

### **The praxeological square as a method for the intercultural study of religious movements.**

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A well-known problem in intercultural studies is the imposition of one's own cognitive and evaluative dispositions on the actors observed. According to structuralist and constructivist common sense, everybody makes distinctions such as “cooked vs. raw”, “rich vs. poor”, “free vs. dominated” etc. in order to organize his or her cognitive and practical universe. Such distinctions extend from insignificant, ordinary habits to important markers of individual and collective identity. In the case of religious convictions, such distinctions (such as “saved vs. unsaved”, “God vs. devil”, “Nirvana vs. affliction” etc.) are normally very important for the actors observed *and* for the observers. Although researchers may or may not be religious, they will nevertheless always have a certain standpoint on religion in general and / or certain specific religious practices. Thus, implicit or hidden cognitive and emotional dispositions will structure the way they construct their objects of observation, what they see and how they interpret their findings.

I will sketch the problem briefly. The method presented in this article was developed for a large research project on Pentecostals in counter-insurgency war during the mid-eighties in Guatemala and Nicaragua. In my first field exploration I noted that Pentecostals tended to enforce discipline in quite a rigid way. A female member of the Assemblies of God explained: “Well, the Assemblies of God have a very hard and jealous order. If we Christians want to be saved, we have to obey strictly.” With my Lutheran dispositions distinguishing “law vs. Gospel”, “coercion vs. freedom”, I perceived such statements as markers of a “lawful” theology and “unfree” religious practice. What happened here was that my perception was being structured by dispositions that were important to my own practice but not to the practice of the actors observed. Any perception is distinction, and the basic distinction (between “law vs. Gospel” in our case) is like the “blind spot” on the retina, which enables vision but cannot see by itself and can only be made visible by an experiment.<sup>1</sup> This is to say that the basic distinction works as an implicit preconception that makes observation possible at the price of structuring reality in a *certain* way.

A first and commonly-known answer to the problems of “preconceptions” in the processes of comprehension has been provided by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989). Hermeneutical philosophy recommends making preconceptions visible by reflecting on them. This is a necessary first step.

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1 See Luhmann 1991: 62; Maturana/Varela 1998.

However, the problem is more deeply rooted. First, simple reflection may bring an awareness of the problem as such, but it does not guarantee the identification of the dispositions that really shape the perception. Second, as Luhmann puts it, in order to make a perceptual distinction visible, it is necessary to establish another – invisible – distinction, and so forth. We fall into an endless regression, and thus, the problem cannot be solved in a categorical or principal way. Instead, it has to be dealt with through methodological measures.

### **Basic guidelines**

During my field exploration, I discussed the observational problem with my wife, an anthropologist. We saw that a first difficulty arises from an analysis that does not take into account the context in which the practices and interpretative concepts are being “used” (Wittgenstein). But this does not say much. Another difficulty arises when the categories implied in the leading distinction of the research instrument are too closely related to those that structure the practice of the actors observed. It is not a good idea to study religious practices using a research instrument based on a distinction of religious terms. Thus, we concluded that it would be best to construct a research instrument that would be as formal as possible and capable of capturing the practical processes of the people observed, allowing us to reconstruct how people make ‘sense’ (Max Weber: ‘Sinn’) of what they think and do. First, a formal, or at least a non-religious, instrument would allow us to observe if religion was at all important for the actors. Second, the instrument would not interfere too much with the actors’ narratives of their religious practice in the context of open interviews. Third, it would facilitate the combination of observations and other data leading to the reconstruction and interpretation of the actors’ practices. A formal model, nevertheless, should not adhere to structuralist binarism, quasi-metaphysical concepts of “symbolic forms” or “symbol systems”, but should show how people generate practical sense as a sense for their practice (Bourdieu). So, fourth, a model should enable researchers to structure the processes by which actors generate a sense for their practice. And fifth, since we search to understand alien practice in its social context, the instrument should be action-related *and* provide a way to relate the findings to the surrounding social structure; it should be a model for analyzing practice in the Aristotelian (*bios*) and Marxian (*Theses against Feuerbach*) sense of the word. Thus the model presented in the following is based on the presupposition that in order to understand alien practice, it is necessary to establish formal, action-oriented distinctions to guide the observation.

Theoretically, the model is based upon the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, namely upon his theory of practical logic, framed with concepts of habitus and social space as well as, to a certain extent only, the theory of fields.<sup>2</sup> As Pentecostalism is a religious movement, approaches of social movement research

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2 See Bourdieu 2007, 2000, 1996, 1980, 1971, 1971a; Bourdieu/Wacquant 2002; also Schäfer 2006, 2005, 2005a, 2003 (with literature on social movement research), 1998.

have been taken into account, both the identity-oriented and strategy-oriented strands. Most important for this publication, however, are the methods borrowed from French structuralist Algirdas Julien Greimas.<sup>3</sup> These were helpful in developing the model of a “praxeological square” out of Bourdieu’s theory of practical logic, which functions as the centerpiece for a network model of practical operators. This serves as an analytical method for reconstructing the practical dispositions of interviewees and as the empirical “groundwork” for a theory of “Identity as a Network” (Schäfer 2005a). The former will be the focus of this paper.

The underlying empirical research took place in Guatemala and Nicaragua in 1983, 1985 and 1986. In two years I conducted 195 open interviews, taped 100 sermons, minuted some 120 services and kept a field diary for observations. For this study it is important to note that the religious actors were strongly polarized according to the polarization of the complete social space in war-torn and crisis-ridden Guatemala. Thus, the most instructive samples we refer to are, on the one hand, Pentecostal groups in the traditional lower classes, and, on the other, Neo-Pentecostal groups in the modernized upper-middle classes.<sup>4</sup> Over a very short period of time and under pressure of social polarization, these groups have developed very different religious styles, although they refer to a common set of religious symbols. Nevertheless, our focus lies not on the impact of social class on religious practice. The examples rather serve to show that, in an intercultural study, the method helps to avoid content oriented presuppositions and enables to detect and reconstruct very different kinds of religious practice, precisely by applying a formal, action-oriented, and *non*-religious instrument to the study of religious actors, even though these actors are widely described as having the same religious style. In the following, we will focus exclusively on the method.

### **The praxeological square – form**

As we are looking for a formal model, basic relations of formal logic seem to fit our needs exactly. Three basic relations of Aristotelian logic have been used in history precisely to structure logical syllogism: implication, contrariness and contradiction. These basic relations are culturally universal, since in any culture people know the relations of causality (sacrifice implies healing), of difference (green versus blue) and of mutual exclusion (light versus darkness).<sup>5</sup> During late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, these

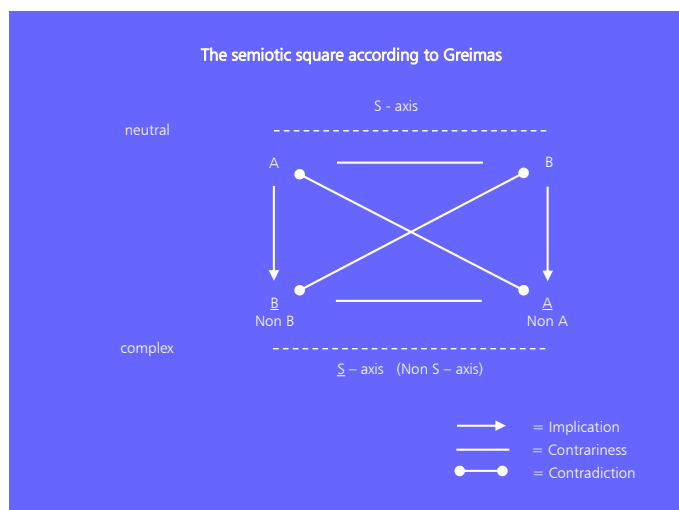
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3 Greimas 1995; Greimas/Rastrier 1970.

4 See Schäfer 2006.

5 There is a discussion as to whether the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction is valid for Asian logic, since “A” can be “B” as well. Nevertheless, it should be taken into account whether we are talking about “A” being “B” in a certain aspect, perspective or context. In such a case, the difference between “European” and “Asian” ways of thinking are no longer as grave. Darkness can be light for a European Mystic as well; however, this kind of religious experience makes sense only within

relations were organized into the so-called syllogistic square. This model was adapted by Greimas and Rastrier (1970) to analyze 'deep structures of the semantic universe'. The square, as the two French structuralists use it, describes the constraints according to which meaning is being produced. The square is made up of terms (A, B, Non-A and Non-B) which are linked to one another by three relations: contrary (A to B), implication (A to Non-B) and contradiction (A to Non-A). The S-axis (contrary) is "neutral", so that the terms have an "either-or" relation. The  $\underline{S}$ -axis (sub-contrary) is "complex", so that the terms have an "as well as" relation. Finally, the relations of implication are named deixis. The first deixis (A and Non-B) is defined as positive; the second (B and Non-A) as negative. Finally, the transverse relations (A to Non-A, B to Non-B)<sup>6</sup>, the "schemata", are contradictory. For the deep structures of the semantic universe, the model shows that meaning is being constituted by difference and logical transformation. To put it simply: to go from "active" to "passive", logic has to pass over "non-active". Greimas and Rastrier use the model to describe the semantic universe of gender relations in France. Thus, they distinguish, on the positive deixis, "matrimonial (prescribed)" and "normal (not forbidden)" relations as "allowed" from the relations on the negative deixis as "excluded": "abnormal (forbidden)" and "non-matrimonial (not prescribed)". The model helps in understanding the logic underlying the cultural systems of meaning. But it is not suitable for understanding the *social* processes of "making sense" of one's practice.



The model has to be transformed if it is to be used in sociological analysis. For sociology, especially in a Bourdieuan / Wittgensteinian framework, it is not the *semantic* universe as such that is of interest, but rather the actors' use of signs, signification and meaning. Signs are themselves not (primarily) representations, but operators of perception, judgement and action. They organize the interpretation of experience in the sense that interpretation is already operative in basic perception. At the same time, experienced objective circumstances (institutions like law or police,

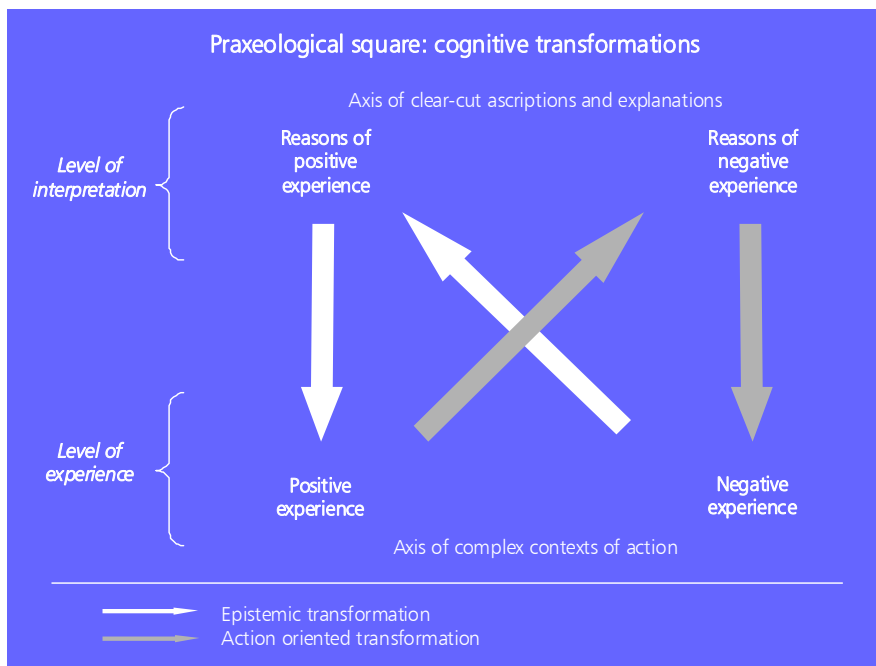
the distribution of material goods, social recognition combined with the access to social spaces etc.) are not only social "hardware", but also function as signs relevant for human practices and not only as objective conditions.

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the framework that the *normal* or *general* relation between light and darkness is one of mutual exclusion.

6 Later, in this article, Non-A will be referred to as "A" and Non-B as "B".

Working on the basis of Bourdieu's theory of practical logic, the square can be transformed for sociological use. For this purpose I distinguish terms for the *description* of experience (A and B) from other terms (A and B) for the *interpretation* (Deutung) of experience. Thus, the model has one term each for negative and positive experience as well as for negative and positive interpretation. Moreover, the model will be read not so much as a static structure of meaning but as a structured process of transformation. The transformative process runs through all the terms, generating sense by interpreting experience – that is, ascribing meaning to practices (as Weber would say). In its sociological use, the model allows for two perspectives of analysis. Examining the mere cognitive operators, it helps to understand the basic cognitive transformations that operate in the deep structure of practical logic. Drawing conclusions about dispositions of habitus, the model allows us (within the limit that “disposition”



is not subject to observation [R. Carnap]) to understand central operations of identity- and strategy-formation among a certain set of actors.

The following application of the model focuses on social movements. We understand, correspondingly, the terms of the square according to the specific forms of practice in this field. This means that, for example, the term for “negative experience” (A) is

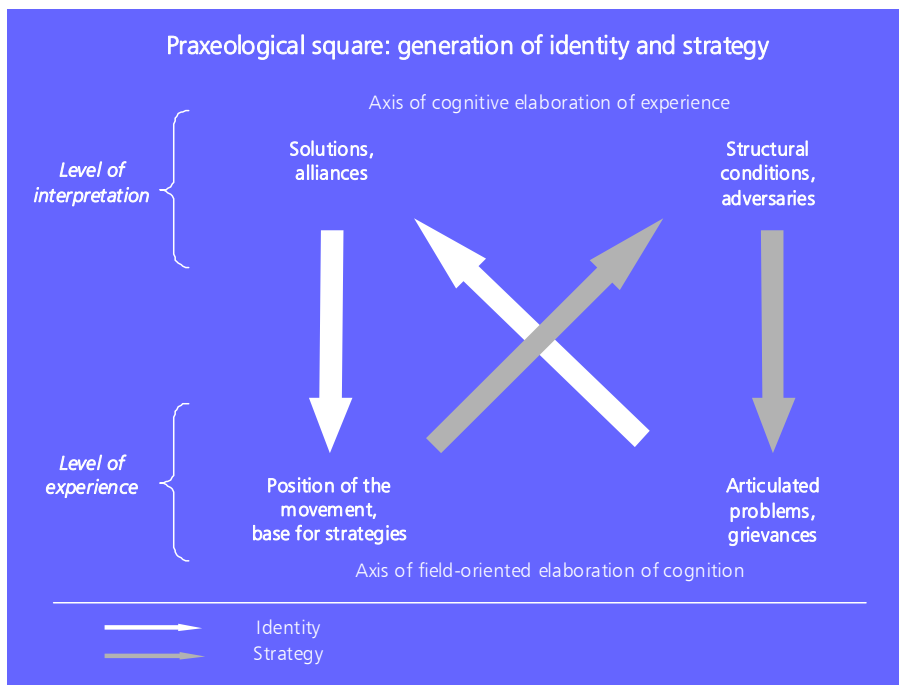
being described as “*crisis*”, since social movements, according to New Social Movement theory, react to “grievances”. Negative experience, however, can be coded differently, according to the field of practice examined in a given research project. The same is the case for any other term.<sup>7</sup>

Looking at cognitive operations, we can understand the creation and transformation of meaning as a process in which actors process their experiences cognitively and generate perspectives of action. Experience is already being classified and assessed during the mere act of perception. In the model, this

<sup>7</sup> This means, for guided interviews, simply that four questions according to the four terms have to be formulated according to specific negative or positive experiences and interpretations in the field of interest.

corresponds to the *epistemic* transformation between “negative experience” (A), “positive interpretation” (or: reasons of positive experience, A) and “positive experience” (B). The epistemic transformation operates under the axiomatic dichotomy between “positive” and “negative interpretation” (A and B), which is to say that clear cut ascriptions and explanations interpret complex contexts of action and experience. In this way, the model helps us to understand how experience, from its first moment, is being understood, not only according to habitual schemes of evaluation but also according to perceived opportunities and constraints. Correspondingly, the *action-oriented* transformation (B to B and B to A) helps us to understand how concepts of action are being molded according to the forms of perception and evaluation of experience, and not *only* by opportunities and constraints. The processes of structuring experience and designing action can be understood as homological.

Looking at identity and strategy, the model can be read as a process in which actors, in our case religious movements, position themselves within their perceived social context. (Collective) actors articulate grievances (A), imagine and formulate solutions (A) for the causes of the grievances (B), and affirm their



position (B), e.g. as a religious movement. The process of interpretation thus allows for a “cognitive elaboration of experience” in order to find a position in the field of action and an *identity* as a social actor. Moving further from this position, the actors are being modeled as developing *strategies* to cope with the “structural conditions” and “adversaries” (B) that cause

their “grievances” (A). The model thus articulates dispositions of perception and judgement as conditioning the design of strategies, but it does not exclude the possibility of strategic calculus in a principal way.

For both perspectives, on cognition as well as on identity and strategy, the model allows us to structure the logic of the transformational processes of ascribing meaning, valued positively or negatively, to experience and action. In both perspectives, the model distinguishes a level – or, according to Greimas, an “axis” – of experience from a level – or “axis” – of interpretation. The distinction between these levels

is important in understanding the transformation which takes place by ascribing meaning to experience and action. Meaning – ideas, “symbolic systems” etc. – is by no means a simple mirror of “reality” (Rorty 1999). Meaning is itself an *operator* of human practice. It does not simply represent states of practice, but, by virtue of being ‘used’ by humans for ascription or attribution, it becomes ‘instrumental’ (in a Wittgensteinian sense). This is how meaning comes to terms in the process of interpretation of experience in our model. Moreover, the distinction between the two levels (or “axes”) in the model leads to another observation. In late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the model was used principally for propositional logic. This usage points to an important difference between the two axes, the contrary and sub-contrary. While one (in our case the “interpretation”) affirms and negates “universally”, the other one (in our case “experience”) affirms and negates “partially”.<sup>8</sup> In terms of Greimas, the first is “neutral”, the second “complex”. In our sociological use of the model, this means that the terms of interpretation of experience (A and B) represent a “clear cut” meaning ascribed to fuzzy experience (B and A). As the actors ascribe – according to their habitus, social position and interest – meaning to experience, they generate clear concepts of experienced social processes and structures that help them to shape their actions. This is the case with any interpretation. Religious practice, however, often counters with a stark difference between experience and interpretational terms. This is, precisely, the reason for its social power.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the formal model can be read as emulating the concept of habitus, the incorporated and creative generator of perception, judgement and action (Bourdieu 1980). The model operationalizes the Bourdieuan theory for qualitative empirical research. Ideally, such research rests upon slightly guided interviews that give interviewees the chance to describe and interpret their practice (in a certain field). There are only four necessary narrative impulses. One focuses on negative experience such as problems and grievances; the second on positive experience such as the own position as a member of a religious movement or a successful individual; the third on negative interpretation, as e.g. the reasons for negative experience, adversaries etc.; and the fourth on positive interpretation, for example ideas for positive future developments, divine or human helpers etc. Such texts will not only disclose the basic structures of the habitus in question, but will most probably also produce a huge surplus of signification, since the interviewees will associate many experiences and interpretations with each question. This points towards two tasks, one analytical and the other one theoretical and methodical. As for the analysis of interviews, it is necessary to establish the connection of signs and the hierarchy of meaning within the texts. The latter

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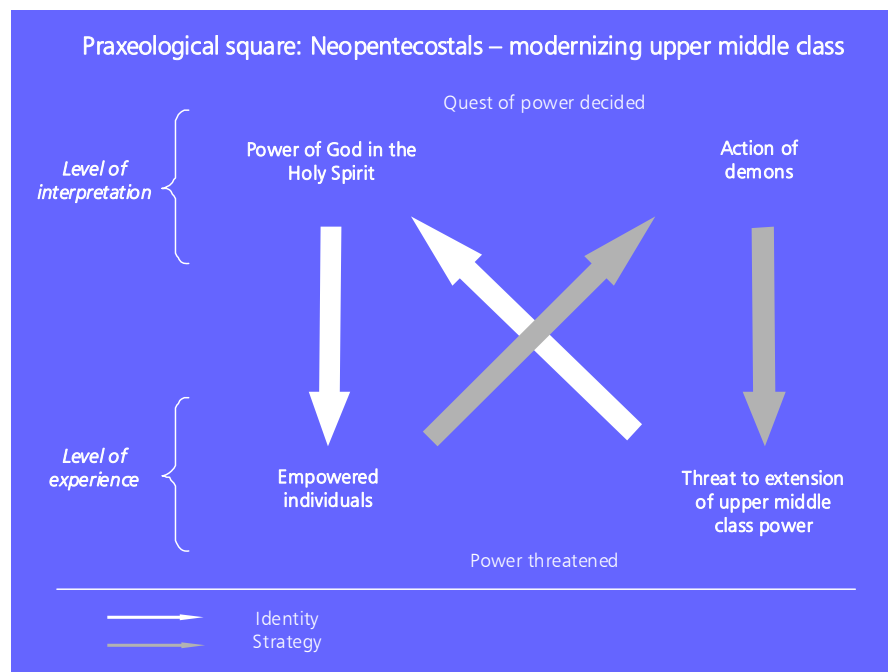
8 According to the positions in our first graph: Position A means “subject affirms predicate universally”, e.g. “all swines are pink”; position B means “s negates p universally”, e.g. “no s are p”; position B means “s affirms p partially”, e.g. “some s are p”; position A means “s negates p partially”, e.g. “some s are not p”.

9 The specific dynamics of religious practical logic cannot be discussed in this paper; see Schäfer 2004.

focuses on paradigmatic relations and can be carried out by Greimas' method of isotopy construction (Greimas 1995), which we can not explain in this paper due to a lack of space. The former focuses on syntagmatic relations and can be carried out by an analysis of basic logical junctions underlying the semantical relations in sequences. These analytical operations cannot be shown here either. However,, this step of analysis indicates the theoretical and methodical task of reconstructing larger relations of meaning out of the interviews. This corresponds to the theoretical notion of practical logic as a large network of incorporated and practically operated dispositions of a given habitus (Bourdieu 1980). Before I sketch this extension of the basic square, I would like to demonstrate the results of the work with our model in a concrete intercultural study of Pentecostals.

### Praxeological square – cultural contents

As shown above, the interview questions did not focus on religious contents, such as the “image of God” held by people etc., but were formal and oriented to the basic logic of ascribing meaning to experience. Thus, the interviewees themselves made sense of their experiences while telling them. The most interesting result was that with the ongoing research, basically according to Grounded Theory with

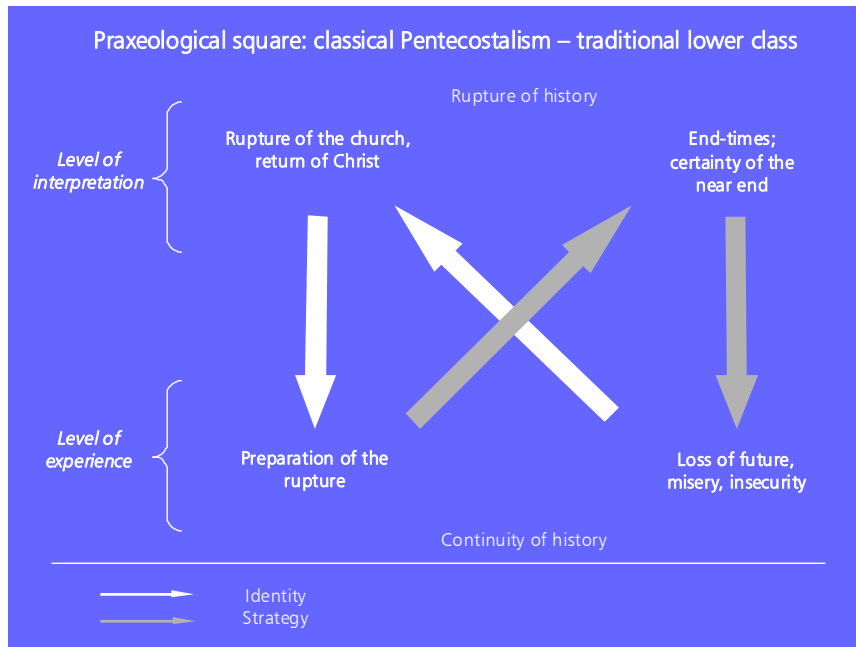


contrastive sampling, two major formations of religious habitus emerged: one among interviewees of the modernized upper-middle class and the other among interviewees of the traditional lower class. Briefly labeled, the former could be called a habitus of charismatic dominion over the world and the latter a habitus of apocalyptic escape from the world. This finding is important since it shows strong internal

differences within what is often treated as a homogeneous religious movement. In fact, the Pentecostal movement in Guatemala was quite uniform in terms of “doctrine” until the early eighties, and even after that, different strands of the movement made use of a common repertoire of religious symbols. However, they have constructed different habitus out of these symbols, according to their social position, their habitus of class, their interest, their opportunities and their constraints.



A brief look at the Neo-Pentecostals in the upper-middle class shows a religious practice mounted on the quest of social power (see axes). The experienced threat to their power (through the guerrilla movement, paramilitary forces, economic crisis and a loss of control over their personal lives) is being contradicted by the power of the Holy Spirit, constituting a new religious identity of empowered individuals. These individuals can combat the originators of the threat, the demons. Thus, exorcism turns out to be the central strategic pattern. The analysis of the network shows that this pattern is being imposed on many



fields of action, even on the Napalm bombings of Indian villages. As for the interplay between experience and interpretation, we see that the threatened social power (experience) is being restored by religious interpretation, making religious “symbols” become practical, in the double meaning of the term.

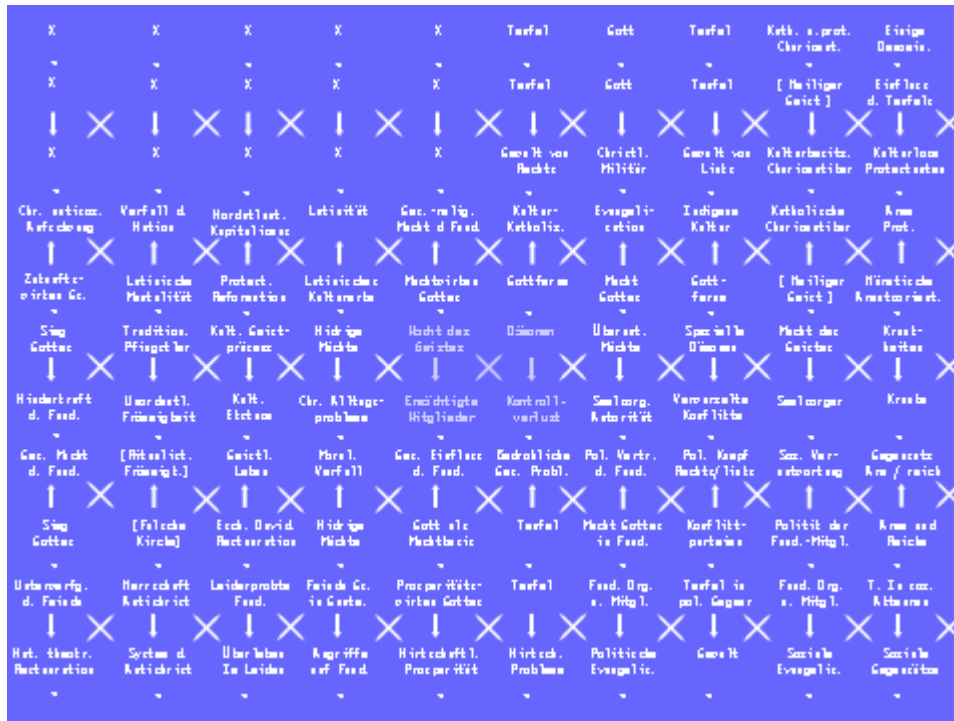
On the other hand, in the traditional fractions of the lower class we find

Classical Pentecostal practice constructed around the quest for survival (“history”). People feel that they lack any possibility to shape their future due to poverty and fierce military repression. They counteract this situation with the promise of being removed in rapture from this world during the near second coming of Christ. This hope results in their new identity as a Church in preparation for the rapture. From this position, the explanation for their loss of opportunities becomes evident – during the apocalypse everything necessarily changes for the worse. In such a situation, the strategy is a clear break with political and social action and a withdrawal into the church – exactly the strategy that, under repression and misery, allows for survival through in-group solidarity. Thus, the religious interpretation of history (the break, see S-axis) turns out to be a rationale and strategy for an experiential continuity of history – which practically means survival.

As for our interest in intercultural methods, we can state that it was precisely the formality of the model that allowed the interviewees to reproduce their own experiences and interpretative schemes, which, during analysis, resulted in the emergence of two completely different sets of practical religious operators.

## Network of practical operators

In the next step, we constructed a network of operators through an analysis of the syntagmatic semantical relations. The square models the most important cognitive operators of a given actor. (This is assured by a certain interview technique and a quantitative element in qualitative text-analysis which cannot be discussed here.) Nevertheless, each of its terms has multiple semantic relations to other concepts within the interview texts. These syntagmatic links (mostly verbs) can be slightly formalized to fit contrary,



implicative or contradictory relations. With additional quantitative weighting, this procedure allows us to reconstruct many interconnected homological squares of secondary, tertiary etc. importance. In the present paper, this is only to show that transformational logic, reconstructed by our model, can be multiplied according to

the adjacent “deep structure” (Greimas) of the interviews. In the present paper, this serves only to show that transformational logic, reconstructed by our model, can be multiplied according to the subjacent “deep structure” (Greimas) of the interviews.

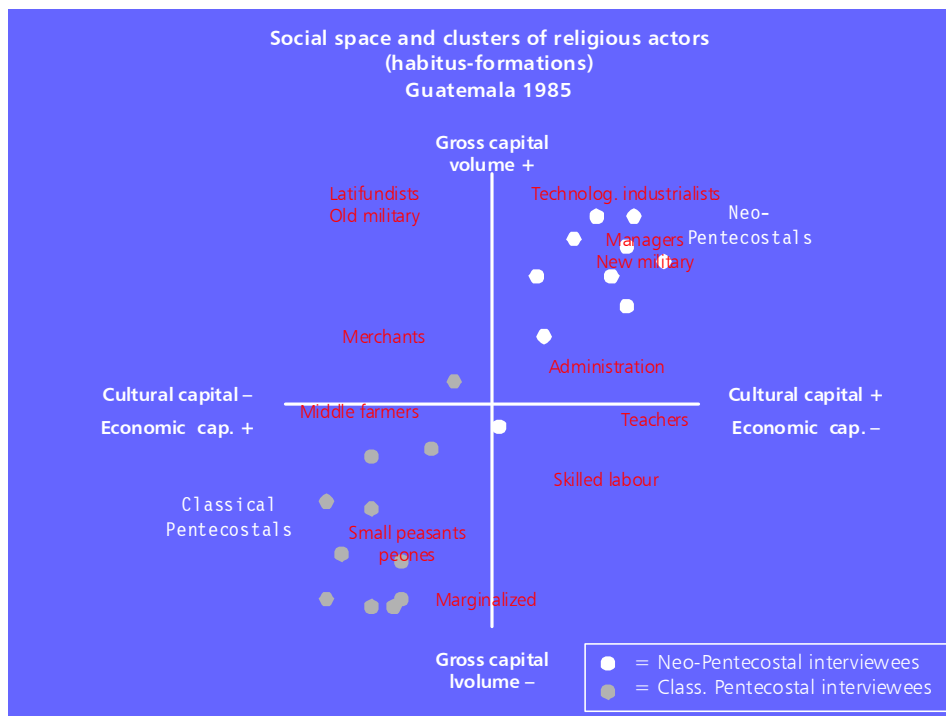
The example of Neo-Pentecostals in the upper-middle class shows, among other things, that the central strategic scheme of exorcism is being used in different fields of practice. It is applied to lesser personal problems with an individual Christian as the exorcist. It also addresses grave personality distortions with a special minister as exorcist. It can well be applied to military conflict, too, with “Christian military” as the exorcist and guerrillas or paramilitary forces as the demons.

Such an extension of the basic model shows the broader structure of the network of operators making up the practical logic of a given actor. Of course, such a network is not completely conclusive, has blank spaces, and open ends – just as the practical logic of humans is not entirely coherent, does not know of

everything and is open to change and development. The actor can be understood to be individual or collective. That is to say, one can analyze a collective set of interviews together or analyze individual interviews and compare or superpose them later, correspondingly with one's research interest. According to theory, in any case, habitus are to a certain extent always individual *and* collective. This means that the network, finally, can be read as a model of dispositions of habitus, i.e. of a 'structured and structuring' generator of practice (Bourdieu). In this sense, it represents the empirical basis for a theory of "identity as a network" (Schäfer 2005a). However, since habitus and field or social space never exist without one another, it is necessary, in order to fully understand alien practice, to relate the findings of the interview analysis to the social positions of the actors. According to the research interest, this can be done in relation to a specific field of practice (like the religious field), to the social space in general, or to both. In the following, I will briefly focus on the social space.

### Social structure

The two habitus formations encountered, Classical and Neo-Pentecostals, are located in different positions in the social space. The space is theoretically constructed according to Bourdieu (2000). It is modeled as a coordinate system by the implementation of two different forms of capital: economic (income) and cultural (education). The y-axis consists of the aggregation of both forms of capital; actors



with a high amount of both forms of capital are at the top with the others below. The x-axis consists of the two forms of capital differentiated against one another; actors with *relatively* more economic than cultural capital are on the left, and those with relatively more cultural capital on the right. Thus, in Guatemala, big landowners are positioned in the upper

left against industrialists and managers in the upper right, and small peasants in the lower left against skilled labour in the lower right etc.

According to basic data (income, possessions, education, profession) on their social structure, the interviewees can be located relatively well within the model of the social space. Thus, we can observe that similar formations of habitus do cluster in specific areas of the social space – the Neo-Pentecostals in the upper right and the Classical Pentecostals in the lower left. This last step allows for the interpretation of networks of cognitive operators really as *practical* operators, since it puts them into their social context of ‘use’ (Wittgenstein). It makes clear what level and kind of social power, expectations, constraints, opportunities etc. the different religious actors are associated with. It shows, e.g., that a power-broking religiosity such as the Neo-Pentecostal variant is related to a social position of *relative* (but not absolute) social power and combined with perspectives of social ascent, blocked by the old oligarchy.

It may, of course, be that the structuring of social space or of a certain field of practice might follow other criteria than the ones of economic and cultural capital. Some might say that in traditional societies, tribes, or post-war societies (like Bosnia) social capital is of more importance. If that is so, the relevant form of capital can be used to construct the model. However, the research of our team at Bielefeld University<sup>10</sup> indicates that there are many good reasons to adhere to a simple way of measuring economic and cultural capital and to leave the rest to scholarly interpretation.

It is only this last step that completes an intercultural research study on religious practice. Precisely in an alien cultural and social setting, the motivation of social action, be it driven by values, ends, affection, tradition etc, cannot be even basically understood without relating it to the social context in which it was generated and is being used. The work of relating habitus and field or space, however, is the task of the researcher’s interpretative work.

## Conclusion

It seems that a central hermeneutical problem, the imposition of preconceptions, can find a methodical solution up to a certain point, although, of course, not generally. A *general* solution is not possible, since it would presuppose that human understanding is able to exit the hermeneutical circle (which would then be metaphysics). Intercultural social science, as I see it, is much more modest. We step outside the hermeneutical circle of religious contents by applying a formal method, which gives the observed actors the chance to enter their own contents. We still have preconceptions, but these are implicit to a formal, practice-oriented *method*, not to any religious content. We simply presuppose that religion is practice and we try to construct a model, as formal and common as possible, for the interviewees to fill with those contents relevant to *their* practice. We do not presuppose more than that, first, every person has

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10 Leif Seibert and Patrick Hahne on Bosnia, Jens Köhrsen on Argentina, and Kurt Salentin as guest specialist for international quantitative research.

experiences that he or she values positively and others that he or she values negatively; that, second, every person interprets such experiences in some way, regardless of the signs or symbols he or she may use to do so; and that, third, every person lives within a social context, whatever it may be.

My initial Lutheran "law vs. Gospel" scheme from my first field exploration proved completely invalid after studying Classical Pentecostal practice. Contrary to my first assessment, the term "authority" (instead of "law") had a very different use within the network of religious operators. To obey authority in order to gain (!) one's own salvation was, in the context of the impossibility of any social action, a way of obtaining new orientation and, even more importantly, of maintaining self-esteem and dignity as a person appreciated by God.

Precisely this was confirmed when I had the chance to validate my findings and my methods during nine years of teaching in Latin America among, partly, Pentecostal students. Although the findings were widely accepted, the methods were even more so. Some of my students were, in fact, looking forward to applying them to German Lutherans.

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