

The Reconstruction of Meaning. Notes on German Interpretive Sociology¹

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Abstract: The epistemological goal of interpretive sociology is the reconstruction of meaning. The basic internal differences appear clearly in the theoretical answers to the question as to where meaning is originally constituted. Within German sociology four main perspectives have become institutionalised, in a) the "Methods of Qualitative Research" Section, b) the "Biographical Research" Section, c) the "Sociology of Knowledge" Section (formerly "Sociology of Language"), and d) the "Objective Hermeneutics" Association. The central theoretical and methodological questions and answers of these different groups are described, and it is pointed out which developments originated abroad and which are specific to German sociology.

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1. State of the Art

What do we actually expect from notes on German interpretive sociology? Do we expect to learn something about the development of, however it is defined, "important" research questions? Should the qualified instruments, the procedures and methods of controlled understanding in all its virtuosity, be presented? Or should the notes be about what is currently, *grosso modo*, being discussed in Germany? But how could the field of discourse then, in turn, be ascertained? As the well-known one between—wrongly—so-called "qualitative" and "quantitative" social researchers? As the, so to speak, internal one between the heterogeneous and partly also antagonistic fractions of non-standardised social research? As the hardly penetrable discourse field—between empiricists, methodisers, methodologists, theorists and epistemologists—of social research seeing itself as

1 This is the updated and abridged—in particular, manifold references to pertinent publications in German were left out—version of the state of the art of German-speaking sociology that was originally published in the *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* (Swiss Journal of Sociology), 3/2000, 459-484, and then in *FQS* 3(2), May 2002, in German.

"understanding" in manifold modes? Or after all as that of the still-inadequately explained "paradigm" of interpretive sociology? And, if need be: in terms of the everlasting, not to say ever-festering, need for differentiation from that idea of conducting social science traditionally labelled as "normative"? Or, here again, more with regard to the manifestos' internal differentiations and the—therewith more or less "systematically" linked and associated—realisations in detail? [1]

Basically, these questions—at least roughly—already adumbrate what should, in fact, be made the subject of such notes. Obviously this cannot be accomplished within the scope of this short highlight. Irrespective of this: it would be more than small-minded not—before I go on to outline the situation in Germany—at least to refer to the fact that, for one thing, interpretive traditions of German-speaking sociology are rooted in Austria to no small degree and time and again receive important impulses from there², and that, for another thing, our German Swiss colleagues in particular are currently developing and championing highly independent—and within themselves highly divergent—interpretive positions.³ And finally, that the difficult situation is not eased by the fact that I myself am undeniably involved in *one* idea of interpretive sociology, and thus quasi in one "fraction" of the discussed discourse field⁴, shall only be added as it were as a footnote because this circumstance may serve to explain the one or other "ignorance" on my part.⁵ [2]

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- 2 Apart from the fact that not only Alfred SCHÜTZ but also Peter L. BERGER and Thomas LUCKMANN come from Austria, amongst many things, one of the most legendary "qualitative" studies originated in Austria—the one about "The Unemployed of Marienthal". The work of the sociological cyclist from Vienna, Roland GIRTLER, represents an arguably indispensable "link" between the "classic" ethnographic method of "nosing around" and the advanced and complex techniques of today's socio-scientific ethnographies.
 - 3 Viewed from the "outside", on the one hand the group around Claudia HONNEGGER in Bern that is largely geared to an interpretive patterns approach, that is to objective hermeneutics and, on the other hand, the groups around Peter GROSS and Thomas S. EBERLE in St. Gallen, that is around Achim BROSZIEWSKI and Christoph MAEDER in Kreuzlingen that both follow a more ethnographic and sociology of knowledge approach seem particularly distinguished. Eberhard BERG and Martin FUCHS in Zurich, in particular, can be positioned between sociology and ethnology. Franz SCHULTHEIS in Geneva bridges the French BOURDIEUian school and German-speaking sociology. See [FQS 6\(2\)](#) and EBERLE and ELLIKER in this issue for an "inside-perspective".
 - 4 In the context discussed here, I feel especially indebted to the idea of *life-world analysis* in the tradition of Alfred SCHÜTZ which implicates an empirical research "mandate" that leads away from a "colonial", pseudo-objectivistic *over-view* (that sweeps *over* the actors' heads) to an arduous perspective quasi seen *through* the "eyes" of the actors. Putting it in a simplified form: sociologists oriented to life-world analysis aim to reconstruct the—inevitably typed—subjective perspectives, i.e. the life-worlds of *other* actors. To the degree that the life-world of *another* person becomes the object of scientific interest, the problem—to which extent and *how* one can succeed at all in seeing the world with the eyes of this other person, in understanding *his* subjectively perceived meaning of *his* experiences and *thus* in explaining his acts and furthermore the consequences of his acts in (the by no means only harmonious) "interaction" with the acts of others (in the sense of WEBER)—becomes virulent from a methodological point of view.
 - 5 Let me at least refer to an anthology that is generally regarded as "central" for—especially German-speaking—"qualitative social research" (besides FQS) and is also published in English: FLICK, von KARDOFF and STEINKE, 2004.

2. Understanding Understanding of Understanding

I regard the reconstruction of *meaning*⁶ as the most general epistemological goal of interpretive sociology. This means, only seemingly pleonastically: understanding understanding of understanding—which in turn means, on the one hand, that understanding *par excellence* precedes and forms the basis of social research and that, on the other hand, it *always* necessarily comprehends understanding and thirdly that this "double hermeneutic" (GIDDENS, 1976) itself is the object of understanding etc. [3]

This concept of understanding understanding of understanding follows from an attitude of methodic *doubt* that the things that are involved in the living together of people are what they seem (cf. BERGER & KELLNER, 1981). It forces open our normal disposition *not* to question, for the time being, all the things that have, for whatever reason, proven their worth, an attitude pragmatically sensible in our everyday lives (cf. SCHÜTZ, 1962). But it likewise also expounds on the problems of every form of—discursively taken-for-granted—*criticism* of any everyday routine (as customarily formulated especially in all variants of alienation, reification and so-called critical theories). In such a way, every assumption that one knows what something is "really" like without being able to explain convincingly how one *can* actually know this is problematised as a matter of principle. [4]

And what is special about the problem of understanding in *sociology*—compared to the classical text sciences—is arguably most notably that sociology is *not* a text science, and is little more so than in the sense that *all* sciences are always *also* text sciences. For, what faces the sociologist when he seeks his object is *not* a text. Rather, first of all and primarily he comes across social practises—also, and to a large extent, communicative practises—and across artefacts of practises. These artefacts can but need by no means be texts. But sociologists too require *more* than just cursory data to be able to interpret in a controllable form. Like all other interpreters, they need congealed, fixed, examinable data that can be realised in an objectified form over and over again—preferably texts (in the broadest sense) after all. For only the interpretation of *fixed* data, thus of "texts" in the broadest sense, allows us to gain valid findings about and valid insights into the research object (thus about which *meanings* are inherent in fixed data, that is in "texts", *and* to attain a sufficient control of the procedures of knowledge acquisition (thus of the question how we know what we deem to know, that is to understand when we interpret fixed data, that is "read texts"). Sociology thus is not a text science in the narrow sense but, with regard to interpretive work, it is after all a science *in need of texts*. [5]

6 As is generally known, the exceptional position of "understanding" sciences in methodological respect is epistemologically justified *par excellence* with the—howsoever connoted—reference to meaning: the observation and explanations of natural occurrences "from outside" are confronted with the participation in and understanding of cultural phenomena "from inside". In other words: While natural occurrences carry no meaning "in themselves" and the observer therefore defines their meaning, cultural phenomena "always-already" have a meaning. Reconstructing this own meaning is, in my opinion, the overarching concern of interpretive sociology.

As I see it, the most fundamental *differences* within interpretive sociology originate from the question of *where* meaning originally constitutes itself. The methodological question of *how* meaning can be reconstructed seems subordinate in contrast. And with the question of which procedures lend themselves to the reconstruction of meaning and to what extent, we are already in the "lowlands" of everyday scientific discussions about methods.⁷ [6]

3. Positions and Gaps in the Discourse

Of course, it would be possible to construe the one or other order myth of interpretive sociology by telling something like a modernistic differentiation story: beginning with the implementation of the meaning dimension by the relevant classics of the subject as opposed to the scientific model of "explanatory" social sciences, moving on via the intellectual wars of the Titans regarding the theoretical hegemony as well as the contentions about the dissociation from the methodo-"logics" in the context of understanding social sciences "understanding" themselves as sometimes more, sometimes less critical science, and culminating in the reflectively sophisticated methods debate of the protagonists of interpretive sociology that has now, for some time now, by no means only been established in principle.⁸ [7]

One could also contrast this quasi-deductive reasoning with a more inductive development model and show how systematising and systematised *concepts* for case studies gradually accrued from procedurally "shirt-sleeved" beginnings, how these were reflected methodologically and were increasingly supported theoretically or were at least better justified, and how, lastly, the epistemological conflict about the question of the constitution of meaning in interpretive sociology is being finalised.⁹ [8]

7 Methods have no intrinsic value. They are merely something like procedurally controlled signposts to insight. And if *standardised* methods *grosso modo* are the procedurally controlled signposts to the explanation of collective factual situations or to functional probability conclusions about individual behaviour along the lines of behaviour theory, then the *non-standardised* methods prevalent in interpretive sociology are those procedurally controlled signposts whose task it is to explore newfound matters, that is individual and collective knowledge and acts newly discovered as epistemologically relevant, to describe their special features and to understand them in their *typical* meaning.

8 In the German-speaking countries, too, we meanwhile have numerous introductions, digests, compendia and glossaries but also several series and journals dealing with theory, methodology and especially the methods of interpretive sociology.

9 If and because the common denominator of interpretive sociology (in contrast to causally or functionally "explaining" sociology) consists in the fact that there is a hiatus between the circumstances, situations and conditions in which people live on the one hand and that what people do on the other hand, (regarding which stimulus-response models are inadequate), and furthermore in the fact that people thus at any rate need to interpret what is happening, to *resolve* what is going on and (howsoever routinely) to reflect what they must, should, can, may do (and what they are really doing, that is what they have done), the basic question—on the basis of this common denominator—in the conflict between the large interpretive camps is (ultimately) how far the analysis should, must or may go in order to be considered an acceptable analysis: as far as the contingent, (people) world-constitutive actor's capacity to act (*grosso modo*: phenomenological tradition); as far as the "tacit" basic rules of interaction and/or communication which (positively or negatively) sanction and thus normalise the actor's courses of action (*grosso modo*: ethnomethodology, conversation and genre analysis); as far as the respective symbol and/or interaction orders which enforce, select and enable certain courses of action (and competencies and skills) of the actor (*grosso modo*: symbolic interactionism); as far

But if one poses the question about the situation of German-speaking interpretive sociology less from a development model point of view and more from an interest in the ethnography of science, then one can witness very lively "discourses" within and between the miscellaneous fractions of the social scientists associated with what is termed the interpretive paradigm: everybody attempts to persuade everybody else which issues need to be discussed—at all times, but now finally genuinely and indeed in earnest. Nobody understands how the other can actually do what he or she is doing without having clarified the matters that should have been clarified long ago. One group insists on the need for a grass roots debate, the other group advocates a refinement of the arsenal of methods. A third group wants a return to empirical objects, and the fourth group states that precisely these must at long last be placed in a theoretical framework. The fifth group barely comes out of the field any more. The sixth group barely goes into the field any more. Many researchers devise many a thing (a)new. Many researchers criticise that many "novelties" are well known. Nobody understands why nobody follows him or her on the right way to reliable data, to valid interpretations, to relevant insights. Almost everyone speaks about rules. Almost nobody adheres to those that others try to assert. Everybody speaks "pro domo". And everybody speaks at random. In short: the discussions are (almost) like those about the "right" theories of *explanatory* sociology and about the "right" methodologies and methods of *standardised* social research. [9]

In these notes I endeavour to take a neutral stance, but I am myself irrefutably involved in this confusion of positions and at present, for a start, see almost no take-up and continuation of important sociological impulses *beyond* those that (again and again) come from the United States of America—possibly barring attempts to proceed with the approaches of Anthony GIDDENS here and of Pierre BOURDIEU there, as well as, for some years now, the attempt to catch up with the international discussion in cultural studies and in community studies. I am still unable to discern that current modernisation and individualisation theses would challenge the protagonists of interpretive social research—with the exception of those from the discourse field around Ulrich BECK—to methodically reflected studies.¹⁰ [10]

as the historical framework and imprint which evoke certain courses of actions and also capacities to act of the actors (grosso modo: biographical research, BOURDIEU-school); or, after all, as far as the pre-social (possibly genetic) structures that constitute the actor's capacity to act (grosso modo: objective hermeneutics)?

10 And yet by no means only, but in particular, Ulrich BECK provides all kinds of suggestions for (detailed) studies regarding the phase of change and reconstruction we are presently witnessing in our civilisation which can be roughly characterised with the keywords "industrial society", "representative democracy" and "enlightened society" (cf., amongst many others, BECK, GIDDENS & LASH, 1994, and BECK, 1999). Established organisational concepts are no longer good as orientation models; formerly familiar things are collapsing and the experience of foreignness is becoming ubiquitous; less and less of what was taken for granted "yesterday" still seems to hold good. Consequently, the old measuring and explanatory models of social research also, and not least of all, become obsolete more quickly than they can possibly be renovated and reformed. But, however indispensable exact description and understanding seem to be under the prevailing circumstances of fundamental social changes and re-orientations—more urgent than "explanations" of any kind—so little do the popular crisis scenarios seem to affect the methods-oriented protagonists of the interpretive paradigm. On the contrary, aside from some exceptions, their collective interpretive potential primarily seems to unfold in the light of the question of what actually happens, if (seemingly) *nothing* happens.

On the other hand, the approaches that establish connections from canonised theoretical positions of interpretive sociology to what is known as radical constructivism in general and to the systems theory coined by LUHMANN in particular, and furthermore to Jürgen HABERMAS' theory of communicative action (although it does not rank among the interpretative canon anyway) as well as to the critical theory in its classical form, are worthy of consideration. It seems that a reception of George HERBERT's works that transcends the established, symbolic interactionist reading, is also being revived. Finally I repeatedly come across attempts more effectively to tap Jean PIAGET's socialisation theory for interpretive sociology. [11]

Beyond the obligatory citation, Max WEBER's work is actively present through the medium of the SCHÜTZ-tradition. Apart from that, it largely remains the object of exegetical exercises. Georg SIMMEL's renaissance as an idea prompter for studies in the field of sociology of everyday life is continuing. Karl MANNHEIM, as it were rediscovered via the detour of GARFINKEL's methodology, has become more important especially in biographical research. From the US tradition, the fieldwork pioneers of the Chicago School have had an impact on the expanding German-speaking ethnography which has also been partially influenced by the reception of Michel FOUCAULT.¹¹ Charles S. PEIRCE's principle of abductive conclusions is developing into a methodological key category of social science hermeneutics. For a while, Erving GOFFMAN's work was not only combed for its theoretical but also for its methodical implications, but currently it does not stand in the focus of attention any more. But for a long time now, the "how-to-do" recommendations of Anselm STRAUSS have undoubtedly experienced the broadest reception and application in German-speaking interpretive social research. [12]

Against this broad reception background, (partly more, partly less) "translocal" institutional frames of reference of interpretive sociology have established themselves in Germany, namely especially 1. the "Methods of Qualitative Social Research" Section, 2. the "Biographical Research" Section, 3. the "Sociology of Language" Section and 4. the "Objective Hermeneutics" Association.¹² [13]

11 FOUCAULT is, of course, especially received and discussed in the context of socio-scientific discourse analyses. He is also of some relevance e.g. for "empirical constructivism" developed in Bielefeld, for historical-hermeneutical gender research and—so to speak already "traditionally"—for research on power and dominance.

12 In relation to the sociological "mainstream", non-standardised, "qualitative" procedures are furthermore ranked higher in research on women and gender, in the parts of sociology of culture perceiving themselves as "empirical" (in particular, of course, in the "Cultural Studies"), and in sociology of the body.

4. Institutional Frameworks

4.1 The "Methods of Qualitative Social Research" Section

German-speaking interpretive sociology is probably most manifestly "internationalised", or to be more exact, "Americanised", with regard to the discussion about the question of quality assurance of qualitative social research. "Qualitative social research" is a—in my opinion misleading—battle concept for the distinctive self-designation of everything that does *not* meet the criteria of so-called "quantitative", in the self-conception of *its* representatives, "actually" *empirical* social research. The idea behind the designation "qualitative social research" is that it is precisely not about *quantities*, not about representative statements regarding proportions of situations, opinions, behaviour patterns, etc., of and in populations but about *qualities*, about generalisable statements about social types, processes, structures, etc. Correspondingly, the continuous query of the critics is and was—in accordance with their criteria catalogue—how so-called "qualitative" social researchers can ensure the reliability and validity of their findings. [14]

For a long time, this problem was solved by researchers who projected themselves as "qualitative" in a more or less individual way: partly by means of excited rituals of self-justification, partly by means of devotional exercises in the face of extrinsic standards, partly by referring to sacrosanct "addresses", partly by means of plain ignorance, partly by means of counter-accusations. Increasingly, though, "one" is beginning to face the problem by means of more or less concerted activities in order to establish an independent catalogue of quality (assurance) criteria. In the light of this rather desolate professional policy background, a work group "Methods of Qualitative Social Research" constituted itself around Christel HOPF and Regine GILDEMEISTER in the German Association of Sociology in 1997. This work group had the explicit programme of discussing the heterogeneous theoretical and methodological approaches as well as the methodic procedures, of further developing the survey and analysis methods and of working out recommendations especially for *university teaching*. After fierce and drawn-out debates, the work group was accorded the status of a section "on probation" in 2003 following a crucial vote in the decision-making bodies of the German Association of Sociology (DGS). This section persistently deals with questions of comprehensive quality criteria for "qualitative"—also and especially in relation to the standards of "quantitative"—research. [15]

The [Methods of Qualitative Social Research](#) Section is mainly networked qua individual personal unions with the DGS [Biographical Research](#) and [Sociology of Knowledge](#) Sections as well as with the [Objective Hermeneutics](#) Association around Ulrich OEVERMANN. These three last-mentioned formations, with different theoretical, methodological and methodic focuses, quasi-traditionally do not only advance interpretive social research but also interpretive sociology par excellence in Germany. [16]

4.2 The "Biographical Research" Section

Using the memories of people as material resources for the reconstruction of topics one is interested in, for whatever reason, is arguably the most palpable alternative to employing social statistic data and other "depersonalised" documents. Hence, "biographical research", understood in a broader sense is often regarded as *the* form of "qualitative" social research par excellence. Biographical disclosures are generally "inexpensive" sources of information that were already used extensively by the "classics" of this approach, particularly by those of the Chicago School (cf., for example, THOMAS & ZNANIECKI, 1927). [17]

For a long time, however, the unresolved problem of this kind of data was the question of in which relation the disclosures of the interviewees stand to their actual memories and which relations exist between the memories and the remembered experiences on the one hand and the experiences gained and the—howsoever ascertainable—actual events in the past. A scientifically acceptable way out of this dilemma was first found by means of Fritz SCHÜTZE's technique of the narrative interview developed in the mid-1970s as well as by dint of the narration analysis based on it. The foundation of the DGS "Biographical Research" Section in 1986 then also fundamentally rested upon the—to a large extent also critical—discussion of the possibilities and limits of this method. And even though the canon of themes and modes of research of this strong grouping has, of course, been expanded quite materially in the meantime—e.g. by means of the so-called documentary method developed by Ralf BOHNSACK, interpretation pattern analysis, story hermeneutics, depth hermeneutics, conversion analysis, etc.—debate on and the further development of Fritz SCHÜTZE's integrated explorative-integrative concept nonetheless still constitutes one of the distinguishing main focuses in the thus genuinely German-speaking biographical research. [18]

4.3 The "Sociology of Knowledge" Section

For approximately thirty years, the "Sociology of Language" Section acted as the "home world" of the followers and sympathisers of—notably re-imported by Thomas LUCKMANN from the USA—social constructivism oriented on the mundane phenomenology of Alfred SCHÜTZ¹³. In the course of its history, the section's central subject matter alternated time and again between a decidedly language-sociological, even socio-linguistical orientation and a more symbol-pragmatic and interaction-theoretical orientation. In the second half of the 1990s, a kind of turn towards the ethnography of everyday as well as of special worlds, entailing distinct communication-sociological and knowledge-sociological

13 The claim of providing a universal matrix for social research that is, according to LUCKMANN (1973), implied in mundane phenomenology is based on the basic assumption that all socially constructed reality rests on the subjective orientation *in* the world and the meaningful constitution of the *social* world. This means that the mundane phenomenology of SCHÜTZ and his successors that strives towards the discovery of the invariant structures of the life-world is not a sociological approach but a proto-sociological enterprise that forms the basis of the actual sociological work.

implications, was observable. This re-orientation was so serious and lasting that the section was then renamed "Sociology of Knowledge" in the year 2000. [19]

On the one hand, this is connected with the fact that there is only a rather limited willingness in German-speaking sociology to accept and to transfer conversation-analytical problem formulations and that consequently the connectivity of the genre analysis hence developed around Thomas LUCKMANN and Jörg R. BERGMANN to "more conventional" sociological research questions is still largely unsettled.¹⁴ On the other hand, an "ethnography" research group was established in the section around Anne HONER and Hubert KNOBLAUCH, in which a number of researchers are active who are genuinely *not* interested in the sociology of language.¹⁵ [20]

In particular, sociological ethnography, the explorative and interpretative investigation, description and translation of—more or less separately—special worlds in late modern societies, which are increasingly proving to be structurally "confusing", is a virulent object of discussion in several respects in interpretive sociology (as elsewhere). For one thing, many of the examined "fields" attract interest beyond the bounds of the profession's attention. For another thing, the "defamiliarising", that is "alienating", view of ethnographers not only arouses the curiosity of the wider public but also that of the persons examined—as it were regarding themselves. Thirdly, contemporary ethnography implies the—albeit still vague—idea of providing material building blocks for restructuring the socio-scientific view of society beyond increasingly obsolete class and stratum models. And fourthly, ethnography is proving to be a hardly limited and limitable field for experiments for pragmatic applications of procedures of data generation, for methods of material analysis, for methodological heuristics and for theoretical ideas. [21]

This arouses the constant suspicions of critics, and this suspicion in turn mobilises the ethnographers' readiness to reflect their work anew time and again, almost at every stage. This occurs with regard to the procedures of data collection, to the evaluation procedures, to triangulation models, to ways and forms of adequately presenting the research results and, of course, also with regard to the competitiveness of ethnographic studies on a stretched third-party funds-"market". At any rate, ethnography *grosso modo* seems to have what the analysts of language code are apparently largely missing: connectivity to other themes and problem formulations.¹⁶ [22]

14 The research group around Klaus NEUMANN-BRAUN that, *inter alia*, integrates genre analysis into its ethnographic work, ranks among the few exceptions.—However, Hubert KNOBLAUCH and Bert SCHNETTLER too time and again attempt to bring the relevance systems of ethnographers and genre analysts together.

15 The "Interpretive Social Research" Research Committee that was founded in the SGS (Swiss Association of Sociology) in 1998 strongly and evidently lastingly co-operates with the DGS "Sociology of Knowledge" Section.

16 Some of the concepts that have long been established and put into practise elsewhere, such as that of "ethnographic semantics", are only very hesitantly being "adopted" in German-speaking social research—although they were very "graphically" transferred, in particular by Christoph MAEDER and Achim BROSZIEWSKI.

Besides the ethnographic strategy that—putting it very simply—consists in moving in one's only seemingly "familiar", only seemingly "own" cultural area, with a quasi-ethnological view that entails regarding the social practices in the manifold "meaning worlds" of modern societies as intently as if they were "exotic" customs, rituals and world views, the *other*, in my opinion, symptomatic interpretive strategy consists in unearthing implied meaning from texts, of any kind, in a methodically controlled way. This meaning is *not* (only) confined to that which—not only according to the naive everyday interpreter but also according to the better part of the sociologists *not* working in an interpretive way—seems to be obvious anyway. I would position this second strategy which, as far as I can see, is, in fact, pursued especially in *German-speaking* sociology, within those approaches which we can—*grosso modo*—subsume under the label "Social Scientific Hermeneutics" adopted from Hans-Georg SOEFFNER. [23]

However divergent the claims to understanding and the interpretive scope of these approaches may be, what distinguishes them from more schematically working "qualitative" analysis concepts in the broader sense and what therefore, in my opinion, at least *unifies* them to such a degree that it is legitimate to subsume them under one term, is the fact that they aim at piercing through the superficial information content of a text to "subjacent" layers of meaning and sense in a methodically controlled way and in doing so target at making, that is keeping, the reconstruction procedure intersubjectively reproducible. Correspondingly, the basic reflective problem of the social scientific interpreter consists of making it transparent to him- or herself and to others *how* he or she understands what he believes to understand and how he or she knows what *he or she* thinks he or she knows. [24]

In the pursuit of this basic concern, the approaches of social scientific hermeneutics have (at least) two more things in common: they are based on *stupidity* and on *slowness*—in fact intentionally so. To put it more concretely: they are based on the interpreter acting "artificially" stupid vis-à-vis the knowledge bases he encounters as well as vis-à-vis his *own*, thus pretending that he does not know, in other words does not have them, in order to be able to constitute the phenomenon to be considered "anew", i.e. "cleansed" of all its routine cultural connotations. Furthermore the approaches are based on the fact that they problematise the usual everyday categorical "fast sorting" of (supposedly "clear") issues, thus suspending the "subsumption logic" inherent in everyday understanding and challenging it on their part. Consequently, they so to speak build reflective "thresholds" into the interpretation processes—with the intention of bringing out the inherent meaning of the phenomena to be considered in each case. [25]

Expressed in methodological terms, we may say that the approaches of social scientific hermeneutics systematically build *doubts* into the process of understanding: doubts about the pre-conceptions of the interpreter, doubts about subsumptive certainties in everyday life and in science, and finally also doubts about reductionist explanations. Their—unwritten—common programme thus consists in bringing, with a purely theoretical interest and consequently

unburdened by everyday relevances, systematic scruples to bear there where, not only in everyday life but also in conventional socio-scientific data evaluation, interpretive routine prevails, thus in enlightening and controlling the scientific process of interpretation there where naive interpretation certainties are usually reproduced as a matter of course. [26]

Thus, by means of "artificial stupidity and slowness", social scientific hermeneutics purposely defamiliarises everyday understanding that is to a large extent profoundly culturally routinised and geared to the pragmatic concerns of everyday life and constantly applies manifold ready-made certainties—viz. for the purpose of the enlightenment of social practices about themselves. It is therefore by no means only its general ambition to expand the arsenal of methods of data analysis (least of all only in terms of hypotheses-generating pre-procedures¹⁷). On the contrary, its claim consists in stripping the basic operations of socio-scientific research *and* of theory formation of their epistemological naiveté par excellence and in reconstructing them and shedding light on them. In other words, the otherwise divergent approaches of social scientific hermeneutics are "held together" by the principle of theoretically challenging, epistemologically reflecting and methodically expounding the problems of quasi-natural, everyday understanding; in short, by the principle of defamiliarising understanding. [27]

4.4 The "Objective Hermeneutics" Association

Undoubtedly the most prominent of these approaches is what is referred to as "objective hermeneutics", developed, repeatedly modified, radicalised and vehemently sponsored by Ulrich OEVERMANN—in association with various "comrades-in arms". Since the congress of sociology in Düsseldorf 1992 it is organised in the form of a registered association ("Arbeitsgemeinschaft objektive Hermeneutik e.V."). [28]

The cognitive interest of objective hermeneutics centres on latent structures that are active, so to speak, behind the backs of people and objectify themselves in their actions. Since OEVERMANN himself (persistently) refers to these structures as *meaning* structures and since I recommended at the outset that the reconstruction of meaning be regarded as the epistemological object of interpretive sociology I tend—in this respect less decidedly than Jo REICHERTZ—*not* to exclude objective hermeneutics from interpretive sociology. But OEVERMANN has at all times and of late—in the context of his lectures and explicitly directed at sociology of knowledge and action theory—increasingly and vehemently forced the debate about the most fundamental theoretical difference within interpretive sociology: the contention about the question of *where* meaning ultimately, and originally, constitutes itself. [29]

According to the teachings of objective hermeneutics, (latent) meaning structures exist as the non-conscious social reality of meaning possibilities. These structures are not only detached from conscious subjective intentional

17 Concerning this misunderstanding, cf., "classically" ABEL, 1947.

representations, as such—i.e. in their systematics, which are demonstrable by observers—they do not even need to be represented psychically on any non-conscious level. That is to say, even if life experience—preserved in texts—undoubtedly represents the central research object of objective hermeneutics, it is equally undoubtedly *not* conceived as meaning-constitutive, but as twice derived: in the first instance, it is predisposed by the social norm structures, which are in turn determined, at any rate limited by the—algorithmically understood—biologically anchored generation rules of human society par excellence. [30]

Tilman SUTTER once referred to this concept—in my opinion congruously—as "norm ontological". Jo REICHERTZ speaks of a "metaphysics of structures". Unlike *phenomenologically*-oriented interpretations in the broadest sense, which are directed at reconstructing the typically intended *subjective* meaning, objective hermeneutics precisely do *not* regard the subject as being of meaning-constitutive relevance. On the contrary, constitutionally relevant are the structures which OEVERMANN assumes to be objective: *they* ultimately carry the meaning in themselves which has to be reconstructed—so to speak by construing right through life experience—by means of the method judged as "objective" by him. [31]

4.5 Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge and hermeneutic objectivism

In contrast, the so-called hermeneutic *sociology of knowledge* is fundamentally based on the premise that one need *not* refer back to pre-social algorithms to be able to understand and explain acts but "only" to the fact that people are born into a linguistically represented system of social categories and typifications. Thus, hermeneutic sociology of knowledge intends "understanding understanding" by dint of a system of typical constructions that have to be logically consistent, in principle subjectively interpretable in a meaningful way and appropriate to both the daily and the scientific experience. These constructions must therefore, in the words of Alfred SCHÜTZ (1962, p.45) be constituted in such a manner

"that an actor in the life-world would perform the typified action if he had a perfectly clear and distinct knowledge of all the elements, and only of the elements, assumed by the social scientist as being relevant to this action and the constant tendency to use the most appropriate means assumed to be at his disposal for achieving the ends defined by the construct itself." [32]

For that the interpreter will at best only succeed in *approaching* the subjective meaning of another person is evident: his or her consciousness is categorically *not* accessible. Only the intersubjectively perceptible—intended and unintended—*realisations* are ascertainable, recordable and thus interpretable but not the *intentions* of the person expressing himself. [33]

Therefore, a central procedural objective is to generate ideal types that (in turn) serve to explain concrete, empirically detectable phenomena and thus to reconstruct how objectivised complexes of meaning consolidate themselves from subjective acts of consciousness. That is to say, it involves the "classic" process of understanding that results from the to and fro between structure and

concretion and in the constant extension of this movement shows both the structure and the concretions in always new connections. In short: hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is the "theoretical" question—detached from the pragmatic hectic of everyday relevances—of how the constant feat of constructing the social order is actually achieved by meaningfully acting everyday actors. That is to say, it is concerned with understanding the meaning of action—and not (or only to a lesser extent) with the reconstruction of so-called a-tergo-"causes". For since not circumstances—howsoever hypostatized as "objective"—but the actor's *experience* is decisive for his definition of the situation as well as for the hence ensuing (action) consequences, it is essential to understand how meanings originate and persist, when and why they can be *called* "objective" and how people in turn *interpretingly* acquire the socially "objectivised" meanings, and hence quarry out their own "subjective" meaningfulness and thereby in turn contribute to the social construction of reality. [34]

Even if hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is thus *procedurally* undoubtedly indebted to the pioneering work of objective hermeneutics as far as the "theoretical"—detached from the pragmatic hectic of everyday relevances—question of how meaning constitutes itself is concerned, *epistemologically* it thus substantially bases on the mundane-phenomenologically reflected "newer sociology of knowledge" (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1967). Given this background, in the context of a *methods debate*, I recommend to keep on speaking of objective hermeneutics here and hermeneutic sociology of knowledge there within the panoply of other socio-scientific interpretation techniques. With regard to the epistemological question concerning the place where meaning is constituted we should perhaps—at least—distinguish between hermeneutic *sociology of knowledge* and hermeneutic *objectivism*, that is *structuralism*—wherein, in fact, the question casually broached by me would once more constitute itself anew: the question of how one should or could conceive an "understanding understanding of understanding". [35]

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