Introduction

This workshop is arranged within the framework of the seminar series "The modernity of Europe" convened by Professors Bo Stråth (EUI-HEC) and Peter Wagner (EUI-SPS). The aim of this seminar series is to deepen the understanding of the specificity of the European variety of “modernity” in terms of its historical developments, its institutional forms, and its interpretative self-understandings. The idea that humans can and should know and master the world—not only “Nature,” that is, but also “the Self” and “the Us/We” as well as “the Other”—in the interest of purposive action and through the instrument of human “reason” is neither unique to “Europe,” nor is it specific to “modernity.” Neither is “rationality”—broadly defined as the conscious and methodical choice of the best means for attaining certain predetermined ends—uniquely modern or European. Nevertheless, the concern with controlling and rationalizing human action as part of a quest for increased certainty has been seen as central to modernity, particularly so after Max Weber’s formulation of the historical rationalization thesis. Also, the ideals of self-mastery and rationality have been placed at the core of European self-identification since Enlightenment thinkers developed a strong linkage between legal-administrative development and liberal-emancipatory ideas. Historically, efforts to rationalize society have often been made the object of political contest and ideological discussion, in particular so during periods of crisis, restructuration, and strong social change (Gemzell, 1989). “Rationalizing” ideas and practices have been central to the isolation of different “functions” and “facts” of collective and individual human behaviour, as well as contributed to the way in which the relations between these different categories—such as those of ”economy” and ”culture,” of ”science” and ”politics”—have been negotiated. The “rationalizing impulse” has indeed emerged as a general characteristic of modernity, transcending political and ideological divides.

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When expressing an interest in the formation of European modernity, it is therefore highly relevant to discuss how rationalization discourses have been produced, interpreted, and debated at different times and in different places, and how these discourses in their turn have been related to the formation of variations of modernity. This workshop aspires first to provide an opportunity to do so, through the discussion of a number of presentations on various “moments” of rationalization from “social engineering” in Sweden and the USA at the turn of last century (Östlund) to the latest developments of “social investment” in the European Union at the turn of this century (Andersson), via “social rationalization” in Germany and the USA during the 1920s (Von Saldern), the transatlantic proliferation of the rationalization movement within industry (Cayet), as well as “social planning” in Sweden and the USA during the interwar era (Marklund). In discussing these presentations there may also be a possibility to test the merits of “social rationalization” as an analytical instrument in the study of acculturation and social control under conditions of modernity. The present text is thus an attempt to give a brief overview of rationalization in these dual capacities, i.e. as a concept of analysis and as a field of empirical study of discourses and institutions. Here, the question on the role of agency and intention in rationalization discourses and rationalization processes will be problematized. Using Weber’s rationalization thesis as the platform of this problematization, this text can hopefully serve as a very tentative basis for our further discussion of the phenomenon of rationalization at the workshop, i.e. for criticism of the concept as such as well as discussion of the practicability and utility of its study.

Rationalization

"Rationalization” (from Latin rationalis ”of calculation;” ”reasonable,” from ratio ”counting,” ”reason,” from reor ”to calculate,” ”to think”) has, as already mentioned, become part and parcel of our understanding of modernity and of modernization in a number of different ways. This is so, not only in more or less self-congratulatory modernization theories, but also in the long tradition of civilization and modernization critique, as well as the more or less “self”-distancing perspectives provided by post-colonialist and postmodernist theories.

In one aspect, rationalization refers to various attempts at the effectivization of a given activity, i.e. reducing the costs and the waste incurred in any private or public enterprise as well as the increasing the profits and securing the returns of this activity, whether it be conducted by an individual, a corporation, an organization, a social group or a state and
regardless of what type of activity is being rationalized. Empirically, this type of rationalization has typically been observed (1) in the ways in which bureaucratic systems, capitalist economies, experimental sciences, nation states, and bourgeois culture gained increased influence as epistemological and organizational forms of European life from the Enlightenment and onwards; (2) in how new techniques of data-collection and –analysis as well as innovative models for application of social knowledge emerged during roughly the same time; and (3) in how the perennial concern of power elites with the disciplination of populations gradually transformed into novel discourses on the ‘social,’ establishing ‘society’ as an object of inquiry. In this conception of rationalization as an historical process, it appears rather as the aggregate result of increased pre-eminence of rationality in the decision-making of individuals and social groups, than as a centrally directed and purposive development in its own right. Rationalization seen in this way is rather a process of social development with specific characteristics than a “project” with specific ends.

What are these characteristics, then? Max Weber’s search for the cause behind the emergence of modern Western capitalism lead him to study what he considered to be its particular form of rationality. The specificity of capitalism, he found, lies not so much in the desire to accumulate more capital, as in the form in which this accumulation takes place, i.e. through the means of calculability, predictability, the system of private law, and the systematic application of science and technology in problem-solving. Following the development of this rationality in history, Weber formulated his thesis on the historical tendency toward rationalization in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* [1922], arguing that human actions increasingly migrates from traditional to instrumental rational action, via affective and value rational action. This tendency toward rationalization is observable at three different levels, according to Weber. It operates in the thought and action of humans, in the legitimization of power, and in social organizations.

The rationalization of human thought is understood by Weber in terms of ”disenchantment of the world” (*Entzauberung der Welt*), a phenomenon which he found most clearly expressed in the expansion of science. Modern science makes the world subject to systematic calculation and prediction, and thereby creates what Weber considered to be a new “scientific” worldview, according to which the world has become less magic and all the more possible to calculate in the interest of instrumental rationality. Since Weber saw how this tendency towards rationalization had permeated modern Western culture, and how it lead to increased
economical, technical, and administrative efficiency, he consequently predicted its continuous proliferation. To be sure, he understood his own social science in rational and value-neutral terms, as he thought no other approach could prevail under conditions of modernity (Wagner, 2001: 9952). Rationalization may have emerged within capitalism, but was no longer confined to it. Indeed, also socialist societies would witness increased bureaucratization and rationalization, since the role of bureaucracy will necessarily increase in a planned economy. As a consequence, life in its totality will be made subject to calculation and planning. Weber observed this risk not only in socialist experimental states, but in all modernizing societies, as legal-rational rationality increasingly replaced tradition and charisma as source of legitimacy. For example, traditional associations and charismatic movements gradually transformed into bureaucratic organizations, structures which could better ensure continued control, legitimacy, and survival under modernity than their predecessors could. To Weber, rationalization meant a paradox in that while humans may have learnt how to master Nature, to develop technologies for the production of still greater surplus for their material survival, and to create administrative and bureaucratic systems for the regulation of social life, the existential foundation of life—the choice of values and ideal and the search for a meaning beyond the soulless calculation of the most efficient means by which to reach a certain goal—had been weakened. The modern human has been imprisoned in a rational “iron cage of goods and regulations” in which he or she runs the risk of losing his or her humanity (Cf. Andersen & Kaspersen, 1996).

The question of agency and intention in rationalization

The combined effects of this Weberian development towards increased rationalization have often been equated with modernization. Weber took the historical process of rationalization to have contributed to a change or rupture in how people have thought and spoken about themselves and their world and acted accordingly. It then becomes interesting to see who were the principal carriers of the process of disenchantment and rationalization in the making of the modern world. The self-reflexive awareness of the constitutive role of human agentiality in changing or maintaining the conditions of the world—in world-making, as it were—increases. According to this perspective, the social and natural world has not only become discursively and practically more “rational”—i.e. accessible to human logic—through the means of rationalizing ideas and practices, but also increasingly possible to “rationalize”—i.e. made to function in rational ways, if only properly analyzed and organized.
What previously may have been the object of inquiry becomes a potential object of intervention and manipulation. Traditional relations between individuals and groups and their fields of activity and function can be renegotiated along lines of what is considered to be rational given this or that end. Interestingly, as the malleability of the world is discovered, the limits of human agentiality are simultaneously expanded in some fields and diminished in others: the imagination of what is administratively and politically (im)possible becomes discursively bound up with ideas on what is and what is not rational as well as what can be convincingly presented as (ir)rational. Now, to Weber, all individuals and collectives follow their own schemes and projects, and are thus active participants in an unintentional historical process: the creation of a modern world stripped of traditional structures of meaning. However, Weber gave the intellectuals a particularly important causal role in the dual process of reducing the significance of previous structures of meaning and building new—and increasingly rationalized—such structures, even if he did not consider them as guiding these processes (Cf. Eyerman, 1985):

[I]t is the intellectual who transforms the concept of the world into the problem of meaning. As intellectualism suppresses belief in magic, the world’s processes become disenchanted, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply "are" and "happen" but no longer signify anything. As a consequence, there is a growing demand that the world and the total pattern of life be subject to an order that is significant and meaningful.

Among the intellectuals, Weber particularly pointed to the role of the scientists in promoting the historical process towards rationalization. The term rationalization has also been closely connected with the results of scientification of social knowledge and the concomitant ambition to organize entire societies scientifically, in particular during the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, the 20th century saw unprecedented attempts at this type of intentional expansion of the limits of human agentiality, stretching from the minute regulation of working life through industrial sociology, time studies, Taylorism, to the organization of everyday life through public housing, household economics, consumption politics, among other things, often via the introduction of wide-scale corporate or state-sponsored social welfare programs and not seldom in conjunction with ambitious experiments in planned economy. The results of these attempts—failed as well as successful—have exerted a strong influence on what is considered normal and just in European and Western societies. These attempts at intentional, guided regulation of social behaviour and social relations, i.e. planning and rationalizing “society” in so many of its aspects, have warranted later scholars to talk of “social rationalization” in their description and analysis of the aims, hopes, and expectations of 20th
century planners, as well as their activities to those ends and the results of these. In sum, it
does not seem to be an exaggeration to suggest that the discursive formation of rationality as
embodied in planned rationalization of society has played an important role in the
construction and transformation of modernity during the 20th century.

Questions for discussion

The causes, objectives, actors and methods of rationalization impulses during the 20th century
have changed over time and varied between different contexts, contributing to making the
development of modernity a multi-linear and multi-vocal experience, full of contradictions
and tensions, as well as unexpected backlashes and “unplanned” outbursts of planning. When
expressing interest in the many modernities of Europe and the world, it may then be time to
ask some questions anew to the old problem of historical rationalization. Rationalization
requires goals, and goals require frames, and therefore it also becomes interesting to ask how
these frames were set in different rationalizing moments. Expressed differently: What was to
be rationalized, e.g. economical, political, everyday social behaviour? Why were these
particular areas to be rationalized, e.g. for social stability, economic efficiency, political and
industrial democracy, “quality” and/or quantity of population? How should it be rationalized,
e.g. through education, voluntary cooperation, competition, planning? By whom would it be
rationalized, e.g. by bureaucratic administrators, scientific experts, popularly elected
politicians, social reformers, philanthropists, interest organizations? Finally, it is perhaps a
promising perspective to see how these different aspects of intentional rationalization—i.e.
scope, motivation, method, and agency—have been legitimized in various historical contexts?
Who has ”spoken” rationalization? In what interests? Using what type of rhetoric? What
relations have there been between perceptions of modernity and the formation of
rationalization discourses? Asking these questions to the historical discourses and processes
of rationalization mentioned above, the workshop may serve to interrogate the unilinearity
and irreversability of effectivization, planning, and rationalization often encountered in
historiography, and possibly even contribute to a qualification of the often too typologized
concepts of modernity and modernization. In concluding, we may summarize the problem to
be put under scrutiny at this workshop accordingly: rationalization has admittedly been an
integral part of the multifaceted experience of modernization, but in what way, and with what
consequences, and how may its study help us understand modernity better?
This workshop will accordingly concentrate upon the various historical motives for rationalization under the 20th century, the century of “rationalization,” “modernization,” and “globalization.” Rationalization discourses that will be dealt with at the workshop range from the scientific management and Taylorism of the first decennia of the 1900s, via the debates on “social engineering” and “social planning” and the “social rationalization” of patterns of consumption, housework, leisure, etcetera during the interwar and immediate post-war era, to the development, planning, and reconstruction discourses of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as contemporary debates on “social citizenship,” “social investment,” and “Third Way” politics.