: legislation is enacted 'in conformity with the formal constitutional requirements' (p. 753). Such rule-governed legislative procedure is rational in contrast to the arbitrary imposition of new legal norms through charismatic revelation (p. 761).

Modern law-finding, as distinguished from law-making, involves the application of general legal norms to the concrete facts of a particular case. In the ideally rational case, legal decisions made in this manner can be reliably predicted by interested parties:

judicial formalism enables the legal system to operate like a technically rational machine. Thus it guarantees to individuals and groups within the system a relative maximum of freedom, and greatly increases for them the possibility of predicting the legal consequences of their actions. Procedure becomes a specified type of pacified contest, bound to fixed and inviolable 'rules of the game'. (p. 811)

Weber contrasts the rational predictability of modern law-finding with two kinds of informal, unpredictable, and in this sense irrational adjudication: first, adjudication based on oracles, ordeals or other 'means which cannot be controlled by the intellect' (p. 656); and second, 'kadi-justice', in which legal decisions derive not from the application of general rules to a particular body of facts but from the judge's 'sense of equity in a given case' (pp. 1115, 1395). Wherever such incalculable modes
of law-finding prevail, Weber argues, they will impede economic rationalization. Rationalization in the legal sphere is thus bound up with rationalization in the economic sphere.

The formalism of the modern Western legal system refers not only to the mode of establishing legal norms and to the mode of applying them in particular cases but also to the nature of the legal norms themselves. Legal norms are formal to the extent that they are general principles, as opposed to particular 'reasons relevant in the decision of concrete individual cases' (p. 655), and to the extent that these general principles are not of a 'substantive' character, in Weber's special sense of the word. As distinguished from substantive rules, purely formal legal rules take into account only 'unambiguous general characteristics of the facts' (pp. 656–7) and thus avoid reference to substantive ethical or political ends, at least in so far as these cannot be construed unambiguously. Pure formalism, Weber grants, is an ideal-typical limiting case, not an accurate description of the modern legal order; in fact, many modern laws instruct the judge to 'render his decision on the basis of ethics, equity, or expediency' (p. 645; cf. pp. 882–9, 979)—i.e. on the basis of substantive as opposed to purely formal considerations. Nonetheless, the modern Western legal order is characterized not only by formal modes of establishing legal norms and applying them in particular cases but also, to a greater extent than any other legal order, by a body of abstract, general legal norms involving no reference to substantive ends or values. These norms, in the ideally rational case, are systematically related to one another, so as to constitute a 'logically clear, internally consistent, and, at least in theory, gapless system of rules under which ... all conceivable fact situations must be capable of being logically subsumed' (p. 656).

Extensive freedom of contract, closely related to the expansion of the market, is another aspect of the modern formalistic legal order. Just as the market mechanism permits—indeed, forces—the individual to secure his economic existence through formally free market transactions, so freedom of contract permits the individual to regulate his economic relations through formally autonomous legal transactions. 'The increased importance of the private law contract', Weber writes, 'is thus the legal reflex of the market orientation of our society' (p. 672). Weber distinguishes the traditional 'status contract' from the modern 'instrumental contract' (Zweck-Kontrakts). The status contract effected a change in the total legal situation ... and the social status of the persons involved ... By means of such a contract a person was to become somebody's child, father, wife, brother, master, slave, kin, comrade-in-arms, protector, client, follower, vassal, subject [or] friend ... [This did not] mean that a certain performance ... contributing to the attainment of some specific object, was reciprocally guaranteed or expected ... The contract rather meant that the person would become something different in quality (or status) from the quality he possessed before. (p. 672)

Instrumental contracts, in contrast, involve no change in status; they aim 'at some specific (especially economic) performance or result' (p. 673). This is true above all of the money contract, the 'archetypal instrumental contract': a 'specific, quantitatively delimited, qualityless, abstract ... agreement' (W&G, p. 515; E&S, p. 674). The pure formalism of the money contract corresponds to the formalism of abstract enacted norms. And its purely instrumental and impersonal character mirrors the instrumental, impersonal nature of market transactions.

Formal legal equality prevails in the domain of enacted law and in the domain of contractual agreement. Enacted norms apply equally to all, 'without respect of person' (E&S, p. 699), and all have the freedom to 'set the content of contracts in accordance with [their] desires' (p. 729). Of course formal freedom of contract does not guarantee that everyone will be equally able to stipulate the terms of contractual agreements, for legally protected inequalities in the distribution of property generate inequalities in bargaining power. Freedom of contract enables an economically powerful employer, for example, to 'impose his terms' upon the worker, who is constrained to accept them by his 'more pressing economic need' (p. 730).

Legal formalism, like economic calculability, is rational only in a purely formal sense. To be sure, formal justice guarantees the 'maximum freedom for the interested parties to represent
their formal legal interests'. But on account of the 'unequal distribution of economic power, which the system of formal justice legalizes, this very freedom must time and again produce consequences which are contrary to the substantive postulates of religious ethics or of political expediency' (p. 812). There is thus an 'insoluble conflict between the formal and the substantive principles of justice' (p. 893), just as there is an irreconcilable tension between formal and substantive rationality in the economic sphere. (The antagonism between the purely formal rationality of the modern economic and legal order and its substantive irrationality from the standpoint of certain deeply rooted value commitments—a fundamental theme in Weber's social thought—is examined in pp. 35-43 of this chapter.)

BUREAUCRATIC ADMINISTRATION

Modern administration, Weber argues, is increasingly—and inevitably—bureaucratic. This is true not only in the sphere of the state, but in all domains of social life. Churches, armies, political parties, economic enterprises, interest groups, associations of all kinds, endowments, universities—all are subject to the inexorable advance of bureaucratization. 'It would be sheer illusion', Weber writes, 'to think for a moment that continuous administrative work can be carried out in any field except by means of [bureaucratic] officials ... The whole pattern of everyday life is cut to fit this framework' (E&S, p. 223).

The indispensability of bureaucratic administration is grounded in its thoroughgoing rationality. One aspect of this rationality is its formalism. Like the modern legal order, bureaucratic administration has a formally articulated and differentiated structure. Formal rules delimit the 'jurisdictional area' of each agency, specify the distribution of authority within the agency, spell out the duties associated with each position, and establish a regular procedure for carrying out these duties (pp. 218, 956-7). Formal, abstract, general rules, moreover, are the specific means of bureaucratic administration:

the authority to order certain matters by decree—which has been legally granted to an agency—does not entitle the agency
to regulate the matter by individual commands given for each case, but only to regulate the matter abstractly. This stands in extreme contrast to the regulation of all relationships through individual privileges and bestowals of favor, which ... is absolutely dominant in patrimonialism. (p. 958)

The formalism of bureaucratic administration is expressed, finally, in a distinctive ethos. Devoted to 'impersonal and functional purposes', the bureaucratic official acts in a 'spirit of formalistic impersonality ... without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm' (pp. 225, 959). The formalistic impersonality of the bureaucratic ethos corresponds to the pure instrumentalism and impersonality of market transactions and money contracts, and the execution of official business 'without regard for persons' corresponds to the formal equality of all persons in the modern legal order.

A second aspect of the rationality of bureaucracy is its technical efficiency, which Weber characterizes in mechanistic terms:

The fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity ... continuity ... unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs—these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration. (p. 973)

The quasi-mechanical efficiency of bureaucratic administration 'makes possible a particularly high degree of calculability of results' (p. 223). This calculability benefits capitalist entrepreneurs, who 'must be able to count on the ... rational, predictable functioning of ... administrative agencies' (p. 1095). More ominously, it also makes the bureaucratic apparatus a 'highly developed power instrument in the hands of its controller' (p. 991; cf. p. 987).

Bureaucratic administration is rational not only because of its impersonal formalism and its machine-like efficiency but also—and most fundamentally—because it is based on knowledge. More precisely, it is based on specialized technical expertise, which becomes increasingly indispensable to administration as
the technical and economic base of modern life becomes ever more complex. By placing a premium on technical expertise, bureaucratization contributes in a very general way to the rationalization of life: it 'furthers the development of rational “matter-of-factness” [Sachlichkeit] and the personality type of the professional expert' (p. 998), and it tends to substitute certification by education for certification by ancestry as a means of monopolizing ‘socially and economically advantageous positions’ (p. 1000).

Like industrial capitalism and formalistic law, bureaucratic administration is rational only in a purely formal, non-evaluative sense. And the greater its formal rationality, the more vulnerable it becomes to criticism for its substantive irrationality. Thus what is ‘appraised as its special virtue by capitalism’—the spirit of formalistic impersonality—may be condemned from another perspective as dehumanizing:

Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is ‘dehumanized’, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal ... and emotional elements which escape calculation. (p. 975)

Similarly, the more closely a bureaucratic organization approximates a technically efficient machine, the greater the danger to individual freedom and dignity: the individual official is reduced to a ‘small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march’ (p. 988). Bureaucracy, moreover, induces an ethic of adjustment (Anpassung), of ‘adaptation to the possible’ (M, p. 24), an ethic that discourages the value-oriented striving that Weber sees as central to the development of autonomous moral personality (see Chapter 4). Finally, the more important the role played by technical expertise in the functioning of a bureaucratic organization, the less responsive the organization will be to the control of those who lack such expertise: bureaucracy, in short, invites technocracy.

ASCETICISM AND THE ETHIC OF VOCATION

Weber analyzes the modern social order not only from a static but also from a dynamic perspective: he aims not only to delineate the ‘special peculiarity’ of contemporary Western rationalism but also to elucidate its historical development (AI, p. 26). In other words, he is concerned as much with the process of rationalization as with the product, rationality. This process, Weber argues, is not a gradual and continuous one. The ‘roads to modernity’, in Benjamin Nelson’s apt formulation, are ‘paved with “charismatic” breakthroughs of traditional structures’ (1973, p. 78). Today, the importance of these breakthroughs is easily overlooked, for the scientific, technical, economic and administrative rationalization of life has become a self-perpetuating process, capable of inducing in individuals the subjective attitudes and dispositions needed to reproduce and reinforce the objectified, supra-individual forms of rationality embodied in the social structure. Weber makes this point explicitly with respect to capitalism:

The capitalistic economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him ... as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action. The manufacturer who in the long run acts counter to these norms, will just as inevitably be eliminated from the economic scene as the worker who cannot or will not adapt himself to them will be thrown into the streets without a job.

Thus the capitalism of today, which has come to dominate economic life, educates and selects the economic subjects which it needs through a process of economic survival of the fittest. (PE, pp. 54–5; cf. p. 72)

Before the advent of modern capitalism, however, economic rationalization was not a self-sustaining process. Modern capitalism, according to Weber, did not develop and could not have developed directly and ‘naturally’ through a gradual process of rationalization from earlier forms of capitalism. The calculative rationality so firmly entrenched in the modern economic and political order is not the product of a slow and steady extension in the scope of calculating, self-interested action. Instead, the development of modern rational capitalism required a radical
breakthrough in the domain of attitudes and dispositions—a breakthrough that Weber attributes to the religious ideas of the Reformation. The logical and psychological pressures generated by the ideas of Luther and Calvin led to the development of what Weber calls 'worldly asceticism'—at once a new ethical attitude and a new personality structure. This inner rationalization of the personality in the direction of unremitting work and methodical self-control, Weber argues, provided a decisive impetus to the development of modern industrial capitalism.10

In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber traces the development of worldly asceticism to four elements of Reformation doctrine. First, Luther's conception of the calling granted full moral and religious dignity to 'worldly' activity—meaning activity in ordinary social and economic settings, as opposed to activity carried out in special social settings (such as monasteries) that are organized in explicit opposition to the 'world'. The holiest task was no longer 'to surpass all worldly morality' through a monastic or other retreat from the world, but to demonstrate one's faith through worldly activity (PE, p. 121). Secondly, the Calvinist conception of an absolutely transcendental deity made true mystical union with God inconceivable: since the believer could not aspire to be the vessel of God, he had to think of himself as an active 'tool of the divine will', as an instrument serving to 'increase the glory of God' through intense, single-minded, rational worldly activity (PE, pp. 113–14, emphasis added; E&S, p. 546). Thirdly, the Calvinist doctrine of the 'corruption of everything pertaining to the flesh' and Calvinism's general abhorrence of 'all the sensuous and emotional elements in culture and in religion' put a premium on strictly impersonal, radically individualistic, and thoroughly anti-hedonistic activity (PE, pp. 105–6, 109, 224 n. 30).

The central Calvinist doctrine of predestination, finally, had decisive psychological consequences. Salvation was regarded by Calvinism as an inexplicable gift of grace from an inscrutable, absolutely transcendental God (E&S, p. 572). In theory, the individual was powerless to affect his salvation and equally powerless to know his predetermined fate. Fatalism was thus 'the only logical consequence of predestination'. But the 'psychological result was exactly the opposite' (PE, p. 232 n. 66, emphasis added). Individuals had a religious interest 'of absolutely dominant importance' (PE, p. 110) in ascertaining their state of grace.11 Hence it was psychologically necessary that there be some means of determining one's eternal fate. In response to this overwhelming psychological pressure, Puritan pastors came to recommend intense, methodically controlled activity in a worldly calling as a means of 'attain[ing] certainty of one's own election' (PE, p. 111), and they came to interpret worldly economic success as a sign of God's blessing, thus relieving the intolerable psychological uncertainty imposed by the doctrine of predestination. Worldly asceticism—the disposition to work intensely and methodically in a worldly calling—is thus presented by Weber as the practical—psychological consequence of the theoretical doctrines of the Reformation, and more particularly of Calvinism.

Weber stresses the hard, relentless rationality of worldly asceticism. (Again, he uses 'rational' in a value-neutral manner and repeatedly notes the irrationality of worldly asceticism, considered from the point of view of personal happiness.12) In the first place, the rigorous self-control of the worldly ascetic is rational in the sense of anti-emotional. Thus Weber remarks on the Puritans' 'rational suppression of the mystical, in fact the whole emotional side of religion' (PE, p. 123). Moreover, methodical self-control is rational because it is continuous and systematic rather than occasional and haphazard: 'the moral conduct of the average man was thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole' (PE, p. 117). Finally, the regulation of conduct through conscious self-scrutiny is rational in that it requires a 'life guided by constant thought', by 'reflection and knowledge of the self' (PE, pp. 118, 235 n. 75).13

Rational asceticism as such has no definite consequences—for these consequences vary with the direction of ascetic activity. Catholic monastic asceticism, for example, produced tremendous economic achievements, but remained 'world-rejecting' and as a result did not dramatically impinge on the economic life of society at large (PE, pp. 118–21). Puritan worldly asceticism, on the other hand, channeled concentrated and disciplined energy into economic activity in the 'world' and as a result 'did its
part [albeit unintentionally] in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order" (PE, p. 181). To begin with, the premium placed on continuous work in a calling and the acceptance of the accumulation of wealth as a sign that one's work had found "favor in the sight of God" (PE, p. 162), together with the condemnation of the idle enjoyment of wealth (PE, p. 157), promoted the "accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save" (PE, p. 172). But the major significance of Puritanism for economic development, according to Weber, lies less in its encouragement of capital accumulation than in its more general contribution to the formation of a "specifically bourgeois economic ethic" (PE, p. 176)—to what Weber calls the "spirit of capitalism"—and thereby to the "ascetic rationalization of the whole of economic life" (PE, p. 278 n. 85). The worldly asceticism of the Puritans was not identical with the spirit of capitalism epitomized in the writings of Ben Franklin: the former was oriented "solely toward a transcendental end, salvation" (PE, p. 118), the latter toward the earning of money as an end in itself (PE, pp. 51–2). But the psychological pressure on the Puritan to confirm his state of grace and the interpretation of economic success as the most important sign of grace meant that worldly asceticism and the spirit of capitalism channeled conduct in the same direction. Moreover, as its primary concern with salvation ebbed, a secularized worldly asceticism became indistinguishable from the spirit of capitalism. "The essential elements of... the spirit of capitalism", Weber writes, "are the same as... the content of the Puritan worldly asceticism, only without the religious basis, which by Franklin's time had died away" (PE, p. 180).

The development of modern industrial capitalism, according to Weber, presupposed on the one hand an "external" rationalization of the environment, through which technological, legal and administrative factors affecting production and exchange became increasingly calculable and thus predictable. A cluster of relatively independent historical processes—including especially the development of modern science and the emergence of the modern state with its formalistic legal system and bureaucratic administrative structure—comprised this external rationalization. But in addition, the development of modern capitalism presupposed an inner reorganization and rationalization of the personality. Nascent capitalist enterprises—capitalist, that is, in external form of organization—could not by themselves transform traditionalistic attitudes toward work; and modern industrial capitalism, based on the "pursuit of profit, and forever renewed profit, by means of continuous, rational... enterprise" (AI, p. 17), could not develop without such a transformation of attitudes. Before the system of industrial capitalism was firmly established, proto-capitalistic enterprises were run in a thoroughly traditionalistic manner (PE, pp. 64-7). Traditionalistic attitudes toward work—the greatest "inner obstacle" to the development of modern capitalism—were decisively overcome only through the inner reorientation of ethical attitudes that was accomplished by ascetic Protestantism. Only when the yoke of tradition had been thrown off through this unprecedented inner rationalization of the personality did sober, scrupulous devotion to the accumulation of wealth—an attitude previously considered "ethically unjustifiable, or at best to be tolerated"—come to be considered the "essence of moral conduct, even commanded in the name of duty" (PE, p. 75). In sum, rationalization in the spheres of science, technology, law and administration created a calculable external environment, while an independent rationalization in the sphere of religion and ethics created a disciplined, work-centered inner orientation that turned out, by a great irony of history, to be superbly "adapted to the peculiarities of capitalism" (PE, p. 55). Both external and internal rationalizations were indispensable preconditions for the development of modern industrial capitalism.

Besides serving as a decisive stimulus "from within" for the development of capitalism, the ascetic personality structure bequeathed to modern society by Puritanism formed the basis of what Weber calls "Berufsmenschentum"—the "vocationalist" or "professionalist" inner orientation that characterizes modern political, legal and administrative as well as economic activity. The Protestant Ethic thus has implications beyond the "spirit of capitalism": in Weber's own sweeping characterization, the essay is about "Protestant asceticism as the foundation of modern vocational civilization" (FMW, pp. 18–19).
Modern civilization is characterized by what Weber calls the 'Versachlichung der Gewaltherrschaft' (W&G, p. 464): by the 'objectification' or 'depersonalization' of the structure of power and authority. In premodern times, power relationships in both the economic and political spheres have a purely personal character. In these spheres ... a whole organized structure of personal relations of subordination exists which is dominated by caprice and grace, indignation and love, and most of all by the mutual piety and devotion of masters and subalterns, after the fashion of the family. Thus, these relationships of domination have a character to which one may apply ethical requirements in the same way that one applies them to every other purely personal relationship. (E&S, p. 600; cf. pp. 584–5)

But in the modern economy and state, relationships of authority, 'no longer possess this personalistic character' (E&S, p. 600). As a result, activity in these spheres cannot be meaningfully guided by ethical ideals such as caritas or brotherliness:

In the economic realm the rise of capitalism makes these ideals just as meaningless as the implicit pacifist ideals of early Christianity have always been in the political realm in which all domination ultimately rests on force. (W&G, p. 902; E&S, p. 1188)

An ascetic ethic of vocation (Berufsethik), however, by virtue of its impersonality and objectivity, is ideally suited to action in the modern economy and in the modern state:

Today ... the homo politicus, as well as the homo oeconomicus, performs his duty best when he acts without regard to the person in question ... without hatred and without love, without personal predilection and therefore without grace, but sheerly in accordance with the impersonal duty imposed by his calling [sachliche Berufspflicht]. (E&S, p. 600)

Only the impersonal ethic of vocation of worldly asceticism, Weber concludes, is an 'adequate' (innerlich adäquat) guide for action in a world in which economic and political relationships have been so thoroughly depersonalized and objectified (W&G, p. 464; E&S, p. 601).

Weber's summary of the unintended cultural and economic consequences of the worldly asceticism of the Puritans may serve as a conclusion:

The curtailment of all feudal ostentation and of all irrational consumption facilitates capital accumulation ... while worldly asceticism as a whole favors the breeding and exaltation of the vocationalism [Berufsmenschentum] needed by capitalism and bureaucracy. Life is focused not on persons but on impersonal [sachlich] rational goals ... And since the success of work is the surest symptom that it pleases God, capitalist profit is one of the most important criteria for establishing that God's blessing rests on the enterprise. It is clear that this style of life is very closely related to the self-justification that is customary for bourgeois acquisition: profit and property appear not as ends in themselves but as indications of personal ability. Here has been attained the union of religious postulate and bourgeois style of life favorable to capitalism. Of course, this was not the purpose of the Puritan ethic, especially not the encouragement of money making; on the contrary ... wealth was regarded as dangerous and full of temptation. However, just as the monasteries time and again brought this temptation on themselves by virtue of the ascetic rational work and conduct of their members, so now did the pious bourgeois who lived and worked ascetically. (W&G, p. 913; E&S, p. 1200)

The worldly asceticism of the Puritans, then, contributed to the development of a distinctive ethos, the various aspects of which Weber describes as the 'spirit of capitalism', the 'bourgeois style of life', and the attitude toward work he calls Berufsmenschentum. This ethos, in turn, promoted the development of modern capitalism and bureaucracy. In this manner, the inner rationalization of the personality effected by Protestant asceticism gave a decisive impetus to the external rationalization of economic and political life and helped it develop into the self-sustaining process of rationalization that it is today.

UNIFYING THEMES: KNOWLEDGE, IMPERSONALITY, CONTROL

Weber's conception of the rationality of modern civilization, as should be evident from the preceding sections, is far from
complexity of the technical and economic base of social life, together with the inexorable advance of bureaucracy, fuels an ever-growing demand for specialized technical knowledge (Fachwissen). This demand determines the general character of the modern educational system, which is increasingly geared to the production of specialized technical expertise rather than to the cultivation of the overall personality. The growing demand for technical expertise also conditions the mode of stratification, for the possession of specialized technical knowledge increasingly shapes one’s life chances (E&S, pp. 998–1002).

The rise of modern science is significant also as the chief agent of a more general process of intellectualization. One aspect of intellectualization is the progressive ‘disenchantment of the world’—the displacement of magical and religious views of the world by the scientific view of the world as a ‘causal mechanism’ that, in principle, can be mastered by ‘technical means and calculations’. The qualification is important. Intellectualization does ‘not imply an increasing general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives’. Quite the contrary: ‘the “savage” knows infinitely more about the economic and social conditions of his own existence than does the “civilized man”’. None the less, intellectualization fosters the belief that no ‘mysterious incalculable forces . . . come into play’, and that one can therefore ‘master all things by calculation (alle Dinge . . . durch Berechnen beherrschen). It is this belief that gives a ‘specifically rational flavor’ to the everyday experience of modern individuals, even those with little or no scientific training (GAW, pp. 449, 536; FMW, pp. 139, 350; Categ., pp. 178–9). At the same time that it induces the belief that the phenomena of everyday life are calculable and therefore (in principle) controllable, disenchantment erodes the belief that the world has a discoverable meaning. Sharp and irreconcilable tensions arise between the deeply rooted demand that life and the world possess a coherent overall meaning and the increasingly evident impossibility of determining this meaning scientifically.

Another aspect of intellectualization is the increasing tendency for individuals to act on the basis of conscious reflection about the probable consequences of their action—a mode of
orientation that Weber calls zweckrational (means–ends rational or instrumentally rational). Zweckrational action is

determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as ‘conditions’ or ‘means’ for the attainment of the actor’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends. (E&S, p. 24)

The displacement of ‘unthinking acquiescence in customary ways’ by the ‘deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self-interest’ is ‘one essential component of the process of “rationalization” of action’ (W&G, p. 22; E&S, p. 30).

The increasing significance of knowledge in social life, in sum, is conceptualized by Weber on four levels. He stresses (1) the growing importance of specialized knowledge—or the certification that an individual possesses such knowledge—for the economy, the government, the educational system and the system of stratification; (2) the progressive displacement of the cultivated man by the specialized expert (Fachmensch) as an emblematic character expressing the central values of our civilization (E&S, pp. 1001–2); (3) the rational cast of everyday experience, deriving from the disenchantment and intellectualization of the world; and (4) the growing salience of individual action based on conscious reflection and calculation.

Impersonality. The modern Western social order, as noted above, is characterized by what Weber calls the ‘Versachlichung der Gewaltherrschaft’—by the ‘objectification’ or ‘depersonalization’ of the structure of power and authority in both the economic and the political realm. Market transactions are the ‘most impersonal’ of all social relationships (E&S, p. 636); and domination by capital (Kapitalherrschaft), based on the purely impersonal fact of a dominant market position, imposes on propertyless workers a ‘masterless slavery’ in which the behavior of the powerful and powerless alike is determined by purely objective, impersonal considerations. The impersonal laws of the marketplace are self-enforcing: disobedience ‘entails economic failure and, in the long run, economic ruin’ (E&S, p. 585).

Political authority, too, is subject to a ‘general depersonalization’ (allgemeine Versachlichung; W&G, p. 218; E&S, p. 294). Weber’s famous typology of types of authority, the core of his political sociology, is based on a distinction between personal and impersonal forms of domination—between domination based on personal authority, whether sanctioned by sacred tradition or by individual charisma, and domination based on the impersonal authority of a system of legal rules (E&S, pp. 215–16, 954). The modern Western political order, apart from charismatic elements in the electoral process, rests almost exclusively on impersonal foundations: on legal authority, on the formal equality of all persons before the law, and on impersonal bureaucratic administration.

Impersonality, finally, is a characteristic of the specifically modern and Western vocational ethos (Berufsethik) and of its source, Puritan worldly asceticism. This ethos bids man fulfill his worldly tasks ‘sheerly in accordance with the impersonal duty imposed by his calling [sachliche Berufspflicht] and not as a result of any concrete personal relationship’ (E&S, p. 600). Rationalization in the direction of increasing impersonality, in sum, denotes on the one hand the objectification and depersonalization of relations of power in the political and economic spheres, and on the other hand the emergence of a new inner attitude—the Puritan-influenced ethic of vocation—appropriate to the transformed economic and political conditions.

Control. The theme of control—over material objects, over other men, over oneself—pervades Weber’s discussions of rationality. The scope of effective control over men and nature has widened dramatically in modern society as a result of the progress of technical rationalization in every sphere of social life—including, Weber notes explicitly, ‘the political, social, educational, and propagandistic manipulation and domination of human beings’ (M, p. 35). (Technical rationalization denotes the development of technically ‘superior’—i.e. more efficient—means of achieving given ends, whatever the value or significance of the ends. See Chapter 2, pp. 55–8.) As scientific knowledge is embodied in ever-new practical applications,
technical rationalization transforms not only economic life, with its growing dependence on scientifically grounded technology, but also military, political, artistic and even religious activity.

Above all, Weber is concerned with the extension of technically rational control over men in capitalist firms and bureaucratic administrative organizations. Such control, based on strict discipline, tends to reduce the individual to the function he performs. In the factory, for example, the 'optimum profitability of the individual worker is calculated like that of any material means of production' (E&S, p. 1156). And in 'that animated machine, the bureaucratic organization' (E&S, p. 1402), the official is only 'a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march' (E&S, p. 988). In general, as the material means of production and administration become increasingly centralized, 'discipline inexorably takes over ever larger areas ... [and] more and more restricts the importance of ... individually differentiated conduct' (E&S, p. 1156).

Effective control over men and nature rests on calculability—the nexus that links capitalism, formalistic law, and bureaucratic administration. Modern industrial capitalism depends upon the possibility of correct calculations. This is true the more capital-intensive industrial capitalism is, and especially the more saturated it is with fixed capital. Industrial capitalism must be able to count on the continuity, trustworthiness and objectivity of the legal order, and on the rational, predictable functioning of legal and administrative agencies. (E&S, p. 1095)

A formalistic legal order, operating 'like a technically rational machine' and thereby enhancing for economic actors 'the possibility of predicting the legal consequences of their action' (E&S, p. 811), is ideally suited to capitalism, as is bureaucratic administration, which satisfies the demand of the capitalistic economy 'that the official business of public administration be discharged precisely, unambiguously, continuously, and as much speed as possible' (E&S, p. 974).

The calculable, disciplined control over men exercised by capitalism and bureaucracy was established with the (unwitting)

help of the ethos of rigorous self-control derived from Puritanism. By emphasizing the historical connection between new forms of institutionalized control over men and a new ethos of self-control, between institutionalized discipline and self-discipline, Weber supplements institutional with social psychological analysis in an effort to clarify the relation between social structure and personality.

**FORMAL AND SUBSTANTIVE RATIONALITY**

In a footnote to the *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber writes: 'A thing is never irrational in itself, but only from a particular ... point of view. For the unbeliever every religious way of life is irrational, for the hedonist every ascetic standard' (PE, p. 194, n. 9). This passage expresses with consummate simplicity two axioms of Weber's social thought. First, rationality does not inhere in things, but is ascribed to them. Secondly, rationality is a relational concept: a thing can be rational (or irrational) only from a particular point of view, never in and of itself.

From the point of view of a given end, for example, an action or a pattern of action is rational if it is an efficacious means to the end, and irrational if it is not. A judgment of rationality or irrationality is in this case a judgment about the causal relation—or lack thereof—between an action considered as a means and a given end-in-view. To use Weber's example, an ascetic way of life is rational from the point of view of the end of achievement, but irrational from the point of view of the end of maximizing pleasure.

Alternatively, from the point of view of a given belief, an action is rational if it is consistent with the belief, and irrational if it is not. A judgment of rationality or irrationality, in this case, is a judgment about the logical relation—or lack thereof—between action and belief. To return to Weber's example, a religious way of life is rational from the point of view of a belief in the existence of God or an afterlife or in the possibility of salvation through good works, but it is irrational from the point of view of the unbeliever, i.e. from the point of view of the belief that there is no God, no afterlife, and no possibility of salvation through good works.
Weber applies this relational conception of rationality to the analysis of social structure by distinguishing between formal and substantive rationality. Formal rationality is a matter of fact, substantive rationality a matter of value. Formal rationality refers primarily to the calculability of means and procedures, substantive rationality primarily to the value (from some explicitly defined standpoint) of ends or results. From the point of view of the purely formal objective of maximizing the calculability of action—purely formal because maximally calculable action can be oriented to any of an infinite variety of possible substantive ends—capitalism, science, technology, and the modern legal and administrative system are highly rational. Such purely formal rationality, however, is in perpetual tension with what Weber calls substantive rationality, meaning rationality from the point of view of some particular substantive end, belief, or value commitment.

The distinction between formal and substantive rationality is fundamental to Weber's social thought, linking his empirical analysis of modern society with his moral response to it. The distinction has both methodological and substantive significance. On the methodological plane, it allows Weber to emphasize the value-neutral, purely analytical status of his conception of the rationality of the modern Western social order. Throughout his empirical work, Weber attempts to use richly value-laden terms in a value-neutral manner; rationality is only one of these. Value-neutral conceptions of domination, legitimacy, and charisma are central to his political sociology, as are mysticism, asceticism, prophecy, salvation, and the sacred to his sociology of religion, and duty, meaning, validity, value, culture, conflict and progress to his general conceptual framework. In employing these notions, Weber takes care—especially in Economy and Society—to distinguish their value-neutral sociological meanings from their value-laden ordinary meanings. He does the same with 'rationality', divesting the term of the approving connotation it carries in everyday use in order to deploy it as a neutral analytical concept.

The rationality that Weber discerns in modern capitalism, law and bureaucracy, and in the Puritan ethic of vocation that underlies them, is a purely formal rationality. In emphasizing the rationality of the modern social order, Weber is not justifying or defending this social order from a particular value standpoint, but is simply calling attention to social structural and social psychological 'mechanisms' that enhance the calculability of action. Such purely formal rationality is an objective property of the social structure of modern society. However, one evaluates the increasingly important role of explicit calculation in social life, the fact of the growing importance of calculation must be acknowledged. The formal rationality of the modern social order is a matter of fact; whether or not this social order is substantively rational, in contrast, depends on one's point of view—i.e. on the means, values or beliefs one takes as a standard of rationality.

The substantive significance of Weber's distinction between formal and substantive rationality is twofold. First, the notion of formal rationality underscores what is 'specific and peculiar' about the rationality of the modern Western social order: the fact that the 'end' in terms of which the social order is rationalized—maximum calculability—is not really an end at all but a generalized means that indiscriminately facilitates the purposeful pursuit of all substantive ends. To be sure, calculability is not the only element in Weber's conception of the rationality of the modern social order. Weber also stresses the increasing significance of specialized knowledge; the steady erosion of customary, religious and ethical restraints on behavior; the regulation of social life through abstract, general norms; the increasingly instrumental orientation of action in all spheres of social life; the systematic self-control bequeathed to modern society by Puritan asceticism; the devotion to impersonal purposes that defines the ethic of vocation; the development of increasingly powerful techniques for controlling men and nature; and the growing impersonality of relations of power and authority. Yet each of these elements is closely related to calculability and thus to enhanced means-ends rationality; each furthers in a general way the purposeful, calculated achievement of any and all substantive ends. Thus technology, to use a hackneyed but nonetheless apt example, can serve equally to destroy or to maintain human life; progress in technical rationality is embodied equally in increasingly accurate nuclear
missiles and in improved kidney dialysis machines. Similarly, purely instrumental action may be devoted just as well to self-enrichment at the expense of others as to the disinterested advancement of a valued cause. These elements of the social structure of modern society can thus be conceived as neutral vehicles for the efficient achievement of any substantive purpose, whatever its significance or 'worth'. It is this substantive neutrality, this indifference to all substantive ends and values, that makes the rationality of the modern Western social order 'specific and peculiar'.

Secondly, and more important, the distinction between formal and substantive rationality serves as a springboard for the exploration of certain tensions inherent in the modern socio-economic order—in particular the tension between the formal rationality of the capitalist economy and its substantive irrationality from the point of view of egalitarian, fraternal and caritative values. This antagonism is 'one source of all "social" problems, and above all, of the problems of socialism' (W&G, p. 80; E&S, p. 111). This is because the formal rationality of the modern economic order rests on institutional foundations that are morally and politically problematic. Maximum formal rationality, for example, requires the centralized private ownership and control of the means of production (E&S, pp. 138, 161); the ability of owners to hire and fire workers at will and to control the work process (E&S, pp. 128–9, 137–8, 163); thoroughgoing market freedom (E&S, pp. 161–2); and, more generally, the 'struggle of man against man' in the marketplace (E&S, pp. 93, 108). The greater the formal rationality of an economic system—the more closely it approximates what Karl Polanyi (1957) calls a 'system of self-regulating markets'—the more vulnerable such an economic system will be to criticism for its substantive irrationality.

Unsympathetic to socialism, fearing that it would accelerate the bureaucratization of life and bring about 'the dictatorship of the official, not that of the worker' (Soc., p. 209), Weber is none the less sympathetic to socialist criticism of the substantive irrationality of capitalism. He acknowledges that capitalism involves the 'domination of the end (supply meeting demand) by the means' (Soc., p. 202)—in other words the domination of substantive rationality by formal rationality. Maximum formal rationality, for example, in no way guarantees the adequate satisfaction of needs—to take one historically important criterion of substantive rationality. For needs may not coincide with wants, and it is the latter, 'awakened' and 'directed' by the entrepreneur through 'aggressive advertising policies' (E&S, pp. 92, 99), that determine what is actually produced. A population may need better health care (according to some—admittedly problematic—criterion of need) but may want more television sets—and in a formally rational economy system more television sets will be produced. Moreover, it is not any and all wants, but only those backed up by purchasing power, that govern production:

It is not 'demand' (wants) as such, but 'effective demand' for utilities, that...regulates the production of goods... What is to be produced is thus determined, given the distribution of wealth, by the structure of marginal utilities in the income group that is both inclined and able to purchase a given utility. (W&G, p. 78; E&S, p. 108)

Formal rationality, then, by no means guarantees substantive rationality, at least to the extent that the latter is conceived in terms of adequate provision for needs or wants. For the 'formal rationality of money accounting does not reveal anything about the actual distribution of goods' (E&S, p. 108), and it is the actual distribution of goods that determines whether or not economic production satisfies the needs or wants of a population. Of course 'adequate provision' is itself an ambiguous standard. If it is interpreted as 'the provision of a certain minimum of subsistence for the maximum size of population', then 'the experience of the last few decades would seem to show that formal and substantive rationality coincide to a relatively high degree' (E&S, pp. 108–9). If, on the other hand, adequate provision is interpreted in an egalitarian fashion, or in accordance with the maxim 'to each according to his needs', then formal rationality would appear to work against substantive rationality.

Formal rationality, moreover, is indifferent not only to the
substantive demand for adequate provision, but to 'all substantive postulates, an indifference which is absolute if the market is perfectly free'. This perfect indifference to substantive considerations underlies what Weber describes as 'the ultimate limitation, inherent in its very structure, of the rationality of monetary economic calculation' (E&S, p. 108).

A more fundamental criticism of the substantive irrationality of capitalism concerns not the distributional consequences of maximum formal rationality but the inherent nature of formally rational economic activity. Maximum formal rationality, for example, requires the subjection of workers to disciplined control by entrepreneurs and to the inexorable rhythms of factory production (E&S, pp. 108, 113, 1156). Such strict discipline and authoritarian control, regardless of its presumed or actual contribution to individual or collective prosperity, may be rejected from a substantive value standpoint as incompatible with equality and human dignity. More generally, maximum formal rationality 'presupposes the battle of man with man' (E&S, p. 93), the market struggle (Marktkampf) of individuals who are formally free but economically compelled to do battle in the marketplace (GEH, p. 277). It is true that 'any human relationship, even the most intimate ... may involve a struggle with the partner, for instance, over the salvation of his soul' (E&S, p. 636). But the uniquely impersonal mode of struggle in the marketplace is 'an abomination to every system of fraternal ethics':

Where the market is allowed to follow its own autonomous tendencies [i.e. where the market is left unregulated and formal rationality is thereby maximized], its participants do not look toward the persons of each other but only toward the commodity; there are no obligations of brotherliness or reverence, and none of those spontaneous human relations that are sustained by personal unions. (E&S, pp. 636–7)

From an egalitarian or fraternal standpoint, then, capitalism may be considered substantively irrational regardless of the distribution of goods.

If the socialist perspective on capitalism illuminates one dimension of the antagonism between formal and substantive rationality in modern society, a religious perspective illuminates another:

it is above all the impersonal and economically rationalized (but for this very reason ethically irrational) character of purely commercial relationships that evokes the suspicion ... of ethical religions. For every purely personal relationship of man to man ... may be subjected to ethical requirements and ethically regulated. This is true because the structures of these relationships depend upon the individual wills of the participants, leaving room in such relationships for manifestations of the virtue of caritas. But this is not the situation in the realm of economically rationalized relationships, where personal control is exercised in inverse ratio to the degree of rational differentiation of the economic structure. There is no possibility, in practice or even in principle, of any caritative regulation of relationships arising between the holder of a savings and loan bank mortgage and the mortgagee who has obtained a loan from the bank, or between a holder of a federal bond and a citizen taxpayer. Nor can any caritative regulation arise in the relationships between stockholders and factory workers, between tobacco importers and foreign plantation workers, or between industrialists and the miners who have dug from the earth the raw materials used in the plants owned by the industrialists. The growing impersonality of the economy on the basis of association in the marketplace follows its own impersonal laws, disobedience to which entails economic failure and, in the long run, economic ruin. (W&G, p. 453; E&S, pp. 584–5, emphasis added)

The ideal of caritas or brotherly love, 'the foundation of every ecclesiastic ethic, from Islam and Judaism to Buddhism and Christianity' (E&S, p. 1188), is utterly incompatible with formal rationality: this ideal is rendered meaningless in the modern economic realm, since economic action predicated on caritas and ignoring the laws of the market is bound in the long run to be self-annihilating.

The antagonism between formal and substantive rationality may thus be interpreted as a tension between conflicting values: between calculability, efficiency and impersonality on the one hand and fraternity, equality and caritas on the other. This is an
example of what Weber calls 'value-interpretation' (Wertinterpretation)—a mode of analysis that
teaches us to 'understand' the intellectual, psychological, and
spiritual [geistigen] content of [the object under study]; it
develops and raises to the level of explicit 'evaluation' that
which we 'feel' dimly and vaguely. For this purpose, interpretation
is not at all required to enunciate or to 'suggest' a
value judgment. What it actually 'suggests' in the course of
analysis are rather various possible relationships of the object
to values/Wertbeziehungen des Objektes]. (M, p. 143)

The idea of an irreconcilable opposition between formal and
substantive rationality is the guiding thread of Weber's 'value-
interpretation' of the modern socio-economic order, suggesting
'various possible relationships of the object [modern capitalism]
to values'. To sum these up in a phrase: characterized by a high
degree of formal rationality, the modern capitalist economic
order maximizes the values of calculability, efficiency and
personality but is deeply inhospitable to egalitarian, fraternal and
caritative values.

Weber interprets the tension between formal and substantive
rationality not only as an abstract axiological tension, a tension
between conflicting values, but also as a real social tension, a
tension between competing interests and between the groups
that are the bearers of these interests. Formal rationality is a
value-neutral concept, but the formal rationality of the modern
social and economic order is not neutral with respect to the
values and interests of different social groups. Maximum formal
rationality favors economically powerful groups—those with
monopolistic or quasi-monopolistic price-setting powers, with
the power to 'dictate the terms of exchange to contractual
partners' (E&S, p. 214). Thus freedom of contract, a prime
condition of maximum formal rationality, is a formally neutral
institutions, but it is not neutral in practice. For it in effect
guarantees to economically advantaged groups the opportunity
to use their superior economic resources 'without legal restraints
as a means of achieving power over others' (W&G, p. 562; E&S,
p. 730). Nor is the principle of formal legal equality neutral in its
consequences:

The propertyless masses ... are not served by the formal
'equality before the law' and the 'calculable' adjudication and
administration demanded by bourgeois interests. Naturally, in
their eyes justice and administration should serve to equalize
their economic and social life-opportunities [Lebenschancen]
in the face of the propertied classes. Justice and administration
can fulfill this function only if they assume a character that is
informal because 'ethical' with respect to substantive content.
(E&S, p. 980)

Formal rationality in the economic and legal spheres thus favors
some groups at the expense of others. As a result, economically
privileged groups deriving their power from market transactions
have a strong interest in maximizing formal rationality, while
economically threatened groups have an equally strong interest in subjecting economic life to substantive
regulation and thus in reducing formal rationality.

The tension between formal and substantive rationality, then,
is both a tension between conflicting values and a tension
between social groups with divergent interests: between groups
interested in and benefiting from calculability and efficiency on
the one hand and groups interested in and benefiting from the
substantive regulation of social and economic life on the other.21
This tension is expressed most dramatically in the political
struggle over socialism; but it also finds expression in the attempts
to increase or decrease the substantive regulation of social and
economic life. Indeed, the tension between formal and sub-
stantive rationality is at the root of many of the great political
conflicts of our time. Even today, many advanced industrial
societies, most notably England and the United States, are torn
by bitter conflicts between groups wishing to curb the substantive
regulation of economic life in order to restore a lost capitalistic
paradise of unimpeded formal rationality and groups wishing to
extend the substantive regulation of the social and economic
order.

THE IDEA OF A RATIONAL SOCIETY

The modern Western social order, in Weber's diagnosis, is
highly, indeed uniquely rational. But it is rational only from a
purely formal point of view, only in a 'specific and peculiar', narrowly restricted sense that excludes the evaluative resonance traditionally carried by the word 'rational'. It is a social order founded on the 'dominion of conscienceless reason', to use the suggestive phrase of Benjamin Nelson (1971, p. 169). The disjunction between reason and conscience—between formal and substantive rationality—is unique to modern society. Never, in premodern times, had social and economic life been regulated by mechanisms so relentlessly indifferent to substantive ends and values; never before had means and procedures become so completely autonomous, so thoroughly divorced from ends.

If 'rational' is used with the narrowly circumscribed meaning that Weber assigns to the expression 'formally rational', then a rational social life is no mere possibility, but the inescapable fate of the modern world. But what if 'rational' is understood in its traditional, broadly evaluative sense? Is a substantively rational society possible? This question, a concern of social theorists from Plato through Marx, is for Weber an extra-scientific one, answerable only from the point of view of a particular value commitment in terms of which the meaning of substantive rationality is defined. According to Weber, there is no scientific way of reconciling opposed value commitments and, consequently, no scientific way of reconciling conflicting definitions of substantive rationality.

Weber's analysis of Western rationalism, like his social thought in general, does have a critical edge. He demonstrates the extreme inhospitality of the modern formally rational social and economic order to the values of equality, fraternity and caritas, and he shows how formal rationality furthers the interests of economically privileged groups. But the critical impulse in his sociological work is exclusively diagnostically: unlike Marx and Durkheim, Weber nowhere suggests a therapy (Löwith, 1982, p. 25). The limits Weber imposes on the critical functions of sociological analysis derive from his conception of the inherent limits of any form of scientific inquiry. Like the Western social order as a whole, science is a rational enterprise only in a purely formal sense, and the limits of science are a special case of the limits of formal rationality. Science, because its rationality is purely formal, is incapable of yielding value judgments, incapable of arbitrating between conflicting value commitments, incapable of defining substantive rationality, and incapable, finally, of supporting a conception of the good society. It is this notion of the limits of objective, scientific rationality that I explore in the next chapter.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1 This essay appears in English as the 'Author's Introduction' in Talcott Parsons's translation of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. It should be emphasized, though, that it is not part of The Protestant Ethic.

2 Weber's two main bodies of empirical work—his comparative historical studies in the sociology of religion and his vast sociological summa, Economy and Society—were both left unfinished at his death. Besides these works, Weber produced technically sophisticated specialized studies on ancient Roman agrarian history, the social structure of ancient Mediterranean society, medieval trading companies, the development of Western music, the modern stock exchange, contemporary East German agriculture, and the industrial psychology of a textile factory (FMW, pp. 9–23; Bendix, 1962, p. 469).

3 For comprehensive and penetrating analyses of the thematic coherence of Weber's empirical work, see Bendix (1962) and Schluchter (1981). Others who have turned to the universal-historical perspective that underlies and informs Weber's empirical work include Mommensen (1965, 1974), Nelson (1973, 1974, 1976), and Tenbruck (1980).

4 Economy and Society (Part One, ch. 2) contains Weber's most extensive—and most difficult—discussion of the rationality of modern capitalism. See especially sections 1–14, 22, 25, 30, 31 and 41. The discussion in GEH (esp. chs 22, 27 and 30) is more accessible, but considerably less detailed. Good discussion of Weber's theory of capitalism, emphasizing his conception of the institutional underpinnings of economic rationality, can be found in Parsons (1947, pp. 30–55) and Collins (1980).

5 It is important to distinguish Weber's ideal-typical conception of purely rational market exchange from the actual course of exchange in the market, which always diverges to some extent from the ideal type, approaching it only as a limiting case. In reality, market exchange has seldom been free of traditional, conventional, or legal restrictions, and market transactions have seldom been purely zweckrational. Weber argues, however, that market exchange becomes increasingly rational as a capitalist economy develops (E&S, pp. 638–9). Moreover, such monopolistic restraints on market freedom as do develop in a capitalist economy differ radically from traditional restraints 'by their purely economic and rational character'; the power of the monopolist rests upon an entirely calculated mastery of market conditions (E&S, p. 639). The rationality of market exchange, in short, is an ideal-typical construct, but one increasingly approximated by reality. Weber makes this point explicitly with respect to another ideal-typical construct, the theory of marginal utility. 'The historical particularity of the capitalist epoch, and . . . the significance of the theory of marginal utility for the understanding of this epoch, lies in the fact that . . . the approximation of
The Limits of Rationality

reality to the propositions of this theory has been constantly increasing' (GAW, p. 371; MU, p. 33; emphasis added). Just as life may imitate art, so reality may approximate the ideal-typical constructions of social theory.

6 Donald Levine (1981a, 1982) argues persuasively that a distinction between subjective and objectified rationality is implicit in Weber's work and helpful in interpreting that work, as well as the work of Simmel and Parsons.

7 Weber's conception of the formal rationality of law, though relatively neglected (in comparison with the rationality of capitalism or bureaucracy) by most commentators, is arguably the 'core of [his] substantive sociology' (Parsons, 1971, p. 40). For a thorough analysis of Weber's conception of the emergence of legal rationality in the West, see Bendix (1962, ch. 12). And for an interesting analysis of the relation between Weber's conception of the rationality of law and his conception of the rationality of other institutional spheres, see Schuchter (1981, ch. 5).

8 Weber's conception of rational bureaucratic administration, like his conceptions of formalistic law and industrial capitalism, is an ideal type: it is a selective accentuation of certain especially significant aspects of reality, not a faithful 'copy' of reality. As Wolfgang Mommsen (1974, p. 19) has remarked, 'the ideal type' of bureaucracy was deliberately designed by Weber in such a way as to underline those elements which he considered particularly relevant in regard to the future destinies of the individualistic, liberal societies of the West'. Mommsen's book is a provocative exploration of the theme of bureaucratic rationalization in Weber's political sociology and political philosophy. For a closely reasoned account of Weber's conception of the nature and limits of bureaucratic rationality, see Beetham (1974, ch. 3).

9 Today, of course, bureaucratic administration is more likely to be assailed for its inefficiency than praised for its efficiency. Still, in comparison with what Weber calls 'administration by dilettantes'—meaning any non-formal management by non-experts—bureaucratic administration is still highly efficient. It is this comparative efficiency, not an absolute efficiency, that Weber emphasizes.

In other respects, however, Weber anticipates many of the ideas of later critics of bureaucracy. He argues, for example, that the development of the state bureaucracy stifled capitalism in the Roman Empire, and suggests that a similar 'choke off' of private economic initiative by the bureaucracy (S Tr, p. 313) might well occur, but again. Unchecked bureaucratic rationalization, moreover, threatens not only economic initiative but personal freedom: the 'casing of the new serfdom [Gehäuse für die neue Herrschaft]', Weber warns, is already visible (S Tr, pp. 281-2; cf. E&S, pp. 1401-3).

10 On the notion of breakthrough in Weber's work, see Parsons (1963, pp. xix-xxv); Nelson (1973); and Schuchter (1981, ch. 6).

11 This is a classic example of what Weber means by an 'ideal interest'. (See F&M, p. 280, where he argues that man's conduct is governed not by ideas, but by 'material and ideal interests'.)

12 The fact that 'continuous work has become a necessary part of [men's] lives expresses what is, from the viewpoint of personal happiness, so irrational about this sort of life, where a man exists for the sake of his business, instead of the reverse' (PE, p. 70; cf. pp. 53, 78).

13 This worldly asceticism of the Puritans represents one mode of religiously ethical rationality, but by no means the only one. The Confucian ethic of harmonious adjustment to the world, by virtue of its 'practical turn of mind', its utilitarian orientation, and its emphasis on 'watchful ... self-control' (R Ch, pp. 228, 241), equally deserves to be called rational. Even world-rejecting Buddhism is rational, producing 'a constantly alert control of all natural instinctive drives' (E&S, p. 627). This is true despite the fact that Buddhism regards 'all rational purposive activity ... as leading away from salvation, except of course the subjective activity of concentrated contemplation, which emotes the soul of the passion for life and every connection with worldly interests' (E&S, p. 628). In his extensive writings on religion, Weber explores the affinities and disparities between different paths of religious rationalization and the rationalization of economic conduct (cf. FMW, p. 293). His conclusion, expounded in rather sweeping terms in R Ch (pp. 226-49) and S Tr (pp. 192-205), is that religious rationalization in the West promoted economic rationalization, while religious rationalization in the East—particularly in China and India—hindered economic rationalization.

14 The contribution of Puritanism to the development of capitalism, Weber writes, 'instructs us in the paradox of unintended consequences [die Paradoxie der Wirkung gegenüber dem Wollen]; i.e. the relation of man and fate, of what he intended by his acts as against what actually came of them' (GAR, p. 524; R Ch, p. 238).

15 For a discussion—and criticism—of Weber's conception of rationality, emphasizing the theme of control, see Marcuse (1971).

16 In this and the following paragraph, I use the notion of formal rationality in a somewhat broader and more general sense than Weber does. Weber distinguishes between the formal and substantive rationality of economic action (E&S, pp. 85-6, 93-4, 105-11, 118, 128, 138, 140, 160-4), law (E&S, pp. 655-7, 809-31, 880-95), and administration (E&S, pp. 226, 239-40, 269-70; FMW, pp. 298-9), but he does not explicitly generalize the concept of formal rationality to characterize the modern Western social order as a whole.

17 Weber's claim to employ value-free concepts in his empirical work has been more often attacked than understood. As is clear from his political writings and from his impassioned lectures on 'Science as a Vocation' and 'Politics as a Vocation', Weber harbors intense, though ultimately ambivalent, attitudes toward the rationality of modern civilization. (I discuss these attitudes in relation to Weber's moral vision in my final chapter.) These personal attitudes, however, do not impugn the value-neutrality of his descriptive emphasis on the rationality of modern civilization. To say that Weber's characterization of modern civilization in terms of its 'specific and peculiar rationalism' is value-neutral simply means that this characterization embodies neither positive nor negative value judgments about modern civilization. But while it involves no value judgments, Weber's emphasis on the rationality of modern civilization is nonetheless constructed in relation to values. Considerations of value-relevance (Wertbeziehung) guide the formulation of his conception of modern civilization, determining which aspects of the infinity of empirical reality are selected as significant and molded into a coherent concept. The elements selected for their significance may be related positively, negatively, or in both ways to values—and the values to which they are related may themselves be diverse and even contradictory, encompassing not only the personal values of the investigator but the values of his community and of his age as well. Unless a concept is
formed through the investigator's consistent selection of features that he personally prizes or abhors—and this is manifestly not the case for Weber's nuanced and complex conception of Western rationalism—the concept cannot be said to be inherently value-laden. The value-relevance of Weber's conception of Western rationalism, in short, is perfectly compatible with its value-neutrality—and Weber makes this quite explicit through his distinction between formal and substantive rationality.

This theme, implicit in Weber's work, is developed explicitly in the work of his friend and contemporary Georg Simmel, particularly in The Philosophy of Money (1978).

The substantive irrationality of what Weber calls formal rationality has been stressed by Löwith (1982) and Marcuse (1971). Perceptive remarks on the tension between formal and substantive rationality can also be found in Parsons (1947, pp. 35–55); Mommsen (1974, pp. 65–71); and Beetham (1974, pp. 273–5).

See Mommsen (1974, ch. 3) for a good discussion of Weber's attitude towards socialism.

Of course there are also tensions and conflicts among groups interested in the substantive regulation of the social order—conflicts over the particular substantive ends to be furthered and over the appropriate manner of pursuing shared ends.

2

The Nature and Limits of Rational Action

Underlying Weber's conception of the rationality of the modern social order is a conception of the rationality of individual action. And just as there are inherent limits to the rationality of the modern social order, so, according to Weber, there are inherent limits to the rationality of individual action. I explore those limits in this chapter, shifting from the perspective of historical sociology to that of philosophical psychology, from a macroscopic focus on the broad outlines of modern society to a microscopic focus on the anatomy of rational action.

Weber's conception of rational action is not easily pinned down. One reason for its elusive nature is that Weber does not aim to specify once and for all what is rational and what is not, but aims rather to bring out the many-sidedness (Vielseitigkeit) of the concept of rational action (GAR, p. 35, n. 1; PE, p. 194, n. 9). Compounding the difficulty of grasping Weber's meaning is the terse, undeveloped, fragmentary character of his remarks on rational action. These remarks, finally, scattered throughout his methodological writings, are not easily reconciled with one another, for Weber develops different conceptions of rational action, draws different distinctions, and uses different terminology in different contexts.

Three distinctions drawn by Weber are examined in this chapter. The first is a very general distinction between non-rational and rational conduct—between spontaneous, instinctive, habitual or otherwise unreflective conduct and deliberate, consciously guided action. The second, corresponding to the structural tension between formal and substantive rationality, is the famous distinction between zweckrational action, oriented to calculable expectations, and wertrational action, oriented to