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Review article

Smith, D.E. 2005 *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. Altamira, Lanham, MD. ISBN 0-7591-0502-2, pp.xiv + 256, \$22.91.

Smith, D.E. (ed.) 2006 *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD. ISBN 0-7425-4677-2, pp.vii + 263, \$27.95.

A sociology for our times? What's wrong with Institutional Ethnography, and why we still need it.

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Although the progressive or critical movement in contemporary sociology still has the capacity to hold large, public events celebrating shared values, it could arguably go further in engaging with current and emerging trends and problems, and in understanding the social and economic conditions of our times. What often disappoints is a refusal, even among our best theorists, to acknowledge that we are living in conservative, and even reactionary, times in which the most likely prospects for radical change and social transformation, either through environmental collapse, the oil running out, a further erosion of civil liberties to combat Al-Qaeda which has threatened to use weapons of mass destruction against civilian targets, or less obvious but equally worrying possibilities such as demographic implosion, are genuinely frightening.¹

Instead of engaging with these issues, critical sociologists mostly led by baby boomers now reaching retirement, whose values and politics have been shaped by a more

optimistic age, often write as if we were still living in the 1960s when both unlimited economic growth, and a more egalitarian and tolerant society seemed possible. Although well-meaning in their desire for progressive change, they appear to be in denial about the extent to which their youthful dreams as romantic idealists yearning for a better world have not been realised, or at least not in the way they anticipated. Baby boomer radicals seldom mention or dwell on the fall of communism, still arguably the most important political event in recent times, although rivalled by the attack on the twin towers on 9/11 and the aftermath, neither of which were predicted or expected by sociological theorists. The Soviet Union, for all its faults, was still viewed by many left-wing intellectuals during the 1970s as preferable to capitalism, at least in demonstrating that it was possible to eliminate poverty and maintain a form of full-employment. No one admits this today and, depressingly, no critical theorist has so far written a substantive or penetrating analysis of neo-liberalism, which has gone from strength to strength electorally in many western countries.

Born in 1926, Dorothy Smith belongs to an earlier generation that has lived through a period of almost continuous economic and population growth, and the achievement of liberal dreams such as civil rights for African-Americans and the emancipation of women, and she is the latest of a number of talented sociologists from this period, including most notably Zygmunt Bauman, who has taken the advantage of retirement to re-work and refresh her ideas, and reach new audiences. This means that her politics were shaped by coming of age as a woman in the 1940s, just as the boom years were about to start (her children are baby-boomers). There are younger readers who may

obtain a sense of excitement from picking up Smith's *Institutional Ethnography*, as offering a radical agenda and methodology for sociology in our times. It should, however, be remembered that Smith had worked out most of the ideas by 1975: she started to combine ideas from feminism, Marxism and ethnomethodology while teaching at the University of California at Berkeley, and reacting against how conventional sociology treated people like objects, and in particular how it uncritically reproduced received views about women as an inferior species (Smith 1979).

The basic methodology, or ontological/epistemological commitment is to start with everyday experience, which Smith claims is neglected by conventional sociology particularly when it tries to categorise or explain the world through abstract theorising, and to work from there to what she calls "the relations of ruling". At the start of *I.E.*, she gives a short history of how modern capitalism and the state developed that can be found in many sociology textbooks. The ruling relations are:

"that extraordinary, yet ordinary complex of relations that are textually mediated, that connect us across space and time, and organise our everyday lives - the corporations, government bureaucracies, academic and professional discourses, mass media and the complex of relations that inter-connect them" (Smith 2005, p. 10).

The method outlined in *I.E.* is to start with your own experience, and conduct a qualitative study employing in-depth interviewing and ethnography focusing on the texts

that organise and constrain our lives (although we can also engage with them creatively) and connect us with the relations of ruling. Smith explains this in some depth when discussing what she calls an “ontology of the social”. There are some interesting chapters on language as a means of coordinating subjectivities, and on the role played by texts as “institutional coordinators”. Towards the end of the book, she also summarises and discusses a number of studies that have used the approach. These include the process of grading in universities, and how “regulatory texts”, for example a legal statute, shapes institutional realities.

Institutional Ethnography as Practice offers advice on how to conduct empirical studies. The contributors to this collection suggest that there is no special method and the institutional ethnographer can employ interviewing, ethnography and textual analysis, provided that the research design and analysis are informed by the theoretical principles of working from everyday experiences and practices to the “relations of ruling”. There are some interesting observations by Susan Turner about how to map organisations through tracing the inter-connections between texts (Smith 2006, chapter 8).

Given that Smith’s interest in the everyday world is partly influenced by ethnomethodology, it is interesting to compare how the two traditions understand mapping. An ethnomethodologist would be interested in how different members of society produce and use maps in the course of their everyday activities, without claiming to have a scientific overview of society. Many institutional ethnographers, by contrast, genuinely believe that they have some privileged understanding of how society works

through belonging to, or representing, oppressed groups (a central assumption in feminist standpoint theory, and some varieties of Marxism). Like other critical sociologists with realist epistemological assumptions, they construct maps that reveal what is supposedly hidden to ordinary people.

This is not necessarily a difficult problem for critical sociology, since it is hard to imagine how one can advance a political viewpoint without making this ontological claim. Moreover, one might argue that all sociological traditions including ethnomethodology involve making some claim to know more, if not better, than ordinary members of society. If sociology involves more than reflecting critically on how the world is socially constructed, if we want it to have a substantive political content, or make moral and ethical claims about human happiness, then it must claim to have a superior understanding to ordinary people. Adopting this epistemological position does, however, create some difficulties if the sociologist also claims to address everyday experience. Although Smith has ambitions to develop a sociology in which people are not treated as objects, I.E. runs the risk of doing just this, since it seems unlikely that every single mother treated unsympathetically by a school administrator, or every nurse asked to reduce the quality of patient care, will share the political views of the analyst. Crucially, they may not even describe their experiences in these terms.

Many sociologists are using I.E. as a method to conduct ethnographic or qualitative research, particularly in Canada and the United States, but also in Europe, and Australia. There is a core group of students and associates of Smith such as Tim Diamond, Janet

Rankin and Marie Campbell, but also a larger group of researchers who have discovered and enthusiastically taken up the method in the last ten years. There are currently 150 members of the I.E. section of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP). They hold regular conferences in North America that attract large numbers of students from a variety of disciplines, such as education and health studies, searching for an attractive way of doing critical sociology, although the audiences are probably not as large as those that Smith addressed during the early 1970s in Berkeley.

What should one make of this methodology and theoretical/political project? Here it is worth starting by looking critically at the claim made by Smith that this is an original and distinctive methodology. She notes, for example, that “it cannot be satisfied with the objectives and practices of much good sociological ethnography that remains within the scope of the observer’s direct experience of a local site” (Smith 2005, p.49). However, she also criticises Michael Burawoy and other critical ethnographers for not adequately addressing everyday practices and experiences:

“Those dimensions of ‘the system’ that for Burawoy emerge at the level of the ‘wider structures’ of ‘states, economies, legal orders and the like’ ...are explored ethnographically rather than theoretically” (Smith 2005, p.38).

In fact, when one looks at a critical ethnographies or discourse analytic studies, which seem to survive and even flourish in conservative times (at least outside Australia), it is difficult to see that I.E. is really so distinctive a project in contemporary sociology. At

various points, Smith allies herself with different critical theorists, ranging from Michel Foucault to David Harvey, and critical sociologists respond favourably to her project (for example, Seidman 1998, pp.320-9). In some respects, *I.E.* starts to sound quite similar to the methodological position advocated by C.Wright Mills (1959) in *The Sociological Imagination*: one should start with the “private troubles” experienced by members of society (an example would be unemployment) and work up to “public problems” (the structures that shape our lives) through reflecting on day-to-day experience. There are additional similarities in that Smith dislikes what Mills called “grand theory”; but reading some of the densely written theoretical chapters in *I.E.*, it is difficult to know what to make of the claim that “its findings are not already prejudged by a conceptual framework that regulates how data will be interpreted” (Smith 2005, p.50). Many sociological traditions have claimed to address everyday experience, but they all inevitably do so from within a theoretical framework that, in the case of critical theories, selects what is politically interesting. This also, of course, means that they can miss what actually matters to ordinary people, or what is happening in society: so there may be a connection between how critical sociologists address everyday experience, and their inability to recognise the problems of our own time.

Sociologists with very different political assumptions to Smith or Mill would agree that there is something happening behind the scenes that can be analysed using scientific theory and method, so to understand Smith’s position as a critical sociologist it is necessary to appreciate how she understands the modern world. In my view, this has become a real weakness in contemporary thought in that, whereas the classical

sociologists advanced a powerful and systematic critique of modern societies that had real political content and impact, sociologists today tend to write more generally, so it is not always clear what they are proposing. Smith, to her credit, still presents herself unashamedly as an humanistic Marxist: someone who believes that something has gone badly wrong in the modern world, and particularly the division between mental and manual labour. In some passages, she seems to equate the “relations of ruling” with our dependence on professional expertise administered through large organisations:

“In general, instead of being ruled directly by individuals whom we’ve known (and perhaps hated) for years and who were known before us by our parents, we are ruled by people who are work in corporations, government, professional settings and organisations, universities, public schools, hospitals and clinics, and so on, and so on” (Smith 2005, p.18)

Many sociologists have been concerned about the rise of mass, industrialised society, but most have recognised the benefits as well as problems, in addition to the absence of alternatives. The modern bureaucratic state provides so much, and has eradicated poverty and disease and improved living standards and opportunities for most of the population, yet at the same time we have lost the security and comfort of living in traditional, small-scale communities. Marx wrote eloquently about the alienating effects of mass production (“commodification”), and Weber about the stultifying effects of bureaucracy. Smith makes an original contribution to analysing how the state regulates individuals, that arguably goes further than discussions of ideology or hegemony by

Marxist theorists, or Foucault's reflections on discourse, through examining how everyday experience is shaped or "filtered" into official texts, and how "regulatory statutes" shape our actions. But she provides no more answers or guidance than any other classical or contemporary theorist as to how we can escape or overcome the problems of the modern world. There is an important activist side to Smith's work in that she is working with groups and individuals concerned about unjust practices. But this does not amount to a political programme against capitalism or modernity, and in fact seems to accept the state and professions as the only means of improving the position of subordinate or disadvantaged groups.

Given the fact we are living in conservative times, it is good to see this radical sociological project flourish. It also raises the spirits to see that so many researchers in North America take qualitative sociology, ethnography and discourse analysis seriously. All kinds of studies are being published by traditions that include postmodern ethnography, grounded theory and conversation analysis. I.E. has made a valuable contribution to this intellectual scene and reminded us that sociologists can and should respond politically to the effect of neo-liberal policies on social institutions and values established during an earlier period of modernity. Persuasive and well-crafted ethnographies by Tim Diamond (1992) about working in nursing homes for the elderly,⁴ and Janet Rankin and Marie Campbell's (2006) about the effects of quality reforms on nursing, make one angry about how the vulnerable are being treated in a society driven by the constant search for efficiency and profit. We need I.E. as a means of speaking out

and understanding what is happening as governments retrench and introduce market competition into public services, not least in universities.

The methodology developed for addressing everyday experience and practices is extremely valuable, and deserves to be taken more seriously by different critical traditions. More critically, I would also want to argue that the studies published to date demonstrate that we are far from having a sociology that addresses or describes the problems of our own times, and develops a political programme or analysis. The “relations of ruling” refers to a whole set of economic, social and cultural changes associated with the rise of the modern state and capitalist economy. Today, we are arguably faced with emerging issues, and perhaps even a new era of history characterised by challenges to the dreams and hopes of the modern world. Understanding these new circumstances will increasingly raise difficult theoretical and political questions for institutional ethnographers, and other critical traditions in sociology.

Notes

1. Some demographers have predicted a dramatic world-wide reduction in population by the mid-21st century (Wallace 1999), which has already happened in some European countries. This may eventually result in a better world, but no one knows how it may change human societies and organisations in the next fifty years.

2. I am grateful to Wes Sharrock for recommending Geuss (1981), who discusses the philosophical implications of advancing a critical theory.
3. This still, however, begs the question as to whether a sociology that did address everyday experience in more depth, or with more attention to a range of political viewpoints, would be more effective politically.
4. For a review of this ethnography, see Travers (2001), p.146-8.

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