

# Introduction to Issues of Methodology and Epistemology in Postcolonial Studies

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This collection of papers is the outcome of a two day seminar on *Issues of Methodology and Epistemology in Post-colonial Studies*, at IDS Roskilde University, October 31 to November 1 1994.

The objective of the seminar was to investigate the interconnections between research methodology and epistemology in "postcolonial studies". Most of the researchers assembled at the seminar, as well as the majority of the speakers, are in fact engaged in what would normally be called development studies. The point of introducing the term *postcolonial studies* in this context is twofold: 1) to create a distance to "mainstream" development studies, where epistemological reflections are not much developed, and 2) to stress the importance of researchers' awareness of *history* - 'the long historical view' as it is phrased in Durre Ahmed's paper - and of *relations of power*; the term post colonial should remind us that relations between the "first" and the "third" worlds until recently were relations of colonisation, and that this relationship still marks our thinking, as well as the realities we investigate.

In order to achieve a coherent discussion at the seminar, it had been my intention that the invited speakers should address at least some of the questions posed in the seminar programme outline. This however only happened to a limited extent. Instead a number of other no less urgent and relevant topics were taken up by the speakers, and subsequently elaborated in the plenary discussions.

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It is my aim in this introduction, drawing on the papers and on the discussions during the seminar, to highlight some of these topics.

A recurrent issue in the papers - especially the first four of them as they appear in this volume - is the need for new approaches and for *reconceptualizations*. The concepts of existing social science - economy, sociology, social anthropology etc. - are vastly inadequate for grasping reality in ways that match what is felt as social problems, let alone in ways that open possibilities for action for social change. Economy, by many seen as the basic social science as far as development studies are concerned, totally fails to account for the growth of poverty, ecological destruction, increasing crime etc., and is of equally little use regarding what could be done against it. On the contrary, as noted by Marja-Liisa Swantz, 'in the economic theory, the expanding economy is counted as successful growth, whether it means that large scale industry reduces employment, pushes the small-scale producers out of the market and impoverishes them, produces waste and pollution with accumulating future expense, or whether privatisation of land, enlarging scale of agriculture and transnational invasion bring along as side effects social problems of hunger, landlessness and homelessness, street children, drug abuse, etc., with limitless social costs in the future'.

## **New Concepts are Needed, and New Approaches**

One such new approach is the post-structuralist line of thinking, which - following Foucault and Derrida among others - focus on *critique* of reason and *deconstruction* of what has up till now been acknowledged as sound scientific thinking, thus laying bare the implicit assumptions and pre-constructed hierarchical dichotomies which guide much so-called scientific thinking,

This approach has been especially fruitful in the hands of social groups previously not seen as producers of science, like first world women, and third world women and men. The subject, the creator of modern science, the scientist, has always been imagined as a man, a white man; differences of sex and race have been seen as decisive distinctions between subject and objects, women and third world peoples seen as objects for science, not subjects.

Seen from the vantagepoints of first world women and third world women and men, the implicit assumptions and built-in

hierarchical dichotomies of so-called scientific rationality (like - following the Cartesian split between mind and matter - mind over body, man over nature, reason over emotion etc.) are full of question marks: Should really this be a suitable basis for understanding??

Thus dichotomies are deconstructed, and implicit assumptions are pulled forward for scrutiny. The historical and cultural contexts for the construction and use of particular concepts are pointed out; their usefulness for further analysis has to be evaluated on that basis.

Another approach which is not in contrast to post-structuralist thinking, rather supplementing it with different types of material, takes a point of departure in *different ways of doing research*, that is in methodology. This again is a field where first world women and third world women and men have been active<sup>1</sup>, for the same reasons as above: On the agenda is the creation of new ways of thinking, new conceptualizations.

Different ways of doing research? What does this imply? I have called this way of working *research as dialogue* (SA 1993) embracing a series of different research agendas from participatory research, in the style of Robert Chambers (1993) and Marja-Liisa Swantz (cf. M-LS's paper) to types of more academic research, like Diana Mulinari's research on women and politics in Nicaragua. What unites these types of research, and distinguishes them from more conventional research agendas in the social sciences, is a *different type of relation, a different balance, between the researcher herself, the "subject" of research, and whatever is being researched, the "object"*.

In conventional research the researcher is firmly placed as the subject with her theories, concepts and hypotheses to be applied and tested in the field. This is also true of the social anthropologist, even if the classical anthropological method of "participant observation", may look rather like research-as-dialogue and 'meeting reality on the ground' (Marja-Liisa Swantz). I hasten to say that there is no clear and distinct dividing line: anthropologists doing participant observation may very well engage in dialogic research. But the classical participant observation has the anthropologist firmly established as the subject, even to the extent as conceiving of fieldwork as a personal "initiation rite", a kind of trial that must be passed on the

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<sup>1</sup> Mushrooming contributions to the development of participatory research methods, initiated by among others Robert Chambers, originate especially from third world researchers.

road to accepted professionalism, cf. the quotes in Marit Melhuus' paper.

In contrast to this, in research-as-dialogue the positions of researcher/subject and researched/object are open and shifting. This has at least two consequences:

1) The researcher herself becomes an object for research. It is important to investigate and make explicit the history and context of assumptions and concepts that make up the professional identity of the researcher. This is what "positionality" is about, cf. Diana Mulinari's paper.

2) The roles researcher/researched may be partially reversed, depending on the type of research in question:

a) In the kind of *participatory research* process that Marja-Liisa Swantz is writing about, the researcher becomes a kind of mediator in a mutual learning process, in which the participants find a shared focus and a common language. 'Genuine democratic processes defined by the participants can develop out of participatory research' (M-LS' paper).

b) In *conceptualizing research*, where the researcher is the conceptualiser, by inspiration from the types of knowledge that she finds in the "field". M-LS: 'Knowledge and experience from the ground level of people's everyday life needs to meet the minds that conceptualise, even if it shakes all well worked-out theoretical constructs'.

Diana Mulinari's paper provides a beautiful example of such an encounter between 'a conceptualizing mind' and 'people's everyday life experience'. It also shows a social scientist well aware of how she is trapped in the conceptualizations of her profession, and that she needs help in order to be able to think along different lines.

This is what DM writes: 'I wanted to give an accurate picture of how women went on creating and recreating the lived world of their households and neighbourhood. *I was a prisoner of a world of sociological meaning.* I felt that their experience of work and struggle had been made *invisible*, considered not relevant, or *conceptualised as "natural"*. The women themselves helped me name this gap. It was Dona Rosaura who always went around saying: 'Everybody can own a house, but a family is another thing'. And Dona Amelia that often told the young people in the neighbourhood: 'There were only houses around here, only houses... it took time for the neighbourhood to be as it is now'. *I began following these clues.* They were trying to tell me that households and families are not the same thing. That there is

women's work in the process of transforming a household into a family. There is women's work in the ways the strong ties of both biological and fictive kinship are weaved'.(Emphasis mine, SA)

The existing sociological concepts, especially regarding women's work, are highly insufficient. According to DM there is 'a discrepancy between the experience of most women and the analytical tools available for understanding this experience. Definitions of reality are not about what people do, but about what is considered sociological relevant in their doing. Most of the social processes feminist researchers work with are worlds that do not 'exist' (sociologically speaking), which *have never been named*' (Emphasis mine, SA). New concepts are needed, names must be found, to grasp what is going on in these "inexisting" areas (many of them right in front of our noses). Part of the endeavour is a process of *denaturalisation*. Creating social relations, transforming a group of houses into a community, will often be an activity not seen by social science, it has no name. It is taken as just a natural extension of motherhood, which itself is just nature, biology. The Managua mothers themselves did not see it that way, and Diana starts 'following their clues'. She creates the concept of *motherwork*. A concept which pulls into the realm of sociology what was previously either not seen (as the creation of a community) or considered "biology" (mothering in a more narrow sense).

That any dividing line between "biology" and "sociology" should be thoroughly questioned, is shown in Märta Salokoski's study of breastfeeding. Breastfeeding, supposed to be a "natural" function, is nothing of the kind. Even great apes do not know how to breastfeed if they have not seen it practised. As MS puts it: 'Nature seems not to be able to develop without the intervention of social learning'. MS's paper feeds into a discussion which in feminism has been opened by the post-structuralist thinkers: The questioning of the sex/gender divide. Gender, as it will be known, was a term introduced by feminists in order to be able to argue against the 'biology is destiny'- point of view. The sex/gender divide usually has been understood as gender being the socially constructed aspect of gender identity, sex referring to the "biological" aspect. It is not hard to see, however, that the sex/gender dichotomy is a conceptual creation which neatly falls into the dichotomous style of Enlightenment thinking: Gender is where culture resides, and where struggle for equality makes sense; sex is nothing but the body, the female body being an obstacle to equality, according to gender equality fighters from

Simone de Beauvoir onwards. Not much to do about it, however. Thus "gender" has been researched and debated, while "sex" has been bypassed in silence.

Post-structuralists are trying to tackle this acknowledged problem by claiming that sex too is culturally constructed. A claim which gets ample support from the investigations into the history of anatomy undertaken by Thomas Laqueur (1990), showing all "facts" about the human body to be based on interpretation, including the "fact" of sexual difference. 'Difference and sameness, more or less recondite, are everywhere; but which ones count and for what ends is determined outside the bounds of investigation' (Laqueur 1990: 10). Henrietta Moore puts it like this: 'If binary sex is an effect of discourse, then it cannot be considered as a unitary essentialism and, more importantly, it cannot be recognised as invariant or natural'. (Moore 1994: 13)

However, even if sexual difference as it is usually referred to, may be open for discussion, *bodies still exist*. And bodies are gendered. If not by "nature" then by "culture". Our bodies are our primary location in the world. They are our basis of (gendered) experience. It is by means of a narrative on bodily experience that Märta Salokoski approaches the discussion of the disappearing line between "sex" and "gender". In her account the body is very real, very material (lumpy breasts hurting from an excess of milk) and at the same time very socially conditioned.

Thus Märta Salokoski's account may be said to fall within what in a recent contribution by Rosi Braidotti et al. is defined as an emerging trend in feminist thinking, 'emphasising the situated, specific embodied nature of the feminist subject, while rejecting biological or psychic essentialism. This is a new kind of *female embodied materialism*.' (Rosi Braidotti et al. 1994: 49, emphasis mine, SA). Märta Salokoski's paper is a very vivid illustration of what Rosi Braidotti et al. go on to affirm, namely that 'bodily experience can neither be reduced to the biological, nor confined to social conditioning. In a new form of "corporeal materialism" the body is seen not as a natural given or a biological essence, but rather as an area of intersection of the natural with the cultural, where multiple codes of power and knowledge are at work' (Rosi Braidotti et al. 1994: 50).

Breastfeeding seems a well chosen topic for exactly this type of investigation, located very obviously in a borderland between "nature" and "culture", and furthermore, no matter how gender is defined, a very *gendered* experience. Märta Salokoski's research is

also exceptional because of its "autobiographical" character, her research process being, as she writes, 'woven into the fabric of my own life', an autobiography of the body. In MS's case she herself, with her own life experience and her own body experience is the subject as well as the object of research.

Märta Salokoski's paper also touches upon another dualistic dividing line, somewhat connected to the sex/gender one: the divide between women as mothers and women as sexual beings. This is a split many white, Western women feel with deep concern, and in MS's paper it is referred to as being a major reason for the decline of breastfeeding in modern urban societies, first and foremost in the USA where, according to MS, 'there had been a war going on about the female breast; should it be the source of joy and gratification for the man (the sexual partner) or should the child be allowed to intrude in this harmony?'

It is important to notice, however, that both sides of the dichotomy, "sex object" as well as "mother" are seen and conceived with male eyes. Nothing is seen from the point of view of the breastfeeding woman, and nobody is taking into account the possible existence of 'a specific female experience of sex, beyond that which can be experienced by males' (MS in a footnote).

A similar point is made by Durre Ahmed in her paper: 'Theories of the female body are preponderantly based on the observations and fantasies of men'. This to the extent that even the Masters and Johnson study, in spite of one of the researchers (Johnson?) being a woman, and in spite of the profile of the research findings being a focus on female sexuality, according to DA, is just another example of *more of the same*: Female sexuality is defined in male terms by quantity and performance in numbers of orgasms, inspiring competition, respectively frustration if capacity proves less high. There is no idea whatsoever of possible alternative or supplementary experiences of sexual gratification. 'In Masters and Johnson studies the freedom of women is modelled on male priorities of power and quantity'.

Durre Ahmed's paper is contributing to the critique of science, but from an angle slightly different from the main attack of post structuralism/deconstructivism: While lamenting that "science" has delegitimized mythology, she shows how modern science itself is based on a myth: The myth of the Hero.

The Hero: White, male, adolescent, the locus of Reason, the creator of Science, the master of Nature. In the history of natural sciences the Hero is busy discovering, penetrating, controlling

and mastering *outer* nature. In Freudian theory the Hero sets out on new tasks, conquering *inner* nature: the dark, alien, irrational unconscious.

'Significantly,' DA notes, 'the foundations of this youngest of the medical sciences were to an extraordinary extent also the inventions of *young* males, mostly under the age of thirty'.

Durre Ahmed sees a parallel between this conquest of the unconscious, and the colonial conquest of the South: Like the unconscious the South is dark, alien, irrational, frightening. In the name of civilisation, it must be tamed. The Hero, conversely, is associated with light, height and law.

Another parallel, drawn by Durre Ahmed, is between the unconscious/the South and Woman. The Ego = mind = brain = conscious 'leaves no room for woman and body', and 'no space for anything feminine, intermediate, ambiguous, metaphorical'.

This has sinister consequences, because, as DA observes, we see with the mind: 'It is the theory which determines what we observe'. Which is parallel to the point quoted from Thomas Laqueur above about difference and sameness being everywhere, but the crucial question of which ones count and for what ends being determined outside the bounds of investigation.

Several of the above issues of discussion are taken up again in Marit Melhuus' paper, now discussed with a point of departure in - and with address to - the discipline of anthropology. The focus of MM's discussion is the relationship between the carrying out of "fieldwork" and the production of anthropological "knowledge". How is this link established, and which are the problems embedded in the process?

On the one hand MM (along with many other anthropologists) sees "fieldwork" as 'a unique form of acquiring knowledge' because it is a 'knowledge based on lived experience' which is 'something more and radically different from bookish learning'. It is, MM says, 'the transposition of the concrete experience of fieldwork to the recognized abstract canons of knowledge which marks the anthropological craft'.

On the other hand MM has initially pointed out that anthropology as a discipline must be criticized for androcentrism as well as for ethnocentrism; furthermore these 'recognized abstract canons of knowledge' may turn out to be problematic, in so far as they are parts of 'the whole cultural heritage which permeates our scientific work with rampant dualisms separating and privileging object over subject, observation over participation, distance over nearness, detachment over

attachment, reason over passion etc'. How to deal with this dilemma?

One way, suggested by some (post)modern anthropologists, would be to try to overcome the dualisms by emphasising *dialogics*: 'foregrounding the dual voices, rather than the lone interpreter. The purpose would be not so much to change the indigenous concepts but rather to alter the anthropologist's own' (Marcus 1992: 319, quoted by MM). In actual fact this sounds very much like the *research as dialogue* suggested above: Finding inspiration for reconceptualizations beyond the "rampant dualisms" of Western thought by listening closer to other people's ways of thinking about their lives.

MM however has two critical comments regarding dialogics: First: Is this at all feasible? she asks. After all, 'however much we replace the monologue with dialogue, the discourse remains asymmetrical' (Hastrup 1992: 122, quoted by MM). It is the anthropologist qua anthropologist who writes up the account. Secondly: What is wrong about dialogics, according to MM, is an implicit notion of assumed equality. Even if it is true that we are all parts of the same world, we are so in very different ways. 'Even though the critics (including the spokespersons for dialogics, SA) are particularly sensitive to the issues of power and reification and insist on particularities, localities and histories - it appears that the notion of an encompassing global process somehow reduces differences to the same, placing us all on one plane. (...) Modernity may have spread its arms to all corners of the world (...) but we all know that modernity still means very different things in very different contexts'. This is an important point. My comment is the following: Research as dialogue (or dialogics, maybe) cannot be based on notions of equality as empirical fact; here as in many other areas of social life, equality is a goal for political struggle, rarely a point of departure. The insight of *research as dialogue* as a methodology-cum-epistemology, is the necessity of *mutual learning*.

Thomas Hansen's paper strikes a different note, in so far as it is his concern critically to investigate the overall philosophical and epistemological context and background of the previous type of discussions. He points to the tendency of post-structuralist and deconstructive thinking of "essentialising and simplifying 'the theoretical Other' into caricatures written in capital letters: Reason, Enlightenment, Modernity, the West, etc." The problem pointed to by TH is twofold: 1) By creating a theoretical Other as a caricature it is too easy to launch one's own

ideas as more interesting and innovative than in fact they are, and 2) Modernity-as-universalist-reason was never the coherent project as which it is conveniently constructed by its present day critics. On the contrary: It was always contested and criticized by its close companion, romanticism. "Modernity was split from the outset in two competing epistemological systems, partially overlapping, feeding upon each other, while simultaneously hardening each others stances. The field of oppositions developing between the rationalist, universalist Enlightenment episteme determined to explain the world (Erklären), and the historicising romanticist episteme looking for deeper meanings and cultural configurations striving to understand the world (Verstehen), is the fertile field upon which all substantial contributions to the social sciences are premised."

With reference to a series of eighteenth and nineteenth century German philosophers (Schopenhauer, Schleiermacher, Schlegel, Hegel, Herder, among others) as well as to Hans Blumenberg (1983) Thomas Hansen shows this Erklären/Verstehen to be what he calls the 'intellectual deep structures' of European thought.

His important point is that "intellectual labour takes place on a historically structured terrain in which new ideas, critiques and attempts to create new ground always are premised on a terrain of 'positions' not of one's own choice. (...) While breaking with the past one may very well, and unconsciously, perform the task of re-occupying earlier positions." Thomas Hansen exemplifies his critique by scrutinizing selected Indian scholars' use of the concepts of 'community', 'hybridity' and 'post-colonialism'. What in fact do these concepts convey? To what extent is, for instance, the concept of 'community' as used by Partha Chatterjee, different from the idea of *Gemeinschaft* (vs. *Gesellschaft*) as formulated in eighteenth century German sociology??

"Inauthenticity, displacement and non-identity with oneself are fundamental and universal conditions of the global modernity, or rather *the multiple modernities* on the globe, that no one can escape and that all - post colonials as well as metropolitans - have to live with." (Emphasis added, SA). This insight is comparable to Marit Melhuus' point that modernity is a shared condition, but a condition that may have very different implications in different local contexts. Then what would be the implications of the differences of these multiple modernities? This question might set a framework for further research.

This introduction has reflected the diversity of the papers given at the seminar, as well as the broad range of discussions

regarding these issues. The aim of the seminar - and of this collection of papers - has not been to reach a conclusion. Rather it has been to open up a debate, or a whole series of different debates. The seminar in itself was successful in this respect. Hopefully this collection of papers will be so too.

### **References not Quoted from the Papers:**

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