Weber’s Concept of ‘Ideal Types’:
A Better Type of ‘Idea Conceptualizing’?

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The law is this: that each of our leading conceptions -- each branch of our knowledge --
passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the theological, or
fictitious; the metaphysical, or abstract; and the scientific, or positive. (Comte 1975, 71)

In this way, in laying out an evolutionary succession of thought leading to positivism,
Auguste Comte believes he solves the problem facing thinkers of his time that human knowledge
was limited in the understanding of objective reality. Comte’s succession of thought is not
merely a law guiding philosophical inquiry, but it is also the defining form of any domain of
knowledge. The consequence of this fundamental, natural law is to provide a rationale for the
thinkers of his age to commit to a positive science where the pursuit of ‘causes’ may be
abandoned in favor of the logical connecting or, essentially, reduction, of the explanations to our
empirical observations.

...the first characteristic of the positive philosophy is that it regards all phenomena as
subjected to invariable natural laws. Our business is -- seeing how vain is any research
into what are called causes, whether first or final -- to pursue an accurate discovery of
these laws, with a view to reducing them to the smallest possible number.... [Instead of
speculating on causes] our real business is to analyze accurately the circumstances of
phenomena, and to connect them by the natural relations of succession and resemblance.
(Comte 1975, 75)

Turning to the social sciences, Comte describes them as divisible in a way that is analytically
analogous to the division that applies in the natural sciences between anatomy and physiology.
Social statics (as in anatomy) is the study of the organization of society, while social dynamics
(as in physiology) is the study of the laws of movement within society:

...social dynamics studies the laws of succession, while social statics inquires into those
of coexistence; so that the use of the first is to furnish the true theory of progress to
political practice, while the second performs the same service in regard to order. (Comte 1975, 230)

Comte’s concern theorize political practice and uncover a universal social order is historically contextualized (if not specifically motivated) by social and personal unrest. From his own situation, it would not be too difficult to imagine Comte’s Hobbesian desire to order the disorder that surrounded him:

The great political and moral crisis that societies are now undergoing is shown by a rigid analysis to arise out of intellectual anarchy. While stability in fundamental maxims is the first condition of genuine social order, we are suffering under an utter disagreement that may be called universal. Till a certain number of general ideas can be acknowledged as a rallying point of social doctrine, the nations will remain in a revolutionary state... (Comte 1975, 83)

Max Weber also seeks to order our knowledge and understanding, but he does not buy into Comte’s agenda of a fundamental law or evolutionary processes. While similarly focused on empirical observations, Weber finds a different solution to the limited capacities of humans to fully understand objective reality. Much closer to the ideas and influence of Comte, especially regarding intellectual and practical motivation, is Karl Marx. Before examining Weber’s ideas, a brief turn to Marx is called for.

Marx’s own ideas on the nature of humans begins by noting the importance of Hegel’s “dialectic of negativity as the moving and producing principle.” In this dialectic Marx acknowledges that Hegel correctly identifies and grasps the objectification of man through his own labor:¹

¹ This notion of humans as natural laborers is in contrast to Comte’s view of humans as somewhat lazy, especially in intellectually pursuits:

The intellectual faculties being naturally the least energetic, their activity, if ever so little protracted beyond a certain degree, occasions in most men a fatigue that soon becomes utterly insupportable; and it is in regard to them chiefly that men of all ages of civilization relish that state of which the dolce far niente [sweet to do nothing] is the most perfect expression. (Comte 1975, 264)
The real, active relation of man to himself as a species-being, or the realization of himself as a real species-being, i.e. as a human being, is only possible if he really employs all his species-powers -- which again is only possible through the cooperation of mankind and as a result of history -- and treats them as objects, which is at first only possible in the form of estrangement. (Marx 1975b, 386)

For Marx, humans are not only a laboring being but also a suffering one. To obtain and gain an understanding of this objectified world, humans dependent on a consciousness that is also a product of labor:

The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness. (Marx 1998, 42)

Marx’s turn to a materialism that includes one’s own consciousness is the base for an empiricism that focuses on production and the relations of production as objects of study. Like Comte, Marx posits a fundamental law that guides this inquiry:

Whenever we speak of production, then, what is meant is always production at a definite stage of social development -- production by social individuals. (Marx 1976, 85)

The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production [i.e., the creation of objects for specific needs] predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well. The process always returns to production to begin anew. (Marx 1976, 99)

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2 Man is directly a natural being. As a natural being and as a living natural being he is on the one hand equipped with natural powers, with vital powers, he is an active natural being; these powers exist in him as dispositions and capacities, as drives. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a suffering, conditioned and limited being, like animals and plants. That is to say, the objects of his drives exist outside him as objects independent of him; but these objects are objects of his need, essential objects, indispensable to the exercise and confirmation of his essential powers. To say that man is a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being with natural powers means that he has real, sensuous objects as the object of his being and of his vital expression, or that he can only express his life in real, sensuous objects. (Marx 1975b, 389-90)
Thus, Marx’s naturalism holds that man must realize his species-being through his labor, which is historically expressed and empirically observed as interrelated moments of production. Although capitalist society, to which Marx devotes the majority of his attention, exhibits specific social relations that simultaneously motivate and result from these moments, Marx is intent in considering this totality as both primary and trans-historical. Thus, Marx describes “production” and the “moments” within production as historical processes that are specific to time and place, yet they also form the abstract, analytical units of his own natural law.

The fact is, therefore, that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, however, of these individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people’s imagination, but as they actually are, i.e., as they act, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will. (Marx 1998, 41)

Weber’s solution to the limited nature of human understanding does not include the imposition of a universal law, whether it be one of consciousness (as in Comte) or in social relations (as in Marx). Both Comte and Marx, as positivists, treat the objective world as ultimately knowable, albeit, in, on and through their own respective terms. The point from which Weber, Comte and Marx deviate from each other is encapsulated in the thinking of Immanuel Kant.

Kant equates humans’ free will with their rationality, such that humans are not merely subject to laws (eternal or otherwise) outside of themselves. In fact, the existence of this free will and subjective rationality establishes one’s autonomy, a condition that is imperative for the possibility of morality:
Will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings so far as they are rational. Freedom would then be the property this causality has of being able to work independently of determination by alien causes; just as natural necessity is a property characterizing the causality of all non-rational beings -- the property of being determined to activity by the influence of alien causes. What else then can freedom of will be but autonomy -- that is, the property which will has of being a law to itself? The proposition ‘Will is in all its actions a law to itself’ expresses only the principle of acting on no maxim other than one which can have for its object itself as at the same time a universal law. This is precisely the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality. Thus a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same. (Kant 1964, 114).

Once separated from natural necessity and as a result of being both freed and confined by one’s rationality, humans are subject to obtaining a delimited understanding of the totality of experiences.

[All] ideas coming to us apart from our own volition (as do those of the senses) enable us to know objects only as they affect ourselves: what they may be in themselves remains unknown. Consequently, ideas of this kind, even with the greatest of attention and clarification brought to bear by understanding, serve only for knowledge of appearances, never of things in themselves. (Kant 1964, 118)

Given these limitations that result from our free will, what is a person to do? If it is our lot to seek knowledge and an understanding of phenomena, natural or otherwise, Kant believes we are caught in an unending paradox of concealment and disclosure. Our task, then, is to define and determine the conditions under and through which the paradox is exhibited.

[It] is an essential principle for every use of reason to push its knowledge to the point where we are conscious of its necessity (for without necessity it would not be knowledge characteristic of reason). It is an equally essential limitation of the same reason that it cannot have insight into the necessity either of what is or what happens, or of what ought to happen, except on the basis of a condition under which it is or happens or ought to happen. In this way...the satisfaction of reason is merely postponed again and again by continual enquiry after a condition. (Kant 1964, 131)

This predicament of epistemological limitation is addressed, not solved, by Weber by engaging in a process of applying ideal types, i.e., abstract constructs, to empirical analysis while conducting oneself in a self-consciously value-neutral manner.3 Before looking at Weber’s notion

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3 The problem of value-judgements that Weber addresses is the following:
of ideal type, it should be made clear that Weber does not promote a strong relativist position, even though he acknowledges differences of perceptions and conceptualizing that is natural and, as with Kant, even necessary. In Weber’s rules for editing the Archiv social scientific journal, Weber and the other editors state that the pursuit of knowledge, which is rooted in contingent practicality, must be methodological rational and understood by others -- even by “the Chinese”:

It has been and remains true that a systematically correct scientific proof in the social sciences, if it is to achieve its purpose, must be acknowledged as correct even by a Chinese -- or -- more precisely stated -- it must constantly strive to attain this goal, which perhaps may not be completely attainable due to faulty data. Furthermore, the successful logical analysis of the content of an ideal and its ultimate axioms and the discovery of the consequences which arise from pursuing it, logically and practically, must also be valid for the Chinese.... There is one tenet to which we adhere most firmly in our work, namely, that a social science journal, in our sense, to the extent that it is scientific should be a place where truths are sought, which -- to remain with our illustration -- can claim even for a Chinese, the validity appropriate to an analysis of empirical reality. (Weber 1949, 58-59)

Weber’s cross-cultural method requires one, first, to be self-conscious of one’s value-judgments, then, secondly, to make clear when one is being opinionated:

First, to keep the readers and themselves sharply aware at every moment of the standards by which they judge reality and from which the value-judgment is derived.... [The] second fundamental imperative of scientific freedom is that in such cases it should be constantly made clear to the readers (and -- again we say it -- above all to one’s self!) exactly at which point the scientific investigator becomes silent and the evaluating and acting person begins to speak. (Weber 1949, 59-60)

Opinions and value-judgments are not, in themselves, bad. They are inevitable. This inevitability of exhibiting value-judgments must, for the social scientist, be made explicit so that the value-judgments may be included in the debate. The stance of indifference and conditional objectivity taken by researchers is especially important because Weber is quite aware of the

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There is and always will be...an unbridgeable distinction among (1) those arguments which appeal to our capacity to become enthusiastic about and our feeling for concrete practical aims or cultural forms and values, (2) those arguments in which, once it is a question of the validity of ethical norms, the appeal is directed to our conscience, and finally (3) those arguments which appeal to our capacity and need for analytically ordering empirical reality in a manner which lays claim to validity as empirical truth. (Weber 1949, 58)
influence that scientific research wields for social policy makers. Thus, the debate on value-judgments becomes even more essential in social policy decisions:

The distinctive characteristic of a problem of social policy is indeed the fact that it cannot be resolved merely on the basis of purely technical considerations which assume already settled ends. Normative standards of value can and must be the objects of dispute in a discussion of a problems of social policy because the problem lies in the domain of general cultural values. And the conflict occurs not merely, as we are too easily inclined to believe today, between “class interests” but between general views on life and the universe as well.... One thing is certain under all circumstances, namely, the more “general” the problem involved, i.e., in this case, the broader its cultural significance, the less subject it is to a single unambiguous answer on the basis of the data of empirical sciences and the greater the role played by value-ideas and the ultimate and highest personal axioms of belief. (Weber 1949, 56)

So, what is an ‘ideal type’? It is an abstract construct created or utilized by the researcher that provides the researcher with a unified model, of some area of interest, that is used to compare with empirical observations and data. Through this process of comparison, differences and similarities to the model can be identified.

An 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. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found anywhere in reality. It is a utopia. (Weber 1949, 90)

‘Ideal type’ must be distinguished from ‘ideal typical,’ which serves a genetic (versus ideal type’s generic) function. An ideal type has no ‘typical’ character and, by itself, has little meaning. When combined with another fact or judgment, an ideal type gains methodological significance. Thus, an ideal type is generic. An ideal typical construct, i.e., a genetic construct, is, on the other hand a “loaded” concept. It already assumes a particular logic and viewpoint regarding the phenomenon to which it is applied. The “laws” of Comte and Marx, for instance, are ideal typical constructs. As an example of one of Weber’s ideal types, I will now examine Weber’s notion of ‘class.’
At one point Weber defines ‘class’ as a group “of people who have in common a specific causal component of their life chances” whereby “this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income” such that the component “is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets.” (Weber 1949, 181) Weber goes on to say that these conditions refer to a ‘class situation,’ thus, people who share a class situation are in the same class.

While a capitalist system, or at least a commodity market system is presumed to exist, Weber’s notion of class is purely descriptive of how to divide up people. It would now be the researcher’s task to define the conditions under which people live and that provide the best demarcation for the research task at hand. Weber does, in this particular reference, define class struggles and status groups, the latter of which is yet another way people may be divided and analyzed. It should be noted that status groups does not necessarily correspond in any one-to-one or even hierarchical relationship with different class situations. The relationship between classes and status groups still needs to be determined. Where the analytical power and the potential complications of implementing an ideal type analysis using Weber’s ‘class’ becomes evident in another of Weber’s references to ‘class’ in *Economy and Society*.

In this text Weber not only defines class and class situation, he goes further to define ‘property classes,’ ‘commercial classes,’ and ‘social classes’ (a derivation of the earlier text’s ‘status group’). Within each ideal type, Weber identifies gradations (‘positively privileged,’ ‘middle’ and ‘negatively privileged’) as well as specific indicators (e.g., jobs or relationship to property/wealth). (Weber 1978, 302-307) It is obvious that the list could go on and on, as long as the researcher can properly define new and relevant (to him/herself) constructs. There is a fetishism in relying on ideal types that is potentially intoxicating, where a researcher can create
layer upon layer of differentiations. This methodological spiral is, perhaps, one drawback to utilizing an ideal type analysis, however, this drawback does not minimize the usefulness of ideal types, it only serves as a caution.

Overall, Weber’s ideal type analysis is Kantian ‘to the bone.’ It effectively addresses the epistemological problems of our limited understanding of objective reality, yet it posits a means to elaborate on the very conditions that define and distinguish our limited understandings. As Kant stated, “…the satisfaction of reason is merely postponed again and again by continual enquiry after a condition” -- or was it Weber who said it?
References


