

*Chapter 2*

**COGNITIVE RELATIVISM:  
BETWEEN POSITIVISTIC AND RELATIVISTIC  
THINKING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Some of the issues raised by the postmodern, anti-positivist critique of the notion of objectivity are not new. The problem, for instance, of the influence exerted by the researcher's values and/or conceptual tools on a theory's empirical findings already has a long history, and has been tackled, quite adequately I think, by such scholars as Weber and Elias (Weber 1978: 24-36 and 285 ff; Hekman 1983; Elias 1987). Other problems, however, to the extent that they are part of the postmodern emphasis on the symbolic construction of all social phenomena, while not entirely new,<sup>1</sup> raise new issues regarding relativism, and therefore deserve more extensive treatment. I begin with a brief reference to the more conventional questioning of the notion of objectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Long before postmodernism and social constructionism, the tradition of symbolic interactionism emphasized the symbolic dimension of all social phenomena (Mead 1934, Blumer 1969). However, the latter's emphasis on the symbolic did not, unlike postmodernism, lead its followers to relativism.

## 1. OBJECTIVITY AND THE ISSUE OF MEDIATION

Postmodern theorists reject the idea of objectivity and ‘value neutrality’,<sup>2</sup> as this is formulated in positivist accounts of the social sciences. They reject the notion that social researchers can orient themselves to their field of study in a value-neutral, detached manner. They argue that it is not only values (political, ethical, aesthetic), but also the vocabularies used (lay or specialized) that mediate between the researcher and the research object. Therefore researchers with different values, different lay idioms and different specialized conceptual tools must inevitably end up with different interpretations and explanations of the phenomena they study. This leads to the notion of ‘equivalent narratives’, to the idea that it is not possible to prove that in the case of competing theories or ‘narratives’ dealing with the same issues, one of them is, cognitively speaking, more valid than another.

### A) Anti-empiricism

Moreover, postmodern theory also rejects empiricism, the rather crude idea that a researcher must first of all observe social phenomena and can only then proceed to formulate generalizations. This thesis of ‘first the facts and then the theory’ fails to take into account that it is the theoretical problematic that delineates a theory’s subject matter in the first place, pointing out what are and what are not relevant facts, as well as how a theory can or cannot be validated.<sup>3</sup> All the above arguments about the mediation issue and the role theory plays in social research lead postmodern thinkers to a more or less accentuated relativist position. They lead to the conclusion that it is not possible to find a mode of assessing competing theories based on cognitive criteria of truth.

### B) The Two Objectivities

I think that one way of dealing with this type of relativist impasse is to distinguish clearly between two types of objectivity. **First**, the positivistic notion which requires the researcher at the start of the investigation to bracket or eliminate entirely all axiological and linguistic/conceptual presuppositions – i.e. to approach the object of study in an unmediated, *tabula rasa* manner. This type of ‘objective’ detachment (as Weber pointed out long ago) is simply not possible either in the social or the natural sciences. Different values, different linguistic mediations, different conceptual frameworks unavoidably intrude into the research

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<sup>2</sup> Concerning the question of value neutrality, there is the erroneous but widespread view (developed primarily by A. Gouldner 1971 and 1976) that Weber’s notion of objectivity entails the positivistic view that values should not intrude into social-science theories; and that the German scholar developed the ‘value neutrality’ view in order to enhance the respectability of the newly-born discipline of sociology. This is not at all the case. Weber argues that values are unavoidably relevant to social-science research. When he speaks of the value neutrality of all science, he by no means adopts the positivistic thesis of an ‘absence of values’. He simply argues, in refutation of *scientism*, that the social sciences, however much they develop, will never be able to bridge the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’. In other words, Weber’s value-neutrality argument is based not on a positivistic but on an anti-positivistic orientation. Sciences are value-neutral in the sense that they cannot empirically validate ultimate value judgments.

<sup>3</sup> For an early ‘pre-postmodern’ version of anti-empiricism, see Braithwaite 1964.

process. There is not and never can be an unmediated, totally detached approach to the study of social phenomena.

However, this need not result in relativism if objectivity is defined differently, non-positivistically as a type of self-discipline requiring the researcher, whenever there is incongruity or tension between his/her values or conceptual tools on the one hand and the empirical findings on the other, to adjust the former to the latter and not the other way round. It is precisely this type of self-discipline that primarily distinguishes an ideological from a non-ideological discourse in the social sciences. In both cases, of course, axiological and conceptual/linguistic concerns are related to and have an impact on the mode of construction and validation of a theory. But the crucial difference between them is that in the ideological discourse the dominant orientation requires the manipulation of empirical data so that they fit immutable value commitments. In the non-ideological discourse the researcher is prepared to do the opposite – to question values and to modify conceptual tools in the light of the empirical evidence.

Now postmodern theorists refuse to accept the concept of ideology<sup>4</sup> and therefore the distinction between more or less ideological approaches to the study of social phenomena. However, even while rejecting the by now unfashionable ideology term, we certainly need a way of distinguishing, for instance, the kind of discourse that Nazi social theorists produced on race, from the discourses we find in today's sociology-of-race literature.<sup>5</sup> It is quite obvious that in the former case, objectivity, as a type of what N. Elias (1987) has termed 'detachment', is totally absent, whereas in the latter it is decidedly present to different degrees. What this means is that the concept of objectivity is not synonymous with the absence of all mediation – axiological, linguistic, conceptual. It may more modestly and commonsensically mean a situation of relative detachment enabling a social researcher to *first*, be aware of his/her preferences in value, linguistic and conceptual terms and *second*, be ready to constantly question the latter in the light of the ongoing empirical evidence.

This type of objectivity, particularly as far as conceptual presuppositions are concerned, is difficult but not impossible. Let us look at a classical example from the literature of industrial sociology. A team of social researchers under Elton Mayo's direction began a research project at Western Electric's Hawthorn plant. This project was initially based on a positivistic framework: the researchers were trying to establish correlations between productivity and such variables as lighting conditions, duration of rest periods, material incentives, etc. When their empirical findings were inconclusive, they realized that the fluctuations in productivity had less to do with the variables that they were trying to measure than with the social structure of the work group and the changing relations between the workers and the researchers themselves. This led to a radical change in methodology and the conceptual tools employed, causing a marked shift from a statistically-oriented positivistic approach to one based on participant observation and on a non-atomistic, holistic conceptual framework.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault, for instance, rejects the concept of ideology, both because of its Marxist, economic connotations, and because it is based on the distinction between false (i.e. ideological) and true (i.e. scientific) knowledge. See Foucault 1980.

<sup>5</sup> For the direct connection between racism and Nazi eugenics policies, see Gasman 1971.

<sup>6</sup> The Hawthorn studies, a cooperative five-year enterprise between the Western Electric company and a team from the Harvard School of Business (1927-1932) were extensively reported by Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939.

Needless to say, objectivity in the above, non-positivistic sense is more easily achieved where researchers operate within the context of an academic community enjoying considerable autonomy *vis-à-vis* state or market pressures.

## 2. THE POSTMODERN CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATION AND EMPIRICAL REFERENCE

Apart from issues related to mediation, another route to cognitive relativism is via the postmodern objection to the ‘mirror’ or ‘representation’ view of social theory; to the idea that a social theory should represent, or mirror as faithfully as possible, a social reality ‘out there’, so to speak. This view is based on distinguishing between the levels of ‘theory’ and of ‘social reality’. This distinction then makes it possible to decide which of two competing theories (both dealing with the same problematic) is closer to social reality than the other using “empirical data”.

In the postmodern view this kind of theory validation is highly dubious. Since social reality, including the theories about it, is symbolically constructed, there can be no distinguishing between theory and social reality. Even the institutional complex of ‘hard’ social reality – i.e. durable institutions such as that of the private ownership of the means of production in capitalism – portray (*contra* Marx) nothing ‘material’. The rules and norms of private ownership are reproduced and persist because millions of people, in a taken-for-granted, routine manner, ascribe meanings and interpret certain exchange practices in specific ways. The supposed materiality of the ownership institutions is based on nothing more than meanings, interpretations, symbols. In other words, it is not only social theorists who construct theories about the institutions of property; laypersons do so likewise every time they change currency in a bank or buy goods in the market place.

Social theories, therefore, are symbolic constructs referring to an ‘empirical reality’ that also consists of symbolic constructs; or, to put it differently, social theories are interpretations of interpretations; they are specialists’ theories attempting to explain those of laypersons’.

Moreover, even if we consider truly material objects – trees, say, or sailing boats – these enter the world of ‘social realities’ when laypersons or specialists variously interpret their existence as objects of aesthetic appreciation, as resources to be used in the realization of human projects, as goods to be bought and sold in the market, as means of saving the planet from ecological disaster, etcetera.<sup>7</sup> If therefore the so-called social reality is symbolically constructed, it is as real or unreal as the theories that try to explain it. To put this in the language of textualism, since society is a system of narratives or texts, the writings of social theorists are simply texts among other texts. And if everything social is constituted via language and its grammatical and syntactical rules, then distinguishing between theory and social-reality does not make a great deal of sense.

This anti-representation argument is reinforced by Saussure’s notion of the arbitrariness of the sign. The Swiss linguist has argued that there is no one-to-one linkage between signifier and signified. In human language, the linkage between the word as a physical sound (signifier) and the word as a concept (signified) is less important, less helpful if we want to

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<sup>7</sup> See on this point Laclau and Mouffe 1985 and Laclau 1990.

understand the meaning attached to the word, than is the synchronic or diachronic relationship between signifiers. This means that the focus shifts from the signified and its empirical referent to the signifier and the linguistic rules governing its linkages with other signifiers. This change in emphasis from signified/empirical referent to the signifier is taken a step further by theorists such as Baudrillard (1976, 1981, 1983) and Derrida (1978, 1981), who dismiss the former altogether and conceptualize society as a chain of signifiers, or as a set of texts that occupy all social space – with nothing social existing *hors text*.

It is on the basis of this kind of logic that postmodern theorists attempt to deconstruct any theory that tries to explain in ‘representative’ manner social phenomena which conventional theorists call empirical reality – a reality supposed to be ‘out there’, separate from theory. In actual fact, postmodernism contends, there is *nothing* out there: the dualism between social reality and social theory simply does not exist. This point of view however, as already mentioned, leads to relativism, since two theories or ‘narratives’ providing different explanations of the same social phenomenon cannot be assessed by the conventional method of ‘empirical proof’.<sup>8</sup> All that can be done is to examine which theory is more logically consistent, or which narrative is aesthetically more pleasing or politically more powerful (Foucault 1980).

### A) The Modern-postmodern Debate in Greek Historiography

I shall illustrate the above by referring to a long drawn-out debate among Greek historians, which began on the occasion of an important conference on Greek historiography in 2002 and which continues in scholarly and less scholarly writings up to the present.

In the ‘modern’, more conventional camp are historians who have been influenced mainly by the Marxist and French Annales school and who try to defend the distinction between theory and socio-historical reality. In the ‘postmodern’ camp are younger historians influenced by the linguistic, post-positivist turn in the humanities, who reject the above distinction as essentialist and therefore misleading. To quote from an author who defends the anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist position:

‘What has almost always been ignored is the textual nature of history; the fact that our past is known to us via texts – texts which are mediated by the position of the informant, by his hopes, strategies, illusions etc. which intrude in the texts he leaves us as energetically as the social context within which he lives. It would have been desirable to have in front of us the ‘real history’ in order to compare it with the more or less exact representations which historiography offers us’ but, he goes on to argue, such a comparison is not possible. (Exertzoglou, 2002)

The above anti-representation thesis is criticized by a ‘modern’ historian who argues that

‘Social history [for the postmodern historian – NM] is nothing but an ensemble of symbolic constructions which are embodied in texts...Therefore whatever refers to the past only exists

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<sup>8</sup> For a development and critique of this position, see Mouzelis 1995 : 48-69.

within interpretations/narratives... The battle of Athens however [the civil-war confrontation in Dec. 1944 – NM] is not the narratives and historical accounts of it.' (Theotokas 2002: 35)

Another Marxist-oriented historian strongly supports the above critique by arguing that

'What is missing [from the postmodern perspective – NM] is the historian's double approach: to the actual beings and to the thoughts about the actual beings. These are two different levels and if one does not study them together, one misses completely the sense of historicity and temporality.' (Eliou 2002: 426)

The postmodernist retort to the above modernist position points out that it is essentialist and therefore unacceptable to distinguish between 'real beings' and 'theories about them', given that both levels (that of theory and that of empirical reality) rest on interpretations and refer to symbolic constructs. In fact there are not two levels at all but only one, that of texts and intertextuality (Exertzoglou 2002).

This debate concerning historiography is not exactly the same as similar debates in the social sciences, but what they have in common is the issue about representation: the question of to what extent the distinction between theory (social and historical) and social reality (present or past) is or is not legitimate. If the answer is affirmative, then it is possible, via the conventional procedures of empirical proof (guided of course by the researcher's theoretical concerns) to decide about the validity or non-validity of competing theoretical interpretations. If the distinction is rejected, we end up with the idea of equivalent (i.e. equally valid) narratives, and we are confronted by the relativist impasse.

## **B) Avoiding Relativism and Essentialism**

The conventional distinction between theory and social reality does have essentialist connotations in that it implies that, of the two, social reality is somehow less symbolic, less theoretical and that theory is less real, less material. The way to avoid relativism, while seriously taking into account the postmodern objection to the distinction between theory and social reality, is to maintain the two-level distinction but to conceptualize it in terms of *first- and second-order symbolic constructs*. First-order symbolic constructs (I-sc) can be conceptualized as entailing the taken-for-granted discursive and non-discursive practices of laypersons whose orientations to institutionalized rules or norms are predominantly (although not exclusively) *practical* in nature. Second-order symbolic constructs (II-sc) refer to practices of actors whose orientations to rules are predominantly *theoretical*. To use Giddens' terminology, in I-sc interpretations, laypersons orient themselves to rules and resources in terms of the 'duality-of-structure' mode – i.e. in terms of a taken-for-granted manner, a matter-of-course routine; whereas in the case of II-sc, actors as 'specialists' orient themselves to rules and resources in terms of the *dualism* mode: they distance themselves from these rules and resources in order to study or explain them (Giddens, 1984: 25–29).<sup>9</sup>

If this is accepted, and again taking the private-property example, two levels can be distinguished in terms of symbolic constructs. First order symbolic constructs (I-sc) refer to

<sup>9</sup> For a critical assessment of the duality/dualism distinction in Giddens see Mouzelis 1989. Giddens, dismisses actor structure dualism and focuses exclusively on actor-structure duality.

the everyday, routine practices of laypersons which contribute to the reproduction of property institutions; whereas second order symbolic constructs (II-sc) refer to the practices of theorists or ‘specialists’ who formulate theories and write books about property institutions. Or, to revert to another example mentioned previously, it is possible to distinguish the ‘battle of Athens’ in Dec. 1944, which entailed the first-order discursive and non-discursive practices of the combatants whose orientations was predominantly practical (i.e. to attack their enemies and achieve victory), from the second-order practices of historians who take distance from these events in order to describe and explain them. In the first case the predominant<sup>10</sup> mode of orientation is that of duality, whereas in the latter is that of dualism.

What this means is that, if we replace the quasi-essentialist distinction between social theory and social reality with the non-essentialist one between first- and second-order symbolic constructs, we avoid the relativistic trap of ‘equivalent narratives’ while emphasizing that both levels entail symbols/theories/interpretations. This being so, historians and social researchers can, on the basis of their theoretical concerns, draw on empirical material linked to I-sc (e.g. statistics, personal diaries, documents produced in the taken-for-granted mode of duality etc.) to assess the validity of their theories (II-sc). In this way the basic logic of the scientific enquiry remains the same (i.e. competing theories can be assessed both for their theoretical consistency and their empirical validity), while at the same time showing that on both levels we are dealing with symbolic constructs.

### 3. THE ‘INTERNALITY’ OF A DISCIPLINE’S SUBJECT MATTER

If the previously discussed route to relativism was via an anti-essentialist critique of the distinction between theory and social reality, a different route rejects that distinction on epistemological rather **than** ontological grounds. The basic postmodern argument here is that the research object or the subject matter of a social-science discipline is not as external to the theory as conventional social scientists assume. Postmodern theorists stressing ‘internality’ have in mind not merely the anti-empiricist argument that it is the theoretical concerns of the researcher that determine what is a relevant fact or how a theory is to be verified; neither do they refer to the well-known theme in the sociology of knowledge that there is a dialectical relationship between a theory and ‘social reality’ – in the sense that the former has an impact on the latter and vice-versa. What they do mean by ‘internality’ is that the subject matter of humanistic disciplines is (at least partly) constituted by discourses emanating from the very disciplines that are supposed to study it. Since a theory does not merely explain a research object external to itself, and given that in fundamental ways the theory *constitutes* its subject matter, there can be no distinction between a theory (II-sc) and its subject matter (I-sc). In that case it is impossible to use empirical data derived from I-sc for the purpose of validating or invalidating II-sc.

Consider criminology for instance. The subject matter of deviance is not external to the discipline in the way that the planets are external to astronomy. For Foucault, for instance, the subject matter of criminology has been constructed, at least partially, by the discursive and

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<sup>10</sup> I emphasize the term ‘predominant’ because all social practices involve both the duality and the dualism mode of orientation. For instance, as ethnomethodologists point out, even in taken-for-granted routinized conduct (duality mode) there is always a minimum degree of reflexivity (dualism). See on this Mouzelis 1989.

non-discursive practices of specialists (criminologists, psychiatrists, social workers) who have created the ‘subjectivity’ of the delinquent. They have also created the distinction between the normal and the deviant – reifying along the way the phenomena to which the above distinction refers (Foucault 1975b: 206-16). This means that criminology as a discipline studies a subject matter it has to a large extent created itself. Or to put it differently: the discourses and practices of criminologists do not merely affect or regulate deviance, but in fundamental ways create and constitute the phenomenon under investigation. In view of this inextricable linkage between a discipline and its subject matter, the two-level distinction (II-sc and I-sc) cannot be maintained and, once again, cognitive relativism cannot be avoided.

### **A) On the Construction of a Discipline’s Subject Matter**

The first point to be made about Foucault’s ‘internality’ argument is that the problem is more acute in certain disciplines (e.g. psychiatry, psychoanalysis, criminology) than in others (e.g. history, macrosociology).

Starting with historical disciplines, theories and interpretations (II-sc) about past events can influence the ways historians interpret them, but cannot affect the past events themselves (I-sc). To be more specific, the accounts by historians (II-sc) of the battle of Athens which took place roughly 60 years ago can have no impact on what happened during that confrontation. There is, of course, the problem of past theories (II-sc) implicated in past events (I-sc). For instance, the strategy and tactics of the two opponents in the battle of Athens were to some extent influenced by cold-war ideologies, communist and anti-communist. But this does not present additional problems for an anti-relativist historian. Current historical interpretations of the battle of Athens can and must be assessed by drawing empirical evidence from *past* first-order and *past* second-order symbolic constructs. (Past I-sc might refer, for instance, to evidence drawn from participant’s diaries, whereas past II-sc might refer to theories concerning the intensity of the communist and anti-communist ideologies during the civil-war period). In other words, a present-day historian can avoid relativism and decide that, on the basis of empirical material drawn from past first- and second-order symbolic constructs, interpretation A of the battle of Athens is cognitively more powerful than interpretation B.

If in the case of historical events the impact of second-order symbolic constructs on past events is nil, for the study of present macrodevelopments it is minimal. For example, while a theory postulating growing inequalities within and between nation-states in the context of present-day neo-liberal globalization may be true, false, or partially true; its findings are not invalidated by the fact that the theory (as II-sc) has an impact on its object of study, i.e. on the actual inequalities (I-sc). In other words, in most cases the impact of social theories as II-sc on ‘social reality’ (I-sc) is not as profound as Foucault would imply. The problem remains of course for the kind of disciplines Foucault deals with (criminology for instance). Here a closer look at how the French philosopher conceptualizes the links between first- and second-order symbolic constructs can give us some clues on how to avoid the relativist trap his arguments lead to.

In his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) Foucault clearly distinguishes the discursive level (with its various ‘scientific’ as well as moral, philosophical, legal discourses) from the non-discursive one which refers to an amalgam of elements such as institutions, techniques of



regulation/surveillance, administrative measures, architectural forms etc. (It is obvious here that by the non-discursive Foucault does not mean not discursively constructed. He simply means *extra-scientific, extra-disciplinary*)<sup>11</sup>. Concerning the links between them, however, there is much ambiguity in Foucault's 'archaeologically' oriented writings. In some parts of his work he gives priority to the discursive level, since discourses (the *archive* as a corpus of 'discursive formations') not only give unity to the disparate elements of the 'extra-scientific', non-discursive/institutional level, but also constitute a given field of knowledge (Foucault 1972: 130); for, as already mentioned, a field of knowledge is not prior to the subject matter it explores. .

In other parts of his work, however, Foucault attenuates or even denies the primacy of the discursive level. For example, when discussing the principles that determine the formation of objects within a discursive formation, he distinguishes not two but three levels of analysis:

- the *discursive level proper*, which refers to disciplines such as psychiatry;
- the level of *secondary relations* formulated within the discourse itself, but entailing what psychiatrists think not so much about matters of their discipline proper, but about (for instance) the linkage between family and criminality;
- the level of *primary relations* which, independently of all discourse or all objects of discourse entail linkages between institutions, techniques, social forms, etc.<sup>12</sup>

So here the non-discursive level (first order symbolic constructs in our terminology) acquires considerable autonomy, since the distinction between primary and secondary relations implies that the institutional or power context within which social-science discourses are embedded plays a crucial role in their construction.

Such ambiguity concerning the issue of primacy disappears in Foucault's subsequent, 'genealogical' phase. At that stage there is a fusion of the discursive (II-sc) and the non-discursive (I-sc) levels. In his power/knowledge concept (Foucault 1980), power connotes knowledge and knowledge power. In the '*dispositif*' or discursive apparatus, discursive and non-discursive elements are linked in such a way that the problematic of primacy or determination disappears. The power/knowledge notion does not merely postulate a dialectical relationship between power and knowledge in the conventional way in which Weber, for instance, conceptualized the tension between the expert and the dilettante politician (who, because of lack of specialized knowledge, becomes the passive tool of a hierarchical inferior – Gerth and Mills 1961: 91 ff). Power/knowledge for Foucault denotes a situation where the knower, the specialist, derives power not only from his/her expertise, but *also and primarily* because the discourses of his/her discipline partly constitute the field or subject matter to be studied. It is because of their deep interconnection that no distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive, between knowledge and power, can be established – not even analytically.

This fusion leads to relativism since (as mentioned earlier) it is no longer possible to use empirical material (I-sc) from the non-disciplinary level in order to cognitively assess second-

<sup>11</sup> In a way referring to institutions as non-discursive implies a certain degree of essentialism, given that institutions are symbolically constructed and therefore entail laypersons' first-order discourses. The distinction between I-sc and II-sc which I propose eliminates this kind of confusion.

<sup>12</sup> See McNay 1994:72.

order discourses or theories (II-sc). So two competing theories on mental disorders, for instance, cannot be empirically assessed by reference to a subject's symptoms.

This is precisely why, for Foucault, the reason for studying humanistic disciplines is not to establish how true or false they are, but to be able to spell out their power consequences, their 'material effects on docile bodies'. Once the representation principle is rejected (a principle incorporating the clear distinction between first- and second-order symbolic constructs), the criterion of truth/falsity in the assessment of competing theories is replaced by that of power/subjugation.

## **B) In Defense of the Distinction between First- and Second-order Symbolic Constructs**

The fusion between the discursive (II-sc) and the non-discursive (I-sc) in Foucault's genealogical phase is unwarranted. This is so for two main reasons. First of all, what Foucault calls 'object of knowledge' (the field or subject matter that a discipline is investigating) is not shaped only by practices derived from the discipline itself. It is also shaped by practices emanating from a variety of sources – some of these generating effects that contradict those resulting from the discipline proper. Consider for example the 'subjectivity' of the delinquent, a central object of investigation in criminology. This object is only partly constructed by the discursive practices of criminologists and of practitioners in neighbouring fields (e.g. psychologists, psychiatrists). It is also formed by discourses from the areas of literature, the theatre, films, underground subcultures, working-class organizations, left-wing parties etc.

This being the case, the total fusion between a discipline such as criminology with one of its major objects of investigation is misleading. It becomes even more so when we take into account the fact that within the very discipline there are conflicting paradigms, not all of which have 'subjugating' effects on 'docile bodies'. Again with criminology as an example, there are fundamental differences between a positivistic approach which constructs the normal/deviant distinction unproblematically and which, in essentialist manner, establishes correlations between crime rates and other variables (such as poverty, ethnicity etc.); and a more interactionist, interpretatively oriented approach that leads the researcher to focus on deviant subcultures (Cohen, A. 1955, 1966) or on the labelling process (Becker 1974). Both of these approaches are different from a neo-Marxist conceptual framework that links deviance to class exploitation/domination (Chambliss and Mankoff 1976).

If this is properly taken into account, then Foucault's rather crude, one-dimensional, monolithic manner of linking social-science knowledge with domination/subjugation is misleading. This is accepted, at least indirectly, by the French philosopher himself when, in his late-late work (Foucault 1976, 1984, 1986) he began to speak of not only practices of subjugation, not only of 'docile bodies', but also of 'practices of freedom' and of subjects who can react reflexively *vis-à-vis* the self and the other. In view of all this, there can be no fusion of the levels of knowledge (II-sc) and of power/domination (I-sc); that means that there is the possibility of avoiding relativism: two competing theories (on the level of II-sc), both dealing with the same issue, can be empirically assessed not only in terms of power but also in terms of truth. One can, in the light of the theoretical problematic at hand, use 'empirical data' derived from first-order symbolic constructs for the purpose of deciding which of the two theories or 'narratives' is cognitively more valid.

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## CONCLUSION

A. Postmodern theories rightly argue that objectivity in the positivistic sense of the term – that is, as the absence of conceptual and evaluative intermediations between researcher and research object – does not and can never exist. Moreover, postmodern theorists, following a long anti-empiricist tradition, rightly argue that theory is not an aggregate result of data collection or statistical measurements. They also rightly argue that it is the researcher's theoretical problematic that indicates what is and what is not 'empirical fact' and more generally how a theory can be empirically verified.

This anti-empiricist stance must not, however, be allowed to lead to the total rejection of the process of empirical verification, a process that is based on the notion of objectivity as a self-disciplinary practice which, as Weber and Elias have pointed out, leads to a kind of 'detachment'; this detachment, in cases where there is a clash between values or conceptual tools on the one hand and empirical findings on the other, helps the researcher to avoid manipulating the empirical data to make them fit his/her conceptual and evaluative predilections. In fact, objectivity in the non-positivistic sense is what distinguishes a non-ideological from a purely ideological discourse within which data-manipulation to fit value preferences is automatic.

B. Turning to a less conventional issue, postmodern theories correctly emphasize that social phenomena are symbolic constructions, and that interpretations/theorisations are not the exclusive privilege of historians or social scientists. We see them in the interactive processes that result in the construction of everyday life – processes in which all social members are necessarily involved.

This should not, however, lead to the relativist claim that there is no theoretical and/or empirical way of comparing and assessing competing theories or 'narratives'. Comparison and assessment are desirable as well as feasible if one examines which second-order narrative is closer to first-order symbolic constructs, i.e. to what we usually call 'social reality'. Social reality, although symbolically constructed, and although to some extent affected by second-order theories trying to explain it, should not be conflated with these theories. Maintaining the distinction between first- and second-order discourses allows us to assess in relatively objective manner conflicting second-order narratives. In other words, the logic of empirical verification remains the same when we replace the quasi-essentialist 'reality/theory' distinction with the non-essentialist distinction of 'first-order/second-order symbolic constructions'.

C. Finally, the fact that the object or subject matter of a discipline is not external to it need not lead to relativism if we remember (i) that discourses outside the discipline can also have an impact on the construction of its subject matter, and (ii) that a social-science discipline contains a plurality of often conflicting paradigms. It is precisely the plurality and contradictory character of extra- and intra-disciplinary discourses that invalidates the fusion between knowledge and power; between second- and first-order symbolic constructs that Foucault's genealogy attempts to establish. Rejecting such a conflation of the two levels enables us to draw material from the level of first-order symbolic constructs for the purpose of examining the empirical validity of second-order discourses. It becomes possible, in other words, to assess competing theories or 'narratives' not only in terms of criteria power and/or aesthetics, but also in those of truth.

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