Duality, the Paradox of the Categories, and Dorothy Smith's Sociological Actuality

Randle Hart, Southern Utah University

Andrew McKinnon, University of Aberdeen

Abstract

Emile Durkheim first outlined the problem of the categories for sociologists after Kant: how do we acknowledge the socially constituted nature of all knowledge and yet still make claims about social reality? In Durkheim's late work he identifies two opposite responses to this problem, empiricism, which denies the problem, and idealism (or constructionism) which finds it difficult to talk about anything beyond our conceptions of social conceptions. In this paper we argue that the sociological work of Dorothy E. Smith provides a better solution to this problem than Durkheim does. Her sociological work provides a useful map both for studying social 'actuality' without succumbing either to relativism or to naïve realism.

Sometime in the late nineteen-eighties, social theoretical debate on epistemology and social ontology ceased to guide the practices of much sociological research[1]. As Reed and Alexander (2009) write, 'There was…a deep change of mood, a shift in the structure of feeling of sociologists, a vague yet powerful sense that the time for crisis and renewal had passed, that the hopes and dreams of theory belonged to a different time' (p.24). The result has been the development of sociological practices marked by empirical pursuits that do not often include epistemological justification. We have shifted from a discipline in which healthy debates about how we know the world – and what assumptions we can make about how the world exists – were part of the background for empirical research, to a reality wherein such questions are no longer interesting to a great many sociologists.

When a large number of sociologists are uninterested in pondering the philosophical foundations of their practices, they are essentially acting on faith that their disciplinary heroes got it right and that they, as empirical sociologists, have no need or inclination to reflect on the epistemological foundations of their researches. In turn, our sociologies become divided between epistemology and empirical investigation. When sociologists are willing to disavow epistemological theory altogether in favour of faith in any one tradition of knowing, we risk a crisis of relevancy in so far as the justification for our truth claims become traditional knowledge (see Lynd 1939; on the general crisis of relevancy in sociology see Savage and Burrows 2007). When we cease considering important epistemological problems (and stop training new sociologists to enter into epistemological debates), we risk being unable to articulate our philosophies of knowing while also being unable (and unwilling) to understand and consider the philosophies of our sociological sisters and brothers.

Although there have been perennial epistemological debates throughout sociology's history (e.g., Lynd, Popper, Adorno, Mills, Gouldner, Abbot, etc), an unresolved paradox of knowing was outlined long ago by one of our discipline's founders. Emile Durkheim

provides the classic statement on the two major epistemological poles, empiricism and social constructionism, and their inadequacy for dealing with sociology's fundamental epistemological problem. If humans understand the world through socially constructed concepts, are our sociological concepts just secondary social constructs for understanding the primary social constructions as they are used by social actors? Or, can sociologists make any kind of claim for understanding social actuality? The two responses to this problem, as Durkheim describes it, are to deny the problem (empiricism), or to surrender to it (idealism/constructionism).

Durkheim has his own solution, arguing that these opposed epistemological responses reflect an ontological 'dualism of the human condition', a solution we find intriguing but unsatisfactory. Several theorists have proposed maps for a via media between the poles of empiricism and constructivism including, among others, Adorno (O'Connor 2004), Habermas (Bernstein 1983), and Marx (Sayer 1978, Bhaskar 1986) and the critical realist theorists (Archer 1995), each of which has its own strengths and weaknesses. In this paper we argue that Dorothy E. Smith's underappreciated epistemological position maps a traversable, though underexplored *via media* between the opposing dangers of empiricism and social constructionism.

Smith offers a classically-rooted epistemological position that links the visceral to the symbolic through ongoing and shared practices of 'doing knowing', one that deserves far more attention than it has received to date. Indeed, we take a Smithian approach to Durkheim's problem and argue that the *shared* act of referring to the world (referring in concert) links an objective historical-material reality and our shared descriptions of it. All knowing (whether lay or sociological) occurs in a historical-material context; and it is this context that is dialectically related to the phenomenological realities that arise from shared practices of trying to know (and communicate about) the empirical world. When we refer to

the world in concert we coordinate practices of knowledge creation and align our consciousnesses and imaginations. In so far as our ways of knowing are useful or enlightening, we understand a world in common, even if only momentarily. In so doing, we create a tacit reality with shared practices, assumptions, meanings, and expectations. It is our capacity to 'do knowing,' together that provides the major reason why Durkheim's duality of the human condition is misguided, and it also provides a road out of the paradox Durkheim's theory was meant to solve.

Smith's argument has important implications for sociological research, but also for emancipatory politics (feminist, socialist, anti-racist, etc.). Her theoretical work provides a means of conceiving the discursive nature of social life (and the operations of power) without giving up the right to talk about the truth. Smith's differences with 'postmodern' feminist theorists such as Patricia Clough, Joan Scott and Judith Butler (cf. Clough 1993; Butler and Scott 1992; Smith 1993; 1999:96-130; 2005: 123-144) centre precisely on her (in our view, successful) attempt to recognize the discursive nature of sociological knowledge without relinquishing the right to speak of social actuality, or to to limit what may be experienced to that which can already be named discursively. To do so would preclude the possibility of sociological discovery, but also the political capacity to name new experiences and forms of oppression.

Durkheim's outline of the key epistemological problem for sociology and proposed Solution

In his 'Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Condition' Emile Durkheim defends his recently published book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) against critics that he argues have misconstrued its argument. Durkheim contends that his critics have misunderstood that the central notion of the *Forms* is the duality of the human condition, and this has resulted in some unfair appraisals of his work. While one must dig pretty deep in the

Elementary Forms to find this 'principle on which [Durkheim claims his book] was based' (2005, p. 35), Durkheim's essay is important for the argument he makes about this dualist human condition and its bearing on the central conundrum of social-scientific epistemology.

The crux of problem Durkheim addresses is this: how do we recognise the social constitution of the categories of perception (something sociologists have been wont to do since Durkheim), without getting trapped by the categories, such that we're left stranded at vertiginous heights with nothing but concepts 'all the way down'. If our perceptions of reality are all socially constituted, how then do we make verifiably true claims about (social) 'reality'? On the one hand, extreme constructionists might argue that all we can do is study the concepts using yet more concepts. On the other hand, extreme empiricists tend to deny the problem altogether. Neither solution has seemed satisfactory to a great many sociologists. Durkheim's solution was to suggest that the problem represented a duality of human nature, and as such the problem was itself the key to unlocking the mysteries of the social.

In the 'Dualism' essay, Durkheim ponders an ontological problem that he suspects theologians and philosophers (as well as many reflective lay people) have long intuited: we are neither fully for ourselves nor fully for Society. The essential argument of Durkheim's essay is that the time honoured view of human beings as homo-duplex, appropriately interpreted, does have scientific merit. Durkheim claims that philosophers and theologians have sensed something quite true, although in distorted form, when they have argued that human beings are body-soul, or beast-angel. Not surprisingly, for Durkheim this dualism reflects the human condition as individual (beast, body, egoism) and society (angel, soul, altruism), two contending forces between which we are ever pulled. Neither position can triumph over the other, but are locked in an unending struggle: we can never belong entirely to ourselves, nor entirely to others. For Durkheim, these two sides have a number of different dimensions, including the material-spiritual, and egoistic-moral. In his discussion of the latter

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(egoistic-moral) dualism, Durkheim highlights how Kantian his thinking on such matters has become: what is moral is that which is 'open to universalisation'.

We have two dimensions of consciousness which expresses this duality, Durkheim argues. One expresses our organism and its immediate experience. The other expresses our social nature; this originates beyond our visceral experience and attaches us to a collective experience. One state of consciousness is dominated by our body; the other is dominated by society through shared representations. For Durkheim, it is essentially through concepts (collective representations) that the social world forms our consciousness and does battle with our individuality (egoism; visceral experience). The social, however, is always at risk when it enters anyone's consciousness and its concepts are individualized – 'each of us puts our own imprint on them' (2004, p.43). Rites and ceremonies (social routines and habits) keep idiosyncratic imprints from diverging too far from collective representations. Society thereby *ensures* that each of us will not too often use concepts (once learned) just as we please.

For William James, a newborn's perceptions of the world are nothing but a 'bloomin' buzzin' confusion' (1983, p. 462) because they have not learned to organize their perceptions by means of concepts. In the *Elementary Forms,* Durkheim takes a strikingly similar position when he argues that:

> Perceptible representations are in perpetual flux; they push each other like currents in a stream, and while they last they are constantly transformed. Each one is a function of the precise moment it takes place. We are never certain of finding a perception again as we first experienced it; for if the thing perceived has not changed, it is we who are no longer the same ([Conclusion III] 2001, p. 328).

Perceptions are individual, and ephemeral, experiences; the concept, on the other hand, is 'outside of time and becoming'. It is the anchor for our perception because it transcends the individual: 'To think conceptually is not simply to isolate and group together qualities

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common to a certain number of objects; it is to subsume the variable to the permanent, the individual to the social' (p. 334). That our concepts are social should be fairly self-evident, Durkheim argues, because concepts come from our shared language; language is a 'collective elaboration' that expresses the way society as a whole experiences the world, or as Durkheim puts it 'imagines the objects of experience' (p. 330).

If Durkheim held that all there was to the world was the way we 'imagine the objects of experience', and nothing beyond those imaginings, this would make him, in his terms, an 'idealist', though we would probably refer to this as a social constructionist position. But for Durkheim, sociology, like its object of study is a 'monster of contradictions', in Pascal's phrase (2005 p. 38). The objects of experience are not reducible simply to the representations we make of them, and this is the claim of the opposite pole: empiricism. Thus,

> We do not understand except through concepts. But sensory reality is not cut out to enter spontaneously and by itself the framework of our concepts. It resists this and to make it pliant with it, we must force it to some extent, submit it to all sorts of laborious operations that alter it to make it assimilable by the mind, and we never manage to triumph completely over its resistance. Our concepts never succeed in mastering our sensations and translating them completely into intelligible terms. They take a conceptual form only if they lose that which is most concrete in them, that which gets them heard by our sensory being and moves it to action: they become something fixed and dead (Durkheim 2005, p. 38).

Durkheim's reason for rejecting empiricism should be clear: perceptions that are not framed by concepts are purely individual and fleeting. Without concepts, we cannot be sure that we see the same thing as our fellows, and even if we could be sure of this, we should not be able to communicate about our purely individual experience. Science, including social science, is for this reason, an inescapably social endeavour. Empiricism in fact relies on socially ordered

perceptions of the world, although it is unable to admit as much. To put this in contemporary terms, while there may be theory-neutral experience, there can be no theory-neutral experience or observation *in science*, especially in so far as science requires communication.

While his criticisms of empiricism (including his own earlier programmatic methodological statement ([1895]1965)) are damning, Durkheim recognises that empiricism nonetheless poses a serious, even insurmountable, challenge to constructionism: If our perception of the world is organized by concepts, where do the perceptions so organized come from? Few would want to argue that they are nothing but illusions. Further, Durkheim suggests, concepts never manage to *fully* capture or make sense of our bodily experiences and sensations. The here and now of one's own embodied experience partially escapes the concepts into which it is forced. We must adapt shared representations to meet the exigencies of our own needs, and to make sense of our bodily and individual experience. This imperfect fit means that we ply concepts to describe sensations and our individual experience, and in so far as we do this, we realize the inadequacy of shared language. That we have no option but to use shared representations to describe our selves to ourselves is itself a sign that Society has a hold on us – our inner voice speaks the language of Society, even as it fails to do so perfectly.

In Durkheim's rendition of Kant, our social concepts constitute reason and give us phenomena (the appearance of things), but our bodies provide us with sensations of the noumena beyond our conceptions of them. Although these personal sensations are inchoate without the social concepts that help us make sense of them, they are nonetheless real sensations. Thus, Durkheim writes: 'It is evident that passions and egoistic tendencies derive from our individual constitution, while our rational activity, whether practical or theoretical, is closely dependent on social causes' (2004, p. 44). But for Durkheim, 'given that we possess an aptitude to live both a personal and an impersonal life, what we need to know is

not what name it is suitable to give these contrary aptitudes, but how they coexist in one and the same being, despite their opposition' (p. 41). *Thus, the antinomy remains, and can only be comprehended by understanding this individual-social duality as both the root of the paradox and as itself a means for understanding the individual in the social world*. The antinomy with which philosophers have long grappled becomes, for Durkheim, the starting point for sociological analysis.

Durkheim's solution to this problem is not very convincing, for two primary reasons. First, like most sociologists, we do not find the relationship of individual to society conceived best only as an antinomy. While there are undoubtedly moments of opposition, individual and the social are also mutually constitutive, rather than being radically opposed to one another (cf. Elias 2000, Giddens 1984, Berger and Luckmann 1969). Unless we can accept Durkheim's assumption that individual and society are distinct and opposed entities, obeying their own laws and existing together only as an antinomy, Durkheim's argument quickly becomes unglued.

The second problem with Durkheim's 'solution' is that he 'solves' the epistemological problem by turning it into an ontological one. As such, he does not answer the fundamental questions about how we as sociologists may know, but instead he simply asserts that the difficulties we have with knowing are inherent in the (dualist) human condition. It does not, therefore, seem inappropriate to ask how he knows that this is the case.

If Durkheim's critiques of the inadequacies of both the empiricist and constructionists positions are compelling, and we think that they are, but his solution to the problem is not, where does this leave us? While some empirical social scientists continue to cling to an unreconstructed empiricism that serves limited pragmatic purposes, among some theorists, the balance seems to have swung towards the constructivist pole, particularly after the 'linguistic turn' (Rorty 1979) in the human sciences. But we must also recognise that there

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are serious dangers here, too. Especially since this leads to proposals that 'truth' and 'fact'

are inescapably relative to the context of their production and the games we play in defending

them. Since our representations of the world exist prior to our experience of it, our

perceptions described through concepts are social representations through and through, all we

can do is talk about the representations 'all the way down.' It is difficult to know, however,

how social scientific discoveries can be made in this way, or indeed how we can learn

anything new, since the categories of perception are preordained by society.

Dorothy Smith's Epistemology between Realism and Constructivism

Dorothy E. Smith is one of the most insightful contemporary sociological theorists;

she has developed a sophisticated, reflexive critique of sociology, as well as offering a

productive new vision for sociological research beginning with women's experience.

Contrary to some popular renditions (and misinterpretations) of Smith as an advocate of

'standpoint epistemology', Smith's sociology is by no means a relativism premised on

women's *subjective* experience (Lemert 1992). Smith has long argued that all knowledge is

socially produced and organized (1990b); she also argues that sociologists must study how

the social world is 'actually' put together (2004). We argue that Smith's work avoids being

relativist without becoming *naively* empiricist; instead, her sociological work has chartered

an innovative and refined course between empiricism and constructivism, starting from the

experience of women. For this reason her work is particularly useful for addressing the

challenge first outlined by Durkheim.

Smith's analysis of contemporary society is her own, and not merely a synthesis (Hill-

Collins 1992) of previous thinkers. Nonetheless, her theoretical and empirical research have

clearly emerged from her ongoing conversations with Marx (as well as Bakhtin, and

Vološinov virtually alone among the Marxists), George Herbert Mead, Maurice Merleau-

Ponty and ethnomethodology. Through sophisticated readings of Marx and Mead in particular she develops the dialectical interplay of constructionism and realism, and these become key resources for both her critique of sociology, and her rejection of postmodern constructivism. Although Smith has not (to our knowledge) engaged directly with Durkheim, her work is particularly useful in addressing the paradox that Durkheim has left us. Her work recognises (at least implicitly) the empiricist and constructivist responses that Durkheim analyses but she provides a novel way of understanding them; and her work contains the tools for an epistemology that allows us to cut a route between the elements of Durkheim's dualistic paradox without accepting the dualism of human nature.

Smith has long argued that knowledge is necessarily and inevitably social, using examples such as Helen Keller and so-called 'feral' children (1999:96-130; 2005:78-98) to show that language use is essential for knowing. Without the coordination of subjectivities provided by shared concepts, we would indeed be left with the vague and transient perceptions that Durkheim describes. Thinking in Smithian terms, we could also recognise the social as Durkheim describes it, but it would need to be radically reinterpreted. Durkheim argues that '[t]o think conceptually is not simply to isolate and group together qualities common to a certain number of objects; it is to subsume the variable to the permanent, the individual to the social' (2001 p. 334). These concepts are 'outside of time and becoming' and for that reason organize social relations from beyond immediate personal experience and relationships. In Smith's terms, the power of concepts to dominate is characterised as 'the ruling relations', and she understands these in much more critical terms than Durkheim does (to be discussed below).

For Smith 'doing knowing' is a necessarily social act, but she has no need to leap across the abyss lying between the solipsistic consciousness of the 'bloomin' buzzin' confusion' to the solid bank of 'society'; rather she argues that much of the work of knowing

happens through the coordination of subjectivities in face to face interaction. This coordination of subjectivities is different from, and indeed sometimes sets itself in opposition to, the relations of ruling. Conceiving the social relations of knowledge in this way does not entail a denial of the poles that Durkheim identifies, but it does require a significant redescription of his understanding of social concepts.

Relations of Ruling

Women's experience provides the starting point for Smith's sociology, but this subject position is most useful because it makes the 'ruling relations' visible; the structure and organization of the relations of ruling makes the everyday/everynight experience of women a viable (and one might argue an indispensable) starting point for understanding the organization of actual social arrangements. Smith's analysis of the ruling relations emphasises the distinctive textuality of power; ruling relations are structured by sets of expert knowledge, bureaucratic categories, organizational policies and forms that must be completed. She writes that

> …the ruling relations form a complex field of coordinated activities, based in
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> technologies of print, and increasingly, in computer technologies. They are activities
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> in and relation to texts, and texts coordinated them as relations. Text mediated
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> relations are the forms in which power is generated and held in contemporary
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> societies. Printed or electronic texts have the generally neglected property of infinite
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> replicability. Replicability of infinite forms of meaning that can be activated in
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> multiple local settings is fundamental to the ruling relations. The materiality of the
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> text and its replicability create a peculiar ground in which it can seem that language,
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> thought, culture, formal organization, have their own being, outside lived time and the
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> actualities of people's living—other than, as the latter become, objects of action or

investigation within the textual. The material text creates a join between the local and particular, and the generalizing and generalized organization of the ruling relations (1999, p. 79).

This is not simply bureaucracy (and certainly not Weber's version of it); Smith is much closer to Marx, and indeed she sees this analysis as an extension of Marx, an elaboration of developments that he could not have foreseen. Marx charts a trajectory by which ruling relations become more impersonal, or where personal relations are mediated through abstract categories, like money. This has only become truer, subsequent to Marx's life: the corporation, the stock market, the education system (to choose three) are all administered textually, and by means of abstract categories, forms, texts, memos and reports.

In Smith's account, textual relations of ruling 'have their own being, outside lived time and the actualities of people's living' (1999 p. 79), bearing more than passing resemblance to Durkheim's understanding of 'society'. But Durkheim's 'society' is in some respects an under-explicated category, it is something that exists, but which can only be seen in the way that people are coordinated—and it largely ignores power relations. For Smith, it is the task of the sociologist to examine *how* such relations are coordinated, and how these relations are power relations. While Durkheim finds the origins of the society in ritual and collective effervescence, for Smith the origins of these categories is in power relations embedded in texts which have the capacity to organize peoples' lives and actions independent of context. (Social relations, however, are not limited to the ruling relations, but include, first and foremost, face to face interaction).

For Smith, concepts and symbols do not *only* represent, rather, they are the primary means of action within text-mediated power relations. In the corporate world actions entail reading reports, making decisions, and taking action by filling out forms, balancing budgets, writing further reports and policy statements, designing organizational charts, or sending

letters, memos and emails. None of this requires the co-presence of another person, indeed it can be done entirely within this hyper-real (non-) space (Smith 2005). Domination is conceptual, which is not to say it does not have an impact on the real world—the worker is disciplined or made 'redundant', the manager gets the stock-option facilitating the purchase of a nicer car, the student is expelled or given a scholarship. But the coordinated effects in the real world are mediated by the hyper-real world where abstract symbols are manipulated in texts.

The way that gender intersects with the relations of ruling is vital for Smith's claim that there is particular value in beginning with the experiences of women (Smith 1987). Over the past several hundred years as this text-based mediation of ruling relations has developed, women have been systematically excluded from, and positioned in relation to, these conceptual practices. Smith writes,

The suppression of the local and particular as a site of knowledge has been and remains gender organized. The domestic sites of women's work, traditionally identified with women, are outside and subservient to this structure. Men have functioned as subjects in the mode of governing; women have been anchored in the local and particular phase of the bifurcated world. It has been a condition of a man's being able to enter and become absorbed in the conceptual mode, and to forget the dependence of his being in that mode upon his bodily existence, that he does not have to focus his activities and interests upon his bodily existence. Full participation in the abstract requires liberation from attending to needs in the concrete and particular (1990b, p. 18).

It is clear that women's home-work, care for the well-being of children and the men who go off to work in offices that coordinate relations of ruling, has been preoccupied primarily with the particular needs of particular people at particular times. But Smith observes that much of women's paid work

mediates between the abstracted and conceptual and the material form in which it must travel to communicate. Women do the clerical work, the word processing, the interviewing for the survey; they take messages, handle the mail, make appointments and care for patients (pp. 18-19).

In short, women do the 'people work' that mediates the abstract activities of the ruling relations. Both as women work to bridge the two worlds so organised –the abstract, disembodied relations of ruling and the particular, embodied world of everyday/everynight life—and as they discover that it is impossible for them to fully exit from actual reality into the transcendent relations of ruling, a divided or bifurcated consciousness is formed.

This bifurcation of consciousness is not entirely unlike Durkheim's duality of the human condition, but Smith recognizes the historic and social causes of it. The duality that Durkheim describes is not inevitable and organic, but social, historic, and gendered. As Smith writes:

Entering the governing mode of our kind of society lifts actors out of the immediate, local, and particular place in which we are in the body. What becomes present to us in the governing mode is a means of passing beyond the local into the conceptual order. This mode of governing creates, at least potentially, a bifurcation of consciousness. It establishes two modes of knowing and experiencing and doing, one located in the body and in the space it occupies and moves in, the other passing beyond it" (1990b, p. 17).

In the 1970s Smith, working as a Professor at the University of British Columbia, and with sole responsibility for two young boys at home, the division between these two worlds became the starting point for a sociology beginning with women's experience. By virtue of its need for abstract categories and objective perspective (a perspective rigidly divided from

the actuality of everyday/everynight experience of looking after two kids), sociology seemed to be part of, or at least embedded in, the problem.

As part of the matrix of expert systems within this conceptual realm, sociology participates in the ruling relations; it shares the problematic (in the Althusserian sense) of ruling, rather than beginning from the problematic of everyday life, or the actuality of being ruled and governed. Starting with the experience of women grounds the sociological enterprise in everyday/everynight actualities, and provides a starting point for understanding how these everyday actualities are dominated extra-locally by the relations of ruling.

Smith's corrective was not simply to add the gender variable, but instead of beginning with sociology's abstract theoretical categories and objective (view from nowhere) methods, she begin to think starting from the problematic of everyday life (1987; 2004). Much of mainstream sociology can be criticised for its tendency to reify (not Smith's term) concepts. Verbs become nouns, processes become things: '*organization, institution, meaning, order, conflict,* and *power*' (p. 55). Terms like '*role, rule, norm* and so on' are treated as phenomena existing 'out there' independent of any concrete action. Patterned actions are seen as examples of rule or norm obeying behaviour. Analytic concepts like 'bureaucracy' become not just sociologists' tools, but are seen as real entities in the world. The ideologists give such concepts explanatory power: something happens because of bureaucracy, globalization, heterosexism, or utility-maximizing; these are conceptual names we might give to certain phenomena— but they are by no means explanations. When we treat them as such we're giving sociologists' concepts causal power; the concepts act, people cease to.

This creates a number of major blind-spots, not least of which is the textual organization, and domination, of people in everyday life by means of the very abstract concepts in which and with which sociologists ply their trade – a problem Giddens has termed the 'double hermeneutic' (1984). Social organization, by means of state and corporate

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powers, coordinates people's actions independent of their face-to-face everyday/everynight relations. When sociologists take their abstract concepts for granted, using them as a means for understanding the world, they often fail to see that they correspond to the social world because these concepts participate in organizing the social order which they want to study. Sociology thereby replicates the relations of ruling, particularly if we accept the giveness of social concepts as Durkheim construes them.

The Social Act

Although Durkheim's social is created and maintained at the level of consciousness, an individual's experiences are hers alone, and embodied existence in some measure solipsistic. Thus, the logic of the individual and that of the social are inevitably an antinomy. Durkheim's paradox of the human condition rests on the assumption that each individual is – as a body in time-space with a bounded consciousness – necessarily divided internally between pure experience of an objective world and collective representations of that same world. For Smith, however, individual consciousness does not confront the actuality of the world alone—which makes this confrontation always social. The 'actual' is always already constituted in social acts in conjunction with text-mediated relations of ruling. Reality, moreover, is necessarily inclusive of individual consciousnesses – not only of an objective social/physical world, but of one's sense of self and place in relation to that world and as part of the world. Consciousness is situated in the actuality of everyday/everynight life in so far as it is a *social* consciousness constituted in interaction. In our interactions we create tacit reality – or challenge conventional constructions of it – and our social consciousness is thus derived from such negotiation. That reality is constituted in the social act means that the truth of that reality is also constituted in the social act. This is not to say that an objective, physical world

does not exist, but that our shared knowledge of it is an ongoing *achievement* and is always open to contestation.

Smith tells a story—one in its essence familiar to all those who have spent time with infants learning language—of her son's first word. She and Dave saw a bird at the window. 'Bird' she said, and he repeated it, beginning to get the hang of the fact that this sound referred to the funny creature fluttering outside the window. Several days later, Dave pointed to a fish in a tank, and said, naturally enough, 'bird'. Correcting her son, Smith tells Dave 'No, not bird. Fish' (1999:115). At the time, Smith used this example to demonstrate to students in her class a lesson taught by many social constructionists: words are arbitrary signs which we attach to things and teach children to learn the connection between the sign and the object.

In Smith's subsequent thinking, the episode has taken on new significance derived in part from her reading of Mead and Bakhtin and her experience in the women's movement. Rather than seeing the problem of meaning as a subject-object relation, she has come to see it as a subject-object-subject relation, which is 'an alignment of the individual consciousnesses via the utterance' and the pointing (indexicality) that accompany such interactions. It involves a mutual recognition of 'bird', or 'fish', or politically, the shared recognition of 'oppression' and 'injustice'. More precisely, referring 'is a concerting of consciousnesses through symbolic communication that gives presence to an object for participants in the emerging course of a social act' (1999, p.115).

As Smith suggests, the social act is always partly 'doing knowing'; epistemology is not something that is the preserve of philosophers and sociologists, but rather, the social act *is already* epistemological practice. This is not to say that we do not have consciousness of our individual visceral experience, but for Smith this seems of secondary importance since the actual social world is only possible in interaction with others. Thus, understanding social

consciousness is more important for understanding the actuality of the social world than is investigating or theorizing visceral consciousness – although theorizing bodies in space and interaction is of crucial importance to her. According to Smith:

> Referring is always a local achievement of some actual occasion or sequence of occasions. As such it is always problematic…Knowledge, and hence the possibility of telling the truth and of getting it wrong, is always among people in concerted sequences of action who know how to take up the instructions discourse provides and to find, recognize, and affirm, or sometimes fail to find, what discourse tells us is there, as well as relying on just such dialogic sequences to settle disputes about what is. Knowledge, thus conceived, is always in time, always in action among people, and always potentiates a world in common, once again, known in common. This account of knowledge and telling the truth represents them not as functions of the individuated consciousnesses of post-Cartesian philosophy, but as dialogic sequences of action in which the coordinating of divergent consciousnesses is mediated by a world they can find in common (Smith 1999, p. 127).

Consciousnesses are aligned – if only temporarily – in the social act, which includes the material practices of referring to objects and ideas in the world. In daily local interaction we come to share recognition of an objective world through socio-material practices such as pointing, indexing, and elaborating. The co-presence of bodies encourages shared acknowledgment, since this allows for elaboration and correction.

The interactional matching and culling of experience with concepts is inevitably and always already socially organized: referring and dialogical interaction are rituals and practices in everyday/everynight life. As Smith writes: 'Referring is a social act in which the category used by the speaker provides something like a set of instructions for the hearer to look for and recognize an object that can be treated as fitted to the category' (1999, p. 126).

The practices of referring to the world, of matching experience with concepts, words and ideas, constitute social reality. Smith continues: 'The hearer may not be successful; she may get it wrong; or the instructions may be inaccurate and misdirect her. But a good map will tell the truth if we know how to read from it to the features it indexes (they *become* features in the reader's local practices of indexing)…' (p. 126). In so far as we use discourse or language successfully to find a world in common, the truth of that world is achieved pragmatically.

We do not often have the luxury of negotiating meaning in concert when we confront texts. This is why the ruling relations can govern, coordinate, and order the social world extra-locally (and in its own image) through text mediation. Text-mediation is, for the most part, a lonely process of confronting the ruling relations: there is rarely co-presence, sharing, and culling of experiences, etc. And if there were, it would do little to confront textual sources of power as it is the non-presence and discursive authority of the ruling meanings that make them almost insurmountable as authoritative meanings. Singular challenges to the ruling relations have little or no impact because those same ruling relations are replicated and enacted so pervasively that a critical mass of agreement or use is continually maintained. There is no definite 'authority' in a local setting (if anywhere) with whom to negotiate. The meanings of the ruling relations arise from a non-space and are only visible in the coordination of the social act itself.

While our exposition of Smith's analysis began with the concept of the ruling relations, it is the problematic of everyday/everynight life that provides the starting point for understanding the ruling relations; the ruling relations can only be uncovered in concrete local experience. As for Marx who begins *Capital* with the actuality of the commodity form as it is confronted in everyday life, Smith's critique is concerned first of all with how the local setting and social consciousnesses are organized and achieved in the social act, but also with how extra-local ruling relations coordinate such social relations and thus consciousness.

By starting with the actuality of local settings, we can better understand the organizational capacity of text-mediated forms of rule. It is the capacity of ideological codes and discursive formations to organize social relations from a hyper non-space that makes it imperative to start critique from the local. The ruling relations govern most efficiently and effectively as they coordinate how people 'do knowing' in the actualities of their everyday/everynight lives. Sociology as a critical project (as opposed to an ideological one) disrupts the ruling relations by taking the everyday/everynight world as its problematic.

In part, the coordination of everyday ethnomethods is an extra-local achievement of the ruling relations. For instance, Smith (1999) discusses how a neo-conservative, ideological code, 'politically correct,' organizes mundane conversations. The use of the code in everyday/night interaction guides social conversations away from equity issues toward the reproduction of the notion that free speech is limited by an (imaginary) tyranny of the civil rights movement itself. In the process, the authority of the ruling relations is maintained since viable critiques of inequitable relations are disqualified or not explored fully in everyday/night talk.

This is not to say that the relations of ruling rule absolutely. Smith maintains the notion that we can know and communicate the 'truth' about the world, regardless of the ruling relations and its established discourses. And, consistent with her phenomenological-materialist roots, the truth can be known in concert. It is in free communication with others, and (ideally) our ability to hold conversations, that we align our consciousnesses, focus on some shared experience of the world, correct misunderstandings, and construct social reality in the process. As Smith writes, 'Truth and knowledge are grounded in the foundational moments in which the social comes into being through language and through the sensory ground which human organisms share' (1999, p. 128). Again, opposed to Durkheim who maintains that the individual and Society are ontologically in conflict, Smith argues that

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social reality itself emerges and changes out of a never-ending sequence of social acts, which are always already guided by some combination of social and visceral experiences and sensations.

The everyday practices of people and the 'intersubjective spaces' that they create through shared recognition of the objects of their experience provides an important lesson for sociological practice in what Smith has named 'Institutional Ethnography' (2005). In an interview, for instance, sociologists participate with an informant in the same intersubjective space. Rather than seeing the data produced as 'contaminated' by the interaction with an interviewer, we are better advised to see it, Smith argues, as a dialogue in which we participate in the coordination of consciousnesses, that *we can learn, with those we interview*, to "see" their world, the world to which they refer. In this way, our preconceptions can be corrected, and we can learn to map their social world, including the relations of ruling in which they are embedded and to which they are subjected.

The 'truth' of these social worlds can be known intersubjectively. Just as two people can look together at a landscape and produce a map of the terrain (and as that map can then inform others of what to look for and expect to find), institutional ethnographers often use this as the guiding metaphor for understanding the institutions in which the people they interview are located (2005 pp. 123-144). Anyone who has done interviews with people in 'foreign' territories recognises that we learn from our respondents, that by talking with them, and having them explain their world to us, will recognise that we can slowly learn to fill in the blank spots on the map from these encounters, and that the 'data' that we thereby produce is a collaborative effort, not unlike the way in which learn to see a 'bird' together.

At the same time that institutional ethnography recognizes that research is necessarily intersubjective, as a political research project it purposefully 'exploits' that intersubectivity to not only to make visible the ruling relations, but also to imagine more humane, less

restrictive, and more open spaces of communicative interaction. In other words, institutional ethnography is a *critical* public sociology at heart and in practice: it concerns itself with the present actualities of social worlds, accentuates how and why these worlds are coordinated, and intervenes for social-political change. Consistent with Smith's reflexive epistemological position, institutional ethnographers situate their own practices – and the reasons for their researches – within the same historical-material context as that under investigation. There is no assumed Cartesian separation between the object of knowledge and those seeking knowledge and reform.

Concluding Remarks

Smith offers an ontology of the social and social consciousness quite different from Durkheim's. Any bifurcation of consciousness (or, essential duality of the human condition) that Durkheim describes must be understood as an historical development. Indeed, rather than begin analysis from a Cartesian and Archimedean view of the social world (as Durkheim does), Smith would ask how this 'essential duality of the human condition' becomes *specifically* problematic in the actuality of *real* human lives, or how the duality itself has socio-historic causes.

That the social organizes our consciousness through the social act means that we are always vulnerable to the relations of ruling, especially in a world mediated by texts. But the formation of oppositional consciousnesses is always possible and emergent in social acts. In pre-literate societies such vulnerability to text-mediated ruling simply did not exist; instead, social consciousness would be socialized through ritual, symbolism, and habit (or tradition). In other words, ruling in pre-literate societies would be achieved by coordinating the social act itself in conjunction with dialogical interaction.

Because social reality is constituted in social acts, our perceptions of the world are organized in concert. Our perceptions are themselves social achievements, in so far as we wish to communicate them. Again, however, the ruling relations rule discursively and conceptually, and thus our perceptions of the world, our social interactions, and our life trajectories are always at risk of being organized from afar. For example, in her classic essay, 'K is Mentally Ill', first published 3 decades ago in *Sociology* (1978; 1990a), Smith demonstrates just how perceptions may be coordinated by various genres of 'accounting' for human behaviour. The result, as she so poignantly writes, is the *actual* control of 'K.' It is not an abstract population, group, or subculture that is interesting to Smith, but the actual people, communities, neighbourhoods, and conversations between real people in the context (and coordination) of their lives that are the focus of her researches. Smith's sociology – and institutional ethnography in general – is a sociology for and about people.

Sociology has always had to steer a course between the Scylla of Empiricism and the Charybdis of constructionism. While there have always been some who are happy to be swallowed whole by the monsters of scientism or of relativism, most sociologists have tried to avoid this. By recognising that our perceptions of the world are always coordinated materially with others, and yet are coordinated with reference to an actual world, both physical and social, Smith's sociology provides us with a map to safe passage without succumbing to Durkheim's dualism. While Smith's map may not be the only viable one, it is certainly one of the most interesting and useful for social analysis and critique.

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End Note

[1] For interesting reviews and discussion of the "return to the empirical," see the special issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory* (2009), 12(1).