

# MAGIC, RATIONALITY, AND MAX WEBER\*

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## ABSTRACT

The notion of magic is central to Weber's empirical studies. His usage is examined and found inadequate; magic restricts the style of social change, but does not prohibit it. A more appropriate definition, in terms of world view, is proposed. Since northern European history reveals a native pattern of individualism and hostility to magic, the question arises whether Protestantism is simply an emergent of tendencies within Christianity or rather a nativistic movement against, and reinterpretation of, a foreign religion. Examination of recent world events also serves to raise questions about Weber's theory that the power of magic could only be disrupted by great, rational prophecy.

Max Weber has occupied a paradoxical position in American sociology. His empirical studies, particularly The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, are widely read and highly esteemed, yet it is his theoretical-conceptual analyses that have most influenced research.<sup>1</sup> For several generations, and perhaps even yet, the greater number of American sociologists have written and studied as if historical and comparative investigations beyond the contemporary and continental U.S.A. were no longer their proper concern within the academic division of labor.<sup>2</sup> Whatever their reason, one consequence is that Weber's empirical studies have tended to be regarded uncritically and to be elevated to the status of proven law or demonstrated fact. To some extent, this is useful: being so established, conscientious sociologists do try to familiarize themselves with some of the studies and, thereby, they enlarge their acquaintance with the history of civilizations. But, there are disadvantages. Research on ancient Israel, China, India, and Europe has made so much progress during the past half-century that to rely on Weber as unquestioned gospel is seriously misleading, both in relation to empirical knowledge and for concepts and theory as well.<sup>3</sup>

The present paper is designed to raise several questions centering about the concepts and theories that Weber bequeathed to us from his empirical researches upon the Protestant ethic and the rise of rational, bourgeois capitalism in Europe. My purpose is, not to demonstrate theories counter to his, but, by introducing fresh data and new concepts to handle them, to open the way for discussion.

## "Magic" in Weber's Empirical Studies

The notion of magic is an appropriate beginning, as it played a key role in Weber's great empirical studies and yet, strikingly, never received a formal definition. Weber did not tell us what he thought magic is, but he argued in a fashion that communicates very well what he thought magic does. In the work, translated into English as the General Economic History, he says that magic is the social entity which gives supernatural sanction to the traditional conduct of life; it involves the stereotyping of technology and economic relations, inasmuch as it invokes the sacred against any attempts to rationalize them. As contemporary illustrations, Weber referred to the conflict with geomancy in China over the location of railroads and factories, and to the caste rules of India, which inhibited the rational assignment of factory labor. As he saw it, the ties of magic have such coercive powers that in all history there has been but one means of breaching them and establishing a rational conduct of life, and this was great rational prophecy, exemplified by that of the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> The illustrations drawn by Weber from China and India were germane to his empirical studies, but they are less than satisfactory for purposes of definition, especially if we wish to draw comparisons with the sociological and anthropological literature on magic, where it is usually analyzed in the context of a primitive or simple society.

Permit me then to apply Weber's notion of magic to a congeries of simple people with whom I have some familiarity, the Indians of North America. It is particularly illuminating to examine the history of American Indian-European White interaction. Persistently and strenuously, the Whites have tried to modify the native cultures and infuse them with the rational spirit of the West. Equally persistently, the Indians have rejected these attempts, and while the White efforts have sometimes been effective in provoking social disorganization, they have not so far stimulated a rationalization of Indian society. Occasionally, Indian prophets of a reforming spirit, and even utilizing a certain degree of Christian symbolism, have initiated religious movements among their peoples, and these have sometimes brought new institutional patterns into being, yet there has been no association with rationalization. Thus, in every way, the Indian peoples seem to exemplify Weber's notion of the resistance magic offers to attempts at rationalizing life activities.

Yet, from the very first contact with the Whites, the Indian peoples have freely adopted many technological developments. Some, like the domesticated horse, were utilized in bold and striking fashion and were made the basis for total social and cultural reorganization. Indeed, Plains Indian culture, which arose in this fashion, was generally so constituted that magic could be used as a device for sanctioning innovation.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Weber's notion of "magic," as the central and conservative support to traditional ways of acting, does not really seem to fit the case of the American Indian. One might attempt to argue on Weber's behalf that the magic of China, India, or other non-Western civilizations was different from the magic of simple peoples, such as the Indians of the Great Plains, but once such a dichotomy in the notion of magic is granted, much more of his argument would have to be revised.

## The Magical World View

A full and critical discussion of the problems of defining magic cannot be given here. Interested persons are referred to the monograph, Religion und Kultus, by the eminent Scandinavian theological historian, Sigmund Mowinckel,<sup>6</sup> and to essays by Murray and Rosalie Wax.<sup>7</sup> In briefest outline, their analyses are highly critical of the definitions of magic that are conventionally to be found in the sociological and anthropological literature. Weber's usage of the term, too, is misleading, but he comes off better than such worthies as Durkheim, Frazer, or Malinowski,<sup>8</sup> perhaps because he committed himself to less in the way of definition. In any case, the basic difficulty with these definitions is their ethnocentrism: instead of describing and characterizing magic, they compare it invidiously with Western science, Western religion, or Western morality and rationality. Then, too, many scholars further confuse the issue by equating magic with witchcraft or sorcery.

Mowinckel and the Waxes have argued that magic can best be understood as a world view, a distinct, consistent, and sensible perception of reality, wholly different from the views characteristic of Western civilization, and, yet, in one form or another, extremely common among the peoples of the earth. People who view the world magically see the entities that comprise it - animals, plants, mountains, stars, and so on - as related to each other by the same forms of social organization and with the same feelings and sentiments as they among themselves. Appearance or physical form is regarded as a vestment that can be altered under proper circumstances and that is irrelevant to the capacity for sociable interaction. One can even put the matter more formally by saying that the magical world violates the first principle of Aristotlean logic, namely that a thing either has or does not have a specific property. The Aristotlean concern with differentiating entities sharply and neatly is directly antithetic to the magical view which seeks to locate and utilize the social interrelatedness and empathic interconnectedness of all beings.

This new characterization of magic, as a world view, fits extremely well with Weber's statement about its conservative force, providing this is understood in the sense of resistance to "rationalization" of conduct and institutions. When people view the world magically, the patterns of action that seem to them socially correct and productive of health and harmony are ones designed to establish the proper feelings and relationships among the various beings of the world. Given the proper supernatural sanction, they are quite willing to modify a given item of behavior, as we have noted in the case of the Indians of North America. Magic is not then a cultural refrigerator freezing actions into a stereotyped mold, but it is a mode of perceiving the world that is entirely contrary to the rationalistic orientation of the West. Accordingly, proposals for change which are formulated and justified within the Western orientation are resisted because they usually impress the recipient peoples as being misguided, naive, immoral, or positively dangerous.

## The Disruption of Magical Ties

Whether or not the reader agrees with this redefinition of magic and the consequent rephrasing of Weber's theory as to its support of tradition against rationalization, a number of empirical questions yet must be faced. Weber argued that the great prophets of Judaism and Christianity delivered a message of such anti-magical force that the way was prepared for the distinctively rational civilization of Europe. Now over the centuries, Christianity has been spread to the corners of the earth, and in many cases it has taken some kind of root. To what extent or in what way has its effect been one of disruption of native magical attitudes and the creation of rational ones? In particular, when has the spread of Christianity been associated with the development of rational forms of social organization, such as bourgeois capitalism, and when not?

The question might be reversed, in the following fashion: In recent years we have witnessed social and political revolutions in a number of so-called under-developed countries, which, we may assume, were heavily magical in their outlook during years preceding. In some cases, there has been the emergence of relatively more rational forms of social organization, e.g. relatively more efficient national bureaucracies. Was the road for these developments paved by missionary Christianity, or by the more secular prophecy of Marxism, or how?

The anthropologist and Indic specialist, Milton Singer, has pointed out the opportunity for a "new Weber," who is likely to be not one man overwhelmed by masses of data, but several or several dozen scholars who would reexamine the theories of their predecessor in the light of the new empirical evidence.<sup>9</sup> One question they might well ask is whether there are any equivalents to great rational prophecy in disrupting the magical view of the world and opening the way for the rationalization of life activities.

## Protestantism and European Rationality

Even the case of Europe itself, despite the brilliance of Weber's analysis, remains open to question. Essentially, he operated on the same assumptions as most persons who receive a "classical" education. They ignore the folk cultures of pre-Christian Europe and regard its civilization as simply the transplanted continuation of classical antiquity (Rome, Greece, and Israel). Thus, for Weber, the important element in European rationalism was Judaeo-Christianity, supplemented by such factors as Roman law. Yet, ascetic Protestantism and rational, bourgeois capitalism came into full flower in northern Europe, not about the Mediterranean basin nor elsewhere in the Christianized world. This might seem a trivial case of happen-stance, except that such analysis as can be done through historical documents indicates the presence natively of some unusual attitudes among the Northern peoples. Literature deriving from heathen times reveals a world organized about magical relationships.<sup>10</sup> But, later literature, some of it pre-Christian and the rest but little influenced by the Christian message, exhibits a disenchantment of significant areas of the world, a corresponding rationalization of conduct, and an emphasis upon individualism.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that some of the European

rationality which impressed Weber as so distinctive was more than a transplantation of Judaeo-Christian and other attitudes from the classical Mediterranean civilizations, but represented a merger between them and a native European movement toward rationality. Equally important, these data suggests that Protestantism was more than an emergent of tendencies within Christianity and was very much a reinterpretation of Judaeo-Christian materials by peoples with vital cultures, traditions, and religious ideals of their own.

Much of sociological terminology for the analysis of religious movements is really a generalization from the European and American history of Protestant sectarianism. The result is a set of concepts that are inevitably ethnocentric, as if the patterns of development of these sects represent general laws of religious movements everywhere and at all times. The alternative hypothesis is that at least some of the distinctive features of Protestant sectarianism represent a nativistic and populist revival of original North European attitudes against foreign influences, particularly those deriving ultimately from Mediterranean civilization. When we observe how universal has been the tendency for a people to incorporate a world religion, like Christianity, into their own culture and reinterpret it, rejecting the original missionaries, the schema for Protestantism has more plausibility. (Incidentally, I am neither ignoring nor denying the frequency with which such movements - in Europe and elsewhere - derive support from local political leaders, like Henry VIII, seeking power and gain.) Certainly, the individualism and anarchic congregationalism of the Protestant sects cannot be traced back to Christian or Old Testament Jewish sources, and comparative examination will not sustain the theory that these features derive from the elementary collective behavior presumed to be universally characteristic of the origin of sects: on the other hand, these key features can easily be linked to Old Scandinavian traditions.

We may conclude by summarizing the basic questions that have been raised in this paper: First, what is the nature of magic and how does it act so as to support traditional patterns of action against attempts to rationalize them? Second, besides great rational prophecy, as exemplified by pre-Exilic Judaism, are there any social forces capable of disrupting significant portions of the magical orientation to the world and thus opening the way to rationalization of action? Third, is there a significant contribution from the local North European cultures that, blending with that from classical antiquity, resulted in the rise of ascetic Protestantism and of rational, bourgeois capitalism? And, finally, if the sociologists are to maintain their claim to Max Weber, as one of their great ancestral figures, then what does this imply for the definition of appropriate sociological tasks and learning?

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## FOOTNOTES

1. This distorted emphasis has been noted by several scholars, including Reinhard Bendix, Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1960, pp. 19-21.
2. Everett Cherrington Hughes, "Ethnocentric Sociology," (address delivered to the Southern Sociological Society, April, 1961). Social Forces, 40 (October, 1961), 1-4.
3. It is instructive to compare reviews in the official sociological and anthropological journals and also reviews as they have appeared in British with ones in U.S. journals of recent translations of Weber (and books about him). The anthropological and sociological reviews of the English translation of The Religion of India were each written by scholars acquainted with the area and interested in the theoretical contributions of Weber's study. Milton Singer addressed himself to the accuracy of Weber's description and the theoretical implications of the more significant omissions and errors, American Anthropologist, 63 (February, 1961), pp. 145-151. Robert N. Bellah devoted his review to the problem of how the study of India fitted into Weber's general strategy, merely noting that there were minor errors in the detail of the discussion, American Sociological Review, 24 (October, 1959), pp. 731-33.

Reviewing Bendix' "Portrait" the British sociologist, T.H. Marshall, concludes by pointing out that, influential as Weber is for modern sociology, sociologists are not attempting to do what he did, and he raises the question, "whether in order to continue the work which Weber so magnificently started, it is necessary for sociologists to become historians, or perhaps for historians to become sociologists - or both," The British Journal of Sociology, 12 (June, 1961), pp. 184-88. In contrast, Talcott Parsons' review of the book concludes with giving high priority "to an assessment of the importance of Weber's theoretical contribution as such, and to a broader treatment of the place of Weber in intellectual history." When he refers to the empirical investigations, it is simply to say, respectfully, that "the problems faced by any critic who seeks to refute the thesis within that (enormously comprehensive) framework are formidable indeed," American Sociological Review, 25 (October, 1960), pp. 750-52.

Singer and Marshall have taken Weber's studies as a challenge; both are highly aware of its empirical strengths and limitations and they point the way for further investigations. Bellah does note the need for completing the program of comparative study that Weber outlined for himself, but, all in all, it would be fair to say that he and Parsons regard Weber's work as a finished accomplishment.

4. General Economic History, Trans. F.H. Knight, New York: Greenberg, 1927, chap. xxx. Magic and rationality are two correlative ideas basic to Weber's empirical investigations. His "study of the Protestant ethic merely explored one phase of that 'disenchantment of the world,' that Weber regarded as the distinguishing peculiarity of Western culture," Bendix, op. cit., p. 90.

It should also be mentioned that for Weber magic (and heathenism) was associated with orgiasticism and ecstatic rites. Weber's use of the term, magic, seems markedly affected by the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, and his conceptual handling of it is less than precise. Like J.G. Frazer, he tended to speak of magic in characterizing both the civilized societies of antiquity (Egypt, China) and the small societies of technologically primitive peoples.

Insofar as magic is the counterpart of rationality in the Weberian sense, and inasmuch as rationality so conceived includes the notion of a systematic and methodical style of life, then the inclusion of orgiasticism and ecstatic rite within the compass of "magic" becomes intelligible. But the magic so defined becomes a special entity, an ideal type, and something quite different from the term as contemporaneously employed by anthropologists and kindred students of religion. For instance, Malinowski included within the range of the term, "Magic," behavior that was humdrum, routine, and free from emotional displays, "Magic, Science and Religion," Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays, Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday Anchor, 1948, 70, 73.

5. "I consider an observation of Clark Wissler's highly illuminating. He had procured some phonograph records from the lips of an aged Black-foot and, by way of making conversation, enlarged on the wonderful ability of the man who had invented this remarkable apparatus. The old Indian would have none of this; the 'inventor' was not a whit abler than anyone else, he contended; he had merely had the good fortune of having the machine, with all its details, revealed to him by a supernatural being," Robert H. Lowie, Robert H. Lowie, Ethnologist, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959, p. 81.
6. Religion and Kultus, trans. Norwegian to German by Albrecht Schauer, Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953, chaps. III-IV.
7. An article critically reviewing some of the ambiguity associated with "magic" and including the rebuttals of fellow scholars is "The Notion of Magic" by Murray and Rosalie Wax, Current Anthropology, 4 (December 1963), 495-518 and 6 (October 1965), 469-471. The Waxes' own attempts at a positive construction are to be found in "The Magical World View," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1 (Spring (1962), 179-188; and in "Magic and Monotheism," Annual Proceedings, American Ethnological Society ("New Approaches to the Study of Religion"), 1964, 50-59; as well as in M. Wax' "Religion and Magic," forthcoming in Introductory Cultural Anthropology, ed. James A. Clifton, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
8. Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, trans. J.W. Swain, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1947; James G. Frazer, The Golden Bough, London: Macmillan, 1911-15; Bronislaw Malinowski, op. cit.
9. Singer, op. cit., p. 151.

10. Many of the myths related in Snorri's Edda are meaningless unless viewed within the frame of the magical world. References to magical practices abound in the Poetic Edda and are frequent in the sagas.
11. Perhaps the most disenchanting and rationalistic of the Old Scandinavian texts are those of the Icelandic historian, Snorri Sturluson: Heimskringla, trans. Lee M. Hollander, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964; The Prose Edda, trans. Arthur G. Brodeur, New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1916, particularly Snorri's introductory and didactic sections. Also displaying these characteristics is the Konungsskuggsjá, an anonymous thirteenth-century Norwegian book of court etiquette; it has been translated by Lawrence Marcellus Larson as The King's Mirror, New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1917. For a further discussion of the issue see "The Vikings and the Rise of Capitalism" by Rosalie and Murray Wax, American Journal of Sociology, 61 (July 1955), 1-10.