

# **HOW FAR CAN IT BE ARGUED THAT RATIONALITY OF MODERNITY CREATES A DEHUMANISED AND DISENCHANTED SELF?**

**Robert John Jefferson**

**NEO: A JOURNAL OF STUDENT RESEARCH  
MARCH 2012**

## **ABSTRACT**

This essay seeks to discover just how far it can be argued that rationality of modernity can do so by focusing on various theorists and their position on the subject. Max Weber is a key philosopher whose perspective is considered throughout the discourse of the essay on topics such as secularisation, capitalism, formal rationality, bureaucracy and 'iron cages' which imprison the self. Ritzer's theory of 'McDonaldization' is also considered, arguing that his specific tenets of control and efficiency lead to dehumanisation. This is concurred by Bryman and his postulations of 'emotional labour'. Marxist theory is also accounted for, around the subject of reification; the transformation of the consciousness of a human into an object. The extreme depths of the argument surrounding the rationality of modernity are presented through applying the theories to the nature of the Nazi Holocaust. Finally, consideration is given as to how to re-humanise and re-enchant the self through postmodernist observation and a case study on the power of community.

In 1929, D. H. Lawrence wrote 'The Mess of Love': 'The moment love is an understood thing between us, we are sure of it, it's a cold egg, it isn't love any more.' (Lawrence, 1994: 387)

One postulates that the line is an analogy for Lawrence's view of the rationalisation of modernity. To rationalise love by defining it removes the magic and human spirit embodied by it. This extends to wider society in industrial processes and social action and can lead to disenchantment and dehumanisation of the self. This essay seeks to discover just how far it can be argued that the rationality of modernity can do so by focusing on various theorists and their position on the subject. Max Weber is a key philosopher whose perspective is considered in relation to topics such as secularisation, capitalism, formal rationality, bureaucracy and 'iron cages' which imprison the self. Ritzer's theory of 'McDonaldization' is also considered, arguing that his specific tenets of control and efficiency lead to dehumanisation. This is concurred by Bryman and his postulations of 'emotional labour'. Marxist theory is also accounted for, around the subject of reification; the transformation of the consciousness of a human into an object. The extreme depths of the argument surrounding the rationality of modernity are presented through applying the theories to the nature of the Nazi Holocaust. Finally, consideration is given as to how to re-humanise and re-enchant the self through postmodernist observation and a case study on the power of community.

Rationalisation is prominent in all walks of society from the refined process of making a fast food meal and the efficient car assembly line perfected by Henry Ford, to the emotionally-detached changes within welfare undertaken by a government bureaucrat. A common argument is made that rationalisation within modern times can lead to nihilism. For example, Weber was of the belief that prior to the Enlightenment; superstition, religion, custom and habit were most influential to the self. To him, they defined what it was to be human and instilled values and attitudes (Giddens, 2001). He suggested that citizens in Europe became disenchanted as a result of the Enlightenment and the emergence of empirical science, economic systems and secularisation (Habermas, 1987).

Weber's views on secularisation are ubiquitous. The apparent decline in faith towards a religious sect or deity is argued as an outcome of the Age of Reason, particularly by theorists such as Comte. Disengagement from religion by public institutions such as schools is cited as one reason for this, meaning it is down to an individual to choose to engage. Secondly, the rationality of society, particularly in the desire to engage with capitalism and the necessity to work has seen disenchantment from religious ideals. Secularisation is also conjoined with a decline in moral values and the traditional family composition. The result is a society that is lacking in moral fibre, with little meaning to life and a poor support structure available to individuals; key aspects of humanity removed (Hollinger, 1994). Ironically, it is argued by Weber that the spirit of the capitalist model, which is predisposed as being the offending tenet of modernity originated from Protestantism. His scholarship determined that capitalism evolved from the desire of Calvinists to seek salvation through gratifying God. Their ethic was to achieve success through hard work, chastisement and diligence, described by Weber as 'asceticism'. So the apparent irony is that in the desire to achieve self-fulfilment, the Calvinists created a system which ultimately disenchanting society.

Economic processes and policies such as bureaucracy and managerialism resulting from the advancement of the Industrial Revolution have furthered the idea of dehumanisation through rationality. Weber's conjecture of formal rationality outlines the implementation of calculability or risk assessment without regard to persons. This notion of exercising matters by disregarding personality or opinion in decision making describes just how much he feels that rationality can degrade the self, explaining that it is "cold and pitiless" and results in a loss of liberty. Moreover, he argues that bureaucracy dominates the self; through the strict following of rules, laws or processes, in order to make society more efficient (Kalberg, 1980). It is this bureaucracy which is likened to an 'iron cage' by Weber in which society is repressed into by its systems and ethics, with no way to escape to a new culture. Ordinary citizens have little control over this and are effectively enslaved by rationality (Hollinger, 1994).

Weber's theory on formal rationality is embodied by the rise of capitalism; the aim to be profitable at the expense of others. He suggests that capitalism would not be so successful without formal rules and administration in order to calculate certainty of return. Therefore, for capitalism to succeed, one needs to employ workers who will adhere to rationalised procedures in order to reap the financial benefits (Vandenberghe, 2008). Marxist theory of reification is a similar argument to Weber's. For Lukács (1971), reification is representing a human being as something physical, altering their consciousness and dehumanising them. In the context of capitalism, Karl Marx talks of the bourgeois merchants dealing in commodities. Being the owners of the means of production, and the labour force of men being part of the production process, the men, or at least their labour-power is therefore deemed as a commodity. In doing man is reified and therefore is stripped of his humanity (Lukács, 1971).

Such rules and procedures are defined in depth by George Ritzer (1996) who argues that the strive for efficiency, control, predictability and calculability are all tenets of his theory of 'McDonalization'. McDonalization is Ritzer's interpretation of modern day rationality using the corporate fast-food giant McDonalds as the manifestation for his doctrine. In doing so, he discusses in length ways in which the desire to make profit has streamlined business processes to a point where the self is ultimately dehumanised. Efficiency is the best example of this. After investigation of the most proficient way of carrying out a task, the model is decreed as the best method to complete it and must be followed. Individuality is therefore removed from the task and the employees effectively become robotic. Of control, this builds further on the removal of individuality by actually removing the individual and replacing them with technology as part of automation. Technology is much more reliable than a human and is not in danger of becoming irrational (Burleson, 2003).

Alan Bryman's thesis on the 'Disneyization of society' parallels and builds upon Ritzer's. He discusses the concept of 'emotional labour'. This was also identified by Ritzer of being beyond Fordism's deskilling of jobs, directly controlling the emotional output of their

workforce (Bryman, 1999). Ritzer identifies the scripted dialogue between employee and customer as a key example. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) define this type of emotional labour as an expression of socially desirable emotions when delivering service to a customer. In the case of Disneyization, Bryman denotes the desire of the employers of Disney for their employees to present a happy and approachable persona. The attempt to influence emotion surely qualifies the notion of the dehumanisation within rationality. The desired effect was the reversal of this concept for the customer; by the employee exhibiting such a positive demeanour the consumer would believe the employee was not actually working thus not be reminded of their own employment and free to enjoy the theme park. Indeed, so desirable was this notion to Walt Disney that it led to the development of a Disney University designed to train employees in the ethos of Disney, including a new vocabulary (Bryman, 1999).

The ultimate example of dehumanisation and reification within society rests firmly at the feet of genocide; in particular the Nazi Holocaust. Hitler's extermination camps serve to exemplify just how extreme the theory of rationality within modern society can operate. However, we must be mindful of Mann's (2006) argument that extermination was not the original plan for the "Jewish problem", thus it would be inappropriate to consider this action as being part of a wider strategy, merely a last resort which had developed over time. Even the methods of killing are argued as being irrational and unbureaucratic (Mann, 2005). However, the progression from encouraging Jews to emigrate, to ghettos, to the manifestation of mobile killing units, to concentration camps and then to the 'Final Solution' of mass-killing in a gas chamber can be considered as an example of rationalisation in action. The idea was to address the "Jewish problem" in the most efficient and effective way possible, drawing parallels with Ritzer's philosophy. The inmates of the death camps were like the proverbial McDonalds burger, treated purely as a commodity. Their worth was scrupulously calculated by their captors, taking into consideration their labour potential and possessions (which included items not only about the person, but even in the person such as gold teeth) was

offset against their feeding and the ultimate cost of disposing of their body upon death from exhaustion or murder. Even the remains of the corpses were considered for income generation (Rubenstein and Roth, 2003). Detaching from the undeniable human atrocity of such action, it can be argued that the process was a normality of modernity; no different from the rearing of cattle or the production of a motor-vehicle. The rationality of the concentration camps extended beyond the Nazi party into wider civil society. Indeed, German businesses recognised the capital gains to be made and invested in new factories with the intention of exploiting captives for the purposes of labour. Thus the nation was actively adapting the social order towards the acceptance of slavery within the economy (Bauman, 1994). The interesting paradox of the Final Solution is that it can be argued that Hitler was trying to return his society to the notion of Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* by embracing a methodology more relatable to *Gesellschaft*.

There are, however, opposing views of the about depersonalisation of the self relating to rationalisation. Ritzer (1996) himself identifies that over-rationalisation can in fact lead to the re-awakening of human spirit, of morality and of self-control. He exemplifies this notion through human revolt to technology within business processes and the pressures of quantification which can lead to poorer quality produce. In order to re-humanise and re-enchanted the self, post-modernists argue that rationality itself needs to be questioned, particularly its subjective inevitability of progress and development. (Kilduff and Mehra, 1997) A case study of such is one community's resistance to the discourse of modernity relating to the rationalised decision to build a hazardous waste facility in their neighbourhood. Clarion, a small town in Pennsylvania was subjected to a proposal by a big multinational corporation to build a \$100 million toxic waste disposal plant. The corporation argued for the necessity of the plan in the interests of progress, as determined by its bureaucracy. Instinctively, the community rebelled, identifying the motives of the corporation as greed; the unrelentless force of capitalism in action and formed a pressure group to fight the plans (Welcomer *et al.*, 2000). So it appears that when one's community, values and

traditions are threatened with change that is when society re-awakens; using the irrationality of emotion to challenge the rationality of modernity.

Criticism is also levelled at Lukács's theory of reification. Axel Honneth (2005), a German philosopher argues that capitalism and other such social and economic structures are not necessarily the agent of reification and therefore should not be blamed for dehumanisation. Indeed, Honneth holds that it is the wider pathological construction of human relationships that is in fact the underestimated dynamic. He purports that other sociological phenomena such as racism can also demonstrate aspects of reification so as to solely attribute it to capitalism and the rationality of modernity is questionable. Moreover, in consideration to modernity he also outlines that both pre-modern and post-modern society was subjected to reification and that problems relating to exploitation and misrecognition are not necessarily related just to economic conditions (Kohn, 2009).

Even Weber has purveyed an antithesis for his own 'iron cage' theories. He talked of humanity clinging on to its existence and irrationality rather than being objectified through utilising the notion of choice and freewill. One could effectively retain the ability to create meanings or ends which would give character to their lives, through autonomy within the confines of the 'iron cage'. This act of free thinking was perhaps the answer to escape his perceived bonds of the cage of the rationality of modernity (Maley, 2004). This notion is also supported by Comte and Durkheim who, whilst accepting a decline in unempirical faith such as supernatural beings and force, believed religion would still play a part of 'moral individualism'. Moreover, without this security provided by norms or Weber's relative 'iron cages', society would risk descending into chaos owing to no control or social cohesion; a state of 'anomie'.

In conclusion, it appears that the Holocaust has presented to us just how far the self can be dehumanised through the rationality of modernity. Let us not forget that it was 'ordinary' professionals who supported Hitler's agenda. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists and even teachers actively committed to a cause which enacted mass-murder in a rational



manner (Rubenstein and Roth, 2003). Moreover, with access to modern technology it is unthinkable as to how far social engineering could be performed today. We have already witnessed similar atrocities since the Nazi holocaust including genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia in addition to the many innocent civilians killed as a result of war. However, despite significant anti-modernism presented in this essay it is prudent to consider some of the positive aspects that modernity has brought to society. Universal education, development of enabling technology, , successful treatments and the eradication of diseases through immunisation, improvements to labour conditions and many more outcomes must be reflected upon before condemning modernity. Of escaping rationality; if society continues to over-rationalise then, as Ritzer maintains, irrationality shall start to re-appear and humanity will become re-encharmed again. Alternatively, as Weber argues, members of democratic societies are ultimately free to choose to engage whether or not to engage in certain aspects of rationalisation in order to stay human and as the case study from Pennsylvania illustrated, the power of community, of collective individuals, must not be underestimated. Whilst capitalism may demoralise those who strive to succeed at any cost, there are some in society who simply reject mass consumption, consumerism and materialism, who take comfort in living their lives under Tönnies' concept of Gemeinschaft in happiness (Squires, 2007).

## *Bibliography*

Ashforth, B. and Humphrey, R. (1993), 'Emotional labour in service roles: the influence of identity' *Academy of Management Journal*, 18 (1), 88-115

Bauman, Z. (1994), 'Modernity and the Holocaust' in Mommsen, W. J. (ed.), *The Polity reader in social theory*, Cambridge: Blackwell

Bryman, A. (1999), 'The Disneyization of Society' *The Sociological Review*, 47 (1), 25-47

Burleson, T. (2003), *What Is McDonaldization?*,

<http://www.mcdonaldization.com/whatisit.shtml>, accessed 11 January 2011

Giddens, A. (2001), *Sociology*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Habermas, J. (1987), *The philosophical discourse of modernity: twelve lectures*, Cambridge: MIT Press

Hollinger, R. (1994), *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences: A Thematic Approach*, London: Sage

Honneth, A. (2005), *Reification: A Recognition-Theoretical View*,

[http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/Honneth\\_2006.pdf](http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/Honneth_2006.pdf), sccessed 9

January 2011

Kalberg, S. (1980), 'Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 2011 (5), 1145-1179

Kilduff, M. and Mehra, A. (1997), 'Postmodernism and Organizational Research', *The Academy of Management Review*, 22 (2), 453-481

Kohn, M. (2009), 'Books in Review: Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea, by Axel Honneth', *Political Theory*, 37 (2), 310-313

Lawrence, D. H. (1994), *Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, Ware: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Company

Lukács, G. (1971), *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, London: Merlin Press

Maley, T. (2004), 'Max Weber and the Iron Cage of Technology', *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 24 (1), 69-86

Mann M (2005) *The Dark Side of Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Mann M (2006) ' Reply: Is Democracy, and was Fascism, Sacred?', *Political Studies Review*, 4 290–297

Ritzer, G. (1996), *The McDonaldization of Society*, London: Sage

Rubenstein, R. E. and Roth, J. R. (2003), *Approaches to Auschwitz: the Holocaust legacy*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press

Squires, N. (2007), *Content islanders reject capitalism for traditional trade - Economy - NZ Herald News*,

[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/economy/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=34&objectid=10481808](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/economy/news/article.cfm?c_id=34&objectid=10481808),

accessed 10 January 2011

Vandenberghe, F. (2008), *A Philosophical History of German Sociology*, Oxon: Taylor & Francis

Welcomer, S. A., Gioia, D. A. and Kilduff, M. (2000), 'Resisting the Discourse of Modernity: Rationality Versus Emotion in Hazardous Waste Siting', *Human Relations*, 53 (9), 1175-1205