

From Puritanism to Paranoia: Trajectories of History in Weber and Pynchon

Ralph Schroeder

Providence, hey *Providence*, what'd you do,
step out for a beer or something?¹

Pynchon's novels are well known for making wide-ranging allusions to other works. The sociology of Max Weber, like other material that informs Pynchon's writings, is a pervasive influence and yet difficult to pin down.² This is especially true of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's interest in Weber is not surprising since his central concerns include the nature of historical interpretation and the impact of science on the modern world. Both the novelist and the sociologist explore, in their different ways, the fate of humanity in a disenchanted and increasingly bureaucratized world. In light of this affinity, we must ask whether Weber's social thought can shed any light on the central themes in Pynchon's novels, and, more specifically, how it influences Pynchon's ideas about history and about the role of science in the modern world. We may also put the question the other way around, asking whether the themes in Weber's work gain an additional dimension by being dealt with in fictional form.

Before we begin investigating Weber's influence on Pynchon, a brief biographical footnote is in order. At the same time Pynchon was studying at Cornell University, one of the foremost German interpreters of Weber's work, Friedrich Tenbruck, taught at nearby Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Is it possible that Pynchon's first exposure to Weber's ideas took place through his attending a lecture by the Weber scholar? After all, it is only a short journey from Ithaca to Geneva, New York. Since we know very little about Pynchon's personal life, this conjecture must remain purely hypothetical. But since we are discussing the work of a writer who delights in making seemingly far-fetched links, this kind of speculation is perhaps not altogether out of place.

Although Weberian themes can already be found in Pynchon's earlier novels, only in *Gravity's Rainbow* do they take on central importance.³ Three of these themes can be singled out. One is the portrayal of Slothrop's paranoid world-view as an almost logical

outcome of the Puritan mentality of his forefathers. This characterization of the genealogy of Slothrop's beliefs closely parallels Weber's ideas about the "Protestant ethic" and its effect on our contemporary world-view. The second theme concerns the way Pynchon endows the rocket with certain dynamic qualities in the midst of a growing trend towards bureaucratization. In more Weberian terms, the rocket takes on charismatic qualities in an age marked by the routinization of social life. Third, the two writers have a common concern about the impact of science in the modern world. Both describe how science, by undermining traditional conceptions of individual identity and of progress, introduces ambiguities into our contemporary world-view.

Although Pynchon has obviously read Weber, the precise nature of his dependence on the sociologist's ideas is impossible to assess. I will proceed, therefore, by shifting back and forth between their works to reconstruct their most striking affinities.

Puritanism and the Dissolution of the Self

The idea that a straight line leads from Slothrop's New England ancestors to his present dilemma surfaces frequently in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Sometimes Pynchon even links them directly: "it's a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia, filtering in" (188). Like the early Puritans, who believed a divine plan had predetermined all worldly events, Slothrop thinks there is a conspiracy manipulating the events in his life. These Puritan origins not only provide a genealogical background for understanding Slothrop's predicament, but they also generate a historical context that locates the transformation of his identity.⁴

The connection between Puritanism and paranoia is made near the beginning of the novel, in the section introducing the story of Slothrop's Puritan forefathers. One way Pynchon alludes to the anxiety of the early Puritans is by invoking the image of the hand of God coming out of the sky to signify the Puritan believer's election. This image is juxtaposed with an account of the rocket's descent, the rocket which lies at the root of Slothrop's paranoia (26-29). This parallel can be taken further: Just as the Puritans sought signs of election in their worldly deeds, so Slothrop pursues a trail of forces which seem to have predetermined his fate. Paradoxically, although both the Puritan and the paranoid world-views focus the believer's attention on a hidden and otherworldly realm, and therefore seem to divert attention from the concerns of this world, in fact they both result in an anxious and systematic this-worldly pursuit.⁵

This paradox is also the central theme of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Here Weber describes how, initially, the ideas of predestination and election typically led the Protestant believer to focus completely on other-worldly salvation. At the same time, the belief that God's divine plan was completely unknowable resulted in a feeling of "inner isolation" and in an "unprecedented inner loneliness."⁶ Such a condition of intense psychological pressure, however, forced the believer to turn to the methodical pursuit of worldly success to gain a visible sign of grace. Although in theory, in Weber's view, it was impossible for the Protestant to achieve certainty about his or her election since God's plan was unknowable and predetermined, in practice the emphasis came to be placed more and more on worldly deeds as a sign of grace. In due course, the shift from a pursuit of religious goals to a pursuit of worldly goals was completed. With secularization and the waning of concern about salvation, only the methodical striving for worldly success in one's "vocation" remained of the Puritan's original religious impulse.

Weber is often mistakenly thought to have claimed that Protestant dogma directly promotes the pursuit of economic gain. In this vein, some of his critics have pointed out that the tenets of Protestantism do not in fact encourage economic activity any more than the beliefs of other religions, and perhaps even less so than those of medieval Christendom. Yet this is to misconstrue Weber's thesis. He knew that, to many Protestants, engagement in economic activity meant involvement in ethically dubious practices and should therefore be avoided. Weber and, as we shall see, Pynchon are interested in establishing a more indirect link: Namely, that the psychological pressure resulting from a purely other-worldly orientation could eventually become transformed into the strongest possible encouragement of systematic this-worldly striving.

For Weber, the Puritan sought to reshape the world in accordance with God's will. Despite the demise of religious belief, modernity is still dominated by this ascetic attitude which seeks to reshape the world, albeit in secular form. But, although the striving for worldly success may have contributed decisively to the rise of modern capitalism, it is no longer required to maintain this social system since its functioning has become well entrenched within an institutional setting:

Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. Today the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally, who knows?—has

escaped from the [iron] cage. But victorious capitalism . . . needs its support no longer. (PE 181–82)

Through the metaphor of the “iron cage,” Weber suggests that the Protestant idea of predestination has become transformed into a secular feeling that one’s life is constantly subject to assessment, except that the individual must now do without the comforting knowledge that this assessment serves a meaningful purpose within a larger design. Weber calls this a “mundane determinism,” the idea that one’s life is predestined in a certain way. Hence even in a secularized age there is still the feeling that one’s “total personality” is constantly being evaluated and that guilt must attach to the failure to live up to this assessment. A “godless feeling of sin” is experienced—even for those deeds which are caused by a person’s “unalterable qualities, acquired without his cooperation.”⁷

Modernity for Weber is characterized, not only by this sense of persecution and guilt, but also by the routinization of social life. Bureaucratization and increasing specialization within an impersonal market economy have brought about the predominance of rigid hierarchical institutions, with the result that the individual must adapt to these routine social conditions. Hence Weber’s pessimistic outlook on the iron cage: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (PE 182).

Pynchon too presents the psychological foundations which helped to establish capitalism as now obsolete. Soon after the Puritan image of “*the great bright hand reaching out of the cloud*” (29), a character says: “A market needed no longer be run by the Invisible Hand, but now could *create itself*—its own logic, momentum, style, from *inside*. Putting the control inside was ratifying what de facto had happened—that you had dispensed with God” (30). But, although there may no longer be a divine plan which predetermines the world, Slothrop still thinks that his life is determined by the rocket and by the constellation of market forces out of which it has arisen. Yet the closer he seems to get to the rocket, and the more information he gathers, the less coherent his personal convictions and character become. Like Weber’s secular descendants of Protestantism who seem to “lose” themselves in worldly pursuits, Slothrop’s identity is completely taken over by his quest.

The dissolution of the self is, therefore, not just an abstract philosophical thesis in the novel, but rather a theme which closely corresponds to the historical account of the origins of modernity that can be found in Weber’s writings. The paranoid quest for certainty

which is linked to a feeling of having a predetermined role in the world can be seen as following from a long chain of events which began with Luther and Calvin. By locating Slothrop's state of mind in the context of its historical antecedents, Pynchon can perhaps better express in fiction what Weber, due to his characteristic restraint as an objective social scientist, can merely hint at: That is, he can give a concrete illustration of the significance of a world-view that has completely lost its original purpose but whose roots nevertheless clearly lie in the Protestant ethic.

The Charisma of the Rocket

As in Weber's work, the rationalization and bureaucratization of the world is a major theme in *Gravity's Rainbow*. This process is represented by the extensively cartelized industries and the sprawling bureaucracies involved in the research, manufacture, and administration of the rocket program. Accordingly, Pynchon's view of politics, like Walter Rathenau's during the séance, is concerned not so much with the division between socialism and conservatism as with the rational bureaucratic structure common to both:

young Walter was more than another industrial heir—he was a philosopher with a vision of the postwar State. He saw the war in progress as a world revolution, out of which would rise neither Red communism nor an unhindered Right, but a rational structure in which business would be the true, the rightful authority. (165)

It is from this perspective that Pynchon's account of the Second World War emphasizes the supranational connections among large corporations and the extensive links among various government agencies.

Weber's political position also points beyond the dichotomy between left and right. His outlook stems from the prognosis that both socialism and capitalism would eventually turn into ever more monolithic bureaucracies. As Wolfgang Mommsen summarizes: "In Weber's view routinization and rationalization pave the way for the eventual rise of a new human species—namely the fully-adjusted men of a bureaucratic age who no longer strive for goals which lie beyond their intellectual horizon, which is in any case likely to be exclusively defined by their most immediate material needs."⁸

Weber thought that only a charismatic leader could possibly halt the processes of rationalization and bureaucratization. Yet his description of modern society suggests that he recognized that such a

reversal would be almost impossible. He saw that, unlike the case of the charismatic founders of the world religions, whose prophetic messages had had a far-reaching impact, the potential for revolutionary modern political leadership was limited, not only because of the overwhelming trend toward bureaucratization, but also because of the nature of constitutional democracy with its plurality of competing powers and interests.

Another process that goes hand in hand with bureaucratization is the disenchantment of the world. Weber suggests that science tends to eliminate the belief in irrational faiths since it offers explanations of the world in terms of causes and laws rather than by invoking other-worldly forces. Religious belief and secular world-views are thus forced to retreat into the realm of private conviction as instrumental efficiency, achieved through the application of scientific methods to the various spheres of social life, becomes ever more widespread. The increasingly rational forms of administration, the growing impersonality of economic life, and the disenchantment of the cultural world all contribute to Weber's notion of an "iron cage" of capitalism.

Pynchon offers a similar vision of a bureaucratic and disenchanted world. During the Second World War and its aftermath, the setting for *Gravity's Rainbow*, some of Weber's pessimistic forecasts seem to have been borne out. But, although Pynchon invokes Weber's idea that charisma will inevitably become routinized, he does not share the view that a charismatic breakthrough in the modern world is unlikely. A dimension unforeseen by Weber had been introduced with the success of National Socialism:

It was widely believed in those days that behind the War—all the death, savagery, and destruction—lay the Führer-principle. But if personalities could be replaced by abstractions of power, if techniques developed by the corporations could be brought to bear, might not nations live rationally? One of the dearest Postwar hopes: that there should be no room for a terrible disease like charisma . . . that its rationalization should proceed while we had the time and resources. (81)

In other words, Pynchon links the rise of Nazism to the emergence of the charismatic leadership of the Führer.⁹ The bureaucratization of the postwar period then becomes a reaction of fear to forestall the reemergence of a powerful charismatic figure like Hitler.

Yet Pynchon also suggests that there may be another form of charisma in the postwar world. The extraordinary charismatic powers that have otherwise been replaced by impersonal structures of domination seem now to be embodied in the technological dream of the

rocket.¹⁰ In Miklos Thanatz's words: "If you'd been out there . . . inside the first minute, you saw, you grew docile under its . . . it really did possess a Max Weber charisma . . . some joyful—and *deeply* irrational—force the State bureaucracy could never routinize, against which it could not prevail" (464). Unlike Weber's charismatic leader, whose followers believe in the extraordinary power of his prophetic message, in this case it is a fascination with the rocket's destructive power and its technological capabilities that exercises a hold on the mind. By showing that an inanimate object may have the power which previously lay in the domains of religion and magic, Pynchon illustrates how the scientific endeavour to achieve mastery over nature, which has so far served to disenchant the world, may also, in its application to the purpose of political domination, serve to reenchant it. The reason for this reenchantment, as Pynchon shows through Weissmann and Pökler, is not only the imperative of a military-industrial complex but also the obsessions and fantasies of those who yearn for technological mastery without regard to its consequences.

Science and the Reenchantment of the World

The affinity between Weber's and Pynchon's views of science carries over into how each interprets the relation between science and our modern world-view. The theme of the disenchantment of the world, of the increasing scientific mastery of the natural and social worlds, is prominent in both writers. But so is the idea that there is an unbridgeable chasm between scientific understanding and individual values. Scientific advancement, as we have seen, leads to the growing impersonality of social relations and to the extension of technical efficiency throughout the public domain. But, although scientific advance is at the root of the most important changes in modern society, it is purely instrumental and value-free. As Weber points out in the essay "Science as a Vocation," science can never tell us how to live or provide an all-encompassing understanding of the world.¹¹

Pynchon's ideas on this matter are most easily recognizable in the figure of Edward Pointsman, whose faith in behaviourism is thoroughly ridiculed. It is not Pointsman's engagement in scientific endeavour as such, but the extension of his beliefs about science into his outlook on the world that Pynchon deliberately counterposes against Roger Mexico's scepticism about Pointsman's reductionism. Pointsman's faith in science leads to a megalomaniacal quest for control, whereas Mexico's tirades against the "system," though doomed, arouse the reader's sympathies.

Weber also has reservations about a misplaced faith in science. Although the disenchantment of the world and the erosion of traditional systems of belief may be irreversible, science itself can never legitimize a particular system of values:

The fate of an epoch which has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we can not learn the *meaning* of the world from the results of its analysis, be it ever so perfect; it must rather be in a position to create this meaning itself. It must recognize that general views of life and the universe can never be the product of increasing empirical knowledge.¹²

Again in the essay "Science as a Vocation," Weber points out that scientific advancement cannot guarantee an increase in human happiness, nor can it establish on scientific grounds that the growth of knowledge is a positive achievement for civilization: "After Nietzsche's devastating criticism of those 'last men' who 'invented happiness,' I may leave aside altogether the naive optimism in which science—that is the technique of mastering life which rests upon science—has been celebrated as the way to happiness" (FMW 143).

The dilemma posed by Weber's analysis of secular modernity remains unresolved in his writings. It consists in a tension between the growing sphere subject to scientific analysis and hence dominated by instrumental efficiency on the one hand, and the shrinking and disintegrating sphere of personal values on the other. "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.' Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations" (FMW 155). Elsewhere Weber also writes of the "parcellization of the soul" that is due to the increasing compartmentalization of knowledge.¹³

Pynchon too rejects the idea that an objective analysis can endow history with meaning. In *V.* he writes of "the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with 'reason.'"¹⁴ Like Weber, Pynchon points not only to the impact of the scientific world-view but also to its limits. Several characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* seem to be powerless against the systematic control over their lives, and one of them suggests that "[o]nce the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good" (539). The situation of acting out a life which seems to have been

almost literally predetermined by means of scientific analysis is shared by, among others, Mexico, Pöckler and Slothrop.

Like Weber, Pynchon does not present any definitive answers to this dilemma. Or rather, the tentative strategies he offers as means of resisting the encroachment of instrumental efficiency upon the individual all seem to undermine themselves. Apart from Mexico's attempts as a member of the counterforce to upstage the "system," Slothrop can also be seen as trying to counteract the increasing impersonality of the world. When we meet him for the last time (at least as a whole person), he is seeking a "way to get back" by conceiving of the world around him as an enchanted one (623). He thinks, for example, that the magical omens nature provides for him are important to his fate, and therefore he tries to establish a harmony with the spirits that inhabit the natural world. Yet it becomes increasingly difficult to see whether Slothrop is successful or not, his dilemma being summed up in Pynchon's earlier question, "Is he drifting, or being led?" (556). The supposition that this attempt to resist the scientific disenchantment of the world is bound to fail is indicated not merely by Slothrop's disintegration but also by the fragmentary nature and the pessimistic (or apocalyptic) tone of the concluding sections of the novel. The ending of the novel seems to indicate that Slothrop's quest for a secure identity in an age dominated by the disenchantment of the world will never succeed.

To contrast Weber's and Pynchon's views of the role of science with two other contemporary currents of thought will further highlight the affinity between their writings. Marxism and Freudianism both presuppose an optimistic faith in science since, for example, they rely on scientific methods to ensure the validity of their conclusions. Marx and Freud (at least the late Marx and the early Freud) both thought their discoveries were as valid as discoveries in the natural sciences. This goes some way towards explaining why their followers have been unable to develop a successful and critical theoretical standpoint towards the role of science. There have, of course, been "humanist" interpretations of Marx's analysis of history and of Freudian psychoanalysis which have emphasized the more existential aspects of their writings. Nevertheless, the fact that the impact of science does not feature as a central question in their systems of ideas, as it does in the work of Pynchon and Weber, stems at least in part from the scientific spirit of their work. One consequence of their emphasis on scientific method then is that Marx and Freud do not locate contemporary problems in the realm of cultural life and of world-views as Weber and Pynchon do. Marx focuses on the modes of production and sees economic change as the basis for overcoming the

contradictions within capitalist society. Freud, on the other hand, locates the central predicament of the modern condition within the individual psyche and resolves it by way of an adjustment of our inner nature. Neither, however, deals with the centrality of the impact of science on modern society and with its consequences for our modern view of the world.

Weber's and Pynchon's thought, by contrast, is not wedded to the presuppositions of science. Nor do their analyses of modernity place much emphasis on the material conditions of society or on an inner essence of human beings. Instead, in their different ways, they provide us with ideas about the historical origins of our modern self-understanding and about the dilemma science presents for our modern world-view. It is perhaps a virtue rather than a shortcoming of these two writers that they do not offer solutions to this problem but rather try to confront the nature of a process that is still unfolding.

A second contrast with other strands in contemporary thought highlights the significance of Pynchon's appropriation of Weber. Most twentieth-century writers, whether social scientists or novelists, have tended to be preoccupied with the alienating features of the capitalist economy, particularly class and work. Weber and Pynchon, by contrast, set their sights on the effects of modern apparatuses of political domination in the form of impersonal bureaucracies and the state's capacity for surveillance. Moreover, for both writers the emergence of these central features of contemporary social life is a product, not of capitalism as an economic system, but of the militarization of modern states. Against this background, the central dilemma of the individual is to preserve a measure of autonomy. This—arguably—represents a more penetrating understanding of modernity than can be found in other contemporary works of either sociology or fiction.¹⁶

These common themes are not the only ones that can be found in Weber's and Pynchon's work, but they sufficiently demonstrate a similar outlook on the modern world. Both writers share the idea of a continuity between the Puritan belief in predestination and the search of the secular modern self for its place within an all-encompassing view of the world. The difficulty of this search can be attributed to the emergence of impersonal structures of domination and to the ongoing disenchantment of the world. A central insight Pynchon seems to have derived from Weber is the conception of a dynamic pattern in history whereby ideas may exercise a powerful impact in society and yet develop inescapably into a routinized way of life. Weber demonstrated how Protestant belief was transformed into an "iron cage" in which a charismatic breakthrough was increasingly unlikely. *Gravity's Rainbow*

illustrates the same trajectory on a more personal scale and, at the same time, brings Weber's ideas to bear on contemporary society with its renewed addiction to the charisma of the rocket.

—Brunel University

Notes

¹Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973) 378.

²The relation between Pynchon and Weber is briefly discussed in Peter L. Cooper, *Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 58–59; William M. Plater, *The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978) 209–10; Thomas H. Schaub, *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981) 57–66; and Joseph W. Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Warner, 1974) 180–81. Extended treatments can be found in Thomas Moore, *The Style of Connectedness: Gravity's Rainbow and Thomas Pynchon* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987) chapter 4; and Vincent Balitas, "Charismatic figures in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Pynchon Notes* 9 (1982): 38–53. Moore discusses mainly the social issues in the novel in general rather than spelling out the specific parallels with Weber's thought. I focus more closely here on the influence of Weber's social thought, particularly on themes not explored by Moore, such as the conception of selfhood and its modern transformations, as well as the ideas of the cultural significance of the disenchantment of the world by science and of bureaucratization. Balitas focuses almost entirely on Blicero and Enzian as charismatic figures. Yet he offers little in the way of identifying the process of routinization which would correspond to the charisma of these figures and which, at least in Weber's view, always accompanies charisma. The same can be said for Balitas's brief account of the charisma of the rocket, which, as we shall see, cannot be understood in isolation from its counterpart, the routinization of the modern world. Neither Moore nor Balitas makes the connection between Weber's study of Protestantism and his view of the routinization of modern social life, which is, again, essential to understanding the other links between his and Pynchon's works.

³The Weberian themes discussed here also appear in Pynchon's *Vineland* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), but in a more oblique way.

⁴In this vein, *Gravity's Rainbow* has been read as revolving around the problem of the identity of the self in the face of history. See Manfred Pütz, *The Story of Identity: American Fiction of the Sixties* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979) chapter 6, esp. 130–31. In terms of the historical contingency of the self, parallels could be drawn here to some recent work in philosophy, notably the writings of Richard Rorty. See his *Contingency, Solidarity and Irony* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), esp. chapter 2.

⁵I focus purely on Puritanism here in order to highlight the similarities with Weber. Pynchon, of course, talks not only about Puritanism but also about its counterpart, the theodicy of preterition. The same applies to paranoia, whose counterpart in the novel is anti-paranoia. These two distinctions are unnecessary for the present argument since the Puritan, preterite, paranoid and anti-paranoid states of mind can be seen as mirror images of each other. On these and other oppositions in the novel, see Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (London: Methuen, 1982) 78–83.

⁶*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Allen & Unwin, 1936) 104–05.

⁷*Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Günther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et al. (New York: Bedminster, 1968) 575–76.

⁸*The Age of Bureaucracy: Perspectives on the Political Sociology of Max Weber* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974) 20.

⁹This idea is also explored in J. P. Stern, *Hitler: The Führer and the People* (London: Fontana, 1975).

¹⁰A similar idea is elaborated in great detail in Dale Carter, *The Final Frontier: The Rise and Fall of the American Rocket State* (London: Verso, 1988). This cultural history of the American space programme uses *Gravity's Rainbow* as a constant reference point.

¹¹*From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1948) 143.

¹²*Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949) 57.

¹³*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1924) 414; my translation.

¹⁴V. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963) 306.

¹⁵For a recent Weberian account along these lines, see Christopher Dandeker, *Surveillance, Power, and Modernity: Bureaucracy and Discipline from 1700 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).