**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 28: Weber’s Methodological Thought II**

* Today we will continue the material we introduced last class by considering:

1. The influence of Rickert’s epistemology on Weber;
2. Weber’s methodological concept of ideal types;
3. Weber’s theory of social action;
4. Weber’s interpretive sociology;
5. Weber’s types of social action.

**Rickert’s Epistemological Influence:**

* In addition to our look at Rickert last class, he influenced Weber through his concept of “value relevance.”
* This involves the idea that selective judgment – based in values of relevance in given social and historical contexts - always precedes empirical observation.
* Empirical reality presents itself to our senses as an “infinite multiplicity” of events/phenomena that must be overcome by a selection process rendering it manageable.
* This selection process involves concept formation, the development of shorthand ways to manage complexity and separate the essential from the inessential.
* When something is isolated as worthy of selection, this involves either commonalities or unique features.
* The former leads to general concepts/the natural science approach; the latter to the historically/socially unique.
* The objects of empirical reality are only of interest to us because they are value relevant in a particular social/ historical/cultural context. This is as true of the natural sciences as it is of the social and historical.
* Ultimately, “knowledge” – whether scientific, social, or historical - is not the grasp, but the *construction* of reality.

**Weber on Ideal Types:**

* Influenced by Rickert’s approach, Weber developed his concept of *ideal types*.
* These are neither a typology nor a dichotomous list of contrasting or comparative elements.
* The ideal type is “a conceptual pattern which brings together certain relationships and events of historical life into a complex which is conceived of as an internally consistent system.”
* Historical ideal types, for example, form concepts by selecting phenomena on the basis of common characteristics, selecting only those concepts that are precisely and unambiguously definable (e.g. individualism, feudalism, capitalism).
* For example, when trying to understand the development of a city economy, one compares craft-based vs. capitalistic city economies of various times and places, seeking common essentials and removing the rest, resulting in a workable analytic type.
* Another kind involves the development of an ideal picture of an historical shift, introducing a developmental sequence into type construction in order to capture the nature of the shift and the conditions behind it (e.g. the shift from traditional to bureaucratic administration).
* Key here is the ability to draw connections and interrelations between divergent condensed elements (e.g. the market, rationality, law, citizenship, etc), retaining what is essential and discarding the inessential.
* The goal of this method is to make explicit *both* the *general* and *individual* characteristics of empirical reality, the *nomathetic* and *ideographic*, at the same time.
* While he knew it was impossible to fully describe reality in a factual sense, Weber did believe it could be at least “framed out” in this manner.
* At the outer edge of the frame were wide concepts like capitalism, feudalism, or the city economy; at the inner limits were subjective meanings related to values, types of social action, and rationality.
* Ideal types serve several distinct investigative purposes:

1. Discovering relationships between types in the world by checking against historical evidence;
2. For interpretive and expository purposes;
3. Helping to form research hypotheses;
4. Reducing ambiguity through adequate description;
5. Leading to broader concepts about society through looking at historically given types of society/realities.

**Weber on Social Action:**

* Weber next attempted to consider the question of how people engage in *meaningful* social action by making valid judgments with others in a social environment.
* Unlike the natural sciences where relevant knowledge is basically general principles of the external world, in the social sciences knowledge must also be related to humans’ “inner nature.” This, particularly how individuals act on their understanding, must be considered to explain events.
* Weber asserted:

1. That sociology must concern itself with the *interpretation* of social action;
2. Sociology must devise a social theory of values, since acts of valuing and judging are *preconditions* to action.

* In effect, Weber emphasized the process of individuals assigning meaning to situations; it does not necessarily come pre-packaged.
* Social action occurs “when the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to an act and takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.”
* He stressed the concept of *human understanding*, or *Verstehen* (the ability of humans to “understand,” to “meaningfully interpret” the actions of others, distinguishing them from material objects).
* Weber argued that the goal of the social sciences was to examine the processes related to “meaning” or “interpretive understanding.”
* Weber asserted that there were two types of understanding: direct vs. interpretive.
* The first focuses on direct observation of the visible, physical characteristics of an act in the world (e.g. a home run in baseball, an angry outburst).
* The latter, interpretive or explanatory understanding takes the first and puts it into the context of meaning, for example, constructing reasons or assigning motives. These subjectively occur in the “inner states” of the actor.
* While achieving something more than the natural sciences, this comes at the cost of “more hypothetical and fragmentary results.”
* All action is rational in the sense that individuals have a subjective value orientation to reality that weighs up means and ends for purposes of efficiency. Different types of rationality become dominant at different periods. Magic and prayer as means give way to practical approaches.
* Rationality can be of two types: *subjective* (inner cognitive evaluation before acting) and *objective* (how far the action adheres to formal rules or means-end calculations).
* Lastly in this regard, and with emphasis on the idea that meaning precedes action, Weber outlined four distinct types of meaningful social action:

1. *Traditional action*: the actor reacts “automatically to habitual stimuli which guide behavior in a course which has been repeatedly followed.” This is often oriented to a fixed body of traditional beliefs, customs, or habits acting as moral imperatives on an actor’s judgment;
2. *Affectual action*: action is affectual if it “satisfies a need for revenge, sensual gratification, devotion, contemplative bliss, or the working off of emotional tensions.” It is an expresses an actor’s emotional state;
3. *Value rational action*: Compared to the “borderline” rationality of the above, this category shows a straightforward orientation to an absolute value. Actors seek to “put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some cause regardless of cost to themselves. The result is less important than the realization of the value itself;
4. *Instrumentally rational action*: Actors take into account and weigh means, ends, and potential results before acting. The most rational type of action, it considers alternative means, the behavior of others, various outcomes, their relative desirability, and so on.

\* Next class: Weber on capitalism.