

Max Weber, Understanding and the Charge of Subjectivism

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Abstract

According to the prevailing opinion, there are three fathers of sociology, namely Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber, and Weber is supposed to be a subjectivist in contrast to the two other classics. This paper argues that Weber is not subjectivist enough. He awards the notion of understanding a key role in his philosophy of science but actually dismisses it in his empirical research. An average meaning, which can be identified on the basis of observation, replaces the process of understanding other human beings. The chapter explores the notion of understanding and the role that it should play in the social sciences in some detail.

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According to common knowledge, Max Weber was a subjectivist who tried to explain society on the basis of the subjective meaning generated in the minds of individuals. In this paper, I will argue that this opinion is not only wrong but that almost the opposite is the case. Actually, Weber is far more objectivistic than subjectivistic. His classification as a subjectivist is based on the first few lines of *Economy and Society* (Weber 1972), where the expression “subjective meaning” figures prominently. But if we continue to read the book, we see that Weber does not put subjective meaning into use either for his theory of science or for his actual research. This point has been made before by Peter Winch. [1] I will follow Winch in his critique of Weber but not in his suggestion of an alternative approach, which according to him captures meaning more appropriately. Winch proposes to interpret social relations as relations between concepts, while I would suggest to follow Pierre Bourdieu [2] in interpreting social relations as anchored in embodied and mostly unconscious meaning. From this perspective, I propose to give the practice of understanding a much more prominent role in sociology than either Weber or Bourdieu have done, even though the notion of understanding has occupied a central role in their work (Weber; Bourdieu, *Weight of the World*). Both Bourdieu and Weber have called

for the relevance of understanding because any social action is meaningful and linked to some meaning for human beings. All human beings participate in the construction of the social world by acting meaningfully and interpreting meaning. However, both Weber and Bourdieu have tried to come up with theories that render the understanding of particular human beings and their perspectives superfluous. Ideally, the social science of Weber and Bourdieu can accomplish what all objectivist science is aiming at, namely explain and predict the particular perspectives and the actions emanating from them. Bourdieu (*Weight of the World*), at least, introduced the necessity of understanding as a method giving access to subjective meaning but in the end these subjective meanings only serve to illustrate his general theory.

However, it was Max Weber who first took the problem of understanding in the social sciences seriously and thereby opened the field for all later researchers. He did so by drawing on the Historical School and Neo-Kantianism, both of which were influential intellectual tendencies in Germany at the time. They initiated the first phase of what was later called the explanation-understanding-debate (Apel). In light of this, the first part of this paper will be devoted to the notion of understanding developed in this debate, on which Weber drew. The second section of the

paper will discuss the notion of understanding, which Weber develops on the first pages of *Economy and Society* that have been used to show that he is a subjectivist. The remaining two sections will unfold the notion of understanding by exploring two dimensions which appear in Weber's work but are in fact entirely neglected by him. I argue that these two dimensions were made accessible by Weber and that they should play a key role in the social sciences. The first dimension is the object that understanding in the social sciences actually has or should have, namely another human being. The second dimension is the methodological application of this understanding for social research.

Explanation and Understanding

According to the mainstream theory of science, which is historically rooted in the works of Galilei, Descartes and the Enlightenment, the purpose of science is to *explain* a given phenomenon. The explanation consists in a description of the object and the application of a lawlike proposition, which deduces the description of the object from a previous state of affairs. In other words, explanation is structurally identical with a prediction (Hempel). The main goal of science, therefore, is to find lawlike propositions, which can be used to predict a great number of similar cases or phenomena. Ideally, this knowledge can be formulated in mathematical terms, which are precise and entirely deductive.

Confronting the ideas of both Descartes and the Enlightenment, Giambattista Vico argued that the Cartesian philosophy of science was not applicable to the human world. According to him, the human world can be more fully comprehended than nature, because we ourselves create it (Vico). A mathematically formulated knowledge in this regard is neither necessary nor meaningful because we can interrogate the object, reproduce its functions, and understand ourselves. We can imitate or even replicate the actions of another human being but not of an object of the natural sciences. We can understand what another human being is saying but not what an object of the natural sciences is saying. And we can engage in a conversation with another human being clarifying what he or she meant but not

with an object of the natural sciences. Vico's argument in direct opposition to Descartes and Galilei was that we cannot comprehend nature because God created it; and for this reason, nature can only be comprehended by God. In contrast, the human participates in the creation of the human world and thereby plays a role in his or her own destiny and must deal with that.

Even if it seems unlikely that we comprehend the human world better than the natural world simply because we construct it ourselves, in identifying the basic difference between the natural sciences and the humanities, Vico at the very least made this question accessible from the perspective of the philosophy of science. Science itself is a part of society. That notion has a whole row of consequences which were worked out in connection with Vico. Many of them figured prominently in the debates about the theory of science that should be applied to a new set of academic disciplines, which were the social sciences.

The social sciences were formed in the nineteenth century as a relatively unified group of academic disciplines. Emerging as the first discipline of social sciences in the eighteenth century, British economics was able to divorce itself from the field of philosophy. Sociology emerged partly as a result of disputes with economics and partly from discussions of the French Enlightenment. These traditions were extensions of the Cartesian philosophy of science and, adhering to Galilei's approach to the natural sciences, sought to apply the theory of explanation, i.e. to subsume the object under universal laws. In Germany, an opposition emerged to that approach in the nineteenth century. It took Vico's argument as its point of departure and with that was more sympathetic to the humanities than to the natural sciences. [3] This opposition mainly arose in two different but related schools.

The Neokantian School postulated that an explanation regarding the human world really concerns itself only with an individual case or object and does not allow for the formation of general laws (Rickert). One is interested in comprehending a specific historical event, a text, a person or a cultural configuration. The explanation of any of these should render

plausible the many factors which lead to the occurrence of the phenomenon. The German Historical School argued, following Vico, that ideas were entirely different from things and their study thus required a completely different methodology. Johann Gustav Droysen added that values were contained within history, and that humans made decisions on the basis of these values. "Morality", then, was first and foremost in the composition of the human world.

The Neokantians recognized the object of the social sciences and the humanities as being entirely particular, precisely because these disciplines pursued a different goal than did the natural sciences. Their goal was not to deduce from universal laws but rather to understand meaningful objects, incidences, expressions, opinions and people. It would be wholly uninteresting to form an explanation of a work of art using universal laws. The same is true for an important historical event. An attempt at understanding the work or the person in the first place is much more appealing. The investigation of the social world does not often contain general or universal pronouncements, but instead has as its goal the particular, which the Neokantians referred to as the "historical individual" (Rickert 84).

One often wants to know what something means or how someone sees the world. There are not only limitless possible descriptions and explanations but also myriad possible epistemological interests and all are more or less equally legitimate. Even if one claims to have understood a written statement, the conditions under which it was written, why it was written one way and not another, and what exactly the author intended it to mean remain unknown. None of these epistemological interests can be reduced to another.

The relationship between subject and object in the social sciences has to do with the role of understanding. Firstly, we must understand the object's significance or place in the social world before we can explain it, which is precisely what Weber argued in response to the Neokantians. We need to know if an action is the casting of a vote, a spirit cult or a game –and what these are. Objectivist approaches attempt to avoid this very problem, and to that end, these approaches

remain unsatisfactory. Secondly, if we were to arrive at a statistical explanation of the social world, which was plausibly and thoroughly objective, we could only do so by overlooking the bulk of the social world. We simply know more about the social world than statistics are capable of revealing. More importantly, we want to know more. We want to know, for example, what a text or ritual means; why a person made one decision instead of another; why or how a certain institution came into being; on what basis someone was found innocent or guilty by a judge; and perhaps most succinctly, how another person sees the world.

The related issues can be illustrated with reference to an explanation –or prediction– of voting behavior. If the social scientist comes from a society, in which the political system has never included elections, he or she would have to understand the institution of elections before attempting any kind of explanation. Otherwise, he or she might interpret the election as a game, a lottery or a religious ceremony, all of which would be misguided. This kind of misinterpretation is exactly what the first European anthropologists presented in their work. The misinterpreted many phenomena they encountered against the background of their society and, on this basis, presented explanations and theories that have nothing to do with any kind of reality.

Therefrom arises another issue, namely that interpretation plays a significant role in understanding. One could easily interpret an election as a neutral poll regarding the best and/or most rational political program for a society to embark on for the next four or five-year period. Alternatively, one could understandably view an election as a choice between candidates whose appeal in the eyes of the electorate is more or less emotional. An election appears differently, however, if one understands it as a clash of ideologies or a legitimation of the ruling class. Each of these explanations is in part warranted, yet each explanation, at least to some extent, contradicts the others. Even more important is the fact that the explanations exert some kind of influence on reality. Voting decisions are influenced by these explanations however one interprets an election, and, with that, each forecast influences the course of an election.

What would become of the election forecast if a group were to, based on some projected outcome, stage a coup d'état or if the forecast caused the electorate to lose faith in the societal function of voting? What scientific value would explanations of voting behavior have in a world in which elections no longer take place?

Max Weber's Concept and Practice of Understanding

Max Weber replied to the issues discussed in the preceding section. He took the Historical School's argument seriously that any explanation in the social sciences presupposes understanding and he agreed with the Neokantians that the formulation of universal laws in the social sciences misses the point. He did not follow the Neokantians in their normative approach, however. Weber attempted to develop a specific science, which was value-free and non-philosophical for approaching the human world.

In his sociology, Weber endeavored to provide a connection between explanation and understanding. This is very evident in his most famous sentence. His main work begins with the famous postulate: "Sociology ... is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with causal explanation of its course and consequences" (Weber 1, my translation). Weber understood action as an internal or external activity, bearing or omission, if it is imbued with *subjective meaning*. For him, action was then social insofar as it related to the meaning in the conduct of other people.

The consequential formulation of "interpretation" and "thereby" has misguided students of Weber to classify him as a subjectivist. One could read the sentence as claiming that the understanding of meaning already is or at least enables the "causal explanation". The scientific process begins with understanding, which is also the basis for explanation. Many interpreters of the sentence have added that Weber after this claim goes on to define the meaning to be understood as "subjective meaning". This they take to refer to a concrete state of mind in an individual. Thereby, Weber seems to imply that

any phenomenon, which is relevant to the social sciences, is rooted in an individual mind. At least, the social scientist has to anchor his or her explanation in an individual mind.

It is certainly true that Weber believed all social phenomena to be rooted in meaning and meaning in turn to be linked to the subjective experience of the mind. Insofar as machines, for example, are regarded only as physical matter, they have no meaning and are therefore no sociological objects (Weber 3). However, not everything that is meaningful can be understood. The core characteristic of sociological objects is the reference to meaning, nothing else. Weber distinguishes different types and levels of meaning and acknowledges that many aspects of the human world are void of meaning but they have to have some relation to human meaning if they are to be included in the scientific research of sociology.

Subjective meaning seemed to be of central importance for Weber, but, in the end, it did not play much of a role in either his examinations of the philosophy of science or his empirical work. In the first instance, Weber excluded those topics from the purview of sociology which were imbued with a singular and known meaning, at least insofar as he differentiated between meanings which were considered ordinary and those which were construed as ideal types (Weber 1). Of the ordinary types, Weber dismissed random actions and put the focus on an "average meaning". For example, if somebody greets another person in the cultural context of Brazil by showing his fist, this is extraordinary and not the common type of greeting. The average greeting is a handshake along with saying "oi". This is what sociology should focus on.

By observing a certain regularity in actions, for example a repetition of the handshake as greeting, one can establish this type of action as an "ideal type". Only the ideal types should be considered objects of sociological inquiry (Weber 2, 9). Following Weber, these objects should not have anything to do with ordinary, singular meanings. A meaning can, for the sake of order, be subsumed under the figurative heading of an ideal type if an action repeatedly takes place, either in the same person or in a group of persons (Weber 14).

In contrast to Durkheim, Weber's sociology had as its principal object of inquiry "social relations", not the totality of a "society". According to Weber, a social relationship is a mutual, reciprocal and potentially replicable exchange between people (13f). The propensity for recurrence defines the social relation as a sociological object (Weber 14). This regularity needs to be observed from a scientific perspective, is not established by the social actors themselves and can be ascribed with a degree of validity. The human interaction then finds its orientation in the establishment of the *legitimacy* of the social relationship in question (or better yet, in the "organization" of the social relationship) (Weber 16).

Sociology should, following Weber, situate the ideal-typical action in a comprehensive correlation of meanings. This correlation can then be viewed in a "typical manner" as a reason or motive for an action (Weber 4). Weber regarded as typical those characteristics contained within dominant mental and emotional habits or practices, characteristics which can be viewed in similar experiential terms (Weber 5). He depicted the first criterion as being adequate on the level of meaning and the second as being adequate in a causal context. "A correct causal interpretation of a specific action means to grasp the observable process and the motive correctly and at the same time intelligibly in their context" (Weber 5, my translation). Sociology must establish categories of actions and with that explain how these categories are incorporated into comprehensive, determining contexts.

With that, understanding has as its sole function the comprehension of the meaning of an action. In contrast, sociology's chief task lies in explaining the aforementioned categories through comprehensive contexts. How can the criteria be fulfilled, which context should be viewed as determining, if the criteria themselves are not tasked with comprehending the internal workings or the meaningful experience of the actors? Weber replies that the categories should be reconstructed according to the model of instrumental rationality, the relation between purpose, means and marginal consequences. The actual actions as they unfold, then, can be considered deviations from the pure, difficult to recognize ideal-typical action (Weber 3). This

ideal-typical action was selected as a conceptual guide because Weber's sociology did not arise from or aspire to a subjective meaning but rather sought to depict and render understandable the social contexts from which meaning can be derived. Sociology is supposed to aim at larger contexts of meaning, not at individual interpretations or experiences. Therefore, Weber allowed only *one type* of action to be reconstructed in the relationship between subjective and comprehensive meaning, and his motives for doing so were purely rational and explicit.

Weber's sociology sought firstly to identify meaningful or important social phenomena and secondly to explain them in the context of a hierarchy of meaning. Understanding in and of itself, however, remained largely irrelevant for his approach to sociological knowledge (Winch 113). If one sticks to the Cartesian perspective, understanding's contribution to the social sciences is meager and provides only peripheral illustrations and verification. Adhering to the Cartesian perspective, however, is neither possible nor desirable in the social sciences. Weber did not want to fully give up the ideal of a Cartesian science, because for him this idea called into question the notion of *Wertfreiheit* and, with that, scholarship in general. He attempted to avoid these questions by presenting a whole line of as-if hypotheses, which in their totality allowed sociology to approximate the Cartesian approach to science.

Existential Understanding

Even if Weber had based his sociology on subjective meaning, he would have developed an external or psychological perspective, which was the Neokantian perspective. Only after Weber, philosophy and sociology managed to elaborate a non-psychological notion of meaning. This was carried out on the one hand by the phenomenological tradition inaugurated by Weber's contemporary Edmund Husserl and on the other hand by the philosophy of language linked to philosophers like Wittgenstein. While Husserl tried to understand meaning entirely from the perspective of introspection, Wittgenstein located meaning exclusively in the

context of social practice. Their interpretations of meaning can be situated at the opposite ends of a spectrum between society and individual but they have one thing in common as opposed to Neokantianism: they do not regard meaning as something that can be understood by drawing on scientific hypotheses about the psychological structures of the mind.

Weber and the Neokantians had no particular interest in understanding itself. As I tried to show in the preceding section, Weber was not even interested in subjective meaning, which is accessible only through understanding. If we study understanding, we realize that it varies according to the type of its object. We can distinguish between five types of objects of understanding. The various objects of understanding require different types of understanding. Meaningful objects obviously represent an important type of understandable objects, and for the hermeneutical tradition, text was the archetype for these objects. We can with very few problems comfortably equate the understanding of meaningful objects with *hermeneutical understanding*. The goal of hermeneutical understanding consists in comprehending the meaning of something. Explanation plays a role in this process, chiefly as an instrument for explaining, for example, a grammatical mistake or the absence of a page from a text. This kind of understanding is of fundamental importance for the humanities but is far less important in the social sciences.

The social sciences place priority on actions. Von Wright argued that the explanation of an action was a teleological explanation which could also contain a causal explanation. The social scientific connection to action is certainly much more complex. Von Wright contended further that one must understand the meaning attached to a given action, and with that, he seemed to have had Wittgenstein's concept of life-form in mind, which in turn is related to Weber's complex of meaning. With a social scientific observation of an action, we must be well acquainted with the social environment in which the activity takes place if we hope to understand or explain it. For Wittgenstein, activities represented the expression of a life-form (19). One can only understand the language-game of an unknown

life-form insofar as one learns the way in which the action is performed. The forms of life and expression are mutually dependent on one another and form the hermeneutical boundary of possible experience. This boundary, like the life-form itself, changes constantly (Wittgenstein 65). According to Wittgenstein, we are not capable of understanding a single word if we are not well acquainted with the practice to which it is attached. In this sense, we can equate the understanding of activities with *practical understanding*.

On the basis of practical understanding, we can construct psychological, historical, sociological or other theories in order to explain actors' motives. That is more or less exactly the same as von Wright's teleological explanation. It is teleological because a motive is not the same as a cause. A motive does not trigger an activity according to any kind of law, because an actor, in spite of his or her motives, could act differently or be hindered from performing an activity. For that reason, Hempel characterized this form of explanation as statistical and differentiated it from the nomological explanation. By combining practical understanding with a teleological explanation, one can perhaps understand why a person acts one way and not another. This kind of understanding can be referred to as *the understanding of motives*.

Practical understanding and the understanding of motives are components for most approaches in social sciences, but they only constitute the core of the scientific approach in anthropology and psychology. The majority of the social sciences use practical understanding and the understanding of motives in order to gain entry to social structures or contexts – and to verify statistical studies. They regard actions and motives as expressions of a life-form, which itself becomes an object of inquiry. In this context and connected to Hegel, Dilthey (180) spoke about an "objective meaning", which we can understand here in terms of traditions, norms, or institutions. For example, one hopes to understand why a law has been enacted, how an art form has been transformed or how an organization functions. This particular kind of understanding is closely connected to explanations and can be referred to as *objective understanding*. This is also the

type of understanding, which would characterize Weberian sociology. In summary, at least three different kinds of understanding activities can be distinguished. One can differentiate between action, motive and objective meaning with regards to the universe of discourse.

Beyond texts and activities, we sometimes want to understand another way of seeing the world – or another person. I would like to refer to this kind of understanding as *existential understanding*. Attempts have been made to reduce existential understanding to the understanding of motives, practical understanding or hermeneutical understanding. These attempts, however, have been misdirected. If we truly want to understand another person, we do not try to explain motives, reconstruct mental conditions, understand activities or meaningful objects and consider that person's state of mind. All of these processes require a theory of the object and are connected to an explanation.

The understanding of another person merely implies an existence and has nothing to do with an explanation. If we want to understand another person, we attempt to conceive of his or her way of being in the world. We can only really do that in a hypothetical way, because we do not have access to another being in the world. Existential understanding is neither empathy (Stein) nor a change of perspective (Mead) but is instead a construction. It implies pre-understanding, hypotheses and falsification. One could well say that we construct or even dream up the way of being of another person. If our observations of another person plausibly match up with our construction, then we can justifiably make the claim that we have understood that person. This process can be differentiated from the conventional forms of knowledge in at least two ways: firstly, its object is a lived experience and thus is really not an object; and secondly, this experience is principally not open to intersubjective verification. For those reasons, I am of the opinion that one should certainly differentiate between the understanding of another person and knowledge –or, at least, distinguish different forms of knowledge.

Following Max Weber, Alfred Schütz has attempted to base the social sciences on existential understanding. He preceded Peter

Winch in criticizing Weber for neglecting subjective meaning and understanding in his theory of science. While Weber claimed that all social phenomena were linked to subjective meaning, he rendered its understanding irrelevant by focusing on ideal-types and explaining these by complexes of social meaning instead of subjective meaning. Even though I agree with Schütz in his critique of Weber, I think that Weber's theory of explanation as interpretation of layers of meaning is a perfectly adequate concept of sociology, while Schütz' interpretive sociology is misguided. It is misguided simply because social meaning is not generated out of individual meaning. Social meaning is largely unconscious and it mostly precedes any individual meaning. It is a more fundamental layer of meaning and should be the core object of sociology, just as Weber has claimed.

Furthermore, Schütz (like Weber) associated meaning with the mind or consciousness. Just like the focus on the individual is misguided, so is the concept of consciousness. Heidegger made clear that existential understanding's object of inquiry, existence, is not really an object at all. The earlier renditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology made the mistake of equating existence with "consciousness" or "experience" and as a result fully overlooked the particularities of existence (Heidegger 45ff). The human is not a thing, substance or object but is an existing being, fully aware of his or her own existence. The particularity of existence stems from its being lived out. In other words, this particularity is not that thing which one observes but is rather what one *is* during the course of observation. A reified object can certainly be observed, but nothing is "there" for him or her; rather, something is "there" only for the observer, who is a "being-there" ("Dasein") (Heidegger 55).

If one seeks to conceive of humans as consciousness, then one tends to objectify them and overlook the decisive factor. A way of life, imbued with "experiences" or "consciousness", certainly does exist but does so in an entirely different way than does a thing. In order to get an appropriate grasp of this notion, the mode of existence must be allowed to come into full view. The meaning of an experience or consciousness

is attributed by the observer, but existence itself is lived out. Rather than being an object, it is the point itself (Heidegger 48). Existence distinguishes itself from all objects in that it is lived out. The human is his or her own existence.

This observation, which Heidegger employed to much different ends, not only allows us to conceptualize another person as a living being but also allows us to do the same regarding ourselves. Existence differs from other forms of being to the extent that it permits us to thematize our own being. Heidegger (55) illustrates just that point with his example of a chair standing near a wall. The chair is not “near the wall” because the wall does not exist “for the chair”. Only with regards to existence is something there, and the presence of the thing is not coincidental or accidental but is only possible on the basis of existence. This implicates the notion of meaningfulness. Existence’s specific way of being is meaningfulness (86). From the perspective of existence, meaning does not emerge by means of organizing a predicate and subject in a propositional structure but rather comes from being there. Heidegger referred to existence’s meaningfulness as “being in the world” (53). Only existence is in the world, because something can only exist for existence. All other things, of course, exist as well, but nothing exists for those things. Existence, however, exists only in relation to something. It might seem a bit obvious, but a person is an existing being only insofar as he or she exists. Weber never acknowledged the object of sociology as an existing being and never linked meaning to this kind of existence.

Heidegger rightly indicated that human knowledge and life should not be conceived of as categories or objects but should instead be thought of as being or existence. Similarly to Kant, however, he was interested in existence as a theoretical process and extended this thinking to being. Humans are not in the world so that theories can be formulated and so that the world can be viewed as theory’s object of inquiry but are here in the first place as active beings. It should therefore come as no wonder that Heidegger, after the publication of *Being and Time* (which was to be the first volume of a philosophical work), shied away from the analysis of existence

and turned instead towards being. He was not at all interested in understanding persons but he opened the path towards it.

Methodological Understanding

If understanding partly aims at discovering meaning as constructed or experienced by other human beings, it is also methodologically relevant. It gives access to the meaning of objects in the social sciences as well as to the world view of other human beings. This is important because the social scientist is a human being him- or herself. He or she only has one particular perspective on the world and needs to understand the perspectives of other human beings if he or she does not want to run the risk of merely proclaiming his or her own world view. This point has been made by ethnomethodology, which emerged in the wake of Weber and Schütz. It is also a core assumption of anthropological methodology.

Even if we say that another person’s experience is in principle not observable, this does not mean that pure fantasy contributes something to understanding. We need a plausible basis for the hypothesis we come up with. In the nineteenth century, Western anthropologists traveled into the “wild”, described the behaviors they encountered and attempted to convey to their readers who these people were whom they were observing –without being able to speak their language or being able to interpret their activities. In Wittgenstein’s words, these anthropologists knew very little about the life-forms and language-games of the people they were describing. Or, in Weber’s words, they did not understand the more fundamental complexes of meaning. Thus, most anthropological explanations from the nineteenth century have not stood the test of time and are now regarded as baseless. They now serve to illustrate the point that one must be able to act in a manner similar to another person in order to understand that person –at least in his or her imagination.

Of equal importance is the idea that one must at least to some extent understand the respective symbolic universe. A certain amount of practical and hermeneutical understanding is then a necessary precondition for an existential

understanding. The actual carrying out this process is not a necessary requirement, but it provides a much better basis than does pure imagination or fantasy. There is a vital difference between imagining oneself to be hungry and actually being hungry –or imaging oneself eating and actually eating. The familiarity with language-games and life-forms is of a different kind for the observer than for the actor. If we want to recognize or even learn a new language-game and life-form, we do so on the basis of the life-forms and language-games which we have already mastered.

In many cases, we revert back to the life-forms and language-games we already know. We then have a more extensive knowledge than the actors, but we invest less. We thus are not capable of relaying the exact experience of other people. We certainly do not understand an object automatically once we have fully mastered the language-games and life-forms which that object has already mastered, and we can sometimes understand an object without knowing much about his or her life-form. The only real requirement is the *re-enactment* of the experience. This re-enactment is, of course, hypothetical and not real. One can master a foreign life-form and still not understand anybody. It can also be the case that one arrives in a foreign place and can more or less understand another person straightaway. One must be in a position to re-enact his or her existence. That can take place entirely in one's own imagination (Geertz 31).

The imagination must be compatible with the observed behavior and is merely a hypothesis which must be validated empirically. This hypothesis is roughly equivalent to a scientific hypothesis but is even more problematic, because that which is contained within it is wholly unobservable. One acquires a notion of the connection between that which is observed and the consummated experience throughout the course of his or her own life history via involvement with other people. Our own experience teaches us something about being in the world, but the notion of our own being in the world is only approachable as a result of our experience with other people. Our own experience evinces the openness of life to many

different opportunities (Humboldt 261).

Understanding another person teaches us about existence but does not tell us anything about an object. Our involvement with other people strengthens both the possibilities of life and our examination of understanding. In an interaction, one attributes a subjective experience to the other person, and this experience is then verified by means of further observations which show them to be either compatible or incompatible with the attribution. This process is indeed similar to a scientific experiment. These attributions can then be communicated to the other person and discussed. This would imply that one can carry out or perform his or her life in a similar way to the other person. The precise point at which this implication becomes dubious would be foreign territory for the other person. This experience can be made or produced in connection to people with whom one has lived for years. Understanding is not rendered impossible by such an experience but rather opens up new possibilities for one's own life and sparks a further effort towards understanding. Furthermore, we tend to pursue a reflexive approach with regards to the people we are trying to understand. On the basis of our own existence –including our life stories, our times, our languages and our knowledge– we make assumptions about the existence of other people, and we then attempt to either confirm or disprove these assumptions by means of observation.

I wish to argue that existential understanding should be a core feature of any sociological methodology. Understanding is used in the social sciences as a method implicitly all the time, in fact every single moment. However, it has been theoretically neglected because the access to meaning has been taken for granted or even dismissed. This is especially true for existential understanding. How another person sees the world and exists in it seems to be rather irrelevant for most social scientists. The objectivism inherent in the social sciences, including Weber's sociology, is largely responsible for this. If one wishes to arrive at general statements about the social world, it seems to be necessary to leave subjectivity behind as soon as possible.

Bourdieu (*Weight of the World*) has shown us a different path. He has argued that the social

world consists of social positions that are relative to each other giving rise to different perspectives that need to be understood. Each person has a specific perspective on the world, which is linked to his or her existential conditions, which in turn are shared by an entire group of people. From this sociological perspective, existence and subjective meaning matter. The other human being is not merely an informant who delivers data to be integrated into a theory by the social scientist but another being-in-the-world with whom one has to enter into a hermeneutical process of mutual understanding because both sides have something to say. Sociological research from this perspective becomes an exercise in existential understanding.

Following Bourdieu (*Weight of the World*), this type of understanding has been further developed into a full-fledged method. The Hannover school of Michael Vester has produced the method of “habitus hermeneutics”, which aims at the reconstruction of the other’s habitus. Habitus in this sense is the link between position and perspective. The method comprises life-course interviews, which are not interpreted in a monologue of the scientist with him- or herself but by a group of researchers who also thematize their own position and perspective in the process. [4]

A similar methodological approach has been adopted by Jessé Souza and his research team. [5] The goal was to establish a personal relationship and to understand the other human being by doing a series of interviews. Each interview was supposed to produce a closer relationship and to make a deeper understanding possible. As with Bourdieu and Vester, the guiding assumption behind the research process was that researcher and interviewee are members of a society whose existence is largely determined by the social conditions, which are different for different social groups. This assumption only comes to the fore if one actively engages with the other through existential understanding.

Conclusion

Weber opened the space for social research. He put the concepts of meaning and understanding into the centre of his approach. Thereby, he was

the first sociologist to acknowledge the complex and special relation between subject and object in the social sciences. He also clarified the relation between individual and society to a large degree by postulating layers of meaning, which are more or less general, and by detaching these layers both from the individual consciousness and the society interpreted as nation state. These are very important advances in the theory of science over the objectivism prevailing in the nineteenth century.

However, Weber fell short of an adequate conception of understanding because the positivistic theory of science was still too dominant at the time. With the help of Neokantianism and the Historical School, he was able to include the subject into his science. But he still dreamt of a science without perspective generated by a free-floating spirit or even a divine point of view. His ideal was value-freedom and towards this ideal, he sought to establish a dismissal of the scientist’s and the object’s subjectivity. For this reason, he never adequately dealt with understanding or with subjective meaning.

Another reason for the inadequacy was the notion of consciousness or mind. Weber, like the entire nineteenth century before him and phenomenology after him, linked meaning to an interior world, which is supposed to happen in the mind and to be accessible only to the individual. On the basis of this assumption, understanding always refers to an individual state of mind. Wittgenstein has shown that meaning is always shared, Heidegger has deconstructed the notion of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated that meaning is located not in the mind but in the entire body and Bourdieu has developed these ideas into a theory of practice. There is no way back to Weber’s concept of subjective meaning from here.

Ednnotes

[1] See Winch 1958.

[2] See Bordieu 1990.

[3] For more, see Apel 1979.

[4] Cf. Vester 2003.

[5] Cf. Souza et al. 2009.

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