Background and Divergent Sources of Relativism in the Sociology of (Scientific) Knowledge

It is no exaggeration to claim that it was above all twentieth century work in the philosophy of science and the sociology of (scientific) knowledge that set the scene for a flourishing of relativist (and constructivist) claims. To be sure, cognitive relativism is by no means a new doctrine. Rather, it is one of the oldest topics in philosophy. Since Plato presented his arguments against Protagoras’ claim that man is the measure of all things in the *Theaetetus*, the discussion of relativist doctrines gave rise to fruitful and heated argument. However, by and large in the history of philosophy cognitive relativists are hard to find.

This situation changed dramatically in the last century. Of course, just as in the case of the early sophists there are sociological and historical explanations for this rise of relativist thought in certain quarters – so there are good sociological and historical explanations for the refusal of relativist thought in other quarters.¹ But there is also a philosophical explanation for this change – an explanation by the changes of thought in epistemology and the philosophy of science *itself*.

In the middle of the last century by now classical figures in philosophy

¹ This should be – and is – also accepted by those very critical of relativist sociology of knowledge. Thus, e.g., Richard Fumerton, who argues for a return to a traditional form of foundationalism, rhetorically asks: “I am a confirmed foundationalist and I studied at Brown – just a coincidence?” (Fumerton 2010, p. 103).
with quite disparate background proposed ideas that might seem to promote relativist theses: Willard van Orman Quine, Thomas S. Kuhn and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Thus, Quine in his masterpiece *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* attacked the radical empiricist doctrine of reductionism, according to which scientific discourse can be defined in terms of observation and logico-mathematical auxiliaries by claiming that “our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body”\(^2\). This confirmational holism gives rise to his famous thesis of the underdetermination of theory by the data that has been used hitherto prominently in relativist argumentation. If, as Quine maintains, “any statement can be held true come what may”\(^3\), then – so many relativists argue – which one in fact is held true depends crucially on social factors.\(^4\)

At the time Quine’s paper was published, in 1951, he was a senior fellow at the Society of Fellows at Harvard University. There, one of the junior fellows was confronted also with Quine’s ideas in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* that – as he remarked – “had a considerable impact”\(^5\) on him: The historian of science Thomas S. Kuhn. About ten years after the publication of Quine’s paper, Kuhn published his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that – beyond doubt – proved eminently influential for the development of the philosophy of science in the twentieth century.\(^6\) Kuhn attacked the classical scientific realist’s idea that science progresses by ever closer approaching the truth: the history of science, he argues, shows that scientific progress rather has to be understood also in terms of radical, revolutionary changes of scientific paradigms. The argument in *Structure* surely was a watershed in philosophy of science and has been used extensively by relativists to argue for their theses. Besides Kuhn’s

\(^2\) Quine 1980, p. 41.
\(^3\) Quine 1980, p. 43.
\(^4\) Cf. e.g. Bloor 1991, p. 16: “[…] theories and theoretical knowledge are not things which are given in our experience. […] This does not mean that theory is unresponsive to experience, It is, but it is not given along with the experience it explains, nor is it uniquely supported by it. Another agency apart from the physical world is required to guide and support this component of knowledge. The theoretical component of knowledge is a social component, and it is a necessary part of truth, not a sign of mere error.”
\(^5\) Kuhn 2000, p. 279.
\(^6\) Kuhn 1970.
thesis of the theory-ladenness of observation and the incommensurability-theses that are taken on behalf of anti-realism, his conclusions arguably open the gate also to sociological forms of relativism: after all, Kuhn claims that “as in political revolutions, so in paradigm choice – there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community. To discover how scientific revolutions are effected, we shall therefore have to examine not only the impact of nature and of logic, but also the techniques of persuasive argumentation effective within the quite special groups that constitute the community of scientists.”

Remarks like these echo ideas of the last of the authors important for the flourishing of relativist thought in the last century: Ludwig Wittgenstein. Thus, in his *On Certainty*, a collection of late notes especially concerning epistemological questions, he imagines people consulting an oracle. Concerning the questions “Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it? – If we call this ‘wrong’ aren’t we using our language-game as a base from which to combat theirs?”

If, in the end, we are forced to use convertive and persuasive strategies, the investigation of these strategies surely is a classical task for the sociology of knowledge. Thus, arguably, Wittgenstein's later philosophical views in his *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty* can be seen as inspiring relativist thought and, in fact, have been very influential in the arguments of philosophers that can be associated with relativism – as for example Richard Rorty. Some authors take Wittgenstein’s considerations also to be exercises in the sociology of knowledge.

It goes without saying that it is highly controversial whether Quine’s,
Kuhn’s and Wittgenstein’s views can be taken to sustain relativism.\textsuperscript{14} What is undeniable, however, is that these trains of thought have been used to corroborate relativist thought in general and also especially in the sociology of (scientific) knowledge since the middle of the last century. This, at least, is the story to be told from recent history of philosophy.

It is a remarkable feature of the debate that the development of relativist and also constructivist thought in the sociology of (scientific) knowledge can be reconstructed quite differently once we throw a glance at the history of sociology itself. For ease of exposition it is convenient to distinguish roughly between \textit{classical} and \textit{new} sociology of knowledge. The inauguration of the sociology of knowledge, i.e. of \textit{classical} sociology of knowledge, as an own branch of sociological research at the beginning of the last century was heavily affected by discussions about relativist implications in the so-called \textit{Streit um die Wissenssoziologie}.\textsuperscript{15} Classical sociology of knowledge – especially the more radical form of Karl Mannheim – was confronted with severe attacks on its ‘sociologism’ that was taken to imply a devastatingly self-refuting relativism. At about the same time as Mannheim’s German edition of \textit{Ideology and Utopia} was published Alfred Schütz aimed to lay down a phenomenological foundation of sociology in his \textit{Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt}.

Drawing on the work of Schütz his pupils Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann proposed a \textit{new} sociology of knowledge in their \textit{The Social Construction of Reality}. Classical sociology of knowledge, they argue, has been unduly focused on ideologies and theoretical knowledge, thus only capturing a small part of what passes as knowledge in a society. Berger and Luckmann propose instead that the sociology of knowledge should more strongly take into account ‘what everybody knows’.\textsuperscript{16} In any case, with Berger’s and Luckmann’s book the talk of \textit{social construction} starts to become popular in many branches of the social and cultural sciences – and also intensely attacked from outside these areas of research – but, what-

\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, it is controversial whether some of these authors \textit{are} relativists. Kuhn, for example, denied to be a relativist in the sense understood by his critics (cf. Kuhn 1970, pp. 205 f.). Cf. with respect to Wittgenstein: Williams 2007.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Meja/Stehr 1982.

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. Berger/Luckmann 1966, p. 65.
ever the subsequent development of the notion of ‘social construction’, it should not be forgotten that, as the subtitle of their book makes clear, it originates as a key notion in *A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. It is the conviction of the editors of this volume – although both see themselves not as cognitive relativists or constructivists – that it is an enormously fruitful enterprise to bring together these different trains of thought in the debate. We think that after the heated debates between the disciplines in what – unfortunately – has been called ‘The Science Wars’ cooled down it is time for a new look at the problems of relativism in the sociology of (scientific) knowledge. The reason is simple: Though not that heated anymore the differences of opinion are still there and they are far from minor ones! Actually the relativism debate still goes on.

The present volume grew out of talks given at the international conference ‘The Problem of Relativism in the Sociology of (Scientific) Knowledge’ held at the University of Siegen on March 22nd and 23rd 2011. It was co-organised by the University of Siegen and the Center for Philosophy of Science (ZfW) at the University of Münster. The aim of the conference was to bring together philosophers and sociologists working in the field and to discuss the problems of relativism from a systematic as well as from a historical perspective. This aim is reflected in the present volume which contains both papers attacking and defending relativist approaches and papers focused on particular authors who played an important role in the history of the debate. Before we will give an overview of the papers we would like to thank all the helpers from Siegen and Münster who made the conference such an enjoyable event and rendered the publication of this volume possible. We want to express our special gratitude to Rafael Hüntelmann from ontos-publisher for the helpful and uncomplicated cooperation in preparing this publication and Mario Franz for the typesetting. Last but not least we would like to thank all the contributors to the conference and to this volume: After all, the success of such a project stands and falls with the contributions, and we are convinced that it has been a success.

17 Cf. Hacking 1999 for exposition.
The Chapters

**Barry Barnes** defends relativist research programmes as scientifically and naturalistically inspired. By way of reporting the history, background and development of ‘Edinburgh relativism’ – especially pointing to the importance of Thomas Kuhn’s work – he summarises the sociological perspective that motivated such programmes in four key points. He argues that especially the fourth key point, the finitist claim that knowledge does not inherently imply how knowledge is to be used such that the links between knowledge and action are the foci of empirical curiosity, bespeaks the scientific attitude of ‘Edinburgh relativists’. Barnes aims to sustain this claim by pointing to the development of fruitful empirical studies carried out in naturalistic and notably relativistic spirit.

**Harvey Siegel** discusses the question of whether epistemological relativism is an incoherent position. After rehearsing Plato’s case for incoherence he examines the position of the proponents of the Strong Programme in the sociology of scientific knowledge. Siegel distinguishes between innocuous and more contentious claims to be found in their writings and examines their arguments for the latter. He focuses on the ‘no transcendence, therefore relativism’-argument; arguing that from acceptance of the impossibility to achieve a ‘perspectiveless perspective’ relativism does not follow. Despite such an impossibility, so Siegel claims, there is a sense in which we can transcend our own, actual perspective. Furthermore, drawing on the possibility of sociological accounts of the causes of the credibility of belief that conflict with the account favoured by Strong Programmers, he concludes that the Programme’s relativism is at odds with its avowed scientific status and finally falls prey to the charge of incoherence.

In the first two parts of his paper, **Richard Schantz** argues that anti-realism seems to be a necessary condition of any serious form of relativism. He deals with the debate between realism and anti-realism and defends a version of metaphysical and epistemological realism with respect to the world of physical objects in space and time. The third part examines the currently popular proposal that relativism should be characterized in terms of the idea of faultless disagreement, disagreements in which both parties can be right. Schantz criticizes this idea and argues that faultless disagreement is an illusion. Accordingly, there are only or-
ordinary disagreements, disagreements in which at most one party can be right. In the fourth part he asks what concept of truth adherents of truth relativism are working with. Schantz looks at the alternatives plausibly available to relativists but comes to the sobering conclusion that no really convincing answer has been given to this fundamental question up to now and that the prospects for giving one are pretty dim.

Magdalena Eckes, Simon Erll and André Wenclawiak are concerned with two questions: Is perception theory-laden and could this lead to epistemic relativism? They argue that the answer to the first question is dependent on how perception is conceived – conceptual or non-conceptual. Therefore, their focus is not only on classical proponents of theory-laden observation like Norwood Hanson and Thomas Kuhn, but also on McDowell as a contemporary philosopher of perception who takes the content of experience to consist of concepts. The authors try to show that non-conceptual content of perception will not lead to any serious kind of theory-ladenness and hence no relativism. If the content of experience is, on the other hand, taken to be conceptual, it is much more difficult to escape epistemic relativism.

Maria Baghramian attempts to clarify the extent and the nature of the link between the contentious doctrines of social constructivism and relativism, where the former is often identified with the latter. She distinguishes between three levels of construction, beginning with the uncontroversial claim that human institutions are socially constructed and moving via the social construction of theories, to the contentious claims that even facts are socially constructed. She argues that in each of these cases the connections between constructivist approaches and relativism are either non-existent or not quite as straightforward as critics have suggested. The aim of her paper is not to defend either relativism or constructivism, but to argue against a tendency to underestimate the strength of the arguments in favour of relativism by associating it with patently absurd doctrines.

Hubert Knoblauch relates the question of relativism to the new sociology of knowledge that – starting in the 1960s – has been at the origins of social constructivism. He argues that, whereas the notion of constructivism was diffused in various branches of the social sciences into what Hacking somewhat disparagingly called “the social construction of everything”, it was often overlooked that social constructivism *sensu strictu*
resulted from an extended phenomenological debate on the foundation of knowledge in the basic meaning of experiences. Accounting for the criticism and deficiencies of Husserl’s attempt for an ultimate foundation of knowledge, Knoblauch maintains, the reference point for knowledge of any kind was to be the mundane life-world as analyzed by Alfred Schütz. As important as the role of the life-world as a fixed (anthropological) reference point to social constructivism, the questions as to how to identify its “mathesis universalis” turned out difficult, and, according to Knoblauch, in the face of the failure (and the surrender) of the search for linguistic and cultural universals, unsuccessful. He aims to show that the critique of linguistic reductionism and the extension to communicative action leads to a transformation into communicative constructivism.

After sketching the major aspects of communicative action and communicative forms the paper finally looks at the consequences of this new approach in the sociology of knowledge on the problem of relativism. On Knoblauch’s account, while communicative action allows for a certain reflexivity, rationality is a form of belief inscribed in and presupposed by communicative action.

Martin Endress points to the idea of arguing with historicism against historicism, and thus tries to renew an argument Karl Mannheim in his most prominent Weimarian period established by configuring a type of reflexive analysis in his sociology of knowledge-approach. With Mannheim’s concept of reflective relationism, Endreß maintains, a three step analysis including the selectivity, perspectivity, and constructivity of any knowledge is established that constitutes its very historicity. He believes, that the current importance of Mannheim’s solution is due to the double-edged sword it established: arguing against the claims for validity, on the one hand, and stating a certain type of validity, on the other hand. Finally, Endreß argues that Mannheim’s historical solution of the problem in question still holds for systematic reasons.

Markus Seidel focuses on one central aspect of Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge: his exemption of the contents of mathematics and the natural sciences from sociological investigations. After emphasizing the importance of Mannheim’s contribution and his exemption-thesis to the history and development of the field and the problem of relativism, he surveys several interpretations of the thesis – especially those put forward by proponents of the so-called ‘Strong Programme’. Seidel argues
that these interpretations do not get the philosophical background and impetus of Mannheim’s contribution right. By distinguishing between naturalistic and anti-naturalistic strands in Mannheim’s work he proposes a new reading on which Mannheim did not exempt the contents of the areas in question principally or because of a lack of nerve and will. It is argued that Mannheim’s exemption-thesis rather is a consequence of his own sketchy sociological investigations of ‘the paradigm of the natural sciences’.

Eva-Maria Jung addresses the question of how Michael Polanyi’s theory of knowledge faces the problem of relativism. In the middle of the twentieth century, Polanyi introduced the concept of “tacit knowledge” that is widely used in recent approaches to cognition.

After summarizing Polanyi’s main ideas, Jung discusses his theory in relation to the problem of relativism. She argues that although Polanyi explicitly rejects relativism his discussion of scientific controversies yields certain relativist conclusions. Moreover, his theory threatens to become inconsistent due to a tension between these relativist tendencies and his epistemic and scientific realism. At the end of her contribution, Jung highlights some major similarities and differences between Polanyi’s account and recent approaches to tacit and explicit knowledge.

Bibliography


