Prologue

A Third Path leads beyond modern and postmodern methodological debates in the social sciences, history, and the humanities. It turns out that choices between the routes of science and interpretation, history and theory, objectivism and relativism are more illusory than real. Even radically opposed methodologies for creating knowledge are only relatively autonomous of one another.

These are not conclusions I set out to reach when I first envisioned this book in the late 1980s. I began with an interest in bringing epistemology – the study of knowledge – into stronger relation with questions about the diverse styles of actual research. I wanted to explore the alternative cultural logics of what I will call "sociohistorical inquiry" – encompassing historical investigations, interpretive analyses, field research, and quantitative studies. The idea for how to do so came as I was completing a book on Jim Jones's Peoples Temple, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (Hall 1987). Reflecting on the methodological rationale of that study, I began to think more broadly about the relationships between what I call "forms of discourse" and "methodological practices of inquiry."

The more I read exemplars and the more I combed epistemological and methodological writings, the more I became convinced that virtually all kinds of inquiry about the social world are amalgams that combine the resources of four different kinds of discourse – value discourse, narrative, social theory, and explanation/interpretation. But despite my sense that these formative discourses are nearly ubiquitous, it became equally obvious that not all research combines the four discourses in the same way. For instance, one researcher may try to keep value judgments completely separate from research, whereas another's value stance entirely permeates empirical analysis. Differentials like this one suggested that I might be able to identify the cultural logics of methodological practices if I could identify various ways in which such practices thread together the four forms of discourse. Exploring the relations of discourses to alternative practices, and of alternative practices to one

another, might also reveal something about the overall domain of sociohistorical inquiry. In turn, understanding this overall domain might improve our local practices and sharpen our communication across divergent methodologies. Pursuing these possibilities is the project of the present book.

Chapter 1 introduces the project by describing my approach, which shifts away from considering knowledge as a purely philosophical problem of epistemology toward a broadly Weberian method of "hermeneutic deconstruction" that I use to analyze forms of discourse and practices of inquiry. Readers more interested in the results of this analysis than its rationale may read the book in other ways than beginning with chapter 1.

Each chapter in Part I takes up one of the four *forms of discourse* that I argue collectively structure practices of inquiry. These chapters develop sequentially. However, each formative discourse can reasonably serve as a point of departure in actual inquiry, and, in this light, each chapter on a form of discourse is relatively self-contained, so that it is possible to read selectively. For each form of discourse, I show that inquiry today confronts both legacies of historical development and characteristic philosophical, theoretical, and rhetorical problems which researchers address in conventional (or sometimes innovative) ways. Chapter 2 traces how discourse on *values* frames research projects and, in turn, how inquiry claims to offer knowledge of value about the sociohistorical world. Whatever the claims for inquiry within any particular resolution of the value problem, the chapter shows that a diversity of viable yet mutually contradictory value bases of inquiry coexist. Chapter 3 makes the case that *narrative* discourse is equally contested, but in different ways. It considers two broad problems: first, the question of how structural characteristics of narrative discourse shape both inquiry and life more generally; and, second, the issue of how narrative can be used as a methodology for research. Methodologically, the chapter differentiates between narratives that are established "intrinsically" – in the meaningful actions of people *prior* to inquiry's narration, versus "extrinsic" narratives that obtain their coherence in ways that are decisively based on the *ex post facto* activities of inquiry itself. In turn, chapter 4 develops a "theory of theorization." In the strong sense of the term, discourses of *social theory* involve efforts to make sense of sociohistorical phenomena on one or another *general* basis. Thus defined, any theory depends on some strategy of concept formation. Here, just as there are diverse plausible approaches to value discourse and narrative, theoretical discourse can conceptualize sociohistorical phenomena in multiple viable ways that cut across one another.

Some readers will want to interject that none of these discourses is really autonomous from the others. This is certainly my view as well. Therefore, in *codas* following chapters 2, 3, and 4, I explore how value discourse, narrative, and social theory lay certain claims on the fourth form of discourse – *explanation and interpretation*. Divergent resolutions of the value problem yield manifold projects in which explanation or interpretation might operate. Furthermore, both narratives and theories can yield explanations and interpretations in their own terms. However, "partialling out" valuational, narrative, and social theoretical claims still leaves a "core" discourse of explanation and interpretation, which I consider in terms of its own problematics in chapter 5. For this discourse, precisely the concern of scientists to differentiate explanation from "softer" approaches such as interpretation suggests a broad and contested terrain. In the most general sense, its discourse is concerned with *accounting* for sociohistorical phenomena and *adjudicating* among competing accounts.

Overall, examining the four formative discourses demonstrates that any given one of them reaches limits beyond which its problematics become articulated with other forms of discourse – values in relation to explanation, theory as an axis of narrative, narrative as explanation, and so forth. My central thesis is that sociohistorical research cannot be carried out wholly within the unalloyed logic of a single, "pure" formative discourse. To the contrary, actual inquiries depend on *hybrid* practices that involve extra-logical mediations among *different* formative discourses employed *in relation to one another*. That is, any given inquiry draws together value discourse, narrative, social theory, and explanation or interpretation. Thus, it should be possible to identify alternative methodological practices of inquiry as discursive hybrids that articulate relationships *among* formative discourses.

Pursuing this thesis, the chapters of Part II examine how the four formative discourses become drawn together in eight methodological *practices of inquiry*, which I elaborate by examining diverse historically oriented research studies. Chapter 6 describes my rationale for the typology of methodological practices that I propose, and table 6.1 previews the eight practices of inquiry that are considered in depth in chapters 7 and 8 (summarized in tables 7.1 and 8.1). Although the whole analysis is greater than the sum of its parts, readers most interested in particular methodologies of research can focus selectively on one or another practice.

Among the eight methodological practices, chapter 7 explores four *generalizing practices* oriented toward research intended to apply across multiple cases (even if only a single case is the focus of a given inquiry).

These practices, derived from a theorization of historical-comparative sociology, are (1) universal history, (2) the application of theory, (3) analytic generalization, and (4) the development of contrasts through comparison. In turn, chapter 8 differentiates four *particularizing practices* oriented to the conventional task of histories, ethnographies, and other idiographic studies, namely, the comprehensive analysis of a single object of inquiry. They are: (5) situational history, (6) specific history, (7) configurational history, and (8) historicism. Taken together, the eight practices offer a set of benchmarks for understanding sociohistorical inquiry as a methodological domain. However, none of the eight is epistemologically "pure" in its logic. Instead, they are hybrids that cobble together the various forms of discourse in culturally meaningful ways.

Chapter 9 concludes that sociohistorical inquiry is neither a single, coherent, epistemologically founded scientific enterprise based on pure reason, nor a Babel of languages beyond translation. It is a complex of interpenetrating discourses, each with its own internal conflicts open to multiple resolutions, lacking any inherent external alignment, yet articulated with one another in alternative discursive constellations of practice. The possible practices of research are shaped by historical legacies, yet open-ended and emergent. Any new practice remains, like other practices, a hybrid cultural logic of "impure reason" that confronts – well or poorly – both the enduring problematics within various formative discourses as well as the problem of bridging among multiple discourses in the conduct of research.

Precisely because inquiry operates in these circumstances, a surprising web of affinities and shared problematics can be found in the manifold practices of sociohistorical inquiry (these relationships are summarized in an admittedly byzantine diagram, figure 9.1, that probably should be viewed only when sitting down!). Heterogeneous methodologies of research are not autonomous; they are deeply connected, and sometimes dependent upon one another. These connections are often denied by practitioners who want to assert the purity of their own methods, maintaining the boundaries that mark off some epistemological Other. But ultimate claims for the superiority of any given practice are suspect, because alternative and sometimes conflicting kinds of knowledge are culturally constructed under the discursive circumstances of impure reason shared by all practices. Therefore, no rhetorical claims of superiority can unilaterally seal off a given practice from critical considerations that lie beyond its supposedly pure domain. In particular, practices of science are predicated, like other sociohistorical research methodologies, on one or another cultural logic. By the opposite token, practices of

inquiry that are dismissed in some quarters as "unscientific" or "anecdotal" have their own viable rationales which, if pursued rigorously, are capable of producing knowledge deserving of attention even by scientists. These conclusions imply neither that all culturally constructed knowledge is equally plausible, nor that any culturally constructed knowledge is necessarily untrue.

As for the present inquiry, it uses tools that I have previously favored in comparative-historical and field research, notably the analysis of substantive phenomena in relation to ideal types. Because some readers may mistake the systematic aspects of this approach as marking an enterprise with modernist or foundationalist pretensions, two points are worth emphasizing at the outset.

First, I do not claim to "totalize" or "represent" inquiry. Instead, I present ideal types as heuristics for the critique and formulation of inquiry's practices. However much these heuristics offer interpretive leverage for understanding inquiry, they neither represent nor subsume empirical diversity. There is always difference. Perhaps the most interesting practices of inquiry are neither fish nor fowl, neither type A or type B. Yet relatively patterned methodological practices of sociohistorical inquiry have become consolidated over the past two centuries or so. In these circumstances, typification helps to address questions of whether and how such practices act like fish or fowl, like A or B, and where and how they transcend the binaries. Even at that, no battery of conceptual tools is all-powerful. As the enterprise of writing the present book tells me, inquiry is a flux of lived practice that cannot be totally reduced to any rationalized systematization.

Second, readers will find that I address a number of issues of "reflexivity" as they arise throughout the text. Included, among other discussions, are a phenomenology of objectivity, discourse about discourse, a history of values, comparison of historicisms, and a theory of theorization. Although I claim no foundation for this study, there is this: unlike *logical* arguments affirming relativism, my account of inquiry's cultures is not in performative contradiction with the methodological practices used to produce it. Instead, there is a mirror reflecting in both directions between the concept formation and perspectives of this inquiry and the discourses and practices of sociohistorical inquiry that it describes. It is a text that I have sought to make an explication of itself.[1]

1 Introduction: the Third Path

Across the social sciences, history, and the humanities, approaches to research often seem disparate. On one front, sociologists Edgar Kiser and Michael Hechter seek to defend the project of general social theory in comparative and historical sociology. Arguing that idiographic approaches and recent trends toward induction play into charges of superficiality, Kiser and Hechter promote the search for causal mechanisms through the deductive use of general theory. From a different direction, in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, historian Natalie Zemon Davis has reexamined old accounts about a village in the south of France, where one day in 1556 there appeared a man who said he was the husband of a woman named Bertrande. Martin Guerre had disappeared years earlier, leaving behind his wife of nine years and a newborn child. The man recounted the reason for his disappearance – he had gone off to war – and the village people welcomed his return. Bertrande took him into her arms. But eventually the Martin Guerre who shared a bed with Bertrande lost favor, and came to be confronted in court with the return of the real Martin Guerre. Did Bertrande know from the beginning that she was accepting an impostor for her husband? Davis weaves a story of complex truths submerged in contending agendas of disguise. In the bargain, she reminds us that secrets and lies make social "reality" a many-layered thing.[1]

As these two examples suggest, it is possible to produce radically different kinds of sociohistorical knowledge. Kiser and Hechter promote inquiry into causal mechanisms, whereas a reading of Davis suggests that even detailed knowledge – much less any general explanation – is tentative, incomplete, and doomed to remain so. How are these and other practices of inquiry to be understood – in their own terms, and in relation to one another? What are the possibilities of dialogue among them? These questions deserve consideration within a broad domain – one that encompasses the social sciences, history, the humanities, and interdisciplinary enterprises such as historical sociology, feminist theory, cultural studies, critical theory, and the new historicism. That domain,

which can be called *sociohistorical inquiry*, recently has been the object of increased interest in rethinking relationships among disciplines and interdisciplinary programs.[2]

In important ways, the issues are methodological. As Reinhard Bendix observed in 1981, "Once we accept that knowledge in the social sciences has been cumulative only to a very limited extent, we are more likely to take a stronger interest in what has previously been excluded: a fuller understanding – admittedly incomplete and partly intuitive – of the parameters of the search for knowledge and its objects of inquiry."[3] By questioning the potential of the social sciences for cumulative knowledge, Bendix implicitly linked them to history and the humanities. By distinguishing between knowledge and its objects, he drew into question any simple account of a representational correspondence between concepts and reality.

I take up Bendix's project of understanding inquiry here under circumstances in which the philosophical examination of claims to knowledge – epistemology – has been challenged by accounts of knowledge as a social construction subject to political and other extra-scientific influences. Yet social constructionists have not found it easy to move beyond general claims, to describe the specific cultural rationales that inform alternative constructions of knowledge. Nor have the social and historical critiques easily avoided circular problems of reductionism. When they focus on the conditions under which knowledge is produced rather than whether it is valid, such approaches fail to account for the significance of knowledge itself, and fall into the performative contradiction of delegitimating their own accounts as ones that may be reducible to external causes.

Contemporary controversies over knowledge derive in no small part from a vexing problem encountered by Immanuel Kant – that pure reason cannot contain inquiry concerning sociohistorical matters within its boundaries. As Kant understood, sociohistorical knowledge cannot be established entirely within the realm of pure reason, for human affairs conflate moral, intellectual, and empirical issues.[4] Given that pure reason at best offers only an incomplete basis for sociohistorical research, it is necessary to supplement Kant's own critique with a "critique of impure reason." As a contribution to the latter critique, the present study charts a "Third Path" that leads beyond objectivism and relativism to an understanding of inquiries in cultural terms – as structured practices with roots in shared discursive resources that facilitate communication about the sociohistorical world. This analysis takes as its point of departure the assumption that sociohistorical research is a craft activity carried out in professional worlds oriented to inquiry, akin

to the art worlds that Howard S. Becker has shown are coordinated through the negotiation and use of "conventions" – working agreements about how things are to be done.[5]

The craft activities of research and their conventions might be investigated in many different ways. Others have studied the social, political, and economic contexts of everyday research practices. But there is another important aspect. Inquiry involves researchers, their audiences, and sometimes wider publics in the production and deployment of meanings. This feature implies that it should be possible to investigate the "cultural logics" that inform the conduct of research. Rather than approaching issues of methodology as matters of philosophical debate, a cultural analysis of this sort assumes that inquiry, like cultural logics elsewhere (for example, in religion), is a bit messy, resistant to thoroughgoing rationalization, and open to challenge from other cultural standpoints. On the basis of this assumption, it is possible to shift Max Weber's *verstehende* (or interpretive) method of cultural analysis from the investigation of meanings in the wider sociohistorical world toward the study of meanings in sociohistorical inquiry itself. To address the reflexive problem of circularity – conducting inquiry about inquiry – in the remainder of this chapter I review contemporary methodological conflicts and propose how to assay inquiry's prospects in light of them. In brief, that approach, which I call *hermeneutic deconstruction*, balances the critical power of deconstruction to unmask hidden meanings with the interpretive power of hermeneutics to identify coherent meanings in cultural constructions.

By investigating cultures of inquiry, I mean neither to exoticize inquiry as the domain of distinctive academic subcultures (microeconomics, ethnomusicology, Asian studies, and so forth), nor to essentialize Culture as a mysterious overarching spirit of Academe. Instead, I take inquiry to be cultural because it depends upon historically embedded and socially practiced activities of cultivating the soil from which knowledge is produced. Clearly, distinctive cultures of inquiry can be identified in diverse research programs, disciplines, interdisciplinary research agendas, and critical projects. But, in the interests of promoting a methodological debate about the inclusive domain of sociohistorical inquiry, I do not focus on local cultures of inquiry in their substantive specificities. Instead, I show how diverse methodological cultures are intimately connected by their alignments and oppositions to one another.

Overall, the Third Path transcends, on the one hand, foundationalism and objectivism, and, on the other hand, the more solipsistic and totaliz-

ing versions of skepticism and relativism. My approach can broadly be construed as "pragmatic," but it goes beyond a general affirmation of pragmatism to identify alternative pathways to knowledge and their potential grounds for communication with one another. This approach addresses workaday issues of research methodology, and simultaneously develops a sociology of sociohistorical knowledge – what Steve Fuller has called a "social epistemology" – that speaks to longstanding controversies concerning how inquiry is, and ought to be, constructed. Specifically, it is an essay in the project that Karl Mannheim once proposed – in the words of Dick Pels, "a sociological *reconstitution* of questions of truth, rationality, objectivity, and value" that shifts from foundationalist Epistemology to "small e" epistemology.[6]

From the foundations of knowledge to the cultures of inquiry

The conventional task of epistemology is to "found" inquiry on a single, logically consistent theory of knowledge. As the twenty-first century dawns, this project has become highly suspect. From one direction, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty has questioned the possibility of sustaining any general claims about knowledge. From an altogether different point of departure, Jacques Derrida uses deconstruction to seek out the unspokens and the unwrittens – silenced truths that haunt the texts marked by their absence.[7] There is serious contention about the ideas of Rorty and Derrida. But controversies over inquiry go well beyond philosophy and textual criticism. New voices have shifted the debates on a wide range of substantive topics – to name a few, the Holocaust, the colonization of the western hemisphere, the empowerment of women, and the political significance of popular culture. Doubts about general sociohistorical knowledge, deconstructive assertions about absent truths, and the new substantive debates converge in a situation that prevails for anyone who would practice inquiry. We all must suspect that, from someone else's point of view, our own efforts can be criticized as untenable. The methodologies that yield knowledge are manifold, and no one of them convincingly asserts its primacy. For sociohistorical inquiry, this is the modern/postmodern condition.[8]

Responses to this condition are several. Those scholars already committed to a discipline or research program, or to Reason as universal logic, may simply ignore external critique. Having invested whole careers in particular institutional arrangements and philosophical

commitments, many scholars will continue their conventional disciplinary practices – art history, literary criticism, economics – as the crafts of intellectual guilds.

A second alternative is to join the ranks of methodological anarchists who assert that a single, objective, universal "Reason" must be displaced by multiple pathways to knowledge.[9] But this response begs questions about the character of these pathways and their merits. The methodologies of inquiry are not infinite in their variety, and no inquiry can do everything at once. Thus, anarchism still requires choice, and that choice may work out better if it is an informed one.

A third broad response is to establish a new practice of inquiry. On this front, certain recent exemplary studies address important puzzles – of how to reconcile theory with historicity, the material world with meaning, obdurate reality with the ephemeral social moment. Lynn Hunt's book *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, for example, undertakes a critical use of Freudian theory to examine desires to rid the country of its royal "parents" that permeated the French political unconscious during the revolutionary period. On a different subject, Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* describes how European "discoverers" found an imaginary new world by seeking to impose their visions from the old world onto the Americas.[10] These books artfully demonstrate that new approaches can create new knowledge by breaking the molds of old conventions.

The promise of the new exemplars, however, is not always reflected in broader currents of inquiry. Some new approaches resurrect old issues that are easier to resolve in rhetoric than in practice. Various "turns" – the historic turn in literary criticism, the cultural turn in history, the realist turn in historical sociology – help consolidate new practices of inquiry. But such moves do not necessarily resolve the enduring problems of the practices to which they are turning. For example, as I argue in chapter 8, the "new" historicism does not confront, much less resolve, the difficulties of the *old* historicism. What Pitirim Sorokin once called "fads and fashions" of inquiry often simply escape old problems only to arrive at new problems (at least new for their new proponents) that are equally intractable, and equally in need of critical thinking about how to conduct inquiry.

The repression of the old Methodenstreit

Inquiry reached this point, I think, because the classic late nineteenth-century conflict over methodology – the German *Methodenstreit* – has returned to haunt modern claims to resolve it. The *Methodenstreit* raised