Sociology: Rationalization


Weber’s sociology of rationalization

Weber used the term rationalisation to describe what happens when the different institutions and practices that surround social action take on the techniques of instrumental rationality. Modern society is modern because it has undergone this process of rationalisation. Weber described capitalism and bureaucracies as “two great rationalizing forces”. In fact, Weber saw capitalism and bureaucracies as being derived from the same basic sources involving similarly rational and methodical action, and reinforcing one another and in the process furthering the rationalization of the Occident. In Weber’s view, the only real rival to the bureaucrat in technical expertise and factual knowledge was the capitalist. However, if we take Weber at his word, it is difficult to argue that he had an overarching theory of rationalization. He rejected the idea of “general evolutionary sequence”.

Rationalization

Weber used the term rationalisation to describe what happens when the different institutions and practices that surround social action take on the techniques of instrumental rationality. Modern society is modern because it has undergone this process of rationalisation. Rationalisation and its consequences regulate the behaviour of social actor and thus contribute to social order.

- Rationalization (sociology) - refers to the replacement of traditions, values, and emotions as motivators for behavior in society with rational, calculated ones;
- For example, the implementation of bureaucracies in government is a kind of rationalization, as is the construction of high-efficiency living spaces in architecture and urban planning;
Weber noted that instrumental rationality was not confined to the economic sphere but also affected the development of democratic systems for electing governments, the rationalisation of government into different departments and the increasing use of bureaucracy as the most instrumentally rational way of organising complex organisations. The legal and medical professions, universities and research institutions and so on, are all similarly drawn under the influence of instrumental rationality. The uptake of instrumental rationality through rationalisation can be seen to be a driving force behind all forms of modernisation in modern society.

**Types of rationality**

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<th>Type of Rationality</th>
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<td>Formal rationality</td>
<td>It is something in terms of how useful it is in a purely practical sense. For example, it is clear the industrial division of labour is a more technically efficient, a more rational way of producing things than feudal agriculture. What is less clear is whether the decision to apply this type of organisation is an entirely rational one given that there is no guarantee that the general quality of life is also bound to improve.</td>
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<td>Substantive rationality</td>
<td>How rational it is in terms of the ends it serves is called substantive rationality. Just because social actors make sensible choices between the various techniques for doing something does not necessarily help us decide if the ends they want to achieve are, in a more substantive sense, also rational. The atomic bomb is the most effective means of mass destruction but mass destruction is hardly a rational objective.</td>
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<td>Instrumental rationality</td>
<td>The new rationality took the Enlightenment idea that people could control their own destiny and turned it into a strategy for action. It was all about controlling the outcomes of action, of eliminating fate and chance, through the application of reason. A characteristic of modern society is that actions are defined as rational as long as they are effective in achieving particular ends.</td>
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Weber’s fear was that substantive rationality was becoming less significant than the other types of rationality, especially formal rationality, in the West. Thus practitioners of formal rationality, like the bureaucrat and the capitalist, were coming to dominate the West, and the type that “embodied Western civilization’s highest ideals: the autonomous and free individual whose actions were given continuity by their reference to ultimate values” was fading away.
The rational iron cage

Weber regrets the loss of high ideals and of meaning in existence that resulted from rationalization. The paradox and tragedy of our time is that rationalization has taught people to master nature, to develop technology for regulating social life, while the existential basis of life – the choice of values and ideals and the search for meaning beyond soulless calculation of effective means for achieving a certain goal – is disappearing more and more. Modern man is trapped in a rational “iron cage of commodities and regulations” and he has lost his humanity. At the same time, he believes he has achieved the highest stage of development.

Questions

1. Modern man is trapped in a rational “iron cage of commodities and regulations” and he has lost his humanity. Comment.
2. Write short note: Methods of Sociology according to Max Weber.
3. Enumerate the types of rationality.
4. Bureaucracy is considered the pinnacle of rationalisation. Discuss.