

## On Ideal Types

### Introduction to the Weberian Concept

"Sociology seeks to formulate type concepts and generalized uniformities of empirical process. ... As in the case of every generalizing science, the abstract character of the concepts of sociology is responsible for the fact that, compared with actual historical reality, they are relatively lacking in fullness of concrete content. To compensate for this disadvantage, sociological analysis can offer a greater precision of concepts. ... In *all* cases, rational or irrational, sociological analysis both abstracts from reality and at the same time helps us to understand it, in that it shows with what degree of approximation a concrete historical phenomenon can be subsumed under one or more of these concepts.

For example, the same historical phenomenon may be in one aspect feudal, in another patrimonial, in another bureaucratic, and in still another charismatic. In order to give a precise meaning to these terms, it is necessary for the sociologist to formulate pure ideal types of the corresponding forms of action which in each case involve the highest possible degree of logical integration ... But precisely because this is true, it is probably seldom if ever [the case] that a real phenomenon can be found which corresponds exactly to one of these ideally constructed pure types. The case is similar to a physical reaction which has been calculated on the assumption of an absolute vacuum. ... When reference is made to 'typical' cases, the term should always be understood, unless otherwise stated, as meaning *ideal* types, which may in turn be rational or irrational ... but in any case are always constructed with a view to adequacy on the level of meaning. ...

The ideal types of social action which for instance are used in economic theory are thus unrealistic or abstract in that they always ask what course of action would take place if it were purely rational and oriented to economic ends alone. This construction can be used to aid in the understanding of action not purely economically determined but which involves deviations arising from traditional restraints, affects, errors, and the intrusion of other than economic purposes or considerations. This can take place in two ways. First, in analyzing the extent to which in the concrete case, or on the average for a class of cases, the action was in part economically determined along with the other factors. Secondly, by throwing the discrepancy between the actual course of events and the ideal type into relief, the analysis of the non-economic motives actually involved in facilitated. ...

The difficulty [of no single ideal type matching a given real-world scenario] need not prevent the sociologist from systematizing his concepts by the classification of possible types of subjective meaning. That is, he may reason as if action actually proceeded on the basis of clearly self-conscious meaning. ..."

From: Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*. (Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie.) Guenter Roth and Claus Wittich, editors/translators. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978: 19-22.

[OVER]

### Example from Weber's *Economy and Society*: The Types of Authority (*Herrschaft*)\*

"Authority (*Herrschaft*), according to our definition (cf. I:16), is the probability that certain (or all) commands will be obeyed by a specified group of persons. Not every exercise of 'power' or 'influence' over other persons is an instance of authority. Domination may be based on a whole range of motives for compliance—from simple habituation to the most purely rational calculation of advantage—but the compliance involved in a relationship of authority must always involve a minimum of voluntarism, an interest of the compliant in complying. ...

Experience shows that authority does not limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual, or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition, every instance of authority seeks to establish and maintain a belief in its 'legitimacy.' Depending on the kind of legitimacy that is claimed, the character of the obedience, the kind of administrative staff required to guarantee it, and the mode of exercising authority will all differ fundamentally. ... Hence it is useful to classify authority according to the claim to legitimacy made by each. In doing so, I will start from the more modern and therefore more familiar type ... [:]

There are three ideal types of legitimate authority. The validity of the claims to legitimacy may be based on:

(1) rational grounds—a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands ([rational-]legal authority)

(2) traditional grounds—an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority); or finally

(3) charismatic grounds—devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority).

In the case of legal authority, obedience is owed to the legally established impersonal order. It extends to the persons exercising the authority of office under it by virtue of the formal legality of their commands and is limited by the scope of authority of that office. In the case of traditional authority, obedience is owed to the person of the chief who occupies the traditionally sanctioned position of authority and who is (within its sphere) bound by tradition. But here the obligation of obedience is a matter of personal loyalty within the area of accustomed obligations. In the case of charismatic authority, it is the charismatically qualified leader as such who is obeyed by virtue of personal trust in his revelation, his heroism or his exemplary qualities so far as they fall within the scope of the individual's belief in his charisma.

From: Weber, Max. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*. 5th revised edition, edited by Johannes Winckelmann. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1980: 122-124. (translation: Büthe 1996, based in part on the Roth/Wittich translation.)

### What Is "Ideal"?

"The much-discussed 'ideal type,' a key term in Weber's methodological discussion, refers to the construction of certain elements of reality into a logically precise conception. The term 'ideal' has nothing to do with evaluations of any sort. For analytical purposes, one may construct ideal types of prostitution as well as of religious leaders. The term does not mean that either prophets or harlots are exemplary or should be imitated as representatives of an ideal way of life."

From Gerth, H. H. and C. Wright Mills. "Introduction: The Man and His Work." In Gerth and Mills, eds. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958: 59.

---

\* Based on the Roth/Wittich translation, *Herrschaft* is often translated as "domination." To my mind, this term has implications that Weber did not intend *Herrschaft* to have, and I have therefore translated *Herrschaft* consistently as 'authority' (a term also used by Roth/Wittich for it).