

Review:

Carl Ratner

Zdenek Konopásek (Ed.) (2000). Our Lives as Database: Doing A Sociology of Ourselves (Czech Social Transitions in Autobiographical Dialogues). Prague: Karolinum Press, 302 pages, ISBN 80-246-0120-6 (paperback) US \$20 (320Kč)

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Abstract: The book consists of autobiographical reflections by Czech sociologists on their personal histories spanning the Nazi conquest, Soviet occupation, velvet revolution and the ensuing decade. Methodological/scientific issues for comprehending subjective aspects of sociology are also discussed.

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1. The Autobiographical Accounts

The book delivers insights into social and personal life through the autobiographical reflections of Czech sociologists on their socio-political histories. The reports are fascinating and moving and present a kind of information not available in official documents or statistical data (p.20). These autobiographies, by socially sensitive sociologists, describe ways that people cope with social policies and institutions by devising personal/informal strategies. [1]

There are many ways to approach narratives. The authors of this "SAMISEBE project" allow the sociological autobiographies to speak for themselves. The narratives are not analyzed, interpreted or evaluated, except for a few summary comments by the authors about one another. "The SAMISEBE group always placed 'subjective substance' above systematic and descriptive quality" (p.127). One of the goals of the project was for each participant to monitor the autobiographies of the others: "Through the presence of the others, each participant has him or herself continuously in sight, having an ambivalent status of the examiner-and-examined" (p.161). There is little evidence, however, that this actually occurred. One participant acknowledged, "I thought that reading the biographies of the rest would influence me a lot. Wrong. The circumstance that I have become acquainted with all the biographies of the first level influenced me only insignificantly" (p.249). [2]

Of particular interest are descriptions of how changes in regimes and institutions affected the choice of life strategies (p.70). For instance, "the phenomenon of discontinuity always filled the new present with a high level of uncertainty which seeped in basically everywhere: into the rules of everyday life and into the

established networks of interpersonal relations" (p.70). From 1948-1989, "the power of the communist party infiltrated every aspect of social life—both public and private. It became an institutional filter which determined the practical decisions of everyday actions and life strategies" (p.70). Family relations were profoundly affected by political regimes and intimacy and trust were undermined by political suspicion of one's closest relatives (p.77). [3]

The Czech people actively devised strategies for dealing with the untenable socio-economic-political system after World War II, yet these strategies were motivated and constrained by the system itself. One example is the manner in which people sought to obtain and maintain housing. Housing was assigned by the State and was not owned by the family. Hence, families devised informal strategies for keeping an apartment in the family network so that a government bureaucrat would not dispense it to another family. One means was to declare growing children as co-occupants of their grandparents' housing so that it could be claimed after their death. Sometimes people would marry and have children specifically in order to be assigned housing. Others got officially divorced so they could acquire two apartments (p.101). Since housing was not assigned to unmarried young people, the phenomenon of cohabitation was rare. Housing policy was directly responsible for an early marriage age (23 for men, 21 for women), and a high marriage rate of 90% among this cohort (p.102). The shortage of housing led young people to live with their parents until housing was assigned to them. This led to conflicts between generations and also a dependency/immaturity among young people (p.103). [4]

These vignettes are representative of many of the autobiographies in the volume. They are moving because they capture the struggle to survive while being hemmed in by social policies, conditions and products. Choices and strategies were always constrained and motivated by societal factors and this is what makes their activity/agency so poignant. If the authors had construed agency as the freedom to act as one pleased—a transcendental ego—this would have eliminated agency's effortful struggle. [5]

2. Social Theory & Subjectivity

In addition to the autobiographical accounts of social life, several didactic chapters on social theory are presented. They offer food for thought on methodological questions that are germane to *FQS*. They represent a struggle by Czech sociologists to break out of traditional positivistic methods, mainly by introducing the agency of both researcher and researchers' "subjects" into sociology. [6]

Subjects' personal experiences are vital to study because they illuminate aspects of social life that are not found in official proclamations or formal norms and policies (pp.52-53). Individuals never recapitulate these formalisms; we always transform them into informal strategies. These are the ways in which social systems are lived. For example, power as demonstrated through a command, "is the result of the activity of an entire chain of actors, each of whom 'translates'

(rather than simply 'transmits') the command in accordance with his or her or its own goals" (p.289). [7]

The subjectivity of the sociologist is also vital. "The personal experience of the sociologist is not only accepted, it is taken as a source of sociological knowledge that has to be mobilized and promoted" (p.157). Sociologists should include their own autobiographies within working sets of data. Social theories and representations are transformed fragments of autobiographies (p.157). [8]

These points need to be developed and defined in the book. As they stand—as introductory, sketchy comments—it is not clear just how they are to be utilized. How should the sociologist's autobiography be included into the set of data, mobilized, and promoted? What exactly does this mean? It is vital to explain how the sociologist's personal goals and experiences can be acknowledged while not superseding the subjects' social reality. How can one avoid having sociological conclusions being mere projections of the researcher instead of representing the social reality of the subjects? [9]

The authors similarly need to explain how the subjects' subjectivity can be utilized while also recognizing structural constraints and influences. The point is made (pp.148-149) that personal experience does not operate autonomously from the social structure (just as the social structure does not operate apart from individual experience). Just how are the two to be conceptualized in interaction? [10]

It is difficult to develop a sophisticated theory and methodology that illuminates subjectivity within a sociological framework. The individualism of capitalist society makes the connection difficult to perceive and postmodernist ideology epitomizes this problem by its tendency to divorce subjectivity from social life. Some sign of this orientation can be seen in the translation model of power that is advocated in the volume. One citation states:

"The chances are that an order has been modified and composed by many different people who slowly turned it into something completely different as they sought to achieve their own goals ... Power is a consequence and not a cause of collective action" (pp. 289-290, my emphasis). [11]

This statement seems to deny coercive power from an authority. It says that power is the consequence of what people make of an order and they have the ability to transform it into something completely different from its original form. Subjectivity appears to be unconstrained by social structures. [12]

If the Czech sociologists resist the influence of postmodernism and develop the culturally-situated sense of subjectivity that appears in many places throughout the volume, it would mark an advance in social science. [13]

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[Carl RATNER](#) has been developing a theoretical and methodological approach to cultural psychology for several decades. He has published *Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Methodology: Theoretical & Empirical Considerations* (Plenum, 1997) and *Cultural Psychology: Theory & Method* (Plenum, 2002). RATNER currently gives workshops on qualitative methodology especially in relation to cultural psychology. His articles can be read on his web site:
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