

Extract of **On the Disenchantment of the World**

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“When I heard the learn’d astronomer,/ When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,/ When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,/ When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with/much applause in the lecture-room,/ How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,/ Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,/ In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,/ Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.”¹

Disillusioned with the rational de-romanticization of nature, the great American poet Walt Whitman, in *When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer*, laments the reduction of stars, objects of sublimity and transcendental wonder, into a bland scientific narrative. Only till he escapes the astronomer’s lecture and wanders into the wild is he able to free himself from the confinement of rationality and contemplate the perfection of nature. Whitman’s frustration speaks to the very disenchantment described by Max Weber. As the world becomes “rationalized and intellectualized”, “sublime values retreat from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life”.² Whitman’s transcendentalism, which has come to be ridiculed by the many champions of modern rationalism, perfectly exemplifies the tension between spiritual beliefs and scientific reasoning resulted from the rise of rationalization in the post-Enlightenment world. In light of this seemingly irreconcilable conflict, I aim to accomplish the following tasks in this essay. First, I will explain the disenchantment of the world in relation to the rise of modern science and rationality. Next, I will analyze the consequences of disenchantment concerning the value and moral fragmentation of modern society and the paradox of modernity and modernization. Lastly, I argue that, while Weber’s observation of the world’s disenchantment is sound, his preoccupation with rationalization as the fundamental driver of disenchantment invites critical re-interrogation.

¹ Whitman, Walt, and Stephen Alonzo Schoff. *Leaves of Grass*. Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860, 214.

² Gerth, H.H., and C. Wright Mills (eds.), 1946. From Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology*, “Science as a Vocation”. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946, 155

The rise of modern sciences and rationality is key to understanding Weber's disenchantment of the world. For Weber, disenchantment is the devaluation of the religious pre-modern worldviews through rationalization, where sciences become the antithetical authority of religion. Due to the rise of modern sciences, which exercise the capacity for rationality and alienates human society from nature, the old religious understanding of the world, one that was rooted in non-empirical narratives and non-rational beliefs of what the world ought to be, is cast into obsolescence and out of the public sphere of legitimate knowledge. Our perception of the modern world undergoes waves of secularization as the religiosity of the pre-modern world is disparaged as scientifically unrationalizable and opposing the intellectual exercise of reason. The old philosophical and religious contemplation of the meaning of life and death that once united communities in former times is replaced by "technical means and calculations" in the name of modern science.³ Whereas belief and religion define the "great enchanted garden" of the former world⁴, their depreciation and delegitimization through modern scientific rationalization define the very essence of the disenchanted world.

I interpret the consequences of disenchantment as a series of continual dialectics and paradoxes in both the realm of human morality and modernity. Under Weber's grant navigation of the self-contradictory imagery of the world, it is no surprise that disenchantment creates and destroys at the same time. This paradoxical notion of simultaneous creation and destruction can be first understood in the moral ramifications of the disenchantment of the world. Weber views disenchantment as a destructive force of a unified worldview and moral foundation as modern specialization promotes distinct rationalities, subsequently creating and justifying conflicting value systems. However, at the same time, disenchantment creates the re-enchantment of moral pluralization. As poetically articulated by Weber, as God comes to his demise, many old gods "ascend from their graves they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces, and strive to gain power over our lives and again and resume their eternal struggle with one another".⁵ Employing metaphors of the divine, Weber parallels the pluralization and fragmentation of modern value systems with a symbolic polytheistic re-enchantment of the world. Religion was once the monotheistic God of the world, the one true system of value-creation, and now,

³ Gerth, H.H., and C. Wright Mills (eds.), 1946. From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, "Science as a Vocation". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946, 139-140

⁴ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (1971) p. 270

⁵ Gerth, H.H., and C. Wright Mills (eds.), 1946. From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, "Science as a Vocation". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946, 149

paradoxically, the disunified secular value systems legitimized by diverse modern rationalities become the new polytheistic warring deities of the world, multiple and contradictory, competing to gain dominance over people's life conducts. Therefore, the disenchantment of the world, in its ongoing dialects of destruction and creation, disenchantment and re-enchantment, leads to the pluralization and thus conflicts of modern value systems in the moral realm of modern society. Consequently, individuals become reluctant to transcend their comfortable bubble of moral relativism to take principled moral action, descending into "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart".⁶ The loss of individual moral imagination in modern society is the ultimate nullity of the disenchantment of the world.

With the loss of principled moral agents, the disenchanted world further creates a paradox of modernity and modernization. Weber's navigation of societal transformations confronts the German value of "Bildung", a sense of self-cultivation and personal self-development.⁷ Thereby, I construe that, for Weber, modernity in its truest form is a notion of humanity grounded in self-cultivation that cannot be devoid of individuals' thoughtful exploration of their relationships with the unique historical development of cultural and social values. In contrast, modernization disenchantments the world through rationalization and traps individuals in the "iron cage" where life becomes solely reliant on control, efficiency, and "a calculation involving only the cool intellect and not one's heart and soul".⁸ Thus, modernization, derailing individuals from paths of moral agency, freedom, and holistic self-development that extends beyond the rational façade of knowledge, ironically fails the project of humane and moral modernity. The motif of contradiction and paradox continues in the tension between modernity and modernization resulted from the disenchantment of the world.

Indeed, in modern society, one's social actions are often rationalized by the fragmented and diverse value systems that render it possible for one to orient his or her action towards "deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self-interest".⁹ Therefore, theoretically, the concept of rationality makes everything, including irrationality, rationalizable and justifiable. Conflicts then arise from conflicting values. As claimed by Qutb, an Egyptian author who turned away from his secularist tendencies towards Islamic sharia, by alienating the sacred

⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 182.

⁷ Ringer, Fritz K., and Jane Bendix. *Max Weber's Methodology: the Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

⁸ Gerth, H.H., and C. Wright Mills (eds.), 1946. From Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology*, "Science as a Vocation". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946, 139

⁹ Weber, Max, Guenther Roth, and Claus Wittich. *Economy and Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013, 30.

from the secular, modernity creates a “hideous schizophrenia” of the world where “spirituality and modern life are constantly at odds with each other”.¹⁰ Qutb believes that only by restoring the shariah to its rightful place as the law of society, humanity can liberate themselves from the rule of man. The passionate advocacy for the restoration of pre-modern enchantment is not only a testimony to the frustration with modern rationalization that delegitimizes the spiritual realm of life, but also ironically in itself a manifestation of the rationalization of the world observed by Weber as Qutb justifies his belief through value rationality, where his actions are “determined by his(a) conscious belief in the value for its own sake of (some) ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other forms of behavior”.¹¹ The value fragmentation of the disenchanted world is hard to dispute. Marx’s inspection of the division of labor that debases workers to thoughtless machines of production¹², lends further support to Weber’s observation of disenchantment, where adherence to the principles of rationality curbs one’s sense of self-development. Likewise, borrowing from *the Communist Manifesto*, Berman notices the trend of disenchantment as he suggests that, under the revolution of rationalization and modern production, people’s “train of ancient and venerable opinions are swept away, all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind”.¹³ Therefore, my agreement with Weber’s theory lies in the objective existence of the phenomenon of the world’s disenchantment.

However, I question the primacy of modern sciences and rationalization as the fundamental impetus to the world’s disenchantment, as suggested by Weber. In the Marxist discourse of historical materialism, the material conditions of a society's mode of production fundamentally determine all facets of society's development.¹⁴ If critiqued against the materialist tradition, rationalization can be further attributed to an economically-determined politics of knowledge, by which I mean the process whereby changing relations of production and consequently power relations among social groups shape the prevailing value paradigms in society. Changes in prevailing economic conditions lead to changes in the authority of knowledge and value production, which then leads to the demise of the old opposing value system and the rise and legitimization of a new one. The Catholic Church in the

¹⁰ Berman, Paul. “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, March 23, 2003.

¹¹ Weber, Max (1978). Guenther Roth; Claus Wittich (eds.). *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 24–6, 399–400.

¹² Marx, Karl *Capital* Vol. I in Tucker

¹³ Berman, Marshall. *All that is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. United Kingdom: Viking Penguin, 1988, 476.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, “Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” in Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1978.

Middle Ages gained itself with such unchallenged economic and political power that Catholic worldviews became the legitimized form of knowledge, the common-sensical value system. Prior non-aligning thoughts were delegitimized and made obsolete as the Church oriented all aspects of social life towards the unified total system of Catholic value. Similarly, as industrialization and Enlightenment gave rise to a new economic order, the old religious authority lost its power to the new property-owning and power-owning figures of society, the bourgeoisie ruling class. The shift from the focus on God as the center of reality to the focus on the self drives individuals' accumulation and pursuit of wealth that ultimately drives the expansion of the capitalist market. Thus, rationalization and modern scientific reasoning became the means for the new institution of authority, that was granted power by the capitalist market, to maintain and solidify their very source of power. Science and rationality were used to replace "religion" and ironically became the "religion" of the modern world, essentially a value system legitimized by the new ruling authority towards which human behavior and beliefs are deliberately oriented. What I want to demonstrate here is the simultaneously timeless and contingent nature of disenchantment dictated by the enduring politics of knowledge. The world undergoes constant disenchantment of the old as prevailing economic and political conditions change, which in turn determines a new paradigm of value and knowledge in the public sphere legitimized by new authorities. Thus, Weber's observation of disenchantment, I believe, is merely a contextualized manifestation of the perennial politics of knowledge with modern contingency determined by modern economic and political conditions. The disenchantment of the world, as a broader social phenomenon, is not a distinct outcome of the rise of rationality and modern sciences, but a reflection of the timeless and universal pattern of social progression where the rise of new power constantly negates the unfavorable and opposing old. Thus, while the disenchantment of the modern world might indeed be shaped by rationalization, its ultimate impetus returns to the politics of knowledge production embedded in the development of material conditions and power relations.

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