Is the Everyday World the Problematic?
Reflections on Smith's Method of Making Sense of Women's Experience

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Our interest in doing a review of The Everyday World as Problematic stems in part from a desire to acknowledge (and make visible in the milieu of political economy) the important role that Dorothy Smith has played, and continues to play, in the development and defense of feminist scholarship. Working in the 1970s as one of the few feminists in Canada with a secure position in academia, Smith provided a whole generation of feminist students with the rare opportunity of doing their work free from the fetters of anti-feminist scholarship. In collaboration with her students she has contributed significantly to the development of feminist research and to the effort to transform male-stream academic practices and knowledge.
Dorothy Smith’s work has been important in revealing the ways in which women, women’s experiences and women’s knowledge have been systematically excluded from the realms of socially legitimated formal knowledge, particularly in the university. For example, since it first appeared in print in 1975 “A Peculiar Eclipsing: Women’s Exclusion from Men’s Culture” (reprinted as Chapter 1 of The Everyday World as Problematic) has prompted much discussion among students that we have worked with and has helped them understand why it is that, as women, we feel (and are) so ‘out of it’ in academia.

In this review, we want to consider Smith’s work in a more specific way in terms of its contribution to the contemporary debates within feminism. Can her method of inquiry be used to explicate the relationships between gender, class and race? What can it tell us about the practices of the state and the implications of these practices for feminist projects? And can it be used to look at the construction and reproduction of subjectivity and how it too shapes the everyday world of women?

We also want to consider what Smith’s method of inquiry offers to a political economy which has had persistent problems in addressing gender issues and in bridging the realities of gender, class and race. Her effort, rooted firmly in marxist method, is to develop a feminist sociology, to “propose and formulate a sociology from the standpoint of women and follow through its implications for research.” The question is, can her method of inquiry be used to address the underlying social and economic structures that shape the relations of ruling and the practices of our everyday worlds?

This book is a collection of six essays (written between the early 1970s and the mid 1980s) organized into four parts, each with a short introduction in which Smith explains the thrust of her argument and locates the articles in the overall context of her work. Smith’s work is an explicit intervention into sociology as an academic discipline, as a body of knowledge with its own forms of language, methodologies and theories.
The first three articles—originally developed in the early 1970s—focus on deconstructing the established North American sociology of that period. Smith's critique demonstrates that, within this sociology, the ideology of the male intellectual elite is presented as the universal reality of social life. Her project is political—it is intended to develop a sociology "capable of explicating for members of the society the social organization of their experienced world, including in that experience the ways in which it passes beyond what is immediately and directly known, including also, therefore, the structure of a bifurcated consciousness." It is intended to challenge male hegemony and to empower women.

Chapter 4, "Institutional Ethnography: A Feminist Research Strategy," represents some of Smith's more contemporary thinking. In order for feminists to challenge the way in which sociology has ignored and/or misrepresented our realities, we must move beyond a critique of sociology based on its exclusion of women, to a critique of the methods which have been used to account for the relations of power in society. Rejecting conceptual practices that "transpose knowing into the objective forms in which the situated subject and her actual experience and location are discarded," Smith argues that a sociology for women "must provide for subjects the means of grasping the social relations organizing the worlds of their experience." The question is not simply, what is our experience, but how is it organized, and, according to Smith, "It is the individual's working knowledge of her everyday world that provides the beginning of the inquiry."

However there are many barriers to this project. Smith explains how our actual realities, local practices and the social relations that organize them are accounted for by institutional ideologies that render some things invisible. "The categories and concepts of ideologies substitute for actual relations, actual practices, work processes and organization, and the practical knowledge and reasoning of actual individuals, the expressions of a textually mediated discourse." The discourse that prevails is one that "obliterate(s) women as active agents" in the interest of
legitimating the functions and processes of the institutions of society in which are embedded the interests of the male-dominated ruling class.

To break through these barriers, Smith argues that feminists must see that actual practices are the "point of entry" into our knowledge of how our lives are constituted. Rather than locating ourselves and our questions in the discourse then, it is crucial to "begin in the work and practical reasoning of actual individuals" and embark on a process of what Smith calls "institutional ethnography"—a process that includes the analysis of the ideological procedures used to render its work organization accountable, the mapping of the actual work processes of individuals and the analysis of how these are "articulated to and determined by the generalized and generalizing relations of economy and ruling apparatus." She draws on her own experience as a single parent to illustrate how the relations between mothers and the educational system are articulated to reproduce class, and how these relations are sustained and maintained by the state at different levels. Smith emphasizes that the terrain to be explored by institutional ethnography is one of work processes - for it is in the articulation of the ideological schemata with the actual work of individuals that the social relations that organize our lives are made visible.

Finally Smith asserts that "institutional ethnography is not a solitary pursuit or a single fieldwork enterprise" but a collective endeavour. She points to the work of her feminist colleagues, which has opened up "a number of different windows" through which the everyday world of women becomes intelligible.

To illustrate how the concept of "the everyday world as problematic" is translated into a research practice, Smith describes the three stages she and her colleague Alison Griffith used to explicate the organization of mothers' work in relation to their children's schooling. Interviews with the mothers about this work formed the basis of the study. But instead of codifying and interpreting the material from these interviews "in relation to the relevances of the sociological and/or feminist discourses," Smith and Griffith allowed
"the standpoint" of these mothers to shape the inquiry about the social organization of the school. For according to Smith,

The methodological assumptions of the approach we are using are that the social organization and relations of the ongoing concerting of our daily activities are continually expressed in the ordinary ways in which we speak of them, at least when we speak of them concretely.\(^\text{12}\)

The mothers’ standpoint must also be preserved because...

...we are working with the assumption that our informants’ narrative of events displays their active involvement in the practical concerting of social relations from their standpoint, and that social organization of mothers’ practices is implicated in the socially organized practices of the school.\(^\text{13}\)

The second stage is the exploration of the particular school based on an analysis of the relations between home and school as expressed by these mothers. The problematic that emerges from the standpoint of these women shapes Smith’s inquiry about and with those who organize the complementary work in particular classrooms, i.e. the teachers. In the third stage, Smith reaches for the explication of the particular school as a “local agent” whose practices are determined in part by “the administration of education by the school board.”\(^\text{14}\)

What is fascinating about Smith’s work is how it makes visible not only the everyday work of women, but the way in which our work is organized so that we are part of a process that reproduces class and gender differences. Smith illustrates how our practices within the relations of ruling produce differences among children that reproduce our class structure,\(^\text{15}\) but she also identifies how they sustain a traditional division of labour between women and men. What is significant for feminists—beyond the recognition of yet another aspect of the work that makes up our everyday life—is to see how the reliance of the organization and practices of the educational system on mothers’ work makes it “practically and emotionally difficult for women with small children to choose to lead their lives differently.”\(^\text{16}\)
But the Everyday World as Problematic is not simply about a new sociology. Smith acknowledges that important as a new sociology for women is in displaying a different relationship with the ruling apparatus, it has no political force. For this, we must rely on a women’s movement and political strategies that are “anchored in relations connecting them with women who do not participate in the relations of ruling and the discourses that interpenetrate them.” For Smith this “interpenetration” of the work of the women’s movement by political discourses presents serious constraints.

Citing examples of difficulties that she and others have experienced in persuading the state to support research centres, which are committed to using her method of inquiry, at the community level in Vancouver and within the Ontario Institute for Education in Toronto, Smith suggests that state funding requires or demands a level of professionalism and bureaucratization that disempowers women and invites us to police our own projects. Rather than empowering women, feminist practices that emerge from such funding relationships with the state have among other things tended to perpetuate (and create) class differences among us and exclude native women and women of colour.

Equally serious for Smith is what she sees as the accommodation of our intellectual, cultural and political struggles to the relations of ruling in the process of creating a public discourse among women and moving (even marginally) into the political arena. “As women’s issues occupy the terrain of ruling, even though only its margins, they conform to its boundaries, and the breaks and fissures that underlie it.”

“Subverting institutionalization” is therefore the answer—for both feminism and Marxism—and the means according to Smith is the new sociology, a new method of understanding and inquiry, that treats ‘the everyday world as problematic,’ that reclaims the standpoint of women as the basis for understanding how our oppression is organized by relations of ruling. While feminists might argue that we are well on our way to liberation because we have produced so much material in the past few decades on women’s ex-
experience, Smith expresses her reservations about the con-
straints of certain trends in 'feminist' theory for our project. 
Arguing repeatedly for a social science based in the
standpoint of women, she is critical of those who have
misinterpreted and rejected the works of Marx for a new
'feminist' theory, creating categories into which our ex-
perience must fit. She is equally critical of those Marxists
who have taken up a structuralism that "has attempted to
re-write Marxism as a theoretical procrustean bed to which
the actualities of our experience are to be brutally
tailored."21 She warns us—as presumably Marx himself
would have—that a successful challenge depends on
discovering from within the expanded relations that contain,
organize, and provide the dynamic interconnections linking our
one-sided knowledge of our own existence into a larger
knowledge of a historical process in which we are active and
to which we are captive.22

Smith's perspective has been influential in the feminist
community since the 1970s. A significant number of
graduates from both UBC and OISE give clear testimony
to this fact without hesitation, as would countless others
working in the educational system and other sites of struggle
in the community and within the state. Her work is a stand-
ard reference for much feminist scholarship. But we believe
there are few who would claim that their understanding of
Smith's approach has been acquired easily, or that the ap-
lication of her method of "institutional ethnography" to
their area of research has been without problems.

It may be that some of the difficulty we experience stems
from the fact that her work does not provide us with a
'recipe' for understanding power. She admits—with seeming
discomfort—to her own difficulties in articulating how race,
class and gender intersect in the practices of the ruling ap-
paratus.23 She invites us to see her work as part of an on-
going collective effort, where windows are opened onto
other terrains that must be explored before we can fully
understand the relations of power that maintain our oppres-
sion. Method rather than theory is the focus of Smith's work
here.
Other difficulties relate to the language of the text. Smith condemns sociology for its inability to reflect everyday life so that even its practitioners learn to deny their own experiences and present their work in inaccessible language. Her alternative of "A Sociology for Women" suggests that such a sociology should be accessible. Yet the language of this book is, like much of the sociology she criticizes, hard reading for even experienced academics.

Smith's criticism of sociology addresses two interrelated issues. One is sociology's reliance on objectivity and research methods which reinforce the notion of the researcher located outside the world being studied. The alternative that Smith offers is a method designed to create an 'insiders' sociology. As reviewers, our interpretation of this point differed.

Meg: As an anthropologist, I wonder how Smith's approach is different from those well-established practices of participant observation and the emic studies fundamental to, for example, British and North American Anthropology or the Chicago School of Sociology. Because she does not discuss the relationship of her method to these others, I find it difficult to assess what is specifically new and innovative about it. Why for example does she prefer this method over participant observation or participatory research? Without such clarification, it is difficult both to assess Smith's work and to apply it in our own.

Sue: I think it is possible to understand and apply Smith's method without assessing it in relation to these other methods. While such assessments are essential to validate claims that Smith's method is an innovative alternative to sociological methods based on 'objectivity,' I do not find them necessary to validate the usefulness of Smith's method and its application to my work.

The second issue that Smith's critique addresses is sociology's failure to represent the standpoint of women. Her argument that mainstream sociology has excluded women as subjects is irrefutable. Yet we are both left
wondering how she situates her method in relation to the methods used by other Canadian feminist sociologists, who also believe they have problematized the everyday world of women. Her references to feminist work in this book are limited to those people who work with her method. To use our own work as an example, we wonder how Smith would assess our articles in Maroney and Luxton's *Feminism and Political Economy* or Luxton's *More Than a Labour of Love*? Some reference to and assessment of the work of feminists using different methodologies could be useful in clarifying Smith's method, and promoting dialogue among us.

Another area where our interpretation differed is on the implications of Smith's inattention to class and race, reflected in her use of undifferentiated categories of "male" and "female." Smith does not entirely ignore issues of class and race, acknowledging as she does that the "interests of only one sex and class are represented as general" and that "the same or similar effects exclude black women, native women, women of other than the dominant classes." Smith's analysis exposes a sociology that has historically reflected "the standpoint of a white male capitalist class." However, particularly in the earlier pieces, she is very vulnerable to charges of glossing the experiences of white middle class women as universal.

Meg: I am concerned that her proposal for a sociology based on the standpoint of women potentially perpetuates the problem. There are many standpoints and there have been endless political struggles over the relations among them. Smith acknowledges different standpoints:

> The exclusion of women is not the only one.... The working class is excluded from the ruling apparatus. It also excludes the many voices of women and men of colour, of native peoples, and of homosexual women and men.

Yet she insists that "the standpoint of women is distinctive and has distinctive implications for sociology." I find this assertion problematic because a focus on "women" presents this ideological category as if it were an actually constituted
social group. Smith's method assumes that if our inquiry is rooted in our everyday lives—as for example, black women, poor women, lesbians—that the specifics of our oppression will be revealed. I think that the method presented by Smith does not insure that such a social inquiry would "deconstruct" the category of "women." Furthermore it does not automatically lead to an analysis of the relations that constitute gender. Nor does it explicate the relationship between various standpoints. I wish that Smith had given us illustrations of how her method could help feminism in its attempts to integrate class, gender, and race.

Sue: By developing a method of inquiry that treats the "standpoint of women" as "problematic," Smith gives us a way of seeing not only the "distinctive" reality of women's lives, but how we relate to both the ruling apparatus and other standpoints in society in living our lives. It allows us, therefore, to move beyond the ideological construct of "woman" to an understanding of our lives as a set of practices, organized by the ruling apparatus, that maintain class and racial differences. I think Smith's championing of the distinctive/specific nature of women's standpoint, and its reflection in a method that is rooted in explicating this specificity, provides the potential to resolve the ongoing theoretical debates about the relationship between class, gender and race, by exposing the practices in which gender, class and race do intersect in our "everyday world." If realized, this would indeed have "distinctive implications for sociology."

Smith's perspective on feminist practice presents difficulties for both of us. On the basis of our own experience in feminist organizations and with the state, we find that her assertions about the nature of "public discourse" among women, and the way in which the state regulates our work as feminists fail to reflect the complexity of practices that have shaped the women's movement(s) and its strategies in the past two decades. While we would agree with her general definition of the role of the state as sustaining and maintaining social relations that reproduce class in the long
run, Smith’s discussion of how this happens—through institutional capture and the accommodation of our discourse to the interests of the ruling apparatus—is still too instrumental to reflect our experience.

For example, the Women’s Research Centre in Vancouver has existed almost exclusively on grants from the Women’s Program of the Department of the Secretary of State since 1976. And although the relationship between the Centre and the Program has often been problematic, and its management has absorbed a tremendous amount of staff time, the Centre has maintained an oppositional position in relation to state practices. The Centre has persistently challenged the ‘women’s movement’ to recognize the dangers of institutionalization through publications such as Feminist Action/Institutional Reaction and “The Feminist Manifesto,” which calls on feminists to reclaim their voices and set their own agendas for change instead of being ‘captured’ by the timetables of the state. This might have been the place for Smith to refer to the work of some of her students who have gone on with the collective project to specify how feminist issues and organizations have been shaped by the practices of the state apparatuses (Cassin, Delhi, Mueller, Ng, Walker).

However, other substantive questions are raised by this book that are particularly relevant for political economy. Smith begins with the observation that power and the relations of ruling in capitalist societies are organized and mediated by texts, predicated on a tradition of thought developed by men in which “What men were doing was relevant to men, was written by men about men for men.” Women have been excluded from this enterprise, often consciously and cruelly, “deprived of the means to participate in creating forms of thought relevant or adequate to express their own experience or to define and raise social consciousness about their situation and concerns.” Because male experience has been presented as if it were total social experience, students who study sociology (or political economy) hoping to learn about society, instead learn about society from the standpoint of men (really—white heterosexual intellectual male society).
It is unclear whether Smith's method can facilitate an analysis of the underlying economic and social structures, which ultimately shape the relations of ruling. The links among the everyday world, the relations of ruling, and the patterns of capital investment and accumulation, of labour deployment and of the political struggles of those conflicting interests are never made. Her method seems to privilege the "ideological apparatuses of the society" without analysing how these are shaped by, and in turn shape the economic, political and social relations of capitalist society. From "the standpoint of women," Smith's method is designed to explicate the "relations of ruling" by which she means the "complex of organized practices, including government, law, business and financial management, professional organization, and educational institutions as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power." But can it be used to tell us about the relationships between the ruling apparatus and the economic structures of our worlds? These are some of the questions raised about Smith's method by those attempting to assess what her feminist sociology has to offer political economy.

Finally, a reading of Smith's work would not be complete without reference to what her method of inquiry can tell us about women's subjectivity. The Everyday World as Problematic is silent on the question of subjectivity. But, because Smith encourages us to question our own experience, our minds go 'beyond the text' to reflect on the full range of experiences that constitute us as women, as feminists. What about relations of power that are manifested at the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels? Does Smith consider the construction and reproduction of the subject a terrain of struggle as worthy as the construction and reproduction of class, race and gender in explaining the oppression of women? Can her method be applied to this sphere? These are important questions for feminist theory and feminist practice.

Does Smith's silence on subjectivity mean that her method cannot be applied to this question, or does it mean that Smith herself does not consider it significant? Does
Smith's definition of the "local work practices" as "the locus of the experience of the subject"\textsuperscript{35} preclude an examination of intersubjectivity (for example sex, or the formulation and relevance of the unconscious), or does it simply indicate the need to continue the redefinition of work already begun by Smith.\textsuperscript{36} Although the concept of "work" is a useful entrée to the relations of power that shape our lives, is it particular to "the relations of economy and ruling apparatus"\textsuperscript{37}—political and finite in nature—or can it be refined for the analysis of subjectivity?

We therefore come to mixed conclusions about Dorothy Smith's book \textit{The Everyday World as Problematic}. Findlay's criticisms relate to Smith's application of her method - namely her articulation of the relationship between the state and the women's movement(s); Luxton has concerns that relate to both the rationale and formulation of her method and its application. The book is exciting in its discussion of the hidden processes that shape our practices, but maddening to even the most informed reader in its constant search for a precision of expression that often defeats our efforts to understand the message of the author. It is confirming in its insistence that women's experience must be the beginning of our understanding of the relations of power in society and confusing in its generalizations about the specific experiences that have characterized our political struggles as feminists in the last two decades. Smith's method poses a challenge to both feminism and political economy as they have attempted to explain how the economy and the male-dominated ruling apparatus shape women's lives.

Notes

2. \textit{Ibid.}, p.89.
5. \textit{Ibid.}, p.163.

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Studies in Political Economy