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Four Levels of Self-Interpretation:
A Paradigm for Interpretive Social Philosophy and Political Criticism

[unpublished]

Abstract
If we are to find the criteria for critical analyses of social arrangements and processes not in some abstract, universalist framework, but from the guiding ‘self-interpretations’ of the societies in question, as contemporary contextualist and ‘communitarian’ approaches to social philosophy suggest, the vexing question arises as to where these self-interpretations can be found and how they are identified. The paper presents a model according to which there are four interdependent as well as partially autonomous spheres or ‘levels’ of socially relevant self-interpretation that have to be taken into account equally in order to provide a sound basis for social and political criticism. Thus, it is from the tensions and incoherences between (A) social ideas and doctrines, (B) social institutions and practices, (C) individual beliefs and convictions, and (D) body-practices and habits that social pathologies can be identified and possible solutions can be envisaged.
Four Levels of Self-Interpretation:  
A Paradigm for Interpretive Social Philosophy and Political Criticism

Interpretive Social Science  
After the ‘linguistic’ and ‘interpretive turns’ of the social sciences (Rorty, 1967; Hiley et al., 1991; Ball, 1988: 4f; Bernstein, 1976: 112f), it is a widely shared assumption in contemporary social and political theory that the complex reality we call ‘society’ cannot be adequately grasped by a scientistic approach that treats it as an aggregate of ‘brute facts’ which can be studied in an objectivist manner (Hesse 1980, Cribb 1991). Rather, in the view of influential authors like Anthony Giddens (1977: 12), Jürgen Habermas (1981: 159) or Michael Walzer (1987), the situation of social science and social philosophy is characterized by what can be called ‘double-hermeneutics’, which is to say that the social scientist interprets a reality that is itself already an interpretation. This second interpretation is taken to be a form of societal ‘self-interpretation’ which is constitutive of social institutions and practices. Thus, Charles Taylor (1971: 26) holds that what is interpreted by social science ‘is itself an interpretation; a self-interpretation which is embedded in a stream of action’. When speaking of socially constitutive self-interpretations, I mean in the following a certain sense of man and his relation to society which is embedded in social institutions and practices and defines their ‘point'. Only in the light of self-interpretations of that sort can actions and institutions be made intelligible. Therefore, in the view of interpretive social science, there is no social reality, and no form of individual or collective action or identity, independent of the self-interpretations that define their point, meaning and character. This does not exclude non-interpretive material factors affecting society like, e.g., changes in the climate, new technologies or warfare forced upon a
given society from the outside. However, social actions, institutions and structures as well as individual and collective identities are affected by these factors precisely through modifications of the guiding self-interpretations; there are no social changes independent of the latter. Now, whereas a lot of consideration has been given to the first form of interpretation, i.e., to the task, methodology and meta-theory of social science, the nature, status and character of the socially constitutive self-interpretation remains largely elusive. Where and what is the self-interpretation of a society? How can it be identified? Who can claim to have the ‘correct’ form of that self-interpretation (which always is, at the same time, an understanding of the world), given that different social and political groups give different accounts of their self-understanding, and different languages and meaning-systems obtain in different spheres of society (like, e.g., economy, science, art, religion, politics)?

These questions are of particular importance for contemporary approaches in the discipline of social criticism. Given that the contenders for universalist normative frameworks in political philosophy (like Aristotelian essentialism, utilitarianism, procedural ethical liberalism etc.) have equally become uncertain and at least controversial, many of those interested in the possibility of upholding justified conceptions of social criticism have turned to ‘communitarian’ or ‘contextualist’ approaches of social philosophy (Walzer 1983, 1987, 1988, 1994; Taylor 1986; MacIntyre 1998; Wolin 1992). According to these, it is the constitutive self-interpretation, or the self-understanding, of a given society itself that supplies the critic with the norms, values and standards he needs for criticizing its institutions, practices or discourses. Now, whereas Michael Walzer in particular has argued convincingly and in extenso for such an interpretive conception of social philosophy and political criticism, in his work (as elsewhere in the literature) it remains unclear how the self-interpretation of a society is identified and which parts or groups of society deliver the proper standards for a social critique. Thus, Judith Shklar (1998: 384f) in her review of Walzer’s work rightfully asks: ‘What are
those “shared understandings” on which everything is based?’ Indeed, one can hardly avoid a sense of confusion when reading through the concluding chapter of Walzer’s *The Company of Critics* (1988), titled ‘criticism today’. He argues that the task of the critic is to hold up a ‘mirror’ to society like Hamlet’s glass that ‘shows us to ourselves as we really are, all pretense shattered, stripped of our moral makeup, naked’ and then to go on and contrast this with ‘an account or interpretation of what, in our very souls, we would like to be: all our high hopes and ideal images of self and society’ (Walzer, 1988: 231). However, it is wholly unclear how these two contrastive images are achieved: Where do we have to look to find how ‘we’ as a society really are, and where do we search for ‘our’ ideal self-image, given the absence of a group or class or social sphere that can be considered as the ‘avantgarde’ of history? ‘There are as many mirrors as there are social critics, and as many mirror images as there are people willing to look into the glass’, Walzer realises himself. ‘For this reason, the critic is bound to imagine other people peering into other mirrors, even though he cannot see what they see; he must acknowledge the endless reiteration of his own critical activity’, Walzer continues (1988: 232). Consequently, the critic, in order to identify the relevant ‘self-interpretation’ of the society he criticises – and of which he is a part – and to gain the standards necessary to fulfill his critical task, is variously and inconsistently referred to (national) history, art, politics, and culture; to the emotions and convictions held by his fellows; to his own moral sense and values (as opposed to that of the ‘misled’ masses); to the values and norms defended by some social groups, but not by others; to the ‘constant values’ of society (however they might be identified); or to shared practices. His critique, in turn, is directed just as inconsistently against particular traditions, authorities, practices, values or social groups or actors.

This confusion as to where the guiding self-interpretation of a society can be found arises first of all because societies are neither static nor monolithic, but in a constant process of dynamic change. Norms and values as well as institutions and practices change and develop; they con-
verge at times and diverge at others. And furthermore, the relative power and influence of
different social groups changes just as well as the importance and relevance of social spheres
like art, law, religion, politics or economy (Pocock 1962). Thus, in the absence of a philoso-
phy of history like the one supplied by historical materialism that gives an account of the di-
rection, logic and structure of historical change and its leading groups, the problem is for the
critic to decide what could provide the non-arbitrary grounds to identify a need for some
changes and to criticise other social changes or developments as harmful or even pathological.
Hence, what is needed is a specified concept of self-interpretation that opens up a non-
arbitrary route for social criticism and the analysis of social change.

Now, if one tries to group the phenomena Walzer suggests as possible locations of the signifi-
cant interpretations, one finds that there are at least three categories as possible bearers of the
relevant norms, values and meanings, namely explicit self-interpretations laid down in texts of
law, literature, theology and theory (a), social institutions and practices (b), and people’s ac-
tual beliefs and convictions (c). In accordance with that, I want to suggest that self-
interpretation should best be understood as a very wide concept in the tradition of Hegel and
further specified today by authors like Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus; a concept that does
not only include conscious, reflective processes but also elements of taste, body-practices (in
the sense of, e.g. Bourdieu’s \textit{hexis}), and emotions like shame and guilt etc. Self-interpretations
lie at the heart of our social institutions and practices, and of our individual, incorporated hab-
its, long before they become explicit in language and theories. What is meant by self-
interpretation thus is a certain sense of what we are as human beings, of what society is, of
what our relations in and towards society are like, and a sense of what truth, time and eternity
might be, of what a good life consists in etc. In this sense, human beings are ‘interpretation all
the way down’, which means that social existence and interpretation indeed become co-
extensive. ‘Man by his existence gives an answer to a question which thereby is posed and can
never be finally answered’ (Taylor 1977: 75). Thus, it is self-interpretations that provide meanings to actions, institutions, individual lives and societies. They inevitably define ‘the point’ of an action or institution. However, it is obvious that we will find nothing like a monolithic, closed and coherent self-interpretation of a society, but rather a complex, multi-layered, partly self-contradictory, but nevertheless related set of self-interpretations. Therefore, what I want to do in the following is to suggest a model for the identification and analysis of socially constitutive self-interpretations that takes the three categories identified above plus a fourth locus of self-interpretation, namely people’s body-practices and habits (d), as its starting point and seeks to relate them in the proper form. This model is to quite a considerable extent based on insights presented in the work of Charles Taylor.6 With the help of this model, I want to argue, social ruptures, conflicts and potential pathologies can be adequately understood and identified, and hence criticised. Furthermore, the task and the position of the social philosopher can be indicated and the dynamics of social change can be conceptualised in a proper way.

**The Basic Model**

I start with the suggestion that one should distinguish between ‘explicit’ self-interpretations which are represented in the semantics of our language, in theories, discourses and dogmas, forming the realm of (articulated) ideas, and ‘implicit’ self-interpretations constituting our social institutions as a form of objectified or ‘sedimented’ self-interpretation. Social institutions and practices are thus materialisations, expressions or embodiments of interpretations that provide them with a point and a specific meaning and define their purposes and standards of excellence. Now it seems obvious that the self-interpretations of the explicit realm of ideas and those implicit or ‘hidden’ in our institutions form a relationship of mutual interdependence as well as partial autonomy, or, to put it in Quine’s terms, they are both underdetermined
by each other. That is to say: rather different theories and forms of discourse are compatible with a given set of institutions; and theories can be put into practice, can be institutionalised in quite different ways, too; but nevertheless, institutions and theories, or implicit and explicit self-understandings, can easily get into conflict and mutual tensions that put pressure for change on one or both of them.

Now, whereas this characterises the relationship between categories (a) and (b) defined above, we surprisingly find that the same two-level-relationship holds between the two remaining categories (c) and (d) defining the beliefs and body-practices or habits as the constitutive self-images of the individuals. For on the one hand, subjects are constituted, and develop an identity, with the help of an explicit self-understanding that is represented in their individual language and in the theories, convictions and ideas they hold. To quite a substantial proportion, a human being *is* what she thinks she is. But on the other hand, subjects are also constituted by a realm of feelings and body-practices or *habitus*, to use Bourdieu’s term, which is pre-reflective and incorporated but which nevertheless carries social meaning and can be understood as a form of implicit, expressive self-interpretation, too.

It is only in the form of interpretations that bodily needs, feelings etc. are accessible to subjects and become relevant to their actions (as different from involuntary behaviour). Thus, even in the way someone moves and speaks and eats, i.e. in his gestures, a certain self-understanding is expressed. In her famous essay *Throwing Like a Girl*, Iris Marion Young (1990), drawing on Merleau-Ponty, has insightfully developed this point. The way a girl (or a boy) throws a ball (or walks, sits, dances, carries a book, even sleeps), she argues, is connected to a specific way of ‘being in the world’, it reveals a certain sense of self and of its being situated in and against the world. Motions and motilities thus carry meanings and interpretations of the self of which there usually is no reflexive awareness. Arguably no five-year old girl has a cognitive representation of the difference between a girl's and a boy's throwing a ball. However, it is not just that those bodily
movements or habits reflect or express such an interpretation of self and world, but the reverse is also true: By learning in interaction with others how to properly walk, sit, dance and throw, a certain sense of self is constructed and shaped. Hence, the idea that there is a pre-reflective, embodied sense of self is not hostile to an anti-essentialist and anti-biologist ‘performative theory’ of identity in the sense of Butler or Goffman.

As with social theories and institutions, individuals’ explicit beliefs and the implicit self-understandings incorporated in our feelings and habitus are mutually interdependent as well as partially autonomous:

The paradox of human emotions is that although only an articulated emotional life is properly human, all our articulations are open to challenge from our inarticulate sense of what is important, that is, we recognise that they ought to be faithful articulations of something of which we have as yet only fragmentary intimations. If one focuses only on the first point, one can believe that human beings are formed arbitrarily by the language they have accepted. If one focuses only on the second, one can think that we ought to be able to isolate scientifically the pure, uninterpreted basis of human emotion that all these languages are about. But neither of these is true. There is no human emotion which is not embodied in an interpretive language; and yet all interpretations can be judged as more or less adequate, more or less distortive [...]. This is what is involved in seeing man as a self-interpreting animal. It means that he cannot be understood simply as an object among objects, for his life incorporates an interpretation, an expression of what cannot exist unexpressed, because the self that is to be interpreted is essentially that of a being who self-interprets. (Taylor, 1977: 75).

In this way, by trying to identify the relevant self-interpretation(s) of a society, one has to take into account the two levels of societal self-interpretation as well as those of individual self-interpretation. However, the term ‘individual’ does not indicate here that the relevant beliefs, feelings or habits are not socially induced, or are not social phenomena themselves. Quite to the contrary, as Taylor (1989: 36) puts it, ‘a self exists only within what I call webs of interlocution’, and he makes it very clear that this holds for both levels of what I term individual self-interpretation. Similarly, ‘societal self-interpretation’ does not refer to a collective super-subject interpreting itself, but to socially constitutive images and understandings of actors, world and society in the sense defined above, too. Thus, we find social meanings constituting society’s self-interpretation on all four levels identified so far, but the ‘webs of interlocution’ that constitute subjects can diverge from the webs of meaning expressed in society’s institutions or legitimating doctrines.
Now, interestingly and obviously, the two levels of individual self-interpretation are closely linked with the two levels of societal self-interpretation in the self same way of interdependence and partial autonomy. Explicit individual self-images as well as habits and feelings are influenced by the dominant social ideas as well as institutions and practices – and vice versa. Consequently, when we look for socially constitutive self-interpretations which underlie the dynamics of social change, we have to analyse all of these four mutually interdependent levels of self-interpretation. It needs to be noted here that when I speak of ‘four levels of self-interpretation’, I do not have in mind a hierarchical model of four subsequent levels, but one that is divided by two axes, one separating the individual from the societal and one distinguishing between the explicit and the implicit (see figure 1 below).
Materialism (as well as Structuralism) assumes that change proceeds bottom up. Idealism assumes that change proceeds top down. Individualism holds that change proceeds from right to left. Holism holds that change proceeds from left to right.

Depending on the theoretical stance one takes, changes can occur from right to left, i.e. they originate in the sphere of the individuals and then lead to social change, which is the position...
of methodological and/or ontological individualism; or from left to right, i.e. social developments in turn transform individuals (methodological/ontological holism); and they can occur top down: changes in theories and ideas transform institutions and practices (idealism), or bottom up: mutations on the level of institutions and practices call for adaptations on the level of ideas, theories and dogmas (materialism).

In my view, it is relatively obvious and can be demonstrated historically that contrary to the aspirations of theoretical purists of all kinds, changes and adaptations in fact do occur in all directions. Thus, on what concerns the idealism-materialism dichotomy, it seems to be clear that sometimes social institutions are overthrown because of the spread of new ideas – the French Revolution of 1789, pace Marx, might be a case in point here, and sometimes legitimating theories and doctrines or ideologies are given up and replaced by new ones because they no longer fit with newly emerging institutions and practices. Most of the time, however, pressures and adaptations will run in both directions. Similarly, on the right side, individuals sometimes radically alter their practices and by consequence their habits, because they do not fit with their reflective self-image, and sometimes they give up their beliefs and convictions because they are constantly contradicted by their feelings, practices and habits.

Thus, I believe that individual as well as social histories can be primarily explained, and are inherently driven by, the dynamic interplay between explicit and implicit self-interpretations. Since theories and doctrines never completely articulate our practices or our underlying and embodied sense of ‘self’, and since the two levels develop according to their own inherent dynamics in different directions, there will inevitably always appear some tensions between them which cause adaptive and frequently co-evolutionary changes in theories and practices. Similarly, history does provide us with examples of change from left to right – i.e. the gradual change of individual reflective self-understandings as well as habitus as a consequence of institutional-cum-ideological change – and from right to left: The 1979 revolution in Iran seems
to be an example of the latter, i.e. of how legitimating social doctrines as well as the corre-
sponding institutions are radically given up because of a new form of self-interpretation gain-
ing hold over the people (Kamrava, 1992: 154f). Conversely, the inhabitants of post-
transformation East-Germany might be an interesting test-case for the former kind of conver-
sion, since they witnessed the overnight-imposition of new legitimating doctrines plus institu-
tions that presumably diverge considerably from their ‘home-self-interpretations’ persisting, at
least for some time, on (C) and (D).  

Thus, it seems to be at least prima facie plausible that the relationship between all four levels
of self-interpretation is one of interdependence and partial autonomy which allows for a cer-
tain level of elasticity, i.e. of divergence between the norms, values, meanings and self-images
that prevail on each of the four levels, but beyond that, when the tensions become too strong,
they will bear dysfunctional or even pathological consequences which call for adaptive
changes on either side. These changes can occur either in an evolutionary process of gradual
and possibly mutual adaptation, or they can be brought about in rather sudden revolutionary
ruptures.

Now this is where I think an interpretive (and critical) social science can step in and diagnose
conflicts and potential pathologies in the form of irreconcilable discrepancies. It is important
to note here that I do not consider discrepancies or inconsistencies to be pathological per se -
quite to the contrary, they are inevitable and function as the creative, innovative force of his-
tory. Pathologies (which I take as always entailing some form of human suffering) only arise
when the discrepancies have grown beyond the horizon of possible re-integration via mutual,
creative adaptations and partial, context-dependent reconciliations or compromises and when
they lead to consistently contradictory impulses on the level of action. A pathological state of
affairs thus requires the massive violation or suppression of a (still valid and powerful) self-
image and of the corresponding set of values in a specific context of action or self-description.

But let me spell out this rather daring claim in the following with the help of figure 2, which tries to depict the respective relationships and possible tensions that can be found between the four levels of self-interpretation. It also indicates how the approach presented here opens up and defines an array of research problems for the different social sciences. This is why I think it could serve as a paradigm for interpretive social science.
Figure 2: Basic Model: *Influences and Pathologies*  
(Macrostructure)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Communitarianism)</th>
<th>(Liberalism)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A) Societal Self-Descriptions</td>
<td>C) Reflective Self-image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B) Social Institutions and Practices</td>
<td>D) Pre-Reflective Sense of Self (feelings, habitus)</td>
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: direction of social influence / potential divergences

**Identifiable Pathologies**

1) institutional and/or ideological crisis  
2) legitimation crisis  
3) identity crisis; psycho-pathologies  
4) clinical pathologies, deviant behaviour  
5) alienation crisis and/or institutional decay  
6) a sharp clash between A) and D) might lead to political terror.

1) As indicated by arrow 1, social institutions and legitimising discourses and theories are mutually interdependent. Thus, as stated above, sometimes institutions are reformed according
to theoretical insights or innovations, and at other times theories and convictions are reformulated to adapt to newly emerging practices and institutions. Most of the time, change will occur in a co-evolutionary mode, where changes in the legitimising convictions and the corresponding practices go hand in hand. Thus, the ‘ideology’ of possessive individualism, e.g., is neither a clear cause nor simply the effect of the evolving market-practices of early capitalism. For just as much as this ideology legitimised and justified the corresponding practice, it was itself rendered plausible and attractive in the light of everyday experience by the latter. In this way, reflective and experiential meanings reinforced each other in a newly emerging form of socially constitutive self-interpretation. However, if the discrepancy between the two levels exceeds the limits of elasticity and creative adaptation, change will occur in a revolutionary mode, leading to either a genuine socio-political revolution (when practices and institutions are overthrown), or to an ideological revolution (when legitimising doctrines are replaced by a new ideology). Both ruptures can be interpreted as a reaction to a foregoing pathological state of affairs where the two levels – (A) and (B) – have irreconcilably grown out of step, leading to an institutional crisis (when (A) is less controversial and institutions seem wrong) or to an ideological crisis (where (B) is stronger and traditional ideas seem unconvincing). This, I think, constitutes a primary area of research for sociologists.

2) Arrow 2 signifies that social doctrines and individual convictions are interdependent, too. Societal self-descriptions change in consequence of citizens adopting new belief-systems, e.g. in the wake of a religious conversion. Conversely, individuals can gain a new self-understanding by accepting new social theories, e.g. emancipatory ideas. Here, discrepancy between the two levels takes on the form of a legitimation crisis which means that the legitimising doctrines no longer seem credible in the eyes of the people (as another form of social pathology). The relationship between (A) and (C) thus is of central concern to the discipline of political theory.
3) On the individual side, as stated earlier, people’s identity can also be seen as comprising two levels of self-interpretation (arrow 3): Their explicit self-descriptions, convictions, beliefs and life-plans on the one hand, and a pre-reflective level of embodied, habitualised, expressive self-interpretation implicit in feelings, body-practices and habitus. As before, these two levels are semi-autonomous as well as interdependent. Our explicit ideas and interpretations reshape our feelings and habitus just as much as the latter exert a constant pressure for re-articulation or modification on the former. As ‘language-animals’, subjects are inherently driven to explicitly articulate and interpret what they ‘really’ feel and what the ‘real’ meanings of their emotions, wishes and their lives are, without their articulations ever being complete or final. If the two, i.e. (C) and (D) diverge beyond the horizon of re-integration and at least partial and temporary reconciliation, identity crises and classical psycho-pathologies will emerge. Thus, when e.g. someone lives by a heterosexual self-understanding and a self-image that is built around the ideal of a good ‘family man’ but has got a homosexual sense of self on the level of feelings and body-practices, some form of pressure and suffering is most likely to occur. Adaptations can once again run either way: In some cases, people will eventually accept new reflective self-interpretations which fit their pre-reflective sense of self, but in others, they might gradually re-interpret and thereby change their feelings and work on their body-practices until they finally correspond to their ideals, although this probably will not work out in the above example. This, obviously, is the field psychology is concerned with.

4) Once again, as indicated by arrow 4, participation in social institutions and practices strongly influences, shapes and moulds individual habitus, feelings and body-practices. This is something the analyses of Michel Foucault (1965, 1977) and those following him have brought to light with respect to the disciplinary institutions and practices of modern society. Conversely, our habitus and body-practices of course also shape and re-interpret social institutions and practices. If the two clearly fall apart, i.e. if there are norms and self-images presup-
posed in institutions and practices that are incompatible with the norms, meanings and self-understandings inscribed into our bodies, pathological reactions are once more likely to appear and take on the form of deviant social or criminal behaviour or of diseases analysed by social psychology and medical sociology. In so far as people actually might become sick at this stage, this is the most obvious case of a pathology.

5) Arrow 5 indicates that (B) and (C) are interdependent as well, in that the individual reflective self-understanding is moulded and changed not only by society’s discourses and doctrines, but also by its institutions and practices. For these always presuppose and, in turn, support certain images of a social actor and of proper interaction, and hence certain norms and values which must be, at least partially, adopted by social actors participating in them. In institutions and practices individuals therefore are confronted with implicit or experiential social meanings that may or may not fit with their own self-images. Conversely, individual beliefs and convictions interpret and thereby influence and (re-)constitute social institutions and practices by (re-)defining their character and meaning and by shaping the way institutional roles are enacted.

Marked discrepancies between the norms, self-images and meanings operating on the two levels will thus cause institutional decay when the norms, values and roles defined by the institutions are no longer taken seriously by social actors (Taylor 1993: 68) and/or feelings of alienation. Alienation thus arises when individuals cannot recognise themselves in the institutions and practices they participate in, as Charles Taylor (1979: 90f, cf. 118), following Hegel, has convincingly argued. This relationship has been a central focus for classical and marxist social philosophy.

The happiest, unalienated life for man... is where the norms and ends expressed in the public life of a society are the most important ones by which its members define their identity as human beings. For then the institutional matrix in which they cannot help living is not felt to be foreign. Rather it is the essence, the substance of the self [...] But alienation arises when the norms, goals or ends which define the common practices or institutions begin to seem irrelevant or even monstrous [...]
6) The direct influence between social doctrines and individual habitus that is not mediated by individual explicit beliefs or social institutions (arrow 6) is probably rather weak or virtually non-existent. However, political doctrines that run against deep-rooted or possibly even anthropological features of our bodily sense of self are not very likely to succeed in the long run. They can only be upheld by the use of force, which in turn leads to severe forms of cultural pathology or even political terror. Thus, our embodied norms and self-images might set a certain limit to what is politically and culturally possible and acceptable. For, in my view, although self-images and meanings embodied in (D) are also subject to cultural and social change and are reshaped by the influences of (B) and (C), they tend to change only incrementally and slowly. If there are anthropological elements underlying our self-understanding manifested in (D), this might set ultimate substantial limits to culturally successful self-interpretations that can be found on (A) through (C), too, which could form a basis for the commensurability of culturally different self-interpretatory systems.

**Normative Consequences**

Interestingly, the differences between some of the most important normative positions in contemporary social philosophy can to some extent be reconstructed by locating those positions on the scheme of self-interpretation developed so far. Before further exploring the implications of the model itself, I will therefore briefly try to present a (highly tentative) sketch of how this could be done.

Present day social philosophy, in my view, is to a considerable degree shaped by four different normative approaches identifiable as essentialism, liberalism, communitarianism and post-structuralism. When one tries to identify or ‘locate’ these approaches and their respective social diagnoses with reference to the four levels of self-interpretation, one finds that they can to some extent be understood as simply taking different starting points and analyzing different
directions of influence and divergence within this system of constitutive social self-
interpretation (cf. figure 2 above).

Thus, essentialists like Martha Nussbaum, e.g., assume that some quite substantial elements
of (D), i.e. of our body-related sense of self, are dependent on anthropological givens. Conse-
quently, incompatibilities between these features and the self-interpretations enacted on the
other three levels can be identified as pathological, and it becomes evident that, from a norma-
tive perspective, the latter have to be modified until they fit with those basic anthropological
features.

Liberals like Rawls and Habermas are not so much concerned with anthropological sub-
stances, but clearly focus on reflective individual self-understandings, values and life-plans
and how they can be allowed to co-exist in a pluralist society, therefore they give normative
priority to this level of self-interpretation. Whereas Rawls in his theory of justice suggests a
rather specific self-interpretation on levels (A) and (B) as adequate at least to modern western
self-understanding just because it allows for maximum freedom on (C), Habermas and dis-
course ethics are not concerned with the contents of individual and collective self-
understandings, but with the process of mediation, communication and adaptation between
individual and collective self-interpretations and with the way these are manifested on level
(B), i.e. in social institutions. Discourse ethics thus is a theory of how reflective individual
self-interpretations should be given maximum freedom and could bring the other three levels
in maximum accordance with them via communication. It assumes that the channels of influ-
ence can be made transparent and should be steered by communicative action. Thus, it identi-
fies pathologies mainly in the form of distorted or one-sided processes of adaptation (primar-
ily along arrows (1) and (2)). It seems to be clear that these approaches focus on the reflective
or explicit levels of self-interpretation (upper half of the basic model). Similarly, preference-
oriented utilitarians focus on the explicit individual self-interpretation presented at level (C)
and ground their normative judgments on the adequacy of (A) and (B) to the aggregated outcome of (C), while generally ignoring the possibility of normatively significant divergence between (C) and (D).

Communitarians, by contrast, think that social pathologies cannot be avoided by giving full normative priority to reflective individual self-understandings, because these can and will clash with the dominant ideas of the social sphere, and also with the manifested norms and self-images implicit in social institutions and practices, creating legitimation and alienation crises ‘of frightening proportions’, as Barber (1984) or Taylor (1971: 50) would have it. From this perspective, liberals and utilitarians wrongly neglect the dependence of (C) on (A) and (B): The individual self-understanding is not something prior to social discourse and institutions, but is rather derivative of the norms, values and self-images manifested in social life. A non-pathological state of affairs is thus only possible, communitarians hold, when (A)-(D) are in fact made substantially congruent; it does not suffice to postulate and demand freedom for (C). The best way to establish this harmony, from the communitarian perspective, seems to be to focus on the historical substance of (A) and use it as a ‘regulative idea’ to look on (B) and (C). That is why communitarians like Walzer or Taylor tend to ask how a given society interprets itself historically and culturally and to identify pathologies from that perspective.

Poststructuralist approaches like the one advocated by Michel Foucault tend to focus on level (B), on the meanings and norms implicit and ‘hidden’ in social institutions and practices, and they try to show how our reflective self-interpretations are constituted and shaped by them, very often without our knowledge. Poststructuralists, however, do not argue that (B) in any way deserves normative priority, rather they try to raise our awareness of the dependence of our reflective individual and collective self-interpretations on institutionalised ‘power/knowledge’-systems. They are not so much concerned with identifying pathologies, but rather try to identify ‘ideologies’ that postulate reflective independence. However, in Fou-
cault’s writings e.g., it sometimes seems as if the ‘hidden’ influences on our pre-reflective sense of self (D), on our bodies and body-practices, are interpreted as somehow wrongful, as a form of structural violence. That would mean that poststructuralists, like essentialists, give normative priority to (D), whereas with respect to the issue of relativism, the two approaches are at maximum distance.

Now the relativism problem, consisting in the question of whether or not certain self-interpretations can be identified as being more adequate or ‘true’ than others, may in fact be solved with the help of the suggested scheme, I believe. For it is obvious that a given self-interpretation on, say, level (C), is not just as good or bad as any other reflective individual self-interpretation, but can be ‘objectively’ measured against the social reality enacted on levels A, B, and D. An individual self-image that is contradicted by the dominant social discourses and convictions, institutions and practices as well as the ‘embodied sense of self’ is pathologically inadequate in that it creates suffering, and the same holds for any other self-interpretation on any other level: It always can be judged and measured in the light of its ‘fit’ with the other three levels or spheres. Of course, the scheme also allows for a distinction between individual and macro-social pathologies: Thus, in a particular case, the self-interpretations on levels (C) and (D) might diverge for purely individual reasons, and also, some drastic divergence between individual and societal self-interpretations could be due to individual reasons: For example, if someone migrates to an alien country, where the culturally operative self-interpretations on (A) and (B) are very different from his ‘home self-understandings’, the difference – particularly the one between (D) and the societal levels – can easily amount to a form of pathology for the individual concerned without signifying a social or cultural crisis at large.

However, there are three concessions of crucial importance to be made to relativism:
1) Since there is always a degree of autonomy and freedom on each of the four levels, there are always several, even contradictory self-interpretations compatible with the other three levels. Put differently, self-interpretations are never completely determined from the ‘outside’; each level remains ‘underdetermined’ by the others and develops a certain path-dependence.

2) Of course, self-interpretations on all levels can and do change. Thus, e.g., a new self-interpretation on level (A) (a new social doctrine) that is at first inadequate to the predominant self-interpretations (B) through (D), can gradually change (B) and thereby also alter (C) and eventually transform (D), that is to say, it can gradually be made adequate. However, since explicit self-interpretations can never completely articulate and grasp the ‘hidden’ meanings implicit in practices, feelings, and habitus, and since one can never control the ‘mutations’ that arise when explicit and implicit, societal and individual meanings interact, such transformations are unlikely to be brought about intentionally. Hence, it might be one of the great challenges before interpretive social science and contemporary social philosophy to find and analyse the laws of transformation and adaptation that are operating here (Oeverman 1991).

3) The overall self-interpretatory system (A)-(D) of course can and will take different forms in different cultures or at different times. The approach presented here does not include ‘external’ criteria to judge on the preferability between overall cultural systems. The only intercultural judgments that can be made refer to the presence or absence of severe divergences or pathologies that persist within a culture or society at a given point or period in time. Therefore, this form of cultural relativism seems to be unavoidable, at least as long as one does not assume strong anthropological limitations shaping self-images on level (D). However, it is important to note that the approach presented here is not one that simply favours or justifies the respective status quo in the name of coherence. For all forms of felt oppression and injustice necessarily imply incoherence and divergence (some social groups are not allowed to follow their constitutive self-interpretations or do not get what they deserve in the light of their
own or society’s dominant self-image). Hence, coherence cannot be politically enforced, and it might well be that a revolutionary overturning of the status quo is the only way to regain coherence or equilibrium.

In sum, the normative criterion that is of overriding importance in this integrative approach is that of coherence or equilibrium (cf. Ferrara 1998). However, as noted earlier, there can be little doubt that some forms and degrees of incoherence and divergence are not only acceptable, but even creative, productive and liberating for individuals as well as societies. The task of the social critic therefore is to identify and locate divergences that lead to contradictory and incompatible impulses for action and turn destructive or become paralysing for social or individual development and that enforce the permanent denial or repression of a certain range of self-images, norms or values instead of a constant, progressive mutual adaptation and (temporary) reconciliation or re-integration. Although I have tried to make some suggestions as to when incoherence turns critical or even pathological, more work clearly needs to be done in this field of research.

**Refined Models**

As soon as one tries to actually apply the basic model developed so far to the analysis of a given society, it becomes evident that it presents a gross heuristical simplification, because there is neither a single, coherent self-interpretation on the level of explicit, constitutive social ideas, nor is there one on the level of social institutions and practices. Rather, there are different institutional contexts or fields of practice like the economy, religion, science, politics, art, and law, which embody (i.e. presuppose and support) respective self-images, norms and values that differ to a considerable degree from each other, and there are the corresponding explicit beliefs, convictions and discourses which also differ and are sometimes even incompatible. Although I can only present a preliminary, tentative sketch of how this theoretical chal-
lence might be met here, it seems to be plausible that the relationship between the respective discourses and practices is similar to the one that is depicted in the basic model; i.e., it is one of interdependence, elasticity and partial autonomy (cf. figure 3, refined model, levels (A) and (B) below). As in the basic model, discrepancies, tensions, adaptations and sometimes revolutions are the norm rather than the exception. In the following, I restricted myself to the analysis of the left, i.e. societal side of the basic model, although much the same would have to be done for the individual side, too.
The relative importance, extension and influence of a social sphere thereby varies over time. Thus, at one time, an economic self-image like that of the *homo oeconomicus* might also predominate in the political, judicial and perhaps even in the religious sphere, whereas at other times the self-image and the norms of the *citizen* or of the *believer* might migrate into other spheres, potentially clashing there with the ‘home-understandings’ of those other spheres. Such migrations can originate in level (A), when, e.g., political processes are newly conceptualised in the discourse of economics, i.e. when economic theories of politics begin to prevail, leading to a gradual subsequent adaptation in institutions and practices, or in level (B), when...
e.g. market-practices suddenly surface in the sphere of politics, forcing theories and doctrines of politics to adapt to the newly emerging political realities. If after such mutations the subsequent adaptations fail and the bonds of elasticity are overstretched, ideological or institutional crises in the sense defined above are likely to arise.

Furthermore, since social groups differ in the degree to which they are involved in the different social spheres or fields of practice, they also differ with respect to their predominant forms of self-interpretation. Hence, (enforced or voluntary) social mobility – e.g. when suddenly a large group of lawyers occupies strategic positions within the political sphere (or vice versa), or when artists become scientists or vice versa – is another reason for the migration of self-interpretations and the occurrence of frictions that go with it.

On the individual plain (levels (C) and (D)), a refined model – which I cannot present at present – would have to take into account the fact that individual identities are not constituted by single, coherent sets of reflective and pre-reflective self-images and values, too, but by a variety of context-dependent self-images and practices that parallel the multiplicity of contexts in figure 3. However, for concrete and precise social or political analyses, even the refined model of figure 3 (mesostructure) is not yet complex enough. For evidently, even the context-specific practices and interpretations are still contested and polyvalent in their meaning. There is neither ‘the’ political (or economic, or religious) self-understanding of a society, nor can we find an unambiguous definition of social roles and practices. Rather, we find (microstructural) variations as to the dominant self-images and values between different political (or religious, scientific etc.) institutions and also between the corresponding doctrines, and we find that differing social actors and groups are responsible for ‘microstructural’ variations and for contesting interpretations even with respect to the self same social institutions or doctrines (cf. figure 4 below). As in the case of the mesostructure presented in figure 3, the relative importance of
a political subsphere or self-description will vary over time. In an attempt to analyse ‘the’ political self-interpretation of a given society at a given time, one will therefore have to look closely on the actual discourses, institutions and practices in which the political life of that society is carried on.

The three political self-descriptions in figure 4 could be parliamentary, constitutional and public discourse, paralleled by parliamentary, constitutional (i.e. judicial review) and democratic practice, – but also e.g. conservative, liberal and socialist self-descriptions. In the latter case, we cannot identify corresponding forms of practice; rather, we find contesting interpretations of the very same institutions and practices. It is revealing to see how the significance of contrast between these political conceptions seems to collapse at present – due to the ‘immunization’ of certain social spheres on level (B), as I will argue in the concluding paragraph below.
Thus, to sum up the result of the exploration undertaken so far, the self-interpretation of a society turns out to be a complex, fluid and multi-layered system of a plurality of different, yet interdependent and closely connected self-interpretations that are involved in an ongoing process of mutual friction, adaptation and transformation. However, although the attempt to give a complete account of ‘the’ self-interpretation of contemporary western society might well resemble the impressive task of decoding the human genetic make-up (a challenge that despite its complexity was met by the combined effort of scientists all over the world), interpretive social analysis does of course not always require a complete reconstruction of the macro-, meso- and microstructures of the self-interpretatory system. How extensive and deep a particular interpretive analysis needs to be is dependent on the actual focus of investigation. For example, the question of whether certain political doctrines are adequate to specific political institutions and practices does not require the reconstruction of the religious or aesthetic meso- and microstructures, nor that of self-interpretations on the individual side of the self-interpretatory system. Similarly, the analysis of discrepancies between embodied habitus (level D) and certain institutional or disciplinary requirements in the army or at industrial workplaces (B) does not call for a complete decoding of the self-interpretation that dominates the doctrines and theories of reflective societal self-description (A). Nevertheless, it is certainly useful in the course of an interpretive investigation to always keep in mind that there are cross-influences between all levels, layers and spheres of self-interpretation.

**Prospects for Social Analysis and ‘Time-Diagnosis’**

As stated before, I want to claim that social change does occur in consequence of the unavoidable discrepancies and frictions between the identified levels of self-interpretation. It can originate from any level and enforce adaptations in all directions of influence (depicted by
arrows 1-6 in the *basic model*). What does not follow from the approach presented here, therefore, is a general theory of social change that locates the source of social evolution on one particular level (as idealist, materialist, individualist or holist approaches do). That does not mean, however, that this conception is purely meta-theoretical without any normative and explanatory power of its own. First of all, the suggested model can serve as a *heuristic tool* for the social critic in his attempt to identify distortions and potential social pathologies and to point out possible ways of overcoming them. And when applied to concrete historical situations, it allows for an analysis of the actual frictions, the most likely or dominant forms of adaptation, and the critical (or even pathological) consequences of the ensuing processes. For example, it might well provide a convincing explanation of why the eastern socialist states crumbled at the end of the 20th century: Without being able to demonstrate that here in detail, there are unmistakable signs that indicate an increasing distance between the ‘official’, legitimising Marxist-Leninist self-description and propaganda in late socialist states and the convictions and aspirations their citizens held (legitimation crisis), and furthermore, it seems to be quite plausible to postulate the existence of a significant discrepancy between official doctrines and self-descriptions and actual performance in the political, economic and social institutions of those states (institutional/ideological crisis). Certainly, economic expectations and performance played a key role here, but they did so via significant divergences in self-interpretations. Hence, as the model predicts, unrest in these societies grew, and a way to overcome the increasing tensions was sought for. Interestingly, the route actually taken was an institutional-cum-doctrinal revolution, that is to say, significant changes eventually appeared on both levels (A) and (B).

It is important to note here that there are generally two different ways in which self-interpretatory social systems or cultural realities can take on pathological features. One is in terms of *substance*, where the concrete norms, meanings and self-images on the four levels of self-
interpretation are mutually and irreconcilably incompatible and give rise to serious conflicts. Here, social philosophers will not have to criticise the *substance* of a certain self-interpretation per se, but point out the irreconcilable inconsistencies within the overall self-interpretatory system that constitutes social reality. Which adaptations and corrections are to be made in such a situation cannot be decided beforehand, I believe. To find viable re-interpretations is a collective task for the society in question. However, it seems to be easier to change social institutions than to bring about a change in individual self-understandings, although the latter might actually be transformed in the process of deliberation, too. The *other* is in the *process* of mutual adaptation: As observed before, self-interpretations on all four levels always take on a life of their own, they develop in different directions according to their own inherent dynamics, path-dependence and outside challenges. Now the process of progressive mutual adaptation can be distorted or blocked in several ways, for example, when the four levels desynchronise and accelerate in their development beyond the limits of re-integration, or when one of the levels develops a tendency of immunisation against the others and thus either forces the other levels into one-sided adaptations or creates severe pathologies.

Both these distortions, I believe, can be observed in contemporary western society (XXX: Forthcoming). Here, to just give the reader a hint at what I have in mind, some social and particularly technological and economic institutions, i.e. ‘sedimented’ and ‘objectified’ self-interpretations on level (B), have developed such a strong inherent dynamic that they almost completely immunise against our individual and collective reflective self-interpretations. This is what we experience as brute economic forces or so-called ‘Sachzwänge’, and it is this that forces upon us the self-images of the producer and the consumer, as I have argued elsewhere (XXX, 1998). Now individuals as well as society as a reflective project are forced to either adapt to this or run into crises of alienation, deviance and ideology, and eventually, because of those, of legitimation, too. It seems clear to me that this observable immunization is incom-
patible with our society’s self-understanding (level A) as a democratic society which determines its own fate and the collective form of life by way of reflective democratic self-determination. Thus we as a society might face the choice of either revolutionizing our present institutional framework or giving up ‘the project and promise of modernity’ as the guiding societal self-description. Interestingly, there are some observable tendencies to follow the second course and overcome the blatant discrepancy with the help of adaptive new social theories like Niklas Luhmann’s systems-theory, or postmodernist theories, which hold that the idea of political understanding and democratic steering of society, i.e. the claim to political autonomy, was illusory and inadequate all the time. However, I think that the corresponding ‘postmodern’ theories of the (incoherent and fragmented) self (or the ‘psychic system’) cannot become our guiding self-interpretation on level (C), i.e. individuals’ pre-dominant form of reflective self-interpretation. For individuals that would actually understand themselves as ‘psychic systems’ or as passive intersections of language and discourse could not gain something like a (moral) identity that allows for a viable orientation towards the world and for the pursuit of a course of action. Hence, it seems to me that at least crises of legitimation and alienation are inescapable, and contemporary social philosophy is called upon to work.

Notes

1 ‘The ideal critic [...] sees [...] people and their troubles and the possible solution to their troubles within the framework of national history and culture. Nation, not class is the relevant unit [...]’ (1988: 234); cf. 235: ‘The form of his attack will vary with the character of his culture, but he is likely to pay close attention to national history, finding in his people’s past (its literature and art as well as its politics) a warrant for criticism in the present.’

2 ‘Ordinary men and women continue to hope for a better life [...], and political leaders continue to justify themselves in ideal terms [...] The critic elaborates the hopes, interprets the ideals, holds both against his mirror image of social reality’ (1988: 233).

3 ‘Sometimes, of course, the critic must stand alone - as Silone did when he broke with his comrades in the party or as Orwell did when he struggled to sustain leftist politics against standard apologies for Stalinism or as de Beauvoir did when she condemned the participation of women in their own subjection [...]’ (1988: 234); cf. 238: ‘He stands among the people [...] But he takes stands different from theirs, for they are often guided by the
ideologists of the state or the party, and he is not. His independence distances him from ordinary men and women as well as from bureaucrats and officials. He inches away from the people-nation, in order to criticise what the majority of his fellows find worthy of praise.’

4 ‘He is a critic of the regime, not of the people; or of some of the people, not others; or of the people in one sense, not in another’ (1988: 238).

5 1988: 234; cf. 236: ‘The case is the same with exile: the critic does not give up his country [...] At the very moment he leaves, he accuses the men and women he leaves behind of desertion: they, not he, have abandoned the constant values of their society’.

6 For my interpretation of Taylor see XXX.

7 Taylor (1978: 139f), following Hegel, suggests that this form of self-interpretation can be understood as the ‘objective spirit’ of society: ‘A certain view of man and his relation to society is embedded in some of the practices and institutions of a society, so that we can think of these as expressing certain ideas. And indeed, they may be the only, or the most adequate, expression of these ideas, if the society has not developed a relatively articulate and accurate theory about itself. The ideas which underlie a certain practice and make it what it is, e.g., those which make the marking of papers [in the act of voting, H.R.] the taking of a social decision, may not be spelled out adequately in propositions about man, will, society, and so on [...] In this sense we can think of the institutions and practices of a society as a kind of language in which its fundamental ideas are expressed. But what is “said” in this language is not ideas which could be in the minds of certain individuals only, they are rather common to a society, because embedded in its collective life, in practices and institutions which are of the society indivisibly. In these the spirit of the society is in a sense objectified. They are, to use Hegel’s term, “objective spirit”’.

8 ‘This puts the role of the body in a new light. Our body is not just the executant of the goals we frame, nor just the locus of causal factors shaping our representations. Our understanding itself is embodied. That is, our bodily know-how, and the way we act and move, can encode components of our understanding of self and world’, Taylor (1995: 170) observes, drawing heavily on the insights of French writers such as Foucault and his followers; and he even claims that ‘this understanding is more fundamental in two ways: (1) it is always there, whereas we sometimes frame representations and sometimes do not, and (2) the representations we do make are only comprehensible against the background provided by this inarticulate understanding. Rather than representations being the primary locus of understanding, they are only islands in the sea of our unformulated practical grasp on the world’. Thus some social scientists hold that e.g. even a phenomenon like obesity is less a physical-biological feature than an expressive function carrying meaning (cf. Bordo 1993).

9 For an insightful discussion of this see Bordo (1993, in particular pp. 289f); for the argument that bodies are sources as well as bearers of meaning cf. McNally (2001) and Bermudez et al. (1995).


11 For ‘idealistic’ interpretations of the French Revolution and the debate about it see e.g. Blanning (1996).

12 Thus, the sociological interpretations and self-descriptions of society that arose towards the end of 19th century can be seen as an answer to the newly emerging practices and institutions of the industrial age. For an-
other possible example of this direction of change cf. Pocock’s discussion of the (re-)emergence of the language of ‘civic humanism’ as a reaction to the social and political changes of the 1640s in England (1975).

13 This idea can be found in the writings of Charles Taylor, although he never develops it systematically; see e.g. the following two arguments: ‘This kind of interpretation [the reflective articulation of the implicit self-understanding, XX.] is not an optional extra, but is an essential part of our existence. For our feelings always incorporate certain articulations; while just because they do so they open us on to a domain of imports which call for further articulation. The attempt to articulate further is potentially a life-time process. At each stage, what we feel is a function of what we have already articulated and evokes the puzzlement and perplexities which further understanding may unravel. But whether we want to take the challenge or not, whether we seek the truth or take refuge in illusion, our self-(mis)understandings shape what we feel. This is the sense in which man is a self-interpreting animal’ (Taylor, 1977: 65).

‘The short answer to why complete articulacy is a chimera is that any articulation itself needs the background to succeed. Each fresh articulation draws its intelligibility in turn from a background sense, abstracted from which it would fail of meaning. Each new articulation helps to redefine us, and hence can open us up new avenues of potential further articulation. The process is by its very nature uncompletable’ (Taylor, 1998: 328).

14 The author is presently involved in a large research-project at the Universities of XXX, which aims at the investigation of the effects of this particular form of transformation.

15 For a contemporary philosophical definition of pathologies see Honneth (1994).

16 This is not to deny that contradictions and inconsistencies between different socially constitutive self-interpretations might go unnoticed and without causing frictions in society over long periods of time, when the corresponding fields of practice and theorizing do not intersect or clash, i.e., when social actors are not forced to decide between incompatible norms, interpretations or courses of action in a specific situation or context.

17 This is very much Charles Taylor’s view of the relationship between ideas and practices (1989: 205f): ‘It is clear that change can come about in both directions, as it were: through mutations and developments in the ideas, including new visions and insights, bringing about alterations, ruptures, reforms, revolutions in practices; and also through drift, constrictions or flourishing of practices, bringing about the alteration, flourishing, or decline of ideas. But even this is too abstract. It is better to say that in any concrete development in history, change is occurring both ways. The real skein of events is interwoven with threads running in both directions. A new revolutionary interpretation may arise partly because a practice is under threat, perhaps for reasons quite extraneous to the ideas. Or a given interpretation of things will gain force because the practice is flourishing, again for idea-extraneous reasons. But the resulting changes in outlook will have important consequences of their own. The skein of causes is inextricable.’

18 Whether a political/institutional or an ideological revolution is more likely to occur seems to depend – at least to some extent – on the actual substance of the dominating social self-interpretation. Thus, a society which is convinced that its steering capacity and potentials for self-correction are very limited (e.g. a society doctrinally led by a theory like Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory or by ideas of oriental fatalism) is more likely to accept the unfolding inner logic of institutional development and its uncontrolled consequences. The same holds true for societies in which the dominating image of the social actor is that of a non-political, individual actor (like the homo oeconomicus). On the other hand, a society which has a strong sense of its being a common political enterprise (i.e. which adopts, for example, a republican political self-interpretation or the ideal of the Greek polis as...
dominant self-image) and in which the dominating image of the social actor is that of the political actor, is more likely to stick to its political or ideological convictions and to enact an institutional revolution.

19 Cf. Taylor (1977: 68ff) for examples of this kind like the ‘black is beautiful’-movement. Also, Marxist doctrines certainly influenced the way individuals conceived of themselves.

20 Similarly, a person might ‘talk and feel like a man’ in terms of explicit self-understanding but, on the level of habitus, nevertheless ‘throw like a girl’ (to come back to Young’s example). In this case, however, painful frictions between C) and D) do not necessarily occur, since there is no blatant incompatibility involved here. Alas, such a self-interpretation will almost inevitably clash with the socially dominant images and performances of masculinity and femininity and therefore lead to frictions between C) and/or D) on the one hand and A) and/or B) on the other.

21 The most clear-cut examples of this are perhaps provided by ethnological studies that try to explain why people from some indigenous tribes, e.g. the Australian Aborigines, are most likely to fail when pressed into ‘Western’ institutions.

22 Cf. Taylor (1993: 68): ‘Institutions are defined by certain norms and constituted by certain normative conceptions of man. It is these conceptions that they sustain. But the relationship of support also works the other way. It is these normative conceptions that give the institutions their legitimacy.’ See also Selznick (1992: 229ff).

23 A striking example of a rather rapid change seems to be the fact that at the introduction of steam-trains in the early 19th century, travellers physically fell sick because of the unaccustomed high velocity. That caused a lot of scientists to think that the speed of human transport had reached an ultimate anthropological limit. However, as we all know, our body-practices have changed considerably since then and therefore, we tend to rather fall sick because of the slowness of some forms of modern transport (Schivelbusch, 1986).

24 This does not rule out the possibility of inter-cultural dialogue and mutual learning. I have tried to explore the possibilities of such a dialogue, that requires the establishment of what I have called ‘dimensional commensurability’, in XXX (1996). Furthermore, those who follow universalist normative approaches insisting on the possibility and relevance of ‘external’ normative criteria might nevertheless find the approach presented here to be useful for the analysis of internal cultural contradictions and of obstacles to the realisation of their own ideals. Hence, the approach is not necessarily anti-universalist but rather indifferent in this respect.

25 An interesting example of frictions of this sort is perhaps Daniel Bells diagnosis of The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (1976: 65ff, 80ff), which consist in the incompatibility between the hedonistic self-understanding of the modern consumer and the more ascetic (‘protestant’) self-image that prevails in the sphere of production. Another striking example might be found in the debate about the ‘two cultures’ (Snow 1993).

26 This form of ‘migration’ of languages or ‘paradigms’ from one social sphere to another has been of central concern to Pocock’s analysis of the development of political languages in early modern history and to his meta-theoretical approach. ‘It is part of the plural character of political society that its communication networks can never be entirely closed, that language appropriate to one level of abstraction can always be heard and responded to upon another, that paradigms migrate from contexts in which they have been specialized to discharge certain functions to others in which they are expected to perform differently’, Pocock writes (1989: 21), and he also states that the languages in which political matters are conceptualised (and the corresponding actor- and self-images) differ from culture to culture: ‘Western political thought has been conducted largely in the vocabulary of
law, Confucian Chinese in that of ritual. Others originate in the vocabulary of some social process which has become relevant to politics: theology [...], land tenure [...], technology’ (1962: 195).

27 It is important to note that practices and institutions always entail certain vocabularies or ‘languages’ needed to act properly within them. ‘The situation we have here is one in which the vocabulary of a given social dimension is grounded in the shape of social practice in the dimension; that is, the vocabulary would not make sense, could not be applied sensibly, where this range of practices did not prevail. And yet this range of practices could not exist without the prevalence of this or some related vocabulary. There is no simple one-way dependence here’ (Taylor, 1971: 33f). Language is thus not only present at level (A), i.e. the level of theoretical doctrines and self-descriptions, but also on level (B). However, as the importance of the vocabulary of a certain social sphere or context rises, more abstract or theoretical languages are usually developed, increasing their influence on level (A) (cf. Pocock, 1962).

28 Furthermore, a refined version of the basic model here would have to somehow account for the differences in explicit as well as implicit self-images that prevail between different social groups or classes.

29 Since the reigning socio-political doctrine of modern western societies holds that social institutions are controlled by, and responsive to, the political will of the citizens, whereas in fact they have immunised against political control to the degree of non-governability, a legitimation crisis is likely to evolve. In fact, it seems plausible to assume that there will arise discrepancies between all spheres of self-interpretation when one sphere is blocked from the process of mutual adaptation.

30 This development also signals a possible change in the dominant social self-understanding of our age from a more active-political to a more passive-cynical interpretation of the role of social actors (cf. note 18 above).

References


