

# ***Examining the Transformation of "Ancient and Modern" from the Perspective of "Weber's Proposition": How the "Iron Cage" of Modernity Is Formed***

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**Abstract:** Weber attempted to find the crucial cultural impetus that supports and propels the capitalist mode of production in the Protestant Ethic, namely the spirit of capitalism. He interconnected religion, culture, and socio-economics through rationalism, simultaneously delving into a conceptual issue, the "transformation of ancient and modern," brought about by the development of rationalism. Building upon this, Weber uniquely examined how society and actions are irreversibly propelled by the force of these ideas to construct the "iron cage" of modernity. Therefore, placing "Weber's proposition" within the broader context of modern thought serves as a perspective to help us better understand and reflect on capitalism as a spirit of thought or ideology, as well as the crises hidden within the societal reality constructed upon it.

**Keywords:** Weber, rationalization, Protestant Ethic, capitalism, modernity

## **1. Introduction**

"Religious ethics" and "capitalism" are often regarded as a set of "heterogeneous phenomena." A prominent characteristic of religion lies in its recourse to mystery concerning ultimate questions and the inexplicable. The nature of mystery is transcendental, endowing authority by establishing prerequisites beyond our experiences and even the boundaries of rational thought. This implies that the development of rationality inevitably conflicts with and opposes it. Conversely, the formation and development of capitalism often symbolize the liberation of human nature in the struggle against the constraints of religious thought. At the core of this ethos is the pursuit of rationalization, especially scientific rationality, as a crucial criterion for social action and economic development. Therefore, rationalization becomes the inevitable cause of contradiction between these two, and the key to rationalizing explanations for succession in historical development.

In response to this assertion, Weber acknowledges that rationalization, or rationalization, is a crucial component of the spirit of capitalism. However, his understanding of religious ethics is one-sided, or it can be said to be a "prejudice" and stereotype towards religion. Weber employs a historical and comparative research method, attempting to illustrate the highly accompanying relationship between the rationalization of the spirit of capitalism and the rational ethical view of Protestantism,

which is the "necessary connection between heterogeneous phenomena" as noted by Guenther Roth in the "Introduction."

In fact, the work Weber accomplishes in his specific argumentation can not only be considered a response to the "Weber proposition," but also meticulously delineates the "transformation of ancient and modern," that is, the concrete manifestation of the problem of modernity in reality, laying an important foundation for his assertion that the development of order inevitably constructs the "iron cage" of modernity. Based on this, this book report will utilize the following argumentative structure: The first part will analyze how rationalization becomes the key to linking Weber's proposition by unfolding Weber's argument on the relationship between Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism, simultaneously exploring the essence of the problem of modernity through the important characteristics of rationalization; the second part will contemplate the role of rationalization throughout the entire process of modernity transition, leading to the conclusion that the core source of the problem of modernity lies fundamentally in the limitations of rationalism; the third part will introduce Weber's discussion on rationalism and narrate how the basic judgment on the "iron cage" of modern society is formed, supplementing the analysis of individual circumstances in modernity society using Marxist theoretical achievements.

## **2. From Protestant Ethics to the Spirit of Capitalism**

### **2.1. Transformation from Traditional Ethics to Worldly Asceticism**

Weber's precise encapsulation of worldly asceticism represents the Protestant ethics after undergoing the entire process of religious rationalization. In Weber's sociology of religion, worldly asceticism differs from the worldly mysticism represented by Confucianism, as well as from the otherworldly asceticism represented by the old Christianity. Weber's particular concern lies in worldly asceticism, where the distinction between worldly and otherworldly pursuits is evident. This distinction can be based on whether the pursuit is aimed at achieving some form of accomplishment in the real world or obtaining a goal that exists beyond the realm of reality, outside of worldly matters. Therefore, choosing to engage with the world often implies accepting the challenge of numerous external temptations to internal desires. In response to the ascetic tendency, Weber observed that certain capitalist entrepreneurs practiced a form of asceticism characterized by "avoiding ostentation, avoiding useless expenditure, never seeking power for its own sake, and often feeling uncomfortable with the outward signs of social reputation they have acquired" [1]. This led Weber to believe that there must be a strong spiritual force capable of exerting powerful restraint on desires.

Weber once made particularly detailed comparisons between the two worldly ideologies of Protestantism and Confucianism. In Weber's view, although Confucianism emphasizes responsibilities and pursuits in the secular world, it lacks a profound rationalistic tendency, as evidenced by its indifferent attitude towards witchcraft and mysticism, such as "the Master does not speak of strange forces and disorderly gods." Furthermore, in explaining the legitimacy of the ideal social order it constructs, Confucianism still relies on the authority of "royal authority conferred by the gods" to maintain social order, while also encouraging popular worship and admiration of sage kings to create charismatic leaders, which inevitably involves the creation of one sacred aura after another. In contrast, Protestantism completely eliminates elements of witchcraft and superstition. Taking Puritanism as an example, Puritanism's "most distinctive feature is the eradication of witchcraft, even in the sublime forms of sacraments and symbols - so much so that strict Puritans themselves, in order to dispel superstition - that is, dependence on any form of witchcraft - can bury the bodies of their loved ones without any formality, fully adhering to the complete elimination of the world from magic" [2]. "Puritans hate everything tinged with superstition - remnants of magic or sacramental salvation - to the extreme" [2]. Therefore, Weber made an important distinction between

Protestantism and Confucianism, namely, "one is tied to witchcraft and the other to the unfathomable will of an extraordinary God" [1].

Thus, the spiritual power that sustains Protestant ethics lies not in fostering worship of the mystical but in solidifying the pursuit of rationality among believers. This implies that Protestantism needs to develop a systematic theoretical framework as support. Weber believed that the most crucial breakthrough in Protestant theory lies in the following aspects:

### **2.1.1. Emergence of the Concept of "Calling"**

Weber believes that the term "calling" used by Luther aims to emphasize the meaning of "a task arranged by God." Compared to the German term "Beruf" (profession, calling), Weber considers "calling" in English to be a more accurate expression. Therefore, it is unquestionable that "calling" is at least a religious concept, and by tracing back to various nations adhering to Catholicism or ancient nations following classicism, there is no mention of any concept resembling the emphasized meaning of "a lifelong task, a definite field of work" [1], yet it has always been maintained among Protestant nations. Therefore, this concept is novel, a product of the religious reform.

The emergence of the concept of calling signifies two significant shifts: First, secular daily practices are endowed with religious evaluations, implying that even worldly activities may receive recognition and encouragement from religious doctrines. "The entire existence of the world serves only for the glory of God. The task of the chosen Christian in the world is only to obey God's commandments to the fullest extent possible, thereby increasing the glory of God" [1]. Second, building upon the former, Protestant ethics can also encourage believers to fulfill "God's will" by fulfilling their worldly duties and thus receive God's grace, marking an important progression from "'justification by faith' to 'justification by deeds'" [3].

The primary obligation in Protestant views is labor. Martin Luther, a key figure in the religious reform, proposed that "labor is the only way to please God," which significantly differs from Catholicism and traditional Western views. Ancient Greek society despised labor because secular work would obscure the true spirit, leading individuals further away from their ideals, hence all mechanical labor in society was to be carried out by slaves. The Bible also contains records of "man shall labor because of sin" as punishment, and Pope Leo I summarized Christian doctrine as "the interest of money is the destruction of the soul" [4].

Although Luther to some extent demonstrated the importance of labor and embodied a progressive mindset, this progress was limited. Luther's view on labor remained relatively conservative; for example, in terms of career choices, Luther advocated that each laborer should only do their assigned tasks well and did not promote crossing professions. This viewpoint clearly does not facilitate talent mobility in society and does not optimize the allocation of labor as a resource. Therefore, the propositions of Calvinism further elevate the significance of labor.

### **2.1.2. Calvinism and the Doctrine of Predestination**

Calvinism, starting from Augustine's doctrine of original sin, put forward the doctrine of predestination, which became the core of Calvinism. Calvin believed that "who are the elect, who are the reprobate, who can be saved, and who should be punished" were predestined by God according to his "eternal will," regardless of anyone's behavior during their lifetime, and the church was equally powerless. Such views are extremely inhumane, bringing immense religious anxiety to the era.

Firstly, "predestination" denies the Roman Catholic Church's "doctrine of redemption." Compared to Luther's assertion of "justification by faith" and the Bible as the sole source of faith, "predestination" further deepens the "privatization of faith," leading to an unprecedented sense of loneliness for everyone. Because there is no longer any intermediary between people and God,

everyone is equal before God; all individuals' statuses are the same because they exist solely for God. No one is free; only God is free. Everyone is merely a product of God's terrible decree (*decretum horribile*). Thus, the only path left for us is to face God's judgment, to walk alone in our own lives, deepening the sense of self-discipline and self-awareness in the hearts of every Calvinist believer. Magic and witchcraft become less credible, and religious rituals lose their significance because no religious behavior can further anyone's redemption and grace.

Secondly, "predestination" further enhances the value of secular activities. "Predestination" does not equate to determinism; although God has arranged a destination for each person in the end, human free will is not deprived. Furthermore, people do not lose the freedom to do good because of God's predestination, as God does not use necessity to force people to do evil. Therefore, although our actions cannot affect God's will or predestination, our actions and even secular achievements themselves seem to be something we can use to speculate or judge whether we are among the fortunate ones chosen by God. That is to say, if a person achieves great success through hard work instead of spending all their time doing evil or living in poverty, then successful individuals are naturally more likely to receive God's grace. Hence, work is no longer merely serving God; it becomes a means to prove God's favor. This is a more radical viewpoint, and its effect is like installing an endless engine in the spirit of Protestants, urging them to work as hard as they can. In this sense, work takes on extraordinary significance.

### 2.1.3. Asceticism

In Weber's sociology of religion, Western religions have always advocated asceticism. The "otherworldly asceticism" practiced by traditional Catholicism involves retreating from the world and practicing asceticism to achieve redemption. Similarly, Protestantism also practices asceticism, but it believes that the true moral objection is not wealth itself but the sloth that possession of wealth can lead to. In the past, when people acquired abundant wealth, they would choose to live a life of idleness and indulgence, which would lead them away from the pursuit of righteous living. Therefore, the real sin is wasting time because, in order to ensure their state of grace, individuals must "complete the work assigned to them by the Lord until the daylight fades," and "only through labor, not leisure, can the glory of God be increased" [1]. This makes the asceticism pursued by Protestantism a continuous process in which believers accumulate wealth through labor and work. At the same time, luxury and indulgence are considered shameful. Therefore, even those who possess wealth should continue to accumulate wealth to gain more. The acquisition of wealth is not a means of enjoyment but the purpose of people's labor. In this sense, the traditional division of labor is broken, and the only result worth considering is whether profit is achieved.

Asceticism combines the pursuit of profit with frugality. At the socio-economic level, it encourages people to work continuously to accumulate wealth while greatly limiting the consumption of high-income earners. This inevitably brings about an important condition for the development of capitalism: the accumulation of capital. Accumulated capital cannot be released through consumption but is re-circulated back into the market through investment and expanded reproduction, thereby forming a cycle. Regarding the role of asceticism, Weber referred to it as "the expansion of that attitude towards life which is essential to the spirit of capitalism undoubtedly played an immensely leveraged role" [1].

## 2.2. The Product of Rationalization: Capitalism and the Spirit of Capitalism

Weber believed that the social order of capitalism was established on the basis of the combined effects of "freely organized labor," "technological calculability," and "the diligent and thrifty occupational spirit possessed by the bourgeoisie." He sought to explore the question of the "historical attribution

of responsibility" for these components constituting the capitalist order. This led Weber to discuss the topic of the spirit of capitalism.

Unlike historical materialism, Weber believed that the development of all social history cannot fundamentally be attributed solely to the development of socio-economics or social existence. The role of spiritual and cultural factors is often overlooked by materialists. Therefore, Weber firmly believed that there existed a spiritual driving force hidden within Western culture that propelled the formation of capitalism. This is another core aspect of Weber's proposition: the spirit of capitalism. Weber openly admitted that directly presenting the concept of the spirit of capitalism seemed somewhat vague. However, he strictly distinguished between the spirit of capitalism and the impulse for profit. Weber believed that the spirit of capitalism drove individuals to restrain irrational impulses through shrewd calculations, thereby maximizing and sustaining profitable activities. This is similar to the "rational actor assumption" established in contemporary economics, where individuals act to accumulate wealth.

From Weber's discussion on this issue, it can be concluded that the core of the spirit of capitalism he seeks lies in rationality and the products of rationalization. Weber attempts to identify a spirit unique to the West, and to do so, he utilizes a comparative approach across various domains including politics, economics, culture, science, and art to summarize a universally present rational characteristic. Politically, although feudal political groups have appeared worldwide, only Western culture can understand the feudal states and bureaucratic systems characterized by "the king is the state" (*rex et regnum*), with trained administrative personnel implementing power according to rational rules under a system of laws. Economically, irrational impulses for profit are prevalent worldwide, with merchants engaging in trade activities, inter-state trade by land or sea, loans, taxation, and currency activities occurring globally. However, the pursuit of profit through sustained, rational capitalist enterprise and the continuous regeneration of profit are unique to capitalist societies. In the realm of science, while sophisticated knowledge and empirical knowledge exist worldwide, the scientific method that combines experimental observation with rational proof is also a creation of Western civilization...

Combining the content of Protestant ethics, in Weber's view, rational characteristics seem to have been consistently embedded in the development of Western civilization. Alongside the rationalization of religion brought about by the Protestant Reformation, the emergence of Protestant ethics with its secular asceticism requirements presents a high degree of consistency with the demands of capitalist society's development. In Weber's actual discourse, he analyzes the religious influences behind the social stratification phenomena of historical periods, leading to an exploration of the religious origins of the spirit of capitalism. The conclusion drawn from such a argumentative structure is that Protestant ethics, as a conceptual tool, constructed the rationalized structure of the spirit of capitalism. Therefore, it can be argued that this rationalized structure was born out of rationalization and has always pursued rationalization as its ultimate goal. This expansion of rationality, which drives the continuous development of modern natural science and social economy, also serves as Weber's incisive entry point for an in-depth analysis of the problem of modernity.

### **3. Changes Past and Present: The Transformation of Modern Society**

#### **3.1. The Disenchantment of the World: From "Permeable Self" to "Buffered Self"**

Weber firmly believed that the disenchantment of the world is an irreversible transition of modernity. Charles Taylor, on the other hand, sees this disenchantment process as leading to a transformation of human self from a "permeable self" to a "buffered self." In pre-modern societies, people faced an enchanted world "of spirits, demons, and moral forces that our ancestors recognized." [5] Correspondingly, the permeability of the self, as Taylor describes it, meant that "once meaning wasn't



confined to the mind, once we fell into that kind of enchantment, entered into the field of external meanings, then we would imagine ourselves as in it, or open to its penetration." [5] This implied that facing a magical world and the various experiences within it, which were transcendental imaginings, were close to reality and were difficult for us to isolate from ourselves.

Correspondingly, buffered self-awareness acknowledges the clear boundary between the self and the external, which represents an impermeable manifestation. This self-awareness further deepens the Cartesian "subject-object" structure, reinforcing the isolation of the self from the external. The self is no longer influenced or defined by the external but is a subject defined by itself. The world outside the subject is reduced to an object to be actively perceived and experienced by the subject, thus leading to the objectification of the external world.

This represents an attitude of closure towards the mysterious, as scientific rationality strips the cosmic order into cold physical causal laws, mechanizing what was once interpreted as a "teleological" universe. This state of affairs is seen by both Weber and Taylor as the product of a vast new "framework of meaning." Weber once said, "Man is an animal suspended in the net of his own weaving of meaning," while Taylor similarly believes that human actions must be underpinned by a "background framework" permeating our experiences, and the behavior and psychology of modern people are built on the dissolution of a traditional framework of meaning.

### 3.2. The Transformation of Social Imaginations: From "Embedding" to "Disembedding"

Charles Taylor has provided a classic analogy for the transformation of social imaginations, namely from "embedding" to "disembedding." These concepts are also at the core of Taylor's thought. "Embedding" implies "self-identity relying on specific social imaginations, cosmic imaginations, and the relatively stable structure formed by the two; disembedding means the reconstruction of social imaginations and cosmic imaginations." [6] The emphasis on individual self arose after the "great disembedding." Before disembedding, individuals were embedded in a holistic universe, where the universal order within it served as the source of meaning. As Yuval Noah Harari describes in "Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind," people at that time did not have their own personal scripts; they adhered to a cosmic script. According to Taylor, the self was just a small part of the "great chain of being," and this chain was the universal order that bestowed meaning upon us.

Disembedding brought about two significant conceptual changes: first, individuals separated themselves from nature; second, individuals detached themselves from the community. Taylor refers to the first shift as the "anthropocentric shift," where humans transcend nature to become a relative human subject, able to objectify the world and use their reason to understand this object. This involves three characteristics of the "subject-object" structure: "externality," "anthropocentrism," and "cognitive bridging," which are the opposite of the traditional "human-world" in situ structure [7]. Taylor calls the second shift the "individualistic shift," where individuals disengage from the community to become highly autonomous individuals, akin to Michael Walzer's concept of the "atomized individual." However, Taylor does not believe that individuals can exist outside of the community, as he points out, "the modern independence of the self does not deny the fact that the self can only exist within other selves." [8] Therefore, Taylor does not consider this shift to mean that individuals can detach from the community, but rather that the community itself has undergone significant changes, and each of us still needs to live together in this particular community. Therefore, Taylor believes that individualism is not an individual perspective but a social one. Before the emergence of this social perspective, society was filled with "organic communities," where hometowns were often personified by expatriates, and the hometown in the expatriate's heart seemed to be alive and richly emotionally connected. In such situations, individuals would be deeply embedded in the community. But in modern society, individuals are no longer bound to spend their lives with a specific group. Population mobility is a prominent feature of modern economic society

and an important driver of socio-economic development. This also allows individuals to realize that to some extent, everyone can freely leave one community and enter another new one, giving rise to a latent individualistic perspective in modern human concepts.

Disenchantment and disembedding are important components of the transformation of modern society. Essentially, they share the same driving force—rationalization. At the same time, they also have a common characteristic: both disenchantment and disembedding emphasize a kind of deconstruction, which primarily affects the traditional order and sources of life values relied upon by pre-modern societies. This naturally raises a question: Can rationality complete the reconstruction of the deconstructed order and values? Weber recognized this issue early on and attempted to reveal what may be the most profound dilemma in the modern world, which he termed "the split between knowledge and faith." Weber's concern stemmed from his realization of the limitations of rationalism. In his exploration of Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism, it is not difficult to discern that the spirit of capitalism did not abandon the need for certainty among individuals in its development process. It also attempted to establish a set of the most primitive values of modernity. However, Weber gradually realized that this rationality itself is not God, and the limitations of rationality become increasingly apparent as the processes of disenchantment and disembedding deepen. This leads Weber to make a final judgment on modern society: that it gradually develops into an "iron cage."

#### **4. From Rationalization to the "Iron Cage"**

##### **4.1. "Instrumental Rationality" and "Value Rationality"**

In the discussion of historical changes, the development of rationalism has driven the deconstruction of pre-modern societies. Thus, the question arises: What did modernity establish after breaking away from the old society? To answer this question, Weber made a structural integration of rationalization, distinguishing between two types of rationality: "instrumental rationality" and "value rationality." These two different rationalities address fundamentally different types of problems.

Instrumental rationality can answer the question "what is," or more precisely, it is applied to the category of "fact judgment." Therefore, the application of instrumental rationality requires a universal, uniform, and objective standard of judgment. This standard should not be influenced or changed by the subjectivity of the knowing subject. Instrumental rationality, driven by this characteristic, is often used to find optimal means to solve problems and achieve goals. At its core, instrumental rationality involves calculation, especially of costs and benefits. This is fundamentally linked to capitalism, influenced by the spirit of capitalism and Protestant ethics. Profit is the ultimate goal in the lives of modern individuals, and the optimal means to achieve profit is to quantify all aspects of life in terms of input and output, making them measurable in terms of wealth. Meanwhile, instrumental rationality is maximally applied by comparing the values of different behaviors in the most intuitive way (comparing numbers) through calculation and making choices accordingly. In fact, whether it is Protestant ethics or the spirit of capitalism, the rationalization emphasized in both is instrumental rationalization. Take Calvinism as an extreme example: Calvinist believers always insist on achieving secular achievements through various utilitarian calculations, but they have never reflected on or questioned the extreme doctrine itself, even ignoring the "value vacuum" brought about by this doctrine. Instrumental rationality is also the foundation of modern economics. For example, in all theories of microeconomics, there is an assumption of an "absolutely rational person," whose rationality is highlighted by abstracting all economic behaviors into mathematical expressions. Some intuitive factors (such as how much a person likes a particular behavior) are also vigorously quantified as the benefits to that person (for example, the Coase theorem in economics requires quantifying the benefits received by an individual in order to negotiate and eliminate externalities through

"subsidies"). The development of modern science also harnesses instrumental rationality. However, Weber sharply observed that instrumental rationality cannot solve the problem of values. This is because there is an insurmountable gap between fact judgment and value judgment. Following this, Weber introduced another corresponding concept: "value rationality."

Value rationality is applied in value judgments, which evaluate the value of something. Unlike instrumental rationality, value rationality itself is the most intuitive manifestation of individual differences, because value judgments ultimately always have a subjective component, which is different from instrumental rationality's insistence on pursuing objectivity. In the past, there was a relatively unified underlying standard for value judgments, namely the framework of meaning under the natural order. However, this order has been dissolved in modernity, replaced by a pluralism of values, which Weber referred to as the "struggle of gods." Weber believed that the main reason for this situation is the serious imbalance in the development of instrumental rationality and value rationality. Weber once stated, "The fate of an era that has eaten of the fruit of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the meaning of the world from its analysis - even if it is perfect. Instead, it must be able to create this meaning for itself. It must recognize that the general views of life and the world will never be the product of growing empirical knowledge" [9]. Instrumental rationality not only fails to answer questions of value and meaning in practice but also continuously encroaches upon the domain of value rationality. This one-sided development of rationalization leads to a pursuit of means that overshadows the pursuit of ends. As a result, many people today are always inclined to prioritize concerns about financial freedom in their daily lives, continually postponing questions of purpose and meaning. However, in the continuous pursuit of wealth, they are instead shaped by this process and gradually sink into it.

## **4.2. Formation of the "Iron Cage" and Reflection Within the "Iron Cage"**

### **4.2.1.From Bureaucracy to the "Modern Iron Cage"**

The modern "iron cage" is a vivid metaphor used by Weber to describe modernized society, and discussing the formation of the iron cage inevitably involves introducing the concept of bureaucracy, which is a product of the development and expansion of instrumental rationality. In fact, Weber's use of bureaucracy is not limited to administrative systems but appears in all areas requiring management. Therefore, enterprises, associations, and even schools fall within the scope of this bureaucratic application. Weber observed that in this management system, to pursue efficiency and stability, managers often adhere to instrumental rationality, quantifying the complex situations of each individual into calculable indicators. Through this simplification and abstraction, management decisions can be made efficiently by the system through effective calculations. Weber referred to this management principle as the "impersonal" principle. This impersonalization is, in fact, an extremely sharp double-edged sword. On the one hand, it brings about a rapid increase in efficiency, allowing the system to operate efficiently. On the other hand, this principle leads to increasing mechanization of the system, and individuals within this system become increasingly instrumental, seen as parts of a social machine. The workers on the assembly lines during the Industrial Revolution are typical embodiments of such systems. Therefore, in Weber's view, driven by a one-sided pursuit of instrumental rationality in the entire era, this bureaucratic principle gradually became the operating principle of the entire society, thus molding the entire society into what Weber referred to as the "iron cage."

This iron cage also has serious drawbacks:

Firstly, it fosters an extremely one-sided social culture, namely, "utilitarian morality." In the abstract of the article, I quoted the viewpoint of "moral support," which holds that virtues such as "diligence" and "thrift" in the capitalist spirit are manifestations of morality. However, this argument



itself has a flaw: a lack of reflection on the nature of morality. Many moral behaviors in modern capitalism are themselves the result of calculations. For example, the government imposes fines to reduce fraudulent behavior in the market. This policy essentially increases the cost and consequences for companies, making such illegal behavior less "profitable" for them. This measure essentially addresses "moral issues" through the utilitarian calculus of "gains and losses," but this approach does not truly instill morality in people. Its result is merely directing people's attention to actions, thereby neglecting the interpretation of the problem of goodness itself. Therefore, the real moral issue is obscured at this level.

Secondly, it fosters an extremely one-sided social relationship, where people become commodities, and interpersonal relationships gradually transform into supply and demand relationships. This characteristic is most vividly reflected in the modern market's concept of "labor resources" and "human resources." In the market, people become commodities, and businesses need to compete for high-quality talents to enhance their competitiveness. Personal "self-development" also gradually tends to cater to a trend of "enhancing one's value as a commodity." This unavoidably encroaches upon the space for enhancing spirituality and developing character. This characteristic also exists in more everyday interpersonal relationships, which Martin Buber referred to as the "I-it" relation. This is also a product of the shift towards individualism. In this type of relationship, others become objects for each subject, and subjects often seek to instrumentalize these objects to satisfy their own needs. Faced with this harsh "iron cage," "experts lose their souls, and hedonists lose their hearts."

#### 4.2.2. Reflection from the Perspective of Marxism

Although there are indeed many fundamental differences between Marx and Weber's interpretations of modernity, and this article cannot comprehensively compare the viewpoints of the two, the use of some achievements of Marxist thought can still bring about a deeper interpretation of the human condition in modernity. This deeper interpretation is reflected in Marx's thorough exploration of the phenomenon behind this condition, thus touching on more fundamental issues. Moreover, from a historical perspective, the problems addressed by Marx still exist even in today's rapid development of capitalism, which in itself is an affirmation of the achievements of Marxist thought.

Marx, by using Hegel's theory of alienation, revealed the structure of commodification and the alienation of labor in modern society. Through the analysis of three forms of alienation: the alienation of labor from the product, the alienation of labor from labor itself, and the alienation of human beings from one another, Marx argued that there is an inherent conflict between individual liberation and the structure of modern capitalism. The freedom brought about by modernity is essentially a kind of one-sided false freedom. Although this liberation seems to bring about more options, in reality, it is still far from human liberation. Regarding the limitations of Western freedom, Marcuse saw that the modern capitalist system still did not abandon control over the masses. Furthermore, this control is akin to a form of "consolation," as people willingly submit to this control, thereby falling into a "comfortable unfreedom." Marcuse's notion of control is more of a consumer society system, where people circulate within this system and become devotees of "commodity fetishism." At the same time, Marcuse inherited Marx's insights into labor alienation, further revealing how individuals gradually become one-dimensional in a "freedom of servitude," while society develops into a one-dimensional society. Marcuse saw a capitalism society that was more developed and perfect compared to Marx's era and keenly observed that in such a society, alienation has not disappeared but instead has permeated into various aspects of life more deeply, widely, and covertly.

Whether it is Marx or Marcuse's thought, they both negate and criticize the view of capitalism as the end of history. Although the modern capitalist social form is progressive compared to the pre-modern society, bringing about tremendous progress in socio-economic and material aspects, Marxism recognizes the core shortcomings of modern capitalism. That is, the development of socio-

economic conditions still cannot bear the cost of "completely depriving people of the possibility of liberation." The development and improvement of modern capitalist society is a process that continuously erodes the spirit of resistance, which is the serious crisis hidden behind prosperity.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper, through the elaboration of Weber's propositions, explores the "highly concomitant" relationship between Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism, and identifies the core clue that connects the entire Weberian proposition—the development of rationalization. The paper attempts to place rationalization within the broader context of the modernity transition to comprehensively understand the impact of this developmental trend, thereby arousing reflection on how rationalization and its product, "modern society," should be approached.

In the actual argumentation, the paper attempts to find two ways of reflection and attempts them both. Firstly, and most importantly, by tracing the shaping role of rationalization on modern society, it reveals the two major effects of rationalization: the disenchantment at the ideological level and the disembedding at the social level, thus demonstrating that rationalism has comprehensively deconstructed the pre-modern society. However, this trend encounters a core problem when attempting to reconstruct an entirely new human habitat with rationality, and this problem itself arises from the limitations of rationalism. Due to the inability of rationalism to overcome this essential limitation, the modernity problem presented in this paper arises, namely the imbalance in rational development and the establishment of the "iron cage." At the same time, the paper also attempts to provide another perspective of reflection, namely by combining Marx's theory of labor alienation with Marcuse's further development of this theory, digging into the deeper core of this problem, and attempting to illustrate that the development of capitalism fundamentally cannot bring about comprehensive liberation for individuals. Furthermore, through Marcuse's perspective, we see that with the improvement and development of the capitalist system, its core drawback of "alienation" cannot be alleviated, and may even be more deeply and universally present. Meanwhile, a kind of "bribery" from the system itself continues to erode resistance consciousness, thereby forming a more hidden but serious crisis.

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