Professionalization, Bureaucratization and Rationalization: The Views of Max Weber*

GEORGE RITZER, University of Maryland

ABSTRACT

Although it has not been recognized, Max Weber had a great deal to say about the professions and the relationship between professionalization, bureaucratization and rationalization. His ideas are very contemporary. He recognized that professionalization, like bureaucratization, is an aspect of the rationalization of society. Unlike some contemporary sociologists, Weber saw that professionalization and bureaucratization are not antithetical. Finally, Weber understood that a profession must be viewed from the structural, processual, and power perspectives. Weber's rich understanding of the professions is attributed to two factors. First, he saw them as part of the rationalization process. Second, his thinking was not distorted, as was the case with American sociologists, by the aberrant case of the physician in private practice as the prototype of the professions.

This paper deals with the heretofore unrecognized significance of the concept of a profession in the work of Max Weber. My analysis is divided into three sections. First, there is the place of the professions in Weber's general analysis of the rationalization of the Occident and the corresponding failure to develop similar rationality in the rest of the world. Second, I develop Weber's concept of a profession from his widely scattered thoughts on the subject and relate it to current conceptions of a profession. Finally, I take up Weber's ideas on the relationship between professions and bureaucracies. I believe that Weber's thoughts on the professions, and their relationship to the issues of bureaucratization and rationalization are extremely significant for contemporary sociology.

Although Weber's thoughts on the professions have had little effect on the sociology of occupations, it is ironic that his intimately related work on bureaucracies has been the

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*D This is a revised version of a paper entitled "Max Weber and the Sociological Study of the Professions" presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1974. I would like to thank Kenneth C. W. Kammeyer for his help with this paper.
cornerstone of the sociology of organizations from its inception. The reasons for the disparity between Weber’s role in the sociology of organizations and the sociology of occupations are many and can be traced to differences in the history and current status of the two fields. A most important reason, however, lies in the way Weber presented the two concepts. Although bureaucracy appears throughout his work, it is also neatly depicted in the now famous ideal-typical form of bureaucratic organization. This concise description was one of the earliest Weberian concepts to be translated into English and it proved to be seminal for organizational theorists interested in analyzing, testing, and expanding the ideal type. Although the concept of a profession also appears throughout Weber’s work, it does not receive the same concise ideal-type treatment. As a result, it must be extrapolated from the body of Weber’s work and that task was virtually impossible in America until the translation of *Economy and Society* in 1968. In a sense the Weberian concept of a profession was hidden from American sociologists (except those who read German well enough to read the original) until that time. It is therefore not surprising that the sociological literature on the professions shows comparatively little Weberian influence.¹ The goal of this paper is to rectify this serious omission.

**THE PROFESSIONS IN THE OCCIDENT**

It is well known that the bulk of Weber’s work examines the development of rationality in the Occident and the barriers to that development in the rest of the world. He analyzed a variety of factors that led to the rise of rationality in the West and examined a number of structures that seemed to embody that rationality. Among these structures can be included the market, bureaucracy, and professions. I do not mean to imply by this that the concept of the profession is as important as the others in Weber’s thinking. But it is clear that a profession is an important example of Western rationality.

Calvinism, and the asceticism it produced, played a crucial role in the development of Occidental rationality. The linkage of Calvinism to the spirit and practice of capitalism, to the market, and bureaucracy is very familiar to American sociology. Less well known is the fact that Weber linked Calvinistic asceticism to the professions: “The clear and uniform goal of this asceticism was the disciplining and methodical organization of conduct. Its typical representative was the ‘man of a vocation’ or ‘professional’ (*Berufsmensch*), and its unique result was the rational organization of social relationships,” (Weber, 1968:556). Although Weber implies here that Calvinism led to the development of the professions, he also attributed a causal influence to professionalism² in the Occidental development of rationalism, and in particular capitalism and bureaucracy: “This worldly asceticism as a whole favors the breeding and exaltation of the professionalism needed by capitalism and bureaucracy. Life is focused not on persons but on impersonal rational goals” (Weber, 1968:1200). Here, as in the rest of his work, Weber sees causality as multi-faceted and multi-directional.

In addition to linking professionals to the development of Western rationality, Weber also related them to the development of a variety of specific institutions in the West. The relationship was, of course, two-sided. Professionals contributed to the rationalization of these institutions and, conversely, the rationalizing institutions contributed to the development of the professions. For example, Weber (1968:1164) discussed four factors that characterized the emergence of the more rational church from the medieval hierocracy and first on that list was “the rise of a professional priesthood removed from the ‘world,’ with salaries, promotions, professional duties, and a distinctive way of life.” Conversely, he saw the rise of the modern church contributing to the development of a professional priesthood.

Although Weber linked the professional to a number of institutions, let us examine in some detail his argument on the relationship between professionals and the development of the legal system. On the one hand, Weber (1968:775) asserted that the professional was needed for the development of a rational system of law: “formally elaborated law constituting a complex of maxims consciously applied in decisions has never come into existence without

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¹ One important exception is the work of Weber’s translator, Talcott Parsons, on the professions. See, for example, Parsons (1939).

² For convenience, I am using the terms profession, professionalism, and professionalization synonymously in this paper. To the purist, profession refers to the occupational category, professionalism to the process by which individuals become professionals (Ritzer, 1973) and professionalization to the process by which occupations become professions.
the decisive cooperation of trained specialists." On the other hand, the development of rational law led to the need for the professional: "The increased need for specialized legal knowledge created the professional lawyer. This growing demand for experience and specialized knowledge and the consequent stimulus for increasing rationalization of the law have almost always come from increasing significance of commerce and those participating in it. For the solution of the new problems thus created, specialized, i.e., rational, training is an ineluctable requirement."

Weber examined the different forms of legal training and the effects of these diverse forms on the development of law. First, legal training can take the form of a craft occupation with the neophyte learning from established practitioners while on the job. This kind of training tends to produce a craftsman, rather than a professional. In terms of its effects, this type of legal training failed to produce a rational system of law as is the case when lawyers are trained to be professionals. Instead, it produced a formalistic law which "did not aim at all at a rational system but rather at a practical". In terms of its effects, this type of legal training failed to produce a rational system of law as is the case when lawyers are trained to be professionals. Instead, it produced a formalistic law which "did not aim at all at a rational system but rather at a practical useful sphere of contracts and actions, oriented towards the interests of clients in typically recurrent situations. . . . From such practices and attitudes no rational system of law could emerge" (Weber, 1968:787).

A second possibility in the development of the legal occupation is training by what Weber calls "honoratoires," or notables. Such an elite system of legal training is unlikely to produce a professional lawyer or a rational legal system.

Finally, there is the system of training lawyers that produces both professional lawyers and a rational legal system. In this training system "law is taught in special schools, where the emphasis is placed on legal theory and 'science,' that is, where legal phenomena are given rational and systematic treatment" (Weber, 1968:784–785). It is modern legal training in the universities that represents the "purest type" of this brand of legal training. In addition to producing the professional lawyer, it leads to the development of a rational legal system in which "the legal concepts produced by academic law-teaching bear the character of abstract norms" (Weber, 1968:789).

It is this last method of producing professional legal experts and the development of a rational legal system that is peculiar to the Occident. Other societies failed to develop a rational legal system because they lacked, at least in part, a system for training professional legal experts. On a general level, Weber (1968:883) argued that "the stage of law decisively shaped by legal specialists has not been fully reached anywhere outside the Occident."

Weber also turned his attention to specific societies to determine why they lacked a rational legal system. In discussing the legal system in India, he wrote (1968:817) "since no one thus specialized in its study and administration, it escaped . . . rationalization." On China Weber (1968:818) contended that "there also was no stratum of responding jurisconsults and no specialized legal training."

It has been made abundantly clear that the trained legal expert is important for the development of a rational legal system: "formally elaborated law constituting a complex of maxims consciously applied in decisions has never come into existence without the decisive cooperation of trained specialists" (Weber, 1968:775). But, Weber went much further and argued that professional legal training is the decisive factor in the development of rational law. Where professionals are in a position to shape the development of law, that law is likely to become rationalized. Such an "intrajuristic" factor is far more important than general economic and social conditions: "The prevailing type of legal education, i.e., the mode of training of the practitioners of the law, has been more important than any other factor" (Weber, 1968:776).

Although I have devoted most of this section to a discussion of the professional legal expert in the Occident, the same argument applies to the development of the professions in general. That is, it is only in the West that we find the wide-scale development of the professional. There were, however, some professionals in other societies just as we do find isolated

2 Unfortunately, Weber is not as clear here as I contend. He uses the term professional to describe the craftsman-lawyer. Such a usage tends to blur the distinctive characteristics of the professional and I have therefore chosen to use the term craftsman to describe the lawyer produced by this type of training program. Weber is not alone in confusing the difference between professionals and craftsmen. More contemporaneously, this confusion can be found in Arthur Stinchcombe (1939).

4 Here I think Weber is engaging in another of his debates with Marx, or is, at the minimum, seeking to round Marx out by pointing out that in this case specific factors have been far more significant than the economic variable.
bureaucracies outside the Occident. But they were extremely rare and qualitatively different from the Occidental professional. In general, other societies presented barriers to the rise of the professions. Take, for example, Weber's discussion of China: “For the educational achievements, controlled by the examinations, did not impart professional qualifications but rather their exact opposite . . . The Confucian maxim that a refined man was not a tool—the ethical ideal of universal self-perfection, so radically opposed to the Occidental notion of a specific vocation—stood in the way of professional schooling and specialized competencies” (Weber, 1968:1049).

In this section I have sought to demonstrate Weber's concern with the professions and their place in his thinking on the rationalization of the Occident. I now turn to two topics of concern in contemporary sociology, in particular the sociology of occupations. I will first deal with Weber's conception of the professions. I will then turn to Weber's thoughts on the relationship between bureaucracies and professions and their implication for contemporary work on this issue.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF A PROFESSION

A significant portion of the literature on professions discusses those characteristics that differentiate the professions from all other occupations. There are three sociological approaches to defining the professions; the structural, the processual and the power approaches. The structural approach is ahistorical and points to a series of static characteristics possessed by the professions and lacking in the non-professions. Greenwood (1957) and Goode (1957) offer classic examples of the structural approach to defining professions. In the processual approach, the focus is on a series of historical stages through which an occupation must go en route to becoming a profession. Representative of this genre is the work of Caplow (1954) and Wilensky (1964). Ritzer (1972) argued that these two approaches can be combined in the idea that there is a professional continuum with occupations at the professional end of the continuum having more of the defining characteristics than those occupations that stand on the non-professional end of the continuum.

The third, and most modern, approach is the power perspective and it is best embodied in the work of Eliot Freidson (1970). The single most important characteristic of the professions is seen as monopoly over their work tasks. A profession achieves such monopoly by convincing the state and the lay public that they need, and deserve, such a right. The power perspective is not, in my view, anti-ethical to the processual and structural approach and is, to the structuralist, one of the defining characteristics of the profession. We can see power as both the motor force behind drives toward professionalization as well as one of the defining characteristics of the professions.

There is implicit in Weber's work on professions a conception that is very close to the modern perspective that integrates structures, process, and power.

Unlike his ideal-type of bureaucracy, Weber offers no clearly delineated definition of a profession. The defining characteristics of a profession are embedded in discussions of specific occupations to which Weber accords the label of a profession. It is in his discussion of the priest that he outlines most clearly the defining characteristics of a profession. He also accepts the idea of a professional continuum and sees power as a significant dimension of professionalism.

Weber sees the priest as an ideal type that lies on one end of the continuum with another ideal type at the other end which he variously labels sorcerer, magician, or prophet. The priest is the ideal-typical professional and the sorcerer the ideal-typical non-professional. As with all of his ideal types, Weber recognizes that, in reality, there is a continuum and that no neat differentiation exists between priest and sorcerer. The ideal types here, as throughout Weber's work, are heuristic devices, not descriptions of reality. He says of the priest and the sorcerer: “the two contrasted types flow into one another” (Weber, 1968:425). I view such a perspective as compatible with the process approach to the study of professions.

In delineating the characteristics of the priest and the sorcerer, Weber also touches on the dimension of power in the process of professionalization. He sees sorcerers exerting “their influence by virtue of personal gifts (charisma) made manifest in miracle and revelation.” (Weber, 1968:425) The power of the sorcerer stems from his charismatic authority. His training “proceeds in part as an ‘awakening’ using irrational means and aiming at rebirth, and proceeds in part as training in purely empirical lore” (Weber, 1968:425). The sorcerer is a non-rational figure. His source of power is non-
rational as is his mode of training. He is powerful in non-rational societies. However, the Occident is moving in the direction of rationality and it is predictable, therefore, that the sorcerer would lose his power to the highly rational priest. The sorcerer simply cannot convince significant others in a rational society that he deserves a series of rights and privileges. In contrast, the priest, who is in tune with the rational society, finds it relatively easy to win a position of significance.

To Weber (1968:425) the priest is distinguished from the sorcerer by “his professional equipment of special knowledge, fixed doctrine, and vocational qualifications.” All three of these factors are crucial in distinguishing the priest (and more generally, the professional), but they are subordinated to what is the crucial dimension in Weber’s thinking on the professions, the nature of the training program: “the distinction between priest and magician must be established qualitatively with reference to the different nature of learning in the two cases” (Weber, 1968:425). It is the rational and theoretical training of the priest that does the most to distinguish him from the sorcerer and his irrational and empirical training.

Although rational training is crucial to Weber, the question arises as to what professionals (in this case, priests) are being trained in? Contemporaneously, we argue that general, systematic knowledge is a defining characteristic of the professions and the subject of professional training. Although he did not use this terminology, Weber (1968:426) comes close when he says: “‘Doctrine’ has already been advanced as one of the fundamental traits of the priesthood. We may assume that the outstanding marks of doctrine are the development of a rational system of religious concepts and (what is of the utmost importance to us here) the development of a systematic and distinctively religious ethic based upon a consistent and stable doctrine which purports to be a ‘revelation.’”

I have already delineated several of the defining characteristics of a profession offered by Weber in his discussion of the priest:

1. Power.
2. Doctrine, or general systematic knowledge.
3. Rational training.
4. Vocational qualifications.

Weber offers a number of other characteristics of professions in the course of his discussion of the priesthood:

6. A full-time occupation. “The full development of both a metaphysical rationalization and a religious ethic requires an independent and professionally trained priesthood, permanently occupied with the cult and with the practical problems involved in the cure of souls” (Weber, 1968:426).
7. The existence of a clientele. At a number of places in his discussion of the priest Weber discusses the need for a laity, or clientele.

This list of eleven characteristics, which in Weber’s view serve to distinguish professional priests from sorcerers, is remarkably similar to a number of contemporary efforts to enumerate the defining characteristics of professions. Furthermore any effort to enumerate such characteristics is, at least implicitly, an effort to develop an ideal type in the Weberian sense. Finally, many contemporary students of occupations are coming to recognize that professions and occupations form a continuum and that power is a significant factor in the ability of an occupation to move toward the professional end of the continuum. Thus contemporary work in the sociology of occupations has much to gain from Weberian insights. Unfortunately, we have had to rediscover in recent years what Weber had already discovered over half a century ago. However, Weber’s major unrecognized contribution to contemporary occupational sociology lies in his thoughts on the relationship between professions and bureaucracies. It is to that topic that I now turn.

PROFESSIONALIZATION AND BUREAUCRATIZATION

One of the most interesting and hotly debated issues in the sociology of occupations is the
relationship between professionalization and bureaucratization. The most widely held position, at least until recently, is that these two processes (and the resulting structures, professions and bureaucracies) are, at least to some degree, antithetical. This antithesis comes out most clearly in the literature that argues that when a professional is employed in a bureaucracy, he is confronted with conflict because of the basic differences between these two normative systems. (See, for example, Scott, 1966.) But a number of recent studies have tended to cast doubt on the assumption that professionalization and bureaucratization are antithetical (Bucher and Stellings, 1969; Engel, 1969; Hall, 1967; Litwak, 1961; Montagna, 1968; Smigel, 1969).

Weber has a great deal to say on the issue of the relationship between bureaucratization and professionalization. Interestingly, his position is more in line with contemporary research on the question than with the older view that the two processes are opposed. To Weber, bureaucratization and professionalization were complementary processes involved in the rationalization of the Occident. Furthermore, the process of professionalization is viewed by Weber as occurring largely within bureaucracies. The two processes are inseparably intertwined in Weber’s thinking. Weber is generally concerned with the “bureaucratic-professional” (Ritzer, 1972:345) that is, with the professional who exists within a bureaucracy and seeks to balance the two systems. To Weber, the priest, and the soldier are, in the Occident, examples of bureaucratic-professionals.

What distinguishes Weber’s thinking from that of early American sociology of occupations which saw an inevitable antithesis between professionalization and bureaucratization? One difference is that Weber’s thinking was embedded in his broader orientation toward the rationalization of the Occident. When one is examining rationality, it is relatively easy to see that professionalization and bureaucratization are related causes, and consequences, of growing rationality. In contrast, American occupational sociologists tended to look at these processes in isolation and therefore failed to see their linkages.

A second difference between Weber and many American sociologists is the amount of attention they gave to one specific occupation—the physician in private practice. Weber devoted little attention to this occupation while it has occupied the bulk of the attention of those Americans who studied the professions. The focus on this single, in many ways aberrant, occupation served to distort American thinking on the relationship between professionalization and bureaucratization.

Unlike most occupations, the physician existed apart from formal organizations, at least between the late 1800s and the mid 1900s. In those years the physician developed an ethic of autonomy and therefore found himself in conflict with the bureaucracy, when he was employed in one. It is from this single case that occupational sociologists generalized about the antithesis between bureaucratization and professionalization. But most professions never existed outside of bureaucracies, hence never faced the conflict experienced by the physician. In recent years, even the physician finds himself employed in organizations and the occupational sociologist is discovering that the physician can live within a bureaucracy. The concentration on the physician in private practice has distorted the thinking of occupational sociologists on the relationship between bureaucratization and professionalization. Since he ignored this aberrant case, Weber’s ideas are far more valid.

Examples of the linking of professionalization and bureaucratization are frequently found in Weber’s work. On a general level, he argued that “the bureaucratization of all domination very strongly furthers the development of ‘rational-matter-of-factness’ and the personality type of the professional expert” (Weber, 1968:998). In addition to such general statements, Weber also linked professionalization and bureaucratization in specific settings:


It is clear from these statements, and the thrust of his work, that Weber saw no antithesis between professionalization and bureaucratization. They are complementary processes involved in the rationalization of the Occident.
Although the bulk of Weber’s work stresses the complementarity of professionalism and bureaucratization, there are points where he seems to see a conflict between the two processes. Weber, of course, saw bureaucratization leading to the “iron cage” of mindless routinization. Although he applauded the efficiency of the bureaucracy, he abhorred the mechanization of life it produced. There are points in his work where Weber seems to hold out some hope, although slim, of averting, or at least ameliorating, what was to him a horrid fate. Although specialized, routinized, and rationalized there are some professionals who seem able to resist, to some degree, the bureaucratization of life. The lawyer seems to be one professional who is inclined to resist bureaucratization and call for what Weber calls “judicial creativeness,” rather than mindless routine. The opposition of the lawyer to mindless routinization is underscored by Weber (1968:886): “Being confined to the interpretation of statutes and contracts, like a slot machine into which one just drops the facts (plus the fee) in order to have it spew out the decision (plus opinion), appears to the modern lawyer beneath his dignity; and the more universal the codified formal statute law has become, the more unattractive has this notion come to be.”

Weber’s major hope seems to lie with the professional politician whom he differentiates from the bureaucratic civil servant. Of course, Weber saw that most modern politicians were lawyers, so his views on politicians are intimately related to his views on lawyers. In his famous essay, “Politics as a Vocation” Weber succinctly describes the difference between the politician and the civil servant:

To take a stand, to be passionate—ita et studium—is the politician’s element, and above all the element of the political leader. His conduct is subject to quite different, indeed, exactly the opposite, principle of responsibility from that of the civil servant. The honor of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction. . . . The honor of the political leader, of the leading statesman, however, lies precisely in an exclusive personal responsibility for what he does, a responsibility he cannot and must not reject or transfer” (Gerth and Mills, 1958:95).

Weber sees the successful politician in need of heroism and passion and these two characteristics are clearly at odds with the kind of personality produced by the bureaucracy. Weber, then, sees some resistance on the part of some professionals to total routinization. But the thrust of his work leads me to believe that Weber felt that they must inevitably fail. The end, for Weber, is clear, unavoidable and horrible. It is a mechanized routinized world in which professionals, bureaucrats, and bureaucratic-professionals are all neat little cogs in a perfectly functioning machine. The events of today seem to support Weber’s pessimism as professionals are becoming a part of bureaucracies and indistinguishable from them (Engel and Hall, 1973). It may be, following Weber, that the demise of the professions as a distinctive category spells the end of the last hope of avoiding “the iron cage.”

CONCLUSIONS

A major goal of this paper has been to convey some of Max Weber’s very rich insights on the nature of professionalization and its relationship to bureaucratization and rationalization. Such an enterprise is necessary since many sociologists either know nothing of Weber’s work on the topic, or hold erroneous views. One such error is conveyed in a recent paper where the authors argue “The social organization of both the professions as traditionally conceived and the old crafts results in work situations which are, and were, in the Weberian (1940) sense, irrationally structured” (Engel and Hall, 1973). Quite to the contrary, Weber regarded professionalization as an aspect of the process of rationalization. A similar error is made by Freidson (1973:19) when he argues that professional principles are “logically and substantively in contrast to what might be called the administrative principle, which figures prominently in Max Weber’s view of the rationalization of society.”

Following Weber, I see both bureaucratization and professionalization as aspects of the rationalization of society. As such, they share many more commonalities than is traditionally noted in the literature. There are certainly points of difference, even conflict, between the two processes, but these are subordinated to the enormous number of similarities between them. I think much of the recent literature has tended to support this original Weberian insight. Although we continue to see articles positing an antithesis between bureaucratization and professionalization (Freidson, 1973), the intimate relationship between these processes is fast becoming an accepted sociological tenet.
REFERENCES


