

*INTERVIEW*

**'You Are Here'**

Interview with Dorothy E. Smith<sup>1</sup>

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**Mots-clés**

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Dorothy Smith is a world-renowned Marxist feminist scholar and activist and a formidable intellect. Her decades of scholarly and activist contributions combine a lively sociological imagination with unflinching rigour, inspiring and challenging academics, professionals and 'ordinary' women and men to consider how social relationships and power are organized in everyday life. She is the author of many ground-breaking articles and books, including *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (1987), *Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling* (1990), *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory and Investigations* (1999) and *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People* (2005). She is best-known for her creation of institutional ethnography (IE), a method of inquiry she originally characterized as a 'sociology for women' but has since recrafted as a 'sociology for people'.

Dorothy Smith was educated at the London School of Economics (B Sc.1955) and did her doctoral studies at Berkeley, California (PhD 1963). Following several years as lecturer at Berkeley and then the University of Essex, she became associate professor and later professor at the University of British Columbia, where she was a faculty member from 1968-1977. She was then professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), now the department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, in Toronto, Canada, until her retirement in 2000. She is currently professor

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<sup>1</sup> Transcription and introduction by Elaine Coburn, CADIS-Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France.

emerita at OISE at the University of Toronto and adjunct professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. Over the course of her career, she has mentored many students who have gone on to become well-known scholars and activists in their own right, including Alison Griffith, Gary Kinsman, Roxana Ng and Ellen Pence, among others.

Dorothy Smith has been instrumental in piloting several major research and activist initiatives, including the Women's Research Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia, founded in 1973 and disbanded in 2000, and the Centre for Women's Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, which she directed from 1992 to 2001. Throughout her career, she has collaborated with unions, women's groups and professional associations to understand how oppression works and think about how to create progressive change. This work includes publications for the Canadian Teacher's Federation, the Committee on the Status of Women and the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

Dorothy Smith is in constant demand as a speaker, and has given lectures at universities and women's centres worldwide, including Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Iceland, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. Her contributions have been recognized with many awards, including honorary degrees at several Canadian universities and in special lectures for universities and scholarly societies in Canada and abroad. Her lifetime intellectual achievements and contributions have been rewarded with various formal honours granted by a number of learned societies, including the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, the American Sociological Association, which has established an award in her name, and the Society for Socialist Studies, for which she delivered the 2007 keynote address.

This interview was conducted by William K. Carroll at lunchtime in a French restaurant in Vancouver BC, on July 8, 2010. On the digital recording, there is the occasional interruption from an inquiring waiter and snatches of conversations by other diners. Near the end of the interview, you can hear some of the mundane sounds of the restaurant's activities, including the sorting of cutlery. Strains of classical music wax and wane throughout the interview: from time to time, Smith's reflections are accompanied, literally, by a symphonic crescendo.

The transcript faithfully reflects the interview, but excludes minor hesitations, repetitions and commentary from the restaurant staff.

*William K. Carroll:* Encoded in the quaint expression 'red diaper baby' is the fact that no one is born a radical. Can you talk about how you became radicalized in the 1960s and 1970s?

*Dorothy E. Smith:* Yes, I certainly can.

My father was a businessman and we were middle class. *Rural* middle class. We were not top of the social scale by any means -- there was a very clear-cut class structure. But, because of the war, when I was eighteen I went to work in a factory. Not for a very long time, for about three or four months, like that. And that was a very... I won't say it was a radicalizing experience, although in some ways I think it was. It made me aware of what it meant to live and work as an industrial worker. It was the end of the war and it was a pretty crude old factory: I don't think there were any machines newer than 1918. And it was so excruciatingly boring and you earned so little.

I'm not exactly sure how it came about, but it was a very political time in the plant. And one of the things that I think was rather characteristic of plants in those days, which might not be so today, is there was a cafeteria and we would all get off for lunch at the same time. And...people would talk. The working class in Britain at that time, at the end of the war, were very, very politicized. So that, I suppose, was the first real shift.

And then, I actually went into a social work training course. We did some practicums and I was horrified. I did a summer practicum in Sheffield, a very active industrial town at that time -- I don't know what it is now. I just saw how people lived and I was totally horrified. And at the end of my course I thought: I'm not going to do social work, it's no good. Something else is needed.

I went to stay with a cousin in London, not technically in downtown London and she lived in an apartment. There were three or four apartments in the same house and in the basement was someone who was running for election as a Labour member of parliament in Essex. I hooked up with that and I worked for them -- for him, I suppose, and for his election.

And I went to live in a working class household. I was one of the few people who could drive, so I used to do the driving up to the Transport General Workers Union and get all the stuff and drive it back. But I also remember, very well, sitting around a table with the women from the local area. We would be addressing envelopes in those days and they would be repeating -- I suppose perhaps it was a saying -- 'Never again, never again. The Depression. We're never going to go through that again. Never again.'

And it *was*... at first, it was very successful, the Attlee government. And, then, gradually I could see it being undermined. I remember going to lunch with the guy whose election I worked for, who got elected, and meeting a guy, originally from Wales, a real lefty, at a time when he was getting concerned that (working class gains) were going to begin to be taken away. Now it didn't get radically taken away. But they did, for example, cut dental care out of health care. That might not seem so significant, but I think he thought it was. And basically, that is what I saw over a period of time.

I remember at one point when this friend of mine was coming up for re-election, I was invited to a party. This was at a house in Mayfair, which of course was kind of upmarket. This guy, who was giving the party, was a very, very wealthy man. He had this fireplace and it was green stone and so on. It was said – and I don't really know what the truth was – you could pick diamonds out. I can't remember ever actually picking a diamond out. But, I thought, there is something going wrong here...

I had a lot of contacts with people on the left, which I continued to have, but I wasn't really active anymore. Partly, of course, I was earning a living, doing secretarial work, until I decided I couldn't stand doing secretarial work any longer and I applied to the London School of Economics (LSE). I didn't really go to university sort of properly, other than my social work training, until I was 26.

I wanted to ask you about that experience at LSE and the whole cross-cultural mobility of doing your bachelor's degree at LSE, moving to Berkeley and then on to Vancouver...

Gosh, yeah! (laughs).

Is there some sense in which these experiences of cultural mobility provided a basis for your re-thinking of sociology? Your chapter in 1992, 'Remaking A Life, Remaking Sociology' reflects on that migration from Berkeley to Vancouver and your rejection of a more colonized form of sociology.

Yeah, that was a different shift, although I think to some extent it had been in the making. One of the things I experienced at Berkeley, which was a surprise in a way, was the degree to which women were of no account. I don't idealize the British system of that academic time. But at the same time, there *was* a tradition of women scholars in Britain, which was just non-existent in the

United States. And I wasn't used to being treated as a nobody, I suppose! (laughs) I'd done fairly well at the London School of Economics.

But I had very mixed feelings. I remember one course given by a guy called Tomatsu Shibutani, who didn't get to keep his job --- maybe I'll talk about that separately. But, he gave a course on George Herbert Mead and it was just absolutely brilliant, a brilliant introduction to a way of thinking. Much better than the symbolic interaction that was taught by (Herbert) Blumer. So, there was that. But apart from that, I don't remember finding anything very exciting.

I suppose, looking back, there were two aspects to it really. One was an attempt to develop an alternative to left-wing progressive Marxist influences: introducing the notion of mass society, shifting from talking about class to talking about social stratification. I suspect a lot of that was very closely tied with the importance of detaching this new kind of sociology from the past that McCarthy had gone after. It was '55 I think, at the tail end of the McCarthy period.

I remember when I got my research assistantship I had to sign a loyalty oath saying that I wouldn't attempt to overthrow the United States government by violence. It was bizarre for me. And very bizarre for me, too, was the non-presence of any left on the campus. There were very, very few people who were left wing and there was no politics on the campus *at all*, none at all. It was so different.

When I left England, it was just after there had been this election in the Dominican Republic of a lefty-democratically elected president. And the US Marines waltzed in and overtook.<sup>2</sup> And there was no mention of it in the newspapers in Berkeley or on the radio -- they didn't have television at that time. It was an extraordinary thing to me that all this could be going on, these actions of the United States and people *there* would not know about them. So it was a big contrast, there was a big cultural shift, not just in sociology, but in the politics: big, big.

The FBI used to come waltzing around to talk to me, and I think they thought...the way I played it, I was just an innocent British who didn't know

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<sup>2</sup> The left-wing government of Juan Bosch took power in February 1963 and was overthrown in September 1963. In April 1965, a pro-Bosch revolt was crushed by United States President Lyndon Johnson, who sent in the US Marines as part of the Cold War fight against Communism. Dorothy Smith graduated from Berkeley with a PhD in 1963, but stayed in Berkeley as lecturer until 1966.

what she was getting into. And so they would give me information about who to be wary of on campus and that kind of thing.

Really? (laughs) Wow.

Yeah. They were these great big guys wearing dull vests and with very rosy faces, which I figured was because they had been there, in the weather...

So this was really the height or the depth of the Cold War McCarthy era and you were at Berkeley. But, one of the things that always intrigued me is your relation with Erving Goffman. I'm not sure when you started working with him, but as I understand it he was your doctoral supervisor. And it would have been in the late '50s, when he was doing *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Asylums* (1961).

He was a very...He had a big impact, because he was someone who... You know he was originally Canadian.

From Alberta.

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He was... I don't know quite how to describe him. He was a sort of...I'm sure there is a term for this, but he just didn't have any respect for academic institutions, as such. He didn't really have any respect for the work of sociologists. He wanted to do this work that he was doing. It is hard, I think, now, to see how radical it was. You come into a department where quantitative methods are just coming into place – I took a year-long course in that area-- and there is this attempt to make a shift. Selznik was there with his organizational approach, Bendix, etc. etc. various others, Kornhauser, you wouldn't even know his name but....

And then here along comes Erving Goffman, a little, bouncy man -- he was quite small and bouncy. And what he put in place was, in some sense, radical: you can actually look at what people *do*. And it was almost an extraordinary thing to say, because there was no sociology at that time that had that character. There would have been, I suppose, if you went back to the Chicago School. But in a sense what was being dumped at Berkeley was the Chicago school, partly because of its connections with social movements. So he had a big impact. And he and my husband and I were actually quite good friends for some period of time. Maybe my thesis turned him on, because it is a study of a state mental hospital.

I've read that ethnography, yeah.

I don't think he was very happy about that. Although at the very end, when he signed off on it, he said: 'I didn't think there was anything new to say about mental hospitals, but you have'. But I think that was a kind of a concession. I don't think he was ever very enthused.

There are traces of Goffman's radical approach, this breath of fresh air that he was giving to sociology at Berkeley at the time, in the sociology that you went on to develop.

He freed you up to look around and look at what's going on.

Still, I wouldn't say that my thesis really particularly draws on that. It draws more on organizational theory. But, no, I certainly learned from it. I remember wandering around the campus with my first born, small kid, maybe a little older than my granddaughter is now. There is this one area where we used to walk: there was this lovely stream and there were trees and it was a bit hidden away from the rest of campus. Now it's all ringed over of course. But, I remember thinking that all this sociology I've been learning doesn't really seem to have anything to do with *living*. And when I got my doctorate, I had this impulse to go rip it up in front of them and say, 'No thanks to you!'.

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Interesting.

And Erving was not a big help. But mind you, he went through a very, very bad time because his wife committed suicide. So it is not really surprising that he was not going to be available. A very difficult time.

When I think of the breakthrough that you made in the 1970s and 1980s, after you came to Canada, what strikes me is how you pulled together three radical approaches: second wave feminism, including consciousness-raising as a method of problematizing experience; ethnomethodology; and the Marx of *The German Ideology*, to produce something new and well-grounded in theory and practice. Can you talk about how your distinctive approach to doing sociology, culminating with IE in the 1980s, took shape and developed as a method and research programme?

Well, I think there were a lot of things that came together. One was just an experience, a student in class, in the days when you had to actually line up to get into courses and so on. He was describing all the difficulties and he's saying, 'What does sociology have to say about this? How does sociology inform this?' And for some reason this kind of stuck with me, like I said, because I could see that the sociology that I had learned didn't actually ever come to grips with what was going on with people and with how an organization is actually put together.

Also at that time, there was a politicization, an interest in Marx. And there was a Marx reading group, which I dropped in on. And I wasn't satisfied with that, because we had courses in Marx at the London School of Economics -- even though, looking back, I see they were really perverted. But I had remembered reading a section of *The German Ideology* in which Marx and Engels said, 'We're going to have done with speculation and all this crap. We're going to start with actual people, their actual work.' And I thought that must be where I should go.

What was distinctive, I suppose, was that because I had had this experience at the London School of Economics, I was *not* going to read this work, *The German Ideology*, as it might have been interpreted by a Marxist theorist. I was going to read it as it *was*. And I was going to pay attention. Of course, I wasn't going to read it in German, I don't have the ability. But, I was going to read it all the way through.

Which is what I did.

And if I read someone like Raymond Williams, I just think: 'He's wrong.' Or Mike Lebowitz' recent book and interpretation of it: 'He's wrong, he's just absolutely wrong.' And at the same time, discovering that in the latter part of the book, which is probably about 500 to 600 pages, Marx was-- and this I think was definitely Marx and not Engels -- in dialogue with these people he's disagreeing with. And in the course of doing it, he is, in a sense, finding out how to do it differently.

And that's what I found fascinating.

Now at the same time, the Canadianization thing was on. I don't know if you remember all that. That's when I was becoming aware that essentially, when I swanned into UBC teaching two semesters of theories of deviance, and you've got this theory, that theory, this theory, that theory...I realize that all I'm doing is this job of reproducing a sociology that really originates and is really about the United States and not about Canada. And, you actually had to start somewhere differently. So: the idea of starting with actual people and



what they are actually doing. Which, of course, as I transliterate from actual individuals to actual people, I'm making what you might call a Goffman move, because he's always talking about actual people.

People who are embodied and situated.

Yeah. Real people. Yeah.

And the notion of the knowledgeable practitioner as a starting point, that ethnomethodological aspect.

I suppose. I think to some extent, one of the things that Garfinkel (1967) does in one of his first essays in the book that I studied in ethnomethodology, is he has a critique of the way that sociology is written that I found really, really powerful. And I did find ethnomethodology very interesting, at first, perhaps particularly in its more ...I find Aaron Cicourel's work interesting. I used to go to conferences, in Boston, and I also spent quite a bit of time in Santa Barbara, on a visiting basis.

At the time, I think that ethnomethodology was quite a challenge to the hegemony of positivism and of the notion of a total, generalizing sociology: abstract formulations, good-for-all-time approaches to social science.

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It did have a big impact. I was less impressed with where it could go, partly because it seemed to be very much bounded by what's going on immediately around you, in a sense. But yes – no -- I suppose you might describe it as sort of liberating, in some ways.

It remained basically a micro sociology. And one of your really important moves in developing a sociology for people, institutional ethnography and so on, is to pull those ethnomethodological insights together with Marxist insights and feminist insights to create something quite distinctive.

Well, the feminist aspect didn't really happen until I came to Canada, to UBC, because that was when the women's movement hit, in the late 60s and '70s. And that was a revelation to me because you could see -- when you took up our experience as women --how, as a subject, you'd always been operating in the intellectual and political and cultural sphere as a male. A certain, incredible

realization. And then going through this transformation and trying to learn to think from somewhere else, it was very...

I had a friend, for example, who was really...well I don't know whether this could have been really, really, really. But, she said that she would look in the mirror and she couldn't see herself. Well, I'm sure she saw something physical, but she couldn't see...she had lost her sense of who she was. And I remember going through two years...in another paper, I've described this as like a process of being in labour. It wasn't as painful. But, when you're in labour, you have this experience of this huge muscular process that takes over your body. And this was rather like this as a socio-psycho mental, I don't know, process of transformation. Because everything I'd learned how to think, all the things I'd been *good* at, et cetera et cetera, you don't just ditch it, but you had begin to find out how to relate to it differently. So a pretty massive, massive shift.

Related to that shift and the Canadianization movement that was part of the context for the shift, was the development of the so-called new Canadian political economy in the 1970s and 1980s.

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I had a lot of friends, some of them were active in the new Marxism that developed....But, I had difficulties, I had difficulties...I'd actually learned from Marx how to think about ideology rather differently. And I could see that there were all these little groups that were formed around ideological differences. And they were so fixated on their ideological differences that they couldn't work together. I found it very, very upsetting. Very upsetting. But, not so much the political economy aspect. That was a separate issue, because I did have contacts with the people who were running *Studies in Political Economy (SPE)* and so on.

You published an essay in 1989 in SPE that was a kind of feminist critique of some of the political economy that was being done at the time.

I got into deep, deep trouble.

Is that right?

I was invited, I gave it as a presentation at a conference, I suppose it was political economists. And I remember, there was a dinner afterwards and I was sitting somewhere. And people came in. And they avoided me. And I was

sitting there almost alone, because they didn't want to have anything to do with me. And I'd been on the board of *Studies in Political Economy*. I can't really remember the sequence of this...And I was asked, I was told... I was dropped.

You were dropped from the board.

Yeah.

On the whole political economy question, what I wonder about is that period in the 1980s, when you were putting a fair amount of your energy into political economy analysis. For example, on the ferry over here today I was just re-reading your essay in Roxana Ng's book with Varda Burstyn, a little Garamond book that you put out in 1985 on the *Women, Class, Family and State*. And then, after that '89 article --and it sounds like there was some ostracism involved -- you no longer write as a political economist and it's not specifically for a political economy readership. Although, of course, there is still political economy in your work. For instance, the essay in *Writing the Social* (1999) on ruling relations is full of insight on political economy. But, it was basically that...

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I'm not sure. But I think that it was certainly partly, partly that process of detaching from political economy. I think also, there is work I had done on women, class and family, which I'm not ashamed of. And to some extent it's taken up again in the work that Alison Griffith and I did on mothering for schooling (e.g., Smith and Griffith 2005).

But, I think that I felt that the topic went beyond the scope of...I mean I would have to go in there full-time if I was going to do it. Because, particularly when issues of race are raised, and those kind of things, you just... It's not that I don't think... I could have moved in that direction. But what I had done that far was based so much within the connections with UK history. I remember Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff's remarkable work and making those connections and so on. But was this Canada? So I decided that I wasn't going to.

I had done a lot, a lot, a lot more reading in Marx. And I felt that when I wrote what I've sometimes called an ontology for institutional ethnology, that I wrote it consciously in a way where I could say that ontologically it's the same as Marx views. But I realized that I didn't really know how to make the

connections. I didn't know how to do it and I was not satisfied. Yes, the political economists would go on, but I had been...

It gets so complicated, Bill. Because when I went to Toronto in '77, one of the things that happened was, that for various reasons I don't understand, *here*, I'd been an academic. But I had also been an activist in various ways. It's true that I didn't join any of these groups, for what I thought were very good reasons. But I worked for some of them. I must say, looking back, they were really screwed up! (laughs) *But* I believe that if you want to see socialism happen, you work for it. I have some questions, now, about the feasibility, but that's a different question.

But when I went to Toronto, one of the things that I found, because I was an academic or for whatever reason, I absolutely was cut out of connections to activism. And it was a very, very painful, painful, painful thing. It was like a big piece of my life was cut off, shut down. And I never quite understood it.

Did you... I mean you've worked here for a long time, but where did you grow up?

Well, originally in the states, until I was sixteen. I moved to Canada when I was still in high school.

Oh, yeah. Where were you living?

Basically in Pennsylvania, before moving to London, Ontario. I finished high school just outside of London, Ontario. But, for me, it's interesting because when I moved to Toronto, which was 1975, I had finished my BA at Brock in St-Catharines. And that was when I became much more political engaged, when I was a graduate student. Whereas you were moving to OISE as professor and although OISE had a lot of radical scholars and had that reputation and everything, perhaps it was somewhat cut off from the world.

I felt actively cut out in these various ways, I suppose. I remember going to meetings when, again, nobody would talk to me. But they wouldn't not talk to me like this one occasion I was describing to you. It was just like they weren't interested. Or, I don't know... who knows? Maybe being a prof had a different character. When I had worked here I had done quite a lot with union organization among women and so on. It took time to overcome being a prof. That meant you really had to not talk (laughs) et cetera. But, I had, in fact,

developed what has become institutional ethnography in the context of doing what we called pre-organizational work. I remember Roxana (Ng) and I were very active in doing this work of bringing immigrant women together to begin to examine institutional, governmental processes. And we weren't doing organization, but we were very actively connected with it.

We also did a whole organizational thing. I helped to set up this Women's Research Centre, which specifically functioned like this. We did this whole organization around women in single industry towns, in which we helped them come together to talk about what their issues were. They weren't supposed to take feminist issues out of the book, as it were. But, they needed to talk about what *were* the concrete issues for women. And then we put that together for them and helped them to organize. We had this way of looking at things from the point of women, in the sense of how to make change: what do you need to know in order to begin to think about making change? And that was very much part of what we were doing with the Women's Research Centre. It subsequently became taken over and became something.... Not that they didn't do good work but I've always felt bad that this kind of method of work and organization...

So that's the prehistory of IE, in a sense: doing that work, trying to get to the life situation of the immigrant women, in this case, and thinking about possible change processes from that standpoint. I wanted to ask a question about standpoints, about the whole evolution of your thinking on standpoints. This is, of course, a highly debated issue. But on your shift from the standpoint of women to the standpoint of people, I guess I would preface this by saying: in the 1990s, feminist standpoint theories came under attack particularly from the post-modern left, if I can use that awkward phrase. But standpoint formulations are, of course, diverse and thinking about your own shift to the standpoint of people, implying a sociology for people, I wonder about a couple of things. Although this move deals effectively with charges of essentialism and insensitivity to difference, some of the key charges that people have laid at the feet of standpoint approaches, does it also proliferate the range of possible popular standpoints, risking a relativism not unlike that which plagues the postmodernists? And secondly, does the shift in your sociology from 'for women' to 'for people' have resonances with intersectionality as a salient theoretical and strategic concept for considering how different movements might be woven together?

Let me take up that second part first. Firstly, it's much more straightforward going from sociology for women to sociology for people. One was that you really couldn't just have a sociology for women. And the second one was, at OISE, some of the people who were working with me were men. Looking back on it, one of the leading one of them was gay, George Smith. And another was very committed working class from Vancouver, Gerald De Montigny. And they took up institutional ethnography. How could it be said that it was just a sociology for women? In some sense, you can't. It's not on, really, when you come down to it. So that was very straightforward.

Now the issue of standpoints and relativism. In some ways, I wouldn't have minded ditching the notion of standpoint, although I think that it can be useful methodologically. But, it was imposed on us by Sandra Harding (e.g., Harding 2004). I think what she did was something very interesting: she drew together the work of a number of feminist writers and showed that there was this common critical thread. And she describes this as an epistemology, and she called it the standpoint epistemology. And that was both useful and tended to a bloody nuisance, really. (laughs).

But, just to get to the relativity aspect. You can, in theory, start anywhere in an institutional ethnography with what's actually going on with people. But then you are discovering how things are actually being put together. And that is not just specific to a particular individual. You are looking at these relations, which have a generalizing, standardizing kind of character. And so you are actually discovering things. And this is one of the things that I think is very exciting about institutional ethnography as it goes forward. We have learned more and more how --- whatever you want to call this 'ruling relations' thing -- they're put together. And you can learn in fields that are very different, with particular institutional focus. And I find that fascinating and I'm really interested in taking it further.

And that's where I think I can begin, *now*, to see reconnecting it with Marx. Although you can't just import Marx from mid-19th century to the 21<sup>st</sup>. But because I have my interpretation of his epistemology and the kind of basic ontology that I think he relies on throughout, I think, in fact, you can't really understand what he is doing in *Capital* unless you recognize that he's still working with actual individuals and their actual work. In the *Grundrisse*, he takes up the concept of the economy and he asks: how can you have a concept like that? And it's partly what I see him doing in relation to political economy. After all, *Capital* is a critique. And he's saying you can't just take these concepts and treat them as if they were the things themselves. You have to

understand that, behind them they express actual social relations among people. And in the economy, there is this interchange between money and commodity or exchange.

So, I'm beginning to be able, *just* beginning to be able to think institutional ethnography through to where I know how to think about that and make a connection. (pauses). Now.

At one time, I had this ontological consistency with Marx. I *knew* I had that, but I didn't know how to begin to see the connection between what you do in institutional ethnography and -- not what you do in Marx -- but there are things that you could do in relation to how things get organized in this economic process. I haven't written about this yet, I'm only just starting there. But anyway, that's the direction. And in a sense, it held me up because I just didn't see how to do it. And I'm not sure that I do now.

In the highly financialized form of capitalism that neoliberalism has bestowed on us and that is now very much in crisis, isn't this, in a sense, a further move into highly textually mediated ruling relations? In understanding this, it seems to me that IE offers some really important resources.

Yeah. You'd have to have skills that I don't have.

Somebody should be taking this up. (laughs)

I'm hoping, I'm really hoping! One of my main hopes was this woman at the University of Calgary, Liza McCoy, when she was doing her thesis (1999), which was looking at the reorganization of higher education and accounting practices. You might have read some of her work. In order to do her thesis, she took two courses, one in financial and one in management accounting. And she also had a degree in economics. So, now, of course, she has moved away from that and she is interested in visual sociology. So, she isn't going to do it. (laughs) But somebody will.

Let me ask about IE and the question of its democratic underpinnings, which Marie Campbell and Frances Gregor (2002) have alluded to. I recall attending a colloquium of yours several years ago. And there were some comparisons between your work and Habermas' work in terms of convergences between your concerns and Habermas' analysis of lifeworld colonization by the system, his valorization of the lifeworld based

communicative rationality as the ever present ground for a democratic way of life. And so I wonder if Habermas is a thinker worth considering here, in thinking about IE: whether your commitment to a people's sociology in some way entails a principle such as communicative democracy, or what Fraser (1997) has called the parity of participation, the notion of favouring social arrangements that enable all to participate as peers in a social life. How do you think about these issues that bear upon the normative foundation of IE?

First of all, I've read quite a lot of Habermas, although not recently. And I think the latter question of yours raises issues about Michel Foucault. And in both these cases, what is recognized is that we are living in the same world. And to some extent we are looking at the same chain of mountains, if you like, is the metaphor that Alison Griffith has used. But we see them very differently and go about the processes of research and thinking about them differently.

I don't like to use concepts like rationality. Because I want very much to rely on discovering how things are actually working, how they are actually being put together by actual people. So I'm pretty sticklish about going with that piece of Marx and Engels. And I don't see that in Habermas nor in Michel Foucault. I very much appreciated Habermas' dissertation work (published in English in 1989, editor's note) on the emergence of the public sphere. But the theorizing of the moral dimension: that doesn't do anything for me. (Repeats) It doesn't do anything for me.

It's been my experience, that as you get to do research that discovers how things work, you can then tell people how they work. In other places, I've said it's a little bit like making a map. You can say, 'This is how it's put together. This is how things are going on'. And people can use this. Now what you take up, of course, depends on where you are, what you can get funding to do, that kind of thing. So there are many areas, like the financial, as we were just saying, that would be very, very fascinating to do.

But, IE *does* have this capacity to return knowledge to people, which extends their ordinary knowledge of how things are put together. Now most of the time, this happens in professional or quasi-professional settings: it goes to nurses, it goes to paramedics, teachers. My daughter in law is an elementary teacher in Ontario and is very impressive in being active in the teacher's union. She finds talking to me very useful: sometimes just the questions that I ask about her work and that kind of thing. Because I think like an institutional ethnographer. So, my sense is that it has this capacity to open things up.



Whether we actually are able to make use of that capacity adequately is another matter.

This kind of experience I was telling you about when we were working with the Women's Research Centre in Vancouver, that was really the ideal situation. I did a lot of work in Toronto, first of all, with women teachers. But once they got going they really didn't need...(laughs). And that's fine. And people have done useful work in terms of working on making change. I think perhaps the most striking is the work that Ellen Pence (eg., Pence and Paymer 1993) has done around issues of domestic abuse in Duluth, Minnesota. Gary (Kinsman) has, I think, made interesting uses of IE. And certainly that book of his is pretty influential.

Yes. Quite inspirational. That actually was going to be my next question: whether you could comment on recent developments in IE, such as activist ethnography, which begins earlier with George Smith, but more recently is taken up by Gary Kinsman in *Sociology for Changing the World* (Frampton et al, 2006) with his co-editors. And there also is recent research on internet based communication and CCTV (closed circuit television) as textually mediated organization (Walby 2005), expanding the scope of the textual.

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I'd really like to see more of that. Yeah.

I guess the question is: in what new directions do you see IE going or would you like to see IE going? And is there some point at which some of the new approaches might push the envelope so far that it begins to tear?

Absolutely.

So, how do you see IE developing as a vibrant research programme linked to emancipatory politics?

I think that the problem isn't entirely in IE. I think it's partly in the current, political...One of the things to me, if I reflect back on my early engagement with the labour movement is, it has begun to seem to me that the other side is winning. And I don't see...I actually belong to the Green Party and so on, but I'm not active politically. It's partly my age, because you don't have the level of energy. But I'm not clear where I could be active and I would feel that I was

doing something. And where I could use these skills that I have. Because I do have them.

I don't know. How do you feel about that? In a sense, I would say, I can see institutional ethnography being useful on the left, et cetera et cetera, but where is it? Where is the left that you could work with in that way?

A lot of IE has been done within different specific sites of what could be broadly called the Keynesian welfare state, social work and programming and so on. But there are interesting studies that really go into quite different contexts, whether internet communications or questions of surveillance and CCTV. Really, taking the notion of text -- you have a very generous concept of the textual -- and really going with that in some interesting ways.

That has a lot of potential in terms of exploration, of how things are put together in the contemporary world. But, I do think that beginning to explore the internet is very important in beginning to extend the notions of the forms of social organization that are coming into being. So, and the CCTV one, by Kevin Walby, I thought that was very interesting. Except -- this is one of the things that irritates me particularly about Foucauldian theory -- you arrive at a concept like surveillance and you stop. Because when I was discussing his work with him, it seems to me where you needed to go was to begin to see how this enters into an organizational process that goes beyond surveillance. And in a sense, that's a direction that I want to go in.

But, you must have this experience yourself with your books: once they are out there, people make of them what they want to make of it. You don't have any control! (Laughs)

That's right. (laughs). As you intimated, I wanted to ask you a question about Foucault. There is both resonance and dissonance between your approach to sociology and the work of Foucault. There is a concern with the discursive, but while Foucault problematized the discursive practices that make us what we are and de-centered the subject, you problematized the experienced world at ground zero and portrayed the subject as a knowledgeable practitioner situated in that world. A Foucauldian might say that since discourse is always-already working through us there can be no ground zero. Better to de-center the subject than to reify it, better to embrace a Nietzschean nominalism than to appeal to some direct

experience outside discursive formations. In your response to Susan Heckman’s (1997) *Truth and Method*...

(laughs)

...You noted that what you propose is not a reduction of concepts to reality, but a rejection of the concepts/reality dualism in favour of a view that, to quote you, ‘Concepts are also ‘in’ actuality’ (Smith 1997). And then in ‘Telling the Truth After Postmodernism’ (chapter six in Smith 1999), which you wrote about the same time, you developed an account of language and meaning that synthesises Mead with Bakhtin and Volosinov. With the fullness of time, a few years after those publications, how do you see the relationship between your work and Foucault’s? And what is at stake in getting one’s analysis of language and discourse right?

(laughs.) On the issue of the subject, this is a very straightforward thing. I go back to Marx: actual individuals. We’re talking about actual people. Not just subjects but people, people in bodies, et cetera, et cetera. You can’t dissolve bodies back into discourse, no matter what you do. Because there are always people who are practicing the discourse. So the discourse is something people are doing, it’s in the actual. I know there is a problem with the term ‘actual’.

Now there is a French translation in process of my book *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. And one of the problems they are going to have is with the term ‘actual’. Although at the moment, they’ve been consulting me about what to do with the concept of the ruling relations, since it doesn’t translate readily. And since they want to position my book as an antithesis to Bourdieu, they don’t want to use a language that hooks it back into Bourdieu. There is a problem with ‘actual’ translated into French. I’m not sure how they are going to do it.

But my little, I suppose, metaphor, is being in malls in Toronto. And you find this map that says ‘You are here.’ And it is that kind of finger pointing off the text, into the world in which you stand, looking at the map or reading it, that is very different. Foucault *never* introduces that.

At all. Ever....in his notion of the subject or the constitution of the subject in discourse. He doesn’t resolve discourse back into the actualities of people who are, talking, et cetera, as we are now.

And in Bakhtin, the sensitivity to the dialogical...

I suppose in the post-modernist, poststructural number -- I am not even sure now which it is -- there's this kind of view that you're referring to: that discourse is always overpowering, in the sense that what you can recognize as reality and what you speak of et cetera et cetera is already predetermined. And that comes partly out of Saussure, as well as out of Foucault. But in Bakhtin's work, it is very different. Because although he has a very closely analogous view of the speech genre at different stages of his work, as pre-existing any moment of utterance, he suggests that any moment of utterance always enters into a dialogue with whatever is pregiven in a discourse or language or speech genre. So you are never fully determined by the genre or the discourse. And it always has this creative character in which you're not just reproducing, but speaking always beyond and moving forward, I suppose you might say. And that's why Bakhtin is...better (laughs), in my view.

You've mentioned some of your former students like Alison (Griffith) and Roxana (Ng), Liza (McCoy), George Smith, Gary Kinsman. And I've long been impressed with your record of mentorship. Your intellectual influence has been conveyed partly through your own voluminous writings, but in great part through mentoring an impressive number of students. A recent cv lists an astonishing 34 PhDs that you have supervised, who have also gone on to mentor others. What this points to is IE as, not only a critical research programme, but an embodied network whose central node is Dorothy Smith. Or if you prefer, a community of scholar-activists that has considerable cohesiveness and reach, evident within learned societies such as the CSA (Canadian Sociology Association) and the SSSP (Society for the Study of Social Problems). This style of intellectual work and dissemination is quite different from say, the pattern of scholars like Anthony Giddens. I'm sure he has mentored a good many students, but the traces of his influence run mostly in the grooves his own prodigious intellectual production: his influence has largely been textually mediated. And rather few researchers have done much with structuration theory: it remains an abstract, metatheoretical perspective.

What would you do with? (laughs). Sorry!

Are there distinct advantages of approaching intellectual production as a collaborative project of community development and might there be a gendered subtext to Giddens's approach and yours?

There could be a gendered subtext. But I don't know, it's hard for me to say. In some ways, I was very moved, way back when I was still at Berkeley, by Noam Chomsky's (1967) call on intellectuals to tell the truth. One of the components of my gradual shift is that sociology didn't have the capacity to do that: to tell the truth. In the work that I've done to develop the capacity to tell the truth, to find out, to discover, you can't do it all. There has got to be other people.

I was very impressed when a couple of people -- I think it was probably Marie Campbell and Liza McCoy, I forget now -- who had completed their degrees, their doctorates. But they were not yet employed and they wanted to have a seminar in which they could discuss their work. And there were some graduate students who were fairly far along. And we came together in this little seminar to talk about their work. And what was very, very striking was how, and I mentioned this earlier I think, even though people were taking up very different areas of work, we could learn from one another. And I suppose that that experience told me: this is something you really need in institutional ethnography. You don't just want a bunch of case studies. You are really beginning to want to learn more and more about how these text mediated forms of ruling, if you like, are put together.

At UVic (the University of Victoria), you have this amazing situation, that by the time people have done their first year in the MA programme, they are so bloody bored, that bringing them into contact so you can actually go out and look at things...And those are things that I learn from. It isn't just that there is teaching. I'm learning from what people find out. Sometimes even if they don't write very good papers, they actually find some interesting things.

I like that.

It's a very open-ended approach and very socially oriented in the sense of co-learning, learning from each other.

Yes. You see, you're not interested in coming back to talk about structuration or anything. If you go out and look out and find instances of structuration, what do you gain? I learned a lot, for example, from one student, I won't mention her name at the moment. But she didn't actually write a very good paper. But what she learned, she was looking at local food production. And she had links with the group at UVic, I guess it was a couple of years ago, that was trying to get the university to purchase from local producers. And she just discovered the various kinds of barriers to this on the side of the university. And then, she also knew some local small farmers and talked to them. And

what she learned from them was essentially that they have got enough to do. And taking on the work of marketing was too much. And I think since there's developed a distinct organization that actually is doing the marketing. And there is now some purchasing by UVic. But that's a separate thing.

I'd learned some economics at the London School of Economics: demand, supply, price, determination of prices and that kind of thing. But what I found fascinating and what her work drew my attention to, was that a market was an actual work organization. And I had never thought of it like that before. I've taken that a little further because that is where I began to see the connectedness with political economy.

So, I do. I do learn from the work they do.

In *The Everyday World as Problematic*, you argued that sociology is part of the ruling apparatus. Is this claim as persuasive today as it was a quarter of a century ago? How do you gauge the transformative impact within sociology of developments like IE or participatory action research and public sociology, these emerging alternatives for sociology?

I think there is some problem with the concept of the ruling relations. Because it was invented at a moment when, in the women's movement, you could see the dominant experience was our exclusion. And so: there they were. But, all the gains the women's movement has made, there has been a renaissance: the whole cultural shift, political, intellectual, it has been quite extraordinary.

But you have to say it's all in the same mould. And if you are doing institutional ethnography, where are you operating? You are operating in a discourse, you're operating in text-mediated stuff. So, you are not going to retreat and go back to the intellectual farm. So you recognize somehow that maybe you have to think about the ruling relations differently.

And that is one of the things that I have said in that paper that I did two or three years ago, that was published in *Socialist Studies* on 'Making Change From Below' (2007). I think that recognizing that the change process has to actually engage in and be part of and active in and know how to operate in...

What I'm suggesting to the French translators is that they don't use the term 'ruling relations'. But they use the term 'organizing relations' or something like that, because you can't avoid that, since you've got to use it, you've got to work within it, and make it work for you.

I guess another emergent trend within the academy has been what Janice Newson has referred to as neoliberalizing practices of managerialism and corporatization. Her book with Horward Bookbinder was published years ago now, in 1988, and these processes have been in motion for some time. And they tend to colonize the classroom and shrink the space for intellectual engagement. And they also add to the long-standing bias that puts abstract theory before practice, an emphasis on cost-effective teaching and learning practices.

And yet, as you point out in a recent interview (Smith 2010), conducted by Janice Newson, the university has also been changed for the better, in great part as a result of the feminist and anti-racist struggles of recent decades. You note, in that interview, your own current CURA (Community University Research Alliance) project: Rural Women Making Change ([www.rwmc.uoguelph.ca](http://www.rwmc.uoguelph.ca)), as a prominent instance in publicly-accountable research. So, what lessons are coming out of that project, with regard to, on the one hand to rural women's struggles and on the other hand, initiatives to democratize the academy?

I'm not sure that I would, today, respond in the same way. Because I think that, yes, real gains have been made of the kind that I referred to. But, I think what's happening to universities today is much more serious than I was perhaps aware of. Or, I'm not sure it happened to the extent that it is happening now. And again, when I was saying earlier, seeing the other side is winning, I find it very depressing. And I find it very depressing on a number of fronts. Like I find the whole issue of climate change extremely scary, very depressing.

And one of the things is, I don't know why the NDP (New Democratic Party) is, at the federal level... just in order to get something out of the parliamentary process, they...a game has to be played but I just find...I find...

You see, I think realistically, this is the difficulty: it's the one that I put forward in the paper I wrote, the plenary thing I did for Socialist Studies. Which is that the nation-state doesn't manage the economy anymore. It manages the population vis-à-vis the economy, its resources vis-à-vis the economy. I'm not clear where you can go. In your work (eg, Carroll 2010), you're showing us the extensive degree to which power is not here. And even though I probably wouldn't be able to be super active, I would like to have the possibility of relating my work to...

And now, the Rural Women Making Change was very interesting to work with. They were very effective. It was very well designed and set up. It

had a brilliant coordinator, Susan Turner, who knew how to deliver, so that you're conforming to what the new SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) wants, you produce outcomes for them. But at the same time they were outcomes that really worked, in many ways, for those involved. I don't know if that programme is still accessible. Of course, the Rural Women Making Change thing was finished a little more than a year ago.

A couple more questions that get on to some of the more, in a sense, depressing aspects of our contemporary world. And the first one is a sort of wrap-up question. You have long been known as a leading proponent of both feminism and socialism. And I remember your 1977 talk at UBC feminism and Marxism, I re-read that on the ferry as well, where you anticipated your concept of ruling rulings in speaking of the standpoint of male domination, which is the standpoint of the ruling class. 'Isms', of course, abound. And as you know, some years ago, Bob Connell, in an appreciative commentary on your work (1992), characterized it as a 'sober anarchism'...

I don't know why. (Laughs)

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How do you negotiate your own political identity in a world that, in some ways, seems far removed from the old and new left, first and second wave feminism, and even late 20<sup>th</sup> century Parisian anarchism?

My god. I'm not sure that I do.

I think I'm impressed with people like my daughter-in-law. Not that I'm not impressed with my son, too. But, she is an activist in a way in which he is not. I don't think there is a clear-cut way to go. I think that it has to be discovered and it's going to be discovered by people like her.

We went out to dinner on my birthday and had a big argument about what went on in Toronto around the G20. I can't remember what I disagreed about now, but it probably doesn't really matter. But what they did in response to my disagreement, they went online and brought up all this stuff out of youtube, that various people had filmed with their phones. Or, some were reporters. And they reviewed it.

And then I could see, Anna went out for a walk. And she went out to *think*. And that's what she's like. And she wants to be active in the teachers union. And she and my son, who is not directly an activist but he helps her in preparing her positions, papers, reports and so on, I think people like her are



going to be having to create new forms of organization and they will be online. My son is very active in babble or whatever it's called...rabble or babble.

It is babble, I think. It's rabble babble. (See 'babble' on [www.rabble.ca](http://www.rabble.ca)).

He's very active in these kinds of discussions on the left, on the internet, which I don't myself, follow. I think that they will be emerging. Maybe out of this G20, someone will produce a documentary.

It's very very disturbing, what they showed. I hadn't realized just how bad it had been.

The extent of the police state situation.

Yes, really. It's a problem. I think that someone in my situation has to depend on the next generation, at least as long as I'm around. If I think of the kind of working class action and organizations that existed in my youth when I was becoming in a sense, enlightened, that doesn't exist. The potentiality doesn't exist, in that way. So.

Right. Let me ask you this: Lenin's question, 'What is to be done?' is never easily answered. And certainly, as we're discussing now, not easily answered today. One challenge has been to discover organizational forms in which democratic and transformative practice can thrive. From the start, your work focussed on social organization. Might a sociology for people rooted in a feminist form of grassroots organizing provide part of an answer to Lenin's question?

I think it could do a lot. If I'm thinking back to the way of working that I described earlier, before I went to Toronto, it was very, very effective what we could do. And I think that could still be done. And I think to some extent this is how Ellen Pence has worked. And actually Susan Turner has also worked in that way. In addition to her role in Rural women Making Change, she has also worked elsewhere, with rural women in various situations. So I think that potentiality does exist.

I don't know. Who knows?

I suppose one of the things that maybe I'm too tempted by... Last year, I've been doing these workshops. And one of the people that I worked with last year is a student in the School of Business at Boston University. And she was very, very impressed. So she set up something in Montreal at the

beginning of August, where I'm going to meet with people, these are women, from that school, who are interested.

And I'm interested in whether institutional ethnography couldn't move into exploring these kinds of larger things...I think that's possible. But on the other hand, I don't want to lose sight of the grassroots work which was really so effective in the early days.

Yes, definitely. One last question, and you anticipated it earlier in registering your concerns about climate change, which indeed is a very worrisome issue: The ecological crisis is one of the great challenges facing humanity today. In closing, I wonder how your critical materialist sociology can provide resources both within the academy and without for problematizing a raft of lived actualities that might be termed ecocidal. And for explicating how in various contexts peoples lives are caught up in ruling relations that are ecologically unsustainable. So, are their prospects for alignment between IE and political ecology or for some kind of politically ecological IE as a kind of initiative within the framework of IE?

I think that it is possible. I was a bit overextended in May, I guess. But I hooked up to some extent with what Martha (McMahon) has been doing. And in the course of doing that, I came to be able to begin to see political economy, or economy, as an actual social organization. And I learned quite a bit about industrial farming. And I could see the way in which the practices of production in industrial farming are shaped to produce the standardization of the product that can correspond, if you like, to financial and managerial organization: translates into some monetary form, cost or da te da te da...

So you can begin to see how decision processes have this kind of standardizing effect, which is potentially disastrous. I think. Which is then hooked into a whole organization of corporate stuff. And I think that I certainly wouldn't be ready to write about it yet. But I'm interested in going on and thinking about and trying to get some more data.

I bought a book that I left in Toronto because I just have too much. But it's on Monsanto. And I'm interested in the GM (genetically modified) stuff in terms of how it does this standardizing of the whole organization of production. And I read some material that described the ways in which...it says a lot of things that I still don't know, well, just in general, of course.

But looking at the production of chicken, the processes of production, the relationship between producers and the purchasers are contract relations. On the other hand, the purchasers can impose requirements in terms of

changes in technology et cetera et cetera, on the producers. And I am interested in that kind of relation in the industrial farming context.

But I'm not quite sure where I'm going to find more information about it. It's a bit laborious. I'm going to read a whole book on Monsanto and a lot of it's a critique on the earlier careless stuff with bisphenols. But that's in the past.

Yeah, I can see that as a good example of how IE could follow the production process. And as you say, the standardization, the ways that things get translocally coordinated in these large industrial agricultural complexes. It's an important piece of the ecological process.

I just have to find out where the information is! (laughs).

As ever.

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