The study of institutions and the paradoxical situation of doing research

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Introduction

The intention behind these opening papers is primarily to introduce ourselves:

- what are our theoretical preoccupations?
- what positions do we take and from what standpoints do we argue?
- what kinds of research are we engaged in?

In this first talk I want to do three things.

a) Explore my choice of title which I have purposely "cribbed" from Preben Kaarsholm.

b) Discuss why I believe a theoretical focus on "institutions" is not enough. Here I shall make some preliminary remarks on theories of practice and also suggest why we are finding increasing mention of "institutions" in development literature.

In this discussion I shall refer to the excellent survey made by Sherry Ortner (1984) in a review of the main themes in anthropology since the 1960's and to the work of Anthony Giddens (1979) whose theory of "structuration" is an important synthesis of ideas concerning practice.

c) Suggest what theories OF practice have meant for me IN practice with reference to some lines of thought from my Mexican research material.

I should also mention at the outset that I am by no means alone in having an interest in "agency" and "practice". A group of us from International Development Studies have discussed and worked together to explore some aspects of these theories and relate them to our own research interests. This has resulted in a book of readings, which should be available soon (Weis Bentzon, 1990).

Institutions and the research process

i) Why should "doing research" be considered paradoxical?

We are bookish people, we aim to be learned and scholarly and become familiar with a broad swathe of intellectual thought. Many of us wish we could read more; often we envy students their chance to read widely and in depth. We are shaped and inspired by what we read and discuss. And over time we come to develop more personal views; we take a stand on theoretical approaches, themes, issues; we come to select particular authors as being more enlightened than others and particular parts of the world as being more interesting than others.

To start with, we espouse the ideas of others. But often in the process we are guilty of simplifying and stereotyping the ideas we meet in order to better digest them and relay them further. (Just as I shall when I get on to the theories of practice). There is a collective process involved in building up knowledge and we are all part of it.

The paradox arises when we recognise that to undertake "innovative" or "original" research, this scholarliness in which we are trained, does not necessarily help us very far in seeing and exploring the "real" world. Indeed, too much bookishness may well be inhibiting.

To actively engage in research, we need to develop a rather different set of skills and awareness. First of all, we need to find things out mostly from people who do not belong to our culture, class, history; people who look upon the world in a very different way from us. They may try and help us or intend to mislead us but either way, understanding what they are telling us is not easy. To do so we need to start as beginners, from scratch; learn and appreciate at least some of the basic concepts in their lives. They are the teachers.

We need to SEE things afresh. Obviously we can never escape the mental baggage we bring with us; nevertheless we can still listen hard for discontinuities, the areas where what we a priori imagine or predict fails to mesh with what people are doing or saying. In this, almost inevitably we are plunged into periods of confusion. The frameworks we thought might hold, do not and we are at sea. Rashly, I might even say that such periods of confusion are unavoidable, if one is trying to

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really SEE what is going on and open up for intellectual surprises and shocks. Without such surprises and shocks, how can any originality be achieved?

That is one type of paradox. Another arises from the situation of field research itself. This is the need to be both a participant and an observer at the same time.

In sum, I am arguing that it helps to combine learning about research techniques and experiences (such as in a Ph. D. course) with the broader, more personal development of "good" sense (as opposed to "common" sense), and a healthy non-conformity.

So we can now ask: Does the study of institutions actually help us as active researchers whereby we train ourselves to SEE and make new attempts to give order to what we are seeing?

And in that connection, does a study of institutions mean that we are better able to avoid some of the worst traps and impasses of Western social sciences in general and development studies in particular? Can we escape from the underlying assumptions present in so many theories and concepts: such as functionalism, evolutionism, volunterism? Furthermore, can we avoid the worst excesses of ethnocentrism, sexism, classism?

ii) What then contributes to "good sense" in research?

Underlying research endeavors are many prior questions, I shall single out only two for mention. Good sense in research is connected with the way we acknowledge and deal with our own standpoints. By standpoint I mean that broader political, paradigmatic position we adopt. This is, in turn, related to our own position in society and lived experience. We stand for certain issues and values; and we stand against others. For me, in recent years a feminist standpoint has been of critical importance and it has affected my choice of theoretical frameworks and the way I want to conduct research.

Good sense is also connected with the way that we handle abstraction. Even though we are interested in wholes, we must select or abstract their constituents. We have to isolate purposely one-sided or partial aspects; this is neither simple nor obvious, though many pretend that it is. It is always essential to bear in mind what we abstract from as well as what we exclude in the process of abstraction.

The main argument I shall sketch out in the next section relates to questions of standpoint and abstraction. This is what I mean when I claim that a focus on institutions is not enough. The new theories and concepts concerning institutions sketched out by John are useful and exhilarating but they should also be seen in the context of theories of practice.

Preliminary remarks on theories of practice

Practice oriented theory has developed out from several antecedents - Weber, the political thinking of Marx, Marxist social historians, some schools of cultural studies and linguistics. More recently, it has made particular headway within anthropology and has been most associated with the work of Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieux. As Geertz put it in 1973, within theories of practice "the logic or organisation of action comes from people operating within certain institutional orders, interpreting their situations in order to act coherently within them". Bourdieux's "Outline of a Theory of Practice" published in French in 1972 and in English in 1977 is still having a powerful influence as social scientists grapple to understand the central concept of "habitus".

Theories of practice arose partly in response to fundamental criticisms made of the predominating structuralist mode of thinking and of the determinism lurking at the heart of many models of development. One can find many different terms being used in the literature to emphasis the importance of activity (praxis, action, interaction, agency) and the need to put the human actor at the centre.

There is, of course, a long tradition of speculating about "action" within the social sciences. Theories of practice have arisen not only in opposition to structuralism and determinism in general, but also more specifically they confront the dominant and essentially Parsonian or Durhheimian view of the world as ordered by rules and norms. As Ortner (1984) states, although the early sociologists had given the term "action" a central place in their schemes, they really meant a reenactment of rules and norms or the execution of rules and norms. Theories of practice are also at pains to avoid the trap of voluntarism in which individuals are assumed to move freely and without restrictions and where the system is viewed as "an unordered reservoir of resources that actors draw upon in conducting their strategies" (Ortner, 1984).

In contrast, with theories of practice, forms of action and interaction are seen, for analytic purposes, as taking place in asymmetrical relations where there is dominance and subordination. This social asymmetry, Ortner underlines, is seen as the most important dimension of both the action and the structures in which the action is embedded.

Practice theory seeks to explain the relationship between human action and some global entity or "the system". This system does not have to be broken down into fixed units or parts; there is no need for divisions as between "base" and "superstructure" nor between separate spheres labelled "economy", "society", "culture", etc. Instead as Ortner argues, the system is presented as a seamless whole. But although "seamless" it is also recognised that not all parts of it are of equal significance or relevance when it comes to analysis. At the core of the system, both forming and deforming it, are the specific realities of asymmetry, inequality, and domination within the given place and time.

Where, then, might "institutions" fit into this schema? To some extent, the word has provided a useful descriptive device in that it is scale-free and relatively neutral. The seamless whole of the system contains institutions at every level and we can roughly infer what they mean without having to be too specific.

The practices under discussion link action with system. And they are first and foremost practices having intentional and unintentional political consequences. When we explore the meaning given to action, then we are confronted with certain differences. On the one hand, there is the view that actors are closely involved with pragmatic choice and decision making, and are actively calculating and making strategies. But on the other hand, actors also produce patterned and routinised behaviour and in this way take part in institutions and reproduce "the system".

I shall now move on to look at some ideas within Gidden's theory of structuration (1979) because the significance of "institutions" is more clearly spelled out. In setting out this theory, Giddens wanted to acknowledge the essential importance of a concept of action in the social sciences, the corollary being an elaboration of a satisfactory account of the competent and knowledgeable human agent. He wanted to formulate such an account "without relapsing into a subjective view and without failing to grasp the structural components of the social institutions which outlive us, as individuals who are born and who die".

The crucial move in this theory is the attempt to transcend the opposition between "action" theories and "institutional" theories.

According to structuration theory, all social interaction rests on a bedrock of relations of domination and therefore as a necessary implication involves expressions and uses of power. Relations between actors can be seen as being relatively autonomous or relatively dependent. Social action consists of social practices situated in time-space and organised in a skilled and knowledgeable fashion by human agents. But knowledge is always bounded: on the one side by the conditions of action (where and how it takes place) and on the other by unintended consequences. Action takes place within a duality of structures: it occurs in the context of and bounded by particular structures but it also leads to the reproduction or change of the structures. Thus the structural properties of social systems are simultaneously the medium and the outcome of social acts. The concept of the duality of structure connects the production of social interaction to the reproduction of social systems across time-space. Thus to study the structuration of social systems is to study the conditions governing their continuity, change or dissolution.

Within structuration, the theme of time is both essential and critical. Different intersecting planes of temporality are involved in every moment of social reproduction and Giddens distinguishes 4:

i)   The "day to day" continuous flow of activity; the immediate nexus of interaction.

ii)   The time demarcated by the life cycle of the organism; the changes we pass through and our responses to them in the course of our lives.

iii)   Institutional time: the long-term sedimentation or development of social institutions which exist and are perpetuated across the generations. This is the "longue durée" of Braudel.

iv)   World time or historical conjuncture: the influence of changing forms of inter-societal systems on episodic transitions.

The planes intersect: with the duality of structure, every moment of social interaction implicated in the passing away of the human organism is likewise involved in the "longue durée" of institutions. Institutions can thus be defined as practices that stretch over long time and space distances in the reproduction of social systems. From this it follows that institutions are not bodies that can easily be established or dissolved by fiat or decree in the short-run. It is possible to

"institutionalise" practices that are already in existence. But if there are no pre-existing "suitable" practices, what then?

When we come to explore this line of thinking we confront much of what "mainstream" development studies is all about. When I started within Latin American studies, structuralism was rife. From the debates on agrarian, social, economic structures, it was easy to go on to discuss policy intervention and what was, in effect, the creation of new institutions which would be "better" than the old. Indeed, I arrived in Peru, at the time when a major land reform was being put into practice. The enclave plantation economy of the coast was to be destroyed while the haciendas and old feudal relations characteristic of the Andean region were to be swept away. Yet with hindsight, now many years after and in the midst of the social turmoil of contemporary Peru, one can say that not only was there a failure to institute any new institutions in the countryside, the agrarian reforms unleashed violent and totally unforeseen consequences (and there are several parallels in the post-agrarian reform history of neighbouring Bolivia).

While in a country like Peru in the 1970's, ideas of change and transformation predominated, now the literature tends to emphasis the durability of structures and institutions. To take a few examples that have caught my eye in recent works.

> The agrarian reform is seen to have "scarcely affected the structure of Peruvian agriculture".
>
> Despite past economic growth in Peru and the growth of women's education, there is little change in the degree of labour market segregation on the basis of gender when comparing the 1940, 1960 and 1980 censuses. Occupations "belong" to either men or women.
>
> Long term studies of income distribution report that the bottom 40% of the population is no better off today than they were 100 years ago.

These remarks raise a central debate within social sciences: the question of "change" versus "societal reproduction". When we look at theories of practice, is it the case that everything that everybody does only serves to "reproduce" the system? As Ortner writes: are divergent or non-normative practices simply variations upon basic cultural themes or do they actually imply alternative modes of social and cultural being?

In discussing "change" we can find several attempts now to move away from explorations of the "grand" versions of social change released only through major revolutions and their aftermaths. In the alternative explorations of change, more attention is paid to changes of meaning in existing relations. One well known attempt to discuss this type of incremental change is provided by Sahlins. As he states, change comes about when traditional strategies which assume traditional patterns of relations are deployed in relation to novel phenomena. This then calls into question the pre-existing strategies of practice and the nature of the relations they presuppose. In this sense, change is failed reproduction.

Sahlins argues that changes in internal meanings within existing relationships are essentially revolutionary. But nevertheless, one must always recognise that there are many mechanisms which hold the system in place despite important changes happening in practice. We are still not easily able to clarify when change is part and parcel of "reproduction" and when change carries "revolutionary potential".

For me, theories of practice have carried great appeal. And in a sense, they are serving to put names on concepts and research methods that many of us have been intuitively reaching out for in the past in our work. Part of the fascination stems from the way feminist analysis has provided inspiration for some of the theories. One can list several parallels, as Collier and Yanagisako (1989) do in comments made with respect to Ortner's 1984 article.

Feminist enquiry and theories of practice are both concerned with the recovery of "voices" and of "real people doing real things". But while centering on human action, both also acknowledge the very powerful effect of "the system" in upholding structures of power and social inequality. In both there is an attempt to highlight the cultural construction of identities and relations such as of femininity and masculinity. They have questioned the utility of breaking the system down into dualities or oppositions and both are deeply concerned with being able to distinguish which tendencies perpetuate and which tendencies transform social relations.

Yet even though one can see parallels, feminist analysis does not share an emphasis on the - at first sight - neutral or genderless "actor", "agent" or "person".

Theories of practice in practice

For the past few years I have been exploring gender and class relations in the context of the rise of "informal" workshop based industry in rural Mexico (Wilson, 1991).

I was working in a country deeply affected by a revolution which set in motion major transformative changes. It was also a country where political change was quickly "institutionalised"; indeed the ruling party for the last 60 years is officially titled the "party of the institutionalised revolution", "partido de la Revolucion institutional" (PRI).

Over the last 30 years there has been a growth of small scale industry in an extensive region of western central Mexico. These enterprises are mostly "clandestine" in that they do not conform to national tax or labour legislation and they are purposely hidden from view. They produce primarily garments, shoes and food products for national and international (US) markets and are technologically quite distinct from earlier artisan activity. Investments have largely been made by local people, though many are dependent on credit links from outside the local area. Most draw predominantly on a female labour force.

I was not interested in "explaining" this industrial growth with arguments made from the point of view of capital; which see "capitalism" as relocating in impoverished rural areas and seeking out the cheap and docile labour of young women. Instead I wanted to look at the institutions, actions and practices through which one stratum of local society was able to capture and bring back new industrial activities to the countryside and through which another stratum became "available" as a labour force. How were these capitalist and labouring "classes" being created? And what happened to both gender and class relations subsequently?

My principal research problematic concerned the nature of change:

i)   - to what extent were relations of domination and subordination being reproduced over time and were incorporating and making use of a new vehicle (workshop based industry) for the maintenance of the "system"?

ii)   - to what extent could social actors, capitalists and workers, men and women, utilise the spaces and possibilities being opened up by a new economic activity to reformulate relations and reconstruct identities?

One line of discussion was the way industrial workshops themselves were patterned on the domestic identity of the household. Gender and generational identities and practices were being transposed from the household to the workshop. This meant that there was minimal break with pre-existing social institutions that secured the control and protection of the young women who formed the bulk of the labour force. In effect, they were handed over by their mothers into the service of the workshop owning wife who remained in charge of recruitment, labour management and their "protection". Just as daughters were expected to leave home at marriage, so they also left the workshop. Up till then, they were expected to show loyalty and obedience. But there were also obligations imposed on owners: the surrogate "daughters" could not easily be fired, nor prevented from attending to religious and family obligations occasionally during the day. In this "household" model, workshops were concealed partly on account of their identity as "domestic" places where the state had no rights to intervene. The catholic church as moral guardian was the far more powerful arbiter of practices locally.

Yet though both owners and workers might support this patterning and the adoption of the "household" model, the model could not adapt to change. Wider gaps and discontinuities emerged. Owners wanted greater command over workers' labour time. And for the young women workers, it was patently clear that owners were using the imagery of the household and family loyalty to exploit them. The women were highly "knowledgeable social actors" and many developed a growing consciousness both as workers and as women facing many forces of oppression and lack of "respect".

    - As one young worker recalled saying to her employer: "Why are you shouting at us? You have no right to. You are not my father. You should treat us with respect. I am a worker and I demand that you treat med with respect as a worker".

The household model has now been partially overthrown - the pressures for change come from owners and workers; both sides being concerned to alter the terms of the relationship and both sides employing specific strategies to further their interests.

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Social actors were using the new economic activity to reformulate relations; and in the case of the workers, this was not limited to life within the workshops. Instead, experiences there and a re-evaluation of their "value" in society has had many implications for the way the younger generation of women hope to reconstruct relations within their families and with society at large.

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