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THE MORALITY OF ETHNOMETHODOLOGY*

HUGH MEHAN and HOUSTON WOOD

Why do ethnomethodology? Academics and scientists frequently invoke two justifications. One of these claims knowledge is acquired for its own sake. This defense assumes that experts develop knowledge superior to laymen. I wish to undercut this belief. I have argued that everyone has an elegant knowledge of his own reality.¹ That knowledge is absolute within realities. I cannot justify my ethnomethodology as a pursuit of privileged knowledge; every farmer, freak, witch, and alchemist has such knowledge.

The second justification relies on variants of the claim that “knowledge is power.” This claim is intimately related to the first. It assumes that knowledge leads to an ability to predict and control which most people do not possess. Ethnomethodological studies rebut this assumption.² For example, the “power” of scientific knowledge is only proven reflexively. Belief in the predictive efficacy of scientific knowledge is an incorrigible proposition. Like other incorrigibles, it does not permit objective test: failures prove its truth.³

This argument depends upon itself. Scientists reflexively experience the absolute truth of their methods and theories every day, and we who live within scientific societies are subject to a similar experience. We feel absolutely that science is power, although science’s child, technology, oppresses us because it has moved beyond the exclusive domain of Western nations to

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The first person singular has been adopted to emphasize that this work is the voice of a union and not of particular persons. Although this work is the result of a collaboration, it now exists independently.

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begin paving the world. Theoretical arguments that science is just one more way of knowing are like sermons preached to a condemned man reminding him that execution is simply one more way of dying.

Ethnomethodology can be an act of rebellion against the scientific monolith. Of course the contemporary scene is already over-populated with such rebellions, but these rebellions share a common weakness: they are non-scientific. Manifestos, philosophies, and poems abound attacking science,⁴ but as they do not speak in the scientific idiom they do little to alter science's course. "Objectivity" is the modern language of power. A Homer or an Aquinas may arise who speaks elegantly against that power, but he will not be heard. Ethnomethodology speaks within the scientific idiom: it is an objective study of objectivity. Ethnomethodology is not a theoretical rebuttal to science; it adopts the scientific vision to produce a transcendence of that vision.

Ethnomethodology is not therefore "anti-scientific." It exhibits a great faith in science, and treats science as an activity of liberation. For centuries the scientific method has been turned on the world, and man has not always benefitted. Perhaps by turning the scientific method upon itself, science will begin to repay man in a more humane coin.

This may be a naively optimistic idea, but ethnomethodology has had this effect on a few of its practitioners. In this paper I shall try to show how it may do the same for others.

The Dialectical Tradition

Ethnomethodology may be viewed as a synthesis of two traditions that are commonly considered mutually exclusive. One of these traditions is scientism. This tradition assumes that the scientific method produces knowledge that is superior to that produced by any of the other methods. As Habermas writes: "'Scientism' means science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as *one* form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science."⁵ Bacon and Descartes were early spokesmen for this tradition, and Newton is commonly supposed to have justified this faith.

This is the tradition that created sociology in the nineteenth century. The task of Comte, Spencer, Pareto, Durkheim, Weber and the others was to show how the scientific method could be modified to study human phenomena.⁶ Scientism flowered in the early decades of this century and culminated in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in logical atomism, logical

positivism. This tradition is known today as *logico-empiricism*.⁷ It finds its expression in the works of Quine, Hempel, Brodbeck, Nagel, Reichenbach, and other contemporary philosophers, and is a common theme among the many quarrelling schools of standard American sociology.

The hermeneutic-dialectical tradition, logico-empiricism's antithesis, arose as an alarmed reaction to this science. Blake is the classic poet of this tradition; Kierkegaard was a spokesman early in the nineteenth century, Nietzsche at the century's end. In the twentieth century it has been represented by some phenomenologists and existentialists,⁸ by the Frankfurt School, and by the philosophies of the later Wittgenstein, Polanyi, and Feyerabend, and others.⁹ Feyerabend summarizes the hermeneutic-dialectic doctrine as follows:¹⁰

... science is only one of the many monsters which have been created by man, and I am not at all sure that it is the best. There may be better ways of finding the "truth." And there may be better ways of being a man than trying to find the truth.

These two traditions feed off one another; each defines itself in part by attacking the other, and in this sense they are both dialectical. Ethnomethodology is a child of the two, but is an *activity* that transcends them. While it has borrowed its *methodology* from its logico-empiricist father, Ethnomethodology's *theory* has been derived from its hermeneutic-dialectic mother. It does not, however, choose sides in the war between its parents, and as a result, both traditions find ethnomethodology anathema.¹¹

The Logico-Empiricist Response

Many followers of the logico-empiricist tradition acknowledge that scientific consciousness has spawned the earth's current malaise. This feeling haunted both Weber and Durkheim decades ago. They saw science as a means to counter chaos. Today even many natural scientists feel similarly. But *within* the scientific tradition there seems to be but one solution: more hair of the dog, more science to solve the problems science has created. Government grants are requested to discover ways to decrease populations that other government grants nourished to explosion. Similarly, scientific agencies that once developed techniques of fouling the air, request more monies to develop devices for cleaning it. Social scientists spend millions studying "social problems" which earlier sociologists in part created.

These proposals exhibit science's incorrigible faith in empiricism as a privileged way of knowing. Science's failures are used once more reflexively to prove the faith that generated the failures.¹²

As the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition grew more strident in the 1960's, the scientists' defenses grew more frenetic. Leach's defense in 1974 is prototypical: reviewing a book edited by Hymes,¹³ which attempts to "reinvent" anthropology within the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition, Leach says "... I fully sympathize with the frustrated exasperation of ... [the] contributors" concerning the negative consequences of science in the modern age. Leach then characterizes the hermeneutic-dialectic theory as the understanding "... that the observer is part of the scene that he observes."¹⁵ This indexes the theory developed here: The observer always in part *constitutes* the scenes he observes. Leach's summary seems fair, but he follows this polemic with "But God forbid that we should propose the search for mystical experience as a proper substitute for the pretensions of objectivity. I have no wish to muddle up my scholarly concerns with the ethics of a Franciscan friar."¹⁶

Leach later complains that "None of this would be subject to any sort of empirical verification. If this is anthropology re-invented, give me cross-cousin marriage every time."¹⁷

Leach's anger is in reply to an angry book, because he is ultimately committed to "empirical verification." He rejects the radical implications of the theory that the observer reflexively constitutes the scenes he enters because it has been presented to him as a theory dialectically opposed to "objectivity." Ethnomethodology accepts the incorrigibles of both traditions. It maintains that objective inquiries are possible using the incorrigible theory of observer constitution. Of course this joining of traditionally opposed incorrigibles changes the face of social science. Thus, ethnomethodologists are led to phenomena that social scientists tend to ignore: ethnomethodology investigates everyday life.

Social science colleagues sometimes ask me to tell them about ethnomethodology, and I have developed presentations for this purpose using video tapes of everyday scenes. I find that sociologists have had little experience at such observation, and have little competence to analyze concrete interactions. This incompetence is remarkable, considering that social order must occur in everyday interactions if we are to claim it is real; it can not occur only as the social scientist's ideal invention. My audience ordinarily protests that I am not doing social science. They ask for my indicators and measurements, but have no interest in the scenes themselves. Only when they are discussing abstracted concepts do they feel secure. I am often made to feel as if I have breached some deep taboo by even suggesting that the problem of social order is related to everyday interactions.

The differences between us do not center on the methods used. I try to speak objectively about the scenes I display. I record them on video tape in an effort to validate my observations. The taboo such work breaches is a ideological taboo. By demanding that my objective analysis be closely tied to actually recorded scenes, I explicitly turn objectivity itself into a phenomenon. One cannot repeatedly view a concrete social scene without raising questions concerning the place of the observer in constructing those observations. This makes sociologists angry, just as Leach had expressed anger in his book review. I have had sociologists walk out in the middle of my presentations. One called out, "That's not sociology!" as she fled the room.¹⁸

The difference between my commitments and that of sociologists' commitments is a moral disagreement. The hermeneutic-dialectic theory as refined within ethnomethodology commits me to the study of concrete scenes and to the recognition that I am always a part of those scenes.¹⁹ Social science, however, is committed to avoiding both these involvements. Social science journals and monographs whose pages contain arguments about concepts and methods which assume that there is *one* real world out there and that this world is independent of social science's concepts and methods, starkly reveal the differences in our forms of life. As Garfinkel writes, the world for these scholars is only a "technical mystery" for which their work offers only technical solutions.²⁰

Social scientists rarely risk disruption of their own everyday routines. Theirs are fundamentally talking disciplines. What research they do beyond their dissertations is mostly completed through graduate students, and it is these students who get their hands dirty in the field. But even the little contact these students have with the everyday world is usually made only within a technical framework such as experiments, interviews, and surveys that assure contact will not become "messy." They do not feel the "real work" begins until they are back in their offices talking about these materials.

My ethnomethodology is not primarily a talking discipline. It is a way of working. It is an activity that forces the practitioner to take risks. Though it adopts an empirical stance, empiricism itself is part of the phenomenon. This phenomenon is not to be found merely by writing about it; it must be directly experienced. Leach was able to transform the idea "... that the observer is part of the scene that he observes" into a bromide because for him it was simply an idea. He did not use it as a principle to organize research of which he himself was a part. If he had, he would have seen that it was a theory that turns upon itself, like the scene studied and the observer observing it. Ethnomethodology as I see it is an activity of doing just this kind of reflexive research.

The Hermeneutic-Dialectic Response

Ethnomethodologists share a common theoretical perspective with thinkers of the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition, but they diverge from these thinkers in what they do with that theory. While they agree with these thinkers when they argue that science is not a superior method of knowing, ethnomethodologists differ from these thinkers in arguing that this insight itself must be treated as “only” a reflexive accomplishment.²¹

Thinkers in the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition argue *ex cathedra* against the doctrine of scientism—they offer carefully reasoned proofs challenging the logico-empiricist philosophy. However, these arguments have little chance of deflecting the scientific monolith. The hermeneutic theories themselves explain why this is so: they inform us that science is a form of life.²² Logico-empiricist philosophy arose only as an *ad hoc* justification for the scientific reality. Scientists will not be convinced by opposing philosophies which demand abandoning a form of life that demonstrates its power daily. To tell scientists that their proofs are “only” reflexive accomplishments does not alter the experiential validity of those accomplishments. Science as an activity does not rise and fall on the consistency of its “reconstructed logics.”²³

The hopelessness of attempting to alter science by reasonable persuasion can be illustrated in another way. Though the hermeneutic-dialectic theorists disparage science’s absolute validity, they continue to embrace science’s accomplishments in their daily lives. They reject science’s philosophy but continue to turn to physicians when they become ill, to machines when they wish to travel, to telephones when they want to communicate, etc. Few of the hermeneutic-dialectic thinkers have attempted to build alternative societies;²⁴ they continue to embrace the accoutrements of science while disparaging science’s absolute intellectual warrant.

This is not to call such theorists hypocritical, as they must work within the circumstances of their life. What I am questioning is whether their way of working is efficacious. It is one thing to *argue* that rain-dances and prayers are as valid as soil chemistry; it is quite another thing to work one’s garden eschewing scientific principles. The hermeneutic theorists’ arguments do not alter the experience of their daily lives. Their style of life is quite like the style of life of those who embrace the logico-empiricist tradition. However their philosophies may differ, they experience more similarly than persons who live in non-scientific realities.

I am trying to create a discipline that does more than construct theories which denigrate science. I believe we need not deny the scientific method which can be used to investigate the theories associated with the hermeneutic-dialectic perspective. We will no longer speak against science *ex cathedra*. We can present our discoveries in a scientific idiom. And, what is equally important, these discoveries will be about the possibility of our selves making discoveries.

Many radical theorists within the hermeneutic-dialectical tradition have called for similar work. From my point of view, however, these theorists are not reflexive enough. They grant themselves a privileged position where reflexive theory is presented as the only means for approaching the truth.

Such exhortations for a reflexive theory perpetuate the dialectical tradition I mentioned above. The world is rigidly bifurcated. Lines are drawn and guns are pointed. While these claims may be equivocated by invocations of the idea of "dialectical relations," the dialectics assume that entities have mutually exclusive properties. They dialectically inform one another, but at the same time their absolute separateness is still assumed.

Elsewhere I offered an outline of a post-dialectical perspective. It hinges on the idea that A and B are mutually constitutive. A is *at once* dependent upon and independent of B. B is similarly related to A. A and B here stand for *all* things, events, persons, relations, and so forth.²⁵

Dialectical theories maintain that some A's turn into some B's, and assumes the existence of time. On the other hand, the theory of mutual containment is atemporal. It speaks to the possibility of time, but does not claim that *some* A's turn into *some* B's over time. Rather, it asserts that *all* A's are simultaneously both B and not B. These relations create the possibility of time and of dialectics.

Of course, one should not choose between the hermeneutic-dialectic theorists and ethnomethodology on the basis of such abstractions. My deeper criticism of the so-called reflexive theorists is that they are not sensuous. They do not alter the everyday experience of either the theorist or the theorist's audience. And, as importantly, they are theories which talk about worlds the theorist has never entered. Ethnomethodology is committed to avoiding such "promiscuous discussions of theory."²⁶

Radical theorists. The most strident spokesmen of the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition are the "radicals." These persons embrace a theoretical perspective

much like ethnomethodology. Hansen's "Dialectical Critique of Empiricism" is paradigmatic. Here he offers a program for a new social science, where:

What must be remembered is the dialectician's insistence upon the historical and subjective (understood as inter-subjective) nature of all inquiry. Man is the agent of theorizing and "fact-collecting," and without man's *intent* there would be no "scientific facts" at all, let alone theories.²⁷

This is a position I have tried to display in actual materials.²⁸ Hansen uses this theory to interpret texts and the empirical work of others. He attacks empiricism by claiming that the logico-empiricists ignore the "historical and subjective . . . nature of all inquiry" and thus are foolish and possibly evil. Moreover, Hansen argues that his own theory is more than only one more historically situated theory, and assumes a privileged position. Hansen has not adopted the dialectical theory to relativize science, but instead maintains that it provides a deeper ground for doing science.

For example, Hansen writes:

Lest it be thought the dialectical viewpoint parallels the idealist view which would allow for all sorts of hair-brained theories to account for man's experienced world, it should be pointed out that the dialectician (*qua* scientist) requires empirical evidence for *any* theory put forth, including his own properly scientific theories.²⁹

In the course of his paper, Hansen argues for his beliefs that the phlogiston theory is really inferior to the oxygen theory, and that such disciplines as witchcraft and alchemy are really "factually" incorrect. Hansen thus accepts the absolutist stance of scientism. He has merely given that position a different theoretical frame.

Much radical theorizing is like this. The hermeneutic-dialectic theories are not used to relativize all theories, instead they are invoked to provide the theorist with a weapon for attacking scientism while retaining the findings science has unearthed. The truth of "the historical and subjective . . . nature of all inquiry" is represented as an empirical truth beyond interpretation. The basis for knowledge it is claimed resides ultimately in the external world.

My approach treats the hermeneutic-dialectic theories as themselves interpretive accomplishments. All theories may be reflexively proved in dialogue with the "external world," but no theory is really "there" more than any other. If I choose to undertake scientific inquiries, it is not because I think

other prescientific theories are “hair-brained,” as Hansen claims. It is rather because I think that such inquiries can accomplish something valuable for me, given my present historical circumstances. Merleau-Ponty complained Weber’s sociology “. . . does not carry the relativization of relativism to its ultimate conclusion.”³⁰ The same can be said of most radical theorists. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty also summarized a position with which I agree when he asked, “But would not a more radical criticism, . . . lead us to recover the absolute in the relative?”³¹

Critical theorists. Mullins argues “radical” theorists must be distinguished from “critical” theorists:³² critical theorists are more theoretical and historical, while radical theorists are more oriented towards action and tend to work outside the academy. There is some overlap between the two groups in that both share the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition.

The work of Habermas provides an example of the critical theory in the tradition of “German idealism.”³³ Habermas argues for the kernel of truth in German idealism in an effort to demonstrate it “is not quite obsolete.”³⁴ Because ethnomethodology’s theory derives from this tradition as well as the hermeneutic-dialectic perspective, much of Habermas’s theorizing is compatible with my program. While I agree with most of what Habermas *writes*, I disagree with what Habermas proposes social scientists *do*.

In one of Habermas’s most important essays, he distinguishes between the “empirical-analytic” and the “historical-hermeneutic” modes of cognition. Having analyzed these, he offers a synthesizing alternative which he calls “critical.” The three roughly correspond to the three traditions I have called in this chapter “logico-empiricism,” “hermeneutic-dialectic,” and “ethnomethodology.” Like my view of ethnomethodology, Habermas calls his third alternative “emancipatory.”³⁶ But his method of emancipation must be distinguished from the method I recommend.

Habermas’s “. . . conception of theory as a process of cultivation of the person . . .” leads to a call for self-reflection.³⁷ Habermas believes in the power of individual reason, and argues that people can think their way to emancipation; I argue that persons must work their way to this experience through contact with concrete empirical materials.

In my interpretation of the hermeneutic-dialectic theory, there is “no time out.”³⁸ Habermas on the other hand, believes that self-reflection “. . . releases the subject from dependence on hypostatized powers.”³⁹ This “emancipatory cognitive interest” can “. . . determine when theoretical statements grasp

invariant regularities of social action as such and when they express ideologically frozen relations of dependence . . .”⁴⁰ Habermas is thus led to distinguish between “ideological” or “justifying” motives, and “real” motives.⁴¹ In my use of the theory, all motives are equal phenomena, are real accounts.

Habermas argues science is ideological. This causes him to reject science’s method, and offer instead a “discipline of trained thought” that aims to “outwit its innate human interest.”⁴² As a result Habermas writes scholarly papers about ideas which provide the raw materials for his use of the method of self-reflection. He argues, “The mind can become aware of this natural basis reflexively.”⁴³ Habermas believes people can think their way to the emancipatory truth.

Habermas’s critical approach is being widely adopted in the United States: for example, Schroyer adopts Habermas’s thesis “. . . that the scientistic image of science is the fundamental false consciousness of our epoch. If the technocratic ideology is to lose its hold on our consciousness, a critical theory of science must lay bare the theoretical reifications of the scientistic image of science.”⁴⁴ Schroyer’s “critical theory of science” is not an empirical theory however. “The interest of a critical science is the emancipation of all self-conscious agents . . .”⁴⁵ For Schroyer, as for Habermas, the method of achieving such self-consciousness is identified with reading and writing philosophy.

I trust that such mental exercises work. However, I do not think that the method of these theorists is generally applicable. In order to use Habermas’s method as he and his followers do, one must first study many recondite texts: Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Husserl are preliminary requirements for the “discipline of trained thought.” My method requires the gathering and analysis of materials which are “objective” in their first appearance and which include the researcher as a constituent part. Perhaps in the tradition from which Habermas speaks, his method is more efficacious than mine. Within the English speaking world, I believe a method based on “data” will prove more useful.

The Politics of Everyday Life

Radical and critical theorizing are abstract disciplines, much like the rest of social science. Such theorists spend most of their time writing and talking about a truth they feel is absolute. Much of this talk is about “politics.”

Politics is a concept conceived only in the form of objects or perception, not “as sensuous human activity.” But, as Marx goes on to write in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, “All social life is essentially *practical*.” It consists of “. . . an ensemble of social relationships.” Radical theorists use these words both as a weapon with which to attack opponents and as a philosophical theory, and maintain as well that it accords a superior insight. For ethnomethodology, Marx’s words are an exhortation to do practical studies of the essentially practical human world.

If all social life is “essentially practical,” Marx’s theory itself must have been an outgrowth of his particular “ensemble of social relationships.” To turn it into a theory about the world seems a mockery. A better use would seem to be to seek to experience its truth in the everyday. Politics are thus not claimed as something people *have*; they are actions people *do*. There are no things in the sensuous world like “bourgeois consciousness” or “class” or “the capitalist system,” there are only people doing their lives in a succession of here-and-nows. To treat these people as abstract categories illustrates the alienation of the theorist, not the alienation of those the theorist talks about.

I am not maintaining that ethnomethodology is apolitical. I am arguing that ethnomethodology has a commitment to Marx’s dictum that philosophers have only interpreted the world while the point is to change it. Ethnomethodology is a way of changing oneself, but it is not merely that. It is also a way of sharing this change with others, it is a discipline that has a chance of changing the way some people live their lives.

Consider once more the concept of politics. Power relationships do occur, but they show themselves only in particular social scenes. People do not unfold conceptual categories, they are reality participants and construct their lives in concert with others. Examination of concrete scenes reveals extraordinary power differentials. Politics are always the politics of everyday life. Where else could political forces be found? Abstract categories like “alienation,” “capitalism,” etc. must be tied to everyday events.

Pollner has employed the concept of politics in his ethnomethodological researches.⁴⁶ Borrowing from Laing, he calls these the “politics of experience.”⁴⁷ They are not to be confused with the concept of politics enunciated in critical theories. Pollner does not merely talk about power differentials, he displays the operations of these differentials in transcripts compiled from everyday events.

The bulk of Pollner’s published materials are drawn from the encounters between alleged traffic violators and judges.⁴⁸ With Emerson,⁴⁹ he has begun

to refine this analysis by joining Psychiatric Emergency Teams, an arm of a municipal agency which enters the home of persons alleged by relatives, neighbors, police or others to be either a danger to themselves or others. Pollner's approach to the reality of politics is illustrated by Laing and Esterson's work.⁵⁰ For example, Laing and Esterson report the relations of a "schizophrenic" girl and her parents:

When they were all interviewed together, her mother and father kept exchanging with each other a constant series of nods, winks, gestures, knowing smiles, so obvious to the observer that he commented on them after twenty minutes of the first such interview. They continued, however, unabated and denied. The consequence, so it seems to us, of this failure by her parents to acknowledge the validity of similar comments by Maya, was that Maya could not know when she was perceiving or when she was imagining things to be going on between her parents. These open yet unavowed non-verbal exchanges between father and mother were in fact quite public and perfectly obvious. Much of what could be taken to be paranoid about Maya arose because she mistrusted her own mistrust. She could not really believe that what she thought she saw going on was going on. Another consequence was that she could not easily discriminate between actions not usually intended or regarded as communications, e.g., taking off spectacles, blinking, rubbing nose, frowning, and so on, and those that are—another aspect of her paranoia. It was just those actions, however, that were used as signals between her parents, as "tests" to see if Maya would pick them up, but an essential part of this game the parents played was that, if commented on, the rejoinder would be an amused, "What do you mean?" "What wink?" and so on.⁵¹

Pollner argues that Laing's and his own materials illustrate that in everyday life people encounter "endless equivocalties."⁵² Together with others, people must establish some unequivocal foundation beneath these equivocalties. Because people experience differently, ". . . the achievement of a consensual resolution requires that one or another of the protagonists relinquish their experience of the world as the certain grounds of further inference."⁵³ Everyone is "versed in the rhetoric of reality",⁵⁴ but some force their versions on others. It is here and only here that power differentials exert their politics. The procedures by which parents force their reality on their children's experience are the same procedures by which more powerful groups subdue the less powerful. This is the way that alienation is created; this is the way "The essential intersubjectivity of the world is preserved at the expense of a particular subjectivity."⁵⁵

By treating politics ultimately as the relations between concrete persons, ethnomethodologists provide a means to abstract from the concrete experience of all social beings, and by so doing illustrate a faith that “. . . the political struggle in America today does not concern power and interests merely, but new perspectives on what is real.”⁵⁶

Critical theorists have argued that masses of people are forced to live in worlds they did not create. Ethnomethodology displays the everyday practices of this alienation and provides a means to transcend it, thus making Marx a forefather of ethnomethodology. In the next pages I will explore this notion further.

Marx as Ethnomethodologist

Borges writes that “. . . every writer *creates* his own precursors.”⁵⁷ For example, if we know Marx’s work, we read Hegel and Feuerbach in a new way: we see in them the potential Marx exploited. Similarly, after absorbing the insights of ethnomethodology, one can return to Marx and read him as a crypto-ethnomethodologist. Adapting the method of Blum and McHugh,⁵⁸ such a reading of Marx has been offered in a series of essays by Filmer, Phillipson, Roche, Sandywell, and Silverman.⁵⁹ They use Marx not to illuminate Marx, but rather to reveal their own practices of alienation. I will discuss their work not to describe them or Marx, but rather to illuminate my own understanding of alienation.

Stratifying practices. The image of language that the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition has spun sees language as “the house of being.”⁶⁰ As Roche says, it is theorized that “. . . the world does not form speech, but speech forms the world, or gives form to the world.”⁶¹ Marx can be viewed as a progenitor of such a theory, but obviously it will not be the Marx of the “vulgar Marxists.” Nonetheless, this interpretation retains the claim that “class” is a fundamental phenomenon.

However, class is now seen as something people do with their speaking practices. “Speakers enact class—show, display, illuminate or manifest it—in their speaking it. Class is what is shown in their class speech.”⁶² Grounds for this conception can be found in Marx. In the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx claimed that in alienating capitalist societies, language is “the agent of divorce.”⁶³ In *Marx’s Grundrisse*⁶⁴ he compared this fetish of language with the fetish of money:

It is no less false to compare money with language. It is not the case that ideas are transmuted in language in such a way that their particular nature

disappears and their social character exists alongside them in language, as prices exist alongside goods. Ideas do not exist apart from language.⁶⁵

Ideas do not exist apart from language, Marx avers, just as the value of goods does not exist apart from the labor of those who produce goods. But in certain times language is reified. It is treated as a thing divorced from the practical circumstances of its speaking. Language becomes a commodity which is bought and sold as if it had a value apart from the speaking labor of those who produce it during their “essentially practical” “ensemble of social relationships.”⁶⁶ There came an evil time, Marx writes,

... when everything men had considered an inalienable became an object of exchange, or traffic and could be alienated. This is the time when the very things which till then had *been communicated, but never sold; acquired, but never bought*—virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc.—when everything in short, passed into commerce. It is the time of general corruption, of universal venality . . .⁶⁷

This describes our present age where love, conviction, and knowledge, are treated as things. We exchange them as commodities through our use of language, and we classify each other according to which of the commodities issue from our mouths. While Pollner’s work illustrates this process in everyday talk, Filmer and his associates concentrate on the alienation of scholarly and scientific speech. Here the process of alienating speech appears in apotheosis.

The warrant for scholarly speech is always attributed to the things themselves. Thus, scholarly speakers present themselves as messengers of nature, when they are really only vehicles for things that are beyond them. Reports are written on behalf of the “facts,” not of social beings. Scholars invoke such phrases as “It can be maintained,” “The data suggest . . .,” “The facts indicate . . .” Within science, literal measurement is the ideal because it is presumed that only nature herself produces the numerals. Operational definitions are another favored device analogous to price fixing.⁶⁷ These and similar rhetorical devices are invoked to pretend that ideas exist apart from language. Scholars and scientists display their alienation by treating their ideas as foodstuff to be sold for a livelihood.

Because ideas are presented as objects and not as “sensuous human activity,” they may be classified. They are offered as ways of stratifying the self and others. This is true of all speaking that forgets “Ideas do not exist apart from language.” Filmer treats sociology as a paradigm case, arguing that social

scientists assume stratifying speech practices in order to construct analyses of "class" and "stratification." Social scientists create "class" as a thing in the world only by simultaneously treating their talk and themselves as things.

Such authors distinguish their analysis from the analysis of those they claim to speak about, and claim their own speech is de-authored and thus objective as opposed to those they speak about, who are said to be subjective. Such analysts tend to see themselves as a stratified hierarchy above the ordinary person in the street. Furthermore, they distinguish themselves from other sociologists: they claim that the speech-"things" they offer are superior to the speech-"things" others have offered. They rate themselves as superior because they have more clearly separated their practical circumstances from their analysis. The best analysts are claimed to be those who speak nature's truth with no "distorting" personal participation whatsoever.⁶⁹

Stratifying speech is also to be found in ordinary conversations. It is not a means of *negotiating* relationships, but is a constituent in the creation of these relationships. Speech doesn't express stratification, it *constitutes* stratification. All speech is alienating when it ignores its origins and treats world and speaker as things rather than as essentially practical activities.

Practices which classify are not necessarily alienating. They only become so when the categories employed in these practices have been broken ". . . from their concrete human foundations, where they originally arise and in which they might have been once valid."⁷⁰ As the editor of *Telos* further remarks, "Thus alienated from their only proper habitat . . ., these categories become abstract, and, in the form of institutions, concepts or rules, they come to bound the very subjects that initially created them."⁷¹ Individuals who are not alienated, however, can *labor*, because to labor is to recognize one's creativity and entails a participation in reality. "The worker, in producing the object, also produces himself and the categories needed to grasp his reality in the process."⁷²

Marx as a reflexive theorist. We are now ready to understand Marx's theory in a new way. His interpretation was not *about* the world; he was attempting to change himself and the world. Marx was working with the same two traditions I defined as the progenitors of ethnomethodology. As a student of Hegel, he belonged to the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition; as a student of Feuerbach and the "scientific socialists," he belonged to the logico-empiricist tradition. His commitment to this latter tradition is evidenced in his first "Introduction" to the German edition of *Das Kapital*. Marx compares his work with chemistry and physics,⁷³ praises the use of statistics, and maintains he

has discovered society's "natural laws of movement."⁷⁴ His *method* is empirical, but his *theory* is drawn from the antithetical tradition. His "natural laws" are not an alienated listing of nature's things, since he offered his empirical findings as a creative, reflexive act. Marx was attempting to display (not report) that "Ideas do not exist apart from language."

Marx employs the scientific mode of stratifying. At the same time that he opposes his theories to other theories and to the ideas of the masses, this theory is also a reflexive "saying." I assume that Marx had not forgotten his claim in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that *scientific* theories are "only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions of the social relations of production."⁷⁵ In Marx's *Grundrisse* he asked his readers to see the work of classical economists as ". . . only the aesthetic fiction of the small and great adventure stories . . ."⁷⁶ Marx expected his own readers to understand that his theories were not being offered as commodities, but were rather authored fictions arising from his own practical circumstances. To use Merleau-Ponty's phrase, their absolutism is found only in this relativity.⁷⁷

In other words, "Marx's analysis of class presents itself as a class analysis of class; it is the theorizing of the proletariat . . . Marx's analysis of class is presented as being ground in, made intelligible by, reflexive upon, and a further instance of that which it theorizes about, i.e., class."⁷⁸

Marx's theory is thus not competitive with other theories of history, and when Marxist scholars argue with their bourgeois counterparts from a Marxist perspective they betray Marx. His theory is not a

. . . truth, hidden behind empirical history, as much as it presents empirical history as the geneology of truth. *It is superficial to say that Marxism reveals the meaning of history.* This "philosophy of history" does not give us the keys to history so much as restore it as a permanent question. It only makes us aware of our time and its partialities [*italics added*].⁷⁹

Marx's theory is consequently not *about* stratifying, but is an attempt to end stratifying speech by raising that speech to a scream. Marx was attempting to create a new mode of being in which his "scientific laws" were to be reflexive laws and would prove themselves in use. If the proletariat could be exhorted to speak as Marx proposed, after a cataclysm of class speaking, stratification would end. By speaking the theory, people would create a world in which the theory was nonsense. In socialism people would know the origins and power of speech; they would once more be self-conscious reality participants.⁸⁰

Ethnomethodology as de-stratifying practice. Marx's theory has failed in the Western world: people have not been freed by it. His "laws" have not been treated as reflexive scientific laws, because their logico-empiricist origins have repressed their reflexive sense. My Marx was not talking about truth; but was rather offering laws about stratifying practices to raise the consciousness of people so that they would end such practices. Instead, Marx's formulations have been treated as things. Scholars read and write books *about* praxis.

Such exegesis may have its use, but ethnomethodology has different commitments. Filmer and his associates offer their analysis of Marx not because they are interested in what Marx really meant, but because they wish to end their own stratifying practices.⁸¹ They suggest that the "proletariat" be read more as a metaphor than as a description of things. Therefore, anyone is a member of the proletariat who produces alienated speech, and Filmer and associates suggest that as scholars they too are proletarians. However, they have attempted to transcend this mode of being. They do research and write papers together but not in an effort to describe the world; instead their work represents a ". . . commitment to another community, a community in which speech is no longer a commodity bought (read) and sold (written) for instrumental purposes . . . the mode of existence which is enslaved by what it seeks to enslave."⁸²

The purpose of this community is to teach one another that the experience of all praxis is sensuous human activity, in which framework reading and writing participate as well. Theirs is a method by which they hope to experience Marx's reflexive truths. Thus, the method Filmer, Phillipson, Roche, Sandywell, and Silverman have adopted is but one of the possibly de-alienating activities that ethnomethodology has spawned. While up to now only this method has been tied closely to Marxist conceptions, I believe that the other ethnomethodological studies can be similarly tied to Marxists concepts. It is the reflexive and critical theorists⁸³ who most often accuse ethnomethodology of being reactionary and amoral; therefore, I specifically chose Marx as a vehicle for detailing the moral implications of ethnomethodology as a form of life.

From an ethnomethodological point of view, today's radical and critical theorists are not radical or critical enough. Because they treat Marxist thought as an object they stratify themselves and claim a privileged position. They interpret Marx's truth, but they have not experienced it. Ethnomethodology can be seen as an activity of de-stratification in that ethnomethodologists work with and among others and attempt to share their procedures with others. It is consequently a radical discipline, and may be

able to change the perspective of many who will not be convinced by polemic or philosophy.

My Hypocrisy

I have argued that ethnomethodology takes no sides in the polemical war between the two traditions that give it birth. Nevertheless, I presented this neutrality polemically: I argued that both of ethnomethodology's forebearers were guilty of thinking their reality absolute. Yet I have spoken of ethnomethodology as if it too were absolute, since I argued that both the hermeneutic-dialectic and the logico-empiricist traditions commit the sin of abstraction. As essentially talking and writing disciplines, they perpetuate rather than diminish alienation. However, even this article is only talk.

My hypocrisy is justified if it encourages readers to put aside these words and begin ethnomethodological practices of their own. To do ethnomethodology one must pursue some activity: further reading does not make one an ethnomethodologist. It is only because ethnomethodology is essentially a way of working that it can liberate us from what Blake called "... single vision and Newton's sleep."

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NOTES

1. Mehan and Wood, 1975, chap. 6.
2. Cicourel, 1973; Garfinkel, 1967; Pollner, 1970, 1973, forthcoming; Schwartz, 1971; Wieder, 1974.
3. Cf. Pollner, 1970; Mehan and Wood (forthcoming, 1975).
4. See Roszak's bibliography, 1973.
5. 1971, p. 4.
6. Cf. Becker, 1968, 1971.
7. First published in 1922, the edition I use is from 1964. I borrow the labels "logico-empiricism" and "hermeneutic-dialectic" from Radnitzky (1973). Interested readers will find there reviews of the literature of each tradition. Radnitzky's call for a "theory of research which is neither logical reconstruction nor psychology or sociology of science (see especially his Volume III) contrasts with the program developed here and elsewhere (Mehan and Wood, 1975). Gouldner (1970, pp. 488 ff) and Habermas (1971, especially pp. 301 ff) also discuss these two traditions and a reflexive alternative.
8. Cf. Manning, 1973.
9. This argument that the natural sciences measure directly and the social sciences only "indirectly" is but a methodological extension of Schutz's (1962) discussion of the necessity of "second order" concepts in social science.
10. 1972, p. 206, in Radnitzky, 1973, p. 417.
11. Insiders to both the logico-empiricist and the hermeneutic-dialectic traditions will find my characterization of these traditions disturbingly glib. They must realize that I do not wish to describe these traditions, but rather to use them in order to illuminate the very possibility of descriptions. They may find comfort in the knowledge that my treatment of ethnomethodology has been similarly glib.
12. Mehan and Wood, 1975, chapter 2.
13. 1973.
14. Leach, 1974, p. 34.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
18. For a hint of the kinds of reactions I am speaking of, see the edited discussion at the end of Mehan (1973, pp. 335 ff).
19. Cf. Gouldner, 1973, pp. 87-88.
20. Garfinkel, 1964, in 1967, p. 35.
21. Cf. Gouldner, 1973.

22. Blum, 1970a, 1970b; McHugh, et al., 1974.
23. Cf. Kaplan, 1964.
24. See Gouldner, 1973, pp. 95 ff.
25. Mehan and Wood, 1975, chap. 10.
26. Garfinkel, 1967, p. viii.
27. Hansen, 1967, p. 15.
28. Mehan and Wood, 1975, Part II.
29. Hansen, 1967, p. 14.
30. Merleau-Ponty, 1955, in 1970, p. 140.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Mullins, 1973, pp. 270–293, provides short bibliographies of these traditions. Jay, 1973–74, pp. 42–44, provides references to the most important recent works of the “critical theorists,” most of which remain untranslated.
33. Habermas, 1970a, 1970b, 1971.
34. Habermas, 1971, p. 314.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 301–317.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 308–311.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 304.
38. Cf. Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970, p. 361.
39. Habermas, 1971, p. 310.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, p. 312.
44. Schroyer, 1971, p. 301.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
46. Pollner, 1973.
47. Laing, 1967.
48. Pollner, 1970, 1974 (forthcoming).
49. Emerson and Pollner, in preparation.
50. Laing and Esterson, 1970.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
52. Pollner, forthcoming.
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, footnote 6.
56. Novak, 1971, p. 98.
57. Borges, 1964, p. 201.
58. McHugh et al., 1974; see Mehan and Wood, 1975, chap. 8.
59. Filmer et al., 1973.
60. Cf. Heidegger's later works.
61. Roche, 1973, p. 79–80.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
63. Marx, 1959, p. 129; cf. Sandywell, 1973, p. 36.
64. McClellan, ed., 1971, p. 71.
65. Cf. Sandywell, 1973, p. 34.
66. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*.
67. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 1963, p. 32.
68. Cf. Silverman, 1973, p. 65.
69. Filmer (1973) reviews this stratifying work in Parsons' theory of classes. Silverman (1973) discusses its appearance in Davis and Moore and their critics. The strident stratifying practices of Marxist writers themselves should be obvious.
70. Piccone, 1970, p. 340.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

72. Anonymous, 1970, p. 298. The journal *Telos* is a valuable resource for *theoretical* examinations of the concept of praxis I have adopted. Kosok's papers (1970) there are especially valuable. Piccone's articles are also important, though as Dallmayr (1973) points out, Piccone remains committed to the possibility of transcendental truths, a faith I do not share. Dallmayr's review (1973) of Paci provides an introduction to the history of phenomenological Marxism. The articles in Israel and Tajfel, eds. (1973), especially Janousek "On the Marxian Concept of *Praxis*," should also be consulted. Merleau-Ponty's work (e.g., 1964, 1969, 1970) has been a resource not only for this paper, but for other work as well (Mehan and Wood, 1975). Pollner (1970) was the first to explore Merleau-Ponty's relevance for ethnomethodology.
73. Marx, 1967, pp. 8 ff.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
75. Marx, 1963, p. 105.
76. McLellan, ed., 1971, p. 16–17.
77. Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 140.
78. Roche, 1973, p. 93.
79. Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 160.
80. Cf. Roche, 1973, p. 94–95.
81. Filmer et al., 1973.
82. Silverman, 1973, p. 75; cf. Gouldner, 1973.
83. Cf. Sallach, 1973; Zeitlin, 1974. ■