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Thinking the social from the perspective of its borders

Introduction

It is specific to modern societies that only living human beings can be considered social persons in a generally recognized sense. Other societies draw different boundaries and include, for example, gods or animals in the sphere of legitimate persons (Kelsen, 1982; Luckmann, 1980). The modern restriction of the sphere of legitimate persons also carries over, more or less explicitly, to much of sociological research, which regards sociation as the sociation of human beings. Strictly speaking, Latour's symmetrical anthropology (Latour, 1991/1995) also lends human beings a privileged position of this kind. Although Latour programmatically calls for symmetry between human and non-human actors, even in his work it is the human actors that ultimately take center stage. They constitute, as it were, the social core of the sociation process, while non-human actors are given the status of assistants. The latter function as stabilizers, lending the social order a kind of solidity human actors could not create on their own. Technical artifacts as assistants supporting action also figure in other areas of the sociology of technology.¹

If, however, one wants to examine how the central position of living human beings is created in modern society and stabilized as such, one must ask a different question: how, in modern societies, are social persons distinguished from other entities? In order to find an answer, it is necessary, as Luckmann did, to suspend the assumption that only living human beings can be social persons. For if sociologists make the same anthropological assumptions that also function as unquestioned premises in the field, they can no longer be made the object of study, but rather determine the course of research in advance.

In order to prevent one's own basic assumptions from impeding research, it is necessary to explicate these core conceptual premises to the point of being able to understand how they determine empirical study. It is becoming increasingly common – in at least German sociology – to refer to basic conceptual

¹ I have shown elsewhere that Latour's inclusion of non-human actors takes up and empirically substantiates an old claim of Durkheim's (Lindemann, 2008a). In general there seems to be a growing consensus in the technology of sociology to understand technology as a means of sociation, which certainly includes the idea that the means can decisively determine this process. Rammert's concept of distributed action also goes in this direction (Rammert, 2007). Cf. also "Technik – Körper der Gesellschaft" (Joerges, 1996).

assumptions as “social theory” (Greshoff, Lindemann, & Schimank, 2007). The term social theory refers to those aspects of sociological theory that determine what is to be understood as a social phenomenon and what methodological principles are to be used in the collection and analysis of data. A social theory thus also includes the anthropological assumptions relevant to a theory. It follows that, in reference to the problem being examined here, it is imperative to explicate the meaning of the fundamental theoretical concepts for theoretical and empirical research.

The fact that an analysis of the borders of the social world is impossible without a thorough reflection on theoretical foundations has an unusual consequence: it turned out, during the research process, to be necessary to supplement the reflection on social theory with two epistemological questions.

1. What is the relationship between social theory and empirical data; or, to be more precise: is it impossible for social theories to be called into question by empirical data?
2. Do social theories necessarily have to make an epistemological claim to universality? What are the consequences of historically situating the epistemological claim of social theories; in other words, of understanding it as a modern epistemological claim?

It is in this way that an analysis of the borders of the social world led to a new kind of sociological research. For it is not only a matter of dovetailing empirical and theoretical research but also of integrating an epistemological reflection on one's own approach into the research process. This requires a reflexive method of theory construction that allows for an exploration of one's own basic assumptions. This book is a proposal for such an approach, inspired by the method of theory construction practiced by Simmel and Plessner.

In the following I will outline this research strategy in four steps. First I discuss the relationship between sociology and its (implicit) anthropological assumptions. My guiding premise is that the relationship between sociology and anthropology has the nature of a “positive anthropology,” in that it is assumed without question that only living people can be social persons. Following Plessner's anthropological reflections, I demonstrate how an analysis of the borders of the social makes it necessary to replace a positive anthropology with a “reflexive anthropology.” A reflexive anthropology makes it possible to see as historical and contingent who is recognized as a social person and what is to be excluded from the sphere of persons (1). In a second step I discuss, in reference to Simmel's theory of the social, the epistemological problem of the relationship between social theory (the theoretical and methodological assumptions guiding observation) and empirical research. I identify two general characteristics of

social theories: social theories make an epistemological claim to universality, and they cannot be falsified by empirical data. Social theories are used to study all empirically or historically observable social phenomena and are thus considered to be universal. As a rule, social theories are rendered immune to empirical challenge since they constitutively enter into both the collection of data as well as into the methodological principles of analysis. Social theories determine what is empirically the case, which is why empirical data cannot contradict them in the sense of falsification (2). In view of this situation, I develop a proposal for making social theories susceptible to challenge by empirical data. In order to revoke the immunity of social theories, however, the link back from the data to “their” social theory can no longer be conceived according to the verification/falsification distinction. Considering the special status that social theories have in relation to empirical data, I propose organizing theory’s relationship to such data according to the troubled/precise distinction. This opens up the possibility of basing the further development of social theories on empirical research (3). In conclusion, I address the significance of the possibility of a socio-epistemological self-relativization for social theories’ epistemological claim to universality. I am not so much interested here in a tangible proof that “our thinking is determined by our social position” (Mannheim, 1929/1991), but rather in a reflection of sociological knowledge from the point of view of a theory of society as well as in the implications of this kind of reflection for the epistemological claim social theories (must) make. My standard of comparison is the self-reflection of one’s own epistemological claims, such as is formulated by Luhmann, for example, in the context of his general theory of society (4).

Reflexive Anthropology

The anthropological assumptions of social scientific theory have to date been as follows: it is either implicitly or explicitly taken for granted that only living human beings can be social persons. Living human beings are seen as essentially undetermined; that is, it is part of the essence of the human to have undetermined drives and needs, which is why a stable structure of drives and needs can only emerge in the process of sociation. To name only a few prominent terms, the human being needs society, politics, culture, and work/practice (this list can be expanded or shortened at will) in order to create a life form. In this sense it is an open question what the human is. The human being understood in this way constitutes the general anthropological assumption based on which sociation processes are analyzed. The works of very different authors converge on this point—e.g. Marx, Weber, Mead, Parsons, Gehlen, as well as the early Luhmann, still under the strong influence of Gehlen (Fischer, 2006, 2008). I call

this kind of anthropological content positive anthropology. The main question appearing within its framework is how undetermined the human being must be in order to understand sociation processes.

Positive anthropology is theoretically sufficient as long as the question of the borders of the social is not explicitly raised. Once it is posed, however, the assumption that only living human beings can be social persons can no longer be taken for granted. Luckmann and Kelsen cite plentiful evidence from ethnological (Luckmann, 1980) and historical (Kelsen, 1982) research that deceased humans, beings from the beyond such as spirits, gods, demons, or angels, as well as animals and/or plants or technical artifacts, can be considered legitimate actors in non-modern societies (chapter 3). Thus it must be considered specific to modern society that only living human beings can be social persons.² From this perspective it is not only an open question what the human being is, but also who can attain the status of a social person. Foregrounding the who-question opens up a new form of comparing societies in that it allows us to ask whether societies can be distinguished according to how the sphere of generally recognized actors is defined. Every society has its own border regime that defines the sphere of legitimate actors (chapters 2, 3, 6.2). Ultimately, a society can only be called a human society if it identifies the sphere of legitimate social persons with the sphere of living human beings. In this sense it is presumably only modern society that constitutes a “human society.” This society emerged around the middle of the eighteenth century, and it is an open question how long it will continue to exist. Only one thing seems certain—it is not going to be declared dead anytime soon.

The human society defines the borders of the sphere of legitimate social persons in an anthropological way. A sociology that implicitly carries with it anthropological content of this kind—a sociology, in other words, that is also based on anthropological assumptions—affirms the modern anthropological borders of the social and thus cannot make them the object of its study.

The theoretical challenge this poses is to acknowledge the particularity of the modern border regime, while at the same time reflexively distancing oneself from it. I refer to the resulting relationship between sociology and anthropology as “reflexive anthropology.” Reflexive anthropology is characterized by the fact that it treats not only the question what the human being is but also the question who is a social person as an open one that can only be answered historically. My use of

² Neo-institutionalist authors have extended this definition by pointing out that not only individual living human beings but also “corporate actors” can function as legitimate actors in a comparable albeit derivative way (Meyer/Jepperson, 2000).

the term “reflexive anthropology” is thus distinctly different from that of Bourdieu und Wacquant and should not be confused with it. They understand reflexive anthropology to refer to a certain form of sociological reflection (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2006), without considering the problem of the fundamental distinction between social persons and others.

A reflexive anthropology that considers the distinction between social persons and others can be found, on the other hand, in the work of Luckmann (1980) and Plessner (1928). Their approaches differ considerably, however, in methodology and fundamental epistemological assumptions. The methodological practice of reflexive anthropology necessarily makes general statements about the relationship between social theory and empirical research. Luckmann follows Husserl and grounds his reflexive anthropology transcendently (Luckmann, 1980). This is Luckmann’s response to Husserl’s resistance to any anthropological or psychological reduction in the reflection on the sphere of the transcendental ego. This approach, however, has problematic consequences for sociological research. For one, transcendental theory does not allow for an adequate understanding of the problem of the other ego, which is the basic condition of sociality.³ For another, this kind of reflexive anthropology would make it impossible to give up the immunity to empirical research enjoyed by the basic assumptions guiding observation.

Once core elements of social theory—which in phenomenologically grounded sociology include the theory of consciousness and its object reference—attain a transcendental status, it by definition becomes impossible for them to be called into question by empirical research. If a reflexive anthropology is to be developed that makes it possible to empirically challenge theoretical assumptions, then it is no longer feasible to continue on the path taken by Luckmann following Husserl. Plessner’s research strategy seems to me to be the more attractive option. It allows for a reflection of the fact [Sachverhalt] that the theoretical assumptions guiding research are established in the research process itself. This in turn makes it possible to refer empirical data back to social theory in a new way, namely as able to challenge the assumptions guiding observation. In the following sections I will discuss this issue, which is a recurring theme throughout this volume, in some detail.

³ Schütz saw this clearly, although he made no further contribution to the socio-epistemological and phenomenological discussion. Knoblauch and Schnettler thus follow Luckmann in their discussion of who can be a social person without responding to Schütz’s criticism of transcendental solutions. Lüdtke (2008) gives a good overview of how Schütz first avoided a transcendental solution, only to then forget about the problem (2008).

An important consequence of reflexive anthropology is the necessity of granting the body a privileged position within theory. If it is specific to modernity that only living human beings can be social persons, it follows that an analysis of modern societies must pay particular attention to the body. Sociality must be thought of as the sociation of earthly, embodied persons (cf. chapter 5). It is only with this in mind that we can understand the importance of technology for the process of sociation. Earthly human beings require technology in order to communicate over long distances or in order to travel to far-away parts of the world. Angels do not need to board an airplane or use a telephone in order to stay in touch with each other or with their Lord, even at great distances. Nor is the relationship between angels and humans subject to such technological restrictions. The great importance of technology in modern life thus points to the fact that sociation must be conceived of as the sociation of embodied actors who see themselves as strictly *earthly* actors. It is therefore precisely the analysis of modernity or of the modern border regime that requires a social theory that grants the embodied human being a privileged position within the theory (cf. chapter 5). It is important to grasp the precise meaning of this statement. It is highly unlikely that the necessity of thinking the social as embodied can be understood in the sense of a universal assumption valid for all societies. Such a social theory is rather clearly marked by its modern origins. This makes evident yet again the importance of keeping an eye both on the problem of social theories' epistemological claim to universality as well as on the problem of the revision of their relationship to empirical data.

The relationship to empirical data of social theory, limited range theories, and theories of society

The analysis of the relationship between anthropology and sociology leads necessarily to the more general problem of the relationship between social theory and empirical research. In order to clarify what is at stake here, I refer to Simmel's distinction between different levels of sociological research and their relationship to each other (Simmel 1908: 20ff). Simmel distinguishes between three levels of sociological theory formation, each with a different relationship to empirical data: social theories, limited range theories, and theories of society.

Social theories contain assumptions about what is to be understood as a social phenomenon and what concepts are given a central role, e.g. expectation, action, knowledge, interaction, or communication. Limited range theories concern particular social phenomena, such as, for example, the way research is practiced in a microbiology laboratory. In my view, the term "limited range theories" is

more suitable than Merton's "middle range theories," as it encompasses theories that are only valid for individual cases or object-related theories such as ethnomethodology or Grounded Theory. Theories of society, finally, are theories about large historical formations such as modern society, capitalist society, or functionally differentiated society.⁴

This differentiation also includes a criterion for determining when a sociological theory is complete. A complete theory should contain an elaborated social theory on whose basis several limited range theories have been developed, as well as include a theory of society.

Simmel's proposal created an epistemological framework for sociology, which, on the whole, is still valid today. The distinction between these theoretical levels can be found in almost every sociological theory, even if not all theories are equally developed on each of these levels. The family of rational choice theories, for instance, has produced a thoroughly elaborated social theory as well as a series of limited range theories, and the same holds for phenomenological and interpretive sociology. The weakness of these theories is in the area of a theory of society. Luhmann's systems theory as well as the theory of communicative action (Habermas), on the other hand, contain thoroughly worked out social theories and theories of society, while their weakness lies in the area of limited range theories.

In order to demonstrate the significance of social theories in the context of a sociological theory and their relationship to limited range theories and theories of society, it is necessary to look more closely at the relationship between theory and empirical data. This relationship differs according to whether we have to do with a social theory, a limited range theory, or a theory of society.

Social Theory

Social theories contain assumptions about the nature of the object as well as methodological concepts; that is to say, assumptions about how the object is to be observed and how empirical data is to be interpreted. Such theories constitutively determine what and how something can be regarded as a

⁴ While Simmel did not set out this differentiation of levels in explicit terms, he developed it extensively in substance. In his sociology he distinguishes those sociological theories that contain claims about givens (in accordance with limited range theories) from those assumptions about the general object of sociological research he refers to as the a priori conditions of the social (social theory), which he in turn differentiates from claims about particular historical forms of society (theories of society). Cf. Simmel (1908: 20).

sociological empirical datum. In other words, social theory serves the purpose of defining, in a general way, what is to be understood as a social phenomenon and consequently can function as an empirical datum for sociological research.

Two consequences follow from these general definitions, which, although they seem almost tautological, are worth being stated explicitly.

- (1) Social theories make an epistemological claim to universality.
- (2) Social theories are not falsifiable.

The epistemological claim to universality derives from the fact that a social theory is valid for every social phenomenon. This is, in a sense, tautological, because sociological observation will only register something as a social phenomenon if it satisfies the particular social theory's criteria for what can be considered a social phenomenon. Discourse analysts identify discourses and analyze the formation of discourses according to this logic; researchers from an action theory tradition perceive actions and identify their logics, which can then be considered as specific to particular societies; and so forth.

The second consequence consists in the fact that empirical data cannot contradict a social theory in the sense of a falsification. Since the empirical data are themselves structured by the social theory, anything else would imply that empirical data could falsify itself. It is for this reason that such data cannot serve the purpose of falsification and cannot decide whether a social theory is right or wrong. This consequence remains implicit, but nevertheless has effects. Research conducted from the perspective of action theory finds a social world consisting of actions. The phenomena found in this way cannot falsify the underlying action theory, since it is primarily actions that are identified as social phenomena.

These characteristics of social theories stand out clearly in Simmel's work because he constructs his theory according to a Kantian model. He explicitly refers to the assumptions of social theory as a priori assumptions. This automatically implies that they are universally valid and cannot be called into question by empirical data.

The two characteristics of universality and non-falsifiability remain even when social theories are no longer understood in the sense of an a priori as Simmel does—which is the case for almost all sociological work since Simmel. It has become uncommon in sociology to refer explicitly to a priori assumptions.⁵ There

⁵ Even Luckmann only refers to Husserl's argument from transcendental theory when he is analyzing the borders of the social. Schütz, whose social theory is also based on Husserl's theory of consciousness (Schütz, 1932/1974), had initially hoped that Husserl's approach would help solve the problem of the other ego, but subsequently gave up this hope (Schütz, 1957). As a solution to

is no indication in Weber's work that a social theory is to be understood in the sense of a transcendental condition for sociological knowledge. His explication of the basic sociological concepts (Weber, 1985) does not even remotely evoke transcendental theory. Nevertheless, the characteristics noted above remain. Weber's general concepts, such as social action in a social relationship as well as the different types of action are conceived as formal concepts appropriate for the analysis of both modern as well as non-modern societies. Nor can the concept of social action be falsified. At most one could determine that a particular phenomenon cannot be understood as a social action. The same holds for other assumptions in social theory, such as Mead's concept of the generalized other or Luhmann's concept of communication.

The main reason why social theories are, as a rule, immunized against empirical challenge seems to me to lie in the following. In the empirical sciences, to which sociology belongs, the verification/falsification distinction is the only recognized form for relating empirical data to theories. Since, as I have shown, it is impossible for empirical data to falsify social theories, it seems inevitable for social theories to become resistant to empirical challenge. This also holds even when the social theory is in no way understood as an a priori. Even then it is true that social theories establish in the first place what can be considered an empirical datum and how it is to be interpreted and related to the theory. Given this, it is evident that these theories cannot be falsified. If it is to be possible at all to challenge social theories with empirical research, the verification/falsification distinction must be given up and something else put in its place. I will return to this point in detail in the following section.

Limited range theories

While social theories contain decisions that determine the course of theoretical and empirical research, limited range theories are developed in the preset structure of a social theory and the data determined by this theory. To cite a prominent example, the theory of awareness contexts (Glaser & Strauss, 1974), applied to the interaction with the dying, is a limited range theory based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of Grounded Theory viz. symbolic interactionism. Limited range theories are developed with an empirical focus and

this problem, which cannot be solved with transcendental theory, Schütz proposes the general thesis of the alter ego (Schütz, 1973), which forms the basis for his work on the structures of the life-world (Schütz & Luckmann, 1984, 1988). Cf. also footnote 3.

are consistently geared toward the verification/falsification distinction. This is true for qualitative research as well (chapter 6).

At this point it becomes important to preempt a possible misunderstanding. Social theories are constantly being confused with microtheories. If one considers, however, the problem of the relationship to empirical data, it becomes evident that the distinction between micro and macro theories takes place within the domain of limited range theories. Microtheories can be falsified or verified. These are not, then, social theories but theories about a small segment of social life. The example of awareness contexts in interacting with the dying would be a microtheory, which as such can be meaningfully verified or falsified. The same holds for theories that concern large segments of social life, that is, for macrotheories. They too can be verified or falsified. Examples would be theories about the distribution of wealth or of career opportunities. The difference between micro and macro is a difference within the framework of limited range theories.

Theories of society

According to Simmel (1908), theories of society are theories that contain claims about large historical formations. They summarize data and limited range theories in a comprehensive statement that characterizes social formations such as capitalist society or functionally differentiated society as a whole. Unlike Parsons or Luhmann, Simmel is not interested in developing a general theory of society that claims to describe all existing societies throughout history. Theories of society for Simmel have a relationship to empirical data that differs both from that of social theories as well as that of limited range theories. The assumptions inherent in theories of society do not constitutively enter into the collection of data. It is rather a matter of hypotheses guiding a meta-interpretation of limited range theories. Ideally, a theory of society would be completely backed by limited range theories. This ideal case has so far never been realized. Theories of society continue to be empirically underdetermined (Schimank, 1996).

The best way to describe the relationship between theories of society and empirical data or limited range theories is in terms of extrapolation. A theory of society is constructed by summarizing at least a few limited range theories in an overall characterization. There can still be a number of limited range theories that don't fit, and maybe even some that contradict the basic claims of the theory of society. The only criterion in relation to empirical data that would have to be met is that the overall characterization be coherent and plausible. Here we have to keep in mind that theories of society as defined by Simmel do not make the

same claim of universal validity as do social theories, which claim to be valid for the analysis of every historically extant social phenomenon. Theories of society are only ever valid for a specific, historically evolved, and transitory societal formation. This distinguishes Simmel's understanding of theories of society from those of, e.g., Parsons (1975) and Luhmann (1997), which claim to be valid for every society. I will look more closely at the consequences of this in section 4.

Following this general characterization of the parameters as defined by Simmel, I will now introduce the conception of social theory that has developed in the course of my analysis of the borders of the social. In order to prevent misunderstandings, allow me to reiterate that when I refer to the parameters defined by Simmel I do not mean Simmel's theory in a narrow sense. I am rather operating under the assumption that Simmel was the first to have formulated the core elements of what in the further development of sociological theory came to constitute an at least implicit consensus.

So far I have presented two elements of this consensus: (1) the difference between the three levels of theory—social theory, limited range theories and theories of society and (2) universality and non-falsifiability as specific characteristics of social theories. But Simmel was also influential in another sense in relation to the conception of social theories: he was the first to dissolve the compact concept of society and to understand sociation based on a dyadic elementary model of the social. This figure of thought can be found in almost every subsequent sociological theory.⁶

The consensus that developed in time between the different sociological theories can be summarized as follows. There is always the presumption of at least two actors: me/you or ego/alter. Their relationship to each other is characterized by reciprocal expectations of expectations—that is, ego expects for alter to have expectations of ego and gears his own activity to the expected expectations. The same is true for alter. A structured weave of mutual expectations of expectations emerges in this reciprocal relationship that can no longer be attributed to the characteristics or actions of individuals. This structured weave of reciprocal expectations of expectations forms an “emergent social order.” This means that these expectations of expectations can only be understood in view of the relationship between ego and alter. I refer to the whole made up of the involved

⁶ To name only a few examples: Weber's understanding of social processes is based on the concept of social relationships, which are modeled on the relationship between ego and alter. Mead develops the concept of the generalized other based on the reciprocal taking on of roles in the relationship between ego and alter. Parsons and Luhmann give primary importance to the theorem of the double contingency between ego and alter.

actors—ego and alter—and the emergent order constituted by their relationship to each other as an “emergence constellation” (chapter 4). This constellation includes on the one hand the relationships between the actors and on the other the emergent order formed by these relationships. The notion of an emergence constellation allows for a general understanding and empirical identification of social phenomena [Sachverhalte]: a phenomenon can be described as a social phenomenon [Sachverhalt] if it can be meaningfully described, understood and, potentially, explained in relationship to the emergence constellation.

The concept of the general emergence constellation allows us to rationally reconstruct the differences between sociological theories. These differences arise from how the general emergence constellation varies in the different theoretical contexts. In other words, sociological theories differ according to how they descriptively pin down the emergence constellation. In chapter 4, “Comparing Theories,” I use the examples of Weber’s action theory and Luhmann’s systems theory to demonstrate how theories can be understood as variations of an emergence constellation.

This, in brief, is the claim inherent in the formulation of the emergence constellation, as far as, for instance, general attempts at integration are concerned. The emergence constellation does not formulate an integrative theory that interweaves, at minimum, the good and important aspects of the different sociological theories into a more comprehensive whole. That was the approach of Parsons, who, of late, has been taken up again in the German-speaking world (e.g. Esser, Münch, Reckwitz). The strategy associated with the formulation of the emergence constellation has a different objective: abstracting from the many differences between theories in order to develop a basic concept of the social that can be developed in different directions.⁷

I would now like to return to the discussion about the two characteristics of social theories named above – epistemological claims to universality and non-falsifiability – in reference to the general emergence constellation. I will begin with the problem of the relationship to empirical data.

⁷ A similar approach to comparing theories is also proposed and thoroughly substantiated in Greshoff, Lindemann, Schimank (2007).

Revoking the immunity of the assumptions of social theory

Discussions about theory normally focus on particular, individual theories. These theories are compared with each other, distinguished from each other, or integrated with each other. In the following I avoid this well-rehearsed procedure by taking not individual theories, but the abstract emergence constellation as the starting point of empirically oriented theoretical research. I use this abstraction as a foundation for developing concrete questions and possible solutions. Here it is important to ask at every step whether there are already efficient solutions to a particular problem or whether there is a need for new ones. The goal is a theory as elegant and as systematically constructed as possible.

The implications of beginning with the abstract emergence constellation can be illustrated by looking at the question of the significance of the social/non-social distinction. This distinction plays an important role in all the theories, each of which point to the fact that a social person will always find entities in her environment with whom it is not possible to form social relationships. Parsons distinguishes between “social objects” and other objects. Mead differentiates between beings capable of taking on a social role and those for whom this is only possible in a derivative sense. Weber’s concept of social relationships necessarily presupposes a distinction between those with whom such a relationship is possible and those with whom it is not. Finally, Luhmann’s version of the theorem of double contingency is based on the ego experiencing an alter ego as an indeterminable horizon of open determination of meaning, that is, as another system processing meaning. The distinction between social persons and others must therefore be entered into the emergence constellation as a key feature. Looking at this characterization of the emergence constellation from the perspective of the borders of the social allows us to identify an open question, until now invisible in the theoretical context: how can we observe the effectuation of this distinction between the social and the non-social?

First, this expansion of the problem makes a methodological modification of the emergence constellation necessary. The central methodological problem lies in understanding how ego and alter understand each other. This is a matter of communicative interpretation in the narrow sense. The methodological particularities of the social-scientific interpretation of the reciprocal interpretations taking place between social persons have always occupied an important place in the development of social scientific theory.⁸ Communicative

⁸ Such as in the work of Simmel, Schütz, Mead, Habermas, Luhmann, and Giddens, to name only a few.

interpretation, however, presupposes the practical differentiation between those entities that are to be interpreted communicatively and those for whom this is not the case. I call this kind of distinguishing interpretation a “foundational interpretation.” If the question of who can be considered a social person is included, a methodology is required that goes beyond communicative interpretation to show the latter’s connection with foundational interpretation (cf. chapters 1, 2, and 6.2).

The notion of foundational interpretation gives rise to a possible misunderstanding. Foundational interpretation practically and effectively determines the exclusion of entities from the sphere of possible social persons. This is not a matter of temporarily restricting communicative possibilities, such as in the case of psychiatric patients placed in isolation in a hospital. While communicative possibilities are severely restricted in such a situation, this is not the same as the fundamental exclusion enacted by foundational interpretation. In principle, a psychiatric patient remains a person whose treatment is aimed at fully reintegrating him into communicative processes. It is in this sense that Stichweh, for instance, specifies the inclusion/exclusion distinction (Stichweh, 2002). When the inclusion/exclusion distinction is discussed in systems theory, exclusion always refers to something that takes place *within* the sphere of the social, as it pertains to entities that are addressed communicatively and act themselves as communicators, but whose possibilities of communication are severely restricted.

Focusing in subsequent research on observing the implementation of foundational interpretation led me to an empirically motivated change in the structure of the emergence constellation: the dyadic emergence constellation had to be transformed into a triadic structure. In order to grasp the significance of this step, let us briefly recall the characteristics of a social theory. The assumptions of social theory are comprised of a theory of the object as well as of basic assumptions guiding the observation, from which the fundamental principles of data interpretation are also derived. What this means in concrete terms is that empirical data, as a basic principle, are structured by theoretical assumptions. In the social sciences there is no such thing as data independent of theory. If, then, the data are already determined by the underlying social theory, it becomes impossible for this data to falsify “their” social theory. No action theorist has ever found an empirical datum that would have falsified the fundamental assumptions of action theory. The same holds for systems theorists.

Although it is impossible for empirical data to falsify their underlying social theories, it does not necessarily follow that social theories are therefore immune to every form of empirical challenge. I would like to use an optical metaphor to

illustrate how data can in fact contradict their social theory. Imagine social theories as conceptual instruments that fulfill a function analogous to optical instruments such as binoculars or microscopes. It can happen when using such an optical instrument that the object appears blurry. In order to see the object clearly, one has to adjust the settings on the optical instrument or perhaps even use another instrument entirely. This can lead to a clear, sharp perception of the object. It is only now that one can know for sure what kind of object it was that before appeared unclear and blurry. A similar experience is possible in empirical research with the use of conceptual instruments. Here too it can happen that a phenomenon can at first not be precisely grasped. The empirical data appear blurry. The data do not falsify the theory, as they are not sufficiently precise in the first place to contradict a theory, and yet the observer is troubled. If social theories are supposed to allow for precise data, the theory becomes problematic if the data troubles the theory. In such a case it would be appropriate, as with the faulty optical instrument, to modify the conceptual settings in order to be able to attain a more precise understanding of the phenomenon. The data do not falsify the theory, but rather troubles it, thus providing a motivation for changing the theory in order to attain a more precise understanding of the phenomenon.

Allowing social theories to be challenged by empirical data cannot, then, occur by means of relating the data back to the theory according to the verification/falsification distinction. I propose, instead, to link the data back to the theory based on the precise/troubled distinction. The validity of social theories would then be based on the criterion of troubledness, with the falsification criterion continuing to hold for limited range theories.

The introduction of the criterion of troubledness took place in the context of empirical research oriented toward the emergence constellation explicated above. That is to say, it was based on the assumption of a dyadic concept of sociality, since the basic model of the social contains an ego-alter relation. A more precise analysis of the data, however, led to the conclusion that the implementation of the foundational interpretation—that is, the basic delimitation process within the observed field—could not be precisely understood within the framework of a dyadic conception of sociality. For this reason it seemed appropriate to me to modify my theoretical assumptions, replacing a dyadic with a triadic emergence constellation. I thus changed the ego-alter relationship of the emergence constellation into an ego-alter-tertius relationship. It was only the triadic emergence constellation that allowed for a precise understanding and interpretation of the data. This process illustrates that even a foundational, observation-guiding assumption such as the dyadic emergence constellation, which I have identified as an implicit consensus of sociological theories, can be

called into question by empirical research. In chapter 6 I describe this process in greater detail.

A modification of this kind places certain minimum requirements on the research process as regards the explication of theoretical assumptions. The criterion of troubledness can only be applied if the social theory underlying the research is articulated succinctly enough. If the theoretical assumptions remain implicit or are too vague, empirical data will not be able to trouble the social theory in question. It now becomes clear why it is necessary to always include a reflection on one's own theoretical foundations in the research process. It is only then that it becomes possible to rescind the immunity to empirical challenge social theories have, in practice, enjoyed since Simmel. Not until theoretical assumptions are clearly and precisely articulated from the beginning can the possibility of changing them even be entertained. It is on this basis that the immunity of social theories to empirical data can be revoked. This also leads to a change in status of the reflection on theoretical foundations. This reflection can no longer be understood in the sense of a purely epistemological reflection largely independent of empirical research, but must rather be included in the research practice of the discipline. This is the only way to ensure that social theories actually give up their quasi-transcendental status in research practice.

Self-reflection of social theory with Reference to the theory of society

The term “theory of society” has two distinct meanings. On the one hand, a theory of society is a theory that characterizes a certain large historical formation, such as functionally differentiated society or capitalist society. Such theories are based on a number of limited range theories and integrate them into a comprehensive characterization of a society as a whole. They are only valid for the designated societal formation. This is the sense in which Simmel uses the term theory of society (Simmel, 1908). On the other hand, there are theories of society in the sense of general theories, which include assertions about the formation of society in general. These theories claim to be valid for all societies. Examples of this are Parsons' postulation that all societies must realize the four functions of the AGIL paradigm (Parsons, 1975) or Luhmann's claim that all societies are to be understood in terms of autopoiesis through communication (Luhmann, 1997). Different possibilities for constructing theories emerge depending on how the term “theory of society” is used. In order to explicate these different possibilities, I would like to turn now to an aspect directly relevant to the formulation of the social theory that is the main emphasis of this volume.

Like every kind of scientific pursuit, sociological research, including the associated theorizing, is itself a social activity. Now science seems to be a phenomenon that is tied to the emergence of a functionally differentiated society. That is to say that without a functionally differentiated society there would be no such thing as science in the modern sense, a fact that is an established finding of sociological research. It is therefore highly likely that the conceptual apparatus of social theory is itself tied to the conceptual possibilities that have developed in the context of such a society. This leads to the following problem. According to their epistemological claim, social theories are formal assumptions that can be used to analyze any society. Social theories are universally valid. Weber's concept of "social action" and of the "social relationship" (Weber, 1921-22/1980) make a claim to universal validity. The same is true for Luhmann's "double contingency" and "communication" (Luhmann, 1984) or Mead's concepts of identity formation such as "I," "me," and "self-consciousness" (Mead, 1934/1967). If, however, the formation of such concepts is a historically situated social practice, the claim of universal validity becomes untenable. We must rather assume that social theories contain concepts—such as those of subjectivity or of the relationships between subjects—whose characteristics are determined by the conceptual possibilities of the society in which they are formulated.

As early as the nineteen-twenties, Misch (Misch, 1967), and following him Plessner (Plessner, 1932/1981), showed that Heidegger's formal concept of *Dasein* as well as Husserl's transcendental theory constitute modern figures of thought that distort our understanding of other cultures. Misch and Plessner's theoretically sophisticated arguments set the tone for a critical approach that has been taken up again recently by neo-institutionalist authors. Meyer and Jepperson have criticized the universalization of the notion of the rational actor, arguing that this notion must be understood as a historically situated form of action characteristic of modern society but not of other societies (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Their criticism of the assumption of the rational actor is comparable to Plessner and Misch's critique of Heidegger.

The result is a methodological dilemma. Empirical and historical research must initially make abstract, theoretical assumptions in order to identify their own objects and to be able to provide information about how these objects are to be investigated. Even neo-institutionalists work with a general concept of the subject that allows them to comprehend the modern rational actor as a historical exception.⁹ In order to open one's own concept up to challenge, it has to first be

⁹ Thus, strictly speaking, Meyer and Jepperson's approach is actually closer to Weber's. Before Misch and Plessner, Weber had already demonstrated that the rational actor as such is a figure belonging to occidental modernity (Weber, 1920/1986). Weber, however, makes this statement

made explicit, as set out in the previous section. It is only then that it can be rationally criticized from a theoretical perspective or be troubled by empirical data. In rational, scientific research, therefore, there is no alternative to explicating one's own social theory. Nevertheless, the opposite practice of letting one's own theoretical assumptions remain implicit continues to be quite widespread.

The problem can be summarized thus: (1) The use of general, abstract, formal assumptions in the form of a social theory is unavoidable in defining the parameters of one's research. (2) These assumptions lay claim to universal validity, which, however, is highly unlikely to be redeemed. My proposed solution is to formulate the abstract, formal assumptions in a way that always includes the possibility of changing them. This would allow for a reference to the—in the end conceptually ungraspable—openness of historical development to itself be built into formal, universal assumptions. In this way it remains open whether there is such a thing as formal assumptions that are universally valid or whether research must get by without them. The undecidability of whether formal, universal assumptions are possible or not places a twofold demand on the use of social theories: they must be treated as formal and universal and at the same time understood in their possible relativity. Plessner (1932) in his essay "Macht und menschliche Natur" (Power and Human Nature) uses the term unfathomability (*Unergründlichkeit*) to express the fact [Sachverhalt] that this undecidability cannot be conceptually grasped.

The use of a general theory of society stands in the way of this solution. Luhmann, for instance, recognizes the necessity of conceptualizing one's own theory or one's own observation of society as a social phenomenon. This kind of reflexivity, for him, is the trademark of a good theory. This is not, however, the same as thinking the formal structure of one's own insights from the perspective of the possibility of their otherness. Luhmann's reflection on his own theory takes place within the parameters set by the general theory of society. This, however, is to conceptually contain the reflection on one's own insights. The general theory of society determines the way in which society and the theory of society itself are to be comprehended as part of society—in terms that cannot be historically relativized. Nor can the conceptual form of understanding oneself be relativized. Thus even the use of a social theory can bypass the specific complication that arises when considering its historical self-relativization. The assumptions about

from the standpoint of general, formal theoretical assumptions. His analysis of the historicity of modern rationalism must thus be distinguished from Misch and Plessner's historicization of the formal categories structuring knowledge.

communication, autopoiesis, system, and system differentiation are treated as being universally valid without any thought given to their historical situatedness. These concepts mark out the parameters within which society, contingency, and history are possible, which is why they are not considered in their construction to be tied to the conceptual possibilities of a particular society. They form the ahistorical conceptual framework of societal-historical development in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (The Society of Society) (Luhmann, 1997).

Given what I have sketched above, it seems more attractive to me to construct a theory of society following Simmel's suggestion; in other words, to understand theories of society as theories of specific large historical formations. Only when theories of society are understood in this way is there the possibility of applying Plessner's notion of unfathomability in "Macht und menschliche Natur" to social theories. This relativizes social theories' epistemological claim to universality without dropping it as such. It is true that a theory design of this kind has consequences that seem to contradict each other. On the one hand it increases the demand for abstraction, formal precision, and complexity in social theories, while on the other there is a clear shift in emphasis to empirical and historical research. This, however, is merely the expression of the fact that epistemological reflection and specialized theoretical and empirical research are no longer isolated from each other.

The work in social theory presented here is aimed at the construction of a program for a critical and systematic development of theory. The particularities of this program can be summarized as follows. (1) The development of theory is undertaken on the basis of a systematic comparison of theories. (2) Empirical research and the theoretical reflection on foundations are no longer isolated from each other. (3) Explicating the relationship between social theory and theories of society opens up new possibilities of comparing societies while at the same time increasing the reflexivity of sociological research. (4) Since the focus on the problem of borders is also an empirical one, such research empirically leads to the ethical and political anthropological border issues that determine modernity's understanding of itself. Research of this kind is based (5) on a reflexive anthropology, thus recasting the relationship between sociology and anthropology.

My focus in this book is on developing a social theory and proposing possible fields for material research. Limited range theories based on this social theory can be found elsewhere (Lindemann, 2002a, 2003a). Questions related to theories of society will only be touched on here, as I will fully explore them in a future volume.

Section A introduces the fundamental principles of a reflexive social theory and anthropology, focusing on the work of Simmel and Plessner. In this context I also explicate the theoretical conditions that must be fulfilled by a self-historicization of the epistemological claim implicit in formal and universal assumptions. In an excursus I discuss the differences between reflexive anthropology and social theory and the positive anthropologies of Scheler and Gehler. The third chapter explores material problems from the perspective of reflexive anthropology. Specifically I am concerned with the changes to the sphere of legitimate actors throughout the process of European civilization and rationalization. This includes ways in which freedom, equality, and individual responsibility came to be guiding concepts of secular law and the emerging practice of torture. At first, the bodies subjected to torture exhibited a marked focus on the beyond and were free and equal. Only in a second step was this focus on the beyond cut off and freedom and equality came to exclusively characterize living human bodies.

Chapter 4 develops the concept of the general emergence constellation and its epistemological implications. I argue that the different directions in sociological theory can be understood as particular variations of the general emergence constellation. In chapter 5 I explain the necessity of thinking sociality as embodied. Without such a thinking, for instance, it is impossible to understand the significance of technology for the process of sociation.

One of the notable characteristics of Plessner's methodological construction of theory is his development of a theoretically controlled form of understanding. This allows on the one hand for the rationally controllable inclusion of phenomena normally classified as belonging to non-social nature in sociological analyses; on the other, it furnishes the means for empirically challenging theoretical assumptions. Finally, by way of the example of expectations in law and the functions of the third I demonstrate a research practice that assesses social theories on the basis of the criterion of troubledness.

Translated by Millay Hyatt

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