

# 4

## Hermeneutics, Weber, Constructivism

The *hermeneutic* tradition we turn to in this chapter (from the Greek for 'interpreter') developed as a critique of *a*) the social atomism of the English, empiricist tradition, *b*) Cartesian rationalism, and *c*) the universalistic assumptions of Enlightenment thought, which radiated from France across Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The epicentre of these three lines of criticism was Germany, more particularly, German *romanticism* – the nostalgic-conservative, yet theoretically often innovative search for community, the exaltation of feeling over rational calculation, and of closeness to nature against mechanisation.

The hermeneutic tradition too belongs to the subjectivist strand in social thought in that the rational is seen as an attribute of the subject. However, it consciously seeks to reinsert the subject into the social world, shortening the distances between the human subject and his/her fellow beings both ontologically and in its epistemology.

In contrast to the model of explanation developed in natural science, the hermeneutic tradition rejects the positivist idea that there can exist a single method for both the natural and social sciences. The social world is a universe of *meaning(s)* which demands an approach specific to its object, and hermeneutics seeks to gain insight into society by interpreting what motivates others (*introspection*), 'understanding' in the sense of empathy

(German *Verstehen*)—something not possible when studying the moon or the ocean floor.

## 1. HERMENEUTICS AND NEO-KANTIANISM

The starting point for all authors discussed in this chapter is the *subjective idealism* of Immanuel KANT (1724-1804). Instead of Kant's cosmopolitanism, however, their loyalties shifted to the (German) *nation*; for his (qualified) empiricism they substituted the method of introspection.

Kant sought to achieve a synthesis between British empiricism (which recommended itself by its successes in natural science—Newton—and of which David Hume at the time was the most prominent representative, cf. Kant's *critique of Hume*) and the rationalism of Descartes, the idea of an inborn capacity to rationally understand oneself and the world. His solution was to argue that people are equipped with two innate modes of perception (*Anschauungsweisen*, i.e., time and space) and twelve *categories* (number, causality, etc.). These allow them to order empirical phenomena. In addition, every human is born with three 'transcendent ideas' (God exists, I exist, the world exists).



However, as soon as one probes beyond the empirical, phenomenal aspect of reality and tries to penetrate the *essence* of things, all this equipment is of little use, Kant argues, because the empirical reference point (something is the case or not), is absent. The essence, what he calls the 'thing in itself' (column 4 in Figure 1.2) remains out of reach for the 'pure reason' with which humans are equipped. On such fundamental issues as whether humans are free or determined, whether time and space are finite or infinite, etc., human reason cannot reach unequivocal conclusions; it becomes mired in contradiction (Kant speaks of 'antinomies'). Such questions are the province of morality and theology, which in Kant's view had an important role to play in bringing about a good society.

By his transcendent ethics, Kantian subjectivism 'embraced an idealist metaphysic or a spiritualist view of nature, asserted a normative conception of social action, and posited freedom and human dignity as the highest moral view' (Seidman, 1983: 162). In this respect it broke with the egoistic utilitarianism and social atomism of the Lockean tradition. One line of how Kant's legacy was taken further, is the totalising, 'objective idealism' of G.W.F. Hegel, to which we return in Chapter 8. The other, which attacked the Enlightenment idea that all human qualities and experiences are by nature *universal*, is hermeneutics.

### **Roots of Hermeneutics in Romanticism and Theology**

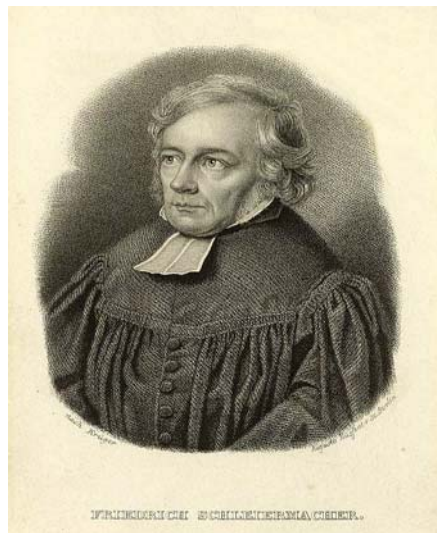
Kant's contemporary, the philosopher and theologian, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), stands at the origin of the hermeneutic tradition. His critique of the Enlightenment idea of universal human progress was laid down in a series of sketches for an alternative philosophy of history, beginning with *Another Philosophy of History to Educate Humanity* of 1774 (a work published ten years later was actually subjected to a highly critical review by Kant himself, cf. Irmscher in Herder, 1997: 159).

Herder does not deny the massive achievements of the Enlightenment. However, he deplors that its philosophy created a cold, disenchanted world in which humans had lost the ability to understand, feel, and enjoy past forms of wisdom and virtue (Herder, 1997: 12). He cautions against an overemphasis on 'reasoning, if disseminated too carelessly, too uselessly—as if it could not weaken, and really did weaken, inclination, drive, the activity of life' (ibid.: 63). What is needed is a return to *feeling*. After all, to understand any action of a people ('a nation'), one must recreate the entire picture of its way of life, habits, needs and the peculiarities of the land and the sky above it; one must *sympathise* with it. To feel its all-embracing soul, Herder argues, don't take its utterances at face value, 'don't reply to the word straightaway!'

Enter into its epoch, into its region under the sky, its entire history, empathise with everything [*fühle dich in alles hinein*]*—*Now you are on the way towards understanding the word (Herder, 1997: 29).

The same applies to understanding a foreign language: one must be familiar with the circumstances of the people speaking it. It requires an extraordinary sharp mind 'to penetrate into these circumstances and needs, and modesty in equal measure to moderate when explaining different epochs' (Herder, 2001: 65). This sums up the hermeneutic method – *entering into the mental world of the society studied*.

**Friedrich SCHLEIERMACHER** (1768-1834), a theologian and colleague of Hegel's at the University of Berlin, took Herder's insights further. He also shifted the emphasis from romanticism to theology. Schleiermacher argued that religion, unlike science and art, was a matter of *revelation*, which came about through 'intense listening' and 'being captivated in childlike passivity' (quoted in Boer, 1991: 43).



Schleiermacher developed a systematic method for the interpretation of canonical and classical theological texts, which led to a procedure that can generally be applied to written and oral language expressions. *Interpretation* is again the key term. Conclusions cannot be drawn on the basis of observation (in which subject and object are separated); the subject 'enters' the object by situating him/herself within it. This process, called 'divination', is composed of two steps: 1) 'Placing oneself within' (*Sichhineinversetzen*) and 2) 'copying' or 're-living' (*Nachbilden*, or *Nacherleben*).

What happens in this process is that the interpreter *shares the inner experience of the thinking, speaking or acting of the object*, and once 'inside', attempts to reconstruct how this speech or thought act or practical act came about in terms of motivations, the creative path to it. Schleiermacher was the first to develop this insight into an integral approach.

The divination process is complemented by *comparison*, and the method as a whole consists in a constant back and forth between divination and

comparison ('approximative oscillation'), *without ever reaching complete knowledge* (Keulartz in Dilthey, 1994: 45). Note the differences with the positivist concern about verification, acceptance/ rejection of a hypothesis, etc.

- Knowledge is never 'positive', only an approximation, however hard we try;
- to acquire knowledge is an *inter-subjective* process: we move from our own mind into somebody else's and back. There is a *forensic* aspect involved that is absent from empiricism/positivism.

Even so hermeneutics remains firmly anchored in the subjectivist epistemology on which all actor-oriented theories are based. Like other subjectivist thinkers, Schleiermacher sees the subject as facing an *ultimately impenetrable* world – hence the limits to our knowledge. As Boer writes in a discussion of Schleiermacher (quoting the latter's 'On Religion' of 1799),

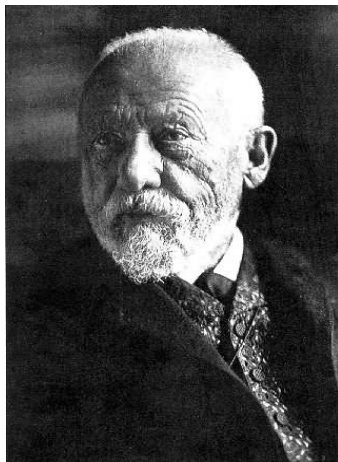
The reality experienced by modern, bourgeois man, *is a dark enigma*; the unknown is dangerous; nature and one's fellow man are the enemies... The "feeling of infinity and god-likeness" is a forced attempt to repress from consciousness the experience of "his limitations..., of the overall coincidence of his form, of the inaudible disappearance of his existence into the immeasurable" (Boer, 1991: 44, emphasis added).

Hermeneutics, then, centrally implies a separation of the human world from the natural world; each requires its own, specific method. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the theological aspect further receded from academia, but the appreciation of a transcendent, collective mindset that pervades both the social relations studied and the subject studying them, remained. Towards the close of the century, these principles were further developed by hermeneutic thinkers such as Dilthey. Another group of thinkers, the neo-Kantians, synthesised the Enlightenment legacy of Immanuel Kant with some of the insights of the romantic-hermeneutic tradition. In their slipstream a number of authors combining aspects of these two strands added further accents, notably Max Weber.

### 'Meaning' At Both Ends of the Interpretive Method

Whether they continued in the hermeneutic tradition, like Dilthey or Heidegger, or pursued the neo-Kantian alternative with its greater stress on rational individual judgment (Max Weber belongs to this strand), all authors discussed in this chapter, albeit to different degrees, share the notion of *a collective mindset bound to time and place*, which infuses social reality with *meaning* and pervades the subject's perception in turn.

[Wilhelm DILTHEY](#) (1833-1911), Schleiermacher's biographer, rejects the idea of an *a priori* rationality of the subject. A human being is not just an intellectual being, but also a feeling and acting being who shares in the



collective mindset of his/her place and epoch (Keulartz in Dilthey, 1994: 23). In one of his early works, Dilthey argued that psychology is not a science of explanation but one of introspection and understanding.

Although both theology and metaphysics have evacuated academia, Dilthey argues, in society they remain operative as 'a metaphysical mood which cannot be suspended, which is at the root of every attempt to provide evidence and which will survive them all' (Keulartz in Dilthey, 1994: 10; cf. Dilthey's *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, 1883 (fragments). It is this metaphysical mood that pervades the individual or group and which must be taken into account when interpreting its utterances. So whilst there is something objective and fixed in the human Ego which manifests itself in all human actions and thought (the 'anthropological' Ego), it is blended with elements that refer to the broader canvas of meaning which is a product of an epoch and a particular society (Keulartz in Dilthey, 1994: 30). As we will see in Chapter 10, this comes close to Freud's distinction between, respectively, the 'Id' and the 'Superego'.

One of Dilthey's pupils, the American sociologist, [George Herbert Mead](#), developed the notion of *interaction* as the process through which meaning is constructed (Keulartz in Dilthey, 1994: 35; cf. Mead's *Science and the*

*Objectivity of Perspectives*, 1938). This would become one of the sources of social constructivism (cf. below).

The *neo-Kantians*, active in the same period as Dilthey, were concerned with salvaging the legacy of Enlightenment thought – notably the aspects of individual rationality and moral individualism, and the notion of responsibility. Otherwise they shared important insights with the romantic-hermeneutic strand. The different accents in their work produced two separate schools (Rehmann, 1997: 127):

- The Marburg School (Hermann Cohen, P. Natorp, E. Cassirer) which built on Kant's *epistemology* (the idea that the subject is born with a priori categories in the mind allowing for the ordering of sense perceptions, but not fit for penetrating ultimate truths) and
- The Heidelberg School (Wilhelm Windelband, H. Rickert, E. Lask) which instead built on Kant's *practical philosophy and ethics*. Here the famous 'categorical imperative', a maxim of ethical behaviour (only do such things that deserve being a general rule), is at the centre of an attempt to construct a philosophy of values.

All of the neo-Kantians shared the position, inherent in hermeneutics, that social ('cultural-historical') science is qualitatively different from natural science and hence requires a different methodology. The subject in each case faces a different object – another 'subject', or a real object that cannot talk back. The *generalising* method of the natural sciences thus is juxtaposed to the *individualising* method of the cultural-historical sciences. In the terminology of Windelband,

- the natural sciences proceed *nomothetically*, by law-like generalisation (from 'nomos', law; as in positivism);
- the social, or rather 'cultural-historical' sciences on the other hand proceed *ideographically*, by individualisation.

In the context of the belated German unification in 1870, realised by war and revolution from above, and hence lacking France's powerful democratic tradition or English liberalism, the neo-Kantians developed

the idea that subjects are or at least should be guided by moral imperatives that cannot be reduced to individual rationality. Positivism, materialism, Hegelianism and Marxism on the other hand were all ruled out on the grounds of either the specificity of the 'social', or because they failed to take into account the axiom of individual responsibility. The neo-Kantian alternative thus is a subjectivist approach, no doubt with a critical undercurrent, but without a historicising perspective (Seidman, 1983: 204-5). An example would be Max Weber's analysis of why German society lacked the right 'mix' of individualism and frugality that Calvinism provided in the development of capitalism in England (cf. below).

With [Martin Heidegger](#) (1889-1976), the hermeneutic tradition returns to its starting point in romanticism, albeit with a reactionary inflexion that eventually brought the philosopher into the force-field of Nazism (Rehmann, 1997: 167; Benewick and Green, 1992: 95-6). Ever since Herder, the appreciation that society is held together by bonds that make the community and its way of life meaningful to its members, had had romantic connotations. Romanticism always hesitates between modernity and a subliminal longing for a past age of organic bonds and assured community (Seidman, 1983: 42); in the aftermath of German unification, the 'nation' imposed itself as a framework of meaning and the focus of romantic sentiment—also in response to the socialism of the labour movement, the obvious alternative.

Heidegger had been a doctoral student of Rickert's, but turned away from neo-Kantianism after the First World War. Via *phenomenology* (the approach developed by Edmund Husserl to provide a method for interpreting 'natural', naïve perception in terms of a system of meaning), he turned to hermeneutics, but with the specific aim to uncover the deeper 'Being'. Heidegger's starting point therefore is not epistemological, but ontological; he wants to recover the true humanity in its *existence*, 'being there' (*Dasein*, a term of Hegel's to denote 'determined being'). In *Sein und Zeit* ('Being and Time') of 1927. Heidegger conceptualises this as *everyday life*, humans engaged in their practical activities ('facticity', a term borrowed from the neo-Kantians), which only under certain conditions requires theoretical reflection. Compressing the subject into the world of other subjects to the point of eliminating the 'objective' altogether,



Heidegger thus arrives at a theory in which human existence itself is 'interpretive' of the life around him/her as it flows by in time. Interpretive thought too is an aspect of existence; in the complex terminology of *Sein und Zeit*, a 'non-objective option of a more indicative and intentional universal stemming directly from the very temporal intentional movement of finding oneself experiencing experience' (quoted in Odysseos, 2007: 41-2; see Heidegger's *Existence and Being*, 1949)

After the war, Heidegger chose to remain silent about his role in the Hitler era. His ideas about daily life as the medium of collective social being however were given a new lease on life in France by Merleau-Ponty's and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism*.

In post-war West Germany, hermeneutics was further developed by [Hans-Georg Gadamer](#) (*Wahrheit und Methode*, 'Truth and Method', of 1960; cf. 'The Idea of Hegel's Logic', 1971). In contrast to Dilthey, who assumes an objective reference outside the subject, in Heidegger and Gadamer this external reference point is absorbed into subjective experience. A student of Gadamer's, [Jürgen Habermas](#) (b. 1929), returned to the Dilthey-Mead lineage (he was also associated with the Frankfurt School, cf. Chapter 10) with his concept of a *normative structure* constituted by communication and interaction. Habermas claims that this normative structure and the life-world of the citizens is being 'colonised' and subverted by technologies applied by capitalism, impoverishing the complexity of human beings (see [Habermas Archive](#)).

Summing up, the subjectivism of both the (neo-)Kantian and the hermeneutic approaches implies that the deeper reality remains shrouded in darkness, so whatever insight we gain accumulates at 'our' end, in the subject's mind. In the case of hermeneutics, we may make informed inferences about the inner drives of the people, communities, cultures that we study. Since we are observing human beings who are, like us, intuitive, experiential, impressionable, etc., we may not be able to penetrate the 'object' entirely; yet as fellow humans, they must be expected to be motivated by driving forces which we can recognise or reconstruct if we properly assimilate their particular starting point, their mindset, and culture. No universalism here, but rather a tendency to

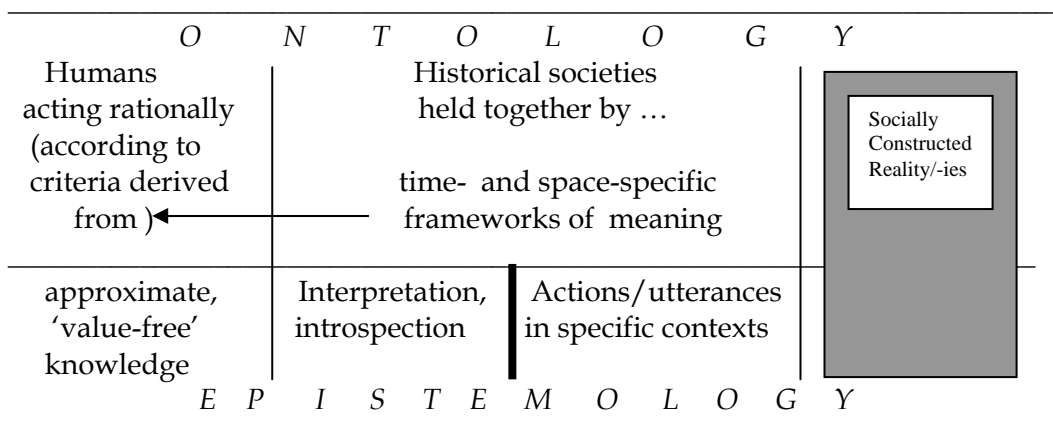
*relativism*, seeing the ‘others’ in their specific circumstances of time and place, as Herder had urged in the 1770s already.

The key points to retain about the hermeneutic (*H*) and neo-Kantian (*K*) perspectives are,

- The separation of *social* (cultural-historical) from *natural* science (both *H* & *K*);
- The aim of overcoming the subject/object divide (*H*);
- Introspection/interpretation as method (*H*);
- ‘Values’ as subjective emotive/reasoned valuations deriving from a *system of meaning* bound to time and place (in contrast to the universal ‘utilities’ of rational choice/game theory) (*H* & *K*).

In Figure 4.1, the ontology and epistemology of society and the ideographic investigative method proper to it are schematically represented. Whilst the essence of the objective world remains shrouded in darkness, concrete human groups uphold a framework of meaning and action, which renders their (socially constructed) social reality meaningful. Epistemologically speaking, however, this is not something we can really know.

**Figure 4.1. Value-Relativistic Ontology and Hermeneutic Epistemology**



We can now turn to the approach developed by Max Weber.

## 2. WEBERIAN ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY

With [Max WEBER](#) (1864-1920), we return to political economy proper. Weber, the Marx of the bourgeoisie, or according to others, the Marx of the managerial class, combines an ontology of a society in which subjects are motivated by a combination of 'value rationality' (*Wertrationalität*, derived from a specific system of meaning) and 'instrumental rationality' (*Zweckrationalität*), with an epistemology of interpretive '*Verstehen*'. In his theory of knowledge Weber is so concerned about 'value-free' scholarship because he recognises that everybody is motivated by values, not all of which are compatible with scholarly 'objectivity'.



Weber initially adopted a materialist perspective, analysing the German social structure in terms of the contradictory combination of conservative landownership and modernising industry. As the labour movement became more prominent and radical, he shifted from an analysis of economic forces to the *political* question why the bourgeoisie in Germany had failed to overcome its conservative leanings (Seidman, 1983: 212-6).

Weber's study of the [Protestant Ethic](#) (1905) aims to provide the answer. The Calvinism as it developed in Switzerland, Holland and England and other Anglophone countries, Weber argued, stimulated initiative because of Calvin's theorem of predestination. True, no one can know what is in store for him or her, but material success may be an indication of divine election, and thus offered a way of overcoming existential uncertainty; in combination with practical rules such as the legitimacy of a (modest) rate of interest, Calvin's doctrines thus assisted in creating a collective mindset favourable to private enterprise. Lutheranism on the other hand is a mystical, incomplete form of Protestantism. It clings to a pre-modern

understanding of social station and 'calling' (*Beruf*) and preached passivity and resignation from the world (Weber, 1920: 65-77). Certainly Weber sided with Bismarck and other (Lutheran) modernizers against the Catholic lower classes. But a German liberalism in his view would require a more thorough ideological renewal to match the Calvinist-Puritan value system so beneficial for capitalist development (Seidman, 1983: 231; Rehmann, 1997: 213).

It is not Weber's claim that capitalism was 'caused' by Calvinism, as sometimes assumed. Rather, Calvinism as a system of values generates a collective mindset which happened to be supportive of parallel capitalist development. To denote this relation he used the concept coined by the poet (and friend of Herder's), Goethe, in the title for a 1809 novel, 'elective affinity' (*Wahlverwandtschaft*). The connection with the hermeneutic tradition is obvious: there is an affinity between Calvinism and capitalism which is in the nature of a mutual penetration, a spiritual closeness between religious conviction and professional ethic premised on active appreciation (not just 'objective' correlation) (Löwy, 2004: 98-9).

In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Economy and Society*), his posthumous magnum opus and one of the classic works of political economy, this is elaborated into the analysis of how different values motivating 'social action' are compounded. Instrumental, calculating rationality (typical of modernity, not just capitalism but also the modern state) contributes to a tendency towards socialisation (*Vergesellschaftung*, from *Gesellschaft*, society), a concept from Hegel and Marx; but it will always be accompanied by emotive-affective bonds, whether they are tribal-traditional or based on a professional esprit de corps. This produces a parallel 'communitisation' (*Vergemeinschaftung*, from *Gemeinschaft*) (Weber, 1976: chapter 3).

### **Subjective Rationality, Irrational World**

As he came to reject his earlier materialist view of history, Weber developed a critique of Marxism. Here he obviously confused *naturalistic materialism* (which holds that everything emanates from nature) with *historical materialism*. Historical materialism is premised on the Hegelian

idea of the cultural development of historical humanity to ever-higher levels of civilisation.

Weber's critique that thinking is not a natural, 'objective' process reflecting other natural processes, but a subjective one, is only valid against naturalistic materialism. His subjective turn towards a neo-Kantianism impregnated with hermeneutics 'led him to repudiate the notion that social science could reproduce history in its essentials or full complexity. *Conceptual analysis and historical explanation are always one-sided, ... by virtue of [their] embeddedness in the perspectives and problems of the present*' (Seidman, 1983: 242, emphasis added). The relativism of hermeneutics, the role of systems of meaning and the values derived from them, are clearly evident here.

Weber's ontology is one of 'social action' within specific normative contexts, valid for one society but not necessarily for others. Social action is motivated by a specific rationality that combines instrumental rationality with normative commitments, the 'value rationality' referred to above. This is one way of arriving at the conclusion that ultimately, reality as such is unknowable. Rationality is subjective, although Weber according to some interpreters rejected the notion of an inborn rationality in favour of the idea that 'rationality must be conceived in historical terms – as the product of the interplay of interests and ideas, and therefore multidimensional' (Seidman, 1983: 254). Given how social processes come about (as the result of specific combinations of values motivating action), they can only be understood by interpretation ('*Verstehen*'), i.e., by applying the hermeneutic method (the subtitle of 'Economy and Society' is 'Outline of an Interpretive Sociology'). Concepts for Weber are *tools* which the rational mind has at its disposal to mentally grasp what is empirically evident (Rehmann, 1997: 131).

Since rationality is an aspect of the subject, and society itself lacks an inherent, knowable logic (one is only aware of the framework of meaning from which value rationality is derived), the subject's actions work to imprint a rationality on the world. *Rationalisation*, making the world conform to accounting principles, in Weber's view was a phenomenon that accompanies capitalist development. Here the interpretation of

Puritanism as a Protestantism of initiative and commitment influenced Weber's own world-view (Seidman, 1983: 231, 244).

Weber followed the neo-Kantians in highlighting that reality as such cannot be known, indeed that it is inherently *irrational*. Whereas Kant had used the Thing in Itself (the objective essence of things) as a limiting concept where the rational mind becomes entangled in contradiction, the neo-Kantians speak of an 'insurmountable opposition' between the subject's rationality and the concrete world. Lask even speaks of the '*doctrine of the irrationality of empirical reality*' and Weber follows this (Rehmann, 1997: 133). This is the absolute opposite of Hegel, who as we will see in Chapter 8, held that 'the real is the rational'. Seidman speaks of Weber's idea 'of the inherent meaninglessness and chaotic character of noumenal reality' (1983: 255; 'noumenon', 'named item'). Or in the words of Karl Löwith,

So-called "objectivity" – and Weber never speaks of objectivity except as "so-called" and in quotation marks – "rests exclusively on the fact that the given reality is ordered in categories, which are *subjective* in the specific sense that they constitute the *precondition* of our knowledge and are contingent upon the presupposition of the value of that particular truth which only empirical knowledge can give us" (quoted in Bratsis, 2006: 15).

This again underlines Weber's subjective rationality – it is the human mind that brings order to an otherwise irrational world; it *must* do so in order to vanquish meaninglessness (Seidman, 1983: 257). Hence the meanings that are imprinted on the different life-worlds in different times and places, are themselves different too.

### **Ideal-Types, Values and Action**

Weber's legacy may be brought under three headings: Methodology, Value Community, and Theory of Action (cf. examples from *Sociological Writings*, 1897).

First, Weber's methodology. Here the notion of *ideal-type* occupies pride of place. Remember that the knowing subject faces an irrational world, but yet has to make sense of it; and that his/her 'tools', theoretical concepts,

are subjective constructs. The ideal-type, then, is a mental image which unifies certain historical relations and events in a 'non-contradictory cosmos of thought [i.e. imagined] interconnections' (quoted in Rehmann, 1997: 187). Its role is to bring to life, visualise, certain relations that have been found or are being suspected to exist; the ideal-type then serves as a limiting concept (*Grenzbegriff*) that highlights relevant aspects so that experienced facts can be measured against it and compared with it.

In *Economy and Society* Weber famously distinguishes political authority under three such ideal types: *Traditional* authority – *Charismatic* authority – *Rational-bureaucratic* authority. These correspond to the society he feels must be left behind (conservatism in Germany), the strong man (with charisma) whom he saw as a necessity to break it but also to replace the Liberal-Socialist alliance which he earlier believed, could do the job; and the monopolistic combination of big capital and the strong state that would result, but which he paradoxically also rejected as a danger to liberalism (Seidman, 1983: 237).

Ideal-types are concepts in which some common element or aspect has been raised *one-sidedly* to shed light on a situation or relation. There is no claim that they capture an essence – that is an unknown that cannot be uncovered. Here Weber goes back straight to Dilthey who claims that in natural science, material relations between things can be established, whereas in social science, the *mental relations between problems* constitute the focus of the analysis (quoted in Rehmann, 1997: 188).

Secondly, the notion of the *community of values*. The neo-Kantians, writing in the decades following German unification, criticised Kant's Enlightenment cosmopolitanism from a nationalist vantage point. All Enlightenment thinking assumes a continuity between individual aspirations and interest, the harmonious operation of the whole, the collective interest. Kant took this furthest by claiming in his plan for a universal peace treaty of 1795, that modern states, if properly cleansed of aristocratic warmongers, would be able to reconcile their differences. Rickert, one of the neo-Kantians, criticises this idea as poor in its concept of humanity and failing to acknowledge the 'most important of human

communities', the *nation* (quoted in Rehmann, 1997: 157). This as we saw had been part of the romantic-hermeneutic tradition ever since Herder.

Weber's point of view on value communities is of importance as an angle from which to understand Global Political Economy: by placing the nation-state at the centre of the analysis as the most significant form of human community, it reduces GPE again to *International Political Economy*, that is, a subfield of IR, which as a predominantly state-centric 'discipline' enshrines the nation-state as the alpha and omega of world affairs. Below we will see that E.H. Carr, one of the founders of modern Anglo-American IR, developed his approach within the hermeneutic tradition, and with the nation-state as the axiomatic point of departure.

Finally there is Weber's actual sociology, his 'theory of action'. This is likewise subjectivist; it springs from the person, group, society that *acts*. It is on this ontology that his epistemology is grafted: if one assumes that the world is made up of subjectively motivated subjects acting on an 'irrational' objective world, the focus of one's method and theory automatically shifts to the domain of epistemology/theory of knowledge, because it is the only reference point of rationality that remains.

Weber's human subject is not determined by labour and reproductive relations, and the rules of reciprocity and cooperation emanating from them. The subject occupies a position from which action is undertaken on the basis of certain 'values'. Even so, subjects are not entirely free in their choice of values because there are historically changing values which direct each individual within their epoch (Rehmann, 1997: 173-4), in the sense of a prevailing system of meaning. This is what Weber terms the 'iron cage' of internalised social values, so that e.g. in rational-bureaucratic society, people are under a compulsion to act in this spirit. It may be that there exists an incompatibility in Weber's thinking between a subjectivist epistemology grafted on an individualistic ontology ('history as the chaotic aggregate of subjectively intended individual acts (methodological individualism)'); and what is in fact a philosophy of history, i.e. history 'as a universal process of rationalisation, locking individuals increasingly into iron institutional structures' (Teschke and Heine, 2002: 173). But then, it was Weber's original intention to establish what was *needed* to bring



German society to a level where it could match the dominant, English-speaking world-economic powers; from this initial equation flows his assumption that all societies have to go through processes of rationalisation that are broadly identical in outcomes even if different in the ways in which they are achieved. These after all are dependent on the value systems of each.

### 3. FROM CARR TO CONSTRUCTIVISM

Hermeneutics and the Weberian paradigm prominently resonate in IR and GPE – from classical IR realism to the currently influential constructivism. On the one hand, there is the notion of the state as an independent, autonomous actor, which is taken from Weber. On the other, there is the notion that it is the subject, ontologically speaking (whether an individual, group, or an entire society), which imparts logic (rationality, order) to the world around it.

#### Neo-Weberian Aspects of Classical Realism

‘All state theory’, Bratsis writes (2006: 9), ‘proceeds “as if” the state was ...a universal a priori predicate to our social existence rather than a product of our social existence. This ...endows the state with ontological qualities not its own and abstracts its existence from the realm of social relations.’ In other words, we assume a ‘thing’ called the state as being in place independent of how society is organised into the unity that we call state.

In its neo-Weberian form, the state-as-subject conceptualization considers the state to be a distinct actor by virtue of the bureaucratic rationality that unites its members and that provides a socially autonomous set of interests such members act to maximise... Unlike its Leninist counterpart, such theories posit the autonomy of the state from society, since the subjectivity that unites its members is state specific and does not originate within society, state managers have a subjectivity that is all their own (Bratsis, 2006: 11).

The more sophisticated interpretation of the autonomy of the state, complete with a hermeneutic epistemology and (proto-) constructivist

ontology, can be found in the work of [Edward Hallett CARR](#) (1892-1982), the founder of modern Anglophone IR, and the historian of the Russian Revolution.



Carr argues that even if one must recognise the mental driving forces, ideals and emotions, of social actors, one cannot jump over reality. In *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939*, Carr synthesises the idea of subjective interest and objective structure.

A theory of world politics, he argues, cannot be built on the foundation of the good intentions of states (people who did so he called 'idealists' or 'utopians'—this would refer to the lineage that reaches back to the enlightenment theory of international politics of which Kant is the main representative. But neither can a theory of IR be built on the idea that world politics consists of a succession of phenomena governed by mechanical causal laws—hence 'realism' (Carr, 1964: 13).

A true theory and practice of IR therefore must synthesise the element of the utopian quest for a just world order, and the reality of a world of states forced to mechanically pursue their national interests only.

In a discussion of Carr's method, Keith Jenkins writes that Carr does not deny that history, as 'events of the past', has really happened. But '[Carr] thinks that the insertion of variously authenticated facts into a historical account and their significance/meaning relative to other selected/dismissed facts, depends not on something *intrinsic* to the facts... but on the reading of events the historian *chooses* to give' (Jenkins, 2000: 308). Indeed in Carr's own words, '[The] status as a historical fact will turn on a question of interpretation. This element of interpretation enters into every fact of history (quoted in *Ibid.*: 309). Carr's approach, therefore, is not positivist or Rational Choice, but a more subtle, hermeneutic approach.

However, as Jenkins adds, this is not really articulated in Carr's writings. It is from scarce remarks like the one quoted and which, 'contain, in fact, the substance of Carr's (extremely slight) epistemological argument, which he nowhere "deepens",' that we must reconstruct his method.

In *The Nation-State and Violence*, Anthony Giddens offers a recent example of an IR elaboration of the neo-Weberian line of thought. It builds on an agent/structure theory which again reverts to subjective rationality to which it attaches a structural component (compare e.g. Weber's idea that the subject's values are inscribed in a larger historical set of values, and operate through a particular community of values which is the nation). The agent, always alone, enters into relations which then constrain his/her action. Ultimately, the world out there remains fundamentally impenetrable; it is at best (re-)constructed on the basis of our own assumptions and predilections.

This takes us to Constructivism.

### **Constructivism**

The constructivist approach today has become the most salient alternative to the dominant ontology of the sovereign subject (individual or social unit) making choices, and the parallel methodology (epistemology) of empiricism. We saw in the previous chapters that these two have quite different backgrounds, both philosophically and in terms of the sociology of knowledge, but that need not concern us here. In fact, the recognised alternative within the mainstream neoclassical economics, is rather the institutionalism we discuss in Chapter 5. In international studies, however, 'her majesty's opposition' without any doubt is constituted today by constructivism. In their work on the theories of knowledge of IR, Hollis and Smith (1991) contrast positivist 'explaining', which they claim underpins (neo-)realist IR, with interpretive *understanding*.

Constructivism brings together all the key theses discussed so far in this chapter

- the idea of the immersion of the subject, 'actor', in the social world;
- the *inter-subjective* constitution of this social world via ideational interaction, placing any 'reality' behind a screen of shared meanings, or even replacing it by an *imagined* reality;
- and in terms of epistemology, the *interpretive* method, using introspection, empathy, to arrive at a reconstructed understanding of the reasons behind an actor's actions or utterances.

Hence, as so often in 'new' social science approaches, constructivism is not so original as many believe (Cf. [Guzzini](#), 2000). Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, originally of 1966, played an important role in bringing back the hermeneutic tradition into mainstream sociology. Step by step, the claim that any characteristic of a society is 'socially constructed' (say, democracy, nationality, market economy...), rather than an empirically observable fact, has made headway.

Helmut Plessner in the foreword to the recent German edition of Berger and Luckmann's book sums up the subjectivist ontology of constructivism as follows:

The reflective consciousness invests the institutional order with its own logic. The objectified social world is placed on a logical fundament by language... The 'logic' with which the institutional order is in this way equipped, constitutes a part of the socially accessible stock of knowledge and is therefore taken as a certainty.. a properly socialised individual knows that his social world is a consistent one (Plessner in Berger and Luckmann, 2001: x)

Note the terms used: 'reflective consciousness' ... 'invests with its own logic' (the institutional order is society) ... society is 'equipped' with this logic (or 'rationality') ... 'the properly socialised individual' therefore knows that the world (society) is logical (rational). This establishes the circular, affirming nature of the world we perceive as consonant with the world we have been socialised into. There is a reference to the reality on which the inter-subjective construction of it rests; but that reality itself is not accessible directly. How we think (socially) that the world is constituted, has its source in our collective thinking, and constitutes 'the

socially accessible stock of knowledge'. So when we think we access 'reality' we access the part of that stock that is labelled 'reality'.

Hence there is no doubt that we are looking at a *subjective* ontology, in which agents construct their own world (which is more or less 'imagined' depending on whether a reference outside the mind is recognised or not); and in which any rationality that the world reveals, must be traced to the agents investing it with. As Odysseos writes (2007: 15), constructivism 'must be understood in part as a call to place selfhood or subjectivity as the bedrock of international politics' ('regimes' and 'epistemic communities—our Chapter 6—are 'constructed' in this sense, [Elkins and Simmons, 2005](#)).

As in the Rational Choice approach discussed in Chapter 2, constructivists of course will not deny that the world consists of many separate subjects which somehow interact. What they deny is that this interactive field itself obeys principles or rules that can be known, and hence would be 'objective'; any rationality it reveals, must therefore be traceable to *subjective rationality* (cf. for an attempt to bridge the divide, [Checkel, 1997](#)). Like Weber, constructivists assume a value-driven social action that presupposes different frameworks of meaning for different (collective) subjects, so the recognition of the interactive field must take recourse to a method of abstraction in order to represent social interaction. After all, if action is constructed from the subjective vantage point and its intentions, motives and meaning are different for the different parties in inter-action; and the objective social constraint, the material pattern of how different social forces collide or collaborate, is unknowable, how do we analyse the undeniable fact that subjects do not act in a void?

In the case of Rational Choice, the conflict/cooperation dilemma is solved with the help of game theory, in which utility-maximising subjects arrive at positions which are the optimum that from their point of view can be obtained. The utilities assigned to any alternative strategy derive from subjective valuations. In the case of constructivism, 'outcomes' from interaction are likewise traceable to subjective valuations, albeit not numerical ones. Rather, what the subjects collectively establish among themselves (*inter-subjectively*), are arrangements that reflect the (majority)

appreciation of states of affairs, which in turn then constitute the grounds for action.

‘The core constructivist claim’, Teschke and Heine argue,

is that historically varying forms of conflict and cooperation are predicated on inter-subjectively constructed institutions. *These institutions lay down the “rules of the game” ... Constitutive rules provide systems of meaning that act as frames of reference for collectively binding and norm-governed action* (Teschke and Heine, 2002: 166, emphasis added).

History thus becomes an institutional trajectory bound up with underlying value communities. The authors then criticise John Ruggie’s analysis of globalisation, which is not explained (as positivist neo-realism or Hegemonic Stability Theory would) by shifts in power capacities, but by a shifting ‘social purpose’. The post-war, consensual ‘embedded liberalism’ is transformed from the inter-subjective positive appreciation of the welfare state, to an ethos of liberalism. The use of the term ‘institutions’ for these ‘imagined realities’, might lead to confusion with institutionalism, which we discuss in the next chapter. Institutionalism however starts from the practical activities of subjects, which congeal into habits; constructivism is a matter of ideational, mental constructions which are ‘institutionalised’ because and to the extent they are shared.

The axiomatic, universalistic assumptions of Rational Choice (everybody is a utility-maximising, social atom), in constructivism are replaced by relativism, in recognition of the separate mental universes of different communities, and subjects are immersed in them. But at no point does constructivism allow these community contexts to become objective, knowable entities obeying a logic of their own. They remain constituted from the subjectivist starting point. Weber solved the fact that action is always compounded by the action of others at cross-purposes by using a probabilistic language, speaking in terms of ‘the chance that’. Compared to that constructivism is less abstract and more substantive, as we look at real people with complex, individualised understandings that can be communicated and shared (or not). But ‘the central constructivist problem is that cognitive shifts have no apparent external referent, but recursively

“invent” the new socio-material reality out of themselves’ (Teschke and Heine, 2002: 170; for a comprehensive evaluation, [Palan, 2000](#))

### **Applying the Method**

In terms of epistemology and method, hermeneutic researchers have to *interpret*, not ‘observe’, their object: they must seek interpretive access to their object-domain, ‘since their area of research is not objectively given, but pre-constituted by a consciousness-driven and communicatively mediated process of the collective construction of social reality’ (Teschke and Heine, 2002: 166). The subjective method implies that it is the researcher who brings ‘logic’ to the outside world, and hence to any object (other subjects) s/he investigates.

The work of the researcher simultaneously has to question this accepted inter-subjective construction. It is not in itself an acceptable result of any investigation to say that something is socially constructed, because by the definitions used in this tradition, everything is. The task is to see how we can become aware of our complicity to the prevailing inter-subjective construction; where the fractures between different social ‘realities’ within any one ‘imagined reality’ are hidden, etc.

This is done through a *critical investigation of the language used*. As Plessner writes, the question is, what is the common sense meaning of a word (what does it refer to in everyday life); which state of affairs is it, that is expressed by its use; and within which inter-subjective understanding of the life-world is it contained. Which separate life-worlds coexist at the global, regional, national etc. levels. There is never a life-world which is not itself enclosed in a normative system expressed through an everyday language.

*Language* therefore is the key to the hermeneutic method, which is not surprising given that hermeneus, as we saw, means ‘interpreter’. But it is not the formalised linguistics of the positivists, but a sociological-cultural understanding of language that is at issue here (Wittgenstein’s eventual conclusions about language games would fit nicely into this hermeneutic understanding of language).

The interpretation of actions/events, then, proceeds by deriving their presupposed meaning from the inter-subjective world of norms and ideas, through which we construct our reality. So *why* somebody (or a collective like a social group or a state) acts, is understood from the normative system in which the agency operates. Say, starting a war in our days will adorn itself preferable with some notion of humanitarian intervention because our life-world is saturated with notions of human rights and the globalisation of responsibilities; in other eras, wars were waged more openly for territory, living space, or the like.

This then leads to a *critique of ideology*. The researcher tries to make explicit the normative system from which agents distil their motivations. At the same time, s/he will always try to uncover a deeper layer of motivations, or a transformative effect: it is one thing to say that wars are legitimated by humanitarian arguments because that is how neoliberalism likes to think of itself, but quite another to deny that therefore, the humanitarian aspect does not matter. In fact, once neoliberal states claim humanitarian motives, that element moves into the foreground and shapes the expectations of others too.

The steps to take in a research project in this tradition, would then be

- An assessment of the prevailing normative system, by collecting samples of types of representations of everyday thought that are available in 'media' (frequent themes in the press, soap operas, political debates etc, etc.). This would provide a hypothetical symbolic language in which the prevailing consensus expresses itself.
- The identification of agents active in this setting, and samples of language produced/used by them which demonstrate a continuity *or* contradiction with the assumed normative system. This rests on the assumption that no social action is undertaken which is not (apart from being goal-rational in Weber's sense) also 'value-rational', i.e., conforms to the prevailing normative system, or code of a given social unit (group, society)



- There can also occur attempts at taking a quantum leap by reference to a higher, more remote life-world than the everyday: this happens in the case of religious motivations. A suicide mission in our days may be motivated, not by the inter-subjective, normative conventions of the everyday, but on the contrary seek to open these up, disrupt them by reference to a life-world further removed (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 2001: 28)
- On the basis of our assessment of the everyday and the more remote life-worlds that serve as references, we may then proceed to design events and agents to *types*, in the sense of ideal-types, of which we can then draw up an inventory of language and other signs by which they manifest themselves. An example would again be, that Western governments claim to wage war in the name of humanitarian intervention. This would refer to a universalistic individualism, consonant with a neoliberal economy; whilst the governments targeted by those wars, usually defend their actions by reference to state sovereignty. The same war can therefore have a totally different meaning for each side, and the task of the researcher is to step back and establish the types of actions, their consonance with the professed system(s) of norms, and any contradictions within them; whilst critically assessing his/her own allegiance to either side so as to uphold the claim to unbiased investigation.
- *Content analysis*, reading closely, reading between the lines, is the key method used in the actual project; written documents provide the sources. To contextualise such content, statements from politicians advocating war presented as humanitarian intervention may be systematised as such; this may yield certain phrases that recur more than one would expect. One step further one can add textual reference material, for instance, sources that are representative of the particular mindset from which intervention is argued as well.

- In all cases, agents are never understood in isolation from the set of normative associations they embody. They always are organically assimilated into, and have assimilated themselves, a social order which is inter-subjectively reproduced over time.