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INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY – TOWARDS A PRODUCTIVE SOCIOLOGY – AN INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY E. SMITH –

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Dorothy E. Smith is known to most of us for her thorough critique of the sociological traditions, for their way of «writing the social» from a ruler's perspective (Smith 1987, 1990a, 1990b). And for the alternative she outlines; a sociology that starts out from where women are, that is from below, when investigating how the social is put together or comes about, so as to produce knowledge about the workings of society that makes sense by us as citizens. In this endeavour «the workings of texts» – especially the sociological ones – have been focused and problematized. Lately, provoked by the post-structuralist text (on texts), she has given a sociological response where a text's social relational aspects are outlined (Smith 1996). How the text comes about and is given meaning and is understood and used in specific relations is also richly illustrated empirically in her latest book «Writing the Social» (Smith 1999). When now proliferating institutional ethnography, she once more brings forth ideas and issues she has been working with all along but now wants to develop further. In institutional ethnography it all seems to come together; texts and relations organising the social across time and space. Is this a sociological response to grasping globalisation?

Visiting Dorothy E. Smith in Vancouver last November and talking about her previous and present work, I had some of our conversations taped. Here I will focus on what she had to say about institutional ethnography, an approach less familiar to most of us but which she strongly wants to advocate. A book on the subject, which she is editing, will come out in a year or two. Meanwhile, if the interview below should raise the appetite for institutional ethnography, the article «Texts and the Ontology of Organisations and Institutions» (Smith 2001) can be recommended.

When asked about the changes in her research focus, Dorothy E. Smith said;

– «Women's standpoint, as I have interpreted it, means starting in the real world. The social can only happen here. You have to find some way to explore the social as it actually happens. Every aspect of society is something that happens. So when I was

looking for a way to approach knowledge and to consider the forms of knowledge – not as something that is in people’s heads – I was looking for knowledge as something taking place in the actual social organisation among people, in the social relations. I spent quite a long time exploring these relations and teaching graduate courses on the social organisation of knowledge, which I distinguished from the more traditional sociology of knowledge where knowledge was treated as something separate from the social which were then to be related to the social, as determined by it, etc. Knowledge was rather, I thought, to be explored as social organisation.

Regarding texts, I have had an interest in text all along but maybe a kind of buried interest. And I did a piece called «K is Mentally Ill» (Smith 1990b) early on, which came out of a stage in my work when I had been reading phenomenology. I then saw something I do want to hold on to – but which is difficult to hold on to – which is the idea that you can discover a great deal about the social as you discover your own practices, from the inside. Not in the ordinary sense of the subjective but in the sense phenomenology in its practice is influenced by Merleau-Ponty. In the observation of analyses – how you perceive things – you can discover how the subject enters into the organisation of perception. I thought that you could also apply this in the discovery of the social, and I still think that. But I had not seen the text as important as I see it now. I suppose it was a gradual process of bringing these two together.

Recognising the importance of texts is to see that they create a juncture between the local and specific – books, papers for example which are activated in local settings – and the extra-local and abstract. Texts hook you up beyond the local; they are not contained within the local setting. And the more I began to explore that the more I began to see how important that was in the whole development of what I have come to conceptualise as the «the living relations».

I began to see a relationship between my interest in text and the possibility of taking the kind of exploration from women’s standpoint further into the organisation of power. The replicability, that texts represent and make possible is essential to the organisation that is characteristic of contemporary society. You could not have the existence of corporations like the ones we have today without replicable texts or discourses. Through the texts you have a way to explore how the translocal and extralocal is actually produced in local settings where people are, in their bodies and particular settings, which at the same time can be connected up. Because we are reading the same text. This does not mean that we all read it the same way. I have introduced the notion of text-reader conversation, to recognise the theory that has come out of French post-structuralism, for example Roland Barthes, which states that a text only becomes what it is in the reading, the text is never the same. My argument is

that in order to establish the significance of different readings you have to be able to recognise and to assume that it is an identical text, that it can be treated as the same in order to say that it becomes what it is. Otherwise, the idea of different readings would be of no interest. This has enabled me to propose that you can treat the text ethnographically, that you can actually explore the ways texts enter into the organising of any corporation, university, etc.

So, is this then your proposal for the sociological approach to the text?

Yes, absolutely. One of the problems I have had when I have read about discourse analysis, and here I have read quite a lot, is that although there seem to be endless ways of doing it none of them answer the need of the sociologist because they do not look at it in relationship to how the text enters into the organising into sequences of action in multiple different sites.

The example I give in the article «Texts and the Ontology of Organisations and Institutions» (Smith 2001), of a grade appeal, demonstrate such a sociological approach. Looking at how texts come into play also radically extends the ethnographic possibilities.

This ethnographic approach of yours have come a long way...

Long before the women's movements, already as a graduate student, I was very uncomfortable with the kind of Parsonian sociology I was taught. Although Parsons was later dismantled the dominance of theory within sociology has been preserved. I came to have a fundamental distrust of theory because it seemed to me that its relationship to the actual was extraordinarily indeterminate. Take for example the concept of role, which only make sense in the kind of time and place when and where a person can be regarded separated from her tasks, that is as something different and/or more than her activities. I wanted a different kind of project, where you would find out if there is a separation, how is this separation produced? I thought that you could actually find out how things were organised. When I went on to look at the social organisation of knowledge as an empirical issue, I asked How is it done, how is it actually organised? That way you can treat knowledge as something independent of us – and not only as something he or she knows – so as to answer questions like: How is it that that category makes sense? How is it that there are some distinctive forms of organisation that we can treat as if they have an overriding relationship to what we might know as individuals?

Institutional Ethnography was mentioned, if I remember correct, already in

your first book «The everyday world as problematic» (Smith 1987), but it is only lately that I have noticed your use of it as a kind of research program for sociology. Why is that so?

Quite a few do work along these lines. I am not alone, quite the opposite. And it was in one of these research groups that it was suggested that we all named us as such, instead of for example «Smithsonian's». Now more and more empirical studies have been done, all of them quite productive, which illustrate the value of the approach. Not only within academia, you could also teach it as a professional skill to be used in political activism. But you have to keep the research going, it is the process of discovery.

How would you relate institutional ethnography to grounded theory, which I guess is a more familiar approach to sociologists most?

I think grounded theory is a disaster. It produces spurious theory. It is not that the empirical investigations are not good, quite the opposite. Quite a few good empirical studies have been done under this heading. But it is the lack of hooking the local to the extra-local and trans-local, that makes spurious theorising possible.

In relation to systems theory, what difference does institutional ethnography do?

The frames of system theory is the system under investigation, its understanding is confined in its own frame. Institutional ethnography, on the other hand, does not aim to understand the institution as such. It only takes the social activities of the institution as a startingpoint and hooking on to activities and relations both horizontal and vertical it is never confined to the very institution under investigation. Hereby the connections between the local and extra-local are made, making the workings of society visible.

Summing up, would it be correct to say that your ambition or scope regarding sociology is the same as the traditions you criticise, it is «only» the approach that is different. Where they focus on theory and use that as a startingpoint, you focus on empirical explorations and methods of inquiry. And where they elaborate and expand «grand theory», you elaborate and expand «institutional ethnography». But they, you and we all aim at understandings of the workings of society...

Well, we all want to know how the society works. I am not going to theorise it; I am going to say we can find it out. I do not claim to know everything about how to find it

out but what I have seen in my experiences from working from this stance for some decades now, is that it works, it is productive.

It is a problem that comes to light when you take up sociology from a woman's standpoint. It is the problem of how sociology for the most part is put together, of how it looks at people from the point of the discourse and seeks to explain how their behaviour is shaped in return. There is a very different possibility of trying to develop a sociology that looks at the society from the point of the people and their experience of it. Institutional ethnography picks up this idea, to explore the institutional order and the ruling relations from the point of view of people who are in various ways implicated in and participating in it.

– End of interview –

Some comments:

Dorothy E. Smith talks just like the way she writes. The extracts above are transcribed directly from the tape without me adding or changing anything. Her language is precise and carefully chosen to express the approach she has developed and during the interview she kindly but firmly put me straight when I now and then fell off her conceptual path. It is not that her concepts and way of expressing herself are difficult to understand in themselves, quite the opposite. Her concepts are the basic sociological ones (for example: the social organisation of knowledge, the co-ordinating of people's activities) but they are being used to develop a method of inquiry of the social rather than being used to develop a theory about the social. Her insistence that we – as sociologists – should start out in the social activities of people, and not in the theoretical concepts when investigating how the social comes about, so as not to read and write the social (only) through our own position (as part of the ruling relations) and its doxa, is actually hard to really grasp when trained to do the opposite. Therefore, Dorothy Smith is easily misread and misinterpreted, which the debates around her work and her own responses clearly illustrates (see for example Signs 1997 vol. 22, no 2 and The Sociological Quarterly 1993, vol. 34 no1). And it might be hard to foresee the full implications of her approach if translated into actual empirical research, especially ones own. And yet, to me at least, it is when translating her approach into a research design, that her approach convincingly proves to make a radical difference and a fruitful alternative to dominant ways of doing sociological research. As a method of inquiry it is in one way a modest appeal. Dorothy E. Smith does not claim to know this or that about society, she «only» claims a way to find it out. And for those looking for grand theory, she might be overlooked or neglected, for not delivering

«the gods» (theoretical conceptual schemes). For others though, her approach being so radically different from how sociology of today is usually done, it might seem too difficult and scary to try it out on ones own. As such it is far from a modest appeal, quite the opposite.

Approaching text with this method of inquiry implies a shift in focus from the post structuralist stance. It is not the discourse of the text that is the startingpoint or the subject who makes use of it who is focused. Instead the inquiry starts out in the relations into which the text and its discourses enters, to investigate the social activities it generates in that particular relational context. It is what the text makes happen, how it is used in everyday life to co-ordinate social activities, as social organisation, that is to be investigated by us sociologists. This can be our specific contribution to the illuminations of the power of texts in everyday life. And since texts are being transmitted and used trans local, they are powerful tools in organising peoples activities, across institutional and national boundaries, standardising people's activities into the kinds of social organisation that make for example bureaucracy possible. «Institutional Ethnography» signals an approach where the use of institutional texts in the co-ordinating of peoples activities is being investigated, with the aim to illuminate how these are «hooked up» – as Dorothy E. Smith express it – hierarchically and horizontally beyond that particular institution. An approach that connects or maybe rather cuts across so called micro- and macro levels by making the everyday world as problematic.

These are my words and of course my interpretations, presented here as an effort to persuade the reader to have another go at Dorothy E. Smith – this little piece as well as her books and articles – so as to see the promised land of sociological inquiry that lies behind her «modest» appeal.

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