

# Cultures of Inquiry

*From Epistemology to Discourse in  
Sociohistorical Research*

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John R. Hall



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# 1 Introduction: the Third Path

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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 delegitimizing 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

### **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 unspoken and the unwritten – silenced truths that haunt the texts marked by their absence.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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

a series of linked questions – about the objectivity of science, the significance of values in inquiry, the relation of cultural science to natural science, and the prospects for generalization in the face of the uniqueness of history.

An intriguing stance toward these issues was promoted by Max Weber in the early years of the twentieth century. Working in the borderlands between history and the social sciences, examining the relationships between theory, methodology, values, and knowledge, Weber took up a position elsewhere than among the foundationalists or the relativists, the general scientists or the cultural historicists. Acknowledging the perspectival basis of sociohistorical knowledge, he sought to affirm inquiry as something other than science, which nevertheless amounts to more than opinion. Because Weber recognized that social conditions would affect the production of knowledge, he refused to be bound by philosophical analysis that treated inquiry as a strictly logical problem. But neither could he be satisfied by social relativists' indifference to the problem of epistemology.<sup>11</sup>

The methodological issues that Weber engaged are still disputed today. Indeed, we confront a new *Methodenstreit* for reasons that have much to do with how sociohistorical inquiry became institutionalized during the twentieth century. The problems of the old *Methodenstreit* were not resolved; they were shunted to the side by modernist totalizations of inquiry within autonomous domains of knowledge – science, aesthetics, and so on. Weber figured in these developments largely by the perverse appropriation that others made of his approach to values. Lifted from the context of Weber's methodology, the term "value freedom" was invoked to legitimate formalized "social science."<sup>12</sup> This dispensation met opposition from scholars such as the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, C. Wright Mills, and Alvin Gouldner. But their reputation as mavericks underscores the modernist institutional interest in maintaining an aura of objectivity by policing an absolute distinction between facts and values. Economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science as social sciences, and history in its own special fashion, aspired to the objectivity presumed to protect the supposed "hard" sciences from any claims about social and historical contamination of knowledge. In an oddly parallel way, the humanistic disciplines became bastions intended to protect aesthetic and moral judgments from the taint of historical or sociological "reductionism." Values, to be worthy of the name, had to be freely chosen. Neither the creative act nor the moral choice could be reduced to any external determination. The various domains – natural science, social science, history, and the arts and humanities – could be autonomous only if values were partitioned off from "facts."

The program of isolating facts from values has by now become deeply problematic. This development affects all disciplines and methods, but it poses the greatest challenge for the legitimation of science. Here, positivism's philosophical prospectus once held out the hope of establishing a method for successively approximating true knowledge, subject to validation or disproof, that would not depend on metaphysical, ontological, or other assumptions, nor on mere opinions of investigators. But fulfillment of the positivist vision has proved elusive. By now, both on the basis of internal critique and because empirical evidence undermines claims for science as an autonomous enterprise, the modernist faith of positivism is widely (though not universally) discredited.<sup>13</sup>

The positivist project initiated by August Comte in the early nineteenth century underwent multiple incarnations – most notably, John Stuart Mill's inductive approach, Emile Durkheim's rules of sociological method, the logical positivism of the Vienna circle and Carl Hempel, logical empiricism, and the falsificationist strategy championed by Karl Popper. Positivists themselves identified a labyrinth of *internal* difficulties – for instance, the intractable problem of establishing a “law,” the difficulty of separating the hypothesis of interest from untested assumptions, and the question of whether it is possible to establish a shared, theory-neutral observation language in which symbols “correspond” to empirical phenomena.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond these epistemological issues, early twentieth-century scholars like Max Weber and Karl Mannheim posed questions concerning how ideas and “knowledge” become socially distributed in the world. Specifically addressing the production of knowledge in professions, Weber analyzed institutional circumstances, and he asked how intellectual work is framed by ethical and value orientations, and how it is driven by processes such as rationalization (for example, in theology). For his part, Mannheim explored the cultural histories and meaningful ideological structures of mentalities such as conservative thought and the liberal-humanitarian idea of progress.<sup>15</sup>

In its modern American dispensation, especially at the hands of Robert Merton, the sociology of knowledge became increasingly concerned with distinguishing “scientific” from biased forms of knowledge. But social studies of science have had consequences that Merton did not intend. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* argued that the most dramatic scientific changes occur not through gradualistic testing of hypotheses, but in revolutionary shifts that sweep away paradigms previously protected through the practice of normal science. In the wake of Kuhn's pathbreaking book, diverse studies have pointed to historical circumstances, the political economy of knowledge interests,

the social organization of inquiry, ideology, funding, competition, social networks, and communication processes as factors that undermine the autonomous integrity of science through external contamination of its practices.<sup>16</sup> Even the last defense of science – the demonstrable power of its theories – no longer necessarily legitimates its claims to generalized, objective knowledge. As Bruno Latour argues, there is no need to deny science's empirical demonstrations in order to show that science socially constructs discrete "nature-culture" complexes out of manifold latent possibilities.<sup>17</sup> Biological knowledge, for instance, connects selected aspects of natural phenomena with scientific techniques in ways that sometimes create organisms such as killer viruses and processes such as cloning; when deployed, such constructed novelties become elements in emergent biological systems. Biology does not simply study the world; it combines technology and nature to create phenomena that become new parts of its field of study.

The character of knowledge has also been reconstrued on other fronts over the past three decades, most notably in critical theory, feminist theory, subaltern studies, anthropology, history, and cultural studies.<sup>18</sup> Deconstruction is the iconic development, because it casts doubt on any rational apparatus for representing things, either within texts or beyond them. Jacques Derrida's analysis, with origins in the poststructuralist critique of structuralism, holds that any coherence in a text – whether of fiction, ideas, or events of the sociohistorical world – can be achieved only on the basis of linguistic feats that mask textual contradictions and ellipses. The practice of deconstruction erases any charitable "suspension of disbelief" about texts in order to investigate how they accomplish their sense of being *about* something, which no longer can be construed as "representation" of anything. The implications for inquiry are unnerving. "Deconstruction," philosopher Joseph Margolis writes, "demonstrates that, in any [our own] historical setting, it is always possible to construe any established schemata for analyzing and interpreting familiar phenomena as more restrictive, more distorting, more inadequate than another that can be generated, now, by submitting the one or ones in question to the process of supplementation." As anthropologist Clifford Geertz has remarked, the collapse of distinctions between categories of storytellers means that "the very right to write – to write ethnography – seems at risk."<sup>19</sup>

Small wonder that assertions about the relativism of enveloping yet unstable textuality meet resistance. To note an emblematic case, feminist theorists are justifiably critical of research that fails to come to terms with gender, and they have raised serious questions about whether methods of inquiry are gendered in how they produce knowledge. Still,

the alternatives to the false objectivism of patriarchy can be disconcerting. One argument holds that people of one gender lack any basis to speak about those of another. But certain feminists criticize such strong relativism. Thus, Donna Haraway acknowledges, "The further I get in describing the radical social constructionist program and a particular version of postmodernism, coupled with the acid tools of critical discourse in the human sciences, the more nervous I get." And, while Sandra Harding recognizes that white feminists cannot presume to speak for feminists of color or women in general, she nevertheless warns against essentializing subject positions as sources of validity, and she remains committed to improving inquiry so that women can produce knowledge beyond mere opinion.<sup>20</sup> These feminist interests are shared by modernists and critical theorists who remain skeptical toward deconstruction because it seems to eclipse normative issues, and to encourage a culture of nihilism that denies the emancipatory potential of knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Facing the deconstructionist challenge, those who hope for rational discourse about the social questions refuse to admit their incarceration in the "prison house of language." They want to reach beyond the walls of the text to analyze our collective prospects.

*From the end of purifying binaries to the Third Path*

The significance of deconstruction will continue to be debated. But its critics seem right in one respect: the assertion of equality among the claims for all ideas is mistaken. Quite apart from the argument's performative contradiction, embracing it would require a pretense of naïveté that works no better in inquiry than it would in everyday life. The challenge posed by unconstrained relativism can be found in assertions that the Holocaust never happened.<sup>22</sup> But despite the pressing need to reason, as Jean-François Lyotard notes, the Enlightenment's ideals of progress through science, reason, and freedom have become subjects of critical doubt. For his part (and he is hardly alone), Lyotard favors postmodern "incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>23</sup> In this climate, the status of Reason as a universal procedure can no longer be taken for granted.

The standoff over modernism and postmodernism, however, seems arbitrary. After all, the binary distinction between Reason and relativism is itself modernist, and it may distort our ability to understand the potential for knowledge. Inquiry is faced with a false choice – either formulate a new general account of knowledge that reasserts some solid way of connecting representations and their referents, or succumb to the bedlam of texts. But the rejection of foundationalism should bring

with it neither a stalemate in inquiry nor a legitimation of mediocrity. Conversely, the anti-relativist nostalgia for procedurally guaranteed truth not only ignores the internal crisis of epistemology; it also tends to sidestep questions about the interests served by institutional arrangements through which scientific knowledge is produced, thereby masking relationships between power and inquiry.

A number of scholars have described the binary oppositions that frame the standoff. Hilary Putnam laments the opposition between Reason and relativism. For Richard Bernstein, the central problem concerns reconciling objectivism and relativism. Jeffrey Alexander writes of a disjuncture between science and relativism, and Randall Collins argues the claims of objectivism versus subjectivism.<sup>24</sup> These oppositions are formidable, but we need to reframe the problem in nonbinary terms if we are to avoid a dialectic of entrapment. Yet, paradoxically, any effort to transcend the oppositions on some *general* basis would simply replicate the totalizing and purifying impulses of modernity. Unfortunately, reactions against Reason, against theory, against representation sometimes fit this pattern: they become uncritically infused with the very modes of thought that they reject. It is too easy to reinvent modernist totalization through its destruction, by totalizing relativism via some critique of Reason or essentializing the world as a text.<sup>25</sup>

In these admittedly pragmatic calculations, the binary oppositions – between modern and postmodern sensibilities, between Reason and relativism, between science and its Other – seem overdrawn. We live in a world where, difficulties notwithstanding, inquiry is practiced and claims of knowledge are made. Each in its own way, either relativism or a monolithic Reason subverts critical inquiry – defined simply as the willingness to call into question any assumption, theory, or hypothesis.

Past the overdrawn binaries lies the Third Path to knowledge. This path is deeply connected both to modernist inquiry and to postmodern critique, but it moves beyond both. It marks the end of philosophy as an autonomous enterprise and the end of relativism as a self-contradictory totalizing claim. And it requires a new understanding of binary oppositions. Modernism, as Bruno Latour has observed, thrives on an odd contradiction: the assertion of sharp distinctions in principle, whereas, in practice, the powerful substantive demonstrations of modernist inquiry often depend on the construction of “hybrids” to connect the very things that the ideology of science must analytically distinguish – the vacuum and the machinery used to produce it, for example.<sup>26</sup> In the realm of sociohistorical inquiry, there is an analogue to Latour’s account of hybrid relations between natural science and its objects – namely, the



possibility of examining hybrid relationships across putatively “pure” regions and objects of inquiry.

One of the most imposing binaries is the one that worried C. P. Snow during the 1950s – the divide between “two cultures,” the sciences and the humanities. This distinction continues to have its force – both in general (witness recent antipathy to historical and social studies of science) and in the intermediate realm of sociohistorical inquiry, where (shifting) boundaries continue to divide scientific and humanistic approaches. Yet the antipathies simultaneously mark and blur the boundaries with which they are concerned. By now there are widespread suspicions that art and science are intimately connected: science as art, rhetoric, and metanarrative, and art as something other than the free play of aesthetics, values, and ideas in an autonomous realm of creativity. Each culture has become historicized to the point where neither is autonomous from external influences. Yet efforts to erase the divide have not given rise to a scientific humanism or a humanistic science. And they have resulted not in one culture of inquiry, but many.<sup>27</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche once suggested, “History must solve the problem of history, science must turn its sting against itself.”<sup>28</sup> Reading Latour suggests that Nietzsche needs revision. Neither science nor history is up to the task of self-study, for they are hybrids, deeply interfigured with each other. Historians once claimed to proceed without theory, but they are now much more ambivalent about this point. Economists used to assert the neat boundaries of their discipline, but those boundaries seem less sharp today. Literary criticism, and especially deconstruction – are they not hybrid activities too?

The Third Path leads beyond modernist efforts to purify foundational logics of inquiry and postmodern critiques that simultaneously reject and recast modernist purifications. It uses a hybrid inquiry to identify the hybrid practices of inquiry. This route depends on understanding inquiry as the product of meaningful social *discourse*. As Seyla Benhabib delineates this shift, it can yield “an epistemology and politics which recognizes the lack of metanarratives and foundational guarantees but which nonetheless insists on formulating minimal criteria of validity for our discursive and political practices.” Understanding inquiry as discourse makes it possible to explore the shared cultural worlds of rhetoric and reason, epistemology and ideology, knowledge and its purposes.<sup>29</sup>

### **Inquiry and its frames of reference**

To investigate inquiry as discourse on the basis of some transcendent “view from nowhere” would make no sense. What approach, then,

might be congruent with present doubts concerning secure foundations of knowledge? Almost paradoxically, there is a point of departure adequate to this situation. It entails acknowledging a circumstance of inquiry that can be identified via theories of subjectivity, namely, that research is undertaken by socially interacting individuals employing various “frames of reference” that orient meaningful activity.

The major strands of subjectivist inquiry – hermeneutics, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and *verstehende* sociology – together suggest a sociology of knowledge that describes both inquiry and meaningful conduct in general. As subjectivist approaches emphasize, socially shared knowledge is possible only because meaningful understandings emerge in the unfolding “here and now” of everyday experience – what the social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz called the “lifeworld.”<sup>30</sup> In Schutz’s account, social actors – politicians, nurses, peasants, children, carpenters, and others – make meanings about the world in relation to personal interests, knowledge, categories, and experiences that come to the fore in their individual streams of consciousness.

Lifeworldly circumstances shape both the subject matter of sociohistorical inquiry and its relationship to that subject matter. In the words of Anthony Giddens, sociohistorical research is engaged in a “double hermeneutic” – giving second-order interpretations to social phenomena, such as the Vietnam War, ethnic inequality, theatrical productions, and so on, that are themselves already matters of (often contested) meanings. Under this circumstance, sociohistorical inquiry imposes asymmetric power relationships of dominance and subordination that effectively replicate subaltern colonialism. That is, the double hermeneutic of inquiry places the meanings of its “subjects” in contexts alien to them. But this is not the end of the matter. Certain feminist epistemologists point out that inquiry’s meaning-production occurs in the lifeworld, and that the observed subjects themselves gaze back at the observers.<sup>31</sup> The observed, and people in general, can make meaning about inquiries’ projects of meaning-making. This circumstance reflects a general condition of “reflexivity” – that social actors make meanings about other meanings as part of everyday life. This condition has sometimes been regarded as an obstacle to rigorous inquiry, but, more recently, efforts to come to terms with reflexivity have been proposed as a basis for, as Loïc Wacquant puts it, transforming “the social organization of social science as an institution inscribed in both objective and mental mechanisms.”<sup>32</sup>

The mental mechanisms that concern Wacquant can be sketched initially by describing the frames of reference available to inquiry. Research is meaningful lifeworldly action. It transpires under specific historical, social, and economic conditions, at particular times and

Table 1.1: *Types of meaning produced via alternative frames of reference*

	FRAME OF REFERENCE		
	Social actor's lifeworld orientation	Observer's lifeworld orientation	Observer's objective orientation
TYPE OF MEANING	Subjective meaning	Observer's subjective interpretation	Observer's interpretation of meaning in objective context

places, through lived social relationships, on the basis of more or less institutionalized conventions for producing and exchanging ideas and knowledge. Because inquiry takes place in the lifeworld, even if it produces specialized meanings, there is no reason to think that the frames of reference available to it are intrinsically different from those available to people in general.

Alfred Schutz analyzed such possibilities in his famous critique of Max Weber's *verstehende* sociology. According to Schutz, each person makes subjective meaning richly and more or less continuously in the flow of everyday experience and action – directed not only to the immediate present, but also to anticipated futures, to memories, and to dreams and fantasies. Each person is simultaneously oriented as both an *actor* and an *observer*, interpreting experience by reference to her own stock of knowledge. Meaningful cognition is a complexly orchestrated *mélange* of different mental acts in the course of unfolding life, but, analytically, three component frames of reference of these acts can be identified. Most obviously, there is (1) the *social actor's lifeworld orientation* as “author” or “agent” in the conduct of life through meaningful social action and interaction. Beyond this frame, Schutz differentiates two other orientations that individuals have available to adopt as *observers* of phenomena: (2) an *observer's lifeworld orientation* that seeks to apprehend original (“subjective”) meanings held by other social actors in their own situations, and (3) an *observer's objective orientation* that apprehends social and other phenomena via some interpretational matrix available to the individual through a general stock of knowledge – for example, religious norms, historical memory about Winston Churchill, psychoanalytic interpretation, business procedures, political ideology, and on and on (see table 1.1).<sup>33</sup>

These alternative frames of reference are only schematic, and they are manifested in intricate ways, both in everyday life and in inquiry.

Distinguishing frames of reference does not resolve inquiry's ontological debates about any supposedly ultimate nature of the world, and it does not privilege one perspective over another – either one that depends on some, “objective” frame of reference, or “lifeworldly” approaches such as *verstehende* sociology and feminist-standpoint epistemology.<sup>34</sup> Instead, it describes a general condition – that multiple frames of reference coexist (1) on the basis of differences between observers' lifeworldly attempts to discern other people's subjective meanings versus observers' efforts to apply objective categories to analysis, and (2) because observers' objective analyses may draw on diverse interpretive schema. Given this general condition, unless and until some descriptive ontology becomes warranted as valid independent of theory, any inquiry must be assumed to have a perspectival status that draws on an observer's lifeworld orientation and/or one or more observers' objective orientations toward framing phenomena, and to make meaning on the basis of the orientations employed. In lifeworldly terms, without denying the potential power of scientific knowledge, we have no reason to assume that science was ever so detached and privileged as the modernist prospectus for it envisioned. On the other hand, even critical practices such as deconstruction do not spell the end of inquiry, for they also depend upon one or another frame of reference, subject to the reflexive gaze of other perspectives.

### **The hermeneutic deconstruction of inquiry**

Once the perspectivity of all inquiry is acknowledged, we can ask how inquiry works when its approaches are culturally structured in alternative ways. This question can be pursued by using a strategy of “hermeneutic deconstruction” – a hermeneutic supplementation of deconstruction – to examine practices of research as cultural *bricolages* of discourse. Overall, this approach tempers the critical power of deconstruction to expose ellipses and contradictions of discourse with the reconstructive power of hermeneutics to tease out meanings in their cultural coherence.

As a way of analyzing inquiry, hermeneutic deconstruction takes inspiration from social epistemology, the sociology of knowledge, feminist theory, rhetoric, pragmatism, and critical theory. It might be thought of as a Foucauldian archeology of knowledge, reflexively directed toward inquiry. The predominant trope – discourse – is theorized by analogy with the work of Jean-François Lyotard. In terms of table 1.1, the central frame of reference is an observer's objective analysis of meaningful discourse, specifically, by way of Weberian ideal types –

sociohistorical models of patterned meaning complexes – used for purposes of cultural interpretation. The project takes inspiration from Karl Mannheim’s investigation of ideological and utopian mentalities, but it differs from Mannheim (1) by drawing on strategies of discursive analysis that have emerged since he wrote; and (2) by focusing the sociology of knowledge reflexively toward understanding the possibilities of inquiry itself.<sup>35</sup>

This program of investigating inquiry as meaningful cultural activity has its general warrant in Hilary Putnam’s pragmatist agenda of shifting from the search for a single encompassing Reason to recognizing different historically formed modalities of small-r reasoning. Given that my investigation cannot transcend its own account of knowledge without engaging in a performative contradiction, I cannot make any claim about its ultimate truth. But Ian Hacking cites the research-program strategy of Imre Lakatos as suggesting an alternative to the standard of truth as a criterion by which to judge inquiry, namely, whether it “opens up new things to think about.”<sup>36</sup> In the terms suggested by Putnam and Hacking, the present study is a local project of reasoning that seeks to open up new ways of thinking about meaningful methodologies of sociohistorical inquiry.

A general philosophical strategy for studying inquiry in this way was elaborated by Richard McKeon in the 1950s. McKeon argued that different kinds of inquiry directed toward the same ultimate subject matter can be generated by alternative ways of combining multiple discourses.<sup>37</sup> How might this McKeonian insight be used to understand sociohistorical inquiry? The method of hermeneutic deconstruction draws on both the work of Jacques Derrida and the hermeneutic tradition, but it does not rigidly follow either one.

### *Deconstruction, totalization, and supplement*

There is an interesting warrant for offering hermeneutics as a supplement to deconstruction. As Derrida made apparent in his 1967 essay, “Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences,” the study of discourses is crucial to the poststructuralist critique of structuralism. In this essay, Derrida described the “centered structure – although it represents coherence itself” as “contradictorily coherent.” To illustrate the problem, he reviewed the famous mythic structures of “savage” and modern thought that Claude Lévi-Strauss had depicted in *The Savage Mind*. From what standpoint could Lévi-Strauss’s discourse on these mythic structures proceed? Derrida insisted that the

search for an epistemological foundation should be renounced in favor of a discourse that “must have the form of which it speaks”: in Lévi-Strauss’s case, discourse on myth “must itself be *mythomorphic*.” This approach is necessary, Derrida suggested, as an acknowledgment that no attempt at “totalization” – encompassing everything within a coherent framework – can be assumed to have a privileged status.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, any totalization gains coherence at the expense of the aspects that it omits, suppresses, or subordinates, and it is vitally dependent on these textual solutions. Therefore, a “supplement” may be developed to identify *absences* – those things not contained by the attempted totalization. There is always “play” between totalization and supplement, and, in turn, a tension between this textual play and history. Put differently, every coherent discourse is incomplete and subject to the exploration of its omissions, which are prefigured by the explicit or implicit principles that yield its coherence. A totalization of liberty versus tyranny, for example, might be deconstructed in relation to the absent construct of community. Similarly, any coherent inquiry based on elaborating the principle of social class *per se* tends either to exclude ethnicity and gender, or to place them in derivative positions. Elaborating such relationships is the task of deconstruction.

Yet is the identification of present (implied) absences the end of the matter? After Derrida, is all else supplementation? The answer, at least for Derrida, is that it is not. If, between two strands of a double-helixed terrain of inquiry, one strand “dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign,” while the other one “affirms play,” Derrida refuses the choice between the two, first because it is “trivial,” and second “because we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différance* of this irreducible difference.”<sup>39</sup> A point not often acknowledged bears emphasis: although Derrida’s deconstruction is sometimes presumed to render all totalizing frames of reference irrelevant, Derrida himself proposed a dialectic of totalization and supplement.

In the present study, deconstruction offers a vital strategy for moving beyond the surface claims of various methodologies, to see how each is constructed as a conventionalized totalization of inquiry, the supplementations of which are equally totalized alternative methodologies. Yet in light of Derrida’s interest in a dialectic between totalization and supplement, this project of deconstruction itself ought to be supplemented as a way to avoid totalizing its analysis. For the study of inquiry, this supplementation can be pursued via a hermeneutic recovery of meanings.

*Hermeneutics after poststructuralism*

If the study of inquiry were pursued as a purely philosophical project, it would fall into a circular begging of the question – what is the epistemological foundation for studying the epistemological foundations of inquiry? But the hermeneutic method follows a different route. From origins in scholarship devoted to exegesis of biblical texts, practices of hermeneutics have found their way into diverse efforts to gain interpretive understanding of meanings, no longer confined to sacred texts, or even written ones.

This shift in interest, originating in the late nineteenth-century *Methodenstreit*, yielded multiple approaches to interpretive understanding. Most notably, Wilhelm Dilthey proposed a program of biographical history, and Max Weber emphasized interpretation of observed meanings. More recently, programmatic solutions have included Hans-Georg Gadamer's interpretive historicism, Charles Taylor's emphasis on meanings shared in common, Paul Ricoeur's temporally grounded emphasis on discourse-as-text and action-as-narrative, and Clifford Geertz's anthropological practice of "thick description." Along with the proliferation of methods, the objects of analysis have widened as well. Today, texts are to be found both in the utterances and interactions of people, and in the cultural products of social action – from sermons, talk at the dinner table, etiquette guidebooks, television commercials, and cityscapes, to social theories and studies of historical events. Yet these texts no longer have any stable relationship with authorship or meaning. The reasons for this are diverse. From one point of view, Jürgen Habermas takes issue with any effort to privilege an individual's or social group's self-interpretation to the exclusion of critical discourse. From another, the poststructuralist movement heralded by Derrida's deconstruction converges with phenomenological accounts of reading and writing. Both emphasize the historical and existential instabilities of meanings.<sup>40</sup> Synthesizing, a poststructuralist and postsubjectivist model of textual production and reception emphasizes a historicity of textual circulation in which neither the autonomy of the text as symbolic structure nor the meaning-making agency of any temporally stable "author" or "reader" can be theoretically privileged in advance.<sup>41</sup> With the collapse of the fixed subject and the fixed symbolic structure, phenomenology and poststructuralism converge in pointing toward manifold historically unfolding textual circuits of meaning operating in the lifeworld and media connected to it.

The present study directs interpretive understanding toward the circuits of meaning whereby sociohistorical research is carried out. This

hermeneutic strategy builds upon contemporary work on rhetoric. Studies by scholars like Wayne Booth on fiction and Donald McCloskey on economic discourse have helped unmask the devices by which texts convince readers of their integrity, independently of the factual basis of their claims.<sup>42</sup> In its hermeneutic aspects, the present study supplements rhetorical analysis of the *products* of inquiry by explicitly considering how meanings shape the *conduct* of inquiry. The idea is not to assert the ultimate validity or invalidity of various methodologies, but to examine how they assemble meanings from diverse discourses into culturally coherent practices.

In turn, this hermeneutic program has a deconstructive dimension. Using the term “deconstruction” here may stretch some conventional understandings, because hermeneutics emphasizes identifying meaningful cultural logics, not their absences. But it would seem paradoxical to totalize deconstruction in a way that excludes the present practice. Deconstructive supplementation is play rather than structure, and texts can be subjected to its scrutiny in various aspects – ranging from grammar, punctuation, and word usage to basic concepts of philosophy.<sup>43</sup> The task here is not to describe an overarching meaningful structure of inquiry. Instead, deconstruction is used to identify multiple kinds of totalizing coherence and supplementary contradiction that coexist in unevenly connected alternative practices of inquiry. This analysis demonstrates why there is an *absence* of totalization among methodological practices.

Making meaningful discourse the object of hermeneutic deconstruction is an arbitrary decision (in that another choice could be made), but the reasoning behind the choice at least can be identified: it is directed toward clarifying the cultural rationales of inquiry (hence the hermeneutic emphasis) – an objective that can be judged by its results and not by *a priori* claims about any supposedly essential character of discourse. The strategy employed draws broadly on Michel Foucault’s studies of knowledge and more explicitly on the perspective developed by Jean-François Lyotard in his book, *The Differend*.

#### *The forms of discourse and practices of inquiry*

Foucault’s initial account of the human sciences, *The Order of Things*, published in 1966, argued that a certain “positivity” of knowledge in the “human sciences” is obscured by sterile debates over whether they can be “sciences.” Convinced that the human sciences “are not sciences at all,” Foucault sought “to determine the manner in which they are arranged in the *episteme* in which they have their roots; and to show,



also, in what respect their configuration is radically different from that of the sciences in the strict sense.” He traced the differences between human sciences and strict sciences to two dimensions of the human condition: (1) reflexivity of consciousness, “the transposition of external models within the dimension of the unconscious and consciousness, and the flowing back of critical reflection toward the very place from which those models come,” and (2) historicity, a feature of social life that “surrounds the sciences of man with a frontier that limits them and also destroys, from the outset, their claim to validity within the element of universality.”<sup>44</sup> Three years later, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault called *The Order of Things* “a very imperfect sketch.” He recast his position by defining the “episteme” as a totality of relations among sciences understood as discursive regularities, and he proposed to search out “unities of discourse” that are identified not in any shared features or coherent logic but, rather, in “systems of dispersion.”<sup>45</sup> In this account Foucault describes the general approach he employed in substantive studies such as *Madness and Civilization* and *Birth of the Clinic*. His strategy suggests a similar project for sociohistorical inquiry.

What Foucault called “systems of dispersion” can be identified in inquiry by mirroring Jean-François Lyotard’s treatment of discourse in his book, *The Differend*. Lyotard contends that all discourses are composed by drawing from heterogeneous phrase regimens. For example, “What is a door?” and “Open the door!” belong to different phrase regimens – one interrogative, the other a command. Different phrase regimens, Lyotard shows, cannot be “linked” to one another in any “pertinent” way. But despite this heterogeneity of phrase regimens, phrases from different phrase regimens become drawn together in genres of discourse – orderings of phrases that themselves have some purpose, such as persuasion or entertainment. Any genre of discourse has something at stake, which Lyotard describes as based on “a single, universal principle, shall we say that of ‘winning’ or ‘gaining.’” However, the stakes in any given genre of discourse are distinctive, and two different genres of discourse therefore may be marked by a “differend” – an ultimate incommensurability between them. The leverage or gain pursued within one genre may have nothing to do with that sought in another. The stakes of an ethical debate, for example, are not typically the same as those of a strategy discussion among politicians.<sup>46</sup>

Lyotard offers his model of phrase regimens and genres of discourse on a level of generality that transcends inquiry. It is not just a matter of philosophical, scientific, or critical discourse: there are discourses of politics, love, and work. The model thus has an affinity with recent efforts to analyze discourses in the world in general.<sup>47</sup>

My purpose here is similar, but I use Lyotard's model of genres of discourse and their constituent phrase regimens as an analogue to inquiry itself. Specifically, I explore sociohistorical inquiry as an arena contested by alternative *practices of inquiry* – relatively conventionalized methodological approaches to the production of sociohistorical knowledge (for example, universal history or, on a different front, analytic generalization). However, these practices cannot be assumed to be logically coherent enterprises; unless otherwise demonstrated, they must be provisionally regarded as logically impure hybrids.

How can these hybrids be described? Just as Lyotard's genres of discourse draw together heterogeneous phrase regimens, practices of inquiry submerge methodological issues not just in rhetoric, but in logical and analytic problems that are the prior subjects of contestation within distinctive zones – for example, social theory. These zones I call *forms of discourse* (or sometimes, “formative discourses”). I do not mean by “form” an entity having autonomous existence. Rather, it is a zone where particular discursive precepts and strategies help “form” practice. Issues relevant to any formative discourse are subject to contestation over alternative conventional resolutions. “Forms of discourse” are thus to be located somewhere between what Aristotle designated as *topoi*, or commonplaces available to all rhetoric – whether of science, law, or love – and what he identified as special topics – lines of argument relevant only to particular subjects. Formative discourses are domains where alternative commonplaces are contested in relation to specialized problems of methodology relevant to how inquiry is conducted.

For any form of discourse, hermeneutic deconstruction can seek to identify its distinctive problematics concerning how to construct coherences about things that in themselves lack any single coherence – namely, the actualities of sociohistorical phenomena. As with Lyotard's phrase regimens and genres of discourse, various forms of discourse in relation to practices of inquiry are like shoes and a coat that both clothe the person but work in different ways. They need not be equivalent in their structure or relations to inquiry. Pursuing this analogy, there is more than one kind of shoe or coat, and alternative *regimens* can order any formative discourse in different ways, thereby affecting how it gets drawn into one or another practice of inquiry.

Identifying formative discourses of inquiry is partly a theoretical task rather than solely an empirical one. As the phenomenology of reference frames (table 1.1) suggests, concepts are not simply representational; rather, they “bring things into view” from one or another perspective. The perspective here is oriented toward unmasking how multiple discourses structure inquiry's practices. In the absence of any assumption