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## Ideal Types

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The ideal types constitute one of the most important methodological legacies from Max Weber (1864–1920). As Weber made clear, ideal types are essentially schemes of conceptualization that serve as methodological instruments for comparing, classifying, and measuring social and historical phenomena. The word itself (*Idealtypus*) was borrowed from Georg Jellinek – a historian and Weber’s compatriot. Nonetheless, Weber equipped the term with further constraints in order to avoid its normative sense. Hence, the word “ideal” in Weber’s writings has nothing to do with the contemporary usage of the adjective “ideal” itself; rather it refers to the idea, or an analytical construct that does not express evaluations of any sort about the reality.

The Weberian concept of ideal types appeared for the first time in the essay “Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” published in 1904 (see Bruun & Whimster 2012). Insisting upon objectivity in the social sciences – without reducing it to the objectivity in the natural sciences – Weber devised an interpretative method that could satisfy both the requirement for generalization and the requirement for individualization through the use of abstract

models. These were to be derived by an inductive process, whereby the social scientist extrapolates particular elements of the object under study to construct a tangible type; i.e., a “pure type” or simply “type” of the object.

In his words, an ideal type

is obtained by means of a one-sided accentuation of one or a number of viewpoints and through the synthesis of a great many diffuse and discrete individual phenomena (more present in one place, fewer in another, and occasionally completely absent), which are in conformity with those one-sided, accentuated viewpoints, into an internally consistent mental image. (Bruun & Whimster 2012: 125)

Therefore, the important characteristic of ideal types is that they are not real or concrete. This means that one cannot find such pure types in the world, but that they serve instead to delimit the boundaries of a phenomenon, providing a pure form (stripped of its nuances), which allows for categorization and comparison.

Weber gave a lucid example of how ideal types serve as a tool in analyzing social phenomena and historical facts: the emergence of the Protestant ethic (a moral and religious phenomenon) and capitalism (a historical event). His methodological contribution, however, can be seen in fields beyond his areas of expertise: economics and sociology. Weberian ideal types appear in political

science (rationality, bureaucracy, and domination), in psychology (kinds of mental attitudes), and in health sciences (types of social assistance), to mention just a few examples.

Finally, ideal types cannot be set as true or false propositions, rather the sole criterion by which they can be evaluated is their abstract use or uselessness for comparing with concrete objects. Critics of the concept of ideal types argue that by using them, one tends to prioritize extreme phenomena, passing over the association between the types themselves, and making it difficult to demonstrate how the ideal types and their parts build and link together into a whole theory.

**SEE ALSO:** Bureaucracy; Capitalism; Weber, Max (1864–1920)

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#### Abstract

The ideal types constitute one of the most important methodological legacies from Max Weber (1864–1920). As Weber made clear, ideal types are essentially schemes of conceptualization that serve as methodological instruments for comparing, classifying, and measuring social and historical phenomena. The word itself (*Idealtypus*) was borrowed from Georg Jellinek – a historian and Weber’s compatriot. Nonetheless, Weber equipped the term with further constraints in order to avoid its normative sense. Hence, the word “ideal” in Weber’s writings has nothing to do with the contemporary usage of the adjective “ideal” itself; rather it refers to the idea, or an analytical construct that does not express evaluations of any sort about the reality.

**Keywords:** capitalism, Protestantism, rationalism

#### Further Reading

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