An Outline of "Objectivity in Social Science"

1. Weber takes the opportunity to discuss the nature of the social sciences (p. 50). This is his most compressed and systematic effort at a problem which he often addressed.

2. Critical here is the distinction (in the literature from Hume (1776) on between "what is" and "what ought to be" (51) and the claims that one can not go from what is to what ought to be.

He argues that one can appeal to empirical knowledge to determine the means to given ends, but the "ends" are not themselves scientifically justifiable. (As in current cost/benefit analysis (52) and one can use logic, of course, to test for consistency of propositions. Ultimately, value judgements are "matters of faith."

There is thus, an "unbridgeable distinction" between three distinct types of arguments. Weber is interested in the third: "our capacity and need for analytically ordering empirical reality in a manner which lays claims to validity as empirical truth" (58).

3. But this assumes that we can distinguish these three types of arguments and worse, it raises the (Kantian) question of how achieving the goal of empirical truth is possible? (63).

4. In what is really a diversion (but important to the Journal which he will edit), he raises the question of "socio-economic" interpretations. He begins with looks very like Marx's "first fact" (64) and goes on to distinguish "economic events (and institutions), "economically relevant" phenomena, and "economically conditioned" phenomena" and offers that as with Marx and Roscher (an historical economist), the journal is concerned with all three--and indeed, that "the economic interpretation of history is one of the most important aims of [the] journal" (68).

But this is not to be understand in "one-sided" ("monistic," "reductionist" manner of most "materialist" history (pp. 68-71) Indeed, all single factor approaches are mistaken (69).

5. This returns us the central question: the goals of social science--"an empirical science of concrete reality" (72). "We wish to understand on the one hand the relationships and cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestations and on the other the causes of their being historically so and not otherwise" (72).

But "concrete reality" presents itself as "an infinite multiplicity of successively and coexistently emerging and disappearing events, both 'within' and 'outside' ourselves" 72). See also p. 78. (This is a Kantian point, as we shall see, we informs everything he has to say.)

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Accordingly, we must select from this infinite multiplicity. On his view of the matter, we select (should select?) only what is important in the sense of "worthy of being known" (72).

What, then, are the criteria of this?

6. The positivist answer: "laws" in the sense of regularities (72). Everything else is "accidental" and can be ignored. Once identified, then, reality can be "deduced" (73).

Astronomy is taken as the ideal; but we are here profoundly misled (74).

"Laws are important and valuable in the exact natural sciences, in the measure that those sciences are universally valid" (80). That all bodies behave according to Newtonian principles is "worthy of being known." On the other hand, "for the knowledge of historical phenomena in their concreteness, the most general laws, because they are the most devoid of content are also the least valuable.... In the cultural sciences, the knowledge of the universal or general is never valuable in itself (80).

In any case, the "determination of ...hypoetical 'laws' and 'factors'" is only the first step. Grasping their concrete "configuration" and "interaction" and rendering these "intelligible" is the second step. Finally, one will need to trace these back in time as far as possible (76). See also, p.79 and the place of "nomological knowledge" (Here compare his effort in the General Economic History.

Indeed, the idea of "an objective analysis of cultural events, which proceeds according to the theses that the ideal of science is the reduction of empirical reality of 'laws' is meaningless" (80). First, knowledge of social laws is merely heuristic and second, and more important, it is the significance which the concrete has for us which is critical and this is not revealed by any law (80).

7. The question, then, is "what is the logical function of and structure of concepts ..." (p. 85).

Following Kant, Weber assumes that reality can be known only by means of concepts. But there are two dominant views of this. One, "within the framework of the classical-scholastic epistemology" holds that "the function of concepts was assumed to be reproduction of 'objective' reality in the analyst's imagination" (p. 106). We make this assumption when we use "generic" concepts, concepts which identify abstract kinds which presumably exist in nature, e.g., mammal. These, in turn, give rise to "laws": e.g., 'All animals with four-chambered hearts are mammals,' and definitions by genus proximum and differentia (p. 93). By contrast, following Kantian epistemology, concepts are seen as "primarily analytical instruments for the mastery of empirical data" (p. 106) -- "means to the end of understanding phenomena which are significant from concrete individual viewpoints" (p. 106). These are, by contrast, ideal typical genetic or quasi generic concepts (p. 100). In the course of developing his argument, Weber notes that
abstract economic theory...offers us an ideal picture of events in the commodity-market under conditions of a society organized on the principles of an exchange economy, free competition and rigorously rational conduct.... Substantively, this construct in itself is like a utopia which has been arrived at by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality.

Notice that "utopias" do not exist: They are wholly imaginary. Thus, there never has been a society organized with "free competition" and "rigorously rational conduct" (e.g., in labor markets, racism and sexism influence decisions which from the point of view of profit-making are irrational influences on decisions.) Compare here also Marx who would hold that the abstractions which he formulated in Capital are real processes which occur in every concrete capitalist society. To be sure, the theory is an abstraction but it "represents" reality for him. For Weber, it "orders" reality. Weber continues:

[The relationship of the construct] to the empirical data consists solely in the fact that where market-conditioned relationships of the type referred by the abstract construct are discovered or suspected to exist in reality to some extent, we can make the characteristic features of this relationship pragmatically clear and understandable by reference to an ideal-type. This procedure can be indispensable for heuristic as well as expository purposes. [As a heuristic] the ideal typical concept will help to develop our skill in imputation in research. It is no "hypothesis" but offers guidance to the construction of hypotheses. It is not a description of reality [a true "representation" of reality] but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression of such a description...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 empirically anywhere in reality...Historical research faces the task of determining in each individual case, the extent to which this ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality.

8. This is also why research in the human sciences is "subjective," not in the sense that it is valid for but one person, but in the sense that is led by "evaluative ideas which dominate the investigator and his age" (p. 84).

Commitment to generic concepts also promotes the idea that it is the goal of the human sciences "to construct a close system of concepts, in which reality is synthesized in some sort of permanently and universally valid classification and from which it can be deduced"(p. 84). Indeed, "a systematic science of culture, even only in the sense of a definite, objectively valid, systematic fixation of the problems which it should treat, would be senseless in itself" (p. 84) (It is hard to believe that Parson's grasped this rather elementary point as regards his efforts at a General Theory.)
9. But given the (restricted) sense of "subjectivity" involved here, Weber is clear that ideal types are not ideals "by which reality is evaluatively judged" (p. 98). When this occurs (as it too often perhaps does?), "the sphere of empirical science has been left behind and we are confronted with a profession of faith, not an ideal-typical construct" (ibid.).

10. Thus, finally, "the objective validity of all empirical knowledge rests exclusively upon the ordering of the given reality according to categories which are subjective in a specific sense, namely, in that they present the presuppositions of our knowledge and are based on the presupposition of value of those truths which empirical knowledge alone is able to give us." (p. 110).

Moreover, versus those relativisms which disclaim empirical methods, "the belief in value of scientific truth is the product of certain cultures and is not a product of man's original nature. Those for whom scientific truth is no value will seek in vain for some other truth to take the place of science in just those respects in which it is unique, namely in the provision of concepts and judgments which are neither empirical reality nor reproductions of it but which facilitate its analytical ordering in a valid manner" (p. 110).