

## MAX WEBER'S SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CONTEMPORARY AGRIBUSINESS: THE APPLICATION OF KEY TERMS (RATIONALIZATION, IRON CAGE, DISILLUSIONMENT) IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE CONTEMPORARY AGE

### Summary

Max Weber's sociology does not belong only to history, as the work of one of the classics of sociology. The terms that originate from his sociological approach – rationalization, iron cage, disillusionment of the world, class, bureaucratization – are a very powerful analytical tool that can be used to understand social relations in contemporary agribusiness and today's global agricultural production. The importance of these terms lies primarily in the following: to show the mechanisms that govern social relations in agribusiness, to provide an understanding of the social consequences of such mechanisms, to anticipate possible negative effects, to shape a narrative, a discourse for the scientific consideration of the issue of food security and the countryside. Weber's key sociological insight relates to the rationalization of agricultural production, the process by which households focus on profit as the primary goal of their activity, thus abandoning the old business ethic of a patriarchal community. This insight serves as a reference in this paper on the basis of which modern agribusiness can be reconsidered. This paper is a contribution to connecting the old sociological concepts that belong to Weber as one of the classics of sociology, with the contemporary social reality of agribusiness, by referring to his works as references and to other scientific literature that deals with the application of his thought in the contemporary social context.

**Key words:** rationalization, bureaucratization, status group, iron cage.

### INTRODUCTION

The concepts that originate from Weber's sociological approach can construct a language, an apparatus that can be used to understand the key issues of contemporary agribusiness: why does the principle of efficiency in agribusiness conflict with the principles of moral and economic sustain-

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ability, the so-called paradox of rationalization? With these concepts, it is possible to unravel the basic logic underlying social relations in modern agriculture: intensive production aimed at making money on as much yield as possible, which is managed through bureaucratic rationalized structures.

On a global scale, this trend can be observed today. All global value chains in agricultural production (meat, milk, soybean production) operate according to the same rationalization logic: the lowest possible costs, the higher the productivity and efficiency dictated by the decisions of large market players. Weber's notions help to understand this tendency not as a "deviation of capitalism" but as its essence, the way it functions in different temporal and contextual circumstances. Individuals can resist these tendencies, but the principle of competition, the imperatives of profit imposed by the market, exert structural pressure, which leaves it no choice to produce according to its own logic (independent of the system) without inflicting enormous economic damage on itself. These terms expose contemporary agribusiness as a structural framework that places the actors, who are part of its network, in certain predefined roles ("iron cage" – in Weber's terminology). Therein lies the paradox of "sustainability" within modern agribusiness – there is more and more talk about green, healthy agricultural production, while the activities of actors in agriculture are limited by the interests of profit and the pressure of competition. The metaphor of the "iron cage" can serve as an explanation for why, despite different narratives about environmental sustainability, some major results are not achieved. Weber's terminology helps to understand this problem not in a moralistic way, but in a scientific way as a structural contradiction, composed of different interests of different actors whose solution requires a long-term and systemic approach.

The strength of Weber's concepts is that they explain why getting out of this described situation is very difficult. The iron cage is imposed from the outside and dictates logic to all actors, even those who would behave differently under different conditions. Every, even the smallest farm, must keep records, be certified, be competitive in price, and therefore be part of a rationalized system in order to survive economically, and because of its comprehensiveness, understanding this process is very important for modern agribusiness.

The main goal of this paper is to deepen the analysis of Weber's concept of rationalization and its application to contemporary social relations in agribusiness, referring to references from his works and the literature of other authors dealing with his approach.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this paper relies on a qualitative, i.e. interpretative analysis of the content that is based on Weber's approach that emphasizes the understanding – "Verstehen" of social life. The most famous and primary texts by Weber were read: "Economy and Society", "Science as a Vocation", "Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism", "Die Verhältnisse der Landarbeiter im ostelbischen Deutschland", referring to key con-

cepts (rationalization, disillusionment of the world, iron cage, instrumental rationality, bureaucracy, class and social class) as references. Sources of secondary literature by authors dealing with Weber (the so-called “neo-Weberian approaches”) were also used.

Both inductive and deductive approaches were applied in the methodological approach: the general framework of analytics were the ideal types of Weber's concepts, and it was deductively investigated how they can encompass contemporary concrete phenomena in agribusiness, while the inductive procedure from concrete empirical cases abstracted the patterns that confirmed these concepts. In this way, analysis took a hermeneutic form: theory led to empiricism, and empiricism, in feedback, went back and pointed to theoretical concepts.

This approach made it possible to understand the key logic of the functioning of society, which is also present in the modern age, so that Weber's thought remains not just a history of the thought of a classic of sociology, but a current approach in contemporary social science that helps to understand today's world.

### **THE STARTING POINT AND THE KEY CONCEPT OF THE IRON CAGE OF RATIONALIZATION – “STAHLHARTES GEHÄUSE”**

In his capital work “Economy and Society,” Weber defines rationalization as an action that is guided by the calculation of consequences, and thus means are selected according to the goal of efficiency (Weber 1978). Rationalization, in the context of the modern age, is for Weber an all-pervasive process in which action is shaped in accordance with efficiency, calculation, legal and legally established rules, leaving less and less space for tradition and magical understanding of the world (Weber, 1978).

Modern agribusiness is the result of this process in several ways:

1. Through focusing on the development of the so-called “smart village”, i.e. digital agriculture (working with drones, machines that have sensors and GPS, etc.) which enables more precise control of work in agriculture, yields and costs;

2. Through the standardization of the entire production process – production everywhere must be organized according to the same rules regardless of local geographical and cultural conditions. There is a tendency to turn farms into a bureaucratically managed factory for the production of meat, milk, vegetables, fruits, etc. All inputs, yields are computer-programmed, the work process is crushed into smaller tasks and strictly prescribed by rules. Animals and plants are thought of only within the framework of economic, instrumental rationality – how much yield they will give, how much will be earned from that yield, etc. Care for the ecosystem has been relegated to the background and

3. Through industrial and chemical production of food and seeds (GMOs, Monsanto, Bayer, etc.), which is a continuation of the process of standardization with the aim of increasing productivity as one of the goals of a rationalized market, capitalist economy. Trade in agricultural products takes place through digital platforms where everything is calculated.

These processes: production according to certain externally imposed rules and prices determined by global supply chains, the use of genetically modified foods, chemically produced seeds sold by large companies operating on a global scale are key features of the rationalization process in modern agricultural production. The word “coercion” is deliberately used to describe the process of rationalization as a reference to Weber's notion of an “iron cage” – participants in a market capitalist economy must obey its laws and tendencies, otherwise individual resistance would imply economic ruin (Weber 2002). The law of profit and competition imposes an imperative on market participants to compete according to the rules of a market economy, otherwise they remain excluded. Closely related to the concept of the iron cage is the concept of bureaucratization. Bureaucratization is necessary for the process of rationalization because it is the one that creates a hierarchy that introduces standardized procedures, rules, expertise, which ensures predictability, manageability, and minimization of risks (Weber, 1978).

To this end, modern social relations in agribusiness are completely bureaucratized:

1. The way they are managed through global supply chains and the management of large corporations: huge corporations in the field of agriculture operate internationally, their operations cross the borders of nation states;

2. Permits and certificates – these companies grant production permits, impose standards in production that market participants in agriculture must follow (provision of various documents, forms, use of specific fertilizers, pesticides, chemical preparations, etc.) and

3. Various subsidies and support through the funds of large international organizations, such as the EU. In order to receive assistance through EU funds, it is necessary to follow specific standards, possess specific characteristics, etc.

Bureaucratization is closely related to the iron cage, primarily because through the relations of the hierarchy it creates a dependency based on the division of labor, whereby individual market participants become anonymous, seen as a number that is more or less profitable in accordance with the logic of profit.

These processes do not remain only technical, but are also “transferred” to the sphere of values, the way of perception of modern man. Weber described this process as “Entzauberung der Welt,” or “disillusionment of the world” (Weber 1946). The word “disillusionment” refers to the process of “de-spelling,” that is, the introduction of the notion that the entire social world and nature are viewed as a resource, as a means, rather than as something that has any particular metaphysical meaning and meaning. Specifically in modern agribusiness, this would mean that farm animals are seen only as a biological resource that produces milk, meat, eggs, wool and not as a living being that is part of the household; To view the land as a terrain for productive production and high yields, and not as an ecosystem for nature, the soil it feeds, etc.; and forests and rivers as a source of inputs for productive production. In such a “dis-

jointed” agriculture, the magical relationship (“the land as a mother”), the religious (the land as a heritage) and any other metaphysical relationship that has existed throughout history is lost, and in its place comes an instrumental rationality guided by the goal of profit.

Modern agribusiness is the embodiment of instrumental rationality in several of the following aspects according to which it operates:

1. *Each unit of production is measured and standardized* – profit is calculated per hectare; hours of work, yields all must be precisely calculated for predictability and

2. *Profit is the key and fundamental goal of modern agricultural production* – human and animal health, biodiversity are goals imposed by regulations that come mainly from the state or some supranational institution (such as the EU institution), but the primary goal of producers and companies is the highest possible economic profit.

Although the goals of such a process are rational from an economic point of view, they can also have some irrational consequences (the so-called “externalities” in economics). Land can be destroyed, water pollution can occur, people can be evicted from the countryside, etc.

Economic-rational calculation ignores these consequences because they are not part of the goal towards which it is directed. Today's debates about GMO foods, climate change, etc., can be interpreted precisely within the framework of Weber's presented terminology because their conflict is impossible to resolve within an approach that emphasizes only efficacy (Kalberg 1980).

### *Division of labor in modern agribusiness: Classes and classes*

Such a hierarchical relationship, based on the division of labor under capitalism, also forms a specific class-layered structure of society:

1. At the top of this hierarchy are certainly international corporations as large market players. They issue certificates, set standards, set rules in the value chain;

2. Large agricultural producers – farmer. Mostly in Western European countries and the United States. These are wholesale manufacturers who hire workers, use modern agricultural machinery on large estates;

3. Small Farmers – Produce in their own homes. Due to the small size of the estate, they cannot significantly affect social relations in agriculture, but in terms of values, they certainly represent the antipode to global rationalized, corporate chains, given that they inherit the values of tradition, rural lifestyle, etc. and

4. Agricultural wage earners are the most vulnerable class with the weakest position in the market. Their position is unstable, given that they can only sell their labor on the estates of larger agricultural producers, landowners and means of production.

## WEBER'S APPROACH TO AGRICULTURE: DIE VERHÄLTNISSE DER LANDARBEITER IM OSTELBISCHEN DEUTSCHLAND

An interesting fact about the topic of this paper is that Weber, before defining his theoretical system, dealt with the sociology of agrarian society. His study *Die Verhältnisse der Landarbeiter im ostelbischen Deutschland* (1892) is not well known, compared to his other works ("Economy and Society", "Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism") which are much more frequently quoted. However, for the purposes of this paper, this lesser-known work of his will be cited in order to show how it is relevant to modern agriculture today. In this work, Weber examines how the logic of the market economy destroys patriarchal relations on large Prussian estates, while turning seasonal workers into migrants with a vulnerable economic position, without protection (Weber 1892; Bendix 1960).

In this work, which is based on empirical research, the outlines of the concepts that he later formulates and that this paper deals with are visible: rationalization, bureaucratization, disappointment, iron cage.

The work was published in 1892 as a result of a survey commissioned by the Verein für Socialpolitik association, with the aim of solving the problem of the outflow of the German population from the east and the mass arrival of cheap Polish labor. It is about 3.000 questionnaires obtained on large estates east of the Elbe where the questions were related to working conditions, lifestyle, wages, and relations between landowners (the so-called "junkers") and wage workers (Weber 1892; Bendix 1960; Käsler 1988).

In this study, Weber described two types of workers:

*Instleute* – workers who are permanently inhabited. They signed a one-year contract with the landlords. And they were paid partly in money and partly in kind. They were included in the farm and thus had relative security (Weber 1892) and

*Freie Arbeiter* – seasonal wage workers, mostly Poles (the so-called "Sachsengänger"). Their contracts were short-term, they were paid exclusively in money, and they were completely unprotected and free in the sense that they could sell their labor power to the highest bidder (Weber 1892).

A key finding of Weber's analysis is this: Junkers, under the pressure of the world market and the price of grain, are increasingly replacing *Instleute* with seasonal workers from Poland because they can pay wages cheaper, owe no protection, and can more easily be fired (Weber 1892). Weber also noted another tendency, namely that the Junkers began to see themselves more and more as capitalist entrepreneurs who made decisions based on the principles of efficiency and productivity (Weber 1892). This, among other things, changes the traditional patriarchal order, because the Junkers, by transforming their role, lose the obligation to protect the *Instleute* who, due to the loss of their previous, traditionally established position, move to the west so as not to take on the role of the agricultural proletariat in their native land. Weber also saw the conflict between the two forms of rationality discussed in this paper: economic instrumental ration-

ality and substantive rationality (Weber 1892). Economic rationality leads the Junckers to employ Polish workers instead of German workers, but this leads to a conflict with substitute rationality, which is the large outflow of population from the east of the country (Weber 1892).

The key findings of Weber's study point to the outlines of an iron cage in agriculture from the time in which he lived, through:

1. *The victory of instrumental rationality over substantive rationality* – the household is transformed into a factory, and the employment relationship becomes contractual, that is, without a personal, personal relationship;

2. *The disappearance of intermediary social classes* – the Instleute were the intermediary layer between the Junkers and the Polish workers. Capitalism exacerbates the contradictions: the instleute either become seasonal workers or migrate westwards, leaving only two opposing classes of juncker and seasonal workers, among whom there is a relationship of great material inequality and

3. *Destruction of local communities in the countryside* – large migrations lead to the disappearance of villages, their community, local culture, customs and traditions.

### *Application to Today's Agribusiness: The East Elbian Pattern in Modern Agriculture*

The same is true in agriculture in the 21st century. Modern agricultural production in the United States and Western European countries takes place with the help of seasonal workers (Rogaly 2008). These seasonal workers are free in the market sense: they work for a wage but without constant protection, while their position competes with local workers (Rogaly 2008), which can be the cause of xenophobia, nationalism, etc.

To prevent the trend of the departure of the local population, the EU is implementing certain measures:

1. It provides subsidies to small, local farmers as a way to counteract market logic and instrumental rationality;

2. She has formed various programs to develop awareness among the local population in order to break down prejudices, xenophobia, negative sentiments towards foreigners and

3. Through various programs, it tries to integrate seasonal workers more deeply into society and protect them from possible abuses of their position.

In the modern era, there is another danger for local workers, but also for seasonal workers, which Weber could not have foreseen, and that is the development of artificial intelligence. It is expected (in accordance with the logic of rationalization in capitalism) that capitalists, in order to increase productivity and under the pressure of competition from other capitalists, will introduce robots into production, which will make the work of both local and seasonal workers unnecessary (Acemoglu and Restrepo 2020). In this way, there may be even deeper social upheavals than the migration of workers from one region to another, which Weber was able to observe in his time.

## WEBER'S CONCEPT OF RATIONALIZATION TO MODERN AGRIBUSINESS

According to Weber, rational action is (*zweckrational*), i.e. rational in the purposive sense, where the actor chooses means based on the calculation of costs and consequences, guided by the principles of efficiency, predictability, etc. (Weber 1978). Thus, the core of the rationalization process is the degree to which action can be quantitatively expressed, measured, and calculated (Weber 1978).

In modern agribusiness, this logic works as follows:

1. *Production according to a strictly established mathematical model* – the modern economy operates according to the dictates of numbers. Drones, sensors, algorithms measure, record, make production decisions, which suppress the farmer's knowledge and experience. Traditional knowledge that has been passed down through generations is being replaced by expert knowledge, expertise that comes to modern times through robots, platforms, artificial intelligence, etc.;

2. *Bureaucratized agricultural production* – the farm becomes a factory that is bureaucratically managed (it has its own workers, managers, etc.) while animals and plants are understood as biological units that produce outputs for the market and

3. *Commodification* – the measurement of every detail within the production process in agriculture aims to assign a monetary, material value to each action and product. In this way, agriculture is fully integrated into the financial flows of capitalism. Numbers are a convenient means of calculation aimed at material earnings, i.e. profit.

### *Standardization, Control and Bureaucracy in Modern Agribusiness*

Bureaucratization involves hierarchy, structures that operate according to general, written rules, distant from the individual (Weber 1978). Modern agribusiness illustrates this principle in the following way:

1. *Through certificates* – in order for a producer to be involved in modern economic flows in agriculture, he must fulfill certain protocols in detail, whereby he does not answer directly to the buyer of his products, but to abstract rules whose fulfillment is supervised by experts (bureaucracy);

2. *Through Supply Chains* – every agricultural shop must be part of Chain that is fully standardized globally and

3. *Through the creation of huge databases* – every action is tracked for the purpose of control, making subsequent decisions based on algorithms, etc.

Such a system of functioning is technically above the individual – power is in the hands of those who define the rules, the standard, who have access to the database.

Bureaucratization seeks to shape time and space very precisely. In modern agribusiness, this process has been taken to the limit:

1. *The acceleration of all operations in agriculture* – as in any factory, a specific time is set for the production of something. Time is a costly resource;

2. *Space design* – A large number of animals and plants are concentrated in a small space to meet the principle of production efficiency. Centralization (which achieves hierarchy) is a basic principle of bureaucracy that serves to facilitate management;

3. *Division of labor and partialization of activities* – large work processes are broken down into simple, routinized, and repetitive that do not require special knowledge. The worker is transformed into an appendage to the machine, without being able to see the whole of the work process;

4. *Digital work tracking* – various applications, algorithms and sensors can monitor the productivity of workers, which corresponds to the principle of “bureaucratic discipline” on which bureaucracy is based and

5. *Unstable workforce* – the partialization of labor, unemployment (surplus labor) produced by capitalism creates a social class of “precarious”, seasonal workers with an unstable position in the market, who are easily replaceable.

Although rationalization, from an economic point of view, is a rational process, it creates a number of irrationalities that in modern agribusiness include:

1. *Destruction of nature*: there is pollution of nature, rivers, destruction of biodiversity. In this way, capitalism, driven by rational economic goals, destroys its foundations;

2. *Impact on health*: GMO food, chemically produced seeds affect human health, which produces great global risks;

3. *Demographic emptying of villages*: with the consolidation of production, small producers are suppressed. The pressure of competition driven by the goal of profit creates poverty and economic marginalization and

4. *Impact on human psychology*: farmers are under constant pressure to be productive, efficient, not to lag behind larger producers, which is also reflected in people's psychological health (depression, burn-out, etc.).

When it comes to Weber's understanding of the process of rationalization in contemporary agribusiness, the aspect of internalization of the process by the social actors themselves is often overlooked. It is not just about external coercion, but about internalized norms of behavior on the basis of which the actors of society make certain decisions. Farmers, as well as other actors in the field of agribusiness, internalize social processes that become part of their daily habitus, which they unconsciously apply. In this way, the farmer becomes the administrator of agricultural production, which makes rationalization enter the field of everyday life. In a psychological sense, he “self-controls”, controls himself harmoniously with the goals imposed on him from the outside, believing that both goals and decisions are his own. Rationalization becomes a duty, a form of moral obligation against which an individual measures his personal worth. Thus, a social process settles in the psyche of people and is recognized in various burnout symptoms, depression, competition, comparison and evaluation, etc.

Rationalization, therefore, is not only a process “around” and “outside,” but is appropriated in terms of values, and thus resistance to the process is perceived as a personal failure on the part of the actors themselves, who in that case would not only lose economically, but would also suffer

a certain psychological pressure caused by the conflict with their own values. This aspect is perhaps the most overlooked and neglected objective consequence of the rationalization process that has been analyzed from Weber's perspective.

## CONCLUSION

This study, which presents the possible application of Weber's concepts to contemporary agribusiness, revealed that Weber's key insights are: the disappearance of the patriarchal community under the pressure of capitalism, the dominance of instrumental rationality over all other types of thinking, the creation of an iron cage as a framework in which market actors are located, relevant even in the modern age. Just as the Junkers once ceased to be patriarchal hosts and became capitalist entrepreneurs, domestic workers changed the role of household members and became wage and seasonal labor, so today, under the influence of artificial intelligence and large migrations of the population caused by wars, companies lay off workers in order to reduce production costs. Traditional value orientations are being lost, and in their place comes an instrumental rationality aimed at profit.

Modern agribusiness is often the target of moralistic criticism and condemnation. However, this analysis shows that the problems that arise are not a question of morality, but of the social structure of capitalism on a global scale, which requires a scientific, long-term and systemic approach. The introduction of artificial intelligence does not solve or ease the situation, but makes it even more difficult. Weber's analysis also showed that rationalization within capitalism erases the intermediaries, intermediate layers of society, which can be linked to the weakening of the middle class in the West. Understanding these social processes is very important for any meaningful rural policy.

Also, modern agribusiness is at its core bureaucratically organized: global corporations, certificates, standards. In fact, this means that bureaucracy concentrates power in the hands of those actors in social life who have access to information, who formulate standards, etc.

Weber's analysis of modern agribusiness reveals that the productivity of modern agriculture comes at a cost and has consequences for society as a whole. A number of contradictions can be observed in modern agriculture: between different social classes (corporations, large and small producers, domestic workers, seasonal workers, etc.), between local communities and globalization, between the traditional value system and instrumental rationality, etc.

Weber's terminology does not offer us a moralistic critique of the modern world, but a powerful language to understand how it works and to ask scientifically relevant questions. These issues are very important today in a situation where there is a rapid consumption of resources, climate change, and the emigration of the population from the countryside. This analysis shows that any solution must take Weber's understanding of the logic of rationalization within contemporary capitalism.

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## СОЦИОЛОШКИ ПРИСТУП МАКСА ВЕБЕРА У САВРЕМЕНОМ АГРОБИЗНИСУ: ПРИМЕНА КЉУЧНИХ ТЕРМИНА (РАЦИОНАЛИЗАЦИЈА, ГВОЗДЕНИ КАВЕЗ, РАШЧАРАВАЊЕ) У ДРУШТВЕНОМ КОНТЕКСТУ САВРЕМЕНОГ ДОБА

### Резиме

Социологија Макса Вебера не припада само историји, као дело једног од класика социологије. Појмови који воде порекло из његовог социолошког приступа – рационализација, гвоздени кавез, рашчаравање света, сталеж, бирократизација су врло моћно аналитичко средство које може послужити и за разумевање друштвених односа у савременом агробизнису и данашњој глобалној пољопривредној производњи. Важност ових термина лежи пре свега у следећем: да прикажу механизме који управљају друштвеним односима у агробизнису, да пружи разумевање друштвених последица таквих механизма, да предвиде могуће негативне ефекте, да обликују наратив, дискурс за научно разматрање питања прехранбене сигурности и села. Кључни Веберов социолошки увид односи се на рационализацију пољопривредне производње, тојест процес којим се домаћинства фокусирају на профит као основни циљ своје делатности, чиме се напушта стара пословна етика патријархалне заједнице. Тај увид служи као референца у овом раду на основу које се може промишљати савремени агробизнис. Овај рад представља допринос повезивању старих социолошких појмова који припадају Веберу као једном од класика социологије, са савременом друштвеном стварношћу агробизниса, кроз позивање на његова дела као референце и на другу научну литературу која се бави применом његове мисли у савременом друштвеном контексту.

**Кључне речи:** рационализација, бирократизација, сталеж, гвоздени кавез.