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Social Constructivism, Hermeneutics, and the Sociology of Knowledge

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**Review Essay: Ronald Hitzler, Jo Reichertz & Norbert Schröer (Eds.) (1999).
Hermeneutische Wissenssoziologie. Standpunkte zur Theorie der Interpretation
[Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge. Aspects of a Theory of Interpretation]**

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Abstract: One of the unique characteristics of German interpretative social research is its combination of the sociology of knowledge with hermeneutics. The "Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge" is grounded in a tradition clearly shaped by a Central European conception of the social sciences as philosophically-founded and, at the same time, dedicated to empirical research. WEBER's work is undoubtedly the important starting point for this line of theory, that received its phenomenological basis from SCHÜTZ and its profile of a sociology of knowledge from BERGER and LUCKMANN. The aim of this model of sociology is the reconstruction of the "social constructions of reality." The common view of all authors included in this anthology is that "pure" theorizing detached from empirical analysis lacks epistemological logic. Therefore, they are justifiably skeptical of all efforts to develop an a-historical general sociological theory. The contributions are intended to further reflection on the epistemological bases of the social sciences and progress in developing the methodological base and methods of social research. The editors emphasize that a "Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge" is to be understood as involving methodical skepticism regarding all forms of "positive knowledge." It aims at the "disenchant-

ment of the social constructions of reality," and this includes criticism of the "constructs of sociologists" by sociologists themselves. The conception and practice of science as a collaborative task as realized by the "Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge" seems to be a very adequate contemporary way of working in the social sciences. The advantage of this line of thought, its inner pluralism, its interest in and willingness to cooperate with other theoretical traditions and ability to focus on the nonsense that can motivate social actions constitute undeniable advantages of this conception of social research and theorizing.

Key words: *methodology, methods, theory, social sciences, Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge*

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1. Background and Context of the "Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge"

One of the unique characteristics in German interpretative social research is a combination of the sociology of knowledge with hermeneutics. Also noteworthy is that it shapes a theoretical current that is, fortunately, not fixated on a particular famous philosopher, but is instead marked by a quite pronounced internal pluralism. There is also a great curiosity, enthusiasm, interest and willingness to respond to the contributions of other currents in our discipline. To judge a multi-faceted book like this from the narrow perspective of how it refers to the work of *one*—supposedly *the*—contemporary German sociologist (cf. SEIFFARTH 2001) is, in my view, a legitimate, but rather limited approach. Moreover, simplifications in this respect may not accomplish the task that one usually expects from a professional review that is *also* intended to inform readers, at least to some extent, about the content of the book. Because, in my opinion, these aspects were insufficiently dealt with in the review by [SEIFFARTH](#) that recently appeared in this journal, I offer a second review here. [1]

Before turning to its contents, however, it is to be noted that the anthology edited by HITZLER, REICHERTZ and SCHRÖER is not a separate work without a history. Rather, it is grounded in a tradition that by now encompasses several generations of scientists and is clearly shaped by a Central European conception of the social sciences as philosophically founded and, *at the same time*, dedicated to empirical research. Max WEBER's call for a social science that would apply the method of "Verstehen" to social action is undoubtedly the major starting point of this theoretical tradition. Alfred SCHÜTZ's works (1932, 1971-72) and his efforts to provide a phenomenological foundation for social theory made a substantial contribution to this theory. The advancement of WEBER's "interpretative sociology," using the phenomenological method developed by HUSSERL, made possible the description of the invariant "structures of the life-world" (SCHÜTZ & LUCKMANN 1979, 1984). Finally, Peter L. BERGER and Thomas LUCKMANN's (1969) reformulation of the sociology of knowledge as dedicated to the study of the structures of knowledge in everyday life and the processes involved in the externalization, objectification and internalization of social reality, rather than focusing exclusively on the analysis of the specialized knowledge of intellectuals or "ideas", further shaped this theoretical program. The aim of this conception of sociology is the reconstruction of the "social constructions of reality". [2]

This anthology is also directly linked to a series of publications about the theory and methods of sociological understanding that have been published in this tradition thus far—apart from numerous case studies and other empirical analyses. In a theoretical regard, for instance, SRUBAR (1988) systematically explored the relationship of SCHÜTZ's social theory to philosophical anthropology. The use of hermeneutics as a method of sociological understanding and explaining has been influenced substantially by SOEFFNER (e.g. 1979, 1989). And the anthologies by SCHRÖER (1994) and more recently HITZLER and HONER (1997) have attempted to provide an overview of the interpretative methods that, in the meantime, are increasingly being used in the growing field of qualitative research projects and have advanced the methodological discussion. The fact that these contributions also contributed to theory development is shown, for example, by the revitalization of sociological ethnography by HONER (1993) and the expansion of social constructivism to a theory of social contexts and communicative construction by KNOBLAUCH (1995). As the contributions to the sociology of understanding recently published by EBERLE (2000) and KURT (2002) testify, the development of this paradigm continues. [3]

Besides differences in the approaches of the scholars referred to above, the common view of all authors included in this anthology is that "pure" theorizing detached from empirical analysis is epistemologically unsatisfactory. Their contributions to the development of sociological theory instead follow the postulate of STRAUSS and GLASER that any legitimate theoretical generalization needs a well-examined empirical basis. They are, therefore, justifiably skeptical of all efforts to develop an a-historical general sociological theory. Instead, we should continue

to reflect on the epistemological basis of the social sciences and try to develop the methodological bases and methods of social research. A final sociological "theory of understanding" will probably never be possible, in the sense of a strict conception of theory as an unchanging system of axiomatic statements. Obviously, however, a sociology conceived of as a science of understanding needs a theory of understanding. This theory has been progressively advanced, updated, and developed with respect to basic theoretical formulations on the background of the authors' empirical research. The editors emphasize this programmatic, dynamic, non-hermetic character in a statement on the cover of their book. The anthology is subtitled "Points of view of a theory of interpretation" and thereby documents an amiably unpretentious self-presentation of a theoretical, methodological and methodical program which is as demanding as complex and is expressly characterized by the publishers as an open-ended project (cf. p.10). The 'hermeneutic sociology of knowledge' understands itself as a substantially unfinished, ongoing theory, and it should thus not be overlooked that this sociology is anything but hermetic. Committed to this idea, it is, therefore, hardly surprising that the discussion of other currents (*also* systems theory) is given relatively broad coverage in this anthology edited by HITZLER, REICHERTZ and SCHRÖER. [4]

2. Contributions to a "Theory of Understanding"

But enough of genealogies. What does this book actually have to offer? It provides readers with a wide range of basic theoretical, methodological and theoretical-comparative articles whose variety includes its origins and textual forms as well as the thematic focus of the particular contributions. The anthology brings together earlier basic publications with new texts and thus permits an overview of the salient developments of the last three decades in interpretative sociology. The first section, entitled "Methodological reflections," includes four contributions. In the first, LUCKMANN, departing from his foundational text of social constructivism written with BERGER (1969), shows "how phenomenological constitution-analysis and the sociological reconstruction of human constructions of reality complement one another" (p.21). In his comment on the "structures of the life-world" (SCHUTZ & LUCKMANN 1974), SOEFFNER emphasizes the anthropological characteristics of phenomenologically-based social theory (p.35) and stresses that the "structures" not only include the outline of a proto-sociology, but also a proto-hermeneutics, because the work is oriented to the foundation of the interpretative paradigm by developing a science of "Verstehen" (p.33). In the next contribution, SOEFFNER discusses the (WEBERIAN) call for understanding *and* explaining and appropriately characterizes sociology as a kind of "retrospective prophecy: a reconstruction of the social constructions of reality and their conditions of construction" (p.40). Beyond a specific methodology and a repertoire of methodical procedures to analyze social reality, sociological hermeneutics is characterized by SOEFFNER as a "specifically historical self-reflexive epistemological style rooted in the conviction that there is no irrevocable, a-historically certain knowledge, no finally-settled social theory" (p.48). The last article, by HONER, unfolds the concept of life-world introduced by HUSSERL, tying it to current discussions on the pluralization and fragmentation of knowledge in late modernity. HONER calls for a sociology of knowledge focused on the analysis of what Benita LUCKMANN has defined as "the small life-worlds of modern man". [5]

In the second section, entitled "Action and social foundation", KELLNER and HEUBERGER deal with the problem of sociological concepts. Their argumentation opposes an intentionalistic reductionism of understanding (p.82) that is satisfied with a reconstruction of actors' subjective perspectives. The aim of sociological concepts is, rather, to elucidate the objective conditions under which sense configurations can occur in everyday life. According to SCHUTZ's postulates, sociological "constructs of constructs" must not only be founded in actors' everyday-life lay constructs, but are also subject to the immanent requirements of the scientific realm concerning "logical consistency" and "adequacy". Contrary to SCHUTZ, KELLNER and HEUBERGER argue that the reality-accent of these "models," if materially saturated, is not only limited to the model world of the sciences, but also applies/belongs to the reality of everyday life—although

abbreviated and exaggerated (p.89). The following essay by EBERLE is also devoted to the problem of adequacy. Comparing the methodological postulates of SCHUTZ and WEBER, EBERLE points out that SCHUTZ reduced the WEBERian adequacy of meaning and cause to adequacy of meaning only. Unlike the proposal of KELLNER and HEUBERGER, EBERLE suggests radicalizing the adequacy postulates to make the individual's subjective perspective the ultimate reference point. He stresses that this implies neither normativization, nor withdrawal from empirical research, and surely not the subjectivization of sociology. Furthermore, defending the thesis of the universality of life-world structures does not imply ideologically immunizing phenomenological proto-sociology against modification and supplementation (p.117). The following contribution by MEUSER examines the potential contribution of the sociology of knowledge to the analysis of social structures. He explores links to the BOURDIEUean concept of *habitus* and the MANNHEIMian conjoint space of experience in order to reconstruct the effects of "a tergo" structures that influence individual action in ways not reflexively accessible to actors themselves. In the last essay, IVÁNYI explores possible links with GIDDENS' theory of structurization and advocates greater attention within the sociology of knowledge to the aspect of power, with which social constructions of reality are intertwined. [6]

The third section, which brings together contributions on "subjectivity and intersubjectivity," opens with a comment by LUCKMANN and SOEFFNER on G. UNGEHEUER's theory of communication. In this text, published for the first time in 1978 as an epilogue to UNGEHEUER's book, they discover in his fragmentary planned theory design a "distantly-reflective attitude of distrust for any alleged certainty." They also criticize HABERMAS's attempt to represent communication as a type of "self-referential role-game of argumentative rationality" (p.184). The following article by SCHRÖER turns to the communicative problems which arise "from the attempts of individuals to adjust their hypotheses of intersubjectivity with one another" (p.187). He examines the contributions to communication theory of UNGEHEUER and JUCHEM, LUHMANN, BERGER and LUCKMANN and criticizes the communication concept of radical constructivism and of LUHMANN's theory of social systems. As opposed to these conceptualizations, he emphasizes the diverging perspectivity of those communicating which originates in their inescapable subjectivity. Communication also forms the core of KNOBLAUCH's article, which illuminates the divergences and parallels of the two most important sociological constructivisms, LUHMANN's system theory, on the one hand, and the social constructivism of BERGER and LUCKMANN, on the other. Reconstructing the historical conditions of the genesis of the—deferred—upswing of both currents [schools of thought], KNOBLAUCH postulates a clear elective affinity between radical constructivism and late modernity. He accuses radical constructivism of breaking with tradition in its inclination to found social theory in cybernetics and biology and hints at its pronouncedly German language style and terminology. Nonetheless, KNOBLAUCH ascertains a convergence of different theory traditions on the concept of communication and, therefore, argues for a complementary understanding that he suggests calling "communicative constructivism." The following contribution by DALLINGER also deals with the "divergences and convergences of system theory and social phenomenology." The article by PFADENHAUER is dedicated to a quite different topic of the sociology of knowledge. It situates the "dramatological" role concept in the context of the sociology of knowledge and, on the basis of an anthropologically-founded understanding of roles, presents the thesis of a general constraint on the presentation of self. Applying her approach to the professional, she emphasizes the conception of professionalism as the "achievement of performance" as a special ability to *represent* competence: "It does *not* depend on whether someone who represents himself as competent actually *is* competent—except for convincingly *representing* competence—to do whatever" (p.279). Since it can also be read as a form of self-reflection on sociologists' representational practices, the contribution by PFADENHAUER is well positioned, leading up to the fourth and last chapter, on the "Reflection of scientific practice." [7]

In his essay, HITZLER takes up the THOMAS theorem and refers to SARTRE's situationalism. He concludes, "A so-called 'social situation' is not the situation of several actors, but that of every single individual" (p.294). This discussion of sociological theories of situation is followed by programmatic considerations, in which HITZLER pleads for a self-reflexive sociology of

knowledge that also renders account of the constructedness of its own sociological assertions. This, however, involves the danger—which HITZLER is aware of in closing his contribution with CAMUS's metaphorical image of the Sisyphus of professional self-reflexivity—of an absurd, infinite regression that culminates in reflections on constructedness instead of doing science—a truly unprofitable activity that was already criticized by SCHELFSKY, who called the scientification of everyday life practice the "institutionalization of incessant reflection" (The fact that HITZLER has doubts about the usefulness of scientific "second-order constructs" seems to reflect an internal erosion of science itself.) The following contribution by LUCKMANN also deals with general problems of social-scientific theory in modernity. Following the argumentation of HUSSERL's *Krisis* (1962), LUCKMANN sketches the "cosmological fiasco of sociology" and emphasizes that it is "not a satisfactory response to qualify cosmological questions as irrational and surrender them to an individual left with his subjectivity and to transform science into a cognitive technology company with very limited liability" (pp.309f.). LUCKMANN explains why alienation from the sources of human consciousness is particularly fatal for social science. In the concluding contribution of the anthology, REICHERTZ addresses the question of validity in qualitative social research. He stresses that "qualitative research can no longer rest on the shoulders of lone warriors, for cooperative and competitive teamwork must become a genuine standard" (p.344). [8]

3. Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge as a Cooperative Task

Not only is this anthology a product of broad teamwork, but teamwork is also a general principle of work in sociological hermeneutics. It is this collaborative character that, in my opinion, makes the hermeneutical sociology of knowledge a challenging and fruitful contemporary approach. Hermeneutical sociology not only possesses vast socio-critical potential that is often overlooked, but it should be understood, the editors emphasize, as involving methodical skepticism toward all forms of "positive knowledge" and aiming at the "disenchantment of social constructions of reality" (p.11). This also includes, as HITZLER notes, criticism of the "constructs of sociologists" by sociologists themselves (pp.302f.)—rarely found in other currents of our discipline. Above all, however, it is up-to-date because of its tendency to favor cooperation. Earlier social theories were often presented as the great intellectual achievements of inspired authors. Today, simply the intended or "unintentional" (?) consequences in the course of institutionalization of repeated academic reforms (as for instance the abolition of research, cf. the bitter comment by TRABANT 2002) no longer permit the luxury of solitary production stubbornly detached from the world. Because of the increasing exhaustion caused by bureaucratization, sociologists simply lack the necessary time. Nonetheless, external constraints are not the basic reason for the joint production of social theory, which is rather a coherent response to an important generational development essential to the sociology of knowledge. The vast increase in available knowledge and specialization in the social sciences have deprived even the most optimistic and long-lived individuals, however heroic and widely-read they may be, of any chance to grasp more than a fragmentary overview of the stock of knowledge—and what is presented as such. Contrary to more "old-fashioned" currents upholding the fiction of single authorship, the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge, in systematically adopting a collaborative model (not a collectivistic retrenchment) of investigation and theorizing, proves to be better-equipped to face contemporary challenges in the social sciences. One may add that the cooperation of several scholars, if possible differently-specialized individuals with various backgrounds, is one of the methodological principles of the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge realized in the "community of interpretation". [9]

Finally, with respect to more "simple-minded" theories, there is one further advantage in presenting progress in theory and methodology in an anthology. We need to resist the temptation, both enticing and dangerous for the social sciences, to extract simple assertions from social reality. Rather, we need to uncover the assumption of *meaning as assumptions* of meaning and examine their collective effects. Because of the pragmatic impulse, common sense is inclined to *either* assume (an explainable) meaning in observed phenomena or to

reject this as "nonsense," denying any explanatory value. According to the methodical postulate to generate the "most improbable interpretation," the benefit of hermeneutically-based interpretive social research is that the "nonsense which determines social situations" (BERGER) can be *systematically* analyzed and is not permanently confined, as in the common sense approach, to mythical obscurity. Undoubtedly this ability is one of the most important advantages in comparison with other currents of sociological analysis. [10]

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