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Reconstructing Epistemology: Toward a Post-positivist Conception of Social Science

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ABSTRACT
The point of departure of this article is the increasing fragmentation of sociology in theoretical and empirical research. On the one side, the flourishing of a kind of social theory that more or less lacks a scientific empirical base has followed the “death” of positivism. On the other side, mainstream empirical sociology often disregard the importance of theoretical sociology and implicitly still goes on almost as if the positivist legitimacy would be untouched. The main claim of the article is that we need to develop a new epistemology of social science in order to escape such an impoverishing fragmentation. The main thesis is that a reconstruction of social scientific epistemology simultaneously involves a rehabilitation of the theoretical and a non-empiricist conceptualisation of the empirical. Both positivism and anti-positivism are thus criticised and a post-positivist – or more specifically – a pragmatist conception of social science is identified and argued for.
Reconstructing Epistemology: Toward a Post-positivist Conception of Social Science

Introduction

Contemporary sociology finds itself in a strange situation. The cleavage between theoretical and empirical research is probably wider than ever before. On the one side, sociologists produce more and more "books about books" (Castells 1996:25) or "metatheoretical" research (Ritzer 1996:622ff), that is theory development, which is not primarily based on empirical observations but rather on reconstructions of already existing theories. According to George Ritzer (1996:630) there is currently an "explosion of interest in metatheorizing". On the other side, most sociologists are still doing empirical research without taking much notice of metatheoretical sociology. While theoretical sociologists often find empirical sociologists theoretically naive, the latter perceive the work of the former as something purely speculative. Theoretical sociology is in the strongholds of empirical sociology not regarded as "real science" at all, but rather as a step back to a kind of pre-scientific social philosophy (compare Korpi 1990). The often-mentioned fragmentation of sociology should thus not only be understood as specialisation on smaller and smaller subject matters, but also as specialisation on either theoretical or empirical research (Compare also Layder 1998:1ff).

One way to understand this kind of impoverishing fragmentation of sociology is to relate it to the "decomposition" (Guneriussen 1996:25) or "death" (Pleasants 1997:143) of positivism. We should be careful not underestimate the significance of this event. As well known, some version of positivism has accompanied sociology since its birth. Today is probably the first time in the history of sociology that practically no
one explicitly defend some kind of positivism.\textsuperscript{1} At the same time, however, contemporary sociologists have not really been able to produce a new methodology, which could legitimate their work. Current theories of science are mostly not normative, but rather descriptive and deconstructive in character. Scientists cannot, according to an influential view, claim to produce truer knowledge than anybody else does. In most cases theory of science and knowledge has ended in some kind of relativism or strong contextualism. Epistemology has, with Taylor's (1995) words, been "overcome".

The metatheoretically-orientated sociologist was typically once engaged in the criticism of positivism. In a theoretical sense she or he won the "\textit{Positivismusstreit}" years ago.\textsuperscript{2} But lacking a new convincing normative theory of science this type of sociologist cannot pursue "scientific" empirical work without betraying her or his own victory. Instead this sociologist typically combine personal everyday empirical experience with reconstructions of classic or contemporary social theory.\textsuperscript{3} The second type, on the other hand, just want to go on with empirical research. She or he do not anymore (and often never did) explicitly defend positivism on a theoretical level, but do in practice still comply with many of its postulates.\textsuperscript{4} Peter Wagner (1994:147) has tellingly called this common reaction to the death of positivism "the zero reaction". If this growing fragmentation into either theoretical or empirical research continues, sociology will be totally divided into theory without a professionally constructed empirical base and empirical research without methodological validity. It is no wonder that the talk of a crisis of sociology has closely followed in the footsteps of the decomposition of positivism.

\textsuperscript{1}There are still a few explicit defenders of positivism such as J. Turner (1985), but there cannot be any question about that the dominating trend in sociology since the beginning of the 70s as been anti-positivism and post-positivism.

\textsuperscript{2}Already in his postscript to \textit{Erkenntnis und Interesse} Habermas (1973:372) could declare that a "systematisch gerichtete \textit{Szentismuskritik}" had become "gegenstandslos".

\textsuperscript{3}Anthony Giddens is a good example.

\textsuperscript{4}On this level of abstraction the distinction between "quantitative" and "qualitative" method is not important. Sociologists who use qualitative methods are typically just as indifferent to metatheoretical research as sociologists who use quantitative methods. Compare for instance the well-known qualitative research method suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967).
If this rough picture of the present state of sociology is at least partly true, then it must be a very urgent task to work out a "post-positivist" conception of social science.\(^5\) One of the main points of most such attempts is that the validity of empirical research presupposes a "rehabilitation of the theoretical" (Alexander 1982:30). It is true that the general claim has been that theoretical and empirical research in some sense are interdependent, but most post-positivist conceptions of science have rather focused on the sense in which empirical research presupposes theoretical research than the other way around. As long as positivism was the dominating conception of social science the post-positivist focus on the significance of the theoretical was necessary. As we soon will see, one of the most crucial traits of positivism is that it, in some sense or the other, neglects or reduces the theoretical dimension of scientific work.\(^6\) Today, however, if we want to avoid that the criticism of positivism leads us into pre-scientific metaphysics or anti-scientific subjectivism -- that is, anti-positivism --, we also must clarify the role of the empirical in post-positivist social science. In this article, I will thus not just argue for a rehabilitation of the theoretical, but also try to develop a non-empiricist understanding of the empirical. The integration of these two elements is, I believe, the best way to counteract the fragmentation of sociology in a theoretical and an empirical part.

To be able to develop a post-positivist concept of social science we must keep in mind how far the criticism of positivism has gone. It has not limited itself to a criticism of specific scientific methods. It has not even limited itself to a critique of specific theories of knowledge. It has gone further. On its most fundamental level it has been a critique of theory of knowledge as such. Philosophers like Karl-Otto Apel (1979), Richard Rorty (1979), Ernst Tugendhat (1983), Herbert Schnädelbach (1985), Jürgen Habermas (1988) and Charles Taylor (1995) have treated epistemology as a special philosophical "paradigm" with a

\(^{5}\)I will use Giddens' (1977) and Alexander's (1982) term "post-positivist". Others talk about a "post-empiricist" (Hesse 1980, Bryant 1995), "post-analytic" (Rajchman and West 1985, Baynes, Bohman and McCarthy 1987) science and philosophy or simply "new rules of sociological method" (Giddens 1976) and "new philosophy of social science" (Bohman 1991).

\(^{6}\)Compare Habermas (1973:9): "Daß wir Reflexion verleugnen, ist der Positivismus."
historical beginning and end. The idea of a theory of knowledge is, according to Rorty (1979:131ff), as old as modern science. It did not "achieve self-consciousness until Kant" (ibid:132), but can be traced back to Descartes. The scientific revolution meant that science was separated from traditional philosophy, which in turn meant that philosophy was transformed from being basically ontological in character to being basically epistemological. The result was division of work between science and philosophy. Philosophy became primarily responsible for a very specific problem: the relation between the subject and the object of knowledge. Its task was to answer the question how valid knowledge is possible. It was thus a normative enterprise that, if successful, gave general orientation and legitimacy to scientific work. This whole philosophical approach was put in question in the beginning of the 20th century. If Descartes and Kant (in his first Critique) were the paradigmatic figures of the epistemological paradigm, Heidegger, Dewey and the later Wittgenstein are the most often mentioned paradigmatic figures of the new "linguistic" philosophical paradigm. The "linguistic turn" meant that the basic epistemological idea of a dualistic relation between the subject and the object of knowledge lost its credibility. Today we are – according to one prominent interpretation - caught in "the prison-house of language" (Jameson 1972). The philosophical turn from epistemology to linguistics thus involves a further rejection of ontology. The world is reduced to "text" or "discourse" and the idea of some kind of "pre-given reality" is seen as utterly naive. Since the emergence of epistemology was so closely related to the emergence modern science, it is not surprising that the contemporary "overcoming" of epistemology also has made the concept of science problematic. Both philosophy and science has undergone a process of disenchantment. They have lost their privileged relation to truth. This fate of epistemology means that an attempt to outline an idea of a post-positivist social science cannot start on a methodological level. The primary task is to reconstruct

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7The concept "paradigm" is in this context explicitly used only by Apel, Schnädelbach and Habermas.
8Epistemology became *prima philosophia*. Other forms of philosophy - such as ethics or aesthetics - were (for instance by Weber, early Wittgenstein and Hägerström) more or less regarded as meaningless or were modelled after the subject-object logic of epistemology.
epistemology. Before I take up that gauntlet, a will end this introduction with a last preliminary remark.

In one sense the disenchantment of philosophy and science has paradoxically strengthened sociology. Not very long ago the distinction between sociology of knowledge and theory of knowledge was self-evident, that is, the distinction between mostly empirical research about the social aspects of everyday or scientific knowledge production on the one hand, and theoretical or philosophical research about the normative conditions of valid knowledge (truth) on the other (compare Brante 1984:23ff). With the publication of Thomas Kuhn’s famous book *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962) and Richard Rorty’s introduction to and editing of the almost equally famous anthology *The linguistic turn* (1967) this distinction between sociology of knowledge and theory of knowledge began to lose its obviousness. At the same time as theory of knowledge was losing its confidence, sociology of knowledge was not only establishing itself as a more and more significant scientific field, it also rather successfully challenged theory of knowledge - so to say - on its own back yard. More and more contemporary thinkers and schools - for instance Rorty (contextual pragmatism), Michel Foucault (post-structuralism), and David Bloor (the Strong program) - started to deal with truth more or less exclusively from the observing perspective of some kind of sociology of knowledge or science.9 Truth is understood as the result of language games, which are played according to different rules in different cultural contexts, that is, truth is nothing but a social construction. This so called "sociological turn of epistemology" (Lynch 1993:163) has thus led to a conflation of sociology of knowledge and theory of knowledge or - as I rather would like to put it - a reduction of theory of knowledge to sociology of knowledge.

9Compare Rorty 1982:xiii: "... a pragmatist theory of truth ... says that truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about." Compare Foucault 1978:60: "... traditional themes in philosophy, which a ‘political history of truth’ would have to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free – nor error servile – but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power." Compare also Bloor’s (1999:84) so called "symmetry postulate": "Both true and false, and rational and irrational ideas ... should all equally be the object of sociological curiosity, and should be all explained by reference to the same kind of cause".
There are thus two related sides to the present "overcoming epistemology". One is more deconstructive. It is about the impossibility or the ideological and violent character of universal normative claims of validity. This deconstruction seems, on the other side, to have opened the door for a more constructive approach. Sociology of science and knowledge is today flourishing.\(^\text{10}\) I am not at all critical about the claim that "there are a number of vital functions that knowledges serve that have nothing whatsoever to do with clear thinking or with truth-seeking" (McCarthy 1996:5). On the contrary, I believe that such a perspective is of crucial importance for sociology. However, an expanding sociology of knowledge was not primarily what Habermas hoped for when he criticised the lack of reflection in positivist social science or what Alexander meant with his call for "a rehabilitation of the theoretical". The sociological turn of epistemology rather means that at the same time as the significance of theory is acknowledged, theory is immediately again objectified. What we are dealing with here is thus what might be called an empiricalisation of the theoretical. Theories, ideas and scientific and everyday knowledges are treated as social things. That is in some sense and to a certain extent quite all right. But if we cannot explicate the significance of theory as a condition of social scientific research, if sociology of knowledge and science is not accompanied by a reflection on its own theoretical presuppositions, then we either end up in paradoxical relativism or are tacitly back in positivism - although in a more sophisticated version. Also sociology of knowledge needs to validate its findings and thus cannot replace a normative theory of knowledge. In this sense the sociological perspective on knowledge has been too successful for its own good. Its colonisation of the field of theory of knowledge ruins in the long run its own validity.

My main claim in this article is that the first important step toward a post-positivist conception of social science is the reconstruction of a normative theory of knowledge. To be able to take that step I will start with a retrospect of the positivist conception of science (1) and the

\(\text{\textsuperscript{10}}\)Even a sociology of philosophy has been developed (Collins 1998 and Heidegren 1999:193ff).
criticism of that conception (2), so that we can go on without repeating those positivist mistakes which convincingly already have been revealed. I will then - in discussion with primarily Alexander and Habermas - argue that a reconstruction of theory of knowledge involves both a rehabilitation of the theoretical (3) and a non-empiricist conceptualisation of the empirical (4). The article ends with a discussion of the different implications that this reconstruction will have for the social sciences as compared with the natural sciences (5).

1. Positivism

So far I have used the concept positivism in singular. However, since Comte conceptualised "sociology" in relation to what he called l'esprit positif this concept has been used to describe an almost endless number of rather different normative conceptions of science: Durkheim's "old" rules of sociological method, the philosophy of science of the Vienna Circle, functionalism, American methodological empiricism, quantitative methodologies in general or even every kind of methodology, which focus on "explanation" at the expense of "understanding". There is here no need for yet another investigation of different positivist theories of social science.\(^\text{11}\) I will instead take my point of departure in Alexander's investigation. Bryant (1985:185) criticises Alexander for tacitly neglecting the French and German/Austrian traditions of positivism and only focus on the American instrumental tradition. In a Scandinavian context such a neglecting is something we can live with. The American version has here without doubt been the most influential one.\(^\text{12}\) I will, however,

\(^{11}\)Giedymin (1975:276) claims that there can be 64 possible forms of positivism. A colleague and friend of mine (Jacobsen 1998) is more modest, but has still found 18 different kinds - from Hume to Jonathan Turner. Others refer back to Hobbes (Rorty 1982:xv) or to Kepler, Galilee, Descartes and Bacon (Comte 1844/1985:56). Bryant (1985) has distinguished between three different traditions of positivism: the French tradition from Saint-Simon to Durkheim, the positivisms involved in the "Methodenstreit", the "Werturteilstreit" and the "Posivismusstreit" in Germany and Austria and finally "instrumental positivism" in American sociology (Lundberg, Lazarfeld and abstracted empiricism in general). Habermas (1973:88ff) and Giddens (1974:1-22 and 1977:29-89) however both argue - to my mind convincingly - that there are crucial similarities between these different traditions of positivism.

occasionally complement Alexander’s somewhat one-sided investigation.

Alexander (1987:16f) claims that "the positivist persuasion rests on four major postulates":

The first is that a radical, epistemological break exists between empirical observations, which are held to be specific and concrete, and non-empirical statements, which are held to be general and abstract. Only because this break is taken for granted can the second postulate be made: more general and abstract concerns - philosophical or metaphysical - do not have fundamental significance for the practice of an empirically-oriented discipline. Third, questions which are of a generalized, abstract and theoretical nature can be evaluated only in relation to empirical observations. Finally, because these first three postulates supply no ground for structured scientific disagreement, the fourth postulate suggests that scientific development is ‘progressive’, that is, linear and cumulative. Differentiation in a scientific field, then, is taken to be the product of specialization in different empirical domains rather than the result of generalized, non-empirical disagreement about how to explain the same empirical domain.

The crucial point here is not simply the neglecting of theory. The crucial point is the reduction of the theoretical to the empirical. One of the key figures of the first post-war generation of Swedish sociology, Gösta Carlsson (1968: 83f), argued for instance for an “inductive” and “quantitative” understanding of theory. He, as so many other sociologists of his time, saw theory as a kind of "informational storehouse" (W. Wallance, quoted in Alexander 1982:10), that is, as accumulation of the results of empirical research. Theory in this reductive sense is also, for instance, to be found in Robert Merton’s idea of "systematic sociological theory", that is, “the highly selective accumulation of those small parts of earlier theory which have so far survived the tests of empirical research." (Merton 1957:5). Hans Zetterberg’s ([1954] 1965) concept of theory is another example of this kind of positivism. The critical trait is the idea that the validity of social scientific research could and should be judged exclusively with the help of empirical observations. According to this view an activity is only regarded as scientific “... so long as the test of the truth of the statement lies in the data themselves...” (Homans 1969:1).
A reduction of theory presupposes a more or less radical empiricist theory of knowledge, which in turn presupposes a dualistic distinction between the knowing subject (reason or language) and the known object (world). The knowing subject is more or less reduced to a passive receiver. Knowledge is a question of passive perception. Positivists think that if we observe social things and events in the right way – that is, according to the rules of scientific method - those things and events disclose their meaning to us or, as Foucault once expressed it; things mumble already a meaning which our language just need to grasp. Mental images, scientific theories and concepts thus represent the meaning of things, which always already is established in the external world before and independently of the knowing subject. The world is thus ontologically understood as - to borrow from Nelson Goodman's (1978) terminology - "a ready-made world". Truth is then a mental or conceptual mirror image of this ready-made world, that is, in the famous words of the early Wittgenstein: "Der Satz ist ein Bild der Wirklichkeit" (1990:§4.01).13

It is true that empiricism was explicitly repudiated by the French positivist tradition (Bryant 1985:14f.) But as Habermas (1973:92ff) and Giddens (1977:35, 40) both have pointed out, Comte and Durkheim's criticism of empiricism was limited. They did not question the idea that perception of a ready-made world is the fundamental presupposition of valid knowledge. The task of theory is, according to Comte, only to select and combine observations of empirical entities in a consistent and logical way. In this respect his positivism is actually not very different from that of Homans' a century later. According to the latter, theory is not just an inductively collected set of data. The theory of a certain phenomenon is the explanation of it; that is, the phenomenon must be put into a deductive system (Homans 1969:4). In this version of positivism, theory is thus to be understood as the accumulation of observations of empirical entities in the framework of deductive logic.14

13In the early stage of linguistic philosophy, the usual dualistic subject-object model of epistemology has not yet been replaced. Only the knowing subject – not the known object - is understood linguistically. That is how we should understand linguistic forms of positivism.

14The only non-empirical entity, which not is reduced in social scientific positivism, is formal logics and mathematics. Early Wittgenstein (1990:§4.014) was more radical and consistent on this point. In
At least in retrospect, it is clear that positivism cannot be understood only as a normative theory of science based on an empiricist theory of knowledge. It implies also ontological, anthropological and political conceptions. The conception of a ready-made world is ontological. We find it for instance in the early Durkheim's (1964:2) very influential claim that the social world should be understood as something "external" to the knowing subject. Social facts are - as Durkheim put it - "things by the same right as material things, although they differ from them in type" (ibid:xliii). Social facts exist "outside the individual consciousness" (ibid:2). Not only ontological, but also anthropological assumptions are involved here. Durkheim presupposes that it is possible for a knowing subject to be located in a different world (the world of reason) than the known object (the empirical world). The world of reason, that is (in the positivist tradition) science, is a neutral world. It is "free of any world view" (Neurath, quoted in Giddens 1977:52) and implicate the possibility of "the absolute freedom of mind" (Durkheim 1984:xxix).

There are actually always two very different kinds of human beings appearing in positivist social science: the scientists themselves, on the one hand, and ordinary people, on the other. They are differentiated because of the kind of knowledge they possess of the empirical world. Both kinds are dualistically separated from the "real" social world, but in very different ways. While scientists by means of method have access to the real world to which they themselves as scientists do not belong, ordinary people's common sense understanding of the same world is ideological, that is false (Durkheim 1964:14f). However, although common people are intellectually separated from reality (in terms of their misconceptions of it), they do physically and socially belong to the empirical world. The social world has a special kind of logic, pattern or order, which is different ("sui generis") from the logic of the subjective world of the individual. This order of the social world

a statement - which reminds us of Galilee's famous dictum: "the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics" - he claims that language and world have "der logische Bau gemeinsam". This statement is probably the most transcendental argument that empiricism (tacitly) has allowed itself.
is however – in Durkheim’s version of positivism - *unreflectively* internalised by every ordinary individual person and becomes hers or his "collective consciousness". Only in this sense are common people’s minds included in the social world and only in that sense do they become subject matters of positivistic social research.

Common people are thus excluded from the social world in the sense of being *actors*.\(^{15}\) We find thus here the criticised "over-socialised conception of man" (Wrong 1961). We find an anthropology, which basically makes the individual to a passive receiver of sociality, a "judgmental dope" as Garfinkel (1967:68) once put it. This alleged passivity of common people is not in the first place based on empirical observations, but follows already from the methodological rule that we should treat social facts as things. A thing cannot act or - if we do not make a distinction between action and behaviour - such actions do not have any consequences for the logic or laws of the social world. For the same reason, this anthropology rules out the need of interpretative methods. If the actor has no influence over the social world, there is no need to understand the actor’s interpretations in order to understand this world. When the individual is seen as a passive receiver of sociality, it is even enough to study the external social world to explain individual behaviour. Connected to this over-socialised conception of man is the positivist focus on social laws and prediction. The less significance we give to action, the more we can expect to be able to explain and predict on the basis social laws.

The other kind of human being, the scientist or the intellectual, can however in a limited sense act. It is in this context that we meet positivism in its political sense. Intellectuals can, with the help of scientific methods and reason, liberate themselves from common sense and discover the truth of the ready-made social world. They should therefore educate politicians, who in turn, with the help of the force of the political techniques of the state apparatus, can make ordinary people behave according to social laws. It is in this context

\(^{15}\)It is thus not a coincidence that - as Giddens has observed (1977:85) - most forms of positivist social science - from Comte to modern functionalism - lack a theory of action.
that Durkheim's distinction between normality and pathology appears. “The duty of the statesman”, Durkheim (1964:75) writes, is to take “the role of the physician: he prevents the outbreak of illnesses by good hygiene, and he seeks to cure them when they have appeared”. He should thus prevent and cure social pathologies on the basis of science. These implications make the heritage of Enlightenment in positivism apparent (compare Durkheim 1984:xxviff). The idea is that science in combination with social techniques should be used as political instruments in our effort to create the good society. It is this political conception that we today call "social engineering" (Compare Habermas 1973 and Bauman 1987).

If my picture of positivism is correct, the reduction of the theoretical to the empirical is only the methodological part of an entire worldview. It depends on the dualistic distinctions between "free-floating" intellectuals and ordinary people, on the one hand, and between a ready-made world and an ideological world, on the other. The scientists and the intellectuals are, in contrast to ordinary people, not judgmental dopes. Their possession of science and reason gives them immediate access to the true essence of the ready-made world. On the basis of this precious possession scientists and intellectuals have claimed a divine place in modern society. Positivists seem to have thought that reason - in this case, the scientific method - can transform them to a kind of modern angels, who are able to rise from the empirical world and observe it from above. Reason makes "God's eye view" possible, that is, what Thomas Nagel has called "The view from nowhere".

2. The critique of positivism

Implicitly the positivist conception of social science a priori limits the significance of the subjective world. Only to a very limited degree have positivists made the social world dependent on the subjective world of ordinary people and thus made the latter a part of their investigations. Positivist empirical studies of the high quarters of reason are further per definition excluded. To the degree that there was a positivist sociology of knowledge, it confined itself to a study of ideologies,
everyday knowledge, false consciousness, etc. It could study external social conditions of science, accidental subjective disturbances on the scientific process and scientific immaturities, which were understood as momentary inabilities to rise above the empirical world. The cognitive core of true science, however, could not meaningfully be studied scientifically because of the belief that this core simply does not belong to the empirical world. This cognitive core of science was the blind spot of positivism (Compare Brante 1984).

The critique of positivism meant that science and intellectuals became self-reflective. The focus shifted from the known object to the knowing subject and thus from the "pure" empirical world to the theoretical presuppositions of reason and science. Eventually this shift of focus led to the decomposition of the divine world of reason - a fall from grace. After the fall philosophers and scientists found themselves almost in the same awkward position as their older colleges had put ordinary people. Without absolute reason, we seem all to have become judgmental dopes. In the forceful metaphorical language of Niklas Luhmann (1988:24) we can say that scientists have now themselves become rats in a labyrinth observing other kinds of rats in other kinds of labyrinths. Today very few seriously imagine the possibility of Durkheim's "absolute freedom of mind". Since Heidegger's "In-der-Welt-sein", Wittgenstein's "language-game", Kuhn's paradigm theory, Rorty's strong contextualism, Foucault's "power-knowledge complex" and Luhmann's constructivism - just to mention a few important examples - the absolute autonomy of reason no longer seems to be a normative option. Reason - a concept, which more and more people hesitate to use without quotation marks - has become situated in time and space. It has become empirical and thus also a legitimate object for sociology. This deconstruction of absolute reason is the background of the earlier mentioned rise of sociology of knowledge and science. Conceptions of scientific methods, conceptions of truth and claims of intellectuals in general are now treated as dependent variables. It has been shown that they are the result of more or less unreflective interests and believes which are
dominant in the life-world of a special culture.\textsuperscript{16} It has thus become increasingly hard to make a clean distinction between science and ideology. The critical theory of the early Frankfurt school saw - just as Foucault - science and reason as means of repression and exclusion. The young Habermas talked about the scientification of society as the straight road to a technocratic society.

Critiques of positivism argue thus for the dissociation from the two earlier mentioned crucial distinctions of the positivist world-view:

1. The dualistic distinction between reason and empirical world breaks down on both sides. The idea of pure reason is criticised just as energetically as the idea of a ready-made world.
2. The dualistic distinction between intellectuals and ordinary people loses its force with the breakdown of pure reason and a ready-made world.

We have seen that a crucial element of reason in its positivist sense is freedom from subjectivity of opinion. Things are not \textit{really} as they appear to be. We have to liberate ourselves from the contingent space and time within the empirical world which we are born into - that is, from subjectivity - before we are able to reach the true essence of things. Truth is only possible from an absolute distance. The question becomes of course then: how can we perform this amazing act of liberation? Is such a capacity at all human? Already Weber (1944:21f) presupposed that humans do not have this divine ability. The social sciences are, according to him, always related to cultural values. If they weren't, knowledge wouldn't be possible at all. According to contemporary critics of positivism, the scientific methods which supposedly would make scientists "free-floating" are in principle not less contextually bound than other human constructions.

Weber also dissociated himself from the other side of the first crucial positivistic distinction, the ontological conception of a ready-made

\textsuperscript{16}We could, for instance, probably successfully explain mainstream Scandinavian sociology with the social democratic culture, which has dominated Scandinavian countries during this century.
world or "metaphysical realism" (Putnam 1983:205ff). Kant, Weber and Rorty have all argued that pure external reality is not a world at all. Pure perception gives us nothing but a chaos of sensory impressions. It is rather the knowing subject who creates meaning and thus order in this chaos - or as contemporary thinkers often rather expresses it - who creates the world. The critics of metaphysical realism have become increasingly radical in how much significance they give to the subjective side of knowledge production. Kant based the creative element of knowledge on a transcendental subject. Weber (1944:88ff) made knowledge dependent on "theoretical constructions" (ideal types), which in turn are related to the values and interests of a special culture. Rorty goes all the way and binds knowledge completely to the vocabulary of a special culture.

The criticism of metaphysical realism is related to the criticism of the correspondence theory of truth. The crucial point of the latter criticism is the following: how can we know that the ideas or concepts of reason correspond to external reality? Such a theory seems to presuppose that it is possible to compare words and things. But how could such a comparison even be imaginable? In what medium should it take place? It has to be a third kind beyond words and things. And what ever could that be? Some defenders of correspondence theory seem to think that things, in some mysterious way, cause the corresponding words. But even if such a causal relationship would be imaginable, how could we ever be sure about that? And in what sense would such an assumption help us to distinguish between truth and opinion? (Compare Putnam 1983, Rorty 1991:21ff and Habermas 1999:40ff)

The anti-positivist answer to these questions is to drop the whole idea of correspondence and radicalise the "linguistic turn". We can, according to this view, never step out of language. "Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt" as already the early Wittgenstein (1990:§5.6) put it. If we are to speak about truth at all, we should - with Rorty's (1991:21ff) terminology - understand it as "solidarity", not as "objectivity". Knowledge is not a correspondence between subject and object, but rather the result of communication, conversation, dialogue, discourse etc., that is, of some kind of
"theoretical" consensus between persons. It is important to see that the anti-positivist conception of "truth" is not normative, but descriptive. \(^{17}\) Truth is simply what a group of people in a certain context happen to hold to be true. Power relations, unreflective underlying values, traditions and subjective interests can explain a consensus about what is true. Such a conception - at least in the last instance - does not allow for a distinction between truth and opinion and thus not between intellectuals and ordinary people. Further, under these anti-positivist theoretical circumstances not only knowledge of the world, but the world itself is to be understood as the result of our contingent truth games.

I will not go deeper into the criticism of positivism. One way to summarise it is to say that positivism has been caught in its own trap. It has historically been one of the most important anti-metaphysical forces in modern society. Its critics have however made clear that positivism itself relies on deeply metaphysical conceptions of scientists as modern angels, of reality as a ready-made world and of truth as the correspondence of words and "things-in-themselves". Positivism is, in Adorno and Horkheimer's famous terminology, enlightenment transformed into mythology. The criticism of positivism can be seen as a self-reflective continuation of positivist criticism of metaphysics. In a political sense this continuation means a disenchantment of the mythological belief in science and technique, which in turn leads to an undermining of the legitimacy of social engineering (compare Beck 1992:155ff).

If this account of the consequences of the "overcoming of epistemology" is true (sic), social science seems to have plunged into a very problematic situation. In contrast to Kant, we do not have a transcendental subject to fall back on (compare Habermas 1999:18ff). Nor do we any longer share Weber's deep conviction that it is possible to make a clear distinction between science and opinion. \(^{18}\) We are

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\(^{17}\) The late Wittgenstein, Foucault, Rorty and the Strong programme all - at least in the last instance - lack an explicit normative conception of truth.

\(^{18}\) This conviction is already inconsistent in view of Weber's own theory of the value-relevance of social science. Compare Collin 1996.
rather standing on the slippery slopes of different kinds of relativism, for instance Foucault's - with Habermas' words (1985:296) - "transcendental historicism" or Rorty's strong contextualism (compare Carlehed 1996:137ff). It seems impossible to consistently make any claims of validity in this new theoretical situation. The situation is, however, paradoxical. It looks like the anti-positivist persuasion has led influential parts of both philosophy and social science to commit what Apel (1987:168ff) has called a "performative contradiction". What we do, stands in contradiction to what we claim. Just let me give you one illustration: Let's say that a sociologist of science would present an investigation, which claims that we successfully can explain scientific results as the consequence of a competition between researchers for fame and glory. The question then arises how we should understand this sociologist's own claim. Is it an exception from his or hers own result or the result of just another play of truth determined by power, subjective interests and strategic action. If the latter would be the case, that is, if the sociologist behind this theory her- or him-self is only seeking power, glory and fame, is the result of this investigation then true or false? I believe that the correct answer is that if inherently normative concepts like reason, truth, knowledge and science are reduced to power games and opinions, these concepts lose their meaning. And yet, we cannot do without such concepts. If the above mentioned sociologist hadn't made any – at least implicit - claims for truth in a normative sense, why should we ever bother to read her or his work in the first place?

As has been indicated above, I believe that we have to make a difference between post-positivism and anti-positivism. Anti-positivism has a deconstructive rather than a reconstructive relation to positivism. In this article we have so far only meet either a metaphysical and normative (positivism) or a post-metaphysical and descriptive (anti-positivism) conception of truth and science. What we lack is, however, a post-metaphysical and normative conception. It is this third possibility that I will try making sense of bellow. The concept metaphysics is here referring to a dualistic distinction between reason and empirical world.
Post-metaphysics is, in contrast, referring to a conception of situated reason. A normative conception of truth understands truth as a claim of universal validity. A descriptive conception of truth, on the other hand, relates truth to an empirical observable consensus among a specific group of people.

3. Rehabilitation of the theoretical

Let me once again take Alexander as my point of departure. He (1987:17f, compare 1982:30ff) claims that a post-positivist conception of science has to rehabilitate the theoretical in four related ways (compare his description of positivism quoted in the beginning of section 1):

1. The empirical data of science are theoretically informed. The fact-theory distinction is neither epistemological nor ontological ... It is an analytical distinction ... a manner of speech. ... Analytical distinction refers to observations informed by those theories about which we feel the most certainty.
2. Scientific commitments are not based solely on empirical evidence. ...
3. General, theoretical elaboration is normally dogmatic and horizontal rather than sceptical and progressive. ...
4. Fundamental shifts in scientific belief occur only when empirical changes are matched by the availability of convincing theoretical alternatives. ... the struggle between general theoretical commitments is 'among the most powerful energizers of empirical research' ...

The central claim here that the theoretical cannot be reduced to the empirical is today on a theoretical level well established. However, two crucial questions remains unclear in Alexander's account: 1. If the theoretical cannot be reduced to the empirical, that is, if theory cannot be understood as a representation or a mirror image of the empirical world, what is then theory? 2. If the empirical world cannot be understood empiricistically, that is, in terms of what we have called metaphysical realism, how should it then be understood? I will in this section focus on the first question and in the next section on the second.

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19 An anti-positivist would not, however, talk about reason, but about "reason".
In his 1982 book Alexander describes science in terms of a continuum from the metaphysical to the empirical. Theory comes close to the metaphysical side of this continuum. It is some what surprising that he uses the term metaphysics here, because that term has, in modern times, been understood as subjective belief and stood in opposition to science, truth and objectivity. His account of theory in the 1987 article does not make it clearer. Alexander talks here about non-empirical factors of science such as "logical coherence, expansiveness of scope, interpretative insight, value relevance, rhetorical force, beauty, and texture of argument" (22). We can be much more specific. If we take another look at the history of criticism of positivism, it shows without any doubt that what theory is all about is "meaning". The pure empirical world is in itself a senseless world. The task of theory is not first and foremost – as the positivists thought – the logically coherent accumulation of empirical observations, but more fundamentally the attribution of meaning. Meaning is the creative contribution of the subject of knowledge. Without knowing subjects there cannot be any facts, only – at least in the post-positivist conception - things and events (compare Habermas 1999:43ff).

Anti-positivists and post-positivists by and large agree in their criticism of positivism. In their own persuasions, however, they differ both in an ontological and an epistemological sense. We will deal with the ontological difference in the next section. Their disagreement in an epistemological sense becomes evident if we ask their advocates if there is any difference between constructing meaning in the form of, for instance, theory, everyday knowledge, opinion and literature. According to anti-positivism the claim that all facts presuppose theory means, for example, that there can be no principal difference between theory and literature and thus - in the next round - between science and literature. On this point it is rather positivists and anti-positivists who agree against post-positivism. When Alexander chooses to talk about theory in terms of metaphysics, it seems at first as he comes close to such an anti-positivist position (compare, on the other hand, Habermas' criticism of levelling the difference between philosophy and literature 1985:219ff and 1988:242ff). However, Alexander explicitly
writes that he wants to avoid relativism and subjectivism. He (1982:21) quotes Michael Polanyi:

Polanyi does not propose a radically subjectivist or idealist position - he is not, in other words, simply an antipositivist but rather a postpositivist. Committed to the epistemological distinction between the internal and the external world and to the scientific ideal of universality, Polanyi conceives of scientific objectivity as emerging from the scientist's commitment to interpersonal formulations about the external world which aspire to universal validity.

The term "interpersonal" in the quote reminds us of Rorty's distinction between objectivity and solidarity. But in contrast to the anti-positivist conception, the post-positivist form of solidarity does not exclude objectivity and universal validity. On the contrary, solidarity - or better - consensus in a scientific community, is what makes universal validity possible. Habermas is probably the one who most profoundly has tried to develop the idea of an intersubjective conception of validity. Already in his 1982 book Alexander refers to Habermas. In his later article, Alexander (1987:22) however writes: "Between the rationalizing discourse of Habermas and the arbitrary discourse of Foucault, this is where the actual field of social science discourse uneasily lies." This statement is very peculiar. To mix Habermas and Foucault is to mix a post-positivist and an anti-positivist. It seems to be a thoroughly eclectic mixture. If Alexander's statement would have been a description of social science - that is, a part of a sociology of social science - such a mixture might have been well chosen. Habermas (see, for instance, 1986:383) does not deny that strategic power and interests usually play an important role in actual discourse. Actual discourse is - to use the title of one of Habermas' books - both Faktizität und Geltung. However, we are here trying to develop a normative conception of social science and in that respect Foucault's descriptive discourse theory is useless. Let us therefore leave Alexander at this point and instead take a closer look at Habermas' normative discourse theory.

I believe that we in Habermas' works can find the most interesting attempt to combine a normative and a post-metaphysical conception of truth and knowledge. His point of departure is, like anti- and post-
positivism in general, the linguistic turn. We can understand his version of this turn with the help of the following figure:20

20The figure is a simplified version of a figure, which Apel (1994:19) has made.
According to Habermas, it is not the semantic side of language, that is, representation, which is of primary interest, but rather the pragmatic or performative side. Speech is then understood as a form of action, that is, as communication or discourse. "Formal" or "Kantian" pragmatics - as Habermas calls his version of the linguistic turn - is the fundamental point of departure not only of his theory of truth and knowledge, but of his theory of situated reason in general. Knowledge is interpretation of the world in the medium of language and interpretation is a performative and creative process. Further - as the later Wittgenstein pointed out - language cannot be private. It involves rule following and it takes at least two persons to follow a rule. Thus, interpretation and knowledge is also an intersubjective relationship. Knowledge exists in the medium of mutual understanding and is the result of communication. Truth should be understood as consensus in a "communication community".

The crucial post-positivist question becomes then in what sense Habermas' theory - without falling back in metaphysics - points beyond a descriptive understanding of truth as (forced) solidarity. According to Habermas, valid consensus is not the result of just any kind of conversation. There are certain normative conditions that we have to meet if our claims are to achieve validity. Habermas (1984:127ff) has - as well known - summarised these conditions under the heading "the ideal speech situation". The ideal speech situation consists of different normative conditions. Habermas (1993:31) mentions "freedom of access, equal rights to participate, truthfulness on the part of
participants, absence of coercion in adopting positions”. I will say a bit more about the most important aspects of this conception.

What do we do when we communicate? We speak, Habermas (1988:106) claims, always to someone about something. Language thus always involves three different "worlds". Language presupposes an ego, which speaks. That points toward the existence a "subjective world". Language presupposes, secondly, an "alter" to whom ego speaks. This relation points toward the existence of a "social world". Thirdly, language presupposes that ego and alter are talking about something. That points toward the existence of an "objective world". According to this view, we are thus not caught "in the prison-house of language". Language always points beyond itself. This differentiation of reality in three different worlds is a condition of understanding. We have to know what dimension of reality primarily is at stake when we are trying to reach mutual understanding.

In his studies of communication, Habermas has also found that we always are making validity claims, which are related to these three worlds. In everyday communication we constantly - implicitly or not - make validity claims about "sincerity" - a claim related to the subjective world, about "the rightness of norms" - a claim related to the social world, and "truth" - a claim related to the objective world. Validity and understanding are internally related. Understanding presupposes claims of validity, which are differentiated according to the three worlds. Truth, rightness and sincerity, in turn, presuppose that alter rationally have accepted ego’s claims.

In everyday communication we normally do not have to argue about the reason for a claim. We are living in a life world in which we take most things for granted. The life world functions as a kind of resource for communicative action. Only when a claim becomes problematic is communication transformed into discourse, that is argumentative speech. We are then trying to redeem a claim. Such redemption is only possible on the basis of "der eigentümlich zwangslose Zwang des besseren Argumentes" (Habermas/Luhmann 1971:137). We have to convince the other about the validity of our claims if we are to restore
mutual understanding. The only things that have force in such a discourse are good arguments (reasons), which lead to insights. It is here crucial to distinguish between cause and insight. A cause simply forces us to accept a claim in the same way as a billiard ball, which hits another billiard ball, forces the latter to move. An insight, on the other hand, is the result of reflection. Insight presupposes "das Nein-Sagen-Können" (Habermas 1981, Vol. 2:114), that is, some degree of autonomy. We accept in this case an argument not because of external forces, but because it convinces us. Such an acceptance, which is based on insight, is called rational acceptance. Validity is dependent on rational acceptance.

According to Habermas validity is also intrinsically related to universality. Universality should here be understood in terms of inclusiveness. A discourse about validity should in principle be open to everybody. The validity of a claim is in principle dependent on the rational and unforced acceptance of that claim by every other. This condition does not mean that we have to have an actual universal discourse. Universality means openness to the arguments of the other. As long as the discourse is open and nobody rationally – that is, with good reasons – refutes the claim, the claim is valid. In this conception of validity, inclusiveness and openness thus substitutes the metaphysical, positivist conception of "God eye’s view". A post-positivist conception of validity does not presuppose “the view from nowhere”, but the view of everybody.

It is crucial to see that Habermas is not claiming that valid consensus presuppose that actual discourse completely fulfils the conditions of the ideal speech situation. It belongs to the very meaning of a norm that it is effective without being fulfilled. It is an "idealisation". To be able to reach understanding we only "counterfactually" have to presuppose these "improbable" normative conditions (Habermas 1999:259). They are in their regulative form constitutive for validity. If we cannot trace more or less implicit conceptions of ideal discourse in

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21 Criticism of these norms themselves involves a change of perspective. The procedures of the discourse and not its original subject matter are then put into focus.
real discourse, we cannot any longer talk about communication. We are then rather dealing with some kind of symbolic violence. The claim that idealisations play a crucial role in actual communication is the basis of Habermas' conception of situated reason (compare Carleheden 1996:27f).

Habermas doesn't understand validity as absolute validity. His conception is a fallibilist conception. We can never exclude that what we hold as valid today, will reveal itself as invalid tomorrow. Somebody in the future or from an alien culture might any time convince me that what I thought was valid, as a matter of fact, is invalid. Such a fallibilist conception does not imply relativism. Rather – as Popper suggested – only that can be true, which can be imaged to be false and which is possible to criticise. A consensus expresses validity as long as the consensus is open to the good arguments of everybody who wants to argue.

Also the Habermasian version of the rehabilitation of the theoretical thus rejects the positivist view that the validity of claims can be judged directly by making comparisons with an objective world. Theory (or everyday knowledge) gives the world meaning. The advantage of Habermas' theory is that the difference between anti-positivism and post-positivism becomes very clear. In Habermas' case the significance of the theoretical does not in lead to relativism, because theoretical claims can intersubjectively achieve validity through discourse.

We have seen that there are different kinds of discourses depending on which kind of validity claim we are trying to redeem. There are further different general criteria of what "counts" as a good argument in different kinds of discourses. Habermas has for a long time focused on the redemption of claims of normative rightness, that is, on practical discourse. He has never spent much time on or been very clear about claims related to the subjective world, that is, ethical discourse (see Carleheden 1996:217ff). In his latest book Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung (1999) he has, however, returned to problems related truth - that is, the special conditions of a theoretical discourse –, which
he has not extensively dealt with since the beginning of the 70s. In our context theoretical discourse is of primary interest. We have seen that this kind of discourse points toward the existence of an objective world. In this case we have to be careful not to make the opposite mistake as compared with correspondence theory, that is, we should not – as anti-positivism - reduce the empirical world to language. So let us now focus on the role of the empirical in theoretical discourse, that is, the role of the objective or external world in a discourse about truth.

4. A post-positivist conception of the empirical

As we have seen Alexander (1987:17f) claims that the fact-theory distinction is neither epistemological nor ontological but “an analytical distinction” and – referring to Lakatos - “a manner of speech”. He also writes that facts simply refer to “observations informed by those theories about which we feel the most certainty”. In the 1982 (30) book he writes that: “Theory and fact are, rather, terms of convenience, decided by the focus of scientific attention at a particular time.” However, these statements do not make it clear how he understands the externality of the world.

As far as I can see we have three different pure possibilities:

1. Theories are representations of an external world.
2. Theories (just as everyday conceptions) are our constructions of the world.
3. Theories (and – in another way - everyday conceptions) are interpretations of an external world.

We have called the first conception metaphysical realism. The second conception is the anti-positivist one. Ontologically that conception means anti-realism. It is, in its pure form, the contemporary version of

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22 In Habermas’ version scientific knowledge and everyday knowledge are not different in kind. But there is an important difference. Scientists are only “virtual participants”. In contrast to ordinary people, the scientist does not “pursue any aims of his own” in the social world under investigation (Habermas 1981, vol. 1: 168).
metaphysical idealism. The world is nothing but a social construction. I will not now discuss these two forms further. What I want to do next is to try to make clear in what sense the third conception distinguishes itself from the other two. I will take my point of departure in Habermas latest effort to develop an epistemology. He (1999:14) now calls his position “pragmatic epistemological realism”.

A consensus theory of truth, in Habermas sense, is not the same as a coherence theory of truth; that is, it is not only about linguistic consistence and freedom form contradiction. Communication is, as we have seen, always also about something. It points toward an objective world. When we speak we can relate to something non-linguistic with linguistic means. People who argue about truth are people who also are living in an objective world. We do not only speak about the world, speaking is also a way of being in the world. It is a fundamental dimension of the human way of living. In other words, we do our interpretations of the world in the world, or better, we live our interpretations. Hence, the linguistic and the non-linguistic dimensions of our existence should not be understood dualistically, but rather as always already connected through life or praxis. This world that we, the “self-interpreting animals” (Taylor 1985:45ff), are living in has social, subjective dimensions and objective dimensions. Like the other dimensions - but in its special way - the objective dimension puts limits on the possible ways of living and thus on possible interpretations (compare Habermas 1999:20f). Some ways of living are simply not successful. Some interpretations cannot be lived. They don't work. The objective world is a potential resistance to our interpretations. The objective (external, empirical) world is actually nothing else than resistance. With other words, if we accept a truth claims or not is dependent on our experiences of living in an objective world. This view leads us to the following post-metaphysical and normative conception of truth: Truth is a fallible agreement based on good arguments between situated people who are struggling to cope with upcoming problems in the world they are living in.

23Compare for instance Judith Butler and Donna Haraway’s criticism of the sex-gender distinction.
So far I have thus tried to make a road between objectivism and relativism and between metaphysical realism and metaphysical idealism visible. There is, however, at least one crucial ingredient left if this road is going to lead us to a post-positivist conception of a social science. I have to be more specific about the differences between an external natural world and an external social world and thus between social and natural science.

5. A post-positivist conception of social science

Without doubt there are fundamental differences between a natural and a social world (compare, for instance, Collin 1998). This matter of fact puts different demands on the natural and social sciences. These dissimilarities have not got any attention in Habermas’ new book. What interests him there is rather the difference between theoretical and practical discourse. Habermas dismisses moral realism. In contrast to theoretical discourse, a practical discourse, he argues, lacks ontological base. “Instead of the resistance of objects we have the contradiction of social opponents, whose value orientations come into conflict with ours.” (Habermas 1999:56) Such contradictions can – for the time being - be solved from “the moral point of view” in a practical discourse. However, the subject matter of practical discourse is a social world, which the participants of that discourse themselves create. This world of valid norms has not an independent existence in the sense that an objective world has. Practical discourse is much more constructivistic in character than theoretical discourse. That is how far we reach with the help of Habermas’ new theory.

Moral philosophy and social science have at least since the origin of social science been going in different directions. However, they do, to large extent, still have the same subject matter - that is, norms - even though the former has a normative and latter a descriptive perspective on them. In view of this relatedness of moral philosophy and social science we should keep Habermas’ argument that the social world lacks an ontological base in mind, because exactly on this point we find a crucial difference between positivist and post-positivist social
science. All the way since Comte and John Stuart Mill, positivists have in a naturalistic way been talking about the social world as if it has an ontology of its own – a social ontology. This assumption followed from the idea that the social sciences should imitate the natural sciences. Such an imitation is only possible if the social world could be imagined to have objectivity and follow laws of a similar kind as the natural world. The result of this a priori methodological decision is a reification of the social world and a reduction of actors to judgmental dopes. We do not have to go into the well-known criticism of this conception again. The interesting question for us is rather if it is possible to avoid this positivist social scientific version of moral realism (naturalism) without falling into idealistic social constructionism. We need a conception, which can allow for both the constructive and the external dimension of the social world. In contrast to the natural sciences, the social sciences need to combine alternative 2 and 3, which was presented in the beginning of section four above.

Even though the social world must, in the last instance, be understood as human-made, it is rather obvious that it does not simply obey our plans and actions. Even when we collectively agree how to act we cannot simply change it as we please. Thus, also the social world has some kind of externality. It too can be understood as resistance (compare Engdahl and Lundin 2000). That is even true for the subjective world. Identity is for instance not something that we simply can understand as playing a role or as a masquerade. Identity is intrinsically related to authenticity. The history of personal experiences, the embeddedness of the self (or of a group) has a certain kind of objectivity in the process of personal (or collective) identity formation (compare Carleheden 1996:217ff and Carleheden 2000). The social world is a world of norms. Norms must without doubt be understood as resistance to subjective will. In a sense and to some degree this post-positivist view thus rehabilitates Durkheim’s view of the social as a special kind of constraint. However, we should not – as Durkheim – presuppose some kind of social ontology to conceptualise this social kind of resistance. Norms are, in the last instance, nothing but human conceptions of what is right. However, they can be externalised and institutionalised and thus made independent of every single
They can, so to say, live a life of their own. They can also take a physical form. A certain normative conception of the family has for instance consequences for how we build houses and apartments. Conceptions of masculinity and femininity are social institutions, which appear in the way we interact, walk, throw things, love, talk, dress etc. Different social institutions even connect to one another and form systems, which work more or less independently of the intentions of actors. “Man is” – as Clifford Geertz (1973:5) beautifully has put it – “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”. The crucial thing is that we can admit all this without presupposing a social ontology. And that is of vital importance, because to the extent something is human-made it can also – at least in principle – be remade by humans. If that is true there are no universal social laws to discover and control as social engineers think. The social world we live in is, in the last instance, the result of our own human history. Or to paraphrase Marx: Men make their social world, although not just as they please .... This difference between positivist and post-positivist conceptions of social science has in the end crucial political implications. In the latter case scientific knowledge is not, as in the former, related to prediction and control, but to social transformation. It is this close relation to politics that in the last instance explains why the social sciences to a much higher degree than natural sciences are exposed to disagreement and theoretical discourse (compare Alexander 1987). Social science has value-relevance.25

According to this post-positivist approach, social science, just as natural science, interpret a world, which can resist interpretations. But the world of social science does not primarily consist of things and events. As Giddens (1976:158) has pointed out the social scientists do not encounter a meaningless world. They encounter an always already pre-interpreted and – let us call it - pre-constructed world. However,

24 In the context of a discourse about truth it does not matter if these norms are ideological or not. That is rather a question for a discourse about normative rightness.
25 Against Weber I believe however that exactly this point shows us that social science cannot make itself independent of practical philosophical reflection. Discourses about truth and discourses about normative rightness are always, in the last instance, interrelated (compare Carleheden 1996:23ff and Carleheden 1998:61ff).
social science is not simply interpretations of interpretations, that is, “double hermeneutics” as Giddens put it. We interpret rather already externalised and institutionalised interpretations and constructions. We interpret systems of institutionalised constructions and interpretations, that is, life worlds, life forms or cultures. We interpret (perhaps contradictory) everyday interpretations of (perhaps contradictory) institutionalised interpretations and constructions. We interpret symbolic constructions, which are based on everyday interpretations of institutionalised interpretations and constructions. We interpret already externalised and institutionalised scientific interpretations and constructions etc., etc. The social scientists must therefore seek the resistance of the social world in two different, but interrelated ways. One way is the communicative resistance from the actual participants of the social world. We have – ideally – to be able to convince not only our colleagues, but also the subjects of our research (compare Carleheden 1998:68ff). However, even if Weber (1980:1ff) was right in claiming that actors cannot act without giving meaning to their actions, it does not follow that actors are aware of the full implications of the symbolic constructions that they use. Social science cannot limit itself to the meaning which actors themselves give to their own and others’ actions. Social science must therefore secondly seek resistance to its interpretations not only in everyday interpretations of action but also in contexts of non-reflective action and non-anticipated consequences of action.

Conclusion

I have in this article tried to take some steps on a road, which leads us between positivism and anti-positivism and toward a post-positivist or – at this stage we can terminologically be more specific - a pragmatist conception of social science. I have primarily tried to make two aspects of that road visible. 1. It has – in theory – almost become common sense to argue for the fundamental significance of theory. It can in no sense be understood as secondary to empirical research. We cannot test theory against facts, because facts are always already impregnated by theory. This rejection of one of the cornerstones of positivism does not however necessarily lead to relativism. In contrast
to anti-positivism, a post-positivist or pragmatist conception says that instead of understanding valid knowledge as the correspondence between concepts and facts, we should understand it as an intersubjective consensus in a scientific community. 2. The emphasis of the significance of the theoretical should not lead us to anti-realism. The rejection of the positivist conception of a ready-made social world does not necessarily lead to an idealistic form of social constructivism. The social world should instead, to a large extent, be understood as externalised and institutionalised interpretations and constructions, which can resist social scientific research. Social scientific knowledge is interpretation, which, so to say, has to be able to stand the test of social life. We have in some way to live our interpretations and relate them to lived interpretations and actions in the social world of our research. Valid knowledge has thus two interrelated dimensions: a theoretical and an empirical one.

In this article I have primarily been working on an epistemological level. If we are to develop a comprehensive pragmatist conception of social science this reconstruction of epistemology has to be applied on a methodological level. However, that has to be the task of another article.

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