Reinhard Sieder

*Social History: on the Way to Becoming a Historical Cultural Science?**

Since the mid-1980s, terms such as "the everyday" (*Alltag*), "experience", "life-world" and "culture" have achieved a meaning and significance which have come to define the new direction taken by social history in the last decade.[1] In what follows, I will first of all outline the conjunctural links between these new or renewed concepts and the criticisms that have been directed at objectivist structural functionalism in historical social science. I will then go on to ask whether labels such as "the history of everyday life" (*Alltagsgeschichte*), the "history of experience" (*Erfahrungsgeschichte*) or "historical anthropology" (*Historische Anthropologie*) are able to symbolise and develop further post-structural changes in social history. Or might it not be more appropriate to speak about the beginnings of a new historical cultural science (*Historische Kulturwissenschaft*)? Are we dealing with the belated introduction of a qualitative paradigm[2] in the field of historical social science (*Historische Sozialwissenschaft*)? Do the exponents of the new approaches already constitute a "third generation" of historical social scientists, successors to both the first generation, who formulated their conception of an historical social science in the 1960s and 1970s and defended it against the mainstream of the time,[3] and the second generation, who spread its new social scientific paradigm in the 1980s? Finally, I will ask where all this fits into the discourse of post-modernism.

---

* Original German version published in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 20 (1994), pp. 445-68.

1 I would like to thank Ulrike Döcker and Erich Landsteiner for their comments and criticism on this article.

2 For an introductory overview, see: U. Flick et al. (eds.), *Qualitative Sozialforschung*, München 1991; S. Lamnek, *Qualitative Sozialforschung*, vol. I: Methodologie, vol. II: Methoden und Techniken, München 1988/89; A. Giddens, *Interpretative Soziologie*, Frankfurt 1984.

3 H-U. Wehler, *Geschichte als Historische Sozialwissenschaft*, Frankfurt 1973; J. Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte. Begriff – Entwicklung – Probleme*, Göttingen 1977, 2nd edition 1986.

Structure instead of culture – a categorical confusion.

During the founding period of historical social science in the 1960s and 1970s, those members of the German historical profession who were more open to innovation and new theoretical developments – at that time, a group very much in the minority – focused on the structures behind social, economic and political phenomena. Partly, this was done by employing statistical data or by converting other kinds of documentary material, such as nominative sources, into statistical data, using statistical techniques which operated far more descriptively than analytically. The initial work in this direction was carried out above all by French historians of the so-called "*Annales* school". After a certain interval, the ideas of the *Annales* historians came to heavily influence historians in West Germany (and later still, in Austria), who began to employ structural paradigms, albeit in modified form and – after the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust – in a politicised manner.[4] The subsequent years witnessed a large amount of research in this vein, which provided new and interesting insights into such areas as household and kinship systems, family structures, property or labour relationships and yields on landed and feudal estates, changes in prices and wages, the social structure of the memberships of political parties (such as the NSDAP) and so on.

From today's point of view, the greatest weakness in the first wave of German-language structural historical research (as was the case with comparable work undertaken in France, Britain and the U.S.) was its thoroughgoing neglect of the supposed subjects of the work in question. That is to say that the interpretations, actions and experiences of the historical actors themselves tended to be ignored, because of the specifically structural perspective adopted when investigating such themes as households, families, feudal estates, firms, associations, political parties or whatever, even if the concern was not simply to construct "structural models", but also to write history – a new, social scientific history.[5] Just as Fernand Braudel's grand

[4] A more extensive discussion of these issues is given in: R. Sieder, "Was heißt Sozialgeschichte? Brüche und Kontinuitäten in der Aneignung des Sozialen", in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* (ÖZG) 1 (1990) 1, pp. 25-48. On some of the differences between the use of structural concepts in the social history practised by the French *Annalistes* and that of German-speaking historical social scientists, see (among others): H. Kaelble, "Sozialgeschichte in Frankreich und der Bundesrepublik: Annales gegen historische Sozialwissenschaften", in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (GG) 13 (1987), pp. 77-93.

[5] My own earliest scientific research at the end of the 1970s was very much in line with this structural functionalist tradition. For example: R. Sieder, "Strukturprobleme der

narrative *La Méditerranée* (1949) had begun to treat time and space as subjective actors,[6] so a number of structural-analytical studies located themselves within the same categorical shift: the logic of structures replaced the social logic of the actors. To give just one example, the following citation from Arthur E. Imhof's article on "Rural family structures" stands as a typical example of 1970s social history (both in terms of its title and content):

> "Malthusian shocks were greatly feared long before Malthus; overpopulation and its reduction by means of positive checks (famine, plague, war) hit large sections of the population directly and severely. There were constant efforts to prevent such a development, in that the potential fertility of women was restricted, be it through the control of marital fecundity (lengthening of the intervals between conception, lowering the age at birth of the last child) or through increasing the proportion of unmarried adults in the population, extending widowhood or, finally, by means of raising the marriage age for women."[7]

---

ländlichen Familie im 19. Jh.", in: *Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte* 41 (1978), pp. 173-217; see also: R. Sieder and M. Mitterauer, *Vom Patriarchat zur Partnerschaft. Zum Strukturwandel der Familie*, (1977), 4th edition, München 1991; engl.: *The European Family*, Oxford 1982, 4rd edition 1989.

6 F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris 1949. So far as I know, the earliest reception of Braudel's ideas in the German-speaking countries was W. Conze in: *Historische Zeitschrift* (HZ) 172 (1951), pp. 358-62. In retrospect, it now seems understandable precisely why the group associated with the *Annales* and later, the first generation of historical social scientists associated with *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* in West Germany, turned away from the subjective in order to draw attention to the "structures" and "conjunctures" at work behind the subjects themselves. This was very much a reaction to what they saw as the hegemony of an historicist tradition which was oriented around politics, states and great individuals. Yet in effect, this move away from the idealistically conceived subject merely ended up throwing out the baby with the bath-water: in Braudel's work, people find themselves in a form of prison, where the sentences are of different length; they act and make decisions only at the uppermost and more superficial of the three levels into which he divides historical time, namely that of *l'histoire événementielle*. As the older Braudel wrote, "history" on the contrary is made "far removed from our persons and our daily misery [...], shifting slowly, as slowly as the ancient life of the Mediterranean", see: F. Braudel, "Personal Testimony", in *Journal of Modern History* 44 (1972) pp. 448-67. In the following decades, historiography increasingly lost sight of the individual as a "societal being" (Karl Marx). Social history was written virtually without people, in terms of data; or to borrow the chic phraseology of its French originators, the structural approach represented the death of the subject.

7 A. E. Imhof, "Ländliche Familienstrukturen an einem hessischen Beispiel: Heuchelheim 1690-1900", in: W. Conze (ed.), *Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas*, Stuttgart 1976, p. 206.

This sample text shows just how easily historians fell into the trap of reifying these kinds of structures. These narratives (which actually aimed to be anything but "narratives") removed the actual impact of structural changes either to the realms of the general consciousness of anonymous historical actors ("Malthusiasn shocks were greatly feared...") or else structures were assigned the status of quasi-actors. In doing so, historians blurred the difference between a scientific classification system based on collected data and the social specificity of what they thought they were observing. This was a result of the heady euphoria created by the belief that historians had attained a greater degree of scientific exactitude through their statistical measurement of certain phenomena, rather than comprehending the meaning of what people tell about themselves (their "statements"). I would describe this substitution of the social logic of the actors with the logic of a specific kind of structures, or the attribution of subjective characteristics to these structures, as *structural realism.* This constituted a disciplinary variation on the structural functionalism predominant in all the social sciences during the 1960s and 1970s. Within that genre, historical subjects only appear – if at all – as puppets on the strings of structures. They occupy social positions and use interpretations which are already predetermined: for example, they alter their fertility patterns as if they were already obeying Malthus' theory long before Malthus himself. In practice, however, this methodology contradicted in one central respect the – at the time oft proclaimed – desire to stimulate an emancipatory and illuminative social science: the new direction failed to provide adequate empirical insights into the processes whereby historical actors contributed actively to the formation or alteration of the relationships within their particular space for acting (*Handlungsspielraum*).

An alternative: the praxiological approach

Around the mid-1980s, a number of social historians began to study the works of the French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. His critique of structural functionalism and structuralism (as practised in the disciplines of sociology and ethnology) proved to be of greatest interest, because Bourdieu's arguments provided the basis for an effective and theoretically well-versed critique of the latent attachment to structural realism displayed by so many works of historical social science. It now became clear that a significant consequence of the one-dimensionality present in historical social science was that societies and their sub-systems (political parties, associations, firms, bureaucracies, households, families etc.) were treated as socio-

structural "facts", as "things" in pure Durkheimian fashion.[8] Partly drawing on the arguments of Max Weber's interpretative sociology, Bourdieu demonstrated that these socio-structural "facts" actually only become *social reality* when they are appropriated by historical actors. In systemic terms, the appropriation of social conditions can mean either the continuation (the reproduction) of those conditions or their alteration. In both cases, the situation derives partly from individuals (through the decisions and actions pertaining to their personal life-course) and partly from the context of social action in which social groups and classes, societies or international organisations are involved. In all these situations, people are very much *actors*, rather than simply being the mere puppets of external conditions or prisoners of structures. In the social theoretical approach offered here, individuals are no longer determined from above, but neither are they "free" to act in completely autonomous fashion, in line with their conscious actions, knowledge and intentions (as in the idealist conception of history).

A new social theoretical conception of social history's general object developed on the basis of Bourdieu's arguments. Where Braudel, Conze and others had viewed social history as the investigation of the hierarchical, structural orders determining human action, whose conjunctural variations consisted of mid- to long-term trends and short-lived events,[9] this new conception understood its subject-matter to be a *dialectical process* between whatever conditions for action existed in a particular time and place and the actual practices of historical actors. "Social reality", a central notion taken on board from interpretative sociology, now seemed to be constituted in a dual way: on the one hand, "social reality" consisted of a set of given factors, which could be described in terms of social, economic and political structures. On the other hand, it also comprised the actions and interpretations of actors, who produce, extenuate or change those given, structured conditions for action; in other words, social agents "structurise" social reality. Contrary to the practice of structural social history, conditions for action no longer took pride of place in historical analysis, because they were not now considered

---

8 E. Durkheim, *Die Regeln der soziologischen Methode* (Paris 1895), Frankfurt 1984, p. 115:. "The first and most basic rule is to treat sociological things as facts".

9 See, F. Braudel, "Histoire et sciences sociales. La longue durée", in: *Annales* 13 (1958), pp. 725-53; German: "Die longue durée", in: H.-U. Wehler (ed.), *Geschichte und Soziologie*, Köln 1972, pp. 189-215; also in:. C. Honegger (ed.), Schrift und Materie der Geschichte. *Vorschläge zur systematischen Aneignung historischer Prozesse*, Frankfurt 1977, pp.47-85. For a comparatively positive treatment of (political) action, see: W. Conze, *Die Strukturgeschichte des technisch-industriellen Zeitalters als Aufgabe für Forschung und Unterricht*, Köln 1957.

to be any more "real" than the actions, interpretations, ideologies and discourses.[10] Myths, mentalities and behaviour ceased to be a kind of intellectual mist obscuring historical reality and became instead its constitutive components, and thus a central part of the subject-matter of social historical research. For this reason, it is possible to speak of a "cultural theoretical change" in social history, whereby "culture" is understood as being inclusive of actors' viewpoints, meanings and interpretations, as well as their structurised symbolic expression in texts, images, objects, rituals, gestures and so on.[11]

Admittedly, even within the framework of a *post-structural*[12] and cultural theoretically expanded interpretation of social history, it is still necessary to pose the question as to what possibilities historical actors actually have to shape and change circumstances according to their own interests and preconceptions. In other words, we must ask if, and how, actors succeed in creating a consciousness of common interests and perceptions (for example, of "justice"), and which alliances they enter into on the basis of such a consciousness. If the consciousness of historical actors can no longer be more or less deduced from structures (as in structural functionalism) nor always be described as a "false consciousness" that will necessarily be corrected in the course of history (as in objectivist marxism), then we are obliged to raise again the question first posed by E. P. Thompson[13] at the end of the 1970s: is it possible to talk about present or historical societies in terms of the classical sociological terminology of "class" or "estate"? And what is the relationship between these analytically conceived schemas and what was perceived as social reality at any given moment in time? How can we avoid the

[10] Michel Foucault tried to draw the attention of "reality obsessed" historians to this issue, albeit with seemingly little success. See: M. Foucault, "La poussiere et le nuage", in: M. Perrot (ed.), *L'impossible prison. Recherches sur le systeme penitentiare au XIXe siècle*, Paris 1980, p.34.; see also, M. Foucault, *Archäologie des Wissens*, Frankfurt 1973.

[11] For an informative overview of the changing conceptions of the term culture in the historical and social sciences, see: U. Daniel, „Kultur" und „Gesellschaft". Überlegungen zum Gegenstandsbereich der Sozialgeschichte, in: *GG* 19 (1993), pp. 69-99.

[12] Not "post-structuralist", because neither French nor German-language social history or "structural history" was ever "structuralist" in the sense of Lévi-Strauss or any other structuralist concept in the field of ethnology or sociology. As an introductory essay see: A. Honneth, "Ein strukturalistischer Rousseau. Zur Anthropologie von Claude Lévi-Strauss", in: idem., *Die zerrissene Welt des Sozialen. Sozialphilosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt 1990, pp. 73-92.

[13] E. P. Thompson, *Das Elend der Theorie. Zur Produktion geschichtlicher Erfahrung*, Frankfurt 1980.

by now notorious mistake of equating historical reality with our preconceived theoretical schemas, or to put it another way, of confusing social logic with the logic of the (social scientific) question? Bourdieu suggested that in logical terms we should think of class as an "ensemble of actors with similar attitudes [...], similar conditions and conditioning [...], to all intents and purposes similar dispositions and interests [...] and consequently similar practices and ideological positions". "Classes" of this kind are primarily theoretical in nature, not real, effective classes "ready for struggle". Yet at the same time, the above-mentioned similarities would lead us to expect that a consciousness of these similarities might develop among actors under certain circumstances. Adequately constructed theoretical classes are thus "probable classes", and in no sense "automatically necessary".[14] The differences between theoretical and actual classes are thus no longer blurred. This represents an effective break with marxist tradition, which equated constructed and real classes with one another, or declared both "virtual" and "actual" classes to be real phenomena, with the transition from one to the other being described in either deterministic or voluntaristic terms.

The quality of a theoretical framework such as "social classes" can be measured according to the degree of precision and complexity with which it constructs the relationships within the order of praxis. In this respect, Bourdieu argues that it is necessary to define the actor's "position" and "place" in social space as precisely as possible. An actor's place and position result from their relationship to the respective positions of the other actors in whichever social space has been constructed, because "what really exists is a relational space".[15] These relationships are defined in terms of the different sorts of capital that the actor brings into play, be they material, spiritual, or intellectual, forms of gender capital (which always place the actor in a relationship with the *other* gender) or physical attraction and physical strength (whose worth is defined in relation to competing actors in the same field), and so on. Which kinds of capital will predominate at any given moment or effectively define social relationships (social inequality, distribution of power, chances for success) depends upon the type of social field that we construct: education, knowledge and academic grade or title predominate in the scientific field, speed and physical strength in the area of sport, material capital and business know-how in the economic sphere, and so on. As a rule, it is a particular accumulation of *several* types of capital that defines the actor's position and place in a given social space. However, all sorts of capital

14 P. Bourdieu, *Sozialer Raum und Klassen*, Frankfurt 1985, p. 12.
15 Ibid., p. 13.

and the various combinations between them only become socially relevant when they are recognised by other actors, or in Bourdieu's words, when they become effective as *symbolic capital.*[16]

Clearly, this also means that the actor's actions, interpretations and experiences should form a central part of our general research focus, because they define the capacity to accumulate particular types of capital, to assert oneself through them in a given sphere and to exert control and power over others. At the same time, actors can be seen to produce and structure social space through their actions and interpretations, given that we understand social space as constituted by social relationships and interactions. We attain information about actors' actions, interpretations and experiences essentially by means of interpreting their *statements* (understood in the broadest possible sense). That is the reason why the methodology of text interpretation and text production (such as various kinds of memory-based interviews) play such a central role in post-structural social history.

Historians' confrontation with questions relating to texts as forms of written, acoustic or audiovisual statements by historical actors on the one hand, and the historiographical texts written about those actors (and their texts) on the other hand, have followed two rather different paths in recent years, despite the fact that both directions are frequently described in undifferentiated fashion as a single "*linguistic turn*". In the first place, adherents of "Intellectual History" in the U.S.A. were influenced by the methods and practices of literary theory (history and literary theory having always been much closer disciplinary neighbours in terms of university organisation there than in Europe). The main consequence of this trend has been the extensive discussion surrounding the fictional (that is to say, the literary) nature of historiography, as part of the critical confrontation with Hayden White's theory of historiographical tropes.[17] Secondly and by way of contrast, German-language social history came into contact with social scientific

[16] On the concept of "sorts of capital", see: P. Bourdieu, "Ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital", in: R. Kreckel (ed.), *Soziale Ungleichheiten* (= Soziale Welt, Sonderband 2), Göttingen 1983, pp. 183-98; P. Bourdieu, *Rede und Antwort*, Frankfurt 1992, esp.: Raum und symbolische Macht, pp. 135; for an introduction to Bourdieu's cultural sociological thinking, see again: A. Honneth, *Die zerrissene Welt der symbolischen Formen*, Frankfurt 1990, pp. 156-81.

[17] See: H. White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Centruy Europe*, Baltimore 1973; German: *Metahistory. Die historische Einbildungskraft im 19. Jh. in Europa*, Frankfurt 1991; idem., *Die Bedeutung der Form. Erzählstrukturen in der Geschichtsschreibung*, Frankfurt 1990. For discussions of White's theories, see "Metahistory: Six Critiques", in: *History & Theory* (HT) Beiheft 19 (1980); B. D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*, Philadelphia 1990; G. Brude-

theories and models of text analysis. By the very nature of their disciplines, social scientists working in the fields of sociology, psychology, pedagogy and psychoanalysis always deal with texts and the problems of their analysis. The methods of text analysis and production developed in this sphere were therefore taken over, adapted and developed further by a number of social historians.[18]

The areas of research where these social scientific models of text analysis have most frequently been employed in the last decade or so have been the history of National Socialism and the post-war era, a number of themes pertaining to the history of everyday life and regional history, and most recently of all, the history of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) and Stalinism.[19] Based on the research methods just mentioned, social history has joined the ranks of those social and textual sciences which employ an explorative social scientific research methodology to try and appropriate a sense of "what the actor in a given historical sphere of action already knows and has to know, in order to 'get his or her bearings' in the daily activities of social life".[20] It is at this point that social history becomes an interpretative social science (*verstehende Sozialwissenschaft*), to borrow a phrase coined by Max Weber.

At the same time, however, it is not enough for an interpretative historical social science to confine itself to the textual analysis of subjective statements, because these cannot be properly explained in terms of themselves alone, but only with reference to the structure of social, economic and cultural relationships as well, together with the conditions for action present

---

Firnau and K. MacHardy (eds.), *Fact and Fiction. German History and Literature 1848-1924*, Tübingen 1990; K. MacHardy, "Crisis in History, or: Hermes Unbounded", in: *Storia della Storiografia* 17 (1990), pp. 5-27; H. Nagl-Docekal, "Läßt sich die Geschichtsphilosophie tropologisch fundieren?" In: *ÖZG* 4 (1993), pp. 466-78.

18 See H.-G. Soeffner (ed.), *Interpretative Verfahren in den Sozial- und Textwissenschaften*, Stuttgart 1979; G. Landsteiner, "Zum Stellenwert linguistischer Modelle in einer wissenssoziologischen Textanalyse", in: *Wisdom* 6 (1992), pp.49-78; R. Sieder, "Geschichten erzählen und Wissenschaft treiben. Interviewtexte zum Arbeiteralltag. Erkenntnistheoretische Grundlagen, Quellenkritik, Interpretationsverfahren und Darstellungsprobleme", in: G. Botz et al. (eds.), *Mündliche Geschichte und Arbeiterbewegung*, Wien 1984, pp. 203-31; R. Sieder and Ch. Gerbel, "Erzählungen sind nicht nur „wahr". Abstraktionen, Typisierungen und Geltungsansprüche in Interviewtexten", in: G. Botz et al. (eds.), *„Quantität und Qualität". Zur Praxis der Methoden der Historischen Sozialwissenschaft*, Frankfurt 1988, pp. 189-210.

19 See Footnotes 63-68.

20 A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge 1984; German: *Die Konstitution der Gesellschaft. Grundzüge einer Theorie der Strukturierung*, Frankfurt and New York 1988, p. 338.

in a particular social space. As is already implicit in the theoretical formulation of the dual construction of social reality, social historical analysis must therefore also examine the historical conditions for social action (conditions which have been structured by social practices). Post-structural history thus reconstructs external structures too, albeit without any longer believing that these structures strictly determine social actions and interpretations: the "structural" is seen instead as characteristic of the *relationships* produced by social interaction. Post-structural social history thus has a variety of methods at its disposal, including both techniques of statistical and demographic research and those of discourse and text analysis,[21] in order to illuminate the conceptual space with which actors are confronted when making their interpretations, and to understand the changes that those spaces undergo.

The kind of post-structural social history proposed here is in this respect differentiated from strictly phenomenological sociology or ethnomethodology, which confine their research programmes to the investigation of social interaction, rituals, gestures, interpretations and meanings.[22] From the same standpoint, a number of works of the so-called "new cultural history"[23] would appear to be overly "culturalistic" in focus, to the extent that they reify symbolic forms and ignore the ontological difference between surviving texts and past practices. They focus too narrowly on the meanings of symbolic forms, without fully recognising that the latter can also be appropriated and used by actors in various ways.[24] I would therefore argue for a social history capable of overcoming the varieties of objectivism, subjectivism and culturalism in equal measure. Bourdieu has suggested that we call this a *praxiological mode* of knowledge,[25] and it is precisely this kind of approach that many social historians are now attempting to apply to the history of everyday life, historical anthropology or micro-history, whatever their differences and disagreements on points of detail.

---

[21] See, above all: M. Foucault, *Archäologie des Wissens*; idem, *Die Ordnung des Diskurses*, München 1974, 2nd edition Frankfurt 1991; a recent critique of Foucault's authorial interpretation of discourse, as if the latter were itself a social actor, can be found in: V. Biti, "Geschichte als Literatur – Literatur als Geschichte", in: *ÖZG* 4 (1993), pp. 371-96.

[22] See: E. Weingarten et al. (eds.), *Ethnomethodologie. Beiträge zu einer Sozialgeschichte des Alltagshandelns*, Frankfurt 1976.

[23] See: L. Hunt, History, Culture, and Text, in: idem (ed.), *The New Cultural History*, London 1989, pp. 1-22.

[24] See R. Chartier, "Text, Symbols, and Frenchness", in: *JMH* 57 (1975), pp. 682-95, esp. p. 690.

[25] P. Bourdieu, *Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis auf der ethnologischen Grundlage der kabylischen Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt 1979, pp. 146.

The argument about labels

The terms "everyday life" (*Alltag*) and "experience" respectively refer only to certain aspects of the dual constitution of social reality that I have just described. "Everyday life" and the resultant label, "the history of everyday life", point to the constant reproduction of social realities and the fact that social realities are constructed day in, day out by interpretations and actions. In common with the first generation of historical social scientists, therefore, social historians working on the history of everyday life reject the limitation of research to specific or unusual events and extraordinary personalities. At the same time, however, there is a frequent misconception that the history of everday life is bound up with a concrete place, "the everyday", which differs from other concrete realities. As with the term ´structure´, it is again possible to observe a tendency towards objectification and reification, in the sense that the way in which actions and interpretations appropriate circumstances (the *modus operandi*) is often objectified as a definite object (an *opus operatum*). Moreover, to rely on an actor's "intuitive" knowledge and actions remains within the limits of the phenomenological mode of recognition. Therefore, many historians of everyday life have already moved onto a praxiological mode. They oscillate in hermeneutically analytical fashion between the actors' manifest and latent meanings and their structured circumstances.

Within the overall conception of the "history of everday life", the "everyday" refers not to any particular well-defined object, but instead to the analytical focus on social actors' living and working relationships, and the ways in which those relationships are "experienced" (reception, interpretation, action etc.).[26] What is more, the term frequently used as a synonym for the "history of everyday life", the "history of experience" (*Erfahrungsgeschichte*), also gives rise to misunderstanding. If this were interpreted absolutely literally, it would refer to a sub-discipline dealing with social actors' historical experiences. Yet experience – the gradual building up of interpretations, feelings and memories that accompanies social action – constitutes only one of the two aspects of social reality formation. The term, "history of experience", thus actually comprises neither the deeds and actions preceeding and accompanying experience, nor the external circumstances in which actors are located. To lose sight of the activities and conditions for action would mean culturalistically reducing social historical reality to mere interpretation, consciousness and mental processes.

[26] See my discussion with A. Lüdtke, "Alltagsgeschichte. Zur Aneignung der Verhältnisse", in: *ÖZG* 2 (1991), 2, pp. 104-13.

Of late, increasing numbers of social historians have turned enthusiastically towards historical anthropology, a new label for which Rebekka Habermas and Nils Minkmar have recently tried to define a clear research paradigm (in the introduction to a volume of collected essays[27]). It is particularly noteworthy that they try to do so almost exclusively by differentiating themselves from "the history of everyday life" and "the history of mentalities". Without at any point going into the historical and methodological variations or differences between these two approaches, they indiscriminately accuse them of treating "people" as "objects determined by their material conditions" and argue that historical anthropology should "strongly dissociate" itself from such kinds of approach.[28] Even if the criticism that Braudel's *Méditerranée* (cited by Habermas and Minkmar as representative of the history of mentalities) is overly deterministic is more or less justified, the same can certainly not be said for other exponents of the so-called "history of mentalities". Rather like historical anthropology, the latter is in practice so varied and at the same time so vaguely defined in social theoretical terms that the assertion, that it rests on deterministic foundations, is certainly unjustified and implies a kind of uniformity which does not actually exist.[29] Even more unjustified is the claim that leading historians of the "history of everyday life" (such as Hans Medick and Alf Lüdtke[30]) are likewise overly deterministic, particularly when it is considered that it is precisely historians such as these who have sought most to avoid the pitfalls of determinism by employing the concepts of appropriation and social practices. After such strenuous efforts to distance themselves from other labels by accusing them

---

27 R. Habermas and N. Minkmar (eds.), *Das Schwein des Häuptlings. Sechs Aufsätze zur Historischen Anthropologie*, Berlin 1992, pp. 7-19.

28 Ibid., p. 7 ff. By way of contrast to Habermas and Minkmar, Wolf Lepenies has written that the history of mentalities stands at the very centre of historical anthropological research. See: W. Lepenies, "Geschichte und Anthropologie", in: *GG* 1 (1975), p.331.

29 See: U. Raulff (ed.), *Mentalitätengeschichte. Zur historischen Rekonstruktion geistiger Prozesse*, Berlin 1989, esp. pp.7-15; P. H. Hutton, "Die Geschichte der Mentalitäten. Eine andere Landkarte der Kulturgeschichte", in: U. Raulff (ed.), *Vom Umschreiben der Geschichte. Neue historische Perspektiven*, Berlin 1986, pp. 103-31; E. Schulin, "Geistesgeschichte, Intellectual History und Histoire des Mentalités seit der Jahrhundertwende", in: idem, *Traditionskritik und Rekonstruktionsversuch*, Göttingen 1979, pp. 144-62.

30 See: A. Lüdtke (ed.), *Alltagsgeschichte. Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen*, Frankfurt 1989, esp. the introduction and the reprint of an influential article by H. Medick, "'Missionare im Ruderboot'? Ethnologische Erkenntnisweisen als Herausforderung an die Sozialgeschichte", pp.48-84. Both articles contain fundamental statements about the "history of everyday life", which in fact coincide in many points of detail with the conception of historical anthropology proposed by Habermas and Minkmar.

of determinism, Habermas and Minkmar only succeed in ending up at the point which the "history of everyday life" (*Alltagsgeschichte*) has already reached: thus we learn that historical anthropology (*Historische Anthropologie*) deals with "social processes as a form of interaction between structures on the one hand and perceptions, interpretations and actions on the other".[31] So where exactly does historical anthropology differ from the history of everday life? Do they both have the same program after all?

I have in fact found little or no difference amongst authors who have written conceptual pieces on historical anthropology. André Burguiere has described those French social historians interested in the qualitative methods used for analysing "systems of representation" as "historical anthropologists", as opposed to the numerous historians (including a great many in and around the *Annales* school) who have devoted themselves to the investigation of the "serial sources" to be found in rural history, demographic history and so on. Burguiere thus considers Marc Bloch's *Les Rois thaumaturges*'[32] and Georges Duby's study of demonstrative profligacy in the high middle ages[33] to belong to the field of historical anthropology. But couldn't we equally as justifiably consider these works to be part of the history of everday life, rather like numerous other examples of French social history dealing with social, economic, religious and political relationships in a particular region and their appropriation by historical actors? Burguiere himself is reluctant to describe historical anthropology as an "independent branch of historical research".[34] Michael Mitteraurer, for example, confines the anthropological side of his research on the history of the family to social history's interdisciplinary contact with "social anthropology, ethnology" and the "individual ethnographies of different European countries", together with themes "which can be broadly understood as anthropological, in that they are of fundamental relevance to research on the family".[35] What is more, Anthony Giddens rightly points out that "any form of social research" possesses "a cultural anthropological aspect".[36]

Historical anthropology would not therefore appear to be a clearly defined field of historical science, distinguishable from the other mentioned labels in terms of questions, theory or method.[37] Moreover, there is nothing very

---

31 Habermas and Minkmar (eds.), *Das Schwein des Häuptlings*, p. 9.

32 M. Bloch, *Les Rois thaumaturges*, Paris 1961.

33 G. Duby, *Guerriers et Paysans*, Paris 1974, German: *Krieger und Bauern*, Frankfurt 1977.

34 A. Burguiere, "Historische Anthropologie", in: J. Le Goff et al. (eds.), *Die Rückeroberung des historischen Denkens*, Frankfurt 1990, pp. 62-101.

35 M. Mitteraurer, *Historisch-anthropologische Familienforschung*, Wien 1990, p. 16.

36 Giddens, *Konstitution der Gesellschaft*, p. 338.

37 H. Wunder comes to the same conclusion in: Kulturgeschichte, Mentalitätengeschichte, Historische Anthropologie, in: R. van Dülmen (ed.), *Fischer Lexikon Geschichte*, 2nd edition, Frankfurt 1990, p. 80.

new about the aim of looking at European history through social or cultural anthropological eyes.[38] However, if one wants to make an impact or stake a claim in the academic world, it is necessary to present what one is doing under a new label. We are thus dealing with a kind of conceptual slogan, which – like the terms "history of everyday life" or the "history of experience" – is intended to help force through a cultural theoretical change within social history. If there is one thing that various attempts to formulate an historical cultural anthropological methodology have in common, it is undoubtedly the employment of the praxiological mode of knowledge mentioned above. That, however, is something that historical anthroplogy shares in common with the history of everyday life and micro-history, women's and gender history, ethnographers who interpret their discipline as an historical cultural science[39] and post-structural variations of ethno-history,[40] to mention only the historical disciplines within the social sciences.

Be that as it may, by no means all practitioners of historical anthropology adhere to the post-structural, praxiological maxims implicit in the dialectical analysis of conditions for action and social practices. Some of their number have not followed the post-structural trend, keeping instead within the structuralist tradition of Lévi-Strauss.[41] Others are unable to apply praxiological maxims, because they remove marriage, birth, family, death, nutrition, etc. from their immediate socio-cultural or socio-economic context, such that they are studied as isolated phenomena and subjected to sweeping comparisons with other societies and continents,[42] similar to the

[38] Compare the extensive bibliography in: U. Daniel, „Kultur" und „Gesellschaft", pp. 82; M. Sahlins, *Inseln der Geschichte*, Frankfurt 1992; N. Z. Davis, "Die Möglichkeiten der Vergangenheit. Geschichte und Ethnologie: Neue Blicke auf vertraute Landschaften", in: Raulff (ed.), *Vom Umschreiben der Geschichte*, pp. 45-53.

[39] See: W. Kaschuba and C. Lipp, *Dörfliches Überleben. Zur Geschichte materieller und sozialer Reproduktion ländlicher Gesellschaft im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*, Tübingen 1982; W. Kaschuba, *Lebenswelt und Kultur der unterbürgerlichen Schichten im 19. und 20. Jh.*, München 1990; idem, *Volkskultur zwischen feudaler und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft. Zur Geschichte eines Begriffs und seiner gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit*, Frankfurt 1988, esp. p. 31; R. van Dülmen and N. Schindler (eds.), *Volkskultur. Zur Wiederentdeckung des vergessenen Alltags*, Frankfurt 1984.

[40] See: K.R. Wernhart und W. Zips, "Ethnohistoire und Kulturgeschichte. Diskussion der theoretischen und methodologischen Grundlagen", in: W. Schmied-Kowarzik and J. Stagl (eds.), *Grundfragen der Ethnologie. Beiträge zur gegenwärtigen Theorie-Diskussion*, 2nd edition, Berlin 1993, pp. 259 and 264.

[41] For an introduction, see: A. Honneth, "Ein strukturalistischer Rousseau. Zur Anthropologie von C. Lévi-Strauss", in: idem, *Die zerrissene Welt des Sozialen*, pp. 93-112.

[42] Compare the criticism made by J. Kocka, "Historisch-anthropologische Fragestellungen – ein Defizit der Historischen Sozialwissenschaft? Thesen zur Diskussion", in: H. Süssmuth (ed.), *Historische Anthropologie*, Göttingen 1984, p. 77: "In order to

way as the doctrine of cultural circles (*Kulturkreislehre*) was employed in the nascent ethnology of the start of the century.[43]

It is not easy to define the relationship between the concept of the history of society (*Gesellschaftsgeschichte*) and the terms just mentioned, because there are a number of contradictory conceptual definitions in existence. In the introduction to his *History of German Society*, Hans-Ulrich Wehler formulates a program for a "socio-structural" history of modern German society and the "changing impact of economy, power, culture and the social inequalities which go to make up that society".[44] For Wehler's pupils, however, the term *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* defines a much broader church, under whose roof it should be possible to "integrate" the history of everyday life, historical anthropology, womens' and gender history, the history of mentalities, a new interpretation of political history and the history of ideas, and even a "historicism redefined for the present day".[45] If this were really the case, then the term *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (history of society) would serve no other purpose than to act as a short-hand for the sum total of quantificatory and interpretative approaches belonging to the historical social sciences.

In practice, terms like history of experience, history of everday life, historical anthropology or history of society (in so far as it is not conceived of as a catch-all concept), are fairly indistinguishable, more or less interchangeable rallying cries. Like all rallying cries, they have their logical weaknesses and give rise to misunderstandings. There are nonetheless good reasons for continuing to employ terms like history of everyday life, due to their

---

bring out particular aspects of a situation or forms of behaviour which change only very slowly, broadly extended conceptions of space and time are employed, which almost necessarily means that social phenomena (for example, such as youth protest) are taken utterly out of their specific historical context (societal, cultural, political and so on), thereby automatically ignoring the usual strictures and rules implicit in historical analysis. For this reason, the approach conflicts with certain key principles of historical social science (above all, the importance of context and basic historical methodology)."

43 See K. E. Müller, "Grundzüge des ethnologischen Historismus", in: Schmied-Kowarzik and Stagl (eds.), *Grundfragen der Ethnologie*, pp. 197-232, esp. p. 202.

44 H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, Bd. 1: Vom Feudalismus des Alten Reiches bis zur Defensiven Modernisierung der Reformära 1700-1915, München 1987, esp. pp. 7-12.

45 M. Hettling et al. (eds.), *Was ist Gesellschaftsgeschichte?* München 1991, Vorwort, pp. 9-10; see also: H. Wunder, *Kulturgeschichte, Mentalitätengeschichte, Historische Anthropologie*; and J. Mooser, "Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, Historische Sozialwissenschaft", in: R. van Dülmen (ed.), *Fischer Lexikon Geschichte*, pp. 65-85 and pp. 86-101, esp. 101: „Die Gesellschaftsgeschichte ist daher angewiesen auf die Kulturgeschichte und Historische Anthropologie, ebenso wie auf die Politische Geschichte".

function as a kind of signal enabling us to point to the neglect of social actors' perspectives and actions in the more objectivist variants of social history and the "history of society". If these efforts eventually achieve their aim – and a number of signs indicate that they will – then the battle slogans themselves will become obsolete. Having become "sociologised" in the 1970s and 1980s, social history will thus be expanded into an historical social and cultural science. Historical actors' viewpoints will be integrated into social historical research in a way that has long been true for social structures (incidentally, the latter being a shift that occurred without the label "social history" being replaced by "structural history", as Werner Conze once suggested should happen). At the same time, it is only to be expected that new labels will repeatedly crop up in the future, in order to mark out new territories and proclaim one's own approach as "new", "nouvelle" or "neu", in contrast to well-established approaches. Social science achieves its dynamic as a societal institution not least through the constant struggle between those already in possession of jobs and positions and those striving after them, as well as the respective efforts of such groups to build up power and influence by forming research groups and methodological schools. But unfortunately, academic self-reproduction has – up until now – not been subjected to the same careful examination as that which is applied to the subject-matter of social science, a fact that necessitates critical reflection about the latter's programmatic statements and the labels it employs.[46] In my opinion, the frequently confusing impact of the – often quite aggressive – use of rallying cries is carried out for reasons of academic politics, in order to establish differences between certain groups and to exclude others. On closer inspection, however, most of these differences prove to be unsubstantiated both in terms of social scientific theory and the actual history of the disciplines concerned.

A return to narratives without theory?

Members of the first generation of historical social scientists have repeatedly accused the history of everyday life and the history of experience as "completely lacking in theory" and its practitioners of being "hostile to theory",[47] and it can be supposed that the same accusations will be levelled

[46] See: P. Bourdieu, *Homo academicus*, Frankfurt 1988; idem, "Narzißtische Reflexivität und wissenschaftliche Reflexivität", in: E. Berg and M. Fuchs (eds.), *Kultur, soziale Praxis, Text. Die Krise der ethnographischen Repräsentation*, Frankfurt 1993, pp. 365-74.

[47] See J. Kocka, "Zurück zur Erzählung? Plädoyer für historische Argumentation", in: *GG* 10 (1984), pp. 395-408; idem, "Klassen oder Kultur? Durchbrüche und Sackgassen in der Arbeitergeschichte", in: *Merkur* 36 (1982), pp. 955-65.

against the proponents of historical anthropology. Admittedly, there are a few historians amongst those choosing workers, peasants, serfs and slaves as their subjects who claim to get by without employing any theory. But a good proportion of social historians interested in the history of the everday life, historical anthropology and so on, base their approach precisely on the above-mentioned social theories pertaining to the dual constitution of social reality.[48] Hostility to theory is thus directed only at those theories which adhere to objectivistic paradigms. On the basis of their criticism of both the one-dimensionality of structural functionalism and culturalistic narrowness, the new generation of social historians has been able to develop a more advanced theoretical understanding.

Accusations as to lack of theory are closely bound up with talk about a lapse back into historical narrative (which also lacks theory). This has stimulated a highly productive debate and, above all, has illustrated that the creation of a binary opposition between narrative and explanation misses the point about the very nature of historical scientific discourse. Or as Roger Chartier has formulated the problem, the specificity of historical knowledge consists "in the narrative and the construction of that narrative"; the degree of historical intelligibility is measured by the plausibility of the given narrative.[49] Jörn Rüsen has argued in much the same way. For him, narrative is nothing less than the actual means by which historical explanation takes place, on condition that the narrative goes beyond the purely mimetic to a level of construction which is then testable, reflective and theorising.[50] The accusation that the history of everyday life or the new cultural history represents nothing more than a lapse into narrative without theory proves untenable, because it relies on an artificial dichotomy between narrative and explanation and refuses to confine its criticism to particular authors who are in fact decidely antitheoretical in their approach. In all its various shapes and sizes, be it structural analytical, quantificatory or qualitative, the writing of history is inherently narrative in form because it is always based on the construction of links in time and space, which cannot be presented in

---

48 Above all, see: Lüdtke, "Einleitung, and Medick, 'Missionare im Ruderboot'?" both in: A. Lüdtke (ed.), *Alltagsgeschichte*; R. Sieder, "Zur Theoriebedürftigkeit der Neuen Alltagsgeschichte", in: H. Nagl-Docekal and F. Wimmer (eds.), *Neue Ansätze in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, Wien 1984, pp. 24-41.

49 R. Chartier, *Die unvollendete Vergangenheit. Geschichte und die Macht der Weltauslegung*, Berlin 1989, p. 35.

50 J. Rüsen, *Zeit und Sinn. Strategien historischen Denkens*, Frankfurt 1990; for a criticism of Rüsen, see: R. Possekel, "Die Widersprüche der Geschichtswissenschaft. Überlegungen zu Jörn Rüsens Historik", in: *ÖZG* 4 (1993), pp. 479-91.

any other way than by *narrative explanation.* Seen from this point of view, historical argumentation – which, as Jürgen Kocka has emphasised, represents the distinctive, excursive style of historical social science – constitutes one of several different types of textual forms within historiographical narrative, along with description, evaluation, numeration and so on. The main thing for social historians – and especially those concerned with the history of everyday life or interested in cultural anthropological approaches – to learn from this debate is that they must avoid placing a naive trust in the directness of mimetic approaches. The desire to be the mouthpiece of the "voiceless" oppressed, as was constantly proclaimed in the nascent phase of "the history of everyday life", potentially ignores the constructive, fictional element in historiographical narrative and averts the focus onto the ideals, processes of idealisation, norms and values that are thereby set in motion.[51]

Some methodological consequences

A number of methodological conclusions must be drawn from these theoretical considerations. The first and most basic of these is that – in their absence – we must empirically investigate historical actors' viewpoints by analysing in a social scientific manner those texts which record relevant statements on their part. That is equally as true for the interpretation of surviving texts (such as diaries, autobiographies, travelogues, police reports) as it is for texts generated during the research process itself, as is the case with the technique of narrative or other kinds of interview. The problems of text analysis raise the question as to how historical actors' interpretations and actions can be understood and explained when the researcher belongs to another time, another society and to other systems of knowledge, belief, sensibility and certainties. If *culture* is understood in accordance with our hypothesis concerning the dual construction of social reality, then it follows that culture is also produced by social actors' daily activities, rather than simply being a system of given symbols, norms and values that are external and pre-existing for each member of society. Every culture is thus bound up with a specific life-world, through which it is created *in praxi* and for practical purposes. If, however, we want to *study* a past life-world, we are obliged – *nolens volens* – to take up the position of *observer.* Bourdieu has argued that ethnologists and anthropologists are frequently in danger of becoming culture-centric because of their theoretical standpoints and reflexive distance

[51] On the fictional character of historical writing, see: V. Biti, "Geschichte als Literatur".

from the field of investigation.[52] That is undoubtedly a criticism that can also be applied to social historians, given that the surviving textual sources are even less likely to provide counter-arguments to the researcher's interpretation than the living subjects studied by ethnologists and anthropologists. If a contemporary life-world is to be studied, we can enter into a communicative relationship with its participants, and thus ourselves become virtual participants in this foreign life-world.[53] This can result in a lengthy (and only partly successful) "second socialisation" process, in which we are gradually able to accumulate experience of the rules, meanings and characteristics of the life-world in question. In most social historical research, however, it is usually the case that the life-world no longer exists: all that remains are written or oral narratives, data, objects and pictures. This greatly widened epistemological gap forces us to recognise the different characteristics of the past life-world and to draw methodological consequences from that fact. The Italian social historian Carlo Ginzburg has gone so far to develop a radical maxim on this basis: "The fundamental technique of research is that of distancing oneself from the subject-matter, the ability to make things seem distant and incomprehensible – and not the other way round, as historians usually try and do. Historians frequently turn to the past with a purely retrospective projection of how the past might have been, [...] in a way that does not see or seek out what is different, but on the contrary, excessively strives after identification with the past!"[54]

The fact that everything cultural is inherently bound up with signs (symbols) implies that in methodological terms, we should make sense of these signs by processing them hermeneutically *and* analytically. Moreover, Ginzburg's hypothesis about the different nature of past cultures means that historical science's traditional hermeneutic approach is no longer sufficient. Historicism was premised upon the idea that there was *one* single history of humanity, whose meaning could be concluded from the historian's *intuitive* interpretation of the sources.[55] However, cultural anthropologists and social historians influenced by them no longer assume that they share *one and*

52 Bourdieu, *Theorie der Praxis*, p. 142.; idem, *Sozialer Sinn. Kritik der theoretischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt 1987, p. 63.

53 See: J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Bd. 1, Frankfurt 1981, p. 63.

54 C. Ginzburg, "Geschichte und Geschichten. Über Archive, Marlene Dietrich und die Lust an der Geschichte", in: idem, *Spurensicherungen. Über verborgene Geschichte, Kunst und soziales Gedächtnis*, Berlin 1983, p. 22.

55 For a critique of German historicism's basic theory of knowledge and philosophy of history, see: W. J. Mommsen, *Die Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Historismus*, Düsseldorf 1971; idem, "Geschichte als Historische Sozialwissenschaft", in: P. Rossi (ed.), *Theorie der modernen Geschichtsschreibung*, Frankfurt 1987, pp. 107-46.

the same world with the actors who form the subject-matter of their research. The more historians open themselves up to the viewpoints of historical actors, the more it becomes clear that those actors' perspectives belong to different life-worlds, or to put it another way, occupy a different horizon of meaning.[56] It is therefore necessary to recognise that we can no longer trust in a common horizon of meaning, as Dilthey and other "hermeneutic idealists"[57] did. Nor can we draw conclusions about historical actors' experiences on the basis of our own experiences, "imagine ourselves" to be in the same situation as people in the past, or trust in an almost secretive kind of "intuitive understanding". That would inevitably lead to our projecting onto the past the experiences and interpretations formed in our own life-world and transposing them to different life-worlds.

Yet what other methodological alternatives are open to us? As long as we dispose of texts that allow us to reconstruct the viewpoints and experiences of historical actors, we are able to employ a systematically reconstructive hermeneutic-analytical approach. By this I mean forms of text analysis which analyse the multi-layered, context dependent nature of texts (and to a certain extent, visual images as well) as precisely as possible, in a way that reconstructs the original narrative along the lines of how it originated in the past.[58] Whether it be an oral narrative, a diary entry, court record or whatever, the text will be treated as the protocol of a par-

[56] The term "life-world" derives from the phenomenological sociology of the 1930s and 1940s (E. Husserl and A. Schütz) and became commonly used in social history in the 1980s, opposing the dominance of structural functionalism. In contrast to its phenomenological meaning (i.e. the subject's "horizon of meaning"), social historians frequently equate "life-world" with local or regional societies. In doing so, however, they lose both the constitutive meaning of life-world, which is bound up with the way actors' interpret and make sense of their life-world, and the methodological necessity of exploring the entirety of its meaning through interpretive social science methods. On the phenomenological concept of "life-world", see: A. Gurwitsch, "Problems of the Life-World", in: M. Natanson (ed.), *Phenomenology and Social Reality. Essays in memory of A. Schütz*, Den Haag 1970, pp. 53-61; A. Schütz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt. Eine Einleitung in die verstehende Soziologie*, Frankfurt 1974; B. Waldenfels, *In den Netzen der Lebenswelt*, Frankfurt 1985; R. Grathoff, *Milieu und Lebenswelt. Einführung in die phänomenologische Soziologie und die sozialphänomenologische Forschung*, Frankfurt 1989. On the sociologisation of the concept, see: Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*; for a critique thereof, compare: A. Linkenbach, *Opake Gestalten des Denkens. J. Habermas und die Rationalität fremder Lebensformen*, München 1986.

[57] W. Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Frankfurt 1981.

[58] An overview of reconstructive analytical methods as they have developed up until now is provided by: Lamnek, *Qualitative Sozialforschung*, vol. II.

ticular action,[59] and interpreted in accordance with our social historical knowledge of its context (contrary to the purely textual models of interpretation employed by linguistics).[60] In this kind of text analysis, subjects actually come into view as *actors*, that is to say that their interpretations are not treated independently of their actions or conditions for action, just as the conditions for action are always viewed in connection with their appropriation by historical actors.[61]

In doing so, it is necessary to consider that the possibility for individuals to change a given situation through social action exists up to a certain point, but this is something often only available to social groups, who can coordinate their actions to a particular end and define a common goal on the basis of common interests (which does not necessarily mean that that goal will always be achieved). If we speak about actors in Bourdieu's sense of the term, then we do not really mean individuals acting alone, but rather, people who exist and act in communicative and interactive relationships. Or to put it more precisely, the actor is our intellectual construction, through which we hope to express accurately aspects of an historical person who communicated and acted in concert with others. At the same time, it seems worthwhile – wherever possible – to take individual actors as case studies,

---

59 H.-G. Soeffner, "Prämissen einer sozialwissenschaftlichen Hermeneutik", in: idem. *Auslegung des Alltags – Der Alltag der Auslegung. Zur wissenssoziologischen Konzeption einer sozialwissenschaftlichen Hermeneutik*, Frankfurt 1989, pp. 66-97.

60 For attempts at this kind of textual interpretation, see my articles, "'Vater, derf i aufstehn?' Childhood experiences in Viennese working-class families around 1900", in: *Continuity and Change* 1 (1996)1, pp.53-88; "A Hitler Youth from a Respectable Family: The Narrative Composition and Deconstruction of a Life Story", in: D. Bertaux and P. Thompson (eds.), *Between Generations. Family Models, Myths and Memories*, Oxford 1993, pp. 99-120; "Freisetzung und Bindung. Eine Fallstudie zu aktuellen Dynamiken im Ehe- und Familienleben", in: J. Ehmer et al. (eds.), *Historische Familienforschung. Ergebnisse und Kontroversen, Michael Mitterauer zum 60. Geburtstag*, Frankfurt and New York 1997, pp. 229-255.

61 Compare the technique applied by Gabriele Rosenthal for the sequential analysis of data and texts. By adapting the ideas developed by F. Schütze and U. Oevermann, Rosenthal essentially takes two main analytical steps: firstly, the analysis of what the author of the text wants to say, and secondly, the experimental weighing up of all possible meanings (*Lesarten*) that are additionally conceivable. The systematic investigation of the differences between the intended and latent sense of a text seems to be one way of acknowledging the cultural difference between historical actors and the scientific interpretation of their statements, as well as of employing that difference heuristically in the search for historical scientific truth (which is always a truth concerned with difference). See: G. Rosenthal, *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte. Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen*, Frankfurt and New York 1995, esp. pp. 186-226.

in order to side-step the frequent pit-fall of structural functionalist social history whereby social groups, collectivities and classes are ontologised as "the family", "the household", "the workforce", "the proletariat", "the bourgeoisie" etc.. By avoiding the attribution of collective characteristics to such groups prior to the research actually taking place, as well as the temptation to smooth over the internal differences within a group (e.g. between men and women, young people and adults, skilled and unskilled workers and so on), it is possible for us to undertake a full social historical investigation on the basis of analytical case-studies, thus improving the empirical quality of our research. In other words, our hypotheses and arguments will be tied to an analysis of empirically reconstructed cases, which can then be tested by comparison with other cases and examples.[62]

Admittedly, there are a number of important questions for which there are no, or hardly any, relevant surviving statements from historical actors, and without there being any possibility of generating statements by means of interviews, because the interval of time is simply too great. In such instances, we only dispose of statements *about* the actors, be they from the side of the authorities, contemporary observers, or proto-sociologists, such as the society writers of the 18th and 19th centuries. These texts can be subjected to discourse analysis, which is still able to treat the text's author as an empirical case-study, even if it is unable to do so for the actual actors themselves. The author's interests, social position, education etc. must be reconstructed with the greatest possible attention to detail, in order for that text to be "deconstructed" and for the observations and claims made about "the bourgeoisie", "the peasants", "the people", and so on, to be interpreted as contextually dependent social actions with their own particular perspectives.

This does not necessarily mean stopping at the construction of case-studies: a number of cases can be compared, and the typology resulting from that comparison (whether systematic or unsystematic) can provide insights into the actual workings of specific periods and cultures. This

62 It is often claimed that such a high level of empirical accuracy can only be attained by social historians working on near-contemporary history, because they are able to employ qualitative research techniques, such as narrative interviews. However, it is also the case that sources from much more historically removed periods can be successfully analysed in terms of the dialectic between conditions for action and social practices, as some stimulating works on the social history of the early modern period have shown. See, for example: E. Landsteiner, "Einen Bären anbinden", in: *ÖZG* 4 (1993), pp. 218-52; Michael Stolberg, "'Mein äskulapisches Orakel!' Patientenbriefe als Quelle einer Kulturgeschichte der Krankheitserfahrung im 18. Jahrhundert", in: *ÖZG* 7 (1996), pp. 385-404; and many others.

case-study and comparative typology based approach has in fact already been employed in many fields of interpretative social history. Social historians have tried to use case-studies in their research on the history of social groups (such as a factory work-force[63]), socio-cultural milieus (for example, youth groups engaged in political resistance in the Third Reich[64]), village micro-societies,[65] means of survival in National Socialist concentration camps,[66] and the political behaviour and everyday experiences of particular generations or social classes,[67] to name but a few. Social scientific biographical research should also be included here, given that it occupies an interdisciplinary middle-ground between sociology and social history and is concerned with the detailed reconstruction of individual lifestories, which can then be contrasted, compared and presented in typological form.[68]

Contrary to the claims made by its critics, all these variants of a cultural scientifically expanded social history do not represent a conception opposing historical social science (*Historische Sozialwissenschaft*). They are very much a part of historical social science, albeit one which avoids reduc-

---

63 See, for example: I. Bauer, *"Tschikweiber haum´s uns g´nennt..." Frauenleben und Frauenarbeit an der „Peripherie": Die Halleiner Zigarrenfabriksarbeiterinnen 1869 bis 1940. Eine historische Fallstudie auf der Basis lebensgeschichtlicher Interviews*, Wien 1988.

64 See, for example: Ch. Gerbel, A. Mejstrik, R. Sieder, "Die 'Schlurfs'. Verweigerung und Opposition von Wiener Arbeiterjugendlichen im 'Dritten Reich'", in: E. Tálos et al. (eds.), *NS-Herrschaft in Österreich*, Wien 1988, pp.243-68.

65 See, for example: D. Sabean, *Power in the Blood. Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge 1985; German: *Das zweischneidige Schwert. Herrschaft und Widerspruch im Württemberg der frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin 1986; idem, *Property, Production, and Family in Neckarshausen, 1700-1870*, Cambridge 1990; R. Beck, *Unterfinning. Ländliche Welt vor Anbruch der Moderne*, München 1993.

66 Among others, see: M. Pollak, *Die Grenzen des Sagbaren. Lebensgeschichten von KZ-Überlebenden als Augenzeugenberichte und als Identitätsarbeit*, Frankfurt 1988.

67 See: L. Niethammer (ed.), *"Die Jahre weiß man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll". Faschismus-Erfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet*, Bonn 1983; idem and A. von Plato (eds.), *"Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten"*, Bonn 1985; L. Niethammer et al. (eds.), *Die volkseigene Erfahrung: Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR*, Berlin 1991; L. Passerini (ed.), *Memory and Totalitarianism*, Oxford 1992; idem, *Torino operaia e fascismo*, Roma 1984; English: *Facism in Popular Memory*, Cambridge 1987.

68 For biographical studies relating to research on the Third Reich, see: G. Rosenthal (ed.), *Die Hitlerjugend-Generation. Biographische Thematisierung als Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Essen 1986; idem, *"Als der Krieg kam, hatte ich mit Hitler nichts mehr zu tun". Zur Gegenwärtigkeit des "Dritten Reiches" in Biographien*, Opladen 1990; idem, *"Wenn alles in Scherben fällt..." Von Leben und Sinnwelt der Kriegsgeneration*, Opladen 1987; W. Fischer-Rosenthal et al. (eds.), *Biographien in Deutschland*, Opladen 1994; a comprehensive bibliograpy is given in: *BIOS* 1 (1988) and 2 (1989).

ing its subject-matter either objectivistically (to the external conditions for social action and interpretation) or subjectivistically (to "lived experience"). It is not the case – as is all too often asserted – that this form of social history abruptly swaps subjective viewpoints for objective structures. Instead, as I have tried to show, it investigates the *dialectical connection* between structured conditions for action and social practices, which structurise relationships within certain social spaces.

In view of the overwhelming occupation of the "social" by structural functionalism, it seems to me an interesting strategic question as to whether we should consider returning to the term "culture" – much as it was used as a conceptual battle slogan in the late 19th century, as a means of combating the primacy of the political – and term the approach outlined above historical *cultural* science. Ute Daniel has put this subject up for discussion, whilst simultaneously showing just how much the concept of "culture" has changed since the earliest attempts to formulate approaches to cultural history in the 18th century.[69] From today's perspective, for example, cultural history as practised by someone like Karl Lamprecht seems too objectivistic and heavily influenced by psychological theory, that of authors such as Breysig, Toynbee or Morgan as overly evolutionistic in approach, and the works of Jacob Burckhardt too narrow in scope.[70] It is nevertheless necessary for historical science to engage with these older approaches, if it is to overcome different configurations of objectivism, idealism and culturalism and move in the direction of a putative historical cultural and social science. After all, it is only possible to overcome what has first been acknowledged as necessary to be overcome.

Trends and future perspectives.

By way of conclusion, I would like to discuss the future perspectives that are opened up for social history by the adoption of the praxiological mode of research outlined above and its move in the direction of an historical

[69] Daniel, *"Kultur" und "Gesellschaft"*.

[70] For some important comments on this topic, see the still relevant discussion by: T. Nipperdey, "Kulturgeschichte, Sozialgeschichte, historische Anthropologie", in: *Vierteljahrsschrift für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte* 55 (1968); idem, "Die anthropologische Dimension der Geschichtswissenschaft", in: G. Schulz (ed.), *Geschichte heute*, Göttingen 1973, pp. 225-55; see also: Daniel, *"Kultur" und "Gesellschaft"*, p. 84.

cultural science. What changes have been displayed in the theoretical conception and planning of social historical research?

A social history which interprets itself as an historical cultural science cannot proceed in a culture-centric fashion, but will be obliged to recognise a *plurality of cultures* and the respective differences between them, based on the different social logics constructed by their constituent actors. In addition, social history will no longer appear to be gender-neutral, but will take *gender relations* as one of its central themes in any given area of research, reflecting as it must the impact of the researcher's own gender on the investigation, interpretation and analysis of historical texts, pictures and data.

Cultural scientific social historians are in a position to break with the universalistic categories ("man" or "people", "the world", "reason" etc.) of idealistic, male-dominated historical science, insofar as they thematicise both their own standpoints and social interests and those of the historical actors they are investigating (which does not mean that they are obliged to lose themselves in those viewpoints!). When seen in this light the hegelian and marxist conception of a historical meta-narrative, which tells history in the form of humanity's gradual emancipation, appears as an unconscious and unthinking interpretative framework for the historiography of "the modern". The teleological conception inherent in this meta-narrative might thus be replaced by a *plurality of histories* possessing open-ended futures. In doing this, however, social historians will no longer be able to conceive of their own role as a normative one (in the tradition of the "late Enlightenment"), whose evaluations of historical processes have recourse to a universal sense of meaning attached to human action.[71] In practical and moral terms, this form of social history undoubtedly can have a thoroughly political, emancipatory impact, as long as it provokes discussion about the actions, experiences and interests of social groups, classes and genders, together with the different forms and scope of power exercised by historical actors. Metaphorically speaking, this kind of social history will not be speaking over people's heads. The investigation of historical actors' appropriation of relationships

---

[71] Representatives of a "late Enlightenment", such as Jürgen Habermas or Jörn Rüsen, see themselves as obliged to refer to a totality, which can be defined as the utopic end-product of a successful discourse. In my opinion, this has been justifiably criticised from the feminist and cultural scientific standpoint as a "utopic pre-creational scenario" and an academic vision of free dialogue relating to those obligatorily interested in knowledge. See: P. Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, vol. I, Frankfurt 1983, p. 47. For a feminist critique, compare the contribution by J. Held and U. Frevert in the volume by J. Rüsen et al. (eds.), *Die Zukunft der Aufklärung*, Frankfurt 1988.

and circumstances brings their actions, interpretations, ideas and physical experiences to the fore.

Ever since the first attempts at defining and practising social history, there has been a tendency to focus on the regional and local level. This is mainly due to the more intense empirical nature of social historical research and will probably increase with the proliferation of more culturally scientific oriented works. However, the regionalisation of research themes does not exclude their being brought together into compilation volumes for the purposes of providing overviews and making comparisons over a broader area. Nonetheless, it does present specific problems. Chief among these is that the increasing variety of theoretical approaches and methods increases the likelihood of results that are incompatible for comparative purposes. For that reason, theoretical discussion among researchers and agreement over the meaning of concepts, terminology and methods employed, will be that much more important, particularly between specialist researchers and those presenting comparative synopses of social historical research.

The current trend should also lead away from deductive or inductive closed, homogeneous "grand theories" towards the construction of hypotheses with more modest theoretical claims, which are stimulated and abductively developed by the data and texts.[72] In place of puristic attempts to keep the old grand theories intact has come an ever more positively evaluated eclecticism. Historical interpretations premised upon continuity and coherence will decline in importance in the face of the loss of meaning experienced by "grand theories" and their respective meta-narratives. In their stead approaches are beginning to appear which stress *discontinuity* and *difference*, although that by no means implies that social or cultural historical science has renounced its claim to be an autonomous discipline, on the basis that it focuses on historical change. The theoretical construction and descriptions of "historical developments" as "secular trends", something which has enjoyed great popularity amongst academic researchers and their public in recent years (to name but one example, Norbert Elias' by now famous theory of civilisation[73]), can in many ways be considered somewhat

[72] Although as yet scarcely noticed by social history, see the "classic" studies by C. S. Pierce, *Collected Papers*, Cambridge 1931. For an introduction to Pierce's work, see: L. Nagl, *C. S. Peirce*, Frankfurt 1992; see too the discussions of "qualitative social research" in (among others), B.G. Glaser and A.L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago 1967; J. Reichertz, *Probleme qualitativer Sozialforschung*, Frankfurt 1985; P. Zedler and H. Moser (eds.), *Aspekte qualitativer Sozialforschung*, Opladen 1983. See also the references given in Footnote 2.

[73] N. Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 2 vol., Frankfurt 1976, esp. vol. 2: Wandlungen der Gesellschaft. Entwurf zu einer

suspicious in ideological terms, because of its insistence on a clearly directed developmental path. Theoretical analyses stressing continuity and coherence favour the suppression of contradictions and the smoothing over of breaks and fissures; developmental theories presumably owe their persuasive force to their ability to raise hopes about gaining an overview of the broken landscapes of the historical world. As long as they are plausible in their formulation, teleological models frequently allow their authors to pass over gaps in empirical knowledge or tempt them to offer a "tendentious" interpretation of texts, images and objects in line with the "developmental path" being followed. Thanks to its greater empirical strengths, however, cultural scientific social history will be able to point up more breakages, interruptions and turning-points in the past, than these "lines of development" can cover over. And as the historical philosopher Frank R. Ankersmit has recently put it, social history will not so much contribute to a consolidation of identity than to making questionable identities more uncertain.[74]

A thoroughly cultural scientific social history will not be working alone in applying the approaches sketched here. The trends mentioned above are immanent, if not present already, in all the cultural and social sciences and humanities disciplines, albeit with different degrees of intensity. Indeed, these changes are visible beyond academic disciplines, being apparent in architecture, literature, philosophy, and not least, in our experiences in daily life: whether we agree with the term or not, they are characteristics common to the post-modern period,[75] a time when modernity is increasing its efforts to think critically about its forms of knowledge, not least its idea of history.

Translation from the German by Laurence Cole/London

Theorie der Zivilisation. For a critique of the teleological nature of this "theory of civilisation", see H. Kuzmics and I. Mörth (eds.), *Der unendliche Prozeß der Zivilisation. Zur Kultursoziologie der Moderne nach N. Elias*, Frankfurt 1991.

74 See the discussion with Frank Ankersmit in: *ÖZG* 4 (1993), pp. 457-466.

75 See: W. Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, 3rd edition, Weinheim 1991.

Social Theory and Practice

An International and Interdisciplinary Journal of Social Philosophy

Volume 23, Number 1 **Spring 1997**

Subscriptions (3 issues): Individuals $15; Institutions $36; Foreign postage $4
Department of Philosophy, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1054