

# From Ideal Type to Pure Type Weber's Transition from History to Sociology

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One major problem with the classics is that we tend to read too much into them and often overlook the obvious. There is also a tendency to treat parts of the works of major thinkers as being more authoritative than other parts, which often results in the dismissal of the latter as stemming from some weakness of the author such as immaturity of thinking, etc. The arguments over the early Marx and latter Marx is an obvious example to that effect. Confusion of similar nature also surrounds the work of Max Weber, in particular his contribution to methodology. This paper examines the fate of the concept of ideal type, a primary contribution of Weberian methodology, and argues that such confusions, to say the least, is totally unnecessary and can be easily remedied.

Weber's exposition of the concept of ideal type in any details was made in two different texts and on two different occasions. The initial formulation of the concept was rendered when Weber took over the joint editorship of the *Archiv fur Sozialwissenschaft*

*und Sozialpolitik* in 1904 and formed a part of the editorial titled "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy" (Weber 1949). The other essay formed part of the "Introduction" to his seminal work *Wirtschaft Und Gesellschaft*, published posthumously, almost twenty years later, though there is reason to believe that the work on the second essay was taken up much earlier and was revised by the author before his death in 1920. These dates are important, and helps to clarify the issue.

The confusion regarding Weber's view of the ideal type originates from the fact that most scholars tend to only look at the earlier text and treat it as the authoritative version and try to explain away the inconsistencies noted in the later essay as deviations attributable to various factors. Some, like Aron (1970), consider the concept as incompletely formulated and offer their improved versions. Others, more sensitive to the issue, like Parsons (1947), recognize the difference between the two texts somewhat, but end up complicating the problem further by inventing their own kinds of *ideal types* often posing one text against the other. Thus, Parsons (1947, 1968) for instance, clearly ignores Weber's formulation when he calls the version of the ideal type in the second text as "rational ideal type". Weber called it the "pure type".

Before we delve deeper into the contradictions let's first look at what Weber meant by ideal type. Put simply, the ideal type is an "idea" of a phenomenon, a conceptualization of a given phenomenon or a situation. It is a "conceptual construct, a mental",

picture, a "mental construct". Social sciences deal with phenomena like capitalism, bureaucracy, religion, or to use Weber's example, "city economy", "handicraft" or "capitalistic culture", but these remain very vaguely defined. Moreover, their meanings may also change from epoch to epoch or from situation to situation breeding ambiguity. Social sciences cannot work with such ambiguity, particularly in terms of the genetic concepts named above. Therefore, the researcher needs to bring out the salient points of the concept by emphasizing or eliminating some of its elements or even exaggerating some others and thereby offering a unified definition. Aron (1970) calls this a process of stylization in which what seems characteristic of the phenomenon is retained and constructed into a type. It is a purely mental drill through which a concept comes to be defined. Thus for Weber.

(a)n ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct (Gedankenbild). (1949 : 90).

This mental, construct, "(i)n its conceptual purity" Weber notes, "cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality". Indeed, it is "neither historical reality nor even the 'true' reality", nor can a real situation or action can be "subsumed as one *instance*, it is a "utopia".

Once, however, an ideal type is formed, it offers the researcher with a tool with which a real situation or action can be compared. Thus it is like a "yard stick" (Mommson 1974) or a "measuring rod" (Lachmann 1971) to fathom reality.

It has the significance of a purely ideal *limiting* concept with which the real situation or action is *compared* and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components. Such concepts are constructs in terms of which we formulate relationships by the application of the category of objective possibility. By means of this category, the adequacy of our imagination, oriented and disciplined by reality, is *judged*. (Weber 1949)

In the Kantian tradition, Weber accepted that reality is infinite and since reality can be represented differently to different persons or is represented in numerous diversity, it is possible, indeed, "it must be accepted as certain" that numerous ideal types of the phenomena can be constructed, of which "none is like another" and none can be observed in empirical reality, but each is built upon certain aspects of reality.

The portrayal of ideal type presented above is the one commonly dealt with in the literature on Weberian methodology, and of the ideal type in particular. This is taken from Weber's earlier essay. The essay deals with a number of issues, beside the construction of ideal type, including the relations between natural and the social sciences, causality, and more importantly, "objectivity" in the social science. The question of objectivity becomes imperative in relation to the question

of social policy to which the essay is also directed. Attaining objectivity, in terms of policy making, in the social sciences that deal with the phenomena of human life, as opposed to the natural science, poses serious problems. Objectivity in such sciences is intimately connected with the question of values. As these sciences deal with all facets of culture objectivity is bound to be clouded by the values we espouse, leading to ambiguity. It is not by shying away from such question of value but rather by acknowledging, indeed, by ordering our conceptual constructs in relation to some specific value orientations that we can hope to build up a science dealing with empirical reality. It is this relationship to certain values that make a cultural phenomenon significant for us. Social sciences are "cultural sciences" in so far as they "treat the events of human life with respect of their cultural significance" (Weber 1949 : 67).

For Weber the "decisive feature" of the method of sciences designated as the cultural sciences is the analysis of the phenomena of life "in terms of their cultural significance". Cultural significance of such phenomena cannot be derived from "analytical laws" since cultural events presuppose a "value-orientation" toward these events (Weber 1949 : 76). Culture itself is a value concept and empirical reality becomes culture to us "because and in so far as we relate it to value ideas". It includes only those segments of reality which have become significant to us because of this value relevance. And since reality is infinite, only a small portion of the concrete reality is "colored by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us"

(Weber 1949:76). It becomes significant to us because it deals with relationships which are important to us because of "their connection with our values" (Weber 1949 : 76). Thus for Weber, "only because of this and to the extent that this is the case it is worthwhile for us to know it in its individual features" (1949 : 76).

It is this concern with the individual features of the concrete reality that lands this science into the realm of historical sciences as will become evident shortly. The social science, whose way of building a conceptual frame of analysis is the construction of the ideal type, "is an *empirical science* of concrete *reality*, the aim of which is "the understanding of the characteristic uniqueness of the reality in which we move" (Weber 1949 : 72). Thus what this science wishes to understand is "on the one hand the relationships and the cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestations and on the other hand the causes of their being historically *so* and not *otherwise*" (1949 : 72).

After establishing the focus of social sciences on the cultural significance of individual events and anchoring them solidly in history, Weber seeks to distinguish these from the natural sciences. The natural sciences attempt the analysis of reality in terms of laws and general concepts. They strive for universally valid knowledge. But such general laws are devoid of content and cannot be the objective of the social sciences, which deal with concrete phenomena ordering them in terms of their cultural significance. Indeed, he argues that, "neither of these two types

of analysis of reality has any necessary logical relationship with the other" (1949 : 77). He feels that it would be "most disastrous" not to think them as distinct in principle. We shall have occasion to refer to this later. In the cultural sciences the knowledge of the universal is "never valuable in itself". At best they can serve as means to the objective analysis of cultural events, therefore, the reduction of empirical reality to laws, for Weber, "is meaningless".

What then is the role of ideal type in such a science? Weber argues that concepts used by the historian is full of ambiguity and therefore when the historian wants to go beyond the bare establishment of concrete relationship and seeks to determine the cultural significance of even the simplest event he "*must*" use concepts which are precisely and unambiguously definable in terms of ideal type. The Greater the need for unambiguity and "sharp appreciation" of the cultural significance, the "more imperative" is the need to operate with ideal type concepts. Weber argued that even if the historian rejects the ideal types as theoretical constructs, he nonetheless, uses similar concepts without actually defining them as ideal types. But what is meant by a theoretical concept can be made "unambiguously clear *only* through precise, ideal typical constructs" (Weber 1949 : 95). When a genetic definition of the content of the concept is sought, there remains only the ideal type.

In this earlier essay, therefore, Weber is addressing the need of the historian. Ideal typical constructs allow the historian to study historical phenomena in their

uniqueness. Ideal types used in this essay is thus a way of formulating concepts for the "scrutiny and systematic characterization of individual concrete patterns which are significant in their uniqueness" (Weber 1949 : 100). This uniqueness is dictated by cultural values. Thus the goal of ideal type according to the needs of cultural science based on historical data is "always to make explicit not the class or average character but rather the unique individual character of cultural phenomena" (Weber 1949 : 101).

But this emphasis on the individual concrete phenomena in relation to their cultural significance is in contrast with the requirements of sociology. Sociology, Weber argues, "seeks to formulate type concepts and generalized uniformities of empirical process" (1947:109). It is interesting to note that the distinction between sociology and history is made explicit while he was elaborating on the concept of the ideal type in the second essay referred to earlier. History, he reminds us, "is oriented to the causal analysis and explanation of individual actions, structures and personalities possessing cultural significance" (1947:109). Both history and sociology are seen as the sciences of social action in this essay. But sociology is defined here as a "generalizing" science and as a result its concepts are more abstract and compared to "actual historical reality", they are relatively lacking in fullness of concrete content. It is to "compensate for this disadvantage" that sociological analysis needs to offer a greater precision to its concepts.

This precision is obtained by "striving for the highest possible degree of adequacy on the level of



meaning". By "adequacy on the level of meaning" is referred to the subjective interpretation of a coherent course of conduct. For Weber a course of conduct becomes meaningfully adequate when it conveys to our mode of thinking and feeling a complex of meaning that is treated as "typical". Construction of such typical course of conduct is achieved by the concepts and generalizations which formulate rational process. Formulation of this rational process is the construction of *pure types*.

Sociology, for Weber is a science which attempts "the interpretive understanding of social action". Action becomes social 'by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual'. Sociology thus attempt at the interpretive understanding of the subjective meaning of social action, that is, the understanding of the "intended" meaning of social action. Achieving of such understanding can be treated as the "explanation" of the actual course of behaviour.

Thus for Weber, understanding involves the "interpretive grasp" of (a) the actually intended meaning for concrete individual action; (b) the average or the approximation to the actually intended meaning of a mass phenomena; and (c) the meaning appropriate to a scientifically formulated pure type (an ideal type) of common phenomenon (1947:96). The concepts and "laws" of pure economic theory are examples of this pure type. As a "kind of ideal type", the pure types "state what course a given type of human action would take if it were strictly rational, unaffected by errors or emotional factors and if, furthermore, it were completely and unequivocally directed to a single

end" (Weber 1947:96) (as in the case of economics, this end is the "maximization of economic advantage"). Elsewhere Weber notes that it is the construction of this purely rational course, pure type, of action that serves the sociologists as an ideal type, since "it has the merit of clear understandability and lack of ambiguity", the two basic requirements of an ideal type as was explained by Weber in the earlier essay. These pure types or the "pure ideal types" have "the highest possible degree of logical integration by virtue of their complete adequacy on the level of meaning" (Weber 1947:110). And primarily because of this that they rarely, if ever, correspond to a real phenomenon. However, for Weber, "theoretical analysis in the field of sociology is possible only in terms of such pure types" (1947:110).

However, it is not to say that sociology has to deal only with the rational. Indeed, much of sociology is concerned with the irrational, that is, the emotional, affectual or even mystic experiences. Weber argues that for typological scientific analysis" it is convenient to deal with the irrational as "deviation" from a "conceptually pure type" of rational action. Nevertheless, Weber feels that Sociology also includes in its scope, various irrational phenomena formulated in terms of theoretical concepts which are "adequate on the level of meaning" implying that ideal types of such concepts can also be constructed. Though they may not attain the highest degree of certainty associated with the pure type. Weber notes that when reference is made to "typical" case, it always means *ideal* type, which may be "rational or irrational" but they are constructed with

a view to "adequacy on the level of meaning" (1947:110).

It would, therefore, be wrong to equate pure type with the ideal type as Parsons does. Pure types are the ideal types of rational action. Weber calls the either as "pure ideal types" or a kind of ideal type" or simply, "an ideal type". Parsons sets a trap for himself by equating the two calling it "rational ideal type" and thus fails to understand how the treatment of the irrational can be accommodated within Weberian methodological framework. (Parsons 1947 : 16). For Parsons the way out is to treat the irrational as mere deviations, which is in conformity with Weber. But since the "rational ideal type" is the only ideal type Parsons recognizes as representing the second text, he is still left without a place for the ideal types of the "irrational". As noted above, Weber had no problems with this. Weber is equally comfortable with the construction of the ideal types of both rational and the irrational ; only, in the case of the rational they are to be called the pure type.

Parsons is not the only one having problems with the concept of ideal type as formulated by Weber. Most authors tend to treat the first essay as the only, or the authoritative, version for the ideal type (Rex 1971). Others treat it as the main work while the later essay is seen as merely an appendix or worse, one which complicates the issue. Thus, these authors try to offer an explanation of the various kinds of ideal type Weber may have had in mind. Aron (1970) considers Weber's project as incomplete though Weber has "grasped what is essential" in formulating ideal

types. Crediting Weber thus, Aron feels that 'perhaps we should distinguish' three kinds of ideal type, namely "historical type (modern capitalism), general types (bureaucratic power), and types of rational behaviour (economic theory) (1970 : 83)." This last actually corresponds to the pure type. Example of economic theory is cited simply because Weber often refers to it. But economic theory is not sociology, and as will be shown shortly, Aron fails to grasp the intention behind Weber's reference to economic theory as an example of rational behaviour. Historical types obviously match the ideal type of the first essay and, I presume, the general types refer to the ideal types in a generalizing science like sociology and is covered by the second essay. But that complicates the issue of the types rational behavioural" since such types (pure types), for Weber, are constructed to "compensate" for the weakness that concept formulation in a generalizing science suffers from (Weber 1947, 109-110), and therefore, should also be treated as the "general types," or vice versa.

Alternatively some authors pose one essay against the other and thus identify ideal types presented in one to be different from the other. Von Schelting (1969) for instance distinguishes between the individualizing (in the first essay) and the generalizing (second essay) ideal types. Sahay (1971) carries Von Schelting's distinctions a step further by identifying sub-types for each of Schelting's types. Thus, he finds in the individualizing ideal types, (a) the type that clarifies the characteristic of a unique action, and (b) that makes the idea of an action clear and consistent.

While in the generalizing type, (a) that which organizes correlated facts to allow imputation of a causal relationship between them, and (b) that conceptualizes the basic general characteristic of a social action in its pure form.

Similar discrepancies between the two essay in terms of the formulation of the ideal types have also been pointed by a number of other authors. Watkins (1973) distinguishes between the "holistic" and the "individualistic" as representing the first and the second essay respectively. This is almost opposite of what Schelting and Sahay state. Mommsen (1974), in spite of his acknowledgement of the two ideal types in Weber, defends the latter on the ground that what appears to be the difference between the two formulations was the result of Weber's attempt at developing a sophisticated system of ideal types as such.

The list of such confusing treatment of the ideal type and pure type is a long one, to the extent that even a recent essay by Turner (1983) continues to refer to the Parsonian invention of the rational ideal type as representing the second essay. It should, however, be evident by now that the second essay is concerned primarily with the pure type, but that does not imply that Weber has forsaken his concept of ideal type. It is there in the second essay as much as it was in the first. The two essays were written in the context of two different disciplines, which, I feel, is sufficient knowledge to appreciate the difference between the two essays and the ideal types therein.

The two essays of Weber under discussion here are

not only spaced by time but also differ in their basic orientations. The first essay of 1904 was written at a time when Weber was primarily a historian, introducing the social sciences, when he still seems to prefer the term cultural science. It has been pointed out by a number of scholars that Weber turned into a sociologist rather late in his career and that too very reluctantly. And that, much of his contribution was not proposed in the context of sociology at all (Rex, 1971). Mommsen notes that it was not until 1913 that Weber "eventually established himself as a sociologist in the full sense" (1974 : 14). The process however began a few years earlier and by 1909 he was working actively for founding the German Association for sociology. It was, around this time 1910, according to Runcimann (1982 :3) that Weber began his work on the *Economy and Society*, whose introduction is the subject matter of the second essay. It may also be noted that Weber, apparent in this essay, was not much at ease with his version of sociology. Right at the beginning of his introduction of the word sociology he adds parenthetically "in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word used here" (Prason's translation 1947 : 88). He also appears rather apologetic about the kind of sociology he is trying to introduce, namely a sociology which restricts itself to subjectively understandable phenomena, "a usage which", he notes, "there is no intention of attempting to impose on anyone else" (1947 : 100). Nor was he very comfortable with his colleagues at the sociology Association soon after the founding of which he dissociated himself from the organization.

The point to be made here is not that he became any wiser by turning into a sociologist. Nor that the description of the ideal type in the second formulation, the pure type, is the more authoritative version. The fact to be acknowledged here is that the two essays were written with two distinct disciplines in mind and that his attitude toward sociology was one of ambivalence.

It was, perhaps, because of this ambivalence that he continuously refers to other disciplines in order to sharpen his methodology first for the cultural sciences and later for sociology. In both essays he directs his attention to economics. Economics in the first essay is identified as belonging closely to the natural sciences following in the footsteps of the latter in its methodological principles. Abstraction, generalization, and law making, therefore, become the obvious choice for economics, as opposed to the concerns with the concrete, the real, and the unique for the historical science. In the second essay Weber attempts to distinguish sociology both from history and economics. As opposed to history, sociology builds generalization but empirical material of sociology "consists to a large extent, though by no means exclusively, of the same concrete process of action which are dealt with by historians" (1947 : 109). It is to minimise this contradiction between the requirements for generalization and the concreteness of empirical reality that sociology needs to sharpen its concepts to a very high degree, to a degree equaling that of economics. In economic theory the concepts are always of the pure type. Sociology, as a generalizing science must also strive for such pure types. But sociology also has to deal

with the irrational and often with statistical averages. So that, sociology, along with building ideal types of the rational, the pure type, has to build ideal types of the irrational and "it goes without saying" that, in addition, sociology has to deal with statistical averages of meaningful kind, for example crime rates, occupational distribution etc. Thus because of its particular requirements, concept building in sociology becomes different from either history or economics. Indeed, Weberian sociology is a very uneasy combination of aspects of both of these two disciplines.

Ideal type is a heuristic device. It offers a way of building concepts. The nature of concepts is different for each discipline. Thus, the way of building concepts of necessity becomes different for different disciplines. Economic theory always asks 'what course of action would take place if it were purely rational and oriented to economic ends alone' (Weber 1947 : III). The ideal types of social action for economic theory are thus "unrealistic or abstract" in nature. They conceptualize purely rational course of action. The ideal types in economic theory are, therefore, of the pure type. Historical sciences deal with cultural values and reality for them is coloured by such values and acquire significance thereby. Concepts in such sciences are dictated by their cultural significance, the ideal types thus also have to be built with the cultural significance of the phenomena in mind.

Weber's sociology deals with the subjective understanding of social action, which has to take account of the intended meaning for the actor. Its concepts therefore, must be meaningfully adequate. However,



since sociology also distances itself from reality and because of its requirements for generalization, it needs to build concepts the way economics does, namely the building of pure types. But, sociology also deals with the irrational, the emotion and affects, which cannot be fully understood. We cannot therefore strive for the same degree of precision as obtained by the pure type for these concepts. Indeed, a "lower degree of certainty" will do for these. Ideal types of such concepts do not have to meet the same requirements of precision as the pure types. Moreover sociology has also to deal with the statistical averages of various empirical phenomena. So that sociology will also have to use statistical averages. All that is required of the concepts of the rational, irrational or statistical averages is that they be meaningfully adequate.

Thus building of the pure type is only a part of building concepts in sociology. Confusion arises when it is treated as the only way of building concepts in sociology or when equated with construction of ideal type as such. More often, however, the confusion is rooted in the fact that the very concept of ideal type is reified.

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