

## Auto/Biography as Method: Dialectical Sociology of Everyday Life

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Review Essay:

**Zdenek Konopásek (Ed.) (2000). Our Lives as Database—Doing a Sociology of Ourselves** (Czech Social Transitions in Autobiographical Research Dialogues). Prague: Karolinum Press, 303 pages (English), ISBN 80-246-0120-6 (paperback) US\$20 (320 CZK)

**Key words:** self, other, individual, society, reflexivity, dialectics

**Abstract:** *Our Lives as Database* is the outcome of a project, in which the participant authors practice sociology by writing and analyzing their autobiographies. I review structure and content of the book and provide a sample analysis of one contribution. While the editor of the book makes a convincing argument why writing and analyzing autobiographies collectively is a suitable method for doing sociology, I propose the consideration of a more dialectical perspective on the issue that makes the (dialectical) relations between individual and society and Self and Other more explicit, and provide additional reasons for the feasibility of the project described. As a reflexive moment fitting the context of this review essay, I draw on the same writing genres and techniques as the authors.

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## 1. Introduction

I don't remember much of the year 1968. I was in Yugoslavia, camping with my family. A few days after returning home, it happened. August 28, we were all glued to the television. Russian tanks had invaded Czechoslovakia, and now were in the streets of Prague. I have a vivid image of a place with a fountain, tree-lined streets filled with people, and Russian tanks. I remember thinking, "We just came from a communist country. We could have been trapped." I also remember my outrage—How could anyone let this happen? How could the Americans let this happen? I only understood later that when there are no American interests (money, exploitation) at stake, American politicians don't care. And, after all, what is the difference between Russians "liberating" Czechoslovakia and Americans bombing the hell out of Afghanistan (or in their terms, bombing it back into the stone age)? [1]

I had promised to write a review essay about *Our Lives as Database*; but at the moment when the book review editor asked me about it, I was physically tired and emotionally drained. Taking on this task *now* seemed like a duty rather than a pleasure. I leafed through the book, began to read Preface and Prologue, and then became intrigued. I read on, jumping to the second part of the book, entitled *Documents*, which contained eight life narratives by participants in the SAMISEBE project. I continued to read on and on for the entire day; the next morning, I picked up where I had left the previous afternoon, finished the *Documents*, and then returned to Part I and Chapter 7 (which, in a strange way of numbering, follows Part II that follows a different numbering, "Life narratives 1" through "Life narratives 8") completed reading the book. In my busy life as academic, I hardly ever have the leisure or desire to read a book from cover to cover. This one was so intriguing that I could not but read it in one swoop! [2]

Growing up in post-war Germany, I knew little about what had happened to Czechoslovakia or any other country neighboring Germany between the two world wars. The entire country, adults and kids, school system, media, and so on, seemed to be engaged in a collective forgetting. And I, as many of my friends, was not very much interested in finding out, perhaps unconsciously trying to unstuck this other *Urschuld*, this other originary guilt. Symptomatically, my parents talked very little about their own youth. From my mother, I received but sketches of her seeking cover in bomb shelters at night during air raids, trips to the countryside for a few potatoes and a good meal with distant relatives, and my grandfather's stay in a field hospital in Poland where my grandmother visited him once. My father didn't talk about his days as a member of Hitler Jugend, only his small-caliber rifle, built identically to the army rifle but with a different barrel; my uncle's flights over their estate, his "training flights" to Vienna to buy "Sacher Torte" for his (female) admirers. I vaguely remember that I heard about the Munich Agreement (September 29, 1938), which brought the Czechoslovak Republic to an end, the annexation of "Böhmen" (Bohemia) and "Mähren" (Moravia). [3]

In all societies, it is the parent's fate to decide "when and how to tell *it* to the child."  
(KAPR, p.232)

The book drew me deeper and deeper into a sociological history of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, viewed from a first-person perspective. I even went to the Internet to search for more information about the country, Prague, and the Russian invasion. And while I read, memories of my own youth in post-WWII Germany began to surface, details of everyday life that had many aspects in common with the different auto/biographical narratives, and which allowed me new perspectives of myself and German culture and social life after the war. Other themes, like the owning of houses and apartments, while not part of my own lived experience, became starting points for images, then reflections of housing in post-WWII Germany. [4]

Most of my classmates in Gymnasium lived in rented apartments. I knew people who owned houses—most of the farmers did, because they had inherited the farm or had built on the property sliced off their parents' farms. But in the city, only the "rich" owned houses—even those of us growing up in relative poverty called most of them "*Neureiche*," the newly rich as distinct from the properly rich, like the nobility. My parents always lived in rented houses, part of the contract my civil-servant father had with his employer, the state, and had no prospects of owning a house or even an apartment. My siblings still live in rented apartments; my mother only owns hers because of an inheritance late in her life. [5]

The auto/biographical materials and most of the essays that preceded them used a representational form that I felt worked very well, more so, which I enjoyed. Material from the auto/biographies were, most often, not mounted as data in the traditional sense, supporting what the author has to say, a piece of constructed reality for the construction of reality, but as texts that stood in relief to the main narrative, almost like the voiceover technique that I have used in the past (ROTH & MCROBBIE 1999) to build tension into the text by disrupting and interrupting the main narrative that threatened to take over and off to become a master narrative. In this way, the reader of *Our Lives as Databases* often encounters multiple perspectives on the same situation or topic, recounted from the perspective, or rather through the auto/biography of the different participants in the collective effort. But before providing a deeper analysis of why the book works and what makes it theoretically so interesting, let me provide a brief outline of its structure and content, which are followed by the exemplary analysis of one chapter and a few points of minor criticism. In so doing, I utilize the same literary techniques employed by the authors of the book. [6]

## **2. The Book: SAMISEBE as Praxis of Method**

This book, as its editor (KONOPASEK) points out, is the result of a sociological project, SAMISEBE, a play on words with two reflexive Czech pronouns, literally meaning "ourselves' selves" (p.13, note 2). Several Czech sociologists of diverse methodological and theoretical commitments, different gender and generations repeatedly met for a period of about four years to conduct a sociological study (experiment) on the changing nature of their society with the fall of communist rule by using their auto/biographies as the primary database. Despite the perceivably interesting results, the project more or less fell apart: increasingly

irregular and spaced meetings, a reorganization of the members' university that turned them from researchers into teachers, and repeatedly failed attempts at garnering outside funding for their project all contributed to the demise of "the golden age of" (p.55) a practical and reflexive experiment that had started so well. Disagreements between members and the tremendous demands on time needed to enact the collaboration contributed in non-negligible ways to the difficulties of maintaining the SAMISEBE project. Nevertheless, before the end of the project, the group was able to produce this wonderful book. [7]

## 2.1 Structure

The contents page of the book provides the following somewhat unusual structure with respect to the distribution of chapters: PREFACE, PROLOGUE (Chapter 1), PART I: TEXTS (Chapters 2-6), PART II: DOCUMENTS (Life Narratives 1-8), and EPILOGUE (Chapter 7). The preface and prologue both introduce a lot of background on the SAMISEBE project. In Part I, five members of the group (DISMAN, ALAN, SMIDOVA, KABELE, & KONOPASEK) provide interpretive and analytical texts that have emerged as products of their collective work. The primary auto/biographical material that these five and the remaining three members (HOLY, KAPR, & STEHLIKOVA) gathered in preparation for and as part of their meetings has been assembled, partially, in Part II of the book. [8]

Not surprisingly, giving the intention of the project, the Texts draw on the auto/biographical materials, some also appearing in the Documents while others are not. However, rather than placing these texts as data and analyzing them in detail, the autobiographical materials are placed as if in counterpoint, relief, or as voiceovers; in some instances, a text produced by the same author but in a different context is similarly set in quotation form and often prefaced "Elsewhere ..." (see following example). There is therefore an interesting interplay between the analytical texts and the autobiographical materials placed next to them. [9]

Elsewhere in my notes: I fully agree with the editor's (KONOPASEK) analysis that "'intertextuality', 'reflexivity', 'indeterminacy', 'multivocality' and 'relativism' are not theoretical or even programmatic principles here" (p.53) but rather concrete praxis. Rather than saying that "SAMISEBE was born as an experiment with a rather weak intellectual basis" (p.53), I might have said that the project began before getting lost in too much (ivory tower) reflection. [10]

The technique worked for me especially in the Documents, where the autobiography of one person was often augmented or relativized by autobiographical materials from another group member, as in the following example from the life narrative of Miroslav DISMAN, relativized by a text by Olga SMIDOVA:

"And this was one of the stumbling blocks of my life, because all the participants got a piece of paper certifying that they would get three pieces of cake and milk coffee and that was the let-down. The milk coffee had skin on it, and I hated skin on milk with a vengeance.

Olga: I also remember a brief sequence. My siblings came on one Sunday for the day, I was sitting in this woman's kitchen, and I had a huge bowl of milk coffee, which I hated with a vengeance and had to drink." (p.194) [11]

While reading, I wondered whether a different format for the book might have worked better and might have been even more consistent of the inter-textual nature of a researcher's experience, which contributes to the interpretive horizon brought to the analysis, and the auto/biographical materials that constituted the (textual) objects of analysis. For example, one could have imagined that the two different texts (Texts, Documents) were arranged in double columns or facing pages (Figure 1), or on upper and lower part of the same page (Figure 2). Apart from the nightmare such arrangements might cause the publisher, would such arrangement lead to different reading experiences? How would the vicinity of the different textual materials pertaining to the same author (is he or she the same, given that there are temporal differences between the times when the texts were authored?)? How would readers proceed with the multiple texts on the same or facing pages? Would the linearity and sequential nature of ordinary reading be disrupted? What would happen to our reading if the texts of different authors—that is, authors who respond to different first and last names—were juxtaposed on the same or facing pages? [12]

LOGY (38-39): 12 hours per day at the department, encounter of death and pain. Listening to many life stories. Conflict with megalomaniac boss. Greater inclination towards Christianity.

Death of father  
Chronic illness of wife  
Attempt at local change of health care system (chronically ill), seminar on the family  
Sociological initiative and what led up to it  
Foundation of sociological and teachers' forum

Elsewhere: SEMINAR ON THE FAMILY (40-43): Josef and I established a seminar, its natural culmination was a conception of family policy. Not adopted, and even after the fall of the

My father often talked about Czechoslovakian coffee, actually, I think he said coffee from Bohemia—he never specified whether this would have been before the war, after the Munich Conference of 1938, or during the war. My grandmother apparently somehow could get a hold of green coffee beans, which she (or, more likely, one of the young women whom she trained to run the households of rich and noble families) roasted for their consumption. ... I never did have coffee until I was twenty. [13]

The demise of an order based on transparency, authority, and trust is a black hole that threatens all fast-changing social worlds. If this process exceeds its break point, all conduct (even well intentioned) merely becomes a contribution to the polyphony of chaos. Human effort, therefore, is usually more or less consciously directed at the conservation and renewal of social worlds in their existing state. In this context, Marris (1974) speaks of the conservative impulse, which invisibly permeates everybody's conduct. It is a self-evident element of everyday reality, it ensures its undeniable perennality. All the malfunctions, all the natural challenges and demands that are not compatible with the existing arrangement of the established social worlds are, consequently, either pushed out to the gray sector or, on the contrary, branded as "evil" problems that cannot be solved in the near future. The agenda

Figure 1: An alternative arrangement of the autobiographical documents (left) and theoretical texts (right) that could have been chosen, which might have led to a very different reading experience.

## CHAPTER 5 THE DEVILISH COCKTAIL OF THE VELVET REVOLUTION

The Social Transition of Society  
in the Biographical Narratives  
of several Czech Sociologists

Jiří Kabele

The years between 1990 and 1992, following the velvet revolution, represent a part of the history of Czechoslovakia in motion that is far from being fully digested.<sup>1</sup> Temptations, risks, and fits of anxiety due to uncertainty have shaken all levels of society. Social relations had to be re-negotiated from the beginning. It was a process in which Thomas's theorem (1966) was clearly at work: if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. The initial social uncertainty (caused by vagueness, muddles or the provisional nature of the accepted definitions of the situation) has objectivated in the transitional anomie, which, in turn, retroactively made it difficult for the participants to orientate themselves in the new reality. The danger arising from this positive feedback, which may lead to breakdown, destruction and chaos, was anxiously experienced during the transitional period.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This text is the first evaluation of the biographies of seven sociologists, written between 1990 and 1993 within the SAMISEBE research project.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the situation in Lisbon, or in present-day Yugoslavia.

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### *Biography, first level*

I, JIŘÍ KABELE \*1946

Brother's death

Studies at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics and at the Philosophical Faculty

Painting

Emigration of sister

Birth of daughter and failure in founding a family

Repeated change of employment and blocked career

SPORTPROPAG and its abolition (problematic orientation)

Child Oncology Clinic, conception of participatory clinical sociology

Figure 2: Yet another alternative arrangement of the autobiographical documents (bottom) and theoretical texts (top) that could have been chosen, which might have led to a very different reading experience not only from the published book but also from the arrangement proposed in Figure 1. [14]

## 2.2 Content

During its experiment, the SAMISEBE group conceived of the texts that they produced as constituting eight biographical layers, beginning with a first, "innocent" biography, subsequently augmented by further biographical texts, which could no longer be innocent given the discussions that had intervened. Whereas the topics at the second level remained unspecified, each author wrote autobiographical texts pertaining to a specific theme to produce subsequent levels. These themes include "What the Czechoslovak Communist Party meant or means in my life," "How the SAMISEBE group met and worked," "My life from 7 to 9 am," "Family possessions," "The last three years," and "My friends." [15]

### 2.2.1 "Documents"

In the Documents, readers find selected excerpts from the original SAMISEBE life narratives produced by the different authors, each life narrative "augmented" by excerpts from the narratives of others. The SAMISEBE project has an iterative quality, where the narratives of one person are constantly confronted with the narratives of others, giving rise to an accelerated process of theoretical sensitivity. Across the different participants, these excerpts cover the broad range of topics that the group had addressed in their focused writing. As a collection, these Documents provide an intriguing perspective on Czechoslovak and Czech society—through multiple lenses constituted by the concrete lives of the different authors. These texts, though selected and assembled for the purpose a book publication, maintain all the heterogeneity that comes with different selves but also the homogeneity that comes from investigating the same collective life, society. Through this collection of autobiographical materials on the same topic, we learn a lot of sociology that we would not get from impersonal-narrator and survey-based analyses of a society said to change following the abandonment of party rule in 1989. [16]

When I read the "Documents," it became clear to me how little I knew about Czechoslovakia, its culture and its people. It is true, I had read every novel and short story by Franz KAFKA, but little else. The country always had a good hockey team, and as far back into my childhood as I can remember, I knew the name of Emil ZATOPEC. I know a little more and am very familiar with composers such as Bedrich SMETANA, Antonin DVORAK, Vitezslav NOVAK, Josef SUK, Leos JANACEK, and Bohuslav MARTINU. How little this amounts as knowledge about a society and a culture! Today, living here in Canada, I am even farther removed from the Czech Republic, which makes it rarely, if ever, into the news—just when they play hockey against our team. [17]

I also saw, for the first time, the man whose name was to become synonymous with Czechoslovak and world athletics: Emil Zatopek. (HOLY, p.207)

Because of the widely varying age-levels represented in the group (birthdates 1924 to 1963), the "Documents" cover different periods each associated with its own dramatic change to the political life of Czechoslovak and Czech society—the truncation of the country with the Munich Pact (1938) and subsequent control by Germany (1939), change to communist rule after WWII (1947), the Prague spring and Russian occupation (1968) and the subsequent period of "normalization," and the "Velvet Revolution" (1989) following massive, popular demonstrations. However, rather than grand narratives about what happened, which brought about so-called changes or transformations, we see events as these were experienced by real, concrete people, how they had to move or had someone move in, who saw "columns of German prisoners, wretched, limping" (p.197) through their villages and who "felt a lot of pity" for the prisoners. We see the "Velvet Revolution" through the experiences of someone who participated in a teachers' forum all the while wanting/having to stay out ("I wanted terribly to get

involved in every activity, and on the other hand I knew that my wife was ill and that I had to stay out of it" [KABELE, p.225]). [18]

As a result, we read a sociology of society from a first-person perspective, and through a perspective where eating breakfast, illness of family members, broken heaters, water in the basement are as much part of everyday immortal society as the history of a nation through grand narratives, purged of what constitutes the very basis of these narratives. There are no mysteries in these lives—just as there are no mysteries in the lives of the exceptional people of this world—we all live concretely, moment after moment, sleep and get up, fill (eat) and empty ourselves, do one thing rather than another. [19]

Reading my CV, many (young) colleagues seem to be mystified by my publication record. I get asked, "What do you do to be able to produce so much?" and "What kind of life do you live?" While I politely answer that there is nothing special about my life, I have an internal monologue that is about getting up, making coffee, drinking water, going to the bathroom, eating, cycling, gardening, cooking dinner, having a conversation with my wife, and going to bed. There is nothing special about my life, no special gifts (intelligence), no special office, no special anything—just plain ordinary life, day in and day out. This plain ordinariness, this lack of something special, is what is so special. [20]

Of course, we all get up in the morning, experience mornings between 9 and 11 A.M. What is so special about this collection of autobiographical experiences is that the authors use them as a starting point for doing sociology, a sociology that is not detached from everyday experience but rather grounded in it. *Our Lives as Database* is therefore also an attempt at sociology that describes and perhaps explains society all the while keeping in focus its members' experiences of this society. I say also, because the authors themselves have their own explanations about what they have done and what the outcomes of their work are. But, in keeping with RICOEUR (1991) that actions are interpretable like texts and with DERRIDA (1988) that the meaning of a text is only accomplished in the act of reading, other readers will arrive at yet other significations of what the SAMISEBE group has done. [21]

### 2.2.2 "Texts"

In the five texts, the authors cover considerable and heterogeneous ground: Miroslav DISMAN, the only latecomer admitted to the original group and the émigré who brings a "stranger's" perspective, describes a very personal epistemology (Chapter 2); Josef ALAN, key figure in the group because of his institutional position as center director, analyses family relationships and membership in the communist party (Chapter 3); Olga SMIDOVA builds on the stories of housing in her analysis of family strategies related to property maintenance and transfer (Chapter 4); Jiri KABELE looks at social transition, constancy and change, of the Czech society during the "Velvet Revolution" (Chapter 5); and Zdenek KONOPASEK provides a superb, theoretically well grounded reflection on the state of sociology, which he considers in terms of a



"grandma" metaphor, and the contribution that an auto/biographical sociology can make to the field (Chapter 6). (Although KONOPASEK confesses somewhere to be "on the right", his grandma metaphor nicely fits with a materialist dialectic [e.g., IL'ENKOV 1977], according to which parents and their off-spring co-exist at the same time, so that sociology exists both as "grandma" and as its anti-dote, the "auto/biographic" incarnation.) [22]

In the first text (Chapter 1), though classified in the section Prologue, KONOPASEK provides an introduction to SAMISEBE, its history, development (including the rules that the participants created and subsequently negotiated as they went along), and a description of the emerging biographical layers. The closing Chapter 7 (KONOPASEK) is somewhat of a continuation of these basic texts (particularly Chapter 6) where KONOPASEK provides an argument for the contribution that reflexive autobiographies concerned with life and social transformation of a former communist country can make to understanding social life and societies in the capitalist West. [23]

Of these texts, even those not classified as "Texts," those written by KONOPASEK, particularly Chapters 6 and 7 are different in the sense that he, more so than others, provide many links to the current state of sociology and draws less on the autobiographical texts created in and for the group meetings. However, in my reading, these texts are necessary to provide some intertextual links between the SAMISEBE experiment and sociology as a field and its state at this historical juncture. These chapters provide the crucial link without which SAMISEBE might have remained the product of an insular effort, standing beside many other efforts without attempts to articulate similarities and differences to other concurrent efforts. KONOPASEK certainly is widely read in and masters the intricacies of many current discourses, whether these pertain to reflexivity, actor networks, or knowledge/power. He covers the sociological and textual terrain ground from RICOEUR to FOUCAULT, ASHMORE to WOOLGAR, LATOUR to LYNCH, and BECK to GIDDENS. [24]

In the spirit of the entire book, these "more theoretical" chapters are part of and stand apart from the other chapters, very much in the same way that the different texts within the chapters are part of and different from the main narrative. But throughout the texts, I found much "food for thought," starting points for autobiographical and theoretical reflections. In fact, through the reflections on my autobiography I realized that these texts about the constancy and change of Czech(oslovak) society, viewed through the constancy and change of eight Czech individuals, were also texts about me and about the society where I had grown up (post-WWII Germany). What we learn, sociologically, is not about one society specifically, but also about the collective human condition more generally. Let me provide by one example, pertinent in many ways to my own life because the chapter author, DISMAN, also immigrated to the country where I am at home now. [25]

I have lived nearly half of my life in Germany, but I never felt homesick to that country, the sense of longing that some people feel when away from "home" (*Heimat*), a stranger in a strange land. Although I feel at home here (Victoria, Canada), there are always people who attribute my ways to my German origins, while simultaneously my German colleagues attribute my ways of being to my North American context. Perhaps my three languages give me away, all of which I speak with some accent—any one with an accent is automatically a stranger, forgiven for the faux pas he or she might commit. Does being a stranger provide a particular analytical vantage point, as DISMAN and ALSOP (2002) indicate? [26]

### 2.3 A sample chapter: The "stranger" as analytical concept

One of the SAMISEBE group is Miroslav DISMAN, who emigrated from Czechoslovakia during the fall of 1968, and eventually became a professor of sociology at York University (Toronto, Canada). Fittingly, he uses Alfred SCHUTZ's (1944) concept of the "stranger" to provide a particular analysis of the changing nature of self and society that is evident in his own autobiography, thereby working towards a "very personal epistemology" (p.59). DISMAN looks at the different experiences of understanding, how with the temporal distance to his native country, his past experience became progressively less an adequate tool for understanding the events in Czechoslovakia. Strangely enough, when he returned after the Velvet Revolution, he rapidly experienced a familiarity quite different from the stranger metaphor, a working of "old ready-made recipes" and "thinking as usual" (p.60). [27]

After a long absence, I had returned to Germany for a three-month fellowship. I remember one Saturday afternoon I took a stroll through the city of Kiel. Something felt strange, inexplicable. I could read the signs, hear and even deciphering what passers-by were saying—and yet I felt as if I had dropped into a foreign land, where I did not understand. Until I realized that all shops and businesses were closed. Although there were people in the street, the city was unexpectedly dead in a way—where I call home, people would go in and out of stores, be walking with their purchases. [28]

But when he subsequently returned for a second time 18 months later, he realized that he did not understand; he was a stranger in his own country. He could not take for granted understanding and being understood. "Even the language, seemingly my own language becomes a problem. The 'chance of understanding and being understood' could not be taken for granted anymore" (DISMAN, p.61). He writes about being able to understand the political and ideological attitudes of his friends, but not able to comprehend where these had come from. And he realizes that even after an extended time, "There are still many areas where I feel that virtually all of them have a different understanding than I have, and that their understanding is different in the same way" (p.64). [29]

Two years prior to my fellowship stay in Germany, a cousin had visited me in Vancouver. We had long conversations about politics, philosophy, and life. As I was listening to her, I heard and understood the words and remembered that nearly

twenty years earlier, I had thought and talked like this. Although this talk sounded familiar, voices from a long forgotten past, it felt strange now, a little removed from reality. It was not that she was removed from reality, she was there with me in a very concrete way, but that the language and the culture it embodies seemed to be so much more philosophical compared to the pragmatism that is—now—my own. That is, there are moments when I hear and recognize the words but do not understand. [30]

As I read DISMAN's chapter, I was thinking not only about my own experiences of immigrating to the country where my parents had met, married, and conceived me, but particularly about the concept of understanding and its relation to familiarity. I had noticed (attributing much of it to my job, teaching, which allowed me to interact extensively with people) that in many social situation I was increasingly able to participate in conversations about culturally and societally significant events, television shows, books, and so forth. I could increasingly predict, or more, know without reflection, what was sensible to say and hear being said. At the same time, my experience during the stay in Germany showed that I was losing or had lost this sense for what would sensibly come next. On the surface and upon quick reading, DISMAN articulates experiences over other émigrés, who, upon returning to the country they left, find that it is no longer the same. [31]

I found the chapter interesting, as well as the others, because on closer inspection, I realized that the author used the concept of *understanding somewhat loosely—thereby raising questions that an epistemology of understanding would have to address*. This concept plays havoc, both in everyday and many professional discourses, because it is used to cover both pre-reflective intuitions about how the world works and explanations of the world in terms of theoretical constructs. DISMAN makes a correlative distinction between *understanding* of social situations, which has to be experienced (p.60), and factual knowledge, which is easy to transmit and easy to comprehend (p.59). And, in a most curious phrasing and reversal of the terms understanding and comprehending, DISMAN claims, "I could understand the present political and ideological attitudes of my friends, but I was still not able to comprehend where these attitudes had come from" (p.62). [32]

It is helpful to conceptualize understanding and explanation (comprehending) as two aspects of a dialectic unit (RICOEUR 1991). Understanding arises from lived experience, including pre-articulate and inarticulate aspects. This understanding requires explanation to be further elaborated and articulated; but the effort of explanation has understanding as a prerequisite. This is the case not only for the social situations that DISMAN refers to but also for the supposedly most rational of human beings, natural scientists. As I documented repeatedly, when scientist were unfamiliar with the biological systems represented in a graph, details of the pertinent data collection procedures, instrumentations, and other "anecdotal" aspects of the research, they found it difficult and even impossible to interpret (explain) the graph (ROTH, BOWEN, & MASCIOTRA 2002). On the other hand, when scientists successfully interpret a graph, we could show that they drew

heavily on "anecdotal" experiences, which provided the very ground that the explanation (interpretation) seemed to require. [33]

In my view, the epistemology of the stranger has to include the concept of understanding, which goes beyond merely recognizing or making cursory connections between signs. What DISMAN and I experienced, which we articulated as not understanding, is the bodily experience of living practical life with those whose language we seemed, on the surface, to comprehend. What we lacked were these crucial aspects of everyday practical life, which is co-extensive with our understanding. [34]

Linked to the problem of understanding and explaining, are those of Self as constant and changing and the Self-Other dialectic. The SAMISEBE project is about the articulation of experience and about reflecting on similarities and differences between different autobiographies. That is, the group members are engaged in the dialectic of understanding and explanation, the latter articulating the former, the former being the requisite of the latter. How we read and understand some text changes over time, as we never look back at the same original text but always through an ever-expanding interpretive horizon, including our own and other's readings (MERLEAU-PONTY 1945). Given that the group worked with their experience and an ever expanding set of texts articulating this experience, It is not surprising that DISMAN felt both the SAMISEBE group and his Self as changing ("The entire SAMISEBE Group is constantly changing" [p.65], "Disman writing this postscript is different from the Disman who joined the project" [p.65-66]). But I return to this issue below. [35]

## **2.4 Some misgivings**

My only misgivings, and these are few and minor, pertain to the copy-editing of the (English) manuscript. Here, a brief listing of some minor annoyances. (1) Throughout the book, there are spelling errors (e.g., "we would by lead away" instead of "we would be led away" or "representatives" [p.144]), which make reading annoying, and may make it difficult for readers from non-English speaking countries, who are much more sensitive, even brittle, to the errors if they also have to rely on a dictionary. (Just think of computers that stall because a single letter has been input differently than what the code allows.) (2) There are sentences here and there that suffer from structural problems. (3) There are several places where the numbering of the footnotes is completely off (e.g., p.41, the numbers in the text are 9, 10, whereas in the footnotes they are 23, 24). (4) At one point, the author announces that the text in italics will be "aligned to the right [sic] margin" (p.139), but subsequently all italicized text is aligned to the left. (5) It is curious to have all the footnotes on the right odd-numbered pages, even if the referring indices are on the left, even-numbered pages. These are not tragic problems, just annoyances, which, only slightly though, tarnish the image of an otherwise marvelous book. [36]

### 3. Why Does Auto/biography Work as Sociological Method?

A central questions one has to ask is why and how the praxis of collective writing and analysis of auto/biography works and legitimately contributes to sociology. In the following, I first sketch the argument that the editor KONOPASEK makes, which constitutes, by and large, a very nice argument (Chapter 6). Nevertheless, I had the sense that two main aspects that seem central to me to sociology and autobiography have not been sufficiently articulated and theorized: the relationship between individual and society, on the one hand, and the relationship between Self and Other, on the other hand. Because I have made this observation in several disciplines over the recent months, I articulate some of the basic features that I think need to be more in the foreground in (qualitative) social research. I begin by providing a review of the editor's own argument and proceed to articulate further positions that one might include in an argument for auto/biographical sociology. [37]

#### 3.1 The insider argument

KONOPASEK's argument for SAMISEBE, or collective autobiography as sociological method, fundamentally revolves around the reflexive nature of sociology as stated in the following syllogism. Sociologists take society as the central object of study. Sociologists are members of society. Therefore, (1) sociologists also study themselves and (2) use their knowledge qua members of society to interpret their data, even if these are not autobiographical. The syllogism constitutes the fundamental assumption underlying the ethnomethodological approach (GARFINKEL 1967). Classical ("Grandma") sociology, however, attempted to separate the sociologist-subject from his or her object (society), even masked the relationship by interposing objective "scientific method," a praxis that distinguished what people do in everyday life (including sociologists qua citizens) from what sociologists qua scientists do. KONOPASEK points out yet another connection between sociology and its object: society always also picks up elements from sociology as it does from other sciences, a phenomenon Ulrich BECK (1992) described as reflexive scientization of society. That is, everyday discourse becomes infused with sociological concepts. Necessarily, any interview would reveal such concepts (discourse, language) in everyday description of reality, thereby reifying the very concepts that a scientific sociology has created in the first place. [38]

KONOPASEK (pp.160-163) characterizes the SAMISEBE method along three fundamental dimensions. First, SAMISEBE explicitly mobilizes the personal experience of sociologists, which allows a blending of professional and biographical discourses and interpretations. This blending does away with the traditional separation between what and who represents and what and who is represented, between subject and its object. Second, the SAMISEBE method is based on an interactive and reciprocal logic. This means that "different" "others," different along the dimension of age, sex, professional histories, political inclinations, thematic preferences, and positions in university hierarchy provide texts and interpret their own and those of others. This grounding in differences

among participants provides, thus KONOPASEK, the SAMISEBE group "*with mutual control over our own biographical and sociological practices*" (p.161, emphases in the original). Third, SAMISEBE is open ended, thereby reflecting the open-ended nature of all autobiographical work. In fact, as I see it, this reflects the open-ended nature of all interpretive work (e.g. MERLEAU-PONTY 1945), especially when human actions are viewed in terms of the metaphor of the text (RICOEUR 1991) and, most generally, human existence itself.<sup>1</sup> KONOPASEK argues that these three characteristics do not only complement but also "guarantee" one another in the sense that mobilization of individual experience (Point 1) and interactivity (Point 2) require time, thereby supporting the open-endedness (Point 3). Similarly, interactivity requires attention to research and social practices, thereby supporting the blending of professional and biographical discourses. [39]

I remember that in the early days of my own research in the classroom of other teachers, I frequently felt outraged about the actions of one teacher or another—"How could he do this?" and "How could she say that?" But as I became a more seasoned researcher, I turned this outrage against myself asking "How do I come to question, 'How could he do this?' and 'How could she say that?'" Turning the outrage against myself became an excellent methodological tool to deal with my presuppositions. What makes me see one lesson in a favorable light but upset with another? What are the experiences and horizons that constitute the other part in the dialectic relation with "reality" from which emerge what and how I perceive social events? [40]

There are, of course, not only advantages that come from being a member of society and also an analyst of this society, because the preconstructed can be found everywhere (BOURDIEU 1992). That is, because sociologists appropriate concepts (discourses) as members of (immortal) society, they run the danger of simply reifying these concepts. "Embedded in, or taken by, the object that it takes as its object, [an un-reflective scientific practice] reveals something of the object, but something which is not really objectivized since it consists of the very principles of apprehension of the object" (BOURDIEU 1992, p.236). The sociologist, taking as his or her task to know an object (social world) of which he is the product, is likely to raise problems and employ concepts that are products of the same object. KONOPASEK concludes, "Hence, of course, the somewhat banal flavor of most conclusions brought about by standard sociological study" (p.146). Simply watching out does not improve the situation. What is required has variously been described as "radical doubt" (BOURDIEU 1992) or "suspicion of ideology" (MARKARD 1984). Personally, I would have liked to see the authors struggle more with this problematic of the preconstructed. BOURDIEU provides the following advice for how to go about this struggle:

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1 I do not endorse KONOPASEK's statement "*Text is real, reality is textual*" (p.165), for as I have argued elsewhere, there are considerable parts of our experience (including expertise) that do not lend themselves (easily) to description and therefore resist the textual metaphor (ROTH 2001).

"To avoid becoming the object of the problems that you takes as your object, you must retrace the history of the *emergence* of these problems, of their progressive constitution, i.e., of the collective work, oftentimes accomplished though [sic] competition and struggle, that proved necessary to make such and such issues to be known and recognized (*faire connaître et reconnaître*) as *legitimate problems*, problems that are avowable, publishable, public, official." (BOURDIEU 1992, p.238) [41]

### 3.2 Dialectics

The SAMISEBE project makes complete sense to me; I even envied the individuals as a collective to have been in the right place at the right time to participate in the praxis of reflexive auto/biographical sociology. But some of the central issues—perhaps just in my thinking—that ought to have been addressed seemed to have eschewed the authors—the dialectics of individual and society and Self and Other. A discussion of these dialectics could have contributed enormously to a project that embodies this problematic in its very banner, auto/biographical sociology. Not only is autobiography also oto-biography, (NLat. < Gr. *ous*, ear), for the ear of the other and necessarily in the other's language (ROTH 2000), but the "/" of the autobiography confronts those biographies that the authors wrote about themselves with those written by their respective others. The "auto-" (Gr. *autos*, self, same), what relates to the self, also confronts the "socio-" (Fr. < Lat. *socius*, companion, fellow), the other, and therefore society. And even before making an autobiography available to others, the Other has intruded via language, which always comes from the other and is for the other, both binding the Self to and alienating it from the Other (DERRIDA 1998). Autobiography is always and already hetero- (or allo-?) biography. In the following paragraphs, I unfold some of the issues that in my view are part of the very reasons why auto/biography as sociological praxis works and why it has a lot to contribute. [42]

#### 3.2.1 Self and other

Elsewhere in my notes: While reading *Our Lives as Databases*, I had the strong sense of the presence of the dialectic of continuity and change, self and other, self as constant and changing. I am thinking about our use of the "I" to refer to myself throughout different times of the day and during different stages in "my" life. Although we experience ourselves differently, we use the same "I." Although "I" am saying that "I" am different, know that I understand differently through my experiences with Germans, there are moments when I think of "myself" as a boy as if it was the same me. [43]

Psychology generally (there are some exceptions) theorizes the human being independently of the social and material world in which it is embedded. Most poignantly, (radical) constructivist psychology argues that the individual is informationally closed, produces ("constructs") its own information, as it is involved in the construction of conceptions of the world, which it can test only for their viability (e.g. VON GLASERSFELD 1989). Such approaches take the individual, the *cogito ergo sum*, as the starting point and the central mystery and

problem is how human society comes about, or more precisely, how we come to understand others. Social constructivist approaches somehow make the reverse argument claiming—often using cultural-historical approaches (e.g. VYGOTSKY 1978) as their rhetorical referents—that knowledge is socially constructed before the individual appropriates it. Both approaches suffer from the problem of essentializing individual or collective and subsequently thinking the respective other term in terms of the first. [44]

An alternative to such approaches has been elaborated in *Soi-même comme un autre* (RICOEUR 1990), which elaborates the problem of the individual in the form of two dialectics: the dialectic of identity based on its two major meanings of identity, sameness (Lat. *idem*) and selfhood (Lat. *ipse*), and the dialectic of self and other than self. Rather than immediately positing the subject, expressed in the first person singular of the "I think" and "I am," RICOEUR emphasizes the primacy of reflective meditation, which "*est le prix à payer pour une herméneutique caractérisée par le statut indirect de la position due soi*" [*is the price to pay for a hermeneutics characterized by the indirect way of positing the self*] (p.28). The very conception of sameness-selfhood and Self-Other as dialectical units implies that neither term takes ontological priority. At the same time, from an ontogenetic perspective, Self and Other emerge together as individuals understand themselves as Selves in the very moment that they understand respective Others as Selves who experience the reciprocal Self-Other relation. Self and Other have the same origin, emerging from the same originary moment of *prise de conscience*. That is, subjectivity and intersubjectivity emerge simultaneously. My reasons for acting are always reasons that are, in principle, intelligible to you, my other; your reasons for acting are, in principle, always intelligible to me, your other. My understanding of the world is, in principle, always also intelligible to you, my other, as your understanding is, in principle, intelligible to me, your other. Even in the most intimate case of relating to oneself, the hand-to-hand touching, the other, the foreign, is already present:

"Cette expérience est déjà hantée, au moins, mais constitutivement hantée, par quelque hétéro-affection liée à l'espacement, puis à la spatialité visible: par où l'intrus, l'hôte, un hôte désiré ou indésiré, un autre de secours ou un parasite à rejeter. [This experience is already haunted, at least, but constitutively haunted, by a hetero-affection related to the spacing, then to the visible spatiality: From where the intruder, host, a desired or undesired host, a helping other or a parasite to be rejected.]" (DERRIDA 2000, p.205) [45]

This Self-Other dialectic makes auto/biography—*autos*, oneself, implies the other, the *hétéro* or *allo*—immediately a plausible way of sociological investigation, as we find in ourselves always also an aspect of the Other. Self and other are so different, but they are also so much the same, they are part of the same, they have an identical origin. Our experience in and of the world is one concrete case of a generalized possibility to experience in and of the world. At the same time, investigating the biography of others (allo-biographies?) provides us insights about ourselves. Collective analysis of the biographies of others provides new insights, of the analysis of our autobiographies: cross-fertilization, allogamy.



These dialectical relations do not facilitate the work but rather seem to proliferate the contradictions inherent in the Self-Other dialectic:

"It was, above all, the presence of *our own* autobiographies (the biographical narratives of each one of us) in the collection of analyzed texts that complicated the whole thing so much and that compounded and amplified the usual interpretive difficulties of sociologists-biographers. Precisely because of the reflexively-autobiographical nature of our research, we continuously felt very close and intimate connections between sociological analysis on one hand and the sum total of our experiences, or 'biographical knowledge', on the other hand." (KONOPASEK, p.42) [46]

The second important aspect coming from RICOEUR's reflections is the dialectic of identity, identity meaning same (*idem*-identity) and self (*ipse*-identity). The tension between these two aspects exist in simple everyday experiences and expressions, such as when we point to an old photograph and say, "This is me at the age of 12." "This" is the indexical term used to designate something in the vicinity of the speaker, here an image. Although the image is present, it is an (iconic) index to someone living at another time, speaker's-age-minus-12 years back. "Me" refers to the speaker at the moment of the utterance. The tension arises from the fact that the sentence establishes an identity "is" of the person living today and the one living speaker's-age-minus-12 years back. These two persons are both the same and different ("Disman writing this postscript is different from the Disman who joined the project" [DISMAN, p.65-66])—a description that makes little sense in classical logic but is a fundamental constitution of dialectical logic. [47]

Throughout my reading, I was commenting (in the book and on note paper) the fact that there was not enough attention to the dialectic of continuity and change, stability and instability, both in individual and society. Auto/biography is inherently about change, growing up, moving about; and yet, despite these changes, we human beings feel that there is something, deep down within ourselves that remains the same and that allows us to say "This is me at the age of 12." Further, despite the fact that we are different selves when we are in the presence of our colleagues during a faculty meeting, of our parents during a Sunday visit, or of our teammates on a sports team. That is, *idem* identity can remain the same all the while its *ipse* part, the Self, changes both in time and with situation. That people are different, even in unexpected ways, does not come as a surprise to me, though it appeared to some of the SAMISEBE authors in the context of Communist-party membership:

"Eva: I shook my head in disbelief when someone that I liked or whom I found nice admitted to being a party member.

In the end, this is even reflected in the language that is used in describing this decision: it was a betrayal, a defection, a deviation, an expression of stupidity, etc. ('One of my friends [...] defected and joined the Communist Party' – Jiri). And when it appeared that the person could be quite normal, uneasiness was felt." (ALAN, p.83) [48]

For a piece of work that announces in its title to be about (social) transitions, necessarily involving change of Self, Other, and their relation, I found this dialectic of sameness and selfhood insufficiently addressed. I believe that a working through of this dialectic in terms of the auto/biographies would have allowed further understanding and explanation of social (and individual) transformation of society. [49]

### 3.2.2 *Individual and society*

The relationship between individual and society does, for the most part, not play a central role in much of the scholarly literature that I face in the domains of research where I work (education, science and mathematics education, social studies of science, pragmatic linguistics). Yet there exist, from my perspective, reasonable approaches for theorizing these two entities: both BOURDIEU (1997) and HOLZKAMP (1983) base their theories in dialectical conceptions of individual human beings and the (social and material) world that surrounds them. Thus, both scholars, respectively, clearly articulate (a) the co-emergence of individuals and their lifeworlds and (b) the emergence of the dialectic between individual and society as part of human development. In both instances, individuals and their social worlds are folded into one another (there is no nice equivalent to the German *Verschränkung*). [50]

Let me begin with the historical process that folds together individual and society into a dialectic relation, a process that also involves the very emergence of human (social) psychology as experienced phenomenon (HOLZKAMP 1983).<sup>2</sup> In the process of human evolution, there was a moment when the ability to use tools (chimpanzees use them, too) and divide labor (wolves and other animals practice it) together provided pre-humans with some advantages that became factors in natural selection processes. With increasing tool production and division of labor, there followed a qualitative shift in dominance from environmental determination to the active adaptation of the environment to human needs and into a process of generalized societal provision. Now, individuals no longer needed to be concerned with their direct survival in a (hostile) environment but could guarantee their survival by contributing to the collective effort of maintaining society. Individuals are now "able to *individually* realize and to share in the societal developmental processes" (HOLZKAMP 1991, p.56). But participation in collective processes always also presupposes mutual intelligibility, intersubjectivity, a mutual understanding that the contribution to the survival of the other also and inherently has my own survival as a consequence. Furthermore, my individual contribution does not require to be specific, so that each of my contribution to society is but a concrete realization of the generalized contributions required for the continuation of society—even to the point that some contributions do not need to contribute to society at all (writing a diary) and even

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2 I only sketch the form that the analysis takes, for there is insufficient space here to articulate the entire argument. For an English introduction by HOLZKAMP himself see *Societal and Individual Life Processes* (HOLZKAMP 1991). For a more elaborate explanation and exegesis of HOLZKAMP's work see the book on German critical psychology by his friend Charles TOLMAN (1994).

harm collective life (murdering someone else).<sup>3</sup> It comes as no surprise that communist party rule could continue even though many, as analyzed by ALAN, did not become party members, refused invitations to become party members,

"MP: In my life, I was offered membership in the Communist Party three times. ... I always refused." (ALAN, p.74)

participated only in a passive way, or were ejected from the party altogether. [51]

Nowadays, an individual is born into a society that has not only emerged from pre-human forms of organization but also has continued to evolve culturally and historically. BOURDIEU (1997) makes a strong argument for the continued relevance of the material basis of human nature (thought and culture), which arises from the openness of each human body to the regularities of the (social and material) world. These influences are formative but only in the sense of being one aspect of a dialectic: the other aspect is the human being who has to perceive the world. This perception itself is a function of the individual's experience, so that individual and his or her world develop together. The world perceived by the individual becomes the ground for his or her actions, but these perceptual abilities have been influenced by the world. The way I perceive and understand the world is always and already shaped by this world, the patterns of its social and material events. This is not the environmental determinism that characterized behaviorist psychology and that BOURDIEU is often blamed for. Rather, at the heart of individual development is the same fundamental organism-environment dialectic that already characterized the thoughts of biologists (VON UEXKÜLL 1972), philosophers (VON WEIZSÄCKER 1973) and social psychologists (HOLZKAMP 1983, LEONT'EV 1978) alike. [52]

This dialectical relation between individual and collective has its consequences. That is, the reasons for actions (*Handlungsbegründungen*) are always mine, in a concrete way, but each reason is simultaneously a concrete realization of the generalized reasons that are available and intelligible at the collective level (HOLZKAMP 1983). More so, these groundings do not just exist in an abstract sense but each individual makes available these groundings to others together with his or her actions (GARFINKEL 1967). Our own views, their contents and the limited nature, are also symptomatic for more general phenomena that transcend the individual me, not only within a particular society or culture, but also across cultures. From a dialectical perspective to concrete everyday life, neither the sameness of individually and concretely experienced action possibilities, as in

"And Dad walked gloomily around the sitting-room, looking at my voluminous pregnancy, and philosophized: 'If it weren't for this, I would send all three of you, little Kacenska too, across the borders in a hurry. ...'

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3 What the American society has not realized is that even murdering someone is a generalized action possibility that exists at a societal level. Thus, killing killers will change little, because it does not deal with the contradictions in the society that makes killing a generalized possibility. This is just what we can see: despite being companion to other (totalitarian) societies that maintain the death penalty, murder rates remain among the highest in the world.

Miroslav: ... I then got my travel papers, and we flew out on December 17.

Olga: ... His wife encouraged him to emigrate." (STEHLIKOVA, p.266–267)

nor their differences, as in

"VR: I was also looking for companionship. And my acceptance or adherence to communist ideals also offered me the companionship of young people." (ALAN, p.73)

"Jiri: My Dad [...], after 1968, a year which was a turning point for him, stayed in the party de facto out of inertia, and because he wanted to finish his life's work." (ALAN, p.82)

are then surprising. Auto/biographical sociology therefore always involves access to the concrete action possibilities and reasons for actions that exist not only for the individuals and the collective, but also, and in the same concrete ways, at the societal level more generally. Because our participation in society allows us to understand not only ourselves but also others although they are different, auto/biographical sociology in a group such as SAMISEBE provides a considerable sampling of concrete everyday understanding of society. [53]

#### 4. Concluding Thoughts

*Our Lives as Database* is the result of a sociological experiment, SAMISEBE, which existed not because of some planning and theorizing, but as concrete practice in one sociology department. The book opens up a fascinating world not only onto Czech(oslovak) society but also onto sociology as a discipline. More so, it provides much material for beginning one's own autobiographical reflections and to further develop some of the themes that the different authors individually and the project collectively unfolds before our eyes. We can engage in our own reflections to test the viability of KONOPASEK's claim that these reflexive autobiographies from the East provide some means for understanding ourselves in the West. [54]

This essay, in an implicit way, also contributes to a sociological anthropology of reading. It is one (concrete) example how a member of society, though not naive with respect to the disciplinary foundations of *Our Lives as Database* interacted with the material text that the book provided. My autobiographical notes, the thoughts they articulate, and the intertextuality they bring about all are the outcome of one concrete reading that reflects an aspect of sociology. [55]

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