

Reflections on the Limits of Reflection: An Invitation to the Discursive Study of Religion

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Abstract

It has repeatedly been claimed that the study of religion should not essentialize “religion” as an object of study that exists “out there,” waiting for us to discover and understand “it.” Reflection on the contexts and hidden agendas of concepts of religion are part and parcel of scholarly activity. But can there be an end to such a circle of reflection? This paper argues that definitions of and approaches to religion are intrinsically linked to the episteme and the discourse of the time. After clarifying the terms “discourse,” “episteme,” and “field,” this dynamic is exemplified with the emergence of the academic field of “Western esotericism.” The paper concludes that rather than looking for a better definition of religion, the academic study of religion should focus on describing, analyzing, and demarcating the religious fields of discourse. These fields are both the object of study for scholars of religion and the scholars’ habitus.

Keywords

discourse, pragmatism, post-structuralism, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu

The academic study of religion is part of larger structures that sustain it. The history of this discipline in its institutionalized form from the nineteenth century to the present reveals that its theories of religion and its interpretational tools are to a large extent dependent on contemporary social conditions and debates, in other words, on the “discourse of the day.” Critical scholarship has reflected on the way this dynamic had been put into practice.

Let me give three examples. In the aftermath of the Enlightenment, the nineteenth century was heavily influenced by ideas of progress and teleological developments into a prosperous future, a mindset that fostered philosophical and political teleologies (e.g., with G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx), as well as interpretations of religion that focused on the various stages and “advancements” of religious history (e.g., with J.G. Herder and E.B. Tylor).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the impression that the project of modernity and Enlightenment had failed and had led to terror, war, and the

world's desacralization, encouraged intellectuals to theorize about religion as a truth *sui generis* that is to be found beyond and outside history.¹

Or, to give a third example: the “colonial frontier” generated theories of religion that responded to political and military aspects of colonialism, more than to independent academic scrutiny (see Chidester 1996). To be sure, with these examples I am simplifying the intellectual and cultural debate of the past two hundred years, but they still illustrate the point I want to make here: that these theories of religion are integrated in larger societal and cultural frameworks.

Due to these considerations, scholars have claimed that the study of religion should not essentialize “religion” as an object of study that exists “out there,” waiting for us to discover and understand “it.” Rather, it has become almost a truism that definitions of religion are scholarly constructs that have a place and a function in a cultural, political, and academic context. Consequently, reflection is of paramount importance for contemporary scholars of religion. Reflection on the frameworks, contexts, and practices of academic interpretations of religion has become a self-evident part of sound scholarly work (see von Stuckrad 2003).

But then the question arises: is there an end to reflection? From formal logic we know many examples of paradoxical meta-reflections. Take, for instance, the case of a library catalogue that is printed as a book. This catalogue may list itself as a book, or it may not list itself. If we are asked to compile a catalogue that lists all and only those catalogues that do not include themselves, we are confronted with the question whether this catalogue should include itself: if it includes itself, it would not be a catalogue that does not include itself; if it does not include itself, it would be a catalogue that does not include itself and thus must include itself. The resulting paradox can only be avoided when we say that there is a difference between a “catalogue” and a “catalogue of catalogues”; or, put differently, that those two levels of cataloguing are in fact only “catalogues” in an analogous sense (see Menne 1981).

Applied to the study of religion, we are confronted here with the issue of the end of meta-reflection (see Day 2001). Is the reflection of the second level a “reflection” or rather a “reflection-reflection” and thus only in an analogous sense the same as the reflection of the first level? How many levels are there?

¹ This change is already visible in E.B. Tylor whose notion of “survivals” ultimately is a response to the impression that the modern world carries with it premodern ideas; see Kippenberg 2002: 55-58. The main turning point in this intellectual process, however, was Nietzsche’s critique of modernity; in the twentieth century, Mircea Eliade is an important representative of this dynamic; see von Stuckrad 2010a. On a critical evaluation of the *sui generis* approach to religion see McCutcheon 1997; cf. Rennie 2001.

Can we stop at a certain level of reflection? And why should we stop at, say, “reflection³⁵” and not at “reflection⁴⁸⁷”? And if we go on with this without stopping at one level, perhaps we will end up in Douglas R. Hofstadter’s *Tumbolia*, in “the land of dead hiccups and extinguished light bulbs. It’s a sort of waiting room, where dormant software waits for its host hardware to come back up.”²

This article argues that with whatever level of reflection and critique we are dealing, there will be another perspective on exactly this reflection and critique that will put it into context and thus question its alleged power of conviction. Does this make our interpretations meaningless or academically worthless? No. But it is a reminder that “meaning” and “truth” are distinct categories. As scholars of religion the best we can do is contribute intelligently to the conversations of our time, which also means that we offer well-argued interpretations of past and recent events in the light of contemporary issues. These interpretations attribute meaning, rather than telling the truth.

In the following I will explore the consequences of this theoretical consideration. I will argue that definitions of and approaches to religion are intrinsically—even if not entirely—linked to the episteme and the discourse of the time which form parameters of research that we are often enough not even aware of, but that significantly limit and influence our theories. Twenty-first-century academic study of religion should respond to these challenges by adjusting its vocabulary and interpretational framework. Therefore, this article is also an invitation to discursive study of religion.

I. Stocking the Analytical Tool Kit

Let me start by clarifying the terms that I find most useful for analyzing what is at stake here. In general, it is post-structural thinking and the discussion between realists and relativists in contemporary philosophy that provide the most interesting insights into the multi-leveled issue of reflection.

The term *discourse* is of particular importance, and I apply it throughout this article in the way Michel Foucault and others have coined it, i.e., as the totality of thought-systems that interact with societal systems in manifold ways.³ “Discursive formations” conceptualize the impact of and mutual

² Hofstadter 1979: 116. Later on, the Tortoise answers Achilles’ question whether “all of Tumbolia [is] equally inaccessible” with the explanation that it may be that things can be “trapped in a deeper layer of Tumbolia. Perhaps there are layers and layers of Tumbolia. But that’s neither here nor there” (1979: 243).

³ Engler 2006 provides a useful overview of the various usages of the term. On Foucault and

dependency between systems of interpreting the world and processes of institutionalization and materialization. Talking of “discursive events” elucidates the fact that discourses are themselves practices that influence non-discursive elements. For Foucault, these practices are usually linked to interests of power and an attempt to control the discourse. Discursive relations can thus be described as power-relations, which means that the term “discourse” refers not only to contents of frameworks of meaning, but also to instruments of power. Discursive practices intend to organize knowledge; but organizing knowledge is no innocent endeavor.

The notion of knowledge leads to another term that Foucault elaborated—*episteme*. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault used the concept of episteme to denote the historical *a priori* that grounds knowledge and its discourses and thus represents the condition of their possibility within a particular epoch. In later writings and interviews, he made it clear that several epistemes may co-exist and interact at the same time, being parts of various power-knowledge systems. He also linked the term “episteme” to the term “apparatus” that he used in later writings:

I would define the *episteme* retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won't say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. The *episteme* is the “apparatus” which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific (Foucault 1980: 197).

Both, discourse and episteme are categories that refer to the *structure* that unifies thought and action. Although Foucault did not accept the term “structuralism” for his work, it is the structural analysis of society that is at stake here. Subsequently, a structural analysis of discourse (i.e., a structural analysis of structural analyses) led to what has become known as post-structuralism. Post-structuralism, then, is itself a discursive event driven by reflection on structures.⁴

The same could be said of the concept of *field*. Pierre Bourdieu—who likewise denied being a “post-structuralist”—defined a field as a social arena within which struggles or maneuvers take place over specific resources and the access to them. Hence, a field should be understood as:

the application of his theory in the academic study of religion see Carrette 2000. Still a very good introduction to Foucault's concept of discourse is his 1970 inaugural address at the *Collège de France* (1971: 10-12; see also Foucault 1989).

⁴ See Williams 1999; Davis 2004; as a recent assessment see Moebius & Reckwitz 2008. The neat differentiation between structuralism and post-structuralism should not be taken too seriously, though; in this regard I agree with Hetzel 2008: 347-348.

a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of a species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relations to other positions (domination, homology, etc.).⁵

The field, hence, is a structured system of social positions, occupied either by individuals or institutions, the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants. Put differently: The field is a space of action or struggle; the struggle is over forms of capital in the field. What is important is the fact that any individual or institution—a “player” on the field—occupies a certain position on the various fields of their society, a position that is determined by the agent’s access to forms of capital. Each field, by virtue of its defining content, has a different logic and an axiomatic structure of necessity and relevance that is both the product and producer of the *habitus* which is specific and appropriate to the field. The notion of fields results in a better recognition of the social relations and of social analysis; what is more, it integrates the level of (rational) action into the analysis of societal discourses.

Bourdieu’s concept of field can easily be combined with Foucault’s notion of discourse, as both approaches are grounded in structuralist analysis. For instance, it is reminiscent of “discursive control” when Bourdieu says of the structure of *habitus*: “Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they [i.e., the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence] can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor” (Bourdieu 1990: 53). The individual is part of a larger structure—discourse—that regulates its *habitus* and its opinions to an extent that almost extinguishes her or his individuality.⁶ Scholars of religion are no exception to this working of discourse.

Recent developments in the academic study of religion reveal such processes. For instance, one may argue that the emergence of the concept of “Orientalism” and the first phase of postcolonial research was itself part of a discourse of “Occidentalism” that used “the West” as a projection screen for ideological programs. What about the emergence of the cognitive study of religion? Maybe this new field of research is part of a discursive change in

⁵ Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 97. See also Wacquant 1989: 39; Bourdieu 1990: 52-65; for an overview of Bourdieu’s “generative structuralism” that builds on the concepts of field, habitus, and capital, see also Rey 2007: 39-56; Jenkins 2002: 84-99.

⁶ For a nuanced analysis of the categories “individuality” and “subject” in post-structuralist thinking see Reckwitz 2008.

which biology and the “life-sciences” are taking over the control of the episteme, resulting in a renaissance of naturalistic interpretations of the human being that replace the former focus on social conditioning. Space does not allow me to dwell on these examples in more detail. Instead, I will limit my meta-reflection to a field of research that has been my own scholarly habitat for a while. The following is therefore also a humble exercise in self-evaluation.

“Western Esotericism” and the Search for a New Narrative

During the second half of the twentieth century European and North American intellectuals became increasingly skeptical of the master narratives that seem to legitimize the superiority of modern Europe. Over against such a narrative of enlightened reason, Christian ethics, and democratic tolerance, scholars insisted on the ambivalence, multiplicity, and the social and religious plurality of European culture. This critique of a superior unity of “the West” can only be understood if we take the change of episteme into account that influenced European culture after the Second World War and the 1960s. People were looking for alternative models of interpreting Western culture, models that seemed more likely to explain the plurality and ambiguity of European identities. They turned to the seemingly marginalized parts of Western culture and paid special attention to aspects of European identity that seemed to represent its “shadow.”

These scholars were looking for a new vocabulary⁷ to analyze European cultural history. One of the terms that gained currency since the 1990s is the concept of “Western esotericism.” Although closely linked to older concepts that had been part of scholarly debate for a long time (mysticism, gnosis, occultism, Hermeticism, etc.), the term “esotericism” seemed to provide a basis for interpreting Western culture that was more neutral—or even positive—with reference to the ambivalences, “undercurrents,” and “margins” of “the West.”⁸ This attraction of a new vocabulary is part of a change of episteme—a changing agreement of what can be true about Western culture.

⁷ When I talk of “vocabulary” I follow Richard Rorty’s understanding of the importance of finding new vocabularies in order to express new analyses: “On the view of philosophy which I am offering, philosophers should not be asked for arguments against, for example, the correspondence theory of truth or the idea of ‘intrinsic nature of reality.’ The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honoured vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary” (Rorty 1989: 8-9).

⁸ One of the first publications in the field is Faivre 1994. A good overview is provided in Hanegraaff et al. 2005. For my own contribution see von Stuckrad 2005; note also the slight changes in approach in von Stuckrad 2010b.

If we look for the reasons for such a discursive change, it seems that the influence of the counter-culture of the 1960s and the “New Age movement” can hardly be overestimated.⁹ As to the genealogy of what scholars vaguely refer to as “New Age,” it is important to note that many elements of New Age culture originate in nineteenth-century religious and philosophical thought, particularly in German Romanticism, the human potential movement, teachings of the Theosophical Society, and the emergence of psychology as a distinct discipline (see von Stuckrad 2005: 140-146). The 1960s and 1970s can be seen as a cultural turntable that disseminated these ideas in a wider context. Many religious beliefs and practices that we witness in North America and western Europe today can be interpreted as a popularized form of New Age thinking.¹⁰ From a discursive point of view, it is not surprising that scholarly instruments of analysis likewise reveal the influence of New Age culture. The concept of “esotericism”—other examples would be “Paganism”¹¹ or “occultism”—is a materialization of such a change of episteme.

Often, the discursive changes that we see operative in culture *and* scholarship are visible in an application of analytical terms that are taken from the object level of analysis. Emic terms—even those that used to have very strong evaluative connotations—can be turned into etic categories.¹² In fact, this process deconstructs the very distinction between emic and etic. What makes these terms “etic” is the simple fact that scholars use them; thus, calling something “etic” is perhaps not more than a rhetoric device to give an emic term scholarly power and blessing.

Let me exemplify this process of adaptation with the concept of “altered states of consciousness” (ASC) which is taken directly from the New Age movement and the psychedelic counter-culture of the 1960s. In a recent article, a renowned scholar of Western esotericism, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, introduces the concept of altered states of consciousness in order to analyze the Hermetic tractates of late antiquity. The concept seems so well known that the author does not even see the need to define it; he simply states that “[i]t is quite common for trance-like altered states to be loosely referred to as ‘sleep’” (Hanegraaff 2008: 142). Hanegraaff criticizes scholars of an earlier generation (particularly Festugière) who rejected the possibility of having

⁹ On the importance of Eastern influences on European and North American culture during the 1960s, see Campbell 2007. As a discursive description of the field of Western esotericism, see also Bergunder 2008.

¹⁰ One example of this is the astonishing figure that a large proportion of German churchgoers believe in reincarnation.

¹¹ Note that many scholars self-confidently (even if ultimately theologically) refer to their field of research as “Pagan studies” and reject the more neutral term “academic study of Paganism.”

¹² This can also work the other way round, with so-called etic concepts being turned into emic ones; examples include “paganism,” “pantheism,” “animism,” and even “heathendom.”

revelatory experiences during altered states of consciousness. In an all-inclusive comparison that resembles the phenomenological tradition in the study of religion he notes that “the idea that ‘people cannot possibly have had such experiences’, and must therefore have invented them, reflects a peculiar blindness on Festugière’s part—quite on the contrary, people have such experiences so frequently that they have been reported through all periods of history and all over the world.”¹³

Another example of a popularized New Age vocabulary is the following statement about the experiential dimensions of the Hermetic text: “Admittedly the difference is a very ambiguous one, and perhaps deliberately so, because the text keeps suggesting that the external cosmos paradoxically (or, if one wishes, ‘holographically’) exists inside the visionary’s own mind.” In a footnote Hanegraaff explains that “the association [of holography] with ‘New Age’ should not keep us from perceiving the applicability of this concept in a context such as the present one” (Hanegraaff 2008: 149, n. 76).

To prevent misunderstandings: I am not interested here in the question whether such an interpretation of ancient texts is academically sound or justified. It is not the content of the argument that is relevant here but its vocabulary. My point is that this vocabulary is clearly part of the discursive event that has brought forth *both* the New Age movement *and* scholarly, “etic,” concepts such as ASC, holography, or esotericism.

Conclusion: Avoiding Tumbolia

If we, as scholars, are determined by the episteme of our society, what then is the added value of academic scrutiny and reasoning? And is there an end of reflection that would provide us with a sound basis of understanding social and historical facts? And what does this all mean for the academic study of religion?

The discursive approach that I suggest in this article allows for a more nuanced analysis and interpretation of the past and the present. From such a perspective, historical imagination is the complex interplay of several dimensions and practices: From the innumerable traces that previous generations have left historians select a few and call them “sources.” The criteria for selecting data are sometimes apparent and easy to understand; often, however, historians are unaware of the episteme that determines the criteria of what can be regarded as approved knowledge, worthy of consideration.

¹³ Hanegraaff 2008: 160. No references are provided for this general claim.

Sociologists of science have argued that these criteria are heavily influenced by social configurations and negotiations, rather than by the “truth” of the facts. Questions of defining a research question, writing positive peer-reviews, or accepting a theory as sufficiently proven or valid are not only dependent on objective reasons but also on social practice. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar state in their by now classic study:

The result of the construction of a fact is that it appears unconstructed by anyone; the result of rhetorical persuasion in the agnostic field is that participants are convinced that they have not been convinced; the result of materialisation is that people can swear that material considerations are only minor components of the “thought process”; the result of the investments of credibility is that participants can claim that economics and beliefs are in no way related to the solidity of science; as to the circumstances, they simply vanish from accounts, being better left to political analysis than to an appreciation of the hard and solid world of facts!¹⁴

The notion of discourse can help us understand the causalities and patterns that underlie these practices and decisions.

It is not by chance that this critical analysis of “truth” mirrors discussions that have taken place in contemporary philosophy—in fact, both instances are representative of the same discursive event. If we consider, for instance, Richard Rorty’s post-analytical pragmatism, we can see the parallel development in historiography, sociology of science, and philosophy (we can add anthropology and the study of religion to this list). Against the realist position Rorty suggests that we should leave behind our attempt to find *objectivity* that would mirror the reality of the world. Rather, what we see at work is the attempt to establish *solidarity* among peer-groups. At stake is not the truth of our models but their power of conviction:

For the pragmatist [...], “knowledge” is, like “truth,” simply a compliment paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed. An inquiry into the nature of knowledge can, on his view, only be a sociohistorical account of how various people have tried to reach agreement on what to believe. (Rorty 1989: 7)¹⁵

The power of conviction is the link to the Foucauldian episteme. The criteria of what is approved knowledge in a given peer-group or society is exactly what partly escapes the influence of an individual. Solidarity, in this sense, can simply mean an accomplice of power and an affirmation of the determining discourse.

¹⁴ Latour & Woolgar 1986: 240. For an interesting historical analysis see Rudwick 1986.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that what Rorty claims in the last sentence is exactly what Rudwick (1986) has put into practice.

The notion of solidarity also implies that scholars do not have to convince *everyone* in an objective way, but that their target group is the community of scholars and other parts of society that they may actually address. This leads to an unavoidable ethnocentrism:

To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others. The first group—one's *ethnos*—comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. In this sense, everybody is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate, no matter how much realist rhetoric about objectivity he produces in his study. (Rorty 1986: 13)

When we ask for the implications of such a position for the practices of the academic study of religion, we can distinguish a methodological from a socio-political conclusion. Taking seriously the challenges and theoretical perspectives that I have described above means a shift of attention and a change of our analytical vocabulary. We will, as scholars of religion, no longer focus our attention on the pros and cons of certain definitions of religion; in fact, we do not need a generic definition of religion at all.¹⁶ It seems to me that the peculiar struggle about definitions of religion that so much occupies scholars of religion has to do with the specificities of our discipline and its history. Other disciplines are much more laid-back with regard to basic terms of their academic fields.¹⁷

Resisting the use of generic definitions of religion does not mean to be vague in what we are actually researching, as Bryan Rennie implies in his contribution to this issue.¹⁸ There is nothing vague in defining a religious field of discourse. To better understand what is at stake in this approach, it is helpful to distinguish “religion” on the one hand from “objects of research for the academic study of religion” on the other. It is much easier to define the latter than to reach agreement about the characteristics of the former.

¹⁶ Aside from generic definitions of religion, it may be useful for a concrete research question to come up with provisional definitions of religion in order to clarify the context of that specific research. But such a definition does not claim to be a general one that can be used for other applications, as well. On the impossibility of having “religion” as “a clearly determined object of a secular sociology” see also Hetzel 2008: 347.

¹⁷ For instance, I am not aware of tough battles about finding a generic, i.e., general, definition of “justice” in jurisprudence, “health” in medicine, “soul” in psychology, or “God” in Christian theology.

¹⁸ “Von Stuckrad... was not alone in initially failing to consider that, while we might temporarily be able to do without *theoretical* or *precising* definitions, we cannot do without basic *stipulative* definitions or we literally do not know what we are talking about!” (Rennie 2010: 116-135; emphasis original); see also note 17 immediately above.

Our object of study is the way religion is organized, discussed, and discursively materialized in cultural and social contexts. “Religion,” in this approach, is an empty signifier that can be filled with many different meanings, depending on the use of the word in a given society and context.¹⁹ It is this use of “religion”—including the generic definitions of academics—that is the responsibility of scholars to explain. Making the *discourse on religion* the main focus of our work also acknowledges the fact that we as scholars are ourselves actors on the fields of discourse.

The boundaries of discursive fields of religion, even if they are fluid and in constant motion, do not have to be controversial in the methodology that I am offering here. Let me explain this with regard to a question that tends to arouse discussion among scholars and in the classroom. “Is football religion?” To answer this question, most scholars check their favorite definition of religion and argue either for or against a religious status of football. From a discursive point of view, the answer to this question would be different: As long as the cultural communication about football does not involve references to what the actors regard as religious, football does not belong to the religious field of discourse; however, when people start using religious semantics in their communication about football—which can also be non-verbal, such as the building of a prayer room in a football stadium—football definitely belongs to the religious field of discourse and is worthy the attention of scholars of religion.

Religious fields of discourse cut across the lines of boundaries of social networks. As actors we encounter religious practitioners and experts, but also politicians, lawyers,²⁰ scientists, journalists, artists, scholars of religion, as well as the institutions related to these groups. The religious fields of discourse are both our object of study and our academic habitat. Since “religion” is not essentialized or separated from these discursive practices, the methodology that I am suggesting here is dependent on interdisciplinary collaboration. The academic study of religion has the potential to orchestrate the scholarly

¹⁹ This is not nominalism, as some scholars assume; see, e.g., Robert Yelle’s contribution to this special issue (on what I call the “tragedy of nominalism” in European intellectual history see von Stuckrad 2010b: 100 and 113). In response to Yelle’s idea of determining “religion” in relation with a systems theory but regarding “religion” as something that *transcends* the system, I would argue that from a discursive point of view the notion of a “religion outside the system” is simply a scholarly maneuver that is happening *within the system*, namely on the religious fields of discourse. But if not with Yelle’s notion of system, my understanding of discursive approaches to religion can easily be combined with Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, particularly with his explicit claim that there is no “religion” without communication (on which see von Stuckrad 2003: 263-264).

²⁰ As an excellent analysis of the changes of juridical discourse on religion in Europe, using the methodology of Pierre Bourdieu, see Reuter 2009.

conversation about religion; it should neither try to colonize this conversation nor should it marginalize itself with overly restrictive definitions of religion.

In addition to these methodological conclusions we can also draw some conclusions in socio-political regards. If there is a core definition of what a scientific activity is, then this refers to *critique* and *reflection*. The goal of the academic endeavor is not to find the truth about the world, but to provide a space for public debate. Hence, there is no end to reflection; reflection and endless meta-reflection are part and parcel of the academic discussion. We as individuals will not be able to fully understand the power of episteme that influences our theories. But there are other individual scholars, of our own generation or in the future, who critically address our theories and contextualize them in a discursive structure.

This is reminiscent of Max Weber who in 1918 addressed students in Munich in his famous speech, entitled “Science as a Vocation.” Weber somehow pathetically explained that being surpassed academically “is our common fate and, more, our common goal. We cannot work without hoping that others will advance further than we have” (Weber 1964: 138). What he means is quite similar to the pragmatist’s position vis-à-vis the objectivity of science.²¹

In the end, the academic endeavor is a social and public one. Its success depends on the existence of a space of public debate that the democratic state and its institutions have to guarantee. For a high quality of academic and scientific debate the university, as well as scholarly associations, are essential. Without these institutions, our work would not be academic at all and our statements would remain invisible in some deep layer of Tumbolia.

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²¹ On the synergies between Weber and “postmodern” theories, see Gane 2002.

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