

## INTERSUBJECTIVITY, INTERCULTURAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE RECOGNITION OF THE *OTHER* – THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF ALIENNESS IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY RESEARCH

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**Summary:** Communication in the intercultural context of geographical (development) research is defined by a specific intersubjective relation between the researcher and the researched. It always faces the danger of misinterpretation concerning the actions of the ‘other’. Without the cultural and social differences that affect understanding and thus limit comprehension, the interpretation of research findings remains dubious. The article draws attention to this issue, which, so far, has not received sufficient recognition in human geography. It is a ‘self-experiment’, in the sense of Bourdieu, regarding the asymmetric relation between two subjects from specific and highly dissimilar backgrounds, found in a peculiar situation defined as ‘field research’. With this self-experiment, the possibilities and limits of intercultural hermeneutics are evaluated. Central to the argument is the critical discussion of the socio-philosophical conceptual foundation on which intersubjectivity and interculturality are based. This critique follows a perspective of the theory of recognition that understands the practices and perceptions of the other in the particular context of everyday life, in order to base the analysis of rationalities underlying social action on their understanding.

**Zusammenfassung:** Die Kommunikation im interkulturellen Kontext geographischer (Entwicklungs-)Forschung definiert ein intersubjektives Verhältnis von Forschenden und Beforschten, das ständig Gefahr läuft, Fehlinterpretationen über die handelnden *Anderen* zu produzieren. Ohne Reflexion der auf sozialen und kulturellen Differenz basierende Verstehensdifferenziale und Grenzen, bleibt wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis im Forschungsprozess zweifelhaft. Der Beitrag möchte einen Anstoß geben, die in der Humangeographie bisher wenig geführte Auseinandersetzung über das Eigene und das kulturell Andere in das Bewusstsein zu rücken: Ein letztlich unumgänglicher ‘Selbstversuch’ im bourdieuschen Sinne, der die zumeist asymmetrische Relation zweier, sich in einer sonderbaren Konstellation der Feldforschung befindlichen Subjekte, beleuchtet und dabei die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen interkultureller Hermeneutik kritisch in den Blick nehmen möchte. Dabei stehen sozialphilosophische Gedankengänge über die Intersubjektivität, die letztlich Grundlage der Interkulturalität darstellt, zur Disposition, ebenso erscheint die Annäherung an eine anerkennungstheoretische Forschungshaltung notwendig, die die Wahrnehmungen und sozialen Praktiken der Anderen in ihrem Lebenskontext begreift und belässt, um dabei ihre Handlungsrationalitäten zu verstehen versucht.

**Keywords:** Intersubjectivity, interculturality, hermeneutics, theory of recognition

### 1 Introduction

All acts of intersubjective understanding inevitably contain certain remnants of alienness<sup>1)</sup>, which is why there can be no understanding of the other in

<sup>1)</sup> GADAMER’s intention is to make the other an equal partner in dialogue by allowing ourselves to be challenged by the other’s position, by allowing it to ‘[assert] itself as truth’ (1960, 445). Understanding, for GADAMER, necessarily involves transforming ourselves through genuine openness to the other. I will argue that, in the intercultural context, the kind of hermeneutics that is proposed in GADAMER’s *Truth and Method* (1960) achieves only the appearance of understanding by redescribing genuine alienness in familiar and domestic terms and, so, inevitably distorting it.

the absolute meaning of the word. The idea that one person can understand someone else’s actions fully can never be anything but a theoretical assumption. Yet HUSSERL and SCHÜTZ postulated that the reciprocal success of communication is founded on the assumption that mutual understanding is possible, so that specific intentions and projects can be realised at the practical level (cf. SHIMADA 2007). Similar to cultural anthropology or development sociology, development research, which is the constituent discipline of human geography addressed in this paper whose ‘object’ is that which is culturally different, confronts the epistemological difficulties involved in attempting to understand the actions of people from radically different cultures and the inaccuracies of interpre-

tation that result from these difficulties. This holds true for geographical development research in the 'countries of the south' as well as for geographical research into migration, ethnicity, etc. in the 'countries of the north'. In the modern age, the familiar and the alien are no longer diametrically opposed; instead, alienness and cultural otherness sometimes come uncomfortably close to our own culture, and we encounter familiar things at the other end of the world (HAUCK 2006). *There* as well as *here*, therefore, the difficulties of hermeneutic understanding arise wherever we find uncertainties and contradictions, as secure traditional interpretations are called into doubt when we encounter cultural traditions that are alien to our own. In principle, the risk of misinterpretation grows as the social and cultural distance between actors and researchers increases. In this context, we need to distinguish between the general category of the *other* and the specific category of the *alien*. Given that both terms refer to a counterpart, their extension is, to a large extent, similar. However, while any difference from one's self may be interpreted as both other and as alien, the difference will be increasingly perceived as strange in addition to being other, the more the situation is unfamiliar and the more the difference is experienced as a symbolic frontier.

This paper seeks to approach the conditions for, opportunities for, and limitations of hermeneutically understanding that which is alien by exploring the concept of intersubjectivity, which forms the basis of intercultural understanding. The focus will be on both philosophical hermeneutics (as an important theoretical basis) and practical intercultural hermeneutics (SUNDERMEIER 1996) (as an empirical methodology). The investigation ends by presenting a theory of recognition of the other (cf. especially RICŒUR 2006 and HONNETH 1994), which, it can be argued, constitutes a necessary extension of the hermeneutical understanding of other life-worlds<sup>2)</sup> to include that of understanding an alien culture. Consequently, this paper addresses not only research in human geography (in a development context) but also those disciplines of social and cultural science that investigate socio-cultural elements in alien settings.

<sup>2)</sup> The 'lifeworld' is defined by SCHÜTZ (1974) as the unstated, unquestioned background context against which everyday life takes place. SCHÜTZ views the understanding of the alien as an everyday foundation of idealisation, which is based on a transfer of similarities and not in a hermeneutic 'empathising: with foreign psychological experiences.

## 2 Approaching intersubjectivity

The following quotation by BERNHARD WALDENFELS expresses the idea that intersubjectivity and interculturality are related concepts. Versus the self, any other constitutes a subject relationality to which the alien merely adds a culture-related distance between subjects: 'Interculturality, a term which is now common currency, reflects HUSSERL'S concept of intersubjectivity as much as MERLEAU-PONTY'S concretisation of intersubjectivity into incorporeity: interpersonal exchange expands into intercultural exchange. Instead of concentrating on a centre surrounded by others, the term creates an intermediate sphere, an intermediate space, an *intermonde* in which everything is related to the other and everything is what it is because it relates to the other. (...). We are looking at a network of relations with nodes, contacts, and connecting points but without a hub' (WALDENFELS 1997, 85).

Let it suffice to point out at this juncture that a decisive difference between intersubjectivity and interculturality does exist. The concept of *alterity* (lat. *alter*: one or the other of two) refers to a term of some importance in the history of philosophy which is used to describe the dichotomy of alterity and identity as mutually dependent moments. Alter is not just any other; it is the second of two identical paired identities, the opposite of the Latin *alius* or the Greek *xenos*, the alien.

Intersubjective relationality is a constitutive element of socialisation and sustained human coexistence within a nation/region or in any location, whereas interculturality between researchers and the researched is imbued with relative ephemerality and randomness and, by the same token, a lack of relationality, quite unlike a life-world that is permanently shared. Nevertheless, interculturality derives its inferential role from the sphere of intersubjectivity. Because the inferential role of the two concepts is intertwined, it is necessary to understand intersubjective thinking as such before beginning to deal with the cultural other.

The two key representatives of idealism in Germany, JOHANN GOTTLIEB FICHTE and GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL, were the first to interpret intersubjectivity as a condition of human existence in general. In his *Foundations of Natural Law According to the Principles of the Theory of Science* (Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre: 1960 [1796]), FICHTE considers that man should understand that, starting out from his own transcendental subjectivity, he discovers

another self-consciousness in a process in which he is 'called upon' by the other to jointly produce a third, a medium of the 'mind' in which both his own and the other's subjectivity are 'suspended'. That HEGEL thought in terms of intersubjectivity in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Phänomenologie des Geistes: 1987 [1807], 140) emerges clearly from his statement that 'self-consciousness in and by itself exists because it is a self-consciousness in and by itself to another, meaning that it exists only if recognised'. In the fourth chapter, entitled 'Dependence and Independence of the Self-consciousness', HEGEL examines the problem of recognition. In his view, an individual can only become conscious of himself by seeing himself mirrored in and recognised by another. The wish of the self for absolute autonomy and freedom constantly clashes with its wish for (social) recognition. The result is a dilemma in which the self experiences itself as dependent and autonomous at the same time, which forces it to split itself into two parts, between which it oscillates. In the intersubjective relationship between master and servant, (mutual) recognition is suspended<sup>3</sup>. However, when attempting to view itself as an independent entity, the self must recognise the other as an equal subject so that it, in turn, may be recognised by the other. 'Self-consciousness can achieve satisfaction only through another self-consciousness' (HEGEL 1987, 108). In HEGEL's opinion, the reason for this lies in the fact that the other self-consciousness is desirous and independent at the same time. Thus, self-consciousness and/or the I can only confirm itself in another. According to HEGEL, this other self-consciousness can be negated through 'desire' but not dissolved, because it is itself a subject. This leads him to argue that recognition by another self-consciousness is a *sine qua non* for the assurance of self-consciousness by the self. Thus, an individual realises 'that objects can never be the true aim of his desire, and that his needs can only be satisfied by congregating with other individuals' (MARCUSE 1982, 108). Like HEGEL, SIMMEL (1908) believes that the essence of socialness, namely the intersubjective constitution of the consciousness in which the being of the subject is predicated on the

<sup>3</sup> HEGEL's 'Master and Slave Dialectics' constitutes intersubjectivity. The thesis of consciousness implies the antithesis of another consciousness. Both consciousnesses are intimately connected; not in a peaceful way, but rather in a 'struggle for recognition'. Their synthesis finally leads to self-consciousness, whereby in the first case it is self-dependent, and in the other case dependent (cf. HEGEL 1987, 140 – 149).

existence of the other, forms a key condition of existence itself. Thus, there is something like a primal connection between subjects<sup>4</sup>.

Beyond HEGEL's intersubjectivity, which is predicated on recognition, HUSSERL's interpretation of the term in his *Cartesian Meditations* (Cartesianische Meditationen: 1950, 121-183) is based on the general assumption that the conditions of human consciousness and existence are fundamentally equal (an existence or coexistence for everyone) as well as on the assumption that a duality of I's is formed in the individual consciousness whenever it explores an alien psyche. As the individual ego conceives of the other as an adequate being, trying to see the world through the other's eyes, the inevitable consequence is that the other must view its own ego in the same way that the ego views the other. In HUSSERL's transcendental phenomenology, the theory of intersubjectivity implies analysing the experience of corporeality and the appresentation of unfamiliar subjectivity based on that (cf. MERLEAU-PONTY 1966 [1945]). The crucial discovery is that of the intersubjective constitution and, consequently, the social contingency of the world as such<sup>5</sup>.

In a modern socio-philosophical concept, HABERMAS (1992, 217) pointed to the social character of subjectivity and the 'intersubjective core' of self-consciousness, emphasising that 'consciousness centred on the I is nothing direct and exclusively internal. Rather, self-consciousness forms on the way

<sup>4</sup> The discourse about intersubjectivity is essentially furthered by the cultural sciences, sociology as well as psychology. The humanities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were confronted with the problem of understanding foreign subjectivity. Hermeneutics within the humanities evolved through dealing with the products of other foreign eras, whereas hermeneutics within cultural anthropology was the result of dealing with other present-day, foreign ethnicities. Sociology, as a science of modernising societies at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, seeks to find a balance between the individualism of modern freedom and the origin of sociological thinking of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The individual mediates as a part of an already existing collective (cf. WEBER and SIMMEL in particular).

<sup>5</sup> In his existentialist work *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*: 1927), HEIDEGGER defines HUSSERL's term 'Mit-Welt' in detail. His understanding of 'Being-in-the-World' ('In-der-Welt-Sein') does not define subjects as being 'present-at-hand', but as being ontological relational 'ready-to-hand'. In his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1966), MERLEAU-PONTY seeks to understand the individual's prereflexive co-existence within the world as well as otherness. The 'intercorporeity' represents a dialectic of self-perception and perception of the otherness/others, from seeing and being seen to a mode of mutual perception as a sign of increasing mutual attentiveness.

from outside to inside via a relationship with an interaction partner that is mediated by symbols. To that extent, its core is intersubjective.' In this, HABERMAS follows HEGEL as well as MEAD, who in his social psychology drew up the concept of the 'generalised other' in his *Mind, Self, and Society* (Geist, Identität und Gesellschaft: 1975). Mead developed a model in which identity has a social genesis that is preserved in the psychic structures of the individual in the form of self-reflexion. His theory suggests that social relations are internalised in a manner that is comparable to the psychoanalytical concept<sup>6</sup>, according to which inner structures are formed by identification. MEAD's core idea (1975, 218) is that a subject can only acquire a consciousness of itself and an identity, establish a relationship with itself, and control its own behaviour, if it is able to see itself 'through the eyes of others' and 'adopt their perspective'. In MEAD's opinion, the fact that man is anthropologically conditioned to rely on others from his earliest childhood forces him to cope with the transcendence of the other (on the intersubjective character of subjectivity postulated by HABERMAS following MEAD, cf. DÖRFLER 2001, 78ff.<sup>7</sup>). In this context, however, development psychologist JEAN PIAGET (1974) refers to the resistiveness of the natural and social world. Children only form the distinction between subject and object emerges in the course of their early development as they become aware of their selves in contrast to the outer world. PIAGET suggests that this process depends on the resistiveness of the sensomotoric world

<sup>6</sup> Within psychoanalysis, intersubjectivity is based on the works of STOLOROW and ATWOOD, among others. By taking account of KOHUT's *Self-psychology* (1979), their psychoanalytical theory and practices are oriented on experiences, which significantly differ from Freud's classical concepts. To their minds, experiences result from and happen through a mutual exchange of subjectivities, for example between those of the patients and of the analysers. Their points of view are based on a mutual context, which means that the analyser seeks to understand the patient from his viewpoint (empathy) and that he also incorporates his own biographical background into the reflection of his attitude towards the patient (introspection).

<sup>7</sup> Apart from H. MEAD's 'generalized other', the anthropology of intersubjectivity particularly gained cognitive definition through J. LACAN's differentiation between 'reflection' and 'systematic otherness', J. HABERMAS' 'communicative action', in N. LUHMANN's 'double contingency' and E. Levinas' philosophy of obligation through the 'face of the other' (cf. FISCHER 2000). DÖRFLER (2001) develops a systematic causal correlation of the subject-orientation as a result of the conflict between identity and difference described by HABERMAS, LACAN, and FOUCAULT.

of perceivable objects, because it forces children to come to an arrangement between their skills and the autonomous world of objects so that they can cope with and manipulate it in a satisfactory manner. This insight forms part of the social capacity to take action that is acquired in dealing with others.

As a basis for defining intersubjectivity, we consider the attempt of BENJAMIN (2006, 67), a psychoanalyst who pursues the relational-theory approach. In her view, 'intersubjectivity describes a relationship determined by mutual recognition – a relationship in which one experiences the other as a "subject", a being with its own mental constitution with whom one can "empathise" although it has its own defined centre of emotion and perception.'<sup>8</sup> Summing up, it may be said that the concept of intersubjectivity relates to interpersonal relations as *the* foundation of the *conditio humana* – in the positive as well as in the negative sense (cf. ALTMEIER and THOMÄ 2006).

In a different context, this condensed socio-philosophical discourse on subject-to-subject relations addresses a *sine qua non* for the attempt made in social and cultural geography to render the perceptions and actions of others, as well as the production and reproduction of society and space in a *here* and *there*, logically comprehensible and transparent. Insofar as culture is seen as a social practice of everyday life, this implies on the one hand a modified understanding of culture and on the other hand an understanding of action, agency, actors and the social *per se* (see RECKWITZ 2003; HÖRNUNG and REUTHER 2004).

Consequently, it appears apposite to suggest that geography should no longer concern itself exclusively with the material expressions and spatial structures of social relations, but devote its attention to the more profound correlations of meaning and significance in intersubjectivity (cf. LIPPUNER 2005). This hints at a shift in the assignment of significance that, while it does not challenge the traditional understanding of the 'spatiality of social life', as SOJA put it in 1985, does add an intersubjective dimension to socio-theoretical reflection in human geography. What does this mean in concrete terms? Societies feature elementary differences in their internal formation and position within a continuum of individualisation and collectivisation, varying

<sup>8</sup> Part of the theory of 'practical intersubjectivity' (JOAS 1985) is also the idea of exchanging gifts, which according to MARCEL MAUSS (1990 [1950]) is a total phenomenon of the human sphere.

between social cohesion as sociality<sup>9)</sup> and individual self-relationality. Intersubjective attitudes are group-related, manifesting themselves (to use structuration theory) within the spatial fabric and reproducing themselves in individual actions vis-à-vis society. Without attempting to formulate a concept of subject-relational social geography, i.e. a discipline that addresses spatially constituted intersubjectivity, this paper focuses on a perspective that is centred on the individual. It is about access to the intercultural relationship between researchers (in social geography) and the subjects from another lifeworld they are investigating. The fact that face-to-face interaction is subject-related shows how urgently necessary it is to reflect on the relationship of understanding between the *self* and the *other*. According to WERLEN (2000), this form of communication, which implies a personal relationship, is one of the essential constituent characteristics of traditional societies. In a culturally alien context, researchers have no option but to depend on this intersubjective sociality.

### 3 Research into constructions of alienness

Metatheoretically integrating a geography concerned with the *other* with an intercultural hermeneutic that aims for a controlled and understandable reconstruction of the conscious perspective of the people concerned requires that we look at the other culture<sup>10)</sup>, its perceptions, patterns of thought, and structures of action in the context *there*. In this case, the understanding in

<sup>9)</sup> *Sociality* is perceived as a social bonding force which becomes active in fields where societal structures, social spaces and socialising subjects are about to develop. It then creates social cohesion by permanently working on 'individuated socialisation' as HABERMAS argued (WENZEL et al. 2003).

<sup>10)</sup> Amongst several attempts to define *culture*, WIMMER'S (1996, 407) reformulated socio-anthropological concept of the term seems to be the most coherent, because it deals with the most important aspects of culture on different analytical levels. Culture is seen as an open and unstable 'process of negotiating meanings, 'which leads to the closure of social groups if a compromise is to be found'. This process comprises three closely connected aspects: (1) the internalised culture of an individual, which forms the basis for processes of negotiation (*habitus*), (2) the common perceptions of the nature of the world as a result of those processes of negotiation (public cultural-collective representation) and (3) cultural practices that represent the limits to social groups within which the processes of negotiation take place (social closure and cultural distinction).

question is not purely self-related, to be achieved by 'worming your way into' the alien culture. Rather, it involves recognising the other, as will be described below in greater detail. Two fundamental problems arise. The first is how to allow, as appropriately as possible, for the diversity, complexity, and meaningfulness of the other's human expressions of life. The second is how to reduce the distance to the reference frame of the alien culture in order to permit an understanding of it in the first place. Frequently, the concepts and practices that relate to dealing with power, settling conflicts, securing a livelihood, religion, knowledge, etc., differ fundamentally from the 'traditions' of the researchers' own background culture. At this point, tension arises. Any attempt to address actions in an alien culture through the medium of *objectivist* sociology is doomed to failure, because this approach disregards the inherent logic and autonomy of the context of an action by basing its analysis on ethnocentric criteria that could never have been the reason for the observed action in the first place. Consequently, understanding an action in the context of an unfamiliar culture must always be based on an (inter)subjectivist approach, on discovering and understanding the other in his alienness as distinct from one's self (cf. MÜLLER-MAHN 2001, 20). In this context, ESCHER (1999) suggested using a pragmatic approach to understanding actions that allows that which is alien to remain alien.

The French phenomenologist MERLEAU-PONTY (1966 [1945], 138) recognised the special status of ethnology as the scientific discipline that deals with that which is alien when he asked the provocative question: 'How to understand the other without sacrificing him to our logic – and vice versa?' He looked for an answer to this question in an experience that is specific to ethnology. To him, the context of the own and the other is not 'vertically universal' but 'laterally universal', something that is acquired through ethnographic experience, the incessant desire to experience the self through the other and the other through the self. Seen in that light, he says, ethnology is not a special discipline defined by a special object but a manner of thinking that suggests itself whenever the object is some other that calls upon us to reflect on ourselves (cf. KOHL 1993). By proxy, even geographers turn into anthropologists of their own spatially-defined society if they view it from a distance and learn 'how that which is ours can be seen as other, and that which was alien can be seen as ours' (cf. MERLEAU-

PONTY 2003, 233f.)<sup>11</sup>. Thus, society is something that is fundamentally alien, independently of its proximity or distance. Alienness as a primordial social phenomenon is not a development of modernity but inheres in the essential logic of intersubjectivity.

#### 4 The researcher and the other – asymmetry of intersubjectivity

GIDDENS (1984, 64) describes a power relationship that is inherent in any superficial conversation between two persons to which the interlocutors bring their own unequal power resources. Consequently, *social* research always implies a reflection of power constellations and the strategies and interests of individuals, groups, or institutions, which ultimately means that ‘social science cannot be neutral, detached or apolitical’ (BOURDIEU and WACQUANT 1992, 51). Geographical research in the so-called developing countries is even more subject to the asymmetry of the relationship between the scientist from the ‘first world’ and his/her host community in the ‘third world’. This implies the intransparent propagation of a hierarchy that was internalised in the course of colonial history. Basically, we should never forget that even if we refuse to accept this inequality, which we may regard as judgmental and inhuman, we are still part of a ‘dominant culture of rulers’ (BOURDIEU 1998, 156). Both we and our conscious and unconscious actions are profoundly marked by this culture, and we are perceived accordingly in the ‘countries of the south’. We appear vested with symbolic and economic power, and the intercultural conversations we conduct are not free from dominance, much as we may wish them to be. Recognising this asymmetry, BOURDIEU et al (1999, 781) attempted to approximate ‘non-violent communication’ by ‘reducing as far as possible the symbolic violence that may be exercised

in an interview relationship’. This imbalance may be righted, at least partially, if researchers perceive themselves as learners and the researched as possessors of knowledge. In any research whose frame of reference is an alien culture, factors that represent economic, moral, and socio-cultural differences should be minimised as far as possible, so that an interpersonal conversation may take place on an equal footing.<sup>12</sup>

Field researchers establish an invisible relationship between cultures. In the (new) texts that they write, they forge a link to an other world that can be read and understood by members of their own life-world. However, they can only act as a ‘transmission belt’ (GALTUNG 1984) between different cultural systems if they are assisted in their research by a person who acts as an honest ‘mediator’ (SEITZ 1989) with the alien group. This aspect is of crucial importance, because those who wish to study a local setting are themselves strangers in the society they are exploring. What they need is a ‘true friend’ who opens a door to a (still) strange world, introduces them to it, and protects them from any dangers that may arise. Without such a liaison, insights are difficult to acquire, even by researchers who speak the local language. Employing a cultural mediator who is much closer to the givens of the alien culture because of his/her own position within the social space tends to promote intersubjectivity in the researcher’s understanding of the statements and actions of his/her research subjects. Once again, however, it is necessary to reflect critically when analysing and interpreting the new intersubjective power fabric created by the introduction of a third person.

#### 5 Philosophical hermeneutics

The ‘theory of understanding meanings’ was introduced among the humanities by SCHLEIERMACHER (1838), DILTHEY (1900/1957), HEIDEGGER (1927), and

<sup>11</sup> The synthesis of different anthropological positions through the privilege of interpretation, as well as the inclusion of hermeneutic thoughts about the observer’s pre-comprehension when picturing alien societies, can be found in particular in GEERTZ’s work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Within his scheme of order, the other represents a complement to one’s own culture: ‘The aim of researching foreign societies is the expansion of the human universe of discourse’ (GEERTZ 1983, 20). GEERTZ’s ‘interpretative anthropology’ regards *culture as text* and text, which is a permanently fixed statement, as a chance to have an understanding of foreign cultures via scientific research. For more details about GEERTZ’s problem within the symbolic ethnology of globalising concepts of living, see, for instance, KUMOLL (2005).

<sup>12</sup> Within the process of researching foreign cultures, the qualitative paradigm turns out to be insightful because it always includes the ideas, wishes, and views of the researched (i.e. LAMNEK 1995; FLICK et al. 1995 a.o.). Information is gained through openness and flexibility in dialogues and discourses. This, in turn, provides reciprocity on the level of understanding. Acquiring local habits and norms, as well as developing mutual trust when gathering information, is seen as a central premiss (cf. SPITTLER 2001). On the other hand, quantitative methods are exclusive and not aimed at fathoming latent meanings of foreign action. In respect to their aim of objectify, scientists’ intention is to ‘desubjectify’ (GERTEL 2005, 5).

further developed by GADAMER (1960). Originally, it was seen as a universalist 'theory of the art of text interpretation'<sup>13</sup>. Its object is the *human element* as such, particularly if it is a 'permanently fixed expression of life' (DANNER 1998, 64).

According to GADAMER, understanding a text from a long-past epoch of history is a creative process in which observers who wish to understand an alien way of life enrich their knowledge of themselves with knowledge about others. This process is facilitated by a 'controlled fusion of horizons' (GADAMER 1960, 274). Understanding, therefore, does not imply *merging* with the subjective experience of the author of a text but *comprehending* this experience by recapitulating the 'mode of life' that gives it meaning. The 'open dialogue' is a hermeneutical paradigm in GADAMER's *Truth and Method* (Wahrheit und Methode: 1960). In his view, understanding relates mainly to language, the medium of intersubjectivity and the concrete expression of a mode of life or a 'tradition', as he calls it. Like HEIDEGGER in his *Being and Time* (Sein und Zeit: 1927), GADAMER (1960, 235) regards understanding not as 'a mode of behaviour of a subject but as a mode of being of existence itself', as an 'agreement on facts' with another person. From this, it follows that he is mainly concerned with the conditions and opportunities of understanding as such, and that he regards hermeneutics as something more than a 'theory of the art of understanding'. Therefore, it is of fundamental importance for the practical application of hermeneutics that the researcher should ask plausible questions about contexts and structures that make sense (cf. POHL 1996, 81ff.). It is important to note that no statement or action can be understood 'in isolation', because it is always tied to a context and a temporal frame of reference (cf. STRUCK 2000, 15). Any interpretation, any understanding can only hold true for its culture-related environment.

The hermeneutic approach is basically inductive; objects, phenomena, and even theories are only discovered in the process of research. When gathering information, emotional experiences, and images of

an other lifeworld, researchers try to cover as many different levels and perspectives as possible.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, before trying to understand the context and reasoning behind the actions of the researched, scientists should begin by considering the alien environment and its people, opening up to them, and developing an awareness of their own fears, prejudices, and preconceived ideas of the *alien* so as to pave the way for reciprocal communication. After all, painting an image of the other implies painting an image of yourself, and vice versa. The ethnopsychologist ERDHEIM (1987, 48) has the following question to ask in this context: 'How should I recognise me as me if I have no other thing, nothing that is somehow "alien" to distinguish myself from? It is normal to regard yourself as your point of reference in the world. It is just as normal that we should always be filled with both fear and attraction when confronted by the alien.'

What is more, understanding the other is possible only if equality or *reciprocity* is established at the level of communication. 'Those who want to understand must accept the milieu of the alien and live in it. (...) The hermeneutical question forces us to beware of sweeping statements of any kind, and to begin at the lowest and most concrete level possible' (SUNDERMEIER 1996, 154).

The above-mentioned *reciprocity* is also to be found in the intersubjective theories of MEAD (1975) and SCHÜTZ (1974 [1932]). In his phenomenological concept of the life-world, SCHÜTZ mentions the principle that viewpoints should be exchangeable in the social world. As previously postulated by HUSSERL, SCHÜTZ propounds the general theory of 'perspective reciprocity' in his 'theory of understanding others' (1974 [1932], 137-197). It is possible that all experiences in the world are fundamentally equal. Any insight into another's subjectivity implies a reduction in complexity, because phenomena are corroborated by reference to a shared world. Indeed, there are epistemological parallels between SCHÜTZ's phenomenology and DILTHEY's (1961, 150) hermeneutic construct of the 'objective mind', which he regards as something common, a *third element* with a unifying effect that all individuals share to a greater or lesser

<sup>13</sup> The founding fathers of philosophical hermeneutics all agree that the art of interpretation requires understanding the whole issue as comprising several parts on the one hand and several parts comprising the whole issue on the other. There are at least four different kinds of hermeneutics: SCHLEIERMACHER's theory of empathy, DILTHEY's theory of subjectivity, HEIDEGGER's existential hermeneutics, and GADAMER's model of self-awareness (cf. WUCHTERL 1977, 173ff.).

<sup>14</sup> BOURDIEU imagined the all-encompassing comprehension of foreign realities as being a deeply disillusioning feeling: Therefore, he concluded his anthropological field research in the Kabyle society in North Algeria as follows: 'My poor Bourdieu, with the sorry tools that you have, you won't be up to the task, you would need to know everything, to understand everything, psychoanalysis, economics (...)' (BOURDIEU in SCHULTHEIS and FRISINGHELLI 2003, 36).

extent, thus overcoming the hermeneutic difference. Relevant examples include language and culture. It is to these spheres of commonality that the cognitive problem of a geography of cultural difference is related. Cultural alienness and language barriers are problems that establish a hermeneutical distance through which the greatest difference emerges between researchers and the researched.

However, the experience of the other shows that there is more that unites than divides people, no matter how different their cultures are. What divides people is their language, their history, and their life-world. What we have in common are basic physical and emotional experiences and conditions: hunger, fear, pain, happiness, love, etc. All these are profound familiarities, the bedrock that brings people together. This foundation of shared feelings and physiology gives us the ability and opportunity to use our knowledge of different worldviews to penetrate *empathically*<sup>15)</sup> the motivational structures of the other – not absolutely, but to an extent that permits partial understanding.

Because we understand the other's feelings, we can approximately share their feelings. And as we feel with others and/or share their feelings, we experience them as peers (SCHLOSSBERGER 2004).

ESCHER (1999, 170) assumes that, in practice, people are able to understand one another and overcome any differences that may arise in the understanding of the other's actions (cf. HAMMERSCHMIDT 1997, 242). In a manner of speaking, we prepare for understanding each other by developing shared connections and recognising the code of the other, regardless of whether the code and actions can be understood as alien (ESCHER 1999, 174), with the proviso that a construction of understanding should always be judged with the temporal and spatial context in mind. Similarly, WALDENFELS (1997, 19ff.) and GADAMER (1960, 71ff.) fully share the opinion that it is one of the fundamental conditions of herme-

<sup>15)</sup> GEERTZ (1983, 56) outlines the axiom of *empathy* by thinking about consequences of non-empathy: 'What happens to *verstehen*, when *einfühlen* disappears?' However, it should be noted that GEERTZ's statement deals with a preferably precise recording of the observation of native ideas, rather than with a psychological empathising with the 'indigenous point of view'. *Empathising*, which is seen as an important ability of the hermeneutic researcher, is regarded as a process of emotionally identifying with another human. Nevertheless, empathising cannot be equated with the process of understanding, because the latter represents a purely theoretical process of a 'thinking penetration of psychological and mental interrelations' (cf. BOLLNOW 1982, 76).

neutic philosophy that alienness cannot be overcome. Consequently, there is nothing that is definitely outside the teleological, dialectical, hermeneutic, or communicative circle.<sup>16)</sup> According to GADAMER, true understanding is not based on a primal form; rather, it is a successful conversation in which a relational connection of subjects is established. Thus, the 'living dialogue' holds a position of fundamental importance in the process of understanding (VETTER 2007, 151). However, the fact that any hermeneutic process involves a kind of *translation* should be taken into account in this context (WIMMER 2004, 127).

Hermeneutic approaches in the interpretative paradigm have, to some extent, become important in (German) research on human and regional geography (see MÜGERAUER 1981; BIRKENHAUER 1987; POHL 1986, 1996; MEIER 1989; STRUCK 2000; POTT 2002; ROTHFUSS 2004).

## 6 Critical objections

Hermeneutic positions such as those held by HEIDEGGER and GADAMER, who emphasise the fundamental importance of traditional meanings, are confronted by several grave problems in the field of intercultural understanding. On the one hand, these are related directly to the concept of tradition and the concept of foreknowledge that follows from it. On the other hand, they relate first and foremost to the ontological idealism of language and the lack of a power concept in the practice of understanding. HEIDEGGER (1927, 445) says that the relationship between subjects is one of 'ontological solidarity'. 'The other is not an *object*. In his relationship with me, he remains a *Dasein*, a being as "being-in-the-world" (...)' In HEIDEGGER's thinking, the existence of that which is alien is unproblematic, because subjects are mutually related even before an individual intentionality forms. If the other cannot appear as an alien counterpart in the first place, because he or she has been involved in a primal interaction from the beginning, it is superfluous to investigate how a subject can be certain from its individual perspective that the other does exist. BOURDIEU (1987, 125) feels similarly uncomfortable with the hermeneutical and phenomenological view of understanding: 'A be-

<sup>16)</sup> According to HEIDEGGER (1927), who sought to explain the 'hermeneutic circle' ontologically, this concept implies that it is always the case that the understanding person already possesses a certain knowledge about what is to be understood. This knowledge is based on internal experiences.



lief which is related to existential conditions that are fundamentally different from your own or, in other words, to completely different games and stakes, you cannot really *live*, much less enable others to relive it by discourse alone.' The discrepancy between the beliefs of the researcher and those of the researched, who live under completely different conditions of existence and pursue completely different strategies and interests in interaction, lead BOURDIEU to rule out any possibility of understanding an unfamiliar lifeworld. As a telling example, FLAIG (2000, 375) describes BOURDIEU's scientific interests and strategies when he stayed with the Kabyles, an Algerian Berber nation, as a *homo academicus*: 'The anthropologist intends to study the marriage rules of the ethnic group he is investigating not because he wants to marry a local girl, but because he intends to complete his habilitation in ethnology at his home university in order to become a professor. To this end, his plans are governed by academic deadlines imposed on him by academic constraints. Conversely, the Kabyle wants to marry off his daughter honourably and with a certain social gain, for which he has only a few years left.'

To be sure, BOURDIEU did little to overcome the hermeneutic difference or to mitigate the problem of understanding in his own empirical social research. It was only in one of his last works, *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (1999), that his methodological perspective shifted towards a form of access that emphasises a respectful ethical state of awareness towards the researched other (cf. SENNETT 2002). In the chapter on understanding, he explains that 'mentally placing yourself in the position which the interviewee holds in the social space in order to challenge him and, in a manner of speaking, side with him from that position (...) does not mean projecting yourself onto the other, as phenomenologists believe' (BOURDIEU et al. 1999, 786).

Another critique of hermeneutic concepts is based on the fact that it does not consider the power-theoretical framework. As VASILACHE showed in his *Intercultural Understanding after Gadamer and Foucault* (Interkulturelles Verstehen nach Gadamer und FOUCAULT: 2003), both HEIDEGGER and GADAMER ignore the fact that traditions are marked by master-slave relationships. Even assuming that direct verbal communication is possible, an intercultural dialogue could not be achieved on the basis of tradition because understanding, according to GADAMER, presupposes agreement on content. However, the other is basically defined on the assumption that differences are understandable *to us*, as KANT indirectly

points out in his cognitive theory. GADAMER denies the very possibility that such differences might be understood in the first place. Accordingly, the only option of gaining access to the symbolic order of an alien culture would be to transfer the preconceptions and/or prejudices of our own culture to the 'strange' culture. In practice, however, such universalism results in non-understanding, because intersubjectivity is annulled by the cultural or temporal aspect of alienness, and language is not a static phenomenon but is itself changeable and transformable.

DERRIDA'S (1988) deconstructivist perspective criticised the concept of hermeneutics that is presented in GADAMER'S *Truth and Method* (1960), because they did not overcome the separation of the significant (phonetic signs, phoneme) and the signified (the designated, association, term). His basic idea was that there is no absolute truth: different, opposing interpretations of the same text are all true. He therefore introduced the very central neologism *différance*, which implies a permanent suspension and instability of significance, the inherent 'difference' in meanings that is always relational and never self-constitutive. DERRIDA indicates that *différance* gestures at a number of heterogeneous features that govern the production of textual meaning. The first is the notion that words and signs can never fully convey what they mean, but can only be defined through appeal to further words, from which they differ. Thus, the presentation of meaning is forever postponed by an endless chain of signifiers. The second (relating to *différance*, sometimes referred to as *espacement* or 'spacing') concerns the force that differentiates elements from one another and engenders binary oppositions and hierarchies that emphasize meaning itself.

Going further, to the perspective of intercultural communication, situational contexts may arise that are based on the fact that the process of practical understanding has the character of conducting a dialogue. It is true that in practice, the focus is on the communication of meanings. However, this communication does not presuppose a fusion of horizons; rather, it is merely intended to permit the recapitulation of the differences of the alien from the self. In this context, understanding a difference is predicated on the two cultures having equal access to the process of communication, as well as on the equality of the interlocutors (cf. the 'ideal language situation' in HABERMAS' *Theory of Communicative Action*, [Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns: 1981]). Unlike the right of truth of power, which, according to Foucault, is revealed by understanding, this calls for a right of dialogue that has a normative effect in practice.

Although freedom from domination is practically never achieved in practice, this cannot change the fact that the presumption of freedom from domination in every actual conversation is the standard by which we distinguish between true and false, consent and dissent, as the case may be. While GADAMER (1960) says that a dialogue includes the commonality that subsists between partners, WALDENFELS (1997, 86) is unwilling to endorse this statement because, in his view, the intercultural involves 'a radical surplus of alienness' or, in a manner of speaking, 'a force that counteracts hermeneutics'. Unlike GADAMER, he believes that what is incomprehensible in the other marks the borderline of understandability. This is an 'indestructible border that can be moved but not removed, like the shadow that walks with us'. Although GADAMER's hermeneutics by no means ignores the alien, it definitely risks regarding it as nothing more than a transition to the familiar, a transition that must be overcome and tamed. This 'generally prescribed understanding' is precisely what WALDENFELS (1997, 83) takes exception to.<sup>17)</sup>

Summing up, hermeneutics is criticised because it is allegedly rooted in an idealist logic that degrades the other, to a 'reflex' of subjectivity instead of comprehending it in its autonomous otherness. WIERLACHER (1985, 342) goes so far as to regard this as a profoundly ideological trait. In his opinion, a hermeneutic process that expressly aims at 'abolishing alienness and facilitating appropriation' perpetuates 'European colonial patterns of thought' by obstructing any attempt to experience that which is alien in its otherness. Consequently, a hermeneutics that methodically tried to debar the other should be replaced by a 'hermeneutics of distance', i.e. an intercultural hermeneutics. Even this, however, would be dominated by post-colonial power structures. Even after the demise of colonialism, the 'countries of the south' are still affected by various forms of oppression, inhumanity, and intransparent power structures (FANON 1963; cf. postcolonial studies, especially by ASHCROFT et al. 2003, and also GERTEL 2005). Institutional structures and their internalisation in the form of unreflected categories determine the limits of what can

be thought, experienced, and said. This being so, they regularly affect interpretational and hermeneutic endeavours to highlight cultural differences in written texts.

## 7 Practical intercultural hermeneutics

While philosophical hermeneutics is mainly concerned with the epistemological conditions for understanding meaning, sociological or practical hermeneutics addresses options for empirically analysing and reconstructing objective and latent structures of meaning in everyday situations and actions (cf. UHLE 1995). Romantic hermeneutics, whose main exponent is SCHLEIERMACHER, did see the unity of understanding and interpretation, but regarded the application of understanding as a separate autonomous act. Conversely, GADAMER believed that understanding is always associated with applying the text that is being understood to the contemporary situation of the interpreter. Thus, whenever you apply any understanding in your life-practice, it will orientate your actions. In practical hermeneutics, action constitutes the 'atom or basic unit' of any expression of human life (POHL 1996, 79). Understanding and acting are intertwined. GIESEN and SCHMIDT (1976, 165) graphically described this complementarity as follows: 'I may consider myself as having *understood* a specific act or action by an alien if I have investigated his *action design* (plans/objectives) and the way he intends to use certain *means* or, in other words, if I can identify the *motive* of his action, and if I have learned to see the situation in which he acts in the same way as it is seen by the alien I am trying to understand. This is the foundation for the maxim that understanding should be guided by the *subjective meaning and purpose* of the actor himself rather than an interpretation of alien action from the outside with the purpose of describing it.'

Therefore, the point is to reconstruct an action complex from the conscious and unconscious motives of the actors in order to render it meaningful. Actions are preformed, not on the basis of logic, but on the basis of means-ends reasoning, which is a form of rationality. However, immanent structures of meaning can only be identified as such if they relate directly to the intentionality of the actor, i.e. to the motives, interests, and reasons that guide his actions.

In his work *Hermeneutics of the Stranger* (Den Fremden verstehen. Eine praktische Hermeneutik: 1996), the religious philosopher SUNDERMEIER calls for an approach that interweaves theoretical and practical insights. His attempt to facilitate intercultural

<sup>17)</sup> HABERMAS (1971) too complained about the universal claim of hermeneutics and he realised that intersubjectivity, which is based on consensus and therefore on understanding, can be the result of a 'false consciousness'. He emphasises the necessity to empirical-analytically *explain* the genesis of processes of understanding. To his mind, GADAMER disregards the fact that consent that results from traditions can be based on different levels of power, which needs to be reflected upon critically.

tural understanding involves a multidimensional, multistage model. The individual stages of the model, whose boundaries are fluid, not only have an analytical function, but may also be seen as methodological tools (cf. ROTHFUSS 2004 for a detailed description that enlarges and implements the model in empirical and methodological terms). (Tab. 1)

and every culture presents (*ibid.* 159)' and materialises itself. However, in order to avoid cultures being labelled simplistically, pressed into a mould, or reified, the *sign* level, the second hermeneutic stage, requires exercising your perception of the alien in order to learn how to read alien signs. At this semiotic level, *sympathy* is of enormous importance. To understand

**Table 1: 'Hermeneutic stages' for understanding the alien**

The Alien Other	Subjective Attitude	Objective Registration	Action Level
Level of phenomena	Epoché	Descriptive analysis	Perception from a distance
Level of signs	Sympathy	Contextualisation	Sympathetic observation
Level of symbols	Empathy	Comparative interpretation	(Partial) identification
Level of relevance	Respect	Translation/ transfer towards us	Convivence

Source: SUNDERMEIER 1996, 155

The first stage, the level of *phenomena*, describes the appropriate attitude of the researcher towards his counterpart. First contacts with an alien presence often involve anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, but also curiosity and joy. It is crucial to adopt an attitude that is as free from prejudice as possible because any *pre-conceived* judgement, whether positive or negative, will blur the researcher's view. 'You have to see the other the way he behaves and portrays himself. Each person is his or her image, which should be surveyed objectively and broadly, using a wide-angle lens in a manner of speaking' (SUNDERMEIER 1996, 158). To follow this precept, *distance* is needed. Close-up perception is out of the question. Nearness narrows your field of vision. 'In any (...) encounter, each must have the right to remain himself' (*ibid.* 158). Therefore, the emerging *phenomenon* of the stranger in all his alienness and strangeness should not only be recognised, it should have a value of its own. This being so, it would be wrong to make an overhasty attempt to *understand* any observations and experiences made in an alien world before they have been properly registered and described. Without critically reflecting on what has been discovered and found, the result will ultimately be a mere reproduction of the common-sense prejudices of one culture about another. Borrowed from HUSSERL's transcendental phenomenology, the term *epoché* used by SUNDERMEIER (1996, 158) for 'subjective attitude' describes a mode of being that refrains from judgement.

The second stage is about naming: 'By assigning a name, I create a distinction. Naming relates to the visible and reinforces it. (Absolute) social invisibility is as unthinkable as an invisible culture. Each

the other in his life-context, his signs of identity must be allowed to remain within their own structure, not interpreted or even universalised recklessly and without reflection on the basis of one's own habits. The point is, therefore, to understand the other through participation and sympathy.<sup>18)</sup> Cultural semiotics, the art of recognising and interpreting the signs of a culture, evolves through use, through 'familiarisation' (BOURDIEU 1987, 18) and 'awareness' as BUBER described it in his work on interpersonalit, *The Dialogic Principle* (Das dialogische Prinzip: 1962 [1997], 153). However, there is a caveat: 'However intensely you may live with and experience another culture and another community, you will never be more than a guest, and you will never become part of the other group' (SUNDERMEIER 1996, 163). This partial changeover opens the door to the third stage, the level of *symbols*, in which the dominant attitude is that of *empathy*, of feeling one's way into the attitudes of the other. What is crucial at this level is to listen and learn, to exercise patience and modesty, and to read between the lines. The characteristic requirement of the symbolic level, the third hermeneutical stage, is to learn how to exercise empathy. This relational hermeneutics differs from that of the previous stages in that the researcher must *identify* with the alien culture.

<sup>18)</sup> By means of MALINOWSKI's (1992) famous *participatory observation*, this postulate can be methodically realised in the 'field'. A precondition of understanding is participation. Through an advanced methodology of *thick participation* (SPITTLER 2001), human behaviour and their culture can be observed and internalised in the most realistic and precise way.

It is about adopting an alien reality, developing an intuitive capacity, and capturing that reality in a precise analysis. The unusual can be identified only by comparison. Nonconformances appear only after a standard has been recognised. Other realities can be rendered transparent only by comparing them to things, events, and feelings experienced in one's own mental and physical existence. And, as explained above in some detail, there is always the caveat not to commit the conceptual error inherent in HEIDEGGER's and GADAMER's philosophical hermeneutics of fusing horizons to establish the 'unity of the one and the other' (GADAMER 1960, 279), which leads one to overlook what separates one from the other prevents one from seeing the alien in yourself straight away (cf. KRISTEVA 1990). 'What is alien must be borne as such' (SUNDERMEIER 1996, 170). Thus, comparative interpretation allows the alien to be approached patiently, carefully weighing differences and congruences against each other. The fourth stage is described as a level of straightforward action. It forms the temporary end of the hermeneutic process. At the level of *relevance*, the preceding levels merge into that ethical stage of awareness that is characterised by 'respect for the human being' (SUNDERMEIER 1996, 184). The attitude of dignity reflects the ability to be astonished by the other. Lastly, the term *convivence*, which was coined by SUNDERMEIER (1996, 190), signifies a 'life actually lived with dedication, encompassing experience and practice, things individual and things collective, participation and exchange.'

The deficiencies in the logic that were described as applying to hermeneutical traditions of thought in the sixth section also apply to practical intercultural hermeneutics to a certain extent, although the precedence of adopting an alien culture is greatly minimised by SUNDERMEIER's multistage approach to the other. The concluding section presents an attempt to formulate a specific 'attitude with the character of action', the recognition of which was described by HÖNNETH (1994), because this is a key element in the interpretation and understanding of social practice in the intersubjective field between researcher and the researched.

## 8 Towards the intersubjective recognition of the other

The limits of hermeneutic approaches indicate the necessity for adopting an attitude of recognition that constitutes an attempt to accord to the other an independent existence of complete integrity, rather

than trying to understand and define it through what is one's own.

Even the relationship between researchers and 'indigenes', which is threatened by historical and structural asymmetry, may become approximately reciprocal and mutual if the practice of 'mutual recognition' is applied. WALDENFELS' conceptual considerations throw some light on the intersubjective construct of recognition. In *The Sting of the Alien* (Der Stachel des Fremden: 1990) and *Topography of the Alien* (Topographie des Fremden: 1997), he forges a link between the phenomenology of experiencing that which is alien and the description of the order of speech. He blends HUSSERL's concept of communicating alien meanings with hermeneutic patterns of dialogue, to which he adds FOUCAULT's (1995) power-theory assumptions. It is worth emphasising that his concept has a topographical aspect, which means that it covers not only the temporal, but also the spatial context of that which is alien. 'Place' is a term that is used by WALDENFELS in many ways. The topography of that which is alien designates not only spatial distances and cultural zones of collective alienness, but also, at the psychological level, that which is alien as a mental place within the subject. The demand of that which is alien, i.e. the claim to and the requirement of being addressed, leads to a paradox between the coercion to comment and the impossibility of its being placed into its proper context by a subject. According to WALDENFELS, one way out of this dilemma is to accord to the claim of that which is alien the status of an egalitarian viewpoint. Approaching that which is alien, not by classifying it, but in a state of amazement and disquiet, enables one to engage with it without depriving it of its specific quality. From this, it follows that WALDENFELS regards the intercultural dyad as an extension of HUSSERL's intersubjectivity; in communication, intersubjectivity is assured by understanding meanings as well as by the presence of a third discursive instance that balances claims to validity: 'The third signifies a viewpoint or standpoint which I occupy vis-à-vis you and myself by considering and treating us both as *persons*, either implicitly or explicitly (...). The third has its own claim inasmuch as any alien claim is shared by an instance that does not coincide with the addressee. If this were not so, the demand "you shall" uttered in a dialogue would be a mere declaration of will (...), not a repeatable claim (...). In genealogical terms, the viewpoint of the third is always tied to a *discursive place* from which it is *asserted*. Even universal viewpoints (...) are not universally valid; they are valid only if they are invoked by someone in certain

circumstances and in certain forms, and if this entails certain consequences (...)’ (WALDENFELS 1997, 124f).

This reveals that the construct of a personal ‘third place’ signifies a discursive space, a space in which the encounter with the alien is experienced by one’s own consciousness. Embedded in the subject, it is an (independent) space of possibilities that formed ontologically, helps to render the other comprehensible. It is this construction of the *third place* that enables subjects to recognise their integrity mutually and completely without losing it between the poles of appropriation and distance. Consequently, the measure of success with which we explore the phenomenon of mutuality in an analytical process of understanding depends on the extent to which we adopt a perspective from a *third place*, beyond that of scientists and the ‘other’.<sup>19)</sup>

WALDENFELS sketched out a path to mutual recognition that was developed stringently by RICŒUR, HONNETH, and TAYLOR in terms of moral theory. In *Oneself as Another* (Das Selbst als ein Anderer: 1996), RICŒUR shows how to find a way to action from subtle self-interpretation, and how to attain the sphere of intersubjectivity, of morality, from a careful description of philosophical reflections. On RICŒUR’s construal of the discipline, *ethics* attempts to determine the conditions for a good and successful individual life, a life that is lived together with and for others, supported by equitable institutions. In his last work, *The Course of Recognition* (Wege der Anerkennung: 2006), RICŒUR provides the rationale for the self as another, a construct of Hegelian moral philosophy that still repays effort, as HONNETH’s (1994; 2000; 2005) socio-philosophical analysis confirms. For the French term ‘reconnaissance’ used by RICŒUR (2006) also means ‘identification’, recognising something as something and ‘recognising oneself’. To illustrate the problems of identification, he asks the epistemological question of how one can be certain that a thing remains the same over the course of time, and what a consciousness must do to achieve this ‘recognition’. In the context of a geography of cultural difference, the third form of recognition dealt with by RICŒUR (2006) is crucial: ‘Mutual recognition’ widens the sphere of anthropological

and phenomenological self-description into the intersubjective and political. In the careful analysis of recognition as a necessary but perpetually threatened basic mode of our societal being, RICŒUR’s essential considerations on obtaining recognition by exchanging gifts, and his sidelights on the multiculturalism of TAYLOR (1992), show how deeply he is concerned with giving space to the human self without either overtaxing it or confirming it in its self-glorification. He can be credited with developing the ethnological theory of ‘gifts’ to culminate in an ‘ethic of gratitude’. Each identity needs the other to produce its own self. However, RICŒUR warns against intersubjectivist exuberance in the theory of recognition. To his mind, an indelible asymmetry remains between the self and the other that cannot be suspended even by the experience of a state of peace. It was probably AXEL HONNETH who formulated the currently most prominent sociological theory of recognition.<sup>20)</sup> In his view, the fact that subjects constantly strive for societal conditions that permit them to develop personal integrity and an undistorted identity or, in other words, the fact that the subject depends on social recognition, forms an elementary anthropological constant of universal validity. This normative design of social cohesion revolves around the ‘struggle for recognition’. There are three normative modes and, by the same token, societal spheres of recognition: emotional attachment (love), cognitive respect, and social esteem, which relate to intimate, legal, and social relationships, respectively. In his opinion, only a successful interplay between all three forms of recognition may produce a social framework that enables the individual to develop a functioning ‘self-relationship’. Self-relationship always describes ‘a person’s awareness of or feeling for his or her proper rights and abilities’ (HONNETH 2000, 66).

<sup>19)</sup> BENJAMIN (2006, 68) approves the necessity of the ‘third’ and suggests, within the context of relational psychoanalysis, the concept of an *intersubjective triangulation*: ‘(...) the third is something we devote ourselves to and triangulating is the mental space of intersubjectivity that allows or arises out of devotion.’

<sup>20)</sup> AXEL HONNETH, who can be seen as the third generation of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory after JÜRGEN HABERMAS, regards the latter’s communication paradigm (whose notion of emancipation he appreciates, but that he considers to be insufficient) as being unable to further develop the social reference point of Critical Theory. To him, such a model of communicative understanding neglects the social experience of humiliation and disrespect, which HONNETH (1994) describes through his conflict theory and which represents the starting point of the research of his work *The struggle for recognition. The moral grammar of social conflicts*. It is not the orientation on positively formulated moral principles that forms the basis for and motivation of social protest of the under classes, but rather the experience of violation of their intuitively given sense of justice. In contrast to HABERMAS, HONNETH therefore regards the acquisition of social recognition as the normative prerequisite of communicative action of all kinds.

In his approach, HONNETH mentions ‘a formal concept of a good life’ (HONNETH 1994, 275), whose three fundamental modes of recognition are just as fundamental for the relationship of interculturality that exists between researchers and the researched. In the intersubjective context of field research, cognitive respect for and socio-cultural esteem of the other occupy a crucial position. Summing up, it is obvious that the theory of recognising the other is a necessary extension of the (intercultural) traditions of hermeneutic thought. Given that there can be no definite outside in hermeneutics, that which is alien is irrevocably denied its *absolute self-integrity*. Therefore, recognising the other implies neither appropriating it nor merely defining it in relative terms in contrast to the self. Instead, preservation leads to the recognition of the other’s subjectivity. In recognition mode, an alien subject is identified and respected as a mentally constituted being whose feelings can be shared, although it is incontrovertibly imbued with its own delimited and autonomous centre of emotion and perception.

We now turn full circle and return to the initial quotation by WALDENFELS (1997, 85), according to which there can be no ‘central station’ but only an ‘intermediate realm’ in the intercultural sphere, a concept which, in this particular form, cannot be found in the history of hermeneutic ideas because the self used to be regarded as the sole point of reference for understanding and insight. The relationship between subjects that mutually recognise one another, which ideally should constitute a balance of power, calls for truly abandoning the self-centred appropriation and differentiation mode: a rewarding and ultimately inescapable ‘decentralising’<sup>21)</sup> process in which subjects who research and interpret adapt their thoughts and actions to a geography that respects the dignity of the (culturally) alien and recognises him.

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<sup>21)</sup> See the explanation on decentralisation of the subject in the philosophy of SCHELER (1948).

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