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Craft, magic and the re-enchantment of the world

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ABSTRACT

This essay challenges the prevailing view of progressive rationality and disenchantment as set out in Max Weber's social theory and reproduced in organizational neo-institutionalism. We observe that rationality and disenchantment cannot exist in the absence of magic, mystery and enchantment. We argue that the contemporary celebration of rationality and disenchantment is a modernist discourse that has marginalized equally compelling instances of re-enchantment. Drawing from the popular press and management research we identify five themes of re-enchantment in the world; the rise of populism, the return of tribalism, the resurgence of religion, the re-enchantment of science and the return to craft. We use these phenomena to elaborate four alternative constructs — *authenticity, reflexivity, mimesis and incantation* - that counterbalance the over rationalized and paralyzing concepts in neo-institutionalism — *legitimacy, embeddedness, isomorphism and diffusion*.

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1. Introduction

Nearly one hundred years ago, Max Weber identified an emerging "disenchantment" with the world. He used the term "disenchantment" to capture a sense of weary nostalgia for what humanity must give up in order to progress. Disenchantment, he argued, was the inevitable outcome of the ongoing expansion of rationality in modernity. Weber saw disenchantment as a natural result of the displacement of tradition, myth and superstition by reason — a displacement that he felt defined the transition to modernity.

Weber's theory of rationalization describes a range of social changes that emerged from the Enlightenment, sweeping away medieval ways of thought (Bell, 2012). Secularism supplanted religion, scientific and expert knowledge replaced myth and magic, and, most profoundly, bureaucratic formal social structures like the organization, the guild and the nation state began to erode traditional collectives like the family, clan, tribe, and community (Berman, 1981).

For Weber, disenchantment meant "the knowledge or belief … that there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by

calculation" (Weber, 1946, pp. 129—139). Weber's thesis of relentless rationalization was intimately connected to the industrial revolution. He presciently predicted the rationalizing impact of industrialization, where massive factories, organized by *trans*-national corporations attached to global consumptive markets achieve ever-greater economies-of-scale in an emergent world-society.

Weber's thesis of unremitting rationality is a central premise of neo-institutional theory. Isomorphism, the structuration of organizations fields, and the global diffusion of modern management practices are extensions of Weber's core idea of the metastasis of formal-rational ways of knowing and being in the world. Neo-institutionalism also shares Weber's sense of disenchantment with its inherent assumption that human agency has been abdicated to institutions. Borrowing from Weber's haunting image of the iron cage, where human will is increasingly suborned to social structures of our own making, neo-institutional theory has been soundly criticized for its persistent unwillingness to attribute change to human agency (Suddaby, 2015).

In this essay we challenge the assumption that inexorable rationalization and disenchantment is the *only* narrative of modernity. Although the empirical evidence of disenchanting rationality is impressive, there is equally impressive evidence of a countervailing narrative of *re-enchantment* in the world.

Some of this evidence is not positive. The resurgence of fundamentalist religion, the rejection of sensible science and an increasingly tribal populism all speak to a worrisome rejection of

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rationality in recent history.

But much *is* positive. The resilience of the family, the resurgence of craft modes of production and the optimistic persistence of aesthetics, myth and other aspects of human reflexivity, all speak to the positive potential of re-enchantment. Yes, there are powerful forces of disenchantment in the world, but there is also a vast but unexamined element of social and organizational life that is simply not amenable to calculation, science or rationality.

We explore this alternative view in this essay where we draw together the disparate threads of a competing discourse that challenges the prevailing view of rationality as both inexorable and universal. Our core argument is that rationality and disenchantment cannot exist in the absence of enchantment and arationality. We challenge the teleological assumption of progress that is implicit in neo-institutionalism — i.e., that humanity is engaged in a civilizing project of rationality that will, ultimately, erase the influence of myth, magic and mystery in social and organizational life.

We present our argument in three stages. First, we describe the core components of Weber's theory of rationality that form the basis of neo-institutional organization theory. Then we present evidence drawn from both academic research and the popular press that challenge each of these assumptions by offering a competing narrative of ongoing enchantment. Finally, we introduce four competing constructs — authenticity, reflexivity, mimesis and incantation — each forms of a "rational magic" that contradicts and counterbalances neo-institutionalism's assumptions of ever-expanding reason.

2. Formal rationality

Max Weber's primary contribution to social theory was to identify the critical role of reason in social history. Broadly stated, Weber argued that the drive toward rationality — the mastery of all things by calculation — informed all areas of human life. The quest for calculability, Weber suggested, underpins all social innovation, perhaps most obviously industrial capitalism, which rests on a range of subsidiary inventions — double entry accounting, the division of ownership and labour, measuring the time-value of money, bureaucratic organizations — each of which enhances the ability to calculate processes of industrial production.

Weber's use of the term rationality was never precise and has been the subject of much debate. Most scholars acknowledge four basic types of rationality in Weber's writing; practical, theoretical, substantive and formal rationality (Habermas, 1984; Kalberg, 1980), each of which uses slightly different forms of calculability. Practical rationality implies a form of calculation required to achieve a desired end, based on pragmatic reasoning. Theoretical rationality is perhaps closest to scientific calculability in that it involves abstract reasoning through deduction and the use of increasingly precise symbolic meanings. Substantive rationality involves calculation based on values where a course of action is deemed appropriate based on the degree of congruence of a give cluster of shared beliefs. Formal rationality requires calculations of universal social rules, regulations and the collective expectations of others.

While Weber clearly viewed these categories as ideal types in which any given act might involve varying degrees of each type of rationality (Hirsch, 1997), neo-institutional theorists have clearly emphasized theoretical and formal rationality in articulating their core argument, i.e. that norms of economic rationality are constructed by social institutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995). More emphatically, neo-institutional theorists have wholly adopted Weber's central thesis that modernity is marked by widespread acceptance of rational ways of organizing and knowing and an inevitable expansion in practices of reason.

Most research in neo-institutional theory has been devoted to elaborating this thesis of rampant rationality. Isomorphism, or the notion that organizations become increasingly similar to their institutional environments as the result increasing structuration of organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), is perhaps the best example. John Meyer and colleagues (Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997) extend the concept of structural isomorphism to the global level of analysis, demonstrating how certain formal rationalities (i.e. environmentalism, feminism, corporatization) now operate beyond the nation state in an emerging and continually expanding world-society.

But we also see Weber's ideas of rationality crystallized in studies of institutional change, which inevitably offer "progressive" narratives of the displacement of traditional ways by more formally rationalized ones. For example, traditions of professionalism are always replaced by bureaucratic or corporate modes of production (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Thornton, 2004), larger social identities always supplant individual ones (Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003) and the adoption of new practices always favours 'modernist' rationalities of science and professionalism over "primitive" practices of craft and amateurism (Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Zilber, 2002). Ultimately, neo-institutional theory reinforces the Weberian narrative of the inevitability of formal rationality through science and technology, on one hand, and professionally bureaucratic modes of organizing, on the other.

3. Disenchantment

Weber predicted that the rationalizing arc of modernity would be accompanied by an increasing sense of loss as the old "nature-centered" world of myth and magic gave way to the new "human-centered" world of efficiency and control. He understood the emotional consequences of modernity and the increasing loss of meaning that inevitably occurred when craft modes of production gave way to the mechanics of the assembly line, when the courthouse replaced the church and the physician supplanted the midwife.

The emotional impact of the disenchanting effect of modernity is captured in post-Enlightenment culture — in William Blake's (Blake, 2008) description of the "dark satanic mills" of the industrial revolution in his poem *Jerusalem*, in Charles Dickens' ode to the dehumanizing factory towns of England in *Hard Times*, or Edward Hopper's remarkable painting *Nighthawks* that captures the aching loneliness of urban life. Equally poignant are the academic studies of disenchantment — from Engels' (1993) heart wrenching descriptions of *The Condition of the Working Class in London*, to Gramsci's (1988) observation that Fordist production regulates both the production of cars and the sexual libido of workers.

Perhaps the most comprehensive summary of the disenchanting effects of rationality is offered by George Ritzer's (1993) powerful concept of *McDonaldization*, in which he describes the inherent irrationality of rational systems that, in their quest for efficiency and calculability, dehumanize their participants. Collectively, these, and a host of critical management studies, sketch out the emotional cavity created by the expansion of rationality in modern capitalist society.

4. Re-enchantment

But is the narrative of the world *really* one of inexorable rationalization? Does neo-institutionalism's thesis of structuration, isomorphism and commensuration fully capture the phenomenal reality of all social and organizational life? Or as Robert Nisbet (1980) suggests in *The Idea of Progress,* does it actually offer a highly selective account of the future as an illusion of progress