this expropriation process to completion, by substituting state officials for private capitalists. In sum, the struggle for socialism would extend the continuum of modern bureaucratic domination and its substantively irrational effects. Socialist society would assume the abstract-general form of bureaucratic, dictatorial socialism; it would appear as only a higher and more concentrated form of development of bourgeois society itself.

Weber was convinced from the beginning that the Bolshevik dictatorship of the proletariat provided evidence for these two arguments. Confidently armed with denunciations of the anarchy of capitalist production and proposals for the militarization of labor through standardized planning, the Bolsheviks, predictably enough, had already preserved or reintroduced practices formerly denounced as bourgeois: the secret police, the Taylor system, hierarchical discipline within the factory and military. The Bolshevik struggle to abolish private capitalism, Weber anticipated, would weaken — indeed, destroy — the last remaining resistance to totalized bureaucratic command and its abstractionist effects. The lingering competition, under capitalist conditions, between private and public bureaucratic organizations — and the possibility of curbing the power of each through a process of "countervailing influence" — would be replaced by a centralizing state administration that controlled the whole of life without regard for particular needs. Existence would come to be as stifling and servile as that of the New Kingdom of Egypt. Bureaucratic socialism would more effectively achieve precisely what the capitalist world was striving for — a bureaucratic dictatorship over the proletariat.

**Nihilism: the fetishism of technique**

The chronic incapacity of modern bureaucratic organizations to justify their raison d'être to themselves and others constitutes a second instance of the disequilibrium between the requirements of formal and those of substantive rationality under contemporary capitalist conditions. Modern bureaucratic life, Weber proposes, is marked by definite nihilistic tendencies. These must be viewed as the substantively irrational effect generated by the adoration of technical proficiency in all spheres of contemporary life. Precisely because of this fetishism of technical, that is, means-oriented considerations, the modern bureaucratic world is more and more often confronted with a loss of a sense of purpose. It unwittingly produces a bewildering and infinite morass of competing evaluative attitudes. Under these conditions of technical efficiency and ethical nihilism, Weber complains, value judgments tend everywhere to be made in a spontaneous and dangerously nonchalant way.95 This development is paradoxical, Weber explains, when it is considered that the formal rationalization of the early modern political economy was in part a consequence of a religious movement — Protestantism — marked by its fervent defense of substantive goals. The emergence of a capitalist culture, and with it the possibility of bureaucratic capitalism as an economic system, was not the product of mechanical financial transactions alone. The bureaucratization of the modern world was in part an effect of the prior rationalization of religious conduct itself. Especially among the rising strata of the lower middle classes, according to Weber's still controversial thesis, Protestant asceticism stimulated the growth of an ethos that greatly facilitated that rational, bureaucratic organization of capital and labor which is peculiar to the modern bourgeois order.66 Weber stresses that the Reformation was not synonymous with the elimination of the church's control over daily life. Indeed, from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the new Protestant movements (Pietism, Methodism, Baptism, and, above all, Calvinism) affected new and more earnestly enforced modes of religious discipline, which penetrated deeply into their believers' personal and social lives. These movements' self-rationalizing activities were guided by an unquestionably new substantive principle: the religious evaluation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form of ethical activity of which individuals could partake. According to the defenders of this principle, living acceptably to God was not to be equated with the suppression of worldly morality in monastic asceticism. From this point on, all individual Christians were to act like monks at all times and in the whole of life; they were duty bound to fulfill the obligations imposed upon them by their position in the world. It was precisely these obligations to serve the glory of God which constituted their "calling," the object of which was the world and all that is within it. Individuals were at all times obligated to prove themselves, to deepen their "inner isolation" even while they developed to the maximum their powers toward the external world. Typically, the Protestant movements specified the content of these obligations through the appeal to labor as an approved calling. It was insisted that one does not work in order to live (that is, in accordance with what Weber calls the "natural relationship", 68). Rather, one was to live for the sake of one's work in the service of "impersonal" social utility. Restless, consistent, and systematic labor thereby became in itself the prime end of earthly life, the ascetic means of future salvation, the most certain sign of rebirth and genuine faith.

Upon this basis, and in opposition to what it described as the vanity and ostentatiousness of ruling feudal culture, Protestant asceticism sought to check and regulate the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions, especially luxury goods. Only the sober, calculating acquisition of goods was seen to be justified. The faithful Christian, it was urged, had to heed the divine call by taking advantage of the opportunities provided. The pursuit of wealth and profitable gain through labor was thus seen to be ethically dubious only if it served as a temptation to living carelessly. Otherwise, the ascetic compulsion to save and the strict performance of duties in a fixed and rationally planned calling were equally morally permissible and necessary, because commanded. Self-assured in its convictions, the new Protestantism also attacked the "sordid elegance" of aristocratic household life. In its place, the ascetics proselytized on behalf of the ideal of the clean, sober, and well-regulated middle-class home. Precisely because the spontaneous enjoyment of life was seen to lead away from both religion and work in a calling, Protestantism instituted new conceptions of time, new forms of patriarchal domination over women, and an unprecedented governance of the body.69 The waste of time through idle talk, luxury, and sexual indulgence was to be ethically
condemned. The calculating, shrewd, and properly self-disciplined men of 
Protestantism insisted that every hour squandered could have been an hour of 
life to the glory of God. Equally, the frill and spontaneity of the ballroom and 
seigneurial sports event, the drunken laughter of commoners in the public house, 
became the enemies of rational asceticism. All idle temptations of the flesh were 
viewed as mere distractions from the hard, calculating pursuit of a righteous 
life.

Through the successful deployment of such claims, Weber argues, Protestantism 
made far-reaching contributions to the emergence of bureaucratic capitalism. 
Even before the emergence of the classical bourgeois ideologies of the 
eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the worldly asceticism of Protestantism 
functioned to legitimate the new (and highly unequal) patterns of distribution 
of wealth and power as the work of divine providence. It was said that both 
sexes of the propertyless classes could withstand the temptations (of idleness, 
the flesh, conspicuous consumption) that go hand in hand with wealth only 
by virtue of their generalized poverty. Obedience to God was contingent upon low 
wages, earthly frugality, and – if necessary – incarceration within the system of 
bureaucratic workhouses for the unemployed. Further, and to the extent that 
it penetrated into the lower ranks of society, religious asceticism also provided 
the emerging order with conscientious, punctual, sober, and highly industrious 
workers. These "self-rationalized" workers identified with their bureaucratized 
work life as if it had been willed by God.

Weber's most far-reaching suggestion, however, is that the full economic 
effect of the Protestant movements generally appeared only after their ethical 
enthusiasm receded. Gradually, the intensity of the ascetic search for the 
knight of God eroded, giving way (among the rising proportion strata, at least) to 
comfortable and disciplined bourgeois lives, marked by a utilitarian worldliness 
supplemented only by a "good conscience." The labors of the Protestant 
reformers produced unforeseen, and even unwished-for, effects. In this 
untended development, there is a deep irony. Under pressure from the temptations 
of wealth – temptations that it had itself stimulated – Protestant asceticism 
succeeded increasingly to a secular consumerism and attempted self-renewals (such 
as the great revival of Methodism prior to the English Industrial Revolution). 
Under the "iron cage" conditions of contemporary capitalism, Weber argues, 
the spirit of religious asceticism has almost completely faded. The relentless 
pursuit of wealth through formal rationalization has become uncoupled from 
the old religious supports in whose name it once proceeded. Indeed, attempts 
of organized religion to influence the conduct of economic life are more and 
more deemed unjustified.

The upshot of this development is highly nihilistic. Immersing the whole 
life in the icy waters of bureaucratic calculation, the fully developed capitalism 
of the present day continuously generates legitimacy problems. Money making, 
with its attendant bureaucratization, destroys its own meaningfulness. Whereas 
those formerly steeped in the Protestant ethic wanted, on ethical grounds, to 
work and engage in business, we are more and more compelled to do so: "The 
idea of duty in one's calling." Weber concludes, "proves about in our lives like 
the ghost of dead religious beliefs." Not only do the proponents of technical 

The legacy of Max Weber

efficiency continuously challenge and enervate religion; having also undermined 
the legitimating power of magic and the norms of tradition, these "sensualists 
without heart" and "specialists without spirit" bracket questions concerning 
whether it makes sense to master life bureaucratically. The value of the capacity 
to master the whole of life through technical means and calculations remains 
theroughly unclear. This is also why the advance of bureaucratization is 

synonymous with the irreversible growth of subjective and this-worldly forms of 
ethical reason. In bureaucratic societies, as it were, reality becomes confusing 
and heterogeneous. It is openly marked by an "infinite richness of events" and 
an inexhaustible "store of possible meanings."

Weber is adamant that this is not altogether a regressive development. The 
advance of bureaucratization destroys, once and for all, the myth that it is possible 
for individuals to apprehend it unambiguously the whole of reality. The 
disenchantment of the modern world contributes to the final erosion of claims upon 
universal knowledge of an objective totality. All spheres of conduct, especially 
those of scientific inquiry itself, have entered an unprecedented phase of 

specialization that, most likely, will forever continue. Knowledge of reality therefore 
comes to be understood as fragmented, subjective knowledge constituted in 
accordance with knowers' one-sided, specialized points of view. It becomes 
evident that the populations of bureaucratic capitalist societies are fatal to live 
without knowledge that can dispense sacred values and reveal the true meaning of 
the universe. Under conditions marked by bureaucratic efficiency and a this-
worldly ethical nihilism, individuals are compelled to choose from among a 
bewildering array of competing cultural values; sensing the precariousness of 
the meaning of their existence, they must from here on select their own gods.

In defense of objectivity

Weber emphasizes that salvation from the ethical nihilism generated by processes 
of bureaucratization is not to be found through an uncritical reliance upon 
empirical-analytic science. He was constantly in opposition to scientific, "realistic-
empirical" (Menger) forms of thinking – and their defenders within the 
Methodenstreit of his time – and his metatheoretical writings must be interpreted as 
a crucial dimension of his more general concern with the limits of bureaucratic 
rationality. Their tortuous, often maddening quality is by no means an index of 
their insignificance to Weber's political project. From the time of his earliest 
polemics against Roscher and Knies, all of Weber's methodological and epistemological 
struggles can be seen as urgent, disciplined attempts to understand 
the meaning of a form of social inquiry that refused the temptations of 
bureaucratic thinking. He was convinced that any further proliferation of 

scientific discourses would only increase the likelihood that bureaucratic, capitalist 
societies would further lose their way in a twilight of normlessness.

This conviction forms the substance of his neo-Kantian arguments concerning 
the unique logic of the cultural sciences. Weber proposes – and not always self-
consistently – that at least three arguments can be adduced against uncritical 
attents at universalizing the methodology of the natural sciences. In the first
instance, the logics of the cultural and natural sciences are in principle distinct. Although, certainly, the concerns of both are grounded within historic-cultural processes, the natural sciences seek universally valid knowledge. They analyze natural realities in terms of generalizing concepts, which guide the formulation of laws confirmed by empirical analysis and rational experimentation. By contrast with this emphasis upon the quantitative, exact, and universal aspects of natural phenomena, the inquiries of the cultural sciences bear decisively upon the qualitative aspects of social life, that is, upon this life as it is manifested in all its particular or historically specific configurations. According to the young Max Weber at least, cultural-scientific analysis (of bureaucracy, for instance) avoids the explanatory subsumption of particular events as representative cases of general, that is, universally valid, processes; unlike the nomothetic natural sciences, the cultural sciences are preoccupied with the concrete individuality (or historicity) of phenomena. This means that the cultural sciences cannot attain knowledge of general laws. Their empirical knowledge is instead uniquely generated through the imputation of particular constellations of events (events that are reckoned to be of general significance for modern life) as the consequence of concrete causal relationships.

Secondly, whereas outer nature is typically a domain of meaninglessness, Weber stresses that the cultural sciences are singularly concerned with psychological and intellectual (geistig) phenomena. These understandings of these phenomena present problems specifically different from those encountered within the exact natural sciences, which are concerned with observing and explaining the laws of events. To be sure, social action chronically shares with natural events a certain dependence upon accidental disturbances and blind, nonrational prejudice. Unlike natural phenomena, cultural beings are nevertheless endowed with the capacity to live in accordance with practical norms. Capable of representing themselves to themselves, they can therefore adopt a deliberative disposition toward themselves and their worlds. Typically, these beings subjectively ascribe “meaning” [Bedeutung] or “significance” [Signifikanz] to their own institutionally situated activities. Methodologically speaking, this point is of considerable consequence for the sociocultural sciences. These sciences cannot systematically ignore the problem of understanding the meanings actors attribute to their own conduct. Within the cultural sciences, “realistic-empirical” inquiries ignore such meanings and are therefore bound to produce results that are conceptually and empirically misleading. Such realistic-empirical inquiries deceptively avoid a series of vital epistemological questions. What knowledge is under consideration here? Is it the idea of investigators who, from the standpoint of various problematicas, regard actors as objects of knowledge? Or is it the ideas of actors themselves?

Positivist efforts to assimilate the cultural and the natural sciences are criticized by Weber, thirdly, for their false claims to “value-freedom.” This criticism is double-edged. In the first instance, efforts to cast cultural-scientific inquiries in the mold of the natural sciences are necessarily plagued by nihilistic outcomes. Ethical ideals can never be the final product or effect of the accumulation of lawlike empirical data. The days have finally passed, or so Weber contends, when the exact, quantifying sciences could be expected to discover the path to God by physically grasping his works. It has become evident that the natural sciences are both fundamentally irreligious and incapable of generating substitute ethical rules of conduct. Whether it makes sense to live within the modern bureaucratic world cannot be decided through reference to the empirical-analytic sciences. Weber quotes Tolstoi with strong approval: “Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important to us: What shall we do and how shall we live?”

Furthermore, and secondly, Weber insists that efforts to exercise ethical values from the cultural sciences are fraudulent, because impossible. “Human, all too human” ethical principles always guide the selection of data. He repeats the insight of Goethe: Theoretical principles are always involved in “the facts.” These principles or “epistemological ideas” [Wertideen] are not the products or conclusions of empirical investigations—as if the definition of the objects of cultural-scientific study could be separated from the evaluation of their significance. From the outset, these principles divine their empirical objects of investigation, investing them with a certain “value-relevance” [Wertbeziehung]; they serve as the presuppositions that render sociocultural reality an object of subjective theoretical inquiry. There is nothing within these object themselves that sets them apart as deserving of recognition, attention, and analysis. A disposition of ethical indifference is thus by no means either appropriate or possible within the cultural sciences: Their problematicas are always constituted (in the Kantian sense) by an ensemble of historically tinted practical questions. These questions serve as something like one-sided vantage points, from which—consciously or unconsciously, expressly or tacitly—social and natural reality is reckoned to be worthy of being classified, analyzed, understood, explained, and evaluated. Ideal-typical analysis, of which Weber’s concern with modern bureaucratic domination and its irrationality is a key instance, is only an explicitly recognized form of these unavoidable processes of conceptual mediation. Confronted with an infinite reality of ever-changing events, Weber’s ideal-typical inquiries seek to analyze a finite portion of this reality as important, as in certain respects significant and crucial to the fate of those who live within the present. With a certain (but never absolute) degree of exactitude, ideal-typical analyses bring about an ordering and clarification of the chaos immanent within the stream of contemporary life processes.

It is precisely through their capacity to analyze and clarify aspects of modern bureaucratic life that Weber’s cultural-scientific analyses claim to achieve a form of objectivity. Motivated by a concern with the problems attending bureaucratic domination within the spheres of state and society, Weber’s inquiries, it is true, openly deny that their status is equivalent to value-free, objective knowledge. This “objectivity” [Sachlichkeit] is of a rather different, and very special form. Weber’s inquiries self-reflexively acknowledge that their knowledge is constituted in and through categories that are marked by a definite subjectivity. Objective, sachliche knowledge of bureaucratic organization admits its dependence upon concepts and presuppositions, including the belief that this knowledge is indeed of value to those who live and act within the contemporary world.