

Editorial

The *Outlines* is back!

Last year's issue, the first, proved quite a success in terms of the networks it mobilized, the attention it evoked, the ways its materials have been relevant, – and, last but not least, of course, the quality of knowledge it contained.

Now, with the second issue, the venture must prove its vitality in terms of bottom-line sales, subscriptions, and University subsidies. Not an easy task in an age of down-loading; an age of a virtual explosion in the number of journals, a growth that even supercedes the – also growing – readership; an age of fragmentation that leads us to single pieces rather than reading whole monographs and rather than joining durable audiences; an age of ever-increasing specialization of disciplines and resources; and, of course, an age when, to many, the idea of *critical social studies* seems hopelessly outdated in its blunt modernity.

Providing we *do* in fact live through the next few months, our otherwise flourishing trajectory has encouraged us in our firm belief in expansive modes of action. Thus, we aim to issue twice next year. A two-times-eighty-pages journal isn't too much for our subscribers to expect from us. And we are getting material interesting enough to expand with.

Our conference on *Technology in Social Practice: Education, Organization, and Health Care*, at the University of Copenhagen in September, was a fruitful gathering of people and resources – and a supplier of great potential material which is now trodding along its long and arduous production line. The idea of combining ad hoc conferences and journal issues seems useful – the journal providing a relatively continuous 'knot' in fluctuating networks. Increasingly, parallel to that form of reification, the Internet, too, is a resource for any journal to appropriate – and to be appropriated by. By the way: recently, we baptized the editors' home page of the journal at http://www.psyk.ku.dk/adm_forskn/udgiv/outlines/

That conference also became the occasion for me as editor to review the *Outlines* and its ancestors, the *Nordiske Udkast*, in the light of how the theme of technology in social practice had been dealt with. Much to my surprise, we had had no discussion of technology since 1986, unless it is understood in the very broad meaning of some kind of mediatedness of human activity.

Mervi Hasu's contribution to this issue can be taken as the first evidence that we aim to change that state of affairs, without, on the other hand, turning into another specialized 'Technology in Social Practice' journal. The *Outlines* will remain open both

to the discursive and the 'non-discursive', but also reflect the turn of some current critical social studies toward artifacts, machines, instruments, things. Mediators of human interaction, yes, but also networks of multiple causation, and, in their own right, an overwhelmingly material set of life conditions which serve our purposes no more than they co-constitute what we take those purposes to be.

Hasu also links nicely to the *action research* theme which is prominent in this issue of the *Outlines*. The idea of research, precisely as critical social studies, engaging in expansive practical changes, is well-known to our readership old-timers: it was clearly present in the first *Outlines*; some may also remember our conference in 1997 titled *Does Research Inform Practice?* – and it even goes way back beyond that. But there are still wide arrays of themes to be addressed and problems to be discussed in this field.

Apart from our own efforts, one may remark the recent appearance of an action research special issue of our next-to-kin British *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* – see p. 104. I mention it partly because that journal's 'conference/networking strategy' actually ended up 'spilling over' into two of the present contributions: those of Georgaca and Mørck.

To begin with, Georgaca challenges any simplistic ideas of harmonious progressive alliances and nicely sequenced actions as constituting the form of action research. Indeed, from Georgaca's convincing example one may argue that the very ideality implied in thinking of action research as a method, or even a distinct form, is overthrown by contextual and processual qualities that are at least as 'overwhelmingly material' as any 'technology', once one gets deep enough into the actual empirical material.

Likewise, Mørck (following a Danish line of work which is informed by, but also

differs from, the German form presented last year in the shape of Markard & Fahl's paper) does see practice research as a kind, or a branch, of action research, but, rather than promoting this 'brand', she ends up in a notion of 'Wild Research' to match the 'Wild Learning' which is at once the theme of her investigation *and* the 'brand label' of the project she works with. The wildness of research is the unsettling of any notions of prefabricated procedures, definitions, and logics which becomes apparent when research understands itself in a context of social practice, and as a kind of social practice. There is an internal movement, then, inherent in the action research commitments of critical social studies, not only outward, decentering attention from the context of bounded cooperation and into broader political and everyday life issues, but also toward ever more general reflections on conceptual and epistemological foundations.

That movement is picked up by Elkjaer in her re-introduction of Dewey's pragmatism. Like Mørck, Elkjaer writes into the context of current developments in learning theory, but the overall approach through the practice–subjectivity–knowledge relations make those fields almost coincide. The pragmatist and the Marxist traditions are two prominent lines of Hegelian heritage that – sometimes worlds apart, sometimes in combinations – have always been crucial philosophical resources to critical learning theory and to action research.

This way of connecting the different contributions to this issue of the *Outlines* into the broader picture speaks to its historical roots, rather than the present social context in which it hopes to be relevant. Is that a confirmation, then, of the view that the *Outlines* remains an expression of the critical modernism of the 19th and the 20th centuries?

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The idea of a critique that unsettles the smooth spontaneous workings of power and challenges the discourses through which we reproduce – and change – is as acutely appropriate as ever. If ever there was a time when critical social studies are called for, it is at the time of puzzling hybrids such as quality assessment, net- or knot-working, decentralized welfare state reform, cooperative prototyping, empowerment, life-long learning, share-ware etc. etc. – the time of hegemony and fragmentation – in short, a present in which only the naïve can remain assured that the economic, political, social

and ecological changes are as inconsequential as our understandings of them are diverse.

Let me conclude in the hope that it is in fact a critical modernism we are expressing. If there is one thing we have learnt from that tradition (and a thing that is exemplified in much allegedly postmodern theorizing), it is that the *uncritical* modernism of doing away with tradition, of defining ‘new world orders’, is as dire in its consequences as if we were to establish humanism by attempting to dispose of ourselves as living animal bodies.