

Classical Sociological Theory
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Weber on Rationalization and Social Action

Welcome to the next session.

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**Weber on Rationalization
and Social Action**



Today, we are discussing the central theme of Weberian sociology that is his concept of rationalization and we are discussing rationalization along with his arguments about social action, which is another very important theme of sociological analysis. So, in the previous classes, we had two sessions on Weber. In one we looked at his personal life in a very brief manner.

And then we also looked at the intellectual climate or intellectual influences of Max Weber during his time which really shaped his thinking and which really prompted him to look at the sociology in a very unique manner and in the second class, discussed the very specific contributions of Weber in terms of his methodological arguments as well as his overall arguments about the distinctive character of sociology.

So I hope you remember that he played a very significant role in the development of anti-positivistic framework on research methodology which proved to be extremely important. We had elaborated the discussion on that. So today we are going to discuss his central theme of rationalization and his idea of social action.

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- Theme of rationality, rationalism, or rationalization is prominent
- For Weber, all cultures exhibit rationality, in that all people can give reasons which make sense for their behaviors, but only in the West does a particular type of rationality, based on bureaucracy, calculation, and the like, become dominant.
- Rationalization is for Weber "the master process of modernity."
- No precise definition given by Weber



So, these three themes such as rationality, rationalism and rationalization, appear very prominently in his argument and as we can say that this theme of rationalization occupies the central position in Weberian sociology. If somebody asks you what is the most dominant or central concern or the overarching theme of Weberian sociology?

Most often this is given as one of the import reasons or important themes because he is using this framework of rationalization to explore question on social action, on economy, on religion and on almost every aspect of modern social life. Therefore, it really occupies the central place and it is extremely for us to understand what does Weber mean by this term rationalization. So for Weber, all cultures exhibit rationality as all people can give reasons which make sense for the behavior.

But only in the West does a particular type of rationality based on bureaucracy, calculation and like became dominant, and this is a very crucial and controversial point because he is saying that rationality is usually understood as way in which you give reason to certain things. We say that human beings are rational animals, because we always think about the consequences of our actions.

We involves in a rational thinking. Weber says that there is nothing unique about this ability to reason as every human society has this ability to reason and everyone attach some amount of reason to their action. If somebody ask you, why you behave like that, they will have certain reasons, they will have certain rationality and this rationality could be based on magic,

It could be based on tradition, it could be based on religion or it could be based on some other kind of justificatory systems. But what Weber saying is extremely interesting, extremely problematic, as well as extremely controversy. So for him, all cultures exhibit rationality in that all people can give reasons which make sense of their behavior, but only in the West does a particular type of rationality based on bureaucracy, calculation and the like becomes dominant.

So Weber is saying something very, very different. Weber is saying that a particular kind of rationality emerged in Europe during a particular time and he connects it with emergence of modernity which say 17, 18 and 19th century and he says that this kind of rationality is qualitatively different from other kind of rationalities that are existing across the globe and particularly in Europe before this particular time.

That is an extremely important point and one of the major criticism against Weber is that his sociology, just like that of Durkheim and almost all major western classical sociologist, was heavily Euro-centric. They assumed that the Europe is the central place of all intellectual activities and on the basis of European yardstick they evaluated other cultures.

This rationalization is for Weber the master process of modernity. So Weber defines modernity through this process of rationalization, which is the employment of a particular kind of rationality. We will examine that particular kind of rationality? A particular kind of rationalization where a particular type of reasons are attributed to our actions and human behavior is shaped on the basis of that certain type of rationality.

This process, weber says, is the master process of modernity, but at the same time, we also need to know that he does not give any kind of a particular definition for this, whereas he has given definition for ideal type, he has given definition for a number of other central themes. But here, he leaves it rather ambiguous, but it is important for us to understand what does he mean by that.

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- Rationalization, the master process of modernity, results in a less magical, increasingly disenchanted world, in which science becomes dominant as tradition and religion lose their power
- It involves a systematic ordering of social life
- While the social order of traditional society rests on an “organically prescribed cycle of natural life” bolstered by habit and custom, the social order of modern society reflects the increasing power of human beings to control the social and natural forces of the world.
- Modern social order is a distinctly *rational* order—a product of deliberate calculation, willful planning, scientific management, the exploitation of expert knowledge, and the application of advanced technologies



The idea is that rationalization is the master process of modernity and it results in less magical, increasingly disenchanted world in which science becomes dominant as tradition and religion lose their power. So here, he is bringing in some more familiar themes that are connected with the rise of modernity. So he says that his master process of modernity results in a less magical and increasingly disenchanted world.

We already had some discussion about that and we will come back to this term disenchantment later when we discuss Weberian discussion on religion, but what is important in Weberian argument is that the modern world is less magical. We are increasingly able to understand the functioning of modern world without the help of magical or religious or theological or metaphysical explanations.

We do not require those kind of explanations anymore and there is a process of disenchantment of the world. Even modern humans are no longer enchanted by the natural phenomenon or social phenomenon when the lightning strikes, when there is a thunder or there is some natural phenomena takes place, we are no longer enchanted or nor do we believe that these things are taking place on the basis of certain or powerful almighty God.

We have moved away from those kind of enchanted world. Modern human beings are no longer enchanted, we are living in a disenchanted world. So human beings are moving out of this enchanted world and science becomes the dominant tradition and religion is losing its power. So this is the theme that we are familiar with as we have discussed it again and again.

The process through which how science was seen as replacing the kind of an explanatory potentials of religion and magic at other things is very important.

More than the arrival of science or along with that, Weber argues that this kind of new peculiar rationality involves a systematic ordering of social life. A completely novel type of ordering is taking place in the modern society and we have discussed this theme already when we discussed Karl Marx and the rise of industrialization.

When we discussed the establishment of factories and siren, we talked about a kind of particular order, but Weber is taking it into a much higher level. So why the social order of traditional society rest on an organically prescribed cycle of natural life bolstered by habit and custom. The social order of modern society reflects the increasing power of human beings to control the social and natural forces of the world is an extremely important one.

He is talking about how in the modern world, human beings are able to create kind of orders which they really want. They are no longer following the kind of an organically prescribed cycle of natural life. When we are talking about a primitive tribal society, their understanding of social order, and their understanding of society is completely dependent upon the nature.

What are the things that are available for them and how should they carry on with their life every day, how should they procure their food, how to survive these things completely dependent on the nature and when human beings started agriculture, we can say that we gained more higher degree of mastery over the nature, but still every agrarian society, every agricultural society depend upon the cycle of the nature on the monsoons, on summers, on the winter because they simply depend on that.

On the other hand, when it comes to the modern times, Weber argues that we are able to create our own social order and it does not mean that we are no longer dependent on nature, but increasingly human social life is being divorced of its dependency over the nature. So, this modern society reflects the increasing power of human beings to control the social and natural forces of the world.

This is seen as the implication or as the consequences of modernity after all modernity promised an increased control over the nature, increased mastery over the nature. Modern social order is a distinctly rational order a product of deliberate calculation, willful planning,

scientific management, and the exploitation of expert knowledge and the applications of advance technologies.

And this in a way we can say that this kind of summarizes what is Weberian argument of rationalization. Weber argues human life is increasingly being deliberated based on deliberate calculation and this calculation follows willful planning, scientific management.

Here scientific management means the micro-managing of each and every aspect human life. You look into the questions of efficiency, questions of safety, into the ways of getting things done at the easiest way, the exploitation of expert knowledge, highly specialized people are available or highly specialized bodies of knowledge is available and this knowledge is being used make the things highly efficient and application of advanced technologies.

Weber argues that this peculiar kind of rationality is something so central to modernity and this kind of rationality was not available to European before modernity and he would say that even during his time it was not the dominant kind of rationality available to non-European which is a very controversial claim.

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- Distinction between substantive and formal rationalism.
- Substantive rationalism is directed toward values resulting in "utilitarian and social ethical blessings" granted by a prince or other authority. This differs from formal rationalism based on calculation and pragmatism.
- Formal rationality is often irrational when viewed from a substantive point of view. George Ritzer's argument about Macdonaldization that undermines values of democracy and individualism in the name of efficiency.
- The rise of rationalism in the West is tied to the emergence of capitalism, the Protestant ethic, bureaucracy, and science.



Weber distinguishes between two types of rationality; one is a formal rationality and the other is substantive rationalism. Substantive rationalism is directed towards values resulting in utilitarian and social ethical blessings granted by a prince or other authority. This differs from former rationalism based on calculation and pragmatism.

So in substantial rationalism you will this rationalism is supposed to uphold certain important values and it is not for the sake of doing certain things, for the sake of instrumentality or efficiency rather this efficiency upholds certain kind of values. So, he argues that he is directed towards values resulting in utilitarian, social ethical blessings granted by a prince or other authority.

So in its enactment, in its very meaning, in its very purpose of this particular action you will be able to see this kind of upholding of certain values and they had not used simply for the case pragmatism or an instrumental manner. Formal rationality is often irrational when viewed from a substantive point of view. George Ritzer's argument about Macdonaldization that undermines values of democracy and individualism in the name of efficiency.

For example, one of the examples of formal rationality is that you try to make things very formal, very efficient, but that many times undermines the substantial values behind that and this idea about Macdonaldization he George Ritzer's develops this concept to explain the process of globalization. He argues that in whichever Macdonald outlet that you walk into anywhere in the world the experience will be same.

The production will be same, the taste will be same, the ambience will be same, but on the other side this standardization in the name of efficiency has a huge flipside. It has quite lot of negative consequences in the sense that it really is against the values of democracy, it is against the values of difference, it is against the value of creativity or individualism and host of other things.

A chef in a Macdonald outlet will not be able to use any of his own ideas because everything is standardized. So, Weber brings in these two types of rationalism. The rise of rationalism and the West is tied to the emergence of capitalism, the protestant ethic, bureaucracy and science. So, this is the larger set of combinations that Weber brings in. We will have elaborate discussion on that as well as on bureaucracy and science.

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Rationalization and differentiation



- Weber views societies as becoming increasingly differentiated as different "life spheres" such as art, science, and ethical reasoning become separated from one another; especially from religion. Each sphere develops its own particular inner logic and standards of evaluation.
- Modern world as increasingly as fragmented, devoid of a cohesive bond or morality emerging from religion
- His arguments on rationalization of social action, economy, authority and so on



So Weber comes to this cost of a rationalization and differentiation, and asks what the kind of relation between rationalization and differentiation is. Weber views societies as becoming increasingly differentiated as different life spheres such as art, science and ethical reasoning become separated from one another especially from religion. Each sphere develops its own particular inner logic and standards of evaluation and this is an extremely important point.

When a society becomes more and more heterogeneous, it becomes more and more complex, more and more diverse. Weber argues that there is a process of differentiation taking place. For example look at the cases of education, health, governance or politics or family relationship, entertainment, each of these fields are increasingly became differentiated.

Each of these things were very closely connected with each other in the early traditional societies and more importantly all of them were very specifically connected with religion. Your system of education was very closely connected with religion. Most of the time what was conducted or communicated through education was nothing, but religious.

Medicine was heavily influenced by religion, then all other aspects that we discuss about family, about governance, about politics, about entertainment, about sports, about education, each and every of this life spheres were entangled with each other and mostly connected with religion. And as societies progressed and became more and more modern, these life spheres becomes more and more independent.

They become more and more autonomous and they develop their own particular inner logic and standards of evaluation and they are increasingly getting divorced from religion. We

know about secular education, we know that modern medicine is increasingly getting divorced from religion, education or family matters or politics each and every of these important life spheres are becoming more and more autonomous.

They are getting divorced from the influence of religion. So, modern world as increasingly fragmented, devoid of a cohesive bond of morality emerging from religion and this is exactly the point that Weber talks about secularization as well. He is arguing that society is becoming more and more secular and the process of secularization and process of differentiation are extremely interconnected.

Secularization without differentiation is not possible. The very fact that religion becomes your private sphere involves this process of differentiation. So he extends this argument of rationalization to explain social action or economy and authority and so on.

So, Weber argues that in a modern society exemplified by places like Western Europe is characterized by increasing rationality where human beings use calculation, modern knowledge and science and expert knowledge and technologies to attain the most efficient way of getting things done.

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- Weber on Social Action**
- Sociology, Weber states, is "a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences."
 - Social action is present wherever individuals attach a "subjective meaning" to their behavior—a motive, purpose, or intention.
 - He identifies four types of social action, each constructed as a pure or ideal type. In reality, he acknowledges, any particular instance of behavior typically consists of some combination of these pure types.



He extends it to the analysis of social action and social action is one of his central themes. So, sociology, Weber states, is a science concerning itself with the interpretative understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. It is the definition of sociology as per Weber.

Durkheim's definition of sociology was sociology as a study of social facts. So here Weber says it is a science concerning itself with the interpretative understanding of social action. So here the most important aspect is social action and it is seen as interpretative and not a mere fact out there to go and collect, we need to interpret.

You need to interpret, you need to objectively understand the subjective meaning attached by actors or towards their action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. So this is how Weber perceives the subject matter of sociology as a science that studies the social action, through the interpretative understanding.

So social action is present wherever individual attaches a subjective meaning to the behavior, a motive, the purpose or an intention and you know that this covers almost every aspect of human action, may be except some reflexive action where we do not really think, and happens unintended actions.

Because otherwise human action is completely intended, we attach motive, we attach purpose, and we attach intention. So, Weber's argument about social action is behavior plus implying the subjective meaning to the behavior. It is not a behavior alone; it is not that people act on the basis of certain stimulus, something that we discussed in the previous class. So he identifies four types of social action.

Each constructed as a pure or ideal type. In reality, he acknowledges any particular instance of behavior typically consist of some combination of these fewer types. So then he proceeds to develop ideal types of social action, he says that these are just ideal types, they are kind of a mental constructs useful for the sociological analysis.

Weber argues that ideal types do not exist in reality, but it is a concept of construct for us to contrast with certain kind of concrete experience or concrete examples. I gave you the example of an ideal student and you know that this ideal student does not exist, but this ideal typical picture of an ideal student is always helpful to compare student with this person who has all the qualities of an ideal student.

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• **Affectual action** is determined by emotions or "feeling states". Emotional influence becomes a dominating factor in deciding the nature of action, mostly reflexive, unintended action.



• **Traditional action** is determined by "ingrained habituation." Along with other customary and unpremeditated daily behaviors, this might include, for example, the ritual greetings we unthinkingly give our colleagues when we arrive at work each morning.

• **Value-rational action** is "determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior." Such action, carried out regardless of consequences, is governed by a commitment to some higher duty or moral ideal. Example, nonviolence



So this four types of actions, the first one is affectual action is determined by emotions or feeling states. Emotional influence has become a dominating factor in deciding the nature of most reflexive, unintended action. So the first one is about how many times we end up doing things when we are heavily influenced by emotion and this because human beings are emotional animals and in a large part of our social action, how much of we say that we are rational, but we know that we are not completely rational in the Weberian sense.

We are heavily emotional animals. So when we are angry, when we are frightened, when we are in certain kind of emotions of grief, revenge, sexual urge or a host of other kind of emotions, we act in very different ways. So Weber argues that this constitutes one of the most important type of action and the second one is this traditional action.

Traditional action is determined by ingrained habituation along with other customary and unpremeditated daily behaviors this might include for example the ritual greetings, we unthinkingly give our colleagues when we arrive at work each morning. So this traditional action is because they are traditional we act in certain way because that is how it has been or we are quite accustomed and used to that.

If you look at our day-to-day activities, starting from the moment we get up, how we interact with others, what are the words that we use, what kind of food that we eat. A host of things can be analyzed or understood on the basis of this traditional action, because of this ingrained habituation. We are so habituated and ingrained in our behavior without our own knowledge.

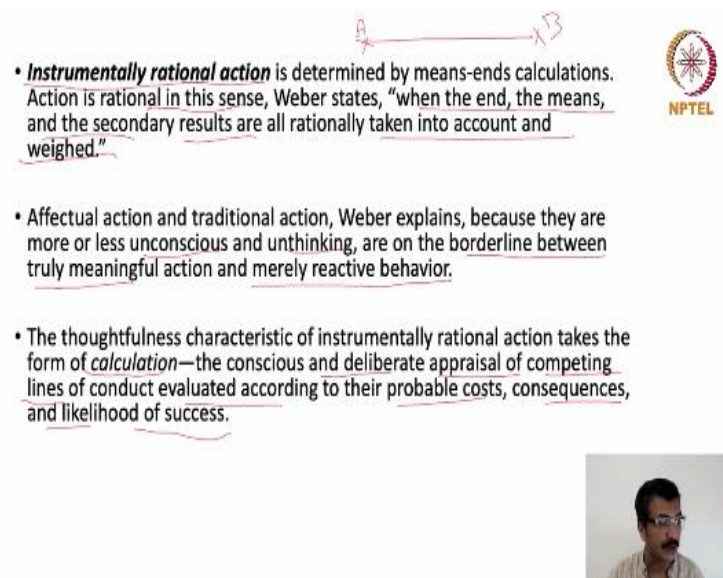
Along with other customary and premeditated daily behavior this might include for example a host of examples and we know that especially when we talk about tradition. Tradition is considered to be something important because we think this has been how things are since the time immemorial. We use this term immemorial quite often as if there is no end to any social practice or things have been the same for the past so many centuries.

The third kind of action is value rational action which is determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake for some ethical, aesthetic, religious or other form of behavior. Such action carried out regardless of consequences is governed by a commitment to certain higher duty or moral ideal example non-violence. The most important motivation for this type of human action according to Weber is commitment to certain values.

We have seen classifications of human actions on the basis of emotions, on the basis of certain tradition, our actions are also heavily influenced by certain commitment to certain ideals and this ideal could be commitment to your own religion, caste, ideology and other ideals. The suicide bombers or the terrorist who are getting ready to be killed by opponents or look at a host of other examples and the example that Weber gives is that of non violence.

Gandhiji, for example, person who tried his level best not to compromise on this whole ideal of nonviolence, that really governed Gandhi's tactics and his strategies about fighting with the British. He did not want to compromise on that. So in every society, Weber argues that there would be certain ideals that would really shape the kind of social action.

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- ***Instrumentally rational action*** is determined by means-ends calculations. Action is rational in this sense, Weber states, "when the end, the means, and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed."
- Affectual action and traditional action, Weber explains, because they are more or less unconscious and unthinking, are on the borderline between truly meaningful action and merely reactive behavior.
- The thoughtfulness characteristic of instrumentally rational action takes the form of calculation—the conscious and deliberate appraisal of competing lines of conduct evaluated according to their probable costs, consequences, and likelihood of success.

The fourth one is the most important one as per Weberian sociology, which is the instrumentally rational action. It is the instrumental rational action that is determined by the means-end calculations, something that we discussed bit earlier about the use of science, calculation, use of expert knowledge because here, calculations are the most efficient way of getting things done.

In this kind of rationality, you will think about reaching from point A to point B in the shortest way. So the efficiency becomes the central concern and that determined by means ends calculations. Action is a rational in the sense when end and the means and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed. So, here they are devoid of every other concern, they are not concerned about tradition and emotion.

They are not concerned about value, their only concern is to get things done in the most efficient manner in the shortest of the time and that is ruthless and heavily technologically driven way of getting things done. Weber argues that this is a modern phenomenon and says it is the hallmark of modernity.

According to Weber, affectual action and traditional action are more or less unconscious or unthinking and on the borderline between truly meaningful action and merely reactive behavior. Because these two actions especially, affective action and traditional action are more or less unconscious or unthinking especially when we are overwhelmed with emotions.

We do not really reflect over things and we tend to act impulsively. So, on the borderline between truly meaningful action and merely reactive behavior the thoughtfulness characteristic of instrumentally rational action takes the form of calculation. The conscious and deliberate appraisal of competing lines of conduct, evaluated according to the probable cost, consequences and the likelihood of success.

Weber argues that the meaning of the term social action in its truest sense or in its fullest sense will be in the case of instrumental rational action because the person or the group of people will think about the probable cost and consequences. They will think about to what extent it is supposed to be a successful one or what the possibility of failure is, all these aspects would be evaluated.

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- the thoughtfulness characteristic of value-rational action takes the form of conviction—the conscious and deliberate adoption of certain values or ideals. Seen as an ultimate commitment to certain values.



- The rationalization of action involves the displacement of unreflective emotional behavior (affectual action) and the “unthinking acceptance of ancient customs” (traditional action) in favor of the “deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self-interest” (instrumentally rational action) and the “deliberate formulation of ultimate values” (value-rational action).

- Increasing domination of instrumental rational action in modern world



Weber argues that this thoughtful characteristics of value rational action takes the form of conviction, the conscious and the deliberate adoption of certain values or ideals seen as a ultimate commitment to certain values and when it comes to value rational action the kind of a thoughtfulness characteristic of value rational action takes the form of conviction when it comes to value rational action.

You know that you may have to take a price for your stand against corruption, against the government or when you stand against the state atrocities or the police violence or the corruption in judiciary. You will have to pay the price, but on the other hand, your conviction really pushes and drives you to take up a kind of a value based particular position.

This conscious and deliberate adoption of certain values or ideals are seen ultimate commitment to certain values. Then rationalization of action involves the displacement of unreflective emotional behavior, affectual action and the unthinking acceptance of ancient customs, traditional action in favor of the deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self interest.

Weber is not saying these are the four characteristics, but Weber is also saying that there is a gradual, but a decisive shift from the emotional and the traditional action to more value oriented as well as instrumentally rational action.

So rationalization of action involves the displacement of unreflective and emotional behavior and unthinking acceptance of ancient customs in faith. So these two things are being slowly

and gradually displaced in favor of the deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self interest, the rational action and deliberate formulation of ultimate value.

So, increasing domination of instrumental rational action in the modern world, is the most important characteristics feature of modern world. This happens by displacing emotional and traditional action, and in effect, the instrumental rational action is emerging as the dominant one of course along with the value oriented action.

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- Capitalism as the manifestation of increasing instrumentally rational action in
- The rational behavior of the individual in the modern world is, Weber argues, increasingly characterized by *calculation* rather than *conviction*, by the self-interested adaptation to circumstances rather than the principled commitment to ideals in the modern world.



Weber gives example of capitalism as the manifestation of increasing instrumentality of rational action. The rational behavior of the individual in the modern world is increasingly characterized by calculations rather than conviction by the self interested adaptation of circumstances rather than the principled commitment to ideal in the modern world and capitalism where we will discuss that in the coming class.

Weber argues that capitalism is a perfect example of the instrumental rational action. When you want to increase, when you are investing money, when you want to reach profit, when you want to earn more money out of your investment, you act in a completely rational action. In instrumental rational action, you do not think about emotions, tradition, or about certain huge lofty values rather you act in a most instrumental manner.

Your only concern is to maximize your profit, how to get back your investment along with the profit. We will come back to this point later. The economic activities in general are supposed to fall under this category of instrument of rational action, but Weber says that

capitalism in particular has quite a lot of such features. So as I told you earlier, Weber argues this rational behavior of individual in the modern world is increasingly characterized by calculation rather than conviction.

These are highly problematic arguments and Weber suggests that you shouldn't see this kind of things in pure forms. Many times the ideas are you will find mixture of different kind of actions it will be very difficult for you to pinpoint and say that okay this particular action is only emotional action or traditional action or instrumental action. Most often you will find elements of different types of action in a given scenario, but Weber's point is very clear.

When a society modernizes, the instrumental rational action becomes the most dominant one by replacing the emotional, traditional and value oriented action because the calculations becomes the most dominant one rather than conviction the values lose their weight. By the self interested adaptation to circumstances rather than the principled commitment to ideals in the modern world.

So this is one of his first set of arguments about social action and here what we saw today is his application of the process of rationalization to explain his concept of social action. So here we discussed his definition of social action, we discussed his definition of rationalism and rationalization and we also discussed his characterization of four different types of actions.

We have also discussed his most important argument about modern society, which is that the instrumental rational action is gradually, but decidedly displacing other forms of actions such as value oriented, traditional and affective actions. So this is his larger argument and we will see the parallel kind of argument when he discusses his works on authority, economy, religion and host of other things.

This is the central theme as I told you, this rationalization is Weber's central theme and he applies this theme to understand and to explain each of these concepts. So, I am winding up today we will discuss the remaining section in the coming class. Thank you.