
UNIT 17 RATIONALITY

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with rationality, a recurrent concept in Weber's work. After reading this unit you should be able to:

- explain the meanings of the terms rationality and rationalisation
- examine Weber's work on rationality with reference to Protestantism, capitalism and bureaucracy
- discuss Weber's views on rationality in sociological investigation and value-free sociology.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous units of this Block have made you familiar with some of the important sociological contributions of Max Weber, namely, ideal types the relation between religious ethics and economic behaviour as well as his understanding of power and **authority**. It is now time for us to handle the central theme in his work, namely, the idea of rationality and the process of rationalisation. As this is a concept that touches almost all of Weber's work, you might find parts of this unit repetitive. However, it is a good opportunity for you to revise some concepts learnt earlier as well as study them from the point of view of rationality.

This unit has been divided into three sections. In the first section, you will get a brief description of the meanings of the terms 'rationality' and 'rationalisation'. The second section will highlight how Weber used the

concept of rationality in his work. The issues taken up will be Protestantism, capitalism, bureaucracy and types of rationality. The third and final section will focus on Weber's application of rationality in sociological investigation with special reference to his plea for a **value**-free sociology.

17.2 THE MEANING OF RATIONALITY AND RATIONALISATION

Rationality refers to those ideas and behaviours which are logically coherent and consistent and amenable to empirical knowledge. Rationalisation refers to the process whereby rationality is applied to various aspects and activities of life. The conviction that rationality is the distinctive characteristic of human beings has made it a central theme in Western philosophy for over two hundred years (Mitchel 1968:142).

According to Weber, the contemporary world is characterised by rationality. Max Weber believed that the key to understand modern society is to be found in its rational features and rationalising forces. For him, the modern Western world is characterised by rationality. As a result of this, human activity is marked by methodical calculation. Quantification, predictability and regularity become important. Individuals rely more on logic, **reason** and calculation than on supernatural beliefs. To Weber rationalisation means that "principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. 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 power existed" (Weber 1946: 139, Cf. Hearn 1985: 76). Let us take an example. If a farmer wants to reap a good harvest, he can spend time, energy and money on conducting *poojas* and prayers. On the other hand, he can utilise the same effort and expense in digging irrigation canals or a tube-well so that his crops may thrive. In the first case, he is dependent on "mysterious incalculable forces"; in the second case he is using rational calculation.

To Weber rationalisation is the product of scientific specialisation and technological differentiation of western culture. He describes rationalisation as striving for perfection, as an ingenious refinement of the conduct of life and the attainment of mastery over the external world (see Freund 1972: 18). Demystification of beliefs and secularisation of thought are important facets of rationalisation which assist in attaining mastery over the world. Rationalisation also involves formalisation of laws and organisations.

As has been mentioned earlier, rationality is a recurrent concept in Weber's work and rationalization is a recurrent theme in the sense of making more rational. His own attempt is to render a rational account of society. Rationality and rationalisation occur several times and in several senses. It could indeed even be argued that the whole body of Weber's work is an exploration of the rationality of social forms and the logic of their changes.

Weber views rationality as a process of rationalisation of social system. This takes place through the emergence of rational organisation and institutions in human society. He also finds the reflection of the process of

rationalisation in human values, beliefs, thoughts and actions. Here he locates the emergence of elements of rationality in social sciences as well.

The rationalisation characteristic of modern societies is manifested in terms of the 'Zweckrational' actions, i.e. actions in relation to goals. Hence the sphere of rationalisation is extended to economic, political, religious organisations etc. Weber makes extensive use of the concept of rationality in his study of social actions, organisations and processes. He also uses it as a mode of scientific investigation. Thus, rationality appears in Weber's work in two broadly distinct, but inter-related ways. Let us see what these are in the next section (17.3).

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Fill in the blanks with suitable words
 - a) To Weber, rationalisation is the product of scientific and differentiation.
 - b) Rationalisation implies mastery over
- ii) State whether the following are True (T) or False (F)
 - a) Rationality means greater reliance on spirits and magic True/False
 - b) Human values and beliefs can never be rationalised. True/False
 - c) Rationalisation can extend to all aspects of society. True/False

17.3 WEBER'S TREATMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF RATIONALITY

Weber treated or handled rationality in his work in the following two major ways.

i) Society as a Rationalisation Process

The first meaning is related to the study of society as a process of rationalisation. That is, an older, less rational form changes into a newer more rational form. This is what he calls rationalisation, i.e. the way in which reason becomes effective in history, the actual historical process.

Weber sees the development of history, and particularly recent history, i.e. the 'modern', as one of increasing rationality and rationalisation. Protestantism, capitalism and bureaucracy are successive forms of this process of rationalisation. They gain their meaningfulness as part of a historical development, i.e. the way in which a later development is more rational than a former.

ii) Rationality as a Methodological Tool

The second way of seeing rationality is as a methodological principle, a strategy of inquiry, a method of investigation. It is Weber's aim to

lay bare the logic of various social forms and processes even when they appear at first glance to be irrational, non-rational or anti-rational. In this sense rationality is a mode of inquiry that seek to discover the reason of a social form or development.

In the following sub-sections, let us examine society as a process of rationalisation. Let us consider the rational features of Protestantism, capitalism, bureaucracy and historical social processes.



Figure 17.1 Society and rationality

17.3.0 Protestantism

Weber's study of the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is usually regarded as one of his most important contributions. In this work, Weber argues for the impact of ideas, particularly religious ideas on creating and transforming of material reality, society and its forms. Thus, Weber sees the primacy of capital and 'capitalism' in the social organisation of the contemporary age, as the most significant way to grasp the society in which we live. For Weber, capitalism is the outcome of the appearance and development of a particular form of religious consciousness the Protestant ethic.

The Protestant ethic, particularly the Calvinist ethic, is a rationalisation of traditional Christian doctrine, which reconciled otherworldly aspirations with the pursuit of this-worldly material gain. Drawing attention to the precise ways in which the pursuit of personal religious salvation are made to coincide with the achievement of material prosperity and power, Weber argued that it was this 'heroic' rationalisation that gave birth to capitalism. The most important rationalisation is the development of a 'this-worldly' asceticism foregoing of consumption of 'the pleasures of the flesh', in favour of saving and accumulation. Through it the believer assures himself of being included amongst those born to be saved, in a religious sense. Weber argued that the rationalism embedded in the Protestant ethic helped to further develop the material condition of modern capitalism (see Hearn 1985: 76).

17.3.1 Capitalism

Max Weber identifies some important conditions for the development of rational capitalism in modern society. These are: Private ownership of all physical means of production, freedom of the market, mechanisation, written law and administration, **free labour** and commercialisation of economic life. Weber claims that though these conditions had been developing in various parts of the world, they first appeared in modern rational capitalism where the religious ethic of Protestantism prevailed. To him Protestantism was instrumental in weakening traditional opposition to the development of material bases of rational capitalism (see Hearn 1985: 77).

Weber is far more impressed with the rationality of capitalist society and the systematic rationality of its social forms and processes. The modes of social organisation and association, and the very mentality of the people reflect rationality. Weber devotes a great deal of space and time to the consideration of the various ways in which capitalist society is not only more rational than the society or societies which preceded it, but actually introduces and establishes reason itself as a desirable process and principle of organisation. His major work, *'Economy and Society'*, explores the ways in which capitalist society is compatible with clear principles of reason and rational organisation. It goes on to examine how an ongoing process of rationalisation and further rationalisation is part of the logic of the growth of capitalism.

17.3.2 Bureaucracy

According to Weber modern bureaucracy is social manifestation of formal rationality. Formal rationality implies the importance of rules and procedures rather than beliefs and sentiments. Bureaucracy's development is based on the separation of the rulers from the ruled, people from the position, and sentiments and beliefs from procedures and regulations. Thus there are several senses in which Weber sees bureaucracy as a form of rationalisation. Among them those that need to be enumerated here are: (i) the systematisation of purposes and procedures (ii) rights and obligations based on established and clearly-defined norms for the purpose of efficiency, and (iii) most importantly, the rationalisation of the procedures of recruitment, promotion and retirement of bureaucrats through which their lives gain security and manageability.

To Weber, bureaucracy is a structure of rational domination. As you already know, bureaucracy is a typical expression of rational-legal authority. Hence, power is legitimate only when its exercise is consistent with the formal, impersonal rules and regulations, which define the organisation. Again a bureaucratic organisation helps promote rational action of its members (see Hearn 1985: 79).

Weber sees the development of bureaucracy as part and parcel of the logic of the development of capitalism, because it is so rational and rationally oriented. Weber also highlights an important paradox or contradiction. The growth of the bureaucratic mentality stifles creativity and daring, the very things that made capitalism possible.

It is time now to complete Check Your Progress 2.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Explain how rationality is projected in Max Weber’s work. Answer in about six lines.

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- ii) Explain a process in which the Protestant ethic brought about rationalisation of Christian belief which was favourable for the emergence of capitalism in Europe Answer in about five lines.

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<p>Activity 1</p> <p>Is there a word for rationality in your mother-tongue? If yes, provide the term and give its definition.</p>
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17.3.3 Types of Rationality: ‘Zweckrationalitat’ and ‘Wertrationalitat’

After reading the above sub-sections you may have concluded that rationality is a characteristic of modern, capitalist society alone. Does this mean that non-capitalist forms of social organisation are irrational? Well, as students of sociology you know that society has a special meaning and coherence for its members. Each society has its own logic of development, its own mode of order and social relationship. In this sense, all societies, capitalist or non-capitalist have a rationality of their own. Exploring a large variety of social forms and norms, Weber identifies two distinct types of rationality. These are: i) ‘Zweckrationalitat’ or goal oriented/ ends based rationality and ii) ‘Wertrationalitat’ or value-based rationality.

The former is characteristic of modern, capitalist society and flows from goal-oriented social action. Zweckrationalitat refers to rationalisation of means and goals/ ends. Reason and logical thinking are recommended in order to obtain one’s desires.

Wertrationalität, on the contrary, is characteristic of traditional social formations. It is involved with morality and touches upon emotions, sentiments and beliefs. Societal approval of individual action is considered important. Weber believes that traditional societies did have rational elements in their social organisation, but these were defined in terms of values or moral norms.

To give you an illustration, take agriculture in traditional (pre-capitalist) society. When to plough, when to sow or when to harvest the crop was determined by rational requirements of season, temperature or moisture in the soil. But at the same time these occasions were also sanctioned as morally desirable events. Festivities and rituals were prescribed for each of these events. In contrast, in a modern factory (capitalist organisation) all activities are governed mechanically by standards of maximising productivity in terms of means and ends.

Activity 2

See a film or read a short story. Identify five social actions in the film or story. State their types in terms of goal-oriented rationality and value oriented rationality.

17.4 RATIONALITY IN SOCIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION: VALUE-FREE SOCIOLOGY

It has been mentioned earlier that the concept of rationality permeates Weber's work from two distinct but inter-related directions, firstly the actual march of rationalisation as part of the historical process, and secondly as a principle of method, a mode of investigating society. Weber is part of the mainstream of the development of sociology, to which he is amongst the most eminent contributors. He devotes, as other classical sociologists, time to the consideration and elaboration of methods, to the actual utilisation of these methods, and is involved in the important historical ventures of his times.

One of the basic concerns of Max Weber is the relation between science and human action. Here he conceives sociology as a comprehensive science of social action. To Weber, the prime characteristics of the world we live in are rationalisation. The rationalisation characteristic of modern societies is expressed in terms of Zweckrational actions, actions in relation to goals. He also viewed science as an important aspect of the process of rationalisation which is the characteristic of the modern European societies (Aron 1967: 189). As a part of rationalisation, Weber argued, for a 'value-free' social science, a debate that continues even in our own times though in different terms, Weber was a firm advocate of separating the rationality of social inquiry from the attempt to make the world more rational. The personal evaluations of the sociologist he said, must be separate from the analysis of society that he/she conducted. The main points of Weber's value-free sociology can be briefly stated as

- i) Sociologists in their study of society are principally concerned with the analysis and understanding of values, as these are the crucial elements of any society. However, they must not let their own values come in the way of a clear understanding of the subject matter. This is the basic foundation of a value-free sociology.
- ii) Sociologists, as human beings are fundamentally involved in evaluating, or passing certain value-judgements. In so far as they are personally involved, can hardly avoid having or living by values. The values, by which sociology develops, however, are the values by which knowledge and science develop as the commitment to dispassionate inquiry. In this inquiry, the sociologists own experiences of valuing or devaluing are themselves data, giving insight into the meaning and relevance of that which they explore.
- iii) The development of a value-free social science in this sense is necessary for creating a body of reliable and assured knowledge. As to whether such knowledge becomes subsequently cause for action is not within the domain of merely sociology as a discipline. Knowledge can guide action only when the discipline itself becomes reliable.

It bears mentioning, in this context that Weber in addition to being an eminent sociologist was also a politician in the troubled Germany between the two World Wars. He is remembered, both for his sociological studies and political activity as having firmly championed the cause of reason, at a time when it was beset with challenges on all sides. This is a fact we must keep in mind when we consider his plea for a value-free sociology.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Describe Zweckrational society in about three lines.
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- ii) Describe Wertrational society in three lines.
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- iii) Describe the basic idea of a value-free sociology, in about three lines.
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17.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have read about the idea of rationality and its accompanying process, rationalisation, the two key themes in the work of Max Weber.

After learning what these terms mean, you have seen how they were studied by Weber in his analysis of Protestantism, capitalism and bureaucracy. You have also seen how Weber classified rationality into two types namely, 'Zweckrationalitat' and 'Wertrationalitat'. Finally, you have learnt how Weber used rationality in sociological investigation and argued for a value-free sociology.

17.6 KEYWORDS

Authority	Legitimate power that is institutionalised.
Free labour	Free labour is the labour of the contractual labourers who are free to choose their employment, employer and the terms and conditions of employment.
Hypothesis	A statement of inter-related concepts, which may be tested for its validity.
Reason	An explanation or justification of an act, idea etc.
Value	An idea about what is good, right, wise or beneficial.

17.7 FURTHER READING

Aron, R. 1967. *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*. volume 2, Penguin Books: London

Thompson, K. and J. Tunstall (eds). 1971. *Sociological Perspectives*. Penguin Books: Middlesex

17.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) a) specialisation, technological
- ii) b) the external world
- iii) a) F (b) F (c) T

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Rationality appears in two distinct ways in Max Weber's work. First, he studied society as a process of rationalisation: that is the logic of change in society itself from less rational form to or more rational form. Secondly he used rationality as a methodological tool, i.e. a methodological principle, a strategy of inquiry. In this sense rationality is a mode of inquiry that seeks to discover the reason of a social form or development.
- ii) Weber argued that rationalisation of traditional Protestant ethic gave birth to capitalism. The most important rationalisation is the

development of an inner worldly asceticism, a foregoing of consumption in favour of saving and a accumulation among the Protestant believers. Hence believers assume themselves of being included amongst those born to be saved in a religious sense.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Zweckrational society is a capitalist society. This society represents the rationalisation of the means and ends and resorts to reason as an effective instrument to affect one's desires.
- ii) Wertrational society is a traditional society. This society has more to do with morality that touches upon value judgments, emotions, and stresses social approval of individual activity.
- iii) Sociologists in their study of society are primarily concerned with the analysis and understanding of values, as these are crucial elements of any society. However, they must not let his own values come in the way of a clear understanding of that which they undertakes to study.

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