

Lotte Huniche & Morten Nissen

Editorial

Our journal has been much criticized for its name. “Outlines”, obviously, does not convey much about the rich contents on its pages. Then, if “Critical Social Studies” says it all, why bother with the seeming formality of Outlines? This editorial has the dual purpose of offering an answer to this question while introducing the present issue.

The first part of the answer is that Outlines is simply the approximate translation of the name of the parental journal Udkast. The name, that senseless string of symbols, conveys singularity; it reminds us that the journal is not just “a journal”, not even just a “certain kind” of journal; it is a particular journal project based in Copenhagen, with a history of cooperation with other research communities in the Nordic countries that share our theoretical and methodological interests. Within the last 5 years, the journal has also developed an international platform. Outlines was born in 1999 as a consequence of a wish to broaden the scope of potential readers and writers given the opportunity to publish in English. All the same, it remains unique and situated in time and place.

The situated concreteness of the Outlines project stands in healthy tension to the abstraction conveyed in the image of “outlines”. The mere contours of the thing, the thin lines with which a fuller picture may begin, is a metaphor of social science as an ongoing theoretical endeavor. But whenever we believe to be providing merely the abstract, the uncommitted bare potential – “prolegomena to the sketch of an approach” etc. – the title, as a name rather than a concept, keeps us within range of the tangibly realized and full-fledged particulars of a real

community¹. The abstract, too, odd as it may seem, is something concretely existing.

But why, then, bother concretely with such abstraction?

The research reported by Hwang, Roth, & Pozzer-Ardenghi may provide some illumination. The article discusses intersubjectivity and communication in practice – arguing, convincingly, that even this requires a reading of concretely realized embodied actions. Just as the argument is for recognizing concreteness, the empirical material is vividly sensuous: transcripts, thick descriptions, narratives, even photos. Thus, the abstract theoretical idea of sociality appears as an observable phenomenon.

This bold juxtapositioning of the theoretically abstract with the practically concrete is characteristic of the approaches to critical social theory that go beyond a purely negative critique, beyond deconstruction or discourse analysis. This is so, not least in the tradition of cultural historical activity theory, but it does probably also include interactionist approaches to discourse when these suggest some intersubjective ontology of conversation and conversing agents. What is it exactly we do when we analyse the concrete: arrange for general (or: generic, universal, fundamental etc.) aspects of human activity to be observed or produced in situated practices that are approached, not as disembodied experiments, but as just that: situated practices?

¹ This may point further on to the association “Forenigen Udkast” which publishes the Outlines and of which any subscriber can be a member if s/he so wishes by simply contacting an editor.

Lemke's discussion of Agamben's biopolitics speaks to that kind of reflexive social studies, since the mere outline of human life, "bare life", may be seen as realized as concrete abstractions in the very camps that epitomize the inhumanity which humanity harbours. The heterotopia – sites that embody abstract ideals² – of humanity are many, yet few so strikingly absolute yet dialectical as the camp. One is surely tempted to allow – or disallow! – the state the privilege of practicing bare life, but, as Lemke argues, bare humanity, humanity stripped naked, is really a ubiquitous abstraction. The discursive power of practical humanism is everywhere, not only in the frightening purity of total institutions.

But if discourses such as that of naked humanity are everywhere, where does that leave us researchers? If we cannot – despite decades of neoliberal reforms of higher education – entertain the fiction of a standpoint outside of the state nor outside of other powers, how do we conceive of ourselves as participants?

Do we reduce life already lived to genealogical outlines? Or do we, in fact, provide prototypical outlines of futures? Even if both may be true, the reflexivity of theoretical research is in some way connected with theories just-in-time; if outlines, then also lines out into present-day practices.

Veresov's reviewing of Vygotsky's work on the background of the "Silver Age" of Russian theoretical thought around the turn of the 20th century shifts Vygotsky's temporality from future to past. Vygotsky, the founding father, turned into Vygotsky, the late child of a long tradition. From Vygotsky, the first of Marxist psychologists, to Vygotsky, the last of the cultural idealists before "activity" reconnects Pavlovian reflexology with the sociology of a purported post-class society. Veresov, of course, is as much a child of his time as was Vygotsky; his "reinventing" of Vygotsky seems appropriate to a time when most off-mainstream theorizing engages with socio-

linguistic dynamics and even risks the label of "post-modern". It is only to be expected that "Marxism" is recontextualized as one of a plurality of ways to designate the kinds of thinking that contextualize mind as the embodied outlines of a richer socio-cultural life; ways that all connect with today's very open landscape of critical cultural-political communities.

Both Pedersen's and Nocon & Nilsson's articles are micro-studies in precisely that issue of the contextuality and the collectivities of research itself. Pedersen details the concerns, action contexts, and events of a practice research project that informed the conflict-ridden movement of social and health services from curing diseases to caring for everyday lives. Practice research, however, cannot think of itself as "informing" practice in the sense of providing outlines to be realized. While Pedersen's critical social study proved useful in connecting voices, lives and conditions in ways that potentially challenge a mainstream clinical approach, the upshot was a far cry from any realization of a researcher's blueprint.

And even researchers' blueprints do not in any simple way realize those same researchers' progressive intentions. This is documented neatly in Nocon & Nilsson's study of gendered patterns of collaboration in academia. The way in practice from a vague idea to a full-blown outline – in this case, a project proposal – is a way from inclusive egalitarian cooperation with a heavy proportion of female contributions to the official document that appears to represent hierarchical and male-dominated structures.

Outlines are beginnings that may become solid. Outlines trace the steps along the road which may be both difficult and laborious. And outlines are even the dubious outcomes of contentuously distributed social practices.

References

- Foucault, M. (1986). *Of Other Spaces*. *Diacritics*, 16, 22-27, at: <http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~bweber/courses/foucaultspaces.html>

² See Foucault 1986.