I originally created this web site on Weber (pronounced "Vay-bur") in 1996 for my students in social theory. Most of the paper is fairly standard, it is based on information and insights from standard texts or through other secondary sources. My intention in summarizing this information was simply to present Weber in a fairly coherent and comprehensive manner, using language and structure for the generalists amongst us. I do claim some originality in regard to explaining oligarchy, the rationalization process, and the difference between formal and substantive rationality (what I have called "the irrationality factor"). In fact, I expand on these Weberian themes considerably in my book, Industrializing America: Understanding Contemporary Society through Classical Sociological Analysis. (Yes, I know, bad title. If I had a chance to do it again it would be HyperIndustrialism.) I have found Weber's ideas on rationalization, the irrationality factor, and sociocultural evolution, to be particularly difficult to get across to students. Yet these ideas are at the heart of Weber's sociology and, I believe, central in understanding contemporary society.

Social Action

According to the standard interpretation, Weber conceived of sociology as a comprehensive science of social action (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977). His initial theoretical focus is on the subjective meaning that humans attach to their actions and interactions within specific social contexts. In this connection, Weber distinguishes between four major types of social action:
1. zweckrational
2. wertrational
3. affective action
4. traditional action

Zweckrational can be defined as action in which the means to attain a particular goal are rationally chosen. It can be roughly translated as "technocratic thinking." It is often exemplified in the literature by an engineer who builds a bridge as the most efficient way to cross a river. Perhaps a more relevant example would be the modern goal of material success sought after by many young people today. Many recognize that the most efficient way to attain that success is through higher education, and so they flock to the universities in order to get a good job (Elwell, 1999).

Wertrational, or value-oriented rationality, is characterized by striving for a goal which in itself may not be rational, but which is pursued through rational means. The values come from within an ethical, religious, philosophical or even holistic context--they are not rationally "chosen." The traditional example in the literature is of an individual seeking salvation through following the teachings of a prophet. A more secular example is of a person who attends the university because they value the life of the mind--a value that was instilled in them by parents, previous teachers, or chance encounter (Elwell, 1999).

Affective action is based on the emotional state of the person rather than in the rational weighing of means and ends (Coser, 1977). Sentiments are powerful forces in motivating human behavior. Attending university for the community life of the fraternity, or following one’s boyfriend to school would be examples.
The final type Weber labels "traditional action." This is action guided by custom or habit. People engage in this type of action often unthinkingly, because it is simply "always done." Many students attend university because it is traditional for their social class and family to attend--the expectation was always there, it was never questioned (Elwell, 1999).

Weber's typology is intended to be a comprehensive list of the types of meaning men and women give to their conduct across sociocultural systems (Aron, 1970). As an advocate of multiple causation of human behavior, Weber was well aware that most behavior is caused by a mix of these motivations--university students, even today, have a variety of reasons for attending. In marketing themselves to students, university advertising attempts to address (and encourage) all of these motivations (though a look at some university brochures would indicate a clear attempt to focus on the zweckrational appeal to career aspirations).

But Weber went further than a mere classification scheme. He developed the typology because he was primarily concerned with modern society and how it differs from societies of the past (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977). He proposed that the basic distinguishing feature of modern society was a characteristic shift in the motivation of individual behaviors. In modern society the efficient application of means to ends has come to dominate and replace other springs of social behavior. His classification of types of action provides a basis for his investigation of the social evolutionary process in which behavior had come to be increasingly dominated by goal-oriented rationality (zweckrational)--less and less by tradition, values or emotions.
Because of this focus, Weber is often thought of as an "idealist," one who believes that ideas and beliefs mold social structure and other material conditions. But he committed himself to no such narrow interpretation of sociocultural causation. He believed that this shift in human motivation is one of both cause and effect occurring in interaction with changes in the structural organization of society. The major thrust of his work attempts to identify the factors that have brought about this "rationalization" of the West (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977). While his sociology begins with the individual motivators of social action, Weber does not stay exclusively focused on either the idealist or the social-psychological level. While he proposed that the basic distinguishing feature of modern society was best viewed in terms of this characteristic shift in motivation, he rooted that shift in the growth of bureaucracy and industrialism.

**Ideal Type**

Weber's discussion of social action is an example of the use of an ideal type. An ideal type provides the basic method for historical-comparative study. It is not meant to refer to the "best" or to some moral ideal, but rather to typical or "logically consistent" features of social institutions or behaviors. There can be an "ideal type" whore house or a religious sect, ideal type dictatorship, or an ideal democracy (none of which may be "ideal" in the colloquial sense of the term) (Gerth and Mills, 1946). An ideal type is an analytical construct that serves as a measuring rod for social observers to determine the extent to which concrete social institutions are similar and how they differ from some defined measure (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977).

The ideal type involves determining the features of a social institution that would be present if the institution were a logically consistent whole, not affected by other
institutions, concerns and interests. "As general concepts, ideal types are tools with which Weber prepares the descriptive materials of world history for comparative analysis" (Gerth and Mills, 1946: 60). The ideal type never corresponds to concrete reality but is a description to which we can compare reality. "Ideal Capitalism," for example, is used extensively in social science literature. According to the ideal type, capitalism consists of four basic features:

- Private Ownership of all potentially profitable activity
- Pursuit of Profit
- Competition between companies
- Laissez Faire, or government keeps its hands off the economy

In reality, all capitalist systems deviate from the theoretical construct we call "ideal capitalism." Even the U.S., often considered the most capitalistic nation on earth, strays measurably from the ideal. For example, federal, state and local governments do operate some potentially profitable activities (parks, power companies, and the Post Office come to mind). Many markets in the U.S. are not very competitive, being dominated by large monopolies or oligopolies (and here, the list is endless). Finally, various levels of government do, occasionally, regulate the economy. Still, the ideal construct of capitalism allows us to compare and contrast the economic systems of various societies to this definition, or compare the American economy to itself over time.

**Bureaucracy**

Weber's focus on the trend of rationalization led him to concern himself with the operation and expansion of large-scale enterprises in both the public and private sectors of modern societies (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977). Bureaucracy can be considered
to be a particular case of rationalization, or rationalization applied to human
organization. Bureaucratic coordination of human action, Weber believed, is the
distinctive mark of modern social structures. In order to study these organizations, both
historically and in contemporary society, Weber developed the characteristics of an
ideal-type bureaucracy:

- Hierarchy of authority
- Impersonality
- Written rules of conduct
- Promotion based on achievement
- Specialized division of labor
- Efficiency

According to Weber, bureaucracies are goal-oriented organizations designed according
to rational principles in order to efficiently attain their goals. Offices are ranked in a
hierarchical order, with information flowing up the chain of command, directives flowing
down. Operations of the organizations are characterized by impersonal rules that
explicitly state duties, responsibilities, standardized procedures and conduct of office
holders. Offices are highly specialized. Appointments to these offices are made
according to specialized qualifications rather than ascribed criteria. All of these ideal
characteristics have one goal, to promote the efficient attainment of the organization's

Some have seriously misinterpreted Weber and have claimed that he liked
bureaucracy, that he believed that bureaucracy was an "ideal" organization. Others
have pronounced Weber "wrong" because bureaucracies do not live up to his list of
"ideals." Others have even claimed that Weber "invented" bureaucratic organization. But Weber described bureaucracy as an "ideal type" in order to more accurately describe their growth in power and scope in the modern world. His studies of bureaucracy still form the core of organizational sociology.

The bureaucratic coordination of the action of large numbers of people has become the dominant structural feature of modern societies. It is only through this organizational device that large-scale planning and coordination, both for the modern state and the modern economy, become possible. The consequences of the growth in the power and scope of these organizations is key in understanding our world.

**Authority**

Weber's discussion of authority relations also provides insight into what is happening in the modern world. On what basis do men and women claim authority over others? Why do men and women give obedience to authority figures? Again, he uses the ideal type to begin to address these questions. Weber distinguished three main types of authority:

1. Traditional Authority
2. Rational-legal Authority
3. Charismatic

Rational legal authority is anchored in impersonal rules that have been legally established. This type of authority (which parallels the growth of zweckrational) has come to characterize social relations in modern societies (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977). Traditional authority often dominates pre-modern societies. It is based on the belief in the sanctity of tradition, of "the eternal yesterday" (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977). Because
of the shift in human motivation, it is often difficult for modern students to conceive of the hold that tradition has in pre-modern societies.

Unlike rational-legal authority, traditional authority is not codified in impersonal rules but is usually invested in a hereditary line or invested in a particular office by a higher power (Coser, 1977). Finally, charismatic authority rests on the appeal of leaders who claim allegiance because of the force of their extraordinary personalities. Again, it should be kept in mind that Weber is describing an ideal type; he was aware that in empirical reality mixtures will be found in the legitimization of authority (Coser, 1977). The appeal of Jesus Christ, for example, one of the most important charismatics in history, was partly based on tradition as well.

Causality

Weber firmly believed in the multi-causality of social phenomenon. He expressed this causality in terms of probabilities (Aron, 1970; Gerth and Mills, 1946; Coser, 1977). Weber’s notion of probability derives from his recognition of the system character of human societies and therefore the impossibility of making exhaustive predictions. Prediction becomes possible, Weber believed, only within a system of theory that focus our concern on a few social forces out of the wealth of forces and their interactions that make up empirical reality (Freund, 1968: 7-9). Within such constraints, causal certainty in social research is not attainable (nor is it attainable outside the laboratory in natural sciences).

The best that can be done is to focus our theories on the most important relationships between social forces, and to forecast from that theory in terms of probabilities.
In this connection, it is often said that Weber was in a running dialogue with the ghost of Karl Marx. But contrary to many interpretations, Weber was not attempting to refute Marx, he was very respectful of Marx's contributions to understanding human societies. But he did disagree with Marx's assertion of the absolute primacy of material conditions in determining human behavior (Aron, 1970; Gerth and Mills, 1946; Coser, 1977). Weber's system invokes both ideas and material factors as interactive components in the sociocultural evolutionary process. "He was most respectful of Marx's contributions, yet believed, in tune with his own methodology, that that Marx had unduly emphasized one particular causal chain, the one leading from the economic infrastructure to the cultural superstructure" (Coser, 1977: 228). This, Weber believed, could not adequately take into account the complex web of causation linking social structures and ideas.

Weber attempted to show that the relations between ideas and social structures were multiple and varied, and that causal connections went in both directions. While Weber basically agreed with Marx that economic factors were key in understanding the social system, he gave much greater emphasis to the influence and interaction of ideas and values on sociocultural evolution (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977).

Gerth and Mills (1946) summarize Weber's posited relationship between material conditions and ideas in the following passage:

There is no pre-established correspondence between the content of an idea and the interests of those who follow from the first hour. But, in time, ideas are discredited in the face of history unless they point in the direction of conduct that various interests promote. Ideas, selected and reinterpreted from the original
doctrine, do gain an affinity with the interests of certain members of special strata; if they do not gain such an affinity, they are abandoned (Gerth and Mills, 1946: 63).

It is in this light that the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism must be read.

**The Protestant Ethic**

Weber’s concern with the meaning that people give to their actions allowed him to understand the drift of historical change. He believed that rational action within a system of rational-legal authority is at the heart of modern society. His sociology was first and foremost an attempt to explore and explain this shift from traditional to rational action (Aron, 1970). What was it about the West, he asks, that is causing this shift? In an effort to understand these causes, Weber examined the religious and economic systems of many civilizations.

Weber came to believe that the rationalization of action can only be realized when traditional ways of life are abandoned (Coser, 1977). Because of its erosion, modern people may have a difficult time realizing the hold of tradition over pre-industrial peoples. Weber's task was to uncover the forces in the West that caused people to abandon their traditional religious value orientation and encouraged them to develop a desire for acquiring goods and wealth (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977).

After careful study, Weber came to the hypothesis that the protestant ethic broke the hold of tradition while it encouraged men to apply themselves rationally to their work (Gerth and Mills, 1946). Calvinism, he found, had developed a set of beliefs around the concept of predestination. It was believed by followers of Calvin that one could not do good works or perform acts of faith to assure your place in heaven. You
were either among the "elect" (in which case you were in) or you were not. However, wealth was taken as a sign (by you and your neighbors) that you were one of the God's elect, thereby providing encouragement for people to acquire wealth. The protestant ethic therefore provided religious sanctions that fostered a spirit of rigorous discipline, encouraging men to apply themselves rationally to acquire wealth (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977).

Weber studied non-Western cultures as well. He found that several of these pre-industrial societies had the technological infrastructure and other necessary preconditions to begin capitalism and economic expansion, however, capitalism failed to emerge (Gerth and Mills, 1946: 61). The only force missing were the positive sanctions to abandon traditional ways. "By such a comparative analysis of causal sequences, Weber tried to find not only the necessary but the sufficient conditions of capitalism" (Gerth and Mills, 1946: 61). While Weber does not believe that the protestant ethic was the only cause of the rise of capitalism, he believed it to be a powerful force in fostering its emergence (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977; Gerth and Mills, 1946).

Oligarchy

Weber noted the dysfunctions of bureaucracy in terms of the impact that it had on individuals. Its major advantage, efficiency in attaining goals, makes it unwieldy in dealing with individual cases. The impersonality, so important in attaining efficiency of the organization, is dehumanizing. But the concern over bureaucracy's threat to the members of a particular organization has served to overshadow its effects on the larger society. Weber was very concerned about the impact that rationalization and bureaucratization had on sociocultural systems.
By its very nature bureaucracy generates an enormous degree of unregulated and often unperceived social power. Because of bureaucracy's superiority over other forms of organization, they have proliferated and now dominate modern societies. Those who control these organizations, Weber warned, control the quality of our life, and they are largely self-appointed leaders.

Bureaucracy tends to result in oligarchy, or rule by the few officials at the top of the organization. In a society dominated by large formal organizations, there is a danger that social, political and economic power will become concentrated in the hands of the few who hold high positions in the most influential of these organizations.

The issue was first raised by Weber, but it was more fully explored by Robert Michels a sociologist and friend of Weber's. Michels (1915) was a socialist and was disturbed to find that the socialist parties of Europe, despite their democratic ideology and provisions for mass participation, seemed to be dominated by their leaders, just as the traditional conservative parties. He came to the conclusion that the problem lay in the very nature of organizations. He formulated the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy': "Who says organization, says oligarchy."

According to the "iron law" democracy and large scale organization are incompatible. Any large organization, Michels pointed out, is faced with problems of coordination that can be solved only by creating a bureaucracy. A bureaucracy, by design, is hierarchically organized to achieve efficiency--many decisions that have to be made every day cannot be made by large numbers of people in an efficient manner. The effective functioning of an organization therefore requires the concentration of much power in the hands of a few people.
The organizational characteristics that promote oligarchy are reinforced by certain characteristics of both leaders and members of organizations. People achieve leadership positions precisely because they have unusual political skill; they are adept at getting their way and persuading others of the correctness of their views. Once they hold high office, their power and prestige is further increased. Leaders have access and control over information and facilities that are not available to the rank-and-file. They control the information that flows down the channels of communication. Leaders are also strongly motivated to persuade the organization of the rightness of their views, and they use all of their skills, power and authority to do so.

By design of the organization, rank and file are less informed than their "superiors." Finally, from birth, we are taught to obey those in positions of authority. Therefore, the rank and file tend to look to the leaders for policy directives and are generally prepared to allow leaders to exercise their judgment on most matters. Leaders also have control over very powerful negative and positive sanctions to promote the behavior that they desire. They have the power to grant or deny raises, assign workloads, fire, demote and that most gratifying of all sanctions, the power to promote. Most important, they tend to promote junior officials who share their opinions, with the result that the oligarchy become a self-perpetuating one. Therefore, the very nature of large scale organization makes oligarchy within these organizations inevitable. Bureaucracy, by design, promotes the centralization of power in the hands of those at the top of the organization.
Societal Oligarchy

While it is easy to see oligarchy within formal organizations, Weber's views on the inevitability of oligarchy within whole societies are a little more subtle. The social structure of modern society has become dominated by bureaucracy. Bureaucracies are necessary to provide the coordination and control so desperately needed by our complex society (and huge populations). But while modern societies are dependent on formal organization, bureaucracy tends to undermine both human freedom and democracy in the long-run. While government departments are theoretically responsible to the electorate, this responsibility is almost entirely fictional. It often happens, in fact, that the electorate (and even the congress) do not even know what these bureaucracies are doing. Government departments have grown so numerous, so complex, that they cannot be supervised effectively.

The modern era is one of interest-group politics, in which the degree of participation of the ordinary citizen in the forging of political positions is strictly limited. Our impact on political decision making depends, to a large extent, on our membership in organizational structures. The power of these groups, in turn, depend in large part on such organizational characteristics as size of membership; and commitment of membership to the goals of the organization; and wealth of the organization. But it is through organization that we lose control of the decision making process.

Those on top of bureaucratic hierarchies can command vast resources in pursuit of their interests. This power is often unseen and unregulated, which gives the elite at the top of these hierarchies vast social, economic, and political power. The problem is further compounded by huge corporations, economic bureaucracies that have
tremendous impact over our lives, an impact over which we have little control. Our control over corporations is hardly even fictional any longer. Not only do these economic bureaucracies affect us directly, they also affect our governments--organizations supposedly designed to regulate them.

To quote Peter Blau on this topic: "The most pervasive feature that distinguishes contemporary life is that it is dominated by large, complex, and formal organizations. Our ability to organize thousands and even millions of men in order to accomplish large-scale tasks--be they economic, political, or military--is one of our greatest strengths. The possibility that free men become mere cogs in the bureaucratic machines we set up for this purpose is one of the greatest threats to our liberty."

**Rationalization**

The rationalization process is the practical application of knowledge to achieve a desired end. It leads to efficiency, coordination, and control over both the physical and the social environment. It is a product of "scientific specialization and technical differentiation" that seems to be a characteristic of Western culture (Freund, 1968). It is the guiding principle behind bureaucracy and the increasing division of labor. It has led to the unprecedented increase in both the production and distribution of goods and services. It is also associated with secularization, depersonalization, and oppressive routine. Increasingly, human behavior is guided by observation, experiment and reason (zweckrational) to master the natural and social environment to achieve a desired end (Elwell, 1999).

Freund (1968: 18) defines it as "the organization of life through a division and coordination of activities on the basis of exact study of men's relations with each other,
with their tools and their environment, for the purpose of achieving greater efficiency and productivity." Weber's general theory of rationalization (of which bureaucratization is but a particular case) refers to increasing human mastery over the natural and social environment. In turn, these changes in social structure have changed human character through changing values, philosophies, and beliefs. Such superstructural norms and values as individualism, efficiency, self-discipline, materialism, and calculability (all of which are subsumed under Weber's concept of zweckrational) have been encouraged by the bureaucratization process.

Bureaucracy and rationalization were rapidly replacing all other forms of organization and thought. They formed a stranglehold on all sectors of Western society:

It is horrible to think that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving toward bigger ones--a state of affairs which is to be seen once more, as in the Egyptian records, playing an ever increasing part in the spirit of our present administrative systems, and especially of its offspring, the students. This passion for bureaucracy ...is enough to drive one to despair. It is as if in politics. . . we were to deliberately to become men who need "order" and nothing but order, become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it. That the world should know no men but these: it is in such an evolution that we are already caught up, and the great question is, therefore, not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parceling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life.
Rationalization is the most general element of Weber’s theory. He identifies rationalization with an increasing division of labor, bureaucracy and mechanization (Gerth and Mills, 1946). He associates it with depersonalization, oppressive routine, rising secularism, as well as being destructive of individual freedom (Gerth and Mills, 1946; Freund, 1968).

The Irrationality Factor

Since it is clear that modern societies are so pervasively dominated by bureaucracy it is crucial to understand why this enormous power is often used for ends that are counter to the interests and needs of people (Elwell, 1999). Why is it that "as rationalization increases, the irrational grows in intensity"? (Freund, 1968: 25). Again, the rationalization process is the increasing dominance of zweckrational action over rational action based on values, or actions motivated by traditions and emotions. Zweckrational can best be understood as "technocratic thinking," in which the goal is simply to find the most efficient means to whatever ends are defined as important by those in power.

Technocratic thinking can be contrasted with wertrational, which involves the assessment of goals and means in terms of ultimate human values such as social justice, peace, and human happiness. Weber maintained that even though a bureaucracy is highly rational in the formal sense of technical efficiency, it does not follow that it is also rational in the sense of the moral acceptability of its goals or the means used to achieve them. Nor does an exclusive focus on the goals of the organization necessarily coincide with the broader goals of society as a whole. It often happens that the single-minded pursuit of practical goals can actually undermine the
foundations of the social order (Elwell, 1999). What is good for the bureaucracy is not always good for the society as a whole--and often, in the long term, is not good for the bureaucracy either.

In a chapter entitled "How Moral Men Make Immoral Decisions," John De Lorean, a former General Motors executive (and famous for many things) muses over business morality. "It seemed to me, and still does, that the system of American business often produces wrong, immoral and irresponsible decisions, even though the personal morality of the people running the business is often above reproach. The system has a different morality as a group than the people do as individuals, which permits it to willfully produce ineffective or dangerous products, deal dictatorially and often unfairly with suppliers, pay bribes for business, abrogate the rights of employees by demanding blind loyalty to management or tamper with the democratic process of government through illegal political contributions" (J. Wright, 1979: 61-62). De Lorean goes on to speculate that this immorality is connected to the impersonal character of business organization. Morality, John says, has to do with people. "If an action is viewed primarily from the perspective of its effect on people, it is put into the moral realm. . . .Never once while I was in General Motors management did I hear substantial social concern raised about the impact of our business on America, its consumers or the economy" (J. Wright, 1979: 62-63).

One of the most well-documented cases of the irrationality factor in business concerns the Chevrolet Corvair (Watergate, the IRS, the Post Office, recent elections, and the Department of Defense provide plenty of government examples). Introduced to the American Market in 1960, several compromises between the original design and
what management ultimately approved were made for financial reasons. "Tire diameter was cut, the aluminum engine was modified, the plush interior was downgraded and a $15 stabilizing bar was deleted from the suspension system" (R. Wright, 1996). As a result, a couple of the prototypes rolled over on the test tracks and it quickly became apparent that GM had a problem (J. Wright, 1979; R. Wright, 1996). De Lorean again takes up the story.

At the very least, then, within General Motors in the late 1950s, serious questions were raised about the Corvair's safety. At the very most, there was a mountain of documented evidence that the car should not be built as it was then designed. . .

The results were disastrous. I don't think any one car before or since produced as gruesome a record on the highway as the Corvair. It was designed and promoted to appeal to the spirit and flair of young people. It was sold in part as a sports car. Young Corvair owners, therefore, were trying to bend their car around curves at high speeds and were killing themselves in alarming numbers (J. Wright, 1979: 65-66).

The denial and cover-up led the corporation to ignore the evidence, even as the number of lawsuits mounted--even as the sons and daughters of executives of the corporation were seriously injured or killed (J. Wright, 1979). When Ralph Nader (1965) published his book that detailed the Corvair's problems, Unsafe at Any Speed, the response of GM was to assign a private detective to follow him so as to gather information to attack him personally rather than debate his facts and assertions (Halberstam, 1986; J. Wright, 1979; R. Wright, 1996). Internal documents were destroyed, and pressure was put on executives and engineers alike to be team players (J. Wright, 1979). De Lorean summarizes the irrational character of the bureaucracy's decision making process:
There wasn't a man in top GM management who had anything to do with the Corvair who would purposely build a car that he knew would hurt or kill people. But, as part of a management team pushing for increased sales and profits, each gave his individual approval in a group to decisions which produced the car in the face of the serious doubts that were raised about its safety, and then later sought to squelch information which might prove the car's deficiencies (J. Wright, 1979: 65-68).

The result was that despite the existence of many moral men within the organization, many immoral decisions were made.

An extreme case of rationalization was the extermination camps of Nazi Germany. The goal was to kill as many people as possible in the most efficient manner, and the result was the ultimate of dehumanization—the murder of millions of men, women and children. The men and women who ran the extermination camps were, in large part, ordinary human beings. They were not particularly evil people. Most went to church on Sundays; most had children, loved animals and life. William Shirer (1960) comments on business firms that collaborated in the building and running of the camps: “There had been, the records show, some lively competition among German businessmen to procure orders for building these death and disposal contraptions and for furnishing the lethal blue crystals. The firm of I. A. Topf and Sons of Erfurt, manufacturers of heating equipment, won out in its bid for the crematoria at Auschwitz. The story of its business enterprise was revealed in a voluminous correspondence found in the records of the camp. A letter from the firm dated February 12, 1943, gives the tenor:

To: The Central Construction Office of the S.S. and Police, Auschwitz

Subject: Crematoria 2 and 3 for the camp.
We acknowledge receipt of your order for five triple furnaces, including two electric elevators for raising corpses and one emergency elevator. A practical installation for stoking coal was also ordered and one for transporting ashes (Shirer, 1960: 971).

The “lethal blue crystals” of Zyklon-B used in the gas chambers were supplied by two German firms which had acquired the patent from I. G. Farben (Shirer, 1960). Their product could do the most effective job for the least possible cost, so they got the contract. Shirer (1960) summarizes the organization of evil. “Before the postwar trials in Germany it had been generally believed that the mass killings were exclusively the work of a relatively few fanatical S.S. leaders. But the records of the courts leave no doubt of the complicity of a number of German businessmen, not only the Krupps and the directors of I.G. Farben chemical trust but smaller entrepreneurs who outwardly must have seemed to be the most prosaic and decent of men, pillars--like good businessmen everywhere--of their communities” (972-973). In sum, the extermination camps and their suppliers were models of bureaucratic efficiency using the most efficient means available at that time to accomplish the goals of the Nazi government.

But German corporations went beyond supplying the government with the machinery of death, some actively participated in the killing process. "This should occasion neither surprise nor shock. I.G. Farben was one of the first great corporate conglomerates. Its executives merely carried the logic of corporate rationality to its ultimate conclusion...the perfect labor force for a corporation that seeks fully to minimize costs and maximize profits is slave labor in a death camp. Among the great German corporations who
utilized slave labor were AEG (German General Electric), Wanderer-Autounion (Audi), Krupp, Rheinmetall Borsig, Siemens-Schuckert and Telefunken" (Rubenstein, 1975: 58).

I.G. Farben's synthetic rubber (Buna) plants at Auschwitz are a good example of the relationship between corporate profits and Nazi goals. I.G. Farben's investment in the plant at Auschwitz was considerable--over $1,000,000,000 in 1970s American dollars. The construction work required 170 contractors and subcontractors, housing had to be built for the corporate personnel, barracks for the workers. SS guards supplied by the state would administer punishment when rules were broken. The workers at the plants were treated as all other inmates in the camp. The only exception was one of diet, workers in the plants would receive an extra ration of "Buna soup" to maintain "a precisely calculated level of productivity" (Rubenstein, 1975: 58). Nor was any of this hidden from corporate executives; they were full participants in the horror. With an almost inexhaustible supply of workers, the corporation simply worked their slave laborers to death.

The fact that individual officials have specialized and limited responsibility and authority within the organization means that they are unlikely to raise basic questions regarding the moral implications of the overall operation of the organization. Under the rule of specialization, society becomes more and more intricate and interdependent, but with less common purpose. The community disintegrates because it loses its common bond. The emphasis in bureaucracies is on getting the job done in the most efficient manner possible. Consideration of what impact organizational behavior might have on
society as a whole, on the environment, or on the consumer simply does not enter into the calculation.

The problem is further compounded by the decline of many traditional institutions such as the family, community, and religion, which served to bind pre-industrial man to the interests of the group. Rationalization causes the weakening of traditional and religious moral authority (secularization); the values of efficiency and calculability predominate. In an advanced industrial-bureaucratic society, everything becomes a component of the expanding machine, including human beings (Elwell, 1999). C. Wright Mills, whose social theory was strongly influenced by Weber, describes the problem:

It is not the number of victims or the degree of cruelty that is distinctive; it is the fact that the acts committed and the acts that nobody protests are split from the consciousness of men in an uncanny, even a schizophrenic manner. The atrocities of our time are done by men as "functions" of social machinery--men possessed by an abstracted view that hides from them the human beings who are their victims and, as well, their own humanity. They are inhuman acts because they are impersonal. They are not sadistic but merely businesslike; they are not aggressive but merely efficient; they are not emotional at all but technically clean-cut (C. Wright Mills, 1958: 83-84).

The result is a seeming paradox--bureaucracies, the epitome of rationalization, acting in very irrational ways. Thus we have economic bureaucracies in pursuit of profit that deplete and pollute the environment upon which they are based; political bureaucracies, set up to protect our civil liberties, that violate them with impunity; Agricultural
bureaucracies (educational, government, and business) set up to help the farmer, that end up putting millions of these same farmers out of business; Service bureaucracies designed to care for and protect the elderly, that routinely deny service and actually engage in abuse. The irrationality of bureaucratic institutions is a major factor in understanding contemporary society. Weber called this formal rationalization as opposed to substantive rationality (the ability to anchor actions in the consideration of the whole). It can also be called the irrationality of rationalization, or more generally, the irrationality factor (Elwell, 1999). The irrationality of bureaucratic institutions is a major factor is understanding contemporary society.

**Weber and Marx**

Weber believed that Marxist theory was too simplistic, reducing all to a single economic cause (Gerth and Mills, 1946). However, Weber does not attempt to refute Marx, rather he can be interpreted as an attempt to round out Marx's economic determinism (Gerth and Mills, 1946).

"Weber's views about the inescapable rationalization and bureaucratization of the world have some obvious similarities to Marx's notion of alienation. Both men agree that modern methods of organization have tremendously increased the effectiveness and efficiency of production and organization and have allowed an unprecedented domination of man over the world of nature. They also agree that the new world of rationalized efficiency has turned into a monster that threatens to dehumanize its creators. But Weber disagrees with Marx's claim that alienation is only a transitional stage on the road to man's true emancipation" (Coser, 1977: 232).
Weber believed that the alienation documented by Marx had little to do with the ownership of the mode of production, but was a consequence of bureaucracy and the rationalization of social life.

Marx asserted that capitalism has led to the "expropriation" of the worker from the mode of production. He believed that the modern worker is not in control of his fate, is forced to sell his labor (and thus his self) to private capitalists. Weber countered that loss of control at work was an inescapable result of any system of rationally coordinated production (Coser, 1977). Weber argued that men could no longer engage in socially significant action unless they joined a large-scale organization. In joining organizations they would have to sacrifice their personal desires and goals to the impersonal goals and procedures of the organization itself (Coser, 1977). By doing so, they would be cut off from a part of themselves, they would become alienated.

Socialism and capitalism are both economic systems based on industrialization—the rational application of science, observation, and reason to the production of goods and services. Both capitalism and socialism are forms of a rational organization of economic life to control and coordinate this production. Socialism is predicated on government ownership of the economy to provide the coordination to meet the needs of people within society. If anything, Weber maintained, socialism would be even more rationalized, even more bureaucratic than capitalism. And thus, more alienating to human beings as well (Gerth and Mills, 1946: 49).

**Sociocultural Evolution**

According to Weber, because bureaucracy is a form of organization superior to all others, further bureaucratization and rationalization may be an inescapable fate.
"Without this form of (social) technology the industrialized countries could not have reached the heights of extravagance and wealth that they currently enjoy. All indications are that they will continue to grow in size and scope." Weber wrote of the evolution of an iron cage, a technically ordered, rigid, dehumanized society: "It is apparent that today we are proceeding towards an evolution which resembles (the ancient kingdom of Egypt) in every detail, except that it is built on other foundations, on technically more perfect, more rationalized, and therefore much more mechanized foundations. The problem which besets us now is not: how can this evolution be changed?--for that is impossible, but: what will come of it." Weber feared that our probable future would be even more bureaucratized, an iron cage that limits individual human potential rather than a technological utopia that sets us free (Aron, 1970; Coser, 1977).

It is perhaps fitting to close with a quote from Max engaged in speculation on the other future possibilities of industrial systems. While Weber had a foreboding of an "iron cage" of bureaucracy and rationality, he recognized that human beings are not mere subjects molded by sociocultural forces. We are both creatures and creators of sociocultural systems. And even in a sociocultural system that increasingly institutionalizes and rewards goal oriented rational behavior in pursuit of wealth and material symbols of status there are other possibilities: "No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals or, if neither, mechanized petrification embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists
without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has obtained a level of civilization never before achieved" (Weber, 1904/1930: 181).

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