Romanticism and the Rise of Sociological Hermeneutics

Dmitri N. Shalin
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, shalin@unlv.nevada.edu

Citation Information
http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/sociology_pubs/51

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/sociology_pubs
Romanticism and the Rise of Sociological Hermeneutics*  

BY DMITRI N. SHALIN

Although biblical exegesis and rhetoric, from which modern hermeneutics derived its first principles, are ancient arts, an effort to establish hermeneutics as a universal science, and especially to extend its principles to the science of society, is of a decidedly recent origin. “There is little doubt,” states Gouldner, “that hermeneutics’ roots in the modern era are traceable to Romanticism.”

Why is this so, what makes romanticism fertile ground for hermeneutical speculations? Hans-Georg Gadamer, a leading authority on hermeneutics, makes this intriguing suggestion about its origins:

The hermeneutical problem only emerges clearly when there is no powerful tradition present to absorb one’s own attitude into itself and when one is aware of confronting an alien tradition to which he has never belonged or one he no longer unquestioningly accepts. . . . Historically it is worthy of note that while rhetoric belongs to the earliest Greek philosophy, hermeneutics came to flower in the Romantic era as a consequence of the modern dissolution of firm bonds with tradition.

Gadamer does not pursue the argument much further, yet his remark offers a clue for a potentially fruitful line of inquiry.

Indeed, the onset of romanticism was marked by the breakdown of a century-old tradition. Precipitated by the French

---


SOCIAL RESEARCH, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Spring 1986)
Revolution of 1789, a crisis of major proportion swept over Europe, leaving its indelible mark on virtually every form of practical and spiritual life. The romantic movement was in great measure an attempt, inconclusive and contradictory as it might seem, to come to grips with the legacy of the French Revolution. The revolution compelled the reappraising of the past and made imperative a conscious stance with regard to the present. It underscored the historicity and fragility of the tradition. Most frighteningly, the revolution revealed the constitutive role of reason, its uncanny ability to revamp the natural order of things, which established man as a participant observer in the drama of history. The realization that man is a producer as much as a product of society—this major insight of sociological hermeneutics—was first formulated by the romantic thinkers in response to the promise and the threat of the French Revolution.

A few preliminary remarks on the meaning of “romanticism” as employed in this paper are in order here. The term has been the subject of an ongoing controversy since the beginning of this century. Some critics see little use in it because “it has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing”—too many different authors are lumped together under the heading “romanticism,” too antithetical are the ideas stamped “romantic,” too uncertain is the time span encompassing the “romantic movement.” What useful purpose, indeed, may be served by bringing under one head such unlikely bedfellows as Goethe, Tieck, E. T. A. Hoffman, Fichte, F. Schlegel, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, A. Müller, Marx, and Novalis? Lovejoy’s unhappiness with the term and his preference for the plural form “romanticisms”


5 Ibid.
are quite understandable. Still, his argument overstates the case. What is peculiar about romantic thinkers, as Gouldner rightly noted, is that "ever since Hegel, romantics have expressed their distance from others by condemning them as 'romantics'." It may be prudent to distinguish those consciously advancing the romantic cause (we can call them "romantics") from those who partake in it without openly subscribing to its tenets or accepting some of its forms (they may be called "romanticists"), but to deny Goethe, Hegel, or Marx a place in the history of romanticism on account of their ambivalence about it is to engage in the "petty politics of cultural history." Barzun hardly exaggerates when he calls Faust "a bible of Romanticism" in spite of Goethe's deliberate attempts to put distance between himself and the romantics. Hegel's contempt for everything romantic notwithstanding, his Phenomenology of Mind is an outstanding piece of romantic philosophy, deservedly included by Peckham among the required readings for all students of romanticism. Gouldner's interest in "Marx's Romanticism" does no violence to the historical realities, even though it flies in the face of Marx's well-known antiromantic sentiments. And certainly a long list of romantic writers compiled by Isaiah Berlin, which features among others Chateaubriand, Kierkegaard, Stirner, and Nietzsche, is no sign of his indifference to the diversity of their respective views. The greater the stature of a thinker, the more likely he is to be in a class by himself; classing him together with other romanticists is not meant to suggest that he is nothing but romantic, only that he took part in the romantic discourse, shared in the romantic

---

7 Barzun, Classic, p. 8.
8 Ibid.
problems, and wittingly or unwittingly contributed to the vast field of idioms and meanings which sprang to life in the aftermath of the French Revolution and signified a break with the Age of Reason.

All this is not to belittle the formidable task facing the student of romanticism seeking to unravel the unity of the romantic movement. This task is exacerbated by the violently contradictory statements emanating from alleged romanticists. In the same breath we find them asserting the autonomy of the individual and the primacy of the whole, the right to self-determination and the duty to the state, personal responsibility for the future and the inviolability of tradition. These contradictions cannot be simply charged to the factional divisions within the romantic movement, for they are endemic to every genuinely romantic thinker; rather, they should be seen as a manifestation of the "contradictoriness, dissonance and inner conflict of the Romantic mind."12 It is to the credit of such students of romanticism as Kluckhohn and Barzun, Peckham and Abrams, Wasserman and Schenk that they endeavored to grasp the unity underlying the romantic movement without glossing over the artistic, intellectual, and ideological diversity of its protagonists.

The following account focuses on the tension inherent in the premises of romantic thought. Several of these premises are central to the present study. The first concerns the romanticists' political commitment and is predicated on the idea that "Romanticism as well as Revolution . . . were united in their impassioned striving for freedom."13 Deploiring revolutionary violence, the romanticists remained committed to the revolution's emancipatory goals. The novel element in their political reasoning was the contention that individual freedom is not antithetical to social order, that the former is grounded in the latter and can be fully realized only in and through

society. The second premise has to do with the philosophical assumptions of romanticism and is based on the precept that "the romantic reaction was a protest on behalf of value."14 Whereas rationalist philosophy sought to minimize the value component in human understanding, the romantic thinkers proclaimed it to be the very condition of objective knowledge. The notion that knowledge devoid of interest and a priori assumptions is a contradiction in terms is quintessentially romantic. The third idea contained in romanticism is that of organic unity. "The paradigm of ‘organic’ unity,” according to Higonnet, is central to “romantic hermeneutics.”15 I will also argue that it is central to the entire romantic tradition in sociology, insofar as it entails a new image of society as Gemeinschaft or free discourse. The above precepts do not exhaust the list of romantic premises; arguably, though, they form the core of the romantic teaching and are signally important for the understanding of romantic sociology and the hermeneutical perspective endemic to its premises. The principal task of this paper is to place these in a proper historical context. I begin with the examination of the romanticists' attitude toward the French Revolution. After reconstructing the premises of romantic hermeneutics, I discuss the circular nature of reasoning in romantic social thought. Next, I analyze the notion of Gemeinschaft as an epitome of the romantic ideal of the future community. And finally, I share some thoughts on the continuity between romantic theory and twentieth-century interpretative sociology.

Political Underpinnings of the Romantic Movement

The history of the romantic movement is inexorably tied to the Revolution of 1789, which continued to evoke passionate

response throughout the nineteenth century. The first generation of romantic thinkers greeted the news about the fall of the Bastille with cheers and applause. To commemorate the happy events of July 14, young students in Göttingen—Hegel, Schlegel and Hölderlin—planted a liberty tree. Friedrich Schlegel ranked the French Revolution with “the greatest tendencies of the age,” along with Fichte’s philosophy and Goethe’s Meister. Fichte praised the valeur of the French and claimed to have laid the philosophical foundation for what they selflessly fought for in practice. Wordsworth, deploring “the baleful influence of aristocracy and nobility upon human happiness and virtue,” declared himself a supporter of the republic. The feeling of euphoria, however, did not survive the third year of the revolution. The Terror struck, and almost overnight the mood of the romanticists changed: enthusiasm gave way to depression, hope to despair, acclamation to denunciation. The awakening was particularly rude for the German romanticists, who saw in the French Revolution the best hope for liberty in their country, still deeply ensconced in the feudal tradition. Even in England, where a good many liberties espoused by the French revolutionaries were in place for more than a century, the judgment of the three years of revolutionary violence was strongly negative. “I abandoned France and her rulers,” explained Wordsworth, “when they abandoned the struggle for liberty, gave themselves up to tyranny, and endeavored to enslave the world.” By the end of the century this sentiment prevailed among the romantic thinkers. The first decade of the nineteenth century witnessed the romanticists’ turning away from cosmopolitanism to patri-
otism, from republicanism to monarchism, from scientific rationality to Christianity and revelation.

It is this metamorphosis that accounts for a still-predominant view of romanticism as a soundly conservative movement. Thus in his study of Goethe and his age, Lukács rarely refers to romanticism without the qualifier “reactionary”; Cobban uses the terms “romantic” and “conservative” as virtually synonymous; Zeitlin speaks about “the Romantic-Conservative reaction” to the French Revolution; Ruggiero scolds romanticism for “promoting a reactionary type of thought inspired by the pure Junkerism”; and Briefs deprecates romantic idealism as “the philosophy of counter-revolution.”

Mannheim makes perhaps the most elaborate case for romanticism as a paragon of conservative thought. In his important inquiry into the styles of social thought, Mannheim identifies conservatism with the distrust of reason and formal logic, preference for qualitative thinking and dialectics, penchant for irrationalism and mysticism, and above all, with the idealization of the past: “Acting along conservative lines . . . means that the individual is consciously or unconsciously guided by a way of thinking and acting which has its own history behind it, before it comes into contact with the individual.”

Romanticism, or “feudalistic romanticism,” as Mannheim sometimes refers to it, with its preoccupation with medieval institutions, abhorrence of radical change, and support of reactionary governments, does then appear to be the purest species of conservatism.

Whatever the merit of the above interpretation—and it certainly succeeds in bringing into focus important aspects of romanticism—it cannot be accepted in its original form. Mann-
heim's scheme fails to account for other facets of romantic thought that cannot be forced under the heading "conservatism." Too perceptive a thinker to simply ignore the inconsistencies, Mannheim acknowledges "the infiltration of liberal ideas into the conservative system of thought" and admits that "liberalism allowed itself to be penetrated by conservative elements."\(^{22}\) By and large, however, he chooses to explain away anomalous manifestations rather than to admit the deficiency of his scheme. Yet the whole scheme needs to be overhauled if we are to understand the unique position of romanticism in postrevolutionary Europe. The uniqueness of romanticism is not to be seen in its furnishing a rallying point for the forces of the past, but in the romanticists' ingenious effort to enlist tradition in service of the revolutionary objectives of the present. An interpretation that paints romanticism as "a one-dimensional negation of liberalism and bourgeois society,"\(^{23}\) an interpretation first fully articulated in Mannheim's Habilitation thesis and still enjoying wide currency, fails to grasp the peculiar status of the past in romantic literature. A simple return to the past was not seriously contemplated by the romantic thinkers, certainly not as a practical option for the future. An ideal past—an organic state of feudal Europe, an amiable polis of Greek antiquity, or a harmonious community of the prehistoric past—was to be regained on a higher level, through the negation of the present. The past of the romantics is clearly an extension of the present, a resource skilfully manipulated to advance a contemporary cause. As Mead observed in his regrettably forgotten study of romantic thought, the romanticists "created a different past from that which had been there before, a past . . . into which a value has been put which did not belong there before."\(^{24}\) The values the romanti-

---

\(^{22}\) Ibid., pp. 167, 139.


\(^{24}\) George H. Mead, Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), p. 64. On the interfaces of Mead and romanticism, see
cists found in medieval Europe were their own, conspicuously modern values of autonomy, freedom, and dignity of man. Combined with the ancient virtues of courage, honesty, and duty, these values were thought to produce the noble, harmonious order of the past. Never mind that the idyllic picture of the past was chiefly the phantom of the romantic imagination; its function was to furnish a convenient vantage point for an attack on the ills of modern society:

The romantics were no fools. They recognized the great accomplishments of the Enlightenment and saw the powerful potential of early capitalist technology. But they saw how these advances in thinking and industry were being used to affect and enslave their own consciousness and behavior as well as those of the people in general. And they sought to recover the revolutionary potential of new inventions and fought for the information and formation of a new social order which was still in transition.25

This is not to gainsay that criticism couched in nostalgic terms lends itself handily to reactionary ideologies. Whatever the intent of the early romantics, they did provide ammunition to the ideologists of Prussian Junkerism; their attacks on the institutions of revolutionary France delayed the advancement of civil rights; and their rejection of capitalism helped to prolong the agony of industrial transformation in Germany and elsewhere. Still, it is imperative to refrain from sitting in judgment on the ideological nature of romanticism outside the historical context. It is hardly an accident that Hegel, a model of romantic conservatism in the eyes of some contemporary critics, was considered in his own time as a liberal and an agent of revolution, his political writings being denied posthumous publication, his influence in German universities condemned to eradication by Frederick William IV. Nor is it totally fortu-


itous that the proponents of Stein-Hardenberg liberal reforms were sympathetic to the romantic cause. As to the romanticists' vociferous opposition to the Enlightenment, we should remember that, in the nineteenth century, the latter's universalism and cosmopolitanism were transformed into a progressively coercive Napoleonic imperialism, deeply resented throughout Europe. The ideological underpinnings of the romantic movement were "neither of the Right nor of the Left." The romanticists looked to the past for a model of the future that would be "neither bourgeois nor feudal." It is indicative that thinkers of such impeccably liberal credentials as Karl Marx, William Morris, Gustav Landauer, and Georg Lukács have strong romantic backgrounds. All in all, romanticism defies an unambiguous political identification and resists attempts to put it squarely on one side of the ideological battles of the day. Can we say, then, that it lacks a unifying political theme? By no means. Löwy misses this point, I believe, when he denigrates the ideological multifariousness of romanticism as "ideological hermaphroditism" ("ideological ambivalence" would be a more fitting term). What he fails to appreciate is that the very attempt to rise above the ideological extremes of the Right and the Left is a unifying principle of romantic thought. The romanticists' craving for tradition and social order is inseparable from their commitment to self-determination and freedom. This commitment survived the decades of reaction and remained as strong in the second generation of romantic thinkers—the generation of Feuerbach and Kierkegaard, Stirner and Marx, Emerson and Thoreau—as it was at the inception of the romantic era, when Schelling first proclaimed that "freedom is the beginning and

27 Gouldner, For Sociology, p. 324.
the end of all philosophy.”  

On this score the romanticists proved to be true heirs of the Enlightenment and the classical liberal tradition. Where they parted company with their predecessors was on the question of the relationship between individual freedom and society. For the philosophers of the Enlightenment and their revolutionary heirs, freedom was indigenous, servitude was man-made; man came before society and made it possible through a social contract. Freedom was defined here as freedom from, as negative freedom or liberty that should be continuously guarded against the encroaching influence of authority, state, and society. The romanticists retained this preoccupation with freedom, but, after a brief period of enthusiasm about the French Revolution, they abandoned the premises of *jus naturae* and embarked on a path toward a new theory, which stipulated that “a firm government is indispensable to freedom.”

Brutal and often patentely random violence in the later years of the revolution (as exemplified in the September massacre of 1792) planted the seeds of doubt in the romantic mind as to the inherent rationality of reason. Liberated from external constraints and left to its own devices, reason showed irrational, if not downright suicidal, tendencies which were conspicuously at odds with the lofty assumptions of the philosophers of the Enlightenment. This traumatic experience compelled the revision of the liberal notion of freedom, which was defined as positive freedom or “freedom for” and proclaimed to be an end product rather than a starting point of human history. Equally radical was the change in outlook on the relevance of tradition. Caught between the ancien régime they deemed obsolete and the new order they found inimical to freedom, the romanticists turned to a distant past. The medieval past of the romantic fancy had

---


little to do with the stagnant society in which the individual was permanently locked into his estate; this past was passé for those who believed that every man is entitled “to make oneself a member of one of the moments of civil society by one’s own act, through one’s energy, industry and skill,”31 that “no man whatever ought to be compelled to any particular class, nor shut from any.”32 The past order which the romanticists came to praise and against which they learned to judge the present was both harmonious, or in the terminology of the epoch “organic,” and at the same time perfectly conducive to individual freedom. No one is forced here to comply; everyone follows one’s native genius; society remains forever malleable, though changes in it come not through the abrupt termination of tradition but through the gradual expansion of its confines. It is a permanent (r)evolution, accomplished through the continuous self-rejuvenation of reason.

One can readily see why these romantic musings appealed to the reactionary politicians in postrevolutionary Europe. No less apparent, however, is the liberating component of romanticism, which proved compatible with the socialist and liberal currents of nineteenth-century political discourse. The ideological perspective unifying nineteenth-century romanticism grows out of the romanticists’ determination to realize radical objectives by conservative means. Romanticism was as much “a negation of the philistine substance and life style of the emerging bourgeoisie and a protest against the utilitarian ordering of life” as it was “a reaction against the backward feudal ideology and conditions of authoritarianism.”33 The romanticists were “innovators and revolutionists” as well as “great restorers and wise conservatives.”34 Their dialectical

34 Talmon, Romanticism, p. 136.
commitment to liberty and order is the broadest common denominator that unites otherwise diverse and openly antagonistic thinkers identified with the romantic movement. To be a romantic, we can say, is to believe that freedom can coexist with necessity, diversity with unity, and self-determination with social order. Romantic philosophy, with its critical—hermeneutical—thrust, was an attempt to work out a theoretical foundation for the practical resolution of these antinomies.

Romantic Philosophy and Hermeneutics

Whitehead defined the romantic attitude as “a protest against the exclusion of value from the essence of matter of fact.” This formula captures the gist of the romantic revolt against the dominant rationalist philosophy. Man, according to the rationalists, is handicapped in his quest for knowledge by innate as well as acquired biases, prejudices, or, in Bacon’s terminology, “idols,” which prevent the knower from seeing things as they really are in themselves. The process of understanding can succeed only if the knower purges himself of preconceptions. The rational mind, urged Descartes, is active to the extent that is necessary to curtail its own unwanted interference with the preestablished order. The universal science of the future, as the rationalists envisioned it, called for faithful observance, not for participant observation; it stressed the activity of res extensa, not that of res cogitans. Once the mind fulfilled its purgative function, it was to assume its proper role, that is, to record faithfully the preordained movement of matter as it revealed itself to a disinterested scientific observer. It was this impersonal, mechanical universe that provoked the romantic revolt against rationalism and mechanism. The romanticists rejected the idea that knowledge can be freed

from the contaminating influence of the process of knowing. Scientific endeavor, according to them, is not a quest for things themselves and their primordial order; the scientific method is not an expedient way of getting around the distortions incurred by man’s presence in the universe. Quite to the contrary, science’s true aim is to humanize nature, to make it more rational; the scientist is a participant observer whose imprint on the outside world is irradicable and whose proper role is to restore man’s responsibility for the world out there. The determination of mechanistic philosophy to do away with “idols” resulted in the dehumanization of the process of understanding. Along with human bias, the rationalists excised the active side of knowing, reducing knowledge to passive reflection. “The overcoming of all prejudices,” contends Gadamer, “this global demand of the enlightenment, will prove to be itself a prejudice. . . .”

Herein lies the significance of the revolution in philosophy initiated by Kant and continued by his romantic successors. The process of knowledge, for Kant, is selective, in that it chooses among many elements before it shapes them into an object. The selection is guided by our beliefs, preconceptions, values, and prejudices—literally prejudgments, without which cognition would be impossible. What it means is that rationalists overlooked an irreducible element of faith or value permeating our knowledge. “I had therefore to remove knowledge,” explains Kant, “in order to make room for belief.” The secret of the transcendental judgment a priori—the heart of Kant’s system—is that it is value judgment, that is, a judgment whose objective validity presupposes prior commitment to certain beliefs and values. The task of philosophical analysis, then, is not to expunge value from understanding and to eliminate all biases but to render them conscious, to turn them

into premises. This is exactly the task of philosophical hermeneutics, the task of becoming reflexive, of uncovering prejudices through which our understanding participates in the production of reality as objective and meaningful. When Goethe insists that every fact is already a theory; when Hegel exposes as self-deception the unreflexive mind's insistence on dealing with "bare facts"; when Emerson scolds reason that separates the fact from value; when Schlegel takes to task an empiricist for his unconscious reliance on a transcendental outlook—when all these giants of the romantic era raise their objections to unreflexive reasoning and urge the inescapability of prejudices, they speak the language of hermeneutics. "This recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust."38

Romantic hermeneutics, as one can gather from the above, is an extension of romantic philosophy. Dilthey takes note of this fact, pointing out that Schleiermacher "was specifically trained in transcendental philosophy which was the first to provide adequate means for stating the problem of hermeneutics in general terms and solving it."39 The principles of romantic hermeneutics—the constitutive nature of understanding, the a priori foundation of knowledge, the unreliability of consciousness, the dialectics of part and whole—belong to the general fund of ideas developed by romantic idealism. Transcendentalism furnished a new foundation for hermeneutics, moving it away from the traditional concern with the inherent properties of the text toward the examination of the concealed interaction between the interpreter and his object. It helped to broaden the scope of the hermeneutical analysis by including in its orbit the entire range of cultural and natural objects, by treating all objective reality as a text

38 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 239.
waiting to be interpreted. The old hermeneutics urged the interpreter unraveling the meaning of the past to free himself from the contaminating influence of the present; the romantic hermeneutics claimed that the past exists only through the present. The former insisted that the interpreter should approach his task unbiased and presuppositionless; the latter assumed that bias is an unacknowledged premise, and all the knower can hope for is to turn his biases into acknowledged premises. Where one aimed outward, focusing the interpreter’s undivided attention on the object, the other turned inward, postulating self-reflection as a precondition of successful interpretation. All understanding which is not dogmatic must begin with self-understanding. This romantic premise gives modern hermeneutics its peculiar flavor. It also points to a distinctly critical thrust of modern—romantic—hermeneutics.

The Project of Sociological Hermeneutics

Paul Ricoeur once observed that we live “in a hermeneutical age,”40 by which he meant modern man’s extraordinary preoccupation with self-reflection, demystification and criticism. The roots of this now-ubiquitous attitude can be traced to the romantic era or, if you will, to 1781, when Kant first proclaimed that “our age is, in every sense of the word, the age of criticism, and everything must submit to it.”41 The same sentiment we find in the two generations of Kant’s successors who declared a war on “dogmatism as a way of thinking,”42 on “the dogmatic tendency in man,”43 and demanded “a ruthless

41 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, p. xxiv.
criticism of everything existing,"44 "a strenuous reacquisition of that which has once been acquired,"45 “putting to the test what has long since passed as established truth."46 Such were the opening salvos of the age of criticism, the hermeneutical age. Not surprisingly, this was also the dawning of the new era of democratic revolutions. It was the time when philosophical disquisitions were nourished by the flames of revolution, when self-reflection bred criticism and criticism inspired open insurrection. The project of romantic hermeneutics was firmly rooted in the revolutionary transformations of the time and should be judged in their context.

A great accomplishment of the French Revolution was the doubt it cast over the divine nature of the social order and man’s place in it. In a dramatic fashion the revolution demonstrated that man’s social qualities as well as the social order of which he finds himself a part are emergent. Whether it consists of slaves and masters, noblemen and commoners, capitalists and laborers, the social order is not ordained by God; nor are its members earmarked by nature for their stations in life; rather, individuals themselves generate their social order in the very process of knowing, by subsuming each other under a priori categories and forcing upon reality taken-for-granted nomenclatures. The institutions of society established in this manner only appear to be “noumenal,” subsisting on their own; in truth, they are “phenomenal,” that is, emergent, historical, contingent on the rational activities of its members. It is the mind that imposes structure on the world and assures its objective reality, and it is entirely in man’s power to destroy his own creation, to supplant the old order with a new one. The realization that mind is a constitutive force was itself an offshoot of the revolutionary era:

That was an age of great destructions. When the Revolution came, many institutions which long seemed to be things in themselves, showed that they were nothing but phenomena. And when new constitutions and new social orders had to be planned, the spirit of the age emphasized the fact that, at least in the social world, it is the office of human intelligence to impose its own forms upon the phenomena, and to accept no authority but that of the rational self. 47

The critical mode of thinking engendered in romantic social thought predicates that society owes its objective reality to consciousness. A fine-spun network of a priori assumptions and categories, according to this premise, serves as a ground plan in terms of which the understanding generates the social world. The understanding does its job without being aware of its awesome accomplishment—it is perennally unreflexive, yet this unreflexivity is the very stuff of which social facts are made. Social reality presents itself to the mind as a noumenon, an object unrelated to the subject or a "bare fact," yet this facticity is apparent: social facts and the social orders they comprise are brought into being by the work of our understanding. The paradox of the social world is that the society confronting us in all its glorious externality and unyielding thinghood is the work of our (un)conscious activity. The whole edifice of social institutions rests on the exceedingly shaky foundation of transcendental beliefs and values. "Ultimately everything rests on a postulate," intones Kierkegaard, 48 even if this postulate remains incomprehensible to the subject. An element of incomprehensibility, opaqueness, and unreflexivity is at the core of social being—expose it, and the whole order will collapse:

But is incomprehensibility really something so unmitigatedly contemptible and evil? Methink the salvation of families and

nations rests upon it. If I am not wholly deceived, then states and systems, the most artificial productions of man, are often so artificial that one simply can't admire the wisdom of their creator enough. Only an incredibly minute quantity of it suffices: as long as its truth and purity remain inviolate and no blasphemous rationality dares approach its sacred confines. . . . [Every system] depends in the last analysis . . . on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis.49

It should be clear by now that social institutions are not immune to hermeneutical analysis, that social facts are perfectly amenable to the interpretative understanding. Moreover, it is quite plausible, as Rickert argued decades ago,50 that the romantic idealists derived their general problematics chiefly from the social domain, on which they modeled their treatment of nature. Transcendentalism was inspired by the travails of the revolutionary age in which the task of recapturing one's authorship first emerged as a practical problem. Dogmatism or the unreflexive mode of being in the world decried by the romantic thinkers is coterminous with the institutions of the ancien régime, which, toward the end of the nineteenth century, ceased to be perceived as natural and inherently rational and were increasingly subjected to critical debunking by the subjects rediscovering the constitutive power of reason. "Thing-in-itself" is a philosophical epitome of the world in which the individual is no longer at home, where he is not a master of himself but an exile, condemned to inauthentic existence by his own unreflexivity. He is surrounded by social facts—customs, institutions, estates, each weighing heavily on his consciousness, demanding unequivocal respect, threatening to subdue anyone who dares to question their authenticity. Alas, this unhappy state of affairs is itself the

49 Schlegel, Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde, p. 268.
work of the mind unconscious of its agency. To break the mold of pseudofacticity in which the institutions present themselves to the mind, the latter must become self-reflexive. When the understanding becomes transparent to itself and acquires a hermeneutical insight into its role as a participant observer in the order of things, social facts lose their impenetrability and submit to rational change.

The project of sociological hermeneutics is thus fundamentally that of rediscovery and emancipation—rediscovery of authorship and emancipation from the oppressive weight of obsolete institutions. The first impetus to this project came from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and the French Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen. We find an unmistakable imprint of these two pillars of modernity in Schelling’s attacks on dogmatism and Fichte’s belief in the primacy of self-determination; in the contempt for philistinism and complacency professed by Novalis, Schlegel, and Tieck; in the critique of alienation by Hegel, Feuerbach, Stirner, and Marx; as well as in the transvaluation of values attempted by Nietzsche at the close of the romantic era. When Marx announced that “self-understanding (equals critical philosophy) by our age . . . is a task for the world” and promised to reform society “through the analysis of mystical consciousness that is not clear to itself,”51 he did not break new ground—he simply stated in explicitly sociological terms the mission of romantic hermeneutics. Marx’s iconoclastic attitude is characteristic of the second generation of romantic thinkers, who were determined to put “the searching knife of criticism” to every institution of yesteryear. Their diction, expressly political and self-consciously defiant, differed markedly from the studiously metaphysical language of their romantic predecessors, but their message remained essentially the same: man is an author of the historical drama responsible for his social world and

capable of reclaiming authority over his creations through the systematic exercise of self-reflection.

*The Dialectic of Rationality and Sociality*

The enthusiasm with which the romanticists greeted the breakdown of the old regime, intense and sincere as it was in the opening days of the revolution, faded rapidly as the news about the increasingly bloody course of events in Paris spread throughout Europe. And when the measured staccato of the guillotines heralded to the world the arrival of the Terror, most of the early supporters of the revolution turned against it, feeling betrayed and loudly denouncing the dangerous shortcut to freedom taken by the French. Something went terribly wrong with the way the heirs of the Enlightenment set out to reclaim the natural rights of man. The dawn of the Age of Reason was marred by exemplary irrationality and seemingly random violence which made a mockery of the optimistic forecasts of the prophets of the Enlightenment. Freed from the restraints of society, reason looked nothing like the benign and constructive force in the service of natural law it was hailed to be; instead, it showed itself to be arrogant, vindictive, and utterly self-destructive. In the wake of the Terror the veracity of a theory that pictured society as derivative and incidental to the affairs of reason was suspect. Toward the end of the century it came under close scrutiny by the romantic thinkers, who gave a decidedly new—sociological—turn to the traditional discourse on the nature of reason.

According to the rationalist mode of thinking, reason precedes society and needs no help from it to do the job it was entrusted with by the Almighty. Society contaminates reason with prejudices—idols—which only muddle the picture of the preestablished harmony. To fulfill its mission, reason must break through the veils of society and open itself to the natural purity of things themselves and their primordial order. By
contrast, the romanticists conceived of reason as socially embedded and historically emergent. Consciousness is permeated with prejudices and a priori assumptions, but it is only because it is so informed and guided by society that it is the consciousness of man. Humans act consciously and rationally when they raise themselves above their immediate existence, place themselves in the perspective of the community, and, armed with a priori categories and values, transform the flux of things themselves into an orderly flow of objective reality. Sociality is implicit in every rational act. "Gemeinschaft, pluralism is our innermost essence,"52 exclaims Schlegel; what this means is that only those forces in man are truly rational that are mediated by the community. Rationality without sociality, mind outside of the human community, is unthinkable.

Already in Kant we find a hint that reason may be social, at least in form if not in substance. The transcendental domain contains cognitive constructs which have no existence apart from the individual mind but which nevertheless transcend personal experience and claim universal validity. Drawing on these transcendental schemes of understanding, the subject can induce objectivity into things without visible recourse to any authority beyond himself, yet each time he raises the claim that the reality in question is objective and meaningful, he presupposes, however tacitly, that it is universally—intersubjectively—valid. When man hazards a universal judgment, "he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgment ... and reflects upon it from a universal standpoint (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others)."53 Kant would not say of course that a priori categories of reason come from society and change with time (he obviously thought these to be innate and


unalterable), but the very fact that they possess a power transcending individual experience and binding on every rational member of the community invites a sociological interpretation.

With Kant's romantic followers the social and historical nature of reason is already a matter of unshakable conviction. Reason evolves historically, along with the human community, and embodies the collective forces of society, even though its immediate expression is individual. The transcendental power of mind, the power to convert things in themselves into objects, is social in form and content. Beyond the transcendental judgment a priori stands a community (real or potential) which delegates its authority to its members and gives them confidence to treat the reality in question as objective and meaningful. Every thought, precept, or deed that passes the test of rationality has its beginning and end in society. Even the most intimate notion of self, according to romantic thinkers, is of social origins: "The self perceives itself at the same time that it is perceived by others. . . . Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself . . . by the very fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized."54 "Only by meeting with, so as to be resisted by, Another, does the Soul become a Self. What is Self-consciousness but to know myself at the same moment that I know another, and to know myself by means of knowing another, and vice versa."55

It would be wrong to infer from the above that, while reason needs society to perform its function, society endures on its own, independently from individual minds. Each society has an enormous stake in cultivating its members' rational faculties—suppress them, and it withers away along with the reasoning powers of individuals. Society is a perpetually renewed community of minds accomplished through the ra-

54 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, pp. 661, 229.
tional activities of individuals. The thesis of the inherent sociality of reason, consequently, requires a dialectical inversion: just as reason is social through and through, so is society permeated with reason. The individual is a responsible member of society to the extent that he acts rationally, and society is an objective and meaningful whole as long as its members share rationales for action. External and petrified as the social order may seem, it remains a product of ongoing rationalization at every moment of its existence. In the language of philosophical hermeneutics this proposition reads as follows: “What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational.”

In the sociological parlance it can be stated this way: “Activity and mind, both in their content and in their mode of existence, are social: social activity and social mind.” Rendered freely, this means that society persists as long as it is projected into the meaningful actions of its members and ceases to exist as an objective whole when individuals deny its inherent rationality and refuse to abide by the a priori schemes of understanding in which it has been traditionally cast.

There is a body of opinion, both popular and scholarly, that depicts romantics as narcissistic, oblivious to the problems of community at large, antisocial in their basic impulses. This view is hopelessly one-sided. Much closer to the truth, I think, are those commentators who contend that “the longing for community is one of the most important themes in Romanticism,” that “in every definite sense we can speak of this philosophy . . . as one which is social in its character.” True, the romanticists are preoccupied with self-reflection and place an inordinate emphasis on subjectivity, but this romantic concern does not imply an a-social bias; if anything, it is due to the romanticists' acute sense of responsibility for the fate of

56 Hegel, Philosophy of Right, p. 10.
59 Mead, Movements of Thought, p. 147.
the community and reflects their belief that the actions of the individual count. This goes not only for the champions of public causes such as Fichte, Hegel, and Marx, but also for the "archindividualists" like F. Schlegel, Kierkegaard, and Emerson. Even Max Stirner, the prophet of modern egoism, reserves his most eloquent rhetoric for the description of "union"—the future community of free spiritual beings. Concern for society is embedded in the romantic frame of mind.

What is different about the romanticists' treatment of society and reason is the radical manner in which they welded the two into one continuum. The romanticists found the seeds of society at the nub of consciousness and discerned the imprint of reason on the fabric of the social order. They discovered a new domain (they called it "transcendental") where reason and society meet, becoming one, a realm of what we now call values, the locus of which is intraindividual but the substance of which is extraindividual and intersubjective. This is a paradoxical realm comprising all those prelogical and largely taken-for-granted categories in terms of which we make sense of the world and which tie us together into a community. Through this domain society enters the individual, leaving a deposit of rationality that makes man truly human. Both reason and society appear to be sui generis, yet neither can exist by itself, and each is inexorably tied to its other. The two grow together, sometimes locked in bitter dispute, sometimes peacefully coexistent, always mutually constitutive. This reasoning was a methodological expression of the romanticists' political ambivalence, of their desire to mediate between the conservative thesis and the radical antithesis. "Dialectical" and "mediatory" are virtually synonymous in romantic idealism.

The whole approach can be seen as a deft attempt to safeguard the emancipatory legacy of the French Revolution from its violent excesses by substituting hermeneutical philosophy for the shallow contractarianism of the Enlightenment. Rejecting the political ideology of the Left, the romanticists contended that human society is not a mechanical aggre-
gate of individuals but an organic whole, the members of which are bound together by a continuous thread of tradition, a way of thinking and feeling that is ingrained in every mind and that cannot be dislodged by revolutionary decrees. At the same time, they shunned the reactionary ideologies and urged the inevitability of social change, thereby serving notice on the ideologists of the old regime that the traditional ways of doing things cannot be petrified by repressive measures any more than they can be legislated by the overzealous guardians of natural rights. An offshoot of this dual political agenda was their hermeneutically grounded social theory with its dialectical, mediatory stance and a characteristic emphasis on the organic nature of the relationship between reason and society, liberty and order, tradition and social change.

Romantic Organicism and the Hermeneutical Circle

In the Occidental tradition, society was often compared to an organism and treated as a whole which, as the saying goes, is always more than the sum of its parts. To be sure, the will of the individual was instrumental in setting society in motion, but once established, it was to persist as a collective body charged with ultimate power to coerce its members in the interests of the whole. From Plato to Aristotle, through Augustine and Aquinas, to Hobbes and Saint-Simon, this metaphor provided a guiding light to theorists searching for an ideal of social peace and harmony. The message it conveyed was a simple one: there will be no peace and harmony until individuals are subordinated to society, as parts of an organism are subordinated to the whole. A healthy society, as seen in this perspective, is the one that is insulated from the wills of its individual members.

The image of organic society we find in romantic literature is of a strikingly different nature. The individual is cast here not only as an actor but also as an author; he is a self-conscious
and critical being endowed with a right—and duty—to judge for himself matters of state. A healthy society is not the one where the will of the individual is subordinated to the will of society but where the will of the whole coincides with the will of the individual. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, romanticists concede, but it is also less than any of its individual members. For the human individual is a social being, "he belongs to more than one world . . . traverses many systems and encircles many a sun." He is "the living species," the knower and the subject who "treats himself as a universal and therefore free being", "to him his species, his essential nature, and not merely his individuality, is an object of thought." To cast him as a part indifferent to the whole is therefore to deprive the individual of his true dignity. The organic analogy thus loses much of its customary biological connotation, becoming more akin to the metaphor of the micro- and macrocosm: "The individual lives in the whole, the whole in the individual. . . . Society is nothing but social life: an invisible, thinking, and feeling person. Each man is a small society." "Man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society. . . . Man, much as he may therefore be a particular individual, . . . is just as much a totality—the ideal society—the subjective existence of thought and experienced society for itself."

The thing that strikes one most about these credal statements of romantic organicism is their circular character: the whole is looked at here through the prism of its parts, while the properties of the part are explicated through the whole.

---

61 Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, p. 112.
The circle involved in this reasoning is neither vicious nor unintended. It can be understood as a special case of what Schelling called "the circle of knowledge," or what is now better known under the name popularized by Schleiermacher as "the hermeneutical circle." The term refers to a circular path the mind is forced to travel in pursuit of meaning. Thus the exact sense of a word becomes clear to an interpreter through its context, the meaning of a sentence through the whole text; the text is understood when the author's intent and a priori assumptions are known, which, in turn, presupposes knowledge of the cultural tradition that shaped the author's imagination.

To comprehend the total cultural context, we have to travel in the opposite direction, starting with the larger whole and making our way to the individual parts. The understanding en route to full knowledge therefore travels in circles: "Complete knowledge always involves an apparent circle that each part can be understood only out of the whole to which it belongs, and vice versa. All knowledge that is scientific must be constructed in this way." Schleiermacher did not explore the implications of this principle for the study of society; nor did his sociologically minded contemporaries draw on his hermeneutical writings. Still, we can say with confidence that Schleiermacher's theory of the hermeneutical circle and romantic sociology share a common heritage of transcendental idealism and help appreciably to illuminate each other. The principle of the hermeneutical circle, Schleiermacher contends, covers all forms of intercourse, past and present, where people make sense, exchange meaning, and produce order out of seemingly incongruous individual acts. Social intercourse, as seen in this perspective, is the hermeneutical process whereby individuals produce a sense of the whole and establish the universe of meaning intelligible to every participant.

---

By the same token, society is a universe of discourse. The term “universe” (literally, one verse) favored by the romantic thinkers is very indicative in this respect: it hints at the Logos, the Word that unites disparate individuals into a social whole. To be grasped hermeneutically, this whole must be “lived through [erlebt] and not just apprehended and explained [erkannt und erlernt]”; it must be studied by the knower with “a feeling for value and meaning.” The hermeneutical scholar appropriates as his own the universe of meaning generated by others. He learns to discern the meaningful actions of individuals behind the most rigid institutions of the state. Cut down to size by his interpretative gaze, the state will no longer awe him with its Leviathanic vastness; rather, he will see it as a living reality. Society will unfold before his eyes as a process of articulation in the course of which individuals grasp their identities as members of the same universe of meaning. The successive generations of individuals partake in this process, bound by a common heritage of language and meaning, yet never failing to leave a mark on it. While they continue to rely on customary terms and apply time-honored nomenclatures, society persists as a pattern or structure with all the appearance of an eternal thing-in-itself. This is just an appearance, however. Society’s customary being is routine, not extemporaneous; it is perpetuated by the participants who are not bound irrevocably to the terms of their discourse. New nomenclatures are devised and brought to bear on the familiar situations, assuring the flow of change. What this means is that “just as society produces man as man, so is society produced by him.”

If there is a single ideological imperative underlying the circular mold of romantic thought, it is the determination to place the individual and society on equal footing. Behind the

organic imagery of romantic social theory one senses the craving for freedom qualified by responsibility, the longing for continuity punctuated by change. Man-the-microcosm, the part coequal to the whole, the species being—this unmistakably romantic terminology has all the markings of the post-revolutionary era. It reflects the sentiment of those who reject the revolutionary and the reactionary alike. The language of romanticism confers on the individual a crushing responsibility for the well-being of the whole society. At the same time, it stipulates that man's liberty is contingent on his ability to embrace the whole, to incorporate its ways into his self. In choosing this language, the romanticists consciously break with the classical dichotomy of the individual and society, for which they substitute a dialectical view that posits the two as thesis and antithesis, as aspects of the same process of the production of social reality. The species being celebrated by the romanticists is a conscious being, willingly submitting to the necessity of law, not because this law is ordained and enforced by an external authority but because it stands to reason. A sovereign and citizen at the same time, he is, above all, a self, a subjective being of society conscious of itself: "The Romantic philosophy pointed out that the self, while it arises in the social experience, also carries with it the very unity that makes society possible, . . . that society is nothing but an organization of selves."**

*Gemeinschaft as an Ideal of Free Discourse*

The image of Gemeinschaft formed in many a head by the prolific literature on the subject is that of a community of individuals bound together by personal, emotional ties, going leisurely about the business of life, insulated from the hustle and bustle of industrial civilization, and generally antithetical

**Mead, Movements of Thought, pp. 125, 101.**
to the spirit of modernity. The impression of an antimodernist bias is exacerbated by the medieval symbolism that crops up in the rhetoric of *Gemeinschaft*. Contrasted to the latter is the image of an impersonal, money-bound, legalistic *Gesellschaft* symbolizing the modern way of life. The final conclusion seems inevitable: one is dealing with a solidly conservative idea, masquerading as a historical description but intended chiefly as ideological ammunition against the forces of modernity and social change. This common view, much of which originates in neoromantic literature, does not withstand a critical examination.

That the romanticists spoke in hostile terms about the age of the machine, despised utilitarianism, and scorned bourgeois philistinism goes without saying. It is also true that they praised the virtues of medieval culture and bemoaned the passing of the organic state. It is emphatically not true that the romanticists entertained serious hopes for the revival of medieval institutions, or that they rejected modernity as such. The romantic notion of *Gemeinschaft* was an explicitly normative construct whose critical edge was directed against the reified conditions of modern life. The unfolding of bourgeois society accorded ill with romantic ideals, and as the gulf between these ideals and bureaucratic realities widened, the romanticists did not hesitate to denounce what they perceived to be a perversion of social intercourse. The romantic idealists longed for a social order that would be neither bourgeois nor feudal. Their views were anticapitalist, insofar as the capitalism of the time was synonymous with the degradation of human conditions, but they were also antiauthoritarian and therefore inimical to the spirit of the Middle Ages. Their mistrust of industrialism and capitalism did not blind them to the emancipatory potential of the machine. And their contempt for bourgeois philistinism was more than offset by their deep respect for the freedoms of conscience and religion that were bourgeois to the core. Call them utopian or idealistic if you will, but not reactionary. Even the label "conservative"
does not fully apply to the proponents of Gemeinschaft, whose commitment to the ideal of free discourse was nothing short of revolutionary, and whose main target—bureaucratic ossification—was as sure a sign of modernity as there could be.

The reification of the state was the main target of the romantic critique in the 1830s and 1840s. So strong was the antistate sentiment in this period that it is sometimes taken as a sign of a break between the first and second generations of romanticists. The split, however, is largely apparent. All romanticists were propelled by the same longing for an organic relation between man and society. The romanticists of the 1840s turned against the state only after their hopes for its imminent transformation into an organic whole were dashed. The iconoclastic attitude toward the state and bureaucracy was already evident in early romantics who lived long enough to witness the distortion of their ideals in the Napoleonic and Prussian states. As early as 1823 Schlegel lamented that the modern state resembles “an all-directing and all-ruling law machine—and decree factory—whose sovereign power should subjugate all things divine and human. . .”69 An echo of these jeremiads can be heard in Marx’s attack on “the spirit of bureaucracy” permeating modern society, Stirner’s philippics against the state as a “true personality” more real than the individual, as well as in the antistatist declarations of Emerson. The target of this criticism was not so much the state as the stifling effect of the bureaucratic social order on the individual. A specimen, a member of a class, modern man seemed to the romanticists of the second generation a bitter caricature of the image of “the living species” they cherished so much: “The individuals have only the value of specimens of the same species or genus; . . . what you are . . . as a unique person must be—suppressed.”70 “The individuals of a class [exist] only as

average individuals, only in so far as they lived within the conditions of existence of their class—a relationship in which they participate not as individuals but as members of a class.”\(^\text{71}\)

“Our age has forsaken the individuals. . . . There are no more individuals but only specimens. . . . Man's kinship with deity [is forgotten].”\(^\text{72}\)

Underlying all these lamentations is a theme that has become closely associated with romantic thought—the theme of alienation and reification. Reification is a pathological symptom of the modern age, a state in which society appears to its members as a noumenon, an external and coercive entity, and not as a living whole responsive to its members' needs and wishes. The state confronts one here as an omnipotent being to be revered, obeyed, and feared by mere mortals. In these reified conditions, free discourse is greatly impeded: it grows compulsive, is marred by deep enmity between the participants, and is subject to frequent breakdowns. The individual is forced to take part in this discourse against his will, producing sense that makes little sense to him personally, generating a reality he experiences as a threat. Alienated from his universal essence, he is reduced to a cog in a superhuman machine. Life, reason, power—everything that belongs to the individual—is delegated to this lifeless automaton that hovers in the Platonic realm of everlasting beings, exhorting men to selfless efforts on its behalf. The root of the modern predicament, as romanticists saw it, is reason's unreflexivity, the fact that "we first share the life by which things exist and afterwards see them as appearances in nature and forget that we have shared their causes.”\(^\text{73}\) The weight of social facts, magnified by the power of tradition, prevents the individual from seeing his own imprint on the way things are. To challenge the


reality of social facts, he would have to question the rationality and good judgment of other beings with whom he partakes in the same social intercourse. The wider the social discourse and the community of assumptions behind it, the more thinglike the social reality, and the greater the fear of committing *lapsus judicii*. No wonder “mankind is shy of self-analysis, and many people tremble slavishly when they can no longer dodge the question . . . what they have become, and who they really are . . . . The spell of life and of the world is upon them.”

It is against the backdrop of this heartless world that we should judge the ideal of an organic community, whose roots the romanticists sought in the past but whose full realization they tied to the future. The term *Gemeinschaft* had not yet acquired its common meaning, but the vision of a harmonious community it had come to signify was already in place. Fichte called it “the universal commonwealth,” Schleiermacher “the community of free spiritual beings,” Müller “an organic state,” Marx “communism,” Stirner “union,” Thoreau “perfect and glorious state,” Emerson “a nation of men unanimously bent on freedom.” Differing in a number of important respects, the authors of these projects agreed on one key point: the society of the future should be a universal community, an ever-expanding universe of discourse that existed for its own sake, excluded no one, and drew every human being in its orbit. The foundation of this social order would not be the social contract of the *philosophes* “but an ever-originating Social Contract,” an alliance that is “perpetually and at every moment renewed and thereby reestablished through new freedoms that spring to life along the old ones.” “It is not another State . . . that men aim at, but their Union, this ever-fluid uniting of everything standing . . . *intercourse* or *union*.” The new social order creates “the real basis for rendering it impos-

---

sible that anything should exist independently of individuals, in so far as things are only a product of the preceding intercourse of individuals themselves."

How can this ideal be realized? A basic premise of romantic hermeneutics—reason is social, society is rational—already suggests an answer: If it is true that reified social institutions are "thoughts [that] had become corporeal on their own account," that the state is "a fixed idea . . . that has subjected man to itself," then to bring down ossified social reality reason must recognize its involvement in the objectivity of the social world—it must become self-reflexive. The knower conquers the Leviathan of the state when he appropriates social reality as his own and refuses to identify with it. The species being, a subjective being of society conscious of itself, man only needs to alter his self-consciousness to bring about changes in society: "The idols exist through me; I need only refrain from creating them anew, then they exist no longer." The foremost task of the day is "self-examination: becoming conscious of oneself, not as individuals but as mankind." This task of critical self-reflection is first accomplished by a great man. A seer, a prophet, a rebel—a great man is always an individual who manages before others to break the spell of oppressive social reality. What distinguishes him from other disaffected individuals is his ability to penetrate the sacred domain of the transcendental a priori, to cast shadow on the taken-for-granted rationality of a tradition, to effect the "Transvaluation of All Values." The romantic hero is a virtuoso of self-reflection and self-transcendence; he does not merely forecast the future, he casts the future by recasting old schemes of thought and broadcasting the new ones. Single-

27 Marx, German Ideology, p. 70.
28 Stirner, Ego, pp. 237, 59.
29 Ibid., p. 223.
handedly he can supply the verses for the future universe of discourse. "The given actuality has completely lost its validity [for him]; it has become for him an imperfect form which everywhere constrains. . . . [He] has advanced beyond the reach of his age and opened a front against it."82 His task, however, is not fully accomplished until he is joined by others, that is, until the awakening from the dogmatic slumber spreads through society. That is when self-reflection and self-change translate into revolutionary change, when "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing [transpires] as revolutionary practice."83 A genuine revolution is a crisis of objectivity on a mass scale, a practical accomplishment of an army of alienated human beings refusing to subsume themselves under the customary classifications and to lend their faces to dramatizing the familiar social reality as objective and meaningful. Revolutionary labor denaturalizes the social order, converting things in themselves back into concrete historical phenomena. And it accomplishes this feat not through physical force but through the power of reason.

It is striking how thoroughly convinced the romantic idealists were in the peaceful nature of their endeavor. The most hot-headed of them were at pains to emphasize the peaceful character of their revolution. The radical transformation of society, insisted Marx while he was still under the sway of romantic idealism, involves nothing else but the

reform of consciousness, [which] consists solely in letting the world perceive its own consciousness by awakening it from dreaming about itself, in explaining to it its own actions. . . . Reform of consciousness . . . through analysis of mystical consciousness that is not clear to itself. . . . Self-understanding . . . is the task for the world and for us. What is at stake is a confes-

---

83 Marx, German Ideology, p. 198.
sion, nothing more. To get its sins forgiven, humanity only needs to describe them as they are.\footnote{Marx, “A Correspondence of 1843,” p. 81.}

Just that—the confession and the reform of consciousness—and the whole of society will be transformed, as if by magic, into something more rational and infinitely more humane. Thoreau and Emerson could not agree more. “Peaceable revolution” is the term Thoreau aptly used to describe the revolt of reason against a society that had become impervious to the wishes of its members (“civil disobedience” is its other, more familiar name): “In fact, I quietly declare war with the state, after my fashion. . . . I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the state, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually.”\footnote{Henri Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” (1847), in The Portable Thoreau (New York: Viking Press, 1947), pp. 123, 131.} In the language of Emerson, one should be a “nonconformist” in order to effect social change, that is, one must stop “conforming to usages that have become dead to you” and playing the “game of conformity.”\footnote{Emerson, Essays, pp. 35, 2–3.} For Kierkegaard, revolution is also chiefly an affair of the mind; it is begun by an ironist, a master of self-transcendence, who endeavors to throw off “the weight of objectivity” and destroy “the actuality he hostilely opposes”; his role is “prophetic, . . . for he constantly points to something future,” but he cannot achieve his task of tearing down the obsolete actuality alone; this is the task for a people.\footnote{Kierkegaard, Concluding, p. 62; Concept of Irony, p. 278.} Of all the romantics, Stirner takes the most radical scalpel to the reified social institutions, vowing to destroy “fixed ideas” whatever form they take—“people,” “party,” “society” itself; but radical as his ends are, they can still be achieved by the same “peaceable” means of self-awakening and self-transcendence: “Higher powers’ exist only through my exalting them and abasing myself. . . . All
slaves become free men as soon as they no longer respect their master as master."88

With all their iconoclasm and extremism, spurred by the upsurge of public discontent in the 1830s and 1840s, the late romantic thinkers remained true to the spirit of idealism, sharing their predecessors’ belief in the constitutive power of reason, man’s potential for self-renewal, and the possibility of evolutionary change. Behind their rhetoric we find the same abhorrence of revolutionary violence and desire to transform the world peacefully that informed the political sensibilities of early romantics who suffered the trauma of the Terror. The image of “true Gemeinschaft” was a guiding light in the romanticists’ quest for a society that makes violence and compulsion obsolete in all its forms, and it is this quest that led them to rediscover the value of tradition and social order. Far from being an expression of the reactionary ideology of the forces defeated in the French Revolution and marching crabwise into the future, the notion of Gemeinschaft was an attempt at creative reappraisal of the past with an eye to securing the emancipatory goals of the future. These goals, reflecting the romanticists’ unshakable conviction in the dignity of man, were as modern as the means of furthering them were peaceful and idealistic. All reason had to do to secure its ends was to realize its constitutive power and break the veil of facticity surrounding obsolete social institutions. The battle for the community of the future had to be fought and won not on the barricades but in the minds of individuals—it was to be a battle of reason against itself, “the battle of reason . . . to break the rigidity to which understanding has reduced everything.”89

The romantic quest for an organic community brings into clear relief what Ricoeur calls the “double edge” of hermeneutics: its penchant for suspicion and its longing for cer-

88 Stirner, Ego, pp. 223, 168.
It also brings to the fore a quixotic, utopian element in romantic hermeneutics, manifested in its proponents’ reliance on reason as a sole means of social reconstruction. The romanticists vastly underestimated the resilience of the bureaucratic state and the readiness of the extant powers to heed the demands of reason. Their confidence in the ability of all people, regardless of class, culture, and ethnic heritage, to come together on ideologically neutral grounds of reason was badly shattered by the flow of history. The logistics of awakening and self-transcendence proved to be far more complex than their optimistic declarations implied. And so it should come as no surprise that, when the revolutionary tide of the 1840s subsided without bringing down the much-despised institutions, a crisis of romantic thought ensued. The decline of romanticism in the midnineteenth century was in large measure a product of a disillusionment with the efficacy of idealism as a means of social reconstruction. The mood of hopelessness palpable everywhere in Europe at this time accelerated the dissolution of romanticism, which, in the second half of the nineteenth century, broke into several divergent, ideologically incompatible currents of thought. Marx’s historical materialism, Morris’s guild socialism, and Bakunin’s anarchism represented the movement to the left from the romantic center; the volkish mysticism and racial theories of Lagarde, Langbehn, and List reflected the parallel movement to the right. The materialist, urban, and internationalist views of the former contrasted with the conservative, nationalist, and militantly antimodernist leanings of the latter. Both the left- and right-wing successors of the romantic movement turned away from the mediatory spirit of romantic hermeneutics, embracing the spirit of partisanship and showing an increasing readiness to employ violence as a vehicle of social change. And the heritage of romantic hermeneutics? It received a new lease on life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thanks

---

to the efforts of Wilhelm Dilthey and a brilliant pleiad of his German and American disciples who resurrected the spirit of romantic idealism in the tradition of interpretative social science.

Romanticism and Early-Twentieth-Century Interpretative Sociology

The impact of romantic ideas on modern social thought was facilitated by the revival of interest in transcendental idealism, which shaped much of the intellectual landscape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in both Europe and the United States. This impact was felt most immediately in the program of cultural studies initiated by Dilthey and popularized by Windelband, Rickert, Simmel, and Max Weber. It is also clearly discernible in early American sociology, which derived its inspiration at least in part from its German counterpart. "The purest vein of Romanticism in American sociology," points out Gouldner, "is . . . to be found in the 'Chicago School,' which had the most concentrated exposure to the German tradition and was, in fact, established by many (A. W. Small, W. Y. Thomas and R. E. Park) who were directly trained in it."91 We may add to this that Mead, a lifelong student of romantic philosophy, studied with Dilthey and at one time seriously contemplated writing a dissertation under his guidance, while Cooley, himself not a Chicagoan but a figure influential among the Chicago interactionists, was a strong advocate of "sympathetic understanding"—a procedure bearing an uncanny resemblance to the method of Verstehen.

The proponents of cultural science and social interactionism

shared ground with a contemporaneous current of thought sometimes referred to as neoromanticism, which was particularly strong in Germany, although some elements of it can be detected in the Populist and the Progressive movements in the United States. Its distinguishing characteristics included a keen concern for the ossifying propensities of bureaucratic rationalization, an aversion to rationalism and dualism, and a strong interest in romantic organicism, all of which contributed to the makings of interpretative sociology. The affinity between the two, however, was only partial: the interpretative thinkers refused to endorse the irrationalism and antimodernism that became the mainstream of neoromanticism in this century, remaining closely attuned to the mediatory spirit of romantic idealism. The extent of their indebtedness to this spirit can be gleaned from the numerous allusions scattered throughout their works.

Dilthey credited Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics as an inspiration for his own cultural studies. Simmel quoted extensively and approvingly from the romantic sources and traced his notion of “qualitative individuality” to the romantic premise that the individual is “a ‘compendium’ of mankind.” Rickert repeatedly stressed that cultural sciences derived their concepts from the German idealist philosophers. Weber effectively endorsed romantic epistemology in his theory of ideal type. And Mead credited romantic idealists with the original insight into the dialectic of self and other.

Philosophically, interpretative sociology can be seen as a systematic application of romantic idealism to social reality. The very form of Simmel’s famous query “How is society possible?” reminds us of Kant’s “How is nature possible?” His answer was that the objective structure of the social world is isomorphous with, and incomprehensible without, the a priori forms of the mind, although in the case of social reality the mind in question is not just that of an external observer, of a sociologist, but the mind of historical individuals comprising a given society. In Simmel’s words, “Societal unification needs
no factors outside its own component elements, the individuals. . . . The unity of society is directly realized by its own elements because these elements are themselves conscious and synthesizing units. 92 The object of interpretative social science is "the mind-constructed world" or social reality insofar as it is brought into existence through the constitutive work of individuals consciously generating the social world in terms of their taken-for-granted beliefs and values. This object calls for a special method of inquiry, the method of Verstehen, which is rooted in the assumption that "knowledge of cultural events is inconceivable except on a basis of the significance which the concrete constellations of reality have for us in certain concrete individual situations." 93 The American interactionists sounded a similar note, contending that a key question for a sociologist studying human behavior—"What does it mean?"—can be answered only through "an imaginary reconstruction of life," 94 that sociologists should not "follow . . . uncritically the example of the physical sciences, [for] while the effect of a physical phenomenon depends exclusively on the objective nature of this phenomenon . . ., the effect of the social phenomenon depends in addition on the subjective standpoint taken by the individual or the group. . . ." 95

The interpretative approach reveals the familiar circular pattern consistent with the hermeneutical thesis that the whole must be understood in terms of its individual parts, individual parts in terms of the whole. Like their romantic predecessors, the interpretative thinkers sought to bring into one continuum mind, self, and society. Man, according to them, is a product and producer of society; society is social intercourse or a

universe of discourse. Following the principles of romantic hermeneutics, the interpretative thinkers shifted the focus of sociological inquiry from macro- to microsocial phenomena. They did not thereby abandon the study of macrosocial formations (as Weber's analysis of Western capitalism would readily testify); they simply endeavored to telescope these into the meaningful actions of individuals:

Such concepts as "state," "association," "feudalism," and the like designate certain categories of human actions. Hence it is the task of sociology to reduce those concepts to "understandable" action, that is, without exception to the actions of participating individual men.96

Society is certainly not a substance, nothing concrete but an event. . . . The relation between society and the individual is an organic relation. . . . The mind is social, . . . society is mental, . . . society and the mind are aspects of the same whole. . . .97

Given these substantive parallels, one should not be surprised to find a deep ideological affinity between the proponents of interpretative social science and their romantic predecessors. The mediatory spirit of romantic hermeneutics permeates the entire edifice of interpretative and interactionist thought. It is evident in Weber's rejection of the "ethics of ultimate ends" with its belief in the efficacy of the last violent deed and his undivided commitment to the "ethics of responsibility." It bulks large in Dewey's ethics of means and his crusade on behalf of "great community." It shows in Simmel's criticism of "negative freedom" and Mead's advocacy of "international mindedness." Inherent in the ideological positions of all these thinkers is a longing for social change free of violence and revolutionary upheavals, a desire to undermine the political appeal of the Right and the Left that was on the

rise at the time in both the Old and the New Worlds. We may recall that the principal task of the Verein für Sozialpolitik was "to achieve by more conservative means the social justice at which the Marxists aimed..." The same desire to rectify the injustices endemic to laissez-faire liberalism informs the progressive agenda of American interactionists. To combat the ills of modernity, the latter openly used the romantic ploy of juxtaposing the idealized past to the conditions of the present. The community of the past they chose as a point of reference was not the medieval social order but the native, rural, Jeffersonian community, yet the virtues they ascribed to it—continuity, liberty, participation, cooperation—were the old romantic virtues of free discourse, of Gemeinschaft. German interpretative thinkers were less apt to invoke the vision of the golden past as an antidote to the wretched conditions of the present (in part because of the indiscriminate use made of it by the neoromantics), but their critique of the "iron cage" of modern bureaucratic civilization had more than a tinge of nostalgia for the bygone era of the true Gemeinschaft.

Whatever the differences, it was clearly the ideal of free discourse that inspired the political imaginations of interpretative thinkers on the Continent and in the United States. What these authors strived to assert is that, however alienated the social intercourse, it is still our discourse, and it is up to us, the participants in this discourse, to change its course and to transform it into a truly "universal" discourse. We can do so, the interpretative thinkers believed, and we can do so without recourse to violence, by subjecting to critical examination the rational grounds of our discourse, by reevaluating values and supplanting them with the new and more rational ones.

To sum up, early-twentieth-century interpretative sociology was an attempt to extend the principles of romantic hermeneutics to the entire domain of the social sciences. Its object

was the production of social reality as objective and meaningful; its major premise—the interdetermination of reason and society; its methodological tool—interpretative understanding; and its ideal—free discourse. With this shift in perspective, the focus of sociological analysis became microscopic, not in the sense that society as a whole moved out of the reach of interpretative thinkers, but in the sense that the whole of society was to be systematically reduced to the predicative activities and rational schemes of understanding employed by its members. A priori categories and values are the means of production of social reality as objective and meaningful; using them skillfully and knowledgeably, members of society impart rational-logical qualities to reality, wade through the uncertainties of daily life, confer on each other social status, and in the process of doing so perpetuate the social order. To the participants of social intercourse this order appears as a thing in itself, a superhuman entity beyond their control and power. But this is only an appearance. The social order, with all its rigidities and inequities, is a product of human intercourse which produces individuals as historical individuals at the same time that it is produced by them as the historical universe of discourse. The structure of the social order is periodically exploded by prophets and charismatic leaders whose reflexive power lifts the veils thrown over the transcendental domain of a priori beliefs and values and forces humans to realize their responsibility for the way things are. The task of interpretative sociology is to aid in this process of demystification. But since this process never ends—bringing down old reifications clears the way for the new ones—the task of interpretative sociology is a never-ending one. That is to say, demystification is a Sisyphean labor that must begin anew the moment it is completed, and so the task of hermeneutically grounded social science is to ensure that this transcendence remains an ongoing endeavor.

There is a characteristic fusion of the normative and the descriptive endemic to the project of sociological hermeneutics
and manifested in its idealistic approach that first imputes a "true" essence to the individual and society and then proceeds to demonstrate how this essence, perverted in the existent reality, can be recovered through self-conscious efforts of individuals. The individual, according to this mode of reasoning, is a species being, albeit reduced to a specimen; society is discourse, albeit reified and compulsive. What is, is judged here by the standards of what ought to be, and what ought to be is proferred as an ideal that is bound to come about when men begin to live up to their true essence. This fusion of the normative and the descriptive is the legacy of transcendental idealism, the legacy inherited by twentieth-century interpretative thinkers and amply manifested in their abhorrence of violence, commitment to liberty and order, and penchant for political mediation and meliorism. The interpretative thinkers did not abandon their trust in reason and peaceful means of social reconstruction when revolutions swept over Europe and violence seemed the only solution to the vexing problems of modernity. We have every reason to call their thinking utopian (in the sense in which the term was used by Mannheim), but we cannot deny their humanism or the relevance of their ideas to contemporary political discourse. The hermeneutical perspective on society as a universe of discourse perpetuated by self-conscious individuals reflects its proponents' profound trust in the freedom and dignity of man. It is an outlook permeated with humanistic values shared by those who believe in the possibility of a community that combines unity and diversity.

It is also an outlook that is flawed by certain biases, a perspective with blind spots of its own. If the social process is fundamentally a process of production of social reality as objective and meaningful, as interpretative sociologists imply, then the questions to ponder are: What are the means of production of social reality as objective and meaningful? Who controls these means of production? How is participation in social discourse affected by one's status and class? How is the
process of universalization and generation structured? Which are the historically specific modes of production of social reality as objective and meaningful? All these questions are of paramount sociological importance. The failure to meet them head-on typical of much of interpretative sociology makes it vulnerable to the charges of an astructural and conservative bias.

Is this failure a legacy of romantic idealism? That the idealistic tendency to exaggerate the claims of reason, to mix the real with the ideal, and to treat the subject of the historical process as a unitary phenomenon might have contributed to it is undeniable. That hermeneutically grounded social theory is inherently incapable of answering these pertinent sociological questions is far from certain. A reexamination of Marx's romantic heritage now under way suggests that romantic hermeneutics is not incompatible with class analysis. The current debate about Lukács's romantic period also points in this direction. Anthony Giddens's work is one more example of recent attempts to combine structural and hermeneutical analysis. Whether these efforts will bear fruit remains to be seen. One thing is clear, however: If interpretative sociology is to succeed as a full-fledged sociological theory, it has to address these questions directly, that is, it has to deal with issues of inequality and exploitation, and it has to maintain a fruitful dialogue with alternative sociological perspectives.

100 Breines, "Marxism": Löwy, Goerg Lukács.

* This is a revision of a paper presented at the 78th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. I wish to express my gratitude to Professors Peter Berger, Ira Cohen, David Zaret, and Lon Shelby for their comments on an earlier draft.