

Max Weber's Ideal versus Material Interest Distinction Revisited

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Draft of 4/24/2017

Abstract

While Weber's distinction between "ideal" and "material" interests is one of the most enduring aspects of his theoretical legacy, it has been subjected little critical commentary. In this paper, we revisit the theoretical legacy of interest-based explanation in social theory, with an eye to clarifying Weber's place in this tradition. We then reconsider extant critical commentary on the ideal/material interest distinction noting the primarily "Parsonian" rendering of Weber and the unproductive allegiance to "generic need" readings of Weber's action theory. We reconstruct the basis of the ideal/material interest distinction in the work of Rudolph von Ihering and provide a sounder basis for its analytic role in Weber's "grand" project.

Weber's distinction between "ideal" and "material" interests, as laid out in the famous passage of the essay on "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" (1946:280), is one of the most enduring aspects of his theoretical legacy (Swedberg 2005a; Swidler 1993), with analysts concluding that Weber proposed this distinction as a way to both critique and revise the legacy left behind by the "materialist" interpretation of history coming from the Marxian tradition (Bendix 1965). Today, the consensus is that the distinction between ideal and material interests gives Weberian historical sociology its advantage over "reductionist" materialist approaches (Collins 1986); by distinguishing between ideal and material interests, Weber can both account for the power of "ideas" at given historical junctures, and provide ways to theorize sources of motivation not reducible to crass economic interests (Alexander 1983). In this respect, the distinction between these two forms of "interest" is of signal importance in differentiating Weberian from Marxian strands of historical sociology. Given the consensus among most Weber scholars on the centrality of this distinction for Weber's entire project, it is surprising how little critical commentary there is on the origins and analytical role that the ideal versus material interest distinction played in Weber's work (Eastwood 2005; Swedberg 2003:292)

In this paper we argue that, despite the aforementioned consensus, it is systematically misinterpreted in a manner that conflates "ideal interests" with "ideas." Such a misinterpretation renders the distinction incapable of playing a productive analytic role in Weber's project. This conflation also stands in the way of contemporary attempts to revive a sociologically substantive notion of "interests" with a strong foundation on Weber's explanatory legacy (Swedberg 2005a).

We begin our argument by outlining two broad approaches to the role of interests in the explanation of action: generic interest theory (GIT) and historically constituted interest theory (HIT). The first posits one or a few basic interests shared by all persons and ultimately offers little explanatory power. The second presumes that actors are motivated by interests, but that these interests are produced by historically specific institutional

arrangements. It is in this more fruitful tradition that both Marx and Weber are considered interests theorists, in spite of the common misinterpretation that Weber offered an “idealist” response which privileged “ideas” to Marx’s “materialist” explanations which privileged “interests.” Rather, we argue that Weber claimed to have identified a set of (ideal) interests that override the typical (material) interests that historical materialists attached to positions in the class structure.

We critically assess commentary on the Weberian distinction, finding most treatments wanting and confused on some important issues. Following this, we revisit the original source (for Weber) of the ideal/material interest distinction: the legal theory of Rudolph von Ihering to bring analytical clarity to the issues. We then specify the particular way in which Weber adapts Ihering’s generic interest based explanation of action into a historical explanatory framework built for dealing with the key problematic of his work: the rise of rational capitalism and bureaucracy.

Interests and the Explanation of Social Action

In the social sciences, interest theory deals with the question of motivation: “what people want” (Vaisey 2010). If in an “idealist” theory what people want is traceable to what they think—e.g. cognition precedes both action and motivation; as in Parsons (1937)—in interest theory people do things because they want something (or want to keep something they like): desires or wants precede both cognition and action. More accurately, both action and cognition are mobilized in the service of realizing a want. The basic postulate of interest theory is therefore the *goal-oriented nature of action*, where “goal” is to be understood in a specific sense: as the *consummation* or *satisfaction* of some (usually but not necessarily egocentric) drive, need or desire. In contrast to the theoretical tradition that emphasizes the influence of “ideas” on action (Parsons 1938; Rueschemeyer 2006) interest theory lacks grand systematizers, thus bereft of a prestigious intellectual pedigree. A common ritual by theorists in the “idea” tradition is to assail interest theorists for allegedly smuggling

reductionistic psychological/biological mechanisms into explanations of action (Swedberg 2005a:363)

There are two broad types of interest based explanations. For some, rather than being arbitrary or culturally constituted, interests should be readable from fundamental (e.g. invariant) features of the human organismic or psychological constitution. Others propose instead that interests should be (lawfully) readable from objective features of how people organize their social relations. This disagreement is constitutive of the interest theory tradition (Swedberg 2005a). Some point to the organismic constitution of the human agent, others point to fixed characteristics of human psychology, while others point to interests as derivable from social interaction and social position. We label these two types of interest theory in the social sciences (1) generic interest theory and (2) historically constituted interest theory.

Generic Interest Theory

The basic strategy in generic interest theory (GIT) is to do armchair psychologizing (either speculative or empirically based) and postulate a single, or a few, universal interests applicable to the entire human species. The theorist can then derive a set of generic motivations driving action from those interests. The major thinkers of both the utilitarian tradition—Smith, Bentham, Spencer—and the Italian tradition of elite and power theorists—Mosca and Pareto—all proposed their own GIT variant. For utilitarians, generic interests in the acquisition of goods or the enhancement of happiness or pleasure, usually glossed as “self-interest” (Holmes 1995), are central (Swedberg 2005b:20–27). In the second case, we find generic interests in power, prestige or domination over others. These two traditions can be conceived as “property-interest” versus “power-interest” variations of generic interest theory (Pels 1998)

With the important exception of modern economic theory (Bourdieu and L. J. D. Wacquant 1992:119–20; Swedberg 2005b:79), GIT is not a very successful explanatory program in the social sciences. Three basic problems beset this tradition. First, there is the

arbitrary way in which every analyst draws up their list of “basic” and “universal” interests; these end up turning into unprincipled laundry lists of things that people *might* want.² If the analyst decides that people want to be rich then they are postulated to have an “acquisitive” interest, or if they want to be healthy, they have a “health” interest, and so on. Second, there is the easy way with which those who believe in the historical and cultural constitution of interests can point to cultures and historical periods in which what is presumed to be a basic interest is absent or blunted (Spillman and Strand 2013:96–98). Finally, generic interest theories have a hard time escaping the charge of tautology. If for every corresponding action, the analyst can postulate a want, and for every want there is an interest, then explaining the action because of the interest resolves into saying that people strive for something because they have an interest in attaining that something, which is a useless explanatory strategy (Hirschman 1986:48; Swedberg 2005a:385).³

Generic Need Theory

Generic need theory (GNT) is an important variation of GIT; in this respect, it shares all of its explanatory limitations. We mention it here for the sake of exhaustiveness, because it is usually not thought of as an interest theory (e.g. Holmes 1995:57–60) but that is precisely what it is. The difference is that need theorists postulate some “abstract” (often psychological) *state* as the *object* for which people are striving. Most need theories are generic because postulated needs (e.g. belongingness, ontological security, etc.) are usually so vague that theorists have a hard time thinking of anybody who (under non-pathological conditions) *would not* want this.

The other difference between GNT and more straightforward interest stories is that, in some formulations, people are conceptualized as sometimes not being consciously aware of what they need, so the model is “reactive” (irrationalist) rather than pro-active (instrumentalist). We know something is a need because once people lack it, they engage in pathological behaviors; the analyst takes this pathological behavior an indication they probably needed whatever was lacking. Erich Fromm’s (1941) suggestion in *Escape from*

Freedom that a reason some see authoritarianism as a source of “security” derived from a need to assuage the isolation and anxiety that come from the release from traditional forms of social control in modernity is probably one of the “classic” examples of GNT at work (as are most explanations of ideological “conservatism” patterned after Adorno et al.’s reasoning in *The Authoritarian Personality*).⁴ Giddens’ (1984) nod towards a psychoanalytic need theory taken from Erickson (with the notion of “ontological security”) is another famous example. Even Weber—who, as we will see below, viewed the trans-historical motivations postulated by GNT as explanatory dead-ends—flirted with a need-theoretic suggestion that people strive to achieve ideological order and consistency and are motivated to accept religious systems structured as “theodicies” because they help make meaningful sense of a senseless cosmos (Mommsen 1965:31; Weber 1946:281)

Historically Constituted Interest Theory

In contrast to the explanatory circularity of GIT, historically constituted interest theory (HIT), sometimes referred to as so-called “conflict theory” is the most successful explanatory tradition in social theory (Collins 2009). In HIT, interests are not “generic” anthropological constants. Instead, interests are produced by distinct institutional arrangements subject to historical transformation; when these arrangements shift so do the relevant constellation of interests. In these respect, proponents of HIT find the tendency of GIT advocates to draw up exhaustive lists of human wants an astonishing waste of time (Marx and Engels 1970). HIT stands opposed to GIT proposals (such as utilitarianism) which “must postulate *ex nihilo* the existence of a universal, pre-constituted interest” (Bourdieu and L. Wacquant 1992:125), even while agreeing with the GIT premise that action is *always* motivated by interests. The difference is that for HIT advocates sociological analysis must focus on “the social *genesis* of historically varying form of interest” (*ibidem*).

Postulating the *historical specificity of forms of interest* differs from the idealist-phenomenological notion of the “social construction” of interest (although the empirical implication that interests should vary by historical period is the same). In the social

construction formulation, interests are constituted by top-down cultural-cognitive processes (Scott 2008), making this an “idea” and not an interest theory. Talcott Parsons and John W. Meyer are correctly identified by Swedberg (2005a:386–387) as influential representatives of this tradition. Swedberg however incorrectly identifies Bourdieu as part of this tradition, alleging that for Bourdieu interests are “social constructions.” Rather, since Bourdieu is clear in noting that interests have a historical *genesis*, they are not cognitive-cultural “constructions” in the crypto-idealist sense implied by phenomenological accounts (Bourdieu and L. Wacquant 1992:121).

In this tradition, the most influential proponent of the historical genesis of interests is Karl Marx; he criticized the classical political economists pseudo-explanatory penchant for postulating generic interests in economic acquisition as the foundation of political economy, even as early as the so-called *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. For Marx (2013), the analyst begins with a historical description of economic institutions, their derivative social positions, and their associated material relations, and *only then* was it analytically warranted to derive the interests appropriate for that economic form: interests were thus induced by the (relational) organization of social positions in a historically constituted social formation (Porpora 1993). In this respect, Marx legitimated the now classical way in which HIT attacks GIT: by “de-psychologizing” interests by making them “readable” from an external index; the “objective” and “scientific” status of his claims depended on this (Barnes 1977). This stands in stark contrast to the essentially psychologizing (or biologizing) tendency of classical GIT proponents. As noted above, this is essentially the position that Bourdieu took.

In Marx’s (and Engels’) “historical materialist” version of HIT, the external index required to impute an interest was “social position” conceptualized in class terms.⁵ Interests attach to social positions (specified by the analyst) and only derivatively to the natural persons who occupy those positions (Porpora 1993). This was a requirement, since it was the only way to avoid arbitrary imputation (Barnes 1977). However, by conceptualizing interests as “objective” and thus detachable from natural persons and individual psychology, Marx

opens an enduring problematic in the HIT tradition. Now it becomes possible to conceive of persons as split between their “objective” interests—which, being the product of a third-person imputation, acquire a normative cast, just like rationality in the utilitarian tradition (Parsons 1937) and their private (psychological) interests. The result is an asymmetry between objective and subjective interests (Spillman and Strand 2013:88). The former, being readable from social position, are considered inherently “rational” while the latter, when they fail to match the objective interests, acquire a pathological coloring. Thus, the Marxian attempt to de-psychologize interests by developing the concept of objective interest allows for persons “acting against their (objective) interests” and thus being condemned by the analyst as misguided, or driven by covert “irrational” motivations.

Once we attach interests to social positions, and conceive of society as a mosaic composed of distinct positions united by material relations (Porpora 1993), then the conceptualization of “society” as historically dynamic system buoyed by the recurrent “conflict” between multiple groups endowed with competing interests becomes the preponderant one (Collins 2009). The theorist then makes predictions as to the most likely axes of social conflict from their reading of the dominant set of interests of an era. In Marx, faithful to the origins of HIT from the ashes of classical political economy, the interests in question usually become the acquisition and maintenance of the relations of production that transfer surplus to a dominant class from an exploited class (and derivatively political power).

Max Weber: Ideal versus Material Interests

Weber develops an interest-based conceptualization of the motivation of action as a way to revise and expand the historical and explanatory power of HIT. One of Weber’s fundamental contributions was differentiating the “economic” interests (so-called “material interests”)—pivotal to the Marxian version of HIT—from a different set of interests he thought equally capable of playing the role of basic motivators: *ideal interests*. In the

remainder, we explore the conceptual origins of the distinction in Weber's work and show that rather than being an aphoristic adjunct, the ideal/material interest dichotomy is pivotal for understanding Weber's primary contributions.

Previous Commentary on the Ideal/ Material Interest Distinction

The Weberian distinction between ideal and material interests receives scant attention in extant literature. Even previous commentators (including those using it) do not provide an unambiguous *basis* for the distinction, nor its theoretical significance for Weber's explanatory scheme.⁶ For instance, in her classic article, Swidler (1986:275) correctly notes that for Weber, both ideal and material interests play the role of motivators of action. She also notes that both are "end oriented" but what makes ideal interests different from material interests, she argues, is that the "ends" towards which ideal interests orient themselves "are derived from symbolic realities." She then interprets the famous "switch man" metaphor (Weber 1946:280) as implying that "interests are the engine of action, pushing it along, but ideas define the destinations human beings seek to reach." This formulation is developed further by Swedberg (2007:220)

We see two problems, the most obvious of which is that it is excessively Parsonian. By interpreting ideas as setting the "ends" of action and interests as doing the "motivational" work, Swidler blunts Weber's theory and collapses it into Parsons' crypto-idealist subjugation of interest driven action to "idea-driven" action. However, no theory that sees "ends" of action as ideational is an interest theory; the point of interest theory is to show that there is no need to impute ideas into people's minds to know what they want; we only need to impute *wants*. Wants may have an ideational component, but in themselves are not ideas nor are they "caused" by ideas. While both "ideas" and wants may share a propositional component, they are opposed in their phenomenological structure and the "mind-world" relation they entail. One (ideas) points from the world to mind; while the other (wants) points from the mind to the world (Searle 2003).

Second, Swidler's formulation reveal the difference between ideal and material

interests. Whereas both are a species of *interest*, it is only partially true that ideal interests differ because they are oriented toward “symbolic realities,” as the pursuit of material interests requires orientation towards symbolic realities, and many ideal interests have nothing to do with symbols, but instead with relief of negative affect or attainment of a positive feelings. The problem comes from a misunderstanding of what the term “ideal” means for Weber. For now, where both ideal and material interests are both a species of interest, then both require the consummation or satisfaction of a *desire*; they are interests because they entail a particular “reward” (Ihering 1968:140). It is in this *reward* that the true basis for a principled distinction between material and ideal interests lies.

Bendix (1965:177) is correct in noting that for Weber each type (ideal and material) of interest “has its own dynamic.” However, the substantive claim “each depends on the other to maintain its direction or momentum” is not warranted. Weber did not conceptualize the relationship between ideal and material interests as either co-dependent or symmetrical (although he often mentions them in tandem). Descriptively, Weber viewed most everyday human behavior, especially of the “masses,” as driven by base material interests in survival, food, sex, etc. He even conceived of popular support for institutions based on magic and attachment to tradition as driven by material interests. For instance, in the opening chapter on the historical origins of religion in *Economy and Society*, Weber notes that the *primordial* motivations for persons to turn to magic and the first religious professionals (the magicians) were not concerns for “higher” spiritual needs, but crass material interests: concerns for health, survival and economic advancement (Swidler 1986:274; Weber 1993:1–3).

Bendix (1965:177) is also off the mark in claiming “according to Weber, material without ideal interests are empty, but ideal without material interests are impotent.” This interpretation relies on taking Weber’s distinction as being isomorphic with the (Aristotle-inspired) distinction between “form” and “matter.”⁸ Here, the “directional” force of ideal interests comes from their capacity to shape otherwise inchoate strivings generated by material interests. But material interests are not inchoate. Instead, they have definite ends,

and specifiable conditions for satisfaction and consummation (Spillman and Strand 2013:87). In most cases it is the reverse: ideal interests are inchoate in providing only very vague and generalized “goal objects” (e.g. psychological states) as their primary aim and fuzzily conceptualized *connections* between these ends and the means to achieve them (Parsons 1938).

Weber understood material interests as being perfectly capable of motivating persons to pursue clear lines of conduct *on their own accord* (in fact he thought this was the empirical norm). The “directive” force of ideal versus material interests is not therefore that ideal interests are capable of “channeling” material interests. This interpretation relies on conflating the distinct notions of “ideas” and “ideal interests.” In Weber’s rendition it is *ideas* (not ideal interests) that have re-directive force in history, and so-called “world-images” created by ideas that can change the dynamics generated by both ideal *and* material interest (Warner 1970). Thus, the interest in salvation or eternal life is an ideal *interest* (found in some form throughout history), the dynamics of which can be changed by the world images generated by religious *ideas* (Weber 1946:280).

More recently, the ideal/material interest distinction is taken up by Eastwood (2005) and Swedberg (2005a). Eastwood appositely notes that this dominant interpretation is untenable (2005: 90). However, Eastwood errs in interpreting the notion of ideal interest as implying an “interest in meaning” (2005: 94). For Eastwood, Weber offers a proto-existentialist GIT account of the “search for meaning” (e.g. Frankl 1985) by positing a generic need for conceptual order in the face of a senseless cosmos. This generic “interest in meaning” is in its turn satisfied via the adoption of belief systems that provide answers to the base existential questions (Shweder et al. 1997).

This is an excessively GITish interpretation of Weber who can be more profitably seen (as argued earlier) as a leading member of the HIT tradition. Eastwood, in equating ideal interests with a generic “need for meaning” robs this concept of any capacity to account for historical change. In contrast, ideal interests were for Weber the best example of how cultural forces could constitute historically specific pattern of interest-driven action, a

key premise of HIT.

Swedberg's (2005a) treatment, like Eastwood's, avoids many of the classic confusions, but stays at a generic level. Swedberg's approach improves over previous treatments in at least three respects. First in differentiating between interests and ideas, second, in understanding the centrality of interest for accounting for motivations of action, and third in allowing for an interplay of a multiplicity of (possibly conflicting) interest in accounting for specific patterns of activity (see Swedberg 2007:290–297). We elaborate all of these thematics in our own account.

In sum, contemporary treatments of the ideal/material interest distinction leave much to be desired. They blunt the interest-based explanatory framework in favor of radical concessions to idealism; fail to specify the distinction between, and thus end up confusing, ideal *interests* and “ideas”; miss that both ideal and material interests are *motivations*, and thus they come pre-packaged with an independent capacity to set the aims of action without having to rely on a “pure” ideational component; fail to account for both the analytical and empirical *independence* (and thus the interplay) of ideal and material interests; finally, they fail to provide a theoretically satisfactory account of the *essential* difference between material and ideal interests.

The Ideal Material Interest Distinction in Ihering

It is well-known, but often unremarked, that Weber borrowed the material/ideal interest distinction from the legal theorist Rudolph von Ihering (Levine 2005:103; Turner 1991:50).⁹ It is also widely recognized that Weber's theory of action was deeply influenced by the legal theory of this time (Turner and Factor 1994), and Ihering was the most influential German legal scholar of the second half of the nineteenth century (Jenkins 1960). Furthermore, as Turner (1991) notes, Ihering is probably the most important theorist of interest in modern social theory that nobody talks about.¹⁰ “Interest” is fundamental to Ihering's legal theory and represents the basic foundation of his conceptualization of human action (Turner 1991:47).¹¹ By basing his legal theory on a naturalistic conceptualization of

human motivation and by letting his reasoning be guided by the actual historical evolution of legal codes, Ihering was hailed in his time for revitalizing German legal thought, moving it away from arid conceptualism (Jenkins 1960; Turner and Factor 1994).

Ihering's interest theory departs from (for a 19th century German thinker) a fairly conventional Kantian problematic but quickly goes beyond it. For Ihering, the basic distinguishing characteristic of human action, distinguishing from the mechanical causality that governs the physical world, is that it is governed by *interests*. Laws have their origins in personal interests and constitute the primary mechanisms different interests are coordinated or competing interests are resolved; thus, "there is no legal rule which does not owe its origin to a purpose, *i.e.*, to a practical motive" (Ihering 1968:liv). Ihering mocked the (Kantian) idea that the defining quality of moral action entails the exclusion of every personal interest via their subsumption under an impersonal categorical imperative (1968: 38-39). For Ihering, the notion of an action not driven by an interest—that is, "disinterested"—is nonsensical. Instead, "[b]eing interested in a purpose... is an indispensable condition for every action—action without interest is just as much an absurdity as action without a purpose; it is a psychological impossibility" (1968: 40). Note that Bourdieu holds the same position (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 69).

Interests link to social institutions—such as the market—when the latter come to be organized to provide persons with an array of positive and negative *rewards*. Rewards are for Ihering, the *means* for the *satisfaction* of individuals' wants. In fact, Ihering first uses the ideal/material interest distinction in discussing different rewards (Ihering 1968:137). The prototypical example of a material reward is monetary compensation (Ihering uses the term economic reward as a synonym for material interest). The prototypical examples of ideal rewards include such things as "power, influence, honor, prestige" (Ihering 1968:87). For Ihering, the ideal/material interest distinction follows naturally from this. Thus, the distinction between two types of interest emerges from Ihering's consideration of two broad types of incentives.

For Ihering, ideal interests are typically found in pursuits that are partially orthogonal to pure economic acquisition (e.g. art and science), spheres that are distinctive because interest in social honor and estimation by peers outweigh interest in economic accumulation. Ihering's primary example—invidiously juxtaposing wage—salaried or other forms of work typical of the professions, is telling. Workers who labor for a mere wage to satisfy organismic imperatives (hunger and shelter) operate according to material interest; the artist, the scientist, or the state bureaucrat, for whom monetary reward is only a secondary motivation for their labor operate according to an ideal interest (Ihering 1968:140–142). The two sorts of interest are incompatible, defining mutually exclusive spheres of striving; it was as perverted to think true art could be created by “an artist who cares for nothing else than... [economic gain]” (nothing more than a “superior type of artisan”) as to believe a “businessman [sic] who should wish to pursue ideal interests” could be effective in commerce (Ihering 1968:143–144).

Weber's Appropriation of the Ideal/Material Interest Distinction

Weber borrows the ideal/material interest distinction from Ihering, and ties it to a historically dynamic theory of motivation, radicalizing the latter's interest-based explanatory strategy, while selectively incorporating elements from generic interest theory (Turner 1991:47ff). The twist is that for Weber, while material interests play the role of quasi-generic, usually ahistorical interests found in all times and places, ideal interests play the role of historically constituted interests subject to over-time variation and modification by cultural symbols. This asymmetry in the conceptualization of the ideal/material interest distinction is crucial for understanding Weber's explanatory strategy, but has gone unremarked in the literature. For instance, Weber's skepticism of using psychology and biology for explaining historical change emerged from the presumption that these sciences offered insight into the organismic motivations that Weber filed under the omnibus category of material interest, but not the sources of ideal interest.

As deployed by Weber, the ideal/material interest distinction is hardly a derivative

copy of Ihering. Most crucially, Weber breaks with Ihering's dualistic penchant to postulate a universal antinomy between material and ideal interests. Instead, for Weber, the historical genesis of new constellations of interests happens via the *interplay* (mediated by the "directive force" of world images) between both ideal and material interests (standing on one side) and world images (standing on the other). Although in the most crucial cases, this interplay involves pitting ideal *versus* material interests, under the aegis of some particular world image. Historically, the world images derived from religion are most effective in generating this "conflict of interests" phenomenon. Thus, the "mechanism" that lies behind the famous proposal for the role of world images in re-directing the momentum of the interest-locomotive is tied to a substantive formulation in which one set of interests (usually the ideal ones) override the usually conservative (in the descriptive sense of forestalling historical change) force of the other ones (usually the material ones).¹²

Therefore, Weber makes explicit what is only implicit in Ihering: "material interests" are not reducible to the "economic" narrowly defined (e.g. acquisitive motives) but encompasses all "basic" organismic motivations (e.g. the "appetites" in Spinoza's terms), common in all times and places. The best source to gain a good understanding of Weber's interest theory is the writings on religion.¹³ Specifically, we suggest that material interests are wants generated by attempts to relieve those "basic" human sufferings that Weber suggests the conception of "redemption" alleviated: "distress, hunger, drought, sickness, and ultimately... suffering and death" (1946:280); interests in wealth, health, sexuality and survival/personal security. These material interests can only be equated with economic interests proper where the accumulation of economic resources is typically motivated because being rich helps the person meet such basic needs (e.g. some forms of distress, hunger and sickness, personal security, and so on). Insofar as even the rich still get sick, old, and die, "economic" interests are not coextensive with all material interests. However, Weber sometimes made things confusing because he referred to such interests as "wanting to live a long life" as "economic" (1993:1).

As usually characterized by Weber (when he contrasted them with ideal interests at strategic points in his argumentation) material interests are anthropological constants, and thus good candidates for generic interests. It was precisely because these material interests are universal they are also useless for understanding the sources of historical change, such as the emergence of rationalism in the West. In contrast, “ideal” interests were doubly strategic from an explanatory point of view. First, while sharing generic features, they were open to institutional and historical variation via the re-directive force of world images. Second, in contrast to material interests, ideal interests are focused on more refined “psychological premiums” such as the receipt of status honor (Kalberg 1990:64), a conceptualization strictly in line with Ihering’s. Ideal interests are not ideas; they are a special *want*, the striving for the satisfaction of which suffices to provide a motivational (in the sense of “impulsions” not post hoc vocabularies of motive) understanding of action (Martin 2011).¹⁴

In Weber, when compared to the satisfactions corresponding to material interests, the psychological rewards corresponding to ideal interests pertain to more “sublimated” (in the Nietzschean formulation with which Weber was familiar) sorts of goal-attainment. In this respect, ideal interests can be linked to strivings induced by the specific style of life of a status group, especially those *whose material interests are taken care of, or who forewent the satisfaction of material interests via virtuoso acts of self control*.¹⁵ Ideal interests, in Weber, emerge more forcefully for those groups who generated a self-sustaining mechanism for the regular satisfaction of their material interest. It is in this way that class position (in the Marxian sense) intersects with historically dynamic interests (Weber 1994:117).

Ideal interests include motivations to strive for such things as the experience of enlightenment, the pleasures that comes from the intellectual (formal) mastery of the mysteries of nature, the achievement of an “honorable” state within the context of a warrior-ethic, or the assurance (*certitudo salutis*) of otherworldly rewards in a salvation religion. Note the obvious relations of “elective affinity” of these interests with the style of life typical of concrete status groups. In addition, altruistic or “other-directed” interests in the fate of

supra-individual enclaves and natural associations (the family, clan, or neighborhood) or the success and permanence of instrumental (purposive) organizations that will outlive the person also count as ideal interests (Weber 1978).

This is consistent with Kalberg's (1996) contention that the link between world images and action does not depend on some (dubious) "formal" property of idea systems (e.g. consistency, exhaustiveness, etc.) as argued by idealist interpreters (e.g. Parsons 1937). Instead, this connection is realized via the *practical* linkage provided by some idea systems between some course of action and the attainment of a "psychological premium" where the premium is endorsed by the idea system even if the means to obtaining it are left vague. Kalberg is the only commentator who recognizes the importance of the notion of "psychological premiums" for Weber's project. Given this, it is surprising that he fails to link this notion to the role that interests play in Weber's account.

Weber links the notion of interest to the notion of reward; in fact, to say action is motivated by interest is just another way of saying that action is motivated by the striving after some reward which may be a means to the *satisfaction* of the interest, or the object of interest itself (Weber 1978: 43). As we have seen, the ideal/material interest distinction in Ihering is first developed in distinguishing between different types *rewards*.¹⁶ The psychological rewards obtained via some of the techniques (e.g. fasting, meditation, etc.) developed in the world religions would count as the means to satisfy an ideal (not material) interest. Thus, we cannot understand Weber's deployment of the notion of psychological premiums in the explanation of action in isolation from the ideal/material interest distinction.

Conclusion

Weber's Aphorism Revisited

Development of Weber's interest theory is held back for two primary reasons. First, as noted above, there is the oft-repeated tendency to confuse the notion of "ideas", as

“world images” (Warner 1970), with the notion of “ideal interest” as a special source of motivations (Eastwood 2005:92). Second, that Weber did not view all forms of motivation in the same way is seldom recognized. He saw material interests as the most generic and least capable of being *directly* influenced by world images, while he saw ideal interests as being only *partially* generic, and being more capable of redirection by world images. The reason being that these interests were set by social conventions and not by organismic imperatives that exerted themselves as non-negotiable needs. Third, there is failing to theorize how world images link to interests without “Parsonizing” Weber.

In the misleading idealist interpretation, world images are conceived as providing the cognitive “ends” in a model of goal-oriented action in which interests are degraded to the role of “energizers” and ideas exalted as “form” or “information” givers (Swidler 1986; Reed 2011). In contrast, for Weber world images operated on material interests *indirectly*. World images are influential only where they provided a (usually post-hoc) *justification* for a practical interest-driven project of disciplining everyday behavior (the so-called “rationalization of action”). Here, the person strives to create the behavioral conditions for an ideal interest to subjugate, in the attainment of a psychological premium (and sometimes totally negate; as in the warrior who sacrifices his life for the sake of maintaining his honor), a set of material interests. Ideas in this sense are “motivations” but not *motives* or “impulsions” (Martin 2011). The result was that the ideal interest became the primary motivator of action *replacing* the previous behavioral pattern governed by material interest. This is why ideal interests play the primary role in historical change; not material interests.

In the pivotal quote (1946:280), Weber rejects the notion that ideas are motivating (Swedberg, 2005: 379). To repeat, “not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s [sic] conduct” (note the mention of *three* not two things). This statement is sufficient for those committed to idealist understandings of action to throw Weber into the heap of (crypto) “materialist” theorists (Alexander 1983). However, (and this is the concession to idealism that makes Weberian interest theory ambiguous) while ideas have no motivating

force, they have “directional” force (Swidler 1986: 274). Ideas “like switchmen” can (“frequently” but not all the time!) re-route the (ideal plus material) interest locomotive in a direction it would not have gone otherwise. Yet, the “mechanism” through which this redirective process occurs remains obscure. It is under these conceptual shadows that idealist (crypto-Parsonian) interpretations of Weber continue to grow; however, it is not too difficult to shed light on this and eliminate the idealist undergrowth once and for all.

In particular, Weber does not offer an “idealist” riposte to Marx—i.e. a crypto-idealist revision to Marxian interest theory—but instead a counter interest-theoretic riposte. Weber claims to have identified a set of interests that *override* (in terms of substantive/historical significance) the typical strivings that historical materialists attached to objective positions in the class structure. This holds irrespective of the (question-begging) tendency of crypto-idealists to think if something is an interest, it is *ipso facto* “instrumental” or “material” (on this point, Weber would beg to differ); for Weber an orientation towards ideas is still *interested* in the standard sense (it is a pursuit of a want that requires satisfaction via the attainment of a reward).

Weber did not understand ideal interests as a species of the general category of “ideas,” but a special *motive* that sometimes harmonized with material interests, and sometimes went *against* material interests (Swedberg 2005: 380). For Weber, interest could turn against interest because the satisfaction implied by one was incompatible with the simultaneous satisfaction of the other.¹⁷ The mystic who retreats from the world cannot simultaneously satisfy his ideal interest in the pursuit of the psychological premium that comes from *certitudo salutis* and his material interests in the enjoyment of carnal pleasures; one of the two interests must give. While it is uninteresting to see people eating or copulating as much as they want (which for Weber was the boring norm), it is more interesting (and historically decisive) to see a group of people give up their material interest in the pursuit of (historically novel) forms of ideal interests.

Here, Weber’s version of interest theory has an important twist. It allows for the

conceptualization of ways in which persons could *systematize* their life in a way that also violated generic human biological and psychological proclivities *within the context of a theory of action as driven by (historically constituted) interests* (Kalberg 1990). Thus, the Weberian “rationalization” of action, entailed the subjugation of organismic, pleasure-driven imperatives to the “cold” exigencies of a systematic, methodical life *regimen* (mind over body). This makes sense only if we presuppose that the primary way in which material interests contrast with ideal interests is that material interests are “creaturely” and thus “natural” while (actions necessary for the attainment of) ideal interests are sometimes *opposed to “natural” human inclinations*.¹⁸ Therefore, the theorists that Weber stands opposed to are actually the generic interest theorists and his strongest polemics (like Marx’s) were reserved for those who wanted to explain the historical specificity of the West by relying on trans-historical generic interests.

Ideal Interests and Rational Capitalism

The implications of our analysis come into full relief when examining Weber’s famous criticism of Sombart on the origins of capitalism. According to Weber, the emergence of rational capitalism cannot possibly be explained by the Sombartian appeal to the “acquisitive instinct.” This was not because Weber was in principle opposed to acknowledging the *existence* or even the causal efficacy (in some contexts) of greed and “acquisitiveness” as sort of material interest; instead, Weber’s main problem with Sombart’s “explanation” centered on the fact that the so-called acquisitive instinct was the wrong interest to explain the historical phenomenon (rational capitalism); a historical constant cannot be used to explain a historically unique complex (Weber 2009).

This is why Weber never tired of pointing out, especially in the famous remarks in the “Author’s Introduction,”¹⁹ that greed and the accumulation of riches (material interests) was not the defining feature of the “rational” capitalism that was (culturally) unique to the West (Weber 2009). Where it deviated from the norm, it could not have possibly been produced via the operation of material interests (which are historically conservative and in fact

responsible for “the norm”). Weber was explicit in noting that greed and desire to be rich and to live a life of luxury are generic (material) interests found in all times and epochs and therefore could not play a causally adequate role in the complex of factors responsible for the emergence of rational capitalism (Weber 2010, chap. 2).

Instead—and this is Weber’s “anti-Marxian” point—modern capitalism and the behavior of the modern capitalist should be understood as driven by the emergence (in the religious sphere) and incorporation of a special *ideal interest* into economic life; namely, the commitment to a rational, methodical, calculative (in the sense of preferring long-term, low-risk predictability over quick, high-risk gain) accumulation in a permanent enterprise. The rational capitalist receives a psychological premium from conducting his or her business to seem alien (and absurd) from the point of view of the material-interest driven “adventure capitalist” (or any other human before that) focused on short-term gains at all costs.

This is not to imply that Weber thought material interests were absent from rational capitalism; instead, while rational capitalism retained the usual bundle of “economic” interests characteristic of adventure capitalism, under rational capitalism these were domesticated via the operation of ideal interests emphasizing the management of the enterprise in a sober, calculative manner, attuned to a long temporal horizon. The existence of a singular historical complex connecting a set of economic arrangements keyed to the accumulation of profit with an ideal interest (and not the raw desire for greed and the exploitation of labor) is what made (Western) capitalism distinctive (Weber 2009). In this respect, what makes the Weberian rational capitalist tick is her capacity to *override* the material interest that says: “Spend now!” “Go for the short term profit/venture!” by subjugating it under the ideal interest that says “Think long term! Invest in the future!” Rational capitalism developed in the West, precisely because the latter voice could win the battle against the former. This is an interest versus interest theory as decisive in the determination of action, not an “idea versus interest” one.

Ideal Interests and the Bureaucratic Ethic

The same “warring interest” model is key to understanding Weber’s account of the rise of a specific form of bureaucratic authority in the West. According to Weber, a person, dedicated to the state bureaucracy without taking advantage of the opportunities for private gain made available by his position, is acting under the aegis of an ideal interest (the much under-theorized “bureaucratic ethic”). The functionary “prefers” instead to live by the rules of the institution which prevent the use of bureaucratic power for personal gain (Jameson 1988).

Thus, Weber explains the “exceptional” rise of rational bureaucracies—and the accompanying exceptional development of the “bureaucratic ethic”—in the West in the same way as the rise of rational capitalism. What from the point of view of this ideal interest is seen as “corruption” (using the bureaucratic apparatus for personal gain or “predation”) is a “normal” material interest that is also historically pervasive (even in the contemporary world) and thus uninteresting (if the goal is to explain the emergence of a culturally distinctive, one of a kind, complex). It is the emergence of an ideal *interest*—and thus of a new kind of person in the “functionary” (Harrington 2007)—in upholding the duties of the office, one that subjugates the material interest in using the same office for personal gain, that requires special explanation and accounts for a unique episode of (consequential) historical transformation in the West.

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Notes

1. In addition to this passage, Weber uses the distinction several times in *Economy and Society* (1978, 202, 224, 246, 264, 287, 935, 1129), and once in the *Collected Methodological Writings* (2012, 135–136).
2. See for instance Swedberg's (2005a) discussion of the interest theories of Ross, Small and Ratzenhofer.
3. Contemporary revivals of “biosocial” approaches to human action promise to remove the arbitrariness inherent in this tradition by relying on evolutionary theory as a (principled) source lists of basic interests characteristic of humans as a species (Kanazawa 2001). The jury is out on this (desperate) attempt to salvage generic interest theory.
4. In fact, most of the “Freudo-Marxism” of the Frankfurt school was a strange combination of GNT and HIT. In this theory, the generic needs were derived from the German (“Western Marxist”) reconstruction of the “philosophical anthropology” of Marx first reinvented by Lukacs and the retroactive fitting of Marx's newly discovered “Paris Manuscripts.” For thinkers such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, HIT entered in their account of how modern capitalism generates “false” needs and interests which override the fundamental “natural” (generic) needs for humans to objectify their creative powers in the form of autonomous (non-alienated) labor.
5. This opens up the problematic of the “imputation of interest” has beset this sub-tradition of interest theory ever since people have tried to deploy interest theory without Marx's assurance that class position guarantees objective imputation (Barnes 1977).
6. The following discussion does not follow a chronological order; instead, our presentation is meant to highlight the basic conceptual issues.
7. This passage can be found in Max Weber Gesamtausgabe 1/19, 110 [in German]. According to Wolfgang Schluchter (1985, 24), the passage was added in 1919-20, in a late revision of the introduction.
8. See Reed (2011) for a creative revival of this line of argument relying on the Aristotelian model of multiple types of causation. In this rendering, motives are the inchoate “efficient” causes of action, which are given shape and form by ideas in their role of formal, content-specifying, causes.
9. This was all that Weber borrowed from Ihering. Weber's conceptualization of

rational action as that driven by explicit purposes (rather than habit or compulsion) (Levine 2005); as well as his famous definition of the state as the “monopoly” of legitimate violence and coercion derive from Ihering.

10. For instance, he is notably absent from Swedberg’s (2005) comprehensive review.
11. In fact, the school of legal thought that can be traced most directly to Ihering’s intervention goes by the name of *interessenjurisprudenz* (Jenkins 1960: 172).
12. For Weber, the primary role of material interests were generally in upholding the status quo. See in particular the discussion of material interests standing in the way of rationalization in China in *General Economic History* (355).
13. In particular the segment of *Economy and Society* known as “The Sociology of Religion,” The first two chapters of *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* the “Author’s Introduction,” the “Social Psychology of the World Religions” (Weber 1946, 267–301) and the “Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions” (Weber 1946, 323–58) essays.
14. Whenever Weber speaks abstractly of ideal and material interests, he speaks of the satisfaction of those interests. Thus, in the famous “Objectivity” essay, Weber (1949) speaks of the “satisfaction of our most ideal needs,” (64, italics ours) and in *Economy and Society* he states that social relationship may “provide the parties to it with opportunities for the satisfaction of spiritual [ideal] or material interests” (43, italics ours).
15. As such Bourdieu’s (1984)—for some excessive—emphasis on “distance from necessity” as the prime mechanism accounting for lifestyle difference across status groups has a direct (if relative unacknowledged) Weberian pedigree. For a “motivational” (and thus interest-based) reading of *Distinction* see Lizardo (2014).
16. Note that Ihering’s account is consistent with modern neuroscientific accounts of the nature of wants/desires that conceptualize wanting/desiring an object Y as the “capacity to perceptually or cognitively represent Y to constitute Y as a reward.” (Thagard 2008, 175, italics mine). This is also consistent with Kalberg’s emphasis on the notion of “psychological rewards” for understanding Weber’s conception of the motivations of action (Kalberg 2004).
17. This is a theme that pervades Western thought from Machiavelli onwards as pointed out by Hirschman (1977).
18. On the central thematic role of implicit and explicit conceptions of human nature in the work of the sociological classics see Smith (2015, 119–158).
19. More commonly known by the Parsonian title of “Prefatory Remarks” (to the *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*). They are usually reprinted (also thanks

to Parsons) as a sort of “foreword” to *The Protestant Ethic*, although they are meant as an introduction to the entire set of works on the economic ethics of the world religions (the EEWR). Because of this intended placement, some have argued that they provide a “master clue” to Weber’s “main aims” (Nelson 1974). We follow that interpretation here.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank two anonymous *EJST* readers for very useful comments and criticisms on an earlier draft that served to clarify the argument and strengthened the paper.