1. The Nature/Culture Distinction in the Explanation-Understanding Controversy

The social sciences are a child of modernity. The underlying concepts which still guide sociological research today emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thinkers such as Marx ([1867] 1990), Durkheim ([1893] 2013), Simmel ([1908] 2009a; [1908] 2009b), Weber ([1904] 2012b), and Mead (1925) theorized the concepts of society, action/social action, interaction, and other basic concepts of sociology. While a more precise historical study of social science concepts dates their emergence approximately one hundred years earlier, i.e., to around 1800 (Heilbronn, Magnusson and Wittrock 1998; Luhmann [1980] 2004; [1981] 1993; [1989] 1993; [1995] 2004), this has little bearing on my initial observation. The only point of contention is whether we should, following Foucault ([1966] 2002), assume an abrupt break between epistemes, or rather a conceptual transformation during a "saddle period" (Kosellek; Vierhaus) between 1750 and 1850, with the roots of the semantic changes culminating in this period traceable as far back as the seventeenth century (Magnusson 1998). In any case, the underlying assumptions of the social sciences—their conceptual apparatus—are an integral component of an order of knowledge that solidified in the nineteenth century and that distinguishes between two different categories of science: the social sciences and the humanities on the one hand, and the natural sciences on the other, along with their areas of study, culture and nature.

1.1 Introduction to the discursive context

In the second half of the nineteenth century, humanities [*Geisteswissenschaften* or *Kulturwissenschaften*] and social science scholars began to ask questions about the foundation of their specific epistemological approach to the world. The resulting discussion has come to be known as the explanation-understanding [*erklären-verstehen*] controversy. Apel ([1979] 1984) identifies three phases of this debate. The first was dominated by an engagement with Kant's transcendental philosophy. The question was whether and in what sense the critico-epistemological justification of physical natural science, which Kant, as was generally accepted, had achieved in

his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant [1787] 2007), should hold for all sciences. More precisely: should the epistemological justification of science hold not only for the natural sciences but also for research in the historical humanities emerging in the nineteenth century, and by extension also for sociology? Dilthey argued that the subject matter of the (social sciences and) the humanities required a different approach in principle, as these fields were concerned not merely with objects, but with subjects able to express themselves. The humanities in this view were faced with an expressive context created by human subjects. There is a marked difference here, Dilthey argued, to the understanding the natural sciences have of their objects. In the humanities, the objects being studied are themselves subjects, able to independently establish an expressively shaped "nexus of life" (Dilthey) among themselves. Rather than scientists bringing a meaningful nexus to the objects in the form of an expectation of lawfulness, this nexus exists there of its own accord, created by the subjects themselves. Simmel put forward this same argument and used it to justify the autonomy of the a priori assumptions underlying sociological research (Simmel [1908] 2009a:41f). Max Weber ([1904] 2012a; [1904] 2012b), by way of Rickert ([1898] 1962), also belongs to this tradition.

The second phase of the explanation-understanding discussion centered on Hempel and Oppenheim's deductive-nomological model (1948; Hempel [1959] 1968). Here too the question was whether the model should apply universally or whether it should exclude—or only apply in a very restricted way to—the social sciences. In the third phase, the claim to universality of the deductive-nomological model was disputed from the perspective of analytical philosophy. Following Wittgenstein ([1953] 2001), explaining and understanding were understood in this view as different language games. Important thinkers in this phase were Winch ([1958] 2008), Wright ([1971] 2009), and Apel ([1979] 1984) himself (see also Apel, Manninen and Tuomela 1978).

All three phases of the explanation-understanding controversy were centered on whether, or how, the "understanding" method can be used to justify an independent epistemological approach to the world that follows a fundamentally different rationality than explanation, which is guided by universal laws. For the purposes of my argument, the difference between these approaches can be summarized as follows: to *explain* is to construct a meaningful connection, such as a causal relationship. The observer studies external phenomena and determines whether the observed elements behave the way she postulated they would. She controls the situation by designing experiments, creating technical/material experimental setups that

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touch off an event or a sequence of events. The researcher can then verify whether the events touched off by the experiment correspond to her starting assumption. Given that the implementation of the experiment constitutes a practical encroachment into the field being studied and thus has an effect on the way events there unfold, this verification process may include a reflexive turn toward the observer herself. Her role and that of the experimental design must be taken into consideration when assessing the limits of the validity of experimental statements.[14]

Other assumptions guide research in the case of *understanding*. Here researchers encounter actors who appear as other I's giving expression to their inner being, understanding each other, and forming an ordered expressive context. In the earlier conceptions of understanding, the emphasis was placed on the researcher/historian understanding other individuals. Even theorists as early as Dilthey ([1900] 1996) and Misch ([1931] 1967), however, as well as later interpretive sociologists, place the emphasis elsewhere: on actors in the field understanding each other and on their interactions generating rules that regulate how they do so. Rather than focusing on understanding individuals in their individuality, the analysis seeks to understand the rules that govern the nexus of these individuals' actions, their interaction, or their communication. To understand in this view, then, is to meaningfully reconstruct the rules governing the way in which actors understand each other in the field.[15]

Concentrating on the distinction between explaining and understanding also entails focusing on the distinction between nature and culture as two discrete subject areas requiring two different epistemological approaches. The explanation-understanding controversy is thus also implicitly a debate about the relationship between two subject areas and about whether the distinction between nature and culture is universally valid, including the question of what objects are appropriate for the understanding approach. In other words: whom, or what objects, is it appropriate to un-

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14 This understanding of explanation is based on Wright's analysis of experimental action ([1971] 2009).

15 See Apel ([1979] 1984:11f) on this point, and, in the sociological context, Simmel ([1908] 2009a:41f), as well as Schütz's distinction between first and second-order constructions. Luhmann's concept of interpretation and his understanding of communication are also based on an abstract, formal concept of understanding. An example from recent qualitative social research is Amann and Hirschauer (1997:19ff), who call for ethnographic research to be grounded as much as possible in the systematicity of the field.

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derstand? For what entities or objects is an explanatory approach more appropriate?

These aspects implicit in the explanation-understanding controversy have come into focus more sharply since the 1980s. One key reason is that work being done in empirical science and technology studies has made clear that nature and culture should not be understood as two ontologically distinct domains (Latour [1991] 1993). In terms of methodology, the most pressing question was how far understanding could reach: does the sphere of those communicating something contain only living humans or do other entities belong here as well? Do all beings we can seek to understand belong to the domain of culture, or do we need new conceptualizations of understanding that subvert the nature/culture distinction? Extending Apel's list, we can refer to this as the fourth phase of the explanation-understanding controversy.

The first three phases are characterized by a focus on more narrow methodological questions of how to approach the world, while in the fourth, the question of the emergence of social order arises. Here, asking how far understanding can reach is treated as the question of an entity's status as actor. The question, then, is: when analyzing the formation of social order, what entities have to be taken into account as understanding co-actors?

The close connection between methodological approach and the question of order is obvious. Is a particular entity one whose actions we must seek to understand or should we be explaining its movements mechanically? Is this a distinction that can easily and clearly be made in every situation? Are there uncertain cases and if so, how are they treated in social life? Should actions even be attributed to individual actors, or should we not rather think in terms of individual actors and technical artifacts making differently structured contributions to comprehensive actions? Questions such as these have been debated by theorists of science and technology since the 1980s (Latour [1991] 1993; Linde 1982; Rammert 2016). In dialogue with ethnology (Viveiros de Castro 1998), the question of actor status came to be formulated in a more general way: what entities should be considered personal actors in processes bringing forth societal-cultural ordering systems? Should only living humans be considered personal agents of these processes or should other entities be included as well?

The explanation-understanding controversy took a new turn with the introduction of the question of order, bringing to center stage an aspect that had thus far been merely implicit in the discussion. The question of how far understanding can reach had already been present in the first phase of

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the controversy: it was treated by Wundt ([1897] 1969:283–95), by Scheler in his analysis of interpersonal understanding ([1923] 2008), as well as by Plessner in his concept of the shared world (Plessner [1928] 2019). It was, however, forgotten in the second and third phases. The debates surrounding the deductive-nomological model, the new dualism, and the notion that explaining and understanding are two different language games left aside the questions of order and of what entities can be understood.

1.2 The expanded problem of order

The problem of order implicit in the explanation-understanding controversy, i.e., the question of how far understanding can reach and hence the question of the borders of the social world, has not been seen as a problem of general significance in the social sciences or the humanities. In mainstream social science there is a marked resistance to even asking the question.

Referring to the "problem of order" is in fact ambiguous given that the "Hobbesian problem of order" has been entrenched in the social sciences at least since Parsons ([1937] 1968a; [1937] 1968b) and can indeed be considered *the* problem with which the social sciences are concerned. It becomes imperative, then, to clarify the difference between the problem of order long implicit in the explanation-understanding controversy and the Hobbesian problem of the possibility of social order. I do so in the following in view of anthropological assumptions, which allows me to work out the significance of problematizing the sphere of actors in societal processes.

The Hobbesian problem of the establishment of social order arises when human beings are released from given bonds without being confronted by an overarching power. The assumption that there is no overarching power that can be taken as a given must also hold from an analytical perspective. This, however, raises the question of how human beings can independently create a valid ordering system that allows them to calculate the actions with which they relate to each other (Wagner 1998). Identifying the problem in this way is a hallmark of the upheavals that ushered in modernity in Europe, and is framed differently depending on whether it is understood in terms of decision, action, interaction, or communication theory. Each of these models operates with different anthropological assumptions.

The last three centuries have shown a trend toward thinning out the positive content of anthropological assumptions. The social contract theo-

ries of such thinkers as Hobbes ([1651] 2012), Locke ([1689] 2012), and Rousseau ([1762] 2002), as well as the early works of classical economics (Smith [1776] 2008) contain relatively strong anthropological assumptions. This tradition of positive anthropological assumptions continues today primarily in rational choice theories, which abstractly posit human drives in order to conduct methodologically controlled research on human behavior (Menger [1883] 2009) or which make anthropological assumptions based on evolutionary theory (Esser 1993, 2006).[16] Other approaches refrain from making positive anthropological assumptions, instead conceiving of the human as a kind of tabula rasa. Concrete empirical analyses are conducted in order to work out how the drive structure is formed by societal processes. Studies by, e.g., Marx ([1844] 2007; [1857–58] 1993), Durkheim ([1912] 2008), and Weber ([1904–1905] 2010; [1904–1920] 2009; [1915] 1968) go in this direction. Ultimately, this view of the human leads to an almost complete eschewal of positive anthropological assumptions, which come to be replaced by anthropological universals or the "human condition." In philosophical anthropology, this condition is described as "world-openness" [*Weltoffenheit*] (Gehlen [1940] 1988; Plessner [1928] 2019).

While social contract theories presuppose humans in a "state of nature" with particular behavioral options, the theory of world-openness starts from the indeterminacy of human behavior, from the idea that it is the nature of the human to be indeterminate. It is because of this indeterminacy that human beings have to artificially create their own drive structure with the help of societal contrivances such as institutions (Gehlen [1956] 2016) or the generalized other (Mead [1934] 2009) in order to artificially establish a natural relationship to their environment (Plessner [1928] 2019). According to this view, human beings do not live in an environment natural to them but in an artificially created reality.[17]

It is evident that this position permits neither a positive determination of human nature nor of human relationships to their environment. The "human condition" rather dictates that the human has to create herself. In philosophical anthropology, the notion of the human condition is elaborated in direct dialogue with research in comparative cultural sociology,

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16 It is debatable whether Coleman ([1990] 2000) is closer to the methodologically justified anthropological assumptions of Menger or to Esser's positing of evolved anthropological characteristics.

17 On the close connections between pragmatism (Dewey, Mead) and philosophical anthropology (Scheler, Gehlen, Plessner), see Krüger (2001).

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ethnology, and history (Gehlen [1940] 1988; [1956] 2016).[18] The human appears here as a historical being in a twofold sense: the historical changes in humans' relationships to their environment also comprise variability in the way they interpret themselves.[19]

Although anthropological assumptions inform the theoretical foundations of the social sciences, there has been next to no explicit discussion of anthropological questions in sociological discourse.[20] However, current research in the social sciences either implicitly or explicitly starts from the assumption that human nature is not fixed, but is rather generated by historical, societal practices. An example of an explicit alignment with philosophical anthropology is Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge ([1966] 1991). The authors treat Gehlen's categories of "world-openness" and "instinct reduction" as founding assumptions regarding human nature, based upon which they develop specific sociological categories. In his early works, Luhmann too makes affirmative use of philosophical anthropology's concept of world-openness (Luhmann [1967] 2005:166f) and explicitly bases his argument of the necessity of complexity reduction on anthropological claims (Luhmann [1967] 2005:147). The structure of this argument remains the same even after his autopoietic turn (Luhmann [1984] 2005).

There is a conceptual analogy to this in Mead as well ([1934] 2009). As Habermas has shown ([1981] 2007b:chap. 5, 1), the development of symbolically mediated communication leads to an invalidation of natural drives, which become societally and symbolically defined. This corresponds in substance to the notion of world-openness. Rational choice theories have also brought forth an analogy to world-openness: the interpretative version of the theory (Esser 1993; see also Greshoff 2006) assumes that the relevant preferences guiding behavior are culturally determined. And yet utility maximization remains an essential anthropological assumption

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18 I cite philosophical anthropology here as an example. Other writers, such as Sartre ([1960] 2004) or Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2012), take a different approach to empirical research, on the basis of which they too, however, formulate anthropological statements.

19 For Kamper (1973:22ff), it follows from this that anthropology must reflect on its own attempts to develop a concept of the human and accordingly work out the impossibility of such a concept.

20 This, as noted above, does not mean that anthropological assumptions do not play a part in this discourse. Thus Honneth and Joas ([1980] 1988) have shown the ways in which anthropological assumptions shape theories of society.

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even for Esser. In the end, the knowledge acquired by understanding has to be integrated here into the algorithm of utility maximization.

To summarize:

Thus far, the main problem of reference for the social sciences has been the incalculability in the relationships between human actors. This incalculability is a result of human world-openness, which in turn is the reason humans' relationships to their environment have to be given an artificial, symbolically mediated form. It is on this basis that social science can analyze the possibilities of societal order formation. Here it is assumed that there is a consensus on what entities are faced with the problem of world-openness: the social is a human affair, and there is thus no need to expressly ask what actors are included in order formation.

The formation of social ordering systems under conditions of world-openness constitutes the traditional problem of reference for the social sciences. Radical shifts in perspective on this problem have meant that stabilizing anthropological assumptions as held by early social contract theories and some of the current theories of rational choice have been increasingly replaced by the notion of the human condition and the world-openness it implies. One fundamental definition regarding the social dimension of order formation has been preserved, however: only living human beings can be considered personal actors.

The question of the boundaries of the sphere of personal actors takes up this radical shift and goes a step further, fastening its attention on the processes that determine where the boundaries between social persons and other entities are drawn. This amounts to an expanded notion of world-openness, in that it can no longer be certain who belongs to the category of personal agent of a structured approach to the world. In the following I will therefore distinguish between basic and expanded world-openness.

World-openness and order formation are intimately linked, as order formation is conceived in relation to the contingencies arising from world-openness. In analogy to the distinction between basic and expanded world-openness, I differentiate between the basic and the expanded problem of reference in relation to order formation. The basic problem of reference in relation to order formation corresponds to what Parsons identified as the Hobbesian problem of the emergence of social order. Asking about the personal agents of societal ordering systems fundamentally expands the problem of reference in the social sciences, forcing us to generalize the problem of order. The modern notion that only human beings ought to be universally recognized as legitimate persons is constitutively tied to an approach to the world that is structured by the nature/culture distinction

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(Descola [2005] 2013). This approach depersonalizes non-human nature as well as splits the human himself into a natural and a personal component. The natural sciences treat the non-personal part as an object of study, while the personal part is seen as the creative source of a highly diverse range of cultures. Positing as contingent the sphere of personal actors in an ordering system automatically makes the nature/culture distinction contingent as well. It is a distinction that denotes the structure of a historically situated approach to the world that cannot be universalized. A general social theory, therefore, must allow for an analysis of the nature/culture distinction as such. Rather than presupposing it, this distinction should be rendered intelligible as one possible way of ordering the world among others.

   It follows that sociological approaches concerned with the agents of societal ordering systems must be able to suggest ways of reflexively holding the nature/culture distinction at arm's length. Determining the boundaries of the sphere of social persons is not only constitutively connected to the ordering of the social world, but also to the substantive and spatiotemporal ordering of phenomena which these social persons may encounter. A social theory that allows for a comprehensive analysis of order formation cannot limit itself to the order of the social, of the social dimension, but must conceive of order formation in a pluridimensional way. As I will show in the following chapters, an analysis of order formation must also include the symbolic as well as the substantive, spatial, and temporal dimensions.