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On Sociological and Common-sense *Verstehen*

Ronald Hitzler and Reiner Keller

In recent years in France Michel Maffesoli in particular (1985, 1988) has stressed the relatedness of 'connaissance sociologique' (sociological knowledge) and 'connaissance ordinaire' (common-sensical knowledge) or 'sens commun' (common sense). Taking as our point of departure the works of Alfred Schutz, we aim to develop the relation between these elements. This may be seen as the leitmotif of our reflections and at the same time a discussion of where the discourses of *verstehende* sociology in the Federal Republic of Germany and France meet. The following arguments thus deal with one aspect of phenomenologically oriented sociology in the Federal Republic of Germany, namely with the reconstruction of the relation between 'common-sense' and 'sociological' *Verstehen* (see also Schutz, 1962; Luckmann, 1983a; Soeffner, 1982). In our view, this reconstruction enables the sociologist to assume an attitude of 'methodological scepticism' that claims to make possible 'abnormal' descriptions of socially constructed reality as well as 'abnormal' discourses on reality and on descriptions of it. Thus the advantage of this attitude lies in the fact that it differs from the pragmatism of common sense, and the point in question now is what methods will make this attitude a scientific operation.

The Problem of *Verstehen*

If we now argue that the social sciences should begin with the description of how something seems to us and how we experience something, we are thus urging them above all not to claim that we know what reality 'really' is without being able to make understandable how we *can* know this at all. We regard phenomenology, so to speak, as a *criticism* of traditional research practices in the social sciences (be they positivistic, scientific, objectivistic or normative — see Husserl's earlier analyses (1970)). Traditional research practices, then, do *not* explain, at least not sufficiently, how their knowledge and findings are possible at all (they merely explain what kind of methods are compatible with scientific axioms and which methods are not). The traditional research practices of our discipline (and not only ours) posit their subjects without explaining how they are constituted. They thus perpetuate, without reflecting on it, the 'common sense' of everyday life in the 'expert knowledge' of the social sciences. But in fact we must continually provide new elucidations

of the links that relate common sense and sociological knowledge — and these elucidations must, as we see it, be based upon phenomenological descriptions and follow the premises of a ‘sociology of *Verstehen*’.

Phenomenology is *not* the same as *Verstehen* (see Luckmann, 1983b). But the questions of what *Verstehen* may be and how *verstehende* sociology may be possible then simply constitute the epistemological question to be posed as basic within phenomenologically oriented proto-sociology. ‘Before’ we start to deal with sociology we thus obviously have to ask how we understand and what consequences the basic structural change that results from the change of perspective in the life world has for the phenomenon of *Verstehen*. Let us therefore begin with the simple statement that positions are held within the social sciences saying that the phenomenon of *Verstehen* has a value relevant for findings. On the other hand, these positions are characterized by differences with regard to the question of what *systematic* value *Verstehen* has for sociological operations, and whether sociology should be exclusively practised on *verstehende* principles. At the same time the question becomes acute: by what measures can *Verstehen* claim the status of being a *scientific operation*? Each normal person — at least each normal adult — already knows that he understands several things and that he does not understand other things. Several people have the impression that they understand pretty much whereas other people think that they understand only a little. But nobody understands everything and nobody understands nothing at all. In principle everybody knows that he fundamentally understands. And if we therefore simply begin with our individual *Verstehen*, then we will come to the question of what sociologists must really do in order to understand.

However, whatever else we (want to) do — for example, describing reality or even explaining reality — our interlocutor is revealed to us as understood and *only* as understood. What we as sociologists do not understand therefore can neither be described nor explained by us in its particularity and all our descriptions and explanations on the other hand are nothing but reconstructive aids aimed at transforming our quasi-natural *Verstehen* of our fellow men into an ‘artificial’ one. This theoretical *Verstehen* may help us find a practical orientation in realities which have been constructed by ourselves as humans. The point in question, however, is to show that, when we assume a certain, non-concretizing perspective, certain aspects of culture normally neglected in the social sciences can be presented in a more distinct and vivid manner. These aspects are the efforts and achievements of normal and abnormal subjects which all together settle down in between the structures

and construct their own small worlds — sometimes in accordance with generally valid cultural programmes, and sometimes by peculiar counter-designs quickly abandoned or taken over. The perspective giving such a view of cultural life must be relearned. We must therefore deal above all with the *Verstehen* of *Verstehen* as a scientific method in the human and social sciences.

The Theoretical Relevance of *Verstehen*

If we suppose that there is something like a shared premise about *verstehende* approaches to be used in the social sciences, then it presumably will be the premise that the specific feature of our subject (in contrast to the subjects of the natural sciences) lies in the fact that it has ‘always’ been meaningfully pre-organized. Hence we must take into account this fact methodologically and methodically, if we do not want to miss this peculiarity of our subject. To spell out this premise straight away: from the point of view of *concept and theory formation in the social sciences*, *verstehende* approaches do not present a supplement but an alternative to all non-*verstehende* schools in the social sciences. Its general claim does not simply lie in the purpose of extending the methodological canon of sociology (presumably even only in the sense of hypotheses producing pre-methods — concerning this, see so-to-speak ‘classical’ misunderstanding: Abel, 1958); its claim, rather, is simply to unveil the epistemological naïvety of the fundamental methods used in social science research *and* theory formation as well as to reconstruct them and to shed light on them. The paradigmatic claim of *verstehende* approaches reads as follows.

Sociological operations are simply based upon acts of *Verstehen* in the sense that *Verstehen* precedes and constitutes the basis and is *always* part of the operations. The importance of *verstehende* approaches for the theory of knowledge thus lies, so to speak, in their ability to ‘reform’ social scientific thinking in general by explaining first of all their own practices. Above all, these practices (and beyond all methodical refinements of quantifying research) are an unreflecting, unquestioning and, to a certain extent, self-evident *understanding of the other’s mind*. It is thus relevant for the theory of science above all to analyse who or what the other may be and how we can know anything at all about him (with regard to the problem of intersubjectivity; see Schutz, 1962b).

This problem justifies hermeneutically the exceptional position of the human sciences with regard to their methodology: the ‘etic’ observation and explanation of natural events is contrasted to the ‘emic’ participation

in and comprehension of cultural phenomena. In other words, whereas natural events do not bear a meaning 'within themselves' and thus their meaning is defined by the observer, cultural phenomena indeed have 'always' had a meaning. And this peculiar meaning is now to be reconstructed. What the scientific interpreter does, does not *in principle* differ from what people in everyday life do, too: he interprets what he observes as indicators for an underlying meaning. But unlike the everyday man, the scientific interpreter tries, provided that he works in a hermeneutically reflective way, to elucidate the preconditions and methods of his *Verstehen*. Thus and only thus *Verstehen* gains the status of a *scientific* method. And only thereby *Verstehen* becomes a subject to be taught and learned *systematically*.

We do not need to put special emphasis on the fact that *Verstehen* and sociology by no means unquestionably belong together with regard to their history. The representatives of the 'hermeneutic' tradition and the representatives of the sociological school, being on the whole 'positivistic' or 'scientistic', have indeed debated vehemently — and are still doing so (see also Wilson, 1970). Put more simply, from a point of view concerning scientific theory, the concern has always been the issue that we have just noted; namely the question of what is the typical character of our subject. 'Positivistic' positions represent a methodological monism, that is, they claim that scientific work means an orientation to methodological standards of science that have been developed especially by natural scientists and are valid in this field of science. In contrast to this stands the understanding of science assumed in *verstehende* sociology which we present here with special reference to the works of Alfred Schutz — as normally the tradition referring to him is meant when we speak of 'interpretive sociology' (Parsons, 1978). The *verstehende* approach that at the moment is the most productive and expanded in theory, methodology, methods and empirical work centres on this tradition (see Heap and Roth, 1973). Besides the mundane phenomenology developed by Schutz, ideas, positions, and methods of existential phenomenology, traditional hermeneutics, philosophical anthropology, and above all of symbolic interaction have since made contributions to this approach (see, for example, Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). For this reason we want in what follows to deal with the problem of *Verstehen* as posited by Schutz when he tried to establish a phenomenological justification of the social sciences. For that purpose we ask above all what 'typical *Verstehen*' — namely, understanding of the other's mind — means and what ensues from this for the relationship of sociology and everyday life.

Social Scientific *Verstehen*

We call *Verstehen* the process through which meaning is given to an experience (see in the following Schutz 1970a). Understanding of the other mind — and this most often is meant when we speak of *Verstehen* in the social sciences — we call the process through which we give *the* meaning to an experience that refers to an event located in the external world and to which an alter ego already has given a meaning. The alter ego's mind is presented to me by symbols (the relatedness of symbol and denotation will be constituted in my mind) and by signs (which as elements of a sign system have an intersubjective already existing meaning and which are representations of the denotation). Signs possess three layers of meaning: (1) an objective meaning (that is, the sign is to be attached in one sense to the denotatum regardless of the person who makes the sign or who interprets it, as it is invariant and can be used 'again and again' according to its meaning); (2) a subjective meaning (that is, the sign has an additional meaning for the individual sign maker and sign interpreter); and (3) an occasional meaning (in other words, depending on the context the sign has a specific meaning, that is to be interpreted with regard to the overall situational context). If I now want to understand the other's mind I will above all have to reconstruct the objective, subjective and occasional meanings of its 'signs' and to interpret them with regard to the context of its subjective motives. Thus it might become comprehensible that *Verstehen* of an other mind can be achieved only approximately and that the extent of this *Verstehen* depends on (a) my knowledge of the concrete other person, (b) my knowledge that the other person's action has an objective (that is, socially valid) meaning, and (c) my situational relevances (how correct the interpretation must be according to my own pragmatic interests). Understanding of the other's mind means to interpret symbols and signs as being appresentations of an other mind, and this of course means in fact to self-interpret. The really intended meaning of an actor and the other's interpretation of what he thinks it was 'intended to mean' are in principle not identical. The last-quoted meaning is only approximately identical with the first-quoted one.

Social scientific *Verstehen*, then, is an artificial theory, an artificial method that should serve to reconstruct social reality adequately and correctly, reliably, in a valid manner and verifiably. The goal of social scientific *Verstehen* unlike that of other artificial forms of *Verstehen* (as for example *Verstehen* by intuition, in mysticism, in existentialism), is to find the typical, namely the typical form of action as well as the typical

form of knowledge tied to the action, and finally the typical form of common-sense *Verstehen*. Only the '*Verstehen* of *Verstehen*' enables us to show systematically similarities and differences between common-sense and scientific *Verstehen*. In fact it seems to us that these similarities and differences are not inherent within the procedure of *Verstehen* itself; rather, they affect the degree of reflection, the form of organization and the goal. Be it in sociology or in everyday life, understanding of the other's mind will approach its subjective intended meaning via interpretation of symbols and signs. The difference lies, rather, in the fact that the interpretation efforts of social scientific *Verstehen* are not made with recourse to common-sense knowledge but with recourse to a stock of special knowledge of professionals; they are moreover not made with reference to the pragmatic needs of the management of life but rather with reference to a system of relevances of a pragmatically disinterested observer. Moreover, the social scientist's *Verstehen* makes no reference to the present-day world of the living but rather to an imagined world of predecessors and contemporaries (see also Schutz, 1962a).

In the process of *Verstehen* the social scientist assumes a particular, not common-sense but theoretical attitude; that is, an attitude of questioning in principle all self-evident elements of social life and an attitude which could be called 'methodological scepticism' or even in a somewhat exaggerated way 'artificial stupidity' (cf. Berger, 1963). Ideally this attitude is characterized by lack of concern for one's own existence and the fact that interest centres only on comprehending reality and on finding out the truth of reality. As Schutz sees it, the real social world, participation and real living fellow men are not part of this attitude; it contains rather, only idealized models of social phenomena and artificial human beings constructed by the social scientist. Thus it becomes clear that Schutz (1964) does not regard social scientific *Verstehen* as being a problem of research but rather being one of reflection. Or in other words, the particularity of *Verstehen* as a scientific method does not lie for him in the sphere of *collecting* data but rather in that of data *interpretation*. We comprehend, even when we conduct social scientific research, the reality created by society due to our *everyday* capacity for understanding that is a result of the reciprocity of perspectives. Scientific *Verstehen* ensues when we assume a theoretical attitude, whereas research practices as well as normal scientific discourse practices take place within the scope of common-sense *Verstehen*.

Social scientific *Verstehen* aims to disenchant social constructs. Social scientific *Verstehen* that finally serves to explain how objective meaning-contexts are created out of subjective activities of the consciousness is a

Verstehen by means of a system of typical constructs that must be logically consistent, in principle apt for subjective and meaningful interpretation, and adequate to the experience of everyday life and to that of science. The social scientist's constructs are thus 'second degree constructs' (constructs of constructs), that must be of such a nature that, as Schutz (1962a) sees it, an actor in the life world would act in this typified manner if he had completely clear and definite knowledge of all elements and only of those elements that the social scientist supposes to be relevant for his action and if he is constantly inclined to employ the most appropriate means at his disposal for obtaining his purposes defined by the construct.

The methodical and methodological problem of the interpretive social scientist is thus the question 'how he can be sure that he really has caught the perspective of the other minds'. The ingenuous — and in sociology, wide-spread — 'solution' to the problem is the following: interrogation of the other person. But such a 'Hurray-empiricism' ignores at least two sources of error. First of all it accepts without question a doubtfully general thesis of the common-sense attitude, saying that the other person and I live in the same world and that we essentially experience the world in the same way, that there is congruency in our meanings or that we can at least come to an agreement about it. Second, it equals the level of communicative meaning and that of meaningful experiences (thus: somebody *says* he would see something that way so he *really* sees it this way). But the subjectively intended meaning of the other person is by no means open to free access: in fact we 'really' do not comprehend at all the 'subjectively intended meaning' of the other person. What we do understand is always something particular: this particularity can be completely anonymous, highly individualized, or just something in between (see also Natanson, 1986). We experience even completely unique informations in a particular way: they are expressed in linguistic typifications, and indeed they have to be expressed in such typifications. Only by and in typifications can we cope with everyday life (see Luckmann, 1983b: 68–91). This is so to speak the first lesson to be learned by a sociologist with regard to his ability to 'understand'.

Common-sense *Verstehen*

Common-sense *Verstehen*, on the contrary, is a commonplace activity of consciousness: generally for humans *Verstehen* is so normal that it does not become a subject of their interest at all. In other words, in everyday

life people are so intensively engaged in understanding permanently that they cannot occupy themselves with *Verstehen* itself. *Verstehen* as 'a form of being' (see Heidegger, 1962) is thus by no means an invention of the social sciences. A theoretical attitude of particularity is not necessary for the everyday process of *Verstehen* as *Verstehen* is simply everyday routine. We also could say that common-sense thinking is a certain attitude — namely, *that* attitude that takes as a normally self-evident point of departure the assumption that people can do or not do many things, that there are always important, less important, and relatively unimportant things and that these things sometimes may be this and sometimes may be that. Further, it assumes that several things simply happen while other things only happen when we do something or do nothing. Other points of departure hold that there are differences between above and below, between right and wrong, between good and bad, and, last but not least, that other people see things approximately in the same way as I see them — or, to their disadvantage, see them differently from me. In short: common-sense thinking is a pragmatic attitude through which we manage our practical life and the fact that we obviously have things in common with other people.

Common-sense thinking is the natural attitude by means of which we suppose that other normal, wide-awake adult people are on the whole people 'like us'. And the common-sense knowledge that essentially influences our common sense is above all a socially distributed collection of certainties claiming this or that is such or such and not quite different, and that it is better to act in such a way instead of acting differently under these or those circumstances in order to cope with this or that problem (see in the following also Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, chs 3 and 4). In principle we can of course doubt common-sense; these possible doubts must however be suspended, eliminated and neglected temporarily and again and again so that we can manage practical life. And it is especially this attitude in which the possible questioning of reality remains excluded that we call the common-sense attitude.

On the basis of common-sense knowledge we make decisions each day in familiar or less familiar situations. Common-sense thinking presents a relatively unsystematic attitude assumed with regard to reality. It operates with interpretations, explanations and deductions that by no means always harmonize. With regard to its perspective, common-sense thinking has its limitations. This means that on the whole it assumes that the way we see things is, although not the only one, at least the right way to see things. Common-sense is bound to traditions; that is, it often operates in a relatively thoughtless and uncritical manner with socially

inherited interpretations, explanations and practices. Common-sense thinking is relatively short-sighted. It is essentially interested in coherences only in so far as they are necessary for the management of practical life: normally it is satisfied by simple explanations and interpretations. Common-sense orients itself to what is occasionally useful for us. Interpretations and explanations of everyday actions serve our personal interests or the interests of the group or society we belong to. Common-sense thinking is the simplest form of legitimation. It operates with socially transmitted stereotypes in a relatively unquestioned assessment of things.

Without asking questions, the everyday man presupposes the reciprocity of perspectives and thus the interchangeability of standpoints as well as the congruency of systems of relevances (see Schutz and Luckmann 1973, ch. 2.5; Schutz 1962b: 207–59). Experiences that are marked by differences due to individuals' biographies can consequently be neglected and the actors' individual systems of relevances are essentially congruent. The actor disposes of a knowledge of acquaintance for each everyday situation: he assumes that action patterns that have stood the test once or repeatedly, can be applied now and in the future with similar success. This typical credibility does not only apply to sediments of one's own experiences but, in analogy to common-sense knowledge in general, also to thought objects handed down by society — namely, thought objects of which the actor simply believes, due to his socialization, that they have stood the test. These interpretation models — that is, these typifications — are modified only according to the specific context: and this is indeed normally done as little as possible. Management of everyday problems thus means in principle the transformation of new and unfamiliar things into familiar and typical things. Only the certainty of the reciprocity of perspectives allows the successful management of everyday life (see also Berger and Luckmann, 1967, ch. 2).

Common and Different Elements

Thus sociologists are often occupied with things with which people are anyhow occupied each day. But sociologists deal with these things in a quite different way from the way they are normally dealt with in everyday life. This means that the social scientific way of seeing things constitutes a perspective of experiencing the world that is indeed founded upon everyday experience but nevertheless also differs from it. Sociological expert knowledge is a form of *theoretical* attitude towards reality.

But this does not mean that the sociologist's practical operations that ensue in a scientific institution are excluded from being part of everyday life. But the sociologist's institutional everyday operations are a means — or at least should be a means — for the sociologist of 'retreat' within a *particular* attitude. This particular (namely, theoretical) attitude temporarily neglects the pragmatic interests of common-sense thinking and replaces them by a purely cognitive interest: i.e. by an interest not to cope with a subject in a practical way, but to analyse it 'sine ira et studio'.

The practical use of sociological expert knowledge for society is thus to draw people's attention to circumstances, contexts and rules that are *not* the matter of common-sense thinking and according to which people manage their life. And the use of social scientific *Verstehen* is thus to draw attention to the 'self-evident' *structures* and *functions* of common-sense knowledge and common-sense thinking. In this sense, therefore, sociology is a professionalized *knowledge* of particularity that is reasonably useful for reconstructing in a more or less detailed way, social constructs of reality. The sociologist assumes a position of distance towards the pragmatism of common-sense thinking. He has, so to speak, in principle to deal with them in a *sceptical* way so that he can shed light on everyday human actions.

It is clear that this understanding of sociology is by no means empirical, but normative: it describes an 'ideal' type of sociology. And in practice even the pragmatically disinterested sociologist is not only a sociologist but an everyday being, too. In many ways he is part of the social life. He is, so to speak, permanently in the dilemma of being *at the same time* co-actor, observer and reporter of the social constructs of reality. His research takes place within the social world and already affects it all the time in an unquestioned manner. His scientific 'output' leaks to a large extent, although often via strange detours, into common-sense knowledge. In brief the knowledge of the sociologist is founded upon common-sense thinking, and common-sense thinking (also) changes as a result of the particular knowledge of the sociologist.

Let us recall once again in conclusion the differences between common-sense and sociological knowledge and between common-sense thinking and the sociological perspective. *No* element of sociological knowledge is important unless, regardless of its mediation, it is related to human common-sense knowledge. But the sociological way of seeing the world is a clearer, more logical and more systematic attitude than that of common-sense thinking. Sociology chooses its subjects according to explicit criteria of knowledge value and makes a systematic classification of these subjects. It defines, too, in a strictly empirical way, the reality

relevant for sociology, whereas in everyday life we do not always distinguish at all clearly between empirically verifiable and non-empirical statements. Sociological statements, unlike everyday views, form a logical system. However, logical consistency is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a sociological statement. The ultimate criterion for a statement, rather, is empirical observation. The goal of science is to explain empirical phenomena in a systematic, generalized and theoretical way. The real reason for sociological explanations of socially constructed reality, however, is to understand the sense and meaning of the everyday actions of people in society. To develop a real sociological expert knowledge, in contrast to pragmatic common sense, thus means to develop another view of simply given, natural and familiar things from everyday experience with a view on everyday actions that, above all, has to be practised in everyday life. It means a distanced position towards what everyone knows in his non- or pre-theoretical everyday life (see Berger and Luckmann 1967, ch. 1). No more, but, as we see it, also no less.