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THE UTILITY OF A STRATEGIC POSTMODERNISM

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ABSTRACT: *Although the postmodern turn has profound implications for the social sciences, its reception in sociology has been mixed. In this article I briefly review these encounters and suggest an embrace of a "strategic postmodernism." Such an approach explicitly integrates both the institutional basis of discursive understandings of the self and the empirical project of knowledge construction within the context of change and transformation.*

In *A Passion for Difference* Henrietta Moore (1994:29) chides the social sciences for their "perverse silence" on the question of postmodernist and deconstructionist critiques of the unified, rational subject of the social sciences. Reflecting this standoffishness, the great majority of sociologists have avoided thinking about or have dismissed the postmodern turn as irrelevant or frivolous, even though its effects on Western academic discourse seriously challenge traditional sociological thought and encourage a rethinking of its theoretical and methodological paradigms (Agger 1991; Lemert 1995, 1997; Rosenau 1992; Smith 1995). Others within the discipline have engaged with the postmodern turn, writing about these encounters and integrating this intellectual climate into the project of knowledge construction (see, e.g., Bauman 1988, 1992; Connor 1996; Denzin 1996, 1997; Featherstone 1988, 1989, 1991; Richardson 1991; Seidman and Wagner 1992; Smart 1992, 1993). In this article I suggest the usefulness of the term "strategic postmodernism" (Lemert 1995) and review the relationship between postmodern insights and sociology. The focus is on constructing an institutionally based "social postmodernism" (Nicholson and Seidman 1995) that is concerned with an ethics of critical praxis as well as with the empirical project so central to the sociological enterprise.

SOCIOLOGY MEETS POSTMODERNISM

"Postmodernism" is a slippery term that intentionally attempts to defy definition and categorization. It is used here to imply a historical moment expressed as the cultural logic of late capitalism as well as a broad intellectual perspective whose

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project is one of decentering and de-essentializing the subject, challenging the notion that reason can provide reliable and objective foundations for knowledge production, and disrupting the hegemony of science as the only paradigm for the generation of truth. In this sense individuals can no longer be seen as fully rational, unified, integrated, and/or coherent self-knowledgeable agents and truth claims are revealed for their relative and indeterminate character (Butler 1990; de Lauretis 1989; Foucault 1978; Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984; Nicholson 1990). These new uncertainties have the ability to facilitate a loss of authority and sense of mission for intellectuals and an increasing disenchantment and anxiety as the historically given, taken-for-granted certainties and universalities of truth and judgment dissipate (Douglas 1986). In addition, a central critique of this new intellectual climate involves the way Western social science has employed a Eurocentric perspective and created "Others" against which the Western, white (normatively male) subject is normalized (Bhabha 1983; Said 1978; Spivak 1988, 1990).

While modern sociology developed in response to the requirements of the modern state and its needs for empirical social management knowledge, these needs no longer exist or have changed their focus (Lash and Urry 1994; Tester 1993). According to postmodernism, no longer can sociology continue to "treat social reality as an object and analyze data as if they [were] shared concepts with consensual meanings" (Smith 1995:58). Postmodernism has ruptured the grand narratives of modernist sociological thought. As Featherstone writes,

There are, of course, lessons to be learned from a postmodern sociology: it focuses attention on the ways in which theories are built up, their hidden assumptions, and questions the theorist's authority to speak for the "other," who as many researchers are finding out, is now often actively disputing both the account and the authority of the academic theorist. (1988:205)

In *Sociology after the Crisis* (1995) and *Postmodernism Is Not What You Think* (1997), Lemert describes and responds to the broad cultural and political anxieties represented by postmodernist thought. He explains the difference between the modern and postmodern within sociology in terms of their relationship to truth claims and to social change generally, emphasizing that postmodernism is less a theory than a condition of social life brought about by the troubles into which modernity has got itself.

If the postmodern is thus understood by the improbable mixing and juxtaposition of past and present form, the modern would be an arrangement of those forms along the improbable axis of continuous progress. The postmodern, even if it is only the ideology of a possible social world, tells the truth of social change—that there is no singular truth behind which to hide the corrupting force of power. Correlatively, the modern is the lie that linear truth organizes the conflicting valences of power. (1995:73)

Lemert's point is that modernist sociological projects from various ideological persuasions had faith that the knowledge they were creating could provide an understanding or critique of society that might force the hand of power.¹ In comparison, postmodernism tends to challenge this approach as naive and questions the taken-for-granted notion that reality is all that it appears to be, emphasizing

that the current postmodern condition represents the point when modern thought is pushed beyond its limits into ideology. Whereas modernist approaches envision a coherent subject moving through the world, the postmodern critique problematizes this view of the unitary subject with a fixed identity who is both rational and transparent to herself or himself.

In terms of how sociology can make sense of these developments, Lemert distinguishes between strategic and radical postmodernism, with the latter position arguing that the social world has changed in ways that do not permit us to speak of reality as true. On strategic postmodernism Lemert writes, "[It] attempts the trick of destroying modernity's foundational quest for truth by revising without completely rejecting modernity's categories" (1995:79). He continues,

[It is] neither so quick to abandon the power of knowledge as are radical postmodernisms nor so steadfast in clinging to the modernist formulation of knowledge's power. Strategic modernisms are attempts more to redefine truth and power than to either dismiss or preserve their classic relations. This, therefore, is the name for those positions that attempt to make two moves at once—rejecting modernity's values while using its language. (1995:81–82)

In the sections below I use Lemert's notion of strategic postmodernism as a way for sociology to both integrate this intellectual climate in productive ways and assert the importance of key concepts that have historically been central to certain aspects of the social scientific enterprise: praxis, the material/institutional context, and the empirical basis of knowledge construction.

PRAXIS

Does destabilizing the subject necessarily result in a fragmented ground for collective action? This is the central question for a theoretical perspective that attempts at once to integrate a postmodern intellectual climate and a conscious critical approach. If such notions as ethnicity and gender are constructed sociopolitically and historically in such a way that there is no essential reality or identity to claim, then what does this mean for social movements built on identity politics? If, for example, we speak "as women," are we invoking a unitary and essentialized character that contradicts the argument that our experience is a product of society? This is the tension that runs constantly through feminist theory and politics, "between needing to act as a woman and needing an identity not overdetermined by gender" (Snitow 1990:9).

In this way, the deessentializing tendencies of postmodernism upset projects that rely on formulated identities for cultural and political mobilization, since categories of being are seen to have no necessary political belonging—even though many are tied together by historical conditions and mobilized for various political projects (Laclau 1990). And, inevitably, postmodern scholarship, with a few exceptions, has tended to avoid entanglements with social action. When praxis is involved, these projects tend to represent agency as "style" and as other subversive representations of the body and sexuality that disrupt such established categories of meaning and behavior as heteronormativity and gendered performance.

There are obvious limitations to the conflation of personal agency with "style" (see Hennessy 1995).

Given these limitations, it is important to tie a critical perspective into postmodernist accounts, integrating notions of praxis as central. By "critical," I imply an attempt to uncover workings of power in the direction of emancipatory strategies for social change; by "praxis," a wedding of theory and action that goes beyond the notion of theory as ideas that are abstractly connected. Unlike critical theorists of the Frankfurt school such as Habermas who has discounted postmodernist tendencies and written them off as reactionary neoconservative theories (see Kellner 1988), I suggest that the questions this intellectual climate poses do not *necessarily* result in the loss of personal agency or in a reactionary kind of relativism or nihilism that avoids collection action.

It is especially within the field of feminist scholarship that questions about the theory/praxis nexus have been raised (see, e.g., Bell and Klein 1996; Butler 1990; Nicholson 1995), since the relationship between the destabiliation of the subject and collective agency is intimately about the viability of the women's movement and women's studies within the academy. Nicholson, for example, has begun by asking whether feminist politics require that the category "woman" have a determinate meaning, and if not, then what might feminist politics look like. She emphasizes that to give up the idea that there is one specific meaning associated with the subject does not suggest that there is no meaning and therefore no agency. She borrows from Wittgenstein's notion of "game" and explains that while it is not possible to point to one feature common to everything called a game, "the meaning of 'game' is revealed . . . through the elaboration of a complex network of characteristics, with different elements of this network being present in different cases" (1995:60). In this way "woman" can be theorized without a unified meaning but with attention to a complex network of characteristics that again portray a notion of their unity across differences. Other scholars whose work has allowed us to move beyond an essentialist critique without losing agency include Alcoff's (1988) notion of positionality, Fraser's (1992) concept of pragmatic discourse, and Spivak's (1990) work on strategic essentialism.

In terms of praxis, Nicholson calls for a rethinking of the concept of coalition politics. She suggests that coalition politics is usually thought of as interest groups temporarily mobilizing around a common concern. She writes: "In such a view, coalition politics is something that feminists enter into with 'others'" (1995:62). But we could think about coalition politics as not something merely external to feminist politics but as that which is also internal to it. This means that we think about feminist politics themselves as coalition politics in which there is no singular or commonly agreed on identity as women. Nicholson calls these "internal coalition politics" and emphasizes that since the women's movement has increasingly been exhibiting these strategies over the last couple of decades, this concept should be incorporated into theorizations of feminism and identity (p. 62).

Central in working through this apparent contradiction between decentered subjects and political agency is the important point that the destabilized identity can *encourage* personal agency through opening up opportunities for a wide array of identifications and mobilizations. Because the self is not bounded to notions of

a fixed identity, it is in a position to take on a range of subject positions, making way for the formation of new coalitional subjects. Butler makes this point:

If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old. (1990:149)

Mouffe (1995:329) joins Butler in emphasizing that the critique of essentialism, universalism, and humanism launched by this new intellectual climate, far from being an obstacle to personal and collective agency, "is indeed the very condition of its possibility." On a more practical level, she not only grapples with the need to realign the postmodern turn with a consciously evoked critical ethical vision, but she also contemplates the issue of citizenship within local and national communities in terms of the potential for social movement formation. Mouffe's notion of citizenship assumes a conception of the social agent as "the articulation of an ensemble of subject positions, corresponding to the multiplicity of social relations in which it is inscribed. This multiplicity is constructed within specific discourses which have no necessary relation but only contingent and precarious forms of articulation" (p. 323). In other words, her notion of social agent emphasizes that there is no subject position whose links to others is definitively assured, and, therefore, no social identity that is fully and permanently acquired. She calls for a "radical democratic interpretation" whereby citizens recognize the numerous social relations where inequity exists that must be challenged if the principles of liberty and equality are to apply: "It indicates the common recognition by the different groups struggling for an extension and radicalization of democracy that they have a common concern. . . . The aim is to construct a 'we' as radical democratic citizens, a collective political identity articulated through the principle of democratic equivalence" (p. 325). Note that Mouffe's understanding of citizenship goes beyond the view that citizenship is one identity among others as in liberalism, or that it is the dominant identity as in the common good notion of civic republicanism or communitarianism. "Instead, it is an articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty" (p. 325).

While intriguing, Mouffe's article is not explicit enough in explaining the processes whereby subjects come together as radical democratic citizens, including the social conditions and practices involved. She does say that a common good can never be reached since multiple interpretations of what this means and the reality of a "them" once a "we" has been mobilized are inevitable. As such the notion of the common good functions as a social imaginary, as something that can be referred to in collective action though never attained. Like Mouffe, Denzin (1996) also comments on citizenship in his description of the new sociological writing informed by postmodernism. He makes a plea for this new scholarship of the future to be guided by a feminist, communitarian ethical model:

The communitarian ethical system is based on an interactive, postpragmatic approach to community, self, and inquiry in the televisual age. This model breaks with classical liberal ethical models and their revisions. It contends that

community is ontologically and morally prior to individuals, and that dialogical communication is the basis of the moral community. Civic transformation is the major goal of any ethical (and occupational) practice. This entails a commitment to the common good and to universal human solidarity. (1996:746)

Responding to Denzin, Seidman, one of the leading sociologists to integrate postmodernism into his thinking and writing, emphasizes the necessity of not moving too quickly toward a postpragmatic approach when considering the relationship between the destabilized subject, personal agency, and community ethics. He defends pragmatism, emphasizing that it is not a perspective that dismisses the theoretical and empirical levels of argumentation in pursuit of mere utility and interest. Rather,

in contrast to epistemic positions that hold that knowledge claims can and should be assessed in relation to a general theoretical matrix, pragmatists insist that the social context and the purposes of the production of knowledge cannot be separated from consideration and justification. In place of a logic of knowledge, pragmatists wish to substitute "pragmatics" that would assess knowledge claims in terms of context, purposes, implications, and consequences. (1996:754)

In this way, Seidman conceptualizes knowledge as related to specific social practices, or as itself a practice, and stresses the necessity of understanding sociological knowledges in terms of the possible social and political consequences and ethical meanings. He aims to "imagine a mode of social knowledge as a thick, dense, elaborated critical reasoning" (p. 757). He presents us with another example of a critical sociology in light of the postmodern.

MATERIAL/INSTITUTIONAL

A major problem of postmodern scholarship is the focus on discursively and textually based theories of the self (Dunn 1998). Here knowledge tends not to be linked in a reliable way to an analysis of the social forces that created such discursive practices in the first place. In this context "discursive" means attention to language, the symbolic, and textual representation rather than an analysis of material social practices. Missing is the institutional analysis that emphasizes there can be no representation outside of historically specific, concrete material contexts. Relationships between subjects and histories are complex and shifting but never free; similarly, identities are not always chosen but constituted by relations of power and always historically given. This argues against a multiple free-floating selves argument and for an understanding of identities linked to multiple sites of power located in concrete historical formations.

Social Postmodernism (1995), edited by Nicholson and Seidman, works toward a "social postmodernist" perspective that "integrates the micro-social concerns of the new social movements with an institutional and cultural analysis in the service of a transformative political vision" (book jacket). Nicholson and Seidman suggest that even though Derrida, the venerable father of deconstruction, emphasized that methodology for textual critique should be clearly aligned with institutional analysis, this tends not to occur in postmodernist writing. It is not enough to reveal the workings of power within discursive constructions of identity; instead the specific

historical context and the economic, political, and social forces that are entangled with the discursive relations must be analyzed. What such an analysis does is point out both the theoretical and the political limits of the discursively based critique of knowledge approach and emphasizes the need to study the specific and national/global social conditions that make such knowledges possible in the first place.

For example, while Butler (1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b) has made important contributions to understandings of subjectivity (especially notions of gendered performativity in understanding the practices of gender), she tends to confine her analysis of identity as a matter of representation in the symbolic order and the localized discursive practices of the ideological sphere. In her critique of queer theory, Hennessy explains Butler's position:

By limiting her conception of the social to the discursive, Butler unhinges identity from the material relations that shape it. Her performative identity recasts bourgeois humanist individuality as a more fluid and indeterminate series of subversive bodily acts, but this postmodern subject is severed from the collective historical processes and struggles through which identities are produced and circulate. (1995:153)

Discourse, a central concept for postmodernism, might be more productively theorized by employing it beyond the realm of language and symbolic practices. McNay (1992:27) defines discourse as "an amalgam of the material practices and forms of knowledge linked together in a non-contingent relation." In any institutional context there are discourses (both material everyday practices associated with institutions and specific language and ways of thinking about issues) that offer certain subject positions with which individuals can identify. Discourse here has meaning beyond that of language and the symbolic in referring to material practices that are tied to institutional arrangements. Following Foucault, Weedon offers the following material definition of discourse:

Discourses in Foucault's work, are ways of constituting knowledge, together with social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the "nature" of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside of their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is [*sic*] always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases. (1987:108)

It is this institutional base, lacking in some accounts, that is central to a notion of discourse that reintegrates the institutional. Discourses on gender, for example, involve the material practices of the reproduction of the sexual division of labor as well as contemporary language and notions of femininity/soft and masculinity/hard. Institutions such as religion, media, education, and medicine are all structured by and located within particular discursive fields that can be understood as ways of organizing social relations of power and giving meaning to institutional processes. Within certain discursive fields some discourses will be more dominant and others more marginal, some claim a naturalized status, and some represent

strong vested interests. As a result individuals actively respond to competing discursive fields by becoming the subject of a particular discourse, although, since these subject positions and the forms of subjectivity they structure imply certain types of pleasures and disqualifications, subjects refuse to identify with certain subject positions or conform with others. In this way the material and the non-material get linked together in this notion of discourse; the focus is on the interplay of power within certain discursive fields in which individuals invest and participate. How we give meaning to the material social relations that structure our lives depends on the range and social power of existing discourses and our access to them and the political strength of the institutionalized interests they represent.

Although this reconfiguration of discourse is useful, it is still barely able to account for wider historically produced institutional practices. The social relations that are implicated in this understanding of discourse have a macrostructure and operate in the field of institutions shaped by national and global forces. In "Democracies of Pleasure" (1995), an article that addresses the concept of liberatory sexual politics, Connell uses the term "sexual social relations" to emphasize that sexuality must be seen as a sphere of social practices that are the field of operation of large-scale institutions. He advocates that analyses of sexuality be employed not only in relation to discourse but also in relation to institutions such as church and family. Traditional discursive approaches, he suggests, that provide emphasis on "sexuality as performance, on the adoption of shifting sexual identities, on the multiplicity of positions in discourse and the possibilities of signification" tend to define sexual politics "as a kind of play" (p. 385). Connell calls for a reemphasis on the ways that sexualities are shaped by social relations that occur in history. "There is a social structure in sexuality," he writes. "We need to talk about the sexual construction of society as well as the social construction of sexuality" (p. 387). In this way, a reframing of the discursive to take into account material practices parallels an emphasis on how multiple sites of power are linked to concrete institutionalized historical formations. This argues for a postmodern practice consolidated by its attention to the local and specific.

EMPIRICAL

The premise of sociology's empirical project—observing and interpreting the lived experiences of the everyday—is one that has defined the discipline and its practices. Whether operating within positivist, interpretive/hermeneutic, or critical paradigms, sociologists have sought after data that have been seen to reflect something real, relatively stable, and potentially describable. However, once there is an acceptance that an unproblematicized "I" does not author experience and that there is no singular essence at the core of each individual that guarantees authenticity and can be observed and recorded, research as usual becomes increasingly difficult. If selves are fragmentary and shifting, if there is no possibility of separation between researcher and researched, and data are just stories about stories, what hopes are there for disciplines that employ empirical projects?²

Denzin considers this problematic in *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997), starting off the text with a discussion of the crises of representation and legitimation that

have seriously undermined the empirical sociological enterprise, and which have been discussed briefly above. He writes about sociology's reliance on the realist frame, the issue at heart in terms of these crises: "The text presumes there is a world out there (the real) that can be captured by a 'knowing' author through the careful transcription (and analysis) of field materials (interviews, notes, etc.). The author becomes the mirror to the world under analysis" (pp. 4–5). The critique of this realist frame involves the observation that language, rather than mirror experience, creates it in such a way that

the process of creation constantly transform and defer that which is being described. The meanings of a subject's statements are, therefore, always in motion. . . . There can never be a final, accurate representation of what was meant or said—only different textual representations of different experiences. . . . This leads to the question of a text's authority. (P. 5)

Smith (1995:54) explores the postmodernist challenge to sociology as an empirically based discipline, emphasizing that "its assertions provide the basis for as radical a critique of the epistemology and ontology of positivistic social science as ever has been mounted." In effect, he suggests that "there can be no valid or reliable mapping of social action or relationships by observing or interviewing actors" (p. 58). This moves the critique beyond the well-worn questioning of instrumental positivism (see Alexander 1992; Fay 1975; Giddens 1974) to a questioning of phenomenological social inquiry also. The phenomenological answer to positivist methods provides a paradigm that, while it moves away from the realist version of truth as something single and unseamed in its quest for inter-subjective meanings, still relies on the ability of the researcher to make sense of the lives of others in a relatively dependable way and to present it as a series of "facts." The critical phenomenological accounts, and especially the work in feminist research methodologies, have attempted to move beyond traditional and patriarchal truths to recognizing marginalized voices and producing knowledge about their truths. In particular, these feminist approaches have subverted traditional ways of doing research (e.g., Behar and Gordon 1995; Fonow and Cook 1991; Lather 1991; Reinhartz 1992) and have been concerned with finding less exploitive ways of conducting research (e.g., Ellis and Bochner 1997; Stacey 1988).

It is especially within the phenomenologically based symbolic interaction studies that discussions of postmodernism have been debated (see, e.g., Charmaz 1995; Lincoln 1995; Mitchell and Charmaz 1995; Prus 1996). However, despite the advantages that many of these do have over traditional quantitative methods, these alternative methods still tend, in various degrees, to hold on to the tenets of empirical truths that postmodernism rejects: (1) a standard notion of referentiality whereby selves are coherent and waiting to be discovered or explained; (2) a separation between empirical "facts" and fictions whereby only the former are implicated in producing understandings of the lives of the researched; and (3) that knowledge is a unique product of a single expert mind rather than a complex product of the social production of ideas, including the relationships between researcher and researched. If we reject these tenets but still want to attempt to empirically investigate the social world, what then?

Ethnography is one methodological approach integrated by scholars who have embraced postmodernist insights. The experimental ethnographies of the last few decades have reflected the questioning of anthropology's ethnocentrist and colonialist tenets and the (im)possibility of representing "others" (Van Maanen 1988, 1995). What emerged has been a highly self-reflexive methodological practice that attempts to understand the ways in which "day-to-day practices of socially situated individuals are always complexly overdetermined by both history and culture" (Radway 1988:367). Problems abound as the ethnographer attempts to write what is ostensibly a biography of the other in a text that is overlaid with her or his own autobiography (Geertz 1988). Geertz's self-reflexive solution is to pay attention to the ontological moment of ethnography, the lived and the experiential, emphasizing that it is important to spell out the ways in which experiences between researcher and researched are filtered through the memory and politics of the former and end up as socially produced texts and knowledges. Other ethnographers such as Marcus, Fisher, and Clifford have advocated self-conscious writing strategies that encourage anthropology as cultural critique, calling for the recognition of partial truths as outcomes of knowledge construction and stressing that ethnographies are allegories or textual productions rather than forms of representational knowledge. These practices, although not without such problems as the reification of the ethnographer as central storyteller and a tendency toward narcissism (see Probyn 1993), do come closer to what a strategic postmodern empirical project might look like.

Another illustration of how postmodernism challenges the empirical foundations of sociology and offers new insight is found in Lather and Smithies's *Troubling the Angels* (1997). Following Visweswaran (1994), Lather (1997:3) comments on the writing of this text: "Using the ruins of feminist ethnography as the very site of possibility for movement from a 'realist' to an 'interrogative' text, the book reflects back at its readers the problems of inquiry at the same time an inquiry is conducted." Lather and Smithies explain its innovative and postmodern, yet empirical, format:

While this book is not so much planned confusion as it might at first appear, it is, at some level, about we see as a breakdown of clear interpretation and confidence of the ability/warrant to tell such stories in uncomplicated, non-messy ways. . . . Via a format that folds both backward and forward, the book moves toward a weaving of method, the politics of interpretation, data, analysis—all embedded in the tale. (1977:xvi)

Troubling the Angels understands the limits of speaking to and speaking for, resulting in what Lather (1997:4) calls "a rigorous confusion" that is hardly seamless. Likewise the authors of *Troubling the Angels* understand their authority and display the text in such a way that they are both present and absent. Often participants' words are presented toward the top of the page and the researchers' narratives are presented below in smaller font, providing an "under-writing that both de-centers and constructs authorial 'presence' through a kind of temporal disturbance" (p. 4). Lather and Smithies's text is innovative, pursuing empirical possibilities from the ruins of what Lather (p. 10) calls "a confident social science."

In *Interpretive Ethnographies* Denzin offers innovative empirical practices in the

form of ethnographic poetics and narratives of the self, performance-based texts, public journalism, and new forms of fiction that draw on the postmodern detective and the search for moral truth about the self. The goal here is what Denzin and others have called a messy textual experimentation involving self-reflexivity, as in the autoethnography, and a disruption of realist frames around reading, writing, and knowledge construction. His focus on public journalism is especially interesting in that it demonstrates a motivation not only to interpret but also to transform the world in which we live (Denzin 1996:750). Using the term "civic sociology," Denzin outlines its goal to contribute toward the communitarian feminist ethic noted above. He writes,

These goals assume a sociologist who functions and writes like a public journalist. Thus, sociology as story-telling [Lemert 1995:14] will be given greater emphasis. This writer, as a watchdog for the local community, works outward from personal, biographical troubles to those public arenas that transform troubles into issues. A shared public consciousness is sought, a common awareness of troubles that have become issues in the public arena. This consciousness is shaped by a form of writing that merges the personal and the biographical with the public. Of course there remains the struggle to find a narrative voice that resists this long tradition favoring autobiography and lived experience as the sites for reflexivity and selfhood [Clough 1994:157]. This form of subjective reflexivity is a trap that too easily reproduces normative (and deviant) conceptions of self, agency, gender, desire and sexuality.

The sociologist's tale is always allegorical, a symbolic tale, a parable that is not just a record of human experience. This tale is a means of experience, a method of empowerment for the reader. It is a vehicle for readers to discover moral truths about themselves. More deeply, the sociological tale is a utopian tale of redemption, a story that brings a moral compass back into the readers' (and writers') lives. In the stories people tell one another about the things that matter to them and the sociologist-as-ethnographer discovers the multiple "truths" that operate in the social world. (1996:748)

There is no doubt that the new intellectual climate of postmodernism challenges the empirical foundations of a realist sociology. Yet, as Lather has articulated, it is out of the ruins of these empirical projects that new possibilities emerge. Although science's claim of being a "master" metanarrative and the traditional pseudoscientific methodologies of the social sciences are disrupted by these new intellectual developments, knowledge projects based on empirical inquiry need not die. They must, however, be radically transformed. Alongside the ability to understand and interpret societies, their structures and the diversity of their inhabitants, it is the analysis of the connections between individual biographies and wider social patterns that sociology can contribute in a postmodern world. Multiple methodologies are perhaps the key here; combinations of approaches that work within interpretive, naturalistic, and critical/praxis-oriented traditions as well as counterpractices that use innovative formats like dialogic and interactive interviewing and use of personal voice (Lather and Smithies 1997), drama (Griffiths 1984), memory work (Haug 1987), co-writing, integration of (group) journals, diaries, archival sources, and so on, all have potential.

In this way the empirical within the postmodern requires a clear articulation of

assumptions and politics and careful consideration of certain questions pertaining to the research process. These issues concern values, ethical standards, language and metaphors used, the economics and practicalities of getting to and staying in the field, the relationship between academic research and public policy and collective action, and so on. "Truths" must be understood as partial, specific, and local at the same time that wider institutional practices need to be understood, stressing the interpretive, self-reflexive, and political nature of scientific conduct in the context of the everyday.

CONCLUSION

In my discussion of strategic postmodernism I have attempted to walk the high-wire between a radical deconstructionist, antifoundationalist, and antiempirical form of postmodernism that would dismiss sociology as irrelevant and the foundationalist, realist, and empirical basis of the discipline many of us recognize as home. I do not suggest an easy merging of the two but merely point out the benefits of addressing this new intellectual climate to better understand the ways individuals live collective lives. A strategic postmodern approach can attend to the broader epistemological issues of how we study the self and under what intellectual conditions and limitations we study it while at the same time attending to the empirical and political work of the sociological imagination. Here I have suggested a need for sociology to more thoroughly integrate postmodernist insights into its theory and practice while highlighting such key aspects of the sociological tradition as an ethics of praxis and the need to ground scholarship in institutionally based and empirically grounded understandings of the discursive.

NOTES

1. Lemert (1995:4) suggests that such scholars as C. Wright Mills and Alvin Gouldner "would probably have agreed more with Talcott Parsons, the sociologist whom both fiercely attacked, than with those today who argue that the time of the modern world is past; that modernity's political and cultural values no longer suite a changing world." Such are the similarities of modernist perspectives despite what we understand as their differing theoretical frameworks.
2. This is also inclusive of such disciplines as political science, history, economics, education, and anthropology as well as the whole range of interdisciplinary scholarship. Often scholars have more in common with people in other disciplines than they do with colleagues in their own discipline. With this in mind, I am not desiring to create a more or less totalized discipline-based argument here; my focus on sociology throughout this article, not only this section on empirical knowledge projects, is for pragmatic purposes and does not intentionally intend to exclude the wide range of interdisciplinary and other-disciplinary work.

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