



Max Weber's rationalization processes disenchantment, alienation, or anomie?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze which concept describes the central theme in Max Weber's works — the rationalization processes — best: disenchantment, alienation, or anomie. I first describe how Weber's rationalization processes were understood in the past. Most scholars have interpreted these processes as disenchantment, although some have seen a stronger affinity to the Marxist concept of alienation. Since the majority have regarded disenchantment as the central theme of Weber's legacy, I discuss Weber's rare statements about the disenchantment process, most of which appear in a speech that was published later as *Science as a Vocation*. I then introduce definitions of key concepts (Hegelian alienation, Marxist alienation, Durkheimian anomie, and de-magification) to provide a more varied and precise vocabulary. This will aid in describing at least two different rationalization processes that can be derived from Weber's theoretical framework (*Economy and Society*) and his historical studies. The first, in the economic and political sphere, can be characterized as Marxist alienation, whereas the second, in the religious sphere, can be interpreted as de-magification and Hegelian alienation. It is possible to regard Weber's statement in *Science as a Vocation* as a third rationalization process, in the sphere of knowledge production, which would suggest the concepts of de-magification and anomie. However, such a reading would seem to contradict the greater body of Weber's methodological writings. Finally, it is concluded that the term disenchantment is not a very useful concept for portraying Weber's intended view.

Keywords Max Weber · Rationalization process · Disenchantment · Alienation · Anomie · Secularization

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Interpretations of the concrete meaning of Weber's key concept — the rationalization process — by scholars in the last 100 years have varied widely. Two major approaches can be distinguished, with some overlap between them. The first connected his view of rationalization to Karl Marx's concept of alienation (Kocka, 1966, p. 328; Wrong, 1970, p. 26; Jasińska-Kania, 1987, p. 208; Turner, 1992, p. 212), whereas the second equated it with the process of disenchantment (Tenbruck, 1980, p. 321). Sometimes these interpretations were combined by emphasizing the similarities of the disenchantment process with alienation (Jasińska-Kania, 1987, p. 208; Turner, 1992, p. vii, 212). Interestingly too, their popularity differed greatly over time, with disenchantment remaining the dominant interpretation throughout the past 100 years (especially within the last 20), while alienation saw prominence between the 1960s and 1990s.

Often the disenchantment interpretation is formulated as follows: the development of modern Occidental rationalism led to the disenchantment of the world, which implies a rational organization of economic activities, a rational generalized and codified law, a bureaucratic administration, calculable science and technological progress, and finally a dogmatized salvation religion that stresses systematic earthly conduct (Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 51; Aron, 1964, p. 105; Schluchter, 1979, p. 35; Turner, 1992, p. vii; Küenzlen, 2005, p. 477 f.; Jenkins, 2012, p. 149; Loia, 2019, p. 186). Sometimes this argument is made with specific reference to the spirit of capitalism (Poggi, 1983, p. 52 f.) or the rationalization of religion (Küenzlen, 2005, p. 478, 481; Walsham, 2008, p. 498) as being the primary cause of disenchantment. The disenchantment of the world, or better, of society, is in turn often interpreted as a loss of meaning in life (Topitsch, 1971, p. 13; Eisenstadt, 1968, p. lv; Alexander, 1987, p. 191; Clegg, 1994, p. 53; Jenkins, 2000, p. 15; Fischer, 2016, p. 189; Loia, 2019, p. 186), which again is regarded as an influence of Nietzsche's death of God on Max Weber (Schroeder, 1987, p. 211; Scaff, 1989, p. 92; Sherry, 2009, p. 372; Fischer, 2016, p. 190 f.; Loia, 2019, p. 186). The culmination point of this line of argument is that Max Weber's main thesis is simplistic and wrong, because modern societies are not "monolithically characterised by scientism, rationalisation, and by a general process of secularisation" (Loia, 2019, p. 182; cf. Jenkins, 2000, p. 12).

However, some scholars have pointed out that Max Weber's work is actually much more complex and that different rationalization processes should be viewed in different spheres of pertinence, e.g., rationalization at the institutional level, which implies bureaucratization, differs from that at the cultural level, which is characterized by the disenchantment of the world (Weiss, 1987, p. 159). Accordingly, Scaff (1989, p. 92, 189) has pointed out that rationalization in the economy is close to Marx's concept of alienation, whereas the "struggle among the gods" relates to Nietzsche's theme. Applying this line of thinking to the disenchantment thesis, some scholars have limited their focus to specific spheres, resulting in two distinct approaches. The first refers to disenchantment of knowledge, or intellectualization, in Weber's *Science as a Vocation*, which represents an increase of expert knowledge and technological progress (Loia, 2019, p. 185; Gearon, 2019, p. 1). In contrast, the second emphasizes rationalization as a disenchantment of religion in the sense of secularization, which implies the loss of spirituality (Turner, 1992, p. vii; Taylor, 2007, p. 553; Sherry, 2009, p. 372; Loia, 2019, p. 182). As mentioned above, Weber has then

been criticized accordingly, such as for predicting a worldwide trend of secularization, which in fact cannot be observed today (Loia, 2019, p. 182; Gearon, 2019, p. 1). Alternatively, he was said to have ignored “the idea that God works in the world mainly through ‘secondary causes’” and that it is the scientist’s task “to follow in the Creator’s footsteps and to trace out the signs of His wisdom in the laws of nature” (Sherry, 2009, p. 371). In other words, Weber was supposedly wrong to call science irreligious as he did in *Science as a Vocation*.

Very few scholars have cautioned against such interpretations as “simplification and caricature” (Walsham, 2008, p. 498) or as being an “extremely one-sided interpretation” of the Weberian legacy (Watts & Houtman, 2023, p. 262). But perhaps it is not Weber’s work that is so simplistic or flawed but rather the interpretations of it. This paper seeks to clarify such a question, and to further explore which of the three popular interpretations — disenchantment, alienation, or anomie — best describes Weber’s central theme, the rationalization processes. For this purpose, I will (1) briefly provide a textual analysis of Weber’s disenchantment statements, (2) define the key concepts, (3) describe Weber’s rationalization processes, and (4) discuss the findings. The relevance of this paper lies in its aim to contribute to a better understanding of the content of Max Weber’s work. In my opinion, it is necessary to understand Weber first, before we can judge the adequacy of his description of historical processes. The latter question is not discussed in this paper.

Max Weber’s statements about the process of disenchantment

Among those who advocate a disenchantment interpretation of the rationalization process, rarely do any acknowledge that the concept of disenchantment never actually was “an important concept in itself” for Weber (Sherry, 2009, p. 370). Consequently, it is very surprising that this term became so dominant in the reception of Weber’s work. In the following I will present Weber’s statements about the phenomenon of disenchantment, an easy task since they are in fact rare. The first such remark appeared in *Economy and Society*, which he wrote between 1911 and 1913 (published 1921-22).

[ES:] As intellectualism suppresses belief in magic, the world’s processes become *disenchanted*, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply ‘are’ and ‘happen’ but no longer signify anything. As a consequence, there is a growing demand that the world and the *total pattern of life* be subject to an order that is significant and *meaningful*. (Weber, 1968, p. 506; emphases added)

Considering that systematic conduct in life is usually supported by highly rationalized theologies (e.g., ascetic Protestantism), these sentences simply mean that rational religions replaced magic in determining the ultimate meaning in our lives.

Weber made his next statement in the *Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions* (the *Zwischenbetrachtung* in *The Economic Ethics of the World Religions*), published in 1915.

[RRWD:] It must be noted, however, that the self-conscious tension of religion is greatest and most principled where religion faces the sphere of intellectual knowledge. There is a *unity in the realm of magic and in the purely magical image of the world*, as we have noted in the case of Chinese thought. A far-going and mutual recognition is also possible between religion and purely metaphysical speculation, although as a rule this speculation easily leads to scepticism. Religion, therefore, frequently *considers purely empirical research*, including that of natural science, as *more reconcilable* to religious interests than it does philosophy. This is the case above all in *ascetic Protestantism*. The tension between religion and intellectual knowledge definitely comes to the fore *wherever* rational, empirical knowledge has consistently worked through to the *disenchantment of the world* and its transformation into a causal mechanism. For then science encounters the claims of the ethical postulate that the world is a God-ordained, and hence somehow meaningfully and ethically oriented, cosmos. In *principle*, the *empirical* as well as the *mathematically* oriented view of the world develops *refutations* of every intellectual approach which in any way asks for a ‘*meaning*’ of inner-worldly occurrences. Every increase of rationalism in empirical science increasingly *pushes religion from the rational into the irrational realm*; but only today does religion become the irrational or anti-rational supra-human power. (Weber, 1946d, p. 350 f.; emphases added)

Here Weber said that originally magic determined both knowledge and ultimate meaning. In contrast, rational religions like ascetic Protestantism need not be in conflict with empirical sciences, although in principle empirical and mathematically oriented sciences tend to create a tension between them and rational religions, because they regard the meaning problem as irrelevant. And from the perspective of these empirical sciences the rational religions are regarded as irrational. Weber picked up this theme again in his *Science as a Vocation*. He gave this speech during 1917, to science students in Munich. In contrast to his very dry academic writing style, this was composed with an eye to entertaining his audience.

[SV1:] The increasing *intellectualization* and rationalization do *not*, therefore, indicate an *increased* and *general knowledge* of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are *no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play*, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is *disenchanted*. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means. (Weber, 1946a, p. 139; emphases added)

Similar to his argument in RRWD, Weber said here that science relies on causal, calculable explanations, no longer needing reference to magical forces, which originally fulfilled this task too.

[SV2:] Now, this *process of disenchantment*, which has continued to exist in Occidental culture for millennia, and, in general, this ‘progress,’ *to which science belongs* as a link and motive force, *do they have any meanings* that go beyond the purely practical and technical? You will find this question raised in the most principled form in the works of Leo Tolstoi. He came to raise the question in a peculiar way. All his broodings increasingly revolved around the problem of whether or not death is a meaningful phenomenon. And his answer was: *for civilized man death has no meaning*. It has none because the individual life of civilized man, placed into an infinite ‘progress,’ according to its own imminent meaning should never come to an end [...]. And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very ‘progressiveness’ it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness. (Weber, 1946a, p. 139 f.; emphases added)

Here Weber extends the argument that he made in RRWD. Not only is science eliminating the question of meaning, it actually is not capable of answering this question (Watts & Houtman, 2023, p. 265). Science can neither tell us what our purpose in life is (see also Weber, 1946a, p. 142, 143) nor who our God is (Weber, 1946a, p. 142). However, this is not a problem for the believer, because he can practice science “without being disloyal to his faith” (Weber, 1946a, p. 147). In other words, the production of knowledge is independent from the quest for ultimate meaning (unlike in magical religions, where both problems are united).

[SV3:] I do not know how one might wish to decide ‘scientifically’ the value of French and German culture; for here, too, *different gods struggle with one another*, now and for all times to come. *We live as did the ancients* when their world was *not yet disenchanted* of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity. Fate, and *certainly not ‘science,’* holds sway over these gods and their struggles. [...] *Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces*. They strive to gain power over our lives *and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another*. (Weber, 1946a, p. 148 f.; emphases added)

This statement is particularly interesting, because Weber claimed here that the disenchantment process has actually changed very little in our lives. The ancient Greeks were choosing between deities, and therefore also between the ultimate meanings associated with those deities. Today, according to Weber, those “old gods” are disenchanted, but we still must choose among them, although now we choose them as “impersonal forces” or abstract principles (see also Weber, 1946a, p. 152), which science has nothing to do with.

[SV4:] The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘*disenchantment of the world*’. Precisely the

ultimate and most sublime values have *retreated from public life* either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations.” (Weber, 1946a, p. 155; emphases added)

This statement is not easy to interpret in the context of SV3. My understanding is that Weber was implying that while the ancient Greeks may have had a choice, this was eliminated during later eras, as dogmatic, monotheistic religions came to dominate the public psyche. But as intellectualization increased — which he connected in SV1 with advances in science — these dogmatic religions “retreated from public life”, leaving us again with choice.

Lastly, in 1919, Weber again referred to disenchantment in his famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (the statement was not in the original version published in 1904-05; Tenbruck, 1980, p. 319; Küenzlen, 2005, p. 477 f.):

[PE:] That *great historic process in the development of religions*, the *elimination of magic* from the world which had begun with the old Hebrew prophets and, in conjunction with Hellenistic scientific thought, had repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition and sin, came here [in ascetic Protestantism] to its logical conclusion. (Weber, 1956, p. 105; emphases added)

Talcott Parsons translated *Entzauberung* here as the “elimination of magic,” which I believe is the correct translation, since Weber clearly referred to the “development of religions.” This statement should be interpreted in the context of his statement in ES: rational religions have replaced magic in the determination of our ultimate meaning (cf. Sherry, 2009, p. 370). Thus, Weber ended where he began: disenchantment simply referred to the elimination of magic in the religious context.

Definitions of alienation, anomie, and de-magification

We now transition to defining key concepts which could be connected to the rationalization or disenchantment process. One of the major problems with interpretations of Weber’s work is that the term disenchantment is used with such varied meanings. In hopes of mitigating this ambiguity, I would like to employ a more diverse vocabulary. The proposed concepts are Hegelian alienation, Marxist alienation, Durkheimian anomie, and de-magification. I am providing here only *my own nominalistic definitions* of these concepts. I do not claim that they cover the essence of what Hegel, Marx, or Durkheim had in mind. The references to Hegel’s, Marx’s, and Durkheim’s work have not the purpose to prove that my definitions are correct, which cannot be done here under the space restrictions anyway. These references are intended to give only a brief introduction to these concepts.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s concept of *alienation* can be regarded as a development of the theological idea of alienation as an estrangement from God resulting from sin or indifference (Tuveson, 1973, p. 34).¹ Hegel combined this idea with his

¹ For a discussion of the theological foundation of Hegel’s work see Schnädelbach (1999, p. 42–46).

dialectical reasoning, which in his philosophy was not only *logical* (the development of ideas in human thinking) but also *ontological* (the development of reality), and therefore in the end the same process (Störig, 1993, p. 461). The dialectical process, or the negation of the negation from thesis and antithesis, to synthesis “is not synonymous with outright destruction” (Zeitlin, 2001, p. 51). The term *aufgehoben* in German has three different meanings: to eliminate, to preserve, and to lift up (Störig, 1993, p. 460 f.). In this sense, a change “from one quality (acorn) to another (oak tree)” according to immanent patterns (Zeitlin, 2001, p. 51) would eliminate some aspects, preserve others, and lift it up to a higher quality. Hegel argued that the whole process of the world is characterized by the dialectical development of the spirit (Störig, 1993, p. 462) from the subjective spirit (thesis – the abstract individuum) and objective spirit (antithesis – the individuum in space and time under the influence of social forces), to the absolute spirit (synthesis — truth and harmony in recognizing God) (Störig, 1993, p. 465; Zeitlin, 2001, p. 50). The subjective spirit is alienated, because it does not recognize “that the substance of [our] lives lies beyond [us],” whereas the objective spirit is alienated, because “the self-recognition is cloudy and obscure” (Taylor, 1975, p. 178 f.; cf. Hegel, 1952, p. 349 f.). What is needed is an alienation of the alienation (Hegel, 1952, p. 353). “Thus Spirit is at war with itself; it has to overcome itself as its most formidable obstacle” in order to escape alienation (Zeitlin, 2001, p. 51). For the purpose of this paper, I call Hegelian alienation the mind’s inability to leave this world (in its concrete space and time) behind.

Hegel’s concept of alienation was criticized by Ludwig Feuerbach, who stated that God did not create men, but that instead men created God, and in this sense any attempt to come closer to God would imply an estrangement from what we really are. Karl Marx retained Feuerbach’s reformulation and combined it with his theory of the division of labor (Kauder, 1968, p. 273; Catephores, 1972, p. 130; Dahm & Fleischer, 1976, p. 65; Dupré, 1983, p. 116; Elster, 1986, p. 55). As a result of the division of labor in the assembly line the worker can no longer connect to the products of his/her work (Marx, 1996, p. 570; Braybrooke, 1958, p. 326) – “he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (Marx, 1975b, p. 274). He/she turns into an “appendage of a machine” (Marx, 1996, p. 639). The worker becomes *alienated* from the products of his/her labor (Schaff, 1977, p. 63), because the dominance of the machine leads to a loss of the independence and creativity typical for an artisan (Marx, 1973, p. 831; 1996, p. 435). Furthermore, we become alienated from other human beings, since our interactions with them are reduced to transactions based on money (Marx, 1973, p. 157, 160). And since the worker is alienated from the products of his/her work and alienated from other human beings, he/she is finally alienated from him-/herself (Marx, 1975b, p. 275; Catephores, 1972, p. 131; Schaff, 1977, p. 76; Petrović, 1983, p. 14). Alienation in more general terms describes a process in which we create things in order to make our life easier, but then the creations begin dominating our life (Marx, 1975a, p. 226 f.; Fetscher, 1973, p. 459; Schaff, 1977, p. 75, 92). “As, in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalistic production, he is governed by the products of his own hand” (Marx, 1996, p. 616). In the end, we become dehumanized beings (Marx, 1975b, p. 284). For the purpose of this paper, I call Marxist alienation in general

terms a state of a person being trapped by his/her own creations, which leads to his/her inability to develop freely as a human being.

The third concept is Émile Durkheim's *anomie*. Durkheim developed Jean-Marie Guyau's anomie concept — the absence of universal rules or in the religious sphere skepticism about an almighty God (Orrù, 1987, p. 103) — further (Orrù, 1987, p. 104 f.). He made a distinction between chronic and acute anomie (Durkheim, 1951, p. 254 f.; Taylor, 1982, p. 15; Besnard, 1987, p. 100). Chronic anomie is the result of an insufficient integration of individuals into society (Durkheim, 1951, p. 208), which again is caused by an ideology of progress (Besnard, 1987, p. 112). The actors can neither acquire social goals nor develop uniform passions (Steiner, 1992, p. 646; Taylor, 1982, p. 13). In this vacuum, the individuals are free to choose their own unique purpose in life, but if they fail to do so (Durkheim, 1951, p. 212), they risk committing egoistic suicide (Iga & Ohara, 1967, p. 60). However, even if they successfully find their ultimate goals, they may remain unachieved due to unregulated passions (Steiner, 1992, p. 646; Taylor, 1982, p. 13). If passions are not moderated, individuals could choose very unrealistic goals, increasing the likelihood of failure to achieve them (Durkheim, 1951, p. 246, 253). This is Durkheim's acute anomie that leads in times of crisis to high risk of anomic suicide (Durkheim, 1951, p. 252; Iga & Ohara, 1967, p. 60; Besnard, 1987, p. 112). Often, chronic and acute anomie are regarded as the same concept (Johnson, 1965, p. 882 f.; Thom, 1984, p. 17), although Durkheim (1951, p. 288) emphasized only their affinity. For the purpose of this paper, I will simplify the argument and call Durkheimian anomie a person's inability to find and realize meaning in life (because of a lack of integration and regulation or too much freedom). In this sense, anomie is the exact opposite of Marxist alienation (Schaff, 1977, p. 209; Thom, 1984, p. 9; Lukes, 1990, p. 81). Anomie is caused by too much freedom, whereas alienation is the result of not enough freedom. Anomie is "formless life," whereas alienation is "lifeless form" (Thom, 1984, p. 1).

Finally, some Weber scholars have pointed out that disenchantment is actually "a poor translation of the German '*Entzauberung*'" (Sherry, 2009, p. 369). Strictly speaking, '*Entzauberung*' means the elimination of magic (Sherry, 2009, p. 369; Grosby, 2013, p. 301; Zisook, 2017, p. 175 f.; Josephson-Storm, 2021, p. 31), and in this sense I will use the term *de-magification* instead of disenchantment, which is in English usually understood as disillusionment (Sherry, 2009, p. 369; Swedberg & Agevall, 2016, p. 86).

Of these four concepts (as I have defined them), only Durkheimian anomie is characterized by a lack of meaning of life. In the problematic state of Hegelian alienation, the subjects found their meaning of life. However, the issue is that it is a false consciousness (Taylor, 1975, p. 179). In contrast, in Marxian alienation the problem is not a lack of meaning, but a lack of life, which is controlled by soulless machines. Finally, de-magification is unrelated to the meaning of life question.

I will use these four key concepts in the interpretation of Max Weber's rationalization processes. This will allow me to avoid possible ambiguity in the term disenchantment by itself and to describe more precisely what Max Weber actually said.

Max Weber's rationalization processes

Max Weber developed in *Economy and Society* a logically consistent system, which derived two types of legitimate orders — communalization (*Vergemeinschaftung*) and sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*) — out of his famous four ideal-types of actions: traditional, based on habituation, affectual, based on emotion (which both lead to communalization), value rational, based on an unconditional value independent of the outcome, and purposive rational, based on an expected outcome (which both lead to sociation; Etzrodt, 2009). If communalization is regarded as the typical solution in pre-modern societies and sociation in modern societies, then we can expect an historically pattern of the rationalization processes from tradition or affect to value rationality or purposive rationality, which is indeed what Weber has captured.

In the economic sphere he described the rationalization process from a traditional closed household economy (*Hauswirtschaft*) — which neither uses money nor exchanges goods, to a pure natural exchange economy — where goods are exchanged against goods (Weber, 1968, p. 100), to a market economy — which relies on money in transactions (Weber, 1968, p. 109). Medieval guilds are an example of a commercial economy, which are usually complemented by capitalist adventurers, who apply rational calculations in order to maximize their profits through trade, speculation, or acquisition of booty (cf. Oakes, 1988, p. 84).

[T]he difference between these economic 'spirits' is the attitude towards risk. Risk-averse actors preferred the security of the guilds, whereas risk-seeking gamblers chose non-restricted foreign trade and other unregulated activities. However, it is clear that these two orientations simply represent different sides of the same pleasure-seeking attitude. (Etzrodt, 2008, p. 51)

Both the commercial and the (fundamental) capitalist economy are pre-modern, because no accumulation of capital can occur. The guilds restrict competition, and with it the possibility for larger profits, in order to guarantee a humble life without exhaustion (Weber, 1927, p. 136, 138 ff.; cf. 1968, p. 638). On the other hand, the capitalist adventurers take high risks in order to accumulate wealth in a short period of time for luxurious consumption. From both of these perspectives hard labor without directly enjoying the fruits thereof is simply irrational (Hertz, 1962, p. 190; Marshall, 1980, p. 19). However, this is exactly the characteristic of a modern capitalist economy. Modern economic actors are not only rationally calculating, as the capitalist adventurers, they also have a work ethic. They try to maximize profits by minimizing risks, but for the sake of reinvestment rather than for consumption (Weber, 1927, p. 356; 1946c, p. 309; 1968, p. 99). Yet, what would motivate a transition to this modern capitalist economy, given its irrational nature (from the perspective of the original capitalist adventurers)? Weber's famous solution to this riddle was the introduction of a particular form of ascetic religion (ascetic Protestantism), which linked afterlife rewards with the economic actor's worldly productivity in this life. Once the modern capitalist economy was thus established, it continued of its own inertia, propelled beyond the originating influence of ascetic religion. This is Weber's first rationalization process from traditional economic activities to purposive rational ones.

In the political sphere a similar rationalization process occurs, according to Weber, from traditional rule in the patriarchal form of a head of a domestic organization (equivalent to the closed household economy; Weber, 1968, p. 231), to a patrimonial form with an administrative staff of a ruler (Weber, 1968, p. 232), and finally to legal rule based on an impersonal bureaucracy (Weber, 1968, p. 220). Legal norms can be established with reference to either purposive or value rationality (Weber, 1968, p. 217), but once the norms are set, they are formally (purposive rationally) applied by the bureaucracy (Weber, 1968, p. 223). Weber added to this the charismatic rule, which fulfills the same role as the this-worldly ascetic religion in the economic rationalization process. Charismatic leaders — prophets or war heroes — have supernatural or superhuman powers “regarded as of divine origin,” which legitimize their rule (Weber, 1968, p. 241; 1946b, p. 296). Those leaders have the ability to question the traditional or legal rules and set new norms based on their value rational choices (Weber, 1946b, p. 297).

From a substantive point of view, every charismatic authority would have to subscribe to the proposition, “It is written... but I say unto you...” The genuine prophet, like the genuine military leader and every true leader in this sense, preaches, creates, or demands new obligations — most typically, by virtue of revelation, oracle, inspiration, or of his own will, which are recognized by the members of the religious, military, or party group because they come from such a source. (Weber, 1968, p. 243 f.)

Charismatic revolutions are necessary to change values in a traditional or modern bureaucratic society. Once new values are introduced, however, the charismatic leader is no longer needed as the new rules quickly become the new tradition (Weber, 1946b, p. 297) or are stoically applied by the bureaucracy. In other words, this represents the same rationalization process from the economic sphere, where traditional organizations transformed to purposive rational ones. And in both, the economic and the political spheres, the consequence of this rationalization process is the development of a so-called steel-hardened shell (Chalcraft, 1994, p. 29–39), more famously translated by Talcott Parsons as an “iron cage” (Parsons, 1977, p. 53 n. 5; Kent, 1983, p. 299):²

The Puritan *wanted* to work in a calling; we *are forced* to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the *modern economic order*. This order is now bound to the *technical and economic conditions of machine production* which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with *irresistible force*. [...] In Baxter’s

² For a criticism of Parsons’ translation see Baehr (2001). I prefer the steel-hardened shell, because a shell is protective as much as it is limiting. The idea that we could leave the shell, but are usually too afraid or lazy to do so, matches Weber’s characterization of charismatic leaders as extraordinary human beings, who can question the given world view (by leaving their shell).

view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the ‘saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment’. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an *iron cage*. (Weber, 1956, p. 181; cf. 1956, p. 54 f.; emphases added)

In the modern economy people “are trapped within the ‘gears’ and ‘machinery’” of capitalism (Chalcraft, 2001, p. 12; see Weber, 2001, p. 130 n. 2, 117). Weber combined this, in his political writings, with the element of modern bureaucracy, which adds its own kind of steel-hardened shell of bondage (Weber, 1968, p. 1402; see Mommsen, 1974, p. 58 f.). Bureaucratic administrative structures limit individual freedom similar to the machinery of assembly lines (Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 50; Beetham, 1985, p. 71; Turner, 1992, p. vii; Clegg, 1994, p. 50 f.). In this sense, humanity’s own creation, the machinery of a modern capitalistic and bureaucratic order, then begins to enslave us with an irresistible, consuming force. Therefore, Weber’s rationalization process, in the spheres of economy and politics, is best described as Marxist alienation (Kocka, 1966, p. 328; Wrong, 1970, p. 26; Bader et al., 1976, p. 484; Beetham, 1985, p. 71; Albrow, 1987, p. 57; Jasińska-Kania, 1987, p. 208; Turner, 1992, p. 212). Of course, Weber goes beyond Marx’s narrow concept of alienation. For example, as the above cited passage from the *Protestant Ethic* showed, Weber regarded all people in a modern society as alienated, “not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition,” but even, say, a humble housewife. Whereas Marx’s alienation was more specifically tethered to the context of industry, with workers lacking creative connection to their product on an assembly line. Furthermore, by adding bureaucracy to capitalism as the causes of modern society’s steel-hardened shell, Weber was actually criticizing Marxism. The Marxists in the 1910s believed that they could control the capitalist economy by creating an efficient bureaucracy, which would centrally plan all economic activity. Weber pointed out, against such ideas, that this approach would not in fact reduce alienation, because a powerful bureaucracy would limit the freedom of individuals even more than the capitalist machine could (Weber, 1924, p. 413 f.). Capitalism — although not the best system because of its alienating power — was, for Weber, still the lesser evil, compared to the possible tyranny of a bureaucratically empowered social regime (cf. Baehr, 2001, p. 166). Thus, in order to protect the rights of citizens in a democracy, bureaucracy too must be restrained (Beetham, 1985, p. 78 f.).

In contrast to this type of rationalization processes in the economic and political sphere, Weber developed a different type in the religious sphere. According to him, its point of origin lay in magical religions (Kippenberg, 2005, p. 176). Those original religions used orgies (drugs, music/dance, and sexuality) as a means for achieving states of ecstasy (Weber, 1968, p. 535). They possessed a primitive mythology of nature with an emphasis on suffering, dying, and resurrection, which followed the pattern of recurring seasons (Weber, 1946b, p. 273). Obviously, the underlying type of behavior of these magical religions was affectual, and they were experiential rather than theoretical. According to Weber, the rationalization process then commenced when monotheistic religions first began appearing, which in turn created the theodicy problem – or why an almighty god allows undeserved suffering in his creation (Weber, 1968, p. 518).

But the more the development tends toward the conception of a transcendental unitary god who is universal, the more there arises the problem of how the extraordinary power of such a god may be reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and rules over. The resultant problem of theodicy is found in ancient Egyptian literature as well as in Job and in Aeschylus, but in very different forms. (Weber, 1968, p. 519)

The proponents of this rationalization process were charismatic prophets, newly minted from their former roles as magicians in the original religions, who began systematizing and rationalizing ways of living (Weber, 1946d, p. 327; 1968, p. 535 ff.) in order to overcome the theodicy problem (Weber, 1946b, p. 275; Tenbruck, 1980, p. 334). They offered solutions to the increasing tension between other-worldly ethical demands and present world realities (Kippenberg, 2005, p. 176). The prophets came up with four ideal-typical solutions for the theodicy problem. The messianic eschatology approach promised justice and equity for undeserved suffering when an almighty and merciful God (or his hero) would ultimately transform this world. “The suffering of the present generation, it was believed, was the consequence of the sins of the ancestors” (Weber, 1968, p. 519). Dualism overcomes the theodicy problem by claiming that God is not almighty. The forces of light are in a struggle with the forces of darkness, and only after a victory of light will this world’s evil vanish (Weber, 1968, p. 524). The third solution is the idea of predestination, which states that an almighty God (as a consequence of his omniscience) has already determined the fate of humans from all eternity (Weber, 1968, p. 522). Ethical behavior cannot influence this outcome, although it can still be seen as a symptom “of one’s own state of religious grace as established by god’s decree” (Weber, 1968, p. 523). In other words, suffering does exist in this world, but it is not undeserved. And finally, the fourth approach is the doctrine of *karma*, wherein guilt and merit will be compensated in future iterations of the soul. Rebirth as an animal, human, or in heaven depends on the balance of sins and ethical merits (Weber, 1968, p. 524 f.). In such a system salvation implies an escape from this wheel of recurring births and deaths (Weber, 1968, p. 525). The rationalization process is here characterized by a shift from experience to abstract theologies on the one hand, and by a replacement of affectual behavior with ethical or value-rational behavior on the other. Marotta (2023, p. 15) described this as a replacement of an immanent magical worldview with transcendent religions. Thus, the rationalization process in the religious sphere is fundamentally different from that of the economic and political sphere. Nevertheless, the latter is contingent on the former in that the advance from affect to value-rationality in the religious sphere’s process is prerequisite for fulfilling the rationalization process from tradition to purposive rationality in the economic and political sphere (cf. Tenbruck, 1980, p. 322).

How can this religious rationalization process then be described? First of all, it is obviously a case of de-magification: magic is replaced by rational theologies (Sherry, 2009, p. 370; Zisook, 2017, p. 173, 175 f.; Watts & Houtman, 2023, p. 265; cf. Kippenberg, 2005, p. 167; Grosby, 2013, p. 301). This is neither secularization nor does this imply a loss of meaning. If the Protestant ethic was meaningless, it could not have impacted to such a level as people’s everyday conduct. And if religions would have vanished, then a Protestant ethic could not have developed. De-magification

means only that what justifies the ultimate meaning of life has changed from magic to rational religions.

However, this is only one aspect of the religious rationalization process. Another more important one is hidden in Weber's detailed historical analysis. There he described how charismatic leaders tended, after their transformation from magicians to prophets, to emphasize ethical conduct to the extent that "particular desires and emotions of raw human nature" had to be transcended (Weber, 1968, p. 540). He declared that religious virtuosi had to subject "the natural drives to a systematic patterning of life" (Weber, 1968, p. 542). The world-rejecting ascetic has to control "all natural instinctive drives" (Weber, 1968, p. 627). The mystic, who tries to achieve illumination through contemplation, must exclude "all everyday mundane interests" (Weber, 1968, p. 544). Confucians repressed "all forms of passion, including that of joy, for passion disturbs the equilibrium and the harmony of the soul" (Weber, 1951, p. 156). For the Yahwe worshippers the sexual sphere was dominated by demons (Weber, 1952, p. 190). The Brahmans rejected women as representatives of the ancient sexual orgies, who could seriously disturb their holy meditation (Weber, 1958, p. 151). Neo-Platonism developed the dualism of spirit and matter into the idea that the body is "the 'dungeon' of the soul" (Weber, 1952, p. 400). The Calvinist God demanded nothing less than systematic self-control (Weber, 1956, p. 115). And finally, in Hinduism, Jainism, and early Buddhism all movement (Weber, 1958, p. 178), the body itself (Weber, 1958, p. 195), or even the thirst for life (Weber, 1958, p. 211) must be overcome to reach nirvana. A general theme appears here, which Weber called alienation:

Ecstasy as an instrument of salvation or self-deification, our exclusive interest here, may have the essential character of an acute mental aberration or possession, or else the character of a chronically heightened idiosyncratic religious mood, tending either toward greater intensity of life or toward *alienation from life*. (Weber, 1968, p. 535; emphasis added)

Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the 'world': from social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic, and erotic activities – in short, from all creaturely interests. One with such an attitude may regard any participation in these affairs as an acceptance of the world, leading to *alienation from god*. (Weber, 1968, p. 542; emphasis added)

Here Weber referred to Hegelian alienation, such that the rationalization process in the religious sphere describes the development of different strategies to address the mind's inability to transcend its own temporal/spatial existence and its consequent misapprehension of God. This interpretation is consistent with Weber's statements in ES and PE (see 1. Max Weber's statements about the process of disenchantment).

So we see that Weber systematically developed two types of rationalization processes in *Economy and Society*, which he applied to his historical studies. The first, from tradition to purposive rationality in the economic and political sphere, can be characterized as Marxist alienation, while the second, from affect to value-rationality

in the religious sphere, can be described as de-magification and Hegelian alienation. The question is whether Weber had a third type of rationalization process in mind, when he was making the above cited statements in RRWD and SV1-SV4. These statements could be read as an attempt to construct a further rationalization process for knowledge production (cf. Jenkins, 2000, p. 12, 17; Schluchter, 2017, p. 41). Originally, magic was not only providing ultimate meaning in life, but was also used as a justification for knowledge (RRWD). However with de-magification in the religious sphere, rational religions replaced magic as the source of ultimate meaning, while in the sphere of knowledge production science with its causal and calculable explanations similarly outpaced any need for magical or mysterious forces (SV1). In principle the problems of finding meaning in life and of producing knowledge are independent of each other, implying that rational religions and science should be able to coexist (SV2 and RRWD). However, a tension exists between the two because science regards the meaning problem as irrelevant (RRWD) simply because it is beyond its scope of answering (SV2). This reading would imply a third rationalization process from affect (magic) to purposive rationality (causal and calculable science) in the sphere of knowledge production, which could be characterized as de-magification and Durkheimian anomie in the sense of a person's inability to find meaning in life within secularized societies dominated by science. Of course, Weber added that even without rational religions in a secularized society, we still need to choose between abstract principles (SV3). The gods might vanish, but their representative values do not. Furthermore, in contrast to Durkheim, Weber saw this lack of a taken-for-granted meaning structure not as a risk (suicide) but as an opportunity for individual, free cognition and enlightened choice. In other words, Weber believed that anomie could be easily overcome and is therefore not a serious social issue.

Thus, if we [teachers] are competent in our pursuit [...] we can force the individual, or at least we can help him, to give himself an *account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct*. (Weber, 1946a, p. 152)

However, there is a serious problem with this interpretation of a possible third rationalization process. Such a reading is at odds with the rest of Weber's work. Weber systematically introduced his theoretical framework in *Economy and Society* before later applying it to his historical studies of economic, political, and religious developments. Consequently, he theorized extensively on economic, political, and religious concepts but said nothing about the topic of knowledge production in *Economy and Society*. Why would this be lacking if he had any intention of theorizing a third rationalization process, which would have unquestionably required reference to historical description, in keeping with the pattern of his other historical studies? Furthermore, it is important to realize that *Science as a Vocation* was published in German, in his collected methodological works (*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*), not in any of his historical studies. Accordingly, Weber's methodology is, in contrast to Thomas Kuhn or Michel Foucault, not based on historical observations but entirely normative. It does not tell us how knowledge *was* produced in the past. It tells us how we *should* produce knowledge. Galen Watts and Dick Houtman (2023, p. 264) are correct in their approach of interpreting Weber's statements SV1-SV4 within the con-

text of his *Wissenschaftslehre*. Adopting a neo-Kantian position, Weber first distinguished between facts (science) and values (religion), and then argued that although science cannot justify values, it nevertheless depends on values (Watts & Houtman, 2023, p. 265).

Disenchanted social science, as defended by Weber, recognizes its rootedness in scientifically-arbitrary values that define what is ‘worth studying’ and what is not, thus acknowledging its inevitable one-sidedness or ‘value relatedness’ (*Wertbeziehung*). It does as such limit itself to a strictly empirical analysis of a state of affairs without pre-tending to be capable of scientifically demonstrating its ‘objective’ meaning (e.g. whether it is important or not, good or bad, etc.). (Watts & Houtman, 2023, p. 266)

Weber was criticizing the naïve belief that science could define the true meaning of concepts. All concept formation was for him arbitrary, based on the values and research interests of the researcher. This is why Weber relied on ideal-types and not *a priori* laws. In this context objectivity (or better intersubjectivity) could only be achieved by providing clear definitions of concepts and by applying the conceptual framework systematically, so that other researchers could follow the argument. What Weber demanded in science was internal consistency in the application of arbitrary concepts. Therefore, the core message of *Science as a Vocation* is not an attempt to formulate a third rationalization process in the sphere of knowledge production, but a warning about the limitations of science. “Finally, you will put the question: ‘If this is so, what then does science actually and positively contribute to practical and personal ‘life’?’” (Weber, 1946a, p. 150) Weber replied that it is education that helps us find ultimate meaning in life. Thus *Science as a Vocation* is a plea for what we would today call liberal arts education (Weber, 1946a, p. 151 f.).

Discussion and conclusion

Is the central theme of Max Weber’s works the process of disenchantment of the world, and if so, is it a simplistic and incorrect thesis? Or is it the interpretations declaring his theme to be disenchantment that are simplistic and incorrect? I have demonstrated in this paper that Weber did not have one unified concept of the rationalization process. Rather, he proposed at least two different ideal-types that represent rationalization processes.³ The first, from tradition to purposive rationality, was applied to the development of economic and political activities. This type cannot – under any circumstances – be interpreted as disenchantment, because neither the closed household economy nor the rule of a patriarchal head of a domestic organization has anything to do with magic. These social arrangements received their legiti-

³ This result is largely consistent with Friedrich Tenbruck’s (1980, p. 322) observation that Weber theorized two major rationalization processes: one in the religious sphere, which Tenbruck called “disenchantment,” and one in the economic and political sphere, which he called “modernization.” However, Tenbruck described them as consecutive periods, whereas I prefer to interpret them as parallel and interdependent processes (here I am closer to Schluchter’s position [1979, p. 10, 13]).

mation through tradition and not through magic. Therefore, Weber's key concept of the steel-hardened shell (or the iron cage) characterizing the central issue of modern societies cannot be understood in any way as the result of a disenchantment process. As I have shown, an extended concept of Marxist alienation explains this issue much better.

The second rationalization process, from affect to value-rationality, which Weber used to describe the development of world religions, is, on the other hand, obviously related to magic, and therefore justifies a characterization of disenchantment. However, for this characterization to convey Weber's nuanced meaning, only de-magification is meant here, rather than secularization or anomie. The ideas of predestination or *karma* are neither secular nor meaningless. They are non-magical ways of providing ultimate meaning in the lives of believers. This disenchantment process does not lead to anomie or a loss of meaning, but overcomes Hegelian alienation and therefore creates meaning beyond one's existence in space and time.

The possible third rationalization process from affect to purposive rationality in science is the only one that could reasonably be interpreted as disenchantment in the sense of Durkheimian anomie. But even this interpretation does not imply secularization. Weber made it very clear that for him science and religion can coexist, because they are addressing different questions. However, the major question is whether Weber's statements in *Science as a Vocation* should be interpreted as a historical description of a disenchantment process in science or not. I agree here with Watts and Houtman's position that those statements should be interpreted in the context of his normative methodological writings, implying, in this case, that Weber never intended to create a third rationalization process.

From all of this I can only conclude that disenchantment as such is *not* a central theme of Weberian sociology. Not only are his so-called disenchantment statements rare, they do not (as popularly understood) agree with the rest of his writings. In the narrow sense of de-magification, disenchantment plays a role in the development of rational religions, but even here the theme of Hegelian alienation describes Weber's historical analysis much better. Current researchers can only emphasize the concept of disenchantment in their interpretations of Weber by simplifying his theoretical framework and by conflating different types of rationalization processes into one. But perhaps such misrepresentations are not altogether surprising when undue weight is placed on a handful of statements in a given speech of Weber's without reconciling these among the context of thousands of pages of his academic works. Such selective interpretive methodology would itself seem more deserving of the term simplistic than the vast Weberian legacy that has remained inadequately grasped by these interpretations.

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