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EPISTEMOLOGY AND SOCIOHISTORICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

In sociohistorical inquiry, no epistemology prevails as a widely accepted account of knowledge. Positivism yet retains its defenders. As alternatives, both structuralist and hermeneutic challenges to science are undermined as foundations of knowledge by their own accounts, yielding the postmodern loss of certitude. Conventionalism, rationalism, and realism have been proposed as "local epistemologies" under the new conditions, and on a broader level, pragmatic and transcendental theories of communication substitute for epistemology classically conceived. As yet, these contending developments do not resolve the crisis of sociohistorical knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Whether or not there exists a platform from which to begin: That is the question that prefigures any effort to write about epistemology—the problem of knowledge and its basis. If there is no such platform, then I must begin without one, either building one without resort to presuppositions, or claiming that such an activity is unnecessary or impossible. On the other hand, it has not yet been disproved that such a platform exists (or might be established), and if I could begin in a way that led me to such a platform, that platform might inform us of the basis upon which I had begun, and whether that beginning depended on the platform itself.

Historians and sociologists face broadly shared epistemological problems,

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here designated as those of sociohistorical inquiry. Mostly we leave to philosophers the problem of accounting how we do what we do. Nevertheless, we orient our efforts on the basis of assumptions about the valid practices of creating knowledge and assessing its truth. Not that the assumptions are universally shared: To the contrary, the hallmark of present-day social inquiry is the absence of wide agreement about its philosophical grounding. But the various philosophical positions do not simply align with particular methodologies or substantive theories of society. There are those who try to ground Marxism in assumptions of historicism that undermine any claims of generalizability, while others seek to establish a theoretical Marxism. As an epistemological presupposition, methodological individualism may undergird both a theory of rational actors and antitheoretical historicism. Thus, the present controversy over epistemology cannot be reduced to a conflict of theories or methods; at the least it bears discussion in terms that do not derive from any effort to establish a basis for a particular theoretical approach. However, given the extensive discourses relevant to social inquiry, a thorough review is out of the question; all I attempt here is a broad-gauged survey that arbitrarily uses certain work to mark the general terrain of debate.

The classic problems of epistemology have attracted the efforts of giants on whose shoulders we stand (or fall). Recently, however, rapid unfoldings in philosophy are matched by other arguments formulated within previously disconnected realms. Literary theory, psychology, the sociologies of knowledge and of science, anthropology, feminist theory, deconstruction, hermeneutics, language analysis—this is but a surface list of the approaches that now gain currency in the consideration of problems that once were effectively contained within debates about the empirical world, logic, concept formation, correspondence theories, and a philosophy of cognition. Epistemology of the social sciences is no longer a field in any narrow sense of the term. Better to say that the field has been replaced by "social epistemology" (Fuller 1988). Those who would confront epistemological problems these days must be willing to entertain discourse from any quarter. Whether or not social inquiry will ever be consolidated under some comprehensive warrant—logical or social—remains to be seen. Perhaps a broader syntax simply will establish the differential locations of diverse knowledge forms. But meanwhile, the problem of epistemology implodes: no single logic, no experience, no cognition offers a point of departure from the epistemological circle. I have no basis on which to present this discourse, yet I do so anyway. It is fashionable in some quarters to leave the matter at that, hanging. But let us push on: You are reading some words and can read more, and you may make some sense (or nonsense) out of them, no matter what your presuppositions. The wonder of discourse is that it may engage more than one reader, even those who do not share its outlook. Perhaps there can be knowledge without knowledge of how

knowledge is. But that is a question for epistemology, and not for this survey of epistemological discourses.

Matters would be clearer if we knew whether there was a social world to be known (and what it was like), independently of knowing how to know about it. If we knew that world to have some coherence of objects, events, and processes in its actuality, that is, independently of our knowledge about it, we would at least know whether our task was to gain valid knowledge about what exists, or to gain knowledge that, even if it did not explain reality, nevertheless might serve some purpose—pragmatic, critical, revolutionary—or other. Issues of epistemology thus become bound up with issues of ontology in a way that ties a Gordian knot. We seem blocked from comprehending the nature of the social world (if it has any coherent nature) unless we have an epistemological path, yet an epistemological path may depend upon an ontology of both the knower and that to be known. Of course the distinction between epistemology and ontology may be meaningful only in the absence of a solution, but until the Gordian knot is cut, the distinction attests to the complexity of the problem. Indeed, it is emblematic of a series of logical conundrums that mark the abyss of epistemology.

To my knowledge, no one has cut the knot, but there has been no lack of recent efforts. By now the old faiths of positivism and empiricism are widely discredited. The problem facing the defenders of science has been one of offering a new account of its basis, one that takes into consideration the critiques. If, on the other hand, objective knowledge is regarded as an impossibility, an array of alternative projects would establish the epistemological basis of relativity as the condition of knowledge, without lapsing into solipsism, subjectivism, or nihilism. Yet even relativity has been relativized; that is, in postmodern veins of thought, any theory of relative knowledge still amounts to a claim to found knowledge, define it, and authorize certain approaches to attaining it. Perhaps the postmodern thrust can be described most generically as the project of unfounding general knowledge—scientific or other. What, then, remains? Nothing, and yet everything. No form of discourse is established; yet shorn of privileging claims, a series of proposals have been set forth to offer, as it were, the foundations of foundationlessness, for example, in research programs, in realism, in pragmatism, and in critical theory. Surveying this complex array of discourses clarifies the (difficult) circumstances under which students of sociohistorical inquiry now carry on.

POSITIVE SCIENCE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The outlook for positivism no longer is positive. By the 1960s it was increasingly difficult to find a philosopher who would take on the designation of positivist or defend a positivist position (Adorno et al 1976). For most, the

"dispute" today no longer is about positivism; it is about "postpositivism" (Alexander 1982). Indeed, continued discussion of positivism might be taken as the beating of a dead Trojan horse if it weren't that positivism persists as a popular worldview among practitioners of science (Miller 1987). Moreover, positivism remains important to the extent that attacks on it have defined the parameters of current debate (Halfpenny 1982).

It may be, as Halfpenny suggests, that many sociologists share emancipatory and critical values which arguably lie at the Comtean core of positivism as a philosophy of knowledge. But as Halfpenny details, the uses of knowledge became subordinated to the basis of knowledge in the incarnations of positivism since Comte, especially J. S. Mill's inductive approach, the logical positivism of the Vienna circle and Carl Hempel, logical empiricism, and the falsificationist strategy championed by Karl Popper. These approaches (and the sociohistorical methods based upon them) all seek to establish science as a form of true knowledge subject to validation, that depends neither on metaphysical, ontological, or other unfounded assumptions, nor on mere opinion of investigators. Such efforts to establish an objective basis of empirical knowledge have been beset by a multitude of problems (Suppe 1977, Halfpenny 1982). Purely in the realm of logic, positivists themselves have identified a labyrinth of dead ends, such as the intractable problem of establishing a "law," the issue of how to distinguish a causal relation from a merely accidental or spurious correlation, or how to distinguish the hypothesis being tested from untested assumptions. The problems are magnified when a statistical or probabilistic approach is substituted for a deterministic one. Especially telling, in the end, is the difficulty in differentiating science from pseudoscience (Wallis 1985).

Tilting toward the empirical and away from the logical facet of positivism creates new problems as it solves others. The question arises of how the world is known, and the answer depends on a theory of sense data that raises problems of fallible subjective observation and judgment—particularly acute for social research (Shweder 1980, Phillips 1973, Faust 1984). The pursuit of empirical observation also raises the difficult problem of whether there can be a shared and theory-neutral observation language. The possibility of establishing such a language is challenged in the first instance by the "later" Wittgenstein's account of language emphasizing the absence of meaning independent of usage in context (Wittgenstein 1968). It is further thrown into doubt by Richard Rorty's (1979) exploration of the idea of correspondence, which would require a context-free language of scientific terms (if one could be established) that could "mirror" reality.

Quite apart from the problems of cognition and language internal to logical positivism, there is the classic *Methodenstreit*—the debate about natural vs social inquiry, and a set of contextual problems: arguments about the ideolo-

gy, history, and sociology of science. Whether the enterprise of studying science itself has any epistemological basis is at best a moot point that does not easily offer an edge to anyone interested in defending science. Thomas Kuhn (1962) may not initially have been particularly interested in challenging the epistemic foundations of science, but neither did his account—showing normal science ignoring disconfirming evidence that awaited revolutionary paradigm shifts—accord with the positivist idea that science could claim an integrity of logic, procedure, and evidence. Kuhn's basic argument has been elaborated and extended by historical and sociological studies that counter Robert Merton's normative view by showing how broad historical forces as well as everyday activity, organization, socialization, funding, competition, communication, and other extrinsic factors derail the actual practice of science from any neat and tidy epistemological formula (Bourdieu 1975, Brannigan 1981, Barnes & Edge 1982, Collins 1983, Barnes 1985, Latour & Woolgar 1986, Latour 1987, Wuthnow 1989, Clark & Gerson 1990). A parallel set of charges focuses on value orientations. Especially in sociohistorical inquiry, science in the technical sense is a commitment that arguably serves some interests, not others—a point made most strongly by critical theorists and feminists (Habermas 1973: 263–64, Bleier 1986, Smith 1987, Agger 1989). On their debunking of science as ideology, together with research on the social practice of science, whatever foundation positivism might claim in theory, it lacks in practice; what counts as scientific knowledge depends partly on factors extrinsic to the assessment of ideas and their validity.

These problems hardly distinguish sociohistorical inquiry from the natural sciences, where the philosophical crisis of knowledge is equally acute. However, a further difficulty specific to sociohistorical analysis turns on the relation of would-be scientists to the objects of their inquiry—societies of knowing and acting subjects. To reckon the basic faultline of epistemology, we cannot and need not consider the manifold specific controversies: for example, the issue of the historicity and secular development of social phenomena and in turn, the reflexivity of social knowledge; behavioral vs *verstehende* knowledge; the question of methodological individualism vs holism or organicism; the status of social rules or norms as explanations. What if the general claims about cultural historicity are true? Positivism thereby fails, first, on the ontological grounds that the social world lacks the patterned coherence of the natural world, and second, because an essential premise—the unity of scientific method—is difficult to sustain if idiosyncratic meaning is taken as an explanation of action.

Whatever detractors may conclude about the logical and ontological difficulties of positivistic social science, it retains adherents. Gellner (1985) offers an impassioned defense of positivism as a special realm of discourse where no

assertion can be privileged, set against the Hegelianist alternative in which privileged discourses of holism and realism establish a realm ruled by dogma that cannot be subjected to disproof. Bryant (1985: 181–82) chides critics of positivism for defining it so narrowly as to ignore the positivist origins of contemporary realist epistemologies (discussed below) and to miss the fundamental importance of "reason and observation" as the basis for sociological knowledge. But despite the rhetorical defense of positivism, there are few direct responses to the critiques. Instead, even those who would seek a foundation for scientific knowledge look elsewhere, while other voices decry the possibility altogether and seek alternative ways of accounting for sociohistorical knowledge. The postpositivist alternatives can only be considered in light of the postmodern condition that emerges from acceptance of the relativity of knowledge.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROJECTS OF RELATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Even if sociologists and historians of science have argued its social relativity, acceptance of relativity does not signal the end of epistemology. Instead, it has fostered points of departure that do not depend on a foundation in analytic philosophy. In the absence of a foundation, various arguments are made against epistemology (or more narrowly, "method") in any privileging form (e.g. Gadamer 1975, Feyerabend 1978). But even these arguments, and especially the variety of studies that locate knowledge as a social and linguistic accomplishment, in turn elevate sociological theories about knowledge to the status of ontologically grounded social epistemologies. Such theories have tended toward one of two points of departure: the knowing subject or the structures of symbols by which things are known. What remains as a question of debate is what basis either relativistic epistemology could offer for obtaining knowledge about the social world. It is this question that frames the postmodern turn.

Structuralist Epistemologies

If scientific knowledge were to take a positivist form, its concepts and language-use rules would transcend any cultural matrix of meaning. Put differently, scientific knowledge could not be predicated upon ways of knowing that take their form independently of science as an activity. Thus, the centrality of language and logic in the classical attempts to found science. With the structuralist turn, scientific discourse itself is viewed as an institutionalized pattern. Suggestions that science is ordered by more fundamental cultural, cognitive, or social patterns—extrinsic to science—tend to undermine its special claims of knowledge: Science becomes one among

many symbol structures, universes of discourse, or language games. The rationalist solution to this problem amounts to an idealism that eschews any empirical investigation so as to establish a theoretical discourse uncontaminated by the naively observed world. In Marxist thought, Althusser & Balibar (1970) offered the most thorough-going structuralist attempt at rationalism (mercilessly satirized from a Marxist historiographic viewpoint by E. P. Thompson 1978). The effort by Hindess & Hirst (1975) to translate Althusser's approach into an empiricist-free sociological theory, by the authors' own admission (Hindess & Hirst 1977), foundered on the historicity of the referents of Marxist theory, specifically, the confounding of "mode of production" by actual social formations.

The alternative to an idealist structuralism is an empirical and historicized one. Lévi-Strauss (1966) offers one basis for this solution by exploring the ways in which classification systems operate. The "savage mind" is no less complex than the scientific one; instead, each operates according to an underlying logic of classification that gives rise to particular forms of knowledge, and not others. A parallel structuralist problematic is established in linguistics—by the semiotic theory originating with Saussure (reviewed by Eagleton 1983: ch. 3), which suggests that signs take on their significance systemically, in ways that have structural patterns independent of the things to be signified or the individuals using the signs. Clearly, however, the most influential approach—seminal for diverse contemporary thinkers—has been Wittgenstein's quasistructuralist theory of group communication. In Wittgenstein's "language games," meaning is established not by its relation to other signs, as in semiotics, but contextually, within particular social groups and their usages. It may well be, with Bloor (1983), that Wittgenstein's vision of language requires the subvention of sociology to study the structural properties of the language games. Hazelrigg (1989a:241) argues that Wittgenstein's approach cannot offer an account of language outside of itself. Nor is there any ready standard for evaluating conflicting claims that each "make sense" on the level of ordinary language and rhetoric. The approach thus lacks (and indeed does not assert) any special foundation for its claims, and it can offer little solace to those who seek firm knowledge.

Essentially the same problem haunts the epistemological solutions of Lévi-Strauss, semioticians, and other structuralists: It is revealing to confront the structure of scientific knowledge independently of the knower, yet this view cannot be taken itself as other than mythological; it offers no escape from its own account, in which all accounts seem culturally tinged. Structuralist approaches thus can render no basis for validation of the general claim of relativism or specific structuralist findings. Yet even if this "poststructuralist" criticism is taken, a profound hyperrelativism substitutes for scientific knowledge. The self-subsuming character of structural approaches notwithstanding,

unless a way of knowing can be established that escapes their frame, the language of science is not simply a description language, it is the product of cultural, cognitive and social structures of discourse extrinsic to the logic of scientific inquiry.

Knowledge and the Knowing Subject

The alternative is to begin with the relativity of the subject who would know. Here, entirely different problems surface. In the late nineteenth century, it was the neo-Kantian question of how values shape inquiry that initiated the German *Methodenstreit,* or conflict over methods. The solution of Max Weber demanded both causal and meaningful adequacy of explanations, and it distinguished sociohistorical inquiry from the physical sciences on the basis of an interpretive interest in phenomena of cultural significance. Cultural significance is, of course, a matter of valuation, and Weber resisted the idea that values could be justified scientifically. Yet what if, as Heinrich Rickert tried to assert, certain values could be identified as universal, such that individuals would not differ in estimations of their cultural significance? Guy Oakes (1988) argues that this would be the only basis for an objective social science. But Rickert's theory of values fails, Oakes contends, and Weber is unable to solve the problem of scientific objectivity. Weber sought to maintain a delicate balance, recognizing the distinctive nature of social inquiry, yet salvaging arguably scientific approaches to concept formation, interpretation, and explanation. Given this commitment on Weber's part, the directions of neo-Weberian sociology will hinge on careful assessment of Oakes' argument. Here, it will be important to consider Guenther Roth's (1976; Roth & Schluchter 1979) explication of Weber's analytic strategy and Bryan Green's (1988) depiction of Weber's argumentation as casuistic, for these discussions suggest that Weber tackled the problem of values at another level as well as the foundational one, i. e. in discourse. Whatever the resolution of the value controversy, Weber's epistemology stands at the Archimedean point of sociological concept formation. Rejecting the natural-science correspondence approach to sociological concepts, Weber instead promoted the use of ideal-type constructs as a basis of rigorous sociological analysis (Burger 1976), an approach that holds promise today for a postpositivist synthesis (Hekman 1983b).

Weber's specific solution also raises a more general problem: the common referents of a sociological concept (e.g. class, revolution, action) may have a different analogical relation to each other and to the concept than is the case in the natural sciences (Stinchcombe 1978). Possibly, the project of social scientific concept formation depends on embracing a theory of metaphor and perspectivity (Ricoeur 1977, Brown 1977, Rothbart 1984). In a somewhat different vein traced through Winch (1958) back to Wittgenstein, for Turner

(1980), sociological explanation is a comparative exercise in exploring translations between assertions about social rules and practices in diverse settings. Translation, in turn, becomes a key element in Paul Roth's (1987) argument for methodological pluralism in the social sciences. Yet Levine (1985; cf Fuller 1988: ch. 6) has suggested that conceptual and explanatory ambiguities are grounded in the ambiguities of social life and its normative practices. Clear conceptualization thus paradoxically depends upon the capacity to encompass ambiguity.

The more radical subjectivist turn is to reject the scientific project of causal explanation and accept the relativity of meaning, yet establish relativism as the basis of a different epistemological project than that of science. The major channels of thought have developed through hermeneutics and phenomenology, often tied to the problems of historiography. Contemporary hermeneuticists, after Gadamer (1975), trace back through Heidegger to Wilhelm Dilthey (1976), who attempted a history founded in subjective temporality and biography. Dilthey thus offers a counterpoint to Althusser's structuralist antihistory (Hall 1980). His complex approach was historicist in its avoidance of explanation by reference to general laws, yet, like Ranke, Dilthey held out the hope of identifying the objective spirit of history (Makkreel 1975). Mostly, historical sociology today has abandoned the hermeneutic program, seeking instead to clarify the logical and ontological bases for historical inquiry in ways that parallel wider epistemological debates (Martin 1977, Atkinson 1978, Skocpol & Somers 1980, Skocpol 1984, Tilly 1981, 1984, Ragan & Zaret 1983, Hall 1988). But there is a countercurrent: Interpretive historians develop a theory of action and meaning that explores explanatory plots through narrative and cultural history (Hall 1990). For this approach, it becomes important to ask both about historical time and the difference between historical narrative and fiction, and about the status of historical narratives that conflict with one another (Burke 1984, 1969, Stone 1979, Hall 1980, Veyne 1984, Carr 1985, Danto 1985, Mink 1987, Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1988, Alker 1987).

In a way different from the new narrative program in historiography, hermeneutics offers counterpoint to science by positing the realm of meaning as irreducible to causal explanation. Interpretation attends instead to "local knowledge" (Geertz 1973). Yet the same issues that obtain for scientific knowledge—of truth and objectivity—confront hermeneutics. Emilio Betti (1984; cf Bleicher 1982) would search for objectivity in interpretation, on the basis of methodological principles. This project, it would seem, moves him back toward Weber's problem of values considered by Oakes: even if an objective methodology could be established in the absence of universal values, estimations of cultural significance, and thereby interpretations, would differ in ways that could not be resolved by resort to rules of knowl-

edge production and validation. By contrast, for Gadamer, honestly confronting the conditions of interpretation in social life cannot support any privileging of interpretive claims: Dilthey's hope of an objective history must be wrong, for truth is relational, and the project of reconstructing history thus impossible. More generally, given the occasioned and episodic pursuit of understanding, there is neither reason nor basis to formalize hermeneutic method, and no basis of definitive interpretation. Whatever the capacities of science to control natural phenomena, in the social realm, both science as activity and the rest of life are conditioned by efforts at mutualities of understanding that shift in the currents of biography and history and values, such that, however precious, truth can be no more than relative (Gadamer 1975; Bleicher 1982: ch. 4: Weinsheimer 1985: 134, 137, 164; Rodi 1985).

The phenomenological development paralleling hermeneutics moved from Edmund Husserl's attempt to resolve the crisis of science through a transcendental phenomenology. By now it is widely agreed that Husserl's work, while fertile and provocative, has not served as the foundation that he sought to establish. Yet Alfred Schutz took Husserl as a point of departure for challenging Weber's use of ideal types, on the basis that such types objectify actors' intentions in a way that eclipses their salience as a basis of sociological explanation (Hall 1981). Despite vigorous critiques of both Husserl and Schutz (Adorno 1983, Hindess 1977, Hazelrigg 1989a), from this lifeworld phenomenology emerged both a quasihermeneutic approach to fieldwork (Wolff 1976; Hall 1977) and an ethnomethodological discussion of scientific versus "mundane" epistemology (Pollner 1987). The phenomenological and ethnomethodological moves claim an epistemology of the subject whereby knowledge—scientific or otherwise—becomes a social accomplishment (Douglas 1970). The turn to the knowing subject also spawns efforts to disestablish the social analyst's voice in favor of a life-history approach (McCall & Wittner 1990), and it has triggered important points of debate for feminist sociologists (Collins 1986, Grant 1987, Haraway 1988). Anthropologists similarly seek to contend with the asymmetric assumptions that yield unreflexive accounts of "other" social actors (Sahlins 1985, Clifford 1988).

In these approaches, the task of knowledge amounts to understanding the ways in which actors—sociologists or others—make the world meaningful in their own terms, prior to others' categorization of their lifeworlds. Thoroughgoing subjectivism thus pushes past the cultural science of Weber and the idiographic historicism of Dilthey to a terrain peopled with knowing and understanding subjects, where truth is relative and the conflict of intepretations prevails. In this realm, not only the utterances and interactions of individuals, but the cultural products of social action—from normative catalogues to cityscapes—become texts, such that the reading of a text is not only

a first-order social activity, but also a second-order sociological activity (Brown 1987). The task of reading texts turns on either a structuralist and semiotic epistemology or subjectivist hermeneutics. Yet either approach affirms an optimistic relativity: Even if science does not equal truth, and truth does not exhaust significant understanding, a cardinal point of faith holds that the account of relativity itself offers a possibility for proceeding with the project of relative knowledge. Hermeneutics and semiotics each would offer a foundation for relativism, whereby, at the least, myth or plot could be placed within intelligible structures and movements of meaning. Put differently, even if the quest for scientific knowledge seemed doomed, it still might be possible to make sense of things.

The Postmodern Turn

Relativism seems forever to ravage itself, in the end rendering its own knowledge and understandings problematic. Such is the postmodern turn. Even so, at least one observer, Jean-François Lyotard, argues that the supposed postmodern crisis of science represents more a phase of the modernist assault on knowledge, rather than any fundamental break. It seems that modernism has its triumphant scientific mode and its questioning, interpretive, humanistic mode; in some sense, postmodernism is marked by the collapse of the distinction between scientific and humanistic thought. Thus, Lyotard will differentiate the modern use of "metadiscourse" to legitimate science versus a postmodern "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984: xxiii–iv, 79). Whence the incredulity? If postmodern thought often is described as "post-structuralist" (Eagleton 1983: ch. 4), it is (*a*) because it originates in part in critiques of the abstracted, ahistorical character of structuralist thought, which fails to address the problem of situated meaning and action (Bourdieu 1977), and (*b*) because it continues the investigation of the text as a problematic. Yet the postmodern target is not only structuralism, but the subjective relativism of philosophical hermeneutics as well. Incredulity turns upon the fabrication of the textual world. In the postmodern terrain, critical analysis is turned from the texts of fiction to the texts of knowledge: indeed, whether the texts are "fictions" or "knowledge" is a distinction of convention accomplished in the texts themselves.

Certain important points can be sighted in the panorama of postmodern texts. First, even if Foucault sometimes depended on modernist (structuralist, totalizing) categories of analysis, he (1970, 1972) originally envisioned a method that could not yet be fully described, perhaps should not be codified. This very pastiche lends to his analysis a postmodern flavor (cf Poster 1987, Hoy 1988, D'Amico 1989). For Foucault, genealogy reveals "an historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge" (Foucault, in Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983:

237). The "archeology of knowledge" may not establish a science that transcends this constituting phenomenon, but it unmasks the way the social world obtains its coherence through the power of disciplines, scientific or otherwise. Whether Foucault is substantively correct in this or that example may be controversial, but for Foucault the controversy can be taken as demonstration of the world that he describes, where the gaze of discipline and the "technologies of the self" guard the boundaries of civilization from the abyss of the uncategorized world (Foucault 1988). Epistemology is unmasked as a moment of power, Western science as a cultural practice of discipline.

Second, the content of knowledge no longer can be said to stand independently of its communication. Instead, the epistemological concerns with legitimating knowledge become blurred with issues of rhetoric and poetics. Foundational to these decenterings of the scientific text is Austin's (1975) speech-act theory: words do not just reflect or describe the world; they also perform. Narrative no longer can be seen simply as a (good or bad) methodological tool of humanistic historians like Paul Veyne. Instead, literary theories of narrator, story, performance, and audience (Maclean 1988) shift the problem of narrative from one of reflecting "what really happened," to demonstrating how narrative sustains a textual world. In history (Cohen 1986; cf White 1978, 1987), writing is said to sustain a sense of "aboutness" that transcends the events about which narratives are written. Economists are less disposed to trouble themselves over critics of a discipline that is much narrower than its potential subject matter, and even if this hubris seems patently self-serving, McCloskey's (1985) excavation of the rhetoric which advances economics as science likely falls on deaf ears. But elsewhere, social scientists (Nelson et al 1987) are taking seriously the principle that ideas and findings do not issue forth independently of distinctive forms of argumentation; the style of persuasion embodies theoretical position (Green 1988). In anthropology, under the collapse of the distinction between native and anthropological storytellers, "the very right to write—to write ethnography—seems at risk" (Geertz 1988: 133).

Third, with Derrida (1978), any effort to systematically describe the ideas of Foucault, deconstruction, rhetoric, relativism, the general problem of epistemology, or the social world and its processes (etc) would itself be an act of violence. Indeed, structure and coherence in texts and in analysis of them can only be achieved on the basis of linguistic feats that mask the contradictions and ellipses of text and world. As Margolis has put it, "Deconstruction demonstrates that, in any [our own] historical setting, it is always possible to construe any established schemata for analyzing and interpreting familiar phenomena as more restrictive, more distorting, more inadequate than another that can be generated, now, by submitting the one or ones in question to the process of supplementation" (1985: 105, brackets in original).

In this restless and relentless text turning from text, we reach "the end of philosophy," a prospect from which epistemology can escape no more than other texts. A new task seems to replace it: creating vision by destroying knowledge.

In the postmodern turn, then, the clear lenses through which to explain or simply interpret the world become irretrievably clouded; then, shattered into myriad crystals, they remain available for us to pick up, polish and peer through, telling others what we see through the lens that fixes our gaze. Is this supposedly postmodern condition anything new? There is good reason to doubt whether we really have moved past modernist skepticism in our predicament, even if the embrace of the predicament creates an acceptance of pastiche and collage that creates new kinds of discourse. Defenders of epistemology might argue that nothing really has changed, yet in epistemology, the saying of the postmodern performs its tasks, leaving it to others to found knowledge or forget it. What of the logical retort—that the critiques themselves must claim truth, in order that their accounts of the morass be sustained? Even this classic conundrum seems to lose its force when contradiction itself no longer can be devalued.

UP FROM POSTMODERNISM?

We are left as actors making meaning by use of structured symbols in communication with others in an institutionalized world. Indeed, this position informed certain philosophies of science even before the collapse of the positivist consensus, and broadly speaking, it represents the assumption of all discourse of knowledge since the publication of Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Yet once the social condition of knowledge is acknowledged, what account can be offered of science and of sociohistorical inquiry? In the wake of deconstruction, rhetoric, poetics, and Foucault's archeology and genealogy, those who write about the problem at all will know that their own texts only with difficulty escape treatment solely as texts, rather than for what they say. As Geertz (1988: 138) remarks, ". . . the burden of authorship seems suddenly heavier." But the clamor of texts, I suspect, has only begun. Basically, two broad lines of discourse are developing. First, with Rorty (1979: 361, 321), if the collapse of the effort to "mirror" the world by conceptual representation or correspondence amounts to the end of epistemology as a general theory of knowledge, then "objectivity" becomes redefined as involving "conformity to the norms for justification" of knowledge or "agreed-upon practices of inquiry." Under these conditions, epistemology becomes local, specific to the particular issue being investigated (cf Lyotard 1984: 54). Second, there is the broader question of relationships among different epistemologies and alternative kinds of knowledge.

Epistemologies

What, then, of local epistemologies? The central problem concerns reconciling objectivism and relativism (Bernstein 1983), science and relativism (Alexander 1990), or objectivism and subjectivism (Collins 1989), yet a myriad of alternatives present themselves. It seems, as Halfpenny (1982) asserted, that the ways out of positivism lead in one of two directions—either toward a scientific realism that (for positivists) amounts to a metaphysic about the world, or toward a "conventionalism" that depends on shared assumptions of investigators. In either case, the boundaries of positivism are exceeded by the solution. Rationalism—abandoning the quest for absolute truth in favor of reasonable belief—offers a vehicle in either direction, and it has been the subject of efforts to constitute "internal" normative standards of science directed to truth as a goal (Toulmin 1972, Newton-Smith 1981, Foley 1987) and theories about the significance of discursive rhetoric, argumentation, and persuasion (Willard 1983, Schrag 1986). Whatever the contributions of refurbished rationalism, it seems that realism and conventionalism will continue to be debated on their promise for clarifying sociohistorical inquiry.

Conventionalism holds out the promise of shortcircuiting logical problems altogether, by the fiat of looking to the actual practices of scientists as ongoing exercises in claiming and disclaiming the legitimacy of knowledge and proper procedures for evaluating it. Science becomes something of an intellectual wrestling match. This approach, which emerged even as logical positivism reached its internal crisis, developed further support in the wake of social and historical studies of science. Polanyi (1967), following Nagel, recognized in the 1960s that science could not depend on a philosophical foundation; instead, he argued, it depended upon the "self-coordination" of informed scientists who adjust their research to the results of others, and on "mutual authority" in which scientists "Keep watch over each other." On the claim that scientists don't do what they are supposed to do anyway, constructivists can ask after what they do when they succeed. The sociohistorical critique of logical positivism is thereby turned to the advantage of science, for example, in the work of Lakatos (1971: 99). By backing off from strict "naive" experimental falsification and attending to the ways scientists develop the "hard core" of a pattern of ideas that generates further ideas and subsumes anomalies, Lakatos could advocate a methodology of historical research programs "which can be evaluated in terms of progressive and degenerating problemshifts." This approach gains credence among some sociologists (e.g. Wagner & Berger 1985, 1986; Kiser & Hechter 1988, but cf Turner 1990), for it provides an account of science without making specific assumptions about reality or the methodologies of research, thus salvaging objective knowledge by containing subjectivity within the battles over research agen-

das. In parallel ways, Bourdieu (1975) asks us to explore the social conditions under which scientists are motivated to search for truth, instead of pursuing other agendas such as prestige: Meja & Stehr (1988) assert that the problem of relativity should be recast by casting the sociology of knowledge in the role of "an interlocutor for epistemological discourse." Conventionalism need not be arbitrary, for the conventions of science can be scrutinized pragmatically in terms of their sources and their consequences.

The alternative, realist, turn away from positivism is marked in the first instance by the emergent position of Karl Popper (1979, 1983), who with other postpositivists, recognizes the theory-ridden nature of observation, yet has sought to posit a "world 3" of objective knowledge in a way that ducks the problems unmasked in the social and historical studies of science. Coupled with a metaphysical "critical" (rather than naive) realist belief in a world that exists independently of our knowledge, Popper posited an "evolutionary epistemology." Others, like Donald Campbell (1988) and David Papineau (1978), try to resolve the special problems of the social sciences within this sort of framework. Campbell would subsume the hermeneutic problem within scientific analysis of interpretive adequacy, while Papineau seeks to move from the level of meaning to that of objective reasons. Such efforts have their sociological roots in the "analytical realism" of Talcott Parsons (1937), and they may face the same issue as does Parsons' approach, namely, whether the realist conceptualization eclipses meaningful action by reducing it to variable characteristics (Hall 1984a,b).

Still within the broad domain of realism, Papineau's attempt to salvage science is countered by the alternative rationalist approach developed, for example, by Bhaskar (1975), Keat & Urry (1982), and Sylvan & Glassner (1985). Although they are concerned with the overall coherence of theory, Sylvan & Glassner nevertheless seek to avoid the idealist and antiempiricist difficulties in the structuralist rationalism of Althusser (discussed above) by proposing alternatives to statistical analysis. Their realism also rejects the purported subjectivism of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, arguing that action occurs within existing frameworks subject to multiple interpretations, and that actors' interpretations do not constitute "in themselves explanations of why those arrangements operate as they do" (1985: 6). Similarly, Robert Wuthnow (1987: 65) distinguishes between the subjective meanings that may be important for understanding social action and the "cultural constructions" on which such meanings are "contingent."

The central problem for a realist epistemology of social inquiry would be to conceptualize what is real in a way that aligns on the one hand with metaphysicalist assumptions of reality, and on the other, with the complexities entailed by social definitions of reality, whether everyday or scientific. This problem

seems largely ignored by Miller (1987), despite his interest in encompassing the social sciences within realism. But the attempt at a solution has been sketched in a philosophical vein by Outhwaite (1987), who proposes reconciling realism with the insights of hermeneutics and the emancipatory interest of critical theory. In a more rhetorical way, Christopher Lloyd (1986) argues for the reality of social structures. Both Outhwaite and Lloyd hinge key parts of their arguments for realism on the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1984), as a way of overcoming the subject-structure and understanding-explanation disjunctures.

Whatever may be concluded about Giddens' theory as ontology, there is a fundamental problem with much of the discussion about realism: It has an abstract and unreal air about it (cf O'Neill 1986). The work of Michel De Certeau (1984), among others, suggests the ceaseless reformulation of life at the borderlands of the unfolding everyday world, outside the ontology of its description by realists, ungrasped by the ways it can be known at one remove through social science epistemology, methods, and concept formation. Even if realism is granted as a *metaphysical* truth, the practical benefits seem few: Realists disagree with each other about the reality that supposedly is there and knowable. This problem is serious enough in the natural sciences, and it is compounded in sociohistorical inquiry by the symbolic and meaningful aspects of social reality (for a dialectical and materialist approach to the problem, for example, see Sayers 1985). Thus, it would seem that realists still are forced back to conceptualizations of reality in which they must confront anew the neo-Kantian problem of epistemology and the Parsonian problem of the relationship of disciplines (discussed by Outhwaite 1987). Accepting realism metaphysically does not entail recognizing the reality or character thereof described by any particular concept (e.g. "social class," or "status group"); thus, practically speaking, it remains for metaphysical realism to offer the social ontology that it would claim to warrant (cf Spencer 1982, Layder 1985, Feyerabend 1988). Absent such an ontology, realism becomes the conventionalism of likeminded scientists.

Pragmatic and Ideal Theories of Communication

Beyond the "agreed-upon practices of inquiry" that I have called "local epistemologies," there is the larger question about the possibilities of discourse when the kinds of knowledge drawn upon are diverse. Here, the post-Wittgensteinian debate among Gadamer, Habermas and Apel, and Lyotard poses the fundamental puzzle. As I already have indicated, the work of Bourdieu and others suggests the limitations of structuralism without action, as fundamentally ahistorical and unreflexive. If Wittgenstein's theory of language games is taken as a general model of scientific discourse, for

Habermas, the structuralist problem reappears in it—on the level of knowledge—as a problem of incommensurability and relativity. Whatever the validity of knowledge within a particular language game, the problem of translation between self-contained language games eluded Wittgenstein, and in this respect, Habermas regards Gadamer's characterization of "porous" language games as offering a route out of the relativism he finds in Wittgenstein's position (Habermas 1988: 130ff, Hekman 1983a). Yet in turn, Gadamer's relativization of values cannot support the project that Habermas wishes to advance, namely, the establishment of a rational universal structure of discourse that accords a place for, and mediation between, the transcendentally established kinds of "knowledge-constitutive interests" directed to technical control," "mutual understanding," and "emancipation from seemingly 'natural' constraint" (Habermas 1971: 311). It is this project that occasions both Habermas's theory of communicative action based on a social ontology of the modern situation (1984; 1987) and his colleague Karl-Otto Apel's (1984) effort to reformulate the explanation-understanding debate on a "transcendental-pragmatic" basis that contributes to the project of emancipation. For neither Habermas nor Apel is the Enlightenment dead. It continues through the containment of science and technical knowledge within human interests, in the decolonization of the system-subordinated lifeworld.

Here, despite Habermas's denial that he is a foundationalist (1984: xli; 1987: 400), postmodern, postfoundationalist philosophers part company with Habermas and Apel, proclaiming them modernists who maintain the faith of a "metanarrative" (Lyotard 1984). For Rorty (1979: 379ff) the attempt to create a transcendental standpoint is misguided. Gadamer regards the search for absolutes as "totally absurd" (q. in Hekman 1983a: 222). Calvin Schrag (1986: 61, 100) questions whether Habermas's "ideal speech situation" is indeed transcultural, and Schrag seeks an alternative basis for discourse in a reformulation of the explanation-understanding debate and a deconstruction that retrieves "communicative praxis." A reinvigorated pragmatism provides Rochberg-Halton (1986), Margolis (1986), and Antonio (1989) with what they regard as an alternative, nonfoundationalist path to critical discourse. Lyotard (1984: 65, 74) is most emphatic: Habermas rightly seeks to transcend the systems philosophy of Niklas Luhmann, but in the attempt, wishfully seeks a unity of experience that links the realms of knowledge. For Lyotard (1984: 63-64), this "seems neither possible, nor even prudent," and he embraces a more anarchistic pragmatics. For him, modern science is infused with (grand) narrative as a tool of legitimation, even as the cogency of this legitimation erodes from within. In the collapse of the modernist legitimation of knowledge, science is acknowledged as a language game in which rules cannot be the basis for the suppression of ideas, and legitimation does not

come through a metanarrative account of it, but piecemeal, in language-game "moves." These are "played in the pragmatics of knowledge" that leaps past what is conventionally settled knowledge to search out "instabilities": "It is producing not the known, but the unknown" (Lyotard 1984: 39–41, 60). Thus, Lyotard seeks to salvage the language-game model from structuralism by a Gadameresque solution, while Habermas links such a solution to a project that may be seen as an attempt to solve Rickert's value quandary (Oakes 1988) with communication as an objective value.

The disagreements notwithstanding, the protagonists share much of an outlook, and their ideas sweep away old issues and generate a new problematic. Whatever the status of Habermas's quest for a new grand narrative of legitimation in communication, like Rorty, Habermas disavows the project of establishing a basis for his knowledge epistemologically: "The theory of communicative action that I have since put forward [i.e., after writing *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*] is not a continuation of methodology by other means" (Habermas 1988: xiv). Both Habermas and Lyotard recognize the established institutional arrangements of technical knowledge production as power-based impediments to the production of nonconforming ideas and ideas which take other forms than science, institutionally defined. Yet Habermas's theory of communicative action posits a utopian speech situation in a way that ironically offers little counsel to the inhabitants of bureaucratically institutionalized spheres of life today, including those where the production of scientific knowledge transpires on a large scale. Lyotard, too, is in his own way utopian: strong on showing the "terror" of modernist science, he can only posit the asystemicity of normatively liberated scientists and an information-accessing public as the basis of "a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown" (1984: 67). Even if Lyotard does not project a value-consensus, still, he advocates an ideal—of non-authoritarian communication.

Yet communication as a value offers insufficient grounds for anchoring sociohistorical inquiry. The world is too much upon us to think that we can afford the luxury of knowledge for its own sake (Hazelrigg 1989a,b). The old master legitimations of inquiry are gone. Nor can practicing sociologists easily alter the institutional matrix in which inquiry is conducted: Whatever the vision of inquiry and communication, confronting the legitimations of institutionalized knowledge will be a matter of ongoing praxis, not of tidy intellectual solution. Nor will those struggles, even in the degree to which they succeed, resolve the questions of what is to be studied, and why. Thus, we are forced back to the realm of values, to the selection of projects of inquiry that bear cultural significance. Yet no calculus seems capable of rescuing inquiry from the multiplicity of values that animate it. Even if, in the end, we assume emergent "local epistemologies" based either on research

programs or realist ontology as language games that orient inquiry for clusters of practicing researchers, the de facto absence of a world calculus of cultural significance assures that social inquiry will be manifold in its forms of discourse for the foreseeable future. Must we then succumb to incommensurate language games that crosscheck the possibility of communication, say, between a hermeneuticist and a functionalist and a positivist? Or can a new form of discourse be established where scientific communication proceeds admidst the diversity of values, ideologies, and language games of knowledge? Karl-Otto Apel (1984) has worked hard to resolve the explanation-*Verstehende* problem, yet his solution seems more ontological than epistemological. That is, he tries to assert the cogency of each kind of inquiry, not the working relations between them. That latter task, for Schrag (1986), involves rhetoric and persuasion. Richard Rorty (1979: 317) has suggested that it is a hermeneutic task, ". . . of the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses. In his [*sic*] salon, so to speak, hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices. Disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation." Such a conversation offers at least the hope of communication. But it cannot proceed unselfcritically; instead, the hermeneutics of conversation must itself be the object of reflexive deconstruction and clarification. Nor can these activities be regarded as philosophical problems, in the traditional sense. Instead, they require further inquiry into the practicing conducts of local epistemologies and their points of value contact and logical convergence/divergence. As James Rule (1988) well demonstrates, by closely considering a wide range of theories concerning civil violence, the positivist assessment of falsifiable theories may inform such an inquiry, with or without foundations. Rule's study in social theory may not salvage positivism foundationally, but it underscores the fact that sociohistorical knowledge will continue to be produced by a variety of means which neither deny nor capitulate to the crisis of knowledge. Even if epistemology as metanarrative is dead, and whether through a persisting positivist agenda or other critical approaches, we can still hope to clarify the shared or incommensurate ontological assumptions, the forms of discourse, concepts, and theories by which we carry on a collective conversation about the social world.

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