

Re-enchantment In Modernity Zoltan Balazs

In Szelenyi's reading, „Weber is one of the early postmodern, post-Enlightenment theorists,” a „liberal in despair.” He considers Weber's „Entzauberung a generic concept,” and asserts that „rationalization is a narrower notion which does not quite capture the complexity of the human conditions (...) under modernity.” The point is, thus, that disenchantment lies deeper than rationalization. What is the magic that we have lost? Szelenyi gives a few hints. He alludes to „our ability to make moral judgments, our ability to experience the work beyond instrumental reason, with our full personality, to be engaged in erotic relationships rather than just sex acts” and a general „loss of meaning.” Not being a Weber scholar, my remarks are restricted to Szelenyi's points. They all revolve around the problem of in what 'magic' consists.

1. Capitalist re-enchantment

Szelenyi himself refers to another „generic” concept, related to 'magic' that was developed (though not invented) by Marx. This is commodity fetishism, a concept meant to comprise the essence of capitalism and that is another generic concept. Marx deliberately chose it for its religious connotations and used it to suggest that our normal, common attitudes towards goods and services on the market are in fact socially constructed and are enjoined on us (both as consumers and producers, employers and employees, etc.) by the hidden forces of capitalism. The term „fetishism” implies, however, some kind of a misunderstanding, even perversion as well, something that right reason and rational thinking must uncover. Even after the demise of religious beliefs, there is still a need to dispel the clouds of superstition about how commodities get their values. Marx indeed concludes that

The life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan. This, however, demands for society a certain material ground-work or set of conditions of existence which in their turn are the spontaneous product of a long and painful process of development (Marx, 2007 [1867], 92).

Thus, commodity fetishism is but both a remnant of religious thinking and a new, strong form of illusion that needs to be combatted by reason (conscious regulation and planned economy). This is, of course, not consistent with the story of disenchantment in and of the modern world. Szelenyi notes this and quickly adds that „[t]he problem Weber saw was not an enchanted world, rather one of *disenchantment*. For Weber, the problem with modernity was not that there is not enough rationality, it was too much rationality” (his emphasis). However, even a cursory overview of the literature on fetishism and the more or less Marxist criticisms of modernity and modern capitalism proves that notions of illusion, distorted communication, ideology, false consciousness, the rule of irrationality and other, similar ones are all studied extensively and that many critical philosophers and sociologists think that like Cipolla's magic, capitalism holds us strongly within its artificial world of material idols. This obviously suggests that at least some „magic” is still very much part of modernity. The enlightenment project has not achieved its goal, we are constantly enchanted by a whirling carnival of commodities, services, experiences, ideas, and so on, provided by for us in ever-increasing quantities and varieties every day. Is the story of a disenchantment credible at all? I leave this question open because the point is not whether or not critics of capitalism who hold such

views are right, but that the thesis about a gradual or even accomplished disenchantment brought about by modernity (whatever that means) is not trivially true.

2. Bureaucratic re-enchantment

2.1. Weber

Szelenyi thinks that rationalization is a „narrower notion” than disenchantment. Again, there is an immense literature on this Weberian notion that cannot be discussed here. Let me, therefore, pull out a single thread out of it. It has been long noted that even for Weber rationalization, an extension of bureaucratic ethos and of legal logic (these terms are not identical, of course), has always carried with it a sort of irrationality. Faith in reason remains a sort of faith, after all. By way of explaining charismatic authority, Weber makes an interesting observation:

In traditionalist periods, charisma is the great revolutionary force. The likewise revolutionary force of 'reason' works from without: by altering the situations of life and hence its problems, finally in this way changing men's attitudes toward them; or it intellectualizes the individual. Charisma, on the other hand, may effect a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm. It may then result in a radical alteration of the central attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different problems of the 'world.' In prerationalistic periods, tradition and charisma between them have almost exhausted the whole of the orientation of action (Weber 1978, 245).

What is especially remarkable in this paragraph is, first, the noted similarity between charisma and reason as revolutionary forces; and second, the reference made to the change of attitudes, situations, problems of human beings as the results and effects of charisma and reason. Weber makes a difference here, since he explains the mechanism of charisma as an „internal reorientation” and the mechanism of reason as working „from without” and adds the somewhat curious notion of „intellectualization.” It is, again, not my job to analyze Weber's argument here in detail, but it is important to point out that the difference between the two operations is not at all clear. Both charisma and reason can be said to be born „outside” but change both the outer and inner world of the subjects in similar ways. For instance, if reason „intellectualizes” us, then charisma makes us „enthusiastic.” This is why both can be revolutionary forces.

I cannot go into further details about how Weber tries to explain the change of authority. He alludes here to the role of charisma in traditional periods and discusses the routinization of charisma. Similarly, reason as a revolutionary force may turn into bureaucratic routine and a system of legal rules. But the question remains: does such a routinization of a once-revolutionary force eliminate the magic of revolution entirely? For every revolution as a *force* has something magical, or perhaps, to use Edmund Burke's more adequate concept, something sublime, about it. Unless one believes in a supreme, divine force *who* is beneficial, providential towards mankind, to whom all forces of nature and society are ultimately subjected, sheer, morally neutral force remains in a deep sense sublime, something that we hold in awe. And the sublimity of every revolution has a magnetizing, mesmerizing, enchanting effect on the participants, both on those who support and who resist it. True reactionaries are as much fascinated with the Revolution as are revolutionaries themselves.

The revolution of reason is politically nonviolent. One may commit horrendous crimes in the name of reason, of course, but Weber's point about the revolutionary force of reason (ratio) does not imply outright violence and it is not an historical reference. It

„intellectualizes” us and intellectualization is contrary to physical violence, though possibly not absolutely contrary to more refined, psychological types of violence. In any case, the age and rule of reason is not entirely without some aspects of revolution and thereby the point about the lure of revolution and our fascination with it *as a force* applies to the revolution of reason as well. It is not entirely accidental that we sometimes use the metaphor of the „force of logic” (there is a logic of force as well which is a meta-metaphor). A philosopher, a scientist, a scholar cannot regard logic a force because reason, to which logic appeals and from which it stems, is the defining feature of humanity in philosophy and science alike, and revolting against it simply does not make sense. Yet the phrases „tyranny of reason” and „force of logic” are not just Romantic excesses. They refer to a very human attitude against imposing anything, including our own reason, upon us. By thus alienating our own reason from ourselves, it becomes a possible force, not dissimilar to other forces of nature, of society, of fate against which we are defenseless.

2.2. Kafka

Weber scholarship has, for instance, found a remarkable congeniality between him and Franz Kafka. To illuminate the possibility of a queer, yet very real re-enchantment enacted by the revolution of reason in modernity, let me expand upon this comparison a little bit.

Douglas Litowitz (2011) argues that

Although Kafka’s writings were generally darker than Weber’s, they both prophesied the ascendancy of instrumental rationality and bureaucratic reasoning (...) Weber used the word *disenchantment* to describe the condition where ‘the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life,’ and this is precisely the legal universe that Kafka depicted in his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* (...) Weber mused that modern man could soon be facing a ‘polar night’ of hyper-rationalization (...) [whereas] Kafka depicted legal systems that possessed a superficial rationality which always, upon closer inspection, proved to be more a mere cover for ambiguity and arbitrariness (49, original emphasis).

Notice the words „hyperrationality” and „superficial rationality,” connected with ambiguity, arbitrariness; and later in the text: the legal system becoming opaque (53), pointless, alien and ultimately „as mysterious as the secret world of priests and shamans” (56).

Similarly, Torben B. Jørgensen (2012) writes about the enigmatic nature of Kafka’s portrayal of bureaucracy with its closedness and constant self-reference as the source of its own legitimacy. Out of this only a no less arbitrary, as he puts it, „trans-rational,” political escape is possible (205). Malcolm Warner (2007), too, thinks that both Kafka and Weber „articulated a reaction of deep ‘cultural pessimism’ that they derived from the onset of ‘modernization’” (1020). There is, thus, a strong view among scholars that what Szelenyi calls disenchantment is, surprisingly perhaps, accompanied by a deep pessimism about a strange sort of re-enchantment in modernity in Weber’s writings and predictions.

But what is this „re-enchantment”? How should we understand opacity, arbitrariness, groundless self-reference, mysteriousness, pointlessness, trans-rationality, superficial rationality, as being somehow contrary to the rule of reason? It was quite fitting to turn to Kafka to figure out the nature of re-enchantment. For in his writings, and especially in *The Castle*, Kafka managed to create a total world which is suffocating, depressing and dark, yet is not without some magic, some low-key, yet real poetry. In one of first direct contacts to the Castle, by phone, K., the protagonist of the novel, has the following experience:

A humming, such as K. had never before heard on the telephone, emerged from the receiver. It was as if the murmur of countless childish voices – not that it was really a murmur, it was more like the singing of voices, very very far away – as if that sound were forming, unlikely as that might be, into a single high, strong voice, striking the ear as if trying to penetrate further than into the mere human sense of hearing. K. heard it and said nothing; he had propped his left arm on the telephone stand, and listened like that (21).

Bureaucracy is, at least in some sense, a poetic experience. Is this irony? Of course it is. But only to reader: once we are in it, enchantment begins. And Kafka goes on. As many commentators have noted, his prose itself is a mesmerizing one, with endless monologues, almost whole chapters in reported speech, a very vulgar, yet still aesthetically sensible style.

Officials are treated as idols, almost like the Roman *lares*, rescued from fire, served as masters, yet not adored. They need to be satisfied sexually, yet „[t]he relationship between the women and the officials, believe me, is very difficult to judge, or perhaps very easy. There is never any lack of love in this place. The officials’ love is never unrequited (173).” There is nothing beautiful, wonderful, elevated about love, yet it is, Olga asserts, still love.

Klamm, the mysterious senior official whom K. tries to meet personally by always fails to do so, can only be observed:

Through the small hole, which had obviously been made in it for purposes of observation, he could see almost the whole of the next room. Mr Klamm was sitting at a desk in the middle of the room, in a comfortable round armchair, brightly illuminated by an electric light-bulb hanging in front of him. He was a stout, ponderous man of middle height. His face was still smooth, but his cheeks drooped slightly with the weight of advancing age. He had a long, black moustache, and a pair of pince-nez, set on his nose at a crooked angle and reflecting the light, covered his eyes (36).

Klamm is singularly unattractive, both as a man and as an official, yet this is all the more intriguing to K. who is on a perennial quest for power, for meaning, for love, for everything that this life can offer to us but always and invariably fails to achieve any of these. Klamm, as the god of the Castle, never speaks to anybody. But K.’s faith in the mystery of the Castle never falters. The new enchantment offered by the revolution of reason may be cheap and miserable, painful and ugly, but can we really say that the „old,” sunken, premodern enchantment was any better? At a point, Frieda, K.’s fiancée, tells K. about her desire to emigrate to France or Spain with him but her desire and her reference to these countries are absolutely hollow. Whether or not France or Spain really exist, we cannot know. Life in *The Castle* is complete and total, and enchantment is not missing from it.

Our world is not as dark as that of the Castle though at certain points of the history of modernity, in totalitarian regimes, in wars, in all kinds of inhuman depravity, it did turn into something close to it. Still, our normal, colorful, bourgeois lives are evidently at odds with the nightmarish, subterranean lives of Kafka’s heroes. But the point is that on a closer look the pleasures and delights modernity treats us with can suddenly turn into something frightening. The kind of re-enchantment that bureaucratic-rationalist modernism has brought upon us comes in form of senseless chatters, or internet chats that are being served to us by a highly sophisticated technology; in form of organizational routines of what to do, when, and how; in form of addiction to TV series, news, blogs, whatever we constantly watch and listen to; and in form of sexuality elevated above eros. However, this is *not* disenchantment. Rather, this is a type of enchantment, if only, at least on a first look, a strange kind. But it works perfectly well.

3. Re-enchantment

Such criticisms of modernity are not novel at all. Szelenyi's mourning over the loss of meaning, eros, self-fulfillment in labor, and even morality, fits in a long and strong intellectual-spiritual tradition sharing of which seems to be a matter of taste and personal experience, rather than of science. Szelenyi himself alludes to Weber's personal history in explaining the sociologist's views on modernity and it appears that his own personal history is very much part of the story about disenchantment and modernity. In fact, there is nothing wrong with making the development of a scholar's preferences explicit, although I have some reservations about the reliability of some of Szelenyi's conjectures with respect to Weber's views. Anyhow, Szelenyi concurs with Weber's pessimism for reasons that appear to have a strong personal aspect. This helps me to make my final points about disenchantment and re-enchantment here.

As I alluded to it, many tenets of the disenchantment conception are applicable to premodern times and societies as well. Those who, like me, share the view that human nature is less flexible and changing than social constructivists tend to think, may agree that modernity can be described, more or less adequately, and among other things, by growing rationalization, legalism, and bureaucratization, but are less convinced by the corollary thesis that this amounts to being or getting disenchanted from something. The reason lies in human nature which is such that we cannot live without fantasies, images, tales, myths, values. We may live in an age of machines but the concept of the machine is itself also an image. Monsters do not live in the sea any more, but they are amongst us. The Leviathan has come ashore and lives with us and keeps both the powerful and the subjects fascinated. Gone is the age of knights, as Burke acclaimed and lamented, yet the lure of war has not tarnished, on the contrary: it has seduced millions of men in the past two centuries. Briefly, what has (perhaps) changed is simply being enchanted by other things and in other ways than, supposedly, our ancestors were once.

Further, it is perhaps no more the classical magic (Zauber) that enchants us. We may seek thrill rather than enthrallment, excitement rather than charm and these distinctions are important. The grace of classical painting has been replaced by the rigor of abstract painting. The lure of classical music has considerably smaller effect on modern ears than the clattering of rock music. Geometry and monotony are important concepts for a modernity conceived and interpreted in terms of rationality and bureaucracy. However, there is so much more about modern life and modern societies that work contrary to these tendencies. Being „thrilled” and „excited” have become rather dull expressions, forms of courtesy. Abstract arts and monotonous music are often shunned at as being meant for subcultures or for special places and occasions. Popular culture has never really absorbed abstract arts, or at least it has never become identical with it. Hard rock and techno are well-embedded styles in modernity, but no less are pop music, jazz, and other, more colorful types and genres. Our natural capacity to desire and appreciate fantasy, variety, surprise, and magic simply cannot be done away with.

And there is a last point which I deem the most substantial one. Though Weber convincingly argued for the transformative force of Protestantism and his terms discussed here (rationalization, legalization, etc.) refer to historically fairly well-established developments and changes. However, aren't there deeper and more pristine trends of „disenchantment” in Weber's sense, along with a specially Occidental trend of re-enchantment? What I have in mind is the so-called individualization of and in the West. As Charles Taylor argued (1989), now quite a long ago, the really crucial change occurred very early in Western history. His analysis of St Augustine's philosophy is particularly illuminating. Augustine's revolution was to make, indeed, to discover the distinction between

what is „in us” and what is „outside of us,” and to orient our reflection towards the inner world. As Taylor puts it, „It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it was Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought” (131). Of course, within our soul we should not seek ourselves in the modern sense but God. However, by constantly observing our own conscience, examining our moral life, we find our own selves often enigmatic, mysterious, too deep to be comprehensible. En route to God within ourselves, we encounter spirits, daimons, evil and good alike, as well as hidden desires, inexplicable reactions, suppressed memories – and this world is a magical one, and perhaps more magical than nature can ever be. And God is the greatest mystery, occupying the deepest part of the soul, making it literally unfathomable. Paradoxically, however, by facing, fighting, accomodating ourselves to this world we also rationalize it, try to make it transparent, explain God Himself as the scholastics did, who had been the first Rationalizers, long before Protestantism appeared. Disenchantment and (re)enchantment go hand in hand, and as long as our journey towards the centre of the human is not ended, we are no more entitled to be „pessimists” about disenchantment than to be „optimists” about a constant re-enchantment. Ironically, Szelenyi’s own concepts: morality, eros, meaning, self-fulfillment are deeply rooted in this Augustinian tradition. Putting these concepts, especially as *concepts*, into the forefront has ever been a defining feature of Western thinking. By conceptualizing our inner world we rationalize it; yet our concepts and our philosophy keep us fascinated by human nature. What is missing is, perhaps, the idea of there being an unfathomable essence in the depth of our soul. Whether religious faith in this, Augustinian and Western sense is a prerequisite of the continuation of our journey, is a matter for further reflection.

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