A World in the Making: Symbolic Interactionism in the Twentieth Century

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[We live in] a universe which is not all closed and settled, which is still in some respects indeterminate and in the making... an open universe in which uncertainty, choice, hypotheses, novelties, and possibilities are naturalized... Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it bluntly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk: it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable.... John Dewey

The world is always different. Each morning we open our eyes to a different universe. Our intelligence is occupied with continued adjustments to these differences. That is what makes the interest in life. We are advancing constantly into a new universe....George Herbert Mead

Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it...both in a more radical and less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed. A pragmatist turns his (sic) back resolutely and once and for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, bad a priori reasons, from fixed principals, closed systems and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards actions, and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant, and the rationalist temper sincerely given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretense of finality in truth.

...William James

The pragmatic, humanistic theory of symbolic interactionism has been, quietly, one of the most endurable social theories of the twentieth century. At times in ascendance, at times declared dead, always changing and adjusting to the world around it, its fortunes have been varied. Whilst some commentators have referred to the recent "graying of symbolic interactionism" (Saxton, 1989), others speak of the "vitalization of symbolic interactionism" (Stryker, 1987); still others talk of the "sad demise, mysterious disappearance, and glorious triumph of symbolic interactionism" (Fine, 1993); and for yet others it is the harbinger of postmodern social theory. In any event, it is now simultaneously ignored by most social theorists, championed by a select group of self styled symbolic interactionists with their own journals, conferences, web sites and professional organization (The Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction), whilst moving through much of social theory in disguised "post-Blumerian" forms (cf. Denzin, 1992: xiv; Fine, 1990). In this chapter my aim is to sketch the varying fortunes of this diverse theory through the past century and hint at some pathways for its future in the next.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM : IMAGES, HISTORIES, THEMES

Most symbolic interactionist sociologies, their differences notwithstanding, are infused with four interweaving themes. The first suggests that distinctly human worlds are not only material, objective worlds but also immensely semiotic, symbolic ones. Indeed, for interactionists, what marks human beings off from all other animals is their elaborate semiotics: a symbol-producing capacity which enables them to produce a history, a culture, and very intricate webs of ambiguous communication. A key concern for interactionist sociology is with the manner through which human beings go about the task of assembling meaning: how we define ourselves, our bodies and impulses, our feelings and emotions, our behaviors and acts; how we define the situations we are in, develop perspectives on the
wider social order, produce narratives and stories to explain our actions and lives; how such meanings are constantly being built up through interaction with others, and how these meanings are handled, modified, transformed, and hence evolve through encounters. It is the semiotic world of discourse, a triadic clustering of signs, interpretants and objects where meaning is never fixed and immutable; rather, it is always shifting, emergent, and ultimately ambiguous. Though we may regularly create habits, routines and shared meanings, these are always open to reappraisal and further adjustment (Perinbanayagam, 1985; Rochberg-Halton, 1986; Wiley, 1994).

This points to a second theme: that of change, flux, emergence, process. Lives, situations, even societies are always and everywhere evolving, adjusting, becoming. This constant process makes interactionists focus upon the strategies of acquiring a sense of self, of developing a biography, of adjusting to others, of organizing a sense of time, of negotiating order, of constructing civilizations. It is a very active view of the social world in which human beings are constantly going about their business, piecing together joint lines of activity, and constituting society through these interactions.

And this is the third major theme - interaction. The focus of all interactionist work is neither with the individual nor the society per se; rather, its concern is with the joint acts through which lives are organized and societies assembled. It is concerned with "collective behavior." Its most basic concept is the self, which implies that the idea of "the other" is always present in a life: we can never be alone with a "self." (Wiley, 1994). But all of its core ideas and concepts highlights this social other which always impinges upon the individual: the very notion of "the individual," indeed, is constructed through the other. At root, interactionism is concerned with "how people do things together" (Becker, 1986).

The fourth theme concerns its engagement with the empirical world. Unlike many other social theories which can soar to the theoretical heavens, symbolic interactionists stay grounded on earth. Interactionist theory can guide the study of any and everything social: though what will be discovered is always a matter of empirical investigation. But in principle, interactionists may inspect and explore any aspect of the social world. As Blumer (1969: 47) put it:

Symbolic interactionism is a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. Its empirical world is the natural world of such group life and conduct. It lodges its problems in this natural world, conducts its studies in it, and derives its interpretations from such naturalistic studies. If it wishes to study religious cult behavior it will go to actual religious cults and observe them carefully as they carry on their lives. If it wishes to study social movements it will trace carefully the career, the history and the life experiences of actual movements. If it wishes to study drug use among adolescents it will go to the actual life of such adolescents to observe and analyze such use. And similarly with respect to other matters that engage its attention. Its methodological stance, accordingly, is that of direct examination of the empirical world....

All these themes mesh together. Meaning itself is an interactive process - it emerges out of interactions. The self is a process built out of encounters and endowed with shifting meaning. Social objects assume their meaning according to how they are handled in joint actions. Social groups are ceaselessly involved in negotiating meaning. Societies are a vast matrix of 'social worlds' constituted through the symbolic interactions of "self" and "others." Only in the grounded empirical world open to observation can self, encounter, social object, meaning, be investigated. There is, then, behind symbolic interactionist sociologies a pervasive imagery - of symbol, process, interaction, and intimate familiarity. All of which helps to shape its theoretical work.

**Contested Histories**

There are now a number of accounts of the history of symbolic interactionism and it has proved to be a contested ground. Norman K. Denzin (1992: 8), probably the foremost contemporary exponent of the theory, has suggested a history of six phases, ranging from the establishment of "the canon" between 1890 and 1932 on through other phases to a recent one of "diversity and new theory: 1981-1990." But much of this is a quite arbitrary periodization and there have been many other attempts at chronology which do not match this. This is no
surprise. For if the world is as the interactionists depict it, then we can assume that (1) there is no one fixed meaning of symbolic interactionism; (2) that "accounts" of its nature and origins will change over time, and indeed be open to renegotiation; and (3) that what it "means" will indeed depend upon the definitions of the significant others whose interaction constitutes its meaning.

Thus the very origins and history of the theory are themselves a contested domain. For a long time every undergraduate student of sociology has been taught that George Herbert Mead was the founder of interactionism in the 1920s. But the term itself was coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937 during a short textbook article in which he was reviewing the current state of social psychology for a student audience (Blumer, 1937). Symbolically, that date could be taken as the founding of the theory, and Blumer as its founder. But this would oversimplify a complex communication problem and belie the theory of symbolic interactionism itself. Because for some the founder is Robert Park (Strauss and Fisher, 1978). For some, it is more generally the Chicago School (Joas, 1987). And for still others it is possible to take it back much further: with affinities in a return to classical Greek philosophers, to Heraclitus - 'one never steps in the same river twice'; to the scholastic nominalism of the eleventh century, or more recently - a mere 200 years ago - to the Scottish moralists or "common-sense school of moral philosophy" found in the work of David Hume and Adam Smith. For them "society is necessarily the matrix from which the human mind acquires intelligence and moral sentiment," and they provide a rudimentary account of role taking, self, and mind (Shott, 1976). Yet it seems unlikely that many of the earlier interactionists in the United States would have been particularly influenced by this literature.

When we come to more recent developments, the "meaning" of symbolic interactionism is no less clear. For several decades after Blumer coined the term, it does not appear to have been in popular use. Howard Becker, a leading contemporary interactionist, can talk of being at Chicago in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but not really knowing the term. The same is probably true of Everett Hughes, another mover and shaker of the tradition. More incisively, Manford Kuhn's (1964) report on trends in symbolic interactionism between 1937 and 1964 - what he calls "the age of inquiry" - talks of a "welter of sub-theories going by a variety of names other than symbolic interactionism," and lists among these role theory, reference group theory, self theory, interpersonal theory, language and culture theory, and person perception. By 1970, when a series of readers and texts had been published and the term "symbolic interactionism" fully established, Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds (1975) introduced a fourfold division of schools into 'Chicago, Iowa, Dramaturgy, and Ethnomethodology' - a typology that is now seen as misleading. The Chicago School was symbolically attached to Blumer (though by then he was at Berkeley and starting a "Californian" school!), and it was seen as more humanistic than the positivist school associated with Manford Kuhn at the University of Iowa; but at least both schools claimed to be symbolic interactionism. Despite controversies, neither Goffman's dramaturgy nor Garfinkel's ethnomethodology could be so easily assimilated - one with roots in Durkheim and the other with roots in Parsons. Any attempt to produce a history of symbolic interactionism in the twentieth century must hence of necessity be partial and selective.

Early Days: The Foundations of Interactionist Thought

Taken as a broad span of thought, symbolic interactionism can be seen to have an affinity with a number of intellectual traditions, most of which were spawned by - or at least found a home in - North American society. (It is interesting that there are only a very small number of interactionists working outside of the United States and Canada.) Its geneology may be linked to humanism, romanticism, pragmatism and formalism; but here the focus will be on the latter - a contradictory amalgam of pragmatism and formalism - both of which in practice had their roots in European thought and which set up an abiding tension within the theory (Rock, 1979). (See Chapter 1 by Holton on much of this: check new edition?).

The Pragmatic Inheritance
The most significant intellectual foundation of symbolic interactionism is undoubtedly pragmatism: it engulfs the entire tradition. Pragmatism is the central North American philosophy which rejects the quest for fundamental, foundational truths and shuns the building of abstract philosophical systems. Instead, it suggests a plurality of shifting truths grounded in concrete experiences and language, in which a truth is appraised in terms of its consequences. Mead’s theory of the self, James’s account of experience, Peirce’s theory of semiotics, Cooley’s ‘looking glass self’ and Dewey’s theory of democratic reform are often cited in this connection. It is a down-to-earth philosophy, born in a period of rapid social change, yet curiously revitalized in the late twentieth century in the work of Richard Rorty, Giles Dunn, Cornell West and much feminism (Dunn, 1992; Joas, 1993; Siegfried, 1996; Dickstein, 1998). It seeks to unify intelligent thought and logical method with practical actions, appeals to experience and the democratizing impulse.

George Herbert Mead’s posthumous, text _Mind, Self and Society_ (1934) is often seen as the key source. It conveys many of the key working ideas of symbolic interactionism: an analysis of experience located firmly within society; of the importance of language, symbols, and communication in human group life; of the ways in which our words and gestures bring forth responses in others through a process of role taking; of the reflective and reflexive nature of the self; of the centrality of the "Act." Uniting all this was his unswerving commitment to the role of science in human affairs; "the scientific method ... is nothing but a highly developed form of partial intelligence," "it is the method of social progress." Mead fostered a position sometimes called "objective relativism" and talks of the "objective reality of perspectives." Many accounts of reality are possible, depending upon whose standpoint is taken. History, for example, is always an account of the past from some person’s present. Likewise, any theorist or theory is open to an array of different interpretations and reinterpretations. In an intriguing article, for instance, Fine and Kleinman (1986) have discussed the "true' meaning of Mead," suggesting that Mead may be seen as a symbolic interactionist, a social behaviorist, a psychological functionalist, a phenomenologist, a corporate liberal, a pragmatist, a neo-Kantian, a monist, an idealist, a Hegelian, a realist, a nominalist, a naturalist, and an empiricist! Will the real George Herbert Mead stand up please?

But it is misleading to focus solely on Mead (1863-1931). For there are at least three other pragmatists who have had an impact on interactionist ideas: James (1842-1910), Dewey (1859-1952), and Peirce (1839-1914). They are very different and some of the intellectual controversies in interactionism are presaged by their differences: the realists are often seen to be Peirce and Dewey whilst the nominalists are presumed to be James and Mead. James, for instance, totters towards phenomenology whilst Peirce advocates a realist practice examining signs. Indeed, Charles Sanders Peirce is one of the founders of semiology, and his work generally takes different lines from mainstream interactionism.

Whatever their differences they all espoused pragmatism. Frequently this distinctive North American philosophy is rather grossly misrepresented - as the philosophy of market capitalism in which all ideas must be useful, or have a "cash value." But this, as James recognized, is a serious distortion. Pragmatism harbors a multiplicity of positions but at its core it can suggest three things. First, it suggests the importance of dealing with the concrete and the particular rather than the abstract and universal. Thus James says in _Pragmatism_ (Perry, 1935, vol. 2: 315): "Damn great empires including that of the absolute . . . give me individuals and their spheres of activity," while Cooley (1956: 36-7) announces in _Human Nature and the Social Order_, "A separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and so likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals. The real thing is human life." With the major exception of Peirce, none of the other pragmatists was keen on philosophical system building or - relatedly - with the search for Platonic essences. As Rorty (1982: 162) says: "My first characterisation of pragmatism is that it is simply anti-essentialism applied to notions like truth," 'knowledge', 'language', 'morality', and similar objects of philosophical theorising."
Hence, secondly, the search for the truth is untenable. But the search for truths and meanings is necessary and possible. Truths are conceived in terms of the sensible effects produced through language; truth depends on "helping us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience." At its bluntest, it is W. I. Thomas's famous dictum - that "when people define situations as real they become real in their consequences." Likewise, James in Pragmatism asks of it: 'what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life?' Less aphoristically, Peirce puts this in his celebrated 'pragmatic maxim.'

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object . . . The whole conception of a quality, as of every other, lies in its conceived effects. (Cited in Scheffler, 1974: 77-8)

And, thirdly the position shuns philosophical dualisms - there is no room in the theory to divorce the knower from the known, the subject from the object, the creative from the determined. By focussing upon the concrete, the interminable dualisms of Western philosophical thought can simply be transcended. And the 'action-structure' debate which haunts much sociology is shown to be a false debate (Strauss, 1993).

Formalism and the Simmelian Legacy

A second important intellectual tradition to shape interactionism- but straining somewhat against the pragmatic inheritance (Rock, 1979) can be found in Simmel's concern with forms. Georg Simmel (1858-1918) wrote short essays, vignettes of social life, rich and textured in their detail of the microscopic order but wholly unsystematic and unfinished. In this mode, he anticipates a great deal of latter-day interactionist writings. His range of inquiry is vast and varied: from books on Kant and Goethe, through studies of art and culture, and on to major analyses of religion, money, capitalism, gender, groups, urbanism, morality, and even love - all are among his many topics. Detail, not abstract generalization, was prime in Simmel's work, for he argued that whilst it was not possible to understand the whole or the totality in itself, any fragment of study may lead one to a grasping of the whole.

His very distinctive sociology distinguishes form and content, and aims to cut through the myriad of contrasting social experiences in order to tap the underlying forms of human association: of conflict and accommodation, of deference and hierarchy, of attachments and degradation. It aims to capture the underlying "forms" of social life and to provide a "geometry of social life." In Simmel's original writings he distinguished between the "content" of social life (wars, love-making, education, politics) and the "forms" (e.g. conflict) which cut across such areas and through which social life is patterned. Conflict, as a form, may be found in diverse situations like war, love-making, and politics; and certain common features will accrue to it. Whilst "contents" varied, "forms" emerged as the central organizing features of social life. Among the "forms" central to Simmel's thinking were the significance of numbers for group alignments (isolated individuals, dyads, triads), patterns of super-ordination and subordination, group relationships (conflicts, competitions, coalitions), identities and roles (the stranger, the poor), disclosures (secrets, the secret society), and evaluations (prices, exchanges). In a sense, Simmel's work constitutes an elementary form of structural theory and can be seen to be partly at odds with interactionism's pragmatic legacy. As this chapter will show later, throughout interactionism's history there has been an important concern with forms: the quest for forms of social interaction is at the heart of the interactionist enterprise. Mini-concepts litter its analysis - careers, social worlds, selves, stigma, awareness contexts, scripts, status passages, strategies, roles, collective behavior, perspectives, commitments, emotional work, and so forth. These may not be exactly what Simmel had in mind, but they nevertheless provide sensitizing linkages across diverse substantive fields and highlight underlying processes at work through which interaction is accomplished.

The Heyday of Interactionism: Chicago Sociology at Work
The traditions of pragmatic philosophy and formal theory converge in the empirical sociology of Chicago, largely through the work of initially Jane Addams (Deegan, 1992) and later Robert E. Park (1864-1944). Park was a student of Simmel, subsequently the chair of the department and, for some, the true founder of symbolic interactionism. Park brought to Chicago a concern both to study the richness of the empirical world as revealed in the city and to detect the "patterns" of city life (Matthews, 1977). For the first four decades of the twentieth century, Chicago sociology dominated North American sociology; and symbolic interactionism was its implicit theory. Chicago was the first department of sociology to be established (in 1892 by Albion Small), and with it came the first main sociological journal, the American Journal of Sociology (in 1895), the establishing of the American Sociological Association in 1905, the first major student text, Robert Park and E. Burgess’s Introduction to the Science of Sociology (in 1921), a large graduate school, and an important series of research monographs. Chicago sociology was firmly committed to direct fieldwork and study of the empirical world, in contrast to the more abstract, systematizing and theoretical tendencies of some of both the earlier and subsequent North American sociologists. It was here that Thomas and Znaniecki made their landmark contribution in The Polish Peasant in Europe and America - the single most important work of North American sociology in the early part of the twentieth century and now too readily neglected. It was here that Park told his students to "go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesk. In short, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research" (Bulmer, 1984: 97). It was here that the city sprung alive as a "social laboratory" and as a "mosaic of social worlds" awaiting detailed research. And it was here that a stream of classic case studies appeared - Thrasher’s The Gang, Shaw’s The Jack Roller, Anderson's The Hobo, Zorbaugh's The Gold Coast and the Slum, and Wirth's The Ghetto are but examples. Of particular note was the development of participant observation and the case study method. It is this concern with empirical theory which continues to permeate interactionist writing, and renders it possibly the twentieth century's only major empirical theory. The foundations of interactionism are seeped in a direct naturalistic observation of the empirical world. There is a persistent concern with matters of methodology. It is a feature that remains with the theory at the century's end - although now it has become much more complex (Faris, 1970; Plummer, 1997).

Herbert Blumer (1900-86) took all this further in the 1930s. He studied at the University of Chicago and taught George Herbert Mead’s classes after his death in the early 1930s. He coined the term symbolic interactionism and his abiding concern was that sociology should become the down-to-earth study of group life; his position is clearly presented in his major book Symbolic Interactionism (1969). It is, indeed, Blumer who has provided the most frequently cited "canon" of interactionism, so he is worth quoting. He suggests the theory is built around three key premises:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (1969: 2)

These are important images to guide the fieldwork so central to this perspective, but they hardly constitute any elaborate "theory." Yet Blumer shunned abstract theory. He disliked the tendency for sociologists to analyze phenomena that they had not witnessed first hand, and he had a particular abhorrence of grand and abstract theory. Instead he advocated a methodology that would explore and inspect the rich variety of social experience as it was lived; that would build up sensitizing concepts from experience; that would produce theories directly grounded in the empirical world; and that would check the relevance of such theories by a continual return to the empirical world. Substantively he was interested in the mass media, fashion, collective behavior, industrial relations, race relations, and life history
research. Further, although Blumer wrote widely on Mead, he was not just Mead’s interpreter, he was also an original thinker. Becker has remarked that "few sociologists are untouched by his thought;" not only was Blumer a serious critic of much that was wrong with social theory and method, his work actually harbors an axiomatic-deductive theory around the collective act. (His work is appraised in an edition of the journal Symbolic Interaction (1988) published shortly after his death, and I have provided a brief account of him in Plummer (1998).

Two major books appeared at the start of the 1980s which reconstructed this early history of interactionism at Chicago and considered the part Blumer played in all this. The first, The Making of Symbolic Interactionism, was written by a leading British interactionist, Paul Rock, and suggested that "interactionism may be usefully construed as an amalgam of Simmel’s formal sociology and a pragmatist epistemology" (Rock, 1979: 28). This is the line that I have primarily drawn upon here. But the second study was the more controversial account by J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith: American Sociology and Pragmatism: Mead, Chicago Sociology and Symbolic Interactionism. Coming from the so-called Illinois school of interactionism, the book provided a "revisionist history" in which it is argued that "although symbolic interactionists trace the roots of Blumerian symbolic interactionism to Mead, textual analysis shows that Blumer and Mead do not even belong to the same metatheoretical camp" (Lewis and Smith, 1980: 25). Tracing the roots of interactionism not only philosophically but also through course reading lists and contacts at Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, Lewis and Smith conclude that Mead was a realist (allied to Peirce), whilst Blumer was a nominalist (allied more to James's and Dewey's pragmatism). Blumer, it is suggested, reconstructed interactionism in a much more individualist and subjective way than that which would be found in Mead. The reviews and symposia which followed the publication of their book indicated a storm of disagreement, which cannot be discussed here (Plummer, 1991: vol. 1, part 3).

Popularization, Critique and Renewal

By the early 1950s "Chicago sociology" was in decline. Park died, Burgess retired, Blumer moved to California. Yet the traditions of symbolic interactionism continued through an expansionist period that has been called "the age of inquiry." In a major review article published in 1964 and looking back over the previous 25 years, Manford Kuhn (the so-called leader of the emerging scientific lowan school of interactionism) could identify a number of key conceptual developments from role theory to "language and culture theory" (Kuhn, 1964). And two years earlier, an original collection of essays edited by Arnold Rose had shown a wide array of research that was now being conducted within this growing tradition: everything from families and work to deviance and health (Rose, 1962). Clearly, by the mid-twentieth century, symbolic interactionism had made its mark both empirically and theoretically. There is no space in a brief overview such as this to review all these trends and developments. Recently some of them have been identified as a Second Chicago School (Fine, 1995).

Symbolic interactionism slowly became a very influential theory during the 1960s, primarily as a critique of the ascendant Parsonian theory, and it helped to reshape thinking in a number of fields of inquiry (notably around deviance, occupations, education, sexuality, and medicine). From the mid-1960s onwards, readers and textbooks started to appear at an accelerating speed, which helped to establish and indeed settle the ground of interactionism as something of a new orthodoxy, at least in sociological social psychology (for the most recent example, see Herman and Reynolds (1994)). As with any orthodoxy, however, it invited attack. And by the early 1970s it had fallen under severe critique from many sides. The Mullinses (1973), in an influential book reviewing social theory, could say (p. 98):

It is clear that the original ideas that developed within symbolic interactionism, like those of standard American sociology, have run their course intellectually and socially. Some symbolic interactionists are still actively publishing and, as a theory in social psychology, symbolic interactionism still has respectability. As a change-maker and general orientation
For sociology and as the loyal opposition to structural-functionalism, however, it has come to an end.

Although they slightly modified this position in a 1983 revision, the death knell rang. A litany of well-known failures were laid at its door. The theory was charged with being individualizing and subjective rather than structural and objective; it was seen to be relativist in the extreme; methodologically muddled; and confused in its conceptualizations, especially of “the self.” Simultaneously it was accused of being both overly voluntaristic and overly deterministic. The more psychologically inclined suggested it neglected both the emotional life and the unconscious (what other sociology is so accused?); while the structural sociologists believed it to be incapable of dealing with power, structure, economics, and history. Many suggested it was too preoccupied with the fleeting, the episodic, the marginal, and the exotic - neglecting whole areas of group life. On top of all this, it was seen to be ideologically troublesome - too conservative or too liberal, depending upon the critic’s stance. Given such a formidable barrage of attack (discussed in Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds (1975) and analyzed further in Denzin (1992)), it is small wonder that by the early 1970s the Mullinses could announce the death of interactionism.

But it was a premature burial. Whilst many earlier concerns have gone on to become mature orthodoxies, codified in texts, readers, overviews, and programmatic statements, there has also been a very serious response to the charges of critics. Indeed, the critical attack of the 1970s may well be seen as a harbinger of radical innovation and revitalization among interactionists. For at the same time as these splits and attacks were happening, symbolic interactionism finally became “institutionalized.” Initially starting as a small symposium held in 1974 at the home of Gregory P. Stone (and attended, among others, by Blumer himself and Carl Couch (Iowa), Norman Denzin (Illinois), Peter Hall (Missouri), Harvey Farberman (Stony Brook), David Maines and R. S. Perinbanayagam (Hunter)), the idea was planted to establish a Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI), with its own conferences, journals, and newsletter (Symbolic Interaction, 1997) This marked a radically different phase in the development of the theory. It had grown from a largely “oral culture” during the first five decades of the century, through an “age of inquiry” and a period of critique in the middle decades, to a time of institutionalization and possible revitalization. Progressively, it has entered a “Post-Blumerian Age” (Fine, 1990).

Within this most recent period, there has been a great deal of productivity. Contrary to the Mullinses’ prediction, interactionists have rallied forth not only to demonstrate their critics’ flaws but also to forge new lines of inquiry, new concepts, new methods. Yet it is a “newness” harboring several competing traditions. No longer is it simply a divide between the Chicago and Iowan schools - the former more naturalistic and humanistic, the latter more scientific and quantitative; nowadays, the field has been scattered into many blooms. Thus, some interactionists do talk in a rigorously orthodox “scientific” tone; others look for a humanistic but still scientific discipline; whilst yet others find “science” to be a central object of attack, and enter the world of “postmodern theory.” Some continue to stress that the incorporation of “structure” is vital to interactionist work; others develop new concepts to bridge the micro and the macro; whilst a few mavericks may well deny the wider social order altogether. Some remain purists and stick to the orthodoxies of traditional interactionist writings, but some veer off into all the latest European intellectual currents: Habermas is co-opted, Foucault is linked, Derrida is absorbed, Baudrillard is utilized, Kohut is assimilated, and Giddens is connected. Likewise, interactionism’s long concern with such matters as temporality, reflexivity, dialogue, culture, communications, identity, bodies, drama, semiotics and everyday life can serve to re-connect the theory to many currently fashionable concerns. There are, then, many strands to contemporary interactionist thought and no single position. Gary Alan Fine, in a leading (1990:220) review, can cite Durkheimian interactionists, Simmelian interactionists, Weberian interactionists, Marxist interactionists, postmodern interactionists, phenomenological interactionists, radical feminist interactionists, semiotic interactionists, and behaviorist interactionists. (I would add that there are also ‘queer interactionists’ (Stein and Plummer, 1996). And similar lists have been provided elsewhere (e.g. Adler, Adler, and Fontana, 1987; Denzin, 1992: xix). In a later article, Fine saw
six major areas to which interactionism had contributed - identity theory, dramaturgy, collective behaviour, culture and art, sociolinguistics, and social problems theory; and he went on to designate three up and coming areas-- new approaches to ethnography, emotion, and symbolic interactionist analyses of organization. The contemporary field of interactionist work is thus in ferment, as can be evidenced through its house journal (Symbolic Interaction) and its year book (Studies in Symbolic Interaction).

The best example of empirical ferment is probably in the sociology of emotions. In the late 1970s interactionism was accused of "neglecting emotion" but such a claim can no longer be made. The pathbreaking study was most certainly Arlie Hochschild's *The Managed Heart*: an empirical study of air flight attendants which demonstrated a central skill of such work was the trading of emotion. This is not like the ordinary work found in the past; instead the "emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself" (Hochschild, 1983: 5).

There are now many occupations that demand "emotional labor," but from this, the more general problem of managing emotions becomes visible - of how some are kept under control, some carefully presented, some willfully "forced," some artfully disguised. Emotion is no longer something which autonomously happens within us, as the province of the psychologist; it is, rather, something that emerges in interaction and often with contrivance. Phrases like "I can't afford to show too much emotion," "I try to be happy," "I let myself have a good cry," "I'm not ready to fall in love again" show such processes at work. Hochschild's study has placed emotion squarely in sociological analysis: but it grew out of empirical work as interactionist theorizing persistently does. Much other interactionist has since been developed within this field, often focusing on particular emotions such as shame (Scheff, 1988), grief (Lofland, 1985) and sympathy (Clark, 1997).

There has been real advance in this area over the past decade, a theoretical advance that is contingent upon empirical work. There is, as throughout the whole history of interactionism, a passionate concern that theory does not become divorced from the practical activities of everyday life. But likewise, the concerns first taken up by interactinists have now been disseminated to other theory traditions: a recent collection of important studies for example pays little homage to the interactionist tradition to which it so clearly is indebted - at least the index does not mention it (see: Bendelow & Williams, 1998). (A Year book is also now produced called Social Perspectives on Emotions edited by David D.Franks -Volume 1, 1992).

CONTINUING DEVELOPMENTS: BRINGING INTERACTIONIST THEORY BACK IN

Denial and Neglect

Yet despite this ferment from within interactionism, the theory has recently come to appear as a somewhat old fashioned theory which is quite often excluded from contemporary discussions. Whilst it has been canonised in the textbooks, it is usually marginalized in contemporary theoretical work. The 'latest debates' often by pass it completely, as if it has nothing to say. And yet I am sure there are many, if neglected, affinities to other contemporary theorisations. Symbolic interactionism - stretched and developed- seems commensurate with ideas linked to Elias’s ‘social configurations’, Bordieu’s ‘habitus’ and ‘practice’, Randall’s ‘interaction chain rituals’, Giddens’s ‘structuration’, Habermas’s ‘communicative competence’. Further, the theory sits well with the current interest in identities, media and bodies - and the wider ‘cultural turn’: Becker and Denzin have both produced (decidedly different) books with ‘cultural studies’ writ large as their titles (Becker and McCall,1990; Denzin, 1992). And then there is the recent (re) ‘discovery’ of a so-called social constructionist paradigm within the social sciences, but especially psychology, as if it was new and had nothing to do with symbolic interactionism. Most of the writers in this ‘new’ approach write with little knowledge - and usually no citation - of the symbolic interactionist accounts of the social world and its long tradition. They ignore the strongly connected ideas - the Thomas theorem, labelling theory, cultural coefficients. Mead is occasionally acknowledged (eg Shotter, 1993; Velody and Williams, 1998: 135) but usually critically; and symbolic interactionism is not mentioned at all (again, Velody op cit: p135 is
one small exception). And when Michael Lynch attempts to provide a genealogy of the tradition, indeed sees it a ‘useful term to collect together studies with eclectic surface affinities’, he gives but one mention to symbolic interactionism and one to labelling theory - in a long list of others (p24; p26). Odd neglects indeed.

It is also strange that interactionism gets ignored in the light of the current renaissance of interest in pragmatism. This has become a key point of reference around which contemporary debates in social thought, law, and literary theory as well as philosophy have been unfolded. It has appealed to philosophers moving beyond analytic philosophy, European theorists looking for an alternative to Marxism, and postmodernists seeking native roots for their critique of absolutes and universals’ (Dickstein, 1998: 1) There are various wings to this renewal: from the linguistic deconstructions of Richard Rorty to a reconstructed community of communication of Jürgen Habermas (cf Diggins, 1998: 222-4). There are also recognitions of its strong links to feminism (Siegfried, 1996) and to its importance for black intellectuals (from Du Bois to Cornel West). But given all this, - that ‘pragmatism is back’ - it is odd that its links with symbolic interactionism has hardly been noted. (But see Joas, 1998; Wolf, 1998)

In what follows, I turn briefly to just three issues that may help shape work in this tradition in the early phases of the twenty first century. These are: the long overdue collapse of the action-structure dichotomy; the development of theories that are more modest and low key where sensitising concepts are given pride of place; the inevitable linkage of past social theories to matters postmodern; and the continuing importance of methods, morality and politics in this style of work. Other recent developments must await discussion elsewhere.

1. Beyond the false dualisms of the twentieth century: the end of the micro-macro split

My first claim is to reject fully the oft cited critique that interactionism is an astructural, apolitical, ahistorical theory; that it is an overly subjective micro theory. It was not in its past, and it is not now. Quite the reverse, its concern with the empirical world has always made it recognise the falseness of dualisms like action and structure; always made it look at the historical anchorage of social actions; and has always found itself embedded in networks of power. This is not to say that all interactionist work does these things all the time; but it is to say that it can and often does handle these concerns.

Thus, for instance, re-reading the classic texts has usually been a myopic experience. The limited focus on Mead’s theory of the self perversely neglects his concerns with history, society as totality, and indeed his immanent socialism. As John Baldwin says, "Mead made a much larger contribution than is widely recognised. He developed a unified theory of society that integrates both micro and macro social events as they evolve and change over time" (1986: 6). And the same is also true of Herbert Blumer: castigated as overly subjective, there is a tendency to selectively read his work as though he were concerned only with social psychological matters. But, as David Maines has clearly shown, this view depends on "a series of myths . . . created and perpetuated regarding Blumer’s work" (1988: 44). A selective reading of Blumer, even among interactionist sympathizers, ignores his much broader statements on race relations, industrialization and devlopment, media and mass society, and industrial relations.

Nevertheless, it is in the contemporary writings of interactionists that these concerns with bridging the micro-macro chasm come most clearly to the fore. A broader bridge than the work of the late but very prominent interactionist Carl Couch is hard to imagine: for at one end of his analysis, he focusses upon the interactive moment of people walking through doors; at the other end upon whole civilizations and the social forms through which they are constituted. The one bridges the other. The so-called micro realm and the macro realm cannot and should not be divorced, anymore than the situational can be divorced from the historical(Couch and Hintz, 1975; Couch, 1984). Likewise, the political process has been analyzed from the small scale level of face-to-face decisions and negotiations to the much
broader hegemonic forces of political language at work in defining realities. For some, "repetitive microsituations are what we call social structure" building an image of society as series of "interaction ritual" chains, and seeing macrostructures" such as states or world systems as simply existing in larger forms than their counterparts in micro situations (Collins, 1983: 184), and all the subsequent work which develops his theory of the interactive chain. For Peter M. Hall, social organization can be approached through six main frames: 'Collective activity, network, convention practices, resources, temporality-processuality, and grounding' (Hall, 1987: 11). In general, a building block approach is adopted: the interactive order interconnects on many levels of social life. Thus whilst the self, and its core concern with "the other," may be a key interactive unit, it has to be woven into a dense web of progressively large-scale interactive layers: of encounters, roles, groups, organizations, social worlds, settlements, societies, civilizations. And all of these are constituted through joint actions; their interconnections are the bases of negotiated orders; and hence social organization becomes a "recurring network of collective activity" (this is Howard Becker's phrase, but see Hall, 1987). The characteristics of these activities and their linkages then become the point of departure for empirical investigation.

One major imagery of connecting the micro-macro comes from a sense of social organization occurring in a "mesostructure" - "how societal and institutional forces mesh with human activity" (Maines, 1982: 10) - through people negotiating with one another in a vast chain of joint actions. In part as a response to the critique that interactionists had no tools for analyzing social structure, the theory of "negotiated order" emerged to depict the workings of social organization through the active participation of its members and not as a static concept. According to Maines and Charlton (1985) this theory can be traced back to a number of classic sources: Mead's dialectical concept of society; Blumer's idea of the interpretative process and the joint act; Park's characterization of society as a succession of conflicts, accommodations, and assimilations; and Hughes's concern with institutional flexibility. The idea of "negotiated order" is stated and developed most explicitly, however, in the writings of Anselm Strauss and his colleagues, especially Psychiatric Ideologies and Institutions (1963) and his later book Negotiations (1978). He depicts social order as "something at which members of any society, any organization, must work. For the shared agreements ... are not binding for all time ... review is called for ... the bases of concerted action (social order) must be constituted continually; or worked out." The theory highlights emergence, change, and temporality; the embedded and contextual nature of order; the omnipresence of specific power relations; the constant segmentation and fragmentation of social orders.

 Strauss's most recent work (1991; 1993), published just before his death in 1997, has built upon this to develop a major theory of action as "Continual Permutations of Action." Part of this is what he terms 'the conditional matrix' and the conditional paths through it. Depicting the social as a series of circles inside each other, needing empirical analysis in every case, he charts a series of levels from the outermost 'international level (which) includes such items as international politics, governmental regulations, .. and issues like the earth's environment' through such levels as the national, the community, the organizational, the suborganizational, the group, the biographical, the interactional and finally the centre of the matrix: action. The empirical researcher has to chart the specific particular matrix at work in any area of study, and chart the paths '-short, long, thick, thin, loose, tight, startling, commonplace, visible , invisible' - in any particular case (Strauss, 1993:60-65). Once again, interactionists stress the folly of sociologists who will keep on returning to the divide of the 'macro' and the 'micro': a wholly 'untenable assumption' - yet one, I would add that almost every sociological theory outside of interactionism seems to fall prey to.

The theoretical reality for interactionists - their "problematic" - lies, then, in focussing upon these interpenetrations; abstract societies (or isolated unique individuals) are not in their sphere of analysis. But these interpenetrations constitute massive social networks for investigation. The old 'structure/action' or "micro-macro" debates must be sidestepped through a firm focus on interaction in which such dualisms are invariably empirically bound together, and where such splits betray a dubious armchair ignorance. All of this is a deliberate attempt to discredit the micro-macro distinction of much sociology, and all of it.
suggests that "the problem of the astructural bias in symbolic interactionism is a dead issue" (see Denzin, 1992: 63)

2 Theorising empirical worlds through mini/sensitising concepts

At the heart of much interactionist analysis is the generation of mini-concepts or sensitising concepts that capture the flow of certain experiences and alert the theorist to new ways of seeing the world- what I consider to be the central task of social theory. Erving Goffman - not himself an interactionist though there are strong affinities - was the master of such a strategy and his work is flooded with such terms as ‘role distance’, ‘back and front regions’, impression management’, ‘career’, ‘total institution’, ‘interaction ritual’, ‘frame’ (Goffman, 1959; 1961;1962;1983). But this continues. In the study of emotions, ideas have been generated around concepts like ‘feeling rules’, ‘emotion work’, ‘status shields’, ‘deep and surface acting’, ‘emotion management’, ‘the emotional self’, ‘sympathy giving’, sympathy entrepreneurs’, and ‘sympathy etiquette’ (Clark, 1997; Bendelow and Williams, 1998; Lupton, 1998). In the study of social movements, the whole field has been characterised through five concepts - emergence, symblization, cognitive and affective transformation, interactive determination, and fluidity (Snow and Davis,1995) Likewise, the work of Anselm Strauss is littered with mini-concepts that help the world be seen anew: ‘awareness context’, ‘status passage’, ‘negotiated order’, ‘trajectory phasing’, ‘local concepts’, ‘grounded theory’, ‘arenas’ ‘strategic interaction’, ‘social worlds’ (Strauss, 1991). Each of these terms when unpacked directs us to a host of theoretical issues, empirical insights and practical concerns.
To take just this one last concept: social worlds. The term has a long history from the Chicago School through (the nowadays too neglected) Tamotsu Shibutani to Anselm Strauss (Strauss, 1978). What the concept of social worlds hints at is interpretive communities transcending specific times and places in which members come to identify with a sense of a common reference point: the term ‘social worlds’ speaks primarily of identification pathways and complex symbols with potential for uniting (and destroying) worlds. Social worlds are fluid ‘universes of discourse’ with their own common activities, joint meanings, shared sites, communal technologies and collective organisation. They are constantly segmenting into subworlds and interconnecting with other worlds. Not as all encompassing and parochial as ‘community’, nor as fleeting and casual as groups or ‘scenes’, social worlds are very much a feature of the late modern world. They hold together people with common concerns even though they may not be in face to face contact with each other, and their frequency in the late modern world is in good part attributable to the rise of modern communications media (print, phone, computer) which make wider universes of discourse more routinely possible than ever before. Social worlds are found in all areas of life - political, economic, sexual, art, deviance, criminal, leisure, religious and so forth. One advantage of this concept is that it stresses interconnectedness, segmentation and fluidity: it stops us suggesting there is one unified social world of anything, and instead highlights the range, the changes, the splits and splintering: it stops us from seeing any world as being too unitary, stable, or fixed. And though the term centrally highlights "universes of discourse", it involves looking not just at forms of communication but also "activities, memberships, sites, technologies, and organizations"(Strauss, 1978). Social worlds may be limited and face to face, but much more commonly they are now large scale and global - criss crossing the world and bringing together a diverse range of enterprises that go well beyond any earlier notion of subculture and community. This one idea has shaped a number of studies. For instance, David Unruh has looked at the ‘social worlds’ of the elderly (Unruh, 1980) whilst Adele Clarke has looked at the struggles between groups involved in the framing of the ‘reproductive sciences’ in North America- seeing them as ‘communities of practice and discourse’. These worlds ‘form fundamental ‘building blocks’ of collective action through which people organize social life. Society can be conceptualized as a shifting mosaic of social worlds that both touch and interpenetrate...’(Clarke, 1998:16) I have also found the idea helpful in studying the emergence of many new sexual groupings in a late modern world(Plummer, 1995).

Building a Formal Theory of Interaction  This scattering of mini-concepts is a major contribution of interactionist work, and each concept can work its own individual insights. But there are those who also wish interactionism to bring such terms together- to create a more formal theory of interaction. So whilst for most, interactionism inevitably strains towards the inchoate, the piecemeal, and the eclectic and shuns the grand absolutes which much social science seeks, some interactionionists do argue that for the theory to advance there is a need for more cumulative, systematic, generalizeable work. This can be seen in the various manuals which attempt to order the conceptual field; in the renewed interest in "generic social processes," and in the attempts to improve the logics of interactionist research: analytic induction has been refined, enumerative induction systematized, and grounded theory developed further.

Thus, and following in the Simmel-Park tradition of formalism, Glaser and Strauss attempted to develop formal sociology further. During the 1960s they developed the methodology of grounded theory and the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). For them, substantive theory focussed upon a particular area like classroom behavior whilst formal theory connected different substantive areas through common processes. Status passages, for example, could be found among teachers, the elderly, gay men, the dying, the handicapped; in cults, political movements, in work situations, and in criminal activities. Although the meanings and experiences differed for each group and required close substantive study,
there was a more generic process at work which articulated the social mechanisms of change in lives. Thus, in their work on dying, Glaser and Strauss moved from a rich substantive area of research (cancer wards and the dying process) to a more sustained theoretical analysis of common forms (such as status passage and awareness contexts). Moving from a detailed case study of a dying patient (Mrs Abel - see Strauss and Glaser, 1977), they were able to seek comparisons with other major status changes in order to develop a more "formal" theory of status passage, where there were many features in common with other status passages. From a grounded substantive study came more comparative, abstract and formal theory. Grounded theory remains at the core of much interactionist work, and has been developed by some of Strauss’s followers (Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Charmaz, 1995).

John Lofland has also recognized the weakness of non-cumulative interactionist studies through his concept of "analytic interruptus," which he defined (1970) as:

starting out to perform a certain task but failing to follow through to the implied logical or entailed conclusion. The label connotes the failure to reach an initially implied climax . . . Many [studies] imply an analysis of mechanisms, devices, strategies and the like [but] they neglect actually to do it. The presentations remain unsystematic, elusive and simply suggestive.

In several works, Lofland has tried to overcome this deficiency by organizing frameworks for analysis and indeed synthesizing a great deal of interactionist work. Thus, in Doing Social Life (1976), a much neglected book, he brings together many findings into a coherent frame; and in Analysing Social Settings (Lofland and Lofland, 1983), a methods cook-book, he encourages others to do so. Aware of such a task, and of preliminary attempts to deal with it, there is no reason that interactionist research in the future cannot become more cumulative and systematic than it often has been in the past.

More recently, Robert Prus has made another strong plea in this direction. Arguing that most social science is woefully inadequate for studying the human condition, he has attempted to be overtly systematic about what to look for in ethnographic enquiry. Symbolic interactionism highlights the fact that human group life is always intersubjective, multi perspectival, reflective, activity based, negotiable, relational and processual; and that through a close observation of this life a generic processual account of its underlying forms may be built up. Central to this are the processes of acquiring perspectives, achieving identity, being involved, doing activity, and experiencing relationships. Whilst these take on concrete grounded empirical forms in every area of study, they may also be seen as transcontextual generic processes (Prus, 1987; Prus, 1997).

This is certainly not to argue for an exclusive insistence upon cumulative, classifying work: interactionists' own sense of the ambiguous, the marginal, and the strange would be at odds with this. But some moves in this direction would help to prevent each new generation of interactionists from having to repeat history.

3. The contested affinity of Postmodernism and Symbolic Interactionism?

Sociological theory in general has given a critical reception to postmodern inquiry. It seems both unwilling to recognise either postmodern social theory or even the arrival of a postmodern social order (Huber, 1995). In the face of a flurry of intellectual activity in other quarters, most (older) sociologists have clung to the traditions of their training and past. Yet of all the traditional sociological theories, symbolic interactionism must be seen as the one which has the closest links to postmodern social theory. Many of the features of the theory anticipate postmodern thought: the concern with signs and symbols, the immanent deconstructive turn through the manifest focus on "social construction," the self-reflexive turn in fieldwork and writing strategies, the longstanding interest in culture and media, the formulation of theories of social identity - all of these are harbingers of postmodern social thought. Indeed, for several commentators, the linkage between symbolic interactionism and
postmodern thought has been a persistent focus of symbolic interactionist writing since the mid 1980s. All recent volumes of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* (the annual yearbook) have been devoted to postmodernism (see especially the volumes after Volume 10). The analyses of ethnography, life history, film, bodies, and culture more generally have become prominent alongside a postmodern turn which highlights rhetorics, writing technologies, social texts, cyberpunk, resisting narratives, and the like. A distinctly newish flavor appears in this latest generation of writings. Even the classic texts of interactionism become scrutinized - deconstructed under this new critical eye eg Street Corner Society (Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 1992).

In an interesting essay, the pragamtic social theorist Dmitri Shalins has coherently argued that ‘The issues ... symbolic interactionism has highlighted since its inception and that assured its maverick status in American sociology bear some uncanny resemblance to the themes championed by postmodernist thinkers’ (Shalin, 1993: p303). He then cites how both reject subject-object dualism and positivism-scientism, whilst championing ‘the marginal, local, everyday, heterogeneous and indeterminate’ alongside the ‘socially constructed, emergent and plural’ (p304). Slightly more extremely (and much less sympathetically), David Maines has argued that ‘symbolic interactionism, by virtue of its interpretive centre, finds an easy affinity with much of postmodernism, but, because of that same centre, has no need for it’. He finds valuable the resurgence of interest in interpretive work, the importance now given to writing ‘as intrinsic to method’, the concern over multiple forms of presentation, and the reclaiming of value positions and ‘critical work’ (Maines, 1996: 325). But he is unhappy with the wider and wilder positions of the postmodern project - when they start simply highlighting the new, or claiming to disbandon all claims to truth.

Yet whilst some see an affinity which should not be pushed too far, others - especially younger scholars- have taken on a full and passionate committment to the postmodern. Championing this more extreme edge has been Norman K Denzin. Denzin has been writing on the symbolic interactionist tradition for well over thirty years and his contemporary influence has been profound. But since the late 1980’s - in numerous books and article - he has taken a ‘postmodern turn’. He thus now appears in a rather odd, even contradictory role, as ‘an early Denzin’ who is a clear symbolic interactionist , and ‘a later Denzin’, who becomes much more radical and critical. His work pushes interactionists to take more seriously the wider claims being made from cultural studies, post-colonial theory, feminism, anti-racist theory, queer theory. He continues to maintain ‘an avowed humanistic commitment to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual (Denzin, 1997: xv) but he now wishes this to be a moral and political project too - one which connects ‘moral ethnography’ to a feminist communitarian ethic. Quite how Denzin reconciles this politics with his postmodern turn is not altogether clear; but it does seem central to his claims.

Many interactionists take issue with the Denzin line, often objecting both to the ways in which it says little that is new to the interactionists, but also concerned with the very grandness of the design and writing of such postmodernists. There is, as Shalins ironically says, ‘nothing petite or humble about (it)... it is as grand in its design, sweeping in its conclusions, and intolerant to its opponents as a narrative could be’ (Shalins, 1993: 313). Indeed, in many of the pomo insights they go ‘over the top’: so much so, that if their arguments are played back immediately on themselves, much of their writing becomes instantly discredited. Their stories often proffer grander narrartives than any interactionist would feel comfortable with! And some would suggest that postmodernists can go so far as to ‘fatalistic, absurd and nihilistic in the extreme’ ( Prus, 1996: 218). In sum, some commentators think that the postmodern turn may be being pushed too far. Yet whatever view is taken, there is no doubt that this debate has served in many ways to galvanize interactionsi theory; and nowhere perhaps is this clearer than in the debates on method.
Interactionists have long found that theory and method are closely intertwined. Since their prime task has been to detect and assemble theories of specific features of the empirical world, they are clearly charged with inspecting that world. And this is the world of methods - primarily (but not exclusively) qualitative, ethnographic and biographical. Hence many writers in the interactionist tradition have spent much time in building up methodological strategies appropriate for theorizing: Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory, Manning’s analytic induction, Denzin’s triangulation and interpretive biography, the Lofland’s strategic analysis, many of the discussions in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (JCE); and so on (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Methodology and theory are closely intertwined.

Yet at century’s end, there has been an increasing anxiety about much of this methodological talk. Many debates have served to challenge the orthodoxies of this approach bringing an increasing concern with textuality, reflexivity, emotionality, authorship, voice and dialogue, interpreting subjectivities, and ethics. The new styles of qualitative work largely find the earlier traditions of describing ‘being there’ as too unproblematic. Much of this critical work has been feminist inspired (eg Krieger, 1983; Clough, 1992; Richardson, 1997). ‘Ways of knowing’ has always been a concern of interactionists, but this concern has brought new debates and more radical stances. Norman Denzin has traced five key moments in such inquiries over the past century: the traditional (1900 to World war II), the modernist (World war II to the mid 1970’s), a period of ‘blurred genres’ (after Geertz) (1970-1986), a growing ‘crisis of representation’ informed by a postmodern sensibility (1986 to the present) and a fifth - even sixth - moment (now, and the future) (Denzin: 1997: xi). I think Denzin’s penchant for chronology is over simple, but it does nevertheless identify a trend which makes the study of the social world more and more aware of its human, interactive and social roots. Unlike the dominant modes of knowledge - both realist and positivist- this mode of knowing brings many challenges. It refuses to rigidly separate out the authorship / knower from the known/reported (issues of reflexivity and voice Hertz, 1997). It will not ignore the ways in which forms of knowledge produced must be linked to ethics, politics and values (eg Denzin, 1997; Josselson, 1996). It argues that modes of writing and presenting findings are closely linked to their inevitable ‘textuality’ (Clough, 1992; Richardson, 1997). It stresses research into the subjectivities of folk taking full awareness of much of the emotionality involved in this (Ellis & Bohner, 1996). It claims the innumerable and inexorable links between ethnographic inquiry and a host of new ways of knowing in a late modern society (eg Denzin, 1997; Rainer, 1998). And it even recognises that sometimes ‘fiction’ may be better than ‘fact’ - the new fiction, the docudrama - even the ‘detective story’ (Denzin, 1997:Ch6) may provide better insights than the flatness of much social science research. Thus, this new research style has to be much more self reflexive, seriously critical of its textuality, and seeing itself embedded in a global political culture. It has to recognise that social scientists have no given right to study who and what they want, and that subjects have every right to challenge the ethnographies that are produced (and indeed are doing so). The whole process is shot through with matters of ethics and politics, of which so many social scientists have been unforgivably silent or ignorant. And it is producing a whole new styles of writing and presentation of - ‘messy texts’, ranging through ‘performance texts, poetry, ethnographic fictions and novels, autoethnography, autobiography, films, short stories, photography, video diaries (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Ellis and Bohner, 1996). There is a very clear distinction here between the experiences the interactionist attempts to capture and the "writing strategies" and "narrative organizations" which then re-presents it (Atkinson, 1990).

Looking broadly at these differences, Gubrium and Holstein talk of ‘The new language of qualitative method’ and suggest they harbour four idioms which should attempt to remain in dialogue with each other. *Naturalism* aims to describe reality on its own terms, ‘as it really is’. It is the oldest of idioms and still sense that a reality can be firmly captured through
adequate immersion in the field. It brings back rich ‘insider’s’ descriptions. Ethnomethodology looks at naturally occurring talk ‘in order to create a sense of social order is created through talk and interaction’. It suspends a concern with the ontological realities of its members, and focuses on the construction of their worlds though talk. It is ‘talk about talk’. Emotionalism suggests research has been overly rationalistic and cognitive and seeks to go deeper than earlier styles by heading into the depths of feeling, ‘the heart and soul of the matter’. Postmodernism highlights the ‘crisis of representation’ - of the growing awareness of the textuality in both what we see and record, what it ‘represents’ and how we present it (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: Ch1). Although it may be possible to see these ‘idioms’ emerging in some kind of history (as Denzin above does), it may be more fruitful to see that each has its risks, and each has ‘ special sensibility’. Through these, Gubrium and Holstein believe they can talk with each other in a dialogue. Thus for instance whilst postmodernism’s ‘special sensitivity’ is to challenge the ‘thingness’ of a ‘there’ to be studied’, it brings an enduring risk of collapsing reality into representation, problems that are reversed for ‘naturalism’. Bringing these differences into dialogue provides a tool for enhancing methodologies.

But it is more than just reflexivities, representations and dialogues that have been placed on the agenda. Interactionists are also increasingly have to confront problems of ethics, morality and power. These are not new issues. But the argument is starting to develop that the very acts of theorising and researching are engulfed in deep ethical and political matters. Theories and research are human productions which are always embedded in ethical choices and political consequences: or as the pragmatists have always said, such ‘knowledges’ have consequences, make differences. If there is such a thing as an ethics-free research or a politically neutral theory, it will be a strangely inconsequential thing. Hence, more and more interactionists are starting to make much clearer the ‘grounds’ on which they work, and to be more explicit about their ‘public’ or political role. In a rather light hearted vein, Harvey Farberman has coined the acronym RHHHAAAAAAAGEE (!) to capture a series of minority discourses that ‘ought to be heard as well as a point of entry into the real world problem that would augment, refresh, and reground theory and method in sociology, as well as enable it, in a more direct fashion, to make social science relevant to the great social policy issues of the day’. The acronym stands for: ‘Racism, Homophobia, handicap discrimination, homeless, anti-Semitism, Arab bashing, ageism, addiction, aids affliction, abuse of women, abuse of children, gender discrimination, economic oppression, ecological disaster....’. (Farberman, 1991: 485)

And, once again, Norman Denzin has also been to the foreground here, as he stakes his claims with a ‘feminist, communitarian, ethical model’ - one which stresses communitarianism, care, love, public science, moral identities, empowerment, morally involved observers, subjects as coparticipants and narrativem dialogical transformations (Denzin, 1997: 275). He argues that ethnographers need to take their research into the public sphere, working alongside the new journalists, poets, filmmakers and the like to generate a new public ethnography. In this he seems to have been influenced by Richard Rorty’s much cited advocacy some years ago that

The novel, the movie and the TV program have, gradually, but steadily replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principles of moral change and progress. (Rorty, 1989: xvi)

Just as the old Chicago-style pragmatic researchers played a key role in documenting the city and its social problems for public policies, now in a late modern world where electronic communications and globalisation have a larger and larger role to play, so the social, political and public roles of a new generation of interactionists may well becomes that of the public ethnographer. There is an irony here: just as Robert Park was a journalist and became a
sociologist, so the twenty first century may incerasinly see the sociologist as journalist with theory moving, at last, out of the ivory towers of academia.

A CRITICAL HUMANISTIC PRAGMATISM FOR A POSTMODERN CENTURY?

In this review I have suggested a history of symbolic interactionism for the twentieth century and hinted at some directions it may be heading. A striking tension - present in the theories roots- lies between those ‘more formalist’ interactionists who in their theory and ethnographic work still strain to grasp the forms and realities of social life (eg Prus, 1998); and those ‘more neo-pragmatic’ interactionists who have taken a stronger post-modern turn (eg Denzin, 1997). But this is a tension that interactionism has long had to live with - both pragmatism and formalism were alive and well in the traditions of Chicago Sociology (cf Plummer, 1998). And I am sure it can continue to live with them well into the twenty first century.

The fortunes of symbolic interactionism in the twentieth century have been variable, but its achievements have been formidable. With a rich - if tensionful - philosophical base; a remarkable - if ignored- history of research; and a consistent ability to rework itself in the light of emerging social life, symbolic interactionism may have cast an ongoing spell over twentieth-century sociology. At the same time, many of its debates these days get bypassed in favour of more recent ‘fads and foibles’. At its best, however, it stands to remind many of the grander theorists of the past century of the continuous need to return to the inspection and exploration of the everyday life found in empirical social worlds, acknowledging firmly its special subject matter: intersubjective, symbolic, reflexive, processual, and ‘human’. It cries out to say that human social worlds cannot be studied like physical worlds; that to know means a deep intersubjective reflexivity that must make the researcher’s understandings link to those of the researched. Over and over again it pleads for us to learn that to talk of the ‘individual and the social’, ‘action and structure’, ‘idealism and materialism’ are the false splits, dualisms and binaries of philosophers and that such splits they need not be imported into the practices of social inquiry. And it tells us -against all the wisdoms of much other theory- that the project we are engaged upon cannot help but be a political and moral one, through and through.

References

Collins, R. 1983: Micromethods a as basis for macrosociology$ Urban Life, 12, 184-201.


Maines, David (1996)'On Postmodernism, Pragmatism and Plasterers: Some Interactionist Though and Queries' Symbolic Interaction Vol 19, No 4 p323-40


Plummer, K. 1997 Herbert Blumer, in Rob Stones ed *Key Sociological Thinkers*, London, MacMillan Ch 6, 84-95


Suggestions for Further Reading

*Tracking the Theoretical Development*

The classic formal statement of the theory is to be found in Herbert Blumer's (1969) collection of essays *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. (Note: in this section bibliographical details will be given only where there is no 'References entry'.) The theory has its own journal, *Symbolic Interaction*, and its own yearbook, *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*.


*An Empirical Theory: Tracking Symbolic Interactionism Empirically*

Most symbolic interactionist theory gets done through investigating social phenomena. The following are a few examples which reveal the merger of theory and the empirical world.

---1987 *Kitchens* ....
Gubrium JF 1983 *Oldtimers and Alzheimers*

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE