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Rationality as a Sociological Category, Free from Evaluation

Dmitrij O. Trufanov*

*Siberian Federal University
79 Svobodny, Krasnoyarsk, 660041 Russia*

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This paper discusses rationality as a sociological category in the light of Weber's principle of freedom from evaluation. This principle is understood as the need to free scientific categories from subjective evaluation due to personal biases of researchers. The author shows the problematic character of the existing approaches to understanding rationality, reveals their judgmental nature. Then, on the basis of postnonclassical (universum) sociological approach, the author formulates the general definition of rationality as cognitive self-reference of social systems. This understanding of rationality is to a great extent free from subjective interpretations due to the fact that not some specific content of reality is stated to be a characteristic of rationality, as it was done in most popular approaches to defining rationality, rather, it is claimed to be the way of expressing this content—a verbal-reflective form. This characteristic has a uniquely identifiable qualitative certainty, which makes it possible to fixate its presence in the studied object.

Keywords: rationality, the principle of freedom from evaluation, postnonclassical (universum) approach, reflectivity, cognitive self-reference of the society.

Introduction. Proclaimed by Max Weber, the principle of freedom from evaluation is a necessary means constituting a particular concept as a scientific category. The German sociologist understood evaluation as the practical assessment of a phenomenon as worthy of approval or disapproval. (Weber, 1990). This involves freedom from subjective evaluation, put forward on the basis of personal preferences of researchers, and orientation on the scientific truth that reflects the object through facts (Tarasenko, 2004). One of the most problematic sociological categories, in respect to which application of this principle is connected with considerable difficulties, is the concept of rationality. This category is often

used in sociological texts to designate various aspects of social reality. Today, about a dozen often conflicting definitions of rationality, which express different points of view of authors adhering to them, are actively used in sociological literature. The analysis of the definitions shows that in the opinion of the researchers the concept of rationality is usually associated with positive evaluations of social objects and phenomena, and the concept of irrationality, vice versa, expresses their negative evaluation. Thus, the concept of rationality becomes a instrument of expressing researchers' attitude towards studied objects, which appears to be conflicting with the principle of freedom from evaluation. Several authors

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* Corresponding author E-mail address: true-fun-off@mail.ru

directly point to the judgmental nature of the opposition “rational-irrational”. For example, B. Gerth in his analysis of rational and irrational in human behavior defines the rational as desirable, and the irrational – as undesirable, associated with the negative evaluation (Gerth, 1995). This author points out the epithets which often represent irrationality of human behavior: “mad”, “stupid”, “foolish”, etc. R. Collins, linking rationality to reasonableness, talks about the widespread meaning of the word, “be reasonable is good, to be unreasonable is to have signs of an idiot, a fool or a small child” (Collins, 2004). G. Simmel, talking about the society and its structure, puts the category of irrational in a row with such concepts as “imperfect”, “useless from the point of view of value” (Simmel, 1996). T. Parsons speaks about the irrational and non-rational as negative terms (Parsons, 2002). The negative role of the meanings, indicated by these terms, is in their ability to cause deviations from the “rational standard of efficiency”, responsible for the connection of means with goals. Arguing on scientific rationality, V.I. Moiseev points out that “stating rationality of something in the statement like “X is rational” – is a kind of value judgments, like the judgments “X is beautiful” or “X is kind” (Moiseev, 2005). According to I.T. Kasavin and Z.A. Sokuler the concept of rationality characterizes not the property of an object, but expresses an evaluative attitude to it. Thus, rationality appears as a construct expressing the subject’s evaluation of an object. The opposition of “rational-irrational” corresponds to the opposition “ours/strange” (Kasavin, Sokuler 1989). Rational acts as a “ours”, expresses a positive evaluation, fixates the fact of compliance of this or that object to/with the relevant value system; irrational – as “strange”, which expresses a negative evaluation of the object. If we distinguish between two kinds of truth in sociology – scientific and science-like (as V.I. Tarasenko does (Tarasenko, 2004)), then

the above-mentioned interpretations of rationality appear to be science-like truth, that reflects the object not through facts, but through values, and thus characterizes not the object itself, but its significance in the context of the human dimension of reality.

Therefore, there exists the problem of applying the principle of freedom from evaluation towards the categories of rationality. This problem is rooted, in particular, in the fact that the criteria of rationality used in the definitions, do not reveal its essential characteristic and, hence, allow for subjective interpretations, when one and the same criterion is considered by some researches and at the same is not considered by others while studying one and the same object. With all the well-known advantages, this fact makes scientific status of the category of rationality problematic, when it becomes the name of the field of disconnected fragments of knowledge expressing subjective value judgments and points of view. We believe that this problem is connected with lack of substantiation of the criteria of rationality. As a rule, sociologists do not seek critical reflection in relation to these criteria, regarding them a priori knowledge or referring to the classics. However, the question of *why* rationality should be reduced to this or that characteristic (expediency, efficiency, standardization, legality or others) is not at all idle. The answer to it is a necessary condition for finding an essential feature of rationality, acting as its universal-objective referent. The latter, in its turn, is the basis for freeing the discussed category of evaluation and its formalization as a descriptive category, fixating well-defined characteristics of social objects.

We will briefly point out the most common approaches to understanding of rationality in sociology, in which this problem is present (for a detailed review of these approaches, revealing their conflicting nature, see our previous works (Trufanov, 2012a)). It will not be an exaggeration

if we call classical the approach, which goes back to the sociology of Max Weber, in which rationality is identified with expediency. In this approach rationality is viewed as an ideal type ((in the words of Yu. N. Davydov it is “utmost expediency”, (Davydov, 1996)), which expresses the objectified connection between the aim of an activity with the means for achieving it. It is a kind of standard of expediency, as expressed to its maximum in the actions of correctly-rational (objective rationality) and goal-oriented rational types. Such “utmost” expediency requires abstraction from the context in which the process of goal-achievement takes place, from its specific conditions, presence of which is defined as interference, leading to deviations and irrationality. The basis, allowing marking a particular connection of aims with means as expediency, is called “obviousness” by the adherents of this approach. For example, in the theory of V. Pareto obviousness is related to the interpretation of the connection of the aim and means by a group social subject, in M. Weber’s theory – with an intellectual understanding of semantic relations. The difficulty of this reason is that such obviousness has cultural, social group and world outlook dependence: the content of obviousness is not the same in the context of different perceptions and cultural contexts, in various historical periods of existence and development of societies and depends on current philosophical paradigms. This can be exemplified by the famous debate about expediency of atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which is still going on. (Walker, 2005; Wilson, 2007; and others). Thus, in this sense the category of rationality becomes a tool of subjective evaluation of conformity of certain actions and to the ideal typical model of expediency.

Other versions of rationality have similar problems. For example, in the framework of another widely used approach, which is the

basis of theories of rational choice, rationality is identified with efficiency. In contrast to expediency, efficiency expresses connection between the choice of means of the activity and the context of its realization, involves consideration of environmental factors – the actual conditions in which achievement of goals takes place. Limited resources act as the environmental condition in which the choice of means to achieve certain goals is made. In the process of considering this condition ideal-typical model of expediency is applied in specific practice in order to select the most effective means of achieving the goal. No special proof is necessary for the fact that the category of efficiency is also related to subjective interpretations, when valuation of certain means from the point of view of efficiency becomes a subject of intense debate, arguments, leading to conflicting points of view. Such is the current debate about the criteria of efficiency for institutions of higher education in Russia, formed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the RF. The same subjective evaluations are common to other approaches, too, in which rationality is interpreted as conformity to law, the truth, the theoretical awareness, orderliness and consistency, normalization and standardization, the ability to set goals, the autonomy of the acting social subject etc.

These approaches, monistic in nature, are based on separating out one particular content of reality, which is claimed to be the essential characteristic of rationality. Thus, rationality is manifested in a number of ideal types, which differ from one another. The use of these ideal types for describing specific objects of reality, as a rule, acquires the character of value judgments, expressing subjective judgments that are rooted in the culture, life and social structures of individuals. This circumstance results in the fact that existing approaches to understanding rationality face considerable

difficulty in interpretation of rationality of modern society. “Liquid” modernity with its blurred standards of rationality (Bauman, 2008), advent of postmodernism, an essential feature of which is the “playization” with its “ordering of disorder” (Kravchenko, 2006) state the growing influence of random, instantaneous, unordered, non-standardized – the factors social life, usually attributed to the irrational. In these circumstances, researchers, experiencing difficulties in interpretation of rationality from the point of view of the mentioned monistic approaches point to emergence of a “hybrid type of rationality” (Kravchenko, 2006), “postrationality” (Anokhin, Troshichev, 2010), the multiplicity of forms of rationality and transition of rationality into its opposition, inclusion of irrational elements into the field of rationality, which are treated as new forms of rationality (Zarubina, 2009). In the context of such fluctuations, rationality loses its qualitative definiteness, therefore its ability as an explanatory theoretical model is significantly reduced and, to the contrary, the possibilities of its subjective interpretations are increasing. Moreover, in the framework of postmodern discourse, with its pervasive relativism, there is a tendency for the invalidation of rationality as a stable characteristic of social reality. This trend is reflected in infinite multiplication of not related to each other meanings of rationality. This makes it pointless to use the concept of rationality in scientific context due to the ultimate lack of clarity of its content.

The way to give rationality as theoretical model back its scientific nature is by giving it the status of a category free from evaluation. This involves the problem of creating such a definition of rationality, which will be based on a common essential feature of rationality (its universal-objective referent), and the possibility of subjective judgments will be kept to a minimum. Such a definition can claim the status of scientific

truth, which describes the object through facts, but not through values.

Point. This task can be carried out in the context of postnonclassical sociology, based on modern cognitive model. For example, in the previous works, we proposed the definition of rationality (Trufanov, 2012b) from the point of view of universum sociological approach (Nemirovskiy, 2008). Universum approach has been successfully used in modern sociology and is an effective tool for solving actual problems of science and practice. (Nemirovskiy, 2006; Nemirovskiy, Sergeev, 2008). The basis of this approach is the diatropic cognitive model, heuristic capabilities of which allowed proposing the solution of the above mentioned problem. As a result of application of these theoretical instruments we have a common definition of rationality, revealing its invariant feature which is present in any definition, and thus claiming the status of a descriptive sociological category, free from evaluation. Here we will give the summary of our line of reasoning.

1. One of the key methodological grounds of postnonclassical (universum) approach is the principle of complementarity, which is now widely used in the analysis of social phenomena. This approach allowed us to consider the existing definition of rationality as social objects in the unity of their objective and subjective components. This means that any definition is a fact of perception of reality in the light of life, social group, and world outlook characteristics of cognizing subjects. The totality of definitions considered in this way acted as the empirical basis for our study, from which further research procedures were conducted.

2. At the second stage of the research, the definitions that make up the empirical basis were compared by means of the diatropic cognitive model in order to find an invariant feature of rationality they contain. The result of this

comparison was the proposition that any definition of rationality is the result of verbalized reflection, during which researchers make judgments based on their points of view, expressing their pre-cognitive relationship with reality. The latter are associated with the initial determinants of activity of social subjects, create a basis for formalization of definitions and are unconsciously included by researchers into the formulated theoretical points (this idea is disclosed in detail in the concept of structure of social theories by A. Gouldner (Gouldner, 2003, p. 54-62)

3. At the third stage, having extended this result to any cognition that exist in social systems, we got the definition of rationality as *a totality of verbalized reflective contents of social reality, constituted by reflective practices of individual and group social subjects*. The premises for this understanding of rationality exist in social and humanitarian sciences: many authors in one way or another associate rationality with reflection (Sivirinov, 2003; Giddens, 2005; Demina, Pavlov, 2011; Shvyrev, 2003; Martishina, 2000; and others).

Example. Therefore, addressing the problem of rationality, we again have to go back to reflective mind – a subject that is aware of its own being. At the same time, from a sociological point of view, it is not the mind, that should be considered as this subject, but its speculative abstract form as a kind of transcendental subject, and the society as a real empirically observable totality of interacting individuals. In the course of their interactions, a special layer of social reality is formed and takes shape, which reflects its existence and development with the help of cognitive means. (this conclusion is discussed in detail in our paper “Rationality as a social fact” (Trufanov 2012c)). Thus, rationality is a phenomenon of cognitive self-referral of social practice. Developing this conclusion, we can say that rationality as a scientific category in all

cases means a *cognitive self-reference of human society and its subsystems*. This formula states rationality as a characteristic, distinguishing human society from animal populations, the world of culture from of natural world. An animal, as A.G. Efendiev notes- is something that is not reflected by consciousness, not regulated by it (General Sociology, 2004). The concept of unconscious in sociological interpretation of O.K. Krokinskaya is close in meaning: unconscious is any type of individual or group behavior, about which the actor does not enter into communication with him/herself. (Sikevich et al., 2005). Thus, in the terms that we use, the rational is the content, reflectively formed in the process of communication by verbal means, the irrational—is the content that is not formed in the process of communication by verbal means.

The proposed definition of rationality has a number of advantages, which we will point out further. Firstly, the essential feature of rationality, which it reveals, gets a convincing justification: in our approach, there is an answer to the question of why rationality should be reduced to the characteristic of verbalized reflective shaping of the content of reality. It is this characteristic which is the only invariant feature contained in all the definitions of rationality considered as social objects. Its use suggests that a marker of rationality is not any particular content of reality (as postulated by the above-mentioned approaches to the definition of rationality), but the way of shaping this content – verbal-reflective form that occurs only in human societies.

Secondly, the proposed definition of rationality allows us to consider the existing approaches to its definition as an explication of types of rationality, revealing particular aspects of its content. The basis for the distinguishing these types is a feature of specific content of reality which is verbalized in the context of reflective activity of social actors. From

this point of view, the characteristics, which rationality is equaled to in monistic approaches (expediency, efficiency, standardization, truthiness, conformity to law, orderliness etc.) remain irrational contents until they are articulated in the process of reflective activity of individual and group social actors. Having received such articulation, they are rationalized and begin to exist as reflective models, revealing the corresponding features of social objects and phenomena. Such models are used in the process of rationalization of activity; resulting in numerous cases of cognitive reflection of objects of reality. In this sense, the term “rationalization of reality” is close to the meaning of Weber’s “Disenchantment of the world” and the concept of “a process of progressive rationalization” by A. Schutz (Schutz, 2003).

Thirdly, the definition of rationality as a totality of verbalized reflective contents of social reality, in comparison with/to other approaches, is to the maximum extent free from evaluation. It is in this definition that the principle, postulated by M. Weber, is realized. Application of this definition involves/implies fixating verbal-reflective content in the studied social object. The fact of the existence and level of such content characterizes the social object in terms of its rationality. Rationality, understood in this way, has a uniquely identifiable qualitative certainty that accurately capture its presence in the object under study. The exceptions are facts of use of verbal-logical instruments in which semantic shaping of the content of reality is not realized. In this connection, these instruments are not rationalized and their content is left irrational. The example of this is a syndrome of *asyndesis* (incoherent speech) occurring with dullness of consciousness. In *asyndesis* sick people utter phrases which have no sense, separate words which are not connected with each other. (Guide to...,1999).

We will disclose this property of our definition in details on the example of the problem of rationality of social organization as a social object. The organization is considered as a target community (Prigogine, 1995), the essential features of which are goal oriented collective activity of its members, presence of a formalized structure and functions of management, ensuring the achievement of its goals. The concept of “rationality of social organization”, as well as the concept of “rationality”, has not received a clear definition in sociology. Researchers use these concepts to characterize the ability of an organization to realize ultimate expediency of its activity, the ability of the organization to optimum activity in specific environmental conditions (efficiency of an organization); an organization’s ability to implement relevant standards and norms of activity, serving socially meaningful goals; adequacy of the organization’s activity to the objective laws of existence and development of culture, the society, nature; the presence of a meaningful and well-functioning order of activities and cooperation within the organization opposing conflicts, contradictions and uncertainty, and others (details of these approaches to the definition are discussed in our paper “To the problem of rationality of a social organization” (Trufanov, 2012d)). These definitions are not free from weaknesses that we disclose above: they are conflicting in their content and give rise to subjective judgments in interpretation of rationality of a social organization. Conflict of these approaches is shown, in particular, in the following circumstances. Ultimate expediency of activity of an social organization can be unattained in specific environmental conditions: the requirement of efficiency of a social organization necessitates abandonment of a model of utmost expediency. Normativity of a social organization may conflict with the requirement of efficiency, especially

if normative practices of goal achievement are not provided in the community with available institutional conditions for their realization. The efficiency of activity of an organization can be in conflict with the requirement of standardization of goal achievement when finding effective ways of activity requires going beyond the limits of standards, application of creative and innovative solutions. Orderliness and consistency as the characteristics of a social organization do not guarantee realization of the principle of legality of its activity: this orderliness can be in conflict with the objectively changed environmental conditions of the organization. As a result of this conflict the concept of “rationality of social organization” loses its clarity and becomes a tool of subjective evaluations of various organizations in particular circumstances of their existence and development. This, as in the case of the concept of rationality, leads to erosion of the scientific status of this category and reducing it to pseudo-scientific truth, reflecting an object through reference to a value.

From the point of view of our approach rationality of a social organization must be defined as the totality of verbalized reflective contents, forming in the process of operation of the organization, and reflecting these processes. (Trufanov, 2012e). Thus, the rationality of social organization appears as a cognitive self-reference of the organization, revealing the basic parameters of its existence and development. This approach allows to remove the conflict of the above given definitions and consider them as a set of key characteristics of an organization. Expediency, effectiveness, normativity, the ability to respond adequately to the challenges of the external environment, conformity to law (legality), and other characteristics of an organization are rational to the extent that they are verbally and reflectively expressed within the organization. Thus, the expediency of an

organization appears as a verbal-reflective connection of goals of an organization and the means used to achieve them. Awareness of this connection can vary significantly in managing and managed subsystems of the organization. Relevant content of such awareness in various substructures of the organization can act as one of the empirical indicators of the degree of solidarity of an organization as a social community, which is an important resource for its activity.

This approach to understanding rationality of social organization is to a great extent free from evaluation due to stating its general characteristic, which has a clearly identifiable qualitative certainty. This allows presenting different characteristics of an organization, used in other approaches as signs of its rationality, as a consistent set of criteria revealing key substantive aspects of rationality of a social organization. An empirical study of these aspects will give the opportunity to study the current situation of existence and development of any existing social organization. A sociological study of rationality of an organization as a social object must include the study of verbalized content presented at various levels of an organization. Such a study, depending on the objectives, may include a content analysis of printed material, relating to activity of an organization – foundation documents, corporate media, internet resources associated with activity of the organization, as well as obtaining sociological data from the cognitive layer of collective and individual consciousness of members of an organization.

Results. Therefore, the concept of rationality in sociology becomes to a greater extent free from evaluation when it is defined as a cognitive self-reference of social systems -- combined verbalized reflective content of social reality constituted by reflective practices of individual and group social subjects. Such freedom from

judgment is achieved by means of the following circumstances: 1. not some particular content of rationality is claimed to characterize it (as it is done in the approaches mentioned in the article), but the way of externalizing of these contents--the verbal-reflective form; 2. as a characteristic of rationality, verbal-reflective form has a uniquely identifiable qualitative certainty allowing to accurately capture its presence in the object under study; 3. the use of this characteristic allows to remove the conflict of the existing approaches

to the definition of rationality and consider them as kinds of rationality, revealing its particular aspects of content. Thus, the fact of existence and the level of verbal-reflective content characterize a social object in terms of its rationality. In this application of the concept of rationality, it becomes a scientific category, representing the objects under study through facts, rather than through values and characterizes the object under study as such, but not its subjective evaluation by the researcher.

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Рациональность как социологическая категория, свободная от оценки

Д.О. Труфанов

*Сибирский федеральный университет
Россия 660041, Красноярск, пр. Свободный, 79*

В статье обсуждается рациональность как социологическая категория в свете веберовского принципа свободы от оценки. Данный принцип понимается как необходимость освобождения научных категорий от субъективных оценок, обусловленных личными пристрастиями исследователей. Автор показывает проблематичность существующих подходов к пониманию рациональности, раскрывает их оценочный характер. Далее на основании постнеклассического (универсального) социологического подхода автор формулирует общее определение рациональности как когнитивной самореференции социальных систем. Такое понимание рациональности в большей мере свободно от субъективных интерпретаций за счет того, что в качестве признака рациональности утверждается не какое-либо частное содержание реальности, как это сделано в распространенных подходах к определению рациональности, а способ оформления данных содержаний – вербально-рефлексивная форма. Данный признак обладает однозначно идентифицируемой качественной определенностью, что позволяет точно зафиксировать его присутствие в изучаемом объекте.

Ключевые слова: рациональность, принцип свободы от оценки, постнеклассический (универсальный) подход, рефлексивность, когнитивная самореференция общества.
