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## Constituting Understandings through Validations

Since human judgment is by nature uncertain, it gains certainty from our common sense. . . . Common sense is an unreflecting judgment shared by an entire social order, people, nation or even all human kind.

**VICO, *NEW SCIENCE***

Want of science, that is, ignorance of causes, disposeth or rather constraineth, a man to rely on the advice and authority of others. For all men whom the truth concerns, if they rely not on their own, must rely on the opinion of some other whom they think wiser than themselves.

**HOBBS, *LEVIATHAN***

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In everyday discourses we often treat knowledge as if it were an isolated independent object that sits somewhere on a shelf in our brains. And even though it is clear from the introductory chapter that I am arguing against such a perspective, it is worthwhile to dwell a little bit more in detail on what is implied in such a take on understandings. As examples for possibly isolated understandings, these will do as well as any: “Peter believes that the next party congress will bring a solution to the consumer goods crisis”; “Wolfgang knows that a vanguard party is the only way to safeguard the interests of the working people”; “Gertrud understands that one cannot run against candidates nominated by higher level party organs.” Such formulations express understandings on the basis of the formula “a person understands (knows, believes, hypothesizes . . . ) that something is (was, will, ought, might, should . . . be) the case,” or for short, “q understands that p(x)” where “q” is a person and “p(x)” is a predicated grammatical (possibly complex) object (e.g., “the house is red” “justice is desirable” “crime should be persecuted”). In speech act theory, statements of this kind are called “propositional acts.” They are that aspect of an utterance that makes a statement about the world. Even though such formulations are ubiquitous, the generalization of the underlying formula into a theory of *how* understanding *works* is troublesome because such a move relies on problematic ontological assumptions. And yet, this is precisely what a good deal of opin-

ion research, attitudinal social psychology, and some analytical philosophy implicitly do.

Looked at it with greater care, the “q understands p(x)” formula presupposes the following. First, it implies that persons and understandings are *independent* of each other, such that “q” and “p(x)” could be conjoined or separated without changing either person or understanding. More precisely, the metaphorical imagery at play in most uses of this formula is one in which “q” is imagined as a container and “p(x)” as something that can be put into it. Independence means, then, on the one hand, that the container is assumed to remain self-same no matter which “p(x)” is lodged inside of it.<sup>1</sup> And on the other it means that “p(x)” remains unaltered no matter in which container (person) it happened to be placed. The generalization of the “q understands p(x)” formula insinuates, secondly, that all the propositions in the container could be neatly inventorized: the totality of our knowledge is seen as a *catalog*. Here, too, the assumption is that items would remain identical no matter what the rest of the list is composed of. Third, the formula makes no reference to any sort of *context*, most notably to any kind of doing in which the understanding would have a place. Moreover, it assumes q to be an autonomous individual whose understandings are not dependent on his or her relations with other human beings and their respective understandings. Fourth, and as a consequence of the three aforementioned independencies, the generalized formula has nothing to say about the ways in which understandings come about, are maintained, and disintegrate. It has no sense that understandings can become institutionalized. Finally, simply because it lacks a theory of generativity, the formula assumes that “understanding,” “believing,” and “hypothesizing” are transparent kinds of activities with universal, that is, transhistorical and transcultural, validity. These points together can be summarized by saying that a model of understanding that builds on the generalization of propositional formulas is completely static; it has no sense of the dynamics of understanding, its role in lived life, in the generation, maintenance, and transformation of social arrangements.

Unpacking the imagery involved in uses of the “person understands something” formula thus brings to the fore the reifying and isolationist ontological foundations on which it rests. They are implausible for the following reasons: (1) Understandings are constitutive of who we are as persons; they are inextricably intertwined with our selves and their meanings, that is, our identities as well as our capacity to act, that is, our agency. (2) “P(x),” the predicated grammatical object of our understanding, is never quite a state

1. For a related analysis of the imagery underlying commonsense understandings of language, see Reddy 1993 and Lakoff 1993.

of the world but just a symbolization of a state of the world, and as such it is contingent on social practices of symbolization in context. While this has long been uncontroversial for value judgments, social formation needs to be acknowledged for all kinds of understandings, including facts. They too are made in a particular way by particular people in particular contexts for particular purposes. In disregard of these multiple contingencies, it would be incomprehensible how understandings came to be problematic in the first place. Taken together, these two reasons, for the ontological implausibility of a propositional theory of understanding, imply that persons exist to a considerable extent *in* their understandings, while understandings come into being only through concrete persons in concrete situations. (3) Understandings are not isolates, but they are deeply intertwined with the practices within which they are deployed and through which they are generated and maintained. Within these practices they are used in a multiplicity of ways: certainly epistemically, but also aesthetically, morally, socially, to feel good, look good, and to sound pleasing. They are also always related to other understandings, some of which we might be able to state under certain circumstances explicitly, others we could not even think of because they reflect such basic assumptions about the world that they have, as it were, long receded from view into a general background of presuppositions. (4) Understanding is nothing we do alone but something we do in complicated relationships with other people in direct contact and in socially and technologically mediated ways. The particular ways in which these relationships with other human beings are lived and organized has profound consequences for how we come to understand the world the way we do. In other words, understandings are institutions, and we need to learn how they come about in action-reaction effect flows. (5) Our processes of understanding are always informed by higher-level understandings about how they ought to work, how they must be procured, under which conditions and how they can be considered reliable, and so forth. In other words, historically and culturally distinct meta-understandings structure the ways in which we maintain, certify, and change understanding. (6) I pointed out in the introduction that the articulation of understandings through their role in guiding actions as reactions to other actions is formative of institutions. Thinking of understandings only in terms of propositions would therefore fall far short of what they actually do in social life.<sup>2</sup>

**2.** Building on Austin's speech act theory (1962) (and mobilizing the hermeneutic tradition of social thought), this generative institution-forming characteristic of understandings (usually with a limitation to discursive understandings) is often also referred to as performativity (e.g., MacKenzie 2006). Unfortunately, this use of language can lead to confusions with another important sense of the term *performance*, i.e., artfully structured action as addressed to other human beings (e.g., Herzfeld 1985; Baumann 1975; Goffman 1959). Of course, both meanings of

Simplifying this picture into a heuristic image, one could say that what we need is a way to comprehend understanding in context. Schematically, three of these contexts suggest themselves: the embeddedness of understandings in interactions with other people; the connection between any particular understanding and other understandings that the person entertaining them inhabits; and, finally, the relationship between understandings and the world at large. Since understanding is always the understanding of a concrete person in a concrete situation, we also have to trace how these three environments shape the person who is doing the understanding. I do not want to suggest that these contexts are in any real sense separable from one another. Instead, they could be thought of as the dimensions of a space in which they can intersect. One could speak in this sense of a social, a doxic, and a referential dimension spanning up a space within which understandings are constituted with varying degrees of actuality. The question arising now is *how* these contexts actually do their constituting work on particular understandings. And the answer is: they do it through the three forms of validation for which I have provided only a rough sketch in the introduction. The following three sections offer important pieces for a phenomenology of each form of validation. Since the focus of the discussion is the processual link between understandings and the social, doxic, and referential contexts, each section is prefaced by a brief discussion of pertinent major issues that have been raised in the literature about this link. Thus the social dimension is introduced by a quick review of the seminal contributions of Mead and Wittgenstein to our comprehension of human sociality. The section on the doxic dimension begins with a discussion of *meaning holism*. And the referential dimension opens with a critique of poststructuralist writers' overemphasis on the linguistic that led them to disregard the experience of the world's resistance to our interpretations.

### THE SOCIAL DIMENSION: RECOGNITION

Arguably the twentieth century's two most important contributions to our comprehension how human beings are irreducibly social are George Herbert Mead's (1934) theory of self-formation, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1984b) argument about the impossibility of entertaining a language privately. Even though neither was primarily concerned with the concept of understanding, the bearing of their work on a sociology of understanding

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performativity are closely related to each other, even if they are not identical. Performance as artful communication is often an invitation to produce "uptake" in Austin's sense, that is, to react to it in a particular way and thus to close one element of an action-reaction flow forming institutions. In other words: performance is often undertaken in the interest of performativity.

is readily appreciated. Mead teaches us how we can think of selves as woven from understandings emerging and tested in conversation with others, and Wittgenstein is indispensable to see why understandings need to be maintained in interaction on an ongoing basis within a connected social whole. From both authors we can learn how our inner lives are laminated on our interactions with other human beings.

### Selves and Identities in Context

Orienting us, understandings form the interface between human beings and the world, as I have argued above. George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934) provides us with a process model of how we come into understanding as an integral part of self-formation. Self is, for Mead (135–37), the capacity for reflexive thought, which requires us to be simultaneously the reflecting subject (“q”) and the object reflected upon (“p[q]” in the notation used above). For him, reflection is essentially internal conversation in which we are speaker and addressee at the same time. In other words, the self can say sentences like “As a good communist I should overcome my petit bourgeois sensibilities,” or “How come I love this man? He’s a communist!” This faculty to reason emerges, according to Mead, in conversation with other human beings. Our status as self has its origin in an identification with our interlocutors who address us, thus creating in us the capacity to become the addressee of our own address.<sup>3</sup> A self is born precisely at the moment when we can begin to anticipate successfully (which necessarily means symbolically represent to ourselves) the other’s reactions to our conversational moves. At this moment, anticipation and reaction begin to correspond or agree with each other for all practical purposes (if not wholly in substance, then at least in form). More precisely: the fact that the other acts as anticipated *recognizes* our anticipation; it certifies our understanding of the flow of communication. As internalization of external communication this means that our relationship to ourselves is mediated symbolically through culturally available gestures, images, and discourse. Through symbolic mediation we also attain a temporality comprising a future in symbolic anticipation, a present in action and a past in making ourselves an object, for example, by representing to ourselves what we have just done. This horizon of temporal unfolding is the basis of the peculiarly narrative character of the self (e.g., MacIntyre 1984; Nehamas 1985; Ricoeur 1984; Linde 1993; Somers 1994).

By describing self-formation in communicative attunement and its in-

3. “Object” here means grammatical object, or simply the recipient of communication. Within the Meadian use an object can be addressed both in an objectifying way (Lukács 1968) (as I-it or even me-it) and a more dialogic fashion as I-you (Bakhtin 1984; Buber 1995).

ternalization at a more encompassing level as “role-taking,” Mead acknowledges that this process is suffused with particular understandings, some semantically explicit, others presupposed in the pragmatics of the context of interaction. There is at the very least a differentiation between speaker and listener, both understood as subjectivities capable of entering communication. Typically there are also references to the world, and the interaction builds on the presupposition that particular kinds of speech acts (“making contact,” “greeting,” “request,” “jokes,” etc.) will be properly identified by the other.<sup>4</sup> Such understandings informing the action-reaction effect flow of communication are rich in identifications—qualitatively differentiated links between speaker, listener, and world.<sup>5</sup> Recognition of these communicated identifications actualizes them, and thus self and substantive understandings of the world come to be inextricably intertwined. In other words, the self acquires meaning, an identity that positions self in the world. Being recognized as a “comrade” in conversation, where “comrade” is imbued with particular behavioral expectations of exercising a firm class standpoint and of practicing self-objectification, persons may begin to treat themselves as “comrades” by expecting of themselves what their interlocutors have expected of them all along. Eventually, they are comrades. A particular self-understanding thus comes to be actualized, informing actions, thus forming institutions.

This example highlights yet another aspect of Mead’s model, which however he leaves unexplored. The communicative process is imbued with understandings about the particular *quality* of the interactional relationship—for example, as an egalitarian, hierarchical, cozy, cold, desiring, rejecting, permissive, punitive one. Following the logic of internalization this quality of the external relationship becomes the quality of the gaze in which a person looks upon him- or herself. In this way, understandings of particular forms of sociality translate into qualitatively specific forms of reflexivity. These are, then, not neutral universal modes of self-relationships, pure thought as it were, but historically contingent ways of relating to oneself and thus of thought, which accordingly comes in many shades and gradations. This has

**4.** Mead makes no effort to specify the gradual emergence of the self from birth to its recognizably selflike appearance in toddlers. Tracing this path poses exceeding difficulties, as one has to be extremely careful about what kinds of mental and communicative abilities are presupposed when, to show then how they are expanded into new terrain. However, Mead very self-consciously bases his model on simple forms of gestural exchanges. But these too have content, however simple. For a more updated developmental psychological take on self-development that has been inspired by Mead (and psychoanalysis) see Stern 1985.

**5.** I am drawing on the theory of identify formation processes I developed in *Divided in Unity*. This theory centers on the notion of acts of identification that, where recognized consistently, can become relatively stable identities.

considerable consequences for the ways in which we need to think about reason and the possibility of critique. If particular forms of deliberation are not practiced in interaction with others, they fail to form as a full-blown capacity of internal reasoning (cf. Volosinov 1973; Vygotsky 1978). More, the development of a particular form of reasoning in one content area does not automatically transfer to other domains of understanding (Luria 1976). This insight will be useful in exploring the question of why Stasi officers had difficulties raising particular kinds of questions why they stalled along with the whole party leadership in forming a more thorough-going critique of actually existing socialist institutions. It will also help us comprehend why dissidence did not proceed from a full-blown critique of socialism, instead developing it gradually with expanding conversational possibilities.

Mead ponders the possibility of a radical fragmentation of the self into as many selves as there are conversation partners (e.g., 142). This is an important point deserving further elaboration. I want to take it into two different, if related directions. First, seeing self in a perspective of ongoing action-reaction effect flows suggests that it is much better understood as a name, as a potentially objectifying shorthand for the process of continuing self-formation that may look like a structure only to the degree that it is continuously reproduced in a self-similar fashion as a set of qualitative identifications (i.e., a self-understanding) and a mode of thought (i.e., a self-relationship). Thus I propose to see *selves* as *institutions* in the sense that I have described them in the introductory chapter. As such, they may change in the course of action-reaction effect flows, especially as old conversation partners drop out, new ones come in and the topics of conversations and their references to the world change. Seen in this way, the self is a multiplex institution differentiated by a multiplicity of qualitatively distinct action-reaction effect sequences. Ongoing varieties of sociality map onto varieties of thought styles; the diversity of identifications deployed and recognized in diverse strands of communication congeal into diverse identities. The degree to which these modes of thought and identifications cohere is dependent on the coherence of the self-generating and maintaining conversations in which a particular person is involved.<sup>6</sup> Again this has consequence for the possibilities to formulate particular kinds of critiques. In any given situation, a person may switch selves, that is, use different modes of reflexivity. Their likelihood of use may also be distributed over the various contexts in which a person maneuvers. What I will take from Mead, then, is the notion of selves as always already existing in substantive understandings of the world,

**6.** A parallel emphasis on plurality in seeming unity is provided by Bakhtin's analysis of speech (e.g., 1986, 60–102; 1981, 259–422).

as operating in modes qualitatively shaped by the kinds of conversations in which they take form, as plural and thus possibly ambiguous or even contradictory, and finally as an ongoing process more or less solidly institutionalized at any given point in time.

The epistemic practices and ideologies of real socialism were not only compatible with this Meadian version of the constitution of persons by their understandings, but also the entire project of an ideology-driven social transformation was in an important sense based on it. This is not much of a surprise given the fact that Marx himself argued throughout his work that the particular form people take (e.g., as bourgeois or proletarian) is historically contingent. In actually existing socialism both the good party soldier and the class enemy were defined by how they understood the world and how they acted in it. The “new man” that socialism hoped to engender was thought to become new through the absorption of socialist understandings and socialist work practices and a particular socialist way of reflexivity that hinged upon the partisan self-objectification of the party member in light of the party’s historical task as defined by its current leadership. The internalization of socialism’s substance was hoped to bring about a transubstantiation of human beings. The unity and monolithicity I have described as an ideal of socialist vanguard parties in the last chapter could only be achieved by aspiring to a total party-controlled environment. In other words, the new man as a planned, thoroughly reconfigured institution was—if we take Mead seriously—only thinkable in a totalitarian society. And the more this measure would have succeeded the more self would have become unitary, with all the adverse consequences this has, for example, for creativity (see chapter 4, p. 239 ff.). Conversely, incomplete totalization could be expected to lead to ambiguities and contradictions and then to the feared “ideological uncertainties.” This is precisely what the leading agents of the party state abhorred and consequently tried to prevent for the sake of socialism’s self-realization.

### **Maintaining Understandings as Institutions**

With Mead, one can argue that understandings are social in as far as they are wrapped up with the genesis and reproduction of the self in social interaction. Wittgenstein (1984b) has provided a different rationale for the irreducibly social nature of human beings with his argument that it is impossible to sustain a language privately (i.e., in isolation from society). Wittgenstein’s argument inspires my own theory in much the same way as Mead’s does by radically challenging the distinction between a private, mental interiority and a public, social exteriority. Wittgenstein’s argument, the core of his later

philosophy, takes its departure from the question of what it means to follow a rule.<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein moves toward an answer to this question by wondering *how* we could possibly *know* that someone is following it. Seen in this light, the central problem becomes finding a criterion that can be used to tell rule-following from random behavior. However, the very notion of an adjudication of rule-following in reference to criteria is problematic, as Wittgenstein points out. Behavior, that is, a necessarily finite trajectory of action, can never be a sufficient reason to ascertain conclusively that somebody has followed a particular rule, let's call it R.<sup>8</sup> One can always argue that the person in question has followed another rule, let's call it R', which is congruous with the exhibited behavioral trajectory but deviates from R elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> In other words, any person who seems to act in perfect accordance with R can always suddenly deviate from R and argue that he followed R' all along, pointing to the trail of behavior as evidence. The connection to my own argument is that rule-following is about stability or replication of action across time. In the introduction I argued that where this is met with constancy in reaction institutions emerge.

Another way to put Wittgenstein's point is to say that understanding left to its own devices is adrift in a sea of endless deferments. The individual rule follower is like a smoker trying to quit: "one more cigarette" is nothing but one more behavioral instance after which quitting is just as plausible as it was before. Wittgenstein goes through a number of potential (individualistic)

**7.** The literature on Wittgenstein's notion of rule-following is enormous. There have been fierce controversies about what he meant exactly with his argument conveyed in collections of aphorisms. Much of the more recent philosophical debate as it has become important in the social sciences has centered on Kripke's (1982) interpretation and its critique, for example, by Baker and Hacker (1984). In the social sciences arguably the most prominent debate is that between David Bloor and Michael Lynch. Bloor's interpretation of Wittgenstein (1983) is central to his "strong program" for the sociology of knowledge (1991). In a nutshell, Bloor's point is that rules on their own cannot cause action. What we need is a consideration of external social factors such as interests. Lynch's ethnomethodological critique (1992) zeros in on Bloor's understanding of rules critiquing his view that practice is something external to rules, while also refuting his causalist program. Bloor has presented a revised version of his interpretation (2002 [1997]). My own account of Wittgenstein has learned from both opponents while steering an independent perhaps even idiosyncratic path.

**8.** Logically this problem is related to the problem of induction. See, for example, Popper 1971.

**9.** The following simple visualization might help to appreciate this point. Imagine a two-dimensional space in which one dimension signifies time, the other some measure of behavior. Any finite number of points in this diagram (i.e., particular instances of behavior) can be connected through an infinite number of functions (i.e., general rules), which all include the points. On the basis of the fixed set of points alone, there is no criterion by which one could rationally decide that they embody the one function rather than the other.

solutions to the problem (e.g., to think of rule-following as a disposition, or the difference that objectification in written form would make) but in the end finds that they all end in an aporia. They simply reproduce the same problem at another level.<sup>10</sup> Rule-following must therefore be anchored in something other than the movement of justificatory reason alone. And that other for Wittgenstein is a *practice* (1984b, no. 202):

Therefore, following a rule is a practice. And to *believe* that one follows a rule is not following a rule. And therefore one cannot follow a rule “privately,” because in this case believing one is following a rule would be the same as following a rule. (Emphasis L. W.]

Practices are for Wittgenstein firmly anchored in a relevant community that simply agrees that a rule is indeed followed (no. 241).

So you are saying, that the agreement between human beings decides what is right and what is wrong?—Right and wrong is what people say; human beings agree in *language*. This is not an agreement of opinions, but of life form.

It is not rule-following that produces agreement, but ultimately it is agreement—indeed mutual recognition, shared understandings, a common culture—that certifies rule-following.<sup>11</sup> Agreement is the more basic fact.

This raises the question of what Wittgenstein means with “practices” and associated terms such as “training” (*Abrichten*), “custom,” “tradition,” or indeed “institution,” which he uses throughout his later work in similar ways. Unfortunately, he does not define any of these concepts directly. To draw from this the conclusion that they are not important is a mistake (Bloor 2002). For he introduces related concepts of his own that are of central significance for his late philosophy. His notion of “language-game” (1984b, no. 7) emphasizes how speaking and doing are closely intertwined with each other, forming simply two aspects of one reality. Hence he argues that the meaning of speech has to be understood in use (e.g., no. 10). His concept of a “life form” has to be understood as an assembly of language games (no. 23), part intentionally fabricated, but for the most part the concatena-

**10.** The philosophical argument aside, one may wonder about empirical counterexamples. So what about the psychotic who steadfastly continues to believe in being a reincarnation of Einstein or Lenin? What about the genial inventor and the *poète maudite* hanging on to their ideas against the tides? cursory evidence would suggest that all of these could be accounted for in Wittgensteinian terms.

**11.** The similarity with Durkheim’s (1997, 40) formulation—that “We should not say that an act offends the common consciousness because it is criminal, but that it is criminal because it offends that consciousness”—is of course not an accident; institutions exist in agreement or better, in regularized action-reaction effect flows.

tion of unintended consequences (no. 18). In short, empirical sociality is central to his late philosophy.

What precisely have we gained from these considerations for our understanding of how rules are maintained, how understandings come to be stabilized? Three insights in particular strike me as important. The first is an ontological clarification. Rules would be misunderstood as autonomous devices that once implanted in our brain continue to function as they are supposed to. Instead, rules are institutions necessarily maintained in the process of ongoing action-reaction effect flows; other people need to certify rule-following. Says Wittgenstein (1984a VI:32): “A game, a language, a rule is an institution.” I have already made use of this when I described what it means to develop processes of understanding into portable forms of understanding in the introduction. Stable mental life is social. What follows from this is that understandings not propped up by social input are subject to entropy. They will disintegrate, that is, they will be forgotten. So here is also at least one-half of an argument of why memory as the maintenance of particular understandings is social. The second important conclusion is that the stability of one process (such as following a rule) can only be understood in reference to the stability of another, ultimately even other *kinds* of process. Most notably, Wittgenstein’s recurring emphasis on the very corporeality of practice (which is compatible with what Foucault [1995, 1978] has to say about disciplines) amounts to an argument that for purposes of regularization discursive understandings have to be laminated onto kinesthetic ones.<sup>12</sup> The third implication is that there is stability in number. This is what grounding rule-following in practice really means. We gain stability in understandings by involving ourselves in networks of relationships in which we check each other. And thus regularity is conceivable only as an intersubjective reality, an institution, which none of us controls individually even though all of us contribute to

**12.** Wittgenstein does not provide any reasons why this is so. And yet it is easy to make at least intuitive sense of it. Corporeal skills such as swimming and or bicycling are much less subject to forgetting than, let’s say, our skills in calculus. In other words, the latter kinds of skill need much more “maintenance work,” renewal in doing, than the former. This may very well have something to do with the organization of our nervous system. It clearly fulfills certain functions (e.g., heartbeat, certain chemical properties of the blood and the organs) without fail, and as far as we know today without social input. We also know that some of the “bodily rules” hang on other physical regularities produced outside of the body, such as night and day rhythms. The age-old literature on mnemonics (e.g., Yates 1966), as well as the social scientific investigation of memory practices (e.g., Halbwichs 1992 [1925]; Connerton 1989; Olick and Robbins 1998; Olick forthcoming), have also explored how in particular kinesthetic understandings can help to stabilize discursive ones. The most important reason, however, is a peculiarity of corroboration with respect to kinesthetic understandings that I will explore below. Kinesthetic understandings are much more easily corroborated than discursive ones.

its maintenance. The social as something distributed across people, localities, and times introduces interactionally generated force toward a common center of epistemic gravity (Kahneman and Tversky 1982).

Wittgenstein's argument remains essentially an impossibility theorem, showing that individuals cannot possibly do what they appear to be doing when left to their own devices. There is no autonomous reason lodged somewhere in the depths of our brains. What is missing is the positive side of the story, an account of *how* precisely the social can stop the regress of rule-following. Wittgenstein merely asserts that it does. This is where the sociology of understanding with its emphasis on processes of validation comes in. The form of validation that ties understandings to social relationships is recognition.

### Recognition

The gist of how recognition as a validating force comes about can be nicely illustrated by quotations taken from two men who were concerned—each in his own way—with the codification and canonization of knowledge precisely at a time when truth claims came to be interrogated more widely, thus triggering a renewed search for a reliable basis of knowledge. The first stems from the late 1790s sketches to a general encyclopedia by Prussian romantic poet Friedrich von Hardenberg, who is perhaps better known under his pen name Novalis (1993 [1798], 29): “It is certain, that my opinion gains much, as soon as I know, that somebody else is convinced by it.”<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, albeit with an interest not in building but in dismantling certainty, Samuel Johnson declared two decades earlier: “Every man who attacks my belief, diminishes in some degree my confidence in it.” (Boswell 1945 [1791], III:3, April 1775). Novalis's and Johnson's central point is that the agreement or disagreement between two people about a particular understanding has epistemic consequences in validating or invalidating it. I call the effect on validity resulting from the comparison of understandings between two people *recognition*; where ambiguous I will qualify it as positive or negative depending on whether it is enhancing or depreciating credibility.<sup>14</sup>

**13.** I have rendered it here in my own translation. In the English-speaking world it has circulated in a multiply flawed—if aesthetically more pleasing—translation quoted by Thomas Carlyle: “My conviction gains infinitely the moment another soul will believe in it.” In this form it became the epigraph to Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*. It is a brilliantly chosen epigraph, because the whole novel can be read as an exploration of this one line.

**14.** It is important to distinguish negative recognition from misrecognition. In negative recognition the ordering of the understandings is comprehended by the other, albeit rejected as untrue, inappropriate, misleading, etc. In misrecognition, it is the ordering process that is not comprehended by the other. If you like, negative recognition is an agonal aspect of com-

Novalis and Johnson limit themselves to discursive understandings. It is important to note, however, that emotive or kinesthetic understandings can also be recognized. A laughing response to a joke that meets other laughter may be validated through it. Conversely, persons who smile happily in a circle of sour faces will sense very quickly that their emotive expression meets with disapproval and may stop in consequence. Likewise, dancers, musicians, or soccer players will find that their movements are, in training and performance, subject to signs of an approving or disapproving nature.<sup>15</sup>

From the discussion of Novalis's and Johnson's aphorisms it is probably clear that recognition takes the form of an action-reaction effect flow. As long as our understandings appear tenuous to us we are probably seeking to find further validation for them. At some times this may take the form of an active search. We directly and indirectly ask people whom we suspect to have better knowledge than we do. At other times, we merely stumble upon other people's evaluation of understandings that we cannot help but notice. No matter whether a question is followed up by an answer, or whether another's pronouncement of the validity of a particular understanding is followed up by an attentive mulling over it, it takes two actors to produce the validating effect.

### Networks of authority

Not everybody's communication of agreement or disagreement about every kind of understanding has a recognizing effect. Instead, we usually have a well-developed sense about who is an authority on something and who is

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munication, a talking against each other; misrecognition is miscommunication, a talking past each other.

**15.** Axel Honneth (1992) triggered, with his book *The Struggle for Recognition*, a debate in political theory explaining the notion of recognition as part of a politics of identity. My discussion makes probably clear, that I mean something related and yet different with "recognition" than the two authors who have shaped the debate on the "politics of recognition" probably more than anybody else, Charles Taylor (1994) and Axel Honneth (1992). I do not want to discuss either of their contributions or the debate at any length here because their project is a very different one. Just so much needs to be said in order to avoid confusion. When they are concerned with recognition they are primarily concerned with the affirmation of an identity that is already formed (see Markell 2003 for a pertinent critique along these lines). As such the term has acquired much currency in the debates about the meaning of multiculturalism. By contrast, when I talk about recognition I am interested in the communicative processes that constitute understandings as institutions. Since these understandings can also pertain to self in the world, while understandings more generally form our interface with the world, one could also say that I am by comparison interested in the question of how identities come about in the first place (see also Glaeser 2000).

not. This was clear to Novalis (1993) as well; he continues his musings about the effects of agreement: “An authority makes an opinion mystically appealing” (29). What he means by “mystically appealing” is probably a combination of two factors. We are, in crucial ways, dependent on the opinion of others, who thus become authorities with the power to recognize our understandings. The “mystical appeal” of authority lies simply in the capacity of organized others to stop Wittgenstein’s infinite regress of rule following, which is to say that authority puts the agony of doubt in suspension. And as I have argued in the introduction, doubt may be agonizing because it puts limits on our capacity to act. Here lies the clue to why, in the absence of authority, we may even listen to random others in spite of the fact that their understanding seems no more “informed,” “better,” or “judicious” than ours. The other reason why authority may be “mystically appealing” is because sometimes we simply do not know why the other appears to us as an authority. A self-reassured performance may be as much its source as good looks, credentials, or demonstrated expertise.

There is often more to epistemic authority, however. Our experiences of the world are often unordered, our understandings of it inchoate. In such a situation the understandings voiced by others may help to arrange them into well-ordered appearances that ease orientation considerably. Such work of *articulation* is an important source of epistemic authority, which may seem mystical, indeed, especially where it is based, as in the case of the soothsayers, on either profound empathic qualities or on hidden knowledge about the other and the world in which he or she desires to succeed. This is the authority of the guru. However, there need not be anything mystical about authority. The modern notion of expertise typically confers epistemic authority as a result of hard labor in organizations in which it is trained and subsequently certified. Yet, expertise may also derive from successful practice; many of us bring cars to repair shops not because they are certified, but because those around us swear that they have done a good job in the past. Intimacy, too, can bestow particular kinds of epistemic authority. We turn to partners, friends, or close kin when it comes to matters of understanding ourselves, other human beings, and/or issues of right and wrong. Precisely for reasons of the high degree of differentiation of epistemic authority (e.g., Abbott 1988; Collins and Evans 2007), it makes much more sense to speak about issue- and context-specific *networks of authority* as the social backbone of validation rather than of epistemic or “interpretive communities” (e.g., Fish 1980 in extension of Wittgenstein 1984b).

Taking somebody else for an authority on particular understandings in particular contexts is itself an understanding. Ideas and practices that confer authority on somebody are therefore among the most important meta-understandings organizing processes of recognition. Epistemic authority

is eminently political because it can be a significant wellspring of power, as Hobbes already noted with keen eyes (1994, chap. 10). Accepting others' authority to validate our understandings means to give them the power to play a role in our making and remaking as agents. All notions of human difference (including those of race, class, gender, nation, etc.) matter in this regard because they typically distribute authority. Evidently, then, while effective recognition presupposes authority, authority itself has to be recognized. It is one of Hegel's (1986) lasting achievements to have seen this dynamic relationality of authority as at once recognizing and in need of recognition. With a philosophical analysis of the relationship between master and servant, he tries to illuminate how asymmetrical authority relationships are fatally mired in self-contradictions. According to him, the master's self-understanding as master needs to be agreed to or recognized by the servant. Yet, that agreement is worth nothing if not given by someone considered an authority. And Hegel takes authority to be constituted by the freedom to give or withhold this agreement. However, servants are not usually in a position to converse freely with their master and certainly need to guard their opinions if they deviate from those of their masters. Servitude, therefore, makes a truly dialectical co-constitution of master as master and slave as slave impossible because of a structural contradiction between the master's need for recognition, which for want of the servant's authority cannot be produced.

From this, Hegel and his followers have derived an impetus for social transformation in the direction of a liberal polity in which all are formally equal (Honneth 1992). Given the model of validation I am presenting here, this is, sociologically speaking, anything but inevitable. All that is needed to stabilize the master's belief in his superiority is the recognition of this understanding by *some* others who are deemed authorities in this limited respect. That role can be played perfectly well by a combination of two different kinds of recognition: one by peers as equal and the other by subordinates as superior. Every leader, every expert has a keen sense of the value of these dual sources of recognition—as expert certified by coexperts and as authority recognized by the less informed seeking advice. If this is so, then the liberalism seen as the inevitable outcome of the master-servant dialectic is already presupposed in it. Only if equality is already assumed in the master's need for recognition by the slave does a contradiction occur. And only then does the dynamic proceed as imagined by Hegel and his followers. The point to learn from the misfiring of this argument is simply that just like in the case of action-reaction effect flows more generally, recognitions, including those constituting authority, need not be mutual or symmetric. They can be distributed in qualitatively differentiated ways over complex networks.

There is another interesting side to the relationship between recognition

and authority. Given particular meta-understandings and ways in which networks of authority are maintained as institutions, they can begin to feed on one another in such a way that knowledge comes to be certified in a circular way. If the ascription of authority is constituted by agreement in particular understandings, then disagreement about them puts authority at risk. Had Erich Honecker ever openly expressed doubt that history's path to communism is inevitable, the rest of the SED leadership would probably have found him unfit to rule. Whole networks of authority can be built on the assent of its members to a core set of understandings. At the same time, this assent endows them with authority, the right to speak up, and the right to the attention of others. Most ideology-based organizations, churches, or political parties operate this way, as do partisan media. The effect of this short-circuiting of authority and recognition can be the removal of particular understandings from critical scrutiny, while they are at the same time continuously certified as well-validated knowledge. Understandings thus maintained are dogmas. They are a common feature of social life. Culture has in this sense a dogmatic core. Enlightenment's unease notwithstanding, dogmas need not be problematic if they are well suited to guide the actions they are de facto orienting and directing. They are also less problematic if the various authorities involved in the formation of dogmas maintain a degree of independence, because they can draw sources of validation distinct from the assertion of the dogma. This was Stalin's problem with men like Trotsky or Bukharin, men who had acquired charismatic authority before and during the revolution, and who could therefore credibly entertain a critique of the currently favored party line. Finally, dogmas are easier to question when meta-understandings emerge that require that they need to be certified in more ways than through the mere recognition by members of the network.

At this point it is useful to consider the emotional dimension of agreement, which was so important to both Johnson and Novalis. Agreement with our cherished understandings makes us feel socially integrated, in touch with other people. It signals to us that we are not alone, and thus it tends to be associated with the positive range of feelings. If we consider our understandings as accomplishments, we may also feel pride; if they are just dear to us, we may simply feel at ease through others' recognition. If agreement seems paramount we may even feel elated. Universally cheered we may feel as if we were walking on water. The underlying reason for this is the link between understandings and agency, which I have dwelled upon in the introduction. No wonder then, that agreement as trigger of positive emotions is such a strong tonic for making and maintaining affirming social relations. Conversely, disagreement with a valued interlocutor produces feelings of isolation. In the absence of strong countervailing meta-understandings that shelter the quality of social relations (such as various kinds of intimacy), dis-

agreements threaten relationships. Depending on how we relate ourselves to the understandings negatively recognized, we may feel ashamed, sad, or angry. Beyond all the rational reasons we may give for the justification of authority on the basis of agreement, there is, then, a powerful emotive process at work that can, in the absence of countervailing meta-understandings, lead to the authorization of those who make us feel good and the deauthorization of those who make us feel bad. Hence the folk and literary topoi of the seductive “pseudofriend” whose ingratiating counsel propels us into tragic failure by recognizing clay-footed understandings and the “misrecognized real friend,” the value of whose uncomfortable but ultimately sound counsel we come to value far too late.<sup>16</sup>

### Communicating recognition: Intentions versus effects

In the last chapter I presented GDR socialism as carrying an agenda of social transformation that has increasingly focused on the *intentional* transformation of people’s political understandings through propaganda. The main instrument to accomplish this goal was the spoken and written word, that is, the dissemination of particular sets of discursive understandings and their subsequent repeated recognition through multiply redundant propaganda channels. However, as speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) has reminded us, a communicative intention is neither identical with its performance nor with its reception and effect. There are many reasons why intention, act, and reception do not necessarily match up, even where the interlocutor is a competent speaker and accepted as an authority by the receiver. I will outline the most important ones in what follows because they shine a critical light on the party’s project of consciousness-driven social transformation.

Agreement is communicated in fine shades and gradations in the interplay of several simultaneous levels of semiosis. Beyond literal word meaning, the minutest variations in speech patterns (word choice, grammatical

**16.** In a pioneering work Randall Collins (2004) describes a process similar to the emotional effects of agreement just outlined in terms of the generation of “emotional energy,” which he links to agency. He argues that people produce emotional energy in *interaction rituals* (a term borrowed from Goffman) by rhythmically attuning to each other in bodily co-presence (47–48). This process dynamic too, claims Collins, is productive of social relationships. For that a clearer understanding of what emotional energy is—that is how it operates—would be useful. The sociology of understanding provides an alternative account, offering more clarity about how the phenomena Collins’s describes come about. Rhythmic attunement is tantamount to the mutual recognition of emotive and kinesthetic understandings in performance. It will become clear in what follows (most notably through the dialectics of recognition discussed in chapter 4) how this agreement is mutually authorizing and thus productive of social relationships. At the same time it enhances agency in specific domains by actualizing understandings.

construction, stress, rhythm, sentence melody), as well as in gestures, body postures, and facial expressions, can appease doubt or raise it, affirm understandings or undermine them. In the flow of everyday interaction it is impossible to attend to and calculate in advance all the validating consequences our performances may entail. Therefore, our intentions to recognize specific understandings, even where they are absolutely transparent to us, and our performances, do not neatly map onto each other. In fact, it is probably fair to say that we inadvertently exude recognitions at least as much as we consciously pronounce them. In performative slips, such as unruly verbal concoctions, dry laughter, or sudden bodily retreats or advances, we recognize others' understandings unconsciously. Through guttural grunts, the slightest nods, and even more so by unfazed, questionless silences we affirm background assumptions about the world that have long escaped our conscious attention.<sup>17</sup> As the phenomenologists (e.g., Schütz and Luckmann 1984) have argued and the ethnomethodologists (e.g., Garfinkel 1967) have amply demonstrated, the recognizing character of such performances becomes perceptible to us often only in breeches against which we may act—with the Samuel Johnson in us—quite violently. In consequence, many understandings become positively or negatively recognized in performance without being thematically highlighted. Every appropriate response to an address is a recognition of the fact that we know how to address and be addressed; every laughter answering the intentional efforts to produce it recognizes a person's ability to crack jokes along with her knowledge about what is supposedly funny.

Given the multiplicity of communicative channels, attempting to control recognition across all levels of semiosis is hard labor. If at all, it can only be produced with a combination of extremely tight discipline and minute preparation. Yet we undertake this labor in particular situations, because we know that recognizing communication is productive of relationships, understandings, and ultimately of institutions. This is especially the case where our explicit situational understandings make this clear—for example, in those domains of interaction that Austin (1962) originally used as paradigm cases for speech acts, such as naming or contracting practices. Because of the awareness about consequences such situations are also fraught with particular anxieties directed at the efficacy of the performance. Almost inevitably, attempts at perfect control of potential recognition lead to rather rigid actual communications. The language of international diplomacy and tele-

**17.** In highly controlled communicative situations the breakthrough of deep motivations and background assumptions into controlled performance is therefore seen as a particularly interesting boon of informational value promising insight into something “real” behind the facade of make believe. In public discourses they are as “gaffes” at once celebrated and played down.

vised debates between political candidates are cases in point. Politicians in contemporary parliamentary democracies need the skill to talk a lot without committing to much while asserting their own competence through the style of their communication. Since socialism very self-consciously placed increasing stock in the institution-generating efficacy of propaganda, and since there was hardly any official communication that was not at the same time seen as propagandistic occasion, the control over language became an obsession. A highly managed and restricted and nevertheless ubiquitous “politolect” emerged as a result.

While the actual performance of an understanding by an authority is the necessary condition for recognition to materialize, the sufficient condition is the judgment of that authority’s performance as recognizing by the person whose understanding is subject to validation. Not only is this judgment as an understanding in turn subject to stabilizing recognition, but it is built on meta-understandings that require continuous validation. Although wishes clearly tinge what we hear and how we hear, wishing to interpret a statement in a certain way cannot be the same as interpreting it; wanting to hear a recognition cannot be the same thing as hearing one (to paraphrase Wittgenstein). For if this were so, we would have lost our capacity to communicate; we would have started to live in our heads. Recognition is thus always dependent on further recognition. So we have to keep asking for it—and not only because it may always be incomplete, but also because, much more prosaically, it is subject to entropy. Even though it is interpreted, it is never merely subjective. To produce the effect, it takes at least two—repeatedly. No matter whether understandings are aired in the interest of obtaining recognition, or whether comments on understandings are dispensed in order to strengthen or weaken certain understandings, the process of producing recognitions is akin to the art of rhetoric in which people try to attain a common ground to stand on in the interest of making or shaping a set of common institutions (Burke, 1969).

### Recognition objectified

To a certain degree recognitions can be disembedded from face-to-face contexts. This is possible wherever there are technologies enabling the objectification of acts that others can interpret as recognizing. Potentially recognizing discourse can be objectified through technologies of writing and voice recording. Thus, we may find recognition for our understandings in books sometimes written centuries ago (Nietzsche 1976, 112); we can find them in laws and regulations, in utterances made or performances given by people we have never met and probably never will. Gestures, winks, and smiles too can be objectified through imaging techniques. Thus we may find

recognition in photographs capturing the encouraging presence of those dear to us. Accordingly we place such pictures in albums or frame and hang them as constant recognizing presences in an environment where we feel we might need them. Sometimes recognition becomes further abstracted and condensed into the image of mythical figures, of gods, heroes, and saints, objectified as paintings, statues, or photographs.

If what I have said in the introductory chapter about the relationship between understandings and institutions is correct, then it is clear what enormous advantages the objectification of recognition has for the formation of translocal and transtemporal institutions. Propagandists of all sorts have used the technological possibilities to objectify recognition, and the socialist parties of Europe were no exception. In addition to distributing texts widely, the images of the founding fathers, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin (until 1956), and especially of the incumbent party secretary, were seen everywhere in public places. These were also plastered with the latest party slogans. Committed party members placed the founding fathers' images in their private homes.<sup>18</sup> However, recognitions based exclusively on agreements read off from objectified performances cannot really stabilize understanding *on their own*. Unless readers, viewers, auditors of an objectified performance are involved in some ongoing interaction with others in which the recognition they derive from the objectified form is recognized in face-to-face communication, they are the sole judge of their own inferences. What looms here is Wittgenstein's regress of rule-following, which can only be halted in practices embedded in corresponding networks of authority.

Objectifications with a potentially recognizing effect are connected with yet another problem for those distributing them with a particular political purpose in mind. Performances are rarely ever unambiguous with respect to the kinds of understandings they can be said to recognize. After all, the recognizing effect follows a particular understanding of another's performance. As interpretations these are necessarily variable. However, the cultivation of particular meta-understandings about how to read objectified performances is a suitable means to narrow the variability of interpretations. Of course this is precisely what the party tried to do by institutionalizing the elaborate and highly centralized system of social reception for party documents and classics I described in the last chapter.

Since objectifications can entail a use that is unintended by the authority issuing and distributing them, the sheer existence of objectifications may pose a problem. For that reason the party never just "issued" new party documents, such as party programs, party statutes, and such. It only "ex-

**18.** Stasi officers sometimes owned a miniatuare of Cheka chief Feliks Dzierzynski. Some of their homes were decorated with portraits of socialist leaders.

changed” them, that is, the old versions, which if read right next to the new ones might deviate from, contradict, or ambiguate a particular new message, had to be surrendered when the new ones were picked up. In this regard the party showed considerable awareness of the potential ironies the objectification of recognition may produce. In others it remained oblivious to the unintended consequences of the mass dissemination of objectified performances intending to recognize the latest party line. It was oblivious to the fact that the omnipresence of a nonauthority or even negative authority—for this is what the party was to people not invested or even opposed to its rule—is vexing to people who cannot escape these performances. To the outsider who does not have to endure the cult of the leaders or the incessant barrage of political slogans they are typically embarrassing.<sup>19</sup>

## Identity

The ideological and political conflicts of the twentieth century speak to a strong link between understandings and identity. The testimonies of the ideological combatants about their involvement—no matter whether liberal, nationalist, fascist, or communist—clearly demonstrate that their commitment can neither be understood as a form of simple interest politics, nor as dispassionate conflicts about the validity of political understandings. The pathos and the degree of violence underlying them can only be grasped once we recognize the degree to which these political understandings became fused with peoples’ sense of who they are.

The constitution of agency that I discussed in the introduction provides a partial answer to the question of why understandings and identity are so closely associated. After all, it is our capability to act successfully and thus to have the possession of valid understandings providing orientation and direction that endows us with a sense of self-worth. Yet there are still deeper reasons. If identity is interpreted as the meaning of a self established through its connections or identifications with the world (Glaeser 2000), then the recognition of understandings containing identifications does not only constitute certainty, self, and social relationships, but also identity. Conversely, disagreements may threaten identity by spoiling identifications with people, ideas, or whatever else matters to self. Attacks on understandings are therefore often enough understood as attacks on identity.

Identity and the certainty in understanding are, however, not always in-

**19.** Here lies the reason why the hyperrealism of critical performers in the Soviet Union, and elsewhere in the former Soviet sphere of influence, could work as such a potent form of critique, as Alexei Yurchak (2006) has pointed out. The omnipresence of a nonauthority or even a negative authority is at least embarrassing if not outright nauseating.

tegrated to the same degree. There are cultural arrangements, practices, and symbolic and emotive forms that can help to distribute the constitution of self's meaning and certainty in understanding over different processes or different aspects of the same process, thus sheltering the one from the other. Such separation is a very important component of certain professions' ethos because they are fraught with disagreement. Law and science are good examples. In both, the identity component becomes ideally wrapped up in the *process* of bringing validations of understandings about, rather than in the belief in particular understandings. In other words, there are sustained efforts to institutionalize identity around the *form* of the professional practices rather than their content. A judge is taken to be exemplary, if she follows due process; a scientist is well regarded, if he applies theory and exercises method in a rigorous manner. Similarly, discursive forums that successfully foster a culture of controversial discussion shelter identity from disagreement by propounding values of positive relationships in disagreement and by rules of conduct that signal respect for all participants, for example, by adhering to turn-taking rules and conventions of polite speech as well as by countering the insidious effects of disagreement with well-timed antidotes of agreement produced, for example, by humor or attacks on common enemies.

The separation between the credibility of understanding and the meaning of self is, however, probably never quite complete, all the care of institutional differentiation notwithstanding. This is amply demonstrated by strong, emotional eruptions into otherwise sober, rationalistic discursive forums. In the professions, even the most famous thinkers and scientists have shown an "unprofessional" attachment to the *content* of their *own* theoretical constructions (Einstein's proverbial "the old man doesn't throw dice," for example). And in the courts even the most meticulous attention to process cannot eradicate completely the feeling that judges are partisans after all. The constitution of people through the validation of understandings is the basic reason why this separation is never entirely successful.<sup>20</sup>

The ethics of absolute finality, which I introduced in the last chapter, suggests, and I will empirically demonstrate this further in chapter 6, that socialism made not only no effort to institutionalize such a boundary, but to its own detriment it brandished such boundaries as a perversion of humanity. In consequence, attacks on socialist understandings were invariably taken as attacks on identity. Even minor critiques could be perceived as

**20.** It is questionable whether a perfect separation of identity and certainty would be desirable. The law must somehow remain in touch with issues of justice that cannot be defined in purely formal terms. What matters about scientific work is content in the end, not the process of its production. For that reason we tend to see the lawyer, the bureaucrat, or the scientist who is merely concerned with the form of their work as heartless or, and in an ethical sense, also as mindless.

intensely threatening with often-dire consequences for the critic. This was not only true for the relationship between people who identified as socialists and others who did not, but it was also true for the relationship between members of the party.

In sum, I have argued in this section for the irreducibly social character of understandings. By recourse to the work of Mead I have first shown how understandings come to be woven into the very capacity of human beings to make themselves the object of their own reflection. By recourse to the work of Wittgenstein I have then demonstrated how understandings as regularized processes of ordering are contingent on the continuous input of other human beings. In both self-formation and regularization the input of others comes in the form of recognitions. The rest of the section was then dedicated to the phenomenological exploration of recognition as an action-reaction effect flow that takes place in networks of authority relations characterized by the slippage between intentions and effects. Finally, I have considered the potential but also the problems involved with the possibility to objectify recognizing performances while closing this section with an exploration of the reasons why negative recognition is frequently experienced as an attack on identity.

### THE DOXIC DIMENSION: RESONANCE

Understandings are not only constituted from within social relationships, but they are always already constituted in relationships with other understandings. In the literature the emphasis on the indissoluble interdependence of discursive understandings is called *meaning holism*. The hermeneutic tradition has from its very beginning battled individualistic and atomistic notions of understanding. Vico and Herder were strong proponents of a meaning holism. The romantics have followed in their wake. It is through their writings that concepts such as *weltanschauung* (literally world conception) or *Weltbild* (world image)<sup>21</sup> gained wide currency. Weber made the latter concept central to his sociology. Through the notion of culture, meaning holism has not only had a deep impact on the hermeneutic social sciences but also on the everyday imagination of the social. In the debates about the nature of science it has likewise left a deep mark with what is known today as the Duhem-Quine thesis. It states that contrary to the basic sentence theories of the positivists, statements are not accepted or refuted one by one, but they “come before the judge of experience together” (Quine 1951; cf. Putnam 1988).

21. “Weltanschauung” is of Kant’s coinage and was fast adopted by other writers (e.g., Herder). “Weltbild” goes back all the way to the Middle Ages as *imago mundi*.

In the last two chapters, I made extensive use of meaning-holism. I tried to show how various components of Marxism-Leninism systematically built on each other. For example, what I have called the ethics of absolute finality systematically built on the vanguard party concept, which in turn is contingent on understanding Marxism as the first true science of the social in human history. What I called the aporia of socialist identity and the three aporias of socialist politics are unthinkable without meaning holism because they were formed by at least three understandings interacting with one another as a whole. In fact, socialism cultivated a strong meta-understanding that Marxism-Leninism was a “coherent, all encompassing doctrine,” no part of which could be doubted without endangering the rest, thus locking the aporias in place. The various component understandings of Marxism-Leninism did not only build onto each other. The distinction of a larger social whole into two antagonistic classes, for example, partook, on the one hand, in other kinds of dualisms (good-bad, light-darkness, male-female, etc). On the other hand, it was a component of yet other more complex sets of understandings prevalent in socialism. Sets of understandings thus build, if not a system—a metaphor suggesting far too much neatness—then a more or less regular or irregular thicket of crosscutting and intersecting differentiations and integrations, that is, of understandings.

While it is undoubtedly correct that understandings must be seen in complex wholes, the conclusion that Duhem and Quine have drawn from it—that they fail in wholes—is untrue in practice. People sort through complexes of understandings, be it theories or religious doctrine, and change either some aspect of their arrangement or one or another of the components. In other words, the difference between a useful theory and a nonworkable theory is not necessarily a total revision of fundamentals, but sometimes it is just a matter of detail adjustments. This is not only true for science, as Kuhn (1962) and other sympathizers with holism have pointed out, but actually existing socialism also offers countless examples for such detail revisions.<sup>22</sup> Historically speaking, some of the more important revisions pertained to the social and economic conditions for successful revolution, the reevaluation of the concept of ideology, and the possibility of socialism in one country. Even in total failure, useful components usually survive to be used in other contexts. This book, for instance, is an example for this, as I am still, in major parts of my argument, relying on selected theoretical frameworks developed by Karl Marx while making no use of his philosophy of history. So even if

**22.** Even the canonization of the classics was constantly adjusted, as they were never favored in their entirety, but always promoted in selective readings. Not only were Marx’s early writings hard to get (even though they were formally published), but also even among his mature works texts fell in and out of favor (e.g., Bahro 1977).

sets of understandings, and a fortiori institutions, are always more than the sum of their parts, there still is a kind of modularity to the components.

Holism therefore needs modification. What we need is a concept to analyze the relationships between various understandings in a set, a concept that gives us some clues why, for example, people let go of some understandings rather than others once pressures for revision occur. It is again Wittgenstein's work (1984b, 1984c) that offers interesting points of departure in analyzing this problem. A variant of the private language argument wonders about the ways in which we attain certainty. He fences with two opponents. On the one hand, he tries to show that radical skepticism is misguided. On the other he argues against Enlightenment optimism concerning the possibility of radical critique associated with the glorious notion of individual autonomy. His main point is simply that justification as process, where one understanding is linked back to others, must come to an end somewhere, as one can continue to doubt—literally—only ad nauseam. So he famously declaims, “Rational human beings do *not* have certain doubts [my emphasis]” (1984b, no. 220). To live our lives we have to let go of skepticism, eventually necessitating a leap of faith. Just imagine you were the propaganda officer of a party group. You have to prepare a speech for which you need a number of quotations. *Neues Deutschland* just had an article with a few quotes of a Honecker speech, and some by Marx, both of which you thought might be useful. What would it be like if you began to doubt that these quotes are accurate and you checked them in the library. It dawns on you that the printed speech may contain errors of transcription and that the Marx volume you consulted might be sloppily edited, or worse, edited by the class enemy. . . . Therefore, all understanding rests somewhere on understandings that nobody *cares* to justify. This does not mean that the process of justification is not important. It just means that it is necessarily selective.

Wittgenstein suggests, in particular, two ways in which skeptical regression is halted in practice.<sup>23</sup> Both of these point to the embeddedness of understandings in contexts of interaction. The first operates by way of transposing the skeptic query from an epistemic to a moral key. Trusting a quotation is translated into trusting the person (or institution) who made it or who supposedly controls it. A good party propagandist might trust a Honecker quote he hears reported on an East German radio station, but he may have doubts about a quote reported on a West German station, which might turn out

**23.** Nietzsche has made a similar point before, which has found its way through Weber (esp. 1988b) into the social sciences. Wittgenstein's particular contribution to the skeptic's dilemma is the way in which he argues that solutions are typically found in practice. Whereas Nietzsche and with him Weber still assume an arbitrary break-off, a voluntaristic leap of faith, Wittgenstein offers social anchoring in hidden self-referentiality as a solution.

to be enemy propaganda.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the production of knowledge is typically deeply intertwined with a particular economy of trust relying on the recognition by a trustee.<sup>25</sup> The second way to arrest the skeptic's regress cannot be captured adequately with the notion of trust. Wittgenstein (along with gestalt psychologists, phenomenologists, and ethnomethodologists) observes that there seems to be a certain play between what he calls the "foreground" and the "background" in the sense that in the pursuit of knowledge certain issues are always explicitly problematized, whereas others, which could equally be put to scrutiny, are not. Most interestingly, people are not even aware that they could raise questions about the background. They are simply not asked, or "bracketed" as the phenomenologists say. Background assumptions are naturalized in the sense that people forget that they are formed as institutions in collaboration with others; they are essentialized in the sense that people forget that they are mere symbolizations of the world rather than the world itself. With Wittgenstein we should ask, then, how particular foreground/background arrangements come about and how it happens that issues previously problematized end up as unquestionably given and vice versa.<sup>26</sup>

Two characteristics of the background are to be noted. The questioning of understandings not only stops because the skeptic herself no longer has any questions, but also because nobody else with whom she is conversing does. The background as such rests on ubiquitous recognition within a network of authority. Moreover, the understanding that has first given rise to the skeptical inquiry stands in a special validating connection to background

**24.** There is the possibility that he trusts neither and that he chooses the Eastern version simply because that one may not get him into trouble once he is asked to justify his choices.

**25.** The sociology of science has made much of this point. Stephen Shapin's (1994) analysis of the role of social status in the production of acceptable truth in seventeenth-century England is the pioneering example for this line of research. As Shapin shows, a fact assumed exalted status of trustworthiness not least by virtue of its pronunciation by a gentleman.

**26.** This route of inquiry, too, has been traveled in the sociology of science, here most notably in some of Latour's writings (e.g., 1988; 1999), who follows, for example, how milk fermentation has moved from a cutting-edge research program hotly debated and contested in leading science journals to the status of mundane knowledge available in every elementary school and every kitchen as a fact-equals-world truism. In practice, both of these paths—moral translation and backgrounding—may be intertwined. Reading Adrian Johns's (1998) account of the history of the book it seems that there may be a trajectory that leads from an epistemic problem (is the person who claims to be the author of a particular text really the author) to a moral issue (a trustworthy publisher) with a moral solution (reputations of publishers) that gets institutionalized as a background assumption that can then be exploited (by fraudulent posing as a trustworthy publisher) to spin back into the other direction.

understandings. That validity-enhancing connection between understandings is what I have called *resonance*. It is the concept that helps us to lend more precision to meaning holism, because the links among various understandings can now be differentially treated as more or less strong and as of varying quality. The “whole” in meaning-holism can now be analyzed as internally structured.<sup>27</sup>

## Resonance

With the notion of resonance I want to capture the validating force resulting from the “fit” between any two particular understandings (within the same or across modes), as well as between as of yet unordered aspects of experiences and their articulation in processes of differentiation and integration forming understanding. The key question in this formulation is, what “fit” means. Long-standing traditions in philosophy and (cognitive) psychology, from Leibniz to Piaget, seek an answer to this question in some formal logical connection that is assumed to be a representation of a universal human reason. However, the ethnographic and historical record has taught us that what is locally perceived as validity fit between understandings varies considerably across cultural contexts. There is not one, but there are different kinds of logics that have not only been mobilized historically across cultures but also within one culture to assess the quality and quantity of validness between understandings. Thus, fit, much like authority, is regulated by meta-understandings, which is to say that it is culturally variable.

In the wider cultural context of European modernity, three broad types of fit that repeatedly appear in different guises can usefully be distinguished from one another: pattern resonance, consistency, and resonance in pursuit. I will discuss them in turn in the following three sections.<sup>28</sup>

**27.** The structure of variously strong connections between the component understandings of the “whole” can now be used to formulate hypotheses about which assumptions can be dropped with more or less violent ripple effects.

**28.** Since “fit” is a matter of designating meta-understandings, this list is needless to say not complete. In chapter 5, p. 275, I will for example, introduce the notion of metonymic resonance where understandings are validated through sheer co-occurrence in a particular spatio-temporal environment. It should also be noted that some of the similarities between principles of classification and principles of resonance discussed here are not accidental. For example, Lévi-Strauss (1966) distinguishes between metaphor (with obvious similarities to what I will explore here as pattern resonance) and the just mentioned metonymy as classifying principles. Resonance builds very particular kinds of classes, namely groupings of understandings from the perspective of their validating relationship of the sort: if this is reliable, then that is too; if this is doubtful then that is as well.

### Pattern resonance

In this type of resonance, validating force derives from the similarity between the formal structures of understandings. An interesting case of pattern resonance in the history of GDR governance is, for example, the 1960s passion of the party leadership for cybernetics (Apel and Mittag 1964; Mittag et al. 1969; cf. Steiner 1999). All administrators (secret police officers included)<sup>29</sup> were asked to present their work plans in terms of feedback-control systems. This is not surprising if one considers that cybernetic thinking shares countless similarities with Marxist thought (the latter's revolutionary dialectic notwithstanding); it stresses the interdependence of all parts, none of which can be adequately understood in isolation, thus urging a totalizing perspective. In the same sense, a statement may resonate (sound right), for example, because it imitates the prosody of another that is already believed, because it follows a particular style of presentation, or because it emulates a particular argumentative form.<sup>30</sup> An example of positive formal pattern resonance is provided by socialism's politolect. Written documents across a wide range of social domains became quite similar in lexical choice and style because the writers needed to authorize themselves by creating a pattern resonance between what they had written and official party speak. In other words, writers employed pattern resonance to perform the required self-objectification. Conversely, the party tried to legitimate its own rule as “of the proletariat *through* the party *for* the proletariat” by using popular speech patterns. In this way many socialist slogans were likened to proverbs. However, the use of pattern resonances to legitimate action can also backfire. The performances of the SED party grandees during the fall of 1989 offer many striking examples, of which Mielke's “But I love you all” and Honecker's “Socialism in its course cannot be stopped by either donkey or horse” are only the most prominent examples. The problem of these performances was precisely that in their very style they provided overwhelming evidence that the speakers seemed either oblivious to what was going on in the country or, worse, were quite willing to simply ignore it.

Pattern resonances not only occur *within* one particular mode of understanding but also *across*. The very principle behind rituals is to create such resonances. Accordingly, the spaces built or set up for their perfor-

**29.** A number of my interviewees remember with a twinkle in their eyes how in the 1960s they all of a sudden had to present their work plans in terms of systems-theoretic considerations. Some say they did not exactly know what it meant, but they saw that these plans made use of boxes and arrows in different colors—and that's what they used to present their plans.

**30.** Michael Silverstein (2003) provides telling analysis of the pattern resonances created by Lincoln in his Gettysburg address, as well as by “Bush speak.”

mance are typically meant to produce resonances between the placement and movement of bodies and ideology (Benjamin 1983; Geertz 1980; Sennet 1996). Where spaces and the movements performed within them do not resonate with doctrine, this may prompt anxieties (for people might get the wrong idea) or the desire to redesign the space. The Renaissance hesitance of the Catholic Church to accept central-plan buildings as spaces suitable to celebrate the Eucharist is an example of this. And so is the redesign of city spaces in socialism (e.g., Flierl 1998). Another simple example for a cross-modal pattern resonance is modern politicians' "bath among the people," associating physical with moral proximity, which was practiced by socialist politicians with the same zeal and for the same reasons that their liberal-democratic colleagues take recourse to it. Another poignant example, equally shared among various forms of modern political arrangements, is the expressive use of marches, associating political action with physical movement, which often end in a central gathering linking physical with the ideological unity in pursuit of a political goal. Finally, in the last chapter I have already mentioned the ritual of critique and self-critique spatializing the usual charge of subjectivism with the seating arrangements of a trial in which a lower-sitting defendant faced a phalanx of elevated party members. The actual experience of resonance in all of these cases is contingent on a principle, that is, a meta-understanding, defining an aspect according to which similarity can be established. In the critique–self-critique case it is the culturally available superimposition of a spatial high-low onto a moral good-bad distinction that makes the resonance between discursive and kinesthetic aspects of critique and self-critique possible.

### Consistency

The second type of resonance I want to discuss here is *consistency*. Its validating force is derived from the compatibility between understandings. Especially, the strong incompatibility or contradiction between an understanding whose validity is at stake with a body of understandings already endowed with credibility invalidates the former. Pattern resonance directly compares the structures internal to two understandings with each other transferring validity through similarity. Consistency by contrast demands that the understandings set in relationship to each other find a mutually supporting place within a relevant overarching order (i.e., a set of meta-understandings such as a particular form of logics). Within this order the understandings under consideration may play a different, albeit complementary role. This means also that they can be structured internally rather differently (as for example major and minor premise in a conclusion). The conduit that transfers valid-

ity is not similarity but integratability. Inconsistency is then the impossibility to reconcile understandings in view of a relevant overarching order.<sup>31</sup> It means that either the one or the other understanding can be part of the order but not both. The more the relevant overarching order is essentialized, the more it appears as a natural, inviolable given, the more pronounced is the resonance effect. Formal logic is such an overarching order that is often hypostasized as a natural grammar of sound reasoning. And so are literary genres or artistic styles, even though these two may make the conventionality of the order more visible.

For the analysis of resonance effects it is important to investigate the ways in which an overarching order is made situationally relevant. Since these orders are historically variant and since there are typically a number of different ones available, the relevance of an overarching order can never be assumed; it needs to be established empirically. Max Weber's *Zwischenbetrachtung* (in English known as "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Direction") (1988c) is particularly helpful to think through the conditions under which inconsistencies can manifest themselves experientially with consequences for institutional arrangements. The starting point for his considerations are phenomena such as the whole-hearted affirmation of an ethics of brotherly love during Sunday church service and the very different ethics underlying business relations the following Monday. Weber makes sense of such phenomena by arguing that we participate in different "spheres of social life." Each sphere may be organized (Weber says "rationalized") according to its own logics. Since these spheres of life are typically bounded institutionally, for example by the temporal structure of the calendar and the spatial distribution of practices, differences in these logics need not be perceived as inconsistent with each other. However, where such boundaries come to be eradicated (e.g., by a fundamentalist ideology claiming paramount consideration across all spheres of life) differences may come in into view as inconsistencies. For Weber, this new situation creates motives to change institutional arrangements. Inconsistent understandings may come to lose their validity and cease to be action guiding; new boundaries may come to be invented; or aspects of the overarching order may come to be reconsidered.

After World War II, Leon Festinger's theory of "cognitive dissonance" (1957) became widely influential. His work focuses on the question of whether "contradictions" between a "belief" and actions that are not "con-

**31.** Since inconsistency as a form of resonance is different from the Marxian concept of contradiction it is important to keep them apart. Contradiction in the Marxian sense pertains not to the incompatibility of understandings but to the incompatibility of institutional arrangements within an encompassing institutional order. It means in particular that the institutional dynamics underlying one institution undermine those of another.

sonant” with it create a motive to change either future behavior or the belief. Countless laboratory experiments conducted by social psychologists around the world have led to rather inconclusive results (Petty and Cacioppo 1996). Yet, refinements of the experimental procedures have led to an interpretation that has found wider acceptance in the social psychological literature. Subjects experience “dissonance” (for Festinger a motivating stress, “like hunger”) if they have no choice but to see themselves as the agent of the dissonant action (rather than seeing themselves as forced), and if they have no means to rationalize the dissonance. This immediately raises the question, under which circumstances anybody would *accept* agency and would not rationalize the situation. So again the question of meta-understandings forming an overarching framework moves to the foreground. Due to the individualistic and acultural presuppositions dominant in psychology, however, cognitive dissonance theory has neither tools nor interest in investigating this question. In this respect, the older, Weberian framework is preferable because it highlights the question under which institutional sociocultural conditions, inconsistencies, come to be perceived thus gaining relevance. Again, the experience of consistency is contingent on meta-understandings, for example, an ethical norm exhorting people to do as they say or even more: to do so uniformly.

Enriched by the notions of meta-understandings and networks of authority, however, cognitive dissonance theory is still quite useful to think with, because it points to one of the ways in which understandings may change. In this spirit I will, in the next chapter, utilize an associated social psychological model, Fritz Heider’s (1958) “balance theory,” to explore some of the possible dialectics of understanding. In the last chapter, I showed that socialism had its own, substantively rational consistency criterion: the ethics of absolute finality. It was even cast into a simple formula that was supposed to help actors maintain a resolute class standpoint. Aspiring socialists were told to ask themselves who the beneficiary of their action would be—the proletariat or its class enemy. In practice this criterion was connected with far-reaching agency ascriptions, which are rooted in assumptions about the party’s and by implication any believer’s access to truth. The flipside of this agency ascription was a particular way to reason about failure, which I have called *socialist theodicy*. This ideological frame, embedded in the organizational structure of a Stalinist vanguard party, did indeed at times produce extreme pressures on party members to self-objectify (which sometimes also had again counterintentional consequences). By contrast, people less committed to the party and its doctrines often describe much less consistency stress because they could argue that they did not have much agency in the first place and that they were forced to act in inconsistent ways as not to face undue disadvantage.

## Resonance in pursuit

The third type of resonance interprets fit as the degree to which a particular understanding furthers or thwarts an active project or pursuit. Hence I will call it *resonance in pursuit*. Understandings, no matter whether they are discursive, emotive, or kinesthetic, resonate in this sense when they fulfill wishes, help to solve problems, further the chances to accomplish a goal, assist in living according to particular principles, open or close the route to, or enhance or diminish sensory pleasures.<sup>32</sup> The validity of the pursuit is transferred to the understanding via the helping hand it lends to the pursuit. The SED's enthusiasm for cybernetics resonated at that level as well. The exuberant hopes for overtaking the West economically that motivated the late 1950s and early 1960s had given way to a more sober understanding of the problems of central planning. Cybernetics was hoped to revolutionize the planning process. It promised new solutions to persistent problems. It looked like a possibility to "overtake the West without catching up with it," as Ulbricht had formulated his hopes.

Resonance in pursuit has probably been the most popular take on how people come to gain certainty in particular understandings. It looms at the bottom of recurrent reproaches that humans are a credulous race. One version of it, a common vulgarization of both utilitarian principles and of the Marxian sociology of knowledge, has it that people believe what they perceive to be in their own best interest. Because desires, goals, and wishes were, over the centuries, seen as such a strong certifying tonic, explicit meta-understandings were developed to counteract their effect. They have found their way not only into Enlightenment thought and scientific pedagogy but also into good counsel to princes, gentlemen, and ladies. In the validating force of resonances in pursuit lies the wellspring of favoring reason and discourse over feeling as reliable sources of understanding. Knowledge is, in that sense, what has been gained in overcoming tempting forms of resonance in pursuit. Just as old as the fear of epistemic seduction is the counterargument of decrying the futility of generating "dry" knowledge devoid of any deeper significance for us, that is knowledge devoid of resonance in pursuit.

I argued above that the dynamics of recognition follows an action-reaction effect flow pattern—as it should being part and parcel of the process of forming understandings as institutions. Resonance too follows this pattern, however with a peculiarity of its own that has everything to do with the self as a being that is simultaneously object and subject. The action part of the sequence is easy enough to discern. The process begins with a more

**32.** Thus the concept of resonance in pursuit is closely related to Bruno Latour's (e.g., 1999) notion of proposition.

or less consciously posed question: “Does this understanding fit with what else I know or desire?” The peculiarity comes about through the fact that we are asking ourselves, not another human being. We react to our own action. It is important to see however, that this reaction typically follows spontaneously; it can not simply be manipulated by the inquiring I, that is it follows with a certain degree of autonomy. The source of this autonomy is the fact that the understandings we use as a base of comparison are not simply maintained by ourselves, but through our interaction with the world above all with other human beings. Memory is in this sense an important mediator in processes of institution formation—a fact that has haunted the socialist project in many ways.

In sum, no matter how innate pattern recognition capabilities, desires, and possibly even some form of rudimentary logic might be, there is no doubt that judgments of similarity, consistency, and desirability proceed for the larger part on the cultural grid of meta-understandings. Which of our five senses would we emphasize in making judgments of pattern similarity? What kind of rhythm or symmetry do we have in mind when we speak of “pattern”? Do we judge consistency in a logical system that is constrained by a binary system of truth values, or do we work within a more complex modal logic? Do we see desire as something evil, leading us to make every effort to transcend it in reason? Do we essentialize our senses, reason, and desires as something biological, or do we assume that they can be developed, cultivated, and refined? Meta-understandings regulate how resonances operate—with consequences for the institutional fabric within which we live.

Meta-understandings also regulate what body or bodies of understanding are relevant for resonance considerations. In other words, they establish a context of resonance. An important meta-epistemological device used for such purposes is the classification of understandings as belonging to a certain domain of social life, thus emphasizing some comparisons at the expense of others. Particularly pertinent for a political epistemology is the very act of labeling an understanding as *political* rather than *private*. In the GDR, designating something as *political* implied immediately that the understanding in question was of concern to party and state. The context of resonance was therefore the latest party policy and doctrine, its “line,” its current interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. What was considered *private* shifted in the course of time, but in general only those understandings that were seen as having no bearing on public life were considered as unambiguously private.<sup>33</sup> Of course, the comparative mobilization of bodies of

**33.** We will see in chapter 8 how difficult it became for the party to relegate religious belief to the private realm, as the peace issue amplified resonances between politics and religious beliefs and practices.

understanding may also depend on the contingent limitations of the situation, such as location, time, the activity a person is currently involved in, and more broadly the issues a person is wrestling with at the moment. They all facilitate spontaneous comparisons. The co-presence of others, too, may make a difference as they can suggest relevant comparisons.

### THE REFERENTIAL DIMENSION: CORROBORATION

To introduce the question of how the world impinges on the validity of our understandings through the success and failure of our action, I will begin by sketching the difference between a positivist and an antipositivist position. The point of this exercise is not to defeat positivism once more, but to highlight a fundamental problem with dominant forms of antipositivism. The last influential school of philosophy that has argued for some kind of unmediated access to reality through our senses is the logical positivism of the so-called Vienna circle. It maintains the notion that there are particular kinds of propositional statements, sometimes called “basic sentences,” that perfectly correspond to the world. Basic sentences in their pristine purity are in this sense not made, but discovered, really dug out from under all the layers of biases and preoccupations with which we deceive ourselves about the true nature of things. And this is what members of the Vienna circle identify as the task of philosophy: the purification of language, exorcising anything in it that is meaningless in either a referential or logical sense. The ideal on the horizon, programmatically invoked by the young Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, is a language in which lying is impossible, a language in which our problems can be either resolved clearly and unquestionably or be discarded as the nightmares of a misguided mind. Logical positivism has become something of the great antipode of almost all philosophizing of the short twentieth century. This sense of a common enemy has, beyond all sorts of other divisions (across which the war of ideas was no less intense), created a broad consensus on the following point. Facts are always constructed by particular people in particular contexts. Alas, there is very little agreement about how it is possible to construct and still learn something valuable about a reality.

The reaction against positivism has led to strong variants of linguistic constructivism. Richard Rorty (e.g., 1989) is probably its best-known proponent in the English-speaking world. The starting point of his reasoning is a valuable critique of the correspondence theory of truth, which he argues along the following lines. Correspondence claims (such as those of the positivists) are apparently problematic and therefore need to be adjudicated. This requires criteria that must be communicated and assessed in discourse. Therefore, rather than pointing to the thing in itself, the adjudication of a

truth claim made on behalf of a sentence just refers to more discourse. There is an important insight here, and I will systematically build on it. However, Rorty's claims go further. He insists that adjudication refers to *nothing but discourse*. He also argues, and this is by no means a necessary precondition for his critique of a correspondence theory, that language neither represents, nor mediates the world in the sense that it would intercede between a self and a world independent and outside of it. Instead, Rorty argues that for us as human beings both we and the world exist always already and *wholly in language*. What this implies is that there is no nonlinguistic understanding, and that there is no prelinguistic experience.

How is it, then, that people in real life make distinctions between understandings that are mere figments of the imagination and constructions that provide some useful orientation? Rorty takes up a pragmatist line of reasoning by arguing that people adjudicate understandings according to their usefulness, which—because according to him we are always already wholly in language—must be done from a perspective of comparisons between languages. If more useful, we change idioms, which Rorty (building on Kuhn 1962) conceives as something like a gestalt-switch between fundamentally incommensurable ways of seeing the world. Rorty feels no pressure to conceptualize the process of switching. There is no investigation of what “usefulness” might mean in the course of our real-world pursuits, and there is never any interest in the question *for whom* such a switch must be useful in order to let such a switch happen. For obviously we do not live in linguistic isolation. Of course, such processes are what interest me, and the theory of validation offers an alternative model. In direct contrast to Rorty, I will argue that changes in understandings may, once carried through, be very well like gestalt-switches, but that the process of getting there has much to do with a disenchantment of old understandings, which typically lose credibility first, not because alternative languages prove to be more useful, but because people begin to “bump into walls” with their current understandings, an experience that has many extralinguistic kinesthetic and emotive components, and that motivates them to look for and/or produce new understandings. Again, the problematic I have just sketched out can be illuminated by thinking in terms of validations. Clearly, Rorty argues his case chiefly along the lines of recognition. What we need is a stronger notion accounting for how we succeed and fail in practice, thus adjudicating what is useful and what is not. The notion of corroboration may help to fill this gap.

### **Corroboration**

Analytically it is useful to distinguish a direct and a more indirect way in which our understandings can come to be corroborated. In the first case an

understanding is self-consciously put into action to see where it leads; in the second case, circumstantial evidence is mobilized to see how it reflects on the understanding in question. An example may help to illustrate this difference in a flash. A number of Stasi officers have explained to me that at some point it dawned on them that party elections had become mere acclamations of candidates designated by higher party organs, and that it was in fact no longer possible to nominate candidates from below with any reasonable hope for success. The first formulation of this insight, that is, the act of symbolizing a hypothesis in response to a series of experiences, typically took shape in a context of marked dislike for the candidate put forth by the next higher level of the party organization. This prompted a kind of puzzlement about why nobody spoke up against him or her as the dislike for the candidate was suspected to be more widespread. In this way, the generalization of the dislike for a particular candidate paved the way for seeing top-down nominations as a problematic practice. There were now two ways of corroborating this suspicion. One officer did indeed make use of his statutory right to nominate a candidate in the next elections. Not only did he fail to win *any* support for his choice, but he was also severely reprimanded for his subjectivism and for endangering the unity of the party. Others feared that much and quietly inquired within their networks of friends what they had observed in elections to party offices in their basic party organizations. It is important to realize that this insight was often formulated without ever having witnessed the actual defeat of an attempt to nominate a candidate from below. The sheer fact that a series of inquiries about election events yielded the result that bottom-up nomination was, after the 1950s, unheard of corroborated the suspicion that it had become impossible. In the first case the suspicion was corroborated directly. If you like, a hypothesis was formed and it was put to the test in a focused, self-conscious action, that is, in an experiment. In the second case corroboration remained indirect—it was not directly linked to past or present actions (insofar as no candidate was set forth and defeated). Instead, indirect corroboration limited itself to the collection of circumstantial evidence.

### Direct corroboration

In direct corroborations, understandings are seen as more or less successful guides for action in the same sense that a map can offer better or worse guidance in getting from here to there. By using them in action they are, in Marshall Sahlins's (1987, 145) felicitous term "put at risk." For direct corroboration to take effect two conditions need to be met. First, the understandings in question need to be seen as shaping the action performed. This connection is immediate in simple kinesthetic understandings. A particular sway of

the hand succeeds or fails to thrust the thread through the eye of the needle. The action-guidance of a particular understanding also seems obvious in processes of rational planning, where an understanding is first articulated discursively before the action takes place. However, since this move involves translations from discursive and emotive to kinesthetic understandings, this link is always open to interpretation. Meta-understandings regulate what counts as a legitimate translation and what does not. Second, the action performed needs to be seen as having had a significant effect on the outcome. This seems to be most obvious in events expressly produced for corroborating purposes, as, for example, in trials, tests, or experiments. But here too, beyond customary attributions it is anything but trivial to demarcate an “action” and an “outcome” from a stream of happenings. Worse, perhaps, since the action guided by understandings is typically part of a larger set of action-reaction effect flows that jointly produce the result, interpretation is indispensable in establishing links between actions and outcomes. Meta-understandings are needed and sometimes even need to be developed to sort through this challenging task (Collins 1992; Knorr-Cetina 1999).

Given what I have said in chapter 1 about the planned, consciousness-driven model of social transformation in socialism, it is clear that direct corroboration is not necessarily limited to the small scale. Even though socialism ranks among the largest such attempts ever undertaken, there were and continue to be others, ranging from the production of planned cities or agriculture (Scott 1998) to the planned introduction of a market economy and liberal democracy in postsocialist Europe. Indeed, common parlance often refers to such large-scale planned transformations as “experiments.” Socialism is often referred to in this sense as a “failed experiment” since the idea of socialism has been established as an “illusion” (e.g., Furet 1999). Within socialism, on the one hand, party documents refer again and again to the purported success of policies planned on the basis of Marxism-Leninism as confirmations of the truth of the teachings of the classics. On the other hand, policies could also be repealed if the outcomes were not as hoped. The official proclamation of the “beginning construction of socialism” at the second party congress in 1952, for example, helped to spur an increasing movement of refugees and was in consequence judged “premature” by the Soviet Union. Hence it pressured its small brother in East Berlin to repeal some of the policies connected with the announcement. And yet, it needs to be recognized that with the scale at which understandings are pitched (“bottom-up nomination of candidates is possible” vs. “socialism is more just than capitalism”), the interpretative needs for linking actions and outcomes increase dramatically.

Direct corroboration is not restricted to prospective rational action, however. In fact, putting it this way would de-historicize the epistemic ideologies

and practices on which the notion of rational planning is based. It is not untypical that we experience a series of happenings as an inchoate conundrum. Yet, the like or dislike of the situations in which we find ourselves after a series of actions can provide an occasion for postmortems, or retrospections in which systematic attempts are undertaken to reconstruct happenings as causal structures that try to link what we have done, the understandings informing in these actions, and some kinds of effect. Retrospection does not have to be a linear retracing, working backward from outcomes over causing actions to antecedent understandings. Working through the conundrum of happening can begin with any known part—our good intentions, the mess or unsuspected bliss in which we find ourselves, the actions we have undertaken. This may include the consideration of understandings that were held unconsciously as deep motivations, of background assumptions as well as of understandings that have only taken shape in the course of action and therefore cannot be said to have preceded action. In fact, through retrospection we may for the first time come to see which understandings have shaped the actions in question. We are ready to admit this in everyday interactions where one can answer, “I don’t know,” to the question of why we have done a certain thing. In such cases, understandings have to be gleaned from a course of action that, as a muddling through, sometimes only articulates understandings in process, which we later see as having directed the action in the first place. Yet, what matters in this process is not what comes first and what comes later; what matters is that a particular way of ordering the world, through differentiations and integrations that can be seen as those *de facto* organizing the performance in a particular environment, has been rewarded with success or penalized with failure. What matters as well is that through retrospection understanding becomes *an* understanding (or set) that is isolated, clarified, and reified out of an infinite stream of differentiations and integrations to become transportable and deployable in another context as digested experience.

The process of retrospection reveals again the degree to which associating understandings, actions, and outcomes is an interpretative task that requires a variety of meta-understandings to succeed. Psychoanalysis, for example, is a complex of meta-understandings that helps us to reconstruct understanding-action-outcome dynamics. Current western trial procedures sometimes project an understanding-action-outcome sequence, and sometimes they just focus on parts of it. The action-outcome link is particularly important in addressing the question of whether anybody’s action in particular is to blame for an outcome, for example, in cases of “criminal neglect.” The understandings-action link moves to the foreground in criminal procedures where assessments of culpability are often contingent on finding

a motive. This is significant, for example, in distinguishing “murder” from “manslaughter.” More mundanely, cultural forms and practices helping to describe and establish understanding-action-outcome dynamics are an integral part of the many “debriefings” that have become a regular feature of organizational life understood as a rational pursuit. The forms of failure deliberations I discussed in the last chapter under the heading of a “socialist theodicy” are good cases in point.<sup>34</sup> For the Stasi, adjudicating whether an airplane crash was an “accident” and thus unintentional or “sabotage” and thus intentional made a big difference for what this event might have been taken to be corroborating.

This dependence on meta-understandings is what Rorty (or poststructuralism more generally) has in mind when he asserts that discourse is pointing to just more discourse. Yet, in a direct encounter with the world there is prediscursive experience in the form of sensory data often offering poignant evidence of success or failure. If I assume that there lies nothing between my beloved one at the other end of the hallway and me, and halfway through rushing to her I bump into a glass door, kinesthetic understanding gets abruptly thwarted, and there is ample immediate sensory evidence of the failure of my assumption. And before discourse picks up we typically feel something, elation or frustration, pride or shame; joy or anger. And only now does a discursive postmortem kick in, perhaps together with my worried beloved suggesting that I need a pair of new glasses. Life in late socialism offered many such immediate experiences of sudden thwarting not only of hopes but also of everyday expectations of failures that were of great significance in understanding socialism as a polity. A carefree afternoon stroll could suddenly end in front of the Wall; a greengrocer did not have the expected fruits; the drive to family in the other corner of the republic took longer and longer, because the number of potholes increased. Also, one such experience could perhaps be talked away in the company of others. But repeated experiences of this kind helped to actualize understandings that could not be rationalized away. Admittedly, all these events could do is to directly corroborate rather minor hypotheses. Yet that “firsthand” knowledge proved to be extremely significant for the *indirect* corroboration of more encompassing political understandings.

**34.** The whole chain is constantly negotiated in the experimental sciences, as Collins (1992) and Collins and Pinch (1993; 1998) have shown. There the issue is often whether a positive experimental effect is actually due to the aspect of the experiment that is supposed to produce it; conversely, in cases of negative results it is often argued that certain aspects of the experiment, which, according to the design intention should not have had an effect, did in the end overlay or make illegible the effect the experimenters wanted to demonstrate.

### Indirect corroboration

There are a number of reasons why it is often difficult, if not impossible, to corroborate understandings directly in action. Many understandings are simply too broadly scaled and scoped to be directly testable in any meaningful sense. They cannot be tied to a systematically executable action framework whose consequences remain identifiable and attributable while working themselves out within a human time scale. Think of the claims socialism made about itself, say its insistence that it alone will lead to an ultimately desirable, just, and fulfilling human society. The problem with such claims is that they require for their execution a massive institutional transformation, working itself out over the *longue durée*. Much more than in any smaller scale and hence a more likely controllable test, the questions haunting any attempt to corroborate broadly scoped understandings are these: “Were the actions intended indeed the actions performed?” “Have they been executed in the prerequisite way?” “Have there been any unanticipated interferences invalidating the results?” This situation becomes compounded if, like in socialism, those interested in corroborating a particular understanding actually work with a set of epistemic ideologies and practices that make the efficacy of actions contingent on the receptivity of the historical situation. One can then always argue that either the institutionalization was not complete enough (insufficient development) or the time not ripe enough to judge conclusively that corroboration has succeeded or failed. This problem is prevalent even for socialism’s “smaller” claims, for example, that it is more just than capitalism. How could such an understanding directly inform anyone’s actions?

Another reason why understandings can often not be directly translated into actions is that the possible consequences are deemed too costly. Opposition members frequently debated the possible consequences of their actions, often rejecting a particular project because they did not want to run the risk of imprisonment (and the consequences this might have had for their children, etc.). So they had to draw conclusions from their deliberations of what might have happened, had they acted in a particular way rather than from the consequences of their performances. Moreover, one may simply not be in a position to perform a direct enactment because one does not have access to the resources that would be required to do so. Just imagine you have a hunch that the secret police taps every phone conversation you are making from your private phone, or that the general secretary does not really know anymore what is going on because his entourage shelters him from all negative news.

In all of these cases we may want to find *indirect* ways to corroborate the understanding in question. This means that we would want to identify un-

derstandings resonating with the one we are interested in and which could be put to the test in action. Such an effort might lead to a more limited direct corroboration. More often, however, indirect corroboration involves the conversion of the understanding-action link into an indicator-search problem. Fixing the indicator value is the outcome of the event, which is then interpreted as corroborating a larger understanding either positively or negatively. The question of justice may in this sense be translated into an issue of criminal success rates, of feeding and housing the most needy, or into a matter of the existence and possibilities of using administrative law to fight decisions of the state. The indirect method of corroboration may also be performed retrospectively. We always do so when we puzzle about the meaning of a particular historical event, features of which we read as an indicator for the veracity of a particular understanding. Thus at the Vth party congress Ulbricht could use the Soviets' successful launching of the Sputnik as a proof for the superiority of socialism, or the Anglo-French-Israeli military intervention after Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal as a proof of the imperialist nature of capitalism.

Epistemic ideologies and practices may designate that there are classes of understandings for which no translation into actionable understanding is available or for which corroboration is fundamentally meaningless. This point is frequently made for aesthetic judgments, and it defines the norms of deontological ethics. Thus, corroborations are contingent on a number of epistemic ideologies and practices that need to be recognized in order to stabilize. Without recognition, the proper translation from possible understanding to actual understanding, from actual understanding to action, and action to more or less successful outcomes would be open to Wittgensteinian regress. The contingency of corroborations on recognitions does not imply that corroboration can be reduced to recognition, however. Once the connections between events and understandings are more or less firmly rooted in epistemic ideologies and practices, corroborations do have a force of their own. Just because there is a more widely held agreement of how to make the connections and how to interpret an event, the event itself obtains power because the injunctions of these practices and ideologies cannot be violated at will by any single individual without invoking the censorship of the relevant networks of authority. In Kuhn's (1962) account of scientific revolutions, anomalies can only come up as an unsettling force on the firm grid of epistemic ideologies and practices that characterize what he has called "normal science." Kuhn emphasizes that such normal science is necessary to produce revolutions. Its rigidity is the very precondition for the *recalcitrance* of experience. And thus it is on the basis of particular discursive arrangements that experience can be allowed to transcend discourse.

In either the direct or indirect case, it is the result of enactment or identification of indicators that in experience creates the corroborating effect. Emotive understandings may play a significant role in signaling that the corroboration is taking place. Shame is a forceful indicator of failure; pride a powerful sign of success. And as Silvan Tomkins already pointed out by investigating the developmental roots of pride and shame (1962, 1963; see also Scheff 1990; Scheff and Retzinger 1991; Nathanson 1992; Katz 1999), these feelings are closely tied to kinesthetic experiences of continuing to *move* with the desired thrust or being radically stopped in one's track, thus abruptly breaking the flow of enjoyment. Indeed, corroborations do at some level include the validation or frustration of some kinesthetic understandings: our movements become blocked or unblocked; we meet physical resistance or we do not; we hit or miss.

Like resonance, corroboration follows an action-reaction effect format with something of a twist. The action part is straightforward. In the direct case it is the action translating an understanding into a test, and in the indirect one it is the indicator search. The reaction part is what I have previously called the outcome or the determination of the indicator's value. And there talk of action-reaction effect flows introduces awkwardness. A natural science experiment is a good example because it forces us to call nature an actor. There is no doubt that experimenters sometimes feel and act as if this were so. And there is indeed no harm if we treat nature as an actor if we also remember that it is a particular kind of actor whom we need to "interact" with in ways rather different from human beings.<sup>35</sup> There are two advantages to using this language. It reminds us that the reaction follows from a contingent process that is influenced, but not in a strict sense determined, by the preceding action alone. Second, we have thus found a way to talk about the role of natural processes in processes of institution formation. The development of kinesthetic understandings—what we usually call skills—is an excellent example. Learning to bike, we venture to hold ourselves in particular ways on saddle, handlebar, and pedals to which gravity "responds" in a constant fashion. It is precisely this constancy that allows us to adjust our own actions until action and reaction literally produce the skill to balance ourselves on a bike in motion. Precisely because nature is a respondent characterized by utmost regularity, kinesthetic understandings are more easily maintained as institutions than discursive ones. There is no moodiness, whim or ambiguous partiality to wrestle with. This, then is at last one reason why laminating discursive rules on kinesthetic ones stabilizes the former

**35.** Latour (1999 and 2005) speaks in this sense quite appropriately of "actants." What is missing in his work is a clear differentiation of the modes of interaction between various kinds of actors.

(see p. 175 in this chapter). This way of bringing stability into process works by supporting recognition with much less whimsical corroboration.<sup>36</sup>

Thinking in terms of action-reaction effect flows in the context of tests performed within social institutional settings is revealing for other reasons. The outcome is now shaped by the concatenation of many people's actions. This is still not a reaction in the traditional sense and yet the term certainly fits better than in the case of a natural science experiment. Now imagine the following. A supply side economist believes that lowering income taxes will increase the government's revenue because he assumes that people will respond to the incentive of higher returns on work by working more. The president he advises puts the theory to a test—and lo and behold the government's revenues sink! The economist is not impressed by the data, arguing that the people are merely spiting him and the president by refusing to work more. In fact he argues that in knowledge of his theory people recognized it negatively, thus making the point that the experiment is spurious. The lesson is simply that in social institutional contexts it is often not so simple to separate corroboration and recognition. The more the concatenation of reactions leads to outcomes intended by no one the closer the validating effect resembles corroboration; the more the concatenation of reactions leads to intended outcomes, the closer the validating effect resembles recognition. The experimental behavioral sciences have long known this in practice. To prevent even the possibility of recognition interfering with corroboration, social psychologists often tell stories that are meant to deflect attention from the actual research hypothesis.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the introduction I proposed political epistemology as a way to inquire into the rise and decline of particular institutional arrangements. The reasoning behind this move proceeded from an analysis of the ontological characteristics of institutions as existing in regularized action-reaction effect flows. Regularity, I argued, is a continuity of action-reaction effect flows, which must be understood from the stability of that which orients, directs, coordinates, explains, justifies, and legitimizes action, namely discursive, emotive, and kinesthetic understandings. I also argued that the process of understanding becomes objectified into understandings by the three forces

**36.** I suppose this is the reason why the practice of physical skills does have a steadying effect on practitioners' identity as is often maintained in the literature on habits and mental health. Nature is neither prone to moods nor to partial feelings, making it easier to maintain our self-worth as physically skilled than as artistically gifted because the latter can not do without the recognition of others.

of validation. In this chapter I deepened this argument. I began by exploring what it might mean to consider understandings as objects, as is so often done not only in everyday discourses but also in social scientific ones. I found the ontological presuppositions of such a view untenable and then explored how understandings are constituted at the intersection of three kinds of “environments”: the social, the context of action in the world, and other already actualized understandings. I found that what is doing the constituting work are three forms of validation, whose phenomenology I unfolded in the sections dedicated to each environment. One of the most important takeaways from this investigation is how the stability of one process (an understanding) must be analyzed in reference to the stability of a possible plurality of other processes (ongoing validations). Following up on this insight we will have to explore in the next chapter how we can model the interaction of various forms of validation as joint contributors to the stability of understandings. Another important result of this investigation is that the three forms of validation are not all created equal. They offer distinct sources of validation, they have a distinct poetics, and yet, corroboration and resonance remain, for their stabilization across time, dependent on continuing recognition. This is true above all for complex discursive understandings about social and political life. Their direct corroboration is scarcely possible. And as Hobbes says in the quote with which I introduced this chapter, now translated into the language of the sociology of understanding, in the absence of possibilities to corroborate understandings one has to take recourse to recognition to gain certainty. The consequence is that networks of authority and propaganda play a much larger role in the formation of those understandings that cannot easily be tested in practice. The crux is that political understandings, that is, those understandings needed to orient and direct politics in the maintenance or transformation of larger institutions, fall squarely into this category. This asymmetry of the role played by the various forms of validation has consequences for how we *should* think about their institutionalization in a polity we might find attractive. The prevalence of recognition in the validation of political understanding needs to be counterbalanced by efforts to keep recognition an open process with real epistemic value. What this involves can be gauged better after a discussion of the dialectics of validation—which is the topic of the next chapter.