**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 27: Weber’s Methodological Thought I**

* Between 1902-04 Weber wrote several essays central to his ideas on the nature and purpose of the social sciences.
* To understand his views in this regard, we need to first consider the intellectual background/debates that had taken place in the prior decades.
* Particularly important were ongoing debates about the relationship between the natural and social sciences.

**Historical and Philosophical Background:**

* Between 1880-1900 there was spectacular growth in the natural sciences, which rapidly grew in prestige.
* The methods of the natural sciences came to be seen as pre-eminent in discovering truths about the natural world.
* As these developments advanced, the historical and philosophical sciences began to decline in stature.
* An open clash soon developed centered around the methodologies used by each camp to discover knowledge about the world (i.e. scientists saw social science methods as largely speculative and intuitive).
* By 1885 the social sciences were suffering a crisis of legitimacy resulting, by 1890, in neo-Kantianism: a philosophical movement seeking to secure the legitimacy of the social and historical sciences.
* Two key issues:

1. The need to search for a theory of knowledge; and
2. The necessity of defining differences in subject matter between the natural and historical/social sciences.

* Two key figures: Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert.
* Wilhelm Windelband:
* Turned to Kant’s writings to find a philosophical justification for the historical sciences (i.e. could historical investigation make a valid claim to objective knowledge?)
* Kant justified natural science investigation, neglected the rest (i.e. he relegated them to the realm of belief)
* Added to the problem was that Hegel’s theory of history had been criticized as speculative, and his method was focused more on ideals that the concrete factual world. This made formulation of causal laws in history impossible.
* Windelband claimed if that human action, intention, historical and ethical pursuits were excluded, only the natural sciences would be the bearers of legitimate knowledge.
* Yet their distinct subject matter varied in ways that could easily be simplified: the natural and social sciences represent two forms of knowledge which attempt to describe two different levels of reality.
* In the natural sciences, there is knowledge of facts in the observable world in which causes and laws can be determined in concrete reality.
* In the social/historical sciences there is knowledge of values and ethics, and this implies knowledge of an ethical realm consisting of the products of human culture. This includes the pursuits of actors and the judgments they make in relation to the social world in which they live and act.
* In the former, judgments are made in relation to facts and observation; in the latter through theory – which alone is capable of grasping objects not directly subject to observation (e.g. values, motive, purpose, morality, etc.)
* Thus, Windelband stressed social and historical values as norms or standards of conduct that may change from society to society, depending on what ends are valued and pursued by historical actors.
* Unlike seeking to develop general laws through observation, experimentation, and deductive methods (which overlooks the individual and unique), Windelband claimed the social and historical sciences should focus on individual events, determine their formative characteristics/what took place, and utilize inductive methods to establish theories afterwards.
* According to Windelbrand, the natural sciences are *nomathetic* (or ‘law-giving’) in how they organize reality with events as mere examples of a rule. The historical/social sciences are *ideographic* in that they assemble available information about an event to arrive at a picture of the whole.
* Windelbrand went in to argue that any given subject could be investigated in either fashion, and a better, more well-rounded picture would result if this were done.
* Windelbrand’s work also suggested that observation itself involved judgment, not mere sensation, and that this, plus value, serve as predicates of human acts.
* Heinrich Rickert:
* Argued that the natural and social sciences differed in relation to their *theory of knowledge*, their *generalizing and individualizing tendencies*, their means of *concept formation*, and in their *attitudes toward values as viable subject matter*.
* Regarding theory of knowledge, Rickert criticized the implicit natural science view that facts can be readily observed as real in the natural world (i.e. judgment occurs both before *and* after the act of observation). “First we judge, then we know.” Values enter the picture one way or another.
* Regarding the disciplines, Rickert distinguished sciences between those whose methodologies and concept formation focused on “lawfully recurring nature” and “individual non-recurring events.” The former develops reductive, summary concepts based on commonalities/does away with individual traits (an oversimplification/ deficiency in method). In the latter, attempts are made to relate as closely as possible to individual phenomena in all their complexity.
* Rickert, lastly, claimed that a description of history and society using the methods of the natural sciences would essentially involve these oversimplifying value judgments, consist of abstract concepts, contain no individuals and particulars, and destroy the empirical concreteness of the world we experience and live in.
* Rickert argued that what gives empirical reality its interest is our individuality and values. He felt that, unlike natural phenomena, social and historical individuals act on the basis of conscious values, and this value orientation leads to active judgment and activity in relation to the ends they value. The methodology of the historical/social science must take this into account.

**Weber’s Synthesis and Approach:**

* Influenced by the philosophers’s above, as well as by an 1890’s debate raging at the University of Heidelberg between Carl Menger (who argued that historical economics was a generalizing science) and Gustav Schmoller (who argued that a new method had to be devised for the social/historical sciences), Weber took up these issues in his own works.
* Weber’s key writings in this regard were:

1. *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* (1902-03); and
2. *Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy* (1903-04);

* Weber essentially took the position that the social sciences were different from other disciplines, including the natural sciences. His goals were:

1. To show that a search for law-like regularities was not possible in the social sciences;
2. To show that the phenomena studied by the social sciences have definite properties marking them off from other disciplines and ruling out the possibility of establishing a natural science of society;
3. To show that the subject matter of the social sciences was comprised of individuals whose social action was based on values. Thus, social scientists must understand how those values serve as a basis for social action.
4. To show that in all disciplines, including the natural sciences, facts never speak for themselves. Interpretation is necessary. Thus, no science is neutral and its observation language is never theoretically independent of the way people see the phenomena and ask questions about them.
5. To show that the social sciences must arrive at a methodology that encompasses both general and specific aspects of historical reality, a procedure Weber referred to as the “ideal type.”

* We will look more closely at Weber’s theoretical formulations in these regards next class.