Introduction

As already the famous example of the first philosophers shows, the problem of the relativity of knowledge lies at the very heart of any reflection on knowledge. It seems that only since the advent of the modern sciences knowledge appears to be reliable, stable and, at least potentially, accessible to anyone. The picture of a modern society carried into the future by knowledge was not least drawn by modern sociology. In fact, sociological authors like August Comte with his ‘law of three stages’ are among the major propagandists of the idea that positive scientific knowledge leads to a new form of society leaving metaphysics and religion behind. Knowledge, in this sense, is tantamount to positive knowledge which accrues, builds up and, to follow the narrative of the enlightenment belief in progress, grows into an ever better future.

As the belief in progress was slowly loosing plausibility by the “dialectics of enlightenment“ and as its implicit religious motivation as a secularized Christian eschatology was unveiled,¹ also the distinctive difference between scientific knowledge and other forms of knowledge was questioned. Paradoxically, the doubts in knowledge have been voiced by those who belong or belonged to the most fervent apologists of truth. Thus, Edmund Husserl, the mathematician and philosopher, who pledged for even philosophy to become a “strict science”, i.e. phenomenology,² ended

¹ Cf. Löwith 1949.
² Cf. Husserl 1910/11.
up with realizing the many ways in which scientific knowledge lost its
ground in the more basic knowledge of the “life world”\(^3\). “Life-world”, in
fact, refers to a concept of non-scientific knowledge which has been ad-
dressed in many strands of philosophy from Vico to Pascal, Herder and
Nietzsche. Husserl, however, gave the notion a peculiar twist in relating
it to and inserting it in science itself. As opposed to the positivist idea
excluding anything as knowledge which does not come up to its stand-
ards, Husserl tried to also account for the “non-positive” and even “non-
rational” forms of knowledge in science and by science; even more, he
took these forms as being essentially implied in the ideas and activities
of science.

As Husserl was well aware, the reflection on knowledge always implies
the question on the sociality of knowledge. Even positivism, although as-
suming a strong relation between subjective perception and objective re-
ality, concedes the necessity to intersubjectively “verify” knowledge. For
this reason, the sociality of knowledge has been an issue in the study of
science for quite some decades, and in recent years, even philosophers
seem to re-discover this issue (sometimes reducing knowledge to “cogni-
tion”). The sociality of knowledge, however, has been also an issue in a
line of thinking which seems to escape both, modern science studies as
well as the late re-discovery of the sociality of knowledge in philosophy.
Starting with Mannheim and Scheler, the sociology of knowledge already
addressed the sociality of scientific knowledge. Moreover, the sociology
of knowledge also related scientific knowledge to other forms of knowl-
edge and accounted for their differences and similarities in sociological
terms. Within the frame of the sociology of knowledge, the problem of
relativism has been formulated in a most explicit way, and it was also the
sociology of knowledge which harked back on the absolutist program
of Husserl. It was particularly Alfred Schütz who drew on Husserl’s phe-
nomenology as a foundation for the social sciences and who accompa-
nied him in his turn to the “life-world”. Due to Schütz the sociology of
knowledge lived on after the Second World War and became the core of
the huge constructivist movement in the 1960s. The “Social Construction
of Reality”, the first explicit constructivist theory in the social sciences,
labeled as the “new sociology of knowledge”, has been written by two

\(^3\) Cf. Husserl 1939.
students of Schütz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Despite the massive and continuing influence of Schütz and social constructivism on the social sciences, the anglosaxon speaking universe of social scientific discourse obviously got the sociology of knowledge out of its mind. In the German speaking world, this tradition lingered on and was, as we shall see, renewed in a way I shall designate as “communicative constructivism”.

As the sociology of knowledge and her relation to social constructivism are not part of the standard knowledge of the social sciences in the anglosaxon speaking universe of discourse, I shall shortly sketch in a very rough way the reasons why and the ways how the sociology of knowledge approached and discussed the problem of relativity. This narrative (which is partly overlapping now with my own biography) must and can remain sketchy for it builds on an impressive number of publications (and even summarizing overviews even if not always in English) on which one may draw.

In doing so, I shall, first, cover the tensions between an absolutist foundation of the sociology of knowledge and its confrontation with the critique of absolute relativism. As a consequence, second, the sociology of knowledge founded a constructivist program which tried to evade the problem of relativism by its intensive search for universals. The universalist program was importantly based on assumption on language. As Habermas’ theory of communicative action demonstrates, this assumption appears too restrictive. Therefore, third, I propose a notion of communicative action as basic element of the social construction which, thence, turns into communicative construction of reality. After a short sketch of the notion of communicative action, I turn finally to its consequence for the problem of relativism.

**From Relativity to Absolute Knowledge (and Back)**

Although the basic concept of the sociology of knowledge may be found in Weber and his analysis of the relation between religious ideas and social groups, in Durkheim and Mauss and their analysis of the correlation between categories of time, space and logic to the structures of social or-

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der and, of course, in many other attempts in sociology, the breakthrough of the sociology of knowledge came with the writings of Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim. Whereas the former put the sociology of knowledge within the context of his encompassing philosophical anthropology, Karl Mannheim (1922) was to become the representative of the relativism of the sociology of knowledge. His idea that knowledge is essentially dependent on its social position, the “Standortgebundenheit” of knowing and thinking is probably the most basic formulation of the social relativity of knowledge. Although Mannheim himself tried to escape relativism by various means, his sociology of knowledge was subject to a heated debate in pre-fascist Germany, as the collection of articles by Meja and Stehr from this time demonstrates. As one example, Robert Curtius, the then world leading expert on romanic literature, attacked Mannheim to represent “sociologism beyond measure”. The lack of any certainty, its groundlessness and its total relativity was, he augured in 1932, one of the reasons for the crisis of Germany. Although it is quite doubtful that it was the relativism and not to strive for absolutism which gave rise to German totalitarianism (as Adorno and Horkheimer argued in their “Dialectic of Enlightenment” from 1949), there is no doubt that the social relativity of knowledge was one of the major insights of Mannheim’s sociology. To Mannheim however, the “Standortgebundenheit” of knowledge, i.e. its dependence on the social position, was not to result in relativism. Instead, he suggested, on the one hand, the method of “relationism” by which the different positions of knowledge are related to one another in order to achieve a total view, and, on the other hand, the “free soaring intelligentsia” as the stratum of potential researchers of knowledge without particular knowledge bias. These and other instruments served him to compensate for the fact that virtually all knowledge claims were dependent on their social functions.

As much as one may doubt that these methods can solve the question of relativism, one should not forget another strand of the sociology of knowledge which became visible in the same year of the publication of Curtius’ article in 1932 – even if historical fate, Hitler seizing power the

7 Cf. Curtius 1932.
other year, somehow retarded its reception. It was the book by Alfred Schütz which has been translated into English as “The Phenomenology of the Social World” in 1974. (Its original German title was literally “The meaningful constitution of the social world”.) As Schütz has become, meanwhile, accepted as a classical author in sociology and one of the pillars of the interpretive turn in the social sciences (which started, one should remind younger scholars, not with Geertz but only then extended beyond sociology proper), one can justify to only roughly summarize Schütz’ major argument.

Starting from Max Weber’s foundation of sociology in social action, Schütz realized and criticized that the basic *definiens* of action, i.e. meaning, was left undefined by Weber himself. In his last systematic book posthumously published, Weber (1978/1921) started with defining the basic categories of sociology. For Weber, action is any meaningful behavior, as social action is behavior meaningfully oriented to others. The lack of a definition of meaning is quite more than just a minor problem, for Weber’s contribution was essentially to link the interpretive tradition of historicism (oriented to meaning) to the positivist tradition of sociology and the rationalist tradition of the economic action (thence the stress on nomothetic explanation in addition to historicist ideography). As the economist Alfred Schütz clearly saw, the whole thrust of Weber’s innovative approach to an interpretive sociology lay on the notion of meaning. Although Weber quite impressively demonstrated empirically how non rational meaning (e.g. of Calvinist Protestantism) entered into assumedly rational action (e.g. capitalist economic action), even in his decidedly axiomatic introduction to sociology with its many definitions he left open the very definition of meaning.

It was Schütz, then, who undertook the task of clarifying the meaning of action and social action. This would not be worth mentioning in this context were Schütz not to draw on a specific tradition of philosophy in order to clarify what is meant by knowledge: Husserl’s phenomenology. Having had based his thoughts first on the philosophy of Henri Bergson, with his book published in 1932 he turned to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl in order to solve the problem left by Weber. Husserl’s phenomenology was to remain the terminological and cognitive frame in which Schütz was determined to define the notion of meaning. As mentioned above, the attempt was made before Husserl’s “Crisis” book (which
appeared only in 1939). This timing made for a specific take on the problem of relativism. Like Husserl, Schütz (1945) started by considering phenomenology as a “strict science”. The phenomenological method, Schütz assumed, was to remedy the historical and social relativity of meaning. It was the “ultimate foundation” of meaning in the basic structures of consciousness which promised an “Archimedan principle” to sociology.

Husserl's claim to found knowledge on the basic structure of consciousness is well known. Husserl (1960/1931) assumed that the method of phenomenological reduction of one's own experiences, described in an introspective and self-reflexive way, would yield an answer to what we can consider as knowledge or, to say it in Husserl’s more exact words, how knowledge of the world is constituted by the activities of the human consciousness. Although it is well known that Husserl did not claim to result at knowledge of the world itself, which, he suggested, is bracketed by the phenomenological method, following the path of Descartes he had hoped to arrive at a “certain” source and origin of knowledge, be it the “ego pole” of consciousness as the origin of the constitutional processes or the “petites perceptions” (a notion he adapted from Leibniz) as the basic processual elements. This idea of an ultimate foundation is quite obviously a clear answer to the problem of relativism faced by Mannheim. Instead of the dependence of knowledge on the social, Husserl made it dependent on the subject, and, assuming basic structures of subjectivity, suggested to base the objectivity of knowledge in the experiences of the subject.

The program of phenomenology triggered a movement which did not just follow the writings of Husserl but took phenomenology as a method of research. As fruitful as this movement turned out to foster the phenomenological method, it led to changes, transformations and criticism of quite a number of Husserl’s original assumption which were now echoed outside phenomenology too. Particularly his attempt of providing a foundation for knowledge in the activities of the knowing subject’s consciousness was subject to major revisions which, themselves, turned into fruitful approaches. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty hinted at the essential corporeality of consciousness. Consciousness, he stressed, should not be understood as immaterial but, rather, essentially part of the body.

as embodied consciousness. Although this critique is still today voiced by practice theories, one should not forget that this criticism must be seen rather as an extension of Husserl, for Merleau-Ponty built his analysis on Husserl’s manuscripts and Husserl (1960/1931) himself had stressed the role of the body for consciousness (which is covered in the German notion of “Leib” as opposed to “Körper”). A second critique, voiced by the late Heidegger and Wittgensteinians from Peter Winch to Jürgen Habermas and, again, recent practice theoreticians, objects against the one-sided role of consciousness and argues that the presumed “phenomena” are essentially (if I may use this word here) coined by cultures and, most importantly, by certain languages as well as the way their semantics and grammar guide our ways of thinking inscribed into language.9 These culturalist objections resulted in the strong thesis of “linguistic” and cultural relativism, e.g. the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis10 claiming that even the basic categories of knowledge, such as time, space and logics, are dependent on the specific language and, thence, differ fundamentally between languages and cultures.11

And finally, it was Schütz himself who, after the adaptation of Husserl’s approach in his first book, „Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt“, contributed to the critique of Husserl and distanced himself from the absolutism of transcendental phenomenology. Already in his discussion of Husserl’s concept of transcendental intersubjectivity (1960/1931), Schütz (1966) complained that Husserl had ended up in a somewhat autistic (or, in Leibniz’ terms used by Husserl, “monadologic”) dead end when trying to explain how an individual subjective consciousness can have access to another “alien” consciousness. Schütz concluded that Husserl failed to solve the problem of intersubjectivity. This problem of “intersubjectivity” is the phenomenological version of the “problem of social order” Parsons (1937) assumed to lie at the foundation of any sociology. It concerns the question if and how, given meaning was constituted by a subjective consciousness, this meaning could be accessed, shared or related to any other subject. While Husserl believed that the social has to be, as it were,

9 This view is essentially formulated already by Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1963/1830–33) idea of an “inner form” of thinking inscribed into every language.
11 Although Whorf’s empirical evidences (e.g. from the Hopi) have been received very widely, they are subject to severe criticism. Cf. Knoblauch 1985.
pre-constituted in the individual consciousness (i.e. transcendental intersubjectivity), Schütz started to argue that intersubjectivity and sociality cannot be founded in or constituted by individual consciousness alone unless it would somehow duplicate the world and itself. As opposed to Husserl’s view, Schütz stressed that intersubjectivity and, thus, sociality is an *empirical* fact that escapes the transcendental constitution by consciousness. The notion of “empirical” here needs to be qualified for it does not mean that consciousness as the sum of experiences has to be understood as basically social. “Empirical” means, rather, that the experience of the other cannot be reduced to the “transcendental sphere” so that the other is not a phenomenon but, instead, a matter in the mundane sphere.

Schütz “mundane” solution has consequences which have been only partly elaborated. It implies that the acceptance of the other is a requirement for any form of sociality (which, as Schütz showed, builds on processes of reciprocity).12 It also implies that the other is being experienced in a way he himself calls “communicative”. While the latter’s implication will be taken up in the communicative constructivist paradigm to which I will turn below, we should focus here on the consequence of Schütz’ critique on Husserl for the problem of the relativity of knowledge. To be more exact, Schütz, rather, made three inferences from the critique on Husserl’s phenomenology: (a) he turned from transcendental to what he called mundane phenomenology; (b) he focused on the analysis of the general structures of the mundane sphere which he called the life-world of everyday life, and (c) he explicated a program for a new sociology of knowledge. Let me shortly explain these three inferences: (a) By mundane phenomenology Schütz tried to describe experiences “within the *epoché* of the life world”, that is without performing the phenomenological reduction or *epoché*, i.e. without, as he stressed, questioning the results of transcendental phenomenology in those areas not connected to the social world (which, as he asserted, remained valid in the mundane sphere). (b) The description of mundane experiences yields, as Schütz claimed, general structures. Following Husserl’s late writing, he called them “structures of the life world”, i.e. the world of the lived experience. The structures of the life world, then, are what is shared in all human’s ex-

12 This consequence has ethical dimensions which come close to theories of recognition, i.e. by Honneth 1996.
experiences. Note that experiences here include actions (as a special form of experience) so that the connection to Weber remains pertinent. (c) The final reaction to the critique on the ultimate foundation of knowledge was the creation of a new form of the sociology of knowledge. Although Schütz referred to Scheler and Mannheim, he designed the sociology of knowledge in a specific way covering the question of how “empirically” meaning can become social, i.e. “knowledge”. Maintaining that all knowledge is constituted by consciousness, related to consciousness and thus accessible to phenomenological analysis, empirically, for the real human being and for the sociologist, most knowledge is, as he called it “derived from the social stock of knowledge”. Most meaning orienting our actions is communicated to us by others. Particularly language is the crucial medium and “repository of knowledge” which he recognized quite early.

**Universalism and the Social Construction of Reality**

Soon after Schütz had formulated his critique of Husserl, he started an encompassing sketch of mundane phenomenology in what was to become his masterpiece, “The Structures of the Life-World”. While sketching the book, he unluckily passed away, leaving a number of detailed notes. It is by no means an accident that this book was finally finished by Thomas Luckmann in a congenial way (not exegetical but following the thoughts of Schütz), one of the authors who, before, had co-written “The Social Construction of Reality” with Peter L. Berger (1966). This first text on and foundation of what became known as “Constructivism” or, to be more exact, Social Constructivism, follows quite clearly (and explicitly) the problems set by Schütz. In fact, the tension between the constitution of meaning by the subject and the sociality of knowledge discerned by Schütz constitutes the very principle and basic dialectical tension of

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13 I must concede that neither Schütz nor later Berger and Luckmann really attempted a definition of the notion of “knowledge”; lacking any systematic study of the notion in Schütz, this is my understanding of the notion which I explicated in the second edition of my “Wissenssoziologie” in 2010.

14 These notes, “the Notizbücher”, are reprinted in the first German edition of “The Structures of the Life-World II” (Schütz/Luckmann 1984).

15 As Hacking 1999 quite impressively showed, constructivism has been subject to the most varied misunderstandings, misreadings and superficial criticisms.
both, the construction of the book and of social constructivism as a theory. Quite notoriously, Berger and Luckmann framed this gap in terms of a “dialectics” between a “subjective” pole and an objective, societal pole. The former relates to the subject addressed by Weber and Schütz, i.e. conscious activities which constitute meaning of experiences, actions (as one type of experiences projected into the future) and their typifications and structures of relevancies. The objective pole, as addressed by Durkheim or Parsons, relates to the knowledge constructed socially on this “meaningful” basis as it becomes “ossified” into or “objective” as social structures, most explicitly institutions and their legitimations. Our reality is socially constructed since our knowledge – and this includes scientific knowledge as well – is socially constructed, i.e. enacted by the actions guided by knowledge. The dialectics of social construction – society is the product of actors, actors are products of society – is “synthesized”, a dialectical notion not used by Berger and Luckmann, by various processes analyzed in detail and represented in the following diagram.16

Despite its dialectical surface,17 the social construction of reality followed analytically the route of conciliating the constitution of knowledge and the social construction in the paths Schütz had set. As Schütz, Berger

16 I am grateful for the design of the diagram by René Tuma.
17 Berger as well as Luckmann, felt quite dissatisfied by the Hegelian and Marxian connotations of dialectics and, except from one of Berger's books, never fell back on this notion again.
and Luckmann started with an analysis of the activities of consciousness as a pre-condition for action and any form of reality for actors. Although actors “externalize meaning”, the world is not constructed ad libitum, as Maturana and Varela (1991) seem to suggest in their radical constructionism. Rather, the constructions are dependent on (a) anthropological and (b) social restrictions. Ad (a): Already in his early critique of Husserl, Schütz had started to draw on anthropology and particularly the German tradition of “Philosophical Anthropology”, as it was founded, among others, by Max Scheler (2009/1928).18 Substituting the transcendental foundation of knowledge by the search for the “conditio humana”, Philosophical Anthropology related the activities of consciousness to their potential anthropological functions, i.e. as forms of coping with environment. The relevance of this anthropological tradition is mirrored in the social construction of reality. Instead of a radical construction of everything ab ovo, Berger and Luckmann relate the activities of consciousness, the form of action and the construction of institutions to the ‘negative anthropology’ of the human body and mind, i.e. the “lack of instincts”, the openness to environments, their plasticity and the “excentric positionality” of the condition humana, as Plessner (1970) framed the anthropological basis for human reflexivity. Ad (b): The deficiency of the human condition is compensated for by social institutions which substitute, in a way, culture for nature. These institutions are themselves the result of social actions and the coordination of respective meaning into (reciprocally expected) social patterns and structures of actions, i.e. institutions.

Without reconstructing the ensuing path of social construction (from the passing on of institutions to third parties, the resulting need for legitimation and the internalization of both, patterns of actions as well as their legitimations to individuals who, thus, become socialized subjects reproducing the reality constructed socially rather than restarting the construction ab ovo), the problem of relativity is addressed now by the new role of anthropology rather than phenomenology. Like phenomenology, philosophical anthropology was an attempt to look for the foundations of knowledge, i.e. philosophy, but it did so in the view of comparative and interdisciplinary study of the conditio humana. The biological, psycho-

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18 The role of philosophical anthropology to Schütz has most clearly be demonstrated by Srubar (1988).
logical, sociological and cultural comparison of humans and their life-forms on an ontogenetic as well as on a phylogenetic plane would result in the discovery of general and universal features of humans including the disclosure of common structures of meaning, i.e. the life-world.

As this reference to meaning makes clear, phenomenology and the quest for the reconstruction of the subjective meaning did not disappear but changed its status. One prominent example for this transformation is the way how Luckmann (1973) integrated phenomenology into a general scientific methodology. Whereas the empirical sciences, including sociology, are considered “objective” in the sense that they collect data accessible to others, phenomenology is, to Luckmann, the science of the subjective. Given the fact that all human action is uncurably (yet not exclusively) subjective, phenomenology is needed in order to clarify this subjectivity.\(^{19}\) To any science of action, therefore, phenomenology provides a preliminary clarification of its basic understanding and notions. Following the path of constructivistic theory of science, particularly Janich’s “protophysic” (1985), Luckmann (1990) designated this role of phenomenology as “protosociology”. Since phenomenology is an introspective method, its status differs from the “cosmological” sciences; it is less “objective” and less naïve, i.e. not accepting their “naïve realism” of the sciences, as he called it. (In this respect, the social sciences do not differ from the natural sciences.)

According to this model, phenomenology can still be considered a “foundational” method. It is now, however, juxtaposed or “related” to other methods in such a way that its inbuilt subjectivity, endangering the possible generalization of its observations, is to be corrected and complemented by two other methods: (a) the “cosmological” methods of the sciences studying the human body, on the one hand, and (b) the sciences studying the variety of human culture and social structure, on the other. The comparative physical anthropological study of the body, the comparative sociological study of cultures, and the phenomenological study of the subjective perspective could, therefore, be seen as relating to one another in a triangular way. By the notion of triangulation I intend to designate the method by which the findings of phenomenological introspec-

\(^{19}\) Schütz (1966) suggested to understand the “constitution” as a form of “clarification” of presuppositions.
tion are related to, corrected by and complementing, on the one hand, our knowledge of cultures, societies and their differences. As this comparison allows to get rid of “culture dependence” of phenomenology, the findings on the physical conditions of consciousness and culture allow for the comparison to other species.20

Triangulation had been no modest program. On the contrary, the correction of the structures of the life world described phenomenologically by the insights on humans and cultures were expected to yield a “mathesis universalis”, the general structures of the human life world, including the common features of consciousness.21 This claim may sound daring and overstretched today yet one should remind our postmodern and relativist contemporaries of the many attempts of “universalization” at that time, i.e. from the 1950s to the 1980s. In linguistics, for example Chomsky had laid the claim on the universal structure of language and a general structure of the mind producing it; in anthropology, Levi-Strauss laid not less daring claims on the general and universal structure of cultural knowledge while, simultaneously, the “human relations area file” program, started in 1949 at Yale University, made an attempt to collect data on all human societies, their social structures and their cultural features. Universalism was by no means a naïve and uncontested program. As mentioned above, a series of prominent researchers and philosophers questioned the assumption of universalism. The most vehement attack against universalism came from the study of language and the “linguistic relativity hypothesis” by Sapir and Whorf.22 Following the Humboldtian theses of language and its “inner form” guiding thinking, they maintained that languages differ so basically even with respect to basic lifeworldly categories (such as time) that cultures must be conceived of as essentially thinking differently – an assumption which was well attacked by the universalists. Since they were all part of the linguistic turn, i.e. the focus on language as the major aspect of the human condition, it is no surprise that language constituted the theatre of war for almost all approaches on the relativity of knowledge.

20 One of the best examples for triangulation is Luckmann’s (1979) analysis of identity which he based on a phenomenological analysis, a comparison of different cultures and the comparison to chimpanzees.
22 Cf. Gumperz/Levinson 1996.
Communicative Action and Communicative Constructivism

On these grounds, it does come to no surprise that Luckmann turned to the analysis of language and its influence on subjective orientation. The highest appreciation of language as a means of overcoming relativism, however, can be found in the work of Jürgen Habermas. In his “Theory of Communicative Action”, he argued that the use of language in action allows for the very possibility of a universal form of rationality. Following Apel in his transcendental philosophical assumptions about rationality, his empirical ideas about language are mainly informed by speech act theory. On the basis of the assumption that language performs three different functions (expressive, appealing, representative), he characterizes communicative action as (a) being oriented to others, (b) referring to something and (c) expressing some internal state. These three aspects parallel the “subjective”, the “social” and the “objective” dimensions (or, in terms of Popper to whom he refers, “worlds”) of communicative actions. Any communicative action by means of language implicitly makes certain validity claims which are related to these three aspects (truthfulness, i.e. the subjective aspect, truth, i.e. the objective aspect, and righteousness, i.e. the social aspect). The validity claim derives from the fact that communicative actions must be seen as social action. For if any (linguistic) communicative action is challenged by someone else, i.e. a next action, actors are supposed to be able to provide reasons according to the three types of validity claims inscribed in the speech act – unless they are subject to other social restrictions, such as power, social inequality etc. It is because empirically this social inequality is regularly the case that Habermas considers the validity claim as “anti-factual”. Yet, provided an “ideal speech situation” with equal actors, the use of language in action would allow for communicative rationality.

Leaving aside the problem of his general theory of social action, Habermas’ theory of communicative action suffers quite obviously from an enormous linguistic bias. It is, to Habermas, basically language which embodies the “power of the better argument” and, ultimately, communicative rationality. Moreover, even if he claims that language is to be considered in its use, he himself reduced the use of language to acts which
follow the logocentric pattern of writing rather than those of speaking (a problem he shares with speech act theory in general). To say it in more general terms, his idea of communication is guided by logocentrism and, even more, by a model of written (or even printed) text-centeredness, ignoring not only oral speech but also other bodily forms of communication and other sign forms and codes, such as diagrams, charts, or pictures (e.g. in the case of legal or scientific evidence).

What is the consequence for the problem of relativity if we take the critique of Habermas seriously? In order to answer this question, I want, first, to ask, what happens if we abandon the idea that language entails the idea of truth, or at least that communicative action necessitates the use of language? The notion of communicative action, I want to argue, still proves useful if we extend it beyond language. In being integrated into the social constructivism, this redefinition of communicative action leads to a transformation of the “new sociology” of knowledge into “communicative constructivism” and a “communicative paradigm”. Since this approach is, so to say, under construction, let me first detail the basic notion of communicative action before I turn, by way of conclusion, to its consequences for the problem of relativism.

In order to avoid the reduction of communicative action to ‘actions + (rather written) language’, Berger and Luckmann as well as Schütz already suggest the notion of “objectivation”. This notion is not only pertinent in Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) work where it is the decisive form in which externalized action becomes part of the social world. (As Habermas, Berger and Luckmann then focus on language as the “most important form of objectivation”). Also Schütz (1974/1932), in his “Phenomenology of the Social World”, stresses that intersubjectivity, i.e. sociality, depends on objectified meaning. While Schütz considers only those objectivations as communicative which are produced with “communicative intent” (“Kundgabeabsicht”), structuralists suggest to consider any material objectivation (“signifiant”) communicative which has a reference (“signifié”), be it a letter written by hand, a sound spoken by mouth or a technical device or a visual representation on a computer screen. As semiotics has made quite clear, such objectivations must by far not be restricted to linguistic signs. Also clothes, tattoos or architectural forms can

be considered as objectifications and even be codified into sign-systems or related to linguistic systematizations. As useful as this extension may be, as doubtful is the assumption that all these objectivations are signs, i.e. that they are embedded into systematic structures, i.e. that they are sign-systems like language. Although this may hold for the American Sign Language, it is already difficult to identify any systematic character e.g. in bodily behaviour or in pre-historic cultural objects. Instead of their meaning being dependent on the structure of signs, i.e. the “system”, as structuralism claims, the notion of communicative action assumes that the meaning of communication is dependent on their use, particularly on social action related to the objectivation.

In this context, the notion of objectivation as part of communicative action is intentionally ambivalent: it refers to objects as “products” of action as well as to the “production” of objectivations, i.e. the temporal process of acting as objectivation. The link between process and product is not established mysteriously. Its major reason lies in the fact that communicative action is essentially related to the body, it is a “performance”. Be it the articulation of a sound, the writing of a letter, the pressing of a button or, at least, a glimpse, it is the body which links any action to the world. It is because of the embodied character of communicative action that instrumentality is always part and parcel of oral, hand-written, printed or electronically mediated communicative action. Opposed to Habermas who distinguished categorically between “instrumental” and “communicative”, this notion of communicative action implies the instrumental because its corporeality has necessarily “effects” on the material world. It is by means of the body that meaning can become “socially visible”. Communicative action is, as Schütz suggested, a form of “working” in the sense that it changes the material world. As communicative actions affect the common environment, they contribute to the construction of reality inasmuch as they quite literally produce objectivations, be they momentary or lasting.

25 The attempts by universalists to identify e.g. universal patterns of behaviours (cf. Ekman/Friesen 1969, Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1997) are good examples for the problems raised by the assumption of systematicity.

26 Because of the importance of the body, the notion of performance here draws on Goffman (1959/1969) and the tradition succeeding him more than on the linguistic tradition.
Yet, these “effects” in the outer world are not dependent on a kind of objective “physical” observability. Instead of being “physical” or “technical”, their existence is dependent on the fact that they are experienced by others. That is to say, the criterion for objectivations is essentially social: they must be part of a “common environment” to the actors participating. Someone else must be able to experience them as something the actor is experiencing too (yet not necessarily in the same, but in a typically similar way). Or, to be more exact, objectivations are due to the fact that I am experiencing someone else to experience something as something I experience (where “experience” always may be an action).

Both ways, experience and acting performance presuppose the ability to experience, i.e. a subject, as well as the ability to assume the experience of someone else, i.e. intersubjectivity. The stress on action as communication related to a subject accounts for these presuppositions. There is no doubt that notions as to who can be perceived by me and by others as experiencing the same as I do vary massively according to the world view, so that some people may assume (or believe) to encounter dead ancestors, angels or the Holy Spirits whereas others might reduce the world to what is positively to be described, e.g. by Carnap’s “protocol sentences”. The beliefs or assumptions made by the world view are included in the “meaning” of action, and it is because of the decisive relevance of these assumptions that we cannot reduce communicative action to communication or bodily performances to “behaviour”. Inasmuch as the meaning of what is transmitted and “shared” socially (again by means of communicative action), this kind of meaning is referred to by the notion of “knowledge”. This “knowledge” which includes the assumptions about actors, objects

28 Communicative action is, therefore, always two-sided and reflexive, for the body is an object in the common environment allowing for objectivations in various modalities (visual, acoustic etc.) and, at the same time, allows to experience the common environment as well as its own objectivations in various sensational forms, visual, acoustic olfactory etc.
29 I prefer “subject” to “agency” for it better refers to the kinds of presuppositions implied in action, such as temporal continuity of experiences (“knowledge”), temporal structures, assumptions on reciprocity, all of which have been already analyzed by Schütz (1974/1932).
and actions (as well as the means of communication) constitute the subject matter of the sociology of knowledge.\(^{30}\)

When referring to the performance of the body, one should remind the adult reader as to the intricate processes by which we learn to use our body in our early socialization. Be it writing with the alphabet, speaking a language or even walking upright, all these assumedly “behavioural” processes need to be learned in very long time spans. Learning to do certain things is certainly a good example for what we call action (be it induced by others, i.e. teachers, or induced by one’s own “will”). While the notion of action refers to the process in which we reflexively turn to “do something” (even if what we want and if the will are dependent on knowledge, power or institutionalized discipline), the example of bodily conduct (e.g. gestures) also indicates that actions need not remain subject to our reflections. They can become part of a “habitus”, an embodied knowledge. As the habitualization of conduct has inspired a vivid renaissance of the notion of “practice”, the lack of any clear notion of action or subject in most theories of practice makes forget to what degree activities of consciousness are implied in “practice”, such as, for example, the sedimentation of complex experience and actions into condensed forms (as analysed by Schütz 1974/1932) or the habitualization of recurrent forms of actions and the routinization of interactively coordinated habitualized actions (analysed by Berger/Luckmann 1966). When, for example, speaking, pointing or writing on a computer keyboard, we dispose of a huge range of such habitualized actions which, and this is the point, need not be reflected any more. Since we know well that the slightest problem may cast a doubt on these habits and can make us reflect, rethink the actions or even reconstruct their (right) course, it seems to me utterly misleading to refer to these habits as “unconscious”. Because of the role of such habitualized processes in communication, it seems quite useful to consider communicative practices as important aspects of communicative actions.

\(^{30}\) Cf. Knoblauch 2005. As much as “knowledge” is transmitted, it is characterized by being adapted and adopted by the subject in order to guide their actions’ orientations. Knowledge, therefore, is not an “element” but an activity; in this sense, it is opposed to what Barnes (1977, p. 2) criticizes as the “contemplative account of knowledge” that “describes knowledge as the product of isolated individuals. And it assumes that the individuals intrude minimally between reality and its representation: they apprehend reality passively, and, as it were, let it speak for itself […]: learning and knowledge generation are thought of in terms of visual apprehension, and verbal knowledge by analogy with pictorial representation”.

As a form of social action performed by bodies, one of the major problems of communicative action consists in the coordination of different bodies. One of the solutions of this problem is, e.g., the sequential structure of conversational interaction which allows the temporal coordination of oral sounds in a way which has been intensively studied by conversation analysis.\(^{31}\) Take, for example, a powerpoint presentation, a form or “genre” of communication also widely used in scientific universes of discourse.\(^{32}\) Here, the body is not just an accidental feature of communication but, rather, adds to the construction of the meaning which is being discussed at those occasions which are considered to be the basic institution of scientific communication. As a form of social action, communicative action also needs to solve the problem of coordinating action’s motives. One example for the synchronization of motives has been demonstrated by Schütz (1962) in his analysis of answer and question sequences. For, as he shows, answers and questions only work on the basis of an inversion of the “in-order-to motive” by one actor into a “because motive”: The question posed by someone who asks in order to know something becomes the reason for the other who answers because she has been asked. Note that synchronization does not mean that actors need to have the same motives (or that they do have them reflexively) but only that motives need to correspond. Insofar as communicative actions tend to solve the problem of coordination and synchronization, they are obviously subject to institutionalization. Within the communicative framework this means that they take on certain forms with respect to the objectivations both as processes as well as products. It is these forms which stabilize the coordination of conduct and turn the synchronization of motives into fixed expectations.

The ensuing processes of institutionalization and legitimation of institutions (which has been analysed in some detail by Berger and Luckmann) provide the basis for institutional differentiation. Thus, religious experts (such as priests or prophets) are not only “institutions” but depend on certain institutionalized forms of communication (and the respective knowledge they embody) which mark religiosity (by decorum, language style, architecture etc.). Quite obviously, the differentiation of

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scientific knowledge follows a similar path. Whatever the legitimatory meaning of “reason” and “reality” may be (a meaning which, as we all know, is heavily contentious within and between the various philosophies of science), one can hardly deny that science as an institutional sphere is characterized by certain forms of communicative action, involving a certain language with its specific codes, disciplinary sub-codes and translations, types of technologies and objects (i.e. the laboratory) as well as forms of actions and motives (as laid down in methodologies and theories legitimating the fields and their claims on knowledge). The importance of communicative forms for the definition of institutions is obvious even in the current process of de-differentiation: The transformation from “mode one” science organized in terms of disciplines to a “mode two” science\textsuperscript{33} opening to the demands and requirements of non-scientific institutions (including the public) is almost tantamount to the ways how scientific forms of communication are transgressing into the forms of communication of what used to be distinct institutions, such as education, economy or politics. It is still an open question if one should describe the processes of de-differentiation as adaptation of science to other institutions, as translation or as transformation into a “knowledge society”. Nevertheless, there is no doubt as to the increasing relevance of science as institution dominating the communicative forms and the legitimations of contemporary society.

Relativity, Communicative Forms and the Belief in Rationality

While I have been trying to sketch the transformation of social constructivism into communicative constructivism, we need to come back to the question as to how the problem of relativism is approached now. Let me try a tentative answer on the basis of this preliminary sketch of communicative constructivism. On the background of the increasing relevance of science in modern society, one of the most important consequences is that what counts as “knowledge” in modern society is, in principle, itself “only” a form of communication. The proliferation of “knowledge” is virtually identical with the proliferation of certain forms of communication by which “knowledge” is marked as being produced (research) or “trans-

\textsuperscript{33} Cf. Gibbons et al. 1994.
mitted”. Whatever counts as legitimate or non-legitimate knowledge in a society is a form of communication – be it the art of performing the unlocking of a door, the articulation of a written text, the writing of an exam or the collaborative production of an oral exam. On these grounds rationality seems to become relative. Relative here means that it becomes dependent on the social relevance of certain forms of communication. For example the rationality of modern science, the rationality of occidental capitalism or the rationality of these words are just one, and one must add, culturally conventionalized form (i.e. genre) of communicative action, such as argumentation, narration, syllogism, calculus, seminars, lectures, experiments etc.

Let me repeat: As knowledge becomes relative to the social relevance of certain forms of communication, also “rationality” is only a title for certain communicative forms. Although all these forms are legitimated as more rational forms of knowledge and knowledge production than, e.g., a prayer, a game or a poem, they are, in this perspective, only a form of communication different from others by historically contingent reasons (that is because others had been already marked as, e.g., religious). By abandoning the universalistic assumption of linguistic approaches, does communicative constructivism, therefore, result in the relativism inherent in any constructivism?

Although I cannot offer a definite answer to this question, I would argue that it must almost logically be refuted for an answer which may be called the believe-in-rationality-thesis. The fact that any constructivism denies the possibility of accessing something real beyond the activities of those who are inquiring does not exclude the access to the processes of inquiry and construction themselves. Moreover, constructivism consists in the very attempt to reflect on its very possibility. While the transcendental solution relied on the capacity of the subject to reflect on its own preconditions and while the universalist solution allowed a form of abstract realism to be linked with constructivist principles, the notion of communicative action accounts for the very sociality of knowledge while relating it to socialized subjects. On the basis of the assumption that communicative action is objectivated, it can be made, by consequence, subject to reflection. We can point to what we see, we can talk about what we talk, we can demonstrate what we discover etc. The ability to reflect on one’s own communication is, I would argue, tantamount to what may be
called rationality: In communicating about communication we, in some way, observe the constructedness of our knowledge while, simultaneously, producing another construction. This reflexive double structure is a kind of “communicative rationality”. Thus, the very fact that there are people who reflect about scientific knowledge provides for some kind of rationality of science.

As opposed to Habermas who still (even if ‘counterfactually’) assumes that rationality can be realized (under ideal conditions), communicative constructivism would contend that any “communication” on “communication” differs necessarily from the communication it is about. As soon as we start to, e.g., “talk about something”, we construct something which is different from the something we talk about, and as soon as we “study” something, we construct something else than the “thing” we claim to study. Thus, it is no accident that the “study of science” never really catches science itself (but becomes a discipline on its own). If, however, communicative rationality cannot be realized, it is and remains “just an idea”. Truth, one could say philosophically (or theologically), is transcendent to communication; sociologically one could argue that it is just one cultural ”topos” of legitimation (as form of making sense of certain forms of communicative action).34

As a consequence, communicative rationality would be only an idea, a kind of belief inscribed in the forms of communication by which we produce rational knowledge (and legitimated by other forms of communication, such as theories of science or the kind of theory I am producing now). Rationality, in this sense, would not differ in any essential way from other beliefs (expressed in communicative forms), such as religious beliefs or everyday knowledge – except of one assumption: that communication is the medium by which we achieve a common understanding of our reality. Thus, Barnes’ (this volume) suggestion to induce from the falsification of most scientific theories that all scientific may be false, presupposes that we are, at least, believing in the principle of induction. As it is only the mere belief in successful communication which founds the

34 At this point, it would not be decisive if “rationality” was an occidental form, expressed e.g. in mathematics, double entry bookkeeping or systematized musical composition, as Weber argues, or if we could identify it in different cultures (or, possibly, universally).
empirical falsification of most belief in truth and rationality, it is the reflexive insight in the relativity of knowledge which allows us to escape relativism – I believe.

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