CHAPTER 3

On Deformational Modeling: Max Weber’s Concept of Idealization

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Abstract

The article aims to reconstruct the idealization procedure understood as a deformational means of concept modeling in the theory proposed by Max Weber. The ideal type represents the basic form of the deformational transformation. Deformational modelling refers to a strategy of conscious and deliberate distortion of an object of empirical reality in varied and consequently contrafactual ways. The method essentially seeks to account for a concept by highlighting significant characteristics of the empirical content of investigated socioeconomic phenomena at the expense of their actual exemplification. The ideal type is a deformed means of representing a selected real-life phenomenon or object, oriented towards the fulfilment of specific cognitive goals while taking into account all methodological conditions involved in the process of its construction. By reference to Leszek Nowak's typology of deformational procedures, it is possible to characterize the Weberian ideal-type method as representing an example of quantitative deformation (positive potentialization).

1 Introduction: Delineation of the Problem

The present study seeks to provide a few preliminary critical remarks regarding the discussion which has been revolving around idealization and Max Weber's ideal types. The problems are interesting not only in the aspect of correct interpretation of Weberian thought but also, or perhaps predominantly, from the viewpoint of clear and adequate self-knowledge of the idealization method. What I claim is that Weber's position, and therefore also the critique of his concept for the idealization model formulated in Poznań School of Methodology, have always carried a fundamental methodological and philosophical significance.1 This is especially evident if one takes a look at problems taken up by idealization theory in the context of the dispute with the positivist concept

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1 It is generally recognized in literature dealing with the topic that Poznan School of Methodology emerged with the publications Leszek Nowak (Nowak 1970; 1971; 1980).
of science.\(^2\) The most important shared area is undoubtedly the domain of the method of exploring and theoretical modeling of theoretical notions for the cognition of sociohistorical reality (Weber [1904] 1949, pp. 91–92).\(^3\)

It is quite lucid today that studies into Weberian thought, particularly in the field of methodology of human sciences, have brought a far-reaching consensus with respect to two central components of Weber’s framework. Nearly everyone seems to concede that:

1. The main points of Weber’s concept pertain to the method and specific problems involved in exploring the reality of culture (which is documented in the anti-positivist streak of the Weberian system), i.e. what was integrated into Weber’s works as a method of ideal-typical construction of scientific notions (Rogers, 1969).
2. The keynote of Weber’s explorations is the principal question about the logical function and structure of theoretical concepts that are specific to sciences that investigate culture (Weber [1904] 1949, pp. 83 and 85).

Major differences in opinion and methodological controversies come into view in the interpretation of the latter issue. What the majority of prominent authors bring to the fore here – in diverse aspects and with varying degrees of rejection – is the inadequacy (or apparentness) of proposals put forward by Weber to justify the exclusivity of ideal-typical notions for the modeling of theoretical concepts in humanist and social sciences. In particular, it is argued that Weber’s account of ideal types as a specific method of cultural cognition has proven unsubstantiated in theoretical terms (Nowak 1971, p. 86), and illusory in practice (Lachmann 1971). What also draws attention here is the

\(^2\) It is worthwhile to note at this point that Weber’s view on positivism was complex and largely determined by problems that needed to be addressed. For example, in the “dispute about method” (Methodenstreit) Weber often reached for the argumentation formulated by positivists (e.g. Carl Menger). However, in matters related to conceptual realism his views were quite critical. Philosophical reflection over science finds its destiny in methodological explorations and ultimately concretizes itself in attempts to precisely define the concept of ideal type and outline its functionality in studying culture (the society). Here, Weber emerges primarily as a critic of methodological naturalism and conceptual realism. Furthermore, when Weber argues against positivism – his campaign essentially directed against the positivist cumulative concept of science and concept of objectivity – he still proposes the development of an “intermediate road” between the greed of the senses (hermeneutics) and the taste of the facts (positivism); compare Weber ([1907] 1982, pp. 489 – 540).

\(^3\) Problems related to Weber’s ideal types in the context of Poznań School of Methodology were addressed by Nowak (1971, 1973 and 1978), Nowakowa (2007) and Brzechczyn (2012).