

Editorial

Introducing an international journal of critical social studies, as a Dane, in the fall of 2001, gives rise to mixed feelings. In the prevalent view, the view of the New World Order, the view of globalized communication – in short, in the view of the community to which the *Outlines* belongs, be it ever so much as a critical commentator – the world changed dramatically that ever-present September 11th. And that revolutionary spirit has, undoubtedly, occasioned sudden changes, not only in ideological and political spheres, but also in economical prospects and military balances. Yet critical social studies have long since described how social discrepancies and turmoil persist and regularly burst into violence; and to the critical student of societies, there is not much novel about the way the world powers deal with it. From a Nordic perspective, Manhattan is no closer than Kosovo, Grozny, or the West Bank. Why participate in the pitiless procession of purported pundits?

Perhaps because when old wine is poured into new wine-skins, it does make a real difference. At least we all seem to get new occasions for our well-worn thoughts. Thus, when the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek was to comment on the WTC terror, he

could strike a chord he had already played for some time: the image of the irreality of late capitalist consumerism, as illustrated by Hollywood themes:

"It is the awareness that we live in an isolated artificial universe which generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction. Is, consequently, Osama Bin Laden (...) not the real-life counterpart of Ernst Stavro Blofeld, the master-criminal in most of the James Bond films, involved in the acts of global destruction? What one should recall here is that the only place in Hollywood films where we see the production process in all its intensity is when James Bond penetrates the master-criminal's secret domain and locates there the site of intense labor (distilling and packaging the drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York...). When the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest Hollywood comes to the socialist-realist proud presentation of the production in a factory? And the function of Bond's intervention, of course, is to explode in firecracks this site of production, allowing us to return to the daily semblance of our

existence in a world with the “disappearing working class.” Is it not that, in the exploding WTC towers, this violence directed at the threatening Outside turned back at us? The safe Sphere in which Americans live is experienced as under threat from the Outside of terrorist attackers who are ruthlessly self-sacrificing AND cowards, cunningly intelligent AND primitive barbarians. Whenever we encounter such a purely evil Outside, we should gather the courage to endorse the Hegelian lesson: in this pure Outside, we should recognize the distilled version of our own essence. For the last five centuries, the (relative) prosperity and peace of the “civilized” West was bought by the export of ruthless violence and destruction into the “barbarian” Outside: the long story from the conquest of America to the slaughter in Congo. Cruel and indifferent as it may sound, we should also, now more than ever, bear in mind that the actual effect of these bombings is much more symbolic than real. The US just got the taste of what goes on around the world on a daily basis, from Sarajevo to Grozny, from Rwanda and Congo to Sierra Leone.”

Evidently, one approach to critical social studies can be to confront an elite of symbol-manipulators with the irreality of what they take to be life, and introduce “the desert of the real” that lies just outside it. Critique is the trope of going out, or opening up and letting in the fresh air, countering the conceptual marginalization of not only the Other, but also even our own bodily materiality. Critique reverses the positions of essence and appearance, of knowledge and belief. And the movements between the artificial and the real, facts and the counterfactual, being and dreaming, never cease to fascinate, spawn, and produce.

On the other hand, critical social studies may run directly counter to that very duality,

insisting that everything, including such phenomena as 3D environments, techno-therapy, and Electronic Patient Records (why, maybe even including Hollywood!), is simply real. This characterizes, one might claim, the three new contributions to the *Technology in Social Practice* theme which we began this spring. Even if quite divergent in theoretical perspective, the three papers have in common a rather pragmatic approach to the introduction of information technologies in the field of health practices. Even including Actor-Network-Theory-inspired analyses, these articles shift the emphasis slightly from epistemology to ontology, compared to those of the previous issue (Outlines 2001:1). But they do it without losing sight of the critical problematization of analytic concepts.

Ludvigsen & Fjuk provide an almost classic, empirically grounded, recommendation to expand the unit of analysis to include social practice. Both with the concept of ‘activity system’, with its familiar triangular shape, and with the empirical field of a 3D learning environment, the authors directly follow up on previous *Outlines* – and they anticipate some of those to come: next year’s *Outlines* are expected to substantially reflect the 2. *Nordic-Baltic Conference on Activity Theory* which was held at Ronneby, Sweden, just two days before September 11th.

In a quite similar vein (though without triangles or virtual worlds) Lauritsen & Elsass’ unit of analysis moves from therapy, beyond its use, and out into the context of everyday life, to even situate contextuality itself. A movement not unlike that of Markussen & Olesen who introduce the concept of ‘trading zone’ as “...a place you can ‘enter’ and ‘leave’ again”, in order to be able to “sort out ethnographic material” and investigate “naturally occurring experiments in real time settings”. It could hardly be any more mundane and down-to-earth than that.

Yet somewhere in the back of the head, there is a devil encouraging us, once again, to 'endorse the Zizekian lesson' and ask whether we have not, with such radical materialism, precisely taken the final step into a purely epistemological problematic?

For those who might prefer the matter-of-fact reading of ethnographic material, Hojlund's study will be interesting. To anyone with a daily acquaintance with the field, it is amazing how rich and complex, how surprisingly foreign, a description of children's lives in ordinary institutions can be. Hojlund is the first anthropologist to write in the columns of *Outlines*, and we hope very much that she will pave the way for others.

The enlightening effect of juxtaposing the ways problems are dealt with in very different cultural contexts is evident and can be experienced once again if one reads on into Ramos' discussion, on the basis of Mexican data and viewpoints, of a subject very close to Hojlund's: the relations between internal and external organizations of meaning, and,

more specifically, ordinary people's (children's) dealing with how (school) professionals and parents categorize them.

What was said of anthropologists should also be said for critical social scholars from Latin America. In general, what is Outside of the dominant North Atlantic community of research does not seem in the least evil or threatening to *Outlines*, even when we are at our most epistemological. When Ramos concludes that "the personal sense about school is constructed over time through an individual's participation across different social contexts in which the person appropriates, resists, or legitimizes diverse collective meanings allowing her to configure a sense of life which may or may not be associated with school" – it is not so hard to recognize in the Outside a distilled version of the Inside – nor, perhaps, to learn from the way it is transformed when appropriated in a place where schooling is directly a scarce resource and an overwhelming family investment.