

Waiting and the Symbolic Construction of the Future

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Abstract

As is well-known, Max Weber defined sociology as “the interpretative understanding of social action,” conceiving of action as social “insofar as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.” He explicitly mentioned that the “behavior of others”, toward which social action is oriented, comprises not only the past conduct of our fellowmen, but essentially also their future conduct. Seizing on this insight, the German Scholar Heinrich Popitz later wrote: “Orientation of behavior consequently means not only the orientation toward ‘faits accomplis’, toward something that is apparently evident, but also orientation on grounds of anticipations, assumptions, hypotheses.”

Popitz’ formulation hints at a specific problem involved in this kind of future oriented social action: How can we know about the future behavior of others? How can we make sure that our anticipations, assumptions and hypotheses will not turn out wrong? For Popitz, the answer lies in standardization. The social institutionalization both of behavioral norms and of sanctions establishes an objective chance that our expectations regarding the prospective conduct of others are well-founded and will stand the test. Thus, argues Popitz, it becomes possible to react to the conduct of others before it actually occurs, and hence to significantly accelerate social interaction. In standardized situations, we need not wait for our counterpart to act, but may anticipate its conduct in our own acting.

Seen from a phenomenological point of view, what happens here is a form of pre-presentation (*Vorvergegenwärtigung*): a future event that is not given to the mind in terms of a current originary impression is nevertheless intentionally grasped by the present consciousness. The here and now is transcended. In the context of social interaction, this “small transcendence” in terms of Thomas Luckmann goes along with a medium transcendence, mediating between the minds of two or more individuals, and sometimes even with a great transcendence, leaving behind the paramount reality of everyday life. By applying Alfred Schutz’s theory of the life-world, the presentation aims at showing how signs and symbols are used to construct the anticipated social reality for which we wait.